

The profile of professional athletes and their influence on consumer perceptions and attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

Professional athletes have become a major influence on consumers over the past few decades. Their influence on consumer decisions and purchasing habits has made professional athletics a multi-billion dollar industry. In 1995, a Georgia Institute of Technology study estimated that sport was worth \$93.8 billion of US business, making it the nation's 11th largest industry (Haverson 1997). This data implies that the sports industry is larger than the motion picture, radio/television, and educational services industries combined (Meenaghan & O'Sullivan 1999).

The enormous size and financial opportunity of the sports industry has led companies to hire popular athletes to endorse its products and services to help increase organizational awareness, brand image and customer loyalty. Popular athletes are enticing to marketers because they can assist companies with their marketing efforts by being the focal point in a combination of advertising, promotion, sponsorship, and/or communication campaigns.

Teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and various other professional leagues have also witnessed the financial benefits of being affiliated with a highly popular athlete. Popular athletes can impact revenue through increased ticket sales, concessions, merchandise, as well as revenue generated by media exposure. These athletes have the potential to increase their team's public awareness and fan base on a national and international level (Rofe 2000).

Teams are investing millions of dollars in their athletes because they realize the enormous economic impact an athlete can have on their organizations and also the surrounding metropolitan areas. In 1999, The Partnership for Greater Cincinnati valued Ken Griffey Jr.'s economic impact for the city of Cincinnati at \$40.5 million. Griffey Jr.'s signing with the Reds also helped create over 652 new jobs in his initial year of playing for MLB's Cincinnati Reds (Rofe 2000). The St. Louis Cardinals conducted a similar survey in mid-1997 when they signed Mark McGwire from the Oakland Athletics. According to the St. Louis Regional Commerce and Growth Association (Rofe 2000), McGwire's economic impact on the city of St. Louis was determined at \$50 million (See APPENDIX A: Griffey and McGwire Impact). Similar published reports estimated Michael Jordan's total worldwide economic impact to be \$10 billion. Dean Bonham, president of the Bonham Group, a sports consulting firm, expects Tiger Woods (PGA golfer) to triple Jordan's figure by the time his career is finished due to his age and universal appeal (Rovell 2000).

Organizations utilizing athletes to endorse their product at times may become vulnerable to negative publicity by being affiliated with the athlete. Widely-publicized incidents involving negative publicity (e.g. O.J. Simpson's indictment and later acquittal on murder charges, Mike Tyson's various exploits with the law, John Rocker's racial slurs) have led to embarrassment and injury to the professional affiliations in which the athletes are linked (Till & Shimp 1998). Over the past few years, the public has seen a growing number of professional athletes involved in immoral, unethical, and illegal acts. Although these

accusations are often false or a distortion of the truth, the potential to impact the athlete's image exists and could possibly influence the general public's perception of their professional affiliations (team, sport, and professional associations).

Understanding the effect negative information can have on the consumer is not only theoretically important, but also valuable for marketing managers. Negative customer-based attitude toward the athlete may result in a less favorable reaction to marketing activity associated with the athlete. In this study, the consumer's level of commitment (high vs. low) will be measured to determine how this negative information affects the two different groups of consumers. The profile of the athlete (positive vs. negative) also will be measured to see if their public image affects consumer response. Does negative information about a positive-profile athlete have the same affect on a low-commitment consumer as it does on a highly-committed consumer? What is the consumer's reaction if the athlete in question has a negative-profile and the consumer has a weaker held attitude toward the athlete's sport or sports in general?

The purpose of this study is to address these and similar questions by investigating how consumers, whom have stronger and weaker commitment levels to sports, process negative information concerning positive and negative-profile athletes. Consumer acceptance of the negative information and the amount of spillover the negative information has on the athlete's team, sport, and professional associations will each be measured.

LEVEL OF COMMITMENT

Commitment is defined as the relative strength of an individual's identification and involvement with an entity (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). When receiving negative information concerning a professional athlete, the consumer's level of commitment to the sport, team, and/or athlete affects their response. This commitment is formed by three distinct components: affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment. Affective commitment describes the emotional attachment a consumer feels for the team or sport. Normative commitment describes the feelings of obligation a consumer has to continue to follow a particular team or sport. Finally, continuance commitment develops as consumers recognize that they have accumulated investments that would be lost if they were to cease involvement with the team or sport (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). Each commitment component is present when dealing with consumers of professional athletics. Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler (1993) feel these components influence the level of commitment a consumer may have toward a sport, team, and/or athlete.

In this study, the Sport Commitment Model (Scanlan, Carpenter et al., 1993) will be used to determine a consumer's commitment to a particular sport (See Appendix B: Sport Commitment Model). The term sport commitment is defined as "the desire and resolve to continue to actively consume sports information, apparel, and view sport in general" (Scanlan, Carpenter et al., 1993). The consumption of sport consists of attending and/or viewing an event, seeking

knowledge and information through sport-related mediums, and/or purchasing related merchandise. The Sport Commitment Model was developed to determine the level of sport commitment with respect to a particular program, sport, or sport in general. According to the model, commitment is hypothesized to be a function of sport enjoyment, personal investments, involvement opportunities, involvement alternatives, and social constraints (Scanlan, Carpenter et al., 1993).

In the model, "Sport Enjoyment" is defined as "a positive affective response to the sport experience that reflects generalized feelings such as pleasure, liking, and fun" (Scanlan, Carpenter, et al., 1993). The "Involvement Alternatives" are defined as "the attractiveness of the most preferred alternative(s) to continued participation in the current endeavor" (Scanlan, Carpenter, et al., 1993). This component will measure the degree to which consumers feel other alternatives as more or less desirable in relation to viewing the sport. Having more attractive alternatives is related to lower sport commitment.

The "Personal Investment" component is defined as "personal resources that are put into the sport which cannot be recovered if participation is discontinued" (Scanlan, Carpenter, et al., 1993). These unrecoverable resources involve the consumer's time, effort, and money. The greater the personal investment equates to a greater sport commitment. The "Social Constraints" component is defined as "social expectations or norms which create feelings or obligations to remain in the activity" (Scanlan, Carpenter, et al., 1993). This

construct specifically addresses the sense of social pressure to be involved with the sport. The greater the pressure to be involved with the sport, the greater the level of commitment.

The final measure is "Involvement Opportunities" which is defined as "valued opportunities that are present only through continued involvement" (Scanlan, Carpenter, et al., 1993). This construct focuses on the anticipation of events or experiences resulting from expected future involvement, rather than their current situation.

BRAND EQUITY

The concept of a brand can extend beyond products and services.

Celebrities and organizations also can be viewed as a brand (Keller 1998 p. 16).

In sport, the individual athlete and team are both marketable brands.

Professional athletes are a marketing entity acting as representatives for themselves and their professional affiliations. By establishing a reputation with the public, the professional athlete is essentially developing himself or herself as a brand, which can be marketed and promoted like a product or service (Keller 1998 p.18).

Marketing activities uniquely attributable to the brand define brand equity.

Brand equity is the willingness of a customer to continue to purchase the product in the future. Brand equity relates to the fact that different outcomes result from the marketing of a product or service due to its brand name and/or other brand elements, as compared to the outcomes if that same product or service did not have that brand identification. According to Keller (1998 p. 43) "Brands with equity provide an "ownable, trustworthy, relevant, distinctive promise to consumers" (See APPENDIX C: Benefits of Brand Equity).

For an athlete, brand equity is defined as developing a highly-committed fan base to continually support that athlete by viewing or attending their games and purchasing related merchandise. An example of an athlete with strong brand equity is Tiger Woods. In 1999, CBS scored an average Nielsen rating of 4.1 in the 11 PGA tournaments televised in which Tiger Woods played, which

was 71 percent higher than the seven CBS-televised PGA tournaments in which Woods didn't play (Ostrowski 2000).

Numerous companies have benefited from their affiliation with athletes that have brand equity. Nike benefits from their association with NBA superstar Michael Jordan. His success on the court and global popularity linked Nike to one of the greatest basketball players in history. This association has led to positive increases in consumer perception of product value, performance, expectations, and brand equity toward Nike, Inc. and their products. According to John R. Anderson (1983), associations like this provide a path to which the consumer's evaluation of the celebrity has an opportunity to transfer to the brand. Athletes with brand equity are attractive to organizations due their popularity and fan base. Although this association has numerous positive outcomes, businesses must be careful when selecting an endorser since the athlete's public image transfers to the product (Anderson 1983).

□ **PUBLIC IMAGE**

Public image is defined as "perceptions about an individual as reflected by the consumer's associations with that individual held in memory" (Keller 1993). By establishing a name and reputation within their sport, an athlete is essentially developing a public image (positive or negative). Marketing programs linking strong, favorable, and unique associations to the athlete in the consumer's memory also assist in the development of these public impressions (Keller 1998 p. 51). Athletes with a strong, desirable image potentially benefit from increased

individual exposure and endorsement contracts since they have achieved public approval and developed a loyal fan base (Keller 1998 p. 16).

Another benefit to having a strong positive image and brand equity allows an athlete to weather a crises or downturn in fortunes more successfully than an athlete with an unformed or negative public image (Keller 1998 p. 56). When consumers are presented with negative information about a professional athlete, it is likely that they spontaneously draw inferences relating to other ties associated with the athlete (i.e. past behavior, image of teammates, etc.) (Broniarczyk & Alba 1994). In 1993, Michael Jordan admitted to having gambling debts of more than \$60,000, and it was rumored to actually be more than \$1 million (Olic 1996). These debts allegedly were owed to drug dealers and associates of the Chicago mob. There were also rumors of Jordan, a married man, being a womanizer. However, Jordan's public image and brand equity was so strong, many consumers discounted this negative information and minimal damage was inflicted to his image and the perception of his professional affiliations. Thus, athletes with positive public images, who have strong brand equity, can offset some negative information due to the consumer's current positive attitude toward the athlete. Companies seeking to become involved with athletes must select a candidate with strong brand equity and a positive public image to benefit from the relationship and decrease possible detractors to their organization.

□ **CELEBRITY ENDORSERS AND IMAGE TRANSFER**

To be considered a credible source, consumers first must view the celebrity endorser as possessing expertise to the communication topic and be trusted to give an objective opinion about the subject (Belch & Belch 1994; Ohanian 1990). A credible endorser can serve as an important antecedent in evaluations of new advertisements and brands. Specifically, a credible endorser has shown to have a positive effect on consumers' attitude-toward the ad, as well as attitude-toward-the-brand (Atkin & Block 1983; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; Goldberg & Hartwick 1990; Mitchell & Olsen 1981).

Kahle and Homer (1985) developed the notion that advertising effectiveness is increased when the image of the celebrity converges with the image of the endorsed product or service. Endorsers act as an attention-getting device that potentially shape consumers' interpretations of the ad and product through meaning transfer. In their study, image transfer occurs when the attitude toward one object (the athlete) is transferred to another object (the product) when the two are paired in an advertisement (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995). According to McCracken's (1989) theory of image (meaning) transfer, this meaning is an overall assessment developed by the consumer's interpretation of the celebrity's public image as demonstrated in "television, movies, military, athletics, and other careers" (McCracken 1989).

Theoretically, brand associations can be influenced when a brand becomes linked with a celebrity through an endorsement (Keller 1993). These associations with professional athletes can persuade the consumer to think

positively or negatively about the endorsed advertisement and product based on their current assessment of the athlete (Langemeyer & Shank 1993). The pervasive use of professional athletes as spokespeople in endorsements reflects the widely-held belief that individuals, who are admired and belong to a group to which consumers aspire, can exercise a strong influence on consumer's information processing, attitude formation, and purchase behavior (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989).

Langmeyer and Shank (1993) demonstrated the impact of image transfer with people's perceptions of a celebrity (Madonna) and their perception of a non-profit agency (Mothers Against Drunk Driving - MADD). For subjects who had a positive (negative) image of Madonna, perceptions of MADD became more positive (negative) after MADD was paired with Madonna.

In this study, meaning transfer and image transfer will be termed "spillover" and the level of impact it has on the athlete's affiliations will be measured. Public image, popularity, and consumer attitude will be aggregated to determine the athlete's profile (positive or negative). In this research, profile is defined as the social acceptance level consumers have toward the athlete. The two chosen athletes will be defined as having either a "positive" or "negative" profile, with the positive-profile athlete expected to have a higher level of brand equity.

HYPOTHESES

When receiving information, consumers will either accept or discount the information depending on whether or not it is consistent with their prior belief about the particular subject (the professional athlete) (Ahluwalia 2000). This consumer process is termed biased assimilation and is particularly present with easy to discount information (Eagly & Chaiken 1995; Haugtvedt, Schumann, Schneier, & Warren 1994; Petty & Cacioppo 1986). However, when faced with difficult to discount information, consumers who strongly hold a positive attitude toward the subject, have been known to accept it (Ditto & Lopez 1998).

Once accepting the negative information about a particular subject, some consumers are likely to spontaneously draw inferences relating to similar subjects associated with it (Broniarczyk & Alba 1994; Lee & Olshavsky 1995). In this study, the impact of these inferences will be measured and termed “spillover”.

It is proposed that the profile (social acceptance level) of the professional athlete will affect the consumer’s decision to either accept or discount negative information when presented with it as well as their commitment level. Most consumers have existing attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about popular athletes since they are frequently the focal point of informational mediums. When a consumer is exposed to negative information about a unfamiliar athlete, it is proposed that their level of commitment with the athlete’s sport will determine whether or not the consumer accepts or discounts the negative information since

the consumer's attitude toward the athlete is unformed (Ahluwalia 2000).

Therefore, the consumer's level of commitment toward the sport and the profile of the athlete will be the points of emphasis when receiving attitude-consistent or attitude-inconsistent information. When consumers receive negative information about an athlete regardless of profile, the hypothesis is as follows:

H₁: Highly-committed consumers are more likely to question the validity of negative information about an athlete, regardless of profile, as compared to a low-commitment consumer.

Due to their lack of knowledge and involvement, low-commitment consumers, as compared to highly-committed consumers, tend to accept, instead of discount negative information when it is presented to them (Ahluwalia 2000). When exposed to this information the impact may spillover to other associated aspects in which the athlete is affiliated (Ahluwalia 2000). However, when highly-committed consumers receive difficult to discount negative information and accept it as valid, the impact is solely isolated to the subject in question, minimizing its potential damage to the athlete's affiliations (Ahluwalia 2000). The hypotheses regarding spillover from negative information onto the athlete's affiliations are as follows:

H₂: Low-commitment consumers, as compared to highly-committed consumers, are more likely to reduce their attitude toward the athlete's team when receiving negative information about an athlete.

- H₃:** Low-commitment consumers, as compared to highly-committed consumers, are more likely to reduce their attitude toward the athlete's sport in general when receiving negative information about an athlete.
- H₄:** Low-commitment consumers, as compared to highly-committed consumers, are more likely to reduce their attitude towards the athlete's professional associations when receiving negative information about an athlete.

METHODOLOGY

Two by Two Design: X axis = Profile of the athlete (positive vs. negative)
 Y axis = Level of consumer-commitment (high vs. low)

Positive-profile / High-Commitment	Negative-profile / High-Commitment
Positive-profile / Low-Commitment	Negative-profile / Low-Commitment

Prior to the main study, approximately thirty randomly selected subjects from Iowa State University were asked to rank the popularity, public image and their attitude toward five current NFL players. Each of the selected athletes are among the most popular athletes in the league and range from not ever being involved with negative information to frequently being involved with negative information. This pretest assisted in determining the public's acceptance level and attitude toward the five athletes. The overall assessment of the public's perception of the individual athletes is termed "profile". The athletes were categorized as either "positive" or "negative" depending on whether or not their individual score was above or below the median. From this pretest, the highest ranking (positive-profile) and lowest ranking (negative-profile) athletes were chosen for the two articles in the questionnaire (See Appendix D: NFL Players Opinion Pretest).

In the main study, approximately one-hundred randomly selected subjects were randomly assigned fictitious negative information, in the form of two articles, regarding one of the two selected NFL athletes (See Appendix E: Fictitious Kurt Warner Article and Appendix F: Fictitious Ray Lewis Article). To further develop

the consumer's attitude toward the athlete, information in the article included the athletes pay, performance level, experience level, and team on which they compete. Participants were asked to answer questions concerning the article to determine the spillover effect the negative information had on the athlete's affiliations. The degree to which consumers accepted or discounted the negative information was measured in a series of questions concerning the source and credibility of the article.

□ **VALIDITY OF THE INFORMATION**

After the participants read the article, they were asked to state their agreement/disagreement on a seven-point scale (strongly disagree/strongly agree) to determine the extent to which they accepted or discounted the negative information. The question, "After reading this article, it was fairly clear to me that "Warner/Lewis" is guilty and should be committed for breaking the law" was asked to assess the participant's opinion of the article. The next question, "Please state your assessment of the information gathering techniques by the source in this article" , (seven-point scale: not at all conducted well/very well conducted) was given to assess whether the participants believed the source gathered the information in a proper manner. Participants were then asked to rank the credibility of the article on a seven-point scale (not at all credible/very credible).

□ **IMPACT OF THE NEGATIVE INFORMATION**

To determine the spillover effect the negative information caused, three questions were asked involving attitude toward the athlete's team, attitude toward the sport in general, and attitude toward organizations associated with the athlete. Participants were asked to respond on a seven-point scale (Very negatively impacted/Not at all impacted) concerning the athlete's ties.

□ **COMMITMENT LEVEL**

Based on the theories and findings previously mentioned, components of the Sport Commitment Model (Scanlan, Carpenter, et al, 1993) were used to determine the consumer's level of commitment regarding the National Football League (high-commitment vs. low-commitment). To determine their level of commitment with the NFL, participants were asked a series of questions based on the following Sport Commitment Model components: individual assessment of their commitment, consumer enjoyment, personal investment, social constraints and involvement opportunities. Participants were then asked to rate themselves on several numerical scales to determine their commitment level (See Appendix G: Commitment Level Questions).

RESULTS

□ MANIPULATION CHECK

A manipulation check was given to thirty participants prior to the main study regarding their feelings and beliefs of the following five NFL athletes: Kurt Warner, Ray Lewis, Keyshawn Johnson, Peyton Manning, and Warren Sapp. Measurements were developed to determine the participant's view of each of the five athletes. These questions measured the participant's view of the athlete's popularity, public image and attitude. The questions asked were "Please mark the category that best fits your opinion of the following NFL player's popularity", "What is your opinion of the following player's public image?", and "What is your attitude toward the following NFL players?". Participants were able to rank the athletes on a six-point scale ranging from 5 (*Very High/Very Positive*) to 1 (*Very Low/Very Negative*), while having the option to check 0 (*Don't Know*) with 3 being neutral for each scale.

An aggregate of the three questions revealed that Kurt Warner had the highest overall player-profile (4.38/5.00) and Ray Lewis had the lowest overall player-profile (2.60/5.00). Therefore, Warner (positive-profile) and Lewis (negative-profile) were selected to be the topics of two fictitious articles stating their supposed wrongdoing for the questionnaire (see APPENDIX H: NFL Players Opinion Pretest Results).

□ **PARTICIPANTS AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

A total of 113 subjects (48 men and 65 women) from Iowa State University completed either the Ray Lewis or Kurt Warner questionnaire. Fifty-six subjects received the Kurt Warner article and 57 received the Ray Lewis article.

Approximately 55 percent of the participants were in the range of 3 to 5 years of college without a degree. The next two largest groups were the 1 to 2 years of college and/or associate degree (17.7%) and Bachelor's degree (15.9%). The remaining consisted of participants who had completed high school - HS Diploma/GED (8.8%) or had completed their Masters degree (2.7%).

Approximately 90 percent of the participants were single and between the ages of 18 to 25 years old.

□ **COMMITMENT LEVEL RESULTS**

Results from the series of twenty commitment-related questions were aggregated showing a minimum score of .75, a maximum of 5.25, and a mean of 2.22. Participants were classified into either a low-commitment or high-commitment category. Participants with an individual mean score less than 2.21 were categorized as low-commitment and those with an individual mean score greater than 2.22 were categorized as high-commitment. Approximately forty-two percent (47) were considered low-commitment and approximately 58 percent (66) were considered high-commitment (See Appendix I: Commitment Level Results).

□ HYPOTHESIS H₁

After given the fictitious negative information regarding either Kurt Warner (positive-profile) or Ray Lewis (negative-profile), participants were asked the following question “After reading this article, it was fairly clear to me that Kurt Warner/Ray Lewis is guilty and should be committed for breaking the law”. Participants were asked to respond to this question by ranking their opinion on a seven-point scale (Strongly Disagree-1/Strongly Agree-7). Results of this question, which was based on the player-profile and consumer-commitment level, had an $F = 1.380$, $p < 0.5$. In agreement with Hypothesis H₁ data from the questionnaire revealed that highly-committed consumers were found to question the validity of the negative information about the athlete regardless of profile, positive or negative, as compared to a low-commitment consumer. Highly-committed participants ($M = 4.08$) were less likely to agree that the athlete committed the crime than low-commitment participants ($M = 4.82$). Highly-committed participants, who received the positive-profile article, had an $M = 4.913$ compared to low-commitment participants who had an $M = 5.242$. Highly-committed participants, who received the negative-profile article, had an $M = 3.320$ compared to low-commitment participants who had an $M = 4.375$. While this interaction is not statistically significant ($p > .10$), the means suggest a pattern that commitment level of the consumer and the athlete’s profile synergistically affect the processing of negative information. However, the main effects of commitment suggests that when consumers are facing negative information about an athlete, highly-committed individuals discount the

information regardless of the athlete's profile more often than low-commitment individuals (See Appendix J: Estimated Marginal Means of Discounting).

Consumers were also asked to rank the credibility of the article based on a seven-point scale (Not at all Credible/Very Credible). It was expected that highly-committed participants would rank the article as less credible more often than low-committed participants. It was also expected there would be a difference in opinions dependent upon the profile of the athlete (positive vs. negative). Results gathered from this question did not support either of these theories with an $F = .476, p > .20$. These results indicated that both high and low-commitment participants similarly questioned the source of negative information regardless of player-profile. (See Appendix K: Estimated Marginal Means for Credibility).

□ **HYPOTHESIS H₂**

Low-commitment consumers, as compared to highly-committed consumers, were expected to be more likely to reduce their attitude toward the athlete's team when receiving negative information about an athlete. This hypothesis was not supported with an $F = .594, p > .20$. The spillover from the negative information onto the athlete's team was proven to be insignificant and no bias toward the athlete's team based on their supposed wrongdoing existed (See Appendix L: Estimated Marginal Means for Team Attitude).

□ **HYPOTHESIS H₃**

The impact of negative information regarding the athlete was expected to reduce low-commitment, as compared to highly-committed, consumers attitudes toward the athlete's sport in general (football). A spillover effect was expected to project from the consumer's beliefs about the athlete onto the athlete's sport.

Low-commitment participants were expected to generalize their negative feelings toward the athlete onto the entire sport. Results indicate no significant negative image transfer to the athlete's sport from the participant's attitude toward the athlete ($F = 1.530, p > .20$). Hypothesis H₃, therefore is not supported (See Appendix M: Estimated Marginal Means for Sport Attitude).

□ **HYPOTHESIS H₄**

Low-commitment consumers also were expected to reduce their attitude toward the athlete's professional affiliations when receiving negative information regarding the athlete. Companies, who used professional athletes to endorse their product or service, were expected to receive some spillover from the negative information regarding their athlete endorser. Results showed that there was no significant relation ($F = .003, p > .50$) with the affiliation. Thus, Hypothesis H₄ is not supported (See Appendix N: Estimated Marginal Means for Affiliations).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The level of impact negative information has on consumers is an important concept for all marketing managers to comprehend. Past research from Ahluwalia (2000) showed highly-committed consumers questioning the validity of negative information about the subject, while low-commitment consumers were more likely to accept this information. The present research focused on this hypothesis, as well as the spillover effect the negative information had on consumers concerning the professional athlete and their affiliations (team, sport, or professional associations). Understanding why this occurs can assist in establishing consumer discounting of the information and the minimization of spillover prior to any potential negative incidents. Marketing managers can assist in the minimization of impact by developing a positive image for their athlete and establishing brand equity prior to any negative occurrences.

This research suggested that a relationship exists between consumer-commitment level and the amount of discounting of the negative information. Highly-committed consumers discounted the negative information at a significantly higher level than low-commitment consumers, which supports Hypothesis H_1 . The research showed a significant difference in the level of discounting between high and low-commitment respondents when faced with negative information about a negative-profile athlete (Low-commitment $M = 4.375$, High-commitment $M = 3.320$) than with a positive-profile athlete (5.242, 4.913). Unexpectedly, this suggests that consumers discount negative

information regarding negative-profile athletes more often than positive-profile athletes. This finding may be attributed to having a single and unfamiliar source releasing the negative information. This trend could be associated with the numerous cases of false accusations about athletes and entertainers, who have previously been the focal point of negative information by non-credible and unfamiliar sources. These repeated false accusations might have created a defense mechanism in consumers to discount single-exposure, and unfamiliar negative information regarding individuals that have previously been involved with wrongdoing.

Findings also concluded there was no significant spillover effect onto the athlete's affiliations, which is contradictory to Ahluwalia's findings. In Ahluwalia's (2000) study, the research suggested that low-commitment consumers are likely to demonstrate a spillover effect to highly-correlated attributes and are likely to exhibit a spreading of the spillover effect. The present research revealed no significant image transfer onto the athlete's affiliations, which may have been caused by the lack of relationship built between the athlete and their affiliations. However, the existence of brand equity with the positive-profile athlete as well as the unexpected brand equity with the negative-profile athlete may have affected consumer reaction toward this negative information. As previously discussed, brand equity allows an athlete to neutralize negative information, thus leading to minimal spillover and the discounting of the negative information.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A few limitations in this research may have flawed findings concerning the effect negative information had on the athlete's affiliations. The two different story-lines for the positive and negative profile athlete, concerning their alleged wrongdoing, may have altered findings. The two articles were not pre-tested to determine if the two articles had similar levels of acceptance. Also, a stronger link between the athlete and their affiliations could have been drawn to better determine consumer's reactions and the potential negative impact on the athlete's affiliations. Although these affiliations were mentioned in the fictitious articles, the affiliations' position and response regarding the athlete's alleged wrongdoing was not stated. The demographics of this study's population might have also skewed some of the findings. A majority of the participants were single, college students between the ages of 18-25 years old. In general, college students are often more rebellious than any other demographic group, and often dismiss allegations and minimize its importance. This may have led to the trend of discounting the information related to the negative-profile athlete more often than the positive-profile athlete and the minimal spillover effects onto the athlete's affiliations.

Future research should examine a real-life situation involving negative information and a professional athlete to determine what spillover effect these affiliations receive from the consumer. Since this research would involve an existing factual situation, it will minimize consumer discounting of the information

and gain a true measure of spillover. This research should also focus on obtaining a more diverse pool of participants to question.

Future research should utilize the same fictitious story-line for both athletes in each of the separate articles. Presenting the same negative information for each athlete (positive and negative-profile) will allow for a more accurate measurement of the consumer's reaction toward the negative information. In the questionnaire, single-item scales were utilized to measure the impact negative information had on the participants. The questions developed to measure the negative effect of spillover may not have adequately tapped the intended construct. Future research should develop multiple-item scales related to the consumer's attitude toward the athlete and their affiliations. This research should give the affiliations' stance regarding the incident to determine if the consumer reaction is contingent on the affiliations' stance. In addition to the consumer's reactions to the affiliations, this research should measure the consumer's attitude toward the athlete's fan base to determine if there is a similar prejudice toward the athlete and their fans. Finally, this research should focus on what reaction the consumer believes is necessary and proper for each of the affiliations. Understanding what consumers believe is the proper reaction to the wrongdoing may assist organizations in the event of a negative occurrence involving one of their athlete endorsers.

Data in this research indicate that consumers, both high and low-commitment, can easily discount negative information if they receive the information from a single and unfamiliar news medium. This demonstrates that

consumer attitudes, regardless of commitment level, are not easily affected by a single source of negative information concerning a popular athlete. This is important for marketers to comprehend because, if they can minimize the release of negative information that is false and/or an extension of the truth, they might be able to assist the process of discounting the negative information. Future research should create multiple exposures of fictitious negative information from various existing and credible news sources concerning an athlete. This should assist in determining the point at which consumers accept counterattitudinal information and the spillover effect on the athlete's affiliations.

In conclusion, the amount of negative information received by the consumer and the point at which the consumer accepts the information as valid is dependent on the consumer-commitment level. This finding is consistent with Ahluwalia's (2000) research. Therefore, more popular athletes, with brand equity, have a stronger defense against negative information, fictitious or true, due to their strong and positive attitude with their loyal customers. This finding is also consistent with Keller (1998 p. 56) in that a strong, positive image allows a more popular athlete to more successfully weather a crisis than a less popular athlete. Choosing an athlete with a positive-profile and assisting in the development of their profile and image can allow marketers to minimize potentially negative information by establishing high customer loyalty and creating positive inferences for customers to refer to when being presented with potentially damaging negative information.

APPENDIX A: Griffey and McGwire Impact

Comparative ticket sales patterns of the Cincinnati Reds and St. Louis Cardinals since 1996. McGwire joined the Cardinals in mid-1997; Ken Griffey Jr. joined the Reds during the 2000 off-season.

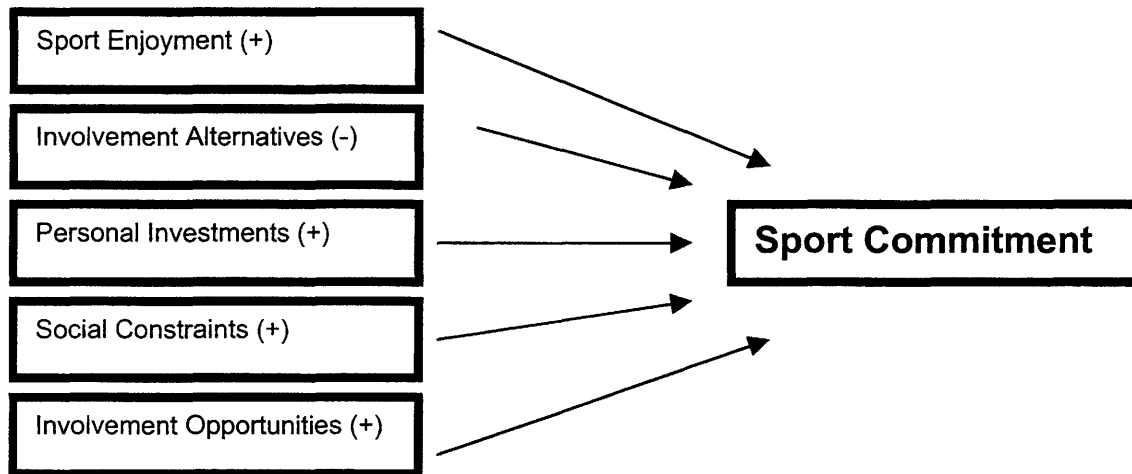
Ken Griffey Jr.

	1996	1997	1998	1999	Cumulative Change
Reds Total Attendance	1,861,428	1,785,788	1,793,679	2,061,222	10.7%
(avg. per game)	(24,492)	(22,322)	(22,144)	25,137	(2.6%)*
Gate Receipts	\$14.8 million	\$14.9 million	\$15 million	\$20 million	
(% increase)	(N/A)	(0.7%)	(0.7%)	(33.3%)	35.1%
Season Tickets	N/A	N/A	N/A	12,500	N/A
2000 season tickets sold as of March 31: 17,000 (36.0%)					

Mark McGwire

	1996	1997	1998	1999	Cumulative Change
Cardinals Total Attendance	2,659,251	2,634,014	3,194,092	3,225,334	21.30%
(avg. per game)	(32,830)	(32,925)	(39,925)	(39,926)	(24.4%)*
Gate Receipts	\$26.5 million	\$33.5 million	\$48.7 million	\$53.4 million	
(% increase)	(N/A)	(26.4%)	(45.4%)	(9.7%)	101.5%
Season Tickets	17,043	18,146	18,165	20,862	
(% increase)	(N/A)	(6.5%)	(0.1%)	(14.8%)	22.4%
2000 season tickets sold as of April 5: 21,112 (1.2%), for cumulative change 1996-2000 23.9%					
* Percent changes are different due to varying number of home dates					
Source: Street Smith's Sports Business Journal of Research					

APPENDIX B: Sport Commitment Model



- **Sport Commitment** - Defined as a function of sport enjoyment, personal investments, involvement opportunities, involvement alternatives, and social constraints. A psychological construct representing the desire and resolve to continue sport consumption.

-
- **Sport Enjoyment** – a positive affective response to the sport experience that reflects generalized feelings such as pleasure, liking, and fun
 - **Involvement Alternatives** – the attractiveness of the most preferred alternative(s) to continued participation in the current endeavor
 - **Personal Investments** – personal resources that are put into the activity which cannot be recovered if participation is discontinued
 - **Social Constraints** – social expectations or norms which create feelings of obligation to remain in the activity
 - **Involvement Opportunities** – valued opportunities that are present only through continued involvement

Source: Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler (1993)

APPENDIX C: Benefits of Brand Equity

- ❑ Greater customer loyalty
- ❑ Less vulnerability to competitive marketing actions
- ❑ Less vulnerability to marketing crises
- ❑ Larger margins
- ❑ More inelastic consumer response to price increases
- ❑ More elastic consumer response to price decreases
- ❑ Greater trade cooperation and support
- ❑ Increased marketing communication effectiveness
- ❑ Possible licensing opportunities
- ❑ Additional brand extension opportunities

Source: Keller, Kevin Lane (1998)

APPENDIX D: NFL Players Opinion Pretest

1. Please mark the category that best fits **your opinion** of the following NFL player's popularity. Be sure to check only one box.

POPULARITY

ATHLETE	VERY HIGH	HIGH	AVERAGE	LOW	VERY LOW	DON'T KNOW
Kurt Warner						
Ray Lewis						
Keyshawn Johnson						
Peyton Manning						
Warren Sapp						

2. What is **your opinion** of the following player's public image?

PUBLIC IMAGE

ATHLETE	VERY POSITIVE	POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	NEGATIVE	VERY NEGATIVE	DON'T KNOW
Kurt Warner						
Ray Lewis						
Keyshawn Johnson						
Peyton Manning						
Warren Sapp						

3. What is **your attitude** toward the following NFL players?

ATTITUDE

ATHLETE	VERY POSITIVE	POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	NEGATIVE	VERY NEGATIVE	DON'T KNOW
Kurt Warner						
Ray Lewis						
Keyshawn Johnson						
Peyton Manning						
Warren Sapp						

APPENDIX E: Fictitious Kurt Warner Article

Friday, Sept. 7, 2001

SPORTS

Duncan County Times

NFL Quarterback Accused of Driving Under the Influence

Duncan County Times reports that Kurt Warner, a three-year veteran quarterback for the St. Louis Rams, has been accused of driving under the influence. Warner's red SUV was seen swerving from lane to lane and almost hit an abandoned car parked on the shoulder before running into a retaining wall on I-70 at around 1:03 a.m. Wednesday morning.

Warner, a graduate from the University of Northern Iowa and former Iowa Barnstormer, directed the St. Louis Rams to a Superbowl victory in 2000 and has been one of the top quarterbacks in the NFL over the last two seasons. Warner is in the second year of a six-year \$40 million contract with the Rams. Warner was contacted by representatives of the Associated Press and refused to comment.

APPENDIX F: Fictitious Ray Lewis Article

Friday, Sept. 7, 2001

SPORTS

Duncan County Times

Accusation hits Super Bowl Defensive MVP

According to sources close to the Baltimore Ravens' organization, the *Duncan County Times* reports that Ray Lewis, a six-year National Football League (NFL) veteran linebacker for the Ravens is rumored to have physically assaulted two Philadelphia Eagles' fans following the August 25 preseason game. Lewis, a five-time pro-bowler and Super Bowl Defensive MVP, recently signed a six-year \$40 million contract with the Ravens. Lewis also signed endorsement contracts during the off-season with Adidas and McDonalds estimated at more than \$20 million per year.

The police report states the two were at the bar following the preseason game wearing their Eagles attire. Lewis and friends supposedly confronted the two and told them to take off their Eagles attire or go home. The two refused and Lewis supposedly hit one in the throat and threw the other into a glass mirror inside the bar. When contacted this morning by the *Duncan County Times*, Lewis' agent refused to comment or disclose any further information and denied Lewis' involvement with any such allegations.

APPENDIX G: Commitment Level Questions

Please rank yourself on a seven-point scale in regards to your commitment level with the NFL with one (1) being very low and seven (7) being very high.

Please write the number that best fits your response in the space provided to the right of the question.

- How dedicated are you with acquiring knowledge and information concerning the NFL (i.e. print, radio, television, internet, etc.)? _____
- How hard would it be for you to stop acquiring knowledge and information concerning the NFL? _____
- How determined are you to stay up to date with current information concerning the NFL? _____
- During the NFL season, how many days of the week do you seek knowledge and information concerning the NFL (via, television, radio, internet, print)?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- During the NFL season, how many days of the week do you seek knowledge and information concerning your favorite NFL team?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- During the NFL season, how many days of the week do you seek knowledge and information concerning NFL teams (other than your favorite team)?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- During the NFL season, how many games do you view per week?
I don't watch the NFL I only watch my favorite team 2 games 3 games 4 games 5 games I view every possible game
- How often do you purchase items associated with the NFL annually (magazines, books, videos, video games, apparel, tickets, satellite packages, etc.)
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 More than 7

Please respond to the following questions with the following numbers:

1 = None; 2 = A little; 3 = Some; 4 = Pretty much; 5 = Very much

- Do you enjoy watching NFL games?
1 2 3 4 5

APPENDIX G: Commitment Level Questions (cont'd)

- ☐ Did you like watching NFL games last season?
- 1 2 3 4 5

- ☐ Do you think you will enjoy watching NFL games this season?
- 1 2 3 4 5

Please respond to the following questions with the following numbers:

1 = None; 2 = A little; 3 = Some; 4 = Pretty much; 5 = Very much

- ☐ How much of your time did you put into watching NFL games last season?
- 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ How much effort did you put into acquiring information and knowledge regarding the NFL last season?
- 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ How much of your own money did you put into consuming NFL items last season (i.e. tickets, clothes, and associated products)?
- 1 2 3 4 5

Please respond to the following questions with the following numbers:

1 = Not at all how I feel; 2 = A little; 3 = Some; 4 = Pretty much; 5 = Very much how I feel

- ☐ I feel I have to watch NFL games so I can be with my friends?
- 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I feel I have to have a high level of knowledge with the NFL to please my family?
- 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I feel I have to have a high level of knowledge with the NFL to please my friends?
- 1 2 3 4 5

Please respond to the following questions with the following numbers:

1 = Not at all; 2 = A little; 3 = Some; 4 = Pretty much; 5 = Very much

- ☐ Would you miss the NFL if you were to quit watching the football games?
- 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ Would you miss the NFL if you were to stop acquiring knowledge and information concerning the league?
- 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ Would you miss the NFL if you were to stop purchasing related items?
- 1 2 3 4 5

APPENDIX H: NFL Players Opinion Pretest Results

POPULARITY	
1. Kurt Warner	4.51
2. Peyton Manning	3.67
3. Warren Sapp	3.25
4. Ray Lewis	3.23
5. Keyshawn Johnson	2.97

PUBLIC IMAGE	
1. Kurt Warner	4.48
2. Peyton Manning	3.68
3. Warren Sapp	2.77
4. Keyshawn Johnson	2.28
5. Ray Lewis	1.86

ATTITUDE	
1. Kurt Warner	4.14
2. Peyton Manning	3.37
3. Warren Sapp	3.17
4. Keyshawn Johnson	2.74
5. Ray Lewis	2.71

OVERALL PLAYER-PROFILE	
1. Kurt Warner	4.38
2. Peyton Manning	3.57
3. Warren Sapp	3.07
4. Keyshawn Johnson	2.67
5. Ray Lewis	2.60

RANKING KEY	
POPULARITY	PUBLIC IMAGE/ATTITUDE
5=Very High	5=Very Positive
4=High	4=Positive
3=Average	3=Neutral
2=Low	2=Negative
1=Very Low	1=Very Negative
0=Don't Know	0=Don't Know

APPENDIX I: Commitment Level Results

An aggregate of 20 survey questions developed to determine the consumer's level of commitment.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Commitment	113	0.75	5.25	2.22	1.222
Valid N (listwise)	113				

Commitment Level (CLEVEL - measured by Mean 2.22)		
High-commitment	Less than 2.22	
Low-commitment	Greater than 2.22	

CLEVEL Totals	N
Low-commitment	65
High-commitment	48

APPENDIX J: Estimated Marginal Means for Discounting

"After reading this article it was fairly clear to me that Kurt Warner/Ray Lewis is guilty and should be committed for breaking the law". Based on 7-point scale - Strongly Disagree (1)/Strongly Agree (7).

	df	MS	F	Sig.
Intercept	1	2197.038	834.919	0.000
Player	1	41.742	15.863	0.000
CLEVEL	1	13.214	2.022	0.027
Player * CLEVEL	1	3.630	1.380	0.243
Error	109	2.631		
Total	113			

1. PLAYER				
			95% Confidence Interval	
Player	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	5.078	0.220	4.641	5.514
Negative-profile	3.848	0.217	3.418	4.277

2. CLEVEL				
			95% Confidence Interval	
CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low-commitment	4.815	0.198	4.419	5.212
High-commitment	4.083	0.271	3.538	4.629

3. PLAYER * CLEVEL					
				95% Confidence Interval	
Player	CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	Low-commitment	5.242	0.282	4.683	5.802
	High-commitment	4.913	0.338	4.243	5.58
Negative-profile	Low-commitment	4.375	0.282	3.807	4.943
	High-commitment	3.320	0.324	2.677	3.963

APPENDIX K: Estimated Marginal Means for Credibility

"Please rate your opinion of the credibility of this article". Based on 7-point scale - Not at all Credible (1)/Very Credible (7).

	df	MS	F	Sig.
Intercept	1	1395.994	775.698	0.000
Player	1	0.913	0.507	0.478
CLEVEL	1	7.349	4.084	0.046
Player * CLEVEL	1	0.857	0.476	0.492
Error	109	1.800		
Total	113			

1. PLAYER				
			95% Confidence Interval	
Player	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	3.648	0.182	3.287	4.009
Negative-profile	3.466	0.179	3.111	3.821

2. CLEVEL				
			95% Confidence Interval	
CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low-commitment	3.815	0.166	3.486	4.145
High-commitment	3.299	0.194	2.915	3.683

3. PLAYER * CLEVEL					
				95% Confidence Interval	
Player	CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	Low-commitment	3.818	0.234	3.355	4.281
	High-commitment	3.478	0.280	2.924	4.033
Negative-profile	Low-commitment	3.813	0.237	3.342	4.283
	High-commitment	3.120	0.268	2.588	3.652

APPENDIX L: Estimated Marginal Means for Team Attitude

"Based on the current findings related to Kurt Warner/Ray Lewis my attitude toward his team has been". Based on 7-point scale –Very Negatively Impacted (1)/Not at all Impacted (7).

	df	MS	F	Sig.
Intercept	1	2787.894	922.159	0.000
Player	1	2.320	0.008	0.930
CLEVEL	1	7.455	2.466	0.119
Player * CLEVEL	1	1.795	0.594	0.443
Error	109	3.023		
Total	113			

1. PLAYER				
			95% Confidence Interval	
Player	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	5.042	0.236	4.573	5.510
Negative-profile	5.012	0.232	4.553	5.472

2. CLEVEL				
			95% Confidence Interval	
CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low-commitment	4.767	0.216	4.340	5.195
High-commitment	5.287	0.251	4.789	5.785

3. PLAYER * CLEVEL					
				95% Confidence Interval	
Player	CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	Low-commitment	4.909	0.303	4.309	5.509
	High-commitment	5.174	0.363	4.455	5.892
Negative-profile	Low-commitment	4.625	0.307	4.016	5.234
	High-commitment	5.400	0.348	4.711	6.089

APPENDIX M: Estimated Marginal Means for Sport Attitude

"Based on the current findings related to Kurt Warner/Ray Lewis my attitude toward the NFL has been." Based on 7-point scale –Very Negatively Impacted (1)/Not at all Impacted (7).

	df	MS	F	Sig.
Intercept	1	3486.289	1560.499	0.000
Player	1	3.765	1.685	0.197
CLEVEL	1	3.181	1.424	0.235
Player * CLEVEL	1	3.419	1.530	0.219
Error	109	2.234		
Total	113			

1. PLAYER				
			95% Confidence Interval	
Player	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	5.437	0.203	5.034	5.839
Negative-profile	5.806	0.199	5.411	6.202

2. CLEVEL				
			95% Confidence Interval	
CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low-commitment	5.452	0.185	5.084	5.819
High-commitment	5.791	0.216	5.363	6.219

3. PLAYER * CLEVEL					
				95% Confidence Interval	
Player	CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	Low-commitment	5.091	0.260	4.575	5.607
	High-commitment	5.783	0.312	5.165	6.400
Negative-profile	Low-commitment	5.813	0.264	5.289	6.336
	High-commitment	5.800	0.299	5.208	6.392

APPENDIX N: Estimated Marginal Means for Affiliations

“Based on the current findings related to Kurt Warner/Ray Lewis my attitude toward organizations associated with him has been.” Based on 7-point scale –Very Negatively Impacted (1)/Not at all Impacted (7).

	df	MS	F	Sig.
Intercept	1	2565.604	950.807	0.000
Player	1	0.117	0.043	0.835
CLEVEL	1	1.436	0.532	0.467
Player * CLEVEL	1	9.124	0.003	0.954
Error	109	2.698		
Total	113			

1. PLAYER				
			95% Confidence Interval	
Player	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	4.790	0.223	4.348	5.232
Negative-profile	4.855	0.219	4.420	5.290

2. CLEVEL				
			95% Confidence Interval	
CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low-commitment	4.708	0.204	4.304	5.112
High-commitment	4.937	0.237	4.466	5.407

3. PLAYER * CLEVEL					
				95% Confidence Interval	
Player	CLEVEL	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Positive-profile	Low-commitment	4.667	0.286	4.100	5.233
	High-commitment	4.913	0.343	4.234	5.592
Negative-profile	Low-commitment	4.750	0.290	4.174	5.326
	High-commitment	4.960	0.329	4.309	5.611

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