

Sinking Fast: The Ryan Lochte Rio Drama Has Widespread Brand Repercussions



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It was exactly what we had been warned to expect from the Rio Olympics: A group of American star athletes mugged at gunpoint by thugs impersonating Brazilian police officers.

It sounded horrible. And it was—but not for the reasons we originally thought. It's become apparent that not only had this mugging *not* happened to American swimmer [Ryan Lochte](#) and three fellow swimmers, but that the group itself had vandalized a gas station and concocted the story to cover up their misdeeds.

It's now apparent that Lochte lied at the time of the incident, he lied in an interview with NBC afterwards, and he may still be lying about what happened. As a result, he now faces criminal charges in Brazil. The US Olympic Committee (USOC), which had initially backed the swimmers, was left with egg on its face, and Americans in general are significantly embarrassed by this charade.

Can the Lochte brand be saved? After all, we've seen all kinds of celebrities act badly and recover.



(Photo Source: Twitter)

It's unlikely the Lochte brand will become buoyant anytime soon. Here's why.

- **This happened on an international stage**—in front of a huge global audience for one of the world's most highly touted and largest-watched sporting events.
- **It sucker-punched the host country.** Security issues in Rio were of paramount concern throughout the Games. Lochte's story hit at the heart of the issue and attempted to implicate the Brazilian authorities in nefarious conduct.
- **Lochte took the coward's way out.** Realizing he was in hot water, Lochte left Brazil quickly, leaving his fellow compatriots Jack Conger, Gunnar Bentz, and James Feigen to explain themselves to the Brazilian authorities. Huh?
- **At every opportunity, he dug himself in deeper.** Lochte's apologies seem staged and shallow. His latest comments indicated he was still drunk when speaking to NBC afterwards. This does nothing engender compassion or empathy about what happened, and it raises issues about how remorseful he really is.
- **The real Olympic stars upstaged Lochte's performance.** From the record setting medal performances of swimmer Michael Phelps to the incredible gymnastic feats of

Simone Biles and the outstanding performances of Simone Manuel, the US has plenty of real heroes to celebrate. Lochte has the misfortune to be the second best American swimmer in the era of Michael Phelps. Phelps has made mistakes, but none that embarrass his country in this kind of way.

- **Sponsors are racing to get out of the pool.** Speedo, Ralph Lauren, Airweave, and Gentle Hair Removal all quickly moved to drop Lochte from their ranks. Pine Brothers cough drops jumped on the opportunity to connect Lochte with a “forgiveness” theme, but that’s small consolation. Pine Brothers who?

What happens next? The USOC should be in damage control mode. They need to make perfectly clear that this kind of behavior will not be tolerated in any way, shape, or form from American athletes. Period. Hope Solo was suspended from the US women’s soccer team for comments made after her team’s loss early in the competition—yet she didn’t fabricate a false attack. Lochte should be suspended and fined, and perhaps even banned from competition. His fellow musketeers should be fined and strongly reprimanded at a minimum.

What happens next is critical. The world is waiting and watching. Let’s make sure we cross the finish line and regain our reputation and credibility.

***About the Author:** Linda J. Popky, founder of Leverage2Market Associates, is an award-winning Silicon Valley-based strategic marketing expert who is the author of the book *Marketing Above the Noise: Achieve Strategic Advantage with Marketing that Matters*. Follow her on Twitter at @popky #mktgabove.*