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David Painter
dpainter@rollins.edu

Brittani Sahn
Rollins College, bsahm@rollins.edu

Paul Schattschneider
Rollins College, pschattshneider@rollins.edu

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Framing Sports' Corporate Social Responsibility:
U.S. Women's vs. Men's Soccer Leagues

David Lynn Painter, Ph.D.

Brittani Sahn, Ph.D.

Department of Communication

Rollins College

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Framing Sports' Corporate Social Responsibility:

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Abstract

Purpose - This investigation's purpose is to compare coverage of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) behaviors of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) and Major League Soccer (MLS). The goals are (1) to extend CSR analyses beyond organizational reports, and (2) to compare coverage of professional sports teams' CSR behaviors across genders.

Design/methodology/approach - Specifically, this quantitative content analysis compared local newspaper coverage of the socially responsible behaviors of the three NWSL and MLS teams owned and operated by the same organizations in Portland, Houston, and Orlando.

Findings - The NWSL teams received significantly less and more negative coverage than the MLS teams. Moreover, the NWSL coverage was more individualistic, more focused on ethics, and quoted individual team players more frequently, while the MLS coverage was more collective, focused on philanthropy, and quoted team organization members more frequently.

Research limitations/implications – Although intentionally based on a sample of six teams, this study's results suggest the biases in coverage of women's sports teams extend beyond the playing field to their corporate social responsibility behaviors, reporting, and news coverage.

Originality/value –As one of the first studies to analyze media coverage of professional sports team's CSR activities and to compare their socially responsible behaviors across genders, the results provide compelling implications for CSR scholars and practitioners, especially in the sports industry.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, professional sports industry, National Women's Soccer League, Major League Soccer

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Framing Sports' Corporate Social Responsibility:

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In the U.S., professional soccer is the fourth most popular sport, generating more than \$1 billion in 2018, and expanding more rapidly than other professional sports (Lea, 2020; Ruthven, 2020). Like other Professional Team Sports Organizations (PTSOs), these soccer teams are business that are dependent upon stakeholders in their host cities (Siegfried & Zimbalist, 2000), so they engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to build relationships with this key public (e.g. Du *et al.*, 2007; Fombrun *et al.*, 2000; Sen *et al.*, 2006). Compared to other businesses, however, PTSOs are under more intense media scrutiny making their socially responsible behaviors particularly salient and influential (Walzel *et al.*, 2018).

Indeed, most people learn about an organizations' CSR behaviors from the news media (Marketing Charts, 2018), and questions about gender disparities animate a line of sports communication research (e.g., Koivula, 1999; Messner *et al.*, 2010; Musto *et al.*, 2017). However, studies analyzing PTSOs' CSR coverage are limited, and we were unable to locate any that included women's teams. This lack of research is a concern because the sports industry is one of the most influential business sectors, shaping public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors on a wide range of issues (McGowan and Mahon, 2009). To help fill this gap in the research, this study analyzes CSR coverage of both women's and men's PTSOs. Specifically, we compared the quantity, tone, and framing of local newspapers' coverage of three NWSL and MLS teams' economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic activities between 2016 and 2019.

Evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility

As stakeholders have become more concerned about brands' socially responsible behaviors, scholars definitions of CSR have become more robust. In particular, Carroll's (1991;

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2016) conceptualization has evolved to include four types of CSR activities or issues. These CSR issues include the organization's: (1) economic responsibilities that keep it operational; (2) legal responsibilities to societal stakeholders; (3) ethical responsibilities to comply with society's evolving normative standards; and (4) philanthropic responsibilities (i.e., monetary and in-kind contributions to local service organizations) that demonstrate good corporate citizenship. We adapted this typology as our theoretical framework because it classifies the CSR issues and socially responsible behaviors into four categories that can be compared across the NWSL and MLS teams at the center of our analysis.

Although Carroll (1979) originally suggested that the four types of CSR issues were sequential or hierarchical and depicted as a pyramid, he later revised them as more dynamic and recursive, noting that stakeholders expect all the organization's CSR activities to promote morally good ends (Carroll, 2016). This infusion of ethics may become problematic, however, when it conflicts with the organization's economic or legal requirements. While PTSOs have been contending with such competing issues for decades, recent news coverage of some practices, such as the unequal treatment of women athletes, has become particularly salient.

Ethics and Sport Teams' CSR Practices

Controversial practices are rife in professional sports, but PTSOs and entities that work within the system (e.g., news and sports media) have an established framework for treating those who do not conform to traditional hegemonic standards (Fink, 2015; Tuggle and Owen, 1999; Vincent, 2004). Of particular concern in this study is that women's PTSOs and athletes receive less media coverage and smaller attendance numbers than men's PTSOs and athletes, despite the increasing numbers of women participating in sports overall (e.g., Cooky *et al.*, 2015).

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Since women's sports competitions are frequently labeled as less entertaining and profitable due to their lower television ratings than men's sports events, they are often designated as niche events. This characterization is also used to justify paying women athletes less than men athletes in the same sport and sometimes within the same organizations. Specifically, the ethicality of PTSO's business decisions involving professional women soccer players' has come under intense scrutiny since at least 2019 when the U.S. Women's National Team (USWNT) filed two lawsuits against U.S. Soccer, which owns and operates the USWNT and the U.S. Men's National Team (USMNT). Further, U.S. Soccer's leadership has changed due in large part to allegations in the lawsuits while the success of the USWNT at World Cup competitions has heightened media attention. Thus, analyzing how the media covers these PTSO's socially responsible behaviors may provide insights into the framing of women and men professional soccer players as well as their potential influences on stakeholders' perceptions.

News Coverage of Sport Teams' CSR

An emerging body of research has analyzed PTSOs' CSR activities (Breitbarth *et al.*, 2015; Paramio-Salcines *et al.*, 2013; Valeri, 2019). The results of these studies suggest that most PTSOs' CSR efforts center on philanthropy (Inoue *et al.*, 2011) and are designed to cultivate stakeholder relationships, especially in their host cities (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Moreover, PTSOs receive much greater media coverage than other businesses, which has at least three effects on CSR behaviors, stakeholder relationships, and the media coverage.

First, this heightened media attention increases stakeholders' expectations that PTSOs will engage in socially responsible behaviors, particularly in their local communities (Heinze *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, since these PTSOs' names frequently pay homage to a characteristic unique to their communities (Heere & James, 2007), they become symbols of civic pride,

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making CSR an important tool for maintaining local stakeholder relationships that are critical for their financial success and longevity (Sheth and Babiak, 2010). Second, this constant scrutiny may foster more positive CSR coverage, especially during crises. For instance, as Hurricane Irma approached Florida, the Florida Panthers, a National Hockey League (NHL) team based in Broward County, donated more than \$1 million to relief efforts and offered its arena to house and feed thousands of electrical power workers (Fortunato, 2018). Third, many sports teams and leagues conduct CSR as part of their issue and crisis management processes. For example, in response to increasing occurrences of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain disease, among NFL athletes, the league has funded research and promoted its efforts to prevent such injuries (NFL, 2012).

In addition to engaging in socially responsible behaviors, PTSOs' must also garner media coverage of their CSR activities to shape public discourse as well as stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Tam, 2019; Tang, 2012). Due to the lack of studies analyzing PTSOs' CSR coverage, however, scholars have called for more analyses to determine how a variety of factors may influence its quantity and quality (Carroll, 2011; Kim et al., 2018). In particular, we wanted to analyze the host cities' newspaper coverage of their MLS and NWSL teams' socially behaviors because they are important information sources for local stakeholders whose relationships with these PTSOs determine their success (Delaney & Eckstein, 2008; Kim & Lowrey 2017; Sheth and Babiak, 2010; Singer, 2001). The goal of this analysis is not only to better understand how PTSOs' CSR activities are portrayed, but also to provide suggestions for increasing gender equity in the reporting.

Gendered Sports Media Coverage

Overall, there appears to be a consensus that male PTSOs and athletes receive more media coverage than female PTSOs and athletes (e.g., Fink, 2015; French, 2013; Godoy-Pressland, 2014). Of particular interest in this study, MLS games receive much greater airtime than NWSL games. Whether due to the athletes' genders, popularity, or perceived entertainment value, this inequity results in women's PTSOs receiving significantly less media coverage than men's PTSOs. This inequity could lead one to expect that the men's teams would receive more CSR coverage than the women's teams.

On the other hand, the USWNT won the last two FIFA Women's World Cups while their male counterparts were much less successful, and most of the USWNT players are also on the NWSL rosters. Thus, professional soccer could be the exception to this gendered sports coverage trend. That is, NWSL and USWNT players such as Megan Rapinoe and Carli Lloyd are probably better known than top MLS and USMNT players such as Jordan Morris and Walker Zimmerman, so their heightened celebrity might make them more newsworthy. However, the lack of prior studies comparing CSR coverage between women's and men's PTSOs means there is no basis for formulating predictions, so we asked:

RQ1: How frequently did the NWSL teams receive CSR coverage compared to the MLS teams?

In addition to quantity, we also wanted to compare the tone of the CSR coverage between the women's and men's PTSOs. The results of prior research across a wide range of industries indicates the tone of CSR coverage is mixed (Byun and Oh, 2018; Carroll, 2011; Cahan *et al.*, 2015; Lee and Riffe, 2017; Lunenberg *et al.*, 2016). When it comes to coverage of PTSOs' socially responsible behaviors, however, there is a basis for expecting differences dependent

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upon the athletes' genders because women athletes receive less positive coverage than men athletes in terms of their athleticism, skill, and entertainment value (Kian and Hardin, 2009; Seay, 2011). Thus we asked:

RQ2: What was the tone of the NWSL and MLS teams' CSR coverage?

Beyond quantity and tone, we also wanted to compare the framing of the NWSL and MLS teams' CSR coverage. Framing is one of the most-used frameworks for analyzing both the content and the effects of news coverage. In short, Tewksbury and Shefuele (2009) explain that framing refers to the ways in which journalists use central organizing ideas to define and give meaning to the events, issues, and individuals they cover. Specifically, these journalistic frames may make particular aspects of the PTSOs' CSR activities more or less salient and/or pass judgment on them (Entman, 1993). For example, the stories could highlight a PTSO's good works, or they could speculate about the organization's ulterior motives (Tam, 2019), and they could differ dependent upon the athletes' genders (Eastman and Billings, 2000).

To analyze issue framing, we wanted to compare the frequency each CSR activity (i.e., economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) was used as the dominant issue in stories about the NWSL and MLS teams. The rationale for this inquiry stems from research indicating that philanthropy is the most expected, frequent, and well-known PTSO CSR activity (Sheth and Babiak, 2010), but that there are significant differences across U.S. men's professional sports leagues (Erickson, 2017). Thus, we asked:

RQ3: What activities were used as issue frames in the NWSL and MLS teams' CSR coverage?

Next, we wanted to explore how the coverage focused on either individual players or the collective PTSO. This inquiry is based on research indicating that female athletes who participate

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in individual and stereotypically feminine sports such as tennis or ice skating receive more frequent and more positive media coverage than women who play more aggressive and traditionally masculine team sports such as soccer or basketball (Fink, 2015; Tuggle and Owen, 1999; Vincent, 2004). These findings could support an expectation that the NWSL coverage would focus on individual players less frequently than the MLS coverage. However, as previously mentioned, the NWSL players are more successful, and thus more recognizable, than their MLS counterparts in World Cup competitions. Since no prior research has compared the individual or collective focus of PTSOs' CSR coverage across genders, however, we asked:

RQ4: How frequently did the NWSL teams' CSR coverage focus on individual players' or collective teams' behaviors compared to the MLS teams' CSR coverage?

Finally, we wanted to explore the journalists' use of source frames in their coverage of the U.S. soccer teams' CSR behaviors. Sources are important frames that act as "primary definers," providing subjective perspectives and constructing specific interpretations of the events and individuals in the coverage (Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 59). In terms of CSR coverage, research suggests that different sources may also determine the other frames used in the stories (Du *et al.*, 2007). Thus, we asked:

RQ5: How were source frames used in the NWSL and MLS teams' CSR coverage?

Method

Sample

To answer the research questions, the sample of NWSL and MLS teams chosen for this project represented three different cities regionally distributed across the United States: the Portland Thorns and Timbers (Oregon), Houston Dash and Dynamo (Texas), and Orlando Pride and City (Florida). This six-team sample was purposefully selected to ensure the teams were

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owned and operated by the same private equity firms, resulting in shared host cities as well as organizational structures and practices.

In terms of these team's national importance, their fanbases reflected their levels of success. First, the Portland Thorns had the highest attendance of any NWSL team, and the Portland Timbers placed fourth out of the 26 MLS teams in 2019 (Soccer Stadium Digest, 2019a, b). Orlando City ranked seventh out of 26 MLS teams while the Orlando Pride ranked fifth out of nine NWSL teams, even though the Pride's roster featured some of the most famous women's soccer players in the world, including World Champions and Olympic Gold Medalists Ashlynn Harris, Alex Morgan, Sydney Leroux, and Ali Krieger as well as international record holder Marta Vieira da Silva (Soccer Stadium Digest, 2019a, b). The Houston teams, however, had less success and lower game attendance numbers, with the Dash ranking eighth out of nine NWSL teams and the Dynamos ranking 20 out of 28 teams in 2019 (Soccer Stadium Digest, 2019a, b).

Data

Next, using the *America's News* database, an exhaustive search was conducted for stories about each team's CSR-related behaviors between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2019 in their local newspapers: *The Oregonian*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Orlando Sentinel*. These Boolean searches included each team's name on line one and a series of keywords including corporate, social, and responsibility as well as other terms associated with Carroll's (1991; 2016) CSR typology on line two: (1) economic as well as financial, money, revenue, owner, partner, investor, stakeholder; (2) legal as well as law, justice, court; (3) ethics and diversity, fair, inclusion, responsibility, environment, sustainability; (4) philanthropy and charity, donate, nonprofit, fundraiser, and community (Walzel et al., 2018). After the searches were completed, 1071 articles were collected and reviewed to eliminate stories that duplicate or only incidentally

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(three times or fewer) mentioned the team, player/organization member, or a CSR activity. This process produced a population or universe of 273 articles, all of which were coded.

Coding Protocol

Each article was considered a single unit of analysis and was coded for mentions and prominence of teams, leagues, and players/organization members as well as CSR issue and source frames. Specifically, the most prominent NWSL or MLS team in each story was coded based on mention counts, especially in the headline, lede, and image captions. To determine whether the tone of each story was positive, neutral, or negative, coders assumed that the coverage was factual and neutral unless specific words, especially in the headline, lede, and image captions, were used. For example, words such as asset, benefits, gain, growth, honor, inspiration, success, and win honor were considered positive while words such as arrest, failure, liability, loss, unequal, and unfair were considered negative words. Unless the article was overwhelmingly either positive or negative, however, it was coded as neutral/objective/mixed.

Next, the coders determined which CSR activity or issue was the most prominent in each article. The CSR activity or issue frame categories were drawn from Carroll's (1991; 2016) typology: (1) economic (e.g., revenue generated, game attendance and/or viewership, economic development); (2) legal (e.g., compliance with or deviance from laws/regulations); (3) ethical (e.g., promoting more honorable practices, especially regarding diversity, inclusion, fairness, and equality or engaging in morally questionable behavior); or (4) philanthropy (e.g., donating money or resources to charities, nonprofits, or underserved populations as well as involvement in community or social issue events/organizations). To code for individual or collective frames, the coders determined whether an individual team player or organization member was the focus of each story or whether it focused on the collective team. To analyze how the coverage used

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source frames, coders noted the presence or absence of sources, and the most prominent source in each story: no quote, team organization member, team player, CSR benefactor, or other.

Intercoder Reliability

Two trained and independent coders double-coded 25% of the total sample. Intercoder reliability was determined using Krippendorff's alpha and Cronbach's alpha. The reliabilities ranged from 0.84 to 1.0, with an average alpha score of .92, suggesting the results were reliable.

Results

The first research question asked how frequently the NWSL teams received CSR coverage compared to the MLS teams. To answer this question, cross-tabulations with Pearson's chi-square coefficient for team mentions and prominence by league were conducted. The results indicated that MLS teams were mentioned significantly more frequently than NWSL teams, $X^2(1, N = 273) = 19.52, p < .01$. As shown in the Table 1, MLS teams were mentioned in 75% of the stories while NWSL teams were mentioned in 63% of the stories. Likewise, the MLS teams were the most prominent in 67% of the coverage while the NWSL teams were the most prominent in 33% of the coverage, and this difference was also significant, $X^2(1, N = 273) = 31.68, p < .01$.

Table 1: Team and League Mentions and Prominence

	Mentioned		Prominent		Total
	NWSL	MLS	NWSL	MLS	
Houston Chronicle	32	30	20	28	48
Orlando Sentinel	49	80	33	68	101
Portland Oregonian	91	95	37	87	124
Total	172	205	90	183	273

The second research question asked about the tone of the CSR coverage across the leagues, and the results of a cross-tabulation with Pearson's chi-square coefficient indicated that the NWSL coverage was significantly less positive, more neutral, and more negative than the

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MLS coverage, $X^2(2, N = 273) = 12.85, p < .01$. As shown in Table 2, 64% of the MLS coverage but only 43% of the NWSL coverage was positive, with typical stories describing how the teams' economic impact or involvement with nonprofit organizations was inspirational, supportive, and/or beneficial to the local community. Additionally, 44% of the NWSL but only 33% of the MLS coverage was neutral and objectively described the teams' CSR activities. Finally, 13% of the NWSL but only 3% of the MLS coverage was negative, with typical stories describing players' bad behavior and the compensation disparities between MLS and NWSL players.

Table 2: Coverage tone by league (in percentages)

	NWSL (n = 90)	MLS (n = 183)	Total (N = 273)	df	X^2	p
Positive	43	64	58			
Neutral	44	33	35	2	12.85	.00
Negative	13	3	7			

The third research question inquired how CSR activities were used as issue frames in the NWSL and MLS teams' coverage. To answer this question, a cross-tabulation with Pearson's chi-square coefficient was conducted. The results indicated that the differences were significant, $X^2(6, N = 273) = 42.37, p < .01$. As shown in Table 3, the percentages of economic stories were similar across leagues, with most stories such as the one headlined, "Portland Timbers, Portland Thorns invest \$65,000 in Thomas Cully Park," describing the teams' actions designed to ensure their own and their host communities' financial development. While the legal stories were also relatively equally distributed across leagues, this type of CSR coverage was generally more negative. For example, stories about the police escorting NWSL Orlando Pride player Alex Morgan out of Disney World or two MLS Portland Timbers players being charged with DUI were representative of legal coverage.

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More compelling, however, was our finding that the NWSL coverage more frequently focused on ethics while the MLS coverage more frequently focused on philanthropy. For example, typical stories about the MLS teams more frequently and positively explained how the players partnered with local nonprofit organizations serving underserved or disadvantaged populations while typical stories about the NWSL teams more frequently and negatively focused on the ethics of the gender wage gap.

Table 3: CSR Activities by League (in percentages)

	NWSL (n = 90)	MLS (n = 183)	Total	df	X ²	p
Economic	42	40	41			
Legal	9	11	10	3	41.06	.00
Ethical	38	10	19			
Philanthropic	11	39	30			

The fourth research question inquired about the individual and collective frames used in the NWSL and MLS teams' CSR stories. To answer this question, a cross-tabulation with Pearson's chi-square coefficient was conducted. As shown in Table 4, the results indicated that 77% of the NWSL stories but only 64% of MLS stories focused on particular players, and this difference was significant, $X^2(1, N = 273) = 4.88, p < .05$.

Table 4: Individual vs. Collective Frames by League (in percentages)

	NWSL (n = 90)	MLS (n = 183)	Total (N = 273)	df	X ²	p
Individual	77	64	57			
Team	23	36	36	1	4.88	.03

The fifth research question asked how source frames were used in the NWSL and MLS teams' CSR coverage. To answer this question, a cross-tabulation with Pearson's chi-square coefficient was conducted. As shown in Table 5, team players were more frequently quoted in the NWSL coverage while team organization members and CSR benefactors were more frequently quoted in the MLS coverage.

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Table 5: Source Frames by League (in percentages)

	NWSL (n = 90)	MLS (n = 183)	Total	df	X ²	p
No Quote	6	5	5			
Organization Member	31	49	40			
Team Player	43	21	28	4	27.56	.00
CSR Benefactor	8	14	13			
Other	9	11	14			

Discussion

This study's purpose is to analyze the quantity, tone, and framing of women's and men's professional U.S. soccer teams' CSR behaviors. The results of our analysis suggest that the women's teams received less frequent and less positive coverage than the men's teams. Additionally, compared to NWSL teams, the MLS teams' coverage more frequently focused on positive CSR issues, with more stories framed in collective terms and more quotes from team organization sources rather than individual players. Since prior research on PTSOs' CSR coverage is scarce, and no analyses have included women's teams, these findings provide some compelling theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Implications

Our finding that the MLS teams' CSR coverage was more frequent and more positive than the NWSL teams' coverage aligns with prior research on PTSO's media coverage. (e.g., Bernstein, 2002; Cooky *et al.*, 2015). Theoretically, these results have largely been explained through the lens of hegemonic masculinity's impact on society. This ideology explains that masculinity – embodied by traits such as physical strength, aggression, and heterosexuality – is the dominant cultural force defining the behavior that is rewarded (Connell, 1987; 2005). However, women competing at the professional level in traditionally masculine team sports such as soccer may not be rewarded or recognized at the same level as men, even when they are more successful. In this system, hegemonic masculinity has punished women because they are

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violating the norms established by the dominant ideology. In other words, women's soccer athletes may be viewed as less feminine for participating and succeeding in a sport that requires speed, strength, and aggression and, as a result, may be viewed and portrayed less positively overall (e.g. Kaelberer, 2019). There is some evidence suggesting women generally are more accepted in sports today (e.g. Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014), but with lower overall attendance/viewership, marketing budgets, and salaries when compared to men's PTSOs, there are lingering negative effects of long-standing hegemonic masculine standards on society.

The differences in tone across the leagues may also be at least partially attributable to the CSR issue frames used in the coverage. Specifically, the philanthropy frame, which is generally very positive, was more common in the MLS coverage; in the NWSL coverage, however, ethical and salary issues, which frequently include more critical or negative statements, were more frequent. For example, a typical MLS story was about the Portland Timbers's philanthropic work with 32 community improvement projects focused on youth and environment during Stand Together Week (Goldberg, 2019). A representative story about the NWSL, on the other hand, was headlined: "Living the (separate, unequal) dream" and described the unethical nature of the gender pay gap (Gordon, 2016).

Moreover, although most CSR coverage across leagues was framed individually instead of collectively, the NWSL stories more frequently focused on individual players engaging in CSR activities rather than the collective team organization, as was the case in more of the MLS coverage. Further, we also found that team organization members were the most frequent source frame used in the MLS coverage, but that team players were the most frequent source frame in the NWSL coverage. Since source frames are such influential definers of the activities in the coverage, determining how it is portrayed and interpreted, these results reinforce our finding that

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the NWSL coverage more frequently focused on specific team players while the MLS coverage more frequently focused on the collective team organizations.

Since stories about individual player's activities do not align with PTSOs' collective natures and missions, these findings suggest that the NWSL's CSR coverage did not "fit" as well as the MLS coverage. Prior research indicates this lack of "fit" between the PTSOs and their CSR activities may result in coverage that stakeholders interpret differently (Lunenberg et al., 2016). That is, readers may attribute CSR stories featuring individuals' behaviors to ulterior and/or personal motives more than stories about team organizations engaging in similar activities. For instance, a typically positive philanthropic NWSL story described how two individual Orlando Pride players volunteered at an animal rescue organization, but also how their adoption of a puppy benefitted them personally (Simmons, 2017). Alternatively, positive philanthropic stories about MLS teams such as the one about Orlando City winning ESPN's Enspire Award focused on the team's collective organizational work supporting equality, diversity, and the LGBTQ community after the Pulse massacre (DelGallo, 2017).

These findings are important because research assessing the influence of PTSO's CSR and corporate social advocacy (CSA) strategies indicates that stakeholders are more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth about a sports entity when the activities are motivated by a team's efforts to give back and help society (Kim et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020). Thus, the collective MLS team's efforts to assist nonprofit organizations may be interpreted as genuine philanthropy while stakeholders may infer that the more individualistic NWSL stories are disconnected from the team's CSR activities and motivated by a desire to satisfy personal needs.

Our findings also provide insights into the coverage of women in traditionally male-dominated spaces. Specifically, when women are included in areas where they are not generally

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viewed as the norm (i.e., professional soccer teams), the ethical implications of their inclusion may dominate more of the coverage than their economic, legal, or philanthropic activities. However, even if the NWSL teams in this study were involved in philanthropy at the same level as MLS teams, they had fewer coverage opportunities, which may have led to stories about more newsworthy aspects of the group; in this case, women challenging hegemonic masculine standards in the professional sports industry. Greater coverage of these non-dominant perspectives is important, but they may hurt overall perceptions of the NWSL. When one of the main motivations for consuming sports is entertainment, coverage that does not fulfill that need can lead sport fans to disengage from associating with a team or sport (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Of course, more research needs to be conducted in this area to understand the actual impacts of CSR coverage on various stakeholder groups.

Practical Implications

In a practical sense, this research can be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps most importantly, the results describe how frames can be applied unequally across genders in the professional sports industry. Because frames shape perceptions, they may generate different impressions of athletes solely based on their gender. The potential for this result is found in NWSL's more negative coverage, which may elicit more negative perceptions of the women athletes, teams, and the league, particularly when they are more successful than the men. Thus, it is important to consider this study's implications in public relations terms.

Although there is abundant research on CSR, most studies of the sports industry have analyzed organizational reports, not media coverage, and focused on philanthropic efforts (Walzel et al., 2018). This study, on the other hand, analyzed local newspaper coverage of the PTSOs' CSR efforts because most people, including local stakeholders who determine the

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team's longevity, learn about these activities from the news media (Marketing Charts, 2018). Further, this study's findings highlight the diversity of sports CSR initiatives, indicating that practitioners, unlike scholars, are not solely focused on community service and philanthropy. Moreover, Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid indicates that the primary, most vital form of CSR is economics.

Across the leagues, most of the CSR coverage was framed around economic issues, which indicates good CSR fit, but it was also framed more individualistically than collectively, which indicates poor CSR fit. While news outlets may use their own lens to frame the organizations' CSR activities, the PTSOs' media relations efforts are important tools for shaping that coverage. This study's results indicate that the PTSOs made wise selections of CSR issues or activities since most coverage focused on economic activities across leagues. However, the PTSOs as well as journalists may need to be more cautious in their use of individualistic and ethical frames that generated more negative coverage of the NWSL teams.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study's findings are interesting, there are some important limitations that must be noted. First, this study analyzed local newspaper stories about three women's and three men's professional soccer teams to draw conclusions about the quantity, tone, and framing of NWSL and MLS teams' CSR coverage. While these teams and media outlets were intentionally selected, extrapolating these results to all professional soccer teams' CSR coverage should be done with caution. As with any research that relies on a sample to make inferences about a larger population, there may be other factors that were not examined in this study that could influence the coverage and analyses in different ways. Moreover, drawing conclusions about the potential

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influence of the content in the CSR coverage must also be approached with caution because this investigation did not analyze readers' responses to the stories analyzed.

In fact, future research combining a content analysis with a survey could measure the relationships among CSR coverage and readers' perceptions. Such research could provide some new and useful information for scholars and practitioners, dependent upon the ways in which it supported, refined, and/or revised current understandings of corporate social responsibility theories. Moreover, an experiment that tested different quantities, tones, and frames in CSR coverage could isolate the effects of these content elements and analyze their influences on viewers' cognitions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions.

Conclusion

Overall, this study provides relevant insights into the uses of frames in the coverage of men's and women's professional sports teams' CSR activities. The results of this study indicate there are some significant differences in the quantity, tone, and framing of the coverage between men's and women's soccer leagues. Although some variables not considered in this analysis could also be shaping the ways in which the media cover these leagues' CSR efforts, these differences provide some interesting implications for CSR as well as media framing theories and practices. In particular, this study's results indicate that, even in the realm of CSR, women's athletics continue to receive significantly less as well as less positively framed coverage than men's athletics.

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