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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to express my gratitude to the Editor of JASM for the personal invitation to contribute to this issue focused on passion at work in sports.

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Abstract

Explored within this article are the dynamic relationship between passion at work and corporate social responsibility (CSR) within sports organizations, highlighting how CSR initiatives can actively nurture and enhance employees' passion for their careers in this sector. Drawing on 15 years of research in this area, two theoretical approaches (i.e., signaling theory, social exchange theory) are referenced to provide a solid foundation for the proposed arguments. What is advocated in this piece is the strategic alignment of employee passion and CSR, illustrating how such integration can positively influence both organizational culture and community engagement. Ultimately, this article calls for a deeper understanding of how passionate employees, empowered by meaningful CSR initiatives, can drive transformative change within the sporting landscape.

Keywords: citizenship behavior, management, passion, positivity, well-being

Setting the Scene

It was a Tuesday, the second day of February in 2010. As part of the data collection for my doctoral study, I found myself sitting across from the head of a charitable foundation linked to one of England's most historical football (soccer) clubs; at that time, competing in the second tier of English soccer. The interview was progressing smoothly, and I was captivated by the insights being shared about how these institutionally attached charitable entities function as conduits for the club's corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. However, as the conversation continued, I noticed the interviewee beginning to shake, his voice quivering with emotion, and tears welling in his eyes. At that moment, I could not help but wonder if my questions had somehow triggered this vulnerability. I felt a wave of concern wash over me, unsure if the discussion was taking a wrong turn. Thankfully, after a brief pause, he composed himself and resumed sharing his managerial experiences and insights. Although the primary focus of my study was not the job itself, I could not help but inquire about his role after that somewhat awkward moment.

This job? I'm not suggesting that the rest of the football club lacks passion, but the community team truly embodies a deep commitment to our work. We're likely at the bottom of the funding hierarchy, yet our dedication is what drives us forward. It's this passion that motivates us to succeed in our roles. (FLC-fc7, in Anagnostopoulos, 2013).

His response opened up a new avenue for my doctoral research, steering it in a slightly different direction. What he shared sparked a deeper exploration into the vital connection between passion at work and CSR in sport, ultimately inspiring a later stream of research dedicated to this intriguing nexus. In this article, I advocate for a deeper intersection of passion at work and CSR within sports organizations. More specifically, I underscore how CSR initiatives can actively nurture and enhance employees' passion for their careers in the sports sector. By integrating CSR practices, sports organizations can cultivate a more enthusiastic and motivated workforce, leading to greater individual fulfillment and overall organizational success. I will succinctly discuss these ideas by referencing two insightful and relevant approaches that provide a theoretical foundation for my arguments and calls to action.

The Passion and Sports Nexus

The sport-passion nexus has long been a focal point of research, uncovering fans, athletes, referees, or coaches' profound emotional attachments (Vallerand & Verner-Filion, 2020). Most studies have concentrated on fans' passion, exploring how this emotional connection influences attendance, loyalty, and overall engagement with teams and events. Similarly, considerable attention has been given to the passion displayed by athletes and coaches, emphasizing how their deep commitment to their craft impacts performance, motivation, and team dynamics (e.g., Schellenberg & Lötscher, 2024). These explorations highlight the transformative power of passion, serving as a driving force in fostering both individual excellence and collective success within the sports industry.

However, as recent studies on sports employees' well-being have highlighted (e.g., Kim et al.,

2023; Oja et al., 2019), there is a significant gap in research regarding the passion of individuals working in sports organizations. Although the impact of passion on fans and athletes is well documented, the emotional experiences and motivations of sport employees have not been equally examined. This oversight is particularly concerning, as employees play a crucial role in the operational and strategic functioning of sports organizations. Understanding how passion influences job satisfaction, engagement, and overall performance remains an underexplored area.

Indeed, after the incident during the interview I mentioned earlier, I turned to the literature to deepen my understanding of passion at work in sports. At that time, however, I only encountered the influential conceptual work by Todd and Kent (2009), which, despite its significance, did not focus primarily on the concept of passion. As a result, together with two esteemed colleagues (see Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016) and drawing on insights from my doctoral study, we laid the foundation for measuring the construct of passion in the sports workplace with a twofold objective. First, we aimed to ascertain whether paid administrative personnel in team sports organizations experience passion for their jobs and, if so, to identify which type of passion they possess—harmonious or obsessive. Second, we investigated potential differences in passion and its types between personnel responsible for business operations and those overseeing the team’s social agenda. The scholarly journey of exploring the concept of passion in relation to the application of CSR in sports had only just begun.

This initial paper, explicitly dedicated to passion at work within sports management literature, sparked a more profound interest in closely examining sports organizations by moving beyond a problem-solving mentality to focus on strengths, possibilities, and opportunities intentionally. This shift led to my scholarly focus on positive organizational behavior (POB) and resulted in a special issue dedicated to this field (see Anagnostopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2017). It also resulted in my affiliation with the Positive Sport Organizational Behavior (PSOB) laboratory (see <https://sites.google.com/tamu.edu/psob/home>) and, most recently, our authorship of the first book in this area (see Kim et al., 2025). In the special issue, we revisited the concept of passion at work (see Papadimitriou et al., 2017) and explored the interplay between job security and passion during economically challenging times, underscoring how passion can significantly impact career satisfaction.

Besides my line of research on the matter, Swanson and Kent (2017) examined the emotional landscape of professional sports, highlighting the interconnectedness of passion and pride within workplace dynamics. More recent studies, such as Escamilla-Fajardo et al. (2021), delve into the effects of entrepreneurial orientation combined with a passion for work on performance outcomes in sports clubs, emphasizing the significance of passion in driving success. Zeimers and her colleagues (2022) further contributed to this discourse by examining how passion impacts sports board functioning, illustrating its critical role in governance and strategic decision-making. Most recently, Winand et al. (2023) captured the essence of passion as a driving force for sports entrepreneurs, reinforcing that passion is not merely a job component but a fundamental motivator in the sports industry. Collectively, these studies underline the vital role of passion across various dimensions of sports organizations while also indicating the need for deeper exploration into the experiences of sports employees.

Let us not forget that in the last decade or so, we have witnessed a gradual loosening of management’s traditional separation between reason and emotion, with the latter becoming “an increasingly

popular focus for management research” (Wright & Nyberg, 2012, p. 1562). This shift has given rise to an emerging field known as emotionology work, defined as “the adaptation and management of standards of emotional expression within organizations” (Wright & Nyberg, 2012, p. 1563). With this in mind, I am a firm believer that as sports organizations increasingly recognize the importance of a passionate workforce in achieving organizational goals, further investigation into the dynamics of employees’ passion can yield valuable insights and strategies to enhance workplace culture and effectiveness in the sector.

The Passion and CSR-Sport Nexus

Through a substantial body of empirical research, the sport management community has convincingly demonstrated the crucial role that sports organizations play in our society. To strengthen their societal impact, these organizations are actively engaged in implementing a variety of CSR initiatives (see Rowe et al., 2019; Walker & Parent, 2010). Typically, it is now common for sports organizations to have dedicated teams, whether through an internal CSR department or a charitable foundation (see Anagnostopoulos et al., 2024; Sparvero & Kent, 2014), responsible for formulating policies and actions that address the needs of various stakeholder groups.

The omnipresence of CSR in sports, particularly team sports organizations (see Walzel et al., 2018), is due to the unique passion exhibited by fans and consumers (see Babiak & Wolfe, 2009, 2013; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). This intense emotional investment in their favorite teams and athletes creates a powerful motivator for organizations to engage in socially responsible practices that resonate with their audience. Fans often view CSR initiatives not just as corporate obligations, but as extensions of their loyalty and connection to the sport, enhancing their overall experience and sense of community. Consequently, the passion of fans and consumers enriches CSR efforts, fostering a dynamic environment where social responsibility is intertwined with the fervor and dedication that define the sporting world.

In my doctoral study, however, I found that although passion emerged as a critical determinant for enhancing the application of CSR, it did not stem from the emotional attachment of fans or consumers. Instead, it was rooted in the emotions expressed by organizational actors—those individuals who actively drive initiatives forward. Many of these CSR managers come from a rich sporting background, with several having played soccer (or other sports in some instances) professionally, giving them first-hand insight into the transformative power that sports can wield in people’s lives. Importantly, even for those without a direct history in sports, these managers have observed the significant social change brought about by the programs their organizations implement, witnessing firsthand how their own decisions can influence and improve the lives of others. For example, an excerpt from my conversation with one of the CSR managers I spoke with is included below:

It’s incredibly fulfilling on a personal level. It may sound a bit idealistic but witnessing the club I’ve identified with since childhood—that has played such a pivotal role in my life—making a real, positive difference in people’s lives is profoundly rewarding. We host graduation ceremonies for various programs, including one in collaboration with the Prince’s Trust and a local

college. Seeing young people, aged 16 to 24, who are not in employment, education, or training transform from uncertain individuals into confident young adults at the end of a 12-week program is incredibly powerful. When they stand before 100 guests to share their journey, it often brings tears to my eyes. It's a reminder of why we do this work—not just for their benefit, but also for their families watching proudly. While working in a world filled with highly paid footballers can sometimes feel detached, seeing these young people, many overcoming mental or physical challenges, start to turn their lives around is incredibly impactful. It truly makes a difference, especially on those grey mornings. (FLC-fc9 in Anagnostopoulos, 2013)

When confronted with such statements, it becomes clear that the concept of passion goes beyond simple affection; it entails a cognitive aspect that underscores the profound importance of their work. This duality highlights not only the emotional investment these individuals have but also their deep commitment to their roles within the organization. Their passion manifests in a strong sense of purpose and dedication, which drives them to contribute meaningfully to their organization's goals and the broader community. This remarkable blend of emotion and intellect fosters an environment where individuals are motivated to excel, ultimately enhancing their personal fulfilment and the organization's overall effectiveness.

Thus, the connection between “passion at work” and “CSR-sport” serves as a powerful catalyst, enabling employees in the sports sector to find meaning, fulfil their creative potential, achieve satisfaction, and foster happiness by leveraging their love for sports to positively impact both their favored sport and society as a whole, with CSR acting as an ideal vehicle for accomplishing these goals. I will briefly explain why and how.

Passion at Work and CSR-Sport: Theoretically Unraveling the Nexus

As noted earlier, CSR is becoming a vital part of the way sports organizations operate, showing up in their daily practices. Additionally, many newcomers are being educated on how to step into the sports world with a focus on these initiatives, whereas those already in the field are learning to harness CSR efforts to create a positive impact in the sports landscape.

Signaling theory provides a fascinating lens through which we can understand how CSR impacts potential employees and job seekers in the sports industry. At its heart, signaling theory tackles the issue of information asymmetry between two parties. This typically breaks down into two types: quality and intent. Most management studies focusing on this theory emphasize the first one. Essentially, quality information is all about how one party showcases their hidden traits—like being a socially responsible sports organization with employees who embrace positive deviance—to gain an advantage from the other party, such as an employee who invests their time and effort to enhance the experiences of sports fans and participants.

In the realm of signaling theory, job seekers in the sports industry look for clues that hint at their potential work experience. In this context, a company's positive CSR practices can act as a key signal, indicating how new employees might be treated once they come on board. To put it simply, sports orga-

nizations that aim for positive deviance in their CSR efforts send a clear message to prospective hires: they are fair, trustworthy, and truly care about their employees and the wider community. This helps candidates expect a welcoming and supportive work environment.

Practically speaking, what does signaling theory really mean for the link between CSR and employees? Well, because not all sports organizations and their CSR strategies are of the same caliber and magnitude, it is essential to identify those encouraging signals that promote CSR to help shape a more socially responsible sports landscape (at internal and external level alike).

Aside from signaling theory, there is another important aspect we should consider. It is evident that CSR cannot thrive without the people behind it. Employees are essential players in bringing CSR initiatives to life, and the success of these efforts really depends on their willingness to collaborate. From my understanding, what is fascinating is that this dedication to CSR often goes beyond the standard economic agreement they have with the organization, creating what we might call a *social contract*. To better understand this concept, social exchange theory can help clarify what I mean.

This theory tells us that two kinds of exchanges happen in organizations: economic and social. The economic exchange is straightforward: a clear and formal relationship where specific terms are established, and employees get paid for their work. On the flip side, social exchange is a little more complex, involving fewer concrete obligations and often centered around personal interests or the joy of making a positive impact on society. This social component is really at the heart of CSR participation, as it often shows up through voluntary actions that go beyond the typical job description. When we think about commitment to CSR, we can look at it from two perspectives: one is the genuine desire of employees to dive into CSR activities, and the other is the organization's commitment to these initiatives. How employees perceive these efforts can greatly influence their views, especially based on how credible and socially valuable they see the organization's actions.

All of these points concern a powerful give-and-take relationship. That is, the more a sports organization pours into CSR, the more employees will look for ways to make a positive impact, leading to greater satisfaction and personal fulfilment. This concept is deeply rooted in the principle of reciprocity found in social exchange theory. So, leaders in sports organizations need to remember that the deeper CSR is integrated into their organizational culture, the more commitment, enthusiasm, and passion they can expect from the individuals who genuinely drive (social) progress.

Concluding Note

In this brief and somewhat personal article, I aimed to share the insights I have gathered about the powerful connection between passion at work and CSR-sport. I was not fully aware of this interplay until I had a conversation with someone actively involved in CSR within the sports realm; it was the *way* he passionately articulated the concept that truly opened my eyes. This prompted me to dive deeper into the relationship, and I have come to believe that passion is indeed a vital common thread in CSR practices associated with sports. It is not solely about the emotional attachment consumers have to sports organizations but even more so about the passionate workforce that drives these CSR initiatives forward. However, we still have much to learn about how this connection unfolds in practice. I hope this brief contribution

sparks curiosity and encourages others to explore this fascinating topic further.

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