
UNDERSTANDING STRATEGY THROUGH A MULTI-PARADIGM PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN FOOTBALL CLUBS

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RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is generating increased interest in management studies (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012) and in different industry-specific contexts. However, works examining CSR in relation to strategy have been few and far between. The complex relationship between strategy and CSR has led researchers to dissect the complexity using single disciplinary lenses. However, a multi-paradigm perspective is another way to address this shortcoming and may provide a better understanding of strategic CSR viewed through managers' decision-making processes. The study draws on the context of football clubs' charitable foundations because these organisations are now becoming the prime delivery mechanism for CSR. Dolles and Sӧderman (2013) remind us that "football is firmly rooted in the local setting and plays a vital part of the cultural and social make-up of local communities" (p. 384). Consequently, an examination of strategic decision-making with regards to CSR-related programmes becomes a timely and reasoned inquiry. To this end, the purpose is to both integrate and synthesize the micro-social processes of 'assessable transcendence' (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014) with Whittington's (2001) perspectives on strategy in the context of football clubs' charitable foundations in order to illustrate the relevance of employing a multi-paradigm perspective to understand how CSR strategy is formulated.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although managers recognize the need to blend socially responsible practices with strategy (e.g., Bruch and Walter, 2005; Porter and Kramer, 2006), neither theorising about nor practicing the two simultaneously is easy. Whittington's

(2001) grid of the four perspectives on strategy offers a friendly way to overcoming such 'difficulty', especially in charitable organizations. However, the intention here is neither to revisit the debate of how strategy can (or should) be done nor to reconcile the different perspectives. Rather, partly aligning this study with Henderson and Zvesper (2002), the study illustrates how Whittington's framework can be used to theoretically understand the strategic decision-making behind CSR within football charitable foundations.

METHOD

Thirty-two interviews were conducted among a sample of key managers in the charitable foundations for the first two divisions of English football clubs (Premier League and Championship) between 2009 and 2011. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using digital voice recorders. Interview transcripts were sent to participants to verify their accuracy in word and meaning. All informants were guaranteed anonymity, and no names were recorded on the transcriptions at any point in the research. Anagnostopoulos et al. (2014) paper outlines in detail the research design employed for this study. Therefore, given the purpose of this paper, a much more concise account of the adopted methodology is offered here.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The intention in this paper was to use a context-specific study to illustrate the efficacy of using a multi-paradigm perspective to examine the strategic decision-making processes of football charitable foundation managers, encountered through the meanings the managers themselves attached to those processes. Specifically, the decision-making strategies adopted by English football clubs through their charitable foundations seem to align with all but one of the four quadrants of Whittington's (2001) framework. For example, managers' micro-social process of harmonising, in its reliance on relatively rational planning, displays elements of the systemic perspective, although the process is profoundly interwoven in the local context and greatly influenced by the socio-economic, political environment and the parent company's playing status. On the other hand, safeguarding displays characteristics associated with the evolutionary approach, which defines profit maximisation (in both business and charity terms) as the natural outcome of strategy making. From this perspective, a more emergent process, dependent on environmental forces (such as commercial businesses' increased interest in CSR), seems to be at play, which ensures organisational survival, over the short term for the foundations and the long term for the parent football clubs. Strategic decision-making from an evolutionary and systemic perspective may lead to transcending, yet the latter largely depends on foundation managers' effective communication skills. Manoeuvring, then, could be viewed from the processual perspective, which proposes that the objectives and practices of strategy depend on the 'compromising' and 'learning' processes that may lead in different directions from those initially planned (through harmonising and safeguarding).

CONCLUSION

Clear boundaries do not exist between Whittington's (2001) proposed generic perspectives on strategy. On the contrary, this study indicates a great deal of overlap within these perspectives, and corroborates Henderson and Zvesper's (2002) argument that conflicting paradigms should be celebrated rather than

viewed as signs of theoretical immaturity. Multi-paradigm approaches can potentially reveal insights into the ‘mechanics’ of managerial decision-making that are not easily discernible from a mono-paradigmatic perspective.

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