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# Headwinds in sports sponsoring

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of a crisis situation in a sports team on the credibility of their sponsor and how the sponsor's use of various crises response strategies may repair the damage done to their credibility.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A scenario experiment was conducted with a 2 (pre/post-crisis) × 4 (sponsor response strategy: denial/distancing/rebuild/no response) mixed factor design. Respondents ( $n = 191$ ) were recruited from a research panel.

**Findings** – The results confirmed the existence of a spill-over effect: the sponsor's credibility dropped as a result of the crisis. More interestingly, the effects of the crisis on sponsor credibility were moderated by the response strategy of the sponsor: the harm that the crisis did to the sponsor credibility was aggravated by a denial strategy, but somewhat weakened by a diminishing strategy. A rebuild response unexpectedly improved the credibility of the sponsor.

**Practical implications** – While partnerships in sports can be risky, because crises can be contagious, such partners can also help one another to protect their credibility. Therefore, this study advocates an integral approach of crisis communication. Sponsors may improve their credibility when they frame their contribution to the solution to the problems as an authentic effort to do good.

**Originality/value** – Starting from an issue arena perspective, this contribution shows how crises in sports teams also affect sponsors and how sponsors can contribute to the restoration of the damaged credibility with suitable responses to the crisis situation.

**Keywords** Sponsorship, Crisis communication, Scandal, Crisis response strategies, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Sponsor communication

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Doping, match fixing, supporter violence, financial misconduct and bribery: in contemporary professional sports, where big interests are at stake, severe crises take place on a regular basis. These crises may concern the behaviour and choices of (members of) a sports team, or that of the sports organizations, like event organizers and (international) sports associations. These crises potentially have severe consequences for the team, athlete(s) and organization itself. Additionally, sponsors may feel the percussions (Solberg *et al.*, 2010), because they often literally “lend out” their name to these partners in sports (e.g. Lacey *et al.*, 2007). As a consequence, sponsors may see their investments in athletes and sports teams backfire, as sponsor credibility may suffer from crises in sports. Especially so, since media attention to sports crises has increased since the early 2000s (Connor and Mazanov, 2010). In the last decade, we have seen extensive (international) coverage of crises involving athletes such as Tiger Woods (golf, adultery), Lance Armstrong (cycling, doping), Michael Rasmussen (cycling, doping), Luis Suarez (football, biting contesters) Maria Sharapova (tennis, doping), teams such as Feyenoord (football, supporter violence), the Olympic Winter Games in Sotsji (LGBTQ discrimination) and federations like FIFA (football, fraud) and IAAF (athletics, cover up doping). In all of these cases, the crisis affected, not just the violators, but also the public images of many of their partners. Consequently, these stakeholders were forced to respond to the crisis. For example, sponsors of the 2014 Winter Olympics were asked to make a statement in response to the alleged LGBTQ discrimination, Nike ended their contract with Lance Armstrong and multiple prime sponsors rejected alleged FIFA fraud practices (Williams, 2012; Gibson, 2015). These examples show that it is important to account for the role of sponsors, in crisis communication research.



Previous studies have considered the consequences of the communication efforts of sports organizations and athletes in times of crisis (Hughes and Shank, 2005; Connor and Mazanov, 2010; Glantz, 2010; Osborne *et al.*, 2016), but these studies do not do justice to the complexity of so-called crisis issue arenas (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017): they predominantly address the influence of the issue owner's (transgressor) communication efforts, such as athlete's communication after a crisis, on public responses. However, during a crisis, multiple actors have an interest in the issue and are making sense of the situation and make statements in the news media (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). Therefore, research should be extended to analyzing the communication of other involved actors, like title sponsors, besides the direct responsible actor.

All of these reactions can be motivated by ethical as well as instrumental considerations. After all, while sponsorship aims for positive image transfer from the athletes and teams to the sponsor credibility (Meenaghan, 2001; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999), negative attributes are likely to be reflected upon sponsor credibility at times of crisis. In other words, the public is likely to associate a sponsor with the sport crisis (Connor and Mazanov, 2010) and, as a consequence, the sponsor credibility suffers. This can even show in the name given to such a case in public discussions, notably the "Festina" doping affair in cycling (1998; named after the watch brand that sponsored the accused cycling team).

Although there is a large body of research on intended positive effects of sports sponsorship (see for an overview Walliser, 2003; Meenaghan *et al.*, 2013), negative consequences and risks of sports sponsorship have only recently started to gain research attention (e.g. Connor and Mazanov, 2010; Hughes and Shank, 2005; Danylychuk *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, no research has addressed the ways in which sponsor communication efforts can contribute to credibility repair. The aim of this paper is not only to investigate whether unethical behaviour of athletes has a spill-over effect on sponsor credibility, but also foremost how sponsors' responses to such a crisis may minimize damage to their credibility.

For this second and main question of the study we build on the literature on organizational crisis communication (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007, 2016; Coombs and Holladay, 2008; Ma and Zhan, 2016). This field of study aims to identify communication strategies that effectively limit reputation damage in crisis situations (i.e. Coombs and Holladay, 2010). The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) proposes that specific response messages are required in specific situations in order to protect an organization's reputation and credibility (Coombs, 2007, 2010). In the current paper, we investigate to what extent the crisis response messages a sponsor uses can prevent credibility loss in case of a doping scandal. Hence, our research question is as follows:

*RQ1.* To what extent do crisis response messages protect the team credibility and sponsor credibility, when a doping crisis occurs in a sports team?

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Crisis situations

Coombs (2007, p. 164) defines a crisis as "an unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organisation's operations and poses a financial and reputational threat". In crisis management literature, three clusters of crisis types have been distinguished (Coombs, 2006, p. 244) – victim cluster: in these crises types, the responsibility of the crisis is not attributed to the organization, but the organization is a victim of the crisis (like natural disasters or rumours); accidental cluster: in these crises types the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional (like technical breakdowns); preventable cluster: in these crises types the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated law/regulation. When an athlete knowingly takes doping and intentionally violated doping rules, a sport organization faces a preventable crisis, after all, the crisis

is self-inflicted, but when an athlete fails a positive test, because of a food contamination, the organization faces a victim crisis.

Within each of these clusters, levels of severity may vary. A crisis, however, should be approached as a dynamic phenomenon; it develops from a routine situation into a situation with significant negative consequences for the organization. The attribution of a responsibility is not a given, but different media may frame the attribution of crisis situations in different ways. Depending on both situational factors as well as strategic handling of the crisis situation, the crisis may either increase in severity, or diminish (Coombs, 2007; Claeys and Van Cauberghe, 2014; Ma and Zahn, 2016). Ultimately a crisis may develop into a scandal, when it causes public outrage, which is usually related to the actions, or lack thereof of actors involved in the crisis (see Hughes and Shank, 2005). In its essence, however, a crisis situation is problematic, not just for transgressors, but also for other involved organizations, such as federations, sponsors and medical authorities. Crisis situations, from each of the three clusters potentially endanger corporate reputations or credibility, employee well-being, as well as the financial performance of these organizations (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2006, 2007).

### *2.2 Sponsor and team credibility*

Sponsoring involves a reciprocal relationship between, in this case, a sports team and the sponsor. Here, the latter provides financial support to the team in exchange for expected effects on brand recognition, sales figures and image transfer (for an overview see Walliser, 2003). For their financial stability, pretty much all sports organizations depend on sponsors, who, in exchange for financial support, get “access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property” (IEG, 2000). Several types of sponsorship relations can be distinguished. In professional cycling, title sponsorship (Clark *et al.*, 2009; Cornwell *et al.*, 2005; Chadwick and Thwaites, 2006) is the main source of income for cycling teams (Van Reeth, 2016). This form of sponsorship maximizes the exposure to the sponsor name by sharing the official name of an event, venue or – in this case – team (Clark *et al.*, 2009). Compared to other sponsorship types such as in-kind sponsorship (cycling equipment or food), or associate sponsorship deals, title sponsorship establishes the strongest connection between team and sponsor, because the team literally cannot be discussed without mentioning the sponsor name. In professional cycling, it also implies a great level of financial dependency between team and sponsor, as the latter provides the majority of the team’s income (Van Reeth, 2016).

Within the domain of sponsoring as well as that of crisis management research, scholars acknowledged the threats of crises to the image (Benoit, 1997; Connor and Mazanov, 2010), reputation (Fombrun, 1996; Coombs, 2007) and credibility (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000; Inoue and Kent, 2012) of the sponsor. In crisis communication research, reputation is often used (Coombs and Holladay, 1996; Ma and Zahn, 2016). Rather than generic outcomes such as reputation, we focus on credibility as dependent variable: credibility of sponsors and sport organizations is crucial in today’s mediatised society, because a loss in credibility threatens the organizations’ authority and legitimacy (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000), and often heralds the beginning of a downfall. After losing one’s credibility, officials are often forced to resign, and organizations lose support. Corporate credibility, then, is defined as the “extent to which the source is perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject” (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000, p. 43). Credibility perceptions are the outcome of an ethical judgement, defined as “an individual’s personal evaluation of the degree to which some behaviour or course of action is ethical or unethical” (Sparks and Pan, 2010, p. 5).

We assume that the sponsor’s behaviour (including its sponsoring activities) contributes to its corporate credibility (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997). This behaviour includes building

and maintaining relationships with other organizations, such as the sponsored team. Engaging in such reciprocal relationships can result in so-called spill-over (Meenaghan, 2001) of positive as well as negative attributes. Whereas sponsors obviously aim for positive image transfer, the risk of negative spill-over, in case of crises, is very realistic as well. In other words, it is expected that the behaviour of the sponsored team, or its members, possibly effects the credibility of its sponsor as well as its own credibility.

### 2.3 *The central mechanism: image transfer*

Image transfer is based on the transfer of meaning from one entity (e.g. a sports team) to the other (e.g. a sponsor). In the context of celebrity endorsement, meanings are described as “the overall assessment of what the celebrity represents” (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999, p. 48). Due to the association between the sports team and the sponsor in, for example, advertising, meanings or characteristics associated with the celebrity, transfer to the brand of the sponsor. Image transfer in sport sponsoring is considered a similar way: through active association between sports team and the title sponsor, elements of the sports team image transfer to the image of the sponsor (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Meenaghan, 2001; Kwon *et al.* 2016). The positive influence of this image transfer is stimulated by several factors, amongst which “match up” or (functional) “fit” between team and sponsor is the most well-known (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Walliser, 2003; Smith, 2004; Kwon *et al.*, 2016). This fit is the perceived congruence between sports team and sponsor (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Gwinner *et al.*, 2009; Kwon *et al.*, 2016). So, the higher the level of fit, the more likely it is that “meanings” often related to sports teams and athletes, such as youthfulness, mental strength and glamour, transfer to the sponsor’s image (Smith, 2004). Following the argument of Lacey *et al.* (2007), more frequent encounters with the sponsorship relations have a positive effect on people’s attitudes towards the brand, one may argue that a strong image transfer effect can be expected here as well. Title sponsorship implies frequent and strong communication of the relationship between sponsor and team, because the team is linked to the sponsor every time somebody uses the official team name.

Title sponsorship is likely to affect not only reputation, but also corporate credibility, as a consequence of the interrelationship between the concepts (Fombrun *et al.*, 2000; Hur *et al.*, 2014). Ergo, we expect a parallel mechanism for negative consequences of sports team crisis situations to affect the sponsor’s credibility simultaneously to that of the sports team. Therefore, we introduce the following hypotheses:

*H1a.* In case of a crisis situation in a sports team, the team’s credibility will decrease.

*H1b.* In case of a crisis situation in a sports team, the sponsor’s credibility will decrease.

### 2.4 *Issue arenas*

Although crisis communication usually focusses on interactions between the organization where the crisis takes place and the audience, in reality, multiple actors have a stake in, and engage in communication about a crisis. Each of these actors make strategic choices when they partake in the communication about the crisis (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010; Vos, 2017). Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) refer to the media place where this conversation about an issue or crisis takes place as the “issue arena”. Fans and journalists do not only rely on team or athlete statements, but also on communication by other interest parties, amongst whom sponsors have an important position due to their close relationship and interest in the performance and credibility of the team they are sponsoring. Trust arises when the public informs themselves using all kinds of communication from the issue arena. Journalists will try to collect information from multiple sources and also the public will not only rely on the team or the athlete, but also on statements made by

affiliated actors such as sponsors (or federations, etc.). For this reason, our study focusses on the communication by the title sponsor of the team and its effects on sponsor and team credibility.

### *2.5 Reputation and credibility repair through strategic crisis communication*

The potential consequences of crisis situations for both organization and stakeholder make it of utter importance to not only manage the crisis strategically, but also to communicate about it in such a way to protect the organization's credibility (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2006, 2007). Authors have developed various catalogues of protective responses (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007). SCCT argues that depending on (perceived) responsibility and crisis history, specific strategies are most effective (Coombs, 2007). Response messages can be categorized as follows:

- Denial strategies: strategies that seek to disprove the existence of a crisis, or to show that the organization does not have any responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2006, 2007; Benoit, 1997). An organization could, for example, deny that there are technical errors in the design of an electric cart, after a deadly accident happened with one of their vehicles. According to SCCT, these strategies are fit for crises where the organization itself is a victim (Coombs, 2007; Claeys and Van Cauberghe, 2014).
- Diminish strategies: in these strategies, the core idea is that the organization accepts the existence of the crisis situation as well as the involvement of the organization. However, at the same time it tries to change the attributions stakeholders make about the crisis, in order to reduce a negative effect on the corporate credibility (Coombs, 2006). In case of accidental crises (where the crisis is not external, but happens in the organization), this is often an effective crisis response strategy according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007; Claeys and Van Cauberghe, 2014).
- Rebuild strategies: this last set of strategies is described as where the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and includes offering material and/or symbolic forms of aid to the victims. It takes positive action to end the crisis situation and help prevent it from reoccurrence (Coombs, 2007). According to SCCT, this is the most effective crisis response strategy in the situation of a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007; Claeys and Van Cauberghe, 2014).

Only in the latter category, does organization accept responsibility for the crisis. This makes it the most expensive, but also the most effective crisis response strategy in case of preventable crises (Coombs and Holladay, 2008). Furthermore, SCCT suggests to only use denial strategies in case of absence of (perceived) responsibility and to use diminish strategies only when the attribution of responsibility is minimal and there is no history of similar cases (Coombs, 2007, p. 173).

Much research has gone into the effects of these response strategies, under different conditions. The general argument of the SCCT model was tested widely (i.e. Coombs and Holladay, 2002; 2008; Van der Meer, 2014; Ma and Zhan, 2016). Others investigated the role of the channel of communication (Utz *et al.*, 2013), and the role of additional elements in the response, such as the expressed emotions or other moderators (Van der Meer and Verhoeven, 2014; Claeys and Van Cauberghe, 2014).

Here, we build on this body of work and consequently expect corresponding effects of response messages from each of the three categories on the credibility of the sports team. Building on the aforementioned argument of the image transfer mechanism, we expect similar effects from response messages from the sponsor on the sponsor's corporate credibility as well. When a crisis of a sports team is likely to have a negative effect on the credibility of the sponsor, a sponsor's response, that is in accordance with the SCCT model,

is then also likely to have similar protective effects on the sponsor's credibility. After all, the public may perceive the sponsor and team to be part of the same network that works together to provide an environment in which the athlete is able to perform.

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the effects of crisis response messages on the sponsor's credibility, below, we distinguish crisis responses from the three categories as well as a fourth: the strategy to refrain from a response to the crisis situation. This strategy is usually ignored in the literature. Coombs (2016) suggests this strategy would be least advisable (p. 120), as it allows others to control the development of the crisis (Coombs, 2010, p. 28). However, we believe it is a frequently practised strategy by organizations and especially sports sponsors to crisis situations that occur in sports teams, to avoid stimulating attention for the issue. In doping-related accusations towards Sky cycling team in 2018, several stakeholders have publicly reacted: athletes, team doctors, team manager, but not the sponsors (Ingle and Kelner, 2017). Benoit and Brinson (1999) have paid attention to the consequences of not responding to a crisis and argued that this could lead to hostile reactions amongst the public, which is difficult to repair in second instance (p. 147). On the condition of careful application, crisis response messages of any of the three categories are more well-received than complete silence (Coombs, 2016); therefore, we test the following hypotheses:

*H2a.* In case of a crisis situation in a sports team, the sponsor's use of denial, diminish or rebuild strategies will protect the team credibility more than not responding to the crisis situation.

*H2b.* In case of a crisis situation in a sports team, the sponsor's use of denial, diminish or rebuild strategies will protect the sponsor credibility more than not responding to the crisis situation.

In a doping case, the public will likely attribute at least some level of responsibility for the violation to the team and sponsor because cycling teams generally see it as their responsibility to fight doping use. Therefore, alleged doping use should be considered, and treated as a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007). Following the SCCT model, this would mean that rebuild strategies would have the most positive effects on team and sponsor credibility (Coombs, 2007; Coombs and Holladay, 2008; Ma and Zahn, 2016). Hence, our third set of hypotheses is as follows:

*H3a.* In case of a crisis situation in a sports team, the sponsor's use of the rebuild strategy will protect the team credibility more than the use of denial and diminish strategies.

*H3b.* In case of a crisis situation in a sports team, the sponsor's use of the rebuild strategy will protect the sponsor credibility more than the use of denial and diminish strategies.

### 3. Method

To test the hypotheses, a scenario experiment was conducted with a 2 (pre-/post-crisis)  $\times$  4 (denial/distancing/rebuild/no crisis response) mixed factorial design. Time was the within-subjects factor in this design: the credibility of the sponsor (Argos Energies) as well as the credibility of the sports team (Argos Shimano Professional Cycling Team) was measured twice with two weeks in between. Right before the second measure, participants were asked to imagine that a fictitious member of the cycling team allegedly violated doping regulations. Next, they read a response by the sponsor of the team, Argos Energies. The sponsor responded with either a denial, distancing or rebuild message. In addition, there was a control condition, in which the sponsor refrained from responding at all.

### 3.1 Sample

A total of 407 participants participated in the first wave. Due to missing data (particularly missing e-mail addresses needed to send an invitation for the second part of the study), 124 participants dropped out after the first wave. After two weeks, the remaining 283 participants were invited to participate in the second part of the study, of which 242 responded. After removal of incomplete responses, a final sample of 191 respondents remained.

All respondents reside in the Netherlands. This sample consisted of 122 females and 69 males. The average age of participants was 37.18 years old ( $SD = 13.83$  years). This sample was quite highly educated: about one in three respondents ( $n = 69$ ) took a higher vocational degree and 67 respondents attended an academic study, either at the bachelor ( $n = 14$ ), or at the master level ( $n = 53$ ). Furthermore, 11 participants attended a secondary vocational training, and 43 participants had only been enrolled in high school. No participants were excluded based on interest in sports or cycling, as we were interested in how the general public responds to information about doping use in cycling.

### 3.2 Procedure

Panel members were approached through a research agency to participate in this study. Among participants, five gift vouchers of EURO 20 were raffled. The study consisted of two waves. In the first wave, participants received an invitation to a questionnaire. In this questionnaire, the credibility of a cycling team was measured (i.e. Argos Shimano Professional Cycling Team), as well as the credibility of one of the two title sponsors of this team (i.e. Argos Energies). These measures served as a baseline. Two weeks later, the participants were invited to participate in the second part of the study. In the second wave, participants read a fictitious news article from an online news site about the alleged violation of doping regulations by one of the members of the cycling team. This suspicion followed irregularities in blood values in the biological passport of the cyclist of the Argos Shimano Team. In the article, the cyclist denies the violation of doping rules, and announces a second opinion.

After reading the news article, participants read a press statement by the sponsor. The content of this response varied according to the experimental condition: in the denial condition, the sponsor stated that the team does not allow doping use, that doping use was not proven and that at this point the news article was merely speculation. In the distancing condition, the sponsor stated that the team was never aware of the cyclist's doping use and still strongly opposes doping use. The sponsor stresses that the team is not responsible for the cyclists doping use. In the rebuild response, the sponsor states that they were never aware of the cyclist's violation, but acknowledges that it is involved in all activities of the team. It apologizes to anyone who may feel disadvantaged and it emphasizes that the team will do anything in its power to straighten this misstep. Finally, in the control condition, the sponsor did not respond to the news at all. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of these conditions. After reading the scenario, participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire again. Before finishing the study, participants were debriefed and assured that the event was completely fictitious and no such event ever took place in this team.

### 3.3 Dependent measures

Team credibility as well as sponsor credibility was measured using the expertise and trustworthiness dimension of Ohanian's credibility scale (Ohanian, 1990; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000; Newell and Goldsmith, 2001). All ten items were rated on a seven-point semantic differential scale. Items included "unreliable–reliable", "untrustworthy–trustworthy", "inexperienced–experienced", and "dishonest–honest". Table I shows that in both waves, this scale was reliable both for the sponsor as for the team.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Because the dependent variable credibility was measured twice with two weeks in between, repeated measures ANOVA was used for hypothesis testing. The sponsor crisis response was the between-subjects factor. To interpret the interaction effects, paired-sampled *t*-tests were conducted.

## 4. Results

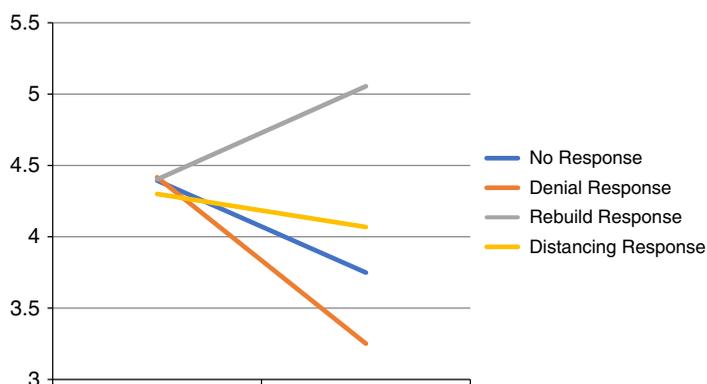
### 4.1 Sponsor credibility

To test the effects of crisis and crisis response on sponsor credibility, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. First of all a small main effect of time was observed:  $F(1, 187) = 32.81; p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.149$ . As one would expect, due to their association with the transgressor, overall, the sponsor's credibility dropped slightly as a result of the crisis ( $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.38; SD = 0.69; M_{post-crisis} = 4.04; SD = 0.97$ ), confirming *H1b*. Furthermore, this effect was moderated by crisis response (see Figure 1):  $F(3, 187) = 40.74; p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.395$ .

Paired-samples *t*-tests confirmed that, in absence of a sponsor response, the crisis caused a significant drop in sponsor credibility:  $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.39; SD = 0.67; M_{post-crisis} = 3.75; SD = 0.57; t(50) = 6.86; p < 0.001$ . This drop was aggravated when the sponsor denied the occurrence of the crisis:  $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.42; SD = 0.69; M_{post-crisis} = 3.25; SD = 0.67; t(46) = 8.74; p < 0.001$ . In contrast, a distancing response prevented some of the damage to the sponsor credibility:  $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.30; SD = 0.66; M_{post-crisis} = 4.07; SD = 0.81; t(43) = 2.20; p = 0.03$ , while, unexpectedly, a rebuild response even strengthened the sponsor's credibility to the extent that the sponsor's credibility was improved ( $M_{post-crisis} = 5.06; SD = 0.79$ ) compared to the pre-crisis situation ( $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.40; SD = 0.74; t(48) = -4.52; p < 0.001$ ). These findings partly support *H2b*: communicating distancing and rebuild strategies limits credibility damages compared to not responding to the crisis; however, communicating a denial strategy does not. The finding do support *H3b*. Although a doping crisis harms the sponsor credibility, and a poor crisis response such as denial can aggravate this credibility

	Pre-crisis	Post-crisis
Team credibility	$\alpha = 0.875$	$\alpha = 0.871$
Sponsor credibility	$\alpha = 0.912$	$\alpha = 0.843$

**Table I.**  
Reliability  
credibility scale



**Figure 1.**  
The effects of crisis  
response messages  
on the sponsor's  
credibility

loss, these data show that a doping crisis can also offer an opportunity for sponsors to display their positive contribution to the sport. When a sponsor shows that their team does everything in their power to right the wrong, it improves the sponsor credibility.

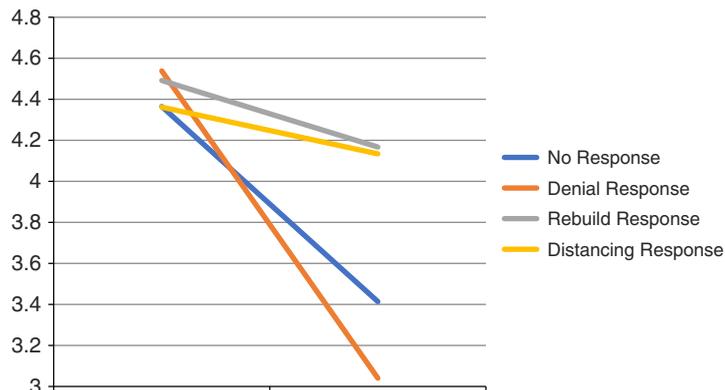
#### 4.2 Team credibility

To test the effects of the doping scandal and the sponsor response on the team credibility (*H1a*), a repeated measures ANOVA was employed. Quite a large effect of time was observed: the event clearly harmed the team's credibility:  $F(1, 187) = 134.71$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.419$ . The team's credibility dropped from 4.44 (on a seven-point scale;  $SD = 0.78$ ) to 3.68 ( $SD = 0.81$ ). An interaction effect between time and sponsor response was observed (see Figure 2): the drop in team credibility depended on the sponsor's response:  $F(3, 187) = 20.63$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.249$ .

Without a sponsor response, the team's credibility dropped considerably:  $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.36$ ;  $SD = 0.88$ ;  $M_{post-crisis} = 3.41$ ;  $SD = 0.68$ ;  $t(50) = 7.61$ ;  $p < 0.001$ . Again, a denial response did not prevent this drop, but aggravated it:  $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.54$ ;  $SD = 0.81$ ;  $M_{post-crisis} = 3.04$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ;  $t(46) = 10.51$ ;  $p < 0.001$ . A rebuild response, however, did prevent some of the damage in credibility; however, still, a significant drop in credibility remained:  $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.49$ ;  $SD = 0.66$ ;  $M_{post-crisis} = 4.17$ ;  $SD = 0.70$ ;  $t(48) = 2.98$ ;  $p = 0.004$ . Finally, no significant drop in team credibility was found when the sponsor used a distancing response:  $M_{pre-crisis} = 4.36$ ;  $SD = 0.76$ ;  $M_{post-crisis} = 4.13$ ;  $SD = 0.69$ ;  $t(43) = 1.62$ ;  $p = 0.11$ . These findings partly support *H2a*, as both communicating rebuild and distancing strategies limited the damage to the team's credibility, but communicating the denial strategy did not. *H3a* was not confirmed, as it was the distancing strategy that prevented the team's credibility best instead of the rebuild strategy.

### 5. Discussion

Professional sports require tight networks of actors, such as individual athletes, trainers, teams, sponsors, doctors, doping agencies, national and international sport federations, broadcasters, fan clubs, and journalists (Solberg *et al.*, 2009). All these actors play their own roles and have different responsibilities in enabling professional sports exercise. At times of crisis, the credibility and reputation of all those actors are under threat (Burroughs and Vogan, 2015). Therefore, usually, those actors will attempt to minimize the damage to their credibility by participating in the communication in the media about the crisis (Vos, 2017). Although it is evident that multiple network actors are involved in professional sports crises, most studies still exclusively focus on the crisis communication of the transgressor,



**Figure 2.**  
The effect of crisis  
response messages on  
team credibility

such as a sports team (Parker and Fink, 2010), or the sponsor (Vredenburg and Giroux, 2018) on some audience, such as the general public (Solberg *et al.*, 2010), fans (Parker and Fink, 2010) or investors (Danylichuk *et al.*, 2016). In doing so, they study dyadic communication between some party and the public in isolation, ignoring the network structure that underlies top sports.

The present study takes the complexity of the environment of a sports crisis into account in two ways: first of all, the influence of a doping crisis (*H1a* and *H1b*) and crisis communication on the credibility of not the athlete him- or herself, but his/her sports team (*H2a* and *H3a*) and the team sponsor (*H2b* and *H3b*) was studied. In doing so, we emphasized how an athlete's ethical violation can spill-over to the credibility of the team and the sponsor, even when it is ambiguous whether these parties played any role in the doping scandal itself. Second, although usually, after a crisis, most public and media attention is directed at the athlete and his or her team, this study looks at the effects of title sponsor communication, which also has an influential voice in the cacophony after a crisis (Connor and Mazanov, 2010).

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

The study provides insight into the way the public makes ethical judgements of different actors in a doping scandal, and how such judgements inform credibility perceptions. Besides comparing an organization's actions against some ethical standard, the public assesses a sponsor's credibility by considering the (sponsorship)ties that this organization maintains with athletes. The underlying assumption is that by financially supporting an athlete, the sponsor approves of his or her behaviour. This means that to remain credible, sponsors should not only act ethically themselves (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000), but also that requirement extends to the actors that it associates itself with (e.g. through sponsorship). This is especially so for title sponsorship, which is the standard main sponsorship relation in professional cycling (Van Reeth, 2016), because the team carries the sponsor's name, and the team members (staff as well as athletes) can almost be considered to "work" for the sponsor (i.e. publicity work). However, the findings seem to suggest that the public would not hold the sponsor responsible for doping prevention in the future. When the sponsor communicates that it intends to play a role in doping prevention in the future (a rebuild strategy), it exceeds expectations, and the crisis even offers an opportunity for a sponsor to improve its credibility.

The study shows that SCCT can be extended to sponsor communication: from its original focus on the main organization in the crisis (here: sports team), to closely related external organizations (here: title sponsor). The mechanisms described in SCCT concerning the effectiveness and fit of the crisis response strategies are similar for the sponsor's responses, as they are in the original theory (Coombs, 2007; Ma and Zahn, 2016). Here too, because of the preventable nature of the crisis, the most effective response strategy (in function of the sponsor's credibility) is a rebuild strategy.

### 5.2 Practical implications

As to the effectiveness of strategic responses to a doping crisis, obviously, the credibility of a sports organization will first and foremost be the result of the organization's own actions. However, this study proves that the communication of affiliated actors may also contribute to credibility in positive as well as negative ways. While partnerships in sports can be risky because crises can be contagious (Wilson *et al.*, 2008), such partners can also help one another repair their credibility in such difficult times.

Therefore, this study calls for an integrated approach of crisis communication of a sports team and its affiliated partners: by strategically participating in the dialogues about a sports crisis, a sponsor can aid or harm the protection of credibility. To remain credible, one may

coordinate communication efforts of the most important actors in one's network. Also, people will use information from several sources in judging credibility (Sung and Hwang, 2014). As such, one's own response is insufficient to restore credibility. It is a joint effort with your network partners, and the spokesperson of the title sponsor can play an important role in the restoration of trust.

The study also provides insight into the effectiveness of several credibility protection communication strategies. As other studies have confirmed (e.g. Ma and Zahn, 2016), the denial of the crisis aggravates credibility loss. It is unlikely that the public will believe that the crisis did not occur at all. In such cases, "double deviation" occurs (Bitner *et al.*, 1990): first, credibility is harmed by the sponsor's affiliation with a transgressor, then, on top of that, the sponsor is perceived to be dishonest about it. Both "offences" are harming the credibility of the sponsor.

While distancing prevents some of the credibility damage, a focus on future rebuild restores credibility the most, because it is presenting an alternative narrative. In a context where doping crises are often responded to with denial, diminish or ignore (no response) strategies, applying the rebuild strategy stands out through its exceptionality and by its aim to prevent future doping crises. This may provide a sponsor with what we could call a "failure paradox": a crisis offers sponsors the opportunity to excel and positively influence the sports. As the expectations–evidence framework (Dawar and Pillutla, 2000) proposes, people interpret an organizational response to a crisis on the basis of their prior expectations about the organization. In this case, people are unlikely to expect sponsors to solve doping problems because these are not their responsibility, but that of teams and anti-doping agencies. Still, by showing your commitment towards this end, a sponsor builds trust and credibility by exceeding public expectations. In such a case, people are likely to "forgive" the sponsor their previous commitment to the transgressor. The credibility restoration effect of a rebuild message indicates that the public can forgive sponsors for their support for cheating actors when they commit themselves to a rebuild effort that goes beyond what the public would expect of a sponsor.

As such, sponsors may improve their credibility most when they frame their contribution to the solution to the problems not as an obligation, but as an authentic effort to do good. The study provides empirical evidence for the notion that crises in sports can have a "silver lining" for sponsors: when using an "embrace strategy", a sponsor focusses on their role in "'fixing' or ameliorating a scandal" (Connor and Mazanov, 2010, p. 30). As such, a rebuild response strategy from the sponsor may well change the way the wind blows.

### *5.3 Methodological discussion*

As with most crises in sports, some of the information in the scenario was somewhat ambiguous: first, it was not completely certain that this cyclist actually took doping at all. Other explanations for the irregularities in blood values were possible (e.g. illness or food contamination). Second, even in case of doping use, the roles different actors played were quite ambiguous: the scenario did not reveal whether the team and the sponsor knew about doping use in the team, neither did the scenario give more information about the team's anti-doping measures. As a result, just like in real-life cases, participants made credibility judgements under conditions of uncertainty.

While this study provides insight into the context of an individual athlete alleged doping use, it is unclear whether these findings are generalizable to other athlete transgressions (Wilson *et al.*, 2008), or to other crises and scandals in sports such as supporter violence, bribery, sexual abuse (Brackenridge, 1997) or financial misconduct. Other crises may differ in the type of crisis in terms of responsibility of team and sponsor (Coombs, 2006, 2007) and crisis response history (Coombs, 2006; Coombs and Holladay, 2002). In the context of the

scenario that has been used in this study, a distancing message is very credible because doping use is not relevant to an energy company. However, when a sponsor gets linked to fraud or financial mismanagement of a sports organization, it may be harder to undo this link, because such practices are probably also potentially relevant in the sponsor's organization. In some instances of crises, a denial strategy may be more credible, and hence more effective when there is evidence suggesting that the crisis may be based on quicksand. In other words, on top of crisis type and crisis response history, the legitimacy of the doping accusations (in this case), or the quality of the evidence behind them may also have a moderating effect on the findings in this study.

Another limitation to the generalizability of the findings in this study is that there might be differences between types of sponsorship relations; individual sponsorship (e.g. Nike and Tiger Woods or Adidas and Messi) may be a different case than the title sponsorship of teams (as in our scenario) or events (e.g. a marathon or sports competition). The sponsorship of an individual athlete is based on the trust that a sponsor puts in this athlete (Connor and Mazanov, 2010). In that case, a potential crisis situation shows that the sponsor clearly misjudged that individual. When a crisis hits an organization or team, the attribution of responsibility is usually more complicated. For instance, in the crisis at hand, it is unclear whether the crisis is caused by an individual within the team (the cyclist or the team doctor), or whether the team as a whole is to blame. The damage to the team's credibility as well as that of the title sponsor will probably depend on how the public makes sense of the crisis.

A last avenue for future investigation is the possibility of interactive effects of different actors' communicative efforts: in particular, when two accounts conflict (e.g. an athlete denies substance use, while officials report a positive test), it is likely that people will question the credibility of either one of those actors (Solberg *et al.*, 2010). As such, in future research, the interactive effects of several crisis messages of different involved actors may be tested. In the case of the scenario in this study, the athlete uses a denial message. This may have affected the credibility of other actors as well.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study contributes to crisis communication theory by showing that the communication of related actors involved (in varying levels) affects the credibility of either of them. Furthermore, it shows that for sponsors of sports teams in crisis it is beneficial to respond to the crisis in accordance to SCCT (Coombs, 2007). These strong results also show a valuable direction for future studies: into the complexity of networked crisis communication in professional sports.

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