Examining Athlete Ally Through Resource Mobilization Theory

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Socio-Cultural - Other (Other)  
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A recent study reported 84% of people in the United States witnessed or experienced anti-LGBTQ attitudes in sport, with over half of all gay men and lesbian women personally experiencing marginalization (Dennison & Kitchen, 2015). To counter this issue, Athlete Ally, a social movement organization (SMO) was established to end transphobia and homophobia in sport. In order to achieve the organization’s mission, Athlete Ally partners with athlete activists, such as Kenneth Faried of the NBA and Mollie Lensig of Major League Quidditch. Athlete Ally has over 150 of these “Athlete Ambassadors” that assist the LGBTQ in sport movement.

For a movement to successfully engage with social conflict, resources must be attained and utilized (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Prior research has indicated that athlete activists can provide social movement events with resources (Wilson, van Luijk, & Boit, 2015) and non-sport specific SMOs can provide athletes with support through social media (Yan, Pegoraro, & Wannabe, 2018). Thus, a mutually beneficial relationship between Athlete Ally and their Athlete Ambassadors can form through the exchanging of resources. Examining resources in a social change setting is best viewed through the lens of Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT; Buechler, 1993). The RMT approach provides a lens for investigating which resources SMOs utilize for furthering its mission. Resources can be split into five categories: moral (e.g. legitimacy and support), cultural (e.g. specialized knowledge), social-organizational (e.g. established infrastructure), human (e.g. labor of activists), and material (e.g. physical items; Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Using the RMT framework, the purpose of this study was to investigate how a SMO, Athlete Ally, exchanged resources with its Athlete Ambassadors to achieve organizational goals.

To achieve the purpose of this study, the researcher employed a case study design. Data were collected over a three-month period. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, with organizational documents (e.g. reports, educational tool-kits) serving as secondary data sources. Interviews were conducted with four full-time employees of the organization and three board members. Questions were asked about the specific resources exchanged between the athletes and organization. The goal was to examine which resources (moral, cultural, social-organizational human, and material) were provided from Athlete Ally to the Athlete Ambassadors and vice-versa.

Findings indicated moral, social-organizational, and material resources were shared between the two entities, while Athlete Ally provided the athletes with cultural resources and Athlete Ambassadors provided the organization with human resources. In practice, both SMOs and athlete activists can benefit each other by providing one another with legitimacy, access to social networks, and signed merchandise or clothing. Separately, SMOs attempting to partner or partnering with athletes should seek to provide their athletes with support and specialized knowledge for engaging with activism. Additionally, SMOs should use athletes as means to gain human resources, like petition signatures and activists, to help accomplish their goals. The mutually beneficial relationship established between Athlete Ally and their Athlete Ambassadors can serve as a model for future SMOs and athletes as athlete activism and social movements within sport continues to rise.