The Influence of CSR in College Sports on Local Fan’s Patronage Intentions

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Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become increasingly prevalent in the sport industry (Walker & Kent, 2009). Not only have professional sport industry focused on CSR to enhance profits and to maintain a good reputation (Sheth, 2006; Babiak & Wolfe, 2007) but evidence of CSR practices in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and its member institutions (Brown & Pieper, 2013) is apparent. While research has demonstrated that sport organizational CSR initiatives can impact patronage intentions including purchasing and donations (Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Walker et al., 2010; Walker & Kent, 2009), however, it is unclear in the intercollegiate athletic context, to what extent college sport fans’ purchasing intentions are influenced by an athletic departments’ CSR practices. Enhancing our understanding of the relationship between athletic department CSR practices and sport fans’ patronage intentions can help athletic administrators utilize their CSR practices as part of their athletic department marketing strategies.

Numerous studies have attempted to examine benefits of CSR initiatives with regard to consumer behavioral intention, including purchase and patronage intention (e.g., Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006; Castaldo et al., 2008; Ellen et al., 2006; Klein & Dawar, 2004). Research has demonstrated that consumer patronage increases as an organization becomes more committed to becoming socially responsible (e.g., Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Walker et al., 2010). In particular, Walker et al. (2010) found a positive connection between CSR and consumer patronage also influenced organizations to devote more attention toward a social activity.

Donations to college athletic programs are one of the greatest revenue sources in universities (McGinnis, 1980; Tsiotsou, 2007; Waddell, 1992). In terms of motivations, individuals make donations to college athletic programs for a variety of reasons including tax benefits, priority seating, quality of academic program and supporting athletic programs have been identified (Tsiotsou, 1998, 2007). Despite this research on donor motives, little is known about how college athletic CSR programs influence sport fans’ donation intentions. Lichtenstein et al. (2004) examined the effect of a corporation’s CSR on customer’s donation and revealed that a corporation’s CSR positively influence customer’s donation behaviors. Based on prior research, it was hypothesized that when college athletic programs engage in CSR practices will positively influence fans to donate to the athletic department.

Several studies have examined sport fan’s team identification (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Schleef, 2013; Walker & Kent, 2009). Team identification is usually defined as “the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport organization” (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 2012, p. 203). Different levels of psychological connection between a sport fan and a team is affected by various factors and engenders different results (Funk & James, 2001). Walker and Kent (2009) revealed that team identification moderates the relationship between CSR programs in the National Football League and fans’ patronage intention. Therefore, it was hypothesized that sport fans’ patronage behaviors toward an athletic departments’ CSR programs might be different according to the level of psychological attachment toward college athletic teams.

Previous research has examined socially conscious consumer’s behavior intentions (Trundle, 2011; Walker & Kent, 2013; Webster, 1975). Socially conscious consumer can be defined as “a consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change” (Webster, 1975, p. 188) and their attitudes are affected by organization’s CSR activities (Trundle, 2011). Walker and Kent (2013) noted that socially conscious consumer’s attitudes influence their behavior intentions and revealed the fact that the social consciousness moderates the relationship between philanthropic awareness, credibility, and consumer outcomes. Therefore, it was hypothesized that the relationship between CSR perception and sport fan’s patronage behaviors can be moderated by the level of sport fan’s social consciousness.
To further our understanding to what extent college sport fans’ patronage intentions are influenced by an athletic department’s CSR practices an instrument was developed based on the works of CSR perception items from Lichenstein et al. (2004), social consciousness from (Walker & Kent, 2012), team identification from (Eddy, 2013), donation intention from (Sampath & Henley, 2007), patronage intention from Walker et al. (2010), and CSR practices from (Sheth & Babiak, 2010). A questionnaire consisting of demographic information and six categories of CSR questions was constructed CSR perception (5 items), social consciousness (1 item), team identification (4 items), donation intention (4 items), patronage intention (8 items), and CSR practices (15 items). The response format for all of the items was a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Scale reliability was measured via Cronbach’s alpha showed CSR perception scale (α = .731), team identification scale (α = .985), donation intention scale (α = .914), and patronage intention scale (α = .834) were acceptable. In terms of the CSR categories, legal responsibility (M = 6.60; SD = .55) was the highest value in college sports CSR practices, followed by ethical (M = 6.20; SD = 1.30), economic (M = 6.20; 1.10), and philanthropic (M = 5.80; SD = .45).

To measure sport fans’ patronage intentions based on an athletic department’s CSR activities, data will be collected via an online survey to be completed by a Midwestern University’s athletic department sport fans (i.e., university administrators, faculty, staff, and students). In order to achieve a reliable factor solution, the targeted sample size is 300 (Field, 2009). Data analysis will involve Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) test relationships between local college sport fan’s CSR perceptions and patronage intentions, and the moderating effects of team identification and social consciousness.

The current research will contribute to the CSR and consumer behavior literature by examining the relationship between intercollegiate athletic department CSR practices and their sport fans’ patronage intentions and how team identification and social consciousness might have a moderating effect. The practical implications of the results could help sport markers of athletic departments to develop effective strategies around the athletic departments’ CSR practices to enhance consumer purchasing and donations. It is important that athletic department utilize their CSR practices to demonstrate that the university is sending a clear message to the community that they are educating student-athletes about being socially responsible citizens and fulfilling the mission of the institution. The presentation will conclude by suggesting areas of future research.