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Even in the convergent marketplaces, consumers’ individual differences such as self-concepts (e.g., individual-self vs. collective-self) have significant impacts on consumers’ decision making (Choi et al., 1999; Lee et al., 1996; Shavitt et al., 2006). For instance, Markus and others (2006) found significant roles of self-concepts in that individualism uses disjoint manner, while collectivism relies on conjoint manner when processing information. Based on these findings, we posit that sport consumers with different self-concepts might process the same athlete scandal differently. In particular, it is plausible that sport consumers’ different self-concepts would affect their different moral reasoning choices (e.g., moral decoupling, moral rationalization, and moral coupling), which have been known to have direct implications on consumers’ evaluations of the troubles athletes as well as endorsed brands (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2015). Therefore, the current study aims to extend the research by examining the impacts of self-concepts on moral reasoning choices, and its subsequent effects on consumer response to the transgressed athlete.

Theoretical Background

Recent moral judgment literature has found that consumers engage in various moral reasoning strategies when processing scandal information about public figures: moral decoupling, moral rationalization, and moral coupling (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2015). By engaging in moral decoupling (MD: separation of morality judgments from performance judgments), individuals can still view the transgressor’s performance favorably, while simultaneously condemning the wrongdoer’s immorality. Moreover, by activating moral rationalization (MR) process, people justify a wrongdoer’s misconduct, resulting in supportive evaluations toward the wrongdoer (Bandura et al., 1996). Lastly, consumers also activate moral coupling (MC) by integrating the morality and performance judgments, which adversely affects the evaluation of the wrongdoer (Lee & Kwak, 2015).

In social psychology, various self-concepts (e.g., individual- vs. collective-self) have been utilized to explain different information processing types. A body of literature has found that when individual-self (IS) becomes dominant in individuals’ minds, people are more likely to allocate attention narrowly to target individuals’ (e.g., athlete endorsers) focal attributes (e.g., performance) rather than surroundings (e.g., morality) when they evaluate the target person (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Given this notion, we posit that IS will lead sport consumers to selection of MD when processing athlete transgressions. In contrast, when collective-self (CS) is prevalent, individuals will tend to disperse their focus between both the focal object (e.g., performance) and the surroundings (e.g., immorality) by holding a more holistic approach. Based on this notion, we also posit that CS will be positively associated with selection of MC which includes the conjoint manner of evaluation surrounding the athlete. Markus and others (2006) have also found that in the collectivistic culture, due to high level of perceived interconnectivity with other people, individuals are more likely to engage in conjoint information process when evaluating a target person, paying attention to a broader array of factors both positive and negative. Thus, we predict that through perceived interconnectivity the level of CS will be positively (negatively) associated with MC (MD). Lastly, although there is lack of theoretical foundation regarding an association between the self-concepts and MR, from a moral ‘disengagement’ perspective (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013), we predict a negative association between perceived interconnectivity and MR.

H1. IS-concept will be positively associated with consumers’ MD reasoning choice: in the IS condition, consumers will choose MD most.

H2. CS-concept will be positively associated with consumers’ MC reasoning choice: in the CS condition, consumers will choose MC most.

H3. CS-concept will be positively associated with perceived interconnectivity.
H4. Perceived interconnectivity will be negatively associated with MD and MR, while positively associated with MC.

H5. MD and MR will be negatively associated with negative word of mouth, while MC will positively associated.

Method
A two-level single-factor design was employed to investigate the impacts of two different self-concepts (individual vs. collective) on moral reasoning choice and its subsequent impacts when evaluating a transgressed public figure. Participants (n = 240; 54.4% male; mean age = 26.92, SD = 6.46; 70.4% Caucasian) were recruited via an online panel service (Mturk.com). After consenting, the participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: individual-self or collective-self. In line with Johnson et al. (2006), participants read a scenario along with two written tasks to increase the salience of either individual or collective self-concept. Participants were then read a scenario depicting a celebrity athlete’s outstanding athleticism and a recent drug scandal. Finally, the participants completed questionnaires including perceived interconnectivity (Gartner & Schopler, 1998), moral reasoning strategy choices (Lee & Kwak, 2015), manipulation check items (Selenta & Lord, 2005), and negative word of mouth (NWoM; Xie et al., 2015).

Results
After excluding forty two participants who failed the written tasks, we regrouped the participants based on their moral reasoning selections, and then conducted chi-square tests. Manipulation check results showed that participants were successfully primed as intended (all ps < .05). The results of the chi-square analysis showed a significant relationship between self-concept and moral reasoning choice ($\chi^2(2) = 9.56, p < .01$). Participants who were primed to activate their IS were more likely to choose MD (n = 67 out of 117; 57.3%; p < .05) than MC (n = 49; 41.9%) and MR (n = 1; 0%). However, others who were primed to activate their CS tended to select MC (n = 61 out of 97; 62.9%; p < .05) over MD (n = 35; 36.1%) and MR (n = 1; 1%): H1 and H2 supported. A path analysis showed that CS has positive impacts on perceived interconnectivity level (standardized path coefficient = .26; p < .01: H3 supported), which in turn affects MD negatively (standardized path coefficient = -.19; p < .01) and MC positively (standardized path coefficient = .17; p < .05), but does not affect MR (p = .76: H4 partially supported). Lastly, the results revealed that MD has negative impacts on NWoM (standardized path coefficient = -.26; p < .05), while MC has positive impacts on NWoM (standardized path coefficient = .34; p < .01). However, MR did not have any significant impacts on NWoM (p = .21: H5 partially supported).

Discussion
The results showed that when individual-self is prevalent in sport consumers’ minds, the consumers are more likely to select their moral decoupling strategy, which evoked lower level of negative response (i.e., negative word of mouth). However, when collective-self becomes dominant, the consumers tend to choose their moral coupling route, which elicited more negative reaction. Moreover, the results indicated that perceived interconnectivity level increased as a function of increased collective-self. As a result, heightened interconnectivity perception motivates consumers to engage in moral coupling and not to engage in moral decoupling, which evokes negative consumer response in both cases. Findings of this study contribute to the sport management literature by showing the role of self-concepts on consumers’ responses to athlete scandals. Moreover, the results suggest that marketing managers should be cautious in coping with transgressed athlete endorsers because consumers’ responses to the scandal might vary depending on their primary self-orientation.