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The Impact of Content Characteristics on Twitter Audience Engagement: An Empirical Investigation of the Canadian NHL Organizations

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I hereby declare that the master's thesis presented herein is my own work, or fully and specifically acknowledged wherever adapted from other sources. This work has not been published or submitted elsewhere for the requirement of a degree program.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to empirically investigate user engagement on the official Twitter pages of professional ice-hockey organizations. The hypotheses were formulated based on the Uses & Gratifications theory and the degree of vividness of a brand post. In particular, academics have identified information-seeking, entertainment, and interactivity as one of the primary motives for audiences to engage with the media content. The framework for a degree of the content vividness was developed as follows: the low level was represented with posts embodying text only, the medium level contained images, while the highest level was considered to be a tweet that was accompanied with a video, which was further divided into two sub-categories of game highlights and videos with out of the rink activities. The results showed that ice-hockey fans are more likely to engage with the content that was posted on the social media pages if it contains an entertaining or interactive type of content. Furthermore, it was found that low vivid characteristics, thus tweets containing only text have a significant and positive impact on the number of times users replied to the post.

Keywords: social media; user engagement; social media content analysis; strategic social media management; professional sports organizations

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CGY	Calgary Flames
COBRA	Consumer's Online Brand-Related Activities
EDM	Edmonton Oilers
MBV	Market-Based View
MMA	Mixed Martial Arts
MTL	Montreal Canadiens
NHL	National Hockey League
OTT	Ottawa Senators
RBV	Resource-Based View
TOR	Toronto Maple Leafs
U&G	Uses & Gratifications
VAN	Vancouver Canucks
VRIN	Valuable, Rare, Imperfectly Imitable, Non-Substitutable
WPG	Winnipeg Jets

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Empirical studies uncovering the factors driving consumers’ interactions with brand on social media are critically needed to provide strategic guidelines for crafting effective social communication strategies” (Tsai & Men, 2014).

In the era of digital transformation that substantially changes the way businesses create value for their customers and capture financial value for themselves, the role of strategic management has received even greater significance since among other things digitalization brought new customer relationship tools and established unprecedented two-way communication between organizations and the public (Grunig, 2009; Iansiti & Lakhani, 2014). Moreover, the digital phenomenon greatly altered the available resources that can potentially lead to a competitive advantage of the firm in the industry (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). Among these newly emerged sources of competitive advantage are social media networks that grew dramatically in the last couple of decades (Van Laere & Heene, 2003; Kietzmann et al., 2011) becoming a *“key element in today’s experience-driven culture”* (PwC, 2019). Social media became a vital part for businesses that strive to enhance search engine optimization processes (Ramdani & Taylor, 2018), increase brand awareness (Severi et al., 2014), strengthen brand image (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016) and positively influence customer’s equity and their purchase intentions (Kim & Ko, 2012). Not surprisingly, given the growing social media popularity, many industries try to take advantage of these platforms to keep up with market trends and stay relevant for their audiences and customers. This includes the professional sports industry that according to the recent PwC’s Sports Outlook report (2019) is expected to experience a market growth at a compound annual rate of 3.2% and currently is on the path of reaching \$83.1 billion by 2023. While globally traditional dominant sport varies significantly, the number one sport in Canada is considered to be ice-hockey. The sport of hockey plays a major part in the national identity, culture, and deemed to be an ultimate *“unifying force”* of the nation (Keating, 2010). Moreover, besides the substantial impact of hockey on national culture and society, there’s also a significant effect on the country’s economy and business (Scotiabank, 2015). Therefore, it can be concluded that the sport of hockey possesses a strategic value to the whole nation, which urges the need for strategic governance at all levels of the industry’s organizations.

The previously discussed benefits that the organizations receive by leveraging social media encourage academics and practitioners to provide more insights on user engagement and try to conceptualize behavioural patterns of social network audiences. However, as was noted by Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie (2014) the growing attention towards the user engagement examination was not reflected in the increasing number of empirical researches, otherwise, the studies in this field were to the date of their publication “*predominantly exploratory in nature*”. The lack of empirical researches on the topic of user engagement was also stressed in the study of Tsai & Men (2014) who examined it from the perspective of cross-cultural comparison. Especially, the absence of practical application of the theories that intended to explain customer or user behaviour, organisation-public relationships, or strategic social media utilization can be observed in the industry of professional sports (Filo et al., 2015). Thus, these authors highlighted the need for more studies that could uncover user’s gratifications and motives to interact with particular media sources or specific pieces of content on the brand’s official social media pages making this the primary reason for conducting the thesis on the topic of user engagement. Furthermore, many academic researches (Williams et al., 2014; Gibbs et al., 2014) along with empirical data given by the social media platform itself (Murphy et al., 2018) provided the ground for particular social media network selection, which fell on Twitter. The strategic value of Twitter for professional sports organizations, in its turn, can be explained by its live nature, which is extremely useful for fast-paced events such as sports, where the information is expected to be delivered in a quick and efficient manner.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Strategic Management

The introductory chapter of the literature review is going to address the fundamentals of the competitive advantage and discuss the significance of strategic management for the long-term prosperity of the organizations. Also, two strategic management views are going to be introduced with an emphasis on core differences of how competitive advantage can be achieved and sustained over time. Furthermore, the paradigm shift in strategic management and its linkage with marketing is going to be addressed along with professional sports industry specifics in the field of management.

The importance of the strategic management in rapidly changing economic and business environment can not be underestimated since it provides a vital framework for developing core competencies that are aimed at any kind of change anticipation and ensure that the organisation can cope with occurring problems in a more holistic and weighted manner (Bracker, 1980). While the pioneers in the field of modern management emphasized that the strategy formulation and implementation lies in the core of the long-term goal orientation and forehanded course of actions adjustments, they also highlighted the significance of the feasible resource allocation in the process of strategy development (Chandler, 1962; Drucker, 1954). More recent publications, however, tried to link new concepts and frameworks such as stakeholder theory with conventional strategic management principles by defining this process as a set of actions *“through which organizations analyze and learn from their internal and external environments, establish strategic direction, create strategies that are intended to help achieve established goals, and execute those strategies, all in an effort to satisfy key stakeholders”* (Harrison & St. John, 2014). Generally, academics have formulated two conceptually opposite views on strategy and competitive advantage: market-based (MBV) and resource-based (RBV). The first one – the MBV constitutes that the company’s competitive advantage arises from *“inherited market power”* (Makhija, 2003), which reflects the fact the organizations should primarily focus on external factors to determine their competitive edge and position themselves accordingly. The main contributors to the theory of market-based view are deemed to be Bain’s (1959) “Structure-Conduct-Performance” paradigm and Michael Porter with his work of “Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing

Industries and Competitors” (1980). The ‘Five Forces’ framework introduced by Porter is considered to be one of the cornerstones in the field of management among both academics and practitioners. The method represents five-dimensional external environment analysis conducted by the organisation or third-party entities to determine the position of the company within the industry or market that include an examination of such factors as “*competition in the industry, the potential of new entrants into the industry, power of suppliers, power of customers, and the threat of substitute products*”, which in the end is intended to provide valuable insights for strategy formulation and ground for competitive advantage. On the other hand, the resource-based view represents an ‘inside-out’ approach with the central focus on internal resources of the company. The RBV is considered to be originated from the Barney’s (1991) publication on “Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage”, where the author argued that to achieve sustainable competitive advantage the company must put an emphasize on the internal resources that have such attributes as scarcity, imperfect mobility, and heterogeneity. The core principle of the theory, thus, comes down to the idea of acquiring, maintaining, and controlling resources and competencies that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, which the author refers to as a VRIN framework of sustained competitive advantage of a firm. In recent decades, utilization and practical application of the RBV increased exponentially in many spheres of business management including marketing (Kozlenkova et al., 2013). In particular, the VRIN framework is considered to be a valuable framework when it comes to the social media environment (Pappas et al., 2017). The authors argued that in the era of a dramatic increase of social media use the role of strategic management in this field has grown significantly and demands from the companies that strive to acquire sustained competitive advantage to approach their social media audiences analytically and thoroughly targeted.

2.1.1 Sports Industry Specifics

In the time of paradigm shift towards the resource-based view and overall customer orientation that involves various industries, professional sports were not left unnoticed, otherwise, the growth dynamics of the industry prompts academics and managers to keep up with the pace that the industry offers by utilizing all the available resources that can lead the organisation to sustainable competitive advantage including marketing tools and techniques. Many authors refer to marketing as the process of building a strategical

approach that is intended to anticipate customer's needs with particular emphasis on the given product development and its further pricing, promotion, and distribution tactics. Thus, sports marketing can be described as the process of satisfying and anticipating the requests that are coming from the sports consumers whether they are consuming sports-related goods or services through direct involvement in the sports activities or through passive participation, which would include watching or listening to the sports content using preferred media source (Hoye et al., 2015). In the same year, Shank & Lyberger (2015) in their book "Sports Marketing: A Strategic Perspective" proposed the exhaustive definition of the sports marketing stressing that it's rather the "*specific application of marketing principles and processes to sport products and to the marketing of non-sports products through association with sport*". Hoye, Smith, Nicholson & Stewart (2015) also suggested that there are universally two dimensions of sports marketing: of sports and through sports. The principal difference of these two lies in the idea that the first one refers to the marketing activities directly aimed at sports products or services, while the second one utilizes marketing theories and concepts to promote and advertise non-sports related goods or services to a specific group of people using the platforms given by sports brands or organizations. Moreover, marketing through sports considered to be an effective strategy assuming the right target audience, while the most used tactics for non-sports brands that are pursuing to build the alliances with sports organizations or athletes are sponsorships, endorsements, product placement, and internet (Jones et al., 2004).

The uniqueness of the sports industry was further discussed by Schwarz & Hunter (2008) and Shank & Lyberger (2015). The authors attributed professional sports to one of the forms of entertainment yet highlighting that it differs significantly from other leisure activities available for people. While Schwarz & Hunter (2008) stressed that the uniqueness of the industry lies in the fact that most of the professional sports offerings are intangible and experiential in its nature and their primary function is to enhance the value of the tangible sports products, the Shank & Lyberger (2015) put an accent on the spontaneity and unpredictability of the sports events in comparison to other forms of entertainment that are usually scripted or programmed. However, as the authors also noted, nowadays, in the era of a wide range of entertainment activities sports organizations should recognise the threat, closely follow the dynamics and adapt to the changes that related competitive markets in the entertainment field have to offer. The RBV logic, for example, can be seen in increasing tourism involvement that utilizes

stadiums as an attraction sight and implementation of the new technological solutions to live sporting events that make the stadium experience unique and create new horizons for clubs to engage with the audience and potentially acquire a competitive edge in the industry (Gammon, 2011).

Shank & Lyberger (2015) also attempted to apply Levitt's (1960) term of marketing myopia in the sports business context. Generally, marketing myopia can be described as the idea of business prioritization of customer needs instead of conventional product or service selling orientation. Therefore, sports organizations that are focusing more on understanding the customers and what satisfies their needs will benefit from a long-term perspective rather than those that put an accent solely on selling sports goods. Hence, the authors approached the problem of describing the structure of the sports industry from the consumer perspective and introduced a simplified model of the consumer–supplier relationship (Figure 1). According to the researchers, the sports industry can be described as a sum of three major components: sports consumers, products and services themselves, and the suppliers of the sports goods, content, and everything that surrounds professional sports organizations. In their book, the authors had devoted special attention to the customers by outlining that: *“if the sporting event is the heart of the sports industry, then the spectator is the blood that keeps it pumping”*. Spectators can observe the sporting event either through attending the event or experiencing the event via media coverage. Thus, being one of the primary ways of engagement between the sports business and their customers, the examination of the spectators' interactions with the media platforms is necessary and requires continued studies in that field.

Figure 1. Simplified Model of the Consumer-Supplier Relationship in the Sports Industry



Source: (Shank & Lyberger, 2015)

2.2 Web 2.0

The establishment of the second generation of Internet-based applications (i.e., Web 2.0), facilitated a direct engagement between a consumer and the organisation. This transformation enhanced user engagement online dramatically through channels that were either not existed before or had a form that did not allow a consumer to approach the brand in an easy, fast, and transparent manner (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010).

The emergence of user-generated content, development of the user interface and user experience and overall rise in digital media interactivity have led the world to accept that the traditional Web 1.0 has already been gone to the past and for a long period of time, we have been living in the era of Web 2.0. The term Web 2.0 was first mentioned by Darcy DiNucci in the article “*Fragmented Future*” (1999). However, the original definition and further popularization of the term considered to be associated with the name of Tim O'Reilly (2007). The author stated that after the dotcom bust the new web has been born and the basic operational principles of the companies in the era of Web 2.0 should be focused on the following competencies: create a platform that is spanning all the devices connected to the global web network, recognise users as a co-developers and strive to leverage from collective intelligence and customer self-service. The discussions of what Web 2.0 really means continued later on and have led the academic world to come up with more interpretations of the term. Thus, Kaplan & Haelein (2010) defined Web 2.0 as an “*ideological and technological foundation*” that has replaced and rethought the old Web 1.0 content publishing process. The researchers highlighted that the emergence of Web 2.0 was only possible due to technological improvements and new software products that had allowed developers to establish platforms for User Generated Content.

The conventional little emphasis on a phenomenon of creative consumer devoted by the organizations in the past is no longer the case in nowadays business environment. Given an enormous amount of information the consumers are facing on the daily basis, it can be proposed that they have become an integral part of the product design, its features, and further marketing activities including promotional campaigns and messages that are intended to make the final product successful on the market. Authors of the “*When customers get clever: Managerial approaches to dealing with creative consumers*” defined creative consumers as an individuals or group of people who not only adapt to

the market proprietary offering but rather have a power to modify, adjust or transform the product or service they are consuming. Furthermore, it is emphasized that the creative consumer is taking a rapidly growing role in product innovations for many markets around the globe. The managerial implications for the company that has a strategic presence online and that recognizes the creative customers as the potential threat and opportunity and is willing to cope with them were broken down into the three-step framework that requires from the firm to:

- develop a specific approach towards creative consumers;
- recognise the existence of the relative power and willingness of consumers to adapt, modify, and transform beloved products and services;
- constantly scan, track, and control promising consumer-developed innovations (Berthon et al., 2007).

Managerial implications of the Web 2.0 emergence were further studied by Andriole (2010). The researcher attempted to investigate what particular aspects of the companies' daily operations were affected the most by the new Web 2.0 technologies. The findings showed that collaboration and communication, knowledge management, innovation, and customer relationship management scored the most proving highspeed boost of the organizations' ability to benefit from Web 2.0 technologies by cost optimization associated with the above-mentioned areas. Other pros for implementation of the Web 2.0 in the business environment suggests that these platforms increase productivity, employee motivation, and positively affect workflow and innovation processes within the organisation (Sophia van Zyl, 2009). However, authors of the both works stressed that along with a number of positive aspects that Web 2.0 brings to the organizations, there are also some downsides related to it. Cybersecurity is one of the crucial uncertainties that come along with the adaptation of the new web technologies. These include unintentionally exposed internal information or profiles set up by spammers and virus-writers. In addition, due to the lack of control over the user-generated content, there is a high risk of the increasing power of customers (Maruzek, 2009) and organisation reputation damage either through intentionally executed attacks by the competitors or through negligent acts of internal personnel.

2.3 Organisation-Public Relationship Theory

In order to examine the relationships between organizations and their publics, researchers proposed organization-public relationship theory as a base framework for building a successful win-win situation for all the parties involved in the communication process. Furthermore, in modern practices, scholars very often refer to “relationship management” as a paradigm that evolved out of the “public relations” term in the context of applied management and corporate governance (Ki et al., 2015; García, 2011; Ledingham, 2015).

The roots of the public relations theory and one of the core definitions of this concept were presented by the authors of *“Effective Public Relations”* who emphasized that it is *“the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends”* (Cutlip et al., 1994). Following the definition that was given by the previously mentioned authors, the group of other researchers emphasized that the actions of both organizations and the public can have an effect on the *“economic, social, cultural or political well-being”* of one another (Ledingham et al., 1997). Following year Huang (1998) continued expanding the organisation-public relationship theory stressing that it is rather a degree to which both parties trust each other with accompanying power to impact and *“experience satisfaction”* with each other. In a further study, Ledingham (2003) highlighted the significance of the ethical aspect of the successful organization-stakeholder relationship that should be focused on a long-term perspective and mutual common goal orientation that in the end will lead to substantial advantages for both. However, as long as the thesis is dealing with the social media engagement of the users with the organisation, the definition of the organisation-public relationship’s theory that depicts those relationships in a comprehensive manner was given by the Broom, Casey & Ritchey (2009). The authors suggested that the theory represents *“patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics”*, while also adding an important point that due to high dynamics of these relationships, they can be captured and evaluated at a single point in time only, though can be tracked and analyzed over time.

2.3.1 Organisation-Public Relationship Dimensions

After defining the concept of the organisation-public relationship and stressing its importance from the managerial perspective, scholars started to examine characteristics or in other words dimensions that should measure the level of those relationships between an organisation and its public. The pioneers in this field Ledingham, Bruning, Lesko & Thomlison (1997) initially identified seventeen various dimensions in the organisation-public relationships, however, the researchers named five of them as the most relevant and vital for a successful bond that is: “*trust, involvement, openness, investment, and commitment*”. Later, Hon & Grunig (1999) introduce a six-dimensional framework of measuring the relationships that include such characteristics as: “*mutual control, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationships*”. Authors stressed that through a quantitative analysis with the help of the Likert scale and the previously mentioned indicators, the organisation is going to be able to measure and maintain successful long-term relationships with their public. Continuing their study in the field of relationship management Bruning & Ledingham (1999) presented statistical evidence for the three-dimensional organization-public relationship scale, which is: “*professional, personal, and community*” that was designed to measure, predict and anticipate consumers’ “*attitudes, predispositions, and behavior*” and track its development over time. The research also proposed a short description of each of the types of relationships with respect to the field where observed organizations were operating which was banking. Thus, the professional relationships are those that put a high emphasis on meeting the expectations that the customers have regarding services the organisation provides, while also maintaining constant and apparent for the public financial investments into organisation-customer relationships. On the other hand, striving to build personal relationships the organisation should focus on the establishment of trust-worthy communication between its employees and the public that is supported by continuous engagement between the groups along with special treatment of the most proactive participants. This type of organisation-public relationships is also associated with high volumes of investments from the company’s side that include time, energy, and finances. At the same time, when an organisation is managing the community relationships, it is usually pursuing close interrelation with the groups the business wants to be associated with, while also indispensably represent and play a significant role on

crucial sponsors' or public's events that can positively impact "*social and economic aspects of the community*".

2.4 Stakeholder Theory

The stakeholder theory has been one of the widely discussed topics among academics since Freeman's "*Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*" was published in 1984. In this original work, the researcher provided quite broad yet reflecting the core of the theoretical definition of who can be attributed to the stakeholder suggesting that this term is applicable for "*any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives*". Further popularization of the theory among the academics, business world, governments, and the media led to a wide range of interpretations of the "stakeholder" and its importance in the field of strategic management. However, despite to the fact that there is no single universal definition of the stakeholder concept, the central principle that stands behind all of them lies in the idea of being aware of interests, needs and impacts of different individuals and groups that to some extent engage with any kind of organisation's activities (Polonsky et al., 2003; Phillips et al., 2003; Wagner Mainardes et al., 2011).

2.4.1 Stakeholder Theory in Sports

The stakeholder theory received a significant amount of attention from scholars in the last couple of decades. They have developed theoretical frameworks and applications providing empirical evidence and managerial implications in many fields of strategic management. While some researchers examined stakeholder theory in the context of corporate social responsibility (Roberts, 1992; Kakabadse et al., 2005), tourism business development (Byrd, 2007; Currie et al., 2009) and media company governance (Stern, 2008; De Bussy et al., 2003), others stressed its importance for decision-makers in the field of strategic sports management (Friedman et al., 2004). However, referring to what Friedman, Parent & Mason (2004) proposed in their research one of the core ideas of the stakeholder theory lies in identifying the organisation's stakeholders, with their further prioritization. These basic steps in stakeholder theory application in the organisation are necessary to provide a ground for practical relevance. Some of the researchers in the field of sports management tried to analyse and come up with the list of the main stakeholders

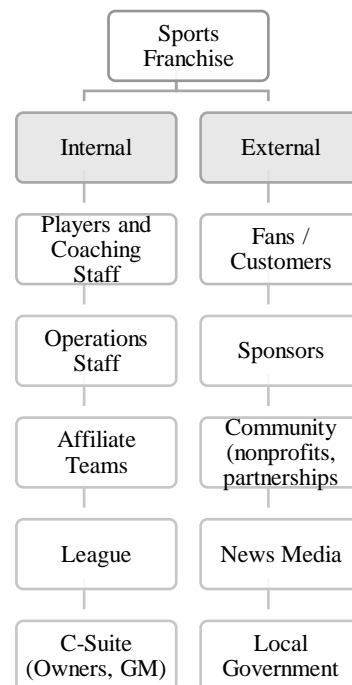
for a sports franchise. Thus, Rosentraub (2000) proposed a five-layered framework containing fans, players, team owners, sports leagues, and international sports organizations that the author depicted in the “Stakeholder Pyramid” (Figure 1a). In this study, the researcher put the fans into the base layer explaining this by the fact that *“spectators change sports from recreation to an event from which revenue can be generated”*. Another way to visualise and capture the core stakeholders for the sports franchise is through a “Stakeholder Map” that was presented by the Baker in 2019. The author highlighted that even though the stakeholder map that was introduced in the paper does not represent all of the relationships that occur within the organisation, it is still might be used as a base for management to build communication strategies accordingly and with respect to interests and needs of all the parties involved in the communication processes.

Figure 2. Sports Franchise Stakeholders

(a) Stakeholder Pyramid



(b) Stakeholder Map



Source: Rosentraub (2000); Baker (2019)

According to the Friedman et al. (2004), each of the organisation has its own stakeholder prioritization mapping due to the fact that each of them pursues its own goals that might vary depending on the season, size of the company or substantial changes in business, political or economic environment around. Therefore, it might be a reason that some researchers proposed different frameworks for stakeholder communication ranking. For example, as opposed to the study of the Rosentraub (2000), who examined the stakeholder theory from the point of view of the sports organisation that pursues the profit-maximization goals and placing fans at the base of the stakeholder hierarchy in regards to this franchise's objective, Hoye, Smith, Nicholson & Stewart (2015) argued that high profits are not always an indicator to measure the organisation's success in sports. The authors suggested that very often the objectives of the sports franchise are rather focused on "*on-field performance and member services*" and those who deliver the results on the way of achieving these goals should have a higher ranking in stakeholder prioritization. In these lights, writers named players as the most significant stakeholders for the sports organisation and proposed generalized stakeholder expectations summary of the sports organisation some of which are highlighted in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Stakeholder Expectations of Sport Organisation

Stakeholder Type:	Expectations:
Players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-field success • Appropriate pay and benefits • Low injury rates
Owners/shareholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return on investment • Public recognition of club or association
Sponsors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand awareness and recognition • Public recognition of club or association
Fans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Game quality and excitement • High win-loss ratio
Community/society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic pride • Provides role models for young adults
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mass market • High level of public interest

Source: Hoye et al. (2015)

2.5 Social Media Marketing

The constantly growing attention to social media from the general public has led to a spurred number of researches in that field all around the globe. These include both academic researchers from various social disciplines and the business world that recognises the power of the new media and therefore facilitates studies in this field to utilize these technologies in the most effective manner (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Filo et al., 2015). The importance of the examination of the phenomenon of social media for the marketers was yet highlighted in the Nielsen report (2009) more than a decade ago. The global marketing research giant quantitatively stated that social media sites had overtaken e-mail in terms of unique users and is going to radically change the complexity of the brand-to-consumer communication processes. Even though there's no ultimate definition of what can be considered as a social media (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010), in this chapter of the thesis some of the definitions that are the most broadly and duly cover the essence of that kind of media are going to be introduced following the marketing-related functions and implications while also making an emphasis on researches focusing on social media marketing in the sports industry.

Traditionally in the academic world, social media is considered to receive its foundations after the emergence of Web 2.0 and is seen as a platform that utilized the technologies that were brought along with the Web 2.0 digital revolution. According to many researchers Web 2.0 was the core driving force for social media to emerge in the form that the world can experience it now (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010; O'Reilly 2007). However, according to Harrison & Barthel (2009) social media existed long before the term Web 2.0 was coined, providing some historical evidence of the first communication online platforms that nowadays would have been attributed to "social media". Nevertheless, one of the heavily cited definitions that reflects the modern understanding of what social media actually is was given by the Kaplan & Haelein (2010) who stressed that social media 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*". Following this study Filo, Lock, & Karg, (2015) suggested another definition of social media. The authors examined this phenomenon from the perspective of sports management and the communication of the sports organisation with its public. The definition that scholars provided in their article highlights not only the

significance of the relationships side between the brand and the public but also stresses some particular stakeholders involved in the communication processes with the organisation on social media. Thus, according to the authors the social media can be defined as a: *“new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations (e.g. teams, governing bodies, agencies and media groups) and individuals (e.g. consumers, athletes, and journalists).”*

In recent years, social media has evolved into a rapidly growing tool for brands to communicate, interact and engage with required customer segments, while investing in social media development and building the strategies for a brand on any of the available online platforms has become a vital aspect for meeting marketing objectives of the firm (Murdough, 2009; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Many of the researchers empirically examined specific objectives of the organizations that to some extent have stakes in social media marketing activities. These include measuring and evaluating social media impacts on such marketing objectives as increasing customer equity and purchase intention (Kim & Ko, 2012; Naylor et al., 2012), improving brand image and brand attitude (Bruhn et al., 2012; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016), and finding positive effects on brand awareness and brand loyalty (Severi et al., 2014; Tritama & Tarigan, 2016). However, despite to the fact that most of the organizations are going to pursue all of the objectives that were mentioned above, there always will be specifics and key measurements depending on the industry that may affect the social media marketing strategy of the brand (Felix et al., 2016).

In professional sports, a significant increase in social media usage and the growing popularity of the online services also arouses interest among team owners and top management of the clubs. The researchers in this field suggest that there's a strong positive correlation between the franchise's digital reach and revenues of the clubs. For example, Dima (2015) empirically proved that correlation of the successful financial performance and digital reach for European professional football market, while also highlighting that on-field performance of the team will have a positive effect on numbers in social media profiles of the teams. Additionally, Parganas, Liasko & Anagnostopoulos (2017) argued that all of the three main sources of the club's revenues, which are match-days, sponsorship, and broadcasting resulted in the positive impact on the total follower

numbers. Further, in the qualitative research conducted with the help of semi-structured interviews with the senior marketing managers of the UK football clubs McCarthy, Rowley, Jane Ashworth and Pioch (2014) found that a decent social media strategy has a huge potential to develop the brand equity along with community building and additional revenue streams for the club in the digital arena.

2.5.1 Twitter

The emergence of social media marketing was only possible with an advent of the social network websites such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube that started to be popularized in the early 2000s (Kietzmann et al., 2011). According to the recent Kepios report (2019), Twitter is among top-tier social network sites globally with an estimated 340 million active monthly users and the highest potential advertisement reach in the US with Canada being placed on the 13th place in this list. Twitter (<https://about.twitter.com>) developers identified their product as a microblogging and social networking platform that is focusing on “*what’s happening in the world and what people are talking about right now*”. The messages are delivered through a short 280-character length ‘Tweets’, which is considered to be the main feature of the social network site.

2.5.2 Twitter in Professional Sports

From the perspective of the professional sports industry, Twitter is recognised as one of the most appealing platforms for both organizations and fans (Williams et al., 2014). The authors continued that the value that the social media network provides for the clubs through promoted tweets, trends and accounts, additional advertisement spaces, branding, and customer relationship building clearly manifests the significance of the platform and urges the need for empirical investigations of the fan engagement behaviors. Furthermore, from the point of view of fans, Twitter is a unique network that enables them to stay up to date to the latest news and communicate in a real-time interactive manner, which is an extremely important factor when it comes to live sports events. The academic world also attempted to provide valuable insights on social media user engagement for professional sports organizations analysing their Twitter accounts. While many studies were focused on how sports franchises can enhance customer relationships via Twitter (Witkemper et al., 2012; Armstrong et al., 2016; Baker, 2019; Price et al., 2013), others studied live-

tweeting impacts on user engagement (Anderson, 2018) and gratifications sought by the followers (Gibbs et al., 2014). However, Williams, Chinn & Suleiman (2014) noted the sports industry still requires more studies focused on user motivations along with a more in-depth user engagement examination on the platform of Twitter. Therefore, the thesis is going to utilize this particular social media network to conduct a content analysis of the selected sports clubs.

2.6 User Engagement

Nowadays in the world of the dynamic business environment, the term ‘engagement’ began to receive increased attention not only among practitioners in the field of marketing but also among academics that attempt to conceptualize the phenomenon (Brodie et al., 2011). The authors stressed the lack of theoretical background around the expression and attempted to consider it from the management and business perspective. Although the researchers constituted that the term can be conceptualized from the standpoint of different stakeholders involved in the business processes, the primary focus of many studies in this field is still on one particular group of people – the customers. According to the researcher, customer engagement represents *“a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships”* and is required to be approached strategically in order to be able to improve organisation’s business performance. Following this logic social media user engagement can be seen as *“active outcomes of users’ interactions with social media content”*, which receives visual representation in a number of likes, shares, comments, or discussions (McCay-Peet & Quan-Hasse, 2016). Furthermore, Schivinski & Dabrowski (2015) empirically studied the implications of social media user engagement on brand equity and found substantial positive effects on brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived brand quality. The increased attention towards user engagement from the business spurred the number of academic publications, some of which are going to be discussed in this chapter of the thesis. The topics that are going to be reviewed include consumer online brand-related activities, factors that drive media content consumption, and detailed examination of the social media posts characteristics.

2.6.1 COBRAs Framework

The technologies that have arisen in the era of Web 2.0 completely changed the dynamics of the organisation-public relationships, while also created new opportunities and concerns for marketers all around the globe. Indeed, as it was stated by the Mayfield (2008) traditional channels like television, radio, newspapers can only provide one-sided brand-to-consumer communication, while social media enables one to maintain two-way communication, thus creating the new frontiers in the relationship management horizons. Moreover, the emergence of social media platforms allowed users and fans to engage with their beloved brands in unprecedented extensive live communication (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). As a consequence, the substantial shift in customers' behavioral patterns can be observed along with a dramatic increase in the users' impact on brands' online activities, which in return possessed the new challenges for brand management in the rapidly changing environment (Gensler et al., 2013). In their research scholars proposed three main issues that brand managers should be aware of regarding new tendencies of customer empowerment. These are customers' recognition as the high influencing power in the brand-building process, the interactivity level that experienced tremendous growth with the emergence of the social media, and a large-scale number of channels through which brand-related activities can be performed by the users.

Although, the relevance of the customer engagement on social media is experiencing huge growth due to the social media boom among the internet users, there are still many struggles associated with the social media utilization for marketers that are striving to manage the brand in that particular kind of media feasibly while keeping the customers and users that interact with the brand pages as engaged as possible (Sklar, 2013). The identification and clustering of different kinds of users became one of the most widely discussed topics in the academic world and led to the conceptualization of the consumer's online brand-related activities, which many researchers nowadays refer to as the COBRAs framework (Muntinga et al., 2011). One of the first authors who comprehensively defined COBRAs as *“as a set of brand-related online activities on the part of the consumer that vary in the degree to which the consumer interacts with social media and engages in the consumption, contribution, and creation of media content”* were Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski (2016). However, despite the fact that this framework is considered to be originated from the Shao's (2009) theoretical investigation

of the users' motivation to consume user-generated media, many empirical studies on that topic were conducted before Shao's work was published. Among them were Shang et al. (2006) investigation of the consumers' online engagement effect on brand loyalty and Duan, Gu & Whinston's (2011) examination of the movies' online reviews impact on their daily box office performance. Finally, this concept received clearly defined dimensions provided by the Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011) qualitative research on what drives the people to engage with the brand-related content and how they can be clustered based on their engagement patterns. However, the authors were not pioneers developing a typology of the online users. Mathwick (2002) clustered all internet shoppers into four groups: transactional community members, socializers, personal connectors, and lurkers. In this typology, lurkers were described as the least engaging members of the online community, who can be characterized as passive observers of others' online activities. On the other hand, transactional community members tend to provide constant feedback and product or service reviews, thus bringing the most value to the community comparing to other identified groups of users. Further, in the context of social media user typologies Li & Bernoff (2008) in their book "Groundswell" that is aimed to explain the modern trend of customer empowerment and how companies can strategically build relationships in this rapidly evolving digital era. Authors clustered social media users into six-dimensional classification: inactive, spectators, joiners, collectors, critics, and creators. As it was mentioned before Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011) developed their own COBRAs typology based on the activeness level of the social media user. The authors believed that typology of the users that interact with brand-related content can be expressed as a "*path of gradual involvement*". The levels of that involvement distributed ascendingly from the lowest level of consuming to medium participation degree of contributing to the most engaging users that create brand-related content themselves. In addition, researchers provided a short explanation of what they meant by each level of involvement. Thus, consuming individual that interacts with brand-related content is described as the most passive behavioural pattern that monitors everything around the brand including reviews, posts, and discussions but never leaves their own mark. The middle participative level namely contributing tends to provide feedback on the brand's products or services and comment on the brand's social media pages, which include both user-to-brand dialog and peer-to-peer discussions. The ultimate degree of involvement is, however, the creating level that can be expressed by

users' production of any kind of content related to brand the examples of which can be video blogs, articles, pictures, or even music. Finally, the scholars summarized their COBRAs typology framework, where to each level of the user involvement they attributed particular examples of brand-related social media use (Table 2). However, the authors emphasized that even though the current table was aggregated from both Li & Bernoff's (2008) research and their own elaboration, it is still not exhaustive due to the nature of the COBRAs framework.

Table 2. COBRAs Typology as a Continuum of Three Usage Types – Consuming, Contributing and Creating

COBRA Type:		Examples of brand-related social media use:
Level of Brand-Related Activities	Consuming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewing brand-related video • Listening to brand-related audio • Watching brand-related pictures • Following threads on online brand community forums • Reading comments on brand profiles on social network sites • Reading product reviews • Playing branded online videogames • Downloading branded widgets • Sending branded virtual gifts/cards
	Contributing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rating products and/or brands • Joining a brand profile on a social network site • Engaging in branded conversations, e.g. on online brand community forums or social network sites • Commenting on brand-related weblogs, video, audio, pictures, etc.
	Creating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publishing a brand-related weblog • Uploading brand-related video, audio, pictures or images • Writing brand-related articles • Writing product reviews

Source: (Muntinga et al., 2011; Li & Bernoff, 2008)

2.6.2 Uses and Gratification Theory

The examination of the consumer brand-related activities provides valuable insights for the brands that strive to reach a profound understanding of what motivates individuals to use social media and interact with the brand's page in particular. The theory that is considered to be originated from Herzog's (1944) research that attempted to investigate stimulus of the radio listeners towards radio soap operas, is focusing on identifying the specific motives that drive the audiences to consume certain media types and content. The U&G approach aims to determine gratifications that: *"attract and hold audiences to the kinds of media and the types of content which satisfy their social and psychological needs"* (Katz et al., 1973). Further, Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1973) introduced five key assumptions for the theory that according to the authors in some way contradict the conventional picturing of the mass media user as a passive observer. The authors suggest that: the audience of a media source is active and pursuing its own goals by using a particular media, the initiative in connecting individual's gratification need to a particular media rests with the user, there's a competition between media and other sources for audience's gratification fulfillment, the audience is self-aware to the extent that they are able to provide valuable data for the media corporations and academics concerning their attitudes towards media source and its content, the cultural value of the media content should be disregarded during the process of audience preferences exploration. Katz, Haas & Gurevitch (1973) formed a list of possible needs that were assumed to be significant satisfactory factors for the audience interacting with any kind of mass media. After conducting the survey, the authors were able to categorize uses and gratifications into five major groups:

1. Cognitive needs refer to the audience's media interaction with the purpose of obtaining information, knowledge, or general understanding of the topic of one's interest.
2. Affective needs relate to aesthetic and emotional experiences, pleasure.
3. Integrative needs appeal to self-esteem building (e.g. self-confidence, integrity, and credibility) and represent a combination of both cognitive and affective needs.
4. The need that performs an integrative function but this time in the context of social interaction, which refers to the relationships building in both small groups of

people that include family and friends and networking outside of the personal circle. In other words, it is a need for affiliation.

5. The need to escape from everyone and everything, tension release, which authors refer to as “*weakening of contact with self and one's social roles*”.

Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011) pointed out that although the concept of the uses & gratification emerged in the middle of the last century and was mainly studied in the context of traditional media, many of the motivation factors are still relevant and applicable for the social media. The authors gathered together many sub-motivators and grouped them up into six the most significant motivators that prompt people to use and interact with social media platforms.

1. Entertainment. Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011) combined two categories of affective needs and escapism that were identified by Katz, Haas & Gurevitch (1973) and described previously into one group.
2. Integration and social interaction. Similar to Katz, Haas & Gurevitch (1973), the authors described this motivation factor as a basic need of a human being to maintain relationships, keep connections and communicate to people around, the need for a sense of belonging.
3. Personal identity. These are the gratifications that are directly related to the individual's identification whether it is self-fulfillment, self-expression, or self-enhancement that can be achieved through writing a blog post, an article in an open-source user-generated encyclopedia or simply by engaging with the content of a brand.
4. Information. Besides the motivators that were outlined by Katz, Haas & Gurevitch (1973) in related cognitive needs factor description, the researchers also mentioned advice and peer opinion seeking that links to risk-reduction in associated kind of activities.
5. Remuneration. According to the authors, the remuneration is a strong driver for the users to engage with the media source. They stressed that, while some users expect to receive economic or financial benefits, others find more intrinsic forms of remuneration.
6. Empowerment. The authors refer to the empowerment factor as gratification that an individual gets by exerting the impact on others whether it is a person or a

company whether through review article or simply raising the issue in the comments section on the social media's brand page.

The U&G theory was applied in a wide range of studies that involve a variety of industries and media sources. The topics that were examined include previously mentioned pioneer study of audience gratifications gained from listening to radio soap operas (Herzog, 1944), the study that was focused on distinguishing the gratifications the television viewers sought and obtain from watching the TV news (Palmgreen et al., 1981), or gratifications people gain from using the telephone (Dimmick et al., 1994). Despite the fact that the uses and gratification theory emerged more than a half a century ago, it is still considered relevant to be utilized in the context of the modern-era media (Muntinga et al., 2011). Hence, examples of the theory application can be found in more recent works of academics that predominantly aiming at examining the online environment around media. Thus, for instance, Yoo (2011) found that socialization, entertainment, and information-seeking are the core drivers for the online newspaper users, while Kim & Ross (2006) empirically tested and based on the results suggested seven motivation factors for the sports video game users, which according to the authors are entertainment, knowledge application, fantasy, diversion, social interaction, competition and identification with the sport. Overall, in the research that was focused on comparing the gratifications of the audience obtained using the internet news sources and traditional media channels such as television and newspapers Dimmick, Chen & Li (2009) concluded that although there is a significant amount of overlap in terms of gratifications sought by the individuals, the Internet represents a huge threat to traditional media especially since it provides *“the broadest niche on the gratification opportunities dimension”*.

The U&G theory was also utilized in the professional sports industry. While some authors used a technique of content analysis on the basis of the U&G theory (Hambrick et al., 2010), others applied theoretical foundations by conducting an empirical study that directly involved sports fans as a research sample (Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Gibbs et al., 2014; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). One of the pioneers in that field were Clavio & Walsh (2013) who attempted to uncover the motivations behind college sports fans engagement with official social media team pages and stated that interaction and information are the main gratifications obtained by the people that interact with this kind of feeds. Further,

Gibbs, O'Reilly & Brunette (2014) using a sample of the Canadian Football League Twitter followers identified four gratifications sought by football fans, which are interaction, promotion, live game updates, and news. Vale & Fernandes (2018) by conducting a web-based survey on Facebook outlined that the need for information, empowerment, and brand love are the key motivators for football fans to engage with the sports organisation's social media page. Finally, the importance of researches that address the topic of motivations behind sports users media activities was concluded by the Gibbs, O'Reilly & Brunette (2014) who noted that the crucial aspect for professional sports teams that want to approach the problem of fan engagement strategically, is to research gratifications that their followers seek to obtain by consuming the content that is presented on the official pages of the clubs. Therefore, some of the major gratifications that are supported by the academic literature are going to be discussed in more detail with the following hypotheses formulation in the subsequent sub-chapters of the thesis.

2.6.3 Informational Content

The need for informational content is one of the primary motivators that can be found across the literature that is focused on studying the uses and gratifications of the traditional media users (Katz et al., 1973). Furthermore, empirical investigations that were aimed to examine gratifications in the context of the social network sites also showed that the need for informational content is strong among social media users (Muntinga et al, 2011; Park et al., 2009), which makes the sports organizations create such content extensively to develop professional relationships with their audience (Wang & Zhou, 2015). In the context of the professional sports organizations, the fans need for information was highlighted by Frederick, Clavio, Burch & Zimmerman (2012) who investigated gratifications of the MMA blog users via Internet-based survey, Archen, Lebel & Clavio (2017) who concluded by conducting qualitative research that Twitter is a "*natural news outlet*" for sport fans and Witkemper, Lim & Waldburger (2012) who noted that the information gathering about favourite athletes can be attributed to one of the main motives of the Twitter users to interact with their social media pages. Hence, it can be suggested that informative sports organizations' posts are going to be more popular among users than non-informative that lead the thesis to propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Brand post containing relevant informative content has a positive impact on user engagement.

2.6.4 Entertaining Content

The search for entertainment is another prevailing gratification sought by the media users both in traditional and Internet format (Katz et al., 1973; Muntinga et al, 2011). Although the need for the entertainment was found to be an insignificant factor for students to participate in Facebook political groups due to more cognitive-oriented topics of discussions there (Park et al., 2009), many other studies show that the need for emotional experiences, pleasure, and amusement is still relevant and can be attributed to one of the primary gratifications sought by the social media users (Katz et al., 1973; Shao, 2009). Moreover, it is a strong influential factor that drives user engagement with a brand-related content in the online environment (Muntinga et al, 2011), including accounts of the professional sports organizations (Witkemper et al., 2012) that are striving to “*inject a unique type of entertainment into professional sports media*” (Armstrong et al., 2016). Thus, it can be proposed that for the sports franchises entertaining posts are going to receive a higher level of user engagement than non-entertaining leading the research to propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Brand post containing entertaining content has a positive impact on user engagement.

2.6.5 Interactive Content

The interactivity of a social networking site is also considered to be a significant factor that drives user engagement (Schultz, 2017) that is characterized by “*two-way communication between companies and customers, as well as between customers themselves*” (de Vries et al., 2012). Moreover, the authors described an interactive brand post as the one that contains a question, link to the website, call-to-action, contest or voting option and suggested that there’s a certain degree of interactivity that each of this characteristic embodies. Thus, the lowest level according to the researchers is to put a link to a website, while possessing a question or quiz represents the highest level of interactivity of a brand post. However, the positive effect on the user engagement that in this case was measured by the number of likes was indicated only in the medium level of

the post interactivity, which was a contest announcement where followers were requested to like or comment to earn some kind of remuneration. The interactivity value of the posts on social media was also emphasized in the researches addressing personal or corporate accounts in the industry of professional sports. According to the Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell (2010) study who analyzed the Twitter content of several professional athletes, interactive posts are the most common types of tweets and accounted for one-third of all posts examined in the research. Furthermore, investigating gratifications of the Twitter users Clavio & Walsh (2013) noted that interactivity is one of the primary motivations for the fans along with information-seeking purposes, while Gibbs, O'Reilly & Brunette (2014) named interactivity in the list of three main factors of social media use among Canadian Football League fans. Therefore, the interactive brand posts are expected to be more popular than non-interactive in the context of professional sports organizations leading the thesis to propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Brand post containing interactive content has a positive impact on user engagement.

2.6.6 The Vividness of a Brand Post

Besides the various gratifications that can drive user engagement with brand-related content in the online environment that were discussed in the previous chapter of the thesis, many authors found empirical evidence that the engagement also depends on the vividness of a brand post (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015). According to Steuer (1992), vividness can be described as “*the representational richness of a mediated environment as defined by its formal features, that is, the way in which an environment presents information to the senses*”. The author highlighted that vividness contributes to the motivational aspect of the users’ content consumption and is represented solely by the technical characteristics of the media publications. Also, many academics suggest that the degree of media content vividness can differ significantly (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015; Coyle & Thorson, 2001). The highly cited research regarding brand social media post popularity conducted by de Vries, Gensler & Leeftang (2012) using the Facebook platform proposed that the gradation of the content vividness can be described on the scale from low through medium to high, where the lowest level of a post vividness include only pictures and photos, the medium contains event announcement, while any kind of a video content represents the highest level of a brand post vividness.

Furthermore, in the study of Coyle & Thorson (2001) that was aimed to examine the impact that the level of vividness has on the users' attitudes towards brands websites, the researchers found that the more the website was accompanied with animations and audio features the greater the level of user experience was indicated among the participants and the stronger enduring attitudes they had towards the website. Moreover, some researchers constituted that medium and high levels of a brand post vividness lead to higher user engagement in the social media environment (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015). Although many academics that were discussed previously were using various brands as a sample in their researchers, accounts of professional sports organizations have never been examined in the literature focusing on posts vividness and its impact on social media user engagement. Furthermore, utilizing the study of Archen, Lebel & Clavio (2017) who stressed that game replays can enhance fan engagement and recent "Think with Google" (2018) article that emphasizes a significant growth in sports fans game highlights search on YouTube, the thesis is proposing to address the gap found in academic literature regarding video content type examination. A more in-depth study of social media video typologies is required to understand what type of content drives sports fans Twitter engagement the most. Hence, the following hypotheses regarding vividness of the social media content are proposed:

H4: The brand post containing text only has a positive impact on user engagement.

H5: The brand post containing images has a positive impact on user engagement.

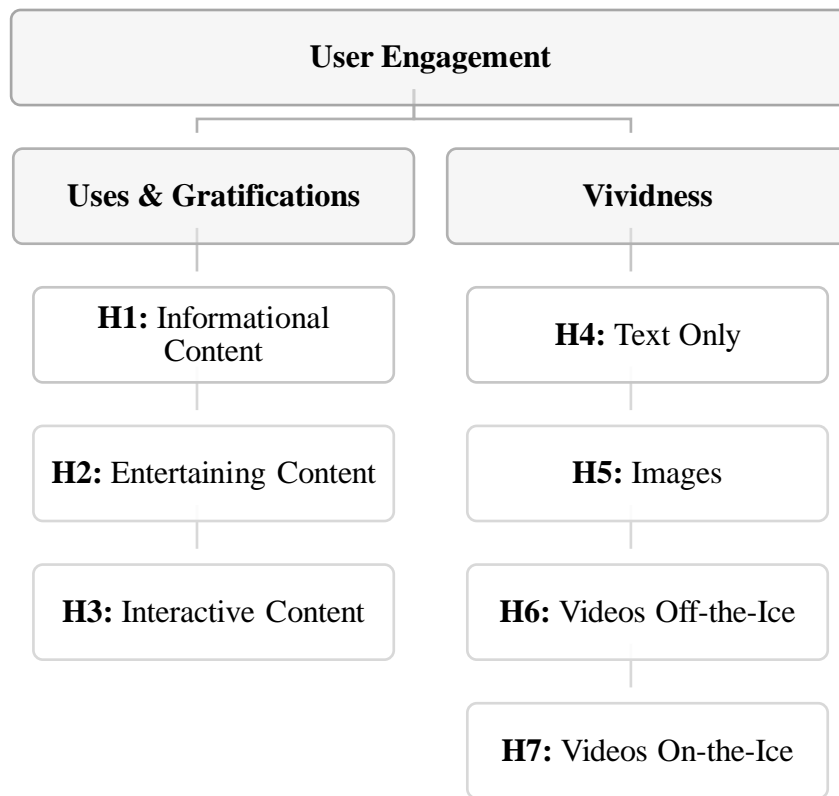
H6: The brand post containing videos with off-the-ice actions has a positive impact on user engagement.

H7: The brand post containing videos with on-the-ice actions has a positive impact on user engagement.

3. METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research technique was chosen for conducting the user engagement examination of the Canadian NHL organizations. Aliaga & Gunderson (2006) defined quantitative research methodology as the one that “*explains phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics)*”, which explicitly reflects the initial thesis motivation and can be applied to the theories and concepts described in the literature review. The hypotheses that were formulated in the literature review part of the thesis are further summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Hypotheses Summary



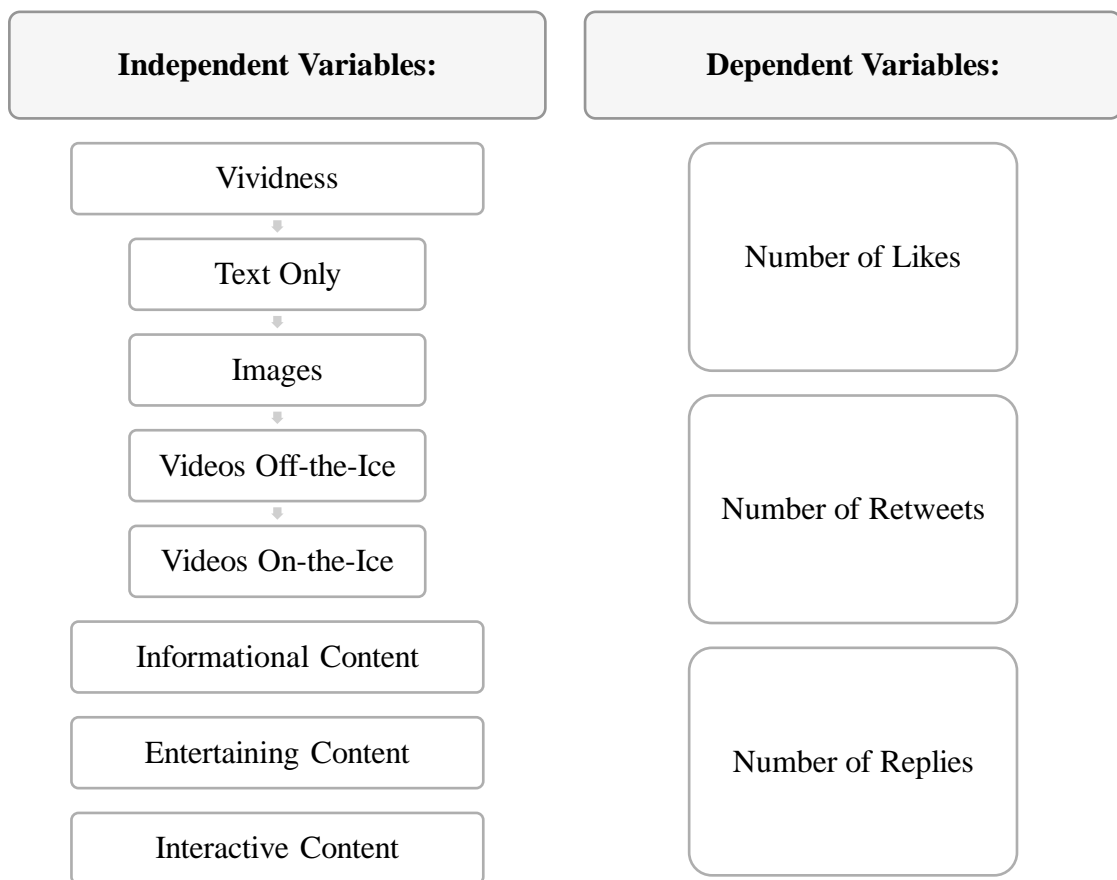
Source: own elaboration

3.1 Variables

Since the application of the statistical methods is a common practice for quantitative researches the multiple linear regression is going to be utilized to predict the outcome of the dependent variable based on multiple explanatory variables. Twitter’s functionality allows third party users to access the following engagement data: number of likes, number

of retweets, and number of replies, which practically shows the number of times users choose to perform a particular interaction option. Therefore, these three indicators are going to be used as response variables and can be attributed to count data with a Poisson distribution (de Vries et al., 2012). Predictors, however, following the logic presented in the literature review are going to be divided into two major groups: the one that originates from the hypotheses formulated on the basis of uses & gratifications theory and the concept of a brand post vividness that was empirically proven to have a positive effect on user engagement (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015). The conceptual framework of the thesis is summarized in Figure 4, where Twitter user engagement is measured in the number of likes, retweets, and replies, which ultimately represents the degree of a brand post popularity. The research argues that different users' motivations along with different levels of vividness will possess different effects on user engagement, which in return will have its managerial implications associated with strategic social media governance.

Figure 4. Schematic Framework



Source: own elaboration

3.1.1 Coding Scheme

In the study, all independent variables are going to be operationalised as binary categorical data. Thus, if the post characteristic is present in the organisation's tweet then it is going to be coded as 1, otherwise 0. The logic for the coding procedure remains coherent with the literature review description of the particular variable, however, at the same time, independent variables are going to be adapted to the specifics of the social media environment associated with accounts of the professional sports organizations. The predictors are going to be coded as follows:

Uses & Gratifications:

Informational Content. The Twitter posts that are going to be accompanied with informative content that in case of ice-hockey franchises can be represented in scores, game results, transfers, players stats, upcoming games, injuries or structural club's announcements will be coded as 1, otherwise 0.

Entertaining Content. The brand posts that are going to have an emotional, aesthetic focus (i.e. player's interviews, historic rewind moments, humor, post-game or goal celebrations) are going to be coded as 1, the publications without these characteristics will be coded as 0.

Interactive Content. The franchises' posts containing questions, links to other websites, Twitter polls, contests, or any kind of call-to-action are perceived to be an interactive type of content and are going to be coded as 1, otherwise 0.

The Vividness of a Brand Post:

Text Only. Tweets accompanied with only text messages represent the lowest level of a post vividness and are going to be coded as 1, otherwise 0.

Images. Every post containing any number of images are going to be coded as 1 otherwise 0. The image presence in a Tweet represents a medium level of a post vividness.

Videos represent the highest degree of brand post vividness (de Vries et al., 2012). However, referring to the gap found in the literature review, the thesis argues that

different types of video materials can have a different impact on user engagement, thus making one or another more vivid for the club's social media audience.

Videos Off-the-Ice. Tweets containing video materials with interviews, documentaries, game discussions, and everything that is outside of the actual game action is going to be coded as 1, otherwise 0.

Videos On-the Ice. The brand posts that include in-game action (i.e. game highlights) are going to be coded as 1, otherwise 0.

3.2 Data Collection

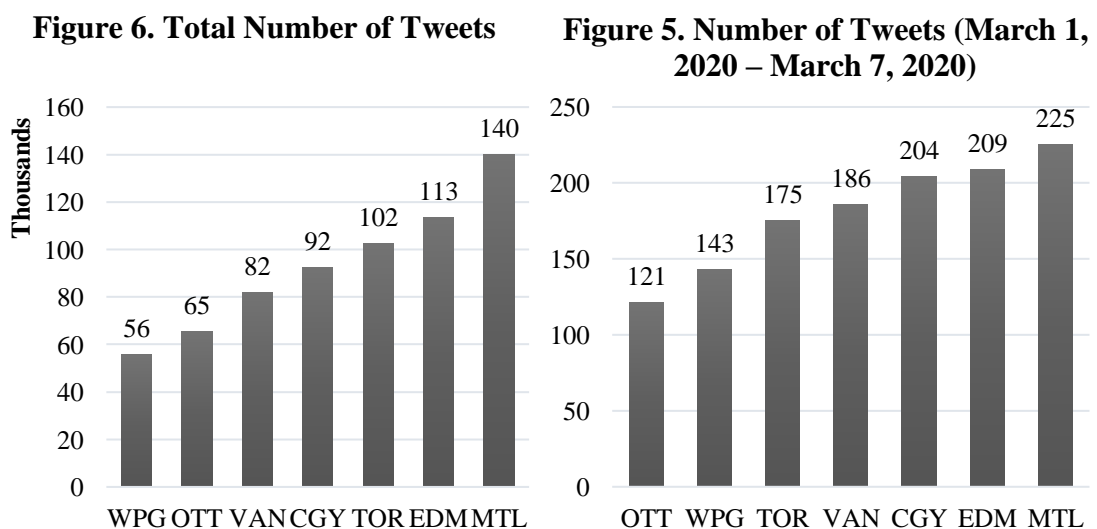
In the academic world, the researchers identified two major sources of information: primary and secondary (Streefkerk, 2018). According to Johnston (2014), however, nowadays in the era of enormous technological advances that allowed us to store huge amounts of data, the utilization of the secondary data is becoming common and prevailing practice for academic researches all around the globe. The thesis is going to exploit the secondary data available on the official Twitter pages of seven professional hockey organizations. In particular, the data for both independent and dependent variables are going to be collected from the following Twitter pages: @MapleLeafs, @NHLFlames, @NHLJets, @EdmontonOilers, @Canucks, @CanadiensMTL, @Senators. Furthermore, the data is going to be collected for every franchises' post during the period of one calendar week from March 1, 2020 to March 7, 2020.

4. PRACTICAL PART

4.1 Results

The empirical investigation was conducted on the data of seven NHL organizations based in Canada. The data was collected for every single tweet that the organizations had over the period of time starting from March 1, 2020, until March 7, 2020. The clubs were actively posting during the analyzed period of time accounting for a total of 1,263 tweets. The response variables for the study were three basic measurements of user engagement available on Twitter: number of likes, number of retweets, and number of replies, the descriptive statistics of which can be found in Table 3.

The average number (M) of franchises' Twitter followers was 891,731, with the highest number of 1,498,731 belonging to Montreal Canadiens and the lowest to Winnipeg Jets with 555,048 fans ($SD = 319,455$) (Appendix 1). The total number of posts that clubs have created over the lifetime period of their accounts was 651,578, while on average (M) organization had 93,082 posts with the highest number of 140,097 accounted for Montreal Canadiens and lowest of 55,750 for Winnipeg Jets ($SD = 26,691$) (Figure 5). For the analyzed calendar week, the total number of tweets was 1,263 averaging 180 posts per club with Montreal Canadiens to be the most active franchise that had published 225 posts and Ottawa Senators the least with only 121 posts ($SD = 34.54$) (Figure 6).



The descriptive statistics of the dependent variables can be found in the Table 3. The average number of likes per clubs' post was 242 ($SD = 384$), while the average number of retweets and replies accounted for 26.2 ($SD = 46$) and 15.9 ($SD = 51$) respectively.

Table 3. Dependent Variables Descriptive Statistics

	Number of Likes	Number of Retweets	Number of Replies
Mean	242	26.2	15.9
Std. error mean	10.8	1.29	1.44
Median	118	14	5
Sum	305259	33090	20078
Standard deviation	384	46.0	51.1

The more insightful data can be, however, found in Table 4 & 5, where the descriptive statistics is presented for the independent variables of the model described in the methodology chapter. The medium and high levels of vivid characteristics (i.e. images and videos) have been used in 87.6% of posts. In particular, images were used 489 times, which represents 38.7% of all posts, while videos accounted for 48.9% with a total of 617 times used in the organizations' official Twitter accounts. Furthermore, videos with game highlights that were coded as 'Videos On-the-Ice' were used more often than videos with content outside of the hockey rink (Table 4).

Table 4. Vividness Descriptive Statistics*

	Text Only	Images	Videos	Videos Off-the-Ice	Videos On-the-Ice
N	156	489	617	309	338
Mean	0.124	0.387	0.489	0.245	0.268
Std. error mean	0.00926	0.0137	0.0141	0.0121	0.0125
Standard deviation	0.329	0.487	0.500	0.430	0.443

*Please note that the summation of the number of videos-off-the-ice and videos-on-the-ice variables are not equal the total number of videos; some tweets contained videos with both characteristics

Furthermore, applying the typologies of U&G theory, it was found that ice-hockey organizations included in the sample used different tactics to stimulate user engagement. Specifically, informational content on average (M) was used in 60% of cases, entertaining in 57.2%, while interactive posts tools were utilized in 19.1% clubs' posts (Table 5).

Table 5. Uses & Gratifications Descriptive Statistics

	Informational Content	Entertaining Content	Interactive Content
N	762	722	241
Mean	0.603	0.572	0.191
Std. error mean	0.0138	0.0139	0.0111
Standard deviation	0.489	0.495	0.393

In addition, bivariate Pearson's correlations (r) were examined between the model variables (Table 6). The results indicate that there are statistically significant correlations between most of the variables. However, taking into consideration the aim of the study and the developed model, it is worth discussing only a few most relevant correlations.

Table 6. Correlation Matrix

		Images	Videos-Off-the-Ice	Videos On-the-Ice	Inf. Content	Entert. Content	Inter. Content	Number of Likes	Number of Retweets	Number of Replies
Text Only	r	-0.3***	-0.21***	-0.23***	0.2***	-0.34***	-0.02	-0.08**	-0.07*	0.22***
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	0.4	0.006	0.01	<.001
Images	r	—	-0.45***	-0.48***	0.02	-0.19***	0.28***	-0.02	-0.01	-0.06*
	p	—	<.001	<.001	0.41	<.001	<.001	0.55	0.78	0.05
Videos-Off-the-Ice	r	—	—	-0.22***	-0.38***	0.35***	-0.08**	-0.09***	-0.11***	-0.09***
	p	—	—	<.001	<.001	<.001	0.007	<.001	<.001	<.001
Videos On-the-Ice	r	—	—	—	0.20***	0.16***	-0.22***	0.16***	0.16***	-0.02
	p	—	—	—	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	0.5
Informational Content	r	—	—	—	—	-0.43***	-0.2***	-0.03	0.02	-0.01
	p	—	—	—	—	<.001	<.001	0.26	0.47	0.76
Entertaining Content	r	—	—	—	—	—	-0.20***	0.24***	0.16***	-0.02
	p	—	—	—	—	—	<.001	<.001	<.001	0.42
Interactive Content	r	—	—	—	—	—	—	-0.16***	-0.13***	0.08**
	p	—	—	—	—	—	—	<.001	<.001	0.01
Number of Likes	r	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.89***	0.14***
	p	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	<.001	<.001
Number of Retweets	r	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.14***
	p	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	<.001
Number of Replies	r	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	p	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < 0.01$

First of all, a statistically significant and moderately positive correlation was found between a number of likes and retweets on the posts with game highlights (i.e. videos on-the-ice), which corresponds to the overall trend of the social media content consumption

among sports fans, which nowadays is represented by a high emphasize on videos (“Think with Google”, 2018), and the users’ motivations to consume sports replays in particular (Archen, Lebel & Clavio, 2017). The significant and reasonably positive correlations could, also, be noted between the number of likes and retweets with entertaining tweets, which also can be explained by the fact that users’ initial stimulus to engage with the social media site is to experience emotional relief and escape from the daily routine (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). Furthermore, the research indicates the moderate and statistically significant correlation between the number of replies and posts containing only text. The reason for this correlation could be the relevance of the content since posts containing no images or videos can be formed in a much more efficient manner due to the reduction of the time lag associated with image or video transfer.

4.1.1 Number of Likes

The model for the number of likes is significant as a whole ($F = 21.9$, $p < 0.01$) and explains the variance of the dependent variable reasonably well assuming the behavioural nature of the study ($R^2 = 10.9\%$, $adj. R^2 = 10.4\%$) (Table 6).

Table 7. Number of Likes Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
1	0.330	0.109	0.104	21.9	7	1255	< .001

The organizations’ Twitter posts containing only texts, images and videos with on the ice actions are not significantly related to the number of likes, while videos with off-the ice actions are significant and negatively related to the number of likes ($\beta_{\text{videos off-the-ice}} = -225.8$, $p < 0.01$), so all of the hypotheses (H4-H7) that were formulated on the basis of the brands’ posts vividness (regardless the degree of vividness) cannot be supported. Furthermore, providing informational content on the brands’ official Twitter pages is not significantly related to the number of likes, while posts containing interactive characteristics are significant and negatively related to the number of likes ($\beta_{\text{interactive content}} = -108.5$, $p < 0.01$), which makes the thesis reject the hypotheses 1 & 3. However, franchises’ tweets accompanied with entertaining content found to be significant and

positively related to the number of likes ($\beta_{entertaining\ content} = 203.4, p < 0.01$) in support of hypothesis 2 (Table 7).

Table 8. Number of Likes Model Coefficients

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	247.1	73.0	3.383	< .001
Text Only	-79.2	76.3	-1.039	0.318
Images	-60.5	72.7	-0.833	0.419
Videos-Off-the-Ice	-225.8	67.6	-3.340	< .001
Videos On-the-Ice	-12.5	68.4	-0.182	0.929
Informational Content	-14.8	26.2	-0.566	0.497
Entertaining Content	203.45	26.2	7.757	< .001
Interactive Content	-108.5	29.1	-3.735	< .001

4.1.2 Number of Retweets

The model for the number of retweets is significant as a whole ($F = 14.7, p < 0.01$) and explains the variance of the dependent variable reasonably well assuming the behavioural nature of the study ($R^2 = 7.6\%$, $adj. R^2 = 7.0\%$) (Table 8).

Table 9. Number of Retweets Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
2	0.274	0.0757	0.0705	14.7	7	1255	< .001

The model for number of retweets has yielded somewhat similar results as for the model of likes. The vivid post characteristics are not significantly related to the number of retweets, except for the videos off-the-ice variable that was proved to be significant yet negatively related to the number of retweets, so the research cannot support hypotheses H4-H7. The posts that were aimed to provide informational content to the followers also was not significantly related to the number of retweets ($\beta_{informational\ content} = 1.66, p = 0.604$), which rejects hypothesis 1. Furthermore, the tweets that were accompanied with interactive content are marginally significant and negatively related to the number of retweets ($\beta_{interactive\ content} = -9.22, p = 0.009$), contrary to hypothesis 3. On the other hand, the posts that contained entertaining content are significantly and

positively related to the number of retweets ($\beta_{entertaining\ content} = 17.99, p < 0.01$) in support of hypothesis 2 (Table 9).

Table 10. Number of Retweets Model Coefficients

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	28.57	8.91	3.206	0.001
Text Only	-13.19	9.30	-1.417	0.157
Images	-8.95	8.87	-1.009	0.313
Videos-Off-the-Ice	-26.37	8.25	-3.197	0.001
Videos On-the-Ice	-1.20	8.35	-0.144	0.886
Informational Content	1.66	3.20	0.519	0.604
Entertaining Content	17.99	3.20	5.622	< .001
Interactive Content	-9.22	3.55	-2.601	0.009

4.1.3 Number of Replies

The model for the number of replies is significant as a whole ($F = 12.5, p < 0.01$) and explains the variance of the dependent variable reasonably well assuming the behavioural nature of the study ($R^2 = 6.5\%$, $adj. R^2 = 6.0\%$) (Table 10).

Table 11. Number of Replies Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
3	0.255	0.0652	0.0600	12.5	7	1255	< .001

The high and medium levels of vivid brand post characteristics (i.e. images and videos) are not significantly related to the number of replies that the users have generated on the official Twitter pages of the analyzed ice-hockey sports organizations, contrary to hypotheses H5-H7. On the hand, posts that were not accompanied with any of the vivid characteristics, thus containing only texts were found to be significant and positively related to the number of replies ($\beta_{text\ only} = 31.34, p = 0.003$) in support of hypothesis 4. Providing informational content was not significantly related to the number of replies, so the hypothesis cannot be supported. However, the tweets that containing entertaining content are marginally significant and positively related to the number of replies ($\beta_{entertaining\ content} = 8.61, p = 0.016$), which supports the hypothesis 2. Furthermore,

incorporating interactive content characteristics also proved to be significant tactic to increase the number of replies ($\beta_{interactive\ content} = 12.82, p = 0.001$) in support of hypothesis 3 (Table 11).

Table 12. Number of Replies Model Coefficients

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	13.42	9.95	1.348	0.178
Text Only	31.34	10.39	3.016	0.003
Images	-7.09	9.91	-0.715	0.474
Videos-Off-the-Ice	-14.04	9.21	-1.524	0.128
Videos On-the-Ice	-1.97	9.32	-0.211	0.833
Informational Content	-3.43	3.57	-0.962	0.336
Entertaining Content	8.61	3.57	2.407	0.016
Interactive Content	12.82	3.96	3.236	0.001

4.2 Discussion

The summary of the results shows that three out of seven hypotheses formulated in the literature review section of the thesis were supported in the research (Table 12). The entertaining content was found to be significant and positively related to the number of likes and retweets, while also proved to be marginally significant and positively related to the number of replies. Furthermore, the posts that had interactive characteristics and that were accompanied with low-level vivid characteristics also were found to be significant and positively related to the number of replies that followers of the Canadian NHL organizations had left on their official Twitter pages.

For the practical part, the user engagement data were collected for every single brand post that was created during one calendar week (March 1, 2020 to March 7, 2020) on the official Twitter pages of the 7 Canadian NHL organizations. The results showed that primary motivation for ice-hockey fans to interact with clubs' social media pages is to consume entertaining content, which was found significantly related to the number of likes, retweets, and replies. Furthermore, posting interactive and low-vivid (i.e. containing only text) content is positively related to the number of replies. In the first case, tweets that had interactive characteristics (i.e. question, contest, link) prompted users to interact with the content on the clubs' pages in the form of a reply to earn some kind of remuneration or to satisfy the need for socialization with people that share the

same interests. On the other hand, the positive user engagement trend of the posts containing only text messages can be explained by the high relevance of content, since it requires the lowest amount of time and resources from the organization to publish this type of content. The results can be used by both social media managers of professional ice-hockey organizations who can be guided by this research in the decision-making processes of content type selection that can potentially generate user engagement the most, and their advertisers that can decide on the basis of the thesis results on which type of content it is the most efficient to run collaborative campaigns with sports franchises in regards of user engagement.

Table 13. Summary of Results

Hypotheses	Expected	Number of Likes	Number of Retweets	Number of Replies
H1: Informational Content	+	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported
H2: Entertaining Content	+	Supported	Supported	Supported*
H3: Interactive Content	+	Not Supported	Not Supported	Supported
H4: Text Only	+	Not Supported	Not Supported	Supported
H5: Images	+	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported
H6: Videos Off-the-Ice	+	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported
H7: Videos On-the-Ice	+	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported

*marginal significance

4.2.1 Managerial Implications

In the world, where the phenomenon of increasing customer power has been recognized as a force that is needed to be reckoned with, the role of social media for professional sports organizations has started to have strategical value. Social media platforms can be considered as a tool that can establish efficient communication with fans, expand the customer base and overall has grown into a significant source that can provide a sustained competitive advantage of the franchise through additional effective ticket, merchandise or advertisement selling platform. The results of the research can be utilized by the social media managers of the professional sports organizations that strive

to enhance user engagement on clubs' official Twitter pages. Moreover, the best practices of the analyzed NHL teams that yielded the positive effects on user engagement can be further applied by other NHL clubs that were not included in the research sample and by franchises from other leagues all around the globe. Furthermore, the study can be valuable for advertisers that aspire to extract maximum from collaboration with sports organizations through product placement on the most efficient type of content. The number of likes and retweets can be increased by providing entertaining content that evokes fans' emotions through humor, celebrations, or outstanding historical moments. Thus, advertisers might consider the entertaining type of content as a primary choice for strategic product placement or any other promotional activities on the social media pages of professional ice-hockey teams. The insignificance of the brand posts' vivid characteristics concerning positive user engagement trend might be explained by the vivid content glut as it accounts for 87.6% of all the posts analyzed during the given period of time. The enhancement of the number of replies, in its turn, can be achieved through placing a question, contest, or entertaining content. In particular, good examples were found on the pages of Calgary Flames and Winnipeg Jets that were using an identical tactic of posting a contest for their followers, where fans were intended to guess the name of the player to score the first goal in the game. Furthermore, text-only posts most often implied the freshest content that can be explained by the time lag of vivid content (i.e. images and videos) to be delivered. Thus, the results of the research showed that the live nature of Twitter that was described in the literature review and its value to the sports fans (Williams et al., 2014) can be further extrapolated as a significant factor also for the ice-hockey fans to engage with organizations' pages, in particular, to react by replying to the timely created post containing information provided solely in the text format.

4.2.2 Theoretical Contribution

The contribution of the thesis to the academic literature focused on social media users' examination can be considered from several perspectives. First of all, researches regarding behavioral patterns of the social media audiences up to this date were mainly theoretical with only a few examples of the empirical investigation involving statistical methods (Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014; Tsai & Men, 2014). Especially, quantitative studies in the field of user engagement that utilized the real-life social media metrics could rarely be found in the industry of professional sports (Filo et al., 2015). Moreover, the

sports of ice-hockey as a whole and NHL, in particular, was never been found in the respective literature. Thus, the research contributes largely to the user engagement examination on social media platforms and to the Uses & Gratifications theory along with COBRAs framework by providing empirical evidence that proves the significance of the theories even for the new modern-era media sources and for the industry has never applied these theories in the statistical investigation before. Furthermore, the thesis attempted to connect strategic management, social media management, and marketing practices by the operationalization of the results that embody practical implications for primary stakeholders of the professional sports organization. Finally, the thesis developed a unique framework by bringing users' motivations to engage with social media, the vividness of the content on the franchises' posts, and further elaboration on the highest-level of the publication vividness (i.e. videos) by examining video typologies. This extension of the video typologies in the concept of a brand post vividness was also never studied before in the academic literature and could be a subject of study in the future involving different industries and further elaboration on video typologies.

4.2.3 Limitations and Further Research

This research is subject to some limitations. Foremost, the thesis used a very specific sample of organizations, in particular exclusively Canadian teams that participate in one professional ice-hockey league (NHL) were chosen to be analyzed, which creates certain limitations in regards of result extrapolation to other leagues around the globe and creates an opportunity to study possible cultural differences in terms of users' motivation to interact with particular social media content. Additionally, the data were collected for a specific period of time. In particular, the research utilized the data, when the regular season was still underway, thus leaving a room for user engagement examination during the off-season period of time. Furthermore, the data were gathered from the Twitter pages of studied sports organizations, which can be further be developed for other social networking sites to examine whether the results still hold. The thesis, also, did not take into consideration the dynamic aspect, thus the future researches can focus on whether the user engagement depends on the time of the day the post was published, or whether the engagement rates change depending on if it is a game-day or a day-off for the team. Furthermore, future researches might examine other user engagement drivers that were discussed in the study of Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011). The variables that might

be tested could include remuneration, empowerment or personal identity and its impact on user engagement on the social media pages of different brands. In addition, academics that are interested in the topic of user engagement might investigate whether there's a statistical correlation between the size of the fan base, city population, and the number of times users interact with the social media page of the respective sports organization. Furthermore, it might be interesting to investigate the impact of the "face of the franchise" presence in the post on user engagement rates, or in other words, applying Twitter terminology would the number of likes, retweets or replies increase if the post would contain the statement, picture, or video with the franchise's main athlete.

5. CONCLUSION

In the era of digital transformation, social media has become a rapidly growing and vital instrument for sports organizations to establish efficient two-way communication with fans. At the same time, social media management is required to be approached strategically involving all the available analytical sources to assure sustained competitive advantage and overall prosperity of the organization. Therefore, the need for consumer brand-related activities examination was highlighted by many academics and managers, who emphasized that strategic social media management can strengthen brand equity, increase brand awareness, boost social engine optimization and positively affect many other aspects of business and branding (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016; Severi et al., 2014; Ramdani & Taylor, 2018). The empirical investigations in this field can shed a light on social media users' motivations to interact with brands' pages and can identify particular content preferences on the basis of engagement rates.

The first part of the schematic framework of the research was created following the Uses and Gratifications theory and the Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities framework, where the initial three hypotheses were formulated after determining the main user motivations to interact with the media provided in the works of Katz, Haas & Gurevitch (1973) and Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011). In particular, the thesis examined whether the presence of an informational, entertaining, or interactive type of content impact sports fans' user engagement on Twitter. Additionally, the research has studied the effects of vivid characteristics on user engagement rates on the official social media accounts of the sample organizations. The results of the empirical investigation revealed that Canadian ice-hockey fans are expected to indicate higher engagement rates if the clubs publish the entertaining or interactive type of content. Furthermore, it was found that low-vivid tweets meaning those that contain only text have a substantial positive effect on the number of times users replied to the post. The outcomes of the research might be useful for both social media managers of the professional ice-hockey organizations and for the existing and potential advertisers of the clubs', the specific implications of which were discussed in the practical part of the thesis including the tactics of user engagement enhancement and the most efficient types of content that stimulates users to interact with brand pages.

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APPENDIX

