Idolizing sport celebrities: a gateway to psychopathology?

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Abstract
Purpose – Sport celebrities often endorse their team, their sport, and non-sports-related products. Increased idolizing of sport celebrities by adolescents is one artifact of this promotional practice. Although seemingly innocuous, adolescents who idolize sport celebrities may, as adults, come to worship such celebrities; this unhealthy obsession may afflict 10 percent or more of adults. If adolescent hero worship of sport celebrities is a gateway to this adult psychopathology, then alerting parents, as well as encouraging social responsibility among advertisers and sport teams/leagues, is critical. This paper aims to address the issues.

Design/methodology/approach – After a brief review of the literature on adolescent hero worship, the literature on the determinants and effects of celebrity worship are explored.

Findings – Once parents, advertisers, sport team/leagues are sensitized to the problem, adolescent hero worship of sport celebrities can be mitigated as a likely gateway to many adults’ unhealthy obsession with celebrities.

Research limitations/implications – Directions for future sport celebrity worship research are suggested.

Practical implications – The incidence of a potentially psychologically damaging affliction can be reduced without harm to advertisers, sport teams/leagues, and athletes.

Social implications – Ways to reduce promotion-induced sport celebrity worship – without eliminating sport promotion per se – are suggested. Recommendations are targeted for sport-related and non-sport-related products as well as teams and leagues/conferences.

Originality/value – This paper is the first to suggest a link between adolescent hero worship of sport celebrities and psychologically dangerous celebrity worship by adults.

Keywords Social interaction, Social behaviour, Social responsibility, Sports, Adolescents, Celebrities

Introduction

In Confessions of a Hero-worshipper (Dubner, 2003), bestselling author Stephen Dubner explores his childhood idolization of Franco Harris, the star running back who won four Super Bowls with the Pittsburgh Steelers. Dubner’s hero-worshiping of Harris eventually extended to renaming himself Franco. In the context of his parents’ devout Catholicism, Dubner wrote:
I thought it had a nice ring to it: Franco Dubner. That was the name I began using on my school papers. I hoped my teachers would pick up on it. I asked my mother outright for an official change of name. She refused. I called the Schenectady County Courthouse to ask if I could legally change my name and they said, Of course you can, as long as you are eighteen years old, and I said, Oh, and they said, How old are you, and I said, Twelve. [Jesus] did not live in my heart. It was Franco Harris who lived in my heart. He was my rock and my redeemer, my protector and my inspiration, my stealth messiah. Though they refused to grant me his name, they could not pry his spirit from me (Dubner, 2003, pp. 48-51).

The remainder of Dubner’s book follows his somewhat disappointing efforts as an adult to bond with and write about Harris. Regardless, his adolescent infatuation was sufficient to motivate a book “about a boy and his hero” (Dubner, 2003, p. 87) almost three decades later.

What appears harmless – a boy besotted with a sports hero – can lead to a ruinous pathological behavior in adulthood. Extreme sport celebrity worship can convolute fan psyches, shake emotional stability, and cause a loss of individual identity (e.g. McCutcheon et al., 2002). For a fictitious example, consider the recently released movie Big Fan. In this dark comedy, a 35-year-old die-hard New York Giants football aficionado, who displays some damaging effects of sport celebrity worship (e.g. psychological and emotional instability), opts not to inform the authorities that he was physically assaulted by his beloved team’s star quarterback; instead, he remains silent to avoid responsibility for his adored player’s prosecution. With this type of unhealthy obsession evident in 10 percent of fans (World Net Daily, 2003), sports marketing constituents cannot afford to ignore this problem.

Mass media has helped to perpetuate such infatuations and offer fans countless opportunities to scrutinize and evaluate their favorite player’s on-and-off the field behavior (Summers and Johnson, 2008). For example, sport biographies for children remain popular. For same-aged readers, Barnes and Noble lists 134 basketball and 80 football biographies; many of them focus on comparably media-friendly players. In general, these books (e.g., Derek Jeter: Captain on and off the Field by Tom Robinson) tout professional athletes as role models through tales of triumph over adversity, the importance of a positive outlook, and the value of a virtuous character. Classic uplifting Hollywood biopics about sport legends – such as Babe Ruth (starring William Bendix), Lou Gehrig (starring Gary Cooper), Grover Alexander (starring Ronald Reagan), Jim Thorpe (starring Burt Lancaster), James Corbett (starring Errol Flynn), and Rocky Graziano (starring Paul Newman) – follow similar storylines.

For children and adults, sport celebrities often are depicted as bigger than life (Hartmann et al., 2008). For example, General Mills celebrates esteemed athletes on its Wheaties boxes, Fat Head sells life-size decals of famous athletes, EA Sports ads and video games depict professional athletes as transcendent, news organizations refer to star athletes by a single name or nickname (e.g. Ochocinco, KG, Ichiro, Yao, Matsui), and star players represent entire leagues (e.g. Derek Jeter in MLB ads, Payton Manning in NFL ads). For adults, the proliferation of fantasy sports wagering further aggrandizes personal accomplishments over team success (i.e. winning or losing a wager depends on personal statistics rather than team outcomes) (Hu, 2004).

All sport constituents (e.g. players, owners, businesses, and media) benefit from professional athletes. Sport business is an estimated $213 billion industry; of this figure, advertising is 14.1 percent, spectator spending is 13.4 percent, gambling is 9.7 percent, media broadcasting rights is 3.6 percent, and endorsements is 1 percent (Adams, 2009). Sport organizations benefit from sport celebrities’ visibility in the mass media (Bush et al., 2004; Jones and Schumann, 2000; Stevens et al., 2003). Sport icons are interviewed before, during, and after broadcasted sporting events. Internet sites and sports news cable channels report on professional athletes’ contracts, legal issues, and personal successes. Magazine and newspaper articles offer intimate details about sport celebrities’ lives (Lines, 2001).
Similarly, non-sport organizations use sport-celebrity testimonials to increase the visibility of their ads and encourage favorable responses to their brands (Friedman et al., 1978; Jones and Schumann, 2000; Jowdy and McDonald, 2002). Such ads work best when the endorser and message are attractive and credible (Stevens et al., 2003). Endorsements may be explicit (e.g., I endorse this product), implicit (e.g., I use this product), imperative (e.g., you should try this product), or co-present (e.g., the celebrity is shown with the product) (McCracken, 1989). Ads with sport celebrity endorsers have become increasingly popular; relative to the preceding 35 years, print ads of this type proliferated during the 1990s (Jones and Schumann, 2000).

By adding meaning, an appealing sport celebrity can encourage fans to generalize their attachment from him/her to an endorsed firm or brand (Brooks and Harris, 1998; Jowdy and McDonald, 2002; Rubin and McHugh, 1987). Firms pay handsomely for borrowed interest of this ilk. In 2007, the top 20 highest-paid US athletes received roughly $300 million in endorsement fees; of that total, Phil Mickelson, LeBron James, Dale Earnhardt Jr, and Michelle Wie received roughly $47,000,000, $25,000,000, $20,000,000, and $19,500,000, respectively. The top-paid international athletes like Ronaldinho, Maria Sharapova, and Vijay Singh earned $32,700,000, $23,799,501, and $16,411,026, respectively (Sports Illustrated, 2007). Thus, economic factors encourage organizations and celebrity athletes to continue depicting the latter in mass media available to children and adolescents.

Adolescents view sport celebrities as the most heroic celebrities (Stevens et al., 2003). Later as adults, they idolize sport celebrities more intensely than other celebrities (McCutcheon et al., 2002). Unfortunately, the seemingly innocuous infatuation of pre-adults with media-hyped sport celebrities may herald a psychopathological condition in adults. Unlike benign fandom, sport celebrity worship, evident across a wide range of sports, can lead to negative parasocial relationships, psychological and emotional instability, and dissociation (i.e., a loss of self) (Basil and Brown, 1997; Hartmann et al., 2008; McCutcheon et al., 2002). It certainly can detract from the team focus of sports, glorify the wrong people as role models, and make people into commodities (Maltby et al., 2004). Yet, scant research links parasocial relationships to the possible damaging effects of sport celebrity worship.

Thus, socially responsible sport organizations should discourage adolescents’ star player idolatry—a likely precursor of adults’ sport celebrity worship—despite the resulting temporary economic turmoil and resistance from entrenched beneficiaries. (Spontaneous sport celebrity worshipping by adults who as adolescents never idolized star players seems unlikely.) To explore this issue, our exposition proceeds as follows. After an overview of the literature on adolescent hero worship, we discuss determinants and potentially damaging effects of celebrity worship. Then, we recommend ways to reduce promotion-induced sport celebrity worship and directions for future sport celebrity worship research.

Adolescent hero worship

Perhaps more famous for their celebrity status than for their greatness or heroism (Boorstin, 1961), professional athletes are immortalized by their fans and have substantial influence on young admirers worldwide (Chan and Zhang, 2007; Dix et al., 2010; Jones and Schumann, 2000; La Ferle and Chan, 2008; Tingchi Liu et al., 2007). Although sport heroes are recognized for their athletic greatness and sport celebrities are recognized for their fame (Stevens et al., 2003), characterizations such as idol, role model, and star are used synonymously (Bush et al., 2004; Lines, 2001). Young fans’ reactions to a favorite celebrity may be called adoration, infatuation, and idolatry (Raviv et al., 1996); for athletes, such reactions may be sport dependent (Martin, 1996). Notwithstanding Charles Barkley’s well-known protestations, sport role models can shape young admirers’ attitudes and behaviors. For example, adolescents’ demeanor, fashion, language, and mindset may be influenced by the analogous traits of favored sport celebrities (Lines, 2001).

An idol is someone whose talents, achievements, status, and/or physical appearance are appreciated and celebrated by fans with various entertainment interests (e.g., sports, music, and movies) (Yue and Cheung, 2000). Idolatry, manifested in worshipping and modeling
behaviors, peaks during adolescence (Raviv et al., 1996). Worshipping may be expressed by collecting idol-related memorabilia or trying to meet the idol (Dubner, 2003); modeling is the effort to emulate an idol by mimicking his or her appearance, speech, and activities (Raviv et al., 1996).

Adolescents use media outlets to explore possible desired selves (Larson, 1995); they can identify with a sport star, through media exposure, and may grow fond of that person and want to be like him or her. Over time, a bond or attachment between an adolescent and a sport celebrity may develop, leading to a stream of hopeful and anxious feelings regarding potential outcomes (e.g. on-the-field success and heartache) (Hartmann et al., 2008). Secondary attachments, which help adolescents construct their identity (Yue and Cheung, 2000), can be parasocial relationships (i.e. non-reciprocated relationships in which one person is densely knowledgeable about another person) with distant others like sport celebrities. The repetitive nature of sporting events, in-depth pre-game, game, and post-game features, player interviews and profile data, as well as frequent commentaries, help spawn the virtual relationship between fans and star players, providing a fertile breeding ground for parasocial relationships (Hartmann et al., 2008). As adolescents share, via mass media, in idols’ supposed triumphs and defeats, the fantasized bonds strengthen. These bonds may be romantic or identity-molding; the former is a desire to be the celebrity’s romantic partner and the latter is a desire to be like the celebrity (Greene and Adams-Price, 1990).

Because identification is related to likableness and attractiveness, the worship of sport celebrities may help young people to develop their own identity (Friedman and Friedman, 1979). For example, the appealing athletic skills, pro-social behaviors, and traits of star players contribute to adolescents’ identity construction (Jones and Schumann, 2000; Stevens et al., 2003).

Celebrity worship

Sport celebrities are more than entertainers; they are expected to uphold their culture’s values and morals (Jones and Schumann, 2000). When the moral legacies of sport celebrities are compromised by drug and spousal abuse (e.g. Darryl Strawberry), cheating (e.g. steroid use by Alex Rodriguez and Ben Johnson; illegal substance in boxers’ hand wraps by Antonio Margarito), illegal behavior (e.g. tax evasion by Pete Rose), inhumane activity (e.g. Michael Vick pleading guilty to federal dog fighting charges), and ill-advised on- and off-the-field behavior (e.g. infidelity by Tiger Woods; unsportsmanlike behavior by Zinedine Zidane; cricket match-fixing by Hansie Cronje; allegations of throwing a tennis match by Nikolay Davydenko), young fans may come to accept and emulate aberrant behaviors (Lines, 2001). Celebrity worship – a type of parasocial attraction or relationship in which people develop an unhealthy obsession with one or more celebrities – provides a conceptual framework for understanding this danger (Stever, 1991). In particular, sport celebrity worship is motivated by needs for stimulation, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, aesthetics, and group affiliation (Wann, 1995).

The Absorption Addiction Model, which can explain celebrity worship (McCutcheon et al., 2002), suggests that fans with weak identity structures try to establish their identity and a sense of fulfillment by becoming engrossed in favorite celebrities (e.g. professional athletes, movie stars, and music artists). Intentions and behaviors caused by such absorption may be addictive and delusional. Under this model (see Table I), celebrity worship advances through three stages:

1. low (i.e. entertainment-social, where a celebrity appeals to fans through entertainment value);
2. intermediate (i.e. intense-personal, where fans’ intensive and compulsive feelings about a celebrity surface); and
3. extreme (i.e. borderline-pathological, where fans empathize with celebrity successes and failures, over-identify with celebrities, and are compulsive and obsessive about the details of the celebrity’s life) (Maltby et al., 2001; McCutcheon et al., 2002).

The percent of celebrity worshippers in each of these three categories is 20 percent (entertainment-social), 10 percent (intense-personal), and 1 percent (borderline-pathological), respectively (World Net Daily, 2003). This hierarchical trend of celebrity worship generalizes to other research (e.g. Martin et al., 2003; McCutcheon et al., 2003), although some studies show intermediate celebrity worship is more prominent than low celebrity worship (Maltby et al., 2001).

Mass media fixations in the second and third celebrity worship stages may lead fans to experience excessive fantasy proneness and dissociation (Maltby et al., 2006) and may cause them to substitute face-to-face interactions with friends and acquaintances for artificial interactions with liked celebrities. In essence, fans exposed to celebrities via mass media may descend mentally from the genuine social world to a world of artificial experience (Caughey, 1978). For example, viewers are drawn to television celebrities whose verbal and nonverbal behaviors mirror interpersonal communication and encourage interactive responses; such viewer attraction, identification, and involvement are augmented by intimate camera angles and close-up shots (Rubin and McHugh, 1987; Rubin et al., 1985). By building routines around and factitious relationships with television celebrities, fans synthesize social worlds with fictional personalities (Ferris, 2001). Unfortunately, psychopathic intentions and behaviors may result when the line between genuine and artificial worlds blurs (Caughey, 1978).

**Celebrity worship: determinants and damaging effects**

Celebrity worship is comprised of four factors: hero/role model, sex-appeal, mystique, and talented artist (Stever, 1991). Hero/role models are people of iconic stature who are viewed as honest, generous, and courageous. Sex-appeal entails celebrities judged as attractive, strong, and well-dressed. Mystique centers on celebrities’ aura; words like “secrecy”, “mystery”, and “misunderstood” describe this factor. Talented artists, who are evaluated relative to their special abilities, are thought of as charismatic entertainers and artisans. Clearly, these factors affect fans’ dedication to worshipped sport celebrities.

Demographics such as age and gender may contribute to parasocial interaction via worshipping and modeling behaviors. Relative to pre-adolescents, adolescents exhibit stronger worshipping and modeling behaviors toward pop singer idols (Raviv et al., 1996). Findings about celebrity worship and gender are mixed; although some studies suggest they are unrelated (Ashe et al., 2005; Maltby et al., 2001; McCutcheon et al., 2003), other studies suggest that males tend more toward pathological celebrity worship (Maltby et al., 2004) and females are more likely to speak positively about brands endorsed by athletes (Bush et al., 2004).

Some personality traits may predispose people to celebrity worship; for example, the tension, concern, feeling of awkwardness, and discomfort induced by shyness cause some
people to avoid strangers and acquaintances (Cheek and Buss, 1981). As a result, shy people may pursue safe parasocial relationships (Ashe and McCutcheon, 2001). Loneliness – the discrepancy between preferred and received social interactions – correlates positively with less interpersonal communication (Rubin et al., 1985). Lonely people who use mass media to fulfill their social interaction needs may become parasocially attracted to media-based personalities (Rubin et al., 1985).

Narcissism and celebrity worship correlate positively because fans see themselves as an extension of a favorite celebrity and believe that they should be adored similarly (Ashe et al., 2005). Narcissists are self-absorbed, egocentric, exploitative, and lack empathy; they have an excessive need for attention and admiration, an inflated sense of self-importance and superiority, and a perceived entitlement of expected privileges, which all discourage healthy interpersonal relationships (Rhodewalt and Morf, 1995). Because narcissists struggle to maintain social relationships, parasocial relationships may help them to fulfill their relationship needs (Ashe et al., 2005).

Celebrity worship can damage fans' psychological and emotional well-being (Maltby, 2004). For example, high-level celebrity worship can lead to anxiety, depression, poor mental health, and negative affect; even low-level celebrity worship can lead to social dysfunction and depression (Maltby et al., 2001; Maltby et al., 2004). Celebrity worship hinders self-understanding and interpersonal relations while creating impressions of foolishness, irresponsibility, and submissiveness (Elliott, 1998; McCutcheon and Maltby, 2002).

Celebrity worship can reduce cognitive and communicative flexibility. Poor cognitive flexibility – indicative of poor interpersonal skills (Martin et al., 2003) – is a person's awareness of alternative courses of action, willingness to adapt to a situation, and flexibility (Martin and Anderson, 1998). Poor communication flexibility – indicative of communication incompetence – is a person's recognition that many alternatives exist for any given situation, and adapting and adjusting are necessary for successful communication (Martin and Rubin, 1994). Celebrity worshippers generally exhibit verbal, visual, spatial, and cognitive deficits in flexibility and associative learning (McCutcheon et al., 2003).

Celebrity worshippers who display strong rather than weak attachments to their favorite celebrities are more likely to condone celebrity stalking (McCutcheon et al., 2006). Stalking is an obsessive disorder known as erotomania, which is a person's delusional belief that a desirable other person loves him/her. As the desired person often is unattainable due to higher social status, higher financial status, or marriage, meaningful interpersonal contact typically is precluded (Fuji et al., 1999; Zona et al., 1993). Erotomania, which is aggrandized by social media outlets through which fans can provide up-to-the-minute information about celebrity sightings and behaviors (e.g. Gawker.com and Twitter.com), is associated with deficits in cognitive flexibility, associated learning, verbal skills, and visuospatial skills (Fuji et al., 1999). People with erotomania are socially ineffectual and have empty lives, perhaps due to oversensitivity, suspiciousness, and/or feelings of superiority (Fuji et al., 1999). Sport celebrities may inspire stalking behaviors in some fans, which may lead to hostile and violent situations (e.g. in 1993, tennis star Monica Seles was stabbed by an obsessed fan) (Emerson et al., 1998) requiring legal intervention (Zona et al., 1993).

Because celebrity worship may lead to violence (Evans and Claycomb, 1999), fans who seek contact with their favorite celebrities are often viewed as dubious, disturbed, and hostile (Ferris, 2001). Through over-identification or dissociation with sport idols, celebrity worship can cause a loss of self (McCutcheon et al., 2002) from a missing normal fusion of thoughts, sensations, and experiences into consciousness and memory, leading to deficiencies in neuropsychological performance (e.g. heightened distractibility) (Giesbrecht et al., 2008).

Possible promotional changes

If (1) idolization of celebrities by adolescents can be a gateway to celebrity worship by adults, (2) some adults have pathological celebrity worship tendencies, and (3) sport-celebrity-related promotional efforts can trigger (1) and (2), then socially
responsible sport organizations—both professional and collegiate—should reconsider now-accepted promotional efforts. To maximize revenues yet discourage celebrity worship of popular players, coaches, executives (e.g., general managers), and broadcast booth commentators, teams and leagues/conferences could adopt one or more of the following promotional changes.

For sport-related and non-sport-related products

Sensitize the public to the dangers of sport celebrity worship. Adults may be unaware of the harm that parasocial relationships may cause them and their children. For example, if fan idolization of sport figures has reached the intermediate or extreme stages of the Absorption Addiction Model, the outcomes can be detrimental to the fan and his/her acquaintances (McCutcheon et al., 2002). To inform fans about the dangers of sport celebrity worship, sport organizations could create public service announcements (PSAs) about the damaging effects of parasocial relationships. Here, edutainment could influence viewers’ beliefs and attitudes; when viewers are absorbed in and process a PSA narrative, they are less likely to resist the message (Slater and Rouner, 2002). These PSAs could stress team success over individual triumphs and suggest better alternatives than celebrity idolatry for adolescent identity formation. By taking a story form rather than a traditional ad form, fans of the spokesperson would tend to internalize the message and alter their lifestyles accordingly (e.g., the reduction in peoples’ risky sexual behaviors after Magic Johnson announced he was HIV positive) (Basil and Brown, 1997). For controversial topics, editorial content can shape perceptions, provide useful information, offer reinforcement, and influence behaviors (Wakefield et al., 2003); in conjunction with PSAs, it can minimize adolescents’ sport celebrity idolization.

Require a warning statement about the dangers of sport celebrity worship in all celebrity-based ads. Many recent sport-themed ad campaigns, such as Nike’s “Be like Mike” campaign with Michael Jordan and “Witness” campaign with LeBron James, encouraged adolescent identity development based on sport celebrities. To promote celebrity-independent identity formation, ads could include warnings about the harm caused by sport celebrity worship. For instance, examples of intermediate and extreme sport idolization behaviors (e.g., compulsivity, obsession) could be depicted to viewers in the hope of dissuading such celebrity worshipping tendencies.

The efficacy of certain warnings depends on their design and placement. For example, warnings in red text, rather than green or black text, evoke greater compliance (Braun and Silver, 1995). Relative to text warnings, warning symbols are especially effective because they attract more attention, are processed more easily, and stimulate greater cognitive elaboration (Bettman et al., 1986). Warnings work best when they precede rather than follow product information (Wogalter et al., 1987). Because consumers view print ads with overtly placed—rather than discreetly placed—warnings as more responsible, such ads induce more favorable responses toward the advertised brand (Torres et al., 2007).

Discourage star athletes from exploiting their fame in product testimonials. Ad campaigns with sport-celebrity endorsers frequently depict their exciting lifestyles. For example, Nike’s campaign for LeBron James shows various depictions of James (e.g., younger, current, and older versions) enjoying the benefits of his stardom: residing in a luxurious home, relaxing by a lavish pool, and wearing glitzy diamond jewelry. To minimize celebrity worship inspired by opulent lifestyles, to which some fans could become obsessed, thereby losing a sense of reality (Caughey, 1978) and self (Maltby et al., 2004) when such lifestyles are unattainable, teams and leagues/conferences could prohibit star players from using personal backdrops in product testimonials.

Focus player-centric ads on the player’s positive traits, such as loyalty, determination, perseverance, sacrifice, and a positive attitude. By focusing on star players’ positive traits, rather than on their celebrity status, viewers and younger fans are more likely to focus on the traits that made the athlete successful, rather than the perks of success. For example, United Way ads that depict NFL athletes (e.g., Roy Williams of the Dallas Cowboys and Troy Polamalu of the Pittsburgh Steelers) donating their time to after-school programs for youths...
and mentoring programs for teens center on the volunteers’ character rather than their celebrity status. By integrating public relations and media planning campaigns, players’ representatives can create favorable sport-celebrity personas by balancing sport-related and off-the-field images (Summers and Johnson, 2008).

Discourage sport-celebrity brands, such as Derek Jeter’s Driven line for Avon, meant to borrow from a star player’s celebrity status. In contrast, encourage official team brands. Each professional sport league could mandate, as part of the players union agreement, that it controls the commercial use of any player’s image. In turn, leagues and their respective teams could recoup additional salary costs by selling team endorsements to advertisers (e.g. the official toothpaste of the New York Yankees). Ultimately, endorsement monies would funnel indirectly to players (i.e. the celebrity talent) via more lucrative team contracts. Such an effort may even divert fans’ focus on players and redirect it toward teams.

For teams and leagues/conferences

Focus promotional campaigns on teams rather than star players. By distributing team-level memorabilia, a sport team could encourage adolescents to adore the entire team rather than one or more star players, which could prevent young fans from entering into the intermediate and extreme stages of sport player idolization. For major league baseball teams, this could mean giving away:
- bats and balls signed by the entire team rather than single players on bat and ball day;
- team posters rather than single-player posters; and
- eliminating single-player promotions like bobblehead doll nights.

Professional leagues now focus much of their promotional efforts on star players; for example, specific athletes serve as the face of their league. Rather than player-centric marketing efforts, leagues could use team-centric marketing efforts, such as using multiple spokespersons or endorsers to encourage team support. Such tactics would be analogous to *Sports Illustrated* offering team and league memorabilia to new subscribers (e.g. a clock with a team or league logo), or celebrating team championships by offering customers and fans team-related merchandise (e.g. a basketball signed by all members of a newly crowned championship team).

Use a team mascot – such as the New York Mets’ Mr Met or the Philadelphia Phillies’ Philly Phanatic – rather than star players, to symbolize team support. Using fictional characters to represent sport teams, such as the Phoenix Sun’s Gorilla mascot, can encourage team support while discouraging sport celebrity worship. By using such mascots in the media and at sport venues to represent teams, instead of star athletes, the damaging effects of a suddenly disgraced player on fans’ psyches may be minimized. Analogous to cartoon spokescharacters in print ads leading to favorable advertising outcomes (Heiser et al., 2008), promoting team mascots may boost adolescent fan loyalty without inducing harmful sport celebrity worship, as indicated in the Absorption Addiction Model (McCutcheon et al., 2002).

Future research

Research on celebrity worship has examined sport and non-sport celebrities; examples of the latter include pop singers, movie stars, television personalities, and dramatic characters (e.g. crew of the starship Enterprise) (Ferris, 2001; Friedman et al., 1978; Leets et al., 1995). As celebrity worship represents a somewhat new research domain, the reasons and explanations for and effects of sport celebrity worship are far from settled (Bush et al., 2004).

To examine the determinants and effects of sport celebrity worship, researchers could study related demographic, cognitive, and emotive variables. For example, at what age is sport celebrity worship the most appealing and the most potentially damaging? How do fan gender, sport category, and athlete characteristics interact to encourage sport celebrity worship (Stevens et al., 2003)? Do anticipated elation and regret – powerful emotions that abet consumer behavior (e.g. Loewenstein et al., 2001) – enhance parasocial attraction for
sport celebrities? How do moods, which influence consumer decision making in non-sport contexts (Bakamitsos and Siomkos, 2004), affect sport celebrity worship? Is the belief that sport organizations act immorally by promoting sport celebrity worship related to people’s moral compass (Forsyth and Nye, 1990; Jones, 1991) or their responses to a sport brand (e.g. attitudes toward the brand, willingness to buy apparel)?

To further our understanding of celebrity idolatry by adolescents in general, other non-sports contexts – such as the movie, music, and fashion industries – could be explored. For example, researchers could examine if girls’ identification with fashion and style figures leads to damaging idolization behaviors.

Ad research might examine if explicit (e.g. I endorse this product), implicit (e.g. I use this product), or imperative (e.g. you should try this product) endorsements encourage sport celebrity worship (McCracken, 1989), or which, if any, celebrity worship warnings in ads curb worshipping behaviors. Results of such studies would help advertisers to develop safe yet effective ads with sport celebrities as product endorsers. Because advertisers reap substantial benefits from using a sport celebrity in their communications, they may resist warnings that parasocial relationships can damage young fans. Nonetheless, such resistance would not preclude sport organizations from being socially responsible about sport celebrity worship. Subsequent research could help these organizations to minimize the harm caused by this phenomenon yet maximize the efficacy of their promotional efforts.

Conclusion

Sport teams, their sponsors, and other entities use likable and attractive sport celebrities to create more efficacious promotions (Bush et al., 2004; Friedman et al., 1978, Jones and Schumann, 2000; Jowdy and McDonald, 2002; McCracken, 1989). The parasocial relationships formed between many people and these celebrities contributes to this efficacy (Elliott, 1998).

Celebrity worship entails fans’ empathy with a celebrity’s triumphs and defeats, over-identification with a celebrity, compulsive behaviors toward a celebrity, and obsession with rudiments of a celebrity’s life (Maltby et al., 2001). Studies on celebrity worship reveal harmful consequences for fans (e.g. declining psychological well-being), celebrities (e.g. being stalked), and society (e.g. blurring the line between reality and fantasy). Although firms often profit by using sport stars as endorsers, sport celebrity worship can damage fans and society. As celebrities in general and sports celebrities in particular are known to influence adolescents in countries as diverse as Australia, China, Singapore, and the United States (Chan and Zhang, 2007; Dix et al., 2010; Jones and Schumann, 2000; La Ferle and Chan, 2008; Tingchi Liu et al., 2007), and adolescents worldwide are subject to similar social and psychological pressures, sports celebrity worship is a likely problem in any country where athletes are glorified.

To mitigate such negative effects and avoid damaging publicity, which may surface through social media outlets that disregard adolescent well-being, sport organizations should adopt promotional efforts that discourage celebrity worship. A sport organization’s pro-active, and thus pro-social, effort to stem sport celebrity worship represents a win-win situation for that organization and its fans. After all, genuine efforts to protect and promote fan well-being should help sport organizations to grow their fan base, increase memorabilia sales, and increase game-day attendance.

Given the powerful incentives to maintain the status quo, some sport teams and advertisers may resist our recommendations. However, these entities could be persuaded by enlightened fans – who could threaten to divert their entertainment dollars elsewhere or boycott irresponsibly advertised products – to adopt one or more of our proposed promotional changes. Hence, our desire to alert sports fans to this problem.

Sport teams and advertisers piggyback on journalists, who popularize star athletes as a by-product of their published work. We do not mean to challenge journalists’ right to free speech; rather, we mean to discourage the exploitation of this by-product.
References


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