

# Athlete's philanthropy and social responsibility communication on social media during COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

As the world feels the impact of the coronavirus, the role of sport and philanthropy has merged as a venue for generating social impact and providing relief to those in need. This research focuses on the social responsibility and philanthropic mobilization of professional athletes to address urgent social needs during the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, the study focuses on the role that social media plays in the communication of these socially responsible activities developed by professional athletes. This study examined how the various ways that athletes are giving back and the messaging strategies related to the impact of COVID-19. By doing that, the authors identified three key areas: Awareness Raising and Advocacy; Calls to Action and Engagement; Information Sharing and Communication. Other relevant insights into philanthropic and social responsibility strategies and approaches were identified (e.g., direct giving, fundraising, awareness raising, mobilizing networks, or information sharing). The paper also discusses the potential responses and outcomes garnered by communicating these efforts and offers insights into how professional athletes can maximize their social impact around the world during crisis during crises such as the COVID-19.

**Keywords:** Social media; Athlete's philanthropy; Social responsibility communication; Athlete's communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 public health crisis has touched every level of the sport industry in all countries around the world. While the situation has resulted in the postponement or cancellation of regular seasons and sport mega-events, key players in sport business are staying on the frontlines of messaging and support to those affected by COVID-19. In response to this global pandemic, professional athletes, teams, sport leagues, partners and sponsors have mobilized their philanthropic engines to 'give back'. While these actions are altruistic on one hand, meant to help others, there may also be additional strategic advantages to the teams, leagues and athletes who are not in the public eye in the same way they would be if they were playing. Strategic benefits may accrue such as burnishing the image and identity of the organization or personal brand and maintaining relevance in the minds and hearts of fans and followers when actual sporting competitions are not occurring (Kim et al., 2017). This article explores the philanthropic and socially responsible activities and efforts enacted by professional athletes in calling attention to key areas of need related to COVID-19. Specifically, it focuses on how philanthropy and social responsibility is communicated during this crisis, and how athletes are mobilizing, leveraging, connecting, and inspiring philanthropic behaviour to focus on social impact and helping others in need.

### ***Professional sport, philanthropy, and social impact***

Philanthropy, charity, and social responsibility have been a key pillar of professional sport for over 50 years (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). In particular, during times of need such as environmental disasters or other crises, athletes and professional sport teams have emerged as key community leaders in providing support (financial, messaging, awareness building, or mobilizing networks) to those affected (Inoue & Havard, 2015). After major natural disasters, professional teams and athletes have taken leadership roles in fundraising and delivering resources to those impacted. For example, after an earthquake in Qinghai, China, NBA star Yao Ming's home province, he formed a charitable foundation to assist with earthquake relief. J.J. Watt of the NFL Houston Texans, similarly, mobilized his network of fans and followers through social media and online fundraising platforms to raise funds and awareness for Hurricane Harvey recovery efforts (Klemko, 2017). After Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Saints channelled resources and energy into rebuilding the city (Fanta, 2015). These examples illustrate the role of professional sport actors in serving as a beacon of hope as well as leaders and role models in informing and helping others – and bring to focus the role of social responsibility and philanthropy during times of need.

As the intersection of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (CSR) with professional sport has increased (Anderson & Martin, 2019; Babiak, Mills, Tainksy & Juravich, 2012; Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Hamil & Morrow, 2011; Kim et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2018), a growing body of scholarship has sought to understand not only the strategic and organizational benefits and challenges of these activities, but also the broader impact of these efforts (Chung, 2018; Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; Inoue, Kent, & Lee, 2011; Kihl, Babiak, & Tainksy, 2014). A key to ensuring broad awareness and messaging of philanthropy and social responsibility is the role of communication, information transfer, and interaction and engagement (Bennett, 2014; Formentin & Babiak, 2014; Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2018). Communication and awareness building of social issues has been facilitated by technology and emerging new media platforms – which allow for vast numbers of followers and social networks to be leveraged to mobilize resources (Bennett, 2014; Jeffries & Xu, 2017).

In general, athletes and professional sport teams use social media as a way to create positive exposure, attract fans and increase their visibility (Pegoraro, 2010). Social media platforms have a significant impact on the communication that takes place in the sport field due to the interactivity that it offers both, fans and athletes, and its quick acceptance by the sport industry (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Some scholars (Ali et

al., 2015) argue that using social media to communicate social responsibility activities is an effective way to build good relationships with different types of stakeholders. Social media is a valuable tool for CSR and philanthropy communication because it can help to craft a specific philanthropic brand / image and provide access and current / topical information to stakeholders (Formentin & Babiak, 2014). Most importantly, with millions of followers across social media platforms, teams and professional athletes can mobilize action and engagement of followers to help support others (Bennett, 2014).

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the context of the current global pandemic, as the public face of their leagues in the absence of actual events and competitions, athletes have become conduits and messengers of not only public health information, but also philanthropic ambassadors and social activists (Moran, 2020). Through social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, or TikTok, athletes may advance and achieve particular philanthropic objectives. To verify that it is the main goal of this research. The purpose of this paper is to understand the strategies and tactics athletes use to engage in socially responsible and charitable work in a time of crisis.

This exploratory study used content analysis to achieve the research purpose. Sport communication studies have used content analysis as main method to understand social media using by athletes and other sport organizations (Abuín-Penas & Fontenla-Pedreira, 2020; Abuín-Penas et al., 2019; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). This study used a similar research approach and categories for the content analysis. The first step was to identify the top charitable athletes in each American and Spanish from a variety of sports (based on salary, visibility, and charitable activity). Then their social media messages were manually downloaded and added into an Excel spreadsheet to be analysed following the recommendations of the previously cited researchers. From these professional athlete social media posts, the authors were able to distil three key themes which shed light into how athletes practice social responsibility in a time of crisis. The three main themes were: *Awareness Raising and Advocacy; Calls to Action and Engagement; Information Sharing and Communication.*

The research focused on athletes developing their sporting activities in Spain and USA, as two of the countries that have suffered the most from coronavirus crisis (both in the number of deaths and in number of those infected), who were using their social media for social responsibility and philanthropy purposes during COVID-19. This study chose to analyse the communication of those social responsibility and philanthropy activities through social media, retrieving those activities to the categories previously mentioned.

## RESULTS

### ***Awareness raising and advocacy***

The issues an athlete communicates about can help to provide a platform for telling stories about organizations in need, businesses that are helping others, or shedding light on social challenges or causes that have been exacerbated by crises such as COVID-19. For example, in the United States, NBA players and teams were some of the first to begin posting about their socially focused efforts. Kevin Love, who regularly participates in philanthropic activities related to mental health through The Kevin Love Fund, announced through his Instagram account, a donation of \$100,000 to fight the fear and anxiety people may experience as a result of the pandemic. In his Instagram message he pointed out:

*“Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. And the fear and anxiety resulting from the recent outbreak of COVID-19 can be extremely overwhelming. Be kind to one another. Be understanding of their fears, regardless if you don't feel the same.”*

Athletes have also used their platform to advocate and raise awareness around social challenges and emerging needs resulting from the public health crisis. For example, The Players Coalition, an advocacy group of NFL athletes, sent a letter to the Federal Communication Commission requesting that the commission ensure internet access to K-12 students in disadvantaged and minority communities where schools are conducting online classes because of COVID-19. In their communication, they encourage others to engage in similar advocacy and support, bringing this message to their thousands of followers:

*“As a coalition of professional athletes formed to address social and racial inequities in America, we appreciate the steps the @FCC is taking to support individuals and families during the COVID-19 pandemic but we can't support limiting access to only those who can afford it.”*

One significant collaborative awareness raising and advocacy campaign launched during the COVID-19 crisis was organized by FIFA and the World Health Organization (WHO) and launched via social media. Using videos and publishing them on their social networks, famous soccer players from around the world, from their homes, gave advice to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Players and former players such as Lionel Messi, Iker Casillas, Xavi Hernández, Gianluigi Buffon, Samuel Eto'o, Valeri Karpin, Radamel Falcao or Carles Puyol have joined this campaign with videos in which they recommend washing their hands frequently, isolate themselves socially and continue other WHO preventive measures.

Because of their platforms, professional athletes can amplify messaging and reinforce their social advocacy and responsibility roles (Babiak et al, 2012; Tainsky & Babiak, 2011). In doing so, they help to shed light on issues directly related to the COVID-19 crisis (highlighting the efforts of health care workers, demonstrating need for equipment etc.). They may also bring awareness to other issues such as domestic abuse, economic hardship, or gaps in education opportunities arising as a result of the pandemic. Many of these initiatives are aligned with causes the athletes and their professional teams have long been involved in and / or focus on through their own charitable foundation and augmented via partnerships with non-profit or corporate organizations.

### ***Donations calls to action and engagement***

Another prominent form of social media interaction by athletes during a crisis such as COVID-19 are donations, calls to action, mobilization and engagement of followers. Communicating to their millions of followers across platforms, athletes are able to marshal and activate fans and followers to adopt similar philanthropic behaviours themselves – to donate to causes, volunteer, or support efforts in other ways. For instance, a group of Spanish athletes, led by tennis player Rafael Nadal and NBA star Pau Gasol forged an alliance to raise money for the "Cruz Roja Responde" (Red Cross Responds) project, which delivers needed resources and money to help the health system and the families that need it the most right now, with the aim of raising 12 million dollars. Both used their corresponding Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts to post messages of unity and collaboration in which they requested the financial support of all Spanish athletes and general public, using the hashtag #NuestraMejorVictoria (#OurBestVictory). Both Gasol and Nadal posted joint statements on their social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram):

*"The time has come for Spanish sport to achieve our greatest victory #nuestramejorvictoria Help support us in the #CruzRojaResponde project with your donation to ES44 0049 0001 5321 1002 2225. @paugasol and I already have donated. Will you join us?"*

*"We are trying to unite as many people as possible to create something beautiful. I am very grateful for everyone's collaborative effort: athletes, artists, companies, federations, citizens."*

By partnering with an international agency such as the Red Cross, they were able to further amplify and extend their messaging and their fundraising efforts. By the end of April, 2020 over 80 athletes and performers had donated funds or equipment to the cause, their contributions had exceeded 9 million dollars, and 917,000 persons had benefited from this campaign (Cruz Roja Española, 2020).


Similarly, NBA MVP, Giannis Antetokounmpo, announced through his Twitter account "My family and I are committed to donating \$100,000 to the Fiserv Forum staff". Shortly thereafter, his team the Milwaukee Bucks, tweeted that the entire team was making donations to facility workers affected by COVID-19, and that they would match any donations to ensure that all employees would be compensated for lost games for 30 days. These types of philanthropic actions by athletes have been common throughout the COVID-19 crisis and are magnified by communication and by the large fan base of teams and athletes. Many of these efforts encourage engagement of followers to match or contribute funds to the causes and issues supported and promoted by the team or athlete.

Many of the calls to action and engagement efforts are made through an athlete's foundation. Another example, Marcus Smart with the NBA Boston Celtics donated meals to hospital workers through his own personal foundation. Through this initiative, he also encouraged followers to donate to support the cause and promised followers a surprise to keep them engaged and connected.

*"My @YGC\_Foundation is donating over 425 meals to Boston & area frontline hospital workers. U can help! Go to <http://MarcusSmart.org> & donate. Til May 16 100% of proceeds go to our workers. Me & my support team got some more surprises that I'll post here in a bit! Stay tuned."*

Other athletes around the world have chosen different ways of showing their solidarity with the aim of raising funds for the fight in coronavirus, one of those different ways were the challenges. Jan Frodeno, German Olympic and Ironman triathlete champion, raised \$216,000 by performing an Ironman without leaving his own home. This money was donated to city hospitals for helping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Frodeno shared the entire experience live through his social networks so that his followers could see how he swam, cycled and ran without leaving his home. This experience allowed followers to engage, watch, connect, and take action by donating funds to helping support those affected by COVID-19.

Three of the best trail runners in the world (Pau Capell, Tòfol Castanyer and Kilian Jornet) got together to create an original challenge #YoCorroEnCasa. With this initiative they were able to raise \$ 95,000 in benefit of the team of doctors and researchers from the "Fight Against AIDS Foundation", IrsiCaixa and a University Hospital, who are seeking a coronavirus vaccine. This initiative invited everyone to run in their own houses during confinement, participants had to make a donation and could share the experience with their idols through live broadcasts on their social media. On his Twitter account, Kilian Jornet pointed out:


*“Join us this Saturday on #YoCorroEnCasa Challenge  <http://albertjorquera.com/yocorroencasa>  
Join a virtual race that aims to: raise money for #YoMeCorono, stay active and raise awareness of  
the importance of not leaving home.”*

One of the biggest social responsibility activities organized in Spain during COVID-19 was LaLiga Santander Challenge, an EA Sports - FIFA20 tournament where soccer players from 18 of the 20 clubs competing in LaLiga participated. This event, in addition to raising \$ 160,000 for UNICEF for fighting against the coronavirus, drew an audience of 173,000 during the final on Twitch ([twitch.tv/ibai/](https://www.twitch.tv/ibai/)). The event was also broadcasted on Spanish television: Movistar Deportes 1, Gol and #Vamos pushing the total cumulative audience to over 205,000 during the weekend. In addition, the main online media in Spain began to follow various topics, such as the official draw, the line-ups and the results. Although the tournament was primarily national in scope, notable international media covered at least some of the #LaLigaSantanderChallenge (hashtag with which the event was named). Twitter was the primary platform used to unite all the necessary parties helping to guarantee the success of the event, achieving more than 35,000 tweets and retweets related to the event (Nielsen Sports and Entertainment, 2020).

### **Information sharing and communication**

During a time of crisis such as COVID-19, access to information can be critical. Additionally, attention and focus on specific issues or key areas of need are also important to address urgent problems. However, in a public health crisis, athletes must make sure to disseminate scientifically correct information about COVID-19 and how to slow its spread. Recognizing their platform and social responsibility, numerous athletes have posted specific language around this, made videos or created graphics. Amplifying scientific messages is important and athletes have a platform to do so and have partnered with the CDC and WHO to ensure that the messages reach the broadest audiences around the world.

For example, Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors used social media to educate his followers on COVID-19. The NBA all-star interviewed Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Curry is the second most followed NBA player on Instagram with 30.4 million followers, and, after the livestream, the video has garnered over 150,000 views (Giffin, 2020). Curry has been very vocal and active in using his significant platform to message to his followers with information about how his followers can stay healthy and safe during the public health crisis. He followed up his interview with Dr. Fauci with a post communicating other COVID-19 resources (with information on transmission, recovery, vaccination, and testing) to his 30 million followers on Instagram and 14 million Twitter followers.

*“Educate yourself and do your part by checking out our @sc30inc COVID-19 resource  
guide...  [sc30.com/covid19](https://sc30.com/covid19)”*

Cristiano Ronaldo, the world-famous Portuguese soccer player, has also helped to disseminate information and help to communicate relevant health related news on his social media accounts, asking his followers to act responsibly and inviting them to follow the World Health Organization advice. On his tweet he said:

*“I speak to you today not as a football player, but as a son, father, a human being concerned with  
the latest developments that is affecting the whole world. It is important we all follow the advice of  
WHO (World Health Organization) and the governing bodies on how we handle this current situation.  
Protecting human life must come above any other interests.”*

One of the requirements to stop Covid-19 infections is to wash your hands regularly, if possible with hydro alcoholic gel. That is why the brothers Marc and Álex Márquez, professional motorcycle riders of the Spanish Repsol Honda Team, in addition to making a donation of medical supplies to the Hospital Universitari Arnau de Vilanova, wanted to teach their followers how to make their own hand sanitizer with products that are usually found at home. With the help of an expert at the Repsol Tech Lab, the riders show, in a YouTube video, the procedure of mixing the elements safely and in the right measures to obtain the right mix.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In times of crisis, the lens on sport as a social change agent is magnified (Inoue & Havard, 2015). The charitable and socially responsible work of teams, their leaders, as well as the athletes themselves has the potential for an immediate and positive benefit on society if communicated and messaged properly (Babiak et al., 2012, Babiak & Formentin, 2014). This global health crisis has prompted deeper consideration of both the practical implications of the communication of sport philanthropy and social responsibility, as well as opportunities for scholarly investigation to better understand the role and impact of the communication of philanthropy and social responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a practical perspective, the nature, content, frequency, sustained messaging around a crisis such as COVID-19 may influence constituents in different ways in the sport industry. Fans and followers of teams and individual athletes may be motivated to give or support causes based on what and how an organization or an athlete communicates about the crisis. While calls to action and engagement may be a communication strategy used in non-crisis times by sport businesses, charities and foundations, the nature and urgency of these requests is magnified during an emergency such as COVID-19. In particular, with companies coming under scrutiny for supporting employees – at the same time themselves feeling the economic repercussions of the health care crisis – communicating on social media about their socially responsible and philanthropic efforts can enhance impression management and branding, and can foster active dialogue and authentic connection with fans and other constituents. It can also serve as the team / athlete's 'voice' in communicating the authentic values and beliefs of the team / athlete around helping others and the role of sport in society (Pursuit, 2017). In order to achieve maximum impact, there must be a clear understanding of intent and purpose of messaging and the audience to whom messages are being targeted. While sport businesses and celebrities are not the only ones engaging in philanthropy and social responsibility during this pandemic, they are one important conduit for communicating about a health issue that is impacting the entire world. Given sport's unique role in society (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007), there is a powerful platform to drive advancement of knowledge and philanthropic practice around the COVID-19 pandemic globally. Sport teams and athletes can build relationships with publics through philanthropy and social responsibility. Communicating about impact and outcomes is also important to foster deeper trust and encourage sustained giving by the athlete or team followers. Finally, a public health crisis such as a pandemic, shines a spotlight on important immediate needs (public health and wellbeing) but also impacts other more longstanding social issues (mental health, domestic abuse, equal access to education, etc.). Professional athletes and teams who already engage in philanthropy and social responsibility may consider the alignment and fusion of these issues and reflect that in their communications to their constituents.

From a research perspective, there are opportunities for more exploration around the relationship between philanthropy and communication during crises. There has been a dearth of research in this area in sport, leaving opportunities for scholars to explore many questions around the role and impact of sport during a global health emergency. We still know little about how 'external actors' interpret the charitable and socially responsible actions of teams or athletes, and the ways they may be influenced by how those actions are

communicated. For example, what communication strategies are more effective at motivating sport fans / followers to make a donation during a team or athlete's efforts at 'crisis fundraising' (Waters & Tindall, 2011). A particular unique aspect of crisis fundraising is that often, the efforts are quickly developed and implemented with little time to make strategic decisions or to ensure accountability. A relevant stream of research would therefore be: what efforts are made (by teams or athletes) to provide follow up information to donors about the impact of their donations and gifts? What platforms and outlets (traditional media, social media etc.) are most effective in these communications? How are these follow up communications perceived by donors and other constituents? Additionally, given the key role of partnerships in developing and implementing socially responsible efforts (Evans, 2020), there are gaps in understanding the ways messaging is communicated in coordination with partners for consistent messaging around relief efforts. Finally, and perhaps critically, what innovations will emerge in the space of philanthropy and social responsibility in professional sport post-pandemic?

This paper highlights the key activities and communication strategies of professional athletes around the world as they grapple with the impact of COVID-19 to both themselves and their fans and followers. Given the unprecedented nature of this global health crisis, reinforcing the image as a globally responsible citizen through strategic communication may not only provide social value, but also be beneficial to the image and brand of the athlete themselves.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Author 1 (Javier Abuín-Penas) and Author 2 (Kathy Babiak) devised the project, the main conceptual ideas and proof outline. Author 1 (Javier Abuín-Penas) and Author 3 (María-José Martínez-Patiño) worked out the technical details and performed the analysis. Author 1 (Javier Abuín-Penas) wrote the manuscript with support from Author 2 (Kathy Babiak) and Author 3 (María-José Martínez-Patiño). All authors, Author 1 (Javier Abuín-Penas), Author 2 (Kathy Babiak) and Author 3 (María-José Martínez-Patiño) contributed to the final version of the manuscript.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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