The Relationship among Anger, Perceived Responsibility, and Negative Word-of-Mouth in the Athlete Scandal Context

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Introduction

Athlete misbehavior has become a widespread social issue. The infidelity of Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong’s performance-enhancing drug (PED) scandal negatively impacted society as a whole. Although negative information, such as the aforementioned athlete scandals, is more influential than positive or neutral information (Herr, Kardes, Kim, 1991), only limited studies have examined the effects of negative information on sport consumer behavior. Further, no prior research has used a comprehensive model, incorporating consumers’ emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions, to examine these effects in the athlete scandal context.

Individually’s responses toward a negative event can be explained by cold and hot cognitions. Cold cognition refers to fact-based, conscious processing while hot cognition, usually operationalized as emotion, is a faster and less conscious decision-making process (Ask & Granhag, 2007; Madrigal, 2008). Managing negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) requires great attention because of its persuasiveness and vividness (Herr et al., 1991). Although emotion (i.e., anger) and cognition (i.e., perceived responsibility) can predict negative behavioral intention (i.e., NWOM; Coombs & Holladay, 2008), which component better predicts NWOM has not been assessed in the athlete scandal context. For example, if a sport consumer cursed about Alex Rodriguez to others when they received information regarding his PED scandal, would they have committed NWOM because of anger or a fact-based cognition?

Drawing on attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965) and expectancy-violation theory (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993), the current study examined the effects of athlete scandals on anger, perceived responsibility, and NWOM. Understanding of consumers’ emotional and cognitive reactions toward athlete scandals will contribute to the sport crisis management literature as well as athlete endorsement studies.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

According to the expectancy-violation theory (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993), when athletes violate expectations, those who observe the betrayal behavior elicit negative reactions. Athletes who play at highly competitive levels are expected to be role models on and off the field, and sport consumers’ expectations for athlete performance is high (Babiak, Mills, Tainsky, & Juravich, 2012). Hence, negative emotion, cognition, and behavior can be elicited when sport consumers’ expectations are betrayed by a scandal related to an athlete’s performance. Attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965) also predicts that perceived intentionality is an important factor when individuals attribute a cause to personal dispositions. For example, simply receiving information regarding the Alex Rodriguez PED case may not necessarily create a negative perception. Some fans may feel he intentionally took PEDs, while others may suspect the possibility that team staff members and people around him drugged him. Based on the aforementioned arguments, the authors posit the following hypotheses:

H1: Performance relatedness of athlete scandals is positively associated with consumers’ negative emotion (i.e., anger).
H2: Performance relatedness of athlete scandals is positively associated with consumers’ cognitive judgment (i.e., perceived responsibility).
H3: Performance relatedness of athlete scandals is positively associated with consumers’ conative response (i.e., NWOM).
H4: Perceived intentionality of athlete scandals is positively associated with consumers’ negative emotion.
H5: Perceived intentionality of athlete scandals is positively associated with consumers’ cognitive judgment.
H6: Performance relatedness of athlete scandals is positively associated with consumers’ conative response.
Much literature in the public relations and consumer behavior disciplines has advocated that both cognition and emotion predict behaviors (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Kwak, Kim, & Hirt, 2011; Park & MacInnis, 2006). Additionally, several studies specifically advocate that both emotion (i.e., anger) and cognition (i.e., perceived responsibility) lead to NWOM in the crisis context (Coombs, 2008; Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Although different ways of cognition and emotion operationalization can be seen, the current study focuses on perceived responsibility and anger since they are recognized as the crisis-relevant factors (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Gelbrich, 2010; Jin, 2010; Kim & Cameron, 2011). Utz and Schultz (2013) contended that when consumers feel perceived responsibility of a crisis, it creates reputational damage and secondary crisis reactions like NWOM. Additionally, Gelbrich (2010) found that anger is strongly and positively associated with NWOM. However, which component is more strongly associated with NWOM in the athlete scandal context is still unknown. Huijbregts et al. (2008) mentioned that emotion-based judgment tends to be low quality and less able to predict behaviors. Hence, the authors argue that both perceived responsibility and anger predict NWOM, but perceived responsibility may explain larger variance of NWOM.

H7: Anger is positively associated with NWOM.
H8: Perceived responsibility is positively associated with NWOM.
H9: Perceived responsibility, relative to anger, is more strongly associated with NWOM.

Methods
The study design was a 2 (scandal performance relatedness: doping vs. off-field violence) × 2 (scandalized athlete’s intentionality: intentional vs. unintentional) between-subjects experiment. Participants were recruited from a southeastern university in the United States in exchange for course credits. One hundred and ninety-three students participated in the experiment and were randomly assigned to one of four stimuli. Each participant was given one of the four fictitious news articles regarding an Olympian. Immediately after reading the news, participants were asked to answer questionnaire items with respect to anger, perceived responsibility, NWOM intention, and manipulation check items. Anger was measured with a four semantic differential scale adopted from Jorgensen (1996). Three items of perceived responsibility were adopted from Coombs and Holladay (2002). NWOM was measured by four items adopted from Coombs & Holladay (2008). Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed. Thirteen participants who reported pre-assumption of the study purpose were excluded.

Results
The results of the manipulation check indicated that manipulations of performance relatedness (Mperformance = 5.25 vs. Mnon-performance = 3.35; t178 = 8.56; p < .001) and intentionality (Mintentional = 4.61 vs. Munintentional = 2.36; t178 = 10.33; p < .001) were both successful. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients indicated that all measurement scales possess acceptable internal consistency (a = .90 -.92). A confirmatory factor analysis provided empirical support for the validity of measurement (c2/df = 1.672; GFI = .94; AGFI = .90; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .061). Results of the structural equation modeling indicated that an athlete scandal is positively associated with NWOM, and perceived responsibility played a significant mediating role in the link between an athlete scandal and NWOM. Consumer anger did manifest, but it was not found to be associated with NWOM. Detailed implications will be discussed in the presentation.