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## Commercial Mythmaking and the Gaelic Athletic Association: Exploring Irish Men's Identity Work Within Influential Social Networks

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# Commercial mythmaking and the Gaelic Athletic Association:

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Exploring Irish men's identity work within  
influential social networks

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**Commercial mythmaking and the Gaelic Athletic Association: Exploring Irish  
men's identity work within influential social networks**

**Abstract:**

This paper explores young men's engagement with Irish sporting and cultural organisation, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), to show how the interrelations and influences of one's social network or human interdependencies all serve as potential cues on which individuals learn to construct their identity projects. This research engages Foucauldian theory to consider the effects of power emanating from multiple sources (to include the influence of peers, family, community, mass media and social institutions) on the individual. By looking at the intricacies of mundane everyday practices, such as the participation in sport, allows a better understanding of how individuals actually come to constitute their sense of self. In particular this paper explores how young men use commercially mediated mythologies to negotiate their membership with the GAA social network. Findings show a marked contrast in men's engagement with mythical GAA mediated material across the membership spectrum. Peripheral members invest more readily in the ideological narrative and utilize the marketplace articulations in their own narratives of identity. Whereas embedded members, those men who actually commit their lives to this amateur sport, resist mythic rhetoric and engage 'demythologising practices' to distinguish their immense investment in this consumption field from a (potentially) devaluing marketplace myth.

## **Introduction**

This paper is a part of a larger project that explores how young Irish men construct their masculine identities and come to know themselves through their engagement with consumption and leisure practices. In relation to consumer research, (Thompson 2004) has for some time argued for a consideration of the socialised nature of consumption beyond the lived experience of the individual consumer. (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) assert that while there is much focus on the agency of consumers and their identity projects within consumer culture research, there is a dearth of work that considers the social and cultural context within which these identity constructions take place. A significant exception is the work of (Dolan 2009) and his study of consumer subjectivity development within the context of increasing social interdependencies, functional specialisation and social integration. This research makes a further contribution towards addressing this gap. Using the Irish national sporting body of the Gaelic Athletic Association as an exemplar, I show how the interrelations and influences of one's social network or human interdependencies all serve as potential cues on which young men learn to construct their masculine identity projects. This approach contributes to the advancement of consumer culture research by inscribing the micro-social context described by the consumer within a larger socio-historical context (see Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

Taking a poststructuralist perspective, this research follows the later works of Foucault to explore the collective structures of knowledge or discursive practices through which social actors come to know themselves. Engaging Foucauldian theory allowed me to conceptualise men as intertwined within their social environs, the recipients of socio-

cultural inscription. Through consideration of the body as produced through discourse as well as disciplinary practices, Foucauldian theory facilitates exploration of the effects of power (to include the influence of peers, family, community, mass media and social institutions) on the individual. The subject remains discursively and socially conditioned in power relations, yet within this configuration the individual's agency to 'define their own identity, to master their body and desires, and to forge a practice of freedom through techniques of the self' (Best and Kellner 1991) is upheld.

To understand how men's bodies are inserted in a complex web of norms and social relations, I look at the commonplace practices of the everyday life. Exploration of these wider social and cultural conditions adds depth to the understanding of how the individual and the social are intertwined: in particular, how men construct their masculine identities within these socio-cultural frameworks. This paper focuses on the discursive context of Irish national sport and the adaptation of commercially mediated mythology within the Gaelic Athletic Association.

## **The Context: A history of the GAA organisation**

At the time of the foundation of the GAA organisation in 1884, its intent was clearly outlined by its founding fathers. In relation to sport, these motivations included a re-establishment of Irish national games, a standardisation of the games' rules and the co-ordination of one body to govern Irish sports. From its inception and despite some protestations to the contrary, the GAA organisation was politically driven, being closely associated with Irish nationalism. The founders, driven by a nationalist agenda, sought to create an Irish sporting body that would halt the spread of British games in Ireland and eventually replace them altogether (Cronin 1999). As sports historian Richard Holt comments, the GAA 'is arguably the most striking example of politics shaping sport in modern history' (Holt 1992). However, according to Cronin, to view the GAA as solely a political organisation supporting only one form of nationalism would be misguided. Instead he suggests that the GAA should be considered as a chameleon of Irish nationalism – 'at times it has been able to stress a strident political nationalism, at others it has retreated to the invaluable role of supporting a cultural nationalism' (Cronin, 1999: 80).

Given the many factions of Irish society's active resistance to British Rule at this time,<sup>1</sup> a more holistic conception of the GAA was as a 'nation-wide campaign to resurrect the physical stature of the manhood of Ireland, which was deemed debilitated because of the combined effects of British rule and the Great Famine' (McDevitt 1997). The cultural revival during the late nineteenth century, from which the GAA emerged, was deemed necessary to provide the Irish with a distinct Gaelic identity separate from all things

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Michael Davitt/the Land League/*United Ireland* newspaper, Charles Stewart Parnell/the Irish Parliamentary Party/Irish Home Rule Bill 1886.

British including ‘British habits, customs, language and their sports’ (Cronin, 1999: 78). And so, in conjunction with the founding of this sports organisation, a ‘Gaelic Renaissance’ was happening in Ireland at this time – an ideological movement with ambitions to build the Irish nation from the bottom up, including creating ‘a new Irish man’ (McDevitt, 1997: 264).

It is said that it is the unique structure of this wholly amateur sports organisation, which began by infiltrating small parishes in rural locations that allowed the GAA to induce a ‘tribal loyalty’ in its members. Ferriter cites this ability to instil passionate commitment to parish identity as the GAA’s greatest success (Ferriter 2004). Humphries quite romantically captures the aura of the GAA– ‘its impact is emotional, visceral ... the GAA is more than a sports organisation, it is a national trust, an entity which we feel we hold in common ownership. It is there to administer to our shared passion’ (Humphries 1996).

It is such deep-rooted affinity to a national ideology that Holt maintains is imperative to sustaining the national ideal. One needs to feel it and ‘take it for granted as a natural truth’. In particular he insists that ideologies are conveyed through myths, ‘usually constructed around ideals of individual success and manhood – what it takes to be a man’ (Holt 2004). One such myth propagating the GAA organisation is its unmitigated support for and involvement in the Irish struggle for independence from Britain in the early twentieth century. Cronin documents how the GAA in fact split during this political period of upheaval, with many members rejecting the physical violence at the time. However, post-independence, GAA members and custodians began to focus on the connection between nationalist violence and national sport, thus allowing for ‘martyrdom and legendary status’ along with a ‘romantic and mythic notion of nationality which

stressed sporting physical fitness as a route to securing national self determination’ (Cronin, 1999: 88-90).

As the GAA is typically discussed in the context of ‘political upheaval, emergent nationalism and state building’, less attention has been paid to its operation in other contexts (Cronin, 1999: 92). Another interesting contradiction to the rationale of setting up an organisation motivated to expel British sport and influence from Ireland is the mode of operation adopted to initiate the GAA. Sport historian (Mandle 1983) records how the development and implementation of this Irish sporting body was inspired by the process of codification and organisation of sporting life in Britain throughout the nineteenth century. He writes, ‘not even the GAA, founded, manipulated and sustained, first by the IRB, later by the nationalist movement as a whole, could escape the wider influences that came from its being located within the United Kingdom. The sports revolution that codified and organized so many traditional games, and invented new ones, was British, even an English phenomenon’ (Mandle, 1983: 105). The ‘new Irish man’ that McDevitt alludes to above is a reconstruction of the cult of muscular Christianity and embrace of manly values that actually originated in British public school sport fields (Cronin, 1999: 107-8).

The aforementioned examples suggest an organisation fraught with complex contradictions throughout its 125-year history. The recurring ambiguities or consumer myths may be what has sustained the GAA brand over time (Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz 2013). Or it could be the GAA organisation’s ability to adapt its commercial narratives when necessary in order to sustain and enhance membership (Connolly and Dolan 2012). Significant and controversial decisions made in more recent times include



the opening up of Croke Park to ‘foreign sports’ of rugby and soccer in 1997, and more imminently the negotiation of a 3-year pay-per-view media deal with Sky Sports. The deal is met with great criticism by many factions of Irish society however the GAA contend the strategic aim is not primarily financially motivated but rather aims to project the game to the greatest possible overseas audience (Keys 2014).

## **Commercial mythmaking and the GAA**

Having briefly considered the socio-historic, cultural and political factors surrounding the foundation and evolution of the GAA organisation, the next section relates commercial mythmaking to the continuing circulation within the media of specific values and meanings stereotypically associated with Gaelic Games.

Arnould defines commercially mediated mythology as the practice of ‘harnessing myth to commercial purposes via the marketplace’ (Arnould 2008). Thompson and Tian describe commercial mythmaking as ‘the efforts of advertisers ... and other marketing agents to situate their goods and services in culturally resonant stories that consumers can use ... to construct their personal and communal identities in desired ways’ (Thompson and Tian 2008). Thompson points out that to gain an understanding of how marketplace mythologies gain a foothold within a given interpretive community, cultural meanings can be disseminated through the ‘meanings, metaphors, and ideals diffused through advertisements’ alongside other communications within the community such as ‘practitioner narratives, conversational discourses among consumers ... and the information and beliefs diffused through ... media via stories, news reports, and expert columns’ (Thompson, 2004: 170). In her study of US cattle trade shows and rodeos and her exploration of the commodification of America’s Wild West, Peñaloza examines how marketers forge links between images and narratives of a mythology with their products and services, and in so doing they not only disseminate cultural ideas but also contribute to culture’s very production (Peñaloza 2000). In considering the mythological US cowboy hero and the Wild West, Peñaloza draws upon Campbell’s assertion that ‘myths

represent long-standing, relatively resilient, popular ritual traditions that perform important cultural functions ...' (Campbell cited in Peñaloza, 2000: 86).

A case study carried out by Meenaghan (2003) illustrates this exploitation of commercial mediated mythology by the Gaelic Athletic Association and its sponsors in an effort to promote the games and increase revenue. Meenaghan documents the GAA's successful marketing partnership with renowned Irish drinks brand Guinness and highlights how the advertising material, which draws on revered Celtic folklore connected to ancient Gaelic games, forges an opportunistic albeit fictitious continuity between the Guinness brand, the GAA organisation and a past mythical Ireland (Meenaghan 2003). Such lucrative sponsorship deals are plentiful in the GAA organisation. While the rationale for establishing the GAA (including religious, political and nationalist goals along with games co-ordination) has been discussed, a coinciding commercial element to the organisation has existed since its inception in 1884, despite its amateur status. From promotional tours to the US from as early as 1888 through fundraising events in the UK in the 1950s to the introduction of jersey sponsorship in 1991, the GAA has continued to flourish and grow by embracing marketing and promotional opportunities where possible. At present, the GAA has approximately 15 commercial partnerships with major Irish and international brands along with numerous jersey sponsorship deals and a multitude of provincial sponsorship deals at club level. These partners, some as banal as insurance or telecommunication providers, all invest heavily in linking their brand to their support of Gaelic games, particularly during the Gaelic sporting season. What is of interest here is to consider the 'relationships between these different market place articulations and

consumers' lifestyles and narratives of identity' (Thompson, 2004: 170). Such advertisements considered to 'mythologise' their promoted brands/products/services are said to be 'constructing an ideal consumer lifestyle'. From a Foucauldian perspective these GAA sponsors are promulgating a 'discourse of power; that is, a discourse that seeks to channel consumers' identities and lifestyles in a particular ideological direction' (Thompson, 2004: 170).

## **Research Approach**

The purpose of this research is to understand how men's identity projects take form and how they are produced through (institutional) practices and discourses operating within the discourse of national sport. In particular this paper attempts to elucidate how young Irish male sports players use marketplace mythologies to negotiate their involvement with the GAA and how these negotiations in turn shape their selves.

This paper draws primarily from data collected following in-depth qualitative interviews. In addition, to gain a better understanding of the discursive regime of Gaelic sport, further data was gathered through participant observation at Gaelic football matches, reviewing online Gaelic sport websites, newspaper articles and blogs, close reading of Gaelic sport advertising material, researching history books recording the history and social significance of Gaelic Sport in Ireland, visiting the Croke Park GAA museum and conducting an informal meeting with the GAA sponsorship manager. It is such cultural resources that aid the diffusion of 'meanings, metaphors and ideals' and in turn allow marketplace mythologies to develop (Thompson, 2004: 170).

The GAA Fellas group comprises five interviewees between 22 and 27 years of age, all hailing from North County Dublin. It was decided to interview men with varying levels of commitment to the sport of Gaelic football. Each man was to be a member of a GAA club; however, the commitment ranged from playing County level football, to playing at Senior level, to playing primarily for recreation and the social involvement. One rationale for this approach was to '*try* and get a range of views on the topic of [my] research' as this may proffer a more insightful range of data (Rapley 2004).

Four respondents are discussed in this paper<sup>2</sup>, using pseudonyms at all times for names of people, clubs and towns mentioned in the data. All four men have been playing Gaelic football at local clubs since the age of six or seven years. Peter and Dan are childhood friends, having met through Gaelic sport. Eamon and Kevin grew up together on the same housing estate and both started football on the same day, when Kevin's father brought them to the club at the age of seven. The latter two are the eldest of this group, having only returned to Gaelic football in the past year for recreation more than the competition. Of the four men, Peter would be well known to GAA followers as he is in the Dublin squad. He is revered in particular by the older two men, who see him as a local hero and as an example to all young players of what can be achieved if one fully commits to the game.

Respondents were asked to familiarise themselves with five particular GAA advertisements<sup>3</sup> before the interview, to aid the discussion. The ads were emailed to each via a YouTube link. Additionally, during the interview process we looked again at a number of these GAA sponsorship advertisements and newspaper photographs<sup>4</sup> to consider their reaction as Gaelic sport players and as consumers to current GAA advertising material in circulation. These interview tools helped to animate the interview talk.

From her own close reading of these GAA adverts (for examples see Appendices 2 and 3), the author identified a number of recurring themes within the narrative and imagery of the ads' content. Virtues exalted include 'Community Spirit', 'Commitment',

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed profile of the four respondents see appendix 1

<sup>3</sup> In order to give an insight into the type of ads in circulation in the Irish media, a description of two of the GAA ads viewed are outlined in the Appendices 2 and 3).

<sup>4</sup> See Appendices 4–8.

‘Perseverance’ and ‘Respect’. Also, themes of ‘GAA Father and Son ties’ and ‘The Disciplined Athlete’ abound. Such commercial narrative developed by marketers and circulated in the Irish media marketplace can be considered disseminators of the cultural meanings and values conventionally associated with GAA sport. What is of interest is whether viewers of these adverts integrate the narrative and mythology into their own narratives of identity. As Thompson states, should consumers integrate aspects of marketplace mythology into their self-conceptions, in doing so they are ‘also constructing a relationship to the multiple discourses of power that circulate in their everyday lives’ (Thompson, 2004: 170).

In order to analyse the interview data a constructionist approach is followed with the understanding that a consumer’s narrated experience is embedded in a social web of possible interpretation. Rather than seeking to discover a respondents ‘essential self’ within interview data, this research takes a narrative analysis approach, considering individuals storytelling within the context of circulating discourses and power relations. Taking this approach allows us to consider identity projects as ‘enmeshed in – and produced within – webs of social relations’ (Lawler 2008).

While there are a number of ways in which one can analyse a narrative text, to include thematic analysis and structural analysis, the method most appropriate to this study is dialogical or performance analysis. Dialogical analysis is interested in how social reality is constructed through interaction, whereby what we take in everyday culture to be ‘true’ is actually produced in daily exchanges. The close narrative analysis of even a single case can display ‘how larger social structures insinuate their way into individual

consciousness and identity, and how these socially constructed “selves” are then performed for (and with) an audience’ (Riessman Kohler 2008). This analysis aptly lends itself to the Foucauldian theoretical framework followed in this research study.



## **Findings**

### The Parish Dream

The advertisements analysed and described in Appendices 2 and 3 capture various idyllic, parochial GAA scenes heralding moments of almost surreal camaraderie and community spirit. Kevin, as previously mentioned, recently returned to play for a neighbouring Gaelic club in a more rural location in North County Dublin after a six-year break from the game. His childhood club, Finian's, is situated in Scotstown, one of Dublin's larger commuter towns. He found Finian's too big, cliquy and lacking parochial atmosphere. His rationale thereafter for seeking out an alternative club reveals an idealism reminiscent of the Gaelic folklore depicted in the GAA ads. He recalls his college days when fellow footballers from rural communities in County Tipperary recited stories laden with tremendous pride in their club and their parish collectively. Kevin envied the sense of community these young men got from being a part of their club and lamented how Finian's did not instil in him a similar sense of honour. And so, when he returns to play football at the age of 26, he chooses the Shamrock Gaels in the neighbouring village of Ongartown over Finians.

**Kevin:** ... Because I suppose, like, when I was in college in Waterford, there was, my mates were from Tipperary and all they talked about was the parish, the pride and the, I swear to God, about the pride in the club and all that and I never felt that playing for Finian's because it was just a club I played with, like ... But it was only when I went out to Ongartown that you really got a sense of what it meant to the parish, like, you know, 'cos it's such a small place ... And everything is built around the Gaelic club out there, like, you know and it's, like, the whole community come out to watch the games and stuff like that and everyone gets to know you ...

Kevin is seeking a community within which he feels a sense of belonging, and from the stories he's been regaled with by past college friends he concludes that membership of a small parish team will help him feel that sense of kinship.

**Kevin:** but I wanted to play with a parish team, I always wanted to ...

**Dee:** Do you not see Finian's as being a parish team?

**Kevin:** No, I see it as, I don't really see it as being a parish team, I see it as being a big town team ... You know, that's a big club or, well, what I wanted to feel was the way the lads talked about in college ... That they had that sense of community and that sense of you know, just that parish feel, like, you know?

**Dee:** And do you get it out there?

**Kevin:** Yeah, you do get it out there, a lot.

**Dee:** Like, what do they do around the club that makes it ...?

**Kevin:** Just, just on a Sunday everybody comes out to watch the games, young, old, children, all that sort of thing, and everybody, like I'm only there like six months but like, everyone knows you, like ... All the kids would be shouting your name and stuff like that and it's, and then we go to the local for a few pints afterwards and it's just like, it's really good for a town, like, for a small town like that ... And when the town, the parish succeeds, everyone kind of, they put up flags and all that sort of thing but you wouldn't get that in Scotstown like, you know, 'cos Scotstown is too big, like, you know?

Within the interview Kevin was asked to take a look at various GAA media photographs and the adverts discussed above. Kevin describes some of the photos using a phrase that cropped up in a number of the interviews – 'putting their bodies on the line'. This is terminology used by coaches to describe the level of commitment the players need to put in to win the ball. Certainly from the images used in this interview, to throw one's body on the line is to put one's body at risk of grave injury, as players are seen contorting their bodies gymnastically in heroic efforts to secure the ball. Relating the phrase back to his own club team talks, Kevin explains how before matches the coach would reinforce to them that they are playing for their parish and their jersey:

**Kevin:** No, yeah, ah you just go for it, I suppose, and, but you would be aware of it as well, like, you know, that, you know, when the team talks before the game, that you'll be told, you know, to put everything in it, you know, it's all about winning and pride in again the parish and the county as well ... Yeah, you're doing it for the jersey and be proud and all that sort of thing, yeah.

Here the football coach can be said to be instilling the players with traditional GAA values of parochialism and utter dedication to the cause through reciting speeches laced with mythic rhetoric lauding pride in one's jersey and parish as motivation to put one's body 'on the line'. Clearly the irony in Kevin's situation is that Ongartown is not his parish, and he has acquired the Shamrock Gaels jersey only in the past six months. Yet he is nonetheless captivated by the lure of a close-knit community and his infiltration of it to belong among them. To support his stance on what the GAA represents to him, he draws upon a line from the Vodafone GAA All Stars ad:

**Kevin:** Ah, they definitely do, yeah, like even stuff like the first ad, with like, 'It's in the DNA, it's in the GAA', all that sort of thing, and that's what it's about, like, you know, it's about, like ...

He unquestionably borrows from the cultural rhetoric provided by Vodafone's sponsorship advert, this 'GAA truth' and recites the phrase to articulate his 'own' thinking on what the GAA signifies to him.

#### The GAA Father and Son 'Truth'

Likewise Eamon, who also has recently returned to play for his local team, Finian's, after a 10-year sabbatical, embraced the GAA imagery of the newspaper photos and the sponsorship ads and identifies with the various scenarios depicted. More than this, when Eamon refers to the ads in conversation, rather than simply read the ad, he inserts his self

and his own life story into the ad's story. In recalling how he got into Gaelic sport, Eamon recites a well-rehearsed story of how it was inevitable he play given that his father and grandfather are keen supporters. His explanation is littered with extracts that somewhat dramatically suggest that playing football was his predetermined destiny:

**Eamon:** There was, well, having this conversation before with ... some, you know, loved ones and family members, it was never an option not to be involved in it because we always, Sundays were spent going to Croke Park when they used to play the league matches, so there was never any doubt that that was what I was always going to go and play in any sport because Dad's from Tyrone and big into his GAA and so, and my grandfather on my mother's side is big into it as well, and all of the time would have been, GAA would have been spoken about so then, that would have been, I suppose, the aspiration then ... GAA was always going to be the goal ...

He goes on to describe various days out with his father to matches, 'triple headers', 'All-Ireland Sunday' and other GAA events through the years that led up to his fated subscription to a club. He describes Gaelic sport almost as a conversational tool that he and his father used to communicate with one another throughout the years. By way of summarising his story of how he joined the GAA, he turns back to the adverts previously viewed. In particular he makes reference to the Vodafone GAA All-Stars advert to illustrate his own father-and-son story. He unquestioningly accepts the generational transition of Gaelic sport from father to son as a 'GAA truth', something that has always been and always will be – *in saecula saeculorum*.

**Eamon:** And even still, the sporting discussions that we have are sometimes related to other sports but predominantly GAA. That's it. That's pretty ... like it's ... and, but even though, that's kind of one of the things that I see with all of those for example, the ads ... It's the transition between generations that has just continued and it's something that's always there so, if you say, oh if you had a son, could I, I would want, like I'd much prefer to see him win an All-Ireland medal than an FA Cup medal.

**Dee:** You would yourself?

**Eamon:** Myself. If I, that's one thing, if I had an option of going back and doing it again, that's what I would want to be – an All-Ireland winner. That's the honesty 'cos I think it's massive.

In using the advert as a prop in his story, his own story becomes intertwined in the advert narrative. He first puts himself in the stance of father looking with aspiration on an imaginary son, projecting his wish to win an All-Ireland medal unto him. However, he shifts the storyline back in time and perhaps more aptly places himself as the young boy with aspirations of achieving this goal of All-Ireland medallist.

It is significant that while Eamon undoubtedly was surrounded by GAA narrative in his family when growing up, and his father conversed with him at length about the sport and brought him to watch various tournaments, it was not actually his own father who brought Eamon to join the local football club. It was Kevin's father that enrolled him at Finian's GAA club. In fact Eamon goes on to reflect how his father never came to the clubhouse when he was training. Given his recital of GAA being a generational unifier, this admission was probed further. Eamon quickly asserts that it was he who did not 'let him go down' to watch him play rather than any lack of interest on his father's part. As we talk about this, Eamon becomes pensive as he tries to remember why he did not want his father around the club – 'this is very, Jesus, this is very deep and meaningful, I never thought I'd open these ... doors'. At first he proffers that perhaps he would have felt external pressure to perform should his father have been there and he'd be distracted, thinking 'Jesus, I'd better not make a balls of this'. However, he is not fully satisfied by this and pauses many times in deep reflection struggling to find a reasonable answer given his previous lengthy narration alluding to his identification to the 'GAA Father and

Son Truth'. He goes on to recall how he had no objection to his father attending his school debates or swimming galas, therefore he cannot accept his first suggestion of his father being a distraction as a credible answer. He eventually arrives at a more satisfactory rationale as he suggests that playing football is an outlet for him, a domain wherein which he can let go, have a laugh, curse, and perhaps display aggression uncharacteristic of him in his work and family roles.

**Eamon:** ... you see because again like you curse a lot when you're playing football and stuff like that, you know, maybe I'm just not into my Dad hearing me curse or something like that, I don't know, it just, I've always found it maybe a little bit just more pressurised when he was there, when I've not the freedom to play.

His justification eases his melancholic mood; however, he is conscious that his answer is not in line with his previous convictions of the GAA providing a platform that unites father and son, nor his recital of the discipline and respect required in this sport. He concludes: 'But, maybe that's just, I'm a contradiction, you know?'

#### Investing in the Commercial Myth?

Kniazeva and Belk assert commercial myth making is open to 'multiple interpretations by consumers depending upon their desires, backgrounds, and aspirations' (Kniazeva and Belk 2010). Interviewees' responses to the GAA sponsorship adverts within this discursive regime of Gaelic sport differed in accordance with their level of commitment to the game. Interestingly it is Kevin and Eamon, the players that have only recently returned to playing football for their local club and who have devoted least physical and emotional time and effort, that invest the most highly in the ideological GAA imagery, as we have seen in the previous discussion. Peter and Dan, both playing football

consistently for 17 years and both privileged in their selection to play for their county – Dublin – don't engage as readily with the mythic connotations suggested in the advert material. Indeed, Peter refers to a Guinness ad and notes warriors with shields (a play on Gaelic folklore linking Gaelic football to Gaelic warriors of old), but he cannot 'buy into' the advertisement as he cannot see the relevance to the game, and so he dismisses the ad with accusations that it is 'only trying to sell'. It is not that the mythic socio-historic content is lost on Peter. In fact it is he who best narrates the story of the GAA grassroots:

**Peter:** Because like back then it was about being Irish, like, you know and being Republican and being just not British, you know, and just that distinction there between foreign sports and soccer and being Irish, you know, and the Gaelic League and being like an Irish sport and all like you know, so that was, back then, you know, for big games in Croke Park like Michael Collins would be throwing the ball in to start off the game or the parish priest, you know, those ... like them links with the church and the Republic Army and being Irish, you know, that's just – that's gone now. It's all about, I still think, I just think, like everything now it's just all driven by money you know and trying to generate money which is not – at the end of the day, like, the players don't get that or anything like that but it's just, the GAA get it to make themselves more powerful, you can see, it's a powerful organisation ...

Peter has a good knowledge of the GAA foundations, but produces a nostalgic narrative for a simpler time in the games when the GAA was not so commercially motivated. And so, when Peter views GAA ads, only those with any realism or connection with the playing of 'a pure game of football' reach him. It is the ads that feature actual star GAA players that hold his attention – players that he admires enacting 'real' GAA moments rather than fabricated tales of a mythical Irish past. Additionally it is adverts capturing match day at Croke Park that are revered by Peter:

or the ones, you know the ones where – I think these are the best ones, you might have a girl from Roscommon and a boy from Sligo and they're married or whatever like that and then they say "separated by county but married for life" or something like that [Super-Valu ad] ... They're good ones because it's true, 'cos

how many times have you gone to Croke Park and you see different couples and they're wearing different jerseys, you know and ... they really kind of capture the kind of, the sense of like ...

Likewise, Dan is more focused on the realities of the game that are portrayed in GAA advertising material. He diverts from the ads circulated by the interviewer when asked his opinion of GAA advertising and instead draws upon an advert from his own recollection. He recalls an ad for Lucozade energy drink featuring a top Gaelic player educating young players as to the importance of hydration for peak performance:

**Dan:** I didn't really, but there's one I think is good, it's just about Colm Cooper, it's about another part of the sport, making, for young people coming up, to make them aware of hydration, like just the Lucozade thing ... But you know, he was saying, explaining how important it is to be hydrated, to be at your peak performance and for younger people to listen, you know, I think that was a good thing, you know, 'cos as you get into a higher level, you realise how important nutrition and hydration and all that sort of thing is and you know, when you're coming up to club level, it's not put across to you so much, but like as you go on, it's one thing that's really drilled into you how important that sort of stuff is so ...

Both Peter and Dan have invested heavily in the GAA organisation. Their entire lives are oriented around the game, from the physical practicalities of training nearly every night to scheduling their family life to fit into the football calendar. Being a Dublin County GAA player is central to their identity project. The sacrifices and commitments are very real to them as individuals. And so, borrowing from Arsel and Thompson's recent redefinition of demythologisation in a consumer culture context, it can be said that Peter and Dan are creating boundaries between their living existence as 'real' GAA players and the fabricated tales spun in marketplace mythologies that may serve to undermine their identity projects (Arsel and Thompson 2011). As Kniazeva and Belk (2010) affirm, it is



the consumer who will decide whether marketing cues to authenticity resonate with their own lives. In the cases of Peter and Dan, there is an authentic GAA story to be told and so they do not need to invest in mythic rhetoric or ‘invented tradition’ available in adverts. In contrast, Eamon and Kevin embrace the advertisement’s folklore and make grand proclamations as to the importance of the game, giving an abstract and ideological rationale rather than reasoning grounded in their day-to-day existence. They eagerly utilise the marketplace articulations in circulation as they complement their narratives of identity, the comforting stories they have constructed to insert their life stories into the traditional, rose-tinted narrative of the GAA organisation.

## **Conclusion**

This paper takes the Irish national sports organisation – the Gaelic Athletic Association – to act as a lens on the discursive practices in operation within the community of Gaelic sportsmen. In particular, commercially mediated mythologies surrounding the GAA were considered in order to understand how young Irish men use these circulating meanings, metaphors and ideals diffused through GAA advertising material when negotiating their own identity projects. It reveals how those participants with the least vested physical time and commitment to the GAA as an organisation, what I call peripheral members on a membership continuum, were more likely to invest highly in the images and narratives of the GAA advertising mythologies produced by marketers, and accept their stories as ‘GAA truths’. These men have constructed their GAA identity on the ‘narratives of socialisation’ that surround them, through their family and friends. Through hypothesising the game and the traditions and folklore surrounding it they have been socialised into a GAA identity built primarily on ideology and stories. They use these commercially mediated meanings in their identity projects constructs (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

On the other hand, participants whose life stories have in a very real and physical sense revolved around the sport of Gaelic football and the GAA organisation, what I call the embedded member, resist identifying with GAA marketplace mythologies. Mediated virtues such as ‘perseverance’, ‘commitment’, ‘discipline’ and ‘respect’ are not just abstract rhetoric for these men, but part of their daily lives as footballers, and incorporate the real sacrifices they make as dedicated county players. Their personal commitment to the GAA social network is central to their identity. And so these men engage in what

Arsel and Thompson (2011) refer to as ‘demythologising practices’ to distinguish their hefty investment in this consumption field from a (potentially) devaluing marketplace myth. If a story is to be told, these men would like it to resonate with the realities and mechanics of the game rather than harking back to a fictitious yesteryear.

In relation to the continuing circulation of advertisements heralding stereotyped conceptions of Gaelic sport, Dolan suggests that branding managers, market researchers and magazine editors are strategic in disseminating discursive appeals only when ‘the potential customer already feels receptive to such discursive practices’ (Dolan, 2009: 138). Thus it remains the romanticism and mythic ideology attached to the game seemingly appeals to a broader audience.

Through exploring how discursive regimes order individual’s lives, be they mediated or otherwise, the self emerges and one gains a better understanding of the individual subject intertwined within societal networks. More so, by looking at individuals’ practices we see that within a specific group various forms of a particular identity can take shape through differential power relations. An embedded member of a social group will experience power differently to those on the periphery and otherwise engage with circulating discourse.

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## **Appendix 1: Personal Profile of The GAA Fellas**

Peter: On the cusp of his 21st birthday, Peter arrived at the penultimate rung on every aspiring young Gaelic player's ladder – a place on the County Senior Football team. Twenty-three years of age at the time of interview, he has a number of Gaelic achievements under his belt. Peter served his apprenticeship as a plumber before being awarded a scholarship to study at a nearby university. Much of Peter's life to date has been shaped and guided by the GAA, with his daily routine centring on football training, competitions and matches. Since our interview in Summer 2010, Peter has won an All-Ireland football medal with Dublin.

Dan: At 22 years of age, Dan is also on the Dublin squad; however due to injury he has not been available for selection. Despite this setback he continues rigorous training schedules and undertakes physiotherapy to return to a similar level of fitness as his teammates. He describes 6.30am training sessions on snow-covered beaches in January as tasks laid down to challenge both physical and mental strength, but ultimately he concludes that these training sessions unite the players and spur team morale. Dan has a deep sense of commitment to the GAA, appreciating all it has given him, and reiterates his desire to 'pay it forward' through means such as voluntary coaching at his club. While Dan served for a time as a carpenter, he recently has found himself unemployed. He carries out odd jobs here and there, but has no steady work at present. Again, since our interview, Dan too, is the proud holder of an All-Ireland football medal.

Eamon: is an Economics and Politics UCD graduate now working as a careers and communications consultant. He returned this year to play Gaelic football at 27 after a 10-year sabbatical. He blames booze and lack of dedication as key determinants in his withdrawal from the team at 17, after 10 years' previous service. One of his key motivations for rejoining the club was to immerse himself in local North County Dublin community life. Eamon trains with the local intermediate team but has to overcome internal politics and seniority of membership in order to secure a place on match day. However, and much to his surprise, it is not the competition of a game, but the fun and comradeship to be had at training that he enjoys the most.

Kevin: at 27 years of age, Kevin has also recently returned to play Gaelic football. From the age of six, his father brought both Kevin and Eamon to the local GAA club to enlist with the Juveniles. A promising player, Kevin's ultimatum came at age 20 when he was torn between playing for his college team in Waterford while his club coach was insisting he make training twice a week in Dublin. Frustrated at the time with management and their demands, a broken collarbone helped decide his fate, and he took the opportunity to hang up his boots for six years until he joined a new local Gaelic club this year. Interestingly, Kevin chose to join the Shamrock Gaels GAA club, rather than return to his childhood team in Scotstown, as he preferred the sense of parochial community and support offered by this small North County Dublin parish over the large, 'cliquey' club in the inhospitable town of Scotstown.

## **Appendix 2**

### **GAA All Stars TV Ad sponsored by Vodafone**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1e32p7KkPo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1e32p7KkPo)

The ambience of this advert, created with epic instrumental background music, shot in black and white, to include eight picturesque scenes, is resonant of a bygone era. Each scene depicts earthy, rugged Irish men in various parochial settings. The narrative of the ad is provided through questions scripted on each screen frame shot, rather than a vocal narrative. The music complements the written narrative, crescendoing at instances of tension within the advert. Each shot develops the story and so an outline is provided below to consider the written narratives provided alongside the images setting the scene.

#### ‘What makes a GAA All Star do it?’

Against a dark backdrop, with just the hint of cloud outlined, the opening scene reveals a single, athletic and strong GAA player with hurl in hand as he gradually raises his head and concentrates his gaze at what the viewer can assume is the focus at hand – the goalposts.

#### ‘Is it the Glamour?’

Scene one fades out to lead into an action shot of a football player getting stampeded upon by fellow players as he falls to the ground, sliding head first through pools of muddied water, the pitch clearly waterlogged, yet the game carries on. A close-up shot of the player raising his hand in slow motion dramatically indicates he has received a blow to the mouth. The written narrative ‘Is it the Glamour?’ is clearly ironic, in stark contrast to the rough and tumble scene portrayed.

#### ‘The Social Life?’

The next scene cuts to a lone figure set in a countryside landscape practising his hurling in the field. The sliotar ricochets off a homemade swing – a car tyre tied to a rope and fixed to a tree, perhaps suggesting that this young man is honing his hurling techniques in the place of his childhood play. The camera pans out to show the young man off in the distance perhaps making his way home, the journey ahead entailing a large mountain that he must ascend to reach his destination. At this point in the scene the text ‘The Social Life?’ appears. The lonely figure making his way across the stark countryside is the antithesis of what one would consider a sociable occasion.

#### ‘The Respect?’

The countryside landscape fades out to cut in to a close-up encounter taking place at the sidelines of a match. A young player hangs his head as a more senior male manager gestures animatedly and shouts into the player’s face, clearly reprimanding him over a recent play made on the field. Though the player looks to be about 30 years of age, he heaves his chest and lowers his eyes to the ground like a young schoolboy as the text appears: ‘The Respect?’. Clearly in this scene the player, a GAA All Star perhaps as the ad suggests, is the subordinate. Rather than being portrayed as a man worthy of admiration, in this exchange between player and manager, the young man shows his

humility in the face of authority. It is not the GAA All Star that commands the respect; rather it is he, despite his mastery of the game, that must show respect to his coach and manager.

‘The Fame?’

This fifth frame shot opens to reveal an empty stand bar one young son standing proudly as he holds up his homemade banner reading ‘Come on Da’ as his father wearily makes his way off the pitch with his fellow crestfallen teammates at the end of a match.

‘Or is it something that runs deeper?’

The father raises his head and a slight smile crosses his lips on sight of his young son with his hopeful banner still raised high. On reaching his son, he places his own hurl into the boy’s hand as the son beams up in admiration at this father.

‘Call it DNA, Better still call it GAA’

The silhouette of father and son walking out of the stadium with father’s hand supportively on his son’s shoulder nears the advert to a close. ‘Call it DNA’ text appears, suggesting that the will to play Gaelic sport is in an Irishman’s blood and has been passed on through the generations. This is followed by ‘Better still call it GAA’ which provides the dual answer to the question posed ‘What makes a GAA All Star do it?’ – the answer being a combination of inheriting the tradition of the game, and the ongoing support and perseverance of the GAA institution which facilitates these players to excel and go on to receive the accolade of an All Star, desired by every GAA county player.

‘Vodafone. Proud to sponsor the GAA All Stars’

The storyline is intercepted briefly by a quick flash of commercial realism. Telecommunications company Vodafone take a screenshot to communicate their proud sponsorship of GAA sport with the specifically designed Vodafone GAA All Stars logo displayed onscreen to illustrate to viewers their solidarity with the association.

‘Strictly for the glamour, of course’

Following the commercial sound bite, the advert returns to the narrative of the story for the final scene. An extreme close-up imposes upon the screen a rugged, earthy looking GAA player peering out at the viewer. The Irishman has weather beaten skin and detailed crow’s feet framing his eyes, he sports a crooked nose from perhaps many clashes on the pitch and wears a broad smirk across his face revealing a wide gap where once his front tooth was lodged. The viewer can assume he is the young man from earlier who was slide tackled to the ground. Rather than fretting over his aesthetically displeasing dentures, the ad suggests a real GAA man takes the knocks and tumbles as part and parcel of the game as the injured player beams almost proudly displaying his ‘war wound’ for all the world to see. The final written narrative satirically concludes ‘Strictly for the glamour, of course’.



### Appendix 3

#### Vodafone GAA TV Ad

([www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjiS5yqicqk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjiS5yqicqk))

This 40 second advert aired in the summer of 2009 on Irish TV with the aim of introducing Vodafone's sponsorship of the GAA Football Championship. The ad is narrated by Sean Boylan, a former county football manager of 23 years, a lengthy service earning him induction into the GAA Hall of Fame. Boylan, a native of County Meath, came from a family actively involved in the Irish independence movement in the early twentieth century. He narrates excerpts from Rudyard Kipling's 1895 poem 'If', with the words of the poem providing meaningful captions to the many GAA scenes captured throughout. As an aside, ironically Kipling was a staunch supporter of British Imperialism and supported the Ulster Volunteers in their opposition to Home Rule in Ireland. Choosing a poet with beliefs antithetical to those of the founding fathers of the GAA organisation may have been an oversight by Vodafone. Alternatively, as imagery we shall see within the ad suggests, perhaps to use this poem heralds a new era of the GAA, one in which political and historical differences can be put to the sideline, and opposing views can coexist without conflict. The following describes the ad as it unfolds to the words of 'If':

#### Extract One:

*If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too*

The scene opens with Dublin and Meath players running onto the pitch to the background roar of excitement from the stands. The Dublin player is knocked to the ground by two opponents and the referee calls for a free kick to be taken by Dublin. The young Dublin player raises his head from the ground and looks upwards towards the goalposts, contemplating the task at hand – he has been granted a free kick in the final minute of the game. The viewer can assume given the tension created in the advert that to score this point could be the winning of the game. A shot of Dublin supporters with their blue jerseys and angst-ridden faces captures the significance of this free kick. The narrative at this point is a poignant message to the young player to focus on his game and not succumb to the apprehensive mood of the crowd – 'If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you', a familiar instruction no doubt delivered many times by their coach and manager. The young man takes his kick decisively and with confidence; we see him proudly walk away as the linesman waves his flag to indicate the point is to be awarded. The once tense Dublin crowd erupt into a wave of cheering and chanting – their team has won.

#### Extract Two:

*If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;*

The next scene focuses on a dilapidated scoreboard in a field which bears the score 'Wicklow 9–26, Kerry 0–0'. By any GAA standard this is an unrealistic score to achieve in a game; what is more farcical, however, is for Wicklow – a mediocre team at best – to have achieved this lead against Kerry – the most successful county in the history of football. When the camera pans out we see, rather than a game in progress, just a lone spectator in the field looking up at this score, and perhaps dreaming of the day when it may become a reality.

Extract Three:

*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;*

The third scene captures a small crowd of spectators of all ages, in what looks like a local community hall watching excitedly as a football game is playing on the TV. At first they all look to be supporting the same team; however, on closer examination some supporters are sporting orange and white jerseys indicating their support of the Ulster county of Armagh, while others are wearing red and white jerseys – the colours of County Tyrone. These two Ulster counties are renowned as bitter rivals in GAA games, with clashes on and off the pitch not uncommon. The camera focuses on two middle-aged women sitting side by side in the community hall in their opposing team colours watching the TV screen with great trepidation. As the small crowd cheers, it is clear that one team has scored, but not at first which team, as one woman remains open-mouthed while the other holds her head in her hand. The Tyrone supporter eventually raises her head from her hands to reveal a broad smile, indicating her happiness rather than despair. The ambiguity is likely to be intentional as the scene cuts to both women hugging each other and laughing, as if to suggest it was not of great significance after all which team scored, as they both embrace in friendship. This scene capturing the women's enduring camaraderie in the face of potential conflict takes place to the apt narrative counselling one to meet 'Triumph and Disaster' equally.

Extract Four:

*If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!*

The final extract from the poem is illustrated with a scene capturing a sea of blue-and-yellow-clad Wicklow county supporters (the dreamers from Extract Two) departing from Dublin's Croke Park stadium – the home of GAA football – after a big match. The camera focuses on a young boy looking up at presumably his father, both in their county jerseys, walking hand in hand as the narrator emphasises the final words of the poem – 'And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!' This scene clearly highlights the GAA as a unifier of generations and facilitator of father and son bonds. Additionally, showing the Wicklow followers persevering in their support of their county, despite their notoriously poor performances (Wicklow is one of two counties in the 32-county championship never to have won a provincial title) displays dedication and pride, even

when the odds are stacked against them. These are qualities the GAA extols and virtues that encourage young men to continue to strive in order one day to achieve their dreams. The closing frame of the advert has the famous Croke Park stadium – the GAA ‘field of dreams’ – elevated in the background with the text ‘Proud sponsors of the GAA Football Championship’ mounted on the easily recognisable red colour used in all Vodafone branding alongside the GAA logo. The narrator concludes with the final words ‘Vodafone. Make the most of now’ as the entire screen is painted in the trademark red of Vodafone and the Vodafone logo pops up in the last screenshot, to ensure the linkage between the GAA and its new sponsor is apparent to the viewer.

Appendix 4



**Appendix 5**



**Appendix 6**



**Appendix 7**



**Appendix 8**

