Athlete Scandals as Consumers’ Identity Threats: The Moderating Roles of Self-Brand Connection and Self-Construal

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In today’s sport industry, it has become a widespread practice to manage the individual athlete as a brand (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Thomson, 2006). At the same time, the risks involved in athlete branding have become important managerial issues in sport marketing. Recently, competitions between different forms of media has also escalated along with the rapid advancement of communication technologies (e.g., social media). In this intense competition, media have expanded their coverage into the personal lives of athletes, shifting their focus to sensationalized news to sell their products (Brown & de Matviuk, 2010). Arguably, usage of new media potentially place athletes at risk for vulnerable situations. While social media (e.g., Facebook, twitter and Instagram) allows athletes to effectively communicate their brand to consumers, athletes’ frivolous comments on social media often cause controversy. For instance, during the London Olympics in 2012, two athletes were banned from the competition due to their tweets, which contained racial overtones (Henry, 2012). Given the unpredictable consequences that come as a result of scandal in the sport industry, it is essential for sport agencies, marketers and also athletes themselves to understand the multifaceted consequences of scandals and to incorporate coping strategies in their branding process in proactive manner. Although a number of studies have investigated the impact of a variety of sport scandals, the majority of the research has focused on consumer’s reaction toward the team or sponsors. Sufficient attention has not yet been given to investigate how athlete scandals affect consumer’s (fan’s) self-image and self-enhancing motivation. Therefore, using brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998) as a theoretical framework, this study examines the conditions under which consumers will respond differently toward their self-evaluation after being exposed to the scandal of their favorite athletes.

Levy (1959) introduced the term “symbolic properties” to describe the personal and social meanings that people ascribe to products, thus giving the products an attached connotation that goes beyond their original functions. Since Levy’s attention to this topic, brand’s symbolic benefits have been a focal subject of a school of research on brand relationship (Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004; Aggarwal, 2004; Chaplin & John, 2005; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Fournier, 1989; Sprott, Czellar & Spangenberg, 2009; Terrasse, 2006). Rooted in Rogers’ (1951) theory of individual self-enhancement, the fundamental premise of brand relationship research is that a human’s desire for possession is derived from self-concept related motivations, such as self-esteem and self-consistency (Sirgy, 1982). Part of consumption behavior is also directed toward the protection and enhancement of this self-concept (Belk, 1988; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1982). Consumers often purchase, display and use those products as means to communicate symbolic meaning to others (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Therefore, they prefer to consume products that project their own sense of self (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982).

In the same vein, the construct of self-brand connection was established as an independent brand construct (Escalas & Bettmen, 2003). Self-connection refers to “the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self” (Fournier, 1998, p. 364). Escalas and Bettmen (2003, 2005) argued that symbolic brand benefits can help consumers construct and cultivate one’s self-concept as well as express that concept to others or to themselves. Through these benefit exchanges, consumers develop relationship with their favorite brands.

Self-brand connection is often examined in the context of brand failure or negative information of a product. Previous studies have found when consumers become connected to a brand, they become more forgiving toward the failure and become advocates for the brand (Anderson, 1998; Kemp, Childers & Williams, 2012). Cheng, White & Chaplin (2012) further investigated rationalizations of the phenomena and found that consumers with high self-brand connection respond to negative brand information as they do to their personal failure. In other words, consumers with high self-brand connection experience the negative brand information as a threat to their self-
concept. Consequently, they tend to maintain favorable brand evaluation even after the brand failure not only because of their in-group favoritism but also because of their needs for restoring positive self-evaluations (Cheng, et al., 2012).

This study posits that the symbolic benefits are core values of an athlete brand because athlete rarely provides physical goods directly to consumers. Instead, athletes provide symbolism through his/her performance and lifestyle that helps consumers to fulfill higher needs (i.e. belongingness, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization). Based on Cheng et al.’s rationale (2012), this study hypothesizes that consumers who have developed strong self-brand connections with athletes will experience self-identity crisis through the athlete’s scandals and, as a result, they lower their self-esteem. In this study, we also hypothesize that the severity of the self-identity crisis varies depending on self-construal which is defined as the extent to which the self is viewed as being separate, distinct from (independent self-construal), or interconnected with (interdependent self-construal), others (Singelis, 1994).

To test the research hypotheses, 2 (scandal x no scandal) × 2 (low self-brand connection vs. high self-brand connection) × 2 (independent self-construal vs. interdependent self-construal) between subjects experimental design is employed and 120 undergraduate/graduate students will be recruited for the experiment. The result of the experiment will be presented at the conference. This study will provide a unique insight by considering athlete scandals as consumer’s self-identity threat. The study will contribute to academic research by introducing the initial attempt to link sport scandal research with the growing body of research in consumer’s self-concept and consumption behavior. This study also purports to contribute to sport marketing practice by providing deeper understanding of consumer psychology and behavior during and after athlete’s scandals. Based on their psychographic characteristics, the researchers will offer several meaningful implications for developing effective post scandal recovery strategies.