

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND FRENCH PROFESSIONAL TEAM SPORT CLUBS: FROM COSMETIC AND LEGITIMACY APPROACHES TOWARDS NEW STRATEGIC REQUIREMENTS

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Research question

The purpose of the present research is to analyze the practices of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the French professional sport sector. We focus on the concept of CSR which has been developed in the United States throughout the second half part of the 20th century, and is now commonly considered in Europe as “*a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment*” (European Commission of Employment and Social Affairs, 2001). Formerly used by the multinational sector only, the concept of CSR has spread nowadays over a large kind of organizations including French professional team sports clubs (FPTSC) in which we studied it. The research question can be summed up in this way “How do clubs integrate CSR practices regarding their particularities of functioning as hybrid organization?”

Theoretical background

In this research, we use strategic and neo-institutional approaches among the many theories in the CSR field. On the one hand, CSR practices in the FPTSC are primarily answering to goals of legitimating aiming to make their activities viable towards the expectations of their environment stakeholders as the neo-institutionalism tradition highlights especially in hybrid organizations (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). On the other hand, strategic works (based on resource-based-view and competencies theories) on CSR in the sport field, especially those which have studied football clubs (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008 ; Walters & Chadwick, 2009), consider the CSR as a potential leverage to a more substantial resources gain. The concept of “institutional logics” (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) is then mobilized to show the difficulty for the FPTSC to integrate in a balanced way the CSR components amid their multiple logics of functioning.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

We suggest an analysis framework composed of seven dimensions (determinants, goals, stakeholders, resources, tools, actions and evaluation) which we apply to four case studies (two French basket-ball clubs: Elan Chalon and Asvel and two French football clubs AJ Auxerre and Olympique Lyonnais). These four FPTSC have been mainly studied between 2000 and 2012. The description of all these dimensions is based on a qualitative analysis. It has been realized thanks to about 40 in-depth interviews conducted among internal managers and clubs stakeholders that can affect or be affected by the realization of CSR practices.

Results, discussion and implications

As these clubs are very different (in terms of legal statute, resources, level of professionalization...), different CSR behaviors are highlighted. However, the common results of this research stress that CSR practices firstly hold a “cosmetic” nature in which CSR does not change the primary objectives of these clubs (i.e. sporting performance). This paper proposes new CSR-oriented organizational strategies which could be less dependent on short-term sporting performance as well as new value creation model by FPTSC and new process to evaluate their global performance. The theoretical and methodological contributions of the research are to build a new framework for the understanding of the CSR practices in FPTSC. The empirical contribution suggests to put CSR components in the management of FPTSC in reducing the loosely-coupling CSR practices with their global strategies. Finally, we present how to introduce a new strategic vision and an evaluation system for FPTSC through CSR approach.

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