Good Intentions or Self Serving Behavior? How the Media Frames Professional Athlete Philanthropy

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Management - CSR (Professional Sport)
Saturday, June 9, 2018
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 1:55 PM
Room: Acadia A

The transformative potential of philanthropy can bring attention to the need for social change. Celebrities such as professional athletes exercise tremendous influence over the public consciousness and this leads to access to public life, business, media and the charitable sector. Athletes like other celebrities, are becoming involved in social and political issues related to social justice, equity, health and well-being, and education (Babiak, Mills, Tainsky & Juravich, 2012; Ilicic & Baxter, 2014; Kim & Walker, 2013). This brings social and political power to athletes — and athletes shape themselves and their own brands through their philanthropic acts. Many athletes now have formalized charities (foundations) (Babiak, Heinze, Lee & Juravich, 2013) as well as support various social causes (e.g., Serena Williams’ support of gun control, educational inequity, and poverty (Perry, 2016)); and there is a growing industry of organizations emerging to support athletes in their charitable works (e.g., Athletes for Hope, Prolanthropy). However, despite seemingly good intentions in their philanthropic efforts, the representation of athletes in the media related to their charitable work varies widely. Some media reporters have criticized athlete philanthropy as not being authentic, that athletes put little actual time and effort into their foundations, and that their efforts are merely for the purpose of self-branding (Sandler, 2016).

The media plays a major role in shaping the discourse around athletes and their philanthropy – and this discourse can impact / influence athlete brand and identity, it can affect the organizations with which they are associated, as well as impacting the social causes they support. The purpose of this paper is to examine how discourses of professional athlete charities (i.e., formalized foundations) are represented in the media coverage of major US news and sport publications. In order to do so, the theoretical framework of media framing was used. Framing theory has its foundations in sociology and psychology and can be used as a paradigm for understanding and investigating communication and related behaviors (Rendahl, 1995). A media frame is made up of framing and reasoning devices, and it functions as a central organizing idea for news media content, which in turn, provides context and shapes experience for audiences (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Since framing can be employed by journalists as well as other elites, frames can have multiple ‘sponsors’ (Gamson, 1989). Through the use of a particular frame, sponsors are able to create meaning by emphasizing or excluding certain issue attributes (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1989). Framing can therefore be considered a dynamic process, as multiple sponsors may attempt to give an event or issue a certain spin (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). For the purpose of this study, framing is used as the theoretical framework as well as a mode of analysis.

Over 100 media articles were obtained from ten of the highest circulating newspapers in the United States, including the New York Times and LA Times, along with two prominent sport publications for 2000-2017, a time period which coincided with the growth of professional sport team charitable foundations (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Given that a frame finds expression in latent meaning structures which may not necessarily be directly perceived (Van Gorp, 2007), a modified version of content analysis (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), examining both manifest and latent content was employed. Each article was coded for basic characteristics including: newspaper source, date, staff reporter, section, article type, and key actors. Framing and reasoning devices such as keywords, metaphors, catchphrases, and problem definition/s were then identified. The main product of this analysis is an adapted frame matrix (Van Gorp, 2010) which will highlight the most prominent frames in the print material.

While the data collection for this study is complete, our analysis is currently ongoing. For this reason, full results cannot be provided here. However, the findings of this study will help to uncover how the media presents philanthropic activity of professional athletes — such as are they framed from a negative / positive perspective, do they present charitable athletes as benevolent philanthropists, savvy branders, media exploiters, or do they suggest...
that this type of activity serves as an ‘insurance policy’ for the athlete – as it might have in the case of an athlete experiencing a personal or professional scandal. This study has practical implications for teams and leagues that provide support for their athletes’ charitable work as well as for the athletes themselves.