

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SPORT: THE CASE OF ITALIAN SOCCER

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Abstract keywords

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Aim of abstract/paper - research question

The aim of this research was to investigate Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in the Italian Serie A soccer clubs. More specifically, the purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) To explore how the clubs address CSR and (2) To explore the forces driving the adoption of these initiatives.

Theoretical background or literature review*

Principles and practices of CSR have been adopted by many sport organizations. There is a growing evidence of, and interest in, professional sports organizations engaging in CSR in different countries. Babiak and Wolfe (2009) examined the internal and external drivers of CSR activities by professional sport teams in the United States. Additionally, Babiak and Trendafilova (2011) called attention to environmental initiatives at the league and team levels in the professional sport industry in North America. Similarly, professional sport clubs in Europe have adopted CSR programs as a means to achieving strategic organizational goals (Brietbarth and Harris, 2008). In their exploration of CSR in the Scottish Premier League, Hamil and Morrow (2011) provided empirical evidence of CSR engagement and motivation. The Italian Serie A league ranks fourth among the European soccer leagues in terms of revenue, with a total of 1.56 billion euros. Also, soccer in Italy plays a significant role in the country's national pride and identity and at the same time it is under exceptional public pressure and scrutiny. Yet little attention has been given to the Italian soccer organizations regarding their CSR activities. Therefore, utilizing Carroll's (1991) CSR model, the most well-known theoretical framework in the CSR literature, this study provides a descriptive analysis of the nature of CSR programs in Italian soccer.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

A multiple case study design was utilized as the method for data collection. Data collection was conducted in two stages. During the first stage, we analysed the official websites of 20 Serie A clubs (during 2011-2012), and also official reports and videos. Data collected during this phase were useful to identify the clubs that had any CSR activity in place and to determine which clubs to target for direct interviews in order to collect in depth information about the specific programs and the forces behind the adoption of these programs. The second stage included 5 semi-structured interviews with personnel responsible for the development and implementation of CSR initiatives within the club. The interview transcripts were qualitatively reviewed with a content analysis and coded. The initial coding was derived from the CSR literature.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions**

Findings indicate that there are different types of CSR activities among the Italian Serie A soccer clubs, which are not always clearly organized under the umbrella of CSR. More specifically, we identified four distinctive types of CSR initiatives: community, education, health, and natural disasters. The interviews' data analysis identified four forces pressuring the Italian soccer clubs to adopt CSR programs: a) social expectations, b) partners' pressure, c) ethical standards, and d) media pressure. This study examined the way CSR initiatives are communicated by Serie A soccer clubs and the driving forces behind these initiatives. CSR communication in Serie A lacked a specific structure and the most prevalent form of CSR was community-related. Clubs also strongly supported education-related and health-related initiatives. The categories identified in this project are consistent with previous studies in other countries, but Italian clubs appear particularly sensitive to consequences from natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. Social expectations are a significant force driving CSR. Other forces such as pressure from partners and media, and ethical standards are also important in practicing CSR. This study sets the stage for multiple future studies: (1) an on-going study of CSR in the Italian sport context in order to gain a better understanding of this evolving phenomenon; (2) a study focused on the organizational structure soccer clubs use to deliver CSR initiatives; (3) a study on the efficacy of specific CSR practices in terms of medium to long term economic performance; (4) a study exploring the possible link between the size of the club and the way CSR is delivered; and (5) a study aimed at evaluating the role and values of top managers in the adoption of CSR programs.

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