Coping in the Wake of #MeToo: An Examination of Moral Reasoning Strategies Following University Legal Scandals

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Few things drive an individual’s attachment to a university more strongly than sports, and the pride fans feel for their team creates a desire for the university’s reputation to remain unsullied (Theisen, 2018). Sport scandals, especially ones of more severe nature, can lead to a decrease in fans’ attitudes if fans believe the incidents reflect poorly on themselves (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005). However, not all reactions are equal. Extant research shows when group members are presented with negative information regarding the group, highly identified members react differently than lowly identified members (Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Sport fans see teams as an extension of themselves and are more likely to show favoritism towards their own team (Wann & Grieve, 2005), even in the event of a scandal.

With the rise of the #MeToo movement, fans are often subjected to news about scandals of a sexual nature. Baylor University, University of Louisville, and Michigan State University all have been involved in various sex scandals ending in dismissals of athletes, firings of coaches, and resignations of presidents and directors. Fans of these universities may utilize coping strategies when faced with news of the scandals due to their affinity with the football and/or men's basketball teams. These coping mechanisms include separating their morality judgments from performance judgments, which enables fans to condemn the action while concurrently praising the athlete or team (Lee, Kwak, & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016).

Previous research has examined the relationship between coping strategies and attitudes towards a brand or individual athlete (Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013; Lee et al., 2016). However, these studies did not examine differences in responses between males and females, which could be revealing in the #MeToo era. There has also been limited research on the effect of sport scandals of a sexual nature on fans’ attitudes towards a university and how these fans cope with news of this type of scandal. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine:

R1) Do sexual related offenses influence fan perception of the university brand?
R2) Are there significant differences between men’s and women’s moral reasoning strategies following exposure to a scandal?
R3) Are there significant differences between highly-identified or lowly-identified moral individuals regarding their attitudes towards the university following a legal scandal?

Guided by the theory of moral disengagement which explains why fans support a wrongdoer despite a scandal (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013), data from 355 fans of Baylor University, University of Louisville, and Michigan State University will be analyzed utilizing regression methods. Theoretically, this study will advance the marketing literature regarding differences in perception and moral reasoning coping strategies towards universities following a scandal that is sexual in nature. Practically, the results will provide insight regarding how fan loyalty may assuage the effects of these scandals on universities, and whether men and women cope with the scandals differently.