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'Golden Spike': Examining Atlanta United FC Communications During the Launch of the Team

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'Golden Spike': Examining Atlanta United FC Communications During the Launch of the Team

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a concentration in Strategic Communication Management
Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to David Grover, my husband and my best friend without whose infinite support this study would never be possible.

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Abstract

Atlanta United FC is a unique example of a U.S. soccer club that had set a record in the number of season tickets sold even before the team played its first game in Major League Soccer (MLS). This research constitutes a thematic analysis of the press releases created by Atlanta United during the period between the launch of the club in April 2014 through its first official game in MLS in March 2017, examining what communication strategies Atlanta United adopted as well as what brand attributes the team communicated to its audience, and how the organization did that.

The study reveals that during the launching period, the team utilized all but one of the communication strategies listed in the Hazleton's (1992) taxonomy of public relations strategies, with the informative and facilitative strategies being the most used ones. The persuasive strategy was often employed, but Atlanta United mostly did it without using directive messages and calls-to-action; the organization utilized emotionally charged vocabulary instead. Atlanta United often combined elements of two or more strategies in one press release making use of the vocabulary, the structure of the messages, and the exploitation of the quotes.

The results of the study show that though the team was new and had not started competing, it found a way to communicate all the brand attributes, including the product-related ones, as well as the team's history and traditions. The most often communicated brand attribute was the club's connection with its fans. The results also revealed cross-cutting themes that were communicated

by the team within most of its messages. Those themes are the team's connection with its community, fame/popularity of the team, and the team's connection with global soccer. The study is building upon the Hazleton's (1992) taxonomy of public relations strategies and Gladden and Funk's (2002) Team Association Model. It can also be beneficial for public relations practitioners because it explores an example of successful communications in the circumstances of launching a new brand in the areas where the publics have a low interest in the sports it represents.

Introduction

Atlanta United FC is a soccer club from Atlanta, Georgia. It was founded in 2014 and joined play in 2017 in Major League Soccer (MLS), the top soccer league in America. During its first season, Atlanta United set a record for the average home attendance – 48,200 people (Panizo, 2017). This number was record-breaking not only for MLS but for such leagues as NBA, NHL, and MLB (Lamle, 2017). The team's average attendance in the 2018 season grew to 53,002 people. Atlanta United also holds a record for a regular-season game attendance: on August 3, 2019, 72,548 people came to the stadium to see its game against LA Galaxy (Sigal, 2019).

Literature shows different reasons people become fans of a particular sports team (e.g., Funk et al., 2009; Hornsey, 2003; Trail et al., 2003; Uhlman & Trail, 2012). The team's on-field success and people's commitment to a specific sport are among them. In the case of Atlanta United, though, one cannot say that either team's on-field results or the popularity of soccer helped the team create such a big fan base. The on-field success possibly influenced people's attitude towards Atlanta United lately (the team won the 2018 MLS Cup, 2019 Campeones Cup, 2019 U.S. Open Cup). However, it could not affect the organization's reputation before the team started playing. Nevertheless, in Fall 2016, when the team was only building its roster and had just hired a head coach, 22,000 season tickets for the next season were already sold.

Also, soccer is not the most popular sport in the U.S. According to Gallup Media, only 7% of Americans named soccer as their favorite sport to watch on TV (Norman, 2018). Neither does Atlanta United represent a region where sports are prevalent. As Parker (2012, para. 12)

noted, "It's Atlanta, known as Hotlanta. It's not for their passion when it comes to sports, just the weather. Oh yes, it gets hot down there." Even hockey could not become "a thing" in Atlanta: two NHL franchises – Atlanta Flames (1972 – 1980) and Atlanta Thrashers (1999 – 2011) were moved to Canada and became Calgary Flames and Winnipeg Jets, respectively.

Darren Eales, the President of Atlanta United FC, said in the interview two years after the team played its first game (Madeley, 2019) that one of the main things the club was concerned about during the launching period was communication with local people and familiarizing them with the new brand. He said he was spending days at sports bars across the city talking to the fans. "The book we write should be called *Pub Crawl Our Way to Success*," Eales said (Madeley, 2019, chapter 3, para.13).

Previous studies show that the way an organization communicates with its publics can influence people's attitudes towards it (e.g., Grunig, 1978). One can say that Atlanta United FC is an effective brand, according to its popularity. The purpose of this thesis is to explore what the organization did from the communication perspective to create this effective brand before the team played its first game. The study adopts Hazleton's (1992) taxonomy of public relation strategies to study what strategies Atlanta United used during the launch of the team. Along with it, it uses Gladden and Funk's (2002) Team Association Model in order to see what brand attributes Atlanta United communicated to its publics during the launching period.

The research may be beneficial for both academy and public relations practitioners. The study develops Hazleton's (1992) taxonomy of public relations strategies in the sports industry by finding what communication strategies one of the most popular sports teams in the country used when it was not well-known. It also provides more detailed descriptions and examples within the sports industry for the communication strategies described in the taxonomy. The

research adds on Gladden and Funk's (2002) Team Association Model by studying the model from the organization's perspective and providing qualitative data on what brand attributes sports organizations communicate and how they can do it. The thesis also offers three new themes emerged from the Atlanta United's data that can be considered as an add-on to the model. For public relations practitioners, the current research may be used as a case study of a successful communication process during a sports team launch.

Literature Review

Strategic Communication Messaging

Analysis of communication strategies is often used when studying crisis communications (Fearn-Banks, 2009). However, there are examples of analyzing communication strategies during non-crisis periods. Hazleton's taxonomy of public relations strategies (1992) was created to form a system helping organizations develop effective messages for their publics. It was also meant to be used by both scholars and public relations practitioners for analyzing those messages. The model focuses on the content of messages instead of organization's structure or characteristics of publics.

Hazleton and Long (1988) described public relations as a process of communication with the publics through messages in order to reach specific goals. They defined six main functions for communication messages: to inform, to facilitate, to persuade, to coerce, to bargain, and to solve problems. The first four functions have been adopted from social change literature, in particular, from Zaltman and Duncan's research (1977), the last two were built on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) ideas about the purpose of communications. Based on these six functions, Hazleton (1992) suggested six matching strategies that organizations use when they communicate with their publics. Later, studies on different communication channels (such as press releases, social media, etc.) were done to see the distinguishing features typical for messages of every strategy and add to their definition (Abitbol, 2017; Werder, 2005). According to those studies, communication strategies can be described as following.

Informative Strategy. One can tell that an informative strategy is used by an organization when its messages are facts. Those messages do not include any assessments. The authors of the messages do not draw conclusions. According to Werder (2005), messages that are used when the organization's strategy may be defined as informative "are characterized by the use of neutral language and organic, or natural, patterns of organization to create greater ease of comprehension" (p. 4). Zaltman and Duncan (1977) argued that informative strategies could be used to help the audience recognize the problem or to create a base for future discussions.

Facilitative strategy. A strategy can be defined as facilitative if an organization in its communication messages does not persuade its publics to act in a certain way but provides resources to help them behave based on predisposed beliefs (Werder, 2005). For example, it can provide directions for accomplishing a specific task or any other assistance. According to Zaltman and Duncan (1977), facilitative strategies are useful when the public recognizes a problem, agrees that it needs to be solved, and is ready to help but needs extra motivation or support.

Persuasive strategy. Persuasive strategies are often used when an organization needs to ask the publics to do something or attract their attention to some cause or issues crucial for the organization (Abitbol, 2017). Distinctive features of persuasive messages are: the messages are directive, and they often appeal to the public's values, emotions, or goals. According to Zaltman and Duncan (1977), persuasive strategies are indicated when the publics do not recognize a problem, product, or cause or do not see them as important ones.

Power strategy (former "coercive strategy"). It can be said that an organization uses a power strategy when, in its messages to the publics, it actively demonstrates that people would

benefit from the recommended behavior or would lose benefits from the behavior that is not recommended (Hazleton, 1992).

Cooperative problem-solving strategy. One can talk about a cooperative problem-solving strategy when an organization defines the cause or the problem, shows readiness to find a solution for it, and encourage its publics to solve the problem together. According to Werder (2005), messages for this strategy are characterized by "an open exchange of information to establish a common definition of the problem, common goals, and to share positions and responsibilities about the issue" (p.6).

Bargaining strategy. The bargaining strategy as well implies an exchange of information between the organization and its publics. Its main difference from the cooperative problem-solving strategy is that the organization is not communicating its willingness to find a solution for a problem together with its publics. It is usually used when an organization and its publics have incompatible goals and are trying to negotiate (Werder, 2005). Among the significant characteristics of bargaining messages, Abitbol (2017) names "strategic withholding of information and acts of deception in order to mislead others" (p. 3).

Several studies were conducted to see what strategies are used more often by organizations. The survey Page and Hazleton (1999) conducted among the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members revealed that the most applied strategies were persuasive and informative, followed by cooperative problem-solving and facilitative strategies, with power and bargaining strategies being in the minority. Another study by Page (2000) supported those findings: persuasive and informative strategies were used more often than the other ones, though the informative approach was leading in this study. The power strategy was used the least, and the bargaining strategy was not reported to be used at all. Since there was a significant limitation

in both studies – public relations practitioners might not want to talk about their organization using such strategies as bargaining and power, two other studies (Page, 2000; Werder, 2006) were conducted. This time, the researchers used content analysis of organizational press releases. The results supported previous findings: informative and persuasive strategies were applied most often; power and bargaining strategies were the least used. Later, Werder and Holtzhausen (2009) conducted a survey among PRSA members again and received similar results: persuasive and informative strategies were reported to be the most popular among public relations practitioners, the power strategy was used the least. However, in this study and in the previous study conducted by Werder (2005), bargaining strategy was not tested because it was considered to be used mostly in interpersonal communications and less typical for mass communications. All the mentioned studies were not industry-specific, though Werder (2005) noted that health care organizations more often used facilitative messages. No detailed research was done on sports communications.

Several experimental studies were conducted to see the influence that different communication strategies can have on the organization's publics. They suggested that the effectiveness of the strategy depends on the type of situation it is applied to. For example, in the situation when the organization responded to activism, people had the most positive attitudes and behavioral intentions towards it when it used cooperative problem-solving strategies. The usage of power strategy, on the contrary, leads to the least effective outcomes for the organization (Page, 2003). During an emergency, such as hurricanes, people showed higher problem recognition when the power strategy is used (Gallo, 2009).

Other studies showed that attributes of publics, such as level of problem recognition, goal compatibility, involvement, and information-seeking behavior, influence the impact of different communication strategies on people (Guilfoil, 2010; Werder, 2005).

Those examples show that the chosen communication strategy can affect people's attitudes towards an organization and their behavioral intentions. They also demonstrate that specific strategies are more or less effective depending on the circumstances, the organization's goals, and attributes of publics. However, more research is needed to see when each strategy is more effective. Mostly, there is a lack of research on the usage of communications strategies in professional team sports. Also, since previous studies on Hazleton's (1992) taxonomy were mostly quantitative, there is a gap in qualitative analysis regarding detailed descriptions of how organizations use different strategies in their communications and a lack of examples of the messages typical for each strategy.

Team Association Model

An assumption can be made that a good brand could play a role in attracting people to Atlanta United. Literature shows that a better brand can influence people's choice of a particular sports team over the others as well as over non-sports entertainment options (Mullin et al., 2000). Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) argued that when a consumer is familiar with the brand and has positive associations toward it, one can talk about brand equity. Their theoretical frameworks were adopted by sports science. Thus, Gladden et al. (1998) utilized Aaker's (1991) concept of brand equity to study Division I college sports. They identified three groups of brand equity antecedents: team-related, university-related, and market-related. The first group included team's success (e.g., on-field success may improve brand equity), a head coach, and a star player (appearance of a famous coach or an athlete in the team/league can lead to an increase of brand

equity). The second group included college reputation and traditions (a high level of loyalty to a college may attract many people to the college athletic teams even if they do not demonstrate high sports results), conference and schedule, and entertainment package/product delivery. The third group included local/regional media arrangements, geographic location, competitive forces, and support.

Gladden and Milne (1999) studied whether the team's success, the presence of a star player, and a famous coach had any impact on the merchandise sales. They found a significant correlation. However, the limitation of those and similar studies was that the only measurement of the success was financial data. That was one reason why Funk (2001) suggested studying brand equity in sports from a consumer point of view. To do so, he integrated Gladden and Milne's framework into Keller's (1993) conceptualization of brand equity, which Keller called customer-based brand equity.

According to Keller (1993), customer-based brand equity happens "when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory" (p.1). He defined three categories of brand associations that a consumer holds: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Attributes were divided into two groups: product-related (e.g., consumer thoughts and ideas about a service or a product) and non-product related (e.g., product price, packaging). Benefits, according to Keller (1993), are personal values and meanings that consumers link to the brand's attributes. In other words, benefits are "what the product can do for the consumers" (Keller, 1993, p. 4). There are three types of benefits: functional, symbolic, and experiential. Functional benefits are usually linked to basic physiological needs. Symbolic benefits are the benefits fulfilling more "complicated" requirements, for example, needs for social approval and group membership. Finally, experiential benefits are the ones a person can

get from products that provide emotional pleasure or mental stimulation. Brand attitudes summarize all the opinions and judgments a person has about the brand (Wilkie, 1986).

Gladden and Funk (2002) argued that though Keller's conceptualization of brand equity was appropriate for the sports industry, it required some adaptation when applying to sports. The reason is – sports product is more unpredictable than the usual product. The performance of the sports team or an athlete may be different from one day to another, and it is difficult to control; sports product is experimental and emotional; and it almost never provides functional benefits (Mullin et al., 2000). Taking all these limitations under consideration, Gladden and Funk (2001, 2002) created and tested a Team Association Model (TAM). The model suggests 16 dimensions of brand associations that form sports teams' brand equity. Concerning product-related attributes, Gladden and Funk (2001, 2002) proposed four dimensions: success, star player, head coach, and management. Non-product-related attributes are logo, stadium, product delivery, and traditions. As brand benefits, the researchers defined pride in place, fan identification, peer-group acceptance, nostalgia, and escape. Lastly, they identified three types of brand attitudes: importance, knowledge, and affect.

Bauer et al. (2008) used Gladden and Funk's model to study German professional football. As a result, they suggested a slightly changed version of the TAM. Their model included product-related attributes (success, star player, head coach, and team performance), non-product-related attributes (management, logo, stadium, history and tradition, club culture and values, fans, sponsor, and regional provenance), benefits (pride, fan identification, nostalgia, escape, socializing, emotions, entertainment, and peer group acceptance), and attitudes (or affect).

Parganas et al. (2015) tested Team Associations Models from the organization's perspective. They argued that sports marketers could control (at least partially) some of the dimensions described in the TAM by communicating certain brand attributes to the publics. Using a modified Team Association Model (see Table 1), they conducted a content analysis of messages on FC Liverpool's (a soccer club from Great Britain) official Twitter account and studied what brand attributes Liverpool communicated the most. The study revealed that in its messages on Twitter, the organization talked about all the brand attributes, but the tweets about star players and team success were the most common as well as tweets about fans and the club's history and tradition. Tweets about the team's management were used least frequently. Messages about brand mark (logo, colors) did not appear on Twitter very often.

Table 1.
Brand Attributes

Factor/Item	Gladden & Funk (2002)	Bauer et al. (2008)	Parganas et al. (2015)
Product-Related Brand Attributes	Success	Team success	Team success
	Star player	Star player	Star player
	Head coach	Head coach	Head coach
	Management	Team Performance	
Non-Product Related Brand Attributes	Logo design	Management	Logo
	Stadium	Logo and club colors	Team's History and and Tradition
	Product delivery	Stadium	Team's Culture and Values
	Tradition	Club history and tradition	Management
		Club culture and values	Sponsor
		Fans	Fans
		Sponsor or owner	Stadium
	Regional provenance	Event's Image	

Parganas et al. (2015) demonstrated how researchers can apply TAM to analyze organizations' communications from a corporate standpoint through textual analysis.

Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) used this approach to analyze what brand attributes two football teams from the English Premier League communicated through their Instagram accounts. Their

research supported that there are brand attributes that an organization can control and communicate to its publics. More cases of successful brands should be analyzed to see what brand attributes the organizations communicated in their messages. This thesis addresses the limitation of both Parganas et al. (2015) and Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) research by analyzing more traditional communication channels (such as press releases) in addition to their analysis of social media.

Soccer in the United States

The soccer system in the United States consists of two main parts. United States Soccer Federation (USSF), the national governing body, is in charge of national teams and is part of CONCACAF (Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football) and FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) (History, n.d.).

The professional leagues make the other part. Major League Soccer (MLS) is the men's professional league sanctioned by USSF (About Major League Soccer, 2018). The league was created in 1994, following the soccer World Cup hosted by the U.S. The U.S. national team took part in the final stage of that World Cup for the first time in 40 years. The first official MLS games were held in 1996, and at that time, it included ten teams. As of 2020, MLS consists of 26 teams (23 teams from the U.S. and three clubs from Canada). The average attendance of the leagues' games is about 21, 873 people per game (Gough, 2019).

Though U.S. national soccer teams and the professional clubs always influenced each other, national teams and professional teams develop differently. Different concepts are used to reach their audience because they require different "ways" of fandom. National teams mostly draw people's attention only during big international sports events and partially attract their fans

because of national feelings (Tomlinson & Young, 2006). At the same time, a professional team requires "full-time" fan support and does not create such a robust national motivation.

Researchers name three universes of soccer in the U.S. "that overlap yet still remain distinct from each other" (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003, p. 1533). The first one consists of people playing soccer but hardly watching it on TV or at the stadium. In 2018, the number of people playing outdoor soccer ages six years and older in the United States was 11.41 million (Lock, 2020). The second group is people who support national soccer teams during World Cups. The third group consists of those who go to the stadium or watch games on TV and support one of the professional teams (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). Although common as an outdoor activity, soccer has never been the most popular sport in the United States, especially as a spectator sport. Before the 1994 World Cup, the results of the polls showed that soccer was number 67 among Americans' favorite spectator sports, being below such disciplines as tractor pulling (Glenn, 1996).

Literature suggests different hypotheses to explain such unpopularity. Some (Markovits, 1990; Sugden, 1994) looked at this phenomenon through a cultural lens and argued that for a long time, soccer was an outside sport for Americans. They stated in particular that starting from the 19th century, when people in the U.S. were looking for something that would unite them as a nation and would not remind them about their cultural differences, soccer became something that was considered alien, non-American (Sugden & Tomlinson, 1994). Markovits (1990) argued that in the 20th century, soccer was "closely associated with immigrants, a stigma, which proved fatal to its potential of becoming a popular team sport in the new world" (p. 241). Other explanations of the unpopularity of soccer include its framing in media as a "boring" sport (Delgado, 1997)

and the way a "typical" soccer athlete looks and behaves – as opposed to a strong and aggressive ideal of an American athlete (Markovits, 1990).

According to recent polls, soccer in America is getting more attention from viewers. It was ranked number four among sports that people like to watch, yielding to American football, basketball, and baseball and surpassing hockey (Norman, 2018). Among people younger than 55, soccer is rated higher than baseball (Norman, 2018). With the development of soccer in the U.S., more complicated models explaining people's engagement in watching soccer appeared. In 2017, Collet called Markovits' (1990) ideas good enough for a myth but far from describing the real ongoing situation with soccer in America.

Trying to reject the belief that a soccer fan or a viewer differs from a "typical" American, Collet (2017) found that "in terms of self-identification, being an American 'soccer fan' is no more 'unique' than being a 'hockey fan'" (p. 357). The author argued that "soccer fan" is not a unique, homogenous group opposed to all the other American sports fans that should be studied separately. He found similarities between soccer fans and other sports fans. For example, like baseball supporters, soccer fans attended church more frequently than non-fans or were more likely to be married, just like football fans (Collet, 2017).

Collet is among those researchers who argue that soccer fans' behavior should be studied as other sports fans' behavior, applying the same sociological, marketing, and communication approaches. With the growing popularity of soccer in some regions such as Seattle, Portland, or Atlanta (Gough, 2020) and relatively low stadium attendance in the other areas, it seems reasonable to conduct multiple case studies and look for the similarities and differences between those teams.

Research Questions

Based on the taxonomy of communication strategies guided by Hazelton (1992), and a Team Associations Model, guided by Gladden and Funk (2002), this thesis examines how Atlanta United FC implemented communication strategies and what brand attributes it communicated to publics during its launch period. Therefore, the following research questions were developed to guide this study.

RQ1: What communication strategies did Atlanta United use during the period from the team's launch until its first official game in MLS?

RQ2: How did Atlanta United use communication strategies during the period from the team's launch until its first official game in MLS?

RQ3: What brand attributes did Atlanta United communicate through to its publics in the period from the launch of the team until its first official game in MLS?

RQ4: How did Atlanta United communicate core brand attributes to its publics in the period from the launch of the team until its first official game in MLS?

Method

Methodology

This is an exploratory study, based on a single case study design. Case study research is well-known in sports marketing and communications (McCarthy et al., 2014; Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Atlanta United FC was chosen for this study given that it is the most popular team whose average home attendance is higher than any other MLS, NBA, NHL, or MLB franchise (Lamle, 2017) in the country where soccer is not the most popular spectator sport (Norman, 2018).

An assumption was made based on Hazleton's taxonomy of communication strategies (1992) and Gladden & Funk's Team Association Model (2002) that communication is a factor in a sports team's popularity. That is why to answer the research questions defined above, a thematic analysis of press releases was applied. Press releases were chosen because they can be a company's primary way of communicating with its publics through news media (Sleurs et al., 2003). According to Gilpin (2008), a press release can be used not only as a tool to inform the organization's publics but as a way to create the organization's image. Also, when one wants to study how the organization frames information about itself, it is appropriate to research press releases because, by doing that, the researcher can eliminate factors of framing by news media. At the same time, thematic analysis of press releases has an advantage over the analysis of the organization's social media, because press releases are meant to be used for communications with a broader audience through mass media. In contrast, social media messages are targeted to the audience that is already interested in the organization and follows the organization's official pages on social media.

Content analysis was previously used to identify organizations' communication strategies during crisis (Arokiasamy et al., 2019) and non-crisis (Abitbol, 2017) times. Werder (2006) tested Hazleton's taxonomy through content analysis of press-releases. Thematic analysis was chosen for this thesis to offer a qualitative approach that can help not only research what strategies Atlanta United used but also how it used them. Thematic analysis helps to provide more detailed descriptions and examples for the communication strategies described in the taxonomy. As for Team Association Model, during previous studies, it was mostly tested from the consumers' perspective (Ross et al., 2006) – the researchers were trying to capture what brand associations fans had toward their favorite team. Parganas et al. (2015) and Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) tested TAM using content analysis of the sports teams' social media. Thematic analysis of press releases allowed a look at the problem from the organization's perspective; it also offered more detailed descriptions and examples for the TAM categories.

Sample

For thematic analysis, press releases created by the Atlanta United's communication team from April 19, 2014 (the first available press release on the team's website) through March 5, 2017 (the first official Atlanta United game) were purposively selected. By analyzing press releases published before the first game, the influence of game results on the team's communications was removed. The press releases were retrieved from the official website of Atlanta United FC (<https://www.atltd.com/author/atlanta-united-communications>).

For this study, several categories of collected materials were removed from the sample. Video press releases were excluded because they required different analysis approaches than written press releases and could be analyzed separately. For the same reason, photo stories posted by Atlanta United on the external platforms (such as Exposure) and replicated in the team

website's Press Releases section were removed as well. Social media reviews were not included, even though they are found under Press Releases. These articles are not formatted like press releases but could offer a unique future study. Lastly, event announcements that contained only the date, time, place of an event, and ticket prices were also eliminated from the sample. However, announcements with a detailed description of the event, its history, or its connection with Atlanta United were included.

Only press releases dedicated to Atlanta United or those that included direct mentions of the club were part of the sample. Press releases dedicated to the Atlanta United Academy were eliminated. Though the academy is an essential part of the club and is a prospective workforce source for the first team, for homogeneity, this study focused only on the press releases dedicated to the main team.

Thereby, 137 press releases retrieved from the Atlanta United official website were analyzed.

Coding Procedures

For this study, a deductive approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and a thematic analysis was conducted. The thematic analysis was mostly guided by Aronson (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006). The deductive approach was chosen because the theoretical frameworks used in this study dictated the data's primary coding. The further data analysis offered a more detailed description and examples for every category (both for the Hazleton's taxonomy of communication strategies and for the Gladden and Funk's Team Association Model) as well as clarification of the existing categories. It also revealed new themes. Deductive thematic analysis is known to be used when a researcher aims "to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). This

matched the goals of this thesis – to see the communication strategies that Atlanta United FC used most, the brand attributes they communicated more often, and to thoroughly describe how they did that.

Step 1. For each press release, it was identified what data relates to already classified categories (Aronson, 1994). Based on Hazleton's taxonomy of the communication strategies (1992), six categories were defined: informative messages, facilitative messages, persuasive messages, bargaining messages, cooperative problem-solving messages, and power messages. Werder's (2005) definitions of the strategies were adopted to describe the categories. A more detailed description of every category concerning the sports industry was developed after the first stage of coding (for the Codebook 1, see Appendix 1). The categories were not mutually exclusive, which means that if two or more types of messages were used in one sample unit, that press release was coded for every category it reflected.

Another set of categories was created based on the Team Association Model (Gladden & Funk, 2002). The categories reflected 11 brand attributes suggested by Parganas et al. (2015) and Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018), who offered a modified version of Gladden and Funk's (2002) Team Association Model. Those categories included three product-related brand attributes (team success, star player, head coach) and eight non-product related attributes (brand mark, club's history and traditions, club's culture and values, management, stadium, fans, sponsor, event's image). Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) definitions of each attribute were adopted to describe the category. During the initial coding, a more detailed description of every category was developed (for the Codebook 2, see Appendix 2). The categories were not mutually exclusive, so if two or more brand attributes were communicated in one press release, that press release was coded for all the categories it reflected.

Step 2. During this stage, the original categories were reviewed (Aronson, 1994). New categories that emerged from the previous analysis were added to a coding scheme. After the categories were defined, they were tested and named by relating back to the research questions and the theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Step 3. Frequencies were calculated to see how often each theme was found in Atlanta United's press releases. Flic et al. (2004) noticed that descriptive statistics are useful for systematizing qualitative data and may help during the final step – detail case interpretations.

Step 4. At this stage, data on each category containing the information about how Atlanta United used each theme was summarized. Quotes were chosen to illustrate the findings (Altheide, 1996).

Step 5. The final report was created, where the key findings and key themes were reflected.

Results

Strategic Communications

The first research question asked what communication strategies were used in Atlanta United press releases. Frequencies were calculated for each communication strategy that Atlanta United utilized. The categories were not mutually exclusive. The thematic analysis revealed that an informative communication strategy was the one Atlanta United employed the most – out of 137 analyzed releases, 121 press releases were classified as informative or used informative messaging alongside another strategy. A facilitative strategy was identified in 30 press releases, a persuasive approach was applied in 22 press releases. In 17 releases, a power communication strategy was utilized, and in 6 releases, a cooperative problem-solving strategy was used. Atlanta United's communications practitioners did not apply a bargaining strategy during the team launching period. In 89 press releases, only one type of messaging was used, 38 contained two types, 10 included three or more.

The second research question asked how communication strategies were used by Atlanta United. The following qualitative results are outlined for each strategy.

Informative Strategy: Beyond Formal Writing

All the informative press releases published by Atlanta United used neutral language. The messages contained little value judgments. They excluded vocabulary that would show the organization's attitude to itself or to any question or cause discussed in the message. Informative press releases also did not evaluate any events or problems as important or not important and did not give positive or negative assessments to them. However, Atlanta United's informative press

releases varied both in the subject and the style. Thus, for the press releases covering such themes as new players, managers, and coaches; the team's name and logo; the stadium's project; sponsor agreements; TV contracts – Atlanta United used formally written informative press releases. Most of the press releases published by Atlanta United from December 2016 to February 2017 (when the team was actively building a roster) were formally written informative press releases covering the news about new Atlanta United players.

Formally written informative press releases consisted of simple sentences transmitting information: the age of the players, the names of the sponsors, the construction schedule for the stadium, etc. Those press releases were fact heavy. Their vocabulary did not contain detailed descriptions or patterns typical for spoken language, as it can be seen in the following example from the press release announcing Atlanta United's new player Miguel Almirón:

Atlanta United today announced it has signed midfielder Miguel Almirón to a multi-year contract as a Young Designated Player. Almirón, a 22-year-old Paraguayan international, was acquired from Club Lanus of the Argentine Primera Division via transfer. (Atlanta United, 2016, para.1).

Atlanta United's formally written press releases also had a rigid structure. Each release started with the main news message: e.g., "Atlanta United will host open tryouts outside of Nashville, Tenn., as part of a series with jersey sponsor American Family Insurance on Oct. 8-9" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.1). The first passage was usually followed by two or three paragraphs diving deeper into details. If a quote or quotes were used, they were placed in paragraphs 2-4. In its formally written informative press releases, Atlanta United generally utilized between one to three quotes. The last paragraph of the release often contained the Atlanta United communication team's contacts for additional questions. From May 2015 until the

end of the year, informative press releases dedicated to the topics other than the team itself (e.g., club's community efforts or sponsor contracts) had an additional paragraph "About MLS Atlanta" (after June 2015, when the club got its official name the section was renamed to "About Atlanta United"). That paragraph provided the key information about the team, its stadium, and its fanbase and was meant for the audience that was not closely familiar with the organization. After Atlanta United gained recognition, Atlanta United's communication practitioners stopped adding this paragraph to the press releases. It also was not included in the releases dedicated to the team roster or management news, presumably because the audience targeted in those press releases was already familiar with the team.

However, not all informative press releases published by Atlanta United followed the official style. Some contained messages written less formally. For example, describing new Atlanta United Head Coach Gerardo "Tata" Martino attending the local NBA team Atlanta Hawks game against Chicago Bulls, a release explained: "Tata took in his first breath of the Atlanta sports atmosphere and caught just a taste of what 2017 has in store for him and his new club." (Atlanta United, 2016, para.2). Acknowledging an informal style in informative messages, the headline of this news release did not use the coach's full name but just his nickname ("Tata attends his first Atlanta Hawks game").

While, for the club news, Atlanta United used formal informative press releases, the organization applied an informal communication style to elaborate on the topics it considered significant. Thus, the previously mentioned press release announcing Miguel Almirón's arrival to the team was formal. However, three days later, Atlanta United followed it up with the less formal informative press release about the significance of the number 10 (the number under which Almirón was going to play for Atlanta United) in world soccer, and the history of that

number: "Nevertheless, there is one number that continues to remain a major part of the soccer conversation. The legendary, iconic number 10."(Atlanta United, 2016, para.3). Therefore, Atlanta United elaborated on the topic and at the same time highlighted that the signing of Almirón was not an ordinary event for the club that could be communicated with one formal news message. Likewise, when the club started a partnership with the USL Charleston Battery (a team from the lower soccer league), it firstly published a short formal message reporting the deal. Then Atlanta United followed it up with another press release revealing more details about the agreement, seeking to continue communication on the topic significant for the team – a topic that deserved more than just a formal news release. That second press release covering the deal with USL Charleston Battery was written in a less formal style and used a different structure – designed as Q & A.

Atlanta United's communication specialists utilized informative messages written in an informal style for the exhibition games reports and educational press releases (i.e., press releases about the history of the game, soccer rules, and the ways the league works). Furthermore, informative messages written in informal style were used when Atlanta United attempted to make the communication between the club and its publics closer to a casual conversation, and not just to inform but to establish relationships between the organization and its publics. Atlanta United used this tactic when wanted to talk to its publics about the people behind the organization. Thus, when the club's owner Arthur Blank was diagnosed with cancer, Atlanta United did not send a standardized press release to the media. Instead, the organization published a less formal letter to the publics, in which Blank talked about his fight against the disease and his plans.

Facilitative Messages: Talking to Fans, Soccer Enthusiasts, and Community

The core point of a facilitative communication strategy is to apply to the audience that already shares the organization's values and help people behave the way they are already predisposed to behave. For a sports team, fans would be such an audience. And that is whom Atlanta United mostly targeted in its facilitative messages. Through its press releases, the club offered the fans different options of how to support their favorite team: from encouraging them to buy single-game and season tickets, to showing them the ways to join the team's support groups, to providing fans with the directions on how to install a new official team mobile application. "Passionate about the game?" the club asks in the press release dedicated to the Atlanta United supporters organizations. "Passionate about Atlanta? Want to join in on the fun? Join an Atlanta United Supporters Group Today!" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.31). The club used the same type of messages to encourage fans to participate in different Atlanta United events and even in the flash mobs that were meant to promote the team:

Take your Atlanta United flag and hang it in your window, raise it up in your yard, showcase it where all can admire. Make sure that anyone who passes by knows that this is OUR city. You are not just a fan. You are part of one voice, one people, one club that embodies the meaning and culture of Atlanta (Atlanta United, 2017, para.3).

In this message announcing the flash mob, the club appealed to the fans' values ("you are not just a fan") and their desired behavior (to support the team, to be a part of the club), and offered them the way to do that ("take your Atlanta United flag and hang it in your window, raise it up in your yard"). Similar rhetoric was used in some of the press releases offering new merchandise to the fans – another way to support the team.

However, Atlanta United had an opportunity to communicate with its fans only after it created a fanbase, which would mean that during the first months following the launch, the organization would generally not be able to apply a facilitative strategy. Nevertheless, Atlanta United did. To make that possible, the club had to look for different audiences that shared its values. The study revealed that the audience Atlanta United targeted using the facilitative messages was soccer enthusiasts. In the absence of team supporters, the organization communicated to a broader group of local soccer fans, providing them with ways to enjoy their favorite sport, organizing watch parties, and offering to get together at the stadium for the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) games that city of Atlanta hosted. "Atlanta, your new MLS team invites you to join together with other Atlanta-area soccer fanatics" (Atlanta United, 2014, para.2), claimed the press release announcing the watch party for the U.S. national team during the World Cup-2014. The call was followed by the game schedule and the directions on how to come and watch the game. Significantly, in these press releases, Atlanta United did not only provide local fans with the information on how they could enjoy soccer in the area but also was highlighting that such an opportunity was provided by "your new MLS team" (Atlanta United, 2014, para.1) as if reminding people that a new organization appeared in the city. And that this organization shares their values and will help them to fulfill their needs in high-quality soccer.

Another public to which Atlanta United addressed its facilitative messages was even broader than local soccer fans. It consisted of all the Atlanta locals, no matter their attitude to soccer. The shared values Atlanta United appealed to while communicating to that public was the region's economic and cultural development and fostering of the local community. Addressing those publics in its press releases, Atlanta United stressed that to fulfill the need to be

a citizen who is useful for the community as well as to become "a part of a club spearheading a new era" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.4) and "Atlanta history," (Atlanta United, 2017, para.4) local publics needed to support the team.

Persuasive Messages: Convincing without Pressing

Press releases published by Atlanta United during the team's launching period rarely used messages that can be called classically persuasive (i.e., the messages where the directive vocabulary, strict recommendations on what opinion publics should have about one or the other cause, or arguments were used). Instead, Atlanta United applied the style that was close to informative but added to its vocabulary value judgments, bias assertions, and statements that were not supported with facts.

For example, in the Atlanta United press releases following the emergence of the team, this study did not find the organization's attempts to initiate a well-argued conversation about why the region needed a new sports team. Instead, Atlanta United occasionally used phrases like "Atlanta is a true soccer town" (Atlanta United, 2014, para.4), "Atlanta is passionate about soccer"(Atlanta United, 2014, para.3), "Atlanta is not only a passionate soccer city but also an attractive destination for world-class sporting competition" (Atlanta United, 2015, para.7). Those statements did not claim to be precise, and Atlanta United did not try to follow them up with additional arguments. Those value judgments could, however, create a feeling among the audience that Atlanta really was a soccer city, that it needed its own team, and that the arrival of this new team was understandable, if not necessary.

Likewise, when Atlanta United was building its fanbase, the team rarely used press releases urging the audience to support the new team or explaining why Atlanta United was the club that fans should choose. Instead, during the first months of the club's existence, its press

releases contained phrases like "the support for our team has been nothing short of phenomenal" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.5), "excitement for the club's arrival has been overwhelming" (Atlanta United, 2014, para.5) convincing the audience that such popularity proved Atlanta United to be worth the audience's support. Later, applying to potential fans, Atlanta United used expressions highlighting how significant fans were for the club, called them "family," "the most important and fundamental aspects of Atlanta United" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.3) and "central to the decisions we make" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.7), as if demonstrating how beneficial it was to be an Atlanta United's fan and encouraging people to become the team's supporters, without bluntly calling for that.

Persuasive messages promoted the idea that the new team was crucial not only for soccer fans but for the entire local community. Thus, in the press release dedicated to the announcement of the new stadium project for Atlanta United, adjectives like "iconic," "state-of-art," "world-class," and "a landmark for the city" (Atlanta United, 2014, para.1) were used to describe the future arena, convincing the publics (without directly appealing to them) that launching the project was an undoubtedly positive (and even "historical") moment for Atlanta, and that it was an important milestone for local sports, arts, economy, and community.

Later, Atlanta United continued to use the same tactics of persuasion, mostly avoiding strict appeals to something but openly expressing the organization's opinions, using either phrases that were aimed to convince people in the significance of the team's agenda (e.g., "this is important," "this is historical") or value judgments (e.g., "Atlanta United has taken *huge* steps in becoming a professional soccer club, *immersing itself in the community*, partnering with *distinguished* organizations, and forming a *world class team* both on and off the field" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.1) to sway publics opinion in the club's favor.

Power and Cooperative Problem-Solving Messages

The usage of power strategy in Atlanta United's press releases was mostly limited by offering special deals (discounts, better seats on the stadium, and merchandise) to its fans. No scare tactics were used, except in the messages where the club was warning its audiences of what benefits they would lose if they do not become season tickets holders or do not do that in time (e.g., "this event is for founding members only, if you want to join us, get your membership now"(Atlanta United, 2017, para.4). Only in one press release from the sample, Atlanta United alerted its publics that those who did not behave as recommended would be penalized for that. That press release was dedicated to the fans' behavior during the matches, more precisely, to the behavior Atlanta United expected from the fans during the first game of the season. The press release was written in the form of an open letter from the team's president Darren Eales. Atlanta United combined two types of messages in that letter. On the one hand, the organization used cooperative problem-solving messaging, encouraging fans to "work together with us" and "ensure that all of our fans are able to enjoy Atlanta United matches and events in a positive, inclusive and safe environment" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.5). On the other hand, the organization warned its supporters that "inappropriate and offensive chants, foul language, and aggressive or violent behavior will not be tolerated and will be dealt with swiftly" and that "if you are found to be participating in any of these behaviors, you are subject to removal" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.4), hence using the elements of power strategy.

Combining Two or More Strategies

Atlanta United regularly combined components of two or more strategies within one press release. To do so, the organization used both the vocabulary and the structure of the messages. As previously discussed in this paper, the usage of emotionally charged vocabulary,

and the presence of judgments, opinions, and statements not supported by facts, even in only one paragraph, could turn an informative press release into a mix of informative and persuasive messages. In addition to the vocabulary, Atlanta United experimented with the structure of its messages, trying to combine different tactics. Thus, the club added informative passages to the facilitative press releases (e.g., a paragraph at the end of the press release with the information about the team) or included calls-to-action ("buy the tickets now") into informative press releases announcing future games.

The quotes Atlanta United picked for its news releases also often created a mix of different strategies within one release. In those cases, the beginning of the release and its last paragraphs contained factual information, while the quote provided the audience with opinions. Thus, in the press release announcing Atlanta's selection as a host town for the semifinal round of the 2015 Gold Cup (CONCACAF tournament), the first two paragraphs broke the news and provided the audience with the schedule and directions for the game and talked about the history of the competition. They used neutral language and simple sentences. The vocabulary in the quote from the Executive Director of the Atlanta Sports Council following the introductory paragraphs was, on the contrary, opinionated ("Atlanta's passionate soccer community") and included arguments about why Atlanta is a "true soccer town." "The prestige of being selected as the host of the 2015 Gold Cup semifinals further demonstrates Atlanta's ability to deliver on all facets of hosting an event," the quote stated. "The 2015 Gold Cup is just another example of the way the city and region are capable of hosting the biggest soccer tournaments in the world." (Atlanta United, 2014, para.1-3). The quote delivered the argument that Atlanta is a city with strong soccer traditions. It also proposed the region's potential in organizing major sports events, convincing people that the Atlanta United's games would be worth attending.

The press release announcing Atlanta United's partnership with SunTrust Bank Inc. started with an informative message about the particulars of the agreement. In contrast, the quote from the top-manager of Sun Trust, following it, had elements of persuasive messaging: it did not just include his comments on the arrangement but also contained epithets characterizing Atlanta United. For example, the quote stated that "Arthur Blank has already put together a very strong team of professionals off the field, and we know they are in the process of building a first-class squad to compete on the field." Choosing such a statement for the release, especially when the team had not played yet and could not demonstrate the quality of its game, Atlanta United created an opportunity to communicate the idea that the team was going to be successful and hence was worth supporting. The quote also helped to highlight the achievements that the club had already made.

Finally, sometimes Atlanta United wrote different paragraphs of the same press releases using different tactics. The club, for example, utilized this approach when talking to its audience about the Atlanta United supporter groups or "ultras"—organized communities of the most die-hard fans typical for the global soccer culture. The press release dedicated to the Atlanta United ultras started with an informative message providing publics with the facts about the supporter groups, their purpose, and their role in the game of soccer all over the world:

They're on their feet for 90 minutes. They stay regardless of the score. They lead the chants that amplify the crowd. The supporters are more than just fans. They are the most dedicated, the rowdiest, and in other parts of the world, in particular Europe, they are dubbed "Ultras" deriving from the Latin word "Ultra" meaning beyond in English (Atlanta United, 2017, para.1-3).

This part of the press release included a detailed depiction of what ultras do. Such a thorough description can be explained with the fact that the team had not played in MLS yet. Hence the only way to demonstrate what a supporter group stood for was to explain that verbally. The historical background of the movement was also clarified in the first paragraphs, which allowed Atlanta United to link itself with global soccer traditions. In the following passage, the messaging type switched from informative to persuasive. As Atlanta United's communication team continued to describe ultras, the focus switched to ultras' "unwavering," "unique" culture and the ways supporter groups help their teams to win: "when a team's home field is known to be intimidating and difficult to play at, it's not because of the facility. It's due to the fact that their supporters create this uncomfortable, overwhelming, loud atmosphere to shake the visiting side and encourage their own club." (Atlanta United, 2017, para.4). This paragraph appeals to the values of Atlanta United fans (to support the team and to help it), local soccer fans (to express their passion for the game), and other publics who wanted to become a part of a "unique" community that was described as a potential second family. The persuasive nature of the message is also demonstrated by the fact that the press release provided the audience only with the information beneficial for the organization. For instance, it did not mention the problems with ultras' aggression that European leagues usually face. Finally, the end of the press release mostly contained facilitative messages. It provided people who want to join Atlanta United supporter groups with instructions on how to do that.

Therefore, Atlanta United used three different types of messages in one press release attempting to build a new identity – local ultras – from scratch by firstly informing its audience about them, then persuading its publics that the support culture is worth joining, and finally facilitating those who wanted to join on how to do that.

Team Association Model

To answer the third research question, frequencies were calculated for the brand attributes described by Parganas et al. (2015) in the Team Association Model. The study reveals that the most communicated theme was the team's relationship with fans and the role of supporters in Atlanta United's life. The "fans" brand attribute was communicated in 36 press releases. Club history and traditions were discussed in 22 releases. Club culture and values were reviewed in 18 press releases. The stadium was also mentioned in 18 press releases. The brand mark was discussed in 13 releases, and star player – in 12. Such brand attributes as sponsor, event's image, and management were identified each in 11 press releases. Nine releases talked about head coach, and eight – about team success. The study also revealed three additional themes that were communicated by Atlanta United: connection with the local community (n=24), popularity/fame of the club (n=19), and connection with global soccer (n=13). In most cases, one press release communicated more than one brand attribute.

To answer the fourth research question, press releases were analyzed to see how Atlanta United promoted its most communicated brand attributes.

Product-related attributes

During the launching period, product-related brand attributes (team success, star player, head coach) were presented less than non-product-related ones in Atlanta United communications. These results were expected because, during the examined period, the team did not have a product to talk about. Atlanta United had not played a single game in MLS. It signed a contract with their first player on January 25, 2016, almost two years after the club was created. The head coach was announced even later – on September 26, 2016.

However, the club managed to find ways to communicate product-related attributes. For example, the team could still communicate such a brand attribute as on-field success. The organization did it by talking about the future of the team, promising its audience a high quality of the game, "a winning team on the field" (Atlanta United, 2015, para. 4), "the strongest team in the league" (Atlanta United, 2016, para. 3) and "the best club in MLS" (Atlanta United, 2016, para 1). "Our aim," said the team in one of their messages, "is to build a championship caliber soccer club and to be as competitive as we can from the start" (Atlanta United, 2016, para 3).

As for the category of the star player, Atlanta United did not use the same tactic as many other MLS teams did, it did not build a whole communication campaign around one big international soccer star. During the first years, the club did not sign contracts with world-famous players, and the team's communication practitioners did not represent anyone in the roster as the main star of the team. Atlanta United created press releases about every new player joining the team. But none of those players was described as a leader or a star. In fact, the structure and the language of those messages were standardized, which allowed the team to avoid highlighting any of the players more than the others. The exception from that were press releases dedicated to newly signed "homegrown" players – athletes from Georgia. Atlanta United described the arrival of people "with strong ties to Georgia soccer" (Atlanta United, 2016, para. 5) to the team as "historical" in all the examined press releases.

Non-product related attributes

Non-product related attributes were communicated by Atlanta United in the majority of press releases during the launching period. The study shows that the most highlighted theme was the club's relationship with its fans. Atlanta United used different ways to discuss this brand attribute. Phrases like "we focused from the beginning on building a unique fan experience"

(Atlanta United, 2016, para.4), or "the community and our fans are what defines us" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.2), "the supporters have always been the most important and fundamental aspects of Atlanta United" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.3) were used to stress how essential fans were for the team's identity. In those releases, the organization sent a message that it had fans in mind no matter what it was doing. Significantly, in the press release dedicated to the supporting groups, Atlanta United capitalized the word "supporters" as if adding more value, emphasizing the importance of those groups.

Atlanta United also used its press releases to highlight the team's appreciation of fans' support. "The lifeblood of the team" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.11), Atlanta United called its supporters, alongside with "nothing short of phenomenal" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.5), "the most passionate" (Atlanta United, 2015, para.9), and simply "best fans in the world" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.1). The club stressed that everything it was able to achieve happened only because of the fans.

Another large group of messages communicating such a brand attribute as "fans" includes the press releases that discussed special deals and experiences Atlanta United offered to its supporters: from the discounts for the tickets ("as season ticket holders they save a significant amount of money on a per game basis as opposed to purchasing single game tickets separately"(Atlanta United, 2016, para.6), to the special events ("This is an exclusive event for Founding Members and invited guests. Not a Member? Join today to receive your invitation" (Atlanta United, 2015, para.4), to the unique experiences ("Don't miss your chance to be a part of a club spearheading a new era in MLS and in Atlanta professional sports history!"(Atlanta United, 2017, para.4).

However, the core theme that emerged from the Atlanta United press releases about its fans was the collaboration between the team and its supporters, a union. In its messages, the club pictured its supporters as part of the team's management, "an integral part of the squad" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.3), co-creators of the product and co-creators of the club's values. "Together, we can make a difference on and off the field," said Atlanta United in its press releases addressing the team supporters (Atlanta United, 2017, para.6). And this "collaboration" between fans and the team was highlighted in the various Atlanta United messages. Thus, in the organization's press release about the new stadium, it was cited that web cameras would be set up on the construction site and that fans would have access to the live stream so they would be able to watch the process and feel as they were a part of the club from the very beginning. In the press release announcing new vendors for the stadium, Atlanta United highlighted that the fans were the ones who helped the club to create a new game-day menu, "fan-first menu" as it was called in the release. The club stated that its top managers had "listened to the concerns of the fans on the food and beverage experience and have responded to those concerns" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.2). Press releases also highlighted that fans played a significant role in creating the team's logo and the uniform kit, as well as the design for the park near the stadium.

One of the most precise illustrations of the idea that Atlanta United communicated its relationship with fans as collaborative and full of respect is the vocabulary that the team chose when talking about its supporters. For example, Atlanta United did not call their fans who bought season tickets for their first year "season ticket holders." It called them "team founders." Also, when revealing a kit for the 2017-18 season, the team announced that "the number 17 would be dedicated to, and reserved for, the club's fan base" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.3), symbolically making their fans an additional player of the team. "Retiring the number of a player symbolizes

one of the highest levels of honor and speaks to their valuable impact on the team," said the release. "So, deeming a number unavailable in order to dedicate it to someone, or in this case, a city of people, is an act of the utmost recognition and respect" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.5). The release also further explained the choice of the number – 17 signified the first Atlanta United's season in MLS. To highlight the importance of fans even more, the club added to the press release a story of one of the Atlanta United players. Josef Martinez wanted to have number 17 for himself, but "sacrificed" it when he was told that the number was reserved for the team supporters. "Martinez also sported the number 17 at his former club, Torino in Italy's Serie A, and even has the number 17 tattooed on his neck," cited the release. "While the number is rich in sentiment for him, he knows this is a decision bigger than himself, his teammates, his coaches, or any individual. "Seventeen may be my favorite number, but it is for the people of Atlanta" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.7).

While communicating its relationship with fans, Atlanta United was also highlighting the "record-breaking" and "overwhelming" amount of support the team got from the fans, as well as the number of season tickets the team had sold. Even before the club built a solid fan base, Atlanta United portrayed itself as a top-rated organization in the area. The club hosted watch parties for the World Cup-2014 games and, in its news releases, invited "all the soccer fanatics" in Atlanta to join them (Atlanta United, 2014, para.1). Gradually, in its messages, the team stopped calling soccer fans in the area "Atlanta soccer fans" (meaning all the soccer enthusiasts no matter the team affiliation) and began to call them "fans of the new Atlanta team" (associating those people with Atlanta United brand) and after the club reported "tremendous fan support that the new team has from people in Atlanta" (Atlanta United, 2014, para. 4). As soon as the club started selling its first season tickets and received its first customers, it also began to mention in

its press releases the number of season tickets sold. Thus, Atlanta United was communicating not quite its relationship with the fans, but a new, separate theme – the club's trendiness, popularity, and the demand it faced.

Another brand attribute communicated extensively during the Atlanta United launching period was the club's history and traditions. Since the team was new and could not address its own history and traditions in the messages to publics, the organization found other ways to communicate this brand attribute. First, the team claimed that it was "making history right now," its press releases cited that history was unfolding in front of the fans' eyes. Such intonation was discovered in many press releases published by Atlanta United during the first years of its existence. In its messages, the club called the appointments of new managers or coaches "historical events" (Atlanta United, 2016, para. 5), new philanthropy initiatives were described as "historic milestone in the club history" (Atlanta United, 2016, para. 3), new players were "in the history books" (Atlanta United, 2016, para. 5), and logo and name presentations were called "milestone moments" (Atlanta United, 2015, para. 4). The club declared that though it did not have a long history, it would create it.

Atlanta United also talked a lot about the history and traditions of not the team, but soccer in general. In its press releases, the organization constantly reminded its publics that soccer was "the most popular sport on the planet" (Atlanta United, 2015, para. 6), and that fans were united by "a spirit of a truly global game" (Atlanta United, 2015, para. 1). The club also adopted and communicated global soccer traditions, for example, an English Premier League's tradition to celebrate Boxing Day. Every year, on Boxing Day, English Premier League features ten games involving all teams in the league. Fans come to watch the games and bring donations for those in need. Atlanta United communicated itself as an ambassador of this soccer tradition in

America, and it invited all soccer fans in Atlanta to come to the watch parties around the city. The club even explained this tradition in terms of American customs to make it closer to the American public:

For a comparison in the US, think of the tradition of watching American football on Thanksgiving with the whole family, now multiply the number of games and add in the insane soccer fanatic culture in the UK, and you have Boxing Day. So get ready, bring your scarves, watch Premier League matches and hang out with Atlanta United staff and supporters to celebrate the beautiful game (Atlanta United, 2016, para. 11).

Introducing its brand mark, Atlanta United also noted that the team was a carrier of global soccer culture. "The word 'United,'" the club wrote in the press release, "has long been associated with the beautiful game around the world," (Atlanta United, 2015, para. 8), addressing the fact that a lot of famous soccer clubs have the word "united" in their name.

Thus, a new theme emerged from the analyzed data – a connection between the team and global soccer. Developing this theme, Atlanta United communicated not only the team's relation to global soccer but the region's connection to the game. In the examined press releases, the city of Atlanta was often called a "historically soccer town" (Atlanta United, 2015, para. 1), a "true soccer town" (Atlanta United, 2015, para. 7), and "a soccer city without doubt" (Atlanta United, 2014, para. 2). During the first year of its existence, Atlanta United specifically highlighted in its press releases that when, in March 2014, the city hosted a pre-World Cup game between the national teams of Mexico and Nigeria, an attendance record for soccer was set for Georgia with 68,212 fans coming to the stadium. Though the numbers mentioned in it did not have any connection to Atlanta United because they reflected fans who came to see national teams, the club used it in their communication with the publics. Thus, Atlanta United accumulates under its

brand not only the traditions of the organization but also the football traditions in general and the football traditions of the region. Atlanta United linked its brand with those themes, declaring the team as an unofficial heir to soccer history and traditions in Atlanta.

At the same time, the club demonstrated different connections with the city: not limited by the ones related to soccer. The study revealed that in its press releases, Atlanta United communicated its connection to not only the soccer traditions of the city but to the general customs and history of the region. In its messages to the publics, Atlanta United made the history of Atlanta part of their own. Thus, when the club presented its initiative for building accessible soccer fields for children near the major urban transit station in the city, its press release cited that the idea behind that was "to combine soccer and transit in Atlanta, historically famous as a transport hub in the Southeast" (Atlanta United, 2017, para 1). Atlanta's historical roots were mentioned in the team's uniform design as well, highlighting that player's jerseys "feature horizontal tonal grey stripes on the front of the jersey in tribute to Atlanta's history as a railroad town" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.4). Before its first game in MLS, the team even created a tradition called "Golden Spike" to honor the city's history as a railroad town. The club installed a large piece of rail inside the stadium, into which, at each game, a voted player, a local celebrity, a fan, or somebody from the community hammered a golden nail. In its press release, Atlanta United cited:

In 1837, a spike was driven into Georgia's red clay leading to the formation of a city. Now, another spike is driven into the ground. Signifying the birth of a movement. The connection to the world. The uniting of cultures, generations and backgrounds. Let the Golden Spike be a reminder of our beginnings and our rise as a city and a club. An everlasting tradition is officially born in the ATL (Atlanta United, 2017, para.10).

Another brand attribute that Atlanta United actively communicated in its press releases during the first three years of the club's existence was club's values and culture. This theme was developed in the press releases dedicated to the team's philanthropy efforts and corporate social responsibility initiatives. While talking about values, the club paid attention to problems of poverty, unemployment, and access to education, and highlighted the ways the club is helping the region to solve these problems by creating new jobs and launching educational programs. Atlanta United touched on the topic of human rights issues. In one of its press releases, the club claimed its support of the Pride movement and reported that its staff and management would attend Atlanta's Pride Festival. The rhetoric of the press release, though, showed that that the club did not proactively advocate for the cause. Atlanta United demonstrated its opinions using phrases like "it is inspiring" or "it is important" but did not encourage its fans to participate in the same social activities that the team would. Instead, the press releases cited that Atlanta United would be happy to see "staff and supporters continue to celebrate diversity and inclusion" (Atlanta United, 2016, para.2). The fact that the press release announcing Atlanta United staff's attendance to the Pride Festival was the only one dedicated to the LGBTQ movement in the analyzed sample, also suggests that the core value communicated in it was the support of the local community, their rights, and their activities (such as the festival), more than support of the global movement for LGBTQ rights.

Releases dedicated to corporate social responsibility and philanthropy were not the only ones where Atlanta United vocalized its values and culture. Conversely, the team incorporated this theme into messages primarily dedicated to other topics such as fans, brand mark, or stadium. For example, one of the most pronounced values of the club – being united by the team – can be observed in the press releases about the fans, philanthropic initiatives (the team's

campaign against cancer is called "Unite and Conquer"), the descriptions of new players and staff members ("he fits in naturally with our style of play and also addresses an area of need" (Atlanta United, 2017, para.2), and the union between the team and the local community. To demonstrate the cultural connections with the locals, Atlanta United adopted cultural codes of the city and translated them through its messages. For example, the press release dedicated to the launch of the team Atlanta United finished with "this, fellow Atlantans, was a party that - surely for some - did not stop 'til 8 in the mornin,'"— using a quote from a 2001 hip hop song by Jermaine Dupri ft. Ludacris "Welcome to Atlanta," an iconic composition and "unofficial anthem" of the city.

Altogether, the connection between the team and the city was so strongly pronounced that it extended beyond any existing categories in Team Association Model. Atlanta United did not only communicate its historical connection with the region (which would fit the category of club's history and traditions) and its efforts to help the charity initiatives it implemented (those messages would fit the category of the team's culture and values). The organization also created an image of its relationship with the region and the community, where the club and the city were tied together with cultural and social ties, as well as economic ones. Communicating the connection with the city and the state, Atlanta United noted that the region's economic growth is as important to them as their own success. In its press releases dedicated to the sponsorship contracts or to the new sports venues they build, Atlanta United noted how much money in private investments or how many new jobs it will be bringing to the state. Atlanta United demonstrated the priority of the community over the team, even by the word order they used. When talking about initiatives that would be beneficial for both the team and the region in its press releases, Atlanta United firstly talked about the city and locals, and only after it – about

itself. "Today is truly a celebration for the City of Atlanta, the State of Georgia for our new Major League Soccer team that will call this stadium home," they wrote in one of the press releases dedicated to the new stadium (Atlanta United, 2014, para. 2).

At the same time, Atlanta United actively communicated that it was not only the team that helped the city and the community, it was also the city and the community that was always ready to support the teams' efforts. "It's a team inspired and fueled by the city," wrote Atlanta United in one of its press releases (Atlanta United, 2017, para.1). Such a symbiotic way of co-existence differs from the more traditional way of the interaction between the team and the locals when the team communicates itself as a donor for certain community causes.

Discussion and Conclusion

When Atlanta United appeared on the sports scene of Georgia, the club must have faced many problems: in particular, how to make the new team popular in the city (and in the country) where soccer was not the most demanded sport, and how to create brand loyalty amongst its publics.

The analysis of press releases issued by Atlanta United during its first three years showed that, at that time, the informative communication strategy was the core one for the organization. The club introduced itself to the publics, raised awareness, and, in conjunction with that, was spreading the news. These findings confirm the results of previous studies (Page, 2000; Page & Hazleton, 1999; Werder, 2005; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009), showing that informative communication strategy is the most used among public relations practitioners. Previous research has not been conducted on sports teams, but this study suggests that a similar trend can be observed in sports communications. The results also indirectly support Werder's (2005) findings that public relations practitioners apply informative strategy when they see the audience as having low problem recognition – Atlanta United was a new team representing one of the least popular sports in the country, its perceived publics did have low problem recognition.

In its informative messages, Atlanta United was not limited to formal writing. For the stories about issues important for the team, as well as for the events reports, educational materials, and human stories featuring people behind the team, Atlanta United chose neutral vocabulary and informal style. Such an approach could provide a better connection with the

audience since it created more opportunities to communicate with the publics rather than just inform them.

A facilitative strategy was the second most used by the club. These results do not support previous research (Page, 2000; Page & Hazleton, 1999; Werder, 2005; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009), where informative and persuasive strategies dominated. Atlanta United's results may be explained with the sports industry's specifics: sports teams are surrounded by the publics that share the same values as the sports organization (fans), which suggests why a facilitative strategy may be more useful than a persuasive one. However, more research is needed to test this assumption.

The popularity of the facilitative strategy among Atlanta United's public relations practitioners may also be due to the way the club used it. When applying a facilitative strategy, Atlanta United expanded its audience. Rather than focusing only on the team's fans, the organization broadly targeted soccer fans (not necessarily Atlanta United supporters) and the local community and provided them with the options to address their needs and aspirations. To soccer enthusiasts, Atlanta United offered ways to enjoy "world-class" soccer in their region. To other Atlanta citizens, the club offered opportunities to be part of city life and history. Such usage of the facilitative strategy might have been beneficial for Atlanta United in three ways. First, it secured the club with an audience of like-minded people even before the team had built its fanbase. Second, it might have raised awareness of the club among a wider audience and, possibly, later converted some of this audience into loyal publics. Finally, by highlighting that the club and its audience had similar interests, Atlanta United created a chance to provoke greater involvement from the publics. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1984), the publics'

involvement can be later converted into a stronger motivation from the audience to be engaged in further communication with the organization.

An increase in usage of facilitative strategy may be attributed to the change in technologies. Previous studies were conducted during the times when press releases were distributed through traditional media only. Nowadays, on the contrary, press releases are designed to be spread not only via newspapers or TV but through new media. This creates additional opportunities for organizations to exercise a facilitative approach by adding hyperlinks leading to the webpages where the audience can get detailed instructions, directions, or make purchases from the organization. Future research on how the usage of facilitative strategy has changed with the development of new media will be beneficial.

To implement the persuasive strategy, Atlanta United chose a "soft" approach: the organization did not try to persuade its audience using directive messages and provoking arguments. Instead, Atlanta United executed the strategy by carefully selecting the vocabulary, choosing strong epithets, and making value judgments. Previous studies revealed that people are more resistant to any kind of persuasion when they are aware that they are being persuaded (Steindl et al., 2015). Perhaps, that is why Atlanta United considered less "obvious" methods to be more effective. Also, it is important not to forget that this study deals with sports – a specific industry where communications can differ from those within other business areas. Perhaps, in sports, such less straight-forward methods of persuasion bring better results because in the field of entertainment (unlike the more "serious" fields such as politics or healthcare), hard pressure is inappropriate and unnecessary. This topic, however, requires further research.

Surprisingly, even though the club actively communicated its strong connection to the community and the fans and their eagerness to do everything "together," a cooperative problem-

solving communicative strategy was used little by Atlanta United. Instead, the club was either encouraging its supporters to do something (facilitative approach) or reported what the club itself did (informative approach). Further research will be beneficial to see how professional sports teams can implement a cooperative problem-solving strategy to better use.

The lack of bargaining tactics in Atlanta United's communications supports previous research (Page, 2000; Page & Hazleton, 1999) and can possibly be explained by the fact that bargaining strategy is usually applied when an organization has a conflict with someone (with an audience or with a third party) or in crises. Most likely, during the launch, Atlanta United simply did not need to use a bargaining strategy. However, some researchers previously considered bargaining approach to be used mostly for interpersonal communications and did not test the strategy (Werder, 2005; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009), hence the strategy did not get enough attention from the researchers. With the boundaries between interpersonal and mass communications blurring due to the usage of technologies and with masspersonal communications (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017) coming to the fore, more research is needed on how public relations practitioners (working for both sport-related and non-sport-related organizations) use bargaining strategy nowadays.

Data showed that Atlanta United often combined attributes of two or more strategies in one press release. To do so, the club used both the vocabulary and the structure of the messages. These findings raise the question for future research of whether applying the mix of strategies within one piece of content is more effective during the sports team's launch.

Atlanta United press releases were also tested on what brand attributes were communicated there. The results support previous findings stating that a new sports brand that does not have on-field achievements would mostly focus on non-product-related attributes in its

messages (Lock et al., 2011). However, Atlanta United demonstrated how product-related brand attributes could be communicated even in the absence of a product. One of the ways the organization did that was by replacing the theme of the team's success with the theme of future success, promising the audience good upcoming results.

Atlanta United used a similar approach to communicate some non-product-related brand attributes, too. Thus, previous research demonstrates that such brand attribute as history and traditions is significant for the sports team (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; McDonald, Karg, & Lock, 2010). Since Atlanta United was a new team, it did not have anything to communicate as its history or traditions. To overcome that, Atlanta United framed its press releases as if the history was unfolding right there, in front of the publics' eyes, and that everyone who was somehow involved with the team or who was a supporter, was part of that history – not only the history of the club, but the history of the city and even the state.

Another tactic that Atlanta chose in the absence of its own traditions and history was to highlight close cultural and historical connections between the team and the city and appoint itself as the successor of this history and these traditions. The connection with the local community and the city that Atlanta United communicated went beyond historical references or reports about the team's philanthropy efforts in the name of the local community. The way Atlanta United narrated its connection with the city was different than the more traditional ways sports teams use to demonstrate that they value their region and residents. In its messages, Atlanta United depicted itself not just as the team that respected the community and helped it. More importantly, Atlanta United created an image of the team being an indispensable part of the region, linked with it by economic and cultural connections.

When publics perceive the connection between the team and the region it represents, it may affect their loyalty to the team. According to the previous studies, such connection is one of the reasons that people, even those who are not interested in sports, tend to watch Olympic games and support their national teams (Tomlinson & Young, 2006). Similar phenomena may occur with the connection of the team with the city. Jones (1998) looked at the example of the English soccer club Luton Town FC and tried to answer why fans remained loyal to the team, even when it showed low results. One of the reasons for that was the team's connection to the area and the community. Moreover, that connection persisted even when the person moved (Heere & James, 2007). Studies show that fans associating their club with their hometown (or, on an international sports scale, with the country), may feel like they betray their city/country when they stop supporting the team (Heere & James, 2007).

Atlanta United's example demonstrates that this connection between the city and the team can be communicated through the team's messages to its audiences. Future research is needed to test this theme and see if it can be an addition to the Team Association Model. This approach the team used also made it easier to distribute news about Atlanta United to a wider audience – because with Atlanta United being an intrinsic part of the city, a lot of the news about the team, its stadium, its sponsors and the club's initiatives became the news about the city.

Another theme that emerged from Atlanta United press releases is the team's connection to global soccer. Previous research noted that for a new team with a lack of achievement, the interest of fans in the sport it represents is crucial (Lock et al., 2011). Atlanta United, in every possible way, communicated its connection with the traditions of global soccer and tried to adapt them to the American reality. This also allowed the club to communicate not only with its own fans but with football fans in general. These two factors may have helped the new club to expand

its fanbase and its audience, as well as gain the trust of those local fans who were interested in European or South American soccer.

Finally, another theme that emerges from the data was the popularity/fame of the team. Atlanta United actively communicated the fact that it was very popular among fans and Atlanta residents, even when the club was far from record-breaking sales and high fan demand. Thus, the organization gradually created a buzz around itself, building a perception that the presence of a new club in the city was something important, interesting, and that it was a trend. Those actions from the team could potentially create additional motivation among Atlanta citizens, including those who were not fond of soccer before, to follow the club and support it.

Conclusion

This thesis showcases one of the ways a new sports organization can communicate with its publics. For that, this paper uses the example of the club that was able to assemble a loyal audience. The findings suggest how the team can apply different communication strategies focusing on informative messages to raise awareness and using facilitative, persuasive, cooperative problem-solving, and power messages to discuss topics of greater importance. It also indicates how the organization may use "softer" persuasion tactics to avoid putting obvious pressure on the publics, and how it can utilize facilitative messages to various audiences. Through the examples of Atlanta United messages, the study demonstrates the ways a sports team can communicate its product-related attributes as well as its history and traditions in the absence of the product and history.

In the case of Atlanta United, the team's brand communications were mostly focused on the organization's relations with its fans. Another crucial theme that Atlanta United communicated to its publics was its symbiosis with the local community. By promoting this

connection, the club created additional opportunities to expand their audience, as well as increase the involvement of the already existing one. This eventually turned the team's news from sports news to local news. Finally, Atlanta United showcases how proactively communicating non-product-related brand attributes can help broaden audiences beyond fans. Although these results are derived from the analysis of the messages of only one successful team, they can be useful and be applied as recommendations for other new sports organizations.

The study provides new information for the development of both Hazleton's (1992) taxonomy of communication strategies and the Team Associations Model (Gladden & Funk, 2002). First, it allows one to look at public relations in sports from the point of strategic communications and gives a hint of how communication strategies that were studied widely in different fields are used in sports. As for Team Association Model, this paper contributes to the research of brand communications from the organizational point of view (instead of the audience's point of view). It helps to see what brand attributes sports clubs communicate in their messages to its publics and how they do that. This paper also reveals three additional themes that emerged from the Atlanta United data that can be further tested as possible additions to the model.

Limitations and Future Research

The design of the study entails a few restrictions. It is a case study, which means that in order to achieve better transferability, it is necessary to later conduct a series of similar research and analyze communication strategies of other new teams that have or have not achieved popularity with the audience and compare the data.

The research method that was applied in this study is thematic analysis. Although it has advantages – for example, it provides a possibility to study how exactly the communication

happened, what the organization said to its audience, and what was necessary for the organization to convey to the public – it leaves two critical questions without answers. The first one is whether all the decisions made by the Atlanta United's communication team were intentional, deliberate, and fully recognized before the strategies were applied? The second question is to what extent the brand attributes that the organization communicated were understood by the audience? For example, did Atlanta United, which actively communicated the team's connection with the local community, succeed in building the perception of connection in people's minds? To answer the first question, in-depth interviews with the Atlanta United's communications team are needed. To answer the second question, a survey among the fans would be beneficial.

The sample that was chosen for the analysis also caused limitations. For this study, press releases were selected to see how Atlanta United communicated with its publics via mass media. However, a sports team interaction with its publics is not limited to press releases. Future analysis on Atlanta United social media would be useful since it may help see the difference in strategic approaches to communications one team uses for different interaction channels.

It will be beneficial for future research as well to investigate how Atlanta United communicated with its publics after it started playing in MLS and whether the communication strategy and key brand attributes communicated to publics changed. Also, keeping in mind that the press releases are meant to be distributed through the media, it would be beneficial to see how the releases written by Atlanta United were presented in the media and how they were framed. Future research of the newspapers is also needed to see whether mass media picked up the themes that were revealed in the press releases by this study.

In terms of developing the theoretical work on strategic communications in sports, more research is required (both on the new and existing teams) to clarify the definition for each strategy in the context of sports communications and to collect more examples of their usage. As for the Team Association Model development, the new themes that emerged from the set of data from Atlanta United should be tested on other teams.

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Appendix 1: Codebook 1

Strategic Communication Messaging					
Category	Short Description (Abitbol, 2017; Werder, 2005)	Full Description	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Examples
Informative Strategy	Messages are characterized by the use of neutral language and organic, or natural, patterns of organization to create greater ease of comprehension.	Press releases that match this category, provide facts. These press releases do not include opinions, assessments. They use neutral language. No offers. No calls for action. Usually have a news story at its core.	<p>Neutral language. Absence of emotionally charged phrases. These messages usually provide the audience with facts.</p> <p>Examples in the sports industry: news releases about new players signed or coaches hired, games' results.</p>	Excludes press releases, where emotionally charged vocabulary is used, especially where the events or causes described in the messages are assessed, depicted as positive/negative/important/unimportant. Excludes messages with calls to actions, directive messages, messages that encourage the audience to act a certain way.	<p>"Atlanta United today announced it has signed Chilean midfielder Carlos Carmona as a Discovery Signing, using Targeted Allocation Money. Carmona will officially join the club's roster pending receipt of his International Transfer Certificate (ITC) and P-1 Visa"</p> <p>"Atlanta United will host open tryouts outside of Nashville, Tenn., as part of a series with jersey sponsor American Family Insurance on Oct. 8-9"</p>
Facilitative Strategy	An organization in its communication messages does not persuade its publics to act in a certain way but provides resources to help them behave based on predisposed beliefs.	The central idea of facilitative messages is that they are not aimed at changing the public's opinion or attract people's attention to an issue. They are designed to facilitate people who are already aware of the cause and are interested in doing something.	In these press releases, the organization usually applies to the fans (either of the team or the sport this team represents). It offers them ways to support the team: e.g., invites them to the game, offers team's merchandise, encourage fans to participate in the events or flash mobs. However, the audience of these press releases is not limited by the team's fans only. The club can apply to other publics that share its values. For example, the organization can speak to a broad local audience about how they can unite the community. Or it can offer people the organization's programs for charity. Often phrases like "let's do it" are used.	Excludes the press releases containing attempts to influence the public's attitude towards the team or a cause supported by the team.	<p>"Atlanta, your new MLS team invites you to join together with other Atlanta-area soccer fanatics to watch Team USA's group play matches during the 2014 World Cup. Let's rally around our universal love of the most popular sport on the planet and get behind the Red, White and Blue!</p> <p>DATES & TIMES Fado Irish Pub 273 Buckhead Ave NE, Atlanta, GA 30305 Monday, June 16: USA vs. Ghana, 5pm-9pm Sunday, June 22: USA vs. Portugal, 2pm-8pm Big Sky 3201 Cains Hill PL NW, Atlanta, GA 30305 Thursday, June 26: USA vs. Germany, 11am-6pm"</p>
Persuasive	The messages are directive, and they often appeal to the public's	These messages are aimed to influence the audience's attitude to the	In these press releases, emotionally charged rhetoric is often utilized. Words like "important", "essential",	Excludes directive messages that promise benefits for recommended behavior or threats	<p>"the new Atlanta stadium will be one of the most spectacular venues in the world"</p> <p>"Atlanta continues to attract leading</p>

	values, emotions, or goals. The organization tries to ask the publics to do something or to attract their attention to some cause or an issue crucial for the organization.	event/problem/cause. Often, they contain directive messages, advice, appeals to the audience's values. However, sometimes the format of those messages may mimic the informative messages, but they will contain value judgments and bias assertions.	"crucial" are used. Usually, persuasive messages include directives, calls-to-actions. If there are no direct calls-to-actions, persuasive press releases can be identified by the presence of value judgments (ex, "this is great for our city") and/or statements that are not supported with facts ("this will improve our economy"). Persuasive messages appeal to the audience's values. For example, messages aiming to increase support of a new sports team may contain statements assuring the publics of the importance of the team for the community, local economy, and development of the city/state. In those messages, statements like "the best," "the most spectacular/interesting/entertaining," etc. may be used.	for the behavior that is not recommended (those messages will be attributed to the category of "power strategy").	companies and venues that create well-paying jobs and boost tourism spending in our city" "Atlanta United has taken huge steps in becoming a professional soccer club, immersing itself in the community, partnering with distinguished organizations, and forming a world class team both on and off the field" "The excitement and anticipation for Atlanta United to begin play in Atlanta is evident every time we interact with the supporters."
Power Strategy	Messages contain active demonstration that the audience would benefit from the recommended behavior or would lose benefits from the behavior that is not recommended.	In power messages, a direct link is communicated: if the publics do what the organization asks them to do, they will get some benefits (for example, those who purchase seasonal tickets will get discounts). Messages communicating that publics will lose benefits if they behave not as recommended are also classified as power messages.	Includes press releases where discounts and profits for fans/season ticket holders/event guests are discussed.	Excludes messages that encourage publics to do something but do not promise any rewards for the suggested behavior (or do not threaten publics for the non-recommended behavior).	"Founding Members not only receive priority in the pre-sale of single and multi-game tickets, but as season ticket holders they save a significant amount of money on a per game basis as opposed to purchasing single game tickets separately. Become a Founding Member and receive special benefits such as VIP status to exclusive events, discounts on merchandise, recognition in downtown Atlanta's new Mercedes-Benz Stadium and more" "Become an Atlanta United Founding Member today and cement your place in history. Have a chance to be pitch-side when your team takes the field in Atlanta for the very first time"
Cooperative Problem-Solving Strategy	An open exchange of information to establish a common definition of the problem, common goals, and to share positions and responsibilities about the issue.	Messages highlight that the team/club has the goals and problems common with the audience and invites its publics to act for those causes or to solve those common problems together.	Often contain phrases like "together with your help we will," "this is our common goal." "this is what we together can do for the community." In these messages, the organization often addresses its audience as the "part of the team," "part of the family." In these messages, the organization also asks its publics for feedback or communicates that something was done/has been changed because of	Excludes directive messages that promise benefits for recommended behavior or threat for the behavior that is not recommended (those messages will be attributed to the category of "power strategy").	"We support Atlanta soccer in every way possible, both in support of the teams and in support of our community. Good acts for those in need are important to us as we strive to make Atlanta a better place." "Together, we can make a difference on and off the field" "We have listened to the concerns of the fans on the food and beverage experience and have responded to those concerns in a way that honors our commitment to providing the best possible fan experience at our events."

			the feedback from the audience and invites its publics to act for those causes or to solve those common problems together.		
Bargaining Strategy	An organization and its publics have incompatible goals and are trying to negotiate.	Used when addressing a conflict or the issue that the organization and its publics have strong opposite views on. It is also used when a club has a conflict with another organization and communicates with the audience to explain its position.	Messages usually describe two (or more) conflicting groups. For example, it can be an open letter from a club's management to a fans' organization that is not satisfied with the club's results and demands to fire the head coach. In those messages, the organization's position is explained, and the reasoning behind the opposite side's position is debated.	Excludes the messages where the conflict is defined, but the organization, instead of opposing itself to the other group, admits the problem and encourages the opponent to join the efforts and solve the problem together (those messages will be attributed to the category of "cooperative problem-solving").	NA

Appendix 2: Codebook 2

Team Association Model/Brand Attributes					
Name	Short Description (according to Parganas et al.,2015)	Full Description	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Quotes
Team Success	Success of the team, quality/style of play of the team	Press releases matching this category describe the on-field success of the team. They are dedicated to the quality or the style that team plays.	This category includes reports from the games won, press-releases where the quality of the team's performance is described as "exceptional," "high-quality," etc. It also includes press releases where the team's possible future success (or the chances for it) is discussed.	Excludes reports about games lost, unless the opponent is described as a very strong one, and/or Atlanta United's game is pictured as "a good fight." If a player's successful performance is described, but the athlete did not play for Atlanta United (e.g., his success in the game for the National Team is described), the press releases should be excluded from the category.	"a winning team on the field" "the strongest team in the league" "building the best club in MLS" [AU has] "lethal attack" "the team as a whole showed a lot of promise and produced glimpses of brilliance" [AU] "defeated the reigning MLS Cup Champions" "promising performance for the MLS expansion club"
Star Player	High quality and/or highly recognizable players	Press releases matching this category are dedicated to the most famous player(-s) in the team or the most successful one(-s). Usually, if a team is trying to build its communication campaign around a star player, his name will appear at more than one press release.	A player will be described as "famous," "legendary," "a star," or the "main hope" of the team. His bio would usually include a mention of a successful career in "renowned" soccer clubs. If a particular player is explicitly mentioned in press releases dedicated to different topics (for example, his success is highlighted in all the games reports, or his presence at the club's events is mentioned specifically), those press releases will fit this category.	Since Atlanta United dedicated a significant number of its press releases to the introduction of new players, it is essential to keep in mind that a new player's simple biography does not fit this category. The press release does not fit this category unless it goes deeper into details, the player is described as the main hope, a leading star of the team, and/or the press release is followed by several other press releases dedicated to the same player.	"Wide, attacking, creative midfielder willing to do the unexpected" "Dynamic, box-to-box central midfielder offering both a creative and physical presence" "Last Saturday at 7:30pm, Andrew Carleton made history. At just sixteen years of age, Carleton earned his first start for the Atlanta United's USL affiliate Charleston Battery, making him the youngest American player ever to start a USL match"
Head Coach	Successful, charismatic or iconic head coach	In the press releases matching this category, the head coach or his coaching team are discussed. The coach/coaching team may be mentioned both when talking about their success with AU, their success with their previous teams, or their activities outside soccer	This category includes reports about new coaches assigned to the club. It contains stories about members of the coaching team. It also includes all the stories not dedicated to the coaches but where a head coach or his assistants are mentioned (e.g., when the on-field success of the team is explained by the decisions/tactics of the coach). Includes press releases where the	Excludes pre-game reports on the team's roster, where the coach's name is mentioned. Excludes reports from press conferences where the coach is interviewed unless the coach's decisions, work, or life are discussed specifically. Excludes events announcements (or reports from the events) where the coach is mentioned unless his presence is	"Not only has Mears been impressed with the mere caliber of his teammates, but also the distinction, the methodology and the professionalism from head coach Tata Martino" "it was obviously a Tata Martino coached side as Atlanta United maintained the majority of the possession and kept Chattanooga chasing" "Atlanta United Head Coach, Tata Martino, experienced his first Atlanta professional

		(charity, personal interests, etc.).	head coach or the members of the coaching team are pictured as initiators of charity or community activities. Includes press releases where other people (e.g., players, managers) are talking about how "important," "essential," the coach or his work is, or how experienced or famous he is.	highlighted specifically, and he is described as an important figure for the event.	sports game yesterday as the Atlanta Hawks faced the Chicago Bulls in Phillips Arena."
Brand Mark	The logo, mascot, colors and uniforms of the team	In press releases matching this category, the name, the logo, team colors, uniform, or a mascot are described, or their meanings are discussed.	This category includes the messages about new uniform collections, opening of the team store, team store sales, especially if the uniform is described there or if the messages encourage the public to buy something from the store to "feel like a part of the team." It includes all the press releases where the meaning behind the symbols on the logo, uniform, or flags is discussed.	Mentions about sponsors are excluded. Press releases where the colors of the uniforms are mentioned only to provide information in which uniform the team is playing the next or current game are excluded.	"The word 'United' has long been associated with the beautiful game around the world. It has particular resonance for Atlanta, as a transport hub in the Southeast, as a multi-cultural, international city and as a club committed to community" "The five vertical stripes, two victory red and three black, represent Atlanta United's brand pillars: Unity, Excellence, Community, Determination, and Innovation."
Management	The executive management of the club, presence of presidents-figures	Press releases dedicated to the top-management of the club, front-office workers, current and previous managers, and owners.	This category includes reports about new managers assigned to the club. It contains stories about managers, owners, front-office workers, as well as all the stories not dedicated to them but where they are mentioned (e.g., when the on-field success of the team is explained by the decisions/tactics of the top-management). Includes press releases discussing the club's management taking part in the club's charity or community activities. Also includes letters and messages from the managers strictly addressed to the audience.	Excludes press releases where the management of the club is mentioned briefly, i.e., when their names are listed among participants of club's events, unless their presence at the event is highlighted (e.g., it is placed in the headline), described with details.	"he [Darren Eales, AU president] will join the club later this year, following a transition period with Tottenham Hotspur FC, a world-renowned English Premiere League team" "His credentials speak for themselves; he knows how to lead a first-class organization and build a winning team"
Club's History and Traditions	Winning records, past success, tragedies, legendary matches, and players	Press releases where previous wins, losses, historical milestones of the team are discussed. Also, press releases where soccer's history and traditions are discussed (if the connection between them and the team is explained). Messages where the city's local history and traditions are discussed can also be in this category if the connection between	Includes messages mentioning previous "great" wins or "historical" losses, long-lasting traditions. The messages usually contain words like "historical," "milestone," etc. <i>NB</i> Includes all the messages, pointing that history is happening right now.	Excludes press releases discussing local history or traditions (Georgia history, Atlanta heritage, etc.), unless the connection between those traditions and Atlanta United traditions is explained in the text. Excludes press releases discussing history or traditions of soccer unless the relationship between them and AU traditions are defined in the text.	"A new era has dawned" "historic milestone in the club history" "Today, history will be made and ambitions will come to fruition as Atlanta United compete in their first-ever Major League Soccer match" "If you become a Founding Member, you will be entered into the drawing for this historic opportunity"

		them and the team's traditions and history is elaborated.			
Club's Culture and Values	Values/culture of the team, its role in the community	Press releases mentioning the team's values, that can be communicated through its special events, its brand mark, its connections with the community. Press releases describing the organization's attempts in corporate social responsibility and philanthropy.	Includes press releases mentioning the team's community programs and philanthropy efforts. Also includes press releases articulating Atlanta United's mission and vision statements. Often includes phrases like "this is our priority," "this is the team's value/mission." Although often messages can communicate both "club's history and traditions" brand attribute and "club's culture and values" brand attribute, it is important to see the difference. When communicating the club's culture and values, press releases usually concentrate on the club's core values, mission, and vision instead of "great wins," records, and customs.	Excludes texts about the city/state/community's culture unless their influence on the team/club's culture is pronounced. Excludes the press releases where the connection with the community is mentioned, but their cultural/value connection is not explained (e.g., press releases where a head coach or the management of the team are described as "Atlanta/Georgia representatives" at certain events. Excludes press releases highlighting that Atlanta United is loved by the local community if those press releases do not say anything about the club's culture or its values.	"It's inspiring to see Atlanta United staff and supporters continue to celebrate diversity and inclusion not only this week but throughout the year" "When we announced the club in 2014, I promised three things: to put a winning team on the field, to provide a great match day experience for our fans, and to entrench this club into the community" "We're excited to partner with Atlanta United to bring quality jobs and economic growth to Franklin Road, and this is just the beginning" "Atlanta United will also partner with the City of Marietta to develop a joint use community park along Rottenwood Creek and trails, bringing multi-use fields to youth in the community within walking distance of the training complex"
Event's Image	The image of the competition or the opponent (rivalry)	These messages describe the competition or the opponent, they may highlight rivalries or explain why one or the other game is interesting/important to watch.	Includes press releases talking about the future games, the teams that Atlanta United is going to compete against and their best players, possible game strategies, rivalries. Reports from the previous games also should be included in this category.	This category does not include the stadium's attractions (food, entertainment). It also excludes the announcements or reports from all the events other than games (non-sport events).	"This game against New York Red Bulls may be a beginning of a historic rivalry" "MARCH 5th Atlanta's Inaugural MLS Home Opener is less than two weeks away. Fans will be raving, excitement will fill the city, and history will be made. Reserve your seat. Tickets are limited"
Sponsor	The image of the sponsor, its association with the club	Messages dedicated to the sponsors of the team, new contracts, etc.	Includes all the press releases where new sponsor's contracts are discussed, messages where sponsor's events or activities are highlighted	Excludes press releases where the name of a sponsor is only mentioned because it is included in the name of the stadium/tournament the press release is about and is not followed by deeper details of the sponsor itself or its influence on the club or the local community.	"As a global brand with deep-rooted ties to the Atlanta community, Coca-Cola's activation at Mercedes-Benz Stadium solidifies our ties in the heart of Atlanta and demonstrates our aspiration to be benchmark in everything we do"
Fans	Not just customers, essential part of a unique product	In press releases matching this category team's relationships with fans are discussed: the influence fans have on the club and the role they play in the team's success on and off the field.	Includes messages about the fans, messages describing the efforts the team makes for its fans. Also includes the press releases where the team highlights the role of the fans in the life of the club or thanks them for the support. The category includes all the press releases mentioning the activities (flash mobs, challenges) that Atlanta United created for the fans,	Excludes press releases where the quantity of fans at sports events is reported, unless it is specifically highlighted that a lot of fans came to see the game/participate in the club's event and that Atlanta United is a very popular and beloved team. Does not include press releases where soccer fans are discussed but they are not	"Since Atlanta was awarded Major League Soccer's 22nd team in April, excitement for the club's arrival has been overwhelming. MLS Atlanta has already set records in fan participation, with more than 5,300 fans signed up for the Founders Club season ticket program resulting in over 15,500 seats reserved" "We have listened to the concerns of the fans on the food and beverage experience and have responded to those concerns"

			especially if the club uses fans' help in promoting the brand (e.g., when fans are asked to participate in the contest and hang Atlanta United flags on their front yards). Phrases like "our fans are the part of the team," "we did this on our fans' demand," are often used, as well as the phrases where fans are called "cofounders of the club," "a family," "additional players." Press releases citing that something was done by the team because of the fans or together with fans also fit this category.	specified as Atlanta United (or MLS Atlanta) fans.	"The community and our fans are what defines us" "In an effort to engage Atlanta Falcons fans and Atlanta United supporters, the teams along with SCAD polled over 1,200 fans to identify themes, colors and aesthetics for The Art Collection"
Stadium	The arena, facilities, concessions at the stadium	Includes all the messages where facilities, entertainment programs, concessions at the arena are discussed.	Includes all the press releases mentioning the advantages of the arena where Atlanta United plays (or will play), its convenience for fans, vendors, and high technologies used to improve the quality of the audience's experience.	Excludes the press releases where the stadium/another Atlanta United facility is mentioned only as a place where a game/club event is happening unless the press release goes more in-depth about the stadium.	"We believe the new Atlanta stadium will be one of the most spectacular venues in the world" "This stadium is meant to reflect what our fans and supporters told us they want" "This will be a world-class stadium where we will host Atlanta United matches as well as international competition"
Additional categories that were revealed during the initial coding					
Connection with Local Community	NA	In these press releases, Atlanta United is depicted as not just the team that respects the community and helps it but also as a part of the city and the state, linked with them by economic and cultural connections.	Includes all the press releases highlighting cultural, economic, historical connections between the club and the city. Includes press releases stating that the team is essential for the region, and the press releases underlining the community's value to the club. Unlike the "club's culture and values" category, the current category includes press releases discussing local history or traditions. Press releases that don't mention the team's values and culture but highlighting the importance of the club for Atlanta and/or Georgia also fits this category. Press releases where Atlanta United's players, management, or coaches are depicted as representatives of Atlanta/Georgia, fit the current category as well.	This category does not include press releases mentioning how popular Atlanta United among fans (how many supporters it has, how many people come to see the games).	"Make sure that anyone who passes by knows that this is OUR city. You are not just a fan. You are part of one voice, one people, one club that embodies the meaning and culture of Atlanta" "We support Atlanta soccer in every way possible, both in support of the teams and in support of our community. Good acts for those in need are important to us as we strive to make Atlanta a better place." "will strive to make the sport of soccer accessible and inclusive for individuals across the state of Georgia through various grant programs, equipment donations and pitch builds" "Atlanta continues to attract leading companies and venues that create well-paying jobs and boost tourism spending in our city. This partnership is another example of our growth as a world-class city and of our will to win."

Popularity/Fame	NA	In these press releases the organization highlights that it is very popular and has a lot of supporters.	Includes all the messages citing the number of single-game tickets and seasonal tickets sold. Contains the messages highlighting "massive support" and "tremendous interest" to the club.	Excludes press releases mentioning how famous/loved soccer is in the area unless the connection between the public's interest in soccer in general with their high recognition of the team is highlighted.	<p>"Interest in Atlanta United has been tremendous since the club was announced as Major League Soccer's 22nd franchise on April 16, 2014"</p> <p>"Blank and his family took a moment to represent the legions of supporters and their new MLS franchise back in Atlanta"</p> <p>"Since Atlanta was awarded Major League Soccer's 22nd team in April, excitement for the club's arrival has been overwhelming. MLS Atlanta has already set records in fan participation, with more than 5,300 fans signed up for the Founders Club season ticket program resulting in over 15,500 seats reserved"</p>
Connection with Global Soccer	NA	Messages highlighting the team (or the region where the team is from) as a successor of the history, traditions, and values of the sport of soccer.	Includes all the messages outlining the popularity of soccer worldwide, its traditions, and its history. Includes all the press releases where Atlanta United is mentioned as the team that adopts, develops, and maintains global soccer traditions and culture. Also includes press releases where the region (Atlanta or Georgia) is described as a place with long soccer traditions (e.g., World Cup games were held there before and gathered big crowds).	Informative and educational messages that discuss basic soccer rules or the laws of the league are excluded. Messages discussing the team's own history and traditions are excluded from this category unless the connection with global soccer history and traditions is pronounced.	<p>"There is no denying that Atlanta is a true soccer town!"</p> <p>"Now a truly popular and accepted date during the Premier League season in the U.K., Boxing Day normally features 10 games, which involves all 20 teams in the league competing on the same day, a very rare occasion. In addition, the three lower tiers of soccer in the U.K. after the Premier League compile nearly all their games on the 26th tallying 34 more games to the mayhem"</p> <p>"It's clear that soccer is a universal language that every member of the club understands"</p>