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NFL Player Safety: Does Prioritizing Player Welfare Attract Consumers?

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(including questions)**

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The National Football League (NFL) has long been the target of criticism by former players who claim to have suffered permanent injuries in NFL games, and has defended litigation from retired players claiming that football participation is responsible for their disabilities (Gibeau, 2011). Throughout league history, there have been frequent instances when the desire to win has influenced decisions about players' welfare that were not in the players' best interests (Goldberg, 2008). However, as this issue has gained increased attention, the NFL has recently embarked upon a fundamental cultural shift, vaulting player safety to the forefront of its organizational mission (NFL.com). The League has instituted a series of rules changes intended to increase safety (Casson, Viano, Powell, & Pellman, 2010), including protections for defenseless players and penalties for players who launch themselves or use their helmets to initiate contact (Ellenbogen, Berger, & Batjer, 2010). Yet, despite the established health benefits derived from increased safety, this initiative has encountered resistance among many players, coaches, and fans (Ellenbogen, et al., 2010). These groups assert that the new rules are unbalanced, providing preferential treatment to offensive skill players and unfairly penalizing defenders (King, 2010). Hence, to some, it appears that the NFL is legislating defense out of the game while deliberately promoting offense and increasing the value of quarterbacks (Clark, 2012). Thus, there is not universal agreement about the value added by these new rules (Fox, 2010). Fans may also be similarly divided about the initiative. Thus, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how the NFL's player safety initiative has affected fan groups.

Freeman (1984) established that in order to remain competitive, businesses need to identify and target the needs of key stakeholder groups when creating strategy. Failure to do so could lead to an alienation of certain groups upon which the organization depends for success. Certain stakeholder groups may develop unique opinions about the organization's motivation behind strategy, since they may be uniquely affected by it (Kihl, Leberman, & Schull, 2010). So while developing a stakeholder-focused perspective is integral to CSR (Godfrey, 2009), addressing the needs of certain stakeholder groups at the expense of others could stifle the effectiveness of the initiative. However, while having a stakeholder focus is an essential function for effective management (Donaldson & Preston, 1995), additional frameworks are needed to predict the outcomes associated with CSR engagement. In sport, CSR involvement has been found to affect several beneficial outcomes including increased organizational credibility (Inoue & Kent, 2012), cost savings (McCullough & Cunningham, 2010), boost in reputation (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Walker & Kent, 2009), increased fan identification (McCullough & Cunningham, 2010), increased merchandise consumptions (Walker & Kent, 2009), and increased intentions to engage in positive word of mouth about the organization. Contrastingly, Inoue, Kent, & Lee (2011) found that charitable giving (a form of CSR) by certain sport organizations had no effect on fan attendance, which suggest that the success of CSR initiatives is likely to vary depending upon the nature of the initiative and the groups affected by it.

Sartore-Baldwin and Walker (2011) provide support for a relationship between CSR initiatives and consumption intentions as their study of NASCAR fans found that CSR initiatives influenced consumption intentions, but did so more strongly when mediated by adoption of a positive image of the practicing organization. Groza, Pronschinske, and Walker (2011) also found that organizational CSR initiatives, when engaged in proactively, positively affected consumer attitudes and consumption intentions, both directly and indirectly as a result of the mediation of consumers' attributions of the organization's motive for the initiative. Groza, et al. (2011) concluded that CSR initiatives that are motivated by outwardly responsible organizational values, rather than by stakeholder demands, drives the development of positive attributions toward the organization that lead to consumption intentions. It is therefore predicted that:

H1: Exposure to the NFL player safety initiative will directly influence fans' intention to consume NFL games and media.

H2: Exposure to the NFL player safety initiative will increase fan development of attributions toward the NFL as being motivated by social responsibility.

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H3: Positive attributions of social responsibility toward the NFL will mediate the effect of the NFL player safety initiative on consumption of NFL games and products.

Additionally, fan attributions toward the NFL as a socially responsible organization have been found to attract a wide range of consumer groups as well as strengthen relationships with existing consumers (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005). However, this effect is likely to be moderated by fans' level of identification with the NFL in accordance with Walker and Kent (2009), who determined that fan identification moderates the link between CSR and patronage intentions, and Sartore-Baldwin and Walker (2011), who discovered that fan identification also moderates the effect of the image of the organization on consumption intentions. As a result, the following additional hypotheses will be tested:

H4: The direct link between the NFL player safety initiative and consumption intentions will be moderated by levels of fan identification with the NFL.

H5: Fan identification will also moderate the link between positive attributions of social responsibility toward the NFL and consumption intentions.

In addition, Welty Peachey and Bruening (2012) found that stakeholder responses to change initiatives can vary between resistance, acceptance, and ambivalence. In the case of NFL player safety, established NFL fans espousing traditional views of the game may be inclined to resist the NFL player safety initiative and reduce their consumption of the NFL if they perceive it to be adversely affecting the integrity of the sport. Thus lastly, we hypothesize that:

H6: The direct link between the NFL player safety initiative and consumption intentions is expected to be moderated by perceptions of game integrity.

These hypotheses will be tested using a sample of approximately 200 graduate and undergraduate students. Participants will be provided a link to a survey assessing their familiarity with NFL player safety (Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011), attributions that the initiative is motivated by social responsibility on the part of the NFL (Groza, et al., 2011; Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011), existing levels of identification with the NFL (Walker & Kent, 2009; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and perceptions of game integrity. Survey items were adapted from the studies cited, with the exception of items assessing game integrity for which a scale has yet to be established. In addition, participants will be asked to provide their likelihood to consume NFL games and media (Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011). Data will be analyzed using structural equation modeling, which will allow testing of the fit of the theorized model and an evaluation of the strength of each of the aforementioned relationships. The aim is to determine the linkages, if any, between player-focused CSR initiatives and fan outcomes. Findings could have significance for sport managers if a link between measures to promote player safety and positive consumer behaviors can be confirmed.