

SPORTS

## Novak Djokovic saga begs question: When should luxury brands stray from ambassadors?

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*Novak Djokovic has caused an international controversy. Image credit: Montblanc*

By KATIE TAMOLA

The world has its eyes on Serbian tennis champion Novak Djokovic as of late, but the attention is not stemming from his athletic prowess.

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The top men's tennis player has found himself at the heart of an ongoing controversy as many contest his quest to participate in the Australian Open despite being not meeting vaccination requirements. Mr. Djokovic's vaccination status and the ongoing negative press may serve as a lesson for luxury brands and their ambassador relationships.

"In a situation like that involving Djokovic, where an event and, in turn, a brand, is experiencing some increased visibility, they should simply carry on as they normally would maintaining visibility and engaging on a brand level, leveraging the traffic to simply expand its audience," said Brady Donnelly, managing director of [Sela](#), New York.

"Of course, it should do so with some caution and sensitivity, monitoring the situation and reading its audience to determine if that line between right and wrong has been cemented."

Up in the air

As a world-class athlete, Mr. Djokovic is no stranger to major endorsement deals. He has served as a brand ambassador for luxury watchmaker Hublot since 2021 and German luxury goods maker Montblanc since 2019.

Many luxury brands across sectors enjoy tapping athletes for campaigns, connecting diverse backgrounds, viewpoints and experiences overcoming adversity with their marketing messaging ([see story](#)). However, this can be a double-edged sword, as ambassadors' off-the-court behavior can also reflect on brands, for better or worse.



*Novak Djokovic is an ambassador for Hublot. Image credit: Hublot*

The situation surrounding Mr. Djokovic's participation in the Australian Open, which begins Jan. 17, continues to evolve.

The tournament cites governmental guidelines to require all players be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 or have a valid medical exception. However, questions continue regarding the validity of the exemption Mr. Djokovic may have received.

On Jan. 5, the star athlete was denied entry into Australia despite having received a medical exemption to participate in the Australian Open. A judge ruled on Jan. 9 that Mr. Djokovic could stay in the country, but government officials still threaten confiscation of his visa and deportation.

On Jan. 12, Mr. Djokovic **admitted** that incorrect information was listed on his travel documents when arriving in Australia, blaming "human error" from his team in failing to declare that he had traveled during the two-week period before entering the country. The athlete also said he made an error in judgment in previously participating at public events in Serbia last month.

Last December, Mr. Djokovic tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, but **reportedly** toured Serbia's postal service and participated unmasked at a panel discussion the day he received his test results. The next day, he also allegedly appeared at an event for young tennis players where he was photographed unmasked.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Novak Djokovic (@djokemole)

### *Novak Djokovic has addressed the situation on social media*

Several spectators, from Australian officials to social media users and television hosts, have expressed immense frustration with Mr. Djokovic.

The star's participation in the Australian Open is still up in the air, while the luxury brands he has partnered with remain quiet. As Mr. Djokovic continues to reap the benefits of being a star athlete and luxury ambassador, it begs the question of when brands decide to intervene and sever ties with controversial figures.

#### Star ambassadors?

While brands may do their due diligence before signing ambassadors, it is no guarantee that star athletes and celebrities will not be the subject of negative press often of their own making.

In fall 2021, NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers, and North American ambassador for Swiss watchmaker Zenith ([see story](#)), faced a breadth of negative press and fan reactions when he revealed he had not received a formal COVID-19 vaccination and criticized the league's policies regarding the virus following a positive test.

Mr. Rodgers misled reporters in an August 2021 press conference when he said he was "immunized" when asked about COVID-19 vaccinations. None of his sponsors, including Zenith, parted ways with the quarterback following the COVID controversy.

In other situations, however, luxury brands have severed ties with ambassadors when they deemed it appropriate and necessary.

Last August, Chinese-Canadian musician Kris Wu was formally arrested on suspicion of rape. Mr. Wu had a longstanding relationship with luxury, having collaborated with brands including Louis Vuitton, Porsche and more over the years ([see story](#)).

Louis Vuitton and Porsche both dropped Mr. Wu following the allegations last year.

For every controversy with an ambassador, brands may continue approaching on a case-by-case basis, acknowledging the ethics and visibility of each situation on its own.

"Whether directly or indirectly, brands seem to shape their reactions to negative press with two factors in mind: first, how their target audience expects them to react to the event, of course, and second, how complex the event is in its own right," Mr. Donnelly said.

"The clearer the line between right and wrong in the mind of their target audience severe or not severe the firmer that reaction needs to be."

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