

Beckham. The rise and fall of celebrity in the Netflix docu-series^{*}

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In the mid-1990s, young David Beckham was already a football star thanks to his performances on the pitch. He quickly became a true celebrity, a status he “achieved” (Rojek, 2001; Ricci 2013), thanks to the public recognition he gained for his sporting abilities. In a short time, Beckham's fame transcended the boundaries of sport to influence other areas, such as fashion and entertainment, connoting the footballer as famous by “attribution”: his constant presence in the media, his marriage to Victoria Adams and the popularity he gradually gained from the public only served to increase his fame. His ageing, his retirement from football in 2013, and the difficulties he has experienced over the years, both professionally and personally, are all part of the narrative fabric of the docu-series *Beckham* (Netflix, 2023). The title of the television product features only the athlete's surname, condensing into a single word the reference to a person-character, to “Golden Balls” on and off the pitch, to the personification of a real brand (Edwards, 2011). David Beckham thus appears as the protagonist of a story that moves along multiple perspectives. Through multiple angles – and interventions – that call into question his media and public image (including archive footage), together with his private image (through interviews and actual confessions made by members of his inner circle), and using a sort of truth-telling narrative, the football champion is presented on screen as a complex narrative character (Mittell, 2015). The articulation between “front region” and “back region” (Goffman, 1959) works on a directorial level as a dynamic capable of reinforcing the celebrity device, around which the entire narrative revolves (Mascio, 2023). Through this analysis, we will try to understand the turning points in the docu-series that mark the highlights of the different phases of Beckham's fluid and changing celebrity, together with his “spreadable” capacity for dissemination (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). The docu-series presents a series of innovative interventions in telling the rise, fall and consolidation of celebrity. The possibility of structuring the narrative using the typical structure of fiction, together with the use of archive footage - as is the case in many docu-series - allows for the elicitation and revival of “authentic” emotions in the various subjects interviewed, starting with Beckham himself. All this contributes to defining the former athlete's celebrity status, which also reverberates on his entire family, consequently encouraging the formation of that form of second-level celebrity that Rojek (2001) defines as “ascribed”.

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Introduction

Released in early October 2023, the docu-series *Beckham*¹, produced and distributed by Netflix and directed by Oscar winner Fisher Stevens, quickly became a global hit. Actually, to tell the truth, it was already a hit before it was released on the platform: social media, newspapers and sports, fashion and entertainment magazines had reported on it a few months earlier, anticipating and speculating on certain aspects of the storyline. David Beckham is back on magazine covers and online posts, reviving – as if it were ever necessary – his celebrity status, capable of crossing the threshold of television series. The arrival of the docu-series on screen was hailed by the media with various descriptions of the footballer: an icon², a character capable not only of crossing multiple stages (football pitches, fashion catwalks, but also farmland and chicken farms), but of doing so while maintaining the same style when taking a penalty kick as when in front of a fashion photographer's lens.

But why did David Beckham become famous worldwide? What kind of celebrity does he embody? How did he go from football stadiums to television series?

These are some of the questions that have guided the analysis we are about to present in the following pages, which considers the Beckham phenomenon as a case of innovative celebrity, capable of relating to multiple fields, and succeeding in each of them. It is a form of capitalisation of celebrity value that encompasses the footballer's public image, but also – and perhaps above all – his private one.

To investigate these moments, we analysed the television product *Beckham*, taking into account its narrative structure, based on the phases and functions described by Propp (1966): initial situation – breaking of the equilibrium (functions 1 to 9) – hero's journey (functions 10 to 18) – restoration of the equilibrium (functions 19 to 31). Following this pattern, the rise – and the critical moments – that accompanied the Beckham-hero are shown on screen, ultimately establishing him as a *mythical* celebrity.

The docu-series is also innovative in the way the story is told and for the directorial choices made, giving the audience an overview of the celebrity status, of its dynamic and complex nature: accessible but volatile, positive or negative, rewarding but also burdensome, or anchored, in Beckham's case, to the representation of a hegemonic yet innovative masculinity, capable of determining solid and inheritable social capital.

The narrative structure identified by Propp emerged as the most widely used tool in *Beckham*'s study to understand the complexity of the text (Mittell, 2015); the rise, fall and rebirth of celebrity; the different storylines and the many levels of accessibility intended for the audience (ranging from football fans to serial lovers). The various aspects were addressed by drawing on theoretical frameworks from celebrity culture, narratology, and media studies. The methodological perspective adopted was that of text analysis, following a socio-media approach.

Beckham, the docu-series

Preceded by articles in various newspapers, the docu-series *Beckham* was released on Netflix on 4 October 2023. It was an instant hit, with the media continuing to devote considerable space and coverage to the footballer in the days following its release, looking back at events from his past and analysing key moments in his life. The docu-series' triumph was subsequently confirmed at the 2024 Emmys, where *Beckham* received five nominations and won the award for Best Documentary. But it was on social media that the television show sparked intense UGC (user-generated content), leading to what has even been labelled the “*Beckham* effect”. In its first week of distribution, the docu-series achieved 44% engagement on total social media content related to Netflix products. Essentially, the *Beckham* effect is fully in line with the dynamics of “Convergence Culture” (Jenkins, 2006), representing an example of the collision between institutional production and promotion and the creation and dissemination of content by fan audiences. This hyper-creation of paratexts connected with the television text has led to such widespread public approval that, at a later stage, even *Beckham* memes have become commonplace.

But where does all this success come from?

Let's start by looking at the original cultural product, the docu-series, which consists of four episodes whose titles retrace the deeds of the Beckham-hero: *The Kick*, *Seeing Red*, *Golden Balls* and *What Makes David Run*. The first episode begins in the present day, showing Beckham, now almost fifty, tending to his beehives and honey production, on his estate in the English countryside. This is followed by images of the August 1996 match between Wimbledon FC and Manchester United, alternating with Beckham's mother's account of the match and her son's goal, a shot from the midfield, described by the press as “the goal of the century”, at the time.

The presence of his family is emphasised from the very first minutes of the pilot episode, highlighting the importance they have had – and seem to continue to have – in the champion's life. This provides viewers with important information to outline Beckham's identity, starting with his origins. It is a useful device that can help many viewers identify with the footballer's story. The main theme is that of humble origins and strong family ties: the story of a person from the working class, not the elite, a self-made man with no preferential access to privileged conditions. Along with his parents, Sir Alex Ferguson, whom he met at the age of 12, plays a very important role in Beckham's life, so much so that he is described by Beckham himself as a “father figure”. Another key figure is Gary Neville, his teammate at Manchester United since the very beginning.

His parents, his wife Victoria, Ferguson and Neville appear both in interviews conducted for the docu-series and in archive footage. The intertwining of past and present punctuates the entire docu-series and contributes significantly to reconstructing the most important stages of Beckham's sporting life. The whole story of the footballer's growth and evolution is accompanied by the narrative of his achievement of fame.

The four episodes highlight the most significant moments of the rise, the first fall, the new rise and the second fall, until the recovery and stabilisation of the Beckham-hero. As already mentioned, the main narrative arc draws on Propp's (1966) functions, thus providing the viewer with a familiar structure: from an "initial situation" (a harmonious middle-class family, excellent relations with Manchester United), there is a first *fracture* with the national team fans and with the whole of Great Britain (Beckham's expulsion from the 1998 World Cup). His family, teammates and Sir Ferguson rallied round to protect the footballer (acting as "helpers" or "agents"), who returned to public favour thanks to his exploits, or what we might call "hero's reactions", in Proppian terms. Significant in this regard is the cover dedicated to him by TimeOut magazine in the spring of 1999, entitled *The Resurrection*. However, the champion's evolution is not linear: there is a new moment of *fracture* involving a clash with Sir Ferguson and Beckham's subsequent departure from Manchester United (2003). This event, described in the docu-series as highly negative for David, is followed by a new rise of the hero: the footballer is transferred to Real Madrid (June 2003), a team made up of the best players in the world, definitively establishing Beckham as a football legend.

This journey shows the audience how David Beckham went from being a *person* to being a *character* – "a global phenomenon", as the trailer says – and the path and process he took to become a celebrity. In the footballer's case, he seems to have achieved double or even triple status: on and off the pitch, occupying a prestigious position in several fields.

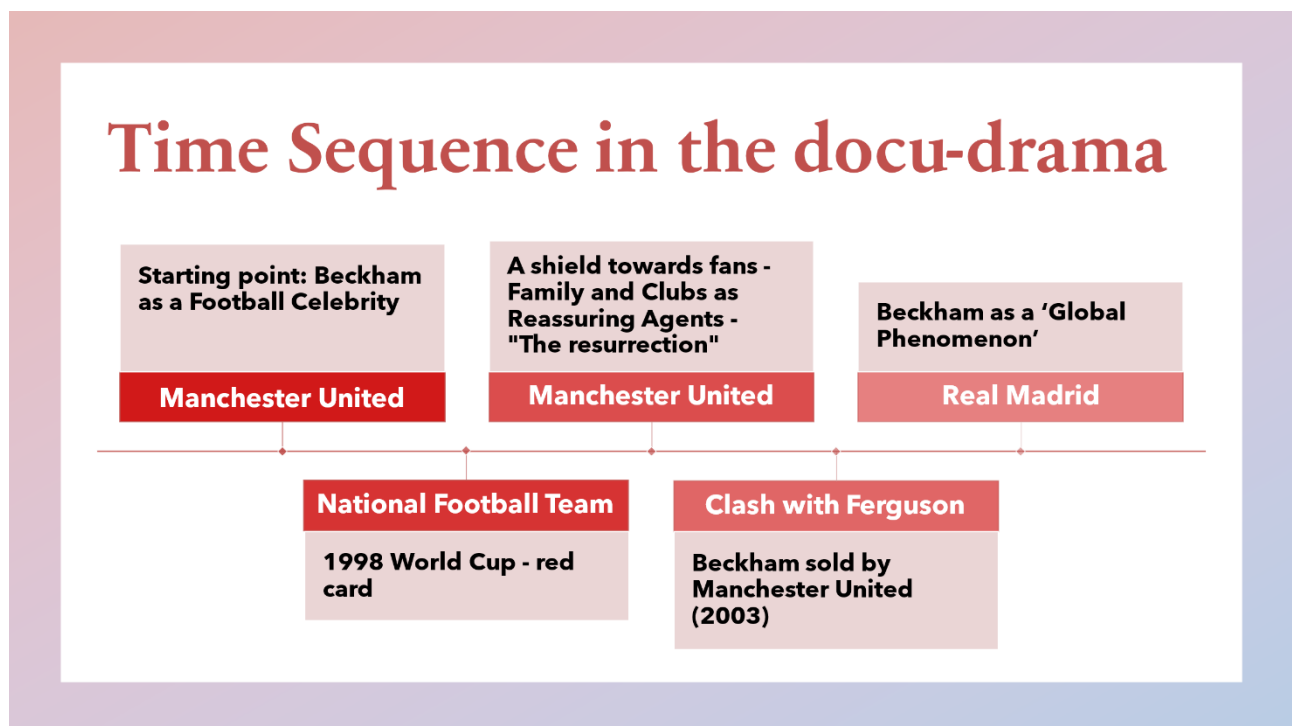


Figure 1. Time sequences in the docu-series Beckham

The development of the “authenticity effect”

In the docu-series, Beckham's life is presented on screen, starting from his childhood and continuing to the present day. The chronological journey is reconstructed according to a directorial strategy aimed at giving weight to specific events and constantly intertwined with excerpts from interviews, designed to produce a perspective capable of articulating the past on the basis of the present, of contemporaneity. This pattern, typical of many serial narratives, emphasises aspects related to the development of Beckham's fame and celebrity, taking into account what his fans already know, thus activating a historical and collective memory linked to the footballer and the public figure he has gradually become.

All this follows the rhythm that characterises the docu-fiction genre, which is based on an intertextual relationship between two forms that are usually kept separate in other products: fiction and documentary. As Alessandro Tartaglia Polcini states, “docu-fiction offers an original form that, in a certain sense, challenges the audience to construct their own mental model of reality through the use of both documentary and dramatic codes (...) constantly negotiating between the documentary and drama genres” (2023, p. 56)³. In the case of *Beckham*, this negotiation is skilfully staged by using, on the one hand, a documentary-style narrative, rich in original audio-video fragments from the media archives of the period, which have dedicated several reports to the protagonist over the years. On the other hand, the docu-series employs a structure that is typical of fiction, or rather of fictional storytelling, with an almost fairy-tale flavour: the main character – David Beckham – as already mentioned, is treated narratively as a hero. And to become one, he must necessarily overcome a series of challenges.

The editing is based on a continuous and well-paced interplay between two time frames, creating a dual narrative: that of the images, interviews and reports from the past, which document David Beckham's evolution, and that of the present, which provides reflections on those moments by the co-protagonists, offering a different perspective on the events. The jumps back in time do not follow a strict chronological order, but are used to recreate the atmosphere of the context, guiding the viewer in understanding the footballer's achievements. The narrative structure also includes the stories of the supporting characters: family members, fellow athletes and people close to Beckham who have accompanied and supported him on his path to success.

One innovative feature of the docu-series is the “authenticity effect” achieved with the interviewees, including Beckham himself. Close-ups of the various interviewees (Beckham, his parents, teammates, etc.) appear on screen, all focused on watching key moments in the footballer's career. We don't see the whole scene: it's not possible to watch the interviewee and the archive footage at the same time. The camera focuses on the face of the person being interviewed, capturing the intensity of their gaze and the emotions that move their facial muscles. The effect seems to be to intrigue viewers and at the same time stir their emotions, portraying faces that show “authentic” expressions.



Figure 2. Diego Simeone while watching the 1998 World Cup match (minute 1:02, episode 1)

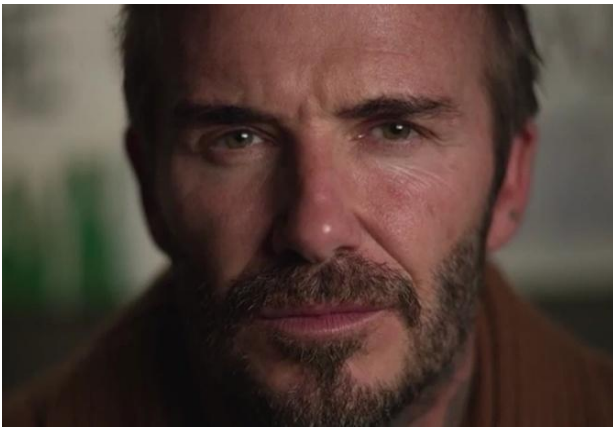


Figure 3. David Beckham while watching the same match (1998 World Cup) (minutes 1:02-1:05, episode 1)

Later, the same images are shown to the audience (a corner kick, a free kick, a foul, etc.), becoming an integral part of the docu-fiction narrative. This also engages viewers who are not football fans: the story is about the deeds of a hero and is told using a tense and emotional tone (joy, anger, amazement, etc.), highlighting his challenges and weaknesses, showing the satisfaction but also the difficulties and pain of many moments. The story is accompanied by comments from those who experienced those moments with him.

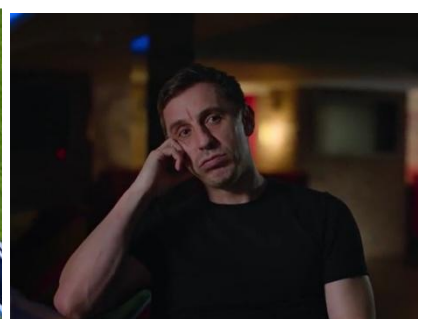


Figure 4, 5, 6. David Beckham is sent off during the match against Argentina (1998 World Cup). Edited footage from archive material and interview with Gary Neville (minutes 1:03 - 1:05, episode 1).

The use of techniques that are typical of docu-series fosters appreciation of the *Beckham* product among different audiences, even those who are not football experts. The moments that shape and debunk Beckham's celebrity become part of a complex narrative, where the football pitch is the setting for an exciting story, and the many shots of corner kicks, passes, and interactions between teammates help even non-experts understand the rules and dynamics of the sport. The dramatic framework used to narrate the various events that characterised the development and desecration of Beckham's celebrity also brings the mainstream audience closer to an understanding of the rules and dynamics of football, as well as the reasons why Beckham became so important.

The fame: from David, to *Beckham*

As we saw above, the first few minutes of the docu-series lay the foundations for observing the footballer in his family context: his closest relatives, together with the people who have been closest to him since the very beginning. It is a story that starts from an initial situation based on an equilibrium and a convergence of goals shared by several people, and therefore a series of shared narrative programmes: an English working-class family that support and guide their son towards a football career.

However, in order to follow his dream, David is forced to leave his home and become part of a new reality, with new points of reference: Manchester United and, above all, coach Ferguson, who immediately recognises the boy's talent. Essentially, referring once again to Propp's functions, we can say that, in order to grow, the hero is forced to leave his environment to face the trials that are necessary to consolidate his role.

Beckham began to stand out for his talent in 1994, when he scored his first goal for Manchester United, but it was the 1996–1997 season that established him as an undisputed football star. However, his growth was not limited to his performance on the pitch. Always well-groomed and image-conscious, Beckham stood out from other footballers of the time, breaking the boundaries of sports fandom to carve out a prominent position in fandom *tout-court*. He attracted so much media attention that he managed to enter the magic circle of famous people in Manchester at the time, and even subvert it in his favour, becoming more famous (and loved) than many of the stars of the music scene of the moment (Oasis, Stone Roses, or Happy Mondays). 1997 was also the year Beckham was named Player of the Year, began dating Victoria Adams – the “posh” member of the Spice Girls, one of the most important bands of the time – and started collaborating with various brands, turning himself into a brand.

Beckham therefore achieves full celebrity status (Rojek, 2001), which is initially recognised for his abilities on the sports field, before expanding into other important areas that have brought him great visibility. As we will see in the following pages, celebrity is in fact both a form of media legitimisation and a form of capitalist accumulation, that is used and exploited on multiple levels and in multiple contexts.

Fame and celebrity capital

Talking about celebrity means venturing into slippery and treacherous territory, especially when the concept is approached from a scientific perspective. Celebrities have always occupied the pages of tabloids and gossip programmes. Today, much of the space on social media is dedicated to them, because they intrigue and interest the public due to their prominence in the public eye, and the desire to know about their private lives. The relationship that the audience has with celebrities is in fact a parasocial one, and for this reason, their involvement often extends to their personal lives (cf. Bifulco, 2018).

Precisely because of their high socio-communicative – and therefore economic – value, celebrities have been a subject of discussion and study for some time. Celebrities, in fact, “take on the role of a prism reflecting their own present” (Carrieri, 2023, p. 110)⁴: they do not merely express individuality, which is more or less singular and unique compared to the masses, but incorporate layers of meaning about social transformations. Celebrity, says Luca Bifulco, “can be understood as a structured social phenomenon and as a particular institutionalised aspect of society” (2018, p. 31)⁵.

Although the status of celebrity has been a subject of observation and study for quite some time, it has only recently become central to media studies. Research and publications in recent years have led to widespread recognition of the importance of the values attributed to the concept, creating a map of meanings rather than a single, rigid definition⁶. As Olivier Driessens (2023) argues, celebrity is in fact perceived more as a process than as a static and lasting position, a condition that can change over time. In this dynamic, the media play a central role: they can increase the fame of individuals through the amount of space and attention they devote to them. Conversely, they can diminish interest in certain celebrities, causing a reversal in their notoriety and therefore their value. Such value is not only symbolic: celebrities acquire relevance in areas that may be different from those that made them famous. Consider, for example, Charlize Theron, first a model and then an actress, Gwyneth Paltrow, increasingly focused on her Goop brand, Blake Lively, who has launched a new range of beverages, and Adrian Grenier, founder of the environmental media studio SHFT.

This “migration” of celebrities, their power to change and conquer spaces that are “other”, can be analysed and understood using the concept of “celebrity capital” developed by Driessens based on a reinterpretation of the ideas of various authors (such as van Krieken, 2012, Hunter, Burgers & Davidsson 2009, Cronin & Shaw, 2002), while taking into account the theoretical framework developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). According to this view, celebrity capital is primarily an accumulation of attention from the media and the public (Boorstin, 1992), and therefore a form of capital that produces both a kind of distance-distinction from the masses and an increase in (good) reputation in those who possess it. Celebrity is, essentially, a condition that emerges from the relationship between a charismatic person and their followers, calling into play the emotional bond that characterises this relationship.

In the docu-series *Beckham*, as we have seen, 1997 represents a turning point, during which David's fame increased significantly thanks to his football performances and his relationship with Victoria Adams, strengthening but also articulating the emotional bond with his fans, supported by the attention he received from the media. Beckham should in fact be seen as a double celebrity: David and Victoria, who were engaged at the time, produced a joint fortune that included the sum of their fame. This form of union was capable of becoming a real asset based on a single "Beckham" brand that encompassed both forms of fame.

David also stands as a symbol of a new model of metrosexual masculinity, based on the idea that "successful men can be caring, fashion conscious, family-centred, gay icons" (Edwards, 2011, p. 226). Beckham has thus managed to condense a diverse set of roles into himself: sportsman, family man and fashion icon, all within a celebrity framework. Tim Edwards sums it up: "The *David Beckham* phenomenon is therefore primarily made up of four elements: sport, the family, sexuality and fashion" (p. 227), a celebrity who breaks the rules and establishes himself as a new socio-sporting model.

Beckham therefore represents the exact opposite of what Sir Ferguson had planned for him. In the documentary series, Ferguson said of the footballer, "(...) becoming a celebrity, it was different from what I wanted".⁷ This moment in the interview is a key point in the episode, and perhaps in the entire docu-series, as it highlights the different perspectives of the characters in the story – and therefore the different narrative agendas – which gradually become more and more distinct.

At the end of the 1990s, Beckham continued to focus on football, while keeping open a number of other potential activities that made him increasingly famous among a mainstream audience, far from the stadiums. Sir Ferguson, on the other hand, maintained a team-oriented vision, considering everything that happened outside the pitch as a distracting and diminishing factor.

Essentially, the rise to a form of celebrity that goes beyond sporting characterisation inevitably leads to a revolution in the relationship between the midfielder and his coach: initially united by the same goal, from this period onwards they embark on separate paths that will lead to a definitive split.

The fall: negative celebrity and degradation rituals

The 1998 World Cup and the crisis with Ferguson in 2003, which culminated in Beckham's transfer to Real Madrid, mark the most difficult moments of his career and are shown on screen following a very different narrative structure.

Until the 1998 World Cup, Beckham's constant presence in the sports media and magazines conveyed a positive image of the champion. On 30 June of that year, during the England-Argentina match, Beckham fouled Simeone and was punished by the referee with a red card. England lost the match and was eliminated from the World Cup. Coach Glenn Hoddle, in a television interview, blamed Beckham's behaviour (and subsequent expulsion)

for the defeat. The event, depicted in the second episode of the docu-drama entitled *Seeing Red*, was a moment of intense tension between Beckham, his fans, and the British public in general. It marked the beginning of a process of real degradation for the footballer, with significant consequences for his reputation. The media questioned his abilities on the pitch and used irony and sarcasm to highlight his behaviour in his private life.⁸

While it is true that celebrity is a deeply relational system capable of establishing and legitimising a specific set of values, it is also true that this system can change direction and activate other frames of meaning. In Beckham's case, the docu-series shows a series of actions, gestures, and behaviours directed against the footballer that undermined, at least for a period, his sporting performance, his psychological health, and the value of his celebrity capital.

The football pitch has always functioned as a symbolic arena: the applause, the chants and the countless displays of affection that greeted the champion before the famous match against Argentina constantly confirmed his status and appreciation. After that match, the stadium became a hostile place for Beckham: inside, he was regularly subjected to forms of discrediting and humiliation. Instead of being greeted with warmth, his entrance is marked each time by expressions of indignation from the fans, according to the typical codes of football: shouting, whistling, banners, etc. Basically, Beckham was accused of a crime that went beyond a foul and a red card: all the irritation and anger that accompanied the national team's exit from the World Cup was directed at him. The footballer thus became the negative symbol of defeat, a sort of sacrificial victim, with all that that entailed.

In addition to the media, it is therefore the public that expresses clear dissent against Beckham, giving rise to a sort of new ritual formula that accompanies his entrance onto the pitch during all matches, a ceremony that marks the transition from positive celebrity status to "status degradation" (Garfinkel, 1956). As Harold Garfinkel states:

The work of the denunciation effects the recasting of the objective character of the perceived other: The other person becomes in the eyes of his condemners literally a different and new person. It is not that the new attributes are added to the old "nucleus". He is not changed, he is reconstituted. (...) Through the interpretive work that respects this rule, the denounced person becomes in the eyes of the witnesses a different person. (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 421-422).

The social use of this re-labelling of Beckham by the English public was a direct consequence of the statements made by coach Hoddle after the defeat against Argentina. Beckham was viewed in a new light by fans, who reassessed his footballing and personal abilities (cf. Giglioli, Cavicchioli, Fele, 1997). This situation becomes a moral and psychological burden for the footballer, to the extent that it seriously affects his performance on the pitch. For five months, Beckham fails to score a single goal and beats a retreat, although he continues to receive the unwavering support of his team.

The situation that arises is the exact opposite of the celebrity status he had enjoyed in previous years, earned through his performances on the pitch. The champion icon is thus cast aside, giving way to the image of a young, irresponsible, and immature player. The media and the public condemned Beckham without appeal, without giving him any chance

to defend himself. And, of course, because of this dynamic, the footballer's notoriety did not fade, as the media continued to devote space to him. Yet it was a negative notoriety that risked damaging him, as his public image appeared to be severely compromised.

The second crisis depicted in the docu-series corresponds to Beckham's transfer to Real Madrid. Although this move consolidated his status as a champion in the public eye, it caused considerable turmoil in his private life. Once again, following Propp's model, the hero is faced with a trial that this time also involves family dynamics. On the one hand, as highlighted in the early 2000s commercials for a well-known drink, Beckham is part of the football Olympus of the period, alongside Ronaldinho Gaúcho, Francesco Totti, Roberto Carlos, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Lionel Messi. On the other hand, on a personal level, these were the most difficult years for him, so much so that the media targeted the celebrity on issues of infidelity and gossip related to his marriage. In April 2004, the "scandal", as it was labelled by the media, was featured on several front pages, from *The Sun* to the *Daily Mirror*, the *News of the World* and *New Magazine*. Once again, some of the qualities that emerged in the development of Beckham's celebrity were called into question by various newspapers: the perfect man, both on and off the pitch, gave way to the portrayal of a person with many flaws, and as such he was captured and depicted in the tabloids.

What Makes David Run: from celebrity to myth?

As we have observed in the previous chapters, the media initially presented Beckham in a celebratory manner, in line with how new sports stars are typically welcomed, and then exploited his moments of difficulty in a spectacular way. The docu-series uses and capitalises on the narrative tension based on the development of celebrity, its crisis and its stabilisation. The chronological sequence used is based on the events that led to him achieving his status as a stadium star.

The importance of Beckham's undoubted sporting qualities, together with his aptitude for the role of fashion icon - and media personality in general - have led to the creation of a form of celebrity that differs, at least in part, from the classic model that was strongly oriented towards the sporting world. In this case, his football skills have merged with those typical of the entertainment world. Beckham is welcomed by his various audiences as an exceptional footballer for his achievements on the pitch, as well as a metrosexual man, the husband of Spice Posh, a symbol of elegance and beauty for his fame per se. From the "niche" of sport, he quickly moved on to mass approval: in a short time, David began to be celebrated even by those who had never followed football, presenting himself as a unique case. He is a character capable of focusing multiple levels of interest on himself, activating a sort of vortex of celebrity flows that makes him a personalised brand and, at the same time, a new model of masculinity.

In the latest episode of the docu-series, *What Makes David Run*, Beckham's trail of celebrity continues to expand, becoming "ascribed" and enveloping his children, who have it "from bloodline", just like the children of royal families (Rojek, 2001). On the other hand,

the Beckhams have been compared to the Windsors on several occasions: having entered Buckingham Palace several times to attend important events, such as the weddings of William and Harry, they have reaffirmed their social importance despite not having any noble titles. Their wedding was labelled by the media as a “Royal Wedding” (Whannel, 2002, p. 207), creating a sort of “vortex effect” between noble people and, more simply, famous people.⁹ This is yet another aspect, if ever there needed to be one, that comes into play in defining the complex form of celebrity that surrounds Beckham, a celebrity who is now well established and no longer subject to fluctuations linked to his performance on the pitch.¹⁰

Once again, the question arises: what is the nature of this type of celebrity?

Looking back over the various stages of the docu-series, it is clear that the celebrity capital of the champion appears almost immediately to be of a mixed nature: it is linked to sporting fame, but also – and perhaps above all – to having become a style icon, alongside another famous personality (Victoria Adams). His way of presenting himself in public was immediately characterised by a dissonance with the standards of footballers in the 1990s: David distanced himself from the stereotype of canonical masculinity typical of sportsmen, proposing his own model of masculinity, unique, innovative, and in some ways “feminised”. This was a significant factor that helped to focus attention on Beckham, both from the media and from audiences with little interest in football. As Sarah Gee writes:

(...) he is positioned as a prime candidate for representing alternative forms of masculinity. (...) While previous research may refer to these types of counter-hegemonic representations as constraints, here, I suggest that they can also be seen as opportunities; that is, Beckham is a liberator of such avant-garde masculinities.” (Gee, 2014, p. 924 – 925).

His ability to pioneer a new model of masculinity has undoubtedly had a profound effect on audiences, elevating his status beyond that of a mere football star. The image of Beckham portrayed by the media – and consumed by audiences – condenses dominant male stereotypes typical of sports champions, together with domestic versions of the champion: sentimental, affectionate and paternal. Beckham therefore appears as a character endowed with a “narrative identity” (Spaziante, 2016). Indeed, as Edwards (2011) states, he embodies a series of identities, some of which are contradictory: a working-class, sporting masculinity, a feminised consumption of fashion and self-care, an appeal to gay iconography, all balanced by being an attentive husband and father. And it is precisely this ability to combine such characteristics that makes Beckham a multi-faceted celebrity, capable of appealing to male and female audiences with very different tastes.¹¹

The complexity of the Beckham figure is also reflected in the various photographs dedicated to him, many of which, in addition to becoming famous at the time of their publication, have since become iconic images, capable of evoking profound meanings, partly connected with the realm of myth. One example is the aforementioned cover of TimeOut magazine from 31 March to 7 April 1999, entitled *The Resurrection of David Beckham*. The title and pose go beyond the role of footballer and fashion icon. The photo represents a sort of mythologisation of the character: a posture that refers to the religious

discourse also highlighted by a series of rosaries that David wears around his neck, worn like necklaces, together with white trousers and a shirt made of light fabric, reminiscent of purity and, above all, ultra-humanity. A resurrection that refers to the much better known religious event. An image inspired by that event, superimposing David onto an otherworldly entity. Garry Whannel writes:

TV Times (22–28 May 1999) later used a similar picture from the same photo shoot, and ran a shortened version of the same article. Their caption read 'David Beckham from sinner to saint: Red Hot and Spicy'. Here then, was a perfect Jesus for the nineties – good looking, stylish, talented, and engaged to a successful female pop singer – a Christ of Consumption. (Whannel, 2002, p. 206).

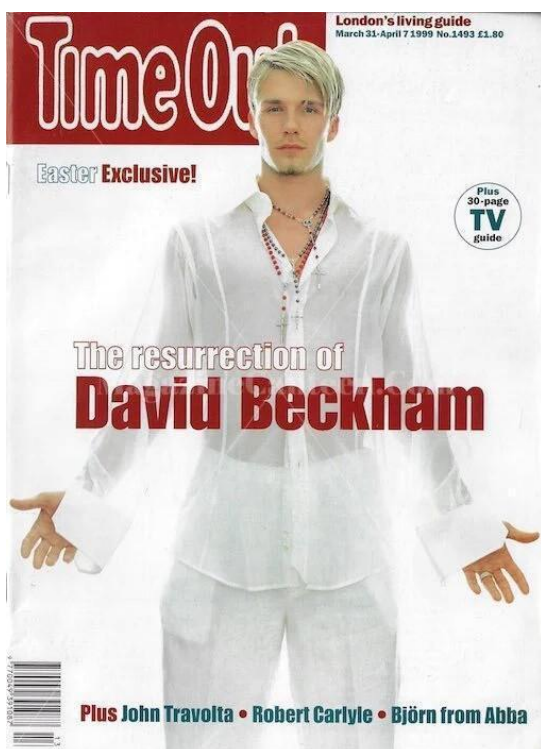


Figure 6. David Beckham, *TimeOut* March 31 – April 7 1999, “The Resurrection”

If it is true, as Bronislaw Malinowski claims, that myth “is not merely a story told but a *reality lived*” (Malinowski 1948, p. 78), then it is capable of setting in motion a sort of mixture between reality and imagination. We can therefore consider Beckham as a unique case of a celebrity who aspires to become a myth, but one of “low intensity”, conveyed “by the culture industry and the market, (...) as an object of personal choice, or rather, primarily of consumption. (...)” (Ortoleva, 2019, p.7)¹². A myth that is therefore nourished by a story set in our own time and in our own world, whose protagonist – as the docu-series shows – is a person not so different from us, with humble origins, who has managed to embark on a daring journey of transformation.

To achieve complete fame, all that was missing, really, was its celebration in serial form. And, as Peppino Ortoleva writes: “The ‘moderate’ myths of fiction (...) are the most universally accepted. They are so because the industrial nature of their dissemination means that they exclude no one, but rather aim at the widest possible audience” (2019, p. 7).¹³

Conclusions

The mass media are fundamental tools in creating, maintaining, and even destroying celebrity status. The analysis of the Beckham case highlights these dynamics, both during the rise and the fall of his celebrity reputation. Throughout the various stages of his career, the footballer has always been given space in the newspapers, until the advent of social media, where he seems (apparently) to have autonomous control over his personal profiles. On the whole, even in the most difficult moments, Beckham has maintained his public visibility. The persistence of this visibility has contributed substantially to the creation of Beckham's celebrity and myth, as clearly emerged in the analysis.

The celebrity *dispositif* also involves a deeply relational system in which the public plays an important role. It is clear that this is a media-based relationship: the relationship between the champion and the audience is governed by typical media mechanisms. This is why Beckham's constant presence on screens and in tabloids has not only made it possible for this relationship to consolidate, but has also legitimised it. Suffice it to say that the most prestigious Italian encyclopaedia, Treccani, now dedicates several entries to Beckham, listing him among the “new stars”.¹⁴

While the “top-down” mechanism typical of traditional media created Beckham's celebrity status, directing it towards the mass audience, it is also true that Beckham's fans have undoubtedly become more active and numerous, thanks to the dynamics typical of participatory culture. In early 2025, the champion's Instagram profile had 87.9 million followers, his Facebook profile had 58 million, his X profile had 55.9K and his TikTok profile had 7.2 million. This dynamism fully contributes to the footballer's status, which finds further confirmation in the serial product.

On social media, Beckham dedicated a few posts to the docu-series, in a sort of dialogue with Netflix profiles, thus informing those followers who were not yet aware of it. Along with the product, the footballer also promoted his family, expanding and amplifying the reach of celebrity, of “Beckhamness” (Edwards, 2011), which has actually been invading the media arena for some years now: several covers of Vogue and I-D have been dedicated to the young Brooklyn, Romeo and Cruz as new models of “conspicuous heritage”.

But it was mainly the audience who creatively reposted some moments from the docu-series on their profiles, creating new points of view and new interpretations through remakes. However, it was mainly the transformation into memes that gave *Beckham* further recognition. Among the many circulating online, one in particular caught the attention of

users and corporations: the one in which Victoria-Posh declares that she comes from the working class. Due to pressure from her husband, she is then forced to admit that during high school she was driven to school by her father in a Rolls Royce¹⁵. The video clip in which this fragment is taken immediately went viral, commented on in ironic and sarcastic ways. The content quickly became “spreadable” and suitable for a wide range of uses, so much so that it was used by David and Victoria themselves for a commercial for Uber Eats and presented during the Super Bowl (2024). Victoria also included a white T-shirt with the words “My dad had a Rolls Royce” among the products for sale on her e-commerce site. This is yet another example of how the Beckhams' celebrity status, attested to, confirmed and validated in the docu-series, is capable of transcending the boundaries of television to invade other territories and reinforce its value.

Biography

Antonella Mascio is Associate Professor in Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes at the University of Bologna, for the Department of Political and Social Sciences. In recent years, her research has focused primarily on online social relations and the interaction between television series and audiences, using a sociological and media perspective that includes research on fandom, fashion and celebrity culture, and studies on nostalgia. She collaborates with Henry Jenkins on the *Pop Junctions* project (<http://henryjenkins.org/>). Her latest publications include: *Serie di Moda* (FrancoAngeli, 2023); ‘Streaming Audiences: Deconstruction of Fashion Gender Stereotypes Through the Imitation of TV Series Outfits’ (in *The Routledge Companion to Media Audiences*, Routledge, 2024); ‘Media Convergence, Fashion and TV Series’ (in *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, Routledge, 2021); ‘Sponsored Things: Audiences and the Commodification of the Past in *Stranger Things*’ (in *Investigating Stranger Things Upside Down in the World of Mainstream Cult Entertainment*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

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Notes

¹ From now on, '*Beckham*' refers to the title of the TV series, while 'Beckham' refers to the footballer.

² From the Sky Tg24 website: "Beckham, trailer della docuserie che parla non 'solo' di un calciatore ma di un'icona" ("Beckham, the trailer for the docu-series that is not 'just' about a footballer but about an icon") (<https://tg24.sky.it/spettacolo/serie-tv/2023/09/22/beckham-serie-tv>); from Il cinematografo: "Beckham. L'uomo, il calciatore e l'icona globale in un'avvincente miniserie Netflix diretta dal Premio Oscar Fisher Stevens" ("Beckham. The man, the footballer and the global icon in a gripping Netflix miniseries directed by Oscar winner Fisher Stevens") (<https://www.cinematografo.it/recensioni/beckham-nbepsc8a>)

³ "Le docu-fiction offrono una forma originale che in un certo senso sfida l'audience a costruirsi un suo modello mentale del reale attraverso l'uso di codici sia documentaristici che drammatici (...) in continua negoziazione tra la colonna del documentario e quella del drama" (Tartaglia Polcini, 2023, p. 56)

⁴ "assumono il ruolo di un prisma riflettente il proprio presente" (Carrieri, 2023, p. 110).

⁵ "può essere intesa come un fenomeno sociale strutturato e come un particolare aspetto istituzionalizzato della società" (Bifulco, 2018, p. 31).

⁶ Among the many publications, we would like to mention the prestigious journal *Celebrity Studies* and the volume *A Companion to Celebrity*, edited by David Marshall and Sean Redmond (2016).

⁷ Minute 21:50, episode 1.

⁸ See the famous photo of him wearing a sarong (cover of *The Sun*, 4 June 1998, entitled *Beckham has got his Posh frock on*).

⁹ As Whannel states: "The event was proclaimed as 'the wedding the whole world had been waiting to see' (OK, 16 July 1999), and the hyperbole was justified by the intense attention paid to the event in the rest of the media. A cartoon in the *Evening Standard* (5 July 1999) showed God in an armchair saying 'I've postponed the end of the world until I've seen the Beckham wedding pictures'." (2002, p. 207).

¹⁰ The 2012–2013 season was Beckham's last.

¹¹ On 12 October 2023, following the release of the docu-series *Beckham* on Netflix, The Economist published an article entitled: *David Beckham's guide to celebrity. As a new series on Netflix shows, it takes more than just a pretty face* (<https://www.economist.com/culture/2023/10/12/david-beckhams-guide-to-celebrity>).

¹² "dall'industria culturale e dal mercato, (...) come oggetto di scelta personale, anzi in primo luogo di consumo. (...)" (Ortoleva, 2019, p.7).

¹³ "I miti 'moderati' della fiction (...) sono i più universalmente accolti. Lo sono perché proprio la natura industriale della loro diffusione fa sì che non escludano nessuno, anzi che mirino ai pubblici i più larghi possibile" (Ortoleva, 2019, p. 7).

¹⁴ <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/david-beckham/>; https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/david-beckham_%28Enciclopedia-dello-Sport%29/; [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/il-nuovo-divismo_\(XXI-Secolo\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/il-nuovo-divismo_(XXI-Secolo)/) (pages consulted on 21/04/2025).

¹⁵ Episode 1, minutes 26-27:16.