

The Celebrated Body: Celebrities, Market and Commodification

El cuerpo célebre: celebridades, mercado y mercantilización

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Abstract: The article aims to analyse how the celebrities’ bodies, especially in sports, incorporates dominant public values allowing us to understand the transformation of the prevailing ideas in a social context. Nowadays, the athletes’ bodies are no longer tied only to performance or sporting success –or to values like hard work, productivity, perseverance, sacrifice, discipline– but much more, than in the past, to qualities such as beauty, wellness, and style. Fame can depend not only on the achievements or sporting skills, but also on simple visibility. Above all, the athlete’s body, with its incorporated values, has today a market value, and the celebrity is readily commodified.

Keywords: celebrity, body, sport, market, commodification.

Resumen: El artículo pretende analizar cómo el cuerpo de las celebridades, especialmente en los deportes, asimila los valores públicos dominantes. Eso nos permitirá entender la transformación de las ideas prevalecientes en un contexto social. Hoy el cuerpo del atleta ya no está vinculado solo a los resultados o éxitos deportivos –o a valores como el trabajo duro, la perseverancia, el sacrificio– sino, y mucho más que en el pasado, a cualidades tales como la belleza, el bienestar, la estética. La fama puede depender no sólo de la habilidad deportiva o de los resultados, sino también de la simple visibilidad. En particular, el cuerpo del atleta tiene hoy día, junto a los valores que incorpora, un valor de mercado y su fama se comercializa fácilmente.

Palabras clave: celebridad, cuerpo, deporte, mercado, comercialización.

Each age is characterized by dominant ideas, produced and conveyed in public discourse. The ideas about the body are no exception. The body is, in fact, surrounded by representations, by meanings changing over time –as, at the same time, the body itself can be transformed.

In our society, sport is one of the most important areas in which these meanings can circulate. The athlete shapes his body, competes, and is celebrated for his achievements, qualities or abilities. Thus, the values embodied in the celebrated athlete flock to the public space¹. His body attracts and provides the full range of views, sometimes conflicting, which feed the public discourse.

Sport, therefore, can be a useful indicator to understand the ideas that different eras and different socio-historical contexts apply to the body, their links with the dominant social values and all the changes involved. For example, the industrial body, typical of the 20th century and that is still a recognized pattern, is the one that ensures productivity and must be trained in order to improve and provide adequate performance. The values involved are efficiency, perseverance, and sacrifice; values useful to laboriously build success around talent. All this in spite of injuries and adversities. Thus, people celebrate a winning body, showing athletic excellence, extraordinary talent, and a body that triumphs in competitions, especially when properly trained. For this, he receives admiration and glory, and he will be able to be acclaimed and remembered.

Today, however, another idea of body emerges, where the aesthetic qualities, the ostentatious visibility, the charm, the link with seductive lifestyles, become important features for the celebrity of the athlete.

Also, celebrity has increasingly a market value. Today, in fact, sport is strongly commodified. Market does not hesitate to make the athlete's body, with all its meanings, a commodity.

The Sport Celebrity and His Corporeality

The celebrity of the sport star is intimately linked to his body, the way he shapes and

¹ See Horne, J., Tomlinson, A., Whannel, G., *Understanding Sport. An Introduction to the Sociological and Cultural Analysis of Sport*, London & New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 158-159.

uses it. He becomes celebrated, in fact, when the skills and athletic ability embodied allow him to get widespread notoriety. This means when his name is not simply present in the news, but it is to some extent their foundation.

The visibility is, of course, essential². In a society that produces and quickly transmits a huge flood of images, the basic principle of the distinction, of the stratification based on reputation and prestige, lays in the aptitude to get the limelight in the public space for a long time.

Thus, athletic excellence and media are the two requirements for celebrity, with different relevance depending on the case. Most of the time –following Chris Rojek– sportsmen’s fame is “achieved”, meaning linked to special merits in their field³. In other words, an athlete must train, build, and regulate the body in order to achieve a successful performance.

But body is not just about performance. Sometimes, also a simple visibility can bring about fame, even when sporting results are not always triumphant. In this case, the ability of the athletic body can be replaced –or at least accompanied– by an interest in aesthetic qualities or by the curiosity that the mere notoriety can generate.

The fame, however, is inevitably linked to media narratives. Narratives, at best, recognize and highlight exceptional qualities, embedded in special events, able to build noteworthy meanings for the audience, attracting and fascinating him. It is through the media that celebrity culture has become a characteristic of contemporary society in general, and in the sports world in particular.

The global media organize the industry of sport and entertainment, spreading, sometimes imposing the images of famous people. In specific occasions, their incidence can damage someone’s reputation or even lead to a slow anonymity. Among other things, sport is one of the few realms within a nation –or even on an international scale– where millions of people pay attention simultaneously to the same events and the same characters.

The information, the images, the representations of athletes are constantly and strongly circulating, creating a solid familiarity and stimulating a continuous interest in their sporting and personal affairs.

Public awareness and the impact on it are crucial, since the public certifies your fame and your attractiveness, or even the loss of your reputation. Nowadays, it is important to reach the audience quickly and tenaciously. The attention often is constantly self-perpetuating, since the more famous an athlete is, the more visible he will be on the media space and vice versa –on talk shows, in the news, on the covers of magazines. In some cases, the attention can even be obsessive. Celebrity leads to an insatiable need of the general public for information. Being out of media visibility for a significant period is risky, and it is not always useful and revitalizing. The continuous limelight is an incontrovertible necessity. The risk is the loss of interest, especially in our age, in which memory establishes roots with difficulty, since images, representations, and personalities are incessantly replaced –and the present is the dominant dimension of experience and identity.

The media, through their narratives and representations, produce a virtual intimacy between the sport star and the audience. This kind of relationship –so-called para-social– generates an identification with the celebrity, virtually conceived as an intimate acquaintance. The athletic excellence and the triumphs of the champions, but also their look

² See Rein, I., Kotler, P., Hamlin, M., Stoller, M., *High Visibility. Transforming Your Personal and Professional Brand*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2006, pp. 12-19.

³ Rojek, C., *Celebrity*, London, Reaktion Books, 2001.

and their lifestyle, become central for fans' identification. Sometimes, it can produce a sort of devotion, but –above all– it affects how people interpret their daily lives.

As Christopher Lasch pointed out, if we are encouraged to identify with celebrities, by the plethora of images in advertising or the media, it is because they give us the opportunity to project ourselves beyond the ordinariness of everyday life to make it ideally more akin to our preferences, or even our illusions⁴. The vicarious glory gives us refreshment.

Of course, the image of the sport star shaped by the media vortex is always under construction, as well as the negotiations with the audience meanings, full of potential contradictions, conflicts, changes, ups and downs. Therefore each champion may have a more or less ephemeral notoriety: he can remain famous for a long time thanks to his performance, his aesthetic appearance, or his lifestyle. He can even be in the highest positions of the reputation hierarchy, but can still suddenly fall from grace.

Celebrity is, in short, constantly negotiated. The focus remains the social values prevalent in the public sphere, the dominant ideas and beliefs –with their symbolic and emotional patrimony– which are crucial for identification, thus affecting even the lives of fans. Whether the main reason for admiration are embedded skills, the athletic achievements of the sports champion or, instead, the simple visibility, beauty, and a body that represents the common beliefs about health, well-being, or a very seductive way of life, it is a debated topic.

In the body of sport celebrities individual but socially recognized qualities are embedded, such as talent, skill, commitment, sacrifice, grace, strength, courage, self-control, discipline in training, and the ability to excel and triumph in the competitive world of sports, although luck and chance factors are not excluded.

Not surprisingly, Barry Smart argues that the performances of sport champions are celebrated as “genuine” and the star is symbol of a perfect authenticity⁵. An ideal able to confirm the values of competitiveness and individualism that are bastions of the contemporary Western culture. In a world characterized by formal democracy, athletic excellence, accompanied by the singularity of personal style, allows to create a social distance and to gain honours perceived as deserved.

The quality of the performance is enacted in the media scene, providing the status and appeal of the sport celebrity and of his body that is considered an indicator of genuineness, youth, wellbeing, health, and positivity.

Of course, as I have mentioned before, celebrity fluctuates. The athletic ability finally fades, successes and defeats alternate, and the image can be compromised by sports failures and personal problems. The athlete may be forgotten or weakly remembered.

According to Ellis Cashmore, media visibility is so important that the sport merit can be secondary, sometimes even scarcely significant. Nowadays, the substantial core of celebrity seems to move from the achievement to the simple public attention⁶.

Borrowing the words of Cashmore, the very idea of merit is, moreover, in constant transformation, a transformation that can also be related to the athletes and their bodies. As for the general celebrity, even for the sport celebrated body, the possession of exceptional qualities, worthy of consideration and admiration, or of extraordinary triumphs may not be

⁴ Lasch, C., *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York & London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1991, pp. 21-25.

⁵ Smart, B., *The Sport Star. Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity*, London, SAGE, 2005.

⁶ Cashmore, E., *Celebrity/Culture*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006.

essential. Some are famous mainly because they enjoy constant media attention. And it seems to work, even for a sportsman with little success, with a perhaps mediocre talent, but able to attract media attention by virtue of accessory qualities. In this case, other social values are at work: a fascinating way of life, beauty –that has a special influence in society focused on youth and aesthetic qualities– extravagance, an idea of wellbeing, etc. These features encode a strong emotional bond between a celebrity and the general public. Visibility, in these cases, really becomes a quality in itself –very useful and rewarding in a society of the image.

The Celebrity Market

In professional sports, competitions, tournaments, and sportspersons are not just part of an athletic realm, but they have clear commercial connotations. The passion of the fans has raised the level of performance and skills required, but it has also increased the consumption related to sports, shaping another field in which athletes, clubs and organizations compete: the market⁷.

Popularity and the body excellence –or idealized authenticity– perceived and shown in the performance by sport celebrities have a market value. The media visibility, related to the reputation of sport stars, is welcomed and is converted in sponsorship, advertising, and fruitful contracts – most of all if we consider the global dimension of sport. Thus, in the market, the reputation of celebrities, with all the values represented and conveyed, is easily commodified in order to give the consumption a more human aspect⁸.

The relationship among sports, the media, and the market has resulted in the transformation of the sports star in a recognizable brand that integrates the various markets, from entertainment to communication, from the production of consumer goods to advertising. What we can see is an industry and an economy of sport celebrities linked to the interests of the capitalist economy in a society characterized by consumption. After all, the contemporary celebrity has ideological and economic foundations⁹. The ideological basis is the liberal perspective that emphasizes the importance of the individual, of his inner life and his personal features. Not surprisingly, the celebrity incorporates different kinds of individuality existing in popular culture, with all the related values: fame, skill, charisma, leadership, and success. The economic side, instead, lies in the monetary value contained in every object and person, which in a consumer society can easily become commodity.

Sport celebrities play multiple roles. They are media goods, since they are the focus of sport programmes, allowing to sell the attention of the audience to advertising companies. They are also specific brands, with a market value, associating their image to different brands and products, to help companies and sponsors to improve their competitiveness.

If the notoriety of sport stars is appreciated by the companies it is because of their way of life as well as for their ability to become role models in terms of consumption choices. The celebrity is, in fact, always connected with identity. Fans buy products not only for utilitarian purposes, simply to own and use objects, but they build individual aspects of their identity, by selecting goods and services that can represent them and that they can

⁷ See Horne, J., *Sport in Consumer Culture*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

⁸ Rojek, C., op. cit., p. 14.

⁹ See Andrews, D. L., Jackson, S. L., “INTRODUCTION. Sport celebrities, public culture, and private experience”, in Andrews, D. L., Jackson, S. L. (ed.), *Sport Stars. The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity*, London & New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 1-17.

identify with.

Consumption is related to identity: a purchase can be useful to express the link with celebrities, building personal identities. Thanks to the media we live in close contact with celebrities, we know how they dress, their consumption, their preferences, their choices in leisure time. And we know what they ask us to buy. This knowledge about their lives can affect the fan-consumer's tastes. Buying shoes, clothes, or food represented by sports celebrities can indirectly identify them in their style. That's why sport stars are, also sometimes unintentionally, "mobile advertisements"¹⁰.

Their way of life becomes a model to imitate, and their body incorporates marketable values and qualities. The fans are voyeurs, appreciating the charm and the skills of famous athletes, and consumers transforming their admiration in purchases. In the sport stars, fans first find a vicarious exceptionality that athletes symbolize with their sporting excellence and their athletic body, in a world that promises to reward the best with adequate prizes. According to Smart, these values constitute the charisma of the star, that is, the idea of owning uncommon qualities, worthy of admiration and devotion. The consumer can enjoy them indirectly by sharing the celebrity's consumption. Not surprisingly, the advertising of companies, such as Nike or Adidas, often focuses their message on the exceptional skills and the triumphs of the athletes¹¹.

Also the fans' purchases are a kind of symbolic reward, confirming the values of success, talent, merit, sacrifice and hard work, typical modern, Western bourgeois values.

Even the athletes considered rebels, after all, usually don't tangibly take position against these values, and their resistance often has most of all a stylistic dimension, it does not seem a real fight against the society¹². In reality, companies and markets do not really like excessive, politicized and unruly nonconformists, so that they do not tend to invest in these athletes, often also indirectly influencing their notoriety.

The extensive and intensive visibility sometimes has a big impact on consumers-fans even without important achievements or a superlative talent. After all, as we have seen, sporting success is not always decisive. Notoriety can sometimes be sufficient and advertising contracts can be unrelated to sport achievements. Once notorious, it is marketing to reproduce the stars and their fame, sometimes more than results.

The body of the sportsperson, then, can be a sign of success, wellness or health related to the performance, but not necessarily. Today, it seems increasingly important for the athlete's commercialized body to be charming, to express youth, beauty, appeal, or a hedonistic lifestyle. These values can be embedded in the image of sports celebrities and in goods, in brands, or in products through which the consumer can assert his vicarious identity.

Celebrated Body, Commodified Body

The celebrated body of sportspersons summarizes the values and the symbols that are prevalent in a society. For this, the public significance of sport celebrities briefly describes its characteristics.

The relationship with the body in contemporary times is linked to concepts such as wellness, pleasure, hedonism, and beauty. Our image must be nice, must lead to narcissistic

¹⁰ Cashmore, E., op. cit., p. 12.

¹¹ Smart, B., op. cit., pp. 195-199.

¹² Cashmore, E., op. cit., pp. 238-239.

complacency and self-satisfaction. Treating the body means taking care of our identity, of the “self” that we show. This in a highly-individualized age, where pleasure and well-being are experienced in the private sphere as a sign of uniqueness. But the image is always in need of external models, terms of comparison of each narcissistic attitude.

Sports provide a field where healthy and strong bodies are represented –and, not infrequently, even winning bodies. The body provided, the sport one, despite the dangers of doping or technological modifications, does not seem to lose its credibility and is often considered the bearer of authentic qualities in a world full of artificiality and corruption¹³. Success becomes the index of the ability to shape winning bodies and to be able to govern them. The media constantly evoke these images providing dramas, narratives, and emotional experiences able to make the stars, and their bodies, cultural icons.

Bodies that, in addition to being worthy –at least potentially– of sporting success, meet aesthetic standards of fitness, stylistic perfection, and athletic build. The media narrative often attempts to make attractive, or even sensational, the lifestyle around this physicality. It is no coincidence, then, that this capacity to excite the audience makes sports a very important area for the commercialization and the economic exploitation of the body.

This phenomenon is part of a broader social process, which has made the perception and the ideas about beauty, desire, and aesthetics a crucial feature of interactions and identity. Our way of being is deeply shaped taking into account the style, the signs of the body or related signs, such as our consumptions. Our appearance and lifestyle represent a visible social competence defining people worthy of note.

The instrumental dimension of the body, typical of much of the twentieth century, now must deal with the aesthetic dimension, that redefines tastes, ideas, the emulation standards, and the principles of social solidarity linked to celebrity. If the image of the body and appearance acquire social importance and economic weight, the attractiveness, the ability to stand out and to fascinate become market attributes. The celebrity’s body thus becomes the place of desire and merchandise, it is forged, shaped and packaged to have impact on the fans and to generate their fantasies¹⁴.

As Jean Baudrillard would say, it is a sign exchanged in a signs market¹⁵. Also, if it has an economic value that needs to be fruitful, it must show signs of health, of beauty, of authenticity, of erotic charm, as well as of skills and success. It must seduce to take on exchange value, and if it implicitly calls sexual urges, so much the better.

You can tie the consumption and advertising of any other goods, from clothes to cars, from soft drinks to jewellery, to these symbols and meanings incorporated by the body.

David Beckham, for example, is still today a recognized and exploited face, so that advertising and sponsorships have enabled him exorbitant profits. He was a football player with well-known sporting qualities. His embodied skills unquestionably played a role in the construction of his image and, at least initially, led him to become a commercial object. However, the narratives characterizing him, incidentally forming his personal brand, build the image of a man who, besides being a good father, an exemplary husband or a serious person, has to do with fashion, beauty, and a refined lifestyle, well-placed in the narcissistic dimension of the contemporary world. His marriage with a pop music star, who in turn has a refined and expensive look and lifestyle, enriches his image with glamour. His graceful

¹³ See Smart, B., op. cit., p. 194.

¹⁴ Rojek, C., op. cit., pp. 101-112.

¹⁵ Baudrillard J., *Lo scambio simbolico e la morte*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2002 (ed. or. *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976).

body is a tribute to appearance and style, but also to wealth and conspicuous consumption: never discreet, staged without inhibitions. His little connection with the characteristic style of the football body and context, masculine, tough, typical of the working-class, is not so much a sign of effeminacy – an insinuation present in the public discourse – but of a shift towards a different idea of the body and its celebrated values¹⁶.

In the case of Beckham, charm, lifestyle and sport skills have jointly contributed to provide an extraordinary media exposure and a very profitable commercial object, even outside the football field. This is unlike, for example, the case of Anna Kournikova, a discrete tennis player who has not achieved particular sporting success. Her beauty, however, has attracted media attention and led to a huge fame and to numerous sponsorship contracts, with obvious economic advantages. Within a women's sport that tends to exploit the eroticized body for business and entertainment, Kournikova has largely exploited her sexual attractiveness to boost her celebrity and to achieve significant gains, beyond her not particularly memorable performances and success¹⁷. Although she is not completely untalented, it can be said that, in her case, the “attributed” part of celebrity is certainly more significant than the “achieved” one. The cultural intermediation of TV, press, internet, the constant attention of the audience, the continuous focus on her charm, or her private life, overshadowed her tennis performances and celebrated a highly commercialized body¹⁸.

Of course, the market and the body are modular realms, able to accommodate multiple representations and ideas. The notoriety linked to the body may be associated with any further elements of belonging and identity, from nationality to ethnicity, from the social class to the gender. Furthermore, the market may take advantage of it, conveying different, even contradictory, messages. It may be the case of Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan, for example, with the controversial ethnic dimension of their image.

It remains, in the prevailing ideas on contemporary sport body, the impression of a transformation. Productivity or performance does not disappear as value horizons, but we can see a significant advance of different values related to the celebrated body, namely those values that the athlete's body can simply translate into commodity.

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¹⁶ See Whannel, G., “Punishment, redemption and celebration in the popular press”, in Andrews, D. L., Jackson, S. L. (ed.), *Sport Stars. The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity*, London & New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 138-150; *Id.*, *Media Sport Stars. Masculinities and moralities*, London & New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 212., Smart, B., op. cit., pp. 154-165.

¹⁷ Smart, B., op. cit., pp. 177-184.

¹⁸ Driessens, O., “The Democratization of Celebrity. Mediatization, Promotion, and the Body”, in Marshall, P. D., Redmond, S. (eds.), *A Companion to Celebrity*, Chichester, Wiley, 2016, p. 399.

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