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Exploring how a disability sport charity utilises exchange relationships with external organisations to sustain operations in times of lockdown

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ABSTRACT

National lockdowns exacerbated the inequalities that many disabled people faced in accessing and engaging in sport and physical activity. Like many organisations, disability sport and physical recreation-focused charities were constrained in their ability to deliver and sustain their services during such periods. This study explored the exchange relationships between a disability sport charity and its existing and prospective business clients as the former rolled key elements of its provision online. Resource mobilisation theory was employed as a framework by which to identify key resource types and mechanisms underpinning the exchanges between the businesses and the charity. Semi-structured interviews with participants from eight businesses were conducted to understand the dynamics of such resource exchange. Moral resources featured prominently in participants' accounts, particularly in relation to the legitimacy of the charity and authenticity of its delivery, with human resources also receiving much attention due to facilitators' engaging delivery styles. Overall, the charity was able to extend its organisational mission of increasing inclusion in physical activity beyond its own programmes via businesses through which it shares exchange relationships, emphasising the importance of such relationships both during and beyond lockdown periods.

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Disability sport; social movement organisation; resource mobilisation; exchange relationships; networks; inclusion

Introduction

In their research examining the effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic on Business-to-Business (B2B) companies' operations, Cortez and Johnston (2020) compared such implications with those of traditional financial crises, such as the 2008–2009 global economic recession. Financial-based crises are typically triggered by endogenous mechanisms within markets, whereas, and unprecipitated by financial factors, the exogenous shock and socio-biological and transmissive nature of Covid-19 exposed a lack of organisational preparedness and protocols of businesses and enterprises for navigating a global public health pandemic – bringing about operational uncertainty in ways that financial crises alone do not (Cortez & Johnston, 2020).

In the UK, government-imposed national, regional, and residential lockdowns were legally enforced to prevent person-to-person transmission of the virus by restricting people's movement, confining millions of people to their own homes at intervals during the pandemic (Roberts, 2020).

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Non-essential services and business were not exempt from lockdown, and instead forced to close their work premises. As Ken Roberts wrote, ‘the industries catering for out-of-home leisure were the first to be hit and the hardest hit by the lockdown’ (2020, p. 626). Consequently, the sustainability of smaller enterprises which are non-profit in nature (and often without cash reserves) and that are essential to the provision of active leisure, sport, and physical recreation were placed in an especially precarious financial position (European Non-Governmental Sports Organization, 2020; Hayton, 2022;). Non-profit organisations – such as disability sport charities (DSCs) – present vital sources of physical recreation for marginalised groups, groups which such opportunities seemingly became limited for disabled people[1] during periods of lockdown (Activity Alliance, 2021; Hayton, 2022; Kamyuka et al., 2020).

Many businesses had to alter their operating procedures in response to Covid-19 restrictions, which, during lockdowns, resulted in the full or partial shutting down of their facilities as well as reductions to staffing (Cortez & Johnston, 2020). For those staff still working in times of lockdown, society witnessed a large scale shift to socially distanced and online working practices, yet, according to Cortez and Johnston (2020), virtual platforms were deemed to diminish operational effectiveness and business impact. From their findings with B2B employees, Cortez and Johnston (2020) indicated that the pre-existing relationships with current partners and customers grew ever more salient to navigating the crisis and organisational survival.

The purpose of this article therefore is to examine the exchange relationships between a DSC and their business clients during lockdown(s) and the resources that are exchanged via such relationships, in order to demonstrate how the DSC: a) generates revenue in times of resource scarcity, and b) is able to deliver to and extend its organisational mission of increasing accessibility and inclusion in sport and active leisure beyond its own sport programmes and via those business clients through which it shares such exchange relationships. To do this, we apply the framework of resource mobilisation theory to illustrate key resource types and mechanisms underpinning their exchange. The research on which this article is based concerns a DSC operating in the North East of England. Established in 2013, this DSC provides disability sport and physical activity programmes and delivers disability awareness training to businesses and organisations operating in and across the field of sport, physical recreation, and active leisure. Rather than centre our analysis on data yielded directly from the DSC, we utilise interviews with key management personnel that represent eight client organisations of the DSC that have either bought services from the DSC in the past, have availed themselves of their digital services during lockdown, or would consider obtaining such services in the future.

The overarching argument that we present in the article is twofold: first, that the relationships shared between the charity and businesses are crucial to the sustenance of the charity and its operations both within and beyond times of lockdown; and second, that the nature of the DSC’s dual service nature in combination with such exchange relationships enables it to extend its organisational mission via recipient organisations, thus continuing to contribute to a much broader movement for social inclusion whilst society was held in the grip of a global health pandemic. The article contributes to the leisure studies and sport literature in several ways. We apply RMT to the study of disability-focused sport, recreation, and leisure provision in a way that, to the best of our knowledge, has not been done previously. We utilise RMT to dissect how a DSC ‘leans in’ to lockdown to draw in resources, sustain its operations, and continue to pursue and extend its mission objectives. By virtue of points one and two, we highlight the salience of those organisations that sit somewhat outside of mainstream sport structures in the provision of accessible and inclusive sport and physical recreation services.

Inclusive sport, physical recreation, and active leisure and the role of the third sector

Emphasising the rhetoric around the centrality of sport and physical activity to the health and wellbeing of all members of society, Sport England’s (2021) recent strategy commits to redoubling its efforts to tackle inequalities that detract from people’s access to and quality of experience in sport

and physical recreation. The strategy highlights the necessity of working with and learning from 'partners' within the sport industry to harness best practice from across the sector to understand, inform, and deliver inclusive and enjoyable experiences for everyone, and especially those that have traditionally been marginalised from such opportunities. Specific mention is given to disabled persons as is the emergence of care homes as a priority area for ensuring that the salience of physical activity resonates, and that quality provision becomes an integrated feature of residents' lives[2] (Sport England, 2021). The third sector plays an important role in contributing to this agenda.

However, the operational hiatus imposed upon third sector organisations (TSOs) by the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting state response has deepened the financial 'crisis' in the sector, undermining the ability of charities to support vulnerable beneficiaries and calling into question the long-term sustainability of such organisations (Butler, 2020). In combination with the UK's exit from the European Union (EU) and the economic austerity policies adopted by successive governments, the impact of Covid-19 completes a triple 'whammy' of financial challenges faced by the third sector (Hill, 2020; Third Sector, 2020; Walker & Hayton, 2018). Indeed, the rolling back of the public sector in the UK since 2010 has ever increasingly beckoned TSOs to fill gaps in 'frontline' social service provision, thus transferring significant risk onto TSOs and away from the state (Dagdeviren et al., 2019).

As local authority sport provision has retrenched further and further, TSOs are becoming the key delivery agents for sport, recreation, and leisure, and this is particularly so for vulnerable groups (Walker & Hayton, 2018). Faced with an increasing demand for services, TSOs have been impacted by diminishing sources, sums, and durations of grant funding from within both the public and private sectors, and this has substantially increased the level of competition within the sector for the ever scarcer financial resources available (Hastings et al., 2015). In response, and in line with the sector more broadly, third sector sport organisations (TSSOs) have become more business-orientated, typically pursuing a pluralisation of revenue streams beyond traditional grant dependencies (Walker & Hayton, 2017, 2018).

One outlet for some TSSOs had been to scope funding beyond domestic bodies by targeting EU social funding (Walker and Hayton, 2017). As a consequence of the UK's exit from the European Union, however, Hill (2020) states that charities and social enterprises will have less access to EU funding or opportunities to lead on EU funded projects. To put this into further perspective, Cooney and Ferrell-Schweppenstedde (2017) reported that, in 2015, UK charities benefitted from £210.9 million awarded directly by the European Commission, and a further £47.5 million via European Structural and Investment Funds. Thus, the funding landscape available to organisations such as TSSOs grows narrower. In the context of Covid-19, according to Third Sector (2020), charity funding streams during the pandemic have been heavily constrained with many having to fall back on their reserves. Yet, at the onset of the pandemic in the UK, only a quarter of UK charities were estimated to have reserves large enough to sustain them for three months (National Council of Voluntary Organisations, 2020) whilst others have no financial reserves at all (Walker & Hayton, 2017), with many forced to rely on committed donors (Third Sector, 2020).

What is more, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief (and exacerbated) the inequalities that disabled people face in accessing and engaging in sport and physical activity (Hayton, 2022; Kamyuka et al., 2020). In illustration of this, figures released by the Activity Alliance (2021) reported that 59% of disabled people felt that their ability to undertake sport and physical activity has reduced during the pandemic, with the proportion of disabled people who felt that they had the opportunity to be as active as they wanted to be decreasing from 58% to 39% following the onset of Covid-19 in the UK.

Theoretical framework

The focus of this article centres around the work of a TSO to which we have given the pseudonym, *Admit*. The *Admit* organisation is a disability sport charity based in the North East of England. The charity exists to increase awareness and opportunity in disability sport

and physical recreation. Its mission is threefold: to promote the health of disabled people; to create opportunities for disabled people to participate in sport and physical activity, and to support all providers of sport and physical activity to include disabled people. To deliver against its mission aims, *Admit* provides disability sport and physical activity events and programmes, as well as disability awareness training courses for individuals and organisations either situated within the sport industry, or who are seeking to incorporate more sport and physical activity into their day-to-day operations.

This article has resonance within two contemporary and related bodies of literature: first, the burgeoning work focused on the increasing significance and operations of TSOs in the delivery of sport and recreation (as contextualised above) and second, literature on the *mainstreaming* of disability sport policy and organisational practice (e.g. Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Kitchin & Howe, 2014; Kitchin et al., 2019). Implemented across many European countries, mainstreaming presents a structural solution to increasing accessibility to and inclusion in sport for disabled people (Kitchin & Crossin, 2018). Mainstreaming represents the policy of integrating responsibility for formalised disability sport provision into non-disabled sporting organisations, and in England, for example, the responsibility for such disability sport provision is placed within sport-specific NGBs (Kitchin & Howe, 2014). However, research indicates that a gap tends to exist between inclusive 'policy and the operations at the implementation level' within mainstream sport settings which render processes of integration largely structural and superficial (Kitchin & Howe, 2014; Kitchin et al., 2019, p. 433). One underlying reason for this is suggested to be because community sport programming is dominated by a competitive pathway logic geared towards high-performance and elite sport, thus reinforcing outcomes and practices which marginalise those with complex disabilities and/or multiple impairments (Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Kitchin & Howe, 2014). In conjunction, insufficient planning, organisational capacity, and capacity building characterised by a paucity of actionable strategies, a lack of specialist personnel, limited range activities, and paternalistic provision overseen by largely nondisabled practitioners and decision-makers further serves to marginalise inclusivity (Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Kitchin et al., 2019).

The work of *Admit* converges with both national and international movements to reduce discrimination and promote inclusive opportunities for disabled adults and children to engage in sport and physical recreation, and to do so with regularity. As aforementioned, in England the most recent national sport (and physical activity) strategy places emphasis on the inequalities of access to and experience of sport and physical activity that marginalised groups such as disabled people have long faced. Entitled *Uniting the Movement*, the strategy document speaks of the radical change required to tackle the underpinning and intersectional dimensions of such inequalities and the importance of organisations (or 'partners') like *Admit* in contributing to this agenda.

Beyond the national level, the work that *Admit* undertakes connects with a much broader human rights movement occurring on an international scale which, in alignment with the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations, seeks to coalesce organisations spanning multiple fields and industries – including sport – 'to end discrimination and transform the lives of the world's 1.2 billion persons with disabilities so they can be visible and active members of an inclusive society' (#WeThe15, 2022). This movement aims to, for example: increase the awareness, visibility, and representation of disabled people; work on governments, businesses, and the public to be more inclusive of disabled people, and to empower disabled people to be active members of society (#WeThe15, 2022). In the context of the current study, such objectives very much chime with Article 30 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* which was introduced to recognise that disabled people have a right to access services from all areas of citizenship including recreational, leisure, and sporting opportunities, and should experience such services with full and effective participation (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). Indeed, as *Admit* endeavour to work with and develop a network of external businesses to deliver services and, ultimately, extend their organisational mission, by virtue of this they also contribute to the overarching movements outlined here.

The mobilisation of necessary resources is vital to the strength and successes of a social movement (Edwards et al., 2019; McCarthy & Zald, 2002; Millward, in press). Indeed, Millward highlights that resource mobilisation theory (RMT) has proven an influential framework in the study of social movements. Prior to RMT, and according to the classical model, social movements were conceived as irrational, emotionally driven and disorganised behaviour expressed by unconnected and alienated individuals (Hayton et al., 2019; Millward, in press). RMT scholars, on the other hand, contend that social movements are extensions of institutionalised actions and whereby the proliferation of organised collective action, and the impetus it is able to galvanise, is dependent upon the availability of and access to specific resources and the knowledge to use them effectively (Edwards et al., 2019; Jenkins, 1983; Millward, in press).

According to resource mobilisation theory therefore, social movements are driven by rational and organised groups or entities (McCarthy & Zald, 2002). To this McCarthy and Zald (1973, 1977) conceptualised the RMT to explain movement formation and implementation as led by emergent professional organisations, and thus referred to these entrepreneurial organisations as social movement organisations (SMOs). SMOs, then, can be understood as those 'organizations that seek to bring about social change by altering elements of social provision or the distribution of opportunities within a society' (Hayton et al., 2019, p. 24; McCarthy & Zald, 1973, 1977). As formal organisations, SMOs employ professional staff, have permanent leadership, and can take such forms as charities or non-profit organisations (Jenkins, 1983; Hayton et al., 2019; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). What is more, exchange relationships and the ability of SMOs to broker access with external actors and entities are therefore critical to their mission goals and organisational sustainability (Edwards et al., 2019). As Edwards et al. suggest, SMOs 'typically cultivate, maintain, and preserve numerous exchange relationships through which they gain access to the specific mix of resources supporting their endeavours' (Edwards et al., 2019, p. 88).

Edwards et al. (2019) and Millward (in press) outline five distinct resource types: material, human, social-organisational, cultural, and moral. Material resources can refer to financial (money) and physical capital (e.g. property, office space, and equipment; Edwards et al., 2019). Human resources relate to labour, expertise, and leadership (Hayton et al., 2019). Social-organisational resources include networks and social ties and non-proprietary infrastructure such as public parks, cycle ways, and the worldwide web (Hayton et al., 2019). Edwards and Gillham (2013) describe cultural resources as tacit knowledge about how to accomplish specific tasks like designing and delivering inclusive activity sessions or disability awareness workshops or utilising new social media, thus requiring tactical repertoires and technical or strategic know-how required to produce events and services, and to mobilise necessary resources. Whilst specific cultural resources are widely occurring in a society, access to them can be socially or spatially restricted and contingent. Edwards et al. (2019) add that unlike human resources whereby individuals have control of who benefits from their skills and knowledge, cultural resources can diffuse into the public domain, and at which point become more difficult to control by their creators. Cultural products such as workshops, web content or digital tools and packages can facilitate the recruitment and socialisation of new 'adherents' who actively support the goals of the SMO and support it buy contributing resources to it (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). Lastly, moral resources are typically bestowed upon SMOs by external sources who – publicly respected themselves – keenly recognise the work of the organisation and draw positive attention to it (Edwards et al., 2019). Moral resources therefore include legitimacy, integrity, solidarity support, sympathetic support, and celebrity (Edwards et al., 2019). Critical to the leveraging of essential resources, is the ability of SMOs to accord with and satisfy institutionally legitimated expectations of potential sponsors of what is appropriate, proper, and desirable, at least in comparison to other entities also vying for resources (Cohen & Arato, 1997; Edwards & Gillham, 2013; Suchman, 1995). Where such endorsement(s) can be garnered, exists the potential to not only mobilise resources over the long-term, but also via networked reputational propagation.

These resource types provide one part of our organising frame in this study. The second part of this organising frame refers to the mechanisms of access and mobilisation of resources through which an exchange relationship occurs, of which there are four: self-production; aggregation; co-optation, and patronage (Edwards & Gillham, 2013; Edwards et al., 2019). An SMO can produce certain resources itself, and examples of resources that can be self-produced include the training of human resources, running events, cultivating networks, and developing web content (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). The aggregation of resources describes the ways in which an SMO collates and harnesses resources offered by dispersed individuals or organisations to allocate to their own ends (such as the aggregation of monetary donations or human resources in the form of volunteer recruitment; (Edwards & Gillham, 2013; Edwards et al., 2019). Co-optation refers to the ability of, for example, an SMO to utilise its relationships with other organisations to access or borrow resources that they already control or produce (Hayton et al., 2019). Any borrowing of resources is transparent and permitted, and often implies a reciprocal arrangement (Edwards et al., 2019). Edwards and Gillham (2013) suggest that buildings, members, and staff, social networks, or moral authority, for example, can all be co-opted by and between organisations. Finally, resources mobilised through patronage typically, but not always, refer to monetary transfers awarded to, for example, SMOs, by traditional donors or funders such as government departments or national governing bodies who are external to the organisation (Edwards & Gillham, 2013; Hayton et al., 2019). Edwards et al. (2019) highlight that patronage can therefore take the form of service contracts which cedes a degree of proprietary control over what that money is used for and how. Human resources can also be provided as part of a patronage relationship, and whereby, for example, a sympathetic or endorsing organisation can temporarily loan some of their staff to an SMO.

We therefore apply resource mobilisation theory within this study as a framework to explore what is shared in the relationships between the *Admit* charity, as a social movement organisation, and its business clients during a move to online provision. The specific focus on a disability-oriented organisation was twofold. First, disabled people have experienced new barriers to being active during the pandemic compared to non-disabled people, and 'are less likely to take part in activities that have become more common during lockdown restrictions' (like outdoor exercise; Activity Alliance, 2021, p. 100), and so the availability of appropriate–and likely online–provision/providers offers a social and physical activity lifeline for those who experiencing such impediments. A second and not entirely unconnected reason relates to the issues associated with mainstreaming. To elaborate on this latter point, *Admit* aspire to support all providers of sport and physical activity to include disabled people, whilst Kitchin et al. (2019) emphasise the necessity for mainstream organisations to access partners with competencies in disability rights and awareness to facilitate their inclusion practices – and RMT helps us to illustrate how such networks and relationships have the potential to be cultivated.

Methodology

This article emerges from a broader project whereby the research team worked with the *Admit* organisation to gather information from its business clients to inform, and then subsequently evaluate a range of digital packages developed, piloted, and launched as it sought to roll out its face-to-face provision in online form during the lockdown periods. A major part of this study was to also understand prospective clients' needs and requirements of such packages. Data collection spanned April and June 2021. For context, at the point of writing, England has experienced three full national lockdowns with varying degrees of social restrictions enforced in between until 'all legal limits on social contact were removed' on June 21st, 2021 (Institute for Government, 2021). The three lockdown periods were: March 26th to May 10th, 2020; November 5th to December 2nd, 2020, and from January 6th to March 8th, 2021 (Institute for Government, 2021).

To recruit participants to the study, the Managing Director of *Admit* provided the research team with the email addresses of 13 business clients, with 8 organisations responding to an invitation to participate in the research. As two participants took part in an interview together, a total of nine participants (eight females, one male) representing those eight organisations took part in the study. Table 1 presents the pseudonyms by which participants are referred in this article, along with a brief description of the organisations for which the participants worked and the activities via which they engaged with *Admit*.

The interview schedule was developed together by the research team. Two members of the research team (FP and RS) conducted the interviews (6 and 2, respectively) to ensure that they could be arranged to fit participants' work schedules. The interviewees discussed and rehearsed the content of the interviews prior to commencing the data collection. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and subsequently transcribed before the transcripts were reviewed by the research team. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with the interviewer asking a set of core questions such as, 'What are the most important things you look for in an organization that offers disability awareness training/sport and physical activity sessions?', 'How do you locate the training?', 'what have your experiences been of any online provision of such packages, so far?', and 'what are your access needs and requirements?'. Where appropriate, participants were prompted for further details and examples to encourage greater depth of responses. The average duration of the interviews was 32 minutes. The project received ethical approval from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Northumbria University (ref. 28,331), and participants provided written consent for their participation.

Table 1. Participant pseudonyms and nature of the work of their organisations with *Admit*.

Participant pseudonym and organisation/role	Nature of work	Services the participant/their organisation has accessed with *Admit* disability sport charity
1. Mandy, local council	Management role in a local council sport and leisure department, including responsibilities for local facilities, sports development and a public health funded programme	• Face-to-face workshops • Online workshops • Point of contact for advice when working on projects
2. Lisa, learning disabilities self-advocacy group	Group worker for a group of adults with learning disabilities to support them with self-advocacy	• Face-to-face physical activity sessions • Online physical activity sessions
3. Vicky, charity for young people with additional needs	Management role in a charity providing leisure activities for 6- to 30-year-olds with additional needs	• Face-to-face physical activity sessions • Online physical activity sessions • Equipment hire
4. Alice, care home activity coordinator	Activity coordinator in a care home for adults with neurological conditions	• Face-to-face physical activity sessions • Online physical activity sessions • Face-to-face boccia training
5. Zach, coordinator for student-athlete practitioner development	National role supporting the development of practitioners at an organisation designed to assist athletes studying at universities in England	• Face-to-face workshops • Online workshops • Creation of bespoke education leaflets
6. Jenna and Donna, National Governing Body	Management roles in a National Governing Body for disability sport, responsible for development (e.g. club, competition) and workforce (primarily volunteers such as officials and coaches, also some paid tutors who deliver training development)	• Face-to-face workshops • Online workshops • Face-to-face physical activity sessions • Working with *Admit* to build disability awareness content into their own products
7. Yvonne, adult weight management programmes	Facilitator on a weight management programme for overweight/ obese adults which has recently been adapted for people with learning disabilities	• Online workshops
8. Lorraine, support officer for a series of daycare centres	Support officer responsible for a series of daycare centres across the county, providing learning experiences (e.g. cookery, crafting) for adults with multiple and complex needs	• Face-to-face physical activity sessions • Online physical activity sessions

A phronetic iterative approach to the data analysis was adopted whereby emic (primary) and etic (secondary) cycles of analyses were undertaken recursively by JH and NM (Tracy, 2019). In undertaking the primary cycle of coding, JH and NM first immersed themselves in the data before inductively analysing the transcripts, making notes and discussing their readings of the data. From this emic analysis, both a manifest and latent sense of relationships emerged prominently from the data – to which key questions unfolded concerning what was exchanged via such relationships and what did this mean in relation to Admit's goals and sustainability. Following this the emic cycle of analysis we then turned to an etic cycle of analysis to which we turned external theories to deductively draw theoretical explanations to frame meaning derived from the data. Etic analysis led us to resource mobilisation theory. RMT was deemed of most theoretical significance as it allowed us to explain what was shared between Admit and its client organisations and to position and contextualise the charity as an SMO. Once this was fed back and agreed amongst the research team, JH and NM subsequently developed a codebook based on the key types of resource (human, cultural, material, moral, and social organisational) and means of resource mobilisation – to which they later imposed on the data. During this second-cycle coding, JH and NM first independently coded the data according to this codebook, before co-coding the transcripts together until consensus was reached across the entirety of the transcripts.

Findings and discussion

The findings from the interviews are discussed below in relation to resource mobilisation theory, with the resource types and mechanisms of resource mobilisation grouped by topics reflecting how these concepts were linked in the participants' accounts. Participants' perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks of online delivery are also presented as these highlight important considerations for future work in this area of practice.

Mutual benefits

Lockdown opened up a new dimension of leisure for client organisations and their residents in the form of 'virtual entertainment' that may have not materialised (or as quickly) otherwise:

> We've been using YouTube a lot . . . we've been on virtual trips to Orlando, we did giant rollercoasters yesterday. We've been to the opera, the ballet, we've been to concerts . . . We were able to bring *Admit* in digitally, and the technology is a great way of delivering extra things to people, because we can't do things face-to-face, if we couldn't do it virtually, we couldn't do it. (Alice)

As McCarthy and Zald (1977) stated, a supply and demand relationship underpins the sustainability of an SMO, and in this example, Alice indicates both a demand for and a receptivity to innovative entertainment solutions – which *Admit* was able to provide. Following on, Lorraine illustrates the creativity and expertise of the human resources supplied by *Admit* as they delivered a virtual exercise programme in story form. This programme generated ancillary activities that served to further involve the service users (adults with multiple and complex needs) as well as the staff at Lorraine's daycare centres:

> We had to launch everything digitally through the Teams or Zoom platform . . . Then along came *Admit* and changed our lives and the staff embraced the opportunity on behalf of the service users, and we had themed events. [Service users] had a choice: would you like to have an interactive session around pirates, astronauts, food, Disney characters? The entire programme, the creative arts, the crafts, the needlecraft, would be building towards the interactive *Admit* sessions. They would sew costumes; they would make masks. In the music class, they would upload songs to go with the themes . . . It was lovely . . . It was so interactive, and the clients responded so beautifully . . . But because our staff were shadowing, were in the sessions to support the learners to get the most out of the opportunity . . . the beauty for us was when they exited, when the funding streams ran out, our staff had picked up the skills to be able to roll out that programme in their absence. It had a dual purpose for us, and it was very valuable.

Lorraine's comments demonstrate two points. The first being that *Admit* possesses the expertise to offer tailored virtual physical activities in a way that other online/social media platforms cannot offer. Second, whilst some clients (such as Alice) hired *Admit* to purely deliver services, others had a cost-saving 'dual purpose' in mind: although the funding to hire *Admit* ran out, the service that had been provided had been structured in such a way as to upskill the client's staff, allowing self-production of such programmes of activity in-house (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). Drawing on Edwards et al. (2019), this presents an example wherein the skills and knowledge of *Admit* staff subsequently translate into cultural resources that have diffused into the client organisation's workforce. The upshot of this for *Admit* is threefold. First, this transfer of practice aligns with *Admit*'s organisational mission of widening access to inclusive physical activity and recreation. Second, cultural products – for example, virtual exercise programmes – can generate advocates and supporters for the SMO, from which it has the potential to derive future resources. Third, by having the daycare staff involved as part of this resource exchange, *Admit* was able to co-opt further human resources who were physically in situ to ensure that the exercise programmes 'have really, really engaged and motivated our service users and staff' (Lorraine).

Quality pays dividends

This topic encompasses a number of resource types and mechanisms in relation to both the physical activity sessions and disability awareness workshops, moving from a simple account regarding patronage and material resources to a discussion of how moral resources can be distributed through social-organisational networks.

Lorraine, satisfied by and grateful for the physical activity sessions delivered by *Admit*, explained that she wanted to secure additional funding to procure further services from them, thus representing a form of patronage to the organisation:

> Now that I know I have access to a budget, I want to be able to sustain the *Admit* initiative as well . . . When the free access to the provision ended through the charitable funding, I liaised with our senior management in the County Council. They've actually paid for some additional sessions.

Lorraine is not alone in this as Mandy also expressed how much she valued *Admit* for their disability awareness workshops, wishing to confer material resources in the form of money in reciprocation for their services:

> Further down the line, we are hoping to get some kind of commissioned work to them, where they come in and deliver some of our disability services on behalf of the Council, because they have that area of specialism which we do not.

Longer-term patronage and partner endorsement is of great importance to the success and sustainability of an organisation (Brinkerhoff, 2005), and as well as wanting to repay *Admit*'s good work with more work, client organisations are willing to promote and recommend the work they do via their networks, therefore adding further reach to their reputation:

> The package has been quite magical so . . . I did say . . . "Is there any platform I can go on to highlight or speak my passion to help you get funding?" . . . We've decided, as a countywide care home, we're going to put some favorable marketing information on Facebook and things to support *Admit*. In the hope that other practitioners will pick up and utilize them as well . . . I've sent my testimony to [my network]. When we have great practice, I showcase it and send it to all external partners. (Lorraine)

The above represents *Admit*'s ability to access wider social-organisational resources: when good practice is recognised, the service provider is endorsed throughout the client's networks. Propagated via these networks, therefore, are moral resources – such as legitimacy and integrity – which client organisations confer upon the SMO and the quality of their services (Edwards et al., 2019). Thus, two relevant mechanisms of resource mobilisation are implicated here: one facet being that client organisations demonstrate their patronage by drawing positive attention to the services

provided by an SMO, and the second pertaining to co-optation – whereby the gaining of access to key networks presents greater opportunities for the SMO to subsequently convert into necessary resources (Edwards et al., 2019).

Legitimate selection

Leading on from the previous topic in relation to legitimacy (moral resources), it was clear that (prospective) client organisations desired providers with good standing and a track record of delivering services satisfying their institutionally legitimated expectations (Cohen & Arato, 1997; Edwards & Gillham, 2013; Suchman, 1995). As Yvonne explained in relation to the workshops:

> We always look for really bespoke training, and to be honest with you, we probably look for a company that's got legitimate experience in delivery themselves. I think that's where it was very nice to understand that they actually have done it themselves . . . I look for a company that's got good quality trademark as well, that they're recognized for that sort of service.

It appeared from the interviews that organisations working with disabled people desired providers that not only had experience of working with specific target audiences, but also that employed practitioners able to identify, relate and speak to the intersection between that audience and the subject matter: 'The most important thing would be if they were delivering training about people's learning disabilities, to have somebody with a learning disability involved in delivering the training . . . like lived experience' (Lisa).

Emphasising further the importance of legitimacy, Yvonne highlighted that the marketing of some services/products by certain organisations may be somewhat misleading and subsequently not meet expectations: 'The other [non-*Admit*] one that I did, I didn't get from it what I needed. It was sold to me differently than what it actually was'. In such cases, if the experience of a service is incongruent with the user's prior expectations and they deem it to not meet their needs, the provider stands to lose organisational legitimacy, weakening its ability to vie for resources in a competitive marketplace (Cohen & Arato, 1997; Edwards & Gillham, 2013; Suchman, 1995). To guard against this, several of the participants intimated that they would undertake audits across their networks to ensure that they fill gaps in their provision or procure training by hiring organisations that they can have confidence in, and which can signal – or have signalled for them – a particular cachet:

> What we have to ensure is that there is an audit trail, that these people are suitable for working with adults with complex needs . . . we've got to be sure that the company is of good status . . . we would make sure that their sports coaches were qualified . . . [Their training and development] would have to be absolutely top-notch. So as not to cause harm or the potential for harm physically to our students (Lorraine)

Zach similarly brings together social-organisational and moral resources (legitimacy); by profiling their network, his organisation aims to find 'leaders' to deliver workshops in their areas of specialism, and this process helps to reveal and verify legitimate providers such as *Admit*, thereby facilitating the mobilisation of material resources (money) to engage them:

> We conduct audits across the network. We either go directly to the education providers . . . or someone who has an area of expertise . . . We conduct a needs analysis of our practitioners and their educational needs and try to work out who would be best suited to fill that gap. That's why we work with *Admit* in the disability sport area as one of our providers.

For organisations like *Admit*, such positive endorsements of the service they deliver help them to penetrate key organisational networks related to their field of work and help to ensure that (prospective) clients procure their services in times of lockdown. Moreover, client organisations favoured 'word of mouth' recommendations when sourcing external service provision: 'You hear

about different things and once you hear a good review then you go and try it out yourself' (Vicky). Yvonne also highlighted that the volume of providers means that recommendations are often the most efficient way to select one:

> Because I've been in this job for such a long time, I really rate word of mouth really highly, definitely because you do get to trust in your own colleagues' experience . . . [and] other health professionals that you've worked with over the years . . . Because I think time is really precious, isn't it? . . . There are so many different companies and organizations offering you training, you really want it to come first-hand from somebody who has been there and done it and rates the training and rates the experience so you're not wasting your time

The social-organisational resources of social ties, and opportunities for *Admit* to patch itself into relevant networks, are crucially important to gaining work, including repeat custom, enabling revenue generation and delivery on their organisational mandate during lockdown. Whilst Vicky's organisation had 'a little catalogue which has different organizations that you can go to', Donna explained that her organisation was likely to contact providers already known to them:

> We haven't really recruited anybody new. We've perhaps reached out to people that we knew of before in partner organizations as well who have delivered for us. No new formal recruitment but certainly looking at what's out there and finding the best people to fit our need.

The upshots of online provision

The lockdown-driven move to online provision has instigated many organisations to connect with a greater number and wider range of providers when seeking to access online awareness training activities or to procure physical activity sessions/programmes. Many of the interviewees stated that they are likely to continue to both operate and participate in online activities due to, inter alia, their accessibility:

> I don't think there will be a push to travel for a day event especially if we can do it online. So, we'll probably look to do the sessions online, especially if it's information heavy and there isn't a technical aspect to it, which I think *Admit* probably delivers, for the [disability awareness] packages they deliver for us. (Zach)

This trend is likely to benefit *Admit* in several ways. As an organisation based in the North East of England, it is not always logistically practical or affordable for prospective clients to travel long distances from the South/Midlands of the country to attend, for example, a 2-hour workshop. Furthermore, delivering services digitally expands the organisation's reach, as colleagues Donna and Jenna highlighted:

> Donna: Everybody has moved online. I think we're all a bit guilty of that when the stuff was face-to-face . . . we didn't go along to it whereas now it's so easy to dial in. I think I've seen more courses now than ever before.
>
> Jenna: We're planning to keep some elements of the virtual things going because actually, from an accessibility point of view, much more people can attend things down the line. We're not just banking on people travelling two hours or whatever to come to an event if we can also host things online or live stream things that we're attending

That online delivery will continue in some sort of permanence will further open up the market for organisations like *Admit* to increase their client-base and the revenue they can generate from it. By possessing and utilising material resources in the form of digital technologies, it can in turn make better use of social-organisational resources (networks and social ties), thus being able to aggregate more income (Edwards & Gillham, 2013; Edwards et al., 2019). Moving further forward, the wider body of clients that *Admit* has been able to amass via digital means during lockdowns may translate into more demand for its face-to-face services upon the denouement of lockdown(s). Several participants spoke to this potentiality; for example, Vicky's organisation was 'actually booking them to come and do some face-to-face which will be so much nicer'. Somewhat connectedly, amongst certain clients prior to the pandemic *Admit* had been better known for, for example,

delivering sport and physical activity programmes, yet the shift to digital working practices and information gathering undertaken by businesses during periods of lockdown had facilitated a wider understanding of their services, potentially boosting demand:

> I was just recently browsing their website and noticed that *Admit* provide awareness training as well as the physical activity sessions . . . I didn't know they did it beforehand. But it's something I would like to know a bit more about. (Vicky)

In sum, resource mobilisation theory draws close attention the exchange relationships between an SMO and the organisations and enterprises that it engages with or hopes to engage with. Our application of RMT here has revealed how the lockdown scenario and a shift to online provision has shaped the form of resources exchanged between the SMO and its clients. It becomes clear that moral resources in the form of legitimacy and authenticity hold prominence for the DSC because, when seeking to identify and select a provider, businesses in this field pay keen attention to recommendations made through their networks as to organisations that will truly understand their clients and how to work with them – and it is in the DSC's human resources where such expertise exists. This, in turn, translates into the material resource of income for the DSC. By illustratively drawing these facets of RMT together we gain a picture of how such exchange relationships drive the sustainability of the charity.

Conclusion

In this article, we have framed the *Admit* organisation as an SMO – given that its organisational mission, practice, and service activities are congruent with national and international movements to promote inclusive opportunities for disabled adults and children to engage in sport and physical recreation. In line with the SMO concept, we have applied the framework of RMT to illustrate types and mechanisms of resource mobilisation underpinning *Admit's* exchange relationships with business clients in times of lockdown. A key argument that we make here is that DSCs such as *Admit* should be seen as more than simply 'on the ground' deliverers of sport and physical activity, but as playing a much wider role in the disability sport movement more broadly. The application of RMT to the disability sport field has allowed us to illustrate how *Admit*–as an SMO–contributes to this broader movement and continues to do so in times of lockdown. Key to its success is the dual services that *Admit* provides: the delivery of sport and physical activity programmes, and disability training and awareness packages. The use of RMT has allowed us to unpack the way that these two services work in tandem to develop the DSC's ability to broker access with external organisations to elicit exchange relationships which are critical to both their mission goals and organisational sustainability, as the former service enables *Admit's* staff to hone and shape good practice which they can share with others via the disability awareness training that they provide (Edwards et al., 2019).

A central finding here, evinced through an RMT lens, is that the quality of service provided – often related to the skill and expertise of the delivering practitioners, coupled with the experience and judgment of these services by the client – is of critical importance to the success, growth, and sustainability of the SMO. The human resources that the SMO are able to deploy are therefore crucial because clients can and will subsequently vouch for the quality and propriety of the services that they provide, conferring upon the SMO moral resources such as legitimacy as they promulgate endorsements of that SMO through their organisational networks – which will potentially lead to more work and further promotion. This is opportune for both the SMO and potential clients because lockdowns have instigated organisations such as care homes and day centres to explore virtual entertainment and they will often seek to procure engaging service providers that understand or can adapt to the needs of their service users. The receptivity of client organisations to virtual and online platforms has opened up new possibilities for sport, leisure, and entertainment provision which *Admit* has been able to adapt to and capitalise on due to the specialist

nature and versatility of its human resources – a key facet of the demand-supply relationship that we contend has underpinned the DSC's organisational resilience during a precarious period for businesses and sport and leisure providers alike.

In contrast then to Cortez and Johnston's (2020) claims that the shift to virtual platforms undertaken by many organisations during lockdown had served to diminish operational effectiveness and business impact, a further key finding was that *Admit* was actually able to extend its organisational mission of increasing inclusion in physical activity beyond the direct provision of sport programmes and services due to the knowledge, skills, and training imparted upon business clients via exchange relationships. The data demonstrated that delivering such services as exercise programmes and disability awareness training can be engaging via online formats, and moreover that online delivery now has a permanence. The capacity of organisations to run online services to either supplement or substitute face-to-face provision has the potential to widen accessibility to disability sport and physical recreation as well for greater promotion of disability awareness than might have been the case prior to the pandemic – not to mention their service reach in terms of revenue generation.

Moreover, because organisations like *Admit* sit outside of mainstream sport structures they are consequently reliant on developing diverse networks outwith sport-specific NGBs to draw in business-critical resources. A further consideration here is that, by its nature, *Admit* exists to support all providers of sport and physical activity to include disabled people, possessing the competence in disability rights and awareness training that Kitchin et al. (2019) highlight that mainstream sport clubs likely require in order to more effectively enact inclusive policies. It would appear then that the work of DSCs like *Admit* confer them legitimacy as niche operators who can complement the integrative goals of mainstream sport organisations (McCarthy & Zald, 2002).

In the call for papers to this special issue, Millward et al. (2021) raised the question: 'How have new leisure providers developed and what does this mean for older providers?'. In the case of the current study however, we might switch the places of the new and old providers and ask instead: 'Has lockdown proven challenging for new entrants to the market?' in the context of inclusive online provision. The business clients in this research stressed not only their desire to source authentic and well-reputed providers, but that they go to great lengths to screen potential candidates that they have knowledge of within their networks. Perhaps the advantage here is with the more established organisations and SMOs with recognised specialisms, as opposed to new companies, or TSOs which ever more often decide to 'chase the funding' to survive (and thus deviate from what they were set up to and are skilled to deliver) – a trend which Hastings et al. (2015) suggest will likely stifle the long-term impact of that organisation. Future research, therefore, could look to plot success, sustainability, and 'mission drift' of diverse types and history of provider operating in sport and leisure spaces. Whilst recognising that SMOs exist within an environment wherein they often compete for resources (Hayton et al., 2019), our novel application and illustration of RMT in the context of the disability sport charity may offer likeminded TSOs a framework by which to assess the strengths of their organisation's footing in a turbulent sector and offer a practical basis by which to identify and pursue purposeful exchange relationships.

Notes

1. In this article we follow the UK social model and exercise 'disability first' language, as opposed to 'people first' language, to emphasise 'disability as an affirmative identity and an underpinning facet of the lived experience of a person with an impairment' (Hayton, 2022, p. 6). In practice, therefore, we refer to 'disabled people' rather than 'people with disabilities'.
2. The authors' conceptualisation of disability aligns with that of the *Admit* organisation that sits at the centre of the article. *Admit* aims to work with participants of any level or type of impairment, including those with high and very high support needs, as well as residents of care homes and daycare centres. Eschewing pervasive norms of able-bodiedness, *Admit* would follow Maika and Danylchuk's (2016) position 'that human ability exists on a spectrum, regardless of impairment' (Maika & Danylchuk, 2016, p. 413), thereby embracing

individual difference and empowering persons that Silva and Howe (2018) consider to be 'differently abled' in and through sport and physical recreation.

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