Pin It: Exploring How Professional Sports Organizations Use Pinterest as a Communications and Relationship-Marketing Tool

Marion E. Hambrick and Sun J. Kang

Abstract
The social media platform Pinterest has emerged as a popular virtual space to showcase content found online (Hempel, 2012). Encouraging users to “pin” and comment on content featuring sports-related activities, athletes, and merchandise, Pinterest presents an opportunity for sports organizations looking to connect and build communities with fans. This study employed the relationship-marketing conceptual framework (Grönroos, 2004) to examine how four North American professional sports leagues used Pinterest over a 1-year time period to communicate as well as encourage engagement and interaction with fans. The longitudinal content analysis and chi-square analyses of 24,156 pins revealed the sports teams used Pinterest to promote the fan group experience, provide team and game information, and sell team-related merchandise. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed, including recommendations for sports organizations seeking to engage their fans and communicate online.

1 University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Marion E. Hambrick, Department of Health and Sport Sciences, University of Louisville, HP/Studio Arts Room 104, Louisville, KY 40292, USA.
Email: marion.hambrick@louisville.edu
Social media platforms offer a bevy of opportunities for sports leagues, teams, and fans to communicate, connect, and build communities online. New platforms arrive in an increasingly competitive environment, hoping to capitalize on the seemingly inexhaustible interest in such activities. Pinterest represents one of the newer social media platforms and has established itself as a viable contender within this realm. According to MacMillan (November 14, 2013), Pinterest boasts over 53 million users as of November 2013, and its financial valuation has reached US$3.8 billion. The site’s popularity is unprecedented, earning the distinction as the fastest growing social media platform of all time (Hempel, 2012). Expanding rapidly since 2010, Pinterest operates like a virtual scrapbook. Users can create theme-based “boards,” where they “pin” pictures, stories, and videos found online. This unique pinning function allows users to capture content by clicking the “Pin It” button located on their web browser’s toolbar and posting the images on their Pinterest boards. Additionally, users can subscribe to boards created by fellow Pinterest users, post comments about their respective pins, and “repin” content found on other boards to their own boards. Users can also link their Pinterest pages to personal Facebook and Twitter accounts, thereby integrating various social media platforms and sharing pins with their Pinterest followers and beyond.

Pinterest features a unique demographic makeup. The platform has a sizeable female presence, as 80% of its users are women. Additionally, 50% of its users have children; 63% are 35 and older and likely to live in Midwestern cities in the United States (MarketingCharts, 2012). One distinction between Pinterest and competitor social media platforms is that users focus on their personal interests rather than the social graphs of others (Bosker, 2012). Pinterest users often relate to one another in terms of common interests (i.e., cooking, do-it-yourself projects) rather than following other users for their personal status updates. Finally, over 80% of the content posted are repins, whereby an individual pins another user’s pin to his or her own boards, illustrating the dense level of information sharing among users within the Pinterest community (Bosker, 2012).

Beyond individual users, sports leagues and teams use Pinterest and tailor individual boards and pins to showcase their organizations. For example, the Chicago Blackhawks used Pinterest to highlight its 2013 Stanley Cup win, behind-the-scenes access to players and other personnel, merchandise for fans of the team and city of Chicago, and pages catering to younger Blackhawks fans. Similarly, the Detroit Pistons displayed pins of in-game entertainment with the mascot, cheer and dance teams, and other half-time activities. Pistons merchandise boards contained pictures of jerseys, hats, and other apparel. The team also emphasized its history with photographs of old logos and vintage sports moments. Pinterest offers users flexibility with their displayed content. The social media platform’s pages allow...
organizations to give fans an inside look at the leagues and teams as well as engage and interact with consumers. The team pins include original content plus repins from other social media sites, official webpages, and the personal pages of fans. Pins linking to official team and league websites can encourage fans to move beyond Pinterest and interact within these pages, extending the level of engagement with organizational offerings. Fans can make comments about the pins and repin them to their own personal boards, creating an instant exchange with the teams and leagues.

The actions of pinning and repinning can cycle between the organization and fans, and as such Pinterest can facilitate interactivity and information dissemination among its users. This content sharing may represent one functional advantage of Pinterest over various social media platforms. While other platforms require users to “post” photos, “tweet” messages, or “upload” videos, Pinterest encourages users to pin images, videos, and other objects simply by capturing them with the “Pin It” button, with the content linking back to the original source (Pinterest, 2013). Connecting online content to its original source can generate exposure and revenues for associated websites. This functionality can help drive organizational sales as a retailer pin can create approximately US$0.78 per click, a 25% increase from 2012 (Perez, 2013). The pinning function also gives organizations and fans the ability to connect and form a sense of community around shared interests.

Pinterest pages highlight important aspects of interactivity and information-sharing activities among sports organizations and fans. These connections can be explored through the conceptual framework of relationship marketing, defined as “the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties are met” (Grönroos, 2004, p. 101). Relationship marketing can be facilitated through social media that gives organizations and fans the ability to connect in a variety of online settings. The heightened presence of sports teams on Pinterest allows them to use the platform as a communications and relationship-marketing tool, a way to connect and engage with consumers. Pinterest’s popularity with individual users highlights an important opportunity for sports leagues and teams to interact with their target audiences and facilitate relationship marketing. The purpose of the study was to explore how professional sports organizations use Pinterest as a communications and relationship-marketing tool. The study addressed which professional sports leagues used Pinterest over a 1-year period, how they used the social media platform to relay information about their teams, and how their usage compared across the organizations over time.

**Pinterest and Relationship Marketing**

Pinterest encourages exchanges of information among users who express themselves through individually selected pins (Hempel, 2012). 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. The increasing popularity of these platforms represents an opportunity for teams and other sports organizations to reach greater numbers of current and new fans, as more individuals use the platforms to communicate with one another as well as consume and create information (Clavio & Walsh, 2013). Sports organizations can leverage this environment to build connections with fans and further their relationship-marketing efforts.

According to Grönroos (2004), relationship marketing begins when a transaction is initiated between a consumer and an organization, such as when a fan purchases team-related merchandise. Rather than viewing the sale as a one-time event, organizations can benefit from relationship marketing by creating an ongoing, sustainable relationship with the consumer by focusing on three primary areas: (a) communication, (b) interaction, and (c) value.

Communication represents the conversation that takes place between the consumer and the organization, where information is passed from one to the other. In a traditional media environment, communication is often a one-way affair. For example, the team advertises its upcoming games via newspapers, television, magazines, and other traditional outlets. The fan, in turn, has a limited ability to respond to those messages outside of purchasing the advertised products, in this case tickets to the events. Organizations that facilitate two-way conversations can spur the second area of relationship marketing or interaction. With interaction, organizations and consumers engage in a more in-depth exchange, as the two groups connect with another and have a continued conversation. 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. The fan in this example may communicate a desire for more affordable ticket prices, and the team may respond by introducing game-day promotions targeted toward such customers. Finally, value, the third area of relationship marketing, reflects the idea that consumers will benefit from communication and interaction that they will identify and have their needs met through this relationship. In this example, the fan may experience value and feel more invested in the team, noting that the organization responded to her needs through a new product offering. In response, the fan may feel encouraged to take part in the special promotion, thus extending the relationship beyond the original purchase (Grönroos, 2004).

When the three areas of communication, interaction, and value combine, the relationship-marketing process takes place. Organizations should communicate and interact regularly with their consumers, cultivating relationships and identifying ways to provide value. These actions in total represent the relationship-marketing process. Benefits for organizations that encourage this process include consumer brand engagement and loyalty, which can translate into increased revenues and profits (Grönroos, 2004).

Grönroos (2004) outlined the relationship-marketing process in a general context. Williams and Chinn (2010) extended this model to focus more specifically on...
relationship marketing with social media and the sport industry. The researchers articulated that the Grönroos (2004) framework could be extended and applied within this context. Social media creates a conduit for sports organizations to introduce themselves and their products, provide information about upcoming or ongoing activities and events, and create a call to action via sales of tickets and merchandise. Rather than simply focusing on traditional media outlets, sports organizations can capitalize on two-way communications that are often an inherent part of social media platforms. They can use these platforms as communications tools and benefit from greater levels of interaction with and increased value for their consumers.

Williams and Chinn (2010) highlighted organizational goals that can be accomplished via social media relationship marketing. Organizations can learn more about fans and their specific needs, develop lasting relationships with them, improve satisfaction and loyalty levels as well as develop and elevate their brands. The authors proposed various ways to accomplish these goals based on the chosen social media platform (e.g., blogs, forums), as some platforms may provide a better fit or means to meet organizational goals than others. For example, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter bring large numbers of fans together in interactive and engaging environments. These settings could help fans feel as though they are part of a larger group through their shared relationships with or membership in the social networks. Additionally, organizations can post content on such platforms. They can also encourage fans to provide their own user-generated content in the forms of photographs and videos. This shared activity can generate consumer-enhanced engagement, as the organization and its fans have an opportunity to create a community through this continuous interaction.

O’Shea and Alonso (2011) examined the role of social media alongside traditional media in sport settings, more specifically with professional sports teams in Australia. Noting the dearth of research in this area, the researchers asserted the need for additional studies to explore social media’s role in facilitating relationship marketing within sports. They surveyed organizational executives and identified challenges and opportunities associated with this usage. In terms of opportunities, organizations can gain a better understanding of how social media users access and process information provided through these platforms. They can also learn how to leverage these conduits alongside traditional media outlets. A variety of options exist, which give teams the chance to connect with consumers where they are (e.g., on their personal Facebook and Twitter pages) rather than forcing them to visit a team website for more information and interaction. Challenges for organizations also exist and include devoting appropriate resources in the forms of time and money spent managing their social media sites. This investment is necessary to ensure a consistent strategy and sustained interaction. Controlling information represents another challenge. In an era where consumers are “prosumers,” actively participating in the information creation and exchange, organizations must balance the desire to create an open and interactive space with the need to protect their brands, images, and connections with customers. Yet despite these challenges, the benefits of
relationship marketing remain. Sports organizations can marry social and traditional media to reach their end goal of creating sustainable customer relationships, which facilitate the sales of tickets, merchandise, and related products.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Abeza, O’Reilly, and Reid (2013) in their study of social media usage and relationship marketing with road-running events. The authors interviewed race directors responsible for each event’s social media campaign and found the race directors valued social media as a means of engaging in and sustaining conversations with current and future participants. They cited benefits in the form of learning more about their participants, as the social media platforms encouraged ongoing conversations. Social media also afforded them the chance to connect with individuals near and far and provide needed information, particularly in the final days leading up to their races. These activities and interaction could generate greater brand engagement and loyalty, demonstrated through sustained relationships and increased participation in their events. However, the race directors cautioned that benefits could only be obtained if organizations devoted the proper resources to their social media campaigns. They must also remain vigilant with their communications content but open and flexible to contributions from their social media followers. Finally, with the sizeable amount of information transmitted through this channel, race directors have to work hard to ensure their messages stay at the forefront and avoid getting lost in the torrent of information provided. The authors argued for more research in this area, particularly taking a longitudinal approach to measure the evolution of social media and changes in usage over time.

Organizations want to create an environment of interaction and engagement within the social media realm but are cautioned to monitor how this content is created and communicated, to ensure consumers feel a part of the conversation without marring the organizational brand and image (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Reid, 2013; O’Shea & Alonso, 2011). Coddington and Holton (2013) examined organizational use of social media for relationship marketing. The authors studied the Cleveland Indians “Social Suite” that offers fans behind-the-scenes game day access traditionally given to credentialed media personnel only. The desire to create more interaction prompted the team to loosen its control and let fans participate in the creation and dissemination of news. The authors concluded that this action would allow the team to continue managing the information it provided while prompting fans to become part of the communications process and developing a symbiotic relationship with an organization to which they attached great importance.

A team about which they cared deeply had validated and affirmed their identity as fans, creating a privileged space in which they could build relationships with other fans. (Coddington & Holton, 2013, p. 17)

Organizations strive to create these deep and lasting relationships and through the relationship-marketing process tries to offer increased communication, interaction, and value with their customers. Looking more specifically at how sports
organizations leverage various social media platforms provides a range of strategies and content.

Zimmerman, Clavio, and Lim (2011) studied Major League Soccer’s (MLS) use of YouTube videos. Of the content provided, highlight videos featuring the league or games were posted most often. Less frequent were videos highlighting or interviewing an individual player. Ranking the videos based on the number of views and comments received, game highlights proved most popular among viewers. The authors concluded that fans expressed greater interest in watching game highlights as opposed to related content and that MLS and other sports organizations—particularly those with limited financial resources—can use social media platforms such as YouTube to provide information about and promote their product offerings. These videos can serve as a vehicle to connect with fans, provide more information about the organization, and further their conversations with consumers.

Wallace, Wilson, and Miloch (2011) examined relationship marketing and brand management via the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and Big 12 Facebook website pages. The authors documented a combination of features used by the NCAA and conference, including emphasis on the following: (a) team success; (b) rivalry; (c) socialization; (d) brand mark; (e) stadium; (f) commitment to the fans; and (g) organizational attributes, such as community giving and goodwill. Comparing the NCAA to the Big 12, differences existed in their respective approaches. The NCAA concentrated primarily on highlighting team successes and players. The organization also created online socialization opportunities by engaging in conversations with fans or posting pictures and content highlighting fans. Conversely, the Big 12 focused on team rivalries and promoted its brand mark, whether logos or associated images.

In a similar study, Waters, Burke, Jackson, and Buning (2011) explored the National Football League’s (NFL) “relationship cultivation” via Facebook pages and official websites. Online activity fell into one of the four categories: (a) reciprocity or highlighting team partners and game promotions; (b) responsibility or information about team and stadium contacts; (c) reporting or team, schedule, and organizational information; and (d) relationship nurturing via merchandise sales and online content. Overall, the team Facebook and website usage centered on relationship nurturing followed by reciprocity. However, this activity depended on the type of outlet, whereby reciprocity appeared more frequently on team websites, while relationship nurturing received more attention on Facebook pages.

Finally, Pronschinske, Groza, and Walker (2012) studied relationship-marketing efforts conducted by the NFL as well as Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), and National Hockey League (NHL) through Facebook, and how these properties connected and built relationships with fans. The authors identified four primary Facebook elements used to accomplish their objectives: (a) authenticity or offering information about the organization’s logos and official pages; (b) disclosure or providing an organizational overview, mission
statement, and website link; (c) engagement or detailing team events, ticket, and merchandise sales; and (d) information or including team details plus photographs and video content. The results revealed having an authentic Facebook page that encouraged fan engagement corresponded with higher numbers of Facebook fans. The authors concluded that sports organizations could benefit from relationship marketing by developing ongoing interactions through this medium.

Studies examining social media usage in sport demonstrate the growing interest in understanding the potential benefits, particularly those addressing relationship marketing and social media’s role in facilitating this process. Relationship marketing requires a heightened focus on communication, interaction, and value, and social media can aid these efforts by creating an environment of two-way communications between organizations and consumers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Considering social media platforms from a relationship-marketing perspective, organizations can use Pinterest in a variety of ways.

First, they can employ Pinterest as communications tools to provide information about their organizations. This information can include details regarding their players, game updates, and charitable events (Abeza et al., 2013; Coddington & Holton, 2013; O’Shea & Alonso, 2011; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011; Zimmerman, Clavio, & Lim, 2011). They can encourage interaction by posting content about their fans and encouraging fans to do the same. Content may feature fan group experiences, such as tailgating, watching the games, or wearing team apparel. These fan-based interaction efforts may help teams spur increased levels of engagement (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2010). Beyond game day, organizations can create a larger sense of community, focusing on elements such as the geographic locale where the organization plays, providing a sense of history with details about the past or showcasing and creating tie-ins with the venue (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2011). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, organizations can use social media as a promotional tool to increase attendance and sell merchandise, which can provide value to the consumer and certainly to the organization (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2011).

Previous studies have focused almost solely on Facebook and how the social media platform can facilitate relationship marketing (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2011). Despite its popularity and extended usage by sports organizations, no studies to date have examined Pinterest within a sports context. The social media platform has grown exponentially since its origin (Hempel, 2012) and represents an opportunity for teams to engage in relationship marketing. This underexplored platform offers sports teams and other organizations the ability to communicate, share information, and interact with fans. The purpose of the study was to explore how professional sports organizations use Pinterest as a communications and relationship-marketing tool. The study examined how often and what types of pins professional sports leagues posted on their Pinterest pages and addressed two research questions:
Research Question 1: How did the leagues use Pinterest to communicate with fans?
Research Question 2: What usage similarities and differences existed among the leagues?

Method

The study was exploratory in nature and used content analysis to address the research purpose and questions. Numerous social media studies have employed this analytical approach to examine how sports organizations and athletes use social media platforms and what information they share through them (Wallace et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2011). Content analysis was used in this study to understand how the MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL teams used Pinterest. Based on their popularity ratings, attendance numbers, and media attention, the prominence of these leagues on the North American sports landscape arguably demonstrates the strong connections sports fans share with these organizations (Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick, & Greenwell, 2011). Therefore, an examination of their activities could provide insights regarding how sports organizations use Pinterest to communicate with fans, offering best practices for others to follow.

Data Collection

The teams were observed during 2012 and 2013 to provide a more long-term view and capture potential strategic developments regarding Pinterest usage over time. Abeza et al. (2013) argued for more social media–based relationship-marketing research employing a longitudinal approach. Social media platforms are a relatively new phenomenon and are constantly updating their functionality. For example, during 2013 Pinterest increased its focus on retailer revenue generation through the platform (Perez, 2013). Additionally, the organization is partnering with Apple, Google, and Foursquare to offer “Place Pins” that let users pin map locations and gather information as they plan trips and activities (Winkler, 2013). Pinterest continues to emphasize new user developments and innovations. Thus, rather than focusing on a single time period, researchers can benefit from examining Pinterest more longitudinal as the platform takes steps to improve and upgrade its functionality. Value also exists in exploring how users—in this case, professional sports teams—have modified their Pinterest usage. This information can provide insights into how users update their social media strategies in conjunction with platform changes. Therefore, the data collection includes 2012 and 2013 pins to provide a longer term look at professional sports and complete a year-over-year comparison of their Pinterest usage.

One important note with these time period selections is that Pinterest is archival in nature. Operating like a scrapbook, the social media platform allows users to create boards to which they can add or delete content. Users may employ different Pinterest strategies, whether continuously adding to a board or periodically wiping the
board clean and restarting with new pins. Pins can remain on the board for one day or indefinitely. This functionality differs from Facebook and Twitter. The latter platforms encourage continuous additions to their news feeds. Users focus primarily on the latest news and information rather than revisiting older content and sports organizations using Facebook and Twitter must compete to keep their information top of mind with consumers (Abeza et al., 2013). Conversely, Pinterest content has more staying power, as users can visit and revisit the pins. Perez (2013) noted that approximately half of pin-based product sales take place within several months after the pin is first introduced, highlighting the longer term nature of this content. Additionally, unlike Facebook or Twitter, Pinterest does not provide an automatic date stamp on its posted material. Teams can create a running archive of information and offer a more timeless perspective for their users.

Thus, during the two data collections, we selected every pin posted on each team’s boards, recognizing that teams may have posted that content the same day or in the prior months. The October 2012 and October 2013 data collections included every pin that appeared on every board, regardless of when it was posted. This data collection process afforded the most complete view of each team’s Pinterest usage. The sample also mimics the experiences of Pinterest users who can visit these boards and review all of the pins contained therein. The data gave us the ability to examine their pinning strategies: whether constantly adding to existing boards without sweeping them periodically, clearing the boards and replacing all of the existing content with new content, or making no changes to the boards over time.

To identify and examine professional teams using Pinterest, an alphabetical list of every professional team belonging to the MLB, NBA, NFL, or NHL and using the social media platform was created. The four leagues maintain official websites (i.e., MLB.com, NBA.com, NFL.com, NHL.com), and the leagues provide links to their respective teams’ website pages. We entered each team’s official homepage via the league website and searched for Pinterest page links. Many links were found on the homepage, in the form of a Pinterest icon button, which was often located alongside Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram icon buttons near the top or bottom of each team’s page. Some teams included specific social media pages on their websites, where they offered this information. Other team Pinterest pages were found through the Pinterest and Google search functions.

In October 2012, of 122 teams across the four professional leagues, 110 had Pinterest pages (MLB, \( n = 30 \); NBA, \( n = 27 \); NFL, \( n = 28 \); and NHL, \( n = 25 \)), while 12 teams had no readily identifiable Pinterest account. As of November 2013, the same 12 teams remained: the NBA’s Los Angeles Lakers, Memphis Grizzlies, and Sacramento Kings; the NFL’s Green Bay Packers, Oakland Raiders, Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and Tennessee Titans; and the NHL’s Boston Bruins, Florida Panthers, Nashville Predators, New York Rangers, and Ottawa Senators.

This information was used to select a smaller but representative sample of teams and their respective pins for further analysis. Using systematic random sampling, the researchers selected every fourth team listed alphabetically within each professional
league for a total of 29 teams across the four leagues (MLB, \( n = 7 \); NBA, \( n = 7 \); NFL, \( n = 8 \); and NHL, \( n = 7 \)). A relatively even split of teams from the four leagues would generate a representative sample and provide a comparative basis regarding how the various leagues and teams used Pinterest.

Of the 29 teams analyzed, 21 had official Pinterest links on their webpages. For the eight remaining teams without these links, we found their Pinterest pages through the Google and Pinterest search functions. These pages contained verbiage such as “The Official Page of . . . .” and link back to the team websites. We contacted each of the eight teams through e-mail or the “Contact Us” section of their websites to confirm the official nature of these Pinterest pages, and one of the remaining teams confirmed its Pinterest page.

After selecting the 29 teams, all of their respective Pinterest pins were downloaded in October 2012 and again in October 2013. Each pin represented one Pinterest posting and included one image, video, and/or text with space for comments below. The text included in the pin plus the HTML alt text describing the image were manually copied and pasted into an Excel spreadsheet along with the team name and board name for each pin. The data set contained a total of 7,609 pins from the 29 teams in October 2012 and 16,547 pins across the same 29 teams in October 2013 for a total of 24,156 pins.

The pins were classified into four primary usage categories with eight subcategories derived from previous studies examining relationship marketing within sports (Abeza et al., 2013; Coddington & Holton, 2013; O’Shea & Alonso, 2011; Pronschinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2011). The four categories were (1) information sharing, (2) group experience, (3) community, and (4) promotional. The categories were modified and expanded into subcategories where necessary to examine Pinterest usage by the sports teams.

1. **Information sharing** represents the team’s engagement with sports consumers by providing team information and insider perspectives to its fan base. The information sharing subcategories are (a) media games and (b) media team. Media games represent details about upcoming games, in-game updates, or past game results. Media team includes information regarding the team’s players, coaches, and support staff.

2. **Group experience** is an important aspect for individuals who consider themselves fans of a particular team or sport and can include tailgating, attending the game, and wearing team apparel. Teams can encourage fanship by asking fans to document their (c) group experience through content that reflects how they interact with each other and the team while participating in team-related activities.

3. **Community** is formed when fans interact with others who share similar interests, and teams can increase this sense of community by providing information about their (d) geography (e) history, and (f) venue. Geography refers to the connection between the team and its city, state, or region, while history
details the team’s historical events and records. Venue represents any information related to the team’s stadium or arena.

4. **Promotional** involves activities related to the team’s game (g) attendance and (h) merchandise. From a team perspective, attendance considers the provision of information regarding ticket sales and other promotional activities. Merchandise refers to selling team-related products such as apparel and home décor.

Two researchers participated in the coding process. They first coded a smaller subset of 50 Pinterest pins from one team’s 2012 data. Comparing their results, they discussed the coding differences and came to a consensus about the codebook and operationalization of the 4 categories and 8 subcategories. The two researchers independently coded the October 2012 and October 2013 pins, and an interrater reliability analysis using Cohen’s $\kappa$ statistic was performed to determine consistency between the coding (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). A minimum $\kappa$ value of .70 is acceptable for exploratory research, and “.80 or greater is acceptable in most situations” (Lombard et al., 2002, p. 600). The Cohen’s $\kappa$ values for the categories were deemed acceptable for the current study and were as follows: community $\kappa = .86$, group experience $\kappa = .85$, information sharing $\kappa = .94$, and promotional $\kappa = .92$. The remaining coding differences were discussed until the researchers reached 100% agreement.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using SPSS 20.0, and descriptive statistics were calculated in conjunction with chi-square ($\chi^2$) analyses to address the two research questions. Frequencies and percentages were reported, reflecting the categories and subcategories deriving from the relationship-marketing conceptual framework and previous research. $\chi^2$ tests were used to examine potential similarities and differences among the organizations, more specifically to compare the leagues based on their usage by subcategory and over time. In addition, the differences in pins across the four professional sports leagues were analyzed.

**Results**

**Research Question 1. How Did the Leagues Use Pinterest to Communicate With Fans?**

The results indicated that of the four leagues, the NFL had the largest number of pins (9,119; 38% of the total pins) followed by the NHL (6,897; 29%), NBA (5,859; 24%), and MLB (2,281; 9%; Table 1). Comparing the data from October 2012 to October 2013, the collective league pins increased from October 2012 (7,609; 32%) to October 2013 (16,547; 69%). In the first time period, the NHL posted the most pins (2,584 pins; 34% of the time period’s total), followed by the NBA.
In the second time period, the NFL had the most pins (7,123; 43%), followed by the NHL (4,313; 26%), NBA (3,675; 22%), and MLB (1,436; 9%). The frequencies among the usage categories and subcategories were examined. Of the four usage categories, group experience was used most frequently (8,543; 35%), followed by information sharing (8,376; 35%), promotional (5,161; 21%), and community (2,076; 9%). Overall, of the 8 subcategories, group experience was used most frequently (8,543; 35%), followed by media team (7,068; 29%) and merchandise (4,675; 19%; Table 2). The five remaining categories were used less frequently with history (1,384; 6%), media game (1,308; 5%), attendance (486; 2%), geography (462; 2%), and venue (230; 1%). In the first time period, group experience (3,053; 40%) and media team (2,182; 29%) had the most pins. In the second time period, group experience (5,490; 33%) and media team (4,886; 30%) again had the most pins. The $\chi^2$ tests revealed statistically significant differences across the four categories, where $\chi^2 = 352.739$, degrees of freedom ($df$) = 3, $p = .000$, and 8 subcategories, where $\chi^2 = 479.930$, $df = 7$, $p = .000$.

**Table 1.** Pinterest Usage by League and Subcategory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pinterest Usage Subcategories</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Geography</th>
<th>Group Experience</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Media Game</th>
<th>Media Team</th>
<th>Merchandise</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MLB Number of pins</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>827</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2,281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within league</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBA Number of pins</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>1,006</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>2,433</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5,859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within league</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFL Number of pins</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>4,123</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>1,989</td>
<td>2,246</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9,119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within league</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHL Number of pins</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>3,032</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>2,192</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6,897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within league</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of pins</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>8,543</td>
<td>1,384</td>
<td>1,308</td>
<td>7,068</td>
<td>4,675</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>24,156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. MLB = Major League Baseball; NBA = National Basketball Association; NHL = National Hockey League; NFL = National Football League.
Group experience pins featured fan activities and participation. The teams repinned content posted by the fans, which offered a glimpse of their personal lives and team affiliations. Their pins included photographs of sports-themed weddings; home decor featuring the team’s colors, logos, and mascots; tailgating events and recipes; and personal affects such as team-related tattoos and manicures. Media team pins included a range of photographs highlighting the players taking part in practices, working at charity events, or engaging in personal activities. Merchandise pins allowed the teams to showcase apparel and related products available for sale. The pins included links to online retailers, where fans could purchase the licensed merchandise. Although used less frequently, the remaining categories also featured team elements. History pins included photographs of throwback jerseys and memorabilia from prior seasons. Media game pins displayed highlights and scores from each game. Attendance pins featured promotions such as special ticket packages and giveaways. Geography showcased the connection between the team and its surrounding environs with pictures of local landmarks and city-related themes. Finally, venue pins included photographs inside and around the team’s facility.

### Table 2. Pinterest Usage by Year and Subcategory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pinterest Usage Subcategories</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Geography</th>
<th>Group Experience</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Media Game</th>
<th>Media Team</th>
<th>Merchandise</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 2012 Number of pins</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>3,053</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>2,182</td>
<td>1,151</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>7,609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within period</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2013 Number of pins</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>5,490</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>1,101</td>
<td>4,886</td>
<td>3,524</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>16,547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within period</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of pins</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>8,543</td>
<td>1,384</td>
<td>1,308</td>
<td>7,068</td>
<td>4,675</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>24,156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within period</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 2: What Usage Similarities and Differences Existed Among the Leagues?

Research question 2a: Usage by league and subcategory. The first $\chi^2$ test compared Pinterest use by league and subcategory, and the results were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4,578.508, df = 21, p = .000$). As discussed earlier, group experience, media
team, and merchandise were the most frequently used subcategories, and the three ranked highly across the leagues. The MLB used merchandise most frequently (827; 36%) compared to media team (454; 20%) and group experience (382; 17%). The NBA used media team most frequently (2,433; 42%) versus group experience (1,006; 17%) and merchandise (850, 15%). The NFL also used group experience most frequently (4,123, 45%) compared to merchandise (2,246; 25%) and media team (1,989; 22%). Finally, the NHL used group experience most frequently (3,032; 44%) versus media team (2,192; 32%) and merchandise (752; 11%).

Research question 2b: Usage by league over time. A second \( \chi^2 \) test was performed, comparing Pinterest use by league from October 2012 to October 2013. The \( \chi^2 \) test revealed statistically significant differences across the leagues, where \( \chi^2 = 627.281, df = 3, p = .000 \). The leagues as a whole used Pinterest more frequently in October 2013 compared to October 2012. A closer look at the data revealed varying increases in usage across the four leagues. The NFL experienced the greatest growth in pins (5,127; 257% increase), followed by the NHL (1,729; 67% increase), NBA (1,491; 68% increase), and MLB (591; 70% increase).

Research question 2c: Usage by subcategory over time. Descriptive statistics were used to further examine the differences among subcategories between October 2012 and October 2013. The increase in pin usage was most prominent for media team (2,704 pins, 124% increase), followed by group experience (2,437, 80% increase), merchandise (2,373, 206% increase), media game (894, 4% increase), attendance (250, 212% increase), history (138, 22% increase), venue (74, 95% increase), and geography (68, 35% increase). The number of pins increased; however, the percentage of pins in each subcategory remained relatively the same for the largest categories. Media team and group experience accounted for 69% of the pins in October 2012 and 63% in October 2013. While most organizations changed or updated their boards and pins within them, some added no new content from one year to the next. This occurred most frequently in the merchandise (\( n = 27 \)), media team (\( n = 24 \)), and group experience (\( n = 15 \)) subcategories.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore how professional sports organizations use Pinterest as a communications and relationship-marketing tool. Research has shown that social media platforms have become a primary source of information sharing and a way to generate sports fan interaction (Clavio & Walsh, 2013). As fans gravitate toward different media outlets, sports organizations can develop platforms to further their relationship-marketing efforts by communicating with fans and encouraging engagement in online communities.
Theoretical Implications

This study’s results highlighted the evolving use of social media—in this case for sports organizations to connect with and provide information to fans. These actions can facilitate the relationship-marketing process as they focus on communication, interaction, and value (Grönroos, 2004). A team’s social media activities and content can lead to increased engagement as fans view, respond to, and repin the organization’s pins. In turn, consumers may recognize value in these transactions, whether through gaining more information about their favorite teams, sharing their own group experiences with others, or purchasing merchandise and other team-related products.

This study was the first to examine relationship marketing via Pinterest in a sport context, focus on the relationship-marketing process, and explore the type of content provided through this communications channel. In terms of usage, the sports teams in this study used Pinterest most often to highlight the fan group experience. Previous studies documented the use of social media by sports organizations to emphasize their fan engagement and create a community around their collective experiences via content posted online (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2011). Other organizations have tried to emphasize a group experience by encouraging fans to take part in the online content creation process within social networks (Abeza et al., 2013; Coddington & Holton, 2013; O’Shea & Alonso, 2011). In this study, the teams developed and repinned Pinterest content featuring fans, whether posing in jerseys, dressing their pets in a similar manner, creating customized team-related art, or showing off wedding cakes with team logos and colors. This content relates to the second component of relationship marketing, or interaction, as the fans and teams traded photographs. Sports organizations can engage fans by offering content that relates directly to them and their personal activities. This social media activity differs from traditional one-way communication that often involves the organization reaching fans through television, newspaper, and magazine advertisements with little in the way of consumer correspondence directed back to the organization (Grönroos, 2004).

Although not all fans can attend games, they can take part in other activities and show their affiliation with and loyalty to the team. Laverie and Arnett (2000) noted that group experience represents an important factor in the formation of fanship as fans outwardly display their personal interests and affiliations. Fans can show their sports associations in multiple ways, and the organizations in this study promoted such displays. The posted Pinterest content illustrated fan engagement beyond simply attending sporting events. A myriad of group experience options can strengthen social identities for the most fervent fans at the games and elsewhere—and potentially spur stronger identities among others watching these interactions (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Providing an online space where fans can embrace their collective group experience represents an important component for teams and fans using Pinterest.

In conjunction with group experience, the teams focused on providing information to fans about all things related to their respective organizations. This activity
speaks to the first component of relationship-marketing process or the communication between organizations and their consumers (Grönroos, 2004). Social media represents a natural way for sports teams to provide information about their organizations, and these communications can serve as a gateway to sustained relationships with consumers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Sports leagues and teams have used social media platforms such as Facebook (Pronschsinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2010) and YouTube (Zimmerman et al., 2011) to provide details about the organization, whether through text, pictures, or videos.

Teams using Pinterest should recognize the importance of giving fans insights about their organizations—whether team rosters, player/team news developments, or activities such as community service participation. These details can give fans a different perspective as they learn more about the athletes on and off the playing surface and can enhance a fan’s connections to the organization (Coddington & Holton, 2013; Pronschsinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2011). Pinterest presents a dynamic forum for sharing content, by combining pictures and videos of players and personnel with supporting text. This information may help highly affiliated fans solidify their fanship as they gain insightful and updated information. The same information could strengthen associations for lesser identified fans as they learn more about the teams. Additionally, organizations have some measure of control over the content provided (Abeza et al., 2013; Coddington & Holton, 2013; O’Shea & Alonso, 2013). Rather than waiting for traditional media coverage of their organizations and events, teams can produce and disseminate their own stories and content. They also can encourage consumers to take part in the creation process, thereby strengthening the trust and engagement with their fan bases.

Displaying team merchandise represented another key team use of Pinterest. This heightened pin usage echoes previous research that notes the importance of merchandise as a revenue source for sports teams and a valuable element for fans (Laverie & Arnett, 2000; O’Shea & Alonso, 2011). As such, organizations can initiate the relationship-marketing process with the ultimate goal of creating sustained relationships with consumers, which can lead to expressions of loyalty and brand engagement through purchases (O’Shea & Alonso, 2011). Wallace et al. (2011) noted that NFL teams used Facebook and webpages to promote merchandise. Buying jerseys and other products allows fans to communicate their affiliations with favorite teams without uttering a word (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Similarly, in this study, the NFL along with MLB, NBA, and NHL teams used Pinterest to promote team apparel and other products. Every team that actively used Pinterest had at least one board and multiple pins featuring their available merchandise and many had many more—often displaying separate boards for women, men, and children as well as home decor and gift ideas. The pins contained photographs along with product information, prices, and where to purchase the products online. Many of the pins linked back to team or league websites and online stores. Fans want to show off their team connections (Laverie & Arnett, 2000) and giving them a way to purchase merchandise via Pinterest represents a viable revenue opportunity for these organizations.
Pinterest as part of the growing social media environment demonstrates the ability to provide an array of content—whether pins focused on information sharing, group experience, or promotional—for sports fans. Williams and Chinn (2010) outlined the potential benefits of using social media as a communications channel and relationship-marketing tool within sports settings. The teams in this study featured these benefits in varying degrees through their pin usage.

Practical Implications

The study explored Pinterest usage by professional sports teams over a 12-month period. This extended examination is important as Pinterest’s functionality continues to change. The social media platform is placing greater emphasis on revenue generation for organizational users (MacMillan, November 14, 2013; Perez, 2013; Winkler, 2013), and sports teams could gain from leveraging these tools. Additionally, a longer term look provides an assessment of Pinterest’s potential staying power. Does the social media platform represent the latest online “flavor-of-the-month,” or does it offer longer term opportunities? A range of social media platforms have emerged within recent years, and sports teams will need to closely compare platforms and decide where to best spend their time and resources based on organizational needs. Williams and Chinn (2010) argued that sports organizations benefit most when they match their strategic goals and objectives with the appropriate platforms.

Viewing the 29 teams during the 1-year period revealed that most teams updated their boards with new content. In fact, the number of pins more than doubled from 2012 to 2013. The biggest driver of this increase was the NFL that accounted for 57% of the 8,938 new pins. Overall, the leagues strongly favored the group experience, media team, and merchandise subcategories. However, examining the subcategory activity highlighted individual preferences among the leagues. The MLB used merchandise and media team most often. The NFL focused on group experience and merchandise pins, while the NBA and NHL used group experience and media team pins most frequently. The leagues were consistent in their preferences as their favored subcategories did not shift from October 2012 to October 2013. The leagues may have concluded that these three areas provided the best long-term opportunities for them in terms of interacting with fans, educating them on team-related activities, and encouraging product sales. Their actions reflect the relationship-marketing process by connecting and communicating with consumers in efforts to generate value and future revenues.

Having said that, the individual teams varied their Pinterest usage, demonstrating a range of content management options. Some used Pinterest like a scrapbook for one period of time, periodically replacing old content with new pins but keeping a similar number of pins within each board at all times. For example, the Boston Celtics used the same merchandise boards (“Celtics Hats,” “Baby Celtics Gear”) but updated the pins to reflect the newest season’s product offerings. Other teams deleted pins and boards in their entirety. Teams such as the Anaheim Ducks,
Milwaukee Bucks, and Oakland Athletics removed boards featuring photo contests and time-sensitive promotions after the events concluded. Some teams introduced new boards, such as the Baltimore Ravens with “Super Bowl Champs Gear” after winning the Super Bowl. Many of the new boards offered team information, such as the New York Islanders “2013–14 Training Camp,” Seattle Seahawks “Q&A Pin: Golden Tate,” and Texas Rangers “Happy Opening Day 2013.”

Most teams used Pinterest as a continuous archive, adding new content to older pins and increasing the overall number of pins featured on each board. The Denver Broncos generated the most new pins and boards, increasing from 237 pins in October 2012 to 3,940 pins in October 2013. The majority of their new pins focused on group experience and media team, and these boards ranged from “Broncos Support for Breast Cancer Awareness” to “Married to the Denver Broncos” to “Player Photos.” The Portland Trail Blazers, Los Angeles Kings, and Seattle Seahawks also drove the overall increase in content produced from 1 year to the next. This strategy allowed the teams to provide new information while retaining details about previous contests, promotions, draft picks, and older news. The archival option allows fans to go back in time to relive the previous year or return to pins and comments they enjoyed at an earlier date.

These findings prompted an additional statistical analysis to explore whether significant relationships existed between the number and types of pins posted by each team and their win-loss records; however, no significant correlations were found. Instead, most teams consistently added new content to ensure their pages represented an interesting and dynamic place where fans could participate in the information exchange. Regardless of approach, these options gave teams a sustained way to provide unfiltered updates and organizational information to fans. However, several organizations failed to update their boards, and their content in some areas remained static over the 12 months. In the constantly changing world of social media, it becomes important to keep content fresh and at the top of consumers’ minds (Abeza et al., 2013).

Static content, particularly for boards such as merchandise or media team, represents a lost opportunity for teams to engage. Fans may quickly lose interest in the team’s boards, feeling as though limited value can be obtained from looking at the same content repeatedly. Thus, keeping the boards fresh and up to date will help keep fans engaged, as they may be prompted to return to the boards repeatedly and search for new information. Previous research documented the creation of value through social media, but stressed the importance of providing adequate resources to manage their social media campaigns and keep this content current and at the forefront of consumers’ minds (Abeza et al., 2013; O’Shea & Alonso, 2011).

In terms of new content, group experience and media team pins drove a large portion of the increase in pins over time, suggesting that teams wanted to highlight fans and their respective affiliations. Additionally, the teams increased pin content related to their organizations, offering fans an opportunity to learn more about the players and team personnel. The findings highlight that teams have embraced Pinterest, investing more effort into increasing their numbers and variety of pins as well
as including the platform as part of their overall social media efforts. Most of the teams in this study featured a Pinterest link on their official websites—on the first page and/or on their social media pages that offer links to Pinterest alongside Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

The teams also increased their emphasis on merchandise pins during the 12 months, and this strategic decision is in accordance with Pinterest’s expanded efforts to help users generate revenues. In November 2013, Pinterest announced a new function, which would allow online retailers such as Wal-Mart and Zappos to access information about the most popular pins on their product boards and learn more about their Pinterest followers. This information will allow retailers and other organizational users to track and mine data about their Pinterest fans, identify the most attractive components of their Pinterest pages as noted by consumers, and highlight popular items for sale (MacMillan, November 14, 2013). This new functionality could extend the long-term usefulness of Pinterest, moving it from primarily an entertainment social media platform to one that can help sports teams and other organizations produce profits. Teams can use a longitudinal approach and explore relationships between the types and number of pins offered versus their ability to increase sales over time.

Going forward, sports leagues and teams can identify potential Pinterest opportunities and develop strategic plans to benefit from them, in particular by showcasing their many product offerings. They can capitalize on the social media platform’s prominent female presence—connecting with members of this key market segment in an online environment women have deemed familiar and comfortable (Hempel, 2012). Some sports organizations may express concern with Pinterest having a skewed female demographic. However, females drive some popular areas of social media usage and represent an important consideration. Referencing another platform, MacMillan (2013, November 20) reported that females represent 70% of Snapchat users and that its users send out over 400 million photographs on a daily basis.

The popularity and demographic splits of social media platforms such as Pinterest and Snapchat highlight the large number of females within the social media environment, and organizations have an opportunity to cater more specifically to them and their needs. Women often are the primary decision makers regarding household purchases and buy a large number of sports-related products (Weinberger, 2012). Displaying pins featuring team merchandise to a female audience—whether for themselves, their children, or the home—represents a sound strategic decision. Females may use Pinterest for nonsports purposes but see team merchandise and related pins while browsing through other content. They may subsequently become more interested in purchasing these products and exploring the organization’s other boards and pins. Other female users may be highly identified fans and appreciate Pinterest’s unique layout and functionality, giving them a chance to interact with their favorite teams in a different manner.

The leagues and teams used Pinterest to advertise their merchandise and also to display details about their teams and games, venues, and surrounding locales.
perhaps viewing the social media platform as a “one-stop shop” of sorts—or as a way to augment their websites, Facebook pages, and other communications outlets. This usage can help promote online communities, where fans can share similar interests in supporting the team. O’Shea and Alonso (2011) noted the emergence of “prosumers” or sports fans not only consume content but also help create it, and organizations have tried to facilitate and encourage this engagement (Abeza et al., 2010; Coddington & Holton, 2013).

Despite Pinterest’s potential advantages, we conclude with a word of caution. Teams should note that as of now, there are no official confirmations or designations on Pinterest pages to confirm whether a page represents an organization’s actual account versus one created by another user. For the purposes of this study, we went to each team’s official website, accessed through their respective league’s official site, and searched for a link to the team’s Pinterest page. These links were frequently found on the team homepage, typically using the Pinterest icon button, which was located alongside the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram icon buttons. Going through these steps ensured that we accessed the team’s official page. However, searching for Pinterest pages through Pinterest or Google, we found several instances of multiple team pages—with some designated as the “official” page but offering relatively little to no content.

Sports organizations should continuously check Pinterest to identify potential instances of rogue accounts, and they should update their own pages regularly. Announcements about Pinterest boards and pins should be made on the team’s official webpage. Teams can accomplish this by posting a Pinterest logo that would direct fans to the Pinterest page with a mere click. In an era of increasing fake social media accounts (Keller & Applegate, 2013), Pinterest should consider including a definitive indication to confirm the authenticity of its pages (Pronschinske et al., 2012). Having an incomplete or inaccurate Pinterest page may be as detrimental—if not more so—than not having one at all.

Finally, some Pinterest critics have noted potential copyright issues as users pin online content without expressly acknowledging the content’s source (Tsukayama, 2012). Citing the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, Pinterest recognizes the importance of protecting copyrights but asserts that its functionality does not actively encourage copyright infringement. Instead, the company stresses a synergistic relationship with other frequently pinned websites such as Etsy, YouTube, and Facebook, and argues that Pinterest helps facilitate increased traffic to those sites. However, company officials will continue to monitor usage and take action if and where necessary (Tsukayama, 2012).

Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, the study examined a subset of North American professional sports leagues and teams using Pinterest. Exploring different professional leagues and teams, collegiate teams, or teams hailing from other
countries may have yielded different results. The study also focused solely on professional leagues and their Pinterest usage. Looking at other social media outlets may have generated different results. Finally, the study examined Pinterest from an organizational perspective to evaluate team and league social media usage. Sports fans also can use the social media platform to fulfill their own needs. Exploring Pinterest use from their perspective may have provided varying insights.

To address these limitations, future studies could expand to include other professional and college sports. As more teams embrace Pinterest, their activities could be explored with an examination of boards and pins from those organizations. Additional studies could include Pinterest with social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook to examine how teams use social media for relationship marketing and to provide information about their organizations across a variety of platforms. Future research could survey social media users who use Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest regularly to better understand why they use certain platforms and which outlets are most effective in promoting and facilitating various consumption behaviors. Studies could also focus on the gender demographic split occurring with Pinterest, and help to identify the potential differences between female and male Pinterest users. Finally, a Pinterest stigma exists for some who view the platform as female-centric based on its large number of female users (Perez, 2013). As such, males may express reluctance to use Pinterest to interact with their favorite sports teams. Future research could examine this stigma in more detail, and assess the perceptions of male and female users.

Summary

Pinterest represents a viable social media platform for targeting females and younger audiences (Hempel, 2012). Employing the relationship-marketing conceptual framework, the study found that four professional sports leagues used the platform to reach these and other fans by providing information about their organizations, emphasizing a shared group experience, and selling merchandise. Opportunities exist to expand this usage further to include more game updates, ticket sales, and other promotions as well as details about organizational venues, locales, and histories. Sports organizations can leverage Pinterest’s many features in conjunction with other social media and traditional outlets, enhancing creating shared online communities with their fans and followers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
References


