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HONORS THESIS

The Future of Professional Sports' Audiences: How Organizational Cultures and Social Media Usage Impact MLB's Ability to Appeal to Younger More Diverse Fanbases

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ABSTRACT

Professional sports organizations are continually attempting to broaden their fanbases and appeal to different groups. Major League Baseball (MLB) has particularly struggled to attract younger more diverse fans. Current literature has focused on the ability of social media and front office representation to cultivate social identification and organizational commitment to broaden existing fanbases across all American professional sports. The purpose of this study is to identify how MLB clubs are adapting to combat a diminishing fanbase and how to effectively diversify their reach. Qualitative research was conducted through twenty interviews of MLB and Minor League Baseball (MiLB) front office employees. Content analysis software, NVivo, was used to categorize interview data identifying three central themes salient to all organizations interviewed: organizational culture, social media usage, and DEI initiatives. Results indicate that diverse representation in the front office, theme nights, youth baseball & softball programs, community partnerships, informative social content, viral content and trends, and showcasing team highlights are the key protocols used in MLB and MiLB clubs to build a younger more diverse fanbase. This research contributes to the field of sports management by providing a comprehensive understanding of what strategies regarding social media and DEI effectively garner a wider scope of fans in MLB and MiLB. This enhances the knowledge surrounding the progression of professional sports fans and the future of MLB.

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INTRODUCTION

Major League Baseball is one of the 'Big 4' American professional sports leagues. They have a major footprint in professional sports and therefore in American popular culture overall. With the immense popularity of baseball globally and many internationally native players becoming stars within the league, i.e., Shohei Ohtani, Ronald Acuna Jr., Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Juan Soto, Yordan Alvarez, Francisco Lindor, Yu Darvish, etc., professional baseball is situated in a position to cultivate an extremely vast reach in regard to their fanbase. However, they are struggling to do so. Professional baseball has been on a steady decline with respect to Americans' viewership preferences (Broughton & Lombardo, 2017). MLB clubs must look to innovate and find new ways to connect with younger more diverse fanbases. There are parts of the game that tend to deter sports fans that will simply never change. Baseball is known to be a long game with many pauses in action when compared to its competitors, the NFL, NBA, and NHL. Yet, there are many ways MLB can look to further engage fans that do not involve altering the pace of play. Social media and the use of mobile content are major components where creativity and innovation may lead to an expansion in the scope of the MLB fanbase. When specifically looking at the younger generations and diversifying the fanbase, representation is going to be key on and off the field. Having different demographics in the front office pushes forward new ideas and unique experiences that influence perceptions and decisions within the organizations (Baer, et al., 2021; Beattie & Lower-Hoppe, 2022; Swanson & Kent, 2015). To accomplish these diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in their front offices and amongst their fans, MLB clubs must tap into one of their most vital resources: brand and team identity. Fans identify with teams, and this is what facilitates a strong consistent base. Research has collectively shown that garnering strong fan identity and meeting their needs can come from a variety of sources, such as fan-player relationships, creating fandom in the front office, and strategic use of digital platforms (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Swanson & Kent, 2016; Kang, 2015).

This research facilitates further understanding of the techniques and approaches organizations are taking to cultivate younger more diverse fanbases. Sports organizations look to develop loyalty and identification, yet they must alter their practices to appeal to audiences they have

been unable to reach. MLB specifically has difficulty appealing to these audiences and has made it a top priority to find ways to widen their scope. Enhancing social media usage to develop more personal connections with the organizations can have a major impact on the age discrepancy currently represented within MLB's fanbase. The implementation of DEI initiatives can also substantially impact the innovation level within MLB clubs. Embracing new perspectives may be the key to facilitating identification amongst demographics that are outside of baseball's average fan. Currently, there is a thorough understanding of fans' needs and how they orient themselves with sports organizations. However, there is little known about specifically how MLB organizations are actively shifting their management perspectives and marketing strategy to adapt and preserve the longevity of their competitive positioning within professional sports. This study seeks to identify how MLB clubs are adapting to combat a diminishing fanbase and how to effectively diversify their reach. This research contributes to the field of sports management by providing a more comprehensive understanding of what strategies regarding social media and DEI, and any other practices that may be revealed after conducting this research, effectively garner a wider scope of fans. This enhances the knowledge surrounding the progression of professional sports fans and the future of MLB.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fan and Front Office Identification and Loyalty

The professional sports industry is built upon fan engagement and attachment to the various sports organizations, including the focus of this study, Major League Baseball (MLB). In order to create social identity and loyalty, they develop fan communities (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015). Fan communities are a form of psychological attachment points that draw upon consumers' tendency to become attached to other consumers of the same brand (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015). When sports organizations can develop strong connections to a fan community, they are able to create social identity (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015; Trepte & Loy, 2017). Social identity demonstrates how people's group identifications contribute to their self-concept. This is a crucial component to sports organizations' fan loyalty as it allows the organization to build their team into the fans' self-concepts. Fans need to be connected to the organization, but an even more significant factor is fans need to and want to be connected to other fans. This concept is identified in literature as fandom which builds upon the concept of fanship. Fanship is an individual's sense of connection to a sports team, whereas fandom is an individual's connection to other fans of the team (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). This necessity for connection can be explained through social identity theory which encompasses how people categorize themselves, make social comparisons, and draw positive distinctions about their groups (Trepte & Loy, 2017). People look to identify positive characteristics of their own in groups and look to assign negative characteristics to the "out" group. Social categorization builds upon social identity theory to explain this phenomenon. Social categorization explains that people are not only defined by their individuality, but also by what categories they belong to, i.e., age, race, economic, etc. (Trepte & Loy, 2017). People group themselves and others to simplify the complex nature of society. People look to draw positive conclusions about the groups they choose to identify with to raise their self-esteem (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Within professional sports, fan communities seek to compare themselves with other fan communities to demonstrate the superiority of their group and their team. Fan communities have been found to be an attachment point that predicts attendance frequency. Attending their teams' events gives fans the opportunity to socialize with others within the community and satisfies the desire to be

with other fans (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015). This social interaction amongst fans adds an additional dimension of loyalty to the sports organization. This further supports the belief that sport spectatorship is "a communal activity and fans' decision to attend a future game might rely heavily on their collective feelings of enjoyment, friendship, and excitement in a fan community," (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015, p.328).

Additionally, it was found that front office employees also participate in this fan socialization (Swanson & Kent, 2015). When employees identify with the team, they perform one of the essential functions of fandom: having a strong desire for their team to be successful. There is strong support for the hypothesis that team identification is a distinct construct from organizational identification (Swanson & Kent, 2015). Fandom creates a psychological connection to the sports organization, which is also a crucial component of organizational commitment. Employees' psychological connections to the team also have an impact on their workplace attitude. Sports organizations should consider how employees identify with the organization and team because they both influence satisfaction, motivation, commitment, and cognitive involvement (Swanson & Kent, 2015). Team identification has the largest effect on affective commitment, which is an employee's emotional attachment to an organization derived from their personal values aligning with the organization's mission and values. Sports organizations will get the best out of their people if they resonate with their values and commit to the organizational vision. To maintain competitive advantages within the sports industry, organizations must be innovative in their approaches to management, marketing, and creating a successful team. To innovate they must create meaningful work and personal responsibility amongst their employees (Baer, et al., 2021). This makes employees feel valuable and gives them a sense of purpose which further enhances identification with the organization (Baer, et al., 2021; Swanson & Kent, 2015). Employees that identify with and feel valued by the organization are more likely to innovate, which enhances problem-solving and the discovery of new opportunities, because they are committed to the organization's success and future. Sports organizations that give employees the freedom to be creative, trust their employees' expertise, and encourage employees to never be satisfied with the organization's operations create innovative environments and affective commitment (Baer, et

al., 2021; Swanson & Kent, 2015). "Innovation is key to the success of organizations, as it is pivotal in facilitating sport organizational growth," (Baer, et al., 2021, p.S33). Therefore, if front office employees are loyal and committed to the organization's success, they will pursue innovative solutions to widen the scope of the fanbase. Fan loyalty is a vital component of a professional sports organizations' success. If front office employees are just as loyal and committed to their success, organizations will progress with future trends with continuous success.

<u>Digital Platforms and Social Media</u>
Social media can be used to maintain professional sports organizations' footprint on popular culture and grow the interest of younger fans. Social media can give insight into an organization's values and vision. Fans enjoy being able to get to know the team better and further connecting with the team. Mobile content is strongly correlated with fan support (Kang, 2015). Social media allows for a participatory experience with professional sports teams which enhances team identification and word-of-mouth intention (Kang, 2015). Social media keeps fans informed, close to the team, and increases the organization's relevance. High levels of interaction with the organization leads to stronger attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Kang, 2015). Younger professional sports fans have a need for mobile content for information, services, and interaction (Kang, 2015). Fans have an increased level of commitment and favorable beliefs towards their teams when the organization provides mobile content for information purposes (Kang, 2015). For example, in a study of professional football fans' social media usage, it was found that fans use social media to interact with players and obtain information about the team which leads fans to become involved with their team (Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014). To build loyalty amongst the younger demographic, organizations must provide content that fulfills the younger fans' needs. Currently, professional sports organizations are using social media to connect to their fans and create relationships. Relationship marketing looks to appeal to current customers and build a collaborative relationship with the consumer (Grönroos, 2004, 2011). Traditional marketing is focused on attaining sales and typically ends once the sale is made. Relationship marketing diverges from traditional marketing tactics through its focus on positive consumer experiences

to create a long-term relationship with the consumer. Organizations are currently using relationship marketing through social media to develop fans' knowledge and familiarity of specific players and organizational customs and values. The player-fan relationship is central to this appeal, and interactions with the players on social media platforms can cultivate this relationship (Wang & Zhou, 2015). Player-fan interactions are key in fans' personal relationships with the organization. Fans must feel both connected to each other and the team at large (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015). Developing personal relationships and community relationships through mobile content leads to high fan interaction (Wang & Zhou, 2015). Interaction is the primary objective of organizations' social media usage (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019). In a study of the four major American professional sports leagues' social media usage in their relationship marketing tactics, it was found that their relationship marketing through social media humanizes the brand, allows for further knowledge of the fanbase, and creates a forum for ongoing dialogue amongst fans and the organization (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019). These relationship enhancements that social media provides allow the organizations to better serve their fans by meeting a variety of their needs and gaining feedback. To create strong fanship within the younger demographics, professional sports organizations must communicate with them through their preferred channels, i.e., digital platforms, word of mouth, and interactive experiences, and fulfill their specific needs.

Millennial sports fans have distinct characteristics regarding their sports consumption that differentiates them from previous generations. Millennials' distinguishing sports consumption behaviors call for the progression of marketing tactics to garner their fanship. Millennials are very powerful fans. They are emotional consumers which can lead to avid support when they resonate with an organization. Millennials demonstrate their heightened levels of emotions through more extreme responses (Baker, et al., 2020). Millennials are community driven, with socialization and staying connected being major values in their lives (Sago, 2010). Their consumption decisions are also often guided by the opinions of other consumers which demonstrates an additional distinguishing characteristic of peer perceptions (Baker, et al., 2020). Due to their high value of socialization, millennials are also very concerned with how

others will perceive their decisions. They are highly influenced by those around them. Fan communities can directly tap into this need for socialization and connectivity and fit very well into millennial consumption behaviors (Baker, et al., 2020; Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015). Millennials participate in considerably more online and social media activities as well as fantasy leagues, which are direct connections to the players and organizations (Baker, et al., 2020). Shifting the focus to Major League Baseball (MLB) specifically, the average MLB fan is 57 (Broughton & Lombardo, 2017), which shows that young people need to be pulled in. Using methods that target young people and coincide with their generation's inherent attributes could grow this demographic within professional sports. Millennials are vital to the longevity of the professional sports industry's strength and future relevance. There has been minimal research conducted surrounding professional baseball's social media strategy. Social identification and organizational commitment have been proven to be central components of a strong loyal fanbase and sports organization. While there have been studies focused on the social media strategies of sports organizations, there is a lack of research discussing MLB's strategy specifically. This study seeks to uncover how MLB clubs use social media to cultivate social identification and enhance organizational commitment, leading to the first research question of the study.

RQ1: How does MLB and its affiliated clubs use social media to cultivate social identification and organizational commitment from both the fans and front office employees?

Diversifying the Fanbase
Baseball games are long with many pauses in action making it difficult to appeal to younger audiences who have shorter attention spans. Utilizing the entertainment aspect of sports in forms of player expression and emotion, instead of penalizing said behavior, could cultivate younger more diverse fanbases. The Philadelphia Phillies' Bryce Harper is a prime example of players that are supporting this cultural shift and have faced backlash for it. Harper is one of the most talented players in MLB currently, and he also happens to be very expressive with his bat flips and celebrations after his monstrous homeruns (Keown, 2016). Critiques say that Harper is cocky and arrogant, yet fans absolutely love him. His entertaining play combined

with his success draws attention to him and MLB. Harper states in an interview with ESPN, "It's a tired sport, because you can't express yourself. You can't do what people in other sports do. I'm not saying baseball is, you know, boring or anything like that, but it's the excitement of the young guys who are coming into the game now who have flair. If that's Matt Harvey or Jacob deGrom or Manny Machado or Joc Pederson or Andrew McCutchen or Yasiel Puig -- there's so many guys in the game now who are so much fun," (Keown, 2016). Harper is leading the charge to shift the culture within MLB to allow players to give fans further incentive to attend games. Expression creates more entertainment and excitement which can widen the base for possible consumers. Players' emotional expressions, i.e., players' celebrations, trash talking, physical altercations, and coaches' behavior, have been historically penalized (Simons, 2003). While these behaviors do not cause any competitive advantage, they do actually add an additional element of entertainment, which keeps fans engaged during pauses in the action of the game. Unfortunately, such behaviors are punished very harshly with fines and suspensions. With the penalization of these expressive behaviors, MLB has clearly communicated its stance on these behaviors that tend to be aligned with certain cultures. The stigmatization of the behaviors has racially prejudice innuendos. There is a major racially motivated double standard of penalized behavior within sports (Simons, 2003). The ideal of sportsmanship was initiated to allow the upper classes to control the lower classes and "civilize" participation, especially in amateur or collegiate athletics (Simons, 2003). Within professional sports, these expressive behaviors are primarily exhibited by African Americans and are an expression of African American male urban culture (Simons, 2003). African American male urban culture seeks to reflect expressiveness, performance orientation, and individuality (Simons, 2003). "White mainstream males interpret these behaviors based on their own culturally based expectations, as challenges to white definitions of sportsmanship. Hence, they often misinterpret these behaviors," (Simons, 2003, p.11). Non-white athletes have been forced to assimilate into the culture of American professional sports which is an industry that has been built on white cultural norms. The expressiveness and performance that African Americans implement into their athletic play is intended to engage their teammates and spectators (Simons, 2003). When African Americans do not assimilate and instead embrace their own cultural norms, it is heavily criticized by the white

mainstream (Simons, 2003). Simons' study specifically addresses African American culture, yet heightened player expression can also be seen within Hispanic/Latino culture. In 2023, MLB players were 6.2% Black, which is the lowest since 1955 when 89.9% of the league was White, 30.2% Hispanic/Latino, 3.2% Asian, and 59.6% White (Castrovince, 2023). The percentages indicate that Black players are being displaced by increased participation from Hispanic/Latino and White players. While African American representation, and therefore expression, is on the decline, Hispanic/Latino players are bringing in their own lively and expressive behaviors which is influencing all MLB players to display more emotion on the field.

Organizations embracing players' emotional expression could open up their base and appeal to younger more diverse audiences. It would keep fans engaged and allows fans to identify with the culture and expression of the players. African American athletes face continuous backlash and lack of acceptance surrounding their activism efforts within the professional sports community. The major themes demonstrated by professional sports' fans throughout social media when African American athletes speak out are renouncing fandom, punishment commentary, racial commentary, general criticism, and attacking other group members (Frederick, Sanderson, & Stocz, 2016). This shows the stark contrast between African American athletes' perceptions and the public perception that racism and social ills are evaporating (Frederick, Sanderson, & Stocz, 2016). Some of the public reactions communicate that they believe activism is futile and further exacerbating racial divide. These diverging points of views display the need for inclusion to better represent the interests of all athletes and fans to create more cohesive organizations and fandoms.

The Dallas Mavericks uprooted their entire organizational culture to embody diversity and inclusion principles. A sexual harassment scandal forced them to innovate and develop zero tolerance policies (Beattie & Lower-Hoppe, 2022). They developed an ethics and compliance office to keep employees accountable and formalize diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. It clearly showed employees what is and what is not to be tolerated (Beattie & Lower-Hoppe, 2022). This sent a message to the entire organization that this was an area of issues not to be

taken lightly and that the organization was taking serious steps to create a cultural shift. They prioritized retaining female employees and having women represented in formal leadership and strategic decision-making roles (Beattie & Lower-Hoppe, 2022). They created resource groups for women, people of color, LGBTQ, etc. to support employees and signal that the Mavericks were proactively pursuing diversity and equity (Beattie & Lower-Hoppe, 2022). They introduced a new set of values, character, respect, authenticity, fairness, teamwork, and safety, to reorient the workplace culture (Beattie & Lower-Hoppe, 2022). They adjusted compensation and met with employees individually regularly to demonstrate the value they held in each person. The Mavericks completely dismantled their toxic work environment through the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Diversity and inclusion offer organizations a competitive advantage. Diversity leads to trust and inclusion in the workplace which triggers collaboration and innovation (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Diversity, equity, and inclusion can also be used in employee retention and inclusion to differentiate itself from the other sports organizations (Beattie & Lower-Hoppe, 2022). Their study demonstrates the successful outcomes of DEI initiatives and how they can cultivate affective commitment within a sports organization. However, their study underscores a lack of understanding of the full impact of DEI initiatives in sports organizations specifically. This study seeks to fill that gap by gathering an understanding of how MLB clubs are using DEI on the field and in their front offices and how it may correlate to the attraction of a broader fanbase. This leads to the second research question.

RQ2: Do DEI initiatives in the front office and on the field impact MLB organizations' ability attract a broader fanbase?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Twenty interviews were conducted with MLB and MiLB front office employees (fourteen women and six men, aged between 25 and 60 years old). Table 1 lists all the interviewees, their positions, and their team's league and division. Nine interviewees were MLB employees while the other eleven were MiLB employees. The interviewees were racially diverse and

with many communities being represented which included perspectives from Black, Latino/Hispanic, and White front office employees. Those interviewed ranged in managerial level, including one assistant, seven managers, seven directors, two vice presidents, two general managers, and one executive. The nonprobability technique of snowball sampling was used to identify the interviewees through professional networks.

<u>Procedure</u>
All participants were interviewed either on the phone or in person with the full conversation digitally recorded for the researchers to review for analysis. For each interview, the researcher obtained permission to audio-record the responses for future transcription, using an iPhone for two interviews and Zoom for the remaining eighteen. This allowed the researcher to provide complete attention to each interview. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, using broad-based questions derived from the literature review focusing on organizational culture, social media, and DEI. This ensured that the same research areas were explored in each interview (see Table 2 for a list of interview questions), but also allowed for exploration and freedom of response. Qualitative data collection was selected to engage in exploratory research with this management-centered topic. Management is highly people-focused and involves many different levels of extensive communication. Using a qualitative research format to encourage conversation around future initiatives, possible shifts in strategy, and organizational culture was considered the best approach for fully exploring the "how" and "why" responses that emerged during each interview. This led to a thorough understanding from those interviewed of MLB/MiLB organizations' reasoning behind their decisions and direction regarding their marketing and management techniques. The interviews were scheduled for between 30 and 60 minutes, which allowed the participants to offer deep contextual details about their experiences, current organizational practices, and methods for cultivating their fanbase. Interviewees ranged in job level and represented many different geographical regions of the United States to create a well-rounded understanding of MLB organizational culture and their initiatives regarding young and diverse demographics, so it can be generalized across the league.

Table 1

Interviewee List

Interviewee	Position and Team
MLB 1	Manager, Marketing & Promotions, National League, West Division
MLB 2	Manager, Education & Player Development, National League, East Division
MLB 3	Vice President, Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion, National League, West Division
MLB 4	Manager, Foundation, National League, East Division
MLB 5	Vice President, Marketing, National League, East Division
MLB 6	Assistant, Social Media & Digital Marketing, American League, East Division
MLB 7	Senior Director, Government & Community Affairs, National League, West Division
MLB 8	Director, Community Affairs, National League, East Division
MLB 9	Executive, Baseball Operations, American League, East Division
MiLB 1	Director, Marketing, Double-A, Southern League
MiLB 2	Manager, Marketing & Communications, High-A, South Atlantic League
MiLB 3	Director, Marketing, Single-A, Carolina League
MiLB 4	Manager, Season Ticket Member Experience, Triple-A, International League
MiLB 5	Director, Community Relations, Triple-A, International League
MiLB 6	Manager, Marketing & Promotions, Double-A, Eastern League
MiLB 7	Manager, Multimedia, Single-A, Carolina League
MiLB 8	Assistant General Manager, Single-A, Carolina League
MiLB 9	General Manager, High-A, Midwest League
MiLB 10	Assistant Director, Marketing & Promotions, High-A, Midwest League
MiLB 11	Senior Director, Business Development, Double-A, Texas League

Table 2

Interview Questions

Organizational Culture
1. What are some of the key values within the organization?
2. How would you describe the organization's management style?
3. How does the organization define "success?" How is this evident in the front office of the organization?
4. Primarily, how do you make decisions within the organization?
5. How dedicated is the organization to diversity and inclusiveness?

Discussing Social Media Usage and Goals
1. Who are your target demographics?
    a. How do you tailor your social media presence depending on the group?
2. What SM platforms do you use within your organization and how is your strategy different depending on the platform?
3. What outcomes are you seeking from your social media presence?
4. In what ways do you see your SM strategy influencing the organization's front office employees and the organizational culture? And is it intentional?

DEI and Fanbase
1. How is the organization impacted by diversity or lack thereof?
2. Could you describe the organization's DEI initiatives?
3. Do you see a correlation between diversity in the organization and diversity in the fanbase?
   a. How does diversity in the front office affect your ability to appeal to diverse audiences?
   b. How does the organization attempt to diversify their fanbase? Could you provide some examples and/or specific strategies?
4. What would like to see in the MLB's future regarding DEI initiatives?

Preparing for Data Analysis

Transcription of the interviews from the audio files was conducted using NVivo transcription software. NVivo is a qualitative analysis software that abets content analysis of large amounts of qualitative data collected by uncovering themes or codes in the data, discovery subthemes, and identifying specific quotes within the transcripts that support the themes and subthemes. Using content analysis software reduces human bias when preparing the data for analysis. The audio files were imported into the transcription software, and then imported into NVivo. The researchers assessed each transcription provided by NVivo Transcription for accuracy with respect to fully representing the correct word choices identified from the audio-file. If the interviewee spoke rapidly or coupled words together, it compromised clarity and resulted in a few nonsensical statements which had to be corrected before further analysis could be conducted.

Preforming Open Coding

It is suggested that coding of the data commence with an initial coding scheme developed based on the review of the literature (Branch, Ramsey & Barker, 2007). The three themes emerging from the literature included Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Fanbase, Organizational Culture and Social Media Usage. While the initial coding scheme assisted in focusing the analysis of the raw data, it did not limit further codes and themes. NVivo (v.14) was used to deep dive and collate different subthemes, organized into nodes within each code or theme. The deep dive method is used to analyze already coded work more intensely.

Open coding using the deep dive method was then followed by consolidating various codes the researcher and advisor recognized. The names of the codes were identified, a brief definition of each code was developed and the number of instances each code was present in the analysis performed was determined (these counts can be found through looking at the nodes pane in NVivo which lists the number of times a node has been coded number of interviews that contain that node).
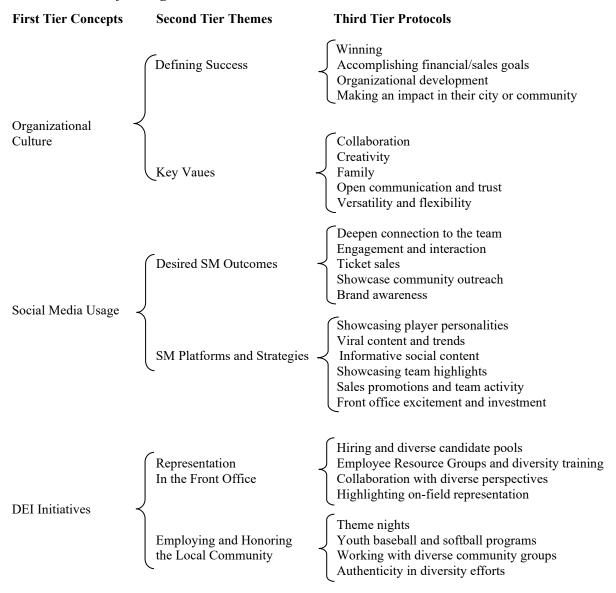
The goal of open coding is to determine the key or core themes. This is accomplished through the merging of two closely related themes into a single code, and the removal of infrequent or non-salient concepts that have been discussed in only a few interviews. It has been suggested that consensus of key codes should center around no more than seven core themes, with four to six being ideal (Allsop et al., 2022).

RESULTS

Further analysis of the interview content using NVivo and the first order themes from the literature resulted in the emergence of second and third tiered themes. The second tier themes are as follows: *Defining Success*, *Key Values*, *Desired SM (Social Media) Outcomes*, *SM Platforms and Strategies*, *Representation in the Front Office*, and *Employing and Honoring the Local Community*. These themes represent the most frequently discussed topics within the interviews and encompass the elements of successful fan diversification. The second tier themes display the areas of focus of MLB and MiLB clubs as they look to appeal to new groups and expand the reach of their organization. The third tier protocols were open coded by the researchers and represent the tactics employed by MLB and MiLB organizations to create effective and authentic appeals to younger fanbases and diverse communities. The three tiers of themes are showcased in Table 3 below.

Table 3

MLB's Pursuit of Younger More Diverse Fanbases

First Tier Concepts	Second Tier Themes	Third Tier Protocols
Organizational Culture	Defining Success	Winning Accomplishing financial/sales goals Organizational development Making an impact in their city or community
	Key Vaues	Collaboration Creativity Family Open communication and trust Versatility and flexibility
Social Media Usage	Desired SM Outcomes	Deepen connection to the team Engagement and interaction Ticket sales Showcase community outreach Brand awareness
	SM Platforms and Strategies	Showcasing player personalities Viral content and trends Informative social content Showcasing team highlights Sales promotions and team activity Front office excitement and investment
DEI Initiatives	Representation In the Front Office	Hiring and diverse candidate pools Employee Resource Groups and diversity training Collaboration with diverse perspectives Highlighting on-field representation
	Employing and Honoring the Local Community	Theme nights Youth baseball and softball programs Working with diverse community groups Authenticity in diversity efforts

Organizational Culture

Defining Success

To understand how the organizations' cultures and functionality impact diversification efforts, the interviewees explained how their organizations define success. Four central protocols emerged: *winning*, *accomplishing financial/sales goals*, *organizational development*, and *making an impact in their city or community*. MLB organizations are sternly focused on *winning* and playing deep into the postseason. This is a central goal for all MLB teams and is

crucial in retaining and growing fanship. (See Table 1 which lists all interviewees, their positions, and their team's league and division referenced throughout the following quotes).

> "I think that anything that's contributing to our team winning more games we're also increasing attendance…that's how I see my job, that like if we have a better team on the field, more people are going to watch" (MLB 2).

> "You know you all want the same thing at the end of the day. You all want to play deep into October and then hoist a trophy at the end of that time. Everybody wants the same thing…I think a lot of it is defined on, you know, your record at the end of the season. No one's going to say they want to finish in last place, and so that really defines success for mostly everybody" (MLB 9).

Alternatively, since MiLB clubs are structured to develop and then give away their best players to their MLB affiliates, winning is not their focus. MiLB clubs do not have control over what players will be on their rosters each day as the MLB teams they are affiliated with are constantly making changes to maximize the development of their players in their pipeline. Therefore, MiLB organizations cannot rely on winning to draw fans into their ballpark. They instead focus on entertainment and fan experience.

> "We do not focus on the baseball, which is obviously extremely different from Major League Baseball. We focus on the fan experience that it's fun for all ages, all races, all demographics. It's fun for everyone, no matter what's going on on the field" (MiLB 3).

Both MLB and MiLB are also highly focused on *accomplishing financial/sales goals*. Interviewees explained that these goals serve as the foundation for successful ballclubs.

> "This past season, we had a goal of 30% increase in ticket and park attendance, which is unheard of. And I mean, huge kudos to our ticketing team because they just like

took that goal and said, all right, let's run with it… But that and then our sponsorship team had a crazy increase in sponsorship in revenue. So, one of the biggest years that we've had, but it's still like not good enough, like we want even more. and so obviously the goal is always to continue to grow" (MiLB 2).

Profitability and being able to grow budgets for new activations expand clubs' reach and allow them to further develop their brand. *Organizational development* is instrumental to the longevity of these organizations as fanbases, and sports audiences continue to evolve. Organizations are always looking to improve upon weaknesses and progress their front office employees.

"Just because we're doing things great and everything's awesome does not mean that there is no room for improvement. So, continually trying to do that. I think more on a personal level, seeing our folks continue to grow within their roles. And then, if there is no more growth to be out here, moving on to the next challenge and advancing their career in some way. I think that's also a great barometer of success…Are we challenging ourselves to be better or are we challenging ourselves to find new ways to do things or new innovations?...Are we putting people in positions to continue to grow?" (MiLB 8).

Organizational development allows these clubs to pivot and make changes to accommodate new fan needs or important initiatives that will progress the organization into the future. MLB and MiLB organizations' *impact in their city or community* defines the success of their club. Support from the city you reside in is central to these clubs as the people that make up these communities and cities are their primary fan demographic.

"This ballpark is a representation of the overall city of [city name], and we really keep that top of mind. That's important. I work specifically with our season ticket members…So it's a lot of commitment of their time. We value them being baseball fans and being able to bring the community in. We have tons of corporate partners

from local banks, local hospitals…So, it's very important to create that connection, that community and be purposeful and create genuine relationships" (MiLB 4).

"For us it really is just seeing how many people we are impacting…And then just growing in terms of like partners wanting to continue doing programs and making more programs" (MLB 4).

"We've also put a really high value on how we engage our community and our fans and that a lot of what we do and what you see reflected in our pregame and in game is a lot about both the [team name] as a baseball powerhouse, but also the [team name] as [team's city], right. So how the culture of [team's city] is a huge part of who we are. So, we really try to fuse those two things" (MLB 7).

Therefore, supporting community interests and using the teams' resources and influence to uplift their surrounding community is paramount in developing strong community relations. These strong relationships foster growth and expansion in their fanbases.

Key Values
Organizational values encapsulate how the organization guides itself and what serves as the foundational principles for their operations. In order to effectively diversify the fanbase the organization must have tools and resources in place to effectively deliver the initiatives. Understanding the value that diversity brings is reflected within organizations' cultures Interviewees communicated values that coincide with five primary protocols: *collaboration*, *creativity*, *family*, *open communication and trust*, and *versatility and flexibility*. *Collaboration* was one of the most eminent values defined by the interviewees. Interviewees discussed the importance of working in tandem with many different departments to execute day-to-day tasks as well as constantly seeking opinions from many different parts of the organizations.

"Collaborative. Definitely one in which we understand that the sum of all our parts makes the whole. So, our voices are definitely important for the business to operate in a successful manner" (MLB 3).

"We have to be so cross-functional across every department because, in essence, like, we're their internal marketing agency. And so, you know, a lot of the success, whether it's ticket sales or corporate partnerships or special events or community affairs, is contingent upon how we support their initiatives. We have to work super collaboratively, both partnered with other internal departments, but then also within our own" (MLB 5).

Additionally, interviewees explained that what leads to strong collaboration is *open communication and trust*. People must feel empowered to execute their responsibilities and also feel comfortable receiving feedback and seeking out advice.

"We are very strong in empowering all of our staff that you have the authority to make decisions, especially on game days. Like in that moment, you're not going to have time to go back three levels of command as an intern and say, 'What is the right decision here?' So, we strongly empower even our interns" (MiLB 3).

"So, I feel confident that my boss is willing to listen to ideas…Got to separate your ego from whatever idea you're creating, which is an important life lesson. But I think with these ideas and in minor league baseball, you just have to be willing to put the ideas out there because even if that one doesn't get approved. Something might fall in place for later that week, later that month, the future year…All we can do is share what we need, what we think fans above, and then it's kind of out of our control from there" (MiLB 4).

"Over communicate…Like oversharing, you know, making sure that everybody is included in the conversation then across departments, that there's a process through it

all…Having an open dialogue and discussion with people and be open to feedback because they might see something and flag something that we didn't even think of [or] wouldn't be a good fit or like there's a conflict here that's happened…Ideally, we want to catch anything that might not be a good idea before it is on the field" (MLB 1).

The professional sports industry is a fast-paced, ever-changing workplace environment. Guests, timelines, and projects are constantly shifting.

"I was like, this is it. This is the final. Like we need to finalize it, we did, and this morning, like, something changed. So like, things are changing all the time" (MLB 1).

Every day in professional baseball there is an event, whether it is a game, community partnership, or sales promotion, so it is critical that front office employees are *versatile and flexible*.

"So, everyone's kind of wearing different hats and involved in different things. Even though you might not directly work in marketing, we may ask for you to help with some sort of social media video that we're doing or looking for ideas or stuff like that. So, you know, we're always looking for folks that are willing to be involved in everything" (MiLB 1).

Not being married to ideas and being able to quickly pivot leads to success within MLB and MiLB organizations. This also coincides with another third tier protocol within organizational culture, *creativity*. All organizations aim to expand their fanbase and operations each year. To accomplish growth, they must try new strategies and tactics to attract different groups that they have not connected with before. Therefore, creativity was discussed by interviewees as a central value within their organizations.

"If you can be innovative, you're also being creative and passionate and all those things that kind of fall into innovative. And if you're empathetic, then you're also kind

and patient and, you know, like you're thinking of other people before yourself. And all those things just kind of make like a well-rounded person, which then, in turn, make us like a well-rounded organization. And then it just bleeds into everything else that we do" (MiLB 2).

"We're always trying to have continuous improvement. We do value being able to create that culture where you're brainstorming, and you have to kind of remind yourself that there's no such thing as a silly idea. You start with one thing, and you never know what it can build up into. So definitely having that creativity is an important piece" (MiLB 4).

"Our operating principles deal with being innovative, being curious, and always having a strategic plan" (MLB 3).

The protocols that emerged promote strong communication and problem-solving proficiency. Additionally, *family* was a key protocol defined by the interviewees. The feeling of *family* in front offices is developed from high levels of trust, common goals, and cohesion.

"They're very understanding…they understand everyone's human…So, we need a personal day off or we need to do things, that's fine…Our CMO, he's a big family guy…To the point where he's doing this small step, like even outside the work setting, just to get to know us better and be, like, intertwined…He wants everyone to like mingle and like that's a good thing that he can personally say he knows everyone's family" (MLB 6).

"We are very family first, very family centric. I mean, as with most minor league clubs, but extremely family-centric, both internally and externally" (MiLB 3).

Front office employees feeling supported by their organizations is central to innovation and progressing the organization into the future. The talent in the front office is paramount when it

comes to expanding the fanbase of professional baseball and shifting operations to reflect more modern strategies.

<u>Social Media Usage</u>
Desired SM Outcomes
The interviewees extensively discussed the purpose and goals behind their use of social media platforms. Five protocols emerged: *deepen connection to the team*, *engagement and interaction*, *ticket sales*, *showcase community outreach*, and *brand awareness*. Social media is used as a marketing tool to give fans extended insight into activity in the organization. The organizations want to build loyal fanbases that are able to drive revenue through their long-term support. Social media allows MLB and MiLB to reach audiences that may not be initially aware of who they are. *Brand awareness* is a central component when expanding a fanbase and social media is being used to increase brand awareness because of its ability to reach a plethora of different groups quickly. Organizations seek to introduce themselves and generate a positive response that can lead to fanship through their social media activity. Additionally, once they have achieved awareness, they want to maintain fanship through *engagement and interaction* with their social media content.

> "What I will say that is consistent across everything we do is, you know, trying to build relationships and instead of talking to people, having a conversation with people…Ultimately, if we can build a relationship with our fans, they're more likely to come to a game, to buy a hat, to purchase a subscription. So, whether you are six years old if our kids club now, we're not talking directly to you we're talking to your parents in that example, or you're thirteen years old on TikTok or sixty-eight years old on Facebook; we still want to build a relationship with you because that brings people closer to the team" (MLB 5).

Consistent exposure to the team serves as a reminder of their presence especially when there is little to no activity in the offseason. Social media usage gives the organizations an opportunity to reach fans outside of their ballparks to create interest in their team and the

experience of the game. Organizations want to draw fans to games to increase *ticket sales*. *Ticket sales* are the primary revenue driver for MLB and MiLB clubs. Social media is used to promote the overall experience with the organization.

> "If I'm showing a video of the experience at the ballpark, for example, a highlight video and a little sizzle reel of kids having fun, families having fun, and like this quick digestible sizzle reel of everything that you can do at the ballpark…You're presenting FOMO[1] of the experience…Show them what they're missing if they don't buy a ticket" (MiLB 8).

Social media showcases the identity of the organization in order to lead fans to have positive perceptions of the brand. Clubs *showcase community outreach* to enhance their relationships with local organizations and display that they are committed to the wellbeing of the community they reside in. For MLB clubs this is crucial in exciting and rallying their cities around them. Interviewees communicated that community outreach is vital to the success of their organizations, especially within the MiLB.

> "But then [social media] is also [saying] like 'we just had this big community event tonight and we're really excited.' We just did a strike out cancer this past year and some of those things that are more like a community play to be like, we want to be supportive of our community, we care about our community, and we're not just trying to only sell you tickets" (MiLB 2).

MiLB employees explained that their reach is limited to the local audience because of their limited resources. MiLB front offices are significantly smaller and have much lower budgets due to the smaller scale of their operations. MiLB must foster strong bonds and integration into their local community to promote both ticket sales and support of their team. Organizations heavily use social media to promote fandom and community.

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[1] "FOMO" stands for "fear of missing out"

SM Platforms and Strategies

Interviewees discussed the platforms and strategies they use to accomplish their desired social media goals. The primary protocols that emerged were *showcasing player personalities*, *viral content and trends, informative social content*, *showcasing team highlights*, *sales promotions and team activity*, and *front office excitement and investment*. Player-fan relationships are something that many organizations are trying to foster and social media is being used as a tool to *showcase player personalities* and provide points for connection. MLB 5 discusses this concept and how crucial it can be when appealing to younger fans.

> "Players are becoming more and more expressive. I think baseball was really the last sport where you had athletes and their personalities kind of become larger than life. If manifests itself in jewelry…different enhancements…their uniform like arm sleeves, even something as simple as the color of their arm guards. And, you know, a younger fan is able to connect with that and emulate that" (MLB 5).

Social media is being used to promote player's individuality and make them relatable figures which enhances fans' identification with team. Interviewees commented on how this is especially salient when it comes to diversity and showcasing players' cultural backgrounds. Highlighting cultural individuality allows the organization to directly relate and appeal to communities the players identify with.

> "[Working with the Latin players] amplifies the character of the Spanish social [media content] …What are we doing differently from the English page? I can make the Spanish page pivot a little more, and that's when you let the Latin players be themselves. It would make sense to let these players be goofballs and let that live in the Spanish page because it would make sense with the culture" (MLB 6).

Additionally, *viral content and trends* can show a different side of the players by including humor which enhances their personability. Organizations make their teams and clubs relatable by using trending audio and video formats that fans find entertaining. This also allows clubs

to reach a wider audience, especially for MiLB teams trying to push beyond their local audience, because their videos are more likely to go viral or receive increased attention if viewers are familiar with the audio or general social media trend.

> "I would say Instagram reels are a combination of just trying to grow eyeballs and hit those trends and what sounds are popular right now, but also using it to kind of hit that dual demographic on Instagram of like there are probably a lot of people on Instagram that are our fanbase and others that are following us trying to figure out what [we're about]" (MiLB 3).

Organizations use social media to display many different types of content in order to address fan needs that lead to loyalty. Social media is being used by clubs to both entertain and inform fans. MiLB 7 explains the importance of being able to deliver many different forms of information on social media to accomplish different goals.

> "I want a social voice that does not marry me to one crowd of people…you need to have a flexible enough social voice that is trustworthy, that your fans trust, that can be professional…if you just develop fans who are looking for entertainment and then you come with something serious, either they're not going to understand it, they're not going to care, or the people who actually need to see it aren't going to be following you or want to see it because they don't want to deal with the other stuff you're posting" (MiLB 7).

Organizations use their social platforms to deliver *informative social content*. This content centers around baseball statistics, in-game updates, and roster adjustments. It allows fans to quickly obtain the team's baseball information. Interviewees cited Twitter, now referred to as X, as the platform they use to provide fans with all baseball updates. This *informative social content* also ties into *sales promotion and team activity*. MLB and MiLB clubs use their social media platforms to promote their theme nights, special ticket offerings, and team events. This form of content informs fans but also seeks to create excitement by highlighting promotional

items and the experience of ballpark events. Clubs also *showcase team highlights* to excite the fanbase. The organizations' social media teams create short highlight reels with engaging editing to capture fans' attention within a short time frame. Showing off the team's success generates positive perceptions of the team and can incline fans to attend games, therefore increasing ticket sales.

Additionally, organizations look to use social media to increase *front office excitement and investment*. A few MiLB interviewees explained that featuring staff in their social media content enhances their sense of community within their fanbase because they are able to recognize familiar faces from the ballpark in their content.

> "Creating unity and using our staff, whether it's full time or game day, on social media in those videos makes [fans] feel more a part of our community because they have access to [front office staff]" (MiLB 3).

Within MiLB, this makes the team feel even more familiar to fans and allows the organization to further imbed itself into fans' social identities. MLB and MiLB organizations understand the importance of ensuring the front office is invested in the team's success. They see that when this is true front office employees are engaged with social media content and interact with posts through comments and reposting.

> "Our front office is so great about picking up our [social media posts], whether it's on LinkedIn or any of that. But they're also just really good about just like sharing funny videos or their stories on Instagram or sharing it on Facebook or whatever it is to help boost those engagement numbers…Our front office is also really excited about social. Constantly I'll have someone pop into my office [and say] 'hey, I saw this on TikTok. We should do it' or 'I saw this on Instagram, what about this?'…Then watch them be excited about the fact that we used their idea" (MiLB 2).

When front office employees are engaged and invested, the organizations see higher levels of performance because employees are socially identifying with the team.

<u>DEI Initiatives</u>

Representation in the Front Office

Representation in the front office was cited as a paramount practice when reaching diverse groups and ensuring authenticity in appeals to these groups. The key protocols that emerged were *hiring and diverse candidate pools*, *Employee Resource Groups and diversity training*, *collaboration with diverse perspectives*, and *highlighting on-field representation*. MLB and MiLB organizations look to *collaborate with diverse perspectives* to authentically appeal to different audiences. Organizations seek to hire diverse candidates to have these perspectives within their front office.

> "[Diversification] is a desire for the top leadership in the organization…because we all understand that front offices of baseball teams need to reflect the audiences that they're entertaining every day" (MLB 7).

Organizations must understand the culture and people they are marketing to in order to effectively garner their attention and fanship. Having diverse perspectives and experiences within the front office is vital to the success of diversification within MLB and MiLB.

> "I like diversity of thought. So, I think a lot of times diversity of thought is influenced by experiences, and your experiences are influenced by…the color of your skin…We in our marketing department do a really good job of [being diverse] and having diverse viewpoints from diverse individuals" (MLB 5).

Diverse front office employees lead to creativity and innovative approaches to widening the audience of professional baseball. They are able to bring in their personal experiences with the groups that they identify with to create a welcoming and inclusive experience for those groups in the ballpark.

Primary DEI initiatives for MLB and MiLB organizations *are hiring practices and diversifying the candidate pool*. Clubs are reaching out to local colleges and universities, specifically HBCUs[2], to showcase opportunities in professional baseball.

> "So, we have tons of HBCU's (historically Black colleges and universities) just as close if not closer. So, we're trying to get into those and trying to get them to come to career fairs and things like that…But I think that's the thing overall in sports is it's just not a very diverse applicant pool as much as we wish it would be…Obviously, we launched 'The Fun for All' campaign a few years ago and as a part of that, we have tried very hard to make our promo schedule extremely diverse in a variety of ways" (MiLB 3).

These connections are key to generating new talent's interest, especially within the clubs' internship and fellowship programs. Many MLB clubs have fellowship programs that are designated for diverse candidates which gives them opportunities they may never have had access to or were aware of. It demonstrates to diverse groups that professional baseball is a space where they can create a successful career. Organizations go out and attend career fairs at local colleges and universities to promote their programs and career opportunities.

> "We're committed to diversifying the employee pipeline. And so that's where you see our fellowship program and our internship program that were created in the current iteration through a DEI lens specifically. And there's direct recruitment and targeting of diverse communities across the country in order to ultimately diversify the front office pipeline…You really start to see the impact of that intentional work" (MLB 7).

> "Their staff go out and do career fairs at colleges and universities across the country with a special focus of HBCU in a way that I don't believe was an intentional focus prior to this…Additionally, we go out to schools with large minority populations or

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[2] HBCUs – historically Black colleges and universities

diverse populations where we're looking to sort of grow diversity of our organization" (MLB 7).

"We have a fellowship program and it is for Black college graduates who are interested in getting in the field of baseball…The ability for us to go out to schools and share this program and have kids who are all of sudden like 'Wait, like I didn't even know that there are like all these types of careers in sports and in baseball.' And so, it just gets them maybe thinking a little differently about [careers in baseball]" (MLB 5).

A few MLB clubs offer housing stipends for their interns so they do not lose out on quality, and especially diverse, candidates because they can't afford to live in the city the club resides in. MLB and MiLB organizations are working to create accessibility to professional baseball opportunities for communities that have been historically sidelined from sport. Once these groups have entered these positions and are represented in front offices, it is crucial to make them feel supported and foster belonging. In order to accomplish this, organizations have developed *Employee Resource Groups and diversity training*. Employee/Business Resource Groups (ERG) are voluntary, employee-led groups that are based on shared characteristics or life experiences. These groups aim to foster inclusivity in the workplace. These groups appear to be only present in MLB organizations.

"Several of [our Business Resource Groups] are based on ethnicity and they are certainly a strategic part of our organization, specifically, for how we should be creating experiences for specific demographics. We want to make sure that we're being genuine and authentic, and certainly that is based on the voices of our front offices" (MLB 3).

"And then on the other end, all our Employee Resource Groups also work very closely with a player. So we have our captain, our co-captain, and then we have a player that kind of I guess you can say he's like a sponsor…we do that because it helps us build

community of like us getting to know our players and basically the ERGs work as a resource to get our ideas for all our heritage nights" (MLB 6).

"I'm also a part of the Pride BRG (Business Resource Group), and I've kind of taken a bit of a leadership role with the Pride BRG which has been really fun to just have a group I feel really connected with. And, you know, in the organization we can just talk about different things and get to know people I would never work with like, you know, someone in baseball operations, we would never cross paths. Well, we get to meet once a month and meet at our outings and stuff like that. So, it's been really nice to connect with peers in a different capacity" (MLB 1).

In addition to ERGs, organizations also use diversity training to educate all of their employees on proper workplace conduct and how to support diverse groups in the workplace.

"At the start of every season, we have an orientation for all our workforce…included sexual assault training, like how to prevent things like that, like correct workforce behavior, and diversity and inclusion" (MiLB 4).

"We're also very geared towards training and development of our internal organization. From awareness training to unconscious bias training" (MLB 3).

Training is paramount to developing an organizational culture that nurtures understanding and unity. These front office DEI initiatives allow MLB and MiLB organizations to enhance the presence of diverse perspectives which advances these clubs efforts to authentically appeal to different groups. Another significant element is *highlighting on-field representation*. Diverse audiences are more inclined to support a team when they see individuals from their own communities represented. The players, coaches, and baseball staff are the most recognized members of the organization which makes diversity on the field paramount. MLB 9 comments on this conclusion stating:

> "Because unless little boys and little girls see people that look different from other people they're used to seeing, they might not think that [playing or working in MLB] is possible. So, representation definitely matters. Because right away you have some sort of connection, even if you just are meeting somebody for the first time" (MLB 9).

To encourage diverse players to pursue professional baseball careers they must see representation and also feel support from the communities they identify with.

> "At most levels we have a pretty diverse coaching staff, not only to be able to access the language barrier, but also just whenever you have something in common with someone it really helps. And I've seen that like with our African American player, like they just really resonate and connect with African American coaches because they have more similar experiences…I think that the players need to see people who look like them and we talk about that all the time in terms of coaching and assignments" (MLB 2).

Diverse groups seek to support the success of those they identify with. When organizations highlight diversity in the most recognizable part of the organization, diverse groups ae able to see the support and promotion of people within their own communities.

Employing and Honoring the Local Community
To effectively deliver DEI initiatives that diversify the fanbase, MLB and MiLB organizations must ensure that their efforts will resonate with the groups they are seeking to attract. The clubs collaborate with local community groups and partners to create authentic appeals to diverse audiences, while using their organization to honor the community they reside in. The primary protocols that emerged are *theme nights*, *youth baseball and softball programs*, *working with diverse community groups*, and *authenticity in diversity efforts*. *Theme nights* are the central focus for MLB and MiLB organizations when it comes to drawing new demographics into their ballparks. These theme nights are games in which all promotions, in-stadium activities, music, and pregame performances coincide with a specific group or event.

Examples of these nights include Hispanic Heritage Night, Black Heritage Night, Pride Night, Pups in the Park, Star Wars Night, etc. Clubs invite prominent groups within these communities to promote the night but also to enhance mutually beneficial relationships with the organization and its surrounding city/community. Most of these events have a giveaway item attached to them which further incentivizes the experience.

> "They have Dominican Heritage Night, Venezuelan Heritage Night, and Cuban Heritage Night. They have all kinds of different [nights] for like basically every population that is represented in [the club's city]…They create specific activations for [theme nights], whether it's like having musical instruments [that] represent that culture or this specific food and music and all those things" (MLB 2).

> "We host Pride Night. We host various heritage nights here at the park…It's always fun bringing in different groups…We also have Japanese Heritage Night. So, it's always just fun bringing in different cultures that all love baseball into one building…We try to bring in guest speakers around the time [of each heritage night] to talk to the front office to learn from them" (MLB 4).

An MLB employee describes the importance of creating an experience that is based on what a specific culture values. In this example they describe how music is a central component of Latin culture and how her department advocates for collaboration with Latin artists to develop an authentic and memorable ballpark experience for the Latin community:

> "They're willing to invest in working closely with Latin artists to help bring in the Latin demographic. You know, basically, they want more Latin fans because, you know, like I said, we have a lot of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans [on the team], and they want to know how to cater to them and how we they can remain our fans" (MLB 6).

The aim of the heritage nights is to honor the most prominent cultures in the club's city or community while also welcoming groups that may be underrepresented in their fanbase. Within MiLB clubs, MiLB has created two key initiatives that were mentioned by all MiLB interviewees. Almost every MiLB team takes part in these two initiatives: Copa de la Diversión and The Nine. Copa de la Diversión began in 2017 and is a season-long event series specifically designed to embrace the culture and values that resonate most with MiLB teams' local U.S. Hispanic communities. The teams take on new names and uniforms that connect with their local Hispanic audience and use these nights to honor the Hispanic community with Latin music, food, use of the Spanish language, and community collaborations.

> "I had someone do Spanish for a couple of innings and they just announced the batters. I had different Latin music being played. There are certain things here and there that we did like a salsa dance cam. But the majority of the game was a normal game because we didn't want to bring them in and be like 'here's your Latin night. You're only welcome on these nights.' We wanted to be able to do it as 'this is how much fun you could have at any game.' So, we very much wanted it to be like inviting" (MiLB 10).

The Nine, introduced in 2022, is similar to Copa but focuses on engaging the Black community. The Nine is named after the number Jackie Robinson wore in his single season in the minor leagues. This initiative includes Negro League commemorative games where team wear the uniforms of Negro league teams that resided in their area. It also includes efforts to create more opportunities in youth baseball and softball programs as well as celebrating Black pioneers within baseball through ceremonies and events at MiLB ballparks.

MiLB organizations have much broader heritage nights in comparison to MLB organizations because they are from smaller cities that do not have large populations of specific cultural groups. In addition, all MLB teams except for one put on a Pride Night. However, within MiLB, Pride Nights are hard to come by because of the typical negative response these teams receive from their local community. MLB teams are located in major cities that have

prominent and commanding LGBTQ+ communities. This is not the case in most MiLB clubs' cities which can be located in less accepting areas. MiLB organizations can struggle to navigate the complexities of supporting DEI initiatives while operating in regions with diverse political landscapes.

> "The vast majority of people do not appreciate things like that. If you ever look at our Facebook comments, the first season we did Copa, it was not pleasant and it still continues to be that way for a Pride Night. It's definitely one of those things where you're hyper aware that you are posting things about Pride and that the comments are going to get aggressive and you will have to monitor that and you have to check your own mental health because people are going to say stuff that you really don't agree with" (MiLB 3).

MiLB employees discussed that Pride Nights are very difficult because it is an immense challenge to make the ballpark a welcoming and positive environment when a large majority of their fanbase will scrutinize the club and guests for being allies and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

With that being said, *authenticity in diversity efforts* is a major component of community engagement in DEI efforts. To ensure different groups feel represented and welcome in the ballpark, clubs *work with diverse community groups* to develop experiences that are culturally authentic and adequately appeal to the target groups. An MLB employee discusses the collaborative process of introducing a new heritage night to their promotional schedule:

> "We had a connection in the [a heritage] community and she was very critical in helping target like maybe eight different [a heritage] influencers, sent them [promotional item for the night], and in exchange they posted something on social media. We gave them suite access…But all we want you to do is let your audience know. So, utilizing social media and their platforms, we grew it and almost sold it out which was very surprising because we were not projected to do the numbers that we

did. All we wanted to do was spread the word that we're having this night. People really liked it, and it was a hit…But it was really cool to be a part of that and to nearly sell out this night for the first time, utilizing influencers and connections in the community" (MLB 1).

Interviewees described their community partnerships and their effective contributions to their DEI initiatives, especially theme nights.

> "When we did Copa in 2019, the first year…we went out into the community and really had like conversations with, you know, people in the community to find out what they liked and how we could make this work well. We partnered with the local Hispanic radio station and found out that fireworks were a very big thing to [the Hispanic community]. So anytime we did a Copa night, we did it on a Friday night because that's when the fireworks were…I was working with the Hispanic radio stations and I'm like, 'How do we change up our whole media experience in the ballpark? How does your music change? Can you help translate stuff for us? Can you help me write Spanish social [content]?'" (MiLB 7).

> "We actually had the LGBTQ Center of [city] come in and do training with our entire staff" (MiLB 7).

> "We have a pretty robust fundraising system here at the ballpark in which we've partnered with various nonprofits from all over the place and all over the spectrum to raise funds and awareness for their causes here at the ballpark and using our platform to elevate those stories and those voices…We dedicate a lot of our promotional schedule to community initiatives, things like mental health awareness. And again, working with the community, working with those local nonprofits, working with those organizations" (MiLB 8).

> "But it's just like catering to the audience because we interacted with this Puerto Rican artist. So, it's like infusing that music. Right now, in the long run, we're going to continue to work with Puerto Rican and Dominican-based artists" (MLB 6).

Lastly, promoting participation in *youth baseball and softball programs* is a central DEI initiative that attracts diverse audiences at a grassroots level. Clubs take their players that identify with diverse communities to local little leagues, especially within minority communities, to encourage youth baseball and softball participation.

> "Baseball is not necessarily the popular sport when it comes to the African American community or, sometimes, even the Hispanic and Latino community. You know, they have basketball, football, and soccer. Starting from the ground level and infiltrating these communities and doing clinics and, you know, getting them interested in baseball, I think that's where it stems from as well" (MiLB 5).

> "We understand that [the youth] are the future season ticket holders. You know, they are the future fans. So, we are definitely trying to make [our youth programs] more engaging" (MLB 4).

> "Part of that is starting young and doing as much work with youth and getting our brand out there and making them feel like they're part of the greater [team] family at a very young age…Finding ways to reach them where they are, whether it's through baseball clinics, through literacy programs that include our players, through bringing our players out in the community on a regular basis so that people feel directly connected to the stars on the field, and to providing that first [team] experience through our [youth program title] program. We bring in thousands of kids every year [to the stadium], providing the transportation, providing food and beverage, [and] giving them t-shirts…Because We know the remarkable experience we're providing at the ballpark" (MLB 7).

Community involvement and participation in DEI initiatives facilitates successful execution and allows MLB and MiLB clubs to be effective in garnering the support of diverse audiences. Developing mutually beneficial relationships with their cities and communities directly correlates to fandom and heightened support of their organization.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the strategies and tactics used by MLB and MiLB clubs to widen the fanbase of professional baseball. The results indicate that MLB and MiLB are primarily focused on engaging Latino/Hispanic and Black audiences to garner their fanship. These organizations are seeking to diversify at a grassroots level through their front office and baseball pipelines, while also working to attract new groups to their ballpark experience. These DEI initiatives are used in conjunction with social media to promote the organization's brand and highlight intentions to facilitate representation and inclusion in professional baseball.

Social Identification and Organizational Commitment through Social Media
 Current literature indicates the importance of social identity when it comes to establishing fan loyalty, and sports organizations can do so by developing strong fan communities (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015; Trepte & Loy, 2017). The data indicates that MLB and MiLB clubs understand this and are continuously working to further engage, entertain, and connect with their fans. The clubs use in-stadium activations (e.g., marketing activities taking place during the game), community partnerships, and social platforms to accomplish social identification and develop their fan communities. The organization's ability to become part of a fan's self-concept is key in establishing fan loyalty (Trepte & Loy, 2017). The results show that organizations are using social media to reach fans and connect them with one another outside of the stadium. The organizations use such platforms to keep fans informed about activities surrounding the team, including game statistics, highlights, player or team updates, organizational events, and ticket and membership information. This directly correlates to current literature finding that fans have an increased level of commitment and favorable beliefs towards their teams when the organization provides mobile content for information

purposes (Kang, 2015). Social media is also used to energize and excite the current base while also grabbing attention and exposing new groups to the organization. Organizations are looking for engagement and exposure to baseball fans on social media. They post edits that feature highlights from the team with trending graphics to get viewers' attention and create intrigue surrounding their team. Social media is being used to facilitate positive perceptions, energy, and connections surrounding the team by creating on-trend high quality content. Current literature discusses the importance of player-fan interactions in fans' personal relationships with the organization. Fans must feel both connected to each other and the team at large, creating social identification and organizational commitment (Gordon, Heere, & Yoshida, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015). Results of this study suggest that MLB and MiLB organizations have a strong understanding of these fan needs and seek to fulfill this through relationship marketing and developing fan communities. Relationship marketing is retaining customers by using a two-way continuous dialogue to understand customer needs and secure long-term profit (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019). Results indicate that teams are doing this by showcasing their players and allowing them to display their personalities and unique attributes. This makes them more personable and relatable to fans. Fans can connect with the players through shared attributes, similar personal interests, and cultural backgrounds. Organizations are using social media to build on findings surrounding relationship marketing and sports. MLB and MiLB clubs are also using social media as a platform to enhance their fan communities through interactive content and use of comment sections.

Front Offices in MLB and MiLB
What the findings reveal that have not been sufficiently discussed in the literature are the different approaches MLB and MiLB clubs use to expand the fanbase stemming from how they define success and their general organizational structure. They both define success through ticket sales and financial success; however, MLB teams' primary goal is to win and have on-field success. MiLB teams are not concerned with winning because of the inconsistency resulting from the structure of MiLB. The teams are constantly changing as players move up and down throughout the league, which means a team's talent and familiarity are ever-changing. This pushes the MiLB to use different strategies to attract their fanbase

which centers around a community engagement and offering a fun family-friendly atmosphere. As several of the interviews claimed, social media is key in consistently expanding their reach through viral content that increases their brand awareness. MLB teams look to do this as well, but instead leverage their team's or players' success to excite and expand their fanbase. Therefore, while MLB and MiLB teams are able to develop strong social identification and organizational commitment through social media, they do so using different strategies based on the resources they possess.

Additionally, social identification and organizational commitment are cultivated through the front office, depending on how strongly the employees feel significant, valued, and supported. Organizations which highlight employee achievements and thank staff for their hard work and dedication through social media influence both organizational and team identification. This leads to, according to research, front office employees participating in fandom (Swanson & Kent, 2015). While social media is one way to achieve these outcomes, this study's findings suggest front office employee commitment and identification is primarily derived from organizational culture and DEI initiatives. MLB and MiLB organizations understand this and primarily focus on inclusivity initiatives instead of social media promotion, such as Employee Resource Groups which will be discussed below. However, it was found that the more identified employees are with the team, the more they engage and interact with the team's social media content.

DEI Initiatives in the Front Office
According to those interviewed, DEI initiatives within the front offices of MLB and MiLB clubs were a major focus for their organization. MLB and MiLB organizations are using internship and fellowship programs to attract younger more diverse talent. They connect with colleges and universities in the area as well as top sports management programs to acquire highly qualified candidates. The fellowship programs tend to center around offering opportunities to diverse candidates and some programs offered housing stipends to remove barriers to entry for these candidates and alter negative perceptions surrounding MLB, specifically within the Black community. Historically MLB has, in a sense, deterred younger

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and diverse audiences because they penalized players' on-field behavior involving self-expression are a part of their culture (Simons, 2003). These programs aim to expose professional baseball to those who may not be initially attracted to baseball within professional sports, combat negative perceptions and alter preconceived notions surrounding the accessibility of careers in professional baseball. Both MLB and MiLB work to create relationships with historically Black colleges and universities to promote their fellowship and internship programs demonstrating that professional baseball is an environment in which they can thrive.

A second finding from this study indicates that many organizations promoting DEI initiatives require their front offices to complete diversity training to educate their staff. MLB 3, who serves as the Vice President of DEI in their organization, demonstrates how a few clubs have taken this a step further and have diversity, equity, and inclusion departments or roles to continually develop their DEI initiatives for both fans and the front office. MLB 7 describes the significance of DEI development in MLB:

> "[Diversification] is a desire for the top leadership in the organization…because we all understand that front offices of baseball teams need to reflect the audiences that they're entertaining every day" (MLB 7).

In addition, many MLB organizations, in particular, have employee/business resource groups. These groups are distinguished by race, gender, sexual orientation, familial structure, common backgrounds, career development, etc. This provides belonging and social identification within the front office which contributes to fandom, and one of the key components of fandom is having a desire for the team to be successful (Swanson & Kent, 2015). Wanting the team to be successful leads employees to be invested in their work, which creates an organizational culture that is driven and dedicated to the organization. Additionally, these resource groups create safe spaces for people to voice their concerns, opinions, or ideas. Many organizations use these groups to help generate ideas for their theme nights and to create authentic heritage nights. Highlighting belonging and using the groups as resources for

catering to diverse audiences was evidenced in several organizations. These Employee Resource Groups serve to not only provide a sense of belonging and agency for their employees, but also as a strategic part of the organizations to navigate multicultural marketing.

<u>Theme Nights</u>
Throughout the results of this research, theme nights emerged as a key strategy used by every MLB and MiLB organization to pull in new audiences, especially the Black and Latino/Hispanic bases. There is a major distinction between the MLB and MiLB in terms of reach and access to diverse fanbases found in this research that has not been addressed in previous literature. MiLB clubs are solely focused on their local community because that is the base that will generate sales via tickets, membership, and merchandise. With that being said, they must appeal to whomever is within that community and whatever audience is available to them. Many MiLB teams struggle to have diverse audiences and front offices because their local community is not diverse which has a major impact on their candidate pools and fanbases.

> "We would love to hire more diverse candidates, but if we're not getting those candidates, it definitely makes it tougher. And a lot of [diverse candidates] aren't interested in baseball, so we don't see those candidates as often as we'd like" (MiLB 5).

> "I tried every year to hire a female or two. And they just weren't there a lot of times…I even offered a person that probably wasn't the right fit just to do our part. And I don't do it to check a box, but [MiLB] had this new program…We always look at [diversity], we always keep that top of mind" (MiLB 9).

In contrast, MLB clubs are all located in major cities that have access to almost every demographic and are able to create relationships with dominant heritages and cultures. Yet, the MiLB is still actively working to diversify their base. Two primary initiatives discussed

were Copa de la Diversión and The Nine. Teams take on new names and jerseys during Copa and Nine game nights and revamp the ballpark experience to honor local Latino/Hispanic and Black communities. This includes music, food, decoration, performances, etc. to appeal to the local Latino/Hispanic and Black communities. MiLB clubs use these nights to collaborate with and form relationships with community partners to authentically appeal to new demographics.

> "We want to try to represent those cultures, but we don't want to do it in the wrong way…We want to make sure we are working with our Hispanic Chamber and doing things correctly and effectively without offending people, because that's the last thing we want to do. We want people to feel safe and included" (MiLB 11).

As the interviewees indicated, organizations seek to make these nights an immersive experience into Latino/Hispanic or Black culture. This exposes fans who are not members of that community to a new culture and welcomes those who are members of that community to a celebratory experience. Theme nights also are used to highlight players that are members of these communities allowing the clubs to promote the player-fan relationship by showcasing relatable aspects of who their players are off the field. It is evident from those interviewed that players feel supported and valued by their team honoring who they are, which nurtures players' organization commitment and furthers their spokesmanship on social media and in the community.

Authenticity in DEI Initiatives
Both MLB and MiLB organizations are highly concerned with authenticity in their DEI initiatives. For the MLB this means they want to ensure everything surrounding their theme nights resonates with and is respectful of the community they are honoring. While this is also true for MiLB clubs, it also means MiLB clubs will not participate in certain theme nights if they do not believe it will resonate with their base. Pride Night is a key example of this distinction. Every MLB organization hosts a Pride Night except one, yet very few MiLB organizations host a Pride Night. These MiLB clubs do not have the support from their base

and local community necessary to create a welcoming and authentic night that honors this community. Additionally, many MiLB interviewees explained that leadership in the organization did not feel compelled to host Pride Nights because of they felt the negative response would overshadow the honoring of the LGBTQ+ community. The MLB is able to focus in on more specific groups within their base and develop theme nights and initiatives that serve that community such as Mexican Heritage Night or baseball development in the Dominican Republic. MiLB organizations do not have the resources, available audience, talent pool, and reach to develop successful and impactful DEI initiatives that are targeted specifically toward less represented fanbases. MLB and MiLB organizations are both actively seeking to diversify their fanbase and their implementation of DEI initiatives are directly translating into more interest and attendance from younger more diverse audiences. They seek to support their community with philanthropic efforts while also appealing to these audiences through front office and on field representation. Repeatedly throughout the interviews, it was acknowledged that representation on the field is paramount to encouraging diverse communities of youth athletes to participate in the sport. MLB and MiLB organizations go into their local little leagues and youth programs to promote baseball within diverse communities and showcase their players that share a common identity. MLB teams are able to take this a step further with their resources and appeal to international audiences by hosting clinics at their international facilities. Young athletes must see professional athletes that look like them to believe a future in baseball is attainable. Community outreach and partnerships that appeal to diverse groups build new relationships that are key to the future development of professional baseball and the expansion of the fanbase.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations

The primary limitation within the research is that the method used to garner the sample was non-random and used professional network connections to attract an adequate sample size. It was also challenging to initially acquire an adequate sample size and find individuals that work within MLB front offices which led the researchers to expand their search to MiLB front office employees. Additionally, many of the interviewees shared similar disciplines and held

similar roles within their organizations i.e., marketing, communications, community relations. This limits the generalization of their perspectives to those that share their positions and/or areas of expertise.

<u>Future Research</u>
Future research conducted should garner the fans' perspectives of the impact and efficacy of MLB and MiLB organizations' DEI and social media initiatives. The fans' views will reveal if these strategies are accomplishing what the clubs set out to achieve and could also offer insight into what additional elements organizations could be focused on that fans believe to be influential. Future research should also further analyze the efficacy of baseball pipeline diversity initiatives and how professional baseball can further its efforts to cultivate enhanced participation from diverse groups.

CONCLUSION

Current literature evaluates professional sports organizations' culture and social media usage and how these strategies impact social identification and organizational commitment, but it is not specific to MLB. This study offers an in-depth analysis of what MLB and MiLB clubs are doing to diversify their fanbase and sport. The study also revealed central distinctions between MLB and MiLB's approaches to culture, social media, and DEI due to their organizational structures. MLB is uniquely placed to reach a multitude of audiences with baseball's international popularity and significant number of international players active in MLB and MiLB. MiLB organizations across the United States give MLB leverage by having professional baseball be accessible and present in communities that do not have professional sports teams. Having the proper culture that values collaboration and different perspectives creates the environment necessary for an organization to grow and evolve past MLB's past identity. Social media contributes to that growth by using the platforms to reach new audiences and increase brand awareness. MLB and MiLB clubs are tasked with showing these young diverse audiences that they belong in baseball through representation and celebration both on and off the field. DEI initiatives at all levels of MLB can be transformational because they are able to develop long-term relationships with young diverse fanbases. Professional

baseball becoming more diverse and attracting younger fans will propel them forward to continue to compete with the other major American professional sports leagues. This study's exploration of MLB specific strategies contributes to and expands previous research surrounding all professional sports and further develops what is known about MLB's attempts to broaden the scope of professional baseball's fanbases through social media usage, theme nights, and front office DEI initiatives.

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