

An Examination of Crisis Response in Professional Athlete Scandals: A Sport Fan's Perspective

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of athlete celebrity scandal on a sport fan's attitude and behavioral intention, and a sport fan's reaction to athlete celebrity's media response after the scandal. 308 samples were collected from professional sports spectators in the United States and data was analyzed through Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis. Results of the study showed 1) responding to the athlete scandal via press conference was more reliable and effective response strategy than responding to the athlete scandal via social media, 2) the influence of the athlete celebrity scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete affected a sport fan's negative behavioral intention regardless of types of scandal, off-field scandal or on-field scandal, and 3) athlete celebrity's high performance and effect of apology via press conference were significant factors that affected the influence of scandal on fan loyalty. This study provides practical information regarding how marketers and public relations managers in sport organizations should cope with athlete celebrity scandals to maintain positive relationship with their fans.

Keywords: Athlete scandal, press conference, social media, fan attitude, behavioral intention.

INTRODUCTION

Athlete celebrity scandals have become important theme in sport management for several decades [1]. According to Gorse and Chadwick (2011) [2], more than 2000 illegal or unethical activities (e.g., doping, match-fixing, and misuse of inside information) occurred in international sports over the past two decades. Athlete celebrities' transgressions negatively affect sport fans' attitudes toward the athlete celebrities as well as athlete's images [3]. Because of this, individual athletes, sport teams, and sport organizations strive to protect images from athlete scandals by establishing scandal response strategies via media [4].

Crisis is defined as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" [5]. Crisis in the sport industry includes unexpected events that negatively influence an athlete or a sport organization such as athletic scandals, criminal charges, labor disputes, facility issues, illegal / immoral actions, accidental deaths, violence and so on [6]. In particular, athletic scandal, defined as "doing something illegal or immoral that has a profound impact on the sport or contest," is one of the most prominent crises in sport [7]. In a crisis situation, individuals and/or organizations try to minimize damages by developing communication strategies to the public, and

those communication strategies in a crisis situation are called crisis response strategies [8].

The importance of response strategies via media after the athlete scandals has been continuously addressed in sport scandal research (e.g., [9, 10]). Some athlete celebrities (e.g., Kobe Bryant and Tiger Woods) respond to their scandals (i.e., sexual misconducts) via press conference in person, while some athlete celebrities (e.g., Conor McGregor and Floyd Mayweather) take advantage of social media such as Facebook or Twitter to apologize for sport fans regarding their misbehaviors (i.e., Conor McGregor's racial joke and Floyd Mayweather's domestic abuse scandal). Selecting appropriate media channel to respond a scandal is important because media coverage significantly influences on public perceptions [11]. In this context, sport fans are more likely to evaluate athlete scandals based on information through media coverage.

Many studies [1, 4, 12, 13] have examined the influence of athlete celebrity scandals on athletes and sport organizations, and demonstrated the importance of media response strategies to minimize the negative impact of athlete celebrity scandals. Despite the abundant research on athlete celebrity scandals, the athlete scandal research has not been examined extensively within the context of sport fan's perspective. In other words, there has been few research as to how sport fans differently perceive and evaluate athlete scandals according to different type of media coverage. In particular, little is known how sport fans' perceived credibility of scandal response can be different according to when the scandal response is done through press conference or social media.

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Understanding sport fans' reaction to athlete celebrity scandals is important to establish fan relationship strategies for sport teams and sport organizations as well as individual athletes. In addition, it is also important to understand the different impact of media use for responding to athlete scandals on sport fans because information credibility is affected by types of communication channels (e.g., traditional media or social media) [14]. In this sense, this study aims to examine 1) the influence of athlete scandal on a sport fan's attitude and behavioral intention, and 2) a sport fan's perceived credibility of response to athlete scandal according to different type of communication channels, press conference and social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Athlete celebrity scandals have been extensively examined in sport management [1, 3, 15, 16]. In particular, the influence of athlete endorser scandals on sponsors has become important theme in sport scandal research [12, 17]. Athlete celebrities, as celebrity endorsers, play an important role in generating positive impact on a sport-related sponsors by showing positive and reliable images to sport consumers [18]. In this sense, the importance of response strategies to athlete scandals has been emphasized in sport scandal research. Despite abundant research regarding athlete celebrity scandals, there has been minimal research as to sport fans' responses to media coverage about the athlete scandals.

In sport, many studies [19-21] have dealt with athlete scandals based on two types, on-field scandal and off-field scandal. On-field scandal means athletes' illegal or unethical behaviors associated with athletic performance or sporting events, and includes doping, match-fixing, misuse of inside information, embezzlement and so on. Off-field scandal is related to athletes' private issues such as sexual misconduct, violence, drug abuse, gambling and so on. Regarding on-field scandals, previous studies (e.g., [22-24]) have focused much on examining the impact of doping or match-fixing scandals on credibility of individual athletes or sport teams, and how to repair images tarnished by on-field scandals. In the case of off-field scandals, researchers (e.g., [17, 25, 26]) have paid much attention to athletes' sexual misconduct and how it affected individuals' and sponsors' images. In considering previous studies have demonstrated the negative impact of on-field and off-field scandal, it can be assumed that athlete scandals negatively affect sport fans' attitudes toward the athlete regardless of scandal types.

Hypothesis 1

Athlete celebrity scandals negatively affect a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete regardless of scandal type, off-field scandal or on-field scandal.

Previous athlete celebrity studies (e.g., [27, 28]) examined the influence of sport celebrity on sport fans and found that sport celebrities' images and behaviors significantly affect sport fans' attitudes toward the celebrities, sponsors, or products, and behavioral intentions such as product purchase intentions. In other words, sport fans form positive or negative attitudes according to how sport fans are influenced by sport celebrities, and their attitudes affect intentions to behave with regard to sporting events or sport product consumptions. This is because an individual's attitude is an important predictor that determines behavioral intention [25]. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the influence of athlete celebrity scandals on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete can influence a sport fan's behavioral intention negatively.

Hypothesis 2

The influence of athlete celebrity scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete affects a sport fan's negative behavioral intention.

In crisis communication research, Coombs and Holladay (2009) [30] noted that effective media response strategies after a crisis in an organization can reduce damages tarnished by the crisis such as scandals. Many crisis communication studies (e.g., [31, 32]) examined people's perceptions and reactions to crisis communication via social media (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) and traditional media (e.g., TV or newspapers). Those previous studies in crisis communication show that the effectiveness of crisis response strategies depends on using appropriate media channel according to type of crisis (e.g., personal scandal, natural disaster, or rumors). In this sense, it is necessary to examine sport fans' reaction to media response of sport organizations to athlete celebrity scandals.

According to Arpan and Pompper's (2003) [33] crisis communication research, people evaluate organizations more credible and the crisis is not severe when the organizations self-disclose the issues via press conference. This means press conference can be an effective communication vehicle when organizations are involved in crisis situations because publics can evaluate the crisis based on much

information from the crisis communicator in the press conference. Unlike crisis response via press conference, previous crisis communication studies (e.g., [34, 35]) indicated disadvantages (e.g., computer illiteracy) of crisis communication via social media such as Facebook or Twitter even though social media is a powerful communication channel in crisis situations. In this sense, it can be assumed that athlete celebrity's response to scandal via press conference can be more reliable and effective to address scandals than responding to the scandal via social media.

Hypothesis 3

Responding to athlete celebrity scandal via press conference is more reliable and effective to affect sport fans than responding to athlete celebrity scandal via social media.

Athlete celebrity's performance has been extensively examined in sport management with a variety of topics such as endorsement value (e.g., [36]), brand identification (e.g., [37]), athlete brand image (e.g., [38]), and sport spectators' consumption behaviors (e.g., [39]). In particular, previous studies demonstrated athlete's performance is a significant factor that affects sport fan loyalty toward individual athletes or sport teams. In considering the athlete celebrity scandals negatively influence brand images of athlete celebrities and sport fans' attitudes toward the athlete celebrities, athlete celebrity's high performance after the scandal incident may alleviate the negative impact of scandal. In this sense, it can be hypothesized that athlete celebrity's high performance affects the influence of scandal on sport fan loyalty.

Hypothesis 4

Athlete celebrity's high performance affects the influence of athlete celebrity scandal on sport fan loyalty.

In scandal research, many studies (e.g., [10, 40, 41]) demonstrated apology is an effective scandal response strategy to recover images tarnished by athlete scandals. In other words, athlete celebrity's sincere apology via media can change sport fans' attitudes toward the athlete celebrity. In this sense, sincere apology positively affects mitigating the negative influence of athlete celebrity scandal on sport fan loyalty.

Hypothesis 5

Athlete celebrity's apology affects the influence of athlete celebrity scandal on sport fan loyalty

METHOD

Samples and Procedure

To understand how sport fans perceive sport celebrity scandals, individuals who visited stadiums to enjoy sports games in the United States were considered. Sport fans are individuals who are emotionally committed to sporting events [42]. In this sense, individuals who attended Major League Baseball (MLB) games in the United States were considered. MLB fans were chosen for several reasons. First, MLB is one of the most popular professional sports leagues in the United States and fans vary in different age groups. Secondly, MLB players have been involved in several types of scandals on-field (e.g., substance abuse- Alex Rodriguez, Barry Bonds; match-fixing- Jeff Locke) and off-field (e.g., sexual misconduct- Chad Curtis, domestic violence- Jeurys Familia) over the past decades. Finally, MLB has the largest number of season games among big four professional sport leagues in the United States, and this allows to collect samples for a long period of time.

First of all, participants were recruited inside of the stadiums. To eliminate biases regarding athlete celebrity scandals, actual names of the athletes and actual athlete scandal cases were not considered in this study. That means fictitious information, including fictitious name of the athlete and fictitious athlete scandals, on-field (doping) and off-field (sexual misconduct), were given with specific description of the survey questionnaire. After the introduction of the survey, each participant was asked to answer questions about sport celebrity scandals and how they evaluate effectiveness of scandal responses according to type of communication channels, press conference or social media. As a result, a total of 308 (Male: 158 / Female: 150) samples was collected.

Instruments

To examine the influence of athlete celebrity scandals on sport fans' attitudes and behaviors, and response strategies according to type of communication channels (i.e., press conference and social media), question items were modified based on the previous studies [43, 44]. Items included 1) the influence of off-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete celebrity, 2) the influence of athlete celebrity scandal on a sport fan's negative behavioral intention, 3) reliability of scandal response through

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

#	Items	Mean	SD
#1	Athlete celebrity's personal scandal such as sex scandal negatively affect my attitude toward the athlete	4.93	1.36
#2	I will not attend any sporting event associated with the athlete celebrity because of the scandal	4.37	1.43
#3	It would be more reliable if the athlete celebrity responded to the scandal via press conference instead of responding via social media	5.08	1.37
#4	I will continue to support the athlete celebrity regardless of the scandal if the athlete's game performance is excellent	4.03	1.58
#5	I think the celebrity athlete's apology via press conference is more effective response strategy than apology via social media	5.10	1.30
#6	Athlete celebrity's sports-related scandals such as doping or match-fixing negatively affect my attitude toward the athlete	5.14	1.26
#7	Athlete celebrity scandals affect my fan loyalty	4.61	1.47

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree.

press conference compared to scandal response through social media, 4) the influence of the athlete's high performance on recovering images tarnished by the scandal, 5) the effect of apology via press conference compared to apology via social media, 6) the influence of on-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete celebrity, and 7) the influence of the athlete celebrity scandal on a sport fan loyalty. All items were measured based on the 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree) (see Table 1).

Data Analysis

After data collection, data was analyzed through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Before analyzing data, values of partial responses and outliers were modified for accurate data analysis. Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis were used to examine the relationships among scandal response variables.

RESULTS

Total 308 samples, 158 males (51.3%) and 150 females (48.7%), were analyzed and the average age of respondents was 37.1. The results of descriptive statistics revealed sport fans perceived 1) responding to the athlete scandal via press conference is more reliable than responding to the athlete scandal via social media (Mean = 5.08, SD = 1.37), 2) apology via press conference is more effective response strategy than apology via social media (M = 5.10, SD = 1.30), and 3) the negative influence of on-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete (M = 5.14, SD = 1.26) is higher than the negative influence of off-field

scandal (M = 4.93, SD = 1.36) (see Table 1). Finally, there were no gender differences on perceptions of athlete scandals, behavioral intentions, and response strategies.

Results of Pearson correlation analysis showed there were moderate correlations between 1) the influence of off-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete and a sport fan's negative behavioral intention ($r = .37$, $n = 308$, $p < .01$), 2) the influence of off-field scandal and the influence of on-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete ($r = .35$, $n = 308$, $p < .01$), 3) reliability of scandal response via press conference and effectiveness of apology via press conference ($r = .39$, $n = 308$, $p < .01$), and 4) the negative influence of on-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete and the influence of the athlete scandal on a sport fan loyalty ($r = .39$, $n = 308$, $p < .01$) (see Table 2).

The influence of off-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete predicted a sport fan's negative behavioral intention ($\beta = .38$, $t(307) = 6.90$, $p < .05$) and the influence of on-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete also predicted a sport fan's negative behavioral intention ($\beta = .21$, $t(307) = 3.43$, $p < .05$). The influence of off-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete explained 13% of variance in a sport fan's negative behavioral intention ($R^2 = .13$, $F(1, 306) = 47.12$, $p < .05$) and the influence of on-field scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete explained 4% of variance in a sport fan's negative behavioral intention ($R^2 = .04$, $F(1, 306) = 11.77$, $p < .05$) respectively.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test what factors predict the influence of the athlete scandal

Table 2: Correlations among Items

	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7
#1	1						
#2	.365**	1					
#3	.212**	.037	1				
#4	-.273**	.110	.017	1			
#5	.233**	.027	.386**	.022	1		
#6	.354**	.192**	.205**	-.091	.199**	1	
#7	.234**	.255**	.120*	.215**	.223**	.393**	1

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

on a fan loyalty. The results of the multiple regression indicated two predictors (athlete's high performance and effect of apology via press conference) explained 10% of the variance ($R^2 = .10$, $F(3, 304) = 10.65$, $p < .05$). In particular, effect of apology via press conference significantly predicted the influence of the athlete scandal on fan loyalty ($\beta = .23$, $t(307) = 3.44$, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of the athlete celebrity scandal on sport fans and how sport fans evaluate the athlete celebrity's media response to the scandal. The results of the study showed sport fans perceived that responding to the athlete scandal (e.g., apology) via press conference was more reliable and effective response strategy than responding to the athlete scandal via social media such as Facebook or Twitter. This can be explained based on the advantage of press conference and disadvantage of social media. According to crisis communication research, credibility of crisis communicator is a significant factor that affects individuals' attitudes in crisis situation [45]. This means individuals' attitudes toward the celebrity scandals are affected by how the crisis communicators respond to the crisis via media.

Previous studies have demonstrated that social media plays an important role in crisis situations, such as disaster or other emergency situations related to public health, life or security [46, 47].

Social media is also an important vehicle in sport to enhance the relationship between athlete celebrities and sport fans [48]. However, it may not be an effective communication channel in athlete celebrity scandals because sport fans may not be able to see how

sincerely athlete celebrity respond to the scandal situation, and sport fans perceive the scandal response based only on text messages or pre-recorded videos on social media. Unlike responding to the athlete celebrity scandal via social media, press conference can be an effective communication channel when athlete celebrities are involved in scandals because the athlete celebrities can deliver more clear and reliable messages through verbal cues (e.g., word choice, intonation or voice) and non-verbal cues (e.g., dress, facial expression, or body language) and sport fans can assess whether the athlete celebrity's response to the scandal is trustworthy based on diverse audiovisual information. In this sense, it can be assumed that responding to the athlete celebrity scandal via press conference can be more effective than responding to the athlete celebrity scandal via social media.

The finding of the study is important because it provides different perspective from previous crisis communication research (e.g., [49]) that emphasized the effectiveness of social media in crisis situations. In particular, previous researchers (e.g., [1]) have not focused much on the impact of media on sport fans' perceptions in athlete scandals. In this sense, the finding of the study is meaningful and provides theoretical implications for athlete scandal researchers.

The study also demonstrated the influence of the athlete celebrity scandal on a sport fan's attitude toward the athlete affected a sport fan's negative behavioral intention regardless of types of scandal, off-field scandal (i.e., sexual misconduct) or on-field scandal (i.e., doping). In other words, sport fans who have negative attitudes toward the athlete celebrity due to the scandal are less likely to attend sporting events associated with the athlete celebrity. This can be explained based on the theory of planned behavior proposed by Ajzen and Madden (1986) [29]. According

to Ajzen and Madden (1986) [29], individuals' behavior intentions and behaviors are determined by attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. In particular, attitude is a significant factor that affect individuals' behavioral intentions. In the same context, sport fans' negative behavioral intentions can be determined according to sport fans' attitudes toward the athlete celebrity after the scandal. In this sense, the finding of the study is consistent with previous athlete scandal research.

The results of the study also demonstrated that athlete's high performance had a positive impact on the influence of athlete celebrity scandal on sport fan loyalty. In other words, the athlete's excellent performance mitigates the negative influence of scandal on fan loyalty. According to O'Roark *et al.* (2010) [37], athlete's performance is an important factor that affects brand identification. Sport fans who are highly identified with their individual athletes or sport teams are significantly affected by performances. In this sense, the athlete celebrity's scandal can have less negative impact on sport fan loyalty due to the influence of the athlete's high performance.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

This study contributes to understanding the negative impact of athlete celebrity scandals on sport fans. In particular, this study provides practical information regarding how marketers and public relations managers in sport organizations should cope with athlete celebrity scandals to maintain positive relationship with their fans. According to the results of the study, for example, responding to the athlete scandal via press conference in person can be an effective crisis communication strategy in sport. Kobe Bryant and Tiger Woods are great examples who delivered credible responses to sport fans via press conference after the sexual misconduct scandals. In this sense, sport PR managers should develop specific media response strategies according to types of athlete scandals, and should educate athlete celebrities regarding the effective way to deliver credible messages using non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, body movements, or nuances of the voice.

Sport marketers should consider the fact that sport fans' attitudes toward the sport celebrity involved in athletic scandals negatively affect their behavioral intentions such as revisit intention. In other words, athlete celebrity scandals can affect sport fans'

consumption behaviors once sport fans' have negative attitudes toward the athlete celebrity involved in the scandal. In this sense, marketers in sport organizations should establish fan relations strategies to relieve sport fans' negative attitudes toward the athlete celebrity after the scandal by showing sincere apology with appropriate compensations such as money refund, free game tickets, or event promotions.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study contributes to understanding athlete celebrity scandals based on a sport fan's perspective. However, this study has several limitations. First, samples were limited to MLB fans in Midwest areas of the United States. In other words, fans in other sports in different areas were not considered in this study. This means the findings of the study cannot be generalizable. In this sense, future study will consider sport fans in diverse sports leagues, such as National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL) or Major League Soccer (MLS) to ensure generalizability.

Second, this study did not consider a specific scandal situation. Sport fans' attitudes toward the athlete celebrity after the scandal can be different according to whether it is on-field scandal or off-field scandal, and unethical behavior or illegal behavior. In particular, sport fans' generosity for athlete celebrity scandals might vary depending on how seriously and frequently it occurs. In this sense, future research will focus on examining the influence of specific type of athlete celebrity scandal with specific scandal situations on sport fans' attitudes and behaviors.

Third, this study did not consider the effect of confounding variables such as fan loyalty or sport commitment. Sport fans' attitudes toward the athlete celebrity involved in the scandal can be different according to the extent to which the sport fans is loyal fan and the extent to which the sport fan is committed to the sports. In this sense, future study will consider the effect of confounding variables that affect sport fans' attitudes and behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Athlete celebrity scandal has become important theme in the field of sport management. There have been extensive athlete scandal research regarding image repair strategies as an athlete's or a sport organization's perspective. However, it has not been

thoroughly addresses as to how sport fans perceive athlete celebrity scandals and how sport fans assess athlete celebrities' or sport organizations' scandal response via media. In this sense, the purpose of the study was to examine the influence of the athlete celebrity scandal on sport fans' attitudes and negative behavior intentions and how sport fans' react to the athlete celebrity's media response.

Findings of the study showed 1) the negative influence of the athlete celebrity scandals on sport fans' attitudes and behavioral intentions, 2) effectiveness of press conference as a scandal response strategy, and 3) the effect of athlete's high performance on mitigating the negative influence of athlete scandal on sport fan loyalty. This study provides sport marketers and PR managers with practical information regarding how to cope with athlete scandals using effective communication vehicles to protect images and reputation. However, this study has several limitations in terms of sample diversity and research design. Therefore, future study will focus on ensuring internal and external validity.

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