How Sport Organizations Should Handle Crises: An Image Repair Strategy on the Situation of an Athletic Celebrity Scandal

Geumchan Hwang, University of Minnesota
Kyu- soo Chung, Winston-Salem State University
Lisa Kihl (Advisor), University of Minnesota

Communication Saturday, May 31, 2014 Poster
Abstract 2014-219 9:20 AM (Urban Room)

Athletic celebrities have played an important role in not only providing entertainment but also representing social and cultural values (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004; Jones & Schumann, 2000). They are, however, involved in various scandals including doping, match-fixing, infidelity, drug abuse, and violence. Such misbehaviors negatively influence the publics’ attitudes toward the athletes’ images as well as the reputation of sport entities (Johnson, 2011). For example, when Lance Armstrong’s doping scandal was revealed, his reputation for his superior athletic as well as for his philanthropic has been extensively damaged. This scandal shows that how an athletic celebrity scandal fast strongly tarnishes an athlete’s reputation and image.

Crisis is defined as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2012, p. 2). Crisis in the sport industry includes unexpected events that negatively influence an athlete or a sport organization such as criminal charges, labor disputes, facility issues, illegal / immoral actions, and so forth (Delatte, 2003). Of several types of crisis in sport, athletic celebrity scandals strongly influence sport fan’s attitude toward the individual athlete and organization (Brown et al., 2012). Scandal in sport is defined as “doing something illegal or immoral that has a profound impact on the sport or contest” (Hughes & Shank, 2005, p. 214). Previous studies (Brown et al., 2012; Kennedy, 2010; Sassenberg & Johnson-Morgan, 2010) have revealed that an athletic celebrity scandal strongly influences an athlete’s image and reputation by giving sport fans negative impression.

Despite its importance of repairing athletes’ images post-scandal, relatively few systemic approaches have been examined to understand image repair strategies after an athlete has been involved in a scandal. The importance of understanding image repair strategies becomes more pronounced if athletes wish to continue with their careers and market themselves and maintain their relationships with their fans and sponsors. The purpose of this is to understand the effectiveness of different image repair strategies after instances of athlete scandals. Specifically, using an experimental design, the study explores which strategies would be the most effective to recover the tarnished image of athletic celebrities.

According to Benoit (1997), five strategies are mostly employed to repair an individual’s image. The denial strategy is to insist not admitting to a scandal or shifting the blame to another person or organization. It’s not always for sport organizations or athletes to maintain the denial strategy. Evading responsibility strategy attributes the crisis to a lack of information and/or misinformation, or to a result of an accident but good intentions. Minimizing negative emotions is called the reducing offensiveness strategy, which focuses on positive traits of the organization and/or athletes to mitigate the negative perception. The corrective action strategy suggests that athletes promise to repay for the damages from the crisis and to take necessary actions to prevent another crisis. Finally, the mortification strategy involves an individual admitting the incident and asking for the public’s forgiveness.

Credibility refers to the believability of an entity’s intentions at a particular time (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Many studies revealed a strong relationship between credibility and brand image (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty et al., 2002). Publics appear to perceive the image of athletic celebrity in scandal differently by the level of credibility for athletes or sport organizations (Arai, Ko, & Kang, 2009). A level of sport fan involvement is another factor that might affect repair of athletic celebrity’s image (Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012). All these components strongly influence the publics’ attitudes, especially sport fans, toward athletic celebrities involved in a scandal (Brown et al., 2012).

This image repair theory provides an understanding of how athletic celebrities can respond to the public to maintain and repair their images (Brown et al., 2012). The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of different image repair strategies involving athletic celebrity scandals by an athlete’s credibility and types of scandal. To meet the aim, the study designed three image repair strategies (denial/mortification/denial+mortification) by two levels of
athlete credibility (high/low) by two types of athlete scandal (on-field/off-field) experiment on the perceptions of an athlete in scandal and attitude toward the image repair strategy (i.e., $3 \times 2 \times 2$ MANOVA). Of five strategies in the image repair theory, denial and mortification strategy were selected based on the previous image repair study (Brown et al., 2012), and combination of two strategies was added to examine interaction effect of two strategies. The effectiveness of an athlete’s image repair will be measured based on the perception change in the Brown et al. (2012) study by comparing overall perception of the athlete celebrity on the situations of scandal to perception of the athlete after the athlete responds to the scandal. All items being measured were adopted from previous studies (Kim & Lee, 2005; McCroskey, 1966; Ohanian, 1990; Shank & Beasley, 1998).

A pilot study was performed with a convenience sample of 42 undergraduate students attending an Midwest American university. A booklet comprised of two fictitious articles and questions were randomly given to subjects. Subjects were first asked to read each manipulated scenario and then answer each question. Fictitious scenarios were created to remove preconceived information about perceived athlete image and familiarity of previous scandals. The level of athlete credibility was manipulated based on three categories of credibility; attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (Ohanian, 1990). As a result of the scale reliability, the perception of the athlete celebrity before the scandal ($\alpha = .71$) and after the scandal ($\alpha = .79$), the sport involvement scale ($\alpha = .73$), and attitude toward the image repair strategy scale ($\alpha = .63$) were acceptable. With regard to general perception of diverse athlete scandals, the results revealed that subjects considered violence and criminal charge as the most deteriorate scandal ($M = 6.10; SD = 1.36$). Doping ($M = 5.67; SD = 1.58$), embezzlement ($M = 5.40; SD = 1.51$), match-fixing ($M = 5.33; SD = 2.24$), and sex scandal ($M = 5.22; SD = 1.92$) were followed orderly. Further results will be presented at the presentation.

The study can provide important theoretical understandings of how effective different image repair strategies are in rebuilding the image of an athlete post-scandal. The expected results can be used for by sport public relations professionals in designing and implementing a crisis management plan, especially for athletes’ involved in a scandal. In this presentation, we will conclude by suggesting future research.