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Bracketed morality and ethical ideologies of sport fans

Brent Smith and John B. Lord
Department of Marketing, Erivan K. Haub School of Business, Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

ABSTRACT
Historically, scholarship on ethics in sport has focused almost exclusively on practices of athletes, coaches and leagues. In this study, we highlight a serious void in the existing empirical literature on morality – ethical ideology and intention – of sport fans. Applying 'bracketed morality,' sport fans sometimes enact or accept behaviours otherwise regarded as problematic in everyday situations – insulting athletes, cursing at officials, celebrating riotously and/or intimidating fans of rival teams. Only some fans actually sanction (oppose) these kinds of behaviours, suggesting that they are questionable but not necessarily problematic, and, thus, worthy of closer investigation. Here, with the aid of four scenarios, we find that sport fans' ethical ideology influences ethical intention. We also find that this influence is mediated twofold by ethical perception of moral problems and trivialization of observed situations, with trivialization exhibiting greater influence. Hence, while ethical ideologies and perceptions are important, they may be bracketed in evaluations of sport-fan behaviours.

They read their sports pages, know their statistics and either root like hell or boo our butts off. I love it. Give me vocal fans, pro or con, over the tourist types who show up in Houston or Montreal and just sit there.

Mike Schmidt, Philadelphia Phillies baseball player

Introduction
With the dramatic growth in size and stature of the global sport industry (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2011, 2016), it is now more important than ever to understand sport fans as producers and consumers, or prosumers (Toffler 1980), of the overall sport experience. Sport fans share in common varied attachments to sport-related objects (Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw 1999), and are driven by motivations that may characterize them as partisans or purists (Dixon 2001). As sport is a fixture of social life (Selznick 1996), how fans share in producing and consuming sport-related experiences can provide a meaningful glimpse into the 'old institutionalism' and 'new institutionalism' values of individuals, societies and nations (DiMaggio and Powell 2000; Gau and James 2013; Gau and Kim
The present research was designed to understand how individuals’ values manifest in their ethical positions and basic reactions to scenarios related to sport fan experiences.

King (2004) presents a simple but important question for sport researchers to consider through ongoing study: ‘What makes fans tick?’ Epstein (1985) suggests that sport is culture. In this study, we examine the psychology of the sport fan, focusing specifically on how moral values and ethical positions operate in the sport fan community. We leverage elements of existing theory – the contingency model (Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Hunt and Vitell 1986) and ethics position theory (EPT) (Forsyth 1980, 1992). For even with advances in knowledge about ethics in sport, most of the focus has been on the practices of athletes, coaches and leagues (Loland 2005; McNamee 1998; Olivier 2010; Roduit and Gaehwiler 2017; Sagas and Wigley 2014; Upton 2011). Yet, there remains much to learn about why sport fans do what they do with and to one another, particularly in a moral context.

**Sport fandom and bracketed morality**

(Wann 1994) notes that sport psychologists have much reason to investigate the characteristics and consequences of sport fanship. When acting as sport fans, some individuals may adopt a ‘bracketed morality’ (Bredemeier and Shields 1984), which allows them to be less moral, consequently performing or consenting/not opposing behaviours regarded as unacceptable or even egregious in everyday life outside of sport contexts (Bredemeier and Shields 1986; Kavussanu et al. 2013). Possibly vacillating from their ‘inner-directed’ to ‘other-directed’ personalities Riesman (1950), individuals transitioning into the sport fan role consequently could become more attuned to the social signals of other fans both in the arena, at the pub, or elsewhere. These signals can set a stage for fans to experience connection, community and disinhibition (Stone 2014). This notion of an ‘other-directed’ self invites inquiry about how sport fans deal with their normally persistent values (e.g. ethical ideologies) (Forsyth 1980).

Gantz et al. (2008) found that many descriptions of sport fans stigmatize them ‘largely due to hooliganism, riotous victory celebrations, and passiveness or laziness as “couch potatoes”’ (65). Over a century ago, Howard (1912) asserted that sport fan partisanship can be evil. Dixon (2001), van der Meij et al. (2015), and others note that partisan fandom, at its extremes, can lead to hostile attitudes or even acts of violence directed at supporters of a rival team. Nearly 25 years ago, Smith (1988) chose the term noble to describe the sport fan; yet, shortly after, Meier (1989) retorted, arguing that the term ignoble would be just as appropriate, declaring: ‘Sport spectators are not necessarily distinguished for genius or skills, they are not illustrious or distinguished by exploits of a high moral nature, nor do they possess qualities or a notably high or admirable kind’ (117, 118). Ultimately, these decades of discourse validate the need for this study’s focus on morality and ethics to address a challenge by King (2004) to find out what makes fans tick.

History reveals varied tolerances for questionable fan behaviours whose mildness or severity depends upon the observer (Smith et al. 1981; Wann and Branscombe 1993). For example, sport media have reported on countless and varied instances of fan behaviours – intimidation of rival fans, riotous behaviours, insult of officials, disrespect of event staff, etc. – that involve willing aggressors, targeted subjects and possibly unassuming observers.
In 1901, Ban Johnson and others founded the American League seeking relief from the undesirable rowdiness and drunkenness of spectators that once had discouraged family attendance and, in turn, threatened game revenues (Leshanski 2003). Many years later, Bart Giamatti, commissioner of Major League Baseball, reiterated similar concerns in his essay ‘To Sports and Fans: Clean up Your Act’ (Giamatti 1998), noting that such behaviour could make baseball less attractive among expanding alternatives for family entertainment. From the 1940s to the present, sport fans have directed insult and intimidation at baseball’s Jackie Robinson, soccer’s Kevin-Prince Boateng and many other athletes (Murphy 2013a; Richburg 2004). For decades, the culture of sport fandom has fostered both pride and prejudice that permit fans to fight one another, pester spouses of athletes, disturb event staff, interrupt games and so on whether in Europe, Asia, the Americas or elsewhere (ESPN.com 2010; Marchand 2010; Murphy 2013b). Responding to the risks imposed by fans behaving badly, amateur and professional sport leagues, school districts, and youth sport organizations have developed and begun enforcing fan codes of conduct to ensure safe and enjoyable fan environments (FIFA 2010; McCarthy 2008; Valade 2010). While official league standards are important, it is also imperative to ascertain how sport fans themselves perceive the questionable behaviours of their peers in the stands. These behaviours are not novel to the sport community; they can escalate and become problematic if not addressed carefully. Zeigler (2007) notes: ‘Sport, like all other social institutions, is inevitably being confronted by the need to become truly responsible. Many troubling and difficult decisions, often ethical in nature, will have to be made […]’ (316).

Framing morality of sport fans: ideology and decision-making process

Fortunately, sport scholarship has shown some interest in exploring moral behaviour in sport (Dixon 2001; Kavussanu 2008; Kavussanu and Boardley 2012; Kavussanu et al. 2013; Kihl 2007). Still, Spaaij (2014) and others contend that scholarly work in this area remains quite sparse. In this study, we build upon the relatively scant empirical literature specifically focused on the morality – ethical ideology, perception and intention – of sport fans. Fans clearly are mixed in their leanings to sanction (oppose) the kinds of behaviours described above. Therefore, it is appropriate to regard those behaviours as questionable, but not necessarily problematic, and, thus, worthy of closer study.

Current literature on ethical decision-making suggests that individuals have value orientations that predispose them to a particular decision-making course (Forsyth 1980, 1992; O’Fallon and Butterfield 2005; Reynolds 2006). Essentially, that course traces how and where individuals are inclined to perceive an ethical issue and, in turn, consider an ethical response to a given situation. The contingency model (Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Hunt and Vitell 1986) is a useful and widely adopted approach for understanding individuals’ ethical decision-making.

Forsyth’s EPT (1980, 1992) states that individuals have one of two primary moral persuasions – ethical idealism or ethical relativism – that shape how they evaluate the content of situations. As firm deontologists, ethical idealists consistently endorse principles that call for being fair, respecting others, doing no harm and so on in all situations. Ethical relativists generally reject the notion that rules for behaviour should be applied universally. In short, they adopt a more flexible, or bracketed, view of the world on a case-by-case basis. This delineation provides a useful framework for understanding how the sport fan might
observe and react to scenarios that involve questionable fan behaviours. Indeed, the idealism or relativism may explain whether the sport fan even perceives a given scenario to include any ethical content deserving of a clearly moral reaction.

Hunt and Vitell (1986, 1993) set a foundation for understanding the process by which individuals make ethics-related decisions. According to the Hunt-Vitell (H-V) model of ethical decision-making, individuals consider how to confront a situation if, and after, they perceive that the situation includes ethical content (Hunt and Vitell 2006). This idea of ethical content reflects Jones (1991) notion of moral intensity, which describes the degree to which situations involve characteristics that may require moral judgement or moral action. As noted by Frey (2000), even Jones (1991) lamented in some ethics research that ‘the effect an issue’s nature may have on the decision-making process had not been acknowledged’ (181). Thus, while various individuals may observe the same event, they may not process it in the same way(s) or to the same end(s). For example, some sport fans could be relatively tolerant of hooligan fights at a soccer match, while others may find it rather disturbing (Rouvrais-Charron and Kim 2009). Looking to the H-V model with Jones (1991) considerations, one can ascertain what factors affect an individual’s observations and ethical intentions regarding the questionable behaviour of sport fans.

Research questions

This study adopts the view that sport is a ‘world within a world’ (Huizinga 1955), where behaviours in everyday life are framed differently due to ‘bracketed morality’ (Bredemeier and Shields 1986). Accordingly, this study offers an approach, partly conventional and partly novel, for examining whether questionable fan behaviours could be perceived as problematic (ethical perception) or trivialized as no big deal (situational trivialization) and, in turn, indicate potential reactions to those behaviours (ethical intention not to enact the observed behaviour).

Appelbaum et al. (2012) note that important scholars have ‘started the process of delineating the nature of a sports spectator, and through this process specific characteristics and psychological typologies of a spectator have begun to emerge. However, key questions remain.’ (423). Advancing that view, we utilise the contingency model (Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Hunt and Vitell 1986) and consider the following research questions to understand how ethical positions, or ideologies, manifest in the sport fan’s ethical decision-making process:

1. Are sport fans’ reactions (i.e. ethical intentions) to questionable fan behaviours influenced by ethical ideology and ethical perception?
2. Does ethical perception mediate the ethical ideology → ethical intention relationship?

The two prior questions are rather well established in existing ethics literature (O’Fallon and Butterfield 2005). However, the authors hope to advance current literature by posing two new questions about mediation of the ethical ideology → ethical intention relationship:

3. Does situational trivialization mediate the ethical ideology → ethical intention relationship?
4. Which mediator, ethical perception or situational trivialization, plays a stronger role in influencing the ethical ideology → ethical intention relationship?
These two additional questions acknowledge an exhortation by Reynolds (2006) that, ‘an evaluation of our ethical decision-making models and the very assumptions upon which they are grounded may be justified’ (241). We believe that Reynolds’ call is especially relevant for examining ethics in the globally popular but understudied context of spectator sport, teeming with fans of varied dispositions and values. Essentially, the authors hope to ascertain the comparative influences exerted by both ethical perceptions and situational trivialization within the ethical ideology → ethical intention relationship.

In the sections that follow, the authors review relevant literature on sport fans and ethical decision, present hypotheses and conduct a special application of multiple mediation analysis to shed light on the noted research questions. Finally, the authors conclude with a discussion of the limitations, contributions and suggestions for future research on ethics among fans in the spectator sport community.

**Hypotheses**

According to Beckwith (2009), values are instrumental for human behaviour: ‘They tell people what standards to use when presenting themselves in society and when evaluating of judging other members of society. As personal standards, values are essential to the process of making comparisons and contrasts’ (448). Myriad values have been proposed to influence fan behaviour in spectator sport (Gau and James 2013; Gau and Kim 2011). Somewhat in line with the ‘bracketed morality’ view of sport fans, Hughes and Coakley (1991) suggest that many forms of deviance in sport are not caused by a disregard of rejection of social values or norms; instead, they are caused by an unqualified acceptance of and unquestioned commitment to a value system framed by what we refer to as the sport ethic. (308)

They explain further that the sport ethic should involve all sport participants (e.g. coaches, athletes, fans).

In their role as sport fans, individuals play a unique two-part role as producers and consumers of the experiences that they co-create with fellow fans. Separated from other life roles as managers, employees or students, sport fans are afforded rare freedoms of ‘bracketed morality’ (Bredemeier and Shields 1986), which allow them to partake in a mishmash of aggression release, excitement, diversion, trash-talking, mental toughness, rituals, loyalties and competitive intensity that can bring out the best and worst of people on an off the field of play (Leuck, Krahenbuhl, and Odenkirk 1979; Mael and Ashforth 2001; Meier 1989; Russell 1981; Sloan 1979; Smith 1988). These characteristics are seldom enabled, exhibited, or tolerated in the workplace or classroom. Of course, it must be acknowledged that many sport fans are attracted to the actual sport contest not the bad behaviour of some other fans. Thus, it can be challenging to discern how moral awareness (Rest 1986), moral intensity (Jones 1991) or other factors affect the decision-making of each individual in the fan role. The lack of ethical decision-making research among sport fans only augments our ignorance on such topics. In any setting, individuals may observe questionable behaviours that call for a measured and firm moral response. Researchers have contemplated this issue with regard to managers, employees and students; however, they have not done much yet with regard to sport fans. Thus, the question ‘What makes fans tick?’ still remains largely unanswered with respect to understanding key ideologies and ethics of sport fans.

(Forsyth 1980, 1992) argues that individuals possess a moral value system, or ‘software’ of sorts, that influences how they observe, perceive and evaluate ethical content in various
situations. His EPT suggests that personal moral philosophies can be understood in terms of two different value orientations – idealism and relativism. (Reynolds 2006) opines that value orientations, or ethical predispositions, ‘are patterns used to process information […] that will facilitate the process of recognizing the issue as a moral issue’ (235). He states further, ‘To the extent that the individual subscribes to or uses these frameworks as tools for addressing moral issues, they are accessible when the individual encounters a new situation’ (235). Individuals who espouse idealism generally adopt relatively consistent, firm and inelastic points-of-view when contemplating the ethics involved in various situations. Guided by universal deontological standards, ethical idealists believe that acceptable outcomes can and should always be achieved without causing harm to others. Thus, they also tend to value hypernorms that ensure respect, safety and security for everyone. By contrast, ethical relativists accept a narrower array of universal norms and contend that moral principles are not absolute but rather conditional. In fact, Sparks and Hunt (1998) and Yetmar and Eastman (2000) found a negative relationship between ethical relativism and ethical sensitivity. Intuitively speaking, ethical relativism may lead individuals to perceive ethical issues as trivially important. Led by pragmatic teleological standards, they generally favour greater freedom, fluidity and elasticity in estimating the ethical content of situations on a case-by-case basis.

**Ethical ideology and situational discernment among sport fans**

For decades, sport researchers have described members of the fan community with an amalgamation of terms, such as noble vs. ignoble or roligan vs. hooligan, essentially underscoring the notion that observed fan behaviours tend to prompt different evaluations and reactions (Gantz et al. 2008; Meier 1989; Smith 1988). As noted earlier, sport fan research has never explored empirically whether or how individuals’ ethical predisposition influences situational perception and intention.

In an extensive review of relevant literature, O’Fallon and Butterfield (2005) report that ethical decision-making, as a direct outcome variable, has a positive relationship with idealism and a negative relationship between relativism. Further, scholars generally agree that individuals must perceive an ethical problem within a situation before they can show an ethical response (Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Hunt and Vitell 1986; Jones 1991; Singhapakdi and Vitell 1990; Singhapakdi, Vitell, and Kraft 1996). The ability to perceive such a problem presumes deep awareness of the circumstances and parties involved. Ethics literature suggests that individuals who perceive an ethical problem will form, or act upon, ethical intentions (e.g. not replicate or tolerate behaviour of the observed actor/offender) (Jones 1991; Singhapakdi, Vitell, and Kraft 1996). In this study, the authors partially agree with this reasoning, arguing that sport fans’ ethical intention can be influenced not only by perception of an ethical problem in a situation but also, or alternatively, by trivialization of the situation. The latter influence reflects the idea that some sport fans may see little to no problem with the acts that they observe.

Researchers have provided some varied insights about what sport fans might actually do upon observing questionable or unseemly behaviours. In a study of sport fan identification, Lanter (2011) suggested that some sport fans are rather willing to accept and/or participate in celebratory violence. Russell and Arms (2001) noted that some spectators are more inclined to act as peacemakers in the midst of violence. Over a decade apart, studies
by Russell and Arms (1998) and van der Meij et al. (2015) found that young adult males are more prone to join or intensify conflicts during and after sporting events. Such findings suggest that moral intensity is relatively low in such contexts, reflecting a tendency of sport fans to experience little moral awareness and to marginalize questionable behaviours as less than problematic.

As demonstrated by Davis, Andersen, and Curtis (2001), the idealistic and relativistic ethical positions have significant explanatory power for measures of personal intention (e.g. the likelihood that one would perform the same questionable actions detailed in a scenario/ scenario). Indeed, an individual’s moral beliefs and attitudes can be said to form ‘part of an integrated conceptual system of personal ethics’ (Davis, Andersen, and Curtis 2001). Given the unwavering standards of ethical idealists, they should be quite morally sensitized and more prone to perceive ethical issues within various situations. Consequently, they would also tend to engender ethical intentions that indicate their discomfort, disagreement and dissension with questionable behaviour. In other words, idealists are less likely to repeat the questionable behaviours they observe from others. Individuals who strongly espouse ethical idealism would more consistently advocate for clear, unambiguous ethical standards compared to individuals who strongly espouse the values of ethical relativism. Focused on duty-based values and the rightness of actions, individuals with a more idealistic orientation are less likely to marginalize situations that involve any harm to any person. Unlike ethical idealists, ethical relativists’ perceptions of moral issues are informed by a rejection of universal moral rules; thus, they would be less inclined to disagree or dissent with questionable behaviours that occur in their midst. In turn, relativists are more likely to repeat the questionable behaviour they observe from others. Individuals who are guided by the pragmatic, teleological orientation of relativism are more likely to trivialize such situations. Thus,

\[ H1: \] Sport fans’ ethical idealism will exert a (a) positive influence on ethical perception, (b) negative influence on situational trivialization, and (c) negative influence on ethical intention, among sport fans.

\[ H2: \] Sport fans’ ethical relativism exerts a (a) negative influence on ethical perception, (b) positive influence on situational trivialization, and (c) positive influence on ethical intention, among sport fans.

**Mediating effects of different situational discernments**

Perception of an ethical problem or ethical issue generally leads to greater ethical intentions (Hunt and Vitell 1986; Hunt and Vitell 1993; Jones 1991). Following Jones (1991), many ethics researchers also expect that individuals will, as a matter of course, calculate the moral intensity of ethical content in a given situation. Implicit in Jones’ concept of moral intensity is that individuals may not evaluate the situational content in the same ways, or to the same ends. Derry and Green (1989) and Frey (2000) assert that consideration of moral intensity can encourage researchers to focus on characteristics of a situation itself rather than on the individual decision-maker. Empirical research has been mixed regarding the quality or robustness of Jones’ multidimensional concept; however, Reynolds (2006) has found that negative relationships exist between moral awareness, harm and violation of behavioural norms. As noted earlier, sport fan research indicates that fans may not necessarily find ethical content in all instances of questionable fan behaviour. Thus, it may be premature or
myopic to assume that any individual’s observations of a situation will resonate inevitably with pure contemplations of moral intensity.

Here, this study takes into account the degree to which individuals separately may perceive ethical content and/or trivialize an overall situation. This two-pronged emphasis, on situational details per se, fits with notion that decision-makers can react to a presence (absence) of compelling moral imperative (Jones 1991). Thus, even considering the magnitude of consequences, social consensus, temporal immediacy, proximity and other factors, individual sport fans could still differ in their tendency to trivialize a situation. As noted earlier, many individuals in the fan role/domain use the spectating experience as an outlet to express their emotions more freely, without the boundaries and strictures associated with their home, work, religious and other lives (Mael and Ashforth 2001). Suspending many basic ‘rules’ of life, scholarly research and popular media reports indicate that fans sometimes make allowances for trash-talking, collectively cursing at officials, cheating (e.g. ‘If you’re not cheating, you’re not trying.’), fighting fans of opposing teams and so on. As suggested by Bredemeier and Shields (1986) and Gantz et al. (2008), individuals generally expect and are accustomed to exhibiting and observing behaviours that would be subjected to criticism, rebuke or reproach outside of the fan community. Thus, while immersed in their fan mode/moment, individuals often relax or recalibrate their sensitivities, ethics and political correctness. Hence,

H3: Sport fans’ ethical idealism will exert an indirect influence on ethical intention through (a) ethical perception and (b) situational trivialization.

H4: Sport fans’ ethical relativism will exert an indirect influence on ethical intention through (a) ethical perception and (b) situational trivialization.

H5: Among sport fans, the relationship between ethical ideology and ethical intention is more strongly mediated by situational trivialization than by ethical perception.

Methodology

Sample

After providing informed consent, one hundred fifty-one undergraduate and graduate students completed a self-administered questionnaire. Overall, the questionnaire included questions about demographics, ethical positions and reactions to sport fan behaviours. The respondents were enrolled at a university located in one of the United States’ five largest cities, top five media markets and leading principle cities to host several professional sport teams (e.g. basketball, baseball, American football, soccer, ice hockey). As a point of record, the United States accounts for the largest recent and forecasted share of global sports revenues (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2011, 2016).

Demographically speaking, the sample is fairly representative of the US sport fan community. Males accounted for 64.8% and females accounted for 35.2% of the sample. Age ranged from 18 to 58 years, with an average of 26.8 years. Respondents identified themselves 65.9% white/Caucasian, 12.1% Asian, 9.9% black/African-American, 2.2% Hispanic/Latino, 1.1% Native American and 8.8% Other. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale, one hundred fifty-one respondents described themselves as fans of American football (4.24), baseball
(3.85), basketball (3.52), ice hockey (3.40), soccer (3.40), golf (3.06), tennis (3.00) and sport in general (4.15/5.00).

We acknowledge that there are several descriptions of sport fans (Giulianotti 2002; Jacobson 2003; Wann and Dolan 1994) we adopt comparably broad descriptions by Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw (1999) (noted earlier) and also by Daniel L Wann et al. (2001). The latter define sport fans as ‘individuals who are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete.’ (2).

**Measures**

**Ethical ideologies**

Individuals possess and refer to ethical orientations, or ideologies, which inform whether and how they apply moral thinking in different situations. Indeed, personal moralities ‘prevail in different times and places’ (Frankena 1980, 18). In this study, the authors have taken the position that, as sport fans, individuals may exhibit behaviours or apply sensitivities that are more casual than those that would be appropriate in work, educational and other settings. According to Zakus, Malloy, and Edwards (2007), it is through ‘these different social and cultural contexts we encounter and work our way through different ideas, beliefs, values, and norms’ (137). For sport fans, these consumption contexts could include live experiences via broadcast media (e.g. television at a pub) or in person at a baseball park, football stadium, hockey rink or soccer pitch.

Respondents provided data about their individual ethical ideologies using the Ethics Positions Questionnaire (EPQ) (Forsyth 1980). The EPQ is comprised of two separate 10-item scales, which measure ethical idealism (deontological) and ethical relativism (teleological), respectively. Items for ethical idealism include, for example, ‘If an action could harm an innocent other, then it should not be done’ and ‘One should not perform an action which might in any way threaten the dignity and welfare of another individual.’ In contrast, items for ethical relativism include, for example, and ‘Moral standards should be seen as being individualistic; what one person considers to be moral may be judged to be immoral by another person’ and ‘What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another’. Respondents indicated their (dis)agreement with each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Scores for each scale were computed by totalling its 10 respective items. The EPQ demonstrated favourable psychometrics properties (idealism $\alpha = .850$; relativism $\alpha = .799$).

**Behavioural scenarios: what do you think? what would you do?**

Four different scenarios were constructed to capture the moral reactions (e.g. perceptions, intentions) of respondents. Ethical decisions tend to be rather situational and/or issue-related (Singhapakdi, Vitell, and Kraft 1996). In studying fan behaviours, sport researchers have used live situations (see (Lennon 1980; Russell 1981; Wann and Branscombe 1990) and hypothetical situations (Russell and Arms 1998, 2001). Consistent with Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and Jones (1991) Jones (1991), Hunt and Vitell (2006) note that ‘ethical judgments and intentions should be better predictors of behavior in situations where the ethical issues are central, rather than peripheral’ (3, 4). Allen, Fuller, and Luckett (1998) assert that behavioural scenarios, as indirect measures, can exhibit less downward bias than direct self-reported measures. Further supporting the utility of behaviour scenarios in this kind of ethics study, Zakus, Malloy, and Edwards (2007) remark:
Problems, however, are rarely matched with a priori rules and resolutions, and are, as a result, sterile and incomplete. This argument demands that the individual’s ability to think critically is fundamental for the ability to recognize and respond to the unavoidable array of ethical dilemmas (obvious and latent) … This, in turn, brings us back to values and the need for a value clarification exercise. (144)

The situational scenarios used in this study provide a means for researchers to understand the relationship between ethical perceptions and ethical intentions within a spectator sport context. Thus, these scenarios provide opportunities to address concerns by Zakus, Malloy, and Edwards (2007) who noted that

[…] we do not often question the ideas and values built into knowledge structures and ideologies, and passed on to us by parents, peers, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, professors, administrators, and others. The world is pre-interpreted for us by those we encounter throughout life. (142)

Capella (2002) gives examples of typical questionable fan behaviour, such as but not limited to drinking during a game, taunting opponent’s fans, shouting at players/coaches or yelling obscenities and expressing hatred towards other team/players. These behaviours provided some direction for composing the following four scenarios that were presented to and evaluated by the research subjects:

**Scenario 1:** A spectator wearing the home team’s jersey spots another spectator in the stands wearing the visiting team’s jersey. Appearing somewhat ‘buzzed’, the home team fan approaches the visiting team fan and yells, ‘You and your team both suck. Why don’t you go back to where you came from?’ The home team fan appears threatening but there is no physical contact.
Scenario 2: A spectator has been drinking beer and yelling at the players and officials. S/he is approached by an usher and is asked to calm down and lower her/his volume so as not to disturb other fans in the area. The spectator reacts and says to the usher, ‘Take a hike, buddy!’ and is uncooperative.

Scenario 3: A home team fan reacts to what is thought to be a bad or unfair call by an official and yells directly at him/her, ‘When I grow old and I can’t see I want to be a referee!’ Other home fans can be heard in the background chanting ‘Bull – !’ repeatedly.

Scenario 4: After their team wins the championship, an individual decides to join some celebrating fans outside the arena. S/he celebrates loudly, yelling and screaming, and carrying on. As part of a large crowd of people, s/he bangs on the sides of cars making their way out of the parking lot.

Ethical perception and ethical intention

In response to each scenario, respondents indicated their level of agreement with three statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale. The first two statements reflect acknowledgements of observations by (Frankena 1980) and Jones (1991) that both morality and moral intensity have time-and-place specificity. The first statement (‘This situation involves an ethical problem.’) reflected the degree to which individuals perceived an ethical problem within the questionable behaviour described in a scenario (ethical perception). The second statement (‘Situations like this are to be expected. It’s not right, but it’s not a big deal either.’) indicated the degree to which individuals dismissed, or downplayed, the existence of an
ethical issue within the questionable behaviour (situational trivialization). Prior situational studies of individuals’ ethical reactions have lacked this important two-pronged feature (e.g. Singhapakdi 2004; Singhapakdi, Vitell, and Kraft 1996; and others). This approach heeds Jones (1991) belief that ethics research should capture individual evaluations of situational characteristics. It also acknowledges Frey’s (2000) recommendation to present a simple question(s) about matters that may involve ethical intensity. Given that ethical decisions are ‘both legal and morally acceptable to the larger community’ (Jones 1991, 367), the first two statements are especially salient in the sport fan context, since some fans may endorse or tolerate behaviors that view as neither ethical nor particularly problematic. The third statement (‘I might possibly act in the same manner as the fan(s) in this situation. ’) indicated the chances that respondents would likely enact the kind of questionable behaviour featured in a given scenario (ethical intention). Summary data for each measure are presented in Tables 1–4.

Ethics research that utilises scenarios typically features statements similar to the first and third statements, relating to ethical perception and ethical intention, in this study. This conventional practice conforms to the H-V model, which suggests that individuals must perceive an issue to have ethical content before they develop an ethical intention. Yet, it should not be assumed that perception of an ethical issue will necessarily lead individuals to develop a favorable ethical intention. Few, if any, studies, to date, seem to account duly for this aspect of the H-V model. In this study, however, we consider not only whether individual sport fans have an ethical perception but also how much significance they assigned to the ethical content within a situation (re: Is it a big deal?). Discerning whether moral

<table>
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<th>Table 3. Scenario 3: Home team boos official/referee for disliked call (n = 151).</th>
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<tr>
<td>A home team fan reacts to what is thought to be a bad or unfair call by an official and yells directly at him/her, ‘When I grow old and I can’t see, I want to be a referee!’ Other home fans can be heard in the background chanting ‘Bull –!’ repeatedly</td>
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Means and correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>IDEAL</th>
<th>RELAT</th>
<th>PERCEP</th>
<th>TRIVIAL</th>
<th>INTENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDEAL</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>−1.79*</td>
<td>−1.86*</td>
<td>−2.28**</td>
<td>−3.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELAT</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.81**</td>
<td>1.84*</td>
<td>0.272**</td>
<td>0.557**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERCEP</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.281**</td>
<td>−0.603**</td>
<td>−0.603**</td>
<td>−0.603**</td>
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<tr>
<td>TRIVIAL</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>0.281**</td>
<td>0.184*</td>
<td>0.272**</td>
<td>0.557**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTENT</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>0.319**</td>
<td>0.184*</td>
<td>−0.603**</td>
<td>−0.603**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01.

Indirect effects of independent variables on dependent variable through proposed mediators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normal theory tests (aka Sobel test)</th>
<th>Bootstrapping with 95% confidence intervals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDEAL → INTENT</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator 1</td>
<td>PERCEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator 2</td>
<td>TRIVIAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>M1 v. M2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELAT → INTENT</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator 1</td>
<td>PERCEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator 2</td>
<td>TRIVIAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>M1 v. M2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^5000 bootstrap samples; bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals.
significance is attached to an observed act directly acknowledges the possibility that 'many individuals can be conditioned (i.e. can “learn” to behave unethically under appropriate contingencies' (Hegarty and Sims 1978, 456). As noted above, a relativistic disposition may lead individuals to perceive some issues as ethically ambiguous, less significant, trivially important or not warranting a big deal of emphasis. Additionally, Sparks and Hunt (1998) note that ethics is personal and learned, thus underscoring our point that individuals may recognize an ethical issue yet still marginalize its significance as a factor that affects their ethical intentions. These findings logically support the decision to include a potentially pivotal intervening variable – situational trivialization – in this study.

Results

Research hypotheses were assessed using ordinary least squares regression and mediation analysis in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20.0. This combination of analytic methods is appropriate since the research model involves independent, dependent and two mediator variables. The model does not include additional antecedents, consequential constructs or multi-item measures. Regarding methodologies in ethics research, Randall and Gibson (1990) contend that 'the appropriateness of the technique depends primarily upon the theory, research hypotheses, and available data' (467). Mediation analysis was performed using the INDIRECT macro (Preacher and Hayes 2008) which effectively estimates path coefficients in a multiple mediator model. (Preacher and Hayes 2008) have demonstrated that INDIRECT is superior to the Sobel test (Sobel 1982) and other mediation tests (e.g.

Table 4. Scenario 4: Fans celebrate and hit on cars after celebrating team victory (n = 151).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>IDEAL</th>
<th>RELAT</th>
<th>PERCEP</th>
<th>TRIVIAL</th>
<th>INTENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDEAL</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELAT</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>−1.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERCEP</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.235*</td>
<td>−2.35*</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIVIAL</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>−0.243*</td>
<td>0.355**</td>
<td>−0.661**</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTENT</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>−0.367**</td>
<td>0.274**</td>
<td>−0.602**</td>
<td>0.715**</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01.

Indirect effects of independent variables on dependent variable through proposed mediators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDEAL → INTENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>IDEAL</td>
<td>−0.0344</td>
<td>0.0109</td>
<td>−3.1674</td>
<td>0.0015</td>
<td>−0.0345</td>
<td>0.0115</td>
<td>−0.0588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator 1</td>
<td>PERCEP</td>
<td>−0.0093</td>
<td>0.0045</td>
<td>−2.0618</td>
<td>0.0392</td>
<td>−0.0098</td>
<td>0.0057</td>
<td>−0.0244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator 2</td>
<td>TRIVIAL</td>
<td>−0.0251</td>
<td>0.0089</td>
<td>−2.8324</td>
<td>0.0046</td>
<td>−0.0247</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td>−0.0461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>M1 v. M2</td>
<td>0.0157</td>
<td>0.0089</td>
<td>1.7586</td>
<td>0.0786</td>
<td>0.0150</td>
<td>0.0097</td>
<td>−0.0088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELAT → INTENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>RELAT</td>
<td>0.0506</td>
<td>0.0120</td>
<td>4.2165</td>
<td>0.0000</td>
<td>0.0511</td>
<td>0.0139</td>
<td>0.0238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator 1</td>
<td>PERCEP</td>
<td>0.0109</td>
<td>0.0051</td>
<td>2.1507</td>
<td>0.0315</td>
<td>0.0115</td>
<td>0.0067</td>
<td>0.0017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator 2</td>
<td>TRIVIAL</td>
<td>0.0397</td>
<td>0.0101</td>
<td>3.9156</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>0.0396</td>
<td>0.0112</td>
<td>0.0199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>M1 v. M2</td>
<td>−0.0288</td>
<td>0.0106</td>
<td>−2.7012</td>
<td>0.0069</td>
<td>−0.0282</td>
<td>0.0120</td>
<td>−0.0560</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^5000 bootstrap samples; bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals.
Baron and Kenny (1986)), since it allows for multiple mediators and adjusts all paths for the impact of covariates not specified as mediators in the model. This method also allows for the identification of a particular mediator that performs more powerfully and significantly than another mediator within a given model. According to Preacher and Hayes (2004), the impact and significance of mediator variables should not be restricted to normal theory tests, but rather based on bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals (BCCIs). BCCIs for a significant independent or mediator variable will not include zero.

The independent variables in the research model – ethical idealism (IDEAL) and ethical relativism (RELAT) – were evaluated for their total and direct influences on the dependent variable, ethical intention (INTENT). The two mediators – ethical perception (PERCEP) and ethical trivializing (TRIVIAL) – were evaluated simultaneously to determine their effect on the IDEAL → INTENT and RELAT → INTENT relationships. As part of the mediation analysis, which controlled for gender, all unstandardized regression coefficients (see Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010) were tested for significance with bootstrapping analysis using 5,000 samples with replacement. Our analysis also contrasts the unique contributions of the mediators, a practice encouraged by Preacher and Hayes (2004). The results of the data analyses are presented in Tables 1–4.

**Scenario 1**

As part of the multiple mediator model for the first scenario, IDEAL exhibits positive influence on PERCEP ($\beta = .0400$, $t = 2.9905$, $p = .0033$) and negative influence on TRIVIAL ($\beta = -.0552$, $t = -3.6978$, $p = .0003$) as expected in the replicated hypotheses H1a and H1b. In contrast, RELAT exhibits negative influence on PERCEP ($\beta = -.0559$, $t = -4.1231$, $p = .0001$) and positive influence on TRIVIAL ($\beta = .0627$, $t = 4.0899$, $p = .0001$) as hypothesized in H2a and H2b.

Regarding the IDEAL → INTENT relationship, the regression model ($R^2 = .301$, $F = 21.092$, $p = .000$) indicates the following direct effects: IDEAL −.0302 ($t = -2.3085$, $p = .0224$), PERCEP −.1992 ($t = -2.334$, $p = .0209$) and TRIVIAL .3362 ($t = 4.3905$, $p = .0000$). In terms of indirect effects, the regression model indicates that IDEAL ($\beta = -.0262$), PERCEP ($\beta = -.0079$) and TRIVIAL ($\beta = -.0183$) exhibit negative influences on INTENT. Based on their respective confidence intervals, each of these variables is statistically significant.

Regarding the RELAT → INTENT relationship, the regression model ($R^2 = .299$, $F = 20.965$, $p = .000$) indicates the following direct effects: RELAT.0313 ($t = 2.2479$, $p = .0261$), PERCEP −.1831 ($t = -2.1153$, $p = .0361$) and TRIVIAL .3388 ($t = 4.4295$, $p = .0000$). In terms of indirect effects, the regression model indicates that RELAT ($\beta = .0313$), PERCEP ($\beta = .0104$) and TRIVIAL ($\beta = .0209$) exhibit positive influences on INTENT. Based on their respective confidence intervals, each of these variables is statistically significant.

**Scenario 2**

As part of the multiple mediator model for the second scenario, IDEAL exhibits positive influence on PERCEP ($\beta = .0301$, $t = 2.3463$, $p = .0203$) and negative influence on TRIVIAL ($\beta = -.0487$, $t = -3.2132$, $p = .0016$) as expected in the replicated hypotheses H1a and H1b. In contrast, RELAT exhibits negative influence on PERCEP ($\beta = -.0188$, $t = -1.4003$, $p = .0261$).
Regarding the IDEAL → INTENT relationship, the regression model ($R^2 = .355$, $F = 26.955$, $p = .000$) indicates the following direct effects: IDEAL exhibits $-.0344$ ($t = -3.0315$, $p = .0029$), PERCEP $-.1157$ ($t = -1.8495$, $p = .0664$) and TRIVIAL $.3883$ ($t = 6.1784$, $p = .0000$). In terms of indirect effects, the regression model indicates that IDEAL ($\beta = -.0225$), PERCEP ($\beta = -.0038$) and TRIVIAL ($\beta = -.0187$) exhibit negative influences on INTENT. Based on their respective confidence intervals, IDEAL and PERCEP are statistically significant, while PERCEP is not statistically significant.

Regarding the RELAT → INTENT relationship, the regression model ($R^2 = .336$, $F = 24.814$, $p = .000$) indicates the following direct effects: RELAT exhibits $.0263$ ($t = 2.1881$, $p = .0302$), PERCEP $-.1386$ ($t = -2.3104$, $p = .0222$) and TRIVIAL $.3875$ ($t = 5.9648$, $p = .0000$). In terms of indirect effects, the regression model indicates that RELAT ($\beta = .0253$), PERCEP ($\beta = .0025$) and TRIVIAL ($\beta = .0228$) exhibit positive influences on INTENT. Based on their respective confidence intervals, RELAT and PERCEP are statistically significant, while TRIVIAL is not statistically significant.

Scenario 3

As part of the multiple mediator model for the second scenario, IDEAL exhibits positive influence on PERCEP ($\beta = .0470$, $t = 3.5762$, $p = .0005$) and negative influence on TRIVIAL ($\beta = -.0402$, $t = -2.8623$, $p = .0048$) as expected in the replicated hypotheses H1a and H1b. In contrast, RELAT exhibits negative influence on PERCEP ($\beta = -.0323$, $t = -2.3104$, $p = .0222$) and positive influence on TRIVIAL ($\beta = .0336$, $t = 2.2862$, $p = .0237$) as hypothesized in H2a and H2b.

Regarding the IDEAL → INTENT relationship, the regression model ($R^2 = .378$, $F = 29.823$, $p = .000$) indicates the following direct effects: IDEAL exhibits $-.0711$ ($t = -4.1087$, $p = .0001$), PERCEP $-.2912$ ($t = -2.6351$, $p = .0093$) and TRIVIAL $.4893$ ($t = 47.237$, $p = .0000$). In terms of indirect effects, the regression model indicates that IDEAL ($\beta = -.0339$), PERCEP ($\beta = -.0140$) and TRIVIAL ($\beta = -.0198$) exhibit negative influences on INTENT. Based on their respective confidence intervals, each of these variables is statistically significant.

Regarding the RELAT → INTENT relationship, the regression model ($R^2 = .376$, $F = 29.496$, $p = .000$) indicates the following direct effects: RELAT exhibits $.0364$ ($t = 2.3607$, $p = .0196$), PERCEP $-.3174$ ($t = -2.9030$, $p = .0043$) and TRIVIAL $.4866$ ($t = 4.6816$, $p = .0000$). In terms of indirect effects, the regression model indicates that RELAT ($\beta = .0101$) and TRIVIAL ($\beta = .0159$) exhibit positive influences on INTENT. Based on their respective confidence intervals, RELAT and PERCEP are statistically significant, while TRIVIAL is not statistically significant.

Scenario 4

As part of the multiple mediator model for the second scenario, IDEAL exhibits positive influence on PERCEP ($\beta = .0429$, $t = 2.9460$, $p = .0037$) and negative influence on TRIVIAL ($\beta = -.0505$, $t = -3.0518$, $p = .0027$) as expected in the replicated hypotheses H1a and H1b. In contrast, RELAT exhibits negative influence on PERCEP ($\beta = -.0446$, $t = -2.9540$, $p = .0001$) and positive influence on TRIVIAL ($\beta = .0589$, $t = 3.7928$, $p = .0002$) as hypothesized in H2a and H2b.
p = .0036) and positive influence on TRIVIAL (β = .0767, t = 4.6415, p = .0000) as hypothesized in H2a and H2b.

Regarding the IDEAL → INTENT relationship, the regression model (R² = .574, F = 66.116, p = .000) indicates the following direct effects on INTENT: IDEAL exhibits −.0368 (t = −3.4034, p = .0009), PERCEP −.2178 (t = −2.8483, p = .0050) and TRIVIAL .4972 (t = 7.3798, p = .0000). In terms of indirect effects, the regression model indicates that IDEAL (β = −.0345), PERCEP (β = −.0098) and TRIVIAL (β = −.0247) exhibit negative influences on INTENT. Based on their respective confidence intervals, each of these variables is statistically significant.

Regarding the RELAT → INTENT relationship, the regression model (R² = .541, F = 57.818, p = .000) indicates the following direct effects: RELAT exhibits .0047 (t = .3894, p = .6976), PERCEP −.0446 (t = −2.9540, p = .0036) and TRIVIAL .5169 (t = 7.1602, p = .0000). In terms of indirect effects, the regression model indicates that RELAT (β = .0511), PERCEP (β = .0115) and TRIVIAL (β = .0396) exhibit positive influences on INTENT. Based on their respective confidence intervals, each of these variables is statistically significant.

**Summary of findings**

Overall, our research results provide some valuable insights about evaluations of and reactions to questionable sport fan behaviours. First, the results confirm that ethical ideologies have a significant direct effect on perceptions (H1a, H2a), and, in turn, ethical intentions (H1c, H2c) within the sport fan context. Second, the results indicate the ethical ideologies have a significant influence on situational trivialization (H1b, H2b). Third, the multiple mediation analyses show that situational trivialization, not ethical perception, actually plays the greater role in mediating both the IDEAL → INTENT and RELAT → INTENT relationships (H3, H4). Specifically, the contrast of mediation effects (i.e., situational trivialization > ethical perception) is statistically significant in certain situations (i.e., Scenarios 2 and 4) (H5).

**Discussion**

Sport is a social fixture of social life (Selznick 1996). Our findings may encourage the sport community – fans, athletes, officials, leagues and others – to reflect upon what ‘bracketed morality’ could mean for an array of fan-related experiences at the arena, the pub or other venue. Guided by our four research questions and five hypotheses, this study confirms that individuals remain mixed in their perceptions of and reactions to questionable fan behaviours. This study builds upon the ‘bracketed’ notion of morality, showing that individuals’ personal ethical ideologies can exert significant influences on how they react to ethical content in situations involving questionable fan behaviours (H1, H2). In many instances, those ethical ideologies can directly and indirectly influence whether fans would espouse the same intentions or enact the same questionable behaviours they might observe.

As detailed above, our findings generally confirm the view that ethical perceptions inform ethical intentions (H3a, H4a). However, we also find moreover that individual sport fans also ‘keep score’ in their appraisal of the significance of ethical content. Consequently, as our results show, trivialization of questionable fan behaviour plays a stronger and more consistent role than ethical perception in mediating relationships between ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) and ethical intention (H5). Thus, a major contribution of this pioneering...
study on sport fans is that it broadens inquiry about individualized, situation-specific ethics in action or inaction. Future research now can go beyond the question ‘Is there an ethical/moral problem with this behavior?’ and also ask ‘How trivial is that behavior?’ By asking more questions and diversifying the mix of decision-making situations, ethicists and ethics researchers can capture more precisely what differentiates the patterns of decisions and outcomes associated with ethical idealism versus ethical relativism.

Consistent with the established theory and empirical research (Davis, Andersen, and Curtis 2001; Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Reynolds 2006; Singhapakdi, Vitell, and Kraft 1996; Smith 2009), this study’s findings support the view that personal perception and evaluation of ethical content can impart significant influences on ethical intention. Furthermore, by treating individuals’ ethical positions as antecedents, the study makes a case for directly comparing the relative mediating influences of ethical perception and situational trivialization across different situational contexts. Finally, this study makes a methodological contribution by including a comprehensive analysis of total and direct effects while properly evaluating the significance of two mediators beyond conventional, but insufficient, normal theory testing. Thus, in sum, this study provides an additional lens for understanding what makes sport fans tick (King 2004) and how they respond to situations that possibly include ethical content.

**Limitations and future research**

We acknowledge that this study has certain limitations. For example, the sample is drawn from a student population in the north-eastern United States of America. While the respondents attended a university in a top-five national media market and sports market, and reported being a fan of several sports, the authors recognize that a more ideal approach might include sampling even more fans, perhaps across two or more countries, or even at multiple sporting events. This approach can and should be considered for future research, since the topic of sport fan ethics still remains relatively understudied.

This study relies upon cross-sectional correlational data, thus capturing data for only one snapshot in time. This issue could affect the generalizability of the results. Fortunately, ethics positions theory suggests that individuals’ ethical ideologies are generally persistent over time. Therefore, mere passage of time or older age may bear minimal impact on how respondents might evaluate the scenario content.

Next, like typical scenario-based studies in ethics, our study utilized intention as a proxy for behaviour; that proxy is taken as a single-item measure. As we have contributed some knowledge on sport fans per our specific scenarios, additional insights might be within reach if one were to feature more scenarios and incorporate multi-item measures whenever possible. Indeed, the scenarios do not include full consideration of some situational factors, such as magnitude of consequence, social consensus, temporal immediacy, proximity and political correctness. This is an implicit, yet bearable cost for advancing the still emerging study of ethics in individual sport fan behaviour. However, one salient consideration for improvement could involve how intergroup dynamics (e.g. fans and police) might affect precipitation or escalation of certain types of fan behaviour (Stott 2003; Stott and Reicher 1998).

This study is the first to examine empirically how sport fans apply individualized, situation-specific ethics in action. Future research can go beyond the question ‘Is there an ethical/
moral problem with this behavior?’ and also ask ‘How trivial is that behavior?’ By asking more questions and diversifying the mix of decision-making situations, business ethicists and ethics researchers could better understand and further elucidate practicable differences between the nature and outcomes of ethical idealism and ethical relativism. As concerns for ethics are made manifest in sport reporting, codes of fan conduct and complaints from fans, we may be witnessing a gradual shift in the tides of tolerance for certain types of these behaviours. Future research on intersections of ethics and sport fandom can draw upon the contributions produced by this study, despite the limitations noted above. We have shown that ethical idealism (relativism) can often lead individual sport fans to perceive more (less) ethical content in various situations and exhibit intentions that are contrary to (consistent with) questionable behaviours enacted by other sport fans. Our results also show that ethical relativism can be linked with a tendency to trivialize the importance of perceived ethical content in a given situation. Consequently, this means that considerable grey areas exist within the ethical code of the sport fan community and are worthy of further exploration.

Conclusion

As part of a community, sport fans play role essential roles in producing and consuming the overall sport experience. They share membership in a vast social and cultural institution (Epstein 1985; Zeigler 2007); however, they are not uniform in their motivations or attachments to the sport experience (Dixon 2001; Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw 1999; Wann et al. 2001). Moreover, as shown in this study, sport fans also differ in their moral positions, decision-making and reactions to questionable behaviours of other fans. While the future looks favourable for ticket gate revenues, concessions sales and media rights (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2016), the sport business community realizes that the ability to growing a sustainable fan base requires an enjoyable, safe and secure fan space. A litany of potentially problematic fan behaviours – confrontation with others, drunkenness, use of offensive language, curses directed at players/officials/other fans and so on – must be monitored carefully as they can discourage some fans from attending sport events. Event organizers at the professional and college level have responded, for example, with camera monitoring, published fan codes of conduct and anonymous at-game reporting systems to deal with people who are ‘misbehaving’. Still, those event organizers should attempt to understand and identify the peacemakers who highly value civil obedience and could be an untapped peer-based source of crowd control (Russell and Arms 1998; Russell, Arms, and Mustonen 1999). All fans – whether die-hard or casual, noble or ignoble, roligan or hooligan, spectating or tailgating – share in producing and consuming the sport experience. Over time, they will model for newer, younger fans the kinds of behaviours that make the fan community tick.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
References


