Crisis Communication in Sport Celebrity Scandals: Effects of Openness, Directness, and Credibility of Response to Scandals on the Behavioral Intentions of MLB Fans

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Abstract

Athletic scandals have become popular theme in sport and many studies have focused on examining the impact of sport celebrity scandals on sport fans, teams, and organizations. Nonetheless, there has been minimal research regarding effective media response strategies when sport celebrity scandals occur. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how a sport celebrity’s media response to athletic scandals affects credibility of the response to scandals and a sport fan’s behavioral intentions to support.

A sample unit of this study was a Major League Baseball (MLB) fan who visited a stadium to enjoy the game and a total of 308 (Male: 158 / Female: 150) individuals were randomly asked at baseball stadiums in Midwest area. To examine sport fans’ perceptions about sport celebrity scandals, a self-administered survey was conducted. The data was analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) test.

Results of the study revealed openness to scandal response and directness of crisis communicator positively affected credibility of scandal response respectively, and credibility of the

Keywords: Celebrity scandal, Openness, Directness, Credibility
scandal response positively affected MLB fans’ behavioral intentions. This study provides individual athletes, PR managers, and administrators in sport organizations with practical implications regarding important response strategies in sport celebrity scandals.

Introduction

Sports is a unique product in that sport celebrities’ (e.g., athletes, coaches, and athletic directors) images and messages are delivered mainly through media coverage and sport fans are affected by the media coverage (Bruce & Tini, 2008). In particular, media coverage regarding sport celebrity scandals (e.g., Lance Armstrong’s doping scandal and Tiger Woods’ sex scandal) significantly affect sport fans (Osborne, Sherry & Nicholson, 2016) as well as damages sport celebrities’ images and reputation (Bruce & Tini, 2008). In other words, athletic scandals negatively affect sport fans’ attitudes toward sport celebrities (Fink, Cunningham & Kensicki, 2004; Till & Shimp, 1998).

Athletic scandals can be defined as illegal (e.g., doping) or unethical (e.g., sexual harassment) behaviors that sport celebrities are involved in over a sustained period of time and those behaviors affect people who are associated with sports (Hughes & Shank, 2005). Athletic scandals have occurred in more than 2000 cases over the past decade regardless of sports (Gorse & Chadwick, 2010). Athletic scandals have become popular theme in sport (Mazanov & Connor, 2010) and many studies (Hughes & Shank, 2005; Sato, Ko, Park & Tao, 2015; Um, 2013; Washington, 2015) have focused on examining the impact of sport celebrity scandals on sport fans, teams, and organizations. Nevertheless, Crisis communication strategies regarding sport celebrity scandals have not been thoroughly examined in previous research (Bruce & Tini, 2008). In particular, little research has been conducted regarding effective media response strategies when sport celebrity scandals occur.

Sport fans evaluate athletic scandals based on celebrities’ responses to scandals through media (Kennedy, 2010). In other words, how sport celebrities respond to scandals through media affect their credibility and fans’ willingness to support them. Specifically, the extent to which a response to scandal is trustworthy can be determined based on who responds to the scandal directly (i.e., crisis communicator) via what communication channels (Zerman, 1995), and the amount of messages expressed to the public (Yang, Kang & Johnson, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how a sport celebrity’s media response to athletic scandals affects message credibility and a sport fan’s intention to support.
Review of Literature

1. Scandals in Sport

A sport scandal is defined as “doing something illegal or immoral that has a profound impact on the sport or contest” (Hughes & Shank, 2005, p. 214). A sport scandal has become an increasingly prominent theme in sports and almost all sport teams and organizations face athletic scandals around the world (Prior, O’Reilly, Mazanov & Huybers, 2013). Previous sport scandal studies have focused on examining the impacts of sport scandals on a variety of topics, such as sport fans (Sato et al., 2015; Summers & Morgan, 2008), sponsorship and endorsement (Hughes & Shank, 2005; Um, 2013), and brand images and reputation (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Sassenberg, 2015; Washington, 2015).

Despite the abundant research, few studies (e.g., Koo, Ruihley & Dittmore, 2012) have examined sport celebrities’ source credibility and scandals. Many researchers (e.g., Jin & Phua, 2014; Lyon & Cameron, 2004; Yang et al., 2010) in crisis communication demonstrated that establishing source credibility is essential to resolve crisis situations. Therefore, it is necessary to study the role of a sport celebrity’s source credibility in sport scandals and how it affects sport fans.

2. Source Credibility Theory

Source credibility is defined as “judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator” (O’Keefe, 1990, p. 130-131) and it is composed of two components, expertise and trustworthiness (Yang et al., 2010). Source credibility is assessed based on individuals’ perceptions toward communicators that provide credible information (Berlo, Lemert & Mertz, 1969; Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; McCroskey & Richmond, 1996; Yang et al., 2010).

Hovland and Weiss (1952) proposed Source Credibility Theory (SCT) to explain how people are persuaded by information sources presented. According to the theory, people are more likely to be persuaded when credible sources are given to people (Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953; Umeogu, 2012). Many researchers (Berlo, Lemert & Mertz, 1969; Dholakia, 1987; Eisend, 2006; Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McCroskey, Hamilton & Weiner, 1974; Umeogu, 2012) have studied source credibility and found the fact that message receivers tend to accept a message when the message source or a communicator has high credibility. SCT has been applied to many contexts, including online website credibility (e.g., Lowry, Wilson & Haig, 2014), consumer behavior in marketing (e.g., Simpson & Kahler, 1980), and organizational behavior (e.g., Widgery & Stackpole, 1972). In particular, SCT has been adopted to explain reputation management research (e.g., Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Herbig & Milewicz, 1995).

In sport communication research, SCT has been used for examining athlete
endorsement (e.g., Stevens, Lathrop & Bradish, 2003), athlete performance (e.g., Koo et al., 2012), and image repair in sport scandals (e.g., Brown, Dickhaus & Long, 2012). In particular, source credibility has been an important theme regarding sport celebrities’ image repair strategies on scandal situations (Brown et al., 2012; Haigh, 2008). As with the previous research in crisis communication (Berlo et al., 1969; Dholakia, 1987; Eisend, 2006; Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951, McCroskey et al., 1974; Umeogu, 2012), providing credible messages through transparent responses to a scandal can be an effective way to protect sport celebrities’ images and positively affect sport fans.

3. Openness to Communication

Openness to communication is defined as personal disclosure to support relationships through clear communication in language (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987). Many researchers (Aakko, 2004; Cox & Dannahy, 2005; Peters et al., 1997; Yang et al., 2010) examined how openness in communication brings out positive outcomes and demonstrated the effect of openness on delivering credible messages in communication. Peters et al. (1997) examined the determinants of trust and credibility in environmental risk communication and the results of the study revealed that openness was one of important determinants that affect trust and credibility. Aakko (2004) examined risk communication in published health reports and found openness to risk communication was an important factor that spokespeople should exhibit to establish and maintain trust in risk communication. Cox and Dannahy (2005) focused on the value of openness in e-relationships (e.g., online coaching, online mentoring) and found that openness was an important element of developing trust for positive e-relationships. In crisis communication, openness positively affects audience engagement in crisis, and it enables communicated messages to be credible (Yang et al., 2010). In this sense, a sport celebrity’s open response to athletic scandal positively affects credibility of response to the scandal.

**Hypothesis 1:** Openness to scandal response positively affects credibility of response to scandals

4. Directness of Crisis Communicator

Many crisis communication studies (e.g., Arpan, 2002; Barrett, Hasbargen, Ocana, Markey, Berg, Grand & Sellnow, 2016; Liu, Bartz & Duke, 2016) have stressed the role of a spokesperson as a crisis communicator when a crisis occurs in organizations. The major role of crisis communicator is to control the crisis situation (McDaniel, 1997) and to defend organizations’ reputation (Holtzhausen & Roberts,
A crisis communicator is critical to establish and maintain trust of the organization (Liu et al., 2016). That is, the effect of crisis communication depends on how the crisis communicators communicate with the public.

In sports, crisis communicators (e.g., athletes, coaches, team spokespersons, sport agencies) attempt to minimize damages caused by crises in sports (e.g., athletic scandals) using response strategies such as apology or denial (Bruce & Tini, 2008; Len-Ríos, 2010).

According to Joseph (1982), a communicator’s nonverbal or verbal cues affect their credibility. Researchers (e.g., Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kiousis, 2001) also have demonstrated that people tend to trust information on media differently according to traditional media (e.g., newspaper, radio) or new media (e.g., internet). That means message credibility is affected by sources that deliver the messages (Harkins & Petty, 1987). In communication research, researchers (e.g., Loosemore, 1999) noted that directness in communication can be effective in crisis management in the sense that it facilitates reaction process and prevents message distortion. Many sport celebrity scandal studied (e.g., Fortunato, 2008; Kennedy, 2010; Meng & Pan, 2013) have shown that sport fans want sincere responses from sport celebrities who are involved in the scandals in person. In this sense, directness in crisis communication (e.g., an athlete’s direct apology in a press conference) may affect credibility of the response to the scandal. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that directness of crisis communicator affects the credibility of a response to a scandal.

**Hypothesis 2:** Directness of crisis communicator positively affects credibility of response to scandal

5. **Behavioral Intentions**

Many studies (Ahmed, Farooq & Iqbal, 2014; Harmon & Coney, 1982; Jones, Sinclair, and Courneya, 2003) have addressed the relationship between credibility (e.g., source credibility, message credibility) and behavioral intentions (e.g., buying intentions, patronage intentions). For example, Jones et al. (2003) examined the effects of source credibility and message framing on university students’ exercise intentions and found the fact that credible sources and messages positively affected promoting university students’ exercise intentions and attitudes. According to previous research in communication, highly credible sources are more likely to be persuasive (McGinnies, 1973; Sternthal, Dholakia & Leavitt, 1978). In other words, high credibility of communicator significantly affects a message receiver’s attitude and behavior intentions (Harmon & Coney, 1982).

In crisis management, researchers (e.g., Heath, 1997; Yang et al., 2010) have
demonstrated that establishing credibility is essential to generate positive outcomes (e.g., image restoration) after crisis situations. In particular, narrative messages that are engaged with individual audiences positively affect individuals’ behavioral intentions (Escalas, 2004; Yang et al., 2010). In this sense, the credibility of messages conveyed in crisis situation may affect individuals’ behavioral intentions after the crisis. Therefore, credibility of response to scandal affects a sport fan’s behavioral intentions.

**Hypothesis 3:** Credibility of scandal response positively affects a fan’s behavioral intentions

![Figure 1. Conceptual model](image)

**Methods**

1. **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to examine how sport fans perceive sport celebrity scandals and how a sport celebrity’s response to scandals affects sport fans’ behavioral intentions. In this study, four latent variables (i.e., openness to scandal response, directness of crisis communicator, credibility of scandal response, fan behavioral intentions) were developed based on the previous literature. To examine sport fans’ perceptions about sport celebrity scandals, a self-administered survey was conducted.
2. Sampling Procedure

A sample unit of this study was a Major League Baseball (MLB) fan who visited a stadium to enjoy the game. MLB fans were selected because athletic scandals (e.g., doping and match-fixing) have frequently occurred in MLB and previous studies (e.g., Nafziger, 2006; Quick, Lambert & Josey, 2016) found those scandals significantly affected MLB fans’ attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, MLB fans were chosen to examine how they perceive MLB scandals and how scandal responses affect their attitudes and behaviors.

A total of 308 samples (Male: 158 / Female: 150) were collected at baseball stadiums in Midwest areas. First of all, each participant was asked to read a fictitious scandal response narrative associated with MLB players. The fictitious scandal situation and a crisis communicator’s response to the scandal were created based on actual doping scandal cases in MLB. After reading the scandal response narrative, a survey instruction was given and each participant was asked to answer questions regarding scandal response, credibility, and behavioral intention. Once each participant answered scandal related questions, they were asked to answer demographic questions.

3. Instrument

12 item scales were adopted from previous literature (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Loosemore, 1999; Ohanian, 1990; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011; Yang et al., 2010). Items for openness to scandal response, credibility of scandal response, and behavioral intention were modified, and items for directness of crisis communicator were created based on the previous literature (see Table 1). All items were measured based on the 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree).

3.1. Openness to scandal response. Openness to scandal response means the extent to which a crisis communicator specifically depicts the scandal situation and conveys clear information. Three items were modified based on the works from Yang et al.’s (2010) openness to dialogic communication scale and salience of crisis narratives scale. Items included 1) the crisis communicator made an effort to respond to the scandal specifically, 2) the crisis communicator seemed arrogant, and 3) the scandal response seemed clear.

3.2. Directness of crisis communicator. Directness of crisis communicator was defined as a degree of direct communication through crisis communicator. Three items were created based on the works from Veil et al. (2011) and Loosemore (1999). Items were 1) the scandal response was directly done by the athlete himself or herself, 2) the scandal response was reliable because the response to the scandal was directly done by the athlete, and 3) the scandal response would not
be trustworthy if it was done by a third person such as a coach or an agent instead of the athlete.

3.3. Credibility of scandal response. Credibility of scandal response means the extent to which the messages conveyed by a crisis communicator is credible. Three items were adapted and modified from Ohanian’s (1990) trustworthiness scale, and Appelman and Sundar’s (2016) message credibility scale. Items were 1) the scandal response was trustworthy, 2) the scandal response was reliable, and 3) the scandal response was believable.

3.4. Behavioral intentions. In this study, behavioral intentions represent a sport fan’s willingness to support the sport celebrity who was involved in the scandal. Three items were modified based on the patronage intentions scale from Walker, Heere, Parent, and Drane (2010), and spectators’ behavioral intentions from Bisciachia (2016). Items included 1) I will support the athlete in the future, 2) I will visit the stadium to enjoy the game regardless of the athlete scandal, and 3) I will speak favorably of the athlete to others.

4. Data Analysis

To validate the proposed model fit, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed. The validity of the measurement model was measured based on the results of χ² test, global fit indices (i.e., Comparative Fit Index, Tucker Lewis Index, Incremental Fit Index, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Based on the results of the CFA, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) test was conducted to examine relationships among latent variables (i.e., openness to scandal response, directness of crisis communicator, credibility of scandal response, and behavioral intentions).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor (Cronbach’s α)</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Openness to Scandal Response (α = .74)</strong></td>
<td>The crisis communicator made an effort to respond to the scandal specifically</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The crisis communicator seemed arrogant</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The scandal response seemed clear.</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directness of Crisis Communicator (α = .73)</strong></td>
<td>The scandal response was directly done by the athlete himself or herself</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The scandal response was reliable because the response to the scandal was directly done by the athlete</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The scandal response would not be trustworthy if it was done by a third person such as a coach or an agent instead of the athlete</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credibility of Scandal Response (α = .85)</strong></td>
<td>The scandal response was trustworthy</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The scandal response was reliable</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The scandal response was believable</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavioral Intentions (α = .76)</strong></td>
<td>I will support the athlete in the future</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I will visit the stadium to enjoy the game regardless of the athlete scandal, a</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I will speak favorably of the athlete to others</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. M = Mean (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree), SE = Standard Error, β = Standardized Factor Loading, CR = Composite Reliability, and AVE = Average Variance Extracted*
Results

1. Descriptive Statistics
A total of 308 samples (Male: 158 / Female: 150) were analyzed to examine the proposed model of the study. The average age of respondents was 37.1 and the descriptive statistics showed 42% of total respondents answered a doping (i.e., use of performance-enhancing drugs) is the most serious scandal in MLB (42%), followed by match-fixing (38%) and off-field scandals (16%) such as sexual misconduct, domestic violence, or illegal gambling.

2. Measurement Model Test
The measurement model was analyzed through CFA. The result of the \( \chi^2 \) test was significant \( (p < .001) \) and the results of the global fit indices were acceptable for the data \( (\text{CFI} = .96, \text{TLI} = .94, \text{IFI} = .96, \text{RMSEA} = .06) \) based on standards of the fit indices (Bentler, 1990; Tucker & Lewis, 1973). To verify convergent validity of the measurement model, AVE and CR were evaluated based on Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) fit indices (good fit: AVE ≥ .5, CR ≥ .7). Constructs of the model revealed acceptable levels of AVE, ranging from .51 to .67. Composite reliabilities of the model ranged from .75 to .86. Therefore, convergent validity of the model was satisfied. With regard to items loaded on each construct of the model, all items were significant ranged from .50 to .94 \( (p < .001) \).

Correlations between constructs ranged from .14 to .50 (see Table 2). The largest squared correlation was .25 between openness to scandal response and directness of communicator, and the value of squared correlation was lower than the smallest AVE of .51 in the model. Thus, discriminant validity was met based on Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) fit criterion. Based on the results of the \( \chi^2 \) test, global fit indices, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, the measurement model was successfully constructed.
Table 2
Correlations between Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Openness to Scandal Response</th>
<th>Directness of Crisis Communicator</th>
<th>Credibility of Scandal Response</th>
<th>Behavioral Intentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness to Scandal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directness of Crisis</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td></td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility of Scandal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Intentions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Structural Model Test

Regarding the structural model, the results of the SEM showed that the χ² test was significant (p < .001) and fit indices were acceptable (CFI = .92, TLI = .89, IFI = .92, RMSEA = .08). Specifically, results of the SEM showed 1) openness to scandal response positively affected credibility of scandal response (H1: γ₁ = .36, p < .001), 2) directness of crisis communicator positively affected credibility of scandal response (H2: γ₂ = .23, p < .001), and 3) credibility of scandal response positively affected behavioral intention (H3: β₃ = .22, p < .001). Thus, all hypotheses were accepted.

Figure 2. Empirical results of the conceptual model
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of openness and directness to crisis communication on the credibility of a response to a sport celebrity scandal and how the credibility of scandal response affects sport fans' behavioral intentions. Specifically, this study focused on understanding the effects of open and direct communication of crisis communicators in MLB scandals and the effect of a credible response to the scandal on MLB fans’ intention to support them in the future. Results of the study revealed openness to scandal response and directness of crisis communicator positively affected credibility of scandal response (H1 and H2, respectively), and credibility of the scandal response positively affected MLB fans' behavioral intentions (H3).

Many studies (Hughes & Shank, 2005; Kennedy, 2010; Mazanov & Connor, 2010; Sato et al., 2015; Um, 2013; Washington, 2015; Yang et al., 2010) addressed celebrity scandals in sports. In particular, studying about crisis response strategies has become an increasingly popular theme in sports (Bruce & Tini, 2008). Regarding crisis communication, previous research has demonstrated the importance of source credibility (Berlo et al., 1969; Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Hovland et al., 1953; McCroskey & Richmond, 1996; Yang et al., 2010). According to source credibility theory proposed by Hovland and Weiss (1952), credibility of information conveyed plays an important role in persuading people. In this sense, showing credible response to sport celebrity scandal is important to positively affect sport fans’ attitudes and behaviors.

In this study, openness to scandal responses and directness of crisis communicators significantly affected the credibility of a scandal response. Previous research in crisis communication showed the importance of openness to communication (e.g., Aakko, 2004; Cox & Dannahy, 2005; Peters et al., 1997; Yang et al., 2010) and direct communication of crisis communicators (e.g., Loosemore, 1999). Therefore, the results of the study support the previous literature. This study also showed that the credibility of scandal response positively affected MLB fans’ behavioral intentions (e.g., revisit intention, purchasing intention). According to previous research in crisis communication, credible messages provided by communicators significantly influence message receivers’ behavioral intentions (Harmon & Coney, 1982). In this sense, the finding of the study is in line with the previous literature in crisis communication.

1. Practical Implications

This study provides individual athletes, PR managers, and administrators in sport organizations with practical implications. First, the results of the study offer important response strategies in sport celebrity scandals. The findings of the study
showed the importance of openness to communication and directness of crisis communicator to ensure credibility of a scandal response. In other words, delivering specific and clear messages through the athlete, himself or herself, is critical to ensure the credibility of the response to sport celebrity scandals. Therefore, PR managers and administrators in sport organizations should be able to cope with sport celebrity scandals based on appropriate response strategies using openness to communication and directness of the crisis communicator.

Second, the findings of the study demonstrated that the credibility of response to a scandal affected MLB fans’ behavioral intentions. This means that credible responses to scandals can positively change sport fans’ intention to support them. Once a sport celebrity scandal occurs, it takes a long time to recover sport fans’ trust and support, whereas athletes’ and sport team’s images are quickly tarnished. In this sense, individual athletes and PR managers in sport organizations should focus on delivering credible messages to sport fans for positive outcomes.

Finally, PR managers and administrators in sport organizations should educate individual athletes regarding the importance of crisis communication so that they can respond to athletic scandals appropriately. Sport fans tend to believe scandal responses that are shown in media. This means media plays an important role in crisis communication. Thus, PR managers and administrators in sport organizations should provide individual athletes with information about media response strategies in athletic scandals.

2. Limitations and Future Research
This study contributes to understanding the importance of crisis communication in sport celebrity scandals. Despite the contributions, this study has limitations. First, this study was designed to have participants answer scandal response questions after reading fictitious doping scandal narratives associated with MLB players. Since each participant answered questions based only on a fictitious story, effects of confounding variables (e.g., sport involvement, team identification) were not thoroughly controlled. Considering the results of the study might be different according to design of scandal narratives, this study has internal validity issues. Therefore, future research should be developed thorough research design to avoid biased answers from participants. In addition, future research should develop appropriate item scales associated with crisis communication in sports (e.g., scandal response scale and effects of image repair scale) to ensure internal validity.

Second, this study has an external validity issue. Samples were collected from MLB fans in the Midwest area. In other words, other MLB fans in other areas and sport fans other than MLB were not considered in this study. In this sense, this study has a generalizability issue. To ensure external validity, future research should clarify the meaning of a sport fan based on psychological commitment and
behavioral consistency (Mahony, Madrigal & Howard, 2000) and population of the study. With regard to sampling, diverse sport fans that are randomly collected from diverse areas should be considered to ensure external validity.

Conclusion

There have been extensive research regarding athletic celebrity scandals in sports (Hughes & Shank, 2005; Mazanov & Connor, 2010; Sato et al., 2015; Um, 2013; Washington, 2015). Despite the abundant research, little research has been conducted on crisis communication strategies in sport celebrity scandals. Studying effective communication strategies in athletic scandals is important to protect images tarnished by athletic scandals.

Based on this, the purpose of this study was to examine how openness to scandal response and directness of crisis communicator affect credibility of scandal response and sport fans’ behavioral intentions. The results of the study showed that openness and directness in crisis communication significantly affected credibility of scandal response and the credibility positively influenced sport fans’ behavioral intentions to support sport celebrities. The findings of the study provide individual athletes, PR managers, and administrators in sport organizations with practical implications regarding response strategies in media when athletic scandals occur. However, this study has limitations regarding internal and external validity issues. Thus, future research will focus on developing appropriate research design and measurement scales, and ensuring sample diversity to resolve study limitations.

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