

Social media adoption as a marketing communication tool by non-professional sports clubs: a multiple case study approach

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media has revolutionized marketing communication (MC). Rugby is South Africa's most professionalized sport, leading the industry in its business management structure as well as its high-performance achievements. However, below the professional level, local rugby clubs face a large disparity compared to their professional counterparts, often relying on volunteers or part-time employees to manage the organizations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how non-professional rugby clubs use social media as a MC tool.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was exploratory, and a cross-sectional sample of twelve organizations was selected and employed a multiple case study approach. Club managers responsible for MC or social media participated in semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti, facilitated the researchers' use of an inductive approach to develop codes and themes for further analysis.

Findings – The findings revealed a high level of adoption of social media by the multiple cases (i.e. rugby sports club respondents), with only slight variations in the usage of specific social media applications (viz., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp). The sports clubs perceived that employing social media added substantial value to their MC. There were six emergent themes related to the organization's perceived benefits from adopting social media MC, namely: brand awareness, relationship-building, player recruitment, attracting sponsors, storytelling, and information sharing.

Originality/value – The study makes a novel contribution in terms of how rugby clubs use social media as an MC tool. The paper advances scant knowledge and awareness of the relationship between South Africa's sports marketing and social media. The conclusions will aid non-professional sports organizations in enhancing the effectiveness of their social media marketing by ensuring that their objectives and target audiences are well-defined.

Keywords Social media, Marketing communication, Non-professional sport, Sports organizations, Rugby clubs, Technology acceptance model (TAM), Multiple case study

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Today, sport is not only a variety of competitions but is also widely considered a robust industry (Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023; Mendizabal *et al.*, 2022) that unites millions of people at one time and has a unique way of allowing people to experience the feeling of personal identity and social identification (Kahiya *et al.*, 2023). In sport, the connection



between supporters and sports clubs is unique because fans are prepared to sacrifice their time and resources to support the teams, resulting in a high level of engagement (Küster Boluda *et al.*, 2024; Pereira *et al.*, 2022). Sport has been cited as a prime example of a strong shared interest in building effective online communities (Achen *et al.*, 2024; Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023), in light of existing fan bases and their degree of sport enthusiasm. As a result of this unifying nature, sport is considered an industry that has acquired a great deal of interest and attention in recent years (Achen *et al.*, 2024; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024). On a global scale, the sports industry is valued at US\$486bn and is expected to reach US\$624bn by 2027, predominantly due to an increase in professional team sports (Globe Newswire, 2023).

Rugby's international expansion proves its capacity to enthrall and captivate a broad range of viewers. Rugby continues to be a very popular sport around the world, with half a billion spectators and the World Rugby Union representing 132 national member unions and eight million players (World Rugby, 2023).

Rugby is a major sport in South Africa, with a devoted fan base of approximately 10 million people (SA Rugby, 2023). South Africa has a reported total of more than 405,000 registered rugby players, which places it in second place globally, just behind France (Ruck, 2023). These players form part of the national, provincial, university, club, and school-level structures. Rugby is a very prominent sport in the country with a strong and passionate following of nearly 10 million people (SA Rugby, 2023), and the national team, the Springboks, has excelled in international competitions by winning the 1995, 2007, 2019, and 2023 Rugby World Cups. South African rugby also participates in other rugby formats internationally, such as sevens rugby and women's rugby, respectively.

Despite the professional development of the sport, the majority of South Africa's rugby-playing population comprises amateur players who play for rugby clubs across the fourteen unions in the country (Viljoen *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, Coetzee (2016) suggests that club rugby in South Africa plays a crucial role in cultivating rugby players to eventually play provincial rugby.

The South African rugby unions have developed extensive commercial operations by implementing strategic business models to generate large, sustainable revenues annually and offering large player salaries. Despite the global recognition of the professionalism of South African rugby at the elite level, there is a perceived widening of the gap between these professional organizations and the "non-professional" rugby clubs.

Social media is revolutionizing consumer-brand interactions, particularly the creation, distribution, and consumption of brand-related content in sports (Achen *et al.*, 2024; Ernstsson, 2022; Fenton *et al.*, 2023; Kahiya *et al.*, 2023; Küster Boluda *et al.*, 2024; Naraine *et al.*, 2022; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024). Sporting organizations are fast adopting the use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp (Achen *et al.*, 2024; Burgers *et al.*, 2023; Küster Boluda *et al.*, 2024; Naraine *et al.*, 2022). These digital platforms provide distinct perceived advantages for sports organizations to communicate with customers and fans in a fast and direct manner, as well as to broaden their marketing impact and reach (Pereira *et al.*, 2022) or by creating a unique setting for enhancing sports brands through fan engagement (Irianto and Kartikasari, 2020).

Following a significant surge in social media and sports marketing literature worldwide, several studies have primarily focused on professional sports teams in American football (Andreski, 2022; León-Quismondo, 2021); basketball (Achen *et al.*, 2024; Andreski, 2022; L'Abate *et al.*, 2024); and soccer (football) (Irianto and Kartikasari, 2020; Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023; Küster Boluda *et al.*, 2024; Ojomo and Olomjobi, 2021; Pereira *et al.*, 2022; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024). Just a few studies have focused on professional rugby organizations (e.g. Jacobs *et al.*, 2022; Kahiya *et al.*, 2023; Kocher, 2014; Kucharski, 2015). Furthermore, only

one study to date has investigated this topic within the professional sport context of South Africa (Abon and Adebayo, 2020).

The focus on professional sports organizations indicates a gap in research pertaining to non-professional sports organizations. Maderer *et al.* (2018) alluded to this fact, advocating that future research should investigate sports clubs that have a lesser brand value. Achen *et al.* (2024), Annamalai *et al.* (2021), Barbu *et al.* (2019), Kucharski (2015), Lefebvre *et al.* (2024), Maderer *et al.* (2018), and Romero-Jara *et al.* (2024) further suggested that further research is required to investigate the social media strategy of various sporting organizations.

This context led to the following research questions for this study:

- RQ1. What is the extent of non-professional sporting organizations' adoption of social media marketing communication (MC)?
- RQ2. What is the perceived strategic value of social media MC for non-professional sporting organizations?

Social media MC and sports organizations

The emergence and rapid growth of social media, and how it has influenced both consumer behavior and marketing practice, has been largely driven by the platforms themselves (Abeza *et al.*, 2019; Abeza, 2023; Geurin, 2023; Sanderson and Abeza, 2024). Sports organizations must actively communicate with their target demographics in order to retain and grow their fan and support base, with social media being the medium in which most spectators interact with their favorite sports team (Abon and Adebayo, 2020; Fenton *et al.*, 2023; Küster Boluda *et al.*, 2024; Mendizabal *et al.*, 2022). The rising fan involvement within social media platforms can potentially generate more options for companies, resulting in higher sales and spectatorship for the sports team (Achen *et al.*, 2024; Kahiya *et al.*, 2023; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024).

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube are the most frequently used platforms by sports clubs and athletes in a variety of settings around the world, according to multiple studies (Abeza, 2023; Andreski, 2022; Burgers *et al.*, 2023; Kahiya *et al.*, 2023; Küster Boluda *et al.*, 2024; Ma *et al.*, 2022; Pereira *et al.*, 2022). Romero-Jara *et al.* (2024) confirm that Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were the most used social media platforms among football leagues across the globe. Geurin and McNary (2021) found that Instagram was a most useful social media platform because visual material gave athletes a larger platform to advertise their personal sponsors. Dittmore *et al.* (2023) posit that Twitter was an important promotional, interpersonal, and informational communication tool among college sport organizations. Online platforms may meet a wide range of customer needs due to the participatory aspect of social media, which connects consumers to brands (Achen *et al.*, 2024; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024).

Spectators are an excellent example of devoted supporters who remain with their team regardless of its performance, which is often evident across the team's social media channels (Irianto and Kartikasari, 2020; Ojomo and Olomjobi, 2021; Ong and Leng, 2022). Furthermore, social media has influenced sport in various ways, particularly as a communication strategy and sports branding opportunity (Kahiya *et al.*, 2023; Kucharski, 2015; Lefebvre *et al.*, 2024; Pereira *et al.*, 2022; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024; Thompson *et al.*, 2018). This suggests that social media can offer sports clubs and organizations the opportunity to reach a wide range of supporters at a low cost, to interact, and to provide brand awareness. Moreover, sports clubs are able to use online communities to access their fans who attend matches and their online fans. Sport marketing studies confirm that social media support sport organizations and athletes alike in developing brand awareness (Pegoraro *et al.*, 2017; Na *et al.*, 2019). Abeza *et al.* (2022) also indicate that social media benefit sport by building

brand awareness in a dynamic way that effectively engages passionate sport consumers. [Lefebvre et al. \(2024\)](#) affirm that the strategic usage of social media is essential to convey the sports organization's identity.

Social media have profoundly affected the way sport is delivered and consumed; the sports industry has become not only a major source of entertainment, occupation, and lifestyle but also a good source of revenue ([Achen et al., 2024](#); [Kahiya et al., 2023](#); [Kucharski, 2015](#); [Machado et al., 2020](#)). With today's technologically mediated information, sports teams may learn about their fans' habits, motivations, values, and grievances, and fans can connect directly with the teams they support ([Achen et al., 2024](#)).

[Ernstsson \(2022\)](#), [Kucharski \(2015\)](#), and [Romero-Jara et al. \(2024\)](#) believe that sports organizations should make use of social media to strengthen fan interactions with the sports products and the teams that they support. Hence, sports organizations are able to obtain a greater insight into their fans, which may equip them to adapt their marketing plans. [Pegoraro et al. \(2017\)](#) indicate that despite having less funding and lower levels of fan interaction, niche sport organizations can still develop relationships with potential supporters by using social media. The significance of word of mouth in sport marketing has substantially increased due to social media becoming a key platform for sport consumers to engage and share their experience ([Abeza et al., 2017](#)). Although engaging with fans, supporters, and other stakeholders online can be challenging for a sports team, it is worthwhile to use these platforms with their many beneficial activities ([Achen et al., 2024](#); [Kahiya et al., 2023](#)). This indicates that social media allows sports brands to extend their market and brand reach, which amplifies overall brand identity and experiences. [Wang \(2023\)](#) confirms that sport organizations can use social media to maintain fan engagement by sharing updates regarding games, events, and players.

Additionally, social media platforms offer sports brands an effective way to communicate preferred company brand associations and brand identity to their supporters ([Annamalai et al., 2021](#); [Lefebvre et al., 2024](#)). [Abeza et al. \(2020\)](#) suggest that sport managers should conduct activities that promote brand humanization, empower audiences to be educated consumers, and provide customer services to further nurture the value of social media. Organizations are acknowledging the necessity to design their presence on social media channels to regulate their brand marketing and to gather insights into consumer-generated content about their brand ([Beissel et al., 2022](#); [Ernstsson, 2022](#)). [Abeza et al. \(2022\)](#) agree that social media allows brands to communicate with consumers faster, cheaper, and more interactively. As social media marketing has become more popular, many brands now allocate a large segment of their marketing budgets to it ([Ernstsson, 2022](#)). Consequently, this study explores the use of social media MC by non-professional rugby clubs in South Africa.

Sports clubs frequently explore creative ways to enhance their brand promotion and engage with their supporters, and technological improvements play a vital part in these endeavors. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was developed by [Davis, \(1989\)](#) and designed to investigate the process by which employees embrace technology. Several studies have examined the effectiveness of the TAM in assessing user behavior in sports settings ([Goibert and Greenhalgh, 2020](#); [Ojomo and Olomjobi, 2021](#); [Uhrich, 2022](#)). However, there is a lack of research on the qualitative use of the TAM ([Duffett and Thomas, 2024](#); [Thomas and Duffett, 2024](#)). Hence, this study will also evaluate the rugby club's social media MC usage in terms of the TAM's usage (perceived usefulness and ease of use) and behavioral (intentions and actual usage) variables.

Methods

In order to achieve the aims of the study, the interpretivist philosophy was chosen as the most efficient way to access rich empirical data and different points of view from the respondents

about their relationship with sports and social media MC. Qualitative research is commonly accepted as an inductive method that involves organizing data into themes or categories and finding connections between those themes or categories (Yadav, 2022). Furthermore, given that there are few studies on South African sports teams' use of social media, the selected research strategy aided in gathering new insights into the study topic.

The study employed a cross-sectional approach, as it retrieved and detailed data from multiple sources within the selected sample of important stakeholders from South African rugby clubs. This study utilized a cross-sectional and multiple case study methodology (each rugby club served as an individual case), which necessitates obtaining data on a phenomenon from many respondents but only once.

This study focused on the club rugby system and, in particular, the Western Province Rugby Union (WPRU) leagues. The WPRU administers the annual club league competitions across the Western Cape, which involve over 110 rugby clubs in the region. Nine league divisions, highlighted below, subdivide the league into two main categories: the Super League clubs and the regional league clubs. The study focused on rugby clubs that participate in the Super League A, B, and C divisions (15 teams in each league) (WP Club Rugby, 2023).

The researchers conducted preliminary research and analysis as part of the sampling procedure to determine whether South African rugby clubs had a presence on social media. The smaller sample size in a multiple case study research design does not always allow for random selection; thus, the sample for the study was chosen using a non-probability sampling technique and a judgmental (or purposive) sampling method. The researchers purposefully selected the cases based on their direct participation in the social media platforms and marketing activities of the rugby clubs. Thereafter, respondents from suitable rugby clubs within the above-mentioned research population were selected as the sample frame, which met the social media usage criteria and was accessible. The chosen sample units for the interviews were appropriate, as they were directly involved in managing their rugby clubs' social media channels. An introductory email and an invitation to participate in the research study initiated the communication with the respondents. Upon the respondents' agreement to participate, the researchers requested a formal, signed permission letter from the rugby clubs to confirm their participation in the interview process.

The researchers established the sample size by collecting data until the study reached saturation, at which point they stopped adding new data from interviews or analysis (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). In this case, the study reached data saturation after ten interviews and conducted two additional interviews to confirm this. A number of local and international qualitative sports studies also achieved data saturation with a sample size of twelve or fewer interviews.

South African qualitative sports studies by Moyo *et al.* (2020, 2022a, b, c), used a sample size of six organizations to determine the link between professional sports organizations' marketing performance and corporate social responsibility. Furthermore, several international studies that investigated various sports codes and social media used samples of between six and twelve respondents (Andreski, 2022; Fitri *et al.*, 2023; Geurin, 2017; Kocher, 2014; Kucharski, 2015; Oshimi and Yamaguchi, 2023; Sharifzadeh *et al.*, 2021; Su *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, these qualitative studies suggested that a sample size of twelve respondents was appropriate.

Ethical approval was received from the researchers' faculty ethics committee (FOBREC2020805) before conducting the study.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a variety of adjustments to standard research procedures, notably data collection. The advent of new video conferencing tools presents qualitative researchers with new avenues to collect real-time data (Gray *et al.*, 2020). The online video platform Google Meets was used to conduct six of the twelve interviews. The other six interviews took place through telephone calls. Due to South Africa's stringent

COVID-19 regulations, online and telephonic interviews were the preferred and most appropriate method for conducting semi-structured interviews during data collection. The interviews (online and telephonic) were audio recorded on an additional device, allowing the researchers to listen repeatedly to the interviews to ensure data validity and reliability, which is imperative when analyzing and coding the data. Prior to the interview, participants provided consent for the interview to be recorded. Interviews were chosen as a data collection method for the study, which assisted the researcher in gaining a holistic overview in an attempt to answer the study's research questions.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with rugby clubs' marketing stakeholders using an interview guide as a data collection instrument. However, preparation for the interview is an important aspect of a successful interview. With the interview taking place online and telephonically, it was significant that both the researchers and respondents had access to a stable internet and mobile network connection to avoid signal issues or any time wastage. The researchers encountered two major challenges during the data collection process: Because participation was optional, several respondents who declined to participate for personal reasons may have prevented the study from gathering more useful information. COVID-19 restrictions also limited the opportunity for any in-person interviews to take place, although the use of online and telephonic interviews might also have provided the rich and detailed data required for this study.

Table 1 provides a summary of the respondents, also indicating the geographic region of the club and the interview details.

The semi-structured interview guide included questions relating to social media usage and tools, such as "Which social media platforms are you currently using?" and "How often do you post on social media?" To identify the strategic intentions and purpose of using social media MC, the following questions were asked: "What value is there in using social media MC channels in marketing the rugby club?" and "What is the primary purpose of having a social media presence for your club?"

The data obtained was transcribed verbatim, then inductively coded and themed, using ATLAS.ti (version 9). The next section discusses these themes in relation to the study.

Results

Social media usage

The results confirmed that all the cases had a social media presence, which included the platforms of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and WhatsApp. All cases confirmed that they

Case	Region	Interview duration	Position
1	Belville	34 min	Social media representative
2	Constantia	35 min	Media liaison
3	Goodwood	25 min	Head of marketing
4	Greenpoint	36 min	Social media co-ordinator
5	Stellenbosch	28 min	Social media manager
6	Parow	25 min	Social media representative
7	Paarl	33 min	Social media manager
8	Kenilworth	32 min	Club administrator
9	Somerset West	28 min	Social media representative
10	Milnerton	44 min	Club administrator
11	Belville	47 min	Brand and project coordinator
12	Claremont	27 min	Marketing manager

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 1.
South African rugby
club sample
description

used both Facebook and Instagram. Four cases engaged with Twitter (X), and three cases indicated that they used WhatsApp. Two of the cases used all four of these social media platforms.

However, there was a larger variation in the frequency of usage, with two cases indicating daily postings and the remaining cases indicating that they posted on a weekly basis.

The study discovered that non-professional South African rugby clubs utilize social media as a marketing communication tool, primarily driven by the aim of boosting brand recognition for the rugby club, sponsors, and players. These findings are supported by Kemp (2023), who indicated that Twitter (X), Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook are the top four social media channels where companies are extremely engaged in South Africa. Other recent studies reported that Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube are the most frequently used platforms by sports clubs, teams, and athletes across various settings around the world (Achen *et al.*, 2024; Burgers *et al.*, 2023; Garat and Capitano, 2023; Jacobs *et al.*, 2022; Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023; Ma *et al.*, 2022; Prada, 2023; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, apart from the use of YouTube, these findings are very similar to international social media usage by sports organizations. These findings confirm the TAM's actual usage and behavioral intention variables for social media platforms by rugby clubs.

Motives for the use of social media MC

The main research objective of this study was to determine why South African rugby clubs are using social media as part of their MC strategy. The responses identified six key themes for using social media: brand awareness, player recruitment, attracting sponsors, storytelling, building relationships, and information sharing and communication. These are now elaborated:

Brand awareness. Building brand awareness for the rugby club, sponsors, and players was a significant motivator for using social media as an MC tool for seven of the cases. Case 5 revealed that they used social media as a way to showcase sponsor brands: "Well, it is first to use the platform to showcase our brand, to share some history and tradition, and to share what the club is all about." Case 1 confirmed that social media MC was pivotal in attracting outsiders such as students and parents: "We decided that the best way for us to attract outsiders, such as students and parents, was to use social media."

Several cases suggested that a motive for creating awareness for the club through social media MC was to show people what the club was about and to get people to participate more actively in the club. Case 5 reported, "For sponsors, it gives them a base to showcase their brand," and Case 6 disclosed, "My main goal was to have people see what the club is really about and that sense of family at our club; if you feel apart, you will participate more actively in the club."

In contrast, other cases indicated that the club used social media MC for brand awareness among players too, for example: "The building up, almost, of portfolios for these players on social media is valuable to them." [Case 4] and "We also use the platform for the current players to showcase what they are about. I mean, the photos and videos just give them exposure." [Case 5]

Case 11 also affirmed that the club used social media for brand awareness because of its perceived penetration and reach into the target market: "Every single one has a mobile in their hands most of the time, and social media seems to have the penetration and the reach that you want."

This research found that the non-professional South African rugby clubs make use of social media as an MC tool, which is chiefly motivated by the desire to increase brand recognition for the rugby club, sponsors, and players. These findings are consistent with other research, which revealed that social media help athletes and sports organizations alike to enhance brand awareness among sports organizations and athletes in many countries

(mainly developed nations) across a number of sports codes (Andreski, 2022; Barbu *et al.*, 2019; Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023; Kucharski, 2015; Ong and Leng, 2022; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024), which revealed that social media help athletes and sports organizations alike to enhance brand awareness. Very few cases verified that their club made use of social media as a way of increasing brand awareness due to its perceived visibility and reach into the club's target market. Consumer engagement was another motivating factor among soccer (football) clubs and cricket clubs (Abon and Adebayo, 2020; Annamalai *et al.*, 2021; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024). This research also shows that a motivation for increasing club awareness using social media MC is to encourage people to engage more actively with the rugby club.

Relationship building. Building relationships and connecting with key stakeholders such as the local community, fans, members, and former players were seen as motives for the use of social media as a MC tool by the majority of the cases.

Half of the cases reported that they used social media MC to engage with and stay in touch with their communities and club members. For example, Case 2 stated: "As a growing club and playing Super League A rugby, you want to engage with your community and support your community. Social media is basically a tool to communicate with your community and people around you." Case 8 suggested: "We try and do a lot of fundraisers and just events to have get-togethers and gatherings at the rugby club itself just to bring the communities together. And that drives our social media page." and Case 10 declared:

Members are always trying to stay in touch with the club, and in the olden days, we used to write newsletters and send it to them. But now, with social media, more and more of the older generation is getting onto social media, although they do not always understand how to use it. They are on Facebook, or Instagram, or whatever, so we share quite a lot on there.

Moreover, a couple of cases stated that engaging with fans was an objective for using social media MC: "My personal objective with social media was, first of all, just connecting with the fans more, getting them more involved." [Case 6] and "Engaging with the supporters where they can go see, hey, there's articles being written about us." [Case 7]

Case 10 noted that former club players are still trying to engage with the club, and social media MC has allowed them to communicate with former players: "A lot of our players have moved overseas, and/or some of them have stopped playing rugby, so they moved away. They are always trying to stay in touch with the club."

Building relationships and interacting with key stakeholders, such as the local community, fans, members, and past players, is apparent from this study's results. The research affirms that social media MC is used to stay connected with people in their community and in their rugby clubs. Recent literature concurs that sports organizations are actively developing relationships with present and prospective consumers via digital channels in order to create appropriate brand communities (Andreski, 2022; Ernstsson, 2022; Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023; Kucharski, 2015). This study also revealed that interacting with fans was a goal of their social media MC usage. This finding is in alignment with studies by Barbu *et al.* (2019) and Romero-Jara *et al.* (2024), who also found that social media communication is critical for their sample selection of sports clubs or teams to retain and build their fan base relationships. Furthermore, Andreski (2022) is of the opinion that teams must first establish ties by employing social media, which is an excellent tool for promoting and retaining two-way interactions, sharing information, and telling stories. Taking into account how pleased the rugby clubs were with how they used social media to promote their brand and establish relationships, this proves that Thompson *et al.* (2018) were correct when suggesting that social media platforms help sports organizations build and improve their brand as part of a longer-term relationship marketing approach. This inquiry also confirms that relationship building is imperative as a motive for employing social media MC within a non-professional sports context in South Africa.

Player recruitment. Several cases cited player recruitment as a benefit and motive of social media MC usage. Case 1 mentioned that since using social media MC, the rugby club now has people interested in playing for the club: “Since we used social media, the club now gets a lot of people who are interested in playing for the club.”

Case 4 stated that the more awareness created around the club, the better the club was able to attract players: “I think the more awareness you can create around the club . . . the more likely you are going to be able to recruit a player whose ambition is to go play at Super League A level.”

Case 4 also felt that social media MC recruitment campaigns were important to employing better-quality players:

I can certainly see if we even do recruitment campaigns towards the end of the year in order to get guys excited for the beginning of the season next year and we start winning more games because we're recruiting better quality players.

The results suggest that the recruitment of players was an important motive for using social media MC since it increased interest and awareness, which enabled the rugby club to attract players. A number of other studies agree with the growing significance of social media as a marketing tool for player recruitment purposes (Bigsby *et al.*, 2019; Bunch *et al.*, 2024; Dunn *et al.*, 2024; Garat and Capitanio, 2023; Jackson, 2019; Kian and Zimmerman, 2023; Prada, 2023). Radicchi and Mozzachiodi (2016) concur that social media has made it easier for scouts and coaches of Italian football club managers to communicate with recruiting prospects. The study posits that the football club teams may be able to improve the effectiveness of the recruiting procedures by using social media to cut costs, increase information flow, facilitate information exchange, and increase the geographic scope of scouting. However, Dunn *et al.* (2024) caution that sports recruiters use social media to indirectly contact players who are otherwise protected by university recruitment and scholarship policies, which is why coaches are concerned about online marketing through social media. Hence, this study affirmed that social media MC can play an indirect yet crucial role in player recruitment.

Attracting sponsors. Several cases identified attracting and linking sponsors as an important benefit of social media MC usage, for example: “This translates to the next thing, where I approach corporate organizations to sponsor the club.” [Case 3] and “So naturally, for me, it was to link sponsors to it to sell the brand more.” [Case 9]

Case 1 confirmed the importance of using social media MC to attract sponsors: “We are trying to get there; I think the more we post, the more we attract sponsors, so that we, hopefully, one day, are going to get huge sponsorships.”

Research by Garat and Capitanio (2023), and Scott *et al.* (2022) found that social media offers significant sponsorship opportunities for sponsor engagement and activations. Boricheva (2022) and Koronios *et al.* (2022) report that knowing the fan base and prospective followers is essential in order to focus on gaining fans and sponsors. This links to the present study, whereby a few cases highlighted that acquiring and establishing sponsors is a significant benefit of using social media. Contrarily, a study on professional sports teams found that a lack of innovation in social media content can have a negative effect on attracting and maintaining sponsorships over short- and long-term timeframes (Naraine *et al.*, 2022). Though attracting sponsors via social media was not the most prominent motive for social media MC usage in this study, rugby clubs in South Africa have also embraced social media platforms to increase the value of their brands by gauging the interest of sponsors and other stakeholders, which is consistent with the aforementioned studies.

Storytelling. Case 2 also presented the following idea on storytelling as part of the benefits of social media MC usage:

We want to show people what we're about, and our community, and our club "gees" [spirit]. We want to show people what the club is about, and what is our ethos, and why we are what we are, and the club has come a long way from back in the day to where it is now, and we want to tell the story.

Several other cases agreed that storytelling serves as an important motive for using social media: "I think the professional teams like to get involved in community projects and uplifting the community. I think that is always a beautiful story to tie in when you are involved with a club." [Case 3] and "I am looking for a good story; I'm looking for success; and I'm looking at always pushing education." [Case 11]

The results indicate that storytelling is an important motive for rugby clubs to use social media MC. Hamer (2021) confirms that storytelling is a traditional sports marketing strategy. For example, the human story of an athlete's rejection and overcoming adversity can be used to inspire fans and create positive connections between consumers and brands. Marketers are aware that the most influential brands tell the best brand stories. Sport can increase viewership through relevant branded content in a way that aligns with the story. This results in enthusiastic fans, new viewers, and other media opportunities. The New Zealand national rugby team, the All Blacks, always uses powerful storytelling to support its valued brand, harness its rich history and heritage, and modernize it with the next generation into today's sustainable brand (Kelly, 2020). In addition, the rise of para-athlete sport (Hu *et al.*, 2023) and women's sport (Beissel *et al.*, 2022) also provides a strong platform for memorable storytelling within the sports marketing setting. This investigation verifies that storytelling is also a motive for utilizing social media MC by South African rugby clubs.

Information sharing and communication. Sharing information and communication were considered important objectives for rugby clubs using social media. Case 1 suggested that having information on social media MC has invited people to the club: "Using social media has invited a lot of people to come to the club, and it is now much easier because the information is out there."

Another case indicated that, from an internal communications perspective, social media was useful for semi-professional rugby clubs: "From an internal communications perspective, I think social media is quite useful, especially when you are dealing with clubs that are semi-pro." [Case 4]

Several cases argued that social media was the most effective communication tool at present for their clubs. Case 6 posited: "I think it is the most effective and the most useful communication tool too, not only connecting with your players but your fan base as well . . . and letting the supporters know what's going on." Case 11 mentioned: "We have now made it a formal part of our communications throughout the structure of the club, from the coaches to the administrators; if we want a message to reach the rugby player, it is via social media."

Half of the cases reported that social media allowed them to provide critical information to club members, such as fixtures, results, and events happening at the club. Several responses below provide further insight in this regard:

The purpose is, basically, for information; the guys want the scores, and they want the results of the weekend. A lot of the other guys are busy at work, and they do not have time for social media or are not allowed to have social media, so when they get home, they want to catch up on what's going on; either via Facebook or Instagram, we communicate with them. [Case 10]

It became a tool to give access to what's happening at the club and keep people updated with fixtures, results, and events that might be happening at the club. I think, in that way, it has brought a much more engaging presence to the members, that constant engagement with our audiences, it has definitely been great. [Case 12]

The cases considered the motive for using social media MC from distinct viewpoints. All cases reported that they believed there was value and benefit in using social media MC to

promote the rugby clubs. In summary, the multiple cases recognized brand awareness, building relationships, attracting sponsors, storytelling, player recruitment, and information sharing and communication as important factors for using social media, as seen in Figure 1.

It is evident from the results that sharing information and communication was considered an important objective for rugby clubs using social media. Social media enabled them to communicate vital information to club members, such as fixtures, results, and club activities. However, few rugby clubs reported that social media was an excellent means for their clubs to communicate in real time. Machado *et al.* (2020) pointed out that social media should be regarded as a more modern form of communication within the standard marketing mix for sports organizations. Although the aforementioned study focused on a single case within the professional sports context, findings comparable to the present inquiry suggest that the evolution of social media affords a tremendous opportunity for sports organizations to establish ties with the general public and their key stakeholders. Hence, in line with prior recent studies (Abon and Adebayo, 2020; Achen *et al.*, 2024; Garat and Capitanio, 2023; Irianto and Kartikasari, 2020; Jacobs *et al.*, 2022; Kahiya *et al.*, 2023; Küster Boluda *et al.*, 2024; Romero-Jara *et al.*, 2024), the results of this research indicate that active social media engagement is primarily associated with the desire to be connected to the brand community through interactions with the brand and other fans.

The present investigation focused on the motivating factors behind the use of social media MC by rugby clubs. While the study specifically looked at non-professional rugby clubs in South Africa, the findings align with those of numerous college and professional sports teams discussed previously. The six social media MC usage categories align well with the TAM's perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use variables. The multiple cases from the rugby clubs perceived social media MC as useful for creating brand awareness, building relationships, disseminating information, and communicating with various stakeholders. The multiple cases also perceived social media MC as relatively easy to use for attracting sponsors, recruiting players, and storytelling purposes.

Conclusions, implications, and limitations

The study confirms that South African rugby teams use social media as an MC tool. The extent of social media usage ranges from a variety of platforms to consciously chosen media, but the rugby clubs preferred Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Based on this conclusion, other sports organizations and clubs should consider a variety of social media platforms when engaging with their audience base. This will allow organizations to reap the benefits of the unique aspects of each of the platforms, for instance, Twitter's distinctive focus on real-time game updates and announcements. The consumption of visual data on social platforms such as Instagram and Facebook serve as an opportunity for a club and its players

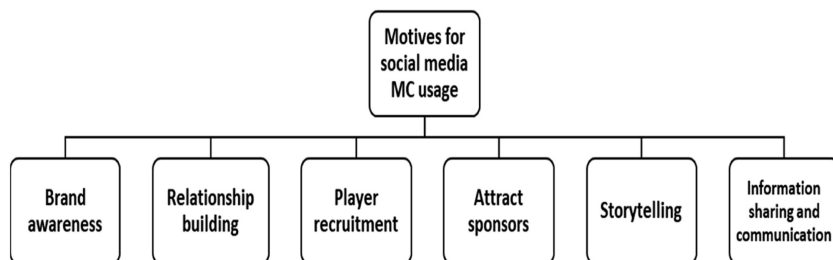


Figure 1.
Motives for social media MC usage

Source(s): Authors' own work

to increase team recognition through the use of visual techniques. Hence, WPSL rugby clubs and other sport organizations should consider Instagram and Facebook Live platforms for presenting real-time information on sport events, which may result in a higher level of community-wide experience. In addition, live streaming and providing real-time updates and highlight segments of a sporting event could be an efficient approach to promote this type of social media interaction for sport clubs.

The study also confirms that South African non-professional rugby teams use social media to enhance brand awareness. There are numerous ways to raise brand awareness, and social media is by far one of the most effective, particularly for sports brands. Brands and sports organizations are encouraged to use social media to engage their target audience, as this increases customer engagement and brand awareness. For South African rugby club teams, greater social media engagement can indicate that more people are aware of their brand and that their marketing efforts are more valuable. Rugby clubs have the chance to reach out to new users and effectively communicate with their audience through this opportunity.

This study demonstrated that developing relationships with both internal and external stakeholders and recruiting players were major driving forces for rugby clubs to use social media as an MC tool. Based on these conclusions, sports organizations should consider social media as an effective tool for establishing and maintaining relationships with their target audience and for recruiting players. Social media MC can also assist in reducing the length and cost of the player recruitment process. South African rugby clubs should use existing social media platforms to establish connections, which can help them extend their reach, strengthen the brand, and build a consumer and player base, thus continually providing effective methods to connect with the audience and enhance engagement. Though attracting sponsors through social media was not the most important reason for using social media in this study, rugby clubs in South Africa have also adopted social media platforms to improve the value of their brands by assessing the involvement of sponsors and other partners. As previously stated, social media allows brands to build relationships with new and existing audiences; therefore, sports organizations should use social media to identify suitable sponsors, as it is a way to increase a team's resources and promote community outreach. Social media enables brands to establish connections with both new and existing audiences. Therefore, sports teams should leverage social media MC to identify suitable sponsors, as it not only enhances their resources but also fosters community engagement. WPSL rugby clubs have the potential to provide sponsors with a predetermined quantity of social media postings on their platforms, which would mention or tag the sponsor and incorporate their logo as a sponsor in the teams' social media profile images.

Rugby clubs were unanimous in their belief that social media had a positive influence on their brands. The current investigation concluded that multiple cases considered storytelling, sharing information, and communication as critical motives for rugby clubs' use of social media as an MC tool. The desire to feel connected to the brand community through connections with the brand and other fans drives active engagement, which brands and marketers should prioritize. Sports organizations should consider continuously distributing stories and information via social media, which may lead to a deeper relationship with followers and, therefore, a larger fan base. South African rugby clubs must concentrate on the types of information and stories that are individualized and are especially valuable or unique to social media. As a result, in addition to focusing on personalization, they should also concentrate on personalization elements that can only be identified through social media. For example, sport club marketers should attempt to create targeted and timely content around various aspects of the clubs and not only focus on match day content, to continually engage their target audience on social media.

The results of this study contribute to existing knowledge in the fields of sports club social media MC and the TAM framework. The study shows encouraging social media usage and behavioral intentions by rugby clubs. Many of the study's key findings also indicate that positive usage motives, such as perceived ease of use (sponsor attraction, player recruitment, and storytelling) and perceived usefulness (brand awareness, relationship building, and information sharing and communication), serve as the primary drivers for sustainable social media MC. As a result, this investigation has provided significant new knowledge about a relatively recent issue, specifically in the context of a developing African country. This knowledge will be valuable for sports clubs that currently use or plan to use social media MC, as well as academics who study the development of TAM theories, particularly from a qualitative perspective.

Further investigation could address several research limitations. The research only focused on a single sport and the teams' stakeholder perceptions, which limits the influence of the results to a solitary industry. Future studies may endeavor to focus on different team or individual sports codes in greater depth, which was also proposed by [Achen et al. \(2024\)](#), [Barbu et al. \(2019\)](#), [Maderer et al. \(2018\)](#), and [Romero-Jara et al. \(2024\)](#). The research used a qualitative multiple case study design among only 12 respondents, so future research should use a larger sample size and quantitative research so that the results can be generalized. The study did not collect demographic information, such as age and gender, or employment information, such as the number of years the respondents had held their positions. Therefore, further research could collect and analyze such information for cross-tabulation purposes. The study further acknowledges the limitations of the geographical landscape, which only considers a single province in the South African sports market. Future research may therefore concentrate on other South African provinces as well as African or international nations to acquire a wider geographical perspective on social media MC usage across non-professional and professional clubs, as suggested by [Kucharski \(2015\)](#) and [Romero-Jara et al. \(2024\)](#). The global popularity of the chosen sport opens up new opportunities for investigation. For example, it may be useful to compare fan engagement rates between countries. Moreover, the research only considered club rugby in South Africa and did not investigate professional rugby teams, school rugby, women's rugby, or sevens rugby. [Kucharski \(2015\)](#) also proposed that future studies could focus on different codes and levels of rugby to assess the use of social media MC.

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