

**For the Love of the Game: Moral Ambivalence and Justification Work in Consuming
Violence**

Short title: **Justification work in consuming violence**

Stéphane Borraz

NEOMA Business School, 59 rue Taittinger 51100 Reims, FRANCE

stephane.borraz@neoma-bs.fr

Tel: +33662498881

Delphine Dion

ESSEC Business School, 3 Avenue Bernard Hirsch, 95021 Cergy-Pontoise Cedex, FRANCE

delphine.dion@essec.edu

Clément Dubreuil

IPAG Business School, 184 boulevard Saint-Germain, 75006 Paris, FRANCE

c.dubreuil@ipag.fr

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors whose names are listed immediately above certify that they had NO affiliations within the last 3 years of the beginning of the work and currently have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any funding/research grants; employment in any organization; financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

For the Love of the Game: Moral Ambivalence and Justification Work in Consuming Violence

ABSTRACT

To analyze moral ambivalence in consumption, we build on Boltanski and Thévenot's economies of worth theoretical framework. We explore how consumers produce moral judgment in response to the moral ambivalence triggered by enjoying watching violence in sports. Our analysis reveals four types of justification work that reflect how consumers use moral principles to justify violence: normalization, heroization, aesthetization and folklorization. Through these practices, consumers celebrate and strengthen the worthiness of competition, but also challenge it. We contribute to the literature on the ethics of violence by exploring the moral justification consumers use when they face moral ambivalence related to violence. We show the complexity of their justification work and how consumers draw on the different worlds of worth to justify violence. This understanding of violence consumption enables us to offer future research suggestions on how moral ambivalence and justification work can be investigated in a variety of contexts.

KEYWORDS

Violence, Morality, Justification work, Moral ambivalence, Economies of worth, Sport.

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

“France can expect absolute brutality from England, we are going to go out there to make sure they understand what Test rugby is. It is about being brutal, it is about being physical and it is about dominating the set piece.” (The Guardian, 2020/31/01).

This is how Eddie Jones, coach of the England rugby union team, warned France before the Six Nations championship in 2020. His words encapsulate the extreme violence that players endure when playing rugby and spectators experience when watching a game. Many contact sports besides rugby involve excessively violent shocks (Green 2011; Harrison 2014). Consider ice hockey, American football, boxing, lacrosse, mixed martial arts or wrestling. Acts of violence can be both unintentional (when one player accidentally injures another) or intentional (when one player deliberately attempts to injure another).

Violence plays an important role in these contact sports. It creates tensions that engage audiences and triggers emotional contagion among spectators (Dubreuil and Dion, 2019). Violence also creates a connection to wilderness, freed from the artifacts of civilization, benefiting the consumer experience (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Thompson 2004). The greater the violence an ice hockey team displays, the greater its attractiveness (Harrison 2014; Paul 2003).

Past research on the consumption of violence has focused on understanding the motivations for consuming violence and the consequences of violence on consumers, especially the violence consumed through TV and video games (Engelhardt et al. 2011; Ferguson 2015; Hilgard et al. 2019; Waddington 2007; Walby 2013).

RESEARCH QUESTION

In this research, we turn our attention to the moral ambivalence of violence in consumption experiences. Violence introduces tensions between contradictory moral principles. It occupies

an ambivalent position in consumption experiences that revolves around the twin themes of pleasure and disapproval. Consumers experience moral ambivalence because they enjoy watching violence whereas violence is morally condemned (Gubler et al., 2018). Our aim is to contribute to the literature on ethics by exploring the moral justification consumers use when they face moral ambivalence.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To investigate the moral ambivalence of violence in consumption, we draw on pragmatic sociology and its typology of different orders or “economies of worth” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]). According to this theory, a central dimension of social interaction is the way individuals justify their actions to others, appealing to moral principles they hope will command respect. At the heart of this framework is an analysis of how actors prove themselves legitimate in situations of moral uncertainty (Reinecke et al. 2017).

Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) examine a wide range of situations where people and firms justify their actions. They argue that justifications fall into six main logics, called “orders of worth” or “common worlds”—systematic and coherent principles of evaluation: the *market world*, which is rooted in competition and value maximization, the *industrial world*, which promotes performance and technical efficiency; the *civic world*, which is focused on collective welfare, rights and democracy; the *domestic world*, which is rooted in interpersonal dependencies, tradition, care and trustworthiness; the *inspired world*, which values creativity, imagination, aesthetics, and artistic sensibility; and the *world of fame*, which is based on renown, public opinion, and self-esteem.

To deal with moral tensions, individuals use the ‘repertoire of cultural-cognitive and normative resources’ provided by these worlds (Cloutier and Langley, 2013, p.371; Silber, 2016). These worlds provide criteria for making comparisons and judging whether someone or something is worthy or not (Reinecke et al., 2017). For instance, in the market world, the higher common principle is competitiveness. Worthy individuals promote competition, rivalry, success, and wealth. In contrast, the unworthy are economically dependent.

The theoretical framework of orders of worth has been applied in an increasing number of empirical studies to investigate the co-existence of competing rationalities in organizations, in particular to investigate competing orders of worth in non-profit organizations or market actions, inter-organizational cooperation, and organizational change (see Jagd, 2011, for a review).

Scholars have introduced the notion of justification work, which consists of the purposeful use of discursive resources to justify the moral worthiness of their claims in relation to specific situations, objects, or individuals (Jagd 2011). For instance, Pattiotta et al. (2011) investigated justification work in the case of a firm seeking to negotiate the moral legitimacy of nuclear energy in Germany after an incident at its power plant. Demers and Gond (2020) analysed how individuals produce moral judgment when forming and challenging a new compromise about a sustainability strategy in an oil sands company.

Following that emergent stream of research, we investigate the justification work of spectators watching violent sports.

METHOD

Rugby provides an ideal context to examine the justification of violence for two reasons. First, it is an intensively competitive mock-combative, direct, physical sport where standards of violence are central and very visible (Dunning and Sheard, 2005). There were 2,208 game-

ending injuries in professional matches in France over a period of three years, which amounts to nearly four players per game (Decq and Berkal, 2016). Second, rugby has become one of the most popular sports in the world. Rugby Union World Cups attract up to a total of 4 billion viewers and matches in the final rounds of French Rugby Union League competitions can bring up to 80,000 spectators.

We collected data from in-depth interviews with consumers and experts, photo-elicitation, and social media posts. First, to better understand the rugby experience, we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with consumers of rugby games. The interviews were non-directive; we let informants talk spontaneously about their experiences of watching matches. Second, to gain an in-depth understanding of the rugby experience, we used a photo-elicitation technique that combines pictures taken by the respondents themselves and nondirective interviews based on those pictures (Heisley and Levy, 1991). Third, to gain professionals' perspective on rugby, we interviewed nine experts. As with our customer sample, we selected respondents on the basis of our theoretical concerns and recruited professionals with varied experience of working within the sport. Fourth, we monitored social networks and forums, where fans recounted their experiences of watching rugby matches. Between October 2014 and August 2020, we collected 19,100 posts on fans' forums (for both Cybervulcans and Racing 92), and the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of the two clubs.

We coded the 36 narrative accounts and the 19,100 online posts using open coding and analyzed them using a hermeneutic approach (Thompson, 1997). We continuously revised our provisional coding through an iterative process of analyzing transcripts of the verbatim interviews and relating them to our emerging theoretical understanding of our interviewees' observations (emic meanings) and our own (etic categories). We continuously studied the literature about experience, sport, and violence. By triangulating our qualitative data, we enabled significant insights to emerge (Thompson, 1997).

FINDINGS

In this study, we investigate the moral ambivalence of violence in consumption practices by revealing how spectators and managers justify violence in sports. Our analysis highlights four justification works: heroization, aestheticization, normalization, and folklorization (see Figure 1).

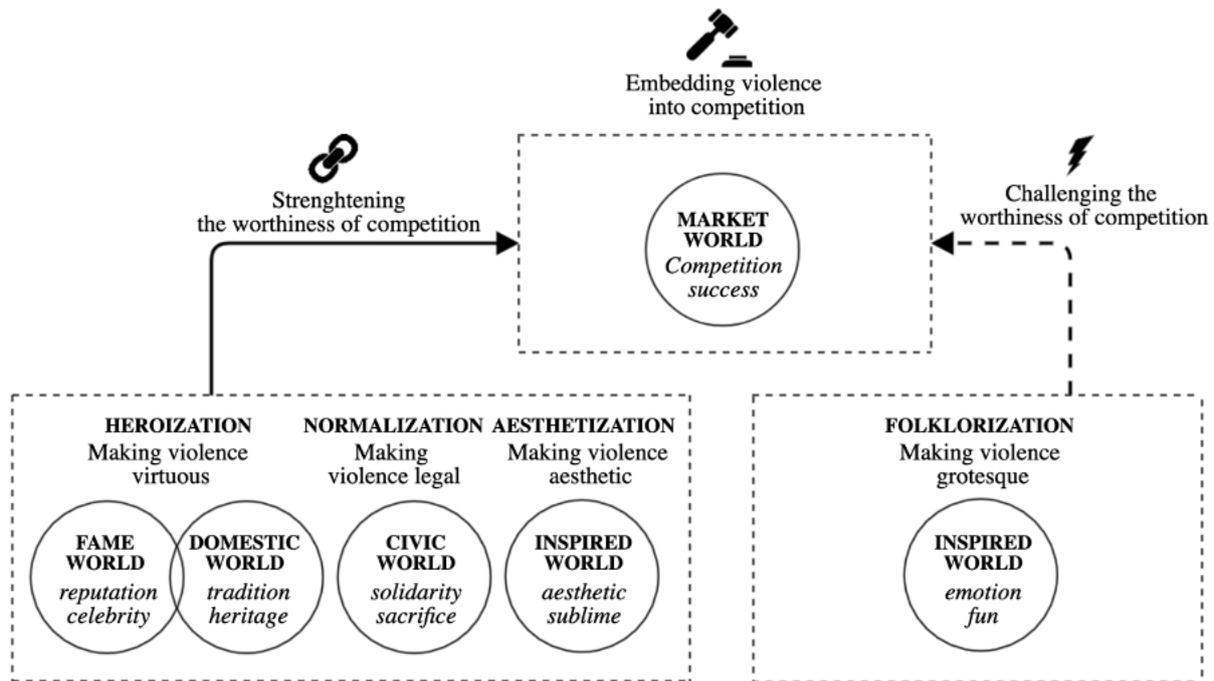
Heroization justifies the worthiness of violence by strengthening competition, the core value of the market world. It makes violence necessary and virtuous. Individuals celebrate competition by inscribing it in a war narrative, an extreme form of competition. It also draws on the civic and the domestic worlds to associate competition with solidarity, sacrifice, pride, and honor.

Aestheticization justifies the worthiness of violence by making it aesthetic. It shelters violence within the inspired world, featuring the game as an art and glamorizing the players' bodies.

Normalization justifies the worthiness of violence by referring to the rules of the game and the governmental institutions. It normalizes violence by making it legal. Folklorization justifies the worthiness of violence by making violence funny.

Folklorization challenges the foundations of the worthiness of competition by rendering it grotesque and making fun of it.

Figure 1 Justification work of moral ambiguities



DISCUSSION

In social sciences, the literature on the ethics of violence is spread across the concepts of *normalized*, *normative*, and *ethical* violence. Inspired by the concept of “everyday violence” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992), *normalized violence* refers to endemic violence that affects individuals living in precarious conditions (Bourgeois, 2009). When violence is normalized, it is so commonplace and inevitable that it becomes part of the social context and usually generates indifference from broader society (Evans and Giroux, 2016). Violence becomes part of everyday life, normalized through the dissemination of narratives that moralize, legalize, and popularize violence (Haleem, 2019).

Research on *normative violence* investigates the roles played by social norms in shaping violence. Normative violence is usually invisible to individuals but makes physical violence visible. Taking this approach, research has focused on rules and norms and the importance of dominant society-wide schemes in building individuals’ moral sense of violence (Kenny et al. 2019; Varman et al. 2020; Vijay and Nair 2021).

Finally, scholars have built on the notion of *ethical violence*, another concept described by Butler (2009b). Ethical violence refers to situations in which individuals perform condemnatory and cruel acts in the name of ethics. Ethical violence can be observed in the application of moral principles that govern an institution’s ethics, producing and reinforcing inequalities between social groups.

In contrast to previous research, we show that the ethics of violence cannot be reduced simply to the normative dimension. Norms and rules are not the only things individuals cite to justify violence. To understand violence, it is important to identify a large diversity of justification work that draws on many different moral values. Violence occupies an ambivalent position in many consumption experiences that revolve around the twin themes of pleasure and moral disapproval. Moral ambivalence is also important in business contexts where employees or managers face moral dilemmas (Demers and Gond, 2020). Drawing on Boltanski and Thévenot’s work, we offer a novel theoretical framework that enables us to

better understand how individuals manage moral ambivalence. We contribute to the literature on the ethics of violence by exploring the moral justification consumers use when they face moral ambivalence. We show the complexity of the justification work this entails and how consumers draw on the different worlds of worth to justify violence. In particular, the civic, domestic, and inspired worlds play central roles in either strengthening or challenging the worthiness of their practices.

Through these practices, consumers celebrate and strengthen the worthiness of competition, but also challenge it. First, consumers justify violence by using principles and arguments drawn from the market world, in which sport is embedded (Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006, p. 157). They celebrate the worthiness of competition, the core value of the market world, justifying violence by linking it to competition. Competition is a core value of capitalist economies and violence is an accepted consequence of competition (Zwick, 2018). Second, consumers strengthen the worthiness of competition by drawing on different worlds. They invoke the civic world (control, rules and sanctions by official institutions, solidarity among team players); the inspired world (beauty, aesthetics, art); the world of fame (honor and reputation); and even the domestic world (the authority of tradition and heritage). This justification work makes violence legal, virtuous, and aesthetic, according to a set of values deemed worthy in other worlds. It solidifies the worthiness of the dominant world (Demers and Gond, 2020). In contrast, the third type of justification challenges the worthiness of competition. This justification work dedramatizes violence by making competition grotesque and mocking it. Challenging the worthiness of competition conversely reinforces violence by delegitimizing critical discourses on violence. If aestheticization dramatizes the war hero and justifies violence as a part of the warrior semantics, folklorization justifies the worthiness of violence by making fun of the warlike elements of the game and the heroized players.

REFERENCES

- Boltanski, L., and Thévenot, L. (2006). *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton University Press.
- Canniford, R. and Shankar, A. (2013). Purifying practices: How consumers assemble romantic experiences of nature. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(5), 1051–1069.
- Cloutier, C., & Langley, A. (2017). Negotiating the Moral Aspects of Purpose in Single and Cross-Sectoral Collaborations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 141(1), 103–131.
- Decq P. and Derkal M. (2016) *Programme de surveillance des blessures en match*. Paris: Observatoire médical de la Ligue Nationale de Rugby et de la Fédération Française de Rugby.
- Demers, C. and Gond, J.-P. (2020). The moral microfoundations of institutional complexity: Sustainability implementation as compromise-making at an oil sands company. *Organization Studies*, 41(4), 563–586.
- Dubreuil, C. and Dion, D. (2019). The spectacle of pain in the experience: A study in rugby stadiums. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing (English Edition)*, 34(4), 29–49.
- Engelhardt, C. R., Bartholow, B. D., Kerr, G. T., and Bushman, B. J. (2011). This is your brain on violent video games: Neural desensitization to violence predicts increased aggression following violent video game exposure. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47(5), 1033–1036.
- Ferguson, C. J. (2015). Does media violence predict societal violence? It depends on what you look at and when. *Journal of Communication*, 65(1), E1–E22.
- Green, K. (2011). It hurts so it is real: Sensing the seduction of mixed martial arts. *Social and*

- Cultural Geography*, 12(4), 377–396.
- Gubler, J. R., Herrick, S., Price, R. A., and Wood, D. A. (2018). Violence, aggression, and ethics: The link between exposure to human violence and unethical behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 147(1), 25–34.
- Harrison, E. A. (2014). The first concussion crisis: Head injury and evidence in early American football. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(5), 822–833.
- Hilgard, J., Engelhardt, C. R., Rouder, J. N., Segert, I. L., and Bartholow, B. D. (2019). Null effects of game violence, game difficulty, and 2D:4D digit ratio on aggressive behavior. *Psychological Science*, 30(4), 606–616.
- Mercier-Roy, M., & Mailhot, C. (2019). What's in an App? Investigating the Moral Struggles Behind a Sharing Economy Device. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 159(4), 977–996.
- Norberg, P. (2018). Bankers Bashing Back: Amoral CSR Justifications. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 147(2), 401–418.
- Paul, R. J. (2003). Variations in NHL attendance: The impact of violence, scoring, and regional rivalries. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 62(2), 345–364.
- Reinecke, J., van, B. K. and Spicer, A. (2017). When orders of worth clash: Negotiating legitimacy in situations of moral multiplexity. In *Justification, evaluation and critique in the study of organizations* (vol. 52, pp. 33–72). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Silber, I. F. (2016). The cultural worth of 'economies of worth': French pragmatic sociology from a cultural sociological perspective. In *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (pp. 159–177). 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Thompson, C. J. (1997). Interpreting consumers: A hermeneutical framework for deriving marketing insights from the texts of consumers' consumption stories. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(4), 438–455.
- Thompson, C. J. (2004). Marketplace mythology and discourses of power. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(June).
- Waddington, D. I. (2007). Locating the wrongness in ultra-violent video games. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 9, 121–128.
- Walby, S. (2013). Violence and society: Introduction to an emerging field of sociology. *Current Sociology*, 61(2), 95–111.