Member Perceptions of Social Responsibility in Nonprofit Community Sport

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Social responsibility refers to ethical practices and a more generalized concern for the community beyond an organization’s narrow mandate and which is not required by law (Babiak & Wolfe, 2013; Carroll, 1979; Persson, 2008). While corporate social responsibility (CSR) among commercial sector organizations has become a focus of research in the past few decades, studies investigating the practice of social responsibility within nonprofit organizations are much less prevalent (Persson, 2008). This may be partly because nonprofit organizations are automatically viewed as being social responsible by virtue of providing a ‘social good’ or service. However, social responsibility embodies a broader philosophy of impact by and through an organization’s discretionary activities (Carroll, 1979, 1999). To date, the CSR literature in sport has mainly focused on professional sport teams, athlete philanthropy, and major sports events and has examined their involvement in environmental, educational, and humanitarian campaigns (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; 2009; Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Carey, Mason, & Misener, 2011; Hamil & Morrow, 2011; Heinze, Soderstrom, & Zdroik, 2014; Walker & Heere, 2011; Walker & Kent, 2013; Walters & Tacon, 2011). A greater understanding of the socially oriented activities of sport organizations in other contexts is needed.

This research is part of a larger project examining the social responsibility efforts of nonprofit community sport organizations who serve their local communities with sport participation opportunities. At the local level, Community Sport Organizations (CSOs) are a prevalent type of nonprofit organization that provide accessible pathways for children, youth, and adults to take part in a range of sport participation opportunities within the club context (Doherty, Misener & Cuskelly, 2015). Given the growing competition and commercialization within the community sport context (Wicker & Breuer, 2011), engaging in social responsibility practices in addition to sport service provision can provide important benefits to the club such as enhanced stakeholder perceptions of the club, increased participation numbers, and greater overall impact on a given community. A prior, exploratory phase of the research program involving focus groups with nine boards of directors of community sport clubs revealed that local clubs are engaging in social responsibility efforts which address a range of social issues including social inclusion, poverty, environmental preservation, and mental health (Authors, 2015). The project also revealed that clubs approached social responsibility in multiple ways and that their efforts to integrate social responsibility into the club’s mandate and strategy varied along a continuum from full/purposeful integration with club mandate and strategy to ad-hoc and unrelated to the club’s primary mandate. Regardless of where they were positioned along this continuum, board members were convinced of the social good that was being done through their club and that community sport clubs are in a unique position to influence their communities. However, even when positioned as a strategic activity, all clubs lacked a clear understanding of whether their social efforts had any impact on their stakeholders beyond anecdotal evidence.

The purpose of the research is to examine the awareness and impact of social responsibility for CSO members. To address this purpose, the research is guided by two objectives: (1) to determine the level of awareness, affective evaluation, and value congruence of CSOs’ social responsibility among members, and (2) to examine whether social responsibility predicts member behaviour.

The expectations of stakeholders and others not directly associated with a product or service is intricately linked with an organization’s reputation, citizenship behaviour, financial performance, and customer loyalty among other outcomes (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Ullmann, 1985; Walker & Heere, 2011). Thus, understanding whether stakeholders are aware of, and have a positive response to the social responsibility efforts of an organization is a critical aspect of assessing its impact (Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006). Walker and Heere’s (2011) Consumer Attitudes toward Responsible Entities in Sport (CARES) model draws upon attitude-formation literature (e.g., Sen et
al., 2006; Du et al., 2007) by incorporating cognitive awareness as a determinant of affective evaluation (e.g., feelings and perceptions about an activity) that will influence the desirability of CSR and willingness of consumers to respond positively. In turn, behaviour (e.g., participation/involvement, willingness to pay, speaking favourably about an organization) is influenced by consumer awareness and affect. Walker and Heere’s (2011) framework provides a valuable foundation for understanding the factors that explain the potential impact of social responsibility on stakeholders in the sport context, given the diverse extant literature on CSR outcomes (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012).

The data collection is currently in progress using self-administered online questionnaire with members within nine CSOs in Canada who previously participated in qualitative focus group research. The prior research outlined the particular social responsibility initiatives of each club and the norms and values associated with those initiatives. The qualitative research serves as a backdrop for contextualizing the current investigation. Each of the club presidents within the nine clubs agreed to participate in the survey phase and forwarded the information letter and survey link to club members. In cases where members are under the age of 18, parents were invited to participate. The range of members among those clubs is 150-3500. The study draws on a reliable measure of CSR perceptions among sport consumers developed by Walker and Heere (2011), adapted to the nonprofit sport context and tailored to the experiences of members. Their measure involves two subscales: (1) cognitive awareness (e.g., I am aware of the social programs of this sport club), and (2) affective evaluation (e.g., The fact I feel positive about this sport club is partly to do with the social programs they developed). The survey also includes a measure of member–club value congruence (e.g., What this organization stands for is important to me; Peng, Pandey, & Pandey, 2015). The dependent variables include three subscales of member behaviours generated from prior qualitative research including word of mouth, loyalty, and club engagement (e.g., volunteering, coaching). Demographic information (age, sex, years as member) will also be collected. Descriptive, correlation, and multivariate (e.g., regression) analyses will be conducted to determine the role of cognitive awareness, affective evaluation, and value congruence on member behaviours. Demographic characteristics will be controlled for when appropriate, and used as moderating variables to examine differences in the impact of perceived social responsibility on outcomes.

This research seeks to expand the scope of sport-CSR discourse to include organizations that serve the population at the grassroots/participatory level and enhance understanding of the influence of social responsibility in this context. The study will provide community sport organizations with an in-depth understanding of how social responsibility influences member perceptions and behaviours, which may help them focus their efforts and more effectively manage their social change agenda moving forward.