
FRAMING OF OFF-THE-FIELD SCANDALS IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS: THE CASE OF THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

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Abstract

Major sports competitions face on- and off-the-field scandals on an ongoing basis (Prior et al., 2014), which raises serious questions about the impact scandal has on professional sport institutions, sponsors, participants, and other stakeholders (Lee, Bang, & Lee, 2013). A number of researchers have addressed various issues associated with scandal in sport (e.g., Hughes & Shank, 2005; Kondro, 2003; Lee et al., 2013; Mazanov & Connor, 2010; Prior et al., 2014), however literature about the media framing of off-the-field high-profile scandals in professional sports is limited. In response, this study analysed the news-media coverage of high-profile off-the-field scandals in professional sports guided by framing theory. Specifically the study asked what are the dominant frames highlighted by news-media regarding off-the-field scandals, and what is the nature of scandal incidents portrayed in the news-media? Such examination is essential, given that the media framing of scandal will have considerable impact on the public image of sport.

Spurred by the public's high interest in sport and sport celebrities, media cover both athletic achievements and details of the star athletes' personal lives (Lee et al., 2013). Star players are viewed as role models, and are expected to represent not only themselves but also their team, city, sponsors, and fans (Meng & Pan, 2013). As such, sport fans are likely to hold a high expectation regarding acceptable behavior of star athletes, and a scandal may emerge when an athlete is caught in activities that are in conflict with these expectations (Prior et al., 2014). When a scandal breaks, it receives considerable media attention and coverage (Meng & Pan, 2013). Professional sport leagues, such as the National Football League (NFL), offer contexts where research on scandals can be undertaken. The NFL, specifically, is an illuminating case of repeated scandals throughout the 2000s and before (Paterson, 2009). Following

which the NFL implemented a Personal Conduct Policy in 2007 to promote lawful conduct and protect its public image that the media portray (Paterson, 2009), making it the case context for this research.

Framing Theory

Framing is the selection, omission, and organization of words, phrases, issues, and events by the media to explain the news and the ensuing understanding by its audience (Calhoun, LaVoi, & Johnson, 2011). The basic underpinning of framing theory is the news media emphasize certain aspects of an issue to transform complex contexts into reportable occurrences that are coherent and easily understood by audience (Santos et al., 2013). Thus, the frames that the media create can lead to biases and judgments (Sikorski et al., 2012). Since media increasingly functions as a reference for sport enthusiasts (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2009), framing theory provides the context needed in sport literature to identify and examine the dynamics of sport-related media coverage and its creation of meaning through the promotion of particular issues and viewpoints (Santos et al., 2013).

Method

Content analysis has long been used by researchers interested in systematically examining the content of all forms of recorded communication. (Potter & Levine‐Donnerstein, 1999). A content analysis was conducted on 17 news-media sites that covered 174 stories on NFL off-the-field scandals from January 2007 to December 2012. Using a keyword-based search, the following news sites were identified covering the stories: CBS, Chicago Tribune, CNBC, Enquirer, ESPN, Fox Sports, Huffington Post, Las Vegas Review-Journal, Los Angeles Times, MSNBC, New York Daily News, New York Times, NFL.com, SB NATION, The Seattle Times, USA Today, and Washington Post.

Results

The study found high-profile off-the-field scandals involving 10 athletes from eight teams. Five dominant frames highlighted by the news-media were identified: money, race, timing, power and nature of punishment. The media framed off-the-field scandals – (i) money –costing players hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars through suspensions without pay or the terminating of endorsement deals, (ii) race –involving a higher ratio black (compared to white) athletes in terms of both the frequency and nature of the scandals, (iii) timing –receiving most disciplinary actions from NFL after a court ruling, (iv) power –having the league Commissioner’s considerable discretionary power in disciplining players through sanctions such as financial fines, length of suspension, and (vi) punishment nature –holding inconsistencies in terms of severity of punishments across players and discrepancies in the league’s application of length of suspension.

The analysis further uncovered nine types of off-the-field misconducts: alcohol, drugs, physical assault, verbal assault, sexual assault, DUI/motor accidents, murder, dog fighting and shooting/carrying guns without a license. On the severity of the incidents, scandals ranged from committing atrocious crimes (e.g., murder) to ignoring basic rules (e.g.,

traffic lights).

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