Beyond the “Business Case” for the WNBA: A Strategic Perspectives Approach for League Sustainability

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Despite being the most successful women’s league in history, the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) has faced challenges ranging from summer sport league placement to ownership issues. The WNBA’s 1997 inaugural season was met with enthusiasm as the official slogan “We Got Next” assured fans of basketball action during the NBA’s summer off-season (Banet-Weiser, 1999). From the outset, the WNBA’s $15 million marketing campaign and corporate sponsorships added to the allure of the WNBA by creating a salient vision of women’s professional team sport in North America (McDonald, 2000). Despite the initial excitement, sponsor commitment, marketing efforts, and NBA support, the WNBA has struggled to increase its fanbase and generate revenue (Hoovers, 2009). Therefore, the most immediate concern is whether WNBA owners and NBA executives will continue to justify their investments in this financially wavering enterprise.

This conceptual article is intended to contribute to the investment debate from a sustainability perspective. We suggest that sustainability can be transposed beyond the “business case” for the WNBA by highlighting three forms of capital (i.e., economic, cultural, and social) that could be less polarized for the WNBA then for their male counterpart. In addition, we argue that corporate social responsibility (CSR) could be one of the underpinning elements to guide executive decision-making about the WNBA by arguing that it could be viewed as a strategic investment for the NBA.

Operationalized in the literature as efforts taken to conserve natural resources and avoid waste (Ambec & Lanoie, 2008), most sustainability discussions have been relegated to the orientation of businesses in the physical (i.e., natural) rather than the social environment. As such, the consequences of management practice for every individual's well-being and the richness of social life as assessed by participation in civic activities have yet to be fleshed out (Pfeffer, 2010). This myopic view fails to capture the nuances of how sustainability applies to the social business environment because the term can clearly encompass a focus on human as well as physical resources. In fact, one of the foci of the Academy of Management's (AOM) division of “Organizations and the Natural Environment” (O.N.E.) is, “managing human resources for sustainability”. This statement illustrates a paradigm shift in broader sustainability discussions.

One of the strongest arguments in favor of protecting the environment is guaranteeing that future generations will continue to enjoy untainted natural resources (Anand & Sen, 2000). However, similar opportunities of leading worthwhile lives in a culturally accepting and socially stable world should be equally as important to preceding generations. As a concept, sustainability has traditionally been related to economic efficiency, market performance, and social responsibility. At its core however, sustainability “… embodies the promise of societal evolution toward a more equitable and wealthy world in which the natural environment and cultural achievements are preserved for generations to come” (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2001). Consistent with this basic premise of sustainability, and given the WNBA’s struggles, its current financial position, and its history with the NBA, we present a model whereby three interconnected perspectives (i.e., business sustainability, social responsibility, and strategic social responsibility) are used to examine the WNBA’s future.

We first examine the WNBA as a separate entity from the NBA. Moreover, we move beyond a uni-dimensional focus to look at the WNBA in relation to the three forms of capital that fuel longevity: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. We next adopt the perspective that the WNBA could serve as an additional pillar of the NBA’s socially responsive program (i.e., NBA Cares). This is not to suggest that the WNBA be a “cause” of the NBA, however, as this perspective allows the WNBA to be seen as supported asset for the NBA. Specifically, this perspective highlights the both NBA’s commitment to diversity and inclusion and the social significance of this commitment to society-at-large. Lastly, and perhaps most controversially, we argue that by effectively positioning the WNBA as a “strategic” socially responsive initiative (i.e., leveraging social initiatives in a way to accrue a direct return on investment), the NBA could gain the ability to differentiate itself based on the organization’s unique culture, competencies, and other strategic opportunities. Adopting this strategy could assist in mitigating negativity as well as bringing other significant benefits to the NBA (Hillman & Keim, 2001; Husted, 2005; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001) that go beyond reputation-building to the further development of social, cultural, and economic capital. While unique in their suppositions, each of these perspectives highlights the unique opportunities that exist for the future of the WNBA.

The WNBA offers much to both sport and society in terms of its cultural and social significance. Thus, the current orientation of the WNBA (i.e., as a profit-driven entity) is in need of a change to one that focuses on the integration social and cultural
issues into their overall business model. The problem with this transition is that the NBA’s model (as with most professional sport organizations) focuses too heavily on recognizing the financial impact that strategy and practice have on stakeholders and societies, rather than on overall sustainability of their brand. The NBA’s initiatives, based on their understanding of “responsibility” in practice, often go well beyond efforts to “do good” for society. However, the organization has failed to recognize the fundamental role they (and their sister organization) play in building healthy and culturally integrated societies.

The WNBA must continue to strengthen their position in existing local markets and concurrently focus their operations on the creation of social and cultural capital by celebrating the larger role they play in inclusion and diversity. Augmenting existing marketing strategies aimed at fostering cultural sustainability may render a more robust bottom line. Because the WNBA’s network is geographically porous, their partnership with the NBA (i.e., bonding) and external communities (i.e., bridging) will help increase social capital around the nation. Enhancing the WNBA’s relationships with the NBA and other external communities will increase the creation of social capital thereby fostering social sustainability (arguably benefiting both leagues). By continuing to support the WNBA and the capital it produces, the NBA is operating in a socially responsible manner and aiding in the sustainability of its sister league. Investing the sustainability of the WNBA will benefit the NBA by differentiating it from other professional sport leagues due to their expansive focus. As well, such investments in sustainability will also help to expand the NBA’s fanbase, which will ultimately benefit their bottom line.