

**Are Sport Fans Really Fair?**

**A Moderation Impact of Perceived Athlete Value on Moral Judgment**

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**25-minute oral presentation**  
**(including questions)**

Athlete misconduct has been known to lead many stakeholders (e.g., fans, teams, sponsoring companies, etc.) to experience a dilemma in terms of their judgments. The recent studies with athlete transgression have found that such judgment process relies on moral reasoning strategies: how people deal with morality and performance judgments of troubled athletes (e.g., Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Hur et al., 2018). Such moral reasoning strategies include moral coupling (integration of performance and morality judgments; resulting in the most adverse impact on athlete evaluation), moral decoupling (separation of performance and morality judgments) and moral rationalization (justifying immoral behavior). Previous studies have shown the positive impact of moral decoupling and rationalization on sport consumers' steadfast support toward a troubled athlete. However, little is known regarding how sport fans' point of attachment could affect such moral reasoning strategies.

Most findings regarding biased sport fan behaviors have shown that fans with strong emotional and psychological attachment (highly identified fans) tend to show positive responses and behaviors to their favorite entities (e.g., athletes and teams) even in negative situations. For instance, they are predisposed to show steadfast support toward their favorite team even with poor team performance (e.g., Roumenstan, 1998). In addition, Lee and others (2016) have found that when highly identified fans with an athlete, they are likely to suppress their negative emotional responses and separate morality judgment from performance judgment resulting in better attitude to the scandalized athlete than their counterparts. Can this finding be equally applied to the situations when the fans have formed different levels of attachment to an athlete and a team? Drawing on the point of attachment (Robinson & Trail, 2005), the black sheep effect (Marques et al., 1988), and the moral reasoning (Bandura et al., 1996; Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016) as theoretical frameworks, the present study aims to investigate how different point of attachments can lead to activate different moral reasoning strategies.

**Theoretical Background**

As for the different attachment points, Robinson and Trail (2005) have suggested that there exist multiple points of attachment for which sport fans may be attracted to sport entities (e.g., athletes, teams, coaches, conferences, levels of sport, academic institutions). For instance, when a sport fan is strongly attached to a team, the fan becomes more concerned with following the team rather than any specific athletes within the team. This does not mean she/he does not have favorite players but it simply refers to her/his much stronger attachment to the team becomes the most significant driver when processing information or making a judgment about the teams and the athletes (e.g., Cottingham et al., 2012). Despite this significance, researchers have yet tested such impact within the athlete transgression context.

The black sheep effect (BSE; Marques et al., 1998) has been known as a skewed psychological response to a group member resulted from a categorization of group members. Marques and others (1988) have indicated that when a group member did something unacceptable damaging group values, other group members characterize the misbehaved group member as an exception or abnormal to the group. As a result, other group members evaluate a deviant group member very harshly. This biased ostracizing can be captured when a target member is not a valued group member (Marques et al., 1998) such as an athlete who is not making significant contributions to of team performance (i.e., bench members). This means even with the same situation, a double standard toward different group members can be applied depending on the perceived values of the target group members. Thus, we posit that highly identified fans with a team will be more likely to activate moral coupling (MC) than moral decoupling (MD) and rationalization (MR) when evaluating an athlete less contributing to team performance. As a result, fans taking moral coupling will show a higher level of intent to punish a target athlete than their counterparts.

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*H1: Highly attached fans to a team will use MC strategy when evaluating a less contributing athlete to the team performance.*

*H2: Highly attached fans to a team will use MD and MR strategies when evaluating a highly contributing athlete to the team performance.*

*H3. Fans activating MC will show the higher level of intent to punish than those who activating decoupling and rationalization.*

### **Methods**

We will conduct an experimental study with a two-level single-factor (performance contribution: high vs. low) between-subjects design ( $n = 200$ ). After a random assignment to one of two conditions (high vs. low contribution to a team performance), participants will be asked to recall their favorite sport team. Then, the participants will be asked to report their team attachment level (Robinson & Trail, 2005) with the imagined team. The participants then will be asked to imagine either (1) a key player who is a certain starter as a scorer or (2) a bench member who mostly plays for as a mob-up-man, and asked to report the degree of performance contribution made by the imagined athlete, between 0 to 100 as a manipulation checking item. They will then be asked to imagine a situation where the athlete is engaged in a scandal (i.e., tax evasion; Bhattacharjee et al., 2016), and complete a survey asking moral reasoning strategies (MC, MD, and MR; Lee & Kwak, 2016). Lastly, their intent to punish will be measured by asking to report a number of games that the imagined athlete should be banned. Hayes PROCESS (model 7) will be conducted to test a moderation impact of the perceived contribution level between the team attachment and moral reasoning strategies.

### **Expected Results and Discussions**

As predicted, there will be a moderating impact of the perceived contribution level of a troubled athlete on highly identified fans' moral reasoning strategies. When the fans believe a troubled athlete is making a significant contribution to team performance, they are more likely to activate MD and MR than MC while showing a lower level of punishment intent. Theoretical and practical implications will be further discussed during the presentation.