For the Love of the Game:
The role of social media and strategic communication in developing women’s softball in Europe

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Abstract

This study explores how social media contributes to the relationship between community and non-profit organizational communication in the scope of marginalized women’s sports. The analysis of the data is based on a theoretical framework of social identity and self-categorization theories in imagined communities from a non-profit, strategic organizational communication perspective. The methods used to gather the data involved a qualitative content analysis process that consisted of conducting in-depth interviews and analyzing the organization’s Facebook posts. The findings concluded that in this case study, social media aids in achieving the organization’s goals for developing softball in Europe by communicating ways to overcome the challenges through informing about softball and development programs, fostering a community for softball in Europe, and encouraging followers to take action. In addition, the organization uses social media to reinforce the identity and values of the European softball community that consists of defining its place, interest and communion through symbolic and linguistic communication strategies. As a whole, this study reveals the importance of the organization using communication to sustain the community online and offline in order to achieve its goals of developing softball in Europe. Further implications would focus on understanding how organizations can build and maintain communities through strategic communication within other fields outside of the non-profit sports sector.

Key words: non-profit organizations, strategic communication, communities, social media, sports organizations

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Preface

It was the symphonic melody of the ball’s vibrations that rang through my clenched hands as I hit my first homerun. This feeling is what drove me to pursue a career in softball at a young age and compete at the highest level internationally. However, softball is not a fair game. The laws of the game and my inability to control its outcomes have broken me down and built me back up many times throughout my career. But, it is a giving game. I have acquired so many unique opportunities from playing the sport. I have met the most amazing and influential people of my life through this sport. And the person I have become is a result of the journey that playing softball has carved for me. Because of this, I have dedicated myself to giving back to this game by supporting and teaching young girls that dream of hitting homeruns too.

After playing softball in college for four years in the U.S., I received an offer to play for the Swedish national team in the women’s European softball championships. Because of my Swedish citizenship, I was able to travel throughout Europe and compete against the national teams of 33 other European countries. From this experience, I noticed that the level of competition and amount of support for softball in Europe was significantly lower than that of the U.S. There was great variation between the best European national teams and the worst ones. But I did recognize one thing—all of the people involved with the sport had such an immense passion for the game. It was evident in the way the women exerted their absolute best effort during practices. The way the facilitators stood in the pouring rain to wait for games to begin. And in the atmosphere of the fans that celebrated each and every accomplishment made on the field. Playing in Europe opened my eyes to the true impact of the sport. Softball has an incredible ability to unite so many people from so many different backgrounds and nationalities. The sport finds a way to intertwine itself into the lives of anyone that comes across it. I noticed while playing in Europe, that I was able to make similar connections or share a mutual experience with every person I met because of softball.

Throughout this research process, I became entangled in the web of softball more and more. I was starting to realize that softball is more than just a sport in Europe. It is also a community. Especially since the sport is so marginalized and underrepresented in this region, the strength of the community is necessary to maintain its presence. I wanted to understand how softball could become more developed in Europe. But I also wanted to know what makes this softball community exist. As a digital media and society master’s student, I have heavily studied
the impact of social media on culture. I thought that it would be interesting to identify a role for social media within the development of softball and its community in Europe. By linking my studies, my passion and personal experiences together, I hoped to create a thesis project that would allow me to fulfil my desire of giving back to a sport that has given so much to me.

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1. Introduction

This study focuses on a particular case of the way a non-profit sports organization uses social media to strategically communicate with its community and achieve its mission. Softball is an unpopular, marginalized sport in Europe and the organization that facilitates its development, the European Softball Federation (ESF), is a major actor in the progression of the sport. This organization utilizes social media to communicate to its followers and encourage the support of softball in Europe. In addition, the ESF is able to use social media to communicate with the community of softball-associated people in Europe that also help to develop the sport across the continent. This exploratory case study will spark discussions about the relationship between social media, community identity and strategic communication for non-profit organizations.

As the research was conducted, the theoretical framework was formed to provide an outline for the data analysis. In this study, the theories of community, social identity, self-categorization and strategic communication for non-profits were combined in order to answer the proposed research questions. The term ‘community’ is defined as a theory in this study in order to understand the identity of the softball community in Europe and how it is stabilized by the ESF and social media. This can be illustrated in the categories of ‘community’ as defined by Willmott (1986), Lee and Newby (1983) which indicate a shared interest, place and communion that unites the community members. For sports communities, however, the term holds a stronger connotation. Based on social identity theory and self-categorization, sports fans identify characteristics of themselves in the sports teams and communities that make up the sports organization (Yoo, Lauren, & Kim, 2013). This fuels their intrinsic motivation to become a part of the team or the organization. The members of this community have imagined a sense of identity as described by Anderson’s (1986) ‘imagined communities.’ The abstract beliefs, values and symbols that the group members have identified are what allows the communities to exist (Anderson, 1986).

Social media also plays a role in upholding the community image. The nature of social media and its functions have made it easier for people to connect and form these communities in an online space (Lindgren, 2017). For non-profit sports organizations, social media is a valuable tool to communicate with members of their respective community. According to Lovejoy and Saxton’s theory for non-profit strategic communication through social media, communicating information, community and action are effective tactics for organizations to engage with their
stakeholders (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). By implementing these strategies, an organization can garner support for its mission from key community members.

As the theoretical framework was developed, the methodology for gathering and analyzing data consisted of conducting a qualitative content analysis for in-depth interviews and the organization’s social media posts. The analysis examined the current challenges and opportunities for softball development in Europe and how the ESF communicated about these concepts through Facebook. In addition, the qualitative content analysis also unveiled the symbolic strategies that the ESF used in its Facebook communication to maintain the softball community’s identity as described by the interviewees.

The analysis, which is presented in a theoretically-informed frame, revealed how the ESF strategically communicated through Facebook to push the agenda for softball development in Europe. It also showed the importance of fostering the community of softball in Europe for the organization and the community members. The community that exists within European softball transcends into the online space provided by the ESF and its Facebook communication. Since this study focuses on a particular case within a very narrow scope of the non-profit sector, the findings are limited and cannot be generalized to all organizations within different sectors. However, this study does contribute to the larger debate between the relationship of online communities and offline communities and their impact on strategic communication from organizations.

1.1 Background of softball in the world

The sport, softball (a predominantly women’s sport that stems from baseball), was first developed in the United States and became an international game in the early 1900s. It involves throwing and catching a ball on defense while the offense attempts to hit the ball and run around the four bases to score runs/points. The sport had been included in the Olympic games until 2004 when it was voted out. Because of this, softball suffered to build international attention and participation from athletes. But in 2016, softball was voted to be brought back as an official competition for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Since this decision was made, countries started developing their softball programs in order to compete in the upcoming Olympic tournament. In the U.S., softball has become one of the most participated women’s team sports and is played competitively at many universities and in a professional league (USA Softball, 2017). In Japan,
the national softball team is ranked second (behind the U.S.) in world softball rankings and the country has also continued to develop youth softball programs (WBSC, 2017). However, of all the 33 European countries that have established national softball programs, only two are ranked comparably with the rest of the world. Unlike Japan and the U.S., Europe faced a lack of awareness, resources and national funding of the sport when it was voted out of the Olympics in 2004. In the most recent years, however, the participation rate of softball in Europe is continuing to increase as the countries are working to become more internationally competitive (Confederation of European Baseball, 2017).

*The European Softball Federation*

In order to develop and promote softball in Europe, the European Softball Federation (ESF) was created in 1976 and acts as the governing body of softball to connect all 33 softball programs in their respective countries. In addition, the non-profit organization stands as the representative of European softball for the rest of the world. The main duties and goals of the ESF revolve around organizing official competitions and development programs for softball throughout Europe. Under official competitions, the ESF holds several European championships and European cups each year for national softball teams and club softball teams. The federation is in charge of managing, promoting and facilitating all of the competitions. For its development initiatives, the ESF works with the softball federations of each country to increase education, provide resources and grow softball access and awareness. The ESF also oversees men’s softball and slow-pitch, but for the purpose of this project, I will be focusing on the ESF and its promotion of women’s softball in Europe.

For the European Softball Federation, social media is an essential platform to raise awareness about softball in Europe and connect with each nation’s federations. In order to unite fans of softball and motivate players to join teams, the ESF created the ‘Softball Europe’ campaign in 2017. The brand, ‘Softball Europe’, was promoted on all of the ESF’s social media pages including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The organization also created a website for fans to learn more about softball and download the ‘Softball Europe’ logo with “#lovesoftball” to share with others. The ESF describes the campaign as an effort to increase education about the sport across Europe. It is designed as a platform to unite softball players, coaches, organizers and fans (ESF, 2017). After the campaign, participation in European softball had received a record
increase in the following year (ESF, 2017). This indicates the success of the campaign as well as in the ESF’s overall efforts to become a more internationally competitive union for the sport of softball. This study will examine how the ESF’s communication strategies in this campaign led to the increased growth in European softball participation and also contributes to developing the sport and its community for the future.

1.2 Research goals and research questions

In this study, I aim to analyze the ways in which the European Softball Federation utilizes social media as a tool for developing softball in Europe. As the research progressed, there were indications of an active and identifiable softball community within Europe that also stimulated the development of the sport. Thus, in addition to the first aim, I have decided to understand how the ESF’s communication strategies sustain the softball community’s identity through social media. With this objective, I plan to answer the following research questions by conducting empirical research and analyzing my findings based on a theoretical approach.

RQ1: What are the ESF’s communication strategies that contribute to the development of softball in Europe?

RQ2: How does social media reinforce and maintain an identity for the ESF and the European softball community?

1.3 Relevance of the study

This study is relevant for sports organizations to increase awareness and participation of sports—particularly women’s sports. A study conducted by the United Nations lists the positive impact that sports have on women and girls. This includes great health benefits and prevention of diseases, self-empowerment opportunities, a higher quality of life, communication and teamwork skills, and also a way to develop leadership skills and build up confidence (United Nations, 2017). Additionally, the UN has found that the participation of women and girls in sports has the potential to challenge stereotypes and discrimination towards gender in communities (United Nations, 2017). Although men’s athletics have always been more prominently shown in the media, there has been a recent increase in women participating in sports. The number of women’s Olympic events expanded from 127 events in 2004 to 140 events in the 2008 London
Goodman

Olympics (Creedon, 2014). In addition, the U.S. National Collegiate Athletics Association reported that the number of female student-athletes grew from approximately 74,000 in 1981 to 186,000 in 2010 (NCAA, 2015). By increasing awareness and working to develop women’s athletics, women and young girls will continue to have more opportunities to participate in sports.

Softball is an extremely small and marginalized sport in Europe. Because of this, it has failed to gain the same amount of support as other more culturally-relevant European sports like soccer or hockey have. Thus, the community and the non-profit organization that work to develop the sport in Europe is vital to the growth of European softball on an international scale. Social media provides an alternative platform for sport organizations to reach fans and make connections (Vale & Fernandez, 2017). The ESF is able to bypass traditional media outlets and use social media as a tool to push its agenda for softball development. However, the ESF must be strategic with their communication. Clavio and Walsh (2013) point out that the growth of social media requires the need for sports organizations to truly understand their audiences. For the ESF, the members of the softball community are the main stakeholders that contribute to the development of European softball. The organization must be able to identify the community and its values in order to effectively communicate to them and with them.

Due to the timeliness of the upcoming Olympics, the improvement of European softball is more crucial now than ever. While participation has been growing, the quality of play in Europe needs to increase as well. By utilizing social media and strategic communication, the ESF and the softball community will be able to spread awareness and build the sport throughout Europe. This study is relevant for research into sports, particularly marginalized ones, and how they can use social media as a platform to communicate with the sport community to develop the sport. In addition, it examines how the increasing presence of technology shapes the way communities are formed and how organizations can communicate with them on platforms other than traditional media.

1.4 Contribution to the field

Social media has had a large impact on the field of strategic communication for organizations (Roberts, 2016). In this digital world where communication takes place online, anyone can access social media and any organization can create an online presence. Social media breaks
down the barrier between organizations and their consumers or stakeholders that they are trying to communicate to (Roberts, 2016). Through social networking online, users can form groups around an organization that stimulates a common interest and goal for the group. The most successful organizations will enable these online communities to exist for their benefit by building them through communication and engagement on social media platforms (Bradt, 2014). Particularly in sports organizations and non-profits, the element of community becomes a prominent factor in the strategies implemented by the organization to communicate to its audience and community members (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). In my contribution to the field of Media and Communication Studies, I hope to add to the larger discussion of creating a framework for non-profit sports organizations to strategically communicate through social media that enables them to support the image and representation of the sport and increase development among their community.

In the discussion of ‘community’, authors have debated timelessly to comprehend an exact definition that captures the essence of the word. With the introduction of social media and the nature of social networking, it becomes unclear of how to illustrate what a community is and what constitutes the term. Many authors have had dissonance in determining whether online or offline communities have more substance. In the author’s study of digital media and society, Lindgren (2017) explains,

“discussions question whether ‘online communities’ can have similar characteristics and fulfil social functions equal to those of ‘real communities’… but even though some critics have argued that the internet cannot foster ‘real’ communities, others have claimed otherwise” (Lindgren, 2017:86)

In this study, I contribute to the debate in which the critics that negate the quality of online communities are challenged by analyzing the ways an offline community exists in an online sphere. Rather than advocating for one version of the community being better than the other, I will offer a perspective that suggests there is a strong relationship and mutual exchange between the two experiences.

2. Literature review

In order to attain a deeper understanding of the relationship between communities, social media and organizational communication, it is necessary to review previous literature conducted
within these fields. For the purpose of this study, the majority of the literature is framed in the lens of sports and non-profit organizations. Although it is a broad spectrum of literature, these topics were chosen to illustrate how the nature of social media can be used as a tool for the purpose of strategic communication for organizations within communities. There is a lack of previous literature that effectively links all of these ideas together, thus, this unique collection of literature allows the study to gain a solid foundation for the theoretical framework and analysis of the data collected that answers the research questions proposed.

2.1 Communities and sports

Although it is difficult to limit the term ‘community’ to a singular definition, the concept is understood at a basic level as the formation of a group based on psychological similarities within geographical boundaries (Warren, 1963). However, sports have created a deeper level of what ‘community’ means. Sports have enabled groups of people to unite together and form communities around the teams and sports organizations that they support. According to group identity theory, sports fans identify elements of themselves in the teams or organization (Heere & James, 2007). This explains why sports fans feel as though they are more than just fans or consumers, but they are also a part of the organization. (Heere & James, 2007). The sports fan community feels as though they are able to directly contribute to the success or failure of the sports teams. The common interest and passion for the sport is what drives the fans to support the teams and each other.

By supporting a sports team or organization, fans fulfil their need to be a part of something. In a study of the relationship between American communities and collective identity in sports culture, Nathan (2013) found that the fans of ‘hometown’ teams are motivated by being able to express their own personal identity that the team represents for them. The sports teams and organizations symbolize the personality of its supporters which allows them to form communities that stem from this collective identity (Nathan, 2013). To the fans, the sports teams uphold a positive characteristic of themselves.

The fans also bond over the shared experience of supporting the teams and being a part of its journey. Nathan (2013) describes this experience as feeling a sense of solidarity from watching an extremely dramatic or victorious match with other fans and being able to recall that feeling for years after. This feeling is what the fans strive to achieve by rallying support for their teams.
Nathan (2013) also highlights how the community of fans for particular sports can cross generational borders. The feelings of pride and identity that are cultivated within these sports communities are passed down to younger generations in order to maintain the strength of the community in support for the sports teams and organizations. Ultimately, this enables the community of sports fans to attain a higher level of unity than the basic version of a community (Nathan, 2013). Sports fans and sports organizations work together to sustain an image for their community that every member identifies with and can rally behind.

2.2 Social networking and online communities

According to a study conducted in 2017 by Hootsuite, approximately 40% of the entire world’s population is actively using social media (Kemp, 2017). The high level of global social media use relates to the framework of social media logic as illustrated by Dijck and Poell (2013). The authors characterize this concept according to social media’s functions of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. Programmability constitutes the ability of users to create and produce content online. Popularity explains how content is shared and becomes viral. Connectivity is the effect of creating online networks of users with similar interests. And datafication describes the way social media can be tracked and measured. These traits give social media the power to transform the way people communicate and share ideas with one another (Dijck and Poell, 2013).

As the concept of social media logic suggests, social media has become an online extension of our habits for social interaction. Lindgren (2017) highlights that social media has provided a more “sophisticated infrastructure for social exchange” to exist in our world (Lindgren, 2017: 40). Our everyday social patterns have transformed into hyper-active communication styles with multiple channels for sending and receiving messages. We now live in a social world that is transcended into an online sphere.

Lindgren cites the research conducted by Gauntlett (2011) as identifying how social media are not only tools, but also multi-dimensional platforms that encourage participation from users, act agnostic towards content, and provide features for community creation. These three characteristics of social media construct an experience of ‘sociality’ which eventually leads to an entire digital network of connected individuals (Lindgren 2017). This shift in technological social interaction has led to the idea of ‘networked publics’ (Ito, 2008). The social and cultural
effects of digital communication becoming a more prominent form of communication has
transformed societies into mobilized and networked communities (Ito, 2008). The
communication patterns within these networks have no systematic structure and are controlled by
the nature of the people interacting with each other (Ito, 2008). This phenomenon essentially
allows individuals to virtually create and consume content while connecting with many people
beyond geographical borders.

The power that social media grants to users also creates more opportunities for personal
and meaningful relationships to be formed. Throughout history, people have always gravitated
toward groups and creating relationships with like-minded people (Lindgren, 2017). With social
media, the process of forming these groups are enhanced by making it easier, faster and more
effective (Lindgren, 2017). However, the existence of communities in a physical space versus in
a digital realm can possess different characteristics. Lindgren notes that some researchers
criticize online groups as being insincere and artificial when compared to groups whose
members meet face-to-face (Lindgren, 2017). Online communities may not re-create the
intimacy of ‘real’ communities, but social media and social networking sites still enable the users
to communicate and make connections with one another. Lindgren (2008) explains that people
fulfil their basic need of being a part of something when they contribute and interact within
online communities. Social media communities allow users to become members of many
different groups in the same space. These different communities may help people gain
information or support that fulfils specific needs for each individual (Lindgren, 2017). Lindgren
(2017) also suggests that by having a more anonymous identity online, users can feel
comfortable expressing their emotions with other online members. Ultimately, online
communities may provide users with benefits that ‘real’ communities cannot due to the unique
characteristics of social media.

On the other hand, Lindgren highlights that online communities require an offline
component to maintain the interaction between members. The internet only provides one facet of
an individual’s identity and it may be important to understand the other aspects of a person’s
background in order to explain the way they interact with others online (Lindgren, 2017). The
debate between the quality of real-world communities when compared to the hyper-personal
networking capabilities of social media is one that continues to be discussed by researchers.
2.3 Social media and sports culture

The use of social media is a key element of today’s sports industry and sports culture. It enables sports information to be more accessible to the sports community (Billings, 2012). Of the active users on social media, 61% of sports fans are following sports-related accounts and 80% of sports fans interact with social media sites during sporting events (Karr, 2017). Vann (2014) explains that the participatory nature of social media caters to the ‘collective passion’ of sports fans and sports culture. With social networking sites, fans of sports can connect to form a community and share moments and feelings about the game and teams they support (Vann, 2014).

Vale and Fernandes (2017) studied the way football clubs drove engagement through Facebook and found that sports organizations are able to greatly benefit from maintaining a social media presence. Many sports organizations and sports teams have social media accounts in which they update periodically about the team and the matches while also interacting with followers. The authors suggest that the ‘popularity’ effect of social media and the high involvement level of sports fans allows sports clubs to build relationships with their fans through social media (Vale & Fernandes, 2017). This finding illustrates the impact that active social media communication has on sports organizations to increase their fan base. The many users that follow sports organizations and teams are able to communicate directly with the accounts and show their support for the sport. Perez (2017) notes that when teams are effectively using social media to create relationships with their fans, they are able to increase support for their brand and motivate the fans. In addition, fans are able to interact with players through their individual profiles which allows them to gain a more personal connection with the teams (Perez, 2017). The real-time effect of social media is also a factor that fans find valuable. Sports teams are now able to use social media sites to post live game coverage and updates to keep fans informed (Perez, 2017). Furthermore, social media is an extremely effective tool for sports organizations to rally support and for fans to create a closer bond with their favorite teams.

Social media’s effect in uniting sports fans allows female athletes to bypass traditional media sources and use social media platforms for representation. Because of social media’s low cost, women’s sports that are less popular can overcome the financial challenges that result in competing against men’s sports for mass media coverage (Coche, 2012). In the researcher’s study of Twitter use for women’s soccer, Coche describes how social media allows women’s
teams to speak directly to fans and stakeholders without having to go through the gatekeepers of traditional media outlets. Coche (2012) recognizes the interactive nature of social networking sites that enable female athletes and women’s sports teams to build relationships with their fans. This is the main difference between communicating through mass media channels and using social media. Social media is a crucial element in women’s athletics for decreasing the gender gap in media coverage and representation between men’s and women’s sports. In addition, this same effect can be applied to marginalized sports. Thus, social media is a crucial tool for the ESF to increase awareness and development of softball in Europe.

2.4 Strategic organizational communication

In 1987, Schneider claimed that ‘the people make the place’ in an organization. This suggests that the values, actions and environment of the organization are determined by the people involved in it (University of Twente, 2017). Based on this idea and theories of psychology and organizations, Schneider (1987) developed a framework for understanding the structures, cultures and processes of organizations. This framework assumes that the organization is an output of the people that belong to it and in turn, the people follow a cycle of attraction-selection-attrition (Schneider, 1987). The attraction-selection-attrition cycle stems from the idea that external factors do not influence the functions of the organization, only the people within the organization do (Schneider, 1987). In the first phase, attraction, people are drawn to an organization based on their own personal interests or what they aspire to be (Schneider, 1987). In the second stage, selection, the organization chooses people to become a part of it based on specific personality characteristics that the people of the organization share (Schneider, 1987). The last phase, attrition, occurs when a person in the organization no longer fits within the organization’s personality that is shared by the people within it (Schneider, 1987). The attraction-selection-attrition theory helps to understand how the identity of organizations is communicated based on the identity of the community and the people within the organization.

In order for an organization to fulfil its mission, it must implement some form of communication tactics to stakeholders. These stakeholders are the people that directly impact the organization and its ability to accomplish its goals. Strategic communication can be defined as the process of using purposeful communication to help an organization (including a corporation, activist group, non-profit, etc.) achieve its objectives (Hallahan, et. al., 2007). From studying the
many layers of tactical communication processes that organizations implement, Hallahan (2004) identified six distinct elements of organizational strategic communication. These include marketing communication, public relations, management communication, technical communication, political communication, and information/social marketing campaigns (Hallahan, 2004). Although these types of strategic communications are unique, they each function side-by-side to create an overarching communication theme that supports the organization’s goals (Hallahan, 2004). By implementing a program for strategic communication, organizations are able to purposefully craft an identity that speaks and resonates with stakeholders.

In terms of social media, the platforms may act as an effective medium for organizations to strategically communicate and engage with users. The characteristics of social media allows organizations to develop relationships with their stakeholders (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). In a study of nonprofit organizations’ Facebook use, the researchers highlighted the strategies implemented to engage with followers that consist of ‘disclosure, usefulness, and interactivity’ (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Disclosure involves being transparent of the organizations’ motives, usefulness describes the process of providing value to the followers, and interactivity is the level of participation taking place between the organization and the stakeholders (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). These strategies were shown by nonprofit organizations to have effectively utilized social networking sites as a tool for understanding their consumers and fostering relationships with them (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Traditional media communication is predominately characterized as a one-way communication channel and can create a barrier between the audience and the organization. But for the non-profit sector of organizations, social media is a communication platform that allows for more efficient and personal access to the specific audience of the organizations.

2.5 Summary

This literature review provides a background and frame for understanding the topics related to this scope of research. Since there are gaps in previous literature that links these ideas in a relevant manner, this literature review uses the concepts of communities, social media, sports organizations, and strategic communication to further develop and create a foundation for crafting the theoretical framework for the data analysis. It is now understood that communities
are formed from members sharing common beliefs with each other, but in sports, the members share a deeper bond and feel as though they are a part of the organization. The nature of social media enables these communities to exist in a virtual world and create an easier process of acquiring members and maintaining connection between them. Social media is a crucial tool for sports organizations to acquire followers and unite fans within these communities. Marginalized sports also benefit greatly from social media coverage. In addition, organizations communicate to stakeholders strategically in order to portray an identity for the organization and influence its audience. Social media allows organizations to strategically communicate to followers and develop deeper relationships with them that permeate into online communities.

3. Theoretical Framework

An outline of the theoretical framework that has been utilized for the data analysis in this study is provided. This theoretical framework includes the main theoretical concepts within the scope of this field that act as a guide for the analysis. Since these theories pertain to a larger view of the field, I have combined the main concepts and ideas from each of the theories to construct a framework that can be most applicable to the scope of this study. Within each theoretical model, a description of how the theory will be used for analysis of the data collected is summarized.

3.1 Self-Categorization and Social Identity in Sports

The theories of self-categorization and social identity help to illustrate the dynamic of sports teams and fans and the relationship between individual members and their sports groups. Self-categorization theory describes the occurrence of people viewing themselves not only as individuals, but also as part of a group and that group memberships are significant factors in the formation of one’s self-identity (Yoo, Lauren, & Kim, 2013). This explains the idea that people view similarities between characteristics of the group and characteristics of themselves (Yoo, Lauren, & Kim, 2013). These similar characteristics may include (but are not limited to) ideas, values, backgrounds, demographics, social status, beliefs or behaviors. Social identity theory is an extension of the self-categorization theory in which ‘individuals group themselves into various classes in order to make sense of the social world and their place within it’ (Yoo, Lauren, & Kim, 2013). For example, these social categories may be dependent on religious affiliation, membership within an organization, generational cohort and gender (Yoo, Lauren, & Kim,
By placing themselves into groups that share similar characteristics, this theory suggests that the individuals will increase their confidence in the definition of their sense of ‘self’ (Yoo, Lauren, & Kim, 2013).

In the context of sports, the theories of self-categorization and social identity unite sports fans and sports teams due to the shared characteristics within the individual identities of the members. Sports fans identify as members of the sports teams, although they are not physically participating in the team’s actions (Thomas et al., 2017). This is due to the idea that fans of the sport and the teams they identify with feel the same impact of the losses and victories as the team (Rees et al., 2015). In a study of sports psychology and social identity, the researchers found that when the status of the group’s association is insecure or unstable (such as the victories and losses of a sports team) the members of a group will attempt to define the group as socially superior based on different status-defining dimensions. These dimensions are characterized by associating a higher-status team with “we are the best team” or by associating a lower status team with “we have the most heart” (Rees et al., 2015). Based on this study, the authors suggest that fans of the sports teams justify their loyalty and support of their team based on social status definitions that resemble the individual values of the fans. This constructed idea or mantra ultimately unites the fans together and motivates them to support the team because they recognize parts of themselves within the team and its fan-base.

The level of motivation and engagement of the members to be involved in the ESF and the community of softball in Europe are explained by the self-categorization and social identity theories. Based on the descriptions of each theory, individuals that are involved in the softball community in Europe are motivated by their sense of self and seeing that reflected by the sport, its supporters and the organization’s communications and actions. The members are united by their shared passion for the sport of softball and the softball teams that they support. Within this thesis, I will apply these theories to my research to understand the definitions of the softball community’s identity that is portrayed through social media and communicated by the ESF.

3.2 Defining ‘community’

In order to understand the softball community, it is important to first identify what a community means and the context of its definition in this study. Upon review of the literature concerning the definition of ‘community’, the majority of authors agree that it is difficult to
attempt to construct a definition for this concept. This is due to the diverse dimensions that stem from the abstract idea of ‘community’ (Crow & Allen, 1995). In order to provide a logical description of ‘community’ and the meaning that the word communicates, Willmott (1986), Lee and Newby (1983) as cited by Crow and Allen (1995) suggest three different ways of approaching the concept.

1. **Interest**: Within this element, the people of the group share a specific hobby, idea or characteristic that gives them a reason to connect. The authors point out that the interest of the group as a whole can also be identified in each individual of the group. This is what draws them to form the community (Willmott, 1986; Lee & Newby, 1983). The community of softball in Europe is united by the common interest of softball. The characteristics of the sport are what draw the members of the community to the game. However, the nature of the sport may reveal a deeper meaning that the community members have identified. Through my research, I will uncover the layers of the sport of softball that unites the community members under a common interest.

2. **Place**: This refers to the specific geographical location where a group of people spend their time or where their shared activities take place. Previous literature has pointed to this element as the most prominent feature of communities. However, Willmott (1986), Lee and Newby (1983) suggest that place is not necessarily so important if the other dimensions of community are fulfilled for the purpose of the group (Crow & Allen, 1995). In addition, the boundaries of ‘place’ become skewed with the introduction of social networking sites and technologies that allow for communication across geographical borders. In terms of this thesis, place is an important factor for the softball community in Europe. Although each country has its own teams and organizations, the European Softball Federation aims to unite all of the countries as one and build the sport throughout Europe. The fact that Europe is the geographical location that each country has in common allows the community to link to one another and aim to become a more competitive opponent against the rest of the world’s softball organizations. In terms of this study, I will identify how social media also contributes to the ‘place’ element of the community definition in a virtual space for European softball.
3. **Communion**: The last dimension of ‘community’ is described by the authors as the most intangible of the other elements. It encompasses a sense of emotional motivation, aspirations or strong values that keep the group together (Willmott, 1986; Lee & Newby, 1983). This image may not necessarily portray a physical or discrete attribute; however, each member of the community will vouch for its existence and support it. Because softball is such a marginalized sport, the sense of ‘communion’ truly drives each member of the community to actively participate in the sport and its development. Within this thesis and through the data I collect, I will locate the description the shared values and beliefs that the softball community in Europe possesses.

*“Imagined communities”* Benedict Anderson (1983)

When describing the sense of unity that arises from being a part of a nation, Benedict Anderson (1983) coined the term ‘imagined communities’ to illustrate the feeling of being in a community that does not physically exist. These imagined communities rely on an intangible sense of community that each member expresses, and this is what drives the community into existence (Anderson, 1983). The desire to create this community-feeling is derived from common symbols and words that represent the identity of the community and its members (Anderson, 1983). In addition, these communities are maintained through “symbolic strategies” (such as flags and colors) that reinforce the image of the community (Lindgren, 2013: 88). When applied to nationalism, Anderson (1983) highlights the fact that all of the citizens in a nation will never meet each other, yet they share a sense of comradery and support for one another due to the national identity they each have imagined.

Although the softball community in Europe is within a specific geographical location, it can be categorized under Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ because there is not a physical space where each of the members meet. However, each member of the community identifies themselves with common symbols and language that portrays their association to the community. At a micro-level, the support of each softball team within the individual European countries helps to build these national identities around the sport. Fans of the softball team are driven by their sense of nationalism for the country that the team represents. These communities lead to the members supporting the sport as a whole in Europe to become more competitive against other parts of the world. Essentially, the softball community in Europe is a real community that exists
because of the imagined identity that has been constructed by each member and driven by their support for their respective nations.

The European Softball Federation acts as the ‘hub’ or facilitator of this community by connecting each of its members together through communication. In order to reinforce the identity of the softball community, the ESF uses the ‘symbolic strategies’ in their communication that resonates with the members and upholds their sense of community. Anderson (1983) points out the role of the media in constructing ‘imagined communities’ for groups of people. This is due to the fact that mass media is able to target large audiences with framed messages and reinforce stereotypes with images and phrases (Anderson, 1983). For this study, social media plays a role in the construction of the imagined community of softball in Europe. Lindgren (2017) notes how social media makes it easier to establish and manifest symbols and feelings to all members of the community. This can be seen in how the ESF uses social media to communicate to the softball community and construct an image for softball in Europe. In my research and data collection, I aim to define what symbolic strategies are used to reinforce this imagined community of softball in Europe. Upon examination of these strategies, I will be able to explain how social media acts as a tool to further construct and sustain the identity of the community.

3.3 Information, Action, Community: Strategic communication for non-profits

To be able to characterize the content of the ESF’s Facebook posts, it is necessary to review the ways in which non-profit organizations can efficiently communicate and interact with followers. This theory is included in the theoretical framework because it provides a guideline for analyzing social media content for non-profit organizations. The framework proposed by the authors in this study provides a way to strengthen the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders through social media. Thus, this theory will be used to identify how the ESF’s strategic communication through social media effectively engages its stakeholders (the softball community).

In a study conducted by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), the researchers aimed to understand how Twitter could be used effectively as a tool for non-profit organizations to engage with their stakeholders. From analyzing a series of tweets posted by 100 different non-profit organizations, the researchers identified three main themes that illustrated their overall communication
strategies on the social media platform. The first, *information*, involves simply posting and sharing information about the organization to its followers (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The information topics included events, activities and basic facts about the organization. The second theme, *community*, illustrates the way the organization posts tweets to foster relationships and construct a sense of community with its followers (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). This theme relies heavily on two-way communication and interactivity between the organization and the stakeholders that constructs a connection between the two. Lastly, *action* is the third theme that encompasses the way an organization promotes and motivates action from its followers on Twitter (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). These posts include a level of engagement from the organization that encourages stakeholders to physically do something—either within the social media platform or actions such as volunteering and donating. The authors conclude that social media breaks down the hierarchal barrier between organizations and consumers to enable communication within a more horizontal landscape.

The European Softball Federation is a non-profit organization that utilizes Facebook for communicating to followers and its community of people involved with softball. Thus, Lovejoy & Saxton’s theory for strategic social media communication acts as a relevant frame to analyze this particular case. The ESF’s following on Facebook generally consists of international softball players, coaches, officials, partner organizations, volunteers, organizers and softball fans. By analyzing the content posted in the ESF’s Facebook posts, I will identify themes related to information, community and action as described by Lovejoy & Saxton (2012) that enable the organization to effectively communicate with its followers and its community to attain its goals for softball development in Europe.

### 3.4 Summary

Each theory listed in this theoretical framework will be utilized for analyzing the data that will provide insight to RQ1 and RQ2. According to social identity and self-categorization theories in the context of sports, the people involved in softball have an intrinsic desire to actively support the sport and its development. Through the data analysis, the internal desire of these people will be uncovered and aid in the explanation of the need for developing softball in Europe. The definition of community as first described by Willmott (1986), Lee and Newby (1983) will act as a frame for defining the community of softball in Europe. Since the
community is not bound by a physical foundation, it is necessary to use the perspective of Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ to understand the abstract beliefs and values that hold the softball community together. In addition, the data analysis will define the role that social media plays in constructing and reinforcing this imagined community. Since this study also analyzes the social media content of the ESF, the ‘information, action and community’ framework for non-profit organizations will be used to outline the communication strategies of the ESF. These communication strategies will reveal how the ESF attempts to develop softball in Europe and build and maintain the European softball community.

4. Methodology

To provide a detailed analysis that sufficiently answers the proposed research questions, the following methods were chosen: conducting in-depth interviews and a qualitative content analysis of the interview transcriptions and Facebook posts form the European Softball Federation. In addition, this research project can be deemed a case study according to the McLeod’s (2008) definition: “an in-depth investigation of a single person, group, event or community.” This is due to the fact that I have chosen to thoroughly analyze the ESF organization and its community within a particular case.

In order to understand RQ1, I needed to uncover the European softball development challenges and potential solutions. In addition, I would have to analyze the ESF’s Facebook content to identify ways that social media is used intentionally to combat the challenges while providing aid to the solutions. For the second research question, RQ2, it would be necessary to gain a more emotional perspective about the European softball community from the respondents as well as underline the emotional cues from the social media content that relate to this perspective. Based on these assumptions, I have decided to combine two different methods of qualitative data collection. This section of the thesis will explain the reasoning for choosing to use the data collection methods of in-depth interviews and content analysis as well as an outline of the process that was followed to select and analyze the data.

4.1 In-depth interviews

An in-depth interview can be described as a purposeful conversion with a specific research subject that enlightens the researcher on a specific phenomenon based on the
respondent’s insight (Legard, R., Keegan, J., & Ward, K., 2003). In order to gain a better understanding of the internal values and beliefs of the organization, I conducted four in-depth interviews with members of the European Softball Federation and self-declared members of the European softball community. I also aimed to better illustrate the landscape of softball in Europe that encompasses the challenges and proposed solutions for the development of the sport. By transcribing the interviews and conducting a qualitative content analysis of the transcriptions, connections were made between the themes discovered and their relationship to the research questions proposed.

A sampling method was chosen prior to selecting participants for the interviews. Since the most efficient way to develop a sampling strategy is to have a goal or purpose in mind (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), the interviewees for this study were chosen based on snowball sampling and status within the organization because I wanted to ensure the credibility of the respondents. Snowball sampling is a sampling technique that consists of using an initial subject to identify other relevant research subjects or actors (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao 2004). From each interview respondent, I gained contact to another respondent based on the previous participant’s referral.

I first started with the communications director of the ESF who had been a player for ten years in the Czech Republic before joining the ESF in 2015. This interview gave me more information about the ESF’s communication strategies and goals. Following this interview, I spoke with the vice president of the athletic commission for players. She had also played softball for 20 years in Italy before joining the ESF as an advocate and voice for softball players in Europe. Next, I conducted an interview with the vice president of operations who oversees softball development projects for the organization. She began by focusing on developing softball in Denmark and now works with the ESF to focus on development throughout Europe. The last interview was with a softball coach who works with European coaches involved in the ESF. The coach has been a part of European softball from a coach’s perspective for over 20 years and is the head of the European Softball Coaches Association project within the ESF. I aimed to attain interview respondents that came from the different backgrounds of European softball and I believe that the experience of each interviewee was greatly reflected in their individual perspectives. Thus, I decided to only conduct these four interviews because the combination of
their different backgrounds was able to provide enough information about the landscape of softball in Europe as a whole.

The interview structure can be described as semi-structured since there was a proposed list of questions made before, but the questions were adapted based on the respondents’ answers. Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003) suggest that an effective in-depth interview should be based on a guide consisting of theories and themes that the researcher already has in mind. Based on the theoretical framework and the research questions proposed, I developed an interview guide that would allow the interviewee’s to openly share their experiences and opinions about softball in Europe. However, the questions for each interviewee were not identical. I attempted to utilize their unique perspectives within the community and ask them questions that related to their positions in the organization.

I first attempted to understand the background of each individual and their personal story of getting into softball in Europe and their positions at the ESF. Questions in this part of the interview generally remained very open-ended to allow for the interviewee to share their story. I then asked about the objectives and the role of the ESF as it related to the development of softball in Europe. Finally, I asked the interviewees more personal questions about their experience with softball in Europe and their ideas of the community that supports the sport. These questions were heavily based on the way the interviewee responded to the previous questions. I wanted to ensure that the interviewee was speaking from their own unique perspective and personal journey of contributing to the development of softball in Europe.

Due to differences in geographical location, each interview was conducted over the phone and lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. I used a device to record the interviews for later transcription that each interviewee was made aware of. Using a device to record the interviews is the most practical way to ensure accuracy and capture the precise language and tone of the participants (Legard, R., Keegan, J., & Ward, K. 2003). Since each interviewee was located in a geographical area outside of my current one (Sweden), conducting the interviews through WhatsApp (a messaging service) on a mobile phone was the most convenient option. WhatsApp allows users to send messages and send or receive calls with no extra charge. I made initial contact with the interviewees through email in order to establish a time and date for the interviews to take place. All of the interviews occurred during the day when the respondents
were most available. After the interviews were conducted, I used the audio recording to re-listen to the respondents’ answers, transcribe them and then analyze the content.

In order to capture the content of the interviews and analyze the data, I used a series of coding methods that summarized the main themes within the data. The primary goals of coding can be characterized as developing a systematic way to identify ‘these repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs as documented in the data’ (Saldaña, 2009). The codes I created were based on a theoretically-informed inductive approach. This involves using the theoretical framework to uncover codes within the transcriptions (Saldaña, 2009:5). I initially highlighted all relevant content in the transcriptions that would allow me to answer my research questions from a theoretical approach. From these codes, I categorized the data into emerging themes that directly related to challenges and solutions for softball development in Europe and the community identity of softball in Europe. Saldaña (2009) emphasizes the importance of being systematic, consistent and transparent during the coding process. To accomplish this, the data was recoded several times to retain accuracy. The process of coding and categorizing the content for this study was conducted through multiple coding techniques that included descriptive coding, in vivo coding, pattern coding and simultaneous coding. Although each interviewee came from different backgrounds in softball, I found that the coding revealed that they were each able to tell relatively similar stories about their experiences. Thus, I was satisfied with the reoccurring themes I discovered and felt that four interviews was sufficient enough to answer my research question.

4.2 Content Analysis

A qualitative content analysis of social media posts from the ESF was conducted to understand the communication strategies of the ESF that would allow me to solve RQ1 and RQ2 from an organizational communication standpoint. The data I aimed to collect would be classified as social media data according to Lindgren’s (2017) definition. Social media data is produced from a ‘public, social process that can potentially be used for social science research with or without permission’ (Lindgren 2017: 232). Since this data collection method took place on the social networking site, Facebook, it is relevant to define the platform and its functions. Facebook is an online platform in which users are able to communicate, connect, create content and share content with one another (Nations, 2018). Any organization can create a Facebook
page where users can follow the account and interact with the organization. To answer my research questions, I focused only on the content that came from the ESF’s Facebook page. Although one could argue that it may be beneficial to look at how fans and members of the community responded to the Facebook posts, there was not enough discourse to analyze through this point of view and I wanted the study to remain within the scope of strategic communication from a non-profit sports organization. Focusing on followers and fans’ responses would give space for discussions that are tailored more towards organizational stakeholder reactions and communication.

Based on the insight I received from my interview with the communications director of the ESF, I decided to analyze the ESF’s Facebook page because she explained that it is the primary social media tool that harbors the majority of the ESF’s communication content. In addition, I decided to focus on the ESF’s Facebook posts before, during and after the organization’s biggest softball event: the European Women’s Softball Championship in June 2017. During this time frame, the ESF launched its rebranding initiative, ‘Softball Europe’ in order to create a more unified identity for European Softball. I utilized a ‘criteria of relevance’ by selecting a data set that would be most valuable for understanding my research questions and encompass the core of the organization’s communication strategies (Saldaña, 2009). The criteria of relevance for this study was constructed by combining the launch of the ‘Softball Europe’ campaign and the ESF’s use of Facebook as its primary communications channel. Using the Facebook search tool and the keywords ‘Softball Europe’, I narrowed my sample to 84 posts from the ESF’s Facebook account between the campaign’s time frame of May and July 2017.

Through a thematic analysis lens, I used multiple coding methods to uncover concepts, trends, patterns and actions from the Facebook posts. As explained by Lindgren (2017), coding allows the researcher to map the most prominent ideas and phenomena from the empirical data. Once the data set was mapped out, I reviewed all of the posts to get a general idea of how to analyze the content. I used a hermeneutics strategy to dissect parts of the data that would eventually lead me to understand the data as a whole (Lindgren 2017). I began by coding and then recoding each post based on what the page was communicating and how it framed the communication. I also highlighted social media tactics such as using hashtags, attaching photos or videos, and sharing posts from other pages.
Once the codes were formulated to describe the communication of the ESF, I moved on to develop categories and eventually themes that related to my research questions. As defined by Saldaña (2009), a theme is the product of the codes being categorized and reflected analytically. The categories I found were linked to the categories found from the interviews conducted. The posts were communicating either a solution to the challenges of developing softball in Europe or supporting the identity of the community and facilitating its connection between the organization and the community members. These became my main themes as stemmed from my theoretical framework of understating social identity theory and communities from and organizational communication standpoint.

4.3 Limitations and reflection

Because of my unique position as a member within the community, I was able to use my experiences and background of playing softball in Europe to make inferences from the data collected. My association to the softball community also aided in the research process because I was already familiar with the ESF and its Facebook page and I used my previously established connections to get in contact with the ESF members. However, it was a challenge to separate myself from the data collected and my active involvement in the community and the organization. In order to combat this, I maintained a more objective approach when analyzing and coding the data in the initial process in order to gain a complete overview of the concepts. This allowed me to extract all of the potential meanings and ideas that emerged. When developing themes to support my research questions, my familiarity with the sport and its presence in Europe enabled me to accurately define the language used in the content analysis and its connection to the development of softball and its community.

By focusing on the problems of my research and how the data can reveal new knowledge to answer them, I have taken a methodological pragmatic strategy for making sense of the codes, themes and categories I have created. Lindgren (2017) explains that this approach takes on a form of ‘bricolage’ which consists of mixing and matching things together to form new meanings. With this strategy, I combined the data I acquired from the content analysis of the interviews and the Facebook posts to make connections within the themes. These connections revealed insight into the development efforts of softball in Europe and the way the community is perceived and communicated to. Ultimately, my methodology has enabled me to review a large
amount of empirical data and gain a better perspective of the softball landscape in Europe to uncover the solutions to my research questions.

Since this study focuses on only one particular case, it would be difficult to generalize the findings from the data to multiple fields within the topic of strategic organizational communication for non-profit communities. More data from the organization’s Facebook content would need to be collected and perhaps a few more interviews and content could offer further insight. Thus, this study is limited and not able to provide a concrete framework for organizations to communicate to communities through social media. However, it offers a good starting point since there is few research previously conducted within this realm as explained in the literature review. It can be noted that the basic methods used in this study can be applied to other studies concerning organizational communication for marginalized sports and other non-profit sectors.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

In order to preserve the integrity of the organization and its communication strategies, the identities of the interviewees were kept anonymous for the purpose of this study. This is due to the fact that the respondents revealed information about the internal communication processes within the organization that may have been intended for organizational members only. Although the interviewees agreed to have their identities revealed, this precautionary step was taken to avoid any harm to the integrity of the ESF. Each of the interviewees provided verbal consent for their transcripts to be used in this study.

Other than this, there were no significant ethical considerations throughout the research process of this study.

5. Analysis of Findings

5.1 Overview

It should be noted that the theory used to analyze the data collected can be perceived as constraining the data and prejudging the findings. However, the theoretical framework used in this study did not fully develop until the analysis of the data had come together. Thus, the theory outlined in the theoretical framework is a product of the findings found in the data collection and analysis and has enabled me to categorize and code the data to make the conclusions presented.
In this analysis, I will present the findings according to the theories outlined previously that help link together the themes that emerged from the empirical data collected. After conducting a qualitative content analysis, the interpretation of the data becomes much clearer when defined for RQ1 and RQ2 individually. However, there were some overall linguistic cues in the data that pointed to the underlying themes of community and organizational communication as a whole. It is important to mention the way the language in the data has set a stage for the community to be constructed and for the social media to reinforce the objectives of the organization and its community.

The interviewees tended to use the words “we” or “us” when referring to the organization and the European softball community’s efforts for development. According to self-categorization and social identity theories, this pattern suggests that the interviewees strongly identify themselves as active members of the organization and the softball community they help to facilitate through the ESF. Ultimately, it is assumed that the interviewees have a strong attachment to the sport and its progress in Europe. In addition, the ESF’s social media content reflected this vocabulary by repeatedly using language that suggested the organization was a group composed of softball-minded people with words such as “our” and “we”. Although the federation consists of 33 unique national softball organizations, the social media content generally pointed toward a more unified spirit of softball in Europe. As Anderson’s (1983) “imagined communities” demonstrates, this tendency to use unified language as a communication strategy highlights the ESF’s goal in creating a community space online for European softball.

Since the ESF has been successful in their goals to increase participation in European softball, this analysis breaks down how the organization has overcome the challenges and effectively communicated to the community of softball in Europe. The findings reveal that the phrases from the interview respondents are reflected by the content in the ESF’s Facebook posts. The challenges of growing the sport and the opportunities that arise from it are communicated by the ESF’s members and to the followers of the organization. Since the ESF is the governing body of softball in Europe and its communication reflects the beliefs of the members, the organization can be identified as the best representative for the softball community and the driving force behind developing the sport in Europe. By highlighting these ideas, I am now able to present the findings that answer RQ1 and RQ2 for the purpose of this study.
5.2 (RQ1) What are the ESF’s communication strategies that contribute to the development of softball in Europe?

In order to understand how the ESF’s communication strategies influence the development of softball in Europe, it is necessary to first identify the challenges that the ESF and the softball community faces and how they have attempted to combat the challenges with proposed solutions. Based on the non-profit organization communication strategies of information, community, and action, one can make a connection between how the ESF communicates through Facebook and the discussed challenges of softball in Europe while providing support to the proposed solutions. The analysis of the data collected from both the interviews and the Facebook content provide insight that enables me to answer the proposed research question in this section.

Challenges

The transcription and content analysis of the interviews provided insight into the reasons for softball remaining such a marginalized sport in Europe. The first, (a) a lack of awareness about softball, refers to the large population in Europe that is unfamiliar with the game. One interviewee stated, “I think it’s one of Europe’s best-kept secrets. People outside of the sport in Europe aren’t aware of the game.” This shows that many people in Europe do not know about softball as a competitive sport in their country which contributes to the lack of awareness that the sport faces.

The second, (b) culture and perception of softball, stems from the interviewees mentioning that softball is not a part of the culture in Europe. Because of this, it is hard to change the perception that people in Europe have about sports. As stated by one respondent, “in Europe you’re used to having two sides and you have to shoot the ball from one side to another side. That’s what we do in Europe.” European sports culture is dominated by soccer and it is extremely hard for softball to penetrate that culture. This proves that the culture and perception of the sport is a huge challenge to overcome for the organization to build softball in Europe.

The third challenge, (c) differences in softball among European countries, describes the unique levels of competitiveness, resources and efforts that each country faces. Some European countries have stronger development programs for the sport while it is much harder to gain participation in other countries due to a higher lack of development efforts. In the interview with
Goodman

the vice president of development, the interviewee mentioned that although the Olympics is a great platform for the sport in Europe overall, “for some countries it is very individual. For Denmark it doesn’t mean anything but for other countries it means that they receive more money for their programs.” This explains the gap between the different national teams and European softball countries due to the vast geographical space.

A fourth challenge consists of the athletes having a (d) lack of resources. This addresses the inability of softball clubs in each European country to receive funding, equipment, facilities, uniforms and the necessary training in order to play the sport at the most optimal level. In the interview with the vice president of athletic commissions, the interviewee explained that “we don’t have enough money for equipment and fields for all of the teams. In Europe there is volleyball or soccer and sponsors are more interested in those sports.” The lack of resources contributes greatly to the level of play that Europe is currently at in the sport of softball.

The final challenge is a (e) limited access to softball. Since softball is such an underdeveloped sport in Europe, the opportunities for athletes to get the chance to practice and compete in softball is very narrow. One interviewee described this experience as the athletes having to travel very far in their countries to find a place to play the game: “in Poland, you have to travel several hours to another part of your country just to be able to play a game.” This explains the importance of allowing players to have more access to softball and bringing the game closer to them, the coaches and the fans.

Solutions

When discussing the development of softball in Europe, the interviewees mentioned many ways to overcome the challenges addressed and grow the sport for the community. The first solution to developing softball in Europe involves (a) promoting the sport in Europe. This encompasses increased media coverage and efforts to display the sport through media outlets and channels. One interviewee stated, “more media time and attention and would just help the sport grow and make everything easier.” In addition, promoting softball in Europe also includes exposing European audiences to softball and the unique culture of the sport. The interviewees noted that showing softball to people allows them to gain more experiences with the game and influence their perception of the sport.
The second solution is (b) *maintaining connections among people involved with the sport.* This includes keeping up the ESF’s relationships with the European national federations, softball organizations outside of Europe, and the softball community within Europe. In one interview, the respondent explained how the development department needs to “maintain contact with all the federations, national federations, and all the ones that want to be in contact with them in order to see to see how the ESF can help them. Through these relationships, the ESF can exert its efforts to build European softball into a respected and competitive union against the rest of the world.

A third solution, (c) *increasing softball learning opportunities,* refers to providing ways for people involved in softball to increase their knowledge about the sport. One interviewee stated, “I think it’s just that the more I learn about the game, the more I realize that it is just an endless sea of learning.” These learning opportunities include ways for coaches and umpires to gain licenses and bringing in good players from the US to share their knowledge. By increasing learning opportunities for the softball community, the level of play will become more competitive.

The last solution is comprised of increasing the quality and quantity of (d) *softball development programs in Europe.* These programs include creating softball camps or organizing events that strengthen the players’ and coaches’ softball skills in Europe. All of the respondents in the interviews emphasized the importance of development for softball in Europe, which is one of the ESF’s principle goals. These programs help youth players and beginners which ultimately leads to the sustainability of softball development in Europe as a whole.

*ESF Facebook communication*

The analysis of the ESF’s Facebook posts revealed that the organization is communicating to its followers to address the challenges of development and provide ways to support the solutions that overcome the challenges. The challenges and solutions that were listed by the interviewees are addressed in the ESF’s Facebook content. These communication strategies align with Lovejoy and Saxton’s (2012) information, community and action framework for strategical communication from non-profit organizations.
By providing information about softball and development programs, the ESF attempts to promote and build awareness of the sport in Europe. These posts included posting news updates about softball in Europe, sharing softball experiences, as well as attaching videos and images of European softball teams and fans of the sport. For example, the ESF posted short quotes from interviews conducted with players that gave an ‘inside look’ into the softball life. These posts were accompanied by the hashtag, ‘#SoftballInsideandOut’, to link together all of these experiences of softball players and share more about what it is like to be involved with softball in Europe. The ESF also made a point to provide access to watching European softball games through a free livestream for their followers. In conjunction with this, the ESF included photos and highlights from the main tournament’s matches. This allows fans to watch the game and encourage people that are unfamiliar with the game to see what it is like.

The ESF’s Facebook posts also engaged with followers online and fostered a community for softball through their communication strategies. By interacting with followers and supporting similar accounts or other national softball teams, the ESF attempts to bridge the gap between the differences among the European countries and maintain its connections with people involved in softball. These posts consisted of celebrating accomplishments made for softball development in specific European countries where softball is not as popular. They even highlighted athletes or coaches that have achieved awards for softball and encouraged followers to congratulate them. Also, the ESF would share news updates from the different European national softball federations’ pages and tag players, coaches or facilitators in posts.
Lastly, the ESF **encouraged followers to take action** in posts that would help the development of softball in Europe and for the individual community members. These “action” words consisted of telling followers to “sign up now” or warning them with “you don’t want to miss this event” for specific softball camps, clinics and learning opportunities. In addition, the ESF posted about ways for followers to donate and provide resources to different European softball club teams. The ESF also featured photos and videos from softball camps or events to persuade followers to continue working hard on the development of softball in Europe.

**Summary**

As outlined in the analysis, the challenges that softball development in Europe faces and the solutions to overcome those challenges are communicated by the ESF through Facebook. By informing about softball and development programs, the ESF attempts to combat the challenges (a) and (b) while offering support for solution (a). The ESF Facebook posts also foster a community for softball in Europe that contributes to overcoming challenge (c) by advocating for solution (b). Finally, the ESF tackles challenges (d) and (e) by contributing to solutions (c) and (d) with posts that encourage followers to take action for developing softball in Europe.

To answer RQ1, the analysis of the findings reveals that the ESF uses the communication strategies of informing about softball and development programs, fostering a community for softball in Europe, and encouraging followers to take action through Facebook in order to solve the challenges of developing softball in Europe.

5.3 (RQ2) How does social media reinforce and maintain an identity for the ESF and the European softball community?

As the data collection and analysis was being conducted, the presence of a community became clear and the significance of its support on the development of softball in Europe was evident. Thus, it is relevant for this study to address how the community of softball is identified and reinforced through social media. According to the self-categorization and social identity
theories, the members of the softball community and the ESF share the same values as each other in support of softball in Europe. Because of this, the idea of the softball community in Europe can be manifested. However, the relationship between its place, interest and communion as described Willmott (1986), Lee and Newby (1983) has not been fully outlined. These characteristics help to construct an identity for the community. According to the themes found in the data collected, I was able to define these different factors of community that construct its identity. This content analysis of interviews and Facebook posts as categorized by place, interest and communion define the ‘imagined’ softball community that proves its existence both online and offline. Also, it provides insight into how the ESF supports and maintains the existence of the community through its Facebook communication and the significance of the community for the ESF to continue developing softball in Europe.

Interest

Interest is described by Willmott (1986), Lee and Newby (1983) as the common hobby, idea or passion that all members of the community share. The one thing that every member of the ESF and the softball community has in common is an interest in softball. The characteristics of softball as described by the interviewees projects itself onto the image constructed by the ESF and the softball community in Europe. By focusing on the nature of the sport, the members reflect softball’s characteristics within their community which helps to strengthen the support of the sport and its community. These characteristics of softball were uncovered from a content analysis of the interviews and Facebook posts and can be categorized as: everyone can play the sport, the sport is unique, and it provides people with great opportunities.

The concept that everyone can play the game refers to the way that softball is a sport that allows people of all ages, genders, backgrounds and sizes to participate. One interviewee explained that, “Everyone can have a role in the game. It is a very inclusive game.” This enables people from many different backgrounds to participate in the sport. The social media posts that communicate this message include providing information about all of the different ways the sport could be played by different audiences such as men or youth players. The ESF also reiterated the idea of “softball for all” that further encompasses this characteristic.

The sport is unique in the way that it is played according to the rules and the fundamentals of the game. It is described by a respondent as having, “so many facets to it, throwing, catching,
running, the offensive team never has the ball. It’s so different.” This is true because softball is different from other popular sports in Europe such as soccer or hockey in terms of the field it is played on, the way teams score points and even the way officials judge the game. The ESF portrays this characteristic by posting videos and images of strange and unique things that can happen during the games. For example, the ESF posted a video of the softball players dancing and singing to cheer their teammates on during a game. As the caption of one photo with players clashing into each other on the field, the ESF wrote “Softball is a sport like no other.” It is evident that the uniqueness of softball is what attracts the softball community members to the game and to each other.

Every interviewee expressed how much the sport has given to each of them and the opportunities they have been able to come across. One respondent revealed, “the sport has given me so much. I have played everywhere all over the world and met so many friends from traveling. So many experiences.” This experience of gaining opportunities from softball is also communicated by the ESF’s Facebook posts when referring to interviews of other players and celebrating the opportunities they have received from playing softball. In one of the posts, a player explains that she has had to sacrifice a lot to play the sport, but it was all worth it for the opportunity to play softball and become a better person. This reveals the personal rewards that members of the community gain from sharing an interest in softball and being a part of the progression of softball in Europe.

Place

Place is an important factor in defining a community because it allows the community to gain physical existence (Willmott (1986), Lee and Newby (1983)). The softball community is united by a vast geographical region that constitutes its ‘place’ for the community. As noted in the literature review, sports bring communities together because the fans want to show support for their shared nation and ‘imagined’ community. However, there are 33 individual and culturally different nations that participate in European softball. Thus, it is difficult to identify a specific place for the community to exist in. The importance of “togetherness” and “connection” between these different nations was a prominent theme in both the interviews and the ESF’s Facebook posts. Interviewees emphasized the importance of keeping those involved with the sport connected for achieving the goals of developing softball as a whole in Europe. One
respondent stated, “I think that what has made softball grow really well and has built up the community is the tournaments. All the people that love the game are brought here together and are out there to play to win. It just brings all these countries together in one place.” This illustrates the essence of bringing the softball community together. When discussing the importance of maintaining connection among community members, one interviewee replied, “If we had more connections with girls from other European countries, we would be able to make the sport stronger in our country.” This emphasizes the impact that connection among the many different countries has for growing softball in Europe and supporting its community.

Since the European softball sphere is divided into 33 different nations, the community utilizes an online platform to harbor its communication and encourage the connection between members. It is evident from the analysis that the characteristics and logistics of social media enables the community to exist and interact within an online space. The ESF’s Facebook account acts as a hub for communication to take place that maintains the “togetherness” and “connection” of the community. From analyzing the sample of posts collected, the ESF used Facebook to update followers about softball occurring all throughout Europe and sharing posts from other European national softball pages. Images of teams standing together also acted as a symbol to reinforce the idea of European softball being a united force. In addition, the ESF used language such as “become a part of this” with posts that emphasized the connection between members of softball teams and softball events. The ESF also used Facebook to interact with followers by asking them questions and encouraging them to communicate with the organization. These posts included language such as “What’s going on in this picture? Any comments.” Although the softball community shares a common geographical location, the community is able to find ‘place’ in social media through the ESF’s Facebook posts that encourage participation, connection and unity.

Ultimately, the ESF brings the community together in one place by connecting all of the members through Facebook. This allows the organization to construct a place for the community to exist. While the members do share support over a similar geographical region, it is still difficult to maintain communication due to the vast area that the continent covers. By emphasizing the notions of “togetherness” and “connection” that are crucial for the sustainability of softball in Europe, the ESF’s Facebook content unites the community in an online space.
Communion

The last element of community, ‘communion’, consists of the values and emotions that strengthen the bond between the softball community members. In order to uncover what these values are, it is necessary to determine the qualities of the “softball people” that make up the softball community and understand how they relate to one another. According to self-categorization and social identity theory, it is assumed that the people of the community identify qualities about themselves within the community—especially in sports. From the interviews, the characteristics of passion, kinship, hope and determination emerged as elements that describe the members of the softball community. From the Facebook posts, it is evident that the ESF communicates these values to the followers in order to construct and reinforce this identity of the community members. Ultimately, the ESF’s Facebook content communicates the ‘communion’ factor with its use of language and symbols that are parallel with the qualities found from the interviews that describe the softball community members.

For the trait of passion, the interviewees emphasized how passionate the people of European softball are and how much they love the sport. One respondent stated, “I think that from the people I’ve come across through softball in Europe, I wouldn’t doubt anyone’s passion that is involved with the game.” This is an important trait of the community that encourages the members to continue pursuing softball and working on its development in Europe. The ESF communicates this passion on Facebook by promoting the use of #lovesoftball on posts. This strategy is used to “connect all of the people who love softball” as stated by an interviewee. In addition to #lovesoftball, the ESF’s posts associated softball with positive phrases such as ‘loving softball’ and ‘it is the best sport in the world.’ These communication tactics highlight the way people in the softball community share the same positive feelings about the sport.

To identify a sense of kinship between members in the community, the interviewees pointed out the way each member shares some form of relationship between other members because of softball. One respondent described this experience as “feeling like whoever plays softball has his or her best friend from softball and it’s like a family really, the community. And I feel like if you play softball and I play softball then we're friends.” This shows the strength of the relationship between members of the community. To highlight this characteristic of kinship, the ESF’s posts used images and language to suggest that softball players, coaches, and organizers are very close and support each other. For example, many images of teams showed the players in
a huddle together, hugging each other, or cheering one another on. The ESF also made an effort to associate the softball community with the phrase “family” to emphasize this unique sense of kinship and closeness between members.

Hope can be considered a very subjective concept, so for this study, hope is defined as “a feeling of expectation and a desire for a particular thing to happen” (Oxford University, 2018). The characteristic of hope, is portrayed by the interviewees and the ESF in how they each spoke about the future of softball in Europe. When asked about the way softball has progressed in Europe, one interviewee responded, “I think more than anything, at least there’s a dream now that can become a reality. I think that every little girl out there shouldn’t be denied that dream to play softball on the biggest stage. Even with all the odds against them, they might be able to achieve that dream.” The ESF also communicates this feeling with posts that celebrate progress in softball development and positive language. In one post, the ESF announced the opening of a new softball field in Hungary and stated, “we’re looking forward to coming here for one of the future European championships or cups!” This suggests that the ESF is positive about the future because of the progress made. This hopefulness for the future is what fuels the ESF members and softball community members to achieve their goals and push for softball development in Europe.

Lastly, determination consists of the community members working hard and overcoming obstacles to increase the development of softball in Europe and build the community. This characteristic is exemplified by one interviewee when they stated, “all the people I met were full of energy. And they always try to do their best. I found that these softball people were always positive, and I like the energy that they have. They never ever give up.” Each of the interviewees also noted that when the people worked hard for the development of softball, they were able to see greater progression of the sport. The ESF communicates this value by updating followers about the members of the organization or the softball community working on their development initiatives. This includes posts that showed images or videos of players working hard on their skills or umpires taking courses to increase their softball knowledge. With hard work and determination, the softball community is focused on their objectives and this encourages everyone to be motivated to help and support the community. The ESF recognizes the importance of determination among the community and uses Facebook to highlight the members that contribute to the development while also updating followers about projects that the organization is working on.
Summary

Overall, the elements of community (interest, place, communion) are identified by the interviewees who are also part of the softball community and the ESF. In order to support this imagined identity of the softball community, the ESF’s Facebook posts reinforce the interest, place and communion through images, language, symbols and interaction with its followers.

In response to RQ2, the ESF uses Facebook to communicate the interest of softball, build a place for connection on social media, and portray the values and feelings of the communion as described by the interviewees to develop and maintain the community of softball in Europe.

6. Discussion

Since the participation rate of softball in Europe has increased in the past year, the ESF has proven that it is working towards accomplishing its mission for developing softball in Europe. This study does not attempt to prove the successfulness of the ESF’s campaign, but it identifies how social media has contributed to the development of the sport and its community. As mentioned previously, marginalized sports—especially women’s sports—must effectively navigate the overpopulated media landscape in order to compete with larger sports and male-dominated athletics. Social media is a tool that allows women’s sports and non-profit sports organizations like the ESF to accomplish this feat. However, it is important to consider the characteristics of the sport and its community offline. Upon analyzing the data and the themes that emerged, the findings suggest that the construction and maintenance of the community both physically and online directly contributes to the development of European softball. The community as a whole is responsible for initiating and carrying out the push for developing softball while overcoming the challenges of growing the sport in Europe. By strategically communicating to this community through Facebook and giving it a platform to exist, the ESF adds fuel to the drive of the community members to grow softball in Europe.

In sports communities, social identity and self-categorization theories explain the motivation of fans to unite around the sport. The social identities and self-categorization needs of the European softball community members incentivize them to identify elements of themselves in the sport and within each other. This in combination with the nature of sports also encourages the members to unite in support of the common goal to grow softball in Europe and become a more
competitive continent against the rest of the world. Based on this desire, the community members have an imagined sense of existence comprised of values and beliefs that define the community’s shared interest, place and communion. These definitions construct an identity for the community’s members to believe in and attach to.

The ESF’s Facebook content suggests that it recognizes the value of the community to help the organization and its mission to improve European softball. Because softball is such a small and marginalized sport in Europe, it is necessary to have a group of people that support it and have the motivation to grow the sport. Many of the challenges that softball in Europe faces and the ways to overcome them directly involve the members of the softball community. The nature of social media gives the ESF a platform to connect and communicate to the stakeholders of softball development in Europe which include the players, coaches, judges, fans and facilitators. Through the communication strategies of informing about softball and development programs, fostering a community for softball in Europe, and encouraging followers to take action, the ESF address the challenges and solutions of softball development and promotes its mission to the people involved in European softball. These people make up the community of softball and have constructed their own image that defines the community. The ESF reinforces this image by using visuals, vocabulary and symbolic strategies on Facebook to manifest the community in terms of what the community members have imagined.

The key findings of this study highlight that the community of softball has existed since the game was first started in Europe and continues to maintain its existence through social media and the ESF’s communication strategies. The people involved in the sport are united together by the similar feelings they share about softball and for each other. The ESF was created by the community members as a way to facilitate the growth of softball and increase the quality of play in Europe. Because of this, the introduction of social media has not radically changed the identity of the European softball community. Based on this analysis, the use of Facebook by the ESF has only reinforced the community’s constructed image that is shared by all of its members. The online community and identity of European softball does not prevail without the support of the physical community and its members—and vice versa. Thus, social media has contributed to the sustainability of the European softball community as a whole which enables and motivates its members to increase development for the sport in Europe.
7. Conclusion

In the debate of whether or not online communities can provide the same substance as offline communities, this study positions itself as an example of the way the two experiences are not mutually exclusive. The nature of social media and the networking capabilities of the internet allow the groups to form and exist much more easily. However, the construction of the identity and the abstract values that hold the group together are cultivated from the minds of the community members. Social media merely reinforces these ideas of the community and portrays its identity in a more tangible form. In addition, the strength of the community and the level of substance it emits is not determined by the platform in which it exists. These characteristics are developed by the community members who have the individual power to establish the strength and level of connection within the community.

What organizations—particularly non-profits and marginalized sports organizations—can grasp from this idea is to find a way to foster the community that exists around them in an authentic and sustainable way. With social media, the barrier between organization and stakeholder becomes construed and the communication that takes place between the two parties plays out over a more horizontal landscape. This enables the communities to unite around the organizations when the community members identify themselves in the values and beliefs portrayed by the organization. When this is achieved, the community members are no longer consumers to the organization, they are a part of it, actively working to help the organization accomplish its goals. This becomes vital to the success of the organization and the existence of the community. With effective communication strategies, the organization can continue developing and sustaining the identity of the community for the benefit of the organization and the community members.

It is important to note, however, that the scope of this study is limited to that of a marginal interest in the non-profit sector of marginalized sports organizations. It would be beneficial to further study the implications of online communities and their relationship to organizations in other fields. The role that social media plays in the organization’s communication strategies with its community can vary according to the amount of profitability that the organization can gain from its customers. For example, this could take place in the
marketing and business sector of organizations where the relationship between corporations and consumers tends to be linear and focused more on an exchange. The motivation to form communities in this realm may be different than that of marginalized sports and non-profit organizations. Although this study does not intend to provide a marketing perspective, it would be of interest to study the communication strategies of organizations that pertain to a community of consumers.

To conclude, social media has greatly transformed the process of communication in society. However, it has not trumped the way humans socially interact. Social media is simply a platform that extends the social habits that we act out on a daily basis. By nature, we tend to form groups with those that have like-minded beliefs and share the same interests, geography or backgrounds as us. Social media makes this process much easier and faster and extends beyond geographical borders. The way the online community functions and exists is an effect of what the offline community has constructed. These two communities are not mutually exclusive, but rather, work simultaneously to strengthen their identity. Organizations are able to benefit from this phenomenon with strategic communication by reinforcing the community identity and positioning the organization as also a part of the community. Since the community is driven together by abstract values and ideas, it is important for the organization to define these ideals in order to relate with the community members and motivate them to work together with the organization. Overall, social media allows the non-profit organization to tangibly manifest and reinforce a community identity and connect the community members in pursuit of the organization’s and the community’s goals.

Ultimately, my personal goal for this study is to provide a foundation for the ESF to develop a systematic way to continue communicating strategically to its European softball community that motivates and unites the members under the goal of growing the sport. I believe that sports are very important for the youth, especially young girls, and it would be beneficial for the ESF to continue promoting softball throughout Europe. By increasing participation and the quality of play, girls will be able to live out their dreams of playing on the biggest stage at the Olympics and representing their respective nations. In addition, the softball community in Europe deserves to have the sport more equally represented by the media and incorporated into the culture of European athletics. With the support of the ESF and the utilization of social media, the European softball community can make softball a ‘sport for all’.
8. Works Cited


9. Appendix

9.1 Interview Guide

Interview #1

1. Can you kind of explain what the European softball Federation is and what they do and who they communicate to as an audience?
2. What is your role at the ESF?
3. I kind of want to talk about the way softball has progressed in Europe? Just from your experience, can you kind of explain how softball has progressed while you've been a part of the organization?
4. I know it’s kind of hard to explain exactly why, but can you kind of give a guess as to why softball is so marginalized in Europe?
5. How would you describe the softball community in Europe?
6. Okay so how are you guys trying to increase the awareness and the participation of softball in Europe? Not just in social media but in general.
7. How do you think the communications has changed since before social media and technology?
8. Do you think that because Europe is so big, it has been able to bring people together?
9. When you are on social media as the ESF, what are your main goals and objectives?
10. So, you feel like now that we have gotten the people already involved in softball, you want to start reaching out to people that don’t really know that much about it?
11. I noticed, when I was looking through the website and things like that, that you guys started the Softball Europe campaign, so I just wanted to talk to you a little about that and ask you what was the strategy behind the softball Europe campaign and what does that mean?
12. And what does #lovesoftball communicate?
13. So, I noticed that you had the #lovesoftball and Softball Europe at the Euro Championships this summer. Was this campaign introduced just for the European championships?
14. Do you think that social media plays a role in building awareness for softball?
15. What are kind of the different strategies behind each social media platform for the ESF?
16. What are the future plans for social media and European Softball federation?
17. And why do you think it's so important for softball to be a bigger sport in Europe, from your personal experience in softball?
18. Do you think doing that by having a strong community and supporters will ultimately help softball in Europe?

Interview #2

1. Can you give an overview of how you got into the softball community in Europe?
2. Do you have any affiliation with the ESF? Or are you just a coach, what is your relationship with the organization?
3. Since you are talking about organizing the coaches’ association and bringing everyone on board, how important do you think it is for the sport to have all of the coaches connected and united together?
4. How have you seen softball progress throughout your time as being a coach and being a part of softball in Europe?
5. What do you think the general perception is of softball in Europe is? Do you think this contributes to its why the sport is so marginalized?
6. Do you think it has anything to do with the fact that softball is a predominantly women’s sport that why it is so marginalized in Europe?
7. How would you describe the people that are involved in the softball community?
8. Why do you think softball is so important to you personally?
9. So ideally, what does the future of softball in Europe look like?
10. Do you think that because softball was bought back into the Olympics, do you think it has given people in Europe more motivation to take part in the sport?

Interview #3

1. Can you kind of give an overview of how you got into softball in Europe?
2. What is your role now at the European Softball Federation?
3. From your international playing experience and meeting so many different people, how would you describe the people that are involved in European softball?
4. What does the ESF do?
5. How do you think softball has grown when compared to the rest of the world?
6. Do you think there is a community for softball in Europe?
7. How do you know this? What makes you think that this community exists?
8. And how does the ESF try to use those tools to communicate about softball?
9. Who are the main people that the ESF tries to communicate to or keep connected?
10. What are ESFs goals for softball in the future?
11. Why do you think softball is such a small sport in Europe?
12. Why do you think that softball is important to develop in Europe?
13. How has softball been important in your life?
14. What have you learned the most from softball and being a part of the federation?

Interview #4

1. Can you give an overview of how you got into the softball world in Europe? Within both the sport and the organization.
2. Can you describe what the ESF exactly does?
3. What is your role at the ESF? Can you describe what you do and how you contribute to the organization?
4. So, since you’re involved in the development and increasing the opportunities for softball to played, how have you seen the sport change over time in Europe?
5. You have talked a lot about keeping people together. Why do you think this is important for growing the sport in Europe?
6. Why do you think softball is such a small sport in Europe?
7. How does the European Softball federation try to communicate about softball and build awareness for the sport to Europe?
8. Do you have any insight into the strategy behind the communications? Like, what the sport could be represented as?
9. Do you believe there is a community for softball in Europe? A community as in a connection of people working together united by this interest of softball.
10. Why is softball so important to you? Why are you so involved in the sport?
11. Why do you think softball is important to develop in Europe? Why do you think it should be a bigger sport?
12. Do you think that softball being back in the Olympics has anything to do with the growth of it?

13. What are the ESF’s goals for softball in Europe for the future.