

MLB Teams Social Media and Consumer Engagement

by

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## **Introduction**

Social media is an integral part of much of our everyday lives. It has slowly taken over how we go about many of our daily tasks, interacting with others, and how we consume information. Because of this, social media marketers and those who manage the social media of businesses have been forced to put time and effort into how they manage their accounts - in order to increase the number of consumers and customer relationships. Social media is used as an avenue to communicate and engage with others. This is no different when it comes to the world of sports. Many of the most popular sports teams and players have millions of followers across the various social media accounts they own. This in turn is a great opportunity for these teams to increase their consumer engagement using these social media sites with the goal of increasing revenue (through merchandise/ticket sales etc.), gaining more fans, and just generally increasing fan loyalty to their brand. Consumer engagement can be defined as the relationship between a company or a brand and the people who follow or consume their content. The goal of consumer engagement is oftentimes not just to generate profit but as stated previously; to increase the overall trust and loyalty between brand and consumer.

In order to do this, the teams that run these accounts have looked to psychological theories and principles. This is not a new phenomenon as marketers and advertisers have done this for countless number of years now. This increase in awareness of the link between human nature and the use of certain psychological principles gives owners of these teams' accounts an advantage in gaining the interest of the average fan/consumer. Social media engagement can be measured in multiple ways but is most often measured by the number of like likes, comments, and shares. The more engaging a post is, the more reach and the stronger the bond is

between the consumer and the brand in question. In this study we will look specifically at the MLB and how teams manage and use their social media accounts. There is the same great incentive for MLB teams and players to use social media effectively to further the connection and loyalty they have with their fans and also just to generally increase the number of fans they have.

This paper will look into three psychological theories that could be used to explain why consumers would engage on social media. The hypotheses and methods are explained and with that, an extensive literature review for each of the three topics will be used to see if previous literature supports the hypotheses. In addition, data will be collected for each MLB team and using this data to run correlations to see if it supports the hypotheses as well.

### **Hypotheses and Theories**

There are a number of theories that could be looked at with the goal of explaining why people would engage more with certain social media posts and accounts more than another. One of these theories that could be pointed to is the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Although this theory is being used to explain social media and consumer engagement, the roots of this theory are in general human nature and have been around since the 1940's, i.e. long before social media was even a thought. The Uses and Gratifications Theory seeks to explain why humans engage in various types of media. It first mainly looked into radio usage and engagement in that aspect; but as different forms of media and information receiving have come about the theory has expanded to what it is today. In the age of social media, there has been an increase in the number of studies testing this theory, since it is much easier to measure engagement on these platforms and get data to analyze. There are slight differences in the details of the theory but it generally states that

humans are looking to fulfill different gratifications by engaging in these media outlets (in our case social media). The five gratifications highlighted by the theory are (Dolan & Conduit, 2016):

1. Cognitive needs – acquiring information, knowledge, understanding our social environment, curiosity, exploration;
2. Affective needs – aesthetic and emotional experiences, pleasure;
3. Personal identity – self-confidence, personal stability, integrity, social status, the need for self-respect;
4. Integration and social interaction – family relations and friendship, connection with the outside world, the need for affiliation;
5. Escapism – the need to escape, tension release, shifting attention from unpleasant to pleasant.

This list of five gratifications represents why an individual would want to engage in various media outlets and I would expect to see teams that utilize certain aspects of this to have increased engagement.

H1:

The Uses and Gratifications Theory says that humans seek out different forms of media to fulfill innate needs that lead to internal gratification. Based on the many needs explained by the theory I would expect the social media of teams to tailor their account so consumers can express their opinions, gain information, and pass time (entertain) in order to maximize engagement on their media platforms. I would expect that teams that post content that allows fans/consumers to do so, will see an increase in the number of likes on their posts and increased engagement and thus fans

would be more likely and more willing to show support in person as well by attending games. With that said I would expect to see a significant positive correlation between the number of likes on Twitter posts and the attendance of MLB teams at their games.

Another part of psychology that has long been seen in research is the innate need of individuals to feel like they belong in some way. This could be to a family, political party, or any other type of family/group (sports teams included). There are many theories that include this innate need of belongingness. The first, and broader theory is known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs coined in 1943. It attempts to explain the various motivations of humans as a whole as a hierarchy of needs. After the physiological needs of food, air, water etc., comes safety, and the third on this hierarchy is the need for a sense of belonging which is what we will focus on. A second theory that goes hand in hand with this theory is the Brief Range of Community Scale (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) that talks about how humans behave to essentially be a part of or belong to a group or community of people such as being a sports fan. The four dimensions of the Brief Range of Community Scale include:

- Membership—feeling of belongingness or relatedness to the organization community.
- Influence—the feeling of making a difference in the group and mattering as a member.
- Needs Fulfillment—the perception that members will meet one another's needs, and resources will be shared through these relationships.
- Emotional connection—a shared emotional connection or experience, through history or commonplaces.

Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to prove the innate need of human belongingness and the reasons laid out in the Brief Range of Community Scale - I would expect these to also be reasons for an increase in overall engagement with certain media posts.

H2:

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs lays out the different levels of human motivation (one of the main one's being belongingness) and the Brief Range of Community Scale explains how humans interact to feel a part of a group or community. These theories should show that fans of sports teams should interact with their favorite team's social media posts in order to feel like they are a part of that said group. One would expect teams and marketers that manage the accounts of teams to make posts that would engage fans and make them feel as though they are a part of a community (strong fan-base) and thus the teams that facilitate this through their social media will see this reflected in an increased social media engagement. In our data collection we looked at homegrown players with the idea that fans would have a higher sense of belonging to these players because they have always been in the organization. I would expect to see a significant positive correlation between the number of homegrown players on a team and the number of followers on Twitter.

The last principle that will be looked at is the Basking in Reflected Glory theory. This essentially has to do with the human tendency to heighten one's self esteem or status by associating themselves with a successful or special group. This theory was first coined in the 1970's but was further developed as technology increased and from that came many new ways to become a part of a certain group. This relates directly with sports as some fans want to become a part of a successful or more popular team or a more popular team to increase their self-image or status.

H3:

The Basking in Reflected Glory theory has to do with the tendency for individuals to associate themselves with a successful or “special” group such as a sports team. With social media there are many new ways for individuals and consumers to feel as though they are a part of the “successful team” by supporting them online through social media outlets. Based on this I assume that teams that experience more success on the field through the number of wins will have a significant positive correlation with the number of followers they have on Twitter.

### **Methods**

The first method to test and determine if the hypotheses are correct was done through a literature review of articles and previous studies having to do with the three theories mentioned. Through reading and researching previously done studies we will be able to determine if the current research should back up our hypotheses. The research will have to do with sports teams and social media looking through the scope of the three theories.

In addition, in order to test these hypotheses, we looked at Major League Baseball (MLB) teams including their Twitter accounts and their relevant engagement numbers from the 2021 season. The MLB is one of the most popular professional leagues in the United States, having the highest revenue second only to the National Football League. We decided to look at Twitter instead of the many other social media sites for multiple reasons. One being the accessibility of the social media “stats” for these MLB teams and also it is a very well established and popular social media site as it has almost 400 million users.

The first aspect of social media engagement we looked into was the average number of retweets for all 30 MLB teams. Retweets are when a user shares the given MLB team’s post on their own feed to be seen by their own group of followers. We also recorded the average number

of likes for each MLB team which is simply when a user double clicks or taps the like button on any given post. We also looked at the number of followers for each team. We found data from before the start of the 2021 season (April 2021) and then at the end of the season. In addition, we found other statistics related to each MLB team to be compared with these social media stats.

The first being the number of homegrown players each team has on their roster. Homegrown players are defined as a player that was signed or drafted by an MLB team and came up through their minor league system. Because these types of players have been in the organization for their whole careers, (even before they are in the MLB) oftentimes they become fan favorites because of how well known they become. We found the number of homegrown players each team had going into the 2021 season both on their active roster and their 40-man roster. The difference being the active roster is the players you bring to any given game against a team. Although, the 40-man roster includes the 25-man active roster but also has other players that can be thought of as reserves - that are able to be moved to the active roster. Lastly, we found the projected WAR (wins above replacement) stat for these homegrown players prior to the 2021 season. WAR is a common baseball stat that encompasses the entire game of a given player including their hitting, fielding, baserunning, and defense. The final number is meant to show the players value against the average replacement player at their same position on the field. The other team stats we recorded were a lot more straightforward as we found the total attendance and the average attendance for each MLB team over the 2021 season. We also found the number of wins each team ended up with at the end of the year and if they made the playoffs.

With these statistics we ran multiple correlations between them to test our hypotheses. To test the first hypothesis, we ran correlations between total attendance and average attendance



with the number of wins. To test the second hypothesis, we ran correlations between the number of homegrown players on the active roster, 40-man roster, and the average war for each team with their number of followers. Lastly for the third hypothesis we ran correlations between the likes, followers, and a ratio we created to combine likes and followers with wins. To get this ratio we divided the likes by the followers. For each of these correlations we found the p-value to determine if there was a significant relationship and also found descriptive statistics for all of the collected data.

## **Results**

### Literature Review Section

#### *Hypothesis 1: Uses and Gratifications Theory*

The basis for my first hypothesis having to do with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, is based on some previous researched studies. Whiting and Williams (2013) conducted research aimed at using the Uses and Gratifications Theory to gain insight as to why individuals as a whole use and engage with social media. They also attempted to look at the gratifications that are specifically gained from the usage of social media. The seven utilities this specific study looked into were social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, and convenience utility. It found that most people used social media for social interaction (88%), information seeking (80%), to pass time (76%), and entertainment (64%) in their reports. Also, in another article, “Social Media Engagement Behavior: a Uses and Gratifications Perspective” (Dolan & Conduit, 2016) talks about the different types of content that Uses and Gratifications can be applied to - one being entertainment which most directly relates to sports content. It found that the main reasons for engaging in this type of content were needs of escapism, hedonistic pleasure, and emotional release. So, with that said the more

entertaining the content is for users there should be a higher rate of engagement and interaction with fans. In addition, an additional study “How fans are engaging with baseball teams demonstrating multiple objectives on Instagram” (Kim & Hull, 2017) did both a textual and content analysis of MLB social media accounts posts through a lens of Uses and Gratifications theory - and found that the highest engaged posts were those with a sporting objective (news about the team). However, they also found that “merchandise objective” photos were highly engaged along with “charitable objective” posts. From this literature review we found that the literature supports the first hypothesis.

### Hypothesis 2: Sense of Belonging

Having a sense of belonging is an innate need for humans overall. There are many studies that look at the link between this and social media engagement. One specific study done by Dr. Tobin (2015) found that social media has an effect on individuals' sense of belonging. In her study she had one group that was just to observe posts and social media and the other that would make comments and interact. It was found that the group that interacted more would have an increased sense of belonging to that group they engaged with and even more so when they got a response back. In addition, Vincent (2016) looked at the belongingness of college students specifically through social media. He found that especially in college aged students this is especially true because of the transition they are experiencing. Social media was found to increase self-esteem in many instances and increase a sense of higher quality social interactions. I would argue that although this study looked at college students, that the innate need to belong is always there and can be found through social media as an outlet throughout our lives. Lastly there Taguea and Reysen (2020) looked at the motivational factors between having stigmatized fan identity and having a greater identity in being a fan of a given team. Of the six different

factors they looked at as to how fans developed their identity as a sports fan - belongingness was the only significant one. So even when a team and its fans are stigmatized for any number of reasons (allegations of cheating, or just generally being bad often). Individuals find comfort in seeing that they are not the only ones being fans of the team and that gives a sense of belongingness to something bigger. From this literature review we found that the literature supports the second hypothesis.

### *Hypothesis 3: Basking in Reflected Glory*

The third hypothesis has to do with the theory of Basking in Reflected Glory. Jackson (2012) looked in depth at the Cleveland Browns social media page through the lens of this theory. The study found multiple things such as the bigger the fan was of the Cleveland Browns, the more likely they would be to use plural pronouns like “we” when referring to the team. In addition, they found the more time invested with a team and becoming a “die-hard fan”, the more the team becomes a part of their social identity. In addition, Cialdini and Borden (1976) found that in Notre Dame University students were significantly more likely to wear apparel of the school’s football team after a win. Lastly, Wann and Dolan (1994) found that high identification fans of sports teams were more likely to show positive emotions after a win and negative emotions after a loss. This change in emotion for diehard fans I think would have an increased impact when a team is on a run of success (like having a good season) or the opposite when they are having a bad season. From this literature review we found that the literature supports the third hypothesis.

### Correlation Analysis

From the data we found a multitude of descriptive statistics for each of the data we collected. For likes, retweets, followers, wins, and attendance we found the mean, median, max, standard deviation, and minimum. These numbers can be seen in the figure below in Table 1.

*Table 1 : Descriptive Statistics*

	<b>Likes</b>	<b>Retweets</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>Wins</b>	<b>Attendance</b>
<b>Mean</b>	1,812	286.66	1,236,020	80.96	18,900
<b>Median</b>	998	105	1,000,000	81	18,928
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	1,867	397.60	723,852	14.46	6,850
<b>Maximum</b>	6,300	1,900	3,500,000	107	34,625
<b>Minimum</b>	126	13	380,200	52	7,933

From collecting this data, we found multiple interesting teams that stood out more than others (see Appendix A for teams' individual data). The LA Dodgers are an interesting team because they are in the top in most of the categories that we have looked at. They have the highest number of retweets, likes, and are top 4 in followers. They are also high in the non-social media data retrieved having the most homegrown players, the number one team in attendance, and the second most wins in 2021. The Marlins are essentially the exact opposite as they were second lowest in retweets, the lowest in likes, and the lowest follower numbers. This also couples with having the second least homegrown players, second least in attendance numbers and bottom four in total wins for the 2021 season. Some possible reasons for this could be the Marlins are consistently in the lower third of the league in total payroll and also got rid of their two best players in previous years in a "rebuild". In addition, the San Diego Padres had an MLB leading 11% change follower increase (leading the MLB). Some reasons this might've been influenced is possibly because in the offseason leading up to the 2021 season, they acquired two top notch pitchers in blockbuster trades (Blake Snell & Yu Darvish) and not to mention they extended their

franchise player Fernando Tatis Jr. to a 14-year deal worth 340 million. In addition, the year before in 2020 the Padres had their first winning record since 2010. That is also reflected in their team total attendance being in the top 3 for the 2021 season.

### Hypothesis 1

*Table 2: Correlations and P-Value for Hypothesis 1*

	<b>Total Attendance</b>	<b>Average Attendance</b>
<b>Likes</b>	0.602 ( $p = 0.0004$ )	0.592 ( $p = 0.0005$ )
		n=30

After running correlations between the total attendance and the average attendance with the average number of likes per team both ended up having a positive correlation. The total attendance and likes correlation was 0.602 with a  $p = 0.0004$ ,  $n = 30$  while the average attendance and likes correlation was 0.592 with a  $p = 0.0005$ ,  $n = 30$ . For both of these correlations the p-value was less than 0.05 meaning both of the correlations were significant.

Using the lit review and the Uses and Gratifications theory helps to explain why this is the case.

The more likes a team has being positively correlated with attendance numbers shows that teams that were able to facilitate a more engaging twitter feed (based on the higher number of likes) had fans that were more likely to go to show their loyalty by actually attending games. This is what one would expect based on the Uses and Gratifications theory and is consistent with the five gratifications being cognitive needs, affective needs, personal identity, and especially the integration/social interaction gratifications and escapism.

### Hypothesis 2

*Table 3: Correlations and P-Value for Hypothesis 2*

	<b>Homegrown Players Active Roster</b>	<b>Homegrown Players 40 Man Roster</b>	<b>Average WAR</b>
<b>Number of Followers</b>	0.158 ( $p = 0.404$ )	0.317 ( $p = 0.087$ )	0.151 ( $p = 0.424$ )
			n=30

After running the correlations with both of the homegrown players on the roster, and the average WAR with the number of Twitter followers we had non-significant correlations. The homegrown players on the active roster correlation was 0.158 with a  $p = 0.404$ ,  $n = 30$  and the homegrown players on the 40 man roster was 0.317 with a  $p = 0.087$ ,  $n = 30$ . Both were very low correlations and had a p value greater than 0.05 showing them to be insignificant. Lastly, the correlation between the average WAR was 0.151 with a  $p = 0.424$ ,  $n = 30$ . Some possible reasons for this include the number of homegrown players and also their projections are not necessarily common knowledge. Although we did expect to see teams with more homegrown players and a higher projected WAR to be reflected in their follower numbers based on fans having a higher sense of belonging to them; there likely isn't enough fans that are even aware of this for it to have an effect on the follower number.

### Hypothesis 3

*Table 4: Correlations and P-Value for Hypothesis 3*

	<b>Wins</b>
<b>Likes</b>	0.638 ( $p = 0.0001$ )
<b>Number of Followers</b>	0.389 ( $p = 0.033$ )
<b>Likes/Followers Ratio</b>	0.601 ( $p = 0.004$ )
	n=30

After running the correlations between the likes, followers, and the ratio of likes divided by followers with the number of wins; all correlations ended up being significant. The correlation between wins and likes had a correlation of 0.638 with  $p = 0.0001$ ,  $n = 30$  and the correlation between number of followers and wins was 0.389 with a  $p = 0.033$ ,  $n = 30$ . Lastly, the correlation between the ratio of both likes and followers with wins was 0.601 with  $p = 0.004$ ,  $n = 30$ .

### **Discussion**

The results of our study mostly supported our hypotheses. The first and third hypotheses had significant correlations that we expected based upon the literature review. For the first hypothesis the Uses and Gratifications Theory helps to explain the expectation that the teams that are able to facilitate a social media where users are inclined to engage by liking more posts; will in turn show support by attending more games on average. This is especially true having to do with the last two gratifications of escapism and integration/social interaction. In addition, the third hypothesis having to do with the Basking in Reflected Glory theory was supported by both the literature review and the data correlations. The theory essentially states how humans tend to associate themselves with more successful groups (or teams) to heighten one's self esteem. So it was not very surprising to see that our correlation between teams that had more wins had a significant correlation with both likes and followers.

The second hypothesis was the only one that did not have significant correlations. Using the two theories that talked about the innate need for humans to feel like they belong in some capacity to a group or something of the like. From this we decided to look at homegrown players and its correlation with followers to see if teams that had more homegrown players, had fans that felt a higher sense of belonging and be reflected in the number of followers. This turned out to

not be true even from the literature review that showed that fans had a high sense of belonging overall. As mentioned before, this could be because the average fan may not be aware how many homegrown players are on their team or which players are “homegrown”. This could be why there was no increase in belonging and thus no correlation between that and Twitter followers.

After getting our results we did a small inquiry into the Twitter of MLB teams. Meaning, we looked at the last 100 tweets of all MLB tweets (retrieved April 2022) to see if certain teams had different noticeable strategies to engage fans. Very surprisingly, the Twitter accounts were very similar in the types of posts they had. Much of what was posted was the outcome of games, and highlights of any given game. There was not much that differed teams from each other in types of posts or a noticeable strategy one team had that another did not. This goes along with what was said above about homegrown players that if certain teams were to advertise their homegrown players more-so or just try to create a connection with fans (in ways similar to the literature review) there would be much more room to increase engagement.

### **Conclusion**

This intention of this study was to look at the link between psychology and consumer engagement in relation to social media. Sports fans are different from the average consumer in that they tend to be much more loyal and less likely to change who they are a fan of (unlike a consumer of a more usual brand). From the literature review and the correlational data we found our first and third hypotheses to be true – finding significant positive correlations between likes and attendance, and wins with followers/likes. The second hypothesis having to do with having a high sense of belonging, looking at homegrown players and followers was backed by the literature review, but the correlation was not significant. From this study we see how MLB teams can use social media and other performance-based metrics to increase engagement from their



fans. Future studies could look at other sports and see if these findings are consistent across other areas of sport. In addition, future studies could look at how social media platforms other than Twitter are used in order to increase engagement from fans.

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## Appendix A

<b>Team</b>	<b>Total Attendance</b>	<b>Average Attendance</b>	<b>Homegrown Players (Active Roster)</b>	<b>Homegrown Players (40-Man Roster)</b>
LA Dodgers	2,804,693	34,625	15	24
Atlanta	2,300,247	29,490	10	19
San Diego	2,191,950	27,061	1	10
St. Louis	2,102,530	26,281	13	20
Texas	2,110,258	26,052	9	19
Houston	2,068,509	25,537	11	24
Colorado	1,938,645	24,854	14	25
NY Yankees	1,959,854	24,498	7	18
Chicago Cubs	1,978,934	24,431	8	18
Milwaukee	1,824,282	22,522	7	12
Boston	1,725,323	21,300	8	12
San Francisco	1,679,484	20,734	7	15
NY Mets	1,484,665	20,620	11	16
Chicago White Sox	1,596,385	20,466	13	22
Philadelphia	1,515,890	19,188	12	23
LA Angels	1,512,033	18,667	6	12
Cincinnati	1,505,024	18,580	12	17
Washington	1,465,543	18,319	9	17
Minnesota	1,310,199	16,377	15	22
Seattle	1,215,985	15,012	4	9
Cleveland	1,114,368	14,472	9	19
Kansas City	1,159,613	14,316	15	25
Detroit	1,102,623	13,612	9	17
Arizona	1,043,010	12,876	4	10
Pittsburgh	859,498	10,611	10	16
Baltimore	793,229	10,169	10	14
Toronto	809,557	10,119	8	17
Tampa Bay	761,072	9,513	5	14
Oakland	701,430	8,767	7	13
Miami	642,617	7,933	2	7

<b>Team</b>	<b>Wins</b>	<b>Likes</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>Likes/Followers</b>	<b>Retweets</b>
LA Dodgers	106	6,300	2,200,000	0.002863636	1,900
Atlanta	88	4,800	1,300,000	0.003692308	783
San Diego	79	895	474,700	0.001885401	90
St. Louis	90	3,000	1,200,000	0.002727273	783
Texas	60	417	1,400,000	0.000297857	43
Houston	95	4,100	1,500,000	0.002733333	532
Colorado	74	128	587,700	0.000217798	13
NY Yankees	92	5,600	3,400,000	0.001647059	770
Chicago Cubs	71	812	2,500,000	0.0003248	80
Milwaukee	95	1,200	642,200	0.001868577	104
Boston	92	4,900	2,100,000	0.002333333	641
San Francisco	107	5,000	1,700,000	0.002941176	852
NY Mets	77	640	1,100,000	0.000581818	56
Chicago White Sox	93	1,800	947,100	0.001900538	274
Philadelphia	82	1,100	1,800,000	0.000611111	106
LA Angels	77	3,700	1,100,000	0.003363636	574
Cincinnati	83	820	877,700	0.00093426	70
Washington	65	1,100	769,200	0.001430057	136
Minnesota	73	224	653,000	0.000343032	23
Seattle	90	1,200	575,600	0.000857143	129
Cleveland	80	1,200	1,000,000	0.0012	151
Kansas City	74	821	1,000,000	0.000821	72
Detroit	77	444	1,400,000	0.000317143	82
Arizona	52	233	590,900	0.000394314	24
Pittsburgh	61	551	745,300	0.0007393	390
Baltimore	52	808	787,800	0.001025641	84
Toronto	91	518	2,200,000	0.000235455	43
Tampa Bay	100	1,300	615,500	0.002112104	169
Oakland	86	618	575,300	0.001074222	80
Miami	67	126	367,700	0.000342671	18