Mitigating Impacts of Visualization Strategies within Messages on Athlete Images in Case of Athlete Scandal

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Celebrity athletes have been recognized as human brands (Arai, Ko, & Ross). From Tiger Woods to Maria Sharapova, however, we have been shown that celebrity athletes’ transgressions devastate their brand images and reputations in consumers’ minds. In most cases, the tarnished athletes try to restore their tainted images and prolong their athletic careers. In this sense, better understanding about how troubled athletes’ images can effectively be managed and rehabilitated in the public’s minds is a significant issue. Despite frequent occurrences of athlete transgressions and their adverse impacts on athletes, there is little research focusing on how troubled athletes’ images can be protected from a communications standpoint. From this standpoint, few previous studies (e.g., Brazeal, 2008; Holdener & Kauffman, 2014; Meng & Pan, 2013), have explored troubled athletes’ response strategies toward negative media publicity. Despite a few initial efforts, there still exists a lack of research attempts to investigate how negative consequences of athlete transgressions can be mitigated after the negative incidents are publicly announced. Therefore, the current study proposes that when athletes release a statement involving a scandal to the public, they can utilize different types of visual strategies within the messages to mitigate the negative impact of scandal on their images.

Theoretical background
Research in visual aesthetic has found that consumers create different perceptions toward the product or brand depending on the shape of the logo or product, and these perceptions determine various types of consumer responses (Zhu & Argo, 2013). In general, visual shape can be classified into either (1) a circular or (2) an angular shape (Jiang, Gorn, Galli, & Chattopadhyay, 2016). Research has empirically demonstrated that a circular shape is strongly associated with the sense of belongingness, love, warmth, and softness; whereas, an angular shape is predominately associated with the sense of uniqueness, coldness, and hardness (Bar & Price, 2006). A key finding in visual aesthetic and marketing literature is that consumers respond more favorably toward the product or brand when the perception of the visual shape is well-fitted with the marketing strategy (Zhu & Argo, 2013). For example, Jiang et al. (2016) found that circularly shaped logos create a perception of softness, and thus consumers more favorably evaluate the advertisement when the advertising message highlights the softness of the product. In contrast, angularly shaped logos evoke a perception of hardness; thereby, consumers create more favorable attitudes toward the advertisement when the message highlights the hardness of the product.

Based on this notion, current research proposes that consumers would create different perceptions toward scandalized athletes depending on the type of visual strategy used in public statements. Whereas none of the empirical research has yet examined how different visual strategies impact consumer responses to troubled athletes, we can make a tentative prediction based on previous literature. Research has shown that circular shapes are more strongly associated with a sense of love, warmth, and softness (Zhu & Argo, 2013), which is a key perception evoked in people when they forgive other’s faults (Berry, Worthington, Wade, Witvliet, & Kiefer, 2005). Therefore, we assert that visual strategies that actively use circular shapes will mitigate the negative impacts of scandal on troubled athletes’ images.

In addition, the current study further argues that the circular shape strategy does not always mitigate the negative impact of scandal on troubled athletes’ images. Particularly, we propose that for more serious scandals, consumers may create more negative perceptions toward troubled athletes’ images when circular shapes are actively utilized in public statements because the recovery effort would not be perceived as sincere. In scandal literature, sincerity is identified as one of the most important perceptions that helps athletes (or brands) recover from bad publicity (Hareli
& Eisikovits, 2006). Thus, we predict that for a serious scandal, the angular shape strategy would be more effective in mitigating the negative impact of scandal on athletes’ images rather than the circular shape strategy. By incorporating these notions, the current study developed the following hypothesis:

H1: For less serious scandals, consumers create more favorable responses toward the athlete and the scandal when a circular type of visual strategy is used compared to an angular type of visual strategy.

H2: For serious scandals, consumers create more favorable responses toward the athlete and the scandal when an angular type of visual strategy is used compared to a circular type of visual strategy.

Method
Design: The current research will employ a 2 (type of scandal: serious vs. less serious scandal) x 2 (type of visual strategy: circular vs. angular) between subject design. A total of 120 online panels will be recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk.

Pretest 1: Pretest will be conducted to identify a serious and a less serious scandal. By extensively reviewing sport management literature and actual cases, we will identify potential scandals that might be used in this research and will ask participants to rate the degree of seriousness for each scandal. Based on the results, we will identify the most and least serious scandals.

Manipulation of different type of visual strategy: Consistent with previous literature, in the angular (circular) shape condition, angularly (circularly) shaped fonts and pictures will be actively used in the public statement (Jiang et al., 2016).

Procedure: In the first stage of the experiment, participants will be asked to read a public statement in which a fictitious athlete is involved in a scandal. The seriousness of the scandal and the different types of visual strategies will be manipulated in the public statement. In the second part of the experiment, participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire that contains a manipulation check question, dependent variables, and demographic information.

Measures: Forgiveness of the athlete (Xie & Peng, 2009), the athlete’s image (Lee, 2004), and intention to support the athlete in the future (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000) will be used as dependent variables.

Results
The current study expected a two interaction between different types of scandal and visual strategy on dependent variables. Specifically, we predict that for a less serious scandal, participants will more favorably evaluate the scandalized athlete when circular shape strategy was employed compared to angular shape strategy. Meanwhile, for a serious scandal, participants will more favorably evaluate the scandalized athlete when angular shape strategy was employed compared to circular shape strategy.

Discussions
The current study will extend athlete transgression literature by examining the impact of visual strategy on consumer responses toward either a less or more serious scandal. In addition, the results of the current study will offer several meaningful marketing strategy in terms of which type of visual strategy would best help athletes in mitigating the negative impacts of scandal ion their images. More detailed theoretical and practical implications will be discussed during the presentation.