Leveraging Sport Events for the Promotion of Human Rights in Host Communities: Diffusion of Innovations and Anti-Trafficking Campaigns

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The National Football League’s Annual Championship Game (the Super Bowl) is considered one of the most popular events in the United States, regularly drawing over 100 million viewers and tens of thousands of tourists into the host community (Tajalli & Peña, 2017). However, there is a pervasive narrative that the Super Bowl is the largest human trafficking event in the United States (Martin & Hill, 2019). The assumption being that the influx of tourists contributes to a heightened demand for sexual services, which could be met, in part, by trafficked persons (Bowersox, 2016). Human trafficking is a complex, global human rights issue (Miller & Wasileski, 2011) and the trafficking of persons for sexual exploitation (i.e. sex trafficking) has been associated with sport events since the 2004 Athens Olympics (Hayes, 2010). Despite limited empirical evidence to support a causal or correlative link between the large scale events and sex trafficking, hosts accept that it is a risk to be managed (Matheson & Finkel, 2013). In response, anti-trafficking campaigns are implemented in an effort to inform and educate residents and visitors. While there are an increasing number of studies focused on sex trafficking at events (e.g. Caudwell, 2018), few have focused on how these events may be used to promote human rights issues. This paper examines how sport events can be leveraged to create awareness and build capacity for tackling human trafficking in host communities. In order to do so, we employ the theory of diffusion of innovations and draw on the model of social event leverage (O’Brien & Chalip, 2008). According to the model, the liminality generated by hosting sport events, coupled with increased media attention, provides opportunities to publicize targeted social issues within a host community (Chalip, 2017). Anti-trafficking campaigns can be categorized as social marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971), as they aim to influence voluntary behavior in order to improve the welfare of a specific audience (Andreasen, 1994). The theory of diffusion of innovations is useful for understanding how communities adopt new ideas and strategies (Rogers 2003). Both mass media and interpersonal communication channels are critical to the diffusion process. This study employs an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995). In this instance, the case —Miami, host of Super Bowl LIV— is of secondary interest, as it plays a supportive role (Stake, 2003) by facilitating our examination of the strategies and tactics employed to generate awareness of human trafficking. Data were collected from multiple sources (Yin, 2014), including semi-structured interviews with event stakeholders, campaign materials, and articles from the highest circulating newspapers in the United States and the state of Florida. In order to analyze our data, we employ the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). As this study is in progress, findings cannot be presented at this time. However, this paper is expected to contribute to the literature on social leverage. In particular, it will shed light on the processes involved in leveraging event media to promote human rights issues and the sustainability of the host communities’ strategies.