Forgetting or Forgiving? A Longitudinal Assessment of Post-Transgression Behaviors on Athlete Trust Restoration

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Introduction

A celebrity athlete’s misconduct damages the athlete’s images and reputation in the public’s mind. Troubled athletes therefore need to find ways to restore their ruined images. For instance, after his illegal dogfighting scandal, Michael Vick has been engaged in various prosocial activities such as raising donations for the youths and educating children to prevent dogfighting (Gonzalez, 2014). Kobe Bryant is known to successfully regain his stature by keeping on winning after his allegation of sexual assault (Dahlberg, 2010). Despite frequent occurrence of athlete transgressions and its contaminating impact on athletes’ images, there is little empirical research dealing with how troubled athletes regain their trust back from the public. Will time be the only factor in repairing ruined reputation? More importantly, does winning on the field or engaging in prosocial behaviors help rebuild trust and promote consumer forgiving? The present study aims to answer these questions by employing a longitudinal approach in an experimental setting. In particular, we examine the impacts of a transgressed athlete’s post-transgression behaviors (i.e., performance improvement, prosocial activities, and control) on changes in athlete trust and forgiveness over a four-week time span. Findings of this study will provide new insights on how troubled athlete’s reputation can be restored over time.

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

Literature has suggested two dimensions of trust (competence- and integrity-based trust; Kim et al., 2004) that are known to play significant roles in rebuilding trust and gaining forgiveness. The competence-based trust (CBT) can be defined as the trustor’s perception that the trustee possesses the technical skills that are required for job (Butler & Cantrell, 1984). Given this definition, competence-based can be regarded as an athlete’s performance on the field. In addition, integrity-based trust (IBT) refers to the trustor’s perception that the trustee is guided by sound philosophies that the trustor finds acceptable (Mayer et al., 1995). This type of trust can be closely related to an athlete’s personal principles. Lastly, previous research has suggested that the forgiveness is a process that requires time (Thompson et al., 2005).

Based on the literature, we predict that an athlete’s performance improvement and prosocial activities after a transgression will have positive impacts on consumers’ trusts and forgiveness (Kim et al., 2004; Xie & Peng, 2009). It can also be expected that performance improvement would result in a greater CBT increase than prosocial efforts, while prosocial activities would result in a greater IBT increase than performance improvement. Lastly, time is expected to have positive impacts on consumer forgiveness (Thompson et al., 2005). Taken together, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1-1. A transgressed athlete’s performance improvement will have positive impacts on consumers’ competence-based and integrity-based trust, and forgiveness.
H1-2. A transgressed athlete’s performance improvement will have a greater impact on consumers’ competence-based trust restoration than other behaviors.
H2-1. A transgressed athlete’s prosocial activities will have positive impacts on consumers’ competence-based and integrity-based trust, and forgiveness.
H2-2. A transgressed athlete’s prosocial activities will have a greater impact on consumers’ integrity-based trust restoration than other behaviors.
H3. Time will have positive impacts on consumers’ competence-based and integrity-based trust, and forgiveness.
Method

A 3 (post-transgression effort: performance improvement vs. prosocial activities vs. control) by 2 (time: Time 1 vs. Time 2) mixed-design (between- and within-subjects) experiment was constructed over a four-week time period. Participants who completed the first phase of study (Time 1) were contacted again in four weeks to complete the second phase of study (Time 2). Undergraduate students (n = 121) from a large Midwestern university participated in the study for a course credit. In the first phase of the study, participants were exposed to a news article briefly describing a male tennis player (Marin Cilic), his doping scandal, and penalties for the doping violation. Respondents were asked to respond to CBT (4 items, α = .87; Kim et al., 2004), IBT (5 items, α = .92; Kim et al., 2004), and forgiveness (2 items, α = .71; Xie & Peng, 2009) scale. Four weeks later, participants who completed the first phase of the study were randomly assigned to one of three post-transgression behavior conditions (performance improvement condition, prosocial activity condition, and neither of the action condition) and responded to the same questionnaires from phase 1. We assessed differences from phase one and phase two (Time 2 – Time 1) on each scale, and conducted paired-samples t-tests to test our hypotheses. Personal involvement with sport (4 items, α = .95; Zaichkowsky, 1985) was measured and included as a covariate in the analysis.

Results and Discussion

Results of paired-samples t-tests revealed that, when exposed to performance improvement information, there were significant increases in CBT (MDifference = .66, SD = .115; p < .01), IBT (MDifference = 1.31, SD = .92; p < .001), and forgiveness (MDifference = .55, SD = .91; p < .001) over time, supporting H1. In regard to the exposure to prosocial activity information, participants’ IBT (MDifference = 2.33, SD = 1.53; p < .001) and forgiveness (MDifference = 1.47, SD = 1.25; p < .001) increased over time, but no significant increase was found in CBT (MDifference = .16, SD = 1.11; p = .36), partially supporting H2. Finally, the effect of time was tested. The results showed that there were no significant increases in CBT (MDifference = -.07, SD = 1.11; p = .72) and forgiveness (MDifference = .23, SD = .77; p = .08) between each time point, but a significant increase was found in IBT (MDifference = .79, SD = 1.02; p < .001), partially supporting H3. Lastly, by creating mean differences of CBT, IBT, and forgiveness between two time points, follow-up contrasts were conducted to compare degrees of increase across conditions. Results revealed that, when controlling personal involvement with sport, participants under the performance improvement condition demonstrated the biggest increase of CBT (MDifference = .66, SD = 1.15) than other conditions (all ps < .05), supporting H1-2. In addition, participants under the prosocial efforts condition showed the biggest increase of IBT (M = 2.33, SD = 1.53) than other conditions (all ps < .001), supporting H2-2. Regarding the forgiveness, participants under the prosocial activity condition demonstrated the largest increase of forgiveness (M = 1.47, SD = 1.25) than other conditions (all ps < .001).

The present study contributes athlete endorsement literature by demonstrating how an athlete can re-obtain consumer trust and forgiveness after a scandal. The results indicate that CBT can be increased only by performance improvement. Moreover, IBT can be increased by performance improvement, prosocial efforts, and time. The results also indicate that forgiveness can be obtained by improving performance level and engaging in prosocial activities. However, results show that time does not make consumers to forgive the wrongdoer. From the crisis management perspective, findings provide important practical implications by highlighting the importance of performance improvement after transgressions which can contribute to restoration of consumer trust in both competence and integrity, as well as generating more forgiveness. In addition, the results from this study suggest that transgressed athletes’ prosocial endeavors can best help the wrongdoers to facilitate forgiving mood from the public. To sum up, the current study empirically demonstrates that transgressed athletes’ post-transgression efforts on performance and prosocial activities are actually beneficial for restoration of consumer trust and obtaining forgiveness.
References


