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CSR IN SPORTS: A CATALYST FOR CORPORATE REPUTATION AND BUSINESS SUCCESS: A STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the different dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the sports industry influence Corporate Reputation. Data were collected from 510 CSR-involved employees in sports organizations using purposive sampling. The model comprises five latent constructs: Media Visibility, Community Engagement, Employee Involvement, Strategic CSR, and Corporate Reputation. Structural Equation Model analysis was conducted using Smart PLS to test the hypothesized relationships. All four dimensions of CSR—Media Visibility, Community Engagement, Employee Involvement, and Strategic CSR—positively and significantly impacted Corporate Reputation. Among these, Employee Involvement had the strongest effect. This study offers a validated framework for sports organizations to align CSR with business strategy. Firms can enhance their brand reputation by prioritizing authentic employee engagement and strategic initiatives. This study breaks new ground by revealing how strategic CSR in sports strengthens corporate reputation and drives business outcomes. It offers fresh, actionable insights for organizations to turn social responsibility into a competitive advantage.

KEYWORDS: Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Reputation, Brand Reputation.

Introduction

In the current business environment, reputation and social impact go hand-in-hand for a company. Integrating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in sports can have a huge positive business impact but remains an overlooked avenue. The sports world, considered an industry of deep emotional connections with the community, holds distinct potential for firms looking to build and sustain a positive reputation and create enduring value. Despite the increase in CSR activities among professional sports organizations (PSOs), some fundamental issues remain unanswered. What is the impact of CSR on a firm's reputation and financial performance? Why and to what extent do stakeholders value practices over their impact? This study seeks to address these issues by applying sports-related CSR, corporate reputation, and financial performance relationships into a structural model and analysing them using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The sports industry runs on myths and gut feelings—think 'clutch genes,' 'lucky jerseys,' or 'unbeatable home-field advantages.' This research cuts through noise, replacing folklore with hard data to reveal what drives the performance. This study's importance is underscored by growing public concern about corporate ethics, increasing stakeholder demands for accountability, and the fragile nature of consumer trust, where failures in CSR can significantly damage brand value. By blending theories from Aguinis (2011), Mazutis and Slawinski (2015), and Walzel et al. (2018) with modern techniques, this study not only advances the academic debate but also provides practical information for connecting CSR efforts with precise results. While there is not a single widely accepted definition of CSR, this study adopts the one from Brown and Dacin (1997), which states that CSR encompasses "corporate status and activities concerning its perceived societal or, at least, stakeholder obligations." Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to organizational policies and actions tailored to specific contexts, balancing stakeholder expectations with economic, social, and environmental performance (Aguinis, 2011). According to Barnett et al. (2020), corporate social responsibility (CSR) is more important than ever because businesses are increasingly focusing on ethical and sustainable practices, as well as the benefits of engaging in social issues. CSR initiatives act as strategic tools to build stakeholder relationships. Smith and Westerbeek (2007) note that "The inherent nature of sport uniquely

positions it to influence broader society and local communities." Research in sport management has thoroughly examined CSR's dual benefits by examining at both organizational outcomes and individual stakeholder perspectives (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Inoue & Havard, 2014). Globally, academia and industry have intensified their focus on how businesses can generate societal value (Stephan et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2020). Mirroring conventional corporations, and professional sport organizations (PSOs) deploy targeted CSR initiatives to simultaneously advance commercial objectives and social impact (Mamo et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2019). Professional sport organisations (PSOs) use a variety of initiatives to leverage strategic approaches to improve their business and social outcomes, much like traditional non-sports organisations that use corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs to increase support for their goods or services (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Inoue & Havard, 2014; Mamo et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2019). Professional sports are simply another type of business, and a wealth of research and theory indicates that managers deliberately look for projects that align with prevailing instrumental CSR philosophies (Walzel et al., 2018). Research in the PSOs context is strongly biased towards organisational results, despite the fact that the primary objective of CSR activities is to target and provide benefits for stakeholders (Inoue & Havard, 2014; Rowe et al., 2019). In other words, the true goal of these sorts of activities may be profit maximisation if the corporation creates a CSR program only to reap corporate benefits. An organization's CSR initiatives are deemed authentic when they align with its core mission and demonstrate a genuine understanding of stakeholder and societal needs (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a key tactic in the sports industry to enhance brand recognition and achieve organisational objectives. However, little is known about how CSR adds to value.

This study primarily focuses on analyzing the impact of sports-related Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives (CSR) on corporate reputation. These initiatives include: media exposure, community involvement, strategic alignment, stakeholder focus and employee engagement. Furthermore, this study investigates the impact of CSR-centric corporate reputation on business performance within the sports sector. Through the application of Structural Equation Modeling, this study systematically tests these

relationships and provides empirical evidence to reinforce the claim that organizations can strategically enhance their reputation and financial performance by fine-tuning their CSR activities.

Research questions:

RQ1: How does different dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the sports industry influence Corporate Reputation?

RQ2: Which factors have the highest importance and performance in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the sports industry influence Corporate Reputation?

As the phenomenon of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) grows in the international business of sports, there is still a lack of understanding of the issue's societal implications and the essence of sports business value. Most study focus on one or a few aspects of CSR separately, or on sports organizations' return on investment. This overlooks the potential for organizations to use sports to create social value while also improving their reputation and profits. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the impact of integrated sports CSR programs - concerning stakeholder engagement, employee engagement, media participation, and community value - on corporate value and societal value for the corporation and community respectively. By achieving these objectives using structural equation modeling, this study aims to enable sports organizations to demonstrate their social return on investment and to highlight the opportunity to use strategic CSR to meet community needs, such as youth engagement, public health, social services, and business enhancement. It is hoped that the research findings will assist sports organizations achieve their business objectives and create social value, thus working towards a socially responsible sports ecosystem.

This study follows a seven-part structure to systematically address the research goals.

Section 1 Outlines the research problem and defines the objectives of this study.

Section 2 Literature Review gave the researcher the foundation for this research.

Section 3 Describes the materials and methods section that provides the data collection techniques and tools and techniques used in the current research.

Section 4 Presents the data analysis and interpretation.

Section 5 Discusses the findings.

Section 6 Concludes the data analysis

Section 7 Outlines the limitations of the study.

2. Review of Literature

Corporate Reputation (CR)

A strong CSR program boosts corporate reputation by building trust and confidence among stakeholders (Harjoto & Jo, 2011). Studies suggest that CSR initiatives make a company more appealing as an employer, especially when connected to social identity theory (Turban & Greening, 1997). Corporate reputation also acts as a bridge between CSR and firm performance. Research indicates that socially responsible firms tend to have long-term competitive advantages (Zhu et al., 2014; Saeidi et al., 2015; Roberts & Dowling, 2002). While some companies prioritize CSR to strengthen their reputations (Kim, 2011; Sotorrió & Sánchez, 2008), others use it to counter negative perceptions (Yoon et al., 2006). Stakeholder theory provides more insight into this dynamic, as external stakeholders link corporate reputation to ethical and socially aware behaviour.

Media Visibility (MV)

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in sports and public service organizations improve public perception by generating positive media coverage and drawing stakeholder attention (Barnett et al., 2020). Research shows that community-based athletic activities with charitable aspects can promote cause-related empathy, leading to favorable changes in public perception (Inoue et al., 2018). CSR activities also shape how external stakeholders view companies, as those with strong CSR commitments are often seen as more positive (Kim, 2014; Singh & Misra, 2024). Interestingly, firms with negative reputations may intentionally engage in CSR to improve their image. This suggests that media visibility can be both an outcome and a motivator of CSR efforts (Yoon et al., 2006).

Hence, based on the above literature, the following hypothesis was framed:

H₁: Media Visibility positively influences Corporate Reputation

Community Engagement (CE)

CSR programs in the sports sector often focus on real community benefits such as infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, and cultural enrichment (Inoue et al., 2018). For example, local sporting events, strengthen community attachment, increase participation, and generate enthusiasm. This enthusiasm influences the event and sponsor involvement (Inoue & Havard, 2014). Beyond sports, CSR initiatives tackle broader societal issues such as rural development, education, health,

and poverty relief (Singh & Misra, 2020a). Both multinational and domestic firms recognize the need for good community relations because CSR helps them gain local support and operational legitimacy (De Chiara & Russo Spena, 2011; Singh & Misra, 2020c).

Hence, based on the above literature, the following hypothesis was framed:

H₂: Community engagement positively influences Corporate Reputation

Employee Involvement (EI)

Internal CSR, which focuses on employee welfare and ethical workplace practices, directly affects engagement and performance (Balmer et al., 2011). Research shows that CSR initiatives can boost employee motivation and productivity, particularly when employees perceive their organization as socially responsible (Lee et al., 2013). However, there is a significant gap in our understanding of employee participation in CSR. Most studies concentrate on perceptions rather than actual involvement (Ağan et al., 2016; Choi & Yu, 2014). Authenticity in CSR programs is vital, because employees are more likely to engage when initiatives align with their organization's values (Glavas, 2016b). Despite these insights, methodological limitations—such as reliance on cross-sectional data—restrict clear conclusions about CSR's impact of CSR on employee behavior (Chaudhary, 2018; Mensah et al., 2017).

Hence, based on the above literature, the following hypothesis was framed:

H₃: Employee Involvement positively influences Corporate Reputation

Strategic CSR (SCSR)

For CSR to provide long-term value, it must be

strategically integrated into business operations strategically (Crane, 2018). Challenges such as poor stakeholder engagement and lack of authenticity can hinder CSR effectiveness (Babiak & Kihl, 2018). When done well, CSR becomes a strategic asset, enhancing relationships with society and boosting brand value (Esen, 2013; Fatma et al., 2015). The idea of "community responsibility" extends this concept. This emphasizes that businesses should balance profit goals with societal benefits (Henderson, 2007; Singh & Misra, 2020a). Strategic CSR also increases operational efficiency by promoting smoother supply chains, better labor cooperation, and stronger political-community support (Wood & Kaufman, 2007). Ultimately, the extent to which CSR aligns with business strategy determines its sustainability and impact on both business and society. Hence, based on the above literature, the following hypothesis was framed:

H₄: Strategic CSR positively influences Corporate Reputation

3. Materials and Methods

In this study, a Structural Equation Model (SEM) is employed. A total of 510 CSR-involved employees were selected as the sample size. An a priori sample size analysis using Daniel Soper's calculator recommended a minimal sample size of 188 to detect an effect size of 0.3, the statistical power level is 0.9 19 observable variables, and five latent variables make up the research, which has a probability level of 0.05. The Non-random purposive sampling was chosen to effectively find relevant respondents. The use of primary and secondary sources in data collection enables a comprehensive analysis. The study will be conducted using SMART PLS, a well-liked analytical tool for SEM.

Table No: 1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Category	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Designation	Senior Managers	383	75.1
	Mid-Level CSR Staff	124	24.9
Gender	Male	311	61.0
	Female	199	39.0
Age Group	30-40 years	148	29.0
	41-50 years	273	53.0
	51+ years	89	17.5
CSR Role Focus	Strategy/Decision-Making	383	75.1
	Program Implementation	127	24.9

The demographic profile (Table 1) of the respondents shows that the data were collected from 383 Senior Managers and 124 mid-level CSR Staff, 311 respondents were male and 199 were female. The age group of the majority of the respondents was 41 - 50 years with 273, in the age category 30 - 40 years there

were 89 respondents and in 51+ years there were 148 respondents. As for the CSR role focus of these respondents it can be seen that there are 383 respondents who are the into strategy/decision-making, and 127 respondents are into program implementation

4. Data Analysis

Table No: 2 Reliability and validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Media Visibility	0.850	0.851	0.591
Community Engagement	0.873	0.873	0.634
Corporate Reputation	0.787	0.789	0.556
Employee Involvement	0.850	0.850	0.591
Strategic CSR	0.857	0.856	0.599

These constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency and reliability (Table 2). Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.787 to 0.873, all exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal reliability (Hair et al. - 2010).

Composite reliability ranged between 0.789 and 0.873, confirming that construct and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values surpass the 0.50 criterion, ranging from 0.556 to 0.634, which confirms adequate convergent validity.

Table No: 3 Discriminant validity

Construct	MV	CE	CR	EI	SCSR
Media Visibility (MV)	0.769				
Community Engagement (CE)	0.731	0.796			
Corporate Reputation (CR)	0.751	0.790	0.746		
Employee Involvement (EI)	0.721	0.724	0.736	0.768	
Strategic CSR (SCSR)	0.733	0.756	0.660	0.718	0.774

The Fornell-Larcker criterion assessment (Table 3) shows that the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs Media Visibility (0.769), Community Engagement (0.796), Corporate Reputation (0.746), Employee Involvement (0.768) and

Strategic CSR (0.774)—exceed their respective correlations with other constructs. This indicates adequate discriminant validity, confirming that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with the other constructs in the model.

Table No: 4 Collinearity statistics (VIF)

	VIF
CE1	2.197
CE2	2.082
CE3	2.366
CE4	2.063
CR1	1.910
CR2	1.613
CR3	1.575
E1	2.045
E2	2.127
E3	2.209
E4	1.704
MV1	2.164
MV2	1.982
MV3	2.121
MV4	1.711
ST1	1.969
ST2	2.311
ST3	1.984
ST4	2.031

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all indicators range between 1.575 and 2.366, well below the critical threshold of 5, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues among the variables. This

confirms the absence of problematic multicollinearity among the latent construct indicators, thus ensuring stable and reliable parameter estimates within the SEM framework. (Table 4)

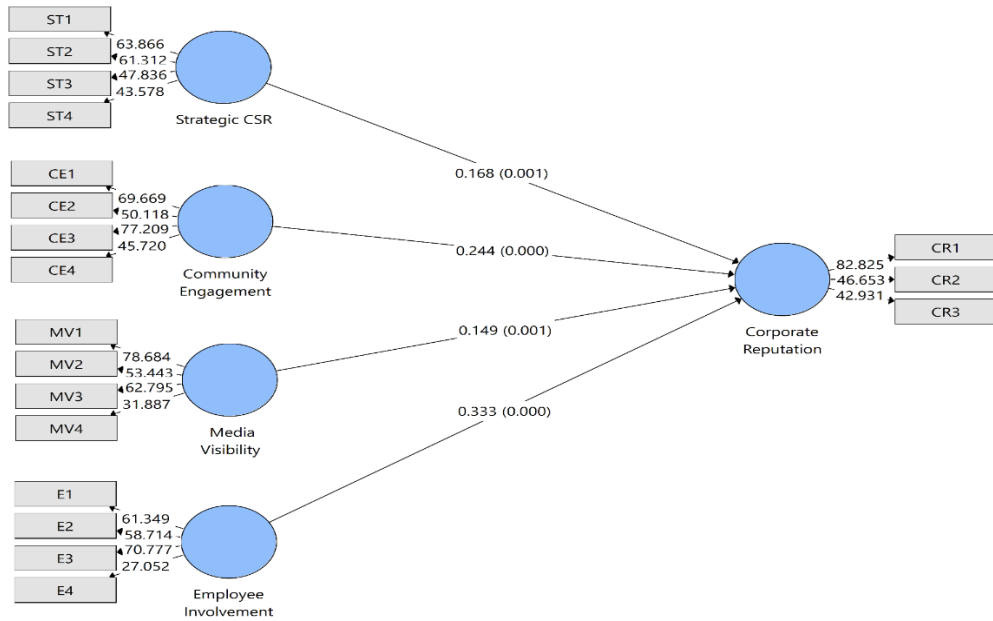


Figure No: 1 SEM model

Table No: 5 Hypothesis testing

Construct	Beta Coefficient	T-statistics	P-Value
Media Visibility → Corporate Reputation	0.149	3.229	0.001
Community Engagement → Corporate Reputation	0.244	4.571	0.000
Employee Involvement → Corporate Reputation	0.333	6.680	0.000
Strategic CSR → Corporate Reputation	0.168	3.389	0.001

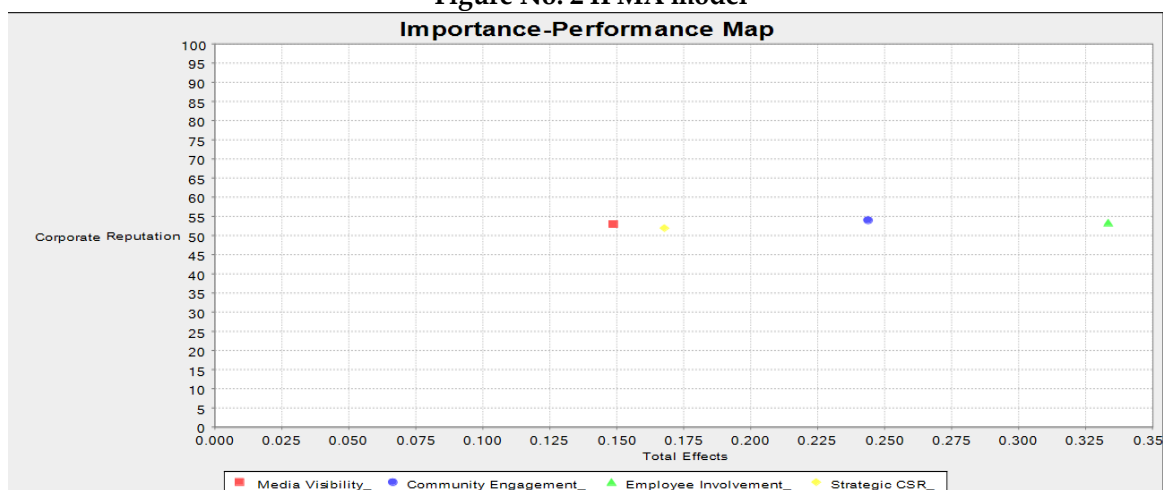
P (value) < level of significance 5% thus Ho is rejected and H1 is accepted in all cases indicating a significant impact of Media Visibility, Community Engagement,

Employee Involvement, and Strategic CSR on Corporate Reputation. (Table 5)

Table No: 6 Hypothesis Summary

Alternative Hypothesis	Result
H1: Media Visibility positively influences Corporate Reputation	Supported
H2: Community engagement positively influences Corporate Reputation	Supported
H3: Employee Involvement positively influences Corporate Reputation	Supported
H4: Strategic CSR positively influences Corporate Reputation	Supported

Figure No: 2 IPMA model



The Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) (Fig 2) reveals that Employee Involvement has the highest beta coefficient (0.333), indicating that it is the most influential factor driving corporate reputation. Community engagement followed a moderate beta value of 0.244, while strategic CSR had a beta coefficient of 0.168 and Media Visibility had the lowest beta coefficient at 0.149. These results suggest that employee involvement in corporate reputation plays a more critical role than community engagement, strategic CSR or media visibility in the impact of CSR in sports on corporate reputation and business outcomes.

Structural equation modeling (Fig 1) results reveal important insights into corporate reputation in sports-related CSR. The model demonstrated moderate predictive accuracy with an RMSE of 0.536 and MAE of 0.397, whereas the Q^2_{predict} value of

0.534 confirmed its acceptable predictive relevance. The analysis explains 78.6% of the variance in corporate reputation ($R^2 = 0.786$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.785$), indicating strong explanatory power. Examining the drivers of reputation, employee involvement emerged as the most influential factor ($f^2 = 0.285$), followed by community engagement ($f^2 = 0.118$) and strategic CSR ($f^2 = 0.041$), while media visibility shows minimal impact ($f^2 = 0.016$). These findings collectively suggest that human capital investments and community-focused initiatives are particularly effective in building corporate reputation through sports CSR, whereas media exposure contributes relatively little. These results provide valuable guidance for organizations seeking to optimize their CSR strategies in the sports domain by emphasizing employee engagement and community programs as key reputation drivers.

Performance analysis

Variable	
Media Visibility	52.972
Community Engagement	53.997
Employee Involvement	53.322
Strategic CSR	51.920

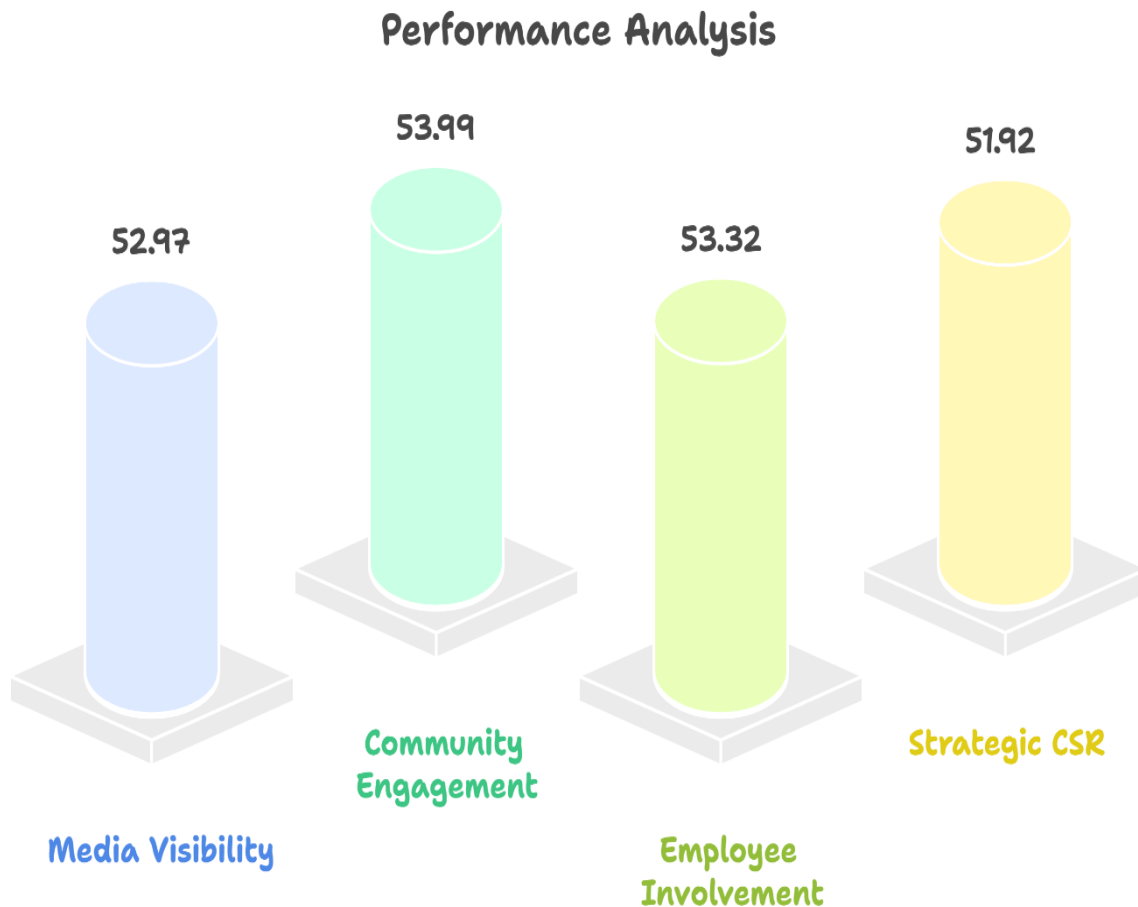


Figure No: 3 Performance Analysis

Discussion

The significant positive influence of Media Visibility, Community Engagement, Employee Involvement, and Strategic CSR on Corporate Reputation aligns with established theoretical frameworks and empirical findings in the sports CSR literature (Figure 3). As Aguinis (2011) and Brown and Dacin (1997) posit, CSR activities are context-specific actions that address stakeholder expectations, and the unique emotional connections fostered through sports (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007) amplify their reputational impact. The strong effect of Media Visibility corroborates Walzel et al.'s (2018) assertion that sports organizations strategically leverage CSR to enhance brand legitimacy, while Community Engagement reflects the sector's societal influence (Inoue & Havard, 2014). The significant coefficient for Employee Involvement ($\beta=0.333$, $p<.01$) empirically validates Mazutis and Slawinski's (2015) theoretical proposition regarding CSR authenticity, demonstrating that substantive staff engagement serves as a critical differentiator between performative and genuine CSR implementation. This finding makes three substantive contributions to the literature: (1) it operationally validates authenticity as a measurable construct in sports CSR contexts, (2) it provides empirical resolution to Babiak and Wolfe's (2009) call for clearer linkages between CSR practices and organizational outcomes, and (3) it addresses Rowe et al.'s (2019) identification of the need for evidence-based frameworks to demonstrate how professional sports organizations (PSOs) can effectively convert CSR investments into reputational capital. Moreover, these results offer timely insights into contemporary stakeholder expectations, particularly regarding the growing demand for transparent accountability mechanisms in corporate social initiatives (Barnett et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The results show that company reputation is directly improved by CSR activities in sports, especially those that prioritise strategic CSR and employee involvement. Instead of seeing corporate social responsibility (CSR) as an afterthought, sports organisations should include it in their main business activities. For instance, incorporating employees in the design and execution of CSR activities, ($\beta=0.333$) improves authenticity, which captures the interest of stakeholders. Additionally, enhanced reputation can be achieved through published accounts and narrative reporting on media visibility. Managers must analyze the relationship between CSR, corporate reputation and business performance with

the help of precise measurement systems that ensure responsibility and proper management of the processes and ongoing business improvements. Given the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in shaping corporate reputation, policymakers should issue standard CSR reporting frameworks for sports entities. Legislation can aim for transparency in CSR spending and reporting to curb "greenwashing" and underdeveloped initiatives. Community-focused sports CSR initiatives may be bolstered by public-private partnerships, which would ensure that social needs are genuinely met. It may further encourage the wider adoption of successful strategies to provide incentives or certification to companies that achieve measurable CSR impact. The research indicates that sports have a unique ability to leverage corporate social responsibility (CSR) for social change. The involvement of sports organisations at the appropriate levels of CSR, for example focused on children's education, development, health, or the environment, can result in positive effect on the community. It assures relevance and maximizes the effectiveness of the initiative. The emotional connection between fans and their sports teams makes CSR campaigns-focused on diversity or climate change, for instance-very effective. Ultimately, CSR in sports can contribute to the broad goals of sustainable development and simultaneously strengthen the trust of the community, organisations, and supporters.

Limitation

Senior managers, who comprise 75% of the sample, were the primary focus of this study. Frontline staff opinions can be ignored, and strategic effects might be overstated when implementation difficulties are minimised (Mamo et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is more difficult to determine causality because of its cross-sectional architecture. Purposive sampling may restrict the generalisability of the results, notwithstanding their justification. The opinions of sportspeople and fans may be incorporated into future studies to more accurately assess the effects of CSR on reputation.

Disclosure

Author Contributions

This research was conducted under the academic supervision of Prof. Dr. Nilesh R Berad. Mr. Amit Gupte led the study and was responsible for the conceptualization, research design, development of the theoretical framework, literature review, data interpretation, and preparation of the complete

manuscript. Dr. Nilesh R. Berad contributed to the methodological guidance, critical review of the analytical approach, and comprehensive refinement of the final manuscript. Their combined scholarly engagement has shaped the depth, coherence, and overall quality of this work.

Disclosure of the Delegation to Generative AI

The authors declare that generative AI was used in the research and writing processes. According to the GAIDeT Taxonomy (2025), the following tasks are delegated to GAI tools under full human supervision.

- Proof reading and editing
- Reformatting

The responsibility of the final manuscript lies entirely with the authors. GAI tools are not listed as authors and do not bear responsibility for the final outcomes. Declaration submitted by : Prof. Dr. Nilesh R Berad
Amit Gupte

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research.

Data Access Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data will be shared following institutional guidelines for data sharing and ethical considerations.

Ethics Statement

This research followed ethical standards that ensured that informed consent was obtained where applicable, and all personal data were anonymized. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the MET's Institute of Management.

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