Celebrity Athletes: Transgressions, Philanthropy, and the Moderating Role of Activity Type and Athlete-Cause Fit

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Introduction

From numerous real-life examples (e.g., Tiger Woods, Michael Vick, Lance Armstrong, LeBron James), we have been shown how fragile athletes’ images can be when the athletes are centered in public controversy. It has been shown that whether the accusations are true or not the controversial publicity apparently damages public figures’ images in consumers’ minds (Dean, 2004). Consequently, the damaged reputations in turn can cause subsequent negative impact on consumers’ perceptions and intentions. Considering the fragility of images and subsequent outcomes of unexpected crisis, many researchers have paid attention to the probable insurance role of pro-social activities (e.g., Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Cause-Related Marketing (CRM), philanthropy) as an effective tool to defend images from the negative impact of a crisis (Coombs, 1995; Godfrey, 2005; Porter & Kramer, 2006). However, little is known about how philanthropic activities conducted by celebrity athlete endorsers, as human brands (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Thomson, 2006), can mitigate public criticism toward the athletes when the athletes are engaged in the incidence of a crisis (i.e., illegal or immoral transgressions). Therefore, the current study aims to examine the insurance role of a celebrity athlete’s philanthropic activity in an experimental setting. In particular, the current study incorporates two potential boundary conditions: 1) type of pro-social activity (simple support vs. own foundation vs. control) and 2) athlete-cause fit (high vs. low).

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

Consumers often tend to maintain more positive attitudes toward public figures with good reputations than toward those with bad reputations (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Dean, 2004). Likewise, individuals seem more likely to condone or justify public figures with positive histories than others with histories of problems (Barton, 1993). Thus, it can be understood that positive reputations create a halo effect by projecting a positive image and evoke positive attitudinal outcomes in consumers’ minds (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). At the corporate level, companies with a long history of CSR involvement are known to earn the trust and goodwill of their stakeholders which in turn, becomes an intangible corporate asset that provides leverage for defending the company against challenges to its legitimacy (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Godfrey, 2005; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Suchman, 1995). Given these conceptualizations, we extend these concepts to an individual level and suggest that the positive reputation of a celebrity athlete built by pro-social initiatives should be an effective means to protect the athlete’s legitimacy in a situation of crisis (i.e., immoral or illegal transgression). Thus, we propose: H1. An athlete’s philanthropic endeavors will play a role as a buffer against public criticism: consumers, in the ‘philanthropy condition’, will report more positive attitudes toward the athlete who experiences a transgression than those who are in the ‘without philanthropy condition’.

In addition, among various topics related to philanthropic initiatives, several studies have focused on the important role of athlete-cause (A-C) fit on the consequences of the activities (Bloom, Hoeffler, Keller, & Meza, 2006; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). For instance, Kamins and Gupta (1994) imply potential positive impacts of A-C fit on the public’s attitude toward the athlete (e.g., enhancing image, credibility, and favorability). Moreover, as we can easily find, celebrity athletes have engaged in pro-social activities at different levels of involvement, from simply supporting to founding and owning charitable organizations. According to the Elaborating Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983), the attitudes formed by central route, which is activated by highly involved issues, are known to become more enduring than the attitudes formed via the peripheral route, which is activated by low involvement issues, against counterattitudinal information (e.g., transgression). Given these discussions, we propose: H2. The type of philanthropic activity will moderate the buffering effects of philanthropic activity: consumers in the ‘owning foundation’ condition will report greater levels of attitudes and intentions towards the athlete who experiences a transgression than those who are in the ‘without philanthropy condition’; and H3. The level of fit between an
athlete and a cause will moderate the buffering effect of philanthropic activity: consumers in the high fit condition will report greater levels of attitudes and intentions than consumers in the low fit condition.

Method

To test a 3 (activity type: simple support/found and own/control) x 2 (fit between athlete and cause: high/low) between-subjects design, an online survey program (Qualtrics.com) will be utilized to collect the data. A total of 300 participants will be recruited from the general population in the United States using an online penal service (e.g., mtulrk.com) to improve generalizability of findings. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of six conditions and will read fictitious articles about an athlete’s outstanding athletic records, an endorsement deal, the athlete’s pro-social activity, and transgression information. After reading the articles, the participants will be asked to complete survey questions.

The outcome measures will include attitudes toward athlete and brand (3 items each: MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), intention to purchase endorsed brand and intention to donate to the cause (3 items each: Yi, 1990), and personal involvement level with the cause and the sport in the scenarios (4 items: Zaichkowsky, 1985) using a 7-point Likert scale. Manipulation-checking items will be included to test whether the intended manipulations work in the participants’ minds. The data analyses will include descriptive analysis, reliability testing, manipulation checks, and a set of ANCOVAs using personal involvement with the cause in the scenarios (i.e., track and field) as a covariate. In particular, the scope of athlete transgression (i.e., doping) and A-C fit (i.e., children’s health [high fit] and animal rights [low fit]) were already identified as stimuli from a series of pretests. Moreover, the funds are already in place, so the data collection is expected to be completed by mid-December in 2014.

Expected results and discussion. From the literature, the results are intuitively expected to demonstrate significant main effects of an athlete’s philanthropic activity on consumers’ attitudes toward that athlete. Specifically, respondents in the with-philanthropy condition will exhibit more positive attitude toward an athlete even after reading transgression information. The results are also expected to uncover significant main effects of the philanthropy type and the A-C fit on consumers’ attitudes and intentions. Participants in the owning-foundation condition and participants in the high A-C fit conditions will report greater levels of attitudes and intentions. In addition to the main effects, significant interactions between the activity type and the fit are expected. Participants in the owning a foundation and high A-C fit condition would show the greatest levels of attitudes and intentions, while participants in the supporting and low fit condition would exhibit the lowest attitudes and intentions.

We believe the present study will make evident contributions to the sport management literature by demonstrating that pro-social initiatives can also play an insurance role not only at the corporate level, but also at the individual level. Moreover, the current study is expected to further extend athlete endorsement literature by exploring significant roles of athlete endorsers’ pro-social endeavors and potential moderating effects of the activity type and the A-C fit. Lastly, the results of present study will provide important practical implications that celebrity athletes’ philanthropic endeavors can be beneficial not only for society in general, but also for the celebrity athletes and associated brands.