Role Models or Criminals? The Effects of Race and Severity of Criminal Activity on Audience Perceptions of Professional Athletes

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Professional athletes wear many hats in society; they represent consumer products as celebrity endorsers, are paid for their athletic and physical abilities, have significant presence in sport media, and are often thought to be role models in society (Knight, Giuliano, & Sanchez-Ross, 2001). However, background checks on NFL athletes reveal that 21% have been arrested for serious crimes (Cook & O’Brien, 1998). Examples of NFL athletes receiving negative publicity for criminal activity are not hard to come by (e.g. Michael Vick, O.J. Simpson, Brandon Marshall, and Matt Jones). Furthermore, previous research indicates that negative publicity can affect audience perceptions of the athlete and eventually endorsement effectiveness (Charbonneau & Garland, 2005; Rines, 2004). Therefore, it is important to understand how audience perceptions of the athletes differ based on the severity of the criminal activity, and the social identity of the audience member. Arguably, the race of the athlete and media consumer influences audience perceptions. Individuals earn membership into social groups based on categorical attributes (ex: race, gender, religion, etc). Such membership assists in the formation of self-identity. (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity theory posits that an in-group bias is the result; here, individuals favor members of the same race, religion, or gender above others.

Ethnicity and severity of criminal conviction served as the manipulated variables in this 2 (white or black athlete) x 2 (convicted of drug possession or child abuse) experimental design. A small southeastern university was selected for the research population based on the ethnically diverse student body; Overall, 212 students participated in the experiment, including 103 black participants and 102 white participants. Research participants were assigned to four groups (based on exposure to one of four stimulus conditions) using a random sampling technique. Each participant received a newspaper article/mug-shot photo combination, and completed a questionnaire. The ethnicity of the athlete was manipulated in the mug shot photo, and crime severity was manipulated in the headline and first paragraph of the newspaper article. Numerous dependent variables were measured including perceptions of the convicted athlete in the article, athlete endorsement value, racial identity, sport media use, sport participation, and demographic variables.

Findings indicate that a racial in-group bias does exist, but varies by the severity of criminal conviction. Black research participants judged the white athlete convicted of drug possession more severely (m=4.91) than white participants (m=3.8; p<.03). Additionally, white research participants judged the black athlete convicted of drug possession more severely (m=5.29) than black participants (m=3.33; p<.001). As hypothesized, research participants in all conditions judged the athlete convicted of child abuse more severely than the athlete convicted of drug possession, regardless of gender (t=-8.76; p<.001). The severity of criminal conviction significantly influenced the athlete’s endorsement value; consumers were more likely to purchase a product endorsed by the athlete convicted of drug possession (m=3.24), than by the athlete convicted of child abuse (m=2.39; t=3.28; p<.001). These findings suggest that the race and severity of criminal conviction of a professional athlete significantly influence audience perceptions of the athlete, and potential endorsement value. Similar research must be conducted to consider the influence of additional in-group biases including national pride, other minority groups, religion, and gender.