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Relationship Management Communications by NHL Teams on Twitter

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Relationship Management Communications by NHL Teams on Twitter

by

Kelsey M. Baker

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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with a concentration in Strategic Communication Management
Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications
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ABSTRACT

The sports industry is massive, bolstered by its relationship with media. A recent development in the sport industry is the advent of social media, which offers the potential for two-way communication between sports organizations and their relevant stakeholders. Relationship management theory helps cultivate an understanding of social media as a vehicle for value creation for an organization and its stakeholders. This thesis is a content analysis of relationship communications strategies on Twitter using the accounts of five National Hockey League teams.

This study builds upon existing literature by identifying stakeholder groups targeted on Twitter by NHL teams, defining subcategories in relationship management communications, and comparing the strategies and tactics used among five NHL teams. Results indicate that players are the most common internal stakeholder identified within this study, while sponsors are the most popular external stakeholder. Interactivity is not a major driver of social media content, but when teams do contribute to some form of interaction, they are most likely to place a mention of a stakeholder or stakeholder group within a tweet. Among relationship management communications strategies, NHL Twitter accounts most often provide announcements directly related to team performance. Engagement metrics show that team promotions receive the greatest number of replies and retweets. Four out of five NHL teams in this study are very similar with their use of relationship management communications strategies and identification of relevant stakeholders. In this sample, the San Jose Sharks account differs the most from the other teams in this study, emphasizing fan interaction and brand personification the most

compared to the other teams in this study. Overall, this thesis contributes to knowledge about social media in the sports industry by providing an in-depth look at the stakeholders and communications strategies identified among NHL teams on Twitter.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Social media is defined as “networked database platforms that combine public with personal communication” (Meikle, 2016, p. 6). Perhaps this definition is too restrictive, as social media, built upon an innate human desire for interaction, has become somewhat of a cultural phenomenon in the age of digital media. Physical boundaries between communities do not appear to exist: individuals connect with voices from around the world in virtual spaces, leading to high degrees of interactivity, identity formation, and content sharing (Lipschultz, 2015). Social media has created a paradigmatic shift in not only how we communicate, but the expectations we have with communication.

This increased interactivity is not restricted to individuals, however. Corporations, nonprofit organizations, and an amalgamation of brands across industries have inserted themselves into social media spaces, utilizing these platforms for organizational goals to engage in responsive communication with consumers. Instead of appearing as faceless entities, organizations are now personified by their social media personalities, marking a major shift into a realm of active communication. In a digital world that is loaded with increased consumer control, organizations can no longer assume that people will listen to what they have to say. Instead, organizations involved in digital media spaces must be willing to create content that promotes active engagement among consumers.

Social Media in the Sport Industry

Put into context for this study, the sport industry has flourished in efforts to adopt and maintain social media into its organizational framework. Each of the four major North American sports leagues, the National Football League (NFL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Baseball (MLB), and the National Hockey League (NHL) create content for social media platforms. Most notably, individual franchises within these leagues have established their own digital media presences. These independent personalities, separate from the leagues in which they operate, inspire a connection between a franchise and its passionate fans. Newman et al. (2017) note that sport media differs from other forms of media consumption in that its audience has severe emotional attachments and self-identification to the teams they follow. Because fans share an “intense collective passion” for teams within their self-proclaimed sport communities, they are more likely to seek out sport-related information on social networks (Vann, Woodford, & Bruns, 2015). Thus, the sport industry is abundant with opportunity to understand how social media is used to achieve organizational goals in coordination with fan engagement.

The integration of new media into organizations’ operations is now an essential function within sport management, so much so that social media managers control the brand and marketing narratives of the franchises they are hired to represent. A sport franchise’s various social media profiles cultivate public perception of the franchise by becoming a vocal and public extension of the team itself. On the very surface, a sport team is comprised of its athletes and coaching staff. They are the public, day-to-day faces of the organizations, as well as the names and faces that most people recognize immediately. But this is no longer the case with social media: fans can now receive information about their favorite sport franchises on-demand. A

verified Twitter account for a sport team, for example, is perceived as an extension of the team's identity itself, even though the social media manager who creates content is not one of the personnel responsible for the team's performance on the field. As a result, the public who interacts with a franchise's social media posts may respond as if they are writing to the team itself, even though the personnel responsible for the team's performance may never see what the public is saying about them.

As a communications tool, social media is young relative to other forms of media like newspapers and television that are often studied in mass communications academic research. Social media is an extension of the sports-media complex, first defined by Jhally (1984), in which professional sports leagues, operating as capitalistic enterprises, are altered by their relationships with media, namely with the large audiences they attract. When Jhally (1984) speaks of media, he is referring to television and professional sports leagues' contracts with networks in particular. If viewed with a more modern lens, the case of social media alters the sports-media complex in such a way that it places sports franchises in direct contact with the fans who support them.

Social media is also a burgeoning field for research potential. Social media provides a mechanism for developing strong relationships between business and consumers in that consumers gain insight into the identities that organizations seek to create for themselves (Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2016). Within the past decade, it has become increasingly clear that social media is not a fad—rather, it is a constantly evolving medium pervasive in a digital world. Because of this, it is important to continue to update knowledge within the field of social media. For the sport industry, social media is imperative in building relationships between a team and its

fans (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2017). Social media may also deepen existing connections between a sport franchise and its audiences.

When it comes to revenue, no sport leagues are created equal. For example, the NHL is the fifth-largest sports league in the world but gathers the least amount of revenue among the four major North American sports leagues (Brown, 2017; Raza, 2016). The average relative value of its teams is also lower than teams in the other major North American sports leagues ("National Hockey League franchise," 2017). In the United States, the NHL is not the same cultural phenomenon as other sports league like the NFL. Therefore, NHL teams, officially known as "clubs," may have to work harder in their marketing efforts to keep fans engaged and excited—their social media presences may contain intrinsic value that leads to greater revenue in the future.

The following study discusses the role of social media using a relationship management framework, including identification of relevant stakeholders, value creation, and an updated framework for the study of social media in the sport industry using the National Hockey League. This proposal then presents a method for a content analysis of NHL club Twitter account tweets.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Newman et al. (2017) define an intricate flow between the media and its audiences in the context of sport communication: sport audiences control the information they consume about the teams and leagues they follow and become actively involved in the sport communication process. Social media is an appropriate medium from which to study the sport industry because sport organizations can communicate messages in real-time while receiving immediate feedback from consumers (Moore & Carlson, 2013). According to Pedersen (2012), sport cannot exist without communication—that is, sport management is dependent upon interpersonal public relations, media rights negotiations, and social media promotional initiatives. This proposal combines the public relations and promotional social media initiatives of sport management into the framework of relationship management.

Relationship Management Theory

Derived from public relations literature, relationship management theory addresses the organizational process of managing relationships with internal and external publics (Maxwell & Carboni, 2014). Phillips (2006) defines an organization as a nexus of relationships whose strength is measured by the strength of relationships among those involved. Relationship management is goal-oriented, relying on the outcomes of mutually beneficial relationships, which necessitates generating benefit for the organization and its necessary publics. Phillips (2006) views relationship management as a function of wealth creation, “wherein public

relations makes organizations more effective by building relationships with strategic publics” (pg. 212).

Stakeholders in relationship management. Ledingham (2010) states that relationship management theory is derived from the requirement of organizations to balance competing claims from stakeholders. In practice, this theory is closely related to Freeman’s (2010) concept of stakeholders in strategic management, which states that stakeholders are “those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist” (p. 31). Drawing from stakeholder theory, this practice of strategic management places people in groups and recognizes the interactions between the organization and its stakeholder groups as opportunities for benefit potentials (Bonnafous-Boucher & Rendtorff, 2016). Internal stakeholders, like Phillips’ internal publics, are groups within an organization, while external stakeholders, like external publics, are groups outside an organization.

Stakeholder relationships in sport. A sport franchise, much like any other business, contains various stakeholders within and outside the organization. According to Serbanica and Constantinescu (2016), social media offers an opportunity for public relations practitioners in the sports industry to strengthen their relationships between the organization and its stakeholders. Social media allows sport organizations to hear from customers, maintain dialogue, and co-create value (Abeza & O’Reilly, 2014; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Verified sport franchise accounts run by professional digital media managers control news and messages sent while earning feedback from stakeholders who are connected to the accounts. Dixon, Martinez, and Marrin (2016) found that athletic marketing departments in university organizations considered social media to be an important tool for raising awareness and marketing to stakeholders. Current literature does not do much to define relevant stakeholders found in sport organizations’ social media usage, but

Naraine and Parent (2017) state that social media can be used to engage stakeholders like athletes, fans, and sponsors.

Organizations have the duty to balance conflicting claims among stakeholder groups and develop symbiotic relationships that have varying impacts on the organization itself, all the while maintaining a professional environment surrounding the organization (Bonnafous-Boucher & Rendtorff, 2016; Freeman, 2010). One way to visualize relevant stakeholder groups is through a stakeholder map that acts as a toolbox for managers to identify key groups and develop strategies for the organization (Bonnafous-Boucher & Rendtorff, 2016). For a sport franchise, a stakeholder map can help provide an overview of relevant publics from which to develop communications strategies, where applicable. The following stakeholder map is presented as a framework from which to understand the relationships that occur within a sport organization:

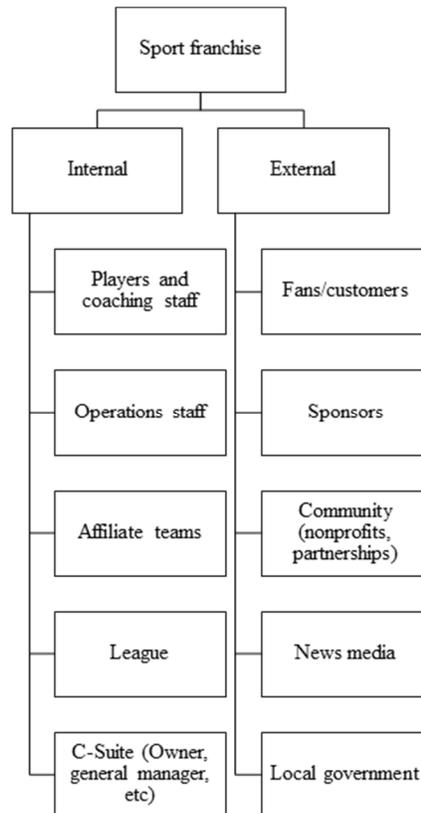


Figure 1. Stakeholder Map for Sports Franchises

The stakeholder map above is not exhaustive, but it is nevertheless a potential framework from which to understand how various groups can influence how a sport franchise develops communications strategies. In the context of social media, it is highly unlikely that a sport franchise would attempt to appeal to all of the stakeholder groups listed above. Fans have great control over the content they want to view on social media—a team cannot establish a relationship with their fans unless they choose to follow or like a team’s page (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). This is not to say, however, that other stakeholders are neglected at the expense of fans—in fact, a sport organization’s other stakeholders may still have an impact on social media strategies, something that other studies apart from Naraine and Parent (2017) do not address. The following research question is proposed:

RQ1: Which stakeholder groups targeted by NHL clubs on Twitter have the greatest prominence?

Value creation in relationship management. To provide a more nuanced perspective of the importance of relationship management in communications practices, Phillips (2006) moves beyond traditional notions of cost-based marketing, which suggests a negative connotation of marketing activities in which funds are spent to communicate; rather, he prefers a “value-based marketing” approach that seeks to justify communications for mutual benefit, or “value-based public relations.” Public relations activities serve a potent role, containing tangible and intangible assets used to meet corporate value-enhancing objectives (Phillips, 2006).

Social Media Usage in Sport Organizations

Combining the ideas of relationship management and stakeholder theory together, we can understand the role that social media plays as an intangible asset in modern organizational structure. Smith (2012) connects relationship management theory to social media, writing:

Social media, as a highly visible and accessible medium, provides a unique context through which a relationship may develop between stakeholders and organizations. The nature of the medium as a public networking device may reveal relationship stakes, shared interests, and overlapping connections. As such, social media may serve as a virtual atlas for the influences, connections, and overall state of a stakeholder-organization relationship. (p. 842)

Ang (2010) argues that a distinction between managing customers and managing social media users is needed to fully understand relationship management theory. Although social media is a game-changer in that millions of people are now online, social media users represent a small, passionate niche of consumers. Users of social media may not always be customers of an organization, and not all customers of an organization use social media. Put into context, fans of one sport team could still follow other teams, and not all fans of a sport team are connected with the franchise on social media platforms. Therefore, potential targeting of stakeholder groups that occurs on social media may influence strategies to appeal to certain demographics. Ang (2010), however, does recognize that people who use social media share common interests to facilitate interactions with each other. At the personal and professional levels, social media is more prevalent than ever before—there is almost an expectation that people are readily available on social platforms.

Twitter in sport. Twitter is a real-time micro-messaging service that enables individuals and organizations the ability to send and receive 280-character messages called tweets (O’Hallarn, et. al, 2018; Zhang, Jansen, & Chowdhury, 2011). Tweets are updated on a timeline in real-time, resulting in a system that generates a constant stream of updated information—it oftentimes feels as if you are receiving news as it happens (Zhang, Jansen, & Chowdhury, 2011). Hutchins (2011) indicates that Twitter is pervasive in our digital society because the words “tweet” and “tweeting,” once considered sounds emitted by small birds, are now most often associated with the online microblogging service.

With over 335 million active users, Twitter is a popular social network for the dissemination of sport-related content, adding a layer to the complicated “media-sport cultural complex” in which digital networks are replacing other forms of media (Hutchins, 2011). Pegoraro (2014) argues that Twitter is a disruptive medium that has revolutionized the traditional television-centric nature of sports media into an Internet-enabled model of sport media consumption. An estimated two-thirds of sports fans are more likely to use Twitter to enhance their live or televised viewing experience compared to non-sports fans—this is also known as a “two-screen experience” (O’Hallarn et al., 2018). Williams, Chinn, and Suleiman (2014) suggest that Twitter allows sport organizations to control flows of information because official platforms can provide fans with information that media cannot provide as easily. Essentially, Twitter provides fans direct access to official sources, removing the need for an intermediary between the organization and its fans.

Research from Neuro-Insight argues that Twitter impacts both sports fans and the marketers who wish to engage with them. Audiences who use Twitter while watching live sporting events show higher levels of engagement and memorability than when only following the event on television alone (Twitter, 2018). Advertising is also more effective on television and on Twitter if audiences are involving themselves in a two-screen experience. Twitter has intensified the production of digital media sport content, accelerated flows of information, and expanded the capacity of networked communications (Hutchins, 2011).

Strategic social marketing. Felix, Rauschnabel, and Hinsch (2016) define four broad dimensions of strategic social marketing, including degrees of interactivity and the culture of marketing. Loosely defined, the degree of interactivity measures the value creation process, with marketers falling into one of two categories: defenders or explorers (Felix, Rauschnabel, &

Hinsch, 2016). Explorers, according to the authors, are more interactive in their marketing approach, while defenders are more passive. The culture of marketing is defined by the dichotomy between conservatism and modernism—that is, does the marketing take a traditional, formal approach to how it presents information, or does it take an informal or conversational approach? The overall missions and visions form a complex interplay into how these marketing dimensions are activated into messages (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2016).

Witkemper, Blaszk, and Chung (2016) established a typology of four community-building social media uses in the sport industry, measured on scales of high and low interactivity. The model developed in this article provides potential for further study, as community-building and interactivity are essential to social media practices. This idea of interactivity is related to research on brand personality in sport. Armstrong, Delia, and Giardina (2016) conducted digital ethnography of the Los Angeles Kings' Twitter account, finding that the account's brand personality helped the brand of the ice hockey team achieve a sense of identity based on open communication, humor, and earnestness in which the brand and the consumer coexist and encourage relationship development within a brand community. More research into the degree of interactivity in sport franchises' Twitter profiles would help determine whether the L.A. Kings' social media strategy is indicative of an overall trend among other NHL teams. Understanding interactivity in social media also advances relationship management theory in that communication between an organization and its stakeholders leads to mutual benefits (Ledingham, 2010). The following research question is proposed:

RQ₂: What is the degree of interactivity among NHL club account tweets?

Social media usages in the sport industry. Waters, Burke, Jackson, and Buning (2011) compared how NFL teams used their official websites and Facebook pages to engage their

fans. Through an analysis of stewardship techniques, the researchers identified four components of relationship-building that the teams used through their social media and websites, including reciprocity, responsibility, reporting, and relationship nurturing (Waters et al., 2011). Using an organization-public relationship framework, Wang and Zhou (2015) studied NBA clubs' use of Twitter, finding that the social networking giant allowed for teams to develop professional and personal relationships with their publics via information-sharing and product promotion.

Abeza, O'Reilly, and Seguin (2017) studied opportunities and challenges of using social media in relationship marketing in the sport industry. Twenty-six sport managers across four leagues were interviewed for this study. The authors found that sport managers found social media useful to get feedback from fans and connect with their fan bases on levels they would otherwise be unable to achieve. However, sport managers also discussed challenges associated with using social media, including monitoring trends and keeping track of improvements and development in social media platforms (Abeza, et. al, 2017). The following research questions are proposed:

RQ3: What are the communications strategies that NHL clubs use on Twitter to engage target stakeholder groups?

RQ4: Which communications strategy receives the greatest amount of engagement?

The importance of social media in sport marketing cannot be understated. Social media does not necessarily guarantee that a sport organization will increase its profits, but it is used as a mechanism for managing relationships between a team's brand and fans, the key external stakeholder for a sport organization. To connect directly back to value creation in the context of stakeholder theory, a sport organization that uses social media to interact with fans may increase

fan utility, leading to greater fan experience and improvement in a fan base's relationship with the organization itself.

This current research takes an organizational approach to strategic social marketing, bridging gaps between stakeholder identification, communications strategies to reach target stakeholder groups, and the engagement related to communications strategies. Some studies narrow their focus on one sport or league, but very few studies that analyze social media in sport communication use ice hockey as their focus. No research to date compares the social media profiles of teams to determine whether there are similarities and differences among strategies between teams. A final research question is proposed:

RQ5: How do NHL teams compare in their uses of relationship management activities on Twitter?

More research is needed on how NHL teams use social media for strategic communication, as the NHL has the least amount of influence among the major professional sports leagues in North America. Using Twitter as the social network of choice for this research builds upon precedents set by Abeza, O'Reilly, and Seguin (2017), who interviewed social media managers in professional sports about how they used social media; Naraine and Parent (2017), who identified relevant stakeholder groups in national sport organizations on Twitter; and Wang and Zhou (2015), who studied how NBA clubs promoted products on Twitter. The proposed research combines all these basic ideas into one study to give a more focused review of social media's role in relationship management for sport organizations.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHOD

The following method is a content analysis aimed at determining the stakeholder groups targeted through NHL club tweets, the themes and frequencies of communications strategies, the level of interactivity within categories, engagement with communications strategies, and comparisons of teams' strategies. Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005) provide a working definition for quantitative content analysis:

Quantitative content analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical models, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption. (p. 25).

Quantitative content analysis uses statistical measures as a vehicle from which to drive conclusions about manifest content, or text that appears on its own. In the context of communication, all communication uses symbols, whether verbal, textual, or images (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Data will be obtained from the official public Twitter accounts of National Hockey League clubs. Twitter is an appropriate communications platform for this study because it is one of the premier social tools allowing people and brands to connect with each other at a personal level (Zhang, Jansen, & Chowdhury, 2011).

Procedure and Sample

The unit of analysis for this study is a tweet. A *tweet* is a 280-character message that may contain, text, photos, videos, or other multimedia. What separates a tweet from other social

media posts is its concise character limit. The population of this study is the Twitter accounts for all NHL teams. Each of the league's 31 teams maintain their own verified accounts (N=31). Due to time restrictions for this study, it is not possible for the researcher to analyze every National Hockey League club account's tweets. A sample of NHL club Twitter accounts was collected for this study. Five teams were chosen out of a possible 31 teams, which accounts for approximately 16 percent of all NHL club Twitter accounts (n=5).

The account names for all NHL teams were arranged in a list based upon their total number of followers, lowest to highest, for each account as of September 2018. Follower numbers ranged anywhere from about 342,500 followers to 2.5 million followers, suggesting a great deal of variance in the possible social reach and levels of potential engagement of club accounts across the entire NHL. The researcher felt it was most appropriate for the tweets analyzed in this study to be derived from teams with similar relative social reach. Teams with the lowest and highest amounts of total followers were considered outliers for this study.

To achieve parity within the sample population, the researcher determined the median number of followers, which belonged to the Washington Capitals at around 729,600 followers. The researcher then found the middle five accounts, based upon the number of followers, by selecting the two teams above and below the Washington Capitals. One team, the Tampa Bay Lightning, was removed from the original sample because of the researcher's identification as being a part of the fan community for this team. The next team closest to the median in terms of number of followers was the San Jose Sharks. Therefore, the five teams chosen for study in this analysis were:

- Minnesota Wild (@mnwild): 676,100 followers
- Washington Capitals (@capitals): 729,600 followers

- New Jersey Devils (@NJDevils): 730,900 followers
- Edmonton Oilers (@EdmontonOilers): 796,700 followers
- San Jose Sharks (@SJSharks): 802,000 followers

Because of the parity established here, it is assumed that comparisons of these teams' levels of engagement will be more equal. Tweets were pulled from TweetDeck, an internal feature available on Twitter's interface. The researcher conducted searches via TweetDeck for each account on each of the identified days for the constructed-week sample, including only tweets published from the five NHL team accounts on the specified dates. The search feature on TweetDeck then created lists of all the tweets published from each account. The researcher organized the tweets by account name to code all of one team's tweets at a time and place them in separate codebooks.

Additional methodological procedures were needed to ensure randomization of tweets. Borrowing from Wang and Zhou (2015), this study will use constructed-week sampling. According to Hester and Dougall (2007), constructed-week sampling is effective for content analysis of online news. Wang and Zhou (2015) adopted this technique in their study of NBA clubs' social media usage because of the volume of tweets spread across 30 NBA team accounts. To conduct this procedure, tweets were collected during the 2018-2019 NHL regular season. Although the NHL regular season spans from the first week of October to the first week of April, time constraints related to the completion of this thesis limited data collection to the first week of February 2019. Holidays and bye-weeks were removed from the dataset to ensure that all team accounts were as equally represented as possible. According to Hester and Dougall (2007), the days of the week selected for analysis are chosen at random throughout the determined period. Put within the content of the NHL, all of the Mondays of the season up to the first week of

February 2019 were identified; one Monday out of the entire season was chosen at random; then all of the tweets curated across the five NHL club accounts for that day were compiled for analysis. This process was repeated for the other six days of the week. The sample for this data was collected seven times over the course of the NHL regular season. This method allowed for cyclic and systematic variation in content (Wang & Zhou, 2015) while ensuring that social media strategies were studied across a longer time period.

The researcher used Microsoft Excel to randomize a constructed-week sample. The various possible dates identified throughout the NHL regular season were prescribed numerical codes, which were then placed onto Microsoft Excel, which selected each date for the constructed-week sample at random. The period between the first week of October to the first week of February was chosen for analysis, as this period represented the first 18 weeks of the NHL regular season. Holiday breaks and bye-weeks were excluded from this analysis as it was unlikely that team social media accounts were active during these times. The following dates were identified for the constructed-week sample: Sunday, October 21, 2018; Monday, December 3, 2018; Tuesday, November 27, 2018; Wednesday, October 31, 2018; Thursday, January 3, 2018; Friday, February 1, 2018; and Saturday, November 17, 2018. The constructed-week sample for this study consisted of 870 total tweets. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the number of tweets for each team represented in this sample.

Table 1. Number of Tweets per Team Account

Team	Number of Tweets	Share of Sample (%)
Minnesota Wild	225	25.9
New Jersey Devils	109	12.5

Table 1 (Continued)

Team	Number of Tweets	Share of Sample (%)
Washington Capitals	129	14.8
Edmonton Oilers	236	27.1
San Jose Sharks	171	19.7
Total	870	100%

Measures

This study contained several research questions related to stakeholder identification, communications strategies. Keeping the categorizations of social media uses for sport organizations in mind from previous studies (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2017; Naraine & Parent, 2017; Wang & Zhou, 2015), the following categorizations of social media uses and their relationship to stakeholder theory will be coded and analyzed.

Direct interactions. This distinction will assist in answering RQ₁, which asks which stakeholder groups are targeted by NHL teams on Twitter. Direct interactions are any mentions, replies, retweets, or polls aimed at direct communication with external or internal stakeholders (see Table 2), or responses to individual tweets. A *mention* is a direct reference to a Twitter account, denoted with the @ symbol. A *retweet* is a repost of a Twitter from a different account (Help Center, 2018). A *reply* is a response to another account's tweet (Help Center, 2018). A *poll* is a short, one-question survey designed to get people to respond to a question and collect data.

Direct interactions differ from the other categories of communication listed below in that they are often embedded within other categories (see Table 2)—therefore, it will be important to

measure under which of the other four categories direct interactions appear most often.

Conducive to the measures of interactivity introduced by multiple authors (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2016; Witkemper, Blaszkka, & Chung, 2016), the interactivity of tweets will also be coded to answer RQ₂. For example, the presence of a direct interaction with a stakeholder would mean, in this study, that the tweet is interactive; for another example, if a tweet contains a poll, it would be considered interactive. Potential stakeholders are identified in the communications strategies listed below, which will be used to answer RQ₃, to give a framework from which to understand how stakeholders may be identified through communications strategies.

Sponsorship messaging. Sponsorship messaging refers to tweets that include promotional materials related to an advertiser, corporate partner, or sponsor. These tweets may include the appearance of a sponsor's logo, the promotion of a sponsor's product, or the identification of a corporate partnership. Tweets in this category may contain direct interactions with sponsors, who, for this study, are defined as external stakeholders in the sport franchise (see Figure 1).

Announcements. Announcements are any tweets that include materials related to any of these subcategories: team practice schedules; game times, including television and radio broadcast schedules; game updates like score reports; athlete or coach interviews; injury reports; contract signings and negotiations; player trades; game statistics; and affiliate team reports. There are a variety of stakeholders from whom direct interactions could be ascribed, including athletes, coaches, broadcast partners, news media, and minor league affiliate teams.

Team promotions. Team promotions are any tweets that include promotional materials related to the team itself, including ticket sales or season ticket offerings; team merchandise; or a contest or giveaway. This category differs from sponsorship messaging in that it will only be

coded for promotions related to the team itself. Fans are the likely target of this communication strategy.

Community contributions. Community contributions describe any tweet that includes public player or mascot appearances; a team’s charitable efforts, including a team or an athlete’s foundation; a non-profit partnership; or a raffle or auction. Targeted stakeholders may include fans, local government, or non-profit partners.

Brand personification. This category was developed in accordance with Armstrong, Delia, and Giardina’s (2016) analysis of the Los Angeles Kings Twitter account. Brand personification is used to describe any tweet that build a personality for the brand and humanizes the account. Tweets within this category may include any text or multimedia that is creative, humorous, or personable.

Table 2. Examples of Relationship Management Communications

Category	Subcategories	Example	Rationale
Sponsorship messaging	Appearance of advertiser or sponsor name or logo; direct promotion of an advertiser’s or sponsor’s product.		This tweet directly promotes a product for a sponsor, offering fans discounts on a sponsor’s product. This tweet would also be coded for the presence of multimedia, in this case a graphic, and the presence of a hashtag.

Table 2 (Continued)

Category	Subcategories	Example	Rationale																		
Announcements	Any information related to team practices; television or radio broadcast times; score reports or game updates; player or coach interviews; injury reports; player contracts or trades; affiliate team reports; or game-related statistics	 <p>New Jersey Devils @NJDevils · 13h #NJDEVILS WIN 🏆</p> <p>@hally09 (1g-1a), @nicohischer (3a), @stefannoosen (1g-1a) and Jesper Bratt (1g-1a) all finish with multipoint performances in the win over Columbus! #NJDevils</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>SCORE</th> <th>GOALS</th> <th>ASSISTS</th> <th>POINTS</th> <th>SHOTS</th> <th>FACEOFFS</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>4</td> <td>36</td> <td>19</td> <td>20</td> <td>41</td> <td>25</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td>33</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	SCORE	GOALS	ASSISTS	POINTS	SHOTS	FACEOFFS	4	36	19	20	41	25						33	This tweet shares the final score of a game. It would also be coded for the presence of an image.
SCORE	GOALS	ASSISTS	POINTS	SHOTS	FACEOFFS																
4	36	19	20	41	25																
					33																
Community contributions	Any information or reference to the city or community in which the team plays; the fan base; public player appearances in the community; a reference to a team’s foundation; nonprofit partnerships; or individual player foundation	 <p>San Jose Sharks @SanJoseSharks · Jan 9 Earlier this holiday season @SharksAlumni paid a visit to @kpthrive Santa Clara to gift toys and spread holiday cheer to patients with help from @spsv. 🎁</p>	This tweet shows roster players out interacting with fans in their community. It would also be coded for the presence of video.																		

Table 2 (Continued)

Category	Subcategories	Example	Rationale
Direct interactions	Any direct mention (which includes the @ symbol to symbolize a direct response to another account), retweet, or reply made in reference to an individual stakeholder or a stakeholder group	 <p>San Jose Sharks @SanJoseSharks · 14h Time for the @BlackOakCasino Goal Guess! Make your pick in the link below for a chance to win a signed puck.</p> <p>Black Oak Casino Goal Guess 201819 Correctly guess which player will score first for the Sharks in today's game for a chance to win a signed puck! san-jose-sharks.rover.io</p>	This tweet contains a mention to an individual fan account. Therefore, the mention of the fan in this tweet acts as a direct reference to an external stakeholder.
Brand personification	Any tweet that provides a voice to the brand beyond the above categories; it may be humorous, creative, or personable	 <p>San Jose Sharks @SanJoseSharks Tiburón bebé doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo Translate Tweet</p> <p>1:03am · 21 Oct 2018 · Twitter for iPhone</p> <p>7 Replies 73 Retweets 449 Likes</p>	This tweet is a reference to a popular meme. The account is not using its platform to directly discuss a game, sponsor, team promotion, or its community involvement. The intent is to be humorous and relatable.

Notice in Table 2 how almost every tweet, excluding the tweet representing a direct interaction, contains more than just text—there is also some visual element present within almost every tweet, often containing more information than Twitter’s character limit would allow through text alone. Visual images and media will be studied as part of this analysis since they are part of tweets themselves. Beyond the categories of relationship management communications strategies, additional measures, including the presence of hashtags and

multimedia will be coded. Visual elements are imperative to gain users' attention, and they also suggest a more complete approach to using Twitter for all that the platform has to offer.

Multimedia serves a greater purpose in that it can allow for the appearance of more messages to a greater number of stakeholders. Research from Twitter indicates that embedded multimedia content fosters greater engagement (Sonderman, 2013).

To answer RQ₄, which asks about the level of engagement among communications strategies, the amount of replies, likes, and retweets for each tweet were coded for analysis. A *like* is intended to show appreciation for a tweet and is represented by a heart (Help Center, 2018). While these measures do not indicate the entire social reach for each NHL team account tweet, these three variables nevertheless indicate the amount of direct engagement for each tweet. To answer RQ₅, the data collected from each of the five team accounts used for analysis in this study will then be compared to show which of the teams in the sample is the most interactive and receives the most engagement.

Coding Procedures

The codebook for this study (see Appendix) contains detailed information regarding the categories of stakeholder communication to ensure clear and consistent coding procedures. Tweets will be coded for the presence of stakeholder communications categories, including any multimedia present within the tweets that connects to any of the categories. Various subcategories within the stakeholder communications categories will also be included for analysis to ensure a thorough and complete analysis. These subcategories create a more nuanced approach to the current study, allowing for potential intersection between categories to give a more detailed analysis of social media than previous studies have completed. The subcategories also help give specific definitions for the main stakeholder communications categories. Given

the composition of this study, it is likely that tweets may contain more than one category of stakeholder communication. This study does not assume that categories are required to exist in isolation.

Data was first collected in Microsoft Excel, then transferred to SPSS 24, which was used for all statistical calculations. SPSS was used to analyze the frequencies of stakeholder communication and conduct a correlation analysis of stakeholder engagement and categories of stakeholder communication. Two coders were used for this study to determine intercoder reliability. A mass communications graduate student was the second coder for this study. The second coder analyzed 10 percent of the sample to help the researcher achieve reliability. Cohen's kappa was used to determine intercoder reliability. The coefficient is useful when the quantitative research uses two coders to analyze datasets. According to Wrench et. al. (2016), reliability is satisfactory when Cohen's kappa is greater than 0.70. The variables identified in this study were analyzed for intercoder reliability, and necessary changes were made until the researcher and the second coder reached intercoder reliability. No conflicts of interest are reported for this study. Given that interpretations will be driven from the data collected in this study, the researcher did not perceive that any bias would affect the outcomes of this study.

**CHAPTER FOUR:
RESULTS**

The sample for this study contained a total of 870 tweets spread across the Twitter accounts of five National Hockey League teams.

Stakeholder Appearances

RQ₁ asked which stakeholder groups targeted by NHL clubs on Twitter had the greatest prominence. Codes for the presence and absence of direct interactions, internal stakeholders, and external stakeholders determined the answer to this question. Data for the raw numbers of tweets containing direct interactions with stakeholders and the total number of references to internal and external stakeholders was collected. There were a total of 23 stakeholder groups identified in this study across all five NHL team accounts (See Figure 2). Broken down, 16 internal stakeholder groups were identified; 7 external stakeholder groups were identified.

Table 3. Presence of Stakeholder Tweets, totals

Team Account	Tweets Containing Internal Stakeholders	Internal Stakeholders (Mentions)	Tweets Containing External Stakeholders	External Stakeholders (Mentions)
@njdevils	45	60	39	45
@edmontoonilers	47	61	32	40
@sanjosessharks	32	36	41	43
@mnnwild	26	32	53	70
@capitals	29	43	59	31
Total	179	232	194	229
% (of sample)	20.57%	50.3% (of stakeholders)	22.2%	49.7% (of stakeholders)

Internal stakeholders. A total of 179 tweets, or 20.5 percent of the sample, contained at least once reference to an internal stakeholder. In some cases, however, there was more than one mention of an internal stakeholder in one tweet. Among all five Twitter accounts combined, there were a total of 232 direct references to internal stakeholders, comprising 50.3 percent of all stakeholder mentions in this study (see Table 3). The most common internal stakeholder group was players, referenced in the sample a total of 102 times through direct interactions. Crosstab analysis between internal stakeholders and categories of relationship management communication indicated that internal stakeholders most often appeared in the announcements category, comprising of 114 total tweets, or 64 percent of all tweets that contained at least one reference to an internal stakeholder.

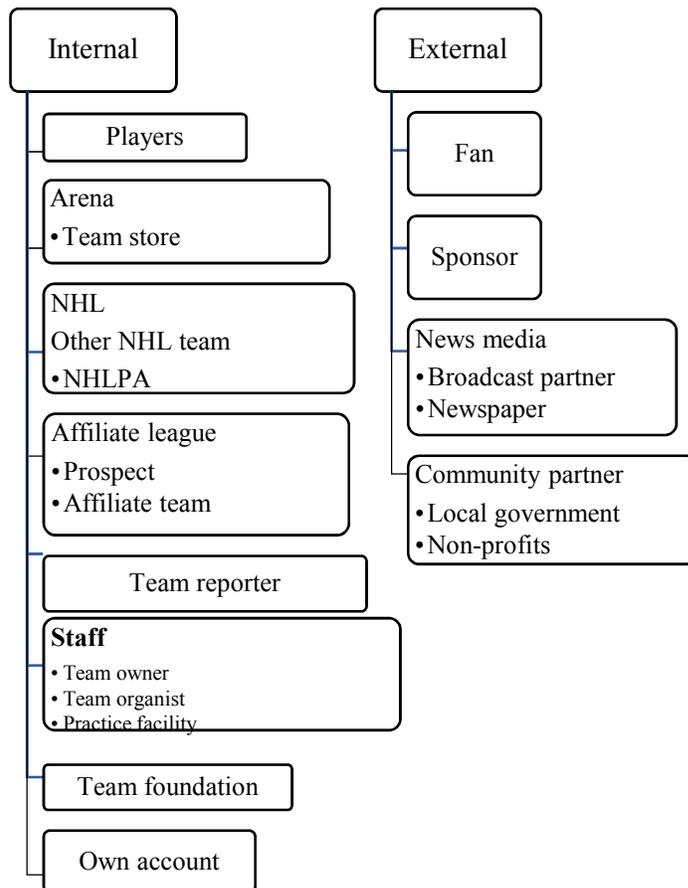


Figure 2. Stakeholder Map, by groups defined in study

External stakeholders. A total of 194 tweets, or 22.4 percent of the sample, contained at least one reference to an external stakeholder. Similar to internal stakeholders, there were sometimes multiple references to external stakeholders located within individual tweets. Among all five Twitter accounts combined, there were a total of 229 direct references to external stakeholders, comprising 49.7 percent of all stakeholder mentions in this study (see Table 3). The most common external stakeholders group identified in this analysis was the sponsor, referenced a total of 99 times, or 43.2 percent of all external stakeholder references. Fans, with 44 total references, and broadcast partners, with 43 total references, followed as the most frequent external stakeholder groups. Crosstab analysis indicated that external stakeholders appeared the most in the sponsorship category, comprising of 91 total tweets, or 46.7 percent of the sample; the next closest category was announcements, with external stakeholders appearing in 71 total tweets, or 36.4 percent of the sample.

Interactivity of NHL Club Account Tweets

RQ₂ asked about the degree of interactivity among NHL club account tweets. The frequencies of direct interactions, including the frequencies for the three subcategories of direct interactions, were analyzed to answer this question. Direct interactions occurred in 335 out of 870 total tweets, which accounted for 38.5 percent of the sample. Of all forms of direct interaction, mentions, which provide links to individual Twitter accounts, were the most common, appearing in 29.5 percent of all tweets. Replies and retweets or quoted tweets were much less common, accounting for 6.6 percent and 4 percent of all tweets, respectively.

Table 4. Frequencies of Direct Interaction Categories

Direct Interaction Category	Frequency	% of Sample
Mention	257	29.5
Retweet or quoted tweet	35	4.0
Reply	57	6.6

Two subcategories of stakeholder communication were considered interactive because they were intended to involve some form of responses from other Twitter users. Take, for example, this tweet from the New Jersey Devils, which is an example of a Twitter poll. The poll encourages fans to provide responses from a list of options. Twitter polls were present in only 4 tweets, which made up for 0.5 percent of the sample.

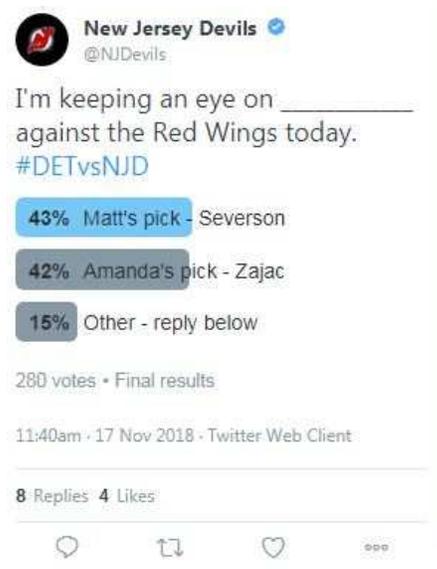


Figure 3. Examples of interactive relationship management subcategories.

The second subcategory of interest is the sweepstakes category, listed under team promotions. These tweets usually involve a call to action encouraging fans to reply or retweet tweets sent out by NHL accounts. The sweepstakes category appeared in 49 tweets, or 5.6 percent of the sample.

Categories of Relationship Management Communications

RQ₃ asked about the communications strategies that NHL clubs use on Twitter to engage target audiences. Several subcategories for each overarching category were identified in this study. Out of the five main categories identified as relationship management communications strategies in this study, announcements comprised the overwhelming majority (67.5%) of the sample. Brand personification (32.2%), sponsorship (17.1%), community contributions (8.2%), and team promotions (7.6%) followed.

Table 5. Frequencies of Relationship Management Categories

Relationship Management Category	Frequency (%)
Sponsorship	17.1
Team promotions	7.6
Announcements	67.5
Community contributions	8.2
Brand personification	32.2

The table above indicates that the frequencies listed above add to more than 100 percent. In some cases, more than one category was present within a tweet. Crosstab analysis helped determine when multiple categories were present within the same tweet. Notable results occurred in the announcements category. In tweets that contained announcements, 86 also contained a sponsorship or advertising message; 127 announcements also contained brand personification.

Subcategories of relationship management communications. Broken down, each overarching category of stakeholder communication also contained several subcategories that were coded for analysis. The subcategories defined in this study provided greater detail than previous studies about the uses of these categories on Twitter.

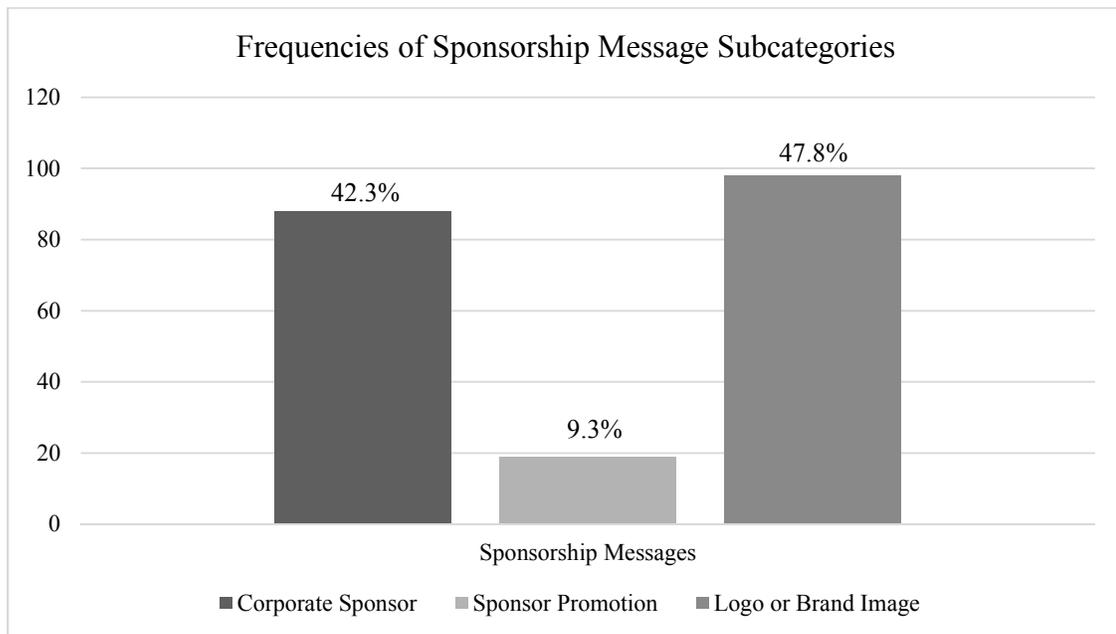


Figure 4. Frequencies of sponsorship message subcategories.

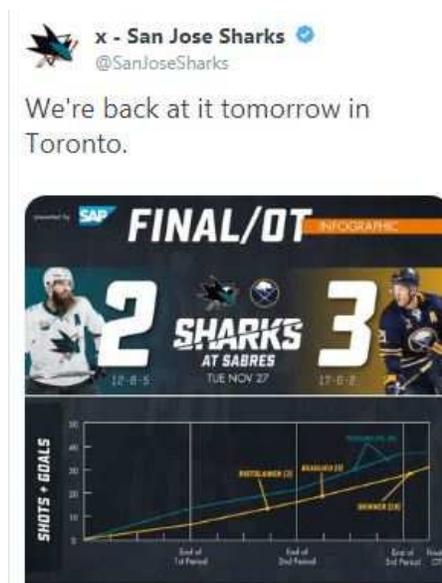


Figure 5. Example of a logo or brand image.

Sponsorship. Three subcategories were defined for the “sponsorship or advertising” category of relationship management communications. Sponsorship and advertising messages satisfy team sponsors who pay millions of dollars to promote their products through the team. Overall, sponsorship messages were not a primary form of content messaging.

As shown on the bar chart above, the most common form of sponsorship messaging was the appearance of a logo or brand image (see Figure 5). The presence of a logo or brand image was followed by the identification of a corporate sponsor, which was typically introduced with language such as “presented by” or “brought to you by.” Sponsorship promotion was rare, appearing in only 19 out of 870 total tweets, suggesting that direct sponsorship promotion is not a priority among NHL teams on Twitter. Crosstab analysis shows that an overwhelming majority of sponsorship messages occur on game days, with 121 tweets, or 81.2 percent of all sponsorship messages, appearing on game days.

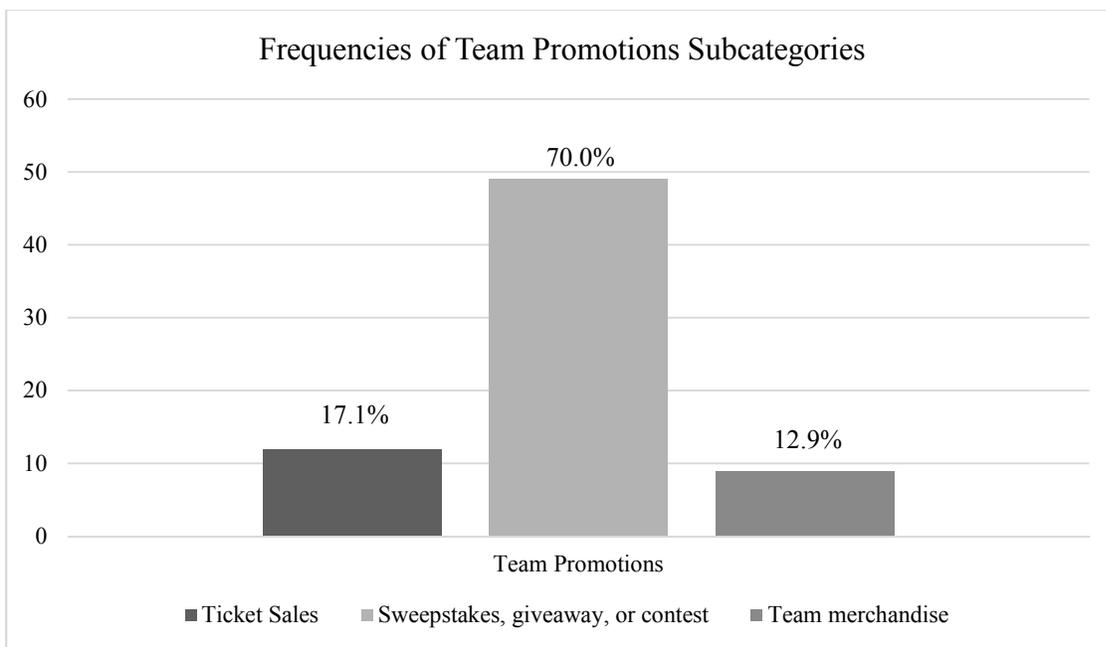


Figure 6. Frequencies of team promotions subcategories.

Team Promotions. Team promotions were the least common form of relationship management communications strategies defined in this study. Team promotions are defined as promotional materials aimed at encouraging fans to purchase products or commodities such as game-day tickets or team merchandise; or encouraging fans to participate in sweepstakes, giveaways, or contests for merchandise, auctions, tickets, or some other form of compensation for supporting the team. Out of the 70 total references to team promotions, 45 (68.1 percent) occurred on game days. Of the three subcategories for team promotions defined in this study, the most common form of team promotion was the sweepstakes, giveaway, or contest, appearing in 49 tweets, which accounted for 70 percent of all team promotions tweets. Of all three subcategories of team promotions, this encouraged fans the most to participate in contests that offered the chance of direct benefit in the form of free tickets or signed memorabilia.

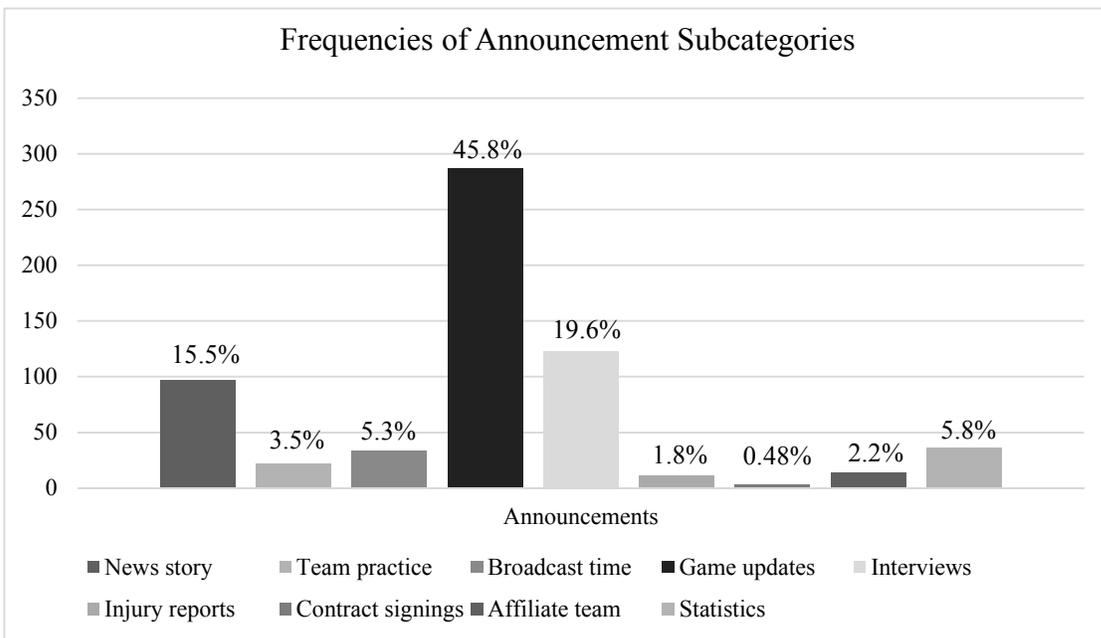


Figure 7. Frequencies of announcements subcategories.

Announcements. Announcements were the most common form of relationship management communication strategy among NHL teams (67.5%). An overwhelming 90.8 percent of all announcements occurred on game days. Game updates were the most common subcategory defined under announcements (see Figure 7). This subcategory works similarly to play-by-play commentary on a television broadcast in that social media managers tweet various plays during each regular season game on their respective team’s schedule, including goals for and against the team and final scores. Interviews were the second most common form of announcement, most often comprising of videos containing reactions from players and coaches about games. News stories were the third most common form of announcements, often containing links to external web sites.

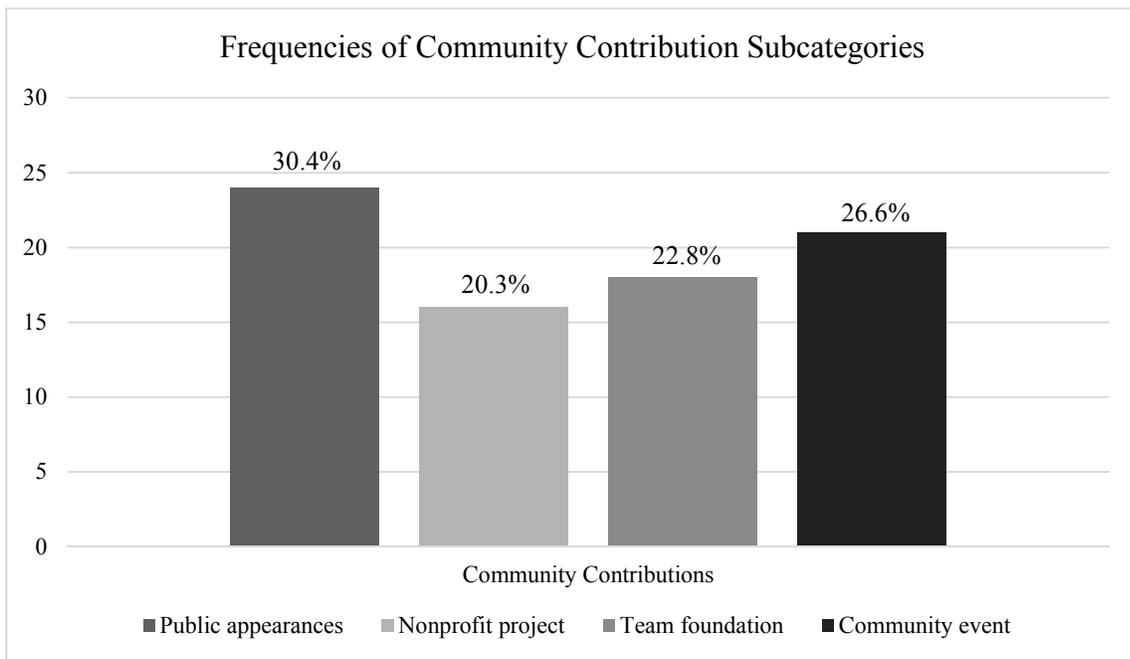


Figure 8. Frequencies of community contributions subcategories

Community contributions. Similar to the team promotions category, community contributions were a rare strategy found within this study, occurring in 8.2 percent of all tweets. Crosstab analysis indicated that 71.8 percent of community contributions were posted on game days. The most common form of community contribution defined in this study is public player appearances, which shows players interacting with people and fans in their communities outside of the context of the game.

Brand personification. Brand personification works differently from other relationship management strategies in that it often appears in conjunction with one of the other strategies defined in this study. However, this is not to say that brand personification cannot exist on its own. Brand personification appeared in 280 tweets, or 32.2 percent of the sample. Crosstab analysis showed that, when analyzed in conjunction with the other relationship management categories, brand personification appeared most often with the announcements category, comprising a total of 127 tweets, or 45.3 percent of all tweets that included brand personification. This analysis also showed that 87.5 percent of all brand personification was posted on game days.

Engagement

RQ₄ asked which communications strategy received the most engagement. In the case of Twitter, engagement comes from a team's followers, which are assumed, for the most part, to be fans of the team itself. The average amount of likes, retweets, and replies for each of the five main relationship management categories for this study were analyzed in SPSS (see Table 6).

Table 6. Average Engagement per Relationship Management Category

	Sponsorship	Team promotions	Announcements	Community contributions	Brand personification
Avg. # of likes	113.51	85.52	132.8	134.97	216.33
Avg. # of retweets	22.83	24.48	21.23	19.68	39.39
Avg. # of replies	15.44	37.29	5.75	2.37	6.23

Brand personification received the highest average number of average likes ($\mu=216.33$) and average number of retweets ($\mu=39.39$). Although team promotions made up for a relatively small percentage of the overall sample, they made a major impact on fan engagement relative to other relationship management communications categories, averaging a total of 37.29 replies.

Comparative Analysis of NHL Twitter Accounts

RQ₅ asked how NHL teams compared in their uses of relationship management activities on Twitter. Several categories among the five Twitter accounts analyzed in this study were examined to determine similarities and differences among relationship management communications strategies. No two Twitter accounts are made the same, but the differences that do exist among the five NHL team Twitter accounts used in this study are subtle. Tweets were not evenly distributed among the accounts. There are several possible reasons to explain this. The @njdevils and @capitals Twitter accounts, for example, only had two game days each in this sample—therefore, they have fewer tweets than accounts with more game days.

Table 7. Comparative Analysis of NHL Teams

	@mnwild	@njdevils	@capitals	@edmontonoilers	@sanjosesharks
Share of sample (%)	25.9	12.5	14.8	27.1	19.7
Internal Stakeholders (%)	11.6	40.4	22.5	19.9	18.7
External Stakeholders (%)	23.6	36.7	22.5	13.6	24.0
Game Days (%)	84.9	74.3	79.1	93.6	91.8
Multimedia (%)	68.9	71.6	91.5	83.1	80.1
Hashtag (%)	65.8	77.1	75.2	88.6	46.8
Direct Interaction (%)	32.4	62.4	38.8	32.6	39.2
Sponsorship (%)	19.6	26.6	31.8	7.6	9.9
Team promotions (%)	7.6	12.8	3.9	6.8	8.2
Announcements (%)	71.1	61.5	67.4	76.3	54.4
Community Contributions (%)	8.4	12.8	3.9	5.9	11.1
Brand personification (%)	15.1	16.5	37.2	28.4	66.1
Avg. # of likes	84.93	99.44	293.88	93.03	203.56
Avg. # retweets	12.08	16.07	47.22	13.69	35.48
Avg. # replies	12.70	6.50	5.37	6.17	6.39

New Jersey Devils. Tweets from the New Jersey Devils Twitter account comprised 12.5 percent of all tweets in the sample. Compared to the other four NHL team Twitter accounts

analyzed in this study, the Devils place the greatest emphasis on maintaining stakeholder relationships through social media. The New Jersey Devils included the greatest percentage of direct interactions among the five teams analyzed, containing some form of interaction in 62.4 percent of tweets (see Table 7). In terms of references to stakeholders, the New Jersey Devils Twitter account referenced six unique internal stakeholder groups (see Table 8) and five unique external stakeholder groups (see Table 9). The most frequent internal stakeholder that was referenced was players, accounting for 29 total direct mentions (see Table 8). The most frequent external stakeholder was sponsors, totaling 24 direct mentions (see Table 9). Because of their emphasis on direct interactions, the New Jersey Devils Twitter account also had the greatest frequency of internal stakeholders (40.4 percent) and external stakeholders (36.7 percent). The most common form of relationship management category used by the New Jersey Devils is announcements, appearing in 61.5 percent of tweets.

Table 8. New Jersey Devils Internal Stakeholder Groups

Internal Stakeholder Group	# of References	Percentage
Player	29	48.33
Team reporter	5	8.33
Arena	8	13.33
NHL	4	6.67
Own account	12	20
Player foundation	2	3.33
Total # Groups: 6	Total # References: 60	100

Table 9. New Jersey Devils External Stakeholder Groups

External Stakeholder Group	# of References	Percentage
Sponsor	24	53.33
Fan	4	8.89
Hockey organization (non-NHL)	4	8.89
Broadcast partner	10	22.22
Non-profit	3	6.67
Total # Groups: 5	Total # References: 45	100

Edmonton Oilers. The Edmonton Oilers had the greatest share of tweets in this sample, accounting for 27.1 percent of all tweets. The Oilers also had the greatest percentage of announcements of all the teams in this study (76.3 percent); however, over 93 percent of their tweets were posted on game days. The Oilers also used hashtags more than any other team, with at least one hashtag appearing in 88.6 percent of their tweets. Compared to announcements, the other categories of relationship management communications strategies were highly uncommon, with each strategy with the exception of brand personification (28.4 percent) appearing in less than 10 percent of the team account's tweets. The Edmonton Oilers Twitter account included references to nine unique internal stakeholder groups (see Table 10) and nine unique external stakeholder groups (see Table 11). The most common internal stakeholder referenced by the Edmonton Oilers is a player (see Table 10), while the most common external stakeholder is a sponsor (see Table 11).

Table 10. Edmonton Oilers Internal Stakeholder Groups

Internal Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Player	32	52.46
Affiliate team	6	9.84
Affiliate league	2	3.28
Own account	9	14.76
NHL	5	8.20
NHLPA	1	1.64
Team foundation	1	1.64
Arena	4	6.56
Prospect	1	1.64
Total # Groups: 9	Total # References: 61	100

Table 11. Edmonton Oilers External Stakeholder Groups

External Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Sponsor	19	47.5
Broadcast partner	7	17.5
Non-profit	2	5
Community partner	2	5
Media	2	5
Hockey organization	2	5
Fan	2	5

Table 11 (Continued)

External Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Misc. league (OHL)	1	2.5
OHL teams	3	7.5
Total # Groups: 9	Total # References: 40	100

Washington Capitals. Tweets from the Washington Capitals comprised 14.8 percent of the entire sample. The Washington Capitals (@capitals) posted sponsorship messages in 31.8 percent of their tweets, a much higher percentage than any other team. The Capitals also used multimedia more than any other team, with 91.5 percent of their tweets containing some form of additional media beyond text. In terms of stakeholder identification, the Capitals referenced internal stakeholders and external stakeholders equally, with each type of stakeholder appearing in 22.5 percent of tweets. The Washington Capitals Twitter account made references to 11 unique internal stakeholder groups (see Table 12) and seven external stakeholder groups (see Table 13), with the most common internal stakeholder group being a player, while the most common external stakeholder group was a sponsor. The Capitals received the greatest number of likes ($\mu=293.88$) and retweets ($\mu=47.22$) among the teams in this study. However, the Washington Capitals had the fewest number of total game days. The variability in content for the Capitals may come from the fact that, without game days, they were most likely to post other forms of content on non-game days.

Table 12. Washington Capitals Internal Stakeholder Groups

Internal Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Player	17	39.53
Team foundation	3	6.98
Arena	2	4.65
Team reporter	8	18.60
Other NHL team	1	2.33
Affiliate team	1	2.33
Own account	4	9.30
Team radio broadcast	2	4.65
NHL	3	6.98
Team store	1	2.33
Owner	1	2.33
Total # Groups: 11	Total # References: 43	100

Table 13. Washington Capitals External Stakeholder Groups

External Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Sponsor	19	61.30
Other team sport	1	3.23
Fan	2	6.45
Broadcast partner	6	19.35
Community partner	1	3.23

Table 13 (Continued)

External Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Local government	1	3.23
Non-profit	1	3.23
Total # Groups: 7	Total # References: 31	100

Minnesota Wild. Tweets posted by the Minnesota Wild team account provided for 25.9 percent of the total sample. The Minnesota Wild's most common relationship management category is announcements, appearing in 71.1 percent of tweets, second only to the Edmonton Oilers. This team has the lowest percentage of direct interactions with internal stakeholders, with references to internal stakeholders appearing in just 11.6 percent of tweets. Out of nine unique internal stakeholder groups referenced in tweets posted by the Minnesota Wild account, the player group had the most total number of references (see Table 14). Out of seven unique external stakeholder groups, sponsors were the most prevalent (see Table 15). Out of the five Twitter accounts analyzed in this study, the Minnesota Wild had the greatest total number of direct references to external stakeholders with 70 total references. While most of the Minnesota Wild's tweets include multimedia, appearing in 68.9 percent of tweets, this is less than the other four teams in this study. On average, the Wild received the least amount of engagement in terms of the number of likes ($\mu=84.93$) and retweets ($\mu=12.08$) but received the greatest amount of replies ($\mu=12.70$).

Table 14. Minnesota Wild Internal Stakeholder Groups

Internal Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Player	14	43.75
NHL	1	3.13
Arena	8	25.0
Affiliate team	3	9.38
Affiliate league	1	3.13
Prospect	1	3.13
Mascot	1	3.13
Team reporter	1	3.13
Team foundation	2	6.25
Total # Groups: 9	Total # References: 32	100

Table 15. Minnesota Wild External Stakeholder Groups

External Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Sponsor	31	44.29
Broadcast partner	13	18.57
Non-profit	3	4.29
Fan	15	21.43
Media	6	8.57
Season Ticket Members (STMs)	1	1.43

Table 15. (Continued)

External Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Community partner	1	1.43
Total # Groups: 7	Total # References: 70	100

San Jose Sharks. Tweets from the San Jose Sharks Twitter account made up 1917 percent of the sample. The San Jose Sharks (@sanjoshesharks) differ the most from the other accounts analyzed in this study. This team had the second-most amount of game day tweets (91.8 percent), second to the Edmonton Oilers. Most of the account’s tweets fall under the brand personification category (66.1%), while just over half of their tweets fell under the announcements category (54.4%), marking the most notable difference from the other teams represented in this study. The San Jose Sharks used hashtags less than any other team, with hashtags appearing in 46.8 percent of all tweets. In terms of stakeholder groups, the San Jose Sharks included direct mentions to 10 unique internal stakeholder groups (see Table 16) and five unique external stakeholder groups (see Table 17). The most common internal stakeholder group was players, while the most common external stakeholder group was fans, which differs from the other four teams represented in this study.

Table 16. San Jose Sharks Internal Stakeholder Groups

Internal Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Player	13	36.11
Affiliate team	5	13.89

Table 16 (Continued)

Internal Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Prospect	1	2.78
NHL	1	2.78
Practice facility	1	2.78
Own account	11	30.56
Arena	1	2.78
Arena musician	1	2.78
Team foundation	1	2.78
Other NHL team	1	2.78
Total # Groups: 10	Total # References: 36	100

Table 17. San Jose Sharks External Stakeholder Groups

External Stakeholder Group	Total # of References	Percentage
Fan	21	48.84
Sponsor	6	13.95
Community partner	7	16.28
Broadcast partner	7	16.28
Non-profit	2	4.65
Total # Groups: 5	Total # References: 43	100

CHAPTER FIVE:

DISCUSSION

As a relationship management tool, Twitter is a useful platform for a variety of informational needs. This social media network is a thriving platform for relationship management communications among NHL teams. In this study, the main goal of relationship management strategies on Twitter is to communicate information about team performance, most often in the form of game announcements. The other strategies defined in this study pale in comparison to announcements.

Stakeholder Identification

The greatest contribution that this study provides to literature on social media in the sport industry is its identification of stakeholder groups targeted by NHL teams on Twitter. Teams satisfy the needs of multiple stakeholder groups by including them in online conversations, sometimes through direct mentions of accounts, which may encourage, but not guarantee, engagement from its followers to follow or support the identified stakeholder groups. The presence of internal stakeholders held a slight edge over external stakeholders, with more individual internal stakeholder groups identified than external stakeholder groups. Compared to the original stakeholder map identified in the literature review (see Figure 1), the new stakeholder map created in this study (see Figure 2) breaks stakeholder categories into specific, distinguishable groups; however, each of the groups identified in the first stakeholder map appear in some capacity in the study. This emphasis on internal stakeholders suggests some

possibilities for reasoning behind this: internal stakeholders like players are cornerstones of their teams and are the most easily recognizable public figures to fans who follow NHL teams on Twitter. In a way, mentioning internal stakeholders within tweets presents the opportunity for fans to recognize and follow those figures.

In terms of external stakeholders, fans, sponsors, and broadcast partners are the notable groups identified among the NHL teams in this study. There are several implications for engaging with these stakeholder groups. Direct fan interaction promotes greater fan engagement and is likely to encourage fan loyalty and team identification (Vann, Woodford, & Bruns, 2015). Identifying corporate sponsors within tweets satisfies a team's requirement to ensure that sponsors receive the promotions they pay to receive. Direct mentions of broadcast partners encourage fans to participate in the "two-screen experience" defined by O'Hallarn et al. (2018).

Interactivity

Interactions create involvement as well as indirect opportunities to build networks with stakeholders. Most subcategories defined in this study are not inherently interactive, and results indicate that interactivity is not a key factor in determining content creation. With Witkemper, Blaszk, and Chung's spectrum of low interactivity to high interactivity (2016) considered, the NHL teams in this study do not emphasize the need to ask for direct involvement from their followers. Rather, interactivity is derived from the three main forms of direct interaction that the Twitter platform provides. Most interactions occur with individuals and groups who have a direct stake within the organization, including players, sponsors, and broadcast partners. The emphasis on sponsors and broadcast partners also fits well into the argument about the relationship between sport and media as defined by Jhally (1984).

Relationship Management Communications Strategies

In terms of relationship management communication, Twitter is most often used to disseminate information related about game events, confirming conclusions reached in Wang and Zhou's (2015) study on communications strategies among NBA clubs. Overall, announcements related directly to live game events are the primary driver of social media content. The use of announcements allows team accounts to become primary sources for the dissemination of news and information, confirming previous research from Williams, Chinn, and Suleiman (2014). Since games are the most common activity that occurs for a team, it logically follows that announcements are the most common form of relationship management communication. From a social media manager's point of view, announcements write themselves—that is, they are the simplest form of content to create because they are reactive to the game played by the athletes. Team accounts become timelines for live game updates, acting as a complement to live television viewing.

Based upon this study, it appears that it is the main priority among NHL teams to communicate information about team performance. Brand personification is also key to building a social media presence overall, although differences in brand personification exist among the five NHL teams analyzed in this study. The use of brand personification aligns with conclusions from Delia, Armstrong, and Giardina (2016), who state that brand personification helps teams develop brand communities online.

While announcements are the prominent relationship management category, the usage of all subcategories and their corresponding subcategories reveal interesting conclusions when it comes to understanding how these relationship communications strategies work for NHL teams communicating with fans. The most popular subcategories in each of the relationship

management communications strategies appears to be tailored to fans. Under the team promotions category, the sweepstakes/giveaway/contest subcategory occurs most frequently in this sample, while ticket sales and team merchandise tweets are rare. Instead of attempting to directly sell products, teams prefer to involve fans in contests. Fans who follow NHL teams are most likely concerned with team performance, so game updates under the announcements category provide the relevant information to assess the team throughout the season.

Under the sponsorship category, the most frequent form of advertising was not a direct promotion of a sponsor's products or services—rather, references to sponsors were indirect through the usage of logos or brand images. This subtle way of including sponsorship information is akin to sponsor logos that are on the boards surrounding the ice during a game—while there is no direct promotion of a product, the appearance of a logo satisfies a team's commitment to their corporate sponsors. For community contributions, public player appearances were the most common subcategory identified. Of all the strategies in this study, community contributions, while an uncommon form of communication in this study, offer the most humanizing look at the players on their respective teams. This subcategory is fan-oriented because these tweets show athletes as role models outside of their daily activities on the ice; rather, these tweets show the interactions that players have with their fans, creating a reminder that players are human, too. Brand personification provides a human element to the faceless Twitter accounts of NHL teams, leading to increased probability of engagement. The more human a Twitter account appears, the more likely that audiences will respond to it—the ultimate goal of social media communication, after all, is engagement.

Engagement

The results for engagement indicate that, given Twitter's basic engagement metrics, fans who follow the five NHL teams prefer tweets that include brand personification, as these tweets make the accounts seem more human. The most active form of engagement on Twitter, however, is the reply. Team promotions earned the most replies on average, suggesting that this strategy is particularly useful to foster interactions from fans. A possible reason for this is the existence of sweepstakes and contests, which often require fans to respond to tweets to have a chance to win a prize. These tweets are specifically designed for fan interaction, and the results suggest that they are effective in motivating audience responses.

Comparisons Among NHL Teams

For each of the five teams included in this study, most of their tweets are posted on game days, suggesting that when there is no game, team social media accounts provide less information on Twitter. In this overall sample, NHL team Twitter accounts are more likely to post more tweets on a game day because the real-time, microblogging nature of Twitter allows for immediate updates. Four out of the five teams analyzed in this study used announcements more than any other relationship management category. When it comes to identification of stakeholder groups in this study, all five teams prioritize players as the most important internal stakeholder group. In terms of external stakeholder groups, each team except the San Jose Sharks prioritize sponsors over any other external stakeholder group.

The Washington Capitals had the greatest variance in terms of content, as they had the highest frequencies of sponsor messages, team promotions, and community contributions. In terms of direct interactions, the New Jersey Devils emphasize stakeholder relationships more than the other teams represented in this study. However, the Washington Capitals and New

Jersey Devils accounts also had the fewest number of tweets in the sample, as the dates randomly selected in this sample left each of these teams with two game days. The Minnesota Wild do not have any notable differences that makes the account stand out from the other Twitter accounts mentioned in this study. However, it is interesting to note that the Wild's frequencies in relationship management categories fall closest to the averages analyzed in the total sample (see Table 4). The Edmonton Oilers place greater emphasis on announcements than the other teams in this study—however, this account also had the greatest number of game days from which to post information. This team also uses hashtags more than any other team. Hashtags are potential conversation-starters as well as representative of larger trends that occur on Twitter, and it appears that the Oilers prefer hashtags to begin online conversations.

Excluding the San Jose Sharks, every other team in this study primarily use Twitter to communicate announcements related to the team, usually in the form of a game update. Although announcements appeared in over half of all tweets posted by the San Jose Sharks, the account stands out the most from the other four teams. Over two-thirds of all tweets posted by the San Jose Sharks included brand personification, suggesting that the team places greater emphasis on creating a unique social environment and personality for the team, putting the “social” in social media. Tweets are often humorous, as if a fan, not a professional social media manager, is responsible for sending out official team information. No one else uses brand personification to quite the degree that the Sharks do, making the organization the most human out of all the teams analyzed in this study. In terms of external stakeholders, the Sharks is the only team that contained more references to fans than sponsors, with 21 total references to fans, the most of any team in this study. Social media, at the very least for this team, assumes more responsibility to its fans than the other franchises in this study. The differences among NHL

teams suggest that there is some variance from account to account in how they manage stakeholder relationships and their utilization of relationship management strategies.

CHAPTER SIX: LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis extends existing literature by examining subcategories in relationship management strategies, as well as providing a framework for comparative analysis of multiple Twitter accounts in the field of sport and media research. It contributes to the growing body of research on the sports industry in social media by using constructed-week sampling to gather the sample. The greatest contribution provided by this study is the stakeholder map that identifies the specific groups targeted by NHL teams. This map, while not exhaustive, gives an in-depth look into the specific stakeholder groups that sports teams may identify on social media. This is also the first study to date that has compared Twitter usages among multiple accounts.

This thesis, however, used data from only five NHL teams—therefore, relationship management communications strategies can only be assumed among these five teams. Team schedules may have had an impact on results for this study—because of the dates chosen for this constructed-week sample, the New Jersey Devils and Washington Capitals had the lowest share of the sample. Accounts like the Minnesota Wild and the Edmonton Oilers ended up with a greater number of tweets because they had more game days in this constructed week sample. This creates a limitation for the study because each team did not have a relatively equal number of tweets. Despite the fewer number of game days for the New Jersey Devils and Washington Capitals, these teams still post the majority of their tweets on game days. This study is unable to

discern whether the lower shares of the sample for these accounts affected the results for each of these teams.

Future research could expand the research presented here. The greatest value for future studies would be in determining why sports franchises use social media to connect with certain stakeholder groups beyond their fans. This research makes it apparent that fans are not necessarily the most important stakeholder when it comes to direct interaction. Future studies could expand upon this knowledge by interviewing social media managers on the organizational objectives achieved on social media by including stakeholders beyond fans in their social media communications. Although some research has been done in this field with social media managers, research that expands upon understanding how social media manages stakeholder relationships is needed.

Because this research is a content analysis, it can define stakeholder groups, but cannot identify reasons for why some are given greater prominence over other stakeholder groups. Overall, this study provides a deeper understanding of the sport industry's relationship with social media as a primary source of team information. The sports industry, given its immense reach among passionate fans, is likely to remain important to understanding how businesses can maintain relationships with their relevant stakeholders. The better we understand the relationships between organizations and their stakeholders, the more we can ensure that organizations know the correct strategies to keep stakeholders engaged in long-term organizational goals.

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APPENDIX: CODEBOOK

Code for the team account from which the tweet was posted:

1. Minnesota Wild (@mnwild)
2. Washington Capitals (@capitals)
3. New Jersey Devils (@NJDevils)
4. Edmonton Oilers (@EdmontonOilers)
5. San Jose Sharks (@SJSharks)

Code for the day of the constructed-week sample from when the tweet was posted:

1. Sunday, October 21, 2018
2. Monday, December 3, 2018
3. Tuesday, November 27, 2018
4. Wednesday, October 31, 2018
5. Thursday, January 3, 2018
6. Friday, February 1, 2018
7. Saturday, November 17, 2018

Was the tweet posted on a game day for the team? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- If “yes,” code for whether the game was played at home or away.
 - Home (in the team’s city arena)
 - Away (in a different city)

Does the tweet include any visual or multimedia elements? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- If “yes,” code for the presence of any of these examples of visual or multimedia:
 - Image (photo, graphic, or infographic)
 - Video
 - GIF
 - Website link

Does the tweet include a hashtag? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- If “yes,” code for the presence of any of these examples of hashtags:
 - Team hashtags (#GoBolts, #allcaps)
 - Game-time hashtag (#MINvsTBL for Minnesota versus Tampa Bay)
 - Charity or community involvement
 - Promotional or contest/sweepstakes (#LightningStrikes for a contest)

Does the tweet contain a direct interaction? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- If “yes,” code for the presence of any of these types of direct interactions:
 - Mention (must include the @ symbol that directs to a separate Twitter account)
 - Retweet or quoted tweet (are part of the same function on Twitter)
 - Reply

If the tweet contains a direct interaction, does it reference an internal stakeholder or stakeholder group? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- See Table 1 for stakeholder map

If the tweet contains a direct interaction, does it reference an external stakeholder or stakeholder group? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- See Table 1 for stakeholder map

Does the tweet include any sponsorship or advertising messages? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- If “yes,” code for the presence of any of these examples of sponsorship or advertising messages:
 - Identification of corporate sponsor
 - Sponsorship promotion
 - Appearance of a sponsor’s logo or brand image

Does the tweet include any team-related promotions? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- If “yes”, code for the presence of any of these examples of team-related promotions:
 - Ticket sales, such as season tickets or single-game tickers
 - Sweepstakes, giveaway, or contest
 - Team merchandise

Does the tweet include any announcements? (0—No; 1—Yes)

If “yes,” code for the presence of any of these types of announcements:

- Team practice session
- News or feature story
- Game time or television broadcast time
- Score reports or live game updates
- Player, coach, or front office staff (owner, general manager) interviews
- Injury reports
- Player contract signings or trades
- Affiliate team reports or updates
- Game- or player-related statistics

Does the tweet include any reference to a team’s community contributions? (0—No; 1—Yes)

- If “yes,” code for the presence of any of these examples of community involvement:
 - Public player appearances
 - Nonprofit project or partnership
 - Team or player charitable foundation activities
 - Community event

How many likes did the tweet receive?

- Code raw number

How many retweets did the tweet receive?

- Code raw number