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Effects of Sport Celebrity Transgressions in
the Sport Industry

University of Southern Queensland

Certificate of Thesis

I certify that the ideas, analyses, and conclusions reported in this thesis are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

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Published Works by the Author Relevant to the Thesis

1. Sassenberg, A. (2015). 'Effects of Sport Celebrity Transgressions: An Exploratory Study', *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 78-90.
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Abstract

The importance of the brand image of sport celebrities is a growing research topic in marketing communication and sponsorship programmes. However, there is a dearth of research focus on the impact of different types of sport celebrity transgressions on the sporting celebrity brand image in a sponsorship and sport context. Limited empirical research and scarcity in assessment, or exploration, of the impact of a sport celebrity transgression on the sport celebrity brand image have resulted in a theoretical gap, which this study seeks to address. Although it is well noted in sponsorship theory how the positive sport celebrity brand image enhances the brand image of the associated sponsors, few studies have included the potentially negative brand image transfer associated with different types of sport celebrity transgressions. Even fewer studies investigate the impact of sport celebrity transgressions on the brand image of the celebrity's associated sport.

Because the sport celebrities brand image is in association with the brand image of their associated sponsors and sport, the sport celebrity brand image is the central focus of this research. Since brand image is dependent upon the perceptions held in consumer memory, the perceptions of consumers need to be investigated in this study. In this context, the aim of this dissertation is to investigate the impact of real sport celebrity transgression scenarios on consumer's' perceptions of the sport celebrity brand image. The present research consolidates a range of theory-guided models used by previous researchers, and adds to sponsorship and sport literature by outlining how consumers respond to different types of sport celebrity transgressions. In the context of sponsorship portfolio, the associative network theory, brand image transfer theory, balance theory, identification and social identity theory are considered collectively and integrated into a conceptual model to guide the development of the propositions.

Evidence for this study was gathered through the use of a qualitative research approach, by applying focus groups and social media data collection methods. This study investigated 16 sport celebrity transgression scenarios by analysing 8280 comments of online consumers. Multiple data analysis methods were incorporated, including qualitative content analysis and NVivo analysis. Triangulation has been applied to compare the results obtained from the different methodologies, in order to seek out similarities and to integrate the different sets of results.

Proposition 1 aims to investigate the impact of sport celebrity transgressions on the sport celebrity brand image. Three key findings emerged from this proposition. First, inferences about the sport celebrity brand image, following a sport celebrity transgression are made in accordance with the celebrity's sport related brand attributes (expertise) and personal related brand attributes (role model ability). The findings showed that consumers still valued the expertise of the sport celebrity after the occurrence of sport celebrity transgressions, but questioned the role model ability of the sport celebrity. Second, when the celebrity is involved in a sport celebrity transgression, the transgression is found to have a negative impact on the symbolic brand benefits (admiration) of the consumer with regard to the sport celebrity, and resulted in intense emotive responses. Third, the intense positive, negative and neutral emotive responses towards the sport celebrity brand image, following sport celebrity transgressions, are based on the core values and norms of consumers.

Proposition 2 was developed to investigate whether and how the different characteristics of sport celebrity transgressions impact on consumer's' perceptions. Results provided insight into grouping the different characteristics of sport celebrity transgressions into five new groups, representing different types of sport celebrity transgressions, including: Recreational drug use and Sexting; Spontaneous On-field Transgressions; On-field Brawl; Disrespect towards the Team; and Doping and Sexual Misbehaviour. Results replicate the findings of previous studies where inferences of a brand image are determined based on the culturally legitimacy of the brand, where the morals and values of the brand match-up with the morals and values of a community (Kates 2004). Specifically, Doping and Sexual Misbehaviour were found to be inconsistent with consumer's' expectations of the sport celebrity brand image and the brand image of the associated sponsors and sport. For this reason consumers offered negative emotive responses such as disgust and disappointment. These sport celebrity transgressions were found to impact negatively on the social fit between the brand and the community. The actions of the sport celebrity were not desirable within the socially constructed community of online sport consumers, and these actions seemed to affect the brand's cultural meaning.

Recreational drug use, Spontaneous On-field sport celebrity transgressions and the On-field Brawl, were consistent with consumer's' expectations of the sport celebrity brand image. However, Recreational drug use was found to be inconsistent with consumer's' expectations of the sport brand image, while Spontaneous on-field sport celebrity transgressions and the On-field Brawl were found to be consistent with consumer's' expectations of the sport brand image.

Consumer's' perceptions of the sport celebrity brand image, following a sport celebrity transgression, have important implications in terms of gauging the effectiveness of the sport celebrity brand image in the sport industry. A unique association between the sport celebrity brand image and the brand image of the sponsors and sport are created through the process of association. Using the associative network theory as an explanation of how consumers re-evaluated the sport celebrities brand image and sport brand image, it was conceivable that consumer's' responses can be developed on the basis of the value they attributed to the match-up between the sport celebrity brand image and the sponsor brand image. This study found that when the sport celebrity transgression had the ability to impact on the match-up brand attribute of the sport celebrity brand image with the sponsor brand image, there might be a correspondingly negative impact on the sponsor brand image. Perceptions of the impact of sport celebrity transgressions on the sponsor brand image might have been formed depending on whether and how consumers valued the match-up brand attribute between the sport celebrity brand image and the sponsor brand image. Theoretically, this research adds to current understanding of sport celebrity transgression effects by moving beyond simple pairing of the sport celebrity transgression and sponsors, to consider the relationship between different characteristics of sport celebrity transgression and how they impact on the brand images of the sport celebrity, the sponsors and sport. Practically, this research assists managers in the event of sport celebrity transgressions. The conceptual model developed in this thesis offers useful guidelines in providing output into the management of the sport celebrity brand image, the sponsor brand image and the sport brand image, after the occurrence of sport celebrity transgressions.

Finally, the challenge for sport celebrities, sport managers and brand managers is to acknowledge the importance of aligning the sport celebrity brand image with the interests of consumers in the sport industry. It is important that the sport celebrity brand image matches-up with the value that consumers attribute to the sponsor and sport brand image. Good brand citizenship depends on incorporating the legitimate meaning of the community and aligning themselves with the interests of consumers and thereby become culturally authentic (Kates 2004). Only then can the different sports achieve thier main purpose – to serve the customer through the maintenance of a culturally authentic acceptable sport celebrity brand image and a sport brand image.

Table of Contents

CERTIFICATE OF THESIS	I
CONTACT DETAILS.....	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
ABSTRACT	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	VIII
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XI
LIST OF TABLES.....	XI
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 SPONSORSHIP AS A MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOL: AN OVERVIEW	1
1.2 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH	3
1.3 JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RESEARCH.....	4
1.3.1 <i>Academic contributions</i>	4
1.3.2 <i>Managerial contributions</i>	5
1.4 METHODOLOGY	6
1.4.1 <i>Stage one: Focus groups</i>	6
1.4.2 <i>Stage two: Social media data collection</i>	7
1.5 DELIMITATIONS OF SCOPE AND DEFINITIONS.....	7
1.6 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS.....	8
1.7 CONCLUSION	8
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	9
2.1 INTRODUCTION	9
2.2 SPONSORSHIP	9
2.3 SPONSORSHIP MECHANISMS.....	11
2.3.1 <i>Brand image transfer</i>	11
2.3.2 <i>Balance theory</i>	14
2.3.3 <i>Identification</i>	15
2.3.4 <i>Social identity theory</i>	16
2.4 THE SPORT CELEBRITY BRAND IMAGE FROM A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE.....	17
2.4.1 <i>The brand value concept</i>	18
2.4.2 <i>The brand image concept</i>	19
2.4.3 <i>A specific set of brand associations</i>	20
2.5 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SPORT CELEBRITY TRANSGRESSION (SCT)	26
2.6 TYPE OF SPORT TO WHICH THE CELEBRITY BELONGS.....	28
2.7 REVIEW	30
2.8 NEGATIVE BRAND IMAGE TRANSFER.....	30
2.9 PRELIMINARY CONCEPTUAL MODEL	34
2.10 CONCLUSION	36
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	37
3.1 INTRODUCTION	37
3.2 THE RESEARCH PARADIGM	37
3.3 RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	38
3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN FOR THIS STUDY.....	39
3.5 STAGE 1: FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY.....	39
3.6 FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS	42
3.6.1 <i>Objective 1</i>	42
3.6.2 <i>Objective 2</i>	45
3.7 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS FROM STUDY.....	52

CHAPTER 4	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: STAGE 2	54
4.1	INTRODUCTION	54
4.2	DATA SAMPLING	55
4.3	DATA COLLECTION	56
4.4	DATA ANALYSIS	57
4.5	STEPS IN SOCIAL MEDIA DATA COLLECTION	58
4.5.1	<i>Step 1: Selection of SCT scenarios</i>	59
4.5.2	<i>Step 2: Identification and selection of social media site</i>	60
4.5.3	<i>Step 3: Develop contact summary sheet for capturing data</i>	62
4.5.4	<i>Step 4: Testing the contact summary sheet</i>	63
4.5.5	<i>Step 5: Uploading contact summary sheets on NVivo software</i>	64
4.5.6	<i>Step 6: Summarise the list of contacts made for each scenario</i>	65
4.5.7	<i>Step 7: Data analysis</i>	74
4.5.8	<i>Step 8: Summary of each individual SCT</i>	75
4.6	QUALITY DECISIONS	75
4.7	CONCLUSION	76
CHAPTER 5	RESULTS	77
5.1	DEVELOPMENT OF REVISED CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS	77
5.2	GROUPING THE DIFFERENT SPORT CELEBRITY TRANSGRESSION SCENARIOS	79
5.3	PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF SPORT CELEBRITY TRANSGRESSION SCENARIOS	81
5.3.1	<i>Develop a list of codes and abbreviations</i>	82
5.3.2	<i>Grouping of social media data into themes</i>	83
5.4	GROUPING OF COMMENTS INTO THEMES USED IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA DATA COLLECTION	85
5.4.1	<i>Terms describing brand attributes and benefits</i>	85
5.4.2	<i>Terms describing the type of sport and the effects of SCTs</i>	91
5.4.3	<i>Terms describing the impact of SCTs on the brand image of sponsors</i>	91
5.4.4	<i>Terms describing the impact of SCTs on the brand image of the sport</i>	93
5.5	RESULTS PER RESEARCH PROPOSITION	93
5.5.1	<i>Proposition 1: A Sport Celebrity Transgression (SCT) will cause consumers to reconsider the Sport Celebrity Brand Image from an a priori state</i>	93
5.5.2	<i>Proposition 2: The characteristics of the sport celebrity transgression (SCT) will impact on whether and how the consumer adjusts their perception of the Sport Celebrity Brand Image, following that transgression.</i>	103
5.5.3	<i>Proposition 3: The consumer's' perceptions of the Type of Sport, will moderate the relationship between a Sport Celebrity Transgression (SCT) and the Sport Celebrity Brand Image.</i>	114
5.5.4	<i>Proposition 4: When a Sport Celebrity Transgression (SCT) causes consumers to reconsider the Sport Celebrity Brand Image negatively, there can be a flow-on effect to the: a) perception of Brand Image of the sport celebrity's Associated Sponsors, and b) perception of Brand Image of the sport celebrity's Associated Sport.</i>	123
5.6	CONCLUSION	133

CHAPTER 6	DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS	137
6.1	INTRODUCTION	137
6.2	CONCLUSIONS REGARDING EACH PROPOSITION	139
6.2.1	<i>Proposition 1</i>	140
6.2.2	<i>Proposition 2</i>	146
6.2.3	<i>Proposition 3</i>	152
6.2.4	<i>Proposition 4</i>	152
6.3	CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	155
6.3.1	<i>Sport celebrity’s brand attributes</i>	156
6.3.2	<i>Sport celebrity’s brand benefits</i>	156
6.3.3	<i>Characteristics (off-field and on-field) of a Sport Celebrity Transgression and the impact on the brand image of the associated sponsors and sport.</i>	157
6.3.4	<i>The influence of the consumer’s’ perceptions of the type of sport</i>	158
6.4	IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, METHODOLOGY AND PRACTICE	159
6.4.1	<i>Implications of the results for theory</i>	159
6.4.2	<i>Implications of the results for methodology</i>	162
6.4.3	<i>Implications of the results for practice</i>	163
6.5	LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH	163
6.6	SUMMARY.....	165
REFERENCES		166
APPENDIX A	CODING OF COMMENTS INTO THEMES ACCORDING TO THE CHARACTERISTIC OF THE SCT (OFF-FIELD & ON-FIELD)	184
APPENDIX B	THE CHOSEN SCT SCENARIOS USED IN THE MAIN STUDY	186

List of Figures

Figure 2-1	The brand image process	12
Figure 2-2	The brand image transfer process during sport celebrity sponsorship	13
Figure 2-3	Illustration of an <i>a priori</i> sport celebrity brand image	26
Figure 2-4	A conceptual model on the impact of an SCT on the sport celebrity brand image and the brand image of the associated sponsors and of the sport	35
Figure 3-1	Focus group guide	40
Figure 3-2	Themes identified in the literature study	42
Figure 4-1	Example of a manual contact summary sheet	62
Figure 4-2	Example of contact summary sheet in social media	64
Figure 4-3	List of new emerging themes during the social media data collection	65
Figure 5-1	A conceptual model on the impact of an SCT on the sport celebrity brand image and the brand image of the associated sponsors and of the sport	78
Figure 5-2	Revised model on the impact of a Sport Celebrity Transgression (SCT) on consumer's' perceptions of the sport celebrity's brand image and the brand image of the associated sponsors and sport	136

List of Tables

Table 1-1	Summary of the research programme	6
Table 2-1	Sponsorship spending by category in North America	10
Table 2-2	The role of similarity in the brand image transfer process	14
Table 2-3	Research on celebrity brand attributes in marketing communication	21
Table 2-4	Brand benefits consumer's' value when associating with a sport entity	24
Table 2-5	Transfer of negative images during celebrity sponsorship	32
Table 3-1	Research paradigms	38
Table 3-2	Focus group profiles	39
Table 3-3	Comments organised into sport and non-sport dimensions	44
Table 3-4	Comments organised into symbolic and experiential dimensions	44
Table 3-5	Comments organised into themes of brand attributes, following an SCT	46
Table 3-6	Comments organised into themes of brand benefits, following an SCT	49
Table 3-7	Objectives and research propositions	53
Table 4-1	Steps and dates followed in the social media data collection in 2011	57
Table 4-2	Components of likelihood of most popular brand attributes perceived as positive or negative, following SCTs	58
Table 4-3	Components of likelihood of most popular brand attributes (in percentage) perceived as positive or negative, following off-field and on-field SCTs	58
Table 4-4	Summary of the selection of SCT scenarios	60
Table 4-5	Summary of social media sites used and their number of comments	61
Table 4-6	Summary on Andrew Johns' social media sites used	66
Table 4-7	Summary of Brett Favre's social media sites used	67
Table 4-8	Summary of Matthew Johns' social media sites used	68
Table 4-9	Summary of Michael Phelps' social media sites used	69
Table 4-10	Summary of Tiger Woods' social media sites used	70
Table 4-11	Summary of Adam Blair & Glenn Stewart's social media sites used	71
Table 4-12	Summary of Alberto Contador's social media sites used	72

Table 4-13	Summary of James O’Connor’s social media sites used	72
Table 4-14	Summary of Quade Cooper’s social media sites used	73
Table 4-15	Summary of Serena William’s social media sites used	74
Table 5-1	Research propositions and themes	79
Table 5-2	List of the sport celebrity transgression scenarios investigated	80
Table 5-3	Grouping of SCTs according to the characteristics of transgression	81
Table 5-4	List of codes and abbreviations	82
Table 5-5	Research themes and comments for the first manual scenario	84
Table 5-6	Terms used to describe the brand attributes and the characteristics of SCTs	87
Table 5-7	Terms used to describe the sport related brand attributes	88
Table 5-8	Terms used to describe the personal brand attributes	88
Table 5-9	The brand attributes of the sport celebrities following an SCT	89
Table 5-10	Terms used to describe the brand benefits	90
Table 5-11	Terms used to describe the impact on the type of sport	91
Table 5-12	Terms describing the impact of the SCT on the associated sponsors	92
Table 5-13	Terms describing the impact of the SCT on the associated sport	93
Table 5-14	Transgressions and the sport celebrity brand image	94
Table 5-15	Transgressions and the sport celebrity brand attributes	94
Table 5-16	Comments pertaining to an SCT and the sport related brand attributes	96
Table 5-17	Comments pertaining to an SCT and personal brand attributes	96
Table 5-18	Transgressions and the sport celebrity’s brand benefits	97
Table 5-19	Transgressions and the symbolic brand benefits	98
Table 5-20	Comments pertaining to an SCT and symbolic brand benefits	99
Table 5-21	Transgression and the experiential brand benefits	99
Table 5-22	Comments pertaining to an SCT and experiential benefits	101
Table 5-23	Grouping of SCT scenarios into off-field and on-field characteristics	104
Table 5-24	Comments relating to brand attributes and the characteristics of SCTs	104
Table 5-25	Comments relating to brand attributes and off-field SCTs	105
Table 5-26	Comments relating to brand attributes and on-field SCTs	106
Table 5-27	Comments relating to brand benefits and characteristics of SCTs	107
Table 5-28	Comments relating to brand benefits and off-field SCTs	108
Table 5-29	Comments relating to brand benefits and on-field SCTs	109
Table 5-30	Comments relating to brand attributes, benefits and SCT scenarios	112
Table 5-31	Comments relating to brand attributes, benefits and recreational drug use	112
Table 5-32	Transgressions and the type of sport	115
Table 5-33	Comments relating to SCTs and the National Rugby League	118
Table 5-34	Comments relating to SCTs and recycling	120
Table 5-35	The consumer’s’ perceptions of the type of sport	123
Table 5-36	Comments on the brand image of the associated sponsors and sport	124
Table 5-37	Comments on the sport celebrity brand attributes and benefits and the brand image of the associated sponsors	126
Table 5-38	Comments relating to SCTs and associated sponsors	128
Table 5-39	Comments relating to brand attributes, benefits and the associated sport	130
Table 5-40	Comments relating to SCTs and the associated sport	132
Table 6-1	Results of NVivo Analysis	139