Sport Partnership Portfolios: How Perceptions of Sport Organizations' Partners around CSR Initiatives Affect the Public's Willingness to Contribute

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The Problem
Professional sport organizations, like other for-profit organizations, are increasingly engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Heinze et al., 2014). 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 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 (this has been shown in sponsor-sponsee relationships, see Pappu & Cornwell 2014). 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 explore the portfolio effect of sport organizations' partnerships with various organizations in different sectors on the performance of social initiatives.

Objectives of the Research
The objective of this research is to examine individual perceptions that influence support for sport organizations’ 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 are addressed:
1) What are individuals’ general perceptions of partnership organizations in different sectors (government, non-profit, for-profit), in terms of their warmth and competence?
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?
3) Can perceptions of partner organizations from different sectors, and overall portfolios, be improved, through better articulation, in order to increase the economic performance of the initiative?

Theoretical Foundation
In the CSR context, 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 leads to 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 through partnering with organizations. Partnerships can convey meaning around the positioning of a social initiative, given social judgments about different sectors. Depending on these judgments, organizations may be more or less effective in creating alignment and resonance with the public. The particular social judgments we consider are with respect to warmth and competence. People’s judgments often fall along these fundamental dimensions (Aaker, 1997; Judd et al., 2005; Fiske et al., 2007). Warmth is defined by generosity, kindness, sincerity, and trustworthiness; Competence is defined by confidence, effectiveness, intelligence, and competitiveness. People use perceptions of warmth and competence to form perceptions of firms (Aaker et al., 2010); when perceptions of both dimensions are high, consumers are more likely to buy products. We extend this rationale to portfolios of partners across sectors to examine whether and how judgments generate support for CSR initiatives (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): public-private, public-nonprofit, private-nonprofit, and tripartite partnerships of all three sectors. Building on these possibilities, in Study 1, we considered professional sport leagues’ partnerships with any one of the sectors (e.g. government, nonprofit, corporation), any two of them, all three of them, or no organizations. Thus, we examined eight configurations.

Study 1
Methods. To investigate the effect of partnership portfolios of sport organization on economic performance of CSR initiatives, we employ two quasi-experiments. For Study 1, we recruited a nationally representative sample of individuals with 5 dollars compensation through Qualtrics. First, subjects (N=652) were asked to rate their perceptions of the different sectors across items for warmth and competence. Then, subjects were given a vignette describing a professional sport organization’s social initiative, including the partners involved – fictitious organizations from different sectors, depending on the condition. To measure economic performance of the initiative, contingent valuation method was adapted to ask subjects’ willingness to donate, pay and volunteer.

Results. Using ANOVA and structural equation modeling, we found that non-profit organizations were rated highest on warmth and competence, and government was rated lowest on both. We also found a positive and significant effect between the measure of overall partnership portfolio warmth and respondents’ willingness to donate and volunteer to the sport organization’s social cause. This effect was mediated by response efficacy – the respondent’s perceived ability of donating and volunteering to impact the social cause.

In Study 2, based on the findings from Study 1, we will narrow our focus to sport organizations’ partnerships with government and for-profit corporations.

Study 2
Methods. Building on our findings from Study 1, we will investigate whether perceptions of partner organizations’ warmth and competence can be increased through better written and visual articulation. We will focus on the government and corporate sectors due to their low warmth ratings, and use real organizations: the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Lowe’s. We will recruit a nationally representative sample of individuals (N=350), using Amazon Turk. Subjects will be exposed to vignettes describing an NFL initiative that aids communities hit by natural disaster, and each partner organization’s involvement. There will be five conditions corresponding to: government warmth, government competence, nonprofit warmth and nonprofit competence, and both neutral. To manipulate perceptions of warmth, we will use descriptors such as: helping, consoling, volunteering, supporting, as well as corresponding interpersonal pictures. To manipulate competence, we will use descriptors such as: expert, rapid, state-of-the-art, strategic, and pictures of technical work. We will then assess perceptions of the organizations and willingness to donate and volunteer to the cause. We expect that perceptions of warmth and competence will be higher for the manipulation conditions and this will be positively related to willingness to donate and volunteer.

Discussions/Implications
These studies contribute to the literature on sport CSR by investigating whether and how partnerships with different sectors can be used strategically to legitimate sport organizations’ activities, through aligning with individuals’ beliefs about the sectors. Further, we examine how low-fit portfolios (e.g. with government) can be better managed by proper articulation to improve the economic performance of the initiative.