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Influence of Athletes as Role Models on Youth Values, Attitudes, and Identity Formation

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have theorised that athletic role models can have a beneficial impact on the self-perception of their admirers. Athletes often serve as exemplary figures who appear "attainable," thereby inspiring youths. The objective of this paper is to examine how athletes as role models influence the values, attitudes, and identities of young individuals. Relevant academic studies and grey literature pertaining to this subject were sourced from esteemed electronic databases. The results emphasize the role of sports as a crucial component in the developmental process of young people. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that the most prominent sports figures are readily embraced as admirable role models by youths, a notion that aligns with the substantial prominence of sports in our society.

1. Introduction

The sports sector has generated numerous sports icons, as athletic endeavours have evolved into a universally appreciated form of recreation. One contributing factor is the genuine excellence and aesthetic appeal of sports, which have captivated audiences from ancient times to contemporary times (Goodman, 1993). Those athletes who excel in their respective fields and exhibit exceptional performance may assume the status of role models (Giuliano et al., 2007). Young individuals, particularly children and teenagers, tend to admire and closely observe the actions of their esteemed athletes (Fleming et al., 2005). Such accomplished sports figures are viewed as role models by youth, who identify with them and aspire to shape their own self-concept and aspirations by emulating the conduct exhibited by these sports icons both during competitions and in everyday life. Consequently, adolescents and young adults involved in athletic pursuits are inclined to select prominent athletes as their role models (Assibey-Mensah, 1997).

Thus, it is apparent that professional athletes serve as significant and esteemed role models for today's youth (Clark et al., 2001). Marketing and public relations professionals within the realm of professional sports have highlighted the critical role that players fulfil as exemplars for young admirers (Funk et al., 2003). Furthermore, coaches and administrators within professional sports recognise that renowned athletes are often considered role models for students in elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as in colleges. For this reason, professional athletes are encouraged to engage in community service initiatives organised on a league-wide basis, which yield beneficial outcomes for society (Feezell, 2005). The British government has actively championed the use of soccer players as role models for youths. For instance, the government's after-school initiative, Playing for Success, employs professional soccer athletes as inspirational figures aimed at motivating adolescents to participate in sports (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007).

There exist two opposing views regarding the obligations of sports role models (Feezell, 2005). On one side, Tim Duncan, an NBA legend, posited that professional athletes who serve as role models for youth should bear a sense of social responsibility regarding their behaviour in society. Smoll (2015)

concurs, affirming that high-profile athletes should embrace their social responsibilities as public role models both on and off the field. Conversely, Charles Barkley, another NBA icon, contended that the substantial salary he receives is not intended for him to serve as a role model for children and adolescents; rather, his purpose is to excel in basketball. He asserts that it is the responsibility of parents to be the role models for their own children. Numerous athletes across various sports align with Tim Duncan's viewpoint. For example, members of the U.S. women's national soccer team, recognised as one of the most accomplished national teams globally, express their awareness of serving as role models for younger generations (Guest & Cox, 2009).

This paper examined the influence of athletes as role models on the values, attitudes, and identities of young individuals. The materials referenced comprised research articles sourced from esteemed electronic databases (Omali, 2021; Omali, 2022; Omali & Akpata, 2024; Omali et al., 2024). The keywords employed were associated with athletes, role models, and the youth. The literature search yielded a considerable number of articles, which were subsequently evaluated based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The exclusion standards pertained to those articles that did not directly address the study's focus while the inclusion criteria were applied to those papers that were relevant to the study's subject matter (Omali, 2023).

2. Results and Discussion

a. *Values, Attitude, and Identity*

The concepts of values, attitudes, and identity are closely intertwined elements that shape an individual's self-perception and their interactions with the environment. Values are fundamental and persistent beliefs about what is deemed significant, functioning as an ethical guide. They represent abstract and deeply ingrained tenets in our lives (Schwartz, 1994) that maintain a level of stability and affect assessments across diverse contexts. Values illustrate ideals of behaviour such as honesty, freedom, and equality. Furthermore, they can be classified according to a two-dimensional framework (Gouveia et al., 2014). Among the most prominent frameworks for understanding human values, Schwartz (1992) identified 56 central values that adequately encompass a wide array of cultural situations. The relationship between value types indicates that the closer two values are, the more aligned their fundamental motives tend to be. For instance, both universalism and benevolence stem from a concern for others. Conversely, as the distance between two values increases, their underlying motives are more likely to be in opposition. An illustrative case is found in self-direction and security: the motivations for individual freedom may conflict with those for national security. When plotted with value types on the x-axis and the strength of correlations on the y-axis, the pattern of relationships depicted resembles a sine wave (a line that oscillates up and down akin to water waves). For example, ingroup attitudes are negatively correlated with universalism, show no correlation with openness values and benevolence, and are positively correlated with both power and conservation values (Feldman, 2020).

Second, attitudes are particular, often transient evaluations or sentiments towards individuals, objects, or concepts that are influenced by underlying values. Numerous overlapping definitions of attitudes exist. For instance, Maio et al. (2019) characterised attitude as a comprehensive evaluation of an object derived from cognitive, affective, and behavioural input. In simpler terms, attitudes reflect our preferences and aversions toward various entities and ideas subject to evaluation. These dispositions are shaped by values and sometimes by external influences such as peer pressure. They can manifest as something tangible, like a mosquito bothering an individual at night, or as broad concepts, including economic systems like capitalism or communism. Attitudes tend to focus on specific subjects, such as a certain policy or individual. They significantly influence our perceptions and interpretations of the world

(Fazio, 2000). For example, in a restaurant setting, it can be far more efficient (and less uncomfortable for those accompanying us) to consider only those meal options that align with our primary preferences (e.g., vegan, fish, meat), rather than assessing every available selection. Additionally, moral convictions may shape our decisions (Skitka et al., 2005): even if there exists a strong positive attitude towards steak from past experiences, a current belief in the moral wrongness of consuming animals may deter us from ordering it (Brandt et al., 2015; Feinberg et al., 2019).

Lastly, self-identity pertains to how individuals perceive themselves, encompassing all dimensions of the self, including physical characteristics, preferences, values, personal ambitions, habitual behaviors, personality traits, and personal narratives (McAdams, 1995). Individuals typically represent themselves in alignment with their self-identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1991), and this perception extends to behaviour (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992), including consumption patterns (Oyserman et al., 2007). Although identity reflects an individual's subjective self-view, it is constructed through social interactions. Theorists adhering to the symbolic interactionist framework suggest that the self evolves through the reflections of others encountered in social exchanges. Consequently, individuals may cultivate multiple identities, for example, "I am a woman," "I am a researcher," "I am an environmentalist." These multiple identities are proposed to be managed within a 'hierarchy of salience': the significance of identities varies, with certain identities, such as gender, being more consistently prominent.

In summary, identity encapsulates an individual's essence, origin, and sense of belonging. This concept includes a person's self-perception, which encompasses their values, beliefs, culture, and individual characteristics. It is established through the repeated embodiment of these values over time, which fosters self-esteem and a sense of purpose. Values shape individuals' attitudes, which subsequently influence their behaviours in what is known as the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) model. A strong congruence between values and attitudes enhances clarity, while a misalignment can result in conflict. Though attitudes and values constitute critical constructs in psychology that are inherently interconnected, they also exhibit a variety of differences. Specifically, attitudes represent specific evaluations towards particular objects, whereas values are abstract principles that transcend situational contexts. Attitudes can manifest as either positive or negative, in contrast to the predominantly affirmative nature of values. Moreover, attitudes are generally less integral to one's self-concept compared to values (Maio, 2016). Given that values serve as foundational principles, they are believed to direct our behaviors (Roccas & Sagiv, 2017) through several factors, including attitudes. Thus, values affect our feelings towards certain objects or individuals, which in consequence shapes our actions (Thorne et al., 2020). The relationship between attitudes and behaviours is influenced by various factors. For instance, the link is more pronounced when the methods of measuring attitudes and behavior align in terms of action, context, target, and temporal aspects (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Furthermore, stronger attitudes—those characterised by higher certainty, ease of retrieval, and significance—exhibit a more robust correlation with behaviour, and the strength of attitudes, along with other moderators, has been the focus of significant empirical research (e.g., Maio et al., 2019; Thorne et al., 2020). Emerging evidence also suggests that the connection between values and behaviour is intensified when the timings of values and behaviour assessments coincide: Foad et al. (2020) found a more substantial association between values and behavioural intentions when both measurements aligned temporally.

b. *Expectations of Role Models in Athletics*

Both the media and scholarly publications (Wilson et al., 2008) consistently inform us about the misconduct of professional athletes both during competitions and in their personal lives, as well as the detrimental consequences such actions can have on the athletes themselves, their peers, clubs, organisations, or other involved parties. Nevertheless, the appeal for professional athletes to

acknowledge their purported responsibilities as role models for the younger generation is occasionally dismissed by the athletes themselves. For instance, in 1993, Charles Barkley, a player in the National Basketball Association in the United States, remarked: "I am not a role model... the ability to run and dunk a basketball should not elevate one to a divine status. There are countless individuals incarcerated who can play basketball; should they then be considered role models? Certainly not" (Wellman, 2003). In drawing a line between being a proficient athlete and adhering to societal laws, or failing to do so, Barkley overlooks the central argument that underpins the prevailing sentiment that professional athletes owe it to their youthful followers—if not the community at large—to comport themselves as role models. One may deny the title of role model; however, such a designation is not a personal choice. Individuals do not decide to become role models; rather, they are deemed as such by others. The true choice they have pertains to whether they will be positive or negative role models. Upon embracing the fame and monetary rewards associated with being a professional athlete, one cannot absolve oneself of the duty to serve as a role model, recognising that children, as well as some adults, observe their actions and look to them for guidance. It is significant to note that athletes obtain sponsorships chiefly because there are individuals willing to emulate their choices and purchase specific products, such as shoes or cereals, that these athletes endorse (Malone, 1993).

We may challenge the assertion that professional athletes are compelled to serve as role models merely due to their admirers mimicking their behaviour, potentially relying on the (admittedly debatable) premise that fans possess the autonomy to choose whether or not to follow such cues. The larger issue remains whether professional athletes possess a duty to function as role models solely on account of societal expectations placed upon them. The existing academic discourse presents a mixed view regarding the nature, extent, and significance of professional athletes as role models, particularly concerning their conduct off the field (Lines, 2001; Fleming et al., 2005). Nonetheless, there are palpable tensions between the principles inherent in leading the life of a professional athlete and those we associate with ethical living and virtue in broader society. Evidence suggests that some professional athletes endeavour to segregate the values associated with a commendable life—the attributes we generally uphold within a civilised community, which theorist Mary Gentile identifies as honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion (Gentile, 2010)—from their identities as professional athletes.

3. Conclusion and Future Scope

This article examined the influence of athletes as role models on the values, attitudes, and identities of young individuals. The concept of role modelling is understood to be a cognitive process wherein an individual observes and assimilates behaviours exhibited by a role model. Notably, one can have a role model without engaging in direct interaction with that person. Such indirect role models, as perceived by learners, are likely to exert a significant impact on their behaviours. In essence, despite the lack of direct, face-to-face contact with their indirect or vicarious role models—such as renowned entertainers and athletes—learners still possess the ability to observe and acquire specific behaviours and skills from these figures through various media outlets.

The research indicated that sports have historically represented and will continue to represent an unparalleled domain in terms of their critical importance for the growth and development of youth. Sports provide a wholesome pastime that cultivates skills, fosters competitive spirit, promotes healthy physical development, and contributes numerous other advantages. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that prominent sports figures are widely regarded as admirable role models by young individuals.

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