

Sport actors' walk of fame: the Trojan horse of celebrity

Diana-Luiza DUMITRIU¹

Abstract. *Sport actors rank among the most prominent and influential public figures, as sport has become a resourceful field for the entertainment industry and object of various identitary social practices. Media's centrality within the sport world continues to play a key-role in providing us with spectacular rises and falls on the celebrity stage, keeping sport actors under a close public scrutiny. The main aim of this paper is to focus on the challenges that the celebrity status brings for both sport actors, as well as for the brands that consider associating themselves with a sport star. What can sport actors and the brands they endorse win or lose on the celebrity battlefield? In discussing the risks embedded in the celebrity status, I choose to address five interrelated dimensions of sport actors' walk of fame: the marketing instrumentalization of sport actors' private life, the time constraints of the professional sport career, the winning-losing dialectics of competitions, the sport actors' complex repertoire of identities and the affinal branding network build around sport actors. All of these aspects attest to the media-dependency of sport actors, but, more important to the face threatening nature of celebrity and the importance of impression management for consolidating sport actors' brand value.*

Keywords: *sport commodification; sport celebrity; impression management; affinal branding; face management strategy; media exposure; brand value.*

Introduction: the media grounds of sport commodification

Living in a time when public exposure, entertainment and spectacular seem to have conquered many social fields, attesting to the *structuring effect* that media exert, especially, upon the cultural production fields (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 64). Thus, there is no wonder that the interest in the society of spectacle (Debord, [1967]1994) and the literature on celebrity

1. Post-doctoral researcher in Communication Sciences, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania, diana.dumitriu@comunicare.ro.

is constantly growing (e.g. van Krieken, 2012; Leslie, 2011; Marshall, [1997]2004; Rein et al., 1997; Rojek, 2001).

In this context, sport has been one of the most resourceful fields for the celebrity market, as it is also one of those forms of culture that has increasingly been subject to high “mediation” and “mediatization” (Thompson, 1990). Media facilitated sport’s entrance under the *commodification radar* and played a significant part in the emergence and diversification of sport-related products and markets. The symbolic power of sport and its instrumental value for other social fields, such as media, is related to more than the general popularity of sport. It covers “the combination of success and product image” (Weis, 1986, p.242), which makes it a resourceful input for business purposes in general and for the spectacular socio-economic dynamics of celebrity in particular (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Jackson & Andrews, 2005; Ogden & Rosen, 2010; Smart, 2005).

Similar to media, sport is another “victim” of the primacy of audience, which seems to have become the main performance indicator. Neither sport, nor media can exist without the public, as every outcome of their action is meant to gain the public’s attention. Hence, through this audience pressure, “the market logic ends up dominating the field of cultural production” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 29) and manages to redefine it in terms of both content and design.

The instrumental role that sport and media play one for the other has consolidated their “marriage of convenience” (Lever & Wheeler, 1993, p. 130), converting it into a *win-win* relationship. While the popularity of sport competitions works as a resourceful input for media, providing large and heterogeneous audiences, media assure the most efficient means for sport events to reach up to their distant publics and “to benefit from an inordinate amount of free publicity” (Smith, 1976, p. 5).

Behind the obvious success of the sport-media relationship, the long “honeymoon had begun for *the ménage à trois* among owners, broadcasters and advertisers” (Lever & Wheeler, 1993, p. 130). Sport actors and sport events work as *commodities* and also as *commercial bait* for selling other

products and services, as well as for providing consistent (media) audiences' flows. Every actor from this circle of promotion plays multiple roles, generating a complex set of direct and indirect financial interdependency chains. From the big banners and billboards that wrap up the field, to the logos on the sport actors' outfit and the time-outs ads on the stadium screens, sport events act as a framework for a public *collage* of competition, advertising and entertainment elements. Fans are no longer the *romantic* supporters, but rather the pragmatic consumers who become more and more aware of their key-role in the wider circle of promotion that the sport actors are engaged in.

Increasing both their number and their power, these "interconnections between sport, the media and advertising have helped to create the impression that the pivotal social and personal experience of the modern age is to be a consumer", even when addressing cultural forms such as sport events (Craig & Beedie, 2008, p. 130). This is why sport events need to go beyond the competitive frame and to enrich their functional and emotional benefits by becoming a hybrid form of performance.

The commercial common grounds of both sport and media increased the interdependency between the two social fields and lead to a *hybridization processes* between the two, which explains why "the new cultural visibility of sport, in turn, stimulated a rapid growth in sport-branded merchandising" (Whannel, 2009, p. 206). Moreover, the success of this sport and media *joint-venture* (Dumitriu, 2014) inside the commodification framework has generated not only new products, but also *new commercial fields* per se, providing us with both new spectatorship and customer experiences.

In this context, the paper will focus on the most glamorous dimension of sport marketization process that is the sport actors' performances on the *celebrity market*. While most studies have laid stress on the celebrity's benefits and the central role of media in creating *highly marketable* sport products, I want to discuss some of the most important challenges and risks that come along with this celebrity status of sport actors. What do sport actors win or lose throughout their transition from public figures to celebrities? What do they have to cope with while enjoying their walk

of fame? What do marketers should be prepared for when deciding to associate a sport celebrity with their brand?

Given the media's centrality inside the social field of sport, as well as their constitutive role in crowning public figures with the celebrity status, I will rather insist on those *walk of fame* aspects for which media's coverage and framing process play a key-role. The problematization of sport actors' performances on the celebrity market will thus bring to the fore aspects related to their brand value, as well as to their engagement in preparing and mobilizing certain face management strategies. Aside from discussing how the celebrity status affects sport actors' life and public image, I will also address the challenges that their celebrity status rise for marketers in terms of brand associations with certain sport stars.

Sport actors on the celebrity market

The law of public visibility rules at every level of sport dynamics, but it reaches its climax when *celebrity* and *spectacular* aspects take the lead. Due to the symbolic nature of sport competition, that lies beyond the tension and the meritocratic aspects of the performance, sport works as a "natural source of prestige" (Allison & Monnington, 2005, p. 9) and a resourceful field for new born stars and impressive walk of fame stories. Though, as natural as it seems, placing sport inside the celebrity framework requires some problematization over the fine line between sport performances *per se* and fame-related social practices and representations. Moreover, it brings out significant aspects regarding the impression management and face management strategies (Goffman 1967, 1971; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Joining their forces in order to cope with the dominant culture of the spectacular, sport and media are constantly involved in finding or creating *sport stars*. However, winning competitions or breaking records is no longer enough if these achievements do not become the object of further media interest and coverage. To some extent we can even say that media bring the ultimate social validation of sport success, by converting sport performance into *celebrity capital*. Moreover, we can speak of some sort of a tacit *media initiation ritual* that marks the transition of sport actors from "anonymity" to "celebrity", from "sport actor" to "sport star". If sport

actors manage to bear up well during this spotlight overflow, as celebrity ceremonial practice, then they prove themselves worthy of such public exposure and praise that come along with the celebrity status.

Achievements on the field are a good start for the exiting *walk of fame*, but they are never enough for holding the front page. Celebrity is not just about sport achievements, but rather “it is constituted discursively, by the way in which the individual is represented” (Turner et al., 2000, p. 11) by the media. This is why it can be said that sport actor’s achievements in competitions provide only the input for what media turn into genuine celebrity offspring.

Sport personalities such as Michael Jordan, Messi, Rafael Nadal, Usain Bolt, Michael Phelps or Nadia Comănesci have become a brand in their own right, providing us with a whole social imagery revolving around their global superstar status. The global nature of sport “introduces and promotes new heroes; individuals whose triumphs are appreciated and assessed on a global scale” (Gammon, 2014, p.247). However, despite their outstanding sport achievements, the media are responsible for activating those “chains of attraction” that assure their actual rise to fame, acting as “cultural intermediaries” (Rojek, 2001, p.10). This golden aura of fame is accompanied by a *high level of social expectations*, as well as a *moral responsibility* to behave both as role model and hero, which, in turn, give rise to more face threatening acts that come together with such high public exposure.

On the fame battlefield, no public battle can be won without having media on your side, as the “celebrity as role model is both made and undone by press and television coverage” (Smart, 2005, p. 8). As attractive as it is for sport actors, the (super)star status comes along with a *role-play dilemma*: how to find the perfect balance between the glamorous and restless celebrity lifestyle and the restrains and moderation required for sport performance?

Nowadays, the public appearances of sport actors reach far beyond the actual sports events and competitions’ settings, covering a wide range of commercial and entertainment contexts that are more or less sports-related. Sport personalities that are “blessed” with personal charisma and

enjoy media indulgence are destined for fame as their rise to the celebrity status is actually the outcome of sport's and media's "complicit, mutually dependent commercial relationship" (Nicholson, 2007, p. 208).

The fascinating power of fame transforms almost every sport actor into a potential advertising endorsement for consumer products. To some extent you can even rewrite the history of sport legendary performance by using the Nike or Adidas commercials. However, from sport related products and brands, sport actors have gradually entered new markets and, due to their large addressability and attractiveness in terms of "followers", they are the new brand ambassadors for banking services, shampoos, cars, deodorants, wines, vitamins, cereals, margarine, watches and the list can go on from mass products and services to luxury ones, from local to global brands.

All in all, media managed to push sport actors on the celebrity market, transforming them into some kind of *kaleidoscopic public figures* that anchor their fame into sport achievements, but go far beyond it in order to keep themselves in the foreground. The *kaleidoscopic* profile of sport superstars refers to the changing public images that a sport actor is related to on the celebrity stage. From successful athlete, to smart businessman, from the image on the red carpet, to the one in the shampoo add, from the press conference setting to paparazzi shots, these multiple reflections of the same public figure stand out as a proof of sport actors' celebrity status and require a good impression management. However, as I will discuss in the next sections, the celebrity status comes with a high level of public exposure and, therefore, with a high vulnerability in terms of face management, with significant implication for both sport actors' reputation as well as for their brand value.

Impression management on the marketing field: the ups and downs of sport celebrity

Changing the coordinates of the sport acts by synchronizing them with the commercial dynamics, media managed to lead sport into the *commodification temptation* and once it entered this path there was no turning back to the *platonian* stage of sport competitions. This reconfiguration of sport experiences did not alter only the nature of sport acts and the

spectatorship experience, but also the mere “condition” of the sport actor himself. In order to gain or maintain their success inside the sport world, sport actors had to adapt and internalize the ruling principles and values that define the marketization of this social field, using them as guiding lines in their overall *impression management* (Goffman, [1959]/2003).

A first aspect that sport actors had to cope with during this reconfiguration process was that, along with sport events becoming a product on the entertainment market, they themselves have been subject to the commodification process. Sport success is no longer just a matter of results and impressive track-records; it also covers a significant financial component and an active role on the commercial battlefield. There is no wonder that on a recent Forbes *World's Highest-Paid Athletes Top*, the top 3 athletes according to their Endorsements' deals reach to more than \$50 millions (Tiger Woods, golf player - \$55 millions, LeBron James, basketball player - \$53 millions and Roger Federer, tennis player - \$52 millions). The need for becoming a highly marketable product is part of sport actors' success and it reflects not only a personal agenda, but also institutional constraints, as sport actors' have to prove their profitability for their clubs and sponsors and to provide a consistent brand image.

Athletic talent is, without any doubt, the main condition for sport success, but, today, it is no longer enough for guaranteeing the laurels of glory. Faced with this *financial dependency of success*, sport actors had to learn how to sell themselves on the sport market, how to attract powerful investors and how to convince major sport clubs that they are or have the potential to become a profitable investment. Take for example the market of sport transfers²: whether we speak of national or global markets, athletes act as any other commodity that is been subject to an economic rationality and a dynamic negotiation process. Owners of these “goods” are interested in maximizing their profit by selling sport actors on the open sport market, while buyers are looking for a perfect balance between their initial investment and the expected return of investment.

2. According to Forbes, the most expensive transfer in soccer's history belongs to Cristiano Ronaldo, when Real Madrid bought him from Manchester United in June 2009 for £80 million or \$141 million in today's dollars - see <http://www.forbes.com/pictures/emdm45eedgk/1-cristiano-ronaldo/>.

The profitability barometer of sport success gave rise to some referential battles of titans in terms of financial and fame capital, like the *El Clasico*, the famous confrontation between Real Madrid's "galactics" and Barcelona's "aliens" or the Super Ball, which was the most valuable sport event brand worldwide in 2013³ (brand value of 464 million U.S. dollars, calculated by Forbes). In every sport discipline, there is this mirage of creating a team of sport stars not just for increasing the chances of winning major sport competitions, but also for gaining a significant competitive advantage in terms of brand value. This is because sport celebrities bring fans and, along with them, media's attention, sponsorship support and marketing opportunities.

However, in the next part of this article I will argue that sport celebrity and sport actors' endorsement is not necessary or always a *commercial Eldorado*, as the *sport-media-marketing* equation is far more complex and can bring to the fore significant constrains and face threatening situations. Rather than providing an extensive analysis of all possible problems that sport celebrities might have to cope with, I will focus on five dimensions that address both the brand value of sport actors, as well as the consequences of their high level of media exposure: the marketing instrumentalization of their private life, the time constraints of the sport celebrity status, the winning-losing dialectics, the complex repertoire of identities of sport actors and the *affinal branding* network build around sport celebrities.

Bringing private lives into the spotlight: sport celebrities' performances in and outside the field

Increasing sport acts accessibility and spectacularity meant also redefining the line between the public and private life of sport actors. Their celebrity status brought along media's chase for unrevealing those aspects that go beyond the sport performance itself. People became interested not only in sport actors' achievements on the field, but also in their performances outside it. Thus, as any other public figure, the sport actor found himself object to the overall *tabloidization approach* embraced by media.

Little by little news about sport achievements and game evolution left room for news about sport actors' lovers, parties, disputes, their food and music

3. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/253353/brand-value-of-sport-events-worldwide/>.

preferences or the “dirty” details of their divorce. Today athletes’ wives, ex-girlfriends, drivers or hair dressers become public figure themselves and hope for gaining their own *celebrity free pass* under the spotlights.

Media found the sport actors’ private life to be a resourceful input for adding more *drama* and *fussiness* to the sport performance on the field. Similar to other social areas, media played a central role in the *sport tabloidization* process, mainly by modifying the boundaries of perception (Goffman, [1959]/2003, p. 131) and the public visibility regions. However, the line between these regions (*front stage, back stage, zone of transition, residual region*) is so fine, that, in many cases, under the pressure of world’s *hypervisibility* and *transparency* (Baudrillard, [1987]/1997), even the backstage and transition zone become subject to sport actor’s performances as an act of staging the audience’s inopportune intrusion into a space that was supposed to be close for its scrutiny.

Bringing training and private aspects under the spotlight, media manipulate the public-private dichotomy and create that *exposure effect* that brings salient aspects of sport celebrities’ life into the open. In trying to bring the backstage to the forefront and to increase the proximity towards sport actors, media had to permute what was meant to be private into public issue, generating a hybridization of the performance regions. This, in turn, provided a good tool for amplifying the *sensationalism* and *spectacularity* of sport performances as media events, but it also generated a high pressure in terms of face management for the sport stars.

In terms of media coverage and attractiveness, news regarding sport actors’ private life end up competing with those regarding their public performances on the sport field. Moreover, private issues become the input for sport *pseudo-events*, which are “made for and by media” (Sartori, [1997] 2005, p.65). Product of this Big Brother chasing of sport actors outside the sport field, sport pseudo-events are built on converting private aspects into objects for public debate.

Athletes getting drunk, coaches’ refusing paternity tests or going for a shopping session draw as much public attention as a sport performance itself. It is not the sport actor who gets to decide where the line between his

private and his public life is, but rather it is up to media to decide to what extent this private-public hybridization can go. Media go for *disclosure* in digging up into sport actors' private life, converting private aspects into public ones. To what extent is this public-private mixture beneficial for the sport actors? What are the marketing implications of this high media exposure of the sport celebrities' private lives?

On the one hand celebrity is defined by high public visibility level, which media exposure of sport actors' private life undoubtedly provides. When sport performance can no longer buy you media converge, your private life can do that instead, keeping you under the spotlight. Moreover, many would argue that these private-life aspects humanize sport celebrities and bring them closer to their publics, which find it easier to identify with them. At first glance, it seems that everyone is winning: media, fans, sport stars and companies they "sell" for. Where's the harm in that?

On the other hand converting private aspects of the sport celebrities' life into public ones is rather a *Pandora box* than a *golden goose*, because this process is out of sport actors' control. This means that high media exposure involves high face management vulnerability. If inconsistency between the image that sport stars have built and projected on the public stage and their actual performances in private context is high, then this can turn into a harmful *boomerang effect* of celebrity. Improper behavior or language, personal preference in clothing, music, food or travel destinations, hobbies, friends or family history (divorce, fights, problems with the law et.) can become significantly face threatening for sport celebrities, as people usually project in them socially desirable values and role-models.

When and if these expectations are not met or, more important, if there is a powerful cognitive dissonance between the public image that sport actors' built for themselves and the one reflected by the private aspects revealed by the media, people feel not only disappointed, but also fooled. This is the turning point when admiration is converted into disgrace, when loyal or potential followers are lost for good. It is also the point where reputational crisis may emerge (e.g. Tiger Woods infidelity story, Adrian Mutu's drug problem).

There is also the problem of professional versus personal media coverage balance. While, at first, there is a consistent demand for more information about a rising sport celebrity from the public's part, the high level of media exposure usually leads to a suprasaturation point. This comes with a resistance position from the audiences' part, as they feel like there is a significant discrepancy between news about the sport celebrities' performances *in* and *outside* the sport field. People start to question the professional value of sport actors' and even criticize them for engaging more in the showbiz-performances than in their professional sport ones. Their "omnipresence" on the screen, at parties, events, in ads or public scandals is perceived as a proof of neglecting their sport career and, to some extent, as a way of falling into the *fame-sin*, which are both face threatening.

Moreover, the high media exposure of private aspects, may bring to the fore the glamorous nature of their life style and the significant discrepancy between their social status *before* and *after* their celebrity rise, as well as between them and most of their fans. From genuine envy to moral problematization of sport celebrities' extravagances and opulence, revealing too much about the private life of sport celebrities might bring more harm than benefits for their public image.

In the end of this section I would argue that this effect of the media exposure upon sport celebrities has lately been amplified by the sport actors' own presence in social media, which are mainly used as Krieger observes for *self-disclosure* (cited in Frederick et al., 2012). They definitely allowed a higher interaction between athletes and their fans (Sanderson, 2010), but have also provided a new way to convert private aspects into public ones. Social media are a more controllable way of revealing private aspects, although they have also become a great source for traditional media to get access to sport celebrities' private life and contributed to the overall increase of sport tabloidization.

The time constraints of sport celebrity

Unlike other fields of celebrity, the time pressure that sport actors have to cope with is significantly higher. There are two time-components of sport celebrity that I want to address in this section, both of them important in

terms of managing the public image of the sport actors and their brand value. On the one hand there are the constraints of a rather short career as top level performers, due to less controllable reasons such as aging or high injury risks. On the other hand there is the continuous change of the front-stage actors on the celebrity market and the need to *freshen-up* the sport stars that people (thus customers) related to.

Most studies regarding the time-frame of sport careers have been focused on the psychological and social implication of the athletic career *termination* or *transition* (Lavalley et al., 2000; Schlossberg, 1981, Stambulova, 1994; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001), focusing on the individual experiences of the sport actors and the way they handle the traumatic character of their “retirement” from the sport elite world. Moreover, these studies provide a rather problem-oriented perspective, with models and suggestions aimed to facilitate sport actors’ process of coping with the adjustment difficulties associated with this process. What was constantly neglected by these studies and what I want to bring into discussion are the “costs” of failing to handle the retirement from the elite sport career in terms of celebrity capital.

The emotional and financial impact that the sport actors’ career termination is amplified by the fact that popularity and social status are important aspects for many athletes’ *self-concept* (McPherson, 1984). Moreover, we are looking at an *overidentification* (Goffman, 1963) process or what Turner (1978) referred to as “role-person merger”, laying stress on the high identification and attachment to a social role that make sport actors unwilling to give up to this role despite the availability of more attractive role alternatives that they can turn to.

Used to the flash-lights, the public attention and veneration, the media interest and exposure, as well as the challenging competition calendar, most athletes have a rather hedonistic approach of their celebrity experience with no back-up plan or strategic way of converting this symbolic social death into a form of “social rebirth” (Allison & Meyer, 1988). However, the end of their professional sport career can be perceived as a “role-exit process” (Ebaugh, 1988) and managed appropriately. The celebrity capital gained during their careers as top level athletes can be more than just a source for

frustration. It can work as a solid anchor for a new career path, having a great (re)generative potential if it is wisely and strategic used.

Along or aside from the organic relation between sport performance and fame, which reflects rather a synchronism between the two (sport achievements bring and feed the celebrity flame), there is also a *strategic* approach of *fame as a gateway*. Aware of the short period of glory on the field, as the life cycle of great performance is very limited, many sport actors build on their “golden age” achievements a fame capital that, in time, could become an input for fame reproduction. In other words, while throughout their careers as active athletes/coaches sport achievements can generate fame, after their retirement from sport competitions, their superstar status should be strong enough to keep them on the front page.

Sport actors’ training and experience on the celebrity stage prepare them for a smooth transition to other fame-related areas like film, television, modelling or fashion. Take for example David Beckham: from perfume, to underwear, from acting to humanitarian campaigns or modelling, he built for himself alternatives *fame gateways* to make up for his football career input of fame. And if there is life after (sport) retirement, for certain there can also be fame after it.

Pele, Mike Tyson, Nadia Comăneci, Anna Kournikova, Hagi, Andre Agassi or Michael Jordan are a few other examples which confirm that the end of the sport “mastery performances’ “ cycle as elite athletes doesn’t need to ring down the curtain over the celebrity status. On the contrary, it is an opportunity to identify, explore and invest strategically in new ways to trade on it, adapt and accept new forms of celebrity re-contextualization.

As I have already mentioned at the beginning of this section, the time constrains of sport celebrity are also related to the constant need for change in terms of leading and secondary characters on the celebrity stage. For this reason, media are engaged in a dual process of identifying/creating and dismissing old sport stars, so that they provide the public with (fresh) new celebrity offspring. Once you have reached the celebrity climax in terms of media exposure, public interest and mastery performances on the field, it is very hard to maintain this level for a long term, so you inevitably face

a receding tide. The celebrity market is very dynamic and goes through rapid updating processes, generating concentric circles of celebrity statuses based on the intensity of media exposure and spectatorship engagement. The hard core circle of celebrity is always time-dependent, favoring the snapshot hierarchy of professional value and image capital, thus present-oriented.

Turning to sport actors who are on the rise and enjoy their celebrity bloom, they provide marketers better chances of reaching to a wide spectrum of customers, as their notoriety is a great starting point. Nevertheless, the marketing campaigns involving sport actors and sport-related products or services show that choosing from the *hard core* circle of celebrity is the (predictable) dominant approach that companies turn to, as this involves a lower risk level that they are expose to .

The winning-losing dialectics

Although it is easier (and mostly) related to glory and praise, the sport celebrity market is not only about positive turnouts. To be put under public scrutiny by media makes sport actors as in for admiration and support, as they are for disregard and contempt. Winning and losing, through their high emotional engagement, are both a resourceful media input in terms of *spectacularity* and *dramatisation* potential.

Whether it is about glorious moments or shameful ones, fame does its part in bringing the sport celebrities on the front page and feeding them with public visibility. Fame has a consistent face threatening component embedded in it and, thus, is strongly dependent on sport actors' impression management efficacy.

The celebrity or the hero status of sport actors is not always related to winning situations, as sometimes might be about losing with grace or failing courageously (Pivato, 1996; Rauch, 1996). The runner-ups, the great performances of outsiders or the close defeat in a David versus Goliath confrontation, can bring the loser a higher image capital than to the winner. The manner and the context of a sport performance can be more important in building up sporting heroes (Gammon, 2014; Hughson, 2009) than the actual winner or loser status.

Dramatic defeats themselves can work as great marketing stories, bringing to the fore values such as courage, perseverance or total engagement and, thus, playing the empathy card. The emotional intensity of losing and the life-lesson it can provide make the loser-corner as resourceful for sport celebrity as the winner's one. As Whannel (2004, p. 482) pointed out, where else would consumers (referring merely to football fans) maintain high levels of consumption even if the quality (success) of the sport performance declines? Where do customers (fans) continue to support and even become much more present in supporting their favorites if not in sport? For sport customers (fans) losing situations provide the perfect context to test and confirm their true commitment, which marketers perceive as a high level of customer loyalty.

Despite “the fetishization of success and winners on television” (Whannel, 1985, p. 61), the dominant competitive experience is that of the losers, not the winners. There are always much more losers in a competition than winners. Moreover, sooner or later, even great champions find themselves coping with failure. Such upsets become a subject of public debate, and media are always there “to encompass the athlete's betrayal of the public's trust and the fans' emotional investments” (Ogden & Rosen, 2010, p. 3). Putting pressure on sport celebrities, media force them to be always prepared to turn to *remedial/ redressive face management strategies* (Goffman 1967, 1971; Brown & Levinson, 1987) in order to save their public face and the brand value attached to it .

Therefore, sport celebrity is not all about winning, but rather about the manner of winning and losing. In this context, what really makes the difference on the short-run is the face management strategies that the sport actors engage in coping with the success or defeat. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that, on the long-run a series of well managed losing situations values less than a series of winnings in terms of brand value, as sport remains the “ultimate meritocracy” global referent (Bell, 2009, p. 54).

The multiple identification pitfall of sport actors

Due to the symbolic value attached to sports, “questions of identity and identification are of critical importance both for the routine functioning of sports and for some of the problems recurrently generated in connection with them” (Dunning, 1999, p. 3), such as the marketing ones. The constitutive nature of identity and identification for the sport dynamics works as a solid premise for its successful adaptation to the consumer culture, in which consumption is understood as “an activity in and through which identity is constructed” (Smart, 2003, p. 74).

Celebrity is not only about the sport actor himself, but also his complex repertoire of identities and the wide range of communities he belongs and connects. From national, to regional or organizational (sport club) identification, the sport celebrities work as community coagulator agent, thus a resourceful “relationship marketing catalyst” (Magnusen, Kim & Kim, 2012). All these overlapping communities that the sport celebrities keep together mean not only fanatic supporters or rather silent ones, but also loyal, occasional or potential customers. Therefore, the sport communities build around these sport stars can act as customer-communities and be targeted as such by companies. But how stable and homogenous are these sport celebrity-based communities?

The most politicized dimension of sport community, and yet, the most stable one is built around sport actors’ national identity. International competitions give “nations a chance to show their power through sports and give people a chance to feel proud of their nation” (Li et al., 2010, p. 128). And who can best represent us if not our national sport stars? Sport actors are invested with both the right, as well as the duty to play for an entire nation, their performances during major international competition acting as a “public diplomacy tool” (Manzenreiter, 2010, p. 29). The symbolic capital of sport performances is related to a significant affective power, as the competition between nations on the sport battlefield is able “to arouse strong emotions in a direct manner and, in a less direct way, to create a sense of belonging and national pride” (Hilvoorde, Elling & Stokvis, 2010, p. 92). It is thus not surprising that most sport-related communication campaigns focus on emotional arguments, but most of all on pride and the feeling of belonging to a (national) community.

Sport actors and their achievements act as important resources for *identity stories* and *national branding anchors* that are globally accepted. The spontaneous association between countries and sport celebrities (ex. Romania - Hagi, Năstase, Nadia, Brazil - Pele/ Neymar/ Ronaldo, Russia - Plushenko, Sharapova, Argentina - Maradona, Messi, the UK - Beckham, Murray, Holmes etc.) attest to the resourceful (para)diplomatic and marketing value that they have for their country promotion. On the global scale, many people hear about and discover a country through its sport stars, which makes sport celebrity a significant component in branding a nation, with or without a clear strategy of its instrumentalization.

When we speak about the organizational level of sport communities or the sport-club communities, which have a rather global dimension, identification dilemmas might arise. The “citizenship of convenience” (Campbell, 2011) and the increasing phenomenon of sport migration define a professional sport field dominated by transnational sport actors. How many of Hypo Handball Club’s players are Austrian? How many of Manchester City Football Club’s players are English? Performance and financial reasons have become more important than national or spatial criteria, as both clubs and individual sport actors are interested in becoming more and more competitive and achieving greater results. National community or sport community identification becomes salient when Real Madrid meets Barcelona or when Chicago Bulls meets L.A. Lakers team, as people define themselves firstly by referring to their club community, which is transnational and, moreover, primary about *shared emotions* and *common competitive interests*.

This is why we are facing a rather circumstantial sport-community identification for both sport celebrities and fans. This network model of *sport community islands* (Dumitriu, 2012) means that, depending on the context, sport stars and supporters activate a certain community-identification mechanisms, while making the other identities silent. Thus, the same volleyball player for example could relate to its club community on the National Championship stage and to its national community during a World Championship, competing against its club teammates that play for other countries. In terms of marketing implication, these alternative sport community islands mean distinct markets and public targets, working as segmentation platforms for companies’ campaigns. Moreover, they

provide a widening of the potential customers, as using Cristiano Ronaldo as brand endorsement means addressing both Portuguese community, as well as Real Madrid community or football fans in general as professional community. It is hence no surprise that he is the second *World's Highest-Paid Athletes* in 2014, according to Forbes⁴ having 11 endorsement major partners like Emirates, Nike, Samsung Electronics and Toyota Motor that generate \$28 million a year in income and one of the biggest social media network-community followings on the planet with 83 million Facebook fans and 26 million Twitter followers.

However, the real problems in terms of face management and marketing consequences begin when sport celebrities switch team, especially well-known rival like Real Madrid and Barcelona (football) or Györi Audi ETO KC and Larvik (handball). Both clubs and sport actors as brands are losing followers, while marketers have to find out the proper strategy to benefit from these fan-community reconfigurations. Moreover, sport actors have to cope with contradictory situations generated by the globalizing stage of sport; for example FC Barcelona's hero (Messi) is not a Spanish football player although FC Barcelona is one of the most powerful Spanish brands, becoming, in march 2014, the first sport team to have 50 million Facebook fans and being valued at \$2.6 billion, almost double what the team was worth in 2012⁵. We can thus reevaluate the marketing and PR costs of sport celebrities' performances - both on the sport field and outside it - by relating to the impact that they might have upon the reconfiguration of the sport community islands built around a sport star.

Affinal branding: the marketing crossroads of sport celebrity

The previous sections of this paper have already discussed the marketing value of both sport actors and events, as well as of sport-related products and services. The high level of popularity and the wide addressability of sport acts are the main reasons that explain the rapid ascension of sport, "as it carries very strong images, has a mass international audience, and appeals

4. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2014/06/11/floyd-mayweather-heads-2014-list-of-the-worlds-highest-paid-athletes/>, last accessed on 27.06.2014

5. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/mikeozanian/2014/01/03/barcelona-becomes-first-sports-team-to-have-50-million-facebook-fans/>, last accessed on 20.06.2014

to all classes” (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003, p. 275), providing higher levels of brand or corporate exposure (Kropp, Lavack, Holden, & Dalakas, 1999, p. 49). Moreover, it seems that the consumers’ general positive attitude towards sport has a moderation effect on their overall attitudes toward the advertising content (Pyun & James, 2011). Audiences’ sport-related “excitement” and “emotional attachment” (Copeland, Frisby, & McCarville, 1996, p. 33) is somehow transposed in their attitude towards advertising, setting important premises for a successful persuasive message delivery.

Along with actors, singers or (catwalk) models, sports celebrities are the spoilt *offspring* of advertising. The way from promoting products, to sport actors themselves becoming *the product* is quite short when it comes to a celebrity-saturated world where everyone seems to be involved in either producing or consuming celebrities (Rein et al., 1997).

Hence, sport actors entered the short list of the most wanted celebrity category and the mere fact that they have become brands in their own right converted them into what can be called a *brand-bond*, connecting a wide and, sometimes very heterogeneous, set of brands. From clothes and face-cream, to cars, banking services or hotels brands, sport actors are engaged in promoting almost any kind of product, service or social cause.

This branding network build around a sport actor, along with the high level of media exposure he has to cope with due to his/her celebrity status makes sport actors very vulnerable in terms of face management. The vulnerability brought by this multiple-roles that sport actors have to perform on both the public and the private scene has less prominent implication for the brands he endorses. Each of these brands requires a specific role-play from the sport actor’s part, in agreement with the brand values and the ad-hoc marketing approach, as well as with the sport actor’s personal branding concept.

However, as wider and diversified is the brand-association portfolio of a sport actor, higher is the face threatening pressure he has to cope with and higher the risks that each brand associated with him/her has to run. This potential domino mechanism is strongly dependent on the

messages and brand values' consistency between the sport actor and the brands he endorses, as well as between all the brands that he promotes. In most cases, a wider portfolio is more likely to involve a high level of product diversification, increasing the challenges for both sport actors and marketers.

If sport actors (and their PR staff) have to answer to the question: "Is this product/service/ company/cause compatible with my brand image?", the marketers should also keep in mind if the other products the sport actor promotes are a proper *branding peer group* to be associated with by the public. Does my bank or car brand benefit or stand to lose from this mediated association with the soft drink brand X, perfume brand Y or the shampoo brand Z the sport actor endorses? How exclusive or permissive should these commercial relationships be so that each brand would benefit the most from it? On the one hand, more brands promoted by a sport actor means a higher level of exposure and notoriety for him and a wider addressability, but, on the other hand, it is harder to provide and maintain a brand-value consistency between all the brands connected by this public figure.

In this context, we should keep in mind that the use of advertising through sport rises questions regarding customers' *identification* and *differentiation* (Lyberger & McCarthy, 2001, p. 431). Brought together by the same sport actor, brands should take a more cautious approach of the implications of this *affinal branding* association mechanism, anticipate and prevent potential crisis generated by brand value inconstancy. What might happen when the same sport celebrity who enjoys fast-food products on TV ads and billboards is also engaged in a social campaign promoting a healthier food-style? How can a luxury perfume brand work with been associated with the same sport actor involved in a mainstream shampoo brand ad campaign? To what extent can these work together without generating strong cognitive dissonance that customer will react to and that might affect the credibility of a brand?

Another dimension that can lead to such situations can be related to the potential discrepancy between the role-play on the commercial stage and the real life consumer behavior of the sport actor himself. How effective is

an ad if it is well known that the sport actor uses or even is a loyal customer of other competitor brand? As much as they like a sport celebrity, when seeing him driving other car brand than the one he so convincingly endorses on TV or definitely using other beauty products than the one he is so found of in the last ads, customers may call this inconsistency on the sport actors and reprobate their commercial (pro-profit) versatility.

Once they have entered the public eye, facing the *Big Brother effect* of celebrity, sport actors engage in a role-playing act that is meant to impress, while maintaining the coherence of their character. From appearance, to joy manifestations on the field, from TV interviews to fan's meetings and joining social causes, the sport actors have found a way to make his public scripts (commercial or not) fit in their overall personal branding concept and be consistent with the *role expectations* attached to each one of them. Nevertheless, improving their role performance requires constant time investment and attention in choosing the proper face management strategies, which reveal the mere dramaturgical dimension of sport's dynamics.

I will thus argue that the reconfiguration of the sport experiences generated by the commodification of these social fields and the high level of public exposure of sport acts gave rise to a *hybrid profile* of the sport actor himself in terms of role performance. This, in turn, requires a consistent concern for impression management from both the sport actors' part, as well as from the marketers one, so that the brand associations with a sport celebrity be a win-win situation.

Conclusion

The centrality of media inside the sport world and their high involvement in the overall process of sport marketization, impelled sport actors to enter and generate new competitive markets, exploiting their commodity value, as well as their role as performers on the spectacular scene of entertainment. Thus, the moment they step into the spotlight, sport actors find themselves subject to constant public scrutiny and their performance on the field is no longer enough to measure up to the social expectations related to their celebrity status.

This paper brought to the fore not only the common grounds of sport and media in fuelling sport actors' *walk of fame* and the marketing potential of a strong brand value built around a sport celebrity, but also the challenges and marketing risks imbedded in this celebrity status. Contrary to the celebrity magnetism that Holt and Mangan admit when claiming that sporting public is too busy worshipping to reflect on the objects of its fascination (Holt & Mangan, 1996, p. 5), I will argue, base on all the aspects that I have discusses in this paper, that we are rather facing a time when the spectatorship experience is more evaluative. The public has higher expectations from sport actors in terms of their performances *in* and *outside* the field. Along with the high level of media exposure, this places sport celebrities in a very face threatening context of professional and personal performances, requiring the mobilization of a wide spectrum of face management strategies.

The marketing instrumentalization of sport actors' private life, the time frame of the *golden age* of elite sport performances, the winning-losing dialectics, sport actors' complex repertoire of identities and the *affinal branding* network build around them attest to the dynamic and complex nature of sport celebrity, addressing both the benefits of this status, as well as its potential costs in terms of reputational and financial capital. Moreover, this article lay stress not only on the challenges that sport celebrities have to cope with in their walk of fame, but also on the challenges that marketers who want to associate their brands with sport celebrities have to consider and take on.

Another important aspect that this problematization of sport actors' celebrity status brought out, in line with previous studies, is the decisive role that media play in creating sport celebrities, helping or preventing them from maintaining this status, extending or shortening their celebrity story. This is why a good media relations management can constitute not only a competitive advantage, but rather a surviving strategy within such a high competitive market as the celebrity one. Moreover, the way media played this winning marketization card in regard to the sport world has led to a structural change in terms of behavioural and discursive practices, from both inside and outside the sport field. This, in turn, has generated

a reconfiguration of the whole social imagery of sport and spectatorship experiences, leading marketers to capitalize more and more on the sport actors' brand value.

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