Consuming “celebrated athletes”—an investigation of desirable and undesirable characteristics

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Abstract
The aim of this study was to identify characteristics of celebrated athletes (CAs) that elicited positive or negative responses from “consumers” (students) in order to gain insights into relationships between characteristics of CAs and consumption. A convenience sample of 272 undergraduate students (155 male, 117 females) completed a survey questionnaire. Free-response questions were used to elicit their most and least favourite CA and to justify their choices. Through Conceptual Content Analysis six categories of characteristics of CAs were identified with the following hierarchical structure: perceived value as a role model; competence; interpersonal characteristics; physical and mental strength; personal identification; and effort and dedication. Theoretical explanations and implications of the findings are discussed for marketing and management of CAs.

Introduction
Celebrated athletes (CAs), variously referred to as ‘sports’ stars, personalities, heros, icons or role models, and their place within sport and public life have been discussed in recent years. Andrews and Jackson (2001) edited a compilation of case studies investigating the social and political aspects of CAs, in order to express their potential for influencing audiences beyond the sporting arena. In addition, Whannel (2002) traced the emergence of CAs and the manner in which they are portrayed in the media to embody social issues such as race, nationality, identity, masculinity and morality. Authors have also examined the issue of CAs as role models, highlighting a moral and ethical responsibility to their audiences, as they are expected to engender strong values that reflect societal and cultural norms; although this is not necessarily something that is expected of other celebrities (Feezell, 2006; Jones and Schumann, 2000; Kristjanson 2006; Turner, 2004; Wellman, 2003). Furthermore, Smart (2005) has examined the key economic and cultural factors that have contributed to the popularity of CAs such as race, gender, professionalism, media coverage and increasingly, the conspicuous presence of commercial corporations that provide sponsorship and endorsement opportunities. Together these findings suggest that CAs are consumed in a whole variety of ways, but ultimately as material dimensions that are invariably
connected with culture and everyday interactions (Ohl and Taks, 2007; Sandvoss, 2005). Simultaneously, a heightened level of public exposure (e.g. publicity from the media) situates CAs as prime targets for endorsement contracts. As Cashmore and Parker (2003) explain, CAs are characterised by a commodification of the human form; however, little is known about how they are used in this capacity, in particular how consumers perceive CAs and the factors that will influence endorser effectiveness (Boyd and Shank, 2004).

**Celebrated athletes and product endorsement**

Product endorsement can be a powerful and extremely fruitful association for both CAs and corporate sponsors, but it can also be an uncertain enterprise (O’Reilly and Braedley, 2008; Stone, Joseph, and Jones, 2003; Till and Shimp, 1998). CAs are undoubtedly a powerful force of attraction for consumers who want to associate themselves with popular figures (Manivet and Richelieu, 2008); yet it remains important that a product's image is congruent with that of CAs in order to achieve a successful blend (Boyd and Shank, 2004; Kim and Na 2007). A financial arrangement is made between the marketer of a brand and the CA; however, the agreement is predominately based on the model of the CA as both a consumer and information provider (Jones and Schumann, 2000; Stevens, Lathrop and Bradish, 2003). Nevertheless, characteristics of CAs add weight to the persuasive authority of product endorsers and subsequent economic consumption. Therefore, it is important to establish the perceived characteristics of CAs that elicit positive and negative responses from target audiences. Level of skill, credibility and attractiveness are postulated to be powerful moderators of persuasive authority (O’Reilly and Braedley, 2008; Schaaf, 1995), with the latter associated with perceptions of expertise and trustworthiness as well as knowledge, skills, honesty and believability (Shank, 1999). Whannel (1992) reported that characteristics of CAs associated with masculinity such as toughness, aggression, commitment, power, competitiveness, courage and ability to withstand pressure are particularly valued in Western society. This constellation of traits was affirmed by Messner, Dunbar and Hunt (2000) who coined the phrase ‘Televised sports manhood formula’ to explain the production and consumption of televised sport programmes. Congruent with these findings, Fleming, Hardman, Jones and Sheridan (2005) reported that technical competence, physical characteristics and temperament were particularly valued by young elite Rugby League players, whereas virtues and vices were perceived to be relevantly unimportant.

Celebrity profiles are manipulated by the mass media and product manufacturers; therefore, it is likely that perceived characteristics of CAs are in part the result of marketing, as opposed to being representative of CAs ‘objective’ characteristics. Indeed, several authors highlight the media as a key factor in creating and reinforcing public
views of CAs (Reynolds, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005; Smart, 2005; Whannel, 2002), but as yet it is unclear how perceived characteristics of CAs can impact on consumers’ thought processes and subsequent behaviour. It has been suggested that CAs serve as reference idols from which agents will evaluate personal conduct, although more empirical data is needed to support this contention (Lines, 1998; 2001; McEvoy and Erickson, 1981; Evans, 2005; Turner 2004). However, if the latter is accurate, audiences will actively discuss elements of performance and personality traits attributed to CAs, and in doing so, will consume views of acceptance, admiration, irrelevance or disapproval. Within the realm of psychology the primary theories underpinning these processes are diverse and could include (among others) Social Representations and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). According to Moscovici (1981; 1984), social representations are a set of concepts, statements and explanations originating in daily life through the course of inter-individual communications. They are thought to underpin all social interactions between people by providing a framework for establishing a ‘shared social reality’, often deriving from the mass media. Consequently, ideas, beliefs and characteristics attributed to CAs are thought to be the product of a social process linking certain (cognitive, social and behavioural) attributions with CAs.

These assertions are also conceptually related to the tenets of Social Cognitive Theory. According to this theory, modelling is “…one of the most powerful means of transmitting values, attitudes and patterns of thought and behaviour” (Bandura, 1986: 47). From this perspective, learning takes place by observing the behaviour of models (i.e., CAs) and the consequences of their actions in terms of positive (rewards) or negative (punishments) reinforcement associated with particular values, attitudes and patterns of thought and behaviour displayed by them. Reinforcement is particularly salient, as it impacts directly on the relative desirability of characteristics attributed to CAs and subsequently the values, attitudes and patterns of thought and behaviour that are consumed by audiences. Therefore, a clearer understanding of mechanisms underlying consumption could inform the management and marketing of CAs, and with specific reference to the process of modelling, for maximising the impact of social marketing initiatives. Despite these important implications for a variety of disciplines, and calls for research to study CAs like other celebrities, as well as to examine spectators views of professional athletes (Cashmore, 2006; McNamee, Jones, Cooper, Bingham, North and Finley, 2007), a paucity of attention has been devoted to identifying the characteristics of CAs from a variety of sports that arouse admiring or contemptuous emotional and cognitive attributions from target audiences. Consequently the aim of this study was to identify objective and subjective characteristics of CAs that elicited positive or negative responses from consumers, in order to gain insights into relationships between characteristics of CAs and consumption.
Young adults, specifically UK university students provide the focus of analysis within this paper, as they are market sensitive and represent a group often noted for brand loyalty (Shuart, 2003; Nikas, 1999). Filo, Funk and Alexandris (2008) explain the importance of loyalty by relaying its connection to repeat business and expanding a guaranteed revenue and cost savings for commercial brands. Furthermore, future consumer potential and economic support from family and significant others makes students an important market to consider. Fashion consciousness, peer pressure, borrowing power and attractive potential for life-long loyalty provide additional reasons to investigate this lucrative market (Zollo, 1999, Yoh 2005). Consequently, a survey questionnaire utilising free response questions was administered to 272 undergraduate students (155 male and 117 Female [Aged 18-21]). The participants consisted of ‘new enrolees’ on Sports Exercise and Sport Management programmes in September 2006. Except for being a new enrolee on the pre-stated undergraduate programmes, no other specific inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied. All data collection took place during induction lectures held during the participants’ first week at University. Participants were requested to refrain from discussing their views with peers to increase independence of responses. Congruent with recommendations of Fleming et al. (2005), the participants were asked to identify their most and least favourite CA: ‘Who is your favourite/least favourite sports star?’

In order to examine different aspects of consumption and their postulated relationship with characteristics of CAs, two free response questions invited participants to justify the reasons underlying their choices: Why do you like/dislike this particular sport star? The open-ended nature of these questions afforded respondents the freedom to provide reasons for their choice under a personal framework. The rationale underlying our decision to focus on ‘new enrolees’ was to minimise contamination of responses as a result of experience with ‘student culture’ and socially desirable responding in terms of being influenced by the opinions, views and perceptions of CAs possessed by the teaching staff. Eight questionnaires were returned either incomplete or unintelligible. This resulted in a total of 264 questionnaires available for analysis.

**Category generation—characteristics of most and least favourite celebrated athletes**

Conceptual content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004) was used to classify characteristics of most and least favourite CAs into mutually exclusive categories. A coding frame was developed that employed both emergent (categories developed following preliminary examination of the data) and a priori coding (categories established prior to analysis based on existing knowledge or theory). In order to enhance credibility, respondent validation was used to reduce bias in the interpretation of the findings. This was achieved by presenting the findings during a subsequent key lecture and in-
viting the study participants to comment on themes and categories identified by the authors. Therefore, the categories presented are grounded in the ‘participants’ words and the interpretation verified as accurate by the participants. This process revealed six categories of characteristics mentioned by this specific group of consumers to justify their choice of most and least favourite CAs. All six categories were mentioned by the participants in the context of most favourite CAs, whereas only five were mentioned in the context of least favourite. Participants provided full and rich descriptions, often detailing multiple reasons for their choices. By selectively using direct quotations from surveys it is hoped that the credibility of the categories are preserved (Flick, 2006). Categories are reported in hierarchical order, most frequently cited to least frequently cited (See table 1).

Table 1: Hierarchical order of categories attributed to most and least favourite celebrated athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Most Favourite</th>
<th>Least Favourite</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Value as a Role Model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o On-field moral and ethical qualities such fairness, honesty, sportsmanship and honour</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Off-field characteristics such as public image in terms of moralistic and ethical lifestyle choices or behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Presence or absence of technical skill or unique ‘extraordinary’ abilities during competition</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Personal successes and achievements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Retention of ‘the common touch’ (modesty)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Amiability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Respect and loyalty for consumers and club (Soccer only)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Antonyms of the above that suggest absence of endearing interpersonal characteristics such as arrogance, overconfidence, disloyalty and greed (i.e., using fame and talent for economic gain)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and Mental Strength</td>
<td>o Mental resilience</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Performance under psychological pressure</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Physicality on field that elicited fear from opponents</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Socio-cultural or physical similarity to the consumer</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Passion and determination</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Commitment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Expeditious recovery from injury</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Category 1: Perceived value as a role model**

This category represented a dichotomy of positive and negative traits associated with CAs perceived value as a role model for society in general, as well as people who may be considering a career in sport. Themes subsumed within this category included both on- and off-field characteristics of CAs. On-field characteristics included the presence or absence of moral and ethical qualities such as fairness, sportsmanship and honour during competition. For example: (1) Michael Owen (Newcastle United and English International Soccer player): “He is very fair and by that I mean very honest and will not cheat in any way and I admire that”; (2) Ryan Giggs (Manchester United and Welsh International Soccer player): “He is a very honest player and has been a role model to me for many years”; (3) Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United and Portuguese International Soccer player): “He’s a great talent; however, he always seems to be cheating by diving, play acting, trying to get people booked. I feel that his type of behaviour is spoiling the nature of the game”; and (4) Linford Christie (Former GB International athlete: 100m Olympic Gold medallist): “Because he let people believe that he had worked to have got what he achieved and was a great role model to many. He shattered it all by taking drugs and letting a lot of people down”.

N.B. Although Linford Christie was never found guilty of using performance enhancing drugs, in this instance rumour has taken precedent over factual evidence and contributed to a negative perception of this CA.

Off-field characteristics such as public image, in particular with regards to moralistic
and ethical lifestyle choices or behaviour were also considered important by participants for justifying their most and least favourite CAs. For example: (1) Tiger Woods (Golf pro: Currently [at the time of writing] ranked World number 1): “I think that he has a good image and sets a good example for young people away from the game”; (2) Ricky Hatton (Light Welterweight Boxing Champion): “He’s a good role model for all ages. You never see him doing bad things which kids will copy. His personal life is never reported negatively”; (3) Diego Maradona (Former Argentine International Soccer player and recipient of the FIFA Award for Best Soccer player of the 20th Century): “His drug lifestyle is not a good example. He got involved with the mafia. He is not a person to look up to”; and (4) Mike Tyson (Former Undisputed Heavyweight Boxing Champion): “This sports star is very violent outside of matches. This is not professional and he is not a good role model for people interested in a boxing career”. Themes within this category are consistent with the theoretical assumption that CAs are expected to engender strong values which reflect ‘expected’ cultural norms (Feezell, 2006, Kristjanson, 2006; Wellman, 2003). From this perspective, CAs that do not personify a virtuous temperament (either on or off-field) are deemed undeserving of the label ‘role model’. Therefore, in contradiction to a social pessimist position this finding provides evidence of virtuous reasoning by consumers, as participants selected CAs who they considered were, or were not, worthy of emulation. Indeed, a value judgement was more frequently made to justify the choice of most favourite CAs.

Category 2: Competence

This category consisted of themes related to perceived competence of CAs. Presence or absence of technical skill or unique ‘extraordinary’ abilities during competition was an important and defining theme in this category, in particular for justifying the choice of most favourite CAs. For example: (1) Kevin Pietersen (England International Cricket Player): “Is capable of playing extraordinary shots”; (2) Steven Gerrard (Liverpool FC and International Soccer player): “He is so good he can win a match by himself”; (3) David Beckham (LA Galaxy and English International Soccer player): “I feel that he is over rated he gets too much credit for the few skills he has, but not enough is made of the skills that he lacks”; and (4) Robbie Savage (Derby County and Welsh International Soccer player): “Because he’s not a particularly good player at his sport. The only thing he’s good for is winding up [frustrating] opponents”. Competence was also defined as personal successes or achievements by participants in the current study: Kelly Holmes (Former GB International Athlete 800/1500m Gold medallist): “She achieved her dream - Gold medals in the Olympics”; and Paula Radcliffe (GB International Athlete: Marathon runner): “For Paula it is all about winning and achieving. She has achieved so much in a career where you need to be the best, ‘cos no one remembers second place”. Appreciation for the technical competence of CAs is consistent with previous research conducted by Lines (1998) and Fleming et al. (2005), although in
contrast to these authors, technical competence was ranked second by participants in the current study. Overall the themes associated with competence, in particular successes and achievements are also reflective of the meritocratic character of sport, and demonstrate the high standards demanded by consumers of sport, whereby CAs were particularly deserving of admiration if they had capitalised on their extraordinary talents by winning prestigious sporting titles or accolades congruent with their personal goals.

**Category 3: Interpersonal characteristics**

In contrast to consuming extraordinary competence of CAs, participants in the current study also admired the ‘ordinary’ in terms of interpersonal characteristics. Themes in this category included a sense of modesty and ‘down-to-earth’ persona: (1) Kobe Bryant (NBA Basketball player): “He is a person who does not like to get in the public eye too much. He keeps himself to himself” (2) Jonny Wilkinson (Newcastle Falcons and International Rugby Union player): “A modest man who doesn’t believe in his own hype. I admire his modesty”; and (3) Steven Gerrard: “He is a very down to earth kind of person - so for example, you would be able to easily talk to him”. Another interpersonal characteristic attributed to favourite CAs was perceived friendliness: (1) Ronaldinho (Barcelona FC and Brazilian International Soccer player: Winner of FIFA World Player of the Year 2004-05): “I particularly like this football [soccer] player because he is always smiling. A friendly looking character in a serious business”; (2) James Hickman: (Former GB International Swimmer) “When I met him he was a genuinely nice person who gave me tips on my stroke”; and (3) Ricky Hatton (Professional Boxer): “Has a good heart. Out of the ring he is friendly and welcoming to supporters and reporters. What you see is what you get”. In addition to a down-to-earth and friendly persona, loyalty to consumers and club was also considered as an admirable characteristic for CAs in the context of Soccer. Examples include: (1) Steven Gerrard: “He has had the chance to move on numerous occasions but his loyalty to Liverpool and the supporters of the club has ruled his decisions”; and (2) Ryan Giggs: “Ryan has stayed loyal to Manchester United for over ten years. Although he has played in a good side he has fought to keep his place where the easy option could have been to move”.

Virtuous qualities of CAs such as modesty, amiability and in particular loyalty were frequently emphasised as being more important than competence, as the following example relating to the CA Alan Shearer illustrates (Former Newcastle United and English International Soccer player): “I like Shearer because he is loyal. He is a local sports star who turned down much bigger clubs. He stayed with Newcastle United for 10 years. There are many talented top class footballers [Soccer players], but for me loyalty to Newcastle United and his team mates makes this man something special. A hero”. Absence of virtuous and endearing interpersonal characteristics such as disloyalty
and profiteering were evident in rationales for choice of least favourite CAs. Although arrogance and aloofness (in particular if combined with lack of competence) was most frequently mentioned justification for least favourite CAs: (1) Maurice Green (USA International Athlete, 100m): “He thinks that he’s better than everyone else. He is over confident and arrogant. I dislike him”; (2) Olly Barkley: (Gloucester and England International Rugby Union Player) “Because he acts so cocky, but has nothing to back it up with”; (3) Robbie Savage: “He has proved that he has no loyalty to any club that he plays for, including his country. He always bad mouths everyone once he moves clubs”; and (4) David Beckham: “he uses his fame and talent to cash in. Money and status seem more important to him”. Themes within the category provided further evidence of virtuous reasoning by consumers, as the presence of endearing interpersonal traits, in particular evidence of allegiance, was more frequently used to justify choice of most than least favourite CAs.

**Category 4: Physical and mental strength**

Themes associated with this category included mental resilience (in particular, in contexts of psychological pressure), courage and physical strength. With reference to mental resilience in the context of most favourite athletes: (1) Tiger Woods: “He feels no pressure and never fails to deliver”; (2) Kobe Bryant: “He can handle immense pressure. He is very focused mentally and I like that”; and (3) Ian Thorpe (Australian Swimmer: 5x Olympic Gold medallist): “Always seems to rise to the occasion when under pressure”. Conversely, although in relatively fewer cases, the inability to demonstrate mental resilience (despite perceived competence) was used to justify choice of least favourite CAs; for example, Tim Henman (GB Tennis player): “Henman is not mentally tough enough. Technically he is good but he freezes in pressure situations”. The latter statement suggests that the presence of competence was not sufficiently powerful to override the perceived lack of mental resilience under pressure. Furthermore, mental toughness combined with competence appears to have a multiplicative impact on admiration for CAs. Physicality and general physical presence that elicited fear from opponents during competition, was also a particularly admired characteristic of favourite CAs: (1) Garry Neville (Manchester United and English International Soccer player): “He makes sure that the opposition know that he is around with some crunching challenges”; (2) John Arne Riise (Liverpool FC and Norwegian International Soccer player): “He can hit a football at great speed. Goal keepers are frightened of his power”; and (3) Shaquille O’Neal (NBA Basketball Player): “He has a big presence on the court, he has the ability to change games with his power and determination”.

These findings indicate that a degree of positive or ‘motivational aggressive behaviour’ displayed by CAs was accepted and admired by participants in the current study. Contrary to expectations a lack of physicality was not cited in rationales for
least favourite CAs. However, excessively aggressive acts were condemned and used to justify choice of least favourite CAs: Roy Keane (Sunderland FC manager and former Manchester United and Irish International Soccer player): “He is blatantly a thug. Many times he has had bust ups and dragged the game through the mud. In his autobiography he also mentions finishing another player’s career and has done just that”. Themes inherent within this category lend further support to the earlier assertion of the impact of media reinforcement. Consistent with Whannel (1992; 2002) masculine characteristics were highly-valued by participants in the current study such as resilience, aggression, commitment, power, competitiveness, courage and ability to withstand psychological pressure.

**Category 5: Personal identification**

Themes within this category were directly related to perceived similarities of participants with the named CA in terms of place, social background and physical resemblance. Identification with place and social background of CAs also frequently elicited issues of pride, dreams and stories of success against the odds. Examples include: Steven Gerrard: “Plays for my favourite football [soccer] team. He is a local lad who has done Liverpool proud”; (2) Alan Shearer: “He has achieved what most Geordies (like me) only dream of. To captain Newcastle and wear the number 9”; (3) Ricky Hatton: “He comes from a Manchester background like myself”; (4) James Hickman: “He was the best in the world and also the smallest in his field. My situation is similar but he has shown that it is possible to beat and break through the stereotype of 6 feet tall swimmers”; and (5) Peter Crouch (Portsmouth and English International Soccer player): “Because he’s a big skinny striker like me”. The absence of similarity in terms of place and social background was cited by several participants as reasons for choice of least favourite CAs: (1) Roy Keane: “Cos he’s joined the Mackams. Mackam bastard”; and (2) Alan Shearer: “plays for the scum”. These derogatory statements represent the colloquial language indigenous to the region of data collection (the North East of England), and are likely to be symptomatic of strong local identities and a historical rivalry between Sunderland AFC and Newcastle United FC; with ‘Mackam’ and ‘The Scum’ used to refer to supporters of the former and latter Soccer clubs respectively.

**Category 6: Effort and dedication**

Themes in this category were exclusively mentioned in the context of favourite CAs and referred to dedication and commitment when both striving towards, and achieving their personal goals: (1) Pete Goss (Yachtsman): “He demonstrates an absolute commitment and dedication to an end goal”; (2) Steven Gerrard: “Has the passion and drive to make him stand out”; and (3) Paula Radcliffe: “Shows determination, aims high and always achieves her goals”. In addition, the respondent validation procedure
revealed that expeditious recovery from multiple injuries and consistently returning to professional competition was viewed as special type of passion, dedication and commitment to sport: (1) Jonny Wilkinson: “Despite numerous injuries he continues to fight to play. Many other players would have stopped”; (2) Ryan Giggs: “Even though hamstring injuries should have stopped his career, he continues to apply himself correctly and he can still make a difference to a game”; and (3) Kelly Holmes: “She has had a lot of injury problems but she has always come back to training when she could have given up”. Therefore, extraordinary effort, perseverance and returning to competition after multiple injuries was viewed as particularly strong indications of an athletes ‘allegiance’ to their chosen sport, and particularly deserving of unique praise and recognition from participants.

**Conclusion**

The social representations of CAs communicated by the participants in the current study (as represented in the categories above) began to resemble and reinforce societal norms, especially in terms of virtue, vice and masculinity. Recency and long-term notoriety of CAs names in this study may have been salient factors in guiding the thoughts of respondents. Jones (1997) alluded to this by emphasising the temporal dimensions of popularity when undertaking fandom-related research. Therefore, attributions made by this sample represent to some extent consumption of prominent social representations of CAs communicated by the media at the time of data collection, although evidence to verify such claims (such as a newsprint content analysis) was not carried out. Despite the acknowledgement of a wide range of athletes (named as favourite or least favourite) at the individual level, there was convergence of themes related to justify choice of most and least favourite CA. Consistent with previous research, findings indicate that credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, physical characteristics and resilience under pressure elicit positive responses from target audiences (Fleming et al., 2005; Schaaf 1995; Shank, 1999; Whannel 1992). However, in contrast to previous research, attractiveness (Schaaf, 1995) was omitted from participants’ rationales for choice of CAs. Competence featured heavily in justifications for choice of CAs, although in contrast a primary emphasis was placed on ‘ethical and moral’ characteristics, in particular personality and behavioural traits that were considered to be indicative of a positive role model, including other endearing interpersonal characteristics such as modesty, amiability and loyalty. Indeed, virtuous characteristics combined with other favourable characteristics such as competence and mental resilience appeared to have a cumulative impact on esteem of CAs. Physicality on-field was also particularly valued by participants, although excessively aggressive behaviour was condemned and used to justify choice of least favourite CAs, which provided further evidence of virtuous reasoning by participants in the current study.
In response to calls for researchers to determine what makes CAs particularly effective as endorsers of brands (Boyd and Shank, 2004), the findings of the current study indicated that physical, behavioural, interpersonal, moral and socio-cultural characteristics (with both positive and negative attributions) are consumed by audiences. This has several important implications for the management and marketing (both economic and social) of CAs. Cultural intermediaries (agents, promoters, photographers and marketing professionals) should foster the development and presentation of moral and ethical qualities of their clients, which would bolster their longevity and potential for commercial endorsements (Rojek, 2001). Furthermore, with specific reference to the processes of modelling, reinforcement and emphasis placed on virtuous characteristics, including personal identification, the results of the current study has implications for maximising the marketing potential of CAs. According to Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), observing a model considered to be salient and similar to oneself (i.e., favourite CAs with whom observers identify) receiving positive reinforcement will increase the likelihood that behaviour will be modelled or a social or moral standard internalised. Positive reinforcement may occur through any number of mediums, such as material success or the conspicuous rewards of celebrity culture. This adds weight to the argument that CAs should have a moral and ethical responsibility to consumers and society in general.

From this viewpoint, marketing of CAs should take account of the positive and negative aspects of reinforcing their views and behaviour both on-field and off-field. Selecting (or marketing) CAs with characteristics perceived to be congruent with the images and messages associated with economic and social marketing campaigns, would invariably augment their effectiveness. With regards to positive aspects, the selection of CAs with characteristics congruent with social marketing initiatives targeting public health (e.g., drugs and alcohol, obesity and sexual health); environmental (e.g., recycling); and racial and anti-nationalist (e.g., kick racism out of sport) as well as other campaigns targeting social and economic problems such as crime and poverty could have tangible benefits for both society and CAs. However, in terms of negative aspects, CAs who actively endorse products or messages that are counter-intuitive to campaigns which target positive change in Society, increase the risk of conveying mixed messages as a direct result of their persuasive power with negative consequences resulting. For example, with regards to social marketing in the context of public health, soccer player Alan Shearer has previously been involved with advertisements for Macdonald’s Fast Food Restaurants; this is despite the UK currently experiencing an obesity epidemic. Therefore, endorsement of negative images, messages or products by CAs that are detrimental to society should be carefully reviewed by governing bodies of sport (even after retirement as persuasive power of CAs can be enduring) on ethical grounds. This viewpoint is also raised by Wellman (2003), although he surrenders responsibility to CAs.
The use of student populations in academic research often raises questions of diminished transferability of results to other contexts, although it is appropriate to use students if the context has been taken into consideration (Enis, Cox and Stafford, 1972; Yoh, 2005). A student sample was warranted in the current study, as sports students offered a clear connection to the realm of sport through a willingness to study the subject (Ohl and Taks, 2007). In addition, students per se are market sensitive (Shuart, 2003) and offer an attractive and feasible market for a multitude of products (Nikas, 1999). However, given that the current study was conducted in an academic setting in the UK, further research should establish the transferability of these findings to other contexts. Future research must be taken to a wider audience in order to gain a deeper understanding of how sport and CAs are consumed by audiences. According to Stuart (2003), there are grounds for undertaking in-depth interviews to tease out some of the more cavernous beliefs and motivations that underpin consumption in this domain. Mixed-methods research could also investigate how people, in particular young people begin to construct an attachment to sport and CAs and the subsequent impact on economic and experiential consumption. The behaviour that characterise the lifestyles of the consumers and the factors that influence relationships between consumers, sporting genres and specific CAs could also offer fruitful avenues for further investigation. In conclusion, this exploratory piece of research has pointed to characteristics of CAs that elicited positive and negative cognitive attributions from a population of market sensitive consumers. This has enabled further insights into the hypothetical relationships between characteristics of CAs and cognitive, social and behavioural aspects of consumption, which has important implications for the management and marketing of CAs, including the integrity of sport in society generally.

References


**JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote**

1. Writing for publication is a learned skill. Therefore, co-authoring a paper with an experienced academic has proven to be a valuable learning tool. I would like to thank Dr. Darren Flynn for dedicating his time to the mentoring process.

2. Kevin is a 29 year old mature student, who is currently in his first year of study on a PhD at the University of Teesside.

3. Dear reader, if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic, the authors can be contacted on: kevin.dixon@tees.ac.uk or d.flynn@tees.ac.uk.