Stakeholders’ Twitter Reactions to An Athlete’s Transgression: A Case Study of Kevin Pillar’s Homophobic Slur

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Toronto Blue Jays’ (Major League Baseball) center fielder Kevin Pillar is one of the team’s beloved players. During a game against the Atlanta Braves in May 2017, Pillar used a homophobic slur to refer to the opposing team’s pitcher. The next day, the Blue Jays released a statement and Pillar issued an apology, both via Twitter. Pillar was suspended two games by the team and he donated his salaries for those games to two LGBTQ related charities (You Can Play Project and PFLAG).

Pillar’s slur can be considered as an athlete transgression, which refers to: “sport or non-sport related incidences that are atypical, and bring negative ramifications against stakeholders associated with the athlete” (Agyemang, 2011, p. 138). Athletes are a common point of attachment for sport fans (Robinson & Trail, 2005), which impact viewership and retail spending on teams (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). However, studies have shown that when athlete transgressions occur both on and off the field, there can be negative impacts on brand image and intent to purchase (Lohneiss & Hill, 2014), as well as team identification (Fink, Parker, Brett & Higgins, 2009).

Often, athlete transgressions are explored in regards to sponsorship and endorsement (Lee, Kwak & Moore, 2014; Wilson, Stavros & Westberg, 2008) and image repair (Hambrick, Frederick & Sanderson, 2015; Meng & Pan, 2013), which overlap with crisis management strategies and concerns. Few of these studies have explored the role of social media as a mediating source for stakeholders during and after a transgression (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2015). Research has shown social media plays an important role in building successful relationships with consumers (Pronschniske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014; Williams, Chinn & Suleiman, 2014). Additionally, social media provides consumers with more power to create discourses, as opposed to solely consuming discourses produced by organizations or other gatekeepers (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016). Twitter has been specifically used by sport consumers for immediate interaction and discussions over a sport’s season regarding sporting events and breaking news in real time (Gantz & Lewis, 2014; Reichart Smith & Smith, 2012). While some studies have explored athlete transgression and social media, a discourse analysis (DA) approach has not been implemented. DA has been used to uncover many taken-for-granted aspects of language (e.g., Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002; van Dijk, 2001). Specifically, critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be used to understand how language effectively supports or challenges cultural and social structures and processes (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to explore stakeholders’ Twitter reactions to Kevin Pillar’s homophobic slur. The research questions are 1) How did stakeholders react on Twitter to Pillar’s homophobic slur? 2) How does the language used in the tweets and statements contribute or challenge dominant discourses in sport?

The Toronto Blue Jays were used in a case study design to limit the focus to the stakeholders and social interactions of a particular team (Yin, 2009). Data was collected over the 2017 season using Visual Twitter Analytics (Vista) software (Hoeber, Hoeber, El Meseery, Odoh & Gopi, 2016). Vista collects live tweets during the season from individuals who are conversing about the players and the team. Using the queries #LetsRise (Blue Jays official hashtag for the 2017 season), #BlueJays, and @BlueJays, tweets were searched from the day Pillar said the slur to six days later, for a total of one week. Retweets and media tweets were removed resulting in 738 original tweets regarding the transgression. Following an inductive approach the data was first read and re-read to determine patterns of responses in the tweets. Next, specific tweets that represented different patterns were chosen for CDA. CDA was implemented using Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional analysis, which involves text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation), and social analysis (explanation).
Preliminary findings demonstrate that stakeholders have mixed reactions to a homophobic slur as an athlete transgression. Common responses included condemning the athlete, condemning the athlete then speaking to his good character, suggesting the slur was not an issue, and dismissing the situation. In some cases, stakeholders directly addressed the Blue Jays organization and/or Kevin Pillar by tagging them in tweets, while others made general statements. The language used in tweets demonstrated three patterns. The first pattern alluded to a changing sporting environment that has zero tolerance for ignorant actions (“@BlueJays Pillar’s remark to Motte was disgraceful. No place in the game for homophobic remarks. Shame.”). The second pattern involved defending the player (“It's easy to be skeptical of player apologies, but I truly believe Pillar is genuinely sincere, and regrets what he said. #BlueJays”). The last use of language reinforced and maintained that sport is not a welcoming place for the LGBTQ community (“@Kpillar4 @BlueJays Motte is a fag for that quick pitch tho! #freespeech”).

Not only does this study add another dimension to our knowledge of athlete transgression by using an on-field situation involving a homophobic slur, the findings inform practical strategies for sport management. For example, by anticipating stakeholder reactions to athlete transgressions, sport organizations can be better prepared to make statements and take actions that would be considered satisfactory. Furthermore, by exploring how language contributes to larger discourses, sport organizations can more carefully consider the ways in which they craft their statements and how it can contribute or challenge societal discourses.