Managing Institutional Complexity in Nonprofit–Corporate Partnerships: A Sport for Development Organizational Perspective

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Introduction: The emergence of dynamic partnerships and linkages between nonprofit organizations and corporate entities has become a central facet of operation and mission delivery in the nonprofit sector (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Sport for Development (SFD) organizations, which leverage sport and physical activity as tools to bring about positive change, have also begun forming strategic partnerships with corporations around the world (Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014; Giulianotti, Hognestad, & Spaaij, 2016; Lytras & Welty-Peachey, 2011). However, given the varied sectoral values, principles, missions, and increasing institutional complexity, collaboration is challenging. Few studies in sport management have explored the challenges in SFD-corporate partnerships (Svensson & Seifried, 2017; Welty-Peachey et al., 2018), and little is known about how institutional logics underpin the nature of collaborative tensions. Using the lens of institutional complexity, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How do SFD organizations reconcile divergent institutional logics in the context of forming and managing corporate partnerships?

Literature Review: Despite the growth of such collaborative efforts in practice, previous studies show that nonprofits often face difficulties when they operate from a different set of organizational values or institutional logics from their corporate partners. Institutional logics are an overarching set of principles that guide an organization’s behavior and essential functions (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010), which provide “assumptions and values, usually implicit, about how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed” (Thornton, 2004, p. 70). Because of this, tensions may manifest regarding the public good or social logic of nonprofits and the commercial or market logics of firms (Drumwright, Cunningham, & Berger, 2004; McLaughlin, 2006). Due to such logic differences, many nonprofits struggle to sustain successful collaborations and long-term relationships with their corporate partners (Ashraf, Ahmadsimab, & Pinske, 2017; Austin, 2000).

Methods: Given its interpretive and exploratory nature, a qualitative approach was adopted for this study. 16 partnerships between SFD organizations and their corporate partners were examined. Multiple data sources were accessed and integrated, including (a) websites/ material published online from participating organizations (e.g., press releases, stories, and social media); (b) news reports, articles, and other publicly available sources; and (c) semi-structured interviews with executives in the SFDs who were responsible for managing corporate partnerships. Interview data are transcribed, being analyzed and coded using Nvivo to distill common themes around conflicting institutional logics and the consequential tensions and the dynamics of resolutions in SFD–corporate partnerships.

Contribution: Although we are currently at the phase of data analysis, this study is expected to contribute to the sport management literature on the cross-sector partnerships by uncovering the tensions grounded in the institutional complexity around forming and managing SFD-corporate partnerships. Moreover, the findings will provide a better understanding of the way in which the SFDs reconcile the tensions and how these mechanisms calibrate the scope and levels of collaborations. Further, the findings will offer essential insights for SFD practitioners to enable them to build sustainable and effective corporate partnerships.