

IDENTIFYING DIMENSIONS OF LEGITIMATION FOR COMMUNITY SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract keywords

Organisational legitimacy, Non-profit CSO, Sport consumers

Theoretical background

In this study, we focus on organisational image, which refers to the sum of knowledge an individual maintains in relation to an entity (Elsbach, 2003). Studies exploring organisational or brand image, in sport, have most frequently focused on professional or collegiate levels. In contrast, there is a sparse body of research exploring the images of non-profit CSOs; despite calls for research in this area (Robinson, 2006). Researchers have found that the images of non-profit CSOs are perceived in relation to whether the organisation acts in a manner, which aligns with the expectations of constituents (Lock, Filo, Kunkel, & Skinner, in press). Such congruence or incongruence between the actions of organisations and the expectations of its constituents provides a basis to understand its legitimacy, or illegitimacy (Suchman, 1995). As Elsbach (2003) argued, legitimacy is one dimension, which contributes to overall perceptions of an organisation's image. Therefore, the extent that non-profit CSOs act in a way that aligns with the socially constructed expectations of its audience has – in theory – a pervasive influence on its image in the external environment (e.g., Elsbach, 2003). In this study, we sought to elaborate on this argument through a mixed-method study of one non-profit CSO in Sydney, NSW. The present study responded to two questions: (1) What are the key dimensions on which the legitimacy of one CSO is judged? (2) Which legitimacy dimensions exert the strongest influence on attitudes towards one CSO?

Study one method and results

To develop an understanding of the key dimensions on which the legitimacy of the target organisation was judged, we distributed an online survey to members of the Manly Warringah Football Association (MWFA) in Sydney. Participants responded to a single open-ended question, which asked for an explanation of factors that had influenced their attitude towards the association's elite talent development organisation, Manly United Football Club (MUFC). This context was chosen as membership fees paid to the MWFA contribute to an annual sponsorship paid to MUFC. Previous research in the same context has illustrated that this sponsorship leads to specific expectations of appropriate action forming in the clubs external audience (Lock & Filo, 2012). Two hundred and seventy nine qualitative responses were collated for analysis. The coding of participant responses to factors that influenced the extent of favour or disfavour in relation to MUFC (i.e., organisational attitude) elicited six themes, which each related to the perceived appropriateness of MUFC's actions (i.e., its legitimacy): trialing procedures, local players, valuing community, role in community, development approach and staff.

Study two method and results

As in study one, an online survey was distributed to members of the MWFA. Using the qualitative data collected and analysed during Study 1, we developed scale items to measure the six theme legitimacy dimensions identified (as listed above). We measured organisational attitude using three adapted semantic differential scale items. Eight hundred and sixty fully completed responses to the online questionnaire formed the sample for study 2 analyses, which occurred in two stages. First, we tested the structure of the six legitimacy dimensions (as defined in the results for study 1) and organisational attitudes using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The hypothesised model fitted the data well: $\chi^2/df = 2.44$, RMSEA .04, CFI = .98. Second, we conducted a path analysis regressing each legitimacy dimension on the endogenous variable: organisational attitude. The model fitted the data well: $\chi^2/df = 2.35$, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .99. The paths from role in community ($\beta = .31$), staff ($\beta = .26$), valuing community ($\beta = .14$), and development approach ($\beta = .10$) to organisational attitude were significant $p < .05$. The paths from local players ($\beta = .09$) and trialing procedures ($\beta = .05$) were non-significant. In total, the hypothesised model explained 63% of the variance in organisational attitudes (Adjusted $R^2 = .63$).

Discussion and conclusion

The dimensions of legitimation that emerged during this research indicated that the funding MUFC received from MWFA created specific expectations of the focal CSO in the eyes of its external audience, which influenced attitudes towards the non-profit CSO. Two main contributions emerged from this study. First, it provides managers and coaches in non-profit clubs with a framework to understand why external audiences maintain certain image perceptions. Second, it provides a first step to understanding how non-profit CSOs can develop strategically oriented programs to gain, maintain, or repair legitimacy in the eyes of external constituents. This in turn can lead to the management and development of an organisational image that is more conducive to attracting participants, coaches and volunteers. Based on this study, improving role performance and activities that are fundamental to the non-profit's purpose will help to align the organisation with the socially constructed expectations of constituents.

References

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