How Do Athlete Scandals Affect Consumers’ Self-Concept? Self-Brand Connection and Self-Construal Perspective

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Introduction
The global expansion of information technology has given sports celebrities an enormous amount of social influence (Brown & de Matviuk, 2010). Currently, athletes are considered as brands, who possess socio-political capacities such as racial harmonization, moral leadership and redemptive suffering (Grano, 2009). At the same time, risks associated with athlete scandals have become major managerial issues in sport marketing. A number of studies have investigated the impact of a variety of sport scandals on our society (e.g., social health, economy, and consumption behaviors). However, scholarly attention has not yet been given to investigate how athlete scandals affect fans’ deeper psychology such as self-image and self-enhancing motivation. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate how athlete scandals affect consumers’ self-concept by applying brand relationship theory and self-affirmation theory.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis
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). The theory suggests that 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 a means to communicate their symbolic meaning to others (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Therefore, they prefer to consume products that project their own sense of self (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982). Applying the brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998) to fan-athlete relationship context, the current study hypothesizes that sports consumers utilize the symbolic values of athlete brands to enhance and verify their self-identities by following them. Through the mutual benefit exchanges, consumers develop self-(athlete) brand connections. However, because of their strong relationship, consumers’ self-identities can be threatened when the athletes are involved in a scandal.

This study further attempted to predict consumers’ reaction toward the athlete scandals by utilizing the self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988). The self-affirmation theory posits that when the consumer’s self-identity is threatened, he/she attempts to restore a sense of self by adopting certain strategies. Base on the theory the researchers identified two direct ways to restore self-identity in this context: (a) CORFing - cutting off the threatened domain of his/her identity, in other words, cutting of the connection with the athlete, and (b) advocacy – confronting the scandal news and advocating for the athlete as a means to protect one’s own self-identity. Researchers also found that how individuals respond toward self-identity threats differs depending on their self-construal (White et al., 2013), which is defined as the extent to which the self is viewed as being separate and distinct from (independent self-construal), or interconnected with (interdependent self-construal) others (Singelis, 1994). Therefore, the study further incorporated the construct of self-construal in the research design and hypothesized that how severely consumers feel identity threats and which behavioral strategy (i.e., CORFing or advocacy) they adopt to restore their threatened self-identity depends on their level of self-brand connection (high vs. low) and the type of self-construal (interdependent or independent self-construal).

Methods and Results
The researchers conducted two experimental studies and one survey to test the hypotheses. In the first experiment, the researchers tested the fundamental proposition that athlete brands help construct and enhance fans’ self-identities by using a total of 89 samples recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The results of the
study 1 indicated that consumers could enhance their sense of self, which was operationalized by self-esteem and self-concept clarity, by activating positive connection with an athlete.

Through the second experimental study and a survey the researchers examined the conditions under which consumers would respond differently toward the athletes’ scandals by focusing on the level of self-brand connection and the types of self-construal. In the second experiment, a 2 (high vs. low self-brand connection) × 2 (interdependent vs. independent self-construal) between subjects experimental design was employed and tested using 173 respondents obtained through MTurk. The results revealed that an athlete scandal could be a self-identity threat for consumers. Specifically, consumers with a high level of self-brand connection perceived greater self-identity threat than individuals with a low level of self-brand connection when their favorite athlete was involved in a scandal. Interestingly, the relationship between self-brand connection and self-identity threat was moderated by the consumers’ self-construal. Among people with high self-brand connection, interdependent individuals perceived more self-identity threats than independent individuals. Perhaps, it is because interdependent individuals tend to depend more on athletes to define their self-identities. Meanwhile, even though they were highly connected with the athlete, independent individuals did not perceive self-identity threat as much as interdependent individuals do. Those highly connected independent individuals perceived as little self-identity threat as people with low self-brand connection to the athletes.

In the study 3, the survey retrospectively investigated consumers’ behavioral responses (i.e., CORFing and advocacy) toward actual scandals. 203 usable cases were obtained through MTurk. The results revealed that self-brand connection and self-construal interact to influence both CORFing and advocacy. Self-construal affect the CORFing and advocacy only in the high self-brand connection. In the high self-brand connection condition, interdependent individuals showed less CORFing behaviors but more advocacy for the troubled athletes than independent individuals. However, in the low self-brand connection condition, both CORFing and advocacy were not influenced by their self-construals.

**Conclusion**

This research is an initial attempt to link sport scandal research with the growing body of consumer self-concept research. By viewing athlete scandals as threats to consumers’ self-concept, the research will provide unique insights into the consumer-brand relationship research. The researchers strongly believes that developing a deeper understanding of sport fans’ self-concept seeking and self-enhancing motivation after athlete scandals will allow sport marketers to predict consumer responses and ultimately help them develop effective re-branding strategies for the athletes. The detailed theoretical and practical implications will be discussed in the presentation.