Authenticity in Sport Organization Statements Towards Black Lives Matter and Social Justice

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On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by police, leading to widespread protests against racial violence and excessive force in policing. Many sport organizations (e.g., teams, leagues) issued statements of support and announced plans to promote social justice. However, many of these statements lacked specific detail, neglected to mention the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, or simply spoke to vague ideals of diversity and inclusion. Given this lack of detail and some leagues’ histories with racism and protest, such messages may be perceived as inauthentic or incongruent with prior behavior (Shen & Kim, 2012, Lehman et al., 2019). However, authenticity is important in public relations (Bowen, 2016), having evidenced relationships to credibility, consumer perceptions, and consumption behaviors (Callison, 2001; Molleda, 2010).

Lehman et al. (2019) argued that temporal context and personal individual factors influence authenticity perceptions. In the context of racial justice, therefore, it stands to reason individuals holding racist ideology may perceive pro-BLM statements as pandering. Conversely, those who think highly of BLM would value such messaging. It is also important to examine organizational outcomes related to diversity-related practices (Fink & Pastore, 1999). Given its salience in the current socio-political climate, pro-BLM public relations messaging is likely to affect important considerations including fans’ perceptions of leagues and purchase intentions (Trail, Fink, & Andersen, 2003). The purpose of this research was threefold: (1) to examine differences in perceived authenticity between leagues’ official statements related to Floyd’s death (RQ1), (2) to explore antecedent relationships of modern racism (RQ2a) and attitudes towards BLM (RQ2b) on perceived authenticity, and (3) to examine the impact of perceived authenticity on fan identification (RQ3a) and purchase intentions (RQ3b).

Data were collected via online survey (n= 336) in the weeks following Floyd’s death. Participants were exposed to one of four official league statements (i.e., NBA, NFL, NWSL, or WNBA) and asked to respond to measures related to study variables. Data analysis is ongoing; however, early analyses show significant differences in perceived authenticity of leagues’ racial justice statements, with the WNBA perceived as the most authentic and the NFL the least (RQ1). We fitted a structural equation model (SEM) to the data to address our remaining research questions (RQ2-RQ3). Across all conditions, modern racism (negative) and attitude towards BLM (positive) were significantly related to perceived authenticity. Finally, authenticity was significantly related to purchase intentions, which was partially mediated by fan identification.

Together, our results suggest the importance of authentic, pro-social messaging from sport leagues. In our study, the NFL’s press release following the killing of George Floyd was seen as the least authentic among the leagues studied, likely due to the league’s recent history with respect BLM and its blackballing of quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Our results further indicated, regardless of league, participants’ feelings related to racial justice influenced their perceptions of message authenticity. Finally, we found that more authentic messaging was positively related to fan identification and purchase intentions. Thus, sport brands should be cognizant of the value of authentic pro-social messaging.