# Social sponsorshipsin sport: Contextand potential

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**Abstract:**
The purpose of this paper is to examine the role that social sponsorship plays in the context of the Scottish football industry with a specific focus on identifying the potential for further growthin thisarea.Usingaqualitativeapproach, personal in-depth interviews were conducted with Scottish football club executives, the Scottish football governing body, existing sponsors and a sports sponsorship agency. The findings indicated that Corporate Social Responsibility inScottish football wasmostlycommunity-based. In the context of social sponsorships the results highlighted that expansion in this specific area of sports sponsorship is possible going forward. The respondents generally were positive about the benefit associated with social sponsorships such askeepingcommercial assetsfor monetisation,maintainingastrongpresenceinthecommunitywithrelativelylowrisk.Positive perceptions within the community can help the industry to offset many of the negative views expressed by fans about the sport.

*Keywords: social responsibility, sport*

**Social Sponsorships in Sport: Context and Potential**
Social sponsorships are increasingly used by organisations to recognise their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) objectives. The aim of this paper is to explore the potential opportunities for growth in this area using the Scottish Premier League as the unit of analysis. CSR's importance as a credible marketing tool has risen over the past twenty years (Crampton and Patten, 2007), becoming a popular method of promotion with corporations supporting social causes through sponsorship known as social sponsorships (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006).

Plewa and Quester (2011) believe sponsorship's contribution to CSR remains under-researched. Often, companies increase their commitments and interests in social sponsorships as a result of CSR programmes (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006; Madill and O'Reilly, 2010). Literature within social sponsorship is sparse compared to other sponsorship areas and its key attributes lack definitions (Madill and O'Reilly, 2010).

Social sport sponsorships are in an embryonic stage of development and further research is needed to better understand their benefits (Plewa et al., 2016; Peloza and Shang, 2011). Social sponsorships do have benefits in a sporting context. Conceptually, Plewa and Quester (2011) discovered social sport sponsorships brought both internal and external benefits. Internally, staff motivation, satisfaction and employee retention improve from involvement with social causes relating to sport. Externally, consumer satisfaction, consumer purchases and consumer retention were also increased. This contradicts Grohs and Reisinger's (2014) view that brand benefits cannot be achieved from social sponsorships. In order to address the aim of this paper we set the following objectives:
1. *To understand the relevance of social sponsorships*
2. *To assess the adoption of social sponsorship in the context of the Scottish Premier League*
3. *To examine the views and perceptions of key stakeholders in the Scottish Premier League with respect to social sponsorships.*

**Methodology**
Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of key stakeholders involved in the Scottish Premier League football industry. They included three CEO's of Scottish Premier Football League (SPFL) clubs: one CEEO of the charitable arm of an SPFL club: four CEO's of existing sponsors: one CEO of a sports sponsorship agency: 2 senior executives (including the CEO) of the Governing body of the SPFL and two senior executives from one club who are directly involved in commercial sponsorship and community and partnership projects. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the qualitative software package NVivo12 as a data management tool. NVivo software supports qualitative research and can analyse the data using powerful search, query and visualization tools designed to integrate data coding with qualitative linking, shaping and modelling. The main benefits of semi-structured interviews is that researchers can move far beyond 'snapshots' of 'what' or 'how many' to probing questions relating to 'how' and 'why' type of questions and explore links between phenomena and real life settings (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

**Discussion and conclusion**
Findings revealed variation in the context of how the stakeholders perceive CSR. One sponsor suggested that "CSR was too narrow, it focused on charitable issues . . . the reason that we now focus on sustainability is that in order to be a sustainable business, in order to survive, you need to be mindful of the communities which you operate in". This view differed from findings in the literature in which Dahlsrud (2008) identified five dimensions of CSR, none of which identified a specifically charitable dimension. However, this provides further justification for

the view that CSR's meaning is currently ill-defined (Green and Peloza, 2011; Okoye, 2009). One respondent supported the authors' views suggesting this inability to clearly define CSR may ultimately prove problematic for CSR as a concept (Okoye, 2009; Sheehy, 2014; D'Aprile and Mannarini, 2012).

Interviews with club CEO's highlighted the significance of social sponsorships in Scottish football. The findings oppose the view of Grohs et al (2004) and Grohs and Reisinger (2014) that sport sponsorships contrast social sponsorships as they are deemed purely commercial. This research indicates the existence of non-commercial football sponsorships. Some sponsors indicated they engage in social sponsorship such as paying for groups of school-children to attend football games in exchange for a charity logo to be displayed on the back of players' shirts. Some sponsors indicated that they did not seek any commercial benefits: one sponsor stated that it was a betting company and did not want its name associated with such social sponsorships for fear of attracting negative publicity.

**Implications for theory and practice**

To make themselves attractive to potential sponsoring companies, it is recommended that football clubs identify and articulate their values clearly, placing a strong emphasis on the local community, as this will support alignment to sponsors' values. Clubs could create video presentations outlining their values to sponsors, along with footage displaying the work they are doing in community projects. To increase social sponsorships, the governing bodies in Scottish football (the SPFL and the SFA) could assist clubs. This could be achieved by providing a 'community handbook' to member clubs, identifying the CSR-related community work which has enabled clubs to gain sponsorship, along with the method and considerations required for entering into such sponsorships. Similarly, the SPFL could facilitate a workshop explaining the benefits of social sponsorships and how to implement these, via presentation material easily developed from the findings of this research.

Social media could be better used for sponsorships, addressing the sponsorship 'activation' issue identified. Clubs could increase engagement through their official Twitter accounts, by encouraging fans to 'Tweet' pictures of themselves at the stadium, tagging the sponsor in this Tweet and following the sponsor's official account in return for a signed shirt.

Our paper highlights the potential for further growth in the area of social sponsorships. In elite sports such as football, clubs and governing bodies are constantly criticised for putting too much focus on monetizing revenue streams from areas such as sponsorship. The *winds of change* suggest that the stakeholders involved are looking to social sponsorship as an avenue for addressing broader CSR objectives. Social sponsorship initiatives can combine effectively with more traditional commercial objectives.

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