

Professional sport corporate social responsibility and opinion leaders: An exploration into the CSR communication between professional sport teams and the media, regulatory bodies, and monitoring groups

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Abstract

Critiques of professional sport corporate social responsibility (CSR) often derive from opinion leader stakeholders, which consists of the media, regulatory bodies, and monitoring groups. Yet, little research has gone towards exploring the communicative practices used by professional sport teams to communicate with their opinion leader stakeholders about the CSR activities of their organization. The purpose of this study was to understand the CSR communication strategies that professional sport teams use to demonstrate their legitimacy to their opinion leader stakeholders and to identify the determinants of such communication strategies. The CSR communication strategies identified by Morsing & Schultz (2006) was used as a theoretical framework for this research. A narrative inquiry research design was used to examine the communication between professional sport teams and their opinion leaders. Using semi-structured interviews, data was collected from three professional sport CSR practitioners that were employed by three separate professional sport teams operating in three different North American professional sport leagues. Drawing from narrative thematic analysis, findings showed that professional sport teams used five CSR communication strategies to communicate with their opinion leaders and that seven determinants of CSR communication with opinion leader stakeholders exist. The findings a) extend the theory of CSR communication by providing empirical evidence for novel CSR communication strategies, b) establish a foundation by which to understand professional sport CSR communication with opinion leader stakeholders, and c) provide a framework for practitioners to evaluate and adjust their CSR communication with their stakeholders.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a result of ongoing organizational corporate social responsibility (CSR) issues (e.g., Holmes, 2022; Rouvrais-Charron & Durand, 2009; Warren, 2017), the legitimacy of professional sport teams continues to be in flux. Legitimacy is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Critiques of professional sport CSR, defined as a set of social and environmental actions undertaken by an organization that extend beyond the financial interests of the organization and meet the needs, expectations, and interests of their external constituencies (McWilliams & Siegel, 2000; Ulmann, 1985; Van Marrewijk, 2003), often derive from opinion leader stakeholders. Opinion leader stakeholders are stakeholders who actively pursue CSR information from an organization to better evaluate the appropriateness of organizational CSR behaviors (Campbell, 2007) and consist of the media, regulatory bodies, and monitoring groups in the professional sport industry (Trendafilova et al., 2013). These opinion leaders have the ability to influence the CSR understandings and expectations of other organizational stakeholders, such as fans or corporate partners (Du et al., 2010), and therefore are critical to the legitimacy of an organization.

According to stakeholder theory, disseminating CSR information to stakeholders, defined as “groups who are affected by the firm or who can affect the firm” (Freeman, 2000, p. 171), can enhance organizational legitimacy (Podnar, 2008; Schlegelmilch & Pollack, 2005). Morsing & Schultz (2006) posit that business organizations employ one, or a combination, of three strategies when communicating about CSR with their stakeholders: the stakeholder information, stakeholder response, and stakeholder involvement strategies. Morsing & Schultz’s strategies

(2006) understand CSR communication with stakeholders primarily from a general public perspective. While the researchers do acknowledge that proactively engaging in communication with opinion leaders is a crucial *component* of the stakeholder involvement strategy, they do not discuss how each strategy can be applied by businesses to communicate with their opinion leader stakeholders. This oversight leaves a large gap in the literature: an understanding of the CSR communication strategies that businesses use to communicate with opinion leaders.

Unique characteristics exist in opinion leader stakeholders of organizations in the North American professional sport industry. For example, the professional sport industry receives heightened media attention around all business activities compared to businesses in other industries, including in the aspects of CSR (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Painter et al., 2022). As it relates to regulatory bodies, professional sport teams have league offices that regulate their activities, representing a distinct governance structure specific to the industry. Additionally, professional sport organizations in North America generally receive little regulation from the United States government and even receive exemption from antitrust laws that prohibit monopolistic behaviors (Grow, 2015; Ross, 2003). Due to these unique characteristics of professional sport opinion leaders, communication may be different with these stakeholders in the professional sport industry than in others. Therefore, evaluating the CSR communication strategies used by professional sport teams to communicate with opinion leaders can yield novel findings as it relates to CSR communication. Finally, research on professional sport stakeholder CSR communication has thus far failed to attempt to understand the CSR communication strategies that professional sport organizations use to communicate with their stakeholders, nor has it addressed communication with opinion leaders, focusing instead on communication with consumers and beneficiaries of discretionary team CSR activities (e.g., Babiak & Kihl, 2018;

Walker & Kent, 2009). Thus, a gap exists in the sport management literature as it relates to professional sport CSR communication with opinion leaders.

1.1 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the CSR communication strategies used by professional sport teams to communicate with opinion leader stakeholders and to identify determinants of this communication. The research questions that guided this research are:

- What CSR communication strategies do professional sport teams employ to communicate with their opinion leader stakeholders?
- What are the determinants of professional sport team CSR communication with opinion leaders?

This research utilized narrative inquiry methodology to address the research questions. Data was collected from three professional sport CSR practitioners through semi-structured interviews and was analyzed using narrative thematic analysis. Morsing and Schultz's (2006) CSR communication strategies were used as a framework to guide data analysis related to the first research question. Findings were presented using narrative text and supported by quotations to provide a rich and descriptive understanding of the themes.

1.2 Significance and Justification of Research

This study makes empirical, theoretical, and practical contributions to CSR and sport literature. Empirically, this research contributes to the professional sport CSR communication literature by understanding constitutive communication as opposed to functional communication which has been dominant in the professional sport CSR communication literature (e.g., Kolyperas &

Sparks, 2011; Raimo et al., 2021). Furthermore, with many professional sport CSR studies focusing on consumer stakeholders (e.g., Blumrodt et al., 2012; Inoue, 2011), this study contributes to the small amount of research dedicated to opinion leaders (e.g., Trendafilova et al., 2013). Theoretically, this study supports the application of existing CSR communication strategies identified in the general business literature to the professional sport industry (Morsing & Schultz, 2006) while proposing novel strategies that apply to this industry, and perhaps more broadly: the adherence to stakeholder, indirect communication, and no communication strategies. Additionally, this research addresses a gap in the professional sport CSR communication literature by outlining determinants of CSR communication with opinion leaders, as research dedicated to the CSR communication determinants have thus far either a) occurred outside professional sport settings; or b) been understood in respect to informative practices based on transmission models of communication (e.g., reporting). These determinants are stakeholder prioritization, team and opinion leader objectives, resource availability, organizational governance, trust in opinion leader, external environment pressure, and requirements by governing bodies.

Practically speaking, an understanding of the determinants of CSR communication with opinion leaders can be used to better inform professional sport team decision-making regarding communication with opinion leader stakeholders. For example, having an awareness of the organizational objectives for CSR communication with a particular opinion leader can help the organization be intentional about engaging in communication that is outside the scope of their objectives, which can in turn lead to communication that allows the organization to learn about that stakeholder's CSR perspectives. Given opinion leader stakeholders have such a large impact on the legitimacy of professional sport teams (Campbell, 2007), improving communication

behaviors is one strategy an organization can improve their CSR image and corporate reputation (Fombrun et al., 2001).

Aside from the practical implications for professional sport organizations, a better understanding of the determinants of CSR communication has the ability to inform opinion leaders and other stakeholders about the role they play in professional sport team communication with opinion leaders. Understanding the role they play in CSR communication can lead to stakeholder actions that apply further pressure to communicate with opinion leaders and ultimately behave in ways deemed socially responsible. For example, a regulatory body, such as a league, that understands its ability to create regulations which require communication with other opinion leaders, like monitoring groups, can begin to take steps to do so.

In summary, this chapter introduced the gaps in the sport management literature regarding professional sport team CSR communication strategies, CSR communication with opinion leaders, and constitutive CSR communication in the professional sport industry. It also stated the purpose of this study and identified the research design that was used to investigate the topic. The following chapter, Chapter 2, will provide a review of the related literature in more detail.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Stakeholders and CSR

Stakeholder theory suggests that businesses exist by building relationships and creating value for all organizational stakeholders (Freeman & Dmytriiev, 2017). Organizational stakeholders, or “groups who are affected by the firm or who can affect the firm” (Freeman, 2000, p. 171), interact with businesses according to their perceptions of the organization, including perceptions of CSR image and corporate reputation (Fombrun et al., 2001; Murray & Vogel, 1997; O’Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008). Given that a definition of CSR is dependent on time and place, different CSR meanings exist between stakeholders. Therefore, an organization must be intentional about understanding and meeting its stakeholders’ CSR expectations if it is to be considered socially responsible (Campbell, 2007) and encourage desirable stakeholder interactions (e.g., patronage) (Freeman, 2000).

All stakeholders are of equal importance to an organization, and no stakeholder should receive prioritization over another in all aspects of CSR (Freeman & Dmytriiev, 2017). Organizations have both internal and external stakeholders. External stakeholders, such as corporate partners, investors, and consumers, are an important element of an organization’s external environment, as they have a large influence on the success or failure and legitimacy of an organization (Murray & Vogel, 1997). External stakeholders are categorized into two groups based on how they seek out CSR information. First, *opinion leaders* maintain there is value in understanding an organization’s CSR, and therefore proactively seek out CSR information about an organization. Second, the stakeholders who are content to passively receive CSR information

about an organization, even when a CSR issue is considered to be particularly important to them are considered to be the general public (Du et al., 2010).

Opinion leaders are “people who influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviors of others” (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007, p. 881). Therefore, not only do opinion leaders seek out CSR information more regularly, they often act on the CSR information they uncover by communicating their findings to a broader audience. Thus, opinion leader stakeholders are often capable of influencing non-opinion leader stakeholders (e.g., the general public) to adjust their behaviors towards an organization, whether that be changing patronage behaviors or protesting organizational practices and therefore play a moderating role in the commitment an organization has to social responsible behaviors (Campbell, 2007). The more present opinion leaders are in the organization’s external environment, and the more the two engage in dialogue about the organization’s CSR, the more likely the organization is to behave socially responsible (Campbell, 2007). Stakeholders considered to be opinion leaders in the professional sport context include the media, regulatory bodies, and monitoring (or watchdog) groups (Trendafilova et al., 2013). While each of these stakeholders is proactive in seeking CSR information and all influence the organization’s CSR behaviors, other characteristics differ, such as expectations, perceptions, and interactions (Campbell, 2007). Therefore each opinion leader will be discussed in detail in their own subsections below, starting with the media.

2.1.1 The media

According to agenda-setting theory, the media has the ability to dictate the topics that society believes are important and influence how the public feels about those important issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). For example, a study examining the media coverage of energy

shortages in Germany demonstrated that public concern around the issue rose from 15% to 30% within a week of the media's increased coverage, and that as media coverage associated with the issue declined, so did the public's concern (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990). This concept extends to all aspects of society to include businesses and their corporate reputations, which is defined individually as "observers' collective judgments of a corporation based on assessments of the financial, social, and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time" (Barnett et al., 2006, p. 34). Carroll & McCombs (2003) propose that as the amount of news coverage devoted to a particular organizational attribute increases, so does the proportion of the public who define the firm by those attributes. Additionally, positive media coverage about a particular business attribute yields positive public perceptions about that attribute, and negative media coverage results in the opposite (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Seeing as CSR is considered to be one of a number of attributes that contributes to corporate reputation (Fombrun et al., 2001), agenda-setting theory suggests that the media can have a large influence on the corporate reputation of an organization through the amount of news coverage they devote to an organization's CSR as well as the positive or negative connotation they use in their coverage.

CSR information disseminated by stakeholders who are external to an organization (e.g., the media) is met with less scrutiny than CSR information distributed by the organization through their own internal channels of communication (Du et al., 2010). For example, in their experiment in which 124 undergraduate students were asked to read passages of CSR information about an organization from both internal and external sources, Yoon et al. (2006) demonstrated that consumers were more skeptical of the motivations of an organization when they learned about the CSR activity from a company rather than a neutral source. Therefore, not only does the media possess the power to influence an organization's corporate reputation

through agenda-setting, they have the ability to influence an organization's legitimacy beyond the organization's own ability to do so. Through a constant threat of public exposure, the media exudes pressure on an organization to behave in ways that conform to the media's CSR expectations (Campbell, 2007). Therefore, it is important for organizations to incorporate strategies to strengthen their relationship with the media, garner media coverage of their CSR, and understand the media's CSR expectations for their organization (Du et al., 2010).

2.1.2. Regulatory bodies

Organizations should seek to interact with governments not only to understand their CSR expectations, but also to participate in creating regulations they will be subject to (Campbell, 2007). Regulatory bodies apply institutional pressure onto organizations through rules, norms, and laws (Oliver, 1991; Trendafilova et al., 2013). Campbell (2007) suggested two propositions regarding the relationship between regulatory bodies and an organization's CSR. First, corporations are more likely to act socially responsible if external regulations exist that establish clear social expectations, and they are more likely to adhere to regulations they participated in creating. Second, corporations are more likely to act socially responsible if their industry self-regulates these behaviors. This is especially so if the industry perceives a threat of governmental intervention or if self-regulation is promoted by governments (Campbell, 2007). Therefore, organizations within an industry can benefit from having an industry-wide regulatory body that governs their activities, and external regulatory forces should promote such associations (Campbell, 2007). In the professional sport team setting, the league office can be considered to be an industry-wide regulatory body. Similar to interactions with governments, it is still important for organizations (including North American professional sport teams) to spend

resources understanding the CSR expectations and perceptions of their industry-wide regulatory body so that they can align their activities to these expectations.

In their model of how institutional pressure affects the corporate social action of an organization, Marquis et al. (2007) proposed that the nature and level of corporate social action of an organization is affected by the regulatory factors in its external environment. For example, Guthrie et al. (2004) found that North American businesses in states where there are higher levels of state corporation tax and more opportunities for philanthropic tax write-offs donate more to schools in their local region. Babiak & Wolfe (2009) demonstrated legal requirements and regulation are a determinant of CSR engagement in the professional sport industry. For example, the United Kingdom (UK) imposed restrictions on the ownership of professional European football clubs by media companies to no more than a 10% stake in the club to avoid market advantages in these companies' bids to broadcast matches (Henry & Lee, 2004).

2.1.3 Monitoring groups

Organizations are more likely to act socially responsible when external stakeholders monitor their CSR activities (Campbell, 2007). Stakeholders such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), social movement organizations, and institutional investors can all take the role of a monitoring group stakeholder (Campbell, 2007). Through direct interaction and communication, monitoring groups understand, evaluate, and, if necessary, lobby on the socially responsible behaviors of an organization or industry (Campbell, 2007). External monitoring applies pressure on organizations to act in ways that align with monitoring group CSR expectations.

Like the media, monitoring groups have the ability to communicate about certain social initiatives of an organization to the broader public (Du et al., 2010). Monitoring groups' CSR communication can apply pressure on an organization through their influence on other external stakeholders, including other opinion leaders (Campbell, 2007). For example, by informing the media about certain CSR practices, monitoring groups may stimulate the media into scrutinizing and reporting on the company in ways they would not have otherwise. Aside from communicating to other external stakeholders, monitoring groups may organize rallies and protests for these stakeholders to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with an organization's CSR activities. Through these indirect interactions, monitoring groups impact the credibility of organizations, a crucial component of organizational legitimacy (Campbell, 2007).

While the literature reviewed in this section demonstrates the importance of opinion leaders to organizational CSR, opinion leaders have received little academic attention regarding how organizations interact with them to account for their CSR understandings, expectations, and perceptions. To date, no literature has investigated how organizations specifically interact through communication with opinion leaders about their CSR activities. This is a surprising gap in the literature given the fact that opinion leaders are so vital to the legitimacy of an organization and have such a crucial role in an organization's CSR development. The research of this study aims to fill this gap while investigating the topic through the lens of a professional sport team.

2.2 CSR communication

CSR communication, or disseminating information to and receiving information from stakeholders about CSR activities (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Verk et al., 2021), can be used to

transparently inform stakeholders on organizational CSR characteristics and behaviors (Podnar, 2008; Schlegelmilch & Pollack, 2005). This can aid in building trusting relationships with stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). CSR stakeholder communication permits stakeholders' CSR needs, expectations, perceptions, and intentions to be understood. Additionally, it allows organizations to be informed and directed in their CSR strategies due to their understanding of their stakeholders. As mentioned earlier, organizational legitimacy is maintained through understanding and meeting stakeholder expectations, therefore, CSR communication is critical in managing the credibility and continuity of an organization (Bebbington et al., 2008).

Dawkins (2004) found that opinion leader stakeholders believe organizational communication about CSR activities is an important indicator of an organization's social responsibility. However, expectations for communication varied between opinion leader groups (Dawkins, 2004). Organizations should therefore understand these expectations to achieve their corporate reputation management goals through communication with opinion leaders. The general business literature argues that organizations may use one of three strategies in their approach to communication with external stakeholders, and these strategies vary in their effectiveness in understanding their CSR expectations (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Morsing and Schultz's (2006) three CSR communication strategies are explained in the next subsection (Figure 1).

2.2.1 CSR communication strategies

According to Morsing & Schultz (2006), the directionality and symmetry of CSR communication are crucial components that distinguish one CSR communication strategy from another (Figure 1). The directionality of CSR communication can either be one-way or two-way

in direction (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). One-way refers to communication that moves in one direction, such as from an organization to a stakeholder. Two-way communication, on the other hand, refers to communication that flows back and forth between two parties, such as in-person conversations between organizations and stakeholders about CSR activities.

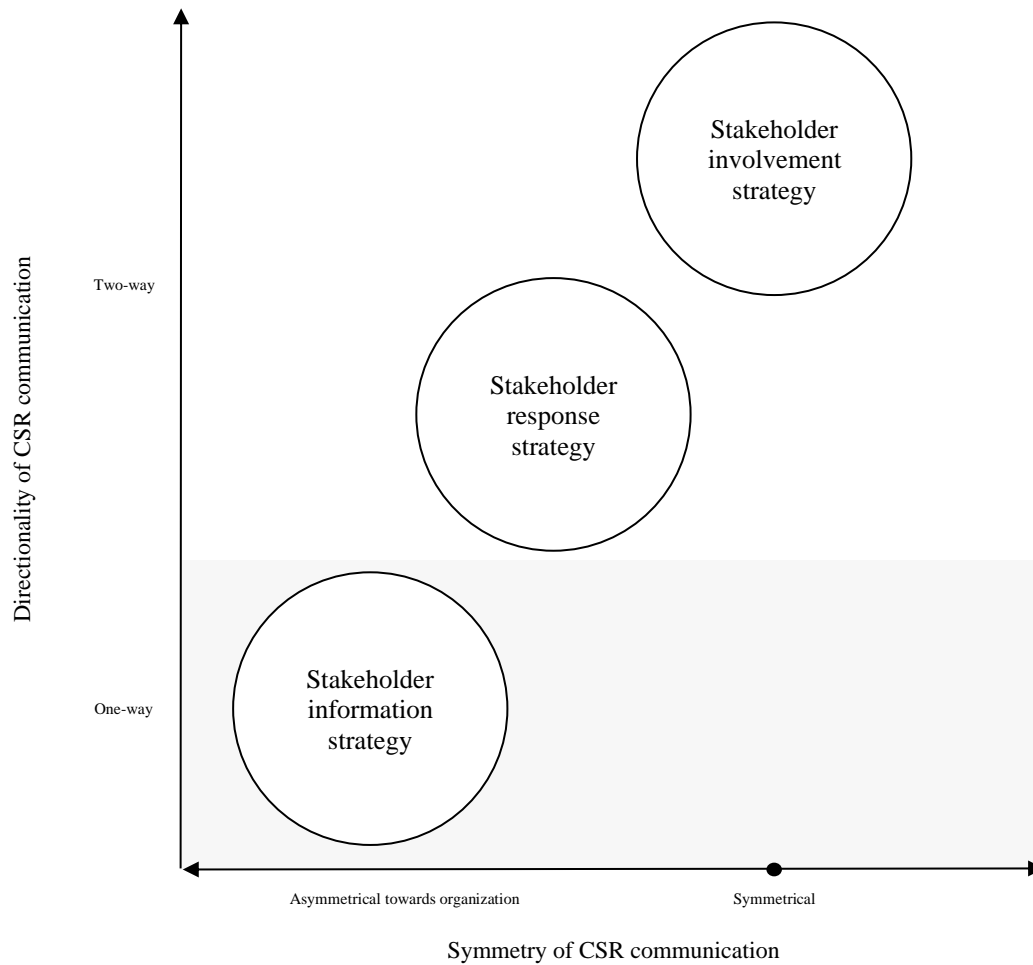


Figure 1 - Morsing & Schultz's (2006) CSR communication strategies in respect to symmetry and directionality

The symmetry of CSR communication is related to the ideas of sensemaking and sensegiving (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In respect to CSR, sensemaking is the process of attempting to understand and ascribe meaning to the CSR expectations and desires of others (i.e., making sense). Sensegiving, however, is the process of attempting to influence the way others understand CSR, thereby influencing the expectations and desires they have for CSR (i.e., giving sense) (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Sensegiving is often carried out by means of persuasive communication, or “any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another, or others” (Stiff & Mongeau, 2016, p. 4). When CSR communication is symmetrical, both the organization and their stakeholders are afforded an equal opportunity to give and make sense through persuasive communication, meaning both parties can influence and be influenced by each other through persuasive communication. When CSR communication is asymmetrical, one party has a greater opportunity for giving sense, such as disseminating information, while the other is placed in a position where they must more frequently attempt to make sense, such as receive information. For example, if CSR communication is asymmetrically tilted towards an organization, the organization has a greater opportunity for giving sense to its stakeholders, while its stakeholders are more frequently placed in a position where they are required to make sense of organizational CSR communication. Relating both directionality and symmetry together, two-way communication can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical, but one-way communication is always asymmetrical in that one party always is in a position to give sense while the other is always in a position where they are required to make sense (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Morsing and Schultz’s (2006) first strategy is the *stakeholder information strategy*. In this strategy, the intent of CSR communication by an organization is to give sense to its

stakeholders by informing them as objectively as possible so that the organization can receive positive stakeholder support (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Managers of organizations that utilize this strategy may insist that they engage in CSR activities because it is “the right thing to do,” and informing stakeholders about their actions is enough to ensure their support. Organizations have no intent to change their stakeholders’ CSR perceptions, and their communication is non-persuasive as a result. Stakeholders become more aware of the organization’s CSR practices but their understandings do not change in any other way. Communication in the stakeholder information strategy can be considered to be one-way communication, because organizations who utilize this strategy give sense by disseminating CSR information to their stakeholders but do not receive any CSR information from their stakeholders and therefore do not make sense of their needs or expectations. Accordingly, the organization does not change their general perceptions or understandings of CSR or of the CSR expectations of their stakeholders. As such the stakeholder information strategy cannot be considered an effective use of communication to manage an organization’s legitimacy.

Morsing & Schultz’s (2006) second CSR communication strategy is the *stakeholder response strategy*. Two differences exist between this and stakeholder information strategy. First, when organizations disseminate CSR information to their stakeholders, they use persuasive language in an attempt to change their stakeholders’ CSR perceptions, expectations, and behaviors. Second, organizations use polls or surveys to seek feedback from stakeholders to evaluate the impact of their CSR communication with them (e.g., changed or unchanged perceptions).

While this is considered to be two-way communication because information moves back and forth between the organization and its stakeholders, communication received from stakeholders takes place through a narrow framework (e.g., an opinion poll). This yields a reflection of the organization's own perceptions and a reinforcement of the CSR values and perspectives the organization already had rather than a better understanding of their stakeholder's CSR perspectives. Communication moving from the organization to its stakeholders is persuasive, while information received from stakeholders is not. Therefore, the two-way communication that occurs through the stakeholder response strategy is considered to be asymmetrical, with the organization responsible for giving more sense to their stakeholders than they make sense of their stakeholders. To state this in conventional terms, while both the organization and its stakeholders gain a better CSR understanding of each other, only the stakeholders' general CSR understandings are changed as a result of persuasive communication, not the organizations. Demonstrated further, when an organization utilizes the *stakeholder response strategy* to communicate with its stakeholders, "the company has the sole intention of convincing its stakeholders of its attractiveness" (Morsing & Schultz, 2006, p. 327). Thus, this strategy lends no knowledge about stakeholders and their CSR perceptions, only their perceptions regarding the organization's CSR activities, and therefore is not an effective use of communication in managing legitimacy.

Morsing & Schultz's (2006) last communication strategy is the *stakeholder involvement strategy*. It has the character of being a two-way, symmetrical communication process where both the organization and their stakeholders attempt to persuade each other in back-and-forth communication featuring dialogue (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). This allows an organization to understand their stakeholder's CSR perceptions and expectations, not just their CSR

understandings of the organization. Unlike the previous two strategies, instead of only communicating about the CSR initiatives they are involved in, they attempt to understand the areas of CSR their stakeholders expect them to be involved in by giving them an equal opportunity at giving sense through persuasive means (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). By beginning with understanding their stakeholders, organizations use an inductive approach to their overall CSR strategy, tailoring their CSR activities to their stakeholders. Organizations that use this strategy can change the CSR understandings of their stakeholders, but it is additionally clear that organizations learn vital information about their stakeholders and change according to this information. Thus, this strategy is considered to be effective at managing organizational legitimacy and all organizations should strive to use the stakeholder involvement strategy to communicate with all of their stakeholders. A major critique of Morsing & Schultz's (2006) CSR communication strategies is that these strategies are limited in that they only examine and discuss CSR communication that is asymmetrically tilted towards an organization (Figure 2). Morsing & Schultz's (2006) CSR communication strategies fail to address the idea that organizations may employ CSR communication strategies in which they receive CSR information from a stakeholder and either respond to this communication or do not disclose any CSR information. By doing so, CSR communication that is asymmetrically tilted towards stakeholders is not considered. This gap is demonstrated in dark gray in Figure 2. Because communication, from a constitutive perspective, is a co-constructive process where both parties co-create meaning through interactions (Crane & Glazer, 2016), it is vital that CSR communication strategies in which stakeholders give more sense than they make sense are evaluated and understood. My study aims to address the gaps in the CSR communication

literature suggested here by understanding CSR communication that is asymmetrically tilted towards stakeholders, all within the professional sport context.

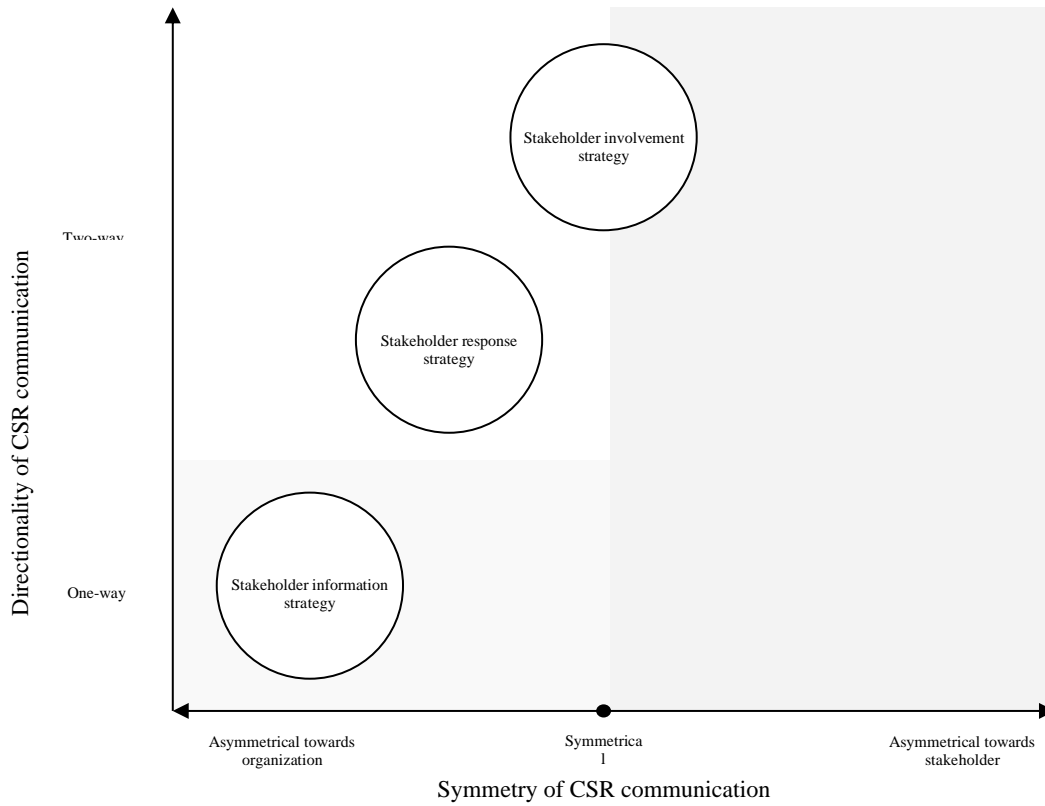


Figure 2 - Continuum of organization-stakeholder CSR communication strategies (Morsing & Schultz, 2006)

2.3 Professional sport CSR

CSR first emerged as an element of the business strategy of professional sport organizations in the early 1990s (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Since this time, professional sport stakeholders have continued to apply social pressure to increase CSR engagement in professional sport organizations (Kolyperas & Sparks, 2011). To adapt to this pressure and effectively manage its legitimacy, the professional sport industry has undergone an institutionalization of CSR

(Trendafilova et al., 2013, Raimo et al., 2021). As such, nearly all professional sport organizations in North America (e.g., National Football League teams) have incorporated CSR programs and charitable foundations into their strategies by the mid-2000s (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009, Breitbarth & Harris, 2008; Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Walker & Kent, 2009). Despite the increase in programming and established foundations, the extent to which professional sport organizations embrace CSR varies (Trendafilova et al., 2013), including their CSR communication with stakeholders.

2.3.1 Professional sport CSR, stakeholders, and CSR communication

Similarly to organizations in other industries, there exist a variety of stakeholders in the external institutional environment of professional sport organizations (Trendafilova et al., 2013). External stakeholders in the professional sport context can be categorized into opinion leaders and the general public, similar to business settings (Du et al., 2010). Both stakeholders, however, have a greater awareness of the CSR activities of professional sport organizations than they do of organizations in other industries (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). For example, professional sport teams receive more media attention than businesses in other industries (Painter et al., 2022), which results in greater organizational transparency and visibility (Raimo et al., 2021). Increased stakeholder awareness of CSR activities results in greater scrutiny for professional sport CSR (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009), making managing legitimacy an extraordinarily precarious endeavor in the professional sport context. Professional sport organizations therefore need to ensure they exhaust any and all efforts that may be effective means of managing legitimacy, including engaging in communication that is characteristic of the stakeholder involvement strategy.

As has been demonstrated in other industries (Freeman & Dmytriyev, 2017), all stakeholders in the professional sport industry need to receive equal prioritization in CSR communication. However, professional sport stakeholders affect organizational legitimacy differently than what is typical in other settings (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). For example, the patronage behaviors and intentions of consumers in the professional sport industry are unaffected by the CSR of their coinciding professional teams (Walker & Kent, 2009; Walzel et al., 2018). The patronage behaviors of the direct beneficiaries of CSR programming initiated and implemented by a professional sport organization are also unaffected by the programming; if a team ended a CSR initiative that a particular stakeholder was a direct beneficiary, their intentions to attend games and buy merchandise would not change (Babiak & Kihl, 2018). While literature has demonstrated that there is a positive correlation between CSR engagement and financial outcomes in general business settings (i.e., Cho et al., 2019), there also appears to be no correlation in the professional sport setting (Inoue, 2011), providing additional support for a lack of a financial case for professional sport CSR. All this suggests that stakeholders who consider themselves to be consumers of a particular professional sport team will interact with the organization they identify with in the same manner regardless if their organization meets their CSR expectations, and therefore organizational legitimacy for this stakeholder group is unaffected by CSR.

Although CSR engagement in professional sport does not appear to be linked with legitimacy from a consumer stakeholder perspective, it has been shown to be an important contributor to the legitimacy of an organization amongst opinion leader stakeholders (Heinze & Lu, 2017; Trendafilova et al., 2013). For example, Trendafilova et al. (2013) demonstrated that opinion leaders were instrumental in initiating an environmental movement that took place in the

professional sport industry in North America during the late 2000s. Additionally, Heinze and Lu (2017) evaluated the institutional evolution of the NFL's approach to handling their CSR crisis involving repetitive concussions and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) of NFL players. They found that opinion leaders were sources of significant pressure that drove institutional change (Heinze & Lu, 2017).

Little research has been expressly given to understanding the communication strategies these organizations use to communicate with these stakeholders about CSR. Instead, communication in professional sport has focused on topics such as the content of reports (Kolyperas & Sparks, 2011; Walker et al., 2010), visibility determinants of CSR communication (reporting) (Raimo et al., 2021), variations to communication respective of nationality of the organization (Kolyperas & Sparks, 2011; Ribeiro et al., 2019), communication between professional sport organizations and their charitable foundations (Kolyperas et al., 2016), communication with CSR program beneficiaries (Babiak & Kihl, 2018), tools to optimize communication (Fromentin & Babiak, 2014), and how to integrate CSR communication into a professional sport organization's strategy (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020). Given that opinion leaders are so critical to the legitimacy of professional sport organizations, it is important to understand the CSR communication strategies professional sport organizations use to communicate with opinion leaders and to identify the determinants of CSR communication with opinion leaders.

Another theoretical gap is that we do not have a good understanding of professional sport CSR communication from a constitutive perspective, or one that incorporates dialogue and a desire to involve stakeholders to better understand CSR (Crane & Glozer, 2016). The examination of CSR communication in sport has mainly been from a functional, transmission-

based perspective (e.g., communication A to X stakeholder results in outcome B for the business) (Crane & Glozer, 2016). In many of these studies, and in many more in the broader CSR communication literature, communication is defined in terms of the existence of reports and other kinds of communication that make use of internal channels. These forms of communication align with characteristics of the stakeholder information strategy, which is deemed ineffective at managing legitimacy (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Therefore, investigating CSR communication in the professional sport industry in a manner that accounts for all strategies that professional sport organizations use to communicate with their stakeholders, whether they be functional or constitutive, is warranted.

This chapter first provided an introduction to stakeholder theory and how external stakeholders of a business can be categorized into opinion leaders or the general public depending on how proactively they seek out CSR information. The literature related to CSR and three opinion leader stakeholders in the professional sport context: the media, regulatory bodies, and monitoring groups was then reviewed. CSR communication literature was next reviewed, with special attention given to the CSR communication strategies proposed by Morsing & Schultz (2006): the stakeholder information strategy, the stakeholder response strategy, and the stakeholder involvement strategy. Finally, sport management literature related to stakeholders, CSR, and CSR communication was reviewed and limitations were identified and highlighted. The next chapter describes the research design of the study including the approach to research, the sample population, data collection instruments and procedures, data analysis and trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 3: Research design

3.1 Research design

This study utilized narrative inquiry (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018) to guide the research.

Narrative inquiry is one of the five most common approaches to qualitative research and is an appropriate design for research that seeks to uncover the stories of individual experience (Hoshmand, 2005). Narrative inquiry focuses on collecting stories from individuals and utilizing these as data for analysis, hence its appropriate fit for understanding individual experience. One benefit of using narrative inquiry is that stories are an easy form of data to collect, as humans often explain their own views of phenomena through stories (Butina, 2015). Other benefits include that narratives are rich in nature, produce in-depth, elaborate data, and correspondingly provide rich, thick meaning (Merriam, 2009).

Using a narrative inquiry, the focus of this study was the CSR communication strategies used by professional sport teams to communicate with their opinion leader stakeholders. Narrative inquiry was an appropriate approach for framing this research, because this study aims to understand the research topic as viewed by individuals who are privy to processes, interactions, and information related to the research topic (Merriam, 2009). By gathering stories about professional sport team communication with opinion leaders from team CSR practitioners, this research was able to uncover their understandings and perceptions of a) the communication strategies their organization uses to communicate with opinion leaders and b) the determinants of communication with opinion leaders for their respective sport teams. These perspectives were used to inform a broader conceptualization of the research problem and associated research

questions and are especially appropriate, because they derive from the perspective of individuals who play a key role in and have a unique understanding of their team's communication practices.

3.2 Sample

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants for this study (Patton, 1990; Coyne, 1997).

Purposeful sampling was suitable for this study, because it was necessary to collect data from individuals who were privy to the CSR communication practices of their organization. Three professional teams from North American sport leagues were selected for this study. A single team was selected from each of the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and National Basketball Association (NBA). These leagues were selected for this study, because they receive the most media attention of all North American professional sport leagues and are the highest revenue earners among these leagues (Brown, 2023; Badenhausen, 2022; Ozanian & Teitelbaum, 2023). Professional sport team CSR practitioners were purposely recruited based on the following criteria: director of a professional sport team CSR department or employee of a professional CSR department and were selected by their director to represent them, knowledge of the CSR activities and communication of their organization, ability to answer interview questions, and interest in participating in the research.

52 potential participants were identified and invited to participate in the study, while only three agreed to take part. Identifying potential participants was a taxing process on the researcher as a result of the amount of time and effort that was necessary to identify and contact potential participants and the low returns on the time invested. The recruitment process became more and more difficult to continue as time went on as the optimism of the research became more and more diminished. While the recruitment letter provided an adequate explanation of the study, the

substitution of layman's terms for academic jargon may have improved recruiting and yielded more participants, as could have shortening the study description and improving its conciseness.

Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics of the participants.

Table 1

Participant demographics

Participant identifier	Gender	Professional sport league	Position in organization	Years in position
Participant 1 (P1)	Male	National Football League	Vice President of Social Impact	2 yrs, 9 mos
Participant 2 (P2)	Female	Major League Baseball	Senior Director, Community Engagement and Executive Director, Club Community Fund	2 yrs, 1 mos
Participant 3 (P3)	Female	National Basketball Association	Senior Manager, Corporate Social Responsibility	2 yrs, 1 mos

Participants were contacted via email inviting them to participate in the study. The email outlined the purpose of the study, participant roles and time commitment, procedures, and a confidentiality statement. Individuals were contacted based on publicly available information via team websites. Once a participant agreed to take part in the study, an interview was scheduled at their convenience. While narrative inquiry suggests 10 to 20 participants are needed for an adequate study, challenges in recruitment resulted in three professional CSR practitioners interviewed for the study. This is an acceptable number of participants for this study, however, as the goal to gain a thick description of first-hand accounts of the phenomena was achieved (Patton, 2002), and data saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006). Participants included two professional sport team CSR department directors and one professional sport team CSR department team member who was selected by their director to speak on behalf of them.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Interview guide

By using an interview guide, all topics related to the research questions are addressed during the interview and answers can be easily recorded by the interviewer (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

An interview guide was made for the purposes of this study and utilized open-ended questions and probes in order to elicit in-depth responses that resulted in rich data. In addition, the interview guide oriented the interviewee towards the research objectives, kept the interviewer organized during the interview, and provided space for the interviewer to document notes of the interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). See Appendix A to view the interview guide used in this thesis.

3.3.2 Procedure

Narrative inquiry is centered on collecting stories; thus, interviews were the primary data collection method used (Butina, 2015). Qualitative interviews are a method of collecting data by asking questions to individuals in order to understand a topic through their perspective (Corbetta, 2003) and were an ideal fit for understanding the topic. Semi-structured interviews were used for this study (Dearnley, 2005). This type of interview outlines the topics discussed during the interview before the interview takes place in an interview guide (Corbetta, 2003; Dearnly, 2005). The order in which the topics were covered, and the phrasing of each question was left for me to decide in the moment (Corbetta, 2003). The interview guide entailed reminding participants the purpose of the study, asking demographic questions, and providing orientation questions that allowed participants to explain how their organization communicates their CSR. Questions about the extent of CSR communication specific to opinion leaders followed. Discussions about

opinion leaders were carried out in the same way with each participant, first by explaining which stakeholders qualified as a member of that particular opinion leader group, second by questions concerning the extent of communication with that opinion leader group and how communication occurs. Finally, questions about the determinants of CSR communication with opinion leaders were posed, including questions that reviewed topics discussed earlier in the interview as well as those that allowed participants to share their own perspectives. Probes were used whenever I needed a more in-depth explanation than what was already provided or whenever a topic was mentioned but not discussed in detail. For example, “Could you please tell me more about...?” was a phrase I used frequently to ask a participant to elaborate more on a topic they had just mentioned.

Interviews were conducted remotely via videotelephony using the software Zoom. Online interviewing reduces geographical constraints and permits schedule flexibility for the interviewee while allowing for the interviews to take place in the comfort of one’s typical environment (Irani, 2019). As consistent with recommendations for semi-structured interviews, the duration of interviews were between 30 minutes to 90 minutes (DiCicco-Bloom, 2006). Interviews were digitally recorded verbatim, with the consent of the participant, to be used for data analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis occurs simultaneously alongside data collection and writing of the report. For example, preliminary data analysis of initial interviews often occurs while additional interviews are ongoing. After initial data analysis is complete, a more in-depth analysis ensues (Butina, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the purposes of this research,

narrative thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). Narrative thematic analysis is a form of data analysis that focuses on the content of the data by deriving themes that generalize the key information from the text (Creswell, 2014). It consists of five stages: a) organization and preparation of the data; b) acquire an initial understanding of the data; c) coding; d) theming and categorization; and e) interpretation of themes and categories (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Organization and preparation of the data were done by transcribing the recordings of interviews. Initial transcription was created by Zoom software, which is 70% to 80% accurate (“Zoom Live Automatic,” 2023), and was subsequently revised by the researcher by watching the video recording and following along with the transcript. Preliminary patterns and themes were recorded as the researcher revised the transcriptions, which helped to familiarize the researcher to the data.

Next, transcripts were coded by re-reading the narratives, investigating the text for recurring words, ideas, and patterns, and creating a corresponding code for each. The qualitative computer software program NVIVO was used to assist in the coding process. Initial codes were categorized into two categories: codes related to CSR communication strategies, and codes related to determinants of CSR communication with opinion leaders. Within these categories, a number of subcategories were created. Within the CSR communication strategy category, three initial themes were created in line with Morsing & Schultz (2006), and three additional themes emerged during data analysis. This was done in order to assign a passage of text to the CSR communication strategy it applied to. Within each of these strategy themes, additional sub-themes were created for each opinion leader. Therefore, a passage of text could be assigned to a particular CSR communication strategy and to the corresponding opinion leader that it referred

to. Within the determinants of CSR communication category, nine initial themes were created. This was narrowed down to seven after each theme was reviewed and revised.

The final stage of narrative thematic analysis consisted of making meaning from the data to determine the main findings of the study and the overall contribution of this study to the research topic (Braun & Clark, 2006; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). Findings are reported using descriptive, narrative text that provides a conceptual understanding of the theme, as this has been shown to be an effective vehicle for communicating qualitative findings (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Tables displaying themes and their representative quotes are used to effectively communicate the findings of this study.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Lincoln & Guba (1985) introduced the concept of trustworthiness as having four components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Nowell et al. (2017) argue that, while more recent indicators of trustworthiness exist, “these trustworthiness criteria are pragmatic choices for researchers concerned about the acceptability and usefulness of their research for a variety of stakeholders.” Credibility refers to the degree to which the researcher’s interpretation of the data represents the respondents’ views of the phenomena (Tobin & Begley, 2004). To address credibility in this research, the researcher had prolonged engagement with the data, meeting the assumption that coding “gets better” as time dedicated to doing so increases (Terry et al., 2017). Transferability was met by presenting the findings of the study using thick, rich descriptions so that those seeking to transfer the findings of the study can make their own judgment as to whether the findings apply to their situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Next, dependability was assured by using a logical, traceable, and clearly documented process to

conduct the research, such as collecting and analyzing the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The methodology for the research was outlined before the study began, notes were taken during interviews, NVIVO was used to document the coding process, and the version histories of numerous research documents, including the final report, have been maintained. Last, confirmability was accounted for by detailing reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entirety of the research (Koch, 1994).

This chapter outlined the research design starting with an explanation of narrative inquiry and an explanation of its appropriateness for use in this study. Sampling and sampling procedures were explained, followed by a description of the data collection methods and data analysis techniques. Last, the study's trustworthiness was explained. The following chapter presents the findings of this study while incorporating a discussion that emphasizes the contribution of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

The findings are organized around addressing the two research questions. The first section addresses the CSR communication strategies that professional sport teams use to communicate with opinion leaders. The second speaks to themes related to the determinants of professional sport team CSR communication with opinion leaders. A discussion of the findings is incorporated throughout the chapter.

4.1 Communication strategies

The findings showed that professional sport teams used five CSR communication strategies to communicate with their opinion leaders: the stakeholder information strategy, the stakeholder involvement strategy, the stakeholder adherence strategy, the indirect communication strategy, and the no communication strategy. No empirical evidence was found that showed professional sport teams use the stakeholder response strategy to communicate about CSR with opinion leaders. Practitioners indicated that their teams used a no communication strategy more often than they used any other CSR communication strategy when communicating with opinion leaders. When communication did occur, the stakeholder involvement strategy was rarely used by teams to communicate with opinion leaders, and other strategies were used more frequently. Professional sport teams may utilize multiple CSR communication strategies with the same stakeholder group simultaneously or at different times. The next five subsections elaborate on each CSR communication strategy theme.

4.1.1 Stakeholder information strategy

The stakeholder information strategy was utilized by teams to communicate with each opinion leader (Table 2). Teams that utilize this strategy disseminate information from the organization to opinion leaders but do not evaluate their expectations (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Professional sport teams communicate about CSR with the media using the stakeholder information strategy by distributing press releases when communication is initiated by the organization. Teams send out these press releases to broadly inform media members about large CSR events that a team or a player is holding. Media members may also initiate CSR communication that is characteristic of the stakeholder information strategy with professional sport teams by contacting the team to learn information about team CSR. This finding can be attributed to the mass media's interest in gathering information and passing it on to their customers for business purposes (McQuail, 1983; Spitulnik, 1993) rather than engaging in dialogue around CSR perceptions.

Annual reports were used by teams to inform governments of their CSR activities. For example, one practitioner said their organization distributes an annual report to their municipal, state, and national government representatives to inform them about their CSR activities and accomplishments over the past year. This was done voluntarily without any regulation or expressed-desire for communication by government officials. Annual reports have been well-documented as a tool that professional sport teams use to communicate CSR information to their stakeholder (e.g., Cobourn & Frawley, 2017, Walker et al., 2010). The finding that teams use annual reports to implement the stakeholder information strategy in their CSR communication with some opinion leaders supports findings in prior literature and advances the primary use of professional sport annual reports.

One practitioner mentioned their organization informs monitoring groups about their CSR activities via their league. The league collects information from each team relevant to the monitoring groups interests and then distributes this information to the monitoring group. The specific example given was the interaction between the NFL and the Fritz Pollard Alliance (FPA), a monitoring group that evaluates the minority hiring of black head coaches and front office personnel in the NFL. NFL teams have diversity, equity, and inclusion data about their organizations, and the NFL consolidates this information for the FPA.

Table 2

Stakeholder information strategy theme

Theme and theme definition	Direction of communication	Opinion leader	Representative quotations
CSR information is transmitted from the organization to inform stakeholders and no communication is received from stakeholders	One-way from team to opinion leader	The media	Our communication staff is regularly talking through what's happening in our CSR work, what we're doing, what a player might be doing and then they bring us in if there is a desire to have a more in depth conversation. (P2)
		Regulatory bodies	We send annual impact reports of our CSR work, as well as our foundation, to all legislative members in [our state], both the House, the Senate, our national representatives in Congress, and then most of our Chambers of Commerce here locally, and then a few other selected state positions, they could be elected officials and auditors, the office attorney general, things like that. (P2)
		Monitoring groups	One of the biggest ones from the NFL standpoint is the Fritz Pollard Alliance which handles diversity hiring practices of NFL teams...All NFL teams kind of have this looser relationship with [the] Fritz Pollard Alliance, both supporting financially but then also transparency around hiring practices. (P1)
		All	Oftentimes it's just one-way communication instead of truly dialogue...I wish that for some of them they were more, they really, truly were a dialogue instead of just a communication flow one way or the other...I think there's more work to be done on that area from our seat. (P2)

4.1.2 Stakeholder involvement strategy

Teams were shown to communicate with regulatory bodies, specifically governments, in ways consistent with the stakeholder involvement strategy (Table 3). Teams that use the stakeholder involvement strategy held open dialogue with government agencies or government representatives that aimed to understand each other’s CSR perspectives and intentions (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). When a team engages in discretionary CSR activities that have to do with political matters aligned with a government agency or a government representative’s agenda, teams and governments can form partnerships to accomplish their shared goals. The example given by one practitioner was the partnership that formed between them and representatives in their state government as a result of a shared interest in justice reform within their state, particularly as it related to expungement. Both parties work closely with one another to accomplish a shared CSR goal, communicating information back and forth and holding dialogue that involves one another. Teams may use communication to persuade a regulatory body to take action towards a particular CSR activity and vice versa.

Table 3

Stakeholder involvement strategy theme

Theme definition	Direction and symmetry of communication	Opinion leader	Representative quote
CSR communication is informative and persuasive by both parties, and information received from stakeholders is both about their perceptions of the organization and their perceptions about general CSR	Two-way symmetrical	Regulatory bodies	We do work with them pretty closely, so they can tell us like, "Hey, this bill is coming up in the sessions at the state level. We think it would be really great to have [the team president], he's our team president, we think it'd be great to have [his] name on this bill," to help push you know expungement is an example, within our state. (P3)

Businesses have been shown to partner with other entities to achieve their CSR objectives, although the literature primarily discusses partnerships with NGOs (Peloza & Falkenberg, 2009). The partnership discussed here between a professional sport team and a governing body can be considered to be an integrative relationship where the two entities share employees and activities to accomplish their shared ventures (Austin, 2000). The team is able to accomplish their CSR objectives more efficiently and effectively through this integrative relationship, resulting in more meaningful team CSR impacts (Peloza & Falkenberg, 2009) and the development of a particular corporate reputation (Fombrun, 2005). For partnerships to be successful, goals need to be set collaboratively between the two parties, and information critical to accomplishing these must be shared regularly and often (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). Thus, communication is a crucial aspect of any partnership, and quality communication that allows for the establishment of goals and the flow of critical information is imperative to the success of partnerships (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). While this business partnership literature is based on business-to-business or business-to-NGO partnerships, the findings of this subsection demonstrate the critical importance of communication in partnerships between professional sport teams and governments. Furthermore, a professional sport team in this study specifically elected to use the stakeholder involvement strategy of CSR communication to facilitate their partnerships with governments.

The CSR communication discussed here deviates slightly from the stakeholder involvement strategy detailed by Morsing & Schultz (2006). First, CSR communication revolves around shared CSR objectives rather than divergent CSR perspectives. This can result in an echo chamber in which a team has its own CSR understandings reflected back to it, a phenomenon

that Morsing & Schultz (2006) identified as characteristic of the stakeholder response strategy. Second, the intent of CSR communication between a team and a partnering regulatory body is not to use persuasive CSR communication to change the other's CSR perspectives. Both parties engage in communication under the premise that, because they are working together on a CSR initiative, they have more in common than not, and therefore communication is not concerned with changing each other's perspectives. This does not suggest that teams and governments cannot each be persuaded to modify their CSR perceptions and activities due to their interactions; rather that each party's aim for holding conversation is not to persuade the other. Persuasive communication that does occur revolves around encouraging the other party to take actions related to their shared goals (e.g., supporting legislation of a bill), not to change their CSR understandings entirely. Once again, it does not mean that each party's CSR understandings cannot and will not change from their communication; rather that if one party's perspectives do change, it does so indirectly and subtly. This may appear to be a minute difference, but it is important to understand, because the stakeholder involvement strategy outlined by Morsing and Schultz (2006) holds that organizations are *intentional* about both wanting to learn from their stakeholders as well as to persuade them of the organization's CSR appropriateness.

4.1.3 Adherence to stakeholder strategy

Regulatory bodies, such as governments and leagues, may hold expectations for a team's CSR activities and require a team to communicate with them to ensure those expectations are achieved. First, these regulatory bodies *inform* a team about the CSR expectations that they have for them and outline objectives they are expected to meet. The team then carries out activities to meet those required objectives and communicates a *response* to these bodies to demonstrate their

compliance. Communication is two-way, as it moves back and forth between the organization and the stakeholder, but it is asymmetrically tilted towards the stakeholder, opposite of what occurs in the stakeholder response strategy. A regulatory body communicates its CSR expectations to persuade the organization to behave in accordance with its expectations without first understanding the CSR perceptions of the organization. Thus, although the communication they receive from the organization is persuasive in attempting to convince the regulatory body of its compliance, it does not allow the stakeholder to better understand the CSR perspectives of the organization since communication is only in reference to the expectations they have set for them. While CSR understandings change in the organization as a result of this communication, no CSR change occurs in the stakeholder. Practitioners noted that communication that follows this strategy rarely features dialogue between both parties, indicating that change in both parties is rarely allowed to occur. This strategy of CSR communication is inconsistent with the three strategies identified by Morsing and Schultz (2006), therefore, a novel communication strategy is proposed here, one that has been labeled by the researcher as the adherence to stakeholder strategy (Table 4).

The adherence to stakeholder strategy appears slightly different depending on whether the regulatory body is the government or the team's parent league. In instances in which the government is the regulatory body, they often make an agency dedicated to overseeing and communicating with the team about their CSR activities. However, the activities they oversee are usually very narrow in scope and tend to focus on the philanthropy pillar of sport CSR, as in how much money was donated to or spent on CSR activities in the local community. In instances in which a league is the regulatory body, they create a department to oversee team CSR activities.

These departments often have a broader scope and were demonstrated to concern themselves with a number of sport CSR pillars, both discretionary and non-discretionary.

Regulatory bodies are a source of coercive pressure that drive CSR engagement in the professional sport industry (Trendafilova, et al., 2013). Coercive pressures is defined as “the pressures which stem from institutions in a firm’s environment which directly formulate rules that a firm needs to comply with one of them” (Alziady & Enayah, 2019, p. 6). Regulatory bodies exert coercive pressure to attribute legitimacy to certain organizational behaviors through rules, cultural norms, or laws, all of which are forms of communication that express the expectations the opinion leader has for the organization (Campbell, 2007). According to the findings above, professional sport teams respond to coercive pressure from regulatory bodies to demonstrate they comply with regulatory body CSR expectations by using the adherence to stakeholder strategy of CSR communication. Aside from regulatory bodies, this strategy was noted to have been used in communication with media members. In one instance, a media member informed a team that they were contemplating publishing a story that would have negatively affected the team’s corporate reputation (Barnett, 2006). This media member *informed* the team of their perception of the team’s CSR activities and allowed for the team to *respond* to their understanding before publishing the story. The organization used persuasive communication in their response to demonstrate that they were meeting the media member’s CSR expectation and convince the media member of their appropriateness. As a result of their communication, the media member decided not to publish the story.

The adherence to stakeholder strategy was used to communicate with monitoring groups as well. For example, monitoring groups, such as Charity Navigator, which provides a rating on

the impacts, finances, culture, and leadership of a charity, will contact professional sport teams to *inform* them that they need more information if they are to designate a stronger CSR rating to the

Table 4

Adherence to stakeholder strategy theme

Theme definition	Direction and symmetry of communication	Opinion leader	Representative quote
A stakeholder holds expectations and even requirements for the CSR activities of an organization, and the organization communicates with the stakeholder to demonstrate their adherence to those expectations	Two-way asymmetrical in favor of opinion leader	The media	There was a group of parents in [our city] who had raised some concerns with the [city] Parks and Rec department about the condition of some of the youth baseball and softball fields, and a reporter from [a local newspaper] was talking with this parent group and writing an article about it...And initially, there had been a call to us [from a media member] saying, "Well, why aren't you doing anything to help this?" and then we were able to say, "Let us tell you the ways that we're helping and what our role is and what we're involved in."...[They said] "Hey, before we put this article out in the world, we need to connect with them. (P2)
		Regulatory bodies	There are certain regulations that we have to follow as an organization because of the legislation that was designed to build the ballpark. And so there's things like reporting on how much giving the [team does] within, kind of in the county specifically, which is where our ballpark sits. (P2)
		Monitoring groups	There are a number of monitoring organizations, kind of those nonprofit watchdog organizations like GuideStar, Charity Navigator, some of these kinds of things where we are. We don't get much communication from them, but we are trying to make sure that we provide information or update our information that's on their website. (P2)

team. The team *responds* to this stakeholder with the information they seek, demonstrating their appropriateness. The monitoring group attempts to persuade the organization and as a result, the

organization learns about the stakeholder's CSR perceptions and may alter their own. Meanwhile, the monitoring group's CSR perspectives are unaltered.

Stakeholders that scrutinize or track the behaviors of teams, such as the mass media and monitor groups, help reinforce and ensure that norms and expectations are followed (Campbell, 2007). This can be considered a form of normative pressure, or the pressures that stem from institutional norms specific to a particular industry (Krell et al., 2016). Stakeholders that exert normative pressures have no authority to directly enforce compliance and therefore cannot penalize noncompliance in the same manner as regulatory bodies (Chen et al., 2011). Instead, they pose a constant risk to corporate reputation and legitimacy by maintaining the ability to publicly expose unsavory business practices that do not conform with the public's or their expectations (Campbell, 2007). The findings here related to the media and monitoring groups exemplify that professional sport teams utilize the adherence to stakeholder CSR communication strategy to communicate with the media and monitoring groups in an effort to mitigate the risk they pose to their corporate reputation and legitimacy.

4.1.4 Indirect communication strategy

Indirect communication with opinion leaders occurs when a team seeks information that has been made publicly available by an opinion leader through the stakeholder's organizational website and incorporates this information into its approach to CSR (Table 5). This can be considered to be one-way communication where opinion leaders indirectly inform teams about their CSR perspectives but do not receive any information about CSR activities from teams. Teams indicated they utilized an indirect communication strategy with media member stakeholders and monitoring groups. One practitioner noted that their organization periodically

reviewed news articles about the team's CSR activities to understand the media's CSR perceptions of the team. The information gleaned from these media reviews was used to either confirm current CSR behaviors if the article portrayed a positive image of the organization or to encourage a more strategic approach to communicating with media members if the article was more negative, including incorporating better dialogue with media members and being more selective of which media members were communicated with.

Other than the media, teams indirectly communicated with monitoring groups to aid in the development of certain aspects of their CSR programming by utilizing resources that were made publicly available through monitoring group websites. A practitioner particularly made reference to the Aspen Institute and noted that the team uses some of its resources to develop CSR programming revolving around youth sport. In all instances of indirect communication, no direct communication occurs between the team and its opinion leader, yet the organization learns about the CSR perceptions of the opinion leader and alters its behavior to meet the stakeholder's expectations.

The concept of normative pressure not only applies to the adherence to stakeholder communication strategy, but also the indirect communication strategy (Campbell, 2007; Krell et al., 2016). While they do not communicate to either opinion leader to demonstrate their compliance when using this strategy, the information professional sport teams learn and use to inform their CSR activities serve the purpose of mitigating the risk of public exposure by these stakeholders. In the event that a stakeholder begins to scrutinize team activities more closely, teams who utilize the indirect communication strategy prepare themselves for the possibility of mass media and monitoring groups increasing scrutiny for their CSR activities and beginning to

communicate with the team in a way closely aligned with the adherence to stakeholder strategy.

Table 5

Indirect communication strategy

Theme definition	Direction of communication	Opinion leader	Representative quote
Organizations review information broadly communicated by an opinion leader (e.g., newspaper articles, stakeholder websites) and utilize this information to inform their CSR activities	One-way from opinion leader to team	The media	We'll read any of the articles, obviously, or any of the coverage. We will monitor just to see how they frame that individual content. (P1)
		Monitoring groups	We've used a ton of [the Aspen Institute's] research to try to help us think about the programs that we're creating and how we evolve our programs...So in terms of the dialogue, it's not necessarily us reporting to them. It's us learning from them, and then taking advantage of the amazing work that they do, kind of gathering the data and the research, so we can then inform our work and our strategy. (P2)

4.1.5 No communication strategy

Two practitioners noted that, more often than not, teams hold no communication about CSR with governments and monitoring groups (Table 6). One practitioner noted that beyond sending an annual report to government officials in their city and state, no communication occurs between their organization and governments. The other stated that their organization does not communicate with monitoring groups for large periods of time and only do so when the monitoring group is interested in updating the information about their professional sport team that it contains on its organizational website. No communication can be driven by professional sport teams, opinion leaders, or by both in the case that neither party has an interest in communicating with the other. Thus, no communication can be asymmetrically in favor of

professional sport teams, asymmetrically in favor of opinion leaders, or symmetrical.

Table 6

No communication strategy theme

Theme definition	Direction of communication	Opinion leader	Representative quote
Communication between organization and opinion leader does not occur	No direction	Regulatory bodies	We, like I said, don't have any reporting requirements from a CSR standpoint in the same way that [a different team] has described in terms of like [that team's] stadium right or anything like that. (P1)
		Monitoring groups	When it comes to the watchdog groups, or something like those different organizations, I feel like those are relationships and dialogue that doesn't exist. (P2)

Not only does no communication represent situations in which teams do not employ any of the five strategies described above, no communication can be considered to be a strategy itself in that many things can be communicated through a lack of communication (Bavelas et al., 1990). For example, consider a team that does not communicate to their media members about CSR. Media members may assume that the team does not engage in CSR practices since they have not received any information regarding these practices and therefore may believe the team views CSR engagement as unimportant, worthless, or otherwise. Additionally, media members may believe that not only does the team view CSR as unimportant, they may find that the team does not find value in communicating about CSR with them, potentially causing a degradation of the relationship between a team and one of their opinion leader stakeholder groups. Therefore, CSR communication with opinion leaders should *always* be sought out by professional sport teams, even in situations where opinion leaders do not seek CSR communication from the organization. The determinants driving the adoption of CSR communication strategies by

professional sport teams in their communication with opinion leaders is discussed in the following section.

4.2 Determinants of CSR communication

This section outlines determinants that are applicable across all stakeholder groups and discusses the implications of these determinants. It is important to note that these determinants are not necessarily independent of one another and can be closely related or even overlap. Table 7 presents all determinants and representative quotes that demonstrate the determinant.

Table 7

Determinant themes and representative quotations

Theme and theme definition	Representative quotations
<p>Stakeholder prioritization Organizations value CSR communication with certain stakeholders over others</p>	<p>The fans and the city give us so much so, “How can we give back to them and what can we do to uplift them?” is really important to us. So just as a whole, as an organization, every single department is involved in the community in some way, shape, or form...We always work with a nonprofit partner in those spaces, but the goal is to always reach out to individual community members...We never really expect the media to be around and show up, but if they are, it's always great to have that added bonus...We've never asked fans to report back on our community efforts...We're just a very community focused team. (P3)</p>
<p>Team and opinion leader objectives Organizations and opinion leaders are more likely to communicate about CSR when their CSR objectives align</p>	<p>Communication with regulatory bodies, especially government groups, is about how we work with them on initiatives, the impact of CSR initiatives that impact the community where we need their support or they need our support. (P1)</p> <p>I think so often people are trying to check the box of what they need to do for their role, and you know, they have the objectives in their space that are important, and we have ours. They're there and then sometimes the two never ever intersect and that's okay, but sometimes it'd be good if there is more intersection in the work. (P2)</p>
<p>Resource availability The financial and human resources available to an organization influence the degree of CSR communication</p>	<p>Frankly, I think it's the resources that our ownership has committed to this. There are some clubs, if you look at their website you'll see that they have two or three people that work on community initiatives. In our department, we have, right now, including interns, 13 people...I think it really depends on how big the organizations are. (P2)</p>

<p>Organizational governance Organizational governance structure and affiliation of governance executives with the local community</p>	<p>We've been owned by the same family for many years, right? It's a single family...They are very, very, very committed to the community and want to be a pillar in the community...Dialogue with one family or one person [is] different from dialogue with 50 people in an ownership group...A lot of [professional sport teams] now are owned by ownership groups that might have 25 different board members that are making the decision on what they're investing in or not...The ownership group might not be local, might not necessarily care about the community, right? They live seven states away...Some of those just don't see this as a priority. (P2)</p>
<p>Trust in opinion leader Professional sport teams tend to communicate more with opinion leaders they trust and less with one's they do not</p>	<p>As we think through the lens of what we're talking about here with CSR, you're only going to trust certain relationships with that. So just because we have a required obligation to work with the newspaper, the media outlets, naturally, we're going to have a deeper relationship or trust built in with certain reporters or certain media members that we're going to want to communicate with from our communication side. (P1)</p>
<p>External environmental pressure Includes regional expectations, CSR culture of local corporations, and social disasters</p>	<p>[Our state] has long been on the top of the list of generous states. And so I think that [our state], from a CSR perspective, it's just part of our culture to do that, to give back, to try and continue to find solutions for that. (P2)</p> <p>We also, I think the other side of that is, like the corporate philanthropy world here, because we have so many giant companies that are headquartered here. You mentioned [company A, company B, company C, company D, company E, company F]. There's a lot of these really big companies that are here in [our state], and that changes the landscape for us. if you're comparing it to another community that does not have the same corporate commitment. (P2)</p>
<p>Requirements by governing bodies Teams are obligated to communicate with an opinion leader due to a demand placed on them by a regulatory body</p>	<p>There are certain dialogues that exist, whether it's one-way or two, that are just required by the nature of some sort of contract agreement, legal law, something or other, a written law that states that we have to provide certain kinds of communication at certain times of the year. So I mean, there's contractual communication that has to happen. (P2)</p>

4.2.1 Stakeholder prioritization

Teams may prioritize some stakeholders over others in their approach to CSR communication.

One practitioner discussed how their team is a community focused organization, and that all their discretionary CSR activities are catered to meeting community interests, stating, “Every single department is involved in the community in some way, shape, or form. All of our [executives],

like I said, are on [community] boards.” Communication with this stakeholder appeared to occur frequently and follow a stakeholder involvement strategy. No matter the stakeholder being discussed, this practitioner’s responses tended to always circle back to emphasizing the organization’s commitment to serving the community. For example, when questioned about their communication with various monitoring and governmental groups, they shared that communication revolves around ways to partner with one another to accomplish shared CSR community objectives rather than about the team’s CSR activities, stating, “We always work with a nonprofit partner in those [CSR] spaces, but the goal is to always reach out to individual community members.” This led to the stakeholder being involved in communication, as discussed in subsection 4.1.4.

Additionally, when the practitioner was asked about their communication with the media, they alluded to their organization placing an emphasis on internal channels of communication (e.g., social media). They stated that their organization doesn’t “really ever have expectations that the local media will cover us,” and that, “If [the media] show up great. If not, that’s okay too.” Therefore, their organization informs the media through press releases or their team social media account, but further communication is non-existent. To further understand how this practitioner’s organization prioritizes stakeholders, the practitioner was asked whether they ever assess fan CSR expectations. They responded by stating they do not, and that they did not feel evaluating fan CSR expectations would yield much information that could be used to better their CSR activities. Therefore, only informing through social media was utilized to communicate with fans. According to their responses, this practitioner’s organization appears to prioritize communication with their community members and only communicates with other stakeholders if it would appear to benefit their ability to meet those community needs.

“Corporate social responsibility is a part of corporate responsibilities oriented toward all stakeholders” (Freeman & Dmytriiev, 2017, p. 14). Therefore, professional sport teams ought to aim to avoid prioritizing any stakeholders over others in their approach to CSR. Doing so results in neglecting the CSR expectations and interests of subsections of stakeholders, which can result in undesirable legitimacy outcomes. In the above example, this phenomenon applies to opinion leaders. While a team who prioritizes opinion leaders over others would be expected to communicate more regularly with them, this is still not recommended, as understanding the expectations of all stakeholders is vital to effect CSR communication and implementation. Teams that prioritize its stakeholders equally can successfully meet all of its stakeholders’ expectations and manage its legitimacy effectively (Freeman & Dmytriiev, 2017).

4.2.2 Team and opinion leader objectives

The CSR objectives of a professional sport team may dictate the level of communication that that team has with opinion leaders, particularly communication with regulatory bodies or monitoring groups. A professional sport team may find it necessary to communicate with one of these opinion leaders in order to accomplish the organization’s CSR objectives. For example, a practitioner mentioned that one of their organization’s CSR initiatives involved working with government leaders to promote legislation that supports Holocaust and genocide education. They mentioned that their team began to work “hand-in-hand” with these leaders in a way consistent with the stakeholder involvement strategy (subsection 4.1.4). Other times, opinion leader objectives can contribute to the extent of communication. For example, two practitioners mentioned that their government officials either had no interest in communicating about CSR with the organization or that they were content with only being informed about team CSR

activities. The same phenomenon was demonstrated in monitoring groups and the media, as it is the nature of these opinion leaders to seek information from organizations which leads to informative communication. In general, one practitioner felt that both teams and their opinion leaders can be guilty of solely focusing on their own objectives in their communicative behaviors. They said:

I think so often people are trying to check the box of what they need to do for their role, and you know, they have the objectives in their space that are important, and we have ours. They're there and then sometimes the two never ever intersect.

It is important for organizations to be cognizant of their objectives and the objectives of their opinion leaders and to try to promote communication that best helps them maintain their legitimacy. Communicating exclusively with opinion leaders who can aid in the team's implementation of CSR activities can result in feedback that justifies and supports the CSR activities that the team is engaged in (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). This yields a narrow understanding of the CSR expectations that opinion leaders have for an organization, as those who do not have capabilities that enhance implementation are unaccounted for. Thus, a team can take inventory of their relationships and corresponding communication with opinion leaders to understand if they only communicate with opinion leaders who aid in their own objectives and then take steps to communicate with opinion leaders who do not.

4.2.3 Resource availability

Practitioners mentioned that the amount of resources a team commits to the CSR department, including employees, work space, equipment, and capital, has an impact on communication with opinion leaders. For example, one practitioner noted that other teams in their league have only "two or three people" in their CSR department, whereas their team employs 13 people, and this

allows them to engage in communication with more stakeholders, including opinion leaders. Additionally, variation in revenue generation across teams and leagues was noted to affect CSR communication. This practitioner discussed that it is no coincidence that the Dodgers foundation is “20 times” as large as theirs, and that they assumed their capacity would be much higher than their own for engaging in involving communication. In general, it can be expected that teams with few resources are less likely to communicate with opinion leaders than those with many, and that as a team dedicates more resources to CSR, communication can be more regular and productive.

Even under resource limitations, it is important for CSR departments of professional sport teams to recognize the importance of opinion leaders to their CSR efforts and to make a concerted effort to allocate resources towards communicating with them because they are so vital to the legitimacy of the organization. As mentioned earlier, prioritizing stakeholders should be avoided (Freeman & Dmytryev, 2017). However, teams limited by resources may need to select one or a few opinion leaders from each group to communicate with until resources are available to communicate more broadly. While this determinant is largely out of their control, leveraging relationships with opinion leaders can help justify increasing budgets to owners and executives. Because there does not appear to be a business case for CSR in the professional sport setting (Inoue, 2011; Walker & Kent, 2009), leveraging these relationships can be imperative to not only justifying larger budgets, but justifying a CSR department in general. Opinion leader expectations uncovered through stakeholder involvement communication, such as a monitoring group expectation that all food containers in the facility are compostable or recyclable, can be shared with owners and executives to persuade larger investment into CSR activities, as well as justification for CSR goals and initiatives.

4.2.4 Organizational governance

Aspects of governance associated to have an effect on communication with opinion leaders include the governance structure and the characteristics of team owners. First, it was suggested that CSR decision-making is simpler in organizations owned by a single owner, as the final decision comes down to them. It was also mentioned that garnering support for CSR initiatives was easier to accomplish because the CSR department only needs to appeal to one individual. Ownership groups involving many owners were viewed as being more difficult to work with for the opposite reasons, that there may be questions about who makes the final decision and that catering to every owner's CSR interests to garner support for various initiatives appears to be a challenge. How this applies to the topic is that getting approval to communicate with opinion leaders can be simpler and more successful when a team is owned by a single owner.

Second, owner affiliation with the local community was associated with having a positive impact on communication with opinion leaders. For example, one practitioner noted that their organization has been owned by the same family for nearly forty years, and the original owner lived and made many businesses in the city that are still there today. Thus, their ownership has always held interest in investing in the local community, and therefore supplied more funding and approved of many initiatives that might otherwise not have been. Sport teams owned by ownership groups who are otherwise unaffiliated with the city may not be as interested in contributing to CSR and communicating with opinion leaders.

As ownership groups are becoming a more common ownership model in the NA professional team sport setting (O'Reilly, 2019), professional sport CSR departments may face more difficulty in receiving approval to communicate with opinion leaders. Additionally,

ownership groups are often composed of individuals previously unaffiliated with the local community (e.g., Stoia, 2022), suggesting that CSR departments may find further difficulties beyond those experienced in interacting with multiple owners. Even recent purchases of professional sport teams by one person have been by individuals who previously had no affiliation with the local community (i.e., Rafferty, 2023). As these trends continue to unfold, the dynamics between CSR departments and their owners could be an interesting point for future research to understand how new ownership groups from an unaffiliated location invest in CSR and communicate with opinion leaders.

4.2.5 Trust in opinion leader

While practitioners noted that communication with opinion leader stakeholders can begin if their objectives intersect, the relationship that they form determines whether communication continues and to what extent. For example, one practitioner stated that their organization communicates about CSR activities with selectively chosen media members who they *trust* to best represent their efforts. Mostly, communication with these media members is consistent with the stakeholder information theory, although it has led to opportunities for communication that is consistent with the stakeholder response strategy, as discussed in subsection 4.1.2. In cases where relationships were damaged between a team and a media member, practitioners noted that they communicated the bare minimum with them and nothing more. Although this example refers to relationships with particular members of an opinion leader group, a general, overarching relationship with an opinion leader group can affect communication with all members in a stakeholder group. For example, an organization that views the entire media as untrustworthy

may keep distant from having close relationships with individual stakeholders, and only inform all media members at once (e.g., press releases).

According to stakeholder theory, trust is an integral aspect of the organization-stakeholder relationship (Greenwood & Van Buren III, 2010), and professional sport team relationships with opinion leaders is no exception. Greenwood & Van Buren (2010) adapted two of Hosmer's (1995) definitions of trust to posit the following definition:

Trust is the reliance by one person, group, or firm, upon a voluntarily accepted duty on the part of another person, group or firm, to act in a manner that is ethically justifiable; that is, undertake morally correct decisions and actions based upon ethical principles of analysis towards all others engaged in a joint endeavor or economic exchange.

Therefore, when a team makes the decision to trust an opinion leader, they expect this stakeholder to undertake morally correct decisions with the information they are given about the team's CSR activities. This highlights the power opinion leaders have in whether communication occurs between a team and themselves. It is thus important for opinion leaders to instill trust in professional sport teams to cultivate a relationship where the team feels comfortable enough to communicate with them, if communication is to exist between opinion leaders and professional sport teams. Additionally, much of the research on trust in the organization-stakeholder relationship focuses on stakeholder trust in an organization and how this affects the organization's objectives (e.g., Barney & Harrison, 2018; Greenwood & Van Buren III, 2010) while little investigates the effects of organizational trust in stakeholders and its effects on stakeholder objectives. Thus, this research provides a unique insight into the influence of trust on organization-stakeholder relationships from an organizational perspective.

4.2.6 External environmental pressure

The external environment in which a professional sport team exists has a large influence on the CSR activities of the organization, including CSR communication with opinion leaders. Three separate sources of external pressures were identified. First, regional expectations for CSR engagement were indicated as a driver of communication with opinion leaders. For example, one practitioner mentioned that their state ranks among the most philanthropic states in the U.S. every year, and therefore the CSR expectations for their organization are more elaborate than teams in many other states. This source of environmental pressure has been labeled by Oliver (1991) as “cause”, or the “rationale, set of expectations, or intended objectives that underlie external pressures” and has been supported as a determinant that drives professional sport CSR activities (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). The findings here demonstrate that this determinant extends beyond CSR engagement activities, like programming and philanthropy, to include communication to stakeholders, at least those considered to be opinion leaders. Additionally, evidence has been provided that European professional soccer clubs engage in CSR communication differently depending on the country they reside in (Kolyperas & Sparks, 2011), and it appears this phenomenon exists within NA professional sport teams but on a state-to-state basis or regional, such as the Midwest.

Second, the CSR of nearby corporations was suggested to be a contributor to CSR communication with opinion leaders. For example, a practitioner mentioned that many of the large corporations in the team’s local environment put significant investment into CSR and that this has an influence on their own commitment to CSR, including communicating with opinion leaders. Oliver (1991) considered this source of environmental pressure as “context”, or the environmental uncertainty and interconnectedness of organizations within an organizational field, has an impact on an organization’s adoption of various practices. Evidence has been

provided that supports this “context” determinant of CSR in the professional sport industry (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). In the above example, the practitioner hints at some degree of interconnectedness with local corporations, at least to the extent that they are aware of their CSR practices, and this influences their professional sport team to adopt similar CSR practices, including opinion leader communication. This suggests that “context” may apply outside of only a professional sport organization’s field and extend to corporations in other fields, perhaps due to the limited number of professional sport organizations that exist in a small geographic area.

The last external environmental pressure can come in the form of a social disaster. A social disaster is an event that causes a crisis in a community based on an event deemed to be unacceptable by the encompassing society and can have local, regional, national, and global implications (Quarantelli & Dynes, 1977). All practitioners mentioned social disaster events, such as the killing of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic, as impacting the communication that occurred between their organization and opinion leaders. In each of their cases, the social disaster resulted in an increased level of CSR commitment to the pillars of CSR that are relevant to the event. One practitioner outlined how a social movement followed by a social disaster stimulated an increase in league-wide engagement and involvement in a specific area of CSR. As a result, their organizations became more committed to making impacts in that area of CSR, something that included incorporating more communication with opinion leaders into their CSR strategy.

4.2.7 Governing body requirements

A requirement by a governing body, either a league or a government, can ensure that a team communicates with opinion leader stakeholders. While no practitioner said that they were legally

required by their governments to communicate with opinion leaders, one stated that their team is obligated to report CSR information to a government agency that was formed out of the negotiation process regarding the construction of the team's stadium in the city. The city agreed to build the stadium with the stipulation that the team meet certain philanthropic objectives in the city and to report to the agency about these benchmarks. Another practitioner discussed that their team requires communication to a monitoring group for the stakeholder to effectively evaluate the diverse hiring practices of the organization. These examples, while isolated, demonstrate the capabilities that governing bodies have to enforce communication with opinion leaders.

Requirements by governing bodies can be considered to be an external source of pressure similar to those discussed in the above subsection. However, it has been separated into its own subsection because of the uniqueness of the ability of one opinion leader to affect communication with all opinion leaders. Governing body requirements have been identified as a determinant known as "control", or the "means by which pressures are imposed on organizations" (Oliver, 1991), and has received support as a determinant that drives professional sport CSR (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Like previous external environmental pressure determinants, the research here demonstrates that the determinant of "control" extends beyond CSR engagement activities to communication with opinion leaders.

In summary, the findings of this study showed that professional sport teams use five strategies to communicate about CSR with opinion leader stakeholders: the stakeholder information, the stakeholder involvement, the adherence to stakeholder, the indirect communication strategies, and the no communication strategy. More often than not, teams do not communicate with opinion leaders about CSR, particularly governments and monitoring groups.

In addition to the communication strategies discussed in this chapter, seven determinants of CSR communication were identified: stakeholder prioritization, team and opinion leader objectives, resource availability, organizational governance, trust in opinion leader, external environmental pressure, and requirements by governing bodies. In the following chapter, a conclusion for the entire research project is provided, discussing theoretical, empirical, and practical implications as well as areas for future research.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, implications, and future research

Professional sport teams used five CSR communication strategies to communicate with their opinion leaders: the stakeholder information strategy, the stakeholder involvement strategy, the stakeholder adherence strategy, the indirect communication strategy, and the no communication strategy. While no empirical evidence was found that showed professional sport teams use the stakeholder response strategy to communicate about CSR with opinion leaders, I do not interpret these findings as suggesting that no professional sport teams use the stakeholder response strategy, nor do I conclude from these empirical findings that the stakeholder response strategy has no applicability within the professional sport industry. Instead, I contend that a broader exploration of professional sport team CSR communication with opinion leaders that investigates a larger number of professional sport teams would result in empirical examples demonstrating professional sport teams do in fact use the stakeholder response strategy.

Professional sport CSR communication strategies used to communicate with opinion leaders exist on a hierarchy of directionality and continuum of symmetry (Figure 3). Previous literature on CSR communication with external stakeholders in the general business setting posited CSR communication strategies that are symmetrical in nature or asymmetrically tilted towards an organization: the stakeholder information, stakeholder response, and stakeholder involvement strategies (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). The research of this manuscript supports the application of these three CSR communication strategies to the professional sport context, providing empirical evidence that demonstrates the usage of these strategies by professional sport teams in their communication with opinion leaders.

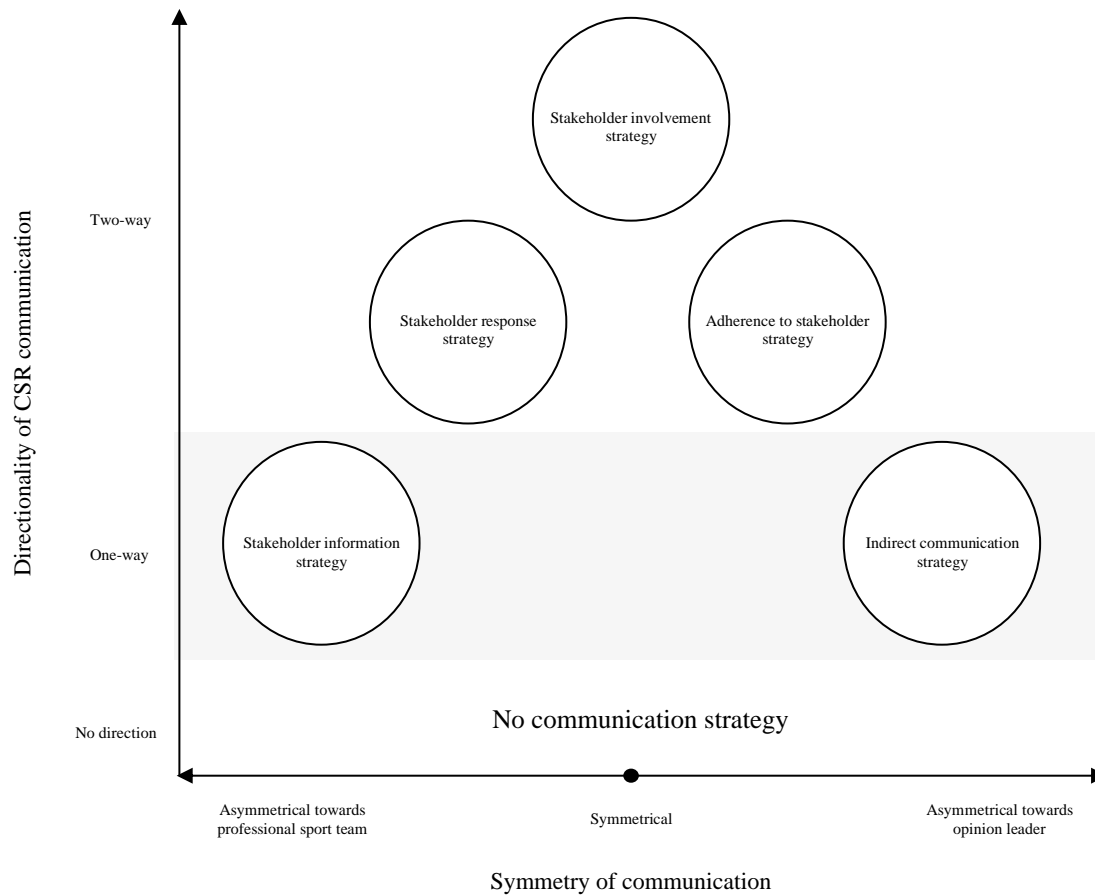


Figure 3 - Professional sport team - opinion leader CSR communication strategies as function of communication symmetry and directionality

Additionally, empirical evidence was provided that demonstrates there exist CSR communication strategies in the professional sport context that are asymmetrically tilted in favor of opinion leaders: the adherence to stakeholder and indirect communication strategies. While Morsing & Schultz (2006) previously demonstrated that CSR communication strategies used to communicate with stakeholders exist on a continuum of directionality and symmetry, they did not consider whether strategies may exist that tilt communication in favor of organizational

stakeholders. Therefore, the research of this manuscript provides an advancement of the theoretical understanding of CSR communication strategies used by organizations to communicate with all of their external stakeholders. I posit here that these findings could have applicability outside the professional sport setting to other industries where communication with opinion leaders occurs, and future research can look to provide empirical evidence that supports this notion. Additionally, the adherence to stakeholder strategy and the indirect communication strategy identified in this study may be used by organizations, both within the professional sport setting and in other industries, to communicate with external stakeholders other than opinion leaders, such as consumers, social media influencers, or corporate sponsors. Future research should investigate whether these novel CSR communication strategies can indeed be applied to other external stakeholders other than opinion leaders. The findings of this study support the notion that the stakeholder involvement strategy is the most effective CSR communication strategy at managing organizational legitimacy for professional sport organizations. However, only one instance was provided in which a team used this communication strategy to communicate with its opinion leaders. Instead, teams used other strategies more frequently, such as the stakeholder information strategy. While this research does not argue that, in a vacuum, non-stakeholder involvement strategies are less effective at managing legitimacy than the stakeholder involvement strategy, a number of instances were demonstrated in which a non-stakeholder involvement strategy of communication was preferred by, and even driven by, an opinion leader stakeholder (e.g., a media member preferring the stakeholder information strategy; a regulatory body wanting to communicate according to the adherence to stakeholder strategy). Meeting stakeholder expectations is central to CSR (Campbell, 2007) and legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, instances in which stakeholder's expectations were met using a

CSR communication strategy other than the stakeholder involvement strategy can be considered to be moments where legitimacy was effectively managed while communicating about CSR using a strategy other than the stakeholder involvement. Yet, teams still should strive for communication that is consistent with the stakeholder involvement strategy, even in instances in which the opinion leader is interested in communication of another strategy, because higher degrees of understanding of the CSR expectations of organizational stakeholders allows professional sport teams to more intentionally address opinion leader needs and more effectively manage legitimacy.

Concerning the determinants of professional sport CSR communication with opinion leaders, I identified seven novel determinants that drive this communication phenomenon: stakeholder prioritization, team and opinion leader objectives, resource availability, organizational governance, trust in opinion leader, external environmental pressure, and requirements by governing bodies. These findings provided empirical evidence that the determinants of professional sport CSR communication with opinion leaders are driven by internal and external sources of pressure, such as organizational governance and governing body requirements respectively. The determinants of professional sport engagement in CSR have been shown to be driven by internal and external sources as well (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009), suggesting that many of the same determinants that influence general CSR engagement in professional sport also influence professional sport team CSR communication with opinion leaders. This empirical evidence provides a better theoretical understanding of the causes and motivations for CSR communication with opinion leaders, as well as the close link between determinants of general CSR engagement in professional sport and professional sport team CSR communication with opinion leaders.

A practical understanding of the professional sport CSR communication strategies and determinants can help professional sport CSR practitioners influence their organization's CSR communication with opinion leaders. Educating professional sport team practitioners on the CSR communication *strategies* that professional sport teams use to communicate with their opinion leaders can allow these practitioners to take inventory of the CSR communication strategies that their organization currently use to engage with opinion leaders. Practitioners may then consider the appropriateness of using a different CSR communication strategy than what they currently employ to communicate with opinion leaders to better manage their legitimacy according to their unique organizational context. Whether a practitioner deems that a different CSR communication strategy may be more appropriate to communicate with their opinion leaders or that their current strategy is ideal to their CSR communication goals, a professional sport team CSR practitioner can use information about the *determinants* of CSR communication to shift their communication practices towards this more desirable CSR communication strategy or to ensure the current CSR communication strategy being employed is maintained.

This research is rooted in the idea that communication is constitutive and not functional. Therefore, it would be an oversight to not point out that a lack of CSR communication perspectives of opinion leaders of professional sport teams is a major limitation of this study. This study attempted to understand the perspectives about professional sport team communication of opinion leaders, but due to difficulties in recruiting, opinion leader perspectives were not accounted for in this study. It is imperative that future research investigates the CSR communication perspectives of opinion leaders in order to fully understand this communication phenomenon from a constitutive perspective. Doing so will provide a clearer understanding of the novel CSR communication strategies identified in this study and allow a

better assessment of the effectiveness of each of the CSR communication strategies in managing professional sport team legitimacy, either supporting or contradicting the findings of this study.

The participants of this study worked for three different teams in three separate North American professional sport leagues. Thus, a comparison of the CSR communication practices between teams within the same league was not feasible. The small sample size does not lend itself for across league comparison either. Beside simply providing insights into the similarities and differences that exist between teams and leagues, these comparisons could yield empirical evidence that would further demonstrate the importance and impact of the determinants identified in this study, as well as potentially uncover determinants not identified in this study. Empirical evidence may also arise that lends itself to the processes by which determinants influence the CSR communication strategies that a team or league uses in the CSR communication with opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are an extremely influential stakeholder in the professional sport industry (Trendafilova et al., 2013), and therefore the findings associated with cross-comparison studies of the ilk discussed above would most certainly extend the broad understanding of the CSR phenomenon in professional sport.

All practitioners in this study worked for professional sport teams in the same geographic region: the midwestern United States. It would be interesting to understand the perspectives of practitioners working for professional sport teams in other locations, especially because professional sport team CSR is affected by the culture of the geographic region in which a team exists in (Kolyperas & Sparks, 2011). For example, the perspectives of professional sport teams located in the southern region of the United States may be entirely different than those captured in this research. Understanding the CSR communication strategies used by professional sport

teams to communicate with opinion leaders outside of the North American context would additionally be useful, as Kolyperas & Sparks (2011) provided evidence that CSR communication is treated differently by teams in different countries.

Additional sources of data, such as archival documents, could have been utilized during data collection to strengthen the significance and generalizability of this study (Bowen, 2009). However, the feasibility of attaining communications between professional sport teams and their opinion leaders may have posed a significant barrier to accessing data of this kind. Additionally, using archival documents is not an aspect of narrative inquiry. Therefore, the research design for this research would have needed to be adjusted accordingly. However, other qualitative methodology, such as case study methodology, may have been a more appropriate approach to the topic. Therefore, future research investigating this topic and CSR communication broadly, should consider using case study research design and other forms of qualitative analysis, perhaps even quantitative analysis, to further understand the CSR communication phenomenon.

As informed by prior literature (e.g. Trendafilova et al., 2013), only three opinion leader stakeholder groups were investigated in this study: the media, regulatory bodies, and monitoring groups. External stakeholders interact differently with professional sport teams than they do with organizations in other industries (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Therefore, future research could investigate whether more opinion leaders exist in the professional sport context rather than only those that have been identified in the general business literature (Campbell 2007; Du et al., 2010). If other opinion leader stakeholders do exist, an examination of the communication between these stakeholders may be useful to further develop the academic understanding of professional sport team CSR communication with all of their stakeholders. Additionally, the rise

of social media has led to a new stakeholder that could potentially be an opinion leader across all business industries: the social media influencer (i.e., Magno & Cassia, 2018). Future research on CSR communication in professional sport needs to evaluate how social media influencers influence the CSR of professional sport teams, and if they are deemed to be an opinion leader, understanding how professional sport teams communicate about CSR with these social media influencers could yield novel empirical and theoretical findings.

Future research could also investigate the use of modern communication technology to facilitate communication between professional sport teams and their opinion leaders. Since the time of Morsing & Schultz (2006) development of CSR communication strategies, communicative technologies have drastically changed and advanced (Lin & Atkin, 2007; McAnany, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). Empirical evidence was provided through this research that showed teams utilize an indirect communication strategy to understand the CSR expectations of some of their opinion leaders and did so utilizing publicly available information sourced from organizational webpages and e-newspapers. A better understanding of how professional sport teams use technology to operationalize the indirect communication strategy, as well as understanding the role that communication technology plays in other CSR communication strategies, could uncover institutional best practices that can be used to inform CSR practitioners within the professional sport and other industries.

Finally, future research in professional sport CSR communication can extend beyond communication with opinion leaders to evaluate such topics as athletes, evaluation of corporate social performance, and comparisons between implicit and explicit CSR. Athletes are an important and rare resource specific to the professional sport industry (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009)

and have been frequently used by teams and leagues to headline their social wellness initiatives and garner positive public perception for their organizations (Babiak et al., 2012). As such, CSR communication with athletes is a phenomenon unique to the professional sport industry, and correspondingly unique strategies, determinants, and implications for professional sport CSR may present themselves if the topic was to be investigated in detail.

Evaluation is an area of rising interest as society's demands for corporations to demonstrate the corporate social performance increase (Wood, 2010). Understanding the applicability of each CSR communication strategy to the evaluation process, such as which of the strategies is most appropriate and effective in evaluative settings, is an area for future research foci. Finally, comparing and contrasting professional sport CSR communication used in explicit CSR and implicit CSR contexts would complement the findings of this thesis well. It was the scope of this research to identify CSR communication strategies, and future research that sought empirical evidence for the explicit and implicit contexts in which strategies are most often operationalized would extend the practical implications and theoretical implications suggested in this thesis. A single organization can be subjected to both implicit and explicit CSR (e.g., in the event an organization has implicit CSR requirements yet aspects of explicit CSR discretion) (Matten & Moon, 2008), and therefore CSR communication strategies used to meet implicit requirements may differ from those used to communicate about explicit activities. For example, is the adherence to stakeholder CSR communication strategy used more frequently in instances of implicit CSR, explicit CSR, or neither with all being equal?

In summary, this research provided empirical examples that advanced the theoretical understanding of the CSR communication strategies used by professional sport teams to

communicate with professional sport opinion leaders by understanding a) what CSR communication strategies professional sport teams used to communicate with their opinion leader stakeholders; and b) what the determinants of professional sport team CSR communication with opinion leaders were. Professional sport CSR communication with opinion leaders had previously received no academic attention in the professional sport literature despite abundant research that demonstrated the importance of opinion leaders to professional sport CSR (e.g., Trendafilova et al., 2013). CSR communication with opinion leaders in the general business literature is similarly lacking development despite similar academic support for their role in affecting CSR (e.g., Du et al., 2010; Campbell, 2007). Hence, the research of this manuscript is timely and important. It is my hope that the empirical examples and theoretical advancements found within this manuscript will be practically used to improve the CSR communication of professional sport teams with opinion leaders and thereby improve the impacts and outcomes of the CSR activities that professional sport teams conduct and that future research will build upon this research to continue to advance our understanding of the CSR communication phenomenon in the professional sport setting and in other industries.

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Appendix A

Basic information:

Interviewee: _____

Time & date: _____

Interviewer: _____

Introduction:

- Purpose:
 - The purpose of this study is to better understand the dialogue between professional sport organizations and opinion leaders, a specific subset of stakeholders.

Again, your participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym.
- Do you have any questions before we begin? I will now turn on the recorder.

Opening questions:

- Please share about your role and how it relates to your organization's CSR and how long you have served in this role.

Orienting question:

- CSR dialogue:
 - The first topic I would like to ask you about is CSR dialogue. It is generally referred as:
 - the “two-way communication processes where conflicting interests and concerns [between organizations and their stakeholders] are addressed”

(Foster and Jonker, 2005, p 51). It can be strategically used by companies to fulfill their CSR objectives by uncovering the CSR perceptions, expectations, and experiences of their stakeholders (Babiak & Kihl, 2018, Johansen & Nielsen, 2011).

- Question:

- Which stakeholders does your organization engage in dialogue with regarding the CSR activities of the organization (i.e., fans of the team, participants of programs)?
- How do you engage in dialogue with these stakeholders?
- Some of the stakeholders you mentioned (that is media, regulatory bodies, and monitoring groups) referred to as opinion leaders, -stakeholders who proactively seek out CSR information about an organization to get a comprehensive understanding of the CSR activities and reputation of an organization (Du et al., 2010).

- The media:

- Questions:

- I am curious about the extent your organization engages in CSR dialogue with the media including newspapers, such as the Star Tribune, radio stations, such as KFAN, and television channels, such as KARE11.

- To what extent does your organization engage in dialogue with the media regarding your organization’s CSR activities?
 - *Depending on the answer to the previous question:*
 - In what ways does your organization engage in dialogue with the media regarding your organization’s CSR activities?
- Regulatory bodies:
 - Questions:
 - I am curious about the extent your organization engages in CSR dialogue with regulatory bodies such as national, state, and local governments, industry-led associations, and internal committees (i.e., the NFL’s Head, Neck, and Spine Committee).
 - To what extent does your organization engage in dialogue with regulatory bodies regarding your organization’s CSR activities?
 - *Depending on the answer to the previous question:*
 - In what ways does your organization engage in dialogue with regulatory bodies regarding your organization’s CSR activities?
- Monitoring groups:
 - Last, I am also interested in learning about the extent your organization engages in CSR dialogue with monitoring groups such NGOs (i.e., U.S. Green Building Committee), social movement organizations (i.e., Black Lives Matter), academic research centers (i.e., GIRSO), and institutional investors (i.e., sponsors).

- To what extent does your organization engage in dialogue with monitoring groups regarding your organization's CSR activities?
- *Depending on the answer to the previous question:*
 - In what ways does your organization engage in dialogue with monitoring groups regarding your organization's CSR activities?
- General opinion leaders questions:
 - Now I would like to gauge your perspective on how valuable your organization views engaging in dialogue with these stakeholders is:
 - In your opinion, how useful do you view engaging in dialogue with these three stakeholders is, and could be, to your organization's CSR activities?
 - Finally, I'd like to understand your perspective on the factors that influence the existence or lack of existence of dialogue with these stakeholders:
 - In your opinion, what factors do you believe contribute to the extent (and means by which) your organization communicates with opinion leaders?

Closing questions:

- Is there anything that we have not covered today that you would like to share more about?
- Part of my research will be interviewing opinion leaders to get their perspective as well. Could you recommend individuals, specifically one member of the media, a regulatory body, and a monitoring group, who I could contact to learn more about this topic?

Closing instructions:

- Thank you very much for your time today. I will reach out to you if I need to clarify anything from today. Additionally, once I have transcribed the interview I will share it with you so you have the opportunity to clarify or add any comments; plus I may have follow-up questions. In addition, following the completion of the study I will share a summary of my results with you.