Background / Purpose

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is increasingly important to business and has influenced increased social involvement in all types of sport organizations (Babiak & Wolfe, 2013; Breitbarth et al., 2015). CSR can be broadly defined as those activities making companies good citizens who contribute to society’s welfare beyond their own self-interests (McWilliams & Segal, 2001; Porter & Kramer, 2006). Over the past ten years or so, scholarly research activity on CSR in sport has increased in scope and scale (Paramio-Salcines, Babiak, & Walters, 2013), establishing a solid foundation from which to further explore more nuanced issues related to sport and social responsibility. The range of research inquiry to date has spanned organizational attributes and functional dimensions. As such, sport management scholars have empirically examined CSR in the context of sport by looking at a number of issues. These include the strategic implementation of CSR (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Heinze, Soderstrom, & Zdroik, 2014); the financial benefits derived from implementing CSR (e.g., Inoue, Kent, & Lee, 2011); the charitable foundation governance model of delivering CSR (e.g., Anagnostopoulos, Byers, & Shilbury, 2014; Sparvero & Kent, 2014; Walters & Chadwick, 2009); different forms of CSR engagement such as environmental sustainability (e.g., Trendafilova, Babiak, & Heinze, 2013) and community development (e.g., Alonso & O'Shea, 2012); and perceptions and attitudes of key stakeholders such as consumers (e.g., Walker & Kent, 2013), as well as CSR programs’ beneficiaries and partners alike (e.g., Kihl, Babiak, & Tainsky, 2014; Walker, Hills & Heere, 2015). However, despite the increased CSR activity in practice and parallel academic inquiry, there has been no attempt to examine this substantial body of work to categorize the knowledge developed in this domain to date. Thus, the scholarly work in this domain lacks unity, coordination, and consistency. The purpose of this study is to collect and inventory the extant literature published on CSR in sport over the previous ten years. In doing so, we synthesize and critically evaluate its main findings with the view to identify what advancements have been made in this body of work, uncovering and assessing the connections between concepts of interest, and exposing gaps that could lead the sport management scholarly community to new research pursuits.

Method

We began our investigation by conducting a systematic content analysis of sport-focused CSR literature. To this end, we launched our initial exploration by establishing key search terms. These included: corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate citizenship, cause-related marketing, corporate social marketing, environmental responsibility, philanthropy, social responsibility of business, sustainability, and social impact. These search terms were used together with sport specific search terms which included sport, team, athlete, or league. We then began identifying sets of articles (both the titles and abstracts) from the following electronic databases: EBSCO (including SPORTDiscus, Business Source Premier, and Academic Search Premier), Scopus, and Social Sciences Citation Index (via Web of Science). After removing duplicates, we identified 1,904 initial articles from the three databases. These articles were subsequently reviewed by two of the authors, who retained 165 articles that were clearly relevant to the scope of the review for further analysis. Next, we conducted a follow-up database search using Google Scholar as well as a manual search of sport management journals (based on the ‘comprehensive sport management journal list’ identified by NASSM). A final step included contacting key scholars on the subject to identify any other articles that were not found in the database and journal searches. In total, the current working list contains 213 scholarly articles. Similar to recent review studies on different subjects (e.g., Gomes et al., 2014, Leonidou et al., 2010), our analysis employed a deductive approach, whereby a coding schedule with pre-set categories was developed with emphasis on undertaking a systematic and replicable investigation. As such, data from each journal article were collected on eight
key areas including: the source and nature of article; characteristics of authors; research design and methodological approach; scope of research; geographic setting of research; unit and level of analysis; theoretical approach; and thematic area. We then further refined our analysis by systematically coding the literature using categories developed by Aguinis and Glavas (2012) and Heigh and Jones (2006) who explored the broader corpus of management literature in CSR. These categories included process dimensions of CSR (e.g., proactive or reactive predictors and drivers, including intra-organizational factors, competitive dynamics, institutional stakeholders, end-consumers, and non-governmental organizations), implementation mechanisms, and outcome effects (on both internal and external stakeholders), as well as the mediating and moderating variables and contingency effects related to CSR efforts and their outcomes. Integrating the constructs used in the management literature enabled us to compare the evolution and development of CSR research in sport to the broader management field.

Findings / Contributions / Conclusions

Our investigation, currently in progress, has provided some initial insights into the body of literature on CSR and sport. The initial findings show a heavy emphasis on research settings in professional sport teams and leagues (in US professional sport and European soccer) while little attention has been paid to the broader scope of firms in the sport landscape including governing bodies, intercollegiate athletic departments, nonprofit organizations, sport marketing companies, agencies, or media companies. We also note a prominence of scholarly work focused on the determinants (i.e., environmental and internal influences, predictors and drivers) for engaging in CSR. Our preliminary analysis has uncovered critical gaps in the sport based CSR literature including a lack of critical or social constructivist studies with most studies exploring the phenomenon from a positivist perspective. Another notable gap is the dearth of studies examining the processes, structures, and systems developed around CSR activities which we argue are critical in impacting implementation, effectiveness, evaluation, and commitment of programs and efforts. Relatedly, there is limited emphasis on partnerships and interactions between organizations delivering CSR which are key mechanisms by which many initiatives are delivered. Finally we observed a paucity of research examining the evaluation and outcomes of CSR efforts by sport organizations and companies. Given the emphasis of scholarly investigation into the phenomenon of CSR in sport, our study is timely and relevant. Such periodic inquiry of the research content of a discipline can provide insights into areas that are cutting edge, valuable or esteemed (Pedersen & Pitts, 2001). We will conclude the presentation with the implications of this review for practitioners as well as offer recommendations for a future research agenda for CSR in sport.