

The Impact of Participation in a Corporate Social Responsibility Program: Examining Fans' Attitudes and Behaviour

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Sport organizations are increasingly engaging in social initiatives as a means of displaying their corporate social responsibility (CSR). Research examining the organizational benefits of engaging in CSR has found it can positively impact fans' assessment of corporate reputation, patronage intentions (Walker & Kent, 2009), and customer loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). However, certain factors can mediate these outcomes including fans' team identification, cognitive awareness of efforts, and general attitudes towards CSR (Walker & Heere, 2011; Walker & Kent, 2009). A limitation of prior research is that consumers are often asked about their attitude and behaviour intentions after reading a hypothetical scenario, which may be a poor indicator of actual consumer perceptions and limit predictive validity (Diamond & Hausman, 1994; Walker & Heere, 2011; Whitehead, 2005). Other studies have been cross-sectional in nature and there is a dearth of longitudinal research that has examined how direct participation in a CSR program implemented in sport can affect fans' attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of participating in a CSR program on fans' attitudes and behaviour. This was achieved through a mixed-method longitudinal experimental design whereby quantitative data provided insights into fans' attitudes and behaviour and qualitative data provided site-specific context.

Fans (N = 498) of local Canadian Hockey League teams (n=15) and an American Hockey League team (n=1) were recruited to participate in a 12-week healthy lifestyle and weight-loss program (Hockey FIT) offered in partnership between the hockey organizations, local fitness facilities, and the educational institution engaged in the current research project. Participants completed an online survey at baseline consisting of previously validated instruments, which have been found to have good construct reliability. Participants answered questions about their cognitive awareness of the team's CSR, affective evaluation, behavioural intentions (Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000; Walker & Heere, 2011), attendance and satisfaction (Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Oliver, 1980), team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), as well as their continued loyalty, attendance intentions, merchandise consumption (and intentions), and media consumption (Fink, Train & Anderson, 2002). Teams were then randomly assigned to either the intervention (n=8) or control (n=10) group. Teams in the intervention group began Hockey FIT right away, while the control group received the program after a 12 month delay. Following the conclusion of the program for the intervention group (i.e., at 12 weeks), both groups were invited to complete the survey again. Participants in the intervention group were also invited to complete another survey asking them about their experience in the program.

Quantitative analyses will include a test of the structure of the subscales in the context of this study, as well as descriptive and multivariate analyses to examine the differences between groups. The qualitative content analysis will provide site-specific context for these findings. This research addresses the call for longitudinal, experimental research that examines how participation in a CSR program can affect sport fans' attitudes and behaviour. The practical implications are relevant for sport managers responsible for justifying current and future social programs.