Adapting to a New Normal: The Impact of the COVID-19 on the Mediatization of Professional Sport Organizations

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Management - Organizational Change (Professional Sport)  
Abstract 2021-029  
Mode: Synchronous

20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Session: Organizational Change  
Thursday June 3, 2021, 1:10 PM - 1:30 PM

The COVID-19 pandemic affects the sport industry, particularly, social distancing has led to the increase of sport consumers’ usage of media at home, which has created both opportunities and challenges for professional sport organizations (Hayes, 2020). As such, the COVID-19 has forced professional sport organizations to adapt themselves to changing media environments (e.g., increasing new media consumption) in order to be successful in this unprecedented global crisis (Sharpe et al., 2020). Hence, sport organizations have used media centrally to adapt themselves to the changing media environment (Donges, 2008).

Sport organizations’ use of media can be explored to understand how sports organizations are mediatized through three dimensions: perception (e.g., a perception of an increased importance of media and communication), structure (e.g., changes of communication unit), and behavior (e.g., diversifying the forms of communication) (Frandsen, 2016). However, little is known about how professional sport organizations have changed their organizational structures and processes to adapt to the media environment during this global pandemic.

Thus, this study explores how COVID-19 affects the mediatization of professional sport organizations. Mediatization was used as a theoretical framework which underpinned the following research questions: (a) How has COVID-19 influenced the perception of professional sport organizations’ media usage and communication? (b) How have the organizations’ structural dimensions in relation to media and communication changed in response to COVID-19, and (c) How has COVID-19 influenced organizations’ behavior in relation to media and communication?

To answer the research questions, this study will examine professional sport organizations in South Korea: the Korea Professional Baseball league (KBO), the Korean football league (K-League), and Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA). Because the Korean organizations faced challenges (postponement of leagues) and created opportunities (broadcasting leagues globally) for revenue generation, an examination of these organizations can provide new insights into how sport organizations were mediatized during the pandemic. Archival materials (e.g., newspaper articles, social media posts of the organizations) are currently under examination. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with managers in media-and communication-related departments of the three selected organizations by February 2021. Inductive and deductive content analysis will be employed on the collected data.

Preliminary findings from archival data analysis suggested that the sport organizations recognized the increasing importance of social media, which helped their fans to stay connected with their sports. Another finding shows that organizations formed systems and new partnerships with global media content distributors, which focused on the structural dimension (e.g., COVID-19 response task force in KBO and the partnership between K-league and Dugout). Lastly, the sport organizations used diversified platforms to communicate with their fans, including online Media Day and live streaming of sports games on social media, which emphasized the behavior dimension.

An examination of the three dimensions of mediatization of sport organizations contributes to the generation of new knowledge in sport communication, which is indicated in the media environment’s effects on organizational changes in sport. Moreover, the research offers practical implications for sport organizations because the study reveals how these organizations adapted to changing media environments during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.