Framing and Conceptualizing the IOR Literature in Sport Management: Mapping the Scholarly Terrain

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Intro / Background / Purpose
As the nature and scope of the sport industry has changed around the world, the role of interorganizational partnerships has become central to the operations of a variety of sport organizations (cf., Bingham & Walters, 2013; Cousens, Barnes, Stevens, Mallen, & Bradish, 2006; Franco & Pessoa, 2013; Grix & Phillpots, 2010). Interorganizational relationships (IORs) among and between sport organizations exhibit an array of forms, structures, and outcomes and often represent a central strategic function. Concurrent with the growth and prevalence of partnerships and collaboration in the sport industry in practice, there has been a related increase in focus of the academic literature on the topic (Misener & Doherty, 2012; Parent & Harvey, 2009; Thibault, Frisby, & Kikulis, 1999). The scholarship on partnerships in sport management has emerged as a growing field of inquiry with researchers exploring a range of issues and industry contexts (e.g., Babiak & Thibault, 2009; McDonald, 2005; Misener & Doherty, 2014; Rosentraub & Swindell, 2009). However, as these studies have evolved, there remains little interconnection, generally accepted models and theories, or holistic interpretation of the knowledge generated by this research. In short, the literature in IOR in sport management is fragmented and atomistic. This fragmentation has led to a situation in the sport management domain that mirrors that of the broader parent disciplines, and as Parmigiani and Rivera-Santos (2011) suggest “this has made it difficult to effectively apply and combine theoretical lenses, to delineate the commonalities and differences between IOR forms, to identify key attributes of specific relationships, and to understand how organizations create and manage a portfolio of relationships” (p. 1109). The purpose of our research is to address these issues by collecting and categorizing the substantial sport-related IOR literature, identifying what advancements have been made in this body of work, uncovering connections between concepts of interest, and presenting key questions and issues that merit further investigation given the gaps and prospects revealed.

Methods
We began by conducting a systematic content analysis of the sport-focused IOR literature (consistent with Berg (2007) and Krippendorf (2004)). This meta review approach summarizes and connects the empirical and conceptual work in the field (Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011). We only included refereed articles focusing on relationships among sport organizations, between sport organizations and other organizations, and network analyses of sport organizations. Articles were culled from sport management journals as well as from parent discipline management journals and policy, nonprofit, tourism, leisure, and marketing journals. The central theme of each article reflected a primary emphasis on an aspect of partnership or collaboration. Articles ranged from empirical to theoretical to critical analyses of partnerships and interorganizational relationships. In terms of focus, articles discussed various aspects of partnership relationships from formation, to management, to evaluation. A total of 118 articles were identified through this process. Using this sample, we developed themes and subthemes for coding and categorizing the articles, including by setting / context / sport industry segment (Pedersen & Thibault, 2014), geographical emphasis, theoretical approach, type of alliance form, methodology used to investigate, and key findings. For a more content oriented analysis of the data we adapted the framework developed by Seekamp, Cerveny, and McCreary (2011) who identified a number of dimensions involved in partnerships. Specifically, these dimensions include: composition (e.g., mixture and number of organizations involved in the IOR), structure (e.g., type or form of arrangement, coordination and integration of partners, formalization, configuration, legal and institutional setting), scope of interaction (e.g., nature and significance of the problem being addressed, geographical scale and scope of efforts, size of target group or community being served, duration of relationship); function (e.g., purpose and objective of IOR; number of programs, services, or activities offered); process dimensions (e.g., mechanisms and
Findings / Contributions / Conclusions
While our analysis is currently in progress, we can report some preliminary insights. Our findings suggest that the majority of the literature focuses on the composition, structure, and scope of interaction dimensions of IORs. There exist substantial research gaps in understanding issues related to the function, process dimensions, and most glaringly, outcomes of these relationships. The focus of the bulk of the sport IOR literature is often on dyadic relationships or networks of relationships on a national level or community level; it is more rare to find empirical investigations crossing multiple levels, units of analysis, or approaching whole systems (i.e., macro, meso, and micro levels). Furthermore, like in the broader partnership literature, many sport focused articles are theoretical in nature or are limited to single cases (e.g., Alexander, Thibault, & Frisby, 2008; Parent & Harvey, 2009; Steen-Johnsen, 2008), while large scale empirical studies continue to be rare. It is also clear that some forms of relationships are receiving more coverage in the sport-focused academic literature (for instance networks (e.g., Spencer & Houlihan, 2014; Stern, 1979) and cross-sector partnerships (e.g., Babiak, 2007) but not joint ventures or franchising forms). Overall, the variety of perspectives, questions, and contexts which these studies explore contribute to the richness of the field, but at the same time, lead to a lack of consensus in theories, concepts, and frameworks useful to assess and guide IORs among sport organizations.

Given the emphasis of scholarly investigation into this phenomenon, this research is timely and relevant, particularly as periodic investigations of the research content of a discipline can “help to determine what is on the cutting edge, considered valuable, or esteemed by academicians” (Pedersen & Pitts, 2001, p. 8). As new management and organizational trends emerge in the sport industry, strategic approaches such as partnerships and collaborations will continue to be critical. The need for empirical research to understand these issues and facilitate knowledge production about partnerships continues to be paramount. Our aim with this research is to create a robust conceptual framework to showcase IOR research in sport organizations. We conclude this presentation with recommending areas rich in potential for further exploration in this domain.