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The impact of social media within the sporting industry

Abstract

Public Relations within the sporting industry should play a vital role towards an organization's key publics, the relationships developed and the overall organizational image that the sport organization portrays. Ultimately public relations are responsible for creating and maintaining a mutually favorable relationship amongst an organization and its key publics. Based on this premise, it can therefore be said that public relations within the sporting industry serve as a management function which involves the managing of communication, reputation and relationships that determine the success or failure of that sport organization. The role of public relations within sporting organizations have acquired considerable significance in the new media era. Hence, making the job of a public relations professional equally easy and difficult in terms of understanding social media, how publics use it and how to connect with their key publics. Therefore this study set out to assess the impact of social media communication tools within the sporting industry. A quantitative descriptive methodology was employed for this study. The results of the study indicated that although social media are used as a communication tool, other social media platforms should be included in the sport organizations communication strategy.

Keywords: public relations, communication, social media.
JEL Classification: L83, L96.

Introduction

Public relations within the sporting industry play a vital role towards an organizations key publics, the relationships developed and the overall organizational image that the sport organization portrays. According to Wilcox and Cameron (2013) the term public relations can be described as a management function that creates and maintains mutually favorable relationships amongst an organization and the key publics on whom its success or failure depends. Furthermore, Hopwood, Kitchin and Skinner (2011) state that sport public relations can be viewed as a managerial communication function that is concerned with the identification of sporting organizations' key publics, the evaluation of its relationships with those publics and encouraging advantageous relationships between the sporting organization and those publics. Based on the above explanations it can therefore be said that public relations in sports serve as a management function which involves the managing of communication, reputation and relationships that determine the success or failure of that sport organization.

Wilcox and Cameron (2013) emphasize that irrespective of the type of organization, communication is of the utmost importance as it maintains and sustains relationships within the organization. The role of public relations in sporting organizations has acquired considerable significance in the new media era. Hence, making the job of a public relations professional equally easy and difficult in terms of understanding social media, how publics use it and how to connect with key publics (Beech and Chadwick, 2013). Barker, Barker, Bormann and Neher (2013) define social

media marketing "as a term that describes the use of social networks, online communities, blogs, wikis or any other online collaboration media for marketing, sales, public relations and customer service." There are numerous and diverse social media communication tools available to public relations professionals, however, the most popular include Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn (Barker et al., 2013).

Beech and Chadwick (2013) affirm that sport organizations should place emphasis on developing two-way symmetrical communication approaches which include direct interchange with the organizations' publics and considering the growing significance, benefits and detriments of using social media. Barker et al. (2013) further state that Facebook is the most popular social network followed by YouTube which is the second most popular, making these platforms well suited for improving brand awareness, recognition, perception and consumer engagement. This study therefore sets out to identify the role of social media as a communication tool within the sporting industry primarily focussing on the popular social networking site of Facebook and second popular file sharing site of YouTube. Based on this premise, this study aims to assess the impact of social media communication tools within the sporting industry and offer suggestions of the benefits of the possible inclusion of social media within the organizations communication strategy.

1. The role of social media within the sporting industry

Hopwood et al. (2011) state that PR is a distinctive management function which lends itself to the establishment and maintenance of mutual lines of communication. Communication promotes motivation through information and clarity and is a process that is

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constantly improving. It is therefore important to note that communication deals with the process of creating meaningful interaction through the use of various communication tools and that public relations are founded on the basis of communication, which makes public relations and communication inseparable (Hopwood et al., 2011). According to Beech and Chadwick (2013) the communication process is the result of successive innovations in the information sector of traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television to the new social media era of information and communication technologies.

Today's social media such as weblogs (personal websites), social networking sites (Facebook), micro-blogging services (Twitter) and file sharing sites (YouTube) combine both PR, and marketing in a participatory manner to facilitate a two-way communication process (Wilcox and Cameron, 2012). This combination and participatory approach plays a vital role within the sporting industry since the concept of building a fan base through effective and efficient two-way communication is the core business of a sport organization (Beech and Chadwick, 2013). Barker et al. (2013) state that selecting specific social media communication tools requires unique and customized tactics to successfully execute a sports organizations' overall marketing goals and communication strategies. Hopwood et al. (2011) suggest that there are enormous opportunities within the sporting industry to build brand loyalty through the use of social media communication tools in a manner which is highly successful, efficient and cost-effective.

According to Westwood (2011) some of the most popular social media platforms utilized by the sporting industry include; Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, YouTube and Instagram, however he identifies Facebook as being the most popular social networking site followed by YouTube as the second most popular social media platform. Duff (2014) substantiates Westwood's (2011) statement by agreeing that Facebook and YouTube are said to be two of the leading social media communication tools in South Africa, with Facebook being the most popular with 11.8 million users and YouTube being the second most popular with 7.2 million users. Wilcox and Cameron (2013) state that the public relations practitioners (PRP's) and marketing personnel within the sporting industry are beginning to assess the impact and power of social media communication tools on their customer relationship-building activities, brand awareness, recognition and perception.

Based on the literature presented above it is evident that social media communication tools can positively influence sport organizations brand recognition, perception and customer relationship-building. Sport organizations must therefore realize that the public is pursuing quality content that satisfies particular needs that they have through strategic messaging. It is important that sport organizations understand the publics need for information, and design their messages accordingly to stand out amongst other content. Thus, contributing to the sport organizations' overall image, perception and customer and stakeholder relationship-building.

2. Advantages and disadvantages of using social media communication tools

According to Hopwood et al. (2011) many sport organizations have adopted a social networking approach to communication as it enables them to easily target their audiences, share content and comment via links to videos, blogs and other social networking platforms. Barker et al. (2013) state that using social media as a communication tool has several advantages and disadvantages for sport organizations. Watson et al. (2002) state that one of the primary advantages of using social media communication is that it reduces cost whilst enhancing target audience reach. According to Hopwood et al. (2011) social media communication offers sports organizations more direct interaction with fans and other stakeholders, assists them in gaining more knowledge regarding the key issues faced by their audience and stakeholder base and helps tailor messages to support stronger relationships.

Baruah (2012) states that despite social media being an important communication tool, it has its own set of disadvantages. According to Chan (2012) social media communication tools require in-depth information and technology knowledge and can place an organizations image and reputation at risk due to a lack of control and dedicated time. Brooger (2010) states that utilizing social media platforms is very time consuming as it may require organizations to stay active in order to keep in contact with its frequent online audiences or users. Therefore, each and every message, comment and feedback that is posted via social media communication tools are not always completely controlled or regulated by the organization (Zimmerman, 2012). Negative comments and feedback as well as controversial opinions received from audiences or clients can have a detrimental effect on an organizations image and reputation since numerous online users can view and spread it globally (Karimi, 2009). In addition, information posted on social media platforms can be misused or abused by competitors or used for fraudulent purposes by hackers. Therefore, companies have the huge responsibility to cautiously monitor and handle all social media activities to avoid potential problems (Duff, 2014).

Based on the above explanations, sport organizations need to successfully design strategic

messages to provide its online users with quality, relevant and up-to-date knowledge and information, its online users will not only be satisfied with using that specific communication platform but will also maintain a positive image and perception of the sport organization. Highlighted as the most popular social media communication tools are Facebook and YouTube in terms of visitors and end-users (Barker et al., 2013).

3. Methodology

The research constitutes a quantitative descriptive methodology evaluating the extent to which social media is incorporated into the sporting industry. The sample selected for this study is a local rugby sport organization within KZN, Durban. It is assumed that this local sport organization utilizes various social media as communication tools to interact with its

stakeholders and key publics. A structured questionnaire will be administered to collect primary data from the staff within the marketing and public relations department via a survey method. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.

4. Findings

The extent to which social media impacts the sporting industry is reported based on the following variables: social media communication tools used in the sport organization; purpose of social media integration; frequency of social media usage; measuring communication through social media; social media button currently on the sport organizations website; can social media contribute towards a positive organizational image and social media as a relationship building tool.

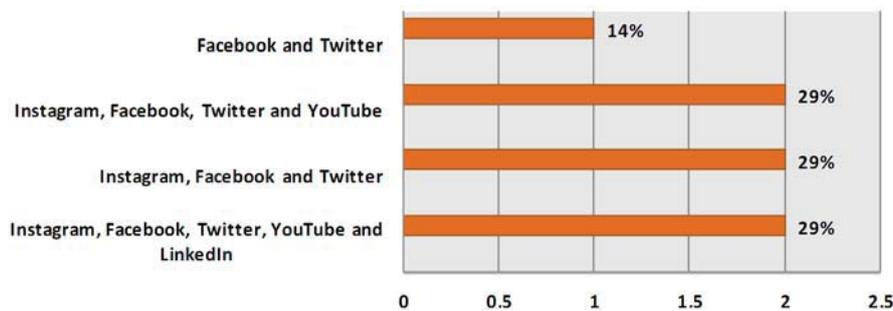**4.1. Social media communication tools used in the sport organizations.**

Fig. 1. Social media communication tools used in the sport organization

The above graph indicates that 29% of the respondents identified *Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube* as social media communication tools used in the sport organization. Another 29% indicated that *Instagram, Facebook and Twitter* were the only social media tools used in the sport organization for communication purposes. A further 29% of participants stated that *Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube as well as LinkedIn* were utilized as communication tools in the sport organization. While 14% noted only *Facebook and Twitter* as the social media tools used by the sport organization. Based on the above mentioned information, while 14% of respondents feel that

Facebook and Twitter are only used as communication tools, it is acknowledged that the most frequent social media tools utilized in a sport organization are Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. This affirms Westwood's (2011) statements that some of the most popular and frequently used social media platforms in the sporting industry today include; Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram. It is therefore pivotal to note that social media is becoming an indispensable part of marketing and an effective means of reaching an organization's target market. It is positive to note that this sport organization has already incorporated social media tools within its operations.

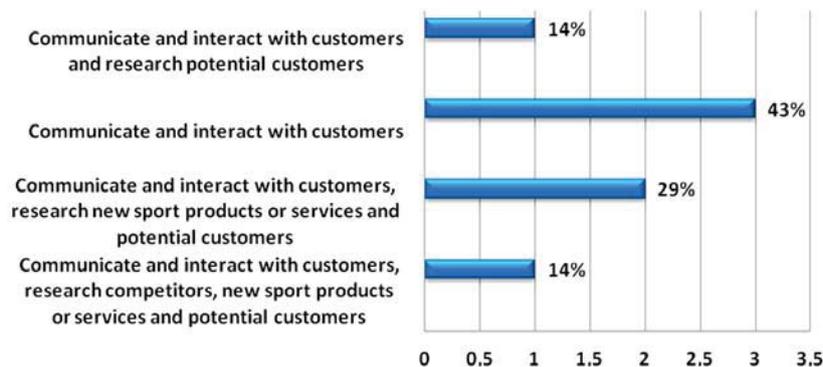**4.2. Purpose of social media integration within the sport organization.**

Fig. 2. Purpose for social media integration within the sport organization

Majority of the respondents (43%) stated that social media *are integrated in the sport organization to communicate and interact with customers*. 29% of the respondents indicated that the social media are used *to research new sport products, services and potential customers* whilst 14% of the respondents felt that it was only to *communicate and interact with customers and research potential customers*. Furthermore, another 14% of the respondents said that its purpose is to *communicate and interact with customers, research competitors, research new sport products or services and potential customers*.

The information provided aligns to the literature provided by Hopwood et al. (2011) who stated that there are enormous opportunities within the sporting industry with regards to using social media in building brand loyalty and awareness, existing and new customer relationship-building and recognition of the organization. As sport organizations continuously strive to satisfy the needs of its customers and gain a competitive advantage, social media communication tools can be employed to promote relationship-building and a positive organizational perception.

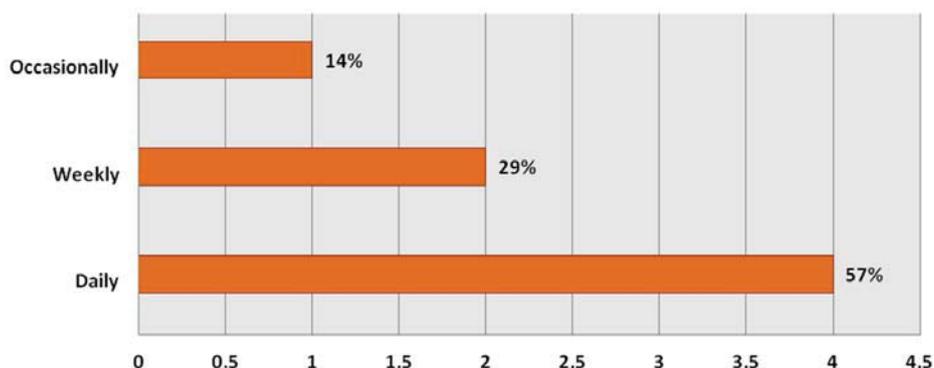**4.3. Frequency of social media usage for business communication.**

Fig. 3. Frequency of social media usage for business communication

Majority of the respondents (57%) indicated that they use social media *daily* for business communication purposes. 29% of the participants stated that they use social media *weekly* and a minority of the respondents (14%) stated that they use social media *occasionally* for business communication purposes. The findings are associated with Duff (2014) who suggests that organizations allocate time regularly to use new media to engage with its online audiences. A series of these online interactions can create a stronger online social presence allowing audiences to receive greater attention, satisfaction and feedback via the social media communication tools used.

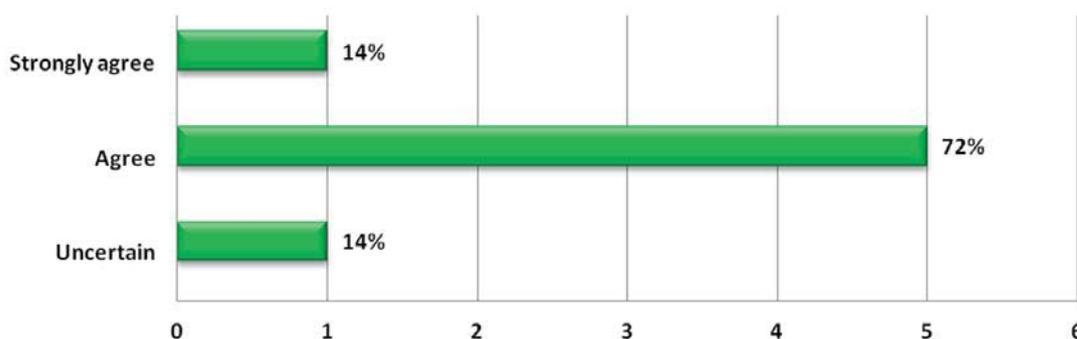**4.4. Measuring communication through social media.**

Fig. 4. Measuring communiaction through social media

Majority of the respondents (72%) *agree that public relations practitioners should measure the amount of communication disseminated about the sport organization through social media*. Whilst, 14% of participants *strongly agree* with the above statement. In addition, the remaining 14% are *uncertain as to whether public relations practitioners should measure the dissemination of information regarding the sport organization via social media*. The findings strengthen Barker et al. (2013) assertions that the need for public relations and marketing teams to measure social media communication remains of paramount importance for organizations. This will enable the sport organization to assess its progress towards achieving the marketing and organizational goals, formulate the necessary strategies and make necessary adjustments. In addition, this can be used as an indication of the effectiveness of the current social media communication tools.

4.5. Social media buttons currently on the sport organizations website
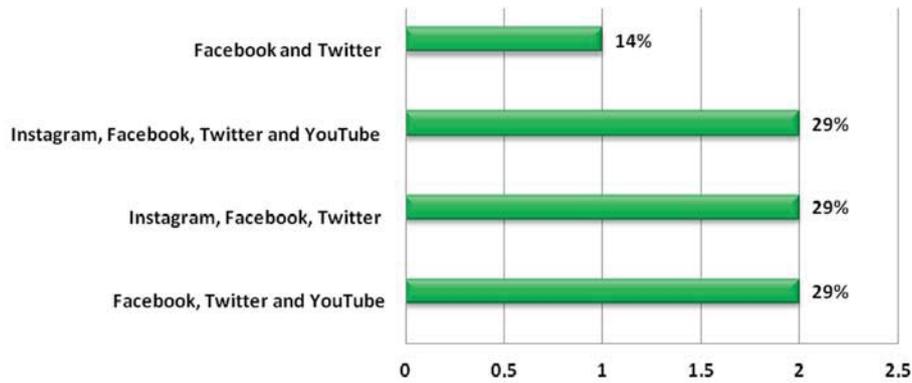

Fig. 5. Social media buttons currently on the sport organizations website

29% of the respondents identified *Instagram, FB, Twitter and YouTube* as the current social media buttons that appear on the sport organizations website. Another 29% indicated that *Instagram, Facebook and Twitter* were the only social media buttons currently on the sport organizations website. A further 29% of participants stated that currently *Facebook, Twitter and YouTube* were the social media buttons that appear on the sport organizations website. While the remaining 14% said that *only Facebook and Twitter* social media buttons could be currently found on the sport organizations website.

The information presented implies that responses vary as to which social media buttons appear on the sport organizations website. The most frequent responses highlighted include Instagram, FB, Twitter and YouTube. These frequent responses affirm Barker et al. (2013, pp. 332-335) assertions that including social media buttons on the organizations websites, promotional materials, brochures and email signatures, a greater social presence and online traffic can be created towards increased organizational awareness and brand perception.

4.6. Can social media contribute towards a positive organizational image?
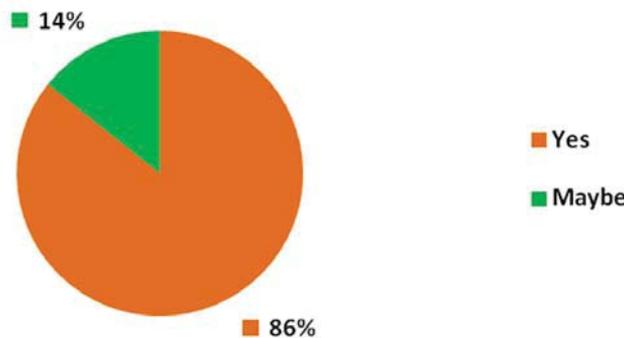

Fig. 6. Can social media contribute towards a positive organizational image?

Majority of the respondents (86%) of participants revealed that they agree that the social media used have benefited the sport organization by contributing towards a positive organizational image while 14% were uncertain. From the above mentioned information provided, it is acknowledged that despite 14% of respondents being uncertain, the majority of respondents (86%) agree that social media contribute towards a positive organizational image. This is validated by Barker et al. (2013) who mention that social media marketing contributes towards increased organizational awareness and an improved brand perception. Social media therefore provide brands with an intimate platform to connect with customers and shape their perceptions, whether through timely and targeted promotions, responsive customer service or the creation of communities of

interest. Furthermore, social media buttons appears in two forms. There are the sharing buttons and the follow buttons. Both are able to perform valuable roles if implemented well. It therefore becomes imperative that sport organizations understand the purpose of the social media buttons and the manner in which they wish to utilize them.

4.7. Social media as relationship developmental tool.
All respondents indicated that they feel that *social media offer the sport organization a cost-effective way to develop relationships with members of various strategic publics*. On the basis of the information provided above, it is acknowledged that all respondents agree that social media offer the sport organization a cost-effective approach to developing relationships. Hopwood et al. (2011) affirm the above by stating that there are enormous

opportunities within the sporting industry to build organizational and/or brand loyalty through the use of social media tools in a manner which is highly successful, efficient and cost-effective. This is further supported by Watson et al. (2002) who suggest that one of the primary advantages of using social media communication is that it reduces cost whilst enhancing target audience reach. Literature therefore suggests that social media is driving tremendous change in the way organizations interact with their customers, employees, partners and general public, providing new opportunities for businesses to influence and engage with key stakeholders while exposing the company and its employees, products and services.

Conclusion and recommendations

The focus of this study was to assess the impact of social media communication tools within the sporting industry. The study revealed that most used social media tools for business communication purposes are; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn. It was also highlighted that the main purposes of social media tools in the sport organization were to communicate and interact with customers, however, research of new sport products or services and research of competitors and potential customers followed closely after. Facebook and Twitter were identified as the most popular and frequently used communication tools in the sport organization, whilst there were varied responses as to which social media buttons appeared on the sport organizations' website. These ranged from Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. However, there are key components that the sport organization should be including in terms of their social media use for business related activities.

It is evident that Facebook and Twitter are the most frequently used social media tools by the sport organization for business communication purposes. It is acknowledged that public relations play a key role with regards to social media as a communication tool. It is therefore recommended that, despite using Facebook and Twitter most often, management should consider incorporating YouTube as a more frequent communication tool as literature suggests that Facebook and YouTube are the two leading social media communication tools in South Africa. This would create an opportunity for the organization to boost its social media online presence by attracting newer markets. The sport organizations should consider using social media tools that are directed at specific target audiences. For example, in terms of Facebook gaming, it is suggested that the sport organization considers creating or developing a local rugby sport game that can be played online on Facebook. Facebook games are today the lifeblood of the social networking website in which 50% of users log in to Facebook just to play games. Based on this fact alone, by failing to capitalize on the online Facebook gaming industry, the sport organization is literally missing out on half of the audience (gamers) logging in to Facebook. Incorporating other social media platforms more frequently in order to create a stronger social media presence over a broader online spectrum. In addition, it is pivotal that top management not only needs to be knowledgeable about social media channels, but increasingly they will need to possess a set of skills that allow them to navigate today's fast-changing, communications-oriented environment. Social media continue to create an impact on customers and force organizations to adapt. Sport organizations should not just react, but implement strategies which will allow them to successfully utilize social media communication tools and lead customer experiences and relationship in the future.

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