Community Sports Foundations and Twitter: Communicating Social Responsibility Programs

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Background/Purpose
Most existing research has agreed that stakeholder communication remains one of the most challenging organizational undertakings within the broad and complex third-sector landscape (Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Saxton & Guo, 2014; Svensson et al., 2015). The challenge in facilitating effective stakeholder communication strategies is also evident within the context of community sports foundations (CSFs), which are charitable organizations established by professional sport teams with the aim of utilizing sport as the vehicle for delivering community-based programs (Kolyperas et al., 2016; Bingham & Walters, 2013).

As a possible way to cope with such challenges, an emerging stream of research is examining how various types of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) utilize popular social networking platforms to communicate with stakeholders in both sports and non-sports contexts (c.f. Abeza, & O’Reilly 2014; Auger, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Saxton & Guo, 2014; Svensson et al., 2015; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016). These studies have suggested that social media offer NPOs an unprecedented opportunity to target, mobilize and interact with their stakeholders (Saxton & Guo, 2014), and in some cases allow them to engage with stakeholders who can contribute towards organizational capacity-building (e.g., potential funders) (Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009).

Against this background, the prime goal of this research is to examine the extent to which core themes of CSFs’ social agendas are being communicated through Twitter, as well as the strategies employed for doing so. In addition, drawing on the contextual characteristics and institutional ties these CSFs have with their ‘parent’ professional teams (Kolyperas et al., 2016), the study sets out to identify whether different patterns of content distribution by the CSFs emerge during different time periods (i.e., team’s on-season versus off-season). Furthermore, given that NPOs’ performance generally (including their ability to effectively communicate and engage with key stakeholders) depends on their overall organizational capacity (Eisinger, 2002; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Svensson et al., 2015), the study also examines whether capacity influences both the extent and the type of strategies employed for the communication through Twitter of core social activities delivered by CSFs.

Theoretical Background
The present study is theoretically informed by stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984). Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) categorized the purpose of Tweets by large US NPOs into three communications strategies: information, community and action. Tweets categorized as ‘information’ provide news, facts or other information about the NPO and are one-way in nature. In contrast, ‘community’ Tweets were either interactional in sparking dialogue or fostered relationships with the stakeholder community. The final category, ‘action’, referred to Tweets designed to stimulate followers into taking some form of action. As the most comprehensive theoretical framework of NPO stakeholder communication on social media, Lovejoy and Saxton’s (2012) work has formed the basis for many subsequent studies across platforms including Facebook (Campbell et al., 2014; Saxton & Waters, 2014), Twitter and YouTube (Auger, 2013).

Methods
The empirical setting for this study is a set of CSFs (n = 22) that are associated with football clubs from the second tier of English football - the Football League Championship (FLC). Two data collection techniques were employed in this study, namely Twitter content analysis and structured interviews (June/July, 2015). The fieldwork took place in two different phases, with the first phase consisting of two sub-phases (on-season and off-season). The first phase involved collecting quantitative data, employing content analysis, and using tweets as the unit of analysis. A non-random sample of the last 50 tweets per period per CSF (n = 2,200 tweets in total) was taken. In order to examine the degree to which the core social agenda of these CSFs is communicated to stakeholders, each tweet was coded.
manually based on its content, and was then allocated to one of the four themes. However, during the first stage of this coding process it became evident that some tweets could not be allocated to any of the themes. Consequently, a more inductive approach was adopted, resulting in the formation of three additional (‘non mission-related’) themes, namely ‘parent club’, ‘commercial’ and ‘other’. The second stage of the content analysis entailed categorizing the Tweets into the three strategies of Twitter communication – information, community and action (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). On completion of the second stage of the coding process, inter-coder reliability (Neuendorf, 2002) was calculated using Cohen’s kappa (Lombard et al., 2002), with acceptable scores achieved for both stages of the coding process (themes $\pi = 0.78$ and strategies $\pi = 0.91$). Insights gained from content analysis do not allow for a full examination of CSFs’ intended objectives and the challenges they face in executing their Twitter strategies. Thus, phase two included structured interviews ($n = 7$) with personnel within the sampled organizations. The purpose of this phase was to complement the quantitative findings while trying to offer some explanatory insights from key organizational actors.

Preliminary Results/Conclusions
This is the first study to empirically show how Twitter is being utilized by this particular type of NPO. The findings suggest that these CSFs are creating content on Twitter by largely drawing on two themes (‘sports participation’ and ‘education’), while much of such Twitter content falls outside their broader social portfolio (that is, categorised as ‘other’). Consistent with findings from other NPO contexts, for CSFs, ‘information’ remains the most frequently employed communication strategy, although notable differences in strategy were identified across core mission-related and non-mission-related (e.g., ‘parent’ club) themes. Furthermore, in contrast to previous work, the present study empirically shows that CSFs’ organizational capacity impacts their Twitter content, with lower capacity CSFs producing a predominance of informational content, while CSFs with greater capacity have been able to devote more resource to their social media activities and thus engage in a broader range of communication strategies. Detailed results that address all the above-mentioned research objectives will be available for and communicated at the conference.