

Branding and governmentality for infrastructure megaprojects: The role of social media



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KEYWORDS

- Megaprojects
- Governmentality
- Branding
- Project community
- Social media

Article highlight:

This paper explores the strategies that megaproject teams use to manage stakeholders through social media (Twitter and Facebook), using the branding of a metro rail project in India as the subject of the study.

What does the paper cover?

The study uses theories of power to study the strategies for dealing with stakeholders through an organisation's brand. The structure follows the 5C's framework of a research article proposed by Lange and Pfarrer (2017):

1. the **Common ground** is summarised as the need for effective stakeholder management
2. the **Complication** is the difficulty in managing external stakeholders who cannot be governed by contract
3. the **Concern** is the underperformance of the megaproject resulting from scope creep and escalation of commitment
4. the **Course of action** is the research methodology employed in studying a complex topic such as governmentality through observing social media

5. the **Contributions** are in the summary and key findings in the form of six propositions along with limitations of the approach and suggestions for future research.

Methodology:

Infrastructure megaprojects tend to experience more conflict than other industries due to the disparate interests of the wide range of internal and external stakeholders. External stakeholders are more difficult to govern than internal ones because they are often not bound by contracts, so organisations adopt many overt and more covert strategies to manage the issues that arise.

In this paper, a brief literature review of governmentality and branding – two strategic approaches to managing stakeholders – allowed the authors to arrive at two research questions:

1. How is governmentality through branding used to manage the megaproject community and the project team?
2. What are the effects of governmentality through branding on the project community and project team?

These questions are addressed using a case study of a metro rail megaproject in India, in which the authors analysed social media outputs surrounding the project and the branding they created. This megaproject was chosen because it extensively used social media and the researchers were able to access key personnel and data.

A content analysis of 640 project and non-project-based Tweets was undertaken. This data was augmented with the community's response (454 comments) on Facebook as well as through 18 semi-structured interviews that captured the project teams' responses. These interviews lasted from 1–3 hours and were conducted over 3 months.

The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature on branding and governmentality.

Research findings:

Analysis of the relationship between social media and branding in this megaproject leads to six propositions about the effect of governmentality on the community and project teams:

1. **Community support** for construction activities results from the reach of the media promoting the organisation, giving progress updates and appealing to the community.
2. **Job attraction within the project team** results from the reach of the media promoting the organisation, giving progress updates and appealing to the community.
3. **Positive brand image in the community** results from the reach of the media promoting the organisation, giving progress updates, appealing to the community and targeting sections of the population.
4. **Enhanced job perception in the project team** results from the reach of the media promoting the organisation, giving progress updates, appealing to the community and targeting sections of the population.
5. **Transformation of the project community into brand advocates** results from the social reach of the media promoting the organisation, appealing to the community and targeting sections of the population.
6. **Transformation of the project team into brand advocates** results from the social reach of media promoting the organisation, appealing to the community and targeting sections of the population.

Conclusions:

The construction industry makes up more than 10% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) but the use and relevance of social media data is under-explored.

This study outlines the positive effect of social media on external stakeholders – the community – and the internal project team in this case study of a megaproject. The governmental strategies used via social media (such as giving project updates, promoting the organisation and appealing to the community) resulted in positive relations with the community and project teams, enhancing the organisation's brand image. This in turn led to increased alignment of the interests of external stakeholders with those of the project, thereby leading to reduced protest.

The researchers identify limitations and possibilities for future research:

- the age limitations of social media users may restrict the effects of governmentality
- similar studies may need to be undertaken in other geographical and cultural contexts to generalize these results
- analysis of social media communications and how community engagement evolves over time
- how governmentality shapes the project team into brand advocates
- resistance to governmentality through social media
- the relative importance of governmentality instruments and their effects through a more mixed-method approach may help identify additional findings.

Within the limitations of the research, this paper summarises six propositions that contribute to the management of stakeholders in megaprojects through governmentality. It also contributes to discussion of community engagement practices in megaprojects that use branding to foster governmentality.

Significance of the research:

For project managers: The role of governmentality in positively influencing external stakeholders – especially the use of social media in implementing governmental strategies – is an important aspect to include in megaproject planning. Aligning external stakeholders with the project's goals is likely to enable the project to meet its stated objective better.

For researchers: Areas for future research are identified, as listed in the conclusions above.

Comments from the authors:

Currently, while there is much talk about the role of social media in politics as well as issues about data privacy, the impact of social media on the management of stakeholders in projects is seldom discussed. This research sought to understand how social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, can shape the preferences of the project community and how it can be used as a tool for effective management of external stakeholders by project managers of megaprojects. We are in the process of extending this work by studying the resistance to the use of these strategies from the communities' perspective.

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Glossary:

Governmentality:

Approach to the study of power that emphasises the governing of people's conduct through positive means. It is generally associated with the willing participation of those involved.

Megaproject:

A set of projects which together support a common strategic goal, generally defined as costing more than 1 billion US dollars and take many years to complete.



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