

Session: **Workshop: Sport management and stakeholders - Panel session 1.**
Abstract nr: **EASM-0120**

Organizational identification and its impact on attitudes toward corporate social responsibility: The “internal/external” stakeholder perspective

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It has been noted that, effective management using corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be accomplished as long as “the practice of corporate social responsibility means responding to a variety of stakeholders with different interests and needs” (Vos, 2003, p. 151) and “formulating strategies to respond to those interests” (Slack, 2005, p. 163). Moreover, as managing stakeholders is “a process in which managers take responsibility for identifying and accommodating the interests of those affected by the organization’s actions” (Maclagan, 1998, p. 147), it is vital to evaluate stakeholders, their attributes, and how that affects their attitudes related to the organization’s social responsibility. These may occur differentially (e.g. attributes, stakeholder category, etc.) as “their values, their relative influence on decisions, and the nature of the situation are all relevant information” for stakeholder management (Jones & Wicks, 1999, p. 208). The influence of stakeholder position (internal/external) has been noted to have implications on how the stakeholder interacts and responds to the respective organization.

For this reason, external stakeholder responses, such as those from consumers, have been evaluated (Sen & Battacharya, 2001). Specifically, research has examined the effects of CSR actions on consumer behavior and consumption and has found that CSR initiatives have a positive effect on consumers’ attitudes toward a firm and its products (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000) as well as on purchase and repurchase intentions (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Despite the increasing focus on the effects of CSR initiatives on consumer attitudes and outcomes, and an increasing interest in internal stakeholders’ perspectives (e.g., employees), there has been little empirical exploration of the hybrid or “internal/external” stakeholder.

Understanding how consumer’s (stakeholder) position relative to the organization and the effect it has on their attitudes toward the organization have yet to be explored within sport. The present study is interested on university students who are considered ‘internal’ (as students of the university) and ‘external’ (as consumers of university athletics).

A point of interest related to the hybrid stakeholder is the influence of organizational identification on perceptions of their identification and their affiliated organization (e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Social identity theory proposes that individuals will engage attitudinally and behaviorally in ways that enhance their self-esteem and social group standing and distance themselves from ‘outsiders’ to develop a

cognitive ‘otherness’ to distinguish themselves (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Identified individuals have been found to be valuable to organizations in many ways as reflected in the possible positive related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, thus researchers have attempted to understand methods of creating, maintaining and strengthening stakeholder relationships with them (e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Whetten, Lewis, & Mischel, 1992). One such benefit may be their perception of an organization’s social identity; whereby identified members perceive their affiliated organization in positive light.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore whether differences in the perceptions of an organization’s corporate social responsiveness exist between highly identified organizational members and low to moderately identified organizational members who represented the “internal/external” stakeholder. Subjects were college students (N = 197) attending a large university in the southeastern United States. Participants completed a 16-item survey rating the extent to which they agreed with items related to their perception of the University Athletic Department’s corporate social responsiveness. Carroll’s (1979) four-dimensional framework of CSR was used to organize the constructs and measures used in this study. The four dimensions reflected financial, legal, ethical and philanthropic domains and the measures were adapted from existing CSR scales to fit the current context. Participants were also asked to self-report their perceived level of organizational identification with the University’s Athletic Department using Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) Organizational Identification Scale. Analysis involved descriptives as well as a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to explore differences between groups in regard to each of the four dimensions of corporate social responsibility.

The results of the one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between the perceptions high and low/moderate identified individuals have on each of the four dimensions of corporate social responsibility (financial responsibility, $F(1,194) = 14.642, p < .05$; legal responsibility, $F(1,194) = 15.159, p < .05$; ethical responsibility, $F(1,194) = 14.198, p < .05$; philanthropic responsibility, $F(1,194) = 19.674, p < .05$). Analysis of the dimension means for each group indicated the more one identified to the organization the more favorable were his/her perceptions of the organization’s CSR activities. Implications for future research and practical application of the findings are discussed.