

# Exploring Social Responsibility in Sports Management: A Comprehensive Literature Review

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*This study examines the integration of social responsibility within sports management, highlighting its unique challenges compared to traditional corporations. Through a systematic literature review of 51 studies from 1993 to 2021, this paper identifies key challenges and opportunities in promoting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in sports. The analysis reveals diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, with stakeholder theory being most prominent. Findings emphasize the need for theoretical coherence and highlight three primary clusters of CSR in sports: societal impacts, ethical governance, and diversity inclusion. The review underscores the influential role of athletes and the complexities of addressing corruption and racism in sports management. It identifies the influence of celebrity status, stakeholder engagement, and the integration of sustainable practices as crucial factors in promoting positive societal change. It also addresses the complexities of ethical behavior, cultural diversity, and stakeholder management in sports. This study contributes to the discourse on sports management by offering insights into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting sustainability and ethical conduct in the sports industry.*

*Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, sports management, sustainability, ethical governance, diversity inclusion*

## INTRODUCTION

Sport, as recognized in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, holds a pivotal role in promoting tolerance, respect, and physical as well as mental well-being. The integration of sports within Sustainable Development Goals, such as achieving gender equality, underscores its significance as a vehicle for social change and empowerment (United Nations, 2022). Concurrently, the global appeal and commercialization of numerous sports have propelled them to unprecedented levels of profitability and attention. However, this heightened prominence within society brings with it a set of expectations from various stakeholders regarding adherence to norms and regulations, particularly in the realm of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

The integration of sustainable practices within sports management presents unique challenges compared to traditional corporations. Athletes often occupy celebrity status, wielding significant influence over their fan base and broader society. Consequently, the impact of sustainable actions within sports transcends mere financial implications, extending to societal values and cultural norms (Anagnostopoulos, Byers, & Shilbury, 2014; Djaballah, Hautbois, & Desbordes, 2017; Hamil & Morrow, 2011; Kaplanidou, 2012; Schyvinck & Willem, 2018). Despite some organizations, clubs, and athletes demonstrating

awareness of their societal impact, significant challenges persist. Instances of corruption, exemplified by scandals surrounding organizations like FIFA, and issues of racism, as highlighted by controversies such as that involving Donald Sterling of the LA Clippers, underscore the complexity of addressing sustainability within sports management.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to examine the variables of sustainability explored within the scientific literature and their implications for sports management. By analyzing the existing body of research, I seek to gain insights into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting sustainability within the sports industry. Through a comprehensive examination of these variables, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how sports organizations can effectively navigate the evolving landscape of social responsibility.

## **SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW**

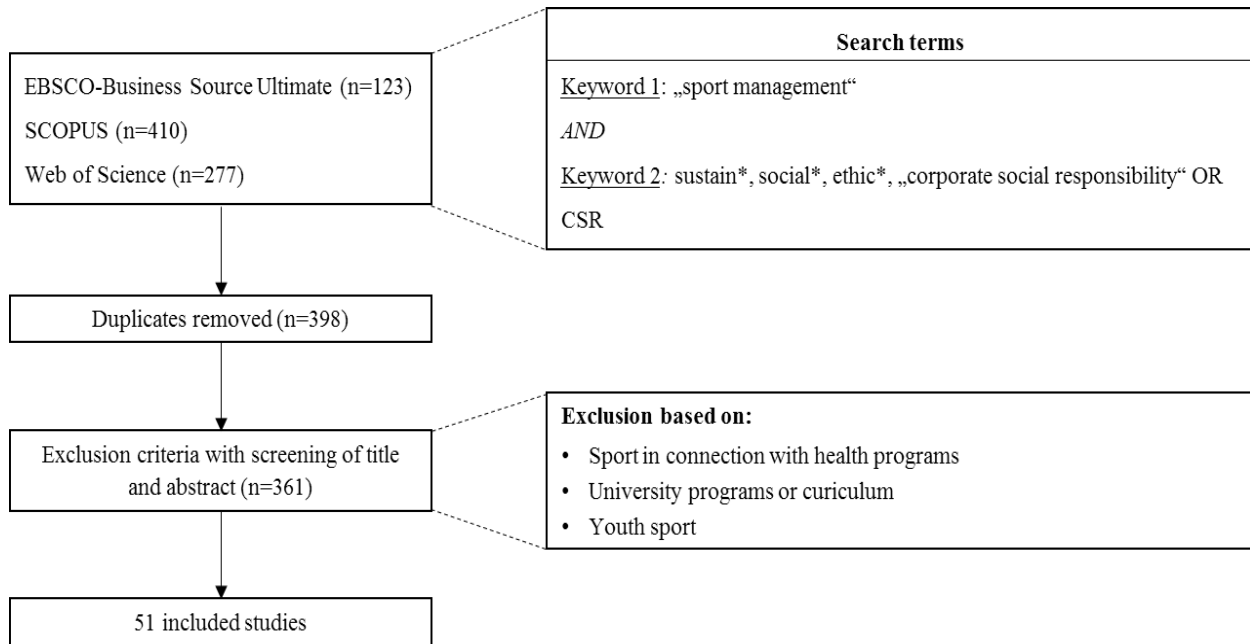
The fundamental task of a systematic literature review is the summarization of individual results from a subarea of literature in order to draw a more robust, comprehensive conclusion and to develop implications from this (Fisch & Block, 2018; Siddaway, Wood, & Hedges, 2019). “Systematic reviews differ from traditional narrative reviews [...] by adopting a replicable, scientific and transparent process [...] that aims to minimize bias through exhaustive literature searches of published and unpublished studies and by providing an audit trail of the reviewers decisions, procedures and conclusions.” (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003, p. 209) In addition to the advantage of replicability, a systematic literature analysis helps, among other things, to discover important variables and theories, to identify and delimit the research problem, to eliminate irrelevant approaches and to structure the research field and the own investigation (Hart, 1998). I followed Cooper and Hedges (2009) and Tranfield et al. (2003) who structured a review process in four main steps:

- (1) Problem Formulation
- (2) Locating the Literature
- (3) Selection and evaluation of studies
- (4) Analyses and synthesis

Unlike primary research, the process of literature analysis is iterative. The initial question changes during the process while reviewing the literature and other relevant concepts can be included later on. Stage (1) starts by defining the purpose of the literature review and determine relevant fields, objectives and themes for the analysis. The aim of this paper is to outline the relationship between CSR and sports management. Therefore, critically analyze the theoretical foundation and the different variables used to describe various aspects of sustainability in sports. To get a more detailed analysis, the review is concentrated on three main research questions. First, the interest lies in the formal basis of the literature by looking at the publication date, the geographical area, the publication type and which sport was the research object as well as at what level. The second question revolves around the different theories, frameworks and models used as theoretical foundation. Lastly, the main question is which variables of sustainability are examined and how do they affect sports management.

To answer these research questions I started by choosing the commonly used databases Web of Science, Scopus and Ebsco Business Source Ultimate. The search included the terms “sustain\*” OR “social\*” OR “ethic\*” OR “CSR or corporate social responsibility” AND “sport management”. There was no limit for the published year to see the development in the research field as sustainability is an ever-changing topic. Otherwise, the search focused on journal articles, books, book chapters and conference proceedings (if a full paper was available) published in English. The initial output were 810 papers of which 398 were duplicates between the different databases. The abstract and full texts of the remaining publications were evaluated based on the exclusion criteria. This review did not focus on the effects of governmental or private health programs on player health, although sport management was analyzed in connection with them. The same does apply for the integration of sports management in university programs or curricula. The last exclusion criteria was the focus on adult sports. After the screening process, the literature review included 51 studies.

**FIGURE 1  
SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW PROCESS**



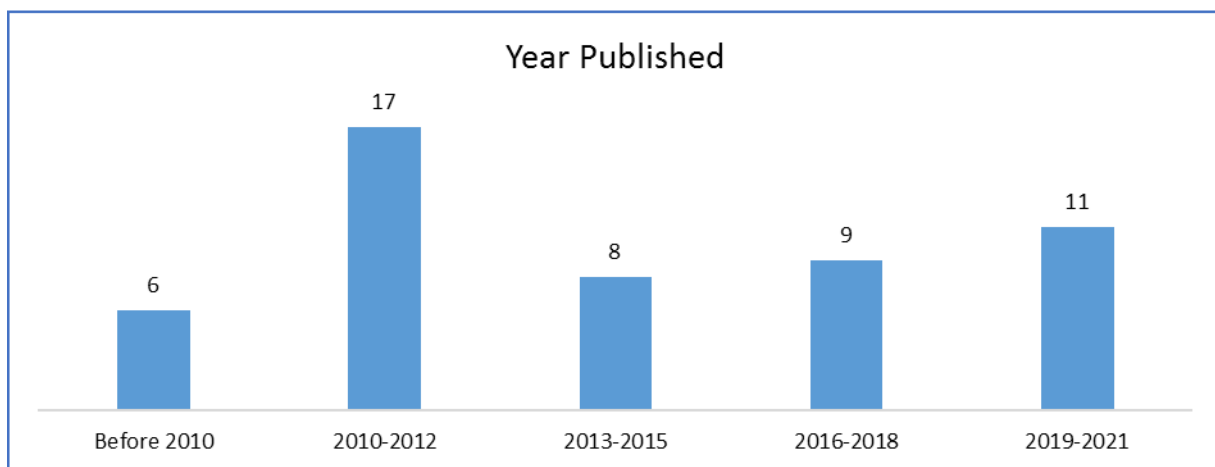
**ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

**Formal Analysis**

To give an overview of the 51 studies and their contents I present the publication year, the geographical region where the study took place and the published journal. The oldest publication included in the sample was published in 1993 with the next oldest publication 12 years later. The number of articles fluctuates through the 2010s but has increased compared to the 2000s. A pattern could not be recognized e.g. as a reaction to certain sport mega events or events with a high impact on social responsibility. The main object for the analyses concentrated on three geographical regions. The first is the global perspective as researchers focused on themes regardless of specific national context or on events that took place on different continents e.g. comparison between different Olympic Games (Gibson, Kaplanidou, & Kang, 2012). Secondly, Europe has been the focus of different studies. Five studies focused on Europe itself, where others analyzed events in specific countries like Spain, Austria or France. Next is North America with 12 studies concentrating on the US, Canada and Mexico. Two studies analyzed Australia and six studies did not specify a geographical region. No studies highlighted sports management in Asia or Africa specifically. All the studies were published in Journals with a high concentration of 82% publishing in three main Journals. Other articles were published in nine different journals with each having one publication.

**FIGURE 2  
OVERVIEW FORMAL ANALYSIS**

Geographical Region	Amount	Journal	Amount
Global	18	Sport Management Review	20
Europe	13	European Sport Management Quarterly	11
North America	12	Journal of Sport Management	11
not specified	6	Others (e.g. Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, Soccer & Society, Journal of Management & Organization)	9
Australia	2		



### Theoretical Frameworks and Operationalization of Studies

The reviewed papers used several theoretical frameworks to explain the impact of social responsibility on sport management. The dominant theory is the stakeholder theory. It is a theory of organizational management that managers have to attend to the needs of groups affected by the company (Freeman, 1984). If managers fail this task, they will have a difficult time implementing strategies or even survive. It has been a discussion who constitutes as a stakeholder as almost everything can affect a company (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) and if stakeholder theory even is a “real theory” (Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003). In spite of this, stakeholder theory has been frequently cited in the field of CSR (Pfister, 2020). The articles using stakeholder theory in this sample mainly analyze specific relationships between the club and stakeholder like fans and sponsors (Constandt, Parent, & Willem, 2020; Schyvinck & Willem, 2018; Walters & Tacon, 2010). Another theory used in the sample is Institutional theory. It states that the organizational environment influences the development of formal structures often more than market pressure (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the broader context of sports management, Institutional theory describes how organizations endure and change as well as the effects of institutional agents (Gilmore & Sillince, 2014). Another description is the six constructs of institutional theory by Washington and Patterson (2011). They argue that Institutional theory in sports consists of six constructs e.g. Legitimacy, Logics and Fields. Each has several underpinning categories. Several other theories, frameworks and models were used in the sample. Mostly they were specific to the analyzed scenario and not a coherent theme within the identified articles. This shows that a theoretical foundation covering the relationship between social responsibility and sports management cannot be found. Supporting this result is the fact that almost 40% of articles didn’t use any theory at all. Bolstered by the fact that the ones being used are mostly not considered theories.

Looking at the type of sport analyzed in the sample, one can see that sport in general was the main object of the analysis. It is more a broader look at relationships between social responsibility and sports management (Bryant, 1993; Girginov, 2010; Pope, 2010; Ratten & Babiak, 2010; Sherry, Shilbury, & Wood, 2007). Soccer was the largest single sport analyzed, mostly focusing on European soccer (Breitbarth, Hovemann, & Walzel, 2011; Hamil & Morrow, 2011; Valenti, Scelles, & Morrow, 2020; Walters & Tacon, 2010). Basketball is mentioned five times as the subject of articles. But, here it is more equally divided between the US and Europe (McManus, 2019; Mendizabal Leïñena & García Merino, 2021; Zhang et al., 2011).

The analyzed level is clustered into three categories: organization, club, and individual. As many articles examined several arguments concerning more than one level, a clear distinction was hard to make. Therefore, the categorization should not be seen as strict but more where the focus lies. The club level focuses on individual teams in different sports. The organization level consists of associations or societies that unite several clubs, e.g. FIFA, Olympic committee. The individual level is focused on the athletes and their interactions with each other and their environment. The club level is analyzed the most within the sample but it is quite evenly distributed among the different levels.

**FIGURE 3  
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND, TYPE OF SPORT AND ANALYZED LEVEL**

Theory, framework, model	Amount
No Theory	20
Stakeholder theory	7
Institutional theory	3
Appreciative Inquiry	3
Critical social theory	2
Partnership theory	1
Resource dependence theory	1
Shareholder theory	1
Social distance theory	1
Epistemology	1
Expectancy disconfirmation theory	1
Grounded theory	1
Implicit leadership theory	1
Integrated model of social involvement	1
Neo-Aristotilean ethical framework	1
Persuasion Knowledge model	1
Social inclusion framework	1
Taxonomy of sport management	1
The Value Belief Norm framework	1
Framework of strategic sensemaking	1
Collaboration theory	1
Construal level theory	1

Type	Amount
Sport in general	29
Soccer	10
Basketball	5
Football	2
Olympic Games	2
community sport	1
E-Sport	1
Skiing	1

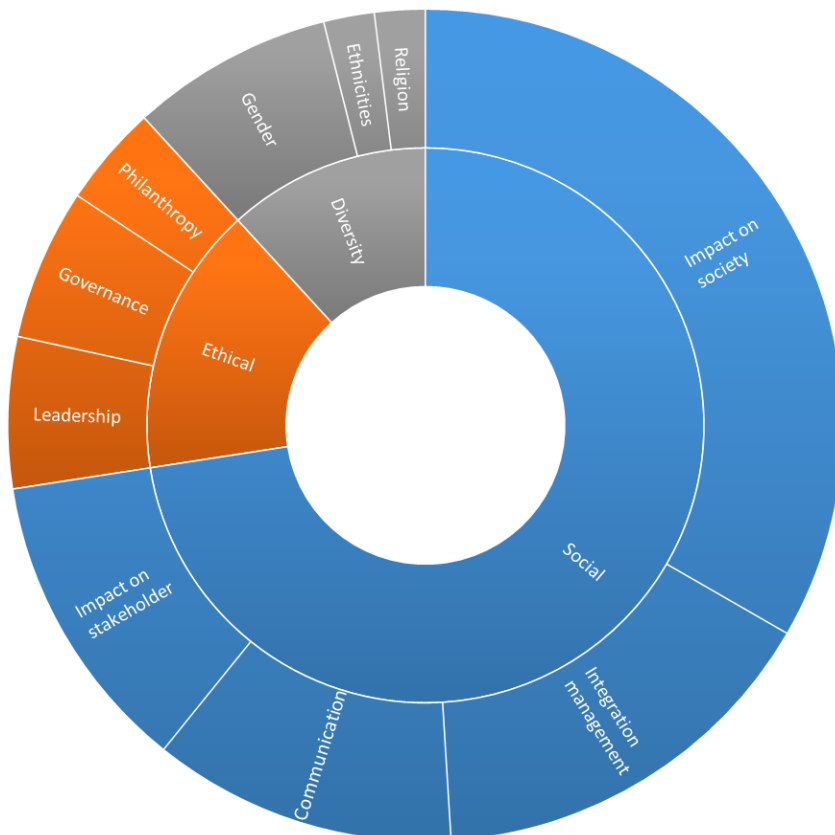
Level	Amount
Club	11
Not specified	9
Individual/Organisation	8
All levels included	6
Organisation	6
Individual	4
Club/Organisation	4
Individual/Club	3

### Social Responsibility and Sports Management

To go beyond a mere descriptive reporting of evidence, it is necessary to conduct an interpretative and explanatory synthesis. Screening the collected data from the sample and their findings to develop different clusters of social responsibility. One of the early results is the heterogeneity of the methods, samples, and fields of research even within this narrow subject. Nonetheless, you can create three clusters. The first

cluster analyses a variety of social aspects, e.g. the impact of social responsibility on various stakeholders or methods to integrate social aspects into management systems. The second cluster discusses ethical matters e.g. corporate governance and moral leadership. The last cluster looks at diversity especially revolving around gender, religion, and ethnicities.

**FIGURE 4  
CLUSTER OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**



**Impact of Diversity on Sports Management**

The debate about gender diversity is mainly driven by social and cultural factors. As the strive for equality shifted in the last decades from corporate masculinity in sport itself to a discussion about management and leadership (Aitchison, 2005; Knoppers, 2015; McKay, 1997). Leadership roles are still mostly occupied by men and therefore leadership styles are masculine (Swanson, Billsberry, Kent, Skinner, & Mueller, 2020). There are difference in styles between men and women and this should be incorporated in organization to promote and raise women.

Race can be defined as “a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies” (Winant, 2000, p. 172). Next to a difference in biological human characteristics, the concept and perception of race is more a sociopolitical and historical process (Omi & Winant, 2015). Sport is often times seen as a vehicle for improving racism and embracing diversity by bringing people from different backgrounds together as fans and athletes to join a common cause (Fink & Pastore, 1999). However, despite this goal there seems to be a disparity between theoretical argumentation and reality especially in the management of sport. Smith and Hattery (2011) argue on the basis of race relations theory that through race relations cycle, symbolic racism, segregation and power imbalances the leadership in the sports field remains racially segregated. Although many athletes in North America’s bigger leagues are African American, the leadership (e.g. coaches, owners, executives) is still

mostly Caucasian. To close this racial gap, organizations and clubs should implement transparent recruitment processes with a rule for racially diverse pools of applicants (Smith & Hattery, 2011).

Religious diversity is closely linked with multiculturalism “which entails that equality must be extended from uniformity of treatment to include respect for difference; recognition of public/private interdependence rather than dichotomised as in classical liberalism” (Triandafyllidou & Modood, 2017, p. 12). So that all people in a community have access to a social and economic well-being without being marginalized. Sport and Community sports in particular can improve social connections between cultural groups (Coalter, 2007; Kelly, 2011). Maxwell, Foley, Taylor, and Burton (2013) present on the basis of a social inclusion framework several practices that contribute to social inclusion of Muslims (especially Muslim women). Mainly cultural appropriate food, facilitates and clothing should be provided or accepted in the regulations of sports clubs and on a wider scale building partnerships with external organizations and providing role models. Nevertheless, an inclusion of Muslim women should not result in an exclusion of non-Muslim women.

### **Impact of Ethical Behavior on Sports Management**

Ethical behavior in sports management is a multifaceted concept encompassing philanthropy, governance, and leadership. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of ethical conduct in sports organizations and clubs.

Philanthropic activities play a significant role in shaping the image and reputation of sports organizations. Literature underscores the importance of philanthropy at various levels, often through case studies and interviews. Professional sport organizations, clubs, and individuals frequently engage in philanthropic initiatives, such as FIFA’s Football for Hope movement and the NBA Cares program. These initiatives serve an implicit goal of fostering trust, appreciation, and compassion among stakeholders. Philanthropy not only benefits the recipients of charitable actions but also enhances the standing of sports entities within their communities. By investing in social causes and supporting disadvantaged groups, sports organizations demonstrate a commitment to broader societal values beyond mere competition. Moreover, philanthropic endeavors can serve as a platform for promoting inclusivity, diversity, and positive social change, thereby contributing to the overall well-being of society (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014; Filizöz & Fişne, 2011).

External pressures exerted by stakeholders such as sponsors, policymakers, and the media often drive the adoption of ethical governance practices in sports management. Ethical governance principles encompass both pragmatic considerations and moral imperatives. For instance, in times of economic crisis, ethical governance may entail refraining from excessive spending on player transfers, even if market forces dictate otherwise. Contrary to the notion that sports exist in a realm detached from ethical concerns, the governance of sports organizations inherently involves ethical decision-making. While competitive dynamics may dominate on-field activities, off-field operations are subject to ethical scrutiny. Upholding principles of fairness, transparency, and integrity in governance not only enhances the credibility of sports organizations but also fosters trust among stakeholders (Daddi, Todaro, Iraldo, & Frey, 2021; López Frías, 2018; Slack, 2014).

Ethical leadership in sports management is a dynamic concept influenced by individual perspectives and contextual factors. Coaches, players, and fans constitute key stakeholders whose interactions shape the ethical climate within sports organizations. Issues such as player misconduct, fan behavior, and the prevalence of hooliganism underscore the importance of ethical leadership in managing interpersonal dynamics and maintaining the integrity of the sport. Effective ethical leadership involves promoting values such as respect, sportsmanship, and accountability among all stakeholders. Coaches and team leaders play a pivotal role in setting the tone for ethical behavior on and off the field. By fostering a culture of integrity and mutual respect, they contribute to a positive environment conducive to fair competition and collective success (Constandt et al., 2020; McManus, 2019; Sherry, Schulenkorf, & Chalip, 2015).

## **Impact of Social Behavior on Sports Management**

Sports, as a cultural phenomenon, intricately intertwines with societal dynamics, reflecting and shaping individuals' beliefs, values, and assumptions. Understanding the complex interplay between social behavior and sports management is crucial for organizations seeking to navigate this multifaceted landscape effectively.

Cultural processes play a pivotal role in driving and facilitating behaviors within the realm of sports. Individuals' beliefs, values, and assumptions, shaped by their national culture, profoundly influence their engagement with sports activities and organizations. Recognizing the cultural diversity inherent in sports allows organizations to tailor their strategies and initiatives to resonate with diverse audiences. Moreover, political recognition of culture brings substantial conceptual and practical benefits, legitimizing the role of sports in promoting national identity, unity, and social cohesion (Mallen & Chard, 2011, 2012; Trendafilova, Babiak, & Heinze, 2013). Social involvement in the sports industry exhibits considerable variability, influenced by factors such as geographical reach, stakeholder influences, and organizational operations. At the first level of social responsibility, organizations often adopt a localized, community-based focus, engaging in grassroots initiatives and outreach programs to address local needs and concerns. Moving beyond localized efforts, organizations demonstrate responsiveness by addressing broader societal demands, exemplified by initiatives like the NBA's global basketball development and community outreach program. At the third level of social responsibility, organizations become agents of change, leveraging their unique position to promote national and global social impact, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries (Flöter, Benkenstein, & Urich, 2016; Spector, Chard, Mallen, & Hyatt, 2012; Walker & Parent, 2010). Central to sports management is the fundamental principle of social responsibility, which entails achieving stated goals without causing harm and rectifying any inadvertent harm. Sports organizations bear a moral obligation to uphold ethical standards, promote inclusivity, and foster positive social change. By integrating social responsibility into their core values and operational practices, organizations can align their objectives with societal interests, thereby maximizing their contribution to the well-being of communities and individuals (Cunningham et al., 2018; McCullough, Orr, & Kellison, 2020).

The perception of CSR varies significantly across geographical areas, reflecting diverse cultural norms, societal expectations, and historical contexts. A comparative analysis of events like the Summer Olympics in Atlanta and Beijing underscores the importance of understanding local dynamics in shaping stakeholders' views on CSR initiatives. Stakeholders in the sports industry comprise a broad spectrum, including sponsors, federations, residents, and teams, each with distinct interests and priorities. Effectively managing stakeholder relationships requires a nuanced understanding of their perspectives and proactive engagement to address their concerns and expectations (Djaballah et al., 2017; Kaplanidou, 2012; Mallen, Adams, Stevens, & Thompson, 2010; Rowe, Karg, & Sherry, 2019; Zeimers et al., 2021).

CSR communication serves as a vital tool for sports organizations to enhance their image, reach new markets, and attract financial capital. By effectively communicating CSR initiatives, organizations can bolster their brand reputation, foster stakeholder trust, and differentiate themselves in a competitive market landscape. Furthermore, corporations leverage sponsorship agreements with sports organizations not only for brand exposure but also for human resources purposes, such as recruiting and motivating employees, and conducting market research to better understand consumer preferences and behaviors (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008; Casper, McCullough, & Pfahl, 2020; Dowling, Robinson, & Washington, 2013; Toohey & Beaton, 2017; Walker & Heere, 2011).

Integrating CSR into organizational strategies, partnerships, and management processes is essential for embedding social responsibility into the fabric of sports management. Key contributing factors to successful integration include the identification of social values aligned with organizational objectives, stakeholder identification, and the dissemination of necessary information to facilitate collaboration and decision-making. However, organizations may encounter barriers and conflicts of interest in integrating CSR, including competition for resources, unequal power relations, and unclear communication channels. Overcoming these challenges requires a strategic approach, characterized by transparency, stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to ethical conduct (Heinze, Soderstrom, & Zdroik, 2014; Welty Peachey, Cohen, Shin, & Fusaro, 2018; Zeigler, 2007).



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the current landscape of sport literature, shedding light on the multifaceted considerations of social responsibility in sports management. While sports possess significant brand value, scholarly attention is predominantly concentrated in specialized journals rather than mainstream outlets. Geographically, the focus is primarily on Europe and North America, with noticeable variations in the definition and perception of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in regions such as Africa and Asia, influencing sports management practices, as exemplified by the impact of cricket in India. Moreover, a cultural approach permeates research in sport studies, emphasizing the diverse perspectives and contexts shaping the field. Despite the relatively even inclusion of all levels of sports organizations and individuals, there remains a notable lack of engagement with theoretical foundations, underscoring the need for individual research initiatives. Specifically, exploring the influence of celebrity status on moral leadership and entrepreneurship in CSR within the realm of sports emerges as a key area for future investigation.

In examining the impact of ethical behavior on sports management, this study underscores the profound implications across various dimensions, including philanthropy, governance practices, and leadership dynamics. Philanthropic initiatives not only benefit communities but also enhance the reputation of sports organizations. Ethical governance principles uphold fairness and integrity in decision-making, thereby earning the trust of stakeholders. Ethical leadership fosters a culture of respect and accountability, ensuring the long-term sustainability and positive impact of sports entities. Embracing ethical conduct is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic imperative for sports organizations seeking to thrive in an increasingly competitive and socially conscious environment. Furthermore, the impact of social behavior on sports management extends beyond the confines of sports arenas, influencing and influenced by broader societal dynamics. By understanding the cultural processes that shape individuals' and organizations' behaviors in sport, as well as stakeholders' perceptions, communication strategies, and integration management practices, sports management can leverage cultural diversity as a source of strength and innovation. Through stakeholders' diverse perspectives and effectively communicating CSR initiatives, sports organizations can enhance their brand reputation, expand their market reach, and drive positive social change. Integrating CSR into organizational strategies and management processes enables organizations to align their objectives with societal interests and foster sustainable practices. Moving forward, fostering collaboration and dialogue between sports organizations, stakeholders, and communities will be essential for realizing the transformative potential of sports as a force for societal good.

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