Understanding the Strategic Nature of Social Responsibility in Major Junior Hockey

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Organizational theory/culture Saturday, June 4, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-251 9:20 AM (Forum West 3)

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to the ethical practices and considerations undertaken for the community beyond an organization’s narrow mandate and legal requirements (Carroll, 1999). Research has found that CSR may add value to organizations through image/reputation enhancement, improved customer loyalty, financial savings, and marketability (Porter & Kramer, 2002, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011). As a result, businesses are dedicating substantial time, effort, and resources (human and financial), to implement social responsibility initiatives (Lacey, Kennett-Hensel, & Manolis, 2015). Carroll’s (1999) early framework of CSR has remained a central framework for understanding the central dimensions that may drive CSR efforts, including economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic.

The phenomenon of social responsibility has received considerable attention in the sport context where CSR programs can provide strategic benefits for professional sport organizations, including an increased fan base and ability to attract sponsors (Athanasopoulou, Douvis, & Kyriakis, 2011; Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Trendafilova & Babiak, 2013; Walker & Kent, 2009). Additionally, research has found that social responsibility initiatives positively influenced consumers’ perceptions of corporate reputation and patronage intentions (e.g., word of mouth, and merchandise consumption) (Walker & Kent, 2009). Other research has explored the ways in which consumer attitudes impact their responses to CSR, suggesting that CSR awareness and affect can act as antecedents to consumer behaviour (Walker & Heere, 2011). Thus, there is evidence that CSR plays a meaningful and multifaceted role within sport management, yet studies investigating the nature and impact of CSR in sport contexts outside professional sport are needed in order to generate knowledge related to its use and impact within other domains of the sport sector (cf. Misener & Babiak, 2015).

The sport of hockey provides a focal context for this study due to its cultural significance within Canada (and Ontario in particular), as it serves as an integral part of the Canadian sport landscape, culture, and identity (Blake, 2010; Hockey Canada, 2014). There is a lack of understanding with regards to the activities that elite amateur hockey organizations are undertaking, which go beyond sport and skill development, and how these organizations may impact their communities beyond the ice. The present study seeks to further understand the strategic nature of CSR within Major Junior Hockey by addressing a two-fold purpose: (1) to explore the strategic nature and intended impact of CSR-related efforts among those developing and implementing the CSR portfolio, and (2) to investigate the relationship between CSR-related efforts, attitudes, and patronage intentions among hockey spectators.

The present study involves a mixed-methods design (Bryman, 2006) to draw together a more comprehensive account of the strategic nature of CSR within Major Junior Hockey. The first phase of the research involves interviews (N=6) with all management team members of one OHL (Ontario Hockey League) franchise in order to explore their perceptions of the social responsibility platform and specific initiatives within the chosen organization. The semi-structured interview guide explores the purpose and nature of staff involvement with social responsibility initiatives, in addition to the integration of social responsibility (values and practice) into the business operations of the organization. The guide also explores how social responsibility and its perceived impact influences the attitudes and commitment of management personnel toward the organization. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with permission from the participants. Interviews are currently being conducted and will be simultaneously transcribed and analyzed using interpretivist qualitative coding as the researcher utilizes a three-stage process of initial, axial, and selective coding to illuminate and give meaning to their interpretations (Charmaz, 2006). This process allows for the researcher to discover the prevalent themes, recognizing the ideas emerging out of the data, bringing them together in a logical, and organized manner (Charmaz, 2006). Participants will also be invited to a
focus group following initial analysis of the data to discuss the interpretations and provide any new insights (cf. Glover, Parry, & Shinew, 2005; Parry, Glover, & Shinew, 2005).

The second phase of data collection involves a quantitative survey distributed to spectators at the OHL organization’s home games. The CARES (consumer attitudes toward responsible entities in sport) scale developed by Walker and Heere (2011) will be used to measure two dimensions of CSR: cognitive awareness (e.g., I am aware of the social programs of my favourite team) and affective evaluation (e.g., I feel good about my favourite team partly because of all the good things they do to benefit the community). A minimum of 300 responses will be collected in order to provide adequate sample size to conduct reliability and validity testing (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Factor analyses will be conducted to test the validity of the CARES scale in this context (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The survey will also include the patronage intention scale adopted from Walker & Kent (2009) and examine consumer intentions using four subscales (i.e., repeat purchase, merchandise consumption, media consumption, and word of mouth). Reliability testing will be conducted on both scales prior to further relationship testing. Regression analysis will provide insight into the relationships among affective evaluation and cognitive awareness of attitudes towards social responsibility initiatives and consumer intentions. The survey data will provide important data on spectator perceptions and intentions that will complement the rich data gathered during the interview phase surrounding the strategic intent of CSR from the management team’s perspective.

The findings of this mixed-methods investigation are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on CSR in sport by providing new evidence surrounding the strategic nature and perceived impact of CSR in the underexamined and culturally significant context of Major Junior Hockey. Results will provide further insight into the relationship between CSR focusing on its relationship to management attitudes and consumer behavioural intentions. The study has practical implications for the management and administration of sport organizations as they continuously search for ways to differentiate their organization from the competition, through the planning and implementation of CSR. By illuminating how CSR programs impact on the attitudes and commitment of staff, and the organization’s bottom line through consumer intentions, managers will be able to make better informed decisions on how to craft and leverage future CSR initiatives to achieve desired organizational benefits.