Online Media: Why Use It? To What Benefit? An Examination of Online Communication Within National Olympic Committees

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ABSTRACT

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Relationship development is indispensable to sports organizations that are now using online media with increasing interest in building and maintaining relationships with the online publics. Most studies examining online communication are based on content analyses of organizations' social media profiles. At the same time, only scarce literature approaches the phenomenon from an organizational perspective in that scholars try to assess the degree of online media adoption, these studies are limited by the sample typology thus limiting the generality of their findings. This study investigates online media usage purposes in 17 National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and their perceived outcomes through a qualitative approach. Respondents identified various usage purposes like information dissemination, centrality, and control over the narrative, organization, and stakeholder promotion. The most prominent outcomes of such usage are constituency knowledge, stakeholder relations, engagement enhancement and raising awareness of issues. Implications for practitioners and research recommendations were also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the sports industry ever-growing presence on the web and especially social media (Billings et al., 2019), abundant research on how national sports organizations (NSOs) use available online media (e.g., Abeza et al., 2019; Naraine & Parent, 2017), but little does it tell us about why these organizations use online media and the outcomes of such usage. Online media is touted to be the ideal tool for its potential to foster dialogue with stakeholders (Gao, 2016; Hia et al., 2020) it enables a reciprocal relationship where both parties receive added value and are loyal to one another, ensuring nonprofits' continuing existence (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014; McCambridge, 2015).

With the establishment of Web 2.0-based online platforms as the stage where every user can gain a following by informing and interacting with other users, practitioners are presented with the opportunity to target and instantaneously interact with various stakeholders (Greenwood et al., 2016). With that considered, the majority of nonprofit organizations rushed to have an online presence. Similarly, nonprofits identified various outcomes of online media usage, e.g., establishing a public presence for the organization, facilitating communication with the publics, enabling faster and enhanced service delivery, and resulting in cost savings in meeting stakeholder needs, to name a few (Geller et al., 2010).

Like practitioners, scholars have been paying attention to online relationship development with particular emphasis on social media (SM) as promising grounds for meeting organizational goals. In doing so, the role of the organizational website in sports communication remains rather overlooked, and research on why the latter is being used is scarce. And most of the existing research approaches the phenomenon through quantitative methods (Abdourazakou et al., 2020; Abeza et al., 2020).

Indeed, content analyses are among the most popular methods to investigate online media usage (Abeza et al., 2019) which offers insight into functionality and content that should be utilized to meet organizational goals. An instance of that is the comparison of two measurement instruments derived from distinct frameworks (i.e. the nonprofit website stage model and the automated testing services model; Kirk et al., 2016) where it was argued that while some models focus on serving the public informational needs (e.g., need for transparency) as well as organizational needs (e.g., the constitution of social capital); other models focus on enhancing user experience and facilitating interactions with an organization through its website. Such analyses further our understanding of how organizations tap into online media's potential to communicate with various publics. However, examining the

organization-public relational dynamic through this lens provides little insight into the organizational perspective and intent, which constitutes the impetus of the present research.

This research seeks to bridge the knowledge gap by uncovering the usage purposes of online media from the perspective of communication professionals within NSOs and the perceived outcomes thereof.

Of note, we seek to uncover the perceived outcomes of online media usage as opposed to actual outcomes, i.e., determining the outcomes from the perspective of practitioners within sports organizations rather than trying to measure the outcomes objectively. The rationale behind this decision is that it furthers our understanding of practitioner perspectives on the benefits of online media, thus offering novel approaches to enhance current communication practices in NSOs accounting for practitioners' attitudes.

The literature review mainly focuses on research addressing online media usage and adoption with an emphasis on sports organizations. Following the literature review, we provide a detailed description of how data was collected and analyzed, followed by key findings and a discussion of the latter. We conclude by highlighting the practical implications of the findings and by suggesting key areas to be explored in future research. In the following paragraphs, we provide a review of the literature relevant to the present research:

Historically traditional media such as radio, print, and television have established a boundary separating the producer from the consumer. Such venues enabled a unilateral communication paradigm in which organizations (producers) fill the role of the hegemon rendering publics to passive consumers (Mogensen, 2014), in doing so, traditional media confer almost complete authority on content producers as opposed to social media.

McFarland and Ployhart (2015) defined social media as any web 2.0 platform that enables user-generated content, either by a single individual or as a result of the collaboration across multiple users. These platforms encompass web- and mobile-based technologies that allow organization-user interactions and the formation of communities around predefined themes, people, and organizations through content sharing. By "content", it is referred to the information posted on these platforms under different formats – text, videos, pictures, or anything else that these platforms support.

While traditional media allow the public to interact to some extent (e.g. via phone calls on live broadcasts), online media platforms have magnified the interaction between an organization and its publics. Websites, on the other hand, allow users to voice their opinion as well as SM have enabled a change in the status quo by enabling individuals to include their voices in the conversation. This is not to say that all users take part in the conversation; a

significant portion of users are passive but still consider themselves part of the community and the conversation taking place (Dean, 2022; Williams et al., 2014).

The shift from traditional media to online media has opened a new field of research. Scholars have praised the potential of the web as a tool to enable two-way communication. Parveen et al. (2015) investigated how Malaysian companies use SM, i.e., for usage purposes and subsequent impacts on organizational performance. The researchers found that SM is used for various purposes, the most prominent being advertising and promoting products, branding, as well as in customer relationship management. Similarly, the authors found such usages benefitted the organization by enhancing the quality of its relationship with customers, and customer service; it was also found to be a cost-efficient means in marketing endeavors.

In the nonprofit sports arena, Naraine and Parent (2017) examined Canadian NSOs' SM adoption. Many hindering factors were identified, among which the lack of resources in that sport development expenditures take precedence over online communication. Additionally, considering the bilingual demographic within Canada, organizations struggled to create content for both communities, which caused some to refrain from using SM. Similarly, in a content analysis of Canadian NSOs conducted by Abeza and O'Reilly (2014) to investigate social media use to create dialogue, the authors found that contrary to supporting voices of SM's potential to create dialogue, SM platforms were mainly used for information dissemination. The authors also found that users did not engage in dialogue, they tended to "like" content instead of sharing opinions. Alike, NSOs were reported to be non-responsive to users' comments and questions, this finding is congruent with Hambrick and Svensson's (2015) findings where Gainline Africa staff members reported difficulty in creating interactivity with users, as interactive content did little to generate public engagement. Instead, users demonstrated interest in content via likes but were reluctant to take part in a conversation.

Extant literature seems to indicate that dialogue as a result of two-way communication is more prominent in the for-profit sector as contrasted with nonprofits, the findings of Wang and Yang's (2020) comparison between for-profit and nonprofit organizations' usage of online media draws a clear distinction between for-profits' focus on the dialogic loop, and nonprofits' focus on the usefulness of information provided and visitor retention; reasons behind this heterogeneity, however, remain rather unclear. Similarly, Abeza et al. (2013) investigated SM use within race event organizers to identify opportunities and challenges. The authors stated that organizers increasingly extended their online communication beyond one-way static communication approaches. SM enables a better understanding of customers through

advanced interactions as compared to traditional approaches, organizations can synchronously interact with stakeholders in a dynamic one-to-one dialogue (Abeza et al., 2013).

While this definition does not seem to have a unanimous consensus in the scientific community on the field. Both nonprofits and for-profit organizations seem to struggle in generating engagement, it also appears that these studies consider engagement as a phenomenon that is manifested through quantitative metrics – likes, shares, and numbers of comments. A considerable number of scholars consider engagement as a phenomenon that transcends the boundary of mere numerical metrics, they define engagement as a product of dialogue wherein both parties, online publics, and the organization, maintain ethical dialogue with the intent of reaching a mutually beneficial position that serves the interests of all parties taking part in dialogue (Annamalai et al., 2021; Kent & Lane, 2021; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2013). This can be achieved by continually educating one's interlocutor on the current state of affairs of issues, events, or organizational decisions in hopes of unifying efforts of all parties to reach a common ground or an objective by demonstrating how it serves the interests of the addressed party. In this definition of engagement, ethical implies that the organization or the stakeholders engage with their counterparts while being predisposed to change their position on issues to reach common ground. This definition relies on the ethical intentions governing a relationship, which is rather difficult to assess or measure. Additionally, it considers the engagement of both the organization and its online publics. In the present study, we only account for the online publics' engagement, we also consider engagement as the process through which the organization guides its online publics toward a tangible behavioral manifestation, e.g., attending events, making donations, volunteering, etc.

In the past fifteen years, online communication research approached new media communication through quantitative methods, mostly through content analyses and surveys; fewer studies in the field of sport communication examined the phenomenon through qualitative methods (Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, little interest was given to the use of organizational websites in combination with SM (Nitschke et al., 2016) which is considerably influenced by the sentiment that organizational websites are a platform for information dissemination. Although many examples support this claim (Kim et al., 2014; Schudde et al., 2018; Sommerfeldt et al., 2012), other scholars contend that it is rather dependent on how organizations use the official website, resource availability, and the technical know-how (Garett et al., 2016; Kirk et al., 2016). In light of the review of the literature, it remains unclear

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why national sports organizations, specifically, elect to use online media to communicate with various publics and what outcomes result from such usage as perceived by the organization. It is therefore the direction of this study to illuminate the overarching impetus of online media usage and outcomes as a result thereof from a practitioner's perspective. Although a plethora of studies on online media usage was carried out as detailed in the literature review, the vast majority of them pertain to the for-profit sector (Abdourazakou et al., 2020; Abeza et al., 2013, 2019; Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015), sports organizations in the nonprofit sector remain rather understudied.

Moreover, previous studies focus on organizations within well-defined national or regional borders which significantly limits the generalizability of their findings. Understanding the significance of online media for NSOs is of great relevance because of the influence that national sports organizations exert on the sports scene both nationally and internationally (Naraine & Parent, 2017). This undertaking would not only help similar organizations identify best practices, but it is also an endeavor to contribute and inform the nonprofit literature to unify the narrative around current practices which helps researchers introduce recommendations that are congruent with professional practices. This study aims to build on the existing literature by examining the National Olympic Committees' use of online media. In addressing identified gaps, the present article seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1. What purposes motivate online media usage by practitioners within NOCs?

RQ2. What are the outcomes, if any, as perceived by practitioners within NOCs?

To serve this purpose, the conceptual model for sports communication was used as a theoretical framework to guide our research and situate the findings within the sports organizational communication landscape. Initially developed by Williams and Chinn (2010) based on Grönroos's (2004) Marketing Process Model, this conceptual model comprises three primary dimensions: communication, interaction, and value. The first dimension, communication, encompasses the reduced reliance on traditional media to the benefit of online media, the integration of social media into the communication strategy, as well as forms of planned, e.g., content created by the organization, and unplanned messages, e.g., third party news stories. The second dimension accounts for organization-stakeholder interaction, and contribution through online media, i.e., content created by members of the community which hinges on two-way communication, as well as the presence on and use of a variety of online media at once, i.e., cross-platform presence and communication. The last and third dimension is value, i.e., the outcome of the usage of online media. The latter dimension encompasses the

increased organization-stakeholder interaction as a result of the recognized importance of online stakeholder participation. Simply put, Williams and Chinn's (2010) conceptual model marries outcomes of online communication with cross-platform presence (e.g., blogs, social media, forums, and organizational websites). This undertaking helps situate the present study within the broader scope of organizational communication, it also helps practitioners in comparable situations adopt the best practices and reflect upon the optimization of their online communication.

METHODS

A qualitative design was implemented to gain insight into the experiences of participants regarding online media usage purposes and perceived outcomes for their organization. Of note, the reader should bear in mind that the interview guide was designed to gather data on different aspects of organizational online communication as it is part of a larger research project; only usage purposes of online media and perceived outcomes fall within the scope of the theoretical framework discussed in the literature review. The interview questionnaire was developed upon review of analogous studies (namely, Abeza et al., 2013, 2019; Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; Naraine et al., 2021; Naraine & Parent, 2017), whereas the conceptual model proposed by Williams and Chinn (2010) helped us situate the identified themes within a coherent underlying framework. Although this conceptual model addresses multiple facets of organizational communication, some features fall outside the scope of this study insofar as they address practices of agents external to the organization, i.e., community-generated content, and unplanned messages pushed by third-party content creators like journalists and bloggers.

Study Group

As regards the choice of the sample, i.e., National Olympic Committees, these are nonprofit NSOs. NOCs have ties to the international sports scene, e.g., the International Olympic Committee, regional sports associations, and continental and international sports federations. This further emphasizes the importance of online media to circumvent the lack of resources required to leverage traditional media (Naraine & Parent, 2017). It, therefore, constitutes a framework of conformity whereby NOCs operate despite their national environment in that, although each NOC engages in a national environment with a distinct cultural climate, examining a sample of NOCs should offset cultural idiosyncrasies by giving prominence to only the common traits across these organizations which in turn contributes

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greatly to the generalizability of the findings to a wide range of NSOs, as contrasted with an examination of national sport organizations within a specific country or region.

The sampling method was the typical case selection which can be described as creating a profile of characteristics for an average case and finding instances of that (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). The selection criteria were that the organization had to be officially recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), resulting in a list of (N=206) National Olympic Committees' website URLs. After this step, the websites were manually visited to ensure their accessibility and that content hosted on the website has been updated within the last three months effectively reflecting that the organization is actively communicating with the online publics through the organizational website, this step resulted in the removal of 32 National Olympic Committees. In the third phase, related Facebook page URLs were collected, for a Facebook page to be considered as "official", it had to possess the "verified badge" and/or linked-to on the website official website of the organization, 44 additional NOCs were removed at this phase. Finally, prior to sending the invitation to the sampled organizations, contact was established with two National Olympic Committees as part of a pilot study, two participants were asked about the medium of convenience they prefer to participate in the interview, to which they indicated that email interviewing would be a pertinent option. To carry the interviews, we ensured that NOCs in the sample provided email contact information, 37 additional National Olympic Committees were removed resulting in a sample of (n=93) NOCs.

Recruiting was done in two phases, first by sending an invitation to our sample through the appropriate email address. In the second phase, NOCs that expressed willingness to participate in the study were sent the interview questions. Participants were given a detailed description of the context of this research. They were informed that they can refrain from answering any questions or withdraw from the study at any time (Meho, 2006). Earlier, five responses were collected and analyzed, following which, 12 additional NOCs were added until theoretical saturation was attained, i.e., no new insight could be identified from the last response collected making a total of 17 responses collected out of 93 initial invitations which amount to a response rate of 18.28% which lower that the response rate in comparable studies which ranges between 20% to 30% (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Taylor et al., 2001). However, a low response yield can be explained by the complexity of our request (i.e., a request to participate in an interview) as compared to the requests of comparable studies (i.e., a single question about organizational activity). Participants had various roles ranging from Chief of Communication Officer to entry-level positions, specific data regarding participant positions

are withheld for confidentiality concerns as some participants did not explicitly consent to disclose their identities. Consequently, consideration was given to ensure their privacy, including not reporting the country and name of the NOC, not explicitly reporting their job titles, and replacing the name of the NOC with a generic one (Table 1).

Data Collection Tools

Considering the nature of the sample, i.e., participants are geographically dispersed, the difference in time zones and the language barrier, email interviewing is a viable solution, it is cost-efficient in terms of time considering its asynchronous nature, and multiple interviews can take place concurrently. Additionally, it allows respondents to formulate their answers competently, which results in well-thought feedback (Daymon & Holloway, 2010).

Data collection was carried out by way of semi-structured interviews. The period between the consent to participate in the study and the completion of the latter ranged from three days to six weeks, from October 2020 to December 2020. Answers were in the form of short sentences, bullet points to multiple paragraphs. Although participants are from different nationalities, 16 out of the 17 collected responses were written in English; one response was written in French, and though the authors understand the French language, participant answers were translated from French to English using the Google Translate service to limit the researcher's influence. The translated answers were, then, read and edited to ensure that the translation accounts for the context of organizational communication.

Data Analysis

Data were unitized and then deductively coded. The unitizing of data segments provided an initial opportunity to align the segments with the specified research questions. Subsequently, information units were classified under emerging themes based on similarity in meaning. Constant comparison was used, that is, recurrent revision and modification of the obtained themes to reach theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014). To perform these steps, all data were imported into QDA Miner Lite, a data analysis program that allows data unitizing and coding. Using the Varimax method in the Factor Analysis set for measures higher than 1, 12 facets were at hand including the %70 of the total variance. The status of convergent reliability and validity coefficients are depicted.

A qualitative content analysis was used to identify the importance of themes based on the number of participants' responses in which a theme is present (see, Morgan, 1993; Figure 1), the qualitative content analysis is not statistically inferential by nature, its only purpose is to help situate a given theme based on its prominence compared to other themes, e.g., a theme

that was identified by 20% participants should be considered as important as a theme identified by 70% of participants (Morgan, 1993).

Table 1
List of Participants (NOCs), Social Media Presence, and Online Media Presence Estimated Based on the Number of Followers Per Country's Population

Country	Official NOC title	Social media channels used	Facebook followers / Country's population	Online media presence (OMP)
Kosovo	Kosovo Olympic Committee	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube	5.46%	High
Liechtenstein	Liechtenstein Olympic Committee	Facebook, Twitter	3.82%	High
-	NOC B	Facebook, Instagram, Youtube	2.62%	High
Great Britain and Southern Ireland	British Olympic Association	Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, Youtube	2.47%	High
-	NOC A	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Youtube	2.34%	High
Ireland	Olympic Federation of Ireland	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube	1.46%	High
-	NOC C	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Youtube, TikTok	1.23%	High
-	NOC D	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube	1.04%	High
-	NOC E	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	0.77%	Low
Croatia	Hrvatski Olimpijski Odbor	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram	0.74%	Low
-	Organization F	Facebook, Twitter	0.58%	Low
Panama	Comité Olìmpico de Panamà	Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter	0.53%	Low
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Olimpijski Komitet Bosne i Hercegovine	Facebook, Instagram, Viber	0.41%	Low
-	NOC G	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube	0.26%	Low
Singapore	Singapore National Olympic Council	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, LinkedIn	0.13%	Low
NOC H	NOC H	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram	0.08%	Low
Algeria	Comité Olympic et Sportif Algérien	Facebook, Instagram, Youtube	0.07%	Low

Figure 1

Online Media Use Purposes and Outcomes for NOCs, i.e., Number Of Cases (Participants) in Which a Theme was Identified
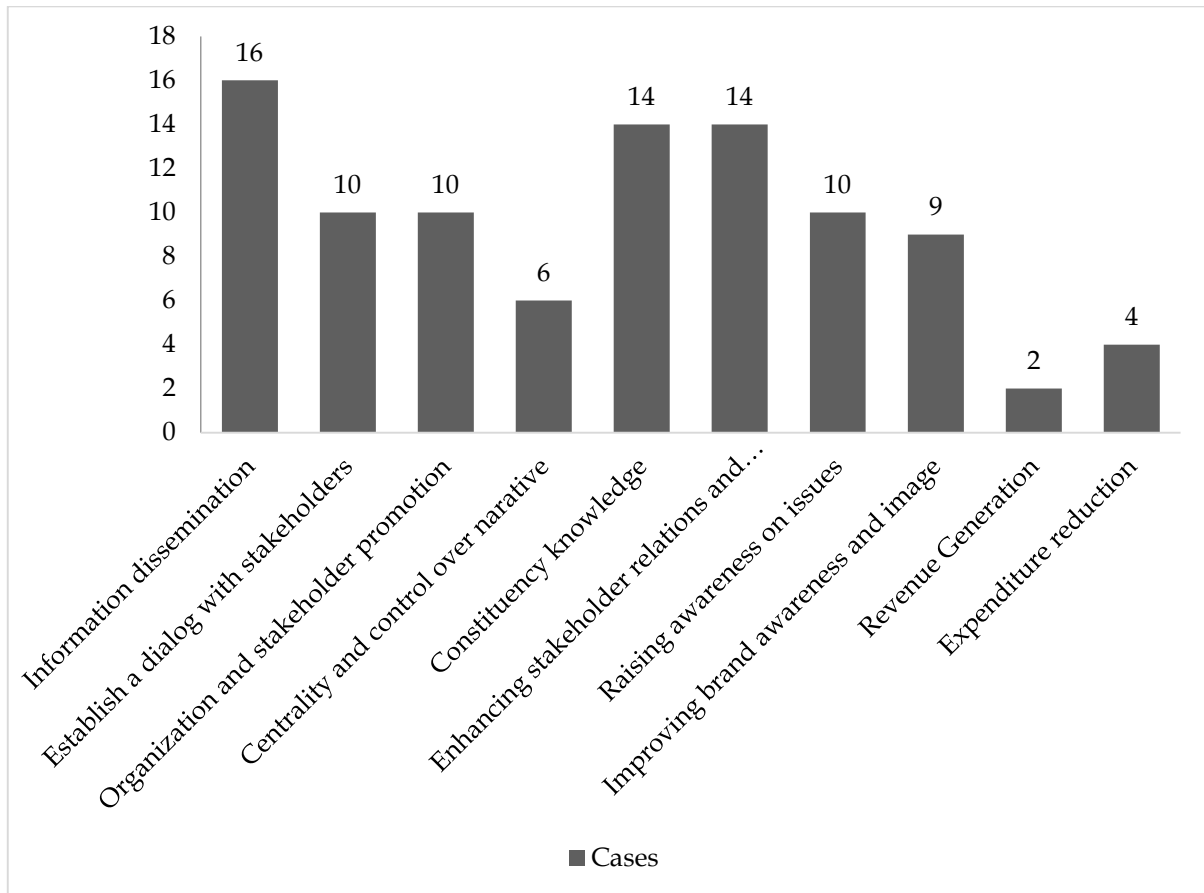
RESULTS

RQ1. Use purposes:

The themes originating from the obtained data revealed that NOCs used online media for various purposes, namely for information dissemination, establishing a dialogue with various stakeholders, increasing reach and control over the narrative, and self and stakeholder promotion (Figure 1). A detailed account of emerging themes is provided below.

Information dissemination:

The most common theme of why NOCs use online media was to promote organizational activities. In 16 interviews, participants indicated that they leverage their website and SM profiles to reach the public regarding organizational activities and upcoming events (at the time of conducting the interviews, the main marketed event was the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, which was held during the summer of 2021), the participant on behalf of the NOC G indicated that: "…communication on the web is mandatory for any organization, large or small. Social media has helped us a lot to gain visibility and recognition".

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Content creation appears to be a constant process, in which teams collaborate to share the main content on the website and complementary micro-content to share on their social media feed to redirect users to the organizational website, the participant on behalf of the NOC of Croatia indicated that:

> *"We do it pretty well. We share short headlines on our Twitter feed, and we offer relatively more information on Facebook because it's possible and people are likely to read the text, we also get more engagement by appending pictures or video clips to the text… a link is often provided to redirect users to the website for more information."*

Respondents also emphasized the relevance of maintaining a level of transparency vis-a-vis stakeholders and the general public by disclosing information regarding their yearly activity, staff, and financial reports. The impetus to reveal this sort of information not only does it emanate from social accountability concerns but also appears to be a contributing factor in sustaining the relationship with funding bodies and sponsors, the participant on behalf of the NOC of Panama stated that:

> *"We have three teams, each dedicated to a category of stakeholder, we have the sports federations team, the education team and we have a team whose purpose is to engage with the general public, to tell stories about relevant events, scores and upcoming competitions. We have a news feed about the preparations and events leading up to the games for the fans to keep them informed in real time."*

Engage in a dialogue with stakeholders:

Though many respondents (10) underscored the importance of online media, in that it provides the organization a platform to voice the Olympic Movement and its values; it does not appear to be the only motivation. The conversational nature of SM appears to be the focus of these organizations to initiate a dialogue and, subsequently, mobilize stakeholders towards the desired goal, the participant on behalf of the NOC of Algeria emphasized that:

> *"We need to be where our stakeholders are in order to open a dialogue and inform them of our events, and unite them around the Algerian National Olympic Committee. We also use Facebook as our primary social media platform to relay information to the public."*

Participants indicated that they utilize both external channels (i.e., sharing content on the website and SM). Still, they also resort to internal channels (e.g. direct contact via Viber, media & press mailing lists, etc.) depending on which stakeholder respondents seek to reach, the participant on behalf of the NOC A stated that:

"To generate engagement, it depends on what we are specifically looking for, sometimes on the web with likes, shares, clicks and time spent on the website, but sometimes we need to provoke, for lack of a better word, some sort of real life reaction in some form or another, it could be getting people to donate or volunteer to help athletes in their community work."

NOC and stakeholder promotion:

Not only do NOCs promote themselves and the values they advocate for, within the community, but they also proclaim relationships with other nonprofit/governmental organizations to foster support, the participant on behalf of the NOC D stated:

"We are cooperating with the IOC on the refugee program launched by the IOC in 2016 to break down barriers and help athletes whose countries are in crisis to be part of the Olympic family under a unified banner."

Similarly, besides promoting other nonprofit/governmental organizations, NOCs leverage their audience to acquire and promote commercial partners, according to the participant on behalf of the British Olympic Association:

"The role also has close ties with the commercial team helping generate value from digital packages and sponsored content with our commercial partners as well as with the wider marketing and communications team on our brand and PR activities... It's our main news feed source and an important part of how we keep the Team GB brand alive outside of Games-time. With over 3,000,000 followers across our social platforms, these channels allow us to champion our athletes 365 days a year, maintain our position as the voice of Olympic sport in the UK and engage our athletes, fans and partners in all things Team GB."

Centrality and control over the narrative:

Some respondents (6) underscored the need to make the organization's online outlets the main source of information, in that respondents use the website to host exclusive content such as interviews with athletes, coaches, and statements from heads of national sports federations. NOCs then share links leading to the content on SM which is considered a platform with higher reach potential than that of the website.

Respondents explained that they need to be the main source of information when it comes to "anything Olympic", they underscored that it is due to seasonality in their activity which makes third-party media less likely to cover stories about the organization outside major events. As such, it serves as an impetus to become the main information source that the

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public would elect. For example, the participant on behalf of the NOC of Kosovo argued that "*…in order to reach as many people as possible we take advantage of all popular social media platforms at our disposal*". While the Participant on behalf of the British Olympic Association emphasized that "*Team GB is at the centre of the media landscape every two years - either a summer or winter Olympics… However, for the rest of the time, Team GB is not obviously in the public eye*".

Furthermore, participants emphasized the freedom and control over content and format they enjoy on the website in juxtaposition to SM platforms, the participant on behalf of the NOC of Panama stated:

> "*We decided to make our social media posts more engaging to encourage people to visit the website to read the full story.*"
>
> "*The reason we want people to visit the website is because we see social media as having a complementary role that leads readers to the source, the official website where we have the freedom to choose the format and topic...*"

Liberty also encompasses choosing the narrative following which a story is told and the tone in 'celebrating' athletic achievements as opposed to third-party media outlets, which might tell it in a neutral manner that does not meet NOCs' expectations, the participant on behalf of the NOC of Singapore stated that:

> "*It's liberating, it gives the organization its own voice and a unique identity through original content and the way it's told, it helps keep us away from the monotony of external media. I don't mean this as a criticism. In fact, they need to be detached to some extent to tell a story objectively...*"

RQ2. Perceived outcome on the organization:

Similarly, according to our respondents, the unique character of online media benefitted NOCs in various ways, namely: constituency knowledge, enhancing stakeholder relations, and engagement being the most common outcomes identified by participants (Figure 1), followed by raising awareness on issues, enhancing brand awareness and image, fewer respondents reported that online media contributed in reducing their communication expenditures as well as by generating revenue.

Constituency knowledge:

Respondents indicated that they leveraged data from their website and SM to adequately segment and profile their publics, respondents also analyze the data to gain an understanding of the publics' informational needs when interacting with content as well as

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the ways they approach the organization. Such inputs enable managers to formulate communication plans to serve content, the Participant on behalf of the NOC of Great Britain stated:

> *"We do a lot of work with third party agencies to research our audiences. This work profiles the sort of people who are stakeholders of Team GB, what sort of content and communications they like, and how they engage with us. This is an important part of how we then formulate our communication strategy."*

Conversely, though participants see the benefits of conducting market research using data available about their online publics, some of them do not carry out similar operations, mainly due to a lack of resources and know-how, the participant on behalf of the NOC of Ireland stated that "*Collecting stakeholder information helps the organization for an aimed information and would lower costs, however it would require planning before undertaking such actions."*

One participant underscored that collecting data enables them to remain aware of how the organization and its stakeholders are perceived by fans and other publics. They also stated that it allows them to identify trends and hot topics that relate to the organization, which in turn contributes to the process of content creation, the participant on behalf of the Croatian NOC argued:

> *"… [by monitoring] mentions of our organization and those of our partners in addition of their recent activities, we can identify trends and hot topics that can affect us or have any sort of relation to the organization. Monitoring partners and related organizations helps come with ideas to generate content especially when there isn't much going on. In addition to that, I find that social media helps organizations understand the relationship they have with their public on the net."*

Constituency knowledge as a theme was prevalent across participants' responses. Upon further examination of participants' responses, we found that most participants used basic metrics as indicators of the general public sentiment (e.g. likes, comments, and shares).

Some participants acknowledged using cookies and SM APIs as a conduit to collect data and occasionally resorting to third party agencies to make sense of it. Most of the identified techniques used third-party toolkits like Google Analytics for the website, and SM dashboards available by default. While advanced techniques allow managers to assess public opinion through sentiment analyses, the less advanced techniques facilitate quantitative analyses, e.g., measuring time spent, bounce rate, or the number of pages visited among other indicators.

Overall, only 6 out of 17 participants (35%) reported using advanced techniques to gain insight into online engagement.

Enhancing stakeholder relations and engagement:

One participant stated that by showing a willingness to engage in a two-way exchange with publics on the website and SM, NOCs were successful in increasing engagement which helps them gain insight into publics' expectations as described, for instance, by the participant on behalf of the NOC G:

> *"We paint the website as not just a platform that relays stories about sporting events or an information platform. We want people to understand that we are here to help the sports community, we invite people to participate and attend events and sometimes we send survey request forms when questions arise. The more people are involved the richer I find feedback to be. We carry this message on all our web platforms."*

One participant (NOC A) concurred that "it helps adding a human aspect to our relationship with them [publics]" by portraying the organization as transparent and open to feedback which humanizes the brand. Respondents mentioned that being accessible helps them reach and retain users from the younger generations. The expedited nature of online media enables organizations to promptly respond to feedback in a one-on-one dialogue with no restriction, for instance participant from NOC F stated that "The web allows for a more personal relationship with the stakeholder, we can answer their questions; we can adjust our strategy in real time based on the feedback we receive."

Raising awareness on issues:

In discussing the relevance of online media to NOCs participants emphasized the importance of online media in raising awareness regarding social issues which directly tie to the activity of NOCs, e.g., the inclusion of women in competitive sports and related fields, the promotion of sports culture within remote areas, anti-doping campaigns, etc., as described by the participant of the Algerian NOC:

> *"We have multiple stakeholders with different interests, sports federations, the state administrations of sports and youth in each city. Generally, we focus on reaching the youth and fans, the promotion of women through sport, high level athletes to help them finance their preparations."*

Participants stated that they also leverage their social capital to raise awareness on issues that do not directly or exclusively relate to NOCs' activities. Many respondents stated

that they collaborated with health organizations to raise awareness regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, the participant on behalf of the NOC A stated:

> *"In our case, communicating on the website and social media platforms helped us raise awareness of the pandemic, not only this communication campaign is addressed to the sports community but to the general public, we collaborate with health institutions to encourage people towards a responsible conduct... "*

Enhancing brand awareness and brand image:

Participants stated that they rely on online media to remain relevant to the public eye, thus enhancing brand awareness, especially outside major events. This is illustrated by the response of the participant on behalf of the NOC of Bosnia and Herzegovina "*For any organization, the Website represents a window to the world!... NOC of BiH has developed a new website, which is highly functional and practical. NOC of BiH is also present on all social networks very successfully.*"

Participant from the NOC F stated that they brand not only themselves but also their commercial partners, by doing so, NOC F serves some of its organizational goals, i.e., gaining exposure vis-à-vis young talents and providing exposure to the public for the sponsors:

> *It's essential for us, our website and social media profiles are very important for people to know about us, our programs and attract the attention of young talent; it's also a great way to offer visibility to our sponsors. And ethically, it makes us transparent as an organization.*

Expenditure reduction:

Organizations claimed that their online media platforms proved to be a cost-efficient tool to reach different publics as an alternative to third-party media as is stated, for example, by the participant on behalf of the Panamanian Olympic Committee:

> *"This is an important asset, reducing distances and saving time and resources, we could reach thousands of people with little means. We also consider these channels as our own media compared to the press on which we have limited influence, therefore we can not [sic] control the news they share and those they don't."*

One participant emphasized the importance of owned online media considering the nonprofit nature of NOCs, that is, the lack of financial and human resources, as emphasized by the participant on behalf of the NOC C:

> *"The web is the backbone of our communication strategy which happens to be budget-friendly... Reaching audiences on the web is cost effective, and cost is an important factor*

to consider in a case like this, and data is freely available on social media, any user can access it with minimum cost."

Revenue generation:

For a few NOCs, there was an appreciation of the role that online platforms play in generating income by providing a dedicated section on the website to sell merchandise or by sharing sponsored content on social media, an instance of that is the statement of the participant on behalf of the British Olympic Association:

> *"The role also has close ties with the commercial team helping generate value from digital packages and sponsored content with our commercial partners as well as with the wider marketing and communications team on our brand and PR activities... Our social networks have also enabled us to drive commercial success around Team GB."*

Some participants went so far as to suggest that NOCs do not only leverage their brand to sell goods and promote sponsored content, but they are also mindful of the potential of owned media and the following generated thereby in negotiating with and acquiring sponsors, the participant on behalf of the NOC E argued:

> *"Increasing the number of visitors to the website gives us leverage when negotiating with partners and sponsors. I think this is a good strategy because it creates a win-win situation: we aim to create quality content for visitors in order to gain traffic."*

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study is to provide an understanding of online media usage purposes and outcomes for the National Olympic Committees, a nonprofit national sports organization. Some of our findings are consistent with previous studies regarding identified themes, i.e., information dissemination, engagement generation as usage purposes, lack of resources and technical knowledge as challenge. We gained new insight, however, into the special uses of online media dictated by the nonprofit character of NOCs which explains the emphasis on information dissemination as a purpose for online media usage, especially the website. The findings of the present study go a step further by identifying that seasonality in NSOs' activity is a cogent factor in the way NSOs use online media outlets that is to establish the organizational online outlets as a central source of information through which they have the control over the frequency and narrative of the messages. Table 2 offers a summary of usage purposes and identified outcomes as reported by the participants.

Table 2

Online Media Usage Purposes and Outcomes for National Olympic Committees

Purpose	Outcome
Information dissemination Marketing organizational activities: leveraging online outlets to inform about and promote activities and events. Social media play a support role: multiple teams/individuals contribute to content creation which is fully shared on the website and supported by micro-content on SM. Maintaining transparency: disclosing information about the yearly activity, financial statements, staff, etc.	**Constituency knowledge** Using data to identify, segment, and profile publics. Understanding the publics' informational needs. Use of advanced techniques: mostly in the high OMP cohort (e.g. APIs and cookies; in some cases, third party agencies to interpret data) in combination with basic metrics. Use of basic techniques: mostly in the low OMP cohort (e.g. likes, comments and shares, time spent on a page, bounce rate, etc.) Monitoring of trends and hot topics to come up with content ideas.
Engage in a dialogue with stakeholders Two-way communication helps in generating engagement and mobilizing constituents towards the desired goal. Using internal channels (e.g. Viber, mailing lists) to interact with some stakeholders; using public channels (i.e. organizational website and social media) to interact with other stakeholders (e.g. fans) on a larger scale.	**Enhancing stakeholder relations and engagement** Willingness to engage in dialogue: heightens engagement, humanizes the brand, accessibility helps in reaching and retaining youth. Expedited nature of online media: promptly respond to feedback, engaging in a one-on-one conversation, with little to no restrictions.
NOC and stakeholder promotion Self-promotion: promoting the organization, its activities, and the values it advocates for. Stakeholder promotion: promoting partners and athletes to gain credibility and reach constituents of their partners. Sponsor promotion: as part of the partnership agreement. Leveraging followers to acquire sponsors.	**Raising awareness on issues** Issues directly related to NOCs: the inclusion of women, promotion of the sports culture in remote areas, and anti-doping campaigns. Issues partially related to NOCs: collaborating with health and government organizations to raise awareness of the pandemic.
Centrality and control over the narrative Seasonality of activity incites establishing oneself as an authority figure among information providers, the main source of information by providing exclusive content. Freedom over the format: website hosts various types of content, e.g., articles, surveys, files, audiovisual content, etc. Control over narrative and tone: NOCs choose the narrative, adopting a celebratory positive tone in relaying information as opposed to the press (neutral tone).	**Enhancing brand awareness and image** Online media helps keep the brand relevant to the public; year-round communication about the organization's activities, championing its Olympic athletes. **Revenue Generation** Selling goods; pushing sponsored content. Leveraging followers to acquire sponsors. **Expenditure reduction** Highly targeted communication with little resources. Prominence of online media is further emphasized considering the nonprofit nature of NOCs.

By means of a qualitative approach, the analysis of online media usage among NOCs, this study showed that organizations' usages are mainly centered on information dissemination (Figure 1). Albeit to a lesser extent, NOCs also use online media to establish a two-way dialogue with various publics, either through private channels or public ones, in

addition to promoting the organization and its partners. Finally, the analysis revealed a will to establish NOCs' online media as the main source of information regarding its activity to constitute both a considerable level of following and to have control over the narrative, content, and format. As to outcomes, the analysis identified six benefits with varying degrees of importance (Figure 1), namely, to enhance the organization's relationship with stakeholders and foster fan engagement. With the same degree of importance, NOCs can further their understanding of their constituency and keep track of trends and hot topics that relate to the organization by leveraging available data obtained from SM and the organizational website. Online media help raise awareness on issues that link directly, or otherwise, to the organization. NOCs also benefited from online media in sustaining brand awareness and/or enhancing their brand image, however, the least perceived outcomes according to the data were expenditure reduction and revenue generation.

As outlined, information dissemination is the most prominent reason why NOCs use online media. Most respondents (16; see Figure 1) find that online media are a great venue to propagate information about currently undertaken activities and future events held by or related to the organization. In serving this purpose, data consistently indicated that the organizational website plays the main role by hosting content in various formats while SM plays a support role, in that they offer a brief overview of what is fully available on the website to redirect users thereto. Although information dissemination is a good tactic to maximize reach, it is criticized mainly because it hinders public engagement and does not guarantee to reach the intended public. Drawing from Hambrick & Svensson's (2015), even if the targeted publics are reached, this does guarantee that the public would engage in a conversation with the organization. In contrast, the lack of dialogue may incite fans and other stakeholders to create venues where they can discuss topics related to the organization away from it, resulting in a lack of control over brand perception. Indeed, Abeza et al. (2019) have found the lack of control over user-generated content in spaces provided by the organization as a challenge identified by practitioners within four major for-profit sports organizations in North America (NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB), a lack of said place would exacerbate the problem considering that the organization would be unable to intervene should it be the case.

Along the same theme, NOCs leverage online media to maintain accountability vis-à-vis various stakeholders, for example, disclosing information about the organization's vision, board of directors, and staff. This finding indicates that NSOs know that transparency breeds a sense of trust, a factor of great importance for nonprofit organizations (Dumont, 2013; Ebrahim, 2016). Ebrahim (2016) has identified four broad areas of accountability, i.e., financial,

governance, performance, and mission. Though these categories are congruent with the obtained results, respondents seem to attribute particular importance to governance and financial accountability. Reasons for such nuance, however, remain rather ambiguous, thus requiring further research.

As indicated previously, communication teams seek to establish direct contact with some stakeholders through internal channels, while they use SM and the website for larger scale communication. Similarly, though to a lesser extent, NOCs use social media to engage in a dialogue with key stakeholders by opting for the most convenient tool in pursuing this objective. Through two-way communication, NOCs can listen to and understand publics' informational needs, which helps create added value for both parties (Abeza et al., 2019), this can be achieved by serving the informational needs of stakeholders which, in turn, contributes to the constitution of a community that the organization can leverage strategically through calls to action/mobilization (see also, Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Along the same vein, participants seem to understand the relevance of SM in generating engagement, they use SM to disseminate information (inform), listen to stakeholders and engage in a conversation (community building), and generate support or mobilize the public towards the desired goal, e.g., including women in the sports industry, developing sport in remote areas, etc. (action), which is what Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) characterize as the hierarchy of engagement, the pinnacle that every organization should strive to achieve through its online relationship building practices.

NSOs also promote their commercial partners, especially on the website, which extends the relevance of online media as not solely an informational asset, but also as an income generation platform. NOCs use their online media outlets to promote their partnerships and partners, in many cases, the nature of these relationships has nothing to do with financial income as many partners are nonprofit or governmental organizations, which leads us to posit that the proclamation of such partnerships enables the organization to gain 'cross-visibility', in that organizations could reach their partner's publics which may potentially increase their followership. Furthermore, though Taylor et al. (2001) investigated organizations that are different in important ways from those in this study, but a comparison may help interpret our results. In their study, the authors argue that while for-profit organizations provide content that encourages users to stay on the website, nonprofits often display content related to other organizations to establish credibility and situate the organization within a greater context. National sports organizations display a behavior like

that described by Taylor et al. (2001) as National Olympic Committees often display ties with organizations to suggest identification with other reputable and like-minded.

A rather novel finding was that participants expressed the need to become the main source of information among third-party media outlets, though it is unclear how to explain this finding, we posit that organizations with a low online presence suffer from a lack of third-party media coverage which further accentuates the need to become themselves the main actor information-wise. Furthermore, the seasonality of Olympic events begets a lack of media coverage during the offseason, as such, participants choose to assume the role of the information provider and become the authority figure regarding anything Olympic. Meng et al. (2015) define the seasonality phenomenon as when a sports organization is not actively participating in a tournament or an event, such periods are marked by a subdued level of exposure of an organization to its fans which makes it a challenging period for sports organizations to engage with their publics.

The two most emphasized outcomes, i.e., enhancing stakeholder relations and engagement, and constituency knowledge can be viewed as part of a virtuous circle benefitting both parties. Engaging in a dialogue with constituents encourages interaction, resulting in more feedback. The obtained feedback, if handled correctly, represents a wealth of information that the organization can leverage to understand what different publics are expecting. It would further enhance the organization's relationships with its stakeholders if acted upon. As such, a lack of proper structure to process data into actionable insight can limit growth. The absence of data processing may be caused by the lack of resources and technical knowledge as reported by some respondents. In this regard, extant research appears to be conflicting. Some studies found that a lack of resources in nonprofit organizations has little influence on how organizations adopt and use SM (Nah & Saxton, 2013). However, the findings indicate that a lack of resources in itself is an influencing factor on data usage, this is congruent with previous studies where a lack of resources and expertise are among the most prevalent challenges identified by practitioners within nonprofits (Campbell et al., 2014; Geller et al., 2010; Naraine & Parent, 2017).

As to constituency knowledge, it can be viewed as the result of user engagement in terms of likes, shares, and most importantly comments which constitute data pools for organizations to mine and distill into actionable insight. However, only a third of the participants have indicated using advanced techniques in collecting and analyzing data (e.g. APIs for data collection, and content and sentiment analyses to gain insight), the rest of the participants stated using basic quantitative metrics to measure engagement, which is

narrowed to the numbers of likes, clicks, etc. Such quantitative metrics may not reflect a faithful picture of public engagement which might lead to faulty assumptions about the current state of public interaction and relationships as a whole, an instance of that is URL clicks on Facebook, where Boehmer and Lacy (2014) found that URL clicks are not related to user interactivity, rather a higher level of organizational interactivity with users affected overall visits (e.g., asking questions and addressing the audience directly).

As regards expenditure reduction and revenue generation themes' low occurrence, though it is unclear how to interpret this finding, previous studies addressing online communication within sports organizations have identified comparable findings, some researchers attribute it to the constantly evolving nature of SM which leaves managers incessantly challenged trying to familiarize themselves with available technologies and opportunities thereof (Abeza et al., 2019), while other researchers like Naraine and Parent (2017) associated the subdued adoption of online technologies with the lack of financial and human resources. Our data seem to point toward both factors, we posit that it may be an indicator that NOCs do not yet realize the full potential of online media in generating revenue, in addition to the lack of resources and technical knowledge as hindering factors.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research advance upon the present understanding of online media use within nonprofit sports organizations. Although an ambidextrous use of online media was found within for-profit sports organizations (Abeza et al., 2019), there is a limited understanding of why online media is used within NSOs. Here, we emphasize the multifaceted approach according to which the organizational website and SM are used, both to maintain a presence within the sports arena and to serve constituents' informational needs, steering the conversation away from the brief one-way communication narrative (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014) towards a layered depiction of online media usage purposes. Additionally, this research contributes to theory by identifying outcomes of online media usage as perceived by practitioners from different national contexts. This provides insight into NSOs barring idiosyncrasies related to specific national contexts. Lastly, these findings further support the existing knowledge according to which a lack of technical knowledge and financial and human resources are all hindering factors behind the subdued use of online platforms. Finally, Naraine and Parent (2017) discussed that resource availability within NSOs is linked to social media adoption. Annamalai et al. (2021) identified seasonality as an intrinsically linked

phenomenon to the sports industry wherein organizations struggle to foster engagement from their online audience outside events. In this respect, the findings of the present study advance the current state of the literature by uncovering other facets motivating online media usage, i.e., the lack of resources to hire traditional media coverage of external media –e.g., media outlets, bloggers, and other content creators– outside major events appear to be a motivating factor for NSOs to establish their platforms as central sources of information all year round. This also should strengthen NSOs' prospects with regards to sponsoring negotiation. These findings may seem straightforward simple concepts, they guide researchers to think about the status quo of NSOs and how they circumvent the lack of resources, the omnipresent challenge across all nonprofits.

As to research recommendations, considering the constant change in online media platforms, a longitudinal analysis comparing the usage patterns over a period can help identify the advances achieved in online communication by NSOs. It is also recommended to investigate regional and national particularities of online media usage and outcomes from an organizational perspective, as it would provide meaningful insight into how online communication is carried out by organizations in different social and cultural settings, Kilduff & Tsai (2003) argued that common traits (e.g. same country or region) establish the setting for a more meaningful insight into actors. Atouba (2019) demonstrated that to reach communication goals through collaboration between nonprofits, there are two factors to account for, reputation and homophyly. We recommend examining the efficacy of partner collaboration in reaching predefined goals and increasing online following through cross-public communication.

Although online media are praised for enabling a dialogue between an organization and its public, and though NSOs are using online media to serve distinct purposes, information dissemination still has precedence over dialogic communication. As to engagement, many practitioners narrow their definition to the numbers of likes and shares and overlook the potential of online media in begetting change within one's community.

The constantly changing nature of online media represents a greater challenge for practitioners within nonprofits as they neither have the knowledge nor the resources to overcome such difficulties. And though practitioners are using online media creatively within the limit of their resources, there is still room for improvement.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a practical stance, the results provide new insight that may help practitioners within analogous organizations. Indeed, understanding how sports nonprofits use online media promotes and guides the adoption of best practices in other organizations within similar settings. Nonprofit sports organizations should broaden their understanding of engagement as it transcends quantitative measurements, rather it is the outcome of a mutually beneficial bond where each party has a clear conception of the added value obtained from entertaining the relationship. Second, practitioners should consider providing entertaining rather than informative content during the offseason, as sports fans find entertaining content more engaging than informative or promotional messages during these periods (Annamalai et al., 2021). Third, Nonprofit sports organizations utilize Twitter and Twitter hashtags to enable inclusive conversations and popularize hashtags that serve as an anchor for online conversation regarding the organization (Naraine et al., 2021). Lastly, practitioners should make better use of available data, lack of technical knowledge and resources notwithstanding, practitioners could hire volunteers and interns well versed in web technologies and data engineering, practitioners could also call for freelancers as it is less costly than full employment.

Limitations

Though findings can only extend to nonprofit sports organizations as for-profit ones differ in many important ways; some of the results can still be applied to other contexts (e.g. the implications of seasonality on sports clubs' communication). Second, the findings are limited to participant responses comprising the sample, results are assumed to be an accurate representation of their experiences, but respondents may have chosen to depict their experience in a way that differs from reality. In other words, our findings are limited by one data source (i.e. interviews), other data sources (e.g. documents, meetings, etc.) may have offered additional insight. Lastly, though email interviewing allows respondents to offer well thoughts and formulated answers, occasionally, responses were underwhelming and took longer to obtain an explanation; in some cases, when responses were unclear, respondents did not further expand on their answers.

Authors' contributions

The first author, contributions to this research are the conceptualization, methodology, and design of the study. The first author also carried out the data curation and analysis, as

well as the writing of the original draft. The second author, contributions consist of the validation of the methodology governing this study, the supervision and critical reviewing of the original draft, as well as the approval of the final draft.

Conflict of interest declaration

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A.

Interview Protocol

1st Component: Role and current practices

Section 1. Exploration of the National Olympic Committee's communication strategy

Position within the organization and role description**.**

The relevance of online communication to the NOC and how SM and the website are used to reach organizational objectives.

Enumeration of constituent groups targeted by the organization and information of interest to each group.

Online channels used to relay organizational messages.

Difficulties encountered in communicating using the organizational website and SM.

2nd Component: Cross-platform presence and data collection

Section 2. Exploration of the attitude toward Integrated Communication

Stance of the respondent on collecting stakeholders' data to guide the organizations' communication strategy.

Stance of the respondent on online presence on multiple platforms freely available to the organization (e.g., Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Website, etc.)

Stance of the respondent as regards integrated communication.

Section 3.: National Olympic Committee's use of analytic tools and metrics of interest.

Usefulness of metrics and web analytics in measuring communication effectiveness.

[If tools are used] enumeration of indicators are used by the organization to measure communication effectiveness.