Signaling Gender Equity: Exploring the Adoption and Importance of a Gender Equity Program in Sport

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A lack of female representation in sport organizations is a phenomenon recognized by many scholars (for an overview see Burton, 2015; Cunningham & Ahn, 2019). Burton (2015) states that research outlines lack of opportunities and/or female role models in leadership positions in sport as antecedent factors to low representation. Further, Kerr (2009) outlines the social culture of sport leadership as a male dominated environment where the perception still exists that females may not “fit” the role of leader. While these studies have provided valuable insight and have suggested ways gender equality can be improved (e.g., Adriaanse, & Schofield, 2014), Spaaij et al. (2019) discuss the need to dissect policies and practices in sport that limit changes related to equity. The purpose of this study is to explore the application and effectiveness of a gender equity program in creating administrative gender equity change within community sport clubs.

Related to social learning theory (Phares, 1976), this study adopts signaling theory where observable actions of one party are perceived by another party as reflecting something unobservable about the first party (Spence, 1973). In the context of the current study, gender equity programs in sport create signals (positive and negative) about gender equity initiatives adopted by the club which translate into behaviors (positive and negative). Therefore, two research questions are addressed, (1) what aspects of a gender equity program (the signal) are explicitly adopted by sport managers engaging in gender equity initiatives, and (2) what aspects of a gender equity program are deemed important (response) by sport managers engaging in gender equity initiatives?

A QUANT-QUAL mixed method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was used to determine the adoption and perceived importance of the phases of a gender equity initiative (quantitative surveys at 3 time points) and explore, in depth, the perceived relevance and impact of the gender equity program (qualitative, semi-interviews and focus groups at 2 time points). The sample of participants came from a population of 25 clubs in one province in Canada who were engaged in a gender equity program. From the 25 clubs, n = 18 managers (one from each of 18 clubs; the key equity program contact) participated in the current study. In line with Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2017) outline of mixed method design, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the adoption rates and importance levels of phases within the gender equity program (i.e., the signals). Then, thematic qualitative data analysis was used to (1) uncover themes related to perceived relevance of the gender equity program to each clubs’ change process and (2) triangulate the adoption and importance data.

Findings contribute to new theoretical knowledge of the signals that are present in these sport clubs to foster (e.g., strategic use of resources) and hinder (e.g., lack of planning, undocumented outcomes) change as a result of a gender equity program. Discussion of the theoretical contribution related to signals associated with gender equity programs in sport (Spaaij et al., 2019) and directions for future research/practice will take place.