Impacts of Confirmation Bias on Sport Consumer Responses to Athlete Scandals

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Despite several benefits, there exist many risks associated with athlete endorsement marketing such as unexpected athlete scandals. Accordingly, understanding different consumer responses to such unexpected scandals from the crisis management perspective has become a critical issue because sport consumers differently respond even to the same incident. Thus, the present study aims to test the impact of confirmation bias that may trigger a positive consumer attitude toward a troubled athlete via different moral reasoning strategies and the impact of brand responses on consumer evaluations.

According to the confirmation bias, people positively evaluate information that matches their pre-existing preferences, while negatively evaluating information that does not match their preferences (Kelley, 1973). Moreover, recent literature has found that consumers can be more favorable to scandal-associated targets when activating their moral rationalization (MR: justification of an athlete’s misbehavior) and moral decoupling (MD: separation of performance evaluation from morality evaluation) (Lee et al., 2016). How can this supporting behavior be evoked?

To answer this, we test the impact of the confirmation bias on MR and MD. Especially, consumers’ team identification will be incorporated as a predictor of the confirmation bias (CB).

H1. Highly identified consumers with a team will show a higher level of CB compared to those with a low-level identification.
H2. CB will be positively associated with both MR and MD.
H3. MR and MD will be positively associated with forgiveness and an athlete’s reputation.

Then, how should an endorsed brand respond to endorsers’ unexpected misbehavior? For the associated brand response, we consider two different types of responses: maintaining the relationship (accommodative) vs. terminating the relationship (defensive). Drawing on Grunig and others (1998), we propose:

H4. Accommodative (Defensive) strategy will have greater impacts on brand attitude and image among participants with high (low) team identification.

A 2 (confirmation bias: with vs. without) by 2 (brand response: accommodative vs. defensive) between-subjects experiment will be conducted (n = 200). After a random assignment, participants under the with-CB condition will be asked to write their favorite team’s name and then report their identification levels by using Mael & Ashforth’s (1992) scales. Those under the without-CB condition will be given an international rugby team’s name and be asked to report their identification levels. A fictitious scenario depicting an athlete scandal and different brand responses toward the scandal will then be presented. Finally, the participants will complete a survey measuring manipulation checking items for CB (Alicke, 2000), MR/MD (Bhattacharjee et al, 2013), willingness to forgive (Xie et al., 2009), an athlete reputation (Bae et al., 2006), associated brand attitude (Edell et al., 1987), and brand image (Pope et al., 2000). After the manipulation check procedure, the hypotheses will be tested by conducting a series of t-tests, reliability test, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. This study will provide theory-based explanations regarding consumer responses based on confirmation bias and enable associated endorsed brands to make informed decisions whether they should either keep or cut the tie with a scandalized athlete.