To Cover or Not to Cover? The Impact of Organizational Signals on Employment Applications of Marginalized Applicants.

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Previous research has demonstrated that having a diverse workforce in an inclusive environment can lead to positive results for sport organizations (Cunningham, 2008; 2009, 2011; Cunningham & Melton, 2011). To reap these benefits, however, sport organizations must first attract talented and diverse applicants by signaling that their workplace is a space where minority individuals can be their authentic selves. The purpose of this study is to examine how individuals interpret inclusive (or non-inclusive) signals displayed by sport organizations, and how their interpretations influence identity management techniques used during the job search process.

While there is evidence that individuals with both visible (Steward & Cunningham, 2015) and invisible stigmas (Sartore, Cunningham & McCullough, 2010) face discrimination in the hiring process, less is known about how they try to conceal and manage their identities during the job search. In the current work, we will examine if, when, and how these individuals actively minimize their stigmatized identities – an act known as covering (Goffman, 1963) – when applying for jobs. Research by Yoshino & Smith (2013) has found that covering is a common workplace identity management technique, with 61% of respondents reporting covering along at least one axis (appearance-based, association-based, affiliation based, advocacy-based) at work, and stigmatized individuals reporting covering more than their non-stigmatized colleagues. Despite these findings, it is unclear if and how covering is deployed during the application process.

We draw from stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), signaling theory (Spence, 1973; Celani & Singh, 2011) and the covering literature (Yoshino, 2002, 2006) to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: How do organizational signals influence covering techniques during the application process for sport-related jobs?
RQ2: Are there differences based on a person’s identity (visible vs. invisible stigma)?
RQ3: How do marginalized applicants perceive the impacts of covering during the application process on their well-being and future careers?

Purposive and snowball sampling will be used to identify participants with stigmatized identities (e.g. racial/ethnic minority, sexual minority, female) from the sport management student population at a large American public university. A qualitative design will be implemented, which will require participants to research two sport organizations (an inclusive and a non-inclusive organization) as prospective applicants. After completing the research, students will complete an applicant pre-screening questionnaire and submit a resume for each organization as if they were applying for an internship or job. After submitting the documents, participants will take part in a semi-structured ‘de-briefing’ interview. Participants will be asked about their perceptions of the organizations, their pre-screening questionnaire responses, and their resumes. Data will be organized in NVIVO 12 and themes will be generated through multiple rounds of coding.

This study will provide greater insight into the application process for sport-related jobs, particularly for applicants that possess marginalized identities. Additionally, this study will help understand if identity covering is manifested in a particular way for prospective employees. From a practical standpoint, this research will allow sport organizations better understand if and how the signals they send during the recruitment process are detrimental to the organization and/or the applicants themselves.