



## 1 **Human Rights and sports mega-events: The role of moral disengagement in spectators**

2 Horne (2015) identified six Sports Mega Events (SMEs) as: the Summer Olympic Games, the  
3 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, the UEFA European  
4 Championships, the Winter Olympic Games, the Commonwealth Games and the Pan-American  
5 Games. Horne (2007: 82) stated that SMEs can have "...significant consequences for the host  
6 city, region or nation" providing the opportunity for communication with billions of people as  
7 they "...attract considerable media coverage." Although there is great scope for SMEs to have a  
8 positive legacy, there is also the potential for them to be associated with negative consequences.  
9 Numerous studies have highlighted the Human Rights (HR) issues associated with hosting SMEs  
10 (for example, Brackenridge, Rhind, & Palmer-Felgate, 2015; Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010;  
11 Horne, 2007; Lenskyj, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2012; Rowe, 2012; Smith, 2009). There has been  
12 widespread reporting of these HR issues in connection with both previous and forthcoming  
13 SMEs (for example, the 2018 and 2022 World Cups in Russia and Qatar respectively, Human  
14 Rights Watch, 2015; Jones, 2015). Event organisers have also been criticised for their handling  
15 of HR issues (Associated Press, 2014; Jennings, 2011). Despite the widely acknowledged  
16 concerns connected with SMEs, public backing for these events endures. The purpose of this  
17 study is to find evidence of moral disengagement (MD) in those who support SMEs. This will  
18 provide a crucial first explanation for what is a cornerstone of the continued growth of SMEs and  
19 the increasing financial prosperity of their governing bodies and sponsors. In addition, it shall  
20 inform future MD research in connection with HR issues.**Human Rights and Sports Mega**  
21 **Events**

22 Adams and Piekarz (2015) divided the HR issues associated with SMEs into five  
23 categories derived from the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR):

1 freedom, protection, access, equality and ability. Freedom concerns issues such as media  
2 restrictions; for example, the “Olympic Bubble” (Horne, 2007, p. 89; Lenskyj, 1996, 2004, 2008,  
3 2012; Schausteck de Almeida, Bolsmann, Marchi Júnior, & De Souza, 2015). This concept  
4 suggests that through flooding the host nation with positive rhetoric and by placing restrictions  
5 on the use of certain phrases (such as, “Olympics” or “gold”) SME organisers not only ensure  
6 maximisation of profits for sponsors at a cost to local businesses but also create an environment  
7 of censorship, restricting criticism of the event. This classification also addresses the  
8 compromising of individuals’ rights to protest, which was noted in connection with the Beijing  
9 Olympics, where an application was required for this right, which came at great personal risk and  
10 it was restricted to specified “zones” (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010). Similarly it was highlighted  
11 around the London 2012 Games, where protests were geographically marginalised (Giulianotti,  
12 Armstrong, Hales, & Hobbs, 2015) or barred, including the long-standing anti-war protests in  
13 Parliament Square (Bowcott, 2012). Given the contrasting influences of sport, the media,  
14 sponsors, politics and security on those managing sports events (Emery, 2010) there are  
15 logistical, financial, branding and governmental agendas to be satisfied. One area where this  
16 dynamic may impact is freedom.

17         The widely reported issue of human displacement is covered under protection (Adams &  
18 Piekarz, 2015). The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) compiled figures for  
19 numerous SMEs and revealed that, amongst others, 720,000 people were forcibly evicted from  
20 their homes ahead of the 1988 Seoul Olympics and 1.25m individuals were displaced before the  
21 2008 Beijing Olympics (COHRE, 2007). The frequency with which this matter arises is detailed  
22 by Porter, Jaconelli, Cheyne, Eby and Wagenaar (2009) who claim, “Displacement is a defining  
23 feature of the mega-event” (p. 395) in their research on the 2012 London Olympics and the 2014

1 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. This theme also concerns human trafficking for the  
2 purposes of prostitution, street crime or begging, which is the subject of specialised control  
3 measures before SMEs (for example, London Councils & GLA Consulting, 2011) and has been  
4 highlighted for both adult and child populations (Adams & Piekarz, 2015; Brackenridge et al.,  
5 2015).

6 The theme of access relates to the right to the presumption of innocence within an  
7 impartial legal system (Adams & Piekarz, 2015). This was evidenced in Brazil, with authorities  
8 bypassing the legal system, using extreme force to “pacify” favelas (shanty towns) in host cities  
9 ahead of the 2014 World Cup (Amnesty International, 2014; Steel, 2014). COHRE (2007) also  
10 noted this issue, reporting on the criminalisation of specific groups ahead of a number of SMEs.  
11 One instance was the issuing of 9,000 arrest warrants for homeless individuals ahead of the 1996  
12 Atlanta Olympics.

13 The fourth theme is that of equality (Adams & Piekarz, 2015). COHRE (2007) note that  
14 consistently, minority groups and those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are affected by  
15 SMEs. Recent examples include indigenous Muslims ahead of the Beijing Olympics (Giulianotti  
16 & Klauser, 2010) and those affected by the changes in the Brazilian favelas (Steel, 2014). Horne  
17 (2007) comments on the tendency to promote values held by the middle-classes, such as the  
18 leisure and business opportunities that accompany SMEs, as being beneficial for the general  
19 population, when actually this ignores swathes of poorer people. Lenskyj (2008) exemplifies  
20 this by noting that developments in and around Olympic sites inflate property prices and rents  
21 which excludes those on lower incomes, breaking up communities. Smith (2009) explains that  
22 SMEs “...may exacerbate urban social divisions, rather than heal them. The potential for

1 negative social consequences is now so well recognised that those representing the rights of  
2 citizens are now seeking related assurances before events are even awarded” (p. 112).

3         These preceding themes relate to the fifth, that of the ability to maintain physical, social  
4 and psychological well-being (Adams & Piekarz, 2015). SMEs affect numerous populations in  
5 various ways, impacting on well-being. Given the Olympic charter sets out that Olympism  
6 respects fundamental ethical principles and should be enjoyed without discrimination  
7 (International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2014) and FIFA claims the World Cup tackles  
8 discrimination and promotes equality (FIFA, 2014), the impact of SMEs on well-being is an  
9 important human rights issue.

10         SMEs have therefore been associated with a range of human rights issues. However, the  
11 public continue to support them through attendance, purchasing merchandise and watching on  
12 television. Public backing also means that governments still desire to host SMEs and investors  
13 and sponsors prosper from them through increased revenue, positive image and branding (Horne,  
14 2007). There is little empirical research or theoretical basis explaining how they are accepted by  
15 the supportive masses. Moral disengagement, as proposed by Bandura (1991), provides a  
16 possible explanation for this behaviour and forms the theoretical framework for this investigation  
17 into how SMEs are allowed to prosper in spite of stark reasons for the opposite

### 18 **Moral Disengagement (MD)**

19         Fiske (2004) defines MD as a process of convincing the self that ethical standards do not  
20 apply to oneself in a particular context by separating moral reactions from inhumane conduct and  
21 disabling the mechanism of self-condemnation. Firstly, the HR concerns that are outlined above  
22 represent the inhumane conduct; secondly, the moral reaction to this conduct would be to  
23 withhold backing for the SME or support the dissenting voices concerned with these issues and

1 thirdly, the disabling of self-condemnation comes in the form of MD allowing oneself to support  
2 the SME in whichever form that may be.

3         The social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura, 1991) proposes that individuals'  
4 behaviour is directed by the affectations that it will bring, actions that induce feelings of self-  
5 worth and satisfaction are preferred to those that bring self-reproach. These emotional responses  
6 are governed by the personal standards of right and wrong that have been developed by the  
7 individual. Behaviour is evaluated against the situational circumstances and the individual's  
8 values and regulated accordingly. As suggested by Bandura (1999), such sanctions are only  
9 applied if they are activated. He proposed eight psychosocial mechanisms that are employed in  
10 order to avoid self-sanctioning, allowing behaviour contradicting personal morals to occur  
11 (Bandura, 1999); these are outlined in table 1.

12         Through the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodology, MD has been found in  
13 broad-ranging areas, including: social behaviours, such as bullying (Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno,  
14 2012), aggression (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Li, Nie & Boardley, 2014) and meat eating  
15 (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012), in corporations (Moore, 2008; Moore, Detert,  
16 Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012; White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009) and in atrocities and the military  
17 (Bandura, 1999; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006). In a sporting context, it has been found in  
18 relation to performance-enhancing drugs (Boardley, Grix, & Dewar, 2014; Boardley, Grix, &  
19 Harkin, 2015) and aggression (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010).

20         The rationale for the current research is that there is a gap in the literature explaining why  
21 the public continue to support SMEs despite the widespread concerns connected with them and  
22 that MD can provide this explanation. Examples are present in the literature which support this  
23 argument. The public have been reported to use phraseology and themes entwined with the

1 rhetoric commonly espoused by organisers and sponsors (Lenskyj, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2012;  
2 Schausteck de Almeida et al., 2015) which may suggest moral justification. Infrastructure  
3 developments associated with SMEs, requiring the displacement of local people, are almost  
4 universally described as “regeneration” (Olds, 1996). This suggests euphemistic labelling that  
5 could be for the benefit of organisers, workers or the public. Waitt (2003) investigated public  
6 opinion of the Sydney Olympics. Numerous controversies were reported, including inaccurate  
7 public expenditure budgeting (Booth & Tatz, 1996), exorbitant costs (US\$1.3 billion), widely  
8 reported corruption (Burroughs, 1999) and HR violations (Beder, 2000). Marketing themes  
9 including international recognition, business opportunities and community spirit (Gratton &  
10 Henry, 2001) were regarded as the biggest positives; however, expressions of what they were  
11 exactly or how they manifest themselves were vague. Despite this, the Games were widely  
12 supported and viewed as having both social and financial benefits, being seen as “fair” and  
13 “inexpensive” (Waitt, 2003). . Literature on the management of SMEs aligns with such findings;  
14 Smith (2014) notes that the “leveraging” of such events through tied-in initiatives based on  
15 political strategies including increasing employment, sport participation, tourism and urban  
16 development can create a concept of legacy without any real tangible benefit. These examples  
17 suggest both moral justification and distortion of consequences are at play when considering the  
18 effects of SMEs.

19           Furthermore, the former FIFA president Sepp Blatter, who when probed on the poor  
20 working conditions for those building stadia for the World Cup in Qatar, which has claimed lives,  
21 suggested FIFA held no responsibility for this, instead simply saying of the companies carrying  
22 out the work, “they are responsible for their workers” (Associated Press, 2014). This

1 displacement of responsibility from the head of such a global sport, demonstrates MD that could  
2 be reflected on a broader scale.

3           Recently, Greenhalgh, Watt and Schutte (2015) found MD applicable in a HR context, in  
4 their study on endorsement for Australian asylum seeker policies. Pertinently, this work was the  
5 first to find MD amongst people who did not personally carry out the actions but instead  
6 supported the policies through their political standpoint or voting patterns. Thus, it is reasonable  
7 to suggest that it could occur in the public who support SMEs through watching, attending or  
8 purchasing associated merchandise, which would provide further evidence for this initial finding  
9 and in a different context.

10           The literature highlights the number and variety of HR issues connected to SMEs and the  
11 importance of public backing for those organising the event. Despite the extensive research  
12 pertaining to these HR concerns, there is a lack of investigation as to why the public continue to  
13 make these events sustainable through their support despite the associated consequences, leading  
14 to a perpetuation of these issues. This study aims to add an important new dimension to the large  
15 body of literature detailing HR issues and SMEs by offering an explanation for the continued  
16 public support they, and consequently their organisers, receive in the face of evidence to suggest  
17 this is unwarranted(Adams & Piekarz, 2015).

### 18 **Research Question**

19           It has been demonstrated that Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of moral agency  
20 could provide an account for the backing of SMEs by the general population; therefore this  
21 study, based upon the five HR themes drawn up by Adams and Piekarz (2015), investigated  
22 whether there was evidence of the presence of MD in members of the public who support SMEs.

23



## 1 **Method**

### 2 **Participants**

3 Participants were selected based on the relevance of the topic, public support of SMEs, and  
4 homogeneity eliciting the richest data (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Krueger, 1994; Richardson &  
5 Rabiee, 2001). Consequently, to participate, individuals were required to have attended a SME  
6 and at the time of that SME have been a London resident, in full-time employment and aged  
7 between 18 and 30. Although divergent samples allow greater generalisability (Mason, 2002),  
8 the novel nature of this study requires uniformity so findings can be drawn more confidently  
9 relating to the population before comparisons are made to other samples (Jones, Brown, &  
10 Holloway, 2012). This methodological approach was also utilised by Waitt (2003) in a study that  
11 included Sydney residents. The participants in Waitt's (2003) study were recruited through  
12 snowball sampling, an approach that supports increased homogeneity (Browne, 2005). The use  
13 of social networks encourages pre-acquainted groups, which helps foster an atmosphere where  
14 sensitive topics are discussed more readily (Browne, 2005; Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger & Casey,  
15 2000). Consequently, 18 individuals were recruited (12 male, 6 female), aged between 27 and 33  
16 ( $M = 30.1$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ), of whom, 14 had attended one SME, three had attended two SMEs and  
17 one had attended four SMEs. The events experienced by those taking part were the London 2012  
18 Olympics and/or Paralympics (17 participants), a World Cup abroad (four participants), the  
19 Glasgow Commonwealth Games (one participant) and a European Football Championships  
20 abroad (one participant).

### 21 **Procedure**

22 Ethical approval was gained from the University's Ethics Committee prior to data collection.  
23 Suggestions for the ideal focus group size range from three to twenty members (Krueger, 1994;

1 Morgan, 1997; Tang & Davis, 1995). Given the sensitive nature of the topics and the possibility  
2 of larger groups becoming aggressive and inconsiderate (Tang & Davis, 1995), it was decided  
3 that the groups would fall towards the lower end of the scale, numbering between three and six  
4 participants. Consistent with Krueger's (1994) guidelines, after a pilot study was carried out, ,  
5 further sessions were run until clear patterns in the data emerged and saturation occurred.  
6 Following assessment and feedback, the pilot study resulted in a slight adaptation of the  
7 interview guide to include further examples of HR issues and greater probing of individual's  
8 views of their roles in the support of SMEs. Overall the feedback resulted in a smaller number  
9 of interview questions. The process resulted in four focus groups being held, lasting between 40  
10 and 60 minutes.

11 Each individual taking part received an information sheet detailing the purpose of the  
12 study, the topics to be covered, their right to withdraw, the availability of their scripts after the  
13 session and their confidentiality. Subsequently any questions were answered and each signed a  
14 consent form.

15 Locations were chosen for their convenience for participants, with the majority taking  
16 place in the home of one of those taking part. Attendees were informed of the location, together  
17 with directions and timings. Each location provided a comfortable, quiet and private setting free  
18 from interruption and distraction, as recommended by Kitzinger and Barbour (1995), with  
19 seating arranged appropriately and light refreshments supplied.

20 The groups convened fifteen to twenty minutes ahead of the scheduled start time,  
21 allowing group members who were unacquainted a chance to meet and talk ahead of the session.  
22 Through conveying that the lead researcher himself had attended an SME on more than one  
23 occasion and with understanding, positive body language and eye contact (Krueger & Casey,

1 2000), the aim was that participants would feel comfortable in relating how they felt regarding  
2 support for SMEs and the associated sensitive topics. Conversely, it was also recognised that  
3 although the lead researcher's personal experience with SMEs would enable the participants to  
4 feel at ease, it should not allow a presumption of parallels between himself and others that could  
5 create a bias or leading questions, in line with the self-awareness and reflection that increases  
6 credence in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Given that focus group members  
7 conveyed their views unprompted and freely it was felt that an environment aligning with these  
8 criteria was created.

9         Focus group sessions were recorded using the Smart Voice Recorder mobile application  
10 (SmartMob, 2015) and followed a semi-structured format, allowing the lead researcher to cover  
11 each area but with enough flexibility to probe lines of enquiry deemed important and produce  
12 rich data (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1995; Mason, 2002).. A debrief followed each session, ensuring  
13 all questions were answered and any comments regarding the data collection process were noted.

14

### 15 **Instruments**

16 The interview guide followed the five themes of HR issues connected with SMEs as described  
17 by Adams and Piekarz (2015): freedom, protection, access, equality and ability, with each  
18 defined for clarity. In order to aid discussion, examples were given for each and views were  
19 sought; for example, under the access theme it was asked, "Ahead of the 2014 World Cup,  
20 Brazilian authorities bypassed the legal system and used extreme force to 'pacify' some favelas  
21 (shanty towns) and drug gangs around numerous cities. Is this acceptable? Why / Why not?"

### 22 **Data Analysis**

1 Each session was transcribed verbatim with participants' names pseudonymised. This was done  
2 at the first opportunity to maximise accuracy and closeness to the data, ensuring an audit trail  
3 could be formed (Boyatzis, 1998). Participants were also given the opportunity to assess the data  
4 for its accuracy with regards to wording as well as context (Holloway & Brown, 2012). After  
5 reading and re-reading the transcripts, the social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura,  
6 1991) formed the framework of the deductive content analysis; previous theoretical research  
7 dictates that this method is appropriate (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Initially, the transcripts were  
8 reviewed separately by the authors, allowing any discrepancies in thematic interpretation to be  
9 highlighted, discussed and addressed. Following procedures advised by Polit and Beck (2004)  
10 after this immersion in the data it was then coded by the lead author on a line-by-line basis  
11 according to applicability, or otherwise, to the categories (the eight detailed in the Manual for  
12 Coding Modes of Moral Disengagement by Bandura (2006)) and a model was created. In order  
13 to maintain consistency and reliability throughout the process of analysis, further meetings  
14 between the authors were held allowing for collaboration of ideas as well as detection and  
15 prevention of any potential bias (Shenton, 2004). Throughout the process a reflective diary was  
16 kept by the lead researcher noting thoughts on the focus group sessions, emerging themes and the  
17 overall procedure, heightening self-awareness and credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

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19

### **Results**

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Evidence was found for the use of seven of the eight mechanisms of MD in members of the public who had supported SMEs: moral justification, advantageous comparison, distortion of consequences, euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility and attribution of blame. These manifested themselves in various ways as displayed in Table 2.

## 1 **Moral Justification**

2 The most common mechanism, moral justification, was used in two contexts. Firstly, in an  
3 overall sense, to offer ways in which SMEs as a whole create benefits for populations, justifying  
4 support for them and secondly, to justify HR issues connected with SMEs. The former was often  
5 conveyed in a general manner, both for SMEs held locally and abroad. P7 said this of London:  
6 "...a lot of people probably got something out of the Olympics that hopefully they'll be able to  
7 take on and pass on." and P4 detailed:

8  
9 I think people should want to have the Olympics or the World Cup in their  
10 country because I think they can be a force for good and it can be quite inspiring  
11 to have it happening in your country and it's a showcase for the country as well.

12  
13 The second context revealed perceived benefits of specific HR issues; for example it was  
14 used to combat conflict regarding the human displacement. P9 demonstrated this when talking  
15 about those affected by it: "...they would be in places with new housing, which is better than  
16 where they were before, so you kind of hope that there's always a benefit." Similarly P17 noted  
17 "...the joys of organising an Olympics in a Western democracy is that everyone who would have  
18 lost their house to compulsory purchase would have been wonderfully compensated, you know,  
19 recompensed in accordance with...fairness and justice." It was also found in relation to the  
20 bypassing of legal procedures in pacifying the Brazilian favelas, P13 argued: "I think there was a  
21 positive side for a hell of a lot of people in the favelas...who had their lives controlled or  
22 blighted by the...by the drugs gangs." These cases illustrate how this mechanism allows  
23 individuals to highlight real or perceived positives resulting from SMEs that enable acceptance

1 of other detrimental consequences. This was summed up through P7 discussing their support for  
2 SMEs, admitting: “You paint a better picture in your head than reality.”

### 3 **Advantageous Comparison**

4 Support for the use of advantageous comparison was found in two circumstances; primarily in  
5 relation to participants’ support of the 2012 Olympics through comparison with other SMEs and  
6 secondarily to provide beneficial contrasts for SME related HR issues. For the first of these,  
7 contrasts were typically drawn between the Games held in England and events held in China,  
8 Brazil or Russia, with examples covering broad views, such as P14 contending: “do I know that  
9 the London Olympics was....the benefits outweigh the costs? No, but I’m pretty sure that erm,  
10 the ratio is better than somewhere, somewhere, like Sochi” and P7 explaining: “in Brazil there  
11 were riots and things, literally...about why it shouldn’t be held there....there wasn’t the  
12 depravity in the UK that Brazil had.” This included views on how they would deal with specific  
13 HR issues; for instance, on the right to protest, P5 commented: “I tend to think that the country  
14 are going to take harder lines, in terms of the way they police them...and I imagine China was a  
15 lot worse than it was for ....the UK.” It is worth noting that although this context frequently  
16 arose, it was not accompanied by a tendency to boycott support for events held in other  
17 countries.

18 The second manifestation of advantageous comparison saw rationalisation for the  
19 consequences of HR concerns. This was exemplified by P8, when commenting on displacement  
20 caused by development around the London Olympic Park: “...can’t believe that there are too  
21 many infrastructure projects that...err...cause absolutely no chaos to anyone anywhere.” This  
22 demonstrates how participants justified their actions by creating positive comparisons making  
23 them appear more benign.

## 1 **Minimising, Denying or Distorting of Consequences**

2 The third mechanism found in explaining support for SMEs was minimising, denying or  
3 distorting of consequences, which was common in two contexts, when discussing the HR effects  
4 of hosting SMEs and when justifying the costs of such events. The first manifestation often  
5 concerned development in Olympic areas, including human displacement and the subsequent  
6 effect that higher rents and desirability have on locals with lower incomes. Again, this arose  
7 regularly when discussing London 2012, primarily through viewing these issues as part of  
8 something that was already taking place. This was exemplified by P12: “it was certainly  
9 something that was happening anyway and is happening in other areas of London that aren’t  
10 Stratford”, P2: “I mean it would have happened anyway, given the overall picture in London”  
11 and P4 also commented:

12           ...gentrification means that poor people who live in the area will struggle to afford to live  
13 there and the Olympics is a vehicle that has increased all of those things in a short space of time  
14 than would otherwise have been the case but...yeah...the underlying problems.....problem still  
15 exists whether the Olympics happen or not...

16           The second manifestation was again found mainly in connection with the London  
17 Olympics, with financial consequences of hosting the Games seen as minimal as the money  
18 would not have been used constructively. Regardless, P7 commented: “I mean what else would  
19 they have done with that money....frittered it away probably on something else” and P3 voiced  
20 similar beliefs about cost: “...wasn’t so much of an issue because, I mean this country has a bit  
21 of a history of...of chucking money away on things.” P1 also demonstrated the belief that the  
22 Olympic expenditure would have had little difference on core social issues:

1           nine billion pounds sounds like a huge amount of money, the government's total  
2           budget is absolutely massive... like I said earlier, it could easily have gone on any  
3           number of things...I don't think, in...in all the things they're committed to doing  
4           in terms of education and health just had to carry on and y'know, that's dependent  
5           on a lot of different things...I wouldn't have said here that it would have actively  
6           affected those things.

### 7   **Euphemistic Language**

8   There was also evidence found of euphemistic language. In line with the work of Olds (1998)  
9   this was connected to the building of SME infrastructure, often happening at the cost of human  
10  displacement. On this theme, P18 noted: "...London is a better place for it and I think the  
11  rejuvenation and that, was a good thing" and P16 used the phrase "You clear out the old for the  
12  new...". Encapsulating the most frequently used term, P7 pointed out the Games "...regenerated  
13  East London massively so..." The phrase "regeneration" was widely expressed by participants  
14  in relation to the displacement issues connected to SMEs.

### 15  **Displacement of Responsibility**

16  Displacement of responsibility was a further mechanism that commonly arose. In the case of  
17  public support this was done in three ways, firstly by placing responsibility for HR concerns  
18  related to SMEs with governments rather than the sport, secondly by placing responsibility for  
19  changing and supporting SMEs and their organising bodies with other agents and thirdly by  
20  maintaining intentional ignorance. The initial context arose with various HR issues; for example,  
21  the right to protest, with P8 noting: "I don't know if I would hold the Games  
22  accountable....things like that....like that's going to be a government thing...maybe it is  
23  a...slightly ignorant, head in the sand kind of approach" and P10 suggesting: "...I tend to hold



1 the...the Chinese government more to account for that than the Olympics...in my head...whether  
2 that's...whether I'm right to do that, I don't know..."

3         With regards to the second form of displacement of responsibility, concerning support for  
4 organisations such as FIFA and the IOC and their SMEs, displacement often occurred through  
5 placing accountability for this with other bodies and governments. P14 commented: "I think  
6 really it's up to countries and big sporting organisations to make a stand before the event...rather  
7 than you know going to English, German, French fans and saying, 'well, are you going to watch  
8 the World Cup?'" The third theme of this mechanism, the concept of wilful ignorance, allows  
9 individuals to minimise cognitive dissonance relating to support for SMEs; P13 acknowledged  
10 this:

11         They have extremely popular products in the Olympics and the World Cup and so  
12 people probably, to an extent, are willing to, maybe, not find out as much as they  
13 would if they were less popular or they just ignore it and that's why it keeps going  
14 on.

15 Furthermore, when discussing the possibility of a World Cup being hosted in England in the near  
16 future, these feelings were conveyed by P7: "I think I would just bury my head in the sand and  
17 hope it was going to get reformed in a few years and go to the (World Cup) games." This  
18 process demonstrates the workings of this mechanism and how it absolves the individual of  
19 responsibility.

## 20 **Diffusion of Responsibility**

21 When participants considered their own role in supporting SMEs they demonstrated evidence of  
22 diffusion of responsibility. P14's views display the perceived lack of personal accountability  
23 concerning this subject: "...there's not much you can do as an individual, I mean you can boycott

1 it but is it really going to make any difference?” Similarly, the option of inaction was explained  
2 by P8: “if I felt it would do anything I would happily not watch any of the events happening on  
3 TV” and P6:

4 something as big as the Olympics, I know it’s really pessimistic but it’s gonna go  
5 ahead regardless, well you know, unless there’s a huge mass...or...maybe that is  
6 pessimistic...but with something as big as that, the government make so much  
7 money, what sort of say does you or a small group of you have?

8 This demonstrates the nature of the diffusion of responsibility felt amongst a significant number  
9 of the participants, in particular with regards to SMEs held in foreign countries where HR  
10 concerns were seen as greater, as noted in the advantageous comparison category.

### 11 **Distribution of Blame**

12 Support was also found for attribution of blame, which centred around individuals’ behaviour  
13 being blamed for harmful effects that occur for them; for example, P2 considered the pacification  
14 of the Brazilian favelas: “I don’t know how else they could do it, if not...if not to instil  
15 fear...cos, otherwise it’s not gonna get...be respected and then the rules aren’t gonna be  
16 followed.” Similarly, restrictions on protests were justified by P17: “I feel slightly like, you  
17 know, if, suddenly, the London Olympics became a series of minor protest groups trying to crash  
18 on TV and interrupt things, I just think it would be an embarrassment.”

### 19 **Discussion**

20 This study, based upon the five HR themes drawn up by Adams and Piekarz (2015),  
21 found evidence of MD in members of the public who support SMEs. These findings lend support  
22 to the applicability of Bandura’s (1991) Socio-Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency in this context.

1 This is the first study to find empirical support for the concept of moral disengagement as an  
2 explanation for the persistence of HR issues associated with SMEs.

3 As explained by Fiske (2004), MD concerns the process through which individuals  
4 convince themselves that ethical standards do not apply to them. The present study reports  
5 evidence of MD with respect to SMEs. The social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura,  
6 1991) helps to explain these findings. This theoretical approach would suggest that these  
7 supporters of SMEs' behaviour is directed by the affectations that engagement with SMEs will  
8 bring. Actions that induce feelings of self-worth and satisfaction are preferred to those that bring  
9 self-reproach, such as perceiving SMEs to involve or enable immoral behaviour. These  
10 emotional responses are governed by the personal standards of right and wrong that have been  
11 developed by the individual. Engagement with SMEs will therefore be based on the situational  
12 circumstances and the individual's values and regulated accordingly. As suggested by Bandura  
13 (1999), such sanctions are only applied if they are activated and then separate moral reactions  
14 from inhumane conduct and disabling the mechanism of self-condemnation. The HR issues  
15 discussed in this study were found to represent the inhumane conduct. The 'moral' reaction  
16 would be to not support such events. This theory would propose that, for these participants who  
17 did wish to engage with SMES, self-condemnation needed to be disabled through the activation  
18 of one of the mechanisms of MD. This then enables engagement with SMEs without  
19 experiencing self-condemnation. The Socio-Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency therefore  
20 provides an approach which facilitates the interpretation and explanation of these findings which  
21 demonstrates the applicability of this theory in this context.

22 This study also adds further evidence to the limited pool of research that has shown the  
23 mechanisms of MD to be present in individuals who support harmful actions without having

1 performed them personally. This may explain why dehumanisation was not found in this study.  
2 Support for SMEs harms innocent parties as a side-effect of their taking place, thus it is an  
3 indirect connection and as Bandura (2002) asserts, this mechanism is most commonly found in  
4 direct situations, at the point of the victim, explaining its omission here. This also explains the  
5 difference in outcome between this research and Greenhalgh et al.'s (2015) investigation into  
6 support for asylum seeker policies that found all eight mechanisms as their topic of study directly  
7 and solely concerned the victims, making dehumanisation more likely. Furthermore, in contrast  
8 to this work, Greenhalgh et al. (2015) consider a subject where the victim is perceived to impact  
9 upon the perpetrator, for example, through the allocation of public funds, alteration of culture  
10 and eventual decreased standard of living. This provides an additional explanation as to why  
11 these studies differ in their findings.

12 Investigating public support for different SMEs held locally as well as abroad has  
13 allowed consideration of this behaviour to be moved beyond the social exchange theory  
14 framework that formed Waitt's (2003) study on enthusiasm for the Sydney Olympics towards  
15 one of MD. That is not to suggest social exchange theory is redundant in this research area,  
16 indeed, the cost to benefit theme of the theory holds similarities to the moral justification  
17 mechanism of Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of moral agency which has been found to  
18 be salient in this work. Given these new findings, however, it appears valid to consider future  
19 research in this area from a MD perspective.

20 A further alternative view generated from the findings of this study could be selective  
21 perception (as part of selective exposure theory, Klapper, 1960) where individuals confronted  
22 with material that is inconsistent with their attitudes, disregard or reinterpret the material to  
23 reduce cognitive dissonance. In this case, participants supporting SMEs and being presented with

1 information that questions the morality of this attitude. With regards to this view, it is important  
2 to note that participants not only engaged with SMEs but were aware of the connected ethical  
3 issues, rather than ignoring or adjusting the information surrounding them. Subsequently, as was  
4 particularly evident in the positive comparison, displacement of responsibility and dissolution of  
5 responsibility mechanisms, MD was required to reduce cognitive dissonance in support for  
6 SMEs, whether that was through attendance, viewing or other means. A key example was that  
7 conveyed by P7 who suggested that ethical issues would not prevent support, including  
8 attendance, at future events, with similar feelings demonstrated by P8, P16 and P17. Once more,  
9 this is not to suggest that selective perception may not play a part in this area and indeed a  
10 complex interaction between related but contrasting theories may explain the relevant thoughts  
11 and behaviours at work.

12         One such example may be potential influences on disengagement, which would be a  
13 further investigatory route worth exploring, perhaps including the effect of the local  
14 environment. The description of the “Olympic Bubble” given by Horne (2007, p. 87) is that of an  
15 environment filled with positive pro-games rhetoric surrounding the Games, where attempts are  
16 made to marginalise dissenting or negative voice in a manner akin to censorship. He asserts that  
17 as SMEs are not only opportunities for sponsors to advertise their products to huge audiences but  
18 also a chance for countries to sell themselves to tourists and investors, during the bidding process  
19 and build-up to SMEs public support is vital. It is during these periods that governments will  
20 attempt to sway, in particular, local residents into consenting to the games (Lenskyj, 1996, 2004,  
21 2008, 2012) with benefits (social, economic and cultural) being exaggerated and costs  
22 understated. Selective exposure theory (Klapper, 1960) would explain how this material is  
23 readily accepted and would also explain the subsequent strength of moral justification and

1 advantageous comparison in connection with London 2012, with the rhetoric leading to  
2 disengagement. Again, it is important to note at this juncture that participants displayed a broad  
3 knowledge of HR issues connected to SMEs both in London and in other countries so this on-  
4 message atmosphere did not lead participants to become oblivious of concerns related to the  
5 Games. This is an important factor as in order to morally disengage, there must be an awareness  
6 of something to disengage from which raises two considerations. Firstly, could this rhetoric have  
7 influenced tendency to, and method of, engagement? Participants brought up topics concerned  
8 with the positives of the London Games on a regular basis, such as economic benefits and legacy.  
9 Indeed, a tagline from the Games, the potential for the London Olympics to, "...inspire a  
10 generation..." was offered as justification for public support by P16. This may be interpreted as  
11 an example of the pervasiveness of these messages and their influence on disengagement. For  
12 these reasons it is important to further investigate populations that are supportive of SMEs both  
13 in their home country as well as abroad. Similarly further work could also target the effect and  
14 prevalence of government and sponsor rhetoric in those who display MD and the role of  
15 selective exposure theory. This investigatory path would help highlight the roles and  
16 responsibilities held by those in positions of power, be that political or sporting as well as how  
17 they may influence apparent mass acceptance of situations that may cross moral boundaries. In  
18 addition to general social and political impact, such knowledge could help find a way to end the  
19 issues mentioned in this study; for example ensuring responsibility is taken for the welfare of the  
20 workers in Qatar.

21 A further related point is that as the participants were universally London-based it allows  
22 explanations to be considered for the differing patterns of mechanisms used in connection with  
23 locally held SMEs in contrast to those held abroad. Moral justification, advantageous comparison

1 and distortion of consequences were particularly prominent when discussing support for SMEs  
2 held locally, whereas examples from SMEs held abroad appeared to draw a broader mechanistic  
3 range. In addition to the influence of the “Olympic Bubble” this may be due to increased  
4 proximity increasing responsibility (akin to helping behaviour, Staub & Baer (1974) or fewer  
5 perceived causal mediators between perpetrator and outcome (Sloman, Fernbach, & Ewing,  
6 2009). Paying to attend may be seen as being more directly affecting the issues than watching on  
7 television thus moral justification, advantageous comparison and distortion of consequences may  
8 have been more applicable in this circumstance. This requires particular consideration and  
9 further work with a population that have attended a greater diversity of SMEs.

10         With regards to limitations, the sample in this study was homogenous in terms of age,  
11 employment status and living area and was too small to consider any differences due to any other  
12 demographic, such as gender. Therefore, although the nature of this sample helps us draw  
13 conclusions from this specific population, future studies should aim to replicate these outcomes  
14 in more diverse populations. This would allow greater understanding of differences between  
15 those of contrasting generations and locations who are affected by SMEs and also allow  
16 consideration of cultural differences in relation to morals. This is pertinent in MD research as it  
17 relies on individuals contravening their moral code, which may or may not be uniform (Bandura,  
18 1991). In this case the UDHR was used as a basis for the research and although this is an  
19 internationally recognised guideline it does not preclude individuals from having a different  
20 perspective. A common issue in this area is identifying precisely when one has morally  
21 disengaged rather than simply acted in a manner he/she believed to be moral or perhaps fulfilled  
22 a social desirability bias. However this is not to suggest there is no evidence of this behaviour.  
23 As previously noted this research investigates MD from past, present and future viewpoints,

1 which is a strength that is unusual in MD work and allows a rounded perspective looking at  
2 previous attendance and support combined with present attitudes and future intentions. It should  
3 be considered, however, that despite this, such an approach does rely upon accurate recall and  
4 predictions of feelings and behaviour. The use of focus groups in this study has allowed initial  
5 exploration into this area; however future research could employ individual interviews to allow a  
6 deeper understanding of how MD comes about in this context.

### 7 **Conclusion**

8 This study has found evidence of MD in members of the public with regards to support  
9 for SMEs. It was demonstrated that in the face of widespread HR concerns that are connected to  
10 such events, seven of the eight mechanisms of MD as proposed by Bandura (1991) were present  
11 in participants' support of SMEs. Such indicators reveal how SMEs and their impact on wide-  
12 ranging HR issues have been allowed to happen and continue to happen, at least in part, due to  
13 their being afforded municipal backing despite broad acknowledgement of these associated  
14 consequences. These findings open up a new area of research into a subject that has accrued a  
15 great deal of political, public and media interest over recent years and one that provokes a great  
16 deal of passion and debate yet has had drawn little explanation.

17 Contextually, it has also been suggested that these mechanisms may differ, depending on  
18 the individual's connection with the tournament. Provisionally, this could include location of,  
19 and attendance at, the tournament. Further research should now look to replicate the pattern of  
20 disengagement in SME support amongst a wider sample and subsequently extend the  
21 consideration of the circumstances that affect the differing mechanisms.

22 Importantly this study also adds to the minimal amount of research into MD with those  
23 who do not carry out the actions upon the victim themselves, but support those actions through



1 indirect behaviour. This new direction in the literature illustrates the potential relevance of MD,  
2 given the importance of public support in an array of high impacting contexts, including political  
3 policy (as investigated by, Greenhalgh et al., 2015) and on international organisations such as  
4 FIFA. The salience of MD within this context ensures that these findings have practical  
5 implications. In particular, an approach which focuses on enhancing awareness of these HR  
6 issues may be less effective in changing behaviour relative to strategies which challenge moral  
7 disengagement and hence promote moral engagement.

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