

A sensemaking approach of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in French sport events – how do organizers make sense of CSR?

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1. Research question

Research on corporate social responsibility (csr) has dramatically grown over the past two decades, but has only reached sport management in recent years. Nonetheless, professional sport organizations, as well as big sport events are relevant fields when investigating csr, notably because their characteristics may allow authors to refine existing models.

According to Weick (1995), organizational sensemaking occurs when organizations are faced with uncertainty and/or ambiguity. In an uncertain environment, managers are unable to provide any interpretation of the situation. In an ambiguous situation, they are confused by too many interpretations. Given that the sport sector's features are divided into unique internal resources (identification, admiration, passion – Babiak & Wolfe, 2009) and ear-splitting external pressures (scandals relating to doping, hooliganism or environmental impacts of major sport events), we suggest that sport event organizers are mostly faced with ambiguous environment. Indeed, there are multiple "cues" (see Weick, 1995) related to csr: institutional forces such as public and federal sport policies, internal drivers such as the proximity between certain kinds of sports and nature, strategic patterns such as cause-related marketing. Organizers are therefore confronted with different interpretations that blur decision-making: how do they make sense of their role with regards to csr?

2. Theoretical background

Sensemaking theory describes organizations as searching for the meaning of csr (Angus-Leppan et al., 2009). As Basu & Palazzo (2008) noted, while much of the literature on csr is focused on csr content, there is a need for a more process based approach, focusing on « the mental frames and sensemaking processes within which csr is embedded ».

In line with this approach, we suggest sensemaking theory can respond to several limits of both institutional and strategic approaches yet borrowing some of their singular contributions. Firstly, while one can find empirical evidence of both institutional and strategic factors in the environment, the two approaches fail why some will have a direct influence on csr and others won't. We suggest that analysing the three steps of the sensemaking process, knowingly scanning-interpretation-action, can explain how informations are selected and, in some cases, rejected from the process leading to csr actions. Secondly, among the seven properties proposed by Weick to define sensemaking,

retrospection may provide a more dynamic vision of drivers influencing decisions: for example, although an event originally implemented csr due to institutional pressures, organizers can develop a more strategic view retrospectively, while realizing the benefits of these actions (energy savings, activation of new partnerships).

3. Methodology, research design and data analysis

Our methodology is based on case studies with theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989). We selected six events based on the type of organizers (institutional, private and associative). We collected data from semi-structured interviews with both organizers and three categories of stakeholders: private sponsors, public partners and associative partners.

Data were analysed through an interpretative framework composed of six dimensions drawn up on a literature review and collapsed into the three steps of the sensemaking process: csr drivers and csr legitimacy (scanning); level of csr strategy and csr praxis (interpretation), csr practices and csr outcomes (action).

4. Results, discussion and implications

First results show that the dimensions of the sensemaking process tend to cluster around two ends of a continuum. The one end, labelled "constrained sensemaking", occurs when organizers are compelled to conform to the role perceived by their stakeholders. It seems to be associated to external csr drivers, moral legitimacy, a low level of csr strategy and a "do no harm" csr praxis. The other end, labelled "demonstrative sensemaking", emerges when organizers manage to control their stakeholders' perceptions. It seems to be linked to internal csr drivers (but sponsors can also trigger demonstrative sensemaking through cause related marketing), pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy, a high level of csr strategy and a "do good" csr praxis.

We see both academic and practical implications of this study. From a research perspective, our work seeks to better understand how responsible practices in sport events derive from the meaning organizers give to csr. For example, anti-doping programs will only be seen as part of csr when the sensemaking process is based on external pressure and moral legitimacy, leading to a "do no harm" praxis. From a practical stance, this study includes reflexions about the development of norms as prevalent csr tools. We suggest that csr norms like ISO 20121 or ISO 26000, for they are based on the normative compliance to a standardized view of csr, could be useful for constrained sensemaking events but not necessarily for demonstrative sensemaking events.

5. References

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