

How do consumers evaluate sponsorship in the aftermath of sport celebrity scandals? Uncovering evidence on social media data mining.

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of sport scandals on consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations to provide a typology of sport celebrity scandals.

Design/methodology/approach: The study conducted four focus groups that were followed by social media data mining. A total of 8289 consumer comments were collected from 147 websites, and a total of 224 comments were analyzed in terms of themes and frequency.

Findings: The research found the impact of sport scandals on consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations depended on whether the scandal was gender related scandal, recreational drug use, gender violence, unplanned and planned on-field scandals. Gender violence and planned on-field scandals can have an overwhelmingly negative impact on sponsorship evaluations, while unplanned on-field scandals may result in positive effects. Consumer empathy may influence the impact of recreational drug use, and the gender of the sport celebrity can influence the impact of unplanned on-field scandals.

Originality/value: This study contributes to sponsorship theory by indicating the type of scandal affects consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations. Two additional factors may impact these influences: consumer empathy and the gender of the sport celebrity.

Keywords: Sport celebrity, scandals, brand image, expertise, sponsorship, role models, gender violence, on-field, off-field, recreational drug use, empathy and gender.

1. Introduction

Sport scandals are intensely connected with shaping community norms and values (Wagner and Storm, 2022). This is especially important to the associated sponsors as the compliance with community norms and values is of significance (Ludwig and Oelrichs, 2020). Sport athletes are often referred to as celebrities due to their stardom, fame, and effect on young fans. They are expected to represent themselves, their team, their sponsors, and their fans (Meng and Pan, 2013). Therefore, this study refers to professional athletes as sport celebrities. The occurrence of sport scandals has become a relevant phenomenon due to increased media attention and availability of digital communication (Sato *et al.*, 2023; Storm and Wagner, 2015).

The increased focus of scholarly work on this phenomenon offered valuable contributions, but fail to show the impact on consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations. Studies rather focused on the impact of types of sport scandals on endorsed products and brands (Hugh and Shank, 2005; Till and Shimp, 1998); management and sponsor responses to sport scandals (Kelly *et al.*, 2018; Westberg *et al.*, 2008); consumer attitudes toward sport stars and teams (Sato *et al.*, 2023; Yoon and Shin, 2017); and consumer behaviours such as purchase intentions and viewing consumptions (Abeza *et al.*, 2020; Lohneiss and Hill, 2014). Due to the recorded effects of sport scandals in research, scholars urged the need for further research on this phenomenon (Ludwig and Oelrichs, 2020; Burroughs and Voghan, 2015; Storm and Wagner, 2015). These studies contributed to our understanding of sport scandals but fail to investigate the perspectives of consumers.

Consumer perceptions may be important due to consumer involvement and social identity levels (Sato *et al.* 2015), as social identity levels were found to differentiate outcomes among consumers (Chien *et al.*, 2016). Studies investigating reasons for maintaining support for the sport celebrities involved in sport scandals, found that some people maintain their

support because they want to protect and restore their threatened self-worth (Akiko *et al.*, 2023).

The knowledge on the effect of sport scandals on consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations is important from at least two perspectives. First, research into various types of scandals and the factors that may shape outcomes may contribute to the analytical insight of the discipline. Second, a study indicated that sport scandals affected community values (Hondrich, 2002; Rowe, 2019). Due to the consolidation of norms and values, and the deep link between sport scandals and the process of norms and value formation, this research may contribute to this formation process. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the effects of sport scandals on consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations to provide a typology of sport celebrity scandals that may guide sponsor management in response tactics.

2. Literature review

This study suggests that sponsors should make use of techniques that formulate an understanding of how sponsorship works when sport scandals occur.

Sponsorship evaluations

With global sponsorship spending surpassing \$66 billion in 2022, more emphasis is being placed on research to provide a deeper understanding of the evaluations from sponsorship investments (Gough, 2024). Indeed, scholars urged further research into the deeper understanding of the value generated by sponsorship investment and to measure sponsorship performance (Meenaghan, 2001). Evaluation is previously perceived as one of the most difficult elements in the sponsorship process due to a variety of objectives pursued by sponsoring organisations (Crompton, 2004). This may explain the lack of research in this field and the limited sponsor measurements in the industry (Meenaghan, 2001). Most sponsorship evaluations were conducted in a more informal occasional manner (Berrett and Slack, 1995).

A large body of knowledge focused on sponsorship evaluations in sport sponsoring events (Crompton, 2004; O'Reilly and Maddil, 2012). Sponsorship evaluations were determined by assessing the relationship between the announcement of sponsorships and the sponsoring firms' stock prices (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005), and analyzing brand-equity-building capabilities of sponsorship events (Cornwell, 2007). This specific lack of understanding and design of sponsor evaluations led to the increasing pressure of sponsors on sponsees to evaluate their sponsorships (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2007).

A vital mechanism of sponsorship is the process of brand image transfer where the brand image of the spot celebrity transfer meaning to the associated sponsors (Meenaghan, 2001). The integration of brand image transfer components allowed Meenaghan (2001) to explain these effects on consumers and highlights the importance of sponsorship evaluations. Sponsorship evaluations based on image enhancement is best measured by the strength of the association that shows the extent to which the sponsoring brand has borrowed the event brand (Crompton, 2004). Based on the brand image transfer process during sponsorship (McCracken, 1989) the 'damaged' image of the sponsee may transfer to the image of the sponsor, borrowing the 'damaged' brand, and devalue the sponsorship. It is thus possible that the meaning of the sponsee, following a sport scandal may transfer to the sponsors and ultimately effects sponsorship evaluations.

Sport celebrity scandals

Scandals have been defined as a violation of the implicit or explicit rules that guide relationship performance and evaluation (Aaker *et al.*, 2004). This definition suggested that consumers' perceptions of scandals vary depending on consumer core values and norms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995). A study done by Kates (2004) investigates the core values of consumers and the dynamics of brand legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to the brand's ability to fit in with the community's shared norms (Suchman, 1995). Studies showed legitimacy as an important component of consumer values and defined legitimacy as a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Consumers may thus require a certain level of desirability, properness and appropriateness that will guide sponsorship evaluations. Sport celebrities are frequently used to enhance and promote sponsor brands, products and experiences.

When sport sponsees are involved in sport scandals perceptions may vary based on consumer core values and norms and how they perceive the scandal. Research indicated sport scandals can lead to negative and positive emotions. The scandal may evoke negative emotions in the minds of consumers, that plays a critical role in the evaluation of the perpetrator (Lee *et al.*, 2008). Positive responses to sport celebrities involved in sport scandals may be due to the consumer's willingness to forgive in terms of out- and in-game situations (Lee and Bang, 2023). Consumers in sport are known to respond in a more emotional manner due to a high level of identification with sport celebrities. Allegiance is the result of intense consumer emotional reaction, higher level of knowledge and greater symbolic value with the sport team (Funk and James, 2006). A study found various responses to scandals that reflected social identity, and indicated sponsors must continue with the sponsorship than to terminate the sponsorship following a sport scandal (Chien *et al.*, 2016).

The same scandal can thus be evaluated differently, depending on the consumer reasoning that related to the type of sport scandal. Scandals in sport were grouped in the off-field and on-field nature of the scandal (Kim *et al.*, 2020). Previous studies focusing on typologies of sport scandals focused on the quantitative analysis of daily newspapers explained types of scandals in terms of paradoxical forms (Ludwig and Oelrichs, 2020), and a conceptual study constructed two ideal types of scandals – bureaucratic fallacy and charismatic failure (Wagner and Storm, 2022), but failed to analyze consumer perceptions of the type of scandal and sponsorship evaluations.

Type of scandal and consumer perceptions of the associated sponsors and sport

So far, few studies have focused on the effects of the type of scandal on consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations. Studies rather focused on the impact of types of sport scandals on endorsed products and brand (Hugh and Shank, 2005; Till and Shimp, 1998); management and sponsor responses to sport scandals (Kelly *et al.*, 2018; Westberg *et al.*, 2008); consumer attitudes toward sport stars and teams (Sato *et al.*, 2023; Yoon and Shin, 2017); and consumer behaviours such as purchase intentions and viewing consumptions (Abeza *et al.*, 2020; Lohneiss and Hill, 2014).

Scholars found an associative link between celebrities and endorsed products, following sport scandals (Till and Shimp, 1998). This study showed that consumer negative information about a sport celebrity resulted in a negative consumer attitude only when the study applied to a fictitious celebrity. When a realistic sport celebrity was used there was no decline in attitude towards the endorsed brand (Till and Shimp, 1998). The severity of the sport scandal

is impacted by gender and performance influences (Hughes and Shank, 2005). A study found women to be less scandalous compared to men and the sport celebrity's performance seemed to affect the severity of sport scandals (Hughes and Shank, 2005). This finding led the current study to include sport scandals that represent both genders.

Research on the effects of the type of scandals focused on management and sponsor responses. On-field sport scandals were perceived by sport managers as more controllable and sponsors found sport scandals that occurred during the game more acceptable (Westberg *et al.*, 2008). While off-field scandals were found to be more difficult to manage, on-field scandals were more acceptable to sponsors (Kelly *et al.*, 2018, Hill, 2010, Westberg *et al.*, 2008).

A few studies analysed sport scandals impact on consumer attitudes on sport stars and teams. Yoon and Shin (2017) test empirically the impact of two types of negative information (immorality and incompetence) on consumers' perceptions. Negative publicity about the sports star's functional issues were found to negatively affect consumer attitude toward sports stars (Yoon and Shin, 2017). Sato *et al.* (2023) found performance related scandals resulted in consumers to express more negative attitudes toward the sport celebrity than performance un-related scandals by generating more negative eWOM (Sato *et al.*, 2023). Ingroup fan attitudes toward the sport team became less favourable toward all stakeholders following scandal, especially when it was described as repeat behaviour (Kelly *et al.*, 2018). Limited studies showed the impact of the type of scandal on sponsorship evaluations.

Studies further investigated effects of the type of scandal on consumer behaviours, such as purchase intentions and viewing consumption. Research shows that Tiger Woods' extramarital affair depressed the sponsor product image, but increased purchase intentions (Lohneiss and Hill, 2014). These findings were echoed in a study indicating on-field and off-field sport scandals had no negative effects on the associated sport team consumption patterns (Hamilton, 2016). Abeza *et al.* (2020) investigated the effects of different types of scandals on sport consumption behaviours and found that different scandal types resulted in various consumer viewing intentions. The most severe scandal types were sexual assault, illicit substance use, doping and organized match fixing (Abeza *et al.*, 2020). These studies contributed to the body of knowledge on sport sponsorship but it is unclear how the type of scandal impact on consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations. The studies contribute to the body of knowledge on sport sponsorship but lacks investigation into consumer perceptions of the impact of the sport scandal type on sponsorship evaluations.

Despite what seems to be daily reports in the media about scandals involving sport celebrities, assessment of the impact of knowing about such scandals on sport consumers' remains limited (Prior *et al.*, 2013). Notwithstanding the frequent controversies in sport, little research has been conducted to understand sport consumers perceptions of the effects of the type of sport scandal on sponsorship evaluations. Drawing from balance theory, and the growing economic and political significance of sport (Storm and Wagner, 2015) this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: How do off-field sport celebrity scandals effect consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations?

RQ2: How do on-field sport celebrity scandals effect consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations?

Theoretical underpinning

Balance theory posits that consumers perceive elements in their environment as appearing in groups of three, in a triangular balanced relationship among the three elements (Crimmins and Horn, 1996). In such case, the consumer seeks to balance relationships by adjusting the evaluation of the celebrity towards the sponsor and the sport and serves as an incentive to develop a positive attitude towards the associated sponsor (Pracejus *et al.*, 2003; Rifon *et al.*, 2004). Thus, according to the balance theory, when sport scandals occurred, and consumers' perceptions change negatively towards the sport celebrity brand image, consumers may seek balance by re-examining their pre-existing attitude towards the associated sponsors and sport in a negative direction, to strive for consistency in their thoughts. The study draws on balance theory as an overarching framework to argue that consumer perceptions of the impact of the scandal on the associated sponsorship and sport, are largely influenced by the type of sport celebrity scandal.

3. Methods

Data collection study was conducted in two stages: stage 1 consisted of focus groups and stage 2 social media data mining.

Focus group stage

Four focus groups were chosen as this approach is consistent with sport research (Hughes and Shank, 2005; Westberg *et al.*, 2008). and it was important that the focus groups provided information about the dynamics of opinions in the context of the interaction that occurred between participants (Morgan, 1988). Convenience sampling was applied and is regarded as acceptable when additional follow-up research is conducted (Hagtveltdt and Patrick, 2008). The sample was chosen based on individuals' demographics, commitment towards sport, and living in Australia. Four focus groups consisting of 6 participants each were conducted (Morgan, 1988; Sim, 1998), according to age (18–24 years, 24–35 years, 36–45 years, 40–60 years) and equal gender distribution (Magnini *et al.*, 2010). Commitment was gauged by whether consumers actively attended sporting events or followed sport on television. Comments were used to develop themes for use in the second stage.

Social media data mining stage

This study conducted social media data mining to investigate real-world data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), related to consumer perceptions of sport scandals (Till and Shimp, 1998). Social media data mining is highly accessible (Smith and Leigh, 1997), and produced faster, convenient, cost-effective opportunities to grasp viewpoints of consumers (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). A study comparing social media data mining with experiential research methods showed that using real-world data has much higher external validity than attempting to simulate the full context of the experimental setting (Mungeam, 2011). Social media data mining comprised of the following five steps: 1) selection of scenarios; 2) population of scenario information in contact summary sheets; 3) categorization of scandals into off-field and on-field types; and 4) the uploading of contact summary sheets to NVivo software.

Step 1: Selection of scenarios

A total of fifteen scenarios were selected for this study and included websites, forums, and youtube videos. The scenarios were searched within the Google Search Engine using the following keywords: “sport celebrity scandal”; “sport scandals”; “athlete scandals”; and “misbehavior in sport”. Scenario selection was based on the inclusion of a highly visible sport celebrity and various types of scandals. To ensure content quality, as a baseline, offensive language, inappropriate and repeated comments were excluded from the study (Agichtein *et al.*, 2008).

A search of sport celebrity scandals was conducted, and Appendix A provides a summary of the scenarios.

Step 2: Population of scenario information in a contact summary sheet

This study applied an online contact summary sheet method to capture the social media data. This online sheet was based on contact summary sheets used in other qualitative studies (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Step 3: Categorization of scandals into off-field and on-field types

A total number of 147 sites and 8279 comments were initially collected in this study. All comments were read and grouped into the following on-field scandal scenarios: Adam Blair, Glenn Stewart on-field brawl, James O'Connor disrespect towards the team, Quade Cooper's on-field foul play, Serena Williams' on-court outburst, and Floyd Landis' use of enhancement drugs. Off-field scandals were represented by the following scenarios: Andrew Johns' recreational drug use, Brett Favre's sexting, Matthew Johns' violence against women, Michael Phelps' marijuana use, Tiger Woods' extramarital affair, Nick D'Arcy's assault charges, and Ben Cousins' recreational drug use. It should be noted that Matthew Johns' violence against women scandal cannot be classified as illegal as he was not charged in relation to accusations of violence against women. Scenarios that did not receive any comments that related to the research questions were discarded, such as Hansie Cronje's match-fixing, Nick D'Arcy's assault, John Hopoate's boxing ring foul play, and Mike Tyson's ear biting incident.

Step 4: Uploading of contact summary sheets to NVivo software

To ensure transparency, the contact summary sheets of each sport celebrity scandal were uploaded to NVivo software to ensure validity of the research program (Gummesson, 2005).

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two stages: 1) thematic analysis, and 2) frequency distribution analysis.

Thematic analysis

Transcribed comments were content analysed in terms of on-field and off-field sport scandals and accompanied positive and negative sub-themes. Data that specifically referred to the associated sponsors and the sport consisted of 223 comments, 26 comments related to sponsors, and 197 comments referred to the associated sport.

Frequency distribution analysis

The data were nominal, therefore the number of observations in each theme was counted, and the proportion of all observations that fell into each theme was calculated (Selvanathan *et al.*, 2014). Overall, commenters expressed more comments relating to the impact on the associated sport (88%) than sponsors (12%).

4. Findings

The findings are now presented according to the research questions.

Off-field sport scandals and sponsorship evaluations.

The following themes were developed for the first research question: gender related scandals, recreational drug use scandals and gender violence.

Gender related scandals.

Gender related scandals, such as sexting and extramarital affairs seem to have a negative effect on sponsorship evaluation. Tiger Woods' scandal elicited the following:

If the sponsors don't drop him, they are just as bad as he is. I too won't be buying anything he endorses now or in the future...we have to stand up for what is right.

Commenters indicated gender related scandals do not fit the image of golf:

I'll support Gillette and Tiger's wife. Golf is a Gentlemen's' sport, something I am sure his dad taught him. He was a role model to young people all over the world.

Additionally, comments showed effects of gender related scandals may be influenced by the ability to win, "these sponsors are short-sighted, within a short period of time, this will all blow over and he will be back winning championships...". A further example showed. "leave the guy alone with his family. I hope when Tiger is back on top he shuns the Gilettes of the world".

Recreational drug use

A small number of comments indicated recreational drug use negative impact on sponsorship evaluations. For example, "it makes me sick to realize the fortune I've paid Telstra over the years has been funding the salaries of these ... people" and, the "Sponsors of the National Rugby League should withdraw their sponsorship immediately." However, the effects of recreational drug use on the sport received more negative comments compared to the sponsors. Negative perceptions of sponsors included "sponsors of the National Rugby League should withdraw their sponsorship immediately." Negative perceptions relating to the sport indicated:

Johns has done a lot of damage to the NRL, he is the most respected player in the NRL. What he has done is a disgrace.

Further negative comments showed:

NRL should have the guts to stand up to this and remove his name from the record books for bringing the game in disrepute.

Overwhelmingly, commenters tried to justify the use of recreational drugs shifting the blame to sport management. Consumer perceptions were influenced by empathy and the sport celebrity's ability to win. Consumers expressed empathy for the sport celebrity involved in recreational drug use, for example, "Most AFL players do drugs it's common knowledge". Commenters rather blames the sport club: "Now the NRL knows their drug policy is weak as well."

Another influencing factor of recreational drug use effects, may be the ability to win:

PLENTY of professional athletes who've done things way worse than take a bong hit, ... He (Michael Phelps) won eight gold medals; his performance is no less amazing just because he smokes pot.

The sport celebrity's abilities are emphasized in the following comment:

He (Michael Phelps) stood tall and made America proud at the Beijing Olympics. This is how America treats its heroes, we forget all the hard work Phelps did to achieve his task, we forget the pride we felt with each gold medal, and we forget all of those things and hang a man for smoking glass pipe at a party. That is our shame.

It seems that effects of recreational drug use on sponsorship evaluations may be influenced by empathy and the ability to win.

Gender violence

Gender violence, such as the alleged group rape scenario, received only negative comments. Following gender violence, the image of the associated sport was described as rotten, ethically corrupt, taking advantage of women, and that the players have a God complex:

There is something definitely rotten in rugby league if the pack rape of a 19-year-old girl is considered as a media beat up by the bogans of Queensland.

Another commenter perceived the sport culture as taking advantage of women:

The actions of all the men involved were disgusting. My son looks up to football players and for them to have a culture of just being able to take advantage of a woman and treat her like a piece of meat is disturbing.

It was also suggested that the sport culture harbors players with God complexes:

I grew up knowing footy players and seeing even then (over 20 years ago) the influence that football culture had on players - the players all had 'god complexes.

Commenters perceived gender violence as an indication that the culture of the sport negative and a slap in the face of supporters, for example:

Because this is footy culture this is what these men do for fun!!! (Matthew Johns).

Gender violence was the only off-field scandal that may affect consumer behaviours toward the sport negatively. One commenter indicated that “treat women and the community with respect, I’m sick of so-called heroes getting away with anything, grow up, and loose the egos. Rugby league (NRL) sounds finished...I will be watching football”.

On-field scandals and sponsorship evaluations.

The following themes were developed for the second research question: unplanned on-field scandals and planned on-field scandals.

Unplanned on-field scandals

The types of unplanned on-field scandals included, the on-field brawl, on-field foul play and on-field outburst. In these scenarios consumer perceptions were influenced by the sport celebrity’s gender. Unplanned on-field scandals that occurred spontaneously during the game received a high number of positive comments. Especially, the on-field brawl in the NRL football game, elicited positive perceptions of the sport, for example:

Mate it's a brutal, physical game. It's blokes like you that try to soften the game, which nobody else wants.

Rugby League is a game played by men.

Some commenters described the on-field brawl as the best thing in the sport:

Best thing about league is the fights lol.

What a fantastic sport!!

Commenters indicated the on-field brawl was enjoyable:

It was gleeful fun to watch but how bloody stupid were the individual players, jeopardizing their team's Premiership chances to satisfy a rush of blood?

Honestly!! It's the wrong end of the season to be acting like that, fellas.

When analyzing the other spontaneous on-field scandals, the on-field foul play caused commenters to perceive the sport positively. For example, Quade Cooper’s on-field foul play, the image of Rugby Union was enhanced and described as a great game. The foul play was explained as accelerating the game, giving the game more excitement, and commenters indicated this is the kind of play the sport needs.

Wallabies did a great job, and showed their mettle when scores were level late in the game. Well done boys!

Another comment suggested that the sport needs a bit of craziness:

First, I'm quite fan of Quade Cooper, as he's one of the rare rugby union players who accelerate the game and take some risks, sometimes, it's a bit too show-off but rugby needs a bit of craziness.

However, it seems that effects of unplanned on-field scandals were influenced by gender. For example, in the on-court outburst of Serena Williams a comment showed:

This sets a low precedent for the game of tennis. Should Serena not be penalized for her actions, ..., we may see more shameful behavior like hers.

This on-court incident may also affect consumer behaviours toward the sport, as one commenter indicate, “don't buy Nike or Wilson. We as normal average everyday people need to take a stand toward this horrifying behavior”. It seems that the gender of the sport celebrity may influence the impact of unplanned on-field scandals on sponsorship evaluations.

Planned on-field scandals

Planned on-field scandals, such as the use of enhancement drugs, received a high number of negative comments related to the associated sport. Following incidents of the use of enhancement drugs, cycling was perceived to be a leader with many athletes perceived to be engaged in enhancement drug use, for example:

Give me break. Of course, they all did drugs. This has been going on in cycling since the 1960's. Lance is just like all the other baseball and football players finding a way to win.

Floyd Landis' use of enhancement drugs was perceived to discredit the sport:

He shows no recognition that his own actions – ‘winning’ the Tour by doping, thus discrediting the whole sport, and then telling a variety of stories about himself.

Enhancement drugs seem to have a negative influence on community values.

Just trying to divert attention from himself. Sports just aren't sports to me anymore. This culture of "You won't win if you don't cheat" is seriously undermining our values in this country.

Commenters indicated when sport celebrities use enhancement drugs ‘it is not a sport anymore’, it is more a sport spectacle:

Professional cycling has never been a clean sport, it was a spectacle created by the media to sell newspapers - it's an entertainment.

Based on the above comments, it seems that the use of enhancement drugs may have a negative impact on sponsorship evaluations.

5. Discussion

A typology of sport scandals was constructed based on the outcomes of this study, including gender related scandals, recreational drug use, gender violence, planned and un-planned on-field scandals. This typology may affect consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations.

Unplanned on-field and Gender related scandals

Unplanned on-field scandals, such as the on-field brawl, on-field foul play and on-field outburst had positive effects on sponsorship evaluations. Commenters indicated the on-field brawl was enjoyable and fun, and most of the comments perceived the sport positively following a brawl. A small number of comments indicated negative perceptions by referring directly to the gender of the sport celebrity. It seems that gender may influence the impact of unplanned on-field scandals on sponsorship evaluations. This finding contradicts previous research that found women to be less scandalous compared to men (Hughes and Shank, 2005). The study done by Hughes and Shank (2005) focussed on the perceptions of media

representative, with no investigation into consumer perceptions. It may be possible that the perceptions of media representatives may be different from consumer perceptions, highlighting the importance of this study.

Gender violence

The findings showed gender violence had an overwhelmingly negative effect on sponsorship evaluations. Consumers perceived the image of the associated sport as rotten, ethically corrupt, taking advantage of women, and that the players have God complexes. Commenters referred to the culture of the sport negatively and perceived this scandal as a slap in the face of supporters. The finding correlates with research done by Abeza *et al.* (2020) that showed sexual assault had the most severe impact on viewing consumption. It seems that sport celebrities involved in gender violence lost their legitimacy in the local community. Sponsors and sport management should ensure training programs focused on showing the severe effects of this scandal on the local sport community.

Planned on-field scandals

Planned on-field scandals, such as enhancement drug use seem to have negative effects on sponsorship evaluations. The use of enhancement drugs led commenters to describe the sport as 'it is not a sport anymore it is more a sport spectacle'. This finding is supported by previous research that indicated the celebrity's performance seemed to affect the severity of sport scandals (Hughes and Shank, 2005), and performance related scandals generated more negative eWOM compared to on-performance scandals (Sato *et al.*, 2023). This may lead to improved testing programs to ensure sport scandals refrain from enhancement drug use.

Recreational drug use

Results indicated that recreational drug use have a negative impact on sponsorship evaluations. However, the negative impact may be influenced by consumer empathy and the sport celebrity's ability to win. The findings showed consumers explicitly showed empathy towards the sport celebrity involved in recreational drug use. It seems that consumers understand the high-pressure sport celebrities are facing daily. In the recreational drug use scenarios, management was urged to respond to the sport scandal by ensuring well developed drug policies to build a positive sport culture. In most of the recreational drug use scenarios consumers urged sport management/club "all clubs in AFL and league need to take some accountability if they give their 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." The finding corresponds with research that showed consumer's willingness to forgive (Lee and Bang, 2023) and the high level of identification with sport celebrities (Funk and James, 2006). Sponsorship evaluations may depend on leveraging the sport celebrity brand image in the aftermath of the sport scandals. The leveraging may include the image of the sport celebrity in preventive promotional programs.

To conclude, sport scandals seemed to negatively impact on sponsorship evaluations. Especially, gender violence (e.g., alleged group rape) and planned on-field scandals (e.g., doping) elicited overwhelmingly negative responses from commenters. Gender violence and planned on-field scandals had the ability to change and discredit the culture of the sport and turn consumers away from the sport. In contrast to this outcome, unplanned on-field scandals (e.g., on-field brawl) may contribute to sponsorship evaluations. Sponsors, sport and sport celebrities should form collaborative partnerships to consolidate norms and values to contribute to value formation in local communities.

6. Theoretical contributions of this study

This study extends the existing literature on sponsorship evaluations by suggesting that the types of scandal may influence consumer perceptions of sponsorship evaluations. Gender violence and planned on-field scandals were found to have an overwhelmingly negative effect, while unplanned on-field scandals may contribute to sponsorship evaluations. We also extend the sports marketing and consumer behavior literature by suggesting that consumers' diverse reactions to sport scandals depend on the gender of the sport celebrity and consumer empathy towards sport celebrities. The study draws on balance theory as an overarching framework to argue that consumer perceptions of the sport and sponsor management response to the type of sport scandal may influence consumer perceptions of the sponsors and sport.

7. Managerial contributions

It is evident that commenters still admired the sport celebrity involved in unplanned on-field scandals and gender related scandals, highlighting the importance of including these sport celebrities in response tactics. Sponsors that actively share responsibility with sport management in developing promotional campaigns that involved the alignment with the sport celebrity may send out a message that the sponsors care about the community values and the education of the youth.

The findings of this study contribute to management by showing the importance of role model ability of sport celebrities. Sponsors and sport management should align with the sport celebrity in promotion campaigns, such as the one punch can kill campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of violence in society. This may motivate parents to allow their children into the sport.

8. Limitations and future research

An important limitation of this study is the inability of data mining to identify consumer demographics. Further investigation into the impact of demographic factors of consumers, such as gender and age, may be valuable. In addition, the findings provided a snapshot of the sport celebrity transgressions that occurred at a specific time, which meant that not all types of sport scandals were included in the study. For example, it would be interesting to investigate whether match-fixing, that may be categorised in planned on-field scandals have the same negative impact on the associated sponsors and sport. Further investigation into the role of empathy in consumer assessment of sport scandals may be a viable future study.

Reference list

- Aaker, J., Fournier, S. & Brasel, S. A. (2004), "When Good Brands Do Bad". *The Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31, pp. 1-16.
- Abeza, G., O'Reilly, N., Prior, D., Huybers, T. & Mazanov, J. (2020), "The impact of scandal on sport consumption: do different scandal types have different levels of influence on different consumer segments?" *European Sport Management Quarterly*, Vol. 20, pp. 130-150.
- Agichtein, E., CasTillo, C., Donato, D., Gionis, A. & Mishne, G. (2008), "Finding High-Quality Content in Social Media", *WSDM*, Vol. February 11-12, pp. 183-193.
- Akiko, A., Ko, Y.J., Asada, A. & Connaughton, D. 2023, "The Effects of Self-Brand Connection and Self-Construal on Consumers' Psychological and Behavioral Responses to Athlete Scandals", *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, Vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 62-75.

- Basil, D. Z. & Herr, P. M. (2006), "Attitudinal Balance and Cause-Related Marketing: An Empirical Application of Balance Theory", *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 16, pp. 391-403.
- Berrett, T. & Slack, T. (1995), "Approaches to corporate sponsorship in Canada's national sport organization", *A report submitted to Sport Canada. Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Alberta, Canada.*
- Boisvert, J. (2009), "The impact of parent brand salience and extension innovativeness on reciprocal transfer of image and performance associations", *ACR Asia-Pacific Advances*.
- Burroughs, B. & Vogan, T. (2015), "Media Industries and Sport Scandals: Deadspin, Sports Illustrated, ESPN, and the Manti Te'o Hoax", *International Journal of Sport Communication*. Vol. 8, Issue 1, pp. 87-102.
- Chien, P. M., Kelly, S. J. & Weeks, C. S. (2016), "Sport Scandal and Sponsorship Decisions: Team Identification Matters", *Journal of Sport Management*, Vol. 30, pp. 490-505.
- Crompton, J.L. (2004), "Conceptualization and alternate operationalizations of the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness in sport", *Leisure studies*, 23(3), pp.267-281.
- Cornwell, T. B. (2008), "State of Art and Science in Sponsorship-Linked Marketing", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 37, pp. 41-55.
- Crimmins, J. & Horn, M. (1996), "Sponsorship: from management ego trip to marketing success", *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vo. 36, PP. 11-17.
- Croft, D. (2013), "A whole new ball game", *B & T Magazine*.
- Davies, C. (2013), "Doping in sport : Landis, Contador, Armstrong and the Tour de France", *Bond Law Review*, Vol. 25, pp. 66-88.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. (1994), "Handbook of qualitative research," *Thousand Oaks California, Sage Publications*.
- Dimaggio, P. J. & Powell, W. W. (1983), "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 48, pp. 147-160.
- Dimitrov, R. (2008), "Gender violence, fan activism and public relations in sport: The case of "Footy Fans Against Sexual Assault", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 34, pp. 90-98.
- Funk, D. C. & James, J. D. (2006), "Consumer Loyalty: The Meaning of Attachment in the Development, of Sport Team Allegiance", *Journal of Sport Management*, Vol. 20, pp. 189-217.

- Gough, C. (2024) *Topic: Sports sponsorship, Statista*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/topics/1382/sports-sponsorship/#topicOverview> (Accessed: 16 May 2024).
- Gummesson, E. (2005), "Qualitative research in Marketing: road map for a wilderness of complexity and unpredictability", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 39, pp. 309-27.
- Hamilton, J.M. (2016), *The impact of on-and off-field sports scandals on team identification and consumer behavior intentions*, The Florida State University.
- Henseler, J., Wilson, B. and De Vreede, D. (2009). "Can sponsorships be harmful for events? Investigating the transfer of associations from sponsors to events." *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, Vol. 10, no. 3, pp.47-54.
- Hill, D. (2010), "A critical mass of corruption: why some football leagues have more match-fixing than others", *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, Vol. 11, pp. 221-52.
- Hung, K., Chan, K.W. and Caleb, H.T. (2011). "Assessing celebrity endorsement effects in China: A consumer-celebrity relational approach." *Journal of advertising research*, 51(4), pp.608-623.
- Hondrich, K. O. (2002), "Enthüllung und Entrüstung: Eine Phänomenologie des politischen Skandals", *Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp*
- Hughes, S. & Shank, M. (2005), "Defining Scandal in Sports: Media and Corporate Sponsor Perspectives", *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, Vol. 14, pp. 207-216.
- Kates, S.M. (2004), "The dynamics of brand legitimacy: An interpretive study in the gay men's community", *Journal of consumer research*, 31(2), pp.455-464.
- Kelly, S.J., Ireland, M., Mangan, J. and Williamson, H. (2018), "Can alcohol sponsorship be diluted by health messaging?", *Sport in Society*, Vol. 21, no. 3, pp.434-451.
- Kelly, S. J., Weeks, C. S. & Chien, P. M. (2018), "There goes my hero again: sport scandal frequency and social identity driven response", *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, Vol. 26, pp. 56-70.
- Kim, D., Ko, Y.J., Lee, J.S. and Sato, S., (2020), "The Effect of Attribution on Athlete Scandals: Consumer Responses Toward Scandalized Athletes and Endorsements", *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, Vol.29, no.4, pp. 269-281.
- Kitchen, P.J., Brignell, J., Li, T. and Jones, G.S. (2004), "The emergence of IMC: a theoretical perspective", *Journal of advertising research*, Vol. 44, no. 1, pp.19-30.
- Lee, C., & Bang, H. (2023), "Managing Athlete Brands in Transgressions: Influence of Athlete Performance Level and the Severity of the Transgression on Consumer Perceptions of the Athlete", *Journal of Global Sport Management*, Vol. 8:4, pp. 884-902.

- Lee, S., Scott, D. & Kim, H. (2008), "Celebrity fan involvement and destination perceptions", *Annals Of Tourism Research*, Vol. 35, pp. 809-832.
- Lohneiss, A. & Hill, B. (2014), "The impact of processing athlete transgressions on brand image and purchase intent", *European Sport Management Quarterly*, Vol. 14, pp. 171-193.
- Ludwig, M. & Oelrichs, I. (2020), "More than a marginal phenomenon: Relevance and content-related aspects of mediated sport scandals", *Sport und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 185-209.
- Magnini, V.P., Garcia, C. and Honeycutt Jr, E.D. (2010), "Identifying the attributes of an effective restaurant chain endorser", *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 51(2), pp.238-250.
- Meenaghan, T., (2001), "Sponsorship and advertising: A comparison of consumer perceptions", *Psychology & Marketing*, Vol.18, no. 2, pp.191-215.
- Meng, J. & Pan, P.L. (2013), "Revisiting Image-Restoration Strategies: An Integrated Case Study of Three Athlete Sex Scandals in Sports News", *International Journal of Sport Communication*, Vol. 6, pp. 87-100.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994), *Qualitative data analysis : an expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.
- Morgan, D. L., (1988), *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, California, Sage, Newbury.
- Mungeam, F. (2011), "Commenting on the News: How the Degree of Anonymity Affects Flaming Online," *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*.
- O'Reilly, N., 2007. *Sponsorship evaluation* (Doctoral dissertation, Carleton University).
- O'Reilly, N. and Madill, J. (2012). "The development of a process for evaluating marketing sponsorships", *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences/Revue Canadienne des Sciences de l'Administration*, Vol. 29, no. 1, pp.50-66.
- Park, C.W., Jun, S.Y. and Shocker, A.D. (1996). "Composite branding alliances: An investigation of extension and feedback effects", *Journal of marketing research*, Vol. 33, no. 4, pp.453-466.
- Poria, Y. & Oppewal, H. (2003), "A new medium for data collection: online news discussions", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 15, pp. 232-236.
- Pracejus, J.W., Olsen, G.D. and Brown, N.R. (2003), "On the prevalence and impact of vague quantifiers in the advertising of cause-related marketing" (CRM). *Journal of advertising*, Vol. 32, no. 4, pp.19-28.

- Prior, D.D., O'Reilly, N., Mazanov, J. and Huybers, T. (2013). "The impact of scandal on sport consumption: A conceptual framework for future research", *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 14(1-4), pp.188-211.
- Rifon, N.J., Choi, S.M., Trimble, C.S. and Li, H. (2004). "Congruence effects in sponsorship: The mediating role of sponsor credibility and consumer attributions of sponsor motive", *Journal of advertising*, Vol. 33, no.1, pp.30-42.
- Rowe, D. (2019), "Scandals and Sport", Howard Tumber/Silvio R. Waisbord (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Scandal*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 324.
- Sato, S., Ko, Y.J., Park, C. & Tao, W. (2015), "Athlete reputational crisis and consumer evaluation", *European Sport Management Quarterly*, Vol. 15, Issue 4, pp. 434-453.
- Sato, S., Ko, Y.J., Kim, D. & Lee, J.S. (2023), "The effects of pre-scandal associations of athlete endorsers and scandal types on consumer blame and eWOM", *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 814-33.
- Selvanathan, E. A., Selvanathan, S. & Keller, G. (2014), *Business Statistics, Abridged: Australia and New Zealand*, Australia, Cengage Learning.
- Sim, J. (1998), "Collecting and analysing qualitative data: issues raised by the focus group", *Journal Of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 28, pp. 345-352.
- Smith, M.A. and Leigh, B. (1997). "Virtual subjects: Using the Internet as an alternative source of subjects and research environment", *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers*, Vol. 29, pp.496-505.
- Suchman, M. C. (1995), "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches", *The Academy of Management review*, Vol. 20, pp. 571-610.
- Storm, R. & Wagner, U. (2015), "The Anatomy of the Sports Scandal: An Outline for a Theoretical Contextualization", *International Journal of Sport Communication*. Vol. 8, no.3, pp. 293-312.
- Till, B. D. & Shimp, T. A. (1998), "Endorsers in Advertising: The Case of Negative Celebrity Information", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 27, pp. 67-82.
- Wagner, U., & Storm, R. K. (2022), "Theorizing the form and impact of sport scandals", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol. 57, no. 6, pp. 821-844.
- Wang, S. & Kim, K. J. (2020), "Consumer response to negative celebrity publicity: the effects of moral reasoning strategies and fan identification", *The Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 29, pp. 114-123.
- Westberg, K., Stavros, C. & Wilson, B. (2008), "An examination of the impact of player transgressions on sponsorship b2b relationships", *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, Vol. 9, pp. 125-61.

Yoon, S. W., & Shin, S. (2017), "The role of negative publicity in consumer evaluations of sports stars and their sponsors", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 16, pp. 332–342.

Acknowledgements

The authors want to thank the University of Southern Queensland for their support in the completion of the research. The feedback of Prof. Marie Kavanagh, Prof. Jane Summers and Assoc. Prof. Melissa Johnson are appreciated. The authors further offer appreciation to Dr. Dona Whiley for the editing of the study.

Appendix A

Summary of the transgression scenarios used in the study.

1. **Adam Blair and Glenn Stewart' on-field brawl** were professional Australian Football League (AFL) players of the 2000s. Blair and Stewart were involved in an on-field brawl during the 2011 NRL Quarter Final. Both players were sent off the field following the on-field incident.
2. **Andrew Johns** was a former professional Australian Rugby League (ARL) football player of the 2000s. Johns was previously regarded as one of the top league players in Australia. Johns admitted taking recreational drugs for the past ten years and confessed to the chargers on national television.
3. **Ben Cousins** was a former professional Australian Football League (AFL) player who played during the 2000s. Cousins football career was tarnished by off-field incidents related to recreational drug use and his contract was terminated on several occasions.
4. **Brett Favre** is a former professional American Football quarterback of the 1990s and 2000s, and highly regarded as one of the best quarterback players. Favre was accused of 'sexting' a sideline reporter from the New York Jets.
5. **Floyd Landis** is a former American cyclist with a career during the 2000s, winning the 2006 Tour de France. Landis was stripped of his Tour de France victory and fired from his team after he was caught using enhancement drugs.
6. **James O'Connor** was a professional Australian Rugby Union (ANU) player that failed to attend the official team announcement and photo at Sydney airport.
7. **Matthew Johns** was a professional Australian rugby league football player of the 1990s and 2000s. He was accused of gang raping a woman in 2002 in New Zealand. Johns was clear of all wrongdoing by the New Zealand police. He was not officially charged with this crime. We therefore referred to this sport scandal as alleged.
8. **Michael Phelps** was a professional American swimmer of the 2000s. During 2009, Phelps was caught using marijuana at a private dinner party and banned from swimming for three months. At the time of the scandal, he won 16 Olympic medals.
9. **Nick D'Arcy** was a professional Australian swimmer. In 2008 he was removed from Australia's Olympic team due to a violent assault on another swimmer in a public bar.
10. **Quade Cooper** was a professional Australian Rugby Union fly-half player in the mid-2000s. Cooper was cited for striking the captain of the All-Blacks team with his knee in his face during the second half of the 2011 Tri-Nations game.
11. **Serena Williams** was a professional tennis player, ranked at no. 1 in the world. During the 2009 American Open Williams was involved in on-court outburst.
12. **Tiger Woods' extramarital affair.** Tiger Woods was a professional American golf player of the 2000s. Woods, at the time of the scandal, won 74 official PGA Tour events. During late 2009, Tiger Woods was involved in adultery involving several people. At the time of the scandal Woods was one of the highest-paid athlete.

Source: Created by authors