The Effect of Crisis Response Appropriateness on the Behavioral Intentions of Major League Baseball Fans
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In recent decades, a number of serious sports-related organizational crises and scandals have attracted worldwide attention, one of the most recent being the case of the sign-stealing scandal in Major League Baseball (MLB). During a crisis, organizations are often faced with decisions regarding how and what to communicate to their stakeholders (Laufer, 2015). Organizational crisis responses can affect not only the outcome of the crisis, but also its impact on the organization’s key stakeholders and the public’s perception of the crisis (Coombs, 2012).

Although the effects of a crisis on relational outcomes are of great importance, there is limited interest in the question of how organizations’ responses to crises, especially crisis communications, affect stakeholders’ behavioral intentions (Kahn et al., 2013). To fill this gap, this study aims to empirically test the relationships among the appropriateness of a crisis response, sport consumers’ attitudes, and their behavioral intentions (i.e., acts of avoidance and revenge). Specifically, we use the commitment-trust-theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and link the appropriateness of a crisis response to behavioral intentions, because trust can be said to play a key role in customer–organization relationships (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991) and consumer markets (Kumar, 1996).

Because a crisis response provides individuals with information on an organization’s causal role in a crisis, and its regrets and efforts to mitigate the wrongdoing (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), and because individuals’ behaviors can be influenced by the information they receive during a crisis (Bakker et al., 2018), we can hypothesize that the more appropriate a crisis response is, the more it mitigates the negative behavioral intentions of fans, in terms of avoidance and revenge intentions. Furthermore, fans’ trust in the organization expected to mediate these relationships, according to the commitment-trust-theory.

We developed an online survey questionnaire and collected data from 367 respondents who reported knowing “a lot” about the MLB sign-stealing scandal and about how Houston Astros responded to the sign-stealing scandal. Given the acceptable fit exhibited by the full measurement model, the hypothesized model also indicated a reasonable model fit ($X^2 = 224.18$, df = 71, $p < .001$, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .07). The direct paths from the appropriateness of a crisis response to avoidance and revenge intentions were insignificant at the alpha level of .05. In terms of indirect effects, trust fully mediated the relationship between the perceived appropriateness of the crisis response and both revenge and avoidance intentions.

The results indicated that perception of an appropriate crisis response by a sports team is a pivotal factor for enhancing fans’ trust, which then decreases their negative behavioral intentions. Our findings theoretically provide empirical evidence that appropriate crisis responses help to build long-lasting and sustainable quality relationships with sports consumers. From a practical standpoint, such an examination is beneficial to the development of relationship marketing strategies in response to crises or scandals.