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“It’s not like I can stop consuming football”

How consumers through moral decoupling support a sports event
conducting unethical behavior

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Abstract

Using the case of the 2022 Fifa World Cup, this study develops the notion of *moral decoupling*, a reasoning process that separates moral judgment and performance judgment. This separation allows consumers to condemn unethical behavior performed by companies and public figures while simultaneously continuing to offer them support. Building on previous research, this study extends the research on moral decoupling to sports events and explores: *How do consumers apply moral decoupling to support a sports event conducting unethical behavior?* By using a qualitative method and conducting 14 semi-structured interviews, an increased understanding was obtained of individuals' motivations and reasonings for watching the event. The study's findings present three different categories of facilitators for moral decoupling for consumers supporting a sports event conducting unethical behavior; *belonging, uniqueness, and insignificance*. In addition to this, the study further contributes to understanding the role of consumer attachment and emotions in applying moral decoupling, as well as explores how consumers can go from moral decoupling to the opposite, moral coupling, through reflective reasoning.

Keywords: Moral decoupling, moral coupling, sports events, unethical behavior, moral judgment, attachment, moral emotions

Introduction

Revelings of corporate unethical behaviors seem to be occurring left, right, and center in this day and age. What is deemed as unethical behavior is subjective to the individual, but is generally seen as behavior that is illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community (Jones, 1991). Via social media, news about corporate missteps are spreading like rapid-fire (Barkemeyer et al., 2020). A recent event that was accused of unethical conduct and caused outrage on the internet worldwide is the 2022 Fifa Men's World Cup. The Fifa World Cup is a global sporting event in football that takes place every fourth year. The competition is one of the largest in the world and engages people across a multitude of cultural, political, and socio-economic backgrounds (Fifa, n.d.-a). The 2022 Fifa World Cup controversially took place in the hosting country of Qatar. The controversy derived from Qatar being accused of inhumane treatment of migrant workers, the country's views on homosexuality and women, as well as accusations of bribery, to name a few (Vanityfair, 2022). The Guardian (2022) revealed that around 6,500 migrant workers had died working under Qatar to build new stadiums and hotels, among other infrastructure, in preparation for hosting the 2022 World Cup. Fifa, the organization that works as the governing body for football around the world and that orchestrates the World Cup (Fifa, n.d.-b) was thereby accused of being corrupt and of violating human rights due to the controversial choice of hosting the World Cup in Qatar (O'Rourke, & Theodoraki, 2022). Consequently, this led to boycotting campaigns against watching and supporting the World Cup, including certain football players and teams

opposing it (Euronews, 2022). The 2022 World Cup, however, still managed to break records concerning the number of viewers around places all over the world (Fifa, 2022). How is this possible?

An explanation that can be accredited to how consumers can support people and corporations despite conducting unethical behaviors is moral decoupling. Moral decoupling implies that one can oppose a company's or person's misdoings, while at the same time not make any further behavioral changes (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Friederich et al., 2022). Support in these cases is a broad term and can include endorsing a brand (including public figures) as a whole or simply consuming products or services from a corporation. Moral decoupling has previously been researched in relation to the support of public figures. The research has investigated the approach taken by supporters of public figures who have exerted unethical behavior. Moral decoupling has been found to enable consumers to disapprove of a public figure's moral transgressions while at the same time supporting that person's performance (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Wang & Kim, 2020). For instance condemning Tiger Woods for his infidelity while simultaneously supporting his performance as a professional golfer (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). Further, previous research has looked into public figures making unethical transgressions and the effect this has had on endorsed brands. Findings show that moral decoupling helps explain how consumers continue to support the athlete and associated brands based on the consumers' level of fan identification (Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Wang & Kim, 2020). One stream of research has additionally researched moral decoupling in relation to consumers' continuous support of companies involved in unethical conduct, where moral decoupling has been shown to affect both the consumers' purchase intentions and their evaluation of the company (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021; Friederich et al., 2022). Further, moral decoupling has been examined in relation to brands' transgressions, consumers' brand loyalty, and attachment, where moral decoupling enables justifications of the relationship with the brand (Xiao et al., 2021; Kim & Krishna, 2022).

While moral decoupling for the most part has been researched in relation to famous people (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Wang & Kim, 2020) or corporations and brands (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021; Xiao et al., 2021; Friederich et al., 2022; Kim & Krishna, 2022), there is a lack of research concerning moral decoupling and sports events. Sports events, or more specifically, mega sports events such as the Olympic Games and the Fifa World Cup, are events that according to Müller (2015, p.8) are “ambulatory occasions of a fixed duration that attract a large number of visitors, have a large mediated reach, come with large costs, and have large impacts on the built environment and the population”. As events of this magnitude involve a lot of money, people, tourism, etc, it demonstrates the magnitude and importance of these sports events to many different stakeholders such as the host-country, its inhabitants, tourists, government, and other countries, to name a few. This has led to there being a desire to host these events among many countries and regions (Koenigstorfer et al., 2019). However, hosting these mega-events has been put in context with unsustainability and critique such as abusing human rights, corruption, media censorship, and host countries forcing vulnerable

communities to move for transformation of urban environments (McGillivray et al., 2019). Mega sports events are therefore of the magnitude that they can be very influential to many different stakeholders and regions making them important to understand. Sports events are further interesting to look at as this type of consumption is argued to have a different consumer commitment compared to other brands or stores (Bee & Havitz, 2010). Furthermore, consumption of sport is harder to replace compared to other products or services such as clothing or one's hairdresser. What moreover differentiates sports events is that they only take place during a certain timeframe, such as the Fifa World Cup which only takes place once every four years. Events can additionally be more complicated compared to a single company or public figure as they often include several actors and stakeholders such as the event itself, sponsors, companies, athletes, etc., which can influence how moral decoupling takes place. This can complicate who is considered responsible or not for the unethical conduct regarding an event.

The 2022 World Cup is a recent sports event that can demonstrate consumers engaging in moral decoupling, as consumers oppose the unethical conduct of the event, while simultaneously consuming and thereby supporting the sports event. Consumption of the event in this case refers to all acts that support the event, including watching the event from home. By studying moral decoupling in relation to sports events, we *aim* to explore the role moral decoupling plays in consumers' support of sports events involved in unethical conduct. This can be better understood by *examining* how moral decoupling has played a role in consumers' consumption of the 2022 World Cup. We explore this by conducting in-depth interviews in order to answer the question: *How do consumers apply moral decoupling to support a sports event conducting unethical behavior?*

Building on previous research, this study expands the theoretical research field on consumer behavior and moral reasoning through developing the concept of moral decoupling in regards to sports events. It further contributes with valuable knowledge for companies to better understand how moral decoupling affects consumers' behavior after learning about the company's unethical behavior. New insights will further be valuable in practice for policymakers to effectively understand and decrease consumers' ability to apply moral decoupling as a justification for their unethical behavior.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The following section presents the theoretical background consisting of the theory of moral decoupling and its related concepts. The methodology presents the study's qualitative approach, analysis method, and quality of the study. Thereafter, the findings are presented with an analysis of the empirical material, followed by a concluding discussion presenting the key findings of the study. Lastly, we present the implications from the study as well as suggesting future research and limitations.

Theoretical background

In order to understand how an individual can offer support to an event conducting unethical behavior, despite opposing the unethical conduct, we have to understand the concept of moral decoupling. Different concepts associated with moral decoupling, such as moral judgment, emotions, and attachment, are relevant in order to understand what makes decoupling possible. Furthermore, sports consumption is tied to the concepts in order to understand consumers' behaviors in relation to sports events.

Moral Decoupling

Previous research within consumer behavior, business ethics, and moral psychology has identified and studied various moral reasoning strategies that consumers can apply, such as moral decoupling, moral rationalization, and moral coupling (Lee et al., 2016; Haberstroh et al., 2017; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021). *Moral decoupling* is a psychological separation process that entails consumers separating their moral judgment from performance judgment. The individual can thereby support a transgressors performance while at the same time avoid compromising their morals by still condemning the transgression (Lee et al., 2016; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021). *Moral judgment* is described as the ability to decide which actions are the most morally correct path to choose (Rest, 1986), while *performance judgment* is the individual's evaluation about how well they believe that a product or service performs, for instance its quality (Friederich et al., 2022). *Moral coupling* on the other hand does the opposite of moral decoupling and integrates moral judgment and performance judgment (Lee et al., 2016). *Moral rationalization*, contrary to moral decoupling, entails that consumers adjust their moral standards to conform with the unethical conduct performed by a company or person they support (Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021; Friederich et al., 2022). Therefore, moral decoupling has been shown to be easier for consumers to apply, as the moral decoupling process allows consumers to avoid compromising their moral standards when supporting transgressors (Friederich et al., 2022). Within the field of business ethics and consumer behavior, Haberstroh et al. (2017) declared that we as humans aim to view ourselves as morally understanding. This positive outlook on ourselves can be threatened when making unethical decisions which can cause cognitive dissonance. Moral decoupling is thereby a way for the consumer to support companies and public figures after they have behaved immorally, and thereby not make any behavioral changes despite the unethical conduct (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Friederich et al., 2022). By separating the moral judgment and performance judgment, it can help suppress guilty feelings and reduce cognitive dissonance in the individual to uphold their moral selves (Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021; Friederich et al., 2022).

Moral decoupling, however, requires additional research to better understand the consumers' support of companies involved in unethical conduct (Haberstroh et al., 2017), making further insights of consumers' transgressions of their morals of interest within different contexts. While moral decoupling previously has been researched related to sports consumption of individual athletes or their brand endorsement (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2015;

Lee & Kwak, 2016; Wang & Kim, 2020), research on unethical sports events is lacking. In order to gain this knowledge and understand moral decoupling in relation to sports events, it is necessary to understand the role of moral judgment and moral emotions within consumers. It is of relevance as according to Lee et al. (2016) moral judgment is primarily governed by emotions rather than deliberate reasoning. Therefore, the emotions evoked when moral standards have been violated are likely to be a strong driving force in individuals' decision-making (Lee et al., 2016).

The role of moral judgment and moral emotions

Previous research within the field of psychology has established that feelings aid the consumer reasoning process and affect consumers' decision-making (Slovic et al., 2007; Schwartz, 2016; Patterson & Mastracci, 2019). Previous research has further argued for the high importance of emotions in individuals' moral judgments and ethical consumption behaviors (Jones, 1991; Cuneo, 2006; Avramova & Inbar, 2013; Horberg et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2016). What is considered as ethical decisions is explained by Jones (1991) as decisions that are acceptable to the larger community, and are considered both legally and morally correct. Further as argued by Schwartz (2016) are there two paradigms of an ethical choice, on one hand it is a process of moral reasoning, while on the other hand it is intuitive or based on emotion. As it has been established by previous research that emotions are important for consumers decision-making and governs moral judgment, it is important to consider when exploring the relationship between unethical sports events and consumers applying moral decoupling.

Furthermore, emotions have been shown to have an effect on consumers' acceptance of unethical conduct. This has led to increased recognition of moral emotions and moral judgment within consumer behavior research (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013; Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021; Friederich et al., 2022). As understood by Martinez and Jaeger (2016), *moral emotions* are described as those emotions that are linked to the interest or welfare of other people, and that is connected to understanding how one's own behavior has an effect on others' welfare. The individual's level of moral awareness regarding the consequences of unethical behavior plays an important role in the ability of an individual to decouple. Therefore, individuals with lower levels of moral awareness are more likely to decouple (Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021; Friederich et al., 2022). Martinez and Jaeger (2016) further explain that moral emotions are self-conscious emotions that include shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride, but that the extent to which these emotions are felt depends on the moral awareness of the individual. Further, according to Hutcherson and Gross (2011), depending on the situation and the emotions involved, the moral judgment and behaviors will be affected differently. Similarly, Ugazio et al. (2012) discuss that emotions' effect on moral judgments depends on the specific emotion as well as the type of scenario.

Friederich et al. (2022) explain that guilt is an emotion that can help people recognize that their moral standards have been dishonored. Guilt can arise when one does a moral transgression and further if the individual takes personal responsibility for the unethical

behavior, believing that they have done something wrong (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013). Self-conscious emotions, such as guilt, can make it harder for consumers to justify their unethical behavior as it increases their perception of personal responsibility (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). Guilt is thereby an emotion that influences behaviors to conform to norms and morals (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013). According to Dedeoğlu and Kazançoğlu (2010), the feeling of guilt is an emotion that often is short-lived and that derives from cultural drift which determines what is regarded to be a concern or not in society. Guilt can therefore differ depending on socialization and through different ways of using justifications. Different types of unethical behavior are viewed differently. Therefore, some unethical behaviors are more socially acceptable than others and are thereby more likely to lead to more unethical behavior (Mills & Groening, 2021).

When an individual does not take personal responsibility for negative situations and considers others to have been in control, the emotion of anger is often felt instead. When feeling anger one blames others as they are considered to have agency and are responsible for an undesired situation (Watson & Spence, 2007). Moreover, shame and guilt are similar emotions that have sometimes been used synonymously in previous research. However, Tangney et al. (2007) clarify that what differentiates the two emotions is that shame focuses on the self-being at stake and disrupts the ability to feel empathy towards others, meanwhile, guilt focuses on the behavioral consequences while also feeling empathy towards others.

Attachment and emotional ambivalence

Another aspect that can influence the moral judgment and emotions of consumers is the attachment that consumers have to a specific brand (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). *Attachment* entails having a connection established with a specific brand, creating positive feelings and an emotional bond between the brand and the self. This can shield a brand from negative publicity by consumers reacting more lightly to ethical missteps (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Therefore it is relevant to understand how attachment in relation to sports events affects consumers applying moral decoupling.

Consumer research has highlighted that the connection an individual has towards a brand can affect the moral judgment of the individual (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Ingram et al., 2005; Schmalz & Orth, 2012; Lo et al., 2021). This can be expressed with different concepts such as attachment, identification, and commitment, all referring to the relationship an individual has towards a brand. Research has shown that consumers are more likely to engage in moral decoupling when they identify or are involved with a specific company or brand (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021). Einwiller et al. (2006) discuss that those who identify with a brand will create less negative associations with the brand in the case of negative publicity compared to those who had a low identification with the brand. When researching sports consumption, Abeza et al. (2020) found that depending on the perceived severity and type of ethical violation conducted by an athlete, it affected the intended fan response differently. Furthermore, studies have identified that individuals' level of commitment to a brand influences how they are affected by negative publicity about the

brand. Commitment involves an emotional attachment toward a brand that evolves through relationship development (Ingram et al., 2005). Similarly to attachment, commitment can impact the ethical judgment of the consumer, leading to an effect on consumer behavior. However, as the level of perceived harm increases, even highly committed consumers will become progressively dissatisfied with the company (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Ingram et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the research fields of *sports consumption* argue for the consumption of sports involving a higher commitment compared to the consumption of goods and stores (Bee & Havitz, 2010; Neale, 2010). The uniqueness of sports can be seen through the high degree of emotional involvement and commitment the consumers have toward the sport and its brand (Abosag et al., 2012). Consumers can therefore stay highly loyal despite these brands undergoing scandals and performance failures (Neale, 2010), as the emotional attachment can create a unique bond (Dwyer et al., 2015). Oliver and Raney (2011) further discuss that entertainment is consumed because of hedonic motivations and eudaimonic motivations. This means that it is a way of experiencing both enjoyment and meaningfulness in the consumption. Moreover, fans who identify with a sporting team often share this attachment with their friends and family and feel like winners themselves when their teams win. Being a fan is considered an important aspect of their lives and it can also be part of their social identity which is important for identifying with a group. The fans can keep the group identification through different behaviors such as attending sporting events (Neale, 2010).

Schmalz and Orth (2012) discuss that consumer attachment to a brand can make consumers experience *emotional ambivalence* when the brand receives negative publicity. This creates a complex blend of both negative and positive emotions in the consumer, which can lead to consumers' behavior going against their own moral beliefs. Penz and Hogg (2011) describe that consumer ambivalence occurs when the consumer experiences mixed emotions with coexisting positive and negative emotions, which leads to an inner conflict that results in either avoidance or approach behavior. According to Ruth et al. (2002) can this lead to actions that are incompatible with the consumers' morals, since assessing what is best for the individual's own well-being can be difficult. In cases of unethical behavior by a company, Schmalz and Orth (2012) argue that attached consumers will experience emotional ambivalence when having positive emotions towards the company and negative emotions towards the company's unethical actions.

Moral decoupling and unethical sports events

Against the discussed theoretical background, we seek to understand how consumers reason for and apply moral decoupling in the context of unethical sports events. There is a difference in the consumption of sports events and the consumption of ordinary products and services. Suggesting that how consumers engage in moral decoupling in relation to sports events could differ. Previous research has discussed the role of how consumers emotions and attachment to brands can affect the ability to apply moral decoupling. Therefore, these concepts are important to keep in mind when exploring moral decoupling in relation to sports events.

While the Fifa World Cup event as a whole can be seen as a brand, it additionally includes a multitude of brands such as Fifa, sponsors, the national teams, etc. This implies a complexity as individuals can have various attachments to the different brands within the World Cup. Moreover, as entertainment consumption, such as sports events, have different motivations compared to the consumption of consumer goods, the performance judgment of sports events can therefore differ compared to consumer goods. In the case of the World Cup, the performance judgment can be evaluated based on, for example, emotional and entertainment values. Sports events, therefore, offer interesting insights into how consumers engage in moral decoupling.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers through moral decoupling justify supporting an event conducting unethical behavior. To gain this knowledge we needed to understand consumers' individual *reasoning, motivation, and experience of such situations*, making qualitative studies using in-depth interviews with an abductive approach most appropriate.

Contextual background

The Fifa World Cup is one of the biggest and most important sporting events in the world (Britannica, 2023). This highly consumed tournament draws billions of viewers and football supporters from all over the world to watch as their national teams compete against each other for the win to be the best (Fifa, n.d-c). We chose to incorporate the 2022 World Cup into this study as it is a controversial event which has been criticized to involve unethical behavior (Amnesty International, n.d). Despite the criticism of the event, it reached a high number of viewers, demonstrating the divide between consumers' behaviors and their ethical beliefs. By using the real-life case of the 2022 Fifa World Cup, it can generate deeper knowledge and understanding of the consumers' behavior and moral decoupling within sports events.

We conducted our research in Sweden which is a country highly engaged in social sustainability and human rights (Smart City Sweden, n.d.). The criticism of the 2022 World Cup has been prominent in the country and about one out of five Swedes have proclaimed that they were going to boycott the 2022 World Cup in Qatar (Karlsson, 2022). On the other hand, viewing figures were high during the World Cup, and record numbers were breached on streaming services during the final of the World Cup 2022 (Ekström, 2022). Therefore, we find Sweden to be a highly interesting and relevant country to conduct our research in. Furthermore, we have limited our research to Sweden because it is our home country, making research and empirical material here more obtainable due to contacts and knowledge of culture.

Collection of empirical material

We found a qualitative study most appropriate for our study as making generalizable findings was not our main purpose, rather we wanted a contextual understanding through collection and analysis of our empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We saw reality through subjective ontology and epistemology, meaning that depending on the context, people's experiences and views can differ and can likewise change over time. We thereby assumed that there was not one single reality, but that individuals shape their own perceptions of the world through their own interpretations and experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Therefore, qualitative studies with in-depth interviews were appropriate as we are researching a social-cultural context of the phenomenon which can be portrayed differently within individuals. Previous research within moral decoupling has primarily used quantitative and experimental methods. However, as we are interested in consumers' individual perceptions within a specific context, a qualitative study allows for an in-depth analysis of the phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Executing a qualitative study can allow us to understand moral decoupling in relation to sports events from a consumer perspective.

In order to receive detailed responses of the studied phenomenon, we conducted in-depth interviews to understand individuals' reasoning, something which Patterson and Mastracci (2019) reasoned to be grounded in the individuals feelings and personal experiences. Conducting interviews thereby gave us the opportunity to adapt our questions according to the situation and respondent in front of us, giving us a deep understanding of their perceptions, understandings, and beliefs (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Further, we had the opportunity to analyze the respondents body language, tone of voice, and emotions at the same time (Björklund & Paulsson, 2012).

The research study consists of an abductive approach which entails a combination of both an inductive and deductive approach. By using previous research and explanations of concepts in combination with interviews it creates a better understanding of the phenomena (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). As limited research exists of moral decoupling in more special cases, it further shows that an abductive approach is suitable as it was vital to go back and forth between theory and empirical material.

We conducted 14 in-person semi-structured interviews, applying purposive sampling to find our respondents. We came in touch with our respondents with the help of contacts such as interviewing friends' friends. Moreover, this allowed us to find respondents that were suitable and relevant for the research and easily accessible, making it an effective method (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The criteria for choosing respondents were that they had watched at least one game of the 2022 World Cup and that they were Swedish citizens. We further chose to interview respondents with different levels of attachment to football as a sport, as it has been shown to have an effect on how consumers apply moral decoupling (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). We conducted the interviews in Swedish to ensure that the respondents could express themselves freely and that the interview was comprehensible to enable a greater in-depth

understanding of their responses (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Thereby, the quotes within our findings and analysis are translated from Swedish to English.

The duration of the interviews were around 40-60 minutes giving us enough time to go in-depth with the respondents and receive substantial and meaningful material. We deemed that we received enough information during this timeframe to reach saturation as every topic was well discussed during the interviews (Mason, 2010). The respondents attachment was determined by the researchers after the conducted interviews as the interview guide contained questions that were used to determine this. The attachment differed among the respondents and was categorized into *very low, low, medium, and high attachment*. For the analysis, we merge the two lowest and the two highest attachments together leaving us with *low attachment* and *high attachment*. This was done as it facilitated the analysis, and additionally because there was no greater difference in the results between the *very low* and *low-attached* respondents, as well as *medium* and *high-attached* respondents. The respondents of the study and their attachment levels can be found in *Table 1* below.

<i>ALIAS</i>	<i>GENDER</i>	<i>AGE</i>	<i>OCCUPATION</i>	<i>ATTACHMENT</i>	<i>FINAL ATTACHMENT</i>
<i>Simon</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Worker</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Sara</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Emelie</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Very Low</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Sandra</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Josefine</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Andreas</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>Worker</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Lukas</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Mikaela</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>Worker</i>	<i>Very Low</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Anna</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>Worker</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Pelle</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>Worker</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Emma</i>	<i>Woman</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Ingrid</i>	<i>Woman</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Robin</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>Worker</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Ines</i>	<i>Woman</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>Worker</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>

Table 1: respondents of the study.

Before starting the collection of material we created an interview guide which set the guidelines for how the interviews were to be conducted (Crang & Cook, 2007; Patel & Davidson, 2011; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Themes within the interview guide consisted of general questions about respondents' connection to football, background concerning

knowledge of the unethical conduct regarding the 2022 World Cup, and questions related to moral decoupling and morals in general. Therefore, the interview guide was developed based on both general questions and questions related to the theoretical framework. As there can be some sensitivity regarding discussions around unethical conduct and morals, it was taken into consideration by ensuring questions were asked in a non-judgemental way, facilitating the comfort and sense of security in the respondents. We experienced no issues regarding the respondents having trouble expressing their thoughts and reasoning. Moreover, the interview guide ensured that we reached our objective in every interview while allowing respondents to raise their own subjects for discussion (Crang & Cook, 2007). We tested the interview guide by conducting two test interviews to ensure that we were obtaining sufficient and relevant information from the respondents before conducting further interviews (Patel & Davidson, 2011). We stopped at 14 interviews because we, as deemed by Bryman and Bell (2015), found we had reached theoretical saturation.

Diener and Crandall (1978) in Bryman and Bell (2015) and Flick (2018) refer to four principles one should consider when conducting ethical research which we conformed to, beginning with ensuring there was no *harm* done to any participants. Each respondent was made aware of what the study concerned, ensuring they could make an informed decision on whether to participate in the study or not (*informed consent*). Further, the participants were assured they would be kept anonymous and that aliases would be used instead of their real names. The respondent also gave consent to audio recording during the interview that they were assured only would be listened to by the researchers. Additionally, the respondents were free to refuse to answer questions if they deemed them too personal, avoiding *invasion of privacy*. Lastly, *deception* was avoided by explaining the nature and objective of the research before each interview.

Analysis of empirical material

For this study a thematic analysis method was applied to the interviews which were transcribed verbatim. This analysis method builds upon generating general topics, patterns, and themes from the qualitative material and identifies themes of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to facilitate our coding process we first coded our data into different colors to get to know our data and eventually coded the material and categorized it into smaller themes. The themes were then connected and organized into more general themes of interest for this study. This analysis method is useful for our study as it allows for flexibility in the analysis of the material to discover different themes in the data and helps to in better detail describe the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In accordance with Crang and Cook (2007), our codes were consistent in the end through a process of going back and forth between the transcribed empirical material and our identified themes, applying an iterative approach, ensuring we got a more thorough and correct analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The coding of the empirical material led to three general themes for this study: *belonging*, *uniqueness*, and *insignificance*. These themes were then chosen to be identified as three

different categories of facilitators for moral decoupling in both low- and high-attached respondents. These categories were related to relevant theory and analyzed in order to answer the research question of the study. In *Table 2* a summary and short description of the three categories is presented. Beyond our three general themes, we further found empirical material that depicted how consumers through reflective reasoning can apply *moral coupling*, after having applied *moral decoupling*. These findings will be developed further in the following findings and analysis section.

	Belonging	Uniqueness	Insignificance
Contents	The social act of engaging with the event.	The uniqueness of the sport and event.	The feeling of insignificance in one's actions.
Description	“Everybody watches it” creating a sense of belonging in society. Facilitating moral decoupling because of the social acceptability of watching the event despite the unethical conduct.	It is hard to find substitutes for an event rarely taking place where attachment and involvement can be high. The sport and event are not easily exchangeable nor replaceable.	Individuals themselves feel like they cannot make a difference. The blame is put on others in a world where it is believed that everything is steered by money and politics.

Table 2: Contents and description of the three categories of facilitators for moral decoupling

Quality of the study

We applied the four quality criterias, *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*, in order to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

We ensured the *credibility* of this study by repeating our understanding of the respondents' answers back to them in order to achieve respondent validation and to ensure that we accurately understood their answers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the research was performed according to so-called “good practice”, by following well-established research processes (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and by having investigator triangulation as a result of being two people conducting and comparing interviews and analysis, making bias less likely to take place (Flick, 2018). Credibility was further enhanced by adding additional interviews after we believed that we had reached saturation. Ensuring that the additional interviews aligned with the empirical material from the previous interviews conducted (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The *transferability* criteria, how this study can be applicable or useful for others (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), is settled through the development of the established concept of moral decoupling, which could be applied to another context in future research to test how it transfers to other areas of consumer behavior and consumption contexts. This study further gives the reader a so-called thick description by going in-depth about the details of the studied phenomena with a small group of people (Bryman & Bell, 2015). While qualitative research has been criticized to lack transparency and can be difficult to replicate according to

Bryman and Bell (2015). We show transparency by providing insights into the process of the study. Further, all material throughout the process has been fully documented and available to the researchers, this contributes to the *dependability* of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Lastly, the criteria of *confirmability* concerns the objectiveness of the researcher, while being completely objective is impossible, certain actions have been taken to reduce potential biases. As the researchers are aware of the possibility that this can occur, it helps prevent bias. By clearly showing the interpretations of the empirical material and how it is linked to theory and findings, it helps in meeting the criterion of confirmability (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Further, to make the study as unbiased as possible, which is a common limitation of qualitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015), the researchers have throughout the research process sought advice from their supervisor and friends to help with guidance and review.

Findings and analysis

In the following, we present the findings from the empirical material gathered through the respondents' reasoning. The coding of the material generated three different themes that are presented as three categories of facilitators for applying moral decoupling: *belonging*, *uniqueness*, and *insignificance*. The findings will be analyzed in relation to previously related concepts of moral decoupling, such as attachment and emotions. Lastly, an analysis of how the opposite of moral decoupling, *moral coupling*, could be applied by the respondents is presented.

Categories of facilitators for moral decoupling

It was apparent through analysis of the interviews that moral decoupling was applied by all of the respondents. The respondents used different justifications for watching the World Cup while at the same time stating that the event was unethical. This aligns with Cowan and Yazdanparast (2021), as moral decoupling is applied by individuals supporting a transgressor's performance while simultaneously condemning the transgression, thereby avoiding compromising one's morals.

We found three different categories of facilitators for consumers' applying moral decoupling when supporting a sports event conducting unethical behavior; *belonging*, *uniqueness*, and *insignificance*. *Belonging* connects to the different ways that social aspects of watching the 2022 World Cup facilitates moral decoupling. Belonging can be depicted on both societal and individual levels and highlights the social acceptability of engaging with the event. *Uniqueness* is a category that facilitates moral decoupling because of the unique performance of the sport and the event. Justifications are based on the low availability of substitutes and individuals' attachment to the sport. *Insignificance*, on the other hand, facilitates moral decoupling through the individual's perception that their actions are insignificant and therefore feel a sense of indifference. Insignificance is often discussed in relation to the magnitude of the event and in relation to one individual's impact. It's important to note that

more than one of the categories could be used simultaneously by a respondent to facilitate moral decoupling.

Figure 1 below portrays how the three categories of facilitators *belonging*, *uniqueness*, and *insignificance* facilitate moral decoupling through the separation of moral judgment and performance judgment. These three categories were found to help consumers apply moral decoupling in order to support sports events conducting unethical behavior.

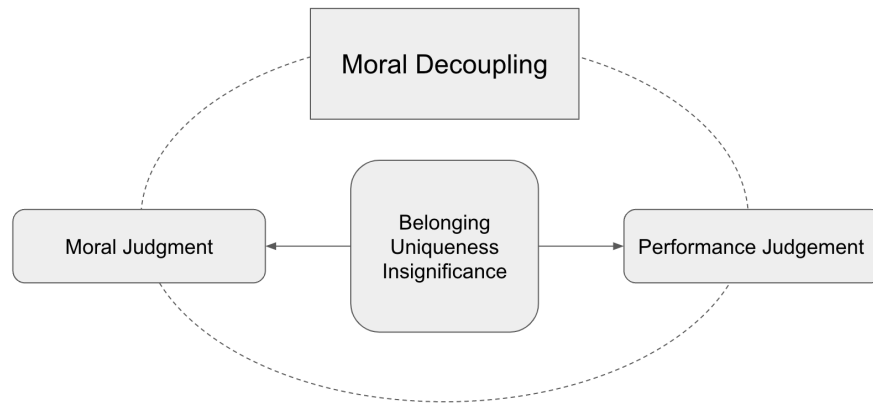


Figure 1: Model of the three categories of facilitators for moral decoupling.

Belonging

Belonging was a common theme that was evident in the empirical material. Within belonging the subcategories of *social aspects*, *fear of missing out*, and *social acceptability*, were found. These concepts enabled individuals to apply moral decoupling and to engage with the event. The category of belonging relates to consumer's feelings of social belonging to friends and family as well as society overall.

Belonging was not portrayed the same in all of the respondents, as the reasoning for watching the 2022 World Cup would differ between low- and high-attached respondents. For respondents where the attachment was low, the arguments for watching the World Cup focused on the *social aspect* of viewing it together with others. The respondents indicated that it was not the sport itself, football, that was important, but rather everything around the event that they associate with it socially. This can be seen through respondent Anna:

"There is a lot around the games themselves and not just the game that does it. Because the game is so long, there is so much around it that you do, you usually eat good food, you drink something good, you spend time with other people. I could never sit and watch a game by myself." (Anna)

As discussed by Friederich et al. (2022), the judgment of performance can for instance be evaluated based on quality, however, in this case, we can see that performance judgment is based on social factors. While research has argued for the importance of identification and

involvement in the ability for individuals to decouple (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021), the statements above indicate that this is possible without a strong identification. The value of viewing the sport instead comes from the social aspects. Further, Lee and Kwak (2016) argued that moral judgment is governed by emotions, this could be seen in our findings as the social aspects of the event created positive emotions in the respondents, which facilitated moral decoupling.

The reasoning of belonging as a justification for watching the event was portrayed differently for high-attached individuals. Belonging was depicted by having discussions with others about the games and players. The high-attached respondents conveyed that they would have felt left out if they decided to not watch the event. Those who had a high attachment usually had others around them that were attached as well, therefore making it more difficult to refrain from watching. Belonging to certain friend groups can be portrayed by Josefine in the following statements:

"Yes, maybe a little because so many people in my vicinity are very interested in sports and football. So then you want to keep up to date to keep up with the conversation. Like me, I spend a lot of time with my boyfriend's friends, then you want to show that you know a lot and are involved." (Josefine)

As argued by Neale (2010), supporters are more attached to sports compared to ordinary consumer goods, and those with high identification commonly share the attachment with close ones as it is a part of their social identity and feelings of belonging with a group. Furthermore, *the fear of missing out* on what was happening in society during the event was expressed by both low-attached and high-attached respondents. The following quote from Simon illustrates the fear of missing out on experiencing a mega event such as the World Cup:

"Even if I'm not that interested, it would probably have been a bit of a feeling of emptiness, that you had missed seeing at least some game. It wouldn't have been too difficult to miss the World Cup completely, I suppose, because I have such a low interest in football. Now after a few months, I certainly wouldn't have felt that I had missed anything, but at the time when the World Cup was on, it might have felt dull that many others had seen it and so you miss seeing something that others are talking about. You don't want to miss out if something big happens, you at least want to see one of the bigger games when it's the World Cup. You simply don't want to miss the experience and also to some extent the belonging to what is happening around the world. It's a big deal, so it's fun to somehow keep up with what's going on, even if you don't see everything." (Simon)

While the event was highly criticized, it was on the other hand viewed as a meaningful and important event for many people around the world, as is depicted by Simon in the quote above. In accordance with Oliver and Raney (2011), entertainment consumption has hedonic and eudaimonic motivations, leading to a more meaningful consumption which can be

connected to the social belonging of engaging with the event. As there are a lot of emotions connected to the context of sports consumption (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Ugazio et al., 2012), it helps explain the drive consumers have to participate and feel belonging. This illustrates that moral decoupling can be easier applied because of the *social acceptability* of the event, hence relatable to Mills and Groening's (2021) findings that some unethical behaviors are more acceptable than others and thereby more likely to lead to unethical behavior. Further, as an ethical choice is based on emotions (Schwartz, 2016), feelings associated with being left out can affect the moral reasoning process and therefore the likelihood of taking part in watching the event. That others watched the event was therefore used as a justification by the respondents for watching the World Cup. When reflecting about if she ever considered boycotting the event, Ingrid says:

"It was probably in that case when it was very much on the news, when like all the influencers were talking about it, maybe I was a bit like yeah maybe not, but really I didn't think much about it, it was going to be broadcast anyway on TV and people close to me looked at it and so on and, as I said, I still have an interest in football. ... I felt that others were going to watch, so why shouldn't I be allowed to watch it too? So it was probably just a quick second to think about it." (Ingrid)

Thereby, the respondents felt it was easier to apply moral decoupling as others applied it as well, some arguing that they would have boycotted the event if those around them had done it too. Overall, the respondent's reasoning for watching the World Cup could be clearly linked to the social aspects of engaging with the event. The event was seen as socially acceptable because of the high involvement in the event worldwide. It benefited the respondents through the social performance and positive emotions obtained by interacting with the event. Belonging therefore facilitated both low-attached and high-attached respondents in applying moral decoupling.

Uniqueness

A second theme that was prevalent throughout our findings is uniqueness. Within uniqueness, the subcategories of *involvement*, *emotional ambivalence*, and *substitution*, were found. Uniqueness appeared across both high-attached and low-attached respondents. It represents the extraordinary football and the World Cup brings to people and the difficulty in finding substitutes for it.

The irreplaceability of the World Cup and football as a sport for high-attached consumers was highly prevalent in our results. For high-attached consumers, the *involvement* with and love for the sport, teams, players and one's country is something hard to replace. One cannot simply turn on the TV to watch a different sport and receive the same amount of satisfaction or passion. Andreas depicts the joy high-attached consumers get from watching the World Cup:

"It has given me much more joy than sadness. I've been able to celebrate with family, I've been able to celebrate with friends, I've been able to drink beer and cheer, I've been able to see my national team go and get their second medal in two World Cups. Two World Cups in a row, they have won a medal and it has been fantastically nice and fun, so ah no really, it's just that it has given me much more joy than sadness, unfortunately." (Andreas)

Our findings can be put in line with Cowan and Yazdanparast (2021) and Haberstroh et al. (2017) who found that moral decoupling is more likely to take place when the consumer is involved and identifies with a certain brand. In the case of the World Cup, the brand can be depicted in many ways, it can be the brand of a certain player or the national team for instance. As can be seen by Andreas' response there are a lot of feelings associated with watching one's national team. Positive feelings can arise in an individual when they feel a connection to a brand which can work as a shield against negative publicity around the brand, making reactions to ethical missteps more light (Einwiller, et al., 2006; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). As the respondent expressed, there is so much enjoyment and positivity in watching the World Cup, especially when the country one feels connected to does well, that it overshadows the negativity. This can further be aligned with Abosag et al. (2012) who found that there is a uniqueness within sport where a high degree of emotional involvement and commitment can be seen in consumers. This unique and high degree of emotional involvement shows the difficulty in substituting the love for football or the World Cup with something else, as an intense emotional attachment is not something quickly changeable. Ines explains how she is emotionally involved with her national team:

"If my national team is playing there, it means that you are in the battle yourself. You're like, it's a mental battle not to explode and break out in both crying, laughing, screaming and violence haha." (Ines)

According to Neale (2010), consumers of sporting brands stay highly loyal despite these brands undergoing scandals. This high degree of loyalty and identification can be seen in Ines' comment on supporting her national team. What is interesting concerning moral decoupling and events is the difficulty that comes along with having many different actors involved. Because, while the consumer is highly loyal to a brand, in this case the national team, the consumer can be less loyal to another actor, such as Fifa. Fifa was the actor who was mostly viewed to be responsible for the unethical conduct of the 2022 World Cup by the majority of respondents. Therefore the event brings complexity as Fifa is the actor viewed as what is mostly morally wrong with the event, while the loyalty lies in another actor which is one's national team, favorite player, or one's interest in the sport. Moral decoupling thereby entailed decoupling from supporting Fifa or the event rather than decoupling from the brand where one's true loyalty lies. This complexity seems to make moral decoupling easier to apply in this case as there is no blame put on the football teams one supports, rather, the blame is put on another actor.

As discussed by Schmalz and Orth (2012) attached consumers can experience *emotional ambivalence* when the brand they are attached to engages in unethical behavior that goes against their morals. However, in the case of the 2022 World Cup, the highly attached respondents will likely experience less emotional ambivalence as they blame Fifa for the unethical conduct and not, for instance, their national team. Meaning that the unethical conduct is not associated as close to oneself but rather further away, reducing emotional ambivalence and facilitating a decoupling in and of itself. This further goes hand in hand with Einwiller et al. (2006) findings where it is declared that those who have a low identification with a brand are more likely to create more negative associations with the brand when it is associated with negative publicity. This could thereby explain the dislike many felt toward Fifa, as there is low identification with the brand Fifa, while at the same time there is high identification with the football teams where there was little to no negative association. This additionally led to the respondents placing less personal responsibility on themselves concerning the unethical conduct related to the event. Therefore, while previous research says that consumers are more likely to support a company conducting unethical behavior when they are attached (Schmalz & Orth, 2012), in our case this is both true and not true. Attachment plays an important role in the decoupling as attachment to football or a specific team itself relates to the performance judgment. On the other hand, the immorality of the event is placed on Fifa, who the respondents were not attached to. Moral decoupling therefore occurs mainly from an actor (Fifa) where a low attachment is present, at the same time as moral decoupling occurs because of an actor where a high attachment is present.

Moreover, the World Cup only plays out every fourth year making it a very rare occurrence which we found sparks the interest in the event both in high-attached and low-attached consumers of football. As it is something that rarely occurs it is something many look forward to. Missing out on one World Cup means you have to wait another four years until the next one, making it feel like a large sacrifice. Andreas talks about the great involvement that can be seen in society when the World Cup is on:

"Yes, but it becomes a completely different commitment, both suddenly from other family members who don't usually watch football, you get in touch with friends you haven't checked with for a long time. The talk at work also changes, it's really almost only the World Cup that everyone talks about. Everyone gets involved every time it feels like there is going to be a bigger championship and especially the World Cup, then everyone is really involved. It's becoming very, people who don't usually watch the World Cup suddenly become drawn into it unwillingly or willingly. It becomes like a celebration." (Andreas)

Therefore, it is not solely the most engaged football fans that look forward to watching the World Cup every year. Rather it is an occurrence that many people with different relationships to football look forward to, as it brings people together as discussed in the section of belonging. The rarity and belonging connected to the World Cup thereby is of a unique sort.

The uniqueness of the World Cup results in *substitutes* being hard to find. As it is an event that takes place every fourth year there is not something similar enough that can replace it as it is a major global event. Respondents found that it was easier to replace more common goods and services where substitutes were much easier to find. As one of the respondents put it, finding a different kind of egg carton is easier than changing your interest and passion for football and finding a completely different sport. This depicts the uniqueness of sports events compared to more common goods, as sports consumption lacks the available substitutes which facilitates moral decoupling. This aligns with Bee and Havitz (2010) findings that sports consumption has a different commitment compared to other brands or stores. As discussed by Dwyer et al. (2015) there is also a more unique bond and emotional attachment between one's favorite team and the supporter. This further is similar to Neale (2010) declaring that sporting team supporters are more attached to the teams than to consumer goods. Ingrid discusses finding substitutes for regular consumer goods versus football:

"I think it would have felt a little different. Affected me more, I think, because if it is an item I actively shop, it feels like it's easier to find a substitute for it. [...] But I know that Shein, I have actively chosen not to shop there even if it is cheap and some have said it is good. So I think that, as I said, it is a little easier to find substitutes than with football. It's not like I can stop consuming football in one way or another, because then I'd have to find a completely different sport and it feels a little more difficult than finding an egg carton." (Ingrid)

Similarly, Sandra compared how one feels about clothing brands and football clubs, stating that more emotions are felt related to sport consumption than clothing consumption:

Like I said, I almost boycotted NA-KD and that's my usual clothing consumption. But sports consumption, I don't know why it's different really, but it's like emotions in a completely different way. You are involved in the consumption of football in a completely different way than you are involved in the consumption of clothes. And that may be because the clothes can be obtained from other actors. If you had seen a football club as a clothing store, it is more difficult to switch between clubs than it is to switch between H&M and Lindex." (Sandra)

Thereby findings show that moral decoupling is easier to perform when there are no or few substitutes available which thereby makes boycotting the event harder since it entails giving something up rather than finding the same thing somewhere else. This can further be related to the discussion above concerning events having many actors involved. In the respondents' statements, having something like the local food store conduct unethical acts such as mistreating their employees is more easy to boycott as the store is the only one to blame. The products within the stores can simply be bought somewhere else.

Insignificance

Insignificance which appeared in our findings can be described as the respondents reasoning for watching the 2022 World Cup in relation to their actions' significance. Within insignificance, the subcategories of *inadequateness*, *proximity*, and *worldview*, were found. The respondents expressed that they felt insignificant when it comes to their impact on the event, because of the event's magnitude and other actors having more power.

A reasoning used to justify watching the 2022 World Cup despite recognizing large parts of the event as unethical was the feeling of *inadequateness* and that one person cannot make any large enough change. This facilitated applying moral decoupling as less negative emotions were associated with one's own behavior, hence lessening the emotional ambivalence within a person (Penz & Hogg, 2011). The emotional ambivalence was lessened and made it easier to decouple as doing the opposite was reasoned to not have made a difference anyway. Therefore there was less inner conflict due to there being less of a mix between positive and negative emotions as described by Schmalz and Orth (2012). It was apparent that respondents felt as though it would not have made any difference whether they watched the World Cup or not, as the magnitude of the event is so large. Andreas explains:

"The thought of not watching struck me and then I felt like this, I don't know, what difference does it make. Of course yes, it takes one person for everyone to change and keep up, etc., etc., but when it's as corrupt as it is, it doesn't matter at all, I think. Unfortunately, there is not much you can do as an individual either. Even in larger groups, even if there are 3 million of us who collectively stop watching the World Cup, there will still be 1 billion people watching. But I don't know, you should never say never, it's clear you can make a difference in some way, I don't know to what extent when it comes to such large sums of money covering the whole world. If you do it in a smaller town or district in [Town] then maybe you can actually influence something but ah, hmm, difficult." (Andreas)

As can be understood from the quote above, the *proximity* and magnitude of the World Cup was something that contributed to the feeling of inadequateness in individuals and others were seen as responsible for the situation (Watson & Spence, 2007). As their action would not lead to any difference, there was no point in trying. However, in the case of smaller brands in closer proximity to the individual being accused of unethical behavior, respondents argued that they would be much more likely to do something about it. This can be explained by the respondents Lukas and Mikaela:

"Say that I'm like City Gross's biggest shopping fan and go there every Sunday. I do my big week shopping and all of a sudden find out that there are employees who have really bad working conditions, the wages are minimal, someone got crushed by a forklift, for example haha, of course you start to react because then that's on a smaller scale. And then you might know that you can actually influence it. But if it's like on this world scale where you're like a drop in the ocean, it feels unreasonable to be able

to influence it...so great for those who didn't want to watch it (the World Cup) and those who don't care about football, no problem. But I still felt that I got something positive out of it and if I still can't influence it to a certain extent that becomes clear and visible, then I feel that unfortunately it just is so haha." (Lukas)

"But maybe it's that I don't feel like I'm making that much of a difference if I don't watch the World Cup. It feels like you have the opportunity to influence ICA (Swedish food shop) more than the soccer World Cup, that's probably it." (Mikaela)

During the interviews, respondents would discuss their shopping habits and which role ethics play during the practice. Very few had situations where they had made real behavioral changes due to ethical misconduct performed by a brand. The ones that had made changes declared that these changes often were short-lived. This can be connected to the feeling of guilt, which stated by Dedeoğlu and Kazançoğlu (2010) is a feeling that often is short-lived. Thereby, when people have made behavioral changes due to a brand conducting unethical behavior, they have done this as it goes against their morals and supporting the company would make them feel guilty. However, when the short-lived guilty feeling starts disappearing, the behavior goes back to what it was before. Thereby, the statements that the behavioral choices would look different if the 2022 World Cup was of less scale and closer in proximity is questionable. As stated in the quote above, the positive emotions that come along with watching one's beloved sport outweigh the negative emotions (Penz & Hogg, 2011). One chooses to focus on the good while recognising there is bad, performing a moral decoupling.

Developing on the notion that the individual does not have enough power to make an impact on the real world, respondents would further find themselves having a *worldview* that the world was already deceitful to begin with. Throughout, the findings showed that there is a belief that everything in the world is about money and politics. As discussed by Anna:

But Fifa. They should know better. It is not only one person who is in charge, but quite a few. Someone has to understand that this is not going to be good. But if it's about money, then maybe nothing can be done. If money rules, it's difficult. Fifa should know this is not going to be good. Qatar just profits from the whole thing, people travel around the world to get there, they profit from it with tourists and all the hotels... for them it's just profit profit profit. (Anna)

The responsibility for the misconduct within the World Cup was more often than not put on organizations such as Fifa and the sponsors, as well as Qatar itself, as their choices were made for their own profit. Accordingly, respondents opposed the power play and politics that was present during the World Cup. The notion that politics and sports should not be mixed emerged from the findings as depicted by Anna:

Mother was very much against it, I remember, father a little too, but he's a bit more like me in that you really want to watch the games, you don't want to mix politics with

sport. I think he felt like me that there is a lot of conflict and then you just watch and try not to think about it. (Anna)

While the awareness of the unethical misconduct of the event was high for the respondents, they did not perceive the consequences of their own behavior as significant. The respondents rather perceived that higher powers such as money and politics governed and were responsible for the unethical conduct of the event. Respondents' moral awareness of the consequences of their own behavior was therefore low which facilitated moral decoupling, aligning with the findings of Cowan and Yazdanparast (2021) and Friederich et al. (2022). Thereby, overall respondents performed a moral decoupling in accordance with Cowan and Yazdanparast (2021), by opposing the unethical conduct of the event, while at the same time placing their attention on the sport itself.

From moral decoupling to moral coupling

Toward the end of the interviews, it was noticeable that the respondents began to reason differently about their own influence regarding having watched the World Cup. As the respondents reasoned during the interviews it became difficult to separate their moral judgment from their performance judgment, making it difficult to apply *moral decoupling* and leading to a *moral coupling* instead. The respondents' answers then progressed towards showing *reflective reasoning*, *taking responsibility*, and *moral awareness* for their actions.

When the respondents *reflected on their reasoning* for watching the event, they progressively began to question their own previous reasoning. As moral decoupling often was applied without further reflection, it became difficult to maintain the decoupling when rationalizing about one's own behavior. Moral emotions could then be seen within the respondents as it became clear to them that they had transgressed their morals (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013). When this transgression was realized during their own reasoning, it was more difficult for the respondents to apply moral decoupling as they started to reflect over their moral judgment about watching the event. The following quote from Josefine illustrates how moral coupling is applied and moral emotions arise when discussing both the performance and moral aspect of the event during the interview:

"No, but it's clear that you, I feel like a hypocrite precisely because, considering that what I study is so sustainability-focused, you have an idea of what the problems are about. I might not have felt the same kind of guilt, if it hadn't, if I had been uneducated in the subject because then I wouldn't even have known what the problems were. But since I know a lot about sustainability but also have just heard and seen so much about the championship before, there are even fewer arguments for me to watch and still I do it anyway. So no, I don't regret it because I thought the World Cup was great fun and it was, ah, it's a breath of fresh air in an otherwise gray everyday life. But it's clear that you think more about the consequences or ah, not the consequences of, ah but well maybe the consequences of actually having watched and then

supporting all these negative things once it comes up. Or when discussing them in conjunction with each other. So ah, that's probably it.” (Josefine)

When asking the respondents if they feel any difference about watching the World Cup after discussing it in the interview, some respondents expressed that they did not like their own behavior, but felt divided since they still wanted to have watched the event. This was clearly expressed by Sandra who felt very divided by her attachment to the sport and her moral beliefs:

“I feel terrible now haha. Yes, but I was actually affected a bit, I feel that, so now I am back there again, but I love the sport but it was, it is, everything is so wrong really and it feels sad that it's the way it is because you feel, I watch it because I like the sport I don't watch it for any other reason. But I become a player in the fact that it is possible. And then you feel terrible that it is like this, because you also know people have died because of this and here I am because I am cheering for a team. But I do not think that when you're in it, you're more of a fan, you're like, you try not to see everything. But when you, and it has become so in discussions and things like that over time. You feel terrible that you are watching, but you still want to watch. So divided. Very divided.” (Sandra)

According to Ruth et al. (2002), emotional ambivalence of both negative and positive emotions can make it difficult for the individual to assess what is the best choice for themselves, which is portrayed by Sandra that feels divided by her emotions. The respondents' answers align with Schmalz and Orth (2012) who argue that emotional ambivalence can lead to individuals going against their own moral beliefs. Further, when discussing both moral and performance judgment of the event at the same time during the interview, it could be observed that it became difficult for the respondent to apply moral decoupling. As the respondents during the interview combined their moral judgment and performance judgment, a moral coupling was applied by the respondents (Lee & Kwak, 2016), therefore making them reflect on their own reasoning for watching the event. Since the respondents had applied moral decoupling much reflection had not been done over their behavior prior to the interview, this is expressed by the respondent Mikaela:

“It just happened that way, I think, it was probably quite thoughtless of me. I don't know if I thought that much. ... It's clear that maybe it feels a little more negative that I watched it. I probably haven't reflected on it enough before.”(Mikaela)

As the respondents found it more challenging to separate their moral judgment and performance judgment, it became difficult to suppress feelings such as guilt (Friederich et al., 2022). The respondents started *taking personal responsibility* for watching the event, as they did not feel like they had made an ethical choice. According to Haberstroh et al. (2017), this can threaten the positive outlook on the respondent's moral selves and therefore create cognitive dissonance within the individual. Moral emotions were created within the respondents as they believed that they had acted against the interest and welfare of other

people, understanding that their behavior had an effect on others (Martinez & Jaeger, 2016). The moral emotions identified in the respondents were guilt, shame, and anger, however, the moral emotion of guilt was most prominent in the respondents. Guilt could be identified as respondents expressed that they had transgressed their own morals and showed that they take personal responsibility for having a negative impact on others (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013), making it more difficult for them to justify their own behavior (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). This can be portrayed in the following quote by Josefine:

"Yes, or rather, the absolute best thing would have been if no one in the whole world had watched the championship. Because then Fifa wouldn't have gotten what they wanted. And that it had been a very clear sign that many people think they have done wrong. So I absolutely think you have a responsibility. At the same time, ah, you're a hypocrite because you yourself sit there and watch every game except for only 2-3 games so I don't actually know how to explain it. So I guess I watch because I love the sport and unfortunately it was under very bad conditions. But ah, it's clear that you actually have a responsibility not to contribute to them generating money when it's actually under such bad conditions, I would say." (Josefine)

Martinez and Jaeger (2016) argue that the extent moral emotions are felt depends on the individual's *moral awareness*, indicating that the respondent's moral awareness could have been heightened through the interview as they noticed their own transgressions of their moral principles. This made it more difficult for the respondents to align with their own reasonings for watching the event. As argued by Haberstroh et al. (2017), we want to perceive ourselves as morally understanding, however, when the respondents themselves understood that they acted contradictory to how they want to be perceived it therefore forced them to make a moral coupling. Thereby, while moral decoupling was performed during the consumption of the 2022 World Cup, the reflection and reasoning of it afterwards made the separation between moral judgment and performance judgment more difficult to perform, instead leading to moral coupling and guilt. However, as declared by Dedeoğlu and Kazançoğlu (2010), guilt is a short-lived emotion and would likely not have a larger influence on the respondent's behavior or likeliness to apply moral decoupling in the future.

Concluding discussion and contributions

The aim of this study was to explore the role moral decoupling plays in consumers' support of a sports event conducting unethical behavior. To better understand this, we used the case of the 2022 Fifa World Cup. We begin by presenting the conclusions of the study, thereafter discussing theoretical and managerial contributions. Lastly, we suggest future research and limitations of this study.

Concluding discussion

Our findings unravel three different categories of facilitators for moral decoupling in consumers when consuming and thereby supporting an event conducting unethical behavior.

Belonging, *Uniqueness*, and *Insignificance* contributed to the understanding of how moral decoupling was applied in relation to sports events compared to what has previously been researched within the phenomena.

Our study aligns with previous literature on moral decoupling by identifying that moral decoupling is applied by individuals by separating the performance judgment and moral judgment (Lee et al., 2016; Haberstroh et al., 2017; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021; Friederich et al., 2022). In addition to this, we can see similar to previous research that attachment and emotions play a role in how moral decoupling is applied by individuals (Ruth et al., 2002; Penz & Hogg, 2011; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). However, we identified three different categories of facilitators that enable moral decoupling specifically in relation to the sports event of the Fifa World Cup in Qatar, which can be of interest in relation to other sports events as well.

Belonging facilitates individuals in applying moral decoupling through the social value and acceptability of engaging with the sports event, which could be identified in respondents with both low- and high attachment to football. The reasoning of belonging was connected to social interactions with individuals as well as belonging to society overall, where emotions showed to play a big role in the facilitation of moral decoupling. The category of *Uniqueness* showcased a difference in moral decoupling for sports events compared to ordinary consumer products or services. It is difficult to find substitutes for sports events, therefore, the uniqueness of the consumption facilitates the ability to apply moral decoupling for individuals. Further, application of moral decoupling was facilitated through the complexity of having multiple actors involved in the sports event, as attachment to the different actors differed. Moreover, *Insignificance* indicates that if the event is of greater magnitude, with a higher power, money, and politics involved, it facilitates the individual in their moral decoupling as it is difficult to see the significance of one's own actions. When something is smaller in scale as well as closer in proximity to the individual, the individual feels a greater responsibility as their actions have a larger impact. Further, from the findings it is clear that the individual does not need to be limited to one category of facilitators for moral decoupling. Rather, multiple categories can contribute to facilitating moral decoupling simultaneously.

Finally, our findings showcased how *moral coupling* can be applied after an individual has engaged in moral decoupling. This finding strengthens previous research arguing for the link between moral decoupling and moral emotions (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Martinez & Jaeger, 2016; Friederich et al., 2022). When the respondents reasoned around the 2022 World Cup it became more difficult to separate the performance judgment and moral judgment. The respondents thereby applied moral coupling instead and started expressing moral emotions such as guilt and shame, as they felt their actions had a negative effect on others' welfare. As moral decoupling no longer suppressed these emotions, it led to increased moral awareness among respondents at the end of the interviews.

Theoretical contributions

While previous research on moral decoupling has focused on public figures, companies, and brands endorsed by public figures (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Wang & Kim, 2020), this study develops on the notion of moral decoupling and sports events. In line with previous research, the findings of our study suggest that moral decoupling is applied by consumers to support companies involved in unethical conduct (Lee et al., 2016; Haberstroh et al., 2017; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021; Friederich et al., 2022). The study thereby adds to the literature on moral decoupling and expands the understanding of consumers that support companies that are involved with unethical conduct in relation to sports events. Our findings depict how three different categories of facilitators for moral decoupling, *Belonging*, *Uniqueness*, and *Insignificance*, can facilitate consumers' separation of moral judgment and performance judgment. Within these three categories, different theoretical contributions were found.

First, it has previously been argued that attachment can have an effect on individuals' moral judgment (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Ingram et al., 2005; Schmalz & Orth, 2012), our study contributes to more insights and nuances into the effect of attachment. Previous research has reasoned for identification and involvement being important regarding individuals ability to decouple (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Cowan & Yazdanparast, 2021). While this was found to be true for high-attached consumers, we found that the probability for individuals to decouple is likely for low-attached consumers as well, as they were found to apply moral decoupling through belonging, without a high identification or involvement. This finding portrays that high attachment can play an important role in facilitating moral decoupling, however, the category of belonging showed that moral decoupling can be facilitated as well despite having a low attachment. This can further be the case in other events where belonging is an important aspect of engaging with the event.

Second, previous literature on moral decoupling has not highlighted the importance of available substitutes and their effect on individuals ability to engage in moral decoupling. The entertainment and value offered through sports events are unique compared to consumer goods and services which often have substitutes available. The study hence contributes to moral decoupling research by depicting that moral decoupling is facilitated when there is low availability of substitutes on the market. Third, we have further expanded the research on moral decoupling by including a discussion on the effects of having multiple actors involved. As consumers can have different levels of attachment and can relate differently to the actors involved, it can influence how moral decoupling takes place as it can affect who is considered responsible or not for unethical conduct. Fourth, the study's results highlight the importance of the consumer's perceived agency. When the consumer feels like their actions are insignificant it is easier to put responsibility on others. With events of great magnitude, it is difficult to see the consequences of one's own behavior, thereby facilitating moral decoupling through consumers perceiving that their actions have low significance.

Finally, this study shows that when having a harder time separating the performance judgment from their moral judgment, respondents expressed self-conscious moral emotions such as guilt and shame. This indicated that the respondents instead engaged in a moral coupling (Friederich et al., 2022). Emotions were then felt that were not expressed before due to moral decoupling's ability to suppress moral emotions (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Friederich et al., 2022). This study therefore sheds light on the role of moral decoupling in suppressing individuals' moral emotions as well as developing an understanding of how moral coupling can arise. Emotions that were expressed by the study's respondents; guilt, shame, and anger, further align with previous research on moral emotions (Tangney et al., 2007; Watson & Spence, 2007; Martinez & Jaeger, 2016).

Societal and managerial implications

Our study brings societal and managerial implications that can be applied in practice to better understand and reduce consumers' support of corporations' unethical conduct. This study showcases the difficulties in getting consumers to align with ethical and sustainable aspects, despite deeming them important. The study further contributes with knowledge on how consumers adopt moral decoupling and how they justify behavioral transgressions that contradict their moral beliefs. By understanding which categories of facilitators, belonging, uniqueness, or insignificance, consumers are relying on to apply moral decoupling, different stakeholders within the event-world can better understand consumer behavior. The findings can work as managerial implications to tailor marketing strategies and communication according to which categories of facilitators consumers are relying on to apply moral decoupling. For example, if there is controversy around an event or company with a close-knit community, the manager may want to focus communication around belonging within the community in order to retain their customers.

Further, the findings of the study can be used to hinder consumers' ability to apply moral decoupling. Findings revealed that it was hard to apply moral decoupling when discussing watching the 2022 World Cup in conjunction with discussing the unethical conduct of the event. This led to the connection of moral judgment and performance judgment, and thereby an application of moral coupling. These insights can be valuable in practice for policymakers to effectively understand and decrease consumers' ability to use moral decoupling as a justification for unethical behavior. Understanding underlying reasonings (such as belonging, uniqueness, and insignificance) that facilitates the separation between moral judgment and performance judgment can thereby help create strategies that obstruct consumers' ability to apply moral decoupling. For example, policymakers wanting consumers to recognise the importance of taking action against unethical conduct could place strategies on increasing the feeling of agency and significance in consumers to change their behavior. Meaning that the consumer is not satisfied with simply recognising the unethical behavior within a situation, as is done when applying moral decoupling, but feels agency to further take action and change their behavior. Managers could further hinder moral decoupling by lowering the perception of social acceptability by taking actions that decrease societal engagement and feelings of

belonging. For instance, informing and educating consumers of the consequences of high societal engagement in relation to unethical conduct.

These implications work as societal implications as they can increase the understanding of unethical conduct and consumption. This further contributes to an understanding of how to facilitate a change toward a more ethical society. By increasing consumers' awareness and informing them about moral decoupling, it can make consumers more self-aware and understanding of their consumption behaviors. The implications can impact society through endorsing ethical businesses and therefore allowing for a long-term sustainable change.

Future research and limitations

This study provides an understanding of how moral decoupling is applied and facilitated concerning sports events, specifically derived from the 2022 Fifa World Cup. While the findings of this study are not generalizable due to the qualitative nature of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2015), it was not our purpose, as our intention rather was to create a contextual understanding based on people's reasonings and experiences. As this study has examined the context of sports events and the 2022 World Cup in relation to moral decoupling, future research could explore different contexts that affect how consumers apply moral decoupling. For example, future research could explore how moral decoupling is applied in other sorts of events, such as festivals, political events, concerts, etc. This could bring about additional categories of facilitators for moral decoupling beyond the three we have found that can be of interest to help understand and develop on the notion of moral decoupling, as well as consumer behavior within different contexts. As this study was limited to only including Swedish respondents, future research could explore moral decoupling in other countries and cultural contexts where motivations to decouple can be driven by different categories. The World Cup, which is a mega sports event, could additionally have a different influence on consumers compared to smaller events or events that are closer in proximity, which can be of interest to explore as well. We further suggest that future research could use belonging, uniqueness, and insignificance, and explore if they apply to other contexts or types of events.

As this study explored what facilitates moral decoupling and the separation between moral judgment and performance judgment, we additionally suggest that knowledge of the categories of facilitators, belonging, uniqueness, and insignificance, can be used to accomplish the opposite of moral decoupling, which is moral coupling. By better understanding what facilitates moral decoupling, these categories can be targeted to hinder moral decoupling and prevent unethical behavior. While this study observed how moral coupling could be applied after a moral decoupling, it was outside the scope of our study to explore this more deeply. Future research could thereby further study how to get consumers to go from moral decoupling to moral coupling, by studying how individuals can bring together moral judgment and performance judgment. An important aspect for future research is thus to better understand how to increase moral coupling in society and decrease unethical behavior.

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