Trust is central to the complex relationship between consumers and organizational corporate social responsibility (CSR), including philanthropy (Kim & Walker, 2013). While this intermingling of trust and CSR has been explored in varied contexts, including the Italian grocery industry (Castaldo, Perrini, Misani, & Tencati, 2009; Pivato, Misani, & Tencati, 2008) and intercollegiate athletics in the United States (Ko, Rhee, Kim & Kim, 2014), the role of trust in regard to athlete philanthropy requires additional attention. Previous examinations of trust and CSR in team sport have centered on activities generated by the team or the team’s formal partners. Thus, this study seeks to extend the literature by determining if the role of trust remains as central to sport organizations when the socially responsible activities are generated by an organization without a formal connection to the team, specifically an athlete’s philanthropic foundation. In order to garner a more complete understanding of the role of trust, additional attitudinal and behavioral outcomes will be explored.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

The positive outcomes of CSR initiatives have made CSR vital to organizational strategy. CSR initiatives generated by sport organizations have the potential to impact both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes such as trust (Ko et al., 2014), patronage intention (Walker, Kent & Jordan, 2011) and event image (Walker et al., 2013). In addition to team-generated CSR efforts, professional athletes are indulging their own philanthropic interests in increasing numbers through their own philanthropic foundations.

Given the dearth of research and the absence of a formalized relationship, the impact an athlete’s philanthropic foundation has on the athlete’s team is not fully understood. Tainsky and Babiak (2011) were among the first scholars to find evidence of a relationship between an athlete’s philanthropic foundation and that athlete’s team. While their study was not designed to find or clarify this relationship, Brown, Czekanski, and Schermick (2015) found a positive attitudinal connection. Building on balance theory, Brown et al. found a positive relationship between perceptions of an athlete’s foundation and the perceptions of the athlete’s team’s CSR. As balance theory is particularly applicable to attitudinal responses (Basil & Herr, 2006; Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Dean, 2002), this study builds upon this theoretical foundation to propose the following:

H1: Attitudes toward the athlete’s philanthropic foundation will positively influence trust in the athlete’s team.

Among outcomes of CSR, trust is unique as it not only acts as potential outcome of CSR activities but also impacts a number of other attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. For example, the literature has shown trust to mediate the relationship between CSR and such varied outcomes as employee turnover intention (Hansen, Dunford, Boss, Boss, & Angermeier, 2011), donor commitment (Ko et al., 2014), and corporate reputation (Fatma et al., 2015; Park, Lee, & Kim, 2014). As the mediating role of trust has been continually reinforced in the CSR literature, this study proposes to explore its impact on key attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of CSR. Corporate reputation was selected due to its organizational value and prominence within the CSR literature (Fatma et al., 2015; Park et al., 2014; Walker & Kent, 2009; Walker et al., 2011). The behavioral outcomes (i.e., ticket sales and sales of athlete-specific merchandise) were designed specifically for this study following the recommendation of Walker and Heere (2011). Thus, it was also hypothesized:

H2: Trust in the athlete’s team will affect the corporate reputation of the athlete’s team

H3: Trust in the athlete’s team will affect ticket sales for the athlete’s team

H4: Trust in the athlete’s team will affect sales of athlete-specific merchandise.
The totality of these four hypotheses result in a model with trust in the athlete’s team mediating the relationship between attitudes towards an athlete’s philanthropic foundation and each of the three outcomes listed above, corporate reputation, ticket sales, and sales of athlete-specific merchandise.

Method

The hypotheses will be tested using Connor Barwin’s Make the World Better Foundation and Barwin’s team, the Philadelphia Eagles, as a test case. A 38-item questionnaire was developed primarily using valid, reliable scales from the extant literature. The items addressing ticket sales and athlete-specific merchandise were designed specifically for this study. Validity for these scales was established through a panel of experts in marketing and sport management. Additionally, the scales will be tested for reliability upon the completion of data collection.

Data collection is set to commence in November, with the instrument electronically distributed to a convenience sample of Philadelphia Eagles fans through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Respondents will receive a credit of less than one dollar to their Amazon Payment accounts for completing the questionnaire.

Upon completion of data collection, a correlation matrix will be produced using SPSS and inputted into LISREAL 9.2 software so the proposed hypotheses and model could be tested. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), hypotheses one through four will be examined through a comparison of observed t-values to critical t-value at an alpha of .05. This method of hypothesis testing follows Schumacker and Lomax (2004) prescribed approach for SEM.

After individual hypotheses are examined, the fit of the model as a whole will be evaluated (i.e., hypothesis five was tested) using, $\chi^2/df$, goodness-of-fit (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Individual changes to the model will be made if necessary and when theoretically justifiable to help improve the overall fit.

Implications

The results of this study will extend the literature by determining if attitudinal and behavioral responses to CSR apply to the team when generated by athlete philanthropy. Additionally, this study will give sport organizations a more defined understanding of the benefits of athlete philanthropy. In identifying specific outcomes, organizations can better determine how athlete philanthropy fits into their organizational strategies and informs their resource deployment in regard to CSR. The results addressing trust will have added importance in this context as the myriad controversies surrounding sport organizations, including player misconduct, work to erode this important relational attribute between teams and their fans.