

## **Is this already the “Box Box” era? The celebrity capital of Formula One stars at the end of their career. The Lewis Hamilton Case\***

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This paper examines the concept of celebrity capital in sports, with a focus on the post-career phase of élite athletes. Using Lewis Hamilton – Formula One champion and prominent public figure – as a case study, the research investigates how this form of capital is renegotiated during the transition from full competitive performance to the prospect of retirement. Drawing on the conceptual framework of celebrity studies, media studies, and sport sociology, while adopting a qualitative approach through a thematic analysis, the study examines Hamilton's self-narrative on Instagram, as well as the ideas that the Italian press is spreading on this particular moment in his career, and the mainstream narrative carried out through the documentary TV series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*. The research identifies the recurring themes of remembrance, generational transition, self-commodification, public legacy, and self-branding strategies. Hamilton's media-driven narrative is oriented towards a gradual process of transformation, placing the athlete between a symbolic closure (of a journey) and promising new possibilities for his future. The case exemplifies how sports celebrities perform a publicly staged negotiation of their end-of-career, constructing a legacy that may extend beyond sport and into cultural, ethical, and entrepreneurial spheres.

**Keywords:** sports celebrity, post-career, celebrity capital, social media, media narratives

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## Introduction. The sports celebrity

The convergence between sport, media, and celebrity culture has profoundly reshaped the role of athletes in the public sphere. Not only do performers within competitive contexts operate as influential figures, but sports stars today also exert influence across media industries, cultural production, and political discourse. Within this transformation, the self-narratives of the athletes, through social media and streaming platforms, play a crucial role in accumulating and reinvesting various forms of capital – economic, symbolic, and social (Bourdieu, 1986) – especially during critical transitional phases, such as the end-of-career. This article investigates how media self-practices and narratives influence the persistence and reconfiguration of celebrity capital after an athlete's career. Focusing on the case of Lewis Hamilton, this investigation examines how platformed self-representation and media storytelling intersect with the ageing process and retirement transition in the contemporary mediascape.

Starting from a theoretical conceptualization, sports celebrities, on top of being successful in their discipline, are athletes who participate in social and public life and receive attention from the legacy media. These characters also benefit from the notoriety they achieved and which was attributed to them (Rojek, 2001) through media representation (Smart, 2005). Physical performance and strength are crucial, often evident through the exposure (or overexposure) of one's body (Tirino, Bifulco, & Castellano, 2022). As various media have evolved, the narrative modes employed by sports celebrities and the methods of constructing and negotiating social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) have also changed or adapted to the medium in which they are presented. We can therefore introduce a different form of capital linked to celebrities. According to Cronin and Shaw (2002) and Driessens, we should rather consider celebrity capital as a new form of capital driven by an increased media visibility, resulting from the recurring presence of celebrities in media representations.

Athletes have thus had to grapple with the importance of their own media image and have become aware of their commercialized image and the commodification of their figure, first through television, and later through social media, in new forms. The celebrities' self-narration propagated through social media, with new modes of self-presentation and self-management (Rui & Stefanone, 2013), has led to greater accessibility for fans to a private sphere that was previously difficult to penetrate, while using entirely new grammars and languages. Compared to the past, sports celebrities establish stronger parasocial relationships with the audiences, as they share their private sphere on social media (Kim & Song, 2016; Chatchaiyan, 2017). Athletes' media practices on social media allow the celebrities to express their status through their affordances (Hutchby, 2001), tracing it back to specific thematic categories such as affluence and luxury, body, health and physical strength, or family (Tirino, Bifulco, & Castellano, 2022; Tirino & Castellano, 2023). This type of content is flanked by content more related to the economic sphere within broader processes such as commodification (Horne, 2006) and endorsement (Smart, 2005), which

include the presentation of the celebrity as a brand, sponsorship contracts, and the commercialization of the athlete and their image, in a context in which commodities and images represent fundamental assets (Kellner, 2003; Kellner, 2010; Sturm, 2014, p. 69). Through social media, celebrities also have gained more opportunities to stand as “role models”, especially for the younger generation (Ahmed et al., 2015; Gupta & Nair, 2023).

Sports celebrities undoubtedly have traits in common with other celebrities, such as a high level of notoriety in fields that transcend their own, a greater access to financial resources, a predilection for luxury in various forms, and the expression of their affluent status. However, in this case, we can include some specificities linked to the sports context and a particular stage of the athlete’s life: the end-of-career and post-career. To explore these issues in greater depth, the article will be divided into different sections that explore: i) the specific characteristics of Formula One, and Formula One sports celebrities; ii) ageism in the sporting context and end-of-career; iii) Lewis Hamilton’s case study, which provides an opportunity to reflect on a transition phase linked to the driver’s age; iv) an empirical analysis of the case study concerning media and audiovisual products revolving around the driver.

## **On the podium of *élite sports*: the specificities of Formula One**

Sports, sports disciplines, and sports contexts are not all the same. Formula One is a “glamorous” sport (Sturm, 2014, p. 70), with a high potential for spectacularization (Andrews, 2019). It has become a centre of interest for the global star system, as evidenced by the presence in the paddock of celebrities from different backgrounds, as well as the guests of the ten racing teams. In this case, many forms of hybridization exist between very different fields. However, it is possible to observe a blend between sport and fashion, as well as between sport and entertainment. This hybridization of contexts makes F1 one of the most popular sports globally (Gasparetto, Orlova, & Vernikovskiy, 2022), and a commercialized show (Castellano, 2024): it can count on the organisation of exclusive events, represented by the Grand Prix, around various continents, including historic circuits (Monte-Carlo) and new ones (Las Vegas), as well as more entertainment-oriented events. The structures become places dedicated to consumption, aiming to combine various forms of entertainment, giving rise to a phenomenon known as “sportainment” (Richelieu, 2021; Russo, 2021, p. 93). Each Grand Prix has become “a media event that reproduces and projects itself as an exemplar of Kellner’s (2003, 2010) ‘spectacular and seductive’ global media spectacle” (Sturm, 2014, p. 69). Every media event requires the purchase of a ticket, which is not exceptionally affordable. Over the last decades, the world of sport has faced many changes, especially towards more extraordinary spectacle and commercialization. The media have played a fundamental role in this context (Castellano, 2024). The storytelling of the event and the television narrative (Sturm, 2014) have evolved to achieve ever-increasing audience involvement and engagement (Fahy, Butler, & Butler, 2023). We

can say that this elite sport may have recently undergone a process of increased popularization,<sup>1</sup> mainly due to the serialization of sports events in recent years. *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* (2019, 7 seasons – ongoing), a documentary TV series often referred to as a “backstage series” (Tirino, 2023, p. 59), plays a key role in this. Produced by Netflix in collaboration with the FIA and distributed by the same media company, the series aimed to reconstruct the Formula One World Championships, revealing details and events often hidden by the broadcaster’s television cameras, through a narrative that emphasized spectacle and interviews with the protagonists. The presence of this kind of product on a streaming platform like Netflix makes Formula One more accessible to non-expert audiences.

Sports celebrities also play a role in the exclusivity of Formula One. In the top male-only competition, the drivers embody “the sport’s glamour too through their globe-trotting displays of masculine bravado and luxurious lifestyles” (Sturm, 2014, p. 70). Each driver, however, embodies their celebrity status in a different way and following certain stylistic features (Castellano, 2023). Formula One is characterized by extreme selectivity: only twenty drivers participate in each season, making each seat not just a sporting goal, but a symbolic achievement. This exclusivity heightens media exposure, turning drivers into hyper-visible figures. Unlike other sports, mid-season replacements are rare and often dramatised. Entering the sport requires significant economic capital, especially to cover high initial costs in the absence of sponsorships. Moreover, drivers’ careers in F1 can be short-lived: some last only a few seasons without remarkable results. These structural constraints shape not only career trajectories, but also the narratives surrounding the retirement from the sport. Formula One constitutes an ideal context for exploring how athletes’ celebrity capital is managed, renegotiated, and transformed into a transitional moment that can accompany their exit from the tracks in a perpetual *pit stop*.

## **Ageism, end-of-career and post-career of a (Formula One) sports celebrity**

The prestige of sports celebrities is closely tied to their active status, but the end-of-career marks a complex and delicate phase. While retirement can open new paths (Coakley, 1983), many athletes, aware of the limits of sporting life, prepare proactively in advance for this transition (Sussman, 1972). They often engage in supplementary activities, either within the realm of sports or in entirely new contexts, frequently venturing into entrepreneurship or commercial advertising. Consequently, the end-of-career and subsequent post-career years can provide new opportunities for athletes, leveraging the celebrity status they have achieved over time. However, the impending end-of-career also represents a critical transitional phase, extending beyond professional considerations (Ronkainen, Aggerholm, Allen-Collinson, & Ryba, 2023), with potentially significant ramifications for athletes’ physical and mental well-being (Voorheis, Silver, & Consonni, 2023). Athletes find themselves going

from being the pivot of their team and from having a practical and symbolic role – especially if they're sports heroes (Bifulco & Tirino, 2018) – to having to give up practising, reshaping their routines, not being at the centre of media attention, and seeing their bodies ageing, while witnessing the emergence of new generations. The mediatized bodies of these celebrities age, and media representations need to adapt to such changes (Middlemost, 2022).

Fans, however, may continue to appreciate such a celebrity, thereby forming a long-lasting fandom (Vroomen, 2004). Stevenson (2009, p. 87) points out that “there is the idea of lifelong fandom and someone to stick with over the life course”. The fans' attachment to the celebrity, not just the sportsperson or athlete, continues as time passes, even after they leave the sport.

Due to this sport's high level of spectacularization, exiting the circuit requires complex management strategies. In some cases, the end of a driver's career is not a sudden event, but a gradual process, marked by the transfer to a team with less prestige and fewer chances of victory or heralded by advancing age. Often in these cases, however, the driver announces an initial retirement, only to return to compete a few years later in other racing teams (e.g. Michael Schumacher), with in between experiences in other championships such as Formula E, endurance, rally (e.g. Kimi Räikkönen), which offer less intense rhythms, less external and public pressure, or space for experimenting with new technologies. This option allows for a gradual transition, diluting the end-of-career, while maintaining their sports skills active above all and favouring the exploration of hybrid professional identities (e.g., driver-entrepreneur). In some cases, at the announcement of a return to Formula One, the media perpetuate narratives about the explosion of a *second youth* (e.g. Fernando Alonso). In other cases, retirement can occur drastically after winning a title (e.g. Nico Rosberg) at a moment of great competitive and physical form. Retirement, in this case, may depend on personal and family reasons or on evaluations regarding the subsequent chances of victory.

In their post-career phase, some drivers remain within the sport as mentors, team managers, or technical consultants – roles that enhance their symbolic and technical value in the discipline, by shifting authority from competition to strategic expertise. This can create a form of *symbolic continuity*, maintaining their presence in F1 culture after retirement. Others transition into media roles, leveraging their technical and communicative skills to shape the sport's mainstream narrative. This path reflects a hybrid celebrity model, where the former athlete becomes an active part of the media that once covered them. Alternatively, some opt for a sharper career break, pursuing entrepreneurship, activism, entertainment, or a career in the fashion industry. The enumerated scenarios are neither mutually exclusive nor rigidly separated: pilots often go through several stages, experience different roles, and construct a fluid transition narrative, also thanks to social media. The public construction of the end-of-career and post-career thus becomes a laboratory of self-representation and narration, in which elements linked to the sporting sphere combine with the logic of personal branding, celebrity capital, and remembrance. Therefore, the end-of-career may not mark a conclusion, but rather a symbolic relaunch, i.e., a moment in which

the driver renegotiates the self-image built up over the years, capitalising on his past to open up new perspectives.

## **Towards the end-of-career, between the renegotiation possibilities of celebrity capital and symbolic constructions**

As anticipated, the end-of-career may not be represented by a clean break with the world of sport, but rather a moment of transition – a path, certainly articulated and complex – that may allow the athlete to build a fertile ground for future activities. The end of a career typically occurs when a driver, while still active, begins to invest more significantly in the future, making decisions that may hint, even to fans, that this moment may not be far off. By examining celebrity capital, and not only the image of the sports hero, it is possible to reflect on the “celebrity capital life cycle” (Carillat & Ilicic, 2019) of these personalities and to understand whether this can still be capitalized and utilized, even at this stage, or whether it is possible to talk about the decline of celebrity capital (Castellano, 2023), i.e. in a phase where public interest and also media interest decreases, with consequent problematic issues. Celebrity capital can be subject to fluctuations, linked to the ability to renew one’s image (Gunter, 2014) and construct narratives that are consistent with the life course one is going through. To understand how the end-of-career can mature, what omens and symbols are associated with this moment, and how celebrity capital can be capitalized or renegotiated, we decided to reflect on the British driver Lewis Hamilton, a seven-time world champion and one of the most iconic figures in motorsport history.

### **“It’s hammer time” or a “box box” era? The case of Lewis Hamilton**

After twelve years at the *Mercedes AMG F1* team (commonly known as *Mercedes*), in February 2024, Lewis Hamilton sensationally announced his transfer to *Scuderia Ferrari* (widely known as *Ferrari*). However, he still has a year to run at the Brackley-based stable. Born in January 1985, Hamilton will end the current World Championship at 40, joining the ranks of active Formula One drivers with greater racing longevity. In addition to his sporting successes, he has distinguished himself within contemporary popular culture by constructing a highly mediatized public image that has managed to transcend the sporting context from the outset. Hamilton has consolidated a global celebrity image over the years, thanks to his numerous collaborations in the fashion system, and he has repeatedly attended the *Costume Institute Gala* (commonly known as the *Met Gala*). This event symbolizes the convergence of fashion and the star system. Lewis Hamilton has been involved in social and environmental causes over the years. Notable examples include his support for the Black Lives Matter movement, his promotion of inclusion in both motorsport and STEM disciplines, and his adoption of a vegan diet, even for his dog, the pet influencer



Roscoe. In particular, Hamilton's support for the Black Lives Matter movement takes on considerable symbolic significance. He remains the first – and still the only – black driver to have competed at the highest level of Formula 1, a sport historically dominated by white sportsmen. Although the grid has included athletes from diverse national backgrounds (including Brazilian, Chinese, and Japanese drivers), the presence of black athletes has been virtually non-existent. This structural underrepresentation may have reinforced Hamilton's political and identity-based engagement, fuelling a form of activism both toward the global black community and in specific national or local contexts, where black individuals remain marginalized or symbolically invisible. Hamilton thus emerges as a politically and culturally influential sports celebrity, reaching beyond the perimeter of the racetrack.

The non-positive moment experienced at *Mercedes* in the last three years and the announcement of his transfer to *Ferrari* in pursuit of an eighth World Championship title that would place him one step higher than Michael Schumacher has made Hamilton's case particularly interesting to analyse, reasoning around his path as a moment of transition towards the end of his career, between media narratives and self-narratives and possible scenarios. Another factor that makes him a particularly interesting character is the uncertainty surrounding his retirement and the path the driver will take. However, various hypotheses have been scattered.

## Method

Two main questions guided the research: a) How is the “celebrity capital life cycle” managed during a transition phase?; b) What are the main narratives related to a transition path that can lead to the end of a career? To answer these research questions, we employed a qualitative methodological approach, which enabled us to reconstruct the narrative, self-narrative, and media dynamics that accompanied the transition period leading up to the end of Lewis Hamilton's career, an emblematic case study in this sense. Although the racing driver has not formally announced his retirement, his mediatized figure is currently the subject of a narrative transition, in which the theme of leave-taking, remembrance, and identity transformation takes on multiple forms within different media environments. The choice of Hamilton as a case study (Yin, 2018) is therefore based not on his actual retirement, but on the symbolism and narratives that suggest the end of an era, not only because of his transfer to *Ferrari*, but probably because of his descent from a podium on which the stories of so many talented young drivers are now being told. The transfer from *Mercedes* to *Ferrari* – thematized in some media products as the “end of an era” – has been taken as a valuable basis for observing how a sports career is recounted, ritualized, and transformed even before it ends, and given the probable approach of that end. We decided to use thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) applied to three different areas: self-narrative on social media and in particular on Instagram, with an analysis of Lewis Hamilton's official profile (@lewishamilton, <https://www.instagram.com/lewishamilton/>);

press narrative, with the analysis of articles from the Italian sports press (*La Gazzetta dello Sport*); audiovisual narratives, with an analysis of the Netflix tv series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*. More specifically, for the Instagram analysis, we considered the period from June 9, 2024, to March 7, 2025, for posts, and from June 9, 2024, to January 9, 2025, for stories, totalling 435 pieces of content manually analysed. We began with the period preceding his victory at Silverstone, which is considered emblematic of his departure from *Mercedes* and his *previous life*. After analysing the Instagram stories for seven months, we decided to stop, but subsequently added another two months of content in the form of posts to document the transition to *Ferrari*. The IG stories were repetitive compared to the posts, so we made this distinction. As for the TV series, we decided to analyse the season in which substantial friction with *Mercedes* emerged, with Hamilton losing confidence in his future and his chances of winning. We also analysed the season in which the transfer to *Ferrari* was announced. We selected episodes that delved more into the issues surrounding Hamilton and these aspects, leaving out other episodes as they were irrelevant to the analysis (four episodes: 6x01; 6x03; 7x01; 7x04). Regarding the press, we decided to focus on a few articles using relevance criteria: the articles had to explicitly mention Hamilton's career stage, possible retirement, or the symbolic implications of his transfer to *Ferrari*. Articles were identified through archive searches on the official website of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (*Gazzetta.it*, <https://www.gazzetta.it>). We think it could be helpful to contextualize the transfer to *Ferrari* and understand the moment Lewis Hamilton experienced.

The selected media environments and cultural products help sketch the narrative related to Lewis Hamilton's moment of transition, understanding how the end-of-career can be a complex and lengthy period not only for the athlete, but also for the media, which must report on it, albeit in a fragmentary way. The thematic analysis helps us identify, organise, and interpret themes across different datasets; it helps reveal the main narratives, values, and symbols articulated within media content. In this case, it enables us to identify specific traits of Hamilton's celebrity capital at a particular moment in his career and to discern the primary themes of the mainstream narratives.

## Lewis Hamilton's Instagram profile

Instagram is a social media platform used by sports celebrities to construct a narrative through images, sharing the first-person account of their lives (both public and private) (Chatchaiyan, 2017), promoting a lifestyle that is both pleasurable and visually appealing to audiences (Perez, 2023). Social media enables individual athletes to build their image by leveraging the affordances and features of various platforms, although often through the strategic work of highly specialized figures. Sports celebrities would publish content on Instagram to reveal their identity and naturalness (Howell, 2021), outside of the constructions imposed by the sport they play, and to nurture their social, economic, and cultural capital (Meyers, 2020). Based on that, we can interpret Lewis Hamilton's content



production on his Instagram profile during the period analysed. The thematic analysis enabled the detection of the main themes that drove Hamilton's self-narration during the reference period, allowing for further reflection on the moment he was going through and yielding a multifaceted portrait of the Formula One driver.

Table 1 summarizes the thematic categories we identified after reflecting on and analysing the audiovisual and textual content found in Instagram posts and stories. We decided to assign subtopics to each thematic category to achieve greater specificity.

THEMATIC CATEGORY	SUBTOPICS	EXPLANATION	N. PIECES OF CONTENT
Competitive persistence	Races, training, performance, body.	Content related to work, dedication and attention to the profession, body care and training, and exposure of the athlete's body. The content shows his desire to prove he is still competitive and up to the task he is performing.	216
Commodification	Promoting companies (brands and companies he co-founded, self-promotion and presence in other media).	Content explicitly aimed at promoting products, partnerships, or branded experiences. It includes sponsorships, adv campaigns, fashion collaborations, and commercial appearances—where the athlete's image functions primarily as a marketable asset in consumer culture. Commodification is understood here in the context of the commercialization of sport and athletes (Horne, 2006). The athlete becomes a marketable entity, like a commodity. This is reinforced by commercial relationships with companies. Hamilton is well-versed in this logic, as evidenced by the content of this category.	88
Relationships and bonds	Family, friends, pet, team.	Content that explains Lewis Hamilton's relationships (friendly, private) with his family, his racing team (with long-standing relationships built over time), his long-term friends, and his pet. This content reveals Hamilton's emotional side.	49
Capital (beyond sport)	Fashion, lifestyle and consumption patterns.	Content relating to the capital Hamilton has built beyond sport, and specifically linked to two areas that are significant for his post-career prospects: fashion and lifestyle. In this category, which does not contain explicit references to commercial activities, such as the driver endorsing brands, we note his care and attention to his outfits, lifestyle and consumption patterns, which perfectly place him in the category of elite sports celebrity.	28
Public and emotional legacy	Celebrations and tributes, remembrance, fans.	Content that reflects the driver's emotional and symbolic legacy within the sport and among fans. It encompasses expressions of gratitude and affective connection with the audience—posts that acknowledge the role of fans in Hamilton's career, and celebrate emotional milestones. These interactions often go beyond the para-social logic typical of celebrity-fan dynamics and suggest a more emotionally embedded public figure. The category includes retrospective content—references to key figures in Hamilton's personal pantheon (such as Ayrton Senna), past achievements, or emotionally charged moments in the sport's history. Emotions, memories, and public recognition intertwine to reinforce the athlete's enduring significance.	28
Ethics and values	Awareness-raising and social campaigns.	Content showing Hamilton's involvement in social campaigns, his presence and activism on current and socially relevant issues.	22
N.C.	/		4

Table 1. Thematic analysis of Lewis Hamilton's Instagram profile.

The analysis shows a massive presence of content related to maintaining a competitive strength, encompassing Instagram posts and stories related to performance, physical exercise and training, and a strong, sculpted body, reflecting a (personal) brand endurance strategy. Content related to training and racing showcases Hamilton's obsessive attention to detail, as evidenced by posts in which he is examining his car, sometimes alongside the team of mechanics and engineers. Frequent pictures show minute details of the single-seater, especially the helmet he wears weekly, demonstrating his passion for his work. From a celebrity capital preservation perspective, we can understand Hamilton's desire to remain fully active and competitive, also to attract media and audiences' attention. However, the emphasis on aspects that transcend motorsports – fashion system, adherence to specific values, and marketing strategies above all – testifies to a hybrid narrative, in which celebrity value (Gunter, 2014) is not primarily bound to the sporting dimension, by the shift towards a more fluid, global, and open one. There is much content linked to commercialization activities, in which the driver highlights agreements with some luxury brands (*Dior*, for which he has become an ambassador; *IWC Watches*, also a *Mercedes* sponsor), as well as brands of which he is a co-founder (*Almave*, +44). Also included in this category are pieces of content in which Hamilton self-promotes his presence within other media, and above all, photo shoots with magazines (*Time*), sometimes fashion magazines (*Elle*, *Style*), demonstrating the hybridization of his character towards other contexts, which may suggest some forms of celebrity capital reconversion when he retires. As mentioned above, there are also Instagram posts and stories linked to ethics and an adherence to specific values, as evidenced by the content produced with *Mission 44*, a charity project founded by Hamilton, which testifies to his openness to sensitive and social issues, such as supporting students at risk of school dropout. There is no lack of content in which the athlete's relational bounds emerges, with attention dedicated to family members (his father and mother), friends (with whom he went on holiday to Africa and was portrayed in some photographs), his dog Roscoe (whose birthday and moments spent together he celebrates), and his team (especially his faithful track engineer Peter Bonnington, known as *Bono*, whom he left behind in his transfer to *Ferrari*). Like all sporting celebrities, Hamilton also showcases his lifestyle through pictures of travel or snow sports, highlighting luxury and affluence, as well as the outfits (although not sponsored content) he wears, especially when arriving at the various circuits. Unlike the "Commodification" category, in this context, we can think of "Capital" as including content that does not explicitly involve commercial activities of a company, but expresses certain elements inherent to the figure – also from a media point of view – that Hamilton has built over time, namely his interest in fashion, lifestyle, and consumption patterns. This content is not promotional, but serves to reinforce his status and recognisability within and beyond the sporting domain. As a category, "Commodification" is closely linked to market logic and consumer appeal, while the category "Capital" reflects the accumulation and performance of different kinds of influence beyond the sporting field. It refers thus to a broader dynamic of visibility – like a form of capital linked to the media system and the media overexposure that celebrities can collect and re-invest (Heinich, 2012; Franssen, 2024) – that may not entail immediate commercial intent, but that nonetheless

contributes to the athlete's celebrity capital and its conversion into influence in multiple social fields. There is also celebratory content concerning other sports personalities (e.g. Ayrton Senna or young winners of minor championships or karting) or fans (those of *Mercedes*, with their unconditional affection, and those of *Ferrari*, whose warmth is appreciated). This content traces the concept of public and affective inheritance. The self-portrayal perpetrated through his Instagram suggests a *liminality*, a space suspended between the end and the transformation, in which the driver is positioned as a still relevant figure – from a sporting, athletic point of view, but also in his involvement in social campaigns and activities concerning the commercialization of his image. Anyways, Hamilton appears to be projected beyond the track. Hamilton remains an athlete and is immersed in competition and competitiveness, while engaging in constructing substantial celebrity capital for his post-career.

## The Italian sports press

The Italian press, specifically some articles from the online version of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (*Gazzetta.it*), chosen as a representative source of Italian sports information, were used to contextualize Hamilton's transfer from *Mercedes* to *Ferrari*. For this reason, we selected just a few articles (six) that explicitly thematized Hamilton's transitional path, opening reflections on the possibility of his end-of-career.<sup>2</sup> The articles were selected using keyword research, favouring thematic relevance. Several dominant themes emerge from the analysed articles, with a register that swings between (self-)celebration and doubtful formulas regarding his future.

We decided to make a table (Table 2) that highlights the article's date of publication, title, main topics, and an interpretation of the themes related to Lewis Hamilton's professional transition. The publication dates of the articles reflect the entire span (which we could also consider a narrative arc) of Hamilton's last professional stage. The titles indicate the focus of the journalistic narrative and the impact it aims to have on the audience. Themes and interpretation give us a more accurate picture of the situation.

DATE	TITLE & LINK	MAIN TOPICS	INTERPRETATION
1/02/2024	"Unbelievable! Hamilton goes to Ferrari! Wolff informed Mercedes of Lewis' choice" ("Clamoroso, Hamilton alla Ferrari! Wolff ha comunicato alla Mercedes la scelta di Lewis"). <a href="https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/01-02-2024/hamilton-alla-ferrari.shtml">https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/01-02-2024/hamilton-alla-ferrari.shtml</a>	Still an active career. Celebrification of his profile.	Celebrification of Hamilton's career with titles and wins, to emphasise his decision to go to <i>Ferrari</i> and leave his historical club, <i>Mercedes</i> .
1/02/2024	"Bullied as a kid, Hamilton, the loyal cannibal on the track, has broken all records" ("Bullizzato da ragazzino, Hamilton cannibale leale in pista ha infranto tutti i record").	Dreaming of his eight title. Age is just a number. Celebrification of his profile.	Minimization of age as a limitation, and possibility to win the title. Chance to overtake Schumacher and become the best driver ever.

	<a href="https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/01-02-2024/lewis-hamilton-ritratto-del-cannibale-che-ha-infranto-tutti-i-record.shtml">https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/01-02-2024/lewis-hamilton-ritratto-del-cannibale-che-ha-infranto-tutti-i-record.shtml</a>		
21/08/2024	<p>"Hamilton: 'Retiring? I'm thinking about it. I'd like to take a break'..." ("Hamilton: 'Ritiro? Ci sto pensando. Mi piacerebbe prendermi una pausa'...").</p> <p><a href="https://www.gazzetta.it/motori/mercedes-f1/21-08-2024/f1-hamilton-ritiro-ci-sto-pensando-vorrei-prendermi-una-pausa.shtml">https://www.gazzetta.it/motori/mercedes-f1/21-08-2024/f1-hamilton-ritiro-ci-sto-pensando-vorrei-prendermi-una-pausa.shtml</a></p>	Concrete farewell reflection, while the time isn't right yet.	Allowed the thought of retirement (Hamilton's own words), but postponed. Hamilton had doubts regarding his future. Willingness to race as long as he remains competitive.
5/12/2024	<p>"Hamilton: 'Saying goodbye to Mercedes? A terrible feeling'. Sainz: 'In all these years, I've given all I could'" ("Hamilton: 'Addio alla Mercedes? Sensazione terribile'. Sainz: 'In questi anni ho dato tutto'").</p> <p><a href="https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/05-12-2024/formula-1-hamilton-ferrari-abu-dhabi.shtml?refresh_ce">https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/05-12-2024/formula-1-hamilton-ferrari-abu-dhabi.shtml?refresh_ce</a></p>	Emotional detachment from <i>Mercedes</i> .	Hamilton realizes his detachment from his historical team (could this be an issue for him?).
16/03/2025	<p>"Not a one-take shot, Hamilton gets nervous with the pit: 'You told me it wouldn't rain cats and dogs'" ("La prima non è buona, Hamilton nervosa coi box: 'Mi avevate detto che avrebbe piovuto poco'...").</p> <p><a href="https://www.gazzetta.it/motori/ferrari/16-03-2025/gp-australia-hamilton-nervoso-con-gli-ingegneri-ferrari-cos-e-successo.shtml">https://www.gazzetta.it/motori/ferrari/16-03-2025/gp-australia-hamilton-nervoso-con-gli-ingegneri-ferrari-cos-e-successo.shtml</a></p>	Difficulties in adapting to his new phase.	Criticism in the transition to a new chapter (with the subsequent Sprint Race victory).

Table 2. Synthesis of the topics of the selected articles regarding Lewis Hamilton's transitional stage.

The themes of the articles evoke concepts such as dreams, adaptability, the possibility of achieving another victory, and emotional separation, suggesting a transition that is neither fully begun nor completely denied. Some articles emphasize the emotional detachment from *Mercedes* as a problematic element. In contrast, others highlight the search for the eighth title as a (perhaps unattainable) dream, while others focus on the difficulties in adapting to the new reality. Thus, on the one hand, we have a portrait of Hamilton at a symbolic end of his career (his farewell to *Mercedes*); on the other hand, a celebratory narrative of the champion from Stevenage is carried out, with all the details regarding his successful career. Age is not a prominent element, although it is present in the background as a subtle theme (in some articles, his date of birth is emphasized). An imminent end is not certified, but the imagery constructed through the articles contributes to defining an interpretative framework that suggests the approach of passing the baton. Hamilton already appears as a transitional icon: no longer just a driver, but a character capable of moving within other contexts. Thus, the press contributes to narrating a moment – his end-of-career – which is progressive and unclear.

## The TV series Formula 1: Drive to Survive

In selected episodes of *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*, the staging of Lewis Hamilton's switch from *Mercedes* to *Ferrari* can be seen, albeit in an emphasized but effectively summarized manner. To rewrite how the audience perceives this sport, this audiovisual production precisely plays on spectacular narration, marked by pathos, with strong characterization of the figures and the attribution of symbolic meanings that extend beyond the sports chronicle of the events. The thematic analysis enabled the detection of prevailing themes, providing an interpretation for each one. The four episodes highlight three central themes, which stand out: the crisis with *Mercedes* and the loss of competitiveness; the shock announcement and the switch to *Ferrari*; the emergence of a new generation of drivers (represented in the analysed episodes mainly by George Russell and Kimi Antonelli). These elements help shape the tale of a decline (initially in sporting terms, but probably also symbolic) of an icon of Formula One. Using thematic analysis, we created a table for each episode, summarizing the main content, topics, and relevant quotes (including indirect ones), as well as the interpretation of the content.

Episode 6x01 – Money Talks	
<b>CONTENT</b>	Reflections on the 2022 winless season. The eighth title goal (still too far away). Frustration during the races (and on the team radio). Negative comments on his car and team performance. Low expectations and superiority of other teams (as he admits).
<b>RELEVANT QUOTES</b>	Hamilton claims they are worse than the previous year, which was still tough.
<b>MAIN TOPICS</b>	Awareness of decline and subsequent frustration. Lack of present and future competitiveness.
<b>INTERPRETATION</b>	The episode could show the culmination of the (emotional) rift between Hamilton and <i>Mercedes</i> . Although the whole team is to blame, Hamilton's performance also suffers. He seems to feel that he may never win his eighth title.

Table 3. Synthesis of the analysis of episode 6x01 of *Formula 1: Drive to survive*.

Episode 6x04 – Leap of Faith	
<b>CONTENT</b>	Doubts about his contract and reflections on his future. Frustration with the team for not listening to his requests regarding the changes to the car. Confrontation with Alonso and career choices. Signing the two-year contract with <i>Mercedes</i> (by an act of faith).
<b>RELEVANT QUOTES</b>	Hamilton admits he does not remember his last victory. Hamilton: "I think we had two difficult years. My goal was to come back to the top and win the championship, but we got into the car in 2023 and it's a horror film". Danica Patrick (former driver): "Clearly time is passing. Lewis is getting older. How many seasons will he have ahead of him?".

<b>MAIN TOPICS</b>	Passing of time. Possibility that his career may come to an end. Lack of competitiveness.
<b>INTERPRETATION</b>	Hamilton is portrayed as a character suspended between past glory (winning images) and a difficult present. Signing the renewal with <i>Mercedes</i> appears more like a gesture of loyalty than an absolute confidence in his future.

Table 4. Synthesis of the analysis of episode 6x04 of Formula 1: Drive to survive.

Episode 7x01 – *Business as Usual*

<b>CONTENT</b>	The announcement of his signing for <i>Ferrari</i> comes as a shock. Collective reactions of drivers and press to Hamilton's announcement at <i>Ferrari</i> . Toto Wolff appears moved and touched when talking about Hamilton.
<b>RELEVANT QUOTES</b>	Will Buxton (journalist): "It's a tsunami". Toto Wolff: "I can't imagine you in a red suit". Hamilton: "It's surreal, moving (to leave)". Another journalist: "He will end his career in red".
<b>MAIN TOPICS</b>	End of an era. (Gradual) transition. Renegotiation of the symbolic capital.
<b>INTERPRETATION</b>	The episode builds a rite of passage around Hamilton: the driver does not immediately leave the scene at <i>Mercedes</i> , but is still there. This aspect seems to accompany his transition. His farewell, however, comes as a shock. His arrival at <i>Ferrari</i> could lead to his eighth title (and perhaps the end of his career?).

Table 5. Synthesis of the analysis of episode 6x04 of Formula 1: Drive to survive.

Episode 7x03 – *Looking out for number one*

<b>CONTENT</b>	The announcement of his arrival at <i>Ferrari</i> contrasts with a previous statement that he would remain with <i>Mercedes</i> forever. An ad hoc editing is carried out. Remembrance and recollection: past successes with <i>Mercedes</i> . Reactions of Toto and Susie Wolff. Reflections on Russell as a symbolic successor. Transition to the new generation (Kimi Antonelli). Hamilton's victory at Silverstone.
<b>RELEVANT QUOTES</b>	Claire Williams (former Williams team principal): "How do you replace Lewis Hamilton? It's almost impossible". Toto Wolff: "Everyone is in Lewis's shadow" (referring to Russell's role).
<b>MAIN TOPICS</b>	Symbolic end of a cycle. Memories, remembrance, and farewell. Generational transition. Leadership issue.
<b>INTERPRETATION</b>	The episode shows the contradiction between Hamilton's willingness to stay and his actual farewell: Hamilton is portrayed as someone who is surprised by his own choice, but also as the one who closes a circle. The victory at Silverstone, at home, is the perfect closure. The first signs of transition are generational (with images of Russell and especially the very young Antonelli).

Table 6. Synthesis of the analysis of episode 6x04 of Formula 1: Drive to Survive.



The tale of Hamilton's technical crisis and disappointment (expressed in team radios and dialogues with Toto Wolff) coincides with the driver's loss of agency, as he finds himself powerless in the face of an uncompetitive single-seater and strategic choices that did not involve him. The car's decline symbolizes Hamilton's emotional disinvestment from *Mercedes* (6x01, Tab. 3). This process is also symbolically recounted in episode 6x04 (Tab. 4), where the signing of the new contract is read as an *act of faith* towards the team, more than as a real expectation of success: the rhetoric of the end begins to creep in here with greater clarity, as can be seen in the words of former driver Danica Patrick, who explicitly introduces the issue of the passage of time and biological limits. The transition to *Ferrari*, the focus of the following season's episodes (7x01 and 7x03, Tab. 5 and Tab. 6), becomes the dominant theme. The narrative of *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* amplifies the impact of the announcement of his switch to "la Rossa" (the Red), likening it to a "tsunami" – to use the words of journalist Will Buxton, that comments this episode – that sweeps through the paddock (primarily *Mercedes* and later the other teams and drivers) and is visually shown with a leaden sky and rain in England, in the *Mercedes* headquarters, on the day when Toto Wolff has the arduous task of informing the team of Hamilton's decision. This is not just a transfer to another team: it is a time of caesura, represented as a threshold between two moments in Hamilton's sporting and public biography. Following the periods of crisis experienced by *Mercedes* in recent years and a signing made as an act of faith rather than absolute confidence in his success, the transfer to *Ferrari* is not only a new step in his sporting career. Still, it can be read as a strategic act to relaunch his celebrity capital, as his public image remains closely linked to sporting performance. The passing of the baton to George Russell and the very young Kimi Antonelli contributes to constructing a broader narrative of the passage, posing as a moment of generational transition. The dominant theme, towering above the others, is thus the passage, perceptible in a confrontation between remembrance and the future. The construction of the sequences reinforces this idea: we can in fact notice an alternation between scenes that trace past victories and difficulties encountered at *Mercedes*, together with the uncertainty linked to the future, in a visual and conceptual juxtaposition that seems to trace the very concept of glory renegotiation. From this point of view, Hamilton's transfer to *Ferrari* is represented as a potential new life, which could either lead him to achieve the coveted eighth title and secure him a place on the podium's highest step or mark the end of an era. The introduction of emotive and emotional statements by Hamilton and Toto Wolff, the symbolic images of the podium at Silverstone, considered Hamilton's *home*, and the debut of the young Antonelli create a frame that alludes not only to a farewell, but to a true generational change.

## Discussion

The media products considered in the analysis enable us to reflect on sports celebrities at the end of and after their careers, and particularly during a transitional phase that may lead

to the end of their competitive careers. At this point, we can return to the research questions and give answers.

*RQ1: How is the “celebrity capital life cycle” managed during a transition phase?*

Sports celebrities attempt to maintain and renegotiate their celebrity capital even during transitional phases. What emerges from our analysis is the liminality of celebrity: Hamilton is not just a Formula One driver and not just a sports celebrity; he is already, in this phase, a post-sports or extra-sports figure, currently inhabiting a liminal place where performance and remembrance coexist, and where sports paths have already been renegotiated into different forms. It is not yet in the “has-been” phase or post-celebrity status (Deller, 2016; Carillat & Ilicic, 2019). The transition, therefore, may not only be about transitioning from competitive activity to retirement; it may also be about a broader redefinition of one’s visibility (Franssen, 2024) and celebrity capital. The end of a sports celebrity’s job cannot be understood as a punctual moment, but rather as a process (narrative and medial) constructed through hypotheses, anticipations, processes of signification, and symbols. The end-of-career may not necessarily coincide with a biographical event (the formal announcement). Still, it may result from a path, transitory and constructed through meanings spread across several media, which becomes readable and shareable by the public. Hamilton’s case is emblematic in this sense, although it presents an underlying ambivalence: the driver continues to compete at the highest level, signing contracts with top teams (*Scuderia Ferrari*) and showing himself still active and performing, even physically; he is, however, immersed in a narrative that already portrays him as a figure in a moment of passage – even symbolically in some cases – and as a character who has performed heroic deeds, but who, despite his uniqueness, must give way to the younger generations that are advancing. The endorsement agreements that Hamilton has already established with several brands, along with his involvement in the fashion industry, suggest the possibility of him expanding into related activities. Activism in social causes, on the other hand, indicates the possibility of converting his social involvement into a more significant social influence with commitments to advocacy activities. The strategic management of one’s image and the celebrity capital built up over the years through talent, dedication, achievements, and extra-sports activities can open up new professional or entrepreneurial opportunities in related or different fields. Digital and, specifically, social media allow one to further expand one’s celebrity capital by implementing narrative strategies to tell one’s story with positivity and optimism through self-branding activities, which are essential for celebrities (Polesana, 2023).

*RQ2: What are the main narratives related to a transition path that can lead to the end-of-career?*

Media narratives and representations play a crucial role in this path. They can significantly impact the transition from competitive and professional life to retirement and the image that

the audience constructs (Tinley, 2012). When narrating the end-of-career and the issue of ageism, legacy media reflect on the moments concerning the (glorious, memorable) past of the “aged” celebrity (Jerslev & Petersen, 2018). They aim to portray them as characters to be remembered by constantly re-presenting moments that primarily concern the “media life” (Jerslev & Petersen 2018, p. 158), i.e., that slice of life that has become a perfect media product. The transition to *Ferrari* can be a narrative dimension through which to read the moment experienced by Hamilton: on the one hand, the opportunity of sporting establishment, with the surpassing of the titles won by another sporting hero (Schumacher), on the other hand, the possibility of transforming his symbolic capital into new forms of capital, with the opening up to different activities. The press, television seriality, and self-narrative contribute – each with its modalities and languages – to recounting this transitional moment, celebrating past successes and anticipating his positioning in the post-competitive sphere (mentoring, fashion system, social activism). As emerged from the analysis of his Instagram profile, the driver has already shown himself to be active in several other contexts that could lead him to maintain or convert celebrity capital into different forms (Gunter, 2014). Hamilton is thus not only the subject of the narrative of the transition towards the end of his career, entrusted to the legacy media, but is himself the author of his public transition: in fact, he uses social media – specifically Instagram – to help trace the path towards a new positioning and renegotiate the different forms of celebrity capital.

## Conclusion

This research aimed to highlight certain aspects related to the end-of-career and to a transition step from athleticism to retirement. A study on the end-of-career should not limit itself to conceiving retirement as a terminal event. Still, it can become a research space to analyse the existing tensions between individual agencies and media institutions and construct new cultural and symbolic inheritance forms. The case of Lewis Hamilton can inspire further food for thought on analysing celebrity capital in transition phases, offering a privileged look at the self-branding processes of athletes in contemporary society. The approach adopted enables the detection of how the public image, at the moment preceding the end-of-career, is constructed and modulated over time through narratives that are also quite distinct from one another.

The transition is carefully crafted by the mainstream media, sometimes even in a provocative way. For example, in Hamilton’s case, after much praise, the press emphasizes how hard it is for him to adjust to his new environment at *Ferrari*, while the TV series makes references to the passing of time. His self-narrative on social media affirms continuity, vitality, and openness to new domains. This contrast exemplifies how athletes can reclaim control over their narrative, constructing an image of resilience and transformation rather than decline.

While Hamilton's case is notable due to his exceptional celebrity capital (Driessens, 2013) and his regime of visibility (Heinich, 2012; Franssen, 2024), as well as his positioning within Formula One, some dynamics may also extend to other athletes navigating similar transitions. The platformed self-presentation on Instagram emerges as a crucial point and space to preserve relevance, engage fan communities, and project future identities. Athletes from various sports are increasingly relying on this form of storytelling to remain embedded in public culture and open new paths beyond the sport.

Hamilton's example also invites broader reflection on how the notion of celebrity capital evolves during post-career transitions. In this scenario, visibility is not merely maintained, but re-signified through social engagement and strategic commodification activities. The capital of a sports celebrity thus becomes a resource to be managed, adapted, and redeployed across media and multiple fields. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of these mechanisms, offering analytical tools that can be fruitfully applied to other high-profile careers in transformation.

## Biographical Note

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> By popularization, we mean accessibility to a diverse audience that is not necessarily expert or niche.

<sup>2</sup> Although the analysis of the Italian press is not systematized and the articles selected are not representative, it was decided to proceed in this way and thus select only a few, by means of keyword research, in order to contextualise Hamilton's public image at this transitional moment and obtain some food for thought regarding his transfer to *Ferrari*.