

# Relationship Marketing and Social Media in Sport

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Relationship marketing (RM) is about retaining customers through the achievement of long-term mutual satisfaction by businesses and their customers. Sport organizations, to retain customers by establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships, need to communicate and engage in dialogue with their customers. To achieve this on an ongoing basis, sport organizations need to employ effective communication platforms. In this regard, social media (SM) is becoming an ideal tool for a continuing 2-way dialogue. However, the effects of SM, primarily in terms of addressing RM goals, are not yet well understood. This study explores the opportunities and challenges facing managers in sport organizations in using SM in an RM strategy. Eight case studies were undertaken on organizations that put on running events. The article presents the findings on the use, opportunities, and challenges of SM and recommendations encouraging continued investigation.

**Keywords:** opportunities and challenges, sport events, running events

Organizations are increasingly focusing their marketing efforts beyond creating a single exchange in building long-term relationships with their customers (Kotler, 2011). Known as relationship marketing, this area of marketing has the central goal of retaining customers by achieving long-term mutual satisfaction between an organization and its customers (Grönroos, 2004; Kotler, 2011). To establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with its customers, any business needs to communicate and engage in dialogue with them (Grönroos, 2004; Sheth, 2002), including sport organizations. To ensure successful communication and dialogue, businesses are required to employ effective communication platforms (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Among these, social media are rapidly becoming an ideal tool for ongoing two-way dialogue (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Many types of businesses today are increasingly engaging in these new media with the aim of delivering their products and services competitively (Askool &

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Nakata, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009), including sport organizations. At the same time, consumers are progressively embracing social media as part of their daily communication mix (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), which includes dialogue relating to their sport-related interests (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Indeed, researchers note that businesses' and consumers' joint interest in social media is changing the dynamics of marketing faster than ever (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

However, the effects of social media, primarily in terms of addressing relationship-marketing goals, are not yet well understood and need further investigation (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Similarly, in practical settings, managers are not fully clear about how social media can be effectively employed in relationship marketing (Ang, 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Even for those already engaged in social media, the new media present their own operational challenges (Woodcock, Broomfield, Downer, & Starkey, 2011).

The purpose of this research, therefore, was to rationalize these areas of relationship marketing and social media in sport. Given that a strong argument can be made that a gap in the sport communications literature exists and that managers of sport are interested in both social media and relationship marketing, this study addresses three research questions. First, the article explores how sport organizations use social media in terms of meeting relationship-marketing goals. Second, it assesses how sport managers perceive the opportunities involved in social media as a relationship-marketing tool. Finally, the study looks at how the managers see the challenges that social media pose in meeting their relationship-marketing goals.

## Literature Review

### Relationship Marketing

A relationship approach to marketing has existed as long as the history of trade and commerce (Grönroos, 2004; Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). Leonard Berry (1983) was the first scholar to coin the term *relationship marketing* (Yang & Wu, 2007; Yu & Trail, 2011). Grönroos (2004) defines relationship marketing (RM) as

A process of identifying and establishing, maintaining and enhancing and when necessary also terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties are met; and this is done by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises. (p. 101)

The basic thinking behind RM, in general, starts from building a two-way collaborative relationship through communication and interaction between businesses and customers (Grönroos, 1994). This relationship involves ongoing dialogue, listening to each other, learning from each other, and ultimately reaching a common understanding (Grönroos, 1994; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). When businesses reach an understanding of their customers by fulfilling promises they made in their communications, they will produce and deliver a cocreated and customer-valued product (Grönroos, 1994). In maintaining and enhancing this process, businesses build intimacy and long-term relationships and eventually secure long-term profits (Grönroos, 2000; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). Identifying the needs of valuable

customers through RM also reduces the cost of serving them over time, which translates into enhanced profit (Ha & Janda, 2011). As indicated in the work of Berry (1995); Christopher, Payne, and Ballantyne (2002); and Grönroos (1996), within the broader marketing context RM's benefits include greater customer retention, increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, greater profits, and increased stability and security.

Customers also derive benefits by getting involved in relational exchanges (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). As Sheth and Parvatiyar suggested, and as supported by Bee and Kahle, customers engage in a relationship because they prefer choice reduction, the benefits of which include greater efficiency in decision making, minimizing searching costs, and achieving cognitive consistency in decisions. In addition, if customers are engaged in a relationship with an organization, they are likely to be familiar with the services offered, which reduces the perceived risks associated with future purchase choices (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Stavros & Westberg, 2009).

Unfortunately, the implementation of RM is not simple. It requires a long-term outlook, embracing technology, and commitment to a customer focus (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). Often, RM is engaged superficially (i.e., some businesses do not commit the resources RM requires) and sometimes unsuccessfully because firms see it as a strategic option to be tested instead of a set of long-term beliefs that will affect all aspects of the business (Adamson, Jones, & Tapp, 2006). According to Grönroos (2004), the implementation of RM is more than a strategy and cannot simply be assigned to a single department like marketing or sales. Relationship approaches to marketing challenge the foundations of marketing and demand reconsideration of a business's existing structures, behaviors, and attitudes. Adamson et al. and Peppers and Rogers (2011) noted that RM is an enterprise-wide approach all employees should embrace. RM is the very essence of business, through which a firm places more importance on commitment to customers than short-term profit maximization.

Although the importance of RM is recognized across different industries, relational exchanges differ considerably across various consumers and contexts (Stavros & Westberg, 2009; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Consequently, RM findings from one field of study may not apply to another (Stavros & Westberg, 2009). Therefore, further research will be required to understand the application and operation of an RM approach across specific industries, in this case the sport sector.

## **Relationship Marketing in Sport**

As Bee and Kahle (2006), Stavros et al. (2008), Stavros and Westberg (2009), and Williams and Chinn (2010) have indicated, limited research and theoretical development has been conducted on RM in the sport sector. Nevertheless, the existing studies offer useful information, and these studies generally accept that sport organizations can benefit from RM (for more detail see the work of Cousens, Babiak, & Slack, 2000; Lapio & Speter, 2000; Stavros et al., 2008; Yu & Trail, 2011).

In most cases, sports-marketing transactions involve some type of RM (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Teams, leagues, athletes, marketing corporations, and fans have relationships with one another that depend on successful management of those relationships (Bee & Kahle, 2006). Sometimes relationship

efforts are explicit; in other cases, they are hidden or unrecognized (Williams & Chinn, 2010). As Bee and Kahle (2006) indicated, for sport organizations to be successful in their endeavors, they should view customers as lifetime partners and try to understand their changing wants, desires, and values. RM represents a compelling marketing approach in the sport industry as opposed to widely practiced short-term transactions (e.g., ticket sales) and immediate profits (Stavros et al., 2008). Through an RM approach, sport marketers can communicate, listen, address customers' needs and desires, and maintain and enhance their fan base (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Yu & Trail, 2011). This has become easier with the development of new technology that encourages sport organizations to communicate with their global audiences and maintain and enhance relationships with them (Stavros et al., 2008).

As indicated earlier, social media are providing new directions and benefits to RM, and Web 2.0 technologies are making relational exchanges affordable and more effective for sport managers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Social media are increasingly becoming an accepted set of digital tools that helps organizations meet RM goals (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

## Social Media

The evolution of Internet communications has transformed one-way-dominated Web communication (i.e., online communication that does not allow readers to make written contribution) into dynamic two-way and multiple-channel forms of communication through social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and Miller and Lammis (2010) indicated that three factors are driving this transformation: technological drivers such as wider access to Internet bandwidth and enhanced data-storage capacity, economic drivers such as easy access to tools to create user-generated content, and social drivers such as society's growing familiarity with the Internet and, particularly, the rise of a young generation with significant technical know-how and enthusiasm to engage online.

This expansion has enabled customers to become producers and distributors of information on social media (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, & McKenzie, 2008). Customers are now able to create, listen, learn, contribute, and circulate interests, experiences, and commentary through collaborative writing, content sharing, social networking, social bookmarking, and syndication (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Thackeray et al., 2008). As these are happening instantaneously, real-time information exchange has become an inherent behavior of today's society (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Attributes such as simplicity, accessibility, contact availability, and transparency have also contributed to the popularity of social media (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

The phrase *social media* (SM) means, however, different things to different people. In the literature *social media* and *Web 2.0* are terms often used interchangeably (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008), even though they are not entirely the same. The term *Web 2.0* was first introduced by O'Reilly (2005; Askool & Nakata, 2011), and although many definitions of it have emerged since then, the term has not yet enjoyed a unanimously accepted academic definition (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Nevertheless, the way the term has been formulated gives an idea of what it means. Web 2.0 succeeds the original Web (i.e., Internet Web sites, "Web 1.0") that largely carries a one-way message supplied by

publishers on a static page (O'Reilly, 2007; Thackeray et al., 2008). Web 2.0 goes beyond the "page metaphor of Web 1.0" (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 17) and features collective and collaborative information produced and controlled by users (O'Reilly, 2007; Thackeray et al., 2008). In Web 2.0, SM users share, link, collaborate, and produce online content using text, photos, audio files, and videos (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Thackeray et al., 2008). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), SM is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61).

Some popular examples of SM applications include Facebook, MySpace, and Bebo (social networking); del.icio.us (bookmarking); Flickr (online photo sharing; Drury, 2008); YouTube (video sharing); BookCrossing (text); and forums and bulletin boards (Williams & Chinn, 2010). As O'Reilly (2005) noted, "Web 2.0 does not have a hard boundary, but rather, a gravitational core" (p. 18), and classifying Web 2.0 technologies into distinct categories is not easy. Yet, some of the technologies and the applications share similarities that help classify applications into particular categories. Constantinides and Fountain (2008) classified Web 2.0 technologies based on application types into five main categories: blogs, social networks, content communities, forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators.

## SM and RM

As Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2010) pointed out, as SM becomes more expressive, consumers are unreservedly sharing their experiences and opinions, which are becoming increasingly influential on other consumers' choices and preferences. The SM network fosters an environment where consumers form strong relationships in which the parties influence each other's views, attitudes, knowledge, information gathering, purchasing behavior, and postpurchase assessments (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This new SM environment has significantly affected power structures in the marketplace, bringing about a significant migration of market power from businesses toward customers (Kotler et al., 2010). Consequently, the SM phenomenon has created a different marketing landscape for marketers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Kotler et al., 2010).

As SM empowers consumers, it also presents attractive opportunities for businesses, including opportunities for marketers to communicate directly with consumers (Miller & Lammas, 2010). Traditionally, marketing communications were limited to one-way, static mass communication, where marketers had difficulty identifying their customers and interacting directly with them (Beech, Chadwick, & Tapp, 2000a). Today, SM has brought the traditional offline customer-organization dyad to a new level that allows customer engagement and dynamic one-on-one real-time dialogue (Drury, 2008). The increasing use of portable and wireless mobile devices has strongly facilitated this dialogue and enabled marketers to reach large numbers of consumers on their personal devices anywhere instantly (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). In this technologically advanced business environment, the "old-school" marketing thoughts and traditional marketing practices are facing new opportunities and challenges and are forcing marketers to think outside the box (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

## SM, RM, and Sport

Via a review of related literature, a series of broad theoretical opportunities and challenges that SM presented in meeting RM goals are conceptualized. These opportunities and challenges are presented here, the opportunities followed by the challenges.

**Opportunities: Better Knowledge of Sport Participants and Fans.** Sport organizations in the past have invested huge sums of money to gather customers' data, relying largely on surveys, focus groups, research companies, and sophisticated sales devices, which are all intended to study the customers' behaviors and viewing patterns (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006; Woodcock et al., 2011). Much of the outcomes of such methods, as Rein et al. and Adamson et al. (2006) indicated, have largely been data driven (i.e., gathering customer data) as opposed to being content driven (i.e., understanding customers). As a result, the outcomes have been superficial, not going beyond accessing customer data or not getting into depth to know and understand customers, which is the bedrock of RM (Adamson et al., 2006). Today, SM is going beyond the "old way" of just accessing customers' data; SM opened up a wider opportunity to get and stay in touch with customers in a direct way, to engage in dialogue (Ioakimidis, 2010; Williams & Chinn, 2010), and to know and understand customers better than ever before (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Through a close knowledge of customers, sport marketers will be able to better understand the needs of relevant customer groups and be able to respond accordingly (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). The access to detailed customer information that SM provides enables marketers to know their customers at a deeper level than the traditional RM approach (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Woodcock et al., 2011). In short, an in-depth, detailed, individual, and closer knowledge of customers' values, needs, desire, and wants is the opportunity SM presented to an RM approach.

**Opportunities: Advanced Customer–Organization Interaction.** Traditionally, sport organizations have had difficulty maintaining contacts and interacting on an ongoing basis with their customers (Rein et al., 2006). SM, as a global communication and exchange medium, has transformed the traditional offline customer–organization dyad into a new level that allows customers' engagement in a real-time and dynamic one-to-one dialogue (Drury, 2008). Nowadays, through SM, sport organizations of nearly all sizes (most importantly those with geographically remote audiences) are able to actively listen in on their customers' voices and keep track of individual customers' needs (Williams & Chinn, 2010). The two-way, or even multiple-way, communication and participation opportunities that SM platforms presented enabled sport organizations to interact in a direct and real-time dialogue with their customers, to update them with important information (Adamson et al., 2006; Williams & Chinn, 2010), and to treat customers individually (Askool & Nakata, 2011). In such information-based marketing, as Beech, Chadwick, and Tapp (2000b) indicated, the "interactive exchange of information, and the content, quality and speed of responses can be a source of competitive advantage" (p. 53) for sport organizations. Therefore, SM has changed the practice of RM, enabling sport marketers to interact with their customers on their own terms, at the time they want; where they play, work, and travel; and through their preferred channel

(Woodcock et al., 2011). Hence, an advanced customer–organization interaction is one of the opportunities SM presented to an RM approach.

**Opportunities: Effective Customer Engagement.**

Today, through SM, customers have acquired their own voices and become confident to come into a brand's "space" and interact, communicate, and engage in dialogue with brands, as well as other customers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Woodcock et al., 2011). As Thackeray et al. (2008) stated, in SM "nobody knows everything, but everybody knows something, and what is known can be immediately shared or distributed" (p. 339), and through this collective conversation, an online collective intelligence will emerge. Hence, it is not only sport organizations that learn about customers from SM conversations, but also customers themselves will have a close and a direct knowledge of a sport organization and understand the organization's position in both good and bad times. As Peppers and Rogers (2011) argued, through the feedback loop both customers and sport organizations can carry on a successive interaction by talking to each other, listening to each other, and then learning from each other and knowing each other closely. A result that emerges from such a learning process will be highly valued by a customer, and that value fosters the customer's loyalty to a business (Peppers & Rogers, 2011). Thus, by engaging in SM, sport marketers will have a chance to hear back from their customers, react aptly, and maintain dialogue on an ongoing basis and market with them (Miller & Lammas, 2010). Therefore, SM permits marketers to effectively engage and encourage customers to become actively involved in products and services cocreation that subsequently reinforces brand engagements (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009; Miller & Lammas, 2010). Collectively, these opportunities allow marketers to make customers feel part of an organization and eventually retain trust in their brand (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009; Miller & Lammas, 2010).

**Opportunities: Efficient Use of Resources (Time and Money).** Sport consumers' dedication and loyalty are far stronger than the loyalty that any other customer exhibits to any other brand (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2010). These sport consumers keenly and continually expect up-to-date on- and off-the-field information about their favorite team. In this regard, speed and interactivity are the values available with SM, where the Web 2.0 platforms are becoming highly valuable tools to respond to these instantaneous needs (Williams & Chinn, 2010). SM is a fast and effective platform to connect and listen to customers' inner feelings with a high-volume reach (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). It enhances personalization opportunities and reduces the corresponding costs involved in communicating with target customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Ioakimidis, 2010).

**Opportunities: Quicker Evaluation of the Customer–Organization Relationship Status.** Customers today do not only express their loyalty by registering as a member of a team or wearing a team vest and scarf. Fans exhibit allegiance by following their clubs on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, bulletin boards, blogs, and content aggregators (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Sport fans are characterized by sharing their sympathy and camaraderie instantaneously and unreservedly on SM platforms on a regular basis (Benigni, Porter, & Wood, 2009, as cited in Waters et al., 2010). The intensity of involvement in dialogues and the level of the messages' flow, traffic, and frequency could signal to some degree the status of the relationship that fans

have with a sport organization at a given point of time, even if it is not a conclusive indicator. For instance, when customers have a problem with a sport organization, they may not participate in SM as often as they did. Customers may participate less or stop all commenting on Facebook, following on Twitter, contributing to blogs, and expressing themselves on message boards. Therefore, the nature of customers' frequent participation and SM's real-time interaction help a sport organization quickly learn its relationship status with customers at a given point of time.

**Challenges: Lack of Control Over Messages Posted on SM.** In today's networked society where one person is connected to hundreds or even thousands of other people, the impact of consumer-to-consumer communication has been greatly magnified in the marketplace (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). On SM platforms, consumers are in charge, largely, of the content of marketing-related messages, and they have greater power over the messages' dissemination and consumption than ever before (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). The flow of information has become multidirectional, interconnected, and difficult to predict (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), and particularly the content, timing, and frequency of the conversations are outside the direct control of marketers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This lack of control over marketing messages stands in contrast to the traditional marketing communications where there was direct control of content creation and distribution (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In addition, preferences and decisions are becoming highly influenced by the comments and advice of other online community members that can hardly be controlled by marketers (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

**Challenges: Concern Over the Credibility and Reliability of Information.** In adopting SM as an RM tool, marketers are facing challenges with content-management issues such as information credibility and reliability. As Askold and Nakata (2011) and Newman and Thomas (2009) indicated, there is a concern among marketers regarding the credibility and reliability of information published on SM. Sometimes SM messages go viral with criticisms (both authentic and fabricated) from customers or supporters of other organizations. Regardless of the origin of the information, such criticisms have a potential to damage brand integrity and destroy an organization's image in today's networked community (Kotler et al., 2010). As Constantinides and Fountain (2008) indicated, the lack of accountability in SM allows everyone to become a self-proclaimed expert who may have an influence on those who are not able to distinguish between stories that are accurate and those made up with a hidden agenda. Not all online community members are careful users, and some members will consume information if it is believable (Miller & Lammas, 2010). In the traditional marketing wisdom a dissatisfied customer can reach around 10 people, which has radically changed today when a disappointed customer's message can multiply and reach millions almost overnight through SM (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

**Challenges: Concerns Over Effectiveness of Messages in Reaching Customers.** Waters et al. (2010) stated that organizations are facing a problem of keeping important messages on top of their SM sites, and that has created concern over the effectiveness of SM in getting messages to customers. On this point, Waters et al. pointed out that on highly trafficked SM pages, organizational messages are often short-lived and messages sometimes may be left unseen. For example, on a highly trafficked sport team's Facebook page, messages upon messages appear instantly



and important messages may not stay at the top of the page. The development of SM content-management policy that addresses such shortcomings will then be another challenge facing marketers.

**Challenges: Difficulties in Identifying "True" Online Customers.** The difficulty of identifying "real" or "true" online customers of organizations (i.e., both online members and offline consumers of a company's services or products) is one of the challenges posed by SM in meeting RM goals. As Ang (2011) argued, not all customers are necessarily online-community members, and, at the same time, not all online-community members are customers of a brand. In some instances users are anonymous (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008) or have used multiple identities covering their personal, social, and business lives (Woodcock et al., 2011). This has made the identification of the true identities of SM users of a brand difficult. Yet at the same time, the identification of influential and active online users of a brand is very crucial for the effectiveness of an RM approach (Woodcock et al., 2011). As a result of this confusion (i.e., the confusion over offline customers and online-community members), managers are unclear about the application of SM in an RM approach (Ang, 2011). In line with this, brands communicate with all customers alike in SM with little chance of identifying the "true" customers and thereby making sharing the brand's secret marketing information with all online members risky.

**Challenges: Setbacks With the Allocation of Organizational Resources.** The issue of the commitment of appropriate organizational resources is another issue facing marketers in adopting SM in their RM approach. To meaningfully realize the benefits of SM as an RM tool, sport organizations will be required to allocate appropriate resources such as human, financial, and time resources, which are challenging considering the contentiousness of SM in some organizations. In fact, entering into SM is easy; any interested party can sign up and participate in SM without problems. Nevertheless, businesses will be required to run their SM sites in a professional manner with the full backing of appropriate resources (Gillin, 2009). For instance, as Gillin and Sernovitz (2006) pointed out, the staff members who will be assigned to run organizations' SM outlets should be dedicated professionals and company insiders who have the creativity in their approach to users' messages and the know-how on use of the Web 2.0 technologies. These staff are also expected to have characteristics such as being receptive to feedback, target oriented, and risk takers and enjoying sharing with others (Gillin, 2009; Sernovitz, 2006). In addition, as Gillin and Sernovitz stated, these professionals should have excellent writing skills and a sense of humor. As Gillin argued, when the staff who run SM sites have these qualities they will be able to engage in a constant flow of meaningful conversations and keep the sites up to date and attractive. However, finding an employee with all these qualities together is an uneasy venture. In addition, a real-time interaction being the main feature of SM, it consumes a significant amount of time both on and off business hours.

## **Emerged Conceptual Framework**

Based on the literature reviewed, including the opportunities and challenges noted by previous researchers, a conceptual framework, shown in Figure 1, was developed and examined further.



**Figure 1** — Emerged conceptual framework on the opportunities and challenges of social media in meeting relationship-marketing goals in sport.

## Method

To address the purpose of the study and its proposed research questions, qualitative case studies on eight sport-event organizers in the province of Ontario, Canada, were conducted. The organizations selected operate participation-based running events. A case-study research design was chosen because multiple case studies have been shown to be an appropriate approach for providing in-depth knowledge of complex situations as they unfold over time (Yin, 2006). Furthermore, case studies are appropriate when questions relate to events over which the researchers have little or no control, and they are preferable when researchers are seeking to develop new theoretical models (Yin, 2003). Running events were selected because two of the authors have deeper understanding of this sport professionally and athletically. Besides, over the past decade, running events have seen a surge in participation (Hoffman, Ong, & Wang, 2010) and corporate sponsorship support (McKelvey, Sandler, & Snyder, 2012).

The cases were selected using a purposive sample based on the geographic focus of the study. Per Berg (2009) and Yin (2003), each case was studied to predict similarities or contradicting results that are based on the proposition of

the research. As a result, as Yin (2003) indicated, a judgmental choice is used in this study as a criterion where it is believed that some degree of certainty (i.e., a replication of a similar result, if any) can be achieved at a stage where three to five additional cases are added to the first four initial cases (which Yin [2003] referred to as literal replications). At the stage where adding more cases would not show a different result (which Yin [2003] referred to as theoretical replications), adding more cases was not considered. This judgmental choice was found to be right in the data-collection phase, and a total of eight cases were considered in the study.

In the data-collection process, a focused interview was used as the primary source of evidence, where one-on-one interviews were conducted with key personnel from each of the eight running events. In the case of six of the organizations, the race directors agreed to an interview, and two events directed the researchers to the communication managers. During the interviews, the cases were also invited to add any points they felt important. The interview questions were developed based on the conceptual framework that emerged from the literature review. Although responses to interview questions were the major source of evidence, a triangulation method was employed by converging two independent sources of information (i.e., one-on-one interviews and content analysis of an SM platform).

The content analysis of an SM platform was conducted once a week during a 1-month period before and after the interview (i.e., during the month of January and February; the interviews were conducted from January 26 to February 5, 2012). At the time of data collection, it was found that Facebook was used by all the cases; as a result, a content analysis was performed on the cases' Facebook pages. Given the lack of an established content-analysis coding scheme, a coding sheet (list of specific points; see the Appendix) was developed based on the academic themes that emerged in the literature that coincides both with the conceptual framework and, subsequently, the interview questions. The list of the specific points was sent to three race directors (one each in Canada, USA, and UK) for review. The race directors' suggestions were taken into consideration, and the revised lists were used for the content analysis.

During the interview, the discussions were tape recorded with the consent of the interviewees and subsequently transcribed. Given the confidentiality agreements signed with each event organizer, the names of the organizations will remain anonymous. A brief description of the cases is presented in Table 1.

Data from the two sources were used to determine whether the academic themes identified in the literature were recognized by the cases investigated in this study. For this purpose, the analytic technique of pattern matching was used, wherein the collected evidence was compared and contrasted against the initially stipulated pattern. The detail of the individual cases was captured, treating each as special and unique, followed by a cross-case analysis. In both within- and cross-cases analysis, a number of commonalities and some limited diversity were revealed. Certain issues were also found to be more prevalent in some cases than others, but ultimately a number of commonalities became apparent. Due to space limitations, the cross-case analysis of the study is considered in this article. Results are next presented in three sections in the sequence of the research questions.

**Table 1 Case Descriptions**

Case	Description
Case 1	An annual elite-level international marathon. The race includes full marathon, half-marathon, and 5-km race. Over 10 years old. In the 2012 event, close to 25,000 runners participated.
Case 2	An annual women-only race. The event includes races of 4 different distances. 4 years old. In the 2012 event, 4,000 runners participated.
Case 3	A series of annual short-distance fun-run/walks across Canada. 10 years old. In the 2012 event, close to 6,000 runners participated.
Case 4	An annual run for a specific group of society. The event includes races of 2 different distances. Over 15 years old. In the 2012 event, over 1,200 runners participated.
Case 5	An annual international marathon. The event includes 9 different races including full and half-marathon. Close to 10 years old. In the 2012 event, over 10,000 runners participated.
Case 6	A series of annual long-distance run and team relays across Canada. 2 years old. In the 2012 event, over 1,200 runners participated.
Case 7	An annual international marathon. The race includes full marathon, half-marathon, 5-km race, and a relay. Close to 20 years old. In the 2012 event, over 15,000 runners participated.
Case 8	An annual race. The event includes races of 4 different distances. Over 30 years old. In the 2012 event, 1,500 runners participated.

## Results

A common finding among all cases was that each of the eight cases reported adopting SM platforms with the objective of meeting their RM goals. This supports Williams and Chinn's (2010) claim that "the potential value and benefits of using SM to meet relationship-marketing goals is significant, and in an environment such as sport it may be particularly relevant" (p. 423). One race director (Case 1) emphasized, "We use SM to communicate, listen, engage in conversation with participants and understand their needs, and maintain and enhance our relationships with runners." One other race director (Case 3) described SM as a tool "towards fulfilling strategies of targeting audiences, cocreating running programs, extending international reach, accommodating stakeholders needs and behaviors, and building a foundation for the future." The race directors' views are in accordance with Grönroos's (2004) and Williams and Chinn's (2010) claim that suggested that organizations, to retain customers by establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships, need to communicate and engage in dialogue with their customers. In this regard, as suggested by Constantinides and Fountain (2008) and Williams and Chinn and acknowledged by the respondents, SM is becoming a valuable tool for a two-way continuing dialogue, which is the core of RM.

## Use of SM

In comparing the use of SM to meet RM goals, few differences and many similarities were identified among the cases. Facebook is the SM platform most widely used by the cases, followed by Twitter; seven of the cases were found to use Twitter as their preferred communication channel. The third most widely used SM platform was YouTube, which was used by six of the cases. Blog, Flickr, and FourSquare were the fourth most widely used SM platforms. The one exception, Case 6, was found to embrace many of the available SM platforms such as Digg, Delicious, Flickr, and TwittDeck, as well as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Cases 1 and 3 were the only two cases that used other platforms; Case 1 adopted Word Press and Case 3 embraced Message Board as their SM outlet along with Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. From this assessment, two points can be learned. One, Facebook is the most popular SM outlet adopted by the cases, followed by Twitter and YouTube, respectively. Second, the cases differ in terms of which of the SM outlets they embrace. As can be noted from Table 2, these cases are adopting SM platforms with the objective of meeting their RM goals.

**Table 2 Data Display of the Use of Social Media in Meeting Relationship-Management Goals (Compiled From the Interview)**

Cases	Platforms used by the cases	Objectives of using SM platforms
Case 1	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WordPress	To engage participants on continuing dialogue, offer timely information, obtain runners inquiries and provide faster responses
Case 2	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	To engage customers in an ongoing dialogue, recruit new participants, maintain partnership and collaboration with stakeholders
Case 3	Facebook, Twitter, Blog, Message Board	To engage in dialogue, establish and maintain relationships, reach a wider market
Case 4	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr	To listen to runners and respond aptly to their messages, reach wider audience at a faster rate
Case 5	Facebook, Twitter, Four Square, YouTube	To offer timely information, listen to runners' demands, engage in conversation with runners, cocreate running programs
Case 6	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Digg, Delicious, Flickr, TwittDeck, FourSquare	To offer timely and useful information, listen to and to have one-to-one contact with runners, enhance long-term mutual satisfaction
Case 7	Facebook, Twitter	To establish, maintain, and enhance long-term mutually rewarding relationships, listen to runners' demands, comments, and concerns
Case 8	Facebook, Blog, YouTube	To interact in a direct and real-time dialogue with runners, maintain ongoing communication

Our first research question was how sport organizations use SM in terms of meeting RM goals. As referred to in the table, the cases expressed their use of SM in terms of the core values that drive organizations to meet the RM goals. These values can be summarized as engagement, understanding, ongoing communication, interaction, timely responses, closeness, partnership, services cocreation, and listening. All these values, as indicated in Grönroos (2004) and Gummesson (1998), are core elements of RM that allow the cases to establish, maintain, and enhance long-term mutually rewarding relationships with their runners.

## Opportunities of SM

**Better Knowledge of Customers.** All of the cases investigated acknowledged better knowledge of the customers as the main opportunity available with SM. According to the respondents, SM offered them the opportunity to gain access to more in-depth customer data and to gain better knowledge of runners than ever before. For instance, one race director (Case 2) emphasized,

SM is about interactivity that allows events and sport participants to create a closer and instant contact, to engage in conversation, to clarify and explain positions, and in due course, to understand each other's interest closely. . . . The communication enables our event to know runners in a relatively much deeper level than before.

Another race director (Case 1) stated that the free accesses that SM provided, together with the availability of portable communication devices and the day-to-day interaction, has given the event the opportunity to gain more detailed information on an ongoing basis about the needs and concerns of their runners. This is in accordance with Constantinides and Fountain (2008), Williams and Chinn (2010), and Woodcock et al.'s (2011) claim that SM is going beyond the "old way" of just accessing customers' data and is now offering the opportunity to know and understand sport participants and fans better than ever before.

**Advanced Customer–Organization Interaction.** Regarding the advancement of opportunity for customer–organization interaction that SM presented, all the cases acknowledged Drury's (2008) argument that SM, as a global communication and exchange medium, has transformed the traditional offline customer–organization dyad into a new level that allows organizations to engage in a real-time and dynamic one-on-one dialogue with their customers. The respondents underscored the role that SM plays in advancing runner–event interaction, offering the opportunity to talk and listen to each other and then learn from each other and know each other more closely on a personalized and ongoing basis.

In this regard, one race director (Case 1) stated that "SM has opened up an opportunity to get immediate access to the voice of our runners and to maintain an ongoing conversation." One other event's communication manager (Case 3) stated, "SM is becoming a customer service portal. We are now funneling questions that would have been handled in the past by the 1-800 free-call telephone numbers." On SM, Case 3's communication manager stated that the expectation is "we are always listening," and for that reason SM outlets are checked in the evenings and on the weekends to maintain that real-time conversation element. The attachment

that emerged from user–organization SM engagement, according to Case 3's communication manager, has allowed their event to advance its ongoing interaction with runners. Another race director (Case 7) pointed out,

In the past, we have been in a difficult position to effectively communicate with our participants, let alone interact with them. With the emergence of SM, we are now able to update our runners with important information on a daily basis and to engage in a direct and real-time interaction.

**Effective Sport Participants and Fans Engagement.** Effective engagement of runners and fans in event management has been perceived by all respondents as the opportunity provided by SM. The interviewees were of the opinion that their events, through SM, gained the chance to hear from their participants; to react aptly; to engage them in conversation on an ongoing basis; to involve them in running-program cocreation, making them feel part of the organization; to market with them; and, eventually, reinforce brand engagement.

As indicated by Case 1's race director, SM allowed them to smoothly resolve a major problem they had in their previous event. The race director stated,

SM allowed us to hear back from our runners about one major problem we experienced and to invite them to suggest a solution, to engage in a dialogue, and, finally, to develop a cocreated plan that we implemented in the following event.

This is in accordance with Miller and Lammas (2010) and Williams and Chinn's (2010) suggestion brands, by being involved in SM, will have a chance to hear back from their customers, react aptly, maintain dialogue on an ongoing basis, and market with them. Case 8's race director also stated, "SM is allowing our event to engage runners in the management of the event." SM permitted runners to become involved in the evolution of the event, including changing the way segments of services were delivered and making runners feel they have a stake in the event organization (Case 8). Another race director (Case 7) explained, "Through SM runners can help to shape parts of our event by sharing their inputs and suggestions, and driving things forward and changing the way events are being delivered." This experience aligns with statements made by Harridge-March and Quinton (2009) and Miller and Lammas, who claimed that SM permits marketers to encourage users to become actively involved in products and services cocreation, to make them feel part of an organization, and, eventually, to reinforce brand engagements.

**Efficient Use of Resources (Time and Money).** In regard to the efficient use of resources that SM presented to the events, all the cases agreed that SM offers the speed, interactivity, and the ability to communicate in real time and more directly with consumers at a much lower cost and with a high-volume reach. The respondents acknowledged that SM enhances personalization opportunities and reduces the corresponding costs involved in communicating with their targeted audiences. In this regard, Case 1's race director stated that their organization has conducted in the past both pre- and postevent runners' surveys with the aim of obtaining feedback on the event services. The surveys, according to Case 1's race director, were not expensive, but with the surveys the organization has not been able to reach a large number of customers and gather feedback in a short time period. However, with the emergence of SM, their event has been able to reach a wider audience and gather

information within a few days' time and at much cheaper cost. This experience is in line with Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) argument that SM offers firms the ability to communicate in real time and more directly with end consumers, at a much cheaper cost. In line with this, Case 2's race director indicated that SM is about getting stories (good or bad) spread quickly and reaching as many people as possible in a short period of time. According to Case 2's race director, runners communicate in real time, and their event is getting immediate runner praises, opinions, or comments at a much cheaper cost.

Yet again, most of the cases (except for Cases 1 and 2) did not consider the comments, opinions, and complaints that were conveyed through SM as being consistently high-quality market information. According to these respondents, the quality of SM messages depends on how reliable and constructive the messages are and vary from high-level messages at one time to subjective or groundless criticisms at another. For instance, Case 7's race director stated that even though SM is providing their event an opportunity to obtain runners' feedback, from seeking clarification on information to expressing their feelings about the event, "It cannot be said that SM messages, in general, have a higher quality."

**Quicker Evaluation of the Runner–Organization Relationship Status.** It is suggested in the literature that the intensity of involvement in dialogues and the level of the messages' flow, traffic, and frequency could signal, to some degree, the status of the relationship that runners have with a sport organization at a given point in time. In this study, some pattern was found where the respondents' answers were diverse. For instance, while Case 2 recognized the suggested opportunity, Case 1 disagreed that it was a benefit available with SM. The other six cases, however, acknowledged the opportunity in principle but, at the same time, pointed out that they had not yet realized the stated benefit. On this latter point, Case 4's race director stated that their SM platforms have seasonal traffic on the days close to their event day and they have not been able to realize the stated features of the platforms. In a like manner, Case 6's communication manager stated, "Even though our event has not noticed this aspect of SM, when runners have an issue with an event, they may not participate in SM as often as those runners who do not have an issue." In contrast, Case 1's race director is of the opinion that through SM their event is getting a lot more input from their SM members when runners have a problem with the event. Case 1's race director stated, "Runners demand to be heard, and we find SM to be the most gratifying way to do so for a large pool of runners."

## Challenges of SM

**Lack of Control Over Messages.** Seven of the eight cases considered lack of control over messages posted on SM platforms to be a challenge either through content or distribution, and only one of the cases (Case 1) viewed the suggested challenge as a controllable problem. According to Case 1's race director, most SM outlets allow platform owners to remove postings. Their organization uses discretion when removing messages and only does so when it is quite obvious that the message is from a competitor or is not accurate or credible. For instance, Case 1's race director stated, "Facebook has a field that allows users to block certain words/phrases, and we use that to remove messages that put the event's liability and safety, as well as brand integrity, in danger."



The other seven respondents admitted the claim pointed out by Hennig-Thurau et al., (2010) and Mangold and Faulds (2009), who stated that consumers are, largely, in charge of the content of marketing messages; they have greater power over the messages' dissemination and consumption than ever before, and the content, timing, and frequency of the conversations are outside managers' direct control. The latter is in line with the argument put forward by Constantinides and Fountain (2008) and Mangold and Faulds. These respondents, who acknowledged the challenge, presented their own argument in support of their position. For instance, Case 8's race director argued that messages can easily become viral in today's networked society with or without companies' presence in the SM space, and lack of control is the biggest challenge in managing the SM outlets. In a similar manner, Case 5's race director underscored the point that people may read, watch, or listen to the negative comments posted on SM until such messages are deleted, and this lack of control remains a downside of SM. In addition, Case 5's race director pointed out that, regardless of the event organizers' efforts to resolve and rectify problems, the negative stories remain as a public online record for "eternity" in terms of video, picture, audio files, or text.

**Concern Over the Credibility and Reliability of Information.** All the eight cases are facing challenges with content-management issues such as information credibility and reliability and how and when to react to messages, particularly to critical messages. One of the concerns of the research participants was the speed of the distribution of critical messages (both authentic and fabricated). According to one of the race directors (Case 4), there is a potential that messages from anonymous users or supporters of other organizations can be posted on their event SM platforms, and "regardless of the origin of the information, criticisms posted on SM platforms could have a potential to destroy events' brand in today's networked community" (Case 4). The race director's view corresponds with the argument presented by Constantinides and Fountain (2008), who stated that the lack of accountability in SM allows everyone to become a self-proclaimed expert who may have an influence on those who are not able to distinguish between stories that are accurate and those made up with a hidden agenda. In line with this, the issue of when and how to react, and how to handle and manage electronic word of mouth, was the other hurdle reported by the research participants.

**Concerns Over Effectiveness of Messages in Reaching End Users.** The question of the effectiveness of SM in enabling marketing messages to reach customers is not a problem that was encountered by all the cases. Some of the cases acknowledged that the issue of getting messages to end users could become a challenge in the days approaching their events. In those last few days close to their events, runners seek information, and the SM platforms receive high volumes of conversations, such that important messages could move down to the bottom of the pages. However, the respondents indicated that their events use reposting features available on SM platforms whenever they find important messages slipping from the top of the SM pages. One race director (Case 4) stated,

In days close to event week our SM platforms get crowded and important messages keep moving to the bottom of the pages. However, we use the reposting features to keep messages current and relevant and stay on top of the pages.

All the cases mentioned the use of the reposting techniques when their SM outlets received higher traffic than usual, and they did not consider the effectiveness of messages in reaching end users to be a challenge. This view of the respondents does not match with the argument of Waters et al. (2010), who stated that on highly trafficked SM pages, organizational messages are often short-lived and messages can be left unseen.

**Difficulties in Identifying “True” Online Customers.** All the cases considered the difficulty of identifying a “real online customer” a challenging side of SM. At times, users are anonymous (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008), and identifying the “true online customers” of a company among the members of the company’s SM site is the difficult side of SM (Ang, 2011). The interviewees acknowledged the views pointed out by the authors. According to the respondents, not all of their runners are necessarily members of their SM platforms, and, at the same time, not all members of their SM pages are runners in their events. As one of the race directors (Case 8) stated, in some instances, some of the SM members share and contribute online content (e.g., text, photo, audio, and video) as anonymous users or conceal their personal, social, or business life with multiple identities. Yet, their events are communicating with all runners alike on SM with little chance of identifying users sufficiently to share sensitive marketing information, which makes such communication a risky marketing venture.

**Setbacks With the Allocation of Organizational Resources.** Considering the contentiousness of SM among some members of their organizations, the research participants are facing a challenge convincing decision makers to allocate appropriate resources. As indicated by the study respondents, entering into SM is easy; however, the organizers believed that the allocation of appropriate resources will be required to run their SM sites in a professional manner. As a result, the issue of securing adequate organizational resources (e.g., human, financial, time) has been mentioned by all interviewees as the foremost challenge facing marketers today in managing SM sites. Particularly, Case 8’s race director stated that their event had encountered difficulty in finding a person with all the SM-management qualities (e.g., a staff member who is receptive to feedback, target oriented, a risk taker, with excellent writing skills and a sense of humor; Gillin, 2009; Sernovitz, 2006) necessary to make their SM outlets more effective. In line with this, Case 5’s race director and Case 6’s communication manager indicated the significance of top management’s support in investing resources to run the SM platforms in a professional manner.

## Discussion

As Grönroos (2004) and Kotler (2011) pointed out, and as we have found in the cases investigated in this study, businesses are increasingly extending their marketing efforts beyond creating a single exchange and are now focusing on building long-term relationships with their customers. In fact, in traditional marketing practices, communications were limited to one-way, static mass communication, where marketers used to have a difficult time identifying their customers and interacting directly with them (Beech et al., 2000a). Today, SM is going beyond the “old way” of just accessing customers’ data; SM has opened up a wider opportunity

to get and stay in touch with customers in a direct way to engage in dialogue (Ioakimidis, 2010; Williams & Chinn, 2010) and to know and understand customers better than ever (Williams & Chinn, 2010). In this regard, all the eight cases adopted diverse types of SM platforms to communicate and engage in dialogue with their customers on an ongoing basis and to retain customers by establishing, maintaining, and enhancing long-term, mutually rewarding relationships. All this is happening, as the respondents stated and Grönroos (1994) and Peppers and Rogers (2011) indicated, by talking to each other, listening to each other, learning from each other, then knowing each other closely and, in due course, reaching a common understanding. This is in line with Stavros et al. (2008) and Stavros and Westberg's (2009) claim that the emergence of new technology encourages sport organizations to engage in communication and maintain and enhance relationships with their worldwide audiences.

However, as ideal as SM is for a relationship-building approach with lists of opportunities (at least theoretically), SM presents its own operational challenges (Drury, 2008; Woodcock et al., 2011). This is demonstrated in this study, where five broad and interrelated theoretical opportunities and challenges SM presented in meeting RM goals were conceptualized from the literature review and examined. We found that the respondents acknowledged most of the anticipated opportunities and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals in sports. Four of the opportunities were recognized by all the cases, and one of the opportunities, though supported by most of the cases, was not fully acknowledged by the respondents. Similarly, respondents uniformly acknowledged four of the challenges, and one of the challenges was not considered a threat by any of the cases. This is demonstrated in the adjusted framework (Figure 2) that emerged from the literature review and was later modified predominantly to reflect the issues ascertained from the data collection. Since one of the academic themes (i.e., concerns over the effectiveness of messages in reaching end users) was not considered by any of the cases as a challenge, this academic theme was eliminated from the adjusted model. In the same way, one of the conceptualized opportunities that received a mixed response, namely, quicker evaluation of the runner-organization relationship status, is presented in broken lines.

## Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study formulated research questions that can be elaborated on and enriched through future studies. During the course of the study, certain issues were encountered relating to the study's purpose (e.g., academic themes identified under the opportunities and challenges of SM are broad and need to be investigated individually). Although such investigation is beyond the scope of this research, further study of these issues is recommended. First, we suggest that the study be replicated in other sports and regions of the country to determine whether the findings can be extended to such areas. Second, we recommend that the organizations considered in this study be reinvestigated after a suitable period to see the changes over time. This is especially important given the newness of SM. Third, the study could be conducted across a wider range of sports but with less depth in each individual sport to identify a broader range of emerging issues in the sport industry. Fourth, while this study focused on managers' perspectives, it would be useful to investigate this issue from the customers' point of view, as well. Fifth, we recommend that a



**Figure 2** — Conceptual model of the opportunities and challenges of social media in meeting relationship-marketing goals in sport. Developed from the study findings.

study be conducted on the effectiveness of each SM platform. Most important, we highly recommend that a wider study be conducted on best practices regarding the uses of SM as an RM tool.

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## Appendix: Coding Sheet for Case's Facebook Page

✓ or x

### *Opportunities*

#### Better knowledge of customers

personalization: messages directed to individual users in conversation threads

understanding: mention of close understanding in messages exchanged

#### Advanced customer–organization interaction

interactivity: the back-and-forth exchange of conversations on a certain issue

responsiveness: replies to runners' inquiries and to organization's postings

#### Effective customer engagement

engagement opportunity: messages welcomed or reasoned by the case

reaction: response to runners' opinions and demands on an ongoing basis

#### Efficient use of resources (time and money)

response to messages: users' reactions to information update

speed and interactivity: speed in replying to users' requests and maintaining dialogue

content quality: nature (e.g., relevance) of customers' comments, opinions, and complaints

#### Quicker evaluation of customer–organization relationship status

level of conversation: conversation consistency over the 2-month period (e.g., frequency)

### *Challenges*

#### Lack of control over messages

negativity: conversations containing negative messages and the case's involvement

consumer-to-consumer threads: level of consumer-to-consumer communications

#### Concerns over content management

tone: whether people are talking about the organization in a positive, negative, or neutral way

#### Concerns over effectiveness of messages in reaching end users

page traffic (e.g., number of postings in a day, a week)

#### Difficulties in identifying a "real customer"

identity of users/name type and messages posted by these users

#### Setbacks with the allocation of organizational resources

timing: timing of postings (e.g., every day) and level of case's engagement

content: the look, content, level of intervention, humor that reflect a professionally managed page

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