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# Analysis of How National Basketball Association (NBA) Teams Use Social Media

Tariq Ahmad

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

AN ANALYSIS OF HOW NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION (NBA)  
TEAMS USE SOCIAL MEDIA

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Tariq Ahmad

College of Natural and Health Sciences  
School of Sport and Exercise Science  
Sport Administration

May 2012

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This Dissertation by: Tariq Ahmad

Entitled: *An analysis of how National Basketball Association (NBA) teams use social media*

has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Philosophy in the College of Natural and Health Sciences in School of Sports and Exercise Science, Program of Sport Administration

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## ABSTRACT

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Social media are defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 59). With the growth and advancement of digital technology in today’s worldwide society becoming more prevalent, it is important to understand how companies, brands and sports teams use these mediums.

Seven social media directors of NBA teams were interviewed in a qualitative-focused study. Questions revolve around motives, implementation, management, and evaluation of social media strategies. Motives of social media use revolve around connecting with fans, while using three different methods: team to fan communication, fan to team communication, and fan to fan communication. Implementation of social media strategies revolve around staff members (immediate and higher-level organization members), timeframe (2006-2009), different types of approaches (team-centric, fan-centric, combining physical and virtual spaces), and use of guidelines.

Management of social media strategies include number of staff, how often strategizing occurred, how often changes were made to the strategy, and if the director was the final decision maker on decisions. Evaluation of social media strategies include how evaluation was conducted, how often social media strategies were evaluated, and if paperwork and documentation were used to evaluate social media strategies.

As social media continues to evolve, so will implementation, management, and evaluation strategies. Each NBA team social media director provided unique responses, and may not work for other NBA teams or sports leagues. However, knowing that the social media directors interviewed use and evaluate social media extensively for their respective teams, the future is bright for the intersection of sports and social media.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Internet is an information space through which people can communicate in a special way: by sharing knowledge in a pool, not just a large browsing medium.

Everybody should put ideas in, as well as take them out (Baird & Fisher, 2005). A new era of business is rising; a technologically-and socially-rich environment that is experiencing breakthroughs across many spectrums. This new era embraces the bi-focal perception that society is shaped by changes in the characteristics of learners, as well as the ways in which they use new technologies to exchange information. One thing is clear: the convergence of social networking technologies and a new “always on” is rapidly changing the face of society (Baird & Fisher, 2005, p. 5).

Social media are defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 59). Although social media are changing how people and organizations communicate, it is still difficult to define exactly what social media are (Wright & Hinson, 2009). Some people use the phrase ‘social media’ whereas others refer to it as “consumer-generated media” or “user-generated content” (Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, & McKenzie, 2008, p. 339). The Pew Research Center noted for the first time that more people read news online than from traditional mass media (2008).

Sports are no different. Sport industry marketing personnel are considering the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on their operations and customer relationship-building activities and are beginning to assess the power of these tools in directly accessing and communicating with their consumers (Fisher, 2008). Web 2.0 is “a collection of open-source, interactive, and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge, and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 1).

Sport properties already have presence on social networks such as Facebook, the most popular and active social networking site, and encourage consumers to join (Williams & Chinn, 2010). According to Fisher (2008), teams view their presences on Facebook as a way to strengthen relationships. As membership continues to grow, further opportunities are likely to emerge. For example, in January 2009, Facebook reported a 276% increase (over a six-month period) in the number of 35 – 54 year-old users and an overall increase in users of 59% (Corbett, 2009). Currently, the 35 – 54 year-old age range accounts for 49% of Facebook users (Bullas, 2011). The challenge for the sport industry is to embrace these new tools, strategically manage their social media presence, and gain greater understanding of the potential value of Web 2.0 tools in meeting relationship-marketing goals (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Social media gives sports fans the ability to connect with other fans as they read and discuss content shared by their favorite sports, teams, and athletes (Hambrick Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Technology aside, the fans’ accessibility to teams is an important antecedent to the development of team identification (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997). Social media also allows fans a personalized

medium where they can express their thoughts on teams and athletes. For example, fans can use Twitter, a real-time information network, to not only follow athletes and teams, but journalists, news stations, and other fans who share the same interest. By following these accounts, fans can get current statistics, game insight, team updates, athlete's personal anecdotes, and fantasy sports updates, just to name a few.

Additionally, people can also connect with others in their vicinity, or on another continent. Interacting through online social networks may prove important for individuals who share common interests but not common locations (Pogue, 2009). Sports organizations use it for many purposes, such as increasing team awareness, selling tickets, and providing game information. Many teams provide Twitter and Facebook updates during the course of a game. These generally include starting lineups, scores, important game sequences, and other events during a game. While many, if not all, teams implement social media, knowing why and how social media strategies are implemented is paramount.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study examined the processes by which National Basketball Association (NBA) teams' social media directors implemented, managed, and evaluated social media strategies. The social media sites Facebook and Twitter were the primary focus because every team in the four major professional North American sports leagues utilizes Facebook and Twitter to implement social media strategies. As of August 2011, there were more than 32 million fans who support NBA teams (not including league accounts) through Facebook and Twitter, compare to 27 million for National Football League (NFL) teams, 21 million for Major League Baseball (MLB) teams, and 10 million for

National Hockey League (NHL) teams (Sports Fan Graph, 2011). However, there has not been a thorough evaluation of NBA teams' social media processes as in-depth feedback has not been extracted in previous studies. Social media is a new form of communication that continues to rapidly grow.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Despite the growing interest in social media, both academics and practitioners have struggled to understand its value and consequences (Kwak, Kim, & Zimmerman, 2010). Given that social media in sport is already pervasive and continues to expand, it is critical for sport communication and media specialists to understand how sport consumers process such information compared with that from the mainstream media (Kwak et al., 2010). This extensive use of social media by social media directors of NBA teams is important because they need to better understand the power of social media in order to be the premiere professional sports league that uses it. Additionally, no scholarly articles have been written about the NBA and the process of how teams' social media directors have implemented, managed, and evaluated social media. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to view the processes of how NBA teams' social media directors determine implementation, management, and evaluation of social media strategies, and to serve as a benchmark so that social media directors of any team or sport can use these findings and recommendations.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to analyze how social media is used by social media directors of NBA teams. Specifically, the study looks to explore:

- Q1 What were the primary motives for engagement in social media?
- Q2 What processes do NBA team social media directors use to implement social media plans?
- Q3 What processes do NBA team social media directors use to manage social media strategies?
- Q4 What processes do NBA team social media directors use to evaluate social media strategies?

### **Importance of the Study**

Social media is used in a wide variety of entities, including retail, consumer behavior, and advertising, among other areas. This study provides information and rationale regarding social media processes implemented by NBA teams' social media directors. While the NBA (and basketball in general) have been heavily researched, social media is a growing entity, while more research is becoming available. Potential benefits and the significance of the current research include viewing how social media directors of NBA teams implement, manage, and evaluate social media strategies, and how teams can improve their social media presence. Results of the study may be used by the NBA to find any gaps in the use of social media to promote the league. Teams may use the results to see how they compare to other teams in implementation, management, and evaluation strategies, as well as opportunities for them to improve their own social media offerings.

### **Delimitations**

This study examines the use of social media among NBA teams. While there are many similarities among different sports, it cannot be fully assumed to generalize the

results to other sports, including MLB, MLS, NFL, NHL, and other leagues and sports. Additionally, this research may not be relative to other entities that use social media to connect with consumers, such as retail, food and beverage, and automobile manufacturers, among many other entities.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of the study is that not every social media director from every NBA team is interviewed, as the study includes a sub-section of NBA teams. The study focuses on select teams, and cannot be generalized to every NBA teams' social media strategy. Second, a self-administered questionnaire instrument was developed. Given the nature of interviews and organizations' hesitancy to completely divulge proprietary information, the responses provided by the participants cannot be assumed to be complete. However, participants volunteered and agreed to partake in the interviews and therefore it can be assumed that participants responded accurately and fairly to all questions.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Social media*: a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 59).

*Facebook*: social networking service which allows users to create a personal profile, add other Facebook users as friends, post pictures, and exchange messages.

*Like*: allows fans of an individual, organization, product, service, or concept to join a Facebook fan club

*Twitter*: Real-time information network and micro-blogging service, which allows users to share news, information, or activities.

*Tweet*: text-based post shared by users on Twitter. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters. A retweet is passing along a tweet from another user to your list of followers. This is similar to email forwarding.

*Follower*: users on Twitter who subscribe to other users' tweets.

*Web 2.0*: a collection of open-source, interactive, and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge, and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes" (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 1).

*User-generated content (UGC)*: various forms of media that are publicly available and created by end users. Such content can be seen as the sum of all ways that people make use of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media opens a new avenue of two-way communication. Since their introduction, social network sites (SNS) such as MySpace, Facebook, Friendster, and Orkut and have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This study will help to fill this gap in the literature, and discusses Uses and Gratifications theory, computer-mediated communication (CMC), Web 2.0, relationship marketing, experience marketing, user-generated content, social media.

#### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

With social media's rapid growth, it is necessary for researchers to look at how it can be harnessed effectively. Just as researchers study other online applications and resources, as well as the Internet in general, understanding social media is critical. The Uses and Gratifications theory is a fitting communication theory to explain social media. It posits that media use is goal driven, with consumers of media using specific, selected channels to satisfy needs and achieve gratifications (Clavio & Kian, 2010). The emergence of computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of Uses and Gratifications theory. In fact, Uses and Gratifications theory has long provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications

medium: newspapers, radio, television, the Internet (Ruggiero, 2000), and now social media.

A Uses and Gratifications approach is beneficial to exploring social media because its principle elements include one's psychological and social needs as well as how media can gratify those needs and motives to communicate (Rubin, 2009). Uses and Gratifications theory holds that multiple media compete for users' attention, and audience members select the medium that meets their needs, such as a desire for information, emotional connection, and status (Tan, 1985). This theory has been used since the 1940s and has experienced a resurgence in the study of the Internet and new media (Rubin, 2009). The seminal piece on Uses and Gratifications theory comes from Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch (1973), who state that audience gratifications can be derived from at least three distinct sources: media content, exposure to the media (per se), and the social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media. People today must be more selective than in the past to select a medium that meets their needs because they have more media choices (Ruggiero, 2000). For example, it follows that people who are most active on Twitter would do so because they get something out of that experience.

Uses and Gratifications theory is successfully being used in recent research on the web (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; LaRose & Eastin, 2004). It is also being used to study blogging (Chung & Kim, 2008; Williams & Chinn, 2010); online games (Wu, Wang, & Tsai, 2010); and social-networking sites such as Twitter (Clavio & Kian, 2010), Facebook (Joinson, 2008), and MySpace (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). This theory is particularly suitable for studying Facebook, which connects past and personal relationships, and Twitter, which offers the potential for both mass and interpersonal

communication (Johnson & Yang, 2009). Uses and Gratifications theory asks what people do with media, not what media does to people. It assumes that media have little or no impact on those who do not use it, but that people select a particular medium because it is meaningful and satisfies one or more needs (Rubin, 2009).

With the widespread adoption of new media, such as virtual worlds, instant messaging (IM), and SNSs, important new research from the Uses and Gratifications theory perspective is emerging. This research sheds light on what motivates individuals to switch from traditional media to new media and what kinds of gratification these are providing (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). A key distinguishing feature of new media is interactivity, which describes the ability of users to provide content in response to a source or communication partner (Ha & James, 1998). In new media, the distinction between consumer and producer tends to blur, which has led to the introduction of the term *prosumer* to describe users' ability to take control over the production and distribution of content (Toffler, 1984). This provides audience members control over content and its use, making it important to examine the gratification new media provides to users in comparison to traditional media (Lin, 2001). Focusing on social media is important because researchers need to understand what motivates users to switch from one tool to another. Moreover, the concurrent use of various tools suggests that each fulfills a distinct need making an analysis of Uses and Gratifications essential.

Uses and Gratifications theory has been used in online settings to compare motivation for participation in online activities. Ruggiero (2000) identified three key benefits of online usage: interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity. Internet (or social media in the case of the three key benefits) fosters interactivity, which gives users

the opportunity to communicate with other users, share and disseminate information, and form personal and professional relationships. In relation to demassification, users can pick activities and content that is of interest to them, as well as specifying with whom they interact, which molds the Internet (and social media) to each user's specifications. And lastly, asynchronicity of the Internet (and social media) provides users more flexible and open lines of communications. Users can post messages for other users to read at any time, and can read and respond to messages at any time as well, making it convenient for users to communicate at their own time.

Uses and Gratifications theory has been recently applied to Internet-based social networking, with scholars attempting to ascertain the nature of the participants and audiences therein (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) used a Uses and Gratifications approach to examine both participants and nonparticipants in the social networks Myspace and Facebook. A survey of college students revealed that the most salient uses for these social networks were to stay in touch with both old and current friends, to post or view pictures, and to make new acquaintances.

Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) employed Uses and Gratifications theory to examine membership in Facebook groups as part of a study highlighting the predictive nature of online participation factors in civic engagement. The authors surveyed over 1,400 college students and discovered four primary dimensions of gratification: a socializing factor, an entertainment factor, a self-status-seeking factor, and an information-seeking factor. The highest degree of variance was explained by the socializing factor, which included items relating to reception of peer support, meeting interesting people, belonging to a community, and staying in touch with people.

In a sport setting, Clavio (2008) applied Uses and Gratifications theory to new media and sport that used the paradigm to examine collegiate sport message-board users and their reason for taking part in the online community environment. The study found four primary areas of Uses and Gratifications for the message-board users: interactivity, information gathering, diversion, and argumentation. These dimensions pointed toward an online experience that valued a back-and-forth relationship between users, rather than an experience that was purely consumption-based.

Johnson and Yang (2009) applied a Uses and Gratifications approach to investigate Twitter. User motives (gratifications sought) and the perceived fulfillment of these motives (gratifications obtained) of Twitter were examined. The researchers found two factors important to the use of Twitter: social motives and information motives. Analysis found that information motives are positively related to Twitter use. Additionally, Chen (2010) found among Twitter users that the more months a person is active on Twitter and the more hours per week the person spends on Twitter, the more the person satisfies a need for an informal sense of camaraderie, called connection, with other users.

The identified motives from Ruggiero (2000) have paralleled studies regarding online use from a sports perspective. In addition to interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity, Hur, Ko, and Valacich (2007) and Seo and Green (2008) also identified gathering information and technical knowledge, and receiving entertainment and diversion to be equally as important for online use from a sport perspective.

### **Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)**

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is any communicative transaction that occurs through the use of two or more networked computers (McQuail, 2005).

While the term has traditionally referred to those communications that occur via computer-mediated formats (e.g., instant messages, e-mails, chat rooms), its application is present in other forms of text-based interaction such as text messaging (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). Research on CMC focuses largely on the social effects of different computer-supported communication technologies, including Internet-based social networking supported by social software.

The abundance of social networking and the subsequent production of social information are interesting characteristics because they lead scholars to reconsider the conventional computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature that focuses on users' intra-psychological processes (Kwon, 2010). Communication online is often characterized as "hyper-personal" (Nowak, Watt, & Walther, 2005, p. 1). While the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is influenced by group and organizational effect, it may also be true that CMC could play a role in the development and support of loosely bound and diffuse social networks, such as those not typically termed a group (Garton, Haythornethwaite, & Wellman, 1997). In such diffused networks, weak ties are created or supported between individual members of various participating groups and organizations (Garton et al., 1997).

An important change brought about by CMC lies in the concept of interaction (Riva & Galimberti, 1997). As technology advances, CMC is no longer machine-to-machine or human-to-machine communication. Rather, CMC has more in common with

interpersonal interaction and connection than with the use of static technology.

Additionally, with the advent of social media, a new communication medium has been created to pass information from one person to another.

There are two distinct types of CMC: synchronous and asynchronous (Dix, Finlay, Abowd, & Beale, 1993). Synchronous CMC is produced when communication occurs simultaneously between two or more users, as in any normal telephone or face-to-face conversation, or an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) done through two or more computers. Asynchronous CMC is produced when communication is not simultaneous, such as posting messages to a message board. The essential difference between the two is a temporal one. Therefore, for CMC to be synchronous, computers must be linked in real time (Dix et al., 1993).

Social media is an emerging synchronous form of CMC, and arguably the most prominent today. It presents a new method for people to interact through CMC, yet still have a real-time, authentic connection. This simultaneous form of communication is becoming standard, as people as people are social by nature, even if the people are not physically in the same room. Before social media, IRC was the most prominent form of synchronous CMC. However, social media allows one person to simultaneously connect with many other people (tens, hundreds, or even thousands) who are not in the same physical location. This allows a new method of interpersonal interaction, networking, and maintaining relationships.

The most common form of asynchronous CMC is electronic mail, or e-mail. One person sends a message to another person, to which that message is stored in the other person's e-mail inbox until he or she reads the message. Due to the static nature of e-

mail, there is no real-time interaction between humans. There are advantages to asynchronous CMC. In terms of e-mail, messages can be forwarded to another user, posted to message boards, or saved in the users inbox or an archive folder. Although the messages are static in nature, they can be retrieved at a later date and time.

### **Relationship Marketing**

Relationship marketing is defined as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Gronroos (2004) further defined relationship marketing as “the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, so that the objectives of all parties are met” (p. 101). The term was first introduced by marketing expert Dr. Leonard Berry in his 1983 book *Relationship Marketing*. Berry stressed that the attraction of new customers should be viewed only as an intermediate step in the marketing process. Berry outlined five strategy elements for practicing relationship marketing: developing a core service around which to build a customer relationship, customizing the relationship to the individual customers, augmenting the core service with extra benefits, pricing services to encourage customer loyalty, and marketing to employees so that they, in turn, will perform well for customers (Berry, 1983).

Relationship marketing was described as a paradigm shift in the mid-1990s and has continued to evolve in a range of different business environments, such as finance, marketing, and manufacturing (Gronroos, 2004). The goals of relationship marketing are to build long-term relationships with the organizations best customers, generating further business and ultimately profit (Williams & Chinn, 2010). It is also designed to contribute

to strengthening brand awareness, increase understanding of consumer needs, enhance loyalty, and provide additional value for consumers (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008).

Relationship marketing emphasizes the retention and development of existing customers and highlights the mutual benefits that arise (Copulsky & Wolf, 1990). Gummesson (1999) discussed relationship marketing and stressed the importance of interactions, relationships, and networks as three central components of the process. As marketing practices continue to evolve, there has also been increased recognition of service-oriented approaches in which intangibility, exchange processes and relationships are central (Vargo & Lusch, 2006). Vargo and Lusch also suggested consumers be acknowledged as active participants and coproducers in the process, which is precisely the advantage of social media. Deighton and Kornfeld (2009) used a model of consumer empowerment in which digital media were used to support a variety of customer interactions and relationships. Again, consumers were recognized as proactive communicators, which differed from the passive hands-off approach displayed by mass media audiences.

Relationship marketing is supported by integrated marketing communication activity and relies on planned messages to assist in the process of establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Two-way, or even multi-way, communications are used to provide opportunities for customers to interact and express their needs to the organization. The planned communications in relationship marketing often emphasize messaging provided through traditional marketing activities such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and personal selling (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Duncan and Moriarty (1997) suggested that additional sources of

communication should be considered in relationship building. For example, service messages (e.g., contact with sales staff) and unplanned messages (e.g., company-related chat rooms) continually throughout a relationship.

Relationship marketing has been used in the sport marketing field in a variety of settings, and a number of sport-specific models have been presented (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Shani (1997) suggested that the sport performance element of the industry was most similar to services and would therefore be most likely to benefit from relationship-marketing approaches. Sport consumers were also recognized as “highly involved consumers with a desire for long-term association with a team sport” (Shani, 1997, p. 9). Shani (1997) also suggested that sports marketers begin this process by developing segmentation strategies and then move along a continuum, recognizing the role of niche marketing and database marketing in developing a rich and detailed platform for relationship marketing.

Stavros, Pope, & Winzar (2008) developed an extension of the Shani (1997) study. The model highlighted a projected convergence of relationship marketing with the increased sophistication and development of sport marketing practice. Organizational structure, research, and a systematic use of relationship-marketing strategies were highlighted as significant components of this model (Stavros et al., 2008). Kim (2008) examined the relationship-quality aspect of relationship marketing in a sport context by considering the impact of seven relationship-quality constructs: trust, commitment, satisfaction, love, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity. These constructs were measured on sport-consumption behaviors (media consumption, purchase of licensed merchandise, and attendance). Kim (2008) found that relationship quality was a predictor

of behavioral outcomes, specifically, that fans who perceived higher levels of relationship quality intended to consume more sport through media, buy more licensed products, and attend more games. The results of the study validated the importance of strong relationships between sports organizations and fans (Kim 2008).

Many sports organizations have embraced relationship-marketing approaches (Williams & Chinn, 2010) and recognized that their consumers are highly involved “with a desire for long-term association with a team sport” (Shani, 1997, p. 9). The potential value and benefits of using social media to meet relationship-marketing goals is significant, and in an environment such as sport it may be particularly relevant in supporting consumers as they become active contributors. As sports organizations rely on repeat purchases of tickets and promotional merchandise and seek to retain loyal consumers, strategic relationship-marketing practices that strengthen these behaviors may have the potential to provide significant competitive advantages (Williams & Chinn, 2009).

The emergence of social media and Web 2.0 technologies has the potential to significantly affect connections with customers (now often characterized as prosumers) and provide new directions and benefits in relationship-marketing (Williams & Chinn, 2009). The concept of prosumers was introduced by Toffler (1984) who proposed that the functions of producers and consumers would blend to a point where individuals would be involved in designing and manufacturing products. Tapscott (2009) states today’s prosumers are actively using Web 2.0 technologies to engage in increasing levels of collaboration and interactivity with organizations.

## **Experience Marketing**

Experience marketing is a form of relationship marketing, based on the lived experiences of users. Sports is about the experience and getting the fans involved. Whether it is buying a pair of shoes at a Niketown Store, working with a personal trainer at a health club, or watching game in a stadium, it is all about the experience (Stotlar, 2009). Hill, Pine, Gilmore, Betts, Houmann, and Stubblefield (2001) stated “experiences are a distinct economic offering as distinct from services as services are from goods, but one that, until now, went largely unrecognized. When someone buys a good, he receives a tangible thing; when he buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays for a memorable event that a company stages to engage him in an inherently personal way” (p. 44).

Social media is related to experience marketing; the users are the ones who are involved in creating content and connecting with their favorite teams via social media. While tangible goods can be easily obtained, an experience is one that can last for a lifetime. With fans reaching out to their favorite teams and athletes via social media, this creates a unique experience for the user, as people are more connected with teams than ever before. Additionally, with the rise of experience marketing, this is seen as a natural progression to connect with consumers (Sass, 2008). And with the growth of social media, experience marketing is a likely fit for teams and brands to use to connect with users, since users can interact continually with different types of messages via social media platforms during the experience.

## Web 2.0

Web 2.0 refers to the fundamental shift that swept across the Internet at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, transforming the information producer-consumer (one-to-many) model into a network in which every user has the ability to produce and consume Internet content (many-to-many). Web 2.0 is defined as “a collection of open-source, interactive, and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge, and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 1). O’Reilly’s article, “What is Web 2.0” is arguably the most successful work in explaining the Web 2.0 revolution and the rise of social media. Web 2.0 is a term made popular following the collapse of the dot-com companies. Original Internet Web sites (Web 1.0) allowed only one-way communication through static Web pages. In a sense, website publishers communicated with users as if lecturing (O’Reilly, 2005).

Key characteristics of Web 2.0 are that (a) the Web itself becomes the platform and is based on using open standards, decentralization, and Internet protocols (e.g., XML, HTML, etc.); (b) the Web is used to harness the collective intelligence of its users, also known as “crowdsourcing” (Surowiecki, 2004); (c) data and, in context, content, represent the value rather than hardware or software; (d) users become developers; (e) a business model for software development emphasizes open platforms and shareability; (f) applications are seamlessly developed over multiple devices (e.g., PC, mobile phone, etc.) and (g) there is a rich user experience facilitated by technologies for interaction (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

In Web 1.0, a person or company would build a website, populate it with content, and then wait for people to visit the site and read the content. The Internet provided very

limited ways for individuals to interact, have dialogue, or create unique content to share with others, including the website's owner. Individuals browsed the Internet from a computer and could only interact with other users through email, message boards, or forums; very few individuals had their own Web space (Weinburg, 2009).

Any interaction users had with companies were through planned and controlled environments such as trade shows, meetups in local stores, or corporate-sponsored events. These meetings were hardly authentic, and were often mediated by the company itself or a third-party such as a public relations firm (Pegoraro, 2010). In essence, users were connected through the Internet, but were still kept at arm's length from any real interaction. Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) indicated that one of the keys to increasing user identification was increasing accessibility to companies, and although Web 1.0 was an improvement on pre-Internet accessibility, it was still limited in its ability to provide points of attachment to companies through increased access.

In contrast, today's Web 2.0 allows for sharing, linking, collaborating, and the inclusion of user-generated content. So users, rather than receiving information through static Web pages, are engaged collectively in a conversation that leads to the generation of online content. That is, nobody knows everything, but everybody knows something, and what is known can be immediately shared through Web 2.0 social media applications (O'Reilly, 2005). The emergence of social media and Web 2.0 technologies has the potential to significantly affect connections with consumers and provide new directions and benefits in relationship marketing (Griffiths, 2008). According to Tapscott (2009), today's consumers are actively using Web 2.0 technologies to engage in increasing levels of collaboration and interactivity with organizations.

Marketers have long used the Internet or interactive marketing as a promotional and communications tool. Internet marketing tactics include banner advertising, sponsorships, pop-ups or –unders, links, paid searches, and so forth (Belch & Belch, 2007). The degree to which Web 2.0 social media applications will transform marketing promotion and expand tactics has yet to be fully realized. With the exponential growth of social media occurring in nearly every industry, the transformation of how business is conducted is consistently evolving. Organizations and businesses are just beginning to recognize and utilize the power of Web 2.0 social media. The second annual “Face of the New Marketer” survey reported that while many companies view Web 2.0 social media as a way to gain a competitive advantage, their budgets and time allocations often reflect other priorities (“Survey Reveals,” 2007).

Sport organizations can capitalize on Web 2.0 technologies to strengthen relationships with fans (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Sports organizations should pay attention to Web 2.0 technologies, and then leverage them and build relationships with fans and consumers. Proactive use of Web 2.0 tools in engaging consumers in a direct, personalized, multidimensional communications and interactions adds value and strengthens relationships (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Growing numbers of professional sports organizations are using Web 2.0 to reach fans in creative, dynamic ways.

### **User-Generated Content**

User-generated content is re-shaping the way people watch video and television, with millions of video producers and consumers (Cha, Kwak, Rodriguez, Ahn, & Moon, 2007). User-generated content sites are creating new viewing patterns and social interactions, empowering users to be more creative, as well as develop new business

opportunities. The advent of user-generated content has revolutionized the online video industry. Hundreds of millions of videos are being uploaded yearly by self-creating consumers. Constant streams of videos in virtually any topic are being uploaded for consumers to enjoy.

User-generated content has grown exponentially in recent years (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Blogger, YouTube, and Wikipedia have helped establish communication models based on blogs and personalized social network sites where users can publish their own content to share with other users (Leung, 2009). Blogs are the most common form of user-generated content (Kwak, Kim, & Zimmerman, 2010) and have been favored by communication firms and consultants as essential public relations tools (Kent, 2008). Other forms of user-generated content include social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), content communities (YouTube, Flickr, etc.), forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators, such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

User-generated content is understood as the various forms of media that are publicly available and created by end users. Such content can be seen as the sum of all ways that people make use of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Through user-generated content, individuals can become active content producers rather than passive recipients of information from mainstream media. Through the Internet, user-generated content can reach almost anywhere in the world and is not limited by subscriptions, unlike newspapers or magazines (Kwak et al., 2010).

With the exponential growth of social media and user-generated content, many sport organizations try to identify ways to make such media trends into a meaningful

communication tool (Fisher & Mickle, 2010). User-generated content is understood as the various forms of media content (e.g. blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) that are created by end users (Kwak, et al., 2010). Some sport entities are already investing in it, but there is still suspicion regarding the effectiveness or credibility of social media as a new communication tool for fan engagement (Coyle, 2010). Furthermore, many sport organizations are still questioning the effectiveness of social media as a marketing and communication tool because they are concerned that fans might say negative things about them (Coyle, 2010). However, the potential persuasive effects of user-generated content have been under-explored, and little empirical research has examined the many claims made by practitioners and media specialists (Kent, 2008).

Given that user-generated content in sport is already pervasive and continues to expand, it is critical for sport organization, sport communication, and media specialists to understand how sport consumers process such information compared with that from the mainstream media (Kwak et al., 2010). Previous studies have shown that the communicator's occupation (e.g., expert vs. nonexpert) determines source evaluations. For instance, imagine that a fan reads a blogger's post about his or her favorite team before the season begins and realizes that the team will have a depressing season. How would the fan process this counter-attitudinal message, delivered as a form of user-generated content? Now imagine that the same message came from a mainstream source (e.g., a sports magazine or its online component) and was written by a sport columnist. Would the fan respond any differently to the message because the source is considered more authoritative and reliable (Kwak et al., 2010)?

According to Geist (2007) via the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, user-generated content needs to fill three requirements: (a) it needs to be published either on a publicly accessible website for social networking site accessible to a group of people, (b) it needs to show a certain amount of creative effort, and (c) it needs to have been created outside of professional routines and practices. The first condition rules out content exchanged via emails or instant messages. The second condition excludes a mere copy-and-paste of already existing content (e.g., posting a copy of an existing Internet article without any modifications to the original content [Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010]). More than 88 million people in the United States alone created online content in 2009 (eMarketer, 2009) and that number is expected to grow to 114 million by 2013, over one-third of the United States population.

### **Social Media**

Social media has had a significant impact on communication since the first weblogs, or blogs, appeared more than a dozen years ago (Thackeray et al., 2008). Social media are distinguished from other forms of communication because they support user participation on a massive, collective scale; the contributions are also distributed among the participants to view, share, and improve (Bradley, 2010). Social media has continued to develop into a number of different forms including text, images, audio and video through the development of forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts, search engine marketing, video sharing, Wikis, social networks, professional networks and micro-blogging sites (Wright & Hinson, 2009). Tancer (2008) indicates that social media is the number one use of the Internet. According to the International Association of Business Communicators (2010), more than half of all Internet users have joined a social

network. Additionally, social networks have become the number one platform for creating and sharing content, and nearly 75 percent of all Internet users have read a blog (IABC, 2010).

The first recognizable social network, SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997, and a rash of sites followed, including Ryze, MySpace, and then Facebook in 2004 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and finally Twitter two years later. Facebook is seeing more growth than either MySpace or Twitter (Alexa Traffic Rank, 2011). Those figures show for July 2010, 3% of global Internet users visited MySpace, 6.45% visited Twitter, and 33.56% visited Facebook. Additionally, 65% of online adults use social networking sites (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). A number of organizations and research groups have explored how blogs, social media and other new technologies are changing the way organizations communicate with strategic publics such as employees, customers, stockholders, communities, governments and other stakeholders (Wright & Hinson, 2009). Weber (2009) suggests the communications world is dramatically moving in a digital direction and those who understand this transformation will communicate much more effectively than those who do not.

There are a plethora of social media sites on which a person can participate (Sanderson, 2010). Many of these sites offer users a number of tools to selectively manage their self-presentation an identity, capabilities that have contributed to the expansive growth of sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Additionally, celebrities are increasingly joining the social media world, using these platforms to connect with fans, with athletes arguably being the foremost celebrity group using social media (Sanderson, 2010).

Research is being conducted on how social media allows individuals and organizations to communicate with one another in new methods (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Gillin (2009) states social media not only have ended the age of one-way messaging, but also put pressure on businesses to engage constituents in new and unprecedented ways. Solis & Breakenridge (2009) believe powerful new social media tools offer unique opportunities in a day when most traditional social media are being utilized on an ever-increasing basis by corporations and other organizations. McCorkindale (2009) reports 69% of the current Fortune 2000 companies are using social networking sites. Ruh & Magallon (2009) indicates the United States military currently is involved in studying the potential of using social media for some of its internal communication campaigns. Paine (2009) points out many organizations now are trying to measure the effectiveness of their social media communication efforts.

Studies have shown that online social networks can create benefits for users, particularly in helping them make important social connections, share information, and increase personal self-esteem (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Although newer applications (Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, etc.) emphasize maintaining relationships, older online social networks like blogs, Web portals, and listservs promote other uses such as exchanging information about new products and conducting business and organizational activities (Ewing, 2008). Hambrick et al. (2010) suggest research findings are part of an evolutionary trend with online social networks. Although online social networks appear as a fad or a trend at first, these networks have quickly evolved into more serious places to engage with consumers, market products, and exchange resources. What were websites that five years ago only members of society used to connect with

friends and family, nearly every organization worldwide uses social media to connect with consumers and fans.

The use of social media has brought the world closer together, breaking down geographic barriers that have historically divided individuals, cultures, and nations and allowing new online communities to emerge and grow (Pegoraro, 2010). And although social media is part of mainstream society, little academic research has been done on specific social media sites.

### **Facebook**

Facebook is a social networking application with over 800 million users worldwide (Facebook Press Room, 2011). The website is free to join and free to use. Individual accounts connect with other users, called 'friends.' The maximum number of friends one user can have on one account is 5,000. Groups can be formed for any team, organization, or interest, users can 'like' a group, and a group can have an unlimited number of likes. The website offers a search bar at the top to look for friends, companies, and games. The fastest growing demographic of Facebook users are women over the age of 55 (Smith, 2009). Therefore, Facebook is a site that people of all ages can use. McWilliam (2000) notes a successful online community allows participants to have a forum to share common interests, develop meaningful and interesting dialogue, and provide a sense of belonging to community members. Additionally, Armstrong and Hagel (1997) stated that communities that can meet the multiple needs of users will provide the most value, thus being the most successful.

Research into Facebook usage patterns suggests that Facebook is used and adopted primarily to maintain contact with offline connections rather than to develop new

relationships (Ellison et al., 2007). In a study of 2,000 students, Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) found that Facebook is used by students for purposes related to “social searching”—that is, to learn more about someone they know offline, rather than for “social browsing”—the use of Facebook to develop new connections. Students reported using Facebook to “keep in touch with an old friend or someone I knew from high school” (Lampe et al., 2006, p. 168).

Ellison et al. (2007) found similar results, indicating that students use Facebook for both maintaining preexisting close relationships (bonding social capital) and keeping in touch with high school acquaintances and classmates (maintaining social capital). In terms of bonding social capital, Ellison et al. suggest that Facebook may provide a low-maintenance way for users to keep up-to-date on friends’ activities, citing the birthday notification as an example of a feature that requires minimal effort to keep in contact with friends. In terms of maintaining social capital, Ellison et al. (2007) suggest that Facebook allows users to maintain a connection to ‘weak ties,’ for example, high school acquaintances who may be able to provide valuable new information and resources.

### **Twitter**

Twitter is a real-time information network and micro-blogging service, which allows users to share news, information, or activities. Like Facebook, Twitter is free to join and use. Users communicate with each other by using text-based messages called ‘tweets’ that can be a maximum of 140 characters. Twitter currently has over 200 million users (Twitter user, 2011). Users can “follow” other users, and be “followed” as well. One major difference with Twitter (as opposed to Facebook) is that a user can follow another user, but does not have to be followed back. For instance, a user can ‘follow’

President Barack Obama, but President Obama does not have to ‘follow’ the user back in return. In this case, this is a one-way relationship. Although Twitter does not provide a representative sample of any one population, it does provide insights into what its users are talking about at a given point in time (Ovadia, 2009).

Researchers began studying Twitter and found that people were using it to give and receive advice, gather and share information, and meet people (Johnson & Yang, 2009). People tweeted about a range of topics, including events of daily life, and linked to news stories (Java, Finin, Song, & Tseng, 2007). In time, Twitter evolved from an online application where users answered a simple question to a new economy of info-sharing and connectivity between people (Sarno, 2009). Research has found that this sharing of everyday experiences and chitchat online help people establish common ground and can bring people together through social media (Donath & Boyd, 2004), but this idea has not been tested on Twitter.

Krishnamurthy et al. (2008) early analysis of Twitter characterized users and their behavior, geographic growth patterns, and current size of the network. Java, *et al.* (2007) examined the follower network on Twitter, including over 1.3 million tweets from over 76,000 users. Their study reported high degree correlation and reciprocity in the follower network and revealed there is great variety in users’ intentions and usages on Twitter. Huberman, Romero, and Wu (2009) demonstrated that Twitter users only interact with a small subset of their social connections. However, the role of Twitter spam in these results has not been explored extensively. Researchers have also investigated reasons why people use Twitter, such as finding common ground and connectedness, as well as benefits for informal communication at work (Zhao and Rosson, 2009). Honeycutt and

Herring (2008) described conversational practices on Twitter based on the “@ reply” that is used to refer to others and to direct messages to others. Boyd, Golder, and Lotan (2009) examined conversational practices in Twitter based on retweeting and the ways that authorship, attribution, and communicative fidelity are negotiated.

The real-time information nature of social media makes it ideal that teams, athletes, and fans use it to connect with each other. All the advantages that social media brings to society is even more prominent for sports, which already has a large, built-in audience hungry for the opportunity to talk directly with sports teams, athletes, and coaches (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010).

Few studies have been conducted on social media in sport. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) examined professional cyclists who used Twitter to communicate with their teammates, coaches, sponsors, and fans during the 2009 Giro d'Italia cycling tour. The authors found the cyclists mainly used Twitter to communicate about road conditions for the race and physical health conditions. Clavio and Cooper (2010) collected data from three populations (retired professional athlete, college football fans, and college students) on why and how they used Twitter. In the first data set, users followed the retired athlete to read her tweets and get a view of her personal life. In the second data set, results showed nearly 80% of survey participants did not use Twitter. The third data set showed only 43% of college students used Twitter (Clavio & Cooper, 2010). While it seems that these numbers might be low, it could be the fact that not everyone has seen the benefit of Twitter yet, and will see its usefulness in the coming years.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The research employs a case-study method. Case study is “an exploration of a bounded system or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1998 p. 61). Yin (2003) also stated that case studies can deal with complex situations where there are many variables of interest, utilize multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and can benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. Zonabend (1992) stated that case study is done by giving special attention to completeness in observation, reconstruction, and analysis of the cases under study. Case study is done in a way that incorporates the views of the actors in the case under study. Merriam (2006) acknowledged, “by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon” (p. 51).

Yin (2003, p. 37) stated a case study design should be considered when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer the “why” and “how” questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study. Based on Yin and other qualitative researchers’ criteria, the intersection of social media and the NBA meets the criteria for a case study. First, the research questions focus on the “why”

and “how” social media directors of NBA teams use social media, and provide a deeper understanding for their rationale and strategies. Second, the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of the NBA teams’ social media specialists in the study. The teams already have a strategy set in place without influence or bias of the researcher. Third, the intersection of social media and the NBA can be seen as a contextual condition, and there is relevance to the phenomenology of social media and the NBA.

### **Pre-pilot Study**

An initial survey instrument was pre-piloted with a small group ( $N = 5$ ) of Facebook and Twitter users. These individuals received either a paper survey or an electronic version (not an actual survey link) and provided feedback, concerns about content, and portions where the survey needed more clarification. Necessary changes were made, then the survey was released for the pilot study.

### **Pilot Study**

Before the final interviews were conducted, a pilot study was developed and administered so that any issues could be determined. The survey (Appendix A) was sent to 1,100 personal contacts on Facebook and Twitter. Participants were notified through Facebook by an event invitation, asking them to complete the survey. Participants were notified through Twitter by individual messages, asking them to complete the survey. Follow-up notifications were sent through Facebook and Twitter every three days after the initial contact for nine days. The survey ran for two weeks from the initial dissemination. While there is not a standard protocol as of yet for disseminating surveys through social media, sending electronic surveys through the Internet to users and contacts and including a personalized note is a good start (Chatfield-Taylor, 2002).

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was submitted to and accepted by the University of Northern Colorado. There were a total of 112 participants in the survey. Six surveys were removed, because no questions were answered (the consent form [Appendix B] was agreed to, but the survey had no responses after that point). A final sample of 106 respondents was gathered, constituting a 9.6% response rate. Online surveys typically generate a 10-15 percent response rate (Chatfield-Taylor, 2002).

The research question asked if NBA fans use one type of social media over another to support their favorite teams. This research question compared if fans used Facebook and Twitter differently to support their favorite NBA teams. Cronbach's Alpha was used to test reliability, and there was not a significant difference in how respondents use different social media sites to connect with their favorite teams (.852 for Facebook [Appendix C] and .843 for Twitter [Appendix D]). The same questions were asked for Facebook and Twitter as to why respondents use either or both to support their favorite teams. A principal component analysis (PCA) was run with SPSS software to analyze the data. There were 15 choices (outlined in Appendix E). For Facebook, of the total variance explained, five components (fan of team, exclusive promotions, game content, non-game content, and other people are fans of the team) each had an eigenvalue greater than 1, which accounted for 83.283 percent of variance explained (Appendix F). For Twitter, of the total variance explained, four components (fan of team, exclusive promotions, game content, and non-game content) each had an eigenvalue greater than 1, which accounted for 78.423 percent of variance explained (Appendix G).

### **Follow-up Interviews**

Respondents had an option to participate in a 20-30 minute follow-up interview regarding usage of social media to follow their favorite NBA teams. Ten respondents provided e-mail addresses, and seven phone interviews were conducted. The follow-up interviews consisted of nine questions (Appendix H).

### **Limitations**

There were three known limitations of the pilot study, although more may be found at a later date. One limitation was that data were not collected from all 30 NBA teams. The respondents represented fans of 23 teams. Although 75% of teams were represented and inferences can be made, it would have been beneficial to receive responses from fans of the other seven teams. Another limitation is that only my personal contacts received the survey. Not all personal contacts are NBA fans, which may be a reason for a low response rate. A final known limitation is the distribution timeline of the survey. The survey was disseminated in mid-July, a timeframe when the NBA is in its off-season period. Fans may not be likely to support or read up on their favorite team until the NBA is in season, which is late October through the middle of June.

### **Direction**

Based on the results of the pilot study, the focus of the research was shifted to a qualitative aspect from the perspective of social media directors of NBA teams. Since there are millions of fans for each team worldwide, the data that can be collected from them will vary to some degree. However, there are only 30 NBA teams, and understanding the strategies and tactics of NBA teams' social media directors was more

beneficial for the basis of the research. More specifically, I looked at the processes and steps implemented by social media directors of NBA teams.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This research followed an interpretivism theoretical approach. In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of the experiences. The goal of research, then, was to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation. They are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals lives (Creswell, 2007). Social constructivism was developed by Vygotsky (1978), who stressed the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of society. He also strongly believed that community plays a central role in "making meaning" (p. 90). This theory was also fitting to explain technology (more specifically social media), and is similar to computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), wherein learning and sharing information takes place via social interaction using a computer through the Internet. This kind of interaction is characterized by the sharing and construction of knowledge among participants using technology as their primary means of communication or as a common resource (Stahl, Koschmann, & Suthers, 2006).

Erickson (1986) stated interpretive research is preferred when referring to qualitative research because of three reasons. First, the term interpretive research is a broader term than qualitative research; therefore it encompasses all other approaches such as ethnographic, qualitative, phenomenological, constructivist, and case studies. Second, although interpretive research is qualitative in nature, it does not carry the false

connotation of excluding the use of quantitative measures. Third, it emphasizes interpretation and suggests a focus on understanding the meanings in action of participants, as well as how those meanings are uncovered.

### **Sampling Procedure**

According to Merriam (1998), a case may be selected to study in depth because it is intrinsically interesting and the researcher who studies it seeks to get as full of an understanding of the phenomenon as possible. For this study, seven social media directors of NBA teams were interviewed. Furthermore, the selection of the teams was based on television market size that included two 'large' large television market teams, two 'medium' television market teams, and three 'small' television market teams (NBA Market Size, 2011). A list of the market size of teams is available in Appendix I. The rationale was that this provided a broader scope of how teams in different markets use social media, and what specific strategies and techniques they utilized.

The selection of the teams involved a two-part process. Merriam (1998) states two types of sampling exist: probability sampling (also known as random sampling) and nonprobability (also known as purposeful sampling). The benefit of random sampling is the factor of generalizability. Since the participants were not selected on specified criteria, there was an increased probability the sample will be more representative of the specific population. The majority of qualitative research does not use random sampling or focus on generalizability; hence the use of nonprobability (or purposeful sampling) will apply to this study. Merriam (1998) states nonprobability sampling "is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61).

Interviews for the research were based on personal contacts with social media directors of specified NBA teams; therefore, the sample was purposefully selected. Additionally, in order to eliminate researcher bias, teams were selected based on various market sizes (in terms of population and geography) in order to gain a broader perspective of how teams use social media. This gave a further look into how NBA teams' social media directors in different markets implemented, managed, and evaluated social media strategies. These teams were chosen because "it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam, 1998, p. 62).

### **Methodological Framework**

This study was rooted in phenomenology. A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. The inquirer collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals. This description consists of "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced it (Creswell, 2007). Social media is a rapidly growing technology, and society has quickly adopted it for everyday use; therefore, phenomenology was a fitting theory for this research study.

### **Sources of Evidence**

There are six common sources of evidence: interviews, documentation, archival records, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2003). For this study, interviews were the main source of evidence, with documentation and archival records that served as evidence of confirmation into how NBA teams' social

media directors implemented, managed, and evaluated social media processes. The following outline lists the sources of data that was utilized during data collection:

### **Interviews**

1. Two teams from an NBA Large Market (Appendix I).
2. Two teams from an NBA Medium Market (Appendix I).
3. Three teams from an NBA Small Market (Appendix I).

### **Documentation**

1. NBA Teams
  - a. Any available documentation in relation to social media
    - i. Facebook page
    - ii. Twitter page
    - iii. Links on team website in reference to social media
    - iv. Team-related and team-approved websites with references to social media
    - v. Official team blogs

### **Archival Records**

1. NBA Teams
  - a. Any available documentation regarding strategies tactics of how the teams use social media.

### **Documentation**

Documents such as websites, meeting agendas, progress reports, and articles that appear in mass media are acceptable forms of documents for qualitative research (Yin,

2003, pp. 85-86). Documents that supported the understanding of how NBA teams' social media directors implemented, managed, and evaluated social media strategies were read and verified. Social media directors were asked about sharing confidential documents that regarded social media strategies, but due to privacy reasons, none of the social media directors were able to provide any type of internal documentation, stating it was for team use only. Articles from websites, newspapers, blogs, or any other source (online or print) were also used to verify social media implementation. These documents were available to the general public, so accessibility and proprietary information was not a concern.

### **Archival Records**

Yin (2003) identified six examples of archival records: service records, organizational records, maps and charts, list of names and other relevant other items, survey data, and personal records (p. 89). Due to the nature of this study (and social media in general), archival records were not available.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were the primary source of research and evidence for this study. Interviews allowed the researcher to go in-depth on a specific topic. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. The interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic. Interviews may be useful

as follow-up to certain respondents to questions, e.g., to further investigate their responses (McNamara, 1999).

A semi-structured interview protocol was used, where specific questions were asked, but participants were allowed to elaborate on their responses freely. Merriam (1998) stated semi-structured interviews allow researchers to adjust to the “situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondents, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 74). Interviews were conducted based on an interview guide (Appendix J). Questions were open-ended, which allowed for interviewees to elaborate on questions, and allowed for additional questions or clarifications based on responses. Interviews were conducted with social media strategists and directors who are knowledgeable about their team’s social media usage, as well as informed of social media usage in general. Interviewing these individuals as well was beneficial in order to get a sense of how social media was used during the course of a game.

### **Internal Validity (Credibility)**

Internal validity concerns whether and how research findings capture the reality of any causal relationship between a study’s variables (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, Yin (2003) stated that “internal validity is only a concern for causal (or explanatory) case studies” (p. 36). Strategies that were used included triangulation, member checking, researcher bias, and a personal statement.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation is an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint (Cohen & Manion, 2000). Triangulation also gives a more detailed and balanced picture of the

situation (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008). Triangulation was used to ensure the most complete information is available, and ensured that different methods led to the same results. If one method was used to gain results, it could be results were reached by chance. However, if two or more methods were used to gain the same results, the results will have more validity. O'Donoghue and Punch (2003) stated triangulation is a method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data. The study was triangulated by interviewing social media directors of multiple teams in multiple markets, and gathered their results to see how the different teams implemented, managed, and evaluated social media strategies. Social media directors were asked about sharing documents and meeting notes that regarded social media strategies, but due to privacy reasons, none of the social media directors were able to provide any type of internal documentation, stating it was for team use only.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking in qualitative research is a respondent validation technique used by researchers to help improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and fittingness of a study (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). This method allows researchers to test their own meaning by going back to the people they interviewed and observed to ensure the message is being interpreted correctly by the researcher. This also ensured the researcher is presenting information from the interviewee in the most accurate and honest manner. Detailed interview transcripts from the interviews conducted were sent back to the interviewees for member checking, to ensure accuracy and fairness. Additionally, this gave the interviewees an opportunity to clarify any points that were not clear or to clear any confusion on a topic or question. Three interviewees found errors in the coding of

the interview, to which were corrected and each director was sent an updated version of the interview transcript.

### **Researcher Bias**

The issue of researcher bias is an important one, and should be eliminated in order to ensure the fairness, honesty, and accuracy of a study. Influencing results to portray a specific outcome must not occur. By outlining the interpretivism approach this study was based on, the following personal statement outlined the rationale of the study and attempted to eliminate any researcher bias.

### **Personal Statement**

Social media is becoming more mainstream in today's society. From celebrities and athletes using it, to seeing Facebook and Twitter icons on websites, to YouTube videos being shown on television, social media has changed the way brands and people connect with each user, and I was interested in seeing what type of impact that has on society. As an avid sports fan and social media researcher, I am interested in this research because social media is a relatively new entity, and significant research has not yet been conducted. In turn, there has been substantial research conducted on the NBA and basketball in general. However, the rationale of the study was that the intersection of the NBA and social media has not been researched or discussed, and this study helped fill the gap. As someone who uses social media regularly, I went beyond the simple scope of checking up on friends and following other users. I used a critical eye when utilizing social media through the course of the day. What one person might see as an athlete posting a status update, I saw as interaction (or lack thereof) with followers.

As presented earlier, while conducting my quantitative pilot study, I interviewed fans on how they used social media to connect with their favorite teams. My findings suggested fans liked using social media to connect with their favorite teams, but would like more interaction and two-way communication. Teams are always looking for more (and better) ways to connect with fans, and social media provides an avenue to do just that. Furthermore, I am interested in the “why” and “how” of the social media aspect, so I wanted to delve further into how NBA teams’ social media directors implemented social media strategies.

Additionally, two of the most appealing aspects of social media are what makes it great for fans (and people alike to use). First, Facebook and Twitter are free for people to use. In fact, Facebook goes as far as saying on their homepage, ‘It’s free and always will be.’ The fact that people can connect with friends, family, and athletes (among many other people) for free shows how powerful social media is. Users have landed jobs, found soulmates, and reconnected with people from their past through social media. And for free. Chris Anderson tells in his book *Free: The Future of a Radical Price* why the most effective price is no price at all, especially in the digital marketplace.

Second, as discussed in the review of literature, user-generated content (UGC) makes social media a success. Instead of users relying on media to deliver content, people can now create and publish their own content. With UGC, the users are in control of the media, and can share any content they would like. Social media is designed for this (hence the word ‘social’), and allows people to, in essence, become their own media. Additionally, the creativity and power of the group is more than the creativity and power of the individual, so allowing the masses to share content makes the users feel satisfied

and be a part of something bigger. Research was needed on this topic because this will help to benefit the NBA on how they can better use social media strategies and processes. Potential benefits of the current research include viewing how social media is changing the way NBA teams use social media and how teams can improve their social media presence, among other benefits. This research will be a contribution to the field, as it gives insight into how NBA teams' social media directors implemented, managed, and evaluated social media strategies.

### **External Validity**

External validity (also called generalizability) is defined as “the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam, 1998, p. 207). To ensure external validity, this study ensures thick description and typicality.

### **Thick Description**

Thick description is the detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context (Holloway, 1997). This provides a rich, detailed description of an event, and allows readers to have a deeper understanding of the situation. The readers may also relate their own personal experiences to the event. For this study, a thick description of the strategies and methods used by NBA teams' social media directors to implement, manage, and evaluate social media allow other teams to see the strategies used by the teams being interviewed, and provided an in-depth, insightful method into the processes of why and how social media is used by NBA teams' social media directors.

### **Typicality**

Typicality describes the similarity of cases in the same context, so readers can compare their own situations and experiences to this study (Merriam, 1998). Seven teams were selected to be studied, with two teams that came from large and medium markets, and three teams from small markets. This allows readers to gauge an understanding of how different teams in different markets use social media, and can make similar comparisons to their own favorite teams or cities where they live.

### **Reliability (Dependability)**

Merriam (1998) stated reliability is whether the study would produce the same results if it were repeated. In order to increase reliability, the researcher must reduce bias and errors. Additionally, *dependability* focuses on the process of the inquiry and the inquirer's responsibility for ensuring that the process is logical, traceable, and documented (Schwandt, 2007). Merriam (1998) described investigator position, triangulation, and audit trail as factors to increase reliability.

### **Investigator Position**

By detailing the theoretical background, sampling methods, interview questions, participants being interviewed, teams and cities involved, and the situation in which they were interviewed, this allowed for this research to be more dependable.

### **Triangulation**

Using multiple methods of data collection will enhance dependability (Yin, 2003). Triangulation was described in further detail in the previous section of internal validity.

### **Audit Trail**

An audit trail is a series of steps supported by documentation detailing an event or situation. As part of the audit trail, all interviews were done via telephone and were recorded. Permission from the interviewees was asked to ensure the researcher was granted access to record the telephone conversation. The interviews were recorded through <http://www.freeconferencecall.com>, a service designed to record telephone conversations. Field notes were used to capture thoughts, interpretations, and anything else deemed noteworthy beyond the scope of the conversation.

### **Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is the range of processes and procedures whereby researchers move from the qualitative data that have been collected into some form of explanation or interpretation of the people and situations being investigated (Lewins, Taylor, & Gibbs, 2005). This study utilized a phenomenology analysis.

### **Phenomenology Analysis**

Creswell (2007) preferred to use a simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method discussed by Moustakas (1994) discuss the points of describing the personal experiences with the phenomenon under study, develop a list of significant statements, take the significant statements and group them into larger units of information, write a description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon, write a description of “how” the experience happened, and write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007).

For this study, all recordings, notes, and conversations were reviewed several times to ensure the most accurate information was gathered. Reviewing this information allowed the researcher to divide data into specific categories, called 'themes' in phenomenological analysis. Once the themes were established, the material was reviewed again and placed the data into appropriate themes.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used. This offers researchers the opportunity to learn from the insights of the experts: the research participants themselves (Smith, 1996). IPA offers the researcher the chance to engage with a phenomenon at a particular level. The participant's 'lived experience' is coupled with a subjective and reflective process of interpretation, in which the analyst explicitly enters into the research process (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p. 20). Importantly – and in contrast to some other qualitative approaches – the researcher is still on familiar territory, in terms of the inferences that can be made from data (such as interview transcripts or audio recordings). IPA makes these inferences cautiously, and with an awareness of the contextual and cultural ground against which data are generated, but it is willing to make interpretations that discuss meaning, cognition, affect and action.

One distinct feature of IPA, as compared to other theoretical analysis, is that it is an inductive approach (meaning a bottom-up approach instead of a top-down approach). This means the researcher generates code and inferences from the data rather than using a pre-existing theory to identify codes that may be applied to the data (Reid et al., 2005). Additionally, prior assumptions are avoided, and hypotheses are not tested. IPA is designed to capture the meanings and interpretations that participants (or interviewees) assign to their own experiences. This is fitting for this study, considering every team

uses social media differently, so every team had different implementation, management, and evaluation strategies of how they used social media. One team, regardless of market, size, or team success, viewed and implemented social media differently from other teams.

This study also used a bottom-up approach, which means that the NBA teams' social media directors were interviewed, instead of individuals at the top of the organization (CEO, COO, GM, etc.) being interviewed about their respective teams' social media strategies. Additionally, each interviewee is an expert for their own team's social media strategies, so detailed thoughts, feelings, and analysis were provided to the researcher for their own team. This allowed interviewees to reflect upon their own role with the team and provided a unique experience and inside look into the strategies and techniques implemented. With the unique aspect of each team using social media to fit their own fan base and market, IPA was a fitting theory and effective way to analyze the data. This allowed for a deeper meaning and understanding of social media usage, and allowed the data collected from this study to be shared in a new light.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

Using the interview recordings and transcripts, this chapter presents the findings of the study. The results of the study were divided into four sections by research question that discuss the implementation, management, and evaluation of social media strategies by NBA teams' social media directors, as well as themes that emerged from the coding process. Each section provides detailed analysis of the data in order to answer each research question.

#### **Participant Characteristics**

Social media directors from seven NBA teams participated in the interview. Two represented 'large market' teams, two represented 'medium market' teams, and three represented 'small market teams' (Appendix I). Teams are coded as follows: LM1 (Large Market 1), LM2 (Large Market 2), MM1 (Medium Market 1), MM2 (Medium Market 2), SM1 (Small Market 1), SM2 (Small Market 2), and SM3 (Small Market 3). In regards to personal demographics (Appendix J, Question 11) of the NBA team's social media directors, all participants were between 25-35 years old. Every participant who chose to disclose their ethnicity was Caucasian. Every participant had attained a bachelor's degree, with one participant indicating they had completed some graduate coursework.

Among the college majors were Journalism (two), Psychology (two), Marketing (one), Media Arts (one), and Sport Management (one). None of the directors took any coursework related to social media during the time of their college studies. However, three of the interviewees stated they took coursework related to computer programming and online technology. Due to the rapid increase in social media over the past three years, interviewees had already completed their college coursework before social media was a mainstream part of society, let alone any coursework being offered on the subject.

### **Research Question 1: Motives**

#### **What were the primary motives for engagement in social media?**

One of the objectives of this study was to discover why NBA teams decided to start using social media (Appendix J, Question 6). Although social media presence is not mandatory, it has become a necessity to implement, much like having a website. Engagement is one of the many factors of social media usage. Not only should this be communicating with multiple users, but meaningful, thoughtful interaction should be practiced as well. The key is to have a solid foundation and reasoning for engagement, not just to create content that does not provide value.

Each social media director shared a common perspective of implementing social media, while provided their reasoning for why their specific teams decided to implement social media. From the social media director's responses, motives for engagement were focused on three themes: team to fan engagement, fan to team engagement, and fan to fan engagement. Regardless of the specific type of communication, motives for engagement centered around connecting with fans.

**Team to fan.** This is seen as the most common form of communication via social media, where the team will communicate with the fans regarding game updates, player appearances, new additions to the website, and many other talking points. Specific examples include a team posting pictures of a game to Facebook immediately following the conclusion of the game, or a team tweeting an injury report, giving player's status for that day's game.

On a broader strategy scale, teams also use social media to create a unique, authentic voice on behalf of the team, create a dialogue among users, and drive online engagement. Among all the reasons shared for teams using social media, connecting with fans was a main reason:

It was to connect with the fans and provide an additional touchpoint. We realized by creating that (engagement), we would actually have control of that (social media) environment (MM2).

We want to keep our fans engaged as much as possible. Sports fans are passionate about their team and anything "extra" we can give them is always a success. We want to enhance their experience with the team and the brand the best we can (SM3).

Rather than a different type of company that has customers, we have fans, and fans are perfect for social media, a perfect way to communicate with them. Our strategies have changed over the years, but as far as getting into it, we didn't realize the full scope of what it was going to become, but we knew this was going to be a very useful tool beyond the traditional ways of communicating with our fans (LM1).

Well I think on a very basic level, I use it to stay connected to friends and family, and similarly, our organization's motives, were originally, as they still are, to stay connected with our fans, who we consider our friends and our family (SM1).

**Fan to team.** This method of social media communication allows the fan to connect directly with the team. As one of the great advantages, the 'middle barrier' (website, television, newspaper, etc.) has been eliminated, and a fan can connect directly

to their favorite team or athlete via social media. This allows for fans to feel a real connection with their favorite team, and can build a closer affinity among the two.

Additionally, fans have irrefutable loyalty to their favorite sports teams. Fans value that relationship, and teams have an opportunity to build upon that affinity by providing content through social media. Fans also tend to view their team as a trusted source for news, so again, any information posted on the team's official social media sites will be seen positively by fans. These fans will also have a tendency to share that information with their friends and family. For example, if a team shares a gameday promotion through their official Facebook and Twitter pages, fans see that information and pass it along to their connections, either via sharing the Facebook post on their own page and letting their friends know of the promo, or by sending a retweet on Twitter, informing their followers about the promotion. Teams discussed how fans are involved with connecting with teams through social media:

It gives fans the opportunity to keep up the discussion. The fans engage with us and we respond and interact with them. Fans may also move up the ladder of attending single games, then hopefully turning them into season ticket holders. Keeping that channel open by letting fans talk to us is important (LM2).

Additionally, two teams gave examples of how fans use social media during the course of a game to engage with the team, and how the team responds:

Currently, we're working on a strategy to bring in more departments, with more customer service stuff. We may not have the answers, but someone in Ticket Services might, so being able to use (social media) tools and can route some of these sensitive topics to the appropriate department for somebody to handle. If there's something like 'there's a big post in the middle of the arena and I need to move seats' or 'this guy next to me is horrible. I hate him. He's swearing all the time' and they complain about it on Facebook or something. Our social coordinator is able to go and forward it to our appropriate person, how do you want to handle it. What our response back to the person would be. So we're trying to spread the load across the organization, people in our organization who

specialize in those areas, so we want to make sure their voices are heard, to represent the organization (SM2).

Anytime a fan mentioned us on any of our Twitter handles...we would copy anybody in the organization that would need to be involved, to respond to that fan...so if there's a complaint we re-route it to that person, and if they didn't have their own Twitter account representing their area of the business, we'd just have them respond to us, and we could direct message that fan, or get in touch with them, somehow, some way. Sometimes it always wasn't a complaint. Sometimes it was a fan saying something nice, we still wanted to get in touch with them, or retweet them, or reply to them on Twitter, to make it very public (MM2).

**Fan to fan.** Social media has allowed for fans to chat with other fans about their favorite team online and through social media. Not only can fans chat through Facebook and Twitter, but can also communicate via social media-influenced websites that allow for deeper engagement among fans. The nature of sports allows fans to discuss last night's game, how the new coach is doing, who will be a free agent, etc. With social media, those conversations can now go online to these sites, and fans can talk about their favorite teams any time of the day. Additionally, fans have the ability to chat with fans worldwide about the ups and downs of their favorite teams. Some NBA teams see these trends and have taken advantage by creating social media sites that are focused on fan-to-fan communication: Teams are still involved in fan to fan communication by becoming an official channel for fans to converse. A few directors talked about how they categorized their fans into tiers, and allowed them to communicate with each other:

With Facebook and Twitter, obviously we still have a huge presence there, and we think it's very, very important, but for our homegrown communities, with our message board and (fan-to-fan social media site), those are spaces we owned. Nobody could take that away from us. We felt that was really important, it was more of a niche community. Allowed us to become closer to our most engaged and passionate fans. So we almost treat it as tiered communities. Facebook and Twitter, you have different audiences there than you would on (fan-to-fan social media site) because they're very much different people (MM2).

Back in the dark days of (our team), we started to erode our fanbase, our fans and our team. And we realized it made us become very humble, and we needed to change how we were fundamentally running our organization, valuing character as much as you do on the court, so we started making those changes, but a lot of people were still ignoring us, were disgusted with the team, so we needed a way to engage with them again. So the thought was, the people who are left, they are pretty hardcore, and it's really tough to be passionate in a room full of haters. So if nine of your other buddies say 'why are you still cheering for this team' it can wear on you. What we wanted to do is create a safe haven for those fans so they were around 10 other people just as passionate as they were still, and so we created (fan-to-fan social media site) and wanted those fans to get even more passionate with the team. They were able to see the changes we made, and then those people can reach out to their friends and maybe convince them to join (fan-to-fan social media site) or maybe turning their attention back to the team (SM2). We also have a team site that currently isn't up (planning to reactivate during 2011-2012 season), but (fan-to-fan social media site), basically a social network for fans, with a blog and a bunch of other content (MM1).

### **Research Question 2: Implementation**

#### **What processes do NBA team social media directors use to implement social media plans?**

As with other strategies and plans, there also must be a foundation set in place to use social media properly. There is more to social media than just posting pictures of the team's practice on Facebook or sends tweet regarding what players are eating for their pregame meal. Carefully constructed plans are discussed, then action occurs based on those plans.

This question was asked to the social media directors (Appendix J, Question 7). There are five themes for this research question: who is involved in the development of social media plans, when did you start to implement social media plans, why did you start to implement social media plans, did you encounter any issues or roadblocks when implementing social media plans, and do you have a set of guidelines you use to measure social media implementation.

**Who is involved in the development of social media plans?** For most teams, a small number of people were generally involved in social media plan development. Some social media directors worked with their immediate staff members, while others worked with higher-level organization members.

*Immediate staff members.* Some directors stated they work with their immediate staff members and parallel departments to develop social media plans:

It was a combination of our Director of Marketing and our head of Digital Sales, so we really worked together to make sure not only our strategy on how we address the community, how we speak to them, and really encouraging the deep engagement that we wanted, but it also wanted to make sure we were impacting the business, so how can we use this in a way to communicate to our fans about all of our different priorities, tickets and corporate partner messaging, which was very important to us as well (MM2).

The New Media team which I oversee develops the team's social media plans, which are based on the organization's philosophies. The New Media focus from the beginning, but now a broader approach is definitely an ongoing discussion (SM1).

Our entire web team typically comes up with the plans, we sometimes gain input from other departments (SM3).

As far as the development, I would say there are other departments, especially now, more and more recently, because social media is such a big part of what we do, from a business standpoint. We get a lot of input from a content perspective from our PR (public relations) department, because they are so used to working in that respect on finding new engaging content for fans and helping us put it out there, so we definitely get a lot of help from them. As far as our sponsorship team and our community relations team, anytime our players are doing anything in the community, or we have a certain contest or promotion that works hand in hand with making sure social media is part of that plan (LM1).

I work across the organization with Sales & Marketing and Communications closely, because we've got different messaging we want to spread across all our content platforms and external partners, radio, TV, and print, and also the other sites as well. So we'll work out some of these core story lines and core messaging (SM2).

***Higher level involvement.*** Other social media directors worked with individuals higher in the organization to develop social media plans:

A lot of it, I come up with ideas, and meet with our Vice President of Digital. He and I talk and figure out what the best course of action is. If need be, we'll talk to people higher up in the organization. I work heavily with our Marketing and Community Relations team as well, so I know what messages they need to have go out via social. And usually, they'll give me the information, and I'll craft the message and post it for them. I also work with the sales person to understand what sponsorship messages need to go out, and usually I help craft messaging for that as well. When it comes to larger ideas, I'm heavily involved in what I need to do, but I talk to (Vice President of Digital), as well as some other people, to hash out what the final idea will be, and how we will implement it (MM1).

At the same time there's an ongoing and transparent dialogue between us and the executive team, so while we may implement many of the strategies, there's constant conversation, and I have a great relationship with my boss (SM1).

I'm in charge of all the development of social media plans. I'll discuss plans with our CMO (Chief Marketing Officer) but he gives me a lot of flexibility to create social media plans (LM2).

At the VP level, there are four VPs that help create the direction, and there's three Senior Directors that take the overarching philosophy or what we really need to execute, and develop a strategy and take it to market. That's the Senior Director of Marketing, Senior Director of Communications, and myself. So we work together and once we craft the thought of what we need to do, we need to talk about this storyline this week (SM2).

**When did you start to implement social media plans?** Another factor into social media is when teams decided to start implementing social media plans. With Facebook starting in 2004 and Twitter starting in 2006, social media has only been present for less than a decade. With sports teams, this is no different. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites were primarily used as personal sites. However, brands and teams have recently started to use these sites to connect with fans. Social media directors shared the timeframe in which they started implementing Facebook and Twitter for their

respective teams, while others implemented various forms of social media at different time frames.

**General timeframe.** Directors provided a timeframe when their respective teams began to implement social media:

We were really ramping up with Facebook and Twitter that year (Spring 2008) as well, so that was probably the year it became a big, big priority for us (MM2)

We made a big push beginning in the summer of 2008 (LM2).

Our (Vice President of Digital) was handling (social media), with everything else he had. And I know they are the first NBA franchise on board with Facebook and Twitter. I know they've been heavily involved with Twitter since January of 2009, and have leveraged that since then. And I believe the Facebook page has been around since the brand pages came about, so the media team since before I got here have been at the forefront of social media efforts (MM1).

We started to use social media in 2006 (SM1).

The 2009-2010 season is when we began (SM3).

**Various social media sites.** Additionally, some teams started using other forms of social media (besides Facebook and Twitter):

We were doing message boards since I got there, so I'm not sure if you could consider that a strategy or not, it was our first step for our foundation, but when we really jumped all-in was around Spring of 2008. That's when we were going to launch (fan-to-fan social media site) (MM2).

In 2006 we started laying the foundation of (fan-to-fan social media site). Executing that was in 2007, and we were on board with (fan-to-fan social media site) and Twitter came on board and then after that, Facebook. We had a MySpace page too, it was run by a fan and we worked with him on stuff. We were in that space but not really doing that much with it. I would say in 2006 we really started talking about what we wanted to do with (fan-to-fan social media site), really connect players with fans (SM2).

2009 is when we started to use it (Large Market 1).

**Why did you start to implement social media plans?** Along with the timeframe of when NBA teams started to implement social media plans, knowing exactly why the teams decided to start implementing social media is just as important. This provides the rationale as to the reasoning behind using social media on behalf of the NBA teams. It can be used for many reasons, such as for marketing purposes, public relations issues, and building relationships with fans and sponsors. Directors provided rationales specific to their team, while others stated a fan-centric approach as why social media plans were implemented.

***Team-centric approach.*** Some directors stated it was commitment and encouragement of their team to begin using social media:

We recognized that we got to fish where the fish are, and if we didn't do it, they would still engage somewhere else, so I think we recognized the value of being there. We are also in the culture that really encouraged innovation, especially with technology and (team owner) and his vision. So all combined, that's pretty much why we took it on (MM2).

Our CMO, General Manager, and Coach were very supportive of social media. Social media allowed us to integrate many facets of technology. Additionally, the team had to know we had to invest money into social media, and we were fighting a big battle with no monetary investment in social media. We created a Facebook app in 2009 which allowed us to spend less time with websites and more time with social media sites (LM2).

We (the team) started coming up with plans to better measure our successes and how they can be improved upon. Also as a way of showing what we have done and what we think will work going forward (SM3).

The organization is committed to innovation, and its driven to connect the team with its fans, and to elaborate on that, in the places where he or she congregates, so we like to try all the different mediums where social media and new media are going (SM1).

***Fan-centric.*** Other social media directors stated a fan-centric approach for why they started to implement social media plans:

I think it's the direct connection with our fans. There's nowhere else, especially at the time when Facebook fan pages became big. The interaction level with fans wasn't directly there. On the website, we're heavy into commenting (MM1).

We want to try to be wherever our fans are. It's our goal to be where our fans are, to connect with them (SM1).

We recognized it as a way to communicate with our fans. Rather than just emailing them or hoping they were coming to our website, it was kind of a way to get them to come to our website, and not to hit them over the head with ticket messaging over and over (LM1).

The first version, that would be the (fan-to-fan social media site) stuff, giving a safe haven for fans, being able to connect with them, bringing a digital presence. So looking at Twitter specifically, we did that around the draft. We wanted to make sure the fans had a behind-the-scenes look at what was going on during the draft, during workout when players would come and fly in from the airport, and that's when we grab our Twitter handle to really pull back the curtain and give direct messaging to fans, publishing straight to the web (SM2).

***Two-way communication.*** Directors also emphasized the need for two-way communication between teams and fans, as opposed to a one-way dialogue:

At the time, usually those were a one-way dialogue, that teams wouldn't get involved in commenting back. Social is a chance where we can directly understand what's going on with the fans, straight from their mouths, so we can have discussions with them, talk to them, understand what they are looking for, for the franchise, and really understand what the pulse of the fans is (MM1).

We want to provide content and engagement and two-way conversation (LM1).

***Revenue.*** Additionally, revenue generation was also a theme into why some teams used social media:

How can we communicate with them (fans) to get them to buy tickets and merchandise, and we were doing that via Facebook, engage them on Facebook, that's the first barrier of entry and get them engaged in (fan-to-fan social media site) to login or register so that they are in our database, email market them or call them or whatever, walk them up the ladder of someone buying retail merchandise or buying a ticket or a package, and then a season ticket (SM2).

***Combining online and offline.*** The relationship between the virtual and physical world, and blending the two, was also a theme among one team:

One of the things we wanted to focus on, continue to focus on, is build up this community online and bringing it offline, face-to-face, we wanted to do that around the games and around community service projects. Now you have Twitter which is kind of the same thing, but people that have never met each other in person, can you go and find a way to meet them in person, to build that connection and drive them back online. It's like a wheel of online-offline-online-offline and build a sense of camaraderie (SM2).

**Did you encounter any roadblocks or issues along the way?** With the success of social media among teams, it wasn't always a smooth process. As expected with any business venture, issues and problems arise during the implementation of social media. Using social media from an individual perspective is different from implementing strategies on behalf of a team, and with that, problems that may not be recognized from an individual's point of view may be of concern for a team. Social media directors responded with various levels of roadblocks and issues, including finding the appropriate outlet, as well as resistance from decision makers higher in the organization.

***Voice.*** Some directors indicated finding an appropriate 'voice' they wanted to portray via social media was a concern at first:

One of the biggest parts was figuring out what voice you should have and the way you should be communicating with fans, whether it's more of a traditional PR-centric voice of 'this is what happened and here are the details.' We kind of started off that way but then realized it was more of a conversational tone, and Facebook is a little more different than Twitter, but Twitter were a little more laid back and just sending updates all the time, whereas Facebook is more structured but more personal, so that was one roadblock, just trying to figure out our voice. Another one might be figuring out where to turn our attention, not only with Facebook and Twitter, but try and figure out what else we should be doing, what else we should try out, filtering through the good and the bad and through the social media platforms that are out there (LM1).

I would say we had some challenges internally, how much we wanted to interact and communicate with the fans, and mostly from a communications side, I think our leadership there believed in social media, really understood it, but was hesitant because, by opening the floodgates to social media, you start to lose control of the message just a little bit, but that's just the nature of the beast. You can't control that, but for a Communications or PR person, that's their job is to control the message, so it's always kind of a struggle, so how can we accomplish this without hurting the integrity of our brand communications (MM2).

***Resistance from decision makers.*** Some social media directors stated there was resistance from other individuals above them:

Yeah I would say we ran into a few. Number one, the league (NBA) had a lot of restrictions in place for teams, as far as what we could do, what we couldn't do, as far as our marketing messages, because social media reaches far beyond the 75-mile radius that the NBA has set up, so I don't think since they got a grip on it for a few years, they didn't want teams going out there and letting things get out of control because they would lose their grasp on it, so that was one thing, and it prevented us from being able to monetize in ways that we'd like (MM2).

Yes, decision makers are the last to grasp what social is and can be. They hear the buzzwords and often just want something to be done for the sake of doing it. It's not always best to be first to do something, but rather be the best at doing it (SM3).

We had some resistance from PR at first. They were concerned about how it would make the team look. They didn't want the team to look bad. When we started using it more and more, PR was ok with it, seeing that it was a positive thing. Our CMO, GM, and Coach, however, were always supportive of social media (LM2).

Oh yeah you do all the time. When we launched (fan-to-fan social media site) it was totally new for sports teams, in fact, it was totally new for brands to do this. I was able to point to that to upper management and the league both, because the league has final say on whether you do something or not, and had to convince a lot of people that this was going to be a good thing (SM2).

***Resistance from fans.*** One director expressed concern regarding the fans, and that changes were made to accommodate them:

With our first iteration of (fan-to-fan social media site) we had some message boards, vibrant community. We relaunched a new version, it was different, the layout was different, and totally lost everyone, and everyone abandoned the new

message boards, and we had to work really hard to get our community back up. That's one of things where you can really do damage, of changing things and launching new things. It was for the better, better functionality, better layout, but people are used to it, then it's really difficult to people to re-engage. It took a lot of work and we listened to a lot of user feedback of what they want to see different, why they didn't like it, and continue to augment and change, evolve that area of the site (SM2).

*No resistance.* Other directors stated they were not met with any resistance when implementing social media plans:

No. The organization has been committed to social media and the evolution of technology as a vital part of today's business (SM1).

It's been a fairly smooth process. As you can tell by different things the NBA has done, when it comes to video and their own social media efforts, they've really embraced trying to be on the cutting edge of this as well, and I know for a fact that higher ups in the organization here with the (team name) were the same way. It was about embracing the new technology and finding the best way to utilize it for the franchise (MM1).

**Did you have a set of guidelines regarding the implementation of social media plans that you use?** With the timeframe of teams starting to use social media and why they decided to implement social media plans, directors were asked if they used a manual or a set of guidelines. These guidelines can be used to show how to properly use social media on behalf of the team, definition of terms, and posting proper content, among other points. Social media directors provided insight as to if (and how) they used their respective social media guidelines.

*Single page.* Two directors stated they use a one-page document regarding implementation of social media plans:

We had a one-pager of how to use it and what's the best way to use it. However, our goal was to relaunch a strategy for all team members of the (team name), so if they wanted to engage in social media, they would know what's ok, what's not ok. We don't want to tell our employees, 'hey you can't use this because we're

scared of what you might say.’ Basically what we said, was guidelines, this is ok, this is not ok, and when you’re out there, just be careful (MM2).

Yeah we have a loose set of guidelines, like a one-sheet on do’s and don’ts, when to post, when not to post. Our HR Department also has a social media policy with employees, especially during this time right now, we need to make sure that we monitor and that we state in the rules to cater by the league. It’s difficult because everybody has the opportunity and you can’t monitor everybody all the time on what they’re doing, but as far as our official accounts, we have a one-sheet that we use. But sometimes, those are gut calls because they don’t fall under guidelines, and things change or move quickly, so if someone’s asking a question, somebody doesn’t have an answer for it, what do we do? (SM2).

**Goal-driven.** Some directors stated they have goals they use when implementing social media plans:

Yes, there’s an outline of the social media policy for all fulltime and part-time team members. Then there’s how the business initiatives are integrated into the New Media team. First we define our goals by the organization, then we define our objectives by the New Media team, so our goal is to engage with our fans, and our objective is to create and share content that drives brand awareness and purchase intent (SM1).

The first process is, “are we offering something to our fans.” If yes then we proceed with fleshing out more detailed campaign. If no, then we immediately reassess (SM3).

**Technology.** One team stated they use technology applications as a guideline to implement social media plans:

As far as process, we use HootSuite, myself and my colleague. We have it on our laptop, our phone, our iPads, so that way we’re always able to check everything related to the (team name) social media feeds (LM1).

**Loose or no guidelines.** Other teams stated they don’t use guidelines, but rather make adjustments accordingly as issues arise:

No guidelines or manual. I take care of everything myself (LM2). It’s more of a feel and adjust accordingly. Social media has evolved and changed so much, and continues to in recent years. A hard line set of guidelines may work right this second, but two weeks from now, three weeks from now, six months down the road, things change so much that they may not really be pertinent

anymore, so we like to have loose guidelines, know what we can and can't do, and what we can't necessarily do, but we try to be pretty open and work from that (MM1).

### **Research Question 3: Management**

#### **What processes do NBA team social media directors use to manage social media plans?**

After the implementation of social media plans, the directors have to ensure these strategies are managed. Is it not acceptable to implement the strategies and hope they work; instead, social media directors of NBA teams have to constantly look at what's working and what's not working, make adjustments, add or subtract plans as necessary for team success on social media, and many other factors that go unnoticed by fans and followers alike.

This question was asked to the social media directors (Appendix J, Question 8). There are four themes for this research question: how many staff members do you have, how often do you strategize, how often do you make changes to your social media strategies, and are you the final decision maker on if and when changes to the strategy are made.

**How many staff members do you have?** Knowing how many staff members that work on social media is important to note. Several years ago, the responsibilities of social media generally were handled by a pre-existing department (Marketing, PR, etc.) and was seen as an added task to their workload. Now, with the rapid growth of social media, NBA teams (as well as teams in other sports leagues) have individuals dedicated to social media. Staff sizes varied among teams. Including the social media directors themselves, LM1 and LM2 had two staff members each, MM1 had four staff members,

MM2 had six staff members, SM1 had four staff members, SM2 had nine staff members, and SM3 had three staff members.

***Specific social media staff members.*** While it is unclear whether some teams have dedicated social media staffers (meaning social media is just one part of their job), at least one director stated they oversee a staff member focused on social media:

We have a Social Media Coordinator, his job is really to be creating conversation on (fan-to-fan social media site), Facebook, and Twitter (SM2).

***Description of staff members.*** Some directors provided further detail on the staff members they oversee, as well as their duties:

We created a Social Media Task Force, because not any one single person can spearhead all of the social media efforts for a team, so I really sought out the people on my team. By the way, the Web Team resided in the Communications Department, so I worked closely with other folks in Communications. We really chose these members carefully for this Task Force, people that not only understood it, but were passionate about it. And these people were charged with coming up with new ideas and brainstorming and watching what was going on out there with teams and just in general. But then, this was the team that was tweeting and posting messages on Facebook and interacted with people on (fan-to-fan social media site), they were doing that, they were monitoring all of the fan communication to find out if there is anything we need to respond to. So that total number of team members is approximately six, including me (MM2).

Pretty much I'm the sole official person in charge of posting and coming up with a lot of the content. The way it works is our Digital Department, we have writers and videographers, they'll provide the content and then I'll craft the message and figure out what the ideal time to post via social. I work with our Marketing and Sales Department as well. Other departments, they give me information and I craft the message. I have an entire calendar where I track what's going to be posted on what day and what the messaging is. I have it color coded for the (team name). So I go about it that way (MM1).

We've got an interactive manager, her job is to really manage the day-to-day operations of the site, she runs the day-to-day operations. I've got an Interactive Specialist whose job is to design and develop for the websites. We've got a digital reporter whose job is to blog, oversee the sport internship program we have here, he's the content creator, especially around basketball and non-traditional CR (customer relationship) projects. We have a Bloggers Network Coordinator, she

is in charge of evangelizing and creating the community around the blogger's network and she writes her own blog as well. We've got a (website) live producer, his job is to, when we run these live shows, runs the camera, runs the software, helps books the guests and what location they are going to be out at, helps manage the chat going on, he really works closely with the hosts on the shows. For (TV show) we've got our in-studio television host, he does the pregame, halftime, and postgame show, he also has his live daily show on the site. We also have a show on (website) called (show name), a guy and a girl, and they're supposed to do a non-traditional sports show that's more pop culture, entertainment, what's going on in (city)-focused, really kind of edgy, quirky, kind of indie, with some interesting guests, and obviously the (team name) woven through their conversations. And there are a couple of internships that are on there, and those that are fulltime, are the Interactive Manager, the Interactive Specialist, Digital Reporter, the Bloggers Network Coordinator, and the Social Media Coordinator and the (TV show) live producer are part-time (SM2).

**How often do you strategize?** In addition to strategizing, how often social media directors strategize is critical. With the dynamic changes occurring in business (and sports), it's important to meet regularly to discuss strategies. Responses were not mutually exclusive: teams that were formal also had some informal and constant times when they strategized.

**Formal.** Some teams had formal meetings held at specific days and times to discuss strategy:

Actual sit-down meetings we had once every two weeks. But we would have informal meetings or conversations or email trails going on all the time, really encouraged sharing findings, not necessarily waiting for that meeting to happen, because sometimes we'd find a really cool article online, and we'll all meet in a group (MM2).

We have a meeting every Monday on what's coming up for the week. But we strategize regularly (MM1).

We have a weekly meeting that's across the whole organization with CR (customer relations), communications, marketing, tickets, sponsorship, and we talk, we go down the agenda with all the different things that are going on with all the different sites and the email and the messages, and social media is a part of that (SM2).

**Informal.** Other teams stated their meetings were informal and followed a looser structure on when strategy was discussed:

Organic growth, as needed (LM2).

At least weekly. We share lots of ideas regularly and see what makes the most sense for us to use (SM3).

**Constant.** With the ever-changing social media landscape, some directors stated strategizing happens on a continual basis:

This may sound weird, but we're constantly strategizing. When I became the manager of the team, we formatted the way the cubes were laid out, so we had an open environment, kind of like (Facebook founder and CEO) Mark Zuckerberg has shared that Facebook has an open layout, and we've adopted a similar layout. So the New Media team is in a circle, and we all share and talk about stuff (SM1).

It's something that's built in to everything we do now, we're constantly strategizing, especially when it comes to content vs. sales messaging. There's a fine line there; fans don't want to be inundated with ticket messaging and sales pitches, but we also have to fight that battle internally with our Sales Department, who always *do* want their message out there (LM1).

#### **How often do you adjust or make changes to your social media processes?**

**After every game, every month, every season, etc.** Along with strategizing, making adjustments is important to the success of social media. Just as an NBA team makes adjustments to their game strategy constantly, social media directors must do the same.

Teams stated there was no set date and time for changes, but it was constant:

**Minor changes.** Directors stated they made changes to the social media processes constantly:

As needed (LM2).

It's continual because it's not only part of how we strategize everything, we're also constantly learning because it's still relatively new. It seems like it isn't anymore, but if we think about where we were three or four years ago, I think

‘wow’ it’s still pretty new and we’re still learning and checking-in and seeing what works, seeing what doesn’t work, so constantly (LM1).

Constantly making changes (SM1).

We adjust as needed. I wouldn’t say it’s after every game or every month, but we remain flexible to change (SM3).

It’s more of a feel. I monitor our Facebook Analytics and monitor a few different ways of what’s working, Twitter as well. I kind of look at those and adjust whether it’s the time of day I’m posting, the type of question I’m posting and the way I’m wording it. I’ll adjust based on what our insight numbers are and what those numbers look like to leverage the most engagement of our fanbase. I also spend time looking at what other teams not only in the NBA, but the NFL, the NHL, and larger non-sports brands are doing to engage their fans, try to implement that into what we’re doing as well. So it’s an everchanging thing of trying to what works best and what pushes out the most interaction, and keep that content fresh, and keep the way we word things fresh as well (MM2).

You do have to be constantly evolving it, so I don’t think we have a specific timing of it (SM2).

**Major changes.** One teams stated they had a set timeline in which changes were made to the social media processes:

I would say our core strategy really never changed, but I think more of our specific goals, things that we were testing changed periodically, especially if we noticed something out in the marketplace happening. I would say minor tweaks happened every three months, quarterly (MM2).

**If and when you decide to make changes to the strategy, does everyone among your staff have to approve, or are you the final decision maker?** As with any organization, there is a proper structure or hierarchy of decision-making that must be followed in order to make changes. NBA teams are no different. Social media directors provided various reasons as to who was the final decision maker.

**Sole decision maker.** One director stated he makes changes to the strategy himself, and has the final word:

Make changes myself, I'm the decision maker (LM2).

**Input from staff.** Several directors stated they speak with their immediate staff members and others in the organization, but were ultimately responsible for decision making:

I was the eventual final decision maker, but I really did look to our team members on the committee to make suggestions. I didn't want to make it seem 'whatever I said, went' and they had to follow that. A lot of times, people would come up with ideas, so what I'd let them do is let them pursue those, and try to give them ownership of those ideas and test them out. I didn't want to tell something that something was a bad idea unless they were able to try it out and prove whether it was or wasn't a good idea (MM2).

It probably depends on what the specific campaign is, but on a day-to-day basis, I'm the final decision maker on what goes out and how we're going to promote it (LM1).

We give input as a group, but ultimately I am the decision maker (SM3).

If it's in regards to the language in the way we're posting things, that's my decision. If it's a larger picture thing, I like to consult with our VP of Digital, get his thoughts, and see what the best course of action will be. I have a lot of freedom in my position trying to make social work. I can make changes if necessary on the fly (MM1).

**Collaboration.** Two directors said it was more of a collaboration if and when changes were made to the strategy:

So we as a team, we implement many of the strategic decisions as far as social media are concerned. Fans feedback is essential to our decision making, integral to the updates we are constantly making. And then in the event we look to make significant changes, we would work directly with the specific stakeholders who it would be related to, whether that's different aspects of the organization, ticket sales, etc (SM1).

At the organization, we just don't work in one singular silo, we have across the whole organization, we really collaborate with the different departments, especially the ones that are creating a message, or ones that are figuring out the best way to exude the brand, so whether that's marketing or communications, so we collaboratively come together and talk about changes and strategy. For example, we wanted to start having fans being able to show how excited they are

for the playoffs and so I went and did some research and found Twibbon, which we can go and create, we can create a PNG (picture file) that people can overlay on their profile, with our campaign name during the playoffs. I took that back to Marketing and Sales and Communications and said 'we're doing this, what do you guys think' and they said 'oh that's awesome, good, ok cool, this is the sign we're going to use, let's go with it' that sort of thing. So it's a collaboration (SM2).

#### **Research Question 4: Evaluation**

##### **What processes do NBA team social media directors use to evaluate social media plans?**

After implementing and managing social media strategies, evaluating how these plans are working is essential. Whether a social media strategy or campaign was successful is measured through metrics and observations, among other factors. After evaluating strategies, social media directors can see what was successful, what needs improvement, what areas can be changed, etc.

This question was asked to the social media directors (Appendix J, Question 9). There are four themes for this research question: how do you evaluate social media strategies, how often do you evaluate social media strategies, do you have to submit paperwork to higher-level organization members (General Manager, President, etc.), and do you use documentation to evaluate social media strategies.

**How do you evaluate social media strategies?** There are specific processes that social media directors use when evaluating social media strategies. With social media platforms changing rapidly and frequently, social media directors need to determine how to properly assess their strategies, and see if their plans are meeting organizational standards. Most social media directors use some type of analytics or metrics to evaluate their strategies:

**Engagement.** Some directors evaluate social media strategies through means of engagement with fans:

We evaluate our numbers on our engagement with fans. Figure out if we were on pace for what we thought we would do (MM2).

We're constantly monitoring everything, all the data we can collect, all the feedback we're getting, all the engagement we're getting. Games are a good indication of that because we can see in real-time who's reacting and who's liking and who's commenting and who's joining our hashtag, all that (LM2).

We're evaluating and tracking by the very basic things that are measurable; engagement impressions, pageviews, all that kind of stuff, time spent, etc (SM1).

**Metrics.** Other directors stated they use social media analytics and metrics to evaluate their strategies:

Facebook and Twitter Metrics (LM1).

Primarily for Facebook and Twitter track growth rate, number of posts, percent of active users of total users, feedback (comments, likes, retweets, mentions) and percent of active user feedback (SM3).

I get heavy into the analytics, Facebook and other insights and kind of look at it and figure out what is working, what isn't. I don't overreact about it on a daily basis if we've had a great day, and I won't overreact if we've had a slow day or if something didn't quite work. It depends on a lot of things. If there is a trend that emerges over a week period, week long period or month long period, then I'll make changes (MM1).

We're constantly looking at the metrics weekly on who's driving traffic to our site, how much engagement we're getting on Facebook, Twitter keeps talking about bringing out their Analytics tool, kind of looking at third-party stuff, but hopefully they'll launch soon, but we stay on top of it and do weekly reporting in our interactive meeting on those various things. So weekly, you can say we pay attention to it but we don't specifically evaluate on a scheduled basis outside of metrics (SM2).

**How often do you evaluate? After every game, every month, every season, etc.** Along with how to evaluate social media strategies, how often plans are evaluated and looked at is critical. As previously mentioned, with the constantly changing world of social media, social media directors stated they evaluate their strategies frequently:

***Continual.*** Some directors stated evaluation happens on a consistent basis, without assigning a timeframe to it:

As needed (LM2).

It's on a continual basis (LM1).

We evaluate by everything that we do, so by the second or by the day, all the time (SM1).

***Scheduled.*** Other directors stated they have a schedule as to when evaluation of social media strategies occur:

On a monthly basis (MM2).

Weekly, monthly and yearly (SM3).

I do it on a daily basis (MM1).

On a weekly basis, we'll look at it and say like 'oh, did that drive traffic?' We'll go and look at it. For evaluation, it's pretty much as-is, when it comes up (SM2).

**Do you have to submit a report to higher-level members in your organization (GM, CEO, President, etc). If so, how often?** While social media directors implement, manage, and evaluate strategies, they report to higher members within their respective organizations. This ensures that individuals who are not involved in the day-to-day processes of social media are kept up to speed with the process and results. Responses varied from weekly to monthly, to no reports submitted at all:

**Weekly.** Some directors said they submit a weekly report to other members in the organization, which contained various information:

Right now, I submit a weekly report of our follower count, but other than that, there's no other timeline of a report that I submit. But every once in a while I'll highlight some numbers related to specific campaigns (LM1).

Yes we share weekly. (SM1).

I do a weekly gauge report. We have (fan-to-fan social media site) metrics in there, or some other social media metrics, I'll send a memo up the chain, whether it's page views, types I'm doing, visits, (fan-to-fan social media site) members, growth of that. Facebook growth, Twitter growth. I work our Vice President of Digital Entertainment to use metrics, and he'll talk about it at the executive level (SM2).

**Monthly.** One director stated they share reports with other members in their organization on a monthly basis:

Yeah I would submit those on a monthly basis. And those would actually be included with our website numbers as well, so it was an all-encompassing report that includes that. However, we did send a daily report around, in terms of all of our Twitter mentions, so anytime a fan mentioned us on any of our Twitter handles, there was a total of four that we would do, we would send the report around, and we would copy anybody in the organization that would need to be involved, to respond to that fan, so that would go around daily (MM2).

**Multiple times.** One director stated they share reports slightly more frequently to higher level members in their organization:

Yes the report goes to our VP who shares with the President. Weekly and monthly (SM3).

**None.** Other directors state they have an informal process, and do not submit any type of paperwork or reports:

No reports submitted; I just talk to our CMO (LM2).

As of right now, we don't have a formal process. When it comes to day-to-day operations of social, and those strategies behind it, I'm pretty much allowed to do what I see fit for it (MM1).

**Do you use documentation that provides a checklist or elements of items you use to evaluate social media strategies?** In addition to evaluating social media strategies, social media directors were asked if they used some type of documentation. Some directors stated they use formal documentation, while others stated no documentation. Most social media directors also referred back to analytics and metrics, while another director mentioned values of their organization.

***Metrics.*** Several teams used metrics and analytics to evaluate how effective their social media strategies were:

The key performance indicators we would look at are a combination of a number of things. Number one, our total number of followers or likes on Facebook, members on (fan-to-fan social media site), but the other, more telling stat, was how many of those fans are active and engaged. You can do it to a degree with Facebook, with the stats it provides you, and with (fan-to-fan social media site) we could definitely tell that. In fact, one of the big, big stats we always looked at on (fan-to-fan social media site) was the overall time spent on the website. That really tells you how engaged they are, because if they are spending six, seven, eight, nine minutes on the site, compared to two or three minutes on a standard website, you know they're very engaged with the subject matter (MM2).

Look at metrics of followers, likes, and engagement. No documentation or paperwork (LM2).

One of them is SportShadow (site that tracks location-based services [LBS] check-ins at sporting events), that's been perfect for us. It's been nice, we know how well we were doing, but to see that with other teams has been great to see our strategy works there. Other than that, my bosses always want to see our follower counts and where we stack up against other teams. It is hard sometimes, because it's one of the only hard metrics that I can show them. We started using certain tracking codes, specific ticket offers, try to gain some steam there, but that's definitely the next big hurdle (LM1).

I would say that we do have elements to evaluate it, yes. Even though it's all the time. There's definitely formal documentation that we use, and then there's also the conversational feel of 'was this cool, did this work or not work, etc' (SM1).

I use Facebook Insights heavily, and a few different sites that I use to track our tweets and our Twitter. We have used PaidLever in the past as well, to provide some analytics. We have an analytics guy here as well that go through and takes a look at each post and see how many comments it got, what time it was posted, how many comments it got, how many likes it got, how many impressions, and we track that as well so I can go look and say, between the hours of 10(am) and 2(pm) over the last month and a half, how have our questions been received, how much interaction have we gained, is it better to post in that two-hour span, or from noon to 2(pm) or 2 to 4, or any two-hour increment, where are we going to get the best bang for our buck out of our social media questions (MM1).

*Values.* One director stated he looks at the core values of the organization when evaluating social media strategies, and making sure all the values were met:

We need to continue with the core values of your brand. We've got four different core values: Open, Different, Confident, and Connected. Was it open, was it different, was it confident, was it connected? If not all four, then no, it was only three, uh-oh. As you're having those communications with people, a tweet versus an email versus a print ad, those are three very different mediums, but they all need to look like they come from the (team name), making sure you stay close to those four core values (SM2).

The social media directors provided great insight into how their teams implement, manage, and evaluate social media strategies, and how the space will continue to develop and grow in the future.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study employed a qualitative design to explore how NBA teams use social media. Specifically, the implementation, management, and evaluation of social media plans strategies were explored. Social media directors of NBA teams that were interviewed not only used social media to engage and connect, but worked diligently to ensure that quality content was provided, best practices were implemented, and ensured organizational goals were met. Every social media director of the NBA teams interviewed currently uses Facebook and Twitter (as well as other social media tools). Moreover, each director interviewed focused on social media and/or digital media for their respective. This is important to note because more sports teams are hiring social media-specific personnel, as opposed to delegating the duty to another department, such as Marketing or Public Relations.

Findings show there was a fan-centric approach to using social media. Additionally, various rationales were shared as to why teams decided to implement social media plans, and processes of implementation. Staff sizes were relatively small, and changes made to social media strategies were made on a continual basis, not only to keep up with the needs of the fans, sponsors, and front-office personnel, but also due to the fact social media is a constantly evolving space, and social media directors needed to keep pace. While teams are always striving to get better on the court, as well as off the

court and in the front office, an analysis of the global sphere of social media and NBA through a SWOT analysis will be presented by discussing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats faced by NBA teams using social media.

## SWOT

### Strengths

**Human factor.** One of the many strengths of social media and the NBA (and social media in general) is the human factor. Although social media is a form of technology, there are still humans who need to manage and operate social media usage. Johnson & Yang (2009) related this to Uses and Gratifications theory, stated that social media offers the potential for both mass and interpersonal communication among people. Social media allows teams to connect with their number one customer: fans. In turn, it allows fans to connect with their favorite teams and other fans, who share a common bond (team, sport, etc). As evidenced by the responses in research question 1 (motives), rationale for social media was based on a team-to-fan communication, fan-to-team communication, and fan-to-fan communication. The human factor also allows NBA teams to ‘listen’ to fans via social media. Their voices can be heard, and teams can connect with fans through these sites. Fans want their favorite teams to ‘come out from behind the logo’ and show they care and want to connect with them.

**Engagement.** In relation to the human factor, engagement is another strength of social media. Nowak, Watt, & Walther (2005) refer to online communication as “hyper-personal” (p. 1), and social media is a form of hyper-personal online communication. The NBA and its teams do a good job of engaging with their fans via social media. Engagement can occur in many fashions, such as replying to a fan’s tweet via Twitter,

responding to a fan's post on the team's official Facebook page, or having a poll that fans can vote on that is only available through social media. Engaging via social media builds the relationship between the team and fans. Williams & Chinn (2010) stated that relationship marketing is supported by activities and relies on planned messages to assist in the process of establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships. Williams & Chinn (2010) also state the goals of relationship marketing are to build long-term relationships with the organizations best customers (or fans in the case of the NBA and its teams), generating further business and ultimately profit. The director from Small Market 2 spoke to this:

How can we communicate with them (fans) to get them to buy tickets and merchandise, and we were doing that via Facebook, engage them on Facebook, that's the first barrier of entry and get them engaged in (fan-to-fan social media site) to login or register so that they are in our database, email market them or call them or whatever, walk them up the ladder of someone buying retail merchandise or buying a ticket or a package, and then a season ticket.

As seen by the statement, this director wants to engage the fans and build a relationship with them via social media, then move them up the ladder of becoming a fan all the way through becoming a season ticket holder. Relationship marketing allows for that, and social media is a good vehicle to accomplish goals of connecting with the fans and creating a stream of business.

**Large reach.** Another strength of social media is the large market reach. With the NBA having a global audience, it is imperative for teams to connect with fans worldwide. Social media provides an outlet to do just that. Additionally, social media allows fans who live near their favorite team to connect with their favorite team, as well

as draw fans in from other areas. The social media director for Small Market 2 spoke to this point of college students in the area, as well as newcomers to the city:

Looking at Facebook, knowing that there was a large audience of college students on there, our colleges are 70 miles and 110 miles away from here. We have two in here in town, and we have some that are surrounding us. They're smaller colleges and universities, but really the big colleges are a while away. How do we have a conversation with these students who are passionate fans, some people are out of state and we want to convert them into being fans of ours, or move to (city) as potential employees.

Additionally, this director made a good point regarding converting fans into becoming fans of his team. With the power of social media, it is possible to do that. Seeing that a team is reaching out to you via social media, whether you're in the same state as the team or in another country, is powerful, and can build a bond between fan and team. When asking residents of Australia and England about their favorite professional sports teams based in North America, several of them mentioned they chose specific teams because of social media engagement (personal communication, 2011).

**Real-time.** Another great benefit of social media is real-time information exchange. With the nature of sports being live, social media is a great way to share information instantly. The NBA as a league, as well as all the teams, do a good job of sending real-time information as it happens. Common examples includes sending game updates to Twitter during the course of a game and posting pictures from the game to Facebook while the game is still in action. As opposed to an email or website update, which isn't as instant as social media, by the time a fan receives an email from a team regarding a player or team occasion, fans may have already received the same information via social media several hours (or even days) before. Even Twitter states on their site they are a real-time information network (About Twitter, n.d.). The NBA and

its teams leverage this real-time information network to connect with their fans in real-time, treating them as if they are watching the game live at the arena.

### **Weaknesses**

**Lost in the shuffle.** One potential weakness of social media is that the space is growing rapidly, and fans may feel their voice is lost among everyone else. While social media are a place to connect with fans and teams alike, many fans may feel they aren't being heard, and that they don't feel different or special from other fans on social media. Pegoraro (2010) stated that with Web 1.0, users were connected through the Internet, but were still kept at arm's length from any real interaction. With Web 2.0 (and social media emerging from it), social media directors of NBA teams need to stay connected with fans via this medium and not regress engagement. With the NBA and its teams having the most number of combined Facebook likes and Twitter followers of any professional sports franchise worldwide, it is easy to feel like just another fan. Even the NBA team with the least number of followers has well over 100,000 combined Facebook likes and Twitter followers (as of December 31, 2011), it is easy to see why fans are not interested in supporting their favorite teams via social media.

**Bad reputation.** Garnering a bad reputation is another disadvantage of using social media. The NBA nor any of its teams have earned or gotten a bad reputation through social media. Unfortunately, this can happen to anyone who uses social media, much less a sports league or team. As mentioned among strengths, real-time information being shared via social media can also be a detriment. If something negative is posted via a team's social media site, this can spread quickly among fans and followers, as well as other social media sites. Even if the questionable information shared via social media

is later deleted, likely the damage is done at that point. With NBA teams having large fanbases via social media, it is critical they are careful with all information that is posted at all times.

**Excessive use.** Using too many (or too few) social media tools can also be bad. Every social media director interviewed uses Facebook and Twitter for their respective teams. However, with the advent of more social media tools becoming available, social media directors have to analyze these tools and see if it would be a good fit for their team. Related to Uses and Gratifications theory, Young (1996) raised concern that excessive use of new media may leave users vulnerable to technological dependencies. Just because an NBA team is using a new social media tool does not mean other teams should use them as well. While directors use various social media sites, using too many can be detrimental to the social media strategies of teams, while using too few tools may cause lack of creativity among teams and boredom among users. Messages can become diluted, social media pages can become cluttered, and using too many platforms can be cumbersome to fans, who may stop using social media altogether to support their favorite teams.

**The time factor.** Time constraints can also be a weakness via social media. With the space growing rapidly, a significant amount of time (and sometimes resources) need to be dedicated to social media. Large Market 1 director stated social media wasn't all he did:

We're not dedicated social media (staff), we do a lot of other things, and social media is one of the many things both of us do.

Although most directors stated they managed social media, they also had other duties to attend to within the organization. Most handle other digital media duties, such as websites, customer relationship management (CRM), and email marketing, among other tasks. Although several teams have dedicated social media staff, these individuals are also responsible for other duties. Some may feel the need to spend more time implementing, managing, and evaluating social media strategies. With social media being readily available to fans, they may expect more from their favorite teams in terms of information and up-to-the-second updates. With that comes more time spent on social media, which can become a time-consuming process. Although not asked about how much time is dedicated to social media management, it can be assumed a significant amount of time focuses on it.

### **Opportunities**

**New platforms.** One of the opportunities for social media usage among NBA teams is using new social media tools. This ties in with Uses and Gratifications theory, with consumers of media using specific, selected channels to satisfy needs and achieve gratifications (Clavio & Kian, 2010). Additionally, in regards to Uses and Gratifications theory, people today must be more selective than in the past to select a medium that meets their needs because they have more media choices (Ruggiero, 2000). Some directors spoke to other tools they use:

I'm in charge of the team's Facebook page, our Twitter page, Foursquare, as well as LinkedIn and Google Plus (MM1).

We like to try all the different mediums where social media and new media are going, so whether, back in the day it was Ustream, or currently it's Instagram, or

Google Plus, or Twitter, Facebook, we want to try to be wherever our fans are (SM1).

As discussed in the *Weaknesses* section, social media directors of NBA teams have to be cautious not to use too many social media sites. There is no right or wrong number of platforms that can be used; social media directors of NBA teams must find a balance that works for them. Each director must assess their social media strategies to ensure they are maximizing social media properly, while using new social media sites appropriately. As stated, some teams are experimenting with other social media tools, as this provides directors new avenues in which to use these platforms to connect.

**New content.** Providing creative content is another opportunity for NBA teams using social media. While it is great that the NBA and its teams use social media, it can sometimes feel that the same content is being shared repeatedly. It is fantastic that most teams provide updates on their games live as they happen; however, just providing updates without any real engagement or connection can lose its luster. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) speak to this: ‘Find out what they (users) would like to hear; what they would like to talk about; what they might find interesting, enjoyable, and valuable. Then, develop and post content that fit those expectations’ (p. 66). As one of the pioneers of sports leagues using social media, the NBA and its teams can benefit from providing fresh information that will keep fans wanting to come back for more. As social media continues to grow, more ideas will be generated and used across the league. Providing interesting content will prove to be a great opportunity as social media expands in the future.

**Combining the spaces.** Merging the virtual and physical worlds is another opportunity for the NBA and its teams. While social media is communication that happens online, it is important to take engagement offline, by offering some type of reward or meeting. A few NBA teams have done this by bringing in fans that follow the team via Twitter or having a meetup at the stadium before the game that involves the team's Facebook fans, among other ways. While communicating online is a fast, easy way for an NBA team to talk to its fans, expanding that relationship into the real world is crucial. Also, while it has only been done by a couple of teams, allowing social media users to meet the team's players provides an added incentive. Teams want fans to attend games in person, so it would be beneficial for teams to orchestrate meetings among social media users before or during the game, or even at a nearby restaurant. NBA teams should 'go online to go offline' and really embrace the physical connection among fans. This will allow fans to make friends with other fans, provide for professional networking opportunities, and collaborate on future projects, all because of the power of social media.

**The voice.** Having users become your "voice" via social media is another opportunity that can be leveraged. NBA teams post information via social media sites, and while it may be seen as just another post to some fans, others may feel the need to spread the news. Tying in to Uses and Gratifications theory, Katz et al (1973) states the audience is conceived of as active, and from this point of view, the approach simply represents an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals, and to do so by simply asking them. Additionally, Katz et al (1973) refers to one of the aims of Uses and

Gratifications theory was to treat audience requirements as intervening variables in the study of traditional communication effects. After all, being a fan of a team is naturally inherent to sports; this means that fans are advocates for information you share. When a tweet goes out on Twitter or a post goes out on Facebook, fans are more than happy to share that information with their friends and followers via social media. In essence, they extend the voice of the team to others. Additionally, these fans can encourage further dialog by talking with their friends, followers, and other fans regarding their favorite teams. This can create a chain reaction among other fans, and non-stop banter regarding their favorite teams occurs, all through one post via social media. NBA teams should leverage the power of the fan more to make sure they feel connected and a part of the team.

### **Threats**

**Other leagues and teams.** The first imminent threat of social media and the NBA are other professional sports leagues, such as the National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Baseball (MLB), Major League Soccer (MLS), and virtually every other professional sports league that utilizes social media. Just like competition on the field of play, these leagues compete with each other in the front office too. Social media is no different. Each league is trying to gain a competitive advantage in who will be the first use a new social media site, who uses social media 'best,' etc. Within the NBA, each team can be viewed as a threat to each other as well. Teams are always trying to be the first team to use a social media platform or method, in which other teams may copy. Additionally, each team may try to steal ideas, strategies, or plans away from another team and pass them off as their own. This can be referred to

as mimetic behavior, which happens when an organization is not sure how to behave under uncertain or risky situations. In order to find the best solutions, organizations usually mimic what other competitors do once competitors were perceived to be successful (Berrett & Slack, 1999).

While most of the social media directors of NBA teams know each other (at least in a professional manner), they are all trying to compete with each other for how social media is used. Large Market 1 director spoke to this point:

The frustrating part is that we don't have near the following as some teams, we're kind of middle of the pack as far as followers. You look at the top 10 teams, there's not really a surprise who's up there. It's frustrating to know they have 10 times more followers than us and we probably won't catch them anytime soon, but at the same time you have to realize followers aren't the 'be-all-end-all' of success. So I think from what we accomplish, what we do and how we engage, strategize and utilize everything.

Whether directors want to provide better engagement, be the first to use a specific platform, or have the most number of friends and followers, there is a sense of competition among the directors. In essence, social media can be seen as friendly competition among the teams, although each team is trying to gain their edge over the other teams.

**Too much information.** Oversharing or teams using too much social media can also be a threat. While social media can be easy to share information, it can be just as easy to overshare or post too much information. Large Market 1 director touched on when and what to share:

We do set some messages on the (HootSuite) calendar, pending messages we know we can send at a time, 15 minutes before a game, or we're going to send this message at this time. It's good to do that, but you also want to be relevant and up to the minute, so it's a fine line with how much you schedule, how much you should do right as you're going along.

There is no set number on many times a social media director of an NBA team should post information via social media; however, social media directors should be cognizant of how much and what type of content they are posting to the team's social media sites. Fans generally are tolerant of receiving game updates via social media throughout the course of a game, and more so if the game is close towards the end of the contest (personal communications, 2011). However, fans generally do not appreciate play-by-play via social media; this can cause fans and followers to get annoyed, and ultimately cause the fan to unfollow or unlike the team's social media pages.

**Longevity.** Although social media has significance today, people getting burned out or viewing social media as a fad is another threat the NBA and its teams can face. Katz et al (1973) state that media compete with other sources of need satisfaction. While social media might fill the needs of consumers, it is not guaranteed to do so in the future. In 2011, social media was growing exponentially by the day. While growth may somewhat start to level off in 2012, social media is still very much part of society. People may get bored of using social media platforms; others may not see the value in it. This is something the NBA and its teams need to consider. Utilizing social media in proper manners while keeping users engaged is critical to avoid them from significantly reducing their usage or leaving social media sites altogether. Social media may be seen as a fad by some because it's the new thing. And with any fad, the buzz will slowly go away. The important thing for the NBA and its teams to recognize is that in order to avoid this, they must make social media part of their communications, sales, and marketing plans.

**Too business-focused.** Overcommercialization of social media is another threat that can arise. The NBA and its teams properly leverage social media with users, encouraging dialog and engagement between the two. However, if a user feels the team is using social media strictly for soliciting fans to purchase tickets or other items, they will soon sour on using social media. The NBA and its teams want to generate revenue and produce ROI (return on investment) via social media; however, that is a fine line the league and its teams must not cross. Push too much towards monetization and fans may feel they are being used. The NBA and its teams must put forth a concerted effort not to make social media strictly a monetary game. Katz et al (1973) state in the mass communication process, much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member. After all, consumers want to have a conversation, not always be marketed to, and they will find another means of communication if they become dissatisfied.

## **Recommendations**

### **Social Media Manual**

There are a few recommendations that encompass the global sphere of social media and the NBA. In terms of managing, implementing, and evaluating social media strategies, creating a social media manual that is a uniform resource across the NBA would be beneficial. While most teams used some type of documentation to help them manage and evaluate social media plans and strategies, there wasn't a manual that was used by every NBA team. A social media manual can spell out the guidelines and rules of directors implementing social media on behalf of their respective teams. This also ensures that all employees are on the same page about what can and cannot be shared via

social media platforms. A social media manual for the NBA and its teams would encourage proper dialog and not disallow it. Additionally, a manual should also protect the NBA and its teams from possible legal ramifications. While social media is still relatively new, organizations are still trying to learn how to proceed with social media strategies; therefore, a formal manual may not be in place. However, as the space continues to grow, a manual covering social media implementation, management, evaluation, and guidelines should be a part of every organization, with each team having the flexibility to adjust components to their respective teams.

### **Active Engagement**

More engagement with fans is another recommendation that the NBA and its teams should implement. As mentioned previously, engagement is one of the facets that makes social media great. More teams should take this into consideration, instead of just pushing out messages with no interaction. Social media is a two-way road, and should be treated as such. When a team just posts game updates, links to interviews, etc., this can get stale very quickly. In turn, fans will also be bored of the same type of information day after day. Instead, make social media a conversation by posting action-oriented statements. Talk to fans via social media, make them feel a part of the team, and ask open-ended questions. Instead of a social media director sending a tweet that says ‘Game starts at 7pm. Be there!’ this can be reworded to ‘Game starts at 7pm. What matchups are you looking forward to seeing tonight?’ Small Market 2 director touched on this issue:

We try to post things as questions if you want to try to get feedback, spark some conversation. Don’t just have a one-way direction, so instead of saying ‘Best dunk of the year, with the (video) link’ we try to say ‘What’s the best dunk of the year? Is it this one (with a video link) or this one (with a video link).’

As he points out, putting things in the form of a question is an excellent way to ignite conversation. Plus it makes the interaction more personal, and that the team values its' fans. Engagement goes a long ways into building relationships with fans, as well as gaining new fans for your team. If more teams implement, manage, and evaluate engagement, this can be very valuable to the credibility of how NBA teams use social media.

### **Involve Fans**

As a follow-up, taking engagement one step further and bringing fans in to speak with the social media team is another way to maximize social media. For example, the team can send an invitation via social media inviting fans to a Town Hall meeting to discuss social media strategies as talk about what is working, what needs to change, etc. is to bring in fans and ask them what they would like out of social media from their team. This is a great way to blend the virtual and physical spheres, as discussed in the *Opportunities* section. Additionally, getting fans involved in the social media discussion can present a unique point of view. For instance, a team may think they are doing great work via social media. However, the fans of the team may feel improvements are needed. By involving the fans in your social media strategies and asking for their feedback, the fans feel more connected and that their team values their opinion. In the end, it is up to the team to decide whether to implement their suggestions, but asking for an outside perspective allows the team so see things they might not have recognized previously.

**Incentivize**

Fans want incentives is another recommendation that the NBA and its teams should use. With the growth of social media, it is not only enough to have fans use these sites. Instead, fans would like some type of incentive or reward. Providing free team t-shirts or a team autographed ball to select social media followers could be a way to provide tangible incentives. Having a chance to meet the players or tour the facility could be ways to give intangible incentives to social media followers. It could be something else, such as a retweet from your favorite team or having your favorite team mention you (thanks Joe Jones for being such a great fan!). Fans liked to be recognized, but more importantly, they want a reason to support the team via social media. Social media directors should give fans a reason to like or follow their favorite teams via social media, instead of just hoping fans will do so. Providing incentives can go a long ways in increasing support.

**Organization Goals**

Aligning social media plans with team strategy is another recommendation. While all social media directors that were interviewed stated they communicate or work with higher-level members in their respective organizations, the key factor is to make sure social media strategies are in conjunction with the organization's goals. Several social media directors spoke to this point, saying they speak to different departments and executive level members regularly to ensure social media strategies are meeting team objectives. If a social media plan becomes public without approval from other members of the team, this may cause disagreements among staff members. It is important to make sure everyone is in accord with the strategy.

### **Future Research**

As progress was made through the data collection, analysis, and findings portion of the research, there are new areas where future research could emerge. The first would be to focus on the other side of social media: the fans. The pilot study focused on the fans perspective of how they use social media to support their favorite NBA teams, while the main research was conducted with social media directors of NBA teams. Getting to the source of the people in charge of implementing, managing, and evaluating social media strategies was crucial into seeing how and why social media was used the way it is. In-depth interviews can be conducted with fans on how they support their favorite teams and players via social media, what value they get, and how they would improve the experience.

Conducting research on more professional sports leagues would be another potential line of future research. Since virtually every professional sports league and its teams use social media, it will be good to compare uses and best practices among different leagues and teams. Additionally, it would be beneficial to research professional sports organizations that have their headquarters located outside the United States, such as soccer (futbol) organization English Premier League (EPL) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Within the United States, it would be good to see how professional sports organizations such as the NFL, NHL, MLB, UFC, WWE, and others use these platforms. Also, NCAA and its member schools use social media, and would serve as a good comparison into how colleges and universities use social media and if it varies from professional sports organizations.

On a narrow scale, conducting an in-depth study of how one team in one sports league uses social media can make for good future research and an interesting case study. Morse (2008) conducted a case study on the Colorado Rockies regarding perceptions of ticket pricing in Major League Baseball. A similar case study could be conducted on how one sports team manages, implements, and evaluates social media during a specific time frame, such as over the course of one game or a series of games. Following one team's social media personnel and strategies can drill down into what strategies work and don't work for that specific team, why they choose to use certain social media platforms, and see what happens on a day-to-day basis of how social media is used by one team.

As social media continues to grow, more platforms and tools are becoming available, and it will be good to conduct future research on these areas. The 'second screen' experience saw significant growth in 2011. This is referred to as any type of device a person uses while consuming sports, such as a mobile device, computer, or tablet (television is considered the 'first screen'). With more teams creating mobile apps specifically for their teams and fans to use, this will provide a good line of future research. With more sports fans using a second screen to consume sports, either while watching at home or in person, research can provide for a rationale as to why fans do this and what lies ahead for its future.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of the study was that not every social media director of an NBA team was interviewed. Although the study interviewed social media directors of large, medium, and small market teams, this study cannot infer that every team in their respective markets uses social media the same way that the teams were interviewed do.

Additionally, seven of the NBA's 30 teams were interviewed. With less than one-fourth of the teams being interviewed, generalizations cannot be made on the overall methods of how every team implements, manages, and evaluates social media strategies.

An additional limitation is that only teams in the NBA were researched, and no other teams from any other sports leagues were contacted for interviews. Therefore, the insight that was provided by social media directors of NBA teams cannot be inferred that teams in other sports leagues use social media in the same fashion. Furthermore, with several cities in the United States having more than one professional team, it also cannot be generalized that other professional sports teams use social media the same way as their counterparts across town or even teams that share the same venue. League restrictions and overall culture of the willingness for teams to use social media can account for this.

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Appendix A  
NBA & Social Media Survey

**SOCIAL MEDIA****1. How many hours per day do you spend on the following social media sites?**

**Likert: 1(0-1 hours per day) 2(1-2 hours per day) 3(2-3 hours per day) 4(4 or more hours per day)**

- A. Facebook
- B. LinkedIn
- C. MySpace
- D. Twitter
- E. YouTube

**2. How often do you use the following social media features?**

**Likert scale: 1(Never use) 2(1-2 times per day) 3(3-4 times per day) 4(5 or more times per day)**

- A. Keeping up with friends
- B. Keeping up with family members
- C. Keeping up with significant others (partner, spouse, etc)
- D. Making new friends
- E. Networking
- F. Support sports/entertainment figures
- G. Other (please specify)

**FAVORITE NBA TEAM****i. What is your favorite NBA team (select only one team from the list)**

**\*\*\*NOTE: TEAMS ORGANIZED IN A DROP-DOWN LIST\*\*\***

Atlanta Hawks	Indiana Pacers	Oklahoma City Thunder
Boston Celtics	Los Angeles Clippers	Orlando Magic
Charlotte Bobcats	Los Angeles Lakers	Philadelphia 76ers
Chicago Bulls	Memphis Grizzlies	Phoenix Suns
Cleveland Cavaliers	Miami Heat	Portland Trail Blazers
Dallas Mavericks	Milwaukee Bucks	Sacramento Kings
Denver Nuggets	Minnesota Timberwolves	San Antonio Spurs

Detroit Pistons	New Jersey Nets	Toronto Raptors
Golden State Warriors	New Orleans Hornets	Utah Jazz
Houston Rockets	New York Knicks	Washington Wizards

**Answer questions 4 through 9 based on your favorite NBA team you selected in question 3.**

**4. Are you a “friend” or member of the team Facebook fan page?**

- A. Yes
- B. No

**5. Why do you support your team on Facebook? (leave this question blank if you answered ‘No’ to question 4)**

**Likert: 1(completely disagree) 2(somewhat disagree) 3(somewhat agree) 4(completely agree)**

- A. I am a fan of the team
- B. Exclusive promotion, deals or offers from the team
- C. Game content (game highlights, post-game interviews, practice videos)
- D. Non-game content (player appearances, team charity events)
- E. Other people I know are fans of the team
- F. Service, support or product news from the team
- G. Other (please specify)

**6. Do you “follow” your team on Twitter?**

- A. Yes
- B. No

**7. Why do you support your team on Twitter? (leave this question blank if you answered ‘No’ to question 6)**

**Likert: 1(completely disagree) 2(somewhat disagree) 3(somewhat agree) 4 (completely agree)**

- A. I am a fan of the team
- B. Exclusive promotions, deals or offers from the team

- C. Game content (game highlights, post-game interviews, practice videos)
- D. Non-game content (player appearances, team charity events)
- E. Other people I know are fans of the team
- F. Service, support or products news from the team
- G. Other (please specify)

**8. How often do you use the following forms of online media to follow your team?**

**Likert scale: 1(Never use) 2(1-2 times per day) 3(3-4 times per day) 4(5 or more times per day)**

- A. Team Website
- B. Online newspaper websites (USA Today, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, etc.)
- C. Blogs/Chats
- D. Discussion boards
- E. Online radio
- F. Podcasts
- G. Internet search
- H. Other (please specify)

**9. How often do you view online media content for your team?**

**Likert scale: 1(Never use) 2(1-2 times per day) 3(3-4 times per day) 4(5 or more times per day)**

- A. Game highlights
- B. Interviews with players and coaches (post-game, practice, newspaper/TV spots)
- C. Practice videos
- D. Promotions, offers or deals from the team
- E. Team and/or game analysis
- F. Day to day updates (injuries, player trades and signings)
- G. Other (please specify)

**FAVORITE NBA PLAYER(S)**

**Questions 10 through 13 ask about player(s) on your favorite team.**

**10. How many “friends” or player fan pages do you support on Facebook?  
(i.e. if your favorite team is the Orlando Magic, are you a “fan” of the Dwight Howard fan page)?**

- A. 0
- B. 1-2
- C. 3-4
- D. 5 or more

**11. Why do you support these player(s) on Facebook? (leave this question blank if you answered ‘No’ to question 10)**

**Likert: 1(completely disagree) 2(somewhat disagree) 3(somewhat agree) 4(completely agree)**

- A. The athlete is my favorite player
- B. I am a fan of the player(s)
- C. Players are on my favorite team
- D. Other people I know are fans of the players
- E. I enjoy reading their updates
- F. Other (please specify)

**12. How many player(s) do you “follow” on Twitter?  
(i.e. if your favorite team is the Orlando Magic, do you “follow” Dwight Howard)?**

- A. 0
- B. 1-2
- C. 3-4
- D. 5 or more

**13. Why do you support these player(s) on Twitter? (leave this question blank if you answered 'No' to question 12)**

**Likert: 1(completely disagree) 2(somewhat disagree) 3(somewhat agree) 4 (completely agree)**

- A. The athlete is my favorite player
- B. I am a fan of the player(s)
- C. Players are on my favorite team
- D. Other people I know are fans of the players
- E. I enjoy reading their updates
- F. Other (please specify)

**Questions 14 through 17 ask about players NOT on your favorite team.**

**14. How many “friends” or player fan pages do you support on Facebook? (i.e. if your favorite team is the Orlando Magic, are you a “fan” of the Shaquille O’Neal fan page)**

- A. 0
- B. 1-2
- C. 3-4
- D. 5 or more

**15. Why do you support these player(s) on Facebook? (leave this question blank if you answered 'No' to question 14)**

**Likert: 1(completely disagree) 2(somewhat disagree) 3(somewhat agree) 4 (completely agree)**

- A. The athlete is my favorite player
- B. I am a fan of the player(s)
- C. Other people I know are fans of the players
- D. I enjoy reading their updates
- E. Other (please specify)

**16. How many player(s) do you “follow” on Twitter? (i.e. if your favorite team is the Orlando Magic, do you “follow” Shaquille O’Neal)**

- A. 0
- B. 1-2
- C. 3-4
- D. 5 or more

**17. Why do you support these player(s) on Twitter? (leave this question blank if you answered ‘No’ to question 16)**

**Likert: 1(completely disagree) 2(somewhat disagree) 3(somewhat agree) 4 (completely agree)**

- A. The athlete is my favorite player
- B. I am a fan of the player(s)
- C. Other people I know are fans of the players
- D. I enjoy reading their updates
- E. Other (please specify)

**MOBILE PHONE**

**18. Do you own a smartphone (i.e., one that has web and email capabilities)?**

- A. Yes
- B. No

**19. What type of smartphone do you have? (leave this question blank if you answered ‘No’ to question 18)**

- A. Apple iPhone
- B. Blackberry
- C. Google Android
- D. LG
- E. Motorola
- F. Nokia

- G. Palm
  - H. Samsung
  - I. Windows Mobile
  - J. Other (Please specify)
- 20. Do you use your smartphone to support your favorite NBA team on Facebook? (*leave this question blank if you answered 'No' to question 18*)**
- A. Yes
  - B. No
- 21. Do you use your smartphone to support your favorite NBA team on Twitter? (*leave this question blank if you answered 'No' to question 18*)**
- A. Yes
  - B. No
- ABOUT YOU**
- 22. What is your gender?**
- A. Male
  - B. Female
- 23. What is your age?**
- A. 16 or 17 years old
  - B. 18-25 years old
  - C. 26-35 years old
  - D. 36-45 years old
  - E. 46-55 years old
  - F. 56 or older
- 24. Where do you live in proximity to your favorite team?**
- A. Inside the metropolitan area (25 miles or less)
  - B. Outside the metropolitan area, but inside the state of your team

- C. Outside the state of your team
- D. Outside the country of your team

**25. May I contact you for a 20-30 minute follow up conversation?**

- A. Yes
- B. No

**i. If you select *yes*, please send me an email at 'tariq.ahmad@unco.edu' notifying me of your interest to participate. I will contact you at a later date to set up a date and time for a phone conversation.**

## Appendix B

### Consent Form for Human Participants in Research

## University of Northern Colorado

Project Title: Examining the use of social media by NBA fans to support their favorite team.

Researcher: Tariq Ahmad, Doctoral Student, Department of Sport and Exercise Science  
Phone Number: 405.201.0870 E-Mail: tariq.ahmad@unco.edu

Faculty Research Advisor: Dr. Susan Hutchinson, Applied Statistics & Research Methods.  
E-Mail: susan.hutchinson@unco.edu

I am researching how National Basketball Association (NBA) fans support their favorite team through social media. You are asked to fill out the survey regarding questions of your use of social media (Facebook and Twitter) and traditional media (websites, newspaper, television, radio, etc.) to support your favorite NBA team. -The survey is designed to take no longer than 10 minutes to complete, and your responses will help us determine how participants support their favorite NBA team through social media.

The survey consists of 25 questions. All questions will have multiple answers from which to choose, and certain questions will have an option to type in a response. Sample questions include who your favorite NBA team is (only one team may be selected), how often you view your favorite team's page on a daily basis, primary reasons for supporting their favorite team on Facebook and Twitter (such as player appearances, post-game interviews, promotions, game highlights and contests, among other items), how often you visit the team website and if you support player(s) from your favorite team on Facebook and/or Twitter.

Additionally, you have an option of participating in a 20-30 minute follow-up interview to discuss your usage of social media in supporting your favorite NBA team. Please note if you consent to a follow-up interview, I will have no knowledge of your survey results; completely different questions will be addressed. To assure confidentiality, I will at no time ask you about your answers to the survey. Interested participants will send me an email to the email address provided at the end of the survey. Your honesty in completing the survey is very important, as this will ensure the accuracy of results.

To participate in the survey, you must be age 18 or older. Survey responses will remain anonymous. To ensure confidentiality, we request that you do not provide your name, email address, phone number, or any information that would assist an individual in identifying survey respondents. Completed surveys will be stored in an electronic database on my computer. While I cannot guarantee confidentiality due to the electronic nature of the survey, be assured that at no time will individuals other than myself and colleagues working on the project have access to your responses. Completed surveys will be kept for a period of three years after which the databases will be deleted. By filling out the survey, you are agreeing that the information supplied will appear in any professional report of this research.

Risks to you are minimal. You may initially feel apprehensive about sharing your usage of social media, but be assured that at no time will myself, or any individuals, know the source of completed surveys. The benefits to you for completing the survey are that you may find out how you use social media and traditional media to support your favorite NBA team, and have the option to give feedback regarding your use of social media to support your favorite NBA team.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Once data have been analyzed and reported, feel free to contact me on or after Monday August 2, 2010 for any findings or implications of the study.

Thank you for assisting me with my research.

Sincerely,

Tariq Ahmad, doctoral student, University of Northern Colorado.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please complete the questionnaire if you would like to participate in this research. By completing the questionnaire, you will give us permission for your participation. You may keep this form for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

**If you agree to participate, please click the “I agree” button to begin the survey. If you do not agree to participate, please click the “I disagree” button and you will be exited from the survey.**

Appendix C  
Reliability Statistics for Facebook

<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha based on Standardized Items</b>	<b>N of Items</b>
.852	.857	15

## Appendix D

### Reliability Statistics for Twitter

<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha based on Standardized Items</b>	<b>N of Items</b>
.843	.846	15

## Appendix E

### Communalities for Facebook and Twitter

1. Fan of team
2. Exclusive promotion, deals or offers from the team
3. Game content (game highlights, post-game interviews, practice videos)
4. Non-game content (player appearances, team charity events)
5. Other people I know are fans of the team
6. Service, support or product news from the team
7. The athlete is my favorite player
8. I am a fan of the player(s)
9. Players are on my favorite team
10. Other people I know are fans of the players
11. I enjoy reading their updates
12. The athlete is my favorite player
13. I am a fan of the player(s)
14. Other people I know are fans of the players
15. I enjoy reading their updates

Appendix F

Total Variance Explained for Facebook

<b>Component</b>	<b>Total Eigenvalues</b>	<b>% of Variance Eigenvalues</b>	<b>Cumulative % Eigenvalues</b>	<b>Total Extraction Sums</b>	<b>% of Variance Extraction Sums</b>	<b>Cumulative % Extraction Sums</b>
1	5.198	34.654	34.654	5.198	34.654	34.654
2	2.172	18.082	52.736	2.712	18.082	52.736
3	2.035	13.568	66.304	2.035	13.568	66.304
4	1.539	10.260	76.654	1.539	10.260	76.654
5	1.008	6.719	83.283	1.008	6.719	83.283
6	.808	5.388	88.670			
7	.628	4.185	92.856			
8	.350	2.331	95.187			
9	.195	1.303	96.490			
10	.186	1.240	97.730			
11	.161	1.071	98.801			
12	.112	.747	99.548			
13	.035	.232	99.780			
14	.028	.185	99.964			
15	.005	.036	100.000			

## Appendix G

### Total Variance Explained for Twitter

<b>Component</b>	<b>Total Eigenvalues</b>	<b>% of Variance Eigenvalues</b>	<b>Cumulative % Eigenvalues</b>	<b>Total Extraction Sums</b>	<b>% of Variance Extraction Sums</b>	<b>Cumulative % Extraction Sums</b>
1	5.043	33.623	33.623	5.043	33.623	33.623
2	2.549	16.995	50.618	2.549	16.995	50.618
3	2.480	16.537	67.155	2.480	16.537	67.155
4	1.690	11.269	78.423	1.690	11.269	78.423
5	.922	6.144	84.568			
6	.740	4.934	89.502			
7	.559	3.726	93.227			
8	.338	2.255	95.482			
9	.267	1.781	97.264			
10	.161	1.073	98.337			
11	.106	.705	99.042			
12	.063	.423	99.465			
13	.047	.311	99.776			
14	.025	.167	99.943			
15	.009	.057	100.000			

## Appendix H

Follow-up interview questions for pilot study

1. Please tell me your favorite NBA team, and why that team is your favorite?
2. Why do you use social media in general?
3. Why did you start using social media to support your favorite team?
4. Why do you use social media to support players, both on your favorite team and not on your favorite team?
5. Tell me about a time that you personally benefitted from your favorite teams' social media page?
6. How does your social media usage differ from your internet usage to support your favorite team?
7. Do you have a smartphone (device that has web and email capabilities), and if so, do you support your favorite team on Facebook and/or Twitter through your mobile device? Why or why not?
8. In terms of social media, what would you like to see being offered by your favorite team?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add in terms of social media and the NBA, either about your team or just in general?

Appendix I

NBA teams by market size

- 1** New York Knicks
- 2** New Jersey Nets
- 3** Los Angeles Lakers
- 4** Los Angeles Clippers
- 5** Chicago Bulls
- 6** Philadelphia 76ers
- 7** Dallas Mavericks
- 8** Golden State Warriors
- 9** Toronto Raptors
- 10** Boston Celtics
  
- 11** Atlanta Hawks
- 12** Washington Wizards
- 13** Houston Rockets
- 14** Detroit Pistons
- 15** Phoenix Suns
- Minnesota
- 16** Timberwolves
- 17** Miami Heat
- 18** Cleveland Cavaliers
- 19** Denver Nuggets
- 20** Orlando Magic
  
- 21** Sacramento Kings
- 22** Portland Trailblazers
- 23** Charlotte Bobcats
- 24** Indiana Pacers
- 25** Utah Jazz
- 26** Milwaukee Bucks
- 27** San Antonio Spurs
- Oklahoma City
- 28** Thunder
- 29** Memphis Grizzlies
- 30** New Orleans Hornets

Appendix J

Interview Guide for NBA teams' social media directors

## Interview Guide

1. Please tell me your position with the organization and what do your duties entail?
2. What experience do you have in the NBA industry?
3. What prior experience do you have with social media?
4. Have you received any type of training (either formal or informal) regarding social media?
5. Please outline for me your responsibilities regarding social media with the team.
6. What were the primary motives for your engagement in social media?
7. Who is involved in the development of social media plans?
  - a. When did you start to implement social media plans?
  - b. Why did you start to implement social media plans?
  - c. Did you encounter any roadblocks or issues along the way?
  - d. What process was utilized to implement social media plans?
    - i. Did you have a set of guidelines regarding the implementation of social media plans that you used?
8. How do you manage social media strategies?
  - a. How many staff members do you have?
  - b. How often do you strategize?
  - c. How often do you adjust or make changes to your social media processes?  
After every game, every month, every season, etc.
    - i. If and when you decide to make changes to the strategy, does everyone among your staff have to approve, or are you the final decision maker?
9. How do you evaluate social media strategies?
  - a. How often do you evaluate? After every game, every month, every season, etc.
  - b. Do you have to submit a report to higher-level members in your organization (GM, CEO, President, etc).
    - i. If so, how often?
  - c. Do you use documentation that provides a checklist or elements of items you use to evaluate social media strategies?
    - i. Do you have any documents you are willing to share with me?
10. How do you feel you compare to other NBA teams and the league?

11. Demographics

- a. What is your age range?
  - i. 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55+
- b. What is your ethnicity?
  - i. African or African-American, Asian or Asian-American, Caucasian, Hispanic or Latino, Native American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.
- c. What is your educational background?
  - i. Did not complete high school, high school diploma, some college but no degree, Associates degree, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, Professional degree, Doctorate degree.
  - ii. What was your major?
  - iii. Did you take coursework related to social media or online technology?

12. Any final comments you would like to add?