Effects of Fan Identification on Moral Reasoning Processes: Focusing on the Ray Rice Case

Joon Sung Lee, University of Michigan
Dae Hee Kwak, University of Michigan
Jessica Minkove, Towson University

Abstract 2015-038

Introduction

A celebrity spokesperson’s immoral misconduct can pose dilemmas and tensions for loyal consumers who already have established deep emotional attachments toward the spokesperson and their associated brands (Thomson, 2006; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). Despite the dissonance from celebrity’s immoral actions, sport fans often tend to become defensive against public criticism surrounding their favorite athletes. In a recent case, Baltimore Ravens’ fans still show strong support for Ray Rice even after his domestic violence scandal. However, to date, minimal attention has been paid to the psychological processes as to how highly identified fans continue to support transgressed athletes. We contend that supporting an immoral actor is a rather complicated process (Lee & Kwak, 2014) and one should look into the moral decision making process. Drawing on moral reasoning literature, the current study examines the impact of fan identification on sport consumers’ different types of moral reasoning strategies which have different impacts on attitude toward the transgressed athlete (Lee & Kwak, 2014). We use an actual case of Ray Rice, a National Football League (NFL) player, whose domestic violence scandal stirred public opinion on the topic.

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

Based on the current literature, highly identified sport fans become more resistant against counterattitudinal information about their favorite players or teams (Kwak et al., 2010; Tormala & Petty, 2004). Moreover, Funk and James (2001) argue that loyal fans with high levels of identification often tend to demonstrate a “tendency to resist change in response to conflicting information or experience” (p. 136). Previous studies (e.g., Tormala & Petty, 2004) provide empirical evidence that such resistance occurs more frequently when an individual (e.g., sport fan) has established strong attachment toward a message target (e.g., favorite athlete or team).

We propose that highly identified fans’ resist tendencies will influence their moral reasoning strategy, which play a vital role in making moral judgments. Based on the moral reasoning literature, two potential activation processes can emerge: First, highly identified fans may activate moral decoupling strategy (MD, separation of morality judgment from performance judgment; Bhattacharjee et al., 2013) to weigh their favorite athlete’s performance relative to the athlete’s immorality to remain supportive to the transgressed athlete (Lee & Kwak, 2014). Second, highly identified fans may also activate moral rationalization strategy (MR, justification of a transgressed athlete’s unethical misconduct; Bandura et al., 1996) to show their support to the athlete (Lee & Kwak, 2014). However, it is less likely that die-hard fans will activate moral coupling strategy (MC, integration of immorality judgment and performance judgment; Lee & Kwak, 2014), which results in damaging the athlete’s reputation as well as the endorsed brand evaluations (Lee & Kwak, 2014). Taken together, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Sport fans’ ID will have positive impacts on the fans’ attitude toward the athlete.
H2. Sport fans’ ID will have a positive and direct impact on MD and MR reasoning.
H3. Sport fans’ ID will have a negative and direct impact on MC reasoning.
H4. MD and MR reasoning strategies will have positive impacts on sport fans’ attitudes toward the athlete, while MC strategy will have negative impacts on the fans’ attitudes toward the athlete.

Based on H1 through H4, we propose that the effect of fan identification will be mediated by moral reasoning strategies. Thus, we propose H5:

H5. Sport fans’ ID will have indirect impacts on the fans’ attitude toward the athlete through different moral
reasoning processes: ID will have positive impacts on the attitude through MD and MR, while ID will have negative impacts on the attitude through MC.

Method
Using an actual scandal (domestic violence case committed by Ray Rice in 2014), the current study incorporates fan ID as the key predictor of moral reasoning processes. Thus, participants (expected total N = 200) will be recruited from two different locations in the United States: the surrounding areas of the city of Baltimore for highly identified fans with the transgressed NFL player, and in the areas surrounding the city of Detroit for less-identified fans with the player. After participants’ consent, participants will be asked to answer their previous ID level with Ray Rice (3 items; Trail & James, 2001) prior to his domestic violence scandal. They will then be asked to view visual images from the video clip involving Ray Rice and his former fiancée/current wife released to the public.

After viewing the stimuli, participants will respond to questionnaires. The measurement items will include ID with Ray Rice, moral decoupling (3 items; Bhattacharjee et al., 2013), moral rationalization (5 items; Bandura et al., 1996), moral coupling (3 items; constructed by authors), and attitude toward Ray Rice (3 items; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). The data analysis will include descriptive analysis, reliability test, and validity test. To test the proposed hypotheses, the data from two different markets will be merged and regression analyses will be used. For H5, a multiple mediator model with three mediators (MC, MR, and MD) will be utilized by using Preacher and Hayes’ (2008) multiple mediation analysis macro for SPSS.

Expected Results and Discussion
We believe that results will show there is a significant positive impact of fan ID on athlete attitude (H1). Moreover, fan ID has positive impacts on MD and MR reasoning, while the ID has a negative direct impact on MC reasoning (H2 and H3). As for subsequent results of each moral reasoning strategies, we expect that MD and MR reasoning will have positive effects on athlete attitude, while MC will negatively affect the attitude (H4). Moreover, fan ID is expected to have indirect impacts on the athlete attitude through different moral reasoning strategies (H5).

We believe the current study contributes to the sport management literature by first showing the role of fan ID on moral reasoning processes in explaining how highly identified fans still support their favorite athlete despite transgression. In addition, the present study will examine indirect impacts of sport fan identification on attitude toward transgressed athlete through different moral reasoning processes. This study will also provide important practical implications related to endorsement marketing. Marketers can utilize communication messages to encourage moral rationalization and decoupling processes in aiming to protect their brands from an athlete’s transgression. Furthermore, the current study will provide additional insights for future studies in this area. For instance, it would be interesting to examine the influence of fan ID at different levels (player vs. team) on sport consumers’ moral reasoning processes and its subsequent impacts on consumers’ evaluations of the associated brand.