

The Role of Social Media in Sports when Developing Long-Term
Relationships with Fans: The Case of the St. Louis Rams and the LA
Galaxy

by Manuel Poch, Bachelor of Arts

A Thesis Project Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Science
in the field of Mass Communications

Advisory Committee:

Mark Poepsel, Chair

Suman Mishra

Gary R. Hicks

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
May, 2015

UMI Number: 1589179

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 1589179

Published by ProQuest LLC (2015). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Au

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower
Parkway
P.O. Box 1346

ABSTRACT

The Role of Social Media in Sports when Developing Long-Term Relationships with Fans: The Case of the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy

by

MANUEL POCH

Chairperson: Professor Mark Poepsel

This study investigates how professional sports organizations are using social media to develop long-term relationships with supporters. Professional sports clubs are important businesses with large communities of followers which present an ideal context to better understand the potential that social media have to help forge strong bonds with fans. This qualitative comparative case study uses relationship marketing as the base theory and semi-structure interviews as the method of data collection. The interviews were performed with key marketing and communication personnel of the St. Louis Rams (Rams) of the National Football League (NFL) and the LA Galaxy (Galaxy) of Major League Soccer (MLS) in order to gather valuable insight into this phenomenon. The findings indicated that both clubs are using social media to introduce key elements and constructs of relationship marketing, which, in accord with theory, are critically important to the development of enduring relationships with the fandom. The findings showed as well that the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy utilize social media as a customer service and data collection tool in their attempt to better understand supporters' needs and preferences to help them deliver a more effective message and forge strong and lasting relationships with supporters, also known as their fandom.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
LIST OF TABLES.....	iv
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	4
Overview of Relationship Marketing.....	4
Relationship Marketing in Sports.....	8
Social Media, Branding and Relationship Marketing.....	15
Research Question.....	19
III. METHOD.....	22
IV. FINDINGS.....	25
Section A.....	25
Trust.....	26
Co-Production.....	35
Personalization.....	39
Influencers.....	44
Section B.....	51
Customer Service Tool.....	51
Data Collection Tool.....	56
V. DISCUSSION.....	61
VI. CONCLUSION.....	70
Limitations/Future Research.....	72
REFERENCES.....	73
APPENDIX.....	78

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. St. Louis Rams' category <i>Trust</i>	27
Table 2. LA Galaxy's category <i>Trust</i>	30
Table 3. St. Louis Rams' category <i>Co-Production</i>	35
Table 4. LA Galaxy's category <i>Co-Production</i>	37
Table 5. St. Louis Rams' category <i>Personalization</i>	40
Table 6. LA Galaxy's category <i>Personalization</i>	41
Table 7. St. Louis Rams' category <i>Influencers</i>	45
Table 8. LA Galaxy's category <i>Influencers</i>	48
Table 9. St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy's category <i>Customer Service Tool</i>	52
Table 10. St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy's category <i>Data Collection Tool</i>	56

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Professional sports have been a part of American popular culture since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Sports have a profound impact on our society, helping transcend cultural differences and bringing entire nations and the world together. Studying the cultural significance and influences of mediated professional sports as iconic symbols in the public sphere is crucial to aid in our understanding of social issues such as social integration, media influences, media stereotypes, the global economy, national unity, diversity, and changes in demographics. Rooting for our favorite teams unites people with different backgrounds under one common symbol playing a significant role in shaping the character of our societies. Images of professional sports presented in the mass media are strong forces that reinforce social values and provide hours of entertainment every day. The lives of many Americans revolve around sports. More than half of the U.S. population are located in or around one of the 30 major cities that have a professional sports team, bringing passionate and emotional moments of triumph and defeat into the American home on weekdays, weekends, during prime time, and even on national holidays such as Independence Day and Thanksgiving.

Communication researchers have a major role in uncovering the crucial relationships between professional sports organizations, the media and their influences in our society. In a time when media are not just conduits for sending information and spreading ideologies, but also tools where the public create and share their own content

through online interactions, understanding this dialogue is an important part of our new social, cultural, and political order.

Social media platforms play an important function in today's sports communication domain. They not only allow supporters to have a daily two-way conversation with their favorite sport teams and players (Williams & Chinn, 2010), but also allow sports organizations to learn about fans' values, preferences, and motivations. In addition, social media helps clubs to personalize messages as well as to encourage fans to participate and co-design multimedia content. Social media interaction has become an effective tool to reach and engage supporters. Just seven of the most popular international soccer clubs hold a combined social media following of 207 million fans (Badenhausen, 2013). The right social media strategy and an effective use of data and digital interactions may bring organizations and supporters mutual value as they forge long-term relationships. Sports organizations will benefit economically from the engagement of lifelong fans and will be more capable of creating a sustainable business; supporters will get more benefits from sports teams that understand their needs; the community will benefit from the different outcomes of having a sports team that understands and praises its supporters and shares their values (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006).

The aim of this study is to examine the role and the functions of social media platforms and understand how they help create long-term relationships with fans in the context of professional sports in the United States. This paper uses relationship marketing as the supporting theory to examine some fundamental elements that could be introduced in professional sports organizations through social media and how these may contribute to the development of long-term relationships with supporters.

This qualitative research paper is structured as a comparative case study and uses semi-structured interviews as the data collection tool. These methodology and design help to gain a comprehensive and subjective point of view from key personnel within the sports organizations that will be studied: the LA Galaxy from the Major League Soccer (MLS) and the St. Louis Rams from the National Football League (NFL).

The fact that this research involves the study of two major sports clubs from two different professional leagues, with a considerably different success history and markets, gives real value to this study and represents a major contribution to the field of digital communications.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview of Relationship Marketing

Even though the first concepts reflecting a relationship marketing approach were introduced in the 1950s, consistent research did not emerge until three decades later when academics started questioning the established marketing paradigm that the seller and buyer were opposing forces in an antagonist relationship (Ganguli, Esligh, & Nast Bechwati, 2009). The first author to coin the term relationship marketing was Leonard Berry in 1983 in the service-marketing field (Kim & Trail, 2011). Berry formulated the first definition suggesting, “relationship marketing is attracting, maintaining and—in multi-service organizations—enhancing customer relationships” (Berry, 1983, p. 25).

The author recommended that American industries adopt a shift in marketing approach from a product-marketing and order-taking one to a relationship-marketing one (Berry, 1982). According to Palmatier (2008) several factors such as increasing global competition, the rise of computing technologies, and the transition to service-based economies merged in order to consolidate the relationship-marketing paradigm. In opposition to transactional exchanges that are based on offering discounts, coupons, or giveaways to customers, relational exchanges “focus on cooperation and interactions resulting from shared values” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 103). Morgan and Hunt affirmed that the growth of relationship marketing both in theory and in practice is due to the general assumption that building relationships leads to an improvement in market share and profit (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). “Relationship marketing refers to all marketing

activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relationship exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22).

The relationship marketing approach is considered today one of the most important areas in the marketing field (William & Chinn, 2010). In relationship marketing, “the objectives of all parties involved are met, where this is done by a mutual giving and fulfillment of promises” (Gronroos, 1997, p. 407). Some examples of the particular characteristics found in the buyer-seller relationship-based marketing approach are “reduced perceived risk, higher trust, enhanced cooperation, and greater flexibility” (Palmatier, 2008, p. 9).

In *Relationship Marketing: Positioning to the future*, Copulsky and Wolf explain that relationship marketing aims to enhance the development of long-term relationships with existing customers and emphasizes the mutual benefit taking place in the exchange (2009). Berry (1983) argued about the importance of maintaining existing customers and attracting new customers for long-term relationships. The main goal of the relationship-based exchange is to create long-term relationships with the finest consumers, increase insight on their behavior, and generate additional value (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). Similarly, Bee and Kahle explained that relationship marketing considers consumers as lifetime customers and makes a thorough effort to understand their needs, wants, and values. “[T]he aim of relationship marketing is to have long-term positive effects on the business with optimum resource utilization through constant interaction, extensive networking and cooperation among all members (employees, customers, suppliers, business partners, etc.) with proper commitment to create superior value for all stakeholders in a trustworthy environment” (Ganguli, Esligh, Nast Bechwati, 2009, p. 6).

Gronroos (2004) affirmed that relationship marketing starts when the transaction is initiated between the organization and consumers. Organizations view the exchange with customers not as a one-time event, but as a process that brings out a sustainable relationship based on three fundamental elements in the relationship-building process: communication, interaction, and value. For Gronroos (2004) an organization's effective communication, in addition to continued and meaningful interactions, leads to value-added outcomes providing additional benefits for both parties. According to Gronroos, customer-perceived-value is the most important factor for a successful relationship strategy (2004). "As long-term relationships with customers cannot be duplicated by the competition, such relationships offer unique and sustainable competitive advantage" (Baron, 2010, p. 25). Bee and Kahle (2006) affirm that "relationships that are internalized and based on shared values have the deepest level of influence and are most durable and consistent" (p. 109). Shared values impact consumer attitudes, and those attitudes leverage consumer behaviors (Bee & Kahle, 2006).

Baron (2010) explains that maintaining a customer is up to ten percent less expensive than finding a new customer. According to Baron (2010), this happens especially because of the high cost of unsuccessful prospecting that is incurred when trying to reach new segments. As the relationship improves and the customers become more satisfied with the organization and less price sensitive, their purchases increase while operating cost drops significantly due to high efficiency (Baron, 2010). "As defection rates fall, the average customer relationship lifespan increases" (Baron, 2010, p. 30).

To exceed customer expectations and maintain and grow relationships, marketers

need to understand what consumers are buying in order to offer additional value (Baron, 2010). “Relationship marketing also requires an emphasis on dialogue and creativity that ensures greater customer involvement with the company in the creation and maintenance of a relationship” (Baron, 2010, p. 26). In long-term relationships, customers become co-producers and organizations create a valuable understanding of their customers’ behaviors. New technologies allow a high degree of knowledge along with sophisticated databases that allow companies to gather information about customers to communicate more effectively (Baron, 2010). “These strategies also require the use of innovative media to target the customer and communicate with him/her on a one-to-one basis” (Baron, 2010, p. 36). The creation of a continuous and updated database management strategy is one of the best ways of organizing insight about customers (Buhler, 2010).

Morgan and Hunt (1994) state that the “presence of relationship commitment and trust is central to a successful relationship” (p. 22). Relationship partners work to strengthen bonds and positively influence cooperation and financial outcomes (Palmatier, 2008). “[D]esigning programs to increase customers’ perceptions of the seller’s free will, benevolence, risk, and cost in providing the benefits will influence customer gratitude” (Palmatier, 2008, p. XI). Kim and Trail (2011) established the importance of relationship quality in: trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity. To successfully implement relationship marketing, Berry suggests the fundamental elements are core service, relationship customization, service augmentation, relationship pricing, and internal marketing (1983). The ability to minimize conflict with customers and the role of boundary spanners and their task to be the first to interact with customers are two crucial factors to consider before implementing a relationship-marketing strategy (Palmatier,

2008).

Consumers prefer to enter into long relationships since they have fewer options to choose from and facilitate the decision-making process (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Bhattacharya and Sen (2002) found that consumers seek to engage in relationships with brands to satisfy “key self-definition needs” (p.77). “[I]f consumers are engaged in a relationship with a firm or an organization, they are likely to be familiar with the products and services offered, which reduces risk, tension, and the likelihood of cognitive dissonance” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 104). “Practitioners must appreciate the holistic nature of relationship marketing and must also demonstrate a willingness to move away from a transactional approach and place a priority on customer retention” (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008, p. 22). According to the authors cited in this section, implementing relationship marketing practices seem to be of critical importance for businesses who want to succeed in today’s competitive and diverse market.

Relationship Marketing in Sports

Sports marketing is defined “as all activities designed to meet the needs and wants of sport consumers through exchange processes (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000, p. 9). According to the publication *The Elusive Fan: Reinventing Sports in a Crowded Marketplace*, sports supporters have never had so many entertainment options to choose from (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006). This includes not only traditional (baseball, football, hockey, basketball, soccer) and emerging sports (lacrosse, paintball, NASCAR, extreme sports) but also digital television, online streaming, video games, fantasy sports, and many other entertainment options that have made it more difficult for marketers to

establish relationships with the fans (Rein, Kotler, and Shields, 2006).

Gladden and Sutton argue that a shift to the relationship-marketing paradigm is needed in order to persevere in the highly competitive entertainment and sports market (2009). “In a marketplace so crowded, the search for fans has become essential to the very survival of sports” (Rein, Kotler, and Shields, 2006, p. 4). Many sports organizations have understood the importance of adopting relationship-marketing strategies in order to nurture long-term relationships with customers, (i.e. fans) (Williams and Chinn, 2010; Stavros, Pope, and Winzar, 2008).

Sports marketers have long recognized the unique characteristics of highly involved sports supporters and their “desire for long-term association with a team sport” (Shani, 1997, p. 9). Tajfel (1978) claimed that sports fandom relates to the concept of social identity that evolved from the individuals’ self-concept and the emotional significance associated with being part of a particular group.

Being part of a social tribe or group of fans offers social benefits because it allows the participants to feel a sense of community, solidarity, prestige, and self-esteem (Dionisio, Leal, and Moutinho, 2008). Sports fans look for a positive social identity and even when fans may not know each other, they still see other fans as a community (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010).

Fans joins cults because they feel comforted by being among other individuals who share the same terminology, attend common places, and show similar passionate behavioral patterns (Dionisio, et al., 2008). “Football-devoted supporters have a kind of cult with their club influenced by the need of social recognition, socialization and symbolism” (Dionisio, et al, p. 17, 2008).

When individuals feel a strong emotional significance to be part of a social tribe, they consume the product because of the symbolic significance in society more than because of their material value (Dionisio, et al, 2008). In professional sports, the club or the team acts as the bridge where the formation of the cult and fandom develop (Dionisio, et al, 2008).

“Dempsey and Reilly (1998) explain this loyalty with the fact that supporters find something in sports that they cannot find anywhere else, e.g. the escape from the ordinary workaday world, the adrenaline rush and the thrill of a match or the feeling of being part of a community” (as cited in Buhler, 2010, p. 65). Sports supporters’ “commitment to the sports organization is often displayed through the repeat purchase of tickets, continued attendance at sporting events, and the purchase of sport-related products” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 104).

Several relationship-marketing goals align perfectly with those of the sporting industry. A sports organization’s main objective is to build relationships that will intensify fan loyalty to help build their brand (Stravos et al., 2008). “Customers, in this case fans, may then become long-term and enthusiastic advocates with whom lasting relationships can be maintained” (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 431). Similar to relationship marketing, “building, enhancing, and maintaining a good relationship with fans is perhaps the most fundamental principle of sport marketing” (Kim & Trail, 2011, p. 65).

Kim and Trail suggest several reasons why relationship marketing would be beneficial for sports entities: because of the need to redirect their focus to maintain existing customers instead of acquiring new ones and because of the capabilities that

relationship marketing has for repairing damaged relationships with supporters considering the devastating consequences that fans' unhappiness may cause (2011). Supporters' discontent may lead to declining attendance and television ratings, decrease of sponsorship support, licensed product revenue, media contracts, and other catastrophic and negative outcomes (Howard & Crompton, 2005). "When consumers enter into a relationship with a sports organization, that act can reflect the consumers' commitment to continue patronage regardless of the other choices available to them. This type of behavior goes beyond repeat purchasing and reflects an ongoing partnership" (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 103). Buhler (2010) stated that the association between sports organizations and fans could be described as a two-way relationship where "fans need clubs as an integral part of their lives, and sports entities need their fans in order to survive – both in financial terms and as organizations" (Buhler, 2010, p. 69).

A limited amount of academic research has been done in the field of relationship marketing. Gladden and Sutton claimed that there is insufficient research on the key factors determining how a good relationship between consumers and the sports organization should be structured (2009). Bee and Kahle (2006) researched how the effects of relationship marketing are influenced by compliance, identification, and internalization in expected outcomes such as attendance at sport events. Stavros, Pope, and Winzar (2008) used qualitative methods to report the utilization of relationship marketing in the Australian sports context. "According to Shani (1997) part of the slow uptake in relationship marketing in sport is attributable to poor implementation of database marketing" (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008).

A database gives organizations the opportunity to target profitable segments and

delivers individualized marketing strategies (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). In the study *Relationship Marketing in Australian Sport*, “[t]he integral role of the database in relationship marketing was reaffirmed and it was apparent that sporting organizations who had installed modern data management systems were greatly advantaged in the implementation and operation of suitable activities” (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). Today, information technology allows sports marketers to build relationships to a large number of sports consumers (Kim & Trial, 2011). Understanding whom the supporters are, where they can be found, and how to communicate with them is critical in relationship marketing (Buhler, 2010). Therefore, research on consumer behavior is an unavoidable requisite for relationship marketing success (Buhler, 2010; Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008).

Bee and Kahle (2006) as well as Shani (1997) suggest that little research and theory have been developed to analyze the use of relationship marketing for sports organizations. However, sports organizations shouldn’t treat sports supporters as imprisoned consumers who don’t have other choices (Buhler, 2010). “Fans are quite loyal to their sports club but that loyalty isn’t blind loyalty” (Buhler, 2010, p. 77).

According to Bee and Kahle (2006), trust and shared values are the most important factors in relationship formation. Trust “is based on consumers’ expectations about the reliability and competency of players, teams, and management. Trust of fans intensifies when they believe that the organization and their staff of players and coaches are perceived as trustworthy and credible. If these expectations are consistently met, consumers are more likely to initiate or maintain a trusting relationship” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 104). Harris and Ogbonna (2008) indicated trust as a critical element of

successful relationships of soccer clubs with fans. Their research findings identified that trust is forged in relation to the perception of the quality of the players, managers, and the youth soccer system.

Values represent long-term consumer beliefs (Bee & Kahle, 2006) and influence trust and commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). “[S]hared values can invoke the highest level of relationship commitment” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 104). Relationships built upon shared values help confront external threats (Bee & Kahle, 2006). “Organizations should try to match the values of their target consumers with the values of the sports team or organization. Additionally, marketing efforts should strive to demonstrate those values to various groups through an integrated marketing strategy” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 108). Interaction with consumers over the topic of sports and hospitality during sports events can be effective ways to establish shared values with consumers (Bee & Kahle, 2006). “[S]ports-related gifts can reward fans, establish an identity for fans, and even express shared values” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 104).

Identification as well plays an important role in the value of the relationship as it is linked with social recognition. Identification is related to team, organization, or player success or failure and consumer satisfaction with the sports team, organization, or player” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 104). The outcome of a supporter’s identification with an organization leads to the key loyal behaviors for success: repeat purchasing and continued attendance (Bee & Kahle, 2006). “These consumers offer sports organizations a competitive advantage that can be realized through relationship marketing efforts (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 104). Making supporters actively participate and feel they are part of the club is a very effective way to construct long-term relationships. Some important

relationship marketing tools in this area are member clubs and fan loyalty programs (Buhler, 2010). Complaint management processes and the reporting of how each complaint is resolved are crucial tools to keep relationships healthy (Buhler, 2010).

Relationship marketing brings mutually beneficial outcomes for sports organizations and sports consumers (Buhler, 2010). Some benefits for business includes the following: cost reduction, increased sales, positive word of mouth, brand loyalty, and competitive advantage. On the sports customers' side some benefits include: confidence (trust), social benefits, economic benefits, special treatment, and interactive communication (Buhler, 2010).

Even though sporting performance during the regular competition season and, possibly the post-season is perhaps the most important factor for organizational success, "the universal nature of sports can stimulate such a strong emotional response in its consumers that many of them will still support the team or individual athletes even though sporting success is not given" (Buhler, 2010, p. 162). Tsotsou (2013) found sport organization's managers could capitalize on the strong emotional attachment of sports consumers and that that can boost the brand equity of the organization. The way relationship quality is perceived by supporters has a significant impact on overall customer satisfaction: "[S]ports properties which neglect the importance of healthy relationships and/or are not able to implement a systematic relationship management programme will find it more difficult to stay competitive in the business of sports" (Buhler, 2010, p. 181-182). As many authors indicated in this section, the implementation of a relationship marketing approach could bring many benefits to sports organizations.

Social Media, Branding and Relationship Marketing

“Social media is a branding form in which your presence should equate to relationships and followers” (Ballouli and Hutchinson, 2010). Social media is being used by many entertainment industries to establish an emotional image in the mind of consumers since the relationship with consumers is cultivated through self-connection and brand intimacy (Turri, Smith, and Kemp, 2013). Through a two-way interaction, social media helps the branding efforts because it develops an emotional engagement with the brand. “Emotional engagement can inspire loyalty and advocacy” (Turri, et al, p. 210)

Organizations are now weighing the importance of using various social media platforms as tools to furnish the conditions necessary for successfully implementing relationship marketing based on their ability to expand communication and increase interaction (Williams and Chinn, 2010). The dynamics of sports communication and the way clubs and athletes interact with their supporters have changed since the arrival of social media and its capabilities to spread news and information (Wysocki, 2012). “[T]he use of social media provides new opportunities to gain maximum leverage in strengthening and building long-term relationships with fans” (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 427).

The benefits of the use of social media to reach relationship marketing goals can be relevant considering Gronroos’ (2004) three elements of the relationship marketing building process that grant organizations the ability to develop effective long-term relationships with customers: communication, interaction, and value. Through *communication*, organizations and supporters engage in a two-way conversation where

information is interchanged. *Interaction* allows a more profound exchange where both groups connect and develop a continuous conversation (Hambrick, & Kang, 2014).

“Through this interaction, the fan can share likes and dislikes and needs and wants. The team can respond to those personal requests by offering existing products or developing new ones” (Hambrick, & Kang, 2014, p. 4). *Value*, the last element of the relationship marketing building process, is the result of the benefits of communication and interaction in which both groups meet their relationship needs (Hambrick, & Kang, 2014). “[T]he fan may experience value and feel more invested in the team, noting that the organization responded to her needs through a new product offering” (Hambrick, & Kang, 2014, p. 4). Sports clubs must cultivate relationships through an ongoing meaningful interaction and identifying means to create mutual value (Hambrick, & Kang, 2014).

In sports, relationship marketing may be of greater advantage if we consider that sports supporters are highly involved consumers (Shani, 1997) and active contributors (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Through social media, sports organizations should build relationships with supporters, not only as customers, but also as collaborators, intermediaries, and influencers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). “The customer is primarily an operant resource. Customers are active participants in relational exchanges and coproduction” (Vargo & Lynch, 2004, p. 7). Social media allows consumers “to develop their own voices in the form of customer reviews, innovative ideas, and opinions” (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 429).

The social media platforms have to be strategically integrated with each other and a permanent two-way communication pathway should be maintained to instantly respond to spontaneous supporter’s messages (Williams & Chinn, 2010). “The information-

sharing component of social media platforms allows sports organizations to do the same while providing information about their personnel, events, activities, and other potential benefits to consumers” (Hambrick, & Kang, 2014, p. 3). “Relationship marketing can be facilitated through social media that gives organizations and fans the ability to connect in a variety of online settings” (Hambrick, & Kang, 2014, p. 3). Some of the most-used social media platforms are: “Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Foursquare, Instagram, Pinterest, and Google+” (Wysocki, 2012, p. 1). “These elements directly apply to uses in sports communication to connect with the public, build a brand, conduct customer relationship management, and manage reputation” (Wysocki, 2012, p. 6). The consistency of the messages throughout platforms is critically important in order to create an effective social media communication.

For instance, Twitter, enables instant communication and interaction, real-time access to the team’s and to players’ content, and it allows fans to feel connected with the organization. YouTube allows supporters to subscribe and to have access to special content (e.g. videos produced just for the platform) (Williams & Chinn, 2010). “Fans’ ability to be involved in the creation of content is particularly relevant to relationship marketing because it provides a natural forum for increasing interaction and peer-to-peer participation. Fans can upload video or photo content that demonstrates their relationship with the team and places them in the center of the communication process” (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 434). Engaging consumers to design, publish, and edit content in the organization’s social media platforms creates a dynamic and interactive environment that promotes a sense of empowerment (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

According to Wysocki (2012) studies have stated the importance of social media

in sports, but have failed to expand the research on how individual clubs should implement social media strategies. “Sports organizations can leverage this environment to build connections with fans and further their relationship-marketing efforts” (Hambrick, & Kang, 2014, p. 3).

In “Embracing the Social on Social Media,” Armstrong, Delia and Giardina (2014) use digital ethnographic methods to analyze the Los Angeles Kings’ social media efforts to engage with supporters. In this case study, the authors suggest that “social media need not serve as solely a communicative or promotional mechanism but as a space for a brand or organization to be real, just as its consumers or fans are” (Armstrong, et al., 2014, p. 9). They conclude that the Kings were able to develop a strong brand community using social media “through its use of earnest, inventive, and, at times, comical and controversial, online interactions (Armstrong, et al., 2014, p. 9). The sports organizations with the most successful social media strategies seem to be focused more on being agile and authentic than on promotional aspects (Armstrong, et al., 2014). Establishing a brand personality through humanistic interactions and human sensibility with supporters has allowed the NHL organization, the Los Angeles Kings, to develop a reciprocation and collaboration within the relationship (Armstrong, et al., 2014).

Hambrick and Kang employed the relationship-marketing conceptual framework (Gronroos, 2004) to study how the most popular professional sports leagues in the United States used the social media platform Pinterest as a mean to encourage engagement and interactions with supporters. Zimmerman, Clavio, and Lin (2011) researched Major League Soccer’s (MLS) adoption of YouTube videos and tracked fans’ choices based on the number of comments and clicks on each video they watched. Waters, Burke, Jackson,

and Buning (2011) studied how Facebook cultivates relationships in the National Football League (NFL). Wysocki (2012) uses interviews and online observation to understand how social media is used in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and establishes eight best practices for social media utilization by sports organizations: “give quality content, incorporate social media offline, gamify social media efforts, personalize fans on social media, collect fan data, fan-source / crowd-source, use fans to amplify the message, and track, measure, analyze and adjust” (Wysocki, 2012, p. iv).

Social media have revolutionized how brands build relationships with sports consumers (Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011; Wysocki, 2012). “[T]he ability to communicate direct and unfiltered messages via social media provides a significant and strategic means of establishing and maintaining a strong brand identity for encouraging repeat consumption” (Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011, p. 423). Social media are effective communication platforms to support a variety of relationship marketing goals (Williams & Chinn, 2010). “As sport marketers capitalize on social media in meeting relationship-marketing goals, it is important to ensure that these tools are integrated and build meaningful relationships through opportunities for communication, interaction, and value” (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 436).

Research Question

The value of relationship marketing as a strategy to create long-term relationships with fans in sports organizations has been observed for decades as cited throughout the literature review. However, little research has been done in order to better understand the benefits of this approach and the ways social media platforms can help implement

relationship marketing's constructs and elements within sports organizations.

Relationship marketing appeared to be the appropriate theory to use in this study considering this research attempts to better understand how sports organizations are using social media to develop long-term relationships with supporters.

This case study will analyze the social media strategies of two professional teams in major leagues in the U.S. from the perspective of the communication and marketing managerial staff of the LA Galaxy (Major League Soccer – MLS) and the St. Louis Rams (National Football League – NFL). These two teams were selected for several reasons. The fact that both clubs represent not only two different professional leagues, but also two very different markets in terms of demographics was one of the reasons for the selection. In addition, the LA Galaxy is one of the two MLS teams in the diverse city of Los Angeles and it has been the most successful franchise in MLS since the league's inception. The LA Galaxy have won the MLS Cup four times and have over a million "Likes" on Facebook (doubling the MLS team with the next higher number) and more than 36.5 thousand followers on Twitter. The Galaxy have been in existence since MLS' first season in 1996, and their main fan demographics are tech savvy and multiethnic Millennials (Nielsen 2013). The Galaxy have marketable players like historical U.S. National player Landon Donovan and Irish striker Robbie Keane. In addition, the Galaxy had in the past world famous player David Beckham, who helped the Galaxy's brand to be recognized worldwide. The Galaxy won their last two MLS titles with Beckham in 2011 and 2012.

On the other side, the St. Louis Rams belong to a more traditional and conservative Midwest market and the team is part of the NFL, the most popular U.S.

sport considering TV coverage, ratings, and sponsorships. The Rams team has been in Saint Louis since 1995 when it relocated from Los Angeles. St. Louis Rams' last winning season was in 2003, and their most successful one was back in 1999 when they won Super Bowl XXXIV. In comparison to MLS fans, NFL clubs have an older fan base and less tech savvy (Oshan, 2014). The St. Louis Rams are active on three social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The Rams have a video platform provided by the National Football League (NFL) and do not have an official YouTube account. The LA Galaxy have official accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Foursquare, Flickr, YouTube, and Pinterest.

The fact that the two organizations in the study are so different from each other from several points of view gives the study an interesting and broad perspective on how social media may help professional sporting organizations in different professional sports in diverse markets, at different stages of their life cycle and enjoying different levels of success. This study is not particularly looking to observe every social media platform separately, but looking to get the overall viewpoint from the communication and marketing managers' perspective about how social media is utilized and how it helps develop long-term relationships with supporters.

RQ 1: How are social media helping the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy to develop long-term relationships with supporters?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative case study developed by using semi-structured interviews as the main method of data collection. “A qualitative case study research design is ideal for capturing the perspectives and the contextual character of human interaction in order to recognize the importance of human action in the social construction of meaning” (Silk, Andrews, & Mason, 2005, p. 12)

A case study involves an intensive study of a specific case such as an organization, a sports team, or an individual (Gratton & Jones, 2010). In order to gain a holistic understanding of a particular issue, “[c]ase study research is based upon the argument that understanding human activity requires analysis of both its development over time, and the environment and context within which the activity occurs” (Gratton & Jones, 2010, p. 107). The main advantage of a case study is that it gives you a chance to study one aspect of a real-world problem in detail from many different viewpoints (Uefap.com). For instance, Stavros, Pope, and Winzar (2008) used qualitative case study as the research design and in-depth interviewing as the method to report on the use of relationship marketing by sports organizations in the Australian sports context. Wysocki (2012) used interviews and online observation to understand how social media is used by teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

This research paper analyzes the role of social media and how it helps professional U.S. sports clubs develop long-term relationships with fans. The fact that two organizations will be studied makes this research paper a multiple case study. “The

evidence from multiple case studies is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust” (Yin, 2003, p.46). According to Yin in *Case Study Research* (2003), case study design can be used when a theory or theories suggest particular outcomes in particular contexts in which researchers would be able to choose a case or cases that provide the necessary context. By analyzing multiple cases, this study makes more robust connections between the research questions and findings than if it were only one case being examined. The case studies will be exploratory in the sense that “such questions deal with operational links rather than mere frequencies or incidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 6). Exploratory research analyzes what happens or happened. Case study as a method is a well-respected approach to conducting exploratory research.

In exploratory case studies, interviews are appropriate when rich qualitative data is required. Interviews enable participants to elaborate on areas of particular and provide perceived causal inferences from the actor’s rather than the researcher’s point of view (Gratton & Jones, 2010). “Interviewing is often associated with the collection of qualitative data, that is, the why and how of a phenomenon, from the respondents’ perspective. Interviews can collect data concerned with concepts that are difficult or inappropriate to measure, tend to allow respondents much more freedom in terms of their answers” (Gratton & Jones, 2010, p. 155).

This study used phone and in-person semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. These types of interviews allow the researcher to adopt a flexible approach if he requires to alter the set of questions or probing for more information with subsequent questions (Gratton & Jones, 2010). “[S]emistructured interviews allow the emergence of important themes that may not emerge from a more structured format. This

enables the subjects to reveal insights into their attitudes and behaviors that may not readily be apparent to the researcher from their prior awareness of the phenomenon (Gratton & Jones, 2010, p.157).

Four interviews per team were performed. Within the interviewees were the marketing, social media, fan engagement/community outreach, and public relations managers of each organization. Every one of the 8 participants is identified with a name and a letter: *Galaxy Participant A, Rams Participant D*). The interviews were designed to help obtain a holistic understanding of how the sports organizations use social media platforms to help develop long-term relationships with supporters. On the other hand, through these interviews this research attempts to find out what additional functions social media have in the overall communication and marketing strategy. Through this study I am hoping not only to answer the proposed research questions but also to make a major contribution to our understanding of the potential of social media as a marketing and communication tool.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of this research obtained from the interviews performed with key informants of the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy. Overall, six categories were identified and discussed to help answer the research question. The findings were divided in two sections. Section A presents how both organizations are using social media to develop key relationship marketing elements such as *Trust, Co-Production, Personalization and Influencers* in order to forge long-term relationships with supporters. Section B presents additional functionalities social media have that help in the development of lasting and strong relationships with fans: *Customer Service Tool and Data Collection Tool*. Each of these categories is presented with its respective subcategories as shown in the tables.

SECTION A

In the process of interviewing and during the process of analysis of the data, four categories were identified as crucial elements in the organizations' strategy to forge long-term relationships with supporters. These categories were identified as elements that are introduced by social media to help the two organizations in this study develop enduring relationships with supporters. These categories are: *Trust, Co-Production, Personalization, and Influencers*. After introducing the data for each element through tables and developing a subsequent analysis for both organizations, a comparison analysis between the two clubs is outlined.

Trust

The first category of our findings, Trust, is the most important factor in the formation of long-term relationships with consumers (Bee & Kahle, 2006), (Palmatier, 2008), (Kim and Trail, 2011). Trust is generated when consumer's expectations are met and when they perceived the commercial relationship as trustworthy and credible (Bee & Kahle, 2006). With the use of social media platforms and the two-way interaction they allow, the Rams and the Galaxy are introducing this critical element which collaborates in the process of generating long-lasting relationships with fans. Through the interviews we identified three sub-categories of Trust in the case of the St. Louis Rams (Personality, Added Value, and Humanize Brand) and two in the case of the LA Galaxy (Personality and Added Value) as shown in Table 1 and 2. These subcategories help understand the different ways both clubs generate Trust with supporters using social media platforms.

Trust: Rams

Personality

All the respondents recognized the importance of establishing an authentic image in the eyes and minds of supporters through the dissemination of consistent messages and an innovative online voice or online personality. *Rams Participant A* mentioned they need to be innovative in the way they talk in social media, but respectful with the values of supporters. *Rams Participant C* suggested that in order to establish trust through online interactions they get involved and have opinions on current issues of pop culture and sports in general. As suggested by *Rams Participant A*, to build a unique online voice the organization tries to differentiate from other brands making sure it lets their personality be noticeable. An example of this is how the Rams use a familiar tone on social media

Table 1 presents the St. Louis Rams' category Trust and subcategories Personality, Added value, and Humanize brand

TRUST	Personality	Added value	Humanize brand
St. Louis Rams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be consistent with communication and have an innovative online voice - Get involved in the community and current social issues - Match fans' values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Give access to exclusive multimedia content - Craft messages to each platform and audience. - Extend life of event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Post depth stories in social media platforms - Show players in the community

Table 1

and share relevant content and links pertaining to issues not only related to sports, but also to diverse interests in the local community. The Rams organization is active in community service work as well, and their primary target markets are family, women, and kids according to *Rams Participant A*. They use social media to show how active and involved they are in the community. They often post photos and videos of staff and players at community events on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

In order to generate trust, the Rams are aware of the importance of trying to pair the values of supporters and to have a balance between being innovative and mindful. The consistent combination of these factors helps in the construction of the credibility and identification of supporters with the club and collaborates in the formation of enduring relationships with supporters.

Added Value

The respondents acknowledged that social media platforms are not mere channels to sell tickets, but a tool to engage fans in meaningful interactions. *Rams Participant A* stressed how they open up the organization to their fans when they allow inside access to exclusive content such as "behind the curtains" videos and photos of the players in training sessions or at the locker-room on game day. The respondents agreed that the digital content has to be content fans cannot get anywhere else. In relation to this, *Rams*

Participant B said that “fans feel they are part of our club, [...] they feel they have inside knowledge and exclusive content, [...] and they can see players in a different light.”

When supporters feel they get an exclusive treatment and content they feel more invested in the team and the relationship and compromise towards the organization greatly increases.

Rams Participant C agreed that what generates more engagement and interactions on social media channels is when they are able to instantaneously capture back-stage handheld camcorder videos or photos of the players before and during the game. Quality multimedia content shared through social media was recognized for respondents as crucial in order to help generate supporters’ trust and engagement. For that reason, the Rams have a well-developed video department that helps create content to share on their social platforms.

Rams Participants B and C pointed out that in order to be relevant on each platform, the content and conversation has to be crafted to the characteristics of each platform. They use Twitter as the main platform for breaking news and game day play-by-play interactions. They acknowledged that Twitter is centered on real-time conversation since most of the activity after a tweet happens in the first hour after it was posted. On the other hand, the content the Rams post on Facebook is more an ongoing and more emotional and timeless conversation, related not just with the football game, but also stories about players or cheerleaders’ life outside the field in their personal life or in the community. Instagram, the third platform the Rams use to interact with fans is focused on images of games, players, graphs, and other visual storytelling content.

As another important factor to help add value through more interactions and

engagement through social media, the Rams acknowledged the importance of extending the life of events. They have created a post-game concert event after every home game that allows the social conversation to continue and double the time of the event. The continuity of the event gives the organization more interactions and more opportunities to capitalize after a win or to show empathy after a loss generating a sense of trust and credibility in supporters.

Giving additional value to supporters is greatly facilitated by the use of Rams' social media channels that at the same time help in the development of stronger relationships with the fan base.

Humanize Brand

Humanizing an organization's social media presence was recognized by all Rams' interviewees as important to help supporters feel connected with the club, to generate commitment to the organization, identification with the brand and ultimately to develop the critical element of trust. One way the Rams humanize their brand through social media is creating in-depth stories about their players' everyday lives outside the football field. *Rams Participant D* suggested that showing players in the community or with their families or pets is a good strategy to make fans feel closer and emotionally attached to the players and to the organization. As an example of this, *Rams Participant B* suggested the following:

If a player just had a brand new baby girl and fans see their family, you put them inside the community. If you see them in a light that is not all fame and glory, you are more likely to invoke that human emotions.

Humanizing the relationship between the brand and the supporters helps the Rams

motivate fans after an adverse outcome, for example, when they emphasize and give more importance to the players in their personal life in the community and not so much as athletes. This is a way the Rams use social media platforms to decrease the sense of distance between players and enthusiasts, which subsequently increase trust and creates longer relationships with supporters.

Trust: Galaxy

Table 2 shows the LA Galaxy category *Trust* and the data from the subcategories *Personality* and *Added value*

TRUST	Personality	Added Value
LA Galaxy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Confident, chic, controversial - Unique and authentic voice - Consistent through the years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide quality multimedia content - Constant two way conversation - Connect around common interests - Extend life of event

Table 2

Personality

Galaxy Participant A identified that people don't necessarily follow organizations per se on social media, but instead they follow personalities that are fun and exciting to follow. In the attempt to follow that strategy, the voice the Galaxy use on social media is confident, chic, and at times controversial. *Galaxy Participant A* explained these characteristics as follows:

We want to be an affordable luxury and an elite brand. We want to be Apple, Lexus. We want to be the elite soccer club in North America. We want to be someone who causes a little controversy. [...] Create a little debate amongst fans. [...] We don't want to shy away from a controversy or get involved.

For instance, after the five-zero playoff wins over western conference rivals Real Salt Lake on Nov. 9, 2014, the Galaxy official account (@LAGalaxy) wrote: *'They*

weren't able to handle it.' This tweet is an example of the confidence the Galaxy shows in their voice on social media platforms. Another example is the Twitter hashtag they use, '#FirstToFive,' that refers to the prediction that they will win the first playoff game on the road to their fifth MLS title. The Galaxy have established a very unique and authentic voice that is based on a positive, funny, and cool attitude toward soccer and Los Angeles. The combination of this confident online personality and the success the franchise has had on the field is a great combination to generate trust and to create long-term relationships with supporters.

Participant B acknowledged that people engaged with the club's social media accounts because they have been consistent through the years. The Galaxy is consistent with what the fans are expecting and that helps generate trust and credibility towards the organization.

The confidence and consistence expressed in the Galaxy's online personality and the various ways they make followers constantly participate in a two-way online conversation help the development of trust which as we mentioned before and relationship marketing's authors indicates, is a crucial element in the development of long-term relationships between organizations and followers.

Added Value

The respondents agreed on the opportunity to add value using social media platforms not only when providing quality multimedia content such is exclusive content, game highlights, or player interviews, but also when maintaining a constant two-way conversation in order to build a sense that the organization cares for their supporters. *Galaxy Participant B* explained they listen to supporters' feedback and ideas and then

notifying them that they are listening. The Galaxy personnel acknowledges fans that their ideas will be taken into account in future initiatives. *Galaxy Participant C* suggested that in order to generate valuable content on social media is critical to understand what fans are looking for and what they are discussing in social channels. *Galaxy Participant C* explained, “We need to engage in conversations with fans about topics they care about. [...] To add value we need to connect around common interests and answer their messages.” The organization understands the importance of keeping a two-way conversation with supporters and promotes online initiatives that encourage them to participate. As an example, during games, the LA Galaxy social media crew encourages supporters to choose the best and worst performers of the game or ask questions about what supporters would value more when they attend a soccer game. Galaxy’s fans feel connected to the club and validated by the organization when this happens. This generates a sense of trust and improves the relationship of supporters with the club.

Galaxy Participant B mentioned that in order to make sure content is consistent and will create value to supporters and to the organization as a whole, they answer the following questions before publishing any social media post: Is this good for our supporters? Is this good for our brand? Is this in the line with our strategy? If they are able to answer those questions, they are able to proceed and know it will be consistent across their whole organization and platforms and will help create lasting relationships with supporters.

Similarly to the Rams, the Galaxy understands the importance of extending the life of the game day event at their stadium. Within the stadium they created ‘El Torito Cantina,’ an outdoor amenity that provides entertainment, possibility to buy Galaxy’s

merchandise, in addition to activities, drinks and food that allows fans to get involved in the sport event two hours before and two hours after the game. This extension of the event help multiplies the social media interactions with fans starting early and continuing hours after the game is finished. This contributes in a great manner to increase the volume of interactions that will result in generating a stronger online bond with a greater number of fans.

Trust Comparison

Both organizations are aware of the opportunity to forge a sense of trust and credibility through social media platforms. The Rams are taking a more conservative approach, trying to match the values of their core supporters, their season ticket holders, and of the Saint Louis community. Since most Ram's season ticket holders are baby boomers, according to *Rams Participant A*, and their emerging target markets are women, families, and kids, they take a more conservative strategy on social media. The Galaxy, on the other hand, takes a more progressive approach based on confidence and self-esteem. Having a younger fan base where most diehard supporters are Millennials, the Galaxy attempts to generate interactions by using humor, controversy, and social media banter. The interviewees from both organizations recognized the importance of generating quality and consistent multimedia content in order to generate meaningful interactions on social media to add value and trust to the relationship.

However, the Galaxy's marketing mangers acknowledged a broader interest in presenting innovative and diverse multimedia content, recognizing that because of the lack of traditional mainstream media coverage of soccer, they have to make a greater effort than other leagues to deliver valuable and relevant content through digital

platforms and their website. As *Galaxy Participant A* stated, “If traditional media do not cover us, we need to construct this digital ground with relevant content.”

The most important finding in the way the Rams are trying to develop Trust in social media is how they use the diverse social platforms to convey a message related to the compromise of the organization within the Saint Louis community. The negative effect that as it is publicly known there is an interest of the NFL and a potential new ownership group to bring back the Rams to its previous city, Los Angeles, makes indispensable for the Rams to develop a strong bond with the Saint Louis community that social media is helping to forge. In the case of the LA Galaxy, Trust is built with a completely different approach. Social media voice and personality of the Galaxy differs enormously from that of the Rams. Based on a very successful sport history and being considered one the strongest teams in MLS, the Galaxy creates Trust displaying a confident and at times a controversial tone in their social media platforms. The Galaxy’s history of a very triumphant sport history, in addition of having world known figures such as David Beckham in the past or Robbie King in the present, have collaborated to develop a sense of confidence that can be observed in their social media voice across platforms.

Social media represent for both organizations the pivotal platforms to help develop Trust with supporters, the key elements that forge healthy long-term relationships with fans and help build a supporting culture beyond and independent of a bad season or an unsuccessful team.

Co-Production

Co-Production refers to the digital strategies to bring fans closer to the organization by allowing them to co-create their online content and let them actively participate in the campaign designs (Vargo and Lynch, 2004), (Bee and Kahle, 2006), (Williams and Chinn, 2010).

Co-Production: Rams

Content Production and Sharing

The interviewees acknowledged that co-production or co-creation of content is an effective way to make fans feel connected with the team. *Rams Participant B* stated that

Table 3 presents the St. Louis Rams' data from the category *Co-Production* and their subcategories

CO-PRODUCTION	Content Production and Sharing	Participate in Decisions
St. Louis Rams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create and Sharing emotional content - Use digital application to customize fan's photo to be published in official platforms 	- Allow fans to create, vote, and answer micro polls

Table 3

Ram's marketing department understands the power of allowing fans co-create content and then share it on their official digital platforms and website. *Rams Participant C* mentioned that because the team is not playing well and have not made the playoff for more than ten years, they have found ways to make fans participate in social media and that have made fans change their mood and disposition to keep supporting the team in spite of losing a game or a bad season. An example of that is when they asked fans to post old pictures from the times the Rams won the Super Bowl in 1999. The Rams' digital staff created an additional page within their official website in which fans loaded on their pictures of those glorious moments. *Rams participant C* said, "Social media has

helped bring those memories back. [...] It made fans remember why they love the Rams and get excited again about the team.” Sharing emotional content is a way to make fans feel good about their relationship with the organization.

Another initiative the Rams undertook regarding co-production was the “#FisherStache” Twitter hashtag campaign to honor the Rams’ head coach Jeff Fisher to celebrate his first game in Saint Louis. The Rams provided a digital application for fans to take a self-picture and digitally attach a mustache to make it appear original and funny. Fans massively uploaded their pictures to Twitter with the #FisherStache hashtag. Previously to home games, the Rams also encouraged fans to use the #FisherStache hashtag including the official Twitter account (@stlouisrams). *Rams Participant A* said, “Every fan got behind that. We established a Guinness World Record for most fake mustache at place it one time.” The fact that the Rams successfully achieved several ways to deliver content and entertainment through co-production is a critical aspect to engage supporters in long-term relationships that may be possible to forge even when the team is not having a good season.

Participate in Decisions

A different way the Rams approach co-production is through a local application called “Cast” which allows fans to create, vote, and answer micro-polls through existing social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. *Rams Participant A* referred to this digital application as a way to get fan’s feedback and create custom content, specialized giveaways, or new and unique concession items:

This allows transparent open voting and polling platform where we can hear directly from our fans. Fans can now have a direct outlet to provide real time

feedback in many areas so that we can cater directly to their preferences.

Making fans create polls and contest in addition to allowing them to participate in club's decisions is an effective way to make fans feel they are an active part of the organization. This sense of involvement in the organization is a critical element to develop in their effort to create long-term relationships with supporters.

Co-Production: Galaxy

Content Production and Sharing

The LA Galaxy uses several ways to leverage the collaborative nature of social

Table 4 presents the LA Galaxy's data from the category *Co-Production* and their subcategories

CO-PRODUCTION	Content Production and Sharing	Participate in Decisions
LA Galaxy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Display fan's digital posts on wall of stadium - Sharing photo contests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design and customized the team's third kit

Table 4

media platforms, making supporters participate in the design of digital content. *Galaxy Participant C* explained that they try to drive emotional connections between fans and players giving the opportunities social media allows:

We allow fans go in our social media and leave a thanks message for Landon (Donovan). We put them on the walls in the tunnel before Landon walks in the field on his last season home game. Also we made a book with the best fan's posts and gave it Landon.

The fact that fans can directly communicate and reward their favorite player create a sense of accessibility that is critical to forge long-term relationships. *Galaxy Participant A* mentioned the Galaxy's marketing and communications managers have

weekly meetings with supporter groups. Each supporter group has a representative that meets with them. Interviewees acknowledged that most of their initiatives on social media came after those meetings with supporters.

Another way the Galaxy is using co-creation is sharing photo contests. Weekly, the Galaxy chooses the best fans' pictures of each home game that was loaded in their social platforms and rewards those fans with game tickets and merchandising items. In addition, they repost their pictures in the Twitter official account. The validation and recognition of fans through official social media sites creates a sense of connection and engagements of supporters with the club.

Participate in Decisions

One initiative they have done in the last seasons is allowing supporters to design and customized the team's third kit. As *Galaxy Participant B* explained during the interview, "We established a Facebook application for our fans to design our third Kit. We had over ten thousand fans designing our third kid and voting on the best. We still wear it today." This way the Galaxy materialized and shows fans they care about their opinions and suggestions. *Galaxy Participant A* mentioned that user-generated content creates significant value for the organization and the fans, and one way to encourage this is through contests and special offers: "The simple fact of providing the space for users to upload content is all it takes to create a lot of good content and a lot of engagement." *Galaxy Participant D* agrees that they need to personalize the experiences of fans in order to create long-term relationships and a way to accomplish this is letting fans participate in some decisions and feel they are part of the organization.

The quality of the relationship of fans with the LA Galaxy greatly improves when

they can directly communicate and interact with players and with the club's managerial staff. Fans feel they are an active part of the organization when they are heard by the club's main figures and this establish a stronger bond that with time will result in long-term relationships with fans.

Co-Production Comparison

Both organizations had very similar initiatives regarding fans' co-creation of digital content. Similarly, the Galaxy and the Rams have digital applications and ways to let supporters vote and decide on club's issues as well as let them propose different social media initiatives or providing them questions and polls through social media. In addition, both sports clubs try to invoke fans to send emotional content related to the organizations' past and present in order to create a sense of nostalgia and accessibility to players. The Rams appeals to bring memories and pictures of the past glorious years trying to make fans forget they have not had a winning season since 2003. On the other hand, the Galaxy use the announcement of the retirement of their legend-player Landon Donovan to let supporters directly communicate with him, printing fan's messages in the stadium's walls.

Focusing on issues that bring emotional memories or ways to capitalize on memorable moments through social media is an effective way to generate long-term engagement of supporters with the organization.

Personalization

Personalization or customization of the message happens when a club acknowledges and validates you as a fan (Wysocky, 2012), (Buhler, 2010). This is the highest degree of approval and recognition an organization can devote to a fan. By

recognizing supporters, thanking them for their interactions, and highlighting their comments or sharing their content, the sport organization is making supporters feel they are an active part of the team. This greatly helps the process of forging long term relationships with supporters.

Personalization: Rams

Sharing Fan's posts

To help generate identification and fans' loyalty, The Rams share supporters'

Table 5 shows the St. Louis Rams' category *Personalization* and the data from its subcategories

PERSONALIZATION	Sharing Fan's posts	Image / Story Sharing
St. Louis Rams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share supporters' posts on official social platforms. - Retweet fans posts to validate fans. This is "today's autograph" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share fan's stories on Facebook - Sharing fan's pictures on the big screen

Table 5

stories and posts in their official sites and social networks. One way they do this is retweeting fans' posts and becoming a follower of their fans in Twitter. *Rams Participant*

A mentioned the value of retweeting fan's posts:

Fans feel personally connected when our official account follows them on Twitter. Fans feel validated. This is today's autograph. That is a personal connection that we can offer to engage and reach out. [...] Personalization is critical for current and future success.

When a team or player retweet or answer fans' post, this personal connection generates a stronger bond of supporters with the club and enhances the way fans perceive the value or their relationship with the organization which subsequently will create a stronger emotional and commercial tie.

Image/Story Sharing

The Rams have used co-production and personalization together when they let supporters collaborate with digital content uploading and sending their own personal pictures from past Ram's successful times such was the year 1999 when the Rams won the Super Bowl. The respondents agreed that the fact that fans are portrayed in official sites or social networks generate a strong emotional connection with the club, identification with the brand, and make them feel closer to the organization.

Another strategy utilized by the Rams to use social media to personalize the experience of fans is when they share stories of fans on Facebook or post photos of fans in the stadium's big screen. *Rams Participant C* gave an example of this practice: "We integrate social media to the big board. It makes fans feel special and get gratification. We establish a stronger tie [and] they get a little bit of popularity [and] recognition." As mentioned before, the validation and public recognition of fans is an effective way to generate long-term relationships with supporters.

Personalization: Galaxy

Table 6 shows the LA Galaxy's category Personalization and the data from its subcategories

PERSONALIZATION	Integration of Visual	Answering Fans' posts
LA Galaxy	-Integration of fans' picture in players' game kit - Enhance game day experience	- Reply to every person who talk to us

Table 6

Personalization is an essential practice for the LA Galaxy. They have personalized merchandize items to season ticket holders and even branded game tickets with the logo of support groups. In addition, they have branded each section of the stadium with the name of every supporter faction.

They also have settled weekly community service programs that put players face to face with fans in the community on a one on one interaction. In the last years they have sent several personalized visual items to season ticket holder. They sent each ticket holder an image of an imaginary press conference of the Galaxy president and Omar Gonzalez (one of Galaxy's most recognized players) presenting a soccer jersey with the name of the fan as if they were a brand new club's acquisition of the franchise and sent it along with the annual package.

All these initiatives to personalize items and get closer to fans are critical ventures needed in the endeavor of forging long-life and deep-rotted relationships with supporters.

Integration of visual

To integrate the personalization element to social media, the LA Galaxy created an option for season ticket holders that consisted of uploading a headshot picture of fans in their websites which latter would be added on the soccer jerseys that players use at home games. Another initiative the Galaxy is taking to improve personalization during home games is the partnership with 'Fanpic,' which is a new digital company that offers a technology that allows to capture fan's reactions when important things happens during games. Fanpic's digital camera takes multiple pictures of fans in the stadium. Fans can access to their picture entering their seat number into the previously downloaded app on their smartphones. Thus, fans are able to access to their images and share it with friends though social media. This improves the fan's experience and change the way a particular game is remembered. Even when the game outcome may have been negative, fans go home with an emotional souvenir while sharing their passion for the club through social media. This digital application helps enhance the game experience for fans, proliferate

the message through digital platforms and develop the engagement of supporters with the club.

Answering Fan's posts

Answering supporters' post on social media is another way the Galaxy customize the communication with fans. *Galaxy Participant C* explained, "We try, through Twitter and Facebook, to reply to every fan who talks to us to keep the conversation back and forth and we let people know that we are listening."

Answering fan messages the Galaxy reassure fan's trustworthiness towards the club's authenticity and increase credibility. These social media strategies make supporters feel they are an active part of the team and this contributes in the process of developing long-term relationships with the fandom.

Personalization Comparison

The Rams and the Galaxy are using the powerful tool of Twitter that allows not only to have a direct and agile interaction with supporters while matching the tone of supporters, but also the ability to validate supporter's ideas and comments. When the organizations retweet a fan's post, it means the content was so valuable that they were willing to share it in their official site. This is an effective way to validate fans. Both franchises understand the benefits of acknowledging fans they are listening to them on social media as well as both know the importance of sharing fans' content such as pictures in their social media platforms or in the big screen during game-day. However, the Galaxy appears to dedicate more attention to personalization. They have created this digital application that allow fans' headshots to be shown in players' jerseys and have partnered with a technology company that will help enhance fan's game day experiences

materializing emotional situations during the game. In other domains, outside digital platforms, the Galaxy also display a particular focus to personalize merchandising, stadium sections, game tickets, and a continuous interest to learn from their core supporters.

Both teams are using social media to create recognition to fans when they retweet fans' posts on Twitter or share their content. In addition, retweeting and answering fans' social media posts help to spread and amplify the reach of messages and increase the size of the social community. Nothing is more personal for a fan that when a team acknowledge how important they are for the organization. This is an effective path to improve the quality of the relationship of sports clubs with supporters.

Influencers

From the data obtained through the interviews, this study identified several ways both sport organizations are using different online influencers to leverage their social media presence in their effort to forge long-term relationships with fans (Williams and Chinn, 2010). Online influencers are social media agents that have an extended net of followers or audience and who their posts, articles or online messages can reach a large population (Freberg, Grahan, and McGaughey, 2010).

Influencers: Rams

Bloggers

The St. Louis Rams work together with various social media bloggers that are prominent in the digital stage within the St. Louis market.

Rams Participant A explained how they include bloggers in the social media marketing strategy in order to amplify and leverage the relationship with fans and

Table 7 shows the St. Louis Ram's category Influencers and the data from its subcategories

INFLUENCERS	Bloggers	Players	Management
St. Louis Rams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bring social media influencers inside the organization - Use bloggers in diverse niches such as the "mom bloggers" to spread the word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote players who share organization's values - Show players in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create a sense of involvement and compromise of club's management

Table 7

maximize their online and social media presence. The Rams' marketing and online staff meet with online influencers twice a month and ask them for ideas and feedback. It is important the fact that the Rams give influencers some inside knowledge about what they have been working on to make them feel more informed on things they can get behind.

Rams Participant B acknowledged the importance to invite influential bloggers to the different activities the Rams organize to keep a close relationship with them: "We invite them to training camps, we invite them to be on the field. [...] They are one of the reasons things get trending and we treat them very well." *Rams Participant D* explained the importance of being very active in looking for the most influential bloggers not just in sports but also in other disciplines and topics. For example, they work closely with groups of bloggers in sports, fashion and health to get their recommendations and influences. *Rams Participant D* said, "It's been great just getting outsiders perspectives and have them really tell the stories for us through their blogs." *Rams Participant C* agreed on the importance of integrating bloggers and define who those influential bloggers are and hear directly from them in person bringing them together to the stadium and integrating them as part of the organization.

Another initiatives the Rams are doing in order to leverage bloggers' influence, is

inviting “mom bloggers” to games and encouraging them to write from their experiences at the games. Since the primary Ram’s target markets are families and women, they chose the ten most notable mom bloggers in the St. Louis area to spread the word that coming to a Ram’s game is a safe, affordable and family-friendly experience. *As Rams Participant A* mentioned, they have created a very active community of bloggers who attend every Rams’ home game to influence fans and reach new markets. They give mom bloggers inside access and show them some of the things from a mom perspective about coming to a Rams’ game and what that means. They’ve written about the experience to attend Rams’ games and that helps showcase some of the things that a lot of people didn’t know about going to the stadium. This helps to reach a great amount of moms who in many cases are in charge of decision in the household as well as strengthen the relationships with a segment that the Rams value as one of their principal targets.

Developing the relationships with influencers is a great opportunity to utilize social media to amplify and influence a great amount of the online population and an effective tool to forge long-term relationship with the community of followers.

Players

Rams participant C mentioned how they leverage players’ social media interactions. When players participate in community programs or fundraising events, the organization encourages them to post images from their own social media accounts or on the Rams’ official site. *Rams participant C* explained, “We promote players who kind of share values and are fun and understand how to promote the brand, so we interact with them having a humorous conversation.”

As observed in the Rams’ official Twitter account, they daily promote tweets of

their most popular socially followed players. This posts not only are related to particularities of the game of football, but related to their everyday life. The tone of the tweets varies from humorous to emotionally charged messages. This strategy to utilize players as influencers and show their everyday activities is an effective way to create a sense of closeness and accessibility of fans to players. As we know from our review of literature, the fact that fans feel closer and more connected to players helps develop bonds with the organization wherein the relationship becomes stronger.

Management

The Rams communication and marketing department also encourage public appearances of their management staff in digital platforms to connect with die-hard fans and to create a sense of involvement and compromise with the community of fans. Executive Vice President of Football Operations Kevin Demoff has participated several times on a chat room called “Rams Heart,” where he regularly participates in a Q & A with fans. The fact that fans are able to reach Rams’ decision makers to ask them questions is an initiative that generates fans a sense of proximity and direct access to the organization.

Working together with bloggers and influencers and understanding how to promote successful content through them, allow the Rams to drive more traffic to their website and social platforms and increase important elements for the development of long- term relationships. Some of these elements are: social engagement, social credibility, accessibility, and identification.

Influencers: Galaxy

C2C

Customer-to-Customer (C2C) is an important way the Galaxy attempt to spread their message across social media. They encourage social media conversations between fans and promote the messages of fans that have a larger number of followers. *Galaxy Participant A* recognized fans trust the opinions of other fans and claim that that the organization needs to utilize the viral capabilities of platforms such as Twitter: “They are your best advocates, people who are doing the sale for you saying” ‘you have to come to a Galaxy game.’” In the weekly marketing meeting, the LA Galaxy social media staff looks for fans’ posts that have had the greatest amount of responses. Once they identify what posts were more successful and what topics interest more to fans, they promote it in their official platforms attempting to keep the conversation alive through the week. This

Table 8 shows the LA Galaxy’s category Influencers and the data from its subcategories

INFLUENCERS	C2C	Local teams	Bloggers	Celebrities	Players
LA Galaxy	- Utilize Fans’ posts to influence other fans.	- Leverage social media on the popularity of other local teams	- Reach a diverse demographic and people of diverse interests	- Reach a massive audience	- Engage a larger audience

Table 8

generates a continuous online conversation and interaction among fans increasing the involvement and engagement of fans with the organization.

The relationship created with this social media advocates not only helps amplify the social media reach, but also makes those fans feel empowered and recognized by the organization.

Bloggers

The Galaxy work together with prominent Los Angeles' bloggers that have followers of diverse demographic and interests depending on what they are aiming to promote. They have worked together with tech bloggers when they introduced new digital applications to fans and worked with Hispanic bloggers and fashion design influencers as well. This way the Galaxy is able to expand their reach and influence of different demographics within diverse segments. The fact that the LA Galaxy is present in blogs of different topics helps the brand to increase their scope and the chances of developing long-term relationships with fans of diverse backgrounds.

Local Teams

A different approach the LA Galaxy take is communicating and influencing the fan bases of other professional teams in the city of Los Angeles looking for developing a collaborating rally through these clubs' social media platforms to get them behind the Galaxy's initiatives. *Galaxy Participant D* acknowledged they try to keep good relationships with the other sport franchises of the city since the city holds some of the most popular teams in U.S. professional sports such as the National Basketball Association's (NBA) team Los Angeles Lakers. Aligning with professional teams of other sports in the city of Los Angeles is a smart strategy to reach sports fans that before may have not known the entertainment proposals and initiatives of the LA Galaxy.

Celebrities

To leverage social media scope the LA Galaxy utilize celebrity outreach initiatives. The Galaxy have a separate department that manages their relationships with celebrities. *Galaxy Participant A* mentioned the facts that being in a celebrity focused

market helps them reach a massive audience: “We have them come out and be ambassadors of our sport team and have them promote their social channels.” The utilization of celebrities in a market like Los Angeles helps to position the brand in the public light creating social awareness, generating credibility and identification, and reaching new potential fans and new markets.

Players

Players play an important role in the process of expanding social media messages for the LA Galaxy. Players’ messages and retweets of official posts are often the most shared and commented messages. The Galaxy encourages their players to post on behalf of community events or activities of their everyday life. *Galaxy Participant C* explained this in the following passage:

Most of our players are really savvy on social media, they come to us with ideas or graphic elements [...]. We try to work with them to make their social platforms visible. [...] We are really good supporting our players on social and they are kind of the bigger influencers and great brand ambassadors.

Making visible players’ social media messages and taking into consideration that the LA Galaxy counts with high profile players, the club is able to maximize the reach and influence that players exercise over supporters. A greater amount of posts and tweets from their popular athletes represents a greater amount of interaction with fans and a greater opportunity to create value for them through the process. More interaction and more value represent at the same time that they are increasing the chances to create loyal and compromised supporters.

Comparison Influencers

Using social media influencers to amplify and leverage social media is a strategy both organizations are wisely taking. While the Rams are attempting to work together with the most influential bloggers in the target market they are trying to reach (women and), the Galaxy uses the opportunities of being located in a celebrity-focused market. The Galaxy works closely with celebrities and other popular sports teams in the city to amplify their message on social media. The fact that the Galaxy have several high profile players who are very active on social media help the club leverage their social platforms as well. In addition, the fact that the coverage of the Galaxy on mainstream media is smaller compared to that of the Rams in the NFL, makes critical for them to promote the club taking advantage of every opportunity social platforms offer to help them develop relationships with fans and the community.

SECTION B

The second section addresses additional functions that social media have within the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy's communication strategy, in addition to serving as a tool to inform, interact, and communicate in a two-way direction with supporters. The findings show that this two additional functionalities are critical to help both organizations in the development of long-term relationships with supporters. The two categories are: *Customer Service Tool and Data Collection Tool*.

Customer Service Tool

Customer Service Tools: Rams

Complaint Management

The St. Louis Rams' interviewees acknowledged that they use social media as a customer service tool. They understand that today's fans appreciate quick updates and answers when problems rise especially at the stadium. As *Rams Participant D* explained, "If someone complains on social media, we either reach out to them separately or have

Table 9 shows the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy's category Customer Service Tool and the data from its subcategories

CUSTOMER SERVICE TOOL	Complaint Management	Repairing Damage
St. Louis Rams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respond to complaints in a timely manner. - Show commitment and compromise towards supporters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Show empathy to get fans on board again - Humanize things or athletes to show a different side
LA Galaxy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use social media as the new customer service - Quickly reply to problems or disagreements the fans may have 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Real time answers to minimize damage - Allow direct communication of fans with decision makers

Table 9

somebody get in touch with them as soon as possible." Social media capacities to immediate response and permanent connection with fans allows a quick and effective customer service that helps create confidence and credibility towards the organization. It also improves the fans perception towards the organization and improves fans' loyalty.

When fans have problems or a bad experience at the stadium, they generally post a message on Twitter in which they including Rams' twitter official account (@STLouisRams) on the post. *Rams Participant A* said these complaints represent a great opportunity for the organization to show fans how much they care about their problems and needs. Responding to supporters in a timely manner shows commitment and compromise towards supporters and greatly improves the relationships of fans with the organization. The Rams see the importance of utilizing social media platforms as a

customer service tool in a responsible and consistent way. *Participant C* mentioned they had several complaints in their social media platforms about the bad quality of the food in the stadium: “We heard them and now we’ve improved the level of food and concessions.” Their social media personnel understand the negative consequence of leaving social media inquiries unanswered and customers feeling frustrated and unheard.

The way social media functions as a customer service tool to improve the experience of supporters becomes of crucial importance to develop long-term relationships with supporters. However, as the number of social media platforms increase and followers multiply, it will soon be necessary to consider an increase in the number of personnel devoted to supervise the messages in order to keep utilizing social media as an effective customer service tool.

Repair Damage

The Rams utilize social media’s capabilities to show empathy to supporters after a bad performance or a defeat. *Rams Participant C* pointed out the need to be careful on social media at the moments when fans are upset, but advised to keep fluent the social media interactions with fans to show them understanding of the situation:

When you lose you have to be able to communicate even though everybody is very upset. It is a fine line, but you have to find the way to use empathy to get them on board again. We try to humanize things or athletes to show a different side of players outside of football to show fans that there is more than football.

As a result of utilizing social media as a customer service tool to repair damage, the Rams are able to capitalize and generate engagement even in unfavorable situations such as a loss or a long period of having failed to qualify for the playoffs. The capability

of social media to repair the damage and get fans on board again, even after bad sports outcomes are critical functionality that social media acquire to generate long-term relationships with the fandom.

Customer Service Tool: Galaxy

Complaint Management

All the interviewees referred to the importance of social media as a tool to manage fans' complaints and agreed that this is one of the most important functions of social media today to improve relationships with supporters. They mentioned that social media allows the organization to quickly hear about problems or disagreements fans express in social media platforms.

Galaxy Participant A said, "Social Media essentially is the new customer service. Social media doesn't work 8 to 5. It is a 24/7 platform; you need to respond and that is how you create a fan base that doesn't view you as a corporate mouthpiece." If in the stadium during a Galaxy's game there is an issue such as a broken sit and is mentioned in any of the Galaxy's official social media platforms, the complaint is passed along to the right channel and supporters get a solution as soon as possible. Once again, the social media immediacy lets fans feel the closeness with the organization and the compromise the club have with them. When this is well planned and there is enough structure to consistently solve the problems of fans during games, this becomes a powerful tool to improve relationships with fans and to reach or even surpass the expectation of fans towards the event and the club. The fact that fans can communicate directly with decision makers to solve their problems is an effective additional function that social media brings to the organization to generate lasting relationships with fans.

Repair Damage

Galaxy Participant B and C mentioned the significance of social media for being able to respond to fans in real time in order to repair damage after an offensive official statement in the official account or a video that may have hurt supporter's sensibility. The interviewees agreed social media immediacy allows to quickly acknowledge supporters that they are aware of any adverse situation they may have caused. They are aware of the importance to minimize damage, responding quickly with a consistent message through all social platforms as well as to educate staff, players and even management on proper messaging on social media uses.

Comparison Customer Service Tool

Both sports organizations are using social media as a customer service tool. Both groups of interviewees recognized how effective social media are to respond to fans' complaints in real time. They acknowledged that not only it helps to quickly resolve fan's problems, but also to acknowledge supporters that they are being heard on social media. The St. Louis Rams recognized the importance to increase the number of social media personnel in order to be able to respond in a more effective way in every platform.

Using social media to hear and respond to complaints is an important aspect of how the two organizations are dealing with their increasingly demanding fan base that with the proliferation of smartphones and social media expect to get quick answers to their claims and problems. Social media function for both clubs as an effective customer service tool and represent an effective way to improve relationships with fans. As highly involved consumers, sports fans expect a special treatment and a quick reply to their problems in the stadium. Social media as a customer service tool is the ideal channel to

address those problems helping develop stronger bonds and long-term relationships.

Data Collection Tool

Table 10 shows Rams and the Galaxy's category Data Collection Tool and the data from its subcategories

DATA COLLECTION TOOL	Monitoring Social Media Interactions	Support Sponsorship Activation
St. Louis Rams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help decisions to where put our effort, resources and time - Try new content and right away know how it does 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maximize sponsorships deals and potentiate future partnerships
LA Galaxy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand fans' wants and preferences. - Use Metrics to understand impact of publications and help decide on content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use digital inventory and social media info-graphics to push sponsorships

Table 10

Data Collection Tool: Rams

Monitoring Social Media Interactions

Monitoring social media platforms is an active practice of the St. Louis Ram's marketing department and greatly help them understand fans' preferences and needs. In a weekly meeting they analyze social media posts and interactions with fans in every platform as well as they check social media metric and content performance across platforms. *Rams Participant C* explained as follows:

Every week we check social media analytics and know what did perform better on our social media platforms, our website, and mobile apps. We break it down into categories: which was the best video, article, and photo gallery. [...] What performed better and who looked at it. [...] Looking at these numbers help

decisions to where put our effort, resources and time, because we don't have a big staff. [...] You can try new things and right away know how it did.

In those weekly meetings the Rams' communication and marketing staff analyze social media interactions to gain insight on what fans are feeling and to get smarter about who their fans want and what are they chatting about. *Rams participant D* acknowledged during the interview that monitoring what works in the digital world helps make the right decisions and plan the social media initiatives. The Rams understand well that the information and knowledge they get from social media interactions with fans and metrics is crucial and is one of the most important functions social media have in the overall marketing and communication strategy.

Having the ability to learn about fans' preferences in order to deliver the right messages in the right platforms represents an unprecedented opportunity to emotionally affect the perception of fans and establish stronger and long-term relationships.

Support Sponsorship Activation

Another use the Rams give to social media metrics is to maximize partnership deals showing social media metrics to current or potential sponsors. *Rams participant D* explained, "We use social media numbers to show sponsors who our supporters are, this is their age, this is the demographic, [and] this is the core we are reaching. [...] We use it towards our advantage." The data and information that social media provide are relevant for the Rams to help them strengthen their position when negotiating with current sponsors and future partners. The Rams understand that social media can be used not

only as a tool to interact with fans and create value to supporters, but also as a data tool in order to obtain a greater amount of sponsorships.

Data Collection: Galaxy

Monitoring Social Media Interactions

Social media data serves as a data collection tool for the LA Galaxy as well. They use the data to get customer insight and understand supporter's preferences. For instance, monitoring digital platforms have helped the Galaxy understand that most fans want to have a personalized and one on one online discussion with the organization and that this generates a greater engagement of fans in future online discussions. They have also learned that supporters want to have online conversations related to local sports teams, celebrities, and social issues.

Besides plain observation of posts they also use a variety of metrics to understand the impact of each publication and to help them decide what content is more effective in each platform and when is the suitable time to publish. *Galaxy Participant A* said metrics help Rams understand what the audience is made of and what kind of messages perform better. *Galaxy Participant C* added:

We know our growth in social, we know impressions, and we know engagement and 'shareability' numbers. We see a lot of different numbers based on the type of content we put out and we are able to shift our content, calendar or content creation around the things that work.

Using social media fans' data allows the Rams to understand what kind of engagement and reach they are getting from those posts and understand how they can be relevant for those fans. Data from online interactions allow the organizations to

understand fan's preferences in social media platforms. Understanding customer preferences in social media is a critical function social media have in the club's effort to develop long-term relationships with supporters.

Support Sponsorship Activation

The Galaxy also utilizes digital inventory and social media info-graphics to push sponsorships. They present social media metrics to sponsors to be able to bring value to the partnerships. *Galaxy Participant B* explained as follows:

We have an established rate card in which we try to utilize our digital inventory to push sponsorship activation. We have over 1.75 million followers across all our social media platforms. We have to make sure to use that information to bring value to our partnership.

All respondents agreed on the importance of improving their database in order to deliver more personalized campaigns and that they need to research on the new software and applications that will help the organization with customized communications to fans.

Comparison Data Collection Tool

The Galaxy and the Rams are taking the opportunity to use the data from social media interaction with supporters in similar ways. Both clubs use visual monitoring and basic social media metrics to help understand what supporters are interested in and what type of content works best in each platform. The fact that social platforms weekly allow the two clubs to gather and analyze the interactions with supporters is of critical importance to help them decide what content and actions are relevant for consumers. The data collected through social media interactions allows them to understand how to be

relevant and create value to consumers. The creation of additional value is one of the most important goals of relationship marketing in their effort to forge long-term relationships with consumers.

Some of the metrics included in the info-graphics are amount of Facebook likes, Twitter followers, YouTube subscribers, blog subscribers and the total community size, as well as, retweets, mentions on Twitter, comments on Facebook, and total online mentions of the brand within a given period of time.

The wealth of information they get from this practice helps both organizations deliver more effective content to help them build more effective social media strategies. In a similar manner, both organizations leverage social media metrics to help them potentiate relationships with sponsors and increase the possibility to attract new partners and sponsors.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy are using social media platforms to develop key elements of relationship marketing that according to theory are critically important to establish long-term relationships with fans (William and Chinn, 2010; Wysocki, 2012; Hambrick and Kan, 2014). The research also infers that both organizations give social media additional functionalities in the overall communication and marketing strategy. Both are utilizing social media as a customer service and as a data collection tool. Notwithstanding, several significant variables and factors were found to be important to consider when making inferences about how sports organizations should be using social media as a marketing and communication tool. This section will serve to discuss this important variables and factors to help find underlying meaning to the findings.

As the findings show, the four elements the two organizations use to develop long-term relationships with supporters through social media are *Trust, Co-Production, Personalization, and Influencers*. Relationship marketing theory and research on social media best practices acknowledged how critical the development of these elements are when trying to build longitudinal relationships with sports fans. On one side, sports supporters are highly involved consumers (Shani, 1997) and possess a stronger emotional attachment and loyalty to their favorite sport team in comparison with customers of other services or products. This gives sports organization a favorable advantage. On the other hand, sport teams have weekly to battle against potentially upset fans after possible failures on games and long years of losing seasons, like is the case of the St. Louis Rams.

Here relies the ability of the organizations and their marketing and communications department to take responsibility and develop creative ways and integral strategies to minimize the consequences of the unpredictable losing or winning outcome on the field. Enhancing the fans' experience beyond the sport outcome is critical (Tsiotsou, 2013) and social media is an indispensable tool to accomplish this task.

The first element we discussed in the findings is Trust. The way the St. Louis Rams use social media to develop Trust goes along with the active presence the organization have in the community and the grassroots effort they make to participate in youth events. They are weekly present at high school's football game and offer football clinics in addition to continuously support social causes in the local community.

Other important factors to mention in order to understand the ways the club is trying to develop Trust is demographics and target market. In the case of the St. Louis Rams, the core of their season ticket holders are Baby Boomers, and the primary target markets they are trying to reach are families and women. It is logical that the way the Rams try to reach this segment is by getting involved in the community. On the other hand, most of LA Galaxy season tickets holders are younger than those of the Rams and most of their die-hard fans are Millennials. This difference in the demographics in this case plays an important role when deciding what approach they are taking on social media. The tone of the Ram's messages and initiatives on social media platforms are much more family-oriented and carefully crafted than those of the Galaxy.

Another important point to notice is that Los Angeles is a less conservative market than Saint Louis. Los Angeles Galaxy's fans belong to a more liberal market and are more willing to support a progressive voice or brand like the Galaxy. In opposition,

St. Louis Rams' fans belong to a much conservative and traditional market that perhaps is less willing to react positively to a controversial and confident social media approach. As we know from theory, matching the values of fans is a crucial strategy in order to attract them and engage them in long-term relationships. Therefore, both organizations seem to be taking the right approach in order to appeal to the characteristics of their own particular markets.

Furthermore, both organizations use similarly exclusive multimedia content to allow fans inside access to the intimacy of the locker room before games posting videos and pictures in their social media platforms. However, we learnt that the LA Galaxy multimedia content is more elaborated, creative and diverse than the Rams. The fact that MLS' clubs have a much less presence in traditional media than what NFL's clubs have, makes necessary for Major League Soccer's clubs to invest more resources to elaborate digital content and additional digital entertainment. The Galaxy presents a vast amount of videos about game highlights, best plays of the week, players' everyday activities videos, and other content that help counterpart the less traditional coverage they get. The Rams are just starting to realize they also need to make more digital content specially dedicated to their secondary target market that is the Millennials segment.

The last aspect of the discussion referred to Trust is the way the two organizations are trying to reach ethnic minorities in their respective markets. In the case of the Galaxy, they develop some content in Spanish. They have a Spanish Twitter account and a portion of their website displayed in Spanish. Even though Galaxy's marketing managers recognized that first generation Latino immigrants are not their main focus, but instead the more assimilated Latinos who belong to the second and third generations who mainly

speak English, it is appropriate to create and deliver Spanish content. Many Latinos in the Los Angeles market, even belonging to second and third generation share their passion for soccer with their parents and grandparents who most of the times choose Spanish as the language of choice when doing family activities such as watching a soccer game on TV or listening it on the radio.

During the soccer world cup in Brazil the LA Galaxy played several games on big TV screens when Mexico was playing to try to reach and engage with those less assimilated Los Angeles Hispanics. The case of the St. Louis Rams is different since the size of the Hispanic population is not as important as other regions like California. However, the Hispanic population in the Saint Louis metro area increased 9.5% from 2010 to 2013 raising the total to 79,000 (St.Ltoday.com). At the same time, the Bosnian community in Saint Louis rises to 70,000 people (stlbosnians.com). Knowing Hispanics and Bosnians are fevered sports fans and acknowledging the demographic shift and growth of minorities in the United States, a targeted strategy to reach these groups would be urgently needed. Up to now, the Rams participate in general events such is the NFL “Hispanic Heritage Month” but have not done anything on their own production neither taking advantage of the participation of Latin American teams and the Bosnian national team during the soccer world cup in Brazil. None of the Rams media content is displayed in other language than English. More research related to multicultural marketing should be done by the Rams in order to understand the potentiality of the diversity in their market.

Co-Production is the second element social media is helping introduce in both organizations. In the case of the Rams, many of their last social media initiatives have

been related to bringing back old memories and past players that were a part of successful teams since they lack a recent history of success. In the case of the Galaxy, the latest social media initiatives and themes have been developed around the upcoming retirement of its superstar player Landon Donovan. Again, appealing to emotions and trying to generate a sense of accessibility to players and the organization is the strategy both teams are taking to make strong bonds with supporters.

Other ways to allow supporters to participate during game-day and enhance the in-stadium experience is using digital devices such as smartphones and tablets, also called second screen devices. This possibility is undermined in both cases by the fact that neither of the two organizations have a free internet wireless connection (Wi-Fi) in the stadium. Considering the large amount of fans that are dependable on those devices to connect with family, to check other sports scores or follow their online NFL fantasy team, this is a detrimental factor when trying to engage fans in long-term relationships. In the case of the St. Louis Rams, the option to build Wi-Fi in-stadium connectivity was not even in consideration, although they recognized they are trying to find partners who will be willing to sponsor and invest on wireless connectivity. The LA Galaxy on the other hand have presented a project and is expecting for the approval to have it built by the end of the 2015 season. In today competitive entertainment scenario (Rein, Kotler, and Shields, 2006; Gladden and Sutton, 2009) and with the advantages of being able to comfortable staying home watching the game on big digital TVs, in-stadium wireless connectivity is essential to attract fans to attend games. In order to forge long-term relationships with fans and sustain a professional sport franchise it is necessary to bring fans to games. In the case of the Galaxy, their main target market is young-professionals

who are absolutely dependent on smartphones. Wi-Fi connectivity is especially important to younger fans that often may opt to not participate in an event when they cannot freely connect to the internet or upload photos to social media. In order for any professional club to be able to maximize and capitalize on the possibilities social media have, it is necessary to plan the construction of a modern free Wi-Fi at the stadium.

The third element that both teams are developing through social media to forge longitudinal relationships with fans is Personalization. The LA Galaxy uses this strategy not just on social media, but across all the organization. The Galaxy maintain interactions and meetings with supporter groups and listens to their ideas and proposals every week. As we saw in the findings section, the Galaxy have branded sections in the stadium corresponding to each group and had even helped fans put together a pub that is completely branded with Galaxy's objects, merchandizing, and flags. This way the Galaxy is able to create a culture of supporters that is important to forge relationships with fans that are not just based on sports outcomes and championships but based on an emotional relationship.

The fourth element identified within the data that the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy are introducing to help them forge long-term relationships with fans is Influencers. The more revealing finding in this category is the way the St. Louis Rams are using bloggers such as the "mom bloggers" to help reach a demographic that is a priority for the organization. This is a clever approach if we consider families is the primary target market of the Rams and that women make the 92% of the decisions at home (N5R.com). Another interesting approach the Rams are taking is making their managerial staff participate in digital chat rooms and the way they are active on social

media. The presence of decision makers in social networks is an effective way to create supporters' credibility. The LA Galaxy, on the other side, mostly leverage the social media platforms using their high profile players who are very active on social media and also take advantage of the celebrity-based city of Los Angeles. At the same time the Galaxy maintain a close relationship with bloggers representing different ethnic groups in the community with diverse interests such as fashion or food. An important element to point out in the findings in this category is the fact the Galaxy's interviewees highlighted how important it is for them to promote the customer-to-customer (C2C) interaction. They acknowledge how important the opinion of fans is for other fans. Through social media they leverage the value that fan to fan interaction has in order to amplify the message, and even more important, give the message credibility. Sport organizations can increase the value of social platforms when supporters share your brand messages. The Galaxy's social media staff identify smart and active social media fans and try to engage them by recognizing them or highlighting their comments. This way they create Galaxy's advocates who share messages and help proliferate their social media communication.

It is widely known that social media is an effective tool to communicate, interact, and generate mutual value with supporters or customers (Gronroos, 2004; Hambrick and Kang, 2014). Notwithstanding, the findings of this study suggest that the two organizations are using social media with two other additional purposes to generate stronger relationships with the fandom: as a customer service tool and as a data collection tool.

Several revealing findings were subtracted in this section. The fact that the social media immediacy helps not only as a customer service tool during games to address

problems in the immediacy of the stadium, but also as a tool to repair damage as Kim and Trail suggested (2011), is an important element worth to dedicate more attention in future research. The St. Louis Rams were very conscious about finding the right way to address supporters through social media after a loss. Considering the importance of the outcome of games for fans, understanding the right ways to create empathy and take responsibility of the loss is critical to forge a stronger bond and establish long-term relationships with fans.

Regarding the way both organizations utilize social media as a Data Collection Tool, the findings suggest both sport organizations use social media data to understand supporters' values and needs, weekly reviewing the interactions, as well as using the metrics tools to understand the impact of posts and content to help the decision making process. This allows the clubs to effectively select where to put the effort and what type of content works best in addition to define what type of content will need to be created in each platform. When the right content is displayed in social media platforms, the engagement of the fandom is greater, the amount of interactions increase, and lastly this generates stronger relationships.

As we learnt in the reviewed literature, individuals participating in social tribes such as sports fans consume the product not because of their material value but because of their symbolic significance (Dionisio) which is one of the most important goals of branding in their effort to develop loyal consumers. The fact that sports organizations have a defined an almost captive group of customers (Buhler, 2010) gives sports clubs a great advantage in their branding effort to create a positive image in consumers' minds that allows the development of long-term relationships.

In addition, having a big event every week and a great amount of messages, posts, interactions, conversations in official and unofficial blogs, gives sports organizations a great opportunity to develop a very savvy understanding of how fans think and what are they saying about the organization, how are they sharing the content, what topics are most popular with their audience, and how the audience is interacting with each other.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The current entertainment landscape, wherein sports fans have so many other options to choose from, makes critical for professional sports clubs to utilize all the resources at hand to reach and engage fans if they pretend to survive and be successful businesses. The use of social media platforms in an effective way is a resource that can help engage fans in long-terms relationships and convert them into loyal customers. The St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy are using social media as a tool to engage fans in long-term relationships as well as to enhance supporters' experiences and to understand supporter's needs, values, and behavior to deliver a more effective message. The findings suggest that both organizations understand the importance to generate an emotional connection with supporters in order to develop strong and meaningful relationships to keep them engaged and motivated beyond the weekly sport outcome.

Showing empathy and involvement in the community and in current social issues, including players' images and posts in official social media platforms, allowing the participation of supporters in decisions and co-creation of content, in addition to customizing and personalizing the message to supporters, are all initiatives both organizations are taking and which are crucial for the success of any professional sport club in the United States.

The findings indicate that there are many variables to consider and further studies to develop when attempting to understand the social media role and uses in different professional sports and different markets. Some of those variables are: primary and

secondary target market, demographics and ethnic diversity, relationship of league with traditional media and new platforms, ownership mentality and idiosyncrasy, personnel available to operate and observe social media interactions, and the overall integration of social media data into the other data software organization uses.

Understanding the current environment of each particular club is critical to outline the right strategies and maximize all the opportunities social media allow for sports organizations. Findings suggest both organizations are aware of the benefits and the different ways social media can help them deliver a better experience for fans, but neither of the two have enough personnel and resources in place to broaden the effectiveness of the social media platforms. In addition, Wi-Fi in the stadium would allow them not only to improve the in-stadium fan experience, but also increase attendance to games and to increase interactions and entertainment options for supporters, in addition to delivering more data and insight about the fans. In today's environment, free wireless connection in the stadiums is almost a requirement if attending sports games will remain an entertainment option for the youngest generation. Rams and Galaxy should pay attention to this important detail if they want to engage the future generations of season ticket holders in long-term relationships and establish them as their die-hard fans.

Social media can greatly help sports organization transform a mere relationship with fans based on sport outcomes to a more meaningful and long-term relationship. This research has highlighted and aligned critical elements that professional sports organizations should introduce through social media to develop long-term relationships with supporters. As Bee and Kahle (2006) suggested there is still a need to further analyze the use of relationships marketing in sports organizations. This research has

broadened the existing amount of knowledge related to relationship marketing in the context of the sports industry and has contributed with new elements and compelling variables to consider when analyzing the role of social media in the overall marketing and communication strategy.

Limitations/Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the findings of this study should be read in the context of the specific samples and taking into account that the data were collected from semi-structured interviews. Results may not be generalized since they indicate the perspective of managers and staff of just two sports organizations in the United States.

Further research is needed to extend the implications of this investigation. Future research should use quantitative methods to make a more objective analysis of the organizations' social media platform. In addition, future research should analyze and compare social media engagement of fans within sport organizations that have free wireless connection in stadium in comparison with those which still do not have it in place.

Research on the importance of social media monitoring tools and the use of mining data software will be appropriate to gain a better understanding of the social media impact in the overall marketing and communication strategy of professional sports clubs. Last, as Gladden and Sutton (2009) also suggested, it would be compelling to increase the body of knowledge of the key factors determining how a good relationship between consumers and sports organization should be structured.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong C. G., Delia, E. B., & Giardina, M. D. Embracing the Social on social media: An Analysis of the Social Media Marketing Strategies of the Los Angeles Kings. *Communication & Sport*, SAGE Journals. doi: 10.1177/2167479514532914.
- Badenhausen, K. (2013, July 15). Barcelona And Real Madrid Rule Social Media. *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2013/07/15/barcelona-and-real-madrid-rule-social-media/
- Ballouli, K., & Hutchinson, M. (2010). Digital-branding and social-media strategies for professional athletes, sports teams, and leagues: An interview with digital royalty's Amy Martin. *International Journal of Sports Communication*, 3(4), 395-401.
- Baron, S., Conway, T., Warnaby, G. (2010). *Relationships Marketing: A Consumer Experience Approach*. Thousands Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Bee, C.C. & Kahlo, L.R. (2006). Relationship Marketing in Sports: A Functional Approach. *Sports Marketing Quarterly*, 15 (3), 102-110.
- Berry, L. L. (1982). Bank Marketing Priorities in the United States. *European Journal of Marketing*, 16 (3), 5-13.
- Berry, L. L. (1983). Relationship marketing. In L. L. Berry, G. L. Shostack, & G. D. Upah (Eds.), *Emerging perspectives on services marketing* (pp. 25-38). Chicago, Illinois: American Marketing Association.
- Berry, L. L. (1995). Relationship Marketing of Services: Growing Interest, Emerging Perspectives. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 23, 236-245.
- Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2002). Consumer-company identification: A framework for understanding consumer's relationships with companies. *Journal of Marketing*, 67, 76-88. doi: 10.1509/jjmk.67.2.76/18609.

- Bodnarchuk, R. (2011, June 17). Women Control Buying Decision in Real Estate. N5R. Retrieved from <http://www.n5r.com/blog/bid/58329/Women-Control-Buying-Decision-in-Real-Estate>
- Buhler, A., & Nufer, G. (2010). *Relationship Marketing in Sports*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Copulsky, J. R., & Wolf, M.J. (1990). Relationship Marketing: Position for the future. *The Journal of Business Strategy*, 11(4), 16-20.
- Curiosity Discovery. Retrieved from <http://curiosity.discovery.com/question/cultural-role-professional-sports>
- Dempsey, P. Reilly, K. (1998). *Big Money, Beautiful Game: Saving Football from Itself: Winners and Losers in Financial Football*. Fourth Edition. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing Limited.
- Dionisio, P., Leal, C., Moutinho, L. (2008). "Fandom affiliation and tribal behaviour: a sports marketing application", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 11 Iss: 1, pp.17 – 39.
- Freburg, K., Grahan, K, Mc Gaughey, K. (2010). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review*, doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001
- Ganguli, S., Eshghi, A., & Nasr Bechwati, N. (2009). Relationship Marketing: A Critical Evaluation of Research Streams. *Proceedings of ASBBS*. 16 (1).
- Gladden, J.M., & Sutton, W.A. (2009). Marketing Principles Applied to Sport Management. *Principles and practice of sport management*. (Chap. 2, pp. 25-44). Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning.
- Gratton, C., & Jones, I. (2010). *Research Methods for Sports Studies*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Grönroos, C. (1994). From Marketing Mix to Relationship Marketing: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Marketing. *Management Decision*. 32 (2), 4–20.

- Grönroos, C. (1997). Value-Driven Relational Marketing: From Products to Resources and Competencies. *Journal of Marketing Management*. 13 (4), 407–19.
- Gronroos, C. (2004). The relationship marketing process: Communication, Interaction, Dialogue, Value. *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 19(2), 99-113.
- Hambrick, M. E., & Kang, S. J. (2014). Pin It: Exploring How Professional Sports Organizations Use Pinterest as a Communications and Relationship-Marketing Tool. *Communication & Sport, SAGE Journals*. doi:10.1177/2167479513518044.
- Harris, L. C. and Ogbonna, E. (2008). “The dynamics underlying service firm-customer relationships: insight from a study of English Premier League soccer fans”, *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 382-399.
- Howard, D. R., & Crompton, J. L. (2004). *Financing Sports*. Charleston, WV: Fitness Information Technology; 2nd edition.
- Kim Yu Kyoum & Trail, G. (2011). A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Relationships Between Sport Consumers and Sport Organizations: A Relationship Quality Approach. *Journal Of Sport Management*, 25 (1), 57-69.
- Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing. *Journal of Marketing*. 58 (July), 20–38.
- Moskop, W. (2014, June 26). Slowly, St. Louis grows more diverse. *St. Louis Today*. Retrieved from www.stltoday.com/news/local/illinois/slowly-st-louis-grows-more-diverse/article_92331b8c-10bd-59be-b9a7-62f7602f7fc9.html
- Mullin, B., Hardy, S., & Sutton, W. A. (2000). *Sport Marketing* (2nd ed). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Nielsen (2013), *Years in Sports Media Report*. Retrieved from <http://cdn2.sbnation.com/assets/3989257/year-in-sports-media-report-2013.pdf>

- Oshan, J., (2014). SB Nation. Retrieved from <http://www.sbnation.com/mls/2014/2/12/5402024/mls-tv-ratings-nielsen-sports-report>
- Palmatier, R. W. (2008). *Relationship Marketing*. Cambridge, MA: Marketing Science Institute Cambridge.
- Rein, I., Kotler, P., & Shields, Ben. (2006). *The Elusive Fan: Reinventing Sports in a Crowded Marketplace*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Reysen, S., & Branscombe, N. R. (2010). Fanship and Fandom: Comparisons Between Sport and Non-Sport Fans. *Journal Of Sport Behavior*, 33(2), 176-193.
- Saint Louis Bosnian. (2014, n/d). Statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.stlbosnians.com/category/statistics/>
- Shani, D. and Chalasani, S. (1992). Exploiting Niches Using Relationship Marketing. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 6(4): 43–52. Retrieved from <http://www.doc88.com/p-975196769866.html>
- Shani, D. (1997). A framework for implementing relationship marketing in the sport industry. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 6(2). 9-15.
- Sheth, J. N., & Parvatiyar, A. (1995). Relationship marketing in consumer markets: Antecedents and consequences. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 23(4), 255-271.
- Silk, M.L, Andrews, D.L., & Mason, D.S. (2005). *Qualitative Methods in Sports Studies*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Stavros. C, Pope, N.K.. & Winzar. H. (2008). Relationship marketing in Australian professional sport: An extension of the Shani framework. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 17(3), 13.5-145.
- Tajfel, H. (1978). *Social categorization, social identity and social comparison*. London:

Academic Press, 16p. Edited by: Tajfel, H

- Tsiotsou, R. H. (2013). "Sport team loyalty: integrating relationship marketing and a hierarchy of effects", *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 27 Iss: 6, pp.458 – 471.
- Turri, A, Smith, K, & Kemp, Elyria. (2013). Developing affective brand commitment through social media. *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, 14(3), 201-214.
- Vargo, S., & Lusch, R. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal Of Marketing*. 68(1), 1-17.
- Wallace, L., Wilson, J., & Mloch, K. (2011). Sporting Facebook: A content analysis of NCAA organizational sport pages and Big 12 Conferences Athletic department pages. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 4, 422–444.
Retrieved from
<http://www.humankinetics.com/IJSC/journalAbout.cfm>
- Waters, R. D., Burke, K. A., Jackson, Z. H., & Buning, J. D. (2011). Using stewardship to cultivate fandom online: Comparing how National Football League teams use their websites and Facebook to engage their fans. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 4, 163–177.
- Williams, J. & Chinn, S. J.(2010). Meeting Relationship-Marketing Goals Through Social Media: A Conceptual Model for Sport Marketers. *International Journal of Sport Communication*. 3 (4), 422-437.
- Wysocki, M. (2012). *The Role of Social Media in Sports Communication: An Analysis of NBA Teams' Strategy*. American University, Washington, DC.
- Yin, R.K. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, California. SAGE Publications.
- Zimmerman, M. H., Clavio, G. E., & Lim, C. H. (2011). Set the agenda like Beckham: A professional league's use of YouTube to disseminate messages to its users. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 10, 180–195.
- Wann, D. L., & Dolan, T. J. (1994). Attributions of Highly Identified Sports Spectators. *Journal Of Social Psychology*, 134(6), 783-792.

APPENDIX

This appendix contains the questionnaire for the eight interviews conducted in this research to personnel of the St. Louis Rams and the LA Galaxy.

Questionnaire

- 1- What are the channels you use to communicate and interact with fans?
- 2- How have marketing strategies directed to engage supporters changed in the last 10 years?
- 3- What role do social media play in your overall marketing strategy to develop relationships with the supporters?
- 4- How does the organization create value to customers through social media platforms?
- 5- What kind of social media programs and activities have you developed in the past, are doing in the present, and are planning for the future to create value to customers?
- 6- What have you done or are you planning to do in order to allow supporters to participate in the online conversation and production?
- 7- Does the organization make any commitments with supporters through social media? What kind and how do you make sure you can fulfill what you promise?
- 8- Can you think of a time or times you have used social media to help build trust with supporters?
- 9- What activities and actions are you taking to promote the sense of mutual reciprocity through social media channels?

- 10- What online personality does the organization promotes in order to show supporters authenticity? How do you promote it through social media?
- 11- How the organization does determines the values they want to communicate in order to be consistent with those of supporters?
- 12- How is social media helping the organization to customize or personalize its message to supporters?
- 13- How do you use social media to help identify possible complaints and to answer them?
- 14- How does the organization use and analyze social media data for customer insight?
- 15- How do the data help the organization frame the right message?
- 16- Do you use the data to detect possible influencers or opinion leaders? If so, how can you use that information?
- 17- Do you take ideas from social media interactions and use them to develop programs or other activities?