“It’s All in How You Say It” The Influence of Fundamentalism, Framing, and Sport Endorser on Promoting Ally Behavior

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Data from large-scale national polls suggest that people are becoming more accepting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) inclusion. In fact, today a majority of Americans polled have favorable attitudes toward sexual minorities. The noticeable improvement in public opinion is perhaps why 94% of Fortune 100 companies now have non-discriminatory policies directed toward sexual orientation, over 50% of states have marriage equality, and an increasing amount of municipalities have enacted laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. The shifting attitudes have also impacted the level of inclusion for sexual minorities within sport (Cunningham, 2012). Indeed, there has been a tremendous rise in the number of LGBT athletes who have publically disclosed their sexual orientation; sport organizations at all levels and in a variety of sports have created LGBT inclusion policies; and an increasing number of non-profit organizations have been established with the aim of reducing or ending homophobia and heterosexism within sport (Griffin, 2012).

Though strides have been made, heterosexism and instances of sexual prejudice continue to diminish the experiences of LGBT persons in sport (Cunningham, 2012)—particularly when these individuals live in less progressive cultural settings (Melton & Cunningham, 2012; Shang & Gill, 2012). For instance, lesbian basketball players in Melton and Cunningham’s (2012) qualitative inquiry shared how few people within their team or athletic department expressed support for LGBT inclusion. Often, these non-accepting attitudes stemmed from players or coaches who held strong religious beliefs. As a result, some of the women felt ashamed of their sexual orientation, isolated from the team, or the need to conceal their sexual identity. The findings in their study are consistent with research in other disciplines that quantitatively demonstrate that people who are religious fundamentalists, those who attend religious services on a regular basis, and individuals who belong to conservative religious entities are more likely to express sexual prejudice than are their peers (Schulte & Battle, 2004; Whitley, 2009). In fact, Whitley’s (2009) meta-analysis suggests that religious fundamentalism holds the strongest association with sexual prejudice.

While past research has established the linkage between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice (Herek, 2009), less attention focuses on what factors might influence these relationships (Cunningham & Melton, 2013). Of the work done in this area, research suggests people with anti-LGBT attitudes tend to change their opinions if people (who are similar to themselves) publically displayed more inclusive attitudes and behaviors. Bandura (1965), in presenting his social learning theory, noted, “virtually all learning phenomena, resulting from direct experience, can occur vicariously by observing other people’s behaviors and the consequences for them” (p. 19). Thus, when a teammate or coworker expresses explicit or implicit positive attitudes toward sexual minorities, it is likely that others in the organization will, as well. Melton and Cunningham’s (2014) observed such behavior in their research with sport employees working in a conservative athletic department.

Given the importance of creating inclusive sport environments in all contexts, the purpose of the current study is to understand how to garner support for a sport organization’s LGBT-inclusion initiative among individuals who live in less progressive settings. Drawing from the sexual prejudice literature, we expect that religious fundamentalism (RF) will negatively relate to support for an LGBT-inclusion initiative (H1). However, we anticipate that certain factors will moderate this relationship. For instance, framing literature suggests the emphasis of a message can influence a person’s opinion toward a topic (Holladay et al., 2003). In the context of diversity initiatives, organizations that fear backlash from prototypical employees (i.e., White, heterosexual, protestant, male, see Fink & Pastore, 1999) have used more general titles to describe diversity trainings or seminars. The rationale behind using a broader term, such as “Team Inclusion” instead of “LGBT Inclusion” is that doing so might increase employee buy-in to the value of training and decrease negative reactions to the topic. As such, we hypothesize that the message frame (MF) used to
promote an LGBT-inclusion initiative will moderate the impact of RF, such that those high in RF will be more likely to support an LGBT-inclusion initiative when a broad frame is used (inclusion benefits all people) than when a narrow frame is used (inclusion benefits LGBT individuals) (H2). We also expect that the person who endorses the message will influence one’s attitudes toward the initiative. Research suggests people in power positions can influence others to promote more inclusive behaviors. As such, we anticipate that the position (coach: player) of the person who endorses the initiative (H3) will moderate the relationship between RF and support.

Participants were students (N = 129) in sport management classes at a university in the Southwestern portion of the United States. Most of the participants were White (51.6 %), 30.6 % were Latino, 8.9 % African American, 3.2 % Asian American, 4.7 % identified with more than two races, 0.8 selected ‘other’ and five people did not respond. In addition, 53.9 % were male and 45.7 % were female.

The current study was part of a collaborative project with Athlete Ally—a 501c-3 nonprofit organization that provides public awareness campaigns, educational programming and resources to foster inclusive sport communities—to help the organization understand how they can gain support in conservative areas. We employed a 2 (MF: benefits all, benefits LGBT) x 2 (Endorser: coach, player) experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Participants voluntarily participated in the experiment. In all conditions, participants were given a 10-minute presentation on Athlete Ally. After learning about the organization, participants were told “an Athlete Ally can be any person — regardless of sexual orientation — who takes a stand against homophobia in sports and brings the message of respect, inclusion and equality to their community. Athlete Allies include competitive and recreational athletes as well as coaches, parents, teachers, league officials, sports fans, other sports participants and advocates around the globe.” If they were in the “benefits all” they were then read testimonies from heterosexual athletes, coaches, and fans about how inclusive sport environments benefit all participants and spectators, not just sexual minorities. If they were in the “benefits LGBT” condition they were then read testimonies from gay and lesbian athletes, coaches, and fans about how inclusive sport environments benefit LGBT participants and spectators. They were then handed information packets that reiterated the information they heard. The packet had a picture of an athletic department endorser and quote saying he was an Athlete Ally. The head football coach at the university was the coach endorser and a football player was the athlete endorser. After reviewing the packet, participants completed a questionnaire assessing level of university team identification (Trail & James, 2001; α = .9) and activist identification (Klar & Kasser, 2009; α = .94), RF (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; α = .81), intention to support the LGBT inclusion initiative (adapted from Weisel & Orit, 2006; α = .98) and demographic information.

Moderated regression was used to test all hypotheses. We entered the control variables (participant sex, activist ID, and fan ID) in Step 1, the main effects (standardized RF, MF, and endorser) in Step 2, and the RF x MF, RF x Endorser product terms in the Step 3. The controls accounted for 13.9% (p < .001) of the variance. After accounting for these effects, the first-order variables contributed an additional 16.8% (p < .001) of unique variance. In support of H1, RF was negatively associated with support (β = -.37, p < .001). The third step, which contained the two-way interaction terms, was also significant, and the variables contributed 9.7% (p < .001) of unique variance. The RF x MF was significant (β = .35, p = .002), though in the opposite direction than hypothesized. Fundamentalist were more likely to support the initiative when they heard the “benefits LGBT” message frame. The RF x Endorser was also significant (β = .20, p = .051), and not in the direction originally hypothesized. The religiously fundamentalist participants were more likely to support the initiative when the endorser was a player instead of a coach.

The findings provide both theoretical and practical contributions. While past research shows athletes are effective endorsers for consumer products, the current results suggest athletes showing support for social causes can also influence fans’ attitudes and behaviors. In addition, the way the initiative is framed can meaningful impact support for a social cause.