

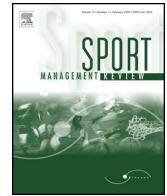


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Full Length Article

The force of the national rhetorical arena: Voices in tune against a disrespectful foreign sponsor

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how a public relations crisis in the sport realm develops when national identity issues are at stake. Based on the media coverage of the All Blacks Rugby World Cup jersey crisis, and drawing on the concept of rhetorical arena, we explore Adidas's crisis communication strategies, identify and summarise the responses, actions, and interactions of various parties involved in the crisis. We consider how these parties influence the development of the crisis in what we call the 'national rhetorical arena'. The article illustrates the power of the national rhetorical arena and its many voices to align over issues of national identity against a foreign sponsor making use of a national icon. When sponsoring national sport teams, foreign sponsors need to be aware they are only borrowing, not appropriating, important signifiers of national identity. They should make sure they do not impede the national public's perceived entitlement to their national icons as any act of disrespect towards national identity is felt very strongly. In a crisis, they need to identify the potential voices in the national rhetorical arena, not underestimate the role of national media to shape and bring together these voices, not downplay the power of the national public, and not underestimate the strong undercurrent of nationalism especially during sport mega events.

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1. Introduction

Despite careful consideration and planning, sponsors can find themselves in the middle of a crisis. In such cases, appropriate public relations communication strategies need to be implemented, especially when the sponsoring organisation is perceived as responsible for the crisis (Coombs, 1998). This was the case for Adidas, sponsor of the New Zealand (NZ) All Blacks, whose high pricing of the 2011 All Blacks Rugby World Cup jersey resulted in media backlash and outrage from the NZ public.

Drawing on the concept of rhetorical arena (Johansen, Johansen, & Weckesser, 2016), we examine how a public relations crisis develops when national identity issues are at stake. Based on media coverage of the All Blacks Rugby World Cup jersey crisis, we analyse Adidas's crisis communication response and identify and summarise the responses, actions, and interactions of various parties involved and consider how these parties influence the development of that crisis in what we

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call the national rhetorical arena. The originality of the article therefore lies in exploring crisis communication in sports sponsorship in relation to the feelings of national identity of various national arena voices. Thus far, scholars have not explored this relationship despite national identity being key to national publics' alignment and attachment to their national team. In our study, we explore the following: (a) who were the key voices in the national rhetorical arena; (b) how did those key voices react to Adidas's actions; and (c) how did these key voices influence the development of the crisis in the national rhetorical arena? To understand this case it is crucial to outline the importance of NZ rugby, explain Adidas's position as a sponsor, and set the crisis context.

2. Context: Adidas's sponsorship and the crisis

Rugby has been part of a cultural discourse constructing an imagined shared national identity (Falcous, 2007; Fougere, 1989; Hope, 2002; Phillips, 1996; Ryan, 2005; Scherer & Jackson, 2007). Instrumental in this construction is the unquestionable international dominance of the game by the men's national team, the All Blacks, who have an unrivalled winning record (<http://stats.allblacks.com/>). However, this myth of rugby's national centrality, articulated by politicians, rugby officials, journalists, public relations and advertising executives has been questioned by the aforementioned researchers and by Bruce (2013, 2017), who studied New Zealanders' views and clearly showed that the game is not embraced by all. As Bruce (2017) argues:

The affective power of media and cultural discourses around rugby appear to work in two directions: one that bolsters feelings of pride, patriotism and national belonging, and one that alienates, angers or frustrates. (p. 112)

Because of their winning record and rugby's important place in NZ culture, the All Blacks are a very attractive sport brand delivering the value of success, but also cultural significance and national identity to corporate sponsors (Jackson, Batty, & Scherer, 2001). German-based multinational sportswear brand Adidas recognised this and in 1999 was successful in its bid to replace long standing New Zealand sportswear brand *Canterbury* as All Blacks sponsor. The sponsoring deal between the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU, now NZR) and Adidas provided the former with a vital source of revenue – estimated at NZ \$100 million over five years (Jackson et al., 2001) – and was a co-branding association based on aligning core brand values (excellence, humility, and respect) between the All Blacks and Adidas. In particular, the brand value of respect involved “respect for the All Blacks, respect for the country, and what it stands for, respect for the people” of NZ (Motion, Leitch, & Brodie, 2003, p. 1087).

In order to counteract concerns from the NZ public as to “how a foreign company was going to handle the nation's most treasured commodity, the All Blacks” (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002, p. 131), Adidas used a corporate nationalism strategy (Scherer & Jackson, 2007; Silk, Andrews, & Cole, 2005) consisting of strategically inserting themselves into the New Zealand culture (Jackson et al., 2001), inventing and constructing a strong local identity for themselves in order to buy New Zealanders' loyalty. In various advertising campaigns that emotionally appealed to New Zealanders' sense of national identity, they endeavoured to be seen as respecting the All Blacks' history and legendary tradition, attempting to display consideration for the All Blacks' brand values of excellence, humility, and especially respect¹ (Jackson, Grainger, & Batty, 2004; Motion et al., 2003; Scherer & Jackson, 2007). However, this strategy was not unilaterally supported; for instance, the use of Maori imagery in Adidas's campaign was strongly contested by Maori tribes (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002; Jackson et al., 2001) and the professionalisation and corporate hijacking of rugby with its “businessmen-administrators, corporate sponsors, public relations people, and other management types” was blamed for killing the traditional All Blacks' spirit and culture (Hope, 2002, p. 235). In the beginnings of this Adidas immersion of the New Zealand All Blacks (Jackson et al., 2001), ex All Black legends, such as Laidlaw (1999), lamented how the All Blacks were no longer a team but a brand on which “a new commercial layer has been superimposed” and whose individuals were:

on an endless conveyor belt from place to place, signing merchandise, posing for photographs, making television commercials and acting out the part as brand ambassadors for Philips, Ford, Lion Nathan or any of the other corporate partners of All Blacks Inc. (p. 175)

Despite this resistance, Adidas continued to highlight their understanding and respect for the team's cultural importance and the All Blacks jersey to New Zealanders, thus subtly downplaying their corporate interest in the commercial value of the All Blacks. As Jackson et al. (2004) noted, Adidas used their high level managers to make public statements such as: “we (Adidas) respect the sanctity of the All Black Jersey . . . we have been very respectful of the whole image” (p. 214). All these public relations and advertising efforts positioned Adidas as a brand inextricably linked to the All Blacks, to be cherished and respected with them and built an expectation Adidas would continue to respect them and the NZ public.

2.1. The crisis

In August 2011, Adidas generated a crisis by failing to deliver on their promise to respect the All Blacks, the jersey, the country, and the NZ people (Motion et al., 2003). As the Rugby World Cup was due to start, Adidas released a new Rugby

¹ For example, the ‘Captains’ or the ‘Black’ campaigns were designed to articulate Adidas's understanding and respect for the historical and cultural legacy of the All Blacks and their jersey (see Motion et al., 2003; Scherer & Jackson, 2007).

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