

A Case Study of Media Influence on Public Attitudes Towards Celebrities

How the Sex Scandal of Kris Wu Influences His Public Recognition and Celebrity Endorsement

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ABSTRACT

In the new media era, media reports can highly influence public attitudes, and events involving celebrities usually draw great attention from the public. Besides, celebrities usually enjoy a high level of public recognition and endorse products, which is known as celebrity endorsement. Also, fandom economy, the operational income generating behavior relationship between fans and their idols, has grown stronger in recent decades[1]. A recent social event calls public attention in China. Chinese-Canadian pop star Kris Wu was detained by Beijing police for alleged rape and there is extensive media coverage of this event[2]. The author intends to test the drench hypothesis on the extent to which public attitudes toward Kris Wu and the whole idol community are affected by conducting an online survey of it. The change of idol community's influence as celebrity endorsers is also investigated in the author's survey. According to the data and results of this survey, it can be concluded that public attitudes toward Kris Wu and idol community and idol community's influence as celebrity endorsers are both declined after the public was exposed to this scandal. What's more, future research can be done on similar cases where celebrities are involved in well-known scandals, focusing more on the change difference between public attitudes toward a specific celebrity and public attitudes toward the community to which the celebrity belongs to.

Keywords: mass media, public attitudes, the drench hypothesis, celebrity endorsement, fan economy

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese-Canadian pop star Kris Wu was detained by Beijing police on suspicion of rape after allegedly "repeatedly seducing young women into having sex". There has been extensive media coverage reporting this event, which evoked various comments and emotional responses from different age and gender groups on numerous platforms. Due to the lasting hot discussion of this event, Kris Wu was frequently mentioned in other similar cases, even in people's everyday occurrences that seem irrelevant to this event. In previous years, researches on idol commercialization in China, famous scandals that attract public attention, and the influence of media reports on public attitudes have been done and there are multiple theories and ample background knowledge that can be used to explain Kris Wu event. Therefore, the author intends to investigate the extent to which public attitudes toward Kris Wu and the whole idol community have been affected and the difference

between these two after the public was exposed to this event since there are frequent gossips and scandals about idols while Kris Wu's behaviors have exceeded the scope of ethics and he is the few who violates the provisions of law. The author also intends to investigate how the idol community's influence as celebrity endorsers has changed because the majority of celebrities are involved in endorsement due to their high public recognition and the celebrity endorsement culture has grown strongly in recent decades. The author adopts survey as the method of research since a survey can be conducted and spread easily. Since the Kris Wu case was primarily spread and viewed on platforms such as Weibo and WeChat in China, the author also uses Weibo and WeChat Moments as channels to spread the survey to ensure that the majority of the sample was exposed to Kris Wu case before. This study intends to reveal the extent of public attitude shift due to the exposure of news on social media, figure out how this shift affects the endorsement ability of celebrity

endorsers and the risk of employing the strategy of celebrity endorsement, and suggest possible improvements for companies that utilize this strategy.

As a result, this article will talk about theories that can be used to explain Kris Wu scandal, how the author’s research is designed and conducted, the results and analysis of the research, and the limitations and conclusion of this research.

2.ANALYSIS ON THE RELEVANT RESEARCHES

Organ transplantation scandals on corneal donation can lead to a decrease in the corneal donation rate. At the end of 2012 and 2014, two huge organ transplantation scandals were widely known in Germany. As a result, the corneal donation rate decreased significantly in 2013 and 2015, respectively. This decrease is primarily because of refusal to donate, which indicates the mistrust of potential corneal donors. It is concluded, the spread of organ transplantation scandals, especially with the help of mass media, is a primary factor that leads to the decrease in corneal donation rate and trust level of the public[3].

Research on the 2011 English riots also demonstrates the influence of media coverage on newspaper readers’ attitudes toward public welfare recipients. For the rioting was widely perceived to be perpetrated by the urban poor, people connect it with the British welfare policies. Before the riots, the attitudes toward welfare recipients of both newspaper readers and non-readers remained essentially consistent; however, after the riots occurred and there had been multiple media coverage of the riots, the attitudes of newspaper readers and non-readers diverged: “Newspaper readers became more likely than non-readers to believe that those on welfare did not really deserve help, that the unemployed could find a job if they wanted to and that those on the dole were being dishonest in claiming benefits.”

“These results suggest that media coverage of the riots influenced attitudes towards welfare recipients; specifically, newspaper coverage of the riots increased the likelihood that readers of the print media expressed negative attitudes towards welfare recipients when compared with the rest of the population[4].”

A person who enjoys public recognition from a large group of people uses this recognition to advertise for a consumer good by appearing with it in commercials of this good. Many companies started to invite celebrities as the endorsers of their brands to become more competitive in the current marketing environment by taking advantage of celebrities’ public recognition[5][6]. However, it is also proposed that companies “put themselves at risk of becoming vulnerable or less profitable if certain celebrities are perceived in a negative light or not seen as credible spokespersons by the public”

and celebrities are also consuming their public recognition while endorsing consumer goods[7][8][9].

“The drench hypothesis postulates impressive effects of media messages on the audience”, which refers to short-term exposure to media messages that can elicit significant changes in perception of the audience[10].

According to the aforementioned literature, the author hypothesizes that the public’s short-term exposure to Kris Wu’s scandals on media can lead to negative attitude changes toward Kris Wu and the idol community, which also refers to decreased public recognition of Kris Wu and the community, leading to decreased influence of Kris Wu and the idol community as celebrity endorsers.

3.RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Data Analysis

The author has surveyed a total of 163 people, and after removing 3 invalid responses who had not heard of the Kris Wu case, the author received a total of 160 valid responses. The data are as follows.

Among the 160 people who had heard of the Kris Wu case, the author classified the sample into 6 categories by whether they were fans and their gender (male/female/others). Due to the lack of data, some groups do not contain the significant result.

3.1.1. Fan/female group

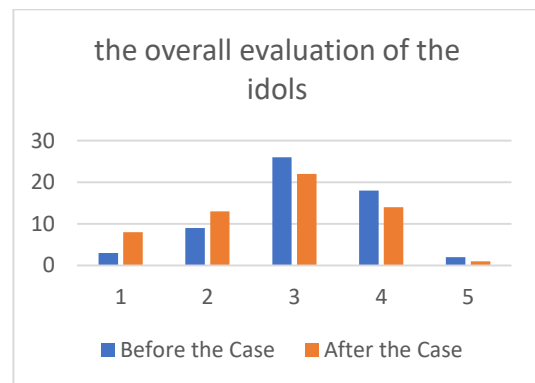


Figure 1. The overall evaluation of the idols

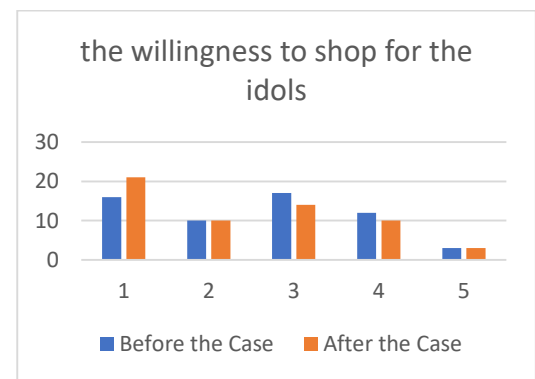


Figure 2. The willingness to shop for idols

Among the 58 individuals from the group of fans/females, although 36 individuals had neutral or positive attitudes toward Kris Wu before the scandal, almost all of them turned negative after hearing the scandal. In addition, both the overall evaluation of the idols and the willingness to shop for the idols decreased after the case, with the average evaluation of the idols decreasing from 3.1 to 2.8 (out of 5) and the willingness to shop for the idols decreasing from 2.7 to 2.5 (out of 5), as shown in the following data.

3.1.2. Non-fan/male group

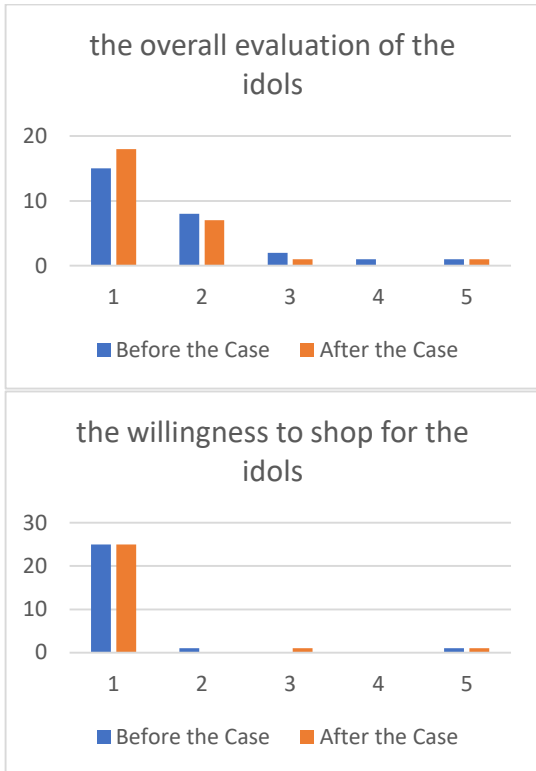


Figure 3. Non-fan/male group evaluation of the idols

Among the 27 individuals in the non-fan/male group, attitudes toward Kris Wu were consistent with the previous two groups - 11 of the original 13 samples that chose a neutral attitude shifted to negative. The average evaluation of the individuals in the group of non-fan/male chasers for overall evaluation of the idols decreased from 1.7 to 1.5 (out of 5). However, the non-fan/male group generally did not have the willingness to shop for idols, so their data did not change significantly.

3.1.3. Non-fan/female group

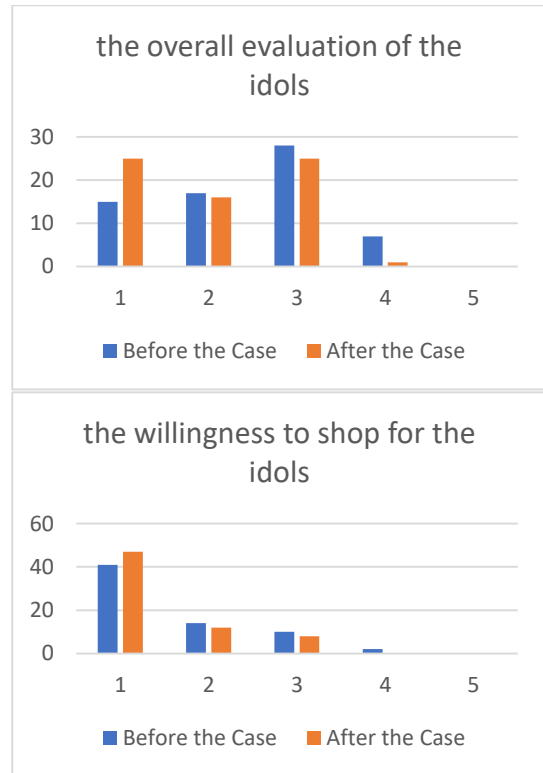
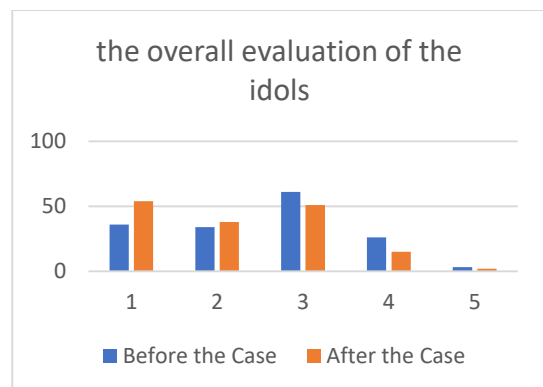


Figure 4. Non-fan/female group willingness to shop for the idols

Among the 67 individuals of the non-fan/female group, only 5 out of 47. With neutral or positive attitudes toward Kris Wu remained neutral, while all other individuals turned to negative. The average evaluation of the non-fan/female towards idols as a whole decreased from 2.4 to 2.0 (out of 5), and the willingness to shop for idols decreased from 1.4 to 1.2 (out of 5), as shown in the following data.

3.1.4. Overall data



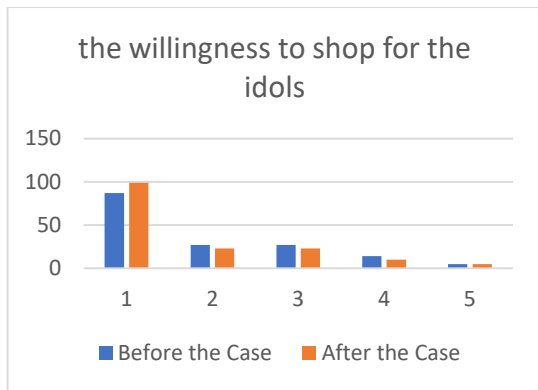


Figure 5. Overall sample analysis

Overall, 92% of the individuals that had a neutral attitude toward Kris Wu changed to negative, and 100% of the individuals that had a positive attitude toward Kris Wu changed to negative. Curiously, three individuals showed a 'retrograde' trend, from neutral to positive, from negative to positive, or from negative to neutral, respectively. However, the author can assume that these trends are not significant, with the vast majority of people shifting their attitudes from positive/neutral to negative. In addition, there were 7 people in the sample who maintained neutral and 57 who maintained negative. The decrease in scoring is also extremely evident from the evaluation data. From all valid samples, the average evaluation for the whole idol group has decreased from 2.5 to 2.2 (out of 5), and the willingness to shop for idols has decreased from 1.9 to 1.7 (out of 5), as detailed in the following data.

4. DATA CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above data, it is not difficult to see that different groups have different scoring structures, but the trend is the same: the Kris Wu case not only significantly lowered people's attitudinal evaluation of Kris Wu, but also pulled down people's evaluation of the whole idol community and reduced people's willingness to shop for idols to a certain extent. Although a few people remained neutral or even 'retrograde', these data did not affect the general trend that people tend to lower their opinion of Kris Wu and even the whole group of celebrities.

4.1. Improvements and shortcomings in data collection

During the data collection process, some data were not collected or were overlooked due to differences in the number of different groups. This may reduce the accuracy of the data collection to some extent, for example, the group of fan/male and the group of fan/others who did not collect enough data.

The dichotomy of "heard/never heard of" does not fit all cases. The level of knowledge about the event can also influence people's judgments, and more detailed

information on exposure depth and frequency can be collected if it is broken down into more detailed levels.

In addition, quantifying people's evaluation of the whole group of idols and people's willingness to shop for them on a scale of 1 to 5 is more subjective and may result in large deviations between samples. If the author splits it into multiple questions and quantifies the evaluation through more objective and specific questions such as frequency, amount, comments and retweets, the author may be able to obtain more accurate results.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the results and analysis above, the author concludes that the public attitudes toward Kris Wu and the idol community as a whole both decline evidently after the public being exposed to the sex scandal involving Kris Wu in a very short period of time, with a sharper decline of attitudes toward Kris Wu since he is directly involved while other idols just belong to the community that closely relates to Kris Wu. As a result, Kris Wu and the idol community both enjoy less public recognition, and their influence as celebrity endorsers have also declined, which confirms that the author's previously proposed hypothesis is highly possible to be valid. Therefore, it can be further inferred that although celebrity endorsement is an effective way of advertising, it will be detrimental for companies that employ this strategy if the public recognition of celebrities who have contracts with these companies is damaged. Possible improvements for these companies are signing up stricter contracts with more restrictions and fines regarding violation of contracts and pre-assessment in terms of moral standards, including behavioral misconducts, of the celebrities they want to sign up with.

However, there are also some limitations and drawbacks of this study. Since the questionnaire is mainly disseminated through two platforms, WeChat and Weibo, where the mainstream and active users are primarily Chinese teenagers (especially Weibo), the sample may not include very complete and comprehensive age and nationality groups and is not sufficiently representative for the population. Although the author attempted to use Facebook survey group to disseminate the questionnaire also, there were no responses from any non-Chinese. The author holds that it is effective to improve the representativeness of the sample by joining and posting questionnaires in public and commonly used online survey mutual help groups on international websites.

Further inferences and assumptions can be made that it's risky for companies to use celebrity endorsement as a primary marketing and advertising strategy since if a certain celebrity is involved in a scandal and has declined public recognition, not only companies that have contracts or partnership relationships with that particular celebrity will be influenced negatively in terms of

consumers' willingness, but also most companies that adopt the celebrity endorsement strategy will be influenced due to the overall decline of public recognition of celebrity group.

It is also pointed out that future research direction can be how long the attention and intensive discussion on media and attitude shift of various media users will last, and how different levels of exposure to a certain news influence public perception including attitude changes to different extents.

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