Fans’ Forgiveness Intentions Toward Underdog and Top-Dog Athletes in Response to Transgression Type

Inae Oh, Seoul National University
Deokkyung Ock, Seoul National University
Tae Hoon Lee, Seoul National University
Choong Hoon Lim (Advisor), Seoul National University

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It is well accepted that transgressions committed by athletes have adverse effects on both the athlete and affiliated team, such as decreased ticket sales, attitudes toward sponsoring brands, and reputation (Fink, Cunningham, & Kensicki, 2004). Although past studies have investigated consumer responses to transgressions committed by sports “stars,” little is known about responses to transgressions caused by the average athlete. Thus, based on Underdog Effect Theory (UET), this study aims to investigate the interactive effects of athlete status and transgression type on consumers’ forgiveness intentions and perceived anger.

The extant sport management literature has shown that the type of transgression committed by a sports star influences people’s responses. On-field transgressions (e.g., doping) are perceived to violate the integrity of the sport and are perceived as more serious than off-field transgressions (e.g., personal misdemeanors) (Kwak, Lee, Chan-Olmsted, 2018). However, in the case of the average athlete (i.e., not a sports “star”), we contend that on-field transgressions may be more readily forgivable. UET suggests that people tend to support underdogs and view them more positively than top-dogs (Kim et al., 2008). Self-Consistency Theory (basis for UET; Li & Zhao, 2018) states that consumers are more understanding of the underdog brand because they identify with the hardships that the underdog brand must overcome (Einwiller et al., 2006). Thus, we theorize that for sports stars, people identify with the success of the athlete, but for an underdog, people identify with the hardships and frustration the athlete must have faced.

In the context of the current study, we posit that consumers are likely to be more understanding of the underdog athlete when (s)he has committed an on-field transgression (i.e., intentional doping) than when a top-dog athlete commits the same transgression. However, in the off-field transgression condition (i.e., assault), consumers will be equally unforgiving of both the underdog and top-dog athletes. In addition, based on previous research stating that consumers feel anger when they encounter an athlete’s transgression (Sato, Ko, & Kellison, 2018), we posit that perceived anger will mediate the relationship between transgression type and forgiveness intentions. Thus, our research hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Consumers will display greater forgiveness intentions toward the underdog athlete than the top-dog athlete in the on-field (i.e., intentional doping) transgression condition.

H2: Forgiveness intentions toward the underdog athlete and top-dog athlete will be similar in the off-field (i.e., assault) transgression condition.

H3: Perceived anger will mediate the moderating effect of transgression type on forgiveness intention.

This study will follow a 2 (Transgression Type: on-field vs. off-field) ´ 2 (Athlete Status: Underdog vs. Top-dog) between-subjects experimental design (n = 400). Athlete status and transgression type will be manipulated by creating fictional biographies (underdog vs. top-dog) and news articles (on-field vs. off-field transgression). Participants will be randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Questionnaire items will include measures for (1) forgiveness intentions, (2) perceived anger, and (3) identification with the athlete. ANOVA and PROCESS macro will be used for data analysis. Detailed results and implications will be discussed.