Does Causal Reasoning Lead to Moral Reasoning?: Consumers’ Responses toward Scandalized Athletes

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Athlete endorsement is among the most effective tools for brand marketing (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). However, brand managers are subject to fatal crises when athletes are involved in scandals (Lee, Kwak, & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Shintaro, Ko, Park, & Tao, 2015). If an athlete endorser’s reputational crisis is not adequately addressed, associated brands endorsed by the troubled athlete could be at risk of negative consumer responses (Rhee & Valdez, 2009; Till & Shimp, 1998; Um, 2013). Although it is important to understand the underlying mechanism of how consumers process negative information of scandalized athletes, there has been limited understanding on the topic (Lee & Kwak, 2016; Shintaro et al., 2015).

According to attribution theory, people attempt to understand other’s behavior by attributing it to the actor’s dispositions or to situational factors surrounding the actor (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973). These causal inferences play a pivotal role in making moral judgments (Kelley & Michela, 1980) about the troubled athlete endorser. In this sense, attribution theory (Kelley, 1973) provides a sound theoretical framework in predicting consumers’ responses to athlete scandals. Moreover, a recent body of literature has suggested that individuals deliberately activate certain moral reasoning strategies when processing other actors’ wrongdoing (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016). Given the fact that individuals selectively utilize their own moral reasoning strategies when observing athletes’ moral violations (Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009; Kunda, 1990), the aforementioned attribution types could interplay to explain consumers’ moral judgment about athletes’ misconduct. Thus, drawing on attribution theory and moral reasoning framework, the present study aims to investigate the theoretical relationship between consumers’ attribution and moral reasoning in the context of athlete reputational crisis. Specifically, the authors examined the impact of attribution types (i.e., internal and external attributions) on moral reasoning strategies (i.e., moral decoupling, rationalization, and -coupling), and their impact on consumers’ responses toward athlete endorsement.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Attribution theory posits that individuals make internal attribution (e.g., dispositional factors; Heider, 1958) or external attribution (e.g., situational factors; Heider, 1958). These two types of attribution lead to different perceptions as well as behavioral reactions (Graham & Folkes, 2014). According to Kelley’s Covariation Model of attribution (1973), individuals make causal inferences in judging one’s behavior or event using three criteria: Consensus (i.e., generalizability of the behavior across other people), Distinctiveness (i.e., uniqueness of the behavior to the focal actor), and Consistency (i.e., consistency of the behavior across time). Specifically, a set of high consensus, high distinctiveness, and low consistency has been known to evoke external attribution whereas a set of low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency activates internal attribution (Kelley, 1973).

As for sport consumers’ moral decision mechanism, previous studies have shown that individuals either separate their judgments of a wrongdoer’s performance from judgments of morality (Moral Decoupling; Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013), or integrate both performance judgments and morality to criticize the actor (Moral Coupling; Lee & Kwak, 2015), or justify the wrongdoer’s performance (Moral Rationalization; Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). These different types of moral reasoning choices could be made based on diverse factors. We argue that causal inference may function as an informational cue for people to make a choice among moral reasoning strategies. Specifically, when people attribute an athlete scandal to dispositional factors of the athlete, they are more likely to expect the athlete will be continuously involved in the same type of scandal in the future than those who attribute the scandal to situational factors (Carroll & Payne, 1976). This high expectancy may lead the people to select Moral Coupling when they evaluate the scandalized athlete; internal attribution shares in common a nature causing negative
responses with moral coupling. In contrast, people who make external attribution will be more likely select moral decoupling or moral rationalization. That is, they may tend to consider the scandal as a situational or transient event and thus elicit less negative responses, leading to moral decoupling and moral rationalization. Based on this background, we propose hypotheses as following.

H1: Individuals who make internal attribution of an athlete scandal will select Moral Coupling more than those who make external attribution.
H2: Individuals who make external attribution of an athlete scandal will select Moral Decoupling more than those who make an internal attribution.
H3: Individuals who make external attribution of an athlete scandal will select Moral Rationalization more than those who make an internal attribution.

Previous literature on athlete scandals and moral reasoning have shown that Moral Coupling is related to consumers’ negative responses to a scandalized athlete and brands endorsed by the athlete, whereas Moral Decoupling and Moral Rationalization is related to consumers’ moderate negative responses to them (Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Kwak, 2013). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H4: Individuals who select Moral Coupling have a more negative attitude toward a scandalized athlete than those who select Moral Decoupling or Moral Rationalization.
H5: Individuals who select Moral Coupling are likely to reduce their support for the athlete than those who select Moral Decoupling or Moral Rationalization.
H6: Individuals who select Moral Coupling are likely to express more negative opinion about the endorsement than those who select Moral Decoupling or Moral Rationalization.

Methods
The hypotheses will be tested through an experimental study using a two-level single-factor (Attribution: Internal vs. External) experimental design using online panel service (Amazon MTurk.com). We will manipulate participants’ attribution of an athlete scandal by providing an athlete scandal scenario in which three dimensions (i.e., consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency) of information about the scandal are manipulated. Specifically, in the internal attribution condition, participants will be provided with a scenario describing low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency of the scandal. In contrast, in the external attribution condition, participants will be provided a scenario depicting high consensus, high distinctiveness, and low consistency of the scandal. After being exposed to one of two different attribution conditions, the participants will report their attributions (Rebecca Yen, Gwinner, & Su, 2004), moral reasoning (Lee & Kwak, 2013), attitude toward the athlete (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), support intention (Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004), and their opinion about maintenance of the endorsement. Chi-square test will be conducted to test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. One-way ANOVA will be performed to test the hypotheses 4, 5, and 6.

Expected Results and Implications
Once successfully completed, the current study will make both theoretical and practical contributions to endorsement risk management literature. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to combine two robust theories (causal reasoning and moral reasoning) to clearly explain consumers’ responses toward athlete scandals and endorsements. Additionally, we could provide endorsement managers with empirical evidence to make a better judgment when they face their endorsers’ reputational crisis. Detailed results as well as theoretical and practical implications will be discussed in the presentation.