

Corporate social responsibility in sport: A critical review of CSR development and sensemaking

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Background

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has received significant attention among sport scholars and practitioners over the last decade. This ever-increasing interest gave rise to a theoretical and empirical influx of studies across various CSR approaches, level of analysis, theoretical perspectives, research designs and methods, CSR pillars, cultural contexts, sport disciplines and sport organizations. Scholars are currently shifting their focus from a content-oriented to a process and strategic-oriented research perspective (Breitbarth, Walzel, Anagnostopoulos, & van Eekeren, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this endeavor by focusing on process-related issues. Specifically, we explore the CSR implementation process, also labelled CSR development process.

Aim and research question

By the last decade, academicians developed insights on CSR implementation to understand how CSR penetrates all levels of the organization. However, the extant body of work fails to capture the complex strategic and cognitive process behind the integration of CSR within sport organizations. We therefore formulate the following question: how can stakeholders' perceptions be integrated in the CSR development process?

In addressing our research question, we conducted a selective review of the sport CSR implementation academic work in the field of sport management and marketing. We briefly outline the basic tenets of the sensemaking approach, present the extant CSR literature mobilizing this particular lens and demonstrate its potential implications for the sport management field. In this context, our objective is to structure the CSR and sport literature and demonstrate that a sensemaking approach can provide valuable insights to capture the shortfalls in the study of the CSR development process.

Findings

We consider Maon (2012)'s conceptual classifications of the CSR implementation literature to review sport-related studies, which conceive that research on CSR implementation is fragmented both in terms of strategic and cognitive perspectives and in terms of organizational, stakeholder and integrative approaches.

The review of the sport-related CSR implementation literature reveals that in recent years, a small but growing body of literature has emerged to analyze CSR implementation process. Two interconnected gaps were analyzed. First, we identify insufficient research focusing on CSR from an individual level of analysis and a clear macro-level domination. Second, little research adopted a stakeholder or integrative approaches of CSR implementation process. Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury

(2013)'s work on decision making process is the only integrative-oriented study since it considered the role of foundation manager in the implementation process from a multilevel perspective. Sport academicians have essentially adopted an organizational approach toward CSR development despite the potential of investigating stakeholders' roles and perceptions.

Considering these shortfalls, we build on the sensemaking literature to provide concrete avenues to address these research gaps and render an integrative perspective possible. In organizational studies, sensemaking refers to the process by which people scan, interpret and give meaning to experience. The concept of sensemaking has been applied by several CSR scholars. In this perspective, CSR implementation of CSR is considered as a process of change occurring through a process of sensemaking (Basu and Palazzo, 2008).

We particularly refer to two studies adopting a sensemaking approach in a CSR context. Firstly, Basu and Palazzo (2008) introduce a process model of organizational sensemaking to address CSR from three dimensions: cognitive, linguistic and conative. Secondly, Djaballah, Hautbois, and Desbordes (2015) investigate how local governments make sense of sporting events' social impact and how their perceptions of such impacts influence their hosting strategies. To our knowledge, this study is the sole application of a sensemaking approach to CSR and sport literature.

Implications

The significance of this approach for the sport management literature is threefold: (1) it contributes to the scholarly activity focus shift from CSR content-based research toward more process-oriented approaches, (2) it focuses on individual level of analysis and encourages multilevel analysis (3) it adds opportunities to further develop stakeholder perceptions and roles with regard to the complementary organizational stakeholder and integrative approaches of CSR development.

Consequently, our contribution is, on the one hand, to provide a critical literature review of the CSR implementation literature by depicting its strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, we have observed that the concept of sensemaking is hardly used by sport academicians but evidence shows that it is particularly relevant to fill the aforementioned gaps.

References

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