

The dangers of third party brand damage by Stuart Fuller

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Last week Uruguayan footballer Luis Suarez was accused of biting an opponent in front of a global audience of hundreds of millions of people. Whilst the officials didn't see the incident, television replays almost instantaneously convicted the superstar of the physical attack. Suarez initially pleaded his innocence, stating after the game that he had run into the Italian, Giorgio Chiellini. Whilst this explanation could be believed in some circumstances, Suarez has a tarnished history of similar events, including a similar incident in 2013 which saw him banned from football for ten games.

Whilst Suarez was trying to deflect the accusations, his sponsors and commercial partners were assessing the damage to their brand by being associated with the Uruguayan. Less than 48 hours after the incident online gambling firm 888poker acted, saying it had "decided to terminate its relationship" with "immediate effect". Suarez joined 888poker as a worldwide ambassador shortly before the World Cup, and produced several video diaries for the website during the tournament, including one after his two goals in the 2-1 victory over England.

Suarez's football boot deal with Adidas could also be in jeopardy after the sportswear manufacturer announced it would consider its partnership with the player, which had seen the image of the star being used across Brazil in the run up to the tournament.

Last year when Suarez was found guilty of biting a Chelsea player, the image of the player with Standard Chartered Bank blazoned across his chest must have caused the financial institution some concern, although not enough to put them off signing a \$30 million two year extension to their commercial partnership.

Major brands often walk on a tightrope in signing agreements with major sports stars, knowing that any minor misdemeanour can seriously tarnish their brand reputation. It is no co-incidence that the world's biggest brands often enter into partnerships with "safe" players, who rarely court controversy although may not be the most dynamic name or image for their campaigns.

Brand damage by association isn't restricted to the actions by people though. Brands need to be aware of unintentional association with people or material that could lead to reputational damage. All it takes is someone holding a branded coffee cup whilst saying something controversial, using a product for illegal or even immoral purposes (such as being associated with adult content) or even someone illegally driving a highly visible make of car to cause negative brand association.

Many brands will work with specialist brand protection management companies such as NetNames to try and stay one step ahead of these issues. Whilst they often cannot be avoided, understanding the extent of the problem is paramount so that the damage can be controlled as quickly as possible.