Routledge Handbook of Football Studies

John Hughson, Kevin Moore, Ramón Spaaij, Joseph Maguire

Football and Stardom

Publication details
David L. Andrews, Bryan C. Clift
Published online on: 05 Sep 2016

How to cite :- David L. Andrews, Bryan C. Clift. 05 Sep 2016, Football and Stardom from: Routledge Handbook of Football Studies Routledge
Accessed on: 27 Jul 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT
17

FOOTBALL AND STARDOM

On context, intertextuality and reflexivity

David L. Andrews and Bryan C. Clift

Introduction

Writing in 2002, Joyce Woolridge suggested that while the phenomenon had been recognised for its ‘social and cultural functions’, the football star continued ‘to be an elusive subject for sustained critical analysis’ (2002: 51). The crux of Woolridge’s argument appears to be that the literature is punctuated within numerous case studies of football stars, yet lacks an ‘overarching framework within which the football star can be better understood’ (2002: 51). While we concur with Woolridge’s identification of the football star as a core aspect of contemporary football culture and intellectual analysis, our pathways diverge when it comes to what we consider to be the existence of established theoretical bases for the interpretation of the myriad dimensions of the football star phenomenon. Indeed, Woolridge’s solution to the theoretical absences she identified – we would argue all too conveniently – encompassed a blend of approaches drawn from cultural studies, media studies, and film studies, that are themselves evident in the contextual and interpretative approaches of those whose work she either repudiated or was perhaps not fully aware of at the time (specifically Chas Critcher (1982, 1991), Garry Whannel (1999, 2001a), and Richard Giulianotti (1999)). Hence, within this chapter our aim is to foreground key elements uniting these approaches; the extension of which allows us to subsequently develop an understanding of the football star as a necessarily contextual and intertextual phenomenon.

As has been documented by numerous commentators, the history and influence of the football star can be traced back to the formative years of the professional game in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Harding, 1998; Mason, 1980; Seddon, 1999, 2010; Smart, 2005; Woolridge, 2002). As the twentieth-century society unfolded along interwoven social, cultural, economic, political, and technological trajectories, so the presence, form, and function of public figures within the game transformed, prompting insightful discussions pertaining to typologies of a football star (Critcher, 1982; Hopcroft, 1968; Whannel, 2001a). Briefly furthering the discussion of footballer typologies, our primary focus is to offer a contextual schema that locates the football star within a contemporary celebrity culture framed by the individualising economic, cultural, political, and technological forces of late capitalism (Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Marshall, 1997; Nayar, 2009). This ‘celebrity-obsessed culture of
Football and stardom

‘new football’ (Williams, 2006: 102) evidences the unavoidably contextual nature of football: a popular practice that simply cannot ‘exist apart from the forces of the context that constitute it as what it is’ (Grossberg, 1997: 255). In concert (at times in tension) with enduring team identifications – and clearly in an effort to secure the interest of those devoid of such neo-tribal affiliations – football is packaged, presented, and increasingly consumed as an exemplar of the star-driven and spectacularised entertainment indicative of late capitalist culture more generally. Hence, by working through such a contextual approach, the elevated importance of football’s imaged personas – as key cultural and commercial motors of the contemporary football industry – will be explicated.

Turning to issues of intertextuality. Any theorising of the intertextual dimensions of the football star requires an engagement with Richard Dyer’s (1979) seminal analysis of the cultural significance and economic function of the star within the film industry. According to Dyer, film stars are those individuals whose labour (their filmic performances) has been the catalyst for generating high levels of cultural (popular recognition) and economic (monetary value) capital, both for themselves and for the cultural products with which they are directly and indirectly associated. Therein, Dyer (1979, 1986) pointed to the intertextual derivation and influence of the star, as created through the productive interplay between the star’s image as represented through film performances/texts, and as embellished through the various promotional texts (the ‘pin-ups and glamour portraits, press releases and to a large extent the fan clubs’ (1986: 4)) through which the star’s ‘constructed personage’ (1979: 109) becomes formed in the minds of the consuming audience. So, within the contemporary football industry it is possible to discern the football star as a ‘field of intertextual representation in which meaning is variously assembled’ (Rojek, 2001: 44), through the fluid exchange and (re)appropriation of discourse that leads to an extinguishing of the boundaries between the reportage, editorial, and promotional aspects of the contemporary media (Darnell and Sparks, 2005). The football star thus becomes seamlessly constituted as an intertextual assemblage of largely consistent and corroborative pan-media discourses, though always liable to the possibilities of oppositional and antagonistic media invectives. Returning to the theme of contextuality, the very meaning of the football star as intertextual assemblage is, of course, also contingent on the dialogic relation linking the celebrity narrative and the ‘historical, cultural and socio-economic contexts to which celebrity is attached’ (Rojek, 2001: 44). The football star is thus a material and symbolic product of his time.1

Having briefly introduced the football star as a necessarily contextual and intertextual phenomenon (a position either explicitly or implicitly discernible within much of the recent football star literature), the following sections will engage more specific elements of this understanding through reference to said literature. First, the relationship between the representational dimensions of football stardom will be highlighted. Second, the various promotional layers of football stardom – both corroborative and pernicious – will be explicated. Third, the process and practice of reflexive football stardom within the new/social media universe will be delineated. The aim is to generate an overview of the research on football and stardom that will, simultaneously, elicit core elements of the theoretical framework previously identified as being absent within the football star literature (Woolridge, 2002).

Representational football stardom

Despite being an intertextual assemblage, at the foundational and generative core of football stardom is on-field performance. Hence, in order to achieve star status and recognition, a player needs to have demonstrated consistent excellence on the field, through which he becomes...
differentiated from rank-and-file playing personnel. Yvonne Tasker (1993) provides a model of on-screen filmic involvement that distinguishes between performers, actors, and stars which can, with a little modification, be applied to the different modes of on-field contributors, which equate to different levels of on- and off-field presence and significance:

**Labourers**: The reliable role players on the team, playing in clearly defined positions which require workmanlike focus and sacrifice. Oftentimes viewed as individuals with relatively limited football and/or physical ability, but who are able to function effectively due to their level of commitment.

**Players**: Those individuals with significant levels of talent and/or artistry. They are recognized as such by those both within, and outside, the football industry as key contributors to their respective teams. However, for various reasons, their public profile outside the game is relatively limited.

**Stars**: Outstanding individual players, most frequently playing in high-profile positions that appear to have the most direct impact on game outcomes (i.e. those involving goal creation and scoring). The popular appeal and recognition afforded through performative excellence is accentuated, and routinely capitalized upon, within the extra-football world, whereby the individual becomes celebritized (in Boorstin’s (2006) terms: commercially promoted as much outside the immediate football sphere as within it, in a manner that augments their well-knowness: their celebrity).

Within the film industry, so within football, as an individual’s career unfurls (or perhaps unravels), there exists the possibility ‘of shifting from one category to another, or existing across them’ (Tasker, 1993: 74). There are countless examples whereby onetime star players have, due to the ravages of injury or time, functioned as little more than football labourers in the latter stages of their career. Interestingly, while their playing contribution may have diminished, they are nonetheless distinguished from fellow labourers due to their residual star aura (what in Bourdieu’s (1986) terms could be described as their accumulated social capital within the football field).

In addition to similarities, there are also significant differences between the derivation and nature of stardom within the football and film sectors, the most important of which keys on the nature of the performance at the centre of the industry. Unlike the fictive subjectivities adopted by star actors (Dyer, 1979), even the most commercially spectacularised forms of professional football seemingly provide an unmediated and authentic window into the exploits and attitudes of:

> real individuals participating in unpredictable contest … the seeming visceral, dramatic immediacy of the sport practice provides the sport celebrity with an important veneer of authenticity, that sets him or her apart from celebrities drawn from other, more explicitly manufactured, cultural realms.

*(Andrews and Jackson, 2001: 8)*

The performative dimensions of the football star offer a semblance of subjective authenticity that often functions to obscure the extant intertextual constitution of the football star (see discussion below), yet which simultaneously substantiates its representational value.
Football and stardom

In one of the most often cited quotes related to football studies in general, Eric Hobsbawm famously opined that ‘the imagined community of nations seems more real as a team of eleven named people’ (1990: 143). Within contemporary societies dominated, and defined by, the culture, politics, and technology of ‘the personal, the intimate, and the individual’ (Marshall, 1997: xiii), singular football stars’ metonymic capacities to represent broader collectivities have supplanted that of the team structure. Rather than being summarily imposed on a docile and compliant populace (Rojek, 2001), football stars are instead carefully crafted, and contextually sensitive, points of cultural negotiation between those within the culture industries controlling the modes and mechanisms of cultural production (be they primarily politically or economically motivated), and these cultural intermediaries’ perceptions of the dominant cultural experiences, values, and preferences of the consuming populace. As such, the contemporary football star is, within any given conjuncture, a potentially potent ‘representative subjectivity’ (source of cultural identification) pertaining to the ‘collective configurations’ (social class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, nationality) that define a society, and through which its constituent individuals fashion their very existence (Marshall, 1997: xi, xii; Rojek, 2006). In being articulated to and through (Hall, 1996) dominant narratives, ideals, and sensibilities with which a mainstream audience would most readily resonate, contemporary football stars are, furthermore, almost unavoidably rendered politically conservative figures: whether lionised or demonised their imaged identities tend to implicitly embody and reinforce the social, cultural, political, and economic status quo.

There are numerous studies focused on various aspects of the manufacture of football stars as nationally representative figures by those with clearly defined national agendas (be they politically or commercially inspired ones, or as is most common a conflation of the two). Of course, the nationally representative subject simultaneously invokes norms of subjectivity, specifically those related to gender, sexuality, race, and/or ethnic identity. However, within this section we will accent illustrative works that foreground the invention of the football star primarily as a representative national subject. Although much of this research focuses on the role of the popular media in the intertextual manufacture of national football stars, some interesting alternative sources have been identified. Jason Borge (2009: 301) provided insight into the role played by Latin American intellectuals in ‘re-working home-grown soccer stars and spectacles into imaginative narratives of exalted alterity’. By contrast, and as part of a broader discussion of the relationship between philatelic propaganda and football, Agbenyega Adedze (2012) discussed the process where some post-independence African nations featured nationally iconic football stars on their postage stamps – such as George Weah in Liberia and Abedi Pele in Ghana – as markers of national independence and identity. Nonetheless, it is the popular media that provides the focal point for the majority of studies of the intertextual derivation and cultural significance of national football stars. Not surprisingly given his cultural and commercial prominence, David Beckham features prominently in this literature (see Cashmore, 2002; Cashmore and Parker, 2003; Rahman, 2004, 2006; Rick et al., 2013; Vincent et al., 2011; Whannel, 2001b).

Many of these discussions focused on the new form of meticulously commodified masculinity that Beckham came to embody, and which challenged ingrained assumptions pertaining to the relationship between football, hegemonic masculinity, and the nation. There are equally interesting discussions pertaining to the nationally representative subjectivities of Diego Maradona (Archetti, 1994, 2001), and Lionel Messi (Brach, 2011) within the Argentinian context, Mark Fish within post-apartheid South Africa (Bolsmann and Parker, 2007), and Didier Drogba (Künzler and Poli, 2012) within the Ivorian context. Focusing less on the manufacture of national communitas (Ingham and McDonald, 2003)
created through the celebration of what are perceived to be inalienably representative subjects, discussions of football stars such as Juan Sebastian Veron (Farred, 2004), Ian Wright (Carrington, 2001), Zinedine Zidane (Dauncey and Hare, 2000; Dubois, 2010; Jiwani, 2008; Morrissey, 2009), and Neil Lennon (Reid, 2008), illustrate how in their respective Argentinean, English, French, and Scottish settings, the public debates mobilised around their subjective Otherness (be it identified in racial, ethnic, and/or religious terms) render football stars emotive sites of contestation within what are fluid – and thereby always potentially fractious – national contexts. Developing from this point, empirically grounded studies of Thierry Henry (Olaoluwa and Adejayan, 2011) and Cristiano Ronaldo (Wagg, 2010) demonstrate the agency of football audiences, in creatively appropriating and manipulating the promotional orthodoxy of football stars’ images to augment what are highly localised and politised identity projects.

Promotional football stardom

Having identified the football star as an emotive and potentially effective agent of national communitas – a figure seemingly able to unite people, in however temporarily and illusory fashion, across the boundaries of structure, rank, and socio-economic status (to name but a few social divisions) (Ingham and McDonald, 2003) – it is important to underscore the commercial forces and relations primarily responsible for the manufacturing of football stars as collectively representative and resonant figures. To that end, the pervasive and invasive nature of today’s promotional culture (Wernick, 1991: 100, 121) has reduced cultural texts to being interdependent cogs within a ‘vast promotional vehicle’ (the culture industry in general terms) that has conclusively blurred the boundaries between advertising (promotional) and non-advertising (non-promotional) media content. This condition of ‘promotional intertext’ (Wernick, 1991) generates a mode of cultural and economic production involving the ‘transposition of signifying practices across a range of different systems … advertising shapes, and is shaped by, other regimes like film and television, popular music and literature’ (McFall, 2004: 25). As a result, the football industry is inextricably and interdependently tied to the broader cultural industrial complex, wherein football stars act as important promotional sites and vehicles informed by, and simultaneously referring to, other sites of promotion (Wernick, 1991).

Even in the visceral immediacy of a game, the football star is (re)presented to the consuming audience as an intertextual amalgam: a discursive accumulation of ‘layer upon layer of mediation’ (Whannel, 2001a: 51) much of which is derived from mutually reinforcing relationships forged with corporate brands (both sporting and non-sporting). Individuals such as David Beckham, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Neymar are themselves highly prized embodied brands, whose image management teams look to secure lucrative advertising and endorsement relationships with an array of major corporations, in an effort to manufacture an intertextually coherent and consistent imaged identity for the star in question. From the corporate brand’s vantage point, football stars are prized endorsers since they are ‘believed to have a wide appeal and a tendency to induce strong affective responses’, and thereby ‘increasingly form the substance with which brands work’ (Moor, 2007: 70).

The literature focused on the promotional dimensions of football stardom has been dominated by discussions of David Beckham’s multiply commodified celebrityhood, which has variously been described as ‘Brand Beckham’ (Ross, 2007), the ‘celebrity corpus’ (Rick et al., 2013), a ‘consumer culture icon’ (Smart, 2005), and ‘celebrity par excellence’ (Wicks et al., 2007). The discussions of Beckham’s transnational scope and influence are particularly instructive, in that they illustrate the geographical complexities of the contemporary football star. As Woolridge
(2002) noted, there are different levels of football stardom – be they local, regional, national, or global – as determined by the scale and scope of cultural dissemination and recognition of the football star’s image. The globally pervasive imaged identity of truly transnational figures, such as Beckham, allows them to exist and be meaningful in multiple locales at one and the same time (Dirlik, 1996; Silk and Andrews, 2001). That is not to assert a global uniformity to a football star’s locally constituted and consumed image, since intertextual figures such as Beckham are – often in an admittedly superficial manner – moulded in response to local contingencies and preferences (Gilmour and Rowe, 2010; Grainger et al., 2005; Rick et al., 2013). Engaging Bauman’s (2000) understanding, he has been described as ‘liquid Beckham’: a fluid and constantly evolving (with regards to time, space, and form) tool for accruing capital by scouring the globe for new consumer markets (Rick et al., 2013). The glocal (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007) nature of Beckham’s constitution as football star has been realised both through transnational marketing and advertising initiatives (Grainger et al., 2005), and also in the precise manner that national media frame his imaged identity according to local values, issues, and at times concerns. Beckham’s glocalisation is most insightfully discussed in Gilmour and Rowe’s (2010) examination of his brief visit to Australia in 2007. Therein, Beckham’s locally manufactured popular image was explicated as being:

at once national and post-national, customised according to the requirements and expectations of its point of reception. His materialization within the Australian media- and sportscape was ‘localised’ through articulation with, and absorption into, the lineaments of Australian national culture.

(Gilmour and Rowe, 2010: 238)

The blurring of the boundaries between promotional and non-promotional media content so indicative of contemporary promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) is clearly illustrated in the role played by journalists in covering the exploits of national teams at major international tournaments. Compelled by the economic pressures of circulation and readership figures, these ‘media patriots’ (Vincent et al., 2011: 614) routinely craft populist narratives, which lionise the national team and its constituent heroes. Focusing on British newspaper coverage of Wayne Rooney (and then girlfriend, now wife, Coleen McCloughlin) during the 2006 World Cup in Germany, Vincent et al. (2011) demonstrated how the print media’s representation of Rooney as expression of a youthful and temperamental, hedonistic ‘new laddism’ depicted him as an updated embodiment of traditional forms of aggressive working-class masculinity, with which a tabloid audience was expected to resonate. Clearly, the same commercial pressures and cultural sensibilities informed Nike’s promotion of Rooney during the same tournament, centred as it was on a:

poster of Rooney above the caption ‘Just Do It’ revealed Rooney in an aggressive pose. From the waist up Rooney had the Cross of St. George painted on him with the wet red paint resembling blood. His arms were horizontally outstretched, his fists clenched, and his painted face contorted as though he was screaming.

(Vincent et al., 2011: 617–18)

Interestingly, this populist promotional subjectivity positioned Rooney as the reassuringly nationalistic, hypermasculine, and warrior-like ‘patriot at play’, in contradistinction to the non-traditional metrosexual and aspirational nationalism of Beckham (Cashmore, 2002; Horne, 2006), and ‘nancy boy’ effeminacy through which the popular press xenophobically
characterised the Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo (Vincent et al., 2011: 619). For football stars such as Rooney, when the popular media is in corroborative mode, the football industry becomes seamlessly incorporated into the ‘hall of mirrors’ of the wider culture industry (Wernick, 1991: 121).

As part of promotional culture’s preoccupation with the individual, mediated depictions of the private persona and lives of football stars are routinely exposed to the consuming public. As Bolsmann and Parker (2007: 120) noted, ‘both we and they have come to accept and expect the intrusive strategies of the world’s media and the scrutinizing gaze which this affords’. Today’s tabloidic fixation with the private preferences, practices, and peccadilloes of football stars would suggest this is a recent phenomenon. However, studies have demonstrated how the popular media (whether it be newspaper, newsreel, television, or web-based) have long recognised the popular interest in – and thereby the commercial value of – illuminating the minutiae of footballers’ lives (Critcher, 1982; Whannel, 2002; Woolridge, 2002). Oftentimes corroborative or complicitous in nature (in terms of actively augmenting the commercially crafted identity of the football star), the cultural economy of the commercial media works in a contradictory fashion to stimulate popular interest by both celebrating individuals and, at times, denigrating those it had previously championed (Wenner, 2013). This latter point keys on the perceived salaciousness of the readership/viewership that prompts the media’s sensationalist exposition of elements of football stars’ lives which contradict the received and/or expected understandings of them. This is graphically illustrated within Bill Grantham’s discussion of John Terry’s success in ‘navigating the mediated roles of Barking lad, great White hope, and Wag custodian’, subsequently undermined by a series of personal indiscretions capitalised upon within a popular media clearly relishing the ‘moment when the hero stumbles’ (Grantham, 2013: 231). At such times, the more conservative elements of the popular media mobilise miscreant football stars as symptoms of a wider social and cultural degeneration, and as vehicles for advancing their populist ideological agendas rooted as they are in a palpable disquiet for contemporary life and social relations. Whannel (2002) eloquently captured this phenomenon – less moral panic, than media-inspired moral disdain – in the mythologising evident within Stanley Matthews’ obituaries which, in contradistinction to the heroic and virtuous Matthews, castigated present-day football stars for their privileged, preening, and promiscuous lifestyles as embodiments of a wider societal decline in traditional morality and masculinity.

**Reflexive football stardom**

Up to this juncture, the impression may have been given that football stars are little more than dutiful adherents to mediated representations of themselves created through the complex circuits of promotion (Whitson, 1998), upon which they have little or no influence. In this vein, Richard Giulianotti (2001) offered one of the most insightful, if dispiriting examinations of football stardom in his telling depiction of Paul Gascoigne’s exaggerated hyperconformity to the crass promotional codes that shaped his public persona. However, unlike Gascoigne, many football stars (as other celebritised figures) are patently sentient and reflexive beings doubtless aware of the nature of relationship (consistent, contradictory, or most likely somewhere positioned between these poles) between their imaged/public and private/veridical selves (Rojek, 2001). There are, of course, no guarantees as to whether football stars choose to actively and creatively intervene in the process of re-engineering what are ‘public facades of identity’ (Rojek, 2001: 192). Nonetheless, historical precedents do exist of footballers seeking to protectively orchestrate ‘the process of image construction that produces stardom’ (Whannel,
Football and stardom

2002: 83). Stanley Matthews was largely successful in this regard, in that his various troubles and indiscretions were largely overlooked as a result of the accumulated symbolic weight of the consistently cultivated ‘interpretative frame that portrays … [him] … as the ultimate respectable sporting gentleman’ (Whannel, 2002: 90). While evidently possible within an epoch dominated by the print media, the decentralised and democratised nature of the ‘new media’ landscape – specifically those as aspects of the social media distinguished from the traditional media due to their facilitation of ‘social interaction, the sharing of digital media, and collaboration’ (Murthy, 2012: 1061) – provides the reflexive football star with more immediate and potentially impactful opportunities to shape the public’s perception of their stardom.

From an initially ambivalent starting point, the sport industrial complex has productively mobilised new social media platforms (such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Vine, Instagram) as an increasingly important aspect of marketing and promotional initiatives at the core of its regime of capital accumulation (Dart, 2012). Despite this ongoing corporate colonisation, the social media remains a cultural space affording a putatively unfiltred, and seemingly authentic, window into the lives and feelings of football stars. For, it is the football star (unless the task is apportioned to one of their promotional retinue) that communicates directly with the social media universe. Their inner thoughts, everyday involvements, and idiosyncrasies are apparently laid bare in 140 characters or fewer, on wall posts, or within six-second videos, such that football stars become more real, more human, to their followers. Of course, as Marshall (2010) noted, the public persona created through the ‘presentational media’ are neither wholly mediated nor interpersonal in nature; they are located at the intersection of representational and presentational cultures. Moreover, while celebrities play a central pedagogic role in the ‘reflexive restructuring’ of private selves – they being powerful sources of ‘emulation’ within the broader ‘body politic’ (Rojek, 2001: 195) – this is equally apparent in celebrities’ reflexive monitoring and moulding of their own public selves.

Updating Goffman’s (1959) understanding of the presentation of self for the social media epoch, Marshall (2010: 44, 38) underscores the reflexivity of contemporary celebrityhood (and, for that matter, football stardom) through the negotiated re-presentation and re-construction of the ‘private self for public presentation’ in response to the presence and perception ‘of the self that celebrity culture has articulated’. In explicating this, Marshall identifies three forms of self-presentation within ‘on-line culture’, each of which demonstrates a different relation to an established celebrity identity. First, the re-presentation of the public self refers to the mobilisation of social media for directing the audience to the ‘industrial model’ of the football star, as propagated through more conventional modes of commercial communication (2010: 44). This public self mode of presentation is in evidence within what are carefully managed Twitter or Facebook accounts and YouTube channels, for figures such as David Beckham, Neymar, and Cristiano Ronaldo, each of which acts as a conduit to the corporately sanctioned renditions of the football star in question (by directing the online viewer to game and public appearances, new advertisements and products, and media coverage). Second, the public private self mode of presentation relies on more personal forms of address and levels of insight. Countering the overly professional image management and corporate tone of the public self, Twitter has become the ‘vehicle of choice’ for presenting the public private self since it offers a level of immediacy and intimacy (Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012), as suggested by the fact that football stars are reflexively choosing ‘what parts of their lives they are willing to convey to an on-line public’ Marshall (2010: 44, 45). Tweets, however inane and inconsequential, render the football stars’ public private self intelligible to its social media public. Third, the transgressive intimate self mode of presentation that offers new levels of insight into the individual football star since it is ‘motivated by temporary emotion; but it is also the kind of information/image that passes virally throughout
the internet because of its visceral quality of being closer to the core of the being’ (Marshall, 2010: 45). Hence, emotionally charged social media responses to poor on-field performances, injury and fitness concerns, contract or transfer disputes, or personal trials and tribulations, appear to express the very core of an individual’s being, despite the fact that they may sometimes (if by no means always) in fact be part of a carefully orchestrated and reflexive image repair strategy (Moody, 2011).

The new social media universe is a double-edged sword with regard to football stars’ control over re-presentation of their public selves. For, while they possess more potential to immediately and effectually influence the shaping of their imagined identities – either in response to on-field or off-field occurrences – the democratised nature of the new media renders them at the mercy of the prosumer (Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Developing from Toffler’s (1980) conflation of producer and consumer, the rise of the prosumer – what Ritzer et al. (2012) refer to as the ‘coming age of the prosumer’ – signals an increased importance placed on the end user within the realisation of commodities and services. Although the prosumer can be discerned within numerous realms, they are most readily associated with exponents of social media: largely autonomous, uncontrollable, and unpaid prosumers being those responsible for the production and consumption of the user-generated online content which defines and drives social media technologies. Not merely consuming celebrity culture, the accelerated and intensified feedback loops created by prosumers’ online comments and reactions on social media platforms actually contributes to public celebrity discourse. Hence, the football star seeking to productively exist and operate, within the social media universe is almost compelled to reflexively ruminate upon the trending dimensions of prosumers’ commentaries, which may lead to re-considerations, or even re-workings, of self-presentational strategies and practices. Indeed, the online football star could be said to be a prosumer of the public self collectively articulated within, and through, the social media.

Conclusion

The representational, promotional, and reflexive football star is firmly ensconced as a key cultural and economic motor of the new football economy (Williams, 2006). However, it would be remiss not to acknowledge related spheres of stardom that productively intersect with the football star system. As confirmed by the media’s response to the retirement of Sir Alex Ferguson as the manager of Manchester United in 2013, and by the incessant media coverage of such high-profile managerial figures as José Mourinho, Sven-Göran Eriksson, Pep Guardiola, and Carlo Ancelotti, top football managers are truly global sport celebrities, despite not having been rigorously addressed as such within the scholarly literature – see for two notable exceptions Carter (2007) and Wagg (2007). The tabloid fodder of star players’ wives and girlfriends – neatly described by Grantham (2013: 229) as the ‘footballer–wag nexus’ – has certainly proved to be a more fruitful realm of intellectual inquiry (Clayton and Harris, 2004; Markula, 2004; Meyers, 2010; Ross, 2007; Vincent et al., 2011). As a result, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider the football industry as a star system (deCordova, 1991), made up of a network of mutually interconnected and inter-constitutive star domains (of which the performative football star is the most culturally and commercially central), that is itself unavoidably and dialectically linked to the myriad other star systems (television, film, music, etc.). Football stardom is part of a wider contextual and intertextual celebrity system that ‘principally addresses the organisations of concepts of individuality and identity for the culture’ (Marshall, 1997: 185). Certainly considerable work has been done in this regard, however, there is clearly more to do in order to fully interrogate the complexities of football stardom. Furthermore – as Grossberg (1992: 29)
Football and stardom

identified in relation to popular music culture – so with football, the ‘size and density of the field continuously expand’. As a consequence, critical scholarly practice is continually attempting to catch up with the moving target of football stardom, which should nonetheless be our goal, however unattainable.

Note

1 In an effort to draw attention (as opposed to reinforce) the gender hierarchy and inequities evident within the masculinist orientation of football culture, commercial media culture more generally, and even within football-focused intellectual practice, this discussion pointedly refers to the football star as a primarily male form (female football stars have arisen across different temporal and spatial contexts, however, they have largely been overlooked by commercial and intellectual interests alike). It is hoped that the reader bristles against this exclusive gendering (which we believe nonetheless reflects the contemporaneous order of football things), and considers its derivation and the strategies necessary for its amelioration.

References


Football and stardom


