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The New Sport System Landscape: Understanding the Interrelationships between Governance, Brand, and Social Media in Non-Profit Sport Organizations

Today, national sport organizations (NSOs) face unprecedented governance, economic, marketing, and technological realities. NSOs wishing to grow their sport must address these realities while continuing to manage governance expectations from key funders (e.g., Sport Canada), attracting new members, and retaining existing ones. This requires balancing traditional sport activities/processes with more business-based activities, like managing their brand and customer experiences, and utilizing current technologies like social media.

As such, the study's purpose is to understand the interrelationships between governance, brand, and social media in Canadian non-profit sport organizations. Our specific objectives are to understand: (1) NSOs' current governance structures, processes and dynamics; (2) how brand governance fits within NSOs' overall governance; (3) the role of social media in these organizations' brand governance; and (4) assist NSOs in aligning and maximizing their governance, brand and social media practices through a participant workshop and webinar.

In the first year of the study, we addressed objective 1 through a landscape study (online survey) of the 32 of the 58 Sport Canada-funded NSOs. In the second year of the study, we interviewed 45 executive and board members of 22 NSOs to complete objective 1 as well as address objectives 2 and 3. We also collected organization documents (e.g., strategic plans, policies, branding documents, annual reports, and financial statements) to help create the interview guide and to provide supplementary data for each NSO. All data were analyzed following Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton's (2013) approach to content analysis.

We found that governing NSOs means balancing increased stakeholder demands with limited capacity. However, some NSOs have managed to increase their capacity or find more efficient ways of dealing with limited capacity, such as outsourcing key roles/projects (e.g., accounting, events) to consultants or contractors.

NSOs face a number of governance challenges, including (a) a lack of governance structure alignment between NSO and Provincial/territorial sport organizations (P/TSOs); (b) keeping NSO board members (made up of P/TSO Members) focused on the strategic/governance level; and, (c) having multiple strategic plans across NSOs, P/TSOs and local sport organizations (LSOs). To

mitigate these challenges, NSOs have adopted a number of strategies, including (a) ensuring information (e.g., new policies and governance changes) are filtered down to P/TSOs and LSOs; (b) providing continued education to board members on policy vs. operational boards (e.g., who makes what decisions); and (c) developing strategic plans in collaboration with P/TSOs as well as encouraging them to develop their own strategic plans in alignment with the NSOs'.

Next, NSOs believe branding is an essential facet of their identity and a valuable tool to help increase revenue and participation, while also changing the perception of their sport. Although NSOs recognize the importance of branding, capacity issues present themselves as a constraining factor, as NSOs seek to strengthen their brand but cannot focus on branding aspects due to limited time and financial capacity. Moreover, while NSOs understand the value of social media, it continues to be seen primarily as a marketing and communications tool instead of as a strategic and governance tool.

These findings provide a snapshot of what it means to govern NSOs in today's sportscape, including associated challenges and strategies. The findings also formed the basis of an NSO workshop and webinar in the third year of the study to address objective 4 of the study. Based on the participants' discussions during the workshop, the research team wrote a workshop report that include sections on the challenges NSOs face regarding governance, branding and social media, as well as available assets/resources and action points for NSOs to address these challenges (see <https://health.uottawa.ca/human-kinetics/research/the-new-sport-system-landscape> for the report and presentations). The report also offers a toolbox of additional resources for NSOs.