

ATHLETES AS PR SPOKESPEOPLE: THE NFL'S "A CRUCIAL CATCH" PR CAMPAIGN EXPLORED

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the National Football League's (NFL) "A Crucial Catch" breast cancer awareness campaign in the United States. Variables included identification with NFL athletes, exposure to the campaign, NFL fanship, and intention to schedule a breast cancer screening (the action promoted by NFL athletes in this PR campaign). Social media outlets and an e-mail listserv of the School of Communication at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York, USA were employed to solicit participants (n=119) in a survey. A questionnaire composed of items modified from Brown and Bocarnea's (2007a) Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Identification Scale to investigate identification with NFL athletes was used. Statistically significant relationships were found between identification with NFL athletes and exposure, identification with NFL athletes and intention to schedule a breast cancer screening, and identification with NFL athletes and NFL fanship. NFL fanship was also significantly related to exposure to the campaign. Implications for future studies analyzing PR campaigns produced by the NFL and FIFA are suggested.

Key Words: Public Relations, Identification, Athlete Spokespeople, Sports Communication, Football

INTRODUCTION

The average consumer is exposed to an extensive message clutter of over 3000 advertising messages per day (Crutchfield, 2010, p. 1) leaving public relations (PR) campaign managers with a dilemma: they must find new, conspicuous means of reaching intended audiences especially when the message concerns more than just brand recognition. However, there are some useful resources for PR managers, particularly those creating health-related messages and communication campaigns to aid in their message effectiveness, such as Arkin's (2008) "Making Health Communication Work." Among other things, Arkin (2008) suggests methods of making campaigns more effective, offering tactics to help planners develop partnerships with other organizations, suggesting the best means of working with the media should a crisis situation occur, and how to employ a credible spokesperson into a

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communications campaign promoting health issues, specifically a PR campaign for cancer prevention. For example, it is suggested that "using an athlete to promote exercise or cancer survivor to promote early detection" (Arkin, 2008, p. 69) is an effective means of increasing credibility for a related PR campaign. Alternatively, Lee and Thorson (2008) suggested that in order for a consumer to attempt to cognitively comprehend an advertising message, there should be a "moderate mismatch," unless a consumer feels brand loyalty. In such a case, they would likely attempt to understand any type of product-promoter connection, no matter how incongruent the match may seem. Specifically, they hypothesized that a "moderate incongruence between the image of an endorser and the image of a product will result in more favorable (a) attitude toward the advertisement, (b) brand attitude, and (c) higher purchase intention than either complete congruence or extreme incongruence" (Lee & Thorson, 2008, p. 436).

PR campaign managers attempting to promote community health issues in the United States have paired celebrity athletes with health-related PR campaigns to increase awareness and/or to encourage the promoted preventative actions to attentive fans, similar to what Arkin (2008) has suggested. Major League Baseball (MLB) athlete Mark McGwire promoted child abuse prevention (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003), National Basketball Association (NBA) athlete Magic Johnson advocated for Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) prevention and treatment (Basil, 1996), and NFL athletes advocated for breast cancer awareness and prevention during the "A Crucial Catch" campaign. The aforementioned campaigns used athletes as spokespeople, which can further expand the scope of these health-related PR messages to attentive audiences, especially those who feel a sense of personal connection with the athlete promoters. While investigation into most of the above-mentioned campaigns is extant, research is lacking surrounding the NFL's "A Crucial Catch" campaign; this is a gap of which the present research study aims to fill. Implications for future research into NFL and FIFA PR campaigns surrounding concussion and head injury prevention are later discussed.

1.1. NFL's "A Crucial Catch" PR Campaign

Walker and Kent (2009) explain, "Sport teams... are often viewed in high regard within their local community, and through CSR programs and social sponsorship they can further enhance their stature in the community" (Walker & Kent, 2009, p. 761). A myriad of sport organizations in the USA and abroad use public relations (PR) for promotion, often implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts to aid in increasing their brand image, while positioning themselves in the mind of media consumers as concern for the communities in which they operate. The NFL's "A Crucial Catch" campaign is an example of a CSR PR promotion that Atkin (2001) would classify as an "adoption of a healthy practice" (p. 3). "A Crucial Catch," co-sponsored by the American Cancer Society (ACS), promotes the importance of annual mammogram screenings for women over 40 years of age to aid in the discovery of breast cancer at its earliest stages (Falzarano, 2013). The ACS (Cancer Facts and Figures, 2013) cites that early detection of breast cancer along with technological advances has enhanced the ability to save lives. The "A Crucial Catch" PR campaign takes place throughout the month of October, which is breast cancer awareness month in the USA. Promotional efforts are vividly transparent during NFL football games and during community events

in such that athletes sport 'pink ribbon' apparel on the field during games and while appearing at events honouring women who have survived breast cancer. Concurrently, on social media and NFL and team-based websites, athletes are showcased discussing their experience with breast cancer, either primarily or secondarily through a family members' diagnosis. Men have a much lesser chance of developing breast cancer than women, so much so that the ACS leaves this probability out of their statistics entirely when predicting the percentage of occurrence during different age intervals (Cancer Facts and Figures, p. 14, 2013). However, showcasing these athletes discussing their secondary experience with breast cancer aids in increasing NFL male athlete credibility to promote this otherwise seemingly incongruent promotion. Jessop (2012) explained the expansive reach of the NFL's "A Crucial Catch" PR campaign in 2011 alone, in that it successfully "reached more than 151 million viewers, including 58 million women age 18 and older" (Jessop, 2012, p. 1).

1.2. Identification

A key variable that determined the level of influence an athlete had on promoting a health-related behavior change, or the intention to change behavior, depended on fans' involvement or perceived closeness with the athlete (Brown & Basil, 2003). The construct of involvement in communication research often takes on one of four forms: 1) Transportation, 2) parasocial interactions, 3) identification, and 4) worship (Brown, 2011). Most relevant to the present study are parasocial relationships and identification. Parasocial relationships, a form of involvement similar to identification, are born out of the perception fans have that a relationship exists with the celebrity that is known only to the fan themselves via their mass media exposure (Basil, 1996).

Brown & Basil (1995) found that the public's identification with National Basketball Association (NBA) athlete Magic Johnson affected their response to his promotion to encourage the prevention and transmission of Human Immune-deficiency Virus (HIV) (Brown & Basil, 1995). Those individuals who felt a stronger connection to the famous basketball player had a higher intention to reduce their high-risk behavior. Brown (2011) explained, "identification with a persona creates an ongoing experience of involvement that influences many aspects of media consumers' attitudes, values, beliefs and behavior long after media consumption" (Brown, 2011, p. 19).

For the present study the conceptual definition of "identification with NFL athletes" is adopted from Brown's (2011) conceptualization of the term, and is defined as the process by which an NFL fan adopts the attitudes, values, beliefs and/or behavior of the NFL athlete or team with which they have created a parasocial relationship or any type of identification. This concept is measured using Brown and Bocarnea's (2007a) Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Identification Scale.

1.3. NFL Fandom

Fandom "serves as a way for fans to confirm or enhance their own identity by presenting themselves in ways that are consistent with the social group with which they identify" (Scott, 2010, p. 76). Wearing sports team or athlete merchandise exhibits fandom. The "A Crucial Catch" campaign, as with most sport-related PR campaigns, sells merchandise including team apparel branded with the campaign logo

and colors for NFL fans to purchase. "The partnership has raised more than \$4 million to date in support of the American Cancer Society's mission to finish the fight against cancer" (Falzarano, 2013, p. 2). In purchasing campaign-related products, the fans are allotted the opportunity to support their team, exhibit their NFL fanship, and give to a worthy cause. Based on fan behaviors, Hunt et al. (1999) created a typology to classify levels of fandom for use by marketers in distinguishing differences in fan motivation and subsequent behaviors. Hunt et al.'s (1999) fan typology groups consist of devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional fans that are then divided by the way in which they act out their level of attachment to a team or an individual athlete. The entire fan typology consists of conceptualizations of five types of fans: 1) the temporary fan, 2) the local fan, 3) the devoted fan, 4) the fanatical fan, and 5) the dysfunctional fan. These fan-types are differentiated on topics such as possessing a self-concept of being a fan, geographical factors, time boundaries, the internalization of a win/externalization of a loss, and identity. The lack of conceptualization of fans for purposes of marketing at that time encouraged Hunt et al. to suggest that "the interaction between the fan's self and the sports consumptive object [whether it be a sport in general, or a specific league, or team] defines what a fan is" (Hunt et al., 1999, pp. 440, 445).

While Hunt et al.'s (1999) fan typology consists of five types of fans the present study categorizes a participant's level of NFL fanship into three categories for simplicity; 1) A non-fan, which includes season-only fans, 2) a genuine fan, and 3) an extreme fan. These sections are distinguished by an individual's level of agreement with statements relating to their self-concept, the externalization of a win, geographic constraint, deviation from social norms because of fanship, and identity. Consider an individual who has no self-concept of being a fan yet who may at times view or attend a game and root for a specific team for external reasons (e.g. being with friends who root for team or being in a Superbowl pool). These fans would either be considered non-fans or temporary fans in the Hunt and associates' (1999) conceptualization since they only watch the game and maybe root for a team for a short period of time. In the present study, this type of individual would be considered a season-only or a non-fan due to their lack of self-concept of being a fan.

Basil (1996) claimed "if identification is the source of a celebrity's effectiveness, it is likely that this process of identification could make a significant contribution to behavior change" (p. 472). The present study surmises these results compiled with levels of NFL fanship might apply not only toward a consumer's intention to purchase a product, but also towards the intention to take the disease prevention action promoted in the "A Crucial Catch" PR campaign, especially for individuals who identify with campaign endorsers.

1.4 Athletes and Credibility

Crutchfield (2010) explains that celebrity endorsers have "the power to instigate and inspire, enlighten and enrage, entertain and edify the consumer" (Crutchfield, 2010, p. 2), which further validates the use of celebrities in community health PR campaigns, as the "A Crucial Catch" campaign does. Although ostensibly it seems as though there may be a mismatch between NFL celebrity athletes serving as spokespeople for this breast cancer awareness PR campaign, as only a minuscule number of men actually develop breast cancer in comparison to women, Lee and

Thorson (2008) proposed that a “moderate incongruence” between an endorser and the endorsed product resulted in a higher purchase intention than a perfectly congruent or incongruent endorser/endorsement match. This suggests that the persuasiveness of a celebrity endorser is best when there is just enough of a product-promoter congruence to intrigue the consumer to think about an advertisement and cognitively process the mismatch (Lee & Thorson, 2008). Inasmuch while discovering this, their focus was mostly on persuasion and purchase intention of advertised products. This finding is very beneficial for communication and PR managers representing tangible products. Nonetheless, this leaves room to apply their finding to investigate more intangible products like the PR efforts exhibited in CSR campaigns like the NFL’s “A Crucial Catch”.

In conceptualizing Lee and Thorson’s (2008) results, one could posit that the moderate mismatch in the “A Crucial Catch” PR campaign, that of the male athletes, the endorsers, and the breast cancer awareness and call-to-action message, the endorsed, could persuade consumers to pay more attention to this campaign. Continuing, they found that when a consumer felt a higher level of involvement with an advertised product, the level of endorser/endorsed congruence made no difference in purchase intention (Lee and Thorson, 2008). Higher involvement led consumers to take the extra step to cognitively comprehend any incongruent celebrity-product matchup (Lee & Thorson, 2008). Hence, it seems as though individuals who feel a sense of involvement or identification with campaign endorsers would actively attempt to comprehend any moderately incongruent campaign. Relating to the NFL’s “A Crucial Catch” PR campaign, it would be reasonable to predict that NFL fans with higher levels of involvement will more likely make a concerted effort to comprehend thus exposing themselves to the “A Crucial Catch” campaign than non-NFL fans.

Scott’s (2010) dissertation study found that repeated exposures of larger-than-life football players led to the formation of perceived closeness with NFL players that likely knew not of the fan’s existence (Scott, 2012, pp. 64-65). NFL fans may feel as though they experience a sort of involvement with their favourite NFL team or NFL athlete especially after great amounts of media exposure to these athletes, including but not limited to television viewing, social networking, live sporting events and CRS PR campaigns like the “A Crucial Catch”.

2. INSTRUMENT

A survey was created and administered from May to June 2014 to investigate the proposed hypotheses in this research. Taking the survey during the NFL off-season allowed for the most accurate determination of one’s level of NFL fanship year-round, not just immediately after the winning or losing of a game. The use of Hunt et al.’s (1999) internalization of a team win distinguishes a temporary season-only fan or non-fan from the genuine fan and extreme fan. Whereas the season-only fan would have a minimal desire to externalize a team win or internalize a loss during the off-season, it is assumed that a true fan (genuine or extreme) will continue to have thoughts of externalization of wins and internalization of losses year-round. Regarding geographic constraints, non-fans would likely change the team for which they are rooting if they were to move to an alternative location where another team was more popular.

Genuine fans might do this, but extreme fans most definitely will not. The main differentiation between genuine and extreme fans lies in their perception of whether or not it is acceptable for them to act in socially deviant ways due to their NFL fanship. Genuine fans will likely consider being an NFL fan a part of their identity yet they would not partake in socially unacceptable behaviors using their NFL fandom as justification. In Hunt et al.'s (1999) conceptualization of the sport fan, they assert, "being a fan is a necessary part of defining [oneself] and of presenting to others their self-identity" (p. 341). This also helps to distinguish a non-fan from a genuine or an extreme fan in the present study.

2.1. NFL Fanship

Hunt et al.'s fan typology is operationalized in the present research study by asking research participants five separate questions, each addressing one of the aforementioned topics related to being a fan (self-concept, externalization of a win, geographic constraint, deviation, and identity). Responses were then summed to determine where they fall on the spectrum of a NFL fan: non-fans (includes temporary fan characteristics from Hunt et al.'s (1999) typology), genuine fans, or extreme fans.

2.2. Exposure

For the purpose of this study, investigation into the variable of exposure to "A Crucial Catch" campaign, regardless of the communication channel, was investigated with a simple scale, exhibiting questions that investigate an individual's awareness of key features of the campaign. This scale will question individuals on their agreement with statements relating to their exposure to easily identifiable attributes of the campaign: 1) The pink colour of cleats, 2) the presence of pink ribbon logos on the field, 3) the existence of breast cancer awareness events hosted in NFL team communities, 4) the NFL cheerleaders wearing pink during games, (5) and their exposure to the campaign.

2.3. Identification

The Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Identification Scale (Brown & Bocarnea, 2007a) was modified to measure identification with NFL athletes for this research study. This scale consists of 20 Likert-type items, which have attained a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .87 (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003). Brown and Bocarnea (2007a) explained, "fans frequently view a team or a player as an extension of themselves... [And] people commonly seek to adopt the values, beliefs, and behaviours of celebrities and media persona [with] whom they admire" (Brown & Bocarnea, 2007a, p. 303). With reliability given to their observation, the present study hypothesized that individuals who identify with the NFL athletes were more likely to intend to follow the promoted action encouraged by the athlete promoters.

3. METHOD

3.1. Sample and Procedure

Subjects participating in this study (N = 119) ranged in age from 19 to 88-years old; the preponderance of participants in this study were female (74%). Overwhelmingly the sample was composed of Caucasian (84%) individuals. The highest educational attainment ranged from high school (8%) to doctoral (.9%). With respect to their personal experiences with breast cancer the majority knew someone

who had/has experience with breast cancer (65%) or had indirectly experienced breast cancer struggles concerning a family member or a close friend with the disease (56%). Despite this prevalence of experience with breast cancer, directly or indirectly, 19% claim to have never had experience with the disease.

Two methods of analysis were employed to determine whether there was a relationship between identification with NFL athletes, exposure to the campaign, intention to take the promoted disease prevention action, and NFL fanship. Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were used to test the relationships between identification with NFL athletes and exposure to the campaign, identification with NFL athletes and intention to get a breast cancer screening, NFL fanship and intention to schedule a screening, and NFL fanship and exposure to the "A Crucial Catch" campaign. A Mann-Whitney test was used to compare the mean ranks for men ($n = 27$) and women ($n = 72$) on participants' intention to schedule a breast cancer screening.

3.2. Measures

The variable of identification with NFL athletes was operationalized using a modified version of the Celebrity-Personal Identification Scale (Brown & Bocarnea, 2007a). This scale asks for the level of agreement with statements like "I try to do things I believe NFL athletes would do," "I look to NFL athletes as role models," and "I advocate the same things that NFL athletes advocate" on a strongly agree to strongly disagree scale 5-point Likert-scale. This original scale is comprised of 20 items; however, only 19 items were used for this study. It has been extensively used for dissertations and research studies and possesses valid and reliable measures using as few as 10-15 items (Brown, 2014 March 14, personal communication).

This 19-item scale was used in Keas' (2008) study with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .80 to .90 (Brown & Bocarnea, 2007a; Brown & Bocarnea 2007b). To operationalize one's level of exposure to the "A Crucial Catch" campaign held in the month of October, a 5-point Likert scale comprised of 7 items was created. Gender was operationalized asking respondents to choose either male or female in a demographic question. NFL fanship is a construct created based on Hunt et al.'s (1999) classification of sports fan typology and is operationalized using measures to determine a participant's level of NFL fanship. As suggested in Hunt et al.'s (1999) typology, constructs relating to self-concept, externalization of a win, identity, geographic constrain, and deviation were operationalized in a 5-point Likert-type scale.

4. HYPOTHESES

H1. Identification with NFL athletes is significantly and positively related to exposure to the NFL's "A Crucial Catch" campaign.

H2. Identification with NFL athletes is significantly and positively related to intention to schedule a breast cancer screening.

H3. NFL fanship is significantly and positively related to identification with NFL athletes.

H4. NFL fanship is significantly and positively related to exposure to the campaign.

5. RESULTS

Results indicate a strong positive correlation ($r = .528$) with a strong statistically significant relationship ($p = .000$) between identification with NFL athletes and exposure to the NFL's "A Crucial Catch" campaign.

There was a moderately positive ($r = .251$) and statistically significant relationship ($p = .006$) between identification with NFL athletes and intention to schedule a breast cancer screening.

A *Mann-Whitney test* indicates intention to schedule a breast cancer screening was greater for women ($\mu = 56.84$) than for men ($\mu = 31.76$), ($n = 72$, $U = 479.5$, $p = .000$).

Spearman's correlation results indicate a strong and positive ($r = .528$) correlation that was statistically significant ($p = .000$) between identification with NFL athletes and NFL fanship.

Spearman's correlation results indicate a moderately positive ($r = .396$) relationship with strong statistical significance ($p = .000$) between NFL fanship and exposure to the campaign.

6. DISCUSSION

This study showed a strong, positive relationship between identification with NFL athletes and exposure to the "A Crucial Catch" campaign; as identification with NFL athletes increased, exposure to the NFL's "A Crucial Catch" campaign increased concurrently. The moderately positive relationship between identification with NFL athletes and intention to schedule a breast cancer screening produced information beneficial for sport and health communication efforts demonstrating that using athletes as spokespeople for community health issues was at least effective in encouraging said action for the present study. As identification with NFL athletes increased, the intention to schedule a screening, the action they promoted in the PR campaign also increased.

Also, those with higher levels of identification with NFL athletes have an increased exposure to the "A Crucial Catch" campaign and have greater intention to schedule a breast cancer screening, the encouraged action, than those with lesser or no identification towards the athletes. When differences in means based on gender and intention alone were investigated, as one might surmise, more women ($\mu = 56.84$) than men ($\mu = 31.76$) had an intention to schedule a breast cancer screening. The "A Crucial Catch" campaign proved to be successful in reaching segmented audience members who identified with NFL athletes. This finding demonstrates that those who identify with NFL athletes have an increased exposure to the campaign and an increased intention to follow through with the campaign's suggestion of implementing the health-related message they promoted, scheduling a breast cancer screening.

The current study showed a strong, positive relationship between identification with NFL athletes and NFL fanship. In essence, participants who felt a strong sense of

fanship towards the NFL had a greater level of identification with NFL athletes. This hypothesis was presented, as a check to insure that there was a clear, positive relationship between fanship and identification with NFL athletes. Similarly, Johnston (2004) found support in his hypothesis that predicted that loyal AGF fans would view their fanship as a great part of their self-identity (Johnston, 2004). Additionally, Johnston found that fans with greater loyalty had greater intention to spend money on merchandise as a means to exhibit their self-identification as a fan (Johnston, 2004).

Wundersitz, Hutchinson, and Woolley (2010) suggested, “the effectiveness of mass media campaigns might be increased if message content and communication channels are tailored to the characteristics of these more narrowly defined segments or subgroups” (p. 10). Therefore, from a marketing standpoint, tailoring health-related messages like the “A Crucial Catch” to those fans who already identify with the athletes may increase the likelihood of message acceptance. Tailoring this campaign to the greatest at-risk group of women 40 years and older who already identify with NFL athletes, although potentially a smaller number, might prove effective in saving lives. The number of advertisement and public relations (PR) messages that the average consumer views on a daily basis continues to increase to exorbitant numbers with the advent of product placements in cellular phone apps, Google’s tracking software, and other communication technologies, which makes it harder even for PR managers to reach intended audiences with important messages. Research studies like this one exhibit that identification with athletes shares a relationship with intention to take the PR campaign promoted action. This serves as beneficial for PR managers, as well as points out a need for future research studies to investigate this variable further. Next are mentioned some areas of future research to more extensively investigating this variable.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the similarities in fan-base fervor of FIFA and NFL fans, among other similarities between the two enterprises, implications from this research suggest that future investigations subsequently be applied to other sports PR campaigns like FIFA’s similarly effectual public health promotions. While the researcher has particular interest in investigating both the NFL and FIFA’s head injury PR campaigns and the relationship identification with athletes plays in making the campaigns more or less effective, other health-related PR campaigns like the NFL’s “Play 60”, encouraging youth to spend 60 minutes a day playing or exercising, or FIFA’s “Football for Hope”, which focuses on youth leadership in “building a better future through football in [fans] respective communities” (Football for Hope, n.d.) can benefit from akin investigation. Examining viewers’ identification with athletes and the goals of the PR campaigns of which they promote, as the present research did, can allow sports management to gain insight into ways to produce effectual promotions benefiting not just the brand of the sports enterprise but also the community at large.

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