Stigma, as a stereotypical perception, has long been defined as an attribute that deeply discredits a target entity (Goffman, 1963). Many real examples (e.g., Tiger Woods, Lance Armstrong) have shown that repeated immoral behaviors stigmatize transgressed athletes in consumers’ perceptions. Such stigma can be viewed as a phenomenal representation of sport consumers’ negative perceptions about a transgressed athlete. More importantly, once a stigma is formed in consumers’ minds, it is known to function as a perceptual schema in evaluating and understanding a target individual (Falk, 2001) such as a transgressed athlete. Moreover, the stigma could have detrimental impacts on a target athlete image and its related entities (e.g., endorsed brands). For instance, Jun and Lee (2017) have empirically found that, from the moral reasoning perspective, a perceived stigma has negative impacts on consumers’ responses to a transgressed athlete. More specifically, their study found more adverse impacts of a stigmatized athlete’s misconduct on sport consumers’ attitudes toward the wrongdoer. In addition, there are more negative impact to associated brand endorsed by the athlete compared to a non-stigmatized athlete’s misbehavior. It is important for scholars and marketers to understand how such stereotypical perception (i.e., stigma) is triggered or formed in order to prevent and break a stigma in the context of athlete transgression. Despite the theoretical and practical significance of the issue, there has been a lack of research on which psychological processes create stigma in the consumers’ minds. Thus, the present study aims to test how perceived stigma is formed and developed in sport consumers’ minds. In particular, to achieve the aforementioned research goal, the current study utilizes the attribution theory (Weiner, 1958; Kelley, 1973) because it can provide a useful theoretical foundation in elucidating and predicting an occurrence of stigma. Based on the theory, we posit that the attribution type (internal or external) determined by the Kelley’s covariate model (1973) can cause consumer stigmatization and its subsequent impacts on the consumers’ moral reasoning choices (moral coupling, moral rationalization, and moral decoupling). Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the impact of sport consumers’ attribution types on stigma and to examine how such stigma affects their moral reasoning choices including moral coupling (MC), moral rationalization (MR), and moral decoupling (MD).

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Attribution theory is a set of theories that explain the assignment of causal inferences and how such causal inferences affect human behavior (Swanson & Kelley, 2001). It posits that individuals make external attribution (e.g., situational factors; Heider, 1958) or internal attribution (e.g., dispositional factors; Heider, 1958) when they understand others’ behaviors. The Kelley’s covariation model (1973) has suggested these two attribution patterns are made based on combinations between three informational criteria including consensus (i.e., generalizability of the behavior across other people), distinctiveness (i.e., uniqueness of the behavior to the focal actor), and consistency (i.e., consistency of the behavior across time). Specifically, a set of high low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency evokes internal attribution whereas a set of high consensus, high distinctiveness, and low consistency activates external attribution. However, there exists a controversy surrounding inconsistent findings based on the consensus criterion (Quayle & Naidoo, 2012). The inconsistent finding issue may come from the nature of consensus information; a peripheral cue (Kim & Lee, 2015) rather than central cues (i.e., distinctiveness and consistency) for assessing a focal behavior and actor. Taken together, the current study assumes that distinctiveness and consistency are major informational criteria for sport consumers to make a causal inference (i.e., attribution) in the context of athlete transgression; low distinctiveness and high consistency activate internal attribution whereas high distinctiveness and low consistency trigger external attribution. In general, attribution theory predicts that behaviors attributed to situational factors (i.e., external attribution) are less likely to be stigmatized than behaviors attributed to dispositional factors (i.e., internal attribution) (Boysen & Vogel, 2008). Therefore, we propose following hypotheses.
H1: Transgressed athletes are more likely to be stigmatized when the transgression is attributed to internal factors (i.e., low distinctiveness and high consistency) than when the transgression is attributed to external factors (i.e., high distinctiveness and low consistency).

Moreover, a line of research (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kawk, 2016; Lee et al., 2016) has found individuals engage in three different types of moral reasoning strategies: 1) moral decoupling (MD: separating performance judgment from morality judgment), 2) moral coupling (MC: integrating both performance judgment and morality judgment, and 3) rationalization (MR: justifying wrongdoer's misconduct). The studies found that by activating either MD and MR, consumers can still maintain positive attitude toward a wrongdoer, while MC lead consumers to exhibit negative attitude toward a wrongdoer. With respects to the causal relationship between stigma and moral reasoning choice, Jun and Lee (2017) have found that a perceived stigma leads consumers to choose MC. Thus, we propose following hypotheses.

H2. Consumer stigmatization will lead the consumers to choose moral coupling than moral decoupling and rationalization.

As for the subsequent outcomes of moral reasoning strategies, we predict the following findings based on previous studies (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016).

H3. Moral coupling will have greater negative impact on consumers’ subsequent evaluations than moral decoupling and rationalization.

Method
We will conduct a single factor three-level experimental study (high-consistency and low-distinctiveness vs. low-consistency and high-distinctiveness vs. control) using an online survey panel service (Amazon MTurk). The stimuli will be developed based on the results of a series of pre-tests. For the main study, we will recruit approximately 250 U.S. residents older than 18. Participants will first read a vignette depicting an athlete’s recent behaviors along with previous behaviors modulating perceived behavioral consistency and distinctiveness. We will then measure attribution type (internal and external; Gelbrich, 2010; McAuley et al., 1992), perceived stigma (Peter et al., 2004) as well as moral reasoning selections and consumer evaluations (Lee & Kwak, 2016). In addition, manipulation check items will ask whether participants perceive the intended level of behavioral consistency and distinctiveness from the depicted athlete behaviors. For manipulation checking and hypotheses testing, ANOVA and a path analysis will be conducted.

Expected Results and Implications
The current study will empirically test how individuals’ attribution types on athletes’ misconduct can generate perceived stigma and its subsequent impacts on moral judgment. We predict an internal attribution triggered by highly consistent and indistinctive behavior will create a perceived stigma in consumers’ minds, which will be associated with consumers’ moral coupling selection. On the other hand, inconsistent and distinctive behavior will lead consumers to an external attribution, which will in turn be negatively associated with a stigma. The present study is expected to extend the theoretical basis how and when celebrity athletes can be stigmatized. Moreover, expected findings will provide several practical implications for marketing managers and agencies. More specifically, results from this study will help marketing managers make informed decisions regarding whether brands should terminate or keep relationships with transgressed athletes. More implications will be discussed during the presentation.