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Ania Izabela Rynerzewska
Mercer University, ania.rynarzewska@gmail.com

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Money, Medals, and Championships: Politically Driven Conspiracy of Silence, Model Development; Implications to Diversity and Inclusion

Ania Izabela Rynarzewska, PhD.

Mercer University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Athletic organizational image and reputation management often require careful consideration of values shared and enacted to create a flawless image with which many fans identify and often admire. However, under the cover of perfect brand image covered with medals, championship and glory, there is often a hidden world of abuse and active participation in silencing the victims to protect the image. This paper analyzes relatively recent cases of two sex scandals in sports: Jerry Sandusky case and Larry Nassar case. Both individuals held higher positions within their organizations' network of supporters who participated in a conspiracy of silence. This paper proposes a model of conspiracy of silence so that future crises related to active hiding of truth to protect the image are minimized.

Amateur and professional sports draw a lot of attention from children to adults and elderly. Watching sports is one of America's favorite pastimes. Unfortunately, under the cover of Olympics medals, championships and big price money individuals within organizations work hard on maintaining sport's or organization's image. Olympic medals, championships and high rankings are what so many athletes strive to achieve. They bring satisfaction, fame, sponsors and revenue not only to athletes but also to the organizations, brands and even nations they represent. Sport brings people together, strengthens communities and grows economies (Leber, 2012). Due to their impact on youth, organizations and society, sport teams, institutions and individuals carry a great deal of responsibility but also power. Big sport is not the only arena of great power (Boyle, 2009). All it takes is to open any social media site and read a few comments to find out that politics, big businesses, and big sports are the power players in our society. The recent sex abuse scandals within athletic organizations suggest that the power of sports may have an impact on fans but, more importantly, it exercise a great power within its ranks. So much so that in order to protect reputations, representatives are willing to commit crimes to prevent reputational damage.

The paper relies on two instrumental cases which took years to emerge regardless of the multitude of signs and individuals in power becoming aware of the abuse. Both case studies follow a very particular pattern that makes them instrumental. Jerry Sandusky, a prominent football Penn State coach, abused small boys from underprivileged communities over the span of years on the premises of Penn State University. Larry Nassar, a well-respected doctor and athletic trainer at Michigan State University and United States of America Olympic Gymnastics

team who abused hundreds of young female athletes. These two instrumental cases serve as examples of politically driven behaviors to preserve hierarchy, status and position of power that have led to tragic consequences by actively silencing the oppressed or those who wanted to stand up for the oppressed. They are examples of organizational and leadership failures that flourished in an environment and under conditions that, as this paper attempts to highlight, should be prevented for the betterment of members, organizations and, ultimately, society.

While this paper highlights two organizations, Penn State and Michigan State University, the purpose is not to vilify them but rather, it is to highlight a culture and other potential antecedents to development of widespread crises involving power dominance in majority/minority interactions. While it may seem like common sense that sexual abuse or any other form of power dominance including but not limited to racism and sexism should not take place in organizations, history and recent developments in sports, politics and entertainment show that these are very much a problem of today's society. This is why; the value of this paper is in its goal of building a model that is to help identify signs to organizational dynamics that may lead to imbalances and crises. In order to build the model of conspiracy of silence, first the spiral of silence, a theory of public opinion developed by Noelle-Neumann (1974) gives an insight into the power of public opinion, it is followed by the explanation of social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and social identity theory (Tafel, 1979). Finally, the paper highlights how these factors may interplay to contribute to conspiracy of silence.

Keywords: *Olympics, Larry Nasar, Conspiracy of Silence, Reputation Management, Crisis, Sport Marketing.*

REFERENCES (Upon Request)

THE AUTHORS **Ania Izabela Rynarzewska, PhD**, is finishing up her appointment as an assistant professor in Sports Marketing and Analytics in the Stetson Hatcher School of Business at Mercer University, and looking forward to her new position as an assistant professor in Marketing at Georgia College & State University in August, 2022. Her PhD in communication with emphasis in marketing and quantitative tools was attained from Florida State University. She is a former scholarship tennis player at FSU's Women's Tennis team and a National Champion of Poland. She is a successful entrepreneur, as an owner of Lux Leonis, her upmarket personal care products are being sold in both in B2C and B2B markets. Her research has been presented at conferences including Academy of Marketing Science, The Association for Consumer Research, AMTP and Society for Marketing Advances. Her work has been published in journals including *Journal of Consumer Marketing* and *Journal of Research Interactive Marketing*.