

## Examination of the Relationship Between Fan Identification and Student Utilization of Social Media in an NCAA Division I University

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*The present study examined the relationship between fan identification and the use of social media by students at a large National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I university in Ohio. Participants were 186 university students who completed the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) and a modified version of the Utilization of Social Media in Sport Survey (USMSS). Respondents reported that Facebook and Twitter were the social media sites used most often to follow the athletic department. Additionally, the results demonstrated a positive relationship between fan identification and the utilization of various social media. Practical strategies are provided in relation to how athletic department staff can encourage college students to utilize social media to follow their school's athletic teams. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to utilize qualitative methodology and experimental intervention to continue to more fully understand the relationship between fan identification and the utilization of social media.*

*Keywords:* social media, Facebook, Twitter, fan identification

### Introduction

There is no doubt that social media has become a primary way in which organizations communicate their message to target audiences, and specifically, this technology is utilized as a vehicle to assist organizations in marketing products (e.g., Bingham & Conner, 2010; Safko, 2010). Not surprisingly, in the world of sport, social media has become a widespread method which allows collegiate and professional sport organizations to interact with their fans (e.g., Broughton, 2013; Spanberg, 2016).

In order to offer sport fans the most recent information, numerous social media avenues are provided by sport organizations for a wide range of marketing purposes. These networks include outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and many other image based social media sites. According to a recent industry report, leading social media platforms for consuming sports related content include Facebook (67%) followed by YouTube (44%) and Twitter (34%) (See Katz, 2016). Research found that Facebook is still a preferred social media platform over Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest (Billings, Qiao, Conlin, & Nie, 2015). Additionally, sport organizations can capture the attention of enthusiasts with the aid of Facebook by displaying event information which provides additional methods for sport organizations to interact (Aeschbach, 2011; Clavio, 2011; Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Hodge, Pederson, & Walker, 2015; Ozsoy, 2011; Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011).

Twitter has given sport organizations the capability to rapidly communicate with their fans. Twitter is another social media platform that allows sports fans to be digitally connected with their favorite sports teams. For instance, each professional sports league in the U.S. has millions of Twitter followers; the National Basketball Association (NBA) has 4.68 million, the National Football League (NFL) has 2.34 million, the Major League Baseball (MLB) has 1.59 million, and the National Hockey League (NHL) has 1.24 million (Fisher, 2016). Sport organizations can utilize Twitter to provide target audiences with up-to-date news (e.g., Armstrong, Delia, & Girginova, 2016; Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Girginova, 2016; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Ozsoy, 2011; Wang & Zhou, 2015); thus, Twitter has helped transform the manner in which athletic departments are delivering information (Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

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Additionally, YouTube affords sports organizations the opportunity to communicate with their fan base by posting video highlights of games, events, and interviews with players and coaches (Clavio, 2011; Zimmerman, Clavio, & Lim, 2011). Hence, social media helps sport organizations offer behind the scenes observations of athletes, coaches, events, and other entertaining activities.

As social media has emerged within sport organizations, inquiries have been initiated to ascertain how this technology is being utilized. Given little is known regarding the understanding of the relationship between the utilization of social media by the college students and fan identification, the present research was conducted to add to an understanding of how social media is being utilized by college students in order to follow their universities athletic teams.

### **Literature Review**

Previous research has identified two categories of studies that analyzed social media usage in sport: content-based and audience-based investigations. Content-based social media research has evaluated the types of messages sport organizations, journalists, and athletes place on social networking sites (e.g., Clavio, 2011; Frederick & Clavio, 2015; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhaigh, & Greenwell, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Moore, Hesson, & Jones, 2015; Pegararo, 2010; Sanderson, 2010).

In contrast to content-based studies, audience-based inquiry research explores how social media is employed by the consumer and also the associations among criterion variables and social media usage (Clavio, 2011). Researchers have recently initiated audience-based investigations which have begun to analyze how social media has been utilized by collegiate (e.g., Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Clavio, 2011) and professional sports fans (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010; Kang, 2015; Ozsoy, 2011; 2012; Williams, Heiser, & Chinn, 2012).

As noted in previous audience-based descriptive research, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are popular social media platforms for functional uses by sports fans. Previous research suggests that Facebook is utilized more often than Twitter or YouTube as a way for individuals to follow their favorite team (Ozsoy, 2011; Clavio & Walsh, 2014). Additionally, Clavio (2011) found Facebook and YouTube to be more popular than utilizing Twitter to follow a college football team. Similarly, Clavio and Walsh (2014) discovered that college students believed they were inclined to utilize Facebook and YouTube more readily to follow their sport organization than Twitter. Importantly, Facebook has been used for various purposes. For instance, previous research has demonstrated that Facebook has been utilized for a myriad of purposes such as relationship marketing (e.g., Pronschinske, Groza & Walker, 2013), brand management (e.g., Wallace et al., 2011), fan identity (e.g., Sanderson, 2013) or fan community (e.g., Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014). Thus, Facebook is one of the most common social media sites used to follow sport organizations.

From a marketing perspective, an important reason to analyze the social media usage of sports fans is because of the potential positive relationship between the utilization of social media and fan identification. For example, in a study by Catalyst Public Relations a majority of baseball and football fans believed that they were more highly identified with their favorite sport team subsequent to using social media to follow their team (Broughton, 2010). Conceptually, fan identification is defined as how strongly an individual identifies with being a fan of a sport team (McDonald, Sutton, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997; Sutton, McDonald, & Milne, 1997; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and based on fan identification theory, it has been theorized that individuals utilizing social media to follow their favorite sport team are more likely to have a higher level of fan identification.

To be more specific, fan identification comes from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), and it provides a rationale as to why a relationship may exist between fan identification and social media utilization. This theory suggested that individuals achieve a positive view of themselves when they are a constituent of a group that they appreciate interacting with (Tajfel, 1978). For instance, students matriculating at a university may initially become a fan of a team or school since they attend a specific university. However, a plausible explanation for the development of a higher level of fan identification is that as students begin to attend competitions, they encounter fellow student-athletes who participate on the university teams. Through social media, the individual that began following the team because they attended the school now begins to identify further with the team as they learn about the athletes and coaches and also interact with additional fans. Thus, online social interactions might influence

stronger affiliations and identification with university teams. Thus, it has been hypothesized that the more a fan uses social media the more identified they become with the team or organization.

The hypothesized relationship between social media utilization and level of fan identification has been examined in the past (Broughton, 2010; Phua, 2010; 2012; Williams et al., 2012). The Catalyst Public Relations organization surveyed fans from the National Football League (NFL) and Major League Baseball (MLB) and found that participants believed they were more of a fan of the leagues after they began utilizing social media sites to follow the professional sport league (Broughton, 2010). Similarly, Phua (2010) utilizing the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993) found a positive relationship between the use of social media websites and fan identification. Likewise, an investigation by Williams et al. (2012) also revealed an association between the utilization of social media and team identification and the likelihood of attending a contest. Specifically, these authors found that those who utilized social media identified more strongly with their team and were also more likely to attend sporting events.

In sport marketing literature, there is a connection to suggest some demographic variables are positively related to fan identification, and these variables are strong predictors for identification. Demographic variables such as age (e.g., Aiken, Campbell, & Sukhdial, 2010; Brown, Devlin, & Billings, 2013; Levin, Beasley, & Gamble, 2004; Sukhdial, Aiken, & Kahle, 2002) and gender (e.g., Harvard, Eddy, & Ryan, 2016; Levin et al., 2004; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001) have been shown to be strong predictors of fan identification.

Although studies have begun to assess the relationship of fan identification to the use of social media at the professional level of sport, limited investigations have assessed the relationship between fan identification and social media usage (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) of students at a large NCAA Division I university. Specifically, the present study utilized the Clavio and Walsh (2014) *Utilization of Social Media in Sport Survey* (USMSS) and the SSIS to examine how college students use social media to follow their colleges' athletic teams and the relationship between social media utilization and fan identification.

## Hypotheses

Based on the findings of previous studies the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: Sports fans will utilize all types of social media to follow their schools sports teams.

H2: Facebook will be the most common social media site used to follow the sport organization.

H3: Age, gender, and various types of social media will be positively related to fan identification.

Thus, the main purpose of the present study is to extend the Clavio and Walsh (2014) investigation. A modified version of the Clavio and Walsh (2014) USMSS was used to gain information about how students use social media to follow the teams of their school's athletic department. Additionally, the present study extended previous studies that utilized the USMSS by analyzing the relationship of fan identification to the utilization of various types of social media.

## Method

### Case

The athletic department is a member of a large Midwest athletic NCAA Division I conference in Ohio. The university has a total of 17 teams (7 male and 10 female sport teams). Similar to other Division I athletic departments, this department was actively utilizes social media. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and Periscope are platforms used. Additionally, each specific university team has its own Facebook and Twitter accounts. In particular, nine head coaches (Football, Softball, Men's basketball, Women's basketball, Men's soccer, Women's soccer, Volleyball, Tennis, and Swimming and Diving) have their own Twitter pages, and one of the athletic facilities has their own Twitter account.

## Participants

Students from one large NCAA Division I university in Ohio participated in the present study. One hundred eighty six students (127 males and 59 females) participated. Overall, 6 freshmen, 32 sophomores, 30 juniors, 58 seniors, 25 fifth year plus undergraduates, and 36 graduate students participated. Thirty five participants were between the ages of 18-20, 95 participants were between 21- 23, 40 were between 24–29, and 16 participants were thirty or older. Of the 186 participants, 167 (89.85%) indicated they had a Facebook account while 132 (70.9%) participants reported having a Twitter account. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and volunteered to participate.

## Instruments

**Utilization of Social Media in Sport Survey.** The survey used in the present study was modified from Clavio and Walsh's (2014) Utilization of Social Media in Sport Survey (USMSS). Additionally, the polarity of the USMSS was flipped for the current study. The modified USMSS for the present study contained 66 questions that inquired about the use of various social media outlets. The survey consisted of a brief introduction section which included demographic and background questions related to the use of social media. Specifically, respondents were asked to report their gender, age, and year in school. Participants were also asked if they have a Twitter account, and a Facebook account. Additionally, participants were asked if they followed the university athletic department's official Twitter and Facebook feeds.

The USMSS also consists of 29 questions that comprise three subscales. The first two subscales of the USMSS are 7-item scales that focus on how the participant utilizes the university athletic department Twitter feed and also how the participant utilizes the university Facebook feed. The third subscale utilized 15 questions which assessed how respondents utilized social media to follow sports. Specifically, respondents were asked how likely they were to complete certain behaviors on a sport related website (e.g., use of Twitter to interact with coaches, athletes, and other fans, watch a videocast, write a comment on a published story, watch a YouTube video, download a podcast, check into a sporting event, submit a picture taken for an online contest, interact with athletes and fans on Facebook, submit audio or video, written content, or picture as part of online contest). Clavio and Walsh (2014) reported an alpha of .921 for this subscale.

In addition to these subscales, a section on how the participant utilized other social media tools to follow university teams is included. These social media tools include the athletic department web site, traditional media websites, blogs, fan websites, YouTube, sports talk radio, and podcasts. Subsequent to these sections, additional questions related to Twitter and Facebook asked the participant to provide responses to how they use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media channels to follow sports.

To assess reliability of the survey, internal consistency was calculated by analyzing how well the items on the test actually assessed the same concept. An alpha higher than .70 is sufficient as the level of reliability, according to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). The present study found an alpha internal consistency of .792 for the modified USMSS, which indicates an acceptable level of reliability.

**Sport Spectator Identification Scale.** The Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) is a 7 item scale developed to assess the level of identification that one has with a specific sports team. The SSIS includes seven questions and uses an eight point likert scale. A total score for the instrument is calculated by summing all the responses which can range from 1-8 for each question. Scores can range from 7-56, with a higher score indicating a higher level of fan identification. The SSIS has been found to be reliable and valid (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and Wann and Branscombe (1993) reported a cronbach's alpha for reliability of .91.

**Demographic Questionnaire.** A short demographic questionnaire was constructed to obtain background information about the participants. Participants reported their gender, age, and year in school.

## Procedure

The first author attended various department classes on the university campus and asked students to participate in a study related to the utilization of social media in sport. University students willing to participate were provided with a survey packet, which included a cover letter, a demographic survey, the USMSS, and the SSIS. Once the packet was administered, students were given time to read the cover letter and then complete the

survey packet. The participants were recruited under the protocol reviewed and approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### Data Analysis

The design of the present study was correlational since the researchers were investigating the relationship of demographic variables and the use of social media to fan identification. First, means, standard deviations and frequencies were computed for both the predictor and criterion variables. Next, point biserial correlations were computed for the relationship between fan identification and the use of various social media to follow the teams of the university athletic department. This statistical technique was used since the researchers are investigating the relationship between a continuous variable (e.g, fan identification) and a dichotomous variable (e.g., use of blogs or not). A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship of demographic and social media variables to fan identification. The predictor variables included, age, gender, year in school, and the use of various types of social media including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, athletic department website, blogs, podcasts, traditional media websites, and sports talk radio to follow their universities athletic teams. The criterion variable for the present study was fan identification. The contribution of each of the predictor variables in predicting fan identification was determined through the use of semi-partial squared correlations.

### Results

Means, standard deviations, and frequencies for the main variables assessed in the study were computed for the whole sample. The means and standard deviations were computed for general fan identification and social media usage on sport related websites. The mean of the sample for the scores for fan identification utilizing the SSIS was 40.96 with a standard deviation of 13.083. See Table 1 for the means and standard deviations for general social media usage.

The type of social media that participants reported they were most likely to use to follow the teams of the university athletic department was “Watch an embedded YouTube video” ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 1.324$ ), followed by “Watch a live stream videocast” ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) and “Interact with a sports organization via Twitter” ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.367$ ). The types of social media that participants reported they were least likely to use were downloading podcasts ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.238$ ) and listening to podcasts on webpages ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.269$ ). The frequencies for the use of various types of media to follow the university athletic department are reported in Table 2.

The present study, in a similar manner to the Clavio and Walsh (2014) investigation, also determined the rank order of how respondents reported utilizing the official athletic department Twitter feed and the official athletic department Facebook feed. Respondents in the present study stated that they were most likely to utilize the official athletic department Facebook webpage to read stories about the game ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 1.461$ ), find out about events ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = 1.441$ ), and to gather personal information about athletes and coaches ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.611$ ). The least likely reasons to utilize the official athletic department Facebook web page was to interact with fans ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.651$ ), to interact with the athletic department as a whole ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.602$ ), to participate in contests in giveaways ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = 1.652$ ), and to interact with athletes and coaches ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 1.590$ ).

Respondents in the present study reported they were most likely to utilize the official athletic department Twitter feed to read stories about games ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 1.359$ ), find out about upcoming events ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $SD = 1.362$ ), and to participate in contests and giveaways ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.583$ ). These were followed by the three least likely reasons to follow the official athletic department Twitter feed which included gathering personal information about athletes and coaches ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ), to interact with athletes and coaches ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ), and to interact with the department as a whole ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ).

Significant point biserial correlations were found between fan identification and the following variables: participants that followed the athletic department on Twitter, ( $r_{pb} = .441$ ,  $p < .01$ ), participants that followed the athletic department on Facebook ( $r_{pb} = .334$ ,  $p < .01$ ), participants that utilized YouTube for coverage of the teams or organization ( $r_{pb} = .416$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and participants who utilized the main athletic department website for information and coverage of the teams and organization ( $r_{pb} = .529$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Additional significant relationships

were found between scores on the SSIS and utilizing traditional media websites ( $r_{pb} = .190, p < .05$ ), podcasts ( $r_{pb} = .222, p < .01$ ), sports talk radio ( $r_{pb} = .164, p < .05$ ), blogs ( $r_{pb} = .246, p < .01$ ) and recruiting websites, ( $r_{pb} = .367, p < .01$ ) to follow the teams of the university athletic department. However, a significant relationship was not found between scores on the SSIS and the use of Newspapers ( $r_{pb} = .098$ ).

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Likelihood that the Respondent Completes the Following Tasks on a Sport Related Website*

	Mean	SD
Watch an embedded YouTube video on a webpage	2.46	1.324
Watch a live stream Videocast	2.55	1.27
Interact with a sports organization Via Twitter	2.92	1.367
Interact with a sports organization via Facebook	2.96	1.329
Interact with an athlete or coach via Facebook	3.11	1.448
Interact with fellow fans via Twitter	3.15	1.48
Interact with fellow fans via Facebook	3.2	1.363
Submit a picture you have taken as part of an online contest	3.24	1.414
Interact with an athlete or coach via Twitter	3.26	1.395
Write a comment on a published story or video	3.26	1.261
Submit your own written content as part of an online contest	3.26	1.506
Check into a sporting event using a program like foursquare	3.29	1.445
Submit audio/video content that you created as part of an online contest	3.3	1.512
Download a Podcast in Itunes or anotherpodcatching site	3.58	1.238
Listen to a podcast on a webpage	3.62	1.269

*Note.* Based on a 5-point Likert scale in which was 1 was labeled as very likely and 5 was labeled as very unlikely.

Table 2

*Frequencies of the number of participants surveyed who use various types of media to follow the teams' of the university athletic department*

	Yes	No
Official Athletic Department Website	162	24
Newspaper	99	87
Traditional Media Websites	98	88
Facebook	93	93
Twitter	87	99
YouTube	78	108
Sports Talk Radio	56	130
Recruiting Websites	40	146
Blogs	36	150
Podcasts	14	172

To analyze the bivariate relationships between various types of social media behavior and fan identification, point biserial correlations were utilized. Analysis of the data revealed significant relationships between fan

identification and how often the university athletics Twitter content is checked ( $r_{pb} = .502, p < .01$ ), how often one retweets postings from the university athletics Twitter content ( $r_{pb} = .443, p < .01$ ), how often one checks the university athletics Facebook page ( $r_{pb} = .269, p < .01$ ), how often one likes a post on the university athletic Facebook page ( $r_{pb} = .293, p < .01$ ), and how often one responds to a post or comment on the university athletic Facebook page ( $r_{pb} = .226, p < .001$ ). No significant point biserial correlations were found between the criterion variable of fan identification and the predictor variables of age, gender, and year in school.

A main purpose of the present study was to determine the relationship of various predictor variables to fan identification. In order to analyze the various unique contribution of demographic variables (e.g., gender, year and school and age) and the use of various types of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Athletic Department Website, Blogs, Podcasts, Traditional Media Websites, and Sports Talk Radio) to fan identification, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Therefore, the present study used multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses that various demographic and social media variables would significantly predict fan identification. The demographic and social variables accounted for a significant amount of the variance in predicting fan identification ( $R = .729, R^2 = .502, F = 17.941, df = 11, 174, p < .001$ ). Following the athletic department on Facebook ( $\beta = .186, p < .01$ ), Twitter ( $\beta = .157, p < .05$ ), YouTube ( $\beta = .181, p < .01$ ), athletic department website ( $\beta = .390, p < .001$ ), podcasts ( $\beta = .136, p < .05$ ), and recruiting websites ( $\beta = .229, p < .05$ ) were found to be significant predictors of fan identification. Thus, the demographic and social media variables were found to predict 25 percent of the unique variance of fan identification. Age, gender, year in school, traditional media websites and sports talk radio were not significant predictors of fan identification in this regression model. Thus, it appears that those that are more highly identified with a team, are more likely to follow the athletic Department on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, the athletic department website, podcasts and recruiting websites.

Squared semi-partial coefficients were utilized to determine how much of the variance the significant variables in the equation predicted. The majority of the unique variance of the regression model was explained by the significant predictors which were whether or not one followed the athletic department on the athletic department website (12.8%), recruiting websites (3.6%), Facebook (2.5%), YouTube (2.1%), Twitter (1.7%), and Podcasts (1.7%).

## Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to examine the utilization of social media by university students at a large NCAA Division I university in Ohio. Specifically, the use of Facebook and Twitter were analyzed to understand how college students use social media platforms to follow sport organizations. Additionally, the current investigations also assessed the relationship of the utilization of various social media outlets and demographic variables to fan identification.

The present study analyzed how social media was utilized to follow a university athletic organization. Specifically, most students had Facebook accounts, while it was less common for the students in the present study to have a Twitter account. In particular, results indicated that college students used the athletic department webpage most often to follow the teams of the university athletic department followed by Facebook, traditional media websites, Twitter, and YouTube. Media reported to be used less often by the present sample included podcasts, sports talk radio, blogs, and recruiting websites.

The results of the present study appear to be consistent with previous research which has found that Facebook was the most common social media platform used by fans of a sport organization (Clavio & Walsh, 2014). Also, the present study found similar results to Clavio and Walsh (2014) who reported that the official athletic department website was used most often to find information about the university athletic department's teams and that blogs, podcasts, sports talk radio and recruiting websites were utilized least often to find information about university athletic department teams.

Another purpose of the present study was to utilize the USMSS to understand how college students follow their school's athletic teams. The findings from the present study supported the results of the Clavio and Walsh (2014) investigation which found that respondents were most likely to watch an embedded YouTube video on a sport related website. Also, participants in the present study reported that they were least likely to listen to a podcast or

download a podcast from a sport related webpage. This finding is consistent with the results revealed in the Clavio and Walsh (2014)'s investigation.

The results of the present study revealed significant relationships between fan identification and the utilization of social media to follow university athletics. Specifically, the findings suggest that those with higher fan identification scores are more likely to utilize YouTube for coverage of the organization, and utilize the main athletic department website for information and coverage of the teams and organization. Additionally those with higher fan identification scores were more likely to listen podcasts, sports talk radio, blogs and recruiting websites to follow the university athletic organization. The finding that there is a relationship between one's level of fan identification and social media use are not inconsistent with past research (Phua, 2010; Williams et al., 2012).

Although the results of the present study appear to have useful practical implications, there are a few limitations that should be noted. Although 186 college students at an NCAA Division I university were sampled, the results of the present study may not be generalizable to other levels of collegiate athletics as well as to the professional sport industry. Also, because the sample only consisted of college students the results of the present study may not be generalizable to the whole sample of individuals that may identify as a fan of the athletic organization (e.g., alumni, community, faculty and staff). Another limitation of the present study was that the survey respondents were not asked if they had social media accounts. Thus, it is not known if the survey respondents had the accounts but were not actively using them.

Despite the limitations of the present research, there are a few practical implications that should be noted. Because the utilization of various social media outlets to follow a sport team appear to be related to one's level of fan identification, athletic departments should find ways to encourage and motivate college students to utilize social media outlets for the purpose of following the teams of the university athletic department. For example, the results of the present study support Clavio's (2011) practical suggestion that athletic departments should continue to educate their students and fans about how they can benefit from utilizing social media technology to follow a university sports team. Moreover, the addition of staff to focus on new and social media initiatives for the athletic department appears to be an important area of growth for university athletic departments. With the demonstrated relationship between the use of various social media outlets and fan identification, having individuals who focus on developing content and also marketing these technologies to the fan base seem imperative. The development of a staff of new and social media will allow university athletic departments the necessary resources to focus on finding ways to direct individuals to their online social media content.

Recent scholars have noted the types of practical strategies that sport organizations can use to provide ways for fans to utilize social media to follow their teams (e.g., Argon, Argon, Köse, & Gökalp, 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). These practical strategies include contests and giveaways, interaction with other fans and the ability to provide feedback to the athletic department as a way to encourage fans to utilize athletic department social media sites. For example, at one large NCAA Division I university, the university provided a chance for those that "like" the athletic departments' Facebook page the opportunity to win a group of tickets and on the field access for a football game. Another example of how athletic departments are utilizing social media to engage fans is having an athletic department representative tweet that they were at a local restaurant and encouraging fans to come to local restaurant to possibly win football tickets. Also, a recent strategy to increase fan identification is to display items from social networking sites on the scoreboard at a sporting event. For example a fan's tweets, pictures, and videos can be posted on athletic department social networking sites (Garrity, 2013). That way, continuous communication and interaction for relationship building (Gronroos, 2004) with fan base can be strategically executed. By doing so, strategies for increasing fan identification could be enhanced.

Future researchers should continue to understand the hypothesized relationship between the use of various types of social media and levels of fan identification. Thus, future investigators who are examining the relationship between social media use and fan identification should consider utilizing a diverse sample of students, alumni, community, and faculty and staff.

Recently, the latest social media platforms have been employed by sport organizations. For instance, several MLB teams use Snapchat to digitally interact with their fan bases. Scholars have also examined how newer social media platforms are used. Hambrick and Kang (2015) investigated how North American professional sports teams use Pinterest to engage and interact with their fan bases and found that the teams that used Pinterest actively promote group experience and offer team/game information. Individual athletes, too, take the newer social media platform



for self-presentation using Instagram (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Thus, in recent years many different social media platforms have been employed by sport fans, sport organizations, and sport media to more digitally connected with each other. Future research may want to examine the use of these more contemporary social media platforms. In particular, Instagram, for instance, is becoming a major source of social media and professional sports teams are starting to use Instagram to generate more revenue, promote their brand, and interact with the fan base in an original and creative manner (Ives, 2014; Sheridan, 2015). So it is necessary to observe how newer social media could be practically implemented for athletic department marketing initiatives. Therefore, future scholars may want to examine the relationship between the utilization of those social media sites and fan identification.

From a methodological standpoint, qualitative research using focus groups is needed to better understand how fans of college sports teams utilize social media. This will allow for an in-depth understanding of how using social media can increase a college student's level of fan identification. Also, experimental studies are necessary to determine if the various social media strategies that athletic departments are utilizing have the potential to increase the fan identification of college students. Another suggestion for future research is to examine how different age groups (younger generation vs older generation) use social media for sport related content consumption and how their fan identification simultaneously plays a role. Additionally, future researchers may want to conduct a factor analysis first for data reduction purposes if the investigators use the USMSS. Lastly, but most importantly, given the rapid pace of technology advancement, continuous efforts to better understand the utilization of social media in the context of sport is vital.

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