The Effects of Gender and Race on Perceptions of Quality, Trustworthiness, and Expertise of Sport Journalists

A’naja Bass, California State University, East Bay
Beth Cianfrone, Georgia State University

Abstract 2014-298
Saturday, May 31, 2014
4:30 PM
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Carnegie III)

The sport media industry is an increasingly competitive field, yet is lacking in diversity. The 2012 Associated Press Sports Editors (ASPE) Racial and Gender Report Card showed the hiring practices for these outlets scored an overall D+ rating, with gender hiring practices earning an F, and racial hiring practices earning a C+ (Lapchick, 2013). The report indicated only 16.1% of ASPE columnists were people of color and 9.7% were women. These low numbers at the columnist level may reflect the general lack of diversity of editors, who have control of the hiring practices. It may also be indicative of issues related to gender and race social roles (e.g., role congruity theory or social identity theory). Women and people of color may be perceived as less credible. It is worthwhile to consider the consumer perspective to see if the readers’ perceptions of sport columnists are gender or race related, which may be impacting the hiring practices. Research is needed in the area of quality and credibility, as they are critical traits of sport journalists. The purpose of this study was to determine if readers perceive differences in sport journalists’ quality or credibility (expertise and trustworthiness) based on the journalists’ gender and race.

Literature Review

Research suggests that the attitude an audience has toward a communicator plays a role in the effectiveness of the communication. The source credibility theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953) states that people are more likely to internalize information when it is presented by a source in which they believe is credible. The effectiveness of a message relies on the expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the source. These three elements can apply to sport journalists and an audience’s perception of journalists may be attributed to credibility. Source credibility literature has indicated that in general, expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness have a positive impact on effectiveness and positive perceptions (e.g., Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008; Ohanian, 1990). Thus, it is important that consumers perceive a sport journalist as credible if he or she wishes to be successful in the field. These elements have been studied in sport journalism. Hardin and Shane (2005) found 85% of women working in the sports journalism field feel as though they are not considered credible because of their gender. Female sportscasters have been considered by both male and female audiences as less authoritative (Etling & Young, 2007). Additionally, the perceptions about the sport itself may influence the audience perceptions. Mastro, Seate, Blecha, and Gallegos (2012) found that norms/stereotypes about gender, race, and sports can influence the perceptions of news reporters and the value of the information they provide. White male reporters were rated favorably in terms of expertise and deemed more likeable when the sport was thought to be typically a white, male sport (e.g., hockey). The same was true for white females. In fact, the white reporters were judged favorably on a consistent basis. Finally, Baiocchi-Wagner and Behm-Morwatz (2010) investigated audience perceptions (credibility and expertise) of female sport reporters using the social-identity theory to determine quality level. Using an experimental design, they provided a news article with a male author name compared to a female name. Their findings contradicted earlier studies with no significant differences in audience perceptions of sport journalists (female reporters were no less credible than male reporters). This could be positive news for females entering the sport journalism field; however, further analysis is needed. The study only included name changes of the news articles and did not assess race. Using photos of journalists may elicit a different response from an audience. Therefore, our study focused on a visual manipulation and measured differences in audience perception through the source credibility model to evaluate the extent to which sport consumers perceive women and persons of color as quality and credible in sport journalism roles.

Method

A total of 236 participants were recruited via academic courses at a large metropolitan university. Participants of the study were African-American (36.8%), non-Hispanic White (36.2%), or other minority (27.0%). Females constituted
55.1% of the sample population. The mean age of the participants was 24 years old (SD = 4.0) and about half were undergraduate students (55.9%).

Design

To measure the effects of race and gender of journalists on perceived quality, expertise, and trustworthiness, we utilized a sports news article as the manipulation, with a four group comparison with white male, white female, black male, and black female columnists. Participants (n = 236) read a sports article and completed a 27-item survey critiquing the article. Participants were randomly provided the same sports article, with either a (a) white female columnist (n = 55), (b) white male columnist (n = 55), (c) black male columnist (n = 52), or (d) black female columnist (n = 72). The article discussed the state of college athletics and football and was written by an award winning journalist in a major news outlet (USA Today). The byline of the article included a fake author headshot photograph (white male, white female, black male, or black female) and fake name (“P. Johnson”), without a news source name to reduce potential impact on credibility (Andsadger & Mastin, 2003).

Instrument

A 27-item survey was developed to measure the quality of the article (8 original items), expertise of the author (3 items from Ohanian’s Source Credibility Scale), trustworthiness of author (3 items; Ohanian), demographics (5 items), sport fandom level (3 items; Wann, 2002), and general sports information (5 items). Items were on a 7 point scale. As part of the instrument phase, a pilot study used Ohanian’s (1990) attractiveness scale to identify four photographs of equal moderate attractiveness levels, to account for that influence.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics for each section were calculated. ANCOVAs were run to determine differences in quality, expertise, and trustworthy between the four groups, controlling for fandom. MANCOVAs were conducted to determine if there were any differences in consumer perception of sport journalists based on the race and gender of the reader.

Initial Findings/Discussion

While the analysis is still in progress, a preliminary examination suggests the effect that gender and race of the journalists independently did not impact the perception of the quality, trust, or expertise. Female columnists (white and black females) were perceived as more trustworthy, more credible, and rated nearly the same on quality as the men. White journalists were perceived as more trustworthy, more credible, and more quality than black journalists. However, the findings were statistically insignificant. The full findings will reveal the differences in perceived journalist quality, trustworthiness, and credibility based on the four groups (white male, white female, black male, black female) and reader race/gender. By examining this information, it can be determined if women and persons of color are being alienated from particular leadership positions in sport journalism unjustly. Implications of the study may provide a sense of the consumer perspective and influence the future of sport media by providing scholars with tangible evidence of consumer perceptions, which may influence future employers’ opinions in hiring. It also may dictate diversity training needs in both the industry and for future industry leaders in sport management or journalism academic programs.