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Corporate social responsibility in professional sports organizations: Evidence from Greece

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Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility is a contemporary ever-evolving field for the materialization of socially responsible initiatives on the part of sports organizations, since sport can influence the lives of citizens in a multidisciplinary manner at regional, national and global level. The purpose of this study was to examine the assumption of responsible social roles on the part of Greek professional sports organizations and in conjunction to exploring the extent of CSR implementation in Greek sports club corporations. The sample consisted of nine football and ten basketball club corporations, which compete in professional leagues in Greece. For the needs of the study, qualitative research was utilized using the semi-structured interview method. The interview protocol included the following thematic axes, (a) concept and implementation of corporate social responsibility within the sports organization, (b) perceived benefits and effects of implementing CSR strategies and Perceived Constraints for CSR actions in the organization. The empirical data were analyzed and interpreted through thematic analysis. The results of the study showed that CSR is perceived mainly through its social and charitable dimension, but also through its positive environmental footprint. The benefits that sports organizations derive from socially responsible actions are recognition, a positive impact on public image, and enhancement of the corporate brand. Due to their social profile, organizations attract positive media coverage, gain favorable publicity and visibility, establish a beneficial brand name reputation, which helps to find sponsors and consequently, improve financial performance; at the same time, the fan base and loyalty increases. There is a positive linear correlation between corporate social responsibility and club sustainability. Some perceived constraints are high business costs and reduced profitability for football clubs, while basketball club corporations identify lack of expertise and qualified staff as well as lack of time as such. However, only few organizations have integrated CSR into their organizational structure and the absence of central coordination and management by a dedicated team, poses a threat to their sustainable business development.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, professional sport organizations, stakeholders

1. Introduction

In a globalized, highly competitive and ever-changing environment, citizens often see business as unethical and dangerous to society [1, 2, 3]. Research (Mori Report) [4] shows that 58% of European citizens believe that the industrial structures and commercial sectors do not properly commit to being socially responsible. In some countries, such as England and Finland, this figure surpasses 70%. Lack of trust and caution in the institution of business is rather evident, so public concern about the role of business in society is growing due to frequent irresponsible corporate policies. Lost customer loyalty, the demand for accountability in addition to the need for social accountability of corporations, inherently constitute the obligation for socially responsible organizations, which will not only strive to maximize the profit of the shareholder, but also to add value to the stakeholder's part [5, 6]. Especially in the sports industry, which is often plagued by phenomena of corruption, match-fixing, racial discrimination, xenophobia, racism, violence and the use of anabolic substances, unethical practices that undermine integrity and damage the sports product [7, 8, 9]. Notwithstanding this, the social impact and influence of sport is catalytic, due to its huge visibility, global reach through the media, and its ability to potentially resolve social issues [10] and alleviate human suffering [11].

Sport can impact the lives of citizens at regional, national and global levels. Professional sports organizations can mold public discourse concerning the standards of responsible social behavior [12, 13]. For the purpose of reversing the relevant negative discourse and reclaiming the credibility of the sports industry, corporate social responsibility initiatives can be an optimal strategic tool through which sports organizations can endeavor raising awareness of social issues, while protecting the company's reputation, improving profitability and increasing trust in the brand [14, 15, 16].

The purpose of this study was to examine the assumption of responsible social roles on the part of Greek professional sports organizations and to investigate the extent of CSR implementation in Greek sports club corporations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Corporate Social Responsibility - CSR

According to Carroll's Four-Part Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility [17], CSR covers a wide spectrum of fields of application, where corporate responsibilities are divided into (a) economic responsibilities, which refer to profitability and safeguarding the sustainability of the company, (b) legal responsibilities, which relate to the obligation to comply with the legislation, (c) ethical responsibilities, which concern actions consistent with social expectations and behaviors that, although not formally stipulated in a legal framework, are nonetheless expected by society as a whole, and (d) philanthropic responsibilities, which concern activities that go beyond social expectations, constitute altruism, are not required by law and are undertaken on a purely voluntary basis.

In the same framework, Elkington [18] argues that the new business culture should be based on the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, according to which club corporations should evaluate their economic, social and environmental performance in the light of sustainable development. Only then will we be able to initiate the discussion about sustainable business models for socially, environmentally and ethically responsible organizations [18].

In more contemporary conceptualizations, corporate social responsibility constitutes the organizations modern understanding and ability to shift their level of performance from short-term financial goals to long-term social environmental perspectives and actions that promote ethics and integrity and have added value to society as a whole [19]. Consequently, researchers [20, 21, 22], distinguish five dimensions of CSR: (a) environmental, oriented towards the protection of the natural environment; (b) social, covering the relationship between business and society; (c) economic; (d) stakeholder engagement and relations and (e) volunteerism, concerning actions that are not specified as legal obligations. This approach describes a more fundamental change in the organizational conduct of firms in their relationships with the stakeholders [23]. In consequence, CSR activities constitute an ongoing commitment on the part of firms to behave with ethics and integrity [24, 25].

In the Green Paper of the European Commission, [26], corporate social responsibility is defined as a concept in which "club corporations decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment... while an increasing number of European club corporations recognize their social and environmental responsibility and consider it as part of their identity" (Green Paper, pp 6) [26]. Successful implementation requires voluntary commitment, which is not imposed by legislation, but is a priority and a central choice

for added social value and positive impact on society [27].

Mohr, Webb and Harris [28] describe CSR as "...the company's commitment to minimize or eliminate potential harmful impacts and maximize its long-term beneficial impact on society." In the same vein Kotler and Lee [29] define CSR as "...the company's dedication to the promotion of the well-being of the community through good business practices."

Nevertheless, there are researchers [30] who appear to be circumspect of the real intentions of club corporations, expressing the view that these initiatives may have an ulterior motive of public relations or corporate coverage of negative events or even bribery.

In any case, CSR reflects a new, current concept of business activity that encompasses the responsibility of each business or organization towards the people, society and the environment as well as accountability and social audit.

2.2 Defining the Corporate Social Responsibility of Sports and Through Sports

Sports policy is being increasingly influenced by corporate social responsibility initiatives as global sports institutions, international federations, professional clubs and individual athletes/stars express a growing interest in incorporating social, environmental and philanthropic concerns [21].

Emblematic sports bodies, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), have intervened since 1992 for the sustainability of the planet with the signing of the "Earth Pledge", within Agenda 21 of the Olympic movement and the Sustainability Strategy of the IOC in 2016 [31]. Entities such as the Federation International de Football Association (FIFA) are developing specific humanitarian programs and initiatives such as the Football for Hope Programme campaign, the Say No to Racism campaign, My Game is Fair Play, and the Green Goal [32, 33]. Equivalently, European organizations such as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), have developed a dedicated CSR portfolio in a multitude of areas such as (a) diversity and inclusion, (b) solidarity, (c) human rights, (d) peace and reconciliation, (e) environment, working with charitable partners to address issues such as racism, violence, inclusion of vulnerable groups [34]. Analogous is the orientation of the National Basketball Association (NBA) with the NBA Cares program that addresses health-related issues [35]. At the same time, more and more professional sports teams are involved in corporate responsibility activities [36, 37]. Having unique tools (facilities, events, sponsors, access to the media) they try to sensitize their fans and society as a whole and especially young people to a series of social issues [38, 8, 39]. A case in point is Chelsea FC, which was the first club to present the 1st comprehensive corporate social responsibility report of \$ 4.34 million in 2005-2006 [38]. Today, an abundance of sports clubs (e.g. Barcelona, Real Madrid, Liverpool), have created separate CSR departments that deal exclusively with the creation and development of social programs related to health, education, and the environment [38]. In this way they sensitize and mobilize their followers, forging patterns of responsible behavior [40, 41]. Finally, even individual star athletes participate in various forms of social activities, creating charitable foundations [10, 39]. For example, the Lionel Messi Foundation, developed actions in the field of health with programs to combat child malnutrition in Mozambique, founded health centers in Nepal, materialized training programs for doctors in pediatric oncology, programs to promote sports to children with cognitive disability, etc. In addition, the LeBron James Family Foundation developed

educational programs to support low-income students, or Wheels for Education, an emblematic project to guide and empower children from vulnerable social groups. The employment of sport as a field for CSR activities does not only concern sports bodies and organizations. There is strong interest among club corporations that move around sports. A depictive example is the sporting goods company NIKE, which, after the scandal of forced child labour in its factories in Asia and its conviction by the Supreme Court of California, began to implement social responsibility actions in the following years, aspiring to reverse the negative publicity and unfavorable image of the company^[42, 43]. Since then, NIKE has implemented charitable programs such as "Let Me Play", environmental projects such as recycling the company's shoes and clothing, actions to promote exercise and physical activity among young people such as "Made to Play" or programs to support vulnerable social groups ("NIKE Community Impact Fund").

In Greece, OPAP, the leading gaming company, develops CSR projects on pillars such as (a) health, upgrading the medical infrastructure of pediatric hospitals in Athens, invigorating the welfare state and improving the quality of life of children with cancer (b) Sports, strengthening 125 amateur football clubs throughout the country with a total participation of 10,000 children, etc.,^[44].

2.3 Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

- How corporate social responsibility is perceived in professional sports organizations?
- What CSR initiatives are professional sports organizations adopting and what actions do they include in their programmes?
- What benefits do sport organizations derive from the implementation of CSR actions? What are the inhibiting factors for the implementation of socially responsible policies?

3. Materials and Methods

The sample consists of nine (9) football and ten (10) basketball club corporations, which compete in the professional leagues of Greece. For the purpose of the study, qualitative research using the semi-structured one-to-one interview was conducted. Both closed and open-ended questions were employed. A predefined interview protocol was created for the needs of the study with the following thematic areas, (a) the conceptualization and implementation of corporate social responsibility in the sports organization, (b) benefits and effects of implementing CSR strategies and (c) inhibiting factors for CSR actions in the organization. Analysis interpretation of empirical data has been conducted through thematic analysis^[45].

4. Results & Discussion

Research Axis 1: Conceptualization and implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility in Sports Organizations.

To the question, regarding whether there is a structured CSR department in the sports organization, football corporations answered positively at 55.56% while basketball club corporations answered positively at 18.18%. When asking who makes the decisions about the scope and actions of CSR in the sports organization, the narratives paint a blurred picture as central coordination and management by a dedicated CSR team seems to be missing. In decision making

of the football clubs the planning and organization of actions falls under the duties of sometimes the CEO (17.24%) is involved, other times under the General Manager (16.09%) or the Marketing Manager (14.37%) and occasionally under the Communication Manager (13.79%). In scarcely any corporations there is an autonomous structured CSR department involved (10.92%). In basketball corporations, decisions on CSR actions are mainly taken by the Marketing Director (21.26%), the General Manager (18.97%) or the CEO (14.37%), while the CSR working group has little involvement (9.20%).

In the question, regarding how they perceive and conceptualize the term "corporate social responsibility", common ground for football club corporations are beneficent actions and reciprocity in the sense of value added to the local community (15.65%), positive environmental footprint (14.89%), philanthropy (14.50%), and operating the organization with integrity and moral principles (14.12%). The basketball corporations conceptualize socially responsible behaviors as raising awareness/sensitizing and contributing benefits to the local community (16.55%), as charitable actions for vulnerable groups (15.20%), and as integrating environmental actions (14.19%).

In the last question of the 1st research axis regarding which CSR actions the sports organization implements, the most popular actions of football club corporations focus mainly on charity (22.53%), environmental footprint (20.33%) and less on business ethics CSR, while basketball teams adopt charity actions (24.72%) focus on integrity and business ethics CSR (16.29%) and less on environmental footprint (15.73%).

Research Axis 2: Benefits and impacts from the implementation of CSR strategies in Sports Organizations:

When asked about the benefits they derive from developing and implementing CSR strategies, football clubs have emphasized that they implement CSR actions because they increase the sense of pride and loyalty of their supporters (21.51%), gain favorable publicity and attract sponsors (18.60%), promote intangible resources and the moral standing of the organization (16.48%) and improve the corporate image (14.94%). Of particular interest is the view that the long-term revenue of the organization is also increased (12.26%). In basketball clubs, corporate image and reputation are perceived to be improved (22.37%), positive impact on fans is enhanced (21.93%), and supporter loyalty is promoted (13.87%), along with favorable media publicity (13.23%) and attracting sponsors (18.42%).

When asked about the perceived impact of socially responsible behaviors on stakeholders (fans, local community, sponsors, etc.), football club corporations claim that CSR actions raise awareness and motivate fans (15.33%), leave a positive environmental footprint (14.94%), relieve vulnerable groups (14.56%), promote quality of life (13.97%), enhance human rights (12.76%), whilst attracting sponsors (18.60%) and increasing fan pride (21.50%). The responses of basketball club corporations were in the same vein, delineating fan pride (21.93%), raising awareness of human rights and activating volunteerism (15.78%), alleviating human suffering in vulnerable groups (15.67%), attracting sponsors (18.42%) and a positive environmental footprint (13.67%).

When asked whether they consider it important to cooperate with the wider sporting environment for the implementation of CSR actions, the narratives of all respondents without

exception were dominated by the conviction that they should cooperate primarily with the governing body of the league, with Charitable Organizations, but also with sporting consumers. Of considerable interest is the view of football club corporations, which consider that they should cooperate with public bodies and NGOs, but also with other competitor clubs.

Research Axis 3: Perceived Constraints and Dissemination of Corporate Social Responsibility actions in Sports Organizations.

When asked about the possible constraints that act as an inhibitor to the implementation of CSR actions in the sports organization, football club corporations referred to the inability to reconcile profit and CSR (21.55%), the substantial business costs of CSR actions (18.97%), the absence of obligatory CSR actions (13.79%) and the fact that CSR actions lead to reduced business profits (12.93%). The basketball club corporations mentioned the lack of time to implement CSR actions (18.28%), the absence of expertise and lack of properly trained staff (17.74%), high business costs (17.20%).

Finally, on the question of how the CSR actions of the sports organization are disseminated and how stakeholders' awareness is raised, through the narratives of the respondents, it is evident that there is a wide scope of information that includes annual reports and corporate responsibility reports (36.8%), online information (21.85%), advertising campaigns (17.59%), press conferences (16.58%) and participation in events organized by club corporations specializing in the evaluation of CSR indicators (12.06%).

4. Discussion

Regarding the possible benefits that they reap, it is the enhancement of the corporate image and reputation, attracting sponsors, the satisfaction and pride of the supporters, the rise of the loyalty of the sports fans and the awareness of the citizens on environmental issues. The findings of the study are in unison with the general bibliography since socially responsible actions on part of the athletic organizations seem to promote the non-material resources of the organization such as the recognition, the positive impact public image^[14, 15]. They increase the loyalty of the sports fans, but also the motivation of the employees within the sector^[15]. According to research^[146, 16], CSR evolves into a strategic tool for the advancement of public image and for the conservation and reinforcement of corporate reputation. CSR initiatives contribute to the creation of an emotional relationship with the clients/sports fans and the augmentation of the fan base^[42]. Due to their social profile, organizations establish a positive reputation for the brand name, which facilitates finding sponsors and thus improving financial performance^[12] Perini *et al.*^[47], suggest that the socially responsible organizations attract positive attention from mass media, they acquire favorable publicity, increase sales and acquire competitive value. That way there is a positive linear correlation between the corporate social responsibility and operational success^[48]. At the same time the CRS may prove advantageous for regional or wider communities and ensures added societal value^[49, 42]. The CSR practices with the dimension of altruism and philanthropy relieve human suffering, strengthen vulnerable social groups and have a positive impact on the community, as a result a betterment of the relations with the community is observed^[12, 50]. All clubs, with no exception, support the importance of collaborating for

CSR actions with the governing body of the sport, with charitable organizations, the state and the sponsors. Nowadays many professional championships utilize CSR options aiming to improve their reputation and public relations, but also to bridge the gap between the athletes and the sports fans and the general society^[3].

The results of the study have shown that very few organizations have integrated the CSR in their organizational structure. The central coordination and management from a specialized CSR team is missing. For the decision-making, the design and the organization of the actions, a different person is often involved (CEO, General Manager, Marketing Director, Communications Manager and rarely a specialized CSR department). The findings are not in accordance with social reality, since more and more sport club corporations create autonomous CSR departments in their organization. Sports club corporations ought to incorporate socially responsible behaviors to their corporate culture by promoting reinforced standards of governance^[19, 51].

Factors that inhibit the materialization of the actions of Corporate Social Responsibility of anonymous football club corporations seem to be constituted of the high business costs and the reduced profits of the organization. The basketball club corporations understand as inhibiting factors the lack of expertise (lack of specialized personnel) as well as the lack of time. On the other hand, basketball teams regard that there is primarily a shortage in time. The Greek sports club corporations ought to realize and understand that they must remodel their focal point from short-term economic goals to long-term social behaviors of added value. With improved standards of behavior there will come high efficiency, increased sales, long-term profits and competitive value for the organization^[19, 12].

5. Conclusions

The survey was designed to deliver a more comprehensive overview of CSR policies in Greek professional sport. From the investigation of the topic it emerged that the development, organization and management of corporate social responsibility in Greece does not respond to modern data, leaving the benefits of responsible social behavior on the part of sports organizations unexploited. A redefinition of the meaning of the concept of corporate responsibility and the role it should be playing in the operation of a modern sports organization is required. On a practical level, this means that in the context of good governance standards, it is incumbent on sports organizations to develop socially responsible policies that will contribute to improving the quality of life of citizens, protecting the environment, relieving and including vulnerable social groups, defending human rights by promoting the social dimension and significance of sport.

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