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# **Beckham: Hero, villain or a bit of both?**

## **The children's viewpoint**

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What sense do children make of the brand symbols that surround them? An ongoing study by Agnes Nairn, Christine Griffin and Patricia Gaya Wicks in the School of Management and Department of Psychology at the University of Bath explores this question. As part of this study, focus group discussions with 148 children (age 7-11) were undertaken. They explain their research.

We asked children to list 'the things kids in your class are into at the moment'. Surprisingly, the most intense discussions did not centre around children's toys and games – what we might term conventional children's products and brands – nor even around clothing, as might have been expected, but around sports celebrities, pop stars and stars on TV shows. Amongst the celebrities most consistently identified, David Beckham provided particularly rich material for discussion and debate amongst the children.

Our findings support the notion that, in some respects, Beckham may be understood as a branded commodity with global reach, and available for 'consumption' through the commercialisation of football, celebrity magazines, his own branded clothing range for younger children, and the various brands and products which he endorses. Perhaps more importantly, though, are the roles and functions which our findings indicate that Beckham fulfils in his positioning as a complex cultural figure. For the children involved in our study, Beckham played a significant symbolic role in peer group relations and in the negotiation of social identities. Children used Beckham to discuss moral values and to debate their understandings of 'right' and 'wrong'.

Beckham played an important role as a (flawed) hero figure in children's discussions. In our study, children saw him as something of a 'hero' and something of a 'villain'. It was apparent that children experienced tensions in trying to understand and interpret the extent to which Beckham might represent 'goodness' or 'badness', and the extent to which his behaviour and performance in various arenas could be understood as 'right' and/or 'wrong'. In particular, such tensions were closely related to children's conceptualisations of *gender* and *sexuality*, *talent* and *just reward*, and such virtues as *humility* and *perseverance*.

Children seem to see 'perseverance' as one of the key qualities which helps them to identify Beckham as a kind of 'hero' figure. A significant number of children in our study told the story of David Beckham's 'sending off' during the 1998 World Cup, and expressed admiration for the way in which he picked himself up and became a

stronger player and team captain following this low point in his life. The children we interviewed would have been babies and toddlers in 1998, and indeed it appears that the children's accounts of David Beckham's growth and development are in part shaped by the stories they themselves have been told by school-teachers and other adults, presumably with the intention to instil 'perseverance' and 'hard work' in children's minds as positive qualities to strive towards. For example, an 11 year old boy made the following point: *'...I think he's quite uh, hard inside because sort of things we got told about the 1998 World Cup when he missed a penalty – when he fouled, yes. But he was sent off and everyone in England blamed it on him and most people would've just left England and deserted to another country...So he's quite tough...I admire that he, like, didn't just run away from it all. He faced up to it, and played the best football that he could'*. A similar message seems to be grasped by a 10 year old girl while reflecting on David Beckham's own account of his life, as presented in his autobiography: *'He's had like, goods and bads in his life and when he writes his autobiography so you actually know what he's been through and everything, so I think you should give him a bit of respect for what he does and everything, but sometimes he just takes it over the top'*.

The latter sentiment expressed by this child (that of going 'over the top') is a common theme expressed by the children in relation to David Beckham, suggesting that even seemingly positive virtues, such as perseverance, determination and hard work, can be seen as double-edged swords. The other side of 'working hard' at something seems to be that one may be seen as 'trying too hard'; with blurred distinctions between when 'effortlessness' is to be preferred to 'exertion'. For example, the care and attention that Beckham gives to his appearance seems to put some children off, with a 10 year old boy explaining: *'I don't know, I just sort of feel, I dunno like, he just tries to look, like handsome...But he ends up being, looking like he wants to look handsome. Like he's trying too hard.'* Beckham embodied some qualities of traditional masculinity (eg. 'a family man'), but some boys referred to him disparagingly as a 'pretty boy' and a 'poof', while deprecating comments were also expressed regarding the 'diamond earrings' and the 'new hairstyles every week'.

'Showing off' seemed to be considered an unattractive quality and a significant shortcoming by the children in our study, and one they frowned upon. While some of Beckham's achievements appear to be worthy of respect and celebration, the levels of success he has attained seem also to be somewhat unsettling, and give rise to questions about whether Beckham is getting a 'just' reward. For example, the

following exchange between a mixed group of Year 6 students suggests that while some children expressed disbelief and discomfort at the material wealth commanded by Beckham, others viewed his fame and fortune matter-of-factly, as the just reward for the qualities he embodies (in this case, his good looks and physique):

*Girl 1: I hate David Beckham, he's horrible, he just shows off, every magazine I read, he's in there, he just shows off.*

*Girl 2: Do you know why, cause he's actually fit and no one else is fitter than him and that's why he's always in the magazines and adverts –*

*Boy 1: For one advert he must get about five million pounds!*

*Girl 2: That's cause he's mega fit.*

*Boy 1: Stop saying that, it's scary!*

*Girl 2: I'm trying to get round to you that he is F-I-T, that does spell 'fit'!*

As a further example, discussions around David Beckham often made reference to his relationship with Victoria and his family life, and the extent to which he could be understood as a 'good' husband and father. One girl used her comments on him to reflect a position on sexual mores: *'I don't like him, coz he's kind of, you know, like, having an affair...'*. In response to a 10 year old boy's comment suggesting that *'All he thinks about is adverts'* (which in itself could be interpreted as a critique of the increasing commercialisation and commodification of football players), a girl in the group attempts to provide evidence that 'family' is one of Beckham's priorities, focusing on his active and engaged role as a father: *'...he does, like, think about his family, because he has actually just had, what's the baby called, Cruise, that's it, and I think Brooklyn's a lot like him...'*

The children we interviewed discussed the subject of David Beckham with high levels of interest and animation. At the same time for some children, the general level of interest around David Beckham seemed unreasonably high; a viewpoint which could in itself be understood as approaching a critique of a celebrity-obsessed society. In an attempt to ridicule this state of affairs (an attempt which in itself demonstrates how critical awareness may emerge from and/or be enabled by peer group interactions), one 11 year old boy made the following comment: *'I think he [Beckham] really has taken it too far coz um, they've got, I think it's in the University, they've got a study called Beckhamology and it's just the study of David Beckham...I heard that off a friend.* He would appear to be reflecting the raised eyebrows in some areas of the

media at the upsurge in academic interest in Beckham's role as a contemporary cultural figure.

However, we firmly believe that if we are to help children navigate their increasingly commercialised lives, we need to go beyond simply ascertaining whether or not children understand what an advert is. We need to understand a lot more about the complex social roles which brands and celebrities play in what it means to be a child to-day. There are a number of positive outcomes from gaining this increased understanding. Deeper insight into the child's brand world will help us to formulate better policies on responsible marketing to children. And a realisation of the complex ways in which children discuss celebrities could help teachers create engaging materials for PHSE classes. "Let's discuss right and wrong to-day" may not be very appealing to children but "What do you think about Beckham being sent off?" would not only be guaranteed to get their attention, but would also stimulate important debates.