

THE SAVING GRACE OF BRANDED ATHLETES: REDEMPTION IN THE PRESENCE OF DEVIANT ATHLETE BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

Constructing and cultivating mutually beneficial relationships is a fundamental aspect of brand management. Understanding the formation and maintenance relationship between fans and athletes is of critical importance to professional sport delegates. Professional athletes each have distinct personalities and values that are visible through competitive engagements and manipulated by advertisers through imagery. It is paramount for athletic principals and agents to functionally link core values to personality during athlete branding. Branding athletes increases fan and consumer identification—often athletes who possess greater commercial success and relevance maintain higher rates of fan identification, loyalty, and commitment (manifesting itself as a protective mechanism in the face of deviant behavior) providing the athlete and the supporting sponsor increased commercial protection. The aim of this paper is to describe the conceptual process of commercial athletic redemption and provide examples of successful and unsuccessful athletic brand redemption through case analysis.

Identification and value creation are intrinsic aspects of sport marketing. Sport, product extensions, and athletes seek to maintain their iconic brand maturity by preventing oversaturation and avoiding commercial decline. In the event of personal or career threats through deviant behavior, athletes and their respective entourage seek to avoid decline and brand “death” through social regeneration in the form of public forgiveness and redemption (Hearit, 2009).

The theoretical underpinnings of brand redemption focuses on the utilization of Social Exchange Theory within an athletic context focusing on the re-affirmation of “violated” social values. Lance Armstrong has sustained and garnered commercial success and protection through his various product endorsements, Livestrong brand, fan

identification, and sponsorship becoming synonymous with hope and survival- to the degree that his athletic abilities remain largely irrelevant to the culture at large. The Armstrong brand has withstood numerous doping allegations and personal struggles, while his peers (Pantani, Landis, etc) have unsuccessfully redeemed their personal brand following sport convictions for deviant behavior.

Deviant athlete behavior may include, but is not limited to: performance enhancing substances, recreational drugs, domestic violence, infidelity, sexual proclivities, evading taxation, gambling, sportsmanship, non-injury related “comebacks”, or retirement. The increasing scrutiny facing athletes and their brands parallel crisis’s facing corporations (such as Toyota, ConAgra, BP, Martha Stewart & Omnimedia, etc.). The end goal for these corporations remains extending product life cycle. Similarly, athletes focus upon the extension of commercial brand life. Anna Kournikova and Michael Jordan have both in their own rights redeemed themselves for their deviant behavior (not winning and retirement) and remained relevant, where Marion Jones, Tiger Woods, Tonya Harding, Mike Tyson, and Martina Hingis incorrectly navigated the apology cycle following deviant behavior and slid into brand decline.

Similar to corporations, athlete brands must be able to navigate both alleged and proven deviant behavior through a redemption process. Redemption requires: (1) the athlete admit and express guilt; (2) apologize for (found or alleged) misconduct; (3) absolve themselves and their brand from the threatening deviance; and (4) reestablish and reconfirm the social value(s) that were threatened by their behavior (Hearit, 2009). Public forgiveness is critical for redemption, which is essential in regaining identifiable group membership. This group protection allows athletes who have allegedly engaged in or confirmed of misconduct the opportunity to seek forgiveness—leading to (commercial) group redemption and re-acceptance. The case study of Jennifer Capriati provides an example of navigating the redemption cycle. Redemption and forgiveness require members to identify and reaffirm group and individual value (Molm, Schaefer, & Collett, 2007). It is critical for any member of an athlete’s team (sponsor, employer, spouse, or even fan) to understand the structure of social exchange to promote athlete identification resulting in athlete brand awareness and perceived value.

Unlike economic exchange where rewards can be quantifiable, social exchange is based on an intangible promise from the specific athlete to maintain the “iconic representation” of the underlying fan’s social values. This form of reciprocation validates a consumer’s existence through group identification and trust; establishing social membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Once group membership is established by an athlete, exchange occurs in the form of fan and sponsor loyalty. There is little physical accessibility to athletes thus it is through social exchange and branding that athletes are able to establish consumer value.

The proposed conceptual research implies that athletes who have been successfully branded to represent identifiable and acceptable social values maintain higher commercial value to sponsors. Thus, if the athlete should engage in deviant behavior and successfully follows the redemption cycle, commercial reacceptance may be

attained.

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