

Do job-relevance and severity of celebrity athlete's transgression matter?

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Abstract:

Utilization of celebrity athletes as endorsers for firms has one of the most prevalent marketing strategies since there are many possible positive effects of celebrity athletes on firms such as increasing brand awareness, enhancing company image, promotion of products, and so on. However, endorsement marketing can also be risky for firms when celebrity athletes were involved in negative behaviors. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of celebrity athlete's scandal on attitudes toward the athlete, his team, the endorsed brand, and purchase intent for the brand according to its severity and job relevance. Based on the manipulation process of job relevance and severity of transgression, four different types of transgression scenarios were made through a series of pretests: (1) job relevance and high severity, (2) job relevance and low severity, (3) job irrelevance and high severity, and (4) job irrelevance and low severity. A total of 225 usable survey questionnaires (170 males, 55 females) were collected from a major national university in the southern part of South Korea. Data were analyzed through a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), t-test, and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Results of the first MANOVA indicated that there was a significant univariate main effect of job relevance on attitude toward team. More specifically, the more the athlete's transgression is related to job performance, the less favorable toward the team he belongs. Results of the second MANOVA indicated that there was a significant univariate main effect of severity on attitude toward athlete. Specifically, the more severe the transgression, the less favorable toward the transgressed athlete. The findings provide some implications on how to successfully develop appropriate risk management strategies when dealing with athlete's transgression.

Key Words: Athlete scandal, negative behavior, Endorsement, Attitude, Purchase intention

Introduction

Celebrities are figures who have high levels of public recognition. Because they are highly influential individuals, numerous companies have been attempting to utilize them as endorsers to obtain better advertising effect and it has become one of the most prevalent marketing strategies (Kim & Cheong, 2011). In line with this, there are relatively many research on the positive effect of celebrities as endorsers in the fields of marketing and communication. Such utilization of celebrities as endorsers provides some advantages. For instance, celebrity appearances on advertisements rapidly increases brand awareness in a relatively short period of time (Lee & Thorson 2008) and increases the rate of recall of advertising messages (Kamins 1990). Furthermore, celebrities cause positive reactions in consumers toward advertisements and help form positive attitudes toward brands, which are known to have positive effects for ultimately increasing consumer intent to purchase products. These advantages are no exception in celebrity athletes.

According to previous research on athlete endorsers, they can help increase brand awareness, enhance brand and corporate image, increase sales, reposition a brand and firm (Charbonneau & Garland, 2005; Olson & Thjomøe, 2011). More specifically, endorsement marketing is one of the most effective marketing and communication strategies to enhance persuasion, particularly when the athlete endorser is credible (Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, 2012), congruent with the target consumers' ethnic background (Kim & Cheong, 2011), and fits with the brand (Koernig & Boyd, 2009).

However, can such positive effects of athlete endorsers be still maintained when they are associated with illegal acts or involved with immoral behaviors? In other words, what are the effects of such acts/behaviors on the celebrity athlete's own image and on the brand or company endorsed by the celebrity? Celebrity athletes' unethical or illegal behaviors are now relatively commonplace, and the tendency is for such events to increase continuously; all the while, the negative effects of such events are also increasing. For instance, when Tiger Woods was involved in extramarital affairs at 2009, companies endorsed him experienced 2% loss in their stock market value (Knittel & Stango, 2013), and some companies decide to even drop endorsement deal with him right after the scandal (e.g., Gatorade, Accenture; Lee, Kwak, & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016). Thus, marketers might face dilemmas about if they should continue or discontinue their relationships with the athlete involved in

the negative events because negative information about the athlete has been known to hinder successful endorsement-based marketing campaigns (White, Goddard, & Wilbur, 2009).

Meanwhile, negative publicity from a transgression of athlete endorser may attract more massive public interest than positive publicity. This is because unfavorable/negative information affects people's perceptions more significantly than positive information (Smith & Petty, 1996). In addition, this can be due to the tendency of negative information to be easier to store in long-term memory as compared to the counterpart (Kensinger & Corkin, 2003). Further, such negative information spreads much more rapidly than before since Internet-based digital media is tremendously being developed.

In these days, while it is not uncommon to see the scandals associated with the allegations of immoral behavior of celebrity athletes, relatively many scholars have attempted to examine on how the scandals impact endorsed brand evaluations in the field of sport management (e.g., Edwards & La Ferle, 2009; Lee, Kwak, & Moore, 2015; Lee, Park, & Ha, 2021; Louie, Kulik, & Jacobson, 2001; Um, 2013). Some findings have indicated that negative celebrity information leads consumers to respond negatively to the athletes and brands they endorsed (Edwards & La Ferle, 2009; Yoon & Shin, 2016), while other findings have indicated that transgressions do not have a negative impact on endorsed brands (e.g., Carrillat & d'Astous, 2014; Lohneiss & Hill, 2014). For example, the immoral behavior of an athlete endorser has a negative influence on the stock performance of endorsed brand (Louie et al., 2001). In contrast, Lear and colleagues (2009) indicated that negative publicity generated by an athlete endorser can still keep having a positive impact on an endorsed brand. In other words, negative information may increase greater consumer attention to endorsed brands.

Previous research on the negative impact of celebrity endorsers' transgressions was based on memory network to investigate if negative images derived from a transgression transfer to endorsed brands (e.g., Thwaites et al., 2012). According to the memory network, negative images can be transferred via the links between human's memory nodes. In other words, it could be possible that consumers' negative perceptions evoked by athletes' transgressions is transferred to endorsed brands and even teams.

Although relatively many scholars have been paying attention to the negative impact of athletes' transgression on themselves and brands they endorsed, there were very few studies examining the specific nature/characteristics of athletes' transgressions. The nature of negative events could be its severity and its job relevance. In other words, public's response to athletes' transgressions may vary according to the severity of the negative event or its job relevance. For instance, it is plausible that consumers have more negatively response to athletes who drove drunk (relatively low severity and low job relevance; Laufer, Gillespie, McBride, & Gonzalez, 2005) than those involved in match fixing (relatively high severity and high job relevance; Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013).

As mentioned previously, transgression associated with celebrate athletes is now relatively commonplace and is being significant risk factors to themselves, their teams, and even the brands they endorsed. Particularly, marketers may face managerial dilemmas about if they should continue or stop their relationship with the troubled athletes. Marketers have little or no control to prevent athletes' immoral behaviors because they usually occur with no expectation. To minimize the negative effect of athlete's transgression, therefore, it is critical to look at its specific nature. As the specific nature of athlete's negative event, the current study attempts to employ the severity of negative event and its job relevance. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the impacts of celebrity athlete's transgression on attitudes toward the athlete, his team, the endorsed brand, and purchase intent for the brand according to its severity and job relevance.

Material & methods

Pretest

A series of pretests were conducted to manipulate transgressions based on its job relevance and severity. First, thirty college students taking sport-related courses at South Korea were told to freely recall two transgressions celebrate athletes made – one that was job relevance and the other that was job irrelevance. As a result, match fixing is the most frequently identified job-relevant transgression while drunk driving is the most commonly identified type of transgression unrelated to job. Based on the results, we finally selected 'match fixing' as job relevance transgression and 'drunk driving' as one that are unrelated to job. After that, ten graduate students enrolling in the department of physical education in South Korea were asked as to how the degree of severity for the two transgressions (match fixing and drunk driving) should be manipulated. For the match fixing transgression, participants had mostly agreed that it should be manipulated whether athletes directly involved in the match fixing (high severity) or they just looked on without doing anything (low severity). For the drunk driving transgression, they had mostly agreed that it should be manipulated based on the volume of alcohol and dealing process of the transgression.

Based on the manipulation process of job relevance and severity of transgression, four different types of transgression scenarios were made: (1) job relevance and high severity, (2) job relevance and low severity, (3) job irrelevance and high severity, and (4) job irrelevance and low severity.

Participants and procedures

For the main study, a total of 250 participants who were interested in professional sports were recruited from a major national university in the southern part of South Korea. From the initial sample, 25 participants

who missed information or multiple answers to one or more questions at the survey were eliminated from further analysis, leaving 225 usable cases. Out of 225 usable surveys, there were 170 males (85.6%) and 55 females (24.4%). The average age of the participants was 26.3 years old ($SD = 6.91$).

This study employed a 2 (job relevance: relevance vs. irrelevance) $\times$ 2 (severity: high severity vs. low severity) between-subject design. Once subjects agreed to participate in the study, they were randomly assigned to one of four transgression scenarios: (1) job relevance and high severity ($n = 55$), (2) job relevance and low severity ($n = 57$), (3) job irrelevance and high severity ($n = 56$), and (4) job irrelevance and low severity ($n = 57$). Participants were then told to read one of the four transgression scenarios. After reading the scenario, participants completed questionnaires asking about their attitudes toward the transgressed athletes and his team. Then, all participants read information about the athlete's endorsement contract with a sport brand. Lastly, participants completed questionnaires asking about their attitudes toward the endorsed brand and their purchase intention toward the endorsed brand.

Instruments

First, a total of 9 items were adopted from existing literature to measure attitudes toward the transgressed athlete (3 items), his team (3 items), and the endorsed brand (3 items) (Lee et al., 2015; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). The 9 items were measured by a 7-point semantic differential scale (i.e., *unfavorable-favorable*, *bad-good*, *positive-negative*). Likewise, purchase intention for the brand endorsed by the transgressed athlete were measured by three 7-point semantic differential items (i.e., *unlikely-likely*, *impossible-possible*, *improbable-probable*) adopting from previous studies (Lee et al., 2015; Yi, 1990). Lastly, two items asking participants' perceptions of the job relevance and severity of the athlete's transgression were employed to check whether the manipulation was successful as intended. Specifically, one item asked whether the transgression in the scenarios would relate to his job (I believe that the transgression in the article is directly associated with his job). The other item asked whether the transgression in the scenarios is serious (I believe that the transgression in the article is very serious). These two items were measured by a 7-point Likert-type scale (*strongly disagree*: 1 – *strongly agree*: 7).

Data analysis

First, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to check out the reliability and validity of all multi-item measured variables. Then, a t-test was conducted for the manipulation check of two independent variables (i.e., job relevance: relevant vs. irrelevant; severity: high vs. low). Lastly, a series of two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine the effects of job relevance and severity on attitudes toward athlete, his team, endorsed brand, and purchase intention.

Results

Scale reliability and validity

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the appropriateness of measurements with the theoretical constructs. The results of CFA showed an acceptable level of fit: χ^2/df ($97.960/231$) = 2.041, RMSEA = .068, SRMR = .039, CFI = .985, TLI = .979 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Table 1 shows factor loadings, Cronbach's α , and average variance extracted (AVE) values of the multi-item measures used in this study. All factor loadings were significant in predicted direction (ranging from .85 to .97), and AVE values were greater than .50 (ranging from .87 to .93), suggesting establishment of the convergent validity. Further, AVE values of all factors were greater than the corresponding squared inter-construct correlation estimates (Fornell, Larcker, 1981; see Table 2), suggesting establishment of the discriminant validity. Lastly, all measures had suitable reliability, as the values of Cronbach's α were all over .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1. Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha (α), AVE values of the Measures

Factors	Items	Factor Loadings	α	AVE
A _{Athlete}	A _{Athlete} 1	.91	.95	.87
	A _{Athlete} 2	.92		
	A _{Athlete} 3	.96		
A _{Brand}	A _{Brand} 1	.94	.97	.93
	A _{Brand} 2	.96		
	A _{Brand} 3	.96		
A _{Team}	A _{Team} 1	.94	.96	.90
	A _{Team} 2	.96		
	A _{Team} 3	.94		
PI	PI 1	.85	.94	.86
	PI 2	.97		
	PI 3	.95		

Note. A_{Athlete} = attitude toward athlete; A_{Brand} = attitude toward brand; A_{Team} = attitude toward team; PI = purchase intention.

Table 2. AVEs and Squared Correlations between Factors

Factors	1	2	3	4
A _{Athlete}	.87			
A _{Brand}	.04	.93		
A _{Team}	.09	.15	.90	
PI	.09	.21	.08	.86

Note. Values on the diagonal are AVE for each factor. Values below the diagonal are squared correlations between corresponding factors.

Manipulation check

Before testing the effects of transgression on outcome variables according to its job relevance and the degree of severity, we first tested whether the intended manipulation (i.e., job relevance and severity) worked properly by performing a t-test. For the job relevance, the results of t-test ($t(223)=5.69$, $p < .01$) showed that “match fixing” transgression ($M=5.39$, $SD=1.71$) were more likely to relate with job (i.e., athletic performance) than “drunk driving” transgression ($M=4.03$, $SD=1.86$). As for the degree of severity, participants in high severity condition ($M=6.05$, $SD=1.15$) perceived the transgression more serious than those in low severity condition ($M=5.23$, $SD=1.59$; $t(223)=4.39$, $p < .01$). Thus, the manipulation of two conditions (job relevance and severity) were successfully met.

Effects of job relevance and severity

A two-way MANOVA was conducted to test the effects of athlete’s transgression on attitudes toward the athlete, the team, the endorsed brand and purchase intent for the brand, according to its job relevance and the degree of severity. As such, the job relevance (job-relevant vs. job-irrelevant) and the degree of severity (high vs. low) were the independent variables. According to the MANOVA results, there was not a statistically significant multivariate interaction effect between job relevance and severity on dependent variables, Pillai’s Trace = .010, $F=.546$, $p=.702$.

Following the non-significant interaction effect, the main effect of job relevance on dependent variables was analyzed. The MANOVA results indicated that there was a statistically significant multivariate main effect of job relevance on dependent variables, Pilla’s Trace = .049, $F=2.791$, $p=.027$. Follow-up analyses indicated that there was only significant univariate main effect of job relevance on attitude toward the team, $F(1,221) = 10.98$, $p < .01$. More specifically, the more the athlete’s transgression is related to job performance, the less favorable toward the team he belongs to (job relevance: $M=3.36$ vs. job irrelevance: $M=3.96$).

In addition, the MANOVA results indicated that there was a statistically significant multivariate main effect of degree of severity on dependent variables, Pilla’s Trace = .117, $F=7.194$, $p < .001$. Follow-up analyses indicated that there was only significant univariate main effect of severity on attitude toward the athlete, $F(1,221) = 22.14$, $p < .01$. Specifically, the more severe the transgression, the less favorable toward the transgressed athlete (high: $M=2.22$ vs. low: $M=3.01$). Table 3 shows univariate main effects of MANOVA.

Table 3. Univariate Main Effects of MANOVA

	Job Relevance		<i>F</i>	Degree of Severity		<i>F</i>
	Relevant	Irrelevant		High	Low	
A _{Athlete}	$M=2.53$ $SD=1.22$	$M=2.71$ $SD=1.41$	1.16	$M=2.22$ $SD=1.14$	$M=3.01$ $SD=1.37$	22.14***
A _{Brand}	$M=3.88$ $SD=1.38$	$M=4.13$ $SD=1.27$	2.02	$M=3.88$ $SD=1.32$	$M=4.13$ $SD=1.33$	1.93
A _{Team}	$M=3.36$ $SD=1.29$	$M=3.96$ $SD=1.34$	10.98**	$M=3.72$ $SD=1.28$	$M=3.59$ $SD=1.41$	.48
PI	$M=4.47$ $SD=1.45$	$M=4.57$ $SD=1.49$	.28	$M=4.52$ $SD=1.51$	$M=4.53$ $SD=1.43$	.01

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

While previous studies have primarily focused on the positive impacts of athlete endorsers on outcome variables (i.e., attitudes toward athlete, team, brand), relatively little attention was paid to how athlete endorsers would negatively impact on the outcome variables when the endorsers are associated with illegal acts or involved with immoral behaviors. As such, this study attempted to examine the impacts of athlete’s transgression on attitudes toward the athlete, the team, the endorsed brand, and purchase intent for the brand according to its job relevance and degree of severity.

One of the main findings from this study suggested that the more severe the transgression, the less favorable attitude toward the transgressed athlete which is consistent with the results of previous study (Laufer et al., 2005). However, the severity of transgression did not have negative effect on attitude toward the team he belongs to. This finding implies that regardless of the degree of severity because athlete’s transgression is his/her own personal matter, the team he/she belongs to has a relatively less responsibility for the transgression (Seo,

2019). Therefore, it is critical for team sport marketers to develop appropriate risk management strategies when dealing with the athlete's transgression.

Another important finding of this study was that the more the athlete's transgression is related to job performance, the less favorable toward the team he belongs to. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2015). In addition, attitude toward the athlete was also less favorable even if the impact was not significant. In this study, job relevance was defined as the degree to which a transgression is directly associated with sport itself. It is well-known that one of the most important values of sports is fairness. Thus, sport fans may reveal more negative attitudes toward the athlete or team as a transgression damage the value of fairness such as match fixing and doping. From this point of view, sport teams may need to make a full effort to prevent such job-related transgressions.

Lastly, transgression's job relevance and its degree of severity did not have any significant impacts on attitude toward endorsed brand and purchase intent for the brand which are inconsistent with the results of previous studies (Lee et al., 2015; Yoon & Shin, 2016). These results may be due to the reason that athlete's transgression has nothing to do with the endorsed brand or company but his/her own misbehavior (Seo, 2019). In addition, transgressions do not always have an adverse impact on endorsed brands, but its negative impact on the endorsed brand may depend on how sport fans process the transgression information (Lee & Kwak, 2016). For instance, if sport fans choose to condone the immoral behavior, then they are likely to show positive feedback toward the endorsing brand. Thus, marketers may need to consider how fans process the transgression information.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the current study may merit further investigation. First, we examined the direct effects of athlete's transgression on outcome variables without considering identification/involvement with an object, such as athlete identification, team identification, and brand involvement. For instance, it is plausible that highly identified fans with an athlete who acted immoral behavior, they would be likely to maintain their positive stance towards the athlete and even endorsed brand. Therefore, future studies should further examine how two examined independent variables (job relevance and degree of severity) interact with identification or involvement with an object. Second, in the current study, we considered match fixing and drunk driving as job-relevant and job-irrelevant transgression, respectively. However, there are many different types of job-relevant (e.g., doping) and job-irrelevant transgressions (e.g., fraud, sexual assault). Thus, future research should explore other types of transgressions to consider different connotations around different types of transgression. Third, perceptions of immoral actions may be different by a set of cultural norms held by individuals or cultural context. In other words, while on-field violence in a soccer game would be considered a serious transgression, it is perceived as a part of game at an ice hockey. Therefore, future studies may need to consider cultural contexts or cultural norms when examining athlete's transgression. Last but not least, future studies need to consider individual difference variables (e.g., gender, age, moral standard), because such variables could further explain the amount of variance of outcome variables.

Conclusions

Previous research has shown that celebrity athlete endorsers can help increase brand awareness, enhance brand image, promote sales, and reposition a brand. Despite these advantages of celebrity athletes, companies, brands, and teams should be prepared when celebrity athletes were involved in transgressions because the transgression have a negative impact on them. Thus, this study attempted to examine the effects of celebrity athlete's scandal on attitudes toward the athlete, his team, the endorsed brand, and purchase intent for the brand according to its severity and job relevance. The results indicated that the effect of job relevance on attitude toward team was significant. What this means is that the more the athlete's transgression is related to job performance, the less favorable toward the team he belongs. Therefore, it is critical for team sport marketers to develop appropriate risk management strategies specially when dealing with the athlete's job-related transgression. Another finding of the study was that the effect of severity on attitude toward athlete was significant. Specifically, the more severe the transgression, the less favorable toward the transgressed athlete. Considering this finding, sport agent who represent the transgressed athlete may need to educate the athletes which transgressions consumers/fans perceive more severely.

Conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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