A portfolio of partners for good?: Examining how perceptions of sport organizations’ CSR partners affects willingness to donate to CSR initiatives

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Professional sport organizations, like other for-profit organizations, are increasingly engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). To enact CSR activities, they often partner with organizations in different sectors including government, non-profit and for-profit. The National Football League (NFL), for example, partners with the National Dairy Counsel, the American Heart Association, the White House and P&G in the Play 60 campaign to reduce childhood obesity. These partnerships can provide sport organizations with needed resources, such as specialized knowledge, expertise, or human and financial capital. On the other hand, partnerships with organizations in certain sectors may limit the success of social initiatives if there are widespread negative perceptions of organizations in that sector. These general perceptions if negative, can tarnish (or, if positive, improve) the image of social initiatives, and in turn affect volunteerism, donations, and participation. Yet little is known about sport organizations’ partnership portfolios and whether working with different sectors helps or hurts the success of social initiatives. Thus, we intend to explore the portfolio effect of sport organizations’ partnerships with various organizations in different sectors on the performance of social initiatives.

The objective of this research is to examine individual perceptions that influence support for sport organizations’ social initiatives. Ultimately, this research aims to generate findings that can inform professional sport organizations and organizations in general as they manage their portfolios of partners around social initiatives. This research has implications for the success of social initiatives and the outcomes for their beneficiaries as well as the success of professional sports organizations. The following questions will be addressed:

1. What are individuals’ general perceptions of partnership organizations in different sectors (government, non-profit, for-profit), in terms of their sincerity, trustworthiness, accountability, stability, efficiency and fit/congruence?

2. How do these perceptions affect individuals’ support for professional sports organizations’ CSR initiatives in terms of economic performance (e.g., donations), given organization partnerships with different sectors around the initiatives?

When organizations are trying to change or start something new, such as a new venture, they must gain legitimacy (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). Institutional theory suggests that organizational legitimacy can be achieved through conforming to the prevailing belief systems in the environment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In order to align with the public’s normative beliefs and create resonance, organizations can evoke symbols that convey meaning (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). For example, studies have looked at how telling vivid stories about a new venture that highlight both the novelty and the traditional features can lead to legitimacy and thus financial support (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001).

In the CSR context, studies suggest that perceptions of the fit between, and thus legitimacy of, for-private organizations and their causes have important implications. High fit reinforces the corporation’s positioning with favorable attitudes, while low fit dilutes the position and creates dislike and lower equity (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006). Thus, organizations must strive to convey a high degree of fit between themselves and their social causes. One way they can do so is to partner with image “matching” organizations. Partnering with organizations can convey meaning around the positioning of a social initiative, given general beliefs or perceptions about different sectors. Depending on these beliefs, organizations may be more or less effective in creating alignment and resonance with the public. Thus we will investigate partnerships portfolios as a potential tool for creating legitimacy for social initiatives, particularly in the sport context (see Chein, Cornwell and Rappu, 2011).
There are three main sectors in the US: public (i.e. government), private (i.e. corporations), and nonprofit (NPOs). Previous research suggests there are four types of cross-sector partnerships that address social issues (Waddock, 1988; Selsky and Parker, 2005). These include public-private, public-nonprofit, private-nonprofit, and tripartite partnerships of all three sectors. Building on these possibilities, we will consider professional sport leagues’ partnerships with any one of the sectors, any two of them, all three of them, or no organizations. Thus, we will examine eight possible configurations of cross-sector partnerships of sport organization with 1) private, 2) public, 3) non-profit, 4) private and public, 5) private and non-profit, 6) public and non-profit, 7) private, public and non-profit, or 8) no partnerships.

To investigate the effect of partnerships portfolios of sport organization on economic performance of CSR initiatives, we will employ two quasi-experiments. We will recruit two random samples of 320 and 300 individuals between the ages of 18 and 60 with three dollars compensation per an adult through Qualtrics service.

In Study 1, to measure perceptions of the different sectors, each subject will be exposed to short descriptions of fictitious organizations representing each of the different sectors and asked to rate their perceptions of the organizations’ trustworthiness, sincerity, accountability, stabilities, and efficiency. Then, subjects will be given a vignette describing a professional sport organization’s social initiative (one similar to Play 60), including the partners involved. The partnerships described in these vignettes will vary according to eight different conditions. For example, subjects in the “private and public” condition will receive a vignette that describes both a private and government partner whereas subjects in the “no partner” condition will be told that sport organization implements the initiative without any partnering organizations. To measure economic performance of the initiative, contingent valuation method will be adapted to ask subjects’ willingness to donate, pay and volunteer. ANOVA and T-tests will be used to compare the performances across groups. In Study 2, we will choose high-fit and low-fit portfolios based on Study 1 and examine how the low-fit portfolios can be better managed by proper articulation to improve the economic performance of the initiative (see Cornwell, et. al., 2006). We will then compare the low-fit portfolio without articulation, the low-fit portfolio with articulation, and the high fit portfolio in terms of economic performance.

Institutional theory submits that organizations need to conform to the normative beliefs in their environments in order to gain or maintain legitimacy and thus viability and success. Studies have suggested a number of tactics organizations can use to resonate with individuals’ and groups’ beliefs, including adopting particular popular practices and using strategically crafted verbal accounts of their actions (Elsbach, 1994; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). This study contributes to this literature by investigating whether and how partnerships with certain sectors can be used strategically to legitimate organizations’ activities through aligning with individuals’ beliefs about the sectors. This study contributes to the CSR literature by examining 1) the mediating role of individual perceptions on support for social initiatives and 2) partnerships across all three sectors (including the often neglected public sector). This study also extends the literature on CSR in the sport management field. Studies in this tradition have looked at motivations for, and perceptions of, sport organizations’ CSR in general (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009; Sheth and Babiak, 2010), but not perceptions of partnerships and how this affects the success of the social initiatives. The proposed study expands on our understanding of how sport organizations’ partnerships can lead to legitimacy around their social change efforts.