

How Do Consumers Judge Celebrities' Irresponsible Behavior? An Attribution Theory Perspective

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In 2007, Michael Vick, quarterback for Atlanta Falcons and a celebrity athlete was in news for his involvement with dog fighting. Corporate endorsers for Vick quickly reacted by withdrawing or terminating the endorsement deals - a response that is based on the assumption that consumers blame the celebrity for the undesirable action. Inspired by this observation and by drawing on the literature in diagnosticity of information, attribution and blame theory, this qualitative research paper investigates how consumers make judgments about celebrity blameworthiness. Results from this qualitative study show respondents were more likely to find the actor blameworthy when they perceived that the latter played a pivotal role in the negative action and that the cause of the action was under his control. Conversely, respondents judged the celebrity as blameless when they perceived the cause of the action as being outside of the actor's control, i.e., the latter was not empowered to alter the consequence. Lastly, in both sets of blame judgments, causal stability emerged to be an unimportant dimension in blame attribution. The findings from the paper offer both theoretical and managerial implications.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2007, Michael Vick, quarterback for Atlanta Falcons and a popular athlete endorser was indicted by a federal jury for his involvement with dog fighting, an illegal practice, at his residence in Virginia. Media, corporate sponsors and non-profit organizations such as PETA shunned this behavior linked with animal cruelty. One of his corporate sponsors, Nike, immediately decided to withdraw his sponsorship for the newest shoe, the Vick V, and in a press release announced Nike's position of zero tolerance of animal cruelty. A year later, in an independent poll conducted by The Atlanta Journal – Constitution that asked the question: “*What are you going to do with your Vick jersey?*” the results showed that 58.27% or 4417 people indicated that they would “trash it” and 41.73% or 3163 people claimed to “keep wearing it”. An important question that emerges from the above observations is how did the individuals who participated in the above poll arrive at the decision to trash or keep the Vick jersey? And how did Vick's endorsers decide to (dis)continue its association with the celebrity? The case of Michael Vick and his involvement and subsequent indictment with dog fighting provides the inspiration for this research that investigates consumer perception and attribution of blame regarding an

undesirable action by a celebrity. An “undesirable” event is described as one that has a deleterious effect on the celebrity (Louie et al. 2001). When an undesirable event occurs, there is a tendency to judge the blameworthiness of those involved (Louie et al. 2001).

This paper suggests that like companies, celebrities are *human brands* (Thomson 2006) since they are managed in ways similar to a brand and could even be envisioned as a single brand/product company. To understand how consumers judge the undesirable action of a celebrity as being blameworthy (to blame) or blameless (not to blame), this paper assumes that undesirable celebrity conduct is similar to a product harm crisis, which is defined as a “discrete, well publicized occurrences wherein products are found to be defective or dangerous” (Siomkos and Kurzbard 1994). In addition to the cost of product recall and legal issues, such crisis can cause considerable damage to the company due to reduced levels of consumer trust, brand equity and consumers’ willingness to purchase the recalled brand in the future (Laufer and Gillespie 2004) along with other products marketed by the company (Siomkos and Kurzbard 1994). When the company is found to be blameworthy, consumers complain (Richins 1983), expect to receive an apology from the company (Folkes 1984), experience anger and participate in negative word of mouth (Folkes 1988) against the firm. Therefore, just like a company, when a celebrity is judged as blameworthy, he or she is expected to experience the same ramifications of a product harm crisis, such as negative word of mouth, complaint, anger and reduced support by his consumers (both fans and organizations that offer endorsement deals to the celebrity). This was clearly the case with Michael Vick whose endorsement deal with Nike and other companies and employment with Atlanta Falcons was immediately terminated following his involvement with dog fighting. Similarly, Pepsi terminated its contract with Mike Tyson when he was involved in blameworthy actions at the time.

Therefore, the objective of this research paper is to understand consumers’ attributions of celebrity blameworthiness, particularly how consumers arrive at the judgment to blame or not to blame the celebrity. This paper draws on insights from the literature on diagnosticity of information, attribution and blame theories and uses a case-based, qualitative methodology to investigate consumers’ attributions of blame towards Michael Vick’s involvement with dog fighting.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

A celebrity is an individual “whose name has attention-getting, interest-riveting and profit generating value” (Rein et al. 1987) that stems from the high level of public attention and interest. In marketing, celebrities have been referred to as *human brands* since they can be professionally managed and have associations and features of a brand (Thomson 2006): the ability to create an image and perception that can be associated with the company or product and build expectations about its performance. Therefore, when a celebrity becomes involved in an undesirable event, public attention and interest is almost instantaneous producing negative consequences for the celebrity.

Research in diagnosticity of information (Reeder and Brewer 1979; Skowronski and Carlston 1987) “...suggests that people have a ‘negativity bias’ in evaluating individuals’ moral behaviors in that they weigh negative behaviors more heavily than positive behaviors” (Folkes and Kamins 1999). This bias stems from the fact that immoral actions are perceived to be more diagnostic of negative traits than moral actions are of positive traits. When a celebrity behaves irresponsibly, his or her unethical action serves as a cue to the consumer, triggering the categorization process

by which he or she is assigned to a specific trait category (for example, honest or dishonest). Additionally, negative cues and behaviors are "...perceived as more diagnostic when such behaviors are viewed as less characteristic of positive persons than positive behaviors are of negative persons" (Skowronski and Carlston 1987)). Thus, it may be argued that when a celebrity who is perceived as being moral behaves in an immoral way, his behavior becomes more diagnostic in impression formation than when he behaves in a positive way.

Research in the area of attribution theory suggests that when individuals are faced with a negative outcome (failure) or experience unexpected or unwanted behaviors by others (Wong and Weiner 1981) they seek to explain the cause to themselves where, "how an offended party reacts to such actions may largely depend on how the offense is interpreted" (p. 612, (Bradfield and Aquino 1999). Attribution theory developed by Weiner (1980) provides the framework to explain this interpretive process and subsequent reactions to negative or undesirable actions. The framework suggests that individuals perform cognitive evaluations of the situation in order to determine if the actor or some other external factor caused the negative outcome. This evaluation then triggers the decision to attribute the responsibility to the rightful party (Shaver 1985). Most of the consumer research in attribution theory has focused on product harm crisis or product failures and therefore, from the perspective of the marketer and consumer, this theory argues that when a product does not perform as expected, consumers seek explanations for the cause of the negative outcome (product's poor performance). Weiner's framework also proposes a cognition-emotion-action process, where the individual assesses the negative event and experiences some affect (happiness or sadness) followed by an attribution judgment of the negative event and further emotions such as anger or guilt (Laufer et al. 2005).

Blame theory (Shaver 1985) argues that "questions of blameworthiness arise only when at least one of the causal elements participating in the production of the effect for which blame is to be assigned is a human action" (p. 162) and for blame to be assigned, the person has to be first found responsible by the observer. Once found responsible for a morally objectionable behavior, that person is likely to be blamed and subsequently punished. However, consumer researchers have extended this research to the context of product recall and have shown that a company similar to a human being might be found responsible and subsequently blameworthy, resulting in negative consequences such as consumer anger, negative word of mouth and reduced purchase intentions (Folkes 1988). In addition research in the area of moral evaluation indicates that blame (emotion) and punishment (action) tend to be closely linked in the consumers' mind (Graham et al. 1997; Shaver 1985). Therefore, when consumers blame an entity, they are also more likely to punish it (Shaver 1985).

In summary, literature on diagnosticity of information highlights the significance of negative information as a trigger of the attribution process which occurs when individuals faced with undesirable consequences seek explanations for the outcome. Finally, blame theory sheds light on the process of assigning blame to the responsible party.

Research Questions

Weiner's framework (Weiner 1985; Weiner 1986; Weiner 2000; Weiner 1980) differentiates between three causal dimensions of attribution that lead to an overall judgment of blame: stability, locus and controllability. Attribution search is expected to first focus on the source or locus of the cause, followed by its controllability and finally causal stability with each causal dimension conceptualized on a continuum with opposite polar ends (Wong and Weiner 1981).

Each of these dimensions also has unique psychological consequences with controllability and stability most relevant to understanding punishment related judgments (Graham et al. 1997).

Causal stability: the nature of an explanation will be influenced by the individual's assessment of whether the cause of the outcome is temporary or permanent. This principle "...states that if an outcome (whether positive or negative) is ascribed to a stable cause (i.e. one that is enduring over time), then the same outcome will be anticipated in the future" (Weiner 2000). Based on this principle it is argued that if the consumer assesses the undesirable behavior of the celebrity to be unstable, i.e., the celebrity's involvement in the irresponsible act is seen as an isolated event, it's likely that consumers will be less likely to blame the celebrity. Conversely, if the celebrity is involved in a series of irresponsible actions and consistently behaves in an undesirable manner then the cause of the undesirable event might be perceived as stable and might lead to blame. Therefore:

Research Question 1: When the cause of the undesirable behavior by the celebrity is perceived as being unstable, will consumers be less likely to blame the celebrity than when it is perceived as being stable?

Causal Locus: refers to whether the cause of the undesirable outcome is associated with the actor or not. This dimension differentiates between dispositional and situational causes, and in the case of product harm crisis points to at least three loci for potential blame: the company, consumers of the product and the external situational factors (Laufer et al. 2005). Therefore it may be expected that when the undesirable act is perceived as being associated with the celebrity, consumers will blame the celebrity, with the opposite being the case if consumers assess the undesirable action to be associated with an external member or situation. On the same note, when a company recalls a product, consumer perception of blame is direct and straight forward towards the company and less so towards other corporate entities (Patrick and Folkes 2002). Hence,

Research Question 2: When the cause of the undesirable behavior by the celebrity is perceived as being associated with the celebrity, will consumers be more likely to blame the celebrity than when it is not associated with the celebrity?

Causal Controllability: Causal controllability is the degree to which the cause is subject to volitional alteration and the consequence could have been different (Weiner 2000). This dimension points to consumers' evaluation of the undesirable outcome as being "...attributed to external causes that are either uncontrollable or controllable by the company" (Weiner 2000). Research in the area of blame attribution suggests that blame perceptions are closely linked to the perceived degree of control and the intent of the entities involved (Shaver 1985). When the consumer perceives "...corporate harm doing is seen as under the control of the firm, confidence in the firm's goodwill and beliefs that the customer's best interests are at heart are undermined" (p.9, (Patrick and Folkes 2002). In the context of product failures, the controllability dimension points to the power yielded by the consumer or other parties such as the manufacturer or the retailer to alter the undesirable outcome (Laufer et al. 2005). Therefore, if consumers attribute the negative product experiences to controllable causes, they tend to assess more blame to the involved entities such as the manufacturer or the retailer. When the cause is seen as being controllable, consumers not only participate in avoidance behaviors but also become actively involved in spreading negative word of mouth publicity about the celebrity (Laufer et al. 2005). This finding supports the theory of cognitive consistency which states that people desire

consistency in their thoughts and actions. Therefore, it is likely that when individuals perceive a celebrity as being blameworthy, they will more likely to be engaged in negative word of mouth or lobbying corporate entities to sever endorsement deals because of the desire to maintain congruency between thoughts and actions. Thus,

Research Question 3: When the cause of the undesirable behavior by the celebrity is perceived as being controllable by the celebrity, will consumers be more likely to blame the celebrity than when it is perceived as being uncontrollable?

For causal attributions in context of a product failure, Folkes (1984) concluded that when locus is internal, the behavior is stable and controllable; consumers tend to attribute the responsibility to the actor (the company) and subsequently blame it. On the other hand, external factors are more likely to be blamed for the product failure when the locus is external, behavior is temporary and uncontrollable. Since celebrities are like brands, undesirable behavior by a celebrity should be judged by consumers in a process similar to that of a product harm crisis. Therefore, it is expected that if consumers believe that the celebrity was the one directly involved in the undesirable action, has had a long history of being involved in similar behavior and could have avoided performing the action, they will more likely attribute responsibility and subsequently blame the celebrity. In contrast, if consumers believe that the undesirable action by the celebrity was caused by some third party or external agent, it is the first time that he or she has been involved in a undesirable action and the act itself is outside the control of the celebrity, they will more likely attribute the responsibility to external factors and not blame the celebrity.

METHOD

The choice of the methodology used in this paper was inspired by three key limitations in attribution research methodology that has largely relied on experimental design. First, research in attribution theory assumes that when exposed to a negative event people spontaneously engage in attributional activities. In literature, these responses are captured by researchers by either asking participants to complete a fixed number of rating scales or by providing open ended explanations for events – both methods that are considered as being highly reactive in nature (Wong and Weiner 1981). Consequently, a self-probe methodology has been suggested Wong and Weiner (1981). This method is composed of two steps: self-questioning and self-coding. For self-questioning, study participants are instructed to write the questions that they would ask themselves following a negative event, since causal attributions generally are expected to follow the “why” questions. For self-coding, instead of allowing independent raters to code the causal explanations, subjects’ code their own responses to accurately reflect their own perceptions.

Second, the three causal dimensions of Weiner’s attribution framework (1980) are not based on factual information but instead are perceptions or judgments inferred on the basis of information about the event available to the observer (Klein and Dawar 2004). In the case of a product harm crisis, this information may be gathered by consumers from multiple sources such as the media or the company itself, among others. Subsequently, it might be expected that similar multiple sources would also serve as conduits of information regarding celebrities’ behavior instead of a narrative presented to a participant in an experiment.

Last, Patrick and Folkes (2002) have argued that assessment of blame depends on the accessibility of information in memory at the time of judgment that might be activated via a number of subtle techniques. One such technique is survey research: by asking questions the

respondent may recall information from memory that might influence response to subsequent questions. As a result, the external validity of experimental and survey research in the area of blame attributions has become questionable.

Therefore, this study relies on a modified version of self-reporting. Instead of self-questioning and self-coding (Wong and Weiner 1981), this paper uses self-reporting on the internet or “netnography” to assess causal attributions. Netnography or internet-based ethnography is a research methodology “...that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets 2002)). This method allows the researcher to gain access to public discussion forums by observing or participating in communications that are self-reported by the participants. The use of netnography as a research methodology has been triggered by the rapid growth of the internet as a source of information increasingly being accessed by consumers to help make decisions and form relationships (Sandlin 2007). This has attracted the attention of marketing researchers who are turning to online communities to understand consumer behavior and decision making (Kozinets 2002).

In the decision to use netnography, this research paper incorporates the benefits of self-reporting with study results not being reactive in nature; uses popular media sources – the internet, as the source of information that shapes consumer perceptions of the negative event and finally, avoids the limitation of survey research that makes memory accessible when it might not be the case. This method of data collection and analysis increases the external validity and generalizability of attributional research findings beyond the experimental setting of the self-probe method or survey research common in literature.

Data

In order to collect posts for evaluation, two online blogs (Free Michael Vick and Dog Lovers’ Against Michael Vick) from a popular social networking site were accessed between July 18, 2007 and October 27, 2007 on a daily basis. This site is the second largest social network on the Web with around 60 million members, is one of the fastest-growing and best-known sites and is a popular online destination used by both teenagers and adults of all ages. This site was also selected because its member profile best matches the fan following of Michael Vick. The eight week period coincided with the first cycle of media coverage of Michael Vick and his involvement with dog fighting. The “Free Michael Vick” blog initially yielded a total of 340 posts while the “Dog Lovers’ Against Michael Vick” produced 350 posts for the eight week period. The choice of these two discussion forums stemmed from the objective of the research which was to assess the causal attributions that drive blame assignment, both when the actor is perceived as being blameworthy and blameless.

The researcher and an independent judge reviewed all the posts and selected those where the respondent had taken a position on Michael Vick’s blameworthiness, i.e. the perceiver viewed the actor’s action as blameworthy or blameless. This review process also ensured that only one post per respondent was included in the final sample. This process produced a usable sample of 42 posts from the “Free Michael Vick” blog and 71 posts from the “Dog Lovers’ Against Michael Vick” blog yielding a total of 133 posts for qualitative analysis. The final smaller size of the sample posts is not surprising since the key objective that members join a social network site is to form relationships and communities with others (Kozinets 2002). Next, both judges analyzed each post to identify causal explanations offered to support the position on blameworthiness. In other words, what caused the perceiver to determine that Michael Vick is

blameworthy or blameless? Posts where the respondent reported no causal explanation for his or her position on blame assignment or stated that they needed more evidence were removed from further analysis. This step in the analysis resulted in a total of 127 causal explanations that included both positions on blameworthiness, and subsequently reduced the final size of the sample posts from 133 to 94 posts for final analysis. Each explanation was then coded by both judges as shown in Table 1. In the above procedure, intercoder agreement was very high and any differences were resolved by discussion.

RESULTS

In the first step, 94 posts were analyzed to identify codable responses where the respondent declared his position on blame assignment. This step produced a total of nine positions each that pointed to the presence of blame judgment and against it. Table 1 lists both sets of judgments. These judgments extracted from the posts show that perceivers expressed their position on blame from different perspectives. It was also common for a single post to display more than one position on blameworthiness. Of the 94 posts, 48 (51%) posts clearly took a position to blame the celebrity while 46 (49%) were against it and found Vick blameless. In the second step, the same 94 posts were analyzed to identify the cause of the action as perceived by the respondent. This step produced a total of 156 explanations. Table 2 presents the causal explanations (n =87) offered by respondents who assigned blame to the actor while Table 3 (n = 69) shows the same for no-blame assignment.

TABLE 1
SAMPLE JUDGMENT STATEMENTS

| | Sample of “Blame” Judgments (in support of blame assignment) | | Sample of “No Blame” Judgments (against blame assignment) |
|----|---|----|--|
| 1. | His NFL career is over | 1. | Free Vick |
| 2. | He should get maximum prison sentence | 2. | Should be allowed to play in NFL |
| 3. | He is cruel | 3. | Celebrities are people - they are not perfect |
| 4. | Admitted that guilty | 4. | I support Michael Vick; I love Michael Vick |
| 5. | I find him repulsive | 5. | Innocent till proven guilty |
| 6. | I condemn him | 6. | Needs help not punishment |
| 7. | I hate him | 7. | Deserves a second chance |
| 8. | He is evil | 8. | Is a good person |
| 9. | He is sick; he is trash | 9. | Seen worse offenses |
| | | | |

Results presented in Table 2 show that respondents who found Vick blameworthy attributed his negative action mostly to causal locus closely followed by the causal controllability dimension. More than half of the 87 explanations that pointed to the importance of causal locus were grounded in the perception of the actor being directly involved in dog fighting. The actor’s

direct involvement with the action stemmed mostly from the perception of him being the perpetrator who was inhuman and cruel to the dogs, closely followed by the perception that Vick was an individual who defied the law and admitted to wrongful behavior both personally and by his endorsers. About 40 percent of the 87 explanations pointed to the importance of causal controllability in blame attribution. These explanations presented several perspectives that all collectively point to the perception of the negative action being controllable by the actor. Within this causal category, the perception that dog fighting is morally wrong was the most frequently cited cause of blame assignment. In other words, members of a society are expected to be knowledgeable about moral behaviors (controllable) and subsequently avoid participating in such actions. Other explanations that point to the cause of the negative action as being controllable included the actor's ownership of the residential property, the action being illegal and the expectation of celebrities to be good role models in the society. Finally, causal stability explained an extremely small portion of the blame assignment, i.e., when the actor was perceived as being involved in the negative action on a repeated basis.

TABLE 2
CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS FOR BLAME JUDGMENTS

| Causal Category | Responses | |
|---|------------------|--------------|
| Causal Controllability | N | % |
| 1. Animal cruelty as in dog fighting is morally wrong | 17 | 47.2 |
| 2. Dog fighting is illegal | 6 | 16.7 |
| 3. Animal cruelty will lead to human cruelty | 1 | 2.8 |
| 4. Celebrities need to be good role models | 5 | 13.9 |
| 5. Owned the residential property where dog fighting was practiced | 7 | 19.4 |
| | 36 | 41.4% (n=87) |
| Causal Locus | | |
| 1. Personally admitted to wrong doing | 8 | 16.7 |
| 2. Companies find him guilty | 2 | 4.2 |
| 3. Vick behaved in an inhumane manner – involved in dog fighting and/or personally tortured the animals and was cruel to them | 27 | 56.3 |
| 4. Vick broke the law | 11 | 22.9 |
| | 48 | 55.2% (n=87) |
| Causal Stability | | |
| 1. Is a repeated behavior – involved in other negative actions and/or dog fighting on a repeated basis | 3 | 3.5% (n=87) |
| | | |
| Total Number of Causal Attributions | 87 | |

Results presented in Table 3 show that respondents who found Vick blameless attributed his action mostly to causal controllability. More than 60 percent of the explanations (n =69) presented multiple perspectives that pointed to the actor being blameless because the cause of the action was perceived as being outside of the latter's control. These reasons that collectively point

to causal controllability were coded into ten different sub-categories as displayed in Table 3. The four most frequently cited reasons that point to the cause of Vick's action being outside his control were associated with his celebrity status that attracted an above normal level of media attention to an otherwise common practice, dog fighting being no different than other forms of animal cruelty, dogs being considered as property by its owners and lastly, that the action was simply a mistake, a prototypical characteristic of human behavior. A small portion of blame attribution was explained by causal locus and stability.

TABLE 3
CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS FOR NO – BLAME JUDGMENTS

| Causal Category | Responses | |
|--|------------------|---------------------|
| | N | % |
| <u>Causal Controllability</u> | | |
| 1. Dog fighting is a common practice in the society | 4 | 8.9 |
| 2. Other forms of animal cruelty is commonly tolerated in the society (dogs have no more value than other animals) | 7 | 15.6 |
| 3. Dogs are property and lower value than human beings (dogs have lower value than Vick in NFL) | 7 | 15.6 |
| 4. Celebrity status makes him more culpable | 8 | 17.8 |
| 5. Black ethnicity makes him more culpable | 4 | 8.9 |
| 6. Abnormal childhood since parents were teenagers and lived in a crime-ridden neighborhood | 2 | 4.4 |
| 7. Laws on dog fighting need to revised | 2 | 4.4 |
| 8. There are worse behaviors than dog fighting | 4 | 8.9 |
| 9. It's human to make mistakes – no one is perfect | 6 | 13.3 |
| 10. He is mentally sick and needs help not punishment | 1 | 2.2 |
| | 45 | 65.2% (n=69) |
| <u>Causal Locus</u> | | |
| 1. Others were involved in dog fighting | 2 | 16.7 |
| 2. Didn't live in the residential property | 5 | 41.7 |
| 3. He is innocent till proven guilty by law | 5 | 41.7 |
| | 12 | 17.4% (n=69) |
| <u>Causal Stability</u> | | |
| 1. No record of negative behavior in past – instead, has been charitable in action | 6 | 50 |
| 2. Made one bad decision | 6 | 50 |
| | 12 | 17.4% (n=69) |
| Total Number of Causal Attributions | 69 | |

Respondents who found Vick blameless attributed his action to members external to the actor (his relatives) or a situation that separated the actor from the action (did not live in the house where dog fighting was practiced). Finally, blamelessness was also attributed to the action being a first time occurrence of negative behavior or the positive behavioral record of the actor in the past.

Three key insights on the issue of celebrity blameworthiness become evident from this analysis. First, for respondents who found Michael Vick blameworthy, locus and controllability were the key causal dimensions of blame attribution. That is, respondents were more likely to find the actor blameworthy when they perceived that the latter played a pivotal role in the negative action and that the cause of the action was under his control. Second, respondents assessed the actor as being blameless mostly when they perceived the cause of the action as being outside of the actor's control where the latter was not empowered to alter the consequence. Lastly, in both sets of blame judgments, causal stability emerged to be an unimportant dimension in blame attribution. The respondents' perception of the frequency of negative behavior had little impact on their judgment to blame the celebrity. Conversely, the actor's positive behavior in the past or the perception of the current action being a onetime occurrence also failed to heavily reinforce the blamelessness judgments.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study of public reaction to Michael Vick immediately after his involvement with dog fighting was exposed by the media provides empirical support for an attributional analysis of blame judgment of celebrity behavior. Respondents in the sample who believed that Vick played a pivotal role in dog fighting and animal cruelty found him blameworthy, while in contrast, those who perceived that Vick was not the locus of the action but instead involved other external members were less likely to blame. In addition, respondents who perceived that Vick's action was controllable by him found him blameworthy, while respondents who believed that his actions were relatively less controllable tended to find him blameless. To a lesser degree, when the cause of Vick's action was perceived as being stable, i.e. respondents believed that he might repeat this or another negative action again, the likelihood of being blamed was greater than when Vicks' action was perceived as being non-stable, i.e. Vick would unlikely repeat this or any other negative action in the future.

A related finding of the study revealed that the sample population was evenly split on their assessment of blameworthiness, with comparable number of posts on both ends of the spectrum. One explanation for why a large number of people in the sample found Michael Vick blameless and were unwilling to punish (or conversely were willing to forgive him) might be related to this popularity and likeability. Research on punishment shows that a socially desirable entity is less likely to be punished and more likely to be forgiven if he is viewed as being more moral and unlikely to be involved in negative actions in the future (Heider 1958; Miller and Vidmar 1981). The findings of this research that show the causal attributions of blamelessness support the argument made in literature that a favorable social perception of the offending entity increases leniency (Bradfield and Aquino 1999). A second explanation might also lie in the difference between two possible attribution tendencies displayed by individuals: harm avoidance and blame avoidance (Shaw and McMartin 1977). If the observer identifies with the perpetrator, then he is more likely to blame the victim because of blame avoidance. If the reverse is true, that is the observer identifies with the victim, he is more likely to blame the perpetrator because of harm

avoidance. Future research should examine the influence of the above two attribution tendencies on blame assignment.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study complements the research in the area of blame theory (Shaver 1985) by highlighting the attributional approach to the assessment of blameworthiness. However, unlike prior research that solely examined the cause of celebrity blameworthy behavior (Graham et al. 1997), this study extends the attributional approach by also investigating the causes of celebrity blameless behavior and compliments research findings by Folkes (1984) to conclude that a celebrity's negative action is similar to a product harm crisis and elicits similar levels of blame attribution. By investigating consumers' attributions immediately following the undesirable event instead of relying on short term memory at a later date or priming it by employing a survey methodology, this study addresses a key shortcoming of attribution research which suggests that time accessibility of information might influence blame attributions.

From a managerial standpoint, results of this study carry significant implications and offer several key insights for celebrity endorsers. Companies that form partnerships with a celebrity have to be prepared to address risks particularly when the latter becomes involved in an undesirable action. In some cases, the decision to (dis)continue the association is evident from the nature of the event where companies would immediately discontinue the partnership when the celebrity is involved in a murder and continue when the celebrity is a victim of an illness. However, the decision "...between these two extremes is not so clear... and, companies must consider not only the nature of the negative event, but also....consumer perceptions of endorser blame and their response to that blame" (p. 50, (Louie and Obermiller 2002).

Literature in the area of celebrity endorsement suggests that the reason companies immediately terminate their relationships with a celebrity involved in a undesirable event is because it presents the risk of transferring the undesirable image of the celebrity to the company (Louie et al. 2001; Louie and Obermiller 2002) and may damage brand evaluations (Till and Shimp 1998). It has also been suggested that consumer response to the firm that chooses to dismiss its endorsement deal with the controversial celebrity depends on the assessment of blameworthiness of the undesirable event. Consumers react favorably to companies that associate with celebrities that are blameless rather than blameworthy for an undesirable event (Louie and Obermiller 2002).

Since the decision for firms to (dis)associate itself with the celebrity involved in an undesirable event hinges on consumer perceptions of blame (Louie and Obermiller 2002), it is important to understand consumers' attribution of blameworthiness for the undesirable event. Results from this study provide this crucial knowledge for endorsers by highlighting consumers' attribution of celebrity blameworthiness, particularly when the nature of the undesirable event is not as clear, such as the case with Michael Vick and dog fighting. In the event, when the company perceives that the celebrity is blameworthy and subsequently chooses to dismiss the endorser (as with Michael Vick and Nike) or not take action and continue its association (as with Hertz and O.J. Simpson and his involvement in spousal abuse), the findings from this research will provide the information that will help the company decide and communicate to key audiences to reinforce the company's decision, clarify its position and subsequently avoid any unnecessary backlash.

This research also provides interesting insights for crisis management: first, companies that are looking to sever their ties with the undesirable celebrity or the celebrity himself should not highlight the role of other minor entities as such action might backfire and produce undesirable results. In the case of a product harm recall with Firestone tires, Patrick and Folkes (2002) found

that when the corporation advertised the steps that consumers (minor entity) should take in the case of a recall, it backfired for the company by making Firestone's role more accessible in consumer memory resulting in further blame. Therefore, it might be expected that when a celebrity highlights the role of other entities involved in the undesirable event, it might in turn increase the salience of the celebrity's role in the mind of the consumer thereby increasing the severity of blame.

Several future research projects emerge from the nature of this study. Since the role of memory accessibility is key in blame assignment, a future research project could investigate whether the lower accessibility of information due to passage of time and decay of information regarding details of the event impacts the attribution of blame. In a separate study that investigated the undesirable event surrounding Firestone and Ford, Patrick and Folkes (2002) found that with time and subsequent decay of information, there was no significant difference in blame between the two companies. Most of the recent consumer research in attribution theory has been in the context of product harm recalls or product failures and has focused on consequences of and dimension of consumer attributions (Laufer et al. 2005) along with some research that has also investigated the antecedents and determinants of consumer attributions where, Folkes (1988) identified three major categories of antecedents: motivations, information and prior beliefs. Therefore, one extension of this study would be to investigate which of the above three determinants significantly explain celebrity blame and punishment. As suggested by Burger ((Burger 1981), a third research project should investigate the influence and locus of empathy in blame attribution. In the case of celebrities, do individuals with a high level of empathic concern for the celebrity blame the latter less severely than others who are low on this personality trait? Alternatively, do individuals with a high level of empathic concern for dogs blame the celebrity more severely than others who rank low on this trait? One limitation of this study is that it chose to focus on one type of celebrity – athletes. It is possible that sports fans might give professional athletes a hero status and subsequently exhibit a high level of tolerance for their favorite athlete's blameworthy action (Louie et al. 2001). Therefore, future research should investigate blame attributions of different categories of celebrities. These unanswered questions provide a robust research portfolio to study blame judgments of celebrity behavior that will subsequently help corporate endorsers by providing knowledge necessary to arrive at and support decisions to either discontinue or continue its relationship with a celebrity involved in an undesirable action.

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