

Executing a Social Media Advertising Campaign for a Community Sport Organization

Michael L. Naraine and Nicholas Burton

Social media advertising is an important part of digital media operations, but is relatively unknown in sport management and marketing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the execution of a social media advertising campaign (SMAC). Using an action research approach, the research team created and executed a SMAC on TikTok for a community sport organization in Canada. Over the course of the SMAC, there were a total of 199,166 impressions at a total cost of \$520 CAD; the cost-per-click of \$0.50 CAD and cost-per-mille of \$2.70 CAD. While there were positive metrics, actual watch time of the content was quite low. Sport marketers should view this study as an important step in advancing social media operations and achieving key performance indicators.

Keywords: social media; digital sport; technology; advertising campaign; sport marketing; community sport organizations; TikTok

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade (and more), social media has emerged as one of the most captivating and oft-discussed topics in sport marketing (Moradi, 2023). Though early conversations were relatively superficial (Filo et al., 2015)—concentrating primarily on the simple presence of various sport stakeholders online (e.g., Pegoraro, 2010) and functional features of social platforms (e.g., hashtags; Blaszka et al., 2012)—the level of attention given to this marketing communications channel has remained high and has led to important investigations such as depicting motivations (e.g., Stavros et al.,

Michael L. Naraine, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Sport Management at Brock University. His primary research is in the area of digital sport management and marketing, examining the strategy, fan engagement, and analytics related to new developments in the sport business landscape (e.g., social media, eSports, blockchain). Email: mnaraine@brocku.ca

Nicholas Burton, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Sport Management at Brock University. His research explores the strategic management and implications of marketing and sponsorship, taking a multi-dimensional approach to sport marketing research. Email: nburton@brocku.ca

2014) and actualized behaviors (e.g., Wakefield & Bennett, 2018). To wit, the level of attention social media has received is deserved. Given the reality of the modern operational environment of sport organizations and consumers, as well as the ubiquity of social media and digital communications, social media has been characterized by some sport practitioners as a “necessary evil” (Naraine & Parent, 2017a; Parent et al., 2018). Despite that negative characterization, social media offers significant utility through cementing a direct link between sport organizations and consumers, affording the former an opportunity to promote their brand to the latter (Armstrong & Delia, 2016).

But this practice is not consistent across all types of sport organizations. In the professional setting, sport organizations have adopted the “echoverse” model, where corporate entities establish a complex feedback loop using a full suite of paid, organic, and earned media (POEM) strategies to reverberate key messages (Hewett et al., 2016; Vargas et al., 2023). This has led to hundreds of millions of engagements that strengthen the relationship between fans and organizations and result in increased loyalty and future purchase intentions (Achen, 2017; Naraine & Bakhsh, 2022). By contrast, amateur and not-for-profit (NFP) sport entities have predominantly adopted an owned (i.e., organizationally driven) media strategy. Due to the lack of financial and human resources to dedicate toward “social” results in a consolidated strategy whereby operations are limited and a holistic POEM strategy is unfeasible, many NFP sport organizations maintain a limited presence on select platforms, notably Facebook and Twitter/X (Naraine & Parent, 2017b). Crucially, such narrow foci prevents NFP organizations from optimizing social operations to increase awareness and reach.

In this vein, there have been very few investigations to document the social media content strategy and actionable operations within an NFP sport setting, save for Thompson et al.’s (2014) work. There, the social media (content) strategy for a national sport organization was examined, including the development and maintenance of metrics/key performance indicators with one social platform: Facebook. Research has shown, however, that NFP platform operations on Facebook (and Twitter/X) are relatively ineffective (e.g., Abeza & O’Reilly, 2014), suggesting that the (channel) strategy being implemented may be the wrong one. Of course, these platforms do generate engagement, but they may not be optimal channels for audience reach and interaction (Naraine & Bakhsh, 2022).

One prominent example of a platform relatively unbeknown to NFP sport organizations is TikTok, a social site that Su et al. (2020) highlighted resonates quite well among Generation Z audiences (born between 1997 and 2012). Despite a complicated relationship with Western regulators and legislators, a result of TikTok’s data privacy policies and Chinese origin (Barinka & Flatley, 2024; Gray, 2021), the site has established itself as a key player in the attention economy

(Haenlein et al., 2020). In turn, TikTok's business portal has increasingly sought to drive brands and organizations to the app as a means of accessing younger, more engaged demographics (Ortiz et al., 2023; Wahid et al., 2023). Research has shown that TikTok's user engagement model encourages passive users to become active users, driving interactivity among users and brands (Ortiz et al., 2023), potentially invaluable to NFP sport organizations seeking to activate new audiences. This engagement facilitation is rooted in the highly involved messaging of TikTok posts (Wahid et al., 2023), drawing upon integrated audiovisual content, textual hashtags, and cultural trend-driven replications of performances and subcultural touchpoints (Haenlein et al., 2020).

The extent to which organizations have succeeded in leveraging TikTok's reach and interactivity has yet to be meaningfully explored, however, particularly within the context of amateur and community sport. Furthermore, there has yet to be consideration of the (paid) advertising function of social media, or the "P" in the POEM strategy. Thus, if sport organizations, especially those in the not-for-profit sector, are to harness the full extent of social media, it is critical to expand on Thompson et al.'s (2014) work to newer, more relevant platforms, and assess the cost/benefit to social media advertising.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the execution of a social media advertising campaign (SMAC) in the NFP sport context. Specifically, this study embraced a marketing action research approach (cf. McNiff, 2013; Perry & Gummesson, 2004), whereby the research team created and executed a SMAC for a community sport organization (CSO), one type of NFP organization in sport. Action research is enshrined in marketing, specifically as a means to address an organization's desire to improve its operations (Ballantyne, 2004), hence its inclusion in this study. In this context, an action research approach to the execution of the paid advertising campaign was implemented, though limited to one platform: TikTok. This decision was predicated on the platform's popularity among Gen Z (Haenlein et al., 2020) and the organization's desire to target consumers in this group. With its intended purpose, the following research questions were developed to guide the study:

RQ₁: What elements should CSOs consider in the execution of a SMAC?

RQ₂: Is there value to a CSO executing a SMAC on TikTok?

Paid, Organic, and Earned Media

Within sport, there is a concentrated focus to harness social media with specific intentions to create awareness of the brand, stimulate a stronger relationship with fans and stakeholders, and, generally speaking, maintain relevancy in a digitally charged environment (Abeza et al., 2019; Naraine & Parent, 2017b). In this spirit,

social media has not been leveraged to achieve larger strategic priorities (Naraine et al., 2022), which is particularly disappointing given its ability to achieve certain objectives such as increasing physical activity habits (Hayes, 2022). Nevertheless, social media is lauded as a(nother) marketing vehicle to increase awareness and strengthen the brand-consumer dyad (Achen, 2017).

In practice, those activities manifest on social media (among other channels) through a POEM approach with each vertical serving an interconnected purpose (Vargas et al., 2023). Owned media refers to content and exposure generated by the brand on channels it controls, such as its own Facebook page or Twitter/X account, while earned media are activities generated by social media stakeholders (e.g., fans, sponsors) such as liking, commenting on, and sharing (brand) owned media (Thornhill et al., 2017). In sport marketing, the majority of research has gravitated toward examining owned media (e.g., Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; Pegoraro, 2010; Thompson et al., 2014), though earned media vis-à-vis engagement has also been discussed (e.g., Blaszkka et al., 2012; Naraine & Bakhsh, 2022). Intuitively, owned and earned media work well in tandem—the brand controls what it pushes out through its owned accounts, and can reap the benefits of earned media exposure through the algorithmic dynamics of the social media space. However, this logic is abruptly challenged by the increasing amount of “noise” on social media platforms (Stavros et al., 2014). Notably, many sport and non-sport brands are attempting to maximize their owned media by taking advantage of earned media potential and have facilitated an attention economy whereby there is increased competition for consumer attention (Yan et al., 2019).

Consequently, to expose consumers (and other stakeholders) to their owned media with the hopes of also facilitating earned media engagements, brands have incorporated paid media advertising into their social media operations (Thornhill et al., 2017). Specifically, brands can pay a social media platform to get specified owned media content to a consumer through a SMAC. These advertising campaigns enable brands to set an allocated budget, the campaign's length of time, and intended segments based upon demographic and behavioral characteristics (Luzon et al., 2022). SMACs can serve to simply achieve greater awareness or be more complex, necessitating a call-to-action, such as linking to an online store or registration form site, thus highlighting the power within this particular vertical. Further, new research suggests that SMACs do not necessarily require significant entertainment value like television advertisements to appeal to audiences, instead requiring only information and interactive elements (Hassan, 2024). In this spirit, SMACs can be a valuable tool for social media marketing. Collectively, POEM is a useful strategy for brands on social media (Vargas et al., 2023). But, to our knowledge, there is no research on paid advertising on social media within sport marketing, underscoring the value of the present study.

Method

To address this study's purpose and answer the research questions, a marketing action research approach was adopted. As Ballantyne (2004) recounts, there are four key phases in an action-based research cycle: (1) planning, (2) implementation, (3) evaluating, and (4) reflection. In the first phase, there is an energy injection from the research team with a willing participant to identify the problems and possible solutions. In the second phase, the mutually agreed upon course of action is enacted, while the penultimate phase evaluates that plan through identifying key metrics and project findings. Finally, the last phase sees the first three re-examined with critical assessment and reflection for re-planning (cf. McNiff, 2013).

The planning phase was initiated in Q1 2022, where a CSO was identified as willing to participate in a SMAC research project. This particular CSO, operating a curling club in the Toronto, Canada, area, articulated the need to utilize social media to coincide with a pre-planned "try curling" event in Q4 2022. The principal researcher met with the executive director (a part-time paid employee) and director of marketing (volunteer board member) of the CSO to establish parameters and an actionable plan. The principal researcher, with the help of a research assistant, began to develop ideas for content assets and a SMAC plan with an intentional focus on owned media content through advertising.

The implementation phase began in Q3 2022 (i.e., September) with the execution of the SMAC. First, a CSO-owned TikTok account and a content calendar were developed, with content assets developed thereafter. Second, the SMAC was executed with the following parameters: (1) a budget of \$500 CAD (with a 5% overage grace in case of anomalies or unanticipated costs), (2) a campaign that would run beginning Nov. 14, 2022 (after the Veteran's Day holiday) and ending Dec. 3, 2022 (when the try curling event occurred), and (3) targeting all TikTok users 18+ in the Greater Toronto area (GTA), and with a primary affinity for or interest in sport and fitness. In a TikTok SMAC, there is the potential to have multiple content pieces grouped together in one advertising campaign, and thus two ads were developed. Ad #1 featured the research assistant, a Gen Z (and person of color) woman and avid curler, speaking to the audience about the social opportunities post-curling, proceeding to consume a beer "after the game." Ad #2 featured the same person doing a highly difficult curling throw (i.e., a 360° spin). Both content pieces had a call-to-action embedded in the video, where the audience could "swipe" or "click" to be sent to the try curling registration page with additional details about the event. The evaluation phase and reflection phase are discussed in the next sections.

The intention of both ads was to showcase the appeal of curling to new audiences. Specifically, having a Gen Z woman of color was meant to appeal to

nontraditional curlers, and demonstrate modernity and currency. Additionally, the two ads intended to showcase the “cool” aspects of the sport through hedonic social activity (i.e., alcohol consumption) and technical prowess (i.e., trick shots). Thus, there was an intended skew toward a youthful, nontraditional curling audience on TikTok to stimulate behavioral intention.

Findings

A total of 199,166 impressions were made on TikTok throughout the duration of the campaign at a total cost of \$520 CAD. The audience was comprised of 54.16% women, and 62% were between the age of 18-34 (see Table 1 for full audience insights). In total, there were 1,012 total clicks, with a cost-per-click (CPC) of \$0.50 CAD and cost-per-mille (CPM) of \$2.70 CAD. Table 2 documents the variance (or lack thereof) between the ads when it comes to key metrics like total cost, clicks, CPC, and CPM. The most notable variance was with respect to impressions: Ad #1 received 85,146 impressions, while Ad #2 garnered 114,020. From an earned media perspective, an added bonus to this paid media approach, there were 1,477 total engagements (i.e., comments, likes): 679 for Ad #1 and 798 for Ad #2.

An in-depth evaluation of the SMAC reveals significant audience attrition in regard to consumption of the paid media. Interestingly, there were 182,029 unique video views, representing less than 10% overlap with the total number of impressions. However, video views declined as duration length increased. Only 1,370 individuals consumed the advertisements in full, though there is a 108% increase when looking at the number of individuals who consumed 50%. Nevertheless, the average watch time per video of 2.21 seconds is considerably low, and represents 10-15% of what is conceptually possible on TikTok (cf. Su et al., 2020). Figure 1 offers a modified screenshot from TikTok Ads Manager, presenting a trend analysis of video views and clicks over the life of the SMAC; it is evident that the first 2-3 seconds are critical for paid media. Specifically, it is possible that consumers are swiping through those ads to the next owned media content piece being pushed their way and/or are clicking on an advertisement immediately to see what the “offer” (i.e., call-to-action) might necessitate.

Table 1. SMAC Audience Insights

Characteristic	%
Gender	
Women	54.16
Men	45.84
Age	
18-24	27.30
25-34	34.72
35-44	19.38
45-54	11.48
≥ 55	7.13
Subregion	
Ontario	40.16
Quebec	21.59
Alberta	12.58
British Columbia	12.29
Manitoba	3.50
Saskatchewan	3.04
All Others	6.84
Interest Category Outside of Sport*	
News & Entertainment	94.23
Beauty & Personal Care	91.24
Games	90.82
Apps	90.53
Food & Beverage	89.70
Travel	88.70
Apparel & Fashion	86.08

*Only Interest Categories > 85% reported

Table 2. SMAC Insights: Ad 1 versus Ad 2

Characteristic	Ad 1	Ad 2
Total Cost	\$251.01	\$268.99
Clicks (to event registration site)	496	516
CPC	\$0.49	\$0.49
CPM	\$2.90	\$2.58
Engagements	679	798
Total Video Views	82,100	99,929
Number of Views Consuming 100%	566	804
Number of Views Consuming at least 75%	1,361	1,520
Number of Views Consuming at least 50%	2,149	2,443
Number of Views Consuming at least 25%	4,022	9,199
Average Watch Time (in Seconds)	2.10	2.27

Note: All currency in CAD

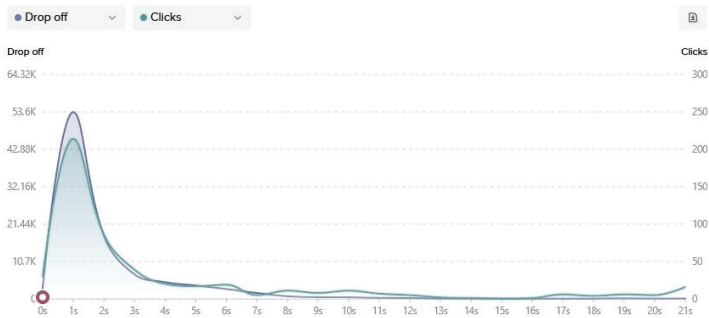


Figure 1. Visual trend analysis from TikTok Ads Manager

Discussion

The evidence mounted in this study suggests that NFP sport organizations such as CSOs should consider executing a SMAC and embracing the “P” in the POEM strategy. To simply rely on the “O,” an owned media approach, as a means to demonstrate currency and modernity via social media is practically inefficient (cf. Naraine & Parent, 2017b). Indeed, there are nuances and subtleties in the social media environment that facilitate different levels of engagement and activity (cf. Thompson et al., 2014), and that requires greater investment to maximize visibility and efficiency. Such investment does exist, but at corporate, for-profit levels where a holistic POEM strategy is utilized (Hewett et al., 2016; Vargas et al., 2023). At the NFP level, particularly in sport, the “newness” of social media and its unknown capacity seemingly continues to plague organizations (Naraine & Parent, 2017a). But that does not mean these organizations should resist doing more, especially when considering executing a SMAC. For example, a SMAC with a CPM of \$2.70 is likely more effective than the printing and labor costs to distribute pamphlets or brochures in local shops or recreation centers. Further, to suggest to a CSO sport administrator that, for \$0.50, you could direct a consumer to your registration sign-up page, that has the potential to be incredibly impactful for the organization in cultivating new members.

However, the present study has also shown that a SMAC requires some careful consideration prior to execution. Although the research team and CSO had aligned on the target parameters, the unique nature of paid advertising on social media vis-à-vis back-end, closeted algorithms creates the condition for boundaries to be broken or for misleading outcomes to occur. For instance, although the CSO wanted a targeted focus on the GTA, only 40% of the audience were in that region. Moreover, while nearly two-thirds of the audience were in the highly coveted 18-34 age range, which includes Gen Z, a third of the audience came from

an older demographic bracket. Although this latter point is not problematic on face (given anyone can try curling), it demonstrates the need to be more targeted.

Similarly, the (cis)gender and interest categories breakdown were relatively balanced, indicative of promotion to a generic audience. Ultimately, the audience yield were individuals with high interests in news, beauty, and food (to name a few), generic interests that do not sway one way or another. This presents a fundamental challenge presented by the bidding scheme used in social media advertising (Luzon et al., 2022). Given the present SMAC's budget and demographic target variables, it is extremely likely that on certain days other brands and organizations outbid the focal CSO and had their ads displayed to audiences in lieu of Ad #1 or Ad #2. But, to ensure that the platform still received all funds allocated to the SMAC budget, it displayed Ad #1 or Ad #2 to others in Canada, older individuals, and those with multiple generic interests, who still may have met some of the other target parameters (e.g., age). Consequently, it is critical that CSOs consider a more granular approach with detailed parameters.

However, the consequence of these actions requires a larger budget (as each target variable increases the bid price) or, perhaps, shortening the SMAC's overall timeframe, neither of which are inappropriate choices. The latter, in particular, may yield much stronger results for NFP sport organizations. Longer campaigns with smaller budgets are more susceptible to being outbid, whereas shorter campaigns with the same budget figures would have higher bid values. Thus, if CSOs are serious about investing in a SMAC to obtain the benefits of increasing audience awareness and generating more call-to-action results, then a shorter campaign duration may be optimal. Yet, resource capacity for CSOs and NFPs is limited (e.g., Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; Naraine & Parent, 2017b), and allocating more financial resources to promotion may not be possible, at least right away. Thus, it is imperative that these sport organizations are cognizant of their objectives, strategic goals, and key performance indicators, as those features may dictate whether SMAC promotion is necessary.

In that spirit, there are drawbacks to a SMAC, especially on TikTok. The most glaring challenge is the quality of ad consumption by the audience. Fundamentally, there is a less than 3-second window in which a brand and the consumer are connected (as evidenced from the findings). Of course, there are consumers who are intrigued by what they see in the ad, especially a video, where there is a Gen Z woman of color throwing curling stones and/or consuming a beer. But, for the vast majority, none of that resonates. For Ad #1, the entertainment value (i.e., consuming a beer) does not occur until the 5-6 second mark, and so there is a good swath of viewers who did not even see that take place (which may have adversely affected this advertisement with the algorithm and thrust Ad #2 forward for more views and engagements). This harkens back to Hasan's (2024)

revelation that SMAC content does not need high entertainment value; rather, the core message of signing up to try curling was not spoken aloud until the end of each ad. In essence, while TikTok lends itself to dynamic video assets (Su et al., 2020), marketers do not need to overcomplicate the SMAC process. Entertaining content can certainly drive owned and earned media (Thompson et al., 2014), but paid media does not require such investment. Instead, there must be caution that TikTok is simply one “spoke” in the attention economy “wheel” (Yan et al., 2019), and advertisements are not always desired content by audiences. Therefore, a static advertisement with a “clean” aesthetic may derive similar, if not greater, performance indicator outcomes.

This raises the question of value for a CSO in executing a SMAC, particularly on TikTok. Certainly, a SMAC is useful to incorporate as part of a holistic POEM approach to social media. On a brand awareness basis, TikTok offers a low-cost proposition to achieve heightened visibility with 350 unique audience members per \$1 spend in the present study. That finding alone can be valuable for a CSO who struggles to achieve exposure in a crowded (sport) marketplace. However, there are hidden costs associated with a SMAC on TikTok that CSOs and other organizations should factor into a consideration of value. The embedded algorithms on social media platforms like TikTok are difficult to manage; it is unclear what content will be pushed out, when, and to whom (with precision). Of course, some of those issues can be managed with more financial investment, but there is still no certainty. In the end, platforms desire advertising revenue for their bottom-line, and will do what it requires to get adverts to audiences, general or specific. Related, there are hidden costs of SMAC execution that lie at the beginning of such activities. Developing content assets for social media that resonates with specific audiences is an uphill battle (Abeza et al., 2019; Naraine & Parent, 2017b), and that sentiment is exacerbated moving from an owned media to paid media perspective. Moreover, developing assets that are only consumed for 2-3 seconds on average may seem incredibly costly, and devalues the process (and its results). Thus, intrinsically, executing a SMAC on TikTok seems valuable for a CSO, as it aids in developing a POEM approach with favorable results. However, extrinsically, the quality of the SMAC on TikTok may cause CSOs to question its value to the organization.

Ultimately, the decision to execute a SMAC—whether on TikTok or elsewhere—should be driven by strategic priorities and the desired outcome from such activities. For example, Hayes (2022) has indicated social media can be an important vehicle to drive increases in physical activity, but CSOs (and others) need to be more explicit about connecting the SMAC to those goals. In the present study, although the SMAC drove traffic to the try curling sign-up page, the CSO did not distinguish between signups that were referred by the SMAC or

by another means. This inability to segment registrations by referral source is indicative of the lack of strategic direction exercised by NFP sport organizations with regards to social media (Naraine et al., 2022). Fundamentally, SMAC and other social media activities should be anchored to strategic priorities with key performance indicators associated with those priorities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the execution of a SMAC in the NFP sport context, delimited to a willing CSO in Canada. A 19-day campaign yielded short of 200,000 impressions, with more than 180,000 unique consumers seeing either Ad #1 or Ad #2 to provoke the call-to-action (i.e., clicking through to the try curling registration page). Consequently, the findings offer some intriguing implications to discuss in the context of the study's purpose and its guiding research questions.

As marketers view this study, investing more resources into social media is an important step toward executing a worthwhile SMAC. The strategic planning of social media and other digital marketing platforms is largely absent, but are necessary to ensure the connection back to key strategic priorities. Further, such investment is required to ensure content assets and ongoing maintenance of owned media on sites like TikTok ensues. Thus, adhering to Mastromartino et al.'s (2024) call, there are actionable steps practitioners should take given the study's findings. At a marketing director level, there should be a revisiting of the POEM approach and what the organization is doing in each vertical to maximize benefit. Further, if it is deemed that a paid media approach is useful to achieve a strategic priority (or multiple priorities), then consideration of TikTok and other social platforms to achieve the desired outcome should occur. Concurrently, social media managers and coordinators should be cognizant to develop paid media content that resonates with intended audiences, but that does not require significant time, human, or financial investment. Finally, these managers and coordinators should also be upskilling in paid media strategies, proactively learning about SMAC dynamics, trends, and refinements.

While this study found unique results that add to a growing understanding of social media marketing and NFP sport organizations (such as CSOs), there were some notable (de)limitations. First, the study was delimited to one CSO and one social media platform for its SMAC (i.e., TikTok). Related, given its "newness" to the organization, the execution of the SMAC featured some ad hoc decisions, including the number of advertisements, types of advertisements, and the duration (and commencement) of the campaign. This also includes the lack of control or consideration for the potential influence of the advertisement content, with the hedonic and high technical sport performance attributes in Ad #1 and Ad #2,

respectively. Third, this study did not assess POEM holistically, and solely focused on the “P” through the SMAC. Moreover, the metrics provided are limited to what is presented and parsed from TikTok Ads Manager, and could have left out more granular details or the potential to perform robust statistical analyses. Finally, this study only assessed the SMAC from an internal perspective; there was no tracking of attendees of the try curling event post-SMAC, as the focal CSO was inundated with new participants on the day, and did not track what stimulated participant engagement or where they learned about the event (in a structured, robust manner).

Although these (de)limitations exist, there are encouraging signs for future research. Scholars should continue to examine SMAC within the NFP sport organization context, as well as in other sport contexts (e.g., professional sport). For example, it would be worthwhile to examine how women’s professional sport organizations utilize SMAC to drive ticket sales (as one key strategic priority). It would also be worthwhile to examine multiple SMACs in one or more organizations, comparing and contrasting TikTok to other platforms like Facebook and Instagram (i.e., Meta Platforms) or Twitter/X. Future research should also consider a longer-term approach to examining social media operations within sport organizations, crafting a study that observes the strategic development of social media marketing and the manifestation of strategy through the POEM approach (or the lack thereof). Importantly, future SMAC research should also consider the content within the advertisements, and engage in controlled A/B testing.

Finally, future researchers who engage in action research with NFP sport organizations may want to consider a post-hoc survey that captures audience perceptions and behaviors as a consequence of SMAC activities; connecting the SMAC to realized behaviors is critical to expand this line of inquiry further.

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