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## Exploiting social media for Stakeholder Engagement in Non-Profit Sporting Organisations

Kevin Mullan, Dr Annabel Latham

School of Computing, Mathematics & Digital Technology, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

[kevinmullan24391@hotmail.com](mailto:kevinmullan24391@hotmail.com)

[a.latham@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:a.latham@mmu.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** Social media has proliferated almost every type of organisation. The most important factor is, how social media is used effectively and efficiently within the organisation. Non-profits are already at a disadvantage compared to those that set out to make money, who have more resources, capabilities and money at their disposal. Social media, therefore, can act as a conduit to engage stakeholders and develop and maintain these relationships to help with organisational productivity, image and growth.

This paper describes a study to understand the relationship social media has with stakeholders and a non-profit sporting organisation, called Eoghan Rua Gaelic Athletic Club, and investigate how social media can be advantageous to non-profits when used in an efficient and productive manner. This is an area of research that has remained relatively untouched and where a narrative gap is very prevalent. It is hoped that this research will be of use to those investigating social media and to non-profit organisations within sport.

The ultimate aim of the study was the creation of a social media framework of policies and recommendations for the non-profit sports organisation to follow. The framework was developed to help the organisation utilise their social media activities and develop and maintain stakeholder relationships within the organisation itself.

The study consisted of primary and secondary research, using a mixed methods approach, which involved interviews and questionnaires with various stakeholder groups in the organisation. Results revealed that motivations for using social media were different within the organisation and different ages and stakeholder groups use different social media applications for different purposes. Ultimately the most telling result was the positive effect social media had on the club and its exposure to stakeholders inside and prospective stakeholders outside of the organisation.

**Keywords:** Social media, Stakeholder engagement, Non-profit organisations, Amateur sporting organisations, Gaelic Athletic Association

### 1. Introduction

An organisation's stakeholders and their level of interest and engagement with the organisation can be crucial to its long-term success. 'The organisation itself should be thought of as a grouping of stakeholders and the purpose of the organisation should be to manage their interests, needs and viewpoints' (Friedman and Miles, 2006: 1). With many different stakeholder groups, with differing influence on an organisation, it can be difficult to develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. This is especially true for small, non-profit organisations, who rarely have the capabilities or resources available, compared to their for-profit counterparts or larger organisations. Traditional stakeholder engagement methods, such as public meetings, forums, and conferences have not been available to small, non-profit organisations who often rely on volunteers to manage the organisation. More recently, social media has become a very popular method for individuals to access information, opinion and create more exposure with potential stakeholders and collaboration with current stakeholders. Organisations have grasped this new technology to enhance their methods of stakeholder engagement. Social media, however, is a low-cost resource, that if used efficiently and strategically can help develop stakeholder relationships and bolster the organisation regardless of its size and resources.

Social media 'refers to an integrated and dynamic service platform that is highly interactive and facilitates content generated by interconnected user communities utilising web applications' (Shrivastava, 2013: 1). It is

about the socialisation of content, but more so, 'social media is considered an evolving phenomenon, a shift in how people discover, read, and share news and information and content' (Malita, 2010).

However, there are also dangers in adopting a broad-brush approach to social media, as not all stakeholders know how to use social media appropriately and efficiently, which leaves the organisation open to negative publicity and exposure. At times too it is hard for small non-profits to manage and adopt correct time management of such campaigns. Therefore research in to how to use social media strategically and in an efficient, effective and positive manner for small non-profits is crucially important. Using social media as part of organisational strategy is becoming crucial, as it is a powerful method of presenting a public face of an organisation. In the amateur sport sector, especially at local level, most organisations are non-profit and have available, limited amounts of resources and capabilities due to their size, catchment area, reach and monetary limits.

'Organizations today face changes in their environments that require them to adjust and adapt their actions and strategies very quickly.' (Ravichandran,2017). Social media can therefore act as an enabler for non-profit sporting organisations, including Gaelic Athletic Clubs (GAC) like Eoghan Rua GAC, who have limited social media knowledge and experience, as well as overall management expertise as an organisation. 'The ability for any organization – no matter how small – to adopt cutting-edge social media technologies presents substantial opportunities for a more level playing field' (Nah and Saxton, 2012). The potential of social media for these organisations allows them to compete with organisations that have much more capability and resources at their disposal to reach out and develop relationships with stakeholders and develop as an organisation.

This paper presents research that aimed to design a new framework to help small, non-profit organisations establish strategies to harness the power of social media for stakeholder engagement. The paper presents a case study of an amateur Gaelic Athletic Club called Eoghan Rua GAC and describes the analysis of their stakeholder groups and their social media habits and expectations, in order to design a framework for social media strategy. The research adopted a mixed methods approach, using primary and secondary methods, with interviews and questionnaire completion being the main data gathering activity. The paper describes the organisation, their stakeholders, their strategies, social media usage and how the organisations' stakeholders viewed their own club in terms of social media effectiveness. In doing so, it highlighted the advantages of using social media as part of organisational strategy to develop and retain stakeholder relations. Through the critical analysis of the organisation, there were several findings. It was clear to see that social media plays a very important role, which is illustrated in the findings in the data analysis of the participants that responded in the research.

It was seen that Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram were the most popular amongst those that responded, however motivations between stakeholder groups for using social media varied. This was a very important finding, as motivations are what drive people to use the things they do. Social media is no different, it is a method for interacting socially and for getting information. By catering to the specific motivations of stakeholder groups, an organisation will be able to sustain, develop and strengthen these relationships with stakeholders. It was through these findings, that the new framework of policies and recommendations was provided for the GAA club itself.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: section 2 is background information and will look at material already published on non-profits and social media. Section 3 will detail Eoghan Rua Gaelic Club as an organisation and its stakeholders. Section 4 is the research methodology. Section 5 presents results and discussion. Section 6 describes the framework and evaluation and the final section is conclusion and future work.

## **2. Background**

Social media is a recent and modern phenomenon, now used extensively by organisations. 'When using social media for building relationships with stakeholders, it is important to understand the interactions enabled by these technologies' (Downey, 2012: 2). Applications such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and others, are now being used by organisations to advertise, promote, gather data and network between

organisations and people. The stakeholders of the organisation are crucial to its success and if there is not an efficient social media framework in place, organisations will inevitably struggle with expanding and development.

Non-profit organisations according to a study in 2015 ‘indicate nonprofits both large and small are increasingly adopting social media for organizational communication with potential funders and other stakeholders.’ (Svensson et al, 2015). Again this highlights the issue of monetary resources available to these types of organisations and how the use of social media can help overcome such problems. It helps by reaching out and recruiting suitable and willing funders who can have major influence in the development of non-profits. Applications such as ‘Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media sites have introduced new convening platforms for organizations to facilitate relationship building and stakeholder engagement’ (Guo and Saxton, 2014). This is a critical element for non-profit organisations for education and information exposure with prospective stakeholders.

Motivations and understanding why people use specific applications is one of the most important aspects an organisation has to address. Social media provides a platform in sporting organisations for two-way engagement between those actively involved in the organisation and the fans that support it. A report into sports and social media indicated social media ‘had a considerable impact on the reciprocal activities of fans, leading to interaction motivated by passion, hope, esteem or camaraderie’ (Stavos, Meng et al, 2013). This also applies to not just fans, but all types of stakeholders within the organisation.

According to a recent study in to motivations and social platforms, ‘following convenience and entertainment, participants reported they use Facebook for passing time, medium appeal, information sharing, self-expression, social interaction, and self-documentation motivations, respectively’. (Alhabash and Ma, 2017).

Findings revealed that ‘the two-way nature of interaction was evidenced by the efforts of teams, not just fans, to provide material that would act as a catalyst for engagement’ (Stavos, Meng et al, 2013). Depending on the organisation, they may want to get users to interact with the organisation in a certain way. Non-profit sporting organisations such as Eoghan Rua GAC, may want to show live stream updates, therefore they may want to focus on the entertainment motivation for users, as can be seen in (Figure 1). Specifically, applications such as Twitter for its live streaming element, as well as the new story modes that have developed for Facebook and Instagram.

	FACEBOOK	TWITTER	INSTAGRAM	SNAPCHAT
1	Convenience	Entertainment	Entertainment	Entertainment
2	Entertainment	Convenience	Convenience	Convenience
3	Passing Time	Medium Appeal	Medium Appeal	Medium Appeal
4	Medium Appeal	Passing Time	Passing Time	Passing Time
5	Information Sharing	Self-Expression	Self-Expression	Self-Expression
6	Self-Expression	Information Sharing	Self-Documentation	Self-Documentation
7	Social Interaction	Social Interaction	Social Interaction	Social Interaction
8	Self-Documentation	Self-Documentation	Information Sharing	Information Sharing

Figure 1- Data showing motivations for social media platforms (Alhabash and Ma, 2017: 9)

### 3. Eoghan Rua Gaelic Athletic Club

Eoghan Rua CLG (Cummann Luthcleas Gael) or Gaelic Athletic Club (GAC), is a Gaelic club situated in the triangle area in the north west of Ireland in County Derry. It encompasses the towns of Portstewart, Coleraine and Portrush. They are a part of the single biggest sporting organisation on the island of Ireland, the Gaelic Athletic Association. The GAA was very much ‘part of a movement that sought to preserve and promote distinct Irish traditions, values and culture, including games’ (O Tuathaigh, 2015: xii). Most important to the GAA is its amateur, voluntary and community ethos. As (Table 1) illustrates there are four sports played at the

club; Gaelic Football, Hurling, Ladies Gaelic Football and Camogie which is the female version of hurling. These games are played by various age groups across the club.

Table 1- All sports and age groups of players at Eoghan Rua

<u>Gaelic Football</u>	<u>Hurling</u>	<u>Ladies Gaelic Football</u>	<u>Camogie</u>
Under 10	Under 10	Under 10	Under 10
Under 12	Under 12	Under 12	Under 12
Under 14	Under 14	Under 14	Under 14
Under 16	Under 16	Under 16	Under 16
Under 18/ Minor	Under 18/ Minor	Under 18/ Minor	Under 18/ Minor
Over 18/ Senior	Over 18/ Senior	Over 18/ Senior	Over18/ Senior

### 3.1. Stakeholders at Eoghan Rua GAC

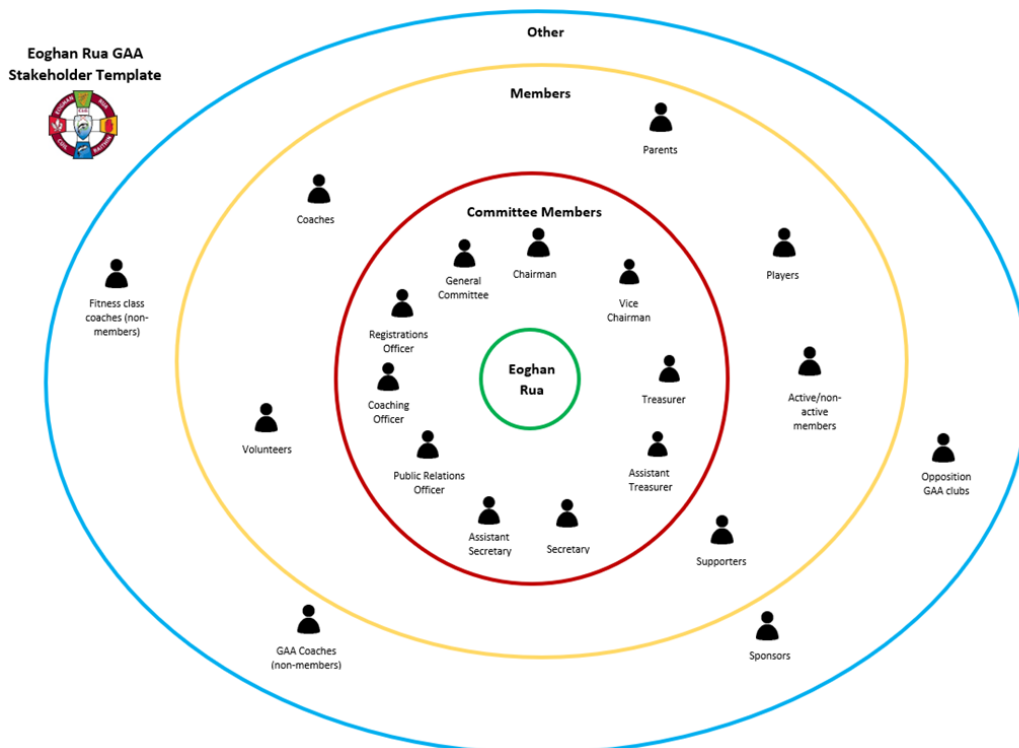


Figure 2- Stakeholder Template developed for Eoghan Rua GAC

There are many and various stakeholders within Eoghan Rua as an entire organisation, however they had not been previously mapped. The organisational and strategic planning of Eoghan Rua however, is dictated by the committee. The committee are central to the organisational structure of Eoghan Rua as (Figure 2) illustrates

and closest to its overall setup. The stakeholder template was designed following discussions during interviews, where stakeholder roles and responsibilities were discussed, and analysis of the stakeholder dynamics of the club were investigated.

#### **4. Methodology**

A mixed methods approach was adopted for the study, utilising both quantitative methods by using questionnaires and qualitative by conducting interviews with important stakeholders within the club. As per qualitative research, it looked at 'the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials- case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts and cultural texts and productions, along with observational, historical, interactional and visual texts' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017: 10).

In contrast the quantitative methods focused "attention on measurements and amounts (more and less, larger and smaller, often and seldom, similar and different)' (Murray, 2003: 1). The purpose of quantitative research is 'to observe and measure, and care is taken to keep the researchers from "contaminating" the data through personal involvement with the research subjects' (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 9).

By using the mixed methods approach, observations were able to be made through interviews and this information was able to be backed up, countered or contrasted with statistics from the questionnaires. The mixed methods approach includes both observations and statistics to utilise and evaluate, which meant the project and findings are more comprehensive and complete. The methods are described in detail below.

The results were then analysed, and the findings combined to enable the development of a framework which provided a set of guidelines and recommendations to help the club improve their social media activities. The results and framework were then discussed with and evaluated by the Public Relations Officer and the Secretary of the organisation.

##### **4.1. Questionnaire**

The method of 'quantitative research can be construed as a research strategy that emphasizes quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2012:35). A questionnaire, therefore, was designed to get stakeholders of the club to answer questions on social media and social media within the organisation itself. The primary sampling method used was stratified sampling which broke the down the organisation in to groups based on homogenous characteristics. Therefore, for this research, the participants were broken down based on stakeholder relationship with the club. The questionnaire included both closed and open questions and was completed anonymously either on paper or online. Once the questionnaires were complete, the anonymous data was analysed to explore findings by age and stakeholder group.

##### **4.2 Interviews**

A number of interviews were conducted to gather more in-depth information from the various stakeholders of Eoghan Rua GAC, and to allow follow-up questions to explore issues raised more fully. Through these interviews as well as questionnaires the stakeholder map as seen in (*Figure 2*) was designed and developed. The interviews were semi-structured as, the participant was given a set of six structured questions which asked various questions on social media and stakeholder relationships within the organisation. The interviewee was then asked follow-up questions to gain more insight and opinion on social media at the club. The results were then analysed.

##### **4.3. Analysis and Evaluation**

Once the data had been gathered from all participants, data analysis and evaluation were done. The first thing that was done, was to see what findings could be taken from the data obtained from all the stakeholders through data analysis. The two datasets were analysed separately and then were compared in order to find patterns and trends from the data that was gathered to help in the development of the framework. The information highlighted the different views, opinions, numbers, percentages and statistics of various types of people related to the Gaelic club. The evaluation emphasised and greatly influenced the effectiveness of the primary research carried out and which critically helped in determining the success of the research.

#### 4.4. Framework

The final stage of the project was the design of a social media framework for Eoghan Rua Gaelic club. The framework was to consist of a set of policies and recommendations to help the organisations' strategy for social media presence and activities throughout the club. The framework is the culmination of all critical research and data analysis carried out throughout the duration of the project. To understand if the framework itself is potentially effective for the club, it too was evaluated by several committee members of the organisation. This was done in order to suggest its' usefulness to the organisation.

In order to truly understand the effectiveness, a follow-up study will be needed after the framework has been in use for a period of time to understand the framework and its' contribution to the club's social media activities.

#### 5. Results and discussion

During the research, 50 questionnaires were distributed, and 32 participants responded, representing a 64% response rate. In addition 3 core members of the Eoghan Rua committee were interviewed; the Secretary, Public Relations Officer (PRO) and an important member of the general committee. The two datasets were analysed and presented separately. The datasets have been synthesised and are presented by theme in this section.

As shown in (Figure 3), the 22-35 age range was the largest age group that responded. This is due to them being the most active members of the club and represent a very large demographic of the entire organisation. Of this age range 60% of them were players at the club and it is they who use Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram most regularly. Under 18 was the second largest group to respond, again with 60% of them being

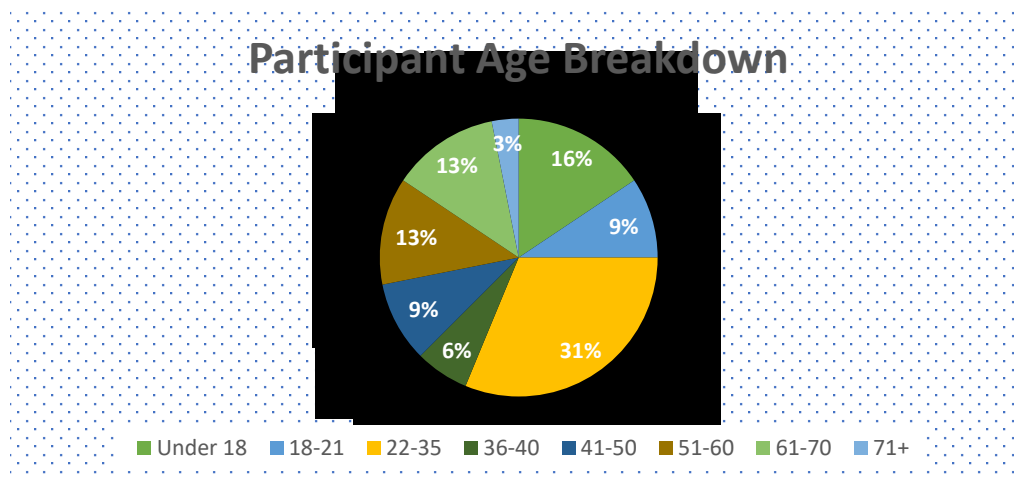


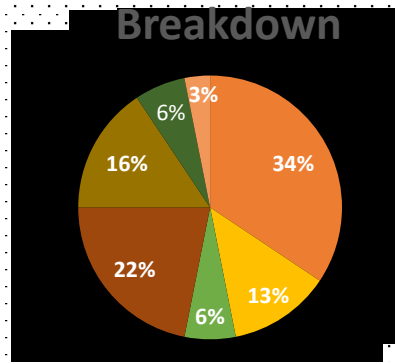
Figure 3- Data showing participant age breakdown

players. These two age groups combined represented 47% of those that participated.

The 51-60 and 61-70 age groups make up 13% each of stakeholders who participated, combining to make a total of 26%. This older age group tended to be very active in the committee in the organisation. The responses from this age group, correlated with several findings from interviews conducted with both the Secretary and PRO. They both reiterated that there needed to be more input from younger members of the committee to stay relevant with younger stakeholders of the club.

As well as age breakdown, as seen in (Figure 3) the participants were broken down in to seven different stakeholder groups and their responses recorded as seen in (Figure 4)

## Questionnaire Participant Relationship



■ Player ■ Supporter ■ Member ■ Committee ■ Parent ■ Coach ■ Volunteer

Figure 4- Data showing participant relationship breakdown

### 5.1. Social Media

The analysis showed that the most popular social media platforms used by stakeholders, were Facebook at 22%, WhatsApp at 21% and Instagram at 19% as seen in (Table 2). LinkedIn was the least popular social media platform amongst participants at 8%. This is primarily because a substantial number of participants that participated in the research study were not in a professional working environment, chiefly those in the younger age categories as illustrated in (Figure 3).

Table 2- Most popular social media platforms

<b>Most popular social media platforms amongst stakeholders at Eoghan Rua</b>		
<b>Social Media Platform</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Facebook</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Twitter</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>Instagram</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>WhatsApp</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Snapchat</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>LinkedIn</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8%</b>

Facebook has been at the club the longest and used for activities in the club itself. During an interview, the Public Relations Officer (PRO) stated that Twitter was used primarily for external activities outside the club like tagging, circulation and exposure to a wider audience. Questionnaires illustrated the importance of WhatsApp and Instagram. WhatsApp was used by 16 different teams from Under 8 to Senior level.

Regarding Instagram it was noted by the PRO, that it was becoming a huge platform both in and outside of the club with stakeholders in general, but especially with young members of the organisation. The PRO emphasized the importance of the social media platform for posting and sharing images, videos and stories online.

The results from the questionnaires and the information gathered from the interviews, highlight the importance of different social media platforms to the stakeholders that responded in the study at Eoghan Rua.

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram being the most widely used for internal and external social media activities. WhatsApp was used primarily as a messaging and social communication platform within the club itself for coaches and players alike.



Snapchat and LinkedIn tended to be the least popular social media platforms used by those that responded. One would assume this is down to Snapchat only being used by those that are of a younger age and LinkedIn, only used by those in a professional work setting. With this information, it is also crucially important to understand the stakeholder and social media motivations at the organisation.

### 5.1.2. Motivations for using social media

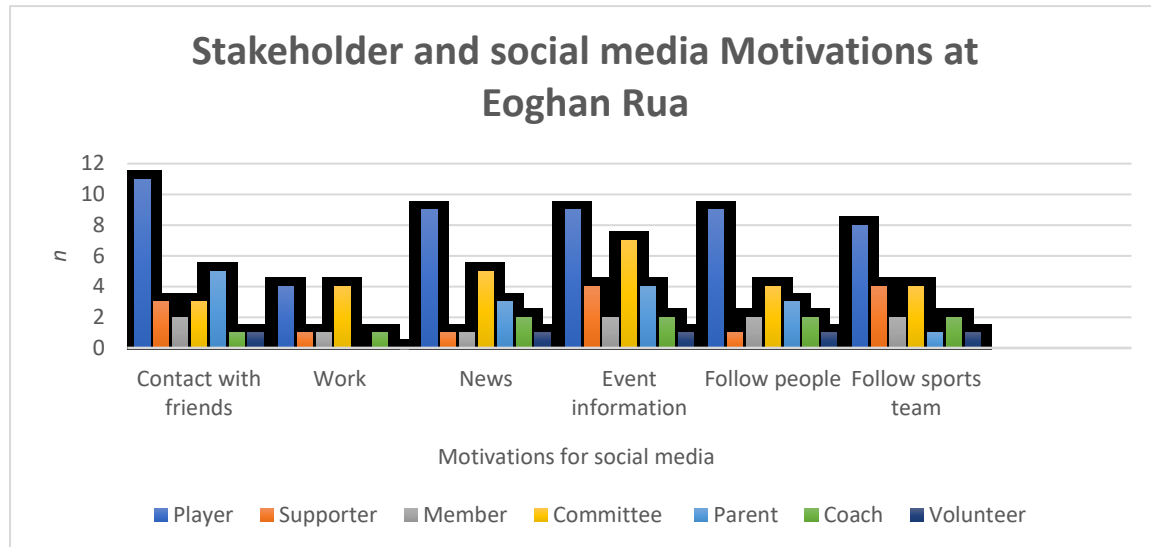


Figure 5- Stakeholder and social media motivations at Eoghan Rua

In (Figure 5), it illustrates each stakeholder and their motivations for using social media. Each motivation is listed on the x axis of the graph and it is then grouped by stakeholder. The y axis, therefore, for each motivation group, each coloured bar represents a stakeholder that has chosen that motivation for using social media. The graph was produced after analysis of the questionnaires revealed what each stakeholder's motivation was during the study.

Several important findings were found throughout the research regarding motivations. Players used social media most for contact and communication with friends. 56% of the player stakeholder group stated they thought the club was good at sharing event information and personal achievements on Instagram and Facebook. With supporters their primary motivation was both event information and following sports teams at 29%. Supporters want to know what the club is up to and the events that are happening so this was an expected result. Like players they too thought the club was very effective at highlighting personal achievements on social media.

Both these stakeholder groups agreed on the need to improve relevance and more fresh material on platforms and to not allow one stakeholder to bear all responsibility for social media activities. Fresh and more relevant material leads to more interest and engagement from stakeholders.

Committee members most prevalent motivation was event information followed by news. The committee members as stakeholders are very much information orientated and they need to know about all important developments in the club. 57% of the committee responded with the PRO included, that Eoghan Rua was effective at regular, up to date posting of events. The PRO also stated that they thought that the club had a decent overall image on social media, which contrasts significantly with supporters of the club who thought this was an area for significant improvement.

Parents primary motivation for using social media was contact with friends, followed by event information. 80% of parents were members of Eoghan Rua WhatsApp groups. They stated that they use it to stay in touch with family, friends and coaches in the WhatsApp groups. They saw it as very effective way of communication and getting important details surrounding the club. The primary criticism of social media from parents was information for children at the Under 10 age group, with 60% stating it was significantly harder to find information on platforms like Facebook or Instagram.

It is clear to see that social media plays an important role, which is illustrated in the findings in the data analysis of the questionnaire participants that responded. It was observed that Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram were the most popular amongst those that responded, however motivations between stakeholder groups for using social media varied. By analysing their reasons for using social media, a catered and more comprehensive strategic framework can be provided

## 6. Framework and Evaluation

A framework was designed based on the results of primary and secondary research, in order to help the organisation manage its strategy for using social media to engage stakeholders. It was important that the framework was simple to follow and prioritised the most strategically valuable activities that could help the organisation get best return on their investment of time in their social media activity. Along with the framework, a summary of the results of the study was given to help put into context the advice.

The framework provided to the organisation is seen in (Table 3):

Table 3- Eoghan Rua Social Media Framework

<b>Social Media Framework for Eoghan Rua GAC</b>
1. Launch campaign in Eoghan Rua to get younger members involved social media activity of club. This will create more relevance
2. Get a player from all age groups from Under 12 to Senior level to engage in social media for important events for variance in club and create a social media takeover for a day
3. Launch a social media workshop once a month to train members on how to use social media effectively and efficiently
4. Use Twitter more for sponsorship profiling and shout outs. It will create more exposure for both club and sponsors
5. Focus on stories feature of Instagram and Facebook. It is widely used by younger members of the club and key way to engage large demographic of the club
6. More emphasis on Twitter live feeds for instantaneous information for entertainment and engagement
7. Launch Q & A sessions on social media platforms. Engages with members of the club and will give the club valuable information to improve their own social media activities

The framework was given to the Public Relations Officer and the Secretary of the organisation, who were asked to evaluate it based on their plans to implement a social media strategy. Both committee members stated that the framework had the potential to be very useful. Regarding social media management the committee members, including the Secretary, PRO and several others, stated it should help significantly. By getting more people involved, from a young age to senior level, it was felt that the framework had the potential to help greatly, as this would mean less pressure on the PRO, with more people on board to post more relevant, different and exciting material on their platforms. Overall it was viewed that it would help improve the management of activities if these recommendations were put in place.

Regarding stakeholder relationship building, the Public Relations Officer and the Secretary could both see the potential of the Q&A sessions recommended in the framework. This was due to attracting the involvement of more members in the club, which could help boost morale, motivation and a sense of responsibility and importance amongst the wider membership. The PRO and Secretary both felt that this would lead to much more positive engagement between members using social media platforms.

## 7. Conclusion and future work

This paper described a case study of a non-profit organisation's social media usage with its stakeholders. The case study centred on Eoghan Rua, a Gaelic Athletic Association, a non-profit, amateur sporting organisation on the north coast of Ireland. It investigated the organisation, its strategy and social media presence for engaging with its stakeholders. The study analysed the organisation's stakeholders, their strategies and social media usage. The study involved a mixed methods approach, including questionnaires and interviews with different stakeholder groups. The results showed that different age groups within the organisation used social media differently. It was apparent that, to engage younger stakeholders, more strategic use of social media was important. Building on the primary and secondary research, a new framework was designed to help organisations like Eoghan Rua to plan and bolster their social media activities to help maintain stakeholder relationships and engagement.

In non-profit organisations, social media is a very important tool for their exposure and relevance. These non-profit organisations, such as Eoghan Rua do not have the monetary advantages of other big organisations that have vast resources. These types of organisations must find other avenues and ways of creating a foothold in their respective industries or sectors. Social media provides a path for these organisations to follow, so they can establish themselves online. As the paper discussed, social media in the club must be used effectively and appropriately by members, if this success is to come to fruition. Without social media, Eoghan Rua would not be as popular as it is. Social media has bolstered the image of Eoghan Rua both online and as an organisation, and it needs to remain a constant in the future.

In discussing limitations of the project, the primary limitation with this research was access to stakeholders and the limited number of responses. Due to the size and nature of the organisation, there were time constraints. The club is an amateur organisation, and this meant that almost the entire club have occupations that meant that some key stakeholders could not be accessed during the study. It would be a suggestion for further future work to repeat the study for a larger club, or perhaps even at county level as it is much larger organisation. This would mean that a more comprehensive, much larger study, on a more accessible club, could be conducted on a similar organisation. In turn the subsequent study and its results could then be used as a template for others, to create a better social media presence for other clubs around the country. Other future work is to revisit the organisation after a period of time to evaluate the framework and its effect on stakeholder engagement.

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