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Successful stakeholder engagement in not-for-profit projects: a systematic literature review

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Abstract: This study explores available literature on successful stakeholder engagement (SE) in not-for-profit (NFP) projects and identifies evidence-based factors that can help achieve successful SE. Using a systematic literature review, a total of 34 records, published in the last decade, were identified and analysed. Common themes that emerged include the role of social media, role of public relations, significance of frameworks and barriers encountered. The study also identified key factors for SE, with supportive and skilled management being the most visible factor. Findings of this study can assist researchers understand gaps in this area, and NFP project practitioners for successful SE.

Keywords: not-for-profit; NFP; project management; stakeholder engagement; success factors.

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1 Introduction

Not-for-profit (NFP) organisations play a very unique and critical role in society. They contribute improvements to its social, cultural, economic and environmental aspects, while complementing service offerings from the government. NFP services are heavily intertwined in everyone's lives, which lead to higher expectations from the public who expect accountability and transparency in the delivery of their services (Hyndman and McConville 2015; Jiao et al., 2019; Wellens and Jegers 2014).

To show accountability, there is a great need to nurture stakeholder relationships. NFPs are considered multi-stakeholder organisations that deal with a large number of different stakeholder groups (Mato-Santiso et al., 2021). Those groups also interact with each other, which is described by Mitchell and Clark (2019) as the presence of multivalent stakeholder relationships. Internal stakeholder groups for NFPs include the organisation's management, board of directors and employees while external stakeholders include the government, donors, customers, other NFPs, sponsors, beneficiaries, volunteers, local communities, and the general public (Fassin et al., 2017; Hyndman and McConville, 2015; Leardini et al., 2019; Manetti and Toccafondi, 2014; Mitchell and Clark, 2019; Velter et al., 2019; Wellens and Jegers, 2014). Nurturing relationships help build awareness, contribute to their advocacy and increase their financial resources (Nelson, 2019). Having more valuable and long-term engagements with stakeholders benefits the organisation and contributes to project success (Swanson, 2012).

It is especially important to implement stakeholder engagement (SE) effectively in NFP projects as there is a constantly changing environment which impacts not only the organisation but also the relationships with their stakeholders (Jiao et al., 2019). This is compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the whole world. Understanding the underlying issues pertaining to successful SE can assist organisations in navigating such a new and uncertain environment, and focus their limited resources on critical areas that can ensure project success.

Successful SE has mostly been studied in the for-profit sector, such as in construction and information technology (Fassin et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2018; Nwachukwu et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2014). The findings of those studies cannot be generalised for the NFP sector, since it varies greatly from other industries due to its diverse stakeholders, relationship with the government and commitment to the public.

Given the unique characteristics of NFP organisations and the limited research available, this article aims to look at the underlying issues relating to successful SE in NFPs and identify the influencing factors for success, through a systematic literature review. The study will be guided by the following research questions:

- What are the underlying issues relating to successful SE in NFP projects?
- What are the evidence-based factors that can influence successful SE for NFP projects?

2 Methodology

To address the research questions, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted on articles published relating to NFP SE in the past decade. According to Dikert et al. (2016), SLRs are "a means of identifying, evaluating and interpreting all available research relevant to a particular research question, or topic area, or phenomenon of interest". The identification of sources is carried out using specific keyword strings, databases, and selection criteria that can be replicated by other researchers interested in this field of study.

Prior to starting the SLR process, a preliminary scoping review was done to ensure that there was both a research gap and enough literature for the review. Once both requirements were met, the review was conducted, guided by the Preferred Reporting

Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 Statement. PRISMA aims to assist researchers in improving the reporting of a systematic review and “reflects advances in methods to identify, select, appraise, and synthesise studies” [Page et al., (2021), p.1].

To understand the common themes or areas of focus of the identified articles, a thematic analysis was predominantly conducted by coding the findings from each article and assigning them into themes following the framework of Clarke and Braun (2017). According to Clarke and Braun (2017), a thematic analysis is defined as “a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data”. This includes six phases: familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Clarke and Braun, 2017).

2.1 Identification of studies

The literature sources were collected from Scopus and Web of Science databases. Based on a preliminary scoping review, both databases appeared to have a good collection of relevant literature that could be useful for this SLR. Furthermore, the two databases have also been used for similar reviews in the past which means that there will be ample literature captured for this study (Oppong et al., 2017).

To retrieve the articles, different search strings were applied as keywords such as ‘SE’ AND ‘NFP’, ‘stakeholder management’ AND ‘NFP’, and ‘project management’ AND ‘NFP’. Other variations of the word ‘NFP’ such as ‘non-profit’ and ‘non-profit’ were also used. An example of a research string used for Scopus was (TITLE-ABS-KEY (stakeholder AND engagement) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission) and for Web of Science was TS = (stakeholder engagement) AND TS = (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, 2013).

Aside from the keyword strings, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were adopted to ensure recent and relevant literature:

- the sources must only be peer-reviewed empirical journal articles
- the articles must have been published within the last ten years
- the studies must be written in the English language
- the studies must be related to a NFP project context.

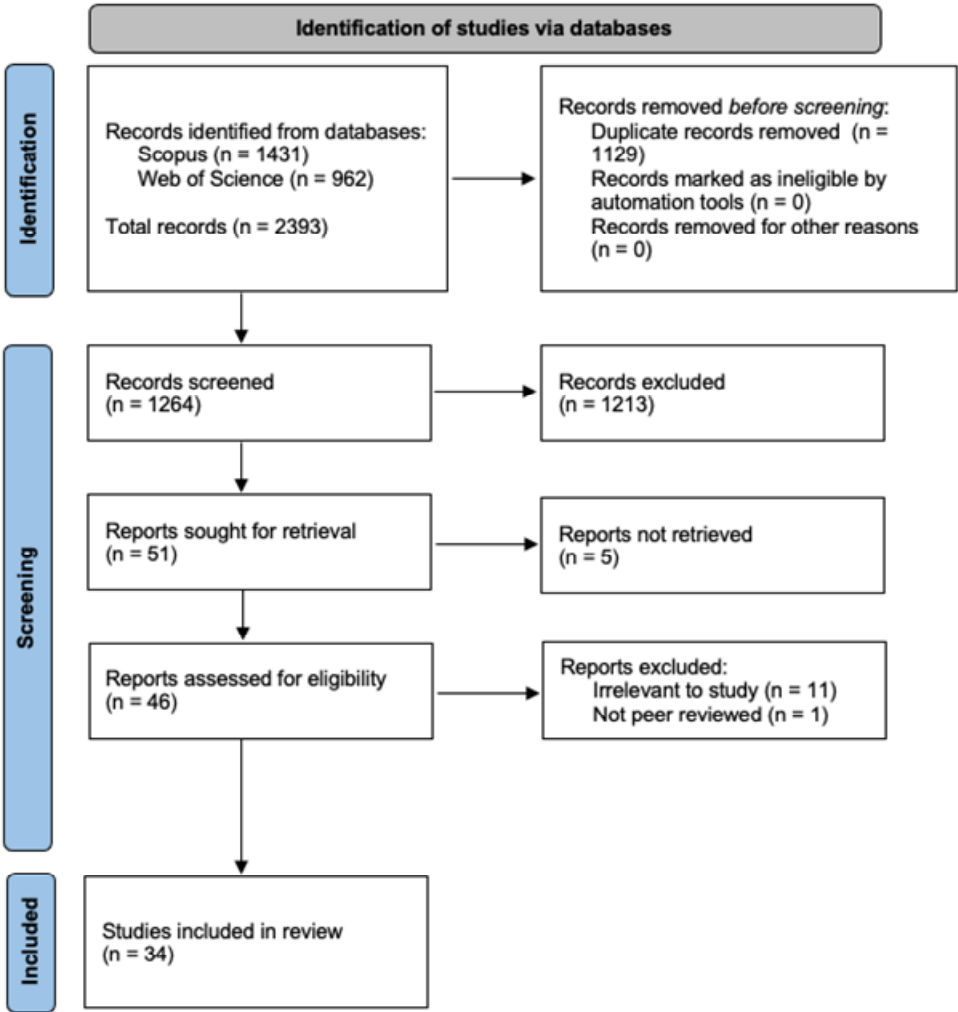
The database search was conducted in November 2021. There were a total of 2,393 records identified from the search from Scopus and Web of Science. After duplicate records were removed, 1,264 records remained and went through a screening process. Figure 1 illustrates the complete process for the identification and selection of articles using the PRISMA flow diagram by Page et al. (2021).

2.2 Screening of studies

The screening process involved looking at the titles of the identified records to investigate if they relate to successful SE within a NFP project context. If the relation to the topic could not be properly discerned through the title, it was included in the next stage of screening. This resulted in 122 records. Further screening was conducted by

reviewing the abstracts to only include those that are predominantly focused on successful SE in NFP projects. Records that focused on NFPs as the stakeholders were also excluded as the focus of this study was to look at stakeholders of NFP projects. This resulted in 51 records for retrieval and assessment for eligibility. These records were carefully read to ensure that they were relevant to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. After this process, only 34 records were included in the final review.

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram of the study (see online version for colours)



These articles were subjected to a rigorous process of validation by each author to be confident that all the selected articles meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria. To ensure that all identified articles were peer-reviewed, Ulrichsweb was utilised after the completion of the screening process. Accordingly, one article published in a non-peer-reviewed journal was identified and removed from the selection.

3 Results

3.1 Demographic of sources

The screening process resulted in identifying and downloading the full text of 34 records that related to successful NFP SE in the past ten years. Table 1 list all of the included sources.

Table 1 List of all included articles

	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Journal title</i>	<i>Data collection method</i>	<i>Country of study</i>	<i>Activity group</i>
1	Ford et al. (2011)	<i>Tourism Review</i>	Interview	USA	Not elsewhere classified
2	Wiggill (2011)	<i>Journal of Public Affairs</i>	Interview	South Africa	Education and research
3	Carman et al. (2013)	<i>Health Affairs</i>	Content analysis	USA	Health
4	Swanson (2013)	<i>Nonprofit Management and Leadership</i>	Survey interview	Canada	Education and research
5	Guidry et al. (2014)	<i>Journal of Social Marketing</i>	Content analysis	USA	Several
6	Maxwell and Carboni (2014)	<i>International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing</i>	Interview	USA	Social services
7	Carboni and Maxwell (2015)	<i>Journal of Public and Non-Profit Affairs</i>	Content analysis	USA	Social services
8	Druschke and Hychka (2015)	<i>Ecology And Society</i>	Interview	USA	Environment
9	Ferkins and Shilbury (2015)	<i>Journal of Sport Management</i>	Interview	Australia	Culture and recreation
10	Thibodeau and Rueling (2015)	<i>Journal of Arts Management Law and Society</i>	Interview	USA	Culture and recreation
11	Clark et al. (2016)	<i>International Journal of Non-Profit and Voluntary Sector Marketing</i>	Content analysis	USA	Culture and recreation
12	Pressgrove and McKeever (2016)	<i>Journal of Public Relations Research</i>	Survey	USA	Social services
13	Studer (2016)	<i>Non-Profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly</i>	Survey	Switzerland	Several
14	Visser (2016)	<i>Project Management Research and Practice</i>	Content analysis	Ireland	Social services
15	AbouAssi and An (2017)	<i>Public Management Review</i>	Survey	Lebanon	Environment
16	Becker et al. (2017)	<i>Eating Behaviours</i>	Content analysis	Global	Not elsewhere classified

Table 1 List of all included articles (continued)

	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Journal title</i>	<i>Data collection method</i>	<i>Country of study</i>	<i>Activity group</i>
17	Cho and Auger (2017)	<i>Public Relations Review</i>	Survey	USA	Several
18	Maxwell and Carboni (2017)	<i>International Journal of Public Administration In The Digital Age</i>	Content analysis	USA	Philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion
19	Walton and Hopton (2018)	<i>Technical Communication</i>	Interview	Vietnam	Social services
20	Alonso-Canadas et al. (2019)	<i>Water</i>	Content analysis	Global	Environment
21	Canas et al. (2019)	<i>Health Expectations</i>	Interview	Canada	Health
22	Nelson (2019)	<i>International Review on Public and Non-profit Marketing</i>	Content analysis	USA	Not elsewhere classified
23	Boyle and Michell (2020)	<i>Construction Economics and Building</i>	Interview focus group	South Africa	Social services
24	Ivanova (2020)	<i>Non--profit Policy Forum</i>	Interview	Japan	Education and research
25	Jiao et al. (2020)	<i>Australian Journal of Public Administration</i>	Survey	Australia	Several
26	Meyer and Barker (2020)	<i>Communicare-Journal for Communication Sciences in Southern Africa</i>	Interview	South Africa	Several
27	Watson et al. (2020)	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	Interview	UK	Environment
28	Brajer-Marczak et al. (2021)	<i>Sustainability</i>	Survey	Poland	Several
29	Matos and Fernandes (2021)	<i>International Review on Public And Non-{rofit Marketing</i>	Focus group	Switzerland	Several
30	Moussa and Benmessaoud (2021)	<i>Public Relations Inquiry</i>	Content analysis	UAE	Development and Housing
31	Osafo (2021)	<i>Advances in Developing Human Resources</i>	Content analysis	USA	Education and research
32	Roach et al. (2021)	<i>Circulation</i>	Content analysis	USA	Education and research
33	Wang (2021)	<i>Voluntas</i>	Survey	USA	Several
34	Webb and Orr (2021)	<i>Journal of Strategic Marketing</i>	Interview	Canada	Culture and recreation

Of the 34 identified articles, there was at least one article published in each year between 2011 and 2021 except in 2012. The year 2021 had the greatest number of articles published with 7 out of 34, followed by the year 2020 with 5 out of 34. There seems to be a slow upward trend in the number of published articles relating to successful NFP SE specifically from 2018 onwards with two articles published each year. Increased interest in this topic can possibly be attributed to a number of factors, such as the increase in number of NFPs worldwide and the greater recognition being given to the impact of the NFP sector on society. In Australia, for example, the number of NFPs has grown significantly in the last 20 years with around 10 new organisations established daily (McLeod, 2016).

The identified articles were published across a wide variety of journals as can be seen in Table 1. Thirty four different journals hosted one article each, from journals focusing on specific activity groups like Health Affairs to more broad ranging journals like Sustainability and Project Management Research and Practice. This reflects the extensive range of interest across different areas for NFP SE.

There was also no consensus among the identified articles on the data collection method used. 12 of them used interviews and another 12 utilised content analysis on gathered data regarding the project or organisation. Seven articles used a questionnaire survey, while one used a focus group discussion to gather primary data. The remaining two articles used mixed methods, applying at least two of these methods to collect data.

The studies were conducted across 13 countries, with two articles not being conducted in a specific country. Many articles focused on North America ($n = 15$) and other countries on Europe and Oceania ($n = 10$) while a few articles focused on Asia ($n = 4$) and Africa ($n = 3$).

Under the International Classification of Non-Profit Organizations (ICNPO), NFP organisations are classified into 12 activity groups: business and professional associations; culture and recreation; development and housing; education and research; environment; health; international; law, advocacy and politics; philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion; religion; social services and; not elsewhere classified. Among these groups, eight were represented in the identified articles, namely social services ($n = 6$), education and research ($n = 5$), culture and recreation ($n = 4$), environment ($n = 4$), not elsewhere classified ($n = 3$), health ($n = 2$), development and housing ($n = 1$) and philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion ($n = 1$). Only four groups were not represented in the identified articles, namely International, Religion, Business and Professional Associations and Law, Advocacy and Politics. Eight further articles did not indicate which groups their study was focused on, and rather stated that the study was distributed to different NFPs.

3.2 Identified themes

In reviewing the identified sources, there were several main themes that emerged. This included the role of social media, the role of public relations, the significance of frameworks, the barriers encountered and success factors for effective SE.

3.2.1 The role of social media ($n = 8$)

The role of social media in engaging stakeholders continues to grow and this was evidenced in eight of the articles identified (AbouAssi and An, 2017; Alonso-Canadas

et al., 2019; Carboni and Maxwell, 2015; Clark et al., 2016; Guidry et al., 2014; Ivanova, 2020; Maxwell and Carboni, 2014, 2017; Meyer and Barker, 2020; Moussa and Benmessaoud, 2021; Nelson, 2019; Thibodeau and Rueling, 2015). Several authors highlighted the differences between traditional means of communication such as phone, email or face-to-face communication, and emergent forms of communication such as social media (Alonso-Canadas et al., 2019; Maxwell and Carboni, 2014, 2017). Traditional forms are often restrictive in terms of participation and may be becoming obsolete (Alonso-Canadas et al., 2019). Emergent forms of communication, on the other hand, enables a wider audience reach and the opportunity for dialogic communication with lower costs involved.

Nelson (2019) and Alonso-Canadas et al. (2019) discussed how various online communication methods can be used to deepen already existing relationships and gain greater commitment. Carboni and Maxwell (2015) took this a step further by showing that when stakeholders are engaged online with an organisation, specifically through social media, they are more likely to also engage in other ways. In these platforms, a credible image can give way to building lasting relationships and engaging stakeholders (Clark et al., 2016; Moussa and Benmessaoud, 2021).

Five out of the eight articles focused on Facebook, two on Twitter and one on social media in general. These authors focused on an activity group but none came out as more frequently studied. The groups included community foundations, environment, youth development, philanthropic, arts and culture, and membership associations.

Given the limited available resources of NFPs, some articles suggested that online presence should be limited to a few social media platforms to have room to develop effective content that will foster dialogue (Alonso-Canadas et al., 2019; Carboni and Maxwell, 2015; Maxwell and Carboni, 2017). Organisations should understand how their stakeholders use social media to make better use of their time (Guidry et al., 2014). Furthermore, with the numerous risks including misuse of social media and lawsuits, increased education on its effective use is still needed (Maxwell and Carboni, 2014).

Nelson (2019), Carboni and Maxwell (2015) and Guidry et al. (2014) studied the different types and contents of posts that would be effective in gaining engagement from stakeholders within their specific context through content analysis. Nelson (2019) and Guidry et al. (2014) classified the posts as relating to information sharing, community building or a call to action, while Carboni and Maxwell (2015) looked at the more effective type of posts such as links, photos or videos.

3.2.2 The role of public relations (n = 3)

Three out of the 34 articles discussed topics relating to the importance of the role of public relations in SE (Guidry et al., 2014; Moussa and Benmessaoud, 2021; Pressgrove and McKeever, 2016). Moussa and Benmessaoud (2021) described how SE has emerged as an important concept within public relations, focusing on the importance of a two-way relationship between stakeholders. Showing evidence of stewardship and being advocates of certain issues can improve public relations, and subsequently, NFP SE (Guidry et al., 2014; Pressgrove and McKeever, 2016). In two of the articles, public relations were studied as part of social media and reaching out to external stakeholders (Guidry et al., 2014; Moussa and Benmessaoud, 2021). With NFP organisations having several different external stakeholder groups with varying attitudes and behaviours, dearth of available literature shows future research opportunities in this area.

3.2.3 The significance of SE frameworks (n = 5)

Frameworks can guide organisations towards optimising the value of their capital for strategic engagement (Swanson, 2013). There were five articles identified which focused on and presented a framework or model for SE (Carman et al., 2013; Meyer and Barker, 2020; Swanson, 2013; Webb and Orr, 2021; Wiggill, 2011). Webb and Orr (2021) presented a simple partnership management matrix to be able to adjust and cater to specific needs of stakeholder groups in sports, acknowledging that each group needs a different frequency and formality of connection. Carman et al. (2013) recognised that there is a continuum of engagement and different levels of engagement within the primary health sector. The continuum of engagement consists of how much information is shared between the stakeholders and how involved stakeholders are in decision making. The levels of engagement include direct care (individual), organisational design and governance, and policy making. This multidimensional framework also discussed factors that can influence SE on the individual, organisational and societal levels. This includes the individual's attributes and beliefs, organisational policies and societal norms. Swanson (2013), Wiggill (2011) and Meyer and Barker (2020) delved a little deeper and showed a more detailed cyclical framework with specific activities that needed to be accomplished, highlighting the importance of organisational understanding and the continuous process of SE. Swanson (2013) focused on the higher education sector presented a framework that involved first developing a strategic engagement plan which incorporated the institutional objectives and recognised SE as a core value. Their framework included the monitoring and evaluation of engagement activities to understand gaps and tailoring activities to fill those gaps, an area which was not discussed in other frameworks. Meyer and Barker (2020)'s model, based on a sample population from South Africa, also recognises the stakeholder as core to the organisation's success. The first two stages focus on a clear and uniform organisational perspective on the importance of SE and issues that need to be resolved. After these are accomplished, the stakeholders are identified before designing a stakeholder management strategy and implementation. Lastly, Wiggill (2011) simplifies a strategic communication management model through empirical research in the adult education sector. Similar to Swanson's framework, it also starts with understanding the organisation's strategy before identifying stakeholders, understanding their needs, assessing risks, developing a communication strategy and the implementation of the plan.

3.2.4 The barriers encountered (n = 5)

The NFP sector faces major challenges despite its continued growth and some of these challenges are also considered as barriers of SE. The review identified five articles that discussed various barriers hindering the involvement from stakeholders. Internally, overworked staff was a key barrier, as well as resource limits (Canas et al., 2019; Wang, 2021). The effects of this barrier can also trickle down into relationships with external stakeholders. Roach et al. (2021) brings up volunteer burnout as another barrier for organisations who are primarily volunteer focused or volunteer led. For bigger organisations, coordination with various departments in the implementation of SE programs and support from top management is also considered as a problem. The financial capacity of the NFP organisations and not having available funding for supporting SE activities is another key challenge encountered (Canas et al., 2019; Roach

et al., 2021). Externally, not having a strong relationship with stakeholders, which leads to frustration with their behaviour, was also a considerable challenge (Canas et al., 2019; Ivanova, 2020; Roach et al., 2021). Findings from Osafo (2021) tackle the challenges of engaging the community through and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The author considers the lack of knowledge and access to technology as big barriers to SE, seeing as there is now a shift to digital and remote working around the world.

3.2.5 *Success factors (n = 31)*

The review identified 31 articles that discussed success factors for SE within various contexts, with most articles mentioning more than one success factor. Table 2 shows ten main identified success factors from these articles, arranged by frequency of occurrence.

Table 2 Success factors identified

	<i>Success factor</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Journal authors</i>
1	Supportive and skilled management	13	AbouAssi and An (2017) Becker et al. (2017) Canas et al. (2019) Carman et al. (2013) Druschke and Hychka (2015) Ford et al. (2011) Meyer and Barker (2020) Roach et al. (2021) Swanson (2013) Thibodeau and Rueling (2015) Wang (2021) Watson et al. (2020) Wiggill (2011)
2	Effective and efficient dialogic communication	12	Canas et al. (2019) Carboni and Maxwell (2015) Druschke and Hychka (2015) Maxwell and Carboni (2014) Maxwell and Carboni (2017) Meyer and Barker (2020) Nelson (2019) Osafo (2021) Roach et al. (2021) Walton and Hopton (2018) Watson et al. (2020) Webb and Orr (2021)

Table 2 Success factors identified (continued)

<i>Success factor</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Journal authors</i>
3 Collaborative environment	8	Boyle and Michell (2020) Carboni and Maxwell (2015) Carman et al. (2013) Ivanova (2020) Roach et al. (2021) Swanson (2013) Visser (2016) Walton and Hopton (2018)
4 Identifying and understanding stakeholders	8	Brajer-Marczak et al. (2021) Carman et al. (2013) Ferkins and Shilbury (2015) Meyer and Barker (2020) Moussa and Benmessaoud (2021) Walton and Hopton (2018) Watson et al. (2020) Wiggill (2011)
5 Managing multiple stakeholders and their relationships	8	Boyle and Michell (2020) Brajer-Marczak et al. (2021) Ivanova (2020) Jiao et al. (2020) Thibodeau and Rueling (2015) Visser (2016) Watson et al. (2020) Webb and Orr (2021)
6 Stakeholder empowerment	8	Becker et al. (2017) Brajer-Marczak et al. (2021) Druschke and Hychka (2015) Guidry et al. (2014) Osafo (2021) Roach et al. (2021) Visser (2016) Wiggill (2011)
7 Proper project management	6	AbouAssi and An (2017) Canas et al. (2019) Jiao et al. (2020) Thibodeau and Rueling (2015) Watson et al. (2020) Wiggill (2011)

Table 2 Success factors identified (continued)

<i>Success factor</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Journal authors</i>
8 Individual traits	3	Carman et al. (2013) Cho and Auger (2017) Pressgrove and McKeever (2016)
9 Financial certainty	2	Becker et al. (2017) Clark et al. (2016)
10 Skilled project team	2	Boyle and Michell (2020) Watson et al. (2020)

Supportive and skilled management was the most frequently mentioned success factor in the identified articles. This included constant support from the Board members and top management, careful change management facilitated by management and support from the organisation. Watson et al. (2020) emphasised the importance of recruiting project managers with experience in NFP and for-profit sectors as they are better equipped to handle various stakeholders and scenarios. Management should also understand the concepts of SE and have an engaged leadership style (Meyer and Barker, 2020; Thibodeau and Rueling, 2015; Wang, 2021). The support of board members is important in successful SE and it is critical to properly select and have clear roles for each member (Ford et al., 2011; Wang, 2021). Apart from these, organisational values, policies and practices that support SE should also be present (Carman et al., 2013; Swanson, 2013).

Effective and efficient dialogic communication was the second most frequently mentioned factor and was identified in 12 articles. Canas et al. (2019) and Osafo (2021) identified clear and concise communication as a factor to avoid ambiguity and reach effective engagement. Successful SE also involves two-way interactive communication rather than a one-way sharing of knowledge (Carboni and Maxwell, 2015; Nelson, 2019). This should be done regularly and iteratively, making sure to include continued listening, responding and collaborating (Druschke and Hychka, 2015; Meyer and Barker, 2020; Roach et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2020). Different authors also noted the importance of strategically tailoring communication to a specific stakeholder group and their needs (Carboni and Maxwell, 2015; Maxwell and Carboni, 2014; Meyer and Barker, 2020; Walton and Hopton, 2018; Webb and Orr, 2021).

Having a collaborative environment was discussed as a success factor in eight of the articles. This is an environment where stakeholders can contribute and engage with each other, as well as provide feedback (Roach et al., 2021). This also includes gaining trust between stakeholders, being attuned to the local culture and having shared values (Boyle and Michell, 2020; Ivanova, 2020; Walton and Hopton, 2018). The organisation's ability to invest time and capacity into building this environment as well as having policies and systems that promote collaboration can increase SE (Carboni and Maxwell, 2015; Carman et al., 2013; Swanson, 2013; Visser, 2016).

Identifying and understanding stakeholders was also considered as an important factor for SE by eight of the articles. Wiggill (2011) acknowledged how most NFP organisations already have an idea about the needs of their stakeholders, but there is a

need to formalise this process. Several authors also noted that understanding stakeholders included mapping their needs, interests, behaviour and attributes (Brajer-Marczak et al., 2021; Carman et al., 2013; Ferkins and Shilbury, 2015; Meyer and Barker, 2020; Moussa and Benmessaoud, 2021). There should be a familiarity with local culture and values, which Watson et al. (2020) coin as value empathy. Knowledge about stakeholders is considered as vital to be able to understand their willingness to engage, tailor strategies and structure processes (Brajer-Marczak et al., 2021; Carman et al., 2013; Wiggill, 2011). This also gives NFPs an understanding as to how to properly allocate limited resources (Meyer and Barker, 2020).

Managing multiple stakeholders and their relationships was discussed in eight of the articles and is associated with balancing interests related to a project and accommodating different stakeholders to ensure they are satisfied (Brajer-Marczak et al., 2021). Value empathy is an important driver for successfully managing different stakeholders, as different partners will require different types of connections (Watson et al., 2020; Webb and Orr, 2021). Findings from Visser (2016) and Jiao, Harrison and Chen (2020) showed that responding to these needs of the diverse groups also includes looking at stakeholder salience and aligning strategies with project objectives. Trust is also noted as a key ingredient in managing relationships between stakeholders, specifically with community participation (Boyle and Michell, 2020; Ivanova, 2020). Aside from trust, Thibodeau and Rueling (2015) discussed the importance of having shared urgency between stakeholders to be able to attain specific outcomes.

Stakeholder empowerment is another important factor for stakeholders to understand that they are valued and was discussed in eight articles. There is a consensus among these articles that stakeholders should be involved in the planning and implementation stages of projects. This includes sharing decision-making and including them in difficult issues (Becker et al., 2017; Guidry et al., 2014; Visser, 2016). This helps avoid conflicts and can influence project success (Brajer-Marczak et al.).

Proper project management was evident as a success factor in six of the articles and involved having clear project objectives, adequate project resources and appropriate risk management. A shared understanding of project goals is critical in being able to implement proper project management, leading to effective SE (Thibodeau and Rueling, 2015). This means setting goals that are clear and mutually defined by all stakeholders involved (Watson et al., 2020; Wiggill, 2011). Several authors also discussed how ensuring that there are enough organisational resources to see the project through and also ensuring that they are allocated properly means that there are enough resources to implement effective SE (AbouAssi and An, 2017; Canas et al., 2019; Jiao et al., 2020). Another important aspect of project management in SE is appropriate risk management. According to Wiggill (2011), risks should be assessed against what the stakeholders needs and expectations are, to determine where they should focus their resources.

There were also other success factors found in the identified articles with less frequency, but are also important to mention. Carman et al. (2013) found that the individual attributes or personalities of stakeholders affected how these stakeholders engaged. Cho and Auger (2017) concluded that stakeholders who were more agreeable and conscientious tend to be more involved and engaged. In Pressgrove and McKeever's (2016) study, loyalty to an organisation seemed to indicate how engaged the stakeholders were. Another factor was financial certainty, where Becker et al. (2017) and Clark et al.

(2016) found that having and investing financial capacity increased SE with the project's external stakeholders and benefactors. Lastly, having a skilled project team was also identified as important in SE. Boyle and Michell (2020) highlighted the importance of a diverse assortment of expertise and skill within the project team, to be able to come up with strategies that can offer the most effective interventions and engagement.

4 Discussion

The SLR was conducted with the aim to understand the main issues relating to successful SE and identify the factors that influence this success. It resulted in a total of 34 articles, showing the dearth of literature available with regard to successful SE within the NFP sector. It is also important to note that not all of the identified articles discussed specific projects, but rather looked at SE from the organisation's perspective. Especially in NFP organisations, it can be hard to draw a line between the stakeholders' involvement in individual projects and the organisation due to the often small and lean structure of these groups.

Several themes have emerged from the SLR. The role of social media and the role of public relations in SE emerged as common areas in literature relating to external stakeholders. The distinction between social media use and social media engagement is a significant one to make, as effectively using these platforms can be the only way to gain more engagement through them. Several authors discussed being able to obtain better communication through these tools and argued that this is still a relatively an unexplored area (Carboni and Maxwell, 2015; Clark et al., 2016; Maxwell and Carboni, 2017; Nelson, 2019). This is especially true given how the identified articles mainly focused on Facebook despite the growing number of social media platforms. According to the non-profit Technology Network, Facebook is the most common form of social media used by NFP organisations but its popularity was already reaching its saturation levels (Non-profit Technology Network, 2012). It is also important to keep in mind that these studies were conducted prior to the 2019 Coronavirus pandemic, which could have possibly given way to various changes in this area. As mentioned, public relations are also perceived to be an emerging topic in the area of SE. According to Moussa and Benmessaoud (2021), engagement has emerged within the public relations realm in the past decade as the key indicator for a good organisation-public relationship. Indeed, there is an overlap in discussions regarding public relations and SE, and both can be seen as connected with each other. Positively connecting and relating with the public also means being able to engage them effectively as stakeholders.

Another key area researched were different frameworks and models that could support SE. These models presented by Carman et al. (2013) and Webb and Orr (2021) are definitely useful within their specific context, but may be hard to generalise to other areas as some of them discuss specific types of stakeholders such as patients or health providers. However, the frameworks suggested by the other three articles showed some similarities, specifically in focusing on a clear and uniform internal understanding of SE before moving on to planning and implementation. Future studies may focus on how to achieve this important organisational alignment, which may be different for each type of NFP organisation.

RQ1 focused on the underlying issues relating to successful SE in NFP projects, and this was evident in all of the themes observed. Social media could be seen as significant to SE but not fully taken advantage of. NFPs may not have the resources to understand the best platform for them to focus on and understand the preferences of their stakeholders. Not having a proper grasp of the relationship of public relations and SE is also another issue to be considered, as NFP projects often work with different external stakeholders with dynamic attitudes and behaviours. Specific barriers encountered can be classified into those affecting internal and external stakeholder groups. Internal challenges revolved around human resources, which also affects engagement with external stakeholders when staff are buried with too much work or when they are simply not available (Canas et al., 2019; Wang, 2021). This is a continued problem for NFP organisations—overworked and underpaid staff which is caused by financial availability and sustainability. External challenges include not having strong relationships with stakeholders, which seem to have been compounded by the pandemic with less and less face-to-face meetings. In relation to this, access to technology is a growing barrier that is important to focus on, as the world moves to the new normal of remote online working. According to the Digital Technology in the NFP Sector Report, less than a third of the NFP population they surveyed had access to the right technology when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, such as video conferencing software or sufficient hardware (Infoxchange Group, 2020).

Addressing RQ2, the most prevalent theme was evidence-based factors for SE, where 31 out of the 34 articles discussed factors that could support increased and effective engagement with stakeholders. This included supportive and skilled management, effective and efficient dialogic communication, providing a collaborative environment for SE, identifying and understanding stakeholders, managing multiple stakeholders, stakeholder empowerment, and proper project management. It is interesting to note that even though limited financial resources are more commonly considered as a barrier encountered to SE, financial certainty was not considered as the top factor for successful SE. These findings show that having the right leaders matter more as they have substantial influence to the project or organisation's success. It also shows the involvement needed from NFP leaders in projects and in relationships with stakeholders.

In defining these factors and looking at examples, it can also be noted that they are interrelated and it may be difficult to simply focus on one. For example, to be a engaged leader you need to be able to communicate well, and managing multiple stakeholders and empowering them means being able to identify and understand them. Further studies may explore these relationships to enable a better understanding of how they are interconnected.

These factors that relate to the NFP sector may be similar but not necessarily ranked the same for other sectors. In a study by Amoatey and Hayibor (2017) relating to success factors for SE in the government sector, communication was ranked first and followed by identifying stakeholders, clear project objectives, maintaining good relationships and conflict management. Having a good management team was not mentioned as an important factor. Interestingly, in the construction sector, a study by El-Sawalhi and Hammad (2015) finds that hiring a project lead with high competency is important, as well as effective communication, clear project goals and understanding the stakeholders' needs. This appears to be more similar to the findings of this study.

5 Conclusions

Navigating the successful engagement of various stakeholders within NFP projects can be complex, needing to take into consideration the limited resources and constantly changing environment that they work in. An SLR for this particular topic was conducted and a total of 34 journal articles were identified based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The records identified were spread across different journals with its sample population from different countries, mostly from the USA. They were also from various activity groups, with a significant presence from Social Services, Education and Research, Culture and Recreation and Environment activity groups.

In reviewing the 34 articles, the most prevalent theme was success factors that facilitated SE. The factors most frequently mentioned across the different studies include supportive and skilled management, effective and efficient dialogic communication, providing a collaborative environment for SE, identifying and understanding stakeholders, managing multiple stakeholders and their relationships and proper project management. Although these factors were studied within their specific NFP contexts, they can still be used to guide other studies within this sector. These factors can support project practitioners as areas to focus on and can also be useful for other researchers who may want to empirically test these success factors within a specific context. It is also important to note that even though projects and organisations may choose to focus on specific key factors, they are all connected and one can definitely impact another. The analysis also showed that although these factors were most commonly studied, other areas such as the role of social media, role of public relations, significance of frameworks and barriers encountered were also areas of research in the available literature. As mentioned in the previous section, there is still a lot of room for future studies within these areas in various contexts.

The practical implications of this study are significant to other researchers interested in doing studies in the NFP sector and to project practitioners. For researchers, knowledge of the current intellectual landscape of successful NFP SE can assist in looking and filling in literature gaps. For practitioners, knowledge of what makes SE successful can guide them in engaging their stakeholders throughout the successful planning and implementation of their projects.

5.1 Limitations

This SLR is limited by its inclusion and exclusion criteria, as these may have excluded other significant articles. The search was conducted on Scopus and Web of Science, and although these are both reliable and have a good collection of literature, other articles may not have been indexed in these databases. Furthermore, keywords used may have limited the search results if the articles used similar but different keywords. The timeframe was also restricted to the past ten years, due to time and resource constraints of researchers conducting the study. The results and discussion of this study may have some cognitive bias, in terms of identifying themes and prominent success factors.

5.2 Research opportunities and gaps

The NFP sector is wide, varied and dynamic, providing a lot of opportunity for future studies. Although the results show that the sample of the selected studies are from

different countries, 15 out of the 34 articles were concentrated in North America. The remaining articles were distributed among the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania, with no study included from South America. This indicates that there is an ample opportunity for future studies in these continents.

Selected studies could be replicated in other countries outside of the USA or replicated within another activity group. The SLR also showed that there are more published articles in relation to stakeholders within the activity groups of social services, education and research, culture and recreation and environment. Only four groups were not represented, namely International, Religion, Business and Professional Associations and Law, Advocacy and Politics. This suggests that although some groups are the focus of more studies, most of them were well represented in the identified articles. It also reveals opportunities for further studies in these activity groups.

The emerging area of social media engagement as directly relating to SE could be further explored given the continuously evolving nature of technology. The articles in this study mostly focused on engagement with the public, donors and volunteers on Facebook and Twitter (Alonso-Canadas et al., 2019; Carboni and Maxwell, 2015; Clark et al., 2016; Guidry et al., 2014; Maxwell and Carboni, 2017; Moussa and Benmessaoud, 2021; Nelson, 2019). Other social media platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn could be studied. Different modes of communication including social media platforms could also be identified and evaluated in terms of the most effective and least resource intensive, given the limited resources of NFPs.

Success factors presented in the discussion could be also used for future studies within specific activity groups. These could be used to identify Critical Success Factors (CSFs) which could prove useful to project practitioners. CSFs are often used to help attain successful project outcomes and help in focusing on important factors within the project.

Lastly, given the depth of its impact, future studies could focus on the pandemic and its impact on different stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic has social and economic impacts unlike any other that the world has faced, and has great impacts on the NFP sector. NFPs are pushed to confront the changing and increasing needs of the public, specifically the elevated levels of poverty and disparity in the community (Cortis and Blaxland, 2020).

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