



Sponsors' CSR strategies in sport: A sensemaking approach of corporations established in France



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perceptions and strategies of corporate sponsors established in France and involved in sport-related corporate social responsibility (S-CSR). Based on the theoretical framework of strategic sensemaking, interviews were conducted with sponsorship managers from 23 corporations involved in S-CSR partnerships with various sports properties. Each phase of the strategic sensemaking process was analyzed, resulting in the identification of three levels of ambiguity in the interpretative process: namely, perceived links between sports properties and CSR, links between S-CSR and sponsors' own CSR, and links between S-CSR actions and the main sponsorship objectives. We described and gave evidence for seven strategies, highlighting the diversity of S-CSR rationales among sponsors. Other factors were found to influence the sensemaking process, namely sponsorship managers' knowledge of their company's own CSR, collaboration between sponsorship and CSR departments, and the role of sports properties as sensegivers in S-CSR actions. Finally, we summarize our results in a process model of S-CSR strategic sensemaking in order to provide both sponsors and sports properties with a better understanding of the multiple possibilities for CSR leverage.

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1. Introduction

Since the mid 2000s, researchers have taken a growing interest in corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the sporting context. Several authors have examined specific aspects of S-CSR (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006, 2009; Bradish & Cronin, 2009; Godfrey, 2009; Kihl, Babiak, & Tainsky, 2014; Kott, 2005; Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Both sports organizations and their stakeholders have a growing understanding of the invaluable assets that sport can offer with regard to CSR; these relate to the notions of admiration, passion, and identification (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Depending on the type of sports properties, such notions include their proximity with social and environmental values, the media power of sporting events (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006), the role model status of individual athletes (Babiak, Mills, Tainsky, & Juravich, 2012), and even the iconic character of some sports facilities (Trendafilova, Babiak, & Heinze, 2013). Although sports organizations' view of CSR is not necessarily strategic (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011), S-CSR actions can serve to “attract fans, secure corporate

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sponsors, generate goodwill among various stakeholders, and to have effective dealings with local and state governments” (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006, p. 215). Concerning their stakeholders, the existing literature offers interesting insights into their strategic interest in S-CSR (Dowling, Robinson, & Washington, 2013; Plewa & Quester, 2011; Seguin, Parent, & O’Reilly, 2010; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Nonetheless, few studies have tried to explore a ‘stakeholder-defined’ S-CSR, which appears to be a promising unit of analysis in general CSR literature. Indeed, Hillenbrand, Money, and Pavelin (2012) noted that since reputation, which is the primary objective for CSR, comes from stakeholders’ judgments, the CSR field could be significantly enhanced by the understanding of how stakeholders perceive CSR actions.

This study addresses this shift in CSR analysis by focusing on a specific type of sport organizations’ stakeholders; namely, corporate sponsors, because they are of crucial importance for S-CSR. First, they are particularly likely to include S-CSR actions in their sponsorship strategies in order to be perceived as good corporate citizens (Misener & Mason, 2010). Second, they can often impose their will through their financial resources, which sport organizations are dependent on (Parent & Deephouse, 2007). This power can notably be used in ethics scandals, as was recently the case when four major FIFA partners demanded the resignation of its former president Sepp Blatter. Sponsors’ S-CSR actions can be carried out with various sports properties (i.e., clubs, federations, and athletes) and are often communicated to the public on the occasion of sporting events (Carey, Mason, & Misener, 2011). However, this general trend raises a question that this exploratory research starts to address: how do corporations from various sectors and with distinct CSR concerns make sense of S-CSR? This question guided the choice of a theoretical approach based on strategic sensemaking (Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993), which is of particular interest because it analyzes the successive stages in the elaboration of organizational strategies. Hence, this paper aims at better understanding sponsors’ perceptions of S-CSR and how these perceptions lead to a variety of S-CSR strategies.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review of S-CSR is provided. We specifically highlight its complexity, which has scarcely been explored as such in the current literature. Then, we present the theoretical framework of strategic sensemaking, the dimensions of which are then used to convert our research question into operational research objectives. In the fourth section, we describe the method, including the research design, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, we present our findings and discuss their theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Literature review: CSR and sports sponsorship

Sport sponsorship involves a strategic relationship between a sponsor and a sports property for mutual benefit (Farrelly & Quester, 2005). It has long been shown that one of the main objectives of sponsorship is its effect on sponsors’ brand image, which is achieved through an image transfer from the positive brand image of the sports property to their own (Javalgi, Traylor, Gross, & Lampman, 1994). Image transfer models are still subject to theoretical developments (Abreu Novais & Arcodia, 2013). On the other hand, CSR refers to “company activities – voluntary by definition – demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders” (Van Marrewijk, 2003, p. 102). From an academic perspective, CSR has remained a heavily debated concept, mostly around two issues. The first relates to its scope. Carroll (1979, 1991) proposed a model structured around four levels of responsibilities (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic), though indicating that the usual definition of CSR goes beyond purely economic and legal considerations. The second relates to the groups – called stakeholders – toward whom corporations are responsible, entailing a constellation of contradictory approaches, from instrumental views according to which the management of stakeholders is only a means for achieving economic objectives (Clarkson, 1995), to moral views through which every legitimate stakeholder should be taken into account (Freeman, 1984). Despite these difficulties, CSR has become a widespread management tool for corporations’ reputation and brand image (Werther & Chandler, 2005).

An interesting link between sports sponsorship and CSR is that sports organizations are seen as a vehicle for deploying corporations’ CSR (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Walters, 2009). According to Smith and Westerbeek (2007), sport has some features that can be effectively used for CSR: youth appeal, positive health impacts, social interaction, sustainability awareness, and cultural integration. These features combine with the subtlety offered by sponsorship, which is often perceived by consumers as more sincere and selfless than direct corporate campaigns (Plewa & Quester, 2011). Consistent with this view are the studies carried out by several researchers into the reactions of consumers to S-CSR initiatives. Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell, and Clark (2003) were probably the first to point out the positive outcomes of S-CSR on consumer attitudes. Walker and Kent (2009) found that the CSR programs of the NFL teams had a positive effect on reputation, word-of-mouth, and merchandise consumption behaviors. Kim, Kwak, and Kim (2010) suggested that S-CSR may have universal appeal and effectiveness. Heinze, Soderstrom, and Zdroik (2014), through an in-depth case study, described several key processes enabling a professional team to implement a strategic and authentic CSR program, notably through partnerships with specifically-targeted corporations.

It is therefore not surprising that a growing number of corporations engage in S-CSR strategies. Farrelly and Geyser (2007) noted that global companies like Nike or Visa view CSR as an interesting approach to sports sponsorship. However, the extant literature has just begun to explore the rationales behind S-CSR practices (Floeter, Benkenstein, & Uhrich, 2016). This paper falls within the scope of Plewa and Quester (2011), who suggested a broad avenue for research; namely, “if sponsors view CSR as a measure of sports sponsorship effectiveness, how do they seek to achieve it?” (2011, p. 305). To start answering this question, it is first necessary to better consider the complexity of S-CSR, as several issues have not yet been fully delineated. Firstly, the extant literature has mainly linked the S-CSR activities of corporations to broad corporate image purposes (Misener & Mason, 2010; Seguin et al., 2010), without providing a clear vision of the strategic outcomes sought by sponsors.

Plewa and Quester (2011) proposed a conceptual framework that identifies the strategic objectives of S-CSR for consumers (i.e., satisfaction, purchase, and retention) as well as for employees (i.e., motivation, satisfaction, and retention). Dowling et al. (2013) showed that corporations can use S-CSR to pursue other strategic objectives, like employee development, subtle research market, and corporate peer legitimacy. These useful contributions have helped advance the idea that S-CSR may offer a diversity of outcomes, aimed at a variety of corporations' stakeholders, which this study intends to further establish. Secondly, image transfer models may be of a peculiar complexity when it comes to CSR matters. Indeed, while sponsors can use S-CSR to counter their own negative image (Waller & Conaway, 2011), sports properties are faced with their own social responsibility issues, such as doping, violence, corruption, and environmental impact. In some cases, a negative effect on sponsors' image may even be due to other stakeholders, as was the case with the criticism surrounding the Russian government during the hosting of the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi (Van Detta, 2014). However, S-CSR partnerships can still be observed with sport properties that are sometimes widely criticized on these grounds. In this regard, very few studies to date have considered the risks of sports properties' adverse CSR reputation on sponsors' image; nor have they considered the potential strategies adopted by sponsors to avoid or counter this risk. Thirdly, the S-CSR literature has not yet taken into account the diversity of corporations' CSR, whose issues vary largely from one sector to another. For example, environmental practices may appear more relevant in the automotive industry than in the banking sector. Thus, it is unclear if and how these various corporations build links between S-CSR and their own CSR.

This paper is therefore based on the observation that the sheer complexity of S-CSR opens up a wide range of possibilities for sponsors. At the same time, however, it generates various forms of ambiguity: do they express their own CSR or that of their partnered sport property? What is the target? For what purpose? In this study, S-CSR is envisioned as a symbolic universe that leads sponsors to engage in meaning constructions, thereby lending itself to the sensemaking approach.

3. Theoretical framework: CSR and strategic sensemaking

3.1. Sensemaking and strategic sensemaking

The sensemaking approach was introduced by Weick (1979) as the application of social psychology concepts in the field of organizational behavior. According to Weick, sensemaking refers to the process by which people give meaning to experience. In organizations, it mostly occurs in ambiguous environments. Weick (1995) defined ambiguity as a situation in which managers have to cope with a large variety of information, leading them to contradictory interpretations. The sensemaking process therefore aims to extract 'cues', (Weick, 1979, 1995) by selecting information from the environment and interpreting them in order to "create an account of what is going on" (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 553). Weick's vision of sensemaking is essentially retrospective in that it mainly relies on using past experience to make sense of the present (Gioia & Mehra, 1996). However, several authors went on to offer a more prospective form of sensemaking (Gioia & Mehra, 1996; Thomas et al., 1993) namely "an attempt to structure the future by imagining some desirable (albeit ill-defined) state [] one that we conceptualize in the present but realize in the future" (Gioia & Mehra, 1996, p. 1229). These developments have led to strategic sensemaking that explores "the link between how [] organizations make sense of information and how they act to influence organizational outcomes" (Thomas et al., 1993, p. 240).

3.2. Sensemaking and CSR

Several authors have claimed that research on CSR could gain considerably from a sensemaking perspective (Angus-Leppan, Metcalf, & Benn, 2010; Basu & Palazzo, 2008), for two main reasons. The first is that, so far, most academic work has focused on CSR content, relying on inventories of CSR actions rather than on their underlying rationales. As Basu and Palazzo (2008) noted, content-based models appear to be limited, particularly with the growing standardization of CSR practices. The sensemaking perspective could respond to this limit by shifting from CSR content to CSR processes and by describing organizations as "searching for the meaning of CSR" (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010). Indeed, sensemaking focuses on "the mental frames [] within which CSR is embedded" (Basu & Palazzo, 2008, p. 123), thereby linking CSR actions to cognitive and discursive dimensions. In this way, it could allow us to better understand why organizations with similar characteristics have non-similar CSR content.

The second is that current research is divided between a strategic and an institutional approach to CSR (Husted & Allen, 2006). The former (Porter & Kramer, 2006) views CSR practices as a means to achieve strategic goals: to project a better image, maximize a corporation's financial performance, or alleviate stakeholders' negative perceptions. The latter tends to focus on the external pressures that force organizations to be more responsible (Campbell, 2007), thus often denying bottom-up drivers. Sensemaking could be a way to reconcile these approaches. Indeed, instead of assuming the predominance of one type of determinant over another, it seeks evidence that managers use both types in the sensemaking process. To this end, external drivers, which do not always materialize in tangible obligations (laws) or inducements (formal stakeholder requests), are considered to operate at the same cognitive level as internal drivers (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). Both types of determinants feed the sensemaking process as cues (Weick, 1995). Consequently, the key principle of a sensemaking analysis is to identify the specific combination of internal and external determinants that lead to CSR actions, thereby allowing for a richer explanation of CSR decisions. In the next section, we reframe our research question into operational research objectives, through an analysis grid based on strategic sensemaking.

3.3. An analysis grid of the S-CSR strategic sensemaking process for sports sponsors

Strategic sensemaking entails three key processes: scanning, interpretation, and action (Thomas et al., 1993). Scanning is the phase in which managers gather cues from the environment. Although the accessibility of information can be an issue, most of the time the critical path is rather the selection of information, because managers have access to more information than they can use. Thomas et al. (1993) distinguished between internal information, which refers to “important [organizational] elements that might bear on future performance,” and external information, which refers to “important events or issues that might affect an organization” (p. 241). For sponsors, the scanning phase may be focused on both their overall sponsorship strategy, and on the sponsorship manager’s knowledge of their company’s own CSR, knowing that they are not necessarily in direct contact with CSR managers. Thus, our first research objective is to identify the cues that sponsorship managers integrate in the scanning phase, upon which their S-CSR strategies will depend.

The interpretation phase involves the use of selected cues into a structure for understanding, in order to reduce ambiguity (Gioia, 1986). For this purpose, incoming information is sorted into various categories. However, such interpretive structures are not necessarily formalized. Most of the time, the classifications built by managers remain on a cognitive level, thus making interpretations transitory and changeable (Thomas et al., 1993). Nonetheless, this phase is at the heart of the sensemaking process, in the sense that it encapsulates the numerous intricacies of CSR strategies. As mentioned, the complexity of S-CSR leads us to the assumption that there are several levels of ambiguity, which may relate to the nature of the message sponsors want to convey, including its focus (i.e., whether S-CSR actions are oriented toward sponsors’ or sports properties’ CSR), its target, and its relative importance in the sponsorship strategy. Hence, our second research objective is to unfold sponsors interpretive structure by identifying the different levels of ambiguity that punctuate the sensemaking process, more or less implicitly.

The action phase refers to the organizational responses that result from the first two phases. Thomas et al. (1993) posited that, “the way a strategic issue is labeled or framed mobilizes action in a particular direction” (p. 242). Thus, interpretive categories affect variables such as the involvement and commitment associated with an issue. Regarding S-CSR, sponsors have a range of specific tools for partnership activations: financial or logistical support, skill-based sponsorship, cause-related sports sponsorship, volunteering or awareness-raising mediums. Each of them is part of a particular strategy that is inherent to the sensemaking process. In view of this, our third research objective is to identify the different S-CSR strategies. By specifying our research question through these three objectives, the strategic sensemaking approach is intended to help disentangle the complexity of S-CSR and the different meanings it can cover for sponsors.

4. Method

4.1. Data collection

In-depth interviews were conducted between January and July 2013, with sports sponsorship managers from corporations engaged in S-CSR actions. We used theoretical sampling to select data sources based on their relevance to the research questions (Birks & Mills, 2011). Our sample was restricted to corporations of international or, at least, national stature based in France, thereby excluding small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Thus, these sponsors and their sport partnerships have an important visibility within the French territory. In order to identify them, we first browsed sports-related websites using several key words related to corporate social responsibility. Each relevant answer was included in our database. In order to ensure construct validity, our query was backed by a typology of S-CSR actions adapted from Walker and Parent’s (2010) types of social involvement in sport (see Table 1).

Given the exploratory character of this study, we sought to take an extensive view of sponsors’ S-CSR rationales by including partnerships with different sports properties, namely national sports federations, national teams, professional clubs, individual athletes, and sporting event organizers. We identified and contacted a total of 72 corporations meeting our criteria. Of these, 23 agreed to be interviewed. Table 2 gives a breakdown of interviewees. The sensemaking process can vary

Typology of S-CSR actions.

| Content areas | Operational definitions |
|--------------------------|---|
| Social integration | Actions in favor of socially deprived persons. |
| Cultural diversity | Actions in favor of ethnic and cultural minorities. |
| Youth | Actions in favor of children (e.g., education and animation). |
| Disability | Actions in favor of disabled persons. |
| Gender equality | Actions to tackle gender discrimination. |
| Health | Actions based on the use of sport to preserve and promote health. |
| Responsible economy | Actions in favor of local or struggling economic actors – responsible sourcing or purchasing. |
| The environment | Actions to ensure limited environmental impacts (e.g., recycling efforts). |
| International solidarity | Actions in favor of developing countries or populations affected by humanitarian crises. |
| Other charitable causes | Actions in favor of causes not listed in the previous areas (e.g., donations to various charities). |
| Sporting ethics | Actions relating to sport inherent issues (e.g., doping, corruption, and hooliganism). |

Breakdown of interview respondents.

| Name | Industry | Partnered sports properties |
|--------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Adecco | Human resource services | National sports federation (Olympic sports), Sporting event organizers (tennis) |
| Banque Populaire | Banking | National sports federation (sailing), Professional team (sailing) |
| Carrefour | Retail | National sports federation (football), Sporting event organizers (cycling) |
| Caisse d'Epargne | Banking | National sports federation (Olympic sports), Sporting event organizers (running) |
| Canon | Electronics | Sporting event organizers (golf) |
| Crédit Agricole | Banking | National sports federation (football) |
| FDJ | Lottery and gambling | Sporting event organizers (cycling), professional team (cycling) |
| Ferrero | Food | National sports federation (basketball), professional club (basketball), individual athletes (basketball, tennis, athletics) |
| Foncia | Real estate | Sporting event organizers (sailing), professional team (sailing) |
| GDF Suez | Electric and gas utility | National sports federations (tennis, football), sporting event organizers (tennis), individual athletes (tennis) |
| Generali | Insurance | National sports federations (volleyball, golf, cycling, horse riding), individual athletes (football) |
| Groupama | Insurance | Sporting event organizers (sailing, running), professional team (sailing), individual athletes (sailing) |
| HSBC | Banking | Sporting event organizers (golf) |
| La Poste | Postal services | National sports federation (football), sporting event organizers (motor racing), |
| LCL | Banking | Sporting event organizers (cycling, running) |
| Lyonnaise des Eaux | Domestic water services | National sports association (triathlon), sporting event organizers (triathlon, running) |
| Malakoff-Mederic | Insurance | National sports federation (handisport) |
| Mc Donalds | Restaurants | National sports federation (Olympic sports) |
| Nike | Sport apparel | National sports federation (football), sporting event organizers (football), individual athletes (football) |
| RATP | Public transport | National sports federations (rugby, handball), professional clubs (rugby, handball), individual athletes (rugby, handball), sporting event organizers (running) |
| Renault | Automotive | National sports federation (handisport), sporting event organizers (motor racing, running), professional team (motor racing) |
| Volvo | Automotive (trucks) | Sporting event organizers (motor racing), professional club (football, rugby) |
| Société Générale | Banking | National sports federations (rugby, handisport) |

widely depending on the manager's position and functions; thus, we systematically interviewed the top manager of sports partnerships to ensure internal validity. Furthermore, corporations can have various sport partnerships. Consequently, in agreement with the interviewees, we only selected those that were related to S-CSR.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 min. They were conducted by the lead author, with 17 in person and 6 via a videophone system. The interview guide included the three dimensions of scanning, interpretation, and action. For the scanning dimension, interviewees were asked about their main sports sponsorship objectives and their awareness of the corporation's broad CSR strategy. For the interpretation dimension, they were asked to reflect on the ways in which CSR was related to their sport partnerships. Question topics included perceptions of their sports properties' assets and barriers to meeting CSR values, the rationales for their selection as CSR vehicles, reflections on their sports properties' social responsibility issues and their links with the sponsor's own CSR. For the action dimension, interviewees described their S-CSR strategies. Question topics included the origin and specific objectives of each S-CSR actions, as well as the nature of their activations. A total of 172 documents were also gathered, including web pages, newsletters, and press releases. However, they were not content analyzed as such and only served to validate respondent claims (Mayan, 2009).

4.2. Data analysis

Interviews were content analyzed using QSR Nvivo10, an analytical piece of software designed for managing large amounts of qualitative data. Following the recommendations of Bandara (2006), the coding method followed several phases. During the first phase we coded data according to the three sensemaking dimensions: scanning, interpretation, and action. Then, each of these dimensions was examined in order to identify sub-dimensions emerging from the data (Mayan, 2009). Sub-dimensions were identified by each author separately, and then discussed between the authors until the final emerging themes were agreed upon (see Dowling et al., 2013).

Within "scanning," two sub-dimensions were coded; namely, "main sponsorship objectives," and "corporate CSR." Each of these sub-dimensions (also known as second category nodes) was refined and split into third category nodes. For instance, the content coded as sponsorship objectives was further coded according to the different objectives (e.g., brand awareness, brand image, public relations, and internal communication). Within "interpretation," three sub-dimensions were coded from the emergence of three levels of ambiguity from the data; namely, "perceived links between sports properties and CSR," "links between S-CSR and sponsors own CSR," and "links between S-CSR actions and main sponsorship objectives." Here again, each level of ambiguity was further explored, leading to third or fourth category nodes. For instance, perceived links between sports properties and CSR values were split into "positive perceptions" and "negative perceptions," and into the different levels of perceptions; namely, "sport as a whole," "specific sports," and "other sports properties." Within "action,"

data were coded according to three dimensions; namely, “CSR area,” “type of activation,” and “partnered sport property of the S-CSR action.” By crossing the scanning, interpretation, and action dimensions, we modeled the sensemaking process of sponsors. Our methodology is qualitative by the nature of the data collected. However, we were able to explore our results further, depending on the frequency of quotations when appropriate, following the methodology used by [Babiak and Trendafilova \(2011\)](#). Nonetheless, the strategic sensemaking model resulting from this study remains qualitative, independently from these quantitative indicators.

5. Results

5.1. Scanning

Interviews began with a general presentation of each corporation’s global sponsorship strategy, without specific reference to CSR. In this way, respondents could evoke S-CSR on a spontaneous basis, offering information about the relative weight of S-CSR among the various sponsors’ objectives. References to CSR, such as ‘social responsibility’, ‘good citizenship’, ‘social communication’, or ‘community involvement’ were made spontaneously by only 17 of the 23 respondents (see [Table 3](#)), indicating that even if all corporations in our sample are engaged in S-CSR actions, these do not appear to be their primary focus. Globally, the most frequently mentioned objectives relate to brand image (39% of the content coded as main sponsorship objectives). CSR communication is only a sub-dimension of brand image, representing half of it (17%). Hence, considered separately, CSR communication is less mentioned than brand awareness (21%), and somewhat more than public relations (13.7%). Other objectives include product communication (8.5%), internal communication (7.6%), and direct sales increase (5.1%).

Another substantial element of the scanning phase relates to the respondents’ knowledge of their company’s own CSR. Although sports partnerships managers are not, by definition, in charge of the global CSR strategy, we sought to evaluate the extent to which they were aware of its main issues, based on the premise that the more they integrate these cues into their scanning phase, the closer linkage there is between corporations’ CSR and their sports partnerships activities. As a result, only four respondents seem to have no or very limited knowledge of their company’s CSR. Some admitted straight away that CSR was “rather blurred” to them (Foncia, real estate) or implied it by talking about CSR in a very broad way, stating that their company “is aware of the evolution of society, of the environment” (LCL, banking). The majority of respondents have an intermediate level of CSR knowledge, in the sense that they were able to mention some of their company’s CSR issues, like combating “compulsive and pathological gambling, notably by financing research in this field” (FDJ, lottery, and gambling)

Main sports sponsorship objectives of interviewed corporations (mentioned on a spontaneous basis).

| Objectives | N respondents | N (%) quotations | Sample quotations |
|--|---------------|------------------|---|
| Brand image, including: | 22 | 46 (39%) | |
| – CSR communication | 17 | 20 (17%) | “We try to use all the levers, that is to say that [sport] sponsorship serves to build an image of community involvement, of a bank close to its customers, we often use the expression <i>Crédit Agricole, useful to the community</i> ” (Crédit Agricole, banking). |
| – Image without reference to CSR | 18 | 26 (22%) | “Football is not used to increase brand awareness, as we already are the best known retailer, but it is used to create links between our clients, our stores and our employees. So our goal is to warmer our image, since everyone is a football fan” (Carrefour, retail). |
| Brand awareness | 18 | 24 (21%) | “Since 2000, there has been a strategy focused on brand awareness. We wanted our logo to be put everywhere, so we became sponsor of big sporting events” (Caisse d’Épargne, banking). |
| Public relations | 13 | 16 (13.7%) | “There is a commercial dimension on our partnerships; our goal is to develop a lot of public relations, to use sponsorship to invite important clients and decision-makers” (Crédit Agricole, banking). |
| Product communication | 6 | 10 (8.5%) | “Our public consists of truck enthusiasts, professional carriers, lorry drivers, so we are essentially on the product dimension” (Volvo, automotive-trucks). |
| Internal communication | 9 | 9 (7.6%) | “For partnerships like Olympique Lyonnais [professional football club] or LOU Rugby [professional rugby club], we mixes several objectives [] since we are based in Lyon and we have 5800 local employees, most of them sports fans, in our counterparties with these clubs there are lots of things for internal use, like tickets for the matches” (Volvo, automotive-trucks). |
| Direct sales increase | 6 | 6 (5.1%) | “Behind that there is also an economic relationship, since when our banks partner with local [sailing] clubs, these clubs open a bank account with us” (Banque Populaire, banking). |
| Other objectives (e.g., competitive differentiation, first-mover strategies) | 5 | 6 (5.1%) | “We proceeded to a competition analysis and our marketing agency brought forward triathlon, which we found very interesting” (Lyonnaise des Eaux, domestic water services). |
| Total | 23 | 117 (100%) | |

or reducing “carbon emissions and fuel consumption to preserve natural resources” (Volvo, automotive-trucks). During the interviews, two factors emerged that may influence the scanning phase. The first is the collaboration between sponsorship and the CSR departments. In our sample, only two sponsorship managers (Renault and Lyonnaise des Eaux) were shown to work closely with CSR managers:

For instance we have a strong CSR axis on gender diversity. Renault is an automotive company, so it is rather a man's world []. And it is from these meetings with the CSR department that we decided to enter this [women's] rally, in order to show that women have a rightful place in the company. (Renault, automotive industry)

The second factor relates to the respondents' specific portfolios. Seven of them are in charge of both sponsorship and corporate philanthropy, which implies a form of social responsibility. Similarly, one respondent (Nike, sports apparel) is specifically in charge of S-CSR partnerships. Depending on these two factors, some respondents integrate more information in their scanning phase to build links between sport and CSR, like RATP's (public transport) sponsorship manager, who states that “social responsibility is always attached somehow to [the company's] sport partnerships, because it gives a real meaning for [their] external and internal audience.” Thus, for each manager, the scanning phase constitutes an initial mapping that sets the interpretative structure in motion. As the sensemaking process moves on, other cues are integrated in order to address the different levels of ambiguity that are described in the following section.

5.2. Interpretation

5.2.1. First level of ambiguity: perceived links between sports properties and CSR

In order to develop S-CSR actions, sponsors need to consider the CSR profile of their partnered sports properties, namely their key CSR assets and drawbacks. Hence, a first level of ambiguity lies in positive and negative perceptions of the links that exist between sports properties and CSR. These perceptions are either linked to sport as a whole, to specific sports, or to sporting events or other sports properties (see Table 4).

Not surprisingly, sport as a whole is seen as an interesting vector for CSR, eliciting essentially positive perceptions (see quotations 1 and 2). However, the same does not necessarily apply for sports disciplines considered separately. Indeed, some specific sports appear to bear positive values (quotations 4, 5, and 6), such as sailing because of its perceived proximity with nature. Conversely, some sports are seen as inherently incompatible with social responsibility (quotations 7, 8, and 9), such as motor sports because of their environmental impact. Perceptions also relate to specific sets of sporting disciplines. Three respondents evoked the distinct values of collective sports (quotation 4). This is also the case for disability sports, which were described as a civic form of sport by three respondents. Some sports are sometimes cited positively, sometimes negatively, such as cycling (quotations 5 and 8).

A third set of perceptions refers to sporting events. Positive perceptions are structured around three dimensions. The first is the ‘feel good’ effect they can generate (quotation 10), in as much as their celebratory nature fosters social ties. The second is their media impact, which makes them ideal moments to show sponsors' S-CSR commitments (quotation 11). The third relates to the good CSR behavior of event organizers. Six respondents noted that some organizers are particularly oriented toward social or environmental actions (quotation 12). Negative perceptions include the bad CSR behavior of some organizers (quotation 13), the environmental impact caused by some sporting events (quotation 14) and other issues, such as doping scandals during the Tour de France (quotation 15).

A final set of perceptions relates to other sports properties. Individual athletes, as well as clubs or teams, can be perceived positively when they are ambassadors for various causes (quotations 16 and 17). Some of them even embody certain CSR areas, such as disability sport athletes, who were seen by three respondents as examples of the integration of disabled persons. From a negative perspective, respondents evoked real or potential situations in which sports properties would be unworthy of promoting social values because of their unethical behavior (quotations 20 and 21). With regard to sports federations, most positive and negative perceptions were found to be linked to their CSR policies and commitments (quotations 18 and 22). Finally, respondents also mentioned various other properties that play either a positive or a negative part in S-CSR (quotations 19 and 23), including referees, sporting equipment, and the media.

An interesting aspect is that positive and negative perceptions have a limited influence on the choice of the sports properties sponsored. Although all the sponsors in our sample are engaged in S-CSR actions, a majority (17 out of 23) did not choose sports properties for CSR reasons, as suggested by Canon's (electronics) sponsorship manager, who pointed that the company was “associated with these events firstly because it is beneficial to [Canon],” and that “companies never invest in sponsorship only for social or environmental purposes.” Only six sponsors chose specific sports properties because of S-CSR objectives, including Malakoff-Medéric (insurance), which partnered with the French Handisport Federation in order “to show that the company cares about important issues,” or La Poste, which specifically partnered with sports federations' referees in order to put forward “the notion of trust and public service.” Thus, the first level of ambiguity appears not to be sufficient to explain the whole strategic sensemaking process.

5.2.2. Second level of ambiguity: links between S-CSR and sponsor's own CSR

Our data highlights a second level of ambiguity in the interpretation phase, which is related to the complex coexistence of two arrays of representations: that of sport properties' CSR, and that of sponsors' own CSR. This ambiguity is reflected in the

Positive and negative perceptions of the links between sports properties and CSR.

| Content | Positive perceptions | | | Negative perceptions | | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|--|---|------------------|--|---|
| | N respondents | N (%) quotations | Sample quotations | N respondents | N (%) quotations | Sample quotations | |
| Sport as a whole | 14 | 24 (11.7%) | (1) “Sport sponsorship is one of the few communication means with which one can associate – I am going to use a swearword – moral values. So the bridge with CSR is rather easy” (Groupama, insurance). (2) “We use sport because it is a vector of social links and cohesion, and because it favors what we put forward, that is to say the destigmatisation of vulnerable people” (Ferrero, food). | 1 | 1 (0.49%) | (3) “In that context, we develop a responsibility, toward the athletes, against doping, corruption and fixed odds lottery). | |
| Specific sports | 18 | 36 (17.6%) | (4) “Collective sports favor diversity, to give you an example, we support associations for disabled children, and thanks to basketball – but it would also be the case with football or rugby – we can mix them with able-bodied children, making them and their parent change their views about handicap” (Ferrero, food – collective sports) (5) “Because it is a tough sport, when you are at the foot of the Mont Ventoux, you are faced with yourself []. And you learn a lot about yourself” (FDJ, lottery and gambling – cycling). (6) “In the collective unconscious, sailing is a clean sport, nature-orientated” (Foncia, real estate – sailing). | 16 | 27 (13.2%) | (7) “Motor sports do not meet our CSR commitments, which is one of our CSR policy” (Ferrero, food – motor sports). (8) “But cyclism today is not clean, it is dirty, it comes from this sport, which has developed a reputation by doping” (Crédit Agricole – cyclism). (9) “All combat sports, apart from judo, are not clean, but sports like boxing, where I have nothing against boxing, but it is not clean, I do not associate our brand with it, I do not want to be associated is to hurt the opponent” (Caixa – banking – combat sports). | |
| Positive perceptions | | | Negative perceptions | | | | |
| Content | N respondents | N (%) quotations | Sample quotations | Content | N respondents | N (%) quotations | Sample quotations |
| Sporting events | 16 | 39 (19.3%) | (10) “There are fathers with their children, it is their first competition, uncles and nephews, it is very diverse and funny” (HSBC, banking – HSBC Family Golf Tour). | Sporting events | 7 | 10 (4.9%) | (13) “Since last year, we witnessed a change, we found that the race was becoming more expensive and we were not able to see if the money went to cancer research or not” (Médéric – La Parisienne, running). |
| Feel-good effect and social ties | 10 | 17 | | Bad organizers’ CSR behavior | 4 | 4 | |
| Media impact | 8 | 14 | (11) “During the start of the race, we offered our exhibition stand to various associations so that they benefit from the visibility of the event” (Banque Populaire, banking – Vendée Globe, sailing event). | Environmental Impact | 2 | 3 | (14) “One year we were attacked by the media because we distributed good products” (Banque Populaire, banking – Vendée Globe, sailing event) |
| Good organizers’ CSR behavior | 6 | 8 | (12) “The organizers have actually built their own boats [] their whole event is based on sustainability, which is very new today” (Foncia, real estate – Multi One Design, sailing events). | Other negative perceptions related to sporting events | 3 | 3 | (15) “Everybody talks about CSR, but in reality, a negative image is ever present, it is not clean and gambling – Tour de France, etc. |

| | Positive perceptions | | | Negative perceptions | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---|----------------------|---------------------|---|
| | N respondents | N (%) quotations | Sample quotations | N respondents | N (%) quotations | Sample quotations |
| Other sport properties | 17 | 36 (17.6%) | | 16 | 31 (15.2%) | |
| Individual athletes | 11 | 15 | (16) “Each association has a professional athlete as patron [] athletes go and meet the children in the hospital, it is a special moment for them” (Carrefour, retail – professional cyclists and players of the French football team) | 3 | 3 | (20) “On Armstrong case, people do not necessarily see the difference between a professional athlete who is Nike to them, so we are new to them” (Nike, sports apparel – former Tour de France winner) |
| Clubs and teams | 4 | 6 | (17) “This allows us to make links with our professional team [] Our coach made training plans for the detainees [] we even brought the team in the prison to meet them” (FDJ, lottery and gambling – professional cycling team) | 7 | 11 | (21) “Even if we have been in prison for a long time, if there is any scandal, it is not an iceberg, that is to say the French people are not hurt” (Société Générale, banking – professional football team). |
| Sports federations | 6 | 9 | (18) “The French Cycling Federation has partnered with the green brigades, who clean off all the bottles and papers on the finish area” (Generali, insurance – French Cycling Federation). | 5 | 8 | (22) “Unfortunately, social movements rarely came from the federations, they came from us” (Crédit Agricole, French Football Federation) |
| Other entities | 3 | 6 | (19) “We seek to be useful to the “men in black”, who are sometimes criticized, but who are crucial for the game [] referees and postmen have a lot in common, notably the notion of trust and public service” (La Poste, postal services – referees). | 7 | 9 | (23) “The boats we use are not sustainable in terms of sustainability, it is not sustainable” (Banque Populaire, banking) |
| Total | 23 | 135 (66.2%) | | 23 | 69 (33.8%) | |

focus and level of CSR involved. The CSR focus can be worded as the following question: “whose CSR is at stake?” The CSR level refers to [Carroll's \(1979, 1991\)](#) ethical and philanthropic dimensions.

The majority of the S-CSR actions reported by our interviewees are at the philanthropic level. Indeed, the issues addressed, such as breast cancer or deprived children, are neither directly attributable to sponsors nor to sports properties. Rather, they reflect a broader civic engagement. In some instances, the main focus of this philanthropic CSR is on sponsors, because they serve the same cause outside their sport partnerships. For example, Banque Populaire (banking), which supports a foundation for orphans, invites the children to its partnered sailing events. In other instances, sponsors accompany the philanthropic CSR of sports properties. For example, Volvo takes part in the Goals against Cancer campaign launched by the Olympique Lyonnais football club.

A smaller number of S-CSR actions relate to the ethical level, in the sense that the issues addressed lie at the heart of the activities of sports properties or sponsors. Regarding sports properties, these actions address doping, racism in sport, or the environmental impacts of sporting events. Another example is the financing of a fleet of sailboats by the French Sailing Federation through Banque Populaire (banking), in order to allow people to sail without having to buy expensive equipment. This action favors access to sport, which is a core mission of the Federation. With regard to sponsors, some actions are oriented toward genuine CSR issues, such as gender equality at work (RATP, Renault, and La Poste), or the risk of obesity as a result of eating their products (McDonalds and Ferrero).

5.2.3. Third level of ambiguity: links between S-CSR actions and main sponsorship objectives

A third level of ambiguity comes from the fact that sponsors do not attach the same strategic importance to S-CSR. This ambiguity is therefore linked to the degree of strategy they perceive in S-CSR in general, as well as in their different S-CSR actions. Most actions involve a relatively low degree of strategy. In this regard, an important element is that their objectives are not clearly envisioned. There seem to be three main reasons for this. The first, already noted in the scanning phase, is that these objectives are very secondary within the whole sponsorship strategy, as is the case for Foncia (real estate), whose sponsorship manager explains that “sustainability is quite new in sport, [the company's] idea is that of a complementary demonstration of [its] philosophy [] but it has never been [the] primary objective.” The second reason is that for some sponsors, sports sponsorship has always included a civic dimension, such as “[inviting] youth to see [French Rugby team] matches, it seem[ed] natural” (Société Générale, banking), even long before the emergence of CSR problematics. The third reason is that some sponsors express some reluctance to communicate on S-CSR actions because they perceive a risk of being accused of greenwashing, as illustrated by the sponsorship manager of Groupama (insurance): “It is rather risky [] we were told ‘you are going to put the corporate foundation on a communication support made for business’, and these kinds of crosses can be misinterpreted.”

Conversely, in our study, other respondents gave a higher degree of strategy to S-CSR, which seemed to depend on the sponsors' ability to link S-CSR actions to their main sponsorship objectives. One example is the gambling company FDJ, whose S-CSR actions “serve to better position [their] brand as an honest and trustworthy sports betting operator” (FDJ, lottery, and gambling). In addition, this strategic dimension also relates to the fact that some sponsors are able to direct their actions toward clearly identified targets, whereas others expect a more diffuse image enhancement. For instance, Carrefour (retail) decided to work specifically on the values of women's football for internal communication purposes, since 65% of their employees are women. In sum, the interpretative process of sponsors appears to be articulated around these three levels of ambiguity, the combination of which is leading to different S-CSR strategies. In the next section, we identify and describe these strategies.

5.3. Action

Based on our data, seven S-CSR strategies are identified. It should be noted that each sponsor can be engaged in several strategies. For clarity purposes, these strategies are grouped into two sets in line with the first level of ambiguity: strategies deriving from positive perceptions of the links between sports properties and CSR, and strategies deriving from negative perceptions.

5.3.1. Positive sensemaking strategies

A first strategy; namely, “enrich current sponsorship deals with peripheral S-CSR actions” (adopted by nine sponsors), reflects a general trend toward adding a responsible dimension to (sometimes long-standing) sports partnerships, without redefining them in greater depth. From sponsors' standpoint, this strategy is essentially philanthropic and has a low degree of strategy, because it is disconnected both from their main sponsorship objectives and from their core CSR. An example is LCL (banking), sponsor of the Tour de France since 1981, which has recently developed actions in favor of the environment (what is generally not a CSR primary issue in the banking sector). Furthermore, the low degree of strategy often comes from the fact that the sensegivers of the actions are actually sport properties themselves. Sponsors simply respond to their proposals without engaging in a complex sensemaking process. In the case of LCL, the sponsor only followed the organizer in its efforts to ‘go green’. It is also the case for Foncia (real estate), which started measuring “the carbon footprint of [their] boat, but [did not] go further the organizers' demands”.

A second strategy, “valorize corporations' non-sport CSR activities” (adopted by seven sponsors) consists of using sports properties, notably sporting events, to communicate the CSR actions that corporations take outside of their sports

partnerships. The focus is therefore on sponsors' own CSR, though mostly at the philanthropic level, whilst the degree of strategy is variable. Interestingly, most of these corporations are title sponsors of the events. This may be due to the fact that title sponsorship generally allows sponsors to bring more components of their brand than other sponsorship deals, including their CSR values. An example is GDF Suez (electric and gas utility), which uses a WTA tennis tournament (Open GDF Suez) to present its partnership with the Curie Institute, a foundation for cancer research. The event is thus seen as an additional and quite impactful tool for their CSR communication.

A third strategy, “valorize employees' CSR engagement for internal communication purposes,” is the most widespread in our sample (adopted by 14 sponsors), what tends to show that corporations often view S-CSR as a means to improve relations with internal stakeholders. Here, the main type of action is the participation of employees in mass sporting events, including charity programs. Employees run in the colors of their corporation, and the participation fees paid by the corporation are allocated to various causes. According to Malakoff-Mederic's (insurance) sponsorship manager, this allows corporations to favor an internal image by fostering “interactions [between employees] outside normal working hours,” and at the same time contributing to the enhancement of the corporate image in the eyes of external audiences, since employees “act as ambassadors for [the company's] societal commitments.” In most cases, this strategy involves a relatively low degree of strategy, because the idea comes directly from groups of employees. In some instances, however, these actions are the subject of a more advanced sensemaking process. For example, Adecco (human resource services) has developed its own charity program – Win For Youth – and makes a donation to charities for each kilometer covered by employees in any running event made under the corporation banner.

Compared with the previous ones, the main difference of the fourth strategy – namely, “Use S-CSR to address corporations' core CSR issues” (adopted by five sponsors) – is that S-CSR is not only seen as a communication platform, but also serves to address primary CSR problematics. Thus, the sensemaking process has led sponsors to reframe their sports partnerships strategy through their CSR strategy at the ethical level. An example of this is Ferrero, a chocolate and confectionery manufacturer, whose CSR has been challenged with accusations that the company is responsible for obesity, particularly among children, because of its products. This bad press led the sponsors to entirely review the sports partnerships strategy. The objective was to demonstrate that the company engaged “in encouraging physical activity among children,” in order to meet the commitments required by “the French health and nutrition policy” (Ferrero, food). Hence, all the sports partnerships were aligned with the CSR program, “Kinder s'engage pour l'enfance ¹”, in which various sports properties took part. Examples of S-CSR actions include the replacement of the Kinder logo by that of the program's charities on the French basketball team's jersey, and the participation of individual athletes, such as Tony Parker (basketball) or Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (tennis), in free sports camps for deprived children. Another case that illustrates the high degree of this strategy is RATP (public transport). The company uses the values of rugby to address violence and incivility issues in subways and buses, through the participation of its sponsored professional club Racing Metro 92 in education activities in schools.

5.3.2. Negative sensemaking strategies

The following strategies identified in this study emerge from sponsors' perceptions that the bad CSR reputation of their sports properties constitutes a risk for their own image. However, while one could assume that these negative perceptions may lead sponsors to avoid such properties, our data indicate that they actually resulted in specific, and sometimes particularly refined, sensemaking processes. Thus, the fifth strategy is to “compensate potential negative image with philanthropic actions” (adopted by five sponsors), by taking philanthropic S-CSR actions with sports properties that are criticized on the ground of CSR. Although these actions may be similar to the peripheral S-CSR actions of the first strategy, they result from a different sensemaking process. Indeed, they have a counter-communication purpose. An example is Cr dit Agricole (banking), a longtime sponsor of the French Football Federation. The starting point of the company's S-CSR strategy is what has been known as the ‘Knysna scandal’ during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, ² during which the French football team was heavily criticized. As “lots of clients came to [the company] saying ‘it is our money you spend on this team’” (Cr dit Agricole, banking), the sponsor immediately withdrew any form of communication through the national team. Then, a deeper sensemaking process led the sponsor to engage in an S-CSR strategy specifically based on amateur football:

The French team was of course our most visible communication support, and it casted a shadow on all the things we do for football []. This is why we wanted to refocus on amateur football, in line with our motto ‘partner of all footballs’.
(Cr dit Agricole, banking)

Several actions were then developed or reinforced, such as the “National Beginners' Day”, which involves 500,000 children and their families and is aimed at communicating values such as solidarity and diversity.

While this strategy constitutes and indirectly forms counter-communication, we identified a more direct strategy, namely ‘counter-communicate using sponsor's help to solve internal sport CSR issues’. Only one sponsor (FDJ, lottery, and gambling) has adopted it. The company does not simply carry out philanthropic actions; rather, it directly addresses the issue that gives rise to criticisms, namely doping. As the sponsor of a cycling team, FDJ was faced with several doping scandals, from the Festina affair to the Lance Armstrong case. After considering a termination of its sponsorship deal, the

¹ Which can be translated by ‘Kinder is committed to help Youth’.

² During which time the French players went on strike as a result of Nicolas Anelka being expelled by the federation for insulting the national coach.

company initiated a deeper sensemaking process through which they drew a parallel between the sports core social responsibility issue that is doping, and one of the major CSR issues in their sector, namely match-fixing and illegal betting. Their idea was “to put the emphasis on integrity and social values [] in sports,” on the basis that “if people do not trust the integrity of competitions, they will surely not bet on them” (FDJ, lottery, and gambling). From that moment, the company took the role of a spokesperson in the fight against doping. They developed innovative actions (e.g., research and development funding, and conferences during the Tour).

Like the previous negative sensemaking strategies, the last one, “valorize CSR-related products or services” (adopted by three sponsors), is derived from negative perceptions of sports properties’ CSR. This strategy is different, however, in that negative perceptions are actually interpreted as an opportunity per se. Here, the approach of sponsors is to identify CSR flaws from their sports properties, and use them to promote their own expertise. Therefore, although the focus is on sports properties’ CSR, a high degree of strategy is involved, which links S-CSR to sponsors’ main commercial objectives. An example is Lyonnaise des Eaux (domestic water services), whose strategy is based on the environmental impact of triathlons. Such impact is the result of the thousands of plastic bottles used by competitors. As a water management company, Lyonnaise des Eaux decided to help reduce the environmental footprint by connecting all the supply points along the race to the domestic water supply. By doing so, the company targets its clients, namely the public authorities, via a specific public relations campaign:

The [triathlon] Grand Prix stops in cities where we have commercial interests []. So the core competence we put forward enables us to demonstrate to local authorities, especially in a context where they tend to internalize domestic water management, that we manage water networks in a sustainable way, maybe better than they would do by themselves. (Lyonnaise des Eaux, domestic water services)

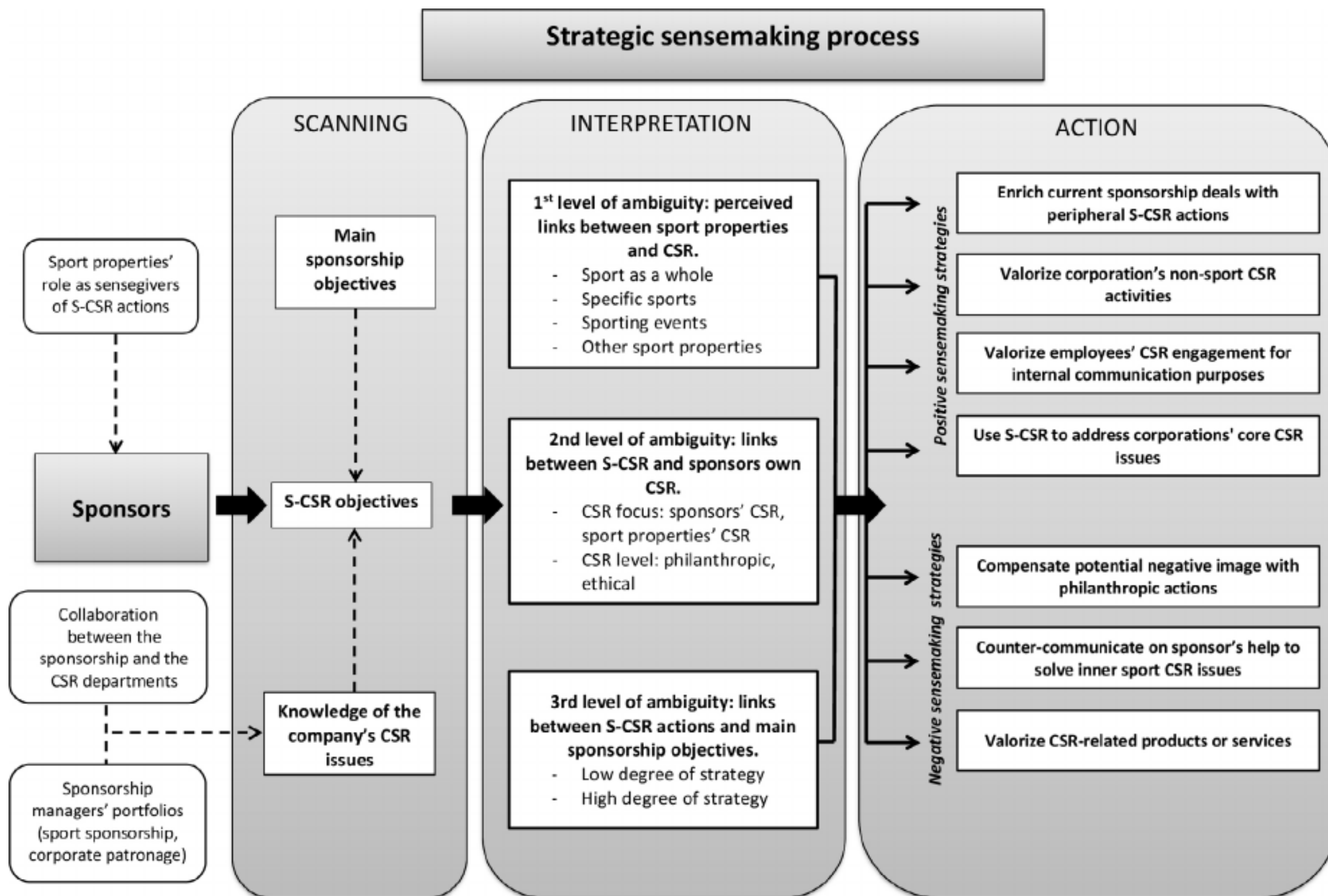
6. Discussion

This research follows the work of [Smith and Westerbeek \(2007\)](#), [Plewa and Quester \(2011\)](#), and [Dowling et al. \(2013\)](#) in seeking to understand why corporate sponsors engage in sport-related CSR and how they align these engagements with their broader sponsorship objectives. Our intention was to explore how these sponsors make sense of S-CSR, given the ambiguity of this concept on the one hand, and the variety of their corporate contexts on the other. Drawing on the three stages of strategic sensemaking, namely scanning, interpretation, and action ([Thomas et al., 1993](#)), we explored how their perceptions were formed, interpreted, and used for the elaboration of various strategies. Our analysis provides a process model ([Fig. 1](#)), which identifies seven S-CSR strategies, resulting from three levels of ambiguity through which information collected in the scanning phase are interpreted by sponsors. Furthermore, we identified several factors that influence the sensemaking process: sponsorship managers’ knowledge of their company’s own CSR, collaboration between the sponsorship and CSR departments, and the role of sports properties as sensegivers of S-CSR actions.

This research provides several new theoretical insights into CSR, S-CSR, and sports sponsorship literatures. The first is related to our use of both the stakeholder-defined and the sensemaking approaches of CSR. General CSR literature has often viewed CSR as a means to meet the expectations of an organization’s stakeholders ([Angus-Leppan et al., 2010](#)). It has also been the case in S-CSR literature, as [Babiak and Wolfe \(2009\)](#) identified stakeholders’ pressures as external CSR determinants for sport organizations. Unlike these works, this study adopts a stakeholder-defined CSR approach ([Hillenbrand et al., 2012](#)) that reverses the analysis, in order to understand how stakeholders’ expectations take shape. Furthermore, by exploring S-CSR actions as subtle and variable meaning constructions involving the alignment of both sponsors’ and sports properties’ goals, the sensemaking approach sketches out a bridge between two research streams, namely the analysis of CSR within sport organizations ([Babiak & Wolfe, 2009](#); [Bradish & Cronin, 2009](#); [Godfrey, 2009](#); [Walker & Parent, 2010](#)) and the more recent analysis of CSR through sport organizations ([Dowling et al., 2013](#); [Smith & Westerbeek, 2007](#); [Walters, 2009](#)).

Concerning more specifically S-CSR literature, we found that most S-CSR actions in our sample referred to the philanthropic level of CSR ([Carroll, 1979, 1991](#)), which is consistent with the works of [Babiak & Wolfe \(2006\)](#) and [Walker and Parent \(2010\)](#). However, our study provides additional insight on the plurality of the social responsibilities expressed through these actions. Indeed, by examining the different layers of S-CSR ambiguity, we show that the sense of the message conveyed by S-CSR actions varies considerably depending on their focus (sports properties’ or sponsors’ CSR) and level (philanthropic or ethical). Besides, as CSR has progressed to become a strategic management tool, the relevance of philanthropic actions can be questioned, notably because of their discontinuity. They may notably give the negative impression that sponsors’ decisions can only be made from the catalog of causes put at their disposal. This is why an interesting element of our study is that several sponsors in our sample opted for S-CSR strategies that are either more continuous or more closely linked to core CSR issues. Some of them even built real paths with ethical CSR, either by focusing on sports properties (e.g., FDJ) or on the sponsors themselves (e.g., Ferrero and RATP).

Concerning the sports sponsorship literature, our analysis provides a twofold contribution to knowledge. The first is that most academic works have analyzed S-CSR from a traditional view of sponsorship, considering sport properties as a CSR vehicle ([Walters, 2009](#)), due to the transfer of their positive image to sponsors’ image. For this reason, [Smith and Westerbeek \(2007\)](#) noted that “corporate relationships with sport organizations that do not have documented policies outlining [CSR] should be avoided” (p. 48). Contrary to this view, our results show that some sponsors develop S-CSR strategies based on their negative perceptions of sports properties’ CSR; paradoxically, such strategies are sometimes even more refined than



Sponsors' strategic sensemaking process of S-CSR.

those based on the conventional transfer pattern. For example, by putting itself at the forefront of the fight against doping, FDJ has actually generated a reverse transfer: it is its own image as a sponsor committed to sporting ethics that is transferred to the image of its sport property. As a result, FDJ's team is often considered to be "the cleanest" in the Tour de France. For other sponsors, the advent of CSR problematics in sport is even seen as an opportunity to advertise their products or services. This strategy notably came to the fore during the 2012 Olympic Games in London, when the organizing committee launched a "sustainable partners" sponsorship program, leading several companies like BT, Cisco, and BMW to propose various sustainability solutions for the event. This study shows that such strategies can also be carried out in non-mega sporting events, which suggests that they may become a widespread type of sports partnerships.

Our second contribution is that, while the extant literature has essentially considered sponsors' S-CSR rationale through broad corporate image purpose (Farrelly & Geyser, 2007; Misener & Mason, 2010), we evidence further specific S-CSR objectives. Indeed, some of the seven strategies that we identified far exceed image considerations, as sponsors can use S-CSR to address their core CSR issues, build trade relations, or advertise CSR-related products or services. Furthermore, in line with more recent works (Dowling et al., 2013; Plewa & Quester, 2011), we found that corporations could aim at distinct targets through S-CSR, namely specific categories of employees (like women for Carrefour or Renault), specific consumers segments (like children for Ferrero), and public authorities (as is the case for Lyonnaise des Eaux).

This research also has practical implications for sports partnership managers. As noted by Chadwick and Thwaites (2005), a growing number of corporations have entered into a rationalization phase of sports sponsorship deals, notably following increases in their financial value. At the same time, the growing necessity to communicate on CSR tends to weigh down their communication budget. In this context, our study follows the observations made by Dowling et al. (2013) and Seguin et al. (2010) that S-CSR provides "a subtly different type of active support to [sport organizations] rather than passively offering financial input" (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 281). Indeed, S-CSR partnership activations often have limited costs in the sense that corporations essentially share their expertise, as shown by the example of Lyonnaise des Eaux, which simply uses its competences in domestic water management to contribute to the sustainability of its partnered triathlons.

Another implication relates to the strong need for sports partnerships managers to develop a good understanding of their company's CSR. Indeed, the more refined strategies appear to be built by managers who have frequent contacts with the CSR department, or by managers whose attributions include both sports partnerships and corporate philanthropy. This may be explained by the fact that these managers are better able to align sports properties' CSR goals with their own CSR and commercial objectives. In this regard, we found interesting differences between corporations from the same sector. For

instance, the six banks in our sample have contrasting S-CSR strategies. Along a continuum from a low to high degree of strategy, LCL would be at the low end, because it only responds to ad hoc requests from its sports properties, resulting in disconnected S-CSR actions. At the other end of the continuum is Banque Populaire, whose sponsorship manager has developed a strong CSR background. As a consequence, he centered the company's S-CSR strategies on its own CSR values of 'a bank for solidarity', by financing the construction of sailboats for the democratization of sailing.

A last managerial implication relates to the choice of partnered sports properties. Only six sponsors in our sample specifically chose their sports properties to achieve S-CSR objectives. A first reason is that, as indicated by most interviewees, S-CSR is only a secondary concern. A second reason is that several sponsors in our sample have a longtime relationship with their sports properties. According to Olson and Thjomøe (2011), the length of a deal is a major success factor for sponsorship, and it would seem risky for sponsors to end longtime partnerships on the grounds that sport properties are criticized over their CSR aspects. Thus, a first solution for managers lies in the three negative sensemaking strategies that we identified, because such strategies allow sponsors to improve the CSR image of their sports properties without losing the brand awareness created through these partnerships. Another way for managers is to maintain deep-rooted partnerships to pursue traditional sponsorship objectives, whilst entering new sports partnerships especially designed for S-CSR. An example is Société Générale (banking), sponsor of the French Rugby Federation for more than 30 years, which decided to partner with the French Handisport Federation in order to add a CSR dimension to its communication through sports.

7. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

This research is intended to contribute to the understanding of the complexities of S-CSR. However, several limitations have to be acknowledged. Furthermore, given its exploratory nature, this study suggests several avenues for future research.

First, our results seem to indicate that because of sponsors' CSR imperatives, some sports or sports properties that have a bad CSR reputation may have a diminishing range of sponsorship opportunities. This observation evidently calls for some nuance, as we only interviewed sponsors engaged in S-CSR. Many other sponsors are not. On the contrary, some use sports partnerships to enhance specific dimensions of their brand personality, such as excitement or ruggedness (Lee & Cho, 2009), which are far removed from CSR values.

Second, the objective of this study was to gather insights from multiple cases rather than multiple insights from a smaller number of cases. Yet, as S-CSR is carried out through partnerships involving not only the sponsors, but also their sports properties, we offer only a partial view of the strategies that are elaborated. Future research should therefore integrate the view of sport properties about such partnerships that induce potential evolutions in their relationships with corporate partners. Besides, as some sports partnerships managers have been found to work closely with their company's CSR departments, more detailed case studies, including interviews with CSR managers concerned by sports partnerships, should also be on the research agenda.

Third, this study does not make systematic comparisons between companies within the same sectors, mainly because of the difficulty in accessing interviews (i.e., the return rate of interview requests was 32%). Future research could therefore seek to provide deeper comparisons in order to identify patterns linking S-CSR strategies to companies' characteristics.

Lastly, sport-related CSR cannot be reduced to partnerships between sponsors and sports properties, because many other stakeholders are also involved, such as public authorities and NGOs. Thus, we argue that the sensemaking perspective may constitute a fruitful theoretical basis to explore multi-stakeholder perceptions in order to advance toward a stakeholder-defined S-CSR.

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