

An Examination of Crisis Communication in Sport: Lessons from Sport Organizations Responding to Coronavirus Disease Outbreak

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Abstract : Professional sport leagues in Europe and North America are shut down due to novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak. Football leagues in Europe (e.g., La Liga, English Premier League, Bundesliga, Serie A, and Ligue 1) and big four professional sport leagues in North America (e.g., National Football League, Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, and National Hockey League) are indefinitely suspended or delayed. COVID-19 outbreak has a growing negative impact on economics of sport leagues. For example, loss of revenue in Europe's top five leagues due to the COVID-19 pandemic was estimated at € 4 billion and loss of revenue in the NBA was estimated at \$650 million as of March 2020. In the unprecedented difficult situation, sport teams and leagues try to communicate with sport fans through diverse media platforms. In sport, however, very few studies have been done regarding how sport organizations effectively communicate with sport fans during pandemics, such as COVID-19 outbreak. Understanding sport organizations' crisis communication is important to develop effective crisis management strategies for sport organizations. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to examine how sport organizations communicate with sport fans via online platforms in COVID-19 outbreak and how sport fans evaluate their communication strategies. 9 official sport league sites (i.e., five major football leagues in Europe and four major sport leagues in North America) and COVID-19 news articles published between January and June in 2020 will be analyzed in terms of coronavirus information, teams and players' live update, fan interaction, fan support, and community engagement. In addition, comments posted on social media sites (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) of major sport leagues will be also analyzed to examine how sport fans perceive online messages provided by sport leagues as an effective communication strategy. To measure the effectiveness of crisis communication performance, five components (i.e., prompt, compassionate, honest, informative, and interactive) of crisis communication will be collected from leagues' official websites information and social media posts. Upon completing data collection, content analysis method will be used to evaluate effectiveness of crisis communication among 9 professional sport leagues. The results of the study will provide athletic directors, administrators, and public relations managers in sport organizations with practical information regarding how athlete celebrities and sport organizations should interact with their fans in pandemic situations. In particular, this study will contribute to developing specific crisis management plan for sport organizations. For instance, football teams and leagues in Europe will be able to create standard manuals to minimize damages caused by disease outbreak, such as COVID-19 outbreak.

Keywords : COVID-19, communication, sport leagues, fans

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