



Applying Dyer's Star Theory to Sport: Understanding the Cultivation of Athlete Stardom

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Samuel Duncan 

Holmesglen Institute and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

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***Correspondence:** Sam Duncan, 6/36 Anderson Road, Hawthorn East, Victoria, Australia, 3123; email: Sam.Duncan@holmesglen.edu.au

Abstract

Sports stars and heroes have always been a product of the times in which they have existed and, as such, athlete stars, largely constructed by and through the media, have evolved over time. In particular, the meanings of characteristics that have defined stars of different generations have changed as society's expectations and social norms have evolved. This can be understood through Richard Dyer's (1998) star theory, which states that to cultivate their stardom a celebrity must resonate with the ideals, values, and spirit of the time.

This theoretical paper aims to highlight how Dyer's star theory – originally developed as a means of understanding the construction of movie stars by mainstream media – can be used to understand the ways in which athlete stars can promote star attributes to cultivate their stardom by displaying modern values and presenting themselves as both “ordinary” and “extraordinary.” By creating a framework for understanding the process of creating athlete stardom, we are also able to begin to understand how athletes' social media activities and stardom will evolve in the future, thus creating an important tool for athletes and their managers responsible for enhancing their brand. To expound and enrich the theory a survey of sports fans is included. The survey responses provide insights into how the expectations of fans can influence social athlete social media strategies and the cultivation of athlete stars.

Key words: Stars, stardom, athletes, sport, social media

Introduction

The idea of athletes as global stars, while not necessarily new, has grown significantly in the global digital age. Increasingly, athlete stars command the kind of attention that elevates them into some of the most recognized brands in the world. Having this level of brand power makes them an increasingly influential tool for the teams they represent and for other brands wishing to align themselves with sporting stars who are increasingly capturing the hearts and minds of young consumers. Indeed, research by Pifer et al. (2015) highlight that young sports fans are often more likely to loyally follow their favorite athletes, rather than their favorite teams.

Stimulating their stardom and power has been the hyper-commercialization of global sport and the associated ballooning of player wages (Pifer et al., 2015). In Europe's top professional soccer leagues, somewhere between 50% and 70% of team revenues is consumed by player wages (Deloitte, 2013), while in American leagues such

as the NBA, MLB, and NFL the figure is close to 50% (Pifer et al., 2015). To leverage the star power of athletes to amplify their own brand value, clubs and teams actively seek to promote and enhance the profiles of their most successful and commercially appealing players. In this sense, star players have been defined and collated alongside a range of other variables associated with the development of brand equity in sports teams (Su et al., 2020).

The relationship between star athletes and the value of the teams they play for has been the focus for a range of studies, including Pifer et al. (2015), who set out to “better understand the seemingly fundamental and important relationship between star players and team’s brand equities” by investigating and assessing how star player characteristics affect areas of brand equities that are important to professional teams. Other studies, such as Braunstein and Zhang (2005), have developed frameworks for how we can understand what makes an athlete a star and the characteristics an athlete must possess to become a star. These areas will be elaborated on in the following section.

However, what is not as widely understood or studied is the process by which athletes can cultivate their own stardom by actively promoting their star characteristics. In an attempt to better understand this, the present theoretical study draws on the “star theory” of cinema and film scholar Richard Dyer, who, in his most famous book, *Stars*, first published in 1979, examined how movie stars were created. By linking notions of stardom and star characteristics to Dyer’s star theory, we can begin to understand how star characteristics can be harnessed and promoted by athletes on their social media channels to develop and manifest their star status. In doing so, we are able to better understand the social media strategies of athletes and how they are likely to evolve in the future. As a result, we can create an important theoretical tool for athletes and athlete managers to use to guide the development of athlete stardom. To expound and enrich the theory a survey of sports fans is included. The survey responses provide insights into how the expectations of fans can influence social athlete social media strategies and the cultivation of athlete stars.

To fully understand how Dyer’s star theory can be used to promote star characteristics and foster athlete stardom, it is first necessary to understand the concept of stardom in a sporting context and the athlete characteristics required to be a star.

Understanding Stardom in Sport: What Makes a Star?

As highlighted above, many studies of athlete stars have centered upon concepts of “athlete brands” and various frameworks designed to understand star attributes and characteristics. Given that star athletes are undoubtedly commercial brands, it is important to understand the concept of the “brand” and how it relates to stardom. Aaker (1991) listed four components of brand equity: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. These have been utilized and expanded upon by others, including Braunstein and Zhang (2005), to make sense of how brand equity is created and sustained, and, importantly, how consumers respond to various brands. According to Aaker, the first phase, “brand awareness,” relates to how quickly, easily, and often consumers think of a brand’s name. The next phase, “brand image,” is often developed through marketing ploys designed to shape the consumer’s attitudes to the brand. This is linked to the “brand associations” phase, which provides insight into how a collection of perceptions combine to provide a judgement of the product’s overall excellence. Judgements of overall excellence determine a brand’s “perceived quality” and, if the overall quality is considered high, the brand will attain significant “brand equity” and “brand loyalty.”

But what makes an athlete a star? There is no doubting the value of star athletes. When LeBron James joined the Cleveland Cavaliers, for example, his star status directly assisted the club to increase its average attendance from 11,497 to 20,562 per game. Simultaneously, the team value increased from \$258 million to \$476 million, the fifth most valuable franchise in the league (Matuszewski, 2010). Yet not every player makes such a significant difference to a franchise and its brand equity. What makes James so influential?

Although the term “star player” is used frequently in sports media, marketing, and public relations, there is a common acceptance amongst academics that it lacks a universal definition and that “ambiguity often surrounds the practitioner’s use of the term” (Pifer et al., 2015, p. 93). However, despite this lack of clarity, there is a general acknowledgement that stars possess and exhibit important on-field and off-field characteristics that distinguish them from their peers, for if an athlete were famous for their off-field actions only, they would be a “celebrity,” not a star (Rein et al., 1997).

Theories about the characteristics an individual should possess in order to be labeled a star generally began outside the realm of sport. McGuire (1968) argued that our attitudes about others are influenced by the expertise, trustworthiness, and persuasiveness we believe they possess. In 1985, McGuire highlighted that our understanding and acceptance of messaging depend upon similarity, familiarity, and liking of the person delivering the message. This illustrates the importance of trustworthiness, which was discussed by Braunstein and Zhang (2005) in their study of star characteristics. They found that attributes including athletic expertise, social attractiveness, likeable

personality, characteristic style, and professional trustworthiness best represent star qualities, and argued that star athletes have the ability to influence others based on these five-star power factors.

Other researchers such as Pifer et al. (2015) argue that these characteristics do not place enough emphasis on “concepts like winning and in-game performance.” Other studies define “stars” through concepts relating to “sports heroes.” However, these often place too great an emphasis on the athlete’s on-field abilities and performance (Shuart, 2007; Yang and Shi, 2011).

Therefore, the most balanced and accurate definition of a star athlete should encompass both the on-field excellence of the athlete as well as the off-field characteristics that ensure they resonate with the public. As such, for this study a star athlete will be defined as an athlete with considerable on-field talents, which are superior to those of the majority of other participants, and who also possesses Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) five-star power factors: professional trustworthiness, likeable personality, athletic expertise, social attractiveness, and characteristic style.

This study is concerned with the ways in which star attributes are promoted and harnessed to cultivate stardom, and so has to ask in particular: How does an athlete with athletic expertise ensure they are also trusted by the community and seen as likeable, socially attractive, and as having characteristic style? How do they cultivate this image to create their stardom? Further, given the broad characteristic traits outlined above, are star characteristics interpreted differently in different communities, societies, and settings? Do they change from generation to generation? And what makes an athlete relatable, trusted, likeable, and attractive?

To help answer these questions and to understand how athletes can foster and enhance their stardom, it is first necessary to understand Dyer’s star theory.

How Is the Star Constructed? Applying Dyer’s Star Theory to Sport

The cultivation of sports stars can be understood through Richard Dyer’s (1998) star theory. This states that a celebrity must resonate with the beliefs, ideals, values, and spirit of the time to capture the public’s interest. According to Dyer, the celebrity or “star” is a branded social phenomenon, reflective of their environment and a product of their era and the culture of the time. As such, fans in a particular era are drawn to stars because they relate to them. This, in turn, helps make them seem trustworthy, likeable, and socially attractive. While Dyer was writing about cinema stars, his theory can be applied to sport as a means of understanding the construction of sports stars via their social media platforms. Dyer states that stars represent shared cultural values, and it is by conveying these prevailing beliefs and ideas that their star persona grows. In doing so, stars provide an ideal of what people generally are supposed to be like. This idea also relates to sport. Coakley (2011) discusses this from a sports perspective, outlining how the prevailing structures of sport provide a meritocratic pathway for obtaining power and recognition, which is promoted as the ‘ideal’ for others to aspire towards. Dyer believes the star persona is largely constructed by the star themselves, or by the media, which today would include the way sports stars cultivate their image via their own social media channels. Furthermore, Dyer proposes that the image of the star is paradoxical: a star is “ordinary” while also being “extraordinary.”

To fully understand how notions of stardom can apply to sport and athletes, it is first necessary to understand their place in film studies. As Robert Shail (n.d, p. 1) explains, “the notion of stardom has been one of the medium’s defining characteristics,” remaining “central to the successful commercial production, distribution and exhibition of films” (p. 1). According to Shail, stars play a significant part in the marketing of cinema. In fact, they are often the primary reason audiences watch movies.

Shail might easily have been discussing the sports industry. In the commercial and professional world of sport, stars are increasingly utilized by sporting organizations to attract fans and help sell their brand. This is also reflective of changing consumer trends – particularly in relation to younger “Generation Z” fans, who are inclined to gravitate toward and follow their favorite athletes rather than a favourite team, changing their team allegiance based on who their favorite athletes are playing for (Duncan, 2020).

Athlete stardom is intrinsically linked to the marketing, promotion, and economic value of the sports industry. Richard de Cordova (1991) emphasizes this point, highlighting that the production of stardom is largely based on the desire of audiences to have more of a product that they have previously enjoyed. Thus, stars are fundamentally important in ensuring sporting audiences are attracted and retained. In this sense, they are a commodity and a product based on satisfying consumer demand.

As Richard Maltby (2003) outlines in his chapter on the star system in *Hollywood Cinema*, while stars are created and cultivated by industry producers, they are also required to embody the characteristics and attributes that make a star appealing to their audience. In this sense, stars as a form of branded social phenomenon are reflective of their environment.

According to Dyer (1998), the star image is constructed by means of various kinds of media texts, including publicity interviews, feature articles, and news reports; in the digital age, such texts would also include social media. The construction of the star is based upon the consistent portrayal of prevailing characteristics and attributes that resonate with and appeal to the audience. Dyer notes that this provides the industry with an opportunity to form a nuanced persona for the star over time. By these means, the star is transformed into a consumer product: fans want to be like them, dress like them, buy the same clothes as them, attend the same sporting events, and go to the same holiday destinations. As Shail (n.d., p. 9) notes, central to the successful creation of stars “is the notion that stars represent something meaningful to those who identify with them,” which in the context of the star athlete involves appearing relatable, trustworthy, likeable, and socially attractive.

Dyer (1998) goes a step further and discusses the role of ideology in the construction and cultivation of stars. According to him, stars must embody the dominant ideology of Western society and, as outlined by Shail (n.d., p. 10) “provide an image of how the world is, or should be, usually with an aspect of approval or disapproval built-in.” Similarly, Stacey (1994) believes that the conceptualization of stars is carried out through historical developments and that, to understand the process of stardom, it is necessary to contextualize the meaning of the star in the terms of their times and the particular mode of their fame’s production and consumption. Thus, their meaning and the values they embody change from era to era, based on shifting ideological, production, and consumption trends in society.

Linking consumer demand and the production of stars is the effectiveness of the character or star in resonating with the public, which can then impact the way the star is perceived in their personal life (Dyer, 1998). For example, many viewers may like a particular actor because of the roles they play in movies. When this happens, the actor’s authenticity and the authentication of the characters the actor plays merge. This concept is equally applicable to the athlete and the role they play in a team.

According to Dyer (1998), to truly resonate with their audience, a star must be seen as relatable and ordinary, reflective of shared everyday American or Western values, while at the same time also being seen as extraordinary – reflective of what ordinary citizens should aspire to be like. Thus, stars can be seen to have spectacular lifestyles thanks to their wealth and social capital, but owing to the “ordinary-extraordinary” paradox, this extravagance does not lead to feelings of resentment or jealousy from society. Stars are seen as ordinary people who live a more lavish lifestyle than the average citizen, yet to many they remain relatable. In the eyes of their fans, their wealth has not transformed them, at least not in a negative way. Rather, their wealth and success are justified: they have achieved what many citizens aspire toward and, as such, their extraordinary lifestyle is relatable to those who dream of a rich and famous lifestyle for themselves. Additionally, although they are famous, their fame serves to highlight their best qualities and portrays them as reputable citizens who reflect the prevailing values of society (Dyer, 1998). If we view this idea in the context of Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) five-star power factors, it is clear the “ordinary-extraordinary” paradox serves to enhance the key star characteristics. By appearing “ordinary,” the athlete is seen as relatable, trusted, and even likeable, while their “extraordinary” attributes reinforce their athletic expertise and attractiveness since they represent what many others strive to be.

Critics of Dyer have stressed that, in today’s vibrant, diverse, and dynamic society, there is no longer a monolithic dominant ideology. Society is more fluid and variable and, as such, stars can take different forms and appeal to different sub-groups of society based on their beliefs, values, and ideology. Furthermore, stars now have far more autonomy in the creation and cultivation of their persona and stardom than they did when Dyer wrote his work. While such persona creation was once the domain of industry producers and publicists, social media means that stars can control their own image far more readily in the digital age.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that, for stars to be successfully created, they must resonate with sections of the community based upon the ideas that they reflect and they must embody key shared characteristics, values, and ideals. This helps ensure fans see them as relatable, trustworthy, likeable, and attractive. It is also clear that the above film-based discussion of stardom can be applied to understand athlete stars. As highlighted previously, athlete stars are an increasingly important marketing tool for sports organizations (Pifer et al., 2015). For athletes to amplify their star characteristics, like movie stars, they must embody the common, shared values of society. Furthermore, just as the meaning of movie stars evolves from era to era based on changing ideological, production, and consumption trends, so too does that of athlete stars. Of particular interest to this study is how social media has impacted the creation, cultivation, and consumption of stars. Today’s stars have more autonomy than ever in exhibiting their personality and shaping their stardom (Gibbs, O’Reilly, & Brunette, 2014). They are able to seamlessly engage with their fans, who can provide instantaneous feedback that enables athletes to measure the popularity of their persona and stardom in real time (Gibbs, O’Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Furthermore, social media enables athletes to portray particular values and ideals that help enhance their star attributes and cultivate their stardom.

Enhancing Star Characteristics by Reflecting the Beliefs, Ideals, and Values of the Time

By utilizing Dyer's star theory to interpret how athletes can cultivate their stardom, we can argue that for an athlete to promote the star characteristics of trustworthiness, likeability, athletic expertise, social attractiveness, and characteristic style, they must reflect the prevailing beliefs, ideals, and values of the time, and, more so, they must portray those values in a manner that upholds the star paradox of appearing both ordinary and extraordinary.

Yet, if it is true that stars evolve and change from one generation to the next, it is also true that they differ between communities, depending on the values that bind the latter. Indeed, in a culturally diverse and dynamic society made up of many sub-groups and cultures, star values can hardly be monolithic. Nevertheless, there are shared and commonly accepted values or ideals that most of society aspires toward or, at the very least, understands and respects. In their study on character strengths and virtues, Petersen and Seligman (2004) outlined 24 common values embedded in religions, rituals, literature, and human activities that have been recognized over time across national boundaries and different societies. They grouped these virtues into six key categories:

- Wisdom and knowledge – creativity, curiosity, judgement, love of learning, perspective
- Courage – bravery, honesty, persistence, zest
- Temperance – forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-control
- Transcendence – appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality
- Humanity – love, kindness, social intelligence
- Justice – teamwork, fairness, leadership

If we assume that these values resonate with society from generation to generation, country to country, and community to community, then perhaps the changes in star characteristics from one generation to the next are more nuanced, based on how they are interpreted and understood, or even how they are depicted in the way athletes project these values. For example, while Dyer (1998) outlines that star values were portrayed by the film industry through different media texts, today many movie and sports stars can use their own social and digital media channels to cultivate their stardom. Furthermore, the way society perceives notions such as beauty, bravery, spirituality, modesty, prudence, and humor can be seen as continuously evolving and as taking on different meanings in different eras and even communities. Thus, the way athletes actively live and project society's values must also evolve.

A Voice on Social Media: Displaying Modern Values Through Social Media

In today's society, athletes are increasingly engaging in social activism and causes to illustrate how they represent prevailing values and beliefs. According to Coombs and Cassilo (2017, p.426), recent times have seen a "resurgence of athletes engaging activism" that is reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s. This is in contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, when athletes were less inclined to support social movements. During this period, athletes were becoming bigger national and global brands than ever before, with many establishing commercial agreements with organizations to promote and endorse their brands, products, and services. They generally felt there was too much money at stake to speak out about social injustices as they feared it would offend people with opposing views and potentially compromise their commercial deals (Taylor, 2020). Those who did take sides in social or political debates would often find themselves criticized and marginalized (Coombs and Cassilo, 2017) or told to "stick to what they know best" (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015, p. 336).

However, this attitude appears to have changed again, with many athletes now being willing to "express an overt commitment to issues of social justice" and "display a degree of social vision – a sensitivity to social injustice" (Edgar, 2021, p. 157). According to Taylor (2020), citing sociologist Harry Edwards, player protests and other forms of activism are now "met with greater public acceptance" largely due to the existence of an audience that "includes people of color and other groups who know what it is to be on the margins." Thus, the actions of athletes reflect the changing demographics and attitudes of their audience. Further driving the resurgence of athlete activism, according to Edwards, is the fact that modern-day athletes are more financially independent than any group of athletes in any previous era of sport (Taylor, 2020). As highlighted earlier in this paper, some athletes are bigger than the franchises they play for, adding millions, or even billions, of dollars of brand equity to their team's value. Thus, some sports organizations need their star athletes at least as much as the athletes need the organization, so providing the athlete with a sense of freedom to advocate for social causes in which they passionately believe.

Kauffman and Wolff (2010, p. 158) outline that while research has been inconsistent in defining athlete activism, athletes themselves have defined it as "starting advocacy organisations, engaging in symbolic protests during competitions and resigning from a team as a form of protest." There has been no shortage of this type of activism in recent years. Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the American national anthem in 2016 in protest at police shootings of African Americans seemingly triggered a resurgence of athletes' social conscience (Coombs and Cassilo, 2017).

Following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of the police, NBA players including Carmelo Anthony, Stephen Jackson, and Damian Lillard joined protest marches, while Chris Paul and LeBron James led campaign efforts to encourage young African Americans to vote in the 2020 presidential election (Taylor, 2020). The NBA purposefully made social justice central to its 2020 season. The league placed social-justice messages on jerseys, allowed players to kneel during the national anthem and stenciled “Black Lives Matter” on the court (Feldman, 2020). Other forms of activism have been more symbolic, including National Collegiate Athlete Association teams putting phrases promoting social justice on their helmets, Major League Baseball teams stenciling “Black Lives Matter” on their home fields, and players wearing BLM T-shirts during batting practice (Taylor, 2020).

Some athletes engage with or even create foundations that are aimed at advancing social causes or addressing injustices. For instance, NFL veteran Michael Bennett, since retiring from the NFL, has dedicated a significant amount of his time to working with Athletes for Impact, an organization encouraging athletes and other sports figures to get involved with worthy causes. According to Bennett, “the idea is that not every athlete has to be another Colin Kaepernick. There are a number of ways, big and small, for athletes to bring about change in their communities” (Taylor, 2020).

Whatever way athletes choose to help advance social causes, by showing sensitivity to injustices and making a positive difference oriented toward the common good, they can be seen to exhibit a range of society’s shared values, including wisdom, courage, temperance, transcendence, humanity, and justice. Applying Dyer’s star theory to understand and interpret how this can enhance an athlete’s stardom, we can argue that, by engaging in activism, athletes appear to reflect modern values, ideals, and sensitivities. In so doing, they demonstrate the “ordinary-extraordinary” paradox. They appear ordinary in that they show that they understand or have experienced the same injustices or challenges as many others in society, but they are extraordinary in that they are seen to be actively making a difference in addressing issues or advancing causes. In doing so, their star characteristics are enhanced—they are viewed as trustworthy, likeable, and socially attractive.

Owning Their Voice on Social Media

While Dyer (1998) stated a star’s characteristics were presented via a range of traditional media texts, today athletes have the power to engage directly with their fans with highly controlled and strategic messages via social and digital media (Su et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Geurin, 2017). In doing so, their voice has become far more prevalent, enabling their power and recognition to transcend societal barriers and segmentation.

Researchers have explored the ways in which athletes manage their images on social media (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013; Kunkel, Funk, & Lock, 2017). Su et al. (2020) illustrate that athlete brands are impacted by the sports, teams, leagues, and affiliations they represent. These brands then further manifest in the increasing production of interaction and engagement between athletes and fans (Gibbs, O’Reilly & Brunette, 2014; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015), expanding athletes’ profiles beyond the sporting arena to their off-field pursuits and personal lives (Su et al., 2020).

Social media thrives on the notion of voyeurism, with excited fans following their favorite athletes to gain a glimpse into their personal and professional lives (Su et al., 2020). Some athletes actively feed off this voyeurism to engage and interact with fans, posting images of themselves attending movie premieres, eating in restaurants, traveling on holidays, or attending other major sporting events (Gibbs, O’Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). The impact of this is significant. Athletes now have a voice. Social and digital media provide them with an avenue to express their views and cultivate their image, release important information and engage with their fans. Some do this more naturally than others, with some athletes employing social media experts to develop content strategies in the hope of fostering a particular image of themselves that serves to improve their commercial value and even increase their marketability (Hutchins, 2011). To cultivate their image, athletes are thus increasingly bypassing traditional media and instead choosing to use their own social media channels or the official channels of their club or team.

Survey Insights: Fans’ Perceptions of Star Characteristics

Based on the above analysis, for an athlete to cultivate their stardom, they must first appeal to, and resonate with, their fans. By posting social media content that portrays them as upholding the prevailing values of society, the athlete will appear as “relatable” and both “ordinary” and “extraordinary.” In doing so, their star characteristics of being trustworthy, likeable, socially attractive, and athletically exceptional will also be promoted, which will assist them in cultivating their stardom. As already highlighted, activism is an important component in athletes displaying the shared values of society and establishing their “ordinary-extraordinary” status.

Dyer (1998) argues that, in the process of cultivating stardom, the demands of audiences must intersect with the production of content and other media texts, which then combine to produce the “athlete star.” As such, it is important to understand where and how fans engage and interact with athletes, what type of athlete content they most enjoy engaging and interacting with, and, crucially, whether or not they believe the athletes they engage with reflect society’s values or the same values as their fans. To gain insights into these consumer demands and perceptions and how the expectations of fans can influence the cultivation of athlete stars, a survey was made of sports fans.

Methodology

The research participants were undergraduates studying sports media and sports business in Melbourne, Australia. The use of this student sample was considered appropriate given that the students have a strong interest in sport and athletes, reflect modern trends, practices, and values, represent a demographic often targeted for brand-related research (Biswas & Sherrell, 1993), and represent a significant portion of sports fans and consumers at the university (Ross et al., 2006). The sample consisted of 150 students, with a completion rate of 71.3% (107 respondents). Almost three-quarters (74.77%) of respondents were aged between 18 and 24, 22.43% were aged between 25 and 34, while 3% were aged 35 or above. 86% were male, while 14% were female. A screening question was included where respondents needed to identify that they did follow athletes on social media.

Based on a review of relevant literature, a survey questionnaire of 15 questions, including both categorical (multiple choice) and ordinal (Likert scale) responses, was designed through a “star theory lens,” with all questions grouped under fundamental star theory themes.

In particular, the survey was designed to provide insights based on the following star theory-related questions:

- What type of content do sports fans enjoy seeing from their favorite athletes on social media?
- Does this content help athletes appear to reflect the common values of society?
- Does the content that athletes post, and the content that fans desire from their favorite athletes, help athletes appear both ordinary and extraordinary?
- Is content relating to athletes engaging with or leading social and political debates perceived positively by fans? Does it assist athletes in cultivating their image as reflective of the prevailing values of the time and thus enhance the star characteristics of trustworthiness, likeability, and social attractiveness?

Demographics, fandom levels and variables about sport consumption were collected as potential control variables to be used in the analysis, however the relatively small sample size did allow for the identification of socio-demographic or socio-cultural impacts. For a research project attempting to attain more categorical conclusions relating to athletes’ social media use and fan expectations, a much larger sample size would be appropriate. Therefore, this theory led study does not attempt to draw any definitive conclusions, however, it does provide important and interesting insights regarding the use of Dyer’s star theory to understand the process of cultivating athlete stardom.

The Process of Cultivating the Star: Results and Discussion

Following Athletes on Social and Digital Media

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of survey respondents (97.2%) follow professional athletes on social media, while 30.84% visit athlete-to-fan websites either “often” or “sometimes”; 39.25% “rarely” visit these websites, while 29.91% “never” do. The fact that an overwhelming majority of respondents follow professional athletes on social media is significant. Dyer’s star theory states that an athlete must reflect modern society, both in the characteristics that define and create the star’s image, and also in the media texts used to cultivate that image. By being on social media, athletes are communicating using the same platforms as their fans. This helps make them appear as “ordinary” and “accessible” in that they communicate via social media channels just like other citizens and even engage with fans. This is a distinctly different approach to pre-digital times, when athletes were only accessible to fans in traditional media texts such as press conferences, interviews, feature articles, and publicity campaigns.

Athlete Content on Social Media

The type of content athletes post on social media should, according to Dyer, enhance the “ordinary-extraordinary” paradox.

When asked what type of content fans enjoy seeing most from the athlete social media accounts they follow, 78.5% of respondents stated they enjoy seeing content about what the athletes are doing in their personal and

private lives. Next most popular is general content about the sport the athlete plays (77.57%) and news about them specifically (71.96%).

These insights highlight the importance of social media content in cultivating an athlete's stardom. Furthermore, if we apply Dyer's star theory framework to these insights and also link them to Braunstein and Zhang's (2005) star power factors we can interpret them as illustrating how athletes can portray themselves as relatable and both "ordinary" and "extraordinary" to cultivate their star power. Over three-quarters of respondents most enjoyed seeing content about an athlete's personal and private life, which might include posts showcasing their homes, holidays, special events, dinner parties, and time spent with friends. This type of content can depict the athlete as an "everyday person," just like those viewing the content. This ensures the athlete appears as "ordinary." However, the content can also illustrate their "extraordinary" attributes, for although they may be posting content depicting everyday activities, it is also likely that, at least occasionally, the content will showcase their extraordinary lifestyles: their homes are likely to be bigger and more expensive, their holidays more lavish, their special occasions more spectacular. Thus, the content shared by athletes helps ensure they appear relatable while also establishing and illuminating the "ordinary-extraordinary" paradox. Furthermore, the fact over 70% of fans enjoy reading news about the athlete in a sporting context highlights the importance of posting content that boosts the perception of their athletic expertise. Again, this highlights the athlete's "extraordinary" characteristics.

Athlete Beliefs, Ideals, and Opinions

Interestingly, over half of all respondents (51.4%) stated that they enjoyed seeing athletes express their views and opinions about sporting and social issues. This view was amplified amongst those aged between 15-24 where 58.8% of respondents stated they enjoyed athletes expressing their views and opinions about sporting and social issues. Furthermore, when asked if they liked professional athletes expressing their views on social or political issues on social media, 57.01% of respondents stated that they did, while 38.32% stated they did not care if players voiced their opinions on social media or not. Only 4.67% stated they believed athletes should only discuss sporting and not social issues on social media.

When asked to what degree survey respondents agreed with the statement "professional athletes should only comment on issues relating to the sport they play," a large majority (71.97%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Over a quarter (28.04%) strongly disagreed, while only 9.35% agreed or strongly agreed. The remaining 18.69% neither agreed nor disagreed. This confirms the argument made above that the notion of athletes speaking about issues beyond the sporting field is largely now accepted and endorsed by the general public.

This supports the idea that athletes are no longer marginalized or criticized for voicing their opinions about sporting or social issues. While an athlete will never be viewed the same way in every community, country or region of the world, it does seem cries for athletes to "stick to what they know best [sport]" (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015, p. 336) appear old-fashioned and redundant. In fact, given over half the respondents stated they enjoyed seeing athletes expressing their views and opinions, and less than 5% believed they should not express their views, athletes should feel free to promote their values and ideals via social media, safe in the knowledge that if their values are shared by their followers, it will enhance their image rather than damage it.

Further supporting this idea is the fact that fans generally believe athletes should lead or contribute to social debates, with 42.06% of respondents agreeing that professional athletes should be "social activists," while only 11.21% believe they should not. Interestingly, almost 80% of respondents claimed they respect athletes more if they actively engage with charities or social causes (79.44%), while almost 30% expect professional athletes to engage with or promote social causes or charities (28.97%).

An overwhelming majority of survey participants stated that they respect professional athletes more for taking a stand against forms of discrimination, such as racism, homophobia, and gender inequality (73.83%), while 26.17% stated an athlete's stance on issues of discrimination does not influence their view of the athlete. None of the respondents stated that they respect athletes less for taking a stand on such issues. Furthermore, over 70% claimed a professional athlete's view on a social or political issue could influence their own view, depending on what the issue was. Just over a quarter (25.23%), on the other hand, stated that an athlete's opinion would not impact their own view at all.

When it came to athletes sharing the same values as fans or society, over half of all respondents (51.4%) stated they either agree or strongly agree that their favorite athletes share the same values, beliefs, and ideals as them. Only 2.8% disagreed, while the remaining 45.79% were neutral. Likewise, 69.16% believe their favorite athletes reflect the values, beliefs, and ideals of today's society. Importantly, less than 1% disagree that their favorite athlete reflects the prevailing values, beliefs, and ideals of today's society.

These research insights highlight that the majority of fans endorse athletes engaging in different forms of activism, including actively engaging with charities and taking a stand against forms of discrimination. Almost four in five respondents respect athletes more for engaging with social charities and causes, and almost one in three expect them to. Similarly, almost four in five people respect athletes more for taking a stand against discrimination. If we view these insights through the lens of Dyer's star theory, it appears that activism can act as a key component in ensuring that athletes appear to support and advance modern values and ideals. This form of activism can help the athlete appear relatable. It also augments their image as "ordinary" in that it shows that they have experienced the same kind of discrimination as many others, or that they value prevailing ideas of equality and fairness, or that they feel passionately about the same issues as a significant portion of society.

However, it also helps them illustrate their "extraordinary" qualities as they are able to use their power and status to actively make a difference and either contribute to, or lead, important social debates. This also helps position them as "ideal" citizens who possess the values and qualities that society should aspire toward. Importantly, by engaging in activities oriented toward reflecting today's values, athletes are able to exhibit the widely admired values of wisdom and knowledge, courage, temperance, transcendence, humanity, and justice, which undoubtedly strengthens their star factor powers of trustworthiness, likeability, social attractiveness, and characteristic style.

Conclusions

While there has been analysis of athlete brands, celebrities, and stars, as well as of star attributes and values, this study has sought to offer a theoretical framework for understanding the process of cultivating stars. While star characteristics have been highlighted in the past, Dyer's star theory allows us to understand how an athlete can foster, cultivate, and promote the star power factors to become a star. Fundamental to the star cultivation process is relating to society by reflecting the community's prevailing values, while augmenting the "ordinary-extraordinary" paradox. In this study we have argued that, to enhance their star power factors of professional trustworthiness, likeable personality, athletic expertise, social attractiveness, and characteristic style, athletes must represent society's most commonly respected values of wisdom, courage, temperance, transcendence, humanity, and justice. However, as Dyer notes, the nuances of what defines these values changes from generation to generation and even from community to community. Thus, athletes need to be aware of what those values represent in society at the time.

Importantly, the process for portraying and cultivating society's values is anchored in the idea that to successfully strike a chord with society athletes must present themselves in a manner that reflects key modern values and, in doing so, makes them appear both "ordinary" and "extraordinary." Thus, athletes must satisfy the demands or desires of their audience while cultivating their stardom via media texts. This paper has highlighted that cultivating their stardom via their own social media channels and engaging in forms of activism or advancing social causes is a key component of this in today's society.

This paper can be seen as an important theoretical primer for further studies that explore the process of cultivating stardom, which might include a more detailed analysis of the types of content that most resonate with modern values. Furthermore, by using Dyer's star theory to understand the creation of the athlete star via social media, we can also begin to predict how social media strategies and content dissemination might evolve in the future to reflect the prevailing values, beliefs, and ideals of the time. This creates an important theoretical tool for athletes and athlete managers responsible for enhancing athletes' brands. Importantly, the survey insights support and enrich the theory, highlighting that the majority of fans endorse athletes engaging in different forms of activism, including actively engaging with charities and taking a stand against forms of discrimination. Thus, Dyer's star theory can now be used as a theoretical framework for further empirically led research, with a larger sample size, seeking categorical and definitive trends between fan attitudes and expectations and the cultivation of athlete stardom.

Therefore, based on the research insights, it seems "star athletes" will continue to actively engage with social media and create content there that offers an insight into their personal and private lives as "ordinary" citizens, while also promoting their sense of social justice and social conscience through expressions of their views and their active participation in social causes and with charities. In doing this, athletes will be seen to share the same or similar values as their fans and the broader community. This will also make them seem "extraordinary", reflecting the image of the "ideal" athlete and citizen. For athletes, their star status and positive image and brand are not only dependent on their sporting exploits, but also on their life as a citizen, which includes their views and active participation within the community.

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