"He's Still the Winner in My Mind": Maintaining the Collective Identity in Sport Through Social Creativity and Group Affirmation

Abstract

Social Creativity and Group Affirmation are two strategies by which individuals that identify with a sporting activity, team, group or individual may protect that sense of identification in light of negative events. This paper explores the use of such strategies through examining reactions to doping allegations surrounding Lance Armstrong to explain how members of two brand communities (one based on the brand of Armstrong as cyclist and the other on the brand of Armstrong as cancer survivor) maintain a sense of allegiance. Through undertaking a netnographic approach, six strategies were identified by members of these communities, three of which could be identified as Social Creativity Strategies (Lance Armstrong as "superhuman", the notion of cycling as a 'level playing field', Armstrong as scapegoat) and three as Group Affirmation (Armstrong as a continuing inspiration, the Armstrong legacy, and denial). The two brand communities demonstrated differing patterns of maintenance, with those within the cycling community focusing more upon Social Creativity strategies, whereas those members of the Armstrong as cancer survivor brand tended to focus upon Group Affirmation strategies.

Key Words

Social Creativity, Group Affirmation, Brand identity, Collective Identity, Lance Armstrong

Introduction

Sport can, for many, provide a valued social identity, and sport consumers are able to develop strong psychological and evaluative connections to various sport communities, such those based around a sports team, activity, or individual, (what can be termed sport 'brands'), and the behaviour of those who are driven to have such connections has "come to the forefront as an object of study" (Heere, et al., 2011, p.407). An important element of the desire that individuals have to belong to such brand communities is that of the search for a positive social identity (Heere, et al., 2011). Yet the brand upon which the community is focused does not always live up to the expectations of members, for example as could be seen with the brand community surrounding Tiger Woods, and the impact of his off the course misdemeanours upon the brand community. For some members, however, allegiance to the brand will always remain, despite potential negative connotations of continued membership. Research into reactions to negative activities related to brands is, however, an area that has received little attention in sport (Fink et al., 2009), particularly in terms of the mechanisms by which a sense of collective identification is maintained. This paper explores such mechanisms by which the brand community identity is – for some at least– protected, through exploring reactions to the negative events surrounding the American sporting hero Lance Armstrong.

Collective Identity and Sport

As Wann (1995) and Trail and James (2001) have outlined, sport fulfils a number of important functions for the individual. These include benefits for self-esteem, providing an opportunity for escape, the opportunity for group and family interaction, and a sense of drama and entertainment (Wann et al., 2001). For many, sport provides varied and important benefits beyond the excitement of watching the sporting event itself, and for some becomes, as Jones (2000: 287) suggests, a "serious" activity. For many, there is a long term personal

and emotional investment with the object of their interest (Giulianotti, 2002), an investment which may go beyond that of watching the spectacle itself, and may extend to fanatical or even dysfunctional levels (Stewart et al., 2003). Membership of a sport community thus becomes, for some, an important and durable element of the self-concept, and becomes a valued element of the individual's collective identity.

Collective identity is "first and foremost a statement about categorical membership. A collective identity is one that is shared with a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common" (Ashmore et al., 2004). Importantly, this is subjective, based upon the individual's own perception and requires no direct contact or interaction with other members. Thus the solitary road cyclist may well have a strong sense of collective identity with those taking part in the *Tour de France.* A number of elements of this collective identity are outlined by Ashmore et al.:

1. Self-categorisation – The individual identifying themselves as a member of the group (such as being a "cyclist").

2. Evaluation – The attitude that the cyclist has themself towards that identity and the attitudes they feel others hold about that identity.

3. Importance – The group member's own subjective view of the importance of that identity to his or her overall self-concept.

4. Attachment – The emotional involvement and inter-connectedness with the group.

5. Social Embeddedness – The degree to which group activities are embedded in the day to day life of the individual.

6. Behavioural Involvement – The degree to which the individual acts to present that identity to others.

7. Content and Meaning – The extent to which the characteristics broadly associated with the group are seen as describing the individuals own characteristics and self-concept.

Two of these dimensions of collective identity are particularly likely to be affected by negative evaluations of the brand. *Evaluation* will be affected not only by the favourability that the individual has regarding the social group, but also the perceived favourability that others hold about the group. The subsequent link between such favourability and self-esteem has been addressed by numerous authors, and the negative impact of unfavourability upon self-esteem, and potential exit from the group as a consequence has been well-documented. The dimension of *Content and Meaning* also has the potential to be affected by negative actions related to the brand in that individuals will experience dissonance through belonging to a group that does not reflect their own values, abilities and ideologies. Thus, for some, negative evaluations of the group and dissonance between the group's activities and the individual's self-concept may lead to exit from the group.

There are, however, a number of social-identity processes and identity-management strategies that are available to minimise the impact of negative events (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2010). The basis of these strategies is that individuals are motivated to defend themselves against threats to their social identities (Sherman et al., 2007) and will demonstrate biases in behaviour, attributions and memories as "part of an ongoing process to achieve, maintain and protect a positive self-concept" (Hornsey, 2008: 214-5). Much of the work on identity-management strategies in sport has explored the dimension of Evaluation, specifically exploring threats to the self-concept as a result of sporting failure by the team or individual, most notably in terms of win/loss. There are, however, other more serious transgressions that members of the brand community may encounter. Despite some sporting brands falling below

required norms of behaviour, sport still is framed as a moral activity, with a moral code (Hartman, 2008). When such a code is transgressed, such as through allegations of doping, membership of the brand community becomes less desirable as the self-concept may be threatened. Collective identity-management through social mobility strategies such as choosing an alternative brand is unlikely (Jackson et al., 1996), and exit from the group (such as through ceasing identification with the community altogether) is often difficult (Jones, 2000). Thus alternative strategies need to be employed to maintain the desirability of group membership, and to protect collective esteem. This paper explores the use of two of these strategies, those of Social Creativity and Group Affirmation, and their role in maintaining collective identity within sport.

Social Creativity and Group Affirmation

One of the tenets of Collective Identity Theory is that individuals will strive to maintain membership of a group that presents a positive identity, and downplay, or even cease membership of groups that may be viewed negatively. Although such temporary (or even permanent) exit from a group is possible through "Cutting Off Reflected Failure" (CORFING), whereby members will downplay or end their association with a team or individual to protect their self-concept (End et al., 2002), those with a strong sense of collective identification are more likely, however, to stress alternative positive attributes of their social referent as a protective mechanism (Yip et al., 2008). Therefore, if being a group member is threatened on one dimension, for example the fan supporting a team that loses consistently, then the individual will focus upon other dimensions of group membership that are more positive, such as the team having an attractive style of play (Jones, 2000). Specifically, in terms of this paper, they will focus on what are termed "group level strategies" (Ellemers and van Rijswijk, 1997), which involve members behaving in some way

that emphasises that being a member of the group remains positive. Two group level strategies that are relevant here are Social Creativity and Group Affirmation.

Social Creativity

As Tajfel and Turner (1979) have outlined, where group boundaries are impermeable (arguably the case in sport, where movement from identification with one team, activity, group or hero to another is both rare and difficult), members focus upon dimensions that favour being within the in-group (still being a member) over joining the out-group (ceasing being a member, or joining another group). This is the concept of Social Creativity. Thus, for example, the sports fan whose team performs badly may be able to protect their identity through comparing their plight with fans of an even more unsuccessful team, which make the idea of being a fan of the other team unattractive in comparison to remaining a fan of their own team. Although rarely applied to the sporting context, Lalonde, Moghaddam and Taylor (1987) undertook a study to explore its use within a competitive sport setting. They determined that ice hockey fans maintained the superiority of their team by focusing on attributes other than the results of the games, such as being less arrogant than the opposition. Lalonde (1992) also found that individuals acknowledged out-group superiority on dimensions linked to clear measures of success (win/lose), but achieved positive distinctiveness by denigrating the opposition fans on other, less clear cut dimensions.

Group Affirmation

Group Affirmation, on the other hand, focuses on positive aspects of being a member of the group without reference to the out-group, or any form of social comparison (Sherman et al., 2007). Group members are better able to tolerate threats to the group brought about by one specific aspect (such as evidence of wrongdoing) by focusing upon other positive aspects of

the group's identity (Cehajic-Clancy et al., 2011), aspects that may be only loosely related to the original domain. The sports fan, in this instance, may want to focus on aspects such as the attractive style of play of their team, or an effective youth development policy without any reference to an out-group. As a consequence, the group member is able to demonstrate greater resilience in the face of adversity.

The Case of Lance Armstrong

Lance Armstrong has, for many years, been idolised and revered as one of the greatest sportsmen in history, "considered by many to be one of the greatest athletes of our time" (McGlone and Martin, 2006:185). His sporting achievements in terms of winning seven *Tour de France* titles are exceptional. Considering that these victories took place less than three years after being diagnosed with advanced testicular cancer, Armstrong's place as a sporting hero was, it would seem, assured. Sports Illustrated named him Sportsman of the Year in 2002. The Associated Press awarded him Male Athlete of the Year four times in a row between 2002 and 2005, he won Best Male Athlete at the Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly Awards in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006, and in 2008 he was recognized as one of Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People (Lancearmstrong.com, 2012). In June 2012, however, following a sustained, but unproven series of allegations of doping from 1999 onwards (Weislo, 2012), Armstrong was charged by the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) with doping offences, based on blood samples stored from previous years, and testimonies from other cyclists. The charges, although initially denied by Armstrong, were not contested. This stance was generally interpreted as by the global media as one of guilt, summarised by Smith, who wrote that "It is indisputable that if the cyclist, seven-time champion in the *Tour de France*, had never taken performance-enhancing drugs or never engaged in illegal performance-enhancing techniques then he would fight to his last breath to

protect his reputation" (Smith, 2012) and indeed Armstrong confessed to the use of performance enhancing drugs in a high profile television interview in January 2013. This paper explores the various Social Creativity and Group Affirmation strategies adopted by those who identify with the 'brand' of Lance Armstrong, whether as fellow cyclist or cancer survivor, through an examination of their responses to the events surrounding the decision of USADA. Although there were, almost certainly, those for which the events would have irrevocably damaged the relationship with their hero, the focus of this paper is on the defensive mechanisms displayed by others.

Methodology

A netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010) in the form of an analysis of an internet forum was undertaken. A netnography allows the researcher to observe behaviour of members of public online forums, with no direct involvement. Internet forums are online environments that allow interaction between users of similar interests as soon as an event takes place and are "popular sites for the expression of support, complaint, disagreement, gossip, and connectedness among sports fans" (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012: 102). The use of forums as a data collection site is fairly well established. Radford and Bloch (2012), for example, used the analysis of three such sites to explore reactions to the death of the racing driver Dale Earnhardt Senior, collecting over 1400 messages in total. This study followed a similar research design, although focusing on a single forum.

The choice of forum presented a number of considerations. Firstly, the use of a specialist cycling forum was considered, however a brief analysis of these demonstrated only limited interaction amongst members, with a greater focus upon technical aspects of the case. Thus it

was decided to use a non-specialist forum. The chosen forum was that of the online *Guardian* newspaper, a national newspaper, located within the United Kingdom, although with forum contributors across the world. The online version of the newspaper attracts over 3.4 million browsers on average each day (ABC, 2012), and is free to access, unlike many rival sites, which generally charge a subscription. The *Guardian* forums generally consist of the story, followed by a series of comments posted by contributors. Comments are posted in the order in which they are submitted, and will often be in response to earlier comments, thus creating an element of interactivity and dialogue between users. Such comments are freely available to read by users, with no registration or other restriction. The scope of the newspaper also allows a large volume of data to be collected, allowing saturation of data (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2012) to be achieved from a single forum.

The story, entitled *Lance Armstrong, the man who strong-armed cycling, gives up fight* was posted online in the *Guardian* on Friday 24th August 2012 (Seaton, 2012). Over the next four days, over 1004 comments in total were posted before the forum was closed. Each of these comments was copied, and pasted into a Microsoft Excel document. A process of data reduction was then started. Any comments related to the protection of social identity were identified. Any comments that did not relate to the concepts of Social Creativity or Group Affirmation were deleted, for example those that were identified as 'trolling' or posts designed to inflame respondents, which were evident at times within the data. It was also important to ensure that data referred to the protection of the poster's own identity, rather than, for example, discussing how others might view the situation and any data relating to the latter was also discarded, as the focus was upon how individuals would protect their own identity. Once this process had taken place, a total of 240 relevant comments remained. Using thematic analysis (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2012), data were deductively coded as either

Social Creativity or Group Affirmation strategies. Within each of these higher order themes, data were further inductively coded into first order themes to identify the different forms of Social Creativity and Group Affirmation exhibited. Following the advice of Smith and Caddick (2012) in terms of enhancing the quality of analysis a 'critical friend' experienced in qualitative research acted as a 'theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations as they emerged in relation to the data (p.72). This allowed debate about the analysis, for example in terms of the difference between the themes of 'inspiration' and legacy for example. This data is presented within the paper exactly as it was presented within the forum, and has not been subject to any correction to spelling or grammar.

The ethical considerations of such research pose an interesting discussion point, particularly in terms of the extent to which online research should conform to human-subject models of informed consent and anonymity. The ethics of online research have been debated throughout the history of online research, with little in the way of agreement or consensus evident (Hooley, Marriott and Wellens, 2012). The forum used was publicly available, without any form of registration process, and accessible to, for example, a much larger readership than any academic journal. Thus the key issue is not that the data is made available to an audience as such, but to an audience that was different to that expected by the contributors. Hooley, et al. (2012) have concisely summarised the arguments supporting the use of such data, suggesting that firstly participants in public, non-password protected forums should not have an expectation of "privacy", and secondly that it is the publication, rather than the person that is being researched. They also discuss the issue of securing informed consent affecting participant behaviour in the same way that participants in an observational study may behave

differently. In light of such issues, approval was gained by the relevant university ethics committee before data collection, with the proviso that usernames were not published.

Results and Discussion

Six first order themes were identified. These were: Lance Armstrong as "superhuman", professional cycling as a level playing field, Armstrong as scapegoat, Armstrong as a continuing inspiration, the Armstrong legacy, and Denial. Of these themes, three were Social Creativity Strategies (Lance Armstrong as "superhuman", the notion of cycling as a 'level playing field', Armstrong as scapegoat) and three were Group Affirmation strategies (Armstrong as a continuing inspiration, the Armstrong legacy, and denial). In addition, two separate brands communities were identified with which individuals were able to collectively identify, these being the brand of 'Armstrong as cyclist', and the brand of Armstrong as 'cancer survivor'.

Social Creativity Strategies

Lance Armstrong as "superhuman"

The first protective mechanism was that of community members stating how Armstrong's achievements were, whether drug enhanced or not, beyond that which could be expected from lesser athletes. This was a strategy used predominantly by those within the cycling community. As one poster suggested:

> *To all those yelling 'cheat' - get on the EPO and lets see how easy you find it climbing up an Alpine pass. Drugs don't magically propel you up a fuckin mountain. Riding the Tour is an unbelievable feat of human endurance, I don't care how much junk you've stuck in your arm.*

Typical comments were that *"What people never cease to forget is that even without doping, these professional cyclists are still superhumans. Endurance cycling is the most gruelling sport in the world"*, *"we still shouldn't lose sight of what an incredible athlete and competitor Armstrong was"*, and *"Whether he doped or not - he was still a phenomenal athlete and thus worthy of some respect"*. Thus, despite the doping claims, participants still viewed Armstrong as "better" in some way, and as such could maintain collective esteem through focusing on the positives of identifying with Armstrong. Although comments within this theme were largely from the cycling community, a limited number of posts referred to Armstrong's recovery from cancer to support the idea of his special capabilities:

> *Yes Lance Armstrong used drugs. Highly toxic ones & lots of them to treat his advanced (stage 4) cancer. Then he climbed back in the ring to overcome the side effects on his body & his mind. And if he used a few more drugs at that stage & later good on him. Just look what he has achieved not just in winning the World's hardest cycling race so many times but also as a highly successful advocate for cancer patients and their carers. As far as I'm concerned at age 72 it's still the 'Tour de Lance'......the man's a winner!*

The idea of Armstrong as 'superhuman' can be seen as a Social Creativity strategy in terms of it locating him as 'better than' what would be considered 'normal'. Thus, the comparison is

not made with a specific other, but more in terms of a generalised view of the norm. This strategy has been noted in other contexts, for example Shinnar's finding that Mexican immigrants protected their self-esteem through referring to the Mexican race as being harder working than the norm, especially compared to Americans (Shinnar, 2008).

The 'Level Playing Field'

A second protective mechanism was that of the idea of cycling being a level playing field, in that community members perceived the whole sport to be tarnished, and thus Armstrong's achievements happened in a culture where everyone else was cheating, rather than seeing Armstrong as a "black sheep" (Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens, 1988), with differing norms and values to the group, thus specifically relating to the Collective and Meaning dimension of collective outlined above, specifically in terms of reducing the disparity between Armstrong's actions and the norms values and ideologies of the brand community, through attempting to normalise doping behaviour.

Bearing in mind that most of his competitors were taking the same drugs, he was probably still the world's best cyclist though. Cycling has always been notoriously drug-riddled. Taking drugs out of the equation will just move the whole paying field down a couple of notches.

Wow. He competed on a level playing field against his competition. The witch hunt derives from singling him out from all the others to expose. Everyone knows what has been going on. So, if Lance is found guilty, who will be awarded the Tours. Why do you think Andy Schleck downplayed his retrospective Tour 'win' after Contador was found guilty. I reckon it's because they are all on the same stuff. It is a level playing field, and

the best is the best. Lance won 7 because he was the best cyclist of his generation. Did

he dope? Yes. But it wasn't an unfair advantage in a sport where everyone was doping.

Yes, they should continue to clean up cycling. Yes, it is disappointing that Lance

(probably) doped. Yes, he has been a bully and a jerk. But the indignation and faux

outrage? Really? You didn't know the whole sport was dirty before this?

This article made me so angry. The writer clearly has no understanding of the sport.

- 90% of cyclists doped back then to only 10% now. It's amazingly unlikely that

anybody racing at the time could have won the Tour without doping. He was still the

best. He is one man, out of thousands of cyclists who doped.

You make me laugh, with all this "myth" and "fraud" business. Cyclists have always,

always taken many and varied cocktails of enhancements. All of them. None of them see

themselves as "cheats". Getting caught is the same as having a toe in the plasticine at

the long jump. No more, no less. Lance didn't get caught, and what's more he did what

it took to win seven Tours. He was the best for those seven years. Period.

This protective mechanism involves emphasising focus on existing referent groups that will

result in a more favourable evaluation of the in-group (Shinnar, 2008). By emphasising the

doping by other cyclists, the misdemeanours become less significant, thus protecting the

individual's sense of esteem. Actions become relative rather than absolute, that is in terms of

how they are perceived in comparison with the actions of others, rather than in terms of the

action itself. As Burstyn argues, with reference to Ben Johnson, the disgraced Canadian

Sprinter, "He may have broken the official rules, but he played by the much more powerful

unofficial rules when he took steroids" (Shinnar, 1997: 222), these unofficial rules institutionalise doping, and as such, brand community members may view Armstrong as not having transgressed the norms of the sport, thus the threat to collective identity is removed, by acknowledging that Armstrong was not guilty of any transgressions of such norms within the sport of cycling, and thus no threat is perceived. All data within this theme related to the brand of Armstrong as cyclist, possibly due to the greater knowledge of those within the cycling community regarding the levels of doping within professional cycling during the Armstrong era.

Armstrong as Scapegoat

A further Social Creativity strategy was that of the focus on Armstrong as a scapegoat. This protects the sense of identification through a focus on the guilt of officials and other competitors who had been upset by his success. Thus blame is attributed to the out-group (officials), and their actions, thus removing blame from the athlete. This differs from the Group Affirmation strategy of denial outlined later in the paper in that it specifically focuses upon the out-group:

> *Who gains from this witch-hunt? and that is clearly what it is, Armstrong ruffled a lot of feathers over his career and this case is personal without a shadow of a doubt.*

> *I am a tad puzzled. As I understand it, there is no 'physical evidence' (positive drug test(s)) against Armstrong. There is, one or more 'Team Mate', who have done a 'deal' with authorities, so they can retain their winning credits and medals? If this is all there is, I think this whole business stinks and this is a witch hunt!*

15

The difference is with Armstrong, you have a relatively new anti-doping body desperately trying to legitimise itself in a country where the major sports self-regulate anti-doping. If USADA bring down Armstrong it boosts there recognition and status. They are also supported by a very willing French media who are also anti-Armstrong (whether rightly or wrongly is a matter of personal opinion) can continue to keep this affair in the news.

I predict the USADA and its witch hunt will not come out of this covered in roses, the director of that agency has far over-reached his authority here. Doesn't pass the smell test, does it?

Thus Armstrong was a victim of accusations made by those such as ex rivals upset by his success, team mates who had done deals to protect their own achievements, or a relatively new body (the USADA) looking for a high profile case trying to legitimise itself. This strategy protects the sense of self though establishing a clear sense of distance between the innocent athlete and the guilty official or ex competitor (Hartman, 2008), thus allowing the protection of the collective identity, through the transference of guilt to a third party, again protecting the sense of social identity through focusing on the negative aspects of out-groups, in this case officials. Again, this was a theme where all data emerged from the cycling community, again perhaps due to greater understanding of the technical aspects of the sport.

Armstrong as 'Inspiration'

Group Affirmation strategies focus on alternative dimensions of identity, other than his cycling record, where being a group member could still be viewed positively without reference to any out-groups. One common Group Affirmation strategy was that of focusing

upon the inspirational impact of Lance Armstrong as cyclist, and the extent to which he inspired the individual themselves.

Say what you like about him, anyone who can come back from the degree of cancer he had and ride a bike, let alone 'win' the Tour, seven times, is a legend in my book. He will always be an inspiration to me.

Well he got me out of the car, onto a bike into the mountains and now as a 56 year old, fantastically fit and healthy - so well done Lance for that.

He inspired me to lose 5 stone weight. An ICON of sheer grit and determination. GO LANCE GO. LIVESTRONG LIVESTRONG LIVESTRONG. "Everyone wants to know what I'm on; what am I on?, I'm on my bike busting my ass 6 hours a day. What are you on?". LANCE ARMSTRONG IS A HERO, ICON AND WALKING INSPIRATION. PERIOD.

The brand of Armstrong as cancer survivor was also prominent within this theme:

I was diagnosed with testicular cancer in 2001. Lance Armstrong made a great contribution to my life in two ways. Firstly by acting as an inspiration while I was dealing with the disease, and secondly by introducing me to the sport of road cycling, which until then I had ignored despite being a sports fan. My newfound interest in the sport led me to do lots of reading about it, which along with my passion for science inevitably led me to the conclusion that Lance must've at a minimum been training on EPO. This was several years ago. Selfishly, I'm glad he did. He competed in an era

where the few non-doped riders could be found hanging off back of the gruppetto. If he'd done likewise, I'd never have heard of him, his story and example would never have helped me survive my cancer and I probably would only have come to road cycling when Cav started winning lots of TdF stages.

Maybe so but before Lance there was little exposure of the benefits of activity for cancer survivors, the standard response to a an enquiry regarding this to health professionals was "if you feel like it, try it" His rise to fame spawned a whole raft of Randomised Clinical Trials across the world that showed without a doubt that appropriate levels of exercise are essential in improving outcomes and life quality for all cancer survivors regardless of type and stage of diagnosis. I have founded two UK charities dedicated to helping people rehabilitate following cancer treatment based on my own experience motivated by Mr. Armstrong.

The idea of Armstrong being an inspiration is not new, as Bayer (2012) outlines. Instead, the emphasis focuses more upon role as inspiration through the collective identity of cancer survivor rather than as a cyclist. This is similar to the idea of introjection, which, as Radford and Bloch suggest, allows group members to reinterpret past interactions with the brand, and to reinforce those memories that are seen as positive, such as the way in which he was a personal inspiration, often at times of difficulty (Radford and Bloch, 2012). Such behaviours focus not on denying the allegations, rather demonstrating an emphasis upon focusing instead upon the positive alternative dimension of his inspirational effects. Inspirational aspects were cited by both communities, either in terms of inspiration to cycle, or as inspiration as a cancer survvior. As well as this inspirational effect upon community members, a similar theme emerged in terms of his legacy, which refers to Armstrong's broader societal impacts.

The Armstrong Legacy

As well as being inspirational to the individual, community members of the Armstrong as cancer survivor brand also suggested that he had inspired a wider audience, providing a valuable legacy to those other than the individual themself. A typical comment was that:

regardless of Lance's doping truth his real long term legacy will be to the establishment of cancer survivorship as a powerful movement, no more to whispered about in hospital corridors. People have taken his example to redefine their lives and move on to greater achievements. Livestrong although not directly benefitting folk in the UK has been a beacon of positivity for all those living with the disease across the world. He is a champion for these people, it's not about hero worship or indoctrination. It's about hope.

Personally I don't think it matters if Lance took drugs. I think the fact he had testicular, brain and lung cancer back in 1996 and was given a 20% chance of even living is the thing that's important. At one point they said he probably would never even walk again. The fact he then came back and won SEVEN Tour De Frances, the worlds hardest endurance sporting event bar none, is incredibly inspiring... The guy is an inspiration to anyone with a horrible illness who may have lost hope... He's still the winner in my mind.

Anyway, on the story itself. Doping or no doping I still respect Lance. Whether his organization is too corporate, you can't deny he has raised awareness for cancers

(particularly previously under-reported male cancers), and has proved that there is

hope for a life after cancer (even if it does require a dosing up).

Again, the nature of the brand is different here, with the brand being that of cancer sufferer rather than cyclist. Thus a positive legacy, whether for the individual, or society, was a key Group Affirmation strategy to maintain a positive sense of identification as member of the Lance Armstrong brand. The perceived benefits of his charity work are seen to outweigh any wrongdoing, and thus the net effect is to view Armstrong positively, and thus the sense of identification is protected. It is interesting to note that, unlike the theme of 'inspiration', all data coded as 'Legacy' referred to his legacy towards cancer, and no data were identified that discussed his legacy to the cycling community.

Denial

Perhaps the simplest mechanism by which to protect the sense of self is to deny that any negative actions actually took place. The data actually demonstrated that Denial as a Group Affirmation strategy was used alongside the Social Creativity strategy of Scapegoating. Thus identification was maintained through data that made no reference to the out-group (that is no offence actually took place), but then suggested that despite this, the actions of others (out-group members) were then to blame for the final outcome.

You gotta laugh at people on this thread, I just didn't know there were so many ex-tour

riders on here.   Lance was a bully, boo-hoo, Lance was nasty to the peloton, Lance

didn't like the press... of course he's a cheat then. He might have been a driven man, a

man capable of not only writing about doing something but actually getting off his arse

and doing it... He was such a hated figure in cycling but he never failed a drugs test. So

what you're saying is that not one person out of all those that hated him ever found something that would nail him to the wall, or if they did they didn't have the balls to come forward at the time. He was such a strong personality, in a pack of strong personalities that no one, till now, saw anything that would have buried him???? And if these people lied about knowing nothing then how can they be trusted to be telling the truth now??? Lance, you're doing the right thing, the bastards have ground you down that's all. Fuck'm, go off and do something else and be a success at that and then see what they have to say then.

Denial was a strategy demonstrated by a number of posters:

Yes, he was arrogant, and yes, a bit of a bully, but that doesn't make him a cheat: evidence will prove that. How did he manage to pass all those positive tests? Who are these co-conspirators who helped him cover up allegedly positive tests? And if the UCI found he had no case to answer, what have USADA got that they didn't have? All the details should be made public, otherwise the public will never really know what was done and how. It's not good enough for all the doubters to come out now and say they never liked him -- there needs to be proof.

He has never failed a dope test! I repeat for those hard of reading, and understanding; HE HAS NEVER FAILED A DOPE TEST! I don't think it can be put more clearly than that. Those who have gone on and on and on accusing him of doping have never produced a shred of evidence, I mean real evidence, against him. It's all talk and inuendo, snide remarks and downright envy. And who are the people accusing him?

Mostly dopers who were caught in the same sort of tests which Armstrong passed. I'll go on remembering his great races with great pleasure.

This is a farce. Lance has had over 500 drugs tests in his career passed them all but this wytch hunt keeps on. Power to him, he's an old guy, he doesn't need to repeatedly defend himself after he has already done so. To some people he's guilty no matter what, so if he defended himself here, some other farcical accusations will come to fruition.

As far as I am aware Armstrong has never failed a drug test. This case has all the hallmarks of an American witchhunt against an incredible sportsman who has run out of the enormous amount of steam needed to continually defend yourself against this type of pursuance.

Elvis lives, the moon landings were faked, the twin towers were brought down by the CIA and Lance Armstrong used drugs. It all fits into place!

Lance has always insisted 100% he has never resorted to illegal drugs. There is not a shred of evidence that could stand up in a criminal trial. He has just come to the end of his tether with the outrageous sniping and innuendo and decided to say F*** You. He is a legend, he is a wealthy man, he is at the end of his cycling career already. I think he has all the last laughs. Thank you man, you were fabulous.

Radford and Bloch (2012) have noted denial as a response from those posting online after the death of Dale Earnhardt. They suggested denial was part of a longer term process, following Kubler-Ross and Kessler's (2005) model of five stages of grief, with denial as the first stage,

however there was no clear evidence from the data of this longer term process in the Armstrong case. The strategy of Denial was used exclusively by the cycling community.

Six strategies have thus been identified that could be used by community members to protect their collective identities. Obviously not all members will adopt such strategies, as can be seen by those who have clearly stated that they no longer consider themselves as connected to Armstrong. It is interesting to see that the strategies that emerged here differ to those identified by Hartman's study of reactions to drug use in baseball. She identified three key strategies, only one of which emerged in the current study, that of the athlete as scapegoat. In addition, she suggested that community members rationalise drug taking by suggesting that drug use does not affect 'natural talent', and that athletes have the right to do whatever they want with their bodies. These two mechanisms did not emerge from the data, perhaps due to the slightly different nature of the study, focusing here upon the individual sportsman, whereas Hartman's study focused on drug use within sport as a whole. Furthermore, it is interesting that the two brand communities demonstrated differing patterns of maintenance, with those within the cycling community focusing more upon Social Creativity strategies, whereas those members of the Armstrong as cancer survivor tended to focus upon Group Affirmation strategies.

It is also pertinent to acknowledge Armstrong's subsequent admission of guilt, and the extent to which this impacts upon the findings of the study. It is important to note that the data has been used to display mechanisms by which a threatened sense of identity may be protected. Thus, once an admission of guilt has been made, then such mechanisms may vary in their effectiveness. Thus, strategies such as denial become unavailable to the community members, whereas strategies such as focusing upon his legacy or his inspirational behaviour remain as

options. Thus different strategies may be used at different times depending upon the context, and even with such an admission of guilt, certain protective mechanisms are still available to protect the sense of identification.

Conclusion

A number of Social Creativity and Group Affirmation strategies are presented here. The Lance Armstrong case is especially interesting as it allows the responses of two different brand communities to be compared and contrasted, those who identified with Armstrong the cyclist, and those who identified with Armstrong the cancer survivor. The cycling community presented strategies related to the sport itself, and Armstrong's performance (as "superhuman", and performing on a "level playing field" where many other participants were seen to be doping), or through the activities of powerful others within the sport (as a "scapegoat", or simply in terms of denial). Thus four strategies were identified exclusively by the cycling community. The cancer survivor community, perhaps unsurprisingly, presented strategies related to Armstrong's wider legacy to society, and particularly those who had experienced cancer themselves rather than any focusing upon his sporting achievements. A final strategy, that of inspiration was demonstrated by both communities, but with a specific focus on the attributes of each, in that cyclists focused on him as a cycling inspiration, whereas cancer sufferers tended to view him as an inspiration in terms of their own personal recovery.

Acknowledging that different brand communities will adopt strategies that relate to their own characteristics and experiences, it is evident that both Social Creativity and Group Affirmation strategies are means by which community members can maintain a sense of allegiance to, and identification with a sporting brand whilst protecting that particular

collective identity. Although there are those for whom the allegations would be sufficient to cease such allegiance, the data would suggest that there would always be a number of supporters willing to support the fallen hero, particularly those who are highly identified with the brand. These mechanisms go some way to explaining why, for some, brand community membership in sport is enduring. They will not apply to all community members, but they provide an explanation for such enduring belonging despite off-field misdemeanours.

Although the study here focuses upon a specific and arguably unusual case, it is relevant to the wider field of consumer studies in terms of how we consume a brand (specifically that of the individual as a brand), and more particularly how we continue to consume a brand where our sense of positive identification with that brand becomes threatened. As mediated consumption of the brand of the individual as 'hero' or 'celebrity' becomes more intense and the relationship between the consumer and brand becomes ever closer through, for example, social media, such instances are likely to become more commonplace. The means by which such relationships are maintained are likely to become of increasing interest.

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