

# To forgive or not to forgive: What Josh Hamilton tells us about sports fandom

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In a recently published article in *Communication & Sport*, Jimmy Sanderson, assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Clemson University, and Elizabeth Emmons, a doctoral student in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama explore people's willingness to forgive then Texas Rangers player Josh Hamilton after an incident in January 2012.

Hamilton serves as a unique study for fan behavior, as he as arguably generates as much attention as a human interest story as he does for his athletic performance. Hamilton's career is mythical in many ways, starting from the pinnacle, then due to alcohol and drug related issues being removed from the game, before returning and rising back to the top. Hamilton's resurgence was accompanied with a public pledge that he refrained from consuming alcohol. However, in January 2012, reports broke that he was seen in a Dallas area bar partaking of alcoholic beverages. In response, Hamilton held a press conference where he admitted responsibility and apologized for his actions.

Celebrity confessionals are becoming more commonplace, and it is important that events be examined from the perspective of fans. Using fan comments on a Texas Rangers discussion board, Sanderson and Emmons found that most people forgave Hamilton through: (a) offering support; (b) "addiction is hard" narratives; (c) human condition attributions; and (d) justification. There were also some people who withheld forgiveness from Hamilton due to his perceived character flaws.

Emmons stated, "Josh Hamilton is a perfect example of a transparent, likeable athlete with a lot of support from fans. With his well-known struggles with alcohol and other addictions, he has disclosed personal aspects that people can relate to, and thus when he falls short, people have an avenue to respond to him through digital media."

Sanderson commented, "Josh Hamilton, in a very public form, personifies the struggles we all face trying to overcome challenges and adversity, because of that, when he admitted responsibility, it was easy for people to relate to that and to support and encourage him."

Hamilton's willingness to accept responsibility for his actions appeared to increase people's identification with him, enhancing perceptions that they were more similar than different. For example, one person conveyed to Hamilton, "You are just like all of us because we all stumble, fail, and have to get back up and recover from our bruises too." Others shared their personal struggles with addiction and declared that empathy was a required response and criticized those who, in their minds, were judging Hamilton unfairly.

Although forgiveness was predominant in the data, there were those who refused to extend this action to Hamilton. This occurred through commentary such as, "I have never seen a person with a serious drinking problem get better because he has a bunch of cheerleaders behind him." These individuals appeared to have reached a "breaking point" with Hamilton and perceived that his actions precluded forgiveness.

Sanderson commented, "one of the outcomes of this study that bears watching is that fans, as the aggrieved party now have the opportunity, via digital and social media to "reframe" athletes' actions away from the field. Typically, it is the offender who attempts to justify a transgression, but in this case, people did that for Hamilton."

Additionally, many people shared that they felt closer to Hamilton because of his adversity. In other words, it is difficult to identify with athletes when performance is used as the measuring stick, however, it is easier to relate to challenges in life and overcoming adversity.

Sanderson notes, "For athletes and other celebrities who make mistakes, Josh Hamilton serves as a vivid exemplar of the benefits of acknowledging responsibility. While there will clearly be detractors, it appears that most people, including fans, are willing to extend the proverbial "olive branch" as they can relate to overcoming adversity and challenges. In fact, it seems as though most people "want" to forgive them because of perceived similarity."

Emmons commented, "With parasocial interaction, we feel as though we know professional athletes and celebrities, and thus when they experience personal turmoil, we feel a sense of emotional investment in them, as we would with other friends and acquaintances. The neat aspect of this study is that parasocial interaction and forgiveness research in interpersonal communication are two well-developed circles of communication research, but they have not been studied together often. Digital media have given us a window into the emotional responses that fans have with the athletes and celebrities they have a vested interest in."

As celebrity confessionals continue to occur, understanding fan responses, particularly the divergent tracks that emanate from a decision to extend or withhold forgiveness will warrant continued research attention.

Provided by Clemson University

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