Influences of Athlete's Transgression in Endorsement Context: Effects of Transgression Type and Functional Fit

Joon Sung Lee, University of Michigan
Dae Hee Kwak (Advisor), University of Michigan

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Introduction

Despite evident advantages of athlete endorsement, various risks are associated with athlete endorsement. In particular, given the fact that many athlete endorsers commit immoral transgressions in today’s world and marketing managers cannot control their misconducts, the athlete endorsers’ transgressions deserve more attention. However, to date, only minimal attention has been paid to celebrity athletes’ transgressions, while the research community has paid extensive attention to the question of how the endorsement campaign can become more persuasive. Therefore, the main purpose of the current study is twofold: (1) to examine negative effects of athlete transgression on sport consumers’ attitude toward an athlete (A\text{Ath}), attitude toward associated brand (A\text{Brd}), and purchase intention (P\text{I}), and (2) to examine the potential moderating effects of two potential boundary conditions - transgression type and functional fit between an athlete and a brand - in an experimental setting.

Theoretical Backgroun...
develop the survey for the main study. A total of 218 respondents were recruited from an online penal service (i.e., mturk.com). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions and were asked to read a fictitious athlete’s outstanding records and transgression information then asked to complete questionnaires. Respondents then were asked to read a brief information about a sponsor brand (i.e., sport drink vs. carbonated drink), and then completed the rest of the survey.

The outcome measures included AAth and ABrd (3 items each: MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), PI (3 items: Yi, 1990), and personal involvement level with sport (4 items: Zaichkowsky, 1985) using a 7-point Likert scale. In addition, manipulation-checking items were included to test whether the intended manipulations worked: (1) a single item asking if the transgression committed by the athlete is a violation of sport integrity and (2) three items asking functional fit between an athlete and a brand (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). Data analyses included descriptive analysis, reliability test, manipulation check, and a set of ANCOVAs using personal involvement with sport in the scenarios (i.e., track and field) as a covariate.

Results

Results showed that individuals in the control (without transgression) condition reported significantly greater levels of AAth, ABrd, and PI than those in the on-field and the off-field transgression conditions (H1 supported). However, according to another set of ANCOVAs and follow-up post-hoc analyses, contrary to our expectations, individuals in the on-field condition (M = 2.93, SE = .15) reported a greater level of AAth relative to individuals in the off-field condition (M = 2.17, SE = .14; p < .001). Moreover, participants’ ABrd (p = .55) and PI (p = .85) levels in on- and off-field conditions did not differ from each other (H2 rejected). Intriguingly, we could not find any significant main effects of functional fit on individuals’ ABrd and PI (H3 rejected). No interactions between transgression type and functional fit were found.

Discussion

From the results, we can understand that athlete endorsers’ transgressions have negative effects on consumers’ AAth, ABrd, and PI regardless of transgression types. However, the results show that off-field transgression has more negative influence on sport consumers’ attitudes and purchase intention than on-field transgression. These results are contrary to what Hughes and Shank (2005) argued. As for the equivocal results, it is plausible to speculate that the perceived severity of transgression could have moderated the impact of transgression on individuals’ perceptions and evaluations. Moreover, brand perceptions do not differ based on transgression type. These results might have transpired due to the laboratory setting utilizing fictitious athlete and brand. As Till and Shimp (1998) noted, compared to the actual marketplace, only limited set of feelings and responses are evoked in laboratory setting using fictitious spokesperson and brand. Given the argument that human memory network consists of associations between memory nodes (Anderson, 1976) we would argue that a single exposure would not be sufficient to build any meaningful associative connections. Furthermore, regarding the functional fit, we utilized drink category, which is considered as a low-involvement product (Traylor, 1981). Use of low-involvement product could have not elicited enough interests in brands (Bogart, 1967; Mitchell, 1979) and failed to evoke expected responses. To sum up, despite the unexpected results herein, the study evidently shows that an athlete transgression has significant negative effects on sport consumers’ AAth, ABrd, and PI. It is worth noting that these findings provide answer for marketing practitioners’ concern about potential negative impact from an athlete transgression to an associated brand. Nevertheless, future studies addressing aforementioned limitations are still needed to further extend our understanding of athlete transgression and its marketing implications.