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A network perspective on cause-related marketing collaborations in professional sport

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ABSTRACT
Although professional sport teams increasingly engage in cause-related marketing (CRM), implementation often remains ad-hoc and superficial. CRM managers fall short of establishing the needed inter-organizational collaborations to attain mutually beneficial outcomes for the organization and society at large. Little is known about the structures and underlying mechanisms behind these CRM collaborations. Network theory and the associated social network analysis was utilized to unravel and compare network structures and governance of two Belgian professional soccer teams with different CRM strategies (i.e., altruistic and integrative). Findings showed a smaller, more fragmented, and centralized network in the altruistic compared to the integrative CRM type. The community department dominated the flow in the altruistic network (i.e., lead organization-governed), while coordination was shared amongst stakeholders in the integrative network (i.e., shared participant-governed). Findings also indicated that both networks could be optimized to better resonate with the CRM strategy envisioned. This study goes beyond a dyadic view on partnerships and contributes to the CRM literature by revealing stakeholder structures surrounding the focal organization. Practically, it helps managers to develop, manage, and sustain partnerships that are supportive of their respective CRM strategies, resulting in more effective CRM approaches and lasting economic and societal impact.

1. Introduction
Over the past two decades, cause-related marketing (CRM) has been recognized as a means for sport organizations to leverage their social engagement in a way that improves the team’s image, reputation, and profitability (Irwin et al., 2010; Lee & Ferreira, 2013; Schyvinck & Willem, 2018). CRM in sport is defined as “strategic sport marketing aimed at creating a mutually beneficial link between a sport organization and a social cause through the use of sport events and programs” (Lachowetz & Gladden, 2002, p. 319). In order to create shared value, sport organizations must balance the economic and social goals behind their CRM engagement (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Sport teams rely on collaborations with fans, corporate sponsors, local authorities and league governing bodies to attain this dual outcome (Wallace, 2004). Specifically, partnerships can provide the necessary resources, knowledge, and access to successfully
implement CRM strategies (Hills, Walker, & Barry, 2019; Jones et al., 2017, 2018). However, many sport organizations struggle with managing (contrasting) stakeholder demands and the partnerships often remain provisional, trivial or unilateral (Babiak, 2007; Schyvinck & Willem, 2019).

Research on how partnerships should be developed and governed to assist CRM strategy implementation remains scant (Lantos, 2001; Walzel et al., 2018). The bulk of CRM literature has focused on the characteristics of individual stakeholders and on dyadic (i.e., sport organization-fan) relationships in spite of broader collaborative structures (Liston-Heyes & Liu, 2013; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Schyvinck & Willem, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019). Liu (2013) categorized CRM into four types (i.e., altruistic, commercial, social, integrative) based on how organizations weigh instrumental versus relational motives. The way these motives (i.e., logics) are balanced and materialized (e.g., involving stakeholders, sharing resources, coordination and power), however, remains unclear. To expand on these works, the present study utilizes network theory and social network analysis (SNA) (see Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Hanneman & Riddle, 2005) to analyse collaborations and to study how network structures facilitate or hinder CRM strategy implementation.

Given the number and salience of stakeholders involved in professional sport, Belgian professional soccer (i.e., global football) was chosen as a context for this study (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008; Fifka & Jaeger, 2020). We selected a soccer team with an altruistic CRM strategy (i.e., low instrumental and relational dominant logic) and one with an integrative CRM strategy (i.e., high instrumental and relational dominant logic) (Liu, 2013) to address the following research question: “How are networks structured and governed in an altruistic compared to an integrative CRM approach, and what are the consequences of these network structures on CRM strategy implementation?” As such, a network perspective was applied to enhance our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of CRM strategy implementation in professional sport.

This research contributes to the growing understanding of CRM, by further refining its theoretical foundations (i.e., shared value creation and stakeholder management). We demonstrate the usefulness of a network perspective in understanding stakeholder collaborations in CRM. By delineating the (differences in) network characteristics (i.e., roles, centralization, cohesion, centrality), the types of ties (i.e., the flow of information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources) and the related opportunities and challenges within each network, CRM (in sport) managers are better equipped to form and manage collaborations that fit their CRM strategy and, consequently, increase the value, legitimacy and sustainability of their CRM engagement (Giulianotti, 2015; Hahn et al., 2015; Provan et al., 2005).

2. Literature review

2.1 Cause-related marketing in sport

Increasingly, professional sport organizations are expected to behave ethically and socially responsible. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) research and practice have demonstrated an increased focus on environmental welfare, employee management, and community engagement, as well as on the reporting thereof, over the last two
decades (Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Kihl et al., 2014). CRM is a less voluntary, more focused and market-oriented form of CSR in which both organizational and societal outcomes are expected from a mutually beneficial partnership between an organization and a good cause or social partner (Galan-Ladero et al., 2013; Schyvinck & Willem, 2018; Yuksel et al., 2016).

CRM initiatives deployed by professional sport teams can demonstrate their goodwill towards a society which, in turn, can deliver favourable attitudes towards the team (Irwin et al., 2010; Roy & Graeff, 2003). CRM efforts can enhance the team’s reputation (Adcroft et al., 2009) fan loyalty (Lachowetz & Gladden, 2002), word-of-mouth (Roy, 2011), and merchandise purchasing behaviour (Walker & Kent, 2009), as well as societal development (Hills et al., 2019). However, despite increased CRM attempts, professional sport teams only rarely succeed in achieving simultaneous organizational and societal outcomes (Kihl et al., 2014; Roy & Graeff, 2003). A lack of supportive stakeholder collaborations is one of the drivers for misalignment between strategy and implementation and, hence, for restraining “win–win” outcomes (Schyvinck & Willem, 2019).

While the need for taking a broad stakeholder perspective in the CRM literature is known, most existing studies focus on uni-directional relationships between an organization and one stakeholder group (Thomas et al., 2019; Vaaland et al., 2008). Similarly, Walzel et al. (2018) stated that the mechanisms sport organizations can use to manage (competing) stakeholder demands (e.g., winning, generating revenue and social impact) remain to be delineated. There are some unique aspects about the sport that advocate a broad stakeholder perspective to CRM.

First, the multi-sectoral character of both CRM and sport implies the need for inter-organizational collaborations. In a CRM in a sport context, the connection between a sport team and a non-profit organization is a prerequisite (Marconi, 2002). Yet, their value for one another exceeds this basic reciprocity. Both the sport team and the non-profit organization want/need their partnership to be of value to fans, as well as to sponsors, the media, the league, and the local community. Hence, other stakeholders also play an important role in CRM effectiveness. Second, Babiak (2007) and Giulianotti (2015) found that institutional pressures and changes in sport systems demand the formation of inter-organizational collaborations. Ecosystem collaborations across sectors are needed to handle broader societal challenges, such as the ecological footprint of sport, diversity and inclusion. Long term shared success will require actors to not only form new alliances, but also to work together differently (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020).

Third, challenges related to capacity amplify the development of inter-organizational collaborations (Yuksel et al., 2016). Relationships among organizations delivering CRM in sport can provide access to a broad range of tangible assets such as, logistics, equipment, funding and technology. Moreover, intangible resources like knowledge, skills and expertise can be shared and/or developed through collaborations (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; Svensson & Wood, 2011; Zeimers et al., 2019).

Finally, employee engagement in CRM can create a happy workforce and enhanced commitment and loyalty (Liu & Ko, 2011). Aligning CRM goals to the purpose and values of the organization requires leadership, top-management involvement and collaborations between departments. Therefore, internal collaboration is needed to demonstrate real value.
2.2 Cause-related marketing strategies

Sport organizations tend to engage in CRM based on two dominant logics: they are either more self-oriented and engage instrumentally; or they are more other-oriented and engage relationally (Liu, 2013). A sport team stimulating sales through the promotion of the brand-cause link, is an example of a more instrumental CRM approach. Conversely, a team taking a relational approach to CRM focusses on issues that affect their relationship with other societal groups and organizations (e.g., school visits, clinics, educational programs, renovations). Although the relational and instrumental dominant logics represent different views on CRM engagement and imply different stakeholder relationships, they are not mutually exclusive. Based on the possible combinations of the extreme values (high vs. low), four CRM strategies are defined: an altruistic, social, commercial and integrative CRM strategy (Liu, 2013).

The type of stakeholders involved, the way they collaborate, and the resources they exchange, is likely to be related to the type of CRM strategy a sport organization adopts. For example, a team with a commercial CRM strategy is expected to show stronger connections between the commercial and the community department, and to have more commercial partners and flows of financial resources in its network compared to teams with a social CRM strategy (Liu, 2013). Jones et al. (2017) noted that stakeholder relationships in sport are often context-specific, indicating the ongoing need to unravel collaborations in different settings. Austin (2000a) described three collaboration forms to conceptualize value creation. In the altruistic form, relationships are philanthropic, of peripheral importance to the firm’s mission, characterized by few and infrequent interactions, and by a small amount of resources invested. In the transactional form, relationships indicate higher levels of reciprocity, investment of resources, interaction and scope. A collaboration with an integrative form is of strategic value to the partners, contains a clear connection to the mission, high investment of resources and a broad scope of activities (Austin, 2000a). Organizations with integrative collaboration forms not only influence stakeholders but also seek to be influenced by stakeholders. These types of collaborations suggest that organizations are highly engaged to explore mutually beneficial action. It seems obvious that having an altruistic CRM strategy results in collaborations that Austin (2000a) defined as altruistic, and that having an integrative CRM strategy leads to integrative collaborations. However, little empirical guidance was found in the literature as to how CRM strategy, collaboration and implementation are structurally related.

2.3 A network perspective

CRM collaborations are mostly based on trust and mutually beneficial purposes, rather than on formal transactions. These voluntary relationships benefit from flexible and informal, rather than vertical and hierarchical organization structures (Wäschle & Woll, 2013). The former are often referred to as networks. Networks have been defined as a “group of three or more legally autonomous organizations that work together to achieve not only their own goals but also a collective goal” (Provan & Kenis, 2008, p. 231). As such, a network perspective is well suited to study CRM collaborations, that go beyond the scope of a single sector/organization type.
Network theory focuses on the relationships between actors and not on the actors themselves (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Actors are viewed as embedded in relationships, which presents opportunities or constraints based on their position in the network (Emirbayer, 1997). CRM departments in sport organizations, for example, will not only be informed about the outcome of their direct relationships, but also about their indirect ties and the opportunities or challenges that certain stakeholders provide based on their position and role in the network (cf. Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Borgatti et al., 2009).

Borgatti and Halgin (2011) conceptualized the network paradigm into (a) the theory of networks and (b) network theory proper. The theory of networks refers to the exploration of the antecedents (i.e., specific properties and processes) that characterize the network as a whole. Conversely, Borgatti and Halgin (2011) defined network theory proper as “the mechanisms and processes that interact with network structures to yield certain outcomes for individuals and groups” (p. 1168). For this study, network theory proper was more useful as it emphasizes the structural components and connectivity within the networks and their consequence on CRM strategy implementation. This structuralist approach to collaborations and networks is common in organizational scholarship (Borgatti & Foster, 2003), however rarely applied to the field of CRM (Babiak & Kihl, 2018; Babiak et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2019; Walzel et al., 2018).

Network theory can improve understanding of CRM by depicting the types of stakeholders, how they collaborate, and what resources they share. Moreover, network theory implies a contextual approach, which makes it well suited to depict if and how different partnerships and linkages are pursued to answer different organizational and stakeholder needs (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). In other words, network theory allows to explore whether and how collaborative structures are supportive of the CRM strategy envisioned, hence improve CRM implementation.

2.4 Social network analysis

Many sport management scholars have used network theory and SNA to study stakeholder’s positions and roles (e.g., presence, coordination, influence, power) in networks (e.g., Dobbels et al., 2018; Hambrick et al., 2019; MacLean et al., 2011; Naraine & Parent, 2016; Parent, 2016; Parent et al., 2017, 2018). Some of this work explored the flow of information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources in networks (Dobbels et al., 2018; Hambrick et al., 2019). Analysing those “subnetworks” (see Provan & Huang, 2012) is important because outcomes of one type of link (e.g., sharing information resources) can be different from other types (e.g., physical and human resources or financial resources). Accordingly, analysing subnetworks can increase understanding of how sport organizations manage the balance between instrumental, relational and societal expected outcomes behind CRM engagement.

The most dominant concepts used to analyse networks at the whole network level are centralization and cohesion, whereas centrality is commonly used to characterize networks at the node level. Average degree (i.e., the average number of ties for each node) is one measure to report on the cohesion of the network (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). Average degree is well suited to compare networks (Borgatti et al., 2018) and is therefore an interesting measure to analyse contrasting CRM approaches. A network’s core-periphery structure is another indicator of cohesion. It specifies a subset of nodes (i.e.,
core) that is well connected to both central and peripheral actors, and a periphery that contains nodes that have connections to some central actors, but few to other peripheral actors (Prell, 2012). Finally, centralization indicates the extent to which coordination is owned by one or a few actors or shared between multiple or all actors in the CRM network (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005).

At the node-level, centrality refers to the number of direct ties an organization has and is thus a measure of how central, active, and influential an actor is within the CRM network (Wäsche et al., 2017). If the CRM department, for example, has ties to many different actors that can supply money, they have alternative ways to satisfy the need for financial resources, and hence are less dependent on individual actors like the commercial department, sponsors or the government to supply money.

To develop meaningful solutions that can help sport organizations to enhance their CRM strategy implementation, collaborations should be delineated in different types of networks (Jones et al., 2017, 2018). This study addressed this call, by comparing the structures and governance of collaborations in two distinct CRM types. More specifically, collaborative structures (i.e., the number and type of stakeholders involved, cohesion, centralization and centrality) and the types of exchanges (i.e., the flow of information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources) were compared in an altruistic versus integrative CRM in sport approach. Moreover, network characteristics facilitating (or hindering) CRM strategy implementation were assessed within each case.

3. Methodology

A comparative case study design (Yin, 2013) was applied gathering data from stakeholders of a sport team with an altruistic CRM strategy and of a sport team with an integrative CRM strategy. Purposive sampling (based on theoretical reasoning) was used to select the two cases and to conduct an in-depth investigation of their networks (Creswell, 2013). Below is a description of the case study settings, as well as the data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Case study settings

Belgian professional soccer was selected as a context for this study. Professional sport organizations increasingly need to balance organizational, economic, societal and stakeholder demands which puts pressure on CRM strategy implementation. Investigating how networks enable or hamper CRM strategy implementation, is of value to sport (Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008), as well as to general management (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Anagnostopoulos (2011) argued that stakeholder management is specifically relevant to professional soccer teams, because of the salience of certain stakeholders (e.g., fans, sponsors, media). There are few legal obligations in Belgium as to how professional soccer clubs should engage in CSR. Clubs autonomously make CRM plans, decide on which themes to focus, which programmes of the league to support, and with whom to collaborate. Hence, a variety of CRM approaches and partnerships exists amongst clubs in the professional league, which made Belgian soccer an interesting context to study CRM approaches and networks.
The cases were selected based on their contrasts, using theoretical dimensional sampling (Creswell, 2013). As the study’s aim was to describe and compare network structures and governance in different CRM types, teams were selected based on their CRM strategy. Accordingly, this study drew on CRM and stakeholder theory to select the cases. For reasons of conciseness, feasibility, and comparability, we decided to focus this study on the two most distinct types of the four CRM strategies defined by Liu (2013). From the 15 professional soccer teams in Belgium (in the highest division) that received a CSR label from the league in 2017, we purposefully selected those two cases that most clearly represented the altruistic and the integrative CRM type (Liu, 2013). An additional criterion was the tenure of the CRM engagement: the aim was to select teams with a program tenure of at least three years to assure comparability.

### 3.2 Data collection

In order to select the cases, we conducted semi-structured interviews with CRM managers of Belgian professional soccer teams. We drew from Liu (2013) and Schyvinck and Willem (2019) to explore a team’s CRM strategies and motivations. Based on their categorization, we questioned CRM managers about why they engage in CRM, what their strategic principles, goals, and expected outcomes are, and whom they wish to target with their CRM campaigns.

After six interviews, lasting between 35 and 45 minutes, we were able to identify two distinct cases; one with high instrumental and relational dominant logics (i.e., integrative CRM strategy) and one with low instrumental and relational dominant logics (i.e., altruistic CRM strategy).

Additionally, the CRM managers informed the researchers about the organizations they (i.e., the community department) collaborated with to realize CRM projects. The framework of Breitbarth and Harris (2008), mapping internal and external stakeholders of a (English) soccer club, was used to probe for additional organizations involved. Furthermore, the team’s websites and CRM plan documents were analysed and used to assist the interviews. As such, a “starter set of group members” (cf. Borgatti et al., 2018), could be drafted to continue the network analysis with.

Afterwards, data were collected from all the stakeholders involved in the CRM activities of the two selected cases. A modified version of Provan et al. (2005) survey was sent to all representatives of the organizations listed by the CRM managers of both teams and to the additional organizations that these representatives in turn provided. To cover the “fans” stakeholder group, for example, we sent the survey to the chair of the supporters’ club and federation. In other words, the individuals most responsible for and knowledgeable about CRM collaborations in their organization were solicited to complete the survey on behalf of their organization (Jones et al., 2018). Respondents were questioned about their (organization’s) collaborations with the other organizations on the list and could nominate up to five additional organizations they considered important in the CRM network. The issue of boundary specification is essential to network analysis, as it determines which organizations will be included in the study. Only three organizations in each case mentioned one additional member. The community department and other organizations that had already completed the survey were re-contacted to provide information on the potential additional collaboration. Furthermore, the organization was added to the survey
for those who had not yet responded. We repeated this snowballing technique until no new names came up.

The first part of the questionnaire included a grid in which all organizations, provided by the CRM managers, were listed. We sought information about network involvement by asking the respondents to indicate whether or not they had collaborated with the listed organizations in the past year. If the respondent confirmed the collaboration, further questions were asked on the type of exchange. More specifically, they had to indicate (through predetermined categories) whether they had given and/or received, information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources (Jones et al., 2017, 2018). Sharing information resources included email, telephone, or face-to-face correspondence, attending meetings, and providing knowledge. Exchanging physical and human resources was operationalized as sharing facilities, trainings, equipment, volunteers or staff (MacLean et al., 2011). Financial resources included all activities related to a monetary transaction (e.g., fundraising, donating, grant writing) between organizations in the network. These descriptions were added as captions to the survey. Through the aforementioned measures, cognitive bias was limited and accuracy of the data collection safeguarded.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The survey response rate for the study was 80%, as 46 out of 57 organizations completed the questionnaire. Response rates for the specific cases were also high: 15 out of 18 organizations responded in the altruistic case and 31 out of 39 in the integrative case. As per the suggestion of Borgatti et al. (2018), we handled the missing data (reciprocated the links) with the assumption that if the respondents had been able to answer, they would have listed all the organizations that mentioned to have received resources from them.

For the SNA, the stakeholder framework of Breitbarth and Harris (2008) was used to aggregate single organizations (for example, “sponsor 1, 2, 3”) into stakeholder groups (“sponsors”, for example; see Table 1). Selecting stakeholder groups as the level of analysis allowed for a more comprehensible and comparable network analysis, and aligned with previous research (e.g., Naraine et al., 2016); individual organizations were not mapped as that would provide micro-level, contextual insights, beyond the purpose of this study. The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>Integrative CRM strategy</th>
<th>Altruistic CRM strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community department</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial department</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Players</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>League</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsors</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health organizations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other public organizations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good causes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social partners</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International platform organizations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of participants</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
recorded ties between actors (i.e., stakeholder groups) were imported into UCINET 6, an SNA software programme (Borgatti et al., 2018), and visualized using NetDraw.

The comparative case study design allowed us to look at the network data within and between two CRM types. At the whole network level, average degree and centralization were used to explore, respectively, cohesion and coordination. At the subgroups level, core-periphery analyses were executed to segment the network into a core and a periphery. At the node level, centrality was measured to assess “popularity” of a node (i.e., stakeholder group) in the network (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). Degree centrality assesses the total number of ties that a particular node has, as well as the number of ties it sends (out-degree centrality) and receives (in-degree centrality). Betweenness centrality refers to the centrality of an actor by assessing how many times an actor is a link between a pair of other stakeholder groups in the network. In that sense, betweenness is often used to identify bridges (i.e., the intermediary link that overcomes a structural hole between two clusters) and brokers (the intermediary actor between two unlinked actors/clusters in the network) (Long et al., 2013). Last, since eigenvector centrality is less suited for directed networks, we used Bonacich beta centrality – a measure that accounts for the connections of a node’s connections – to explore the power of actors in the network (Borgatti et al., 2018). The different centrality measures chosen serve different purposes regarding the identification of key network members; degree depicts how influential a node is in the network; betweenness indicates the control a node has over the network, and beta specifies the power benefit of being linked to centralized actors. A node can, for example, have few direct connections (i.e., low degree), yet be connected to many others through those few direct connections (i.e., high beta), and therefore be a key actor in the network.

In addition to the differences in the constitution (i.e., cohesion, coordination, and powerful actors), we also assessed the types of exchanges (i.e., information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources subnetworks) in both cases. To understand if and how those different types of collaborations within a CRM type were associated, and thus, to gain insights in mechanisms to support implementation in line with strategy, a quadratic assignment procedure (QAP) correlation was used. QAP correlations provide information on whether statistically significant relations exist among different subnetworks (Borgatti et al., 2018).

4. Findings

Figures 1 and 2 provide the graphical representation of both teams’ CRM networks. Nodes are plotted using a graph theoretic layout that locates them based on their geodesic proximity and path length similarity (Borgatti et al., 2018).

4.1 Integrative CRM network

The network of the team with an integrative CRM strategy consisted of 39 organizations that were grouped into 13 nodes. These nodes allowed for the total amount of 84 ties (collaborations) in the network. The average degree score of 6.462 (see Table 2) suggests that, on average, actors (i.e., stakeholder groups) in the integrative network had more than six ties with other actors. Centralization in this network was rather low,
with a score of 44%. Poole (2008) indicated that “scores above 60 percent indicate a substantial amount of network activity concentrated in one or a few actors, and scores below 40 percent indicate a substantial amount of fragmentation in network activity” (p. 283). The moderate score indicates that coordination in this network was decentralized and shared amongst a group of actors. Concomitantly, outcomes of the core–periphery analysis showed that there were, in fact, four users in the core of the network, representing 30% of the total number of users present. Those core actors included the community department, the commercial department, sponsors, and the government. The measures at the whole network level seemed favourable to attain what the integrative CRM strategy refers to as relational and instrumental outcomes of CRM engagement.

The size of each node in the sociogram (as illustrated in Figure 1) is determined by its total number of ties. Degree centrality, an actor-level measure indicating the exposure of a node in the network, illustrated that the community department was in the most favoured position in the network having most ties to other stakeholder groups. However, other actors such as sponsors, governmental organizations and the commercial department of the team also played important roles in the network based on degree centrality. Sponsors appeared even more influential (higher out-degree centrality) than the community department.

Betweenness centrality showed that the league held the most important intermediate position (17.841) in the network and was able to control and coordinate network processes. The league acted as a governing body urging the commercial and community department to engage in the CRM projects of their wish in return for (financial) support. Moreover, without the league capitalizing on its brokerage position, international

Figure 1. Sociogram of the team adopting an integrative CRM strategy (nodes sized according to degree centrality).
network organizations would not have been connected to the network and a hole in the social structure (i.e., structural hole) would have appeared. This structural hole could be harmful for knowledge sharing and organizational learning as the mission of the international network organizations is to share information and best practices with the clubs. Positioning themselves in between stakeholder groups and spanning structural holes, thus made the league an important actor in this network.

The actors in the core of the network (i.e., community department, commercial department, sponsors, and government) also revealed the highest Bonacich beta centrality scores, hence yielded significant power through their network relationships. Sponsors, for example, had relatively high Bonacich beta centrality values (1.936), compared with others in the network indicating their power and strength within the integrative network. Sponsors and the commercial department are important to assure the instrumental outcomes, whereas the community department and local government organizations are salient in safeguarding legitimacy towards the community. In short, the core network structures at the node level were also supportive of the dual outcome aimed for in this CRM strategy type. Notwithstanding, fans, players, and staff stayed at the periphery of the network, with low centrality numbers. Those stakeholder groups had limited power to control the flow of information, resources and/or money in the network. Given the equal importance of consumers/fans and other stakeholders as targets for CRM activities in the integrative type, those results suggested a flaw in the network structure to support CRM strategy implementation.

Collaborations can represent one or more types of exchanges, meaning one partnership can consist of multiple ties. In the integrative CRM network, the total amount of ties consisted of 71 information resources ties (47%), 63 physical and human resources ties (42%), and 18 financial resources ties (12%). The measures of those three subnetworks are
presented in Table 3 and their accompanying sociograms are illustrated in Figure 3. Indeed, findings showed that most CRM collaborations occurred at the level of exchanging information resources, and to a lesser extent physical and human resources, whereas monetary transactions only fractionally occurred. Also, average degree was much lower in the financial resources network compared to the information resources and physical and human resources network. Some stakeholders were missing and some others, like fans, were only peripherally connected to the financial resources network. This suggests that financial resources for CRM initiatives were mostly generated from sources other than fans or supporters. Table 3 shows that both the community and the commercial department were equally prominent actors in the financial resources network (ID centrality of 0.150). In terms of out-degree centrality, findings showed that sponsors (OD centrality of 0.200) were most influential as they exchanged money with many others.

### 4.2 Altruistic CRM network

A smaller number of organizations (18) constituted the altruistic network. Those 18 organizations accounted for 10 stakeholder groups and 54 relationships (see Table 1). With an average degree of 5.400, the average amount of ties that each stakeholder group had was lower compared to the integrative CRM network, suggesting a less cohesive network. The centralization score (50%) indicates that relationships were more concentrated among one or a few central actors. A core–periphery analysis of this network showed three actors – the community department, the good causes and the government – constituted the core of the network. A closer look at the accompanying sociogram (Figure 2) illustrates the central position of the community department.

The node level measures performed on the altruistic CRM network (see Table 2) were indicative of strong ownership by the community department. This actor had degree centrality numbers (total, ID, and OD) that were close to double the size of the second most central actor suggesting the great connectivity of the community department to other nodes. In addition, the community department had a betweenness centrality score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Network measures per team.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Node level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree centrality(^{a,b})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsors (0.289, ID: 0.228, OD: 0.283)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government (0.233, ID: 0.189, OD: 0.211)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betweenness centrality(^{a,b})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>League (17.841)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsors (1.936)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government (1.834)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.295)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonacich beta centrality(^{a,b})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subgroups level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core-periphery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole network level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralization(^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of ties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \(^a\)Top three scores are presented. \(^b\)Normalized scores are presented. \(^c\)Scores range between 0 and 100.
of 21.481, meaning 21.5% of all possible geodesic (shortest) paths in the network passed through this node. This demonstrates that the community department had considerable influence on the transfer and exchange of information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources throughout the network. In terms of the Bonacich beta centrality in this network, the community department, the good causes, and the government had the highest scores, indicating their power in coordinating CRM efforts. The community department in this network type got support from both the local government and the league to engage in CRM, and did this mainly through donations to good causes. Structures at the node and whole network level in this type were in line with the CRM strategy envisioned. A typical altruistic CRM programme is initiated and managed by a community department that wants to do good for the community (i.e., make donations) without considering or planning the potential marketing benefits of those activities.

Similar to the integrative CRM network, the number of ties in the information resources and physical and human resources subnetworks were higher than the number of ties regarding the exchange of financial resources (see Table 3 and Figure 4). That is, the total amount of ties consisted of 47 information resources ties (51%), 38 physical and human resources ties (40%), and 8 financial resources ties (9%). Average degree (0.800) was much lower in the financial resources network compared to the information resources and physical and human resources network. All actors were involved in sharing information resources and physical and human resources, however, only 6 out of 10 were also engaged in sharing financial resources. Fans, players, staff, and public organizations were not involved in the financial resources network in this CRM type. The in- and out-degree centralization in this network was indicative of philanthropic contributions and donations as the money mainly flew from the league (highest OD centrality 0.222) to the community department (ID centrality 0.167), that in turn organized CRM projects that benefitted good causes (ID centrality 0.222). The central role of the community department was clearly visible in the measures of the two other subnetworks as well. Table 3 illustrates that the community department was indeed both prominent and influential (high ID and OD centrality) in exchanging information resources and physical and human resources through the network.

### 4.3 Cross-case comparison

A comparison between the two networks highlights similarities and important differences. Table 2 notes the findings at node-level (i.e., degree, betweenness and Bonacich beta centralities), subgroups-level (i.e., core–periphery), and whole network level (i.e., average degree, centralization, and size) of both teams. A higher number of stakeholders and ties was present in the integrative type compared to the altruistic network. Some stakeholder groups, like sponsors, public organizations, and international network organizations even did not participate in the network of the altruistic type. Both teams had moderate to highly cohesive networks. Yet, many possible linkages were not being realized, suggesting that actors were selective regarding the partners they considered salient for attaining their CRM objectives, especially the monetary ones.

A glance at Table 2 supports the picture from the network maps (see Figures 1 and Figures 2) in that the community departments were highly central in both CRM networks. Especially in the altruistic network, its centralized nature indicated the important role of the community department in the network. It seemed that most network-level activities
were coordinated through and by this actor. Conversely, in the integrative network, the community department was less dominant and stakeholders acted more collectively. Multiple stakeholders were central and able to control the flow of information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources.

Fans were absent in the core of both networks. Similarly, internal stakeholders such as, players and staff had low degree and Bonacich beta centralities in both networks. The community department and the government appeared in the core of both networks, and had decidedly high Bonacich beta centrality scores, indicating their power in either network. The extra stakeholder group in the core of the altruistic type was the good causes, whereas the commercial department and sponsors were central in the integrative type. These findings support the different views on the dominant logics – instrumental versus relational – as discussed earlier.

Because of the different rationales, logics, target groups, and strategic principles in the two CRM types, different associations between subnetworks (i.e., information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources) were expected. However, in both CRM networks, collaborations mostly occurred in the form of exchanging information resources. Table 3 indicates that only around 10% of the exchanges involved the transaction of money. Regarding the correlation between the different types of ties, the findings revealed similar associations in both cases ranging from 0.275 (correlation between

### Table 3. Network measures per subnetwork.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Information resources network</th>
<th>Physical and human resources network</th>
<th>Financial resources network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integrative CRM strategy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average degree</td>
<td>5.462</td>
<td>4.846</td>
<td>1.385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralization⁴</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of ties</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-degree centrality⁵</td>
<td>Community department (0.250)</td>
<td>Community department (0.321)</td>
<td>Community department (0.150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sponsors (0.222)</td>
<td>Sponsors (0.190)</td>
<td>Commercial department (0.150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-degree centrality⁵</td>
<td>Government (0.167)</td>
<td>Government (0.167)</td>
<td>Good causes (0.050)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community department (0.269)</td>
<td>Sponsors (0.250)</td>
<td>Sponsors (0.200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government (0.176)</td>
<td>Community department (0.226)</td>
<td>Government (0.083)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sponsors (0.167)</td>
<td>Government (0.167)</td>
<td>Commercial department (0.050)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Altruistic CRM strategy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average degree</td>
<td>4.700</td>
<td>3.800</td>
<td>0.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralization⁴</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of ties</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-degree centrality⁵</td>
<td>Community department (0.417)</td>
<td>Community department (0.417)</td>
<td>Good causes (0.222)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government (0.250)</td>
<td>Government (0.250)</td>
<td>Community department (0.167)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good causes (0.250)</td>
<td>Good causes (0.250)</td>
<td>Social organizations (0.111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-degree centrality⁵</td>
<td>Community department (0.417)</td>
<td>Community department (0.250)</td>
<td>League (0.222)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good causes (0.306)</td>
<td>Government (0.222)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government (0.250)</td>
<td>Good causes (0.167)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ⁴Scores range between 0 and 100. ⁵Top three scores are presented. ⁶Normalized scores are presented.
physical and human resources network and financial resources network) to 0.664 (correlation between physical and human resources network and information resources network) in the integrative type and between 0.286 (correlation between physical and human resources network and financial resources network) to 0.494 (correlation between physical and human resources network and information resources network) in the altruistic type (see Table 4). The $p$-values for the three correlations in both networks were statistically significant and positive at the .05 level. Those findings indicate that network members who formed relationships in one subnetwork possessed similar relationships in the other two subnetworks. Looking more closely at overlapping relations in the integrative type, we found that 13 out of the 84 collaborations (or 15%) involved sharing both information resources, physical and human resources, and financial resources. Similar outcomes (13% of the ties, or 7 out of 54) were noted for the altruistic network. More than 72% of the collaborations were multiplex (i.e., sharing at least two types of ties) in the integrative case compared to 64% in the altruistic case. More than 90% of the collaborations in both networks involved sharing information. Given the aim for simultaneous creation of increased revenue and organizational legitimacy in the integrative CRM type, larger correlations and multiplex relationships were expected in this type compared to the altruistic type.

Figure 3. Sociogram of the information, physical and human, and financial resources networks of the team adopting an integrative CRM strategy.
5. Discussion

This study used a network analytical approach (Provan & Kenis, 2008) to describe, explain, and compare relational configurations in an altruistic and integrative CRM approach (see Liu, 2013) and used these configurations to explain CRM strategy implementation. The results indicated that some structures and characteristics were supportive of the strategy envisioned, whereas others hampered successful implementation of the CRM strategy. Both enabling and impeding structures are depicted in the section below.

The integrative strategy, in which both instrumental and relational outcomes are aimed for, was reflected in the implementation of the case studied by a high number of stakeholder groups (and organizations) involved, many and strong ties, and a high cohesion in the network. The altruistic network, in which organizations are less proactive in reaping marketing benefits and more concerned with giving back to society, showed a lower number of actors involved, less ties, more fragmentation, and less activity in the network, compared to the integrative CRM type.

The type of actors that were influential in the network also corresponded to the dual outcome aimed for in the integrative type. Accordingly, the commercial department and the sponsors were important to assure financial outcomes, and the community department, as well as local government organizations, were salient in safeguarding legitimacy towards the community. The network of the team adopting an altruistic CRM approach was more centralized around the community department and the nodes in the core of the network reflected the more reactive and ad-hoc approach to CRM. Notably, the community department received resources from the government in return for engaging with the local community and charitable causes. These findings accord with Walters and Anagnostopoulos (2012), who stated that social engagement in altruistic attempts is treated as an isolated activity to comply with stakeholder demands rather than integrated into the core of the business operations. The lack of significant roles occupied by commercial partners in the altruistic type confirms that teams in this type do not have much instrumental goals behind their CRM engagement, which can be problematic for long-term sustainability (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Stakeholders in the integrative type were less reliant on relationships with the community department to bridge connections, as exchanges were also realized through other actors. The league, for example, was an important broker in the network as it enabled connections of the commercial department, sponsors and social organizations with players, for instance. Taking into account and integrating various target groups provides the needed resources, goodwill, and legitimacy to attain both instrumental and relational outcomes (Liu, 2013). On the other hand, this makes collaborations in the integrative CRM type more complex and multifaceted compared to the altruistic type (Austin, 2000a).

In terms of governance, the findings of this study indicated that the altruistic strategy showed a “lead organization-governed structure”, whereas the integrative strategy reflected a “shared participant-governed structure” (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Where the lead organization-governed structure can favour stability and efficiency, it can also constrain effectiveness and growth as the diffusion of resources throughout a broader network of CRM stakeholders remains limited (Jamali & Keshishian, 2009). Community departments are not self-contained and must ensure that complementary skills,
competencies and resources enter the network in order to effectively implement CRM and safeguard social and economic impact (Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; Porter & Kramer, 2006).

The “shared participant-governed structure” (Provan & Kenis, 2008), apparent in the integrative network, showed more trust-based, decentralized, and balanced relationships. On the other hand, participant-governed networks depend more on the involvement and commitment of a significant subset of organizations that put the community department in a more vulnerable position (Katz & Heere, 2015). For example, too much involvement of the commercial department might raise scepticism with stakeholders and thus face resistance (Du et al., 2010; Svensson & Wood, 2011). The focal organization has to deal with the pressure of attaining goal consensus and managing stakeholder heterogeneity, since all actors have personal agenda’s regarding CRM projects. One can imagine rivalry between the community and the commercial department, for example, regarding incoming funding from community activities.

As mentioned earlier, some network characteristics were not entirely supportive and hindered implementation of the intended CRM strategy. First, fans and spectators (i.e., consumers) played a less significant role compared to other stakeholders in the networks of both cases studied. This suggests that even teams adopting an integrative CRM strategy execute CRM more as a functional tool, focusing their efforts towards local stakeholders rather than to the broader audience of fans and supporters (Constandt et al., 2020; Roy & Graeff, 2003). The lack of external focus in the altruistic network was
remarkable given that organizations in this type would normally aim for positive PR, word-of-mouth and buzz around CRM programmes. For similar reasons, media is an actor that was expected to be part of this network. Yet, this stakeholder was not mentioned in either one of the networks studied. Poor external communication and fan engagement is a missed opportunity to garner favourable CRM outcomes. Especially since professional sport organizations enjoy huge emotional connection with and passion from their consumers (Walker & Kent, 2009).

Second, internal stakeholders, such as players and staff were equally located at the periphery of both networks. These findings relate to the work of Hahn et al. (2015) who mention that CRM is often “stuck in the boardroom”, handled top-down, and associated with lucrative transactions. A more bottom-up approach, involving players, staff, employees and other internal stakeholders in the network would not only bring in new ideas, resources, and knowledge in the network, it would also make CRM a shared responsibility.

Finally, the subnetworks of both cases showed more ties and greater connectivity in the information resources and physical and human resources networks than in the financial resources network. Given the “donation culture” within the altruistic type (Liu, 2013), a higher number of financial exchanges was expected. The desire to control decision-making, a narrow scope of activities, and the lack of engagement are potential explanations for low development of the money network compared to other subnetworks in this type (Austin, 2000a; Babiak, 2007; Kihl et al., 2014). In the integrative type, the poorly developed financial network indicates the difficulty of managing relational and instrumental goals as equally important and thus, to implement CRM according to the intended strategy. Hahn et al. (2015) and Giulianotti (2015) mentioned similar tension between self- and other-oriented needs regarding social engagement. However, the results of the QAP correlations indicate that information ties could be considered a starting point for sharing other resources, as scholars found evidence that an increase in one type of connection could enable an increase in other types as well (Hambrick et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017, 2018). Given the positive correlations between the three types of collaborations and the fact that most actors have an information tie in addition to other ties, both teams could enhance their network structure by further building on the information relationship. They can create synergistic value recognizing that “social, relational, and

### Table 4. Quadratic assignment procedure correlation matrix of collaborations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integrative CRM strategy</th>
<th>Information resources network</th>
<th>Physical and human resources network</th>
<th>Financial resources network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information resources network</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and human resources network</td>
<td>0.664*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial resources network</td>
<td>0.355*</td>
<td>0.275*</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic CRM strategy</td>
<td>Information resources network</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and human resources network</td>
<td>0.494*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial resources network</td>
<td>0.393*</td>
<td>0.286*</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Measures represent Pearson correlation coefficients. *p < .05
economic goals are not conflicting but integrally connected” (Austin, 2000a, p. 739). Extending the type of ties can strengthen the relationship between actors because if one type of association is lost, collaboration between actors may continue through other types of ties (Jones et al., 2017, 2018; Ziakas & Costa, 2010).

Irrespective of whether relational and instrumental expected outcomes are high or low, effective implementation of any CRM strategy requires a network that enables a mutually beneficial outcome for the organization and society (Marconi, 2002). In both cases studied, there were some stakeholders and ties missing to fully support the CRM strategy envisioned. In that regard, both teams might consider installing a Network Administrative Organization (NAO) that acts as a third-party mediator. Consistent with previous research (Adcroft et al., 2009; Walters & Tacon, 2010), the findings of Kolyperas et al. (2015) showed that soccer teams with separate foundations are more engaged, have better access to resources, closer relationships with players, and a broader scope of activities and partners with whom they interact, compared to teams that have community departments as their CRM delivery agents. A separate foundation, recognized by its larger degree of autonomy and responsibility for its strategic and financial directions, may be well suited to attract actors (and thus, resources, knowledge, skills), mediate relationships and optimize coordination (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2017). Engaging fans, supporters, players and funders may become easier, as community departments often experience a tension between improving CRM effectiveness and making a sincere effort to improve society. Attracting new stakeholders or amplifying existing stakeholder relationships may challenge existing priorities and mindsets and inspire professional sport teams to improve their CRM engagement. If in close collaboration with the management of the team, a foundation may be used as a mechanism for enhancing legitimacy and reducing the complexity and scepticism of shared governance (Adcroft et al., 2009).

5.1 Theoretical implications

This research extends the investigation of CRM beyond the consumer response perspective that has dominated the area of research (Irvin et al., 2010; Roy & Graeff, 2003; Thomas et al., 2019). While effects of CRM engagement on consumers/fans deserve attention, this study took a broad stakeholder perspective on CRM strategy implementation and thereby addressed the call to move beyond dyadic relationships when studying CRM and marketing in general (Babiak & Kihl, 2018; Katz et al., 2020, 2018; Lachowetz & Gladden, 2002). Quatman and Chelladurai (2008) argued that in using a dyadic approach, researchers still “disregard the structural form, making an implicit bet that they can adequately analyze ties in structural isolation, without reference to the nature of other ties or how they fit together” (p. 341). Moreover, stakeholder collaborations are needed to successfully implement any CRM strategy and are therefore a vital consideration in studying CRM management (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008; Liu, 2013; Schyvinck & Willem, 2018, 2019).

A network lens provided this much needed, broad, and structural view on CRM management. The SNA applied in this study allowed for a quantitative description of relational properties such as centrality, brokerage, coordination, and power behind CRM management. We thereby answered to the call of sport management scholars to better understand the policies, processes, and structures behind social engagement (Hills et al.,
2019; Jones et al., 2017, 2018; Kihl et al., 2014; Walzel et al., 2018). Furthermore, the network perspective provided a more systematic understanding of how stakeholder relationships (should) relate to CRM strategy and therefore contributes to the further conceptual development of sustainable CRM management in sport and beyond.

The comparative case study design allowed for an in-depth understanding of the structures and governance of collaborations in their specific context and deemed suited for theory building (Creswell, 2013). Assessing and comparing the consequences of network variables on CRM management in two distinct cases improved understanding of shared value creation. While similar stakeholder groups were involved in both networks, the findings of this study showed that we cannot assume that network governance in an altruistic and integrative CRM approach is anything alike. The fact that stakeholders in the core of both networks differ greatly highlights the need to step away from a one-size-fits-all approach to CRM management.

5.2 Managerial implications

Managers in professional sport organizations face pressures for greater legitimacy and sustainability regarding CRM management. Jones et al. (2017) stated that organizations are no longer evaluated simply on their output, but equally on how they manage relations with stakeholders and establish legitimacy within the community. Yet, knowledge on how value should be created and how collaborations can/should support the CRM strategy envisioned remains scant (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; Frow & Payne, 2011; Thomas et al., 2019). This study has shed light on the mechanisms of collaboration in an altruistic and an integrative CRM in sport approach. Its findings provide sport managers with more information on the number and type of stakeholders involved (and missing), the number and types of ties/interactions between stakeholder groups, and on the strength of relationships in distinct CRM approaches. In knowing which stakeholders are more powerful, central, and peripheral in both networks, managers are better able to target relationships that are supportive of the CRM strategy envisioned. Drawing on their enhanced network knowledge, sport managers adopting an integrative CRM approach, for example, can reach out to organizations with complementary resources (like sponsors), mitigate scepticism through partnering with compatible actors (like the local government), and decrease power issues through balanced (instrumental and relational) collaborations or the installation of a NAO. In short, knowledge about network structures and characteristics may serve as a starting point for more effective CRM implementation (i.e., in line with strategy) and consequently, improved economic and societal impact (Bhattacharya et al., 2009).

5.3 Limitations and future research

Despite the insights provided by the comparative case study design adopted in this study, a number of (de)limitations are present. A first and obvious delimitation is the selection of two cases. Therefore, transferability and generalizability of the findings cannot be assumed. Moreover, this study was not designed to evaluate CRM performance, to explain causality, or frame one type of CRM approach as superior to another. The goal of the comparison was rather to generate an in-depth understanding of how collaboration
patterns and configurations occur within and between different CRM approaches. The association between the structures/governance of different CRM networks and their outcome is an intriguing topic, which could be usefully explored in the future research. Larger scale, traditional comparative studies (Goodrick, 2019) could be carried out, examining many networks across all four CRM types defined by Liu (2013).

Second, although we take CRM strategy as a starting point for this study, we do realize that CRM implementation, with the formation of inter-organizational collaborations, is a dynamic, multifaceted, and non-linear process. Future research might focus on the cause–effect relationship between strategy development and implementation (i.e., type of projects, programmes, relationships) more accurately. In this case, adopting an organization instead of a stakeholder group level of analysis might provide additional insights on CRM collaborations.

Third, boundary specification is a common issue in SNA, and thus also in this study. We gathered additional data until no new names were mentioned, however, the chance of missing organizations remains. Eleven out of 57 organizations in the network could not be reached. Efforts were made to obtain data as completely as possible, yet, analysis is based on incomplete network data. However, Jones et al. (2017) indicated that with a response rate of 75% or more, the impact of missing data is limited. Missing data was handled by reciprocating the links. This is a robust method for analysing undirected networks. However, caution is needed when interpreting the centralities of the directed subnetworks (i.e., flows of information, human and physical, and financial resources). Specifically, out-degree centrality measures for missing data are assumed by the researcher by reciprocating the links, rather than confirmed by an actual response.

Finally, a viewpoint from non-collaborating organizations or stakeholder groups (sponsors in the altruistic case, for example) might provide insights into why some organizations are reluctant to join the network. Similarly, future research could focus on the role of foundations as “broker” organizations in CRM in soccer networks. Whilst evident in the United Kingdom, the presence of foundations as separate entities managing CRM is not common in many other European countries.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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