

**Social Responsibility and the Olympic Games: The Mediating Role of Consumer Attributions**

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**Organizational theory  
Abstract 2009-040**

**May 28, 2009  
2:30 PM**

**25 minute oral  
(Richland B)**

Concerns about the nature and scope of CSR have grown significantly on issues ranging from labor to the environment. These concerns have proliferated in the popular press (Alsop, 2004), among political leaders (O'Rourke, 2003), and in the academic literature (cf. Crampton & Patten, 2008; Edward & Willmott, 2008; Matten & Crane, 2005), spurring a lively debate over the role of CSR in the global business environment. Not surprisingly, this debate has reflected the instrumental (i.e., business pragmatism) discussions on the relationship between a firm's reputation, stakeholder associations, and corporate success in the marketplace (Sen et al., 2006). As a result, the recent spate of social irresponsibility has provided ammunition to the media depicting organizations who promote social responsibility as deceptive and self-interested (Basu & Palazzo, 2008).

No such recent example is better than the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the organizing committees in answering the critics' calls by addressing the social impacts derived from mega-sporting events. Sport in general, and the Olympic Movement in particular, have frequently been promoted as a force for good in the world (Bloom et al., 2005). However, critics of the Games argue that rather than promoting "Olympism", the Games have primarily been used to leverage public funds to satisfy elite economic interests, resulting in long-term debt and negative host city impacts (cf. Andranovich et al., 2001; Lenskyj, 2003; Whitson & Macintosh, 1993). As well, concerns relating to the environmental impact of the Games have been highlighted (cf. Getz, 2005; Leopkey & Parent, in press). These practices have led to arguments that CSR breeds public cynicism as consumers now suspect many firms of "greenwashing" (Laufer, 2004) and cause exploitation (Vlachos et al., 2008).

For the Olympic Games, embedded knowledge of social progress is centered on the symbolic importance that nations have placed on winning the right to host and successfully hosting the Games (Whitson & Macintosh, 1993). Much "face" was on the line in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics as their billing as the "Green Games" was dichotomized by China's poor environmental record. Consequently, this was a major source of leverage for activists interested in discrediting the Chinese government and the IOC for their selection of the host site. Therefore, the associations that Olympic consumers assigned to the Games represented a battleground over stakeholder mind share (Sen et al., 2006). As witnessed by the media attention given to the games, the BOCOG attempted to leverage stakeholder associations to gain the strategic advantage of only positive publicity for China (Séguin et al., 2008).

Previous consumer association research has centered on either corporate ability (CA – producing quality products) or corporate social responsibility (CSR – commitment to social causes). However, by utilizing a framework describing attributional judgments of consumers as values-driven, stakeholder-driven, and strategic (Ellen et al., 2006), this research sought to broaden this limited scope to fully understand how consumers view the motives behind social engagement. We developed and tested a theoretical model proposing that CSR awareness influences customer patronage toward, and perceived reputation of, the IOC. In addition, we theorized that consumers' attributions would influence the relationship.

Drawing on insights from the CSR literature supporting awareness as an antecedent to behavior (Sen et al., 2006), we predicted that Olympic consumers' awareness of CSR will positively influence their assessments of organizational reputation (H1) and their intent to patronize the organization (H2). Based on additional attribution research (cf. Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Vlachos et al., 2008), we felt that consumers' attributional judgments of the IOC's social engagement would fully mediate the awareness-patronage relationship (H3). The CSR awareness construct was developed using guidance from previous literature (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001;  $\alpha=.81$ ), while the remainder of the questionnaire incorporated items to measure consumer attributions (Ellen et al., 2006; values-driven  $\alpha=.85$ , stakeholder-driven  $\alpha=.87$ , strategic  $\alpha=.73$ ), reputation (Gaines-Ross, 1998;  $\alpha=.91$ ) and patronage intentions (James, 2006; word-of-mouth  $\alpha=.84$ , repeat purchase  $\alpha=.86$ , merchandise consumption  $\alpha=.77$ ).

Data were collected from visitors of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games representing 38 different nations over a three-week period during the Games. After the removal of incomplete questionnaires, 503 [male: 286 (57%); female: 217 (43%)] questionnaires were utilized in the analysis. We applied structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships between CSR awareness, attributions, patronage intentions, and reputation. SEM is particularly suitable to test the model because it allows

## 2009 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2009)

simultaneous estimation of multiple relationships between latent constructs involving mediation while accounting for measurement error (Nielson et al., 2008).

We followed the commonly established two-stage procedure (Hoyle & Panter, 1995). First, a CFA was conducted to assess the validity of the measurement model and the discriminant validity of individual constructs. Second, a structural model involving path analysis was used to estimate path coefficients and test for relationships. Two competing models were evaluated in order to determine the model representing the best fit. The no-mediation model fit reasonably well, establishing a unidimensional structure ( $\chi^2(df)=674.071$  (229),  $\chi^2/df=2.944$ ,  $p<.001$ ), RMSEA=0.062, GFI=0.91, NFI=0.90. However, the full-mediation model fit the data better ( $\chi^2(df)=608.690$  (226),  $\chi^2/df=2.693$ ,  $p<.001$ ), RMSEA=0.058, GFI=0.91, NFI=0.92) thereby supporting H3.

As predicted, awareness positively predicted patronage intentions and reputation providing support for H1 and H2. The analysis indicated that consumers' attributions likely have differential effects on the dependent variables. Values-driven attributions positively influenced word of mouth intentions ( $\beta=.133$ ,  $p=.003$ ), and reputation ( $\beta=.114$ ,  $p=.007$ ) but had no influence repeat purchase or merchandise consumption. Stakeholder-driven attributions positively influenced repeat purchase ( $\beta=.273$ ,  $p=.003$ ), merchandise consumption ( $\beta=.209$ ,  $p=.005$ ), and reputation ( $\beta=.216$ ,  $p=.001$ ) but had no significant influence on word of mouth consumption. Strategic attributions negatively influenced repeat purchase ( $\beta=-.297$ ,  $p=.001$ ), and demonstrated a weak but still significant influence on merchandise consumption ( $\beta=-.055$ ,  $p=.045$ ).

As illustrated in the results, Olympic consumer's intentions are more likely to predict repeat purchase intentions because the IOC is pressured by its stakeholders and society to undertake CSR-related activities, rather than for an internal, normative reason (i.e., the "right thing to do"). However, this consumption pattern is personal, not affected by word-of-mouth or because consumers believe that others would return based on the IOC's social activities. The apparent disconnect between, notably, the IOC's activities, values, consumption, and stakeholder pressure seems to point to a more complex relationship which certainly requires further study. Implications for practitioners and academicians will be forwarded.