

## IDOLS AND ROLE MODELS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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The manufacturing of idols for young people has been marketed more aggressively in recent decades. Idols for young people refer to someone idolized by children and teenagers. Individuals compare themselves with “reference groups” of people who occupy the social role to which the individual aspires. A role model could be seen as a person who serves as an example, whose behaviour is emulated by others. The appearance, the look, the competence, the ability also have a great importance for being a role model. There seem to be some conceptual differences between an idol and a model. However, characterizations such as idol, role model, and star are often used synonymously. The terms will also be used interchangeably in this short essay. The focus here is not to clarify the differences. The purpose is just to highlight the question whether there are more strict public demands on the behaviour of sport idols than of other kinds of idols, like pop stars or TV actors.

Children’s socio-cultural identity is developed in a social interplay where the individual internalises the culture and shape and develops his or her self-image in identification with others. Idols are powerless elite, but are of great interest for young people. Children and adolescents are big consumers of media and the visual image is exposed all the time.

The sporting hero or heroine has traditionally been perceived as epitomizing high ideals of morals and fair play. Sport stars have been seen as role models for young people’s interpersonal behaviour. The social ideals embodying values

learnt on the playing field could readily be transferred into everyday life. The word sportsmanship has been used in the sense of a noble behaviour in people's relations. Today, other characteristics besides sportsmanship behaviour seem to be important for young people and new role models are appearing. Athletes who decline the spotlight and just perform their sport have been seen as good role models and those athletes who demand the spotlight as poor role models. Being in the spotlight offers a great opportunity for sport stars to earn big money. Growing media intrusion might have changed the public view upon sport stars, together with a much wider range of other potential role models. There seem to be some differences in role models between female and male pupils. Boys name first sporting heroes or "action stars" whom they admire because of their strength, aggression and their ability to get things done. In contrast, sport stars do not seem to have the strong function of role-models for girls. They admire the stars and starlets of the movie and music scene instead.

Teen idols are often exposed as sex symbols who are famous persons of either gender. They can be actors, musicians, models or sport stars who are found to be sexually attractive by the public. The media plays an important role in creating and sustaining the public perception of which persons are viewed as attractive. Sexually alluring photographs of celebrities, including both posed and unauthorized photo shots taken by paparazzis with zoom lenses, occur to a very high extent in all kinds of media. These media are in turn sustained by a strong public demand for continuing to show new pictures of the hottest stars and there is a lot of money to be made. This also includes the sport stars. The proposed link between sport participation and a healthy way of living has been used to justify engaging successful sports people to disseminate healthy messages to the community. There is also a common perception that sports people are viewed as role models and that they have a positive impact upon individuals and the broader community in general.

A countless number of children and teenagers idolize sports celebrities and they also imitate the way they behave. When superstar athletes have done irresponsible things in the limelight, people react with indignation. However, when the same thing happens with rock stars, models, actors or TV stars involved, there

is not such a strong public reaction. There seem to be more strict moral demands on sport stars which have a kind of obligation to society to act in a moral manner while in the public eye. The public opinion is often that athletes should bear in mind that their actions have effects on what their fans consider to be acceptable behaviour. This is not at all the fact for musicians, for example. Some sport stars have declared that they do not want to be role models. It has been argued that athletes have no more responsibility being role models to the youth than other kind of stars and that parents should be the ultimate influences on their children's lives. Though parents may be the ultimate influences, children are also influenced by media and they use media outlets to explore possible desired selves.

Children and adolescents are able to identify with sport stars as well as with pop stars or actors through media exposure, and may grow fond of those persons and want to be like them. Because identification is related to popularity and attractiveness, the worship of stars may help young people to develop their own identity. Sport stars should perhaps be looked upon as artists, in the same way as all other kinds of artists. It may be out of date to look upon sport stars being automatically good role models for children.