

**Sports Consumer Response to Negative Publicity: The Moderating Effect of Publicity Type and Commitment Level**

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Few business settings deal more with media than professional sports. The increasing reliance of sport business on effective media relation activity underscores the industry's need for a thorough understanding of publicity's effects (Funk & Pritchard, 2006). However, despite the scandals in sports arising around us every day, little is known about how negative publicity affects sports consumers' attitudes towards the team or athlete involved in scandalous events. In the current study, we hypothesize that sports consumers' responses to negative publicity regarding teams depend both on their commitment to the teams and the type of publicity (e.g., corporate ability-related vs. corporate social responsibility-related). Sports, being both a social and an economic institution (Sheth & Babiak, 2009), are investing heavily in their performances both on and off the field. Yet, facing negative publicity in either CA or CSR is inevitable for every sports entity. Considering managerial resources within a team is limited, it is impossible to maintain positive images in both of the two dimensions all the time. Therefore, it is imperative for managers to better understand how sport fans process different types of negative publicity.

The role of commitment in information processing is well documented, being shown to play a critical role in determining attitude change to negative publicity (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). When exposed to negative publicity toward a brand, attitude change is significantly greater in low-commitment consumers than in their high-commitment counterparts. The same phenomenon has been witnessed in sports settings. In their research on commitment's moderation of message effect, Funk and Pritchard (2006) examined the effect of publicity valence (i.e., positive vs. negative) on attitudes toward a Major League Baseball (MLB) team. The result showed that committed individuals tended to have more stable beliefs and feelings about a team when they were faced with conflicting (negative) publicity. In line with the previous research, our first hypothesis (H1) is that when exposed to negative publicity toward a team, low-commitment sport consumers exhibit greater attitude change as opposed to high-commitment sports consumers.

In the current study, we borrow the categorization from Xi and Peng (2010) to classify publicity in sports into that which is related to corporate ability (CA) and that which is related to corporate social responsibility (CSR). The categorization is following a systematic two-category classification of corporate associations developed by Brown and Dacin (1997). Based on this classification, Berens (2005) found that compared to its CA counterparts, CSR association is more accessible and demonstrate poorer diagnosticity for product evaluation, where diagnosticity is considered as the degree of perceived usefulness of information. The same study also found that when involvement decreases, a person is more easily satisfied with information that is less diagnostic but more accessible (Berens et al., 2005). Therefore, it is expected that low-involvement consumers will rely on CSR-related publicity as cues for evaluation, while high-involvement consumers tend to seek for CA-related publicity. In the current study, as commitment is closely associated with involvement (Beatty et al., 1988), our second hypothesis (H2) is that publicity type (i.e., CA-related vs. CSR-related) will moderate the effect of commitment on attitude change such that high-commitment sport consumers will exhibit greater attitude change in response to CA-related negative publicity as compared with CSR-related negative publicity toward a team, while low-commitment sport consumers will exhibit greater attitude change in response to CSR-related negative publicity as compared with CA-related negative publicity toward a team.

A 2(commitment of the consumer toward the team: high and low) x 2(type of the negative publicity: CA-related and CSR-related) between-subjects experimental design will be employed. Undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university will be recruited for the study. One CA-related and one CSR-related article about the university's football team will be developed through a pilot study (N = 50). Two hundred university students will be recruited for the main study to test the proposed hypotheses. Psychological Commitment to Team (PCT) Scale (Mahony et al., 2000) will be used to measure subjects' commitment to the team. Respondents will be grouped into either a high- or low-commitment group based on their PCT score. Each subject will be randomly assigned to one of two publicity

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conditions and will be asked to make counterarguments about the publicity. To discern attitude change, we will follow Funk and Pritchard's (2006) technique to use latitude-of-rejection (L-O-R) measure. Participants will be asked to place an 'R' by any objectionable statement, the number of sentences checked objectionable were used to calculate the size of the width of the L-O-R. Wider L-O-R enable respondents' attitude to the team to endure despite negative publicity (Funk & Pritchard, 2006) Two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be utilized to test the hypotheses. Data will be collected in January 2014 and the results will be presented at the conference.

The results of this study will contribute to the literature by bridging the gap between commitment, publicity type, and consumer response. There is a lack of existing research regarding how different sports fans respond to different types of negative publicity. At the managerial level, this study can help teams to determine their strategy when they deal with their existing or potential fans. Our research will suggest that when a team wants to strengthen its existing fan-base (i.e., high-commitment fans), it may want to put more emphasis on field performance and avoid negative CA-related publicity. On the other hand, if the team aims to expand the fans base by utilizing team-related communication efforts, the team should make efforts to eliminate CSR-related negative publicity.

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