Does Doing Good Shield against Athlete Scandals? The Effect of Positive Associations on Consumer Judgement and Behavior Toward Scandalized Athletes

Shintaro Sato, Georgia Southern University
Yong Jae Ko (Advisor), University of Florida
Kyriaki Kaplanidou (Advisor), University of Florida
Daniel Connaughton (Advisor), University of Florida

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Athlete scandals have received tremendous attention from both practitioners and academicians (Lee & Kwak, 2015; Sato et al., 2015). It is indisputable that scandalized athletes can generate adverse impacts on a wide variety of stakeholders including teams (Fink et al., 2009) and sport events (Doyle et al., 2014). Despite the significant influence athlete scandals can generate, scholars have overlooked how athletes and their managers should implement damage minimization strategies in preparation for unexpected scandals. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of positive associations athlete have built on consumer blame judgment and online negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) in the athlete scandal context.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Brown and Dacin (1997) suggested that consumers establish two different associations with companies; corporate ability and social responsibility. Corporate ability association refers to consumers’ psychological association with organizations that have the ability to provide excellent services and products whereas corporate social responsibility association means consumers’ association with organizations that are considered as socially responsible. Applying this contention, the authors in the current study argue that sport consumers also establish associations with athletes based on athletic performance and their philanthropic status. Previous literature has also suggested that consumers are never free from contextual information (Bless & Schwarz, 2010). The aforementioned associations can serve as contextual information to create biased judgment and behavior toward scandalized athletes. Based on these arguments, the authors advanced the following hypotheses:

H1: Consumers blame scandalized athletes more when previously established associations and scandal types are relevant.

H2: Consumers blame scandalized athletes less when previously established associations and scandal types are less relevant.

H3: Consumers engage in online NWOM more when previously established associations and scandal types are relevant.

H4: Consumers engage in online NWOM less when previously established associations and scandal types are less relevant.

Method

A three (association: athletic performance vs. philanthropy vs. control) by two (scandal type: performance vs. non-performance) between-subjects experiment was conducted. A total of 216 participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk and were randomly assigned to one of six conditions. Each participant read a scenario explaining a fictitious tennis player named Phil Franklin’s (1) outstanding athletic performance, (2) philanthropic-related engagements, or (3) general information (i.e., control condition). They then read another short news story about Phil Franklin’s performance-related scandal (i.e., use of performance enhancing drug; PED) or non-performance related scandal (i.e., tax evasion). In the (non-)performance related scandal condition, participants received information describing Phil Franklin’s PED (tax evasion) issue. After reading a set of two scenarios about association and scandal, participants provided blame and online NWOM behavioral responses. Lastly, participants answered manipulation check items. After cleaning data, 173 useful responses were utilized for further analyses.
Results

We firstly ran independent sample t-tests to validate manipulations. The results revealed that participants in the performance association condition showed higher ratings (M = 6.07, SD = .66) than those in the control condition (t(114) = 10.82, p < .01, M = 4.51, SD = .87) and the philanthropic condition (t(114) = 11.29, p < .01, M = 4.05, SD = 1.16). The results also indicated that participants in the philanthropic condition thought Phil Franklin had engaged in philanthropic activities (M = 6.42, SD = .53) more than those in the control condition (t(116) = 18.52, p < .01, M = 3.89, SD = .90) and the performance condition (t(110) = 17.64, p < .01, M = 3.20, SD = 1.27). Regarding the scandal type manipulation, the results showed participants in the performance-related scandal condition rated significantly higher on an item asking if the scandal was related to athletic performance (t(171) = 43.01, p < .01, M = 6.44, SD = .61) than the non-performance scandal condition (M = 1.74, SD = .81). These results indicated that the manipulations were successful.

A two-way ANOVA was first conducted to test the effects on consumer blame. The results revealed a main effect of scandal type (F(1, 167) = 25.91, p < .01, $\eta^2 = .13$) but the main effect of association (F(2, 167) = .04, p = .96, $\eta^2 = .01$) was not significant. More importantly, these main effects were qualified by the two-way interaction of association and scandal type (F(2, 167) = 5.21, p < .01, $\eta^2 = .03$). Simple effect tests indicated a significant difference between the performance association condition (M = 9.58, SD = .54) and control condition (M = 9.09, SD = .81; t(57) = 2.70, p < .01, r = .34) when a performance-related scandal occurred. Furthermore, consumers in the performance association condition (M = 8.25, SD = 1.03) blamed the scandalized athlete significantly less than those in the control condition (M = 8.83, SD = 1.05; t(57) = 2.09, p = .04, r = -.27) when a non-performance scandal occurred. However, consumers did not show significant differences in terms of blame in the performance-related scandal situation (Mphilanthropy = 9.19, SDphilanthropy = .77 vs. Mcontrol = 9.09, SDControl = .81; t(55) = .47, p = .64, r = .06) and in the non-performance scandal situation (Mphilanthropy = 8.64, SDphilanthropy = 1.12 vs. Mcontrol = 8.83, SDControl = 1.05; t(59) = .65, p = .53, r = .07) when philanthropy association was salient. These findings indicated H1 and 2 were partially upheld.

With regard to online NWOM, the proportion of consumers who engaged in online NWOM behavior was assessed by a Z-test of proportion by following Dunn and Dahl (2012). The results indicated that consumers in the performance association condition with a performance-related scandal were more likely to provide negative comments about the scandalized athlete (n = 24, 85.7%) than those in the control condition (n = 20, 64.5%, Z = 1.87, p = .06). Consumers in the performance association condition, however, did not tend to engage in more online NWOM behavior (n = 10, 37.0%) relative to the control condition when the scandal type was non-performance related (n = 12, 40.0%, Z = .23, p = .82), suggesting that H3 was partially supported. In the non-performance scandal situations, consumers were less likely to engage in online NWOM behavior when the performance association was salient (n = 10, 38.5%) than the control condition (n = 20, 64.5%, Z = 1.96, p = .05). Finally, the proportional differences of consumer online NWOM behavior between the philanthropy association condition (n = 12, 38.7%) and the control condition (n = 12, 40%, Z = .10, p = .92) were not significantly different. These findings also demonstrated that H4 received partial support.

Discussion

The current study shed lights on the importance of establishing positive associations from a pre-scandal crisis management perspective. Marketing managers should acknowledge that the domain match between associations and scandal types generate different consumer judgment and behavior. Previously established performance association can protect scandalized athletes from negative judgment when the athletes are involved in non-performance related scandals. However, the athletes are judged and discussed online even more negatively when they engage in performance-related scandals. The authors will further discuss theoretical implications of the shield and association effects, and practical implications in the context of athlete management.