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BEHIND THE HANDLE: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE
OF SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGERS FOR
PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TEAMS

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A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

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by
Megan Joan Courage
May 2020

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Accepted by:
Dr. Angela N. Pratt, Committee Chair
Dr. Andrew Pyle
Katie Barnes McElveen

ABSTRACT

The current study aims to expand sports communication literature from an organizational standpoint. Current literature does not recognize social media departments as an integral part of organizational communication, but rather as a function of public relations (PR) strategy. This study consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with social media managers currently working for a professional sports team. Participants discuss their experience working within a professional sports organization, including their interdepartmental structure and relationships, and aspects of their job that they think the general public would be surprised to learn. The study builds upon existing literature concerning sports communication, social media, PR, and marketing, with emphasis on role and systems theoretical structures. The findings of this study reveal that social media management at the professional sports level is much more marketing-focused that existing literature would suggest, with every participant listing the sponsorship team as one of their two closest collaborators, alongside the PR department. The concluding discussion offers implications for future academic work in this area, as well as practical applications for industry professionals at all levels of sport.

DEDICATION

To my parents, thank you for supporting me in all that I attempt to do. Thank you for never adding to the stress that I put myself under, but instead being a comforting voice on the other end of the phone. I'm not sure where I got the irrational confidence that I currently possess, but I'm sure it has something to do with you loving and believing in me unconditionally, no matter what.

To my friends in Braintree, Clemson, D.C., and beyond, thank you for being my outlet for the past few years, and especially the last two. No one makes me laugh harder than the people I've been lucky enough to surround myself with, and I wouldn't have made it through without you being there to talk me off a ledge, and laugh (lovingly) at my suffering.

To my MACTS cohort, you're welcome for always being the last to start an assignment. But really, thank you all for being exceptional people, friends, and peers. Your work ethic has frightened me at times, but it has also inspired me when I've needed it most. I wish you all the best in your future endeavors, but I already know you'll be fine wherever you go.

And lastly: "I want to thank me for believing in me, I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I wanna thank me for having no days off. I wanna thank me for never quitting… I want to thank me for just being me at all times."

- Snoop Dogg
Hollywood Walk of Fame Star Acceptance Speech
(Brandle, 2018)

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To Dr. Andrew Pyle, thank you for your encyclopedic knowledge of all things public relations and crises. Whenever I drifted too far into my comfort zone of practical application, you were there to help decipher the intimidating theoretical concepts into terms I could not only understand, but apply and build upon. Thank you for challenging me to make this a more well-rounded study.

To Katie McElveen, I can't thank you enough for authoring the work that sparked my interest in sports communication and social media. It inspired me in my first semester of grad school, when I was in desperate need of academic inspiration, and it undoubtedly laid the groundwork for what eventually became this thesis. Your MACTS success story gives me hope that my borderline unhealthy interest in sports will lead to me a successful career as well.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As social media begins to permeate every aspect of our lives, sports are no exception. Athletes use social media to cultivate brands and manage their image more than was ever possible with traditional media. Sports fans are afforded direct access to their favorite teams, athletes, and news outlets. Every professional team in North American leagues, as well as most major collegiate sports teams, have Twitter and Instagram accounts. These accounts are where fans look for updates on their teams' games, players, management, breaking news, etc. This study aims to explore the realities of being the person behind the handle: social media professionals who hold the power to craft and share stories about a team or organization, and who also face the pressure of maintaining an image and contributing to a growing industry.

This research will explore some of the intricacies that occur in the professional realm of social media. Social media teams are an amalgamation of public relations (PR), brand management, sponsorships, marketing, graphic design, crisis communication, and customer service responsibilities. Social media sports, or #SMSports, as it is commonly referred to on Twitter, is a growing community of professionals whose full-time job it is to keep social media accounts fun, informative, profitable, and effective. The reason this research is important is because a large gap exists in communication and PR scholarship concerning social media as a profession. In the realm of sports, studies demonstrate how fans utilize social media to interact and foster parasocial relationships with their favorite athletes. These athletes are in turn able to explain their side of a story, as well as express

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parts of their personalities not typically accessible to fans. However, regarding the social media professionals who manage official team and league accounts, there is very little research to be found. Searches for "social media professionals" return articles written about how other professions (i.e., health care) can most effectively use social media, or how employers should monitor their employees' use of social media. This deep gap in literature is not only a justification for why the following research is necessary, but a clear example of the way that social media professionals, especially those in the sports world, often go unnoticed and unappreciated.

Through a series of interviews with professionals working in sports social media, I uncover how the newness of this profession might lead to informality and structural issues within an organization, making it easy to take it for granted—until something goes wrong. This study seeks to learn how social media employees view their place in the larger structure of the organization and how they feel the system recognizes or ignores them. I asked my participants to tell me about how they view their work environment, as an important reality of their vocation is that they are always connected. Some factors that I took into account when evaluating the responses were: the size of the employing organization, the maturity of the organization, and the way that supervisors and executives view the necessity of an effective social media presence. The goal of this piece is to fill a gap in sports communication literature, as well as provide practical ways for sports organizations to evaluate their own structures and priorities regarding social media.

This paper is organized as follows: the literature review addresses sports on social media, encroachment between disciplines, integrated marketing communication (IMC) frameworks, and the theoretical basis for this study. Next, the qualitative methodology used for this study is justified and explained. The subsequent sections provide the study's findings and address how the findings can be interpreted and applied, including practical industry advice and directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to fully understand the interviews that I conducted with social media managers of professional sports teams, we must first acknowledge the existing literature related to their experience. Before data collection began, my preliminary research focused on sports on social media, social media as a PR tool, and social media as a profession. As I collected data, it became clear that this was too limited a scope through which to study the participants' experiences. My study aims to not only inform previous research, but also to close the academic-practitioner divide. In order to do so, the practitioners themselves must be at the center of the study. Therefore, I will begin by reviewing literature specifically related to my participants' social world: sports on social media (#SMSports), PR, departmental encroachment, and IMC (including the concepts of social media marketing and relationship marketing). Next, I will review literature broadly related to my participants' social world: the theoretical concepts of roles and systems. Finally, I will conclude with my research question.

#SMSports

The advent of social media has reshaped the sports world, changing the way that organizations, media members, and fans communicate about sporting news, games, and even interact with one another. There is no mistaking the importance of a social media presence to building the brand and following of an organization: All 122 professional sports teams in the four major North American leagues: the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB),

and the National Hockey League, have a presence on Twitter. The growth and importance of the use of social media has been significant in the sport industry over the past decade (Newman, Peck, Harris, & Wilhide, 2017). In professional sport, various bodies are increasingly embracing social platforms, including teams (Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015), leagues (Hambrick & Kang, 2015), athletes (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012), events (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012), and fans (Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014). As social media consumption grows among the various entities of professional sport, these platforms offer a multitude of opportunities for sport organizations (Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015).

Previous research has shown that an adequate use of digital media is essential to understanding and responding to the expectations of different audiences, as well as improving the effectiveness of communication departments (Kent & Saffer, 2014; Linke & Zerfass, 2013; Moreno, Navarro, Tench, & Zerfass, 2015). It is crucial for sports organizations to use their social media platforms to prove that they are indeed listening to their fans, audiences, and followers (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Communication efforts that seemed so simple before, must now be wary of messages being misinterpreted or unfavorably interpreted by the audience (Sanderson, Barnes, Williamson, & Kian, 2015). Sanderson et al. is an example of a situation where an organization's social media use can lead to unintended consequences. In this study, a PR effort by Florida State University's football program led to widespread, public criticism of their quarterback's off-the-field behavior. While studies exist that show how individual athletes use social to repair their image after off-the-field scandals, not much academic literature can be found concerning

on-social problems. Websites like *Complex* and *Bleacher Report* publish articles criticizing social media missteps, but the concept is still open for formal research.

Sports fans supplement their traditional sports consumption with participation on social media, which allows them access to their favorite athletes, teams, and leagues. By using social media, sports teams and organizations are able to create more dynamic relationships with fans and followers than is possible through traditional media outlets. Sports social media is based on innovation, motivation, digital media, communications, and sharing of sports experiences (Janicic, 2018). This has created large shifts in the way organizations communicate with the public. The use of social media by professional sport organizations goes beyond simple social communication (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). While plenty of work has been done to evaluate how social media is used to create and maintain relationships on social media (Abeza, 2019; Wang & Zhou, 2015), and what fans expect and gain from following their favorite teams on social media (e.g., Billings, Qiao, Conlin, & Nie, 2017; Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Spinda & Puckette, 2018), very little has been done to explore the world of the social media professionals on the other side of the account. In order to understand the experience of social media managers in professional sport, we must first understand the culture of #SMSports.

<u>PR on Social Media</u>

Social media has impacted not only social worlds like sports, but specific industries altogether. One of the industries that has been most profoundly impacted by the advent of social media platforms as communication tools is PR. According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), "Public relations is a strategic communication

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process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2020). Social media has changed the PR process of information dissemination to a more direct, interactive form of communication, which incorporates a spectrum of stakeholders (Chewning, 2015; van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vligenthart, 2014). PR and other organizational personnel must evaluate perceived audience reaction on social media and incorporate those insights when evaluating the efficacy of campaigns, as opposed to efforts that were presented to the public through more traditional means, and were not open to immediate feedback (Sanderson, Barnes, & Williamson, 2015). It is crucial for organizations to use their social media platforms to prove that they are indeed listening to their fans, audiences, followers, etc. (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). As audience members can quickly become active participants in PR narratives, it is important to examine how social media campaigns have the ability to exacerbate certain situations, while they can be used to calm and explain others (Sanderson et al., 2015). Additional literature that proposes social media management is a role of social media professionals will be addressed shortly, and discussed more deeply in the conclusion of this study.

Throughout this study PR functions are discussed in relation to those that either mirror, or come into conflict with, marketing tasks. Marketing is the function that identifies human needs and wants, and then offers products and services to satisfy those demands (PRSA, 2020). The goal of marketing efforts is to create transactions that deliver products and services in exchange for something of value to the provider. The marketing industry has been impacted by social media in ways similar to the effects felt

by PR. Social media provides direct access to target consumers, but has also necessitated the development of social media marketing strategies, which are strikingly different than those of traditional marketing. The interaction of social media, PR, and marketing is a theme throughout this study.

<center>Encroachment</center>

As I will discuss in the results of this study, social media teams' responsibilities seem to be an amalgamation of communication, marketing, sponsorships, PR, graphic communication, and crisis management. Due to this overlap with multiple other departments, it is important to define the concept of *encroachment*. Functional encroachment involves "one department intruding on the activities traditionally in the domain of the other" (Lauzen, 1991, p. 245). Lauzen (1991) theorized that having similar responsibilities, tasks, or audiences leads to encroachment. Gesualdi (2019) explains that despite the fact that research on this conflict has fallen off since the 1980s and 1990s, it does not reflect a drop in encroachment in practice – with the incorporation of social media efforts, that tension has actually intensified. Much of encroachment literature focuses on marketing and PR (Gesualdi, 2019), which is appropriate given the discussion of this study; however, this approach does not assume that social media is affecting the encroachment between only marketing and PR. Revisiting the encroachment concept is warranted, especially because PR and marketing functions have changed drastically since the early days of encroachment research (Gesualdi, 2019).

With this in mind, I will discuss how new IMC activities, including social media marketing and relationship marketing, blend the tactics of marketing and PR using social

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platforms. As the boundaries between the two professions blur, power issues and the overlap of goals between marketing and PR functions can lead to encroachment (Lauzen, 1991). The social channels used by these groups could be creating more encroachment issues as they compete to strategize, manage, and control social media efforts on behalf of their organizations (Gesualdi, 2019). Today, paid social strategies such as native advertising, sponsored posts and tweets are equally likely to be created and placed by marketing and PR practitioners (Gesualdi, 2019). These realities suggest that communication practitioners need to be "willing to test the creative boundaries irrespective of traditional communication demarcations" (Kitchen, Spickett-Jones, & Grimes, 2007, p. 150), which requires knowledge and competencies in advertising, PR and marketing.

<div align="center">Integrated Marketing Communication</div>

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is the "practice of coordinating all brand communication messages" and "marketing mix decisions" (Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2015, p. 41). IMC involves cross-functional collaboration between marketing, PR, advertising and other departments involved in communication efforts (Place, Smith, & Lee, 2016). IMC was developed in the late 1980s as a way to merge these departments into one in an effort to coordinate communications effectively (Kitchen, Brignell, & Jones, 2004). Kitchen et al. (2004) wrote that IMC is the "attempt to combine, integrate, and synergize elements of the communications mix, as the strengths of one are used to offset the weaknesses of others" (p. 20). Some of the foundational principles of IMC include building long-term relationships with customers, delivering a consistent message,

and a commitment to listening or two-way communication (Luck & Moffatt, 2009; Moriarty et al., 2015). Successful IMC implementation is characterized by an exchange of information, sharing of ideas and resources, being responsive to others' needs, as well as discussing and reaching agreements (Neill & Jiang, 2017). The fact that separate marketing and PR departments continue to exist in organizations today suggests that IMC perhaps was not the solution it was promised to be (Neill & Jiang, 2017).

Some barriers to successful IMC implementation identified in previous studies include miscommunication, distrust, turf battles and functional silos as colleagues in advertising, PR and marketing were protective of their domain and budgets (Kitchen, Spickett-Jones, & Grimes, 2007; Ots & Nyilasy, 2015). Scholars attribute the root cause of these issues to different mental models or "cognitive filters" among decision makers (Ots & Nyilasy, 2015, p. 135). Some examples of different mental models might include prioritizing customers over other stakeholders, such as employees (Neil & Jiang, 2017). The IMC perspective tends to view employees as key stakeholders, but they may also fit into other stakeholder categories, such as shareholders or local community members (Moriarty et al., 2015). This will be especially relevant to the present study as participants discuss their responsibilities and the structure of their organization. Most existing IMC literature excludes social media, but Valos, Habibi, Casidy, Driesener, & Maplestone (2016) warned that if organizations see social as an add-on, and not as a vital part of IMC, they are not likely to grasp the opportunities offered by social media.

Social Media Marketing

Over the course of the past decade, marketers have used social platforms to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as athlete endorsements (Brison, Baker, & Byon, 2013), promotions (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011), PR (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011), news updates (Reed & Hansen, 2013), and relationship marketing (Williams & Chinn, 2010). As sports fans continuously expect updates about their team on and off the field, speed and interactivity make social media a valuable tool to respond to these needs (Williams & Chinn, 2010). For marketers, it enhances opportunities for personalization and reduces the costs involved in communicating with target customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Ioakimidis, 2010). Huang and Hsu (2017) found that sports marketers can use social media to facilitate marketing communication campaigns, add value to sports products and services, create two-way communication between sports brands and consumers, support sports sponsorship programs, and forge brand communities. Sports marketers conduct traffic and engagement analysis on their social media accounts—such as marketing communication management, consumer's voice probing, and sales predictions—which provide data to support business decisions (Huang & Hsu, 2017).

Relationship Marketing

Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000) define relationship marketing as an ongoing cooperative behavior between the marketer and the consumer. The primary purpose of relationship marketing is to establish strong relationships between organizations and their best consumers (Williams & Chinn, 2010) through the long-term mutual satisfaction of

both parties (Grönroos, 2004). Williams and Chinn (2010) established a link between social media and relationship marketing, finding the value of social media tools in helping sports marketers achieve their relationship marketing goals. Social media platforms are making the relationship approach practical and affordable (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013). As Hambrick and Kang (2014) explain, social media provides an opportunity for direct and real-time conversation, talking and listening to each other, and then learning from each other.

Many sports organizations have applied relationship marketing to their traditional marketing operations in order to create and strengthen customer relationships (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009; Lapio & Speter, 2000; Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). Social media presents an opportunity for marketers to reach almost every stakeholder anywhere and anytime (Stavros et al., 2013), to engage with them, and to create a mutually-valued product (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014). Kim, Trail, and Ko (2011) report that enhanced relationship quality results in outcomes such as greater media consumption, licensed-product consumption, and positive attendance trends. Fan loyalty to a sport team is far stronger than the loyalty other customers display toward any other brand (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011). Despite this strong loyalty, relationships between teams, leagues, athletes, marketing corporations, and fans are most successful with effective management of those relationships (Bee & Kahle, 2006). Kim, Trail, Woo, and Zhang (2011) also point to the power that a strong fan base has in attracting sponsors and media, which are the main sources of revenue for most sport organizations.

In a study with a similar participant pool to the present research, Abeza, O'Reilly,

and Seguin (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 managers of professional sport teams in North America. Their participant pool was a bit wider than the current study, and included social media managers, directors of communication, and directors of digital media. Their study focused on the social platforms adopted, the intended objectives of social media use, the opportunities social media provides, and the challenges of social media as a relationship marketing medium (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019). While the present study focuses on the experience of social media managers, rather than their view of social as a medium, we must explore the concept of relationship marketing to fully understand their roles in their respective organizations. A full understanding of social media's use in achieving relationship marketing goals in the context of professional sport is emerging but limited, particularly from the practitioners' perspective.

<div align="center">Role Theory</div>

Research on social media theory in the PR and communication literature is sparse. Ngai, Tao, and Moon (2015) identified nearly three dozen theories that have been used in social media research, from an assortment of disciplines, but argue that no specific theories of social media yet exist. Scholars are studying social media in a variety of ways relevant to their own communication context (Gesualdi, 2019); however, no one has yet proposed a social media specific theory for PR (Kent & Li, 2020). Throughout this study, though I am interviewing social media managers, I am really trying to understand where they fit into their organization. Thus, I have relied on organizational communication theories to evaluate my findings. Organizational communication is defined as the

channels and forms of communication that occur within organizations, such as corporations, non-profits, and governmental bodies (Deetz, 2001). This includes both communications within an organization and public-facing communications, which are both directly applicable to the scope of this study. The two theoretical concepts I feel most closely relate to my participants' experiences are roles and systems.

Biddle (1986) stated that role theory is concerned with the ". . . patterned and characteristic social behaviors, parts, or identities that are assumed by social participants, and scripts or expectations for behavior that are understood by all and adhered to by performers" (p. 68). The concepts usually examined in roles theory research are role, social position, status, expectations, consensus, and conformity. Role theory has been studied thoroughly throughout the decades since its inception. As Dozier and Broom (1995) said, "Perhaps no concept has proven so theoretically and empirically useful as the organization role" (p. 3). Much of the extant research concerning role theory pertains to roles for PR practitioners, but I believe the foundation of the theory is applicable to professional social media management as well.

In terms of communication research, scholars tend to differ in their interpretations of roles, which makes it challenging to build on the theory's foundation. Roles can be interpreted as an organizational or occupational perspective; perceptions or behaviors; and tasks, responsibilities, or normative expectations (Biddle, 1979; Dozier & Gruni, 1992). PR scholars' application of role theory primarily falls in line with Katz and Kahn's (1978) definition of role behaviors as recurring activities, with each role serving the overall functions of an organization. Industry definitions appear to focus on the extent

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that PR practitioners possess the power to choose the most appropriate approach to solve

PR problems for an organization (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016). Some theorists tout

the idea that roles are essentially expectations about how an individual ought to behave in

a given situation, while others consider it means how individuals actually behave in a

given social position (Şeşen, 2015). Others have suggested that a role is a characteristic

behavior or expected behavior, a part to be played, or a script for social conduct (Coser,

1975). Social media practitioners have to appeal to various internal and external publics

at the same time, hence they need to shape their messages according to the target groups

and take on different roles (Şeşen, 2015). Role theory can provide a useful starting point

for planning of social media management activities for external publics of an

organization.

Much of the literature on this topic focuses on conflict between PR and

marketing, and references social media as a responsibility of, or an asset to, another

department. In order to fully understand the lack of literature concerning social media

management as a viable profession, we should acknowledge that social media is typically

viewed as a subset, or even a vehicle of other functions, rather than an independent entity.

Neill and Moody (2015) wrote the article, "Who is responsible for what? Examining

strategic roles in social media management", which aimed to fill a gap in scholarly

research on social media management by analyzing human resources and PR

practitioners concerning how they view their roles in this area. Again, social media is

assumed as the responsibility of another department altogether. Neill and Lee (2016)

subsequently provide evidence of seven social media roles and associated responsibilities

assumed by PR practitioners. The authors determine the identification of a new role, Internal Social Media Manager, as a contribution of their study (Neill & Lee, 2016). This is especially relevant to the current research, given that participants work as social media managers (or under a similar title): Rather than it being one of their roles as a PR professional, it is their job title and central responsibility. This is not to downplay the importance of this career, but rather to suggest a large gap between theoretical explanation and practical implementation of organizational social media management.

Neill (2013) indicates that the rise of social media has increased PR practitioners' power and influence in companies, over marketing professionals who may not have the same skills (Smith & Place, 2013). In addition, social media has the potential to increase the perception of PR as a strategic communication function (Estanyol, 2012). While PR may take the lead in online communication, some have suggested social media management requires collaboration with other departments such as information technology, marketing, and legal (Breakenridge, 2012; Neill & Moody, 2015). The current study has similar findings, but examines social media management from the standpoint of a department of its own.

According to Şeşen (2015), role theory is predictive. It implies that if we have information about the role expectations for a specified position, a significant portion of the behavior of the persons occupying that position can be predicted (Şeşen, 2015). Something worth noting is that in addition to heavily influencing behavior, roles influence beliefs and attitudes – individuals will change their beliefs and attitudes to correspond with their roles (Biddle,1986). This will be important in discussing how

participants view their role in the organization, and how that impacts their beliefs and attitudes about their work.

<center>Systems Theory</center>

Another theoretical lens through which to view this study is systems research. Systems theory was first introduced by van Bertalanffy (1950) and was introduced into the organizational setting by Katz and Khan (1966). Systems theory is an approach to organizations that likens them to an organism with interdependent parts, each with its own function and interrelated responsibilities. The system may be the whole organization, a division, department or team; but whether the whole or a part, it is important for members within the institution to understand how the system operates, and the relationships between the connected parts of the organization.

Systems theory promotes an understanding of how interrelated subsystems contribute to an organizational whole, and as it is useful for both understanding and managing PR (Almaney, 1974; Broom & Dozier, 1990; Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985), I consider it to be relevant in evaluating the position of a social media manager within a professional sport organization. The distinguishing characteristic of a system, according to Almaney (1974), is the structure and pattern of interaction (communication) between a system's subunits and the resulting interdependence among them. This means that wherever two subsystems meet in a company—for example, where marketing, communication, and PR intersect with social media management—communication must occur for these subsystems to cooperate with one another (Wiio, Goldhaber, & Yates, 1980). Communication is vital to the "smooth operation of the total system" because it

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integrates all subsystems (departments), maintains the internal stability of the total system (i.e., the organization), and links the total system with the external environment (Almaney, 1974, p. 36-37). Effective interdepartmental communication heavily influences how well the overall system functions (Almaney, 1974; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Creedon, 1993).

Systems theory also posits that the external environment puts pressure on a system or company to change (Cutlip, et al., 1985; Grunig & Grunig, 1989). It is impossible for organizations to be isolated from outside factors, including the economic, social, and cultural structures of society (Şeşen, 2015). Organizations have to adapt to these new conditions in order to remain successful. Perhaps the most influential single theory to emerge from the systems approach was proposed in the 1960s by Karl Weick and begins with the observation that an organization's environment includes information as well as material resources. In the past few decades, the information environment has grown exponentially more complex. Many communication situations can no longer be handled by routines and rules – organizations and their members both shape, and are shaped by, the information environment in which they operate (Weick, 1969). Public facing departments, such as the social media team, serve an important role to systems theory by enabling a company to be "open." An open system is one that interacts with its environment by exchanging information, monitoring environmental changes suggested by the information, and continually reacting to those changes – which are some of the most commonly cited affordances of the organization adoption of social media (Almaney, 1974; Cutlip et al., 1985; Naumann & Lincoln, 1989). Without communication and

subsequent changes according to outside pressures, systems (organizations) become insensitive, dysfunctional, unproductive, and outdated (Broom & Dozier, 1990). This is something that the public is acutely aware of, as is evidenced the very public criticism of some organizations' social media management (Broom & Dozier, 1990). Organizations are not only a technical or economical institution; they have become social systems (Şeşen, 2015).

Systems theory has limitations – one being that while it explains the role of specific functions in an organization and the importance of accurately evaluating their efforts, while the most effective and accurate methods of evaluation remain uncertain. More critically, Creedon (1993) examined the absence of a critical feminist perspective in the application of systems theory, arguing that the theory "uncritically accepts the gendered, racist, classist and heterosexist norms that support systems theory" (p. 2). In the context of this study, this criticism could be supported depending on the structure and hierarchy that the participants experience in their respective organizations.

<u>Working in Social Media</u>

A large gap in literature exists surrounding the structure of creative work environments, especially social media, and social media in sports specifically. Most recent social media research has limited the idea of social media workers or professionals to those considered "influencers", but there is an entire professional community of social media managers whose work warrants exploration.

Cultural and creative work may be viewed as abstract, and therefore less deserving of research, but there is nothing abstract about the impact of organizational

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social media presence. Workers in the creative industry are drawn to the autonomy, creativity, and excitement that media industries can provide, but they must also be willing to accept the high risks associated with a relatively unstable work environment (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005). While the Neff et al. article predates most social media platforms, the sentiment is echoed in more recent research. For example, de Peuter (2014) warns that the figure of the self-reliant, risk bearing, non-unionized, always-on, independent creative worker has become a role model of contemporary capitalism, but it hardly a template for economic and social justice, or even emotional well-being. Social media managers in sport are a prime example of this professional lifestyle, as they are either the only, or one of few people, responsible for handling the 24/7 news cycle that has been expanded by social platforms. According to previously referenced research, social plays an important role in the operations of many other departments, and having all these activities on one type of media means they are required to be are "permanently online" (Vorderer & Kohring, 2013, p. 188).

Especially relevant to those working in social media management is the blurred line between work and non-work time, given that most of their responsibilities are fulfilled through their phones, which are almost always at arm's reach, leaving little excuse for any reaction other than immediate attention. Both in past research and in a general evaluation of the profession, it is clear that younger generations are more tech savvy, and tend to be the earliest adopters of new technologies (Sha & Dozier, 2012). Since younger individuals have a greater understanding of social media, job titles and organizational hierarchy may matter less than their expertise in this domain (Neill & Lee,

2016). Though it may seem obvious, this is worth noting as participants make reference to the structure of their organization, or to their superiors' understanding of their responsibilities.

<div align="center">Current Study and Research Question</div>

The goal of this study is to further understand how social media managers for professional sports teams experience their positions on a daily basis. Though there has been ample research on the efforts of organizational social media accounts in this context, not much attention has been paid to the individuals who control and contribute to these accounts. The existing literature that explores organizational social media use often focuses on corporations, or individual public figures, rather than sports organizations. Overall, the concept of social media professionals is deeply underrepresented in academic literature. The following work aims to fill these gaps in literature, as well as provide practical implications for how organizations can capitalize on having a social media manager on their payroll.

RQ1: How do social media managers for professional sports teams understand their role within their organization?

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

<u>Qualitative Research</u>

The goal of qualitative research is for scholars to build a complex and holistic picture of the experiences of their participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research question for this project is: How do social media managers for professional sports teams understand their role within their organization? I chose a qualitative approach for this project because the nature of experiences are not easily quantified and often hard to measure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I analyzed the words of social media professionals in order to report a detailed understanding of their professional experiences. As the primary researcher, I worked to emphasize the social constructs of these professional realities, and how they may be impacted by the nature of social media, as well as the relatively recent recognition of their profession. Consistent with Denzin and Lincoln (2011) this work will address the relationship between myself (the researcher and a master's student), and the participants (professionals in their field). Similarly, attention was paid to the nature of this inquiry, as experiences in the workplace, especially negative ones, can be a difficult subject to discuss (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

<u>Subjective Realities and Reflexivity</u>

In order to accurately portray the experience of professional sports teams' social media managers, I worked to consistently acknowledge the subjective realities they participate in, and practiced reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis process. The nature of qualitative research necessitates that researchers speak directly

with and learn from their study's participants, while sharing similar vocabularies in order to understand a "common meaning" or "universal essence" (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Though I have an extensive understanding of social media from a personal standpoint, and sports on social media from a theoretical standpoint, I continually renegotiated my understanding of this world in order to share meaning with the participants throughout these interviews (Ellingson, 2009).

In addition to acknowledging the lack of an objective reality in the interview process, I worked to be continuously reflexive during my interactions with the participants. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) define reflexivity as the process of engaging in mutual recognition of, and adaption with others, enabling the researcher to manage the "twisting, turning roads of qualitative research" (p. 72). In order to be reflexive during this research, I kept in mind my personal, professional, and theoretical involvements that had potential to shape my understanding of those of the participants. As an avid sports fan and social media user, I have seen sports social media grow exponentially throughout the past decade. My experience includes following favorite athletes and teams, but also following local and national media members who cover the good, the bad, and the ugly of sports. It is my presence on social media that encouraged me to study sports communication in the context of social media during my pursuit of a master's degree. I have conducted multiple term research projects on sports social media, which include the uses and gratifications sought and obtained by fans who follow their favorite athletes and teams on different platforms, how audience members reacted to a tweet from an official college football program Twitter account that exacerbated an existing crisis, and an

analysis of image repair strategies enacted by a coach in crisis by letters published on his personal Twitter account. While I hope that my theoretical experience looking at sports social media and crises was helpful during the anticipated research, I acknowledge that my previous studies likely impacted my position as an interviewer. I did my best to note any times during the data collection process where I felt that the participants' responses were in direct contradiction to my previously-held beliefs and understandings about the essence of sports on social media.

Another aspect of my position as researcher that I worked to recognize is my experience working with social media in a professional setting. I have held internships for corporations, university departments, and sports camps that have required or consisted entirely of posting on social media. After I complete my graduate studies, I plan to pursue a career in professional sports in communication or PR. While this does not necessarily fall under the umbrella of social media, it must be acknowledged that my professional aspirations do involve working for the type of organization within which my participants have worked and still work. My intention in acknowledging all of this is not only to consider my responsibility to the reader, but also to be sensitive to how my position may have impacted the nuances in the stories that the participants shared (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

<div align="center">Phenomenology</div>

I chose a phenomenological approach to answer the research question posed above because the participants' experiences would not be accurately conveyed through a closed questionnaire or survey (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We can see the final product

of the participants' work by scrolling the feeds of the organizations they work for, but this does not tell the whole story of what it is like to work in professional sports social media. The goal was to understand this phenomenon from the participants' own perspectives, because as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) put it, "the important reality is what people perceive it to be" (p. 26). The best way to learn about the experience of working in pro sports social media is to talk with those who experience this reality firsthand. Schutz (1970) argues that it is the meaning we make of our experiences, rather than the objective experiences themselves, that constitute our reality. Thus, the experience that the participants shared during the interview process was best understood through a phenomenological lens. My role in the study was to gain understanding from the meanings that they assigned to their own experiences.

<center>Procedures</center>

This research utilized semi-structured interviews in an attempt to understand the everyday, lived experiences of the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The questions were open-ended and flexible, focusing first on the participants' current position and how they got there, then gradually developing into a discussion about more specific experiences. Kvale (1996) likens interviewing to the Latin translation of conversation as "wandering together with" (p. 4); the purpose of interviewing is to join the participants on a journey through their experiences, providing encouraging feedback, rather than imposing a strict question-and-answer session. Throughout the interviewing process, I utilized a discussion guide, which allowed for amendments in order to align with discussion from the previous participants, or for added questions if I felt the

<center>25</center>

participants had more to share. The objective of this study was to create a composite

description of the essence of the experience of these individuals working in sports social

media (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

<center>Participants</center>

Social World

The social world of interest in this study is the experience of social media

managers of professional sports teams' Twitter accounts. This is a relatively new social

world as social media has become an integral part of organizational communication in

just the past few years. The hierarchical position of individuals contacted are lower level

positions, excluding departmental heads. The purpose of this was to identify individuals

who have relatively similar levels of responsibility and workload, and also give a sense of

whether the social media professionals' experience is consistent across early stages of

career development.

Included/Excluded

In the beginning stages of this project, I considered interviewing social media

managers for both university and professional teams. However, because of the differing

structures, resources, and organizational goals between university athletics departments

and professional teams, I decided to limit the participant pool to those currently working

in major league professional sports in the United States. After further consideration, I

decided to limit the scope further to the three major leagues with the largest social media

following: the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Football League

(NFL), and Major League Baseball (MLB). Representation from these leagues varied

<center>26</center>

based on response as well as timing during the teams' seasons. The idea was to focus on a specific segment of social media professionals, in order to be more contextually consistent in evaluating the essence of their experience. Intercollegiate athletics departments have their own realities that deserve exploration in their own studies; the same can be said for minor league teams, and professional teams outside the North American sports context.

Recruiting/Contact

Participants were initially identified by their official position, as listed on their organization's website. Upon obtaining IRB approval, I contacted them via my university email to their listed professional email. After completing interviews with the few participants who were responsive to my email inquiries, I asked for their help in recruiting others. They suggested reaching out via Twitter, as most of their relationships with other social media managers was created and maintained on the platform. After getting approval from my advisor, I began to recruit more participants through Twitter's direct message function. I identified potential participants by their Twitter biographies, which usually included the handle to the account that they managed, and through their mutual follower/following with other participants in the industry. No matter how they were recruited, all participants were given a brief explanation of the aims of the study. They were asked if they would be willing to participate in a 45-minute conversation about how they got to their position and their experiences in the social media profession. They were also provided with a copy of the discussion guide and an informed consent form, which provided information about participating in the study. I reached out to over

50 professional sport social media members: Some did not respond at all, and some stopped responding after the first rounds of correspondence. Ultimately I ended up with 9 participants, four from the NFL, four from the NBA, and one from MLB.

Interview Specifics

Due to the geographic distance between myself and the participants, in-person interviews were not feasible. Initially, participants were offered the choice between phone calls or video conference. After a few interviews were conducted over speakerphone, there was a clear decline in audio quality in the recordings, which hindered transcription efforts. I then began to request FaceTime when confirming interview availability, and all subsequent participants were able to comply. Each interview was audio recorded in full, with one recording running on an automatic transcription service, Otter.ai, and another through QuickTime video. Each interview followed the discussion guide, beginning with general questions and gradually becoming more specific. The guide served as a loose and flexible plan to follow, and was frequently amended based on what I learned from my previous conversations with participants, or questions that occurred to me during the interview process. I implemented memoing throughout the process: taking manual notes while the participants spoke, noting non-verbal cues, inflections, variation in tone, or any visible excitement or negativity throughout the conversations.

Table 1.1

Participant Information

	Pseudonym	League	Region	Type of Interview	Length of Interview
1	Elizabeth	NFL	Southwest	Video	36 minutes
2	Robin	NFL	Southeast	Phone	40 minutes
3	Charlotte	NBA	Northeast	Phone	50 minutes
4	Georgia	NBA	Pacific	Phone	29 minutes
5	Raven	NBA	Mid Atlantic	Video	41 minutes
6	Quinn	MLB	Mid Atlantic	Video	32 minutes
7	Logan	NBA	Southeast	Video	26 minutes
8	Cody	NFL	Midwest	Video	36 minutes
9	Mark	NFL	Northeast	Video	38 minutes

Data Analysis

Transcription

As previously stated, an automatic transcription service was utilized while recording each interview. After the interviews concluded, I went back to manually check the transcription and edit the text of each conversation. Listening back to each interview allowed me intimate familiarity with the data and provided an opportunity to work through all the data thoroughly (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Thompson et al., 2009). Though tedious, the process of transcription was a chance for me to reflect on and reflexively document the earlier interviews differently within the context of the later ones (Davidson, 2009). Rubin and Rubin (1995) maintain that there is a reason for every story that is told

in an interview, so it is essential to pay attention to the participants' words. Throughout transcription, I looked for a combination of textural description (what the participants experienced) and structural description (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context) to convey an overall essence of their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Quotes included in the results section of this paper are from each participant's interview. Given the casual nature of these interviews, it was necessary to edit these quotes for readability, but the content and the context of their words were not altered.

Open Coding

Throughout transcription, I used a method of open coding, looking for "landmasses of meaningful data from the surround sea of raw, uncoded data" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This process helped me to identify recurring themes between the stories of the participants, and to separate the data into major categories of information for further analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Constant Comparative Method

The interviewing process followed a constant comparative method, which I value for its flexibility in organizing the data while also respecting the context in which the participants share their stories (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As addressed before, I held a certain position throughout these interviews, and the constant comparative method guided me toward the main discussion points, while allowing the participants' words to influence my understanding of their experience. Similarly, since these interviews took place over the span of weeks, I was able to make note of interesting

or unexpected incidents and compare these to following interviews in order to be more precise and to reduce bias (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This process aided in discerning themes from one set of data to the other, and worked to build foundations of thematic concepts from the beginning of the interviewing.

Thematic Analysis

Gibson and Brown (2009) identify the three stages of thematic analysis as: *examining commonality*, *examining differences*, and *examining relationships*. It should be acknowledged that thematic analysis has critiques in phenomenology because of the generalization of an individual's experience (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

Data Saturation

In order to conduct a valid study in a reasonable span of time, I conducted nine interviews in my quest to reach data saturation. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study and when further coding is no longer possible. Interview transcripts were reviewed continually, to avoid saving all the analysis until the end, which also allowed for effective use of the constant comparative method. Common themes began to emerge after the first three interviews, and by the ninth, participant responses were becoming predictable. When asked about interdepartmental relationships, each participant made mention of PR and marketing as their two closest interactions. Additionally, participants repeatedly used the concept of trust to describe the quality of these relationships. Notes were made when participants echoed the content of previous interviews. Recruitment was discontinued when it appeared that no new themes would emerge from continued interviewing.

Representation

Throughout the process of interviewing, transcription, and analysis, I did my best to honor the voices of my participants. Participants' exact verbiage is included throughout this work, where it is beneficial to provide examples of emergent themes or explicit differences in the data. Participants' words may include structural descriptions where the context of the conversation is important for further understanding.

Quality Study

In order to ensure this is a quality study, I intended to exemplify Tracy's (2010) three criteria for qualitative research: 1) *exploring a worthy topic*, which is studied with rich rigor, sincerity, and credibility, 2) *resonating with the reader to provide a significant contribution*, and 3) *performing research ethically and in order to achieve meaningful coherence* (Tracy, 2010). In the review of existing literature, I provided justification for this topic as one worthy of study, and used previous work as a guide to keep the study sincere and credible. In addition to filling gaps in literature, this study introduces readers to the experience of an understudied profession, and provides practical implications of the results. Throughout the study I observed Ellingson's (2009) warning about looking for a universal truth: "we must not become so enchanted with our evocative story or eloquent analysis that we romanticize an account as embodying Truth, instead of recognizing its inherent partiality" (p. 33). To the best of my ability, I share the personal truths of the participants and put them in the context of existing scholarship to create a meaningful study that can advance research and provide real-life impact for readers and practitioners alike.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The goal of this research was to answer the question: how do social media managers for professional sports teams understand their role within their organization? The findings of my study indicate that the essence of their experience is a complicated one, due to the fact that their position, and typically their entire department, is relatively new. Participants view themselves as an integral part of the organization, but many believe that their peers do not view them as such, or at least do not understand the importance of their function. This underestimation transcends the organization, as the general public has their own perceptions of what it means to work in social media. Participants were promised anonymity in their discussion of their current employment situation, and in the following sections will be a referred to by a pseudonym, and at times by the region and league in which they currently work.

As I conducted interviews, and subsequently analyzed transcripts, three main themes of discussion emerged: 1) *Organizational Structure: Inconsistency and Interactivity*, 2) *Departmental Relationships: Trust and Tensions*, and 3) *Occupational Hurdles: Internal Trivialization, External Criticism, and Team Performance*. These themes, and their respective subthemes are discussed below. These findings serve to advance knowledge in sports communication research, as well as organizational efforts in the sports industry, and any that view social media as a vital part of strategy.

Inconsistency: Lack of Industry Standard

Each organization's social media team is differently structured and housed. Elizabeth, who works for a NFL team in the Southwest, explained that she is one of only three full-time employees dedicated to social, with three part-time interns working in support, while Raven, who works for an NBA team in the Mid-Atlantic, stated that she is one of 16 people on the digital and social team. Besides the discrepancy in size, organizations varied on where their social media teams fit in their larger structure: some in marketing, some in digital (which usually includes all internet-based work), some in content (which combines those in control of posting with the content creators), and two participants (Raven and Cody, who works for an NFL team in the Midwest) are part of their respective teams' in-house entertainment arm. This lack of uniformity between professional teams might have consequences for social media professionals moving from one organization to the other. Though their general job responsibilities remain similar, the structure around them can vary greatly.

Interactivity: Touch Point of the Organization

When asked about the structure of their organization, participants shared the sentiment that their team is one of the only ones in the organization who interacts with every department:

> We are really a touch point for the entire organization. I don't think there are
> many departments that can say that, in working here, you're going to have to work

with everybody. I don't think that that's something that people see or would think

about. And that doesn't even go into the football operations side. (Cody)

I think we're one of the rare departments in the building that touches everybody:

we touch football, we touch the football players, we touch PR. We're in contact

with PR quite a lot, especially during the season. (Mark, an employee of an NFL

team in the Northeast)

Being at the center of an organization's front office operations, as well as the most public

department, seems to add pressure to the position: "You have the keys… the saying is

you have the nuclear codes," said Mark.

Additionally, there was repeated mention about the need for patience in dealing

with different personalities throughout the organization. For example, Charlotte, who

runs social for an NBA team in the Northeast, said, "It takes a lot more patience than

people realize." Mark echoed this sentiment: "You have to trust and be patient with a lot

of other people, people who may not think the same way that you do, when you're in

social because you touch so many of [the] departments."

<u>Departmental Relationships: Trust and Tensions</u>

One word that stuck out to me throughout the interview process was "trust". Trust

emerged as a significant theme when explaining their relationship with other members of

their organization. Those who have a strong relationship with PR felt that they do so

because of a mutual trust between the two departments.

They respect us and we respect them. They understand that we need a heads-up

ahead of time to prep content, and we understand that anything remotely risky

needs to get run by them first. We're trying to do that to keep the trust going.

(Georgia)

Social trusts PR to allow them access to certain people and events that will provide exciting and profitable content to their audience, and PR trusts social to communicate information effectively, and sensitively if necessary.

> PR is willing to go to bat for us. For example, they let us interact with the players ourselves. I know there are a lot of places where you've got to go through PR, but here, they understand we're employees of the team, and trust us. There are very good trust boundaries here. (Cody)

As mentioned before, participants expressed that their supervisors do not necessarily understand the ins and outs of social media, and thus are more willing to trust the younger, more junior employees with the platforms, without much hesitation.

> I hadn't even been through my first season, and my boss, who's not tech-savvy at all, looked at me and said, "It's yours, go with it." (Charlotte)

> There is some gap in understanding, younger people have grown up on it [social media] and see how things have changed. A lot of our interactions are supervisors leaning on younger people and saying, "Hey, this is your field of understanding and I trust you guys to do the work and understand it." (Robin)

In discussing the importance of trust between departments, participants also explained the essence of their relationships with the departments that they work with most closely. Participants listed "public relations" and "sponsorship/partnership marketing" as the

teams with which they have the most and the closest interactions, but they acknowledge that they also work with creative, and team (e.g., football) operations, amongst others.

Trust and PR

Given the existing literature referenced earlier in this work, it is not surprising that PR and social media teams work together closely in almost every organization referenced. However, there is a clear distinction between organizations in which these two departments have a strong relationship, and those in which they do not.

> I talk to people in my position at other teams, and I can't believe they don't have a good relationship with their PR department. How do they not respect what you do, and how do you not respect what they do? Our departments have to go hand in hand, because, essentially, they are the voice of the team. (Cody)

The social media professionals interviewed routinely referred to PR as a more "traditional" segment of their organization, one that is helpful in allowing them to access certain players and events, but also one that tends to be protective of the organization's brand, and thus could be strict and exclude social from sensitive information:

> You've probably heard, people do need to work with that department [PR], but the effectiveness of the work all depends on the relationship between the two. Ours [relationship] isn't the best. I think they're just worried that we'll release something before we're allowed to. (Elizabeth)

Participants were not asked directly about their corporate cultures, but I found it compelling that they were quick to explain the positive or negative aspects of their organizations from their standpoints. Those participants from more traditional,

conservative organizations, expressed frustration with the more regimented expression of creativity than they were used to from previous positions. This includes organizational prohibitions against participating in what participants perceive as the fun, light-hearted internet trends, such as GIFs, memes, and even inventive graphics. "Everything has to be much more old-fashioned, obviously it's a different audience in general but I was getting frustrated, my first few months of work just because people didn't see things as easily as they did at [alma mater]," said Robin, of his position with an NFL team in the Southeast. Raven described how these restrictions work in practice:

> Before we can post certain things, we have to talk it over with PR directly. Yesterday, someone came up a really good idea, and it turned into this big group brainstorm. Before we could take it any further, we said, "Hey we really need to like stop and pitch this to PR."

Participants attribute these strictures to their organizations' commitment to a championship mentality, or a dedication to positively represent their stakeholders, namely their fan base or even their owners. "How are you representing the storied organization of winning? Everything is much more formal and much more protected," offered Robin. Raven reinforced the idea of the power structure behind this type of culture: "I think that drawback comes from their boss' bosses and upper-level people in general."

On the other hand, it is significant to see how participants are proud of how their organization views their work. Georgia, of an NBA team in the West said, "This organization understands the value of social, so I get pulled into a lot of meetings, to see how X campaign or Y contract would be able to be executed on social media." She

continued to say that the respectful relationship between the PR and social employees is rooted in trust:

> [Trust] is just something that builds over time and builds with communication internally. If you have trust with your PR department then they're going to trust what you're saying needs to happen on social, and you're going to trust what they're telling you. Also, our PR department gets it. I think they are the best PR department in the league, they're so good at their job – they respect us and we respect them.

Trust and Marketing

My academic focus on communication led me to spend most of my time thinking about how fans use social media accounts to connect with their favorite athletes, or how individual athletes and teams use social to mediate crises that arise in the media. I had expected participants to discuss these functions as a large part of their responsibilities, but I quickly learned that social media management has far more to do with marketing and sponsorship opportunities. Though I was surprised by this fact, participants expressed similar naivety before they started working in the industry. When asked about things they wish they knew before going into their profession, the sponsorship side was a common response: "I guess I wish I knew how marketing-minded you have to be," said Raven. "It's crazy to me to see, even just in the past four years since I started, how much more of a priority the sponsorship [is]," said Quinn, the only participant currently employed by an MLB team.

I guess I probably thought that it [social media management] would be a little more open. I always understood that there was a monetary part of the job, but maybe I just didn't understand the extent of it. (Mark)

Participants responded similarly when they were asked to share something that they thought the average person would not know about working in social media – most responded with something surrounding how much their content is monetized. This was surprising to me, but participants repeated this sentiment over and over: that almost every piece of content they put out had been paid for by someone, with the promise of reaching a certain goal of engagement or return on investment.

A lot of my job during the season is making sure that our content calendar has everything planned, and that we are hitting the goals for sponsorship. So certainly you have your creative, funny posts, and your highlights, but you've got to make sure you're hitting the numbers that we have promised to sponsors. (Mark)

Not only that, but these sponsorships are packaged and planned months in advance. In professional sports, a multi-billion-dollar industry, social media seems to be another way to achieve the bottom line of making money for the organization.

A lot of the sponsored stuff we plan weeks and months ahead. We have this huge sponsor calendar, so we know which sponsor has posts on which days, and what time those are going to go out. (Logan)

Participants offered comparisons between their work in professional sport and college athletics. Charlotte made the distinction clear: "(S)omething that doesn't really get talked about is how much revenue plays into it. With college accounts, their goal is to be cool

and do all this innovative stuff and attract recruits. [In professional sport,] it's completely different." Her sentiments were echoed later in our conversation, as well as during multiple other interviews.

> If you win on the court you've already won, I don't need social media to do that. I could half-ass it [social media] and my brand would still be there and be fine. But if I can see another opportunity to grow the business, then that's when I can request additional resources. (Charlotte)

> The difference between college level to NFL level is here [NFL], I work with a lot of other departments, the marketing department, the sponsorship department, and the client services, because we do have a lot of sponsors here. (Elizabeth)

> A lot of people will see it [working in social] as we just tweet the score, but we sell partnerships, we sell sponsorships, and we monetize Twitter videos. It's become a necessity as opposed to a luxury. (Robin)

Regarding relationships with the marketing department, participants expressed feeling wary about sponsoring every piece of content that they put out to their audience:

> We're a little bit more reluctant in terms of who we work with. We have been very protective of social media because we want to provide some incentive for our fans to tune into what is being sponsored. (Cody)

Charlotte, too, mentioned the challenge of balancing brand authenticity with revenue generation: "We work really closely with them [sponsorships], usually there's tension because they want to bring in as much money as possible, but I'm incredibly protective of what we put out on our channels."

We try to work closely with our sponsorship crew and MLB sponsorship to
ensure that we're not just dumping everything on our feed at once. We want to
make sure that it's important stuff that we're posting, and that we're sponsoring in
in a nice tactful way. (Quinn)

Everything is sponsored, which makes sense. But, we think, "Okay, we have to
find ways to sneak creative back into sponsored," because our fans are going to
notice [the sponsored content] and say, "That's not what I want to look at."

(Raven)

As mentioned previously, social media teams interact with more than just the above
departments. According to them, by acting as the "touchstone of the organization", they
work with most everyone in the building, on all levels. They are also the most public
facing team, besides the professional athletes themselves. Based on their responses, and
the reality of working on the internet their position at the center, and the front, of the
operation, is a difficult place to be.

<u>Occupational Hurdles</u>

Internal Trivialization

Participants echoed each other in describing the instances in which they feel that
their coworkers and supervisors do not necessarily understand the nuances of managing a
team's social media. A few used a similar phrase that they've heard from other
departments — "throw this on social"— which, to them, insinuates that social is
frivolous, immediate, and disregards all the planning that goes into a detailed schedule
that forms long before the season starts.

There are times it's frustrating because they [upper level employees] want things, that we, as the younger people who actually understand social, have to say, "Hey that's not exactly how it works." There are frustrations sometimes, so we have to work to understand each other. (Robin)

People trivialize social a lot, which can pan out in different ways: not getting adequate resources or not getting adequate time to plan or prep or communicate certain things. We're speaking to an audience of millions, even though people say, "It's just a post," we know it's not just that. (Georgia)

Similarly, participants lament that co-workers will approach members of the social team with an idea of what should or should not go on social, without understanding the channels through which certain content goes for approval. "Even the language that people use when they talk to you about social, 'Oh just put it on social,' or, 'Can you just tweet this?'" explained Georgia.

Charlotte described instances in which people will confront her, asking, "Why didn't this go out at the time I wanted it to?" because they lack a general understanding of all the channels through which a single post must go. She cited being a young woman holding a position with a lot of power is also a factor that can rub people the wrong way, and lead to further tensions when their unrealistic expectations are not met.

External Criticism

Participants expressed that while they were prepared for some of the criticism that comes with working in social media, it is still frustrating to encounter so many "armchair experts". Participants seemed weary of members of the general public who believe that,

because they manage their personal social media accounts, they have an understanding of how to run an account with hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of followers. "Because social media is such a prevalent thing in society, everybody thinks they're an expert," said Cody. Some people think that working in social is so easy, and that simply being on social media regularly substitutes for actual job training: "There's still going to be people, especially even younger people, that live on social media, that, you know, think, 'I could do the job tomorrow,'" said Mark.

> My extended family all say, "Wow, you have the coolest job." Yes, I do, but I'm not telling them all the times when I'm up working until 4 a.m. (Elizabeth)

As Georgia described her experience of feeling unfairly trivialized, "Just because you can turn on the stove doesn't make you a chef." Cody said he frequently compares such lack of understanding to other professions to explain how ridiculous he feels it is to offer unsolicited advice to someone who works in an industry in which you have no experience:

> We always joke when somebody has that conversation [about working in social] with us: do you think they have that same conversation with [someone working in] finance? 'No, this is how you balance the budget, this is how you do it', and I think that goes hand in hand with the exposure. (Cody)

Additionally, social media is so pervasive and accessible that mistakes made are more public facing. "I wish social people everywhere would get a little more leniency, because if Johnny in in marketing messes up, it's probably not seen by that many people, but we mess up and it's seen by millions," said Mark.

Team Performance

Participants shared the experience of having less content to post after a loss than after a win. They gave two reasons: 1) Fans don't want to hear anything from a team that they are emotionally attached to after being let down, and 2) It is not fair to sponsors to attach their names to graphics and posts with a losing score. "You have to get into the rhythm of, 'All right guys, here's the score, we know it's bad, and we're sorry,'" said Robin.

The time before the game begins is where social professionals feel they have the most freedom: "You're undefeated in pregame, so you can get away with a lot. You haven't yet started losing, people aren't upset with what you're posting at that point, so you don't have to be as strategic or as careful," explained Cody. But once the game begins—perhaps even once the season itself begins—things change for content creators. As Mark put it:

> I've gone back and forth on this, because at first I thought winning mattered a lot. Then I thought you could create good content no matter what. And now I've gone back to what I originally thought – winning matters a lot. The hardest part of social is winning will affect the perception of your work, no matter how good you are [on social].

Mark also expressed how difficult he feels it is to maintain a strong social presence during a rough season: "Our fan base wants us to be good so badly that they kind of hate us, and as a result it seems like nobody likes our social."

I feel fortunate that participants were willing to share specific details of their professional experience with me throughout the interview process. Their openness, and the fact that their experiences shared many common threads, allows this study to inform not only on current sports communication research, but also on current industry practices.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

My results can be categorized into three themes: organizational structure, departmental relationships, and occupational hurdles. Subthemes that arose in discussion of organizational structure concern lack of industry standard and perceptions of being a touchpoint of the organization. Subthemes of departmental relationships included trust, public relations (PR), and marketing. Subthemes of occupational hurdles were internal trivialization, external criticism, and team performance.

This study aimed to fill gaps in both sports communication (particularly PR and IMC and organizational communication (systems and role theories and encroachment) scholarship, and to show how the two disciplines can work together to study phenomena. The findings explore the profession of social media management, a profession that has grown in importance, but not in recognition, in the context of professional sports. The following section will examine the significance of these findings as they relate to both academic research and practitioners, and provide support for my research question: How do social media managers for professional sports teams understand their role within their organization?

Implications for Scholarship

There is no shortage of literature on either sports communication or organizational communication, but that which concerns both is limited, and usually relates to the structure of the team on the field, rather than the supporting organization. The stories of my participants might resonate with other social media professionals, even

outside the realm of sports, as searches for literature concerning social media managers revealed few, if any, previous recognition of this occupation. The research question in this study inquires about the experience of social media managers for professional sports teams, and how they view their position within their organization. While the results cannot be generalized, my participants' responses indicate that in their profession, they feel they are an integral part of the teams' operations, but are not necessarily fully understood.

One aspect of these interviews that stood out to me was that participants listed sponsorships and partnership marketing as one of the organizational teams with which they had close, if not the closest, interactions. Much of the literature I have encountered in studying sports on social has dealt with how social media is used to create and maintain relationships on social media (Abeza, 2019; Wang & Zhou, 2015), and what fans expect and gain from following their favorite teams on social media (e.g., Billings, Qiao, Conlin, & Nie, 2017; Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Spinda & Puckette, 2018). The only other study I could find that had a participant pool of individuals who run social media for professional sports teams was Abeza, O'Reilly, and Seguin (2019). While it is reassuring that such a study does exist, their research was focused on how participants viewed social media as a relationship marketing tool, rather than how they viewed themselves as members of a larger organization.

The concepts of encroachment and IMC were especially relevant to this study given the rise of social media departments and how they interact with, and at times conflict with, other existing departments. Some participants were the first social media-

focused employees at their organization, which means that they either created new roles for themselves, or took over roles that previously belonged in other departments. Neill (2013) indicated that the rise of social media had increased the power and influence of PR practitioners, which is based on the assumption that social management falls under the responsibilities of the PR department. Most encroachment and IMC literature focus on the interactions of PR and marketing, and the delicate balance that allows the two to work together. Participants listing PR and sponsorships as the two teams with which they work most closely is not surprising given the history of literature linking the two. However, it would be interesting to see both encroachment and IMC research expanded to acknowledge social media as its own profession.

The theme of "trust" between internal departments at these professional sports teams was one that arose multiple times during the interview process. Trust was seen as the deciding factor in whether or not they viewed their relationship with other departments favorably. This fits perfectly within the IMC framework, as Neill and Jiang (2017) identify distrust as one of the previously identified barriers to successful implementation.

According to the literature concerning working in social media, or any creative field for that matter, the participants' identification of internal trivialization and external criticism as two harsh realities of the job is not surprising. To the general public, most of whom utilize some type of personal social media, it might seem like an easy task to send a tweet or post on Instagram; the added perk of working for a professional team makes it all the more impressive. But participants assert it is not always as glamorous as it seems.

As de Pueter (2014) calls it, they are "always on", which is echoed by Vorderer and Kohring (2013): They are required to be "permanently online" (p. 188). The internal trivialization of the job could be rooted in a similar idea, that social media is simple to operate. However, the fact that a majority of social media managers are young, entry-level workers could also be a contributing factor. Younger generations are much more tech savvy, and thus have a greater understanding of social media (Sha & Dozier, 2012), but just because they are the most expert employees in social does not necessarily translate to high ranking job positions, or the feeling of more organizational recognition (Neill & Lee, 2016).

     As far as losing goes, it is no surprise that participants identified poor on-field performance as a deciding factor in what content and sponsorship activation is deemed appropriate. As literature explains (Compton & Compton, 2014), losing is the worst crisis a team can experience. Fans will forgive their favorite teams and athletes for most infractions, as seen again and again (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Brazeal, 2008; Kennedy, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Nelson, 1984), but losing is inexcusable. This is in line with concepts related to identification theory, which is heavily researched in sports (Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004; Spinda, 2011; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). The two main concepts of fan identification are basking-in-reflected-glory (BIRGing) and cutting-off-reflected-failure (CORFing). Identification with a group has important implications for one's self-esteem (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). In this case, participants are referencing their fans' defense mechanism of CORFing, which aims to protect the fan's ego. Fans will avoid association

with a losing (or poorly-perceived) team, and thus will have less or negative engagement with their social.

The results of this study are in direct opposition to the results of role theory work that establishes social media management as a function of PR practice (Neill, 2013; Smith & Place, 2013). According to participants, though they work closely with the PR department within their organization, social media usually falls under marketing or a dedicated digital media team. It is important to consider that other industries might have different organizational charts, wherein social media does fall under the responsibility of PR. Despite their findings that social media responsibilities belong to PR professionals, other works in role theory did in fact see the need for collaboration with other departments, including marketing, on social (Breakenridge, 2012, Neill & Moody, 2015). This specific aspect is reiterated in the results of this study, as participants expressed their view of social media as the touchpoint of the organization.

Similarly, systems theory can be applied to most organizations, but in this case, Almaney's (1974) discussion of the structure and pattern of interaction (communication) between a system's subunits and the resulting interdependence among them is especially relevant. Without PR, social media teams would lack a lot of the important information that makes them a necessary source of news for stakeholders; without sponsorships, their content would be much less valuable to the whole of the organization. Inversely, without social, these departments, and many others, would have no medium through which to communicate with stakeholders, fans and consumers. In their responses, participants reiterated the systems theory assertion that communication is vital to the smooth

operation of the system, as open communication with other departments, along with trust, allowed for better interdepartmental relationships. Another factor in which this study supports systems theory is that professional sports organizations have adopted social media in order to become a more "open" system. Weick (1969) stated that organizations are shaped by the information environment in which they operate – and as we know, the most effective social media presence is one that is aware of the outside factors, and continually reacting to new information and changes in the environment.

<center>Implications for Industry Professionals</center>

While the findings of this study may be interpreted as a range of neutral to negative experiences, most participants still expressed a true passion for their roles working in social media management. These interviews seemed to be cathartic for these young professionals, given that they shared their feelings about how misunderstood and thankless their jobs can be at times. Especially given that this is a new profession, situated in the industry of professional sport where it may seem that tradition is king, it is understandable that tensions arise. I feel that given my interest in this topic, and my minor experiences working in social media, I may be one of the few outlets that these participants had for talking about their careers, making this a liberating experience. I want to ensure that their experiences are accurately represented, and that if the negative points they shared were overrepresented, I at least made mention of the gratitude they expressed to be in the positions they currently hold.

Though they consider themselves grateful to be working in professional sport, their shared experience indicates there is still room for improvement on the industry side

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as well. The first suggestion I would make is for higher-level, departmental heads to take inventory of the resources that they are allocating to their social media presence. There was a wide disparity in department size described by participants. It seemed as though those with larger staffs were able to focus more on one task or element of social, whereas those with smaller teams seemed to be scrambling to accomplish everything that they needed to on game days. It could be argued that there is little downside to hiring more social media professionals, even if the organization decides to start off by expanding with seasonal social interns.

The participants interviewed for this study were all relatively young; for some this is their first job out of college. Given the nature of social media, that it comes more naturally to those who have grown up using it, this is not surprising. However, industry professionals should consider the potential lack of upward mobility in this industry, and how that could affect social departments in the next decade or so. The way that most professional teams are set up, social media management falls under the marketing department, which is usually run by a VP of marketing or branding. There is no departmental head who represents social media, which might not be an issue now, but for those who are looking to make a career out of social media management, the lack of possible career advancements could prove frustrating in the near future.

Some of the hurdles addressed in this study are unavoidable aspects of social media: the publicity and constant exposure to public criticism, and even just the anonymous, critical nature of the internet. However, organizations are very much in control of mediating the internal tensions that were discussed. In these interviews,

participants explained that social media teams work most closely with PR and marketing. Though social is an asset to both of these departments, it does not seem as though social managers feel they are internally recognized as such. This could be due to the new, young characteristics of the job, and the reluctance of experienced professionals to change their daily functions. However, underestimating the potential of a strong social presence, or hesitating to give the social department the time and resources they need to be successful, only serves to hurt the organization's bottom line. This tension may also be felt on both sides, with more established departments being wary of the new and instantaneous nature of social. If there is as much tension as the participants describe, industry professionals, either inside social, or perhaps in human resources, should work to create a clear demonstration of the value of social to all other departments. Additionally, during the onboarding process of social media professionals, it could be helpful for new employees to be introduced to members from other departments as well, in order to immediately build the foundation of trust that was felt to be so vital to interdepartmental relationships.

As for social media managers themselves, though they are usually younger, lower-ranking members of their organization, there is no reason that they cannot work to establish strong, working relationships with those in PR and marketing. A system is most effective with clear communication between the subsystems. Some of the reason that social media departments do not receive the time and resources they require is due to the contemporary nature of the field, and ultimately a lack of understanding from other members of the organization. Keeping in mind that the environment of every institution is

different, it is not unreasonable to speak up and request additional resources, or to offer a further explanation of your position's function and value.

I hope that this study can be a catalyst for any change that needs to be made, not only in the sports industry, but in social media management at large. I appreciate the professionals who took the time to share their stories with me. I hope that this project accurately expressed the stories they shared with me, and maybe encouraged them to reflect upon their experiences.

CHAPTER SIX

LIMITATIONS

The research process allowed me to temporarily enter professional social media managers' worlds to try and understand the role that they experience within their organizations. I feel as though I reached saturation during the interviews, but I realize my study has limitations. Methodologically speaking, I conducted the interviews either over the phone or via video conference. Because my sample included individuals living across the United States, in-person interviews were not feasible, though they might have garnered more meaningful observations, such as the ability to actually see their workplace contexts. While I felt I gave each participant freedom to speak his or her mind, I realize that talking about one's career or workplace environment can be a personal or difficult conversation, which may have affected the candidness of their responses.

Another limitation came from the limited number of participants from each league. Only one participant works in Major League Baseball (MLB), and it is possible that the structure and priorities of each organization may differ from league to league. Cultural differences between leagues were not immediately visible in this study, but may have become more obvious if there was a larger sample.

I used convenience and snowball sampling to find my participants. All of my participants satisfied the necessary criteria. However, these types of sampling have the potential to produce unwanted bias (Yin, 2011). Finally, a phenomenological study aims to uncover the participants' realities, and as such, these results cannot be generalized to a larger audience. While this is not a limitation per se (I intentionally chose this approach

as the best way to answer my research question), it does invite scholars to continue to explore this and other contexts to gain understanding of sport and social media communication and management.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focused on the profession of social media management in the context of professional sport, with some influence from organizational communication. It is my intent that these findings advance knowledge in both social media management and sport communication while also serving as a guide for practical applications in industry. However, this study also raises more topics of inquiry that should be explored in future scholarship.

First, the reason why I found this topic so worthy of study was because it was almost impossible to find scholarly work about social media as a profession. Existing scholarship focused on the rise of social media influencers, including bloggers and YouTubers, whose careers are more self-governed and creative. However, there is an entirely different realm of working in social media, which is running organizational accounts. Any research that mentioned social media in a corporate setting was concerned with how employers should view or restrict the social media activity of their employees. The premise of this study, to interview social media managers for professional sports teams' official accounts could open an entirely new field of research concerning social media work. The methods used in this study could be applied to social media departments for larger companies, non-profits, and other organizations outside the world of sport.

Multiple participants in this study had experience working in college athletics before switching to their current roles in professional sport. No matter if the sentiment behind the comparison was positive, negative, or neutral, those who mentioned collegiate

athletics social media management were quick to point out the stark differences between the two. Future scholarship might consider a similar study to the present research, but with a participant pool of only college athletics social media managers. Additionally, researchers might consider doing an entirely new comparative study, comparing the goals, structure, and overall experiences of those working in college and professional sports.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

My phenomenological study into the experiences of social media managers in professional sport provides insight that can benefit both academic research and the industry in practice. The participants' own perspectives were able to shed light on a previously unexplored topic. Their candid discussion of their understanding of their place within professional sports organizations illuminated a deep disparity between existing literature and industry practices. While previous studies establish social media as a function of PR professionals, I was able to conduct in depth interviews with people whose entire role is social media management. These social media managers shared experiences with the structure of their organization, the departmental relationships they experience daily, and the hurdles that they face working in such a young profession.

Participants shared with me the importance of trust in all aspects of their interdepartmental relationships, which might be a given for most relationships, but is worthy of special consideration due to the relatively recent incorporation of social media into organizational communication efforts. In order to reap all the benefits that social media has to offer, organizations must first understand its value. As far as research goes, there is a clear gap in understanding of social media work, and not just in sport. This study aimed to begin closing this gap, by establishing social media management as a career worthy of recognition and continued exploration.

APPENDIX

Discussion Guide

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me! I'm Megan Courage, a graduate student researching sports on social media at Clemson University. I am talking with social media managers for professional sports teams to learn more about their professional experiences.

1. Explain to me how you ended up in the position you currently hold.

2. Describe your responsibilities as a social media manager.

3. Will you describe for me what a typical day looks like for you?

4. Tell me about the departmental structure within your organization.

   a. How do you feel about where you fit within this structure?

5. If there is one thing you wish you had known when you started this job, what would it be?

6. A) What is your best memory from, or the best part of, being a social media manager?

   B) If you're willing to share, what is your worst experience, or the worst part of your job?

7. Is there anything we haven't discussed yet that you feel is essential to telling the story of a pro sports social media manager?

These questions may be modified and more questions may be added as the interview process progresses.

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