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## There goes my hero again: sport scandal frequency and social identity driven response\*

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### ABSTRACT

With sport scandals reported frequently in the media, it is important to understand how associated stakeholders are affected. In the current work, we investigated the impact of off-field sport scandal on key stakeholders (the sport, implicated team, sponsor brand), and the roles played by team identification and scandal frequency. A 2 (fandom) × 3 (scandal frequency) between-subjects quasi-experiment examined responses to scandal news stories. Ingroup fan attitudes became less favorable toward all stakeholders following scandal, especially when it was described as repeat behavior. This differed to outgroup fan attitudes, which became less favorable toward the sport, but were generally negative and stable for other stakeholders, irrespective of scandal frequency. Respondents were willing to attribute responsibility to particular perpetrators rather than the team, and tended to endorse sponsorship continuation simultaneously with perpetrator removal/sanction. Findings have strategic implications for those involved in sponsorship, sport marketing, and sport management.

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### KEYWORDS

Sport scandal; sponsorship; social identity; fans; brand attitude; spillover

Brands frequently align with sporting entities through activities like corporate sponsorship as part of their marketing strategies. These alliances are intended to evoke a positive response from consumers (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). However, they might also be damaging to brands in some instances, such as when a sports scandal erupts. For example, when the FIFA corruption scandal emerged in 2015, a considerable amount of press was generated discussing potential damage to sponsors like Adidas and Coca-Cola (Jervell, 2015). Similarly, when the elevator assault footage of NFL player Ray Rice was made public, sponsors distanced themselves to avoid being tarnished by association (Castillo, 2014). In some cases, brands announce a termination of the partnership, and in others they declare a continuation of sponsorship (perhaps with a message of disapproval), or they otherwise remain relatively silent on the matter (Boudway, 2014). Despite how commonplace sport scandal has become in recent years, and the potential risks it poses to associated brands and sporting bodies, only limited research has examined its consequences, and particularly the repercussions for various stakeholders (Doyle, Pentecost, & Funk, 2014; Wilson, Stavros, & Westberg, 2008).

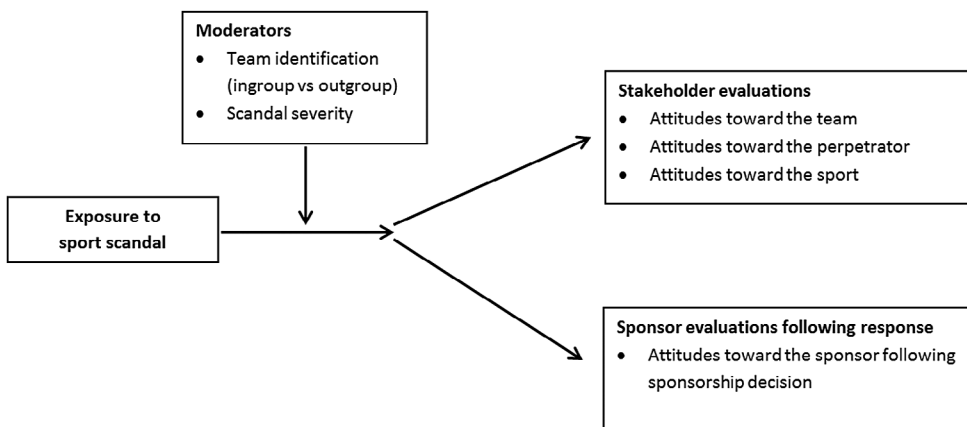
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In one recent experimental study, Chien, Kelly, and Weeks (2016) proposed a framework based on social identity theory, suggesting that responses to sport scandal will differ between fans of the implicated team and fans of rival teams, and that the severity of the scandal will moderate effects (see Figure 1). The framework highlights that incidents like doping scandals can have differential impacts depending on the stakeholder considered. Using American college football as a context, Chien et al. reported that fans' attitudes toward the team diminished to a greater extent when several team members were implicated, as opposed to just one player, presumably because these more severe scandals can begin to reflect badly on them as fans (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Rival team fans' attitudes were less favorable in general, and varied less over conditions where there was just one team member involved versus many since rival fans already hold a relatively negative view of the implicated team, with the scandal just reinforcing these perceptions.

Interestingly, Chien et al. (2016) found that both fans and rival fans may be willing to isolate blame to specific perpetrators, rather than blame the team/sport as a whole. In relation to sponsor brands, the research revealed fans typically endorsed a continuation of sponsorship despite the scandal, while rival fans endorsed termination. Although these findings shed light on the consequences of sport scandal for stakeholders, the results were limited to a single type of scandal (doping) within one sporting context (American college football), a single operationalization of scandal severity (number of individuals involved), and were in relation to a scandal that impacted play outcomes. In reality, a diverse array of sport scandals are reported in the media, and reactions may not necessarily be the same if game outcomes are not affected. Indeed, the diversity of scandal types and characteristics that exist may be why so few controlled experimental studies on the topic exist, and why authors are left continually calling for more research into the effects of scandal (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009).

In the current research, we extend the ideas of Chien et al. (2016) to consider the impact on stakeholders when scandal relates to an off-field transgression that does not impact gameplay (alcohol-fueled violence). The impacts of these off-field scandals are important to understand since they represent about one-third of scandals reported in the media (31%;



**Figure 1.** Sport scandal framework. Source: Adapted from Chien et al. (2016).

Chien et al., 2016), and because of the ever-increasing media scrutiny of athletes' personal lives, and the growth in social media platforms that increase the risk of negative off-field incidents receiving attention (Pegoraro, 2010). The celebrity status given to athletes today can mean that the nature of these scandals (e.g. alcohol and violence related) has the potential to influence those who look upon them as role models. News reports frequently claim that off-field misconduct by athletes can tarnish the image of sport and reputation of associated entities (e.g. host countries), or jeopardize relationships with particular fan bases and with sponsors (e.g. Koch, 2013). An empirical test of such claims is warranted.

Accordingly, our research seeks to replicate and extend Chien et al. (2016) by testing the generality of the framework forwarded in that study. The importance of replication and extension studies in marketing research has been emphasized by a number of commentators in recent years (e.g. Kerr, Schultz, & Lings, 2016). Uncles (2011) argues the importance of replication to the scientific method and knowledge advancement, highlighting that such studies help reveal the boundary conditions of effects – something very pertinent to contexts like scandal which vary on a number of dimensions (e.g. scandal type, severity, relationship to game outcomes). Evanschitzky and Armstrong (2010) note that replication and extension are cornerstones of science, and encourage publishing of such studies to support this endeavor. To this end, our work makes four key contributions. First, it extends the ideas presented in Chien et al. by considering how fans and rival fans differentially evaluate various sport stakeholders (sport, team, and sponsor) following exposure to an off-field transgression that has no connection to gameplay (alcohol-fueled violence). Second, it examines an additional operationalization of scandal severity (frequency of occurrence: single or repeated) to understand when people may be more or less likely to dismiss transgressions. Third, it investigates the hypothesized effects in a different sport and different national context to advance empirical generalization. Finally, it examines qualitative comments from participants to reveal how fans and rival fans expect sponsors to respond in the absence of an explicit termination or continuation declaration following scandal. This is a common strategy when sponsors want to see how the scandal will play out, or wish to continue with a sponsorship without necessarily appearing to support wrong-doing (Boudway, 2014).

## Literature review and hypothesis development

### *Sport scandal definition*

Hughes and Shank (2005, p. 214) conceptualize sport scandal as actions that are '... either illegal or unethical, involve multiple parties over a sustained period of time, and whose impact affects the integrity of the sport with which they are associated.' Here, we propose that value can be added to understanding sport scandal complexity by noting it can occur both on-field and off-field, and can impact stakeholders well beyond the sport itself. We thus propose a more comprehensive description that *sport scandal includes those transgressions by sports-connected parties that are either illegal or unethical, occurring either on-field or off-field, which have the potential to reflect directly or indirectly on the integrity of the sport, as well as on associated stakeholders.*

Notably, our definition excludes the suggestion that the action must occur over a sustained period of time since a transgression occurring just once is often deemed scandalous (e.g. when Olympian Ryan Lochte falsely claimed to have been robbed at gunpoint during the Rio Olympics, it was widely described as a scandal; Visser, 2016). Further, we include that

sport scandal has the *potential* to reflect on the integrity of stakeholders since the implications are not always clear or direct. In line with previous findings (Chien et al., 2016), we argue that reactions to scandal can instead vary depending on an individual's affiliation with the team. Fan differences are central to the current study and we outline background understanding around team-based social identity effects below prior to forwarding several hypotheses.

### **Team-based social identification**

Sport is one context where group membership can be held passionately, and where intersecting and competing allegiances are held simultaneously (Wann & Grieve, 2005). For example, two people who are fans of the same code of football (e.g. Australia's National Rugby League) may feel a strong connectedness in their shared affiliation as fans of this sport, and a repulsion of others who favor a competing code of football (e.g. Australian Football League). Simultaneously, these two individuals may feel a direct rivalry with each other if they are fans of competing teams within the same code. Such complex allegiances have implications for the way different stakeholders will be impacted when scandals erupt.

According to social identity theory, people's social identities are derived from their memberships in a variety of social groups, together with attached value and emotional significance (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Individuals are motivated to maintain a positive identity by associating with groups like successful sports teams, and conversely, dissociating from other groups such as rival sports teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). People seek identity enhancement by attempting to preserve or strengthen the group to which they belong (the ingroup) and act in ways that highlight distinctiveness from other groups (outgroups; Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000). This identity enhancement process often occurs in a biased manner with people subjectively evaluating their ingroup more favorably than any outgroup (i.e. *ingroup favoritism*; Aberson et al., 2000). Furthermore, people can provide unjustly negative appraisals of outgroups to emphasize superiority of their own ingroup (i.e. *outgroup derogation*; Wann & Grieve, 2005). These biases can be particularly pronounced when the ingroup is at risk, or when an individual's identity has been threatened (Wann & Grieve, 2005), such as in the case of sport scandal. Accordingly, team identification can serve as a mechanism that underlies fans' reactions to scandal.

Up to a point, people may be tolerant of transgressions by members of their own ingroup, and more so than of similar transgressions enacted by members of competing outgroups (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008). Thus, when an athlete is involved in a somewhat minor off-field transgression (e.g. a speeding offense), most fans may be dismissive. Ingroup members often attribute such actions to temporary situational factors, or particular individuals, rather than to the ingroup itself (Hewstone, 1990). When the incident is more severe however, such as when it occurs repeatedly, it may start to affect how ingroup members view the group and their affiliation with it. Work by Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford (1986) highlights that ingroup members can begin to view the group less favorably, and seek distance, if they perceive that membership has started to reflect badly on them. This fan behavior is termed *cutting-off-reflected failure (CORFing)* and has typically been discussed in relation to sports fans attempting to reduce their association with an unsuccessful team (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). For example, CORFing has been observed when a favored team loses a highly anticipated match, with fans attempting to distance themselves through actions like not displaying team colors

or memorabilia (Snyder et al., 1986). Furthermore, fans may distance themselves following notable transgressions because of a sense of *vicarious shame* derived from having a shared identity with the wrong-doer (Fink et al., 2009; Lickel et al., 2005). In the context of sport scandal, we expect this distancing will manifest in the form of less favorable evaluations of the various stakeholders associated with the athlete responsible for the scandal (i.e. the sport, implicated team, and associated sponsor).

In considering how the sport in general will be impacted when an individual athlete is involved in a scandal, we predict all fans of the sport, regardless of team affiliation, will begin to evaluate the sport less favorably for the reasons outlined above. Even though scandal may be linked to individuals within one particular team, shared membership in the superordinate 'sport fan' group will result in poorer attitudes toward the sport, both among fans of the implicated team and among fans of the rival team (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). Moreover, we expect these attitudes to become poorer in both groups as frequency of scandal increases due to ego-protective mechanisms like CORFing (Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

While this prediction may seem intuitive, commentary does exist that suggests otherwise. For example, Connor and Mazanov (2010) argue that scandal has become ubiquitous in sport today, resulting in the public being desensitized to it. Consequently, it could be argued consumers' attitudes might not decline over time with repeated exposure, but rather might plateau once exposure has reached a certain point (*scandal fatigue*; Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012). Thus, it is possible that ongoing or repeated involvement in scandals by sports teams or athletes might reach a saturation point, and hence might not always have cumulatively negative effects on attitudes. It is for this reason that our prediction of a decline in attitudes with increased scandal frequency due to phenomena like CORFing and vicarious shame must be tested.

*Hypothesis 1:* Following exposure to a sport scandal, attitudes toward the sport will become less favorable among all fans of the sport (regardless of team affiliation) and the effect will be stronger as scandal frequency increases.

Differences based on fans' team identification can be expected when considering evaluations of the implicated team. Thus, while attitudes toward the sport might become less favorable for fans of any implicated team due to sport being a superordinate group, team differences will likely exist for fans of specific rival teams. This highlights the relativistic nature of social identity (Wann & Grieve, 2005). Research examining *ultimate attribution error* in social identity reveals that when an ingroup member engages in negative behavior, unless it is ongoing and representative of group norms, fellow ingroup members can be fairly dismissive, attributing the behavior to temporary situational factors or specific individuals (Hewstone, 1990). In contrast, when an outgroup member engages in negative behavior, it is attributed to stable characteristics, and considered typical of the outgroup (Hewstone, 1990). Accordingly, distinct patterns of appraisal about sport scandal may emerge depending upon whether the individual is a fan of the implicated team (ingroup fan), or a rival team (outgroup fan). We expect that due to ingroup favoritism (and outgroup derogation), ingroup fans will hold more positive attitudes toward the team in general than will outgroup fans. However, we expect ingroup fans' attitudes to become less favorable in the presence of scandal, and to become poorer still as scandal frequency increases (Lickel et al., 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Outgroup fans, on the other hand, are expected to display relatively stable negative attitudes across levels of scandal frequency. This is because, in line with ideas

about ultimate attribution, outgroup fans already hold generally negative views of the team and attribute the scandal to being normative for that team (Hewstone, 1990).

*Hypothesis 2a:* Following exposure to a sport scandal, attitudes toward the team will be more favorable among ingroup fans than outgroup fans.

*Hypothesis 2b:* Ingroup fans' attitudes toward the team will become less favorable as scandal frequency increases (compared to a one-off scandal), but outgroup fans' attitudes will be stable regardless of scandal frequency.

Through activities like sport sponsorship, sponsor brands and teams/athletes can become strongly linked in memory, with fans forming an integrated cognitive representation that reinforces shared associations (Cornwell et al., 2005). Thus, when a sport scandal breaks, it has flow-on effects for sponsor brands. We expect ingroup fans will have more favorable attitudes toward the sponsor than will outgroup fans since the sponsor is essentially viewed as an ally, and thus a type of ingroup member (Chien et al., 2016). As with attitudes toward the team, we expect ingroup fan attitudes toward the sponsor will become less favorable as frequency of scandal increases (Lickel et al., 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Outgroup fan attitudes toward the sponsor in contrast should be relatively stable across levels of scandal frequency because outgroup fans already hold negative perceptions of anything affiliated with the implicated team (Hewstone, 1990).

Differential fan responses toward team sponsors have been observed in previous research examining rivalry effects. For example, Dalakas and Levin (2005) showed NASCAR fans displayed positive attitudes toward the sponsor of their favorite driver and negative attitudes toward the sponsor of their least favorite driver. Similarly, Grohs, Reisinger, and Woisetschläger (2015) reported results in the context of soccer showing positive attitudes toward sponsors of favored teams and negative attitudes toward sponsors of rival teams. Further, in relation to social identity effects, research by Angell, Gorton, Bottomley, and White (2016) revealed that highly identified fans pay more attention to team sponsors and that they can experience *schadenfreude* (pleasure at the rival team's misfortune) when something negative happens, which would be very relevant to fan responses in situations like scandal. Thus, rivalry between the teams and team identification are likely to create differential fan response to sponsors.

*Hypothesis 3a:* Following exposure to a sport scandal, attitudes toward the team sponsor will be more favorable among ingroup fans than outgroup fans.

*Hypothesis 3b:* Ingroup fans' attitudes toward the sponsor will become less favorable as scandal frequency increases (compared to a one-off scandal), but outgroup fans' attitudes will be stable regardless of scandal frequency.

In addition to the hypotheses above, our work also aims to explore perceptions of how fans feel sponsors should respond following scandal, where an explicit sponsorship decision has not been provided. This is important to understand since not all sponsors offer explicit statements of continuation or termination, and it remains unclear how fans actually want sponsors to react. This exploratory component of the research is intended to supplement our hypotheses, and provide insight into the question of *how fans feel sponsor brands should respond when faced with a scandal implicating the sponsored team*. In line with the foregoing discussion, it is expected fans will prefer sponsors to maintain their support in the face of minor transgressions, but endorse a harsher response following more severe (repeat) scandals.



## Study

### Method

Our scandal scenario involved a high-profile rugby league player implicated in off-field alcohol-fueled violence (single vs. repeated incidents). The player was described as belonging to a team within a major annual rugby league series in Australia. The series is a best-of-three competition between two teams (Team A and Team B), each representing two major Australian states. The rivalry between these teams and their fan bases is strong, and thus appropriate for testing our hypotheses regarding team identification. We used real team names in experimental stimuli for ecological validity, but anonymize teams here for reporting purposes. The scandal topic of alcohol-fueled violence was chosen given this has been noted as problematic within rugby league in Australia (Walter, 2014).

### Design and participants

The study employed a 2 (fandom: ingroup, outgroup)  $\times$  3 (scandal frequency: neutral-no scandal, single scandal, repeat scandal) between-subjects design. Dependent variables included attitude toward the sport ( $Att_{sport}$ ), attitude toward the implicated team ( $Att_{team}$ ), and attitude toward the team sponsor ( $Att_{sponsor}$ ). All materials were administered to participants via an online survey platform.

Our manipulations were implemented using fictitious sports news stories, where an incident was described for one team (Team A), but evaluated by fans of both teams. The survey link was emailed to an established mailing list of 2665 fans (1102 Team A fans, 1563 Team B fans), which was developed previously using social media recruitment via rugby league fan pages for university research into rugby league. It was completed by 266 respondents, giving a 10% response rate. Demographic breakdown aligns with rugby league fan gender split for the chosen sporting event with 41% female (Daily Telegraph, 2017, reports female viewers represent 42% of the audience), with age groups being comparable to what might be expected for respondents to an email survey (56% aged 18–30 years, 36% aged 31–49 years, and 8% aged 50+ years). To ensure data were based on responses from fans who identified highly and with only one team, we excluded 44 participants who indicated they were a fan of both teams (identification score of three or above on a seven-point scale for both teams), showed low team identification for both teams, or low sport involvement scores (scores below three). Our final sample consisted of 222 high identifying fans – 89 Team A fans ( $M_{TeamA\_Ident} = 4.45$ ,  $M_{TeamB\_Ident} = 1.43$ ), and 133 Team B fans ( $M_{TeamB\_Ident} = 4.63$ ,  $M_{TeamA\_Ident} = 1.32$ ).

### Materials and procedure

Participants were asked to take part in an online survey to understand perceptions of sports news stories and were randomly assigned to one of the news story conditions. All participants were entered into a prize draw for a \$200 gift card, and upon completion they were debriefed and informed the news stories were fictitious.

**Fandom and social identity measures.** Participants completed five semantic differential scale items to determine level of involvement with rugby league (adapted from Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990): ‘unimportant/very important,’ ‘means nothing/means a lot,’ ‘personally relevant/personally irrelevant,’ ‘doesn’t matter a great deal/matters a great deal,’ ‘of no concern/



of great concern. Team identification was measured using five Likert scale items adapted from Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999): 'I am a fan of [team]'; 'I have good feelings about [team] fans'; 'I feel strong ties with [team] fans'; 'Being a [team] fan is an important part of who I am'; 'In terms of my attitudes and beliefs, I feel that I am similar to [team] fans' (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .97$ ). In this experiment, we consider fans of Team A the ingroup, and fans of Team B the outgroup since the scandal manipulation related to a Team A player.

**Scandal frequency manipulation.** Participants read one of the three fictitious news stories focusing on Team A: relatively neutral information about the focal team (neutral-no scandal), a single first-time alcohol-fueled violence incident involving a player (single scandal), or an alcohol-fueled violence scandal that was described as part of a series of such incidents by the player (repeated scandal). Each news story consisted of three paragraphs of text. The first paragraph outlined the general issue, the player profile, and an initial reaction from the team. The second paragraph provided details of the incident and highlighted its frequency. The third paragraph re-emphasized the nature of the incident and its frequency, followed by comments from the team and a 'we're waiting for more information' type comment from the sponsor. Gillette was chosen for use as the fictitious sponsor since it represented a familiar brand of moderate congruence with rugby league. Gillette was not an existing sponsor of teams in the series, thus avoiding issues of preexisting sponsorship perceptions.

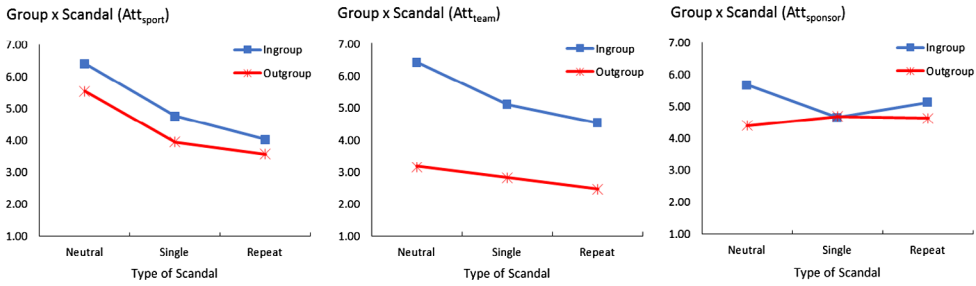
**Dependent variables.** Participants rated  $Att_{\text{sport}}$ ,  $Att_{\text{team}}$ , and  $Att_{\text{sponsor}}$  separately using three semantic differential scales (negative/positive, unfavorable/favorable, bad/good; Weeks, Cornwell, & Drennan, 2008; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .99, .99, .98$ , respectively). Two final exploratory items were included to qualitatively provide an answer to the question of how fans feel sponsor brands should respond when faced with a scandal implicating the sponsored team: 'What would you do if you were a sponsor?' and 'What would you do if the sponsorship was up for renewal?' The questions were open-ended and designed to elicit views on preferred sponsor response to scandal and to triangulate quantitative survey items. Use of qualitative research is widespread in the sports management and marketing literatures as a means of gaining rich insight into phenomena (Edwards & Skinner, 2010; Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008).

## Results

A 2 (fandom: ingroup, outgroup)  $\times$  3 (scandal frequency: no scandal, single scandal, repeat scandal) between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted.  $Att_{\text{sport}}$ ,  $Att_{\text{team}}$ , and  $Att_{\text{sponsor}}$  were dependent variables. Using Pillai's Trace as the multivariate test statistic, fandom was shown to relate significantly to the dependent variables,  $F(3, 214) = 56.278, p < .001$ , as was scandal frequency,  $F(6, 430) = 10.384, p < .001$ , and their interaction  $F(6, 430) = 2.518, p = .021$ . These effects were followed up at the univariate level to test our hypotheses. Figure 2 shows overall patterns for each dependent variable.

### Attitudes toward the sport

In support of hypothesis 1, which predicted  $Att_{\text{sport}}$  would become poorer across levels of scandal frequency for both ingroup and outgroup fans, we found a significant main effect of fandom,  $F(1, 216) = 9.870, p = .002$  ( $M_{\text{ingroup}} = 5.074, M_{\text{outgroup}} = 4.363$ ), and a significant



**Figure 2.** Patterns of ingroup and outgroup fan attitudes toward each stakeholder over levels of scandal frequency.

main effect of scandal frequency,  $F(2, 216) = 33.114, p < .001$  ( $M_{\text{Neutral}} = 5.980, M_{\text{Single}} = 4.366, M_{\text{Repeated}} = 3.809$ ). There was no interaction between fandom and scandal frequency,  $F(2, 216) = .340, p = .712$ . Thus, while ingroup fans rated the sport more favorably than did outgroup fans, presumably because the news stories had focused on ingroup content,  $\text{Att}_{\text{sport}}$  for both groups became poorer in the presence of scandal, and this was stronger when scandal was described as more frequent.

### Attitudes toward the team

Hypothesis 2a predicted ingroup fans would show more favorable  $\text{Att}_{\text{team}}$  than outgroup fans. Hypothesis 2b supplemented this by predicting ingroup fans'  $\text{Att}_{\text{team}}$  would become less favorable with increased scandal frequency, while outgroup fans'  $\text{Att}_{\text{team}}$  would remain stable regardless of scandal frequency. In support of these hypotheses, we found a significant main effect of fandom on  $\text{Att}_{\text{team}}$ ,  $F(1, 216) = 143.987, p < .001$  ( $M_{\text{Ingroup}} = 5.348, M_{\text{Outgroup}} = 2.821$ ), and a significant interaction between fandom and scandal frequency,  $F(2, 216) = 3.038, p = .050$ . As predicted, this interaction was driven by a significant decline in  $\text{Att}_{\text{team}}$  for ingroup fans,  $F(2, 86) = 12.930, p < .001$  ( $M_{\text{Ingroup\_neutral}} = 6.417, M_{\text{Ingroup\_single}} = 5.103, M_{\text{Ingroup\_repeated}} = 4.524$ ), while  $\text{Att}_{\text{team}}$  for outgroup fans remained relatively stable and unfavorable, although a slight non-significant downward trend was apparent,  $F(2, 130) = 2.232, p = .111$  ( $M_{\text{Outgroup\_neutral}} = 3.167, M_{\text{Outgroup\_single}} = 2.830, M_{\text{Outgroup\_repeated}} = 2.468$ ).

### Attitudes toward the sponsor

Hypothesis 3a predicted ingroup fans would have more favorable  $\text{Att}_{\text{sponsor}}$  than outgroup fans. Hypothesis 3b noted  $\text{Att}_{\text{sponsor}}$  would become less favorable for ingroup fans as scandal frequency increased, while  $\text{Att}_{\text{sponsor}}$  would remain stable for outgroup fans regardless of scandal frequency. These hypotheses were supported. We found a significant main effect of fandom on  $\text{Att}_{\text{sponsor}}$ ,  $F(1, 216) = 9.994, p = .002$  ( $M_{\text{Ingroup}} = 5.162, M_{\text{Outgroup}} = 4.578$ ), and the interaction between fandom and scandal frequency was significant,  $F(2, 216) = 4.234, p = .016$ . Ingroup fans displayed a significant decline in  $\text{Att}_{\text{sponsor}}$  in the presence of scandal,  $F(2, 86) = 4.060, p = .021$  ( $M_{\text{Ingroup\_neutral}} = 5.687, M_{\text{Ingroup\_single}} = 4.655, M_{\text{Ingroup\_repeated}} = 5.142$ ), although there was some non-significant rebound between single and repeated scandal conditions,  $F(1, 55) = 1.425, p = .237$ . Outgroup fans displayed very stable levels of  $\text{Att}_{\text{sponsor}}$  regardless of scandal frequency,  $F(2, 130) = .941, p = .570$  ( $M_{\text{Outgroup\_neutral}} = 4.404, M_{\text{Outgroup\_single}} = 4.690, M_{\text{Outgroup\_repeated}} = 4.641$ ). Thus, while outgroup fans'  $\text{Att}_{\text{sponsor}}$  was unaffected by presence

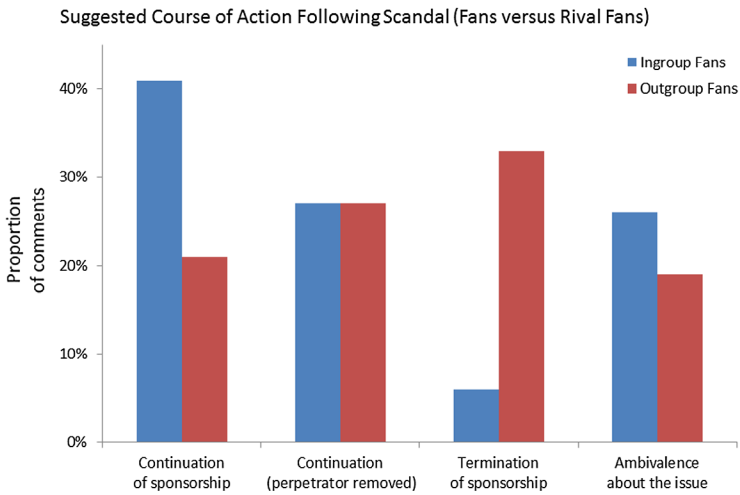
or frequency of scandal, ingroup fans' attitudes became poorer when a scandal was reported. Given that ingroup attitudes did not decline between single and repeat scandals, but instead appeared to show a non-significant rebound, it may be that these fans associate the negativity of a scandal with the sponsor when it first occurs, but with repeated instances begin to isolate blame to the specific athlete/team alone. Additionally, this could represent a form of scandal frequency desensitization (Connor & Mazanov, 2010).

### ***Analysis of qualitative comments***

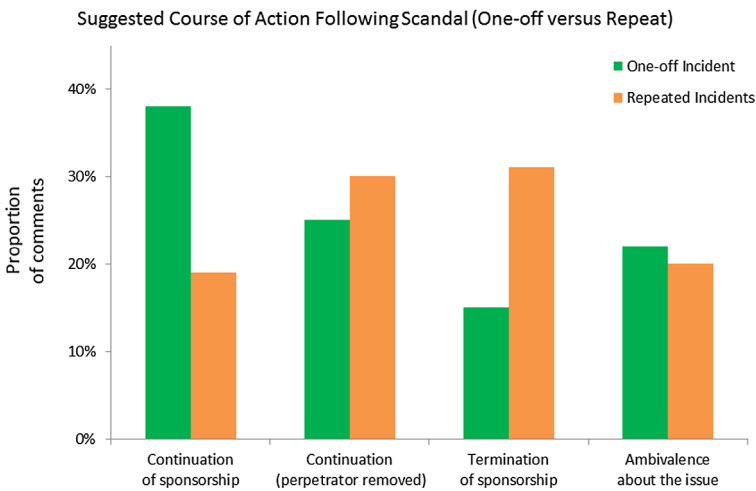
We employed thematic analysis to code participants' qualitative comments in order to identify dominant themes in responses to the two open-ended questions, adopting established protocols suggested by Lindlof and Taylor (2010) and Neuendorf (2016). Themes were determined via agreement among three researchers, with discrepancies of classification resolved through researcher discussion, thus achieving interpretive reliability (very few comments were ambiguous with regard to classification). This classification was then verified by an independent researcher. Frequency counts of comments within each theme were then tabulated to determine the prevalence of response types. A dominant theme in responses to the question 'What would you do if you were a sponsor?' was that the scandal involved only one player and hence the whole team should not be punished (e.g. 'The sponsor is for the team, and I do not believe the whole team should lose sponsorship because of one bad fruit'). This theme appeared across both ingroup fans (25% of comments) and outgroup fans (23% of comments), which indicates that even outgroup fans are able to rationalize that the entire team should not be held responsible for the transgressions of one player.

With regard to the question 'What would you do if the sponsorship was up for renewal?', the thematic analysis revealed most responses could be classified into one of the four dominant themes: (i) continuation of sponsorship, (ii) continuation but with perpetrator removed, (iii) termination of sponsorship, and (iv) ambivalence about the issue. Two chi-square tests were undertaken to examine the pattern of response types based firstly upon team identification (ingroup, outgroup), and secondly upon scandal frequency (one-off, repeated). Responses to the no scandal condition were excluded to ensure all continuation/termination comments were based following scandal occurrence. Our first chi-square test showed that people's responses following scandal varied depending on their team identification ( $\chi^2 = 15.814, p = .001$ ). The majority of ingroup fans suggested continuation of sponsorship (41%), with a lesser number suggesting continuation with perpetrator removed (27%) or being ambivalent (26%). Only a few respondents suggested outright sponsorship termination (6%). In contrast, most outgroup fans recommended either termination of sponsorship (33%) or continuation with the perpetrator removed (27%). Slightly lower numbers suggested unqualified continuation (21%) or were ambivalent (19%). As previously discussed, ingroup fans appear to be somewhat dismissive of transgressions, whereas outgroup fans are more willing to recommend sanctions. Notably, our data do suggest a large proportion of outgroup fans are satisfied with continuation (see Figure 3).

Our second chi-square test showed that people's responses also varied depending on whether the scandal was one-off or repeated ( $\chi^2 = 9.125, p = .028$ ). For one-off incidents, the majority of respondents indicated continuation of sponsorship (38%), with lesser proportions suggesting continuation with perpetrator removed (25%), or being ambivalent (22%), and the smallest proportion suggesting termination (15%; see Figure 4). In contrast, when the scandal was described as repeated, the largest proportions of respondents indicated termination (31%),



**Figure 3.** Dominant themes within qualitative comments regarding suggested sponsor response following scandal, split by ingroup/outgroup.



**Figure 4.** Dominant themes within qualitative comments regarding suggested sponsor response following scandal, split by frequency of scandal.

or continuation with perpetrator removed (30%). Lesser proportions were ambivalent (20%), or simply suggested unqualified continuation of sponsorship (19%). This indicates that people are quite sensitive to the issue of scandals being one-off (and hence more dismissible) or part of repeat behavior (and hence more punishable). This aligns closely with the idea of CORFing, in that fans may be dismissive up to a point, but will then begin to distance themselves when wrong-doing becomes representative of undesirable group norms (Lickel et al., 2005).

## Discussion

The current research replicates and extends the ideas of Chien et al. (2016). It shows that scandal that occurs off-field and does not affect gameplay can still impact stakeholders

linked to the transgressing athlete (the sport, implicated teams, associated sponsors). Thus, it provides evidence that transgressions of athletes can potentially influence how people perceive associated sport stakeholders, even when the misbehavior has no direct connection to the sport. With the celebrity and role model status that is often afforded to sportspeople today, it would appear that actions well beyond the sporting domain can affect not only perceptions of the individual sportsperson, but also perceptions of stakeholders linked to them.

In line with ideas about CORFing and vicarious shame (Lickel et al., 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1990), our findings show scandal has a negative impact on the attitudes of ingroup fans, and that this applies to the evaluation of affiliated stakeholders (sport, team, sponsors). Ingroup fans may be somewhat dismissive of one-off scandals, but are less dismissive of those that occur repeatedly. For outgroup fans, attitudes become less favorable toward the sport following scandal, regardless of the specific team implicated since they belong to the superordinate 'sport fan' group which is affected (Gaertner et al., 1993). Outgroup fan attitudes toward the implicated team and sponsor are relatively unaffected by the scandal since their attitudes are already negative. In line with *ultimate attribution error* ideas, for outgroup fans the scandal simply accords with existing negative perceptions (Hewstone, 1990). Thus, there may be something of an 'attitudinal floor effect' for outgroup fans, where the already negative attitudes have little scope for decline.

For those brands involved in sponsorship and sport marketing at the time of a scandal, this might suggest strategic value in considering fans and rival fans as separate audiences, with a specific emphasis on maintaining positive attitudes among fans, given that the attitudes of rival fans appear somewhat invariant (and already negative). Our findings are consistent with recent survey studies reporting a relationship between fan identification and favorability of response toward brands sponsoring a scandal-afflicted team (Angell et al., 2016; Grohs et al., 2015). They also accord with recent experimental research that suggests identification driven by rivalry can elicit a positive bias toward teams and sponsoring brands, overriding moral judgments that might otherwise occur (Lee, Kwak, & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016). Interestingly, our findings imply something of a punitive response toward rival team scandal, which may be reflective of *schadenfreude*, as per the work of Angell et al. (2016). Practically, this all suggests that teams faced with scandal may have limited strategic capacity to alter rival fans' attitudes (Bee & Dalakas, 2015), but some ability to influence and leverage their own fans' attitudes, to prevent negative perceptions from developing. Consequently, cultivating a loyal fan base, perhaps through on-field performance, might hedge against hard times.

Our qualitative results reveal that both ingroup and outgroup fans often accept that responsibility for scandal lies with specific perpetrators, but nonetheless, attitudes toward other stakeholders may still suffer. For stakeholders such as the sport and implicated team (and indeed the sponsor), this suggests that taking action to address any scandal that erupts to limit repercussions may require well-publicized sanctioning of specific perpetrators. In terms of how our participants thought a sponsor should respond, ingroup fans largely endorsed a continuation of sponsorship, or a continuation with perpetrator removed, and almost never advocated outright termination of contract. Rival team fans in contrast, tended to endorse either termination or a continuation with the perpetrator removed. These are important findings because previous work such as Chien et al. (2016) has looked at consumer response to sponsors' stated decisions, but not necessarily how consumers feel sponsors *should* respond.

Our findings also revealed that for one-off incidents, people were generally more forgiving, and willing to recommend continuation of contract, but for repeated incidents most were inclined to recommend termination or a qualified continuation (perpetrator removed). It appears both ingroup and outgroup fans are tolerant of transgression; however, when it becomes severe, they feel sponsors should take punitive action. This finding should be reassuring for sponsors and teams since it implies that if a perpetrator is appropriately dealt with, damage may be minimized.

While our qualitative data focused on how sponsors should respond, the finding that fans believe responsibility lies with specific perpetrators has clear implications for the management of teams and the sport more generally. These are the bodies that ultimately have the ability to sanction athletes (e.g. after a first instance of rowdy public behavior), and hence the ability to prevent repeated occurrences, and prevent the resultant negative response spilling over to other stakeholders. Our study suggests that even with a significant one-off scandal, if the particular perpetrators are sanctioned, fans may be satisfied, and less likely to develop negative evaluations of associated stakeholders. Preventative approaches like having a player code of conduct will be useful, as will education programs addressing inappropriate behaviors, both on- and off-field.

### **Limitations and future directions**

In the current study, our focus was on scandal that occurs off-field and does not affect gameplay (alcohol-fueled violence), and in Chien et al. (2016) the focus was off-field scandal that can impact gameplay (doping). One category of scandal that we have not addressed, however, is on-field scandal. On-field scandals will be important to consider in future research since these incidents can often be directly observable by fans, and spread quickly with live streaming and media coverage (e.g. on-field biting, fighting, racial slurs). Moreover, on-field scandals potentially have even greater scope than off-field scandals to be directly associated with sport stakeholders given they occur within the sport context. The NFL's 'Deflategate' football tampering case involving Tom Brady is perhaps a good example where the team and other stakeholders were quickly implicated (Nocera, 2016).

While we have noted that fans can be willing to isolate responsibility to specific perpetrators, which might limit spillover effects to stakeholders, our research was cross-sectional, and did not examine reactions following actual perpetrator punishment or removal. Future research that employs a longitudinal design will be useful in providing insight here, as it will help inform our understanding of how long it takes for stakeholders to recover from scandal once a perpetrator is removed, or is indeed retained. While brands that exit sponsorships are most likely foregoing past marketing investments, those that choose to continue with a sponsorship in the face of scandal (one-off or repeat) may strategically be better placed if attitudes do ultimately rebound. Research is warranted to help understand if and when this occurs, so as to better inform sport management and public relations activities, as well as overall marketing strategies.

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