

# ACCESSIBILITY AND DISABILITY CSR POLICIES IN FOOTBALL: THE CASE OF MANCHESTER UNITED FC

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## Abstract keywords

Accessibility and Disability in the Manchester United culture as CSR policy.

## Aim of the abstract

This study seeks to understand *how* and *why* accessibility has become part of Manchester United's business culture and CSR approach over the last three decades (Downs & Paramio-Salcines, 2013; Paramio, Campos & Buraimo, 2012; Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2012). One of the objectives of this paper is to use CSR as a framework for understanding what has been done for one of the main stakeholders such as Supporters with Disabilities (SwD) by one of the most prestigious football clubs worldwide in terms of sporting and financial performance coupled with their long-term national and international fan-base support.

## Literature review

As in other industry sectors, there is now a great deal of consensus that in the twenty-first century, all types of sports organizations offer an appropriate context for developing and implementing a corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach (Paramio-Salcines, Babiak & Walters, 2013). Therefore, football clubs, as the case of Manchester United will show, cannot ignore CSR given that this managerial concept has gradually been integrated with strategic management and corporate governance in most countries. In this vein, football clubs have to implement CSR within their activities and programs without losing their competitive advantage.

According to stakeholder theory, a useful framework with which to conceptualize sport and CSR, the point is made that sports organizations should recognize the interests of a wide range of constituents that have a stake in the organization. It has gradually been acknowledged that those football clubs, like Manchester United, who want to present themselves as socially responsible organizations should pay greater attention and act responsibly towards a wide variety of issues, including those of human capital, the environment and relations with different stakeholders as in the case of Supporters with Disabilities (SwD). However, when clubs want to define the range of issues that football clubs should focus their attention in order to translate stakeholder's demands and expectations into practice, the "multidimensional nature of CSR in football clubs" in Europe is widely acknowledged as a recent study by Walters & Tacon (2011) shows. This makes the issue of CSR complex, and as such there is no universal agreement on what areas professional football clubs in Europe can be involved in when developing and implementing CSR initiatives (Paramio-Salcines, Babiak & Walters, 2013). As indicated above, promoting accessible environments to SwD to stadiums should not be considered isolated or 'ad hoc' practices (Paramio, Campos & Buraimo, 2012; Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2012), but instead accessibility and disability must be conceived as a fundamental value embedded within the club. Nevertheless, football clubs in the main leagues in Europe do very little to promote access to their SwD at their stadiums. This issue is not considered part of the majority of the football industry in Europe-related CSR programs nor is it ranked high on their agendas. The case of Manchester United FC's approach to accessibility and disability serves to illustrate the peculiarities of implementing CSR in small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) as the club represents.

## Methodology

As Walters & Tacon (2011) argue "there is a need to know more about how sport organizations think about, implement and measure CSR" (p.25). Therefore and trying to further theoretical development of CSR, the analysis is based on ongoing communications with Phil Downs, MBE, one of the pioneers in this area and currently in charge of the operation for all Manchester United events and services for disabled fans at Old Trafford over the last years. Downs was also one of the first disabled people to start making proposals to the club as well as observations on the operation of different stadiums in Europe. In addition, data was also gathered from 'live experience' by one of the authors during Old Trafford visits in the past years.

## Results, discussion and implications

This study represents an initial exploration of the accessibility and disabilities CSR policies in one of the most prestigious football clubs as Manchester United FC. As part of the evolution over the period 1980-2013, the paper discusses how the club has succeeded in translating accessibility of spectators with disabilities (SwD) and disability, who are valued in this process as significant stakeholders of the club, as a charitable and philanthropic activity to their current consideration as a strategic management practice of the club. Finally, the expected benefits of the incorporation of accessibility to the business culture and practices of the club are also considered.

## References

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