

Helping Sport Management to Protect Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

This study represents the first attempt to investigate how consumers expect sport management to respond to sport celebrity transgressions, while still protecting their corporate social responsibility. Consumer responses were resourced from online forum sites and the investigation noted that consumers expect sport management to respond to sport celebrity transgressions in several ways. Findings indicated that consumers noted specific sport celebrity transgression responses: 1) suspension; 2) apology; 3) fine; and 3) develop educational programmes for sport celebrities. Additionally, consumers indicated that these response strategies should be consistent and uniform through all types of sport.

1. Introduction

A sport celebrity transgression occurs in sport companies. After communicating to the necessary stakeholders, sport management's response should align with the framework of societal norms. Failing to align with the norms and values of society may result in consumers rejecting the corporate brand (Kates, 2004). Corporate social responsibility is the duty of each corporation to protect the interests and values of the community (McWilliams, 2015; Tain & Chuang, 2014). The reputation of a company is regarded as an important asset to its stakeholders (Winkleman, 1999). This study, therefore, assumes that the company valued how the stakeholders perceived its reputation. Protecting company social responsibility is further vital for the sustainable growth and high financial performance of the company (Brammer & Millington, 2008), and it is a key driver for maintaining a positive company reputation (Melo & Garrido-Morgado, 2011). The current study aims to provide more clarity on how sport management should respond in the event of a sport celebrity transgression to ensure the values of the company aligns with the values of society.

2. Management response strategies

A rapidly growing body of literature investigates how companies should respond to a crisis (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2008; Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). The majority of these studies focus on how companies should apply the appropriate communication to ensure less reputational damage. Previous studies highlight accommodative response strategies, such as an apology (Benoit, 1995; Sellnow et al., 1998). However, this type of strategy may have legal consequences, as companies automatically accept responsibility of the transgression when they apologize (Fitzpatrick, 1995). Coombs ((2006) suggests a Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which indicates that crisis response depends on the attributes, or characteristics, of the crisis. These studies suggest response strategies based on the level of crisis responsibility of the company. A critical limitation of these studies are the grouping of crisis scenarios into natural disasters, rumours, workplace violence and product tampering, with no reference to how management should respond when a sport celebrity transgression occurs. Research has developed several crisis response strategies, such as an attack on the accuser, denial, excuse, victimization, and justification (Bradford & Garrett,

1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Ihken, 2002). The outcome of these studies were used as themes in the current study.

3. Methods

The study reported here explores consumer attitudes towards sport celebrity transgression response strategies using data sourced from online forum sites. This study followed a similar research design that investigates individuals' responses to celebrity behaviour (Jones, 2015; Radford & Bloch, 2012). Several sport celebrity transgression scenarios were investigated from 2011 to 2013, through the analysis of consumers' comments on websites. The following sport celebrity transgression scenarios were included in this study: Adam Blair and Glenn Stewart's on-field brawl; Alberto Contador's doping; James O'Connor's disrespect towards his team; John Hopoate's on-field foul play; Matthew Johns's sexual misbehaviour; Mike Tyson's ear biting incident; Quade Cooper's on-field foul play; and Serena Williams's on-court outburst. Appendix A provides a summary of the sport celebrity transgression investigated in this study. To ensure consistency, a code-table was used for the thematic analysis of the data (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). To ensure validity, the code-table and code process was presented to a group of scholars and marketing specialists at a major university in Queensland, Australia. The code-table consisted of comments that were grouped into themes using a theory-based deductive thematic approach, as well as a data-based inductive thematic approach (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). Deductive coding offered the 'apology' theme and inductive coding resulted in themes that include: 'suspension', 'fine' and 'educational programmes'.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis showed commenters expect sport management to take some accountability for sport celebrity transgressions to ensure the value of the sport athletes align with values of society. One such a comment shows:

All clubs in AFL (Australian Football League) and NRL (National Rugby League) need to take some accountability if they give these players that are winners such a long leash this is what happens, at some point with Cousins and others the animals have taken over the zoo. And clubs both in AFL and rugby league and union need to ensure the players are setting examples in the community, and are prepared for life after being a professional athlete. The more scandal prone an athlete is in when playing with a club, the less likely there will be money after their retired because businesses now what the public thinks of the scandals.

Findings indicated that consumers noted specific sport celebrity transgression response strategies, including: suspension, apology, fine and educational programmes. The first type of sport celebrity transgression response strategy indicated sport management should suspend or ban the sport celebrity from the sport/game. The on-field brawl between *Adam Blair and Glenn Stewart* resulted in a consumer to note as follows:

Getting punched in the head like this can actually kill people. It has in the past. Then what? Gallop got it right. The game is tough enough. The ex-players saying it is all in the spirit of the game are simply thugs. Fine and suspend the players hard. SET A STANCE.

A consumer also showed *Serena Williams* should be suspended:

She should be suspended not even apologizes at the moment after shamelessly the answer is I DONT REMEMBER what a low set of values is not an example for any sport violent women nothing to do with intensity with been committed 100 %.

When *Alberto Contador* was involved in a doping incident a consumer noted:

If Alberto Contador were a close personal friend, my friendly advice to him would be to retire from the professional cycling arena, permanently.

Also, the *John Hopoate* on-field foul play incident showed consumers felt the sport celebrity should be suspended for life:

Firstly he sticks his finger up someone's ... and now sends someone to hospital.

The league should just ban him for good.

During *Quade Cooper's* on-field foul play against Richie McCaw, consumers indicated he should be suspended for one game:

He seems lucky to get away without any punishment, I would've probably banned him for the first WC game to send a message not to do that nonsense anymore. He'd be better off learning to tackle rather than doing this crap.

A variation on suspension is where consumers indicated the sport celebrities should be suspended for one year. After the on-field brawl between *Blair and Stewart*, a consumer indicated:

This kind of stuff is not good. It makes those players should have the book thrown at them that is not what I want my son to think is acceptable on the field and the punishment is a disgrace hang your head in shame David Gallop man up and ban for 1 year minimum that is the only fitting punishment for pub brawlers

Another comment from a consumer showed *Alberto Contador* should be banned for more than one year because of the doping incident:

The UCI's decision will likely see the Spanish federation review the case and possibly issue Contador a ban of up to one year. Why only one year? My recommendation would be a 10 year ban.

A second type of sport celebrity transgression response strategy indicated the celebrity should apologize. During *Blair and Stewart's* on-field brawl, a consumer indicated that when the sport celebrity apologizes the entire incident should be forgotten. For example:

Both players have come forward and apologised and no one was hurt. COMPLETE OVERREACTION and also if my team has to play any of these teams and win it will be an anti-climax knowing that we didn't beat the best team fielded.

In contrast, another consumer showed *James O'Conner's* apology is not enough.

I applaud the administrations attitude on this. These young guys have too much money available to them and too much time on their hands. In my view, rugby is the ultimate team game and when one reaches the pinnacle of their careers in this sport, they become role models. After a few years, being highly paid and *enjoying* 'their work', they are or should be set up for life. Ignoring what the code has given them, ignoring the obvious discipline required must have consequences. It is not enough to have a simple apology and expect it to go away.

Supporting the above comment, the following response shows an apology from *Matthew Johns* is not enough:

This whole situation is appalling. I'm not sure what I find more disturbing the idea that someone I was a fan of was capable of such predatory and discussing behavior, or the way the league media is trying to brush it aside with that pathetic apology and "...well said, now let's get on with the show"!

A third type of sport celebrity transgression response strategy showed that sport management should fine the celebrity. The following two comments serve as examples:

I want to see the best footballers represent my country, they are not boys they are men, don't sack them from the team fine them, say, \$100,000 an incident!!! (James O'Connor scenario)

Do the right thing. Send a message to the young tennis players coming up that criminal behavior on the court (Serene Williams scenario).

A fourth type of sport celebrity transgression response strategy showed sport management should provide guidance to celebrities and develop specific educational programmes for sport

celebrities. For example, in the on-field brawl between *Blair and Stewart* one commenter indicated:

He is young, and I don't think he compromises his team mates like Giteau did on or off the field, I think the demands of a pro rugby player is overwhelmingI believe he's suffered enough, no need for any suspension. These young fellas need guidance that is all.

Consumers indicated they expect the trainer to provide overall support to sport celebrities; for example, in the *John Hopoate's* incident a consumer noted:

The focus of Hopos training is the trainer. His trainer makes himself the centre of attention. Making someone become conditioned to pain is no way to train a fighter. Pain is part of the deal. The trainer should be helping him to become complete.

One consumer linked these sport celebrity transgressions with the values of society, by suggesting more educational programmes in the *Matthew Johns* scenario:

Respect and proper conduct in youth and society in general is declining and I believe this is due to widening of boundaries and relaxed laws and standards. We need to get tougher on laws...especially with proper education programs!

Another commenter supports this statement, commenting on how sport celebrities can play an important role in preventing sexual violence in society:

Realizing that this is not an AFL or NRL issue, but societal change is needed. Maybe this is an opportunity where our Footy Codes can unite and for once truly raise awareness of the problem of violence in our society.

The following comment showed that consumers expect sport management to provide more training to athletes:

How about if they step off the violence cycle? NRL people if you're reading this post how about Holistic approach to training players. How about trimming players wages and redirecting that money to employ psychologists, therapists, counsellors, elders (whoever and whatever it takes) to devise and develop programs to educate these young men?"

Additionally, consumers indicated two characteristics of sport celebrity transgression response strategies. Consumers noted that these strategies should be consistent and uniform. For example:

I am a Manly fan, and don't mind a bit of biff, but agree this incident didn't look good and the players involved need to be dealt with appropriately. My concern is that in recent years the NRL and judiciary has been very inconsistent and indeed this has been one of the main criticisms. Witness plenty of biff being tolerated in SOO and rarely any send off or citing, Dave Taylor getting 5 weeks while Uate gets off completely and Carney up until recently still playing despite repeated incidents while other players from a number of clubs cop suspensions and fines. I have no issue with the NRL taking action (against an on-field brawl) provided it is measured and consistent.

Another commenter showed sport celebrity transgression response strategies should be uniform across all types of sports. For example:

In this case, I ask where and why there is not a set of agreed upon rules by all of the organizations so that we know what to do in *Contador's* case. We have at least 3 different entities that will pass judgment upon Contador irrespective of the other entities. What will Spain do? What will WADA do? It's ridiculous.

One commenter noted some preventative actions, such as weekly drug testing. For example:

Any sportsperson who has influence on kids should be on weekly drugs tests. Keeping the sports clean doesn't matter. What does matter is the impression given to kids.

Discussion

Based on the results, sport management should take accountability to protect the interests and values of the community by responding to sport celebrity transgressions. Specific sport celebrity transgression responses were highlighted in this study: sport management should: 1) suspend or ban the sport celebrity from the sport/game; 2) provide an apology; 3) fine the sport celebrity; and, 4) educate and support sport celebrities. These sport celebrity transgression response strategies may assist in protecting company social responsibility, and ensure a positive company reputation and high financial performance. Additional findings showed that consumers expect sport management to enforce consistent and uniform sport celebrity transgression responses across all types of sport and incidents. This will further ensure that sport companies fulfil their duty to protect the interests and values of the community. The fact that that these response strategies are not aligned with a specific situation or type of sport celebrity transgression remains one of the significant limitations of this study. Coombs (2006) argues that a response strategy depends on the situation or type of transgression. Future studies that match the situation of the transgression with the specific response strategy may provide a deeper understanding into this issue. It may further be interesting to test additional types of transgressions. These findings were further tested in a quantitative survey.

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