French First Football League Clubs and CSR Communication: Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk?

Jens Blumrodt, Rennes School of Business

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Professional sport clubs use their digital communication to inform and engage their spectators, to foster loyalty and to communicate a specific brand image (Parganas et al., 2015), to build a positive reputation, and to achieve management goals with a clear and purposeful sense of the “who we are” and “who we want to be viewed as”. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) plays a role in forming a sport club's image (Blumrodt et al., 2012). CSR-Communication, as part of publicised image, can backfire if customers perceive it as self-serving (List and Momeni, 2017). We investigate if fans perceive clubs’ CSR engagement as it is intended by clubs’ management.

Identity is defined as perceptions originating from within the organization, and image as perceptions that exist outside of the organization (McCarthy et al, 2014). Research has yet to provide empirical evidence to assist those in charge of corporate brands in this regard. CSR engagements have been defined and assessed for the sportainment with a focus on philanthropic activities and ethical behaviors (Kihl, Babiak and Tainsky, 2014; Sheth and Babiak, 2010).

The study is carried out with all professional football/soccer clubs participating in the French Ligue 1 during 2017-2018 season. It contains three parts, first, a content analysis of club websites, second, interviews with managers and third, interviews with fans. For the content analysis we identified 26 codes in total (cf. Chiou, Lin, and Perng, 2010); 174 items were retained for scanning the web pages. The interview guideline with directors covers seven questions concerning the general approach to their club’s image, concerning CSR commitment and communication. Fans have been contacted via clubs’ databases and interviews with focus groups were carried out. WEFTQDA was used to measure brand elements. Master degree students were instructed to carry out the focus groups interviews.

We surmise that different strategies and perceptions appear, and that not all reflect a consistent CSR image. In addition, some clubs with no CSR communication and a low level of CSR engagement are perceived by their spectators as being mainly about sports and competition. In these cases, brand strategy of publicised image matches perceived image and leads to a coherent brand identity. Twelve clubs communicate their CSR engagement alongside sport-related information; fans observe the CSR engagement and integrate it in the image of their club. A diversified image corresponds to club size: “The bigger the business, the more it has to tell” (Blumrodt and Palmer, 2013). Identity alignment is achieved when at least some community involvement is communicated: “Our team, our colour, our city”.

Non-communication of CSR engagement can lead to brand image incongruity and brand identity mismatch, if the club has a history of community involvement and a strong local fan base. Over- and under-reporting of CSR exist in other industries (Kim and Lyon, 2014). We demonstrate why some clubs do report their CSR engagement and why others refrain from reporting despite engaging in CSR, an hypothesed model is generated for the sportainment.