

# Impacts Of Different Self-Concepts On Consumer Moral Judgment Process In Athlete Endorsement Context

Lee, Joon Sung; Ko, Yong Jae

University of Florida, USA

E-mail: joonsunglee@ufl.edu

Despite the globalization of marketing activations (i.e., celebrity endorsement), consumers' different self-concepts (e.g., individual-self vs. collective-self) still have significant impacts on consumers' information process. However, to date, the differential impacts of consumers' self-concepts on the moral judgment process in marketing context has been underresearched by researchers. In particular, it is plausible that consumers' different self-concepts would affect their different moral reasoning strategies (e.g., *moral decoupling*, *moral rationalization*, and *moral coupling*), which have direct implications on consumers' evaluations of the troubles celebrity endorsers as well as endorsed brands (Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016). Therefore, the current study aims to examine impacts of self-concepts on moral reasoning process, and its subsequent effects on consumer response to the transgressed celebrity endorser.

## Theoretical background

Moral judgment literature has found that consumers' multi-faceted responses to the even same scandal are triggered by different moral reasoning strategies taken by the consumers. Previous studies have found that *moral decoupling* (MD: separation of morality judgments from performance judgments) and *moral rationalization* (MR: justification of a wrongdoer's misconduct) enable consumers to support a wrongdoer (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013), while *moral coupling* (MC: integration of morality and performance judgments) evokes adverse response to the wrongdoer (Lee & Kwak, 2016). Moreover, social psychology literature has found that if individual-self (IS) is dominant in individuals' minds, people tend to allocate evaluative attention narrowly to target individuals' (e.g., celebrity endorsers) focal attributes (e.g., job performance) rather than surroundings (e.g., morality; Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006). Given this notion, it posits that IS will lead consumers to activate MD (focusing more on focal attribute than circumstances) when processing athlete endorsers' scandals. In contrast, with salient collective-self (CS), individuals will tend to disperse their evaluation focus between both the focal object (e.g., job performance) and the surroundings (e.g., morality) in a holistic manner. Thus, a positive association between CS and MC can be predicted. Moreover, although it has not been empirically tested, Markus and others (2006) also suggested that in the collectivistic culture, due to high level of perceived interconnectivity with other people, individuals would tend to engage in conjoint information process when evaluating a target person, paying attention to a broader array of factors both positive and negative. It means that the broader evaluation focus the consumers have, the more negative evaluation they will show. Thus, it is predicted that as the level of CS increases, the level of perceived interconnectivity will also increase. Moreover, with higher interconnectivity level, the consumers are expected to have broader evaluation focus, which will have positive (negatively) impacts on MC (MD). Lastly, although there is a lack of theoretical foundation regarding an association between the self-concepts and MR, from a moral '*disengagement*' perspective (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013), a negative association between level of interconnectivity and MR is predicted.

## Methods

For a two-level (individual- vs. collective-self) single-factor experiment, 240 participants were recruited via an online panel service (Mturk.com). Replicating Johnsons and others' (2006) priming approach, after random assignment, participants read a scenario to increase the salience of either individual- or collective self-concept, and then answered manipulation checking questions. Participants were then read a scenario depicting an athlete endorser's career records and a recent drug scandal. Finally, the participants completed questionnaires including perceived interconnectivity (Gartner & Schopler, 1998), evaluation focus (Markus & Kitayama, 2004), moral reasoning choices (Lee & Kwak, 2016), and negative word of mouth (NWoM; Xie et al., 2015).

## Results and discussion

The manipulation checking test showed the priming scenarios successfully worked as intended ( $p < .05$ ). The results of a path analysis showed that the CS has positive impacts on interconnectivity ( $\gamma = .26$ ;  $p < .01$ ), which in turn has negative impacts on MD ( $\beta = .31$ ;  $p < .01$ ) while having positive impacts on MC ( $\beta = -.17$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Lastly, the MD has negative impacts on NWoM ( $\beta = -.26$ ;  $p < .05$ ), while MC has positive impacts on NWoM ( $\beta = .34$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

Findings of this study contribute to the consumer psychology literature by shedding light on the role of self-concepts on consumers' responses to celebrity endorsers' scandals through a cross-cultural lens. In particular, by testing the moral reasoning process employing perceived interconnectivity and evaluation focus as mediators, the present research empirically tested how different self-concepts trigger different consumer responses to morally tainted celebrity endorsers. Lastly, the results suggest that marketing managers should be cautious in coping with troubled endorsers because consumers' responses to the scandal might vary depending on their primary self-orientation.

## References

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