

## **How do International Sport Federations communicate through social media: A content analysis of FIFA's Twitter communication.**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to analyse the way in which Twitter is used by International sport federations to interact and engage with its followers.

**Methodology:** A content analysis using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software was conducted of 5,389 online messages tweeted by FIFA on Twitter between August 2014 to January 2015.

**Findings:** The results suggest that FIFA does not use Twitter to its full potential by mainly sharing one-way information rather than engaging to a greater level with its followers.

**Implications:** The research highlights the importance of the effective use of Twitter as a potential powerful communication tool for International sport federations. Communicating about social development and engaging followers could potentially increase International sport federations' reputation and build trust amongst followers and stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Social media communication, Twitter, Relationship Marketing, Engagement, FIFA, International sport federations.

## **Introduction**

It has been widely accepted that social media plays a major role in society as it has become a worldwide trend (Campos et al., 2013). Although academics have claimed there has not been enough research done in this area, there have been a growing number of studies within the field of social media and the influence it has within the sport industry (Campos et al., 2013; Mahan, 2011; Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015; Stavros, Meng, Westberg and Farrelly, 2014). Indeed some authors have focused their efforts on adding to the literature by trying to enlighten the reasons why individuals (including professional athletes) engage in social media (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh and Greenwell, 2010; Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015; Witkemper, Hoon Lim and Waldburger, 2012) others focused on understanding the different motives for virtual interaction in regards to fans/followers (Stavros et al., 2014) and there are others who worked on assessing the implementation of social media within sport organisations' strategies and their desired outcomes (Campos et al., 2013; Gibbs, O'Reilly and Brunette, 2014). Twitter has become a popular social media platform for users such as athletes, teams and leagues across the globe to share a wide variety of content and enable followers to keep up to date with their favorite athletes and teams in the sport they are most interested in (Hambrick, 2012).

Furthermore, authors have increasingly been interested in studying the impact social media platforms such as Twitter can have towards building relationships between organisations as a whole and their customers and/or consumers within the sport industry (Abeza, O'Reilly and Reid, 2013; Stavros et al., 2014; Williams and Chinn, 2010; Witkemper et al., 2012). Indeed relationship marketing has become a key strategy employed by organisations in order to retain key customers and answer the different needs and wants of consumers. Witkemper et al. (2012) argued that relationship marketing strengthens brand awareness, enhance the understanding of consumer needs, increase loyalty and add value for consumers.

Existing literature has mainly focused on professional sport teams and athletes' communication through social media (Gibbs et al., 2014; Hambrick et al., 2010; Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015; O'Shea and Alonso, 2011), but has not yet addressed the way in which International sport federations (IFs) use social media to communicate. IFs are much different from sport teams or athletes as they would not partake in sport competitions, but organise them and vouch for the rules of the game they promote (Zintz and Winand, 2013). They have therefore a different agenda as compared to national or local teams and their athletes, and represent their organisation members (i.e. national sport federations). As such they fall within the concept of meta-organisations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008) as their members are not individuals, but organisations themselves. One of the most famous IFs is FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Amateurs) which vouch for the game of football. This study aims to focus on examining the way FIFA uses Twitter and analyses how they interact with their followers as they are known as on Twitter.

The study aims to contribute to the existing literature on sports communication and sport management by providing evidence as to how IFs communicate in the social media and the way they interact with their followers. The research provides managerial implications on improving social media communication and discusses future research directions.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Social media and Sport***

More people use social media applications as they are available to all whether it is through computer laptops, tablets or smartphones the use of such media as well as virtual communities keep growing (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015; Stavros, Meng, Westberg and Farrelly, 2014). Williams and Chinn (2010) define social media as “tools, platforms, and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate, and collaborate with others.” (Williams and

Chinn, 2010, p.422). Additionally they argue that social media are a different form of communication compared to other traditional communication tools as they enable users to get involved on a global scale with the possibility to view, share and edit different contents. Indeed, according to Abeza, O'Reilly and Reid (2013), users have the possibility to create, listen, learn, participate, share interests, experiences, and commentary using collective writing. As a result it has enabled users to become both "producers" and "distributors" of information on social media. Sport consumers are seen as "channels" which the sport products can be promoted (O'Shea and Alonso, 2011), indeed the sport fans have come to be both the consumer and the product advocate. Mahan (2011) stated that digital social media platforms have developed into a point of emphasis in the sport industry as sport organisations, athletes, sponsors and media outlets are looking towards these new technologies in order to communicate quicker with the sport consumer whilst also delivering information about products or brands to (prospective) consumers. Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015) argued that "social media present a cost effective medium that: embraces interactivity, collaboration and co-creation above one-to-many communication; integrates communication and distribution channels; provides opportunities for customisation; and delivers superior speed to the delivery of information communication and feedback" (Filo et al., 2015, p.167).

In regard to sport, there are a number of opportunities social media offer to sport organisations as well as sport managers and marketers, most importantly being able to strongly develop the level of commitment and engagement of followers through the creation of innovative and interactive experiences whilst also increasing relationships through social media which can be beneficial considering the highly competitive environment in which sport organisations operate in (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015). Mahan (2011) supports this by adding that the number of different social media platforms that are available to Internet users such as websites, blogs and discussion boards have enables consumers to interact not only

with other consumers, but with athletes, sport organisations, and sponsors too. Furthermore, he argues that sport organisations, sponsors and media organisations, which he defines as “traditional producers”, have acknowledged the prominence that can be generated by utilizing such new media platforms such as Twitter in order to achieve marketing objectives.

Created in 2006, Twitter has since gained rapid awareness by Internet users and has developed into one of the most popular social media platforms worldwide (Campos et al., 2013; Hambrick, 2012; Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015). Twitter has been described as a microblogging site (Campos et al., 2013; Hambrick, 2012; Smith et al., 2012; Witkemper et al., 2012) where users post what are known as ‘tweets’ limited to a maximum of 140 characters, these short updates are an example of user-generated content which makes Twitter part of social media (Campos et al., 2013). Additionally, tweets can include hyperlinks to news headlines, blogs, pictures, videos that appear in a ‘feed’ of individuals following other users (Smith et al., 2012). Whether individuals or organisations it gives them the possibility to create their own personal home page where they can post tweets which gives free subscribing users the ability to read and follow them on a daily basis (Hambrick, 2012). Twitter users are able to ‘retweet’, explained as a reposting of another user’s tweet (Campos et al., 2013), ‘reply’ or ‘favourite’ tweets within their continuous news feed by the followed users. In turn this enables effective information sharing within the twitter community as it expands from one user to the other in a matter of seconds (Hambrick, 2012; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh and Greenwell, 2010). Ultimately this simplifies the communication processes without any time or location restrictions which have helped create relationships between consumers and (sporting) organisations that would have not been achievable in the past (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015). Two other interesting features of Twitter includes the use of hashtags, that is the hash (“#”) character followed by any series of characters or word(s) to relate a tweet to a topical category, and the use of “@” followed by a twitter

account name, enabling anyone to address a tweet to any twitter user, although restrictions may apply. The motivations behind the use of Twitter however vary depending on users' different needs. Indeed athletes, sport organisations and professional teams all have different desired outcomes of using such platforms to interact with their followers.

### ***Motivation and Understanding behind the use of Twitter***

#### *Professional Athletes' use of Twitter*

Twitter has become a prevalent social network amongst professional athletes in an attempt to reach out to their fans. It has certainly enabled athletes to communicate with fans in a more direct and open way compared to what was done before such as going through the public relations department of sports companies and other ordinary media outlets (Hambrick et al., 2010). The study conducted by Hambrick et al. (2010) was to examine the ways in which professional athletes used Twitter by undertaking a content analysis of athletes' tweets and understand the communication interactions between them and their fans. They placed each collected tweet in one of six categories ranging from 'interactivity', 'diversion', 'information sharing', 'content', 'promotional', and 'fanship'. In order to gain a general understanding of how communication occurs between fans and athletes, the authors used what is known in the communication research area as the 'Uses and Gratifications Theory'(UGT) which focuses primarily on how consumers engage within a variety of activities and their reasons for doing so. The UGT can be employed towards online social media sites such as Twitter and may help to understand its continuous growth. Their results showed that interactivity was the most common motive with 34% of tweets collected falling into this category which showed that athletes used Twitter to directly interact with their fans (followers) and those with the most followers had more engaging tweets. 28% of tweets were seen as 'diversion' tweets as they comprised mainly of non-sport-related subjects whereas 15% of their tweets were implicated in 'information sharing' on their own team or sport(s) and finally 5% of their tweets included

'promotional' topics which, according to the authors, indicated that athletes did not take advantage of the power of Twitter to promote their endorsements, sports and team. It is the power of new technologies such as Twitter which provides new opportunities for athletes to communicate with sports fans and has ultimately changed the way in which people communicate (Hambrick et al., 2010).

### *Professional Team sports' use of Twitter*

According to O'Shea and Alonso (2011) professional sport organisations are highly affected by the fast switch in new technologies. Due to the competition, external pressures and high demands from sport club fans, professional sport organisation managers are being heavily influenced in the way to market and brand their product. Nowadays most professional sports teams have access to social media to stay close and connected with their fans. In order to do so they have used Twitter to share breaking news, pictures, videos, advanced access such as live updates during games or special events for example (Gibbs et al., 2014). Gibbs et al. (2014) investigated "how professional sport teams reach, inform and satisfy fans" (Gibbs et al., 2014, p.189). By combining semi-structured interviews and an online survey they aimed to understand what motivates and satisfies Twitter followers of professional sport teams using the Canadian Football League and its eight teams as their main participants. Similarly to Hambrick et al.'s (2010) study, the authors used UGT to underpin their study whereby they argued that it assumed users are typically active and choose their media sources based on the influence of satisfactory social and psychological needs (Gibbs et al., 2014). The authors found four key gratifications pursued by Twitter users such as interaction, promotion, live game updates, and news which add to the understanding of how professional sport teams can successfully develop strategic fan engagement in an effective and efficient manner.

Pritchard, Stinson and Patton (2010) introduced two psychological aspects regarding team identification such as affinity and affiliation. They explained affinity as a process whereby

fans associate and identify themselves to a team because there are similarities between the fan and the team in particular ways. Affiliation is described as the will for a fan to be a part of a particular group. It demonstrates the level to which a fan adopts particular characteristics or perceptions of a sport organisation. The authors' study examines the dual relationship between both psychological aspects of team identification being influenced by a team's positive features (which creates affinity). According to the authors, communicating core organisational ideals (which builds affiliation) should not just arouse identification but also increase the attendance to the team's events. In terms of Twitter, associating affinity and affiliation from fans to the sport organisation would increase the number of followers whilst also increasing the identification to it.

#### *Sport organisations' use of Twitter*

Campos et al. (2013) argue that "exploiting Twitter's two-way communication capabilities has been identified as a key to building relationships and the most suitable way to conduct strategic communication campaigns on Twitter." (Campos et al., 2013, p.6). Hence engaging with fans or followers is crucial for sport organisations who want to exploit the functions of Twitter in more depth. Indeed as they please their fans, the latter are influenced to use Twitter repeatedly which generates more openings to venture the social media application for sport organisations (Campos et al., 2013). Furthermore, in recent studies it has been said that creating content brings engagement as new consumers expect to have online services and information supplied in an eloquent, targeted and manageable manner that is available for immediate consumption (Campos et al., 2013). Hambrick et al.'s (2010) argued that sport organisations typically use Twitter to share information on games, ticket sales, and increase brand awareness and product sales. However to use Twitter effectively and efficiently sport organisations need to fully understand its features and the potential effects that may benefit these organisations (Hambrick et al., 2010). This is supported by Sutton, McDonald, Milne



and Cimperman (1997) where they stressed the importance of delivering and answering fans' expectations in terms of sharing valuable content which will, if used effectively, result in mutual benefits which are personal connectedness for the fans/followers, and an increase in the sport organisation's image in the consumers' minds.

In a different study, Meng, Stavros and Westberg (2015) provides brighter visions of the use of social media in sport and especially regarding sports organisations in the way these use them to communicate and engage with fans. To achieve this, qualitative data research was conducted where content analysis was undertaken to examine the online 'messages' posted by 30 NBA franchises on Facebook and Twitter. The findings of this study showed that the latter have taken great advantage of social media platforms.

Meng, Stavros and Westberg's (2015) developed a framework of team communication through social media highlighting four communication sets such as: Informing, Marketing, Personalizing and Activating. The authors recommend that sport organisations should make rigorous efforts in their communications strategy by implementing these four types of communication. Results showed that Informing and Marketing communications were a one-way dialogue whereas Personalizing and Activating were a two-way dialogue which offered more interaction with fans. Within these four categories there are a number of different activities in which teams take part in and use social media to communicate these activities. These are as such: "Organisational news", "Activities outside sport" and "Diverting fans to other content" (Informing); "Promoting" and "Direct sales" (Marketing); "Initiating contact" and "Direct responses" (Personalizing); "Group Involvement" and "Gathering feedback" (Activating). All of these forms of communication can help sport organisations achieve their marketing goals, strengthen relationships and retain customers. However the authors stated that not every team used Twitter as efficiently as the other. Indeed "some teams' online presence appeared forced and unnatural" and that "the social aspect of these platforms was

underutilized with a large proportion of posts focussed on traditional one-way communication, rather than engaging fans through more interactive communication.” (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015, p.205, 207).

### ***Relationship Marketing, Social Media and Sport***

Many researchers have conducted studies on relationship marketing and how it affects social media users’ motivations whether they are individuals (fans and/or followers) or sport organisations, the use of such social media like Twitter can prove to be very beneficial in building meaningful relationships between both parties (Abeza et al., 2013). However there has been insignificant research done on relationship marketing within the sport industry (Abeza et al., 2013; Witkemper et al., 2012) as it is still a recent field of study.

Abeza et al. (2013) stated that organisations as a whole are gradually moving forward from simply creating a one-way communication to a two-way communication scheme in order to build long-term relationships with their customers. In turn this is the overall benefit of adopting a relationship marketing strategy as it is crucial for organisations, especially sport organisations, to be able to retain customers. In order to achieve this, a clear knowledge of what customers’ needs and wants is necessary as they have become more and more suspicious of sport organisations’ marketing objectives. Therefore it is important organisations make sure the interaction between them and their followers is equally beneficial (Stavros et al., 2014).

In the study conducted by Abeza et al. (2013) the authors explored the different opportunities and challenges sport managers faced by using social media in their relationship marketing strategy. To do so they led qualitative data case studies on eight sport organisations who organised running events in Canada. Their results showed that all organisations used social media platforms to achieve their relationship marketing goals. Some of the opportunities to

use social media that were found comprised of: better knowledge of customers, advanced customer-organisation interaction, effective sport participants and fans engagement and efficient resource management (time and money). However some of the challenges that were found also need to be considered as they can lead to a lack of control over posted messages, concerns over the credibility and reliability of information, concerns over the effectiveness of messages in reaching end users, difficulties in identifying “true” online customers and setbacks with the allocation of organisational resources (Abeza et al., 2013).

In a similar study, Williams and Chinn (2010) examined how sport organisations could reach their relationship marketing goals through social media. They argued that the new challenge for sport organisations is how to handle the shift in customer relationship, indeed consumers nowadays are now known as “prosumers” due to their ever growing knowledge. The authors came up with an improved framework based on Grönroos’s (2004) relationship marketing model which focused on communication, interaction and values in order to include ‘prosumers’ and describe the different interactions that take place through social media communications. Therefore their study was based on giving more insight for sport marketers to meet their relationship marketing objectives through analysing the different values of each social media platform. In regard to the integration of Twitter to meet relationship marketing goals, the study found that the use of such social media outlet has proven to be effective in strengthening and maintaining relationships with fans as it provides sports organisations, coaches and athletes the opportunity to instantly communicate with their followers. In turn this allows fans to gradually interact and add value to their sporting interests.

### ***Twitter and Sport National Governing Bodies***

Campos et al.’s (2013) research paper consisted of analysing the integration of social media platforms, in this case Twitter, into Sport National Governing Bodies (SNGBs) to assess the ways in which sporting organisations’ social media content enables them to reach their overall

strategic objectives in terms of engagement and persuasion. The spread of this study analysed how nine SNGBs for different sports in England used Twitter as the degree of integration into the strategic operations of sport organisations such as SNGBs has not been given much focus. The results of this study showed that the SNGBs engage through Twitter effectively even though some were more efficient than others. For example England Hockey found a better way of engaging with their followers than others due to the fact they had more followers. The more followers the more chances of engagement this creates for sport organisations (Campos et al., 2013). However some SNGBs were able to generate higher levels of engagement in spite of not having a significant number of followers. According to the authors this might have been due to the popularity of the sport (etiquette) and the content shared. An important way to know whether the engagement sought was effective is by looking at the number of retweets (RTs) on one tweet (Campos et al., 2013). This means that twitter users can share one's tweet and add their own thoughts before posting it in their news feed. Another feature of the results showed how SNGBs used Twitter in order to reach their strategic objectives of increasing sport participation. For example, according to the study Rounders England's tweets used 35% of the persuasion principles (Reciprocity, Commitment and Consistency, Social proof, Authority, Liking, and Scarcity) introduced by Cialdini (2001), in order to raise awareness and increase followers' participation in their sport. What was interesting to see is that out of all nine SNGBs their focus differed, indeed some were more focused on engaging with their fans and others were more focused on increasing participation through Twitter.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative data analysis was conducted to investigate the way IFs use Twitter and how they interact with their followers. A case study based analysis was chosen to showing detailed knowledge of situations whereby researchers have no control over and when developing or extending new theoretical models (Abeza et al., 2013).

### ***Case study: FIFA***

FIFA was chosen as it has become one of the most recognizable International Sport Federation in the world most notably due to the ever growing popularity of football across all continents. Founded in 1904, FIFA has 209 member associations and employs approximately 310 people from over 35 nations and comprises of a congress (legislative body), Executive Committee (executive body), General Secretariat (administrative body), and committees (assisting the Executive Committee) (FIFA.com, 2015). FIFA aims to develop the game of football worldwide, organise international tournaments, and promote the impact football can have in society (FIFA, 2015). In terms of marketing, FIFA's targets to position itself as "best in class in the sports marketing and sponsorship field" (FIFA, 2015). FIFA's marketing is oriented towards promoting and adding values at events for sponsors, host nations and cities, member associations, sponsors and fans. FIFA aims to ensure "a consistent and aspirational brand image" (FIFA, 2015).

FIFA joined Twitter in May 2010. Its main account (@FIFAcOm) contains of the latest football news from around the world in 209 countries. It has over 7.6 million followers (October 2015) and has more than 50,000 tweets. The second account involved in this study (@fifamedia) is the FIFA Media department which is based at the FIFA headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland. It is responsible for handling media communication and operations for FIFA, which was created in April 2011. It has over 190,000 followers (October 2015) and has more than 5,400 tweets.

### ***Data Collection***

The preliminary stage of this study consisted of visiting FIFA's Twitter accounts, @FIFAcOm and @fifamedia and collecting all the tweets that were posted between the 21/08/2014 until the 21/01/2015. The time period was chosen after the 2014 FIFA Men's World Cup which attracts most social media attention and out of major international competitions, except FIFA

U-20 Women's World Cup (Canada, 5-24 August) and FIFA Club World Cup (Morocco, 10-20 December).

@FIFACOM is focused on general football news whereas @fifamedia focusses on internal and external news on FIFA's diverse activities through the sport of football. Data collection was led in mid-October 2014 and then repeated a month later in mid-November 2014 in order to have a large selection of tweets and helped develop a better representation of FIFA's social media use (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015). A total of 5,389 tweets posted on both accounts were collected through the add-on NCapture to observe how the International governing body for football used this social media platform to engage, interact and communicate with fans across the globe.

### ***Data Analysis***

Thematic content analysis of the 5,389 tweets was carried out using QSR NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis computer software. Meng, Stavros and Westberg's (2015) framework of four types of social media communication (i.e. Informing, Marketing, Personalizing and Activating) has been used as the thematic structure for the present analysis. Each tweet had the potential of being included in more than one communication category. Sub-categories were used in line with Meng, Stavros and Westberg's (2015) framework, and further categorises were created to report FIFA's particular communication, and the way it interacts and engages with followers. Coverage has been calculated for each category as the percentage of tweets in the category from the 5,389 tweets that have been analysed during the four months period, and for each sub-category as the percentage of tweets in the sub-category from the total number of tweets in its category.

## Results

From the months of August 2014 until January 2015, FIFA was particularly active on Twitter. The examination of the governing body's posts exposed many different topics within the four main communication categories but also within the different activities included in those types of communication. Furthermore, some of FIFA's tweets were found to fit in more than one communication category as well as in more than one activity.

### *FIFA's twitter communication content and followers' engagement*

Table 1 shows FIFA Twitter communication by categories illustrated by examples of tweets. FIFA did not only inform and promote to its followers but attempted, to some extent, to activate and personalize its communication, directly or indirectly, with individual followers which would help getting them involved within a global community through the sport of football.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

“Informing” relates to providing information on different topics such as “Activities outside sport”, “Diversion”, “Organisational news” and “Stakeholder news”. The first theme referred to information related to players, members of staff, or the sport organisation taking part in non-sport activities associated with football. The different activities found throughout the data analysis are as such: charity (“*FIFA to invest USD 1.5 million #WorldCup public viewing revenue in Football for Hope*”), employment (“*Want to work for FIFA? We have 2 video journalist vacancies in #Digital department. Apply here: (Link provided)*”), health (“*FIFA has launched a mental health research project to try to lift the taboos surrounding it*”), social media (“*Keep track of FIFA's Social Media activity across Twitter, Facebook and YouTube right here! (Link provided)*”), worldwide issues (“*TOGETHER #WECANBEATEBOLA:*

*Learn about FIFA's public health campaign in the fight against Ebola. (Link provided)*”), and personal information (“*Happy birthday to Rogerio Ceni (42), Frank Leboeuf (47) & @Mad7e7 (38)*”). The latter, concerned with providing information on players and staff that are part of the footballing world was the most tweeted about with 65.5% coverage within “Activities outside sport”.

Diversion refers to directing followers to other content such as pictures, videos, blogs or websites, match reports, interviews and stats on different players, managers and staff. Due to the 140 characters limitation on Twitter, followers would be linked to other websites for additional information that would be of interest to them (“*WATCH: Video interview with @Cristiano on his latest FIFA #BallondOr win. (Link provided)*”).

Organisational news comprised of news and information directly associated with the organisation in relation to the sport of football. Three main sub-themes resulted from the data such as: Events (“*Road to the 2018 #WorldCup begins today in Miami.*”); Organisation which includes subjects such as economy, finance, legal, technological, governance and ethical issues (“*RT @jeromevalcke: FIFA committed to developing women's football in Brazil, with \$15m investment pledge, a start.*”); and Sport development including important subjects such as legacy and sustainability plans (“*Brazil gets behind women's football development.*”).

Stakeholder news comprises news and information directly associated with players (“*@LacazetteAlex kept up us his goal streak, while Lucas Barrios hit a hat-trick in @Ligue1.*”), managers (“*@MrAncelotti says @realmadriden's #CopaDelRey exit could help their @LaLiga campaign.*”) and member of staff at FIFA (“*RT @SeppBlatter: Congratulations @Socceroos. The @afcasiacup hosts got off to a winning start: 4-1 v @KuwaitFA in Melbourne. #AC2015.*”), whilst also providing news and information on clubs, national teams and international leagues in relation to the sport of football (“*Australia face*



*China as @afcasiacup knockout stage begins @Socceroos @theKFA @UzbekistanFF.”;*  
*“San Lorenzo see off Boca #argentina.”).*

“Marketing” communication arises when FIFA posted appropriate and engaging promotions and advertisements through two types of activities: direct sales, which involved directly providing fans with the opportunity to easily buy products online such as tickets and official merchandise on the FIFA Store (*“Did you get an itchy sweater again? Get what you really want at the Official FIFA Online Store”*; *“@SanLorenzo fans, think your club can lift another trophy in December? #ClubWC tickets here: (Link provided)”*). The other activity within “Marketing” involved promoting competitions (*“Road to the 2018 #WorldCup begins today in Miami”*), special events (*“ONE HOUR TO GO: Just an hour until the ceremony begins. Follow our Live Blog here: (Link provided) #BallondOr”*), live games from leagues and international games all around the world (*“LIVE: Follow Equatorial Guinea v Burkina Faso in Group A of the #AFCON2015 here: (Link provided)”*). But also upcoming league, domestic cup, Champions League fixtures from different continents (for example UEFA; AFC; Copa Libertadores) and international games (*“@FCBarcelona and @realmadriden face difficult away games @LaLiga. The weekend previewed: (Link provided)”*).

“Activating” means of communication focusses on creating ways in which online followers would get involved as much as possible in different activities such as: gathering feedback from followers /fans in order to collect their opinions before developing or implementing a new idea; and group involvement ensuring, where possible, followers/fans are included in relevant general interactive processes including group discussions and group-focused questions such as (*“QUESTION: With #AFCON2015 now underway, we want to know who your favourite African player of all time is & why?”*). Gathering feedback from followers and fans only occurred once. Indeed there was only one retweet by @FIFACOM from @FIFAWWC asking for fans’ opinions (*“RT @FIFAWWC: YOUR VIEW: #U20WWC is*

*over; but YOUR participation is not! How can we improve our content? We'd love your feedback.”).*

“Personalizing” communication consisted of conversing with individual followers. In this case these could be either followers/fans or sport people, mainly football players. This type of communication could be done in two ways: through direct responses which involved openly responding to individual questions or comments by either tweeting or retweeting a follower’s response (“RT @PetrCech: @FIFACOM yes, of course :-); “RT @acciesfc: @FIFACOM Many thanks FIFA, recognising our great run!”). The other way is by initiating contact which consisted of direct, interpersonal contact with an individual fan or a follower, initiated by FIFA (“@Simeone answered your question @Ahmed\_Osaimi! See his reply in our Live Blog: (Link provided)”

Twitter has allowed FIFA to strengthen its level of interaction with fans and followers however it is clear that the level of communication with its followers is not as engaging and interactive as it could be. The next section details the coverage of FIFA’s tweets according to the different categories.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

### ***Coverage of FIFA’s Twitter activity***

The number of tweets within each of the four communication categories and sub-categories is outlined in table 2. FIFA communicates primarily in a one-way stream given 89.33% of its tweets during the four months period of analysis were categorized as “Informing”. Marketing oriented tweets represented 9.67% of all tweets. In terms of the two-way communication stream. FIFA activates followers in 8.96% of its tweets, and personalised tweets represent 1.06% of tweets. The total category coverage is greater than 100% given some tweets were classified in more than one communication category. A good example of this would be when

FIFA attempts to promote one of their events, such as the Club World Cup, through marketing communication this can also be included in personalizing communication as FIFA asks fans if they have purchased their tickets for their teams upcoming games during this event (“@Moghreb\_Tetouan fans, watch your team on the biggest stage! #ClubWC tickets here: (Link provided)”).

Interestingly, among the tweets analysed, 2,494 (46.3 percent) used hashtag. The top five most popular hashtags are #clubwc (n=266), #ballondor (n=263), #worldcup (n=207), #ucl (n=125) and #wwc (n=111). Hashtags are frequently used by FIFA to draw attention to particular events taking place such as the FIFA Club World Cup, the election of the FIFA Ballon d’or award or the UEFA Champions League competition. These events are related to different types of communication categories. The findings relative to FIFA’s social media use and the way in which it communicates on Twitter, are considered in the following sections.

## **Discussion**

Twitter is referred as a communication tools with potential to enhance team identification (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015) and relationship marketing (Abeza et al., 2013; Williams and Chinn, 2010). However, it is different for IFs as they represent the sport in which teams play. IFs operate at a much higher scale than a sports team and is accountable to a number of different stakeholders, including its member organisations, as it represents one or more sports across the world.

Findings revealed the different types of content shared and tweeted by FIFA: (1) sharing news and information both in and out of the sport of football, (2) entertaining content with links provided to the main website, (3) using promotion, sales and advertising for events organised by FIFA but also football games all across the world from league games to international

games, (4) questions directed to fans, (5) interacting with individuals or a group of fans/followers.

Waters and Jamal (2011) argued that non-profit organisations primarily use Twitter to deliver one-way communication. In line with the authors' findings, the current study found that most of FIFA's tweets directed its followers to a range of different information on its website.

Twitter is essentially being used by FIFA as a channel to provide information which involves FIFA sharing details on specific events such as the World Cup and to generate a discussion from followers which ultimately could lead to an increase of interest for the event as suggested by researchers (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015; Pritchard et al., 2010). FIFA relationship marketing through social media seems limited to making its followers aware of related football events taking place, but does not focus on other aspects of relationship marketing underlined by Witkemper et al. (2012) such as understanding consumer needs, increasing their loyalty and adding value for consumers. Although Twitter has the potential to boost visibility, fan/follower knowledge and also strengthen the relationship between a sport organisation and its global group of followers (O'Shea and Alonso, 2011; Waters and Jamal, 2011; Witkemper et al., 2012), FIFA primarily uses Twitter to share information. FIFA does not capitalize on the opportunities that Twitter would give to build relationships with fans/followers and enhance its image as part of its communication strategy. There is a lack of potential use in terms of two-way communication. On the other hand, Lovejoy et al. (2012) argued there have not been enough indications that Twitter can accurately bring both short-term and long-term financial advantages or build relationships between followers and organisations. Therefore, FIFA might be less motivated to put in the effort in terms of time and resources in order to build relationships with their followers. This could explain why FIFA uses more one-way communication to share information on a number of different topics

and promoting its activities which can be seen as “traditional” ways of communicating rather than two-way communications.

Engaging fans/followers would enable FIFA to achieve its goals in giving the game of football and the organisation itself a cleaner image worldwide. The reason behind the lack of engagement with fans/follower in social media might be due to the high number of followers which make it difficult for sport organisations, especially IFs, to respond directly to individual fans and why these organisations tend to just share information. Even though it is understandable, there is an inevitable risk in not directly responding to fans as it can cause confusion and annoyance from the latter towards the nature of this approach (Stavros et al., 2014). In keeping with Meng, Stavros and Westberg (2015) results suggest FIFA could potentially interact more with fans. Indeed, given most of FIFA’s tweets have external links provided to redirect fans to FIFA’s main website, the organisation could use some of its resources and enrol representatives to create an internal social network. This would give FIFA the opportunity to improve the communication with fans and might enable the organisation to keep control over its presence, commercial links and tasks. Although, as McLean and Wainwright (2009) argued, there is a risk in using such approach as it could push fans away if FIFA over-commercialise their website. Additionally, there is also a risk for FIFA in opening up too much about what goes on behind the scenes. After what has been going on in previous years, fans/followers could use Twitter to respond negatively towards FIFA’s ideas and intentions.

As argued by Purdue (2001) social capital involving trustworthy relationships between communities and leading organisations could contribute to successfully developing communities. In this sense, FIFA could be viewed as a social entrepreneurial organisation, as the author describes this status as being similar to “transformational leaders” which combines business skills with a vision for the community, as opposed to “transactional leaders” who

focus on interacting with its followers. In line with Purdue (2001), the current study shows that FIFA does share information on its activities in order to develop the game of football, for example “*RT @jeromevalcke: Development seminars focus on FIFA's reforms as well as their impact on football's governance & development globally – (Link provided)*”, but should maybe focus on interacting with its followers more often as this would show fans across the world that FIFA is highly committed to developing communities through football. However, there is some degree of conflict over trust between people and organisations in both partnerships and communities as there could be constraints in producing social capital (Purdue, 2001). Indeed, results suggest that FIFA do not seem to communicate these types of content very often which might be due to the lack of opportunity there could be in accumulating social capital. As argued by Persson (2011) “good governance” could also lead to building trust between sport governing bodies and their communities. Indeed, incorporating good governance principles such as transparency, accountability, responsibility, equity, efficiency, and effectiveness whilst also focusing on CSR activities and social capital, could enable sport governing bodies to reinforce their reputation and build trust within its community. Results suggest that FIFA does indeed incorporate “good governance” as part of its CSR activities, for example “*Governance principles key to FIFA's development programmes - (Link provided)*”. And given the 2015 FIFA scandals, FIFA has a long journey in rebuilding trust with its stakeholders. Twitter represents a valuable tool for FIFA to do so, and its corporate social responsibility activities the right message to regain trust and improve its reputation.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been a growing activity undertaken by all types of sport organisations due to the ever increasing interest and desire for people within communities to make sure organisations' business practices are done in a socially acceptable behaviour (Lewis, 2003; Walker and Kent, 2009). Although there are some remaining issues

as to the way these social activities are conducted, it has the potential to significantly boost sport organisations' global status and restore fans' trust towards the organisation they identify themselves to (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009; Godfrey, 2009; Lewis, 2003; Walker et al., 2010). One of the issues that have been in the way for sport organisations to fully capitalize on the positive outcomes of CSR activities has been the way the latter communicate these social activities (Douvis et al., 2014). For example the "Football for Hope" initiative (launched in 2005) is one of FIFA's many CSR activities which sustains responsible community projects by providing funding, equipment, training, know-how and exposure which brings hope and opportunities to disadvantaged minorities and improves the lives of young people within these communities (FIFAactivityreport, 2013). This inevitably contributes towards the achievement of FIFA's mission which is to build a better future. Findings show that FIFA does indeed provide evidence and information about their social developments through football ("*#WorldCup Legacy Fund split: US 60m to infrastructure, 15 to #womensfootball, 15 to grassroots, 10 to other projects*"). However, this maintains the argument that there is a clear lack of interaction between FIFA and its followers.

The four types of social media communication (i.e. Informing, Marketing, Personalizing and Activating; Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015) seem interconnected. For example, FIFA tweeted "*Thanks @GarethBale11 for your help in trying to reduce the spread of Ebola in affected communities. #wecanbeatebola*" This tweet is a good example of the interrelatedness between all four types of communication. Indeed it informs fans that FIFA is fully involved in reducing the spread of Ebola in affected communities, in addition it promotes both FIFA's activity and players' involvement towards public health and Ebola which can be confirmed by this tweet "*TOGETHER #WECANBEATEBOLA: Learn about FIFA's public health campaign in the fight against Ebola – (Link provided)*". In terms of activating, the first tweet shows that FIFA used the hashtag #wecanbeatebola which according to Lovejoy et al. (2012) signifies

that the message is relevant to a particular subject and by using the hashtag it gives organisations the opportunity to also get followers involved. For example, FIFA could encourage fans to use the #wecanbeatebola to ask questions and spread the news about FIFA's health efforts. In terms of personalizing, it shows that FIFA initiates contact by mentioning @GarethBale11. As Lovejoy et al. (2012) argued through these messages, a conversation is created between FIFA and the user but can also be seen by all other users either following the organisation or on the individual's account. This would enable IFs to communicate and focus their messages to fans/followers and so, would involve sharing information on corporate social responsibility including themes such as "Sport development", "Community activities and programmes", and "Worldwide issues". CSR information could be communicated more effectively and shared more often by FIFA using multiple communication strategies as one tweet could be used to inform, promote, activate and personalise towards fans/followers. This therefore, emphasises the gap that needs to be filled by FIFA in order to fully capitalize from the opportunities Twitter offers to sport organisations to engage with fans.

### ***Managerial and theoretical implications***

Maximizing the use of Twitter can contribute towards the achievement IFs' objectives and so it is imperative to develop and sustain this link successfully. This study exposes the opportunities for IFs, through the use of Twitter, to successfully engage and interact with fans and followers. Even though the study focused on the use of Twitter by FIFA, the outcomes are relevant and directed to International Federations (IFs) in their respective sport.

Originally, fans use Twitter in order to obtain updated information and news on teams, players, coaches, transfers and other associated features of the organisation (Informing).

Indeed, by sharing live updates, exclusive news, interviews, pictures and videos, it enables IFs



to answer their expectations from appropriate and pertinent information therefore enhancing their gratification. Additionally, Twitter provides IFs with valuable opportunities to present their target market to marketing communications in regards to teams, games and events (Marketing). Indeed, by making sure promotion and advertising are related and valued by fans, IFs can boost ticket and official merchandise sales, and generate a greater audience to their events. Notwithstanding, there is a potential risk of over-commercializing on Twitter which has become a problem for some organisations and may cause fans to look away (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015). Furthermore, Twitter also enables IFs to reach out to fans by directing them to a whole group of other fans and by asking questions and getting them involved, this generates co-creation and stimulates feedback (Activating). This communication strategy can prove to be successful in producing opportunities for group membership and augmenting what can be called “fan-community” engagement. Moreover, the contact made between IFs and fans can be personalized with individual fans or a group of fans through directed dialogues (Personalizing). In effect, by further developing the online availability aspect of IFs and building a more “tailor-made” approach, this has the potential to strengthen the relationship with fans. Finally, Twitter can give IFs the opportunity to communicate and promote most of its activities within the sport they represent. However, communicating activities outside sport such as corporate social responsibility has proven to accelerate fans’ satisfaction, sense of belonging and expand relationships (Social development). This gives IFs the opportunity to build trust and enhance their global reputation as this feature is interconnected with all four other features within the online communication strategy. Indeed by providing live updates, pictures and videos of the activities (Informing), promoting and exposing fans to relevant information that can be of value for them (Marketing), getting fans involved in the development, asking questions and gathering their feedback on potential or current activities (Activating) and personalize contact through

individual or group discussions (Personalizing), IFs will be able to fulfil their objectives and coagulate their relationship with their fans, and create a competitive advantage over other IFs.

It is important for IFs to note that whilst one-way communication provides content that appeals to and is wanted by fans, it will not be as beneficial if two-way communication is neglected which emphasises the uniqueness of Twitter in that it generates personal contact between organisations and their fans (Meng, Stavros and Westberg, 2015). A part from the communication categories that have been discussed throughout this study, there are further recommendations to be made towards IFs who use Twitter. Although there is a risk of getting fans involved in their activity developments through Twitter due to the image IFs, such as FIFA, can have in the eyes of fans it is really important for the IFs to consider using more interpersonal and activating approaches to communicating on Twitter as this will motivate fans to engage more frequently and will help IFs strengthen their image by constantly developing their sport, making it available to all through different communities around the globe whilst also giving fans the opportunity to have an input in developing the sport within their respective communities.

The research contributes to the understanding of sport organisations' use of social media. Particularly, it is the first study to address IFs' use of social media. It has confirmed Meng, Stavros and Westberg (2015) framework of four social media communication strategies and suggested that these are interconnected. CSR activities have been highlighted as a potential message that could be used by IFs in connection with these strategies to build trust and reputation.

### ***Limitations and further research***

It should be noted that there are some limitations to the current study. This research was undertaken during a five month period of a single International sport federation which could

be considered a short period of time to draw conclusions on the way IFs use Twitter.

Therefore this limits the understanding of how IFs use Twitter by only basing the study on one of the many that are involved in sport. Although the time period seemed short, there were a lot of tweets collected which provided a good representation of the content displayed on FIFA's Twitter accounts. It could be argued that other IFs may well be more interactive and use dialogic tweets with their followers rather than mainly using one-way communication. Future research could compare and contrast different IFs' use of Twitter and of other social media platforms in order to determine whether the use and content differs through different sports. In addition to this, a similar study could analyse IFs' online activities in the build up to events, during and after the events they organise or are associated to, such as the FIFA World Cup, the UEFA European Championship or the World Rugby World Cup. Indeed this would be of interest to both determine if the type of content and the type of interaction varies during these International events. Similarly, a study focussing on fans/followers' perceptions of IFs social media engagement through personalizing and activating tweets would revealed the impact of the latter social media strategy.

Greater attention could also have been paid to the frequent use of hashtag by FIFA. Indeed, almost half of FIFA's tweets use hashtag. No research has yet shown the interest or value in using hashtag, but the present research show the importance of such a use in social media. It could be argued that hashtag are used for marketing purpose, and so related to the 'marketing' social media communication strategy. However, further research needs to be undertaken on the topic we would name #marketing. Particularly, what is the value of #marketing strategies?

## Conclusion

This research gives a first insight into how one of the most popular social media platforms is being used by one of the most recognizable International Sport Federation, FIFA, to communicate with fans/followers all around the world. Additionally, this research helps understand more generally the use of twitter by IFs to interact and engage with followers. Moreover, Twitter is seen as one of the best social media platforms to enhance relationships with fans however, there are still unanswered questions on how to best use Twitter in order to interact with organisations' fans on a regular basis. The current results suggest that FIFA use more one-way communication rather than using two-way communication, and this represents a missing opportunity to engage with fans and rebuild its trust and reputation.

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**Table 1: FIFA Twitter communication content by categories**

Categories	Examples of tweet
<b>Informing</b>	
Activities outside sport Information related to players, staff, or the organisation participating in non-sport related activities.	<p>“Happy birthday to @YCabayeofficiel (29), Leonardo Cuellar (63) &amp; @JessFishlock (28)”</p> <p>“FIFA statement on the Ebola epidemic: (Link provided)”</p>
Diversions Diverting followers to other content including pictures, blogs or websites, match reports, videos, interviews and stats from players, coaches and members of staff from FIFA.	<p>“VIDEO: Take a closer look @FIFATMS &amp; how the International Transfer Matching System works. #transferwindow: (Link provided)”</p> <p>“Report &amp; pics from Korea Republic's 2-0 win over Uzbekistan in the @AFCAsianCup last eight: (Link provided)”</p> <p>“EXCLUSIVE: We chat to @salomonkalou on @FIFCI_tweet, #AFCON2015 &amp; the absence of @didierdrogba: (Link provided)”</p> <p>“STATS: @Cristiano, @Socceroos, @SouthamptonFC, Diego Alves &amp; Francesco Totti star this week: (Link provided)”</p>
Organisational News News and information directly associated with the organisation in relation to the sport of football.	<p>“RT @jeromevalcke: Event dates for #confeds in 2017 &amp; 2018 #WorldCup scheduled to be announced in Morocco after FIFA Executive Committee mee...”</p> <p>“#WorldCup Legacy Fund split: US 60m to infrastructure, 15 to #womensfootball, 15 to grassroots, 10 to other projects.”</p> <p>“Key sustainability achievements of #WorldCup included carbon offsetting &amp; support for 26 community projects. (1/2)”</p> <p>“18.2% tickets sold at a discounted rate, 445 tonnes of waste recycled, US 2.25m worth of IT equipment donated. (2/2)”</p>
Stakeholder News News and information directly associated with the teams, players, members of staff at FIFA, clubs/National teams and other international leagues in relation to the sport of football.	<p>“RT @SeppBlatter: Good Luck @AucklandCity_FC &amp; @Moghreb_Tetouan tonight in the 1st game of the 2014 #ClubWC.”</p> <p>“Messi strike earns cup advantage over @Atleti @FCBarcelona.”</p> <p>“Rodgers buoyed by Sterling-inspired @LFC #LeagueCup.”</p> <p>“@OfficialASRoma target tenth title, @acffiorentina face @Atalanta_BC in #CoppaItalia.”</p> <p>“LIVE: @LesVerts - @BafanaBafana kick-off in 2nd Group C match of the day #AFCON2015: (Link provided)”</p>



**Table 1: FIFA Twitter communication content by categories (continued)**

Categories	Examples of tweet
<b>Marketing</b>	
<b>Direct Sales</b> Providing fans with the opportunity to easily purchase items online, such as tickets and official merchandise.	<p><i>“Want something other than socks? Get what you really wanted at the Official FIFA Online Store: (Link provided)”</i></p> <p><i>“@Cruz_Azul_FC fans, ready for Morocco 2014? Get your #ClubWC tickets today!: (Link provided)”</i></p>
<b>Promotion</b> Providing relevant marketing communications through advertising or promotion of the teams, games, competitions, special events, live league games but also international games all around the world, upcoming league, domestic cup, Champions league from different continents, and international games.	<p><i>“#BallondOr: @Cristiano, Messi or @Manuel_Neuer? We'll find out in less than 24 hours!”</i></p> <p><i>“LIVE: @stokecity 0-1 @chelseafc at HT. Follow the rest of the @premierleague clash here: (Link provided)”</i></p> <p><i>“Preview the rest of the weekend's @LaLiga games with @FCBarcelona visiting Getafe: (Link provided)”</i></p>
<b>Activating</b>	
<b>Gathering feedback</b> Collect fan/followers' opinions before developing or implementing a new idea.	<p><i>“RT @FIFAWWC: YOUR VIEW: #U20WWC is over; but YOUR participation is not! How can we improve our content? We'd love your feedback.”</i></p>
<b>Group involvement</b> Ensure, where possible, fans are included in relevant general interactive processes. Can also include group discussions.	<p><i>“Question: Which team impressed you most in the weekend's @UEFAEURO qualifiers, and why?”</i></p> <p><i>“RT Best @UEFAEURO performance: @ArranInYYC Wales, they showed a lot of determination to hold Belgium to a draw away.”</i></p>
<b>Personalizing</b>	
<b>Direct responses</b> Directly responding to individual questions or comments.	<p><i>“RT @PetrCech: @FIFAc com yes, of course :-)”</i></p> <p><i>“RT @acciesfc: @FIFAc om Many thanks FIFA, recognising our great run!”</i></p>
<b>Initiating contact</b> Direct, interpersonal contact with an individual fan/follower, initiated by the organisation.	<p><i>“Thanks @GarethBale11 for your help in trying to reduce the spread of Ebola in affected communities. #wecanbeatebola.”</i></p> <p><i>“@SanLorenzo fans, think your club can lift another trophy in December? #ClubWC tickets here: (Link provided)”</i></p> <p><i>“RT @arangelz: @FIFAc om have no favourites but I think @Cristiano will win it.”</i></p>

**Table 2: FIFA Twitter communication content by categories and coverage**

Categories	Sub-categories	Number of tweets	Coverage (%)
<b>Informing</b>		4814	89.33
	Activities outside sport	345	7.17
	Diversion	1055	21.91
	Organisational News	453	9.41
	Stakeholder News	2961	61.51
<b>Marketing</b>		521	9.67
	Direct Sales	70	13.43
	Promotion	451	86.73
<b>Activating</b>		483	8.96
	Gathering feedback	1	0,21
	Group involvement	482	99,8
<b>Personalizing</b>		57	1.06
	Direct responses	2	3.51
	Initiating contact	55	96.5