When Athletes Break the Rules: Post-Transgression CSR Communication Strategy

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Sports serve as an effective vehicle for delivering corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages (Hamil & Morrow, 2011). Athlete endorsers who are involved in CSR help create a positive brand reputation for the endorsing brand (Lee & Babiak, 2019). However, those who endorse brands can also face challenges when their brand ambassadors commit transgressions. When athlete endorsers have committed a transgression, organizations take the action of implementing a CSR initiative to reduce its negative impact (Ricks, 2005).

Existing studies with regard to the athlete endorsers’ post-transgression CSR have revealed mixed results. Some studies have found that post-transgression CSR programs that are congruent in its context with the transgression are more effective in reducing the negative effects than the CSR that are incongruent (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In contrast, other studies have challenged those studies with contrasting evidence to the proposed effects (e.g., Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009). Equally, it has not been established with any clarity whether an athlete endorser’s post-transgression CSR initiative that corresponds with the transgression issue is a more effective strategy to restore a damaged reputation than one that does not. This warrants further research in post-transgression CSR and its effects on consumer perspectives and relevant behaviors.

This study identified important limitations. First, previous studies have not integrated the effects of an athlete endorser’s pre-transgression CSR into consumer evaluations of the post-transgression CSR. It is important to look at this because consumers’ judgment is guided by their past perceptions regarding the particular situation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Second, we claim that one way to gain clarity of what causes such inconsistent results in perceived CSR congruence literature is to examine the different types of transgression. As consumers actively interpret the CSR initiatives in the light of situational factors (Ham & Kim, 2019), post-transgression CSR communication strategies should look into situational factors. Lastly, consumers are more likely to be skeptical of CSR programs when they conflate an athlete endorser’s CSR endeavor and his or her transgression (Lee & Babiak, 2019). However, there is a lack of empirical research that examines how consumers develop such skepticism when an athlete endorser’s CSR initiative is associated with the transgression issue.

To fill the void, this study employs a 2 (pre-transgression CSR: congruence vs. incongruence) × 2 (post-transgression CSR: congruence vs. incongruence) × 2 (transgression type: sports-related vs. non-sports-related) between-subjects design to test the proposed hypotheses. Dependent variables are skepticism of the post-transgression CSR, attitude to the endorsed brand, and intention to purchase the brands. We have started collecting data, and a total of approximately 300 participants will be recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Instruments were revised versions of existing scales in the pertinent areas. To test the proposed hypotheses, this study will utilize the PROCESS macro Model 3; the simple slope analysis). We believe that this study can contribute to CSR literature by revealing the outcomes of athlete endorsers’ post-transgression CSR strategy in a negative situation, and also identify new findings that consumer perceptions of the post-transgression CSR can vary based on the type of transgression.