The Impact of Internal Marketing Activities on Mandatory Volunteers in Sport: A Case from the 2019 Military World Games in China

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Mandatory volunteering may contribute to creating lifelong volunteers for the society and building social/human capital for individuals (Huang et al., 2009). However, it is possible that mandatory volunteering may not lead to greater intention to volunteer when they feel being forced to participate in volunteering (i.e., reluctance theory; Helms, 2013) or if they do not have a pleasant volunteering experience (Karl et al., 2008). Although the majority of involuntary volunteers are supportive of their mandatory volunteer experience after actual volunteering (Henney et al., 2017), they are more likely to volunteer again if they feel appreciated and connected to the mission of the sport event, and trained well for their volunteer tasks. In this regard, the concept of internal marketing can be applied to mandatory volunteers to improve volunteer outcomes, such as job satisfaction and greater motivation to provide better service (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005).

In internal marketing, employees (and volunteers) are treated as ‘internal consumers’ who must be informed, developed, and motivated to provide effective services to the clients or sport entity (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005). Internal marketing strategies should thus focus on effectively disseminating information about the sport entity’s mission, training and supporting volunteers to perform their jobs, and motivating volunteers by acknowledging their contribution and providing rewards (Nogueira et al., 2020). However, despite the utility of the internal marketing concept, there is a paucity of studies that have examined the influence of internal marketing on volunteer outcomes (Nogueira et al., 2020). Based on the concepts of internal marketing linked to employee engagement, the current study investigated the relationship between internal marketing activities and internal marketing outcomes (i.e., role clarity, commitment to the sport event, and future civic intention).

Data were collected from 513 college students required to volunteer at the 2019 Military World Games using a survey questionnaire and analyzed using partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results showed that internal marketing had a positive impact on role clarity (beta = .70, p*** < .001), commitment (beta = .41***), and intention (beta = .18, p** < .01). Role clarity was related to commitment (beta = .50***), and intention (beta = .19**). Commitment was associated with civic intention (beta = .48***). Overall, role clarity and commitment partially mediated the relationship between internal marketing and future civic intention.

Role clarity, commitment, and civic intention were regressed on the three dimensions of internal marketing (i.e., Vision, Development, and Reward). A series of multiple regression analyses revealed that role clarity and commitment were mostly associated with reward, followed by development. Somewhat differently, the civic intention was most significantly predicted by development, followed by rewards.

This study suggests the practical importance of internal marketing strategies on volunteer outcomes in the context of mandatory volunteers in sport. Sport event organizers should improve the volunteer experience by making effective internal marketing strategies including how to better interact with volunteers, enhance their roles by providing both formal and on-the-job training, feel valued by the sport entity, and build up closer relationships by sharing the mission and cause of the sport event/entity.