When is the Tipping Point? The Role of Emotions on Consumers’ Processing of Celebrity Athletes’ Transgression

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Marketing Thursday, June 4, 2015 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 
Abstract 2015-065 3:50 PM (Joliet)

Introduction
Sport fans experience dissonance (e.g., negative affect) when they learn about an athlete transgresses. However, they use different moral reasoning strategies which help them to either defend or criticize the athlete (Lee & Kwak, 2014). As such, consumers’ evaluations toward a transgressed athlete is a rather complicated process and has been left under-researched. Recent studies have shown that moral reasoning process plays a vital role in shaping their attitude towards the transgressor as well as the brand associated with the endorser (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2014). While consumers’ moral reasoning strategy is critical in understanding how fans view the transgressor, little is known about the motivational function of negative emotions that influence consumers’ moral reasoning strategies. In particular, we propose that certain emotions can predict which moral reasoning strategies consumers choose to activate. Three discrete negative emotions (i.e., anger, disgust, and contempt) are considered in this study to examine the impact of such emotions on consumers’ moral reasoning strategies and attitudes toward the transgressed athlete as well as the associated brand.

Theoretical Background
Recent studies on moral judgment have shown that consumers tend to activate a specific moral reasoning approach in processing one’s immoral actions (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2014). For instance, a moral rationalization process allows consumers to excuse the wrongdoer (“Others have done worse, so we should give him a second chance”). A moral decoupling process allows consumers to separate the judgment of athlete’s performance from immorality judgment (“What he did was wrong but he is still a great athlete”). On the other hand, a moral coupling process allows consumers to integrate athlete’s performance and immorality judgments, which negatively affects athlete evaluations (“I can’t accept him anymore.”). Such reasoning process plays a critical role in shaping consumers’ evaluations toward the athlete as well as the endorsed brand (e.g., Lee & Kwak, 2014). For instance, when consumers choose to activate moral rationalization or moral decoupling, they view the athlete and the endorsed brand more favorably than consumers who activate moral coupling strategy. Therefore, it remains critical to understand what motivates consumers to engage in a specific moral reasoning strategy. Likewise, Lee and Kwak called for more research in this area to examine the impact of moral emotions on consumers’ moral reasoning strategies.

Based on Haidt’s (2003) conceptualization, three emotions (i.e., contempt, anger, and disgust) are considered as “other-condemning” emotions, which feelings are elicited from actions or character of others. Observing or hearing about an athlete’s immoral behaviors would elicit those negative moral emotions. For instance, anger is a response to unjustified insults and the action tendency of anger is often selfish and antisocial. Disgust, on the other hand, is a visceral response to social violations that blur the boundaries between humanity and animality (Haidt, 2003). The action tendency of disgust is often prosocial—motivating individuals avoid, expel, or otherwise break off contact with the offending individual (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993). Lastly, contempt involves looking down on someone and feeling morally superior (Haidt, 2003). Contempt is often considered to be a cool emotion, compared to the heat of anger, or the visceral influence of disgust (Izard, 1977). Therefore, contempt motivates neither attack nor withdrawal. Given the various action tendencies associated with three other-condemning emotions, we propose that each emotion dimension might function differently in motivating consumers to engage in particular moral reasoning process. Understanding different roles of discrete emotions will shed new insights on when is the tipping point for a scandal that really damages the athlete and the associated brand. Findings of the study will also provide practical implications for brand managers to know when to continue or discontinue their endorsement marketing with the troubled athlete.
Method
Pilot Test. Undergraduate students (N = 42, female 21%) were recruited for a pilot test. We used an actual scandal case (domestic violence case committed by Ray Rice in 2014) and participants were told to view the visual images from the video clip involving Ray Rice and his former fiancée/current wife released to the public. Immediately after viewing the visual stimuli, participants were instructed to rate their emotional feelings on the following three emotion dimensions (Grappi, Romani, & Bagozzi, 2013): Anger (annoyed, mad, and anger), Contempt (contemptuous, scornful, and disdainful), and Disgust (disgusted, feeling distaste, and feeling revulsion). They also completed moral reasoning measurements (Moral Decoupling, Moral Rationalization, and Moral Coupling; Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2014) followed by attitude toward athlete.

Main Study. Participants (targeted N = 150; currently collecting data) are recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk with the same procedure described above. In addition to pilot test, we will measure brand evaluations (attitude toward the endorsed brand and purchase intention of the endorsed brand).

Expected Results and Discussion
Preliminary results show that three negative emotion dimensions are positively associated with each other (all ps < .01). However, only the Disgust dimension had significant effects on moral reasoning approaches. Disgust was positively associated with Moral Coupling (r = .41, p < .01) and negatively associated with Moral Decoupling (r = -.32, p < .01). Preliminary findings indicate that Disgust primes individuals to engage in moral coupling process, which leads to negative athlete evaluations. In addition, all three negative emotions were negatively associated with attitude toward the athlete (rs = -.36, -.37, -.56, all ps < .05), suggesting that negative emotional responses from a scandal can lower the athlete evaluations. We also expect that negative emotions will have a damaging effect on endorsed brand evaluations. Similar to preliminary results, we expect that Disgust will have the strongest negative influence on how consumers view endorsed brands. This expectation is in line with the emotion’s motivational function of expel or break off association with the offending individual (Rozin et al., 1993).

The current study contributes to the endorsement marketing literature by examining the role of emotions on moral reasoning process. We believe that the degree of emotional response triggered from an athlete’s scandal would be a reliable indicator for which moral reasoning process the consumer will likely to activate. Although we experience negative feelings from someone’s immoral behaviors, not all negative emotions are the same. Feelings of Disgust will motivate individuals to cutoff their ties with the transgressor and its extended brand. Marketers should realize the importance of understanding consumers’ emotional reactions to various transgressions, as some emotional dimensions would carry longer than others and potentially harm their brands.