

**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION ON CHINESE SPORTS FANS’  
EXPERIENCE OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO MAINTAIN FANSHIP**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The use of social media in sports has attracted increasing attention from both business and academia perspectives. Against the backdrop of China's sports market becoming increasingly appealing to sports leagues and associations worldwide, social media offers an important channel. However, the Chinese sports fans with whom they are attempting to interact are a new population with distinctive features and taste on social media, offering no straightforward recipes to follow. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study aimed to understand Chinese sports fans' lived experience of maintaining fanship via social media, further acquiring insights at how that experience impacts their identification to a team(s). Purposive sampling was used to recruit 7 participants. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. van Manen's detailed approaches were used to guide data analysis while the Team Identification theory was adopted to provide a theoretical framework. The findings suggest that social media offers diverse fan experiences in relation to practicing fanship. Fans maintained fanship and enhanced team identification after constantly using social media to show support. Emotional affiliation between fans and teams became stronger. Fanship, from the perspective of fans, became more valuable. Findings of this study also suggest that using social media to practice fanship may benefit fans in the long run. The participants suggested they experienced improving psychological wellness and social ability because social media afforded them an opportunity to live vicariously through teams.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Sport is about experience. It offers the chance for people to “exercise their bodies, minds, and emotions in a way that is socially acceptable and positive” (Bireline, 2014, p. 13), offering many people shared experience and intense interaction among fans. As the advance of information technology brings social media into people’s lives, more opportunity for online activities were created, which largely expanded the capacity to engage in social activities related to sport. Social media is an online communication platform (Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013), encouraging many-to-many dialogues, “the sharing of information, experiences, and perspectives” (Weinberg, 2009, p. 1), and the creation and distribution of content (Zarella, 2010). Social media brings an opportunity for individuals to make “direct and real-time conversation, talking and listening to each other, and then learning from each other and knowing each other closely” (Abeza, 2016, p. 5). Social media diversifies users’ online interaction, creating new opportunities, and it is arguable that bringing social media into the context of sport will enrich fans’ experience.

Regarding the term “social media,” it came into play in the early 2000s while high-speed Internet access aided in creating social networking sites such as MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), and Twitter (2006), giving the name "social media" and contributing to the prominence it has today (Kaplan & Haenlin, 2010).

Social media enables users to obtain information, share opinions, and generate self-created content, presenting distinguishable features than that of paper-based media or traditional electronic media, including quality, reach, frequency, interactivity, usability, immediacy, and permanence (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008). Typically, users access social media services through networking computers or mobile devices. After logging in (or creating) an account, users can actively interact with other individuals, communities, and official accounts. Social media introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between businesses, organizations, communities and individuals (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011), influencing not only how communication occurs, but also how people experience their daily lives and how they view society.

Notably, despite a late start in social networking site development, China's social media platforms, such as Sina Weibo, are gaining momentum and attracting interest worldwide. Sina Weibo was released in 2009, sharing many similar features with Twitter, but has now evolved into a multimedia blogging platform, which can be seen as a combination of Twitter, Tumblr, and in many ways YouTube as well. Weibo allows users to creatively post self-created content with no limitation on the number of words, including but not exclusive to photos, videos, instant messages, and voice recordings. Arguably, Weibo is defining how people communicate with others online, how they express opinions about social issues, and how they build up fandom online. With less than 20% of Twitter updates sent to users, almost half of

updates of Sina Weibo were sent to people through mobile phones (Crampton, 2011). Noting a huge growth of online users has been witnessed in the past few years, Kantar, one of the world's leading research, data and insight companies, released the *China Social Media Impact Report* for 2017, which showed that the usage of social media in China has recently increased. For example, users above 40 years old alone have increased by 40% compared to last year, whereas young adults in their 20s are the largest group impacted by social media (Guo, 2017). Since Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are inaccessible in China due to Internet censorship, known as the “Great Firewall,” and the central effort of the government’s online surveillance (Albert & Xu, 2017), their Chinese equivalents are taking this unique opportunity to further develop without competition.

Sport fans, who sport teams seek to disseminate information to and gain support from, have become a valuable target population for sports businesses, teams and leagues to reach through social media (Haugh & Watkins, 2016). The significance of fan study has also been valued from a business perspective. Cunningham and Eastin (2017) suggest sport enterprises focus on fans in their marketing attempts. Not only are individuals closely connected to the wider world, but business enterprises also manage to make use of social media to build relationships and enhance market strategies, overcoming geographic barriers to a large extent. As Bireline (2014) explained, individuals are getting used to acquiring

information via social media; it is efficient in promoting communication due to its capacity of transmitting messages among users instantaneously.

Realizing the capacity of social media in facilitating communications by many people with and to many people simultaneously, this platform has changed the landscape of the sports industry. Serving as a point of connection among fans, teams, players, and organizations, social media plays a different role for each group. To illustrate, fans are using social media to track the latest game schedules, interact with players by leaving comments on players' accounts, and post self-created feature stories. They are now able to gain an inside look at their favorite players and access to team stories behind the scenes that otherwise would not be accessible. In the other direction, studies found that social media is being used more frequently by sports organizations and athletes as a tool to contact fans (Parks, Quarterman, & Thibault, 2007), an attempt to fulfill "advertising purposes" (Han & Dodds, 2013, p. 11), and build and monitor relationships (Perdue, 2010). Arguably, social media has significantly impacted sports as a whole, from communication, business marketing, policy making, and fan-base expansion and engagement. For both athletes and individuals, there are significant benefits brought from social media use (Bireline, 2014). This study aimed to undertake a hermeneutic phenomenological exploration on sports fans' lived experience of using social media to maintain fanship with sports team, with a specific focus on highly identified Chinese sports fans.

Many sports teams and leagues have made their presence felt on China's social media platforms as an attempt to enter and engage with China's sports market. Taking the National Basketball Association (NBA) as an example, up to 2017, its official account on China's social media platforms has attracted more than 33 million followers, surpassing the number on its Twitter account by six million subscribers, and around 200 million viewers from China were attracted to the 2017 NBA Finals on mobile alone (McNicol, 2017). Notably, Weibo has offered fans more choices to experience and to interact, and at the same time enhanced the impact of NBA on China's sports market. Major sport leagues, including the NBA and the National Football League (NFL), are partnering with China's social media, Weibo in most cases, using it as a resource to expand their global outreach and interact with Chinese sports fans. Those moves made by sports leagues not only highlighted the potential of social media in promoting corporations within China's sports industry, but also point out the need for gaining greater understanding about Chinese sports fans, who are either targeted customers or team supporters. Within the context of this study, the term "fan" refers to an individual who have a constant psychological connection to a particular team (Funk & James, 2001). As Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) pointed out, the self tends to present certain patterns of behaviors and sense of loyalty due to cognizance of being a member within a particular group. Sport creates an environment where fans generate a sense of belongingness, either to a particular team or fans' community, or even both. Through this, they tend to interact and invest

emotions (Gantz, 2013). As such, emotional attachment encourages fans to practice fanship in a variety of ways, making them an ideal population for sport research.

Foster and Hyatt (2008) suggest that the reason why an individual becomes a fan is due to the intention of belonging to something that is meaningful. Studies demonstrated that among print, broadcast, mobile phone, and online media, the use of social media exerts the greatest influence on fans, not only improving their self-esteem level, but also triggering emotional fluctuation and behaviour changes, and even changing the way they view themselves (Phua, 2012).

Noting there's a difference between fanship and fandom, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) defined fanship as "the individual's sense of connection to a sport team" while the term fandom is "the individual's connection to other fans of the team" (p. 177). In this regard, the term "fanship" used in this study is referring to a fan's relationship with a particular team in which a fan is consistently interested. There are three types of sports fans in general: low, medium, and high (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 2017). Those who having low identification tend to be relatively passive in keeping a relationship with the team, but rather enjoy the game mainly for entertainment purpose. As such, low identified fans do not emotionally attach to a particular team, let alone devote time or money to support a team. As for fans having an identification between low and high, they tend to support a particular team merely when the team performs well. As such, their attachment to the team is more often than not, short-term and unstable. As Sutton et al. (1997)

explained, such identification may “follow the fate of fads and die out after the involvement has run its course” (p. 177). In comparison to those two types of fans, highly identified fans have “the strongest, most loyal and longest term-relationship” (p. 177) with a team and are more likely to devote themselves to team support activities either emotionally or financially, or even both. As such, connection built between highly identified fans and their favourite teams is stable, long lasting, and unwavering, making their experience of maintaining fanship stand out from one another. In sum, the term “highly identified fan” refers to an individual having a strong emotional attachment to a particular team (Wann, Ensor, & Bilyeu, 2001). Fanship offers a fitting context to explore fans’ lived experience of using social media to maintain relationships to a particular team.

Past studies have accumulated significant knowledge about fan groups, including their motivations and behaviours (Clark & Maher, 2016; Gibbs, O’Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Haugh & Watkins, 2016; Larkin & Fink, 2016; Papacharissi, 2014; Pegoraro, 2010). Few, however, were centering on fans’ lived online experience from their perspective (Jacobson, 2013). Given the importance of fanship in the lives of fans and the heavy promotion of sport through social media, it is incumbent on researchers to investigate social media, adopting a research angle from the fans’ perspective (Haugh & Watkins, 2016).

Although increased scholar attention has been attracted to fan study via social media over the past decade (e.g. Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2016; Hermida,

Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Mudrick, Miller, & Atkin, 2016; Phua, 2010; Phua, 2012), little has been done that has expanded the research setting outside of North America. Fans nurtured by different cultures might have different experiences with social media use, so knowledge obtained about fans in the U.S. and other countries should not be generalized to understand Chinese fans. Different populations might present distinctive features across social media (Haught, Willis, Furrow, Morris, & Freberg, 2016).

Most studies centering on fans' social media use have been mainly conducted through surveys or other quantitative methods (Billings, Broussard, Xu & Xu, 2019). This leaves a knowledge gap regarding the social media experience of fans who identified with a particular team, particularly concerning how they acquire distinctive experiences of fanship via social media, and what that experience means to their team affiliations. There is a particular need for understanding fan experience via social media from outside the most studied context of North America, providing a warrant for this study to further explore.

Moreover, from a methodological perspective, no studies to date that I could find use a phenomenological approach to interpret fans' unique stories of their experience on social media. This study seeks to fill this gap, in conducting a phenomenological exploration on fans' experience within China's sports context, investigating how highly identified Chinese sports fans use social media to experience and maintain fanship.

Team identification theory was utilized as the theoretical framework, serving as a vehicle through which the researcher can better interpret fans' lived experiences. Team identification affects the ways fans display fanship (Wann, Royalty & Roberts, 2000). For instance, fans publicly presenting themselves as a fan of a team and indicate feeling proud of it. Therefore, team identification theory offers an excellent theoretical guide for this study to investigate fan's lived experience of using social media to keep fanship, and further look at what that experience means for the continuation of fans' team identification.

This study expanded research in the study of fanship within China's social media context, accumulating greater knowledge on the distinctive features of Chinese sports fans' online experiences and China's social media platform. Furthermore, the findings may potentially provide enterprises and teams with resources to look at in their attempts to build their Chinese fan-base and contact targeted customers.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to better present the scholarship centering the study of fans, this chapter will feature four sections: 1) the general use of social media, including its role in people's lives and impact on redefining communication; 2) the application of social media within the sport context, including the ways athletes and teams utilize social media; 3) fans' social media use, including motivations behind their social media engagement and common online behaviours, and finally, 4) introduction on social media use within China's sport context, including its influence on China's sport industry and sports fans.

### **Roles of Social Media in General**

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” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media are part of the new Web 2.0 era in which “content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (p. 60-61), which allows users to bring in their own personalities. Peters et al. (2013) describe social media as “communication systems that allow their social actors to communicate through multiple dyadic ties” (p. 282). Resources like blogs, vlogs, wikis, and social networks, plus worldwide-known platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram,

are all contained within the term “social media” (Drury, 2008), all of which contributed to its prominence today (Witkemper, Choong Hoon, & Waldburger, 2012). Social media not only enables people to express themselves and interact with others, but also makes the process faster and more direct.

Individuals use social media to actively connect with the world, and media agencies in many ways, are virtually having the same mindset of reaching out to more people and building a deeper connection with them. Embracing social media as an efficient marketing mechanism to build up brand loyalty, organizations also look highly on the impact social media has on transforming the market landscape. Given decreasing costs and increasing availability, many individuals are now able to launch their own blogs, social networking sites, and exchange ideas with others (Weinberg, 2009), presenting a tendency of direct interaction with brands, transforming communications between individuals and brands from one-to-many to many-to-many (Dolan et al., 2016). Sharing has become the key feature of social media use (Hermida et al., 2012). In this regard, individuals have more say while organizations and companies have more opportunities to learn consumers’ purchasing behaviours, which also creates a significant research area for scholars to explore.

Snelson (2016) carried out an overview of social media research literature published from 2007 through 2013. All the 229 research studies being analyzed were conducted from either qualitative or mixed methods. It showed a large body of research focusing on the impact of social media, but that advertising, communication,

marketing, and public relations are attracting the most scholarly attention, followed by social science, information systems, health care, and education. This scholarly work represents a significant growth of academic interest on social media phenomenon. As Snelson further claimed, “the upsurge of social media use has been coupled with increased interest in learning more about human interaction with social media and the type of content posted on social media sites” (p. 11).

Moreover, as one of the most effective tools in building relationships, the application of social media has been examined from different contexts, ranging from community, business sectors, and organization management (Shaw, Mitchell, Welch, & Williamson, 2015; Sitter & Curnew, 2016). Among those studies, notably, questions explored include who social media users are, and how social media is being used. Scholars in the field, including Correa, Hinsley, and de Zúñiga, (2010), specifically looked at personalities of social media users, and Khang, Ki, and Ye (2012), took a step further to examine the transformation of communication within social media context. To illustrate, Correa et al. (2010) gave credit to previous findings, noting that people who are more open to experience, more extraverted, and higher in neuroticism, are more likely to engage in social media. They further argued that differences of gender, age and the status of emotionality contribute to people’s preference of social media engagement. As the young adult cohort constitutes the majority of the user base, emotionally unstable males are, to a large extent, regular social media users, whereas no significant relationship has been found among female

users in this regard (Correa et al., 2010). One study focusing on social media research noted an interesting trend shifting from “mass communication to interactive digital communication” (Khang et al., 2012, p. 281), illustrating the role of social media in generating participatory audiences, in that people sometimes regard themselves as the creator of interactive media, such as being a self-journalist. It is arguable that gathering information while surpassing the restrictions posed by traditional mainstream media like newspaper and TV, together with sharing knowledge and interacting with friends, are the most common motivation of social media users (Khang et al., 2012; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012).

To further illustrate from the perspective of information technology, it is notable that social media offers web-based services, enabling individuals to generate their own profile within a constructed and bounded system, linking them with countless other users in a digital manner, and encouraging them to develop and maintain social connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Unlike traditional forms of media which involve mostly singular activity, social media encourages users to form bonds with others rather than simply being the receiver of information. This allows users to have more say in the process and greater power over the message dissemination and consumption (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), be it huge or small. In this way, social media evolved from traditional media, becoming not only an informative tool, but also a “connective tissue” (Hull & Lewis, 2014, p. 11), largely

affecting the relationship outcomes (Bireline, 2014), bringing users to the center of interaction.

Looking at the use of social media from a business perspective, research found that online consumers are more likely to engage in social networking activities due to the need for interaction, gathering and sharing information, as well as entertainment (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Heinonen, 2011; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Vries & Carlson, 2014). As these characteristics facilitate the advent and growth of online communities, which individuals could join in based on shared interests, organizations also found opportunities to connect with their potential customers. This is largely attributed to the accessibility, timeliness, and simplicity of social media (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008), in that those features promote instantaneous information exchange between customers and organizations, creating opportunities for marketing and relationship building (Watanabe, Yan, & Soebbing, 2015). Similar arguments found support in the study of Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011), which emphasized that social media ensures long-lasting conversations between individuals and enterprises. As Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011) explained, the effective use of social media is critical because it largely benefits from “a personal touch that is relationship oriented” itself (p. 276).

Taking a step further, Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) distinguished three types of social media use: consuming (low level), contributing (medium level)

and creating (highest level). This suggests that lower engagement happens when customers passively receive information from the brand or engage in basic interaction, such as “liking” an official account, while higher engaged online users tend to actively embrace the brand into their day-to-day lives, creating content and reviews by themselves. Likewise, Calder et al. (2009) discussed users’ social media experience and noted a correlation between online engagement and successful advertisement. In this regard, it is important to note that despite different purposes, companies resort to social media to develop enduring connection with consumers (Baldus, Voorhees, & Calantone, 2015), creating an environment where consumers can engage with brands intently, which in turn increases their potential purchase (Gil-Lopez, Ahmed, & Taylor, 2017).

Rapid developments in participatory online activities bring opportunities for users to produce, consume, and enjoy online content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media provides a space where people can express themselves and actively engage in social life. As traditional forms of media usually inform audiences with information that has been selected, polished, and edited, it is more of a singular activity with less interaction happening along the way (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Social media enables users to speak for themselves. For example, Sitter and Curnew (2016) found that people are using social media to protest human rights, illustrating the use of social media in the context of community advocacy, calling for better knowledge and understanding on this new platform, so as to enhance its role to “amplify voices,

mobilize support, and foster community connections both online and offline” (p. 281). Arguably, the potential of social media in changing the landscape of communication and global dialogue is beyond measure, and such impact will reach out to nearly all sectors.

With general understanding obtained about the roles of social media in business and an individual’s life, the focus will now shift to the use of social media among young adults. With younger generations constituting nearly the largest user group of social media (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2018), it comes with no surprise that their social media engagement is becoming a big area for inquiries. Their use of social media is particularly important, considering young adults tend to play the role of both the producers and distributors of information.

Moran (2016) found that young adults are showing more interest in things happening on social media, not only interacting with specific purposes such as gaining more attention and followers, but also being sensitive to the languages used by other users and errors on the web. This research was conducted through seven English-speaking countries (three in Europe, Canada, the USA, Australia & Singapore); yet no significant international differences were found regarding the social patterns of young adults. Likewise, Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr (2010) noted an increasing number of college-background online users who post their own creations, build personal webpages, comment on others’ page, and blog constantly. With younger generations presenting a high interest in social media use, studies

revealed that there are negative impacts. For example, the literature indicated that youth in diverse places such as the USA, Bulgaria and Holland experience a decrease in self-esteem, devaluated self-conception, and increased loneliness and anxiety (Pack, 2015; Stankovska, Angelkovska & Grncarovska, 2016; Valkenburg, Peter & Schuten, 2006). In this regard, the easier users interact with others through social media, the more likely they will be exposed to different voices and comments, forming distinctive experiences. Even so, recognizing that social media may exert negative influences on users, it is crucial to note that social media have created a broadened social environment for some people to absorb information, express one's self, and connect to others.

Gallagher (2017) states that teenagers tend to compare themselves with others on social media, through selfies and the number of "likes," which will generate negative perceptions about themselves and consequently, they may resort to eating disorders and excessive body training. In many cases, however, social media aid a more smooth and relaxed communication. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) support this argument in that they found social media helps introverted students to socialize, start conversation, and build healthy relationships. Wolfradt and Doll (2001) made a similar argument in their study, that strong social interaction via the online media platform helps adolescents relieve pressure.

## **The Use of Social Media within the Sport Context**

Utilizing social media within the sport context has been recognized as the most effective way to bring together direct participants (i.e., athletes/players, spectators/fans, managers, coaches and organizations). With an important role to play in stimulating economic growth, sport attracts not only academic interest, but also media corporations, inevitably turning into a global business. Smart (2007) describes sport as “an economically significant, highly popular, globally networked cultural form” (p. 114), pointing out the significance of correlation between sports, sponsorship, the media, and consumer culture, as those factors “contributed to the growth of a globally extensive popular culture of sporting celebrity... in the ‘take-off’ phase of the globalization of sport” (p. 115).

## **Social Media Use within the Sport Industry**

Taking the social nature of sport into account, its business is, in most cases, experience-oriented, displaying a compelling need for enduring relationships with fans, who constitute a significant supporting group of sport organizations (Haugh & Watkins, 2016). Arguably, it is this demand that gives rise to the popularity of social media within sport context, as it surpassed the traditionally singular information dissemination and create an environment enabling dialogue among fans, stakeholders, players, and organizations (Gantz, 2013). As Hopwood, Skinner, and Kitchin (2010) see it, social media requires an “understanding of how organizations will interact in a continuing dialogue between themselves and their stakeholders – from fans to

community to sponsors to internal staff” (p. 202). Adding on that, whereas professional sports have been widely seen as products with high commercial value, fans are becoming sophisticated consumers, contributing to the commodification process in different ways (Hopwood et al., 2010). As social media enhanced fans’ connection with teams and players, it has strengthened fans’ emotional attachment, attracting them to consume the sport and regard it as a way to show support. At the same time, organizations try to keep fans informed through social media, increase fans’ involvement and loyalty, and ultimately implement marketing strategies based on long-term relationships with fans (Abeza, 2016). Abeza, O’Reilly, and Reid (2013) emphasized the opportunities brought by social media for ensuring successful relationship marketing of sport organizations, including greater knowledge of participants, advanced multiple-way communication between customers and organizations, more effective customer involvement, and more efficient use of resources, therefore enabling organizations to better understand customers while at the same time monitoring and evaluating their relationships.

Moreover, as social media enables fans to generate self-created content, it encourages organizations to seek better marketing plans that features with distinctive fan elements, such as encouraging fans to repost web links or content consisting of new products and famous athletes. In this regard, active and comprehensive engagement with fans, as targeted consumers, are the keys to success, especially when fans are regarded as “the living and breathing representation of sport – the

heart and soul” (Hopwood et al., 2010, p. 139). Many sport organizations have already made the move to utilizing social media to build long-term relationships with fans, strengthening relationship marketing while enhancing brand loyalty (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Providing discounts, live shows of athletes, and updating events are among the strategies used by organizations to attempt to connect with their fans (Witkemper et al., 2012). In this process, brand values were promoted, imagery content were created, and unique identities were fostered (Ballouli & Heere, 2015; Watkins & Lee, 2016). All of those achievements contribute to the successful marketing effort of organizations. From fans’ perspective, on the other hand, they are willing to be the “brand ambassadors” and in most cases (Hopwood et al., 2010, p. 140), tend to see it as an effort to support teams and players. Similarly, it makes sense for organizations to look highly on fan groups and even treat them as the most critical part in maximizing the economic value of sports as a global business.

Similar arguments found support in Watkins and Lee (2016)’s study, which suggested that whoever wants successful marketing outcomes need to create fan-oriented social media content, valuing fans’ preferences. For example, managers tend to have sporting superstars be the face of the brand. Such moves have been regarded by many enterprises as an effort to enhance public relations and create unique associations with fans (Watkins & Lee, 2016). Arguably, using social media to implement marketing strategies allows a company to build ties with their customers,

by revealing pictures or information about their product lines, progress, or in some cases, big decisions. Tiago, Tiago, Faria, and Couto (2016), are in line with this point, as they pointed out that social media keeps fans, as customers, connected with brands and the trend. Not only are the size of fans groups continuing to expand (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008), they are showing higher loyalty to sporting brands than fans in other industries like entertainment (e.g., fans of bands or musicians), as well (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011), presenting high value for the sports industry.

### **Social Media and Athletes**

Social media plays an important role in sport business, and research has demonstrated that athletes are using social media to reach out to the world as well. Athletes share their personal lives (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson, 2011), interact with fans (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010), and in many cases, prepare for their retirement from their athletic careers, illustrating the huge commercial value of social media engagement from top sports players (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016).

Among those studies, Hambrick et al. (2010) noted that athletes' tweet mostly for the purpose of interaction, which is equally true for fans, as social media provides fans a channel to know more about athletes' personal lives, supporting the argument mentioned earlier that social media plays a pivotal role in fans' sporting experience. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) specifically looked at elite players' tweets and fans'

responses, pointing out that through social media, a “cultivated insider perspectives for fans” (p. 113) emerged during the process.

Examining elite athletes’ Twitter engagement, Pegoraro (2010) compared athletes’ online activities. The results found were similar to aforementioned studies, in that interactivity is the priority for both fans and athletes’ social media engagement. However, for most athletes, responding to fans is the major reason for social media use. Their motives include sharing personal lives and promoting personal brands online. Sanderson et al., (2012) made a good argument to this point, in that they describe social media as “a meeting place for athletes and fans to meet up and share information” (p. 30).

Similarly, Emmons and Mocarski (2014) noted that elite athletes are willing to “participate on a player-to-fan level, encouraging the use of social networking sites in fan engagement” (p. 4). More frequently, athletes are using social media to present personality beyond sporting content, adding personal touches to their interaction with fans, and thereby enhancing athlete-fan relationships. Browning and Sanderson (2012), in line with this argument, pointed out that social media, in many ways, functions like a public relations strategy that aims to maintain optimistic self-presentation.

## **Social Media and Team Support**

When it comes to the use of social media within fans' group, it is important to note that this online platform provides a "second screen" (smartphone or tablets) for sports fans' game spectating and improves fans' game-watching experiences by offering alternative opportunities to engage with content and carry out sporting communication simultaneously (Haugh & Watkin, 2016). Fans are free from the season schedule by using social media to connect with teams (Larkin & Fink, 2016). Statistics showed that in 2016, 76% of fans watched sports while engaging in online social activities through smartphones, comparing to only 62% of fans in 2011 (Romanovsky, 2017). Among reasons for their social media engagement during spectating, Young (2017) suggests that being "social" tends to be the feature the majority want.

Building upon past studies, Seo and Green (2008) developed a motivation scale for online sporting consumption, illustrating that among ten dimensions of motivation, "team support," "fan expression," and "entertainment" ranked as the top three factors. Frederick, Lim, Clavio & Walsh (2012) further argued that fans' desire of supporting teams encouraged their online activities, which in turn improved organizations' merchandise sales. Yoon, Petrick, and Backman (2017) suggest that by constantly engaging in social media, fans give credit to the team they followed, become involved in team-related issues, and consequently develop attachments, which will then transform to an enduring relationship, beneficial for both fans and

marketers. Social media maintains fans' affiliation with teams, not only during the season, but also on a daily basis. By this token, it is not a surprise to see that using social media to keep fans' support and launch marketing strategies have become the mainstream among sport industry (Newman, Peck, Harris & Wilhide, 2013).

### **Social Media and Sports Fans**

Sports fans use social media as “a viable mechanism to display their fandom” (Sanderson, 2011, p. 72), interacting with others while at the same time expressing their own thoughts. Studies suggest that fans not only devote a significant amount of time to following news about teams and players (Tapp & Clowes, 2002), they are frequently sharing experiences on social media as an attempt to display fandom (Benigni, Porter, & Wood, 2009; Boyle, 2004). One's sense of hope, esteem, passion, and camaraderie are key reasons behind fans' engagement (Stavros, Meng, Westlake & Farelly, 2014). With social media, fans who are emotionally attached to hometown teams but have relocated their residence, are still able to show support (Collins, Heere, Shapiro, Ridinger, & Wear, 2016; Gil-Lopez et al., 2017). The widespread use of social media in sports has truly transformed the interaction between fans, players, and teams (Pegoraro, 2010) making it more accessible, faster, and more direct (Hull & Lewis, 2014; Sanderson et al., 2012).

Social media surpasses the traditional media platforms by its timeliness. It enables fans to know the latest sport news at their own will and without being restricted to newscasts (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013; Hull & Lewis, 2014).

Social media helps fans reach out for the latest updates and game reviews, creating a space where they can exchange thoughts on games, athletes, and teams (Hermida et al., 2012). As Hull and Lewis (2014) put it, fans use social media to “bypass traditional media and interact directly with athletes and teams” (p. 3). In this way, fans are gathering more information about their favorite teams or players and off-field stories that otherwise might not be covered extensively by the mainstream media.

Studies also showed that fans are willing to leave suggestions on athletes’ social media account and actively respond to athletes’ messages (Sanderson et al., 2012), becoming more active in keeping fanship. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) suggest that fans tend to closely connect themselves to athletes and teams, through such things as actively expressing their thoughts on athletes’ lives, offering advice on teams’ agendas, leaving critical comments, and defending their favorite players and teams against others’ criticism. As such, the use of social media within sports context has truly brought the experience of sporting communication to a new high.

Another feature worth mentioning related to fans’ social media use is that the easier fans connect with teams and athletes, the more likely they will devote themselves to fanship, immersing in athletes’ personal lives, while at the same time they “enact diverse behaviors ranging from admiration and support to criticism and censure” (Sanderson, 2012, p. 17). Interestingly, Krier (2017) found that sports fans who were intensively involved in social media depended on it to identify who they

were and how other people saw them, demonstrating a perception that social media engagement affects “how people feel others see them and their lifestyles” (p. 115). Moreover, as the format of self-created content gives fans more freedom to express themselves, McCarthy (2014) found this encourages fans to take on the role of “media critics as part of their task” (p. 77). Impacted by different cultural environments, even fans supporting the same team might present different preferences, behaviours, and attitudes. Fans experiences of expressing fanship through social media are not likely to be the same and common features cannot be concluded before undertaking in-depth exploration from individuals’ perspectives.

Past studies have shown that sport fans not only rely on social media to fulfill the need of group affiliation, gathering and sharing knowledge, but also extend networks beyond geographic and linguistic barriers, immersing themselves in larger communities and giving themselves more say (Collins et al., 2016; Gantz & Lewis, 2014; Gil-Lopez et al., 2017; Hermida et al., 2012; Hull & Lewis, 2014). Sport, then, is no longer a platform simply for physical activity or entertainment, but has transformed into a global commodity, as “individuals, teams, franchises and organizations are becoming increasingly interdependent on the very consumer/fan base that initially elevated them to this position” (Hopwood et al., 2010, p. 72).

As sporting communication took place during fans’ social media interaction, what followed was “the commonalities and differences among fans around the globe” (Gil-Lopez et al., 2017, p. 18), pointing out the need for tailored exploration

of fans from different countries. Scholars like Wallace, Wilson, and Miloch (2011) and Pegoraro (2010) emphasized the need for investigating fans' groups, given the sheer size of individuals who follow athletes and teams, calling for deeper exploration to fans' very personal experience, especially within the context of an unfamiliar targeted country. Also, as fans are influenced by their unique cultural positions (Park, Li, & Dittmore, 2015), understandings of social media use cannot be applied outside of their cultural contexts. Therefore, it is important to seek new insights and knowledge on different fan populations.

### **Chinese Sports Fans Research Review**

China has witnessed a huge demand for growth in social media, which brings tremendous impact on people's lives and keeps evolving. Notably, the major online media platforms in China before the 90s were bulletin board systems (BBS) due to tight control of the government on the operation and content of media. As such, the true growth of social media in China starts from the 90s when Tencent launched Weibo, a brand-new platform for online communication often seen as a combination of Facebook and Twitter, not only enabling users to follow other users' accounts and acquire updated news, but also allowing user-created content. However, with the Chinese government creating a more favorable environment for social media development, changes are astonishing, bringing with it cooperation, opportunities with foreign entities and new channels to interact with the world. Since Facebook,

Twitter, and Instagram are inaccessible in China due to internet censorship, their Chinese equivalents are taking this unique opportunity to develop and have significantly changed Chinese people's social life. In addition to Weibo, described in the first chapter, another platform worth mentioning in China is WeChat, which enables users to make video chat, pay bills, play games, purchase merchandise, follow celebrities' official accounts, etc. In terms of the social function of WeChat and Weibo, the former serves as a channel to connect with friends and family members while the latter, in many ways, broadened users' social circle, linking them to the outer world. Currently, Chinese people spent 40 percent of their time on social media, a figure expected to grow rapidly (Woerner, 2018), presenting a significant demand of social media use. China's Internet users reached 650 million in 2015, almost twice the population of that of in United States (Pew Research Center, 2018), whereas 697 million people use WeChat per month in the same year (Gray & Hutt, 2017), a number larger than the USA and Europe combined (Santoro, 2016). Further, nearly 700 million people are active online users in China while among this big user base, 600 million are using social media (Chadwick, 2017). A recent study reveals that monthly active users have just reached over 411 million on Weibo (Deagon, 2018). With social media platforms gaining more momentum in China, research conducted by the Kantar corporation noted that China's younger generation, especially those born in the 90s, are showing more favor, trust, and satisfaction on social media (Guo, 2017), with evidence showing that China's young people have

even more friends online than in real-life (Crampton, 2011). The social media landscape of China differs from that of any other country, in that China's social networking sites rapidly developed without competing with traditional media or working its way up slowly from the bottom (Santoro, 2016). It is also important to see the value of China's social media in enhancing marketing, promoting cross-cultural communication and corporation. Tencent, one leading technology giant in China with less popularity outside the country, has surpassed Facebook in market value and made its way into the global top five companies (Gray & Hutt, 2017). It is expected that more attention will be devoted to China's social media market as its growth achieves full momentum.

### **Chinese Sports Fans' and Social Media**

With China's sports industry experiencing remarkable growth, the government is actively promoting the sports economy with the hope of reaching an approximate value of \$800 billion by 2025 (Dreyer, 2017). Notably, the development of the sports industry represents greater significance than building China into a sports power, in that has also been acknowledged as an integral part of fulfilling the new Chinese dream of great renewal of the Chinese nation. Not surprisingly, along with the rapid development of online platforms in China, an increasing dependence of social media use have also been witnessed in the sports field.

Last year, China's national football team won their first battle in the FIFA World Cup Qualification by defeating Korea 1-0, causing an instant sensation on

China's social media platform Weibo, creating billions of pageviews of related content, 1.39 billion pageviews on subject #top12WCQ# and 630 million on topics related to #ChinaVsKorea# (Yao, 2017). Taking the 2018 World Cup as another example, fans across China strove to push their favorite team onto the list of most searched hashtags and hottest topics. During 15 days of the Cup, Weibo launched a list of teams, inviting Chinese fans to vote for the most likely winning teams. By reposting others' articles, holding discussions within the interface of teams, and browsing contents related to teams, Chinese fans coincidentally "predicted" the order of teams that were knocked out of the game. This interesting coincidence soon went viral on the Internet, attracting fans to gather together and discuss related topics. Weibo has become a place where new trends are born, seen, and developed, catering to the demand of fans through their own online engagement.

### **Business Mindset**

The sheer size of China's social media user market is too big to be ignored by global corporations, in particular within the sporting arena, where China's sports industry is offering new and extensive room for growth. With many sports clubs and agencies realizing the potential of Chinese people's social media engagement, they are craving opportunities to reach out to more Chinese sports fans. In 2016, the National Football League (NFL) made a partnership with the microblogging service Weibo to live stream games in China (Leung, 2016). One year later, the Professional Golf Association (PGA) and the National Basketball League (NBA) made the same

move to partner with Weibo as attempts to expand its global outreach in China's sports market. The NBA has brought not only pre-season games to China, but also launched an indoor themed entertainment center for families to enjoy the game and build connections (Tuchman, 2016).

As noted earlier, up to 2017, the NBA's official account on China's social media platforms had attracted more than 33 million followers, surpassing its Twitter account by six million subscribers (McNicol, 2017). Qian Jun, the Chief Operating Officer of NBA China, mentioned multiple times during a press conference that the more than 30 million active users of Weibo will bring a significant increase of NBA fans (Lv, 2017). According to the statistic released by Iresearch (2017), in the first season of cooperation between Weibo and the NBA (2017 – 2018), the overall video views of content related to NBA have reached over 4.1 billion, and page views increased to 15.5 billion.

Unique cultural and sporting communities were gradually formed through fans' engagement on social media, paving ways for event managers and agencies to build ties with the targeted community and fans. Likewise, many less-known foreign teams have also began to accumulate their Chinese fan base. Studies suggests that Chinese sports fans are more likely to be affected by marketing measures, showing considerable preference on interacting through social media, such as Weibo and WeChat accounts, instead of traditional news channels (Ostsiaker, 2017). It is important to note that fans truly drive the growth of the sport industry. In this regard,

tailor-made strategies are needed for any sports clubs eager to connect with China's sports market.

### **Knowledge Gaps**

Though social media research within sport contexts and related to sport content has advanced over the past few years, few studies take fans' experience with social media as the focal point, including from the perspective of fans themselves. Arguably, areas covered by academic studies focusing on social media use within the sport context are mostly its role in affecting fans' identification and fandom (Clark & Maher, 2016; Collins et al., 2016; Krier, 2017; Larkin & Fink, 2016), motivating fans' online engagement (Clavio & Walsh, 2014), and influencing sports marketing and management (Abeza, 2012; Naraine & Parent, 2017). Fewer studies, however, have been carried out to explore fans' experience from an individual's perspective (Bireline, 2014). Funk (2017) introduced a sport experience design framework, aiming to extend sport consumer behaviour research. The "experience" discussed in the article, however, is focused on user experience, grounded in an economic perspective.

Similarly, Dolan et al. (2016) explored sports fans' engagement with social media, centering on methods used by fans to interact with brands and clubs through social media. Also, Stavros et al. (2014) specifically looked into fans' motivation of using social media to enhance sports communication. Common findings were

revealed in those studies, in that social media serves as an effective and valuable vehicle for fans to maintain connection, express expectation, share experiences, demonstrate expertise, bask in team glories, and make judgements about a team's performance. Arguably, fans' motivation for social media use has been comprehensively examined by past studies (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick et al., 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010; Seo & Green, 2008; Thomas, 2011). That being said, Jacobson (2003) noted that despite an increase of research on sport fans, most of which focus on the impact of fandom or using text or content analysis to provide better insights at the outcomes of being a fan, understandings about fan experience are left for future exploration.

Despite a late start, China's social media is gaining full momentum and realizing its potential. The many-to-many connected arena will become the norm as more sports leagues look to expand their overseas outreach and more companies seek resources to enter China's sport market. Realizing fans' role as either customers or supporters is crucial to any successful attempts of engaging foreign markets; both sports agencies and enterprises need to acquire fresh knowledge about this group under the era of social networking communication. Considering Chinese sports fans have distinctive cultural backgrounds, experiences of social media use within such environments might be different from that of fans living in the Western countries. Therefore, new insights gained from China are needed, instead of using past findings to generalize Chinese fans.

To illustrate, Park, Li, and Dittmore (2015) found that the reasons behind fans' desire of following Chinese athletes included acquiring professional knowledge, passing time, and maintaining fanship. Moreover, unlike their U.S. counterparts who tend to build ties with college teams and interact with teams for the sake of entertainment and arousal, Chinese sports fans not only have closer affiliations with foreign teams, but also enjoy higher satisfaction when using Weibo to express themselves (Billings et al., 2019). In line with those findings, Li, Dittmore, & Scott (2017) noted that fans' behaviors were diversified across different social media platforms due to cultural influences, in that Weibo users are more willing to interact and express team support whereas fans on Twitter tended to be more active in building ties with sports organizations. However, as they only carried out a survey on fans following the LA Lakers, a comprehensive understanding about fans' social media experience within different cultural orientations were therefore missed, calling for future studies to enrich academic resources in this respect, providing a partial warrant for this research.

As suggested by Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015), the widespread use of social media within the sports context has overcome geographic restrictions. Therefore, it is important to acquire fresh insights on the diversity of fans using social media in different countries. It is also critical to note that China's social media platforms, such as Weibo, were designed and developed to serve Chinese users (Lei et al., 2018). Despite similar functions, China's social media platforms might be occupied by fans

in a totally different manner, generating different fanship experiences to be explored. Moreover, Foster and Hyatt (2008) argued that the number of potential fans residing in non-local areas are larger than those living in the local community. This presents a need for sports teams, from a business perspective, to expand its fan base both locally and overseas. In order to do so, they further suggest sports teams acquire a comprehensive understanding of distant fans of the nation. With increased business interests attracted to China's sports market, greater knowledge of Chinese sports fans, in particular those who are emotionally committed to specific teams, is needed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

After analysis of the findings on the experience of highly engaged Chinese sports fans, the study will turn to Team Identification theory to see how applicable it is as way of looking at that experience. Team identification, according to Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease (2001) refers to the extent to which individuals felt belongingness to a particular team, in that 'fans' tend to consider their team as an extension of themselves, therefore developing a psychological connection to this team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann, Melnick et al., 2001; Wann & Schrader, 1997). It stems from social identity theory, with the basic idea that individuals become a part of social categories which exert positive reflection on their self-concept (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), strengthen their self-esteem (Branscombe & Wann, 1991), and as a result, regard their own group as superior

compared to the others (Hogg & Abrams, 1999). Lock, Taylor, Funk, and Darcy (2012) specifically examined the development of team identification, illustrating that it is a central part of fans' self-concept, which will influence their everyday behaviours. For example, team identification would exert a huge impact on fans, potentially boosting the level of self-esteem and reduce depression (Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

Fans' behaviour of searching for news and media articles are a team-directed outcome of developed identification, where individuals' need of evaluating identity, motivates such behaviour. Under the concepts of team identification, individuals who highly identified as fans to a particular team are inclined to consider the team's glory and defeat as their own (Fink, Parker, Brett & Higgins, 2009). Wann and Branscombe (1990) coined the term BIRGing (Basking in Reflected Glory) to refer to fans basking in teams' success as their own glory, and the term CORFing (Cutting Off Reflected Failure) to refer fans' attempt of cutting off negative outcomes like failure. It has long been seen as a valuable lens to investigate fans' behaviours, such as verbal and physical violence (Chien, Kelly, & Weeks, 2016), spectating patterns (Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Wann, Weaver, Belva, Ladd, & Armstrong, 2015), and consumption features (Theodorakis, Koustelios, Robinson & Barlas, 2009). From different perspectives, some scholars utilize this theory as guidance to explain fans' emotional fluctuations (Lee, Gipson, & Barnhill, 2017; Stavros et al., 2014), changes

of self-perceptions (Wann, Royalty, & Rochelle, 2002) and social relationships, as well as motivations of following a team (Haugh & Watkins, 2016).

Noting that human beings need to “form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497), Mann (1969) found through past studies that fans are likely to feel socially connected within a sporting context. In many ways, fans are linking how they perceive themselves to a particular team’s performances, and this recognition would spur them to defend this team aggressively (Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Wann, Dolan, McGeorge & Allison, 1994; Wann, Peterson, Cothran, & Dykes, 1999; Wann, Royalty, & Rochelle, 2002). Similarly, Wakefield and Bennett (2017) demonstrate the more fans enjoy the game, the more they would be willing to interact with others and share self-created content with larger audience, whereas those with less enjoyment of the game have less desire of doing so. Conversely, fans who share highly emotional attachment with the teams are less likely to share information, because in many ways, they regard themselves as a part of the team, reviewing the game from players’ perspective. As such, they tend to show concerns toward the future instead of sharing self-created content, be it positive or negative, at the present. As the impact of social media on redefining communication between sports organizations and fans continue to expand (Haugh & Watkins, 2016), increased scholarly attention is attracted to investigate how team identification influences fans’ interaction with teams through social media (Phua, 2010; Smith and Smith, 2012). Likewise, considering fans tend to have more control

of social media surrounding their beloved teams, Wakefield and Bennett (2017) also call for future research to have a closer look at the nature of sports fans through social media platforms.

Team identification theory is widely used in studies of fans to explain why they present different behaviour patterns and attitudes towards their favourite teams (Moyer, Pokrywczynski, & Griffin, 2015; Mudrick et al., 2016; Wann, 2006). As such differences depend on how close and intense fans identify with the team, features of highly identified fans tend to be more salient for investigation, considering their willingness to follow a team at the first place are among the highest (Wann, Ensor, & Bilyeu, 2001).

Team identification influences the “emotional experience” (Lee et al., 2017, p. 89) of fans. The close affiliation fans share with their favorite teams helps them better cope with negative emotions, such as depression and alienation, in that it makes them feel connected and see value in themselves (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). On the other hand, they will also connect in anxiety as they regard themselves as a part of the team and therefore take togetherness as their duty (Stavros et al., 2014), experiencing negative emotions along with the team. The most committed fans are those individuals whose cognition was impacted by their favourite teams (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). These fans have a persistent positive attitude towards the team, resist changes, and demonstrate supporting behaviours that tend to be long lasting. Arguably, highly identified fans have a more intense emotional affiliation with the

team, tend to attribute the favorable outcomes to internal factors such as good performance of the team while blaming losses on external forces, for example media manipulation or poor coaching (Doyle, Lock, Funk, Filo, & McDonald, 2017; Jang, Wann, & Ko, 2018; Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2002). In other words, highly identified fans are more likely to present “biased attributional processes” (Fink et al., 2009, p. 144) in fanship, in that have different feelings and experiences regarding to the results of the game. Researchers have demonstrated that fans having high identification to a particular team are more active in practicing fanship in real life, such as attending games more frequently (Hill & Green, 2000) and purchasing more team apparel (Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007; Madrigal, 2001). However, how they experience and maintain fanship via social media is understudied. That being said, growing scholarly interest has been seen investigating the correlation between sport-led social media use and sports fandom presented by the most identified groups of fans (Billings et al., 2019), making highly identified fans an excellent target to conduct studies on.

Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) regard team identification as a multi-dimensional concept, which is constructed by the following criteria: 1) Self-categorization, in that a fan identifies him/herself as “a fan” of a particular team and obtain a sense of belongingness; 2) Evaluation, referring to either the positive or negative attitude a fan has towards the team and how much this attitude would be influenced by others’ opinions and comments; 3) Importance, concerning the degree

a fan values his/her fanship towards a particular team; 4) Attachment, referring to a fan's emotional involvement with the team, such as seeing him/herself as an extension of the team; 5) Social embeddedness, in that a highly identified fan would interact with other fans whereas a low embedded fan is less likely to do so; 6) Behaviour involvement, describing a fan's common practices of supporting the team with action, such as watching the live game, discussing with others, and purchasing team apparel; 7) Cognitive awareness, in that highly identified fans are more likely to be knowledgeable about a particular team. As such, in this study, aiming to explore how Chinese sports fans experience and maintain fanship via social media, highly identified fans will be targeted as participants. Team identification theory will be utilized as a theoretical guidance of experience explanation and interpretation.

This study, focusing on the lived experiences of Chinese sports fans' social media use, will supplement research on China's social media use within the sports context, accumulate knowledge about Chinese sports fans in a comprehensive manner, and provide enterprises the resources to look at during marketing and relationship building. The following are the key questions to be explored in this study:

- 1) How do Chinese sports fan use social media to experience fanship with a team(s)?
- 2) What does that experience mean to them in terms of being a fan of a team(s)?
- 3) How do fans' experiences impact them in terms of team identification?

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach studying lived experience, revealing the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; van Manen, 1990). Those who tend to conduct research from a phenomenological approach expect to understand “what” participants experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). The term “phenomenology” was used as early as 1765, which can be traced back to Kant and Hegel (Moustakas, 1994). But it was Edmund Husserl, who was regarded as the father of phenomenology in the twentieth century, who significantly developed the theory, and further named his philosophical method as ‘phenomenology’, meaning the science of pure “phenomena” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 55), The aim is to go “back to the things themselves!” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Husserl perceived ‘experience’ as “human consciousness,” which is a valuable object for scientific study (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Since Husserl focused his understanding of phenomenology on consciousness, he believed that each individual’s experience must be taken in its own right as it “shows itself and as one is conscious of it” (Stewart, 1974, p. 22). Moustakas described it as “intimately bound up in the concept of intentionality” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). Furthermore, Husserl was mostly concerned with building a foundation for knowledge (Todres & Wheeler, 2001). Such concern was then transformed as “transcendental phenomenology,” referring to the active role played by consciousness which, in his view, is a necessity for the unity of all experience (Stewart, 1974). Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology starts with the things themselves, studying “the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (Moustakas,

1994, p. 49). It is an approach to understanding human experience that “has us focus on the essential structures that allow the objects naively taken for granted in the ‘natural attitude’ to ‘constitute themselves’ in consciousness” (Beyer, 2016, p. 3).

However, his theory was later developed by one of his most outstanding students Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who was born in Germany. Heidegger shared Husserl’s concern with lived experience, but offered his own expansion of phenomenology (Stewart, 1974). Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology shifted from Husserl’s transcendental project to a hermeneutic emphasis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), which does not seek fixed essences or truth that can be determined once and for all, but set out to explore and understand experiences consequently. It opens to new insights instead of stable meaning while rejecting the claim that a researcher’s cultural background should be isolated from the process of studying experience (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2016).

Following this, Heidegger developed interpretive phenomenology (Creswell, 1994). The “essence” in interpretive phenomenology refers to what makes a thing as it is (van Manen, 1990). It is to explore human experiences that are meaningful but embedded in people’s common lifeworld, going beyond purely describing essences. Lived experience should be regarded as an interpretive process (Racher and Robinson, 2003), so as to look for those meanings. In this sense, Heidegger’s phenomenology is concerned with *being in this world (Dasein)*, rather than *being (Sein)*, focusing on how people experience the context of common practices, instead of describing a reality people consciously know (Solomon, 1987), indicating that for hermeneutic inquiry, researchers “are unable to completely bracket prior conceptions and knowledge – we are necessarily

embedded in a historical context” (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 415). As each person formed their experiences within their own lifeworld, external influences are inevitable (Smith, 1987). Therefore, it is incumbent upon researchers to explore their unique experiences within the specific setting being studied. That being said, an interpretive stance, a focus on being-in-the-world (Dasein), and the hermeneutic circle, therefore, formed key facets in Heidegger’s thinking (Newberry, 2012), guiding researchers to look into participants’ experiences and gain greater knowledge about what those experiences mean.

Moreover, compared to Husserl’s phenomenology, which would transcend researchers’ prejudgments, understandings, and attitudes about phenomena, Heidegger argued for knowledge “outside of an interpretive stance, whilst grounding this stance in the lived world – the world of things, people, relationships and language” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). As for Heidegger, “prior experiences, assumptions, [and] preconceptions” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 25) are needed in the process of doing research. That’s to say, whereas Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology studied the lived world from the perspective of a “detached observer,” Heidegger insists that it is impossible for an observer to separate him/herself entirely from the world being studied and points out that “conscious experience are also the ways one is in the world” (cited in Stewart, 1974, p. 64). As Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom (2008) states that in terms of hermeneutic phenomenology, essence refers to “our understanding of the everyday world is derived from our interpretation of it” (p. 45).

Given that social media closely ties with people’s day-to-day lives, it is not only impossible, but also unhelpful for a researcher to detach him or herself entirely from subjects being studied. In Heidegger’s phenomenology, a researcher’s pre-knowledge not

only guides him or her to realizing that a certain study is “needed in an area that is understudied” (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 4), but also helps to conduct a meaningful study. Considering that fans' experiences of using social media might differ from one country to another due to different cultural and social environments, it is incumbent on the researcher to explore his/her experiences within the setting of China, acquiring better understanding of the meanings behind it, putting it in the context of their daily practices of being a fan.

Adding on that, considering Heidegger’s phenomenology emphasize the situated nature of human experience and paid close attention to the relationships and activities from which experience and meaning emerge (Lopez & Willis, 2004), it is a much more effective and beneficial way for researchers to conduct a study, for it allows meaningful engagement with participants and broadening understanding about specific phenomenon (Newberry, 2012). Notably, in addition to philosophy, phenomenology as a research method has also been used in many humanistic and social science disciplines, such as psychology (Giorgi, 1975; Giorgi, 1997), education (van Manen, 1990; van Manen, 2003), as well as leisure (Howe, 1985) and sport related studies (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Bireline, 2014; Dale, 1996; Kerry & Armour, 2000).

Within the context of this study, it is important to note that sport is a unique cultural activity, has intense social background and serves as a microcosm of social issues, displaying not only social attitudes, community behaviors, but also the trends of development. It plays a significant role in shaping participants’ world values, social abilities, and overall wellness. Since social media has increasingly moved into people’s lives, its tie with sport communication are not only close, but intense. It is critical for

those who attempt to understand people's experience with social media to adopt their own knowledge and experiences into the field. For this study, the experience that Chinese sports fans have with social media is the question. By understanding what situation or environment they put themselves in and how do they managed to stay connected, it affords better, micro-level knowledge on how highly identified Chinese sports fan experience and maintain fanship via social media.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Consistent with phenomenology, purposive sampling was adopted to ensure all the participants recruited have lived the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 1998). This study focused on the experience of highly identified fans. Such fans have the following key features: 1) self-categorizes as “a fan” of a particular team; 2) show constant support to the team regardless of how well or how bad a game ends; 3) values his/her fanship; 4) a willingness to interact online through social media; 5) practices fanship; and 6) tends to know more about a particular team (Ashmore et al., 2004). In order to better explore highly identified Chinese sports fans' social media experience, the following criteria was utilized to recruit targeted participants: 1) Weibo users in their 20s who self-define as “a loyal fan” of a particular team; 2) constantly show support to a particular team regardless of winning or losing; 3) value his/her/their connection towards the team as an indispensable part of being a sport fan; 4) actively engage in team supporting activities on social media, such as sharing self-created content, or managing fan-run super-hashtags

(Chaohua in Chinese). Chinese sport fans have grown more dependent on mobile internet and mostly refer to Weibo within the context of China's sporting arena. This makes it the most suitable platform for agencies and clubs to expand industrial chains and contact fans, and for academics to undertake research. In order to find participants, snowball sampling was used throughout data collection. Snowball sampling consists of establishing a contact with one or two initial subjects with the experience being studied by this research, and then requesting they identify more potential participants until the pre-specified sample size has been completed.

There are no specific guidelines on the sample size for phenomenological study. Creswell (1998) suggested a number between 5 and 25 while Morse (1994) opined at least 6, looking highly on the quality of participants over quantity. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, 7 participants were ultimately recruited.

Social media platforms such as WeChat was used in the process of contacting and recruiting participants. Each individual who agreed to participate in the study and interview was asked to read and sign a written consent form prior to participating, and was promised anonymity.

## **Data Collection**

In terms of data collection, semi-structured interview were used, which is a method used to explore themes of participants' lived experience from their own perspectives, unfolding under an interview guide that focuses on the key research question (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this way, it allows space for interviewees to

recall experiences of significant meaning, while being “neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire” (p. 27). This ensures information-rich data for further study (Patton, 2001).

The researcher conducted all interviews in person while in China. Six face-to-face interviews were initially conducted, and a seventh interview was included after initial data analysis to ensure data saturation. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, depending on how much information participants shared. All the interviews proceeded with open-ended questions, used as a template to encourage participants to recall and share their personal experience, identifying areas for the researcher to probe.

Before the interview commenced, an informed consent letter was provided to participants, which includes a description of the research for ethical reasons.

## **Participants**

This study drew on seven highly identified Chinese sport fans, all in their 20s. Among the seven participants, three were male (Yifang, Liu Yuqiao, Hu Zongheng) and the others were female fans (Zhang Jingyu, Wu Yuman, Chen Hua, Ni Yuanwen).

Two participants’ (Ni Yuanwen and Li Yifang) favourite teams came from domestic leagues, Guo’an football and Shou Gang Basketball respectively, whereas the others came from overseas - more specifically, the NBA teams Denver Nuggets (Liu Yuqiao), San Antonio Spurs (Wu Yuman), Philadelphia 76ers (Chen Hua), Los Angeles Lakers (Hu Zongheng), and international football club Real Madrid (Zhang Jingyu). Nearly every participant self-portrayed as die-hard fans, including one who characterized herself

as a “mom fan,” one as experiencing a form of “kinship,” and one as a “firm believer.” All the participants demonstrated at least six years of fanship, showing passion in using social media for sport-led activities, and the willingness to participate in this study.

Ni Yuanwen was the first participant recruited and showed great interest in this study after seeing recruitment letter on WeChat. Voluntarily offering help to recruit participants who might be interested and meet the desired features of this study, Ni Yuanwen re-posted the recruitment letter on her social media profile. Chen Hua, one of the colleagues of Ni Yuanwen, contacted her and was eventually recommended by Ni Yuanwen to the researcher after knowing the data collection will be conducted through interviews and showing interest at sharing stories about her fanship. Three other participants, Hu Zongheng, Li Yifang, and Wu Yuman were recruited after contacting the researcher directly after seeing recruitment letter on WeChat.

I sent the letter directly to a few friends who were known as sport fans to see if any of them has related experience or recommendations on potential participants. Zhang Jingyu, displayed interest at participating after self-evaluating as a perfect match for this study. This interview was eventually conducted in early January, 2019. With six interviews done and all the transcripts analyzed, I thought that saturation has been reached. Nevertheless, I further did a seventh interview to follow-up on some ideas and confirm themes, in an effort to ensure the richness of the data. Zhang Jingyu had re-posted the recruitment letter to her cousin Liu Yuqiao later on, who thought of himself as a die-hard fan of the Denver Nuggets and always showed a huge interest in talking to people about his fanship. Although Liu Yuqiao agreed to participate right after knowing

the theme of this study, the interview was conducted one month later due to tight schedule of his IELTS exams, in June 2019.

## **Interviews**

Participants were interviewed in a natural setting of their choosing and were recorded using a smart-phone, from which transcripts were produced. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in Beijing, China, through December 2018 to June, 2019. Three interviews were conducted in a coffee shop, one interview was conducted in restaurant own by the participant himself, one interview was took place in conference room where the participant was employed. The other two interviews took place at restaurants chosen by participants. Only one participant was married (recently) while the others remain single. Five participants had full-time jobs, the other two were students, one of whom (Liu Yuqiao) just earned a Bachelor's degree and is applying for a master's degree.

Each interview was opened from an introductory question of “tell me about yourself?” and was followed with the question: “tell me about yourself as a fan?” Due to tight time schedules of participants, a second round of interviews was not feasible. To offset this step, the researcher spent extra time in the review and coding process to ensure the quality of the information obtained through the data, and that it captured the lived experiences of the interview participants.

The analysis was completed using NVivo 11 software, but the researcher analyzed all the transcripts multiple times before using NVivo to redo and complete the analysis, in an effort to better understand participants' experience and interpret meanings from them.

After all the interviews were transcribed, I imported them to NVivo and coded important statements. From there, I created node structures to help tease out meaningful units.

Themes and sub-themes were constructed as they emerged. I chose to present participants' experience through excerpts from interviews, in an effort to provide a more complete picture of the participants' authentic feelings.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis followed a sequential plan, guided by Van Manen's (1990) methodical procedures. This proceeded through line-by-line reading of the transcripts, following with coding important statements, clustering into meaning units, generating sub-themes by consolidating similar topics or splitting unique ones, and ending with identifying essential themes. The first step involved immersed reading, enabling the researcher to get familiar, as much as possible, with participants' experiences as they live it, while at the same time commenting on "similarities and differences, echoes, amplifications and contradictions in what a person is saying" (van Manen, 1990, p. 56). The next step involved line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts. As suggested by van Manen (1990), the margin was used to document emerging titles, transforming codes into phrases that able to "capture the essential quality of what was found in the text" (p. 56). At this point, a computer file was created to store all the labels, which the researcher frequently checked back with to help further write down textural and structural descriptions. Important statements were connected and clustered into meaning units, in an on-going and iterative procedure, allowing the researcher to go back and forth from

previous codes to new information, building a closer interaction with the transcript. Sub-themes in the data were clustered together.

All the transcripts were analyzed separately, with the researcher looking for convergence and divergence after finishing the analysis of each document, and then constructing themes using Team Identification as a theoretical framework of guidance. Team Identification theory was used after clustering codes and concise phrases into meaning units to interpret participants' experience, identifying essential themes. The researcher attempted to move backwards and forwards between the important statements found from transcripts and the analysis afterwards, moving from parts to whole following a process required by the hermeneutic circle. This process helps with in-depth interpretation and identifying meanings emerging from participants' experience, deepening the understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. As van Manen (1997) put it, "in determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (p. 107).

All the themes identified by researcher are presented as descriptive writing to discuss the findings in the results chapter. This study was intersubjective, depending on the participants to share their experiences and provide the ideas that form meaning. The researcher attempted to explain the lived experiences and portray participant's meanings through thick descriptive writing.

## **Ensuring Trustworthiness**

Koch (1994) argued that trustworthiness is vital to sound qualitative research, which is an alternative criterion for ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Van Manen (1997) lists orientation, strength, richness and depth as the major quality concerns of phenomenological research. In an effort to ensure the richness of the data, a field journal was made to capture interactions and pre-understandings as the study proceeds (Koch, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1986), including comprehensive descriptions about the setting, the interviews, and the participants, so as to provide as much details as possible, reconstructing participants' conversation instead of merely depending on verbal recording (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). The ways that the interpretation of data emerged and how the interpretations were challenged and revised was also recorded in the field journal, providing material for self-reflection.

Second, as an attempt to ensure the analysis made by the researcher represents participants' realities and experiences accurately, member checking was used in this study, a technique regarded crucial for ensuring credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this process, transcripts were sent back to the participants so that they have a chance to verify the information, add anything that might have been missed in the interview, and leave comments. A brief summary of themes discovered from transcripts was provided to them to see if those made sense and that their experiences are reflected in some of those themes. All those efforts were made to ensure the truth value and applicability of this study (Klopper, 2008).

Considering that hermeneutics seeks the meaning in an individual's common life experiences, the researcher's personal experience related to the phenomenon being

studied and pre-understandings played a critical role in unfolding a hermeneutic phenomenological study (van Manen, 1990). As van Manen (1990) suggests, the first step for a researcher following a hermeneutic approach is turn to “a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world” (p. 30). So as to formulate the explicate pre-knowledge, a reflection is offered in the following paragraphs to present my position as a researcher.

As a self-identified heavy Weibo user, I check my Weibo account and browse content all the time - during meal-time, shopping, or even lining up for the check out. Mostly, I use Weibo to acquire social news, search trendy information about products, follow Chinese celebrities, as well as sport teams and players, including Liu Wen, LeBron James, Stephon Marbury, the Golden State Warriors, and the Lakers. Though I do not identify myself as a fan of these players and teams, I search news about them as an effort to expand my sporting knowledge and horizon. Sometimes, I may use Weibo to track down timelines for new-release movies or TV series. Instead of joining in super-hashtag discussions, I prefer to browse content and catch up with hot topics. However, I like to share interesting things happening in my life via Weibo, such as pictures of funny moments and videos of family times, and regularly post my thoughts on some social issues, such as the #Metoo movement, or repost my tips regarding mental issues, such as anxiety and depression. More often than not, I would use hashtags in my content. As such, whenever someone else searched keywords related to the hashtag I used, there are chances that my content will pop up. For me, it increases the possibility of having more people to view the content I share. As I would also use hashtags to search when I have no specific topics to look for, I noticed that many users include hashtags in their contents

that have nothing to do with those hashtags at all. For example, some football fans posted pictures of having a fancy dinner while using ‘#中韩大战 (#ChinavsKorea)’ in the content. Similar things can be found easily on Weibo, an interesting but weird phenomenon that makes me curious - I cannot help but wondering if they are using hashtags only for the purpose of increasing the rate of their favourite teams being viewed, or attracting more attention to make the team more popular?

I found myself particularly interested in things happening on Weibo during the 2018 World Cup. Weibo created a specific interactive media page for games, providing a variety of functions for fans to enjoy the game, such as super-hashtag discussions, winner prediction, team support through comments, the number of ‘likes’ and re-posts. As such, the official accounts of teams will show up in order based on the numbers of ‘likes’ or comments received. In other words, the more comments and re-posts a particular team got, the more it will appear on the media page of Weibo. At that time, whenever I opened my Weibo account, the advertisement page of the 2018 World Cup appeared, and the front page of Weibo was filled with content related to different teams. Out of curiosity, I entered the interactive media page of England National Team and found out that there have not only rules made by fans to guide others on how and when they shall comment on content related to England National Team, but also analysis of ranking criteria, showing other fans the most efficient way to improve team ranking.

I worked as an editor intern in *National Geographic* (NG) in the summer of 2017, responsible for managing their official account of Weibo, planning online activities, and communicating with subscribers. This experience made me even more curious about the relationship between individuals and the group they followed. To start, whenever I, on

behalf of NG, posted contents on Weibo, at least 50,000 pageviews were generated within a few minutes, accompanied with dozens of comments. What interested me most is that those followers care about not only the contents sent by NG, but also the frequency of posting. For example, during times when the work-load was too heavy to post new contents in regular hours, followers sometimes left comments to ask for reasons or cracked a joke to check if the editor was absent. Other times, they would post contents in their own account and use '@' to reach out to NG. As I was the one posting contents on a daily basis and responding to subscribers' comments, I was shocked to see how frequent they were involved in activities related to NG and how active they were in trying to interact with an official account. By the end of my internship, I was even able to recognize a few subscribers due to their active engagement in online activities relating to NG.

Quite simply, it is almost certain that being a fan involves support practices towards a team or player, or even both. However, my experience mentioned above indicates to me that fans can take fanship in a more serious and devoted manner. As such, I started to wonder if the experience fans have had via Weibo means something to them? What would they do on Weibo to maintain fanship? Will fans' Weibo experience impact their fanship and the connection to their favourite teams? These experiences and curiosities present personal pre-knowledges that have drawn me to the topic of this research.

## **Ethics**

Given human participants was involved in this study, ethics approval was requested from the University of New Brunswick's ethics review board. A consent form was reviewed and signed prior to the interview. Participating in this study was completely voluntary; hence, participants were informed that they were able to withdrawal from the study at any time.

To protect the information of participants, a locked filing cabinet contained the signed consent forms of the participants and a separate cabinet was used to store the hard material, such as the transcripts. Audio recordings were stored on a computer with a password protected code. All the names of participants were pseudonyms, created by using Mandarin phonetic symbols and translated to English writing.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study aimed to explore the lived experience of Chinese sport fans who used social media to maintain fanship. This results chapter presents the findings of this inquiry starting from illustrating the ways that Chinese sport fans used social media to overcome time and geographic barriers of connecting to the teams, in particular those located overseas. Themes developed in the study elaborate how the fans, after maintaining team accessibility, proactively routinized fanship practices, becoming not only obsessed with social media, but increasingly emotionally committed to their favourite teams, displaying stronger team identification. From there, higher self-evaluation as loyal fans and greater real-life impacts were indicated by participants.

### **Essential Themes**

Throughout the data analysis, themes were identified to best present the essence of how Chinese sport fan use social media to maintain fanship. The first, “social media ensures accessibility,” elaborates how social media has been utilized to overcome real life constraints and how it affords constant connection between fans and their favourite teams. Specifically, this theme explains how fans used Weibo to proactively maintain flow of team-oriented information by interacting through liking, commenting, posting self-generated contents, etc., and therefore routinized fanship practices.

The second theme, “social media as a representation of fan identity,” highlights how Chinese fan used social media to present and self-evaluate their fanship. In this part, examples are provided to give more insights into the ways that the historical record of

fans' online behaviours were used to display each one's fan identity, such as their browsing and liking history. From there, examples are provided to present how fans in this study gradually saw more value in their fanship, generating higher evaluations of themselves.

The third theme, "social media as an emotional fuel enhancing fans' team identification," illustrates how fans' constant engagement on social media strengthened their psychological affiliation with the team. Two sub-themes were further identified to better present the results: realness and closeness. Starting from descriptions of how participants commonly feel "real" and "close" to the teams, it follows with examples showing the ways fans obtained stronger emotional bonds with their favourite teams.

The fourth theme, "taking initiative on social media," elaborates on how fans, after being afforded a channel to personalize the fanship experience, used social media to make their own contributions. From there, two related aspects were identified under the sub-theme of "making contributions" to present how fans tried to make contribution for the teams' good: improving teams' media exposure and helping the daily administration of teams' profiles.

The fifth theme, "stronger team identification leads to social media addiction," highlights how fans' deeper connection to a team encouraged higher social media commitment. The sub-theme "looking to experience more" shows how fans looked forward to being more involved in teams' interactive activities, such as receiving feedback, and displayed a higher desire of adding depth to the overall fanship experience and making mutual connections sustainable. The sixth theme, "practicing fanship online as a mental shelter," demonstrates how fans, using social media to maintain fanship,

gained real life benefits, including better psychological well-being and social relationships. Those are the two sub-themes coined to better present participants' lived experience on this front.

### **Social Media Ensures Accessibility**

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that limited resources in real life constrained participants from supporting their favourite teams. They frequently discussed the intention of doing more to support their favourite teams, if they were not constrained by either cost or geographic barriers, or even both. Four participants' favourite teams were located overseas, which made it hard for them to stay connected and show their support. Given this, practicing fanship in real life, such as going abroad to watch live games, was unpractical and costly, bringing the potential risk of estranging teams from their Chinese fans. Disappointment was apparent among participants when describing how unrealistic it was for them to attend an event and watch their favourite teams. For example, Wu Yuman said, "Though it's not incredibly pricey, I cannot afford to ask for a 'game leave'." Game leave refers to participants not being able to leave work for several days to attend an event. Chen Hua elaborated:

I would argue that there's little things we, as fans, can do to support teams, in particular those teams from the North America in real life. You cannot just ask for a game leave and buy a flight to watch their game. I cannot afford it.

Participants commonly recounted the inconvenience of supporting their favourite teams in real life and expressed dissatisfaction when they had less involvement. However, they found an alternative solution to gain access to their favourite teams in adopting social media to offset this challenge. Using social media helps fan make up the deficiency, ensuring accessibility that was otherwise hard to obtain in real life.

Participants mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews that they would habitually scroll through Weibo to acquire the latest updates from their favourite teams, checking out official accounts, looking at pictures or videos, liking, posting team-related content, and commenting. For example, Wu Yuman recalled that as much as she wants to keep the connection to her favourite team long-lasting, she would turn to social media to “make up for what I cannot do in real life,” referring to such experience as a “whole other story.”

It was evident that Weibo, in comparison to other platforms being used in China, has become the most common and most accessible tool in connecting fans to teams, ensuring accessibility while minimizing the cost. Nearly every participant suggested that using Weibo to show support stands out as the easiest way to keep maintaining fanship. It seems that the convenience and straightforward aspects of Weibo narrowed the distance between fans and teams emotionally, enabling participants to practice fanship as easily as a swipe of a finger. For instance, Chen Hua recalled, “Weibo has become my to-go application for reaching out to the world. I just enjoy how it provides me what I need in a timely manner...” In this way, social media use greatly offsets the shortage of access to teams, in particular those from North America, which hinders fans from maintaining fanship.

Given the convenience and cost-efficiency advantage of social media, participants commonly integrated Weibo into their daily efforts of supporting the team. Wu Yuman offered the following insights on use:

I would browse news about [the NBA San Antonio] Spurs every day, in particular during commuting. I'd like to check out the latest updates posted by the Spurs' official account, unofficial pictures taken by fans, as well as trending topics relating to the team... my daily routine of using Weibo is checking out the latest updates before doing some search by myself.

Zhang Jingyu considered a similar activity as her personal habit and explained that she was willing to do it daily. Similar experiences were shared by Ni Yuanwen as she recalled that Weibo usage has become, "a personal habit," and referred to it as the source where she got encouraged to keep herself informed. Chen Hua added, "I would re-post those things, liking their contents, or leave messages... sort of my daily routine."

As participants commonly suggest that activities such as tracking down the latest updates, liking, commenting, and posting were routinely carried out, it could be argued that Weibo affords diversified options to practice fanship without interruptions from real-life inconveniences. Participants can show support in an easier, more straightforward, and cost-effective manner, thereby facilitating an increase and consistent social media engagement. For instance, Wu Yuman stated, "As much as I used Weibo to maintain fanship, I look at it as the most normal and common thing to do in life." It was apparent that practicing fanship through Weibo constituted part of her daily routine, as she later

described, with “no need at all to even mention it,” if not for being prompted to think about it in answering the interview question.

It is noticeable that once engagement was realized, social media was utilized as a “transfer station” to maintain psychological connection between fans and the team. Chen Hua described it as “bringing me to the team and vice versa.” Liu Yuqiao recalled when talking about using Weibo as a transfer station, “I can track down all different kinds of news sent out by the team, including their financial condition, trade information, or etc. After obtaining those initial information, I would then use search engine, such as Baidu and Google, to dig deeper.” From there, he elaborated a stronger affiliation between him and the team, describing it as “a chain of relationship,” and further, a “progressive process.”

Social media, by its nature, aims to improve socialization and generalize communication, creating an environment where individuals connect to one another constantly. Within the context of this study, Weibo creates multiple circles of connection, linking participants to not only teams, but also to a larger society existing in the visual form that is loaded with richer information compared to the non-visual. To illustrate, participants commonly referred to Weibo as a “transfer station,” where they not only connect to teams, but vice versa. Hu Zongheng identified,

It works as a transfer station where not only I expressed my feelings, so does the team, communicating to fans through Weibo. I think that’s really the point of using Weibo to stay connected. Because it’s not only a channel through which I obtain information I need, but also a transfer station where feelings are interconnected.

Likewise, Wu Yuman valued Weibo in its role as a bridge not only in sustaining mutual communication, but more importantly, enhancing her psychological bond with the team.

### **Social Media as a Representation of Fan Identity**

Social media affords personalized engagement with teams that participants are following, so having a personal account on Weibo can be seen as the equivalent of having a new identity in the digital world, somewhat separate from that of real life. As such, it creates an environment for fans to display fanship without the need of publicizing their real-life identities, enabling immersion in presenting fan identity based on their personal preferences. Chen Hua suggested,

Weibo creates a separated world from reality where all the things that matter in your real life mean nothing in Weibo, including age, sexuality, jobs, etc. You have only one ID, which is fan, or maybe celebrities' follower.

Likewise, Zhang Jingyu recalled on how she administered her profile to practice fanship to her heart's content, "back then, I was a consumer, which means that for the most part, I was receiving information and consuming contents sent to me, but now, I see myself as a producer, not only running an account, but also managing it."

Since participants' social media experience was subject to their own interests and demands, the stronger affiliation they developed with the team, the more likely their accounts would turn into a platform showcasing their identity as a fan, including but not exclusive to users' interfaces, browsing history, records of liking, commenting, posting,

and related behaviours. As participants' engagement on social media increased, they left more online traces of their fanship in the form of things like their browsing history and liking pages, which makes their profiles more recognizable. Social media was utilized not only as a platform presenting fan identity, but more importantly, as evidence of changes of fans' self-perception. As Ni Yuanwen stated, "I think at the moment you, or whoever opens my account, you'll know that I'm a fan of Guo'an, because all the content is oriented towards them." Wu Yuman added,

I honestly like how my account turns out, namely brimming with Spurs' elements, such as funny gifs of players, photos capturing emotional moments on court, as well as articles I wrote. That said, I guess I'm simply enjoying the process of administrating my own account, the more I make it team-oriented, the more I would put credit on myself as a "die-hard" fan of the Spurs....I feel a sense of achievement if somebody else recognizes me as a qualified "die-hard" fan of Spurs by viewing my content.

It was apparent throughout the interviews that participants consider fan identity more identifiable after they put out things that are team related in their media accounts and put their fanship more out in the open. Social media keeps activities traceable and visible, for example with things such as what they put on their accounts, what content they viewed, who they followed, how they argued against others, and how they commented on content posted by others. Social media thus enables fans to be more conscious of efforts they have put forth in presenting fanship. It was clear that the more frequent and active participants engaged on Weibo to practice fanship, the more records

were created, therefore leading to self-perceptions that they have made tangible contributions and expanded their knowledge base about the team. As such, it seems they generated higher self-evaluation on fan identity, resulting in distinguishing themselves from others. Taking Wu Yuman as an example, she described:

I think there's part of me craving for the sense of uniqueness, leading to an incentive of looking at things like a "professional," making me different from others, or fans in general. I simply don't want to be regarded as "a fan," you know.

Upon reading their narratives, it was clear that for participants, their active Weibo engagement meant they put more value on themselves, in that participants tended to regard themselves as more knowledgeable, qualified, and special, when compared to others. These self-perceptions manifest themselves when participants shared personal stories about how being able to keep pace with the team made them feel superior over other users:

I think I've become more knowledgeable, in that I acquired more information, was exposed to various content, and obtained more understanding about the Lakers. In this way, I think I've become more qualified as their fan, as I'm confident in saying that I know the latest updates on the Lakers, I'm among the first few who acquired such information, and I'm an expert (Hu Zongheng).

Wu Yuman offered more insight on this idea, "the more time I spent on Weibo to search content of high quality, the more confirmed I become in identifying myself as a 'die-hard' fan of the Spurs, leading to a more intense affiliation with the team."

While Weibo constantly pushes the latest updates on software, participants are making efforts to keep up as well. This constant renewal of knowledge seems to have motivated them to separate themselves from others with less Weibo engagement, in terms of practicing fanship. As Wu Yuman argued,

I see more value on myself along the way, as if I'm knowledgeable enough to voice my idea and no fear at all for criticism. By this token, I shall say that I become prouder of myself as a Spurs' firm believer after self-taught, adequate knowledge about the team. Therefore, I'm willing to not only recognize myself as a genuine fan, but also show this identity to others, which makes me feel special, as if I'm among the few truly knowing the legendary team of the NBA.

Chen Hua expanded on this in saying,

... just feel like I've become qualified, in that I really know things about the team, and I've obtained enough knowledge about them. My opinions count...while I use Weibo to interact with others, I reach out to new things in a timely manner, making me knowledgeable and bringing me a sense of being an insider...as a fan of the 76ers, you are special.

### **Social Media as Emotional Fuel Enhancing Fans' Team Identification**

As much as Weibo is digital and visual in nature, at its core it is cost-effective, diversified, and efficient connection, which encouraged fans to fully immerse themselves in maintaining emotional affiliation with their favourite teams. Once participants felt a

stronger affiliation with teams, they seem to have established an enhanced psychological connection, which arguably resulted in stronger team identification. It was apparent that participants see themselves as getting closer to the team due to a constant flow of information and engagement, leading to higher level of emotional integration with the team. Two sub-dimensions were interpreted from participants' experience: Closeness and Realness.

### **Closeness**

Feeling closer to a team is a commonly shared experience coming with social media engagement; participants suggest that they feel a sense of "closeness" with deeper insights acquired about the team. With fans' access to different kinds of information through social media, they were forming knowledge about teams in a more comprehensive manner, which arguably eliminated, as much as possible, the feeling of estrangement that might come with knowledge deficiency. In this way, fans get closer to teams emotionally, fueling a stronger team identification afterward.

This idea becomes manifested as Chen Hua recalled, "It feels like I'm becoming closer to the 76ers. It feels like that I know them better, have deeper understanding about them, and am even immersed into their team culture." Likewise, Zhang Jingyu explained her connection to Madrid as "tighter," whereas Wu Yuman hinted a sense of estrangement if not involved in team-related activities:

I think using Weibo not only enriched my experience of being a fan, but also opened a door for me to know the team in a more comprehensive way.

That being said, I'm getting closer to the Spurs step by step, having little

sense of isolation and estrangement. I think by keeping myself informed and active, I get to know them deeper and deeper, as if they are my neighbour, you know, feeling close and familiar...Although there's no direct interaction between me and the team, yet I see our ties become stronger and firmer, as long as I'm immersing in team-related stuff.

It is arguable that the timeliness and rich aspects of information provided by Weibo have overcome the potential risk of estrangement that may come with the visual and intangible nature of social media. As such, being informed constantly without the inconvenience of interruptions makes participants feel closer to the team emotionally, leading to deepened affiliation to teams.

Zhang Jingyu described how Weibo enabled her to feel closer:

Honestly, I always feel isolated from Madrid before using Weibo, in that I feel they were far away from me, unreachable even though I paid close attention to them. Using Weibo to follow their account, however, I'm able to communicate with others in real time, post my own articles available for others to view, and in this way, I feel I have become closer to them and the emotional ties between me and Madrid have been thoroughly enhanced.

While participants commonly expressed a sense of closeness, this feeling encouraged emotional integration, a process during which participants see more purpose and meaning out of social media engagement, in turn hinting a stronger identification to their favourite teams and leading to a sense of belonging. This idea of "sense of belonging" can be one example of how interwoven the experience of strengthening team identification is for fans. As an example, Liu Yuqiao elaborated, "I think the most

important thing of using Weibo for me is making me feel that I am belonging to Denver, becoming more stuck to either Weibo or the team.” This could be attributed to the feeling of closeness generating and enhancing the perception that they are part of the team. Despite the fact that online engagement involves minimal physical interaction, its impact on fans’ team identification is prominent and effective. For example, when talking about connection, Wu Yuman explained, “all the materials collected through Weibo, be it updates, photos, articles, and etc., helps me form deeper insight on the Spurs, leading to the conception that we are friends. Feeling close in this way.” Li Yifang similarly suggested, “I feel like that I’ve become a part of the team, experiencing the same things like they did, accompanying them all the time, same pace, same schedule.”

A final point is that while common features were shared, Ni Yuanwen also expressed a feeling of pride, stating that her fanship was partially stemming from emotional affiliation to her hometown, since her favourite team Guo’an comes from the city where she was born and raised. In this case, she was more than willing to support the team both in real life and through social media, preferring to take the latter as a bonus, encouraging her to “keep following Guo’an for all those years.” One way to look at such experiences would be to suggest that participant’s psychological connection to certain communities, be it hometown or other geographic groups, sustained emotional affiliation. Ties between an individual and the community are generally stable, persistent and are more likely to shape an individual’s identification to the team in subjectively positive ways. While social media affords an alternative channel to show support and maintain fanship, participants were able to fully immerse themselves in displaying team identification.

## **Realness**

It was prominent that participants tend to view their fanship as more tangible after constantly supporting their favourite teams through social media. One way to look at this idea, would be to suggest that seeing efforts paying off makes participants feel ‘real,’ for they have effectively maintained the loyal fanship and psychological connection.

The conception of “efforts being paid off,” within the context of this study, refers to participants making practical actions on social media to support their favourite teams, such as searching for updates, liking, commenting, and posting contents related to teams. These traces of fanship can then be looked back at, affirming the sense of realness. Upon reading transcripts, it seemed that participants showed more willingness to use social media when they felt “real” fanship. In this, it is likely that the greater knowledge gained, the deeper this feeling of “realness” becomes, for it brings sharper insight about fans’ favourite teams, which cannot be obtained if not using social media to ensure a constant flow of information. Hu Zongheng suggested, “I think I’ve become more knowledgeable and able to know more details related to the team, such as equipment, players’ outfit, etc. I feel real in this respect in terms of connecting to the Lakers as a fan.” Zhang Jingyu said,

As I use Weibo to browse whatever contents are available online, I’m able to keep myself in pace with Madrid, or in other words, keep myself updated.... it has made my support tangible, either through posting photos, articles, or other methods.

Wu Yuman added, “I think Weibo makes my time spent online worthwhile and effective, my efforts of maintaining ties with the Spurs tangible and meaningful. In this regard, I know what I did would paid off in certain ways.”

While social media was used to enhance the feelings fans hold about their favourite teams, each participant's identity as loyal fan was strengthened, and a stronger team identification was also obtained, which can very much be attributed to the closer emotional affiliation of fans.

### **Taking Initiative on Social Media**

The next theme offers more insight into how the participants were using social media as an essential instrument to make their own contributions. While participants indicated the necessity of adopting social media in their fan-life, they suggested an array of follow-up activities coming with Weibo engagement, such as subscribing to more accounts pertinent to their favourite teams, finding more sources of information, and carrying out activities in real life. With social media affording resources that are multi-layered and multi-directional, fans were able to map out activities in accordance to their own interests, and thus take initiative to engage in the digital world. One way to view this idea, would be to argue that although news and TV programs keep fans informed, these methods present restrictions in personal participation and interaction. Through having social media in place to make contact with teams, fans had more options to not only make up real life restrictions, but also proactively personalized their experiences of maintaining fanship. Zhang Jungyu noted, "I feel like that the more I expose myself to information, the more interesting things I found. In this way, I think Weibo as a social media platform leads me into a deeper level, bringing me to content that is comprehensive and having depth."

It was evident that participants tended to undertake activities fulfilling specific desires, such as learning more about game schedules and trades by checking out teams' accounts, commenting on others' content to express their own thoughts, and liking to publicly display fan identity. These activities can very much be seen as an alternative strategy to make up for the passive experience they had in real life, an effort to create a more enjoyable and sustained experience of maintaining fanship by themselves. For instance, Wu Yuman describes,

I'm able to reach out to both official and unofficial information by browsing content shared within fans' community, therefore giving me better insight at the latest updates about the Spurs. In this way, I acquired not only more information in-depth, but also stories behind the screen, such as funny moments before or after games, stories happened in locker room, etc.

Another way that social media was used as an essential tool that encouraged taking personal initiatives was in how participants actively engaged in self-expression. It seemed that they tended to express more and share more through Weibo within the context of this study. For example, Zhang Jingyu, in explaining how creating her own content through Weibo turned her into "not only a receiver of information, but also a provider," elaborated on the idea of taking initiative: "I can't express my thoughts without a channel, so Weibo makes it work.... I think what I like most about Weibo is enabling me to express my own thoughts, instead of purely receiving information passively." Likewise, Wu Yuman discussed the convenience of using Weibo to carry out activities based on her interests and valued it for saving her from "catering to courtesy" in more personal relationships. Here, she said, "I'd like to present my mood, attitude, and

opinions to whoever occasionally encountered my content, perhaps in the form of liking, re-posting, or simply just commenting, depending on the mood.” Notably, having a channel in place to personalize the fanship experience, rather than being informed passively, encouraged fans to actively practice fanship. The following sub-theme offers more insight in how the participants further add more depth into their actions by making social media contributions themselves.

### **Making Contributions**

While Weibo affords firsthand experiences of practicing fanship, it adds an invisible responsibility to participants, in that they commonly expressed impulses toward doing things for the teams’ good. Taking into account the user-friendly and convenient aspect of social media, it appears that as much as Weibo simplified participants’ efforts of practicing fanship, affording an opportunity to participate proactively, it encouraged participants to put more attention on bringing benefits to teams, instead of merely enjoying the convenience, such as access to teams and constant flow of information.

Notably, participants generally expressed a ‘need’ of getting into action on Weibo and viewed activities as them making contributions to the teams’ development. One way to explain, would be to suggest that Weibo affords an opportunity to carry out activities by participants themselves, instead of merely participating in those organized by official accounts. This was sometimes even referred to as “doing work.” For instance, Ni Yuanwen discussed how using traditional media to follow the team dissatisfied her, referring to it as offering “no resources” to “do my work.” Along similar lines, Liu Yuqiao addressed this idea well: “you can’t expect Weibo to provide you detailed

information, in my view. But you can do your work.” In this, participants had more control over activity choice and therefore put great value on the results.

As of another example, Wu Yuman described a feeling of obligation with her favourite team through social media, "as if there's a sense of mission inside me calling for practical actions." Throughout the interview, she used words like "obsess," "unconsciously," and "obligated" multiple times to discuss the impulse of making contributions to the team's good. As she recalled, "the feeling of being obligated to do things, is coming without any omen."

It could be argued that with the easier access obtained by participants through social media, the less likely it is will they purely stay informed passively, but rather desire to make their own moves, thereby taking initiative. Wu Yuman indicated:

Whenever I logged into my account, seeing all the stuff I posted or collected before, I would consciously feel that I need to do more today, browsing new updates or at least checking out hot topics on the day. The more I engaged on Weibo, the more intense this feeling became, as if I need to bring more tangible benefits to be truly qualified as a "die-hard" fan of the Spurs. As long as I see myself as more knowledgeable and as a genuine fan, I feel obligated to do things to be more deserving of such a title.

Chen Hua added that "If I'm not supporting them or doing things for them, I would always feel incomplete, you know, feels like you are forgetting something or lacking something. Then I am not qualified as a real fan of them."

While some participants undertook activities in a more casual manner, hinting a mindset of “doing something was better than nothing,” the majority of participants displayed purposive social media engagement, having specific goals in mind in an effort to make contributions. This difference could be explained by personal preferences while the idea remains the same, which is bringing benefits to the teams’ success in China’s sport market. Overall, upon reading participants’ narratives, it is revealed that they tended to focus making contribution on two related aspects: improving teams’ media exposure and helping in administrating teams’ official social media images. To provide more insight into participants’ lived experience, these aspects are developed below.

### **Using Social Media to Improve Team's Media Exposure**

Increasing the team’s exposure on social media was a common reference to the idea of making contributions. One way to look at this idea, would be to suggest that while social media accounts are commonly viewed as an individual’s identity in the digital world, the exposure rate of the account represents how popular this account is; the more frequent an account being visited or @ in users’ posts, the more likely it acquires higher media exposure by showing others that this account operates smoothly and actively, instead of being considered idle. The more active a team participates in the major social media used in its targeted market, in particular through interacting with its key segmentation, the higher commercial value it displays to potential media partners and sponsors. Participants suggested that they value teams’ Weibo accounts because they regard those as teams’ representation in China. As searching and activities alike contribute to higher media exposure of an account, the more frequent fans search or post

content relating to teams, the higher view rate this teams' account will get. When fans kept interacting with the team through searching or putting up related content, they were contributing to keeping the teams' account active. As an example, Chen Hua noted,

I would watch live games on Tencent, registering a membership. As we all know that the more audience watching live games, the higher the view rates become, so I regard it as a way to bring 76ers more heat...Tiny efforts count, the more heat the better... For me, by posting contents added with hash-tags or @, I'm making contributions, an effort to improve 76ers' page views and maintain their 'heat.'

Zhang Jingyu shared similar experience as she recalled that she would support the team through "constantly following, browsing, and posting contents related to Madrid." Wu Yuman argued that,

I can contribute to higher view rate of the Spurs related contents by simply adopting little tricks, such as using "#", key words, or directly "@" Spurs and NBA. In this way, whoever is searching NBA would potentially see my content, again, leading to increased view rate for the Spurs.

Similarly, Li Yifang said "I would just re-post and re-post, kinda of like a competition.... I feel like being threatened, truly. I just want to post things related to Shou Gang....I need to do things to support them."

### **Helping in Administrating Teams' Social Media Image**

Another aspect omnipresent throughout the interview was that participants felt offended if someone tainted the teams' social media image. Notably, participants

expressed their frustration and grievance when confronted with individuals saying mean things about their favourite teams. They commonly referred to those individuals as short-sighted; nearly every participant expressed their willingness of speaking out “the truth” or putting up back-stories, in an effort to safeguard the team against criticism. Not only have they put considerable efforts in this respect, but they also placed high credit on such activities as necessary in practicing fanship. In this vein, Wu Yuman said,

misunderstandings, I believe, bring an array of negative impacts, such as lower momentum for Spurs to interact with Chinese fans and more roadblocks in the way of building up a fanbase....As a “die-hard” fan of the Spurs, rather than a fanatic of players, I see myself with a responsibility to speak up for the team, help in administrating the team’s account, keeping it in order. ... As Weibo gathered crowds into a wider community, I think it’s critical to leave a good impression of the Spurs to as many people as possible. Overall, I want to minimize the potential damage coming with mean comments on the Spurs’ media image... I think it’s not enough to run a good media account by relying on social media specialist or stuff alike. There’s demand of fans’ support and help.

This could relate back to the idea discussed earlier that constant connection, be it emotional or psychological, urges fans to integrate teams’ concerns and issues into their own psychology. Considering that highly identified fans tend to view themselves as an extension of their favourite teams, sharing both glory and defeat as their own (Fink et al., 2009), it is arguable that as much as participants regard teams’ social media profiles as teams’ representation in China, they are valuing teams’ social media images as their own.

In this, they are fusing things happening around the team into their own issues of concern; prejudiced arguments and nonsense criticism, for example, might be seen as threatening the teams' glory. This can explain participants' shared feelings of being offended. In such situations, while fans managed to maintain constant connection to teams, their affiliation to teams becomes stronger, presenting in forms of higher concerns over teams' future success and practical actions of safeguarding teams' media profile.

Despite different methods, participants shared the feature of protecting teams from potential damage, be it coming from failures on the court or biased information. As information conveyed by "haters" was usually viewed as inauthentic and unilateral, it is understandable that participants regarded such content as detrimental and threatening, which might hinder the team's attempts of building up a fanbase in China. As an example, Li Yifang talked about how he had experience with haters,

they made up stories about Shou Gang, fake news, saying that our players are playing around with women, all that sort of thing. Those stories will mislead others to believe that our players did bad things. I think they were splashing dirty water on us. If they want to play dirty, so be it. I'm the one they don't want to screw around, so yup, I have no choice but to fight fire with fire, making up stories for them.

As another example, Chen Hua talked about knowing that haters simply gave vent to their own feelings by decrying teams and that he saw no need at all to argue with them. She would respond,

I would make a thorough analysis of contents I posted, including reasons, evidences, and etc. I know there's no point at all to do all those things. But I

have to. Otherwise, other users who have little knowledge about 76ers will take those wrong things for granted or underestimate team's performance. I feel so pitiful if things like that happened.

In this way, participants' intention of helping in administrating teams' media profile could be explained as them making efforts to cut off, as much as possible, the potential negative outcomes coming with inauthentic content, including but not exclusive to mean comments and false news, so as to create an enabling environment for teams to develop.

### **Stronger Team Identification Leads to Social Media Addiction**

One of the key findings was that stronger psychological connection with the teams facilitated participants' engagement on social media. It was evident that participants commonly described their participation in social media activity as more active, even going to the point of obsession or addiction, which was commonly discussed throughout the interviews. One of the ways participants' engagement on social media increased to be an addiction, was described by browsing team-related contents and presenting fan identity whenever they can. For example, Chen Hua explained that she "cannot help" herself in browsing the team's contents on Weibo. Wu Yuman emphasized similar feelings as "binge eating" and recalled how, in most cases, it made her end up staying up late: "I need to at least find something valuable and useful so that makes my time spent surfing worthy...I simply need to stay up late to get the latest updates given the time differences between China and the U.S." Ni Yuanwen elaborated on this idea by

attributing her growing obsession on social media to closer emotional ties with the team and described it as something she “cannot live without.” Liu Yuqiao explained that being accessible to his favourite team through social media “motivated” him to participate in other ways, such as online lotteries, voting on polls, and purchasing a range of products, such as T-shirts and cups.

Growing addiction on social media engagement also seemed to be present in participants showing more willingness in self-expression. As discussed above, it was apparent that participants intensely integrated social media into part of their lives. Upon reading their stories, it seemed that they got used to such platforms as an outlet for voicing personal opinions. Fans’ higher evaluation on their fanship, constant engagement on social media which maintained information accessibility, and greater knowledge about teams, resulted in more confidence in expressing their attitudes. In this situation, participants were empowered to establish and display their identity as loyal fans through participation, such as joining in online discussions, and posting articles. For example, Chen Hua, in describing her social media activities, expressed a strong motivation of self-expression:

I think I’ve become more confident online... they [the 76ers] are my backup. I’m the 76ers’ fan, a knowledgeable and qualified fan, so I feel myself supported by this team as well. I’m more willing to join discussion, express myself, and try out new things on Weibo.

Liu Yuqiao added,

I would also post my own analysis on Weibo, something I wouldn’t do in early years. So, it definitely improved my participation on Weibo, and I think,

changed my ways of using Weibo in general, not exclusive to sport, but my habits as well.

The majority of participants utilized social media to express themselves and participate in online activities, but some also suggested they engaged in more aggressive behaviours, such as trolling other teams and spreading fake news about other teams. Given that social media operates in a digital world where users can display without significantly matching with real life, it can be argued that it empowers them to express less hesitation when trolling opponent teams on Weibo. Zhang Jungyu explained that in real life,

I would always hold some words from speaking out in fear of harming the relationship between me and my friends, or even keep silence. But I can say whatever I want on Weibo, without restriction. I'm a normal person as well, which means that I sometimes behaved like a hater as well, I don't deny that. That being said, I would emotionally leave mean comments on other clubs' official accounts. Given how easy and low cost it is for people to express themselves on social media, I think mean comments are inevitable.

While social media enables personalized engagement, it can lead to differentiated behaviours. Fans behave differently; aggressive actions are subject to individual characteristics and can be regarded as a personal preference. For example, Wu Yuman articulated how she would not "troll" another team for any reason:

Well, I'm not trying to picture myself as noble or decent, it's just because I know at the first place how hard it is for each team to get through hard

times. Despite how promising a future look like for certain teams, they all have issues to handle. There might be conflicts around the administrative level, painful run-ins, even grudges among players, you name it. There's simply no reason to target them as a personal outlet. It's unfair. But everyone has their own preference, it is not your business, therefore no reason to interfere. I'm just saying that I don't really have any interest or incentive to do such things.

### **Looking to Experience More**

Since participants felt a closer relationship with the teams, they seemed to crave for content that had more in-depth information, placing high value on knowing more about their favourite teams. In this way, content shedding light on back-stories about teams was particularly valued. As discussed in the previous theme, participants tended to see themselves as knowledgeable and distinguishable from others. The more active they engaged on social media, the more information they managed to keep. As such, information that is consumed quickly can hardly fulfill them anymore, resulting in them obsessively looking for information that offers them more comprehensive knowledge. Another way to look at their intention of acquiring in-depth content, would be to suggest that it was them becoming eager to inform others since they see themselves as experts with insider knowledge, and feel a need to fulfill the sense of uniqueness of being a loyal fan as discussed in previous themes. Being one of the few fans who know back-stories or first-hand information about teams would satisfy participants' need of feeling special, qualified, and knowledgeable. This could be a reason explaining their intention of not

only speaking up for the team, but also informing others with their “objective” analysis. For example, Zhang Jingyu spoke about posting articles to share stories behind the scenes, to inform others with “truth below the surface.” When talking personally about voting for All-Star players through Weibo, Liu Yuqiao stated that he would particularly focus on supporting those who have the ‘real deal,’ instead of those who “simply look pretty on data.”

With all of this, it is arguable that the stronger fans identified with the team, the more interest developed for in-depth content as fans need to update themselves with new insights about the team in order to maintain a stronger psychological connection. In those cases, the expectation to experience more and to be more distinguishable facilitated participants’ social media engagement. Wu Yuman indicated,

The closer I get to Spurs, the better I get to know their spirit, culture, and history, therefore leading to higher demand on the quality of content. To put it simply, I have less interest in consuming fast information, but rather center my attention on specific fields.

Participants seemed to constantly look for more ways to practice fanship through social media. As discussed above, participants developed higher social media engagement. Upon reading their narratives, it seemed that they also generated more expectations for the accessibility of their favourite teams. Arguably, the more knowledge obtained, the more likely fans will generate higher demands on ways to support their favourite teams, from “keeping connected and informed” to “actively engaged,” as an effort to make their fanship experience more comprehensive, enjoyable, and sustainable.

This can be explained as fans looking forward to getting responses from their favourite teams, and adding more personal touches to the fanship experiences. As an example, Wu Yuman spoke about wishing the team put more effort into sustaining interaction and looked at it as an essential way to “enhance connection.” Other comments highlighted how the participants looked forward to more interaction from the teams’ side:

We need to acknowledge that there are just too many fans to be listened and taken care of. It is unlikely for teams to reach out to every single fan.

In this regard, it’s better to do it through offline activities, as a more effective method for the team to interact with fans. Even so, I think by using online platforms, it helps the team to communicate with fans, at least reach out to a few fans per time. In this way, we would know that our thoughts and support does matter to the team and the team will use social media to respond. After all, it is us who buy tickets to watch the game, support the team, bring in income. The team has the obligation, in my view, to interact with us through online platforms (Liu Yuqiao).

Given that participants commonly shared an experience of routinely using Weibo to maintain fanship, it is understandable that they got bored at certain points with basic functions, and therefore looked for more ways to diversify engagement and interaction. This can lead to wanting more from the form of social media used. Hu Zongheng said,

I want my interaction with the team to be more intense and vivid, so I hope Weibo provides me more services. If it failed to do so, I would have to find new channels...For now, I tend to use Weibo as a springboard to search more and try out more new apps.

Although expectations varied in detail, participants commonly shared a desire of having more ways to express fanship, looking for new services or functions that have not been fully utilized. Wu Yuman explained such expectations as “creating surprises” for her, while Li Yifang suggested a need to learn new stuff to get “closer” to the team and that having social media to constantly afford “new functions” is a must to help him connect: “I think the point here is that there should be no limitation on creating new things, particular on social media. In this way, I think I’ll be connected to my favourite team more constantly and closely.”

### **Practicing Fanship through Social Media Brings Personal Impacts**

One of the main questions of this research was what does it mean for Chinese sport fans to use social media to maintain the identification with their favourite teams? Experiences shared by participants answering the above question suggested that using social media to maintain fanship has not only strengthened their team identification, but also exerted prominent and profound impacts on their psychological well-being and social relationships. Along with participants unfolding their experience, an important point worth mentioning is that their body language often became more engaged and they had richer facial expressions when reflecting upon benefits gained through maintaining fanship on social media. Some participants valued the lessons learned from accompanying the team as it went through hard times, others the self-improvements seen in real life. It was evident that meanings that came with the experiences being explored go beyond the realm of fanship and expanded to real life. Participants’ reflections on real

life impacts commonly fell into two aspects: mindset and interpersonal relationships. Two dimensions were interpreted to present the essence of their lived experiences: social media as a mental shelter to improve psychological well-being and social media as a facilitator of social ability.

### **Social Media as a Mental Shelter: Maturity and Happiness**

Nearly every participant highlighted, to different degrees, that using Weibo to practice fanship motivated self-reflection. Enlightenment and inspiration were frequently mentioned when asked, “what does it mean for you, as a fan, to use Weibo to maintain fanship?” Answers suggested that those experiences encouraged participants to give a second thought on things happening in real life and thus behave in a more mature manner in the face of challenges and hardships. Notably, social media allows fans to operate on a level closely connected to the team and maintain a constant state of engagement. Participants were able to not only experience the same struggles and happiness as if they were team members, but also suggested they learned lessons along the way, from either things happening around the team, or the ways teams adapted to overcome difficulties. More specifically, while participants kept themselves informed in a timely manner, they were sharing both happiness and frustration coming with games. As such, participants were living vicariously with their favourite teams by witnessing the entire process of the team converting sorrow into motivation and inspiration along the way. Although participants did not actively seek to learn from the team, unhampered fanship experiences seemed to facilitate such actions. An example of this was evident in Liu Yuqiao’s

explanation of how connecting to the team encouraged him to look at things from different perspectives:

I'm becoming more able to see through the appearance to the essence, seeing the depth of problems, and forming my own thoughts... I learned to see things happening in my life differently. In this way, I think it helps me deal with things happening in my life differently, seeing depth to it, you know...I believe this is a process for me to grow up as well.

Hu Zongheng and Ni Yuanwen suggested likewise; both regarded themselves as being “inspired” by the team and therefore tending to solve problems in ways enlightened by the team. Wu Yuman explained by describing herself as more at “ease and calm” in facing unexpected life situations, and that she has become “more patient:”

I felt a slight change in mindset as well, in that I'm more able to enjoy the moment, instead of always eyeing for what I'm going to achieve in the future. I have become less profit-oriented, as for I tend to focus more on everyday steps right at the moment, not merely good-looking results. This mindset, in my view, symbolized that I'm growing up, becoming more mature.

Zhang Jingyu added that in following the team through Weibo,

I learned to put myself into others' shoes, in that I gradually understand everyone can be special and different, having all kinds of ideas. In this way, I think I've become more mature...I started to understand that there's no way to force others to buy your idea; frictions are always there. Taking

this mindset makes me feel ease, and I'm becoming more humble and modest.

Li Yifang, who had been criticized online for allegedly plagiarizing one of his tutor's pieces of artwork, highly valued the opportunity of maintaining fanship with Beijing Shougang basketball team. In his case, it was evident that he was gaining mental power from sustaining emotional bonds with the team, as if they were "backing him up." He later spoke about how this inner strength gained from connecting to the team changed his mindset, encouraging him to move on:

I think my world view has been shifted as well, in that for now I feel like everyone has their hard times and everyone will fall to the bottom of their lives at one point, just like the team has good and bad times... they make me feel that it's better to focus on building a better future than immersing in the present failure.

Arguably, it is during this process that fans reshaped their mindset, leading to self-reflection that otherwise would be less likely to happen if not having teams as a mental shelter to draw strength and learn lessons from.

Along with what have been discussed above, changes of mindset also presented in a higher sense of self-requirement. It was apparent in most cases that participants were looking forward to nourishing a "better self." This could be attributed to fans with high team identification considering themselves as an extension of the team. Such conceptions lead to a desire for self-improvement, particularly when teams were regarded as outstanding. In this situation, fans' intention of nourishing a better self can be seen as an effort to match themselves with the team, living up to the identity as a "die-hard" fan of an outstanding team. Wu Yuman articulated this well:

The closer I get to the Spurs, the more intense need I felt to become more credible and positive, sort of like nourishing a more attractive personality. I simply felt an ever-intensifying desire of becoming better myself. By this token, I think through active engagement on Weibo, I have become more willing to take a sharp look at myself, namely doing introspection now and then....Regardless of becoming more social, or attractive in terms of personality, the idea is always the same: nourish a better self.

Participants seemed to become happier after being afforded a place to concentrate on themselves, relieving pressure and negative emotions without having to cater to others. In this, participants were able to get rid of the inconveniences of qualms, interruptions, or embarrassments that might come with face-to-face interaction in real life, and enjoy the process of connecting to their favourite teams. For example, Wu Yuman spoke about how being able to express her thoughts made her feel “relaxed” and further “involved” in interacting with the team by “focusing on my very personal preference and interest.” As she stated:

Using Weibo to reach out to the Spurs is a long process without necessarily yielding practical or tangible results, and I don't really need those “results” so to speak, but rather valuable lessons learned along the way, as well as a vivid experience. In this way, I feel less stressed out in real life, as for I won't be as obsessed with promotion as I would before, nor would I be entangled with buying property, a car, and etc. I shall say, I simply become happier.

Zhang Jingyu added to this in saying,

I'm able to truly focus on myself, what I like or dislike, instead of taking my family or career into consideration... Following Madrid created a shelter for me, in which I'm able to find peace and stay away from daily hassles. I feel comfortable when checking out Madrid-related stuff on Weibo.

### **Social Capability**

Notably, social media by its nature is social and communal, which determines that whoever is on that platform will inevitably be involved in interactive activities. One way to look at those actions, would be to suggest they represent individuals making efforts to reach out to the external world. As such, regardless of forms of socializing, individuals were keeping themselves not only informed, but more importantly, connected. Hu Zongheng shared his feelings as he recalled,

as Weibo unites fans of the Lakers, I made myself many friends through this platform. In this way, I'm not only sharing my thoughts about the team with others, but also reflections, experiences, etc. Somehow I think that Weibo has expanded our Laker family, helping me find a bigger and wider group to be social with and make my life more colorful and interesting.

From participants' statements, it appears that social aspect of Weibo has been effectively utilized through practices of fanship. As participants obtained more knowledge about their favourite teams through social media, they managed to store rich topics of conversation, which seemed to be effectively used in real life communication. For example, Wu Yuman spoke about how reaching out to the team made her more of "a

topic maker, rather than purely a listener.” By connecting to the fast-changing world, she explained:

I’m more willing to talk and share my stories of following the Spurs. In this way, I shall say that I’m becoming more confident in holding a conversation, more easygoing, funny, and open-minded...I think this experience enriched my life, making it more vivid and colorful so to speak, thereafter turning me into a person who is funnier, more easygoing, and enjoyable to socialize with.

Zhang Jingyu, in describing her experiences of using the team as a topic to kick off a conversation, even expressed a strong sense of excitement, as she recalled, “my work now mostly centers on execution. I make contact with new people every single day, and Madrid has become my ice-breaking topic, something I won’t dare to do before!”

Likewise, Hu Zongheng was admittedly more sociable and recounted that it is through social media engagement that he has made himself more friends, and as a result, has made his life “more colorful and interesting.”

During the process of practicing fanship, fans expanded their horizons by accessing multi-layered information, leading to not only enriched knowledge about the team, but also higher capability to engage in conversations. In this way, while fans managed to sustain their psychological connection with the team, and they improved their social abilities, extending positive impacts obtained through practicing fanship to real life.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Using team identification theory as the theoretical framework, this study sought to explore Chinese sports fans' lived social media experiences of maintaining fanship, extending current research to outside of North America. More specifically, this study examined how Chinese sports fans used social media to practice fanship, how those experiences influenced their team identification and vice versa; and what those experiences mean for Chinese sports fans.

Notably, adopting social media to ensure accessibility is indispensable for Chinese sport fans to maintain a connection to teams. Restricted by real life limitations, participants of this study discussed being dissatisfied due to the incapability of doing more for their favourite teams. Being able to enjoy experiences of maintaining fanship through social media, however, offset such deficiencies. Social media facilitated fans' engagement and led to an apparent enhancement of team identification. The findings suggest that fans' engagement on social media not only strengthened their affiliation to teams, but also making they feel that it profoundly influenced their psychological well-being and social ability.

### **Engaging in Social Media to Sustain Practices of Fanship**

Fans in this study embraced social media extensively to inform themselves and actively take initiatives to support their favourite teams. It was evident that fans gained access to widespread information through social media and therefore connected to teams

constantly without being constrained by real life obstacles and needing to care about social courtesies to others.

The findings revealed that it is essential for teams and leagues to adopt social media to afford uninterrupted and personalized engagement, particularly because fans are extensively regarded as the “heart and soul” (Hopwood et al., 2010, p.139) of sport. This is because the convenience and user-friendly nature of social media offsets the more passive experiences fans have had offline in maintaining fanship. As such, it affords fans not only more options to choose from (such as liking or re-posting team’s official content), but also an environment where they were able to make their own contributions. In this way, instead of being informed passively, fans were encouraged to express and maintain fanship according to personal interests. While highly identified fans tend to support teams through high amounts of online activities (Fink et al., 2009), social media can become an ideal forum for them.

It was apparent that fans in this study were putting more attention on “how” to express fanship through social media, rather than just using it to access information. Notably, nearly every participant expressed a sense of satisfaction after being afforded with a channel to actively practice support. As highly identified fans, they tended to get motivated by attaching great importance to fanship, which resulted in more supportive behaviours, ranging from news searching to posting articles (Fink et al., 2009). From this, they not only routinized such efforts into their daily lives, symbolizing a sustainable social media engagement, but more importantly, personalized it, making experiences more vivid and enjoyable.

While personalized social media use was realized, fans in this study presented higher motivation in carrying out activities relating to the teams of which they were fans, such as browsing, liking, and commenting, and they commonly discussed this as enabling them to share personal thoughts or “do my work.” This finding was in line with what Benigni et al. (2009) suggested, in that fans frequently share experiences in social media, making efforts to project their loyalty to teams. While Stavros et al. (2014) identified that sense of hope, esteem, passion, and camaraderie are key motivations of fans’ social media use, those who highly identified may have developed a stronger desire to acquire those feelings, and therefore used social media more frequently and extensively.

It was apparent that the ability to make one’s own contributions through social media further facilitated fans’ intention of making such contributions. As much as social media offsets the relatively passive experiences of maintaining fanship offline, it gives fans more control over self-chosen activities. Fans in this study put greater value on the potential benefits coming from their “contributions.” Khang et al., (2012) noted that people participating in social media tend to define themselves as creators of interactive media. The findings of this study suggested that fans may have reinforced this perception, and developed a contributor mindset, regarding team-relevant interactive activities as contributions.

The two major concerns discussed were improving teams’ media exposure and supporting the daily administration of official accounts. Given that highly identified fans tend to regard teams as a form of self-extension (Wann, Melnick, et al., 2001), it can be suggested that fans were taking teams’ future development as their own concern, leading to efforts to help create a better future for teams. A propensity of linking one’s self-

perception to a team has been identified among fans, especially those who have high team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Wann et al., 1994; Wakefield & Bennett, 2017). Social media may have become an ideal forum for fans to deal with negative perceptions that arise from attempting to take the perspective of teams. Notably, while the majority suggested purposive behaviors that may contribute the team's online presence, some indicated a more casual participation on social media, yet still indicating that tiny efforts count as long as they were doing something. Either way, it seemed that participants utilized social media as an instrument to make experiences more enjoyable and more personal, therefore sustaining practices of fanship.

### **Antisocial Behaviours**

Another important finding revealed was that fans were no longer satisfied with sharing results from certain games, such as teams' glory and failure, but rather preferred to take real action, strategically reversing potential negative outcomes coming with online criticism. This could be attributed to highly identified fans' biased perceptions towards teams' performances (Fink et al., 2009), and a mindset of crediting favorable outcomes to teams and blaming losses on external forces (Doyle et al., 2017; Jang et al., 2018; Van Leeuwen et al., 2002). This is in line with the idea of BIRGing (Basking in Reflected Glory) pointed out by Wann and Branscombe (1990), referring to fans basking in teams' success as their own glory, and the idea of CORFing (Cutting Off Reflected Failure), referring to fans' attempt of cutting off negative outcomes like failure. Likewise, Hirt and Clarkson (2011) used the term "schadenfreude" (p. 5) to refer to fans' perverse emotion of feeling joy in the misfortune of a team's rival. Noting that highly identified fans tend

to practice fanship more actively and frequently in real life (Hill & Green, 2000), the findings here suggested that some fans may have used social media, such as leaving mean comments on rivals' message boards, to release such emotions and offset feelings associated with being unable to exercise support in real life.

Two participants demonstrated antisocial actions that seemed less likely to be undertaken by them offline, including trolling and using fake accounts to leave negative comments about opposing teams. Given the seemingly anonymous aspect of social media, it allowed fans to self-express with identities they preferred. Those participants discussed their willingness to behave anti-socially on social media. Stavros et al. (2014) noted similarly that fans tend to display a sense of protectiveness on social media and have a strong desire of confronting opinions that violate their self-perceptions. Given that highly identified fans regard themselves as an extension of teams, it makes sense that those fans may regard criticisms targeting teams as a violation of themselves. This may have generated an impulse to defend teams, something for which social media affords a platform. Stavros et al. (2014) suggested that despite high emotion being common in sport, it is more apparent in the social media context, because fans were being afforded an environment where they can feel more in control. This factor of control can very much motivate fans' social media use. As findings of this study revealed, fans' antisocial actions may link to social media protecting them from revealing true identities when rebuking other fans' judgement or trolling opposing teams' media profiles.

## **Social Media as Protective Screen**

Since teams are based in North America, fans perceived the teams' media profile as the teams' identity in China. This encouraged fans to engage in activities meant to protect teams from criticism that was commonly seen as obstacles to their development in China. As discussed above, fans in this study integrated teams' concerns into their own, seeing themselves as the representative of teams; this self-concept manifested an increase of affiliation (Lock et al. 2012). While Meng et al. (2015) pointed out that close affiliation between highly identified fans and the team evoked emotional responses, it is arguable that the constant flow of team-oriented information enhanced emotional integration. As a result, this maximized such responses through simplifying the effort required.

Moreover, fans in this study described a sense of fear when talking about expressing their genuine feelings on things in real life, for they were concerned about the likelihood of harming relationships with their friends. Having social media in place, however, afforded an opportunity to choose identities that did not necessarily represent who they were offline. From this, given that the digital aspect of social media bears more tolerance to different forms of online activities (Stavros et al., 2014), fans determined the ways to present their identity, taking the initiative to practice support for their favourite team. As such, social media was used as a protective screen through which fans eliminated subsequent worries, therefore enabling them to be involved in supporting teams. It was prominent that fans in this study responded to issues surrounding their favourite teams more emotionally and personally when using social media.

It is arguable that fans were using differentiated ways to personalize social media engagement, making fanship practices more appealing to sustain, even with the potentially negative behaviours displayed by two of the participants. Wakefield and Wann (2006) indicated a close interrelationship between team identification and fan aggression, finding that highly identified fans tend to behave more antisocially at sporting events, engaging in behaviours such as openly discussing criticisms, verbal abuse of players and even verbally confronting opposing fans. These findings link to the results of this study, in that as much as social media encouraged self-expression, it facilitated abnormal behaviours, if only in digital form. These behaviours included trolling opposing teams and using fake accounts to disturb other teams' profile. In a similar vein, Smith and Smith (2012) also suggested that by displaying fanship identity through Twitter, fans were presenting "favoritism toward other fans of the same team" (p. 551). This finding supports the essential theme demonstrated by this study: social media becomes a showcase for fanship identity. They explained that social media created "an extra layer of anonymity or 'security'" which encouraged fans' bold, even aggressive moves, making them more likely to "lash out" (Smith & Smith, 2012, p. 551). Overall, essential themes revealed by this study have displayed the inter-subjectivity and inter-connectedness of sports fans' lived experience of maintaining fanship through social media.

### **Social Media as a Facilitator of Team Identification**

Intending to get closer to teams, fans used different functions of social media concurrently, such as liking contents, commenting on message boards, and joining in

online discussion, which can be explained as them making efforts to maintain fanship. Notably, fans in this study described how a closer bond with their favourite teams was established and maintained psychologically, leading to a stronger affiliation with the teams. From this, they generated feelings of closeness and realness from their fanship.

Given that the diverse nature of social media enables multi-directional and interconnected flow of information (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), fans' experiences were enriched. Noting that team identification was influenced by an array of factors coming from fans' overall experiences, Funk and James (2006) suggested that how fans experienced online activities will largely impact their identification to the team. Previous studies indicated that fans' team identification can be simply affected by access to team-oriented information (Funk & James, 2001; Gau et al., 2009). From participants' descriptions, it was evident that they obtained a more pleasant experience due to proactive engagement on social media, such as enjoying the convenience of self-expression, constant flow of information, and simplified team accessibility. From this, they valued social media as indispensable in not only providing access, but more crucially, making experiences vivid and enjoyable. As a result, social media was adopted as more of a facilitator of team identification, rather than simply being a means of communication between teams and fans.

The findings of Wann's (2006) study suggested that fans' team identification can be enhanced by having teams inform fans of the traditions of the team, as this deepens the feeling of belonging. This can largely contribute to a more personalized relationship between fans and the team, as Meng et al. (2015) found that such affiliation affords fans "a feeling of access to the inner sanctum" (p. 211). Similar to their findings, fans in this

study described that participating in team-related activities through social media brought better insight about the teams, making them feel like insiders who knew more about stories from “behind-the-scenes.” From this, participants described a greater desire to keep themselves informed with the latest updates and participating in activities. Interestingly, Murrell and Dietz (1993) suggested a sense of togetherness may occur when highly identified fans support teams through the sharing of familiar identities, as this creates a group context.

While fans’ loyalty can be significantly impacted by the degree of such affiliation, Stavros et al. (2014) identified a deficiency in understanding their team affiliation within a social media context. The findings of this study suggested that fans not only experienced a consistent flow of group affiliation by using social media to ensure team accessibility, but more crucially, strengthened the feeling of belonging, which can very much be seen as another form of togetherness. Previous studies indicated that revealing inside information would give fans a feeling of intimacy, making them take the fan-team relationship more personally (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Meyrowitz, 1986) and more seriously (Stern, Russell, & Russell, 2007). The findings of this study added more depth to this aspect, suggesting that fans have significantly strengthened team identification after obtaining more knowledge about teams and participating in interactive activities on social media. Similarly, Meng et al., (2015) indicated that fans developed stronger identification to their favourite teams when they present higher willingness of checking out team-related information and introducing the team to others. Participants’ descriptions in this study match with their argument that using social media to acquire

diversified information enhanced fans' feeling of being an insider and consequently strengthened team identification.

A recent study conducted by Vale and Fernandes (2018) suggested consideration of social media as a significant instrument in strengthening the fan relationship, which links to the ability of social media to enhance connectivity and promote interaction (Gantz, 2013; Sun, 2010). Having social media in place to produce multi-layered information and ensure accessibility will significantly impact fans' feeling of belonging, leading to stronger emotional bonds.

Despite the methods of practicing fanship being different in this study, efforts were targeted with a common purpose – making support more sustainable and effective. As an example, using hashtags has been noted among efforts to practice team identification (Smith & Smith, 2012). In this, fans using social media to undertake team-oriented activities, be it liking, commenting, or other things, are practicing team identification. While their changing preferences were catered to through personalizing such engagement, what potentially ensued was a solidified relationship with each fan's favourite team. As a result, it can enhance each team identification (Meng et al., 2015). Whilst the team's accessibility plays a crucial role in maintaining fans' loyalty, not exclusively to those who have already developed high identification, this study highlighted the significance and opportunity of strengthening fan-team affiliation through social media.

Notably, Kaplan and Langdon (2012) highlighted the difference between Chinese fans and American counterparts regarding social media use, stressing that Chinese fans had a higher attachment to players than with teams. The findings of this study suggested

otherwise, in that fans may have developed higher identification with teams due to enriched and “personal-touch” fanship experiences they had on social media. Given their study was conducted in 2012 when social media just took off in China, it is understandable and arguable that Chinese sports fans’ mindset and behaviours may have changed since then. Collectively, participants’ descriptions show how active social media participation impacted and altered their everyday practices of fanship, which in a number of ways resulted in the enhancement of team identification.

### **Social Media Obsession**

Findings in this study also showed that fans became more reliant on social media after feelings of closeness and realness were generated out of fanship. More specifically, participants commonly described the connection as working circularly, which encouraged their social media usage while at the same time strengthening emotional bonds with the team. From this, they discussed social media engagement as becoming harder to control or “an obsession.” This can be explained by a stronger team identification potentially motivating social media engagement (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007), particularly prominent in those highly identified fans (Gau, James, & Kim, 2009). It is possible that fans’ participation on social media may become even more frequent and routinized along with growing team identification. Witkemper, Hoon, and Waldburger (2012) support this idea by suggesting that how much a fan engaged on social media was largely influenced by the level of team affiliation.

As discussed above, fans' team identification can be strengthened by providing them with team relevant information, and social media is an ideal forum to this end. While fans in this study expressed that they experienced an increasing psychological attachment to teams, they may have developed an obsession on social media due to the desire of maintaining emotional intimacy. In a similar vein, Pronschinske, Groza, and Walker (2012) found that how well a team engages fans through official Facebook pages can largely impact fans' social media engagement. Despite the variations in platforms, the results support findings revealed by this research, in that highly identified fans tend to have a more active engagement on social media which in turn, strengthens team identification.

Stavros et al. (2014) used the term 'hope' to describe highly identified fans' propensity of portraying teams a favorable future through posting positive statements on social media, and further identified a sense of collective optimism coming from validation by other like-minded fans. Being able to display team affiliation within a wider social network in which highly identified fans can gather, participants in this study may have reinforced a sense of belonging and developed an obsession with using social media to keep such feelings intact. Importantly, seeking a sense of belonging has been ingrained in Chinese culture as a traditional belief. This may have motivated fans to increase social media engagement, in an effort to fulfill their emotional desire of maintaining group affiliation. It could explain participants' increasing compulsion of using social media to interact.

From this study fans' description, it was apparent that the perception of belonging was integrated into their practices of fanship and became interwoven with team

identification. The above explanation was found to be supported in several studies, including Kyung-Hee Kim and Haejin Yun (2007), who argued that the online environment can very much result in an enhancement, to a certain degree, of users' cultural expectations about maintaining relationships. This is because users' behaviours overall reflect their distinctive cultural values (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011). In addition, Heere and James (2007) suggested that sports teams represent a large community containing not only players, coaches, and fans, but also geographic groups such as the city where fans lived. They argued that fans' affiliation to the team will be impacted by those larger social communities. Whereas teams help in connecting an individual with larger social networks, it works the other way as well, enhancing an individual's affiliation to the team.

Buhler and Nufer (2010) suggested that the long-term success of teams lies largely on fans' loyalty, considering they constitute the major customer population; the loyalty can be maintained and enhanced through interaction on social media (Pentina, Gammoh, Zhang, & Mallin, 2013). Social media allows teams and organizations to establish and enhance social bonds with fans (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013), in an effort to strengthen fans' commitment. In line with that, the results of this study suggest that while social media was used to personalize and sustain fanship practices, adding more personal touches to interactive activities from the teams' side may enhance fans' overall experiences. This coincides with Tussey's (2013) study that identified digital sport fans as deeply engaged consumers, who prefer to consume sport in interpersonal relationships. Li et al. (2017) suggested that being a fan of a collective team may be more important to Chinese people than their Western counterparts. The findings of this study

line up with their research, highlighting that it is not only meaningful for Chinese fans to practice fanship on social media, but also enhance team identification while doing so.

O'Shea and Alonso (2011) demonstrated that social media can be used as an efficient instrument to offset constraints faced by teams entering a new market (e.g., lack of personnel). Although teams followed by fans in this study may not necessarily be troubled by such issues, it may bring greater financial benefits if teams and leagues utilize social media comprehensively to engage with Chinese sport fans. It is recommended that teams should invest more time in creating personalized interactions, ensuring the connection between the two sides is long-lasting and active, particularly Weibo, the dominant social media within China's context. This idea is consistent with several researchers, including Gau et al. (2009) who suggested that teams and sport marketers need to "maintain highly identified fans and manage them as valuable assets" (p. 86), as well as Achen (2016), who pointed out that the larger fanbase a team built on social media, the higher the team's income will be, and such connections help teams carry out targeted market strategies. In this, it is necessary to adopt social media in not only enhancing team's accessibility, but also diversifying fans' overall experiences of practicing fanship, to strengthen their team identification more effectively (Park & Dittmore, 2014).

### **Higher Evaluation on Fanship**

Following a stronger emotional connection to teams, fans in this study also experienced a growing self-evaluation on their identity as loyal fans. More specifically,

participants' descriptions indicated a higher willingness of displaying fan identity on social media by playing a role of teams' safeguard/ambassador. They discussed how using social media to "speak up" for or share the "genuine truth" about the teams made them valuable and qualified fans. As discussed previously, highly identified fans tend to credit teams for good performance and blame others for unfavourable outcomes, so fans may have acquired a sense of fulfillment by using social media to defend teams' performance, resulting in a feeling of self-empowerment. This lines up as a good example of BIRGing – "Basking in Reflected Glory" (Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

Qualman (2010) identified that individuals may express themselves forcefully on media platforms; Stavros et al. (2014) extended the idea into sport context, by suggesting that fans express their positive expectations for the team in an authoritative tone. From there, fans who are active on social media may be inclined to present their knowledgeable status, using the platform to display "specialist knowledge, authority, commitment and status" (Stavros et al., 2014, p. 9), fulfill a sense of worthiness, and realize greater identity benefits. In this way, their sense of self can be ameliorated. The idea of "higher evaluation on fanship" suggested by this study adds more insight to this end, as fans may realize self-empowerment after using social media to project a fan-based image of the self. This manifests when participants tend to defend teams through the sharing of back stories and argumentative posts. Social media offers information accessibility that can largely enrich fans' horizons; fans may have found fewer obstacles in accessing team-related resources, enabling them to obtain more knowledge and insights, leading to feelings as if they are more distinguishable and qualified to be seen as loyal fans. This

idea was supported by Hirt and Clarkson (2011), who suggested considering knowledge as a central dimension in identifying fanship and differentiating true fans from non-fans.

Furthermore, given that highly identified fans tend to see their identities as fused with that of their favourite team's, in becoming more knowledgeable, they may have further generated a sense of superiority, with a higher evaluation on their loyalty towards teams. The work of Smith and Smith (2012) supports this idea, as they pointed out that people considering themselves as members within certain group tend to have "more favorable attitudes toward and judge as superior members of their own group" (p. 542), leading to the perception that others outside their group are inferior. From there, social comparisons were made by those in-group members to enhance the feeling of being an insider, and realize an increase in self-esteem (Fink et al., 2009). The findings of this study supported such argument that fans who became more knowledgeable about the teams saw themselves as more important and valuable.

Along with fans putting higher evaluation on fanship, a stronger willingness of showing off identity as loyal fans was described. While Sundén (2003) identified media profiles as a place where individuals are able to "type oneself into being" (p. 3), the ways that this profile is presented, however, is subject to user discretion (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As fans generated stronger team identification, they were more willing to display their team affiliations to others by leaving trails on social media to show their loyalty. It was evident that social media was used as a showcase of fanship. Most fans in this study indicated a noticeable change on their personal account, in that content posted were mostly team-oriented, which made their profile more recognizable. They commonly

described a feeling of satisfaction in a circumstance where others were able to recognize their fan identity by looking at their social media account.

From this study it appears that the perception of being a qualified fan generated positive emotions among participants, which encouraged them to put more value on fanship. From that, fans were motivated to not only increase the frequency of social media engagement, but more importantly, the depth of it, to live up to a higher self-identification.

### **Expectations**

It is important to point out that when fans took initiative on social media for what they perceived as the team's benefit, they generated higher expectations of team accessibility. Their descriptions showed that they were not only looking for teams to carry out more interactive activities, but also had a greater desire for finding in-depth content. It was evident that fans had formed clearer requests in terms of maintaining fanship through social media, manifesting a higher demand of strengthening team identification after being satisfied from the initial stage of ensuring information accessibility. Maintaining connection seemed to no longer stand out as the priority. It is understandable that fans were seeking more ways to practice fanship, matching with the idea discussed above about creating personalized fanship experiences while at the same time, adding depth to it. Another way to explain is to consider that fans' higher self-conception facilitated their request of upgraded knowledge. If they were able to obtain a deeper understanding about the teams, it would add more depth to the overall experiences of maintaining fanship. Fans' descriptions revealed that acquiring more insight about the

teams enhanced feelings of closeness and realness, and diminished estrangement that might come from insufficient knowledge. Fans' expectations of having more ways to practice fanship displayed their desire of getting closer to teams.

### **Personal Impacts**

When asked, "what does it mean to be a highly identified fan using social media to maintain fanship," participants indicated that they gained greater real life benefits after embracing social media to practice fanship, and that such influences are expected to be long-lasting.

Noting that "fans" are different from "spectators" and that the two terms cannot be used interchangeably (Hugenberg, Haridakis, & Earnhardt, 2008), studies have suggested to considering an individual as a fan based on how much he/she demonstrates passion about a team or the sports (Jones, 1997). Fans are more likely to extend feelings obtained from a certain game, and such affiliation can become so intense that "parts of every day are devoted to ...his team" (Pooley, 1978 cited in Hugenberg et al., 2008, p. 69). From there, fans' identification with a certain team is influenced by a broad set of factors such as personality, the need for belonging, and environmental elements like geographic proximity to teams (Wann, 2006). Cunningham and Kwon (2003) specifically pointed out that seeking group affiliation can be the primary motivation behind being a fan. Hugenberg et al. (2008) suggested that fans' desire to this end can be fulfilled with sports fanship enabling them to acquire an identity within a collective setting. As much as fans' team affiliation can be interwoven with the cultural environment where they were

raised, it is important to conduct fanship studies with attention to both internal and external forces. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the focus was to understand meanings of Chinese fans' fanship experience on social media within China's context. The findings revealed are fruitful, highlighting that Chinese fans living far from teams may have extended the positive impacts of team identification by using social media to strengthen this affiliation, taking advantage of the platform to offset external constraints such as geographic distances. As a result of these actions, fans can acquire long-term psychological satisfaction.

Seemingly, fans in this study live vicariously through their favourite teams and learn from teams during this process. From there, participants embarked on self-reflection. Taking the study of Kagan (1958) which suggested that an individual who self-identified to a group tends to "react to events occurring to the group as if they occurred to him" (p. 298), highly identified fans are more likely to respond to the success and failure of the team as if it was their own (Tic4, Zillmann, Kennedy, & Erickson, 1992). Following this logic, such perceptions can motivate self-examination, encouraging fans to examine whether they have lived up to the expectation of being a fan who is not only loyal, but more crucially, knowledgeable and qualified. This is understandable given scholars commonly regarded self-esteem as a key influencing factor of fanship, related to people's underlying desire of feeling self-valued (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Rosenberg, 1979) or maintaining a positive sense of themselves (Tesser, 1991). Participants' descriptions demonstrated that they tend to look at hardships from different perspectives after comparing their potential reaction to that of teams, resulting in a noticeable and favourable change of mindset. Teams were commonly referred to a source

of power from which fans can draw strength. As a result, it brought greater benefits to fans' well-being, leading to a significant improvement in social relationship.

### **Psychological Wellness**

Tellingly, by keeping and strengthening team affiliation through social media, fans may have experienced an enhancement of self-esteem, and thereafter, obtained greater psychological health. Kim and Yun (2007) used the term "self-relations" (p. 307) to describe the process of an individual evaluating and objectifying his/her own thoughts, emotions, as well as personal content posted on social media. They argued that while users' personal memories were stored electronically and chronologically by social media, one's own inner thoughts were documented along the way. This stimulated users to not only undertake self-reflection, but also express themselves in more straightforward ways that might not be used offline. The findings of this study are consistent with such arguments, as participants described how being able to live vicariously through the teams facilitated self-reflection, leading to the notion of becoming "a better self." This is consistent with the idea that highly identified fans have greater emotional commitment to their teams, which can result in higher self-esteem (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, and Sloan, 1976; Stavros et al., 2014). Simsek (2013) noted that by obtaining a sense of belonging through the interaction within a social group, individuals' self-concepts can be improved, leading to higher levels of happiness and satisfaction with life.

Interestingly, Stavros et al. (2014) suggested a degree of control can occur if fans actively engaged on social media, and they attributed this psychological change to fans' consistent identity investment, in particular through posting and sharing of positive

statements about teams. The findings of this study are in line with their idea, for fans may have created an identity within the context of fanship, different from the ones recognized in real life, such as wives and employees. In this way, they may have not only been able to achieve self-empowerment through the practice of fanship, but more significantly, undertaken self-reflection by comparing two different roles, leading to greater psychological well-being.

Similar arguments have been consistently suggested by scholars. For example, Cohen (2017) suggested that fans who are generally happier are those willing to participate in team-led activities, especially through demonstrating stronger team identification in the process. Positive effects of team identification on individuals' psychological wellness have been identified, and the major aspects are relevant in their social and personal life, such as increasing sense of belonging, greater self-esteem, happiness, and decreasing of negative feelings (Sung, 2015; Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Fans who developed a higher affiliation with teams are more likely to establish enduring social connections, and benefit from a better psychological wellness coming from it (Clopton & Finch, 2010; Reding, Grieve, Derryberry, & Paquin, 2011; Wann, Polk, & Franz, 2011; Wann, Waddill, Polk, & Weaver, 2011).

As participants deepened team identification through active social media engagement and became more active in displaying fanship, a sense of happiness was commonly expressed by participants. Interpretations made from participants' experiences were not only consistent with the argument that team identification plays a buffer role in offsetting negative emotions such as depression (Branscombe & Wann, 1991), but were also in line with prior studies mentioned above.

Despite the articulation of the positive psychological impacts of team affiliation, a deficiency occurs in understanding its application within social media contexts (Stavros et al., 2014). While BIRGing, the propensity of basking in the glory of teams' accomplishments, was commonly witnessed among fans and can be regarded as a strategy to indirectly satisfy one's self-esteem (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011), methods of doing so can be as simple as visibly displaying team affiliation to others, such as using team-related products (Oliver, 1999). Within the social media context, this study suggested that fans may have alternatively used the platform to present team identification and better benefited from the positive impacts of team identification. This is consistent to what Wann, Waddill, Brasher, and Ladd (2015) found, that fans experiencing stronger team identification tend to have more positive social wellness. Wann and Weaver (2009) suggested likewise that not only does team identification closely relate to fans' social well-being, but it also plays a significant role in predicting social integration.

### **Social Relationships**

Following previously discussed ideas, fans improved interpersonal relationships after actively engaging in social media activities. This is because social media links fans to a larger community in which socialization happens in an all-around manner, if only existing in virtual space online. Notably, Gantz (2013) regarded social media as effective in supplementing relationships while Boyd and Ellison, (2007) highlighted the uniqueness of social media in making users' social networks visible. It is arguable that while fans managed to make new friends with whom they share similar interests and affiliation to teams, they also maintained connections to old friends after exploring rich

topics of conversation on social media, particularly those related to teams. Sport was widely seen as an universal topic for starting a conversation. As such, it was during the process of “sharing experience and knowledge with others who have similar interests” (p.525) that fans maintained relationships and socialized with others (Hur et al., 2007). This idea is in line with Hirt and Clarkson’s (2011) study where the term “companionship” was used to interpret fans’ preference for attending sport events in the company of others. This preference can be attributed to fans enjoying the opportunity to socialize, particularly with those who share similar team affiliation (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000). Being unable to do so, however, can arguably diminish fans’ experience of both practicing fanship and socializing with others. While fans of this study commonly talked about two barriers, rarely having friends that are fans of the same team and being unable to attend games, it can be suggested that using social media helped to improve fans’ overall experience of practicing fanship.

The platform affords not only an extensive network to socialize with, but also constant accessibility to teams. Similarly, Haythornthwaite (2005) highlighted the role of Twitter in affording an opportunity to forge new relationships and enhancing multi-directional conversations that was otherwise hard to obtain between individuals. This can largely be attributed to social media going beyond users’ typical social networks through its “immediacy and interactivity” (Smith & Smith, 2012, p550). Along with the rapid development and application of social media, it is arguable that individuals’ social relationships will be improved by engaging constantly on social media. Social media linked fans to a larger community, enabling interactions with other like-minded individuals. Fans displayed team identification to a wider audience and strengthened in-

group distinctiveness, thus leading to the enhancement of affiliation to teams. Hirt and Clarkson (2011) suggested likewise, in that fans, being afforded with accessibility to broad networks of others to share similar affiliation, will further develop a sense of pride, which can be attributed to people's desire of identifying differences between themselves and others, or in other words, a sense of distinctiveness (Brewer, 2003).

It is less likely that they will have such an experience if not using social media. Most noticeable was that fans described a sense of disappointment with not being able to find friends sharing a similar commitment to the same team. In this situation, they may have used social media to offset this deficiency within their own friendship network, by entering a virtual community of like-minded fans to fulfill social needs. This improved the ability to socialize with others, enabling fans to build interpersonal relationships in real life. This was evident when fans talked about having more topics with which to start a conversation and being able to break the ice with strangers. Many studies suggested likewise, commonly arguing that content taking on a conversational tone would give users an illusion that they were being listened to and cared about, thereby leading to the enhancement of para-social interaction (Labrecque, 2014; Stever & Lawson, 2013).

With social media, fans can join highly affiliated social groups where members are highly emotionally invested. This in-group affiliation can improve both social and emotional health (Compton, 2005; Correll & Park, 2005; Tajfel, 1982). This study suggests that fans used social media to reinforce in-group feeling by constantly practicing fanship. As a result, they may have realized the enhancement of personal self-esteem, team identification, and more profoundly, socio-psychological wellness (Sung, 2015).

## **Conclusions**

This study reveals some of the complexity and uniqueness existing among highly identified sports fans living in China. Although attempts at practicing fanship may vary, common experiences are shared. The findings suggest that active social media engagement allows the continuation of practicing fanship without interruption, so fans were encouraged to take initiative to personalize their experiences, which minimized the adverse effects of losing momentum or feeling isolated from the team. As such, it leads to closer emotional connections and stronger team identification.

During this process Chinese sports fans reinforced information accessibility, generated stronger self-recognition as loyal fans, and devoted efforts to contribute to teams' development in China. With social media being the major channel for mutual communication, Chinese sports fans' growing interests of interacting with teams and expectations bring opportunities. However, the potential of China's social media in bonding fans with teams and strengthening fans' loyalty has not been fully released.

## **Recommendations**

As the "heart and soul" (Hopwood et al., 2010, p.139) of sport, fans are of great importance to teams. While findings of this study suggested an intention of fans to enhance connection with teams through social media, it is recommended that teams interested at China's sport market should invest more time in interacting with Chinese sport fans. Notably, highly identified fans are more likely to generate emotional responses (Meng et al., 2015). In this, teams should embrace social media with

differentiated tactics to deepen fans' emotional commitment while ensuring the connection between the two sides is long-lasting and active. In this way, it would be easier for teams to yield financial outcomes by having fans actively response to teams' marketing strategies. Since close interaction can enhance fans' loyalty to teams (Grant, Heere, and Dickson, 2011), teams and leagues should therefore cater to Chinese sports fans' requests, making more direct communication through increasing and diversifying teams' accessibility. By adding more unique personal appeals to their fanship experience, it might potentially bring greater financial outcomes to teams (Foster & Hyatt, 2007) and heighten their impact in foreign markets (Kerr & Emery, 2011). This could be beneficial to teams considering an increase of social media usage and the potential for sports teams to connect with individuals not normally reached through traditional marketing channels (Pronschinske et al., 2012).

Given the exploratory nature of this phenomenological study, the researcher obtained better understanding about meanings of Chinese fans' fanship experience by interpreting those meaningful experience that embedded in their common life (van Manen, 1990). However, teams, particularly those coming from North America, should put more effort into fulfilling fans' interests and desires, thus maximizing the potential of highly identified sports fans to achieve satisfactory outcomes.

### **Contributions, Limitations and Future Directions**

Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015) called for new insights to expand social media studies outside the North American sporting arena; many scholars are in line with them,

noting an increasing demand of investigating distant fans, so as to better understand the target population within different cultural orientations (Foster & Hyatt, 2008; Li et al., 2017). Nevertheless, with Asian sports markets, particularly that of China becoming more appealing to professional leagues, fresh knowledge on Chinese sports fans is needed to pave ways for their attempts of entering China's sport market.

Few studies take fans' experience with social media as the focal point, so this study fills the gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of Chinese sports fans using social media to maintain fanship. Practically, this study contributes to an on-going dialogue about the importance of adopting social media into teams' efforts of building the fanbase in a market outside the North America, both for researchers and managers within the sport industry. Against the backdrop of social media gaining momentum across different industries, this study made the unique contribution of investigating Chinese sports fans' distinctive social media experience. Knowledge gained in this aspect can be applied to create more business opportunities, maximize the brand value of teams and leagues alike, and promote the globalization of sport culture.

While the long-term implications of social media require further examination, it is hopeful that this work will help offer resources for future investigations, in particular those surrounding fans' social media engagement within China's sport context.

However, this study is not without limitations. One limitation is that this research focused on young adults who are highly identified sports fans. Given that social media is gaining more momentum among other age groups, such as teenagers and the old, how fans coming from these age segmentation experience fanship online is waiting to be

explored. Future studies are warranted to understand how the fanship experience and attachment to teams differs for different age groups.

This study primarily focused on the exploration of highly identified sports fans' experience, with no specific attention devoted to the correlation between gender difference and fanship experience. Given an increasing number of women projected interest in sport and are being identified as fans, how their fanship experience differs from that of male fans is worth studying. This is a line of inquiry that future scholars should continue to examine, offering better understanding about Chinese consumers, especially considering the ever-important role of Chinese women in driving consumption.

Finally, as sport leagues, teams, and companies increasingly go global, future studies are suggested to further examine fans coming from other Asian countries so that greater scholarship on sports fans can be obtained without missing the large segments of the global population.

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## Appendix I

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### *Introduction*

#### 1. Tell me about yourself

*Probes: Where are you coming from? Are you a student or full-time employee? What is your marital status?*

#### *Understanding participants' fan stories*

#### 2. Tell me about yourself as a fan of a team(s)

*Probes:*

2.1 Which team(s) is(are) your favourite?

2.2 When and how did you start to see yourself as a sport fan of your favourite team(s)?

2.3 How do you define yourself as a fan of the team?

2.4 What activities do you usually do to keep or display your identity as a fan of your favourite team(s)?

*(Now that we talked a little bit about your experience as a sport fan for some background information, I'd like to go further and ask you questions related to your experience with fanship experience on social media.....)*

#### *Understanding participants' experience in social media within sport context*

#### 3. Tell me about your experience with Weibo as a fan of your favourite team(s)

*Probes:*

- 3.1 When and how did you first encounter with Weibo?
  - 3.2 Would you please describe for me how you combine Weibo with your life of being a fan of your favourite team(s)?
  - 3.3 What, on that platform, has been attracting to you? Why?
4. Describe to me how your experience on Weibo impact your identification with your favourite team(s)

*Probes:*

- 4.1 Would you describe to me in what ways has your connection to the team has influenced your activities on Weibo? How did you feel?
  - 4.2 In what ways has your experience with sport-related social media has influenced your team identification?
    - 4.2.1 Has it influenced your decision of keeping follow or support the team?
    - 4.2.2 Has it influenced the ways you used to identify yourself, as a fan of your favourite team(s)?
  - 4.3 What does it mean to you, as a sport fan, to use social media to keep connecting to your favourite team(s)?
5. Do you think your identification to a team(s) was reflected on your experience on social media?
6. Do you have something else to add on? Or stories want to share? Did I miss anything that might be important to help you recall experiences of using social media?

## **Curriculum Vitae**

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