Understanding Perceptions of Social Responsibility in Professional Sport from Contemporary Sport Consumers

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Scholars have traditionally focused on the role corporate social responsibility (CSR) plays in business, particularly leveraging social performance for building stakeholder relationships and profit maximization. Broadly defined, CSR refers to “actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law” (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001, p. 117). It is no longer sufficient for companies to focus their efforts and resources on making profits and abiding by the law; it is now expected that organizations contribute to the betterment of society through philanthropic efforts. In addition, the growth and popularity of professional sports has prompted the need for sport organizations to clearly identify and communicate what they perceive their social responsibilities to be (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007).

Over the past decade, nearly all professional sport leagues and teams have established CSR programs (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Godfrey, 2009). Sport organizations are considered an important part of the local community, which helps foster meaningful connections between teams and fans (i.e., consumers). Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) emphasized the importance for organizations to consider consumers’ awareness, attitudes, and attributions towards CSR activities. Efforts from various sport teams include, charitable foundations, partnerships with local nonprofits, and community outreach programs. Examples of community outreach efforts from professional sport leagues include MLB Stand Up To Cancer, NBA Without Borders, and NHL Green. Given these distinctive initiatives among sport franchises, it appears further investigation is warranted. CSR initiatives may serve as a means of strengthening customer relationships and encourage sport teams to devote greater resources and profits to social outreach efforts.

While studies have attempted to examine consumer reactions and attitudes towards socially responsible initiatives from sport organizations, it is still an area of research that is not completely understood. Greenwood, Kanters, and Casper (2006) indicated that a clear understanding of consumer behavior, attitudes, and desires provides valuable information for determining how best to market products and services. Perhaps the more a sport organization can understand the millennial fan base, the better it will be at capturing millennial attention, consumption habits, and loyalty (Gainor, 2015). As the first generation to grow up immersed in technology and now the largest part of the workforce (Patel, 2017), millennials should be the focus of strategic marketing techniques and communication policies. It has been found that low levels of general CSR awareness are a key stumbling block for companies looking to reap the positive benefits of engaging in such initiatives (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

It has been suggested that pro-social marketing initiatives, such as CSR, can become a market differentiating strategy for companies (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Engagement in CSR has been found to lead to customer loyalty and other positive purchase outcomes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Similarly, consumers’ knowledge of a firm’s CSR initiatives may lead to a higher evaluation of the company and more positive evaluation of the company’s product (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Maignan (2001) has called for more research to investigate consumers’ true level of awareness of firms’ CSR records. Millennial sport consumers are an important demographic that has not been well examined previously, considering they have been found to generate tremendous purchasing power (Gardyn, 2002). We contend CSR has the potential to offer strategic benefits for sport franchises to enhance their image, improve organizational effectiveness, and generate affective support among consumers. Therefore, in this study we aimed to investigate millennial sport consumers’ perceptions to various CSR activities within professional sport. Additionally, we sought to determine the extent to which the level of team identification influenced this relationship.

The theories of team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1991) and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) guide the
theoretical framework for this study. Team identification has been described as an attachment that provides fans with a sense of belonging to a larger social structure (Wann & Branscombe, 1991). Stakeholder theory claims any group or individual who can influence or affect the achievement of a company’s objective must be considered to sustain long-term success (Freeman, 1984). These frameworks will allow us to examine sport consumers perceptions of CSR initiatives with respect to how an individual identifies with a particular team and the stake consumers have in sport organizations.

In order to address the purposes of the study, several instruments were adapted from the literature. Consumers’ perceptions of CSR will be measured using a 16-item scale (Maignan, 2001). These items address Carroll’s (1979) four components (economic, legal, ethical, discretionary) of CSR with four items corresponding to each dimension. To measure consumers’ cognition and affect towards CSR, items will be adapted from Walker and Heere’s (2011) consumer attitudes toward responsible entities in sport scale, including four items to measure cognitive awareness and two items to measure affective evaluation. Team identification will be adapted from the sport spectator identification scale, which has seven items and measures the extent to which individuals identify with a sports team or program (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Demographic information (age, sex, ethnicity, location) will also be collected and used as moderating variables to examine relevant differences.

The instrument for this study will be distributed electronically to sport consumers between the ages of 18 to 37 through nonprobability snowball sampling. Our attempt is to obtain a sample that can be generalizable with regards to various demographic characteristics. Institutional Review Board approval has been granted and data collection is currently underway. As this is a study in progress, the results and discussion points will be discussed in more detail during the presentation. Practical implications for practitioners and organizational leaders will also be included. The current research will contribute to the CSR literature by examining the relationship between professional sport teams’ CSR practices and their sport fans’ perceptions. From a theoretical perspective, we expect team identification to have a moderating effect to CSR. While fans are recognized as stakeholders of the team, findings may suggest their importance. The practical implications of the results could help sport marketers develop effective strategies around the teams’ social initiatives to enhance consumer perceptions. The study will provide professional sport organizations with an in-depth understanding of how social responsibility influences consumers’ perceptions and behaviors, which may help them focus their efforts and more effectively manage their social change agenda moving forward.