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Successful Sports Philanthropy Communication Strategies: A Focus on Major League Soccer's (MLS) Promotion of the Safe Places to Play Initiative

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SUCCESSFUL SPORT PHILANTHROPY COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES:

A FOCUS ON MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER'S (MLS) PROMOTION OF THE *SAFE PLACES TO PLAY*

INITIATIVE

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Abstract

Organizations have recognized the value and importance of corporate social responsibility by dedicating their time and resources to help the surrounding community. However, primary research centers on the traditional business world and not on how corporate social responsibility has evolved in other highly influential institutions, such as professional sporting organizations. Previous research has also explored nonprofit communication, yet few have followed how various organizations communicate a specific and shared campaign. Therefore, this thesis explores what communication strategies different community relations departments and foundations of Major League Soccer teams utilize regarding the *Safe Places to Play* initiative. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of these organizations, and themes were derived from their responses. The results of this study will benefit academics and professionals by advancing scholarship and providing insight for professional growth.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, communication strategies, sport philanthropy, Major League Soccer*, Safe Places to Play*, nonprofit communication

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Successful Sports Philanthropy Communication Strategies:

A Focus on Major League Soccer's (MLS) Promotion of the *Safe Places to Play* Initiative

"We want every child to have a safe place to play right in their neighborhood. It's why we're committed to creating 1,000 new mini-pitches by 2026" (*Safe Places to Play Mini-Pitches - U.S. Soccer Foundation*, 2020). This mission is the key focus of the U.S. Soccer Foundation, a non-profit organization that aims to build soccer mini-pitches (small, customized, hard-court surfaces designed for organized and pick-up games) in underserved areas throughout the United States. This program–known as *Safe Places to Play*–is already quite successful, thanks to the help of the U.S. Soccer Foundation's partner organization, MLS WORKS, the social responsibility arm of Major League Soccer (MLS). Through these partnerships, the U.S. Soccer Foundation recently celebrated its halfway mark with the completion of its 500th mini-pitch in the country in June 2022 (Arnold, 2022). Additionally, every team in MLS (currently 29) has an associated foundation or community relations department potentially involved in the cause. Although this presents exciting potential for vast reach and meaningful community impact, 29 different MLS organizations also means possibly 29 different communication strategies–some of which may be more effective than others in promoting *Safe Places to Play*.

Although extensive research has been conducted on corporate social responsibility and how organizations communicate their initiatives in the standard corporate world, few have delved into the inner workings of this concept regarding other non-traditional, highly influential institutions, such as professional sports organizations. Despite holding a prevalent place in society, and in their immediate communities, these professional sports organizations often get more recognition from the fans and the media for their success on the field or court rather than for what they do outside of it. This aspect makes it easy for people to dismiss or even ignore the

philanthropic initiatives of these organizations. It also creates an environment in which the community is unaware of the resources available to them. Therefore, it would be beneficial for academia and these MLS community relations departments and foundations to know which effective communication strategies to utilize. That way fans and other influential stakeholders are encouraged to get involved and donate, a concept that can be challenging (Walters & Tacon, 2011).

There is also a lack of research regarding how specific campaigns are communicated across multiple non-profit organizations. Hence, this study seeks to understand what communication strategies are employed by foundations associated with MLS teams across the country in promoting the *Safe Places to Play* initiative. The results of this study will benefit academics as they can understand the strategies and dynamics that impact this flow of communication. Professionals in the field can also discover areas of growth based on the results produced in this study. Understanding what communication strategies are successful with stakeholders is the only way this campaign can reach its full potential and its goal of 1,000 mini-pitches by 2026.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Corporate Social Responsibility

The idea of corporate social responsibility (CSR) centers around the notion that a business is going above and beyond the economic goals of its organization to positively influence the surrounding community. The broadness of this concept has pushed scholars and businesses alike to reconceptualize its meaning over the years (Schattschneider, 2020). In 1953, one of the earliest definitions of CSR emerged, claiming that it is the "obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of actions

which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society" (Walters & Panton, 2014). However, academics and business practitioners have argued that this act is not so individualistic. Instead, CSR is accomplished through partnerships and interactions with various stakeholders, such as employees, customers, suppliers, local organizations, and the general public. With this concept in mind, CSR can be understood as the "organizational behavior that aims to affect stakeholders positively and that goes beyond the organization's economic interest" (Walters & Panton, 2014).

Organizations have realized the potential of CSR in simultaneously providing benefits for those around them and themselves. They can protect their reputation, develop brand loyalty, and even foster competitive advantage through acts of corporate social responsibility (Walters & Panton, 2014). However, if this is all an organization prioritizes, it can promote skepticism among stakeholders about the company's genuineness and raise questions about its true motives (Woods & Stokes, 2019).

To better understand a company's motivations for corporate social responsibility, Archie Carroll, a researcher and author in the field, proposed a framework in 1991 entitled the "Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility" (Figure 1) (Business Faculty from Ontario Colleges, 2018). It explains how society requires an organization to be profitable while abiding by the law. Through these actions, society also expects businesses to operate ethically and give back to the community when possible. Although these expectations are valid in many aspects, organizing these elements in a pyramid fashion has sparked debate and confusion among many. Carroll's pyramid framework assumes a hierarchy of domains, with the economic domain being the least valued and the philanthropic being the sector most desirable for all organizations, which may not

be the case. It also overlooks that many of these domains can and do overlap (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003).

Figure 1

Carroll's (1991) Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility
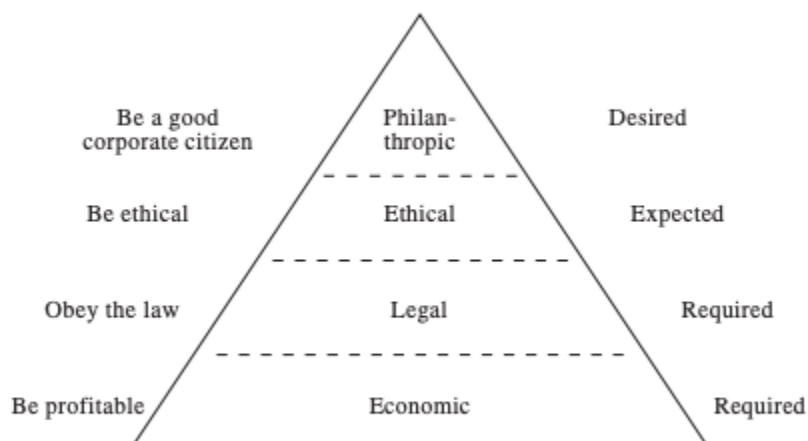
Note. By A.B. Carroll, "The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility: Toward the Moral Management of Organizational Stakeholders," *Business Horizons* (July-August 1991): 39-48.

Consequently, Carroll and another scholar, Mark Schwartz, have built upon the initial framework to provide a more comprehensive approach to corporate social responsibility–the three-domain model (Figure 2). This framework is structured through a Venn diagram to emphasize that no one domain is of more importance than another (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003). The three-domain model pulls from Carroll's pyramid in that the categories remain economic, legal, and ethical, aside from the fact that the philanthropic category, previously at the top of the pyramid, has been subsumed under the ethical and economic domains (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003).

Figure 2

Three-Domain Model of Corporate Social Responsibility
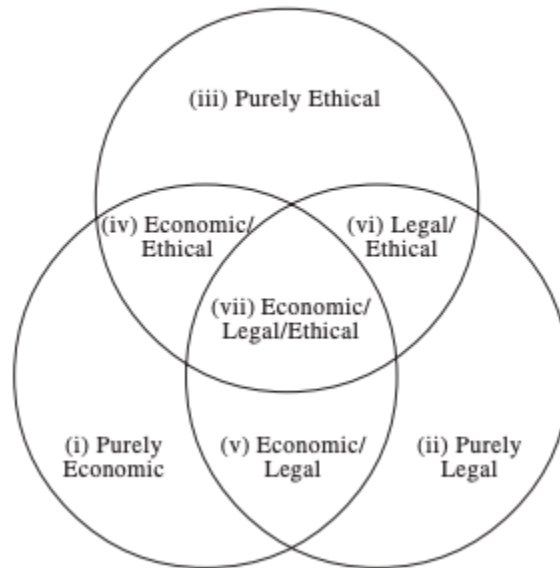
Note: By Schwartz, M. S., & Carroll, A. B. (2003). Corporate Social Responsibility: A Three-Domain Approach. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *13*(04), 503–530.

The economic domain in the Three-Domain Model of Corporate Social Responsibility captures activities intended to have a direct or indirect positive economic impact on the corporation (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003). The legal category focuses on a business' responsiveness to legal expectations mandated and expected in federal, state, and local jurisdictions, such as through compliance, avoidance of civil litigation, and anticipation of the law (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003). Lastly, the ethical domain refers to the general population's and stakeholders' expectations of responsibilities (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003). Even though this framework is not exempt from limitations and could be contested, since "purely legal" or "purely ethical" actions are hard to define, Carroll and Schwartz's updated framework is a valued step in

CSR research. This new framework allows an organization's engagement with CSR to be multi-dimensional and purposeful.

Regardless of the framework utilized when analyzing a business's corporate social responsibility, it is evident that organizations are obligated to give back to the community since society expects this dedication from them. Instead of being viewed as an optional "extra," society has placed value on these acts of philanthropy and critically evaluates whether or not an organization is sincere in its intentions (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017). Although this is true in the standard corporate world, it is critical to examine if this remains in other highly influential institutions. Professional sporting organizations, for example, are highly renowned for their athletic accomplishments, yet research and attention often dwindle when it comes to their philanthropic endeavors (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017). Understanding why this tends to be can make or break the impact of these initiatives, especially ones such as *Safe Places to Play* which are trying to maintain momentum.

Corporate Social Responsibility in Sport: Sports Philanthropy

Professional sporting organizations have particular characteristics that must be considered for corporate social responsibility and philanthropic initiatives to thrive. Fundamentally, sports have always been a unifying force in American society and the world, allowing them to rally their communities to support causes (Schattschneider, 2020). Through attendance at events and engagement with the local media, communities build personal connections—otherwise known as team identification—to their respective sports organizations (Durant, 2016). This bond places these entities in an advantageous position to use the community's established affection for the team to leverage CSR initiatives and promote them more effectively (Durant, 2016). They can then also easily promote and form programs and

initiatives designed around physical exercise and living healthier lifestyles, as it aligns with the nature of their organization (Walters & Panton, 2014).

Sporting organizations have also become increasingly influential in the global community, allowing them to have mass media distribution and communication power to a vast audience (Walters & Panton, 2014). This element is beneficial, as such widespread engagement allows for greater appeal, especially among younger audiences, which traditional development schemes tend not to reach (Levermore, 2010). Sports can also reach marginalized communities in particular while providing a space for partnerships among institutions that would not typically work together (Levermore, 2010).

Many professional sporting organizations have created foundations or specified departments within their institutions to carry out philanthropic activities. Whereas a community department directly operates within the organization, just like a marketing or accounts department, a foundation is established through a corporation as a separate entity (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017). Foundations are non-profit, have independence strategically and structurally from their associated sporting club, and typically run their community CSR initiatives on behalf of their associated sporting organizations (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017). These initiatives, whether through a department or a foundation, vary from those enacted by a typical corporation. For example, sports philanthropy can include "athlete volunteerism, educational initiatives, philanthropic/charitable donations, community development, fan appreciation, health-related initiatives, and community-based environmental programs" (Durant, 2016). The Birkbeck University of London conducted a study and found that over 70% of European football clubs are involved in community engagement projects, with 89.1% working with local schools and 81.2% providing support for youth programs (Walters & Panton, 2014). Whether abroad or

domestically, initiatives enacted by sporting organizations tend to promote social outcomes, strengthen a collective identity, pride, and well-being, and encourage fans to develop positive interactions with each other and the community (Mamo et al., 2021). However, many clubs cite resource constraints and trouble securing funding as primary challenges in their philanthropic efforts, which can negatively affect their progress in this area (Walters & Panton, 2014).

To successfully carry out CSR initiatives, professional sports organizations must maintain favorable relationships with influential stakeholders and effectively communicate with them. Just as traditional businesses do not function in isolation, neither do sporting organizations. The ability to work with a complex set of stakeholders—which encompasses any group or individual that can affect or be affected by the activities of a corporation, such as employees, fans, media, and broadcasters—is essential (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017). By building this network, teams and stakeholders can authentically collaborate toward community development. For example, the Detroit Lions connected nonprofit Playworks, which offers play opportunities to low-income students, with organizations such as Come Play Detroit, a provider of recreational sports in the city for the National Football League (NFL)'s Play 60 campaign. Given that the Play 60 program focuses on bettering overall youth health and wellness throughout the country, these partnerships were beneficial for both organizations while allowing the Detroit Lions to generate more attention for the cause. It was so successful that these partnerships continued for the following year (Heinze et al., 2014).

Fans that are particularly enthusiastic supporters of their team are likely to influence the extent to which a sports organization engages in CSR, so having an established relationship with these individuals is necessary (Mamo et al., 2021). Especially considering the relationship foundations have with their professional sporting organization as separate yet connected entities,

they need to consider the complex interdependencies between all people involved when communicating their initiatives (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017). Therefore, teams must utilize two-way communication when detailing their CSR initiatives to stakeholders to reduce this risk of misunderstanding and unawareness (Woods & Stokes, 2019).

Corporate Social Responsibility: Communication

Communicating corporate social responsibility endeavors to stakeholders can be daunting as it can dictate an initiative's success. Additionally, this communication is vital in building and sustaining legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders (Türkel & Akan, 2015). Organizations that can be authentic and honest about their purpose and progress regarding CSR initiatives are more likely to build trust with consumers and stakeholders. For example, Starbucks has consistently shared its milestones regarding its sustainability goals on its website and social media platforms, which has been met with positive feedback and support from stakeholders (*Communicating CSR with Authenticity*, n.d.). However, if CSR communication is poor or deceitful, it can garner the opposite effect. For example, Volkswagen communicated and promoted for years how their diesel engines had fewer emissions and reduced nitrogen oxide pollutants by 90 percent. Yet, in 2015, the Federal Trade Commission made a complaint that these cars were doing the opposite, emitting up to 4,000 percent more emissions. This resulted in a billion-dollar penalty for the company while significantly harming its reputation in the eyes of stakeholders (Benz, 2020).

Corporate social responsibility communication has thus been defined to reflect this importance, as it is the "process of anticipating stakeholders' expectations, the articulation of CSR policy and managing of different organization communication tools designed to provide true and transparent information about a company's or a brand's integration of business operations, social and environmental concerns, and interactions with stakeholders" (Türkel &

Akan, 2015). In the sports world, this process is dynamic, interactive, and multi-dimensional (Pedersen et al., 2007).

CSR communication is an evolving area, with various avenues and platforms explored. Companies use both open communication forms, such as advertising and PR, and more subtle forms of communication, such as CSR reports and websites (Türkel & Akan, 2015). In some cases, movies and documentaries have even been developed by teams such as Real Madrid FC, Barcelona FC, and Inter Milan FC, to showcase a behind-the-scenes look at the social side of these clubs and how they influence the community (Kolyperas, 2012). Recently, soccer clubs have shifted to utilize more sophisticated channels, such as advertisements, individual star players, and other resources, such as YouTube and online social media coverage, to communicate with stakeholders. Regardless of form, some companies speak about CSR matters through internal channels, such as codes of conduct, to build an organizational culture and target specific stakeholders. On the other hand, others explicitly publicize these matters so broader groups can see their dedication (Kolyperas, 2012).

With the rise and variability of social media, social platforms have been additionally beneficial for communicating philanthropic activities. Seen as a "game changer" for organizations, social media has resulted in increased access for stakeholders to receive news updates, results, various multimedia, promotional content, and acts of social responsibility (Naraine & Parent, 2017). Teams such as the Los Angeles Lakers have high engagement via social media, with 51.95 million followers across their four official social media accounts—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. The Golden State Warriors, Chicago Bulls, Miami Heat, and Houston Rockets complete the top five professional sports teams in the United States with the most followers and engagement (Mullan, 2022). The popularity of these teams on all

channels to communicate and reach such a large group of people in a matter of seconds highlights the sheer power of social media and professional sports organizations in society.

Especially given that many non-profit organizations, such as foundations, have limited financial resources to dedicate to promotional content, understanding the value of social media has become imperative (Naraine & Parent, 2017). With such a diversity of channels, efficient CSR communication relies on external and internal moderators, such as finances, company structures, and public support (Kolyperas, 2012).

In an analysis of CSR communication, management scholars Shuili Du, C.B. Bhattacharya, and Sankar Sen developed a conceptual framework to understand the different aspects that affect this process (Figure 3). They theorized that CSR communication includes the message content, which can pertain to the social cause itself or a company's involvement, and the message channel through which the information is disseminated (Du et al., 2010). As the message travels, it can be affected by different moderators: company-specific and stakeholder-specific. Company-specific factors can include the influence of corporate reputation and CSR positioning within the company; in other words, the extent to which a company relies on its CSR activities (Du et al., 2010). Stakeholder-specific factors can include the type of stakeholders, such as opinion leaders and the general public, and the extent to which they support and provide social value to the initiative. After these contingency factors affect the efficacy of the message, the communication then results in internal outcomes such as awareness and identification and external such as consumer and investor loyalty and advocacy (Du et al., 2010).

Figure 3

Corporate Social Responsibility Communication Framework
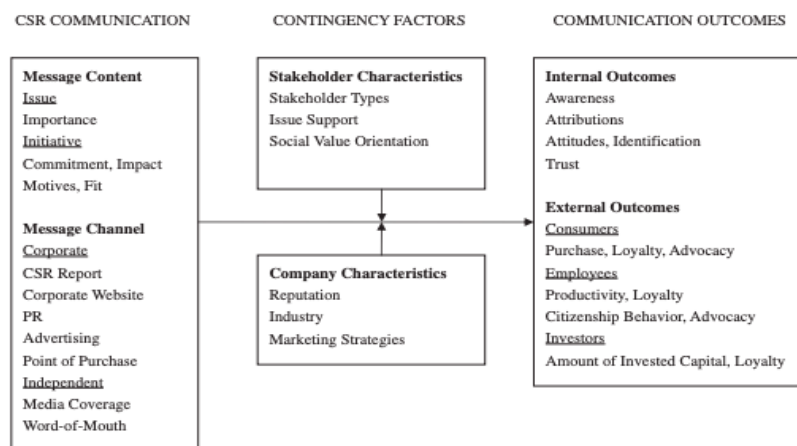
Note: Du, S., Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2010). Maximizing Business Returns to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): The Role of CSR Communication. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *12*(1), 8–19.

As detailed in the CSR Communication Framework, it is crucial to understand how organizations frame and communicate their CSR activities and what can influence the effectiveness of these messages. For professional sporting organizations, message source does not necessarily play a large role in influencing consumer attitude towards the organization; it is the message that is more important (Inoue et al., 2013). Therefore, the framing of a message can essentially shape one's perceptions and behaviors (Schattschneider, 2020). This communication can also enhance brand loyalty and ensure a positive consumer perception, so organizations must dedicate time and effort to this element (Walters & Panton, 2014).

Understanding an organization's capacity needs to be taken into consideration as well. Capacity, as it pertains to non-profit organizations, can be defined as the range of capabilities,

knowledge, and resources necessary to be effective. This aspect can include an organization's

size, leadership, lifecycle stage, program model, and revenue base (*What Is Nonprofit Capacity*,

2014) Lower-capacity non-profit organizations, such as those who may not have much financial

capital, staffing, or infrastructure, tend to produce predominantly informational content, whereas

those with more capacity can devote more resources and engage in a broader range of

communication strategies (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016). As a result, these higher-capacity

organizations can go beyond and be more playful with the strategies they employ, such as by

taking on "edgy" social media personas. Lower-capacity entities, on the other hand, can't afford

to take this risk, which results in these groups proactively developing their social channels and

communicating with a more professional tone (Naraine & Parent, 2017).

If communication between stakeholders is poor, it can result in inadequate and unclear

CSR processes, abstract and immeasurable goals, and limited CSR development within a club

(Kolyperas, 2012). In one study that looked at the CSR responsibilities of teams in the English

Football Premier League, many clubs recognized the challenge of communication. They reported

that this aspect needs to be improved as not many people know much about what they do to

better the community. As a result, they encounter additional funding barriers, ambiguous

expectations, and misconceptions that could've been avoided had they utilized proper positioning

and a thorough communication strategy (Jenkins & James, n.d.).

Therefore, organizations should improve external communication to enhance awareness

levels and widen access to funding and participants (Jenkins & James, n.d.). Bettering internal

communication can simultaneously allow for staff involvement and the realization of an

improved reputation and image. These groups can also utilize the power of social media as it

captures the attention of younger audiences more than traditional media when it comes to news

consumption (Boczkowski et al., 2017). The philanthropic activities of professional sporting organizations are significant in shaping an organization's culture and bettering the surrounding community, so these groups must understand all they can do to communicate effectively to achieve the best results possible.

Corporate Social Responsibility in Soccer

Prior to the 1920s, the game of soccer in the United States was slow in gaining popularity (*Social, Economic, Ethnic, and Demographic Influences on the Growth of American Soccer*, n.d.) On the other hand, countries who have a more established history with the game are in a position to leverage their country's long-standing passion to their advantage. For example, since soccer was codified in 1863 at the Freemason's Tavern in London, the sport has only grown in both size and popularity–it is considered the most popular game in the UK to both watch and participate in. It is also home to the biggest and most successful league in the world, the Premier League (Lange, 2020; The Football Association, 2020). Conversely, it was not until the United States was awarded the responsibility of the World Cup in 1994 that the sport sparked the curiosity of those in the country, encouraging the founding of Major League Soccer (MLS).

The league began with 10 teams and has since grown to 29, competing across the United States. The growth of MLS in size and popularity has ultimately resulted in more communities' investment in the sport and the teams. Since these teams are embedded within their communities, they significantly shape a local community's identity (Walters & Panton, 2014). For example, those in Catalonia, a region in northeastern Spain that includes Barcelona, see FC Barcelona as "més que un club," or in other words, more than a club. They are involved with causes facing the region, such as the integration of immigrants, and engaged with the football and non-football

community, causing people to find a sense of belonging within the club and assume parts of it as their own identity (Ranachan, 2008).

Professional sports teams, like those in the MLS, are organizations with images, reputations, and relationships with stakeholders, which lends these groups to constant media scrutiny (Schattschneider, 2020). Through televised games and pressure from the celebrity status attributed to professional athletes, teams are encouraged to feel an even greater need for corporate social responsibility in their communities (Schattschneider, 2020). This attention in combination with the rapid commercialization of the game has since caused many clubs to contemplate their role in the communities in which they reside and led them to participate in philanthropic activities (Kolyperas, 2012). Concerning MLS, this has transpired in every team in the league dedicating themselves to the social responsibility platform set forth by the league, MLS WORKS.

MLS WORKS & its Initiatives

As one of the largest professional sporting organizations, MLS has not only found success on the field but off as well through its social responsibility platform MLS WORKS. The platform seeks to "enrich the lives of those in need across the United States and Canada" by addressing important social issues and giving back to surrounding communities (MLS Soccer, n.d.-i). This mission is achieved through various initiatives, legacy projects, charitable giving campaigns, and partnerships with national programs (USSF). Some of these community partners include the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, 100 Black Men of America, the American Red Cross, Athlete Ally, Hope and Heroes, Special Olympics, and the U.S. Soccer Foundation (MLS Soccer, n.d.-k).

Credited as the architect of MLS WORKS, JoAnn Neale, who is also the President and Chief Administrative Officer of Major League Soccer, has led the platform's commitment to social responsibility through national programs and grassroots initiatives in communities that are typically underserved (MLS Soccer, n.d.-f). MLS WORKS currently focuses on six different initiatives ranging from Special Olympics team support to charitable donation fundraising.

U.S. Soccer Foundation & *Safe Places to Play*

MLS WORKS has teamed up with the U.S. Soccer Foundation (USSF), a 501 © (3) organization that serves as "the national model for sports-based youth development in underserved communities," to install mini-pitches in disadvantaged areas through their *Safe Places to Play* initiative (*About - U.S. Soccer Foundation*, 2020). This partnership came about very naturally, given that MLS WORKS and the USSF are similar in the way their missions both recognize how powerful sports can be as a vehicle for social change. They also both recognize how essential it is for one's physical and personal development to have access to these programs and spaces.

In celebration of the league's 20th season in 2015, USSF, Adidas, MLS, and Southern New Hampshire University launched the 20 for 20 mini-pitch initiative to build 20 mini-pitches in underserved communities in coordination with each of the 20 MLS clubs established at the time (*U.S. Soccer Foundation*, n.d.). They achieved this goal, as these two organizations have collectively installed nearly 300 new places to play soccer nationwide (MLS Soccer, n.d.-l). To build upon this milestone and the achievement of completing 110 more mini-pitches in 81 communities across the country in 2021, the Foundation has announced that it aims to serve one million youth in its programs and create 1,000 mini-pitches nationwide by the year 2026 (*U.S. Soccer Foundation 2020-2021 Annual Report*, 2021).

Statistically, this achievement would only strengthen the already immense impact this initiative has been producing. Currently, mini-pitches strengthen communities and build cohesion, as 91% of individuals in the area say their mini-pitch serves as a community hub. Mini-pitches improve the lives of youth, as 98% of young participants say that their community feels safer post-installation, allowing them to be more active. Soccer is also played five times more at sites after installation, with 31% of users being brand new to the sport, thus growing soccer participation as a whole (MLS Soccer, n.d.-l).

In communities where finding a safe place to play can be challenging, small and customizable mini-pitches can suit any urban environment. Complete with benches, lockable storage units, and brightly colored courts with detailed signage, these spaces transform the look and feel of a community. These mini-pitches additionally come equipped with lighting to extend the number of hours one can play and include ADA-accessible gates and a hard-court surface, so no player is excluded from the game (*Safe Places to Play Mini-Pitches - U.S. Soccer Foundation*, 2020).

Present Study

The *Safe Places to Play* initiative has proven successful thus far, as post-mini-pitch installation has shown to produce safer communities, and soccer participation has risen (*Safe Places to Play Mini-Pitches - U.S. Soccer Foundation*, 2020). However, for this success to continue, these foundations must be purposeful in their communication strategies. Only then can they reasonably achieve their goal of 1,000 mini-pitches created by the year 2026.

Therefore, the present study plans to examine the connection between the *Safe Places to Play* initiative and corporate social responsibility communication strategies. With every team in Major League Soccer committed to the cause, a possible 29 different communication approaches

could be utilized when discussing the impact and importance of this program with stakeholders. Previous studies have explored CSR communication and non-profits, yet little research has followed a specific campaign across different organizations. By interviewing professionals in the field, this study will examine first-hand where they have celebrated success and encountered challenges communicating the *Safe Places to Play* initiative. Therefore, these findings will benefit academics and professionals by advancing scholarship while providing real insight into how to best keep this initiative going for maximum community impact.

Research Questions

RQ1: Which communication strategies do MLS teams use to promote the *Safe Places to Play* initiative?

RQ2: In what ways are the communication strategies used to promote *Safe Places to Play* similar and different between MLS teams?

RQ3: Does the presence of more contingency factors (both stakeholder and company-specific) affect the efficacy of the message being communicated as demonstrated by Du et al.'s CSR Communication Framework?

RQ4: How can foundations in MLS learn from each other regarding successful communication strategies so everyone can make more informed decisions and impact communities on a greater level?

Method

To best understand the different communication strategies employed by MLS teams in their promotion of the *Safe Places to Play* initiative, this study utilized a qualitative research design. Themes were derived from the responses received during semi-structured interviews with

representatives from five different MLS soccer clubs. Participants were then given an executive summary detailing the findings present in this study (see Appendix A).

Participants

All 29 clubs currently operating in Major League Soccer have an associated foundation or community relations department that acts as the social impact arm of the organization. It is these groups that work together under the umbrella of MLS WORKS, the league's social responsibility platform. Initially, clubs were divided into their respective Western and Eastern conferences, and six were randomly selected and contacted from each group. This randomization was purposeful, as none of the clubs chosen resided in the same state, to ensure that the study was widespread. However, as time progressed with little response from the selected clubs, every club in the league was contacted via email and LinkedIn messaging, regardless of the conference and location. All interviewees currently work in the community relations department for their club or their club's respective Foundation. The five participants interviewed consisted of three females and two males. They ranged in age and levels of experience, from Coordinators to Senior Directors.

Data Collection & Analysis

The data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with representatives from each of the selected club's foundations. These interviews were conducted via Zoom and over the phone to accommodate geographic distance and prioritize interviewee convenience. The interview questions were developed with the intent to gauge club representatives' experiences working for the *Safe Places to Play* initiative, creating mini-pitches for their community, and the communication strategies utilized to share these actions (see Appendix B). The semi-structured interview format allowed for further probing and

opportunities for elaboration. Interviews lasted around 30 minutes on average and were voice-recorded with participant permission.

The interviews were then transcribed verbatim from the Zoom recordings to ensure clarity. From those transcriptions, responses were organized by corresponding research questions and additional interesting comments. These comments were extracted and compiled in a separate document. Participant responses were then analyzed for similar themes.

Results

RQ1: Which communication strategies do MLS teams use to promote the Safe Places to Play initiative?

Clubs reported using modern communication strategies more frequently than traditional print sources when sharing information and updates about their initiatives. The most mentioned strategy by these representatives was the use of official press releases and end-of-the-year impact reports. Once these are composed internally, with the help of the communications department, and edited additionally by any sponsors who are involved in the project, these are sent out digitally. They can be found on the professional team's official website and their social media channels. These releases are both informative and enlightening, as clubs can share firsthand their motives while providing specificities such as the pitch's location and details of the unveiling.

The moment a pitch is unveiled and announced to the public was reported to be a monumental time for heightened media engagement. In addition to the occasional flyer, clubs similarly explained that they contact various local media outlets in hopes they cover the event. Luckily, they have all been fortunate enough to have a few outlets attend their grand openings, which provides an additional communication boost. From there, participants reported focusing heavily on the storytelling aspect through social media tools such as Facebook, Instagram, and

Twitter. Participants involved in clubs with more than one pitch built noted that as more spaces are created, the buzz-worthy elements arise from the stories within rather than the mini-pitch itself. For example, the lives that are impacted and the positive change occurring as a result of the creation of the mini-pitch. Ultimately, these platforms are very impactful in spreading awareness on a larger scale, as described by one participant:

> Social media changed the game for everyone. It allowed us to expand our reach to those that want to learn more about our club specifically and our fans and supporters. And then the league also does a great job through MLS WORKS of helping us highlight what we're doing. So, we've done like Instagram takeovers with their channels, where we're reaching more people outside of our market and really highlighting the work that we're doing in our local markets.

These platforms are advantageous as all of the participants explained that their accounts are run internally by the professional team's official communication and public relations departments. This exposure is crucial in creating and maintaining awareness for not only the initiative itself but in gaining attention to what is needed at that time. Just as communicating to the public about the pitch itself is important, so is contacting donors for fundraising support. Connecting and maintaining positive relationships with these groups, especially those working for foundations, is essential in getting these projects started to begin with. On this side of the process, representatives reported that they tend to lean into LinkedIn. One participant explained that it is a major priority for them to utilize in the coming year sharing:

> I think that especially when you think about foundations, like donors are what you're really looking for. You're not looking to build a fan base. You're looking to build a donor base, so think about where donors are living—living online, and where you can reach

them. To me, it's few and far between that we're you know, reaching donors on Instagram, right like maybe you know smaller more grassroots donors, but in terms of big donors who are probably going to move the needle on our funding, we're probably going to be looking at a LinkedIn, or, you know, more traditional assets.

RQ2: In what ways are the communication strategies used to promote *Safe Places to Play* similar and different between MLS teams?

Throughout all of the interviews conducted, no striking differences emerged in the responses, as they all engage in comparable strategies. Each participant cited press releases and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as the primary forms of communication. Differences occurred in the ways that different entities placed more or less emphasis and reliance on particular strategies. For example, discussions with representatives who have an established foundation through their club prioritized strategies that involve LinkedIn more than those with only a community relations department. This is understandable as a foundation is more reliant on donors and sponsors to keep its programs running. Those with only a community relations department, on the other hand, were less focused on the fundraising aspect and reported being open to any social media strategy created by their PR and digital marketing teams. Additionally, even though these pitches are being built in underserved communities, they each have distinct needs that cannot be generalized, which can cause one strategy to be advantageous in one area and fail in another.

Therefore, regardless of the communication strategy employed, whether that be through press releases or on social media, a common theme that arose through the interviews was the need to be mindful of the specific campaign and understand your audience. For example, one club specifically mentioned how they recognize the community they serve is affected by the

digital divide, explaining that "the neighborhoods that we serve, and where [in our city] our mini-pitches are like families just aren't as digitally connected as we'd hope." As a result, they ponder how to best be effective since they typically post all of their initiative updates on their socials. This participant then wondered how that might affect their communication strategies, saying "so yeah, is it going through community organizations, is it going and printing a flyer on community boards, is it advertising at the actual mini-pitch itself so that once one person finds one they know to find other ones?" Questions such as these are both timely and crucial when considering how to best make sure that the community is aware of the resources available to them. Therefore, to produce a more meaningful impact on the community, these clubs need to be strategic, purposeful, and open-minded when deciding what communication strategy to employ.

RQ3: Does the presence of more contingency factors (both stakeholder and company-specific) affect the efficacy of the message being communicated as demonstrated by Du et al.'s CSR Communication Framework?

In discussing with representatives their overall experience working with stakeholders and sponsors from inception to completion, it was evident that external groups definitely impact the efficacy of the messaging, as outlined by Du et al.'s CSR Communication Framework. In short, the framework states that a combination of the message content and channel, which are essentially the communication strategies employed by these organizations, are affected by certain contingency factors – whether that be stakeholder or company-specific. As the message travels and is influenced by these elements, it produces different internal and external communication outcomes that organizations strive to achieve, such as consumer loyalty and increased awareness (Du et al., 2010).

Along with the public being a primary stakeholder in this initiative, the participants explained that the primary sponsors and community partners that aid in the creation and development of these pitches also have a large stake in the project. However, this type of stakeholder is only one layer to the many characteristics that can be of influence. How intensely the entity supports the issue at hand, and if they have an already established social value and philanthropic orientation, can also affect how a message is received. When asked further about this form of stakeholder involvement, participants reported that the sponsors are often decided upon in partnership with the professional team's sponsorship and sales departments. In those agreements, they will predetermine how a sponsor will support the effort, whether that be through in-person commitments or online by producing a certain amount of content before and following the event. A participant described how this process still results in predominantly club-forward messaging by explaining:

> Most of them have some community aspect to their sponsorship, and then so we get a chance to kind of plug our program into sponsorship deals through our sponsorship program…Usually there is a shared effort on making the [mini-pitch] announcement. So, the club is going to go ahead and share it. [Our sponsor] is probably going through their own channels to announce, hey, we just, you know, put another field in. So, I think that the communication of it is probably, in my opinion, 75/25 club driven. The sponsors usually, you know, they defer a bit into how the club wants to message it. They almost agree into the messaging of what the fields are for at the very beginning.

On the other hand, just because these sponsors are somewhat obligated to promote the initiative does not necessarily mean they are truly invested in the cause, which is a reflection of their social value orientation. Participants explained that sponsor involvement is a complicated

relationship, as these sponsors often have their priorities and agendas they want to achieve. One participant explained that "one of our sponsors has been much more at arm's length, like they donate money, but they're not super involved. So, I think it probably just varies, the interest of the actual sponsor."

However, when these clubs find a sponsor that desires to be "all in," it not only makes the process more enjoyable, but it allows for a greater impact. If the sponsor is willing to share the project with others without being told to do so, it results in more awareness and community involvement. One participant also elaborated saying that if a sponsor goes above and beyond their minimum commitment it is ultimately beneficial for both the initiative and the sponsor itself, as they are allowed to make further advantageous connections in the community.

In addition to the stakeholder and company contingency factors in Du et. al's framework, every single participant expressed in their interview another component to consider: societal factors. Throughout the interviews, there was an overwhelming consensus that outreach is a challenge because society tends to prioritize other aspects of the business. For example, one participant shared this sentiment:

> I would say it's probably still a challenge doing outreach to this day. I feel like it's not very well known within [our] community, and could definitely be marketed more just because it is such an easily accessible place for various youth groups…Other things have taken priority, but it definitely needs to come back into our eyes just because it is such a great resource for that community.

When these initiatives keep getting dismissed and delayed, it dampens communication outcomes, such as awareness and advocacy. Another participant echoed these concerns by saying:

I think that, to be honest, up until I joined a couple of months ago, they weren't doing much of a job of like letting people know that they could access these resources. It's one of those things that community organizations and even corporate organizations, when they are doing really good work, sometimes shy away from promoting it. And so, you're caught in this echo chamber of doing all of this cool work but no one actually knows what you're doing.

This communication breakdown is also exhibited in the views of external societal groups, such as local media and news outlets. It is one side to have the company or organization internally pushing these tasks lower on the priority list, but to have extrinsic perspectives doing the same can be additionally harmful. Through the interviews, it became clear that even a high-profile league, such as Major League Soccer, endures this treatment. One participant elaborated on this dynamic by providing the following example:

I would say from my counterparts in MLS like a lot of times, community work for teams doesn't get as lime lighted as it does, unless you're like the NFL, and can brag about, or Lebron James, and say, 'I built a school,' or 'I have so much money,' like the stories go a lot further than what we just are is expected of us to do all the all the time. So, it is interesting. People want us to do the good things but then local news outlets won't really pick up what we're doing. They'd rather cover the game we just lost over the fact that we just opened up a new field. So, it is kind of funny. But then the same media will criticize well, what are you doing [for the community] and well, we just did XYZ, but you chose to focus on the sport and not the outcome of the mission of the team. So, it is interesting, based on market, what you would have to battle in terms of like we're doing it, just how do we get the larger scale media to report on good rather than just games?

Another societal implication that was expressed by participants was the consideration of the status of the community you are serving. Not only will this factor dictate the flow of the message itself, but it influences which communication strategy one utilizes. Therefore, this layer needs to precede everything else. One participant, in particular, spoke about this concept when explaining that their club is implementing mini-pitches in historically technologically disadvantaged communities:

> Transferring that ownership from the team to the community and making sure the community knows that these are for all of us to share and take care of is important. And how do you let people know who aren't digitally connected? How do you inform those who aren't digitally connected, know what they have access to? And it's a really tough one. I think that we're trying to get creative in that sense. Having our organization or other organizations who can come out and inform families of what resources are available to them is big for us.

All of these challenges and contingency factors, whether present in Du et. al's framework or not, do result in different internal and external communication outcomes. However, these outcomes are held at different levels of importance based on the club's individual focuses and metrics of success. Even though every participant highlighted a separate result that they tend to look for when determining the success of a communication strategy, the primary response was by traditional tracking of online engagement. Participants cited that their content teams especially tend to focus on these hits, reads, clicks, and opens, as they have their own criteria they strive for. When it comes to the online feedback, a participant noted that their department is trying to do a better job of being more "data informed" rather than "data driven" because there are other determinants of success that are of value too. However, unlike this straightforward

information, calculating the exact number of people served at a mini-pitch becomes a little more difficult, as explained by one participant:

> It's really not easy. You know when you look at people who live in, say, a 2-mile radius of a mini-pitch, you can say that you're serving those people, but how many of those people are actually, you know, coming to a pitch? Harder to say. You know a lot of people will go out at random times, and just count by hand you know how many people are at this mini-pitch. That's just what other teams have done and then they multiply it by a number that they decide on but it's all kind of arbitrary and made up and so it's hard to quantify the amount of people who get served at your mini-pitch.

Therefore, most of the participants cited more personable measures and determinants of success, such as qualitative feedback and gratification. Two of the participants interviewed specifically mentioned that they do many back-end surveys especially after the event to get an idea of how the community found out about the initiative, their thoughts, and ideas for improvement. Outside of these surveys, participants collectively expressed that they want to feel as though they are making a difference in how people feel—a true characteristic of the community outreach field. For example, a participant shared:

> I, in full transparency, don't really pay attention [to the media hits]. [The PR team is] very much more numbers focus than I am. I'm like, oh, the principal of this local school loved it. Success! We're going to make a really excited community happy and feel seen. And that is success to me in my role. And then, yeah, my other co-departments have other aspects of what success looks like.

Regardless of what a club chooses to prioritize and value as success, each ultimately responded in congruence with Du et. al's CSR Communication Framework. In particular, each

expressed through their experiences that not only do the presence of contingency factors affect the efficacy of the message, but so do the intensity of those elements.

RQ4: How can foundations in MLS learn from each other regarding successful communication strategies so everyone can make more informed decisions and impact communities on a greater level?

As a result of the interviews conducted with individuals who have varying levels of expertise in the field and regarding the *Safe Places to Play* initiative, each club can learn from the others. The insights the participants shared both on the developmental initiative side and communication side can be valuable for these clubs to implement moving forward.

Communicating with the Community

When communicating with the community, a primary focus is making sure that the message is received by the right individuals. Some clubs that were interviewed have realized that this might not necessarily mean them, and have seen the value of reaching out to others who may have that reach. A beneficial recommendation would be to not shy away from connecting with other organizations already present in the community that you intend to serve. More often than not, they will have the knowledge of how and when that population best receives and interprets information, whether that be through printed flyers, electronically, or even word of mouth. By partnering with these already established organizations, clubs can find ways to circumvent communication barriers, like digital divides, and make a more considerable impact.

Another piece of advice that might serve these organizations well is being strategic when writing sponsorship contracts. Since every participant mentioned that their main sponsors and partners primarily come from agreements made with the sponsorship team, it presents the perfect

opportunity to use this exchange for community benefit. One participant explained the importance of capitalizing on this interaction by saying:

> It is based on finding a mutual philanthropic focus. We kind of do our research on our end to find companies that kind of align with the same values, and want to have the same kind of outreach. Our sponsorship team does a tremendous job when they're soliciting new sponsors to be a sponsor of the team, that they also find out if there's a community element that these companies want to be involved in, and what does that community element look like. Is it volunteerism? Is it being a part of this mini-pitch, or is it education? And then linking those together with our different programs and initiatives.

In ensuring that the partner or sponsor is intrigued and invested in the cause, the organization has already won half of the battle. If a sponsor is already passionate and motivated in furthering the cause, there will be a lesser chance of conflict down the road, as they would want to help in any way possible. Therefore, it is crucial for a successful communication strategy that sponsor involvement is not only explicitly stated in the contract, but expressed and desired personally by the group.

Communicating within the Organization

Communication within the organization is vital to the success of community-centered initiatives as well and was an aspect that was discussed in a few interviews. Having other members buy in on these missions can make or break how an initiative builds and sustains momentum over time. However, this can be difficult to achieve especially considering corporate culture. One participant mentioned how from their perspective:

> I think community-oriented work, in general, is kind of seen as less of a priority to some people internally, because I think that obviously, just because something's an

organizational goal, doesn't mean that everybody's always bought into that organizational goal. And so, learning how to advocate for your work is important…I think it comes with the corporate culture in general, that not everybody is going to be bought into everybody else's goals.

To combat these perceptions, one participant advised focusing on the commitment of top leadership. If the top individuals in the organization express that community outreach initiatives are of importance to the entire entity and not just that singular department, it can help to slowly change others' minds. One participant, who is fortunate enough to have experienced this dedication from head leadership, shared that they were able to essentially "build a lot of the club DNA around it" because from day one their owners have been really serious about how the organization is really impacting the community at large. If this is achieved, the organization becomes more holistically invested, which improves communication for these community initiatives overall.

Leveraging Tie to Professional Team

MLS community relations departments and foundations are in a special position compared to other non-profit counterparts–and this is largely due to their inherent tie to the professional soccer team they are associated with. As a result, these clubs have an opportunity to utilize this connection for their benefit. One participant admitted this aspect by divulging,

We do have the fortune of having [our team's] brand with this massive brand equity and being able to leverage that for really important campaigns, and use that elevated platform to lift up some of our work and make sure that we're reaching a bigger audience than we normally would. I think it's a big opportunity that we try to leverage and be strategic, because obviously, you can't overuse it. And you know, sometimes you know, [our]

social team is protective over there because they're obviously trying to build a much bigger brand. And so, you kind of have to be very strategic about what you choose to collaborate on or not collaborate on, and how you, you know, decide what channels you want to pursue for a certain campaign.

Although one does need to be deliberate about how and when they make use of this tie in an attempt to come across as authentic, the sheer opportunity for this collaboration is a step ahead of what other nonprofits have access to. These community outreach departments and foundations can elevate their work on a greater scale and potentially reach a whole new audience outside of their immediate community. This relationship also allows for these groups to focus more on the operations side rather than stressing over how it is being communicated.

Another way to simultaneously take advantage of this connection is by bringing into play a characteristic that not many other non-profits have: celebrity endorsement. Each participant mentioned that at their pitch unveiling ceremonies, they often have a few of the professional players make an appearance, which often draws in a larger crowd for these events. A possible recommendation could be to host more events with those players at the mini-pitch locations in addition to the opening day ceremony. Furthermore, one participant mentioned that a goal for them in the upcoming season is to also use the stadium and game days to communicate with the public about *Safe Places to Play*. On match days, fans from all over the community are already congregated in the same space, so it would be a missed opportunity to not utilize this prime opportunity to impart knowledge about a valuable resource created for them.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine where professional sporting organizations' community relations teams and respective foundations have found success and encountered

challenges when communicating about the *Safe Places to Play* initiative. This inquiry is

especially timely as some of these groups are working alongside the U.S. Soccer Foundation

which aims to create 1,000 mini-pitches by the year 2026. Even those who are creating safe

spaces in their communities that don't directly contribute to this goal, there is still value for these

clubs to all learn from each other about how to become better communicators. Apart from the

professional angle, this study is one of the first to explore corporate social responsibility research

as it pertains to following how a specific campaign is communicated across different

organizations, which further advances scholarship.

Communication Strategies

Through the various interviews conducted, the participants shared insights about their

experiences creating mini-pitches and how they navigated through communicating this project

with others. These responses, for the most part, significantly aligned with previous research,

especially concerning what strategies these groups tend to use. The most common forms of

communication utilized were reported to be press releases for information and social media when

storytelling. This use of modern and open communication coincides with what past researchers

have indicated as the primary avenue for conveying and exchanging knowledge in the

community relations space. Previous research has also emphasized how much of a game-changer

social media was for this field, which was echoed greatly by all participants.

One participant, however, extremely stressed the value of LinkedIn as a resource for

communicating with donors, which was not as highlighted, if at all, in prior studies.

Additionally, no participants even mentioned utilizing YouTube or traditional advertisements to

showcase the good they are doing in the community, even though that was heavily emphasized in

earlier analyses. Other studies also observed only nonprofit organizations that were not

associated with professional sporting entities. Therefore, unlike those groups that have to be more constrained in the promotional content they produce, the participants mentioned how they do not have this concern given that they are tied with large brand equity and reputation. These differences are significant to address as they reflect technology and social media's growth over time. Platforms such as YouTube, which were a primary source of information back when those previous studies were conducted, are not as relevant today due to societal trends and emerging social channels. Therefore, this research is beneficial as it provides a more recent and accurate update to these findings.

Communication Successes & Challenges

Responses coincided mostly with the findings present in Du et. al's Corporate Social Responsibility Communication Framework. The participants expressed that, although they have all had predominantly positive experiences communicating their initiatives with the community and working with external stakeholders, the presence of contingency factors does influence the effectiveness of the message. Just as the framework predicted, working with stakeholders who are more involved with the initiative and message leads to more advantageous outcomes, such as increased awareness and advocacy. Those who are less involved make the entire process more complicated and even appear disingenuous to others. This aspect is why it is so crucial to find and work with those who have mutual philanthropic focuses so their motives do not have to be in question.

Besides Du et. al's framework, these sentiments also coincide with other corporate social responsibility academic research, such as Cobourn & Frawley (2017). Their findings indicate that working with a complex set of stakeholders is essential for community development initiatives, which was echoed greatly by the participants' individual experiences.

However, what Du et al's Framework fails to acknowledge, which was raised by the participants themselves, is the additional influence of societal factors. For the one sending the message, there is a necessity to at least be cognizant of the corporate culture present. If those in your organization are not even willing to advocate for the mission, it not only will lessen the reach of the message, but it perpetuates the perception that this field of work is an extracurricular or side passion project. Rather these decisions and initiatives are an integral part of the company, embedded in every department. It also does not help that the participants expressed that external media, such as local news outlets, often overlook these stories if they are not "buzzworthy" enough or directly tied to the result of a game.

The societal status of the receiver of your message is also essential to take into account also. If the community one is trying to reach resides in a lower socioeconomic area, they might be subject to the digital divide and other factors that can preemptively intercept and alter how the message is interpreted. Therefore, it would be noteworthy to be aware of how this societal layer impacts communication as well. It might be advantageous for Du et al's framework to include societal factors such as these at the beginning and end of the framework to acknowledge its influence and how these are deeply interwoven into all aspects of the flow of communication.

However, in reviewing all challenges expressed by the participants, it is still crucial to acknowledge that even though these are valid obstacles, these groups still have certain luxuries that other lower-capacity nonprofit organizations do not have access to. For example, lower-capacity nonprofits have to market and promote their work all on their own instead of being backed by a professional team's social platforms and reputation. This association already gives community-facing departments and foundations an advantage over other nonprofit organizations doing similar work.

Regardless, understanding the challenges endured by the participants, whether already exhibited in Du et al's framework or not, is precisely why looking at nonprofit communication is so important. It also emphasizes the significance of this study specifically. If professionals have an awareness of the obstacles they might encounter, they can better prepare and restructure their communication strategies accordingly. Additionally, these sentiments help in slowly changing the narrative surrounding this work. Simultaneously, it is advantageous for academics as it provides an update to the already existing theories.

The Value of Sports Philanthropy

Although not explicitly tied to a particular research question, participants also all expressed the importance of sports philanthropy as a whole, which is worthy of discussion as it further emphasizes previous research findings. Previous studies have acknowledged that professional sports teams have particular characteristics that lend themselves to being in a prominent position in society. These groups are of great influence that they can leverage their community's affection for them and unify them toward their community initiatives.

The participants interviewed reinforced this concept through their discussions. One participant mentioned that they essentially view it as a responsibility to serve and be a leader in their community not only because the public looks up to them for guidance and encouragement, but also because the club quite literally wouldn't be where they are without them. As one participant succinctly stated, "you want to support those who support you." This elevated status in society also allows these groups to take a stance on social issues and create a legacy bigger than themselves. Another participant even acknowledged how the current generation of fans is likely to notice if a group with that much status does nothing as they are strong proponents of authenticity. Therefore, engaging in sports philanthropy is not only a smart business move but

simply the right thing to do. The fact that these responses are so in tune with what has been reported in prior research, and amplified even more so, shows that this area of the field is extremely valuable and deserving of attention. Subsequently, knowing effective communication in this space becomes that much more beneficial for both professionals and academics.

Limitations

This study was subjected to multiple limitations, especially regarding methodology. First, the participant structure was intended to be purposeful randomization, with a select few chosen from each conference while also being mindful that no two participants would be from the same state. However, it was increasingly difficult to get in contact with these individuals despite multiple rounds of attempted contact through both email and LinkedIn messaging. Considering the limited time frame, the method was switched to an open convenience and snowball sampling format. However, this still could not overcome the limited reach of the survey, as only five interviews were conducted with those who were interested and available within the time frame.

Another limitation that arose during the study was that due to the few responses and availability of the interviewees, conversations were had with individuals with varying degrees of expertise and knowledge of the communication strategies utilized and the *Safe Places to Play* initiative. Some participants knew more than others, which altered the interviews slightly. If conducted with more time, it might be beneficial to specifically choose participants based on thorough background evaluations of their involvement with the initiative. This would ensure that everyone had a proficient understanding of *Safe Places to Play* and the communication strategies involved in communicating it to the community. It might also be worthwhile, with more time, to be additionally selective when it comes to interviewing only those who built their mini-pitches with the U.S. Soccer Foundation. Although every representative was part of a club that had built

a mini-pitch in their community, not all were through the U.S. Soccer Foundation. This resulted in intriguing discussions and comparisons, but these do not technically count towards the U.S. Soccer Foundation's goal of creating 1,000 by 2026.

Despite these limitations, this study offers insight into the current communication strategies utilized by community relations and foundation entities in the professional sports space. It provides a glance into what has been successful amidst certain challenges so that overall communication is strengthened which is beneficial for maintaining the momentum of an initiative. Ultimately, both academics and professionals in the community relations field can benefit from the information present in this study as it both increases scholarship and can encourage adaptability and improvement tactically for these organizations.

Conclusion

Due to this study providing benefits and a deeper understanding for both academics and professionals, there are consequently key implications present for both of these areas that need to be considered. Academically, this study provides an opportunity to analyze a space of the industry often not discussed in depth as much as others in prior research. This lack of research attributed to the nonprofit communication sector of sporting organizations means that this study contributes meaningful knowledge to a growing area of academia and encourages scholars to reconsider previous research models. Models such as Du et al's Corporate Social Responsibility Communication Framework, for example, was published over ten years ago, and can be updated with the relevant data procured in this study.

However, it would be beneficial to consider running this study again with specifically lower-capacity organizations to determine if there are any drastic differences in the findings. All participants interviewed in the current study worked for a community-centered department or

foundation that is part of a higher-capacity organization, given each of their ties to a professional soccer team. If conducted intentionally with lower-capacity groups or even exclusively with one or the other community relations departments or foundations, that might procure different results as well.

For the professionals interviewed and their colleagues, this study is valuable because it gives them a look to examine similarities and differences between themselves and their counterparts when it comes to an initiative in which they share a common goal. Although these successful communication strategies and ideas can in no way be generalized across the country, these clubs serve distinctly different communities, and the core values of this research remain the same. Club representatives should take into account their individual goals and determinants of success from the communication strategy utilized and what logistically makes sense for their targeted demographics to truly be successful. They should also be mindful, regardless of the communication strategy utilized, that they and their sponsors are being perceived as genuine and authentic, as the opposite can significantly harm an initiative's success and an organization's reputation.

The current study also opens up a dialogue for club leaders to collaborate in the future, which could help lead to an impact on a greater scale. It encourages them to look beyond the clubs and organizations that are immediate to them geographically and get inspired by other groups' innovations and ideas. Above all, this research is special as it sheds a light not only on the tremendous behind-the-scenes work these organizations do for their local communities but also on this particular initiative. *Safe Places to Play* and the creation of mini-pitches throughout the United States are life-changing projects for youth in disadvantaged areas. It opens the game and aids in breaking down systemic barriers that exclude certain groups from participating in

sports. Therefore, it is imperative that for this initiative to sustain momentum and reach more

communities, the insights provided by this study are utilized and shared between clubs.

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Successful Sports Philanthropy Communication Strategies:
A Focus on Major League Soccer's Promotion of the Safe Places to Play Initiative

Ysabella Ferruzzi

Introduction

This executive summary provides an overview of the findings from my Honors Thesis study. Thanks to your participation and flexibility during our interviews, I gathered information about successful communication strategies for the Safe Places to Play and mini-pitch initiative, what factors affect the efficacy of the message, and a few recommendations. These insights can strengthen your current tactics, and help you and your team ultimately retain momentum on these initiatives to achieve more impact overall.

Theoretical Framework

Du et al.'s Corporate Social Responsibility Framework
This theoretical framework was utilized as the basis for my analysis. In short, the framework states that a combination of the content and the channel, essentially the communication strategies employed, are affected by certain contingency factors. This results in different communication outcomes, such as consumer loyalty, increased awareness, and advocacy.

Research Questions

My research questions for this study included:
1) Which communication strategies do MLS teams use to promote the Safe Places to Play initiative?
2) In what ways are the communication strategies used to promote Safe Places to Play similar and different between MLS teams?
3) Does the presence of more contingency factors (both stakeholder and company-specific) affect the efficacy of the message being communicated as demonstrated by Du et al.'s CSR Communication Framework?
4) How can foundations in MLS learn from each other regarding successful communication strategies so everyone can make more informed decisions and impact communities on a greater level?

Key Findings
- Clubs reported using modern communication strategies more frequently than traditional print sources when sharing information and updates about their initiatives. The most mentioned strategy was through official press releases and end-of-the-year impact reports.

- For storytelling and sharing the personal and heartfelt stories of the families impacted by the mini-pitches, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are best. If looking to build a donor base, LinkedIn was found to be the ideal platform.

- Regardless of communication strategy, be mindful of the specific campaign and understand your audience. If the community you serve is affected by different socioeconomic factors, such as the digital divide, be creative and innovative when communicating with those groups.

- A message's efficacy is impacted by contingency factors, such as a stakeholder's support and a company's reputation.

- Societal factors, both internal and external to the organization, also influence the success of a communication strategy. Corporate culture and the local media tend to not prioritize this area of work, making communication more difficult.

- Success is less focused on data and numbers and more on personal measures (experiences and gratification expressed in back-end surveys).

Professional Recommendations

- Do not shy away from connecting with other organizations working in the community you are serving. More often than not, these groups will know how and when that population best receives and interprets information. By partnering with these already-established organizations, you can find ways to circumvent communication barriers and make a more considerable impact.

- Be strategic when writing sponsorship contracts. Write specifically how you would like them to contribute or collaborate on the communication front. It is wise to, from the beginning, align with sponsors with a mutual philanthropic focus. Ask what they are passionate about so that they are motivated to participate on their side.

- Begin advocating for your work within your organization. Having other members buy-in on the mission can impact how an initiative builds and sustains momentum. One participant advised focusing on securing the commitment of top leadership.

- Leverage your tie with the professional team to the fullest! This connection sets you apart from other nonprofit organizations and elevates your message. Incorporate players at more than just the unveiling ceremony by hosting additional events at the mini-pitches to attract the community. Also, utilize your stadium and home game days to creatively communicate with the public about your initiatives, especially Safe Places to Play (for example, during halftime). Since fans from all over the community congregate on match days, it is a great time to share the work that you are doing!

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Successful Sport Philanthropy Communication Strategies:

A Focus on Major League Soccer (MLS) Promotion of the *Safe Places to Play* Initiative

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction

1) Can you please tell me your name and the club you work for?
2) What is your title and the responsibilities of your job?
3) How did you come into your current position and how long have you been in the industry?
4) Can you please describe your top priorities/initiatives?
5) From your perspective, why is corporate social responsibility and sports philanthropy (giving back to the community) important to your club?

Safe Places to Play **Initiative & Communication Strategies**

6) How long has (your club) been involved with the *Safe Places to Play* initiative and what has your experience been like so far?
7) How do you decide which sponsors you choose to partner with in creating these mini-pitches?
    a) *Follow-up questions:*
        i) In these sponsorship partnerships, who has input in what is being communicated? Does it affect what communication strategies you utilize?
8) For these mini-pitches, did you notice that some stakeholders or sponsors were more involved than others, especially with communicating and promoting the pitch?
    a) *Follow-up questions:*
        i) Did that more or less involvement impact the outcome of the pitch? (more/less awareness, consumers, partnerships)
9) What communication strategies do you typically utilize to promote the *Safe Places to Play* initiative?
10) Do you tend to utilize more traditional communication channels (tv, radio, magazines, flyers, mail) or newer communication channels (social media, email, blogs) in promoting your mini-pitches?
    a) *Follow-up questions:*
        i) Do you utilize a variety of channels or only a few channels? Why?
        ii) What are the benefits of choosing these channels? Challenges?
11) How do you determine if your communication strategy has been successful? What does a successful communication strategy look like to you?
12) Please tell me a little about what your experience has been like working with the US Soccer Foundation to create mini-pitches through their *Safe Places to Play* initiative.
    a) *Follow-up question:*
        i) How does this partnership influence the communication strategies you utilize to promote this initiative?

13) Can you walk me through what the process was like in creating your most recent mini-pitch in (insert city here)?
    a) *Follow-up question:*
        i)   What communication strategies did you utilize during this time and why?

Challenges:

14) Can you tell me about a time when you encountered a challenge communicating with the community about an initiative your foundation was a part of?
    a) *Follow-up questions:*
        i)   Where do you think these challenges come from?
        ii)   How did you overcome it?

Future:

15) What are your plans for the future with the *Safe Places to Play* initiative?
    a) *Follow-up questions:*
        i)   Are you planning to create any more mini-pitches? If so, where/when? If not, why?

Probes:
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Can you give me an example?
- Can you describe how that felt?
- I am not sure I understand what you mean.
- Can you define that or tell me what that means to you?