

Aligning governance, brand governance and social media strategies for improved organizational performance: a qualitative comparative analysis of national sport organizations

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the potential configurations of governance, brand governance and social media strategies leading to effective organizational performance.

Design/methodology/approach – A fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis including 28 Canadian national sport organizations (NSOs) and six conditions highlighted two sufficient configurations for effective organizational performance, defined as either budget per capita or athlete numbers.

Findings – Although no single component of governance, brand governance, or social media strategy is necessary to succeed overall, brand reputation and the strategic use of social media to communicate NSO identity were common to both identified configurations. Accountability was important for effective organizational performance in terms of budget per capita, while transparency was more important for higher athlete numbers. Thus, condition specificity is paramount in non-profit organizations that often have multiple objectives.

Originality/value – This study provides substantial theoretical and managerial implications, including the need to integrate brand governance and social media in non-profit organizations' overall governance activities.

Keywords Competitive advantage, Good governance, Branding, Organizational effectiveness, Integrated governance

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the 1980s, the Canadian sport system underwent significant changes to increase its professionalism and organizational performance, changes documented by Slack and colleagues



(e.g. Amis and Slack, 1996; Kikulis *et al.*, 1992, 1995a, b; Slack and Hinings, 1992; Thibault *et al.*, 1991, 1992, 1993). Contemporary sport managers, in Canada and internationally, are under increased scrutiny from various stakeholders regarding their credibility to govern themselves, to demonstrate appropriate ethical leadership standards and to maintain the trust of their organizational members, sponsors and other stakeholders. How these organizations respond to these governance challenges will impact them, their sports, individuals and society. Their brand's reputation and equity will also be at stake, potentially impacting their organizational performance.

National sport organizations (NSOs) must manage governance expectations from Sport Canada, a key funder and other stakeholders (e.g. the international governing body, sponsors, athletes and the media) (Parent *et al.*, 2018). NSOs wish to grow their sport at all levels; however, human, financial and material capacity often present limitations (Amis *et al.*, 2004; Doherty and Cuskelly, 2020; Millar and Doherty, 2021). Economic constraints have forced NSOs to be more business-oriented (Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Slack, 2004). Although the Canadian government provided \$72 million in relief funding to the sport sector in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Heroux, 2020), the current environment means uncertainty for organizations; yet this uncertainty has been building for several years (e.g. the 2007–2009 global recession, the BREXIT fallout). As a significant portion of Canadian NSOs' funding stems from public sources (Parent *et al.*, 2019), their ability to stretch taxpayers' dollars is critical for them to improve their financial sustainability, survive and be competitive.

NSOs must balance high performance sport and grassroots participation needs (Harris *et al.*, 2021). To do so, NSOs need to attract new members, retain existing ones and increase corporate and media support. This requires balancing traditional sport activities/processes with more business-based activities, such as managing their brand and customer experiences. Given the modern, networked society (Rainie and Wellman, 2012), a social media strategy offers access to all essential stakeholders, from millennials to Masters' athletes, as well as corporations and media partners. As is the case for other industries, social media's increased importance offers unique opportunities for NSOs to enhance their management and marketing activities, build their brands and ultimately enhance customer experiences (cf. Abeza and O'Reilly, 2014; Eagleman, 2013; Thompson *et al.*, 2014). Although social media can help gain a competitive advantage (Williams and Chinn, 2010), NSOs often incorporate social media without a well-defined strategy (Naraine *et al.*, 2022) and with few resources (Naraine and Parent, 2017), thereby limiting its potential. This affects NSOs' organizational performance and ability to attract additional funding that could be reinvested to further improve outcomes (e.g. growth of participants in their sport or international performance).

Their prevalence in and impact on Canadian society make non-profit sport organizations like NSOs an appropriate context to understand and assist in maximizing efficiency and effectiveness considering societal trends, namely the importance of governing one's brand and grappling with how social media activities should fit within the brand governance process. Understanding the relationship between governance, brand and social media strategies will help NSOs maximize their potential to meet their funders' and stakeholders' expectations, while growing their sport at all levels to the benefit of Canadians. However, Canadian NSOs, like organizations in other industries, adopt different means, processes and designs to reach the outcome expectations, known as equifinality (cf. Mintzberg, 1979, 1984; Parent *et al.*, 2021b). Thus, we cannot assume all NSOs would align their governance, brand governance and social media activities in the same way. But are there more effective configurations? Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to explore the potential configurations leading to effective organizational performance, using Canadian NSOs as our context.

In the following section, we review the literature on organizational performance, governance, brand governance and social media. Next, we describe the methodology through the construction of the configurational model and the empirical sample, data calibration and

analysis. Then, we present and discuss the results. Finally, before concluding, we provide theoretical and managerial contributions and implications.

Literature review

Our study is founded on a combination of three literatures: (sport) governance, brand governance and social media. After reviewing the organizational performance literature, each is described below.

Organizational performance

As the numerous models developed since the 1980s demonstrated, the organizational performance of non-profit (sport) organizations is a complex and multidimensional concept (Nowy *et al.*, 2015; O'Boyle and Hassan, 2014; Sowa *et al.*, 2004; Winand *et al.*, 2010; Winand *et al.*, 2014). Nowy *et al.* (2015) underlined that organizational performance is a combination of efficiency, which is "a relationship between the system inputs (resources used) and the outputs produced" (Madella *et al.*, 2005, p. 209), and effectiveness which refers to "the capacity to achieve the institutional goals" (Bayle and Madella, 2002, p. 2). Scholars agreed determining organizational performance requires financial and non-financial measures (Delshab *et al.*, 2020). Based on preliminary work by Winand *et al.* (2010), Delshab *et al.* (2020) built a four-dimensional (i.e. finance, sport, member, strategy) measure of non-profit sport organizations' performance. More recently, Harris *et al.* (2021) acknowledged the difficulty of measuring NSOs' organizational performance due to the heterogeneity of their objectives. They suggested measuring organizational performance through three permanent and paramount objectives of all NSOs: members, medals and money (the so-called "3M" model). This model considers the NSOs' budget, athlete numbers and competitiveness at the international level. Because of the comparative nature of our study and its need to have similar criteria, we used this model to measure NSOs' organizational performance.

(Sport) governance

A ubiquitous term, "governance refers to theories and issues of social coordination and the nature of all patterns of rule" (Bevir, 2011, p. 1); increasingly, researchers consider administrative arrangements, market features, multijurisdictional aspects and stakeholders when understanding governance. In turn, 'sport governance' is concerned with governing or steering the overall sport in one or across jurisdictions; thus, this includes governing the inter-organizational stakeholder network (García, 2009) and the intra-organizational aspects of key sport organizations within this system, such as NSOs. To study governance within an organization, Koliba *et al.* (2011) argued researchers should not only examine organizational performance measurement and different types of accountability but also the organization-stakeholder interactions (e.g. communication type and frequency, resource allocation and exchanges). In this paper, we therefore considered the participation of and interactions with stakeholders (including stakeholders' participation in different organizational decisions, and the use of social media) and types of accountability and organizational performance measurement outcomes.

Like the broader management literature, sport-based governance research topic examples include board composition, representation and management (Adriaanse, 2016), power (Hoye and Cuskelly, 2003), leadership (Ferkins *et al.*, 2018), motivation and conflict (Hamm-Kerwin and Doherty, 2010) and strategic capability (Ferkins and Shilbury, 2015). Although we understand many sport governance structural elements, researchers have been slow to incorporate processes and other managerial considerations (e.g. marketing/brand, communications) into our sport governance understanding. To wit, of the 2,155 studies

Parent and Hoye (2018) examined in their systematic review of governance principles' impact on organizational performance, just 19 measured governance principles; within these, only the board structure-performance relationship could be empirically found.

There is also no agreement as to what constitutes 'good' sport governance. Hare (2015) argued good sport governance should involve a vision, planning, accountability, monitoring and resources, while The Sports Governance Observer (Play the Game, 2013) suggested transparency and public communication, democratic process, checks and balances and solidarity. More recently, the "Support the implementation of good governance in sport (SIGGS)" project (Zintz and Gérard, 2019) argued good governance includes autonomy and accountability, democracy, integrity, participation and inclusivity and transparency. Thus, we see similar concepts such as accountability and participation, but also transparency, which we also consider in this study. In a recent systematic review on governance principles in sport, Thompson *et al.* (2022) found accountability, transparency and democracy to be the top three principles cited by record authors in terms of frequency. Notwithstanding, there are growing calls for not using "good" governance but "better" governance to denote the idea of organizations seeking to improve their governance practices instead of organizations being "good" or "bad" at governance (Chappelet and Mrkonjic, 2013; Parent *et al.*, 2021a; Thompson *et al.*, 2022).

Perhaps more important, however, is the recognition that one size does not fit all; there is not one way of bettering an organization's governance (Parent *et al.*, 2021a). Following this line of thinking, Parent *et al.* (2021b) recommended the use of archetypes for organizational researchers and found four archetypes for Canadian NSOs: Board-led, Executive-led, Professional and Corporate. Board-led NSOs prioritize stakeholder engagement and governance as key values. They are the smallest of the NSOs in terms of capacity though they are highly efficient, and their board is more operational in nature, in part due to the small or nonexistent staff. They focus on participants as a main revenue source and for organizational performance measurement. Executive-led NSOs prioritize stakeholder engagement and diversity as key values. They are a little larger than Board-led NSOs, see the senior staff person (e.g. Chief Executive Officer [CEO]) lead most decision making and focus on financial goals as well as stakeholder communication and participation. Most of their revenues come from governments. In turn, Professional NSOs prioritize stakeholder engagement. Their larger capacity, which includes public and membership funding dominating, sees a decentralized structure with staff making most decisions and the board being more of a governance board. Both Professional and Corporate NSOs focus on organizational performance measures. Corporate NSOs focus on governance and stakeholder engagement values, with some also including diversity. They are the largest capacity organizations and closest to a for-profit organization in terms of governance structures and processes. Thus, depending on the NSO's archetype, how managers will deal with governance, branding and social media may differ.

Brand governance

The sport brand ecosystem contains different types of interconnected brands that interact with one another. As Kunkel and Biscaia (2020) suggested, many of these entities operate in a vertical, architectural scheme, such as an athlete brand being connected to a sport team brand, that sport team brand being connected to a sport league brand and a sport league brand connected to the sport federation brand. Similarly, the NSO brand ecosystem (e.g. Curling Canada) includes an athlete brand (e.g. Jennifer Jones) being connected to Provincial Sport Organization (e.g. Manitoba Curling Team) brand being connected to the NSO brand. In this dynamic, an NSO brand like Curling Canada is also impacted by external sport brands such as events (e.g. Curling's Scotties Tournament of Hearts), sponsors (e.g. Scotties) and

Broadcasters (e.g. TSN) evolving the initial sport brand architecture conceptualization (see [Kunkel et al., 2013, 2014](#); [O'Reilly et al., 2023](#)). Indeed, what is unique about the sport brand ecosystem model is the acknowledgment of different environmental factors, emphasizing the strategic nature of sport marketing and not solely the operational branding pieces ([Karg et al., 2022](#)). Traditionally, brand managers embraced a functional brand perspective in which branding activities are isolated and serve to fulfill the requirements of the organization's core offerings ([Bhat and Reddy, 1998](#)). However, there has been a shift towards a strategic brand perspective, whereby various elements of brand architecture such as positioning, personality, reputation and image and relationships are considered to generate value through the brand ([Keller and Lehmann, 2006](#)). [Jones \(2005\)](#) argued brand managers ought to take a holistic approach to determining the sources of brand value and identify the main stakeholders in relation to brand value creation. There is more to branding than simply considering the consumer-brand dyad ([Ind and Bjerke, 2007](#)) as stakeholders play an important role in co-creating the brand ([Taks et al., 2020](#)). This, in turn, creates governance challenges.

[Séguin and Abeza \(2019\)](#) highlighted the differences between operational brand management, strategic brand management and brand governance. At the lower, functional level, brand activities pertain to tactics, controls and evaluations. At the middle, strategic level, brand activities involve setting guidelines, (re)positioning, expansion and maintenance to ensure consistency. Brand governance is situated at a higher, overarching level and involves the reconnection of the brand back to the organization's mission, vision, values and policies, as well as its internal and external stakeholders. Thus, brand governance ensures that an organization's brand is managed in a consistent and cohesive manner, which can contribute to the success and sustainability of an organization. It is one aspect of corporate governance, which encompasses a range of activities related to the management of an organization as described in the previous section. Effective brand governance is key to supporting broader governance goals, as one's brand can be an important asset or liability ([Aaker, 1991](#)) depending on how it is managed.

Consequently, brand governance embraces the notion of branding as a stakeholder-based engagement ([Ind and Bjerke, 2007](#); [Jones, 2005](#)). It conceptualizes the potential for working with, instead of just for, stakeholders, unlocking the ability to co-create and add value to core products and services ([Hatch and Schultz, 2010](#)).

Although brand governance research is rare, the work of [Taks et al. \(2020\)](#) determined brand governance activities were not undertaken by NSOs with smaller budgets and limited resources. Furthermore, their study highlighted the potential for social media to exist as a cost-efficient way to brand the organization through co-creation with stakeholders but that too required more governance oversight. Although Taks and her colleagues offered insights into brand governance behaviors (or lack thereof) in sport, notable limitations of their work included (1) examining these behaviors solely in the context of financial and human resource capacity; and (2) not linking the potential governance structure or archetype to help explain brand governance results.

Social media

Concomitantly, social media has emerged as a popular marketing communications tool in business, increasing consumer accessibility to brands through the creation of online communities with instantaneous, ongoing two-way communication ([Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010](#)). Inevitably, this tool has also been embraced by the sport industry, a sector comprised of both individual- and organizational-level brands (i.e. brand ecosystem as discussed above). From athletes (e.g. [Pegoraro, 2010](#)) to sponsors (e.g. [Abeza et al., 2014](#)) and professional teams (e.g. [Pronschinske et al., 2012](#)), there has been an extensive proliferation of social media adoption within the sport environment.

As much of the sport industry's adoption of social media occurred in the early 2010s, it has given scholars an opportunity to expound the focal relationship between the consumer and brand, especially a sport organization in the context of the latter. Although early work was much ado simply about the presence of sport stakeholders online, research from [Stavros et al. \(2014\)](#) began to unpack consumer motivations for engaging with sport organizations via social media, notably the ability to share, socialize and outwardly exhibit fandom. Building upon that sentiment, [Achen \(2017\)](#) articulated that the consumption of a sport organization's social media content could result in increased loyalty and affect purchase behaviors (e.g. tickets, membership). In this spirit, there exists an identification that social media can positively influence consumers and reinforce their connection to the sport organization. However, the maturation of social media, its general ecosystem and nuances, have also produced a condition wherein the consumer and organization dyad can be influenced by the focal consumer-sport organization relationship, but in turn, also influence other consumer-sport organization relationships. Indeed, there are influential, centralized stakeholders who can control communication flow in social media networks and bear the potential to distort the marketing communication efforts of the sport organization ([Naraine and Parent, 2016](#); [Yan et al., 2019](#)). However, while the use of social media by sport organizations is potentially useful, it is primarily viewed as an operational tool with limited strategic oversight. Specifically, [Naraine et al. \(2022\)](#) identified that board members and executive staff are aligned in the absence of social media governance, despite its importance on brand governance and stakeholder management ([Taks et al., 2020](#)).

Additionally, social media as a modern marketing communication tool in the sport industry has been primarily viewed through a corporate lens ([Karg et al., 2022](#)), with a few notable exceptions, particularly in the Canadian context (e.g. [Abeza and O'Reilly, 2014](#); [Naraine and Parent, 2016, 2017](#)). Abeza and O'Reilly assessed how Canadian NSOs use social media to facilitate stronger relationships with stakeholders, while Naraine and Parent illuminated key influencers in these social media networks (2016) and the operational challenges experienced with implementing social media (2017). The limited number of examinations is surprising as many NSOs seemingly value online communication ([Girginov et al., 2009](#)). This omission is significant given the increased professionalization and corporatization by organizations in this sector ([Parent et al., 2018, 2021b](#)). As this process ensues, there is the potential for adoption and use of social media similar to organizations driven by profit. However, while this mimetic behavior is possible, NSOs have a unique strategic function as well as differing goals and objectives. Indeed, there is still much to learn about this marketing communications tool and its impact on non-profit organizations, particularly those in sport whose stakeholder networks are dynamic and at risk of being shaped by digital communities ([Naraine et al., 2020](#)). As social media increases in importance amongst NSOs ([Naraine et al., 2022](#)), it is critical to assess the overall alignment with brand governance and general organizational governance to determine whether espoused plans and objectives match operational actions.

In summary, the above literature suggests that the more active an NSO is in governance, brand governance and social media practices, the better its overall organizational performance. This study examines this assumption, recognizing the growing convergence toward corporatization ([Parent et al., 2021a, b](#)). The next section provides an overview of the methodological design to examine the phenomenon under review.

Method

To identify configurations of governance, brand governance and social media strategies leading to NSOs' effective organizational performance, we carried out a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) ([Rihoux and Ragin, 2009](#)). fsQCA is a configurational method

that has proven to be relevant to examine organizational and governance issues (Fiss, 2007; Greckhamer *et al.*, 2008, 2018; Peris-Ortiz *et al.*, 2020) and specifically in the context of NSOs (Winand *et al.*, 2013; Zeimers *et al.*, 2021; Lefebvre *et al.*, 2022). By assigning cases (i.e. NSOs) into subsets, fsQCA identifies sufficient/necessary configurations of conditions leading to an outcome of interest. Sufficiency and necessity are measured through consistency and coverage, which “serve analogous purposes of significance and effect sizes in regression analysis” (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018, p. 489). According to Greckhamer *et al.* (2018), fsQCA involves six main stages: building the configurational model, constructing the empirical sample, calibrating the data, analyzing the data, evaluating the robustness of findings and reporting and interpreting the findings. We describe the first four stages below, while the fifth and sixth stages form the results section.

Building the configurational model

The first stage required building the configurational model by identifying the outcome and the conditions making up the configurations. Our outcome of interest was NSOs’ organizational performance and the conditions were linked to governance, brand governance and social media strategies.

Regarding the outcome, the “3M” model (i.e. money, members, medals) of Harris *et al.* (2021) grounded our measurement of NSOs’ organizational performance. This model was relevant because it provided a common measure of organizational performance across our cases. However, COVID disrupted our data collection for the medal measurement. Initially, we planned to take medal measurements during the PyeongChang 2018 Winter and Tokyo 2020 (summer) Olympic and Paralympic Games as these two events fell within the same NSOs’ quadrennial funding timeline (i.e. 2016–2020). Unfortunately, COVID pushed Tokyo 2020 to 2021, thereby moving it out of the quadrennial. Moreover, COVID caused multiple (additional) challenges for NSOs that were extraordinary and may not reflect “normal operating procedures,” thereby introducing potential data skewing or bias. Thus, to control for the issues caused by COVID, we decided to collect data on events that took place only before COVID. Therefore, we replaced Tokyo 2020 with the 2019 Pan American Games in Lima, a major event for the NSOs in our sample. The problem was that 7 of the 28 NSOs were not represented at the Pan American Games, which represented a significant gap in our sample. We therefore adapted the “3M” model by focusing only on money (i.e. NSO budget/capita) and members (i.e. the number of athletes affiliated to the NSO). We discuss this adaptation of the model in the study limitations. In other words, our study retained the number of athletes and the budget as measures of organizational performance, which led to the following two models: a first model examining configurations leading to a high number of athletes, and a second model examining configurations leading to a high NSO budget per capita.

Regarding the conditions, we identified and incorporated into our models six main conditions likely to influence the NSOs’ organizational performance. The number of six conditions respects the ratio of the number of variables (conditions + outcome) to the number of cases which must be 0.33 or less to obtain a theoretically valid model (Marx, 2008). The two governance conditions were transparency and accountability due to their dominance among sport governance principles (Thompson *et al.*, 2022). Transparency and accountability were measured by summing a set of dummy variables (see Parent *et al.*, 2021b). High scores measured high levels of transparency (min = 2, max = 7) and accountability (min = 7 and max = 12).

Concerning brand governance, we integrated two conditions: the brand strategy discussion with external stakeholders and consideration of the brand reputation when making decisions. These two conditions are highly variable within NSOs (Taks *et al.*, 2020), which is relevant in comparative analyses to highlight discriminating conditions. Following

Taks *et al.* (2020), brand strategy discussion with external stakeholders was measured by a dummy variable and consideration of brand reputation when making decisions was measured by a five-point Likert scale.

Finally, the communication of the organization's mission, vision and values through social media and the diversification of social media content were identified as strategic use of social media related to governance and brand governance (Taks *et al.*, 2020; Naraine and Parent, 2016), and added to our model. The communication of the organization's mission, vision and values through social media was measured by a five-point Likert scale (see Taks *et al.*, 2020). To measure the diversification of social media content, we adapted the Herfindahl index, a well-known measure of concentration/diversification (Wicker and Breuer, 2013). Respondents were asked to rank the top five examples of social media content produced by their organization (from 1: most often produced to 5: least often produced). Next, two categories of social media content were established: sport-related content (e.g. competition score, live updates, or standings) and non-sport-related content (e.g. newsletters, sponsor activation, or charity events). For each category, a score was calculated by summing the rank of each content example. Finally, the diversification score for social media content was obtained using the following formula: $1 - \text{Herfindahl Index based on the score for each category (i.e. } 1 - \text{"sports-related" score}^2 + \text{"non-sports-related" score}^2\text{)}$. A diversification score close to 1 indicates high diversification of social media content. Table 1 shows the details of the measurement of these six conditions.

Constructing the empirical sample

The second stage involved constructing the empirical sample and collecting data. Our population included all Sport Canada-funded NSOs ($N = 58$). As these NSOs vary in capacity (e.g. having no full-time employee to 58 employees, having boards between four and 15 members; see Parent *et al.*, 2019 for more details on this population), in October 2017, we invited the board chairperson or senior staff person of all 58 NSOs to participate in an online survey. After reminder emails, 32 NSOs completed our survey. Out of these 32 NSOs, 28 responses were complete/valid and were retained as cases for this study (48.3% of response rate). The profile of respondents was as follows: 17 were CEOs/Executive directors (60.7%), nine were Chairs (32.1%), and two had another role (one board representative and one director of sport development and high performance; 7.1%). In addition to the online survey, athlete numbers in early 2018 were obtained from Sport Canada. Our sample of 28 NSOs included 24 summer (85.7%) and four winter (14.3%) sports. NSOs varied in the annual budget for 2018 from \$28.32 to \$33,720.93 CAD *per capita* and the number of athletes from 86 to 56,533, thereby demonstrating a range of small to large NSOs in the sample.

Calibrating the data

QCA is a set-theoretic method which means all conditions and outcomes need to be conceptualized as sets. Consequently, the third stage (called data calibration) implies determining the case's (i.e. the NSOs) membership in the sets by defining thresholds. To obtain a more fine-grained analysis, we preferred the fsQCA to the crisp-set QCA. While crisp-set QCA dichotomizes data, fsQCA requires several benchmarks to calibrate data, leading to more precision in the membership degree of each case (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we used the standard three benchmarks (fully in or fully out of the set, and the crossover point) integrated into the "fsqca 3.0" software to calibrate our data (Misangyi and Acharya, 2014; Peris-Ortiz *et al.*, 2020). For example, for the "transparency" condition, the calibration determined for each NSO whether it was in (score = 6) or out (score = 5) of the "transparent NSO" set. The crossover point was the point of maximum ambiguity between in or out of the set (score = 5.5). Thresholds related to each benchmark were selected following Misangyi and Acharya (2014) and are provided in Table 1.

Condition/Outcome	Measure	Calibration			Sample descriptive			
		Fully In	Crossover	Fully out	Mean (SD)	Median	Max	Min
Conditions								
Transparency	Sum of dummy variables	6	5.5	5	4.64 (1.59)	5	7	2
Accountability	Sum of dummy variables	12	11.5	11	10.57 (1.48)	11	12	7
Mission, vision, values through social media	Five-point Likert Scale	4	3	2	3.68 (0.91)	4	5	2
Diversification of social media content	1 – Herfindahl Index based on social media content	0.39	0.36	0.32	0.29 (0.15)	0.32	0.50	0
Brand strategy discussion with external stakeholders	Dummy variable	1		0	0.61 (0.50)	1	1	0
Consideration of brand reputation when making decisions	Five-point Likert Scale	4	3	2	4 (1.05)	4	5	1
Outcomes								
Athlete numbers	Number of affiliated athletes	6,155.25	4,390.88	2,626.50	7,208.71 (13,624.80)	2,626.50	56,533	86
Budget per capita	Budget divided by the number of athletes	5,843.22	3,411.80	980.39	4,697.27 (8,053.67)	980.39	33,720.93	28.32

Source(s): Created by the authors

Table 1.
Building the
configurational model:
measure, calibration
and sample
descriptives

Analyzing the data

Finally, the fourth stage is the calibrated data analysis. Data were analyzed with the “fsqca 3.0” software developed by [Ragin and Davey \(2016\)](#). The analysis was divided into two sub-steps. First, we examined the conditions’ necessity to identify whether one or more of the six conditions in our study are necessary for effective organizational performance. Second, we identified configurations of conditions leading to effective organizational performance using the truth table algorithm (the Quine–McCluskey algorithm). The truth table contains all possible configurations (in our case, $2^{\text{number of conditions}} = 64$ configurations). The algorithm requires researchers to set multiple *a priori* minimum thresholds to reveal configurations ([Misangyi and Acharya, 2014](#)). Then, based on [Greckhamer et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Misangyi and Acharya \(2014\)](#), our analytical procedure and thresholds were as follows: (1) we first identified the configurations that had a minimum raw consistency of 0.8; (2) from these configurations, we eliminated any that had a PRI (proportional reduction in inconsistency) below 0.75; and (3) we used a minimal overall acceptable solution consistency of 0.8. Consistency and coverage scores assess the configurations’ validity and relevancy; while consistency score measures how consistently empirically observed configurations are related to the outcome, coverage score assesses the empirical relevance of a configuration ([Greckhamer et al., 2018](#)).

Results

[Table 2](#) presents the results of the conditions necessity analyses. The consistency value for each condition was below the minimum threshold of 0.9 for both models ([Greckhamer et al., 2018](#); [Peris-Ortiz et al., 2020](#)). Accordingly, no single condition is necessary for effective NSO organizational performance. However, the consideration of the brand reputation (0.83) when making decisions had a high consistency for high athlete numbers. Also, the communication of the organization’s missions, vision and values through social media (0.88), the brand strategy discussion with external stakeholders (0.85) and the consideration of the brand reputation when making decisions (0.87) had a high consistency for a high budget per capita. The coverage scores ranged from 0.19 to 0.48, which are values close to or higher than other organizational studies ([Misangyi and Acharya, 2014](#); [Peris-Ortiz et al., 2020](#)) indicating a good model’s relevancy.

[Table 3](#) provides sufficient configurations for effective organizational performance regarding athlete numbers and budget per capita. The fsQCA analysis highlighted one consistent configuration leading to high athlete numbers and another one leading to high budget per capita. Below, we report these two configurations produced by the fsQCA software and denote the presence and absence of governance, brand governance and social media strategies within each configuration as follows (e.g. [Fiss, 2011](#)): conditions are denoted by ● (present) and ○ (absent).

Condition	Athlete numbers		Budget per capita	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
Transparency	0.36	0.33	0.33	0.29
Accountability	0.31	0.30	0.36	0.33
Mission, vision, values through social media	0.63	0.31	0.88	0.41
Diversification of social media content	0.19	0.19	0.50	0.48
Brand strategy discussion with external stakeholders	0.47	0.28	0.85	0.48
Consideration of brand reputation when making decisions	0.83	0.37	0.87	0.37

Table 2.
Analysis of necessary conditions

Source(s): Created by the authors

	Configurations leading to higher	
	Athlete numbers	Budget per capita
Transparency	●	
Accountability	○	●
Mission, vision, values through social media	●	●
Diversification of social media content	○	●
Brand strategy discussion with external stakeholders	○	●
Consideration of brand reputation when making decisions	●	●
<i>Overall solution consistency</i>	0.93	0.99
<i>Overall solution coverage</i>	0.11	0.21

Note(s): Conditions are denoted by ● (present) and ○ (absent). No circle means the condition is inconsequential to the configuration outcome

Source(s): Created by the authors

Table 3.
Sufficient configurations for effective performance of NSOs

First, the configuration leading to effective organizational performance in terms of athlete numbers refer to transparent but not accountable NSOs that do not discuss their brand strategy with their external stakeholders, but consider their brand reputation when making decisions. They communicate their mission, vision and values through social media, but do not diversify their social media content.

Second, the configuration leading to effective organizational performance in terms of budget per capita refers to accountable NSOs that discuss their brand strategy with external stakeholders, and consider their brand reputation when making decisions. In addition, these NSOs communicate their mission, vision and values through diversified social media content. Finally, transparency is not an essential condition in this configuration. This means NSOs displaying this configuration have a high budget per capita, whether or not they are deemed transparent.

Discussion

This paper explored the potential configurations of governance, brand governance and social media strategies leading to effective organizational performance, using Canadian NSOs as our context. Based on two organizational performance indicators (i.e. athlete numbers and budget per capita), our research highlighted two sufficient configurations leading to organizational performance depending on how it is measured.

Our findings show that no single governance, brand governance, or social media strategy is necessary for effective NSOs' organizational performance. Nevertheless, the consideration of the brand reputation, when making decisions and the strategic use of social media to communicate NSO identity, is common to both identified configurations. Hence, these elements seem critical for effective organizational performance regardless of the indicator. On one hand, this reinforces reputation/image as a central component of brand governance (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). On the other hand, from a brand governance perspective, it highlights the importance of reconnecting the brand to the organization's identity (i.e. missions, vision, values) (Séguin and Abeza, 2019). Overall, these findings support Taks *et al.*'s (2020) work underpinning the need to incorporate brand governance as a critical component of NSO governance and support it with strategic social media activity.

This research also nuances the overall claim that governance principles (i.e. transparency and accountability) are standards for effective organizational performance (see Parent and Hoye, 2018). In isolation from other strategic aspects, transparency and accountability do not seem necessary for effective organizational performance as measured in this study. Indeed,

the organizational performance indicators are static measurements based on organizational performance outcomes in one particular year. Future research should consider a dynamic measurement of performance, like the change in organizational performance (i.e. increase/decrease; better/worse) over a broader period of time, and include an appropriate dynamic measure for the medal outcome part of the “3M” model (Harris *et al.*, 2021). This empirical finding means more direct, empirical work is needed to understand the relationship between different governance principles and organizational performance outcomes. It also questions the assumption that following “good” governance principles automatically leads to improved organizational performance, which empirically supports Parent and Hoye’s (2018) contention.

But, our results do indicate that specific configurations of governance, brand governance and social media strategies are sufficient for effective NSOs’ organizational performance. By highlighting these different alignments, our study supports the need to examine the organizational performance determinants through pathways or configurations of interconnected components (Winand *et al.*, 2013). Our results also demonstrate the importance of strategically aligning governance, brand governance and social media strategies. Regardless of the organizational performance indicator (i.e. athlete numbers or budget per capita), the combination of at least one element of governance, brand governance and social media strategies leads to effective NSOs’ organizational performance. This alignment between the three strategic dimensions highlights their necessary interconnections and the importance of considering the brand and social media strategies as responsibilities within the organization’s overall governance and not only at the managerial and operational levels (cf. Taks *et al.*, 2020). This implies that so-called governance boards may need to expand their duties to include not only traditional governance activities (e.g. strategic planning) but also brand and social media-related governance activities.

Finally, these configurations for effective organizational performance are distinct according to the organizational performance indicators. For example, accountability, social media content diversification and brand strategy discussions with external stakeholders are present in the configuration leading to a high budget per capita, but not in the configuration leading to high athlete numbers. The stakeholders directly involved in these organizational performance indicators may explain this difference, a sentiment previously explored by Naraine *et al.* (2020). First, as NSO budgets are heavily dependent on subsidizing bodies such as public authorities and sponsors (Parent *et al.*, 2021b; Winand *et al.*, 2013), these stakeholders’ involvement in brand strategy may explain a higher financial outcome. Similarly, having visibility through diverse social media content and being confident that the organization’s leadership demonstrates accountability can attract new sponsors and strengthen existing subsidizing partner relationships. Clearly, accountability, social media content diversification and brand strategy discussions with external stakeholders are more oriented external to the organization. Conversely, these aspects are less influential in attracting athletes who may be more attentive to the identity and reputation of the organization, with transparency reflecting a more inward orientation towards the organization. These different configurations by organizational performance indicator are significant because NSOs and, more broadly, non-profit organizations have multiple goals (and thus multiple organizational performance indicators) and not just financial profit (Harris *et al.*, 2021). This implies non-profit organizations with multiple goals may need to prioritize their goals, as the resulting configuration or structure will differ depending on whether it is more important to have a high number of members (athletes or other) or more money per athlete to work with. For some NSOs, athlete numbers may not be a strategic priority due to the type of sports. NSOs such as Diving Canada (i.e. springboard, platform and high dive) or Bobsleigh Canada are quite different than Canada Soccer or Curling Canada in their potential to attract participants (i.e. specialized vs. mass participation sports, limited capacity in terms of infrastructure, equipment and coaches).

In summary, (1) for the budget indicator: strategies to target external stakeholders who can contribute financially are important; the element that is more externally oriented to the organization (i.e. accountability, diversifying social media content and discussing branding with external stakeholders); (2) for the athletes' indicator: the focus is more on the organizations themselves; the element that is more internally oriented is transparency; (3) for both organizational performance indicators, brand identity is important (i.e. communication of the organization's mission, vision and values through social media and brand reputation).

Theoretical contributions and implications

This study advances the knowledge about the alignment between governance, brand governance and social media strategies within NSOs and, more broadly, within Canadian non-profit organizations. Though this research focused on Canadian NSOs, our results offer recommendations for NSO researchers and managers in similar contexts outside Canada, particularly in countries where sport is also organized based on the federated sport model with public funding (e.g. many European countries such as Belgium, Germany or Switzerland, but also other Western countries such as Australia). For instance, it demonstrates the value of fsQCA to interrogate governance, brand and social media questions within non-profit (sport) organizations in federated sport systems. Whether this is also the case in centralized or unitary sport systems remains to be determined.

Moreover, two key research implications emerge. First, our research contributes to the governance literature by empirically demonstrating the need to integrate brand governance and the strategic use of social media into organizations' governance structures and processes. This implies that researchers need to broaden their definitions and explorations of governance to brand and communication aspects.

Second, many research groups and organizations advocate the importance of NSOs implementing "good" governance principles such as transparency and accountability, leading to better organizational performance. However, our study tempers these statements and urges caution in blindly applying a range of principles in the name of improving organizational performance outcomes. As the present study demonstrates, and in line with the idea that a "one size does not fit all" approach is incongruent with NSO operations (Parent *et al.*, 2021a), the organizational performance indicator determines the importance of one governance principle over another. Therefore, future research on "good" governance should consider that nonprofit (sport) organizations have various objectives which require the activation of different conditions, and in turn, will impact organizational structures and processes. Also, researchers should consider the interconnection of these principles with other governance dimensions, such as brand governance and social media strategies, which are crucial elements of stakeholder engagement and expectations (Naraine *et al.*, 2020; Taks *et al.*, 2020; Helm and Jones, 2010).

Managerial implications

Across the world, non-profit sport organization managers are pressured by their stakeholders to increase their organizations' efficiency. This study invites these sport managers to integrate and appropriately align brand governance and social media strategies into their organization's overall governance. Considering brand reputation when making decisions and the strategic use of social media to communicate the organization's mission, vision and values are crucial aspects. Nevertheless, these two aspects must be combined with other elements to lead to effective organizational performance. In particular, managers should select and apply the best configuration in accordance with their organization's primary goal or objective. For example, an NSO manager whose main objective is financial performance will have to develop the organization's accountability, the diversification of the organization's

social media content and the integration of stakeholders when determining brand strategy. In contrast, the NSO manager whose main objective is the number of athletes should not prioritize these three points but should focus instead on their organization's transparency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research identified two sufficient configurations of governance, brand governance and social media strategies leading to effective organizational performance. Although no single governance, brand governance, or social media strategy is significantly necessary for effective organizational performance, considering brand reputation when making decisions and the strategic use of social media to communicate the organization's identity are crucial. In addition, depending on the organizational performance indicator, the configuration differs, which means organizational structures and processes will need to differ depending on the desired organizational performance outcome (here membership numbers vs. financial). Therefore, our study highlights the importance for academics and managers to integrate and align brand and social media governance into the organization's overall governance.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations, including the choice of conditions in our configurational model. Our conditions have a robust theoretical anchor necessary for a quality fsQCA analysis (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018). However, because the literature on brand governance and social media within NSOs is still underdeveloped, future studies may identify further conditions complementary to those in this study. As a result, new configurations could emerge. In addition, the number of conditions was limited by the number of cases in our sample to meet the variable-to-case ratio of 0.33 (Marx, 2008). Future studies could exploit large-N QCA (see, for example, Lefebvre *et al.*, 2022), such as through a sample of NSOs from multiple countries, to increase the number of cases and, therefore, the number of conditions.

Another limitation is the choice of thresholds to calibrate the data. Ideally, these thresholds should come from the literature (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018). However, we used thresholds based on our data distribution in the absence of such thresholds in the literature. Although this approach is methodologically correct and does not detract from the analysis quality (Misangyi and Acharya, 2014), future studies should determine discriminant thresholds for each model condition.

Next, our study is based on a sample of 28 NSOs. Although this sample is representative of our population and the response rate was high (48.3%), the number of organizations remains limited. Future studies should extend the analysis to other non-profit organizations outside of the sport context to refine or add to and compare the configurations highlighted in this study to other organizations and contexts.

Our study is also limited to two organizational performance indicators. The heterogeneity of NSO goals is well established (Parent *et al.*, 2021a, b), and surpasses the three permanent and paramount objectives of all NSOs, the so-called "3M" model identified by Harris *et al.* (2021): members, medals and money. Nevertheless, COVID has made the collection of medals data challenging, if not impossible within the set timeframe. Nevertheless, our study provides a solid foundation for building future post-pandemic comparative studies examining NSO organizational performance. On one hand, it would be relevant for future research to consider this "medal" component. On the other hand, and more importantly, it would be relevant to move from a static measure of organizational performance (imposed by the pandemic) to a dynamic measure. For example, collecting data over several years would enable researchers to observe the evolution of organizational performance (i.e. increase/decrease; better/worse) and therefore to better understand how governance, brand governance and the strategic use of social media have contributed to this evolution in organizational performance.

Finally, our empirical results call into question the "do good governance to improve your organization's performance" assumption. As such, further empirical research is critically

needed now to examine the various governance principles and their actual impact on organizational effectiveness and performance outcomes.

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