When a Celebrity Is Tied to Immoral Behavior: Consumer Reactions to Michael Jackson and Kobe Bryant

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - When a celebrity's identity is linked to implications of immoral behavior, the reactions of consumers to the celebrity will determine whether their careers can continue to generate profits in the entertainment industry or as endorsers. However, the reactions of consumers tend to vary, from absolute belief in the celebrity's innocence to absolute belief in his guilt. For example, reactions to the recent charges against Michael Jackson and Kobe Bryant illustrate the widely varied reactions of consumers. In the case of Michael Jackson, the media coverage emphasizes the reactions of his ardent fans who believe he is absolutely innocent, in implicit contrast with others who believe that he is probably guilty of the charges against him. Similarly, the media coverage suggests that many people believe Kobe Bryant is innocent of the charges that were made against him. However, many of the companies who had used him as an endorser are not taking the risk that their products will become associated with a man perceived as a rapist in the minds of some of their consumers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
When a celebrity’s identity is linked to implications of immoral behavior, the reactions of consumers to the celebrity will determine whether their careers can continue to generate profits in the entertainment industry or as endorsers. However, the reactions of consumers tend to vary, from absolute belief in the celebrity’s innocence to absolute belief in his guilt. For example, reactions to the recent charges against Michael Jackson and Kobe Bryant illustrate the widely varied reactions of consumers. In the case of Michael Jackson, the media coverage emphasizes the reactions of his ardent fans who believe he is absolutely innocent, in implicit contrast with others who believe that he is probably guilty of the charges against him. Similarly, the media coverage suggests that many people believe Kobe Bryant is innocent of the charges that were made against him. However, many of the companies who had used him as an endorser are not taking the risk that their products will become associated with a man perceived as a rapist in the minds of some of their consumers.

Social Identity Theory suggests that consumers’ level of identification with celebrities like Michael Jackson and Kobe Bryant may help predict the way they react to such situations. I propose that consumers who are strongly identified with a celebrity are less likely to react negatively than consumers with a lower level of identification. Fans who have only a low level of identification with the celebrity may be unlikely to continue to buy merchandise endorsed or produced by the celebrity, whereas those who are strongly identified may continue purchasing the celebrity’s products because they believe in his innocence.

Social Identity Theory describes the causes and consequences of identification with individuals and with groups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1985), and has been used in marketing to describe consumers’ identification (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Identification describes the effect of a relationship on definitions of identity, and occurs when a relationship becomes relevant to identity (Reed, 2002). Consumers who identify with the celebrity would define their identities in part based on being a fan of the celebrity. Strength of identification depends on the importance of being a fan of the celebrity to the consumer’s identity. Being a fan of the celebrity is an important part of strongly identified consumers’ identity. However, consumers can also have a relatively weak identification with the celebrity, if the celebrity has become somewhat relevant to their identities but is not very important to them. For example, a consumer might be weakly identified if he or she had been a fan of the celebrity in the past.

The strength of consumers’ identification is expected to predict reactions to the charges against the celebrity. Strongly identified consumers are expected to believe in the celebrity’s innocence, whereas people who are have a relatively weak identification with the celebrity are expected to be more likely to believe that he is guilty. As a result, weakly identified consumers are expected to be less willing to purchase or recommend the celebrity’s products than are strongly identified consumers. In addition, emotions are expected to indicate consumers’ feelings about themselves based on their connection to the celebrity following the accusations of immoral behavior.

I conducted an online survey to investigate the relationship between strength of identification and the reactions of consumers when celebrities have been linked to charges of immoral behavior. Consumers were recruited to describe their reactions to the accusations of immoral behavior against Kobe Bryant and Michael Jackson. The reactions of consumers with a relatively low level of identification were found to be more negative for Michael Jackson than for Kobe Bryant. Consumers who were weakly identified with Michael Jackson were less likely to be willing to purchase and recommend his products than were consumers weakly identified with Kobe Bryant. However, strongly identified consumers were no less likely to purchase and recommend Michael Jackson’s products than were consumers strongly identified with Kobe Bryant.

Strongly identified consumers were more likely to believe that Michael Jackson and Kobe Bryant were innocent than were weakly identified consumers. Strongly identified consumers were also more likely to be willing to purchase and recommend the celebrity’s products. In addition, strength of identification was found to predict emotional reactions. Strongly identified consumers were more likely to feel proud of being a fan, while weakly identified consumers were more likely to feel guilty and ashamed of being connected to the celebrity in any way. The results of this study indicate that strength of identification plays a role in shaping consumers’ reactions to such celebrity scandals, and that Social Identity Theory can help to predict consumers’ reactions to immoral behavior.

REFERENCES
