

Impact of sports role model attributes on the development of learners' self-concept

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Abstract

Researchers have postulated that sports role models can positively affect the self-concept of their followers. However, there have been no empirical studies to exploring this social phenomenon. In an effort to bridge this gap, this study examined the impact of sports role model attributes on various facets of self-concept. The study's participant pool comprised college students who identified a professional athlete as their role model. The sports role model scale (Kim, Koo, Kim, Shin, and Dixon, 2021) was adopted to measure athletic performance and personality. The self-perception scale (Neemann & Harter, 2012) was also adopted to measure scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between two predictor variables (athletic performance and personality) and four outcome variables (scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance). The results of this study identified a significant influence of each predictor variable on every outcome variable, providing empirical support for both role identification theory and media influence theory within the realm of the sport management. In other words, many college students perceive high-profile athletes as their role models. These young admirers watch their sports role model's superior athletic performance and their favorable personality. Consequently, the two aspects of professional sports role models positively influence college students to develop four domains of self-concept (scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance) which help the students succeed in both professional and personal life. Based on these findings, it is recommended that coaches and administrators in professional sports leagues need to pay attention to athletes' behavior on and off the venue so athletes can hear feedback from them to keep positive attitude and behavior throughout their career.

Key Words: Professional sports role model, athletic performance, personality, self-concept

Introduction

Since spectator sports have become one of the recreational activities that American people enjoy, the sports industry has produced many sports heroes (Strudler, 2000). One possible reason is that true greatness and beauty in sports have inspired and been cherished by sports fans from ancient to modern times (Goodman, 1993). In the US, fantastic performances of star athletes in professional sports leagues and the Olympic Games have come to represent the achievement of the American dream (Coakley, 1994). Professional athletes who do their best and succeed in sports can indeed be given role model status (Giuliano et al., 2007). Children and adolescents admire and follow every action that their favorite star players take (Fleming et al., 2005). Such successful athletes are perceived as role models by young individuals who feel a similarity to them and want to develop their ideal self-concept and career by watching and learning from those sports role models' behavior on and off the sport venue (Strudler, 2000). Therefore, teenagers and young adults who watch or participate in sporting activities are highly likely to choose high-profile athletes as their role models (Assibey-Mensah, 1997).

Given the above, it is evident that the affluent and influential role model acceptable to youth today is the professional athlete (Clark et al., 2001). For example, in Great Britain, a British Asian boxer who won the silver medal at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games is represented as a public role model for Britain's multi-ethnic society (Burdsey, 2007). Promotional and public relations practitioners in professional sports leagues have emphasized the important function of players serving as role models for young fans (Funk et al., 2003). Also, coaches and league administrators in professional sports teams know that famous athletes are regarded as role models for students at elementary/middle/high schools and colleges. Therefore, professional athletes are encouraged to participate in league-wide community service programs, which have a positive impact on society (Feezell, 2005). Payne, Reynolds, Brown, and Fleming (2003) have also identified sports role model programs and their positive influence on youth participation in physical activity. The British government has actively promoted the use of soccer players as role models for children and adolescents. For example, Playing for Success, a government after-school program, utilizes professional soccer players as role models in order to encourage teenagers to play sports (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007).

There are two contrasting perspectives on the responsibilities of sports role models (Feezell, 2005). On the one hand, Tim Duncan, an NBA legend, asserted that professional athletes as role models for young individuals should be socially responsible for their conduct in society. Smoll (2015) also admits that high-profile athletes should feel the full weight of social responsibility as public role models both on and off the sport venue. On the other hand, Charles Barkley, another NBA legend, argued that the reason why he receives a high salary is not to become a role model for children and adolescents but to shoot and dunk a basketball, and that therefore parents must be their children's role models. Many athletes in other sports support the perspective of Tim Duncan. For instance, players on the U.S. female national soccer team, considered one of the most successful national teams on the international stage, say they are role models for young students (Guest & Cox, 2009). Additionally, a large number of Americans agreed that professional athletes can be good role models for the younger generation (Ziemer, 2000).

Role modeling is considered to be a cognitive process of an individual while watching and learning from a role model's behavior (Gibson, 2003). There are two types of role modeling: vicarious/indirect role modeling and direct role modeling. Vicarious or indirect role modeling may not be regarded as equally effective as direct role modeling because individuals choose their vicarious role model on their own and observe him or her from a distance (Gibson, 2003). So it can be very challenging for individuals to obtain necessary ideas and support directly from a vicarious role model (Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978). However, it is apparent that individuals can have a role model even though they are not directly interacting with that role model (Jung, 1986). Such an indirect role model who is constructed by learners is likely to strongly influence the behavior of those learners (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In other words, even if learners do not have a chance for face-to-face interaction with their indirect/vicarious role models such as famous entertainers and athletes, they can still watch and learn specific behaviors and skills of the role models through the media (Clark, Martin, & Bush, 2001).

In order for a learner's role modeling to occur, an individual must have desire to develop their self-concept; find a public figure who can (vicariously) fulfill their needs; perceive their similarity to that public figure; and imitate that figure's specific attributes (Gibson, 2003). In other words, when a person believes that his or her ideal self-concept is similar to the image of a highly visible public figure, it is possible that that individual selects that celebrity as a role model to further develop his or her self-concept (Strudler, 2000). For example, teenagers or young adults who enjoy playing sports or watching professional sports are likely to perceive their similarities to professional athletes and are willing to imitate their favorite athletes' behavior (Wilson & Sparks, 1996). People who are willing to improve themselves, learn their social role, master certain skills, or achieve a goal are likely to seek external role models who successfully display those desired attributes (Collins, 1996). Furthermore, individuals must believe that they can become similar to their exemplary role models through the imitation of those role models' behavior (Gibson, 2003; Giuliano et al., 2007). For instance, college students can be significantly inspired and motivated by public role models such as high-profile athletes, singers, and actors when their behavior seems valuable and achievable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). If learners believe that they could develop relevant bonding with their role models, that will greatly enhance their motivation to work hard and develop a self-concept to become like their role models (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

On the other hand, people not only choose successful individuals as their role models (Ibarra, 1999), but they also perceive various other attributes of these role models during their entire careers (Gibson, 2003). For example, role models are observed by individuals for different purposes, such as socially desirable behaviors (Jung, 1986). This finding indicates that admirers tend to watch and learn various prosocial behaviors of their role models (Addis, 1996). Consequently, emulation of these positive aspects of a role model's life can help learners improve their personal life and professional career (Addis, 1996). Due to extensive media coverage, followers can carefully watch and learn both professional and personal aspects of public role models' behavior (Addis, 1996). For example, learners can emulate various domains of a public role model's behavior, such as his or her professional skills, work ethic, leadership, individual characteristics, morality, and community service (Addis, 1996). In this sense, vicarious role modeling can occur in a comprehensive way (Addis, 1996). As such, comprehensive role modeling is plausible not only by observing direct role models, such as parents and teachers, but also by emulating vicarious role models, such as celebrity athletes and entertainers (Clark, Martin, & Bush, 2001).

In the later years of a teenager's life, a role model plays a vital role in formulating and improving that young learner's self-concept (Ibarra, 1999). Specifically, this role model provides the learner with a specific goal, professional skills, and personal attributes that are needed to make the learner's professional and personal life successful (Gibson, 2003). For example, college students who play or watch sports are likely to perceive high-profile professional athletes as their role models because sports role models' behavior on and off the sport venue, represented through the media, can inspire these young learners and help them develop their self-concept and pursue their career (Strudler, 2000). According to Bucher and Stelling (1977), college students are willing to have a comprehensive role model who helps them not only to improve their professional skills but also to live exemplary personal life. Furthermore, even young adults still want to find role models and comprehensively perceive and follow their many positive attributes, because such role modeling behavior helps improve their self-concept (Gibson, 2003).

Relevant theories can support the social phenomenon of role modeling. Role identification theory argues that people are likely to be attracted to another person who successfully plays a role similar to theirs (Erikson, 1950). Such people want to identify with that role model and strengthen their similarity to them by observing and emulating his or her behavior (Erikson, 1950). Such identification with an admired person helps individuals learn what expectations a given role requires (Erikson, 1950). In other words, this role identification informs the learners of the formal tasks of their role and the accompanying appropriate behaviors (Erikson, 1950). Additionally, the mass media influence individuals to perceive professional athletes as role models (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). High-profile athletes' behaviors on and off the sport venue are often at the center of media attention (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). Viewers' perceptions are strongly affected by the content of media coverage (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). If the media portray the good character and virtue of athletes who are role models, sport fans are highly likely to accept and emulate this positive reinforcement (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002).

Building on the studies and theories described above, empirical research was conducted to specifically examine the relationships between various professional sports role model factors (athletic performance and personality) and various learners' self-concept factors (scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance.) For measuring the sport role model, the previously published scales (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2003; Kim & Trail, 2010; Rich, 1997) did not specifically measure the specific factors of the sports role model construct (athletic performance and personality). To fill the gap in the sports role model literature, Kim, Koo, Kim, Shin, and Dixon (2021) have recently developed a multi-dimensional sports role model scale. The current study has adopted the athletic performance factor and the personality factor from this newly developed sports role model scale. Also, as mentioned above, previous research has broadly argued that sports role models influence young people to develop their self-concept. Therefore, to define self-concept, this study adopted four factors (scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance) from Neemann and Harter's self-perception scale (2012).

This study assumed that young admirers watch and emulate various types of behavior of their own sports role models that are covered by the mass media. The current study comprehensively reviewed the sports role model literature to examine what attributes of sports role models young students observe and learn. Two were defined: athletic performance and personality. "Athletic performance" refers to sports role models' performance-related attributes on the sport venue. Previous studies (Feezell, 2005; Fleming et al., 2005; Giuliano et al., 2007; Guest & Cox, 2009; May, 2009) have shown that athletic performance is the unique aspect which professional sports role models exhibit, compared with other types of celebrity role models such as movie and pop music stars. In other words, young students who like sports watch and emulate the superior performance of their own sports role model in order to master certain sports skills, improve their own athletic performance, and become similar to the sports role model (Neemann & Harter, 2012). For example, Kobe Bryant, who perceived Michael Jordan as his role model, has emulated every aspect of Jordan's athletic skills (Starkand, 2017). The current study thus considered athletic performance of sports role models to be an important variable that can positively influence the various domains of learners' self-concept, such as scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1: *Athletic performance of a sports role model will positively influence learners' scholastic competence.*

Hypothesis 2: *Athletic performance of a sports role model will positively influence learners' job competence.*

Hypothesis 3: *Athletic performance of a sports role model will positively influence learners' athletic competence.*

Hypothesis 4: *Athletic performance of a sports role model will positively influence learners' social acceptance.*

The second dimension of the sports role model to be examined, personality, refers to good character in sports role models. Previous research (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Guest & Cox, 2009; Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Fleming et al., 2005; Giuliano et al., 2007; Rich, 1997; May, 2009) has reported that young individuals like to see a good personality in their own sports role model and want to resemble that character. In other words, professional athletes who have a good personality off the playing field are perceived to be good role models for young learners (Kraft, 2015). Today, admirers have an opportunity to interact with professional sports role models in various ways, such as at a stadium or fan meeting or on a social networking service such as Twitter (Davis, 2017). Professional sports leagues cannot survive without fans, and therefore professional athletes are supposed to be fan-oriented on and off the sport venue. Building on existing studies and relevant theories, this study also proposed that the personality of sports role models can positively influence the several aspects of learners' self-concept: scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance. Therefore, the following hypotheses were established:

Hypothesis 5: *Personality of a sports role model will positively influence learners' scholastic competence.*

Hypothesis 6: *Personality of a sports role model will positively influence learners' job competence.*

Hypothesis 7: *Personality of a sports role model will positively influence learners' athletic competence.*

Hypothesis 8: *Personality of a sports role model will positively influence learners' social acceptance.*

Material & method

The sample used in this study included college students who perceive a professional athlete as their role model. This study recruited American college students through Amazon Mechanical Turk, which provides survey respondents with information on the primary researcher's email address, a survey code, and the link to an online survey tool such as Qualtrics. The researcher collected a total of 500 questionnaires. 346 questionnaires were usable. The investigator did not know the contact information or names of the research participants during data collection because they participated in the study via the Qualtrics online survey tool, which assures the confidentiality of survey respondents. To protect the confidentiality of the research participants, the survey questionnaire did not contain any information that personally identifies them. There were no known physical or psychological risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that the participants might experience while completing the survey questionnaire. However, if any respondent felt uncomfortable with participating in the study, he or she was able to withdraw from completing the survey at any time.

This study adopted reliable and valid measures that have been used in prior research as described in Table 1. The sports role model scale (Kim et al., 2021) was adopted to measure athletic performance and personality. The self-perception scale (Neemann & Harter, 2012) was also adopted to measure scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance.

The data analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS 23.0 program. Multiple regression analyses were employed to examine the main effects of the two sports role model variables (athletic performance and personality) on the four self-concept development variables (scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance). For these analyses, the two sports role model variables were designated as predictor variables, and the four self-concept development variables were designated as outcome variables. The sample size of this study (N=346) met the guideline for accurate predictions as recommended by Knofczynski and Mundfrom (2008).

Table 1: Measures and Reliability

Factor and Items	α
<i>Athletic Performance</i>	.83
My sports role model is a high-level performer	
role model is a high-level performer at the highest level of competitive	
My sports role model's play inspires me	
My sports role model's athletic performance is exemplary	
<i>Personality</i>	.85
My sports role model is a positive person	
My sports role model is kind	
My sports role model is generous	
<i>Scholastic Competence</i>	.80
I feel confident I am mastering my coursework	
I feel intellectually competent at my studies	
<i>Job Competence</i>	.86
I feel I will be good at my future job	
I feel confident about my ability to do a future job	
<i>Athletic Competence</i>	.90
I feel I am good at sports	
I feel I can do well at athletic activities	
<i>Social Acceptance</i>	.81
I feel I am socially accepted by many people	
judgment about whether to buy their product	
I like the way I interact with other people	
judgment about whether to buy their product	

Results

Demographic analyses indicated that 65% of respondents were male (n=223), 50% were White (n=174), and 35% were Asian American (n=120). The high percentage of Asian-American respondents might be attributed to the fact that Asian-Americans are more likely to use the Internet than other ethnic groups (Spooner, 2001). 76.7% of respondents were age 17 to 25 and 23.3% were age 26 to 35. Multiple regression analyses were used to test the proposed hypotheses. Prior to the analysis, assumption violations were checked. First,

multicollinearity was examined by examining the variance inflation factor (VIF). The VIF values were less than 2, which indicated that the predictor variables in the model were not correlated and acted independently (Pallant, 2010). Second, normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and outliers were examined by inspecting the normal probability plot of the regression standardized residual and the scatter plots of the standardized residuals. These analyses indicated no violations of the assumptions.

After the preliminary analyses, the main analyses were conducted. First, scholastic competence was regressed on both predictors (athletic performance and personality). The total variance explained was 18.6%, $F(2, 338)=38.337, p<.001$. Both predictors were statistically significant, with personality the higher influence ($\beta=.257, p<.001$), followed by athletic performance ($\beta=.234, p<.001$) as described in Table 2. Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 5 were supported.

Table 2: Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Scholastic Competence

Predictor	Standardized Coefficients β	R^2
Athletic Performance	.234***	
Personality	.257***	.186***

*** $p < .001$.

Second, job competence was regressed on the two predictors. The total variance explained was 27.6%, $F(2, 338)=48.720, p<.001$. Both predictors were statistically significant, with personality the higher influence ($\beta=.319, p<.001$), followed by athletic performance ($\beta=.281, p<.001$) as described in Table 3. Therefore, hypotheses 2 and 6 were supported.

Table 3: Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Job Competence

Predictor	Standardized Coefficients β	R^2
Athletic Performance	.281***	
Personality	.319***	.276***

*** $p < .001$.

Third, athletic competence was regressed on both predictors. The total variance explained was 9.7%, $F(2, 338)=18.097, p<.001$. Both predictors were statistically significant, with personality the higher influence ($\beta=.231, p<.001$), followed by athletic performance ($\beta=.119, p=.05$) as described in Table 4. Therefore, hypotheses 3 and 7 were supported.

Table 4: Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Athletic Competence

Predictor	Standardized Coefficients β	R^2
Athletic Performance	.119*	
Personality	.231***	.097***

* $p=.05$, *** $p < .001$.

Forth, social acceptance was regressed on both predictors. The total variance explained was 17.6%, $F(2, 338)=36.333, p<.001$. Both predictors were statistically significant, with personality the higher influence ($\beta=.343, p<.001$), followed by athletic performance ($\beta=.121, p<.05$) as described in Table 5. Therefore, hypotheses 4 and 8 were supported.

Table 5: Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Social Acceptance

Predictor	Standardized Coefficients β	R^2
Athletic Performance	.121*	
Personality	.343***	.176***

* $p<.05$, *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of the study demonstrated the important role of a sports role model's athletic performance in influencing college students' scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance. In other words, admirers who perceived the athletic performance of their professional sports role model to be superior were more likely to be confident in their scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance. This result supported the statement that an external role model helps young individuals formulate their self-concept (Strudler, 2000). Gibson (2003) also mentioned that an external role model can motivate an individual to establish and improve a specific goal as well as professional skills and personal attributes that are important to their life. According to May (2009), a role model is required to perform with superior skills that allow him/her to succeed in a certain field. A professional sports role model who exhibits excellent performance on the sport venue can positively influence various aspects of admirers' lives (Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, & Knight, 2007). In other words, college students who have a professional athlete as their role model and perceive his/her athletic performance to be superior, are likely to develop a self-concept which helps them perform well in school, the workplace, sports, and personal relationships.

Furthermore, the study results indicated the positive impact of a sport role model's personality on college students' scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance. That is, admirers who perceive their professional sports role model to have a good personality showed more confidence in their scholastic performance, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance. This result supported the notion that a role model demonstrates not only a specific job performance but also favorable personality characteristics that society needs (Addis, 1996). The socially desirable characteristics that a role model utilizes to create a successful professional and personal life can positively influence admirers to try to develop a self-concept that will help them succeed (May, 2009). Therefore, a professional sports role model who exhibits good personality traits on and off the sport venue has a positive impact on young college student admirers who are trying to develop several facets of their self-concept, such as scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance.

Conclusion

Consistent with relevant theories, many college students perceive high-profile athletes as their role models and watch various types of role model behavior on and off the sport venue in order to emulate the athletes. These young admirers observe both their sports role model's superior athletic performance and their favorable personality, while making an effort to develop their own self-concept. These two aspects of professional sports role models positively influence college students to develop four domains of self-concept—scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance—which help the students succeed in both professional and personal life. Based on these findings, it is recommended that managers and administrators in professional sports leagues need to pay attention to athletes' behavior on and off the venue so athletes can hear feedback from them to keep positive attitude and behavior throughout their career.

In addition, it is also recommended that professional athletes, especially those who play in high-profile leagues (soccer, basketball, baseball, ice hockey, American football, cricket, volleyball, tennis, and golf), should also feel socially responsible for their conduct on and off the sport venue. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, an NBA legend, Charles Barkley, argued that professional athletes should not be public role models for young students. He believes that professional athletes receive high salaries because they exhibit the highest level of athletic performance in their sport, which numerous people around the world enjoy watching on television. However, because many of the study participants' sport role models wielded significant impacts on various aspects of their admirers' lives, professional athletes should consider themselves more than millionaire celebrities. Therefore, high-profile athletes all over the world need to become positive role models who exhibit not only superior athletic performance in the venue but also prosocial behavior outside the venue. In doing so, young students who have been observing the exemplary lives of their sports role models are likely to become good citizens and involve themselves in the community in a positive way.

For example, Heungmin Son, a high-profile soccer player in the English Premier League, is regarded as one of the sports role models in the soccer world. He has demonstrated not only extraordinary performance in the English Premier League by being the first Asian player to win the golden boot award for the 2021-2022 season, but also his good personality as evidenced by many good deeds such as donating money to the victims of South Korea's worst-ever forest fire (Griffie, 2019). He has also donated 100 million South Korean won to a nonprofit organization battling the coronavirus outbreak (Kilpatrick, 2020), and he has joined the World Food Programme (WFP) as a Goodwill Ambassador to support the organization's response to a global hunger crisis (Khorsandi, 2022). For actions such as these, Son is loved by many British and South Korean people, who consider him to be a true sports role model that many young people across the world want to look up to and emulate.

This study has some limitations. First, as the data was collected only in the United States, the results cannot be generalized to other global areas. This limitation calls for future research be conducted on other continents with different sports cultures, such as Asia, Africa, Europe, Oceania, and Latin America, to discover differences among them. Second, the design of the current study is not experimental. Therefore, future research should utilize an experimental design to examine the causal relationships between the two aspects of professional

sports role model (athletic performance and personality) and the four domains of learner's self-concept (scholastic competence, job competence, athletic competence, and social acceptance).

Conflicts of interest - The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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