The Impacts of Stigma in Athlete Endorsement Context: Focusing on Sport Consumers’ Moral Reasoning Strategies

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Introduction
Mike Tyson, Tiger Woods, Maria Sharapova, Lance Armstrong, and Ray Rice: these are some athletes who had transgressions. Previous studies (Lee & Kwak, 2016; Lohneiss & Hill, 2014; Till & Shimp, 1998) show that negative information surrounding celebrity athletes can have either a direct or an indirect adverse impact on sports consumers’ evaluations of both the troubled athletes and the brands associated with or endorsed by the athletes. In particular, these studies show that consumers’ responses toward troubled public figures are not just tied to the incident itself, but hinge upon the moral judgment processes the consumers activate. A line of research (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Lee, Kwak, & Moore, 2015) has identified different moral reasoning strategies: moral coupling (MC), moral decoupling (MD), and moral rationalization (MR). Although the mechanisms evoking consumers' equivocal responses to transgressions have been found, potential predictors triggering individuals’ different moral reasoning routes are undetermined given the current research to date (Lee et al., 2015). In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to various stigmas within the context of athlete endorsement, despite their significance in explaining consumers’ responses to athletes’ immoral behaviors. Thus, the current study aims to extend our understanding about the potential predictors of consumers’ moral decision-making processes. In particular, the present study will incorporate the concept of stigma—which has been known to result in the strong rejection of disgraced targets in individuals’ minds. This approach is expected to contribute to a better understanding of sport consumers’ divergent moral judgment processes.

Literature Review
The general concept of stigma has long been defined as an attribute that deeply discredits a target entity (Goffman, 1963). More specifically, once a target individual is stigmatized, even ordinary behavior executed by the target person could be considered and evaluated in negative ways by other people. More importantly, stigma has been known to be difficult to erase and to be easily associated with stereotyping, discrimination, separation, labeling, and the loss of status (Link & Phelan, 2001). These elements further nurture strong negative emotions toward targets (Peters, Burrell, & Mertz, 2004) and contaminate targets and their surroundings associated with him or her (Slovic, Gregory, & Flynn, 1995). As a consequence, stigma evokes the strong rejection of a target individual as its outcome. Likewise, the context of sports is not an exception to stigma, as has been shown in various examples athlete transgressions. For instance, when Lance Armstrong confirmed his doping violations, Nike cut ties with the tainted athlete. The company dropped its endorsement deal with Armstrong and removed its sub-brand, LIVESTRONG, to avoid adverse impacts from the stigmatized athlete (Heitner, 2012). This shows that stigma and its aforementioned negative outcomes, such as subsequent rejection and discrediting, could be important issues that associated brands should consider. However, to the best of our knowledge, no one has investigated how stigma can affect sport consumers’ moral judgment processes.

A recent body of moral judgment research suggests that sport consumer evaluations of disgraced athletes are more focused on psychological reasoning processes (i.e., MD, MC, and MR) that the consumers utilize in processing incoming information, and less focused on the immoral behavior itself (Bandura et al., 1996; Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Ditto et al., 2009; Lee & Kwak, 2016). According to these studies, people select their own moral reasoning routes when processing other actors’ immoral behaviors. This approach has extended our understanding of sport consumers’ multi-faceted responses to any given incident. Although several predictors of different moral reasoning strategies have been identified (e.g., relevance to job performance, fan identification, and negative moral emotions) (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2015; Lee, Kwak, & Minkove, 2016), there still exist underexplored potential predictors of sport consumers’ moral reasoning.
Thus, we predict stigmatization will make sport consumers activate their moral coupling strategy because both stigma and moral coupling have been known to trigger negative responses to wrongdoers in consumers’ minds. However, consumers without perceived stigma would select moral decoupling or rationalization more often than other consumers with stigma.

H1. Consumers with perceived stigma will be more likely to choose moral coupling than consumers without perceived stigma.

H2. Consumers without perceived stigma will be more likely to choose moral decoupling and rationalization than consumers with perceived stigma.

As for the subsequent outcomes of moral reasoning strategies, we predict the following findings from previous studies (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Lee et al., 2015).

H3. Moral coupling will have greater negative impact on consumers’ subsequent evaluations than moral decoupling and rationalization.

Method

We will conduct a single factor two-level experimental study (stigma: with vs. without) using an online survey panel service (Amazon MTurk). For the main study, we will recruit approximately 250 participants, targeting United States residents who are over 18 years old. Stimuli will be generated based on the results from pre-tests. Participants will first read a vignette depicting an athlete’s previous behaviors. We will measure the perceived stigma (Peter et al., 2004) in participants’ minds. After assessing the stigma, the participants then will be asked to read an article about a fabricated scandal, and then will complete a survey asking them about their moral reasoning strategies and their evaluations of the athlete and an associated brand (Lee & Kwak, 2016; Lee et al., 2016). In addition, manipulation check items will be generated and included. To test the hypotheses, Chi-square analysis and a series of ANOVA will be conducted.

Expected Results and Implications

The present study will be the initial attempt to test the concept of stigma in the athlete endorsement context. In other words, this study is expected to extend the theoretical basis so we might better understand sport consumers’ responses to morally tarnished athletes. Moreover, expected findings will provide several practical implications for marketing managers when associated athletes face negative publicity. More specifically, results from this study will help marketing managers make informed decisions regarding whether brands should terminate or keep relationships with troubled athletes by proving the negative impact of perceived stigma on consumer evaluations. More implications will be discussed during the presentation.