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Celebr-Age

Celebrity and Ageing in Media and Sports Contexts

A cura di

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When Stars Grow Old – Cultural and Media Processes of the Celebrity/Ageing Nexus: An Introduction to the Special Issue*

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Celebrities constitute a particularly relevant phenomenon in the media and sports contexts of contemporary society. As central figures in the cultural public sphere, they exemplify what John B. Thompson (1995) describes as mediated "quasi-interaction", where individuals form non-reciprocal relationships with distant personalities who appear familiar through repeated media exposure. They occupy public space through the emotions they arouse in an ever-widening public. Celebrities are not only media products but also emotional and symbolic figures who evoke affective investments from audiences (Marshall, 1997; Dyer, 1979). Their visibility enables para-social interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and contributes to the creation of a shared emotional experience across dispersed publics.

However, screen stars and sports stars are transformed into myths and heroes only when they embody collective values and symbols, whether on a local, national, or global level. As Richard Dyer (1979) argued, stars function as ideological texts that crystallize cultural contradictions and desires. In the case of sports stars, David Rowe (1995) emphasizes their

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role as national icons or global commodities, whose performances become vehicles for projecting broader social narratives such as heroism, discipline, and nationalism.

The media play a crucial role, both in telling celebrities' stories and in providing them with stages through which they can self-represent themselves and communicate directly with fans and audiences, especially in the digital age – we may consider the relevance of social media within these processes. Contemporary celebrity is inseparable from processes of mediatization (Hjavard, 2008), where media logic shapes public life. In the digital context, social platforms have enabled a new kind of presentational media self (Marshall, 2010), allowing celebrities to perform authenticity and manage their image continuously, while fans engage in participatory co-construction of fame (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Through their biographies and different modes of storytelling, celebrities accumulate celebrity capital, that is, the capital that has been accumulated through visibility on the media scene and that can be exchanged for other forms of capital (social, economic, cultural). This concept builds on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986), and has been adapted by Olivier Driessens (2013) as celebrity capital: a form of symbolic capital that is accumulated through media visibility and convertible into other resources. Celebrities can spend their celebrity capital – over the years and, therefore, also in the post-career – in other social spheres (politics, business, entertainment, etc.). Former athletes and actors often leverage their fame to reinvent themselves as media personalities, entrepreneurs, or political figures (Turner, 2004). Their trajectory illustrates the fluidity of celebrity status, which can persist beyond professional activity.

This special issue hosts contributions about celebrity and ageing, devoted as much to celebrities mainly from the audiovisual entertainment system (film, television, social media) as to sports stars. The intersection of celebrity and ageing has emerged as a critical area of inquiry within media, cultural, and gerontological studies. Ageing challenges traditional ideals of youth, beauty, and physical vitality that are central to celebrity culture, revealing deeper social anxieties about the body, time, and visibility. For screen celebrities, ageing disrupts their image that is often constructed around youthful allure and sexual attractiveness – especially for women. As Chris Holmlund (2005) argues, older female stars are often rendered invisible or cast into reductive roles (e.g., the "matriarch"), reflecting broader patterns of gendered ageism in the media. Conversely, older male stars (e.g., Clint Eastwood, George Clooney) may retain or even gain cultural capital, reinforcing the double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1972). Stars can use ageing to craft more complex public personas, embracing maturity, legacy, or decline as part of their brand. This process is often managed through controlled media performances, including interviews, memoirs, and social media narratives that emphasize authenticity or resilience. In the world of sports celebrities, ageing is especially pronounced due to the early peak and decline of athletic performance. Ageing athletes face retirement dilemmas, body deterioration, and shifting public roles – from hero to commentator, coach, or brand ambassador. This transition reveals how celebrity in sport is closely tied to physical excellence, and how post-retirement visibility often depends on personality, media savviness, and commercial appeal (Rowe, 2004). Media narratives often romanticize ageing athletes as symbols of endurance or nostalgia,

especially in retrospective coverage and Hall of Fame tributes (Wagg, 2012). However, such portrayals may obscure the lived realities of ageing bodies, including chronic injury or identity loss. In the digital age, ageing celebrities increasingly use social media to negotiate age in public, often challenging stereotypes by remaining culturally relevant or advocating for active ageing. Marshall (2014) argues that this visibility can destabilize traditional notions of ageing as decline, promoting alternative models of ageing with agency – though often within neoliberal logics of productivity and self-care. Ageing complicates celebrity identities across domains, from the glamour of the screen to the ephemeral heroism of sport, while also offering sites of resistance, nostalgia, and reinvention.

The papers about celebrity and ageing included in this special issue engage with at least three disciplinary perspectives: Film Studies and the history of audiovisual media; Sociology of Communication and Culture; and Media Studies. The dialogue and interweaving of different approaches makes it possible to provide a rich, varied and complex picture of the various possibilities for investigating the relationship between contemporary celebrity forms and ageing processes.

Moreover, the field of Celebrity Studies itself has always been multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary: this attests to the productivity of employing multiple frameworks, perspectives, and concepts in the analysis of a multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon such as celebrity. This field explores how fame is produced, circulated, and consumed, with particular attention to the role of media systems, audiences, and cultural practices. Movie stars have historically been at the center of this discourse, serving as key figures in the cultural imagination and in media economies. In the 1960s, the Hollywood studio system—which had tightly controlled star images—was in decline, leading to a shift in how stars were perceived and constructed. The rise of New Hollywood (e.g., actors like Jane Fonda or Dustin Hoffman) marked a transition from idealized glamour to more fragmented, politicized star images reflecting cultural and generational change (Dyer, 1979). Richard Dyer's foundational work, *Stars* (1979), argued that movie stars are not merely performers but textual constructs, embodying contradictions in social values and ideologies. His approach laid the groundwork for analysing stardom as both a cultural product and a site of ideological struggle. With the advent of postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s, the line between public and private personas became increasingly blurred. Scholars like Joshua Gamson (1994) analysed how stars were constructed through both media narratives and audience participation, anticipating today's "celebrity economy" shaped by reality TV and tabloid culture.

A first block of papers focuses, precisely, on movie stars. These articles detect both the structural dimensions of the celebrity/ageing relationship (with particular reference to actresses) (see the detailed work by Dagnino and Pitassio), and the strategies and agencies of individual celebrities – such as Isabella Rossellini (studied by Pesce) and Gilbert Roland (analysed by Salvi) – successfully crafting original image managements in the late stage of their careers, respectively embodying an ecological mindset and advocating ethnic identity.

Gloria Dagnino and Francesco Pitassio examine how age, beyond a simple chronological measure, functions as a complex "master identity" in casting. It introduces the critical

concept of “screen age”, defined as the perceived age an actor can credibly portray, and argues that its operational framework contributes to the under-representation of mature female performers. Drawing on cultural gerontology, the authors empirically test Susan Sontag’s seminal idea of a “double standard of ageing” that disproportionately affects women. Through semi-structured interviews with Italian casting directors, the study confirms that older actresses receive fewer and less prominent roles than their male counterparts, a widespread issue across the European film industry. The research highlights the gatekeeping role of casting directors in assigning screen age and explores the potential, yet limited, impact of diversity casting and digital de-ageing technologies on these ingrained gender biases. This issue offers a timely analysis of how casting practices perpetuate or challenge ageist stereotypes, urging a broader conversation on the representation of ageing in media.

Sara Pesce explores how ageing celebrities, as they move from cultural centrality to marginality, can offer insights into both sustainable personal management and environmental resilience. By analyzing Isabella Rossellini’s career, the scholar examines how older celebrities navigate production systems and beauty standards while challenging societal norms. The research argues that the experimental behaviors prompted by ageing can reflect a broader ecological mindset. The analysis draws parallels between individual adaptation to ageing and the principles of environmental justice, such as resource scarcity, unequal distribution, and disposal, whether of attentional capital or natural resources. Rossellini’s career in the new millennium serves as a case study for “assertive marginality”, where she transforms her cultural obsolescence into innovative and inspirational narratives. The study highlights a connection between the behavior of certain ageing celebrities and the principles of environmental justice, demonstrating how public figures can influence societal attitudes toward sustainability. The research situates these dynamics within frameworks of environmental heterogeneity, salvage capitalism, and sustainable ecosystems. The discussion centers on three key elements of Rossellini’s adaptability: her mobility and peripherality, her authenticity as it relates to biodiversity, and her engagement with social networks to promote an ecological stance. The author concludes that the entertainment produced by some ageing celebrities, like Rossellini, promotes an ideal of functionality that embraces reuse, resilience, and connectivity.

Costanza Salvi analyses the career of Gilbert Roland. Her article highlights how Roland’s career, spanning from the 1920s to 1982, was less a result of his unchanging nature and more a testament to his ability to adapt to Hollywood’s evolving trends and global expectations. The scholar argues that the turning point in Roland’s career occurred after World War II, when he began to embrace his Mexican heritage to portray more confident and assertive characters. He implemented two key strategies: presenting a positive role model and engaging with audiences across the US-Mexico border, securing a transnational and transgenerational understanding of his message. Moving beyond the common portrayal of Roland as only a “Latin Lover”, this study offers a new perspective on how a self-aware ethnic identity enabled him to succeed as an ageing actor and adjust to new sensibilities in post-war Hollywood.

In the digital age, movie stardom has undergone further transformation. Social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) allow stars to directly curate their public images, challenging traditional gatekeeping by studios or press. Marshall (2010) introduced the concept of the "presentational media self," where celebrities engage in a continuous, self-authored performance online. Today's stars are often multi-platform personas, blending acting roles with lifestyle branding, activism, and fan interaction. This shift has led scholars to study "microcelebrity" practices (Senft, 2013) and "para-social engagement" (Marwick & boyd, 2011), blurring the lines between stars and influencers.

Although not dedicated to movie stars, the work developed by Miriam Ferraro, Marco Pedroni and Donatello Bramante focuses specifically on this particular phenomenon of contemporary celebrity culture. The scholars examine how social media platforms are changing the cultural representation of ageing, with a specific focus on the rise of elderly influencers. The study moves beyond the typical focus on digitally native youth by exploring the case of Gabriella Tupini, an octogenarian psychologist with a popular YouTube channel. The authors use a qualitative case study approach, combining content analysis and netnography, to investigate how influencers like Tupini reconfigure the dynamics of influencer culture through alternative strategies like expertise, emotional resonance, and narrative intimacy. This analysis addresses how elderly influencers contribute to reshaping ageing narratives, the strategies they use to build authority and foster intergenerational intimacy, and how their practices challenge ageist stereotypes. The findings show that Tupini's unscripted videos promote cognitive participation and emotional identification across different generations, creating a unique form of "intergenerational digital intimacy". Her approach, which rejects commercial strategies and emphasizes introspection, contrasts with the metrics-driven practices common among other influencers. The article introduces the concept of "intergenerational influence culture" to describe how older adults are not just participating in digital spaces but actively reshaping them. This shift has emancipatory potential, but it may also obscure structural exclusions and reinforce neoliberal ideals of "productive ageing".

The second block of papers focuses on the multiple forms and dynamics of sports celebrity, including ~~through~~ the study of the narratives and self-narratives on which it is built. Sports celebrity is, primarily, a celebrity forged on the playing field, through the tactical, technical, athletic and character qualities, expressed by famous athletes (Rojek, 2001). Part of the articles included in this special issue concerns the study of celebrities who have become famous in the past, or in recent years, either in mainstream or élite sports (Schmid *et al.*, 2024). The authors present original research, using qualitative methodological approaches and interdisciplinary references ranging from the well-established literature on celebrity studies (Marshall, 1997; Van Krieken, 2012), along with sociological, narratological, and marketing perspectives, touching on specific issues and reasoning about substantive differences between celebrity, sport, age, and gender (Lines, 2001). There are, however, two issues that run through all the articles: one has to do with the process that leads the sportsman toward the post-career, a period of life that in most cases takes the form of a new beginning. The other has to do with the spectacularization of sport, through its 'characters',

heroes, myths. Sport as a spectacular form increasingly exploits media logics, using on the one hand the spaces traditionally set up for it, such as newspapers or dedicated radio and television programs, and on the other hand becoming the protagonist of genre innovations ("sportainment," Castellano in the volume), particularly in the serial sphere of celebrity.

A first example presented in this special issue concerns the docu-series *Maradona in Mexico* (2019), analyzed by Luca Bifulco, which recounts the exploits of the great soccer player grappling with the role of coach of a Mexican lower league team. What characterizes the audiovisual product is undoubtedly the charisma of Maradona, an undisputed global soccer leader, capable of arousing deep emotions in a wide and devoted audience, although physically fatigued and probably already ill a year before his death. It is precisely on charisma that Bifulco dwells, taking the foundational aspects of the concept from the studies of Max Weber (1978) and Randall Collins (2020) to use it in defining the type of celebrity to which Maradona can be traced.

Simona Castellano also in her article on Louis Hamilton, along with a study of the industry press and the champion's self-promotion via social media, considers the analysis of the docu-series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* (Netflix, 2019 -) featuring the driver in the fourth season (world championship 2021).

And again in Ylenia Caputo's article, the docu-reality *Ginnaste – Vite parallele* (MTV, 2011 - 2016) and the TV series *Corpo Libero* (Paramount+, 2022) are analyzed as representative narratives of broad transformations of the depiction of female athletes and the female sports body in the context of artistic gymnastics.

Thus, docu-series – and media narratives more generally – influence the persistence and reconfiguration of celebrity capital, which appears increasingly linked to the redefinition of the visibility of individual subjects. The different and innovative forms of sportsmen's self-narration (see the case of social media, Tirino and Castellano in the volume) and the spaces that the media devote to them function according to multi-perspective and multioriented logics, especially in the post-career phase. The maintenance, or reconstruction of para-social relations (Rojek, 2016) between sports celebrities and their audiences may in fact mutate, transform, and draw closer in that space of pseudo-intimacy so much evoked by digital media (Gupta and Nair, 2021).

Television seriality, therefore, seems to be a narrative device particularly well suited to restore the symbolic richness of the social and cultural processes activated and/or connected to sports celebrity. In this perspective, the analysis conducted by Antonella Mascio on the docu-series *Beckham* (Netflix, 2023 -) explores David Beckham's transition from a football star to a global celebrity and brand. Using a narrative structure that draws on Vladimir Propp's functions, the docu-series portrays Beckham as a mythical hero navigating the rise and fall of his fame. Through a blend of archival footage and interviews, the production creates an "authenticity effect" and presents a complex and dynamic view of celebrity. According to the scholar, this approach makes the story accessible to a wide audience, including those who are not football fans, by framing the events in a dramatic and emotional way. The analysis delves into the docu-series' directorial choices and storytelling,

showcasing how Beckham's public and private life are intertwined to establish him as a "spreadable" media phenomenon.

The dimensions and processes of the post-career are also extensively discussed in Lorenzo Di Paola's article on the great champion Primo Carnera, the first Italian to win a world boxing title in 1933. Di Paola's analysis highlights the physical characteristics of the champion that would transform him into a symbol of strength in the fascist period and enable him to achieve a successful post-career and subsequently occupy prestigious positions in the media productions of the time, dominated by cinema and only later by television. The study explores both the duration and the ways in which *he sports figure engages in strategic fame managment, transforming himself from celebrity into myth, starting from the world of sports and landing in the world of entertainment.

Mario Tirino's article is also dedicated to the delicate transition from career to post-career. The author addresses the complicated management of the renegotiation of celebrity capital (Driessens, 2013; Gunter, 2014) accumulated by the sports stars during their competitive career, in order to reinvest it in the same or other spheres (politics, entrepreneurship, etc.). Such renegotiation appears particularly delicate because of its effects on the sports star's target audience. Using the case of Gigi Datome, Tirino analyzes the practices and processes through which celebrities restructure their public role by assuming the role of influencer and influ-activist, while continuing to exercise the role of seasoned sportsmen. By acting as influencers in the transition to a new public image in the post-career, Datome and sports celebrities more generally, aware of their communicative potential, can thus inspire people, consolidate their reputations and maintain a space of credibility and trustworthiness through the civic, social and cultural causes they promote.

Celebrity capital thus emerges as the central focus of the different articles, transforming and migrating from a purely sports context to others that nevertheless contemplate media logics, emphasizing the cultural, economic and political dimensions of the celebrity device.

As a whole, the contributions selected in this special issue provide a rather stimulating overview of the issues inherent in contemporary celebrity culture. Our goal was to present problems, questions, critical elements of the phenomenology of celebrity at the intersection of multiple social worlds and cultural contexts (cinema, TV, social media, sports, etc.) that often interconnect in unprecedented ways, and with the help of different theoretical models and disciplinary approaches. We hope that the articles presented here can contribute to further explorations of the field and build other occasions and platforms through which scholars can engage with each other in the near future as well.

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Biographical Notes

Antonella Mascio (antonella.mascio@unibo.it) 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).

Roy Menarini is Full Professor at the University of Bologna, where he teaches Cinema and Cultural Industry. He is a senior editor (and former editor-in-chief) of the academic journal *Cinergie – Il cinema e le altre arti*. He co-directs the international research centers CFC (Culture, Fashion, Communication) and INC (Italian Research Network in Celebrity Studies). He has published extensively on contemporary cinema and topics such as film criticism methodology, cinephilia theory, and film analysis.

Sara Pesce is Associate Professor of cinema at the University of Bologna, where she teaches film history, cinema and literature, and performance studies in audiovisual media. She was a Fulbright scholar at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, and at Columbia University, at the Department of English. She has undertaken research on the cultural roots of the Hollywood film industry, on cultural memory and digital culture in the contemporary global context, and on screen acting, stardom, celebrity culture, and fashion. Her research is published in journals and edited collections. She is the author of books: on Hollywood Jewish founders (2005. *Dietro lo schermo. Gli immigranti ebrei che hanno inventato Hollywood*), on World War II and Italian Cinema (2008. *Memoria e immaginario. La seconda guerra mondiale nel cinema Italiano*), and on Laurence Olivier (2012 *Laurence Olivier nei film*). She is editor and author of a book on film melodrama (2007. *Imitazioni della vita. Il melodrama cinematografico*) and of one on time, memory, and paratextual media (2016, *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media*. *Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts*). She is co-founder of INC, the Italian Research Network on Celebrity Culture.

Mario Tirino is an Associate Professor at the University of Salerno, where he teaches "Media Communication Sport" and "Sociology of Sports Cultures" and is Scientific Director of the Digital Cultures and Sports Research Laboratory (DiCS Lab). On the mediatization of sport, he has written several articles, published in national and international scientific journals, and edited the volumes *Sport e scienze sociali* [Sport and Social Sciences] (with L. Bifulco, 2019, CONI Prize), *Sport, pratiche culturali e processi educativi* [Sport, Cultural Practices and Educational Processes] (with M. Merico and A. Romeo, 2022), *Sport e comunicazione nell'era digitale* [Sport and Communication in the Digital Age] (with L. Bifulco, A. Formisano and G. Panico, 2023, CONI Prize) and *L'atleta digitale* [The Digital Athlete] (with P. Russo and S. Castellano, 2024). He also edited the monographic issue of the journal "Im@go",

entitled “The Sports Hero in the Social Imaginary” (with L. Bifulco, 2018), and the monographic issue of the journal “Eracle”, dedicated to “Media, Society and Cycling Culture” (with P. Landri, 2022). He has been Visiting Professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. He directs the scholarly publishing series "Binge Watchers. Media, sociology and the history of seriality" (with M. Teti).

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The Double Standard of Screen Age: An Exploration Through Cultural Gerontology and Production Studies*

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This article investigates the underexplored concept of "screen age" within the Italian film industry, situating it at the intersection of cultural gerontology and production studies. By analysing screen age as a distinct construct from chronological, biological, social, and psychological age, the article aims to illuminate how age is understood and operationalized in casting practices. Drawing on Susan Sontag's concept of the double standard of ageing, the study focuses on the gendered biases that systematically marginalize older actresses, contributing to their underrepresentation and typecasting. Through an exploratory qualitative analysis based on semi-structured interviews with Italian casting directors, the article reveals the gatekeeping role of casting professionals and the socially-determined nature of assigning screen age, which often results in privileging youthful femininity over age diversity. The research also reflects on the evolving practices of diversity casting, questioning whether race- and gender-inclusive strategies might be extended to age-inclusive approaches. Although international practices such as digital de-ageing are emerging, they still remain peripheral in the Italian context. The paper argues for the need to integrate screen age more rigorously into academic and industrial discourse and proposes a rethinking of diversity paradigms to encompass age as a critical identity marker. The findings highlight both challenges and possibilities for inclusive representation in contemporary audiovisual media, advocating for systemic change in both creative and industrial spheres to counter entrenched ageist and gendered norms.

Keywords: Casting, Blind casting, Screen Age, De-ageing, Double standard

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Introduction and methodology

At least half a century has passed since Neorealism icon and first Italian female Oscar winner Anna Magnani reportedly uttered these famous lines to her make-up artist: "Please don't retouch my wrinkles. It took me so long to earn them". Since then, despite being far from a de facto equality, the status of women in Italian cinema and, more broadly, in Italy's legal, economic and social system has improved substantially. Yet, to date, the valorisation of mature actresses remains an open challenge for the Italian film industry, which overall offers fewer and less prominent roles to actresses over 55 than to their male counterparts.[1] However, this is a widespread issue affecting the European film industry overall. As major English actress Emma Thompson a few years ago declared in an interview with *Vulture*:

> The age thing is insane […]. It was ever thus. I remember saying years and years ago, when I was 35, that they'd have to exhume somebody to play my leading man… Nothing's changed in that regard. If anything, it's got worse […]. I remember somebody saying to me that I was too old for Hugh Grant, who's like a year younger than me, in *Sense and Sensibility*. I said, 'Do you want to go take a flying leap?' (Buchanan, 2015).

The same goes for American film and media production, as the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media surveyed in detail: in 2021, among film characters aged 50 and over, 4 out of 5 are men (Geena Davis Institute, 2021). In this paper we explore the "double standard" that affects female ageing actors in Italian contemporary film production. In her seminal contribution, Susan Sontag observed that:

> Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology – intrinsic to which is the fact that afflicts women much more than men. It is particularly women which experience growing older […] with such distaste and shame. […]. Being physically attractive counts much more in a woman's life than in a man's, but beauty, identified, as it is for women, with youthfulness, does not stand up well to age. (1972: pp. 29-30)

We first examine the multifaceted nature of the very notion of age, which, depending on the disciplinary fields of application, extends beyond the chronological record. In the case of the film industry, a critical, but under-scrutinised notion is that of "screen age", which refers to the age that an actor is perceived to credibly portray on screen. In the following pages, we argue for screen age to be regarded as a distinct categorization of the age construct, and we critically examine how its conceptual and operational framework in the Italian film industry adds to the under-representation of mature (female) performers. Drawing on cultural gerontology's view of age as "one of the master identities, a key dimension of difference" (Twigg 2013, p. 2), we then turn to analyse whether existing practices of diversity casting may effectively contribute to improve the employability of older actresses, and under which conditions. Thirdly, we test these assumptions by means of an exploratory qualitative study conducted through semi-structured interviews with seven Italian casting directors. Six of the seven interviewees are members of the Unione Italiana Casting Directors (U.I.C.D.),

the non-profit trade association established in Rome in 2015 with the aim of promoting "the development, qualification and upholding of the principles underpinning the [casting] profession."[2] The interviewees have been selected using a mix of personal contacts and snowballing technique. Interviews have been conducted between February 2023 and October 2024 through a combination of in-person meetings, videoconferences, and telephone calls, depending on the interviewees' availability. Interviews were conducted in Italian, and the excerpts reported in this article were translated by the authors. Interviews were designed to explore four main themes covering a range of research interests that incorporate and exceed the focus of this contribution: the casting directors' educational and professional career; their work process; their definitions and, more generally, their operational experience with the concept of screen age; and their view and experiences with diversity casting. The authors' decision to conduct the interviews on these relatively broad and diverse topics goes back to two guiding principles of production studies: firstly, the general complexity in gaining (and re-gaining) access to industry professionals (Ortner 2009; Barra, Bonini & Splendore, 2016), and secondly, the intent to reconcile meso- and micro-level-focus in the analysis of production cultures and practices (Szczepanik & Vonderau, 2013).

Age beyond numbers

The turn of the 21st century has seen an acceleration in the shift of the age composition of the population towards the older age segments. Increasing life expectancy and decreasing birth rates are the main factors behind this trend, which is no longer limited to Western and high-income countries, but now concerns nearly every country in the world. The share of the global population aged 65 years or over is expected to increase from 9.3 per cent in 2020 to around 16.0 per cent in 2050 (United Nations, 2020). According to Eurostat data, with a population four years older than the European median age, Italy is currently the second oldest country in the world after Japan. After having long remained the preserve of medical, social work, and public policy research, over the past two decades, the subject of ageing has also been embraced more systematically by social scientists and humanities scholars, who have contributed to the "cultural turn" of gerontology studies (Twigg and Martin 2015, p. 2). One of the tenets of the cultural approach to the study of age and ageing is a critical stance, and ultimately deconstruction, of the very notion of age, "challenging earlier modernist accounts based on medical or chronological definitions of age, and the explicit normativities contained within them" (Ibid.) Chronological age (CA), i.e. the time passed since an individual's birth, is a recurring variable not only in scientific research of any discipline, but in the very organisational structure of society that public institutions enact (for example, to determine who has the right to vote, drive, or drink alcohol). The ubiquitous presence of CA in many aspects of everyday life, though, contributes to conceal its theoretical opaqueness. CA is essentially "a *proxy variable*" (Schwall 2012, p. 2), a placeholder for further biological, psychological, cognitive, social, and cultural traits and

processes that are influenced, but not exclusively determined, by the passage of time. Given its perceived atheoretical nature, CA is often conflated with the very traits and processes it should help to analyse. Thus, scholars across a variety of disciplines have elaborated additional categorizations of age, to better account for the actual phenomena connected to CA, as well as for the multidimensionality of the ageing process. We now proceed to illustrate some of these alternative measurements, before turning our attention to the one that is of specific pertinence of the film industry, screen age.

Alternative categorisations of age

Ageing is a process that affects individuals at the biological, social, and psychological level (Mathur & Moschis, 2005). Biological ageing – also referred to as senescence – refers to the changes affecting an individual's body over time. A common feature of biological ageing is the decrease in muscular strength, while other phenomena are sex-dependent, such as the end of reproductive capacity associated with the menopause. Conversely, social ageing is closely connected to the social norms that govern the society to which an individual belongs to. Such norms may vary greatly over time and across cultures and affect how an individual perceives their positioning with respect to life-defining transitional events, such as marriage, parenthood, or retirement (Séguy et al., 2019). Psychological ageing, instead, indicates the process whereby an individual psychological and emotional abilities evolve over time, particularly to adapt to changing expectations from their environment (Schwall, 2012). For instance, people with older psychological age are generally expected to have lower memory skills and higher ability to regulate their emotions. The biological, social and psychological age of an individual is determined by a combination of objective factors, self-perceptions and perceptions by externals. These may converge or diverge between each other, as well as they may or may not show a direct correlation with chronological age. For example, whereas a professional gymnast with a CA of 28 may be considered biologically young, their social and psychological age would probably be (self-)perceived as old, even close to retirement, given the particular norms governing that sport. In a different professional context, an early middle-aged man like Emmanuel Macron made headlines in 2017 for being the youngest President elected in France's history. What about the film industry? How does an actor's CA impact the way he/she is perceived socially and professionally? How is an actor's CA related to the age of the character he/she is (allowed) to play on screen? Is there any relation at all in a time of digital (de)ageing technologies and AI-generated human replicas? To try and offer some tentative answers to these questions we need to take a closer look at casting practices and the concept of screen age they inform.

Casting, Diversity, and Much Ado About Something

Casting plays a non-negligible role in designing characters, the visibility of age, and reducing gender inequalities in the selection of performers. However, it is one of the least acknowledged professions within the film and media industry, and an undertheorised one. To date, most of American and European professional recognitions do not include this activity. Neither US Academy Awards comprise this category, nor do French César, Spanish Goya, or German Deutsche Filmpreise. However, recent signs of change can be spotted: since 2020 British Film Academy Awards (BAFTA) bestow an award to the best casting, from 2025 onward the same will happen with the Italian David di Donatello (Renga, 2024) and the Academy Awards recently announced the introduction of the Best Casting category from 2026 (Academy 2024). But what kind of action does casting perform and how can it contribute at mitigating such disparities?

The *Collins Dictionary* enumerates many meanings for the verb "to cast"; most of them refer to an intentional action, which expresses a political orientation (to cast a vote), visually scrutinizes something (to cast a look), questions an assumption (to cast a doubt), projects a light or a shadow (to cast a shadow), or tosses a line to fish (to cast a fishing line). However, one meaning is closer to what is at stake in casting for a film production, as the verb also describes the production of an artifact, by pouring a liquid material into a mould (to cast an object) and therefore bringing together intention (the mould) and unpredictability (the liquid material). In fact, when selecting performers for a role, apparently casting directors pour human material into the container that the character is; though, selecting performers is itself an act of determination of what an abstract character is, which brings about a unique entity, previously existing only in a virtual mode. As a recent handbook on casting practice puts it: "Casting is about defining the character to tell a story […]. To cast an actor to type, means to cast them in a type of role that they are known for playing" (Catlif and Granvile 2013, p. 6).

In an article published at the height of semiotics craze, in the late 1970s, John O. Thompson attempted at applying to the movies the commutation test structural linguistics refer to, for determining whether a component at the level of expression is relevant for the level of content, to discover that when changing lead actresses and actors the content is altered, too, but the same doesn't go for minor roles, such as stunts or extras. Which led the author to solicit a thorough survey of past and actual casting practices (Thompson, 1978). As regards our concerns, this attempt proves that casting, notably for major roles, determines the meaning of the film and orientates its understanding.

Casting practices, notably in US and European film productions, need to balance the individual actors – sets of bodily features, professional skills, and their persona, i.e., the coalescence of their public appearances and fictional roles – with a set of types that underpin the selection – a common knowledge associating bodies to social and individual functions, no matter how this association is questionable. Typecasting is, in some way, the dark side of stardom as a narrative of individual self-fulfilment and personal achievement, because it

roots the professional selection in preestablished, although mostly unconfessed, gender, class, ethnic, and racial categories. As Pamela Robertson Wojcik remarked, casting is "political practice, not only as a labour issue, but as touchstone for ideologies of identity." At the same time:

> Typecasting in film is, to a large degree, inescapable, insofar as the business of film acting, and especially the star system, relies on recognisability, marketability, and the necessity for known commodities. (Robertson Wojcik 2004, p. 170).

Thus, beyond an obvious assessment of acting skills and professional reliability, casting is based on the face and, more generally, on physical appearance. To sum up, typecasting brings about an embodiment, i.e.:

> The actions performed by the body, on the body and through the body which are oriented toward the social and which are both subject to and made salient by the reciprocal actions and expectations of the self and others. (Gilleard and Higgs 2013, p. ix).

Accordingly, the embodiment of an abstract character into a physical appearance and demeanour which casting brings about orientates a social response to said character.

In some way, casting practices seem to perpetuate stereotypes and look for bodies which reinforce received wisdom as regards gender, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and… age. Richard Dyer reflected on the same notion of stereotype, clarifying its function in designing boundaries across social groups and, therefore, making distinctions which reinforce structures of power:

> Stereotypes do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behaviour, they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none. Nowhere is this more clear than with stereotypes dealing with social categories that are invisible and/or fluid. Such categories are invisible, because you cannot tell just from looking at a person that she or he belongs to the category in question. (Dyer, 2009, p. 211)

Age is certainly visible, but definitely fluid. Therefore, enforcing stereotypes in its representation as related to gender, and accordingly selecting bodies and demeanours to incorporate said stereotypes is a way to maintain power structures, no matter how inadvertently. Is there any space for innovation and transformation? And how could such changes happen, since casting relies on corporeality, i.e. the materiality of the body, to produce the embodiment?

Amy Cook describes casting as an *act of compression*, as typification enhances some features, while neglecting or downplaying others. Basically, through a cognitivist approach, the American scholar claims that casting brings to life characters by creating categories:

> Casting, like trailers, works to reduce the possibilities of a character. This takes advantage of the cognitive process of compression: the same shorthand I rely on when I see a line drawing and know it represents

> a face. I argue that we use compression in casting, in naming, and in perceiving faces to efficiently make sense of the present and anticipate the future. (Cook, 2018, p. 35)

However, bodies mostly in and for themselves provide the audience with an information which cannot be entirely concealed or suppressed: "[S]ome information is more visible than others. This is the information that the actor doesn't need to act and often cannot mask" (Cook, 2018, p. 65).

In the US, pleas for change in casting practices and opening opportunities for performers not belonging to the white majority have been made since the mid-1940s, and notably with the rise of the civil rights movement. The Non-Traditional Casting Project, which dates back to 1986, and later tellingly changed its name to Alliance for the Inclusion in the Arts, advocated and fought for more equitable access to the roles in the American theatre, cinema, and media overall. The movement created around non-traditional casting or, as recently renamed, multicultural casting led to a number of practices enhancing extant stereotypes and taken for granted characters and roles, mostly bestowed on the white majority. Among them, upon Angela Pao, we might mention *'colour-blind casting'*, which implies assigning roles regardless of race, ethnicity, disabilities, or, if possible, gender – as is the case of Jeffrey Wright as Commissioner Gordon, in *The Batman* (M. Reeves, 2022) or Judi Dench incarnating M in 007 *Skyfall* (S. Mendes, 2012); *'societal casting'*, when performers embody the race, ethnicity, gender, or disability they perform in society as a whole – for instance, this is the case of Tony Cox in *Bad Santa* (T. Zwigoff, 2003) or in *Oz the Great and Powerful* (S. Raimi, 2013); *'conceptual casting'*, when the race, ethnicity, gender, or disability of the performer are enhanced to give resonance to the production – as is the case in recent Italian TV series *Zero* (P. Randi, I. Silvestrini, M. Ferri, M. Hossameldin, 2021), with a cast mostly made of second-generation Italians, unfortunately discontinued after the first season; and, finally, *'cross-cultural casting'*, when the story is dislodged from its initial setting and relocated into a different framework, may this be racial, ethnic, etc. – say, Omar Sy in recent French TV series *Lupin* (L. Leterrier, M. Said, L. Bernard, 2021-23), which Gaumont produced and Netflix released, which reconfigures through a second-generation Frenchman of African descent the renowned adventures of the gentleman thief created in 1905 by Maurice Leblanc (Pao, 2010). This taxonomy of non-traditional casting practices fits better in theatre production, where a canon of characters and stories is well established and innovation by casting is measured against the background of decades or centuries of previous productions of the same play. However, we all experience in our social and private lives making assumptions with regard to gender, class, race and ethnicity. Casting against these assumptions contributes at reshaping our expectations and how we experience society and individuals (Syler, 2019). To summarise, casting can reinvent the categories we rely upon and create working opportunities for those performers which extant categories and assumptions neglected for racial, ethnic, gender, or disability reasons, and still neglect. Innovative casting can foster opportunities for an alternative and new understanding of the society we live in and the individuals we live next to.

Can we also think of an age-blind casting? Apparently, age is not a binding factor on the stage, since performers can incarnate characters beyond or before their biological age, which might be a reason why non-traditional casting has barely theorised ageing in theatre. However, film and TV productions and their celebration of youthfulness and beauty are less keen in doing so. As an Italian casting director posited, when comparing film and theatre casting: "We might define film casting as the quest for closeness between performer and character […]. To determine a performer most of the times one starts from physical and social features: race, sex, age, physical complexion, social class, character's features…" (Boccardi, 2012, p. 84). Furthermore, stars bring into films their persona, which orientates the narratives of their age – for instance, in the early 2000s Jack Nicholson repeatedly incarnated an ageing white man, but his persona shifted away his characters from the representation of physical decay and solitude, and tinted them with vitalism, lust, and an outsider's acute look onto social and human misery. The same goes, more recently, for Italy, where celebrated actor Sergio Castellitto embodied an embittered retired orphan aged 100 years, with all the vital strength of his youth, and the wisdom of his age in *Il più bel secolo della mia vita* (A. Bardani, 2023). These examples, as the previous ones, indicate that innovation is possible, and that CA can differ from representation. However, if colour-blind casting is now a well-established, albeit questioned, practice, the same doesn't go for age-blind casting.

Awards increasingly acknowledge aged performers, as compared to some decades ago, and therefore substantiate a shift toward a more accurate representation of our ageing societies. Though, as Emma Thompson ironically pinpointed, opportunities are not the same for different genders. Does European, and more specifically Italian, film production implement strategies to mitigate the effects of inequality in casting? The following section provides preliminary answers by relying on semi-structured interviews with Italy-based casting directors, who work across national and international films, scripted shows, and advertising productions.

Screen age and diversity casting

Screen age (SA) is a key concept in film and television production, which has received limited attention from media industry scholars; possibly due to the same perceived a-theoretical nature of age, which we previously discussed. SA is an industry term that casting directors routinely use when looking for an actor to attach to a particular role. Whereas a character in the script is given an age, the actor to embody that character is scouted and ultimately selected not so much for her/his CA, as for the age she/he can *convincingly* portray[3]. Narrative factors such as the character profile and its positioning within the film plot, as well as stylistic factors such as the film's genre and the director's vision determine which age categorisations bear the greater salience for making an association with a particular performer. In some cases, casting director may look for certain outwardly markers

of biological ageing (e.g. hair colour, skin texture, posture, etc.), while in others they may privilege attributes that are indicative of a certain social age (e.g. a male actor above 50 would probably be the best candidate to play a corporate CEO). Since it is SA age that drives the decision to allocate a screen role, actors tend to publicise this information, rather than their CA, in the personal profiles that they manage on popular websites perused by casting directors, such as the American IMDb, the German e-Talenta and the Italian RB Casting. Another reason for doing this is to reduce the risk of becoming subject to ageist discrimination on the part of casting directors, given the film industry's historical youth-oriented bias (Morin 1957). In this sense, a momentous step occurred at the end of 2022, when Amazon-owned leading industry website IMDb introduced the possibility for users to remove their CA, as well as other personal information, from their pages. The update followed a decade-old dispute between IMDb and some of the US main industry associations, including SAG-AFTRA. The dispute had been initiated in 2011 by an (unsuccessful) lawsuit brought by American actress Junie Hoang who claimed to have missed auditions and job opportunities after IMDb revealed that she was in her forties:

> If one is perceived to be 'over the hill', i.e. approaching 40, it is nearly impossible for an up-and-coming actress, such as the plaintiff, to get work as she is thought to have less of an 'upside'." (Excerpt from the actress complaint reported in Child, 2012)

The US actress' legal case and the change in IMDb's policy that ensued suggest that the currency of SA, rather than CA, within the film industry does not exempt this latter from ageist biases, and that such biases continue to primarily affect women. This phenomenon also emerges in the Italian context, as reflected by the accounts of the casting directors interviewed by the authors. We now present and discuss some of the findings of our interviews. Besides confirming, as previously mentioned, the persistence of a double standard of ageing towards actresses – a concern that unites the Italian film industry and Hollywood – the results of our interviews also point to some country-specific facets.

Screen age is the eye of the beholder

To a film's director, as well as to the audience, SA functions as a visual signpost that positions the character in the age spectrum, thus contributing to a representation that derives from artistic and narrative choices. Casting directors are responsible for pre-selecting actors that meet the artistic and narrative choices dictated by the director. To screen actors, SA functions as a category of segmentation of the labour market, in that it serves to circumscribe groups of performers who can aspire to and compete for certain types of acting jobs. This twofold function of SA frequently engenders a tension between the film's narrative requirements, the director's artistic vision, and the actor's occupational interest, which ultimately falls on the casting director to solve. In this sense, our interviewees stress that attributing SA is their prerogative, rather than the actors' themselves, whose judgment in this regard cannot be trusted.

> Screen age is something that some actors self-define, if you see their resumes or get on e-Talenta. And this is not a good thing, in my opinion, from an actor. In what sense? In the sense that screen age is not something one can establish him or herself. The person looking at you determines how old you are. (Adele Gallo)

> In the online databases it is the actors who put their [screen] age range and sometimes they are very unreliable because they see themselves as much more... “flexible” than they actually are. (Lilia Hartmann Trapani)

> You can’t imagine how many times I receive pictures of 50-year-old actresses that say “Screen Age: 35” Thirty-five? Come on! They write it down themselves, you know? You cannot rely on what actors write because they always indicate younger ages. So, screen age is for you [the casting director] to decide. (Antonella Perrucci).

These excerpts point to the gatekeeping role that casting directors play in assuring that the actors’ selection conforms to the artistic choices of the director and, at the same time, in controlling the access to the very possibility of competing for an acting job via auditions. In this sense, casting directors perform a complex and critical work in replicating or challenging (gendered) ageist stereotypes.

Screen age is gendered

Our interviewees generally confirm the scarcity of screen roles for older actresses compared to older actors, thus empirically substantiating the persistence of Sontag’s double standard of ageing, particularly in the film industry. However, their accounts differ in the ways they make sense of such disparity, and in the awareness they show of their own potential part in it.

> As usual, women pay their ageing a bit more dearly than men. If there’s a story where husband and wife are of the same age, you almost always search for a younger actress. Unfortunately, that’s the way it is. Why is that? That I can't tell you. There is by now a fossilized habit of doing this, which leads in a stereotypical way to say, “The wife must be younger than the husband.” (Eleonora Barbiero).

> There are very good ageing female actors. If you go to the theatre, you see them perform. The problem is that there are not many screen roles for them. Or the ones that are there, are clichés, like the grandma. It is difficult for there to be the role of, say, a female business leader. (Lilia Hartmann Trapani).

> Things have been changing lately. If, in the screenwriting, the default is still to portray some characters as men, sometimes we suggest to the directors “Shall we try to change the character to female?” And there’s an openness, if you will, towards portraying some jobs, which used to be more male-dominated, such as the lawyer, the doctor...to having them played by actresses. (Adele Gallo).

One of our interviewees mentioned the positive effect that the spread of SVOD platforms has had on the volume and diversity of screen roles available to older actors, and especially on the opportunity for them to boost their career at a later stage.

> If there is one good thing that streaming platforms and this whole endless string of series brought, is that they created a constant need for new characters, some of whom were older and had a role that grew over time. (…) This allows actors to emerge even if they weren't known to the audience since they were in their 20s. I see this as a positive thing. (Eleonora Barbiero).

However, when asked about examples of this positive trend, Barbiero mentioned a male actor, 1967-born Tommaso Ragno.

Screen age-ing is not (yet) digital

In Hollywood, digital post-production has been used to alter an actor's age appearance ever since the early 2000s. However, it is from the second half of the 2010s that the technology has started to be employed throughout entire films, as opposed to being restricted to individual scenes, particularly flashbacks. Whereas most examples concern superhero and science fiction blockbusters, like *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Gemini Man* (2019), digital de-ageing has also been used across other genres, such as Martin Scorsese's epic crime *The Irishman* (2019); the fourth sequel in the eponymous slasher franchise *Scream* (2022); and the fifth installment of the action-adventure franchise *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny (2023).* The spread of digital de-ageing techniques has been increasingly interrogating "how the youthening of aged bodies via engineered high-definition likenesses represents a possible future for, and an increasingly pervasive substrate of, digital stardom" (Holliday 2021, p. 211). In Italy, very little has been reported on the use of this type of technology on national film productions: an exception is constituted by Gabriele Muccino's *Gli anni più belli* (2020). In that film, 1969-born Kim Rossi Stuart and Pierfrancesco Favino, 1974-born Claudio Santamaria and 1979-born Micaela Ramazzotti play a group of friends in a drama that spans four decades. We asked our interviewees if they have encountered digital de-ageing, and whether and how the possibilities afforded by this technology come into play when casting actors for screen roles. None of our interviewees had had direct experiences of the use of digital de-ageing in the projects they had been working on.

> So, digital de-ageing per se…no, I've never encountered that directly. I have always seen prosthetic make-up and look modifications done manually. Which is still the best way, in my opinion. (Eleonora Barbiero).

> I can't think of any examples in my experience. Ageing or de-ageing is mostly done through make-up, or otherwise we cast multiple actors of different ages. Also, [digital de-ageing] is very expensive. (Marita D'Elia).

One of our interviewees, who frequently works on international co-productions, mentioned that whilst the digital manipulation of an actor's likeness has been discussed within international industry associations, in Italy it has not yet been operationalized in contracts, or other film industry practices.

> With digital technology they can do incredible things. We had a meeting with our colleagues from the International Casting Directors Association to discuss how AI may or may not affect our work. They showed us a clip with an actress speaking in English, and not only she was dubbed in other languages with her own voice, but her whole face and mouth movement were changed! This is something that is not yet addressed in Italy. Maybe in the US, following the recent strikes, they will do something about it. (Lilia Hartmann Trapani).

Indeed, the Italian film sector has been relatively slow to address the topic of AI. Following the approval by the EU of the AI Act, a position paper has been published in July 2023 by Confindustria Cultura Italia, the umbrella association representing the Italian cultural and creative sector, including the film, audiovisual and digital industries grouped in ANICA[4]. However, no further guidelines or recommendations have so far been issued by industry associations, including the Unione Italiana Casting Directors, on how to concretely deal with AI in relation to screen performance and the regulation of acting labour.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we analysed screen age, an important yet under-scrutinised and under-theorised concept within film and media industry studies. We have done so by drawing on the work of cultural gerontologists, whose reflections on age as a cultural and social construct have provided the basis for our own empirical examination of how screen age is operationalised in casting practices. We especially wanted to test one of the seminal ideas driving age studies, i.e. the existence of a double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1972) that discriminates women more severely than men. In sum, we attempted at bringing together theoretical reflection originating in cultural gerontology, with a more empirical survey provided by interviews with a selected sample of casting directors, to understand how these latter implement their assumptions as regards diversity and act as gatekeepers.

We focused on how casting practices substantiate characters by selecting distinct actresses/actors and, by doing so, implicitly orientate their reception, since they reinforce or counter stereotypes.In fact, whilst casting practices have contributed to foster more inclusive representations within other dimensions of diversity, notably ‘race’ and ethnicity, gendered biases appear to affect older actors to this day. Individual Italian casting directors seem aware of this disparity, and willing to act to correct that; however, findings from our production studies examination suggest that we are still far from overcoming long-established gendered ageist practices, such as the default casting of younger female actors to be paired with older male ones. Whereas diversity casting strategies may – and should – start to more systematically consider old age as an under- and mis-represented identity dimension, the lack of meaningful roles for older actresses also needs to be addressed on the part of Italian screenwriters. In this sense, the surge of screen productions connected to the spread of streaming platforms may create new opportunities for older performers, similarly to what has been happening for non-White and second-generation Italian actors (see for instance Netflix original series *Zero* and *Summertime*), as well actors with disabilities

(as in *Prisma*, produced by Amazon Prime Video). However, as the aforementioned examples confirm, streaming platforms have so far shown interest mainly in young audiences. If we consider the traditional "masculinised and youth-obsessed" nature (Jermyn 2012, p. 3) of commercial cinema, epitomised by Hollywood, as well as the persistence in Western societies of a widespread anti-ageing sentiment, fueled by a profitable industry, we should not underestimate the specific challenges connected to the cultural meanings attached to old age. Furthermore, albeit still distant from the practices (and budgets) of Italian film production, AI applied to the rejuvenation and ageing of screen actors holds the potential to disrupt the practices and the market of acting labour, as well as the professionals around it, starting with casting directors. This is bound to become one of the key nodes of future research into the theoretical and industrial notion of screen age. We acknowledge the limited scope of our study, which, given the existing research gap, had a primarily an exploratory purpose. In future research, we intend to expand our use of production studies methods, to better illuminate the social and cultural conceptualization of (old) age in its interplay with film production practices. Prospective areas of inquiry are agents representing older actresses and actors, screenplay writers, producers. And, it almost goes without saying, performers themselves, both in main and side roles, for a thorough understanding of the intersectional nature of ageing, which affects in different ways distinct categories of performers.

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Notes

[1] Data from the AGE-C Ageing and Gender in European Cinema project show that of all the over-55 leading characters featured in Italian films released between 2014 and 2023, 80.5% are men and only 19.5% women. The AGE-C project (2023-2027), to which the authors of this articles collaborate, is led by the University of Frankfurt and funded by the Volkswagen Foundation: https://age-c.eu/

[2] This is stated in the "About us" section of the U.I.C.D. website: www.unioneitalianacastingdirectors.it/what-is-the-uicd/?lang=en (last accessed 22 December 2024).

[3] Prominent age studies scholar Kathleen Woodward has written extensively on age as performance (see Woodward, 1999; 2006), a concept that echoes that of gender as performance theorised by, among others, Judith Butler.

[4] See ANICA's press release on this matter: www.anica.it/news/news-anica/cci-su-intelligenza-artificiale-come-settore-abbracciamo-questi-progressi-tecnologici-ma-allinterno-di-un-contesto-regolatorio-che-tenga-conto-del-rispetto-del-diritto-daut (last accessed 23 December 2024).

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Isabella Rossellini's Assertive Marginality. A Sustainable Paradigm in Contemporary Ageing Culture*

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This study explores the intersection of celebrity ageing and ecological sustainability, using Isabella Rossellini's career trajectory as a case study to examine how ageing celebrities navigate the margins of the attention economy, the production systems and the beauty standards. As celebrities transition from cultural centrality to marginality, they often engage in experimental behaviors that challenge societal norms, offering insights both into sustainable personal management and environmental resilience. By analyzing Rossellini's public roles in the new millennium, this paper uncovers how ageing celebrities influence audience perceptions of ecological issues, drawing parallels between individual adaptation to ageing and broader principles of environmental justice. The discussion situates these dynamics within the frameworks of environmental heterogeneity, salvage capitalism, and sustainable ecosystems, emphasizing the socio-cultural implications of resource scarcity, unequal distribution, and ethical disposal – whether of attentional capital or natural resources. This analysis underscores the interconnectedness of cultural dynamics and environmental challenges, revealing how celebrity culture both mirrors and influences collective attitudes toward sustainability and resource preservation. Ultimately, this research contributes to scholarly debates on celebrity engagement with environmental causes, arguing that ageing celebrities, by transforming their cultural obsolescence into innovative and inspirational narratives, reflect broader adaptive processes within societal and ecological systems.

Keywords: Isabella Rossellini, ageing, sustainable ecosystem, fashion, film, social network

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Introduction: Functional and Dysfunctional

Critical circumstances arising from a celebrity's transition from the center to the margins of the attention economy can foster experimentation and creativity. One of such circumstances is the ageing of celebrities, which offers valuable insights into the cultural dynamics of entertainment industries, their social environments and audiences, in relation to notions of functionality and dysfunctionality – concepts that have gained increasing prominence in gerontology. Furthermore, the experimentation prompted by ageing among celebrities can illuminate shared ideas and behaviors rooted in an ecological mindset. This highlights sustainable personal management as a model for environmental resilience, drawing parallels between individual adaptation and broader ecological principles.

Throughout the ageing process, a celebrity may change their behavioral patterns, blending innovation with established societal values – including those producing and consuming the spectacle of well-known people. Ageing celebrities may embrace diversity from standards due to changing rhythms, bodies, and success expectations. When pushed to the margins of the production system, they may engage in sustainable behavior by being off-standards, pioneers, or subversive, although such behavior stems from cultural processes that initially cultivated fame within a non-sustainable framework of monopoly, inaccessibility, surplus, and unethical career dismissal. This occurs in a society grappling with the scarcity of vital resources, including attention and long-term thinking, alongside waste overabundance and disposal challenges.

Drawing on theories of environmental heterogeneity, resilience in salvage capitalism, and connectivity in sustainable ecosystems, this study examines Isabella Rossellini's ageing as a model of affirmative marginality. Considering her public appearances in the new millennium, this discussion uncovers mechanisms internal to celebrity culture that renovate the meaning of old-age functionality (Katz and Marshall, 2004, pp. 53-75), while influencing audiences' perceptions of ecological issues. Rossellini's case sheds light on a broader phenomenon exemplified by Hollywood film stars like Jane Fonda and Susan Sarandon – figures whose careers are marked by enduring relevance and visibility. Their long-standing functionality as performers, along with their distinctive personalities and styles, has established global models of positive ageing. Yet, Rossellini represents a particular sphere of celebrity construction – one that foregrounds a cosmopolitan mindset, does not rely on a rhetoric of the body aligned with youthful appearance, and sustains the celebrity's self-positioning as mobile.

Central to our discussion is Rossellini's symbolic and physical movement from the margins to the center of the attention economy. This trajectory serves to convey the necessity of using ageing for the purpose of an ecological turn in society. Our argument posits a clear connection between the behavior of certain ageing celebrities and the principles of environmental justice brought about by global agendas. Both domains highlight issues related to resource scarcity, unequal distribution, and unfair use of resources – whether material or attentional. By considering Rossellini's deployment of her celebrity capital, intersections between these areas become evident, demonstrating how ageing public figures can influence societal attitudes toward sustainability.

The overarching assumption is that changes within a socio-cultural ecosystem as pervasive as global celebrity culture inevitably align with broader social narratives, environmental structures, and ecological equilibria (as in recent reprisals of ecocriticism: Belardinelli, Pescatore, Sonego 2025, pp. 5-12). Our analysis of ageing celebrities' role in shaping ecological concerns contributes to a substantial body of literature on celebrity engagement in environmental causes. Scholars acknowledge that celebrities possess immense power as cultural influencers, bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and public awareness (Goodman, 2013, p. 269. Anderson, 2013, pp. 339-352. Turner, 2006, pp. 153-165. Craig, 2019, pp. 775-789). Rather than expanding on activism, though, this paper focuses on celebrities' politics within their own ecosystem: celebrity culture. On the one hand, it builds on studies addressing the emotionalization of ecology: celebrities shape audiences' feelings about climate change and act as emotional witnesses, politicizing emotions in a neoliberal framework (Goodman, Doyle, Farrell, 2017). On the other hand, it underlines how celebrities position themselves as ecological subjects within their socio-cultural environment.

When established celebrities are positioned at the margins of their ecosystem dominated by the Star's monopoly of attention, they can foster a sustainable mindset by transforming the dynamics between preservation and disposal – of bodies, contents, and values – into innovative and inspirational entertainment. Dealing with their own "disposal" as cultural assets, ageing celebrities contribute, consciously or not, to a projectable future based on policies that avert termination and prevent resource depletion. Their personal politics, their way of creating entertainment, and their characters on screen parallel issues of environmental scarcity and environmental justice, particularly regarding the exploitation of natural resources and privileged access to them. Just as natural resources are overexploited without regard for the future, ageing celebrities may be discarded once they have exhausted their attentional potential.

Environmental sustainability highlights the importance of valuing existing resources rather than constantly seeking new ones, while addressing inequalities in access to those resources. This dynamic resonates with broader cultural myths that create inequities and abuses, such as the myth of beauty, which pressures women to pursue unrealistic standards (Wolf, 1991, p. 6). Like unsustainable consumption, beauty myths promote unattainable standards – ones that demand constant modification of the body through products, procedures, and practices promising transformation. Embracing "positive ageing" through beauty and lifestyle consumerism is a consequence of such myths. These myths thrive on dissatisfaction, positioning women (and increasingly men) in a perpetual cycle of self-scrutiny and reinvention. Thus, they align with neoliberal logics that can be at odds with ecological principles and feminist critiques. For they reproduce patterns of inequality and exclusion and reflect the same logic of disposability that drives environmental degradation: the belief that we must always be improving, replacing, or upgrading what we have.

Isabella. Established, Cosmopolitan, Peripheral

If celebrities are generative centres that explain the social world's functioning and its values (Couldry, 2010), they can be observed as promoters of spreadable innovation when they respond to ageing through new self-constructions. This is especially true for long-time established celebrities, as an innovation's visibility is key to its adoption, alongside the social prestige and satisfaction it generates. Exploring how and when they narrate and present themselves in conditions of presumed imperfection, unconventionality, or defectiveness helps us understand how societies cope with personal crises related to senescence, impairment, and marginalization, framing these within broader systemic crises such as environmental and demographic challenges.

Public personalities who have been visible epicenters of societal myths can act counterculturally. Behavioral challenges may arise from awareness of internalized age narratives we encounter from an early age (Gullette, 2003). These challenges stem from facing midlife downsizing, erosion of workplace seniority, or the need to contest media portrayals of ageing "Xers" and limitless "Baby Boomers" (Gullette, 2004). We compare this kind of celebrity behavior to that of rare or pioneer species in nature, studied by ecologists for their resilience in supporting global biodiversity (Ricklefs, 2015, pp. 540-571). Rossellini exemplifies this phenomenon, particularly in her evolution as a star persona in the new millennium, when she began responding to a crisis in her visibility – a shift in her position as an actress and fashion model. Despite being an iconic and respected figure, Rossellini has expressed frustration over the scarcity of roles suited to her advancing years. This mirrors the concept of "planned obsolescence" in the entertainment world, akin to industrial planned obsolescence. Rossellini has reacted to this with a politics of personal mobility, embracing a mutable image, multiple geographies, and a satellite position in the cinematic milieu.

In the late 1990s, Isabella took discursive control of her potential obsolescence within the attention monopoly regime, by fashioning her new condition as an ex-model in her 40s. After her contract with Lancôme ended, she wrote her autobiography *Some of Me* (1997), positioning herself as a mobile subject – geographically itinerant and oscillating between the center of attention and the margins, between normative bodily canons and eccentric ones. In doing so, she intertwined personal memory with cinema history.

Belonging to a cinematic élite through heritage and embodying natural beauty are two cornerstones of Isabella's celebrity. Embracing cosmopolitanism is the third, distinguishing one. Born to Roberto Rossellini, an Italian neorealist director, and Ingrid Bergman, a Swedish actress who became an American citizen, she inherited a transnational cultural vision, growing up bilingual and multicultural. Her career in film and fashion took her worldwide, collaborating with figures like David Lynch and Martin Scorsese, while becoming the face of Lancôme. Her global lifestyle is evident in her experiences living and working in Italy, the United States, and France, which defines her as a global citizen. At the same time, Rossellini manages her own political economy of fame akin to celebrities like Bono, Angelina Jolie, or George Clooney, who leverage their fame for international humanitarian efforts. She aligns with many Hollywood figures who are constructed through global media systems and became symbols of aspiration across cultures by means of the power of the affect

(Marshall, 2014, pp. 73-76). This is the expression of a widely accepted vision of cosmopolitanism as a response to global risks and challenges. According to Ulrich Beck, in a world risk society, individuals and institutions are urged to recognize shared vulnerabilities and responsibilities, moving beyond national loyalties to embrace a cosmopolitan ethos of global solidarity, challenging systemic inequalities and fostering global citizenship (Beck, 2006, pp. 48-68).

Thus, Rossellini's cosmopolitanism implies distinction and remaining integrated into an élite of global visibility – a value insistently conveyed through her self-narrative. On the other hand, Rossellini's mobility includes a drive toward marginality. She uses her public position to praise eccentric behavior, her choice to deviate from norms. Not only in *Some of Me* but also in her later autobiographical discourse – including her 2023 theatre show *Darwin's Smile* – does Rossellini recover peripheral information usually excluded from celebrity discourse. Currently, her social media communication features a selection of awkward expressions, angles, and spaces that are not aesthetically nor rhetorically distinct from certain discourses of hers on ecological wools or sustainable animal breeding. In the past, she wrote about Audrey Hepburn's dirty nails and Katharine Hepburn's frayed trousers, praising the former's sensibility and the latter's assertive style. Bodily details excluded from Hollywood stars' rhetoric inject celebrity discourse with marginal information. This sort of material trivialities convey a meaning that we can consider ecological. Because they invoke practical wisdom and resistance inside an unsustainable environment such as the luxury Hollywood milieu. Minor or peripheral information-supplies add perspective, allowing celebrities to be used to reassess the value system of a sustainable society.

Rossellini's marginal stance relates to her upbringing by her unconventional parents, and her fame being collateral to their stature. Despite her own prominence, she positions herself in secondary symbolic spaces. In *Some of Me*, she questioned the worth of her exorbitant income as a model in an imagined dialogue with her father. She described modeling as entering a realm of stupidity, compared to other spheres of "intelligent" effort, such as her father's rigorous cinema. However, Rossellini's involvement in fashion proved to be creative and focused on resilience within an ephemeral system. She has been putting an emphasis on breaking ranks for a long-lasting career. Only models who contrast the endless stream of new, beautiful, and anonymous girls discovered by agencies, photographers, and designers achieve careers longer than average (Rossellini, 1997, p. 109).

Constructing celebrity discourse with subversive potential is inherent in Rossellini's fame, a centrifugal movement from fashion and film industry rules, that stems, yet, from her power (economic and symbolic) to negotiate her peripherality, to embrace or reject glamorous image-making. In the new millennium, she has increasingly used her conspicuousness to create non-mainstream audiovisual discourse, as in *Green Porno* (2008), where she merges avant-garde aesthetics with ecological messaging and molds a humorous, non-glamorous star persona. Rossellini subverts traditional narratives of animal behavior and gender, reinvents representations of female seduction, and explores a hybrid form of eco-documentary "at the margins of the small screen" (Sinwell, 2010, p. 119), originally created for viewing on cell phones and iPods and meeting the Sundance Channel's effort to programming specifically for Internet viewing.

Three Elements of Adaptability

In her mature years, Isabella's acting career has diminished, paradoxically, as compared to the typically less persistent modeling career. Her recent acting consists primarily of small and secondary roles, although meaningful (as proved by the latest Oscar nomination). In contrast, her modeling career has seen a glorious resurgence, marked by significant comebacks and rebrandings. In 2018, Lancôme rehired her. Her appearances on the covers of *Vogue* magazines have championed a new aesthetic and vision of glamour. Rossellini has remolded her public persona based on the essential characteristics of heritage, beauty, and cosmopolitanism, by embracing anti-glamorization, inclusive beauty standards of plump silhouette and wrinkles, and a bucolic personal imagery tied to the recolonization of peripheral spaces and rare species.

Today, Rossellini promotes an ecological stance that can be understood through a three-pronged model rooted in adaptability: (1) her mobility and peripherality bound to navigating diverse environments; (2) her authenticity built in an inclusivity-focused identity and in her personality as an ethologist; (3) her active engagement with social networks, through which she imparts a distinctive, personal significance to environmental sustainability.

Mobility and Peripherality

In 2010, Rossellini founded her farm in Bellport, Long Island, as her residence and sanctuary for heritage breed animals. Her commitment to biodiversity and sustainable farming is frequently highlighted through interviews, her book *My Chickens and I* (2018) and her active presence on Instagram. In 2013, she initiated the Mama Farm project, encompassing agricultural cultivation, animal husbandry, and innovative approaches to a harmonious relationship with nature, with the mission of educating younger generations about environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation. While Rossellini has chosen a quiet, retired life on her farm, her journey from a peripheral existence to the limelight is continuous. Moving fluidly between an unglamorous lifestyle and high-profile public appearances – film sets, red carpets, and catwalks – she embodies a remarkable mobility from the sidelines to the spotlight. Her consistent presence at Cannes, whether as an actress, jury member, or brand ambassador, underscores her enduring connection to international cinema. She also regularly attends the Annual Golden Globe Awards, has received an Oscar nomination, and remains a prominent figure at the most prestigious cinematic events. Even in her 60s and 70s, Rossellini has graced fashion runways as a special guest, joining the ranks of designers who have embraced inclusivity, such as Dolce & Gabbana's Spring/Summer 2019 show, which was hailed as a celebration of diversity (Harpers Bazaar, 2018). During the most important fashion weeks, photographers capture her in poses that reflect an unstudied elegance, free of exaggerated gestures or calculated expressions. Her presence feels natural. Her ironic touch, her ability to inhabit a role while observing it from the outside define her.

Rossellini's ability to navigate between marginality and prominence is relevant for an ecological mindset, as it demonstrates an aptitude for occupying border territories, and exercising agency within local contexts, revitalizing abandoned areas and utilizing them to treasure a quiet lifestyle and breed rare species. These qualities contribute to resilience in complex adaptive ecosystems. Resilience theories emphasize the critical role of marginal species and underutilized habitats in maintaining global ecological stability (Walker & Salt, 2006). Such theories also highlight how marginal territories can function as climate buffers. For instance, coastal wetlands serve as natural barriers against storm surges and flooding. While these areas may be considered marginal in terms of agricultural productivity, they are indispensable for ecosystem stability. Similarly, Rossellini's role as an ageing celebrity who promotes functional marginality through her personal example can be viewed as a cultural buffer. Aware of her diminished media productivity, she nonetheless fosters stability by creating spaces for media decompression, reflection, and remembrance, as demonstrated by the unofficial, quiet tone of Rossellini's communication through videos and pictures of her activities at Mama Farm.

Her communication on Instagram continues a perspective on herself inaugurated in her autobiography. Her father and mother serve as enduring pillars of memory, frequently evoked alongside anecdotes about filmmakers or stories of other individuals from artistic legacies. Isabella positions herself as a living memory, asserting her role as an authoritative storyteller, her attitude being a mixture of adaptiveness and creativity. Just like *Some of Me*, which stood out as an unconventional text, written not at life's conclusion but in her midlife years (Masecchia, 2024, p. 80), Rossellini keeps reinterpreting established categories, including ageing: she prefers to be "ancient" rather than merely "old".

In natural ecosystems, the functional diversity of rare or uniquely distributed species enhances the system's ability to adapt to climate changes or disturbances. Species with varied responses to disruptions bolster overall resilience. "Stress-tolerant" or "pioneer" species play a vital role in restoring or reorganizing ecosystems after disturbances. This principle resonates in Rossellini's self-narratives, such as in *My Chickens and I*, an illustrated book where she shares her passion for raising chickens, celebrates their intelligence and implicitly her own "scientific turn", adopting a visually humorous self-representation in her space of creative retreat.

Integrating past and present dynamics of fame exemplifies her distinctive capacity for stress tolerance. Rossellini reclaims an authorial self-storytelling when she shares images of herself with a range of personalities in their late years. Her firm control over her public image offers a model of resilience that reshapes the established framework of celebrity culture, challenging its traditional emphasis on youthful appeal, generational divides, and the dichotomy between functionality and dysfunctionality.

Authenticity as Biodiversity

The second element of Rossellini's ecological posture lies in her playful engagement with the notion of authenticity as she ages. Her pronounced wrinkles and steadfast refusal of

plastic surgery exemplify her eccentric stance, resonating with the concept of biodiversity. In this context, a "diverse body" refers to one that resists alignment with socially imposed norms. Having been subjected to the market logic where models are deemed "past their prime" at a young age, Rossellini faced a professional crisis that catalyzed a subversive inclination. She adapted her specificity as an actress, cinephile, and manager of herself to the profession of modeling. Firstly, she blended acting and modeling, searching for a feeling or thought while posing. The *Vogue* covers photographed by Richard Avedon reveal dreamy, witty, ironic, and genuinely expressive portrayals. Applying acting techniques to posing in front of the camera becomes an assertion of personality, subverting the traditional passivity expected of models. Furthermore, Rossellini actively manages her image, as her contracts grant her authority to choose the photographer – a photographer who, in her words, "knows how to see" (Rossellini, 1997, p. 28).

To better grasp the cultural foundations of Rossellini's authoritative stance, it is crucial to recognize that her ageing crisis unfolded during the 1990s – a transformative era in which personalities like Naomi Campbell and Claudia Schiffer were reshaping the image of fashion models. These models not only asserted themselves, but also championed their rights, acquiring a distinct political identity. Within this historical context, Rossellini's positioning highlights her resistance to normative beauty standards and her adoption of a more empowered, multifaceted sense of self.

Rossellini oscillates between having been an icon of aspirational femininity and her current status as a "high-profile" exemplar of "temporal success". When she was dismissed by Lancôme at age 42, Rossellini started campaigning for the reality of her own beauty, divorcing it from the codes of fashion photography's constructed naturalness. As Deborah Jermyn has noted with reference to other mature celebrities, naturalness is strictly tied to photographers' sophisticated obliteration of their own artifice. In 2018, Lancôme featured her in an advertising campaign shot by Peter Lindbergh at age 65. The campaign, for an anti-ageing cream, carried the slogan "I am who I am", propagating a rhetoric of positive ageing. Ageing well is equated with the conquest of an authentic self. Indeed, the two promotional videos incorporated the biographical narrative of her dismissal and subsequent rehiring by the French brand (D'Amelio, 2021).

Comparing Peter Lindbergh's polished images from 2018 to those captured by Zhong Lin for *Vogue* Italia in October 2023 highlights how significantly Rossellini's image has evolved into a manifesto on women's realistic appropriation of fashion imagery. The iconic cover image exhibits wrinkles, softness, and a monastic haircut, with a sardonic, amused expression. Seduction no longer adheres to the conventional principles of celebrity girling. The degree of departure from standards of thinness and smooth forms is both pronounced and deliberate. In her seventies, Isabella regains a top position in the attention economy, but does so by waving the flag of marginality. In this, Rossellini is in good company, considering the growing phenomenon of gray models and the increasing inclusion of older actresses in glossy campaigns. Her politics of high visibility through a marginal stance is always supported by a sophisticated discourse: "I asked *Vogue* Italia not to retouch the photos and to leave me with my wrinkles. Francesca Ragazzi, who directs the magazine, agreed: the new generations are looking for more modern and intelligent definitions of

beauty." A complicity with younger generations is brought about. The author of *Vogue*'s shoot, Zhong Lin, is a young, self-taught photographer born in Malaysia and raised in a multicultural community. A new intergenerational and cosmopolitan alliance underpins this operation of assertive marginality.

On the one hand, Rossellini's assertiveness aligns with the post-feminist neoliberal paradigm. This framework redefines beauty – from an ideal of youth to a construction of the self through elegance and sophistication – signifying economic advantage, luxury, and materialism. Attitudes toward ageing reveal social inequality, as Marc Augé discusses in *Une ethnologie de soi: Le temps sans âge* (2014). Rossellini's appearances as "age-proud" reflect class and privilege. More than that, it has turned into a bankable figure, considering how the fashion industry is increasingly aware of the need to expand across age demographics. On the other hand, Rossellini displays a specific trajectory from conformity to eccentricity due to her ability to synthesize eccentricity with mainstream appeal – a form of syncretism that designs a conceptual celebration of the margins. By forging a synergy between margins and center, dominant and subordinate, typical and unconventional, Rossellini engages in a dynamic that resists obsolescence – the threat of being discarded as nonfunctional. Instead, she proves functional within a growing image-making system that serves the needs of the gray economy. In doing so, Rossellini transforms the dynamics of preservation and disposal – of bodies, contents, and values – into entertainment.

The Ecologic Self

In her mature years, Rossellini has improved her ability to bring together her star persona and her ecological persona. Starting with her debut as a filmmaker in *Green Porno*, she has developed a capacity for metamorphic self-reinvention while giving personal meaning to the global respect for the natural environment. *Green Porno*, a film series that blends humor, artistry, and science to explore the mating habits of insects and marine life, employs elaborate costumes, playful storytelling, and stop-motion animation. It demystifies the complexities of nature and redefines Isabella's star persona, challenging traditional feminine semantics and beauty standards. She gives an ordinary face to ecological awareness. Rossellini's performance blurs the rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman, meeting the agenda of posthumanism – by overcoming an anthropocentric view of the world – and ecofeminism, which set a parallel between the oppression of women and the oppression of animals (Peterson, 2016, p. 427).

Perfectly aligned with celebrity rhetorics, Rossellini's authenticity is rooted in her evolving life narratives, recently enriched by her self-crafted identity as an ethologist collaborating with zoologists.[1] Her authenticity manifests through self-promotion on platforms perceived as grassroots, marked by a deliberate absence of polished professional image-making, or her presence in indie cinema circuits like MUBI. Her roles often resonate with territorial values and the sanctity of nature, as seen in her poetic portrayal of an elderly heiress in *La chimera* (2023), by Alice Rohrwacher. This fashioning of an ecological persona has been closely intertwined with her activity on social networks, particularly through her posts on

Instagram and her video essays on the Criterion Channel about the circularity of geological eras. Similarly, on the theater stage, *Darwin's Smile* (2023), with its focus on the resemblance between human expressions and animal expressivity, contributes to her personalization of ecology. On Instagram, Isabella evokes iconic moments from classic cinema, appealing to an adult, cinephile audience that values historical and artistic continuity. Her communication style is ironic, blending archival references with current projects to create an appeal for both long-time followers and new admirers. References to her collaboration with Lancôme target a mature demographic, equating sophistication with beauty for women aged 40-50 and above. At the same time, she presents herself riding a large tricycle without makeup, embracing natural changes through elegant style choices that inspire mature women to see beauty and success beyond the ages of 50 or 60.

Through her active presence on social media, Rossellini rejects the postfeminist myth that female ageing can be reversed, evaded, or halted, embracing instead a continuum of female subjectivity that defies rigid binary divisions between youth and old age (Jennings, Krainitzki, 2015, 178-196. DeMello, 2008, pp. 297–311). Since the early 2000s, ageing studies have contested binary frameworks such as progress versus decline (Gullette, 2004; Segal, 2013) and young versus old (Woodward, 1999, Woodward, 2006, pp. 162–189). This "age-pride" ethos fosters atypical forms of visibility, contributing to broader diversification efforts and challenging representational inequities in film, television, advertising, and politics. It celebrates multiplicity, conceptually aligning with advocacy for biodiversity.

Conclusions

There is a cultural and conceptual continuity between our contemporary era's pronounced interest in longevity, the ephemerality of media and memory contents, and the concurrent rise of sustainable development goals. Fears of obsolescence and running out of time underpin all these phenomena. In contemporary awareness, ephemerality poses a threat to the planet's survival. Rossellini's constellation of new functionalities underscores the cultural nexus between managing the planet's ephemerality and its inhabitants' personal ephemerality management. Concerns for integrity and survival are simultaneously personal, communal, and planetary realities, embedded within a global culture preoccupied with the threat of perishability and ensnared in utopian ideals of permanence, eternal youth, and control over decline and deterioration. These utopias, alongside an incremental economic mindset, represent non-ecological values, as they promote exploitation, undermine diversity, and foster exclusion. The entertainment produced by some ageing celebrities like Rossellini reverberates and propagates an ideal of functionality that oscillates between margins and center, embracing reuse, resilience, and connectivity.

Biographical note

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Notes

[1] Rossellini collaborated with the Smithsonian Institution and the Wildlife Conservation Society, earning a Master's in Animal Behavior and Conservation from Hunter College in 2003. She partnered with zoologist Dr. Alan Rabinowitz and, in Italy, with zoologist and science communicator Mia Canestrini to advocate for wildlife preservation and raise environmental awareness through films and educational projects.

Mediascapes journal 25/2025

"All things change, but Gilbert Roland remains the same" (or not?). Recycling, adaptability, and endurance in age transition*

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Gilbert Roland's career spanned from the early 1920s to 1982, the year of his last appearance on-screen. In 1974, when he was 69, the *Los Angeles Times* commented upon his capacity to endure, defining his glamorous figure as living proof that time can add character to his handsome Latin features. Still, the sense of fulfillment derives less from invariability than from his ability to adapt to Hollywood's evolving trends and global expectations. This article contributes to the adaptability hypothesis for aging stars addressed by this special issue of *Mediascapes* by exploring Roland's critical moments. At the beginning of his career, the actor either capitalized on the Latin Lover trend or attempted to erase his origins to avoid excessive typecasting. However, as he aged, his career stalled in smaller movies, and finding roles became all the more challenging. The turning point took place after World War II, when the actor, now in his 50s, began portraying characters associated with his Mexican origin. He aimed to present a more confident and assertive image of Mexico in Hollywood through the characters he played on the screen. Two main strategies employed by Roland are emphasized in the article: firstly, he proposed a positive role model, established through a well-planned program combining awareness of aging and the objective of maintaining a consistent standard of professionalism. Secondly, he addressed his audiences across the US-Mexico border to secure a transnational and transgenerational understanding of his messages. This article provides a fresh perspective on Gilbert Roland's career by moving beyond the narrow portrayal of him as just a Latin Lover, which has been the focus of academic scholarship thus far. Instead, it highlights his modern approach, based on a full grasp of the factors that have driven popularity in the post-war phase of Hollywood studio production.

Keywords: Adaptability, Latin lover, Mexican actor, Star system, Post-war Hollywood

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An interesting article published in the *Herald Examiner* in 1969 defines Gilbert Roland as a "fully realized man", an appropriate definition for such an actor whose career spans from the 1920s, when he started as an extra at $3 a day with Clark Gable and Gary Cooper, to 1982, the year of his last appearance on the screen. At that time, this Mexican American actor, arrived in Hollywood at the age of fourteen, was a seventy-year-old man. The article describes Roland as a transnational star, widely recognized by an audience distributed along the US-Mexico border, where people admired him for fifty years. Roland's endurance was his best quality. The columnist delves into the actor's perseverance and ability to adapt as he navigated the shifting landscape of different practices and modes of production. Primarily, the editorial highlights how this ability played a pivotal role in shaping Roland's career, enabling him to thrive despite a series of ongoing challenges (AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 5"). However, his skill in being responsive to change was mostly grounded on a strategy for communicating his ethnic identity in a way that reflected the social temper of the time. His approach impacted how Hispanics were perceived in American society after World War II. This essay intends to explore the relationship between maturity and ethnicity, arguing that a self-aware ethnic stance enabled Roland to succeed in old age and adjust to a growing sensibility focused on a different, renovated cause. The connection between ethnicity and maturity allowed him to establish effective foundations for the transnational and transgenerational success that characterized the latter phase of his career, after he turned fifty.

Roland's career can be divided into two phases, with World War II as a pivotal point between the first and the second. The initial phase lasted from 1925 to 1940, when the image of Roland as a Latin lover emerged according to the established formulas introduced by studio production. The second phase, from 1945 to 1982, marked a shift toward embracing the realities of old age. Simultaneously, the period represented a significant moment of self-awareness regarding ethnicity in Roland's life, a personal choice that reflected a broader shift in American society, culture, and cinema industry. The emergence of a new generation of actors who willingly engaged with the cause of the early civil rights movement also mirrored the advent of a post-1948 phase of studio production after the landmark antitrust case at the US Supreme Court leading to the Paramount Decrees. This phase is often remembered as an era in which Hollywood industry increasingly adopted flexible production and distribution practices, fostering independent enterprise and international creativity based on the contribution of new global talents (Mann, 2004). Roland's move toward a different communication strategy partially echoed this critical change, especially when the actor addressed audiences across the border, emphasizing his ethnic origin or clearly articulating his fight for a wider variety of roles for Mexican actors. By examining Roland's life and career, we can assess not only the evolving portrayal of Mexicans in Hollywood but also the actor's way to cope with aging issues.

Luis Antonio Dámaso de Alonso and the craze for all things Latin

Let us start with a few biographical data. Roland was born Luis Antonio Dámaso de Alonso in 1905, in Ciudad Juárez. His father was a Spanish bullfighter who settled in Mexico with his wife before the birth of Luis. The young Luis Antonio wished to emulate the father and dreamed of becoming a matador. However, in 1913, after the breaking out of the Mexican Revolution, the family moved across the border to El Paso. Started in 1910 and lasted 10 years, the Revolution intensified the movement of Hispanics northward. The Spanish-speaking population grew significantly between 1910 and 1930, as many families, attracted by job opportunities in American agribusiness, founded new communities in Texas, California, Arizona or settled in existing barrios in Los Angeles (Ruiz, 1993). The Alonsos were very poor at that moment and the father asked his children to help the family so Luis Antonio — who was eight years old when they crossed the border — had to sell newspapers in front of the hotel El Paso del Norte. He did not know English at that time but was greatly helped by his teacher Alma Bartlett at Franklin School. When he was fourteen years old, he caught a freight train and moved to Hollywood looking for a job as an extra.

Contrastive images of Mexicans characterized the first phase of Hollywood history when Roland arrived in Los Angeles in the early 1920s. Mexicans were often depicted as villains, primarily in westerns, where they appeared as nameless bandits or cantina girls. These characters had a fleeting presence on the screen, serving mainly as a plot device. The fiery Latina was usually confined within the limits of the protagonist's fling and usually marked by bad intentions or unrestrained sexual behavior. The main character could flirt with her, but the shallow relationship sooner or later had to give way to the respectful marriage with an Anglo-Saxon woman. The male counterpart of a cantina girl was usually a "greaser". The term originated from a purported habit of Mexican workers to use grease while loading heavy burdens in cargo wagons to protect the skin from scratches, which suggested scarce hygiene. In common usage during the years of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), this term was still used at the beginning of the following century in dime novels and early silent films (Stanfield, 1987, pp. 97-112; Fojas, 2008, p. 6). Men or women, the Mexicans were generally associated with the full range of shades in the portrayal of evilness: irrational violence, dishonesty, dementia, brutality, moral degeneration, sexual urges, ugly physical aspects such as unclean hair or missing teeth (Berg, 2002). The situation began to change when pressures coming from foreign public opinion led to take direct action. In 1922, the Mexican government began to boycott Hollywood products, leading the foreign relations office of the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) to slightly change the status quo of using despicable stereotypes to systematically represent the population south of the border (Vasey, 1997, p. 19). Albeit many scholars argue that the change in contents and forms was extremely limited,[1] the need to tackle the boycott led to the emergence of different roles, with noble *caballeros* and Latin lovers as substitutes for greasers and harlots.

Roland started his career roughly after this event when, to a certain extent, it was a good time to be different in America. In her book on the story of Latinos in Hollywood, Clara Rodríguez points out that the decade was very likely the most generous of times for Latinos in film (2004, p. 2). The author might exaggerate a bit, however if a change happened somehow, it did happen also through the emergence of the Star System. The beguiling almond-shaped, black eyes of Rodolfo Valentino are certainly responsible for the affirmation of a different sensibility. Inaugurated by the Italian *divo*, a craze for all things Latin was registered in a tendency to foreground *Latinness* not only in Spanish or Latino actors but also in Anglo stars such as John Gilbert, Clark Gable, or Robert Taylor, whose pencil mustache and ebony shades were particularly seductive. The fabrication of a star aimed at emphasizing an exoticism that was, at times, completely made up. According to Rodríguez, this tendency aligned with a broader pattern in newspapers and in the trade press, where the origins of all stars were established and illustrated. As the author writes, "short biographies, in small print, often accompanied full-page photos of stars, giving other information such as birth date, height, weight, hair and eye color, name of spouse, and ancestral details" (p. 10). Even those who did not have Spanish surnames or who had previously changed them to English-sounding names in the effort to escape typecasting, have their Latin American origins accentuated to capitalize on a great demand.

Roland took advantage of this moment and participated in the same fabrication process. The first studio to hire him was Preferred Pictures, which was founded by B. P. Schulberg — father of Budd, who authored the novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941) and wrote screenplays for Elia Kazan's films *On the Waterfront* (1954) and *A Face in the Crowd* (1957). The studio devised Roland's unexpressed quality and crafted the image of a Latin lover for his first significant role as Carl Peters in the 1925 film *The Plastic Age* (Wesley Ruggles). Schulberg produced the movie before later becoming a supervisor at Paramount, where he also brought along Clara Bow, the film's leading lady, and Roland (AMPAS, f. 61). Despite the Anglo-sounding name of the character, Carl Peters, the actor's look, with its dark skin and eyes, accentuated a daredevil personality. Shortly before *The Plastic Age*, the young Luis Antonio was asked to change his name to a "nice middle-class-sounding American name such as George Adam", but he could not look at himself in the mirror and look credible under that name. He thus chose to combine the names of his favorite male and female movie stars, John Gilbert and Ruth Roland (AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 3"). He capitalized on olive complexion, black eyes, and thick, curly dark hair as unequivocal signs of ethnicity. Name and look encapsulated a precise identity and validated the important process of recognition in the audience, which happened according to a specific intention that mingled opposite characteristics. For instance, he mostly referenced all-American stars, as evidenced by his repeated emphasis on the healthy and active style of Douglas Fairbanks over the ambiguous detachment of Valentino. In the minds of the audience, Gilbert Roland evoked a mix of playful, amused vigor and a hint of sensuous impudence, revealing his desire to blend European poise with Latin characteristics. His romantic relationships with three beloved female actresses of Anglo origins — Clara Bow, Norma Talmadge, and

Constance Bennett — opened the golden doors to heavenly parties, rich villas, and country clubs allowing him to join the entourage of celebrities living in luxury ("Home Movie n. 3"). He simultaneously presented himself on the same level as his audience, not a big star but a great fan who, through his stage name, pinpointed a youth spent dreaming of becoming a Hollywood celebrity.[2] Roland thus resulted from a combination of the opposites: ordinary aspiration and extraordinary lifestyle, empathy and unattainability, the American character and the Latin look.

The period between 1925 and the early years of the following decade was the apex of his stardom, also aided by the relationship and following marriage to Bennett, which lasted from the late 1930s to 1946. Like Antonio Moreno and Ramon Novarro, Roland was an emblematic figure of his time, but it would be incorrect to assume that this was an ideal time to be a Latino star. This historical period was marked by significant confusion among audiences regarding who could truly be considered Latino. In the early twentieth century, the term "Latin" was indistinctly referred to Italians, Portuguese-speaking individuals, and Spaniards, while "Spanish" generally encompassed the Spanish-speaking populations of Latin America. The terms "Indian" and "Mexican" were also used interchangeably. Only later, were the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" introduced to identify those with origins, respectively, in Latin America and Spain (Rodríguez, 2004, pp. 21-22). Additionally, studios tended to categorize the ethnic roles into different segments, often discriminating against darker-skinned or non-European buffoons and harlots in favor of main characters who were lighter-skinned, upper-class, and of European descent. However, Roland partially escaped this tendency, often playing a variety of different roles. In *After Tonight* (George Archainbaud, 1933), he plays Captain Rudolf Ritter, an Austrian high-rank soldier, as producers preferred to cast him as a generic 'foreigner' in films where he nonetheless played the leading man with dark hair and bedroom eyes, the erotic dream of the leading lady.[3] Conversely, in *Call Her Savage* (John Francis Dillon, 1932), Roland is Moonglow, a calm and collected Native with whom the rambunctious Nasa Springer, played by the It-girl Clara Bow, ultimately finds serenity. Nasa's reckless behavior is not a result of her ethnic background, but rather stems from a lack of fatherly love and acceptance, affection that only her intelligent and sympathetic soul mate Moonglow can guarantee. Despite a variety of different ethnic roles being offered to a celebrity essentially considered a romantic incarnation of a handsome and athletic Latino, ethnicity *per se* was seldom discussed. More often being a Mexican was a factor surfacing in the iconic list of "all things Latin" that encouraged the adoption of a certain look: "lace mantillas, Spanish combs, ruffled lace dresses, dark sultry looks, pulled-back hair with Spanish side curls, toreador themes and clothes, or flamenco poses" (Rodríguez, 2004, p. 26). This look surely shaped the popular spirit or mood of the time but struggled to affect the social perception on a deeper level.

The challenges of aging and a new motivation

The first phase ended with a personal and professional crisis: the marriage with Bennett ended in a bitter divorce in 1946, and parts in Hollywood were difficult to find. This phase was the lowest point in his career. He was forty-two years old. The second chance he thought he deserved was only granted by the low-budget film industry. After the war, Roland started from scratch again in B-moviedom, at Monogram Pictures, playing the starring role of Cisco in the cycle of six movies released between 1946 and 1947: *The Gay Cavalier* (William Nigh, 1946), *Beauty and the Bandit* (William Nigh, 1946), *South of Monterey* (William Nigh, 1946), *Riding the California Trail* (William Nigh, 1947), *Robin Hood of Monterey* (Christy Cabanne, 1947) and *King of the Bandits* (Christy Cabanne, 1947).

Cisco is one of the most beloved incarnations of a Mexican hero after Don Diego Vega/Zorro. The latter was initially disseminated by the 1919 novel *The Curse of Capistrano*. During nighttime the sophisticated aristocrat Don Diego becomes Zorro — Spanish for "fox" —, a crime fighter and avenger who combats corrupt governors and army captains in Spanish California using bullwhip, sword, and supersonic reflexes. His calling card is the letter Z carved on the foreheads of evildoers as punishment or reminder that he is always watching from the shadows, ready to stop rascals and hoodlums. According to Stephen Andes, Zorro, the hero that was first serialized by American writer Johnston McCulley in 1919, was the result of a concoction of multiple sources that elaborated upon the adventurous life of the Mexican bandit Joaquín Murrieta (Andes, 2020, pp. 10-59). Even if we see traces of this Mexican origin in Zorro, the inevitable association with Douglas Fairbanks, who made the character immensely famous in *The Mark of Zorro* (Fred Niblo, 1920), elaborated upon this origin, transforming it into a story about a white hero with whom the white, middle-class audience could mainly identify (pp. 110-133).[4] Cisco is a Zorro transplanted in a western setting who still maintains the primary purpose of defending the weak against the powerful. However, the clear ethnic codification of Cisco represents a novelty, pinpointing a return to and a confirmation of the Mexican origins represented by the folk hero Murrieta. Cisco is not a masked, white vigilante but a vaquero dressed in a traditional suit — like Murrieta — who steals from the rich and gives to the poor, always prepared to defend fellow friends usually located south of the border against evil characters of Anglo descent. Furthermore, while the adventures of Zorro were limited to the setting offered by late Nineteenth-century California, Cisco expands his adventures to the entire Mexican borderland.

Albeit extremely modest, these popular serial films strongly encouraged the creation of a new discourse of community that promoted a collapse of the old barriers based on the alleged cultural and social authority of a white Anglo-Saxon elite. In them, the viewer could witness the creation of a new world where older standpoints became untenable. One of these standpoints established, for instance, that a dramatic hero needed to be Anglo-Saxon while criminals were expected to display traits associated with a foreign country or a specific ethnicity (May, 2000). By contrast, the cycle often sympathized with poor but noble Mexicans

or with the most liberal and young Hispanic aristocracy against the evil plans of greedy characters that were always associated with the northern side of the border. Cisco was the best representative of a renovated Mexican American character: lighthearted, contemptuous of the law but not of a personal ethic, and a superb lover compared to lukewarm, tepid, too-polite Anglo cowboys (Loy, 2001). Notably, Roland was allowed to contribute to the dialogues, which testifies not only to the relative freedom permitted in B-moviedom but also to Roland's aspirations for a different star persona, less identified with previous stereotyped roles. This figure remained unchanged throughout his career, mainly when the actor acquired full maturity.

In contrast to the first phase, when Roland either capitalized on a Latin look or tried to erase his identity to avoid excessive typecasting, his homeland became extremely important in this second phase. Notable filmmakers began to take notice of his acting skills, mostly Vincente Minnelli, who chose him for the role of Gaucho, the suave actor who keeps the screenwriter's wife, the southern belle Rosemary (Gloria Grahame), occupied in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). Here, the actor shows a bright caricature of a Latin lover, which attests to his capacity for a self-ironic approach in examining his past. He also worked with Anthony Mann in *The Furies* (1950), where Roland is Juan Herrera, a Mexican version of a traditional cowboy, proud and ready to fight against the tyrannical power of T.C. Jeffords (Walter Huston), evident illustration of the Anglo-Saxon idea of the frontier as a theatre for the self-assertion of a free man in a territory that was purportedly considered fully available. Mann's film was adapted from Niven Busch's novel of the same title, *The Furies*, published in 1948, the centennial of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848), which ended the Mexican-American War and roughly established the border we know today at the Rio Grande. Juan and the Herrera family's struggle in the film symbolizes a yearning for recognition of Mexicans' right to live on the land that once belonged to them, a land that was previously Mexico. The actor later appeared in numerous runaway productions of westerns south of the border, where he usually played a proud and uncompromising idealist fighting for the cause of the Revolution. The last phase of his career, from the late 1960s to 1982, was mainly occupied by a series of productions of Spaghetti westerns that exported a similar trope, plot, and characters — albeit steeped in a large dose of cynicism and irony — to a different country. The final role was that of Don Braulio Zavala, the antagonist of the titular gringo outlaw in Fred Schepisi's *Barbarosa* (1982).

Old age led Roland to develop a strong desire to advocate for the cause associated with this newly adopted ideological mindset. During this second phase, his ethnicity emerges not merely as a social type, as it did at the beginning, but more deeply as a personal choice that enables the actor to comment upon the contradictions of the society in which he lives. Firstly, his discourse on Mexico acquired a nostalgic overtone. For instance, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1971, the actor, in his late sixties, recalled his childhood in Ciudad Juárez, describing the country as a land of contrasts, made of poverty and genuine sentiments. Mexico is associated with a geography of the soul that mingles a real place with a heart full of memories. However, his homeland was not just a place to be seen with eternal

homesickness. Roland often highlighted his fondness for Mexican cinema, mainly expressed toward the film director of the golden age Emilio Fernández, as well as his admiration for actors extremely popular in the US, such as Pedro Armandáriz, Miguel Inclán, Pedro Infante, Mario Moreno (Cantinflas), Dolores del Río, and Maria Felix. Equally stressed in numerous Spanish-speaking journals and magazines was the admiration for cherished historical figures representing national identity, above all, Pancho Villa.[5] Furthermore, Mexico often became a source of inspiration for all his most personal TV or film projects, and a means to draw attention to and promote the characters he played. Apart from *Blood on the Horns*, a script co-written with Niven Busch, inspired by his father's life, Roland penned many original stories. One of them, *La Dulcera*, recounted in first person the story of a *soldadera* of Pancho Villa who follows the leader through all his battles and prepares *bisnaga*, the cactus candy the leader of the Revolution adored. She is also the mother of Tiburcio, who later betrays Villa. The story was later sold to NBC and provided the foundation for the episode number 24 of the first season of *Wagon Train* (NBC, 1957-62; ABC 1962-65), titled *The Bernal Sierra Story*. To fit the show's format, the story was set in the days of Benito Juárez rather than those of Villa, and the focus of the treachery shifted from the traitor to the victim. Roland starred in the episode playing Bernal Sierra, a man who escapes from a sentence to death for armed resistance against the troops of Maximilian I and joins the wagon train in Texas to take revenge against a fellow combatant killed by a gringo who hides among the pioneers (AMPAS, f. 164, 165). In the promotion of all these films and TV series, rather than downplaying his *Mexicanidad* as a blemish to be erased in assimilatory practices, Roland literally used it as a signature, a source of pride and empowerment. This tendency also surfaces at the level of the performance.

In the post-war years, Roland's acting style was still rooted in a pragmatic, pre-Method approach, which adopted the technique of inventing characters on the basis of a natural and instinctive ability rather than using the complex procedures established by the Actors Studio. He was more at ease with cool wit or ironic suavity than with dramatic bursts of anger or despair that were typical of the post-war phase of acting. The vitality of his roles is particularly evident in his portrayal of Escobar in *Bandido!* (Richard Fleischer, 1956). Here, instinctive reactions and colorful, almost improvised gestures — such as the quick sign of the cross — are designed to evoke a sympathetic response in the Spanish-speaking segment of the mainstream audience. Ethnicity is often the object of a self-ironic approach that uses a playful detachment in addressing such representations. Nonetheless, this sort of aloofness does not contradict a fight for better roles and rather reveals the importance of wearing an ironic outfit. Roland often recalled that his desire to change the Cisco Kid's scripts back in 1946-47 was intended to highlight that the protagonist was a well-read man who quoted Shakespeare or Mexican poets. In an article published in *The New York Times* in 1969, he complained about the stereotypical image of Mexicans wearing sombreros, going barefoot, and playing the guitar (AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 9"). The Mexicans he wished to portray were men of honor, courage, and idealism but also extremely intelligent, full of confidence, and self-ironic.

A narcissistic approach and a transgenerational formula

The relationship between old age and ethnic self-awareness can thus be seen at three levels: personal, ideological, and semiotic or performative. This framework only partially reflected the marketing strategy of studio production. The trade press surely promoted Roland as a transnational actor both before and after World War II. This is exemplified by *Cine-Mundial*, the Spanish-language version of *Moving Picture World*, a magazine documenting Hollywood's expanding influence in Latin American markets and the emergence of Mexico's national cinema (Serna, 2014). In a 1941 issue of *Cine-Mundial*, Roland's marriage to Bennett served as an excellent opportunity to illustrate that Luis Alonso — the newspaper used his real name — was the perfect teacher for his wife when Bennett needed to learn the Spanish language for a film production she was preparing for Warner Bros. ("Hollywood. En las verdes colinas del poblado de Calabasas," 1941, p. 465). During the post-war era, the bilingualism mentioned by *Cine-Mundial* remained a crucial aspect, as it showcased his ability to work in both industries, including Hollywood runaway productions in Mexico, where the knowledge of the local language was highly valued. However, this is just one facet of a larger narrative that characterized the more personal strategy of the actor, a strategy that was later confirmed by his performances on-screen and discourses — in Spanish or English — off-screen. It was in this last phase that he aimed to build up and stabilize the different image developed during the two years of Cisco.

In the last years of his life and career, the actor applied a conservatory and narcissistic approach to aging issues. Supported by usual claims over his healthy habits, dietary restrictions (apart from red wine), and active life daily spent on the tennis courts of the Beverly Hills Tennis Club, the conservatory approach represents a strong connection to the energetic and positive attitude that characterized his maturity. He always bragged about having maintained the same waist size since his twenties. Furthermore, with maturity also came a sense of complete detachment toward all the things that had caused suffering in his past, when, back in his twenties, he struggled to be recognized as a skilled actor. A transgenerational formula also played a pivotal role in this final phase, mainly applied to a particular attitude toward success or lack of it. One of the most repeated advices from Roland to younger actors was to avoid worrying. During an interview he states: "I do not eat myself up inside by fretting about things. That's what makes people old" (AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 9").

This transgenerational formula, seeking a possible dialogue with a younger generation, is also present in his final role, that of Don Braulio in Schepisi's revisionist western *Barbarosa.* Visibly old and tired, Roland plays a one-legged patron of a big hacienda who harbors a deep hatred for the outlaw gringo named Barbarosa, performed by the legendary country singer Willie Nelson. In the film, Roland shows a worn-out version of the narcissistic image that he has kept alive for years. The first time the viewer sees him, Don Braulio bemoans the loss of many Mexicans killed by the gringo. He despises Barbarosa, blaming him for the gunshot wound that led to the amputation of his leg. Out of anger, the old man

encourages the youth around him by recounting stories meant to ignite their courage and fuel their desire for revenge against their Anglo enemy. All he wants is a retaliation against the outlaw. However, as the film progresses, it becomes clear that the two men cannot live apart, not only because of their kinship — Barbarosa has a child with Don Braulio's daughter — but also because they share the same imaginary border landscape. One cannot exist without the other. The director gives Roland only three scenes, but they are incredibly powerful. In these moments, the actor concludes his career by portraying on the screen the complex love-hate relationship that, on the one hand, unites the two ethnic groups and, on the other, reflects Roland's life as an in-between man, a *fronterizo*. Simultaneously, he shows to younger generations that hatred toward others can be a harbinger of self-destruction.

Roland's last years occupied a limited niche in which ethnicity, albeit deeply expressed and articulated, still appeared uncrossable and distant. To a certain extent, the risk of remaining within the limits that characterized the first years was still high. Nonetheless, his most personal films, interviews, and deliberate choices in private life reflected a clear intention to articulate an ideological perspective grounded on a specifically Mexican experience that also had a universal overtone. This perspective called for a reassessment and a deconstruction of the mainstream audiences' preconceived notions and categories, expanding their perception of Mexico and its population. In this light, Roland exemplifies a positive outlook on aging, especially when compared to Ramon Novarro, for whom aging was never easy (Rodríguez, 2004). The ability to address younger generations by proposing old age as a synonym for trustworthiness identifies an entirely different historical moment from the one obsessed with youth and rejuvenating approaches. Compared to the construction of girlhood as a route to stardom for many white women in the classical era of Hollywood,[6] the old age of Gilbert Roland certainly took advantage of a different gender but also turned on its head a preconception about getting old, suggesting that aging could become a means to express reliability and a desire for authenticity (Bolton & Lobalzo Wright, 2016). Thus, old age turns into an opportunity to express a specific stance on ethnic identity, one that simultaneously suggests that aging can be a synonym for credit rather than supremacy and wisdom rather than conventional values. In this way, Roland could deconstruct the initial stereotype and shape a new horizon of meanings related to what it meant to be a Latino in the US.

In the final analysis, old age gives Roland the strength to endure through an association not with a national stereotype of Latin masculinity but with a form of ethnic identity that is not afraid of expressing a deep-seated skepticism regarding the capacity of American society to fully accept and validate an ethnic group that was for so long forgotten, avoided, ignored, or misrepresented in a merely exotic image. With his mature presence and established position as a fulfilled actor, he could also align with a cultural context marked by a revival of the importance of ethnic pride in American society, a moment in which ethnicity was no longer connoted as a simple Latin look, but as a sign of authenticity and sincerity. By examining his career, we can assess the different stages of the process that continue to

advance the interests of ethnic groups in American society. We also discover compelling evidence that it is indeed possible to embrace the journey of aging with wisdom and grace.

Biographical Note

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Notes

[1] According to Laura Isabel Serna, for instance, the American audience, primary source of revenue, had very few objections to stereotypical representations. Hence, the studio executives preferred to maintain the same codes, simply being evasive about the location. In this way, a direct connection between a place and a population was less clear (Serna, 2014).

[2] Many modern sources remember that he was one of the biggest movie fan in the world. In all his interviews Roland recalled that he "played hooky from school to watch serials at a local movie house" in El Paso. The city of El Paso is never forgotten in his memoirs and interviews (Rodríguez, 2004, p. 90; AMPAS, "Scrapbook n. 3").

[3] Similarly, Dolores Del Río and Ramon Novarro were cast as generic 'foreigners'. Del Río is a Native raised by a Mexican family in *Ramona* (Edwin Carewe, 1928), a Polynesian in *Bird of Paradise* (King Vidor, 1932),

the titular French woman in *Madame DuBarry* (William Dieterle, 1934). Navarro is a Russian lieutenant in *Mata Hari* (George Fitzmaurice, 1931) and the titular Jewish man in *Ben-Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925).
[4] Fairbanks nonetheless remains one of the most evident activators of social and cultural changes that also hailed the lower classes' taste and their idea of fun (May 1980, pp. 96-146).
[5] "As a small boy", the actor writes in a tribute, "I remember him on the steps of the *Aduana* (Spanish for customs) after he captures the town from the *federales*. I looked at him in silent admiration. He was the *gran guerrillero*. The fearless liberator. Pancho Villa was the savior of Mexico" (AMPAS, f. 204).
[6] Gaylyn Studlar's excellent volume *Precocious Charms* (2013) largely explains this connection between female stardom and the construction of girlhood.

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Intergenerational Influence Culture: Reframing Ageing through Social Media Narratives*

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This article examines how digital platforms are reshaping cultural representations of ageing, with a focus on the rise of elderly influencers as symbolic agents in an evolving influence culture. Moving beyond youth-centred narratives of digital fluency, the study explores the case of Gabriella Tupini, an octogenarian psychologist whose YouTube channel challenges ageist and gendered assumptions about technological competence, self-representation, and cultural authority. Using a qualitative case study approach that integrates content analysis and netnography, the article investigates how figures like Tupini reconfigure the logics of influence culture by employing alternative repertoires of expertise, affective resonance, and narrative intimacy. The analysis addresses three interrelated research questions: How do elderly influencers such as Tupini contribute to reconfiguring ageing narratives via social media? What discursive and relational strategies support their authority, particularly around therapeutic discourse and self-disclosure? To what extent do these practices disrupt stereotypical boundaries of age, visibility, and symbolic capital in digital ecosystems? Findings highlight how Tupini's unscripted videos promote cognitive participation and emotional identification across generational lines, cultivating a distinctive form of intergenerational digital intimacy. Her rejection of commercial strategies and emphasis on reflective discourse contrasts with dominant metrics-driven influencer practices. Rather than embodying performative vitality or entrepreneurial self-branding, her digital presence affirms the value of experience, introspection, and psychological insight. This article advances the notion of "intergenerational influence culture" to describe emerging dynamics in which older adults not only access but reshape digital participation. While such cases offer emancipatory potential, they may also obscure structural exclusions and reinforce neoliberal ideals of productive ageing. By foregrounding alternative imaginaries and affective labour, the study contributes to critical debates on age, media, and agency in platform societies.

Keywords: Ageing, Digital storytelling, Social media, Influence culture, Intergenerational communication

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Introduction

In recent years, social media have not only transformed everyday communicative practices but also reshaped the symbolic frameworks through which ageing is culturally understood. Central to this shift is the expansion of "influence culture" - a socio-digital formation that redistributes visibility and symbolic capital through algorithmic infrastructures and affective labour (Pedroni, 2025; Murru, Pedroni & Tosoni, 2024). Although this phenomenon is typically associated with younger, digitally native users (Palfrey & Gasser, 2011; Prensky, 2001), an expanding body of cultural and sociological research invites a reconsideration of such generational exclusivity. In this context, the emergence of elderly influencers, sometimes referred to as "granfluencers", illustrates how older adults are increasingly asserting their presence in digital ecosystems that were once demographically exclusionary.

This article explores the role of elderly influencers in reconfiguring narratives of ageing on social media, focusing on the case of Gabriella Tupini, an octogenarian psychologist whose YouTube channel has attracted a substantial and intergenerational audience. Her trajectory challenges prevailing stereotypes about technological incompetence in later life and demonstrates how influence culture can be reshaped through alternative repertoires of authority, including psychological expertise, autobiographical disclosure, and narrative intimacy. We argue that such cases exemplify an emerging "intergenerational influence culture": a formation in which digital participation not only crosses generational boundaries but also unsettles symbolic hierarchies, privileging youth-centred visibility.

Our analysis foregrounds the intersection of ageing, media engagement, and social positioning, showing how figures like Tupini resist normative portrayals of old age as decline, passivity, or invisibility. Social media platforms are far from neutral or inherently inclusive; rather, they operate as contested terrains in which ageing identities are performed, negotiated, and legitimised. In these spaces, older adults exercise agency not merely as users but as narrators of lived experience, constructing counter-discourses that challenge ageism and revalue later life.

This article contributes to critical gerontology and media studies by addressing underexplored questions about older adults' practices of digital self-representation and symbolic labour. It pursues three interrelated research questions:

(1) How do elderly influencers like Gabriella Tupini contribute to reshaping narratives of ageing through social media?

(2) What communicative strategies underpin their authority and foster intergenerational intimacy, particularly within therapeutic and autobiographical discourse?

(3) In what ways do such figures challenge ageist stereotypes and reconfigure influence culture, generating new forms of symbolic capital and intergenerational connectivity?

By addressing these questions, we aim to demonstrate that ageing subjects are not merely adapting to digital environments but actively redefining their logics, values, and imaginaries.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing the case study method as its central framework. While qualitative analysis forms the principal axis of investigation, quantitative metrics, such as view counts and audience engagement data relating to Gabriella Tupini's media practices, are also integrated to enhance contextual depth. The case was selected not only for its emblematic relevance within the Italian cultural context, but also for its capacity to critically interrogate and redefine the role of older influencers active on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

The term "granfluencer" reflects the neoliberal extension of productivity into later life, wherein older individuals, through their online visibility and influence, are framed as active contributors to market and social dynamics. By engaging in practices of personal branding, entrepreneurialism, and continuous self-optimisation, these figures embody a model of ageing aligned with neoliberal ideals of individual agency, productivity, and consumer engagement, positioning later life as a stage for economic and symbolic value creation (Syachfitrianti, Setiawardhani, & Kim, 2022).

In Italy, where individuals aged 65 and over comprise 24.1% of the population (Istat, 2023), older adults are traditionally confined to familial roles – particularly as "nonni" (grandparents) responsible for intergenerational transmission (Collicelli, 2024). Gabriella Tupini diverges from this normative image, illustrating a hybrid positioning at the intersection of self-promotion and digital performativity.

Tupini exemplifies a granfluencer who, while retaining her generational identity, departs from the conventional depiction of older adults as exclusively affectionate and familial figures. Her professional background in psychology equips her with discursive tools that enable a thoughtful and reflective mode of intergenerational engagement. This stands in contrast to internationally known granfluencers such as Baddie Winkle and Iris Apfel (see Figure 1), who deploy alternative strategies for reconfiguring ageing identities.

Baddie Winkle (United States) subverts normative age expectations through a playful and provocative aesthetic. Her persona challenges conventional ageing stereotypes via humour and irreverence, transforming mobility aids into stylistic statements and reframing ageing and disability as compatible with sexuality and visual spectacle (Banerjee, 2023).

Similarly, Iris Apfel has achieved iconic status by mobilising her distinctive fashion sensibility to foster cross-generational appeal. Her work connects evolving senior consumer preferences with wider production and consumption trends, repositioning older age within a discourse of aesthetic capital and design expertise (Syachfitrianti et al., 2022).

By contrast, Tupini foregrounds professional authority and intellectual discourse. Her content fosters cross-generational resonance through cognitive engagement and recognition of expertise. This approach not only bridges generational divides but reconfigures the epistemic and affective expectations attached to older social media users. It displaces superficial notions of intergenerational connection with deeper, more dialogic forms of exchange, informed by therapeutic discourse and autobiographical reflection.

Granfluencer	*Platform style*	*Discursive register*	*Mode of authority*	*Target audience*
Gabriella Tupini	Unscripted, reflective videos	Therapeutic, intellectual	Psychological expertise	Intergenerational, Italy
Baddie Winkle	Visual provocation	Humorous, ironic	Aesthetic disruption	Global, youth-focused
Iris Apfel	Stylised fashion statements	Cultural commentary	Iconic taste and legacy	Design-savvy audiences

Figure 1. Discursive positioning of three granfluencers

To investigate these questions, we adopted a qualitative case study design centred on Gabriella Tupini's YouTube channel. Methodologically, the research combines content analysis with netnography (Kozinets, 2010), examining both the mechanisms of content production and the dynamics of audience engagement, including patterns of interaction and participation. The empirical sample comprises twenty videos, selected according to two complementary criteria: the first ten videos chronologically uploaded (to trace the origins and evolution of her digital presence), and the ten most viewed videos as of October 2024 (to explore audience reception and resonance). Additionally, all videos explicitly addressing intergenerational dialogue were included, for a total of 9 videos. The selected material was drawn from a corpus of 166 videos uploaded between July 2019 and July 2024. Each video typically ranges between 30 and 40 minutes in length, with some generating up to 1,500 user comments and a total cumulative view count exceeding seven million.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), conducted in parallel with netnographic observation, led to the identification of four major thematic clusters that structure Tupini's digital discourse (see Figure 2): (1) *Childhood trauma* and the inner child: reflections on unresolved psychological wounds from early life, often articulated in critical relation to therapeutic prescriptions such as unconditional forgiveness; (2) *Therapeutic discourse* and emotional introspection: the use of psychological language to frame self-understanding, relational dynamics, and emotional labour; (3) *Intergenerational tensions* and institutional critique: narratives addressing youth alienation, adult hostility, and critiques of digital culture and formal education; (4) *Spiritual development*: a syncretic vision of "evolutionary magic" that merges psychological insight with intuitive metaphysics and esoteric cosmologies. These clusters are not rigid categories but overlapping interpretive zones that reveal the affective and epistemic textures of Tupini's influence. Her monologues draw strategically on autobiographical memory, psychological framing, and audience resonance to foster cross-generational connection.

The combination of analytical modalities adopted content analysis, netnography, and thematic mapping enables a fine-grained examination of how ageing, authority, and therapeutic intimacy are enacted in platform contexts. While the focus on a single case may limit generalisability, it offers, in line with Flyvbjerg's (2006) defence of the case study, a powerful lens through which to interrogate emergent cultural phenomena and challenge age-based exclusions in digital participation.

The construction of ageism

Social media increasingly shape the identities of older individuals, just as they do for younger generations, with particular emphasis on how later life is mediated and rendered visible. Demographic changes have contributed to the emergence of a so-called "third age", characterised by greater social and economic participation among older adults (Cheng, 2023). However, online representations of this demographic remain constrained by persistent ageist stereotypes, often perpetuated by younger users and embedded within the logics of platform culture.

From a constructivist perspective, ageing is shaped by the sociocultural contexts in which it is represented and negotiated. The concept of ageism captures the tension between ageing as a potential resource and ageing as a "social burden," thus positioning older adults as marginalised subjects in policy, cultural, and market domains. This marginalisation persists regardless of individuals' physical, mental, or material resources (Gilleard & Higgs, 2014), underlining the structural nature of symbolic exclusion.

Digital media research has frequently overlooked older cohorts, reflecting a broader epistemological bias towards youth-dominated demographics. In Italy, for instance, only 7.3% of individuals aged 65-74 reported using social media in 2016 (Sala, Cerati, & Gaia, 2023). More recent data, however, indicate substantial growth: the Digital 2021 report by We Are Social and Hootsuite shows that 15% of Italian internet users over the age of 65 now actively engage with social media platforms (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021). While this suggests growing inclusion, inequalities in access, confidence, and cultural legitimacy persist.

A key dimension of this exclusion lies in the lack of social capital, which Bourdieu (1986) defines as the network of relational resources and social ties that enable access to power and recognition. In digital contexts, social capital intersects with technological competence to constitute symbolic capital, legitimising one's visibility and influence online. Older individuals who lack such capital are often relegated to peripheral positions within platform hierarchies. By contrast, those who succeed in establishing a digital presence frequently possess elite social capital, often derived from professional or familial networks. Biographical experiences, especially those linked to occupational identity, may lay the groundwork for digital competence in later life (Aroldi & Carlo, 2016). Yet access alone is insufficient: low perceived self-efficacy, the absence of tailored support, and structural

barriers to digital training continue to constrain meaningful participation (Wilson, Gates, Vijaykumar, & Morgan, 2023).

In response to this exclusionary environment, Creative Gerontology has emerged as an interdisciplinary framework that foregrounds the narrative and expressive capacities of older adults. Rejecting deficit-based models of ageing, this perspective underscores how older individuals can contribute to public discourse through creativity, lived knowledge, and self-expression (Cohen, 2006). Within this framework, promoting digital literacy among older adults is increasingly viewed as a cultural imperative (Colombo, Aroldi, & Carlo, 2018).

This process of digital inclusion is shaped by what Hirsch and Silverstone (1992) define as "domestication": the integration of new technologies into everyday life and cultural routines. Within households, intergenerational relations frequently serve as informal sites of ICT learning, particularly through interactions with younger family members (Carlo & Buscicchio, 2023). These exchanges facilitate not only technological skill acquisition but also the formation of affective ties, contributing to the mitigation of the so-called grey digital divide. For many older individuals, digital media serve as tools to "keep up with the times," sustain social relevance, and reassert agency in a platform-mediated world (Aroldi & Carlo, 2016).

Understanding how older adults engage with social media is thus essential, not only for expanding normative conceptions of participation, but also for contesting the cultural marginalisation that continues to equate ageing with decline. Older users are not passive consumers; they increasingly construct digital narratives that challenge symbolic invisibility and reconfigure later life as a site of reflection, creativity, and social value.

Reconceptualising Ageing through Social Media

The role of social media in reshaping perceptions of ageing has moved from peripheral to central, establishing itself as a key arena for negotiating the symbolic boundaries of later life. In recent years, internet access among adults aged 65 and over has risen significantly. In Italy, between 2019 and 2023, this demographic recorded a 16.1 percentage point increase in digital exposure (Agcom, 2023), reflecting broader shifts in how ageing is lived, represented, and made visible.

While platforms such as Instagram and TikTok remain strongly generational, primarily attracting users under the age of 30 others, notably Facebook and YouTube, function as more inclusive digital environments. According to the Pew Research Center (2024), these two platforms are the only ones widely used across all age cohorts in the United States, effectively operating as digital *agorás* where intergenerational interaction and convergence take place.

A growing body of literature has explored the psychosocial benefits of digital engagement among older adults. Li and Zhou (2021) investigate gendered patterns in internet use and their impact on subjective well-being, while Cho, Choi, & Lee (2023) examine disparities in

well-being among older individuals living alone versus those cohabiting. In the Italian context, Furlan and Meggiolaro (2025) confirm that internet use positively affects both sociality and emotional satisfaction, particularly when employed to sustain interpersonal relationships.

The emergence of granfluencers, a term originating in journalistic discourse and typically used to describe individuals over 70 who attract younger audiences on social media (Jerrentrup, 2023), illustrates the increasing centrality of older adults within digital publics. These figures actively contest ageist stereotypes that depict later life as passive, dependent, or aesthetically irrelevant. By engaging in dynamic and visible intergenerational interactions, granfluencers introduce new models of age-related participation (Ng & Indran, 2023).

They can thus be understood as "cultural intermediaries" in the Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu, 1979): actors who reshape the symbolic economy of ageing in digital cultures by promoting values such as lifelong learning, reinvention, and creative experimentation. This is especially evident among fashion granfluencers, who challenge expectations of appearance, propriety, and generational legibility by merging stylistic self-expression with cross-generational resonance (Ghosh, 2023; Syachfitrianti et al., 2022).

Yet such visibility is not devoid of ambivalence. A systematic review by Shao and Yin (2025) shows that while these representations can subvert ageist tropes and promote agency, they may also reinforce a neoliberal emphasis on *performative vitality, a model* that marginalises experiences of illness, dependency, and structural vulnerability.

Mainstream portrayals of ageing often adhere to the "successful ageing" framework, developed by Rowe and Kahn (1997), which valorises health, independence, and productivity in later life. Within social media environments, this framework becomes performative: ageing is deemed "successful" only when rendered digitally visible, while those excluded from such visibility are symbolically erased (Gehrmann, 2023). This logic overlaps with long-standing medicalised discourses that pathologise ageing, positioning it as a process requiring clinical or lifestyle intervention (Estes & Binney, 1989). Public narratives increasingly frame older adults as social, economic, and emotional burdens (Victor, 2004), whose worth must be justified through productivity and autonomy.

This *consumerist empowerment* paradigm (Shankar, Cherrier & Canniford, 2006) aligns well-being with consumption and optimisation, offering a narrow and exclusionary ideal of self-worth based on independence and material success. Western digital cultures tend, therefore, to flatten later-life experiences into a singular aspirational script.

In contrast, alternative narratives are emerging within digital spaces, ones that affirm ageing as visible, meaningful, and identity-constitutive, rather than something to be concealed or denied. These counter-narratives draw on cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) rather than dominant norms of beauty or productivity, reconfiguring older adulthood as a space of expression, reflexivity, and relational complexity.

Social media platforms enable the articulation of these alternative imaginaries. Through digital storytelling, older individuals assert knowledge, share lived experiences, and craft identities that resist dominant scripts of decline and irrelevance. These practices support

new forms of symbolic participation, challenging the invisibilisation of ageing and affirming later life as socially and narratively generative.

In this regard, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model (1969) offers a particularly useful lens. As Zhong (2023) argues, older social media creators perform the self in ways that respond to both platform logics and audience expectations. These are not simply strategic displays or passive self-reflections but forms of relational identity-making shaped by algorithmic infrastructures. These performances are dynamic and emotionally resonant, structured around the creator's desire for recognition and the audience's longing for intimacy and meaning.

A foundational case in this regard is Peter Oakley (known online as *Geriatric1927*) who launched a YouTube channel in 2006. Through autobiographical narration and emotional openness, Oakley fostered intergenerational connection and, at one point, managed one of the platform's most subscribed channels (Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009). His trajectory demonstrates the potential of older adults to use digital media for self-expression, empathy, and community-building. Nevertheless, generalising such cases risks obscuring the structural exclusions that limit digital access and voice for many older individuals.

Indeed, platform infrastructures are governed by commercial and algorithmic logics that prioritise visibility, coherence, and affective appeal. Content that diverges from these imperatives often remains marginal. Even when older adults do achieve visibility, it is often conditional dependent on their capacity to meet the aesthetic and affective demands of platform capitalism.

Gabriella Tupini's digital presence exemplifies this negotiation in distinctive ways. Her videos eschew dominant aesthetic norms and monetisation strategies, favouring unscripted monologues rich in affect and grounded in psychological expertise and spiritual reflection. Rather than spectacle, she offers cultural authority rooted in presence and resonance. She does not perform youthful vitality; instead, she provides reflective density, emotional openness, and a model of later life that affirms authenticity, care, and intergenerational dialogue.

Case Study: Gabriella Tupini

As of October 2024, Gabriella Tupini's YouTube channel had amassed 143,000 subscribers and hosted 166 self-produced videos, each attracting between 6,000 and 400,000 views, with a cumulative total of over seven million. The channel, inaugurated on 20 July 2019 with a short video entitled *Introduzione alla magia evolutiva* [*Introduction to Evolutionary Magic*], initially followed an unusually prolific rhythm, with near-daily uploads for over three years. In the past year, production has slowed to two or three videos per month, although Tupini has maintained a consistent online presence. The videos, typically 25 to 40 minutes in length, contrast with the short-form immediacy of platforms such as TikTok or Instagram Reels. Yet YouTube remains a medium conducive to extended, reflective content, particularly in

psychological and philosophical genres (Wattenhofer, Wattenhofer, & Zhu, 2012). For Tupini, this format facilitates the exploration of complex themes and fosters a sustained relationship with her audience.

The visual aesthetics of her videos reinforce her recognisability. Filmed in her Roman home, furnished with antique decor and greenery, Tupini often appears against digitally rendered natural backdrops – forests, waves, starry skies – wearing brightly coloured clothing and adorned with numerous rings. The structure of her videos is stylistically consistent: each entry is numbered, titled in uppercase, and introduced with a standardised greeting. While her delivery lacks formal structure and often includes thematic repetition, this appears to be a conscious stylistic choice. Rather than offering didactic instruction, she aims to transmit a personal and spiritual legacy. Her tone is spontaneous, intimate, and affective, echoing Baym's (2015) concept of *imagined intimacy*, wherein sustained presence and self-disclosure foster a sense of personal connection with audiences.

The most viewed videos revolve around several recurring thematic concerns (see Figure 2). These include: (1) the long-term effects of childhood trauma and the centrality of the *inner child*, often discussed critically in relation to therapeutic prescriptions such as unconditional forgiveness; (2) broader therapeutic discourse focused on emotional introspection and affective resonance, shaping both the tone and relational dynamic of the channel; (3) intergenerational tensions and adult hostility towards youth, particularly concerning digital culture and institutional critique; and (4) the notion of *evolutionary magic* – a syncretic and intuitive framework of spiritual development that fuses psychological insight with alternative cosmologies.

Thematic cluster	*No. of videos*	*Avg. duration (min)*	*Average views*	*Average comments*	*Representative Videos1*
Childhood trauma / Inner child	3	38.54	270.230	2377	*Perdonare i genitori* [*Forgiving One's Parents*]; *Autostima e Autosvalutazione* [*Self-esteem and Self-evaluation*]; *Piacere a se stessi* [Self-pleasure)
Intergenerational tensions and youth alienation	2	33.35	68.374	820,5	*Videogiochi e smartphone non fanno male* [*Video Games and Smartphones Are Not Harmful*]; Figli incompresi [*Misunderstood Children*]
Therapeutic discourse and emotional introspection	2	31.2	370.875	2777	*Pensieri positivi* [Positive thoughts]; *Come guarire la psiche* [How to Heal the Psych]
Spiritual development	3	18.59	302.531,3	997	*Introduzione alla magia evolutiva* [*Introduction to Evolutionary Magic*]; *Dove andiamo nel sonno* [Where we Go in our Sleep]; *Contattare i Defunti* [Contact the Deceased]

Figure 2. Thematic Clusters in Gabriella Tupini's Video Corpus: Topics, Reach, and Representative Titles[1]

Exemplary statements include:

> If I forgive my parents who harmed my inner child, I wrong my child. (*Perdonare i genitori*)

> If a boy prefers video games to reality, it means he is unwell. It is not the game that harms him, it is reality that is more damaging than the game. (*Videogiochi e smartphone non fanno male*)

> School is boring because it fails to stimulate. The Ministry of Education prohibits public education because everything must conform to their programmes. (*Videogiochi e smartphone non fanno male*)

> Magic is made with the spirit, with the soul. You have to enter a certain dimension. If you do not, it is not magic. (*Introduzione alla magia evolutiva*)

These statements are typically accompanied by autobiographical fragments and anecdotal reflections, but seldom by systematic academic references. Occasional mentions of Freud or Castaneda emerge, albeit informally and unsystematically. Her use of psychological discourse does not function as conventional instruction but rather operates through mediated affective resonance. The unscripted delivery, minimalist aesthetic, and lack of monetisation collectively enhance a sense of authenticity, particularly among younger viewers, who perceive her as intellectually honest and emotionally trustworthy.

Audience engagement is especially intense in the comment sections, ranging from 500 to over 1,500 comments per video. These are overwhelmingly positive, often expressing gratitude for her clarity and for the emotional reassurance her content provides. Viewers frequently share personal experiences, sometimes in vulnerable and confessional terms, attributing psychological relief and recognition to her videos.

> She exudes a calmness and tranquillity that puts everyone at ease. She feels like family. In 38 minutes, she managed to explain the causes of social issues common to many families. (YouTube comment, 29 July 2024, female)

> Now I feel like I've found the grandmother I never knew – a grandmother who speaks to me with calmness and sweetness. (YouTube comment, 31 July 2024, female)

> I'm a 16-year-old boy who loves to ask himself questions… Thank you for giving young people like me – who often feel much older than they should – the tools to work on themselves and live more serenely in a chaotic world. (YouTube comment, 30 July 2024, male)

> It had been years since I allowed myself to cry. Listening to you speak made me feel I could do so freely. (YouTube comment, 1 August 2024, female)

In this sense, Tupini's channel exemplifies what Furedi (2004) terms *therapeutic culture*, in which media platforms serve as arenas for mediated self-expression and shared emotional labour. The intimacy fostered in the comment sections is further reinforced by her occasional direct responses and use of "likes," cultivating a sense of mutual recognition and emotional reciprocity.

The channel's level of professionalisation is virtually non-existent. It contains no monetised elements, product placements, or official partnerships. In July 2024, however, Tupini self-published a 300-page book on Amazon, which became a minor bestseller. Reviews noted its amateur formatting and lack of pagination, features that mirror the informal

ethos of her video production. This anti-commercial stance paradoxically enhances her legitimacy in the eyes of her followers, who associate authenticity with independence from platform metrics.

Beyond YouTube, Tupini maintains a decentralised digital presence on Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, and TikTok, though she does not personally manage these accounts. The Instagram profile *@tivoglioparlare*, curated by authorised collaborator Miriam Calderano, reached 119,000 followers by August 2024 and includes 135 reels, with view counts ranging from 20,000 to over one million. On TikTok, although no official account exists, videos tagged *#gabriellatupini* have accrued over two million views, with some individual clips receiving up to 100,000 likes. Telegram and Facebook groups function as extensions of her community, enabling interpretive dialogue and offline collective engagement.

These dynamics suggest a participatory and decentralised ecology of dissemination, consistent with Jenkins, Ford, and Green's (2013) concept of *participatory culture*, in which users act as active curators and mediators of content. The strategic diversification across platforms enables her to reach heterogeneous audiences with differing media practices. Her preference for YouTube as the primary medium aligns with the affordances of vlogging, which supports extended autobiographical reflection through audiovisual storytelling (Burgess & Green, 2018). YouTube's interactive features, particularly its comment system, facilitate intergenerational dialogue and the circulation of emotionally resonant narratives.

From a sociological standpoint, Gabriella Tupini occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of psychological discourse, elder storytelling, and intergenerational digital intimacy. Through the lens of the *Stereotype Content Model* (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), her persona blends warmth and competence, attributes that generate trust and admiration across age cohorts. Unlike many influencers who rely on spectacle or provocation, Tupini fosters engagement through calm presence, reflective delivery, and sustained narrative continuity. Her digital identity functions as a relational composite: part grandmother, part therapist, part spiritual guide. The cultural authority she exercises stems not from celebrity status, but from the resonance of her voice and the depth of her listening.

Mental Health, Self-Intimacy, and Digital Therapeutic Spaces

The audience's engagement with Gabriella Tupini's content must be situated within the broader cultural prominence of psychological well-being in contemporary social media discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic, marked by widespread trauma and prolonged social isolation, intensified demands for emotional connection and psychological support. During this period, social media usage surged, offering users vital means to maintain interpersonal ties and find solace in online communities (Nguyen et al., 2020). Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok increasingly served as spaces for sharing personal

experiences, expressing vulnerability, and accessing mental health resources, thereby mitigating some of the psychosocial effects of isolation (Ostic et al., 2021).

This broader cultural shift has generated a marked increase in mental health-related content across platforms, ranging from *autopathographies* (autobiographical narratives of illness) and recovery to professionally curated therapeutic materials. These communicative practices serve multiple functions: raising awareness, reducing stigma, and fostering hope for healing (Ziavras & Diamantaki, 2024). Personal storytelling facilitates emotional identification and promotes a sense of community, while the inclusion of professional voices lends credibility and guidance. This evolution signals a reconfiguration of influence culture, wherein vulnerability and psychological introspection increasingly replace earlier ideals of aspirational perfection.

Instagram, once dominated by highly curated displays of achievement and aesthetic control, has in recent years experienced a shift towards content foregrounding emotional openness, illness, and affective complexity (Maslen & Lupton, 2020). This trend responds to a cultural demand for authenticity, where public articulations of suffering are re-coded as forms of relational capital. Digital storytelling becomes a mode of affective labour: creators offer emotionally resonant narratives that deepen perceived intimacy, particularly around themes of trauma, healing, and intergenerational pain.

Yet the circulation of vulnerability is not politically neutral. The conditions under which visibility is granted or withheld remain shaped by structural inequalities. The digital divide continues to follow gendered patterns. Older women, in particular, are statistically less likely to access or feel confident using digital technologies, not only due to technical barriers, but also because of enduring cultural narratives that construct technology as a masculinised domain (Sawchuk & Crow, 2012). This asymmetry raises critical questions about who gains visibility, whose experiences are recognised as therapeutically valid, and under what conditions such narratives can emerge and circulate.

In this context, Gabriella Tupini's digital presence assumes a counter-stereotypical significance. Her content frequently centres on emotional repair, psychological introspection, and the long-term impact of familial relationships, especially the parent–child bond. These dynamics are not only explicitly addressed but also pervade the affective fabric of her discourse, even when not thematised directly. This orientation aligns with broader patterns in online culture, where parenting and intergenerational themes serve as powerful affective anchors for engagement (Abidin, 2017).

To conceptualise the mechanisms operative in Tupini's narrative approach, Zeavin's (2021) notion of "self-intimacy" proves especially salient. Self-intimacy refers to the construction of a relational public self through the digital sharing of personal thoughts and emotions. By disclosing her inner experiences and reflecting on her emotional history, Tupini invites viewers into a space of shared vulnerability. This performative openness fosters familiarity and trust, reinforcing the perception of her channel as a psychologically safe and emotionally intimate space.

Lupton's (2017) concept of "affective atmospheres" further elucidates the emotional textures at play. These atmospheres are not reducible to individual emotions but consist of

shared affective intensities that shape collective experience. Social media platforms, through their multimodal affordances and relational architectures, enable the creation of such atmospheres. Repeated exposure to Tupini's reflective tone, unscripted delivery, and non-judgemental stance generates a rhythm of emotional co-presence, one that privileges recognition, resonance, and empathic alignment.

These theoretical perspectives converge meaningfully in Tupini's video practice. Her monologues exemplify self-intimacy through confessional narrative and therapeutic framing, while simultaneously producing an affective atmosphere that binds her audience through a shared emotional horizon. Her content is not merely watched; it is *felt*. Viewers do not simply absorb her discourse but participate in an emotionally co-regulated experience, one that is simultaneously personal and collectively structured.

These dynamics contribute to the construction of the channel as a *digital therapeutic space*. While it does not offer clinical intervention, it performs analogous functions: fostering insight, processing emotional pain, affirming personal worth, and alleviating isolation. In doing so, Tupini's work challenges dominant assumptions about generational relevance, therapeutic authority, and technological competence. It repositions older women not as passive recipients of care but as affective agents capable of shaping digital publics and sustaining emotionally resonant communities.

Conclusions: Towards an Intergeneration Influence Culture

The case of Gabriella Tupini exemplifies how digital platforms are reshaping cultural narratives of ageing, disrupting established stereotypes and fostering more inclusive imaginaries of later life. Her trajectory as a granfluencer reflects a broader reconfiguration of influence culture, a domain long dominated by youth-centric aesthetics and performative self-presentation. By asserting a presence grounded in reflective monologue, psychological depth, and sustained audience engagement, Tupini expands both the generational and cultural parameters of digital influence.

The growing visibility of elderly influencers such as Tupini signals a meaningful transformation in the dynamics of platform participation. These figures do not simply adapt to digital environments; they actively reshape them. They mobilise symbolic capital rooted in life experience, professional authority, and narrative authenticity, challenging the assumption that technological fluency is the preserve of younger generations. In so doing, they inaugurate new modes of engagement: privileging introspection over spectacle, resonance overreach, and intergenerational dialogue over algorithmic virality. These modalities disrupt dominant platform practices by prioritising continuity, unscripted delivery, and dialogic presence over metrics-driven optimisation (see Figure 3).

Yet this shift is not without its contradictions. While the prominence of older influencers challenges prevailing imaginaries of decline and dependence, it may also obscure the structural exclusions that continue to shape the digital experience of older adults. Online

representations of ageing often privilege those who are already culturally, cognitively, or economically equipped to participate. As such, the figure of the expressive, self-actualised older influencer risks functioning as an aspirational ideal that inadvertently reproduces neoliberal expectations of productivity, visibility, and personal optimisation. The symbolic capital attached to later-life digital agency thus coexists with persistent inequalities in access and recognition.

Tupini's case also reveals how therapeutic discourse, emotional labour, and affective intimacy have become central to contemporary forms of digital influence. Her videos are not merely media artefacts; they operate as relational practices, spaces of collective reflection, emotional mirroring, and psychosocial reassurance. In this sense, her work enacts a feminist *ethic of care*, recasting older women not as recipients of care but as cultural interlocutors, capable of generating meaning, support, and resonance within digital publics. At the same time, it raises critical questions about the commodification of vulnerability in platform economies, where authenticity is monetised and intimacy becomes a form of capital.

The concept of "intergenerational influence culture" emerges from this complex constellation of practices, tensions, and negotiations. It designates a cultural formation in which older adults not only access but reshape the symbolic economy of digital media. These actors create new circuits of visibility and recognition that transcend generational hierarchies, reframing later life as a space of narrative productivity, social relevance, and relational depth. This form of influence is defined not by follower counts or trend fluency, but by the capacity to mediate between introspection and address, personal biography and collective meaning.

Platforms such as YouTube increasingly operate as affective and cognitive spaces in which older influencers like Tupini engage diverse publics, promote psychological literacy, and cultivate dialogic forms of relationality. Her channel functions as a site of cognitive participation, where audiences are addressed not as passive consumers but as *co-thinkers*. This reframing of influence has significant implications for how cultural authority, agency, and ageing are imagined in digital societies.

Nonetheless, the emergence of intergenerational influence culture also highlights unresolved tensions. The inclusion of older voices may inadvertently reinforce platform logics that reward only those who conform to affective and aesthetic norms. The growing cultural value attributed to older influencers remains, in many cases, conditional, granted to those who exhibit resilience, eloquence, and productivity. As such, the symbolic expansion of influence culture is unequally distributed, and its transformative capacity necessarily partial.

Tupini's case compels renewed theoretical engagement with ageing, not as a passive demographic condition, but as a culturally and politically generative field of practice. Her presence unsettles the visual, temporal, and discursive economies of platform culture, offering not only alternative representations of older adulthood, but alternative ways of being influential. By foregrounding voice over performance, resonance overreach, and care over commerce, intergenerational influence culture provides a valuable lens through which to

reimagine how digital media might accommodate more plural, reflexive, and ethically attuned imaginaries of ageing.

Dimension	*Description*	*Distinctive traits (compared to mainstream influence culture)*
Agents	Older adults, often women, engaging in content production on mainstream platforms	Non-youth-centric; often previously excluded demographics
Platform practices	Long-form videos, unscripted monologues, affective interaction, non-commercial presence	Low optimisation; emphasis on continuity, authenticity, and relationality
Forms of authority	Psychological expertise, autobiographical depth, care ethics, life experience	Less based on aesthetics or trend fluency; more on resonance and credibility
Affective dynamics	Intergenerational intimacy, emotional mirroring, therapeutic trust	Intimacy replaces aspiration as core mode of engagement
Cultural role	Reframing later life as narratively and socially productive	Counters invisibilisation and medicalisation of ageing
Ambivalences and risks	Conditional inclusion; potential co-optation by neoliberal scripts of productivity and visibility	Success framed as exception; dependent on symbolic capital and emotional labour

Figure 3. Dimensions of intergenerational influence culture

Biographical Note

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Notes

[1] Thematic clusters were constructed by aggregating the analytical categories presented in this section and cross-referencing them with the empirical data from the video corpus. Total views and comment counts refer to the videos included in the content analysis sample and were retrieved directly from the platform as of October 2024. For each cluster, representative video titles are provided in both the original Italian and their English translations. Durations are rounded to the nearest minute. View counts are not intended as metrics of success but as indicators of audience resonance.

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"Es el show de Maradona". Between charisma and commodity*

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The TV series *Maradona in Mexico* seems to make explicit the conflicting coexistence of rationality and irrationality, disenchantment and enchantment in the celebrity status of contemporary sport. Sport has, in fact, its own ritualistic, emotional, effervescent dimension, capable of rooting solidarity, identity, and social belonging. At the same time, the factors of commercialization, commodification and spectacular entertainment, based on the principles of economic rationality and profit orientation, are equally constitutive today, if not more influential. Thus, a sports celebrity maintains that complex balance between being a brand within a market logic and an identifying point of reference for communities of fans, apparently by virtue of charismatic qualities and a predisposition for enchantment. Maradona's experience in Mexico – with his performance in the TV series – is no exception. The series tells the story of how Maradona, called upon to coach a low-ranking team in the Mexican second division, emerges as a charismatic leader, a centre of ritual attention, apparently gifted with mysterious and ineffable qualities. Despite his advanced age and very poor health, he still seems capable of arousing deep feelings, of instilling energy and of potentially leading a team – and with it the whole community – towards innovative and glorious footballing and moral achievements. However, his charisma does not escape the mesh of market rationality without being somehow contained and integrated. As a famous personality inserted in the commercial mechanisms of football, but also as a character in the television industry, he is experiencing that process of commodification of reputation that is typical of sports celebrities.

Keywords: Maradona, Celebrity, Charisma, Economic Rationality, Commodity

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Maradona in Mexico is a documentary TV series set during the two football seasons in which the former Argentine champion trained the Mexican team Dorados de Sinaloa – Apertura and Clausura championships 2018-19. The team from Culiacán, a city in the state of Sinaloa known until then on the international scene above all for the presence of one of the most impressive drug trafficking cartels in the world, was not in good shape. They were languishing in the second division of the Mexican league, and the first games of the season – prior to Maradona's hiring – were studded with defeats.

To improve their sporting fortunes, the Mexican club hired Maradona as a coach, with the aim of shaking up the team, reaching the league playoffs and, with the greatest ambition, gaining promotion to the first division.

And so, an elderly, debilitated, exhausted Maradona, with clear difficulties in walking and speaking, who was very likely suffering from alcohol problems and was weakened by medication – let's not forget that he would die shortly after, in 2020 – arrived in Culiacán and began his adventure as head coach of the team with significant ambitions, although not impossible to achieve considering the not particularly difficult level of the championship. All this despite not being able to boast an exciting curriculum and career as a coach. On the contrary, Maradona's footballing excellence remained anchored to the years when he was playing. On the other hand, his quality as a character capable of attracting attention and focusing the gaze, conversations, and interest on his person remained alive and unchanged.

He could in fact count on his reputation as an excellent former footballer, for many the greatest in the history of world football, a worldwide fame that is still very much alive and kicking, as well as the credit of a very strong personality, an aura of charm that distinguished him, good interpersonal skills and quite a significant influence on other footballers.

In the two seasons, always starting the championship in a losing position, the Dorados led by Maradona always reached the final, but lost in both cases.

These are the events in a nutshell. The TV show, which will follow Maradona from the moment he arrives in Mexico, suggesting that the TV project was immediately linked to his signing, tells the story of the team, the matches, the social, cultural, and sporting context, briefly focusing on some of the club's protagonists – players or managers – but always keeping the focus of the story, both in terms of content and emotional structure of the narration, on the *pibe de oro*. In fact, the whole series is conceived as a show focused entirely, almost obsessively, on him.

"Es el show de Maradona" – "It's Maradona's show" – is, not by chance, one of the phrases with which the TV series begins. Through the film technique of flash-forward, the phrase is uttered by a Mexican television commentator after Maradona's expulsion and heated complaints against the referee on the day of the Apertura championship final. Thanks to his explosive anger, Maradona easily takes centre stage – as if he were in a peripheral position – putting on a show that is quite spectacular. These first few lines of the TV series anticipate the main plot of the TV programme, before returning to the beginning of the story. The show is in fact completely centred on the figure of the former Argentine footballer, who will always be in the spotlight, either directly in the frame or as the focus of conversation in most of the interviews with fans, managers, and Dorados players, but also as the target of

chants or comments from opposing fans, most of which are confrontational and hostile. In short, he is the absolute protagonist and symbolic centre of a substantial collective ritual, but also the explicit or implicit origin of the show, a captivating exhibition, celebrity capital to be invested in the football industry and in the collateral and support economy – such as the media.

After all, the sporting motivation for his recruitment as a coach is accompanied by a more or less indirect or hidden desire to market him extensively. Maradona's arrival will bring media attention, journalists eager for interviews, sponsors, and commercial exploitation to the Sinaloa club. This was something new that would lead to a new economic as well as sporting direction. The TV series also fits into this dimension where the ritualised moments of football – such as the match, training sessions, the dynamics within the locker room, etc. – or the spaces and opportunities for entertainment – such as the entire radio or television programme – are organised according to market logic.

Essentially, we are still talking about the commercialised level of the sport, where the mechanisms of celebrity are used to attract the attention of fans/spectators within the attention economy.

Maradona in Mexico thus seems to be an example of the unique interaction between the forms of (bureaucratic) rationalisation that are typical of football performance and the market – in our case, the entertainment, cultural and sports industries, as well as the celebrity industry – and irrational and enchanting elements. This is because the more or less implicit prevailing object of the story, and of the staged show, seems to all intents and purposes to be Maradona's charisma. He is in fact fully represented as a charismatic leader, who envelops the community with ineffable and enchanting qualities that make him the guide of an entire sporting community. However, in the market dimension in which he is employed, his charisma, precisely because it is spectacular and spectacularized, becomes a commodity, in line with the idea of the sports celebrity as a physical entity and as a star of competitive performances, capable of exploiting their capital of notoriety for profit (Bifulco, 2017; Cashmore, 2006; Driessens, 2013; Gunter, 2014; Rojek, 2001; Smart, 2005).

Basically, we seem to witness a rational project to exploit the representation of Maradona's charisma, the ideal spokesperson for a world of enchanted and portentous forces that influence the community of the Dorados, also achieved through a more or less partial or complete concealment or denial of rational or technical factors – from the technical-rational construction of the football performance to the methodical processes of media production.

Charisma and celebrity

> "It is the fate of charisma to recede before the powers of tradition or of rational association after it has entered the permanent structures of social action. This waning of charisma generally indicates the diminishing importance of individual action."
>
> Weber, 1978, vol. II, p. 1148

Studies on the relationship between charisma and celebrity are not new in academic debate, especially in sociological research.

Delving into celebrity – either as a quality or as a person – is anything but uncommon among those who have focused their studies, or at least part of them, on the sociological or socio-historical analysis of charisma on a theoretical level or in its translation into relationships and concrete social behaviour. These authors often tend to emphasise the difference or at least a certain distance between these two realities, even when they can see some points of contact.

John Potts (2009), for example, is the author of a well-known book on the use of the term and category of charisma in Western history, from its original use in Greek culture and then in Christianity, to its creative and original rediscovery by Weber and its subsequent use to connote the extraordinary nature of stars in the twentieth century culture industry. Potts highlights how the rational and meticulous construction that characterises the star's media factory does not fully correspond to the paradigmatic conception of charisma as an immediate presence, genuine quality, sign of authenticity – at least in the representation that the community should find vital. It is no coincidence that Potts sees celebrity as a sort of "synthetic substitute" for charisma, a product of the economic rationality of capitalism, of the image and consumer society. This is despite recognising the undoubted relationship between fame and a certain degree of charm, attractiveness and magnetism that make up celebrity.

Even Randall Collins (2020), who tries to translate Weber's conception of charismatic leadership into the microsociology of everyday contexts and encounters, made up of emotional energy transfer and connections of ritual interactions, does not seem entirely willing to find a clear overlap with charisma, in a few scattered lines dedicated to celebrity. This is because the media construction around the star, resulting from a continuous rational work on images, news, and information, seems to go beyond the actual situational ability to motivate the followers/fans and guide their behaviour. Often the celebrity would appear to be trapped in the mechanisms of media consumption and audience share rather than having any real power.

On the other hand, several scholars of the processes and mechanisms of celebrity seem more indulgent and willing to find traces of charismatic qualities in celebrity itself. This obviously does not mean that they approach the matter with benevolence and avoid a critical approach.

Robert Van Krieken (2012), for instance, sees in celebrity the latest and most complete development of Weberian charisma. In the rational and bureaucratised definition of popularity concentration processes within the media system and the capitalist attention economy, Weberian charisma can effectively integrate with the other forms of authority, the rational-bureaucratic and the traditional ones. Attention becomes hence capital, a resource based on the public recognition of exceptional and prodigious qualities in an individual, basically on a charismatic force intrinsic to performances and representations visible in the media scenario.

P. David Marshall (1997), on the other hand, sees in celebrity the rationalised form, conceived according to the mechanisms of the contemporary culture industry, of the irrational and emotional identification processes that underpin the relationship between community and a charismatic individual. The elements of disenchantment, magic and mysticism are however replaced by bureaucratic, rational, and scientific mechanisms. Celebrity acquires the rationalised status of commodity and the relationship with the audience is equally methodical in a market economy, but this is based on the cultural legitimation of the individuality that celebrity publicly expresses and defines.

Based on this, Charles E. Hurst (2015) suggests that there is a peculiar fusion of the rational and the irrational, enchantment and disenchantment in the Weberian sense, in celebrity. The underlying attraction of celebrity is irrational, emotional, part of the realm of enchantment, but its image – full of passionate shades – is managed rationally, through market logic and profit orientation, often with the help of various organisations and specialists. Basically, celebrity condenses the creation and effective sale of charismatic personalities through bureaucratic organisations – corporations, media organisations, advertising agencies, sports organisations, and all market-oriented institutions.

But what exactly does charisma mean and, above all, what kind of characteristics does a charismatic leader possess or at least – in a way that is more in line with Weber's theories – what does a community see in them that legitimises their influence and authority? To orient ourselves in the twists and turns of the concept, we will partly use its original meanings, while deepening its scope and referring to Weber's framework.

In its primary sense and within an irrational and basically magical-religious conception, charisma indicates a spiritual, free gift, guaranteed by divine grace and benevolence. It is expressed in an innate talent – therefore with a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the concept of merit – and unfolds in a striking ability to amaze, to attract, but also to inspire reverence and even awe.

We are therefore dealing with an "elusive something" (Potts, 2009) that is irrational, immeasurable, and unpredictable. A quality that belongs to an individual without a precise and rationally explainable reason, but which shows mysterious and inexplicable aspects of the human bond.

Yet, we are talking above all about a collective feeling that, as it is transferable, settles in a person.

Hence, the idea of possessing an inner, magical force is associated with authority. The extraordinary skills and features that the community recognises in the individual are the qualities that enable them to gain the obedience and following of their followers, who place their trust in their gift. Personal trust and devotion to the person – for their exceptionality, their character, their successes – express the irrationality of authority and of the committed relationship established, even though it often needs to be nourished by signs or tangible proof through prophetic modes of expression – in some cases a result of exceptional personal suffering.

The "gift", the sense of extraordinariness, has a social dimension, in the belief of the community and in the bond that is thus created between leader and group (Spencer, 1973).

Validation is always social and internal to the community to which one belongs (Friedland, 1964). At the same time, by articulating the group's values and symbols, the leader becomes its emblem.

In its ideal-typical aspect, charisma is also a revolutionary force that makes history (Weber, 1978). The charismatic leader is an innovator who enters history, takes on a mission and a community fate, breaks with the pre-established order and becomes the spokesperson for a new order that is presumed more satisfying, especially from the point of view of values. By virtue of awe and reverence, the leader can potentially guide followers towards forms of collective joy.

To summarise, Martin E. Spencer argues:

> We then turned to the question of 'What makes the charismatic leader charismatic?' and answered this in terms of 'mastery' and 'representation'. Through mastery of fate and the demonstration of world-ordering capacities the leader inspires reverence and awe. Through representation the leader expresses or incorporates the ideals of his followers, thereby generating enthusiasm (Spencer, 1973, p. 352).

In doing so, their force opposes tradition. At the same time – in their irrational mystery, in their display of superhuman qualities and in their inscrutable power to draw their followers passionately along – they contrast with the processes of bureaucratization and modern rationalization, which are composed of efficient methods, abstraction, predictability, depersonalization, routinization, and little attention to personal freedom. Hence a certain predisposition to the cult of the romantic genius.

In its pure form, charismatic force has opposing features to rational economic behaviour and the pursuit of interest. Charisma triggers an action devoid of monetary interests, far from the characteristics of economic enterprise, from which it would instead be threatened.

If, on the other hand, one wonders how charisma translates concretely, in real-life situations, into the ability to lead enthusiastic followers to action, the only attempt at analytical and theoretical composition, albeit a rough one, is that of Randall Collins (2020). According to the American sociologist, this attitude, or rather a real situational technique that can be incorporated into one's way of acting, is characterised by the general ability to assert oneself in face-to-face encounters and conversations, to broadly spread emotional energy, to be the focus of ritual attention and to become a centre of identification.

More specifically, from this point of view, charisma would take on different connotations and modalities depending on the context, the occasion, the processes and mechanisms involved.

A first way of being a charismatic leader is linked to a "frontstage charisma", which corresponds to the ability to arouse enthusiasm in large crowds and motivate them to act. It is characterised by the ability to give impressive performances in front of an audience, by linguistic and dramaturgical abilities, by the ability to transform every moment into a show, not for entertainment, but as an experience of transformation of emotions, motivations, and will. This type of charisma is characterised by: the ability to dominate public conversations – controlling the rhythm, the content, the emotional tone, having the last word, and leaving

the other person with few arguments; the ability to make decisions quickly and break with tradition, as well as the ability to understand who can be on your side; the proclivity to be unpredictable, to surprise and therefore instil energy and excitement, to elude usual expectations; the ability to understand and observe others in a micro-situation in order to orient their emotions and define the situation; the inclination to feed on the relationship with the crowd and on emotional sharing, managing to understand their dynamics and making them an echo of one's own self, even in moments of difficulty; the ability to stand as a moral revolution, a new force and emotional resource, a source of redemption from and in suffering.

Another form of charismatic leadership, according to Collins, is based on "backstage charisma", which takes place in informal everyday situations. In this case, the ability to dominate meetings emotionally in a more personal environment comes into play, as well as the ability to persuade, make immediate and convincing decisions, and inspire loyalty and creativity. With their close followers the charismatic leaders tend to share their style and way of interacting, making themselves known as the boss, the centre of attention, dominating the time of action and defining emotions. This is how they motivate their closest collaborators, convince them, spread their energy, arouse and transform emotions, and make themselves heard.

In addition to these two highly situational forms of defining the charismatic relationship, there is also "success-magic charisma", or rather an "aura of success" that surrounds the leader and that can clearly be associated with the previous charismatic modalities, especially the first. In this case, success seems to be reproduced in the imagination, the leader is perceived as unbeatable, prodigious, capable of producing lasting triumphs, despite obstacles and possible failures that have little impact on the recognised esteem – given that it is always the crowd that recognises the authority, with its fragility and possible inconsistency.

Finally, Collins identifies "reputational charisma", as a result of the three previous charismatic forms. This is the ability of the charismatic person's reputation to reproduce itself and maintain the individual's appeal. Naturally, it is not enough to simply (have once) gain(ed) fame to be charismatic, since the inclination to incentivise the actions of followers is key to charisma. At the same time, this type of reputation can be artificially constructed, can be ephemeral and can even be created after death, as an ex-post narration.

The representation of Maradonian charisma

Maradona's arrival as messiah

The theoretical background just outlined provides us with a useful conceptual arsenal to return to *Maradona in Mexico*. One of the main contents of the TV series is based on the

staging of a sort of explicit show of messianism, not without a certain utopian significance (Paz, 2021).

The expectation of a messianic arrival is clear from the very beginning. “Maradona Llegó” (“Maradona arrived”) goes the refrain of the opening credits’ track, adding “para alegrar al fútbol” (“to bring joy to football”), and consequently to revive the fortunes and morale of the community that awaits him.

The opening credits reveal what will be a key meaning of the entire show, namely Maradona’s mission, a collective necessity that underpins the prophetic bond between the *pibe de oro* and the community. Maradona is expected to create an extraordinary situation with an equally exceptional and prodigious outcome: to lead the Dorados de Sinaloa team, but also the city of Culiacán and its fans, to a sporting and moral victory, but also an economic one, considering the club’s finances.

This is why his football history, made up of triumphs, falls, and comebacks, is recalled as a series of steps towards the culminating moment of the arrival of the eternal *diez* from the past as coach of the Mexican team, for a community that awaits him like a saviour.

The ageing legend, tried by life, by age, by health problems and addictions, by his posture and by his declining dialectic, is tasked with bringing joy to a decadent reality and leading it to sporting triumph, or rather the promotion to the first division. The gift of divine grace, or the benevolence offered by transcendence, certainly does not mean grace as bodily gracefulness. If Maradona’s body was a dispenser of athletic joys as a footballer (Alabarces, 2021; Archetti, 1997), now only another kind of strength can be released from his battered body.

The dominant representation of the story is that of a Maradona who manages, despite all obstacles (and up until the ill-fated final against Atlético de San Luis), to take the fate of the team upon his shoulders, to motivate his players to the point of revolutionising two seasons that already seemed to have been scripted for failure. He becomes the centre of attention for the fans, the team, the city, and the press, a catalyst for emotional energy and motivation to act.

Maradona is, in fact, described as the architect of a change in collective history, with a modest team, made up of second-tier players, which he managed to revive and take all the way to the final in both football seasons.

As mentioned, these two seasons always begin with the anticipation of Maradona’s return. In the first case, it was simply the anticipation of his first arrival as the club’s coach, while in the second season there was also the anticipation of his return to social life after a hospitalisation and the fear that he might die. Here the story further amplifies the dimension of suffering linked to messianism and the idea of a sacrifice for the community. The challenge of his alarming physical condition, his recovery from illness, the festive welcome and the ability to turn around the progress of a championship that had started very badly – also in this second season – will be the predominant subject of the story. And the matches will become joyful, as well as victorious.

Overall, in both sporting seasons, the story is told of how Maradona arrives in an apparent state of misery and neglect – the unfinished stadium with the pitch to be re-done, the

indolence of the workers, the neglected facilities, the team at the bottom of the league table, the disheartened fans, the city plagued by its social problems, and so on – and his touch changes the destiny of the community, in spite of its problematic conditions.

Undoubtedly, in the story, the Dorados also take on the task of helping Maradona, of making him happy. Deep down, in his mythologised form, *el pibe*, the boy, always coexists alongside the leader. It is no coincidence that he is a leader who inspires confidence, but remains a capricious character, to be pampered, insecure, potentially prone to despondency, perhaps unable to govern himself. Epiphenomena, evidently, of an active charisma, but part of the human contradictions that every myth elevates to a broader existential level.

Between history and myth (or archetype)

The myth, indeed. Throughout the TV series, the narration of Maradona's charisma is intertwined with a cyclical temporality closer to the time of the myth. In fact, there are several archetypal models that tend to be repeated: for instance, he returns to a suburban, desolate place characterised by poverty and crime – among other things, we are talking about one of the world's main drug production centres, famous for the presence of the notorious drug trafficker El Chapo Guzmán. From a certain point of view, it is a symbolic return – and narratively recalled in a more or less implicit way – to Villa Fiorito, to the poverty of Naples, or to a reality marked by the drugs that have left such a mark on his life.

Throughout the show, Maradona always maintains a popular dimension and style. He often proves ungovernable, easily irritated, rude, even aggressive with referees or opponents, especially with fans of other teams when they insult or mock him. At the same time, he shows affection and consideration for the friends, players and fans of his football club.

This style of his strengthens his bond with the audience, fans, and enthusiasts, but also with his players, with whom he shares his origins and class, thus marking the boundaries of his in-group.

The personal, but above all collective, redemption from individual and community misery at the same time make up the cyclical dimension of the archetype that inspires the narrative: Maradona has allegorically lifted Argentina out of misery, giving it joy and pride, he has done the same with Naples, and now he is preparing to do so with the region of Sinaloa.

After all, the same story of poverty and redemption that Maradona experienced first-hand, and with him the countries that welcomed and acclaimed him and that he redeemed, is repeated in his players. The story dwells on similar tales of poverty and football-based redemption, but also social and emotional ones, in the lives of several Dorados players. Maradona is therefore the tangible and symbolic role model, a centre of identification capable of motivating, instilling confidence, and guiding these players. The parallel is obvious, the affinity of their worlds inhabiting a timeless archetype.

The last place to go back in time is Mexico. Home to Maradona's greatest triumph, the 1986 World Cup, the country is now ready to welcome a new sporting success, new honours, new celebrations, new glory.

Within these cyclical time frames, the story unleashes the revolutionary power that creates history, the linear time of Maradona's landing in Sinaloa and the events that lead to two dramatic climaxes – the two finals of the two championships – although with a negative outcome.

With his arrival, a Maradonian revolution began, according to the *pibe de oro* himself: he went into minor football in search of challenges, to overturn the existing order and rewrite the history of the underdog, from the social outskirts of the world to an exciting result to boast about.

Maradona's story is thus transferred to the club's history. In the union between archetypal and historical time, personal suffering – cinematically evident in physical pain and infirmity – and collective suffering merge, in the name of possible revenge, of success despite difficulties, pain, and adversity.

Charisma vs technique and bureaucratic rationality

Maradona arrives in Mexico to carry out a profession in all respects, but in the TV series the job is carried out as if it were a gift, or at least this is the dominant tone of the story. On the other hand, the transferability of charisma to people and objects allows it to be potentially acquired personally or transferred to an occupation – that of a coach in Maradona's case.

Thus, the story describes how he is looked upon by all members of his community – footballers, managers, fans – with deference and devotion. He sparks enthusiasm, instils confidence, brings cohesion to the locker room, is loved and spreads love – almost like a father figure or a protector for his players. As a ritual and symbolic centre, he takes on the role of arousing and spreading emotional effervescence, of catalysing and translating with his decadent physicality joy, hope, expectation, but also disappointment and the ultimate pain.

At the same time, his influence produces excitement among the people of the city, who believe in him, participate in the celebration, in the rite of redemption and collective satisfaction.

The aim of his arrival is to symbolically climb back up through sporting success, to rekindle enthusiasm through football and victories, to protect the public prestige of the community – the team, the fans, and the city – and thus to achieve a moral victory and restore the collective honour – which remains unchanged despite the defeat in the two finals.

The confidence, joy, passion, and energy that he instils actually translate into results on the field and into a boost to the collective self-esteem and self-confidence. The team experiences a series of victories, turns its position in the league table around and then

comes within an inch of being unexpectedly promoted to the first division. This is how Maradona proves his strength to his followers.

This new destiny of success and positivity is represented in the TV series as connected to his charismatic presence, a presence that he sustains with his maladroit corporeality and he often insists on emphasising – not by chance, "I want to stay with you", is what he repeats after the first final he lost and the unknowns about his health, a health that he does not worry about and that, in any case, seems less important than the embodiment of his mission.

Furthermore, his leadership is expressed in his constant defence of his players – they do not play if the pitch is in poor condition, so as not to compromise their physical condition – and of the community, or of himself against his opponents and their insults.

As we said, charisma is based on an irrational attraction – and Maradona's one as it is represented in the TV series fully confirms the model – which contrasts with rational, methodical, technical-instrumental, bureaucratic, and organisational factors. All these latter elements are almost completely ignored in the episodes and in the main themes of the script. The material aspects of Maradona's profession, such as his salary or the economic benefits of his celebrity status, are hidden or in the background, although there is mention of his ability to attract media interest, the attention of sponsors and funding for the club. However, these are minor issues that do not often appear in the narrative and symbolic structure of the TV show. After all, in the exemplary model of the charismatic leader, there is not much room for money and for any profit-oriented economic-rational behaviour.

At the same time, there is no real discussion of the strategies used to build a winning team, such as the transfer market. There is some mention of new players arriving in the second season, but in this as in other cases, the entrepreneurial ethics involved in managing a successful club is overshadowed by the magic of Maradona's intervention.

Similarly, it is rare to see Maradona giving technical and tactical instructions, other than briefly on two occasions, once at the blackboard and another on the field for a few moments. Although the training sessions are often filmed, i.e. the moment when the athletic body is methodically kept in shape or the football skills are prepared, the explanations about the technique and tactics of the game are very rare, unlike the moments when Maradona motivates and encourages the team.

It is likely that, even in the day-to-day running of the club, this task was often entrusted to his collaborators – but we can only assume as much. However, the technical and tactical aspects of the team's performance are either ignored or play a secondary role – as in the case of Luis Islas, the assistant coach, during the first season – or are even almost mocked and dialectically overcome by Maradona's return in the second season.

In this case, in fact, the ineffectiveness of the technical-tactical instructions of his substitute, and then assistant, José Maria Martinez is cinematically emphasised before his arrival. Here technique and tactics are dominant in the story, punctuating and accompanying the team's initial defeats. Maradona's return will correspond to the disappearance of these aspects from the story, replaced by his charismatic influence and a new course of victories.

Images of players undergoing physiotherapy or medical treatment remain the only effective narrative concession to the scientific, rational, and technical components, or to the

role of experts and specialists within a hegemonic account of emotional and irrational factors.

The commercialised show and celebrity as a commodity

Maradona in Mexico is an emblematic product, in many respects, of the intricate dialectic between enchantment and disenchantment, irrationality and rationality that emerges when celebrity and charisma somehow meet.

In the contemporary sports industry, the commercial and spectacular dimension is prevalent (Andrews, 2006, 2019; Boykoff, 2014; Horne, 2006; Sewart, 1987; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2001). Of course, football and its underlying passion are characterised by strong emotions, but also by business with its rational and standardised procedures, as well as by the technical construction of winning performances that are also spectacular and therefore marketable.

As a sports celebrity, Maradona possesses a capital of notoriety, but also a charismatic capital that in this case are invested according to the logic of profit, in an instrumental and calculated use of the grammar of reputation within the attention economy.

The element of enchantment that characterises the *pibe de oro*, distinguished by his strong personality, feeds on an aura of mysterious and prodigious energy and fully inhabits the realm of the irrational and enchantment. But these meanings, and the underlying emotional connotations, are at the same time effectively sold as a form of commodity by rational and disenchanted organisations – media, advertising, sports.

Generally speaking, and even more so in the case of Maradona and his charismatic personality, there is no rational explanation for the attraction to celebrities, but their image, based on emotional components, is managed by specialists using rational production mechanisms, standardised procedures, and calculations of interest and economic advantage. It is no coincidence that the president of Dorados recalls with emphasis and great emotion the phrase “Sometimes fools spectacularly pave the way”, to explain the logic behind the investment in Maradona. Charisma is imbued with spectacle, and spectacle is magic, it is a ritual, but not infrequently it can also be instrumental performance and business.

Behind the promotion and protection of the charismatic bond with the public, there is a well-coordinated rational structure, planning, programming, and a meticulous organisation of time, space and tasks. Specialised people work according to distribution mechanisms and a hierarchy of tasks, specific skills and career mechanisms.

If the Maradonian scene is defined by the vehemence of his charisma, the background subtly recovers, in a way somewhat blurred by the power of the famous personage, the forces of technique, capitalism and bureaucracy.

Maradona was hired by the Dorados as a star, perhaps even before being hired as a coach. Of course, there were also sporting goals, but the hype surrounding his arrival

immediately boosted media interest, increased stadium attendance and fan travel to away games, helped to sell tickets, raise funds, and attract sponsors. Promotional videos, interviews, possible sponsorship contracts, fundraising dinners are all part of his presence. A city devoted to baseball is now waiting for economic development through football. The TV series itself, and the whole crew that immediately follows this adventure, is part of a large commercial organisation that exploits Maradona's popularity.

He is the centre of the ritual, through which he attracts the constant attention of anyone present – it is no coincidence that everyone wants to have their photo taken with him, both his fans and his opponents, attracted by his aura of celebrity – as well as the media, within a mechanism of constructing messages and images typical of a commercialised consumer culture.

At this point, everything becomes spectacle and everything can be spectacularized and sold: not only the charismatic personality on the screen and a story imbued with messianism and the expectation of redemption, but also the crime and misery of the cities of Maradona's past and present, the poverty of the people that reflects the original condition of the *pibe de oro*, the suffering, the old age, the illness. Even a hospital stay can be spectacular.

After all, the spectacular, and therefore economic, dimension of the Maradona phenomenon is one side of the coin that is inseparable from the Mexican project based on his persona.

This is how, with celebrity, the enchanting, the magical, and mystical elements can be absorbed by the rational, the disenchanted, the bureaucratic ones. In other words, celebrity can be overshadowed by everything that is calculable, deliberate, systematic, regulated, instrumental, exact, predictable, scrupulous, sober, effective, methodical, impersonal, quantitative, coherent (Hurst, 2015). Not exactly the image of Maradona.
All in all, even the cult of personality can appeal to market logic.

Conclusions

Speaking of military leaders, Weber considered the matter of the forms of bureaucratic rationalization of command and what could remain of the factors of attractiveness, emotional ardour, and the bond of trust with the leader. The process of instrumental calculation, even of irrational factors, seemed to him the dominant feature of modernity:

> Discipline puts the drill for the sake of habitual routinized skill in place of heroic ecstasy, loyalty, spirited enthusiasm ft/ a leader and personal devotion to him, the cult of honor, or the cultivation of personal fitness as an art. Insofar as discipline appeals to firm ethical motives, it presupposes a sense of duty and conscientiousness – 'men of conscience' versus 'men of honor' (…). All of this serves the rationally calculated optimum of the physical and psychic preparedness of the uniformly conditioned masses.
> Enthusiasm and unreserved devotion may, of course, have a place in discipline; every modern conduct of war weighs, frequently above everything else, precisely the morale factor in troop effectiveness. (…) It seeks to influence combat by "inspiring" the soldiers and, even more, by developing their empathy for the leaders' will. The sociologically decisive points, however, are, first, that everything is rationally calculated,

> especially those seemingly imponderable and irrational emotional factors – in principle, at least, calculable in the same manner as the yields of coal and iron deposits (Weber, 1978, vol. II, p. 1149-1150).

Based on Weber's considerations, when a popular personality, capable of arousing people's enthusiasm and influencing their moods and behaviour, is included in commercialization processes and market logic, it seems useful to reflect on the boundaries and power relations between the different areas.

Maradona remains a sports hero, a symbol, and identity reference, but also an inspiration for many fans and for cultural and class identities even beyond the simple football sphere (Alabarces, 2006, 2014, 2021; Alabarces & Rodríguez, 2000; Archetti, 1997, 2008; Bifulco, 2020; Bifulco & Dini, 2014; Brescia & Paz, 2023). However, as a star he lived, and still lives despite his earthly death, also within the commercial dimension, where one of the forms of routinization of his personality is expressed according to economic logic.

This is partly inevitable and not necessarily something to be viewed with dramatic alarmism. It is all about maintaining the transparency of these dynamics, not hiding the impetus of the market in the emotions of belonging and the joy of sport. This is to avoid the risk of absorbing into common sense and legitimising, without any critical sense, the rational evaluation of the human body, the consideration of the human being as a commodity, the use of its market value.

Biographical note

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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; iiii) 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 élite sport may have recently undergone a process of increased popularization,[1] 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 élite 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.[2] 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"). https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/01-02-2024/hamilton-alla-ferrari.shtml	Still an active career. Celebrification of his profile.	Celebrification of Hamilton's career with titles and wins, to emphasise his decision to go to *Ferrari* and leave his historical club, *Mercedes*.
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.

	https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/01-02-2024/lewis-hamilton-ritratto-del-cannibale-che-ha-infranto-tutti-i-record.shtml		
21/08/2024	"Hamilton: 'Retiring? I'm thinking about it. I'd like to take a break'..." ("Hamilton: 'Ritiro? Ci sto pensando. Mi piacerebbe prendermi una pausa'…"). https://www.gazzetta.it/motori/mercedes-f1/21-08-2024/f1-hamilton-ritiro-ci-sto-pensando-vorrei-prendermi-una-pausa.shtml	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	"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'"). https://www.gazzetta.it/Formula-1/05-12-2024/formula-1-hamilton-ferrari-abu-dhabi.shtml?refresh_ce	Emotional detachment from *Mercedes*.	Hamilton realizes his detachment from his historical team (could this be an issue for him?).
16/03/2025	"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'…"). https://www.gazzetta.it/motori/ferrari/16-03-2025/gp-australia-hamilton-nervoso-con-gli-ingegneri-ferrari-cos-e-successo.shtml	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*

CONTENT	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).
RELEVANT QUOTES	Hamilton claims they are worse than the previous year, which was still tough.
MAIN TOPICS	Awareness of decline and subsequent frustration. Lack of present and future competitiveness.
INTERPRETATION	The episode could show the culmination of the (emotional) rift between Hamilton and *Mercedes*. 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*

CONTENT	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 *Mercedes* (by an act of faith).
RELEVANT QUOTES	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?".

MAIN TOPICS	Passing of time. Possibility that his career may come to an end. Lack of competitiveness.
INTERPRETATION	Hamilton is portrayed as a character suspended between past glory (winning images) and a difficult present. Signing the renewal with *Mercedes* 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*

CONTENT	The announcement of his signing for *Ferrari* comes as a shock. Collective reactions of drivers and press to Hamilton's announcement at *Ferrari*. Toto Wolff appears moved and touched when talking about Hamilton.
RELEVANT QUOTES	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".
MAIN TOPICS	End of an era. (Gradual) transition. Renegotiation of the symbolic capital.
INTERPRETATION	The episode builds a rite of passage around Hamilton: the driver does not immediately leave the scene at *Mercedes*, but is still there. This aspect seems to accompany his transition. His farewell, however, comes as a shock. His arrival at *Ferrari* 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*

CONTENT	The announcement of his arrival at *Ferrari* contrasts with a previous statement that he would remain with *Mercedes* forever. An ad hoc editing is carried out. Remembrance and recollection: past successes with *Mercedes*. 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.
RELEVANT QUOTES	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).
MAIN TOPICS	Symbolic end of a cycle. Memories, remembrance, and farewell. Generational transition. Leadership issue.
INTERPRETATION	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

[1] By popularization, we mean accessibility to a diverse audience that is not necessarily expert or niche.

[2] 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*.

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Eternal Youth. Gymnasts, Ageing and Body Narratives across Sport, Media and Post– Career Trajectories*

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Gymnastics is a discipline that offers the possibility to explore the complex relationship between body, ageing and gender. Professional gymnasts, who reach the peak of their physical performance during adolescence, appear to undergo an anomalous alteration of the ageing process, shaped by both extrinsic elements (intense physical effort, strict dietary regimes, the use of pharmacological substances) and intrinsic ones (the natural biological metamorphosis). As is well known, the developmental phase, with the changes it entails – first and foremost the onset of menstruation – affects the athletes' physical performance. Their young bodies are thus prematurely perceived, experienced and managed as if they were "old bodies", generating a paradox that translates into concrete attempts to delay such ageing, through practices that, in fact, reverse the process and confine gymnasts within a sort of "perpetual youth", with all the associated physical, biological, psychological, and even social implications. In exploring this phenomenon, reference will be made to the representations and narratives of gymnasts in the media, with a specific focus on the docu-series *Ginnaste – Vite Parallele* (MTV, 2011–2016) and the fiction *The Gymnasts* (*Corpo libero*, Rai 2, 2023). Furthermore, exemplary figures in the discipline will be taken into account, such as Carlotta Ferlito for Italy and Simone Biles for the United States, who, as public and cross-media personalities, contribute to the redefinition of the female body, ageing and heroism, in the sporting context and beyond.

Keywords: Ageing, Gymnasts, Agency, Post-career, Sport Heroines

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Introduction

Artistic gymnastics constitutes a privileged site for interrogating the tensions that traverse the female body within contemporary sport, particularly in relation to the concept of ageing, understood not solely as a biological process, but as a cultural and media construct. More than other disciplines, gymnastics invites critical reflection on the nexus between performance, visibility, and the representation of youthful corporeality, revealing how the imperatives of athletic excellence intersect with those of entertainment and celebrity.

Over the past two decades, elite gymnasts – especially those belonging to the Millennial and Gen Z cohorts – have emerged not only for their competitive accomplishments, but also as highly visible media figures operating within a cross-media ecosystem that spans television and digital platforms. Their public exposure has brought into sharp relief a central paradox: the young athletic body, celebrated for its efficiency and virtuosity, is simultaneously subjected to control regimes aimed at suspending time – delaying or even denying the visible signs of biological maturation. In this sense, artistic gymnastics functions as a particularly revealing lens that helps us see more clearly the contradictions of sporting ageing and the normative models of femininity that this sport reinforces or subverts.

This essay focuses specifically on a selected group of Italian and American gymnasts – such as Carlotta Ferlito and Simone Biles – who have distinguished themselves not only through their sporting achievements, but also through the intense and often contradictory media attention surrounding their biographical trajectories. These athletes, through multifaceted and sometimes contested public narratives, have contributed to reconfiguring the boundaries of female sporting subjectivity, embodying emergent models of celebrity, agency, and cultural resistance. The Italian context – which remains underexplored in academic literature – constitutes, in this sense, a particularly salient case study, not only due to the technical calibre of the athletes involved, but also in light of their visibility within the national media landscape.

The analysis adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on cultural studies, the sociology of sport, and media studies. Specifically, it is grounded in the examination of media content related to gymnasts active from the 2010s to the present, with particular attention to audiovisual materials (including docu-series and television fiction), cross-media narratives, and digital communication practices. A central corpus of the study is composed of the Italian productions *Ginnaste – Vite parallele* (MTV, 2011–2016) and *The Gymnasts* (*Corpo Libero*, Rai 2, 2023), analysed as representative of broader transformations in the representation of athletes and the female sporting body.

These texts are further complemented by an analysis of self-branding strategies and digital storytelling performed by the athletes on social media platforms – particularly Instagram and TikTok – accompanying moments of biographical rupture or transition. Additionally, the article draws on interviews released by the athletes in newspapers, weekly magazines, and national and international periodicals, with the aim of capturing the complexity of the discursive construction surrounding the figure of the contemporary

gymnast. The corpus includes testimonies relating to competitive experience, training conditions, bodily regulation, and media exposure, thus enabling a multidimensional inquiry into the symbolic and cultural production that accompanies – and often reshapes – not only the athletes' careers but, crucially, their post-career trajectories.

A Young Old Body: The Paradox of Ageing in Artistic Gymnastics

The analysis of ageing within the context of artistic gymnastics offers a particularly productive lens through which we can question the categories traditionally employed to define and interpret the ageing process – foregrounding its construction as a socio-cultural, rather than merely biological, phenomenon. In dominant cultural imaginaries, ageing is typically associated with chronological progression, biological decline, and the visible markers of physical maturation. This conception also permeates sporting narratives, where the conclusion of an athlete's career is conventionally aligned with the onset of adulthood or the deterioration of physical performance.

This paradigm is especially evident in numerous disciplines – such as soccer – where peak performance is generally situated between the ages of twenty and thirty, followed by a physiological downturn. Similar trajectories are observed in tennis, athletics, and swimming, where athletes tend to reach their competitive apex before the age of thirty, after which performance declines due to cumulative physical strain and a diminished capacity for recovery. Even in endurance-based disciplines like cycling or marathon running, where the decline is comparatively gradual, the effects of time manifest through a reduction in muscular strength and aerobic efficiency. Conversely, certain sports – such as golf or selected motorsport categories – are marked by greater athletic longevity, as technical skill, strategic acumen, and accumulated experience can partially offset the impact of physical ageing and extend the athlete's professional lifespan.

Irrespective of the discipline, the athletic decline and eventual retirement typically coincide with a stage of biological maturity – when the body has completed its developmental trajectory and begins a slow, gradual process of physiological ageing. In the case of artistic gymnastics, however, this chronological and corporeal equation appears fundamentally inverted. Athletes in both artistic and rhythmic gymnastics commence their competitive careers at a remarkably early age and tend to reach their peak performance well before the completion of full biological maturation – most often in late adolescence. Their careers unfold, culminate, and frequently conclude prior to the attainment of physiological adulthood. In this respect, gymnasts elude the conventional understanding of ageing as a linear progression toward decline. And yet, their sporting experience positions them within a condition of premature ageing, imposed by the structural logics of the discipline and by the aesthetic and performative expectations projected onto their bodies. Here, ageing assumes a symbolic function, detached from biological deterioration and anchored instead in cultural scripts of obsolescence and value.

To fully grasp the implications of this dynamic, it is essential to situate it within the broader context from which these athletes emerge. According to Sundgot-Borgen's classification (1994), artistic gymnastics belongs to the category of so-called "aesthetic sports" – disciplines in which physical appearance is closely intertwined with performance assessment. These aesthetic sports are further embedded within the broader group of "leanness sports," where the maintenance of a low body mass index is considered a prerequisite for competitive success. Within this category, a distinction may be drawn between "judged" and "non-judged" disciplines. In the latter – such as athletics – thinness may enhance performance capacities (e.g., speed, endurance), yet the athlete's body is not directly subjected to aesthetic evaluation. In contrast, judged disciplines conceive the body both as a vehicle of technical execution and as an aesthetic object, subject to visual scrutiny and formalised assessment.

Gymnastics falls within the former category, characterised by a high degree of subjectivity in technical evaluation, wherein the athlete's physical appearance becomes an integral component of the assessment process. As a result, aesthetic pressure and the imperative to conform to specific corporeal standards occupy a central position in the life experience of gymnasts, often contributing to distorted perceptions of both the body and the ageing process (Parsons & Betz, 2001). Within this framework, it is not ageing per se but growth that emerges as a particularly critical and destabilising factor. The onset of menstruation, in particular, represents a physiological threshold that disrupts the bodily equilibrium upon which gymnastic performance is predicated, as it is frequently accompanied by increases in body mass and changes in physical composition (Claessens, Lefevre, Beunen & Malina, 2006).

Menarche may thus be experienced as a traumatic rupture – marking the transition from childhood to adolescence – and prematurely confronting athletes with dynamics more commonly associated with ageing, such as the loss of an idealised bodily "purity" and the emergence of physical changes perceived as impediments to performance. In this context, the body is not simply a site of development, but one of discipline and resistance, where biological transitions are problematised rather than naturalised.

The response to these biological changes frequently manifests in strategies of bodily and weight control (Smolak, Murnen & Ruble, 2000; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001), which may include the use of slimming agents, restrictive dietary regimes, and other dysfunctional behaviours (Dipla, Kraemer, Constantini & Hackney, 2021). These practices are aimed not only at maintaining the thinness demanded by the aesthetic norms of the discipline (Parsons & Betz, 2001), but could also be interpreted as contributing to the postponement of biological maturation – potentially resulting in a condition of "perpetual youth" that, paradoxically, reflects a form of premature ageing and embedded ageism. While these athletes' bodies remain chronologically and biologically young, they are nonetheless experienced, regulated, and disciplined as if they were already ageing – subjected to continuous efforts of preservation in resistance to the natural course of physiological development.

Empirical studies confirm that the average age of menarche among gymnasts is significantly delayed compared to non-athletic peers (Brasili, Massidda & Toselli, 2008;

Georgopoulos et al., 2002; Malina, 1999). This paradox assumes substantial cultural and media significance, particularly when considered in relation to sports and audiovisual narratives centred on gymnastics – narratives that are seemingly oriented towards a predominantly young female audience. The representation of gymnasts as eternally adolescent bodies, suspended in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, not only reproduces unattainable ideals of femininity and corporeality, but also reinforces the imperative to resist and control ageing as an inevitable – and therefore threatening – process of bodily transformation.

Artistic Gymnastics in Audiovisual Media: Between Celebration and Disempowerment of the Body

Within the context of audiovisual representations of artistic gymnastics, it is crucial to examine how the media have contributed to constructing not only the image of the discipline itself, but also that of its athletes – foregrounding their sporting achievements alongside their personal lives and the psychological and physical toll of high-level competition. A paradigmatic example of this dynamic is the teen-oriented miniseries *The Gymnasts*, produced by Rai Fiction for Rai 2, which centres on a group of adolescent gymnasts entangled in the investigation of a mysterious murder. The series is situated within a broader socio-cultural context marked by a series of scandals – both national and international – concerning artistic and rhythmic gymnastics, and clearly reflects a growing public sensitivity regarding the safeguarding and well-being of female athletes.

Over the past decade, numerous cases of physical and psychological abuse involving young gymnasts have come to light, most notably the case of Larry Nassar, osteopath for the U.S. national gymnastics team from 1996 to 2017. His trial and subsequent conviction triggered an unprecedented public reckoning with the structural conditions endured by female athletes. Similar dynamics have emerged in Italy, particularly within the sphere of rhythmic gymnastics, where the national team – commonly known as the “Farfalle” (“Butterflies”) – became the centre of media attention following public accusations made in November 2022. Two former athletes, Nina Corradini and Anna Basta, aged 19 and 22 respectively, broke their silence and denounced the mistreatment, humiliation, and psychological abuse they experienced within the Italian Gymnastics Federation. According to their testimonies, the athletes were subjected to sustained psychological pressure by their coach at the federal training centre, who enforced rigid standards concerning physical appearance and weight control. These pressures, they reported, rapidly developed into forms of body obsession and distorted self-perception, resulting in significant psychological distress.

In this light, the decision by Rai Fiction to produce a teen crime drama appears far from incidental: it reflects not only a strategic attempt to engage a youth audience through a popular subgenre (Caputo, 2024), but also operates as a vehicle of social critique –

shedding light on the mechanisms of bodily control and exploitation to which gymnasts are subjected. These mechanisms are often geared toward preserving a state of youthfulness and immaturity, in service of maintaining an "ideal" physique for competition – frequently at the expense of the athletes' physical and psychological health.

Furthermore, *The Gymnasts* draws critical attention to the construction of a feminine ideal grounded in parameters that continue to shape the media representation of female athletes. The gymnast's body, in its stylised perfection, becomes not only a symbol of eternal youth, but also a site of extreme vulnerability – perpetually under pressure to conform to an idealised and disciplined aesthetic. This regime of image production closely aligns with the theories advanced by Gill Lines, who argues that femininity in sport is persistently mediated by normative expectations of youthfulness, conventional femininity, and heterosexual appeal: "Female sport stars are often compared to the feminine ideal (...) they are marginalized, trivialized and objectified." (Lines, 2001, pp. 286–287). Within this framework, the athlete emerges not merely as a performer, but as a public body – one that is at once consumable and, in certain respects, sacrificial.

These dynamics, however, are not confined to the institutional context of sport; they are also reflected – and frequently initiated – by the media. A retrospective examination of the 2010s reveals both continuities and shifts in the ways gymnasts have been represented across media platforms. A significant case in point is the docu-series *Ginnaste – Vite parallele*, broadcast on MTV from 2011 to 2016. The programme followed a group of young athletes training at the *Guglielmetti Federal Technical Centre* in Milan, documenting not only their athletic preparation and competitive journeys, but also the more intimate dimensions of their lives – friendships, family relations, and academic challenges. Despite its commercial success, the series attracted criticism for its portrayal of the athletes as "heroines" to be admired primarily for their perseverance, a narrative that often obscured the psychological and physical burdens associated with the demands of high-level competition.

Moreover, the popularity of the series fuelled a representational dynamic that, while increasing the athletes' visibility and promoting the values of sport and competition, simultaneously magnified their private lives in ways that were at times ambivalent. On the one hand, the programme offered viewers access to the world of elite gymnastics; on the other, it reinforced the notion that the athletes' lives were always-already oriented toward spectacle. The personalisation of their daily struggles – though effective in humanising their experience – ultimately contributed to their transformation into fully-fledged media celebrities, amplifying their public exposure and embedding their subjectivities within logics of affective consumption.

After all, "*Ginnaste*" is a docu-soap, part of those "reality narratives" in which, as Manzato argues,

> the reality represented is affected by scripting interventions that shape the discourse: even in a genre that claims to be grounded in real life, one can observe clear authorial structuring (…) this is 'real life' rendered through a heavily edited montage – often far from realistic – which follows multiple narrative threads. Its structure still follows the open – ended serial format, marked by specific cues. (2016, p. 33)

This dynamic is exemplified by the notable absence of Olympic champion Vanessa Ferrari and national coach Enrico Casella from the programme, as neither authorised the use of their image. Casella, in particular, expressed concern regarding the overexposure of young athletes, drawing attention to the disproportionate focus placed on appearance and aesthetic expectations – dimensions that extend well beyond athletic performance – and implicitly revealing the presence of a stratified system of bodily control. The gymnast thus occupies the central position within a complex matryoshka of influence, shaped simultaneously by coaches, media apparatuses, and broader socio-cultural forces, all of which contribute to determining the conditions under which the athlete becomes visible, recognisable, and culturally legible as "successful."

> But is the message conveyed truly positive? What remains with us after witnessing certain situations brought to light? One thing is certain: proper preparation for competitions takes place away from the cameras, and the true stage for gymnasts is the arena, where it is not television ratings that matter, but the final scores achieved. (Casella, 2011)

The audiovisual representation of gymnasts does not merely portray them as athletes, but rather recasts them as emblems of a broader corporeal and socio-cultural ideal that exceeds the boundaries of sport. Through their media image, wider cultural discourses related to gender, bodily discipline, and regimes of visibility intersect and converge. Television productions and docu-realities, in particular, do not simply document the athletes' sporting trajectories; they actively participate in the construction of their media identities, shaping the collective imaginary that surrounds them. This process, however, is far from neutral: the intense media exposure and the spectacularization of their discipline significantly influence how these athletes are perceived and treated – both within the sporting domain and in society more broadly – with substantial implications for their psychological and physical well-being.

These representational dynamics intersect with the specific characteristics of Italian sports journalism, which has long exhibited a tendency toward the "worldly" dimension of storytelling, favouring narratives that extend beyond the strictly athletic sphere. As Spalletta and Ugolini (2013) observe, Italian sports journalism has always retained a hybrid character, yet in recent decades, this hybridity has become both central and structurally embedded. Sport is no longer narrated exclusively through the lens of competition, but is increasingly intertwined with other domains – politics, economics, current affairs, and entertainment. This shift reflects a broader trend within journalism towards the relentless pursuit of newsworthiness, even within the ostensibly apolitical sphere of sport. At the same time, athletes and sports institutions are not passive in this transformation; on the contrary, they actively engage with media logic, recognising the strategic value of visibility and adapting to the flows of contemporary information ecosystems, which are now inextricably linked to social media practices.

This reflection leads to the consideration of a further dimension intimately connected to the notion of ageing: the post-career. What happens when a gymnast's athletic trajectory

concludes at a young age – often before reaching full physical or personal maturity? How is her public image renegotiated once the body – and, more importantly, the subject – ceases to conform to the parameters of competitive performance?

Carlotta Ferlito and the Post-Career: Celebrity Capital, Social Media, and Self-Branding

The reflection on ageing in the context of professional gymnastics cannot exclude an analysis of the post-career phase – a dimension that is pivotal not only from an identity standpoint, but also in terms of its broader symbolic resonance. A paradigmatic example in this regard is Carlotta Ferlito, born in 1995, a key figure in the contemporary landscape of Italian artistic gymnastics. Ferlito emerged during a renewed period of public and media attention to the discipline, following the widespread acclaim of athletes such as Jury Chechi and, most notably, Vanessa Ferrari – her teammate (Ugolini, 2014). Over the course of her career, Ferlito secured significant results both at a national and international level, including three gold medals at the Italian Championships and participation in the 2012 London Olympics, where she reached the individual all-around final.

What renders Ferlito a particularly compelling case study, however, is not her athletic trajectory per se, but rather the transformation of her public and media persona. Her case illustrates how the gymnast's visibility extends beyond the temporal confines of competitive performance, evolving into a broader cultural phenomenon that continues to operate even after the conclusion – or suspension – of her professional career.

At the age of just sixteen, Ferlito became one of the protagonists of *Ginnaste – Vite parallele*, which projected her beyond the niche world of competitive gymnastics, transforming her into a popular figure even among non-specialist audiences. As Ugolini (2014) observes, the media narrative constructed around Ferlito unfolds along a dual axis: on one side, the recognition of her athletic achievements; on the other, her progressive transformation into a celebrity, with a cross-media identity that spans television, press, and social media. In this sense, Ferlito's case perfectly embodies the transition from athlete to pop culture figure, aligning with a broader trend in which sport increasingly intersects with the codes of entertainment and visual culture.

This dimension becomes even more significant in light of the interruption of her athletic career. Following her public denunciations, Ferlito was removed from the Federation and, de facto, excluded from what would have been her third – and final – Olympic Games. The context of her statements aligns with the wave of scandals that erupted in November 2022, initially tied to rhythmic gymnastics, but with repercussions across the broader field. In particular, her exclusive interview with *Le Iene*[1] and her subsequent social media posts brought to light the toxic dynamics within the sport, while also offering a critical reflection on the role of the media: as part of her broader critique, Ferlito denounced the excessive

presence of cameras during the filming of the docu-series, an exposure that the athletes reportedly endured without the opportunity for negotiation or informed consent.

It is precisely this paradox – between imposed visibility and strategically managed visibility – that makes Ferlito's case exemplary for interrogating the ambivalent nature of celebrity capital, understood as "accumulated media visibility that results from recurrent media representations" (Driessens, 2013, p. 17). On one hand, media overexposure subjected the athlete to overwhelming and potentially harmful scrutiny; on the other, it allowed Ferlito to consolidate a public image that extended well beyond her sporting achievements, enabling her to reconvert this symbolic capital into alternative forms of recognition, particularly within the social media environment. This process activates a dynamic increasingly common among athletes of her generation: self-branding. By leveraging the follower base built during her competitive years and her prior media exposure, Ferlito constructed a second career as a content creator, influencer, and digital activist.

Her current public role is not limited to product promotion or the cultivation of a personal aesthetic, but also includes a discursive effort of denunciation and awareness–raising, particularly around issues such as eating disorders, mental health, and the pressures exerted on young women in sport. Celebrity capital, therefore, is not merely spent to sustain personal visibility outside the competitive sphere, but is also reconverted into a tool of agency and cultural intervention. Her presence on digital platforms, particularly Instagram (@carlyferry, 837k followers) and TikTok (@carlottaferlitoo, 362k followers), enables her to reach an intergenerational audience: on one hand, peers who followed her since the days of the docu-series; on the other, a new generation of users who first encounter her as an influencer and only later – if at all – as a former athlete.

This phenomenon can be read in light of Bifulco and Tirino's reflections, according to which "in the age of convergence (…) the tribalization of the relationship between community and hero manifests itself in the surplus, creative, and imaginative practices of the Internet," (2018, p. 21) where the bond between fans and sports celebrities is expressed through fluctuating affective modes, ranging from mythologization to mockery. The digital visibility of former athletes, therefore, is not confined to a promotional space, but becomes an affective and political arena in which storytelling, identification, and the renegotiation of public image unfold in participatory, fluid, and at times contradictory ways.

In this sense, social media today represent the privileged site of post-career continuity: a space in which the public figure can evolve, adapt, and transform, negotiating in real time their identity and symbolic value. For Ferlito – and many other Generation Z athletes – the end of the sporting career does not mark an exit from the scene, but rather a metamorphosis: a shift from athlete to digital sports celebrity, capable of surviving – and at times being reborn – within the multiplicity of languages and formats of contemporary communication.

In parallel, generalist newspapers and mainstream periodicals have also contributed to shaping the post-career storytelling around Ferlito, with a particular focus on her affective, relational, and emotional dimensions. *Vanity Fair*, which has followed the evolution of her public image over time, presents a narrative arc that ranges from the celebration of her career peak (Oggiano, 2016; Pizzimienti, 2019), to the gradual emergence of critical

reflections on the world of gymnastics, as seen in 2020 (Colosimo), when Ferlito already spoke openly about eating disorders and the pressures she had endured, albeit without directly clashing with sports institutions. In more recent articles (Amorosini, 2024; Nicolini, 2024), the emphasis shifts to a narrative centred on personal suffering, family ties, and her mother's illness, but also on the courage needed to speak out publicly. Likewise, in her 2024 interview on the Mediaset talk show *Verissimo*, the media construction relies heavily on a confessional and empathetic tone, portraying Ferlito as a resilient figure – emotionally close to the public – who transforms trauma into a tool of awareness. This mode of storytelling, which alternates between vulnerability and empowerment, aligns closely with the logic of celebrity capital and post-career self-branding, in which public identity is structured through emotional and relational narratives (Rojek, 2016), both on social media and in mainstream media outlets.

Vulnerability, Agency, and Post-Heroic Narratives

A further critical issue concerns the concept of sporting heroism, particularly in its gendered declinations. As highlighted earlier, the cross-media storytelling of the discipline – and, with it, of the athletes' celebrity – has become a key sounding board for the denunciation of abuse and for raising awareness on themes historically marginalized in sports discourse: mental health, trauma, and the body's refusal to submit to the logics of performance and perfection.

In this scenario, the case of Simone Biles has taken on a paradigmatic value. In 2021, during the Tokyo Olympics, Biles withdrew from both the individual and team finals, citing the need to protect her mental health. Her gesture, made at the height of her career, disrupted the traditional narrative of the invincible athlete and inaugurated a new grammar of success – one that recognizes vulnerability not as a sign of weakness, but as an act of resistance. Her return to competition two years later at the US Classic, culminating in a new victory, only reinforced the symbolic power of that initial gesture. The viral media coverage of her breakdown, withdrawal, and subsequent comeback transformed Biles into an emblematic figure of transgenerational resilience, capable of embodying and promoting new shared values, particularly among younger generations.

Other athletes have made similar choices, restoring complexity to the traditional sports narrative. This is the case, for instance, of Katelyn Ohashi, a former rising star of American gymnastics, who left elite competition at the age of 21, after experiencing repeated episodes of body shaming, based on a physique deemed "inadequate" by prevailing standards. Following spinal surgery, Ohashi returned to gymnastics as a collegiate athlete, competing for UCLA from 2016 and contributing to a reimagining of sporting performance as a collective, expressive, and political experience. Her routines, marked by energy and freedom, went viral on social media, helping to construct an alternative image of the athlete – not as a body to be disciplined, but as an agentic subject.

Social media, through their mechanisms of circulation and amplification, have played a pivotal role in the viralization of these gymnasts and, in particular, in reinforcing the public resonance of their return. Performance videos, interviews, public statements, as well as moments of collapse, crisis, and rebirth, have been shared, recirculated, and reinterpreted within a cross-media ecosystem that has transformed individual episodes into collective narratives. In the cases of Simone Biles and Katelyn Ohashi, digital resonance has helped to build an imaginary grounded in the body's rebellion against oppressive expectations, in empowerment, and in a redefinition of strength through vulnerability. The viral spread of these stories has not only extended their reach, but also fostered affective and interpretive communities that align with emerging values such as authenticity, dignity, and self-determination – thus fostering new models of female heroism.

This narrative shift has also resonated widely across mainstream media, which have helped to institutionalize the idea of a female heroism rooted in vulnerability and rebirth. Headlines such as "Vulnerability is not Weakness" (*La fragilità non è debolezza*, Murgia, 2021), referring to Biles' temporary withdrawal from the Tokyo Olympics, or *The Simone Biles Revolution* (O'Rourke, 2023), in the wake of her triumphant return, reflect a redefinition of excellence that increasingly privileges emotional authenticity and agency. Similarly, titles like "The Dramatic Stories of the Rebellious Gymnasts" (*Le drammatiche storie delle ginnaste ribelli*, Cazzullo, 2022) and "'You Look Like a Pig': Gymnast Katelyn Ohashi Speaks Out Again and Fights Against Body Shaming" (*'Sembri un maiale'. La ginnasta Katelyn Ohashi torna a denunciare e a battersi per il body shaming*, Monnis, 2019) explore the rupture between the performative and the lived body, underscoring a shift from conformity to self-assertion. Local press like *La Nazione* (2023) have described these stories in terms of "rebirth" and "rediscovered love for sport", portraying athletes no longer as performing bodies, but as resilient individuals reconciled with themselves. Across all these examples, trauma is neither silenced nor erased, but rather articulated and made shareable through narrative; crisis is thus transformed into story, and story into a symbolic resource through which the athlete's role within the public sphere is redefined.

A pivotal component of this narrative reconfiguration is the transition from the "rise and fall" to the "fall and rise" biographical model. While both structures maintain a cyclical framework, the crucial – albeit nuanced – distinction lies in the narrative's point of departure and in the transformative value ascribed to failure. The "rise and fall" biography, which remains particularly dominant in representations of male athleticism, is anchored in the primacy of success: the fall, when it occurs, functions as an epilogue – a moment of crisis that enhances dramatic intensity without destabilizing the underlying heroic paradigm. As Bifulco and Tirino note, this narrative includes "the moment – inexorable for an athlete – of physical decadence," which may give way to a "different kind of beginning" (2020, p. 13). Yet, from the present author's perspective, this model continues to operate within an ascending narrative trajectory, wherein transformation is relegated to a post-peak phase and fails to constitute the foundational axis of the athlete's journey.

In contrast, the "fall and rise" biography – progressively emblematic of contemporary representations of female athletes – locates its narrative fulcrum in the fall itself. It is

precisely within the moment of fracture, disruption, and suspension that the trajectory toward success is set in motion. This is not simply a process of identity re-elaboration, but rather a reconfiguration of vulnerability as the foundational condition of heroism. The crisis is no longer conceived as an obstacle to be overcome in order to restore a prior self; instead, it emerges as the prerequisite for becoming what one is destined to be. In this framework, the fall does not merely precede success – it generates it.

Notably, this narrative configuration intersects with the theme of ageing, particularly in the case of gymnasts, whose careers begin – and often conclude – at a remarkably young age. Here, the fall is not associated with physical decline or biological senescence, as is commonly the case in other sports, but rather functions as a symbolic rupture that enables the gymnast to renegotiate her public persona and reassert herself within a space of agency. Athletes who return to the spotlight after a hiatus, a traumatic experience, or retirement, effectively rearticulate the temporalities and modalities of sporting ageing, decoupling it from biological chronology and embedding it within a narrative logic of resistance, transformation, and self-reinvention.

From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon intersects with the broader reflection on the gendered construction of sporting heroism. As is well known, the heroic imagination in sport has historically been shaped by a masculine paradigm: the athlete-hero embodies strength, virility, tenacity, and dominance, retaining legitimacy even in defeat. The fallen male athlete is still celebrated as a symbol of resilience, often inscribed in an epic and linear narrative. Conversely, as Gill Lines (2001) observes, female sporting heroism tends to be confined to stereotypical and archetypal figures. Lines identifies two dominant archetypes: the sex goddess, hyper-feminine, and sexualized, and the girl next door, youthful, accessible, reassuring. Both images reinforce a vision of the female athlete as an object of the male gaze – be it desiring or paternalistic – that ultimately limits her agency.

These representations reduce the complexity of female subjectivities in sport, denying women the possibility of occupying narrative spaces that are autonomous, contradictory, and layered. Nonetheless, there are figures who, while operating within complex media logics, have managed to carve out relatively autonomous symbolic spaces. Such is the case, among others, of Serena Williams, Federica Pellegrini, Cathy Freeman, and Megan Rapinoe. Through diverse communication strategies – ranging from the assertion of ethnic or sexual identity to assertive management of media visibility – these athletes have partially renegotiated the roles assigned to women in sport, emerging as symbols of strength, agency, and discontinuity in relation to dominant models. Though they remain exceptional figures, their presence helps illuminate the still-limited opportunities for constructing female narratives that are not entirely subjected to patriarchal or aestheticizing gazes.

In a similar way, contemporary gymnasts also seem to challenge this logic. Through narratives of vulnerability, trauma, rupture, and return, they propose an alternative model of heroism – one rooted not in invulnerability, but in the conscious exposure of fragility. In this sense, female anti-heroism is not a negation of heroism, but a rewriting of it. These athletes do not reject strength, they redefine it: strength as the ability to ask for help, to stop, and to change the rules of the game.

This shift is also enabled by the evolving configuration of media platforms. Within a communicative ecosystem that privileges experiential narratives, affective engagement, and practices of sharing, gymnasts are no longer positioned as passive objects of external storytelling, but emerge as active agents and authors of their own narratives. In asserting narrative control, they contribute to a redefinition not only of the cultural imaginary of sport, but also of femininity and power itself.

Nonetheless, it remains essential to adopt a critical lens toward the dynamics underpinning these emergent narrative forms. As Lines (2001) observes, female athletes achieve media visibility predominantly when they conform to specific gendered expectations, with their vulnerability frequently articulated through tropes of redemptive emotionality and normative morality. In this light, even the "fall and rise" biographical model – despite its apparent transformative potential – risks being co-opted by the very cultural logics it purports to challenge, rendering acts of resistance into ritualized and commodified performances. The athlete's return following a moment of crisis may be framed as an assertion of agency, yet often in a mediated and illusory form, circumscribed by imperatives to elicit empathy, garner approval, and accrue market value. What emerges, therefore, is an ambivalent dynamic – less a marker of emancipation than a manifestation of the unresolved tension between autonomy and conformity, transgression and cultural legitimation.

Conclusions

Contemporary gymnasts, positioned at the intersection of hyper-performative athletic practices and normative aesthetic regimes, are actively reshaping their public identities through a nuanced reconfiguration of the codes of visibility, vulnerability, and power. The analysis presented in this essay has sought to illustrate how the female gymnastic body – traditionally constructed as fragile, youthful, and subject to control – has evolved into a site of complex symbolic negotiation, wherein biological, cultural, media, and political dimensions intersect and are contested.

Artistic gymnastics constitutes a particularly illuminating case for examining the contradictions embedded in the social construction of ageing – wherein biological and cultural temporalities collide, producing tensions between growth and preservation, evolution and stasis, maturation and resistance. Athletes within this discipline exemplify an intensified regime of bodily regulation, in which ageing is not merely a physiological process, but a socially constructed phenomenon, deeply influenced by the logics of spectacle, performance, and success. Rather than representing a marginal deviation from the dominant model of masculine sporting heroism, the narratives surrounding adolescent and post-adolescent gymnasts outline an alternative semantic field – one in which ageing is rearticulated not as a signifier of decline, but as a transformative threshold, and in which success emerges from crisis, rupture, and temporal suspension. Vulnerability, in this context, is not only acknowledged, but deliberately performed and publicly circulated,

acquiring the status of cultural and affective capital capable of reshaping the expectations and imaginaries of an entire generation of spectators.

Within this framework, a rearticulated configuration of the female sporting subject emerges – one that may be interpreted, through the lens of postfeminist theory, as an ambivalent discursive formation (Gill, 2007): a form of femininity no longer constructed solely in opposition to masculinity, but one that hybridizes strength and vulnerability, autonomy and spectacularization, agency and representational constraint. As Gill notes, postfeminist sensibility is characterised by the entanglement of empowerment and surveillance, choice and coercion, discipline and desire. The gymnasts under examination – such as Carlotta Ferlito, Simone Biles, and numerous other lesser-known yet digitally prominent athletes – appear to embody this postfeminist ambivalence, wherein the capacity for strategic self-exposure coincides with the potential to expand the discursive boundaries of what may be articulated, rendered visible, and politically claimed.

The symbolic significance of these figures extends well beyond the sporting domain, calling into question the very categories through which ageing, celebrity, self-care, and bodily construction are conceptualised in contemporary culture. In this regard, gymnasts are not merely athletic subjects, but cultural agents who question and destabilise the discursive foundations of sport and success from within, opening up new spaces of meaning for female self-representation and fostering a renewed critical reflection on subjectivity within the public sphere.

Biographical note

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Notes

[1] *Le Iene* is an Italian television program focused on investigative reporting and satire, featuring a mix of reports, provocative interviews, and humor. It has been airing on Italia 1 since 1997 and is known for addressing current issues with a sharp and often controversial style.

Mediascapes journal 25/2025

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".

Keywords: Beckham, docu-series, narrative hero, celebrity, myth

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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 icon[2], 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.

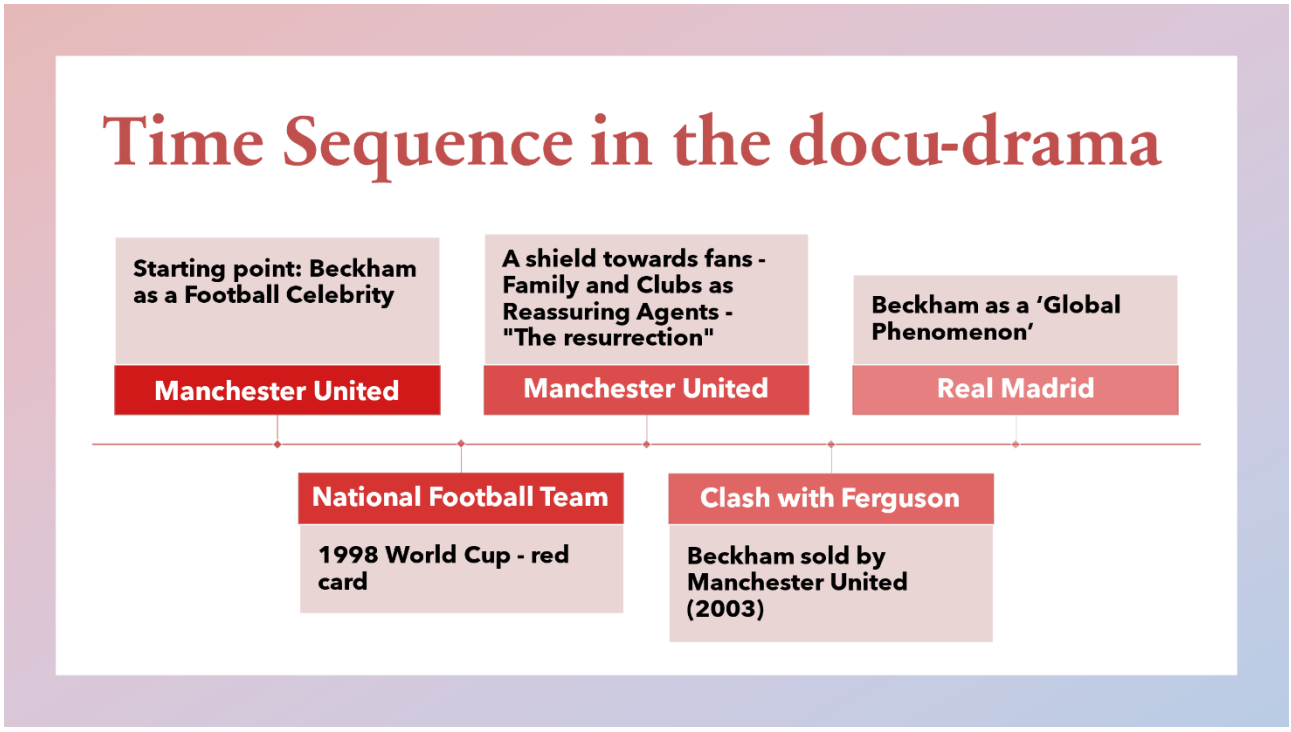

Figure 1. Time sequences in the docu-series Beckham

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)

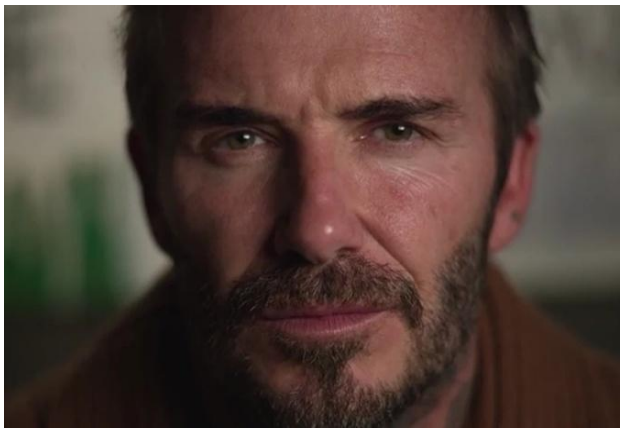

Figure 3. David Beckham while watching the same match (1998 World Cup) (minutes 1:02-1:05, episode 1)

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 definition[6]. 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).

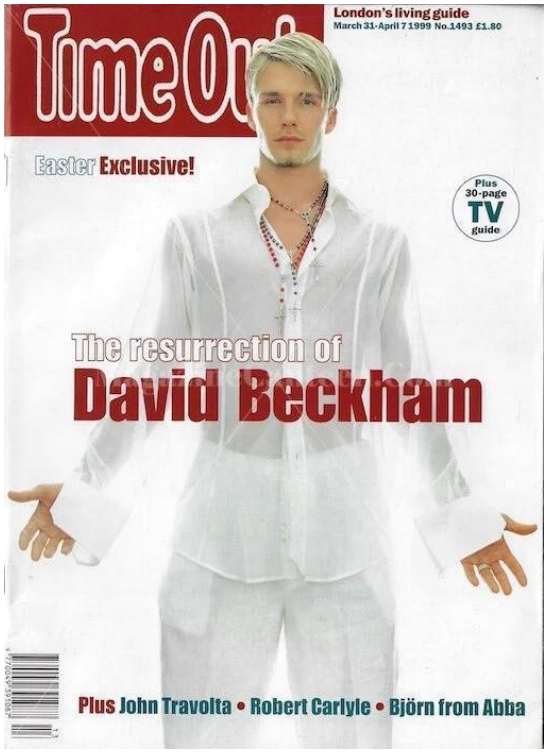

Figure 6. David Beckham, TimeOut March 31 – April 7 1999, "The Resurrection"

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 Royce[15]. 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)/ (pages consulted on 21/04/2025).
[15] Episode 1, minutes 26-27:16.

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For a Fistful of Fame: Carnera at the Intersection of Sports and Entertainment*

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This paper explores the figure of Primo Carnera (1906-1967) – the first Italian to win a world boxing title in 1933 – as a paradigmatic case for understanding the transformation of celebrity capital during the post-career phase, within a media environment vastly different from today's, initially dominated by cinema and later by television. Carnera was notable not only for his athletic achievements; his public image was skillfully renegotiated and reshaped by traditional media – newspapers, cinema, and later television – which solidified his status as a prominent celebrity even after his retirement from the ring. This study focuses particularly on Carnera's ability to reinvent himself during his post-career phase, managing to retain a prominent position despite ageing and physical changes, thanks to the resources offered by the media landscape of his time. His transition from sport to the broader field of entertainment stands as a compelling instance of how celebrity capital can be strategically redeployed beyond the athlete's initial domain of renown. Through the analysis of various media narratives – from journalistic reports to films, comics, and television portrayals – this paper discusses how Carnera made the most of his fame, leveraging the main media platforms of the era. Adopting a multidisciplinary perspective, this study draws on media analysis and celebrity studies to investigate how strategies of self-narration – mediated through traditional formats such as cinema and television – enabled Carnera to sustain his public profile across shifting media landscapes and biographical ageing.

Keywords: Primo Carnera, Celebrity capital, Media transformation, Post-career, Boxe

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The life of Primo Carnera offers a compelling case study to explore the complex entanglements between sport, celebrity, media, and politics (Andrews & Jackson, 2002). Existing scholarship on the Friulian boxer has largely focused on two areas: his athletic achievements and the ways in which Fascist propaganda capitalised on his public image, constructing the popular myth of the "giant with feet of clay" (Buscemi, 2020; Mancuso, 2017; Marchesini, 2006; Mottadelli, 2015). This study shifts the focus to Carnera's post-career phase, examining how his public persona was reshaped through his engagements beyond the boxing ring. Analysing his personal trajectory provides a lens through which to investigate the intersections of mediatization, the spectacularization of sport, and the cultural representation of the athletic body.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach – drawing on biographical methods (Zanfrini, 1999; Spano, 2005), mediology, sports sociology, and celebrity studies – this article traces the evolution and reconfiguration of Carnera's celebrity capital. It reveals how this iconic Italian sports figure turned his body into both a symbol of social redemption and an enduring presence in national collective memory. As Olivier Driessens (2013) argues, celebrity capital may be understood as a form of symbolic capital (in a Bourdieusian sense) derived from public visibility and media exposure, and convertible into other forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) across different fields. Far from being a static asset, this capital is subject to fluctuation, shaped by media engagement, audience responsiveness, and the celebrity's ability to navigate evolving cultural terrains. Carnera provides a valuable historical case study to explore these dynamics, demonstrating how celebrity capital can be strategically reactivated across shifting media platforms – from the circus arena to comics, cinema, and television – even in the absence of continued athletic success. Building on Barrie Gunter's (2014) work, Carnera's trajectory can be seen as an instance of fame durability grounded not simply in charisma or singular achievement, but in the adaptability of his persona to a wide range of media grammars. His case also resonates with the "celebrity capital life cycle" proposed by Carrillat and Ilicic (2019), who argue that celebrity status requires ongoing strategic engagement and narrative repositioning. Carnera's evolution – from heavyweight champion to wrestler, film actor, and television personality – showcases a rare capacity to stretch symbolic capital across time and genre, a feat seldom achieved by early twentieth-century athletes. Lastly, Carnera's career may be read through the lens of Franck's (2018) economy of attention, in which visibility operates as a form of currency within the symbolic marketplace of fame. His sustained public presence – despite ageing, sporting defeat, and ideological appropriation – highlights how bodies marked by narrative density and physical extraordinariness can function as potent attention magnets, enabling symbolic capital to circulate well beyond the domain of athletic performance.

This study is guided by two main questions: how did Primo Carnera navigate the cultural and media transitions of his time, adapting his public persona across multiple formats and narrative genres? What does Carnera's post-career trajectory reveal about the conditions of persistence of celebrity capital in early twentieth-century media culture – particularly regarding the symbolic flexibility of the athletic body, the adaptability of the "gentle giant"

archetype, and the role of cross-media storytelling in sustaining fame beyond athletic success?

This article aims not only to reconstruct the trajectory of Primo Carnera's post-career fame, but also to situate it within a broader theoretical reflection on how celebrity capital is accumulated, sustained, and reconfigured. Focusing on a figure whose fame spanned circus, sport, comics, cinema and television – and who managed to retain cultural visibility despite physical decline and the end of athletic success – the article contributes to ongoing debates on the durability and translatability of celebrity. Carnera's public image challenges linear or medium-specific conceptions of fame, illustrating how certain embodied archetypes – such as the "gentle giant" – operate as floating signifiers, capable of adapting to diverse narrative and ideological frameworks. Through this lens, the article seeks to expand the field of celebrity studies by demonstrating how symbolic capital grounded in bodily extraordinariness may be preserved through cross-media storytelling, and how fame can be renegotiated over time through a dynamic interplay between personal agency, industrial logics, and cultural archetypes. Rather than offering an exceptionalist portrait, Carnera functions here as a heuristic device for rethinking the conditions under which fame persists or fades, bringing to the surface the invisible scaffolding that supports long-term celebrity within pre-digital media ecologies.

Panem et Circenses *et Boxe*

Primo Carnera, born in Sequals in 1906, grew up in conditions of extreme poverty, which led him to emigrate to France at a young age. It was there that his life first intersected with the worlds of sports and entertainment, through the circus environment, where he was hired as a sideshow attraction:

> He was a regular spectator and the owner of one of the sideshow tents noticed the young man towering a good 30-40 cm above the rest of the crowd. Alphonse Ledudal, as he was called, likely sensed – thanks to the shrewd instincts of a somewhat roguish man of the streets – the potential profits that someone of Primo Carnera's size (and presumed strength) could bring to his "business". He approached Carnera, offering him a life full of excitement and adventure: endless entertainment, money for fine clothes, and enough food to stave off hunger. And so, the young Friulian, seeking his fortune in the world, found himself, at the age of nineteen, working for a small circus. There, he became "Juan the Terrible", "the Terror of Guadalajara", "le champion qui jamais a été battu", the star attraction of the show.[1] (de Concini, 2006, p.65).

This environment drew from a 19th-century tradition that was beginning to evolve into something new, thanks to the emergence of mass media. However, the circus and similar popular spectacles still retained a distinctly 19th-century aesthetic of "wonder", characterized by an emphasis on the exceptional and the extraordinary, where unusual bodies took center stage. This spectacle culture, in which Carnera's career was rooted, can be more precisely understood through the conceptual framework of the freak show, as

developed by Robert Bogdan (1988). In his analysis, Bogdan distinguishes between the "exotic mode" – which frames physical difference as culturally distant – and the "aggrandized mode", which emphasizes physical extraordinariness (such as size or strength) as a mark of heroic exceptionality. Carnera's portrayal, particularly in comics and films, aligns closely with the aggrandized mode: he was not a grotesque anomaly, but an exalted figure whose gigantism was admired, idealized, and narratively domesticated.

Moreover, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1996, 1997) argues, the cultural function of bodily "deviance" is not only to provoke wonder, but also to serve as a site for the negotiation of normativity. Her work on "the stare" and "the spectacle" of the extraordinary body reveals how physical difference is transformed into narrative capital. Carnera's case reflects this dynamic: his gigantism becomes a "legible" sign of strength, masculinity, and moral innocence – a template that enabled his repositioning from a circus attraction to a cinematic and televisual archetype. Through his body, audiences could experience both admiration and reassurance, as his strength was consistently framed within the archetype of the gentle giant, a benign other who, despite his size, elicits empathy and affection, rather than fear. In this context, Carnera's gigantic physique and imposing presence proved to be a perfect match for performances centered on wrestling. It is worth noting that professional wrestling, which would later become a key component of Carnera's post-boxing career, originated in France around 1830. During that period, wrestlers excluded from the elite wrestling circuits formed itinerant troupes, showcasing their skills at fairs and circuses. These wrestlers shared the stage with other performers, such as exotic animal exhibitors, tightrope walkers, and bearded women, reflecting a spectacle culture still deeply rooted in the tradition of the freak show.

During one of the circus stops, Primo was noticed by former French boxer Paul Journée, who introduced him to the world of professional boxing. In 1929, he arrived in the United States at the height of the Great Depression, Prohibition, and the dominance of the Italian-American mafia. His career began with a rapid and seemingly unstoppable rise, aided by fixed matches orchestrated by the mafia and his manager, culminating in his victory of the world heavyweight title on June 29, 1933, when he defeated Jack Sharkey.

However, his journey was not depleted of tragedy. The death of boxer Ernie Schaaf, partially attributed to a bout with Carnera in the February of the same year, left a profound mark on Carnera's life. This tragic event helped to shape the image of Carnera as the "gentle giant", leaving an indelible imprint on his career.

These athletic achievements laid the foundation of the celebrity capital Carnera amassed, which, in the context of the era's migration dynamics, transformed him into a true popular hero. For many Italians, both in the United States and in Italy, Carnera became a symbol of the struggles and sacrifices endured by migrant communities. This deep emotional connection, where "the identification of fans with a sports hero creates an in-group, a 'We', that professes shared worldviews and experiences mutual trust and loyalty" (Tirino & Castellano, 2020, p.52), foreshadowed the Fascist propaganda that would soon capitalize on his image.

Mottadelli (2015) highlights how, following his title victory, the Fascist regime launched a campaign to exploit Primo Carnera's image, transforming him into an icon of Italian racial strength and aligning him with Fascism. His figure was idealized, with physical imperfections removed, and he was visually integrated into the regime's rhetoric, often depicted in a black shirt or military uniform, accompanied by declarations of patriotism and support for Mussolini. However, popular interest in Carnera had already begun to emerge in the early 1930s, prior to the regime's formal propaganda efforts. This fascination, visible in the press, novels, and popular songs, celebrated not only his athletic victories, but also his sexual magnetism and links with celebrities and the American underworld. While not explicitly Fascist, these representations often conveyed virilist and heroic ideals that aligned closely with Fascist values, suggesting a cultural environment already receptive to his subsequent ideological appropriation.

Despite his defeats against Max Baer in 1934 and Joe Louis in 1935, Carnera retained significant relevance, transcending wins and losses, and building a celebrity capital that made him a prominent figure in the popular culture of the time. He soon began leveraging this capital in his post-career endeavors, becoming the central figure in a variety of media productions. His body became the focal point of narratives that combined a sense of wonder and amazement – characteristics of the era's spectacles celebrating the extraordinary and the superhuman – with an ideal of raw strength and benevolence.

Carnera's Strips

Even before winning the world title, Carnera's imposing presence captured the public imagination, influencing even Disney, which drew inspiration from the Friulian boxer for one of its early sports-themed comic stories. In *Boxing Champion* (1931) by Floyd Gottfredson, Mickey Mouse faces off against "Creamo Catnera", a ruthless feline boxer whose name and strength clearly allude to Carnera (Di Paola, 2023). The relationship between Carnera and comics is surprisingly rich, complex, and multifaceted, reflecting the boxer's ability to captivate the masses and inspire narratives that, starting with his physicality, stretch into the realm of diverse adventures.

Carnera becomes, in fact, a figure capable of embodying the ideals and stereotypes of his era. Comics, an extremely popular and widespread medium in the 1930s, were particularly well-suited to transforming his image into myth. Due to its versatility, the medium provides a variety of representations of Carnera, whose figure continually oscillates between myth and reality.

Remarkably, Carnera himself developed a curious passion for this medium. In the early 1930s, the King Features Syndicate began publishing a series of comic strips titled *Primo's Dreams*, credited to the Italian boxer himself. These strips playfully explore the imposing physicality of the boxer, placing him on the fine line between dream and reality.

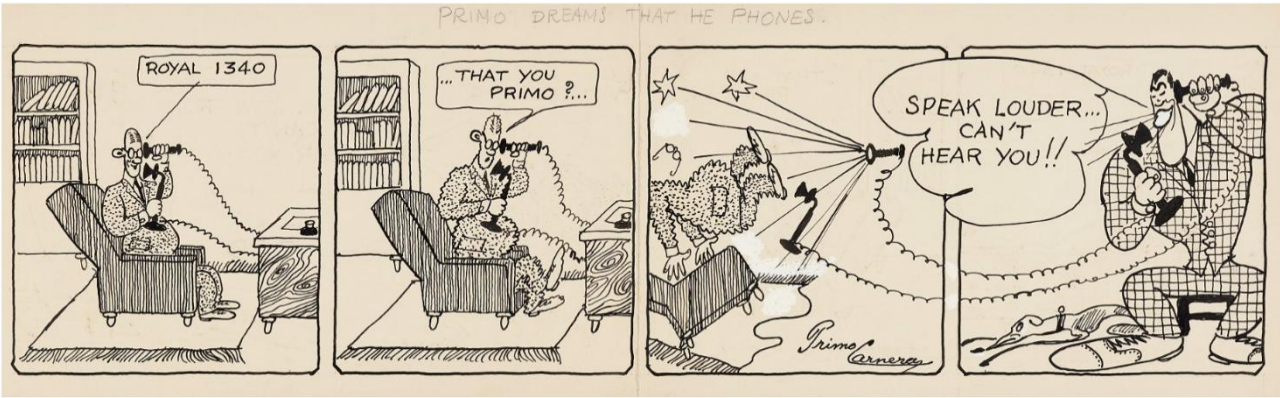

Figure 1: Primo's Dreams. Ulrich Merkl Collection.

In fact, it is highly likely that the strips were actually created by the Franco-Belgian cartoonist Louis Gérard Berings:

> Primo had met Louis Gérard Berings in Paris […]. He was captivated by the beauty of the cartoons Berings published daily in the newspaper «Le Matin». The Friulian boxer harbored a secret passion: the desire to draw himself. He therefore asked Berings […] to give him lessons. This led to a solid friendship, so much so that when Carnera set sail for the United Kingdom, already wrapped in glory and wealth, he convinced Berings to accompany him. […] Thus, in 1930, Carnera produced a substantial series of comic strips in a humorous style, often placing himself at the center of the situations as the target of gentle teasing, which further increased his popularity and likability. Three years later, the entire series was revisited and published under the title *Primo Carnera's Nightmares* […] by the «New York Journal».[2] (Zanotto, 2006, p.189).

Italy, unsurprisingly, could not remain indifferent to the epic story of Carnera (Di Paola, 2023). Notably, much like the cinema of the time began transforming athletes into movie stars, comics capitalized on the popularity of such figures. The first character inspired by Carnera – both in his body and in his predisposition for fistfights – was *Dick Fulmine* (1938), created by comics artist Carlo Cossio and sports journalist Vincenzo Baggioli. Although not a sports-themed comic, *Dick Fulmine* featured a plainclothes police officer in Chicago, whose Italian-American identity and penchant for brawling reinforced the already widespread and international myth of Carnera. A second character clearly indebted to both *Dick Fulmine* and Primo Carnera was *Furio Almirante* – initially illustrated by Carlo Cossio and later scripted by Gian Luigi Bonelli – whose storyline likewise revolved around muscular strength, migrant heroism, and rough justice. Furio, an Italian boxer who emigrates to the United States, quickly learns to dispense justice on his own, defending himself and the vulnerable from the powerful and exploitative. Both *Dick Fulmine* and *Furio Almirante* conformed closely to the governmental directives of the period. Not only did they perform Roman salutes and fight against dangerous outlaws (mostly depicted with racial or ethnic stereotypes), but they also embodied the prototype of masculinity promoted by Fascism.

Comics thus absorbed the propagandistic narrative that Fascism had constructed around Carnera, whose physical characteristics were ideally suited to the glorification of Italian vigor and athletic prowess, as shown by numerous newspaper articles dedicated to his figure (Mancuso, 2017). A few years after the end of the war, in 1947, *Carnera*, another comic

series inspired by the Friulian giant, appeared on newsstands. Created by publisher Tristano Torelli with artwork by Mario Uggeri, this series, published in the typical strip format of the era, depicted the imaginary life of the boxer, combining his bouts in the ring with battles against various types of criminals. The tone is completely different in the short story *Carnera il gigante buono* by Sergio Toppi, published in 1972 in *Corriere dei Ragazzi*, and in Toffolo's graphic novel *Carnera: la montagna che cammina* (2001), where the focus shifts from fantastical adventures to a strong emphasis on biographical details. Interestingly (though unproven), legend has it that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were inspired by Carnera when creating the character of Superman. Indeed, the cover of Superman's debut issue bears a striking resemblance to an illustration that circulated globally in *La Domenica del Corriere* (1933), showing Carnera in Hollywood lifting a car with his bare hands to save a man.

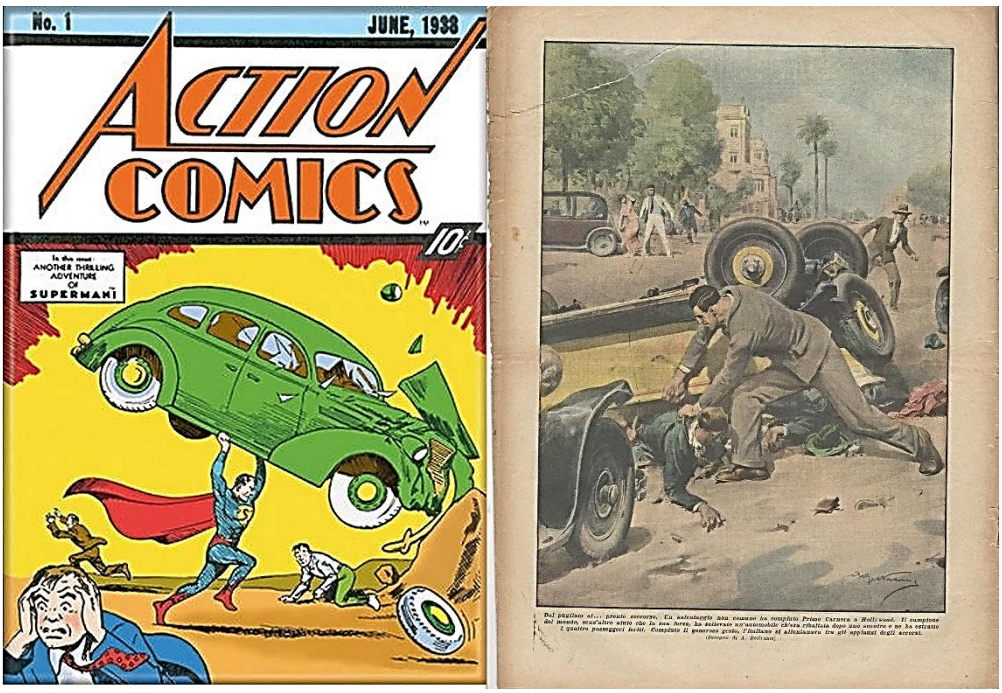

Figure 2 Superman n.1 (1938) - Domenica del Corriere (1933)

A Cellulose Giant

If comics serve as an excellent indicator of Carnera's popularity, cinema truly allowed to capitalize on this popularity in his post-career phase, marked by relentless activity. The film industry, unsurprisingly, leveraged the familiarity and public image Carnera had built during his boxing career. In 1933, the same year he won the world heavyweight title, Carnera appeared in two Hollywood films: *Mr. Broadway* by Walker (in which he makes a brief appearance as himself) and *The Prizefighter and the Lady* by W.S. Van Dyke, where he portrays himself in a boxing match against Max Baer. Notably, Baer would later defeat Carnera in real life, claiming the title in 1934. While promoting the latter film, Metro-Goldwyn-

Mayer (MGM) heavily mentioned the fact that the two leading actors were real-life athletes destined to face each other in the ring. Following Carnera's title victory, MGM capitalized further on his fame by incorporating archival footage into *Bombshell* (1933), a film directed by Victor Fleming, though Carnera himself had no active role in the production.

When Carnera returned to Italy in 1937, following a series of painful defeats and plagued by financial and health problems, his popularity was still remarkably high. He embarked on an eight-month tour with Renato Rascel and between 1939 and 1949 appeared as a character actor in ten films produced at Cinecittà. These included *Traversata nera* (1939) by Domenico M. Gambino, *Vento di Milioni* (1940) by Dino Falconi, *La nascita di Salomé* (1940) by Jean Choux, *La figlia del Corsaro Verde* (1941) by Enrico Guazzoni, and *La corona di ferro* (1941) by Alessandro Blasetti. He resumed his role as himself in *Harlem* (1942) by Carmine Gallone, and concluded this phase of his Italian film career with *Due cuori tra le belve* (1943) by Giorgio C. Simonelli.

All these works, in one way or another, "play on the dimensional contrast between his gigantic figure" (Gaberscek, 2006, p.166) and the smaller stature of those around him. When Carnera returned to the United States in 1946, his boxing career was nearing its end, but within a few years, he would achieve renewed fame through professional wrestling (a topic explored later). This newfound success led to his participation, once again portraying himself, in *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack.

In Italy, in 1952, he again played himself in *Il Tallone di Achille* by Amendola and Maccari, where the comedic potential of the disproportionate size contrast between Carnera and the diminutive Tino Scotti was exploited. In the United States, he appeared in several productions alongside notable actors such as Bob Hope, Vincent Price, and Robert Wagner in *Casanova's Big Night* (1954) by Norman Z. McLeod, and *Prince Valiant* (1954) by Henry Hathaway, where he played minor roles. His final film, *Hercules and the Queen of Lydia* (1958), directed by Pietro Francisci, once again capitalized on his physicality, casting him as the overbearing giant Antaeus.

Primo Carnera's cinematic career highlights his ability to leverage his image through the consistent use of his now-iconic extraordinary physique. Notably, both in the United States and Italy, he frequently portrayed himself – often with a touch of irony – in one-dimensional roles that emphasized his nature as a "gentle giant", often clumsy or self-deprecating. Drawing first on the success of his boxing career and later on his post-boxing achievements in professional wrestling, Carnera effectively responded to the cultural demands of two distinct national contexts. This proves how cinema could offer new avenues for transforming an athlete into a true icon.

Catch Me If You Can

Unlike the heavily choreographed and media-saturated spectacle we know today, post-war professional wrestling in the late 1940s was still closely tied to its vaudeville and circus roots, blending athletic competition with theatrical performance.

In 1946, at the age of forty, Carnera hung up his boxing gloves. Unexpectedly, life presented him with the opportunity to revisit his past as a circus wrestler in a completely new form. Professional wrestling offered the Friulian champion a second chance, and he quickly became a prominent figure in this precursor to modern wrestling, ultimately earning a place in the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) Hall of Fame in 2019. However, this new phase was not merely a reprise of his past. While professional wrestling retained numerous elements of theatricality (including its circus-like origins), it was evolving into a global media phenomenon connoted by a strong narrative structure surrounding its protagonists. As Roland Barthes observes in *Mythologies* (2012, pp. 3-5):

> The virtue of wrestling is to be a spectacle of excess. Here we find an emphasis which must have been that of the ancient theaters. [...] Some people consider that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle [...]. The public couldn't care less that the fight is or isn't fixed, and rightly so; the public confines itself to spectacle's primary virtue, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters to this public is not what it believes but what it sees. [...] Hence the wrestler's function is not to win but to perform exactly the gestures expected of him. [...] Wrestling, on the contrary, proposes excessive gestures, exploited to the paroxysm of their signification. [...] Each sign in wrestling is thus endowed with an utter clarity since everything must always be understood on the spot.

In this context, Carnera's body becomes the interpretive and narrative key through which the audience engages with his performances. His powerful physique and unique personal history make him an ideal embodiment of the “gentle giant”, a charismatic and immediately recognizable figure for the public. Shaped by his boxing career and by a life of extraordinary experiences, his physicality thus serves as a “performative mask”, lending his gestures and movements a symbolic depth that secured his place in the pantheon of this sport-spectacle.

Carnera’s ability to adapt to the world of professional wrestling and to leverage his boxing past to create a new persona demonstrates not only his versatility, but also how his post-career phase was marked by a continuous redefinition of his public identity.

By the 1950s, professional wrestling, particularly in the United States, had begun to extensively exploit mass media, and television became the primary vehicle to expand and sustain its audience. The DuMont Network was the first national broadcaster to air wrestling events:

> Fred Kohler, kingpin of the Chicago wrestling world, had been broadcasting his cards locally on two stations (WBKB and WGN) before national TV took hold. [...] But it wasn’t until DuMont came calling that he – and pro wrestling – took hold of the mainstream. Wrestling was a natural fit for DuMont; Kohler knew what he was doing, and the shows were cheap to produce – not to mention the fact that his central location and position of power within the NWA meant that he could import the top stars of the “squared circle” to the

> small screen. By the early '50s, Thursday and Saturday night pro wrestling were two of the top shows on DuMont and a certified national phenomenon (Shoemaker, 2013, e-book.)

Carnera skilfully seized this opportunity to maintain and renew his relevance, even in the face of ageing and the passage of time. In 1956, at the age of fifty, he won the *WWA Los Angeles International Television* title, intertwining his wrestling career with a narrative that emphasized both his strength and his generosity.[3] Television played a crucial role in this process of redefinition. From a declining champion, Carnera repositioned himself as a veteran of strength, someone resilient to the effects of ageing and capable of delivering spectacular matches to audiences who, thanks to TV, could witness his performances from their homes. This mediatization established a continuous bond between the athlete and his audience, renewing his myth through the allure of enduring strength, still visible despite advanced age. Carnera's body, already iconic during his boxing career, now acquired new layers of spectacle. While in the past it symbolized the power of the "Italian race", through wrestling it became an emblem of resilience and vitality, a representation of athletic longevity. Wrestling, with its emphasis on theatricality rather than pure competition, provided Carnera with the opportunity to capitalize on his physicality in new narrative forms.

Carnera's career in professional wrestling thus signals a profound shift at the intersection of sports and entertainment, with mediatization taking on an increasingly central role in the postwar era. Television amplified the spectacle of professional wrestling and redefined the role of athletes, transforming them not only into competitors, but also into entertainers and celebrities crafted for the visual and narrative pleasure of the audience. Carnera's transition to wrestling and his cinematic career embodied this transformation, where the success of an athlete was no longer measured solely by sporting achievements, but also by the ability to adapt and respond to the new dynamics of spectacularization driven by the media.

Conclusions

Despite being often reduced to the myth of the naïve colossus, Primo Carnera exemplifies a remarkable case of adaptive celebrity – a figure whose fame endured not solely because of his athletic triumphs, but thanks to his ability to remain narratively and visually available across shifting media platforms and cultural contexts. His celebrity trajectory offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which fame can persist over time, even in the absence of continued professional victories. Carnera's enduring fame can be attributed to the intersection of three key factors. First, his physical extraordinariness – framed not as deviance, but as heroism – resonated with the "aggrandized mode" of spectacle described by Bogdan (1988), where gigantism becomes a source of wonder and admiration rather than fear or marginalisation. His body was not merely a site of performance, but a symbolic asset, continuously reinterpreted through evolving media grammars. As Garland-Thomson (1996, 1997) has argued, extraordinary bodies function as culturally potent texts – and Carnera's

was particularly legible: monumental, yet gentle; physically imposing, yet emotionally resonant.

Second, his trajectory reveals the media-industrial ecology of early twentieth-century fame. From the circus to comic strips, from cinema to television, Carnera moved seamlessly through a hybrid media landscape that rewarded figures capable of crossing genres and platforms. This cross-media adaptability transformed him into a serialised media object – a persona that could be endlessly recontextualised, domesticated, and reframed. The archetype of the "gentle giant" in particular served as a floating signifier, affording him a narrative elasticity unmatched by many of his contemporaries.

Third, Carnera played an active role in sustaining his celebrity capital, as theorised by Driessens (2013) and Gunter (2014). His willingness to parody himself, to take on comic or self-deprecating roles, and to appear emotionally vulnerable – most notably in his television performance on *Il Musichiere* in 1958 – illustrates that the persistence of fame is never purely structural or accidental. On the contrary, it is co-produced through the figure's strategic performance of availability and adaptability. On this occasion, Carnera famously sang:

> "Lo so che sono un Ercole ma vi confesso che le viole mammole e i marrons glacés e come mi commuovono i drammi al cinema, i bimbi quando piangono e chiamano mamà! E questo avviene, ahimè, sapete voi perché? Ho il cuore tenero, tenero, tenero, l'animo nobile, nobile, nobile, sono sensibile, tanto sensibile che se mi toccano mi metto a piangere, faccio uno strillo e chiamo papà!"[4]

This self-parodic performance – far removed from the hypermasculine image cultivated during his boxing years – consolidated his status as the "gentle giant" in the national imagination, endearing him to a mass television audience. The popularity of *Il Musichiere*, one of Italy's most watched programmes at the time, offered Carnera a platform to reach publics far beyond the traditional confines of sporting fandom, enabling a rearticulation of his persona as both heroic and affectively accessible. Carnera's narrative adaptability places him in a lineage that anticipates global figures such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, who likewise transitioned from sport to spectacle, from hypermasculine action to comedic self-irony. Both constructed celebrity personas grounded in physical excess, but capable of semantic fluidity – capable of being re-signified without losing recognisability. Carnera, long before the age of digital branding or social media, reveals how fame can function as a modular narrative device, not bound to a single cultural field, but rooted in a body capable of absorbing and redistributing symbolic meaning.

Ultimately, Carnera emerges as more than a historical figure: he becomes a heuristic model for understanding how celebrity capital can be preserved and reactivated across media ecologies. His life – at once mythical and dramatic – offers an epic arc that continues to resonate today: from humble beginnings and the struggle for survival, to the tragic death of an opponent in the ring and the triumph of a world title; from manipulation by managers and the Fascist regime to his reinvention through wrestling, television, and cinema; from national glory to illness and eventual decline. This narrative, rich in conflict, pathos and

contradiction, allows Carnera to exist simultaneously within historical and mythical time. In this light, Carnera's story transcends the often-ephemeral terrain of sports celebrity and enters the symbolic realm of athletic heroism (Bifulco & Tirino, 2018). It is a story that endures because it mobilises archetypes that are at once spectacular and intimate – enabling Primo Carnera to remain, even today, a cultural figure both extraordinary and profoundly human.

Biographical Note

Lorenzo Di Paola is an FNRS Postdoctoral Researcher at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). His research sits at the intersection of media studies, comics studies, the sociology of literature, visual and digital cultures. He is the author of the monograph *L'inafferrabile medium. Una cartografia delle teorie del fumetto dagli anni Venti a oggi* (2019), and has published widely in Italian and international peer-reviewed journals, including *Comicalités*, *Cinergie*, *Studies in Comics*, *Im@go, Elephant & Castle*, *Sociétés*, *H-ermes*, *Mediascapes* and *Between*, as well as in various edited collections. He is a founding member of SNIF – *Studying 'n' Investigating Fumetti*, an international research network dedicated to the interdisciplinary study and promotion of comics. He collaborates with several research groups, including COMICS (Ghent University), ACME (Université de Liège), the Centro Studi Media Culture Società, and DICSLab – Digital Culture & Sport Lab at the University of Salerno.

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Notes

[1] È uno spettatore assiduo il proprietario di uno dei baracconi si accorge di quel giovanottone che supera il rimanente pubblico di buoni 30-40 cm. Alphonse Ledudal, questo è il suo nome, intuisce forse, con il fiuto sicuro dell'uomo di strada un po' malandrino, i possibili futuri guadagni che un uomo della stazza (e della probabile forza) di Primo Carnera potrebbe apportare alla sua "impresa". Gli si avvicina, gli prospetta una vita varia ed avventurosa: divertimenti a non finire, soldi per bei vestiti, pasti a sufficienza per calmare la fame. E così il ragazzone friulano, andato nel mondo in cerca di fortuna, finisce intanto, diciannovenne, in un piccolo circo: diventa "Juan il terribile", "il terrore di Guadalajara", "*le champion qui jamais a été battu*", il numero *clou* dello spettacolo.
[2] Primo aveva conosciuto Louis Gérard Berings a Parigi […]. Era rimasto conquistato dalla bellezza delle vignette che il *cartoonist* pubblicava ogni giorno nel giornale «Le Matin». Aveva una segreta passione il friulano: potere egli stesso disegnare. Chiese quindi a Berings […] di impartirgli delle lezioni. Tutto questo sfociò in un'amicizia tanto solida che allorché Carnera stava salpando per il Regno Unito, già avvolto di gloria e ricco, convinse Berings a seguirlo. Fu così che nel 1930 Carnera disegnò una folta serie di *strips*, in una variante umoristica che, ponendosi sempre egli al centro delle situazioni come bersaglio di garbati sfottò gli assicurò ulteriore popolarità e simpatia. Tre anni più tardi l'intera serie venne ripresa e pubblicata col sopra titolo *Primo Carnera's Nightmares* […] dal «New York Journal».
[3] "Article 17 of the contract signed with his manager required Harris to ensure that event organizers allocated half of all proceeds to support relief efforts for Italy. If this was not possible, Carnera himself would personally donate 5 percent of his earnings" (Toschi, 2006, p.151).
[4] "I know I am a Hercules, but I confess that violets, marrons glacés, and cinematic dramas deeply move me, as do children crying and calling for their mother! And this happens, alas, because—do you know why? —I have a tender, tender heart, a noble, noble soul, and I am so sensitive that if someone touches me, I start crying, scream out, and call for my father!". This is a song by Renato Rascel (1955), slightly altered and adapted to the context.

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What Comes Next? Sports Celebrities as Influencers in the End-of-Career and Post-Career Phases: The Case of Gigi Datome*

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The end-of-career and post-career represent a delicate transition for sports celebrities. At this stage, the management of the celebrity capital accumulated over the course of a competitive career involves a renegotiation with the target audience and stakeholders, in an attempt to reinvest it in the same or other (political, business, etc.) sporting spheres. Social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, constitute media environments in which celebrities can set up forms of self-representation and self-narratives that influence and inspire the behaviour of followers and wider circles. Such communicative stages may also be aimed at practising forms of activism (cultural, civic, political, social, etc.). This paper intends to investigate the practices and processes through which sports celebrities, in the end-of-career and post-career phases, renegotiate their public role by being influencers and influ-activists. The specific case examined concerns the analysis of the forms of self-narration and self-representation set up by basketball player Gigi Datome on his official Instagram page, in the period between the end of his career and the first months of his post-career.

Keywords: sports celebrity, post-career, ageing, influencer culture, influ-activism

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End-of-career and post-career for sports stars and the renegotiation of celebrity capital

Celebrities are charismatic and fascinating personalities. In the field of social sciences, Charles Wright Mills (1956, pp. 71-72) provided a fundamental definition of celebrity: "The celebrities are The Names that need no further identification. Those who know them so far exceed those of whom they know as to require no exact computation. Wherever the celebrities go, they are recognized, and moreover, recognized with some excitement and awe. […] More or less continuously, over a period of time, they are the material for the media of communication and entertainment". Mills outlines an initial theoretical systematization of the relationship between celebrity, on the one hand, and prestige, stratification, and power, on the other. Additionally, Mills identifies a class of "professional celebrities," whose success is determined solely by their public visibility.

Only since the 1990s has the sociology of celebrity and fame undergone significant development. Marshall (1997) and Rojek (2001) studied the commodification of celebrity as an indicator of capitalism's ability to commercialize any subject or phenomenon. Dyer (1979) and Cashmore (2006), however, observed that celebrities are both products and promoters of the commercialization and the capitalist market economy. Moreover, Dyer (1979) highlighted the active role of audiences in the construction and affirmation of celebrity, through symbolic processes that cannot be reduced to the intentions of the cultural industry. These studies pave the way for subsequent developments in the sociological analysis of celebrity, with interactions with Media Studies and Fandom Studies.

In the sports context, an athlete is perceived as a celebrity when he/she is publicly recognized as a figure to whom society attributes prestige and honors, thanks to his/her technical and character qualities, both within and outside the sporting context. This celebrity status increases the athlete's visibility and opportunities to gain recognition, privileges, and material and immaterial benefits (van Krieken, 2012). Sports celebrity is closely tied to physical abilities. Athletic skills, when expressed in highly competitive contexts and leading to significant successes, allow individuals to gain public attention and notoriety. Thus, the glory of a sports celebrity is based on an ideal of competitiveness that, in the eyes of the public, is synonymous with authenticity (Smart, 2005). Since it is the result of years of training, sports celebrity can be seen as an "achieved celebrity," earned on the field (Rojek, 2001).

The body of a sports celebrity is the epicenter of multiple processes. It is the means through which athletic excellence is expressed. Moreover, especially in the digital age, it represents socially approved values such as naturalness, well-being, and positivity, reflecting the prevailing aesthetic standards of the time. Beyond technical and tactical skills, other qualities favor the attainment of celebrity status: sacrifice, courage, leadership, cooperation, tenacity, and creativity (Bifulco & Tirino, 2019).

Celebrity is a status that depends on public attribution, fueled by the media echo of sports events and the stories surrounding them (controversies, private life, etc.). Therefore, it is important to place the phenomenon of sports celebrity within the meta-process of the

mediatization of sport. The media play a crucial role in shaping sports cultures (Tirino, 2019 and 2022a). According to Frandsen (2020, pp. 16-17), this analytical framework: 1) focuses on the study of mutual interrelationships between media changes and sport changes; 2) describes how media cause changes in sport organizations, proceeding in "waves" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016); 3) identifies media processes that can produce long-term changes in individual practices, organizations, and the social structure of sport; 4) explains how the incidence of media on sport varies significantly, between different sports, between different groups within the same sport, between national contexts, and in different eras; 5) defines a holistic analytical approach, linking mediatization to other meta-processes, such as globalization, commercialization, and individualization, in producing relevant social changes in sports.

Sports celebrity, therefore, remains intrinsically tied to the interplay of three meta-processes: the mediatization, commercialization, and globalization of sport. By meta-processes, we mean a vast and diversified set of phenomena whose impact is measurable only in the long term (Krotz, 2007). One of the keys to strengthening an athlete's fame is the ability to manage their public image through the media. In the public arena, every famous athlete continuously interacts with fans, spectators, and audiences, sharing emotions related to sporting events and their private life. The narration of their stories fuels the sports myth, which is recounted through films, TV series, comics, novels, podcasts, and theatrical plays.

The media shape the symbolic environment in which champions gain visibility (Cashmore, 2006) and build their myth (Bifulco & Tirino, 2018). Both informative media (radio, television, talk shows, etc.) and narrative media (films, series, video games, etc.) contribute to constructing and sometimes destroying sports celebrities' reputations. Radio and television have allowed fans to perceive an unprecedented closeness to celebrities, fueling what Horton and Wohl (1956) define as a "parasocial relationship", through which the fan experiences a kind of "distant intimacy" with the champion. Since the 1950s, with the increasing role of television broadcasters in sports, athletes have begun to capitalize on their visibility through advertising, sponsorships, and collaborations with companies. Celebrity enables them to accumulate economic resources, while sports-related consumption is driven by the aura of authenticity, success, and positivity that elite athletes convey. The "celebrity capital" – i.e., the "accumulated media visibility, derived from recurring media representations" (Driessens, 2013, p. 17) – can be converted into other forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, etc.). The study of the end-of-career and post-career of sports stars makes it possible to explore how this phase becomes an opportunity to renegotiate the limits imposed by an ageing body in order to experiment with new professional opportunities and new forms of connection with fans. Celebrity capital can also be converted into civic and social activism, politics, and entrepreneurship.

In the digital era, social networks have amplified the possibilities for self-construction of the public image of sports celebrities, transforming into spaces where athletes manage their visibility and "celebrity capital" (Bifulco, 2023). These environments mix private and professional spheres, a phenomenon that has led to the overlap of contexts, increasing the

risk of inconsistencies and contradictions in the values expressed by sports celebrities (Tirino, 2024). The growing presence of celebrities on social media requires careful reputation management to avoid unpleasant situations such as cyberbullying or data theft (Tirino, 2022b).

This makes the study of ageing and post-career transitions of sports celebrities particularly interesting. Ageing entails a reduction in physical and cognitive abilities, forcing the end of an athletic career and a lifestyle change, much like other traumatic events (such as major defeats, injuries, and scandals) (Marshall & Rahman, 2014). Not all athletes are prepared for these considerable changes in their daily and public lives (Tinley, 2012). This transition period affects not only the professional career (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017; Ronkainen et al., 2023), but also the negotiation of the identity (Hlasová & Ronkainen, 2023; Hlasová, Pauha, & Ronkainen, 2024; Schmid, Hlasová, Ronkainen, Conzelmann, & Schmid, 2024) and the physical and mental health of athletes (Voorheis, Silver, & Consonni 2023).

When sports celebrities end their competitive careers, they enter a critical phase in which they must plan a new public role within the sports context but in a different capacity (such as coach or executive) or in other career contexts (Coakley, 1983). The mediatization of celebrity, therefore, assumes specific relevance in the post-career phase. The post-career of sports stars is also influenced by mainstream media narratives in two different ways. On the one hand, sports celebrities' narratives contain numerous references to a glorious and memorable past (Jerslev & Petersen, 2018). On the other hand, the very presence of the celebrity in many media products (commercials, TV series, films, guest appearances on various shows and so on) confirms their profound mediatization in the contemporary era. The search for new professional positions thus involves a reconfiguration of their relationship with their fanbase. Almost always, this period is linked to ageing. In this redefinition, many celebrities attempt to create new self-narratives (especially on social media) that go beyond the sports dimension. Managing one's celebrity capital in contexts beyond athletic competition becomes crucial.

The rise of sports stars as influencers

The rise of social media platforms has revolutionized content consumption and engagement, particularly in sports. Practices of identity construction and self-presentation and performativity (Polesana, 2023; Taddeo, 2023), through self-representation and self-narration on social media, allow sports celebrities to give rise to public-relevant meanings, intensifying para-social relations (Bifulco & Tirino, 2019) and profiting from commercialization practices of their image.

This digital shift has led to the emergence of "sport influencers," individuals with substantial online followings who are seen as role models or experts by their audience. These influencers, who may be athletes or play other roles (journalists, former players, coaches, and so on), share content regularly and have the power to shape opinions and

behaviors. The platform society (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018) offers athletes a range of tools and environments to reconfigure their relationship with audiences and fandom, under the banner of greater engagement, immediacy and personalisation (Russo & Germano, 2023).

Sports influencers have become key figures in the sports industry, leveraging platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok to connect with and influence sports fans. They create interactive and engaging content that promotes a more immersive sports experience. Academic and industry interest in sports influencers is growing. Some researchers are exploring how athletes use social media to shape sports perceptions (Szymkowiak, Garczarek-Bąk, & Bączyk, 2024): Chmait et al. (2020), for example, analysed the effects of tennis players, as influencers, on social media engagement and demand for tournament attendance. Similar to what has been proposed in other fields, Lamirán-Palomares, Baviera, and Baviera-Puig (2020) presented a system for measuring the influence of sports influencers. Other scholars have investigated how the influencing frame is changing actors and processes in sports journalism (Germano & Russo, 2024; McEnnis, 2023). However, most studies focus on the potential effects of sports influencers on purchase intentions and brand loyalty of followers and fans (Abuín-Penas & Máiz-Bar, 2022; Aydın, 2024; De Araujo, Kamath, Pai, & Dhaigude, 2024; Guld, 2021; Lee, 2021; Massi, Piancatelli, Vocino, & Rojas-Méndez 2024; Moreira, Pereira, Santos, & Pires, 2023).

However, especially in the field of social sciences and Media Studies, fewer studies have been devoted to the role of influencing in the processes of renegotiation and reconfiguration of celebrity capital by sports stars (especially in the late and post-career). This paper aims to explore exactly these issues.

The Gigi Datome case

Cross-referencing the theoretical frameworks of celebrity studies and sports mediatization, our paper starts with three research questions: a) In what ways do sports celebrities renegotiate their celebrity capital by acting as influencers? b) What are the peculiar strategies of self-narration and self-representation on social media in the phase before and after leaving their competitive career? c) How are these media practices relatable to cultural, civic and social activism?

Methodology

To answer these research questions, we deemed it appropriate to proceed with a case study. The choice was based on these parameters: the unfolding of a career marked by excellence in terms of national and international sports successes; the implementation of multiple civic, cultural and social activism initiatives over the course of the career (elements

that allow for the identification of an "exemplary biography"); the placement of the end and post-career in a recent period (2023-2024); and the management of an Instagram profile marked by a constant production of content and interactions over time. The choice fell on Gigi Datome, a basketball player for Olimpia Milano and captain of the Italian national team (when the selection took place).

To answer the research questions and consider the identified case study, we decided to apply a mixed method approach (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017), which involved the application of different qualitative research techniques. Reconstructive biographical research offers detailed and methodologically reflective proposals for the analysis of experienced and/or narrated life stories (Becker, Pohn-Lauggas, & Santos, 2023; Riemann, 2006). The adoption of reconstructive biographical research aims to trace the key stages in the construction of Gigi Datome's celebrity status, to contextualize both the concluding phase of his professional career and his post-retirement trajectory, and to investigate the processes through which he came to embody the role of an activist influencer.

For Datome's self-narrative, we decided to focus the analysis on his Instagram profile, because it is the social media on which to a more significant extent athletes give rise to self-narrative and self-promotion practices (Bae, Hahn, & Cho, 2023), through images, linked to social, cultural, and aesthetic values (Caldeira, De Ridder, & Van Bauwel, 2018; Caliandro & Graham 2020). Datome's Instagram profile, in the chosen observation period, had about 300,000 followers. In addition, during the period under review, the profile had the characteristics of continuity, consistency and richness of communication and constant interaction of followers.

The content analysis of the athlete's Instagram profile was conducted through media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005). This method allowed us to identify content classes structured according to precise parameters. We wanted to understand which matrices and models dominate the celebrity's (self)narration on social media in the post-career phase. The investigation focused on Gigi Datome's Instagram activity during the period surrounding his retirement from professional basketball (May 25, 2022 – June 30, 2024), considering both form (the analysis of media content types, stylistic features, and linguistic registers employed) (Delli Paoli, Addeo, & Bottoni, 2021) and content (the identification and classification of topics and content categories). From a qualitative perspective, particular attention will be paid to how the former captain of the Italian national team renegotiates his sports celebrity status. This will be examined through the evaluation of parameters such as vividness, verbal interactivity, caption length, and posting schedule, within a communication strategy primarily oriented toward the promotion of physical, mental, and cognitive well-being, and an active lifestyle (Recio Moreno, Gil Quintana, & Romero Riaño, 2023).

Like other researchers engaged in media content analysis, we confronted various methodological considerations (Prasad, 2008). These challenges were addressed through a systematic process encompassing several stages: first, we defined the precise elements to be analyzed; second, we established clear categories for interpretation; third, we selected a representative sample of content relevant to our research; fourth, we verified the consistency and accuracy of our coding procedures; and finally, we executed the content

analysis (Stempel, 1989). In order to ensure a process of double-check reliability, the operation was carried out by another scholar as well[1]. The posts were classified according to the content of the message, beyond the media typology of the materials (images, images plus text, video, etc.).

Results

The reconstruction of Datome's sporting biography enables us to outline both a concise profile of his athletic career and a brief account of his civic, philanthropic, and social engagement. Reconstructive biographical research was conducted, using 258 articles published in newspapers and online magazines as sources, between January 1, 2003 and June 30, 2024.

Luigi Datome began his professional basketball career at age 16 with Mens Sana Siena, contributing to the team's victory in both the Italian Championship and the Supercup during the 2003-04 season. In parallel, he joined the Italian national youth teams as a small forward, earning two bronze medals at the FIBA U18 European Championship (2005) and the FIBA U20 European Championship (2007). Following a season with Legea Scafati, Datome became a key player for Virtus Roma, where he was named MVP of the Italian Serie A in the 2012-13 season and led the team to the playoff finals. Between 2013 and 2015, he played in the NBA for the Detroit Pistons and Boston Celtics, participating in the playoffs with the latter. Due to limited court time in the NBA, Datome returned to Europe and signed with Fenerbahçe. During his tenure (2015-2020), he won three Turkish Super League titles (2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18) and secured a EuroLeague championship in 2016-17. In 2020, he signed with Olimpia Milano, with whom he won the Italian Cup (2020-21) and two national championships (2021-22, 2022-23). On a more international level, Datome earned 203 caps with the Italian national team (2007-2023), ranking tenth in all-time appearances for the senior team and first overall when including youth national teams. He concluded his career at the 2023 FIBA World Cup in the Philippines, captaining Italy to an eighth-place finish. While the athletic career of the Sardinian basketball player is marked by numerous triumphs, his public image is equally positive. The biographical reconstruction highlights, first and foremost, his strong attachment to family values. For instance, upon joining the Boston Celtics, Datome chose the jersey number 70 as a tribute to his family's basketball club, Santa Croce Olbia, founded in 1970.

Secondly, Datome has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to supporting children with disabilities. In 2017 and 2018, he organized the 'Gigione Day' charity event, donating the proceeds to the Association of Parents and People with Down Syndrome and to the National Association of Parents of Autistic Individuals. His environmental advocacy is also evident. In 2017, he participated in WWF Italy's 'Earth Hour' campaign to combat climate change. Moreover, he has supported various charitable initiatives, including campaigns for the Bambino Gesù Foundation (summer 2019) and aid for vulnerable communities in Sardinia (August 2023). During the war in Ukraine, he actively endorsed several initiatives

by the Italian Red Cross – also through social media – aimed at delivering essential supplies to affected populations.

The analysis of the form of communication developed by Datome on his Instagram profile allows us to develop some preliminary thoughts. Firstly, the published content shows a meticulous attention to aesthetic aspects, as evidenced by the careful selection of images, videos, and (more rarely) musical tracks. Secondly, the content management policy also includes a painstaking classification of reels into homogeneous sections ('Afternoon', 'Manila WC', 'Olimpia Milano 23-24', 'Cooking', 'Ravenna', 'Championship', 'Top 10!', 'Turkey Earthquake'). Thirdly, Datome frequently employs an ironic and self-ironic linguistic register. A clear example of this is the strategic use of hashtags aimed at engaging fans (#serinascorinascogigione [if I am reborn, I will be reborn as Gigione]; #cosaleggegigione, [What does Gigione read?]). Fourthly, the posted content displays a sensitivity to diverse cultural, religious, and political perspectives, conveyed through conscious and respectful language choices. This civic vocation is reflected in the commitment to promoting shared values of integration, solidarity, and inclusion. Equally pronounced are the cultural vocation, primarily expressed through the continuous promotion of reading, and the pedagogical vocation, demonstrated by the constant attention to younger audiences and a focus on the group rather than on the individual self.

The media content analysis encompassed 139 posts and 8 reels (comprising a total of 130 media items) published by Datome on his Instagram page between May 25, 2022, and June 30, 2024. This period includes the months leading up to and immediately following the Italian basketball player's retirement from competitive sports [FIG. 1].

The media content analysis conducted on the Instagram profile of Gigi Datome allowed us to operate based on content classes. We identified the following five content classes: a) Career; b) Activism; c) Family and Private Life; d) Sponsorships; e) Media Penetration [FIG. 2]. The "Career" category comprised the largest share of posts, with 73 entries (52.49% of the total). We subdivided this category into "Competitive Career", "Career Celebrations", "End-of-Career and Post-Career", and "(Other) Celebrities" [FIG. 3]. The "Competitive Career" subcategory included 36 items; 12 specifically related to Olimpia Milano, and 24 to the Italian National Team.

The posts dedicated to Olimpia Milano celebrate the team's victories and cheer on teammates and fans. First of all, the contents (video and images) aimed at celebrating the club's 29th championship stand out. The post reserved to advertise the extension of the contract for a further season, dated 12.07.2022, is among the most interesting, as it denotes the awareness of the passing of time and the approaching conclusion of the competitive career [FIG. 4]. Generally speaking, the tone used is that of a leader capable of galvanising the environment, stimulating his teammates, but also ironising (as in the videos of his teammates sleeping while travelling) and celebrating friendship (as in the post dedicated to Nicolò Melli). During the 2022-23 regular season there is a rarefaction of posts, whose frequency goes back to being significant during the playoffs, the championship finals, and then for the celebration of the title won (Olimpia's 30th).

In the content about the national team, Datome shows a strong awareness of the role of captain. The pattern often involves publishing a post before the national team's match, inviting followers and fans to support the team, and a post afterwards, commenting on the performance. The captain encourages the team after a defeat and calls for improvement even after a victory. The emphasis is often on the importance of the team as an entity capable of achieving any goal through unity of purpose, determination and sacrifice. The frequency of publishing content on the national team, physiologically, intensifies during competitions in which the team plays several games in a few days, such as the European Championships, played in Italy in 2022, and the World Championships, played in the Philippines in 2023. The Italian Basketball Federation (FIP) recognises Datome's role as a symbol of Italian basketball, for instance through a post shared on the official profiles of the Federation and the player, with a photo of the athlete in his game uniform (dated 26.08.2022) or through a video (dated 02.09.2022) in which he extols his sense of belonging. Furthermore, sports experiences are lived and recounted by Datome as an opportunity to explore the territories, as attested by the post (published on 12.09.2023 and accompanied by 9 photos) in which the champion regrets having been able to make few excursions to the Philippines, due to his competitive commitments and the climate. Even in the content dedicated to the national team, there is no lack of light-hearted moments, such as in the post (published on 31.08.2022) in which – in a photo with the game uniform, surrounded by white, red and green luminescent tubes – Datome winks at Star Wars.

The subcategory "Career Celebration" hosts very relevant content as to the research questions. Through the reconnaissance of some significant milestones of his career, in this type of posts, the basketball player seems to retrace his achievements, somehow highlighting the essential components of his celebrity capital. In this sense, we can mention: a short video, steeped in nostalgia, but also pride and awareness, showing all the game uniforms worn in his career, with the background of Bob Dylan's song *A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall* (29.07. 2022); the celebration of 3,000 points in the Italian championship (30.10.2022); the video-montage of the most significant moments of his entire career, accompanied by the champion's words, filled with gratitude ("I never would have imagined…") (07.07.2023) [FIG. 5]; the repost of a Euroleague post in remembrance of the Fenherbace victory (2017) (07.07.2023); the four posts dedicated to the last game in Italy with the national team jersey (17.07, 12.08, 14.08, 22.08.2023); the 200th game with the national team (also celebrated by a FIBA post of 04.09.2023); reflecting on the importance of enjoying the end of a career, during the "BSMT" podcast (05.10.2023); the Turkish Basketball Federation's tribute, during a Fenerbahçe Euroleague match (05.10.2023).

The posts in the subcategory "End-of-Career and Post-Career" are dedicated to reflections on the conclusion of Datome's long competitive career and the new roles undertaken by Datome as a manager of Olimpia Milano (from September 2023 to July 2024), head of delegation for the Italian national team (from October 2023 to July 2024), and coordinator of all men's teams in the Italian national program (from July 2024). This category of content highlights Datome's profound awareness of what these new roles entail: the importance of seizing opportunities, assuming responsibility, and the need for training in

these new roles – all aspects that appear to be consistent with the leadership displayed by Datome, especially in the second part of his competitive career. The basketball player discussed these topics in an interview given to “Sky Sport”, during a special, significantly titled “The New Life of Gigi Datome”, which was reposted on his Instagram profile (04.10.2023) [FIG. 6]. The new image that the champion constructs in post-career appearances seems consciously oriented towards transferring the celebrity capital he accumulated during his career to other contexts. In this perspective, we can interpret his experience as a testimonial for the prestigious Executive MBA Master’s program at the “Luigi Bocconi” University: in the relevant post on the Master’s official account (shared by the basketball player’s Instagram account on 23.11.2023), photographs from the meeting are accompanied by the text: “The dialogue in the classroom ranged from the development of charisma, to the importance of change, to a team management style that places authenticity and vision at its core”. Similarly, in the clip from the popular television show “Le Iene” (posted on 20.12.2023), Datome, who states that he is frequently invited, after his retirement, by schools and companies for leadership seminars, emphasizes the importance of empathy in becoming a leader and inspiring others. In another public intervention, on the podcast *A carte scoperte*, reported in a post on 22.12.2023, the former captain of the national team argues against the conception of sport as an obsession, with its related psychophysical consequences, inviting reflection on the importance of mental serenity and respect for one’s own limits.

This process of renegotiating celebrity capital reaches an initial concretization with the new roles entrusted to Datome. His Instagram profile encapsulates the narrative of this status transition. In a post from 20.02.2024, reposted by the champion’s Instagram page, the FIP (Italian Basketball Federation), on the occasion of the Italy-Turkey match, simultaneously celebrates Gigi’s first time as head of delegation and Nicolò Melli’s first time as captain, in a kind of ideal handover that also celebrates the friendship between Datome and Melli. This post is followed by others showing him in official engagements accompanying the national team (26.02, 20.06.2024), among which one stands out in which – photographed in the classic pose of the *umarell* [a slang term for elderly men who spend their time observing construction sites], while supervising the technical inspection of scoreboards and baskets – Datome jokes about his ageing [FIG. 7]. Even Euroleague, in a post shared by FIP and FIBA, congratulates the champion on his new role as manager at Olimpia, using a photo of Datome in a suit and tie and the caption “That suit really suits you” (23.02.2024). In a post from 17.06.2024, Gigi bids farewell to Olimpia after the conclusion of his experience as a manager, with a selection of the most beautiful moments lived in Milan during his four years serving the club and a text that contains a keen reflection on the complexity of the post-career period: “And now that the celebrations are over, I can say thank you to @olimpiamilano1936 for these 4 years together. I will always be grateful to Olimpia for the last seasons as a player and especially for having accompanied me in the first year after my career, which can often be critical and destabilizing”.

The “(Other) Celebrities” subcategory, entirely residual (just 4 posts), contains materials dedicated to other basketball and sports personalities – specifically, athlete Filippo Tortu

(25.05.2022), basketball players Filippo Bargnani (Datome's friend, 14.07.2022), Vasilis Spanoulis (in a post dated 18.09.2023, on the occasion of his retirement), and Sergio Rodriguez (in a post dated 19.06.2024, also on the occasion of his farewell to basketball).

The second identified class, designated "Activism", comprises 39 posts (representing 28.04% of the total), subdivided into three subcategories: "Bookgrammer" (28), "Culture" (5), and "Charity and Social Promotion" (6) [FIG. 8]. Collectively, the content within this category presents a precise image of the reconfiguration dynamics of Datome's celebrity capital within various forms of social activism: activities promoting books and reading, expression of cultural interests, and direct engagement in civic, social, and solidarity-based causes. Datome's activity as an influ-activist committed to promoting reading and literature – while not unique[2] – contradicts the deeply rooted stereotype of the uncultured professional athlete with an aversion to culture. The analysis of the 28 posts dedicated to literature, which attest to Gigi's dimension as a bookgrammer and cultural influ-activist, reveals meticulous attention to classifying and communicating the books read, a notable heterogeneity and variety in his choices, attempts at in-depth analysis of the books, and invitations to engage with lesser-known works; the pursuit of direct contact with publishers, booksellers, and even popular writers (such as noir novelist Don Winslow). Furthermore, specific attention is given to the memorial and civic value of literature, as exemplified by the books recommended on the Day of Remembrance (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947, by Primo Levi, 27.01.2023; *La nuit*, 1955, by Elie Wiesel, 27.01.2024) and Liberation Day (*La scelta*, 2022, by Walter Veltroni, 25.04.2023). For Datome, the passion for narrative is not limited to reading, but has also translated into writing the children's graphic novel *Il gigante del campetto* [The Giant of the Playground], published by Il Battello a Vapore in 2023: this is a work with a clear pedagogical vocation, with an anti-bullying focus, to which several promotional contents are dedicated on the champion's Instagram profile (29.03, 26.04, 11.05.2023). Significantly, the bookgrammer activity has garnered several external acknowledgements, traces of which can be found on the basketball player's Instagram page – for example, being entrusted with a special book show on Radio 105's *105 Kaos* program (23.06.2022), being invited to a talk about books (21.07.2022), or being attributed the role of "special curator" at Book Pride in 2024 (09.02.2024), and so on.

The second subcategory, "Culture", which is residual in nature (only 5 posts), gathers content related to Datome's other cultural experiences (music, cinema, travel). Due to its record number of interactions (131,000 likes, 273 comments), the most significant content is a short video showing Gigi participating as a guest guitarist at a Patti Smith concert [FIG. 9]. On that occasion, the caption chosen by Datome highlights his view of his Instagram page as a deliberate space for self-representation and self-narration: "I was undecided about posting about last night because it was so special that no words or video could truly convey the happiness I felt. But social media are a sort of personal diary for us, and yesterday's page definitely deserves to be immortalized!".

The last sub-category of the second class, named "Charity and Social Promotion" and also residual (6 posts), collects contents in continuity with the charity and social promotion activities Datome has been carrying out for many years, such as: the participation in events

for the rights of people with Down syndrome (12.10.2022, 21.03.2023); the promotion of initiatives in favour of the victims of the earthquake in Turkey (a country where Datome lived and established deep ties during his militancy in Fenerbahçe) (10. 02.2023); his direct involvement in the "Move for the Planet" programme to combat climate change (07.06.2023); the public initiative held, at the invitation of Bulgari and Save The Children Italia, on the occasion of the International Day for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (20.11.2023); the meetings with schools as manager of Olimpia Milano (20.03.2024).

The publication of material relating to family and everyday life is, on the whole, limited. In fact, only 16 posts (11.51% of the total) were attributed to the third content class, "Family and Private Life". This type of content strengthens the para-social relationship with fans (Horton & Wohl, 1956) through different strategies of self-narration of his everyday life. A romantic register presides over the publication of images with his partner (basketball player Chiara Pastore), as in the posts during her pregnancy (04.08.2022), on Christmas Eve (24.12.2022) and for their anniversary (16.12.2023). Gigi's bond with his little daughter Gaia is immortalised in many posts, often dominated by an ironic linguistic register and images of funny poses and situations (13.03, 09.05, 01.07, 22.12.2023, 07.03.2024). The post in which Gigi appears reading a book to his daughter Gaia (11.10.2022), in addition to conveying values such as care and paternal love, appears consistent with his public image as a bookgrammer committed to claiming the educational function of reading and also denotes the porosity of the content classes identified. Similarly, the post in which Datome reviews, through selected images, the most significant moments for him in the past year (31.12.2022), highlights the intermingling of professional and private life, in fact confirming the collapse of contexts (boyd, 2008; Vitak, 2012; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) that presides over the forms of self-narratives on social networking platforms.

The size of the "Sponsorship" class is also modest (6 posts, or 4.31% of the total). The sponsored posts concern an ADV for Tissot (04.09.2022), a commercial for the phygital copies (physical and digital) of his graphic novel (19.09.2022), a partnership with the magazine "Sportweek" (24.12.2022), an advertising campaign "Remember the Why" for Adidas (11.04.2023), a testimonial activity for Engie Italia for the promotion of environmental sustainability (04.10.2023), a participation in the advertising campaign "Ready to Play" in collaboration with Decathlon (26.03.2024).

Finally, the fifth and last class, called "Media Penetration" (just 5 posts, or 3.59%), although small in size, can be considered of interest, as it gives an idea of Datome's communication skills in various media environments. In addition to the aforementioned graphic novels and the radio show for Radio 105, the basketball player was the protagonist of the direct production of the podcast *Afternoon* [Fig. 10], conceived and conducted with his colleague-friend Nicolò Melli, and distributed on the FIP YouTube channel. The podcast told the backstage story of the national team during the World Cup in the Philippines (26.07, 18.09.2023) – Datome's last experience as a player. Media penetration also included an interview with "Il Post" (01.03.2023), a guest appearance on the popular talk show *Stasera c'è Cattelan* on Rai Due (04.03.2023) and three podcast appearances ("BSMT" on 05.10.2023, "Tintoria", 25.10.2023, *A carte scoperte* 23.12.2023) – all activities duly

promoted and commented on his official Instagram page, in a sort of continuous reinforcement of his media strength and visibility, also due to the traceability and "on demand" access of many of the shows Datome took part in.

Conclusions. Sports celebrities' influ-activism and post-career

The analysis of Datome's Instagram profile, in the immediate pre- and post-retirement period, allows us to trace the profile of a sports celebrity who approached with maturity and awareness the leaving of competitive activity, without hiding the difficulties of such a transition and thus preserving an authenticity in communication.

Gigi's post-career is marked by a high capacity to reconvert his celebrity capital accumulated during his competitive career, both in the same sporting sphere (as attested by his roles as a manager of Olimpia Milano and head of delegation of the national team), and in other spheres (as attested by the different activities ascribable to cultural, social and civic activism), thanks to the multiplicity of interests matured over the years.

Many of the contents published by the sample are the expression of a marked vocation for the promotion of commitment and solidarity (both in the sporting and non-sporting fields) and of an active lifestyle, which improves people's quality of life through experiences of cultural (reading, music, etc.) and relational enrichment (in the name of values such as inclusion, tolerance, mutual support, solidarity).

The analysis of Datome's Instagram profile allows us to confirm the presence of certain dynamics of public reputation management, previously observed for other stars from different spheres (entertainment, politics, etc.). The strategy of repurposing celebrity capital into other forms of capital (social, economic, cultural, etc.) seems to produce effective results only when the celebrity – as in Datome's case – is able to exhibit consistency between the structural qualities of his public image, built over the course of their competitive career, and the communicative practices developed on social media. In this perspective, the former basketball player shows high communication skills, evident as much in the packaging of social content as in his ability to master different media contexts (radio, TV, podcasts, comics, etc.).

Although the objective of our paper was not to analyze the forms of interaction between Gigi and his fans, we can state that Datome exhibits charismatic authorship, since – in Weberian terms – there is a large community of fans, supporters and sympathizers who attribute to him certain traits of the leader, extensively demonstrated as much in his career in club teams as in his history with the Italian national team. Datome's reputation, credibility, and even authenticity are thus continually replayed on Instagram, seeking continuous complicity with fans.

The main contribution offered by this analysis concerns how Datome's technical, character, intellectual and relational qualities, perfectly balanced in his communication,

accompanied the champion in redefining his public image in the delicate phase of transition to post-career.

The numerous posts dedicated to celebrating his career serve as a platform for Datome to mourn the end of his competitive career and lay the foundations for his charismatic leadership and values, both on and off the court, to find expression in other roles (executive and head of delegation). However, it is the content devoted to cultural, civic, and social activism that identifies some trajectories through which sports stars can reconfigure their celebrity capital in the post-career.

The phenomenon of “influ-activism” identifies the convergence of influencer culture and digital activism in the online sphere (Murru, Pedroni, & Tosoni, 2025). Influence culture is characterized as a toolkit of resources, skills, and strategies that individuals use to construct lines of action. Influencers, as key actors within this culture, are defined by their ability to attract a significant audience and monetize their activities on digital platforms (Kozinets, Gambetti, & Gretzel 2023; Pedroni, 2023). Influ-activism is defined as the hybrid space where the practices and aesthetics of influencer culture intersect with digital activism. Acting as influencers in the transition to a new public image in the post-career, sports celebrities aware of their communication potential (such as Gigi Datome) can inspire people, consolidate their reputation, and maintain a space of credibility and trustworthiness through the civic, social, and cultural causes they promote. While this would involve activists adopting influencer marketing strategies and aesthetics, influ-activism practices developed by Datome only marginally lead to monetization through sponsorships. This does not detract from the fact that the relational and social capital, expanded by his influ-activist activity, cannot be converted into different forms of utility, ranging from public recognition of his leadership (in institutional, as well as commercial contexts), to the entrustment of new professional roles to media visibility in differentiated occasions.

Nevertheless, the development of influ-activism is shaped by broader neoliberal and platform logics. Neoliberal logics, based on commodification and individualism, align with platform logics that prioritize visibility, engagement, self-branding, and authenticity. This link between influ-activism and neoliberal logics brings up the issue of resource gaps between different types of sports celebrities. Indeed, the sociological study of the management of celebrity capital in post-career highlights the disparities between elite and not-elite athletes. Only the former possess the economic, social, and relational capital necessary to redesign their careers, including through influ-activism practices, while the latter often face significant challenges in defining a new status and social positioning.

Media content analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page

Number of posts analyzed	139
Number of reels analyzed	8 (130 media items overall)
Period	25.05.2022 – 30.06.2024 (period straddling retirement from competitive activity)
Content Classes	5

Figure 1. Media Content Analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page

Media content analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page / Content Classes

Content classes					
	Description	Number of posts	%	Maximum number of likes	Maximum number of comments
1. CAREER	#	73	52,49	61053 (post n° 69)	3223 (post n° 69)
2. ACTIVISM	#	39	28,04	131392 (post n° 16)	273 (post n° 16)
3. FAMILY AND PRIVATE LIFE	Posts devoted to the family unit and household activities	16	11,51	13279 (post n° 116)	97 (post n°114)
4. SPONSORSHIP	Posts containing ADV	6	4,31	2958 (post n° 55)	245 (post n° 55)
5. MEDIA PENETRATION	Posts devoted to participation in radio and TV programs, podcasts, etc.	5	3,59	20022 (post n° 76)	250 (post n° 76)

Figure 2. Media Content Analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page. Content classes

Media content analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram profile / Career

Content Classes					
	Description	Number of posts	%	Maximum number of likes	Maximum number of comments
1. CAREER					
Competitive career	Posts dedicated to competitive activity, between Olimpia Milano (12) and the National Team (24)	36	25,89	33719 (post n° 91)	500 (post n° 95)
Celebration of the carrier	Posts dedicated to celebrating career milestones	18	12,94	61053 (post n° 69)	3223 (post n° 69)
End-career and post-career	Posts devoted to activities immediately before and after the retreat	16	10,79	49751 (post n° 93)	1308 (post n° 93)
(Other) Celebrities	Posts dedicated to other basketball and sports celebrities	4	2,87	14849 (post n° 137)	34 (post n° 137)
		73	52,49		

Figure 3. Media Content Analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page. Class "Career"

Figure 4. 12.07.2022. Celebration of the contract extension with Olimpia Milano

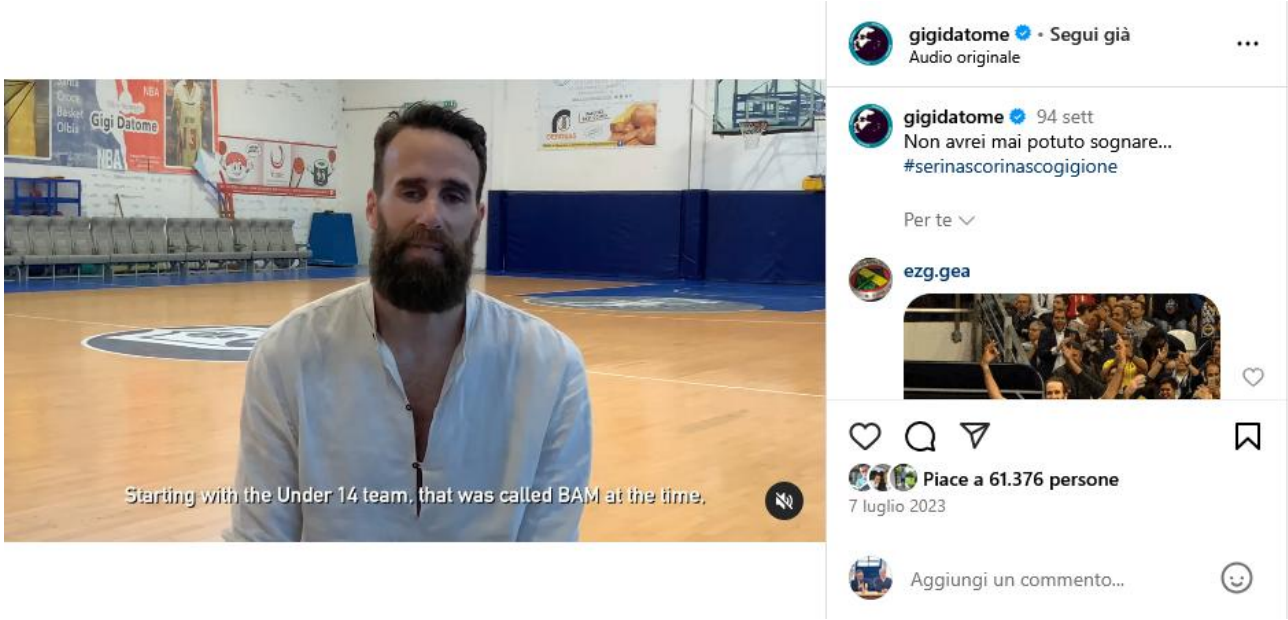

Figure 5. 07.07.2023 (video). Celebration of the entire career

Figure 6. 04.10.2023. SKY Sport special "The new life of Gigi Datome"

Figure 7. 30.06.2024. Irony over "umarell" status

Media content analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram profile / Activism

Content classes					
	Description	Number of posts	%	Maximum number of likes	Maximum number of comments
2. ACTIVISM					
Bookgrammer	Posts devoted to discussion of books and related activities	28	20,14	4072 (post n° 120)	62 (post n° 120)
Culture	Posts devoted to cultural content (travel, music, film)	5	3,59	131392 (post n° 16)	273 (post n° 16)
Charity and social promotion	Posts dedicated to social initiatives	6	4,31	834 (post n° 52)	9 (post n° 52)
		39	28,04		

Figure 8. Media Content Analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page. Class "Activism"

Figure 9. 02.08.2022 (video). Guest guitarist at a Patti Smith concert

Figure 10. 26.07.2023. Promotion of the podcast Afternoon

Biographical note

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Notes

[1] I thank my colleague Simona Castellano for her collaboration.
[2] Another example is the Italian-Senegalese goalkeeper Alfred Gomis, on whose Instagram profile one can find reading tips and experiences, united by the hashtag #leclubdelecture.

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The Underground Resistance. Resilience and evolutions of analogue competitive videogaming: the case study of "Street Fighter 3" and the Italian Community*

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Video games have been, and increasingly are, a component of popular culture. With their growing popularity, their ability to generate mythopoiesis, stereotypes and language is becoming increasingly evident, as is their economic relevance and the size of their fan bases. The pandemic and the consequent increase in the use of digital media has further made this phenomenon a more and more important part of many people's lives, no longer just young or very young, increasingly extending to other socio-demographic groups, as is also evident in the growing phenomenon of nostalgia and 'retro gaming'. The well-known Street Fighter saga, as a whole, has had a very strong media, artistic and imaginative impact, just think of the fact that the franchise in question has expanded to include comics, anime, films in a trans and cross media manner. Today, communities of gamers, be they platform loyalists, nostalgic or early adopters, are a fertile field to study the role that Street Fighter 3 has had and still has in shaping imaginaries, communities, places and practices dedicated to this activity, in fact, almost 20 years after its release, the title is still played, even competitively, by specific communities in the sector, despite its apparent commercial failure. This video game has the typical characteristics of 1990s fighting games, but the fact that it is still played has brought interesting innovations and developments, updates that run parallel to the game itself: streaming, new gaming peripherals and new communities. Gaming peripherals, necessary for tournaments, are not only space-consuming but also vintage, requiring dedicated space, skills and technical knowledge that players often learn on their own by domesticating the tool in question. Given these premises, the research intends to structure itself in an ethnographic investigation aimed at exploring the members of a community of Italian players, avid enthusiasts, numerically meagre and heterogeneous in terms of age and socio-economic background. This community has demonstrated resilience in terms of continuity, challenging the evolutionary processes of gaming, but making its own customised evolutionary transformation, partially adapting to contemporary modes of 'play'. Despite being a heterogeneous community, the places dedicated to tournaments and gatherings are for the most part located in the city of Milan, the place of choice for conducting the research, consisting of semi-structured interviews with selected individuals. With rare exceptions, these players have nurtured the existence of the community for over ten years, interacting even outside its physical space and enriching its direct and indirect knowledge of the game in question.

Keywords: gaming, retrogaming, phygital, community, ethnography

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years, digital transformation has manifested itself in the form of steady progress towards the production and distribution of increasingly portable devices, from computers to smartphones to wearable technologies. The gaming sector has undergone a progressive abandonment of the physicality of gaming in favour of forms of interaction that are less and less tied to pure spatial "presence" and "co-presence" (Gee, 2006). This phenomenon, widespread throughout the digital technology sector, has increasingly led to a paradigm shift away from "ownership", linked to the physicality of peripherals and analogue media, in favour of the paradigm of "access", related to platforms and their business systems – e.g. from Blockbuster to Netflix. This can also be seen from the perspective of the shift from "cosality" to "non-cosality" of both media and experience (Han, 2022).

Moving from the arcade phenomenon of the 1990s (Kirriemuir, 2006) to the disappearance of physical forms of software – through the replacement of optical storage media in favour of cloud-based ones – we have come to the domination of the digital/online dimension altering the spatiality of play and interactions, peripherals, consumption and production practices. The various social interactions that used to take place in predefined physical spaces have been replaced, modified and often overlaid by actions that occur entirely on the net, in a process of suspension of direct contact and in an environment that has restructured itself mainly into mediated or semi-mediated synergies. The resulting "assemblage of play" (Taylor, 2009) – i.e. the interrelationships (among many) of hardware and software, but also the social practices external to the game as well as the individual and community human components which ontologically define "play" – is altered.

Spatiality thus becomes a dimension of value analysis, both of play and relationships. It is precisely space, with the emergence of shared work (co-working) and living (co-housing) places, that is receiving more and more attention; less attention is given to social relations for playful purposes, externalised from the place of work and life, but functional to essential parts of human life. The sharing of the rigidly defined space dedicated to social-ludic interaction becomes the first form of "resistance" to the multidimensional change of personal relationships and values.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a powerful incremental factor in the consumption of digital media products (Amankwah-Amoah, Khan, Wood, & Knight, 2021). Not only has the demand and supply of these products increased, but also the hours per capita spent behind a screen, and consequently the knowledge of the tools. Devices have grown exponentially, increasing in number and sophistication in many homes. They have been domesticated and made part of an incrementally diverse and pervasive media ecosystem. Also in the gaming sector, the pandemic acted as an amplifier of an almost consolidated trend: the disappearance of residual physicality and the consolidation of a "border" (Benti & Stadtmann, 2022) not always perfectly defined between "internal" and "external" space. No longer, therefore, only a spatial division, but also a temporal dilation, with more uncertain (or "blurred") nuances between lifetimes and "play/entertainment" moments.

This phenomenon, evident in the success of streaming as well as social networking platforms, has also fully involved the configuration of ludic entertainment (Cabeza-Ramírez, Sánchez-Cañizares, García, & Santos-Roldán, 2022). The home, in turn, becomes the ultimate multifunctional perimeter, "hosting" actions ranging from work to interactive entertainment, thus mirroring multidimensional and multilevel globalisation. What can be experienced inside one's home is precisely everything the market has to offer, from selling clothes to enjoying immersive online experiences to heterogeneous forms of media. All of this without the need for a physical search that can be experienced in an outdoor environment. This steadily increasing trend is doubly related to new forms of interaction and sociability, as well as to a fast-growing phenomenon, especially – but not only – among young people, namely "social withdrawal". This phenomenon includes aspects such as social anxiety and the redistribution of time, including the shopping cart, in favour of non-tangible goods and products – "not-things" – dematerialised in the virtual universe (Fong et al., 2023). Entertainment, as an integral and integrated part of the market, becomes, in this way, an everyday usable, "zero kilometres" experience.

This work sets out to explore these transformative dynamics that have increasingly affected our societies, leading to a total overturning of the paradigms of life and play, and the forms of resistance that have been implemented in "defence" of the spatiality and "physicality" of interpersonal relations. This "defence" manifests itself not only in the preservation of "outdated" experiences, whether medial or social, but also in gatekeeping and segregation phenomena in communities, whether online or offline. This analytical process is carried out through the analysis of a case study concerning a small community of video gamers, fans of a single game, who meet every two months in the city of Milan, "defending" in this way values and passions in open contrast to what the current commercial gaming experience proposes.

The goal of this article is to clarify how this Italian gaming community manages to maintain its resilience and continuity over time, and what techniques and strategies it deploys to adapt to the industry's new infrastructure and contemporary gaming practices while retaining its distinct identity and traditions. In an attempt to explore these dimensions, this paper seeks to delve into the practices, adaptations, and evolution of the community. In addition, in this particular case study, there is also an interplay between nostalgia, technical knowledge and innovation, which are in turn intertwined with the cultural and social dynamics specific to the Italian context. This paper is subdivided as follows: the first section aims to delve into the theme of spatiality in the pandemic context, the forms of gaming connected to it, and a brief depiction of the peculiarities of the arcade centres "phenomenon"; the second section describes the case study, both regarding the gaming community and the game in question; the third section concerns the methodology adopted during the interviews; the fourth section reports reflections and results about the empirical experience; the conclusions, divided into two parts, will first present a synthesis of what has been analysed during the study, and then will offer some observations on the issues of elitism and gatekeeping concerning events that occurred posthumously to the fieldwork.

Pandemic as an amplifier of gaming experiences: trends and resistances

The pandemic, despite its adverse effects in various spheres of daily life, has significantly increased earnings in several multimedia sectors, directly responding to the demand-supply of the period (Paschke, Austermann, Simon-Kutscher, & Thomasius, 2021; Vargo, Zhu, Benwell, & Yan, 2021). Of these, video games have been among the biggest beneficiaries, both on mobile platforms and on "semi-portable" hardware such as increasingly high-performance computers and consoles (Şener, Yalçın, & Gulseven, 2021). The pandemic is seen as the central stimulus for the production of new mutable – and adaptable – forms of gaming, in turn encompassing mechanisms of "escape" from a reality considered "oppressive". This process has strongly stimulated the development and dissemination of tools for the enjoyment of augmented reality activities, both recreational and otherwise: among these, one cannot fail to mention the metaverse, to which companies and players in the recreational and communication sector have begun to pay attention with growing interest (Mohammed, Aljanab, & Gadekallu, 2024).

While industry, consumption and trends are moving in this seemingly unstoppable transformative current, apparently dissonant experiences continue to multiply: music on vinyl has regained a significant weight in sales, not only for niches or enthusiasts (Mall, 2021); the same can be said for cassettes (Demers, 2017). Clothing styles and film aesthetics, meanwhile, have often moved in a conservative direction, taking up past or older canons, in an increasingly uncovered and numerically consistent manner (Kalinina, 2012).

A similar discourse can be made for retro gaming. This phenomenon, in turn, is structured in various (and different) directions: from the production of new consoles, powered by new technologies and new computing engines but with retro/vintage aesthetics, designed to replay past video game titles; or with a nostalgic return or collector's approach to the original consoles, now technologically outdated (Bowman & Wulf, 2023; Wulf, Bowman, Rieger, Velez, & Breuer, 2018).

Amid the transformative process described above, which can be considered fully mature, there are forms of "resistance" that generally absorb communities of fans of a single game or, at most, an (episodic) saga of said game. Despite contemporary contaminations in the means of communication and interaction (from forums to mobile chats), these communities tend to seek the original experience through the "purity" of the hardware – and often also the software – of origin. The possible examples of this phenomenon are innumerable, just think of the most famous titles for Nintendo platforms, such as Super Mario, The Legend of Zelda or Pokemon, where long-lived fans abound. They not only play and purchase the new titles and the consoles needed to reproduce them but also conserve or collect the old versions and the related devices to operate them: in this way, they give rise to communities, online and offline, to share, purchase, exchange memorabilia and to experience through media fruitions now less and less frequent in other spheres of life (Heineman, 2014).

Also positioned in this same vein is the fighting game genre,[1] a video game type that had its most prosperous phase in the 1990s (Harper, 2010; Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys, 2018).

These games were born with characteristics strongly linked to the gaming context: the need, by genre type, to be present on-site with several other people created a level of interaction strongly connected to the game's sociality. As a result of that success, the Italian *picchiaduro* community was formed and developed since the first half of the 1990s, a dynamic period for arcades in Italy. Those years fully reflected the historical, socio-economic, technological and logistical characteristics of the medium in question. At that time, the genre was mainly accessible in bars and public places, often equipped with one or two booths, or in "game rooms" (Kirriemuir, 2006), spaces dedicated to video game entertainment,[2] born from the competitive design typical of the 1980s (Kocurek, 2015). Game rooms were public places that were "populist, energetic, and ultimately threatening" (Williams, 2006, p. 3), and consistently fostered the formation of community identities and norms, often challenging social conventions and generating phenomena of "moral panic" (Skolnik & Conway, 2019, pp. 745–746). These spaces, mainly urban but sometimes itinerant in local events, created codified socio-spatial interactions, which technological evolution gradually transformed or erased (Su, 2010). The initial impossibility of reproducing these technologies at home (Fassone, 2020; 2021) reinforced the mythopoiesis of the arcade experience, with both positive and negative implications.

The social complexity of arcades was intertwined with that of arcade communities. Such spaces were both physical and "metaphysical spaces where participants negotiated social and cultural conventions" (Skolnik & Conway, 2019, p. 742), contributing to the formation of a global arcade fighting "culture" (Harper, 2013) and the development of subcultures (Shaw, 2010) related to the media and the players themselves. As in the case of role-playing gaming sessions, where contexts isolated from external interruptions were crucial (Williams, Hendricks, & Winkler, 2006, p. 26), arcades also set clear spatial/physical boundaries functional to the play-relationship act. Although this experience is shared in many international contexts (Berger, 2017), in some specific cases, such as Italy, France or Japan, more enduring forms of resistance and aggregation have been observed.

Arcade centres, places par excellence for encounters between enthusiasts – as well as a world apart from their contemporary versions made of commercial establishments linked to betting and video poker –, experienced moments of strong cultural impact at the time, albeit with evident ambivalent aspects, both positive and negative, as well as national and contextual differentiations. In the Italian case, the phenomenon was decidedly smaller in scope than the American, French and, above all, Japanese ones. Still, their impact at the cultural level and on the collective imagination remains.

The end of that era coincided first with the advent of "porting" on consoles, more and more similar to the originals, of games that were present in the arcade centres; and later with the advancement of online gaming and the consequent realisation of networked multiplayer gaming possibilities (Flanagan, 2017). The substitution of physicality, especially of a genre that was declining in profit compared to more mainstream videogame novelties (sports, fps, simulations, etc.), had become definitive with the advent of the so-called "Seventh Era" consoles (2004-onwards), implemented with a now highly advanced online

gaming system, along with the increasing diffusion of broadband connections, a determining factor for interconnected gaming.

The following section delves into this paper's case study.

The case study

Although these changes are now at least two decades old, some communities have resisted, albeit unevenly, the external transformations in the constant search for the "original" experience. One such community is that of *Street Fighter 3*. Despite the saga being made up of numerous episodes, the sixth of which was recently released (2023), the third chapter was the last, apart from various spin-offs or cross-overs with other brands, to be "anchored" almost entirely to the physicality of the game venue. Unlike the later chapters, which were conceived and created for online play,[3] and regardless of some – not entirely successful – attempts to bring the third chapter[4] to contemporary gaming platforms, *Street Fighter 3* has remained faithful to its origins, and to the values of its fanbase. Although this game followed the specific market dynamics of the time (Woodcock, 2019), in which it was technically and commercially impossible to reproduce it perfectly except on arcade platforms, enthusiasts have over the years "elevated" its nature beyond the original economic structures. This made the game not only partially untethered to its initial commercial conditions, but it was "ennobled" in the task of counteracting today's economic dynamics of online-only sales and gaming experience.

These communities' resilience, in a proto- and pre-globalised sense, has also manifested in Italy. This should not be particularly surprising, as there are several communities related to this specific game, albeit composed of small numbers, in many European, American and Asian countries. Ultimately, this is a form of resistance that possesses several reading lenses: physical space vs. mobile online boundaries; nostalgic affection vs. obsession with trends; spatially immobile socialisation vs. a-spatial interactivity; passion vs. changing of user's tastes; analogue vs. digital game formats. The enjoyment of these types of experiences, constrained to peculiar spaces, tools and times, always requires greater engagement and commitment than current entertainment media. The result is that the motivations of the users of these platforms, their engagement and their determination are often multifaceted and intense, which is why, even though they are niches, it is not unusual to see the formation of close-knit and highly motivated communities, but also easily prone to phenomena of exclusivism, closure and "toxicity".

Although it is possible to observe these phenomena in many different frameworks, the present work has focused its attention on the particular case of *Street Fighter 3*, a video game which, due to its peculiarities, belongs to the "fighting game" genre, as well as the historical period of its release, is worthy of a specific in-depth section.

Street Fighter 3

The *Street Fighter 3* saga, which consists of three different iterations (*Street Fighter III: New Generation* (1997), *Street Fighter III: 2nd Impact* (1997) and *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike* (1999)), is part of the well-known *Street Fighter* series (1987-present) by the Japanese software house *Capcom*. It is a series of fighting games, i.e. a genre of video games based on close combat between two or more opponents, either bare-handed or with weapons. The aim, simple in its conception and realisation, is to defeat the opponent, either operated by a real user or managed by the CPU. This saga was explicitly created for coin-operated arcade games, abbreviated to coin-op, i.e. physical machines operating inside booths in which inputs directly from the players' actions are reproduced, processed through electrical or computerised components and subsequently visualised through outputs on an electronic monitor or similar display. Specifically, *Street Fighter 3* was produced for the CD-ROM-based *CP System III* (*CPS-3*) hardware, distancing itself from the previous titles in the series regarding hardware and game graphics. The commercial success of *Street Fighter 2* was not replicated by 3, also due to changes in gameplay and, above all, in the cast of usable characters that had previously become iconic and easily recognisable in mass culture. In fact, in the first iteration, only two iconic characters from the series – *Ryu* and *Ken* – returned, increasing to four (with the addition of *Chun-li* and *Gouki*) in the third and final version of the game. Although to this day the game is considered by fans to be the “pinnacle” not only of the series but of the genre, the lack of success at the time made it invisible to the mainstream audience and soon forgotten by the gaming scene, which was increasingly interested at home gaming systems and in 3D fighting games.

Despite this, more than twenty years after its development, *Street Fighter 3: 3rd Strike* boasts a host of dedicated and resilient who, with passion and often personal material resources, have made community gaming on well-defined physical spaces a form of resistance to media transformations. The experience, in order to be considered authentic and thus accepted by the community, must possibly be lived through a cabinet equipped with the original gaming hardware (*CPS-3*), thus demarcating the choice to inextricably link the survival of the game through the revitalisation and maintenance of the original peripherals. Regardless of the presence of alternatives more affordable to a mass audience, i.e. emulated online versions of the game on consoles and PCs, these enthusiasts remain faithful to the physicality of interaction, both ludic and relational, in designated socialisation spaces outside of remote interaction. “Bodies in play situated in determined contexts” (Apperley & Jayemane, 2012, p. 18), which at the same time cannot free themselves from the overall relationality of the action.

In short, the game would not survive if the physical community did not exist, taking the peculiar materiality (“material turn”) of gaming to extremes (p. 18). At the same time, the relational dimensions connected to this particular experience are taken to other antithetical extremes, through forms of elitism and gatekeeping.

The Italian case: physical communities, the Studio "Ashirikubi" and the balance between market and relational values

Italian communities of fighting games enthusiasts have existed since the very existence of arcade cabinets, in which many young and very young in the 1980s and 1990s could have their first impact with a technology impossible to reproduce in their own homes (Fassone, 2020; 2021). The places where this type of entertainment could be found were diverse but traced back to specific areas, spatially and temporally: during summer holidays in seaside resorts, in the "mobile" amusement arcades of town festivals, in ad-hoc commercial venues, often found only in large cities, in stadiums and shopping centres. Despite the potential heterogeneity of environments in the Italian case, the *sala giochi* ("arcade centre") – or at least the idea that this specific gaming experience represented – possessed well-defined connotations that transcended the national context. Generally speaking,

> arcade cabinets were often placed in arcade, with noisy pinball machines' mechanics and chimes, loud music, low lighting, etc. Arcade cabinets are designed to give a specific experience that a common computer desktop cannot render (Dor, 2014, p. 27),

thus placing this kind of environment in a socio-cultural context defined by the centrality of the physical (visual, audio, tactile, relational) experience of play.

The memories, often nostalgic, of a past seen as a moment of ludic interface devoid of later socio-occupational constraints are part of the engine that fuels the current, numerically meagre and molecularised, communities of gamers who refer to the video games of those years.

Italian fighting game communities, as of today, represent a small segment of national gaming due both to the limited genre's commercial value and to the recent transformation of the forms of gaming. Fighting games require the presence of at least two players, and only in the last 10-15 years has the technology to be able to enjoy this experience entirely online with a sufficient degree of "appreciation". Indeed, now hardware peripherals and Internet networks can reproduce appreciable experiences without a high delay in input response and a significant absence of lag, which were crucial factors in the original gaming experience. However, at the same time, technology has impoverished another type of dimension present in the 1980s and 1990s, namely that of relational nature. Physical presence during gaming sessions, identified in a precise spatial location and during a dedicated timeframe, went hand in hand with an often obligatory visual and tactile relationality with the other players present in place. This dimension, or value, has declined with the adoption of the new virtual gaming media and their respective forms of interaction and communication: much they succeed in reproducing the action in real-time, they inevitably lose part of the purest and most direct relational dynamism.

Considering the importance of the game's original experience and the relational one, groups of specific fighting game enthusiasts have, over the years, formulated solutions

aimed at reducing their molecularisation across the country: first through the creation of geographically identifiable communities (regional or city-specific), often through the use of forums and subsequently dedicated communication platforms (e.g. Discord, but also the more common forms of messaging software); and recently with more structured attempts revolving around the phenomenon of e-sports (Hindin, Hawzen, Xue, Pu, & Newman, 2020). In this last evolutionary phase, the genre has inevitably transformed, adapting to the competition and sponsorship logic while embracing the often uniquely online means dedicated to video games, such as streaming, video production and the creation of national and international tournaments with commercial content. The permeability between the boundaries of analogue and digital gaming (Dixon & Weber, 2011) has thus reached its most advanced stage, leaving the latter in an increasingly dominant position.

Nevertheless, not all games and communities have been fully influenced by this latest transformative process, remaining anchored to values, both of purity of experience and distance from the neo-liberal and competitive market mechanism, in open contrast to the simple process of competitive and commercial expansion that the media has undergone.[5] This, in Italy as elsewhere, is the case with *Street Fighter 3: 3rd Strike*, and *Studio Ashirikubi* in particular. Born from the passion of a single player, the Studio has expanded by involving the niche of gamers passionate about the aforementioned game scattered throughout Italy, proposing to experience the ludic – and relational – experience as it was originally conceived, codified by rules and customs crystallised in time and in the people who constitute them.

Methodology

This work makes use of an empirical approach based on a small-scale ethnographic study, already used in the study of the relationship between the real and virtual worlds of gaming in everyday life (Giddings, 2014), derived from the study of media cultures and subcultures (Ang, 1985; Morley, 1992) which aims at an inductive process of analysis (Geertz, 1973) capable of creating causal connections through the participants' experience.

The data collection was structured in two phases: a first one characterised by a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews addressed to individual members of the gaming community; a second one consisting of a return of the results, first elaborated by the researchers and discussed again with the community members through a focus group – in the form of open discussion – with low directivity. The ethnographic data were collected by one of the researchers, who was not only a researcher but also an engaged user in the community under observation. This necessitated the use of a sociological reflexivity and a more external gaze, less engaged in the dynamics under observation (Bovone, 2010). These contingencies partly gave rise to the choice of constructing the research through the points of view of two researchers, the first actively part of the community and therefore able to enter as a privileged witness, the second external and unattached to the internal

mechanics of the group being observed. In this way, it was possible to deploy various levels of observation, as well as reflexivity, on the data in possession. One of these levels is undoubtedly the reflexivity of the interviewer in question, a privileged witness but also a researcher; a further level is that present in the relationship with the interviewees, members of a common group; finally, a last level is the one developed between the researchers themselves during and after the field observations.

The case study of this paper is an Italian community of gamers dedicated to the game *Street Fighter 3: 3rd Strike*, which meets about every two months in a defined physical space in the city of Milan, the *Casa dei Giochi*. In this place and at a precise moment in time, the gaming experience is recreated as it was originally conceived, i.e. through the original hardware and software: a form of gaming vigorously sought after by this community. The first pool of interviewees comprised eight gamers, heterogeneous in terms of age, origin and socio-economic background, who were given a main outline and eight points related to the research theme, which can be found in the appendix.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews involved the voluntary participation of the interviewees, preceded by a brief description of the purpose of the work, during a two-day gathering of the group (25 and 26 November 2023). All interviews, a total of 8, varying in length, were recorded and transcribed in full. The presence among the researchers of an active member of the community under analysis led to the adoption of a further methodological approach: the collection of the interviews was entirely entrusted to him, as a privileged witness, capable of activating human relationships and interpreting data often unknown to potential outsiders, while the transcription and analysis phase was first carried out by the researcher from outside the community itself, and then proceeded, with a reflexive approach, to a collegial comparison. The reason for this choice was motivated by the fact that returning to the results by benefiting from a directly involved point of view actively allows for a greater understanding and fidelity to the thoughts of the player community, thus transcending the role of the researcher/observer alone but at the same time also that of the player/member of the community personally engaged.

Once the data from the first round of interviews had been collected and transcribed, it was first processed and analysed by the researchers and then discussed in a focus group with the gamers. The focus group was held two months after the first survey, during the next community meeting, again at the *Casa dei Giochi* in Milan (January 21, 2024). On this occasion 3 new members of the community were added, who participated after receiving an explanation and insight into the themes, purposes and tentative results of the research. The intention was to re-discuss the results of the research, re-interpret the interpretations and co-construct the meanings with the subjects, removed from the position of mere objects of study but becoming active participants in the meanings' construction (Donati, 2011; Pinheiro & Colombo, 2021). During this second instance of confrontation, a structured roundtable discussion was held, encouraging reflective dialogue among participants. This session included the eight individuals previously interviewed in the initial survey, as well as three additional gamers who were present only for this occasion. The inclusion of new voices further enriched the conversation, enhancing the depth of reflection within the community.

As a result, the discussion became more dynamic and engaging, fostering meaningful exchanges that benefited both individual participants and the group as a whole.

Finally, the analysis performed on the data, the themes that emerged and the conclusions drawn by the authors were definitely challenged by intra-community events that occurred posthumously to the collection of empirical data. Due to certain forms of exclusivism and gatekeeping operated outside the original fieldwork timeframe, but which the authors became aware of through intra-community sources, a new level of reflexivity and analysis of the data had to be put in place, integrating the new elements that emerged with respect to what they already possessed.

Results

In presenting the results, we will proceed according to the same dynamic as described in the methodology: an initial part of the analysis of the interviews that allowed us to reach an elaboration of meanings such that we could return to discuss them again with the players, and the subsequent elaboration and co-processing of these results in a reflexive and layered manner. Starting with the first phase of the research, we will faithfully use the words of the interviewees themselves, precisely to enhance their role in the construction of meanings.

As far as personal experience with the game is concerned, this varies discretely with age. One of the interviewees is

> (...) born in 2001, so I'm one of the new generation for this... these, how to say... these games. I'm younger than the game itself, so, how should I say... my thinking about the game and how it should be played is completely different from many (Int. 8).[6]

The age dimension assumes a twofold relevance: younger players are provided with a different availability of time to devote to the game than the “older” ones; to this factor must be added the opposite overall experiences of the video game world, and of this game in particular, in which the younger players have not directly experienced the game at the time of its launch, and thus not even all the original relational experiences. Therefore, their media and video game universe is more diverse. Community members are often gamers who have been passionate about video games since adolescence and have then cultivated this passion over time, some of them more continuously than others. This aspect also affects the dimension of nostalgia, which for some is a concrete experience and life story, while for others it is a stylistic and formal, more idealised element. Some of them have a passion that is not limited only to *Street Fighter* and the related community but also play other games (or genres of games) both on different consoles and within other communities. A case in point is Int. 6, a fan of the fighting game genre, who arrived in the community under analysis after other similar experiences:

> (...) the first thing I did, when I came to Milan to study at university, was to look if there was a *Tekken*[7] community in Milan, and, and luckily there was, there was, I found it after two months, when I arrived in Milan, and it was here, at the *Casa dei Giochi*. And... and so that's how I started. Then over the years, um... there was a little bit of... a little bit of influence a little bit of... of other fighting games, 3D, 2D, *Street Fighter*, *King of Fighters*, and a little bit at a time I started to look at a little bit of everything, until I came to know about *Third Strike* (Int. 6).

Street Fighter 3: Third Strike, due to its peculiarities and, in part, its difficulty, is considered

> (...) a game that has created a great myth around itself, of... that has... that carries great respect with it, like this sort of colossus of the, of the fighting games, that everyone looks up to, um, but very often they just do that, just watch (Int. 6).

These particularities are both attractive and exclusive. For some players, the fact that the game is, as such, a kind of selection apparatus for people who must necessarily be motivated and committed turns out to be a relevant aspect, while also introducing potential problems regarding gatekeeping and isolation phenomena. Some interviewees see this feature as a decisive advantage. In fact, according to one of them

> there are a lot of entry barriers... I the first time I went to play with the *Master*[8] I lost 70-0. It's a game that gives you an extreme advantage especially on a mental level, I mean, if you as a player already know what the novice is going to do you can punish him disproportionately, something that has changed in modern games. Um (...) it's positioned as quite an extreme game, which is why the people who come in to try it online, come offline, they're a certain type of people, and when they come in that room, for me they already have a basic respect and not... just for being there, and I'll never treat them badly because they lose 20, in fact, I recognise a path that I've taken and I try to include them in that path (Int. 4).

Even before the location and physical infrastructure required to use it, *Street Fighter 3: Third Strike* enables specific selective group dynamics. An additional dimension, layered on top of the software infrastructure, is the hardware, itself complex, perhaps more so than the game dynamics. One of the community members interviewed revealed that

> (...) the hardware on which *Street Fighter 3* runs is a hardware that has been, let's say, saved, over the years, by a person, a certain *Darksoft*, who made sure to recover all the dead cartridges of this system, and, and found a way to revive systems... cards that cost 700, 800 euros, that used to die because they had a suicide battery, that once... that finished practically erased the code inside, the protection code. So, you ended up with cards that were literally useless. So, for years, many people threw them away, and many who kept them anyway managed to revive them, which is why today we also have 6, 7 working systems that, like, 15 years ago was unthinkable (Int. 1).

The physicality of the hardware, as well as its authenticity, is considered by the majority of users to be a decisive, if not crucial, difference. The aspect of nostalgia is present, with different facets, in both older players and newcomers. The original game and hardware act as an intergenerational link through an experience considered (or desired) as common between the different age cohorts (Bolin, 2017). The concept of nostalgia, understood as “a

specific affective modality of engaging with the past" (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020, p. 2) through a personal inner landscape of nostalgic imagination (Keightley & Pickering, 2012), is also linked to the new gaming possibilities allowed by porting, consoles and emulators, which are considered by many to be practices of a lower, less "pure" status than that possible with the original hardware. Indeed, as we can find from the words of Int. 1

> (...) seeing, um, that there was the possibility of playing on the original hardware, so, the game... regardless of whether one is good or not, but one knows that one is playing the way it was meant to be played. So I would say that, you know, it's crucial, for me, that there's all the original boards… (Int. 1).

And again:

> So, it's true that there are some... some surrogates, we can say so, of the game, I would never have thought to, however, consider the emulated game valid, sold, repurposed... however... various imperfect portings on consoles without ever in any case making a reference to what the original thing was. Now we have the possibility in 2024, by this time, to access the original thing anyway, in the way it used to be, so it's not just a question of nostalgia, it's a question of purity... good, a bis, again! I mean, if there's a chance, why not, why not... not go ahead and access the, the right thing, the pure thing, the round thing in its identity, and why not pull other people in. That is the concept (Int. 2).

> (...) now, apart from all the difficulties of meeting offline, the cost of playing online is much less. So... it is now possible to say, 'I don't give a damn about the community, I just want to play the game'. It is possible. I didn't. But my thought is that if it wasn't that game there wouldn't be anything else, people change, new people are always coming, different people are always coming, we find... common things to talk about, but starting with the game (Int. 4).

This need can be framed more precisely in the form of technostalgia (Bolin, 2017, pp. 103–106), in which firstly access to the original gaming hardware, and then being able to evoke past social relationships, is crucial. Emulation, therefore, remains in its sole dimension of "accessibility", without any actual game-preservation function, as it necessarily alters the gaming (Dor, 2014) and social experience.

Age and the media environment in which people have lived make this dimension even more varied and multifaceted. In fact, one of the youngest, talking about the physical hardware, i.e. the arcade cabinet, considers that

> precisely because it's, um... also the arcade cabinet, it has its reasons, the game was created to be on an arcade cabinet, it was created to have a lever and 6 buttons. It has to be, I mean, it has to be played that way precisely because the... the developers thought it should be played there. It had to, sorry, it had to be played there. But... for me, who was born from the online, making the jump from offline to online doesn't change anything for me, to be honest (Int. 8).

Still, it remains an important and particular aspect, but not with the same relevance, almost reverential, that those who, for anagraphic reasons, have become domesticated to the practice of video gaming precisely by using this type of device dedicated to it. The

exclusivity of the community, which in this as in other contexts could result in an exclusivist elitism, for younger members would seem to be partly limited by the possibility of transmedialising the physical gaming experience. Regarding the communicative aspects made possible by new digital technologies, community members agreed that these represent a possibility both for personal gratification and for the involvement of potential new members. One of them states:

> when I post on Instagram this stuff here that I'm doing, and I put the arcade cabinet up, a lot of people outside of this group are like, “ah, that's cool”, “ah, wow”. And, even comparing us with, with other gaming communities, we're like we're doing a more noble thing... (Int. 4).

The streaming of the video game on dedicated social platforms is also considered not only a possibility of opening up for the community but also an opportunity for “study” – for strategic analysis and in-depth examination concerning techniques and specificities of the use of the platform in other contexts.

The subsequent moment of elaboration proved to be more or less an enthusiastic continuation of what had been found and created previously. The purely competitive dimensions of the game were once again mixed with the relational, physical and temporally defined components, proving to be the lowest common denominator for the existence of the experience. It is reaffirmed that there would be no community – and no game – if *Studio Ashirikubi* and this specific space did not exist. Those who shelved the game in past decades, and those who have recently resumed it, would not have resumed/continued it in the absence of this type of organisation and the possibility of reconstructing an interactive, physical, almost anachronistic reality. For almost all members belonging to the younger generations, the dimension of physicality and its topicality are questioned. Similarly, the “historical” actors of the community counter this vision of the media, highlighting the crucial importance of the material component and denouncing the importance of the generational component, clearly posing a question of gatekeeping.

> I think the generational component matters a lot here, and in fact I don't... I don't agree at all... in the sense that, um, I would play the game apart from the fact that I like the game, the thing that gives me the most chance to have offline (FG. 2).

Playing *Street Fighter 3* – not sporadically or just online – would not be possible for almost all participants. The existence of the offline community remains the main parameter for continuing to play (for all but one of the two youngest interviewees, both digital natives), and the interpersonal, physical relationship is the only real value that detaches this experience from the domain of impersonality – and dangers – of the digital world. In the words of one of the longest-lived players, this dimension emerges irrefutably:

> (...) I remember the ovehyped excitement, and then the game itself, the fact of meeting the person who sits next to you, or stands... more often it happened to me that they were standing next to you, because they were arcade cabinets built to stand, and... and then from there I gradually discovered

> that there was a whole undergrowth, a subculture... (...) today I am pleasantly here with the *3S* community, carrying on something that has changed in a general way... in a substantial way, in the strong points, no?. It's something that may be difficult to explain to one's grandchildren, or in any case, um, to the young people of today, who may be the target audience of a video game business that has in any case completely changed, um... it still remains a very valid alternative, or an option, to carry on the healthy part of the video game (Int. 2).

Conclusions

The target group for the case study under analysis proved to be heterogeneous in terms of age, gaming experience, geographical origin and socio-economic background. All eleven community members surveyed during this investigation (8+3), different in many ways, remain equally willing to travel long distances to be present at this specific time and place.

The dimensions of the relationship, and community, are certainly of crucial importance, even though the world of video games, especially the contemporary one, is – at least seemingly – less and less related to such traditional and recurrent dynamics of physical sociability. This relationship dimension is even more important than the game itself for many of the interviewees. As a (partially) competitive gaming community, it still needs to be organised around a game, a defined space, a defined time, and established practices and cultures of reference (Kocurek, 2014). It is interesting to add that while some literature disputes both the correlation between (crafted) physical spaces and the act of playing to framing this type of community into a subculture, and that these forms of resistance are indeed against the current market dynamics (Pitroso, 2024), the case study seems to demonstrate how, at the very least, members attempt to self-attribute these characteristics.

The age dimension, although blurred by other variables, remains an important component in consideration of the value scales, clearly distinguishing the digital natives (Riva, 2019) from those who have experienced the physicality of relationships in their “purity”, making the fruition of the experience for the youngest more linked to the competitive and performative dimension than to the human and social one.

The game, as repeatedly mentioned, has its historicity and relevance also at a diachronic level and in terms of building imagery within the broader community of fans of the genre. The relevance and devotion to the game can be deduced from the importance attributed to the possibility of experiencing it using the original hardware, in some cases linked to dynamics of remembrance and nostalgia, in other cases to dynamics of exclusivism and purism.

The possibility of playing a video game released in 1999 with the original devices in 2023 is not only an exercise in “nostalgia” or “collecting” passion: in fact, this practice opens up new possibilities of hybridisation with new media, unanimously accepted by the members of the community. The reason for this inclination would seem, somewhat controversially, to be a desire for openness to the outside world, an attempt to curb the necessarily exclusive nature of an experience that is situated in a specific space and time. Partially, it represents

an attempt at revolution, not just resistance, to the dynamics of the contemporary video game world. Thus, a full-fledged, peculiar and authentic "existence" seems to be emerging almost three decades after the launch of the game in question. The game has been and remains peculiar: cloaked in an almost mythical fame, for everyone it is one of the pillars that allow the existence of the community experience; a passion, a supporting fulcrum around which human relationships, group dynamics, community could be built. The necessary physical presence also arises as a possible means of distinction, a status device, going so far as to consider players who are not willing to move spatially, invest in resources, engage and submit to the rules of the offline community as second-class players.

This aspect emerges in a veiled manner from the discourses, which, even when they turn towards openness to new media and participatory web tools, they do so in an ostentatious perspective, intending to show a supposed "superiority" of the community of reference. Physical presence is a *conditio sine qua non* for most of these people, as the "closed" situation during the pandemic phase and the consequent isolation were a crucial moment of questioning. For many gamers, and especially for the gaming sector, the pandemic period was instead a golden age: digital consumption, as well as the media infrastructure in the home, increased exponentially; the same was true for sharing and streaming platforms (Alvarez, 2024). However, this kind of "synthetic" relationship has not been able to replace, in the case of *Street Fighter 3* community members, the physical dimension, and this is not only because of problems with porting or fidelity to the original experience (which, as mentioned above, some were not even able to experience because of age). It is clear in the interviews that, in some cases, a parameter for deciding whether or not to play a game is the presence of its respective offline community.

It is therefore possible to observe a kind of recession of "synthetic" sociality, which, while continuing to become more sophisticated and increase the range of its possibilities and techniques, still fails to completely overlap – or replace – the experiences of co-present physicality

> (...) do I come more for the game or for the community? I like not to answer that question, in the sense, I don't want to know too much. (...) I mean, it's something that goes outside, at a certain point the game explodes, right?, it goes outside the game, and so it's a, an incredible starter to do things that, in its smallness, of the game, can still be important in a broader discourse of, of quiet living, or quality of life, which can also happen in other things that are not a video game, but how nice that it happens with a video game (Int. 2).

Between openness and elitism: traces of gatekeeping in the Italian SF3 community

The centrality of relationality found in this study, however, does not exclude mechanisms of closure towards the outside world, elevated to the point of resulting in explicit phenomena of gatekeeping and exclusion. Gatekeeping turns out to be a structural behavioural form peculiar to gaming communities, arising as a direct evolution of cultural practices and

behavioural codes of hardcore gaming born in arcades and, before them, in essentially similar form in the pool halls of the 1950s (Skolnik & Conway, 2019). After all, “braggadocio” (Su, 2010), techno-masculine values (Skolnik & Conway, 2019), sexism (Vossen, 2018), incidents of sexual harassment (Klepek, 2012), racism and forms of elitism are part and parcel of the history of fighting game communities, particularly those associated with the *Street Fighter* saga. In an environment run by a single organiser, the risk is to lose the proactive normalisation by external stakeholders who, due to their visibility, negate possible exclusionary phenomena. In our case study, direct actions were found to exclude certain players, in an arbitrary manner, by the community organisation. This resulted in a marginalisation derived from factors that are not related to relational or competitive issues concerning the game but linked to opposing visions of the management of the community's off and online interactions. This risk, however, had already been partially perceived, albeit in a sibylline and almost undertone manner, during some interviews.

The behavioural norms present at the time of the arcades, in this way, are reproduced once again: thus, it is possible to infer not only the need for hardware and software “uncontaminated” from contemporary online practices but also the reproduction of excluding behavioural dynamics typical of the historical environment of the genre. It should also be recognised, within the community in question, that even the inclusion of younger players is, at least in the cases found, always dependent on particular playing skills demonstrated in different contexts, including physical presence. In this way, such mechanisms produce an exclusionary elitism in which those who do not conform to the rules and codes of conduct are automatically positioned as outsiders. They are then formally divided from the group of insiders, either by personal technical skills (proficiency in the game) or by adaptation to the rules imposed by those who hold the technical monopoly (hardware and software) for the functioning of the community.

The fact that some of these events occurred posthumously to the interviews and focus group highlights how, despite the (albeit limited) visibility towards the outside world that occurred through this study, the closure towards “change” has (re-)found old forms of expression. Inevitably, the authors' analysis and reflexive process with respect to the data also had to proceed through a new analytical level, thereby having to question what was originally elaborated from empirical experience and thus having to re-analyse and re-work the material in their possession. This further insight, like the very nature of this community and gaming communities in general, is still an open question and potentially interesting object of future research topics.

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Notes

[1] The fighting game genre mainly presents two typologies, i.e. “encounter” or “scrolling” (Salvador, 2013). The case study of this work falls into the first typology.

[2] But not necessarily aimed at actual gamers.

[3] With the partial exception of the fourth chapter, initially present in both its arcade and later console/PC versions, but designed to have online functionality adhered to the latter type of hardware.

[4] Of which there are three different versions, but only the last one is used as a competitive and socialising component.

[5] Or, at the very least, as part of a “subculture of consumption” (Meikle, 2013) that seeks to differentiate itself from mainstream market mechanisms through its peculiarities.

[6] All the verbatim texts could be find in the original language in the appendix file

[7] *Tekken* is a video game series in the fighting game genre developed and published by *Namco*, which started in 1995. Initially developed as a series for arcade cabinets, versions were later released for various consoles as well.

[8] This is a senior member of the group who was given that additional appellation.

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"Roman-ness" in Italian Crime Dramas. Media Representations and Audience Perception*

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Over the last years, several Italian crime dramas have increasingly explored Roman-ness, defined as the distinctive way of living and thinking (as well as speaking) traditionally ascribed to the inhabitants of the Eternal City. This article presents the results of an empirical study aimed at investigating *whether* and *how* representations of Roman identity provided by crime dramas align with audience perceptions of "Roman-ness". Employing a mixed-method approach, the research combines qualitative media content analysis of eight selected crime dramas with a structured quantitative survey of audience perceptions. Findings show that Roman-ness emerges as a cultural identity equally constructed in crime dramas and recognized by audiences across three distinct narrative levels: plot, settings, and characters. The crucial role of actors/actresses' authentic Roman origins in shaping audience perceptions is particularly notable, highlighting the significance of Roman celebrities in legitimizing mediated representations of cultural identity.

Keywords: Crime dramas, Roman-ness, Media Representations, Audiences, Mixed Methods

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Introduction

In recent years, the Italian city of Rome has often stood out as a recurring setting for many serial dramas (e.g., “I Cesaroni”, “Skam Italia”, “Tutti pazzi per amore”, “Un medico in famiglia”, etc.), whose storytelling blends the structural elements of serial narratives with the typical features (sometimes, actual stereotypes) of the so called “Roman-ness”.

This term, which is uncommon in Roman sources, was first coined by the 3rd-century Roman writer Tertullian, who used it pejoratively to refer to those in his native Carthage who imitated Roman culture. Today, it traditionally refers to cultural, social, and political characteristics, values, and institutions of ancient Roman civilization, which significantly influenced the culture and history of Europe and, more generally, the Western world (e.g., the Latin language, the Roman religion, Roman art and architecture, the Roman political organization, Roman law, Roman engineering, etc.) (Pohl, 2014). Roman-ness also stands out as a synonym for the way of living and thinking and the slang that popular images traditionally ascribe to the inhabitants of the Eternal City, even when they “play away” (Gruen, 1992; Hamilton, 1993).

The strong interest shown by serial dramas in Roman-ness allows for the construction of cultural images of Roman-ness by audiences to certainly depend on the meaning traditionally ascribed to this concept, but also – and above all – on the discourses they engage in (Holdaway & Trentin, 2013). Indeed, serial dramas provide audiences with social representations that involve a wide range of cultural identities (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, gender, etc.), and these representations are highly effective as they operate through *characters* (e.g., embodying stereotypes and prejudices), *settings* (e.g., suggesting that certain places rhyme with insecurity, crime, wealth, etc.), and *situations* (e.g., referring to real events) (Kellner, 1995; Marinescu, Branea, & Mitu, 2014).

From this point of view, serial dramas serve as cultural texts (Hall, 1997) that both reflect and shape societal values, beliefs, and norms (Couldry, 2003; Mittell, 2015), having the potential to contribute to symbolic power relations (Bourdieu, 1991). Furthermore, serial narratives are increasingly emerging as new forms of media experience (Boccia Artieri & Fiorentino, 2024), engaging audiences in diverse ways, particularly through the remediation and reuse of languages, formats, and content (Ragone, 2023; Hill & Lunt, 2024).

One of the main mechanisms through which these dramas impact audiences is through the process of identification (Cohen, 2001), by providing viewers with characters and narratives that allow for emotional and psychological connections. This identification process often crosses various categories of identity, making serial dramas’ representations able to influence audiences’ perceptions of specific social groups (such as women, men, people of colour, LGBTQI+ people, etc.) (Hendersen, 2007) and enabling viewers from diverse backgrounds to see aspects of themselves, or what they aspire to be, reflected in the narratives’ storytelling.

However, because they are social representations that provide audiences with salient models, their meaning structures may (or may not) coincide with those ones that audiences

assume when decoding the messages (Moores, 1993; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), with the consequence that the social representation of a particular group, a cultural identity or, in our case, a way of living and thinking, becomes the result of a negotiation process between different points of view.

Aims and Methodology

Based on these premises, this article presents the results of an empirical study focusing on the representations of Roman-ness in Italian crime dramas, with the aim of understanding *whether* and *how* the idea of what it means to be Roman corresponds to audiences' perception of "Roman-ness".[1]

Therefore, the article aims to test the following hypotheses:

- As meaningful discourses, crime dramas provide audiences with their representations of Roman-ness, which may be influenced by the specific features of crime narratives.
- In turn, audiences decode the frames of meaning suggested by crime dramas by accepting, negotiating, or opposing them. In the latter case, especially, they might attribute to Roman-ness a meaning different from that suggested by media narratives.

The decision to focus specifically on the crime genre is based on four main reasons.

First of all, audiovisual representations of crime "Roman-ness" have a long and varied tradition, initially shaped by post-war cinema and later crystallized in the neorealist and *poliziottesco* genres (Marmo, 2018). In the 1970s, a corpus of films focused on delinquency and systemic corruption in Rome gave rise to what some scholars have defined as the "Roman crime movie" (Santandrea, 2019; 2024), portraying the capital not only as a picturesque emblem of national identity, but also as a fractured and morally compromised city. This tradition persists in contemporary crime dramas, which both revisit and revise "Roman-ness" through the lens of renewed popular culture (Grubb & Posik, 2021), often filtered through intersectional perspectives on identity and representation (Farci, 2019).

Second, among the many serial dramas that have dealt with Roman-ness in recent years, crime dramas stand out (Buonanno, 2012; Lepratto, 2021), with Rome oscillating between marginalization, often replaced by more provincial settings, and a renewed centrality as a symbolic and cinematic capital of crime (Pezzotti, 2012).

Additionally, the great popularity of crime dramas (Dall'Asta, Migozzi, Pagello, & Pepper, 2023) allows us to consider them as "the most popular genre across Europe" (Bondebjerg, Redvall, Helles, Lai, Søndergaard, & Astrupgaard, 2017, p. 223) and an effective "lens through which to observe the local, national and even transnational issues that are prevalent in a society" (Hansen, Peacock, & Turnbull, 2018, p. 1), laying the ground for the development of a shared popular culture (Barra, Jacquelin, & Pagello, 2021).

Lastly, precisely due to their role as both *mirror* and *shaper* of national identities, crime narratives (and especially local ones) could deeply influence the perception of the countries and places they are set in (Bengesser, De Rosa, Jensen, & Spalletta, 2023), while also contributing to forms of "banal cosmopolitanism" (Beck, 2004), allowing distant audiences to engage with local stories through shared narrative codes and transnational genre conventions.

From a methodological point of view, the study adopts a mixed-method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), proceeding along two complementary steps that combine media content analysis and empirical audience research.

The first step focuses on the internal construction of Roman-ness within crime narratives through a qualitative analysis aimed at taxonomizing the different meanings of Roman-ness across a selected corpus of 8 crime dramas related to the Eternal City. The selection did not follow a strict chronological frame but rather a strategic sampling logic, integrating different parameters, such as: *release* (before/after the rising of platforms); *distribution* (linear television, pay tv, VOD); *location* (series explicitly set in Rome or featuring Roman-native characters); *presence of Roman characters/actors in key roles* (criminals, detectives, victims, legal roles).

The selected case studies consist of:

- "Il Maresciallo Rocca" (Rai, 1996-2005, 5 seasons + final episode), set in the Latium city of Viterbo and played by one of the most popular Roman actors (Gigi Proietti), exemplifying public service crime drama, with moral overtones and a rural setting that contrasts with traditional urban narratives.
- "Distretto di Polizia" (Mediaset, 2000-2012, 11 seasons), set in a fictional Police station located in the well-known Roman suburb of Tuscolano, represents a typical commercial TV crime format focusing on the intersection between crime and every day urban life.
- "Romanzo criminale – La serie" (Sky, 2008-2010, 2 seasons), based on Giancarlo De Cataldo's novel and inspired by the real story of the "Banda della Magliana", portrays Rome as a violent metropolis, merging historical accuracy with stylized storytelling.
- "Suburra – La serie" (Netflix, 2017-2020, 3 seasons), inspired by De Cataldo and Carlo Bonini's novel and drawn from the real events of the "Mafia Capitale" scandal, is Netflix's first Italian original production depicting the power struggles between organized crime, politics, and the Vatican in contemporary Rome.
- "Rocco Schiavone" (Rai, 2016-current, 6 seasons), based on Antonio Manzini's novel and set in the Northern small city of Aosta, features a Roman police inspector who displays his embedded Roman-ness outside of Rome.
- "Baby" (Netflix, 2018-2020, 3 seasons), a hybrid teen/crime drama inspired by real events (the so-called "Baby Squillo" scandal) involving upper-class Roman high schoolers.
- "Nero a metà" (Rai, 2018-2022, 3 seasons), set in Rome's Monti neighbourhood, and led by Roman actor Claudio Amendola, combining procedural tropes with social

themes such as race, identity, and generational tension within a contemporary Roman life.

- "Petra" (Sky, 2020-current, 2 season), adapted from Alicia Giménez-Bartlett's novels and set in the Italian northern city of Genoa. Although geographically detached from Rome, it features a popular Roman actress (Paola Cortellesi) in the lead role.

All available seasons of each series were considered, although the analytical focus was placed on recurring thematic patterns and representative characters rather than full episodic breakdowns. For classification purposes, the crime dimension was assessed functionally rather than strictly generically, in line with recent scholarship on hybrid storytelling (Lotz & Lobato, 2023).[2]

The second step of the research aimed to understand *whether* and *how* viewers perceive Roman-ness in relation to the same four levels of representation identified in the textual analysis. To this purpose, a structured questionnaire with a predetermined fixed set of alternatives (Corbetta, 2014) was administered using the survey administration app Google Forms.[3] The survey consisted of closed-ended questions, designed to explore how these perceptions vary across key socio-demographic variables (age, gender identity, and place of residence – Rome *vs.* outside Rome).

Respondents were asked to evaluate, in both general and specific terms, how Roman-ness is expressed through language, characters, social roles, and narrative spaces. Data collection consists of 296 filled eligible answers, coming from viewers who reported having watched (fully or partially) the 8 crime dramas analysed in the first step of the research.[4]

Representations of Roman-ness in crime dramas

The content analysis carried out in the first phase of the research allowed for the identification of four different levels of Roman-ness: *plot*, *setting*, *characters*, and *actors/actresses*.

The choice of these analytical dimensions stems both from previous media studies literature, which stresses the interplay between textual content and cultural identity (Fiske, 1987; Couldry, 2003) and from the adaptation of the noir genre to both film and television outlets (Hellwig, 2023). These levels allow for examining both the construction of Roman-ness and its symbolic aspects through familiar urban symbols and recognizable performers.

Roman-ness in the plot

Roman-ness in the plot specifically concerns references to real news events: while "Baby" and "Romanzo criminale" focus on the faithful transposition of criminal news stories that occurred in Rome, the narrative that underlies "Suburra" tends to become more realistic over the seasons, starting from a more general representation of criminal trends that belong to the image of the city of Rome (power clashes and corruption among organized crime,

politicians and churchmen), and moving toward a more faithful representation of the real events of the Mafia Capitale scandal.

Roman-ness of the plot also refers to the *depiction of family ties*, which often act as strategic resources and the first battlefield: in “Distretto di Polizia”, the crime stories are interwoven with personal lives of the characters; in “Baby”, the adolescent perdition is explicitly traced back to the need to satisfy family frustrations; in “Rocco Schiavone”, the wife’s death is a recurring torment; “Nero a metà” highlights the human being’s innate inability to relate to the “unfamiliar”, especially when it threatens one’s own family relations (e.g., the main character Claudio Guerrieri resents the relationship between the deputy inspector Malik and his daughter Alba).

Finally, Roman-ness of the plot emerges in relation to *differences/conflicts between the City’s neighbourhoods*. From this point of view, “Baby” stages the opposition between the high society of Rome and its suburbs (Parioli *vs.* Quarticciolo), two opposite souls within the same city whose inhabitants feel uncomfortable in places far from their origins. Conversely, “Suburra” portrays the dichotomy between the criminal underworld and the Roman upper class, through the conflict between people disillusioned with politics and the social climbers of the gangland, halfway between depravity and criminal vocation (Fig. 1).

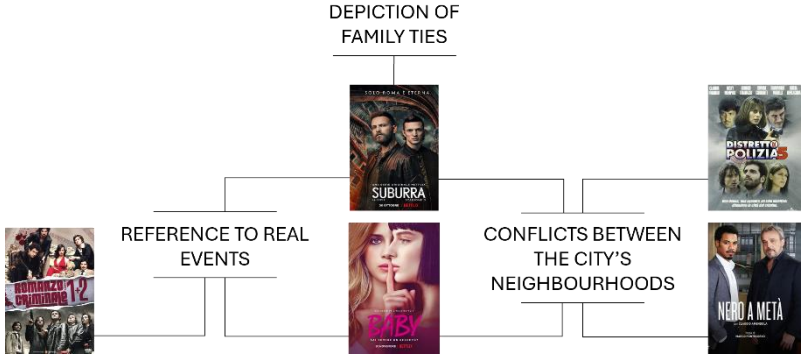

Fig. 1 – The “Roman-ness” of the plot

Roman-ness as setting

As a setting, the city of Rome becomes an active part of the story, both through its symbolic places (such as the Magliana, Monti, and Tuscolano districts) and through its relocation.

Looking at the first perspective, the Rome of “Romanzo criminale” is both the inspiration and the victim of the criminal saga, thanks to the faithful representation of the historical setting, which adds to the authenticity of the story. Rome is also the protagonist in “Nero a metà”, which shows both the wonders and the contradictions of the city, from the multiethnic Rione Monti to the suburban sheds of the Ostiense district. Finally, “Distretto di polizia” tends to become one with its own police station, the “X Tuscolano”, to the point that it often suggests the image of a very playful and at times unreal Rome, which barely engages with crime stories. On the contrary, the relocation of Roman-ness tends to take two different shapes: *from the periphery to the city centre* (this is the case of “Suburra”, which shifts from the Ostia setting of the first season to the conquest of Rome in the following seasons), and *from the city of Rome to external locations* (such as the city of Aosta, the setting for the investigations of Rocco Schiavone, who is nevertheless always closely linked to the memory of Rome) (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – “Roman-ness” as setting

A character named Roman-ness

The Roman-ness of the characters takes shape in terms of typical aspects of the Roman lifestyle (macro-level), as well as in terms of characteristic attitudes of the Roman people (micro-level).

On a macro-level, Roman-ness is easily detectable in the character of Rocco Schiavone: his Roman personality is strong and proud, together with his recurring habit of speaking the Roman dialect, which he also offers to teach to his northern colleagues, to enable them to become part of his world. Schiavone also embodies, on a micro-level, some of the distinguishing features usually attributed to Roman citizens, in particular a combination of roughness and truthfulness, which together shape his full characterization. The representation of this character, sometimes stereotyped (but never caricatured), is also functional to the representation of an ideal-type of Roman-ness that is synonymous with non-conformism, rebellion against rules created specifically to break – if not the conventions of the genre – certainly those of custom, to the point of making him seem like an “anti-hero”.

The distinctive features of Roman-ness, both in terms of personality and way of thinking and living of the Roman citizens, also appear in “Distretto di Polizia” and “Nero a metà”. In the first case, the portrayal of some typical Roman features (such as spontaneity and genuineness, common to almost all the policemen/women of the “X Tuscolano”) reaches its maximum expression in the character of Mauro Belli, the “Romano de Roma” inspector who has left a special place in the hearts of many fans (also due to his sudden death during the 6th season). In the second case, the Roman-ness of the protagonist Carlo Guerrieri seems to be closely linked to his empathy.

The characters’ Roman-ness is also expressed through the language they use to mark their being Roman: this is the case of Schiavone (e.g., the well-known episode in which the inspector explains to his colleagues the difference between “me coglioni” and “’sti cazzi”), but also of “Suburra”, where the importance of the Roman slang refers to the dialectical variations that identify different areas of Rome (e.g., the cadence typical of Ostia, the South of Rome).

Finally, Roman-ness also appears in contrast to a more general anti-Roman-ness, embodied by characters such as Petra – a Police inspector based in Genoa, who never regrets her Roman origins but increasingly identifies with her new host city – or stands out as synonym for “*anti*-Italian-ness”, as in “Nero a metà”, where this dynamic is articulated through the opposition between the distinctly Roman Carlo Guerrieri and his right-hand man Malik Soprani, a young immigrant born in the Ivory Coast and raised in Italy (Fig. 3).

Special attention must also be paid to the Roman female characters, whose representations consist of determined and out of the ordinary women, who assert themselves in predominantly male environments. However, their depiction also suggests that crime fiction remains a masculine genre by default.

On the criminal-side, Roman-ness takes shape in two different representations of women: on one hand, the more stereotypical depiction offered by “Romanzo criminale”, where female characters (Donatella, Roberta, and Patrizia) do not play leading roles, but rather serve as “wing women” of the male gang members. On the other hand, the more empowered status gained by the female characters of “Suburra” (Sara, Livia, Angelica, and Nadia), who progressively take over their fathers’ or husbands’ criminal business, using power as a means of self-determination, to the point of becoming the real driving force behind the action.

On the detective-side, the emphasis on the portrayal of female “crime women” is largely linked to the main character of Petra, a police inspector with a sharp wit and biting irony, portrayed as a solitary and independent woman who uses her femininity to mislead not only suspects but also her colleagues and superiors. A similarly strong and combative personality is also found in the character of Giulia Corsi (“Distretto di Polizia”), one of the most beloved and iconic female characters in Italian crime television.

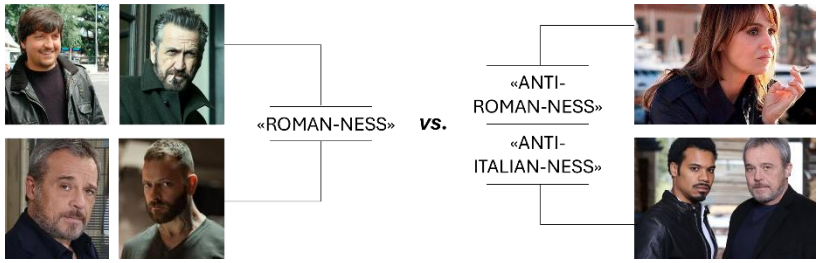

Fig. 3 – The "Roman-ness" of characters

How Actors' and Actresses' "Being Roman" Matters

The Roman-ness of the characters tends to match with the "being Roman" of the involved actors/actress. The existence of true and proper "binomials", expressing a clear identification between the Roman-ness of the characters and that of their associated actors, emerges in relation to several crime dramas and involves both the male and the female perspective (Rocco Schiavone/Marco Giallini, Carlo Guerrieri/Claudio Amendola, Mauro Belli/Ricky Memphis, Sara Monaschi/Claudia Gerini, Giulia Corsi/Claudia Pandolfi). All of these binomials are characterized by a continuous crossover between the character and their performer, to the point of transferring the characteristics of the one to the other and vice versa.

By contrast, this symbiosis is broken only in a few cases, and always in the form of a denial of one's Roman-ness, on the one hand for reasons of geographical relocation (Petra Delicato/Paola Cortellesi in "Petra"), and on the other hand because the actress' being Roman matters less than her closeness in age to the played character (Chiara Altieri/Benedetta Porcaroli in "Baby").

Against this, however, there is an additional level of Roman-ness that goes beyond any kind of identification, which seems to rely only on the personal features of the actor as a Roman star. This is the realm of Gigi Proietti, a Roman actor who is universally recognized as a symbol of Roman-ness in the world, and whose interpretation of Giovanni Rocca is able to give a Roman imprint to the whole series, even though it isn't set in Rome and doesn't involve Roman characters. Even though "Il Maresciallo Rocca" doesn't show any analogy to actual news events that occurred in Rome, nor does it clearly identify Roman settings, nor does it explicitly refer to the Roman origins of the characters' stories, the leading role played by Gigi Proietti becomes in itself an expression of the Roman-ness of his character, to the point that the general public often (wrongly) takes his Roman origins for granted (Fig. 4).

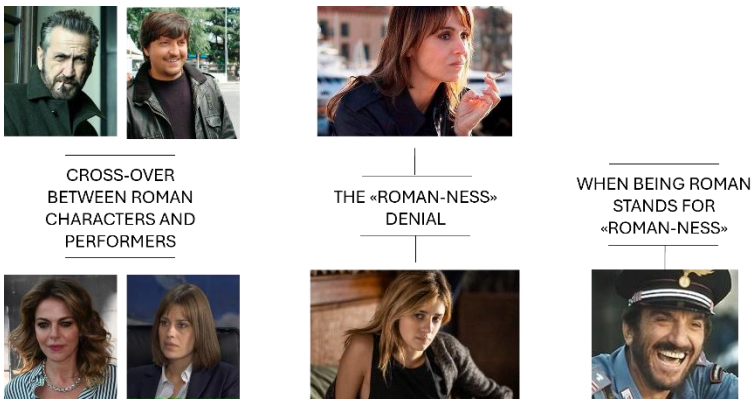

Fig. 4 – The interplay between the "being Roman" of actors/actresses and the "Roman-ness" of characters

Audience perceptions of the representations of Roman-ness in crime dramas

The second phase of the research focuses on how audiences perceive and interpret the representations of Roman-ness identified in the content analysis.
While the sample was not statistically representative, it reflects a wide and diverse demographic distribution. Gender was nearly balanced, with 48.8% of respondents identifying as male and 51.2% as female, and no respondents selecting the "other" category. The majority of respondents were over 30 years old (88.5% in total), with more than half aged between 30 and 45 (53.4%) and 35.1% over 45.[5] By contrast, younger participants under 30 accounted for only 10.8% of the sample. Notably, 70.3% of participants live in Rome – and this ensures cultural familiarity with the geographical and symbolic references encoded in the series – even though the percentages of who lived outside Rome is nonetheless more than 1 in 4 (28.4%).
The survey was structured to detect both general impressions (e.g., traits associated with Roman identity) and detailed associations with specific series and levels of representation (e.g., the role of dialect, character types, narrative settings).

Roman-ness as social and cultural frame

Respondents tend to identify Roman-ness with both the personal attributes of the Roman inhabitants and the city's features: 1 in 4 respondents (24.8%) consider Roman-ness as to be synonymous with the Roman "way of doing", while for 23.3% it coincides with Rome's neighbourhoods and streets; finally, 16.6% think that Roman-ness refers to its history and traditions.

According to the interviewees, the three adjectives that best describe the Roman natives are, on the one hand, the expression of a more negative evaluation, as confirmed by the choice of "coatto" (which stands for "redneck") (19.3%) and "sborone" (which stands for "show-off") (14.9%); on the other hand, a more positive evaluation is expressed by those 28.4% of respondents who describe the Roman as "verace" (truthful). It is reasonable to assume that, by choosing the adjective "verace", the respondents would identify the Roman with a straightforward person, who nevertheless does not border on the negative dimension of "redneck"/"show-off". What is more, the "genuine" personality of Roman is perceived more by his own fellow citizens (29.8%) rather than by those who live in other cities (23.9%) (Fig. 5).

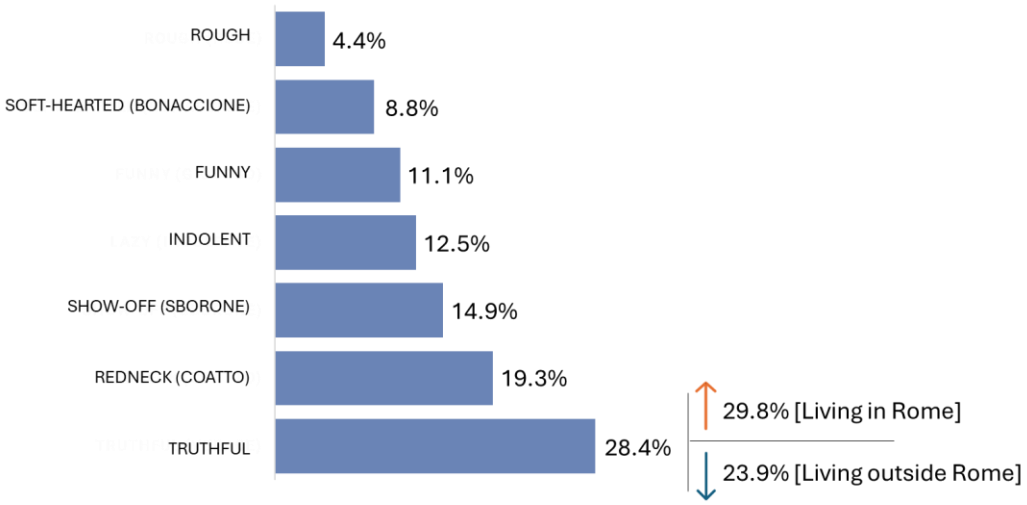

Fig. 5 – Adjectives describing Roman natives

Which crime dramas best rhyme with Roman-ness?

Respondents (and especially the youngest ones) tend to associate the idea of Roman-ness especially to "Romanzo criminale" (33.9%) and "Suburra" (23%), two crime dramas which boast a common past, marked by a pre-existing movie on the same plot. From this point of view, although it was made clear in our survey that all questions were specifically related to serial dramas, the influence of movies on respondents' perception cannot be completely ruled out. The ranking third place is gained by "Distretto di Polizia" (14.5%), whose Roman-ness has affected the collective image, persisting over the time even after many years from the end of the last season. However, if the Roman-ness ascribed to "Romanzo criminale" and "Suburra" seems affected by interviewees' age, the Roman-ness of "Distretto di Polizia" stands out as universally recognized by all age groups, taking shape as an intergenerational common feature (Fig. 6).

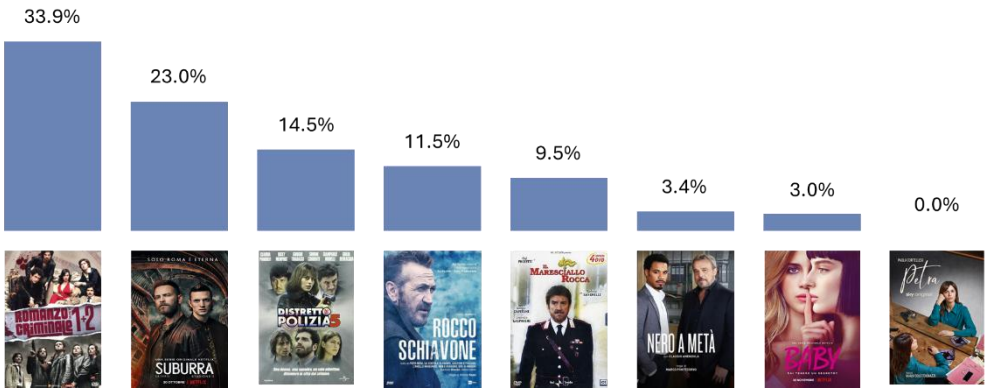

Fig. 6 – Which crime series best rhyme with "Roman-ness"?

Moving to explore more specifically the 4 dimensions of Roman-ness suggested by the content analysis, the interviewees are used to identify Roman-ness mainly with characters (47%) – an item selected to a greater extent by women (52%, compared with 42.5% of male respondents) – as well as settings (35.1%), which instead is a perception more common among men (38.4%) rather than women (31.1%). Looking at the age perspective, the identification of Roman-ness with settings is stronger among the over-45s (40.4%), compared with the lower percentages recorded among the under-30s (34.4%) and the 30-45-year-olds (31.6%). On the contrary, Roman-ness embodied by the characters turns out to be a common perception among the youngest spectators (56.2%), which tends to decrease among the 30-45-year-olds (48,7%) and even more among the over 45s (41.3%) (Fig. 7).

Four levels of Roman-ness embodied by crime dramas

Respondents' perceptions tend to match with crime dramas' representations referring to the interplay between the four levels of Roman-ness and the way in which crime dramas embody them. The plot stands out as the most important feature of Roman-ness in relation to "Suburra" (37.1%) and "Romanzo criminale" (31.1%), followed by "Baby" (23%), that is the three serial dramas based on true crime stories involving the Roman territory.

On the contrary, crime dramas such as "Baby", "Distretto di Polizia" and "Nero a metà" owe their Roman-ness mainly to the settings (respectively 57%, 38.9% and 28.7%) while, surprisingly, only 25.2% quote "Romanzo criminale". Characters, too, are also of paramount importance to transfer Roman-ness firstly for "Rocco Schiavone" (40.7%), then for "Suburra" (30.6%), "Romanzo criminale" (31.1%) and "Il Maresciallo Rocca" (32.6%). Finally, Roman-ness is a matter of actors/actresses both in crime dramas not set in Rome (30.8% "Petra", 31.4% "Rocco Schiavone"), or played by very famous and popular testimonials of Roman-

ness, such as Claudio Amendola (33.7% “Nero a metà”) and Gigi Proietti (31% “Il Maresciallo Rocca”).

In particular, the Roman-ness of the plot seems to be strongly related to the fictionalization of true crime (31.9%), but also to the differences between the neighbourhood of Rome (28.7%) and the relationship between legality and lawlessness (27%). In terms of characters, respondents confirm that the Roman dialect is one of the most important factors in conveying Roman-ness (43.2%), followed by personality (24%) and gesture (18.2%).

Regarding the locations that best express Roman-ness, 41.9% of respondents chose the “real” set of “Romanzo criminale” (i.e., the Roman neighbourhood of Magliana, which also appears in the name of the criminal organization that inspired both the film and the serial drama), followed by a very fictional set such as the “X Tuscolano” police station (20.9%). On the contrary, other real locations, such as the Parioli district or the Ostia coastline, score lower percentages (10.1% and 13.2% respectively) (Fig. 7).

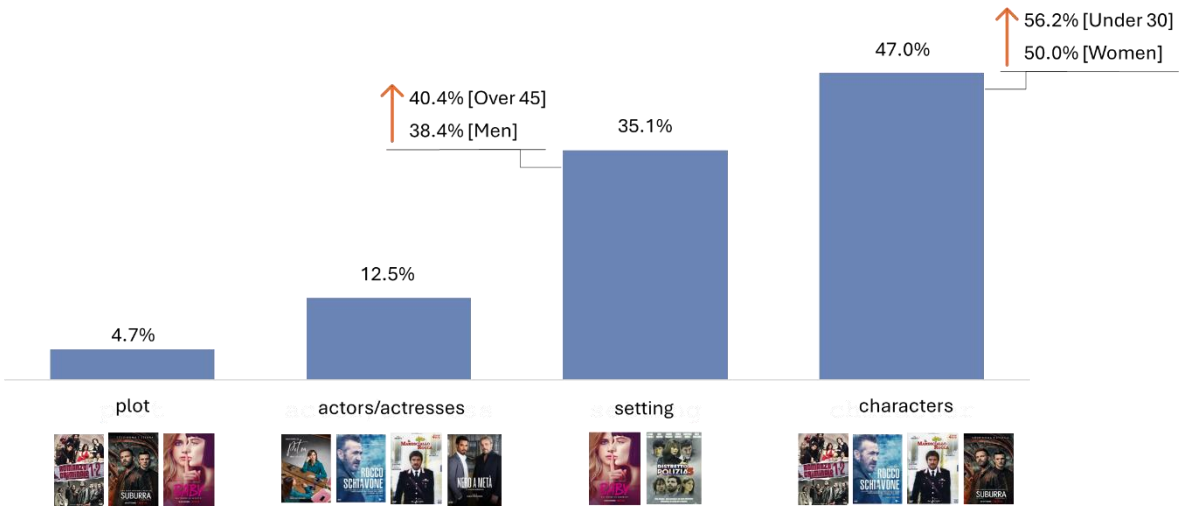

Fig. 7 – The interplay between crime dramas and the four levels of “Roman-ness”

The dark and male side of Roman-ness

The survey also aims at establishing whether and how Roman-ness is perceived by audiences as a matter of role, gender, and neighbourhood. With regard to the first issue, respondents tend to associate Roman-ness with the “dark side” of crime, with 66.9% stating that its fictional representation is more effective when embodied by criminals.

On the contrary, there is no doubt that Roman-ness rhymes with men and with those who come from suburban neighbourhoods characterized by a significant social, cultural, and economic degeneration. Indeed, 93.2% of respondents state that the male roles are more trustworthy testimonials of Roman-ness than the female ones, and 85.8% think that Roman-ness refers to the so-called “borgatari” rather than to those who live in upper-class neighbourhoods (the so-called “pariolini”) (Fig. 8).

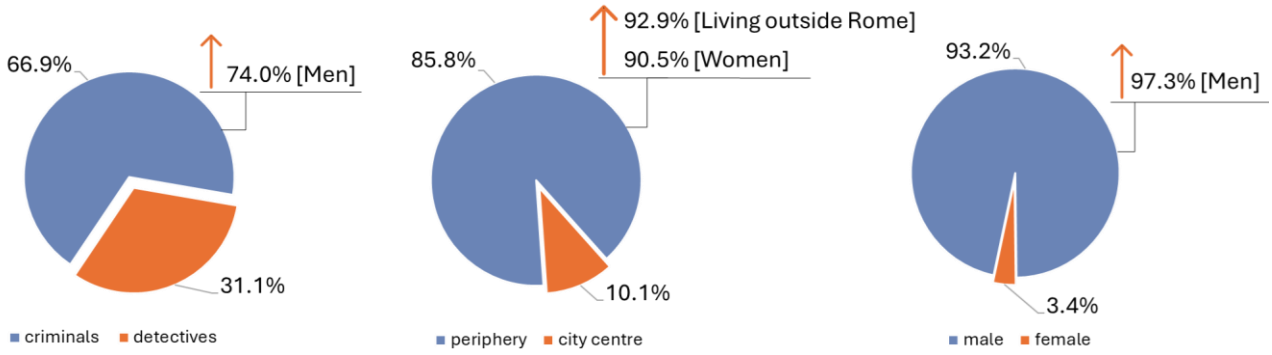

Fig. 8 – The dark and male side of "Roman-ness"

While they may not always play leading roles, Roman female characters are perceived as active and self-assertive figures who reflect key aspects of Roman-ness, namely resilience, irony, and a strong presence in public or institutional settings.

A total of 66.9% of participants believe that female characters convey Roman-ness *quite a lot* (51.4%) or *a lot* (15.5%). This percentage is higher among female respondents (71.7%) compared to male ones (61.7%). It is also interesting to note that respondents not living in Rome express stronger agreement with the idea that female characters convey a sense of Roman-ness (76.2%) than those residing in the capital (64.4%).

Further insights come from a follow-up question that asked participants to specify what character traits they associate with Roman female figures in crime series. The two most frequently cited attributes are "asserting themselves in male-dominated environments" (28% overall), and "being determined women" (26.4%). Both these traits are particularly emphasized by female viewers (31.1% and 29.7% respectively).

However, respondents also acknowledge limitations: 15.2% note that female characters rarely hold leading roles, and 12.8% detect stereotypical elements in their portrayal — with both percentages higher among male viewers (19.2% and 16.7% respectively).

These findings suggest that crime dramas appear as a symbolic battleground where older stereotypes persist, but where negotiations of gender and authenticity are nonetheless visible (Fig. 9).

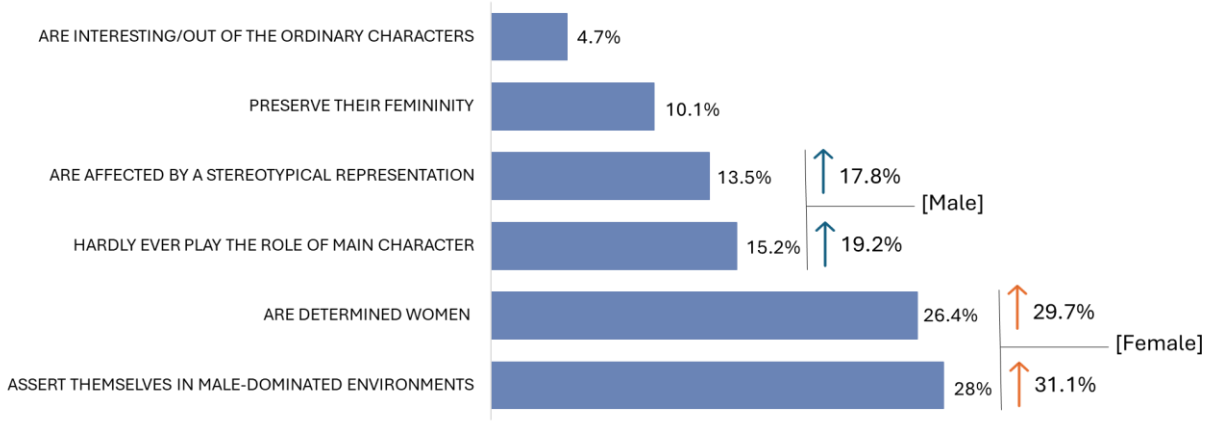

Fig. 9 – Audience perceptions of Roman female characters in crime dramas

Roman-ness without Roman actors/actresses?

According to the respondents, the Roman-ness of the actors/actresses has a significant influence on the Roman-ness of the character: almost all the respondents (89.8%) consider the presence of real Roman actors/actresses as a guarantee of a more credible and faithful interpretation of their Roman characters.

Among male figures, the pairing most closely associated with Roman-ness is Mauro Belli and Ricky Memphis ("Distretto di Polizia", 20.3%) – particularly among female respondents (28.4%) and those not living in Rome (22.6%). This is followed by the duo "Rocco Schiavone" and Marco Giallini (18.6%), which resonates especially with both younger viewers (under 30: 28.1%) and older ones (over 45: 26%), suggesting that Roman-ness is being reconfigured through contemporary, more ambivalent portrayals. Next comes the binomial "Il Maresciallo Rocca" and Gigi Proietti (15.5%) which also resonates with younger audiences, particularly with nearly 1 in 5 respondents under 30 (18.8%).

In contrast, "Suburra" and "Romanzo criminale", while widely recognized for their depiction of Roman criminality, present characters less directly associated with Roman-ness as individuals. This may be partly due to their ensemble storytelling and fragmented urban narratives, which distribute identity across a broader canvas, making single characters like *Il Libanese* or *Aureliano* part of a collective atmosphere rather than isolated emblems of local identity.

For female characters, the most powerful association is found in the pairing of Sara Monaschi and Claudia Gerini ("Suburra", 24.7%), whose performance draws on both the narrative relevance of the character and – presumably – Gerini's long-standing, familiar image as an iconic representation of Roman femininity. She is followed by the duo of Angelina and Greta Scarano ("Romanzo criminale", 17.9%), with particular appeal among male respondents (23.9%).

Unlike the case with male characters, it is noteworthy that the most memorable female characters often emerge from ensemble narratives – such as “Suburra” and “Romanzo criminale”. This may reflect the plot’s gradual shift toward greater visibility and agency for female figures who, while embedded within collective storylines, assert themselves in traditionally masculine domains, enhancing their symbolic association with a modernized image of Roman-ness (Fig. 10).

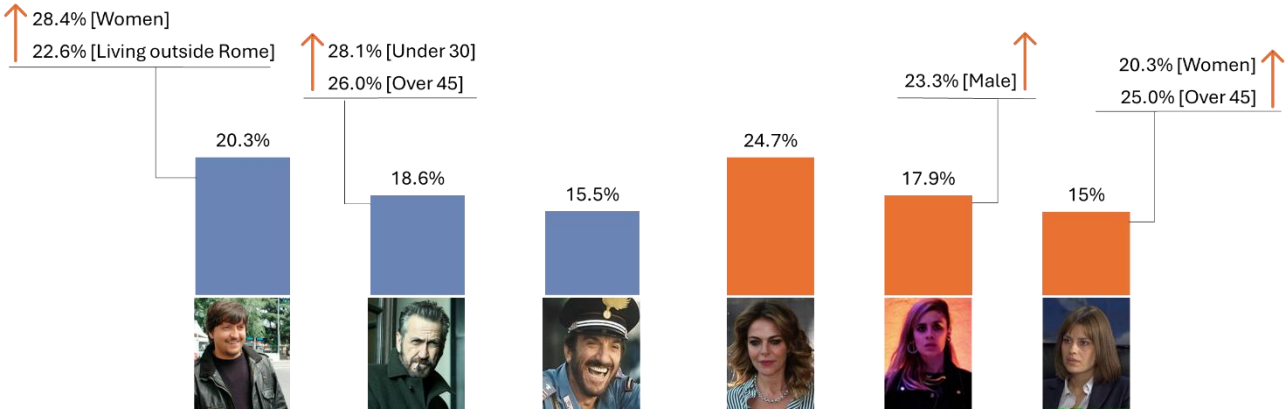

Fig. 10 – The most effective binomials of “Roman-ness”

Discussion and conclusions

By formulating two different hypotheses, this study aimed to investigate whether and how representations of “Roman-ness” in Italian crime dramas correspond to audiences’ perceptions of this cultural identity.

Regarding the first hypothesis, the research confirms that crime dramas depict Roman-ness across multiple narrative levels originating from the interplay between textual content and cultural identity (Fiske, 1987; Couldry, 2003) – namely, plot, setting, and characters – with particular emphasis on Roman slang, which, although it emerges in all the crime dramas as an essential part of the Roman cultural identity, stands out in particular as an additional feature that helps to reinforce the personification of Roman-ness.

Crime narratives, however, vary in how they deploy these elements, sometimes focusing more on the plot, other times on the setting or characters, each enriched by sub-levels of representation (e.g., fictional *vs.* factual dimensions of the plot).

Furthermore, while Roman-ness as a historical identity rooted in ancient civilization (Pohl, 2014) tends to recede into the background, the contemporary cultural identity conveyed by crime dramas is more prominently shaped by the so-called “Roman way of thinking and living”. As a result, although plots and settings play a significant role in conveying the idea of Roman-ness (and in shaping the images associated with it), it is above all the characters who stand out as the primary and most effective Roman ambassadors.

From this point of view, across all series, leads and co-leads embody traits commonly associated with Roman identity: authenticity, irony, roughness, and resilience. Nevertheless, this more genuine representation appears predominantly in the depiction of detectives or their relatives, while Roman criminals are more frequently rendered in grotesque or stereotypical terms.

With respect to the second hypothesis, although the study does not produce generalizable data, it does offer significant insights into audience responses. These reveal that viewers largely *accept* the narrative frames proposed by crime dramas, though they also demonstrate moments of *negotiation* or *opposition* (Hall, 1980).

Crime lovers' perceptions of the characteristics of Roman-ness tend to align with those prevailing in crime drama representations, especially in connection with "Roman way of thinking and living" and the Roman dialect, seen as the most effective marker of Roman identity. Characters' attitudes, ranging from roughness to playfulness, further reinforce this identification, though criminal characters are additionally perceived using colloquial, often derogatory labels such as "coatto" and "sborone".

Secondly, it is noteworthy that the perception of Roman-ness emerging from crime dramas does not clearly distinguish between real and fictional representations. Rather, these two "extremes" are embodied by "Romanzo criminale" (the more realistic) and "Distretto di Polizia" (the more fictional). Supporting this interplay between reality and fiction, viewers often refer to *Suburra*, whose narrative gradually shifts over the seasons from fictional storytelling to a stronger alignment with actual events.

In contrast, an oppositional decoding approach emerges in relation with the perception of Roman-ness, particularly when filtered through narrative and gender roles. While the encoded messages in crime dramas do not explicitly distinguish between good and bad characters, or between male and female representations of "being Roman," audience interpretations reveal a marked preference for a "dark" and "male" vision of Roman-ness. In this oppositional reading, Roman identity tends to be strongly associated with male figure – even in the presence of popular and well-regarded female characters, such as *Giulia Corsi* from "Distretto di Polizia" – and is more readily linked to criminal roles, despite the high degree of Roman-ness embodied by non-criminal characters like *Rocco Schiavone* or *Mauro Belli*.

In conclusion, on the one hand, audiences seem to accept the representations suggested by crime dramas, thus confirming the significant "framing power" of seriality (Scaglioni, 2016); on the other hand, they also tend to reject them (or at least some of them) especially when the representation of Roman-ness becomes more ambivalent, preferring in these cases the more grotesque and stereotypical interpretative frames over the (at least apparently) more honest and truthful ones.

However, the most interesting aspect emerging from the research concerns the ways in which audiences tend to negotiate the meaning frames suggested by crime dramas. This is particularly evident about the perception of Roman-ness as embodied by actors and actresses. From this point of view, serial dramas in most cases encode Roman-ness by drawing on the added value of the actor's or actress's Roman origins, while also attempting

to go beyond it (as in the previously mentioned cases of “Petra” and “Baby”). By contrast, audiences appear to be almost reassured by the actor’s or actress’s Roman-ness, to the extent that this feature, in their perception, becomes a kind of precondition, without which the Roman-ness of the character itself may be questioned.

In this case, the use of the conditional is necessary, since the analyzed crime dramas do not allow for the full validation of this hypothesis, given that their main leads and co-leads (or at least their most emblematic characters) are mostly played by Roman actors or actresses. However, an interesting “clue” in this regard comes from the contrasting case of “Il Maresciallo Rocca”. In this crime drama, Roman-ness is not expressed through the plot, characters, or setting, but solely through the Roman identity of its lead actor, Gigi Proietti, whose well-established status as an authentic “Roman celebrity” is transferred to the series, endowing it with a shared and widely recognized status as an “ambassador of Roman-ness”.

Biographical Note

Paola De Rosa (PhD) is an assistant professor in Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes at Link Campus University of Rome, where she teaches *Corporate and Institutional Communication*, *Media & Politics*, and *Crisis Communication*. Her research interests include crisis communication, the analysis of media representations and their effects on audiences, with a focus on gender issues and female empowerment. She has been a research fellow within the European project GEMINI-*Gender Equality Through Media Investigation and New training Insights* (CERV-2022-GE). Among her publications: *On-screen leadership models and beyond-the-screen celebrification processes in the Italian teen drama “Mare fuori”* (with M. Spalletta, M. E. D’Amelio, *Celebrity Studies*, 2025); *Audiences of popular European television crime drama: A nine-country study on consumption patterns, attitudes and drivers of transcultural connection* (with C. Bengesser, P. Majbritt Jensen, M. Spalletta, *European Journal of Communication*, 2023).

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Notes

[1] This article is positioned as part of the long queue of dissemination activities deriving from the H2020 research project DETECt-*Detecting Transcultural Identities in European Popular Crime Narratives*, which combined large-scale investigations of transnational crime narratives with more focused studies on national and local articulations of cultural identity. In continuity with this framework, the current study shifts from broad comparative logics to a localized case study, narrowing in on how Roman-ness is represented and perceived through Italian crime dramas.

[2] The series “Baby”, though marketed as a teen drama, was included due to its hybrid storytelling (Lotz & Lobato, 2023), since it embeds themes like sexual exploitation, criminal networks, and institutional complicity – narrative elements that align it with a broader understanding of contemporary crime dramas.
[3] The questionnaire was disseminated through a call for participation shared concurrently across the social media channels of the above mentioned DETECt-H2020 project and Link LAB – the Social Research Centre based at Link Campus University. The aim was to reach a public already familiar with or interested in cultural representations, media narratives, and television studies, thereby engaging an audience particularly inclined to reflect on symbolic content and its meanings.
[4] A preliminary filter question was included to assess whether respondents had watched (fully or partially) the eight selected series. Responses from participants who declared they had not seen any of the series were excluded from the analysis.
[5] The higher percentage recorded in this age group is in line with previous research on the age-related appeal of the crime genre, particularly among viewers aged 30 to 50 (Coviello, De Rosa, Re, & Spalletta, 2021).

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The media ideologies of medical influencers: between distrust of social media strategies and management of follower expectations*

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This study compares the media ideologies of Italian med-influencers and their followers concerning medical personal branding on social media. The existing literature explores how medical practitioners promote themselves online. Nevertheless, it overlooks the beliefs shaping how med-influencers use social media for personal branding and how they perceive their followers' expectations. In order to explore med-influencers and followers' media ideologies, 28 semi-structured interviews, integrated with the techniques of cognitive walkthrough and thinking aloud methods, were carried out. The interviews with the Italian med-influencers and followers were analyzed through a reflexive thematic analysis. The results reveal a lack of awareness of social media logic among med-influencers, a deterministic approach towards social media, and false beliefs about follower expectations. These media ideologies affect the choice of med-personal branding strategies, limiting them to clarity, entertainment, and the sharing of personal content. Med-influencers believe that posting personal and fun content is enough to humanize the doctor's role. Conversely, followers prioritize genuine emotional engagement. Findings suggest that, while digital literacy skills are important, med-influencers also need greater awareness of how their beliefs and misconceptions may affect personal branding practices.

Keywords: medical influencers, medical personal branding, media ideologies, social media

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Introduction

Doctors are among the most respected professionals, second only to scientists, while social media managers and influencers rank significantly lower[1.]

Social media influencers are defined as "a subset of digital content creators defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors" (Duffy, 2020, p. 1). Although many aspire to become a SMI, only few people obtain this status (Estables, Guerrero-Pico & Contreras-Espinosa, 2019).

The status of SMI is, indeed, characterized by the possession of specific requisites that include a perceived credibility, attractiveness, and expertise, but also "other mechanisms (e.g., endorser-brand fit, desire to mimic and emotional attachment) that impact on consumer outcome variables (e.g., engagement, brand attitude, and purchase intention" (Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 618).

Despite the widespread success of Social Media Influencers (SMIs), their role remains controversial and widely debated. While they have the potential to drive social change, there is not always an adequate level of awareness regarding their function as agents of such change. Moreover, the profession lacks shared ethical standards. SMIs are capable of influencing the social and emotional sensitivity of their followers on issues of social relevance. However, this potential often clashes with a content production culture driven by controversy and oriented toward Clickbait (Yusanto & Nugroho, 2024). Other critical aspects concerning the role of SMIs include, in some cases, the dissemination of misinformation, the reinforcement of unrealistic beauty standards, and a lack of transparency in how they manage the personal data and privacy of their followers, which they often collect in the course of their activities (Ekinci, Dam & Buckle, 2025).

Although, also for these reasons, the profession of SMI is ranked lower than doctors, the number of doctors using social media for self-promotion has greatly increased, adopting the role of medical influencers (hereafter med-influencers). They are "individuals from either a medical or non-medical background who engage in health conversations on social media, and by doing so influence what the public think about a health issue" (Guo et al., 2024, p. 1). In literature they are also identified as social media health influencers (Zou, Zhang & Tang, 2021) who focus on health-related topics and use social media to disseminate health messages, arousing emotional resonance, and facilitating behavior changes (Albalawi & Sixsmith, 2017). Their ability consists of reaching a vast number of subscribers and building relationships with them (Senft, 2008).

In this study, we use the term *med-influencers* to refer to physicians from various medical fields who use social media to share content related to their profession and health-related issues. By building their personal brand around their professional expertise, med-influencers gain credibility and foster emotional attachment and engagement with their followers. Through the dissemination of health-related content, they contribute to the development of knowledge and awareness, potentially leading to attitudinal and behavioral changes in relation to health prevention and treatments.

In Italy, vaccine hesitancy (Comunello et al., 2017) prompted healthcare professionals to use platforms like TikTok (Parisi et al., 2023). In such a context, med-influencers offer a possible solution in combatting disintermediation and providing a more qualified competitor to 'Dr. Google'.

Literature has focused on how medical practitioners use social media for self-promotion, health advocacy, and knowledge dissemination (Chen & Wang, 2021). However, little attention has been given to doctors' and medical staff's knowledge, skills, biases, and beliefs about social media logic and affordances when promoting themselves and their content (Low et al., 2021).

Adopting the perspective of media ideologies (Gershon, 2012a), this study focuses on the underlying beliefs and convictions held by medical professionals regarding the skills necessary for using social media appropriately for professional purposes, as well as how those beliefs shape practitioners' use of digital platforms for medical self-branding and to promote health issues.

The media ideologies of med-influencers will be compared with those of followers to analyze discrepancies and convergences.

We explore these, through a qualitative study based on 28 interviews with Italian med-influencers and followers to investigate their attitudes and (false) beliefs that affect the perception and use of social media for professional purposes, especially in the health field.

The study has theoretical implications in showing how the media ideologies approach applied in this field reveals the existence of biases in the professional use of social media that might shape the strategies adopted by med-influencers and perceptions of the med-influencers by followers. The study also has practical implications for medical professionals in avoiding misconceptions that can impact the strategic use of social media for self-promotion

Personal branding in the medical field

Personal branding (hereafter PB) is 'the metaphoric expansion of marketing of goods and services in the world of entrepreneurs' (Gehl, 2011, p. 1). This process emphasizes one's strengths, human characteristics, and uniqueness (Venciute et al., 2024), taking into account the target audience one wants to address (Rein et al, 2006; Khedher, 2014). Its goal is to generate trust (Gehl et al, 2011).

The strength of PB depends much more on the individual interactions and partnerships it establishes (Scheidt et al., 2020; Jacobson, 2020) than on competencies (Peters, 1997). Therefore, PB strategy creates a contact between the branded persona and the customer that will evolve into a relationship based on an emotional connection (Baltezarevic & Milovanovic, 2014; Gorbatov et al., 2018) and attachment (Thomson, 2006).

Therefore, it is important to narrate something real, including the description and externalization of the entrepreneur's private life and personal details, to the point that those who follow them believe they are part of that world (Rachmad, 2023).

Thanks to social media, the importance of PB has shifted from the field of entrepreneurship and marketing to other professional fields, such as the medical profession, where medical self-branding has begun to spread rapidly. This consists of adapting PB strategies to the medical field to maximize the visibility and increase the popularity of professionals (Jeyaraman et al., 2023; Szwed, 2024). Therefore, med-personal branding aims to bring medical practitioners out of their anonymity and make them recognizable within a professional circuit with high competition. In contrast to other professional fields, "developing a professional personal brand in the medical area is a process that is closely connected to, even interdependent with, the patient's degree of satisfaction" (Luca et al., 2015, p. 352).

The interest in PB among medical professionals is linked with the transition of the healthcare system into a market aimed at acquiring sources of finance, along with the great success achieved by online healthcare platforms (Yang et al. 2019). In these environments, an effective PB strategy on social media allows patients to identify a doctor and doctors to make their professional skills identifiable to users/patients and considered trustworthy. Moreover, PB offers doctors and health practitioners the opportunity to stand out in a competitive environment and to benchmark or network with the wider community (Panahi et al., 2016).

Until 10 years ago, some hesitation was registered among medical practitioners in making full use of social media because of the potential legal implications related to public access to these environments (Brown et al., 2014). Ethical concerns often have led doctors to decline a friendly request sent by a patient on their social media account, feeling uncomfortable thinking a patient can see content posted by the doctor on their social media page (Brown et al., 2014). Another issue refers to the risk of self-commodification by doctors (Lair et al., 2005; Cederberg, 2017) and confidentiality (Panahi et al.,2016). Other risks include the over-simplification of medical issues to comply with the direct and concise language required by social media (Hawn, 2009; Di Marco et al., 2024).

Despite these numerous concerns (Jeyaraman et al., 2023), the importance of digital media in health care is widely recognized. Attempts have been made to add digital literacy skills to medical course curricula, especially after finding that practitioners sometimes produce or endorse sensationalist content below medical standards (Law et al., 2021). These skills are predominantly aimed at promoting the efficient use of the Internet and social media to research health-related information or in assessing the advantages and potential dangers of writing medical blogs (Mesko, 2015). However, this attempt to increase digital literacy underestimates the strategic use of digital platforms to achieve specific goals such as promoting medical content, the profession, and the professionals.

Studies focused on med-PB have paid scant attention to the issues arising when doctors try to negotiate their professional knowledge, skills and duties with social media logic (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) and their affordances (Costa, 2018) to allow their unique qualities to emerge.

Doctors dealing with social media to promote themselves vs their followers' expectations

Medical professionals use social media for several purposes (Chen & Wang, 2020): from networking to learning activities, from influencing public opinion (Guo et al., 2024) to countering misinformation, and from humanizing the role of doctors (Ng et al., 2024) to career development opportunities (Roman, 2014).

Doctors' use of social media has been analyzed through three main perspectives: presentation of self; impression management; and the socio-technical perspective.

Notably, the social media management for PB is mainly handled by the practitioners themselves; seldom they delegate the responsibility to family members, friends or social media managers (Ioan et al., 2014). This justifies the concerns regarding the appropriate communication strategies to use on social media and practitioners' fear of being perceived as unprofessional (Ohlheiser, 2020).

One of the main concerns regards managing different roles and selves in online environments (Atef et al., 2023). Practitioners adopt negotiation strategies between their roles as influencers and doctors to strategically merge multiple faces into one. Behind this strategy, it is recognized the role practitioners' beliefs have about their audience's expectations in their self-presentation, namely: "to learn from a knowledgeable face" but with the need to receive help "of a pedagogical face" (Atef et al., 2023, p. 2679). Nonetheless, it is not explored how these convictions may affect the strategic use of social media.

Studies on the impression management of digital identities reveal that the presentation of the self becomes more fragmented and compartmentalized. Doctors post selected pieces of the self, separating personal from professional content (Maggio et al., 2024), combining the two identities or splitting them on different social media (Lopez & Robbins, 2021). This effort derives from the (mental) health professionals' awareness that using social media for self-branding requires a high standard of online behavior to gain or maintain a reputation. However, beliefs about what this high standard of online behavior consists of are not made explicit.

Impression management of digital identity by health practitioners is aimed at dealing with concerns about their participation on social media and at taking control of others' perceptions. Lopez & Robbins (2021) state that digital identity management is a four-step process based on 1) deconstruction, 2) creation, 3) presentation, and 4) the monitoring, evaluation and reconstruction of the self. The deconstruction phase is important because it includes a step for assessing technology. It gives attention to the role of technology in the digital identity management process, by assuming a negotiation between medical practitioners and digital platforms. This negotiation consists of assessing the function and purposes of different social media and understanding how to use them differently.

Medical practitioners shape their impressions and judgments about the functionality of the specific technology through hands-on experience and contact with others. This is an important process in learning "appropriate online behavior" (Lopez & Robbinsm, 2021, p. 169). Nevertheless, this study does not consider the criteria practitioners use in assessing

whether online behavior is appropriate or how these judgments might shape the process of creating a digital identity as health professionals.

The online environment plays another important key role in defining med-PB strategies and potentially shaping practitioners' brand performances. Through analyzing it, some studies (Zhang et al., 2021) adopt a socio-technical perspective, arguing that the environment constitutes an antecedent of PB strategies because it provides the med-influencer with information about the sort of regulations and competitors typical of online healthcare platforms. This information influences the identity construction and performance of practitioners, inviting them to display the ranking of the hospital where they work, their medical and academic titles, and publications. Nevertheless, this information does not impact their PB performances as opposed to offering a written consultation. Similarly, hands-on experience with online environments used for PB, and the analysis of competitors' strategies do not consistently guide med-influencers toward implementing effective PB strategies (Zhang et al. 2021). Therefore, what med-influencers believe is true and strategic for their self-promotion is not always accurate, but whether and how these false beliefs drive their online behaviors has not been adequately explored.

Environment, concerns and expectations are traits the literature has identified as factors explaining what PB strategies health practitioners adopt in acting as med-influencers.

The gap emerging in the literature on medical-PB is that it mainly focuses on exploring what med-influencers do, rather than on the beliefs behind the way they use social media for med-PB. Thus, what still needs to be explored are the med-influencers' ideas "about different communicative media and how different media functions shape the ways they use these media" (Gherson, 2010a, p. 290) for PB.

This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on beliefs about social media and how they work in shaping the way practitioners practice med-PB. We explore these dimensions through the perspective of media ideologies: "people's beliefs, attitudes and strategies about a single medium" (Gershon, 2010b: 389), or more specifically "what people believe about how the medium affects or should affect the message" (Gershon, 2010b, p. 391).

One aspect to look out for is how "people's beliefs, attitudes, and strategies about media structure do not necessarily reflect how people use media" (Gershon, 2010a, p. 284). Thus, it is possible that what med-influencers say about how social media work in reaching their PB goals is not always correct; nevertheless, these beliefs might affect how they use social media for med-PB.

We will also consider the beliefs followers have about the appropriate way for med-influencers to do PB on social media. A study on follower perceptions highlights the importance that they ascribe to social validation characterized by positive peer endorsement and recommendation of med-influencers. Transparency and authenticity in personal and professional content shared on social media are very appreciated and stimulate a sense of connection that increases loyalty (Szwed, 2024). This study does not consider the role of follower expectations and beliefs about the process of med-PB.

Exploring med-influencers' ideas about how social media can be used for promoting themselves is important in understanding if and how practitioners' use of social media is shaped by their own and their followers' ideas about it.

Starting from these premises, the research questions directing our analysis are:

RQ1: What are the media ideologies med-practitioners hold about using social media for PB?

RQ2: How do media ideologies shape the way med-influencers use social media?

RQ3: What are the beliefs med-influencers have about the (supposedly) most appropriate communicative strategies and models for promoting themselves on social media?

RQ4: What beliefs shape follower expectations about med-influencers and what are the critical issues followers find in the way medical practitioners use social media for PB?

Methods

This study privileged a qualitative approach based on the online semi-structured interview technique. This typology of interview is the most suitable to gather information about med-influencers' and followers' beliefs and attitudes on the strategic use of social media, considering that beliefs and attitudes are "evident in narratives but not always narrated as such" (Galletta, 2013, p. 2).

This technique was integrated with cognitive walkthrough (Blackmon et al., 2002) and thinking aloud (Lewis, 1982) methods. Therefore, we gave participants small tasks during the interviews to allow the med-influencers to describe the reasons behind the strategies adopted for communicating and managing social media. We also asked followers to show us their favorite content and med-influencers' accounts to explore the reasons behind their preferences and the beliefs that support them.

Participant recruitment

The participants were identified through the keywords #doctors-medicine, and #doctorinfluencers typed in Italian on Facebook and Instagram. Among the 287 results that emerged, 67 on Instagram and 220 on Facebook, we selected only those accounts of med-influencers that met the following criteria: being Italian; being an individual account, using one or more social media for medical PB purposes; managing personally their professional accounts without the support of a social media manager; working in different areas of medical specialization; and number of followers. 40 accounts matched these criteria.

The followers were identified among those following the accounts of the selected med-influencers and who, in turn, suggested other contacts they knew who also followed different med-influencers not included in our list since they did not match all the selection criteria.

The criteria for selecting med-influencers' followers were: being Italian; following more than one med-influencer; having an average age between 25 and 30. The age was self-declared by the participants when they were contacted to participate in the study. This age group represents a transitional phase between emerging and established adulthood, during which individuals typically acquire greater autonomy in health-related decision-making and actively seek information online to support those decision. Their perceptions of med-influencers are therefore especially relevant for understanding the influence such figures may exert on health awareness, attitudes, and behaviors among young adults.

Once the med-influencers and followers were identified, we sent them an invitation to participate in the study via direct message, mainly on Instagram.

Out of the 40 selected, only 6 med-influencers accepted to take part in the study. Therefore, we combined a snowball sampling procedure with a purposive network sampling approach. On one hand, the med-influencers who accepted the invitation suggested contacting colleagues practicing medical-PB through social media. Through this procedure we have obtained the availability of 3 additional physicians. After that, a purposive sampling strategy was conducted through the authors' networks to identify profiles that met our initial criteria and ensured gender balance. Through this procedure, an additional 6 med-influencers were recruited. At the end of this procedure, a total of 15 med-influencers accepted to take part in the interview.

The followers contacted were 25. We selected them basing on the criteria of relevance of their interactions with the med-influencers, such as: numbers of comments to the med-influencers' content and number of likes on posts and content shared by the med-influencers. Out of the 25 followers initially contacted, only 3 agreed to participate in the study. These participants, in turn, provided us with the contacts of other 10 followers of med-influencers who were willing to take part in the interview. Therefore, 13 were the followers eligible for the interviews. Thus, we conducted in total 28 interviews: 15 with Italian med-influencers and 13 with followers of med-influencer accounts.

The interviews were conducted online, through the Zoom platform, between November 2021 and September 2022 and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

The interview outline for med-influencers explores the following topics: opinions about the use of social media for disseminating health information; their reasons for practicing PB on social media; the goals they want to achieve through PB and the strategies they implement; the processes of the definition of their goals; opinions about health professionals who practice PB; management of their interactions with followers and expectations about them and their reactions to the content proposed; examples of effective and ineffective strategies for medical-PB, with requests to show accounts of other med-influencers that reflect the two situations.

The interview outline for followers explores the following topics: reasons for following med-influencers; description of the process of selection of med-influencers they follow to explore the criteria for choosing them; opinions about med-influencers that post personal and professional content on social media; expectations of med-influencers and the needs of followers that med-influencers must satisfy.

By following the cognitive walkthrough (Blackmon et al., 2002) and thinking aloud (Lewis, 1982) methods, we assigned to the med-influencers the task to show us their social media accounts in order to present and comment on the content that generate more interaction with followers and their opinions about it. Additionally, we asked them to explain how they manage these interactions, including the strategies they use to respond to comments and the types of content they consider most effective, along with the reasons why.

Conversely, the task assigned to the followers was to show and comment on the process through which they chose which med-influencer accounts to follow, as well as the criteria they used in making these decisions.

Procedure

The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed separately through the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021a) by two coders (the authors) who used a deductive approach. The codes used to generate themes were interpretative more than descriptive. Some codes were specific to med-influencer discourses, others to follower discourses, and others were common to the two groups. To explore media ideologies in med-influencer and follower discourses, we operationalized this concept by looking for narratives referring to beliefs and attitudes on strategies about med-influencers' PB on social media.

The codes initially applied to the med-influencer discourses are attitudes toward social media use for PB; implicit or explicit beliefs and attitudes about social media logic and affordances to explore behaviors adopted to circumvent them or benefit from them.

The codes used for follower discourse are expectations of medical PB, med-influencers selection process, and med-influencers evaluation criteria.

The codes common to both med-influencers and followers are (false) beliefs about social media strategies for PB; perceived appropriate or inappropriate strategies for PB; and the limits and benefits of social media functions.

The coding process, according to Braun and Clarke (2021b) is part of an analysis situated in an interpretative reflexive process. Therefore coding is open and organic and "themes should be the final 'outcome' of data coding and iterative theme development" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p.7).

We then shifted from codes to themes that capture "patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In doing this, we reviewed the coded data and solved the discrepancies when occurring, returning to the original data until agreement was found between the two coders about the interpretive line ascribed to each code or the research for a new interpretative perspectives on the intereviews exerts. Then we collapsed overlapping codes and clustered those that presented similarities and that "describe a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.63).

The macro-themes and themes that emerged from the analysis refer to med-influencers' media ideologies about the use of social media for med-PB, followers' media ideologies about online medical-PB, and shared media ideologies.

Interviews were anonymized for privacy reasons and were conducted according to the ethical principles of the Helsinki Declaration (AMM, 2013).

Results analysis

The med-influencers interviewed were 8 women and 7 men. Their average age was 44 years old. They work in different medical fields: Allergists (N=2), General medicine (N=4), Gynecology (N=2), Plastic surgery (N=4), Dentistry (N=2), Ophthalmology (N=1).
Two of them have only a Facebook account, four have only an Instagram account, eight have both Instagram and Facebook accounts, and one has both an Instagram account and a TikTok account. No discourses referring to differences in the use of these digital platforms was registered, even though they have different affordances. This can be explained by the fact that the participants' discourse focused on the general concept of social media, without going into the specifics of the platforms. Therefore, their reflections did not take into account the differences that characterize various digital environments available for promoting PB.

Their followers were aged between 25 and 34 years old. Among the interviewees, there were 10 micro-med-influencers (>1.000 followers), and 5 macro-med-influencers (>100K), according to Conde and Casais (2023)'s classification. They mainly used Instagram and Facebook for med-PB.

The followers interviewed were 7 women and 6 men, between 25 and 30 years old. Each follower interviewed followed 2 to 3 med-influencers on social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok.

The interviewed followers are predominantly students enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate degree programs, or individuals who have already obtained a bachelor's or master's degree. More specifically, among the participants there is one graduate in Cultural Heritage, one in Marketing, one in Psychology, one in Tourism, one medical graduate, two medical students, one student attending a beauty therapy school, and four participants who did not declared their educational background.

In the following section, we present macro-themes and themes referring to med-influencer and follower media ideologies about med-PB on social media and shared media ideologies.

Med-influencers' media ideologies

The media ideologies that emerged from med-influencers' narratives refer to beliefs, false beliefs, and prejudices about how to practice med-PB on social media appropriately. Those

beliefs are often supported by convictions concerning how social media work and its functionalities.

The macro-theme a) '*media ideologies rooted in false beliefs'* includes the following themes:

a.1) Social media strategy as fiction and strategic goals as deception.

The med-influencers believe that success on social media depends only on the doctor's professionalism and medical skills. If a med-influencer has those requisites, no strategies are needed. This idea is rooted in the media ideology that social media's role is only to provide visibility. They are perceived as a broadcasting medium that automatically helps med-influencers reach as many people as possible through their affordances.

> Social media are suitable for all types of information (…) They offer a great opportunity, an enormous showcase (Plastic_surgeon_m).

The word 'strategy' was used in the interview outline to explore how med-influencers reach their goals, but it was perceived as a threat to their honesty in promoting content and presenting themselves.

Med-influencers conceived strategies as something to achieve commercial rather than dissemination purposes. They answered the questions related to strategies with an attitude of distrust, as these excerpts illustrate: "Ok, but I don't apply any strategy or anything, I'm myself" (Surgeon_m) or "Yes I didn't know I was applying it but ok" (Gynecologist_f) or "I don't have any particular strategy, and honestly, I do it more for fun or to stay in touch with patients who already know me than to promote myself" (Surgeon_m).

Practitioners' discourses reveal prejudices about using strategies for self-promotion in the medical area; strategy is seen as being synonymous with fiction.

The main bias in med-influencer media ideologies is thinking that strategies consist of emulating successful models applied by more famous med-influencers. This emulation contrasts with their goal of being themselves and genuine to the point of declaring that having a professional profile is a sort of private choice with no public implications.

> I didn't open my profile by emulating others, you know? I opened it for myself (Plastic_surgeon_f).

> No, I don't have any goal. I didn't set any goals for myself. That is, I just set out to evaluate whether it was working and that's it (Surgeon_m).

A deterministic attitude toward social media emerges, like a turn-on/off mechanism that does what it is expected to do.

Goals and strategies are something beyond med-influencers' intentions. They frame their professional profile as an attempt or just a verification of social media affordances and successful actions to implement through digital platforms.

a.2) Social media as a double-edged sword, especially during COVID-19

Practitioners acknowledge that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was a useful tool for quickly disseminating information to many followers.

The deterministic attitude that emerged in the previous theme turns into a more user-centered perspective when the interviewees focus on specific and concrete circumstances, such as the information activities carried out via social media during the pandemic. In this case, the med-influencers' media ideology is that conveying information and succeeding in using social media for PB depends on the communicative abilities of the med-influencers themselves more than on platform affordances.

> The capability of conveying info on COVID-19 is more related to the verbal ability of those using the social media than to the social media themselves (Plastic_surgeon_m).

From their perspective, the role of social media is simply to amplify their content, like a megaphone, and reach as many users as possible.

Therefore, the media ideologies of practitioners regarding how social media work as a medium to divulge health information are dominated by a deterministic perspective, sometimes user-centered, sometimes social media-centered.

This perspective supports the media ideology that social media are a double-edged sword, in the sense of its technical and relational dimensions.

From a technical perspective, social media quickly conveys information about COVID-19 prevention; although they are perceived as a machine you can easily lose control of.

> (The use of social media) can get out of hand, there's a loss of control over the number of requests, potential breaches of information, and misunderstandings (General_practitioner_f).

From the relational perspective, med-influencers suffer the effects of direct communication with a multitude of users. The number of information requests that arrive from their followers is seen as excessive. As this doctor says: "I was inundated by requests of information about COVID-19" (Gynecologist_f).

This perception is shared among all participants who label followers' information requests as "excessive", "misleading", "risky", "silly", "immoderate", "foolhardy", "exaggerated", '"an abuse".

Beyond this media ideology, there is a lack of knowledge about social media logic, more specifically about how popularity works in those environments and how to manage connectivity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In this belief, little consideration is given to the option that, to control these platforms, there is a need for skills and knowledge of afffordances and community management the interviewed practitioners seemed unaware of.

a.3) Beliefs about successful models of communication on social media for med-PB

There is a common idea among physicians about the successful communicative strategies to adopt to communicate on social media. That idea refers to two communicative aspects: style and tone of voice.

In terms of style, there is a widespread belief that "clarity", and "brevity in exposure… incisiveness" are successful communicative strategies.

> (The content) must be short, impactful, and enthusiastic. Just like an advertisement, because on social media, the attention span is extremely low (...) When you want to promote yourself, you need to be striking, positive, but also very clear and concise in your explanations (Allergologist_f).

Regarding the tone of voice, the interviewees strongly believe that health content need not be conveyed through a serious attitude. Amusement is considered the most appropriate tone of voice for a med-PB on social media, whereas seriousness is a mistake.

> Another mistake is using a method that's too heavy, too serious (...) There needs to be a bit of joy, something fun (…) Otherwise, people get depressed and bored (Oral_Surgeon_m).

The communication strategies considered successful in online PB are based on the media ideology that social media are for fun, and users, in these environments, look for entertainment. This belief is based on biased perceptions of both social media and expectations about followers. Italian med-influencers believe that social media are not an environment suitable for serious topics, and they also think that users and followers are more into scrolling the feed in search of fun and recreation.

The practitioners' discourses highlight a stereotypical view of followers and also a self-stereotype according to which physicians are not considered human. Thus, the only way to get closer to followers is to adopt the tone of voice and communicative style that users are supposed to like and expect on social media, namely humor, irony, and brevity. More specifically, med-influencers believe that amusement is the only tone of voice effective in humanizing them. No other options are considered in their discourses for this purpose.

> It turned out that people love an ironic side in a professional because it makes you more human (Plastic Surgeon_m).

Although, in the first theme, physicians showed skepticism towards strategies, their discourses reveal the adoption of a strategic approach in their communicative choices, aiming to please their followers.

Practitioners' beliefs reveal a disjunction between strategies as a way to reach the goal of an effective PB aimed at promoting themselves, which is not acceptable, and strategies aimed at creating closeness to their followers, which is considered legitimate.

Other themes emerged about media ideologies not necessarily refer to false beliefs. These themes are included in the macro-theme: *b) 'beliefs and ideas about med-PB on social media'.*

b.1) Social media are an opportunity to humanize doctors

Alligned with the literature (Ng et al., 2024), the Italian practitioners interviewed mention the widespread concern that doctors are not perceived as human. This strong belief affects the style, the tone of communication they use, and the choice of content to post on their professional profile.

Although med-influencers claim to reject strategic approaches, they end up planning to share aspects of their personal lives on social media to build trust with followers, and to reshape their perceptions of the doctor's role.

> It's nice that people who choose to rely on you as a professional know who you are and trust you...It's a boost to the doctor-patient relationship...It's nice that patients know something about me (General_doctor_f).

Beyond the declared search for spontaneity in PB on social media, med-influencers use empathy as a tactic for attracting loyalty. As this doctor says:

> Having a glimpse into the personal life of the professional increases loyalty (...) Empathy is also important. The moment I can connect with my follower is the end point of my dissemination activity (General_ practitioner_f).

Almost half of the med-influencers interviewed stated that they mixed personal and professional content in their profile. Thus, they reveal aspects of their personal lives on social media that their professional role typically prevents them from disclosing in offline settings. Through this, they leverage social media logic to challenge the image patients and followers usually have, offering a different perspective on their professional role.

> One of my goals was to raise awareness of the medical profession; however, it is also to humanize it. We are not robots! (General_practitioner_m).

Social media provide the environment to present the profession itself rather than medical performance. They are an alternative stage for showing what happens backstage and for giving a new perspective on the profession.

Contrary to other studies (Lopez & Robbins, 2021), Italian med-influencers have no problem in managing different facets of their personalities. Their efforts in constructing a unique self, made up of a professional and personal dimension, have the purpose of restoring humanity to the role of the doctor.

b.2) The challenge of interacting with a new anthropological species: "the patient from the Internet"

The interviews clarify that med-influencers adapt their communicative performances to what they believe to be patients' expectations, as is consistent with other studies (Atef et al., 2023). Nevertheless, in this study med-influencers are aware that the patients they are relating with through social media are not just informed patients, but "know-it-all patients" based on their use of the Internet. This belief shapes the pattern of communication practitioners adopt on social media.

> Everything has changed, because there is now an extremely high level of attention to what the doctor says, as well as how it is said and presented. The patient who comes from the Internet is the one who found me online and who is used to surfing, documenting, informing, and looking for a specialist who is less a professor and more… let's say... a hands-on person and who always explains everything they are going to do and why they are going to make a diagnosis and why they are going to do a test (Allergologist_f).

Dealing with demanding patients is challenging. A deterministic perspective emerges on the role of the Internet and social media in creating a demanding patient and, simultaneously, a sense of frustration in the med-influencer's attempts to meet their expectations. As the previous Allergologist states, "It is hard to tell followers they are wrong...social media might generate expectations that I could not satisfy" (Allergologist_f).

This constant search for information by patients leads them to come across fake news. Med-influencers consider it threatening, not only because of the effects it produces but also because of the effort med-influencers have to make in countering fake news. Indeed, whereas physicians give rational information, fake news hits the emotions and has much more success and impact.

> There has been a worsening, the patients are know-it-all, it is not true that they know, they have a basis, but they cannot have the same knowledge as the doctor. (Followers think that) "Doctor is the hand that performs and I already know everything"(...) It is worse how the patient sees their doctor. Fake news have also complicated my work, it's harder to explain that the patient is wrong (Plastic_surgeon_m).

Interviewees express a critical attitude toward patients' use of digital platforms for health purposes, highlighting a kind of tug-of-war between Doc. Google and med-influencers. In practitioners' narratives, the bias of a double standard emerges clearly. They question the way patients use those environments, considering them dangerous; on the other hand, med-influencers present the use they make of social media as an antidote to the dangers of digital platforms used for medical purposes.

> Google Health has proven to be quite dangerous, not only in terms of diagnoses, treatments, and self-diagnoses, but also from the emotional perspective of the patient (...) Google often exacerbates emotional crises, especially in emotionally vulnerable individuals. In this context, the presence of doctors on social media can potentially serve as a small barrier (General_medicine_doctor_m).

Followers' media ideologies

Follower discourses highlight a different perspective on what should be the role of doctors who use social media for med-PB. Their narratives shed light on the true c) *followers' expectations and media ideologies about med-influencers*, contrary to what the latter expect. The themes included in this macro-theme are:

c.1) Med-influencers must be spontaneous and not show commercial interests

Whereas med-influencers believe that showing part of their personal life on social media is useful for PB and most of all to humanize the role of the doctor, the perspective of followers on this is completely different.

Posting content related to their personal life is not relevant for humanizing physicians. It is rather the proof of their reliability, which just dispels any doubts about the fact that med-influencers are on social media to genuinely share information and build an authentic relationship with their follower instead of to showcase their expertise to increase their business. As these followers state:

> If I perceived a promotional purpose (of med-influencers), it would bother me...it's something that would drive me away (...) I give a lot of importance to the human side of the med-influencers I follow (Male_27_yo).

In followers' opinions, med-influencers and business cannot exist side by side. According to followers' beliefs, a balance between professional and personal content is the proper way to address med-PB on social media.

> I think presenting one's (personal) life is a plus... of course, everything has to be done in the right measure (Male_27_yo).

> Professionalism is necessary (...) But there has to be an emotional corridor... An intimacy that you feel even not knowing this person (Male_27_yo).

Stressing the emotional dimension more than the professional one, followers show a higher level of awareness about the more effective PB strategies than the med-influencers themselves.

c.2) *The criteria in choosing a good med-influencer*

According to followers, it is not easy to identify med-influencers to follow on social media. The criteria adopted to select them are the same as the followers use to identify macro-influencers or celebrities on social media.

> Being the doctor of a famous person (is a criterion). I said to myself she could be a reliable dermatologist. I saw that more than one person follows her, so I said, why not? (Male_28_yo).

Followers look for reliability, but also for the med-influencers' attitude that emerges more when they show moments of their private lives and which does not emerge when they perform only their professional skills.

> (I follow doctors) because I'm interested in their specialization field as well as a little bit for their attitude on private life, their approach to things that are not purely medical. They then become characters that one follows like they were Chiara Ferragni (male_26_yo).

The criteria mentioned by followers to choose a good med-influencer to follow are: the "number of followers" they have; "the blue flag", which shows it is an official profile; having "common followers"; using "keywords or hashtags" related to trend topics. Interestingly, the criteria to follow influencers are valid also in selecting valuable med-influencers, and at the same time, "influencers" themselves become a criterion of choice for med-influencers. According to followers, "influencers or celebrities that follow med-influencers" guarantee the reliability of a physician's professional account.

c.3) Followers' expectations of med-influencers during COVID-19

Followers believe that during COVID-19 med-influencers had to provide: "data", "clarity", and "frequent updates". They expected med-influencers to compensate for the difficulty of seeing doctors face-to-face during the pandemic.

> The impossibility of relating to doctors in person (during the pandemic) caused people to start contacting doctors on social media and then having them as social media outlets (Female_35_yo).

While med-influencers consider "excessive" followers' requests, the latter appreciated that they gave up their leisure time to explain the effects of vaccines.

> They inspired me with trust because they were standing there, maybe even with a blackboard, explaining step by step what this vaccine was doing inside our body (Female_28_yo).

Followers' expectations toward physicians during the pandemic were shaped by a specific dimension of social media affordances: simultaneity. Followers expected to receive frequent and simultaneous updates from their doctors, which was impossible.

> Med-influencers are those who continuously give an update rather than 'normal' non-famous doctors who instead give updates somewhat randomly when needed (Female_27_yo).

A belief that emerged among followers, talking about COVID-19, is that med-influencers played a vicarious role during the pandemic, compensating for the lack of information from doctors followers were usually in contact with offline.

The difficulty in accepting the low availability of doctors to communicate with patients made med-influencers gain higher appreciation, credibility, and trust, during the pandemic.

Med-influencers and followers' shared media ideologies

The comparison between followers' and med-influencers' interviews reveals just one d) *shared media ideology* expressed through the following theme: thinking of doctors on social media as influencers is demeaning.

Med-influencers and followers share the idea that medical practitioners and influencers belong to two separate worlds, even though they share the same environment. Therefore, they should follow the same rules.

> A professional is not an influencer because they are doctors, however, you are still on social, and in my opinion the content you want to convey must be appropriate for the medium you are using (Female_26_yo).

> I don't want to call them influencers ... Poor doctors! However, any person who works well with reels or TikTok (during the pandemic) has been followed much more (Female_24_yo).

It emerges a media ideology based on the prejudice that followers have toward the role of influencers compared to that of physicians on social media. Although they perceive the same goal of reaching visibility, there is a sort of indulgent attitude by followers toward the use doctors make of social media. Another example of a double standard emerges towards those whose main profession is working on social media and those who use it professionally, but practice their profession offline.

Similarly, doctors consider being an influencer as something distant and different from their world.

> I have over 1,000 likes on my FB page, it's not so much but it's a lot for an ophthalmologist because I am not an influencer (Ophthalmologist_m).

Behind the media ideology that seeing a doctor as an influencer is reductive, there is a common view among med-influencers and followers: the presence of doctors on social media is of great importance and utility. However, at the root of this perspective, there is always the latent bias that the medical profession is something serious and the social media environment is not.

Discussions and conclusions

This study has explored, through the lens of media ideologies (Gherson, 2010a), Italian med-influencers' and followers' beliefs, attitudes, and biases about the use of social media

for professional strategic purposes. It has also explored how med-influencers' beliefs shape their more frequently used PB strategies and their relationships with followers.

Unlike existing literature, our analysis offers a comparison between med-influencers' and followers' media ideologies about reciprocal expectations.

The results highlight that med-influencers have, more than followers, many media ideologies based on false beliefs about how social media work, followers' expectations, and the (supposed) effective communicative strategies to promote themselves on digital platforms.

Two main med-influencers' media ideologies emerged about the use of social media for PB (RQ1). Firstly, med-influencers associated the concept of strategy with commercial purposes, rather than communicative goals for self-promotion. This affects their behavior, pushing physicians to avoid the emulation of structured communicative formats used by more successful med-influencers, and making them prefer a more genuine communication strategy not planned in detail. Secondly, med-influencers have a deterministic conception of social media: they believe that posting content is enough to reach visibility and popularity. This belief, contrary to Lopez and Robins (2021)'s study, is not based on a technological assessment. Moreover, it does not consider platforms' affordances and social media logic elements for practicing PB. Currently, none mentioned the use of sponsored content showing unawareness about the necessary socio-technical effort to create engagement that goes beyond content creation and posting practice.

Such a deterministic perspective shapes the way they use social media (RQ2), that are approached as a broadcaster medium. Med-influencers overlook that the management of interaction with followers plays a key role in med-PB. The feeling of being overwhelmed by requests for information from followers highlights that med-influencers devote all their attention to content creation rather than to community management activities. In their beliefs, the two things are separate activities, and physicians underestimate that requests from followers may feed their content creation strategies. Consequently, there is no room for negotiation with followers and social media affordances through direct message restrictions or turn-off notifications to reduce the pressure caused by followers' requests. By ignoring those affordances, med-influencers adopt a passive role in the use of social media and do not exert their agency capacity. This explains why they perceive social media as a tool that is out of their control.

Other false beliefs concern what med-influencers consider to be the most appropriate communicative strategies for PB on social media (RQ3).

Practitioners believe that a clear, brief, and fun communicative style and tone of voice determine the effectiveness of communicative strategies for self-promotion. These beliefs are not based on an analysis of the platform used, the competitors, and the target, contrary to what emerged from Zhang et al.'s (2021) study. Their strategies are mainly based on med-influencers' prejudices about social media users' preferences, such as the convictions that followers use social media just for fun. This belief, inevitably, reduces to amusement the possibilities of communication strategies for PB.

Secondly, med-influencers confirm the usefulness of social media for humanizing the image of physicians (Ng et al., 2024). However, the only communicative strategies considered effective are avoiding seriousness in presenting medical content, along with sharing aspects of their private lives.

This widespread belief supports the idea that PB branding on social media is only for those professionals who know how to entertain. This media ideology cuts out from the process those doctors who do not want to merge private and professional life or to apply fun to professional aspects, leaving them believing that being a good doctor is not enough to practice med-PB online. Giving more importance to certain personal communicative skills over others, and less importance to social media logic management skills, risks creating forms of exclusion among medical practitioners in practicing med-PB on social media.

Followers' media ideologies and expectations play a crucial role in challenging these misconceptions (RQ4). According to followers, humanization is not only achievable through the use of an entertaining style or by sharing personal content, as med-influencers believe, but mainly by being available to clarify health-related concerns, and by creating an emotional connection with followers.

Followers' emphasis on emotional connections with doctors on social media aligns more with PB literature, which highlights merging personal (Loroz & Braig, 2015) and emotional aspects (Thomson, 2006), than with med-PB literature, which prioritizes showcasing professional competencies (Panahi et al., 2016).

Contrary to previous studies, the Italian med-influencers' do not struggle to merging multiple selves into one (Atef et al., 2023) but to finding a consistent communicative style between the medical and personal communication. This challenge triggers a communicative breakdown. To achieve this communicative consistency between humanizing themselves and disseminating medical content, physicians discard the seriousness and complexity of medical language, which they view as less appealing.

The paradox is that med-influencers take inspiration from a supposedly ideal communication style for social media and keep their distance from the communicative strategies used by well-known med-influencers or general influencers, refusing to appear like them, and neglecting all the skills and diverse techniques and strategies that those professional influencers possess.

Behind this paradox is the absence of an intermediate step between physicians' specialized expertise and a communication style assumed to be effective on social media. This intermediate step consists of a lack of awareness and skills among med-influencers—not only regarding social media logic and platform affordances, but also concerning the strategies and methods for disseminating scientific content to a general audience on social media platforms. The absence of this skill set, combined with the media ideologies on how social media work and the role of med-influencers on social platforms, contributes to the illusion among physicians that social media formats, trends, and communication features can serve a compensatory function—offering an easy-to-use toolkit that replaces, rather than complements, the more nuanced dissemination competencies traditionally held by a

select few, such as health communication specialists, journalists, or physician-science communicators.

Also in followers' beliefs, a paradox occurs. They reject diminishing med-influencers by equating them with general influencers. Nevertheless, in selecting which med-influencers to follow, followers adopt the same criteria they use to select influencers, if not even using the influencers themselves who follow doctors as a measure of physicians' credibility. This result adds to Szwed's (2024) study that social validation is not only determined by the positive opinions of peers but also of influencers.

The fact that followers consider it diminishing to compare med-influencers to general influencers indicates that the two roles are perceived as hierarchically distinct. This perceived distance is also shaped by the normative expectations followers have regarding the complexity and scientific importance of the content shared by med-influencers—expectations to which they appear generally receptive. However, followers lack alternative tools, beyond those offered by the logic of social media engagement and the platform dynamics, to identify the most trustworthy med-influencer profiles. As a result, they rely on credibility and trust conferred by other followers or even by general influencers to compensate for their limited ability to assess a physician's quality beyond their communicative performance on social media. In other words, for med-influencers, communicative style tends to be predominant in content production, while for followers, the ability to access high-quality medical content outweighs the appeal of a trendy communicative style—as long as the content remains clear and understandable. Nevertheless, followers not always have the proper knowledge to recognize a high-quality medical content.

Moreover, we may hypothesize that the high level of education among the followers who participated in the study plays a role in shaping their expectations regarding the role and responsibilities of med-influencers. However, when it comes to the criteria used to select which med-influencers to follow, elements related to social media logic appear to be predominant. This poses new challenges for med-influencers in terms of how to gain visibility and credibility in the eyes of potential followers—through mechanisms that are more closely tied to platform logics, rules and affordances than to their professional medical credentials.

In conclusion, using the lens of media ideologies and understanding how med-influencers' beliefs shape the way they use social media for PB provides important theoretical and practical implications.

The analysis of media ideologies reveals a scenario, marked by contradictions and paradoxes, where the most significant highlight is that when med-influencers are not fully socialized into PB strategies, digital literacy and social media logic, false beliefs lead their behavior affecting the effectiveness of med-PB.

Moreover, digital literacy skills might not be enough to orient physicians in the professional use of social media for med-PB. Understanding, in line with the purposes of digital literacy, how digital media works, their biases and agendas, and how the content is created, shared, and consumed can, surely, fill a gap of awareness that physicians have on social media logic and affordances. Nevertheless, that knowledge might not be enough to

counter the deterministic approach to social media, which is a limitation to the development of successful PB strategies online.

This knowledge needs to be integrated, more than with social media marketing skills, with awareness of the socio-technical dimension that characterizes the interaction between professionals, social media, and their affordances. It could make practitioners aware of how their biases and attitudes toward social media might affect the way they use it, eliminating the double standard that suggests that communicating medical content is for experts whereas the strategic use of social media is within everyone's reach.

The media ideologies guiding med-influencers' PB on social media have significant social implications. Med-influencers create health-related educational content that reaches a wide audience with varying levels of knowledge on these topics. Biases about followers and how social media functions risk leading to the production of oversimplified content, which doctors hope to address more thoroughly during in-person consultations. However, for many users social media may remain the only source of health information, and the way content is presented can foster the false belief that health problems can be resolved online.

Therefore, considering the practical implications of this study, it would be beneficial to integrate the training of medical and health professionals with educational modules dedicated to communication, focusing on the acquisition of four interrelated core communication competencies.

The first competency concerns the ability to disseminate medical knowledge to a general, non-specialist audience across various media environments. The second relates to the development of advanced digital literacy, aimed at understanding both the risks and the opportunities associated with the use of digital technologies in medical practice. The third involves building awareness of the sociotechnical nature of digital platforms, including the role of affordances in shaping communication processes. Finally, the fourth set of competencies pertains to social media marketing and personal branding strategies, which would help medical professionals understand how to make themselves and their scientific content visible and recognizable within the media ecosystem—ensuring clarity without compromising complexity.

This study has limitations, primarily related to the small sample size and the lack of information on the actual digital literacy level of the participating doctors. Future research should investigate whether the media ideologies of med-influencers who work in different medical fields may differ from each other and whether certain medical fields are more inclined than others to develop advanced digital literacy skills, greater awareness of social media logic and affordances.

Nota biografica

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Notes

[1] https://it.yougov.com/international/articles/34168-scienziati-e-medici-le-professioni-piu-ambite-tutt

Mediascapes journal 25/2025

Il borgo dei borghi. Autenticità, consumo e mediatizzazione dell'esperienza nei borghi italiani*

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The debate surrounding the hamlets of Italy's inner areas experienced an unexpected surge during the Covid-19 pandemic, partly driven by the desire to escape densely populated and congested urban centers. This contribution focuses on the media imaginary of Italian villages, aiming to identify its distinctive features in relation to the social and cultural phenomena catalyzed by the pandemic. While contemporary research on hamlets and Italian inner areas often focuses on the territorial impact of institutional tourism policies, the media imaginary underpinning these policies remains an underexplored field. These institutional initiatives are intrinsically tied to classification criteria for the authenticity of hamlets. This study focuses on an Italian television program that features a competition among the country's most outstanding villages. This specific segment of media production allows for a focused examination of prevailing conceptions of authenticity, treating them as narrative dispositifs that contribute to constructing the value of the experiences offered by Italian hamlets. It highlights several value systems that describe authenticity and provide guidelines for its recognition, thereby legitimizing the worth of certain experiences. Changes observed in the analyzed media artifacts regarding authentication processes, both pre- and post-pandemic, allow the conclusions to reflect on the dominant orientations of contemporary tourism consumption practices in the Italian hamlets.

Keywords: authenticity, consumption practices, pandemic, tourism, television

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Introduzione

Questo articolo s'inserisce nel quadro di una ricerca più ampia, incentrata sul processo di crescente riconoscibilità e diffusione dei borghi italiani nel paesaggio mediale contemporaneo. Diverse ricerche hanno messo in luce la relazione tra la riconoscibilità dei borghi italiani nel discorso pubblico e nei media, con l'idea di esperienza turistica autentica, consentita dalle specifiche caratteristiche morfologiche e culturali dei borghi (Salvatore, 2010, Ercole, 2016, Cocco, Mines e Salvatori 2020, Sabatini, 2023). Se tali ricerche hanno evidenziato lo squilibrio tra il grande impatto sulla dimensione discorsiva del turismo nei borghi e le scarse ricadute sulle politiche territoriali che stentano a migliorarne la vivibilità, minore attenzione è stata dedicata al modo in cui l'immaginario dei borghi italiani viene veicolato e riprodotto su diversi media. Mentre infatti le aree interne vedevano «scivolare a valle» (Pazzagli, 2021, p. 41) i loro abitanti e, attraverso una lunga parabola evolutiva iniziata che risale almeno ai primi del '900, diventavano posti da cui andarsene (Giovagnoli, 2020), alcuni borghi sono stati coinvolti in processi di brandizzazione, grazie ad alcuni vettori che rendono possibile conferire il carattere di autenticità, genuinità e spirito contadino (Olori e Mariani, 2022).

Nel quadro di questo filone, questo contributo focalizza l'autenticità da un punto di osservazione specifico, la trasmissione televisiva *Il borgo dei borghi*. La selezione del caso di studio, e del corpus di analisi, è stata orientata da un lato dall'incremento di attenzione, anche critica, rivolta ai borghi italiani durante la pandemia di Covid-19 (Barbera, Cersosimo e De Rossi, 2022), dall'altro dalla centralità del mezzo e dei linguaggi televisivi durante la pandemia (Scaglioni, 2020, Antonioni e Polesana, 2022). L'analisi del programma televisivo in questione muove dal considerare l'autenticità come una costruzione culturale (Grazian, 2019, Lipovetsky, 2019). Essa può essere analizzata in quanto dispositivo narrativo di costruzione del valore (Boltanski e Esquerre, 2017), che produce degli effetti sul piano della giustificazione e della legittimazione del valore dell'esperienza che è possibile fare nei borghi italiani, la quale rappresenta un caso particolare di esperienza, nel più ampio campo delle pratiche di consumo turistico (Gemini, 2008, Zukin, 2008, Urry e Larsen, 2011, Sassatelli e Arfini, 2017). Il focus su una specifica trasmissione televisiva consente un'esplorazione situata delle forme di mediatizzazione dell'esperienza in un periodo specifico, a cavallo della pandemia. Concentrare l'analisi su una produzione televisiva implica d'altro canto che alcuni aspetti, che verranno esplicitati nella discussione che segue, restino in ombra e possano essere, quindi, approfonditi in successive ricerche.

I borghi italiani tra spopolamento e patrimonializzazione

Nell'ultimo decennio l'attenzione verso i borghi italiani, e più in generale verso le aree interne del Paese, è cresciuta nelle arene di dibattito pubblico, politico e accademico. Dialogando, talvolta anche polemicamente, con la spinta proveniente dalle politiche pubbliche (Barca,

Casavola e Lucatelli, 2014, Lucatelli, Luisi e Tantillo, 2022), si è affermata una generale condivisione nel sostenere quella che si starebbe configurando come *inversione dello sguardo* (De Rossi, 2018). Ossia uno spostamento di attenzione dai centri urbani e una diversa configurazione degli immaginari sociali verso la realtà politopica e complessa della fitta rete di insediamenti che caratterizza la morfologia delle aree interne italiane. Un posto di primo piano nel dibattito è occupato dal ruolo del turismo nell'orientare e sostenere la sopracitata inversione dello sguardo (Andreoli, Coccu e Silvestri, 2018, Brandano e Mastrangioli, 2020).

La multinazionale di consulenza britannica Deloitte è impegnata da alcuni anni in un'attività di ricerca e diffusione sulle economie dei borghi italiani (Forbes, 2024, Incorvati, 2024, Ministero Turismo, 2024). Nel rapporto *L'impatto economico e occupazionale del turismo e la digitalizzazione nei Borghi più belli d'Italia* del 2024, Deloitte fornisce un'analisi dell'impatto economico e occupazionale derivante dal turismo nei borghi (Vulpiani, Rossetti, Petrolongo e Amadori, 2024). I numeri diffusi nel rapporto di Deloitte, basati su dati ISTAT, sono relativi ai 362 borghi italiani che fanno parte del Club *I Borghi più belli d'Italia*. Il rapporto parla di un indotto complessivo di 8,8 milioni di presenze, composto al 37% da visitatori internazionali e al 32% da visitatori giornalieri, per un totale di circa 21,5 milioni di pernottamenti. Tra spese dirette, indirette e indotte[1] si stima che l'impatto delle presenze turistiche nei *I Borghi più belli d'Italia* si attesti intorno ai 13,8 miliardi e coinvolga oltre 90mila occupati. L'incidenza del Club *I Borghi più belli d'Italia* sulle presenze turistiche sembra confermata dal fatto che le regioni con il maggior numero di borghi inseriti in tale rete, tra cui Marche e Toscana (rispettivamente con 31 e 29 borghi) sono anche tra le regioni che hanno ricevuto più visitatori. Lo stesso rapporto (Vulpiani et al. 2024) mette tuttavia in luce come l'ottimo stato di salute dell'industria turistica dei borghi sia coesistente al loro spopolamento: la contrazione del numero dei residenti nel decennio 2011-2021, nei Comuni presi in considerazione dal rapporto, è del 4,4% rispetto a una media nazionale dello 0,7% per lo stesso periodo.

Spopolamento e incremento del turismo, abbandono e patrimonializzazione (Boltanski e Esquerre, 2017) si presentano come due facce consustanziali nelle aree interne italiane contemporanee. L'accelerazione del dibattito su aree interne e borghi durante la pandemia deve essere quindi contestualizzata all'interno di processi e tendenze che si estendono spazialmente oltre i confini italiani e temporalmente precedono la pandemia. Gli studi sulla *rural gentrification* (Clocke e Thrift, 1989, 1997, Ghose, 2004, Zukin, 2011) segnalano infatti due processi apparentemente divergenti, eppure sincronici: «da un lato, la valorizzazione economica delle aree centrali dei contesti a maggiore densità urbana (i centri storici) e, dall'altro, la valorizzazione economica delle aree geograficamente disperse e di pregio» (Semi, 2022, p. 88). Le ricerche sulla gentrificazione nella città suggeriscono come i processi di valorizzazione, oltre che dalle politiche pubbliche, siano sospinti dal protagonismo di alcuni attori che dettano i canoni di riconoscimento dell'esclusività/autenticità attraverso alcune pratiche di consumo, stabilendo criteri di accesso legati ai capitali economici e culturali (Zukin, 2008, 2010, Semi, 2011, Ocejo, 2017).

Nelle aree interne italiane contemporanee è possibile osservare lo stesso processo di valorizzazione a macchia di leopardo, con una competizione tra specificità e tipicità locali, tra l'altro suggerita dalla stessa struttura dei bandi pubblici che mettono a disposizione le risorse per le aree interne.[2]

A questo proposito Boltanski ed Esquerre parlano di *forma collezione* per riferirsi a un paradigma di attribuzione del valore molto diffuso in Europa occidentale, proprio in ragione della grande disponibilità di «giacimenti patrimoniali» (Sassatelli e Arfini 2024, p. 155), che vengono valorizzati per l'unicità dei loro patrimoni materiali e immateriali. A differenza degli altri tre paradigmi di attribuzione del valore identificati da Boltanski ed Esquerre (2017) – *forma standard*: il valore, nel presente, dell'innovazione e dell'avanzamento tecnologico; *forma attivo*: la redditività di un bene nel futuro; *forma tendenza*, che gioca con la velocità del ciclo di usura del nuovo – la *forma collezione* non produce oggetti nuovi, bensì si basa sulla peculiarità di arricchire di valore cose antiche o già esistenti, tramite un certo modo di narrare il patrimonio.

Considerata dunque questa parabola evolutiva che vede l'autenticità svolgere un ruolo fondamentale nei processi di valorizzazione, nell'intensificazione della produzione discorsiva intorno ai borghi durante la pandemia (Fenu, 2020), concetti come perifericità, *remoteness* e bassa densità di abitanti vengono rivalutati positivamente diventando fattori attrattivi. Raramente, però, tale dibattito riusciva ad affrontare che proprio l'alterità spaziale e temporale dall'urbano è indice di disuguaglianza nel riconoscimento (Barca et al., 2014) dei diritti di cittadinanza per chi abita, e per chi decide di tornare, nelle aree interne (Cocco et al., 2020, Sabatini, 2023, Membretti, 2023). Se il lockdown dovuto alla diffusione del Covid-19 ha abilitato diverse prospettive strutturalmente critiche, tanto sugli effetti negativi causati dal congestionamento dei centri urbani sulla salute pubblica (Mela, 2020), quanto sulla necessità di imprimere alle pratiche di consumo una diversa sensibilità ambientale ed impronta ecologica (Bartoletti et al., 2022), le aree interne e i loro borghi si sono configurate, di fronte a queste sfide così impegnative da cogliere, come meta ideale del desiderio di fuga che la classe media dei centri urbani proiettava verso le aree interne (Bindi, 2021). La possibilità di riconoscere nei borghi delle aree interne uno spazio di alternativa, pratica e ideale, rispetto all'urbano, dipendeva quindi dal differente posizionamento di chi guardava verso le aree interne.

Durante la pandemia diversi articoli di giornale pubblicati sui principali quotidiani italiani contribuiscono a cristallizzare una dicotomia nel dibattito pubblico e negli immaginari sociali, tra l'insostenibilità socio-ecologica della vita urbana e le storie di chi decide di trasferirsi nelle aree interne durante la pandemia: la densità urbana è opposta agli ampi spazi aperti, l'inquinamento all'aria pulita, la qualità delle materie prime al cibo dei supermercati, l'anonimato della vita urbana a relazioni sociali sane (Olmo, 2022). L'impatto della pandemia nel quotidiano produceva una tensione nell'immaginario edenico dei borghi delle aree interne italiane: il senso di crisi induceva a desiderare la rarefazione della presenza di abitanti, se non la loro completa assenza e, di fronte a tale desiderio, i borghi e le aree interne italiane si presentavano come contesto ideale, pronto all'uso.

Figura 1. Collage di alcuni tra i principali articoli che hanno alimentato il dibattito sui borghi italiani durante la pandemia

Mediatizzazione e codificazione dell'autenticità

L'ipotesi che ha guidato questo articolo muove dal considerare gli effetti socio-culturali della pandemia sulle pratiche sociali, interrogando tanto l'impatto quotidiano delle discontinuità marcate dalle misure di contenimento dei contagi, quanto i modi per fronteggiare, elaborare ed addomesticare tali discontinuità (Bartoletti, Paltrinieri e Parmiggiani 2022). Osservare i cambiamenti mentre sono in atto, e misurarne la durata anche dopo il passaggio dei periodi di picco della pandemia tra 2020 e 2021, ha implicato e implica del resto una serie di questioni metodologiche per la ricerca sociale (Lupton, 2021), che hanno visto nella ricerca sui media digitali un importante ambito di problematizzazione e applicazione (Boccia Artieri e Farci, 2021). Se alcune ricerche hanno evidenziato il ruolo delle immagini presenti sulle piattaforme social nell'orientare le pratiche di consumo e gli immaginari turistici post-pandemici (Luise, 2022, Addis e Capineri, 2024), questa ricerca si concentra su una produzione televisiva diffusa e influente con l'obiettivo di individuare se al suo interno sia presente un discorso sull'autenticità, e comprendere se la presenza di tale discorso svolga un ruolo nell'orientare la valorizzazione dell'esperienza che è possibile fare nei borghi dentro e oltre l'impatto della pandemia sugli immaginari sociali.

I linguaggi televisivi costituiscono un punto di riferimento necessario e distintivo nell'ecosistema mediale contemporaneo, pur tenendo nella dovuta considerazione la proposta delle piattaforme e di altre forme mediali che affiancano e svolgono una funzione complementare alla visione televisiva classica (Antonioni e Andò 2024). Dato il focus della ricerca, è inoltre opportuno rilevare quanto i linguaggi televisivi abbiano veicolato discorsi sociali e culturali, anche politici, durante la pandemia, ad esempio attraverso la pubblicità (Antonioni e Polesana 2022) e come in generale si sia ravvisato un protagonismo della televisione, in quanto: «mezzo di comunicazione che, più di tutti, è stato in grado di rappresentare, narrare, "mediatizzare" la pandemia per un'amplissima platea» (Scaglioni, 2020, p. 17). Attraverso il focus sulla trasmissione *Il borgo dei borghi*, l'analisi si è incentrata

sulle forme di racconto e presentazione dell'esperienza, da un lato considerando la descrizione autenticante di pratiche, oggetti e contesti, dall'altro la capacità di riconoscimento dell'autentico da parte dei soggetti competenti. Il successo di pubblico rende questa trasmissione una importante vetrina per i borghi, in grado di aumentare visibilità online e flusso turistico (Corallini, 2024), come viene ribadito più volte dalla conduttrice nelle varie puntate.

Inoltre, è significativo notare che la trasmissione seleziona i borghi concorrenti dalla rete del Club *I Borghi più belli d'Italia*, su cui è basato il rapporto di Deloitte sul turismo dei borghi citato in precedenza. Il Club è proprietario dell'omonimo marchio depositato, che viene attribuito secondo precisi criteri definiti dalla «Carta di qualità»[3]. Oltre al numero di abitanti (inferiore a 2mila per il borgo storico, a 15mila per l'intero territorio comunale), il borgo deve dimostrare una certa qualità urbanistica (compattezza, omogeneità, preservazione, ecc.), architettonica (secondo i principi di armonia e omogeneità) ed evidenziare «con fatti concreti» una propensione alla promozione turistica. L'apposizione del marchio *I Borghi più belli d'Italia* nel cartello stradale che segnala i confini comunali è dunque subordinata ad una serie di interventi urbanistico-architettonici nello spazio pubblico, come la chiusura al traffico, la cura di sfumature e gradazioni di colori delle facciate «rinnovate e abbellite», l'armonia delle aperture (porte, portoni, finestre, luci ecc.), la presenza di elementi decorativi simbolici (frontoni, insegne, stucchi ecc.), la «mimetizzazione delle linee aeree elettriche e telefoniche», l'abbellimento di illuminazione pubblica, insegne pubblicitarie e verde pubblico.

Figura 2. Il logo del Club I borghi più belli d'Italia

Il Comitato Scientifico del Club dovrà anche verificare la promozione turistica del borgo, ovvero la presenza di artigiani, enogastronomia tipica, feste e rievocazioni storiche, attività ludiche, culturali e sportive. Questi criteri di codificazione morfologica (De Rossi e Mascino, 2022) interessano in questa sede non solo perché ampliano attrattività e visibilità turistica sulla base di un meccanismo selettivo che formalizza l'autenticità, ma anche perché quello stesso meccanismo selettivo permette di accedere alla trasmissione *Il borgo dei borghi*, oggetto di analisi dei successivi paragrafi.

È utile di seguito considerare che i processi di distinzione, omologazione e falsificazione dell'autentico negli immaginari culturali e sociali costituiscono un oggetto di riflessione che

ha attraversato le scienze umane e sociali, e in particolare gli studi sul turismo (Boorstin, 1964, Turner e Ash, 1975, MacCannell, 1976, Frow, 1991, Wang, 1999). Nel viaggio, secondo Laura Gemini (2008) si attiva una performatività nei processi di riconoscimento dell'autentico, nel senso che le pratiche sensoriali e immersive di esperienza dell'autentico sono espressione di autorappresentazione del soggetto e al contempo di forme di sapere, ovvero attenzione e sensibilità verso alcuni tratti ritenuti veri, genuini, naturali, tipici, credibili. È evidente, dunque, che più che definire l'autenticità in base a qualità intrinseche degli oggetti, una prospettiva culturalista tenterà di comprendere tanto le logiche discorsive (narrazioni, norme, sistemi valoriali) di autenticazione (Grazian, 2019), quanto il ruolo delle tecnologie visuali digitali che sono in grado di abilitare, informare e plasmare lo sguardo sull'autentico (Urry e Larsen 2011). Nel campo dei consumi, come in quello turistico (Gemini, 2008), scegliere l'autentico implica l'uso e lo scambio di competenze, che abilitano il processo di riconoscimento. La diffusione di queste competenze è legata ad un orientamento etico e morale implicato dalla complessificazione dei flussi di merce nell'esperienza quotidiana e sociale contemporanea (Vannini e Williams, 2009, Williams e Schwartz, 2020). In una certa misura, ai consumatori è richiesto essere competenti e dimostrare consapevolezza (Lipovetsky, 2019) rispetto ai processi sociali situati di autenticazione (Zukin, 2008, Koontz, 2010), i quali si realizzano attraverso le interazioni di «consumatori, intermediari, produttori, territori, eventi, saperi, oggetti e significati» (Sassatelli e Arfini, 2024, p. 142). A fronte di un uso così diffuso e condiviso del concetto di autenticità, Boltanski ed Esquerre parlano di un «dispositivo narrativo per selezionare, nella molteplicità fenomenica, le differenze che una determinata cosa presenta» (Boltanski e Esquerre, 2017, p. 73).

Visti gli elementi finora raccolti e assumendo la particolare centralità, rilevata nel paragrafo precedente, delle pratiche di consumo turistico nel panorama contemporaneo delle aree interne italiane, le domande di ricerca si specificano e distinguono: 1. Il focus su una specifica trasmissione televisiva può consentire di cogliere se l'autenticità svolga un ruolo importante nel definire il valore dell'esperienza che è possibile fare nei borghi italiani? 2. Data l'importanza del turismo nelle aree interne e l'intensificazione del dibattito durante la pandemia, il focus su una specifica trasmissione televisiva può permettere di inquadrare gli eventuali cambiamenti sulle forme di rappresentazione legate ai borghi e alle aree interne?

Presentazione del caso di studio e aspetti metodologici

Il borgo dei Borghi è un format televisivo giunto nel 2024 alla sua undicesima edizione, spin-off del programma *Kilimangiaro*, prodotto da Rai Cultura ed Elephant Italia SRL. Condotto da Licia Colò e Dario Vergassola nel suo anno d'esordio (2014) a partire dall'edizione successiva è affidato a Camilla Raznovich, affiancata da diversi co-conduttori. Considerato il focus della ricerca e il frame teorico-analitico esposto nei paragrafi precedenti, per

l'osservazione si è scelto di selezionare alcune puntate. Nell'analisi che segue si approfondiscono le puntate delle annate 2018-2019 e 2021-2022, coerentemente con l'obiettivo di osservare il cambiamento delle logiche di costruzione e legittimazione del valore dell'esperienza nei borghi in un periodo specifico, a cavallo del periodo di picco della pandemia. Il corpus della ricerca comprende comunque tutte le puntate andate in onda dal 2014 al momento in cui si scrive, al fine da un lato di avere a disposizione una panoramica generale sull'evoluzione della trasmissione, dall'altro di attestare, o meno, la stabilizzazione dei cambiamenti nella versione contemporanea della trasmissione.[4] Considerando le specificità del mezzo televisivo, il tentativo di comprendere il ruolo dell'autenticità nella costruzione del valore dell'esperienza nei borghi ha operato tramite un confronto con alcune categorie analitiche centrali per la ricerca sociale sulla televisione contemporanea (Antonioni e Andò 2024), che verranno illustrate nel corso della discussione.

Vista da un lato l'estensione del minutaggio, dall'altro la ridondanza della struttura, si è scelto di non procedere ad una descrizione puntata per puntata, quanto ad un quadro generale che permette di rendere conto delle principali caratteristiche della trasmissione e di illustrare esempi e occorrenze, tramite il riferimento al minuto e alla puntata specifica. Laddove si sono rilevate discontinuità tra pre e post-pandemia, e delle opportunità di comparazione tra diverse puntate dovute ad elementi salienti rispetto al focus sull'autenticità, queste verranno opportunamente segnalate e contestualizzate. Nei due paragrafi che seguono il lettore troverà all'interno del paragrafo 5 una presentazione dei risultati dell'osservazione delle puntate, e nel paragrafo 6 una discussione analitica, basata su alcune categorie interpretative, che permette di tornare sulle domande di ricerca.

Esplorazioni e competizioni tra i campanili italiani

Focalizzando le caratteristiche dell'evoluzione recente de *Il borgo dei borghi*, si può osservare che l'edizione 2020 del programma non è andata in onda e, a partire dall'edizione successiva, quella del 2021, il format ha conosciuto dei significativi cambiamenti. La struttura delle edizioni 2018 e 2019 prevedeva infatti un palinsesto esteso in 4 puntate, con tre serate eliminatorie e una serata finale. Durante la serata finale il televoto consentiva di esprimersi, in diretta, sui 20 borghi finalisti. Il voto popolare veniva poi sommato, con una proporzione del 50%, con il voto di una giuria di esperti selezionata dalla produzione.[5] Il format diffuso in più serate nell'edizione del 2019 vede un crollo degli ascolti (la media delle 4 puntate si attesta al 4,40%, contro il 6,25% dell'anno precedente 2018, con lo stesso format) e dopo la pandemia, nel 2021, la trasmissione torna al format classico, con cui era nata, di un'unica puntata finale. Sia prima che dopo la pandemia il format della serata unica si conferma efficace dal punto di vista degli ascolti, non scendendo mai sotto il 6% e superando per ben 5 volte l'8% (edizioni 2014, 2016, 2017, 2021 e 2024), con il record registrato nell'edizione del 2021 di 8,7% di share e una media di 2.090.000 spettatori.[6]

Il processo di selezione si svolge, per così dire, in background in entrambe le versioni del format, nel senso che la lista dei venti borghi più votati viene svelata solo in prossimità della finale, mentre il televoto rimane aperto su una finestra temporale estesa (ad esempio, nel caso dell'edizione 2024, dal 25 febbraio al 17 marzo). Inoltre, va osservato che alcuni borghi hanno partecipato a più edizioni del concorso, in ragione del piazzamento ottenuto nelle edizioni precedenti. Tale criterio sembra però avere risvolti discrezionali e asistematici nella selezione, se si osserva che non tutti i borghi che hanno ottenuto buon piazzamento hanno occasioni di partecipare e che, nel caso dell'edizione 2019, abbia partecipato un borgo già vincitore, ovvero Gradara nelle Marche.

Il cambiamento rilevante delle edizioni 2018-2019 riguarda lo spazio occupato dalla trasmissione nel palinsesto e, di conseguenza, nell'economia generale del minutaggio della trasmissione *Kilimangiaro*. Mentre nel format a serata unica ogni borgo è presentato sul sito de *Il borgo dei borghi* mediante un video, che costituisce la versione ridotta di quello andato in onda durante puntate del *Kilimangiaro* (spesso in coda, nei minuti finali), il format delle edizioni 2018 e 2019 prevede tre puntate di avvicinamento alla finale, esclusivamente dedicate ad *Il borgo dei borghi*. Durante le tre puntate i video di presentazione vengono alternati da passaggi in cui la conduttrice Camilla Raznovich esplora un'area di una Regione specifica. Per fare degli esempi tratti da entrambe le edizioni: nella puntata del 17/11/2018 dedicata al Veneto, lo storico dell'arte Philippe Daverio accompagna Raznovich nella Marca Trevigiana; nella puntata del 29/9/2019 Piergiorgio Odifreddi accompagna Raznovich in un percorso alla scoperta dei castelli e delle cantine delle Langhe.

Figura 3. Raznovich con lo storico dell'arte Philippe Daverio nella Marca Trevigiana, di fronte Villa Barbaro a Maser (TV)

Il format delle edizioni 2021 e 2022 recupera questa struttura riducendo il tutto ad una serata unica, con video di presentazione dei borghi alternati a momenti di esplorazione di diversi territori in compagnia dei tre giurati, che per entrambe le edizioni sono: Jacopo Veneziani, storico dell'arte; Rosanna Marziale, chef; Piergiorgio Odifreddi, matematico e accademico. Per fare l'esempio dell'edizione 2022, Raznovich anticipa nelle prima battute del programma di voler «sorvolare laghi, borghi e paesaggi» (03:11m), trovandosi prima sull'Isola Bella del Lago Maggiore con Jacopo Veneziani, poi all'Antica Corte Pallavicina a

Polesine Parmense con Rosanna Marziale, e infine a Montepulciano con Piergiorgio Odifreddi. Lo scarto sostanziale riguarda le direttrici spaziali e temporali delle esplorazioni che vengono svolte: rimanendo in un'area che presenta elementi di attrattività turistica, suggerendo un possibile itinerario geografico e muovendosi sul piano di una temporalità sincronica a tale itinerario per le edizioni 2018 e 2019; sorvolando le diverse possibilità offerte dall'Italia dei borghi e scendendo con affondi puntuali non collegati tra loro, presentati poi in differita e intervallati dai video di presentazione dei borghi in gara nelle edizioni 2021 e 2022 (e, in continuità, fino all'edizione 2025). Legandosi alla possibilità di offrire, nello spazio della trasmissione, uno sguardo politopico sui borghi italiani, Raznovich nell'anteprima dell'edizione 2022 invita il pubblico a condividere foto e taggare *Il borgo dei borghi* sui social, suggerendo alcuni hashtag.

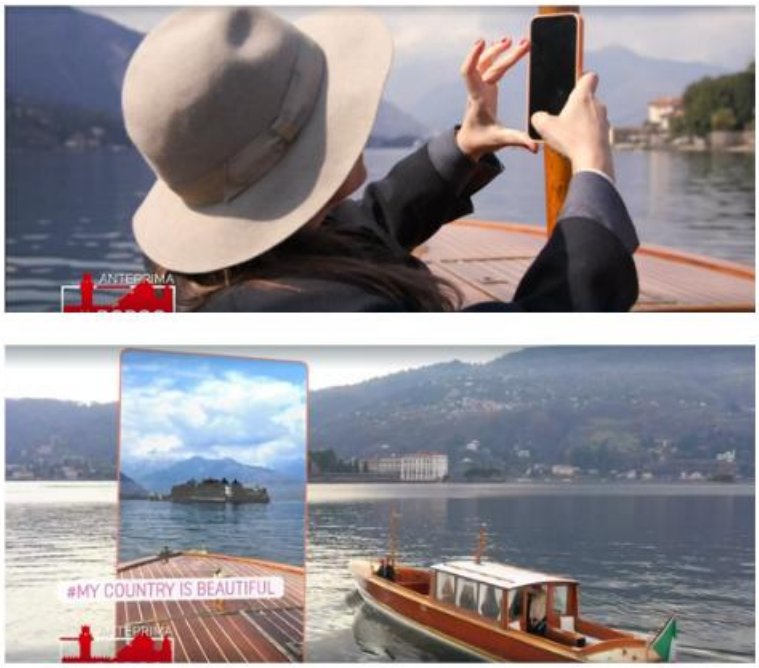

Figura 4. Sequenza in cui Raznovich suggerisce al pubblico di condividere foto dei borghi con hashtag e tag

Nella finale delle edizioni 2018 e 2019, le esplorazioni sul territorio lasciano posto alle riprese in studio. Raznovich dialoga con i tre componenti della giura degli esperti (composta nel 2018 da Philippe Daverio, Mario Tozzi e Filippa Lagerback, quest'ultima sostituita da Margherita Granbassi nell'edizione 2019), e un pubblico caldo pronto ad applaudire, composto dai rappresentanti di ognuno dei 20 borghi rimasti in gara. I video di presentazione di questi ultimi vengono suddivisi in 4 gironi da 5, al termine della fine dei video di presentazione di ogni girone si dà avvio al televoto dal quale si otterranno gli ultimi 4 borghi finalisti. Nonostante la conduttrice Raznovich affermi a più riprese che «i borghi italiani sono tutti bellissimi», il principio competitivo alla base della struttura del format induce un campanilismo a cui è difficile sottrarsi. Tra il serio e il faceto, nella serata finale dell'edizione 2018, Daverio afferma che il campanilismo è «bellissimo, […] fierissimo, ma ognuno odia

l'altro, e questo spiega l'attuale situazione del nostro paese», e Raznovich chiosa: «Viva il campanile!» (0h:22m).

Figura 5. La presentazione della giuria degli esperti durante la finale dell'edizione 2018

Il corpo principale del minutaggio delle serate 2018 e 2019 è occupato dai video di presentazione e dalle votazioni, mentre gli interventi dei giurati, a cui spetta conferire spessore culturale, appaiono sacrificati dal ritmo di un format che fatica a stare nelle 2h e 30m previste dal palinsesto. Per ammissione di Raznovic, quella dell'edizione 2018: «è stata veramente un po' una corsa» (2h:11m). Oltre a interpellare i componenti della giuria, alla conduttrice-mattatrice è affidato il compito di dettare i tempi e interpellare i rappresentanti dei borghi presenti nel pubblico. Questi vengono coinvolti in modo particolare dopo ogni proclamazione del borgo vincitore di un girone, quando i due rappresentanti del borgo presenti in studio vengono invitati dalla conduttrice a gioire e, incalzati con ironia, a convincere gli spettatori della bellezza del proprio borgo in vista della fase finale. Ne offre una esemplificazione il botta e risposta durante la finale 2019 con il rappresentante di Gradara, nelle Marche, il quale afferma: «anche se abbiamo già vinto, ci riproviamo, perché… 2 cinte murarie, terra, mare, 13 torri, una rocca, insomma, abbiamo… tanto», e Raznovich: «bene, giusto, giusto, credere e vendere il proprio borgo. Grazie ragazzi anche a voi, in bocca al lupo anche a Gradara» (1h:49m).

La proclamazione del vincitore presenta naturalmente delle forti differenze. Nelle edizioni 2018 e 2019 avviene in studio, in diretta, e vede susseguirsi in un climax ascendente: gli ultimi appelli al voto da parte dei rappresentanti dei 4 borghi finalisti, il voto dei giurati (che pesa per il 50% sul risultato finale), l'annuncio di chiusura del televoto, lo svelamento del voto dei giurati e le loro motivazioni, il progressivo svelamento della classifica finale, a partire dall'ultimo. I rappresentanti del borgo vincitore vengono invitati sul palco e premiati con una targa, mentre in sovraimpressione la regia inserisce coriandoli e Raznovich si congratula entusiasta. Nelle edizioni in serata unica, del 2021 e 2022, i video di presentazione dei borghi vengono mandati in onda nell'ordine della classifica finale. Annunciando ciascun

video dai diversi luoghi in cui si trova durante la puntata, Raznovich afferma ad esempio: «ma adesso riprendiamo la nostra gara, e andiamo quale borgo si è classificato nella posizione numero 4» (finale 2022, 2h:11m). Al termine di ciascuna delle tre esplorazioni, Raznovich ritira il voto dell'ospite, che è anche membro della giuria esperta, in una busta chiusa. I voti verranno svelati alla fine, in corrispondenza dell'annuncio del borgo vincitore, anche se in tutta evidenza quei voti hanno già contribuito a formare la classifica finale, e dunque l'ordine dei video di presentazione dei borghi nel montaggio della trasmissione.

Figura 6. Raznovich riceve la busta con il voto di Rosanna Marziale durante la finale dell'edizione 2022

Si segnala in conclusione l'elemento che più di altri produce un effetto di continuità tra le varie edizioni della trasmissione, ovvero il video di presentazione di ciascun borgo. Ogni video inizia con delle riprese dall'alto svolte con il drone, vero filo conduttore onnipresente in tutte le puntate. Le riprese aeree spesso seguono una macchina o una moto che entrano nelle vie del borgo, snodandosi tra vie, coppi, scorci e paesaggi vertiginosi. A queste prime riprese si sovrappone la voce narrante del programma, che introduce l'origine del nome del borgo e la sua posizione geografica. La parola passa agli abitanti, tendenzialmente giovani e presentati da un sottopancia con nome, cognome, età e professione; a loro è affidato il completamento dei cenni sul patrimonio storico e artistico. Il montaggio che segue alterna le riprese con il drone a tre filoni: (1) racconto del legame personale di un abitante con il borgo; (2) anziani o "personaggi" che recitano un proverbio in dialetto; (3) il turista, spesso straniero, che invita a visitare quel borgo. La parte conclusiva del video di presentazione si concentra su un aspetto specifico del patrimonio storico e culturale, su un artigiano o un mestiere, sulla principale attività di tradizione/rievocazione. La scena finale vede un nutrito gruppo di abitanti riuniti in un luogo rappresentativo esclamare in coro: «votate per XY, il borgo più bello d'Italia!».

Figura 7. Alcuni screenshot dai video di presentazione nella puntata finale dell'edizione 2018

Esperienza, engagement e ordini di valorizzazione

Per cominciare l'analisi a partire dall'osservazione delle puntate esposta nel paragrafo precedente, è anzitutto opportuno considerare come tra le edizioni non si riscontri vera e propria discontinuità, quanto invece ibridazione tra diversi formati, alcuni dei quali tipicamente appartenenti alla trasmissione *Kilimangiaro* (come le esplorazioni dei territori in compagnia di una figura esperta, ospite-guida), altri provenienti dai format della tv generalista (varietà e game show, su tutti, sembrano influenzare lo stile delle due finali nelle edizioni 2018 e 2019). Il ricorso a una estetica riconoscibile contribuisce a conferire una identità televisiva definita a *Il borgo dei borghi*. Il video di presentazione dei borghi in gara sembra l'elemento che più di qualsiasi altro assume valore distintivo, scongiurando il rischio di rendere il format a serata unica poco distinguibile da una qualsiasi puntata de *Il Kilimangiaro* in cui si esplorano territori in compagnia di ospiti-guida. I video di presentazione dei borghi non si limitano, infatti, alla mera "presentazione", quanto ad incasellare la particolare costruzione qualitativa del racconto di ogni borgo all'interno di un linguaggio televisivo peculiare, con l'obiettivo di generare affezione, coinvolgimento e senso di esperienzialità nelle audience.

La componente estetica svolge certamente un ruolo nel rendere gradevole l'esperienza di coinvolgimento. Per questo, nei video di presentazione è certamente presente l'adesione a un canone iconografico e figurativo, che contribuisce a costruire una certa estetica dell'autenticità. De Rossi e Mascino (2022) sostengono a proposito come l'immaginario figurativo contemporaneo proponga i borghi come «opere d'arte totali», attraverso

movimenti «metasegnici e metonimici» (2022, p. 68) in cui le qualità sensibili dello spazio vengono estratte e riproposte in modo incrementale e cumulativo: «la natura stratificata e incrementale dei paesi si capovolge in carattere borghigiano: la patina, la tortuosità, l'irregolarità, lo sviluppo altimetrico e rugoso diventano tratto estetico» (De Rossi e Mascino, 2022, p. 70).

Figura 8. Uno scorcio di Ronciglione (VT) vincitore dell'edizione 2023 de «Il borgo dei borghi»

Tuttavia, ne *Il borgo dei borghi* emerge con forza il ruolo di altri attori a cui è affidato il ruolo di orientare e certificare il processo di valorizzazione a partire da ciò che si sta guardando, dunque di qualificare l'esperienza nei borghi anche dal punto di vista delle capacità e competenze necessarie a riconoscere l'autenticità. Nelle edizioni 2018 e 2019 tale compito è affidato alla viva voce di chi proviene dai borghi, i rappresentanti presenti in studio, richiamando gli spettatori con una sorta di appello elettorale che, in quanto tale, punta all'empatia e al posizionamento. Il format assegna altrettanta importanza ai giudici, che nell'edizione 2021 e 2022 vedono una operativizzazione del proprio ruolo: da una funzione istituzionale se non a tratti puramente scenica, d'intrattenimento, rivestita nella puntata finale in studio delle edizioni 2018 e 2019, al ruolo di *gatekeeper* incaricato di raccontare un'area geografica e consigliare itinerari, dunque di fatto legittimando alcune scelte di consumo turistico rispetto ad altre.

Considerando questi elementi in relazione alla struttura del video di presentazione, è possibile inquadrare i principali contenuti veicolati dalla trasmissione e riconoscere il dispositivo narrativo di costruzione e legittimazione dell'esperienza nei borghi. In seguito all'analisi comparativa del corpus di puntate prescelte, è possibile distinguere 5 campi di costruzione dell'esperienza autentica nei borghi: (1) patrimonio culturale, artistico, religioso; (2) usanze, cultura materiale, scomparsa e resistenza dell'artigianato; (3) anziani, proverbi, comicità e ironia quotidiana, buon vivere nei borghi; (4) alimentazione sana, prodotti IGP, gastronomia locale; (5) esperienze naturalistiche, paesaggio, attività outdoor. Ogni video di presentazione costituisce una lettera d'invito, da un lato product placement nell'arena dei più di 360 *Borghi più belli d'Italia*, dall'altro appello accorato costruito grazie ad alcuni ordini di valorizzazione. L'appello finale per il televoto dei rappresentanti dei 4 borghi finalisti

(1h:55m) sublima questa logica di valorizzazione che, in quanto tale, induce ad un posizionamento differenziale. Per fare l'esempio dell'edizione 2018, Guardiagrele (AQ) sceglie l'indicazione logistica, «siamo a 20 minuti sia dal mare che dalla montagna»; Mel (BL) l'onda emotiva «sprizza energia e felicità»; Subiaco (RM) il patrimonio storico-culturale «orgoglio dei piccoli centri che hanno fatto la storia d'Italia»; Petralia Soprana (PA) viene personificata «lo merita davvero, ne ha passate tante, non ha solo il cibo genuino, ma anche il cuore, l'animo».

Questi appelli convocano i soggetti a un meccanismo di scelta complesso, basato su diversi ordini di valorizzazione (Boltanski e Thevenot 1991), sui quali il corpus e gli obiettivi del presente contributo non ci consentono di entrare nel merito, non avendo raccolto le voci e le motivazioni che esprimono i soggetti. Sulla scorta di tale prospettiva analitica, possiamo però notare che l'efficacia de *Il borgo dei borghi* come dispositivo narrativo di costruzione del valore si denoti non tanto sulla base della competizione tra i borghi, non tanto sulla tensione tra gli ordini di valorizzazione, quanto sulla loro compresenza e complementarità. La tenuta complessiva del dispositivo narrativo è garantita da un patto implicito: non c'è alcun bisogno di stabilire quale sia il borgo più bello d'Italia (Raznovich afferma spesso: «tutti i borghi sono bellissimi»), quanto piuttosto sottolineare che l'esperienza dei borghi italiani è una continua scoperta di qualità e autenticità particolari, uniche nel loro genere. Certo, tale proliferazione dei campanili è anche una croce, come afferma Daverio durante la puntata finale del 2019: «ed è per questo che il carattere degli italiani è ingovernabile» (1h:13m). La scoperta dei campanili a cui *Il borgo dei borghi* convoca gli spettatori delinea dunque un movimento d'unificazione (l'unico possibile?): frammentazioni, conflitti e diseguaglianze vengono pacificate tramite la proposta di equidistanza e complementarità tra gli ordini di valorizzazione.

Gli ultimi due aspetti che passiamo in rassegna riguardano l'inserimento della trasmissione nel palinsesto e i conseguenti cambiamenti relativi al coinvolgimento delle *audience*. In uno scenario generale di de-strutturazione della visione, l'attenzione al palinsesto (Barra, 2022) permette nel caso in questione di osservare gli aspetti relativi alla temporalità e alla sincronizzazione della visione. Il format della sfida delle edizioni 2018 e 2019, in onda in autunno, viene ricollocato alla prima serata finale della domenica di Pasqua nelle edizioni 2021 e 2022. In chiusura dell'edizione 2021, Raznovich afferma che spera che il programma abbia dato «spunti per la gita fuori porta di domani» (2h11m). L'intento di fornire una panoramica trasversale dei borghi italiani, quasi una carrellata o meglio un'enciclopedia di veloce consulto, connota più chiaramente l'intento principale del format, ovvero orientare i criteri di legittimazione della scelta delle pratiche turistiche.

Conseguenza del diverso inserimento del palinsesto è la perdita di sincronia tra effetto di *liveness* (Gemini e Brilli, 2023) del mezzo televisivo e proclamazione del vincitore. Di fatto, nelle edizioni 2021 e 2022 (e in continuità fino all'edizione 2025), l'annuncio viene trasmesso in tarda serata da Raznovich che si trova, in pieno giorno, in una qualche zona d'Italia. Se è inevitabile un certo depotenziamento causato dalla differita, la moltiplicazione delle possibilità di visione implica una messa in prospettiva la concezione tradizionale di immediatezza. Considerando che l'obiettivo non è tanto premiare il miglior borgo, quanto

offrire delle ragioni valide per scoprire tutti i borghi d'Italia (o almeno, tutti quelli che fanno parte del Club *I Borghi più belli d'Italia*), la versione live-show in studio può essere considerata, coerentemente, superata. A fronte dell'espansione delle forme di visione, con piattaforme e *second screen* che affiancano la visione classica televisiva (Antonioni e Andò, 2024), piuttosto che riproporre un concorso-sfida tra campanili, il format a partire dalle edizioni 2021 e 2022 punta su un formato più snello che stimoli l'*engagement*, anche attraverso la produzione di contenuti sui social media.

Conclusioni

Questa ricerca ha reso possibile evidenziare come attraverso l'analisi dei cambiamenti delle forme di mediatizzazione, sia possibile comprendere da una prospettiva specifica il ruolo dei dispositivi narrativi di autenticazione nei processi di costruzione del valore dell'esperienza turistica. Tale prospettiva specifica, approfondita in questo articolo con l'analisi della trasmissione *Il borgo dei borghi*, presenta certo dei limiti che corrispondono a questioni rimaste in ombra nella presente trattazione, e che possono dunque essere considerate potenziali linee di sviluppo futuro della ricerca: da un lato è possibile ampliare la prospettiva sulle logiche di legittimazione valoriale che provengono dal lato dei consumatori, in relazione alle specifiche logiche geografiche che orientano le scelte dei turisti in base a regioni, aree, distretti e località. Dall'altro, per comprendere le forme di produzione dell'immaginario contemporaneo dei borghi italiani nell'ecosistema mediale, sembra centrale considerare il modo in cui associazioni, attori istituzionali, enti e altri soggetti si posizionano sui social media, veicolando quali forme di esperienza dei borghi.

Riguardo gli interrogativi sui cambiamenti tra pre e post-pandemia, che hanno orientato la domanda di ricerca, possiamo affermare come non si tratti di discontinuità nette, quanto di adattamento del format che riprende elementi già nelle corde de il *Kilimangiaro* – il contenitore che racchiude *Il borgo dei borghi* – come l'esplorazione del territorio con ospite. In una ricerca sugli spot pubblicitari andati in onda durante il periodo pandemico Antonioni e Polesana (2022) rilevano come il binomio italianità/autenticità fosse associato, nel caso di uno spot della Regione Umbria, alla sicurezza di viaggiare nei borghi. Belli e sicuri, vicini e sorprendenti, i borghi della trasmissione *Il borgo dei borghi* sono alla portata di una gita fuori porta improvvisata, organizzata anche la sera prima guardando la tv. Questo prontuario di consigli su dove trascorrere Pasquetta non solo permette di riscoprire la prossimità, ma inscrive anche la possibile esperienza dentro una cornice temporalmente delimitata, quella del mordi-e-fuggi. Il basso, o inesistente livello di organizzazione richiesto per poter fare esperienza dei borghi italiani è emblematico di una proposta turistica che tiene conto della propensione dei consumatori al risparmio nel periodo post-pandemico (Secondulfo e Tronca 2023), mentre fornisce una serie di legittimazioni alla ricerca di evasione dall'urbano tramite la promessa di esperienze autentiche.

Focalizzare l'autenticità come uno dei dispositivi narrativi che concorrono alla costruzione e legittimazione del valore dell'esperienza nei borghi, ci ha permesso di guardare da una particolare prospettiva i video di presentazione che scandiscono il format. Questi ultimi possono essere visti come dispositivi narrativi autenticanti, dal momento che riescono ad articolare al tempo stesso una descrizione dell'autenticità e delle competenze che è necessario maneggiare per riconoscerla e apprezzarla.

Se la valorizzazione dei «giacimenti patrimoniali» (Sassatelli e Arfini, 2024, p. 142) nei borghi italiani vede anche un vivace brulicare di reti, pratiche e attori impegnati in rievocazioni, sagre e nelle più svariate iniziative (Dei e Di Pasquale, 2018), il quadro generale delle aree interne (Barca et al., 2014) rimane sconnesso, segnato da spopolamento e diseguaglianze su base spaziale (Coppola et al. 2021). Da questo punto di vista non potremmo aspettarci che *Il borgo dei borghi* si faccia carico di raccontare marginalità e questioni socio-territoriali delle aree interne. Tuttavia, la mediatizzazione di questa sorta di competizione tra i borghi italiani, dove ad essere sorteggiati sono borghi già appartenenti al circuito de *I borghi più belli d'Italia*, rispecchia altri meccanismi premiali e competitivi per l'assegnazione dei fondi per lo sviluppo ai borghi e alle aree interne. Il caso recente del PNRR Borghi presenta ad esempio forti analogie, visto che la selezione dei Comuni che potevano concorrere si è basata su una sorta di competizione, orientata in realtà da una selezione eterodiretta e arbitraria[7], su cui hanno pesato i capitali culturali e simbolici dei contesti dove fossero già oliate le sinergie tra morfologia estetica, iniziative turistiche e circuiti di valorizzazione del tipico. Meccanismi di selezione e, di conseguenza anche di esclusione, che restituiscono quanto sia dominante nel dibattito sulle aree interne (e nella sua intensificazione durante la pandemia) la direttrice turistica, essenzialmente mirata alla valorizzazione e al consumo dell'esperienzialità. Una direttrice rispetto alla quale i borghi italiani sono chiamati a posizionarsi, esprimendo (costruendo) il valore delle loro autenticità.

È indicativo, in conclusione, notare come il buon vivere occupi una parte importante dell'immaginario mediale dei borghi italiani. Anziani divertenti, simpatici, un po' buffi, accoglienti, che recitano proverbi e avvicinano il turista all'idea di appropriarsi di un quotidiano effimero eppure prezioso, contraddistinto da una cordiale e rassicurante aria di famiglia. L'efficacia di questo filone narrativo potrebbe essere occasione di ulteriori approfondimenti di ricerca, dal momento che sembra ulteriormente comprovata[1] dalla recente trasmissione *Lo spaesato*, un *people comedy show* condotto da Teo Mammuccari su Rai2 che propone un racconto di alcuni borghi incentrato proprio sulla comicità del quotidiano. L'Italia dimenticata delle aree interne ci ha già perdonato, anche se l'abbiamo colpevolmente perduta, rimossa e marginalizzata: ha il viso sorridente e prodigo di un anziano, che ci assolve accogliendoci in un quotidiano che sa di casa.

1 I dati sugli ascolti della trasmissione *Lo spaesato* sono registrati, serata per serata, sul sito Davidemaggio.it e aggregati nella seguente pagina di Wikipedia: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lo_spaesato

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Notes

[1] Per impatto diretto del turismo, nel rapporto Deloitte (2024) si intendono le spese e gli acquisti registrati durante la presenza sul territorio; per impatto indiretto si intende l'effetto dell'economia turistica (comprese le attività necessarie ad organizzare l'offerta) su altre filiere produttive del territorio; per impatto indotto si intendono gli effetti generati del reddito prodotto dalle attività turistiche, misurato nei termini di spesa sul territorio per nuclei famigliare con impiegati nelle attività turistiche. La parte di tali redditi diretta all'acquisto di beni presenti sul territorio genera un ulteriore incremento di produzione, valore aggiunto e reddito, il quale costituisce l'effetto dell'indotto.

[2] Da questo punto di vista è paradigmatico il caso del Piano Nazionale Borghi associato al Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR). Le numerose critiche pervenute nei confronti di questa sezione del PNRR hanno contestato il rischio di ulteriore sperequazione e divario che deriva dalle differenti capacità dei comuni di essere più competitivi e più in grado di attrarre risorse, flussi e competenze degli altri: da un lato, infatti, con la linea A del Piano Borghi, si individuano 21 borghi di particolare rilievo e significato (uno per regione) e si assegna ad ognuno 20 milioni di euro (per un totale di 420 milioni) finalizzati allo sviluppo di un progetto pilota, dall'altro, con la linea B, si finanziano almeno 229 progetti locali di rigenerazione culturale presentati dai piccoli comuni, per un totale di 380 milioni di euro.

3 La Carta di qualità con i requisiti d'accesso al Club Borghi più d'Italia è disponibile al seguente link: https://borghipiubelliditalia.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/cartaqualita-borghi.pdf

[4] L'analisi è basata sulle puntate della trasmissione «Borgo dei borghi» disponibili sulla piattaforma RaiPlay. Si forniscono di seguito i riferimenti del corpus di analisi preso in considerazione. Le edizioni dalla 2019 alla 2024, sono tutte disponibili al seguente link https://www.raiplay.it/programmi/kilimangiaro/il-borgo-dei-borghi/il-borgo-dei-borghi-2022. Le altre sono raggiungibili tramite ricerca per parole chiave su motore di ricerca, ai seguenti link: (2014) https://www.raiplay.it/video/2014/10/Kilimangiaro-Il-borgo-dei-borghi-del-12102014-ee0534ce-fe1b-43c6-9914-49963d2afa64.html (2015) https://www.rai.it/borgodeiborghi/ContentSet-9e6ae2ef-3776-4558-baa5-ccefc646f673.html (2016) https://www.rai.it/borgodeiborghi/ContentSet-5c85beab-d31a-412d-b828-0697264a8108.html (2017) https://www.rai.it/borgodeiborghi/ContentSet-5a34c4a6-2094-4375-9f35-8105249cd636.html, (2018) https://www.raiplay.it/video/2018/11/Il-borgo-dei-borghi-0b7133c5-c530-4d86-9699-68ad4304a37a.html

[5] Il Regolamento ufficiale della gara è reso disponibile dalla produzione all'interno di una sezione dei siti RAI dedicata, disponibile a questo link: https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1539013947731_Scarica%20il%20regolamento%20completo.pdf

[6] I dati sugli ascolti del programma sono registrati, serata per serata, sul sito DavideMaggio.it. ed è possibile consultarli, aggregati, nella seguente pagina di Wikipedia: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Il_borgo_dei_borghi#cite_note-9

[7] Il dibattito sul PNRR è stato molto ampio e ha coinvolto diversi attori e voci, di cui si può trovare traccia facilmente in rete. Per una panoramica riassuntiva, a partire dalla quale poter approfondire, si rimanda a Il Post (2022) e Coltré (2022).

Mediascapes journal 25/2025

"To be Queer, To be in Dating Apps, To be Queer in Dating Apps": Biographical Queerness and the Creation of Safety Strategies in Online Dating behind Stigma and Fears of Italian LGBTQ+ Young Adults*

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This study examines the experiences of Italian LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer) young adults (aged 19-35) navigating safety in online dating apps in the context of growing sociocultural challenges. Situating itself in the study of digital intimacies, the research explores how platform affordances, societal norms, and individual identity journeys shape digital dating safety practices and their perceptions among LGBTQ+ users. Drawing on eight focus groups with 39 people, in this article we employ thematic analysis to uncover users' experiences of risks, fears, and strategies for navigating safety on dating apps. These findings expand on Babcock et al.'s (2024) Safety Spectrum Theory Model by introducing the concept of "Biographical Queerness," which captures the dynamic and evolving relationship between LGBTQ+ users' identities, their digital practices, and the idea of modality spectrum between offline and online safety practices. The findings reveal that Italian LGBTQ+ young adults frequently face risks such as harassment, fetishisation, unsolicited explicit content, and the fear of being outed in both digital and physical spaces, based on their gender (identity and perception), and sexual orientation.. These risks are compounded by Italy's current sociocultural climate, which often stigmatises LGBTQ+ identities, making digital visibility a precarious endeavour. To mitigate risks, participants report employing a range of safety strategies spanning in-app, multi-app, and offline practices. Users' approaches in the apps to safety are shaped by what we describe as their Biographical Queerness, which reflects their evolving gender and sexual identities and their sociocultural and biographical contexts. These strategies intersect with the Safety Spectrum Theory's (Babcock et al., 2024) categories of strict, fluid, and relaxed safety protocols, demonstrating how users adapt their behaviours based on perceived risks and contextual factors. By examining the interplay between LGBTQ+ identities, digital practices, and cultural contexts, this study nuances understanding of safety negotiation in digital dating spaces for LGBTQ+ users in Italy. This paper seeks to highlight the significance of identity-specific risks, platform affordances, and the sociocultural landscape shaping LGBTQ+ digital intimacy and safety practices.

Keywords: online dating, dating apps, LGBTQ+ young adults, safety strategies

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Introduction

Dating practices and experiences in digital spaces have been studied in the social sciences through various lenses, particularly when focusing on the intersection of mobile apps, gender, and sexualities (Reschiglian & Usachova, 2022). The uses of these technologies have been framed as multidimensional phenomena and often as either positive and empowering (Parisi & Comunello, 2019; Ranzini et al., 2022; Byron, 2020) or stigmatising and violent (Miles, 2017; Lamont, 2021).

While there is considerable research on dating app use around the world, especially among LGBTQ+ people, there is little research on such dating app use in Italy. Given the importance of cultural context, it is vital that we understand the contours of dating app use - and associated risks and opportunities.

In Italy, characterised by traditional cultural norms and persistent stigma against LGBTQ+ identities, the risks associated with LGBT+ and queer visibility are magnified, rendering digital visibility a precarious venture. With the rise of right-wing and 'anti-gender' (and anti-trans) movements and homophobia in Italy (Trappolin, 2024; Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018), more LGBTQ+ young adults are facing cultural backlashes and heightened stigma. These experiences play out in both physical and digital spaces and especially complicate 'dating practices' (Scarcelli, 2020; Coppola & Masullo, 2021; Parisi & Comunello, 2019).

Through a thematic analysis of eight focus groups undertaken from October 2023 to January 2024 with 39 Italian LGBTQ+ young adults (19-35 years old), focusing on the experiences of risks, fears, and safety in digital dating spaces, this article situates itself within the growing body of research on digital intimacy focussed on exploring LGBTQ+ people's experiences with(in) dating apps.

The research questions that guided this project are:

1. What risks and fears are faced by Italian LGBTQ+ young adults in digital dating apps and experiences?
2. How do Italian LGBTQ+ young adults negotiate and manage those risks and fears in digital dating apps and experiences?

Building upon and expanding the Safety Spectrum Theory Model (Babcock et al., 2024), this paper introduces the concept of 'Biographical Queerness' as an element that shapes safety strategies for online dating experiences and the spectrum of online/multi-app/offline strategies. In particular, the construct of 'Biographical Queerness' captures the fluid and evolving relationship individuals have with their sexual and gender identities, particularly as these intersect with digital practices. By examining the risks, fears, and strategies employed by LGBTQ+ dating app[1] users in Italy, this research contributes to understanding how identity and technology merge in a culturally specific context and a biographical moment.

Academic context

Cyber-queer spaces

‘Online’ spaces and digital media have long been conceptualised as places where people can explore identities and connections (Turkle, 1999; boyd & Heer, 2006). While we acknowledge the use of the terms ‘online’ and ‘offline’ can inscribe a dualism that does not necessarily exist when smartphone users are or can be continuously connected to social media and various apps (Jurgenson 2012) we use these terms at times to align with the way our own participants used online/offline. At other times we users the terms ‘digital’ and ‘physical’ (rather than ‘online’ and ‘offline) to note how spaces (apps, platforms, bedrooms, the street, the classroom, forums, etc.) operate differently, requiring adjusted strategies for the presentation of self and the enacting of safety. Non-normative and marginalised subjectivities have long navigated this boundary between digital and physical spaces to discover sexualities (or languages to that map to experiences of sexualities), gender/s, bodies, and interactions which might not be available or visible in physically bounded/’offline’ sociocultural contexts like home towns, classrooms, and the family home (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Fox & Warber, 2015; Duguay, 2014; McKenna & Chughtai, 2020).

Robards et al. (2018; 2021) discuss the lasting impact of the internet on young LGBTQ+ individuals over two decades. They explore how digital spaces have provided avenues for community-building, identity exploration, and support for queer and gender diverse people, emphasising the enduring importance of the internet in facilitating connections and inclusion. Early on, digital spaces were imagined as utopic for queer subjectivities (Wakeford 2000) because of their capacity to operate as sites of resistance to heteronormativity. ‘Cyber queer’ spaces opened up possibilities for queer people who may have been marginalised and otherwise geographically isolated. There, specific groups were conceptualised and studied as a “community” and not as a group of communities with diverse needs and interests.

Pym et al. (2020) further present arguments to emphasise the tension between the role of the imagined and overdetermined “queer community” concept and the individualism performed within the digital arena offered by dating apps, concerning app affordances and subjective agency. More recent research has highlighted experiences of lateral exclusion, harassment, and marginalisation that occur within queer spaces, for instance through sexual racism (Carlson, 2020) and biphobia/bi-erasure (Nelson et al., 2023). Thus, while social media platforms and especially dating apps offer opportunities for identity formulation (Campaioli, 2023), connection and belonging (Baker, 2021; Bonner-Thompson, 2021), they can also at once be problematic and dangerous, with many users reporting experiences of isolation, and exclusion, or harassment in the same queer community (Piluso, 2019; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Albury et al., 2020, Filice et al., 2022).

Dating Apps, Risks, and Safety Experiences for LGBTQ+ People

At the intersection of dating app technologies and LGBTQ+ identities, it is crucial to recognise the fundamental role of platform affordances in promoting safety. However, these affordances must be complemented by individual strategies that protect both online and offline relationships.

Furthermore, the sociocultural context in which dating apps are used greatly affects not only the scripts and practices of personal interactions (Comunello et al. 2021; Miller, 2019; Broeker, 2021; MacLeod & McArthur, 2018) but also the perception of security with(in) dating apps for specific individualities, such as women or LGBTQ+ subjectivities (Tao, 2022; Conner, 2022; Stardust et al., 2022; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016). Dating apps have become critical sites for connection, intimacy, and identity exploration, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals who may have limited physical spaces for intimate interactions. These platforms, however, are not free from societal biases, exposing LGBTQ+ users to risks such as harassment, fetishization, and discrimination. Moreover, queer visibility (Pym et al., 2020; Smith, 2022) and the shame of using online dating apps and sites (Cali et al., 2013; Paul, 2014) build the cultural understanding of the safety phenomena that are to be explored.

LGBTQ+ individuals have historically and in many cultural contexts continued to challenge societal norms, resist stigmatisation, and navigate risks (physical, financial, reputational, familiar, etc.) by employing resourceful and innovative approaches to manage dating app environments (Byron et al., 2020; Harkness et al., 2021). For instance, as for the negotiation of surveillance and etiquette, Byron and Albury (2018) unpack the role of dating apps and the agentic posture and strategies of the users, acknowledging the importance of cultural and ethical practices in such digital spaces. Great focus is given in their work to self-made rules shaped according to the personal ethical practice in dating apps and the transgressions of the other users, as they mould how surveillance is put into action.

Byron et al. (2020) and Byron (2020) highlight how friendships are strategically used to safeguard encounters, such as sharing locations during dates or seeking reassurance and endorsement by consulting mutual online friends about a potential date. Additionally, security practices like rituals of transition (Broeker, 2021) and hierarchies of intimacies (Scarcelli, 2022) play a significant role. These practices include exchanging contact details across different platforms, such as transitioning from dating apps to messaging apps like Instagram or WhatsApp, which serve both as markers of increasing closeness and as protective measures against potential violence. Such strategies underscore the dynamic interplay between self-disclosure, safety, and relationship-building in LGBTQ+ dating contexts.

Nevertheless, reconceptualising safety and risk in young people's online sexual practices is crucial to moving beyond paternalistic and fear-based frameworks. Rather than treating risk solely as a negative or pathological element, it should be understood as a dynamic and potentially constructive force, as one that interacts subjectively with experiences of pleasure and agency (Naezer, 2017). As Naezer (2017) argues, this perspective allows researchers

to decouple risk from outcomes and instead examine how it is navigated, negotiated, and even embraced within the context of digitally mediated sexual expression.

Theoretical Framework

The Safety Spectrum Theory Model

Babcock et al. (2024) focuses on how LGBTQ+ young adults negotiate personal safety when using dating/hook-up apps. Risk is here approached as a multidimensional and context-sensitive concept that extends beyond traditional public sexual health concerns, including physical, psychological, and identity safety. Safety refers in this study to the strategies and practices LGBTQ+ young adults use to mitigate potential harms, whether physical, emotional, or social, when engaging in app-based hookups.

Studying specifically LGBTQ+ young adults in Canada and the USA, the research accesses risk-mitigation protocols employed while navigating online dating were examined using a qualitative approach, leading to the development of the Safety Spectrum Theory Model (Figure 1). This model provides a framework for understanding the nuanced protection strategies adopted by LGBTQ+ young adults during both online and in-person hookups/dates. It has been emphasised how individuals assess and mitigate risks according to their own perceptions, experiences, and comfort levels.

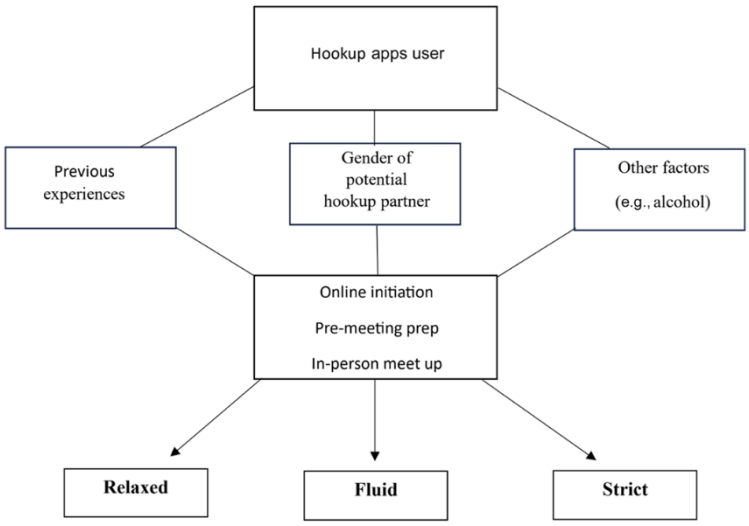

Figure 1 - The Safety Spectrum Theory Model (Babcock et al., 2024)

Informed by previous experiences, broader social structures like gender, and situational factors like alcohol consumption, the framework categorises safety strategies across a spectrum: strict, fluid, and relaxed, avoiding the rigid binary between safe vs. risky. Strict strategies involve strong adherence to personal rules and guidelines when meeting potential

hookup partners; fluid strategies allow for situational compromises with less rigid practices; and relaxed strategies reflect a lack of engagement in safety protocols.

Importantly, safety is framed as situational and context-dependent, with users adjusting their strategy protocols depending on factors like various levels of perceived risks and trust, based on previous experiences, the gender of the potential hook-up partner, and external influences such as alcohol, drugs, etc. In the context of the paper, they suggest that identity elements of race/ethnicity or disability status and other intersectional characteristics should be further studied in research. These findings emphasise that safety protocols are circumstantial, adapting to the context of each phase – online initiation, pre-meeting preparation, and in-person encounters – rather than being strictly determined by the sexual identity of the user, illustrating how safety considerations manifest differently throughout the hook-up/dating process.

Methodology

The research presented here is part of a joint initiative in education and research between the University of Padova (Italy) and Monash University (Australia) part of the 2023 Seed Fund Scheme called "Young LGBTQ+ people and digital intimacy", engaging in a comparative study of the use of control and safety features in social media platforms and dating apps in Italy and Australia. This paper will concentrate on examining the Italian context and phenomena.

To navigate the intricate landscape, we adopted an explorative qualitative approach by combining online and offline focus groups (FG). These FGs served as a dynamic platform for engaging with participants and gaining insights into their digital intimacy experiences in Italy, ranging from online dating security strategies to sexting behaviours.

Between October 2023 and January 2024, we undertook 8 FGs, strategically distributed across four macro-regions of the country: North-west, North-east, Central, and Southern Italy. This geographical diversity aimed to capture nuanced variations in LGBTQ+ digital intimacies influenced by regional contexts. Each macro-region hosted two FGs.

A total of 39 LGBTQ+ individuals actively participated in the FGs. To ensure a comprehensive representation, participants were recruited through snowball sampling from diverse backgrounds and identities within the queer spectrum to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGTBQ+) people. The inclusion criteria encompassed 18-35 years-old individuals engaging in Italian LGBTQ+ online dating and sexting practices. All the participants received an Amazon voucher for twenty-five euros for their participation.

Given the multifaceted and complex self-identifications of the participants[2], a systematic approach was employed to enhance the clarity and interpretability of the analysis while respecting the richness and diversity within each category. The diverse gender identities were classified into three main umbrella groups: cisgender male (7, of which five are gay and two are bisexuals), cisgender female (20, of which 15 are bi/pansexual, four lesbians,

one not able to label her sexual orientation), and transgender/nonbinary identities[3] (12, five queers, four bi/pansexual, two lesbians, one heterosexual).

Half of the FGs (4) were conducted online using the Zoom platform, allowing participants to join remotely allowing a wider access. The remaining four were organised offline, enabling face-to-face interactions and fostering a deeper understanding of localised dynamics.

As for the content of the FGs, diverse scenarios about experiences of ‘safety’ in online dating, sexting practices, and queerness in digital spaces were more generally investigated. Moreover, the research subjects were asked to compile a card[4] with user control features of various dating apps present in the Italian panorama, consisting of LGBTQ+-specific apps and more generic ones (Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, OkCupid, Feeld, Hinge, Her). The card collected data about the knowledge, use, and perception of the effectiveness of the app’s safety features[5].

The conversations explored participants' familiarity and engagement with dating apps to better understand how these technologies shape experiences, including feelings of risk and fear during use, and the strategies employed to manage visibility and ensure safety while navigating personal queerness.

The empirical material collected has been analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for a deep dive into the rich, detailed, and complex dataset collected from the FGs. By systematically coding the data and identifying themes, it was possible to unravel the underlying ideas, beliefs, and experiences shared by participants. Participants have nominated themselves with their names or aliases to preserve their identification agency (Downes et al., 2013).

Risks and Fears

The online dating experiences lived by Italian LGBTQ+ young adults portray a nuanced and complex landscape that LGBTQ+ people must navigate. As the research participants reported predominantly engaging with non-LGBTQ+-specific dating apps (Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, etc.), they must navigate particular scenarios these platforms present. While some dating apps, which can be seen as ‘cyber-queer’ (Wakeford 2000) spaces such as Grindr or Her, offer opportunities for queer inhabitancy, they are not perceived as universally ‘safe’ (Albury & Byron 2016) especially for bi and trans users (Nelson et al. 2023) and due to experiences of racism and lateral marginalisation (Carlson 2020).

Focusing on overall LGBTQ+ specific risks and fears, key concerns also include the fear of being 'outed' in small (home)towns where individuals are not openly LGBTQ+, particularly among family members and friends, due to the risk of word-of-mouth from acquaintances. It is perceived that the safety experiences and stigma associated with using dating apps as being LGBTQ+ are specifically connotated and challenged, as they are combined with both the cultural stigma of being in dating apps for romantic and relational purposes (as seen in

Cali et al., 2013; Paul, 2014) and the general lived discrimination of being 'non-normative' identities and having sexual orientations:

> Martina (queer, bisexual, 27): "and in general [there is the fear of] being seen and judged, to be queer, to be in dating apps, to be queer in dating apps"

So, through Martina's quote, there are different elements to be considered while understanding the safety practices implemented by not only their sexual orientation, gender, or social gendered perception (Pym et al., 2020; Smith, 2022) , but also by the same existence in the landscape of online dating in the Italian panorama and the combination between these characteristics. This adds complexity to the already difficult negotiation of visibility and participation in dating apps , encountered also by heterosexual and cisgender users (Cali et al., 2013; Paul, 2014).

Moreover, participants' narratives revealed a range of risks based on the gender identity and sexual orientation of participants as dating app users.

Cisgender men expressed concerns over the risks of unsolicited explicit images (dick pics on Grindr mainly) and 'catfishing' (being misled about the appearance and/or identity of the person they were chatting to) while also recognizing their male privileges when navigating (online) dating experiences. Most gay men generally have the perception of safer experiences on Tinder rather than Grindr, as it is perceived as more dating-friendly and less merely sexual hook-up focused, in line with Giles et al. (2022).

> Anthony (cisgender male, gay, 27): "Probably, the biggest fear for me—the first thing that comes to mind—is the authenticity of the other person. This applies both to their photos and to the words they use, the conversations they have."

> Domenico (cisgender male, bisexual, 25) : "Yeah, in the few experiences I've had with dating apps—mainly Tinder and Grindr—Tinder hasn't really given me major issues. But with Grindr, well, it always feels like there's a bit of a risk, like jumping into the unknown. Kind of like what Andrea and Elisabetta mentioned—there are lots of profiles with no info or pictures, or people who immediately spam *you-know-what* without even saying hi or trying to have a conversation. But then again… it's Grindr, so you kind of expect it."

For cisgender women, the same risk of catfishing has been highlighted, along with concerns about aggressive and violent behaviours from cisgender and heterosexual men. Additionally, there is a reported risk of men exploiting the app's categorisation of gender-diverse individuals and women as a means to gain access to women or female-presenting people on the platform, even if they choose the app category feature "women only" to protect themselves.

> Ginevra (cisgender female, bisexual, 26): I'm bisexual, and when I used Tinder, I set my preference to both genders. But especially with men, I often felt like just a piece of meat, purely because of the way they approached me. It's partly the app, but also… well, that's why I ended up removing men as an option—I felt safer getting to know women. […] I've experienced situations where someone on Hinge identified as a woman but turned out to be a man—perhaps they made an honest mistake, as they didn't

> seem queer, or maybe they were trying to game the system, I'm not sure. It also happens that people who identify as men still appear in my matches on Tinder, probably because, as she mentioned, the algorithm eventually starts suggesting them for some reason."

Transgender and nonbinary participants reported some unique vulnerabilities, alongside the shared fear of catfishing and reported violent acts from cisgender male. These worries also include the fear of the fetishisation of bisexual/pansexual people and lesbians by cishet men. Key concerns include the risk and fear associated with 'chasers', namely individuals who seek sexual pleasure with only transgender individuals.

> Martina (queer, bisexual, 27): "I'm bisexual and queer, but I often pass as a straight girl, so on Tinder, I choose both things [as categories]. However, when I get approached by straight men, their approach is sometimes very, very aggressive for sure. "

> Schiorro (nonbinary, queer, 24): "I've encountered another huge, huge, huge problem… men online. I've set the filter to 'women only' on all the apps I use because I often feel an actual fear of being contacted by men, of their invasiveness. And of course, I'm speaking in general terms – I'm referring to cis men as shaped by society."

> Andrea (trans masc enby, bisexual, 22): "And another fear for me, probably, especially as a queer person knowing the environment, is that there are people who are actually what the English term describes as *Chasers*—people who specifically seek out queer individuals. This can be, for instance, due to fetishisation. I'm a bisexual person and also a trans person, which means I can find myself in situations where I'm unknowingly fetishised in both respects."

These quotes highlight how individuals who are perceived as women—whether transgender, nonbinary, or otherwise gendered as female through social perception—are often subjected to acts of violence by men. Such interactions reinforce patriarchal and sexist norms of courtship, wherein men are positioned as possessing power and agency over others (Comunello et al., 2019). Moreover, this is perceived as a risky and tricky situation, where several strategies through the apps are shaping people perceived as women's protection by eliminating men through setting the filters accordingly ('women only' options). Not only gender becomes an issue for them, but also sexual orientation is a matter to take into consideration, especially if bisexual or queer, which leads toward the potential meeting with men. Their perception of the intersectionality of their identities (as nonbinary or trans and bisexual/queer) keeps underlying the impact of fetishisation in such online courtship (Albury et al., 2020).

In addition, there is apprehension about being reported as 'not belonging to the platform' and facing violent reactions from men on Grindr. For transgender and nonbinary (mostly still female-presenting or AFAB[6]) individuals in such digital space whose presentation is perceived as not 'passing' as men or male-presenting, there is a fear of being excluded from romantic or dating opportunities while getting harassed, misgendered, or even 'outed.' On Grindr, the rigid binary understanding of gender in the digital interactions is still very relevant, undermining queer experiences. These factors contribute to the perception that Tinder offers

a comparatively safer experience for trans men and nonbinary individuals with masculine presentations compared to Grindr. For trans men, there is also the risk of being reported for non-conformity to the dating apps' (as Tinder or Grindr in particular) perceived user norms.

> Gabriele (trans man, heterosexual, 25): "Gabriele: For example, I used to feel quite apprehensive about using dating apps or websites, mainly because I often felt the pressure to appear a certain way on these platforms. I actually started using these spaces before coming out as a trans man, so it was quite complicated to meet people because I had a very masculine presentation, but at the same time, I wasn't very comfortable with my appearance. A lot of my worries revolved around this part of me, and often, when trying to connect with people romantically, I faced difficulties because of it.
>
> Interviewer: If I may ask, did you also encounter difficulties with the technology itself, or was it mainly about how you could or had to present yourself on that specific app?
>
> Gabriele: From a technological perspective, I do think there are biases embedded in these platforms. If I present myself in a certain way, I could even end up being reported as not belonging to that community. For example, if I had signed up for Grindr some time ago, I probably would have been flagged because I wouldn't have been seen as someone who 'should' be there. Or, even if it weren't the technology itself, there would have been people making me feel like I didn't belong. So I think it's a mix between the technology and the people who use it."

Gabriele understands and underlines how the mutual shaping between the technology and the societal perception of gender (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999) is strongly proven also in the space of online dating phenomena, proving how it is difficult to experience a space for relational and identitarian self-exploration for gender non-conforming people.

Therefore, fears and risks expressed here are the ones that form the personal understanding of the overall online dating experience of the users, shaping the strategical choices for safeguarding themselves throughout the in-app experience and the effective hook-up/dating experience (which include the online initiation and the pre-meeting organisation). Such risks and fears are notably less pronounced for some but increase significantly for individuals who are not cisgender male. This disparity highlights varying levels of online safety privileges within the broader 'queer group', underscoring criticism of cyber-queer spaces (Robards, 2018; 2021). These findings reveal the difficulty of constructing a generalised queer understanding of dating apps, as experiences are shaped by intersecting factors of (socially perceived) gender, sexuality, and biographical queerness of the users.

Online Dating Safety Strategies

Following Babcock et al.'s (2024) theorisation of a spectrum of strategies at work in managing safety on social media, we present the online dating safety strategies corroborating the model suggested. Furthermore, we turn to how our participants engaged

in a mixture of in-app and offline safety approaches and practices to mitigate risks and fears. This provides insights to complexify the strategical interactions which take place in the world of online dating, considering the identities that are involved in such social exchanges. As we explore below, these strategies are interlinked with the ways our participants were simultaneously navigating their gender and sexual identity journeys and social acceptance.

LGBTQ+ participants adopted diverse approaches to mitigate risks related to their journey within their gender and sexual identification, categorised into three broad protocol strategies, which we map here according to Babcock et al.'s (2024) Safety Spectrum Theory Model.

Strict

Highly cautious participants, who were often not fully out in specific contexts, employ practices as avoiding apps in familiar localities (not opening apps in their hometowns, for example), refrained from sharing identifiable information, and restricting their profiles to minimize exposure. Practical examples of such modalities include hiding their profile or even deactivating the app, choosing generic dating apps (and not gender diverse or queer dating apps, like Tinder instead of Grindr or Her); and not putting photos that include the face or other identifying features, or links to social media accounts in the bio.

> Feffa (cis female, bisexual, 25): "When I was in (a small town in northern Italy), I would deactivate it." [...] "[Town] is small, provincial, so in the end, it's always the same people around. So, with guys, I could still manage, but it still bothered me quite a bit, like, to come across a classmate from elementary school or someone I played basketball with ten years earlier. But especially exposing myself on the app with girls, so like, 'Oh, she's bisexual,' which now I don't have a problem saying—my family knows, I mean. But it's like that part of me, the child who grew up in that place, that part of me, mm, is fine with them not knowing, I don't know how to explain it. [...] And that's it, so yes, I'd say my biggest fear was that people would find out."

Fluid

The practices chosen by the participants employed selective disclosure, tailoring their visibility and identity presentation based on contextual factors, such as the app's perceived safety or user demographics, based on their personal stage of identitarian LGBTQ+ self-discovery. Participants recall techniques which relate to the choice of a specific/sectoral app for LGBTQ+ individuals (such as using Bumble rather than Tinder) or to disclose specific identitarian elements in the bio strategically (regarding their political values or relational orientation).

> Ginevra (cis female, bisexual, 26): "I also identify as polyamorous, but I would never feel comfortable writing 'polyamorous' on Tinder, while on Bumble I already feel more at ease including it, even if just in

> my bio. I'm not sure if it even makes sense to write it, but in any case, I've never felt comfortable writing it on Tinder. Since I've only recently started this polyamorous journey, I've been wondering when is the right time to tell someone you're getting to know? Before meeting them? So, I still haven't figured out the right way to do it".

Relaxed

Individuals who were confident in their LGBTQ+ identity and were fully 'out' tended to report fewer precautions and more relaxed practices around their visibility on apps, engaging with apps without significant modifications to their profiles or behaviours.

> Cepuka (cis man, gay, 27): "In terms of fears and challenges, even those related to technology, I've actually had very few. Since I came out before signing up on the site, I never really had major concerns about showing myself."

The Online and Offline Spectrum of Online Dating Strategies

To briefly describe the overall approach to safety strategies, it can be noted that there is a variety of modalities that employ in-app, multi-app (external to the same dating app used) and offline features and tools.

The majority of such strategies are employed across our cohort, with little difference according to the gender and/or sexuality of the users to underline that the safety issues are common to all individuals. Among Italian LGBTQ+ young adults, safety strategies emerge as complex and multifaceted, shaped by the interplay of offline, multi-app, and online approaches. As in-app strategies, these include preferring platforms where profiles are verified, utilising specific filters (e.g., gender, orientation, age), and analysing profile bios and pictures for compatibility.

To open up to multi-app and external strategies, many also seek linked social media accounts for additional verification. A hierarchy of intimacies (Scarcelli, 2021) and rituals of transition (Broeker, 2021)—such as shifting conversations from dating apps to social media (e.g., Instagram) and eventually to private messaging apps like WhatsApp—play a crucial role in fostering trust, underlying how safety and intimacy are closely intertwined.

> Gemma (cis woman, bisex/pansex, 26): "I also do this kind of selection. I usually chat a bit first on the apps, looking at their photos, bio, and what they write—because there are some bios that just scream, "Okay, no, this is a red flag." Based on that, I move them to other apps because there, there's a different kind of selection. [Unclear] They get to see my daily life, my photos, how I talk. And above all, I really push them to send audio messages, videos, and photos so I can see over time how they behave. On Instagram, especially, I get message requests, so there's no direct messaging. And just from the first message I received there, I can often tell a bit about the person—whether they introduce themselves or not, whether they make inappropriate comments. Because on dating apps, they all seem amazing, calm,

> and everything… but then they show up on other social media with weird messages. So now, no thanks."

Going to offline strategies, users often learn safer practices through experience and advice from peers, such as meeting in public spaces to be surrounded by people and not feel alone with the other person.

> Italia (transmasc nonbinary, bisexual, 25)**: "**In my opinion, something important—I'm not sure if I'm answering your question—but what G. said about meeting in a public place where there are lots of people… even that makes me a bit uncomfortable. Maybe because I'm perceived by society as a girl, a woman—I don't know. I feel a bit at risk if I don't know you, and I just don't feel comfortable saying, "Hey, let's go for a walk in the park." I don't know how many people will be in the park, I don't know your intentions, and I don't have the physical strength to resist if something were to happen. So yeah, relying on these strategies—do they work? Do they not? I wouldn't know. But still… it all feels pretty limiting."

Despite these strategies, there remains no concrete way to eliminate risks, and users frequently rely on a 'sixth sense' to navigate safety concerns, as reflected in the words of Italia, transmasc nonbinary, bisexual individual (25 years old): 'You know when it's not safe [...] it's survival matter.'

Such findings regarding the implementation and perceived efficiency of the safety features of dating apps align with previous studies (Phan et al., 2021; Byron et al., 2020; Harkness et al., 2021). While users place trust in the efficacy of native safety features, the results underscore the critical importance of adopting a multifaceted approach to protection and risk management. These strategies highlight and reinforce the concept of 'safety labour,' a burden often perceived as a personal responsibility, particularly for individuals socialised as and socially perceived as female (as discussed in Gillett, 2021). The elements of in-app and offline strategies come closely tied with the approach formulated by Babcock et al. (2024), extending the understanding of the principal approaches to online dating safety strategies (strict, fluid, and relaxed).

Building on the model proposed by Babcock et al. (2024) and considering the elements presented above, the identity biographical journey of LGBTQ+ young adults plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of diverse approaches to risk mitigation in their in-app presence. Two key elements, which can be referred to as 'Biographical Queerness,' characterise their positioning within the spectrum of strict, fluid, and relaxed approaches. The first element pertains to personal changes experienced during their exploration of gender and sexual identity, ranging from being in the closet to fully and publicly embracing a LGBTQ+ identity. The second element relates to their stage in the gender transition journey, specifically for transgender or nonbinary individuals. Therefore, 'Biographical Queerness' emerged as a critical factor influencing conceptualisations of 'safety' and 'risk' on dating apps, with participants' practices often evolving alongside their identity journeys and experiences of social acceptance. Indeed, it is important to underline that the process of "coming out" as LGBTQ+ is not a neat spectrum, but rather a very non-linear and context-specific practice (Klein et al., 2014). So, even in the online dating process, this has to be

complexified and specifically understood as part of the individual identity awareness to be considered for a strategical approach towards the digital courtship. As seen in the findings, some people are more comfortable with their queerness, not dictating their need to come out to people who are of little consequence are their lives.

These strategies offer a critical lens into the ways LGBTQ+ individuals navigate the intersecting demands of self-disclosure, safety, and relationship-building on dating platforms. Far from being passive users, they engage in deliberate, situated practices that reveal how intimacy is not only pursued but also strategically managed in response to structural vulnerabilities, platform affordances, and social norms. These everyday tactics illuminate the affective and political dimensions of queer digital life, offering valuable insights into how desire, risk, and recognition are negotiated within technologically mediated spaces.

Convening all the above, we propose here an Extended Safety Spectrum Theory Model (Figure 2). Central to this model is the interplay between individual identity factors—such as sexual orientation, gender, and social gendered perception—and the broader cultural and experiential contexts shaping in-app interactions. LGBTQ+ young adults navigate their in-app presence through two primary dimensions: biographical queerness and previous experiences influenced by cultural context, each varying along a spectrum from strict to fluid and relaxed states, both online and offline. These factors affect the overall online dating experience, particularly concerning the gender and sexuality of potential partners and the process of online initiation leading to (pre-)meeting scenarios. By accounting for these intersecting dimensions, the model highlights the dynamic negotiation of safety, identity, and desire within digital platforms, demonstrating how these negotiations are conditioned by both personal identity markers and situational contexts.

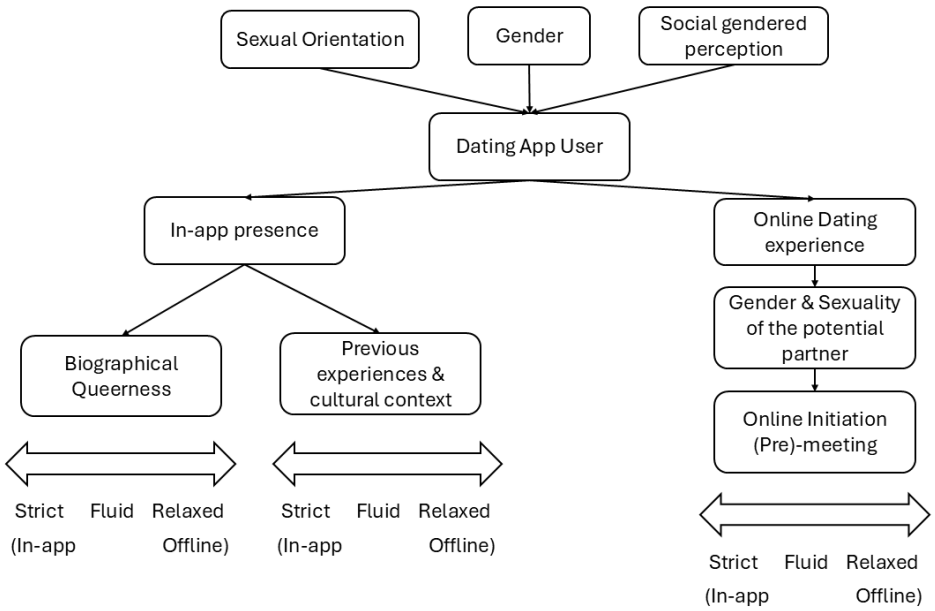

Figure 2 - Extended Safety Spectrum Theory Model

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the interplay between 'biographical queerness' (sexual and/or gender identity journey), cultural context, and strategies for managing 'risk' to exercise 'safety' on dating apps. In doing so, we propose here an extension of Babcock et al.'s Safety Spectrum Model to include these factors. By drawing attention to how biographical queerness shapes interactions with dating apps, we emphasise the role of cultural and contextual factors in Italy. By situating these experiences within the broader socio-cultural and political context of Italy, the findings reveal how digital intimacy intersects with biographical queerness and cultural context shaping both risks and the strategies used to mitigate them.

The introduction of 'Biographical Queerness' as a conceptual category that broadens the scope of the Safety Spectrum Theory Model, emphasises the fluid, yet evolving relationship LGBTQ+ individuals have with their gender and sexual identities in digital spaces. This lens highlights how safety strategies are deeply intertwined with users' journeys of self-discovery and the socio-cultural contexts they inhabit. 'Biographical Queerness' serves as a critical lens to understand the intersection of identity, temporality, and technology in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. This concept resonates with contemporary discussions on digital intimacy and queer spaces online (Robards et al., 2018; Byron et al., 2021).

The study identifies a complex ecosystem of risks faced by LGBTQ+ dating app users, including harassment, fetishisation, exposure, and societal stigma. These risks are not only tied to the affordances of the platforms themselves but also to the heteronormative and discriminatory environments in which these individuals live. Italian LGBTQ+ young adults employ a spectrum of strategies—spanning strict, fluid, and relaxed approaches—that blend in-app features, multi-app tactics, and offline practices to enhance their sense of safety and agency. While some strategies are general and shared across different gender and sexual identities, others are distinctly LGBTQ+, shaped by the participants' unique vulnerabilities and cultural positioning.

These findings underscore the dual role of dating apps as both empowering tools for connection and visibility and precarious spaces where societal biases and discrimination are often reproduced. By documenting how Italian LGBTQ+ young adults navigate these tensions, this research not only contributes to the discourse on digital intimacy and safety but also offers practical insights for platform design and policymaking. App developers must consider how to create inclusive, user-centred features that address the specific safety needs of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in regions where LGBTQ+ identities remain marginalised or face regressive marginalisation in increasingly conservative contexts.

Future research could expand upon this work by exploring intersections with other axes of identity, such as class, or disability, as well as by examining longitudinal changes in the perception of safety among LGBTQ+ dating app users in Italy. Additionally, further exploration of the concept of 'Biographical Queerness' in different cultural and political contexts could deepen our understanding of how digital platforms intersect with identity

formation and negotiation. Importantly, this research also contributes to more locally informed, culturally specific understandings of dating app use.

In conclusion, online dating for LGBTQ+ young adults in Italy is a delicate balance between opportunity and risk. Through their resourceful strategies, these individuals demonstrate resistance and creativity in navigating digital spaces, but their experiences also call attention to the need for more equitable and 'safe' online environments. Recognising and addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering inclusive digital platforms that support intimacy, connection, and identity exploration for all users.

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Notes

[1] In the Italian context, there is no clear distinction in the vernacular discourse between "hook-up apps" or "dating apps" or "online dating". Therefore we will use concepts coming from such categories interchangeably, as they are useful to better grasp such varying context.

[2] The self-identifications of the participant are here shared in the quotes, to respect their own personal understanding (gender and sexual orientation).

[3] We decided to divide cisgender with transgender and nonbinary experiences as they report different risks, fears, and practices based on the social gendered perception. The choice to incorporate transgender and non-binary identities "as to refer to youth whose sex assigned at birth does not completely align with their current gender identity, while also recognizing that identities of transgender and nonbinary are not always mutually exclusive." (Price-Feeney et al., 2019) is used to better understand our population.

[4] The card is an informational sheet about the protective features offered by various dating apps identified by the researchers. It included a section for the respondent's personal details, such as birth year, gender, and sexual orientation; questions about the respondent's familiarity and usage of certain dating apps along with descriptions of their safety features (also provided by the researchers; follow-up questions on whether the respondent knows and uses these features, and if they find them effective; and a final section asking whether the respondent uses other dating apps and whether they would pay for enhanced safety features, along with a space to explain their reasoning.
[5] App safety features are understood as safety and privacy features provided by the apps' infrastructure as 'Block the contact' (Tinder) or 'Report and Block' (Grindr), 'Private Detector' (Bumble) or 'Hide me from Discover' (Feeld). These are available to any app user, with no regards to specific gender, sexual orientation, nor sexuality.
[6] AFAB: Assigned Female At Birth.

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Imagining Photography in the Age of AI. An analysis of the debate on Boris Eldagsen's *Pseudomnesia: The Electrician*[*]

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The present article observes the current crisis of photography concerning the new algorithmic and machine learning systems, which are increasingly integrated into the apparatus of capturing, processing and creating technical images. In this moment of technological transformation, it changes conceptions and definitions of photographic images, influencing both the imaginaries from a structural and philosophical point of view, as well as the imaginative expectations and related worries of individuals. The case of Boris Eldagsen, who won a photography award in April 2023 with an image generated with DALL-E, was the trigger for a debate on social media, particularly Facebook, concerning the relationship between photorealism and photography, art and communication. Through the qualitative content analysis of posts and comments, it is possible to observe the trajectories by which new distinctions are defined by social imaginaries.

Keywords: Generative visual media, Photography. AI-generated images, Boris Eldagsen, Visual Culture

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Introduction

In April 2023, news broke that the German photo-media artist Boris Eldagsen (b. 1970) refused the first prize in the "creative" category of the Sony World Photography Award (SWPA). The reason for his refusal concerned the media origin of the winning image, titled *Pseudoamnesia: Fake Memories. The Electrician*, which is not a photograph but an artwork created entirely with DALL-E. Through this text-to-image AI program, Eldagsen produced a depiction – styled to resemble 1940s photography – of two women of different generations, one positioned behind the other.

DALL-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and all other unsupervised machine-learning tools for image generation fall under the category of *generative visual media* – GVM (Arielli, Manovich, 2024). Popularized in 2022, these tools quickly sparked interest and curiosity, but also fears and ideological clashes. Photorealistic AI-generated images therefore raise ethical, political, and communicative issues, which can be placed within the framework of what is referred to as the post-photographic turn (Grazioli, 2024). [1] Since these computational images take on the form and appearance of photographs, it becomes necessary to investigate the semantic and practical ambiguities that shape their perception, use, and distribution in society.

By refusing his first prize at the SWPA, Boris Eldagsen sought to highlight the distinction that persists between the two technical objects. His statement accompanying this refusal – "AI is not photography" – sparked one of the first major media debates on this new category of technical images. Indeed, the case's ability to tap into and foreground current cultural tensions made it highly newsworthy for a wide range of online information sources, well beyond the fields of photography and art.

On the one hand, this case relates to the dimension of the *imaginary* as communication through images and in-formation in the media, coupled with relevant sociotechnical dynamics (Durand, 1963; 1994). On the other hand, it involves *social imaginaries* – the set of expectations, ideas, and conceptions that define the space of possible action in the public sphere for who belong to it (Taylor, 2004).

Thus, Eldagsen's case makes it possible to analyze both users' imaginaries and distinctions concerning what is photographic nowadays, as well as those that Taina Bucher (2016) has defined as *algorithmic imaginaries* – that is, the ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, and how they function.

Finally, the focus of this paper is not to analyze the photographic practice itself, as commonly emphasized on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram (Leaver et al. 2020); rather, the core of the contribution lies in the media debate that developed around the image *Pseudomnesia* and Eldagsen's refusal of the award. In this respect, the paper does not center on visual cultures as they emerge accounting the visual elements of communication (Aiello, Parri, 2020), but instead focuses on the debate arising when an image becomes controversial. Users' imaginaries are thus explored through the analysis of public post and comments, with the image functioning as a trigger for topics, sentiments,

concerns, and shared narratives. For this reason, Facebook appears to be a more suitable site of observation (Seargent, Tagg, 2019).[2]

Theoretical background

The photographic image: capture or creation?

The media innovations of technical images have a dual influence on the imaginary. They affect its functioning – that is, the way it is generated and disseminated – but they also shape its repertoire of representations, as their technological status stimulates collective imagination (Fiorentino, 2019). Perceptual and visual processing modalities that increasingly depend on data sets and computational/algorithmic are affecting how systems of representation and communicative relations are structured, as well as the value and potential for transmitting memory and documentary recording (Esposito, 2022). This is driving a growing process of the mediatization of the imaginary, defined by an increasingly complex relationship among media assemblages, apparatuses, and social systems (Boccia Artieri 2015; Gemini, Brilli, 2023).

The growing confusion between photographs and AI-generated photorealistic images is intensifying a broad conversation – which, truth be told, never really died down – about the very meaning of photorealism. Hausken (2024) refers to the difference between photorealism as *depiction*, i.e., the appearance of the image that AI systems can reproduce, and documentation as *detection*, which can only be attributed to photography's indexical capacity.

The *trustworthiness* of photorealism that is perceived as detection is the main problem. As demonstrated by Farid and Nightingale (2022; Farid, 2022), synthetically generated faces are almost indistinguishable from real ones, and it is not difficult for fraudsters to exploit the ease and speed of synthesis to avoid detectable flaws. This phenomenon is called *hyperrealism*, indicating – counterintuitively and surprisingly – that AI-generated faces are often perceived as more "human" than real faces (Miller et al., 2023).

AI systems can extend the technical and visual reproducibility inaugurated by photography (Benjamin, 1936) to an even further breaking point: reproducing photorealism as a "style", given that the majority of objects in the data sets on which AI systems are trained are photographic images (Crowford, Paglen, 2021; Salvaggio, 2023; Sluis, Palmer, 2024).

This issue amplifies the anxiety surrounding photographic manipulation – an enduring debate dating back to the very origins of the photographic medium (Fontcuberta, 1997) and exacerbated by the advent of digital technology, internet and the release of Photoshop (1990).

Already in 1992, the photographer Franco Vaccari argued that digital images – outcomes of operations performed by computers – would herald the end of photography. Within the information society, Vaccari, drawing on Niklas Luhmann, asserted that context has become

indispensable, as it represents the informational framework that "makes it possible to orient oneself in the labyrinths of *verisimilitude* […] and it is the concept of *verisimilitude* that is in crisis" (p.93).[3]

Scholars of the *Pictorial and Iconic Turn* argue that images have gained greater autonomy in meaning and the ability to generate knowledge beyond merely representing the world (W.J.T. Mitchell, 1994; Bohem, 1994). In particular, photography, in relation to technological innovation – firstly digital and later computational or algorithmic (Rubenstein, Sluis, 2013; Zhang, 2022) – has progressively diluted the relationship between external object and the image as its referential record.

Today, photography increasingly follows the logics of *platformization* and *datafication* (Blashke, 2019; Taffel, 2020), on which machine vision (Rettberg, 2023) and platform seeing (MacKenzie, Munster, 2019) operate. These mechanisms, integrated into smartphone systems, involve algorithmic functions capable of collapsing, simultaneously – through the integration of hardware and software – the dynamics of image capture, post-production and circulation. In this context, the distinction between capturing an image and creating it becomes very blurred.

Recent studies by Johanna Zylinska (2023) move in this direction: "photography is changing in its encounter with other media technologies (computers, sensors) to become a form of "sensography." These changes lead to a reconfiguration of perception on an individual, societal, and infrastructural level" (p. 18).

From Vaccari's time until today, there have been numerous predictions of the "death of photography" in relation to its techno-digital remediation, of which GVM could – at least for now – represent the point at which the "photographic" form becomes detached from its specific medium (Bolter, Grusin, 1999; Hertz, Parikka, 2012).

For this reason, in *Forget Photography* (2021), Andrew Dewdney describes photography as being in an intermediate stage between life and death: "The zombie of photography is not the technology, which itself is relational, but a received and embodied set of ideas and practices standing over and pursing another set of objects and images" (p. 27). In the author's view, the classic paradigms of photography should be "forgotten" in light of the current regime of images, thereby allowing us to imagine the photographic medium in radically new terms, including the various dynamics integrated into everyday practices – individual, social, political, and economic.

In a recent special issue of *Media Theory* titled *Seeing Photographically* (2024), the editors attempt to map out new ways of understanding photography, including its relationship with GVM. "Seeing photographically" thus becomes a faculty – indeed, a "way of seeing" (Berger, 1972) – that, on the one hand, persists as a set of knowledge structures and co-influences the imaginary and visual culture; on the other hand, it is no longer merely a human-centric faculty (as conceptualized by classic theorists of photography like Barthes, Sontag, and Flusser) but is also recognized as belonging to a post-human, machinic vision.

> Recent developments offer the opportunity for a fundamental reconsideration of photography: what it once was and what it might be becoming, and how these changes might impact our understanding not only of

> visual culture but of (human) perception, human–technology relations, and the relation between visual images and knowledge practices in the future (Mcquire et al., 2024, p. 7).

Kalpokas (2023) offers an interesting perspective on the possible artistic status of AI-generated images. Building on Benjamin's (1936) classic reflection on the relationship between aura and reproduction, the scholar notes how AI-generated art occupies a middle ground between Benjamin's interpretation of photographic reproduction and the traditional conception of art. On one hand, it is the product of a serial reproduction of what exists, but it is also "societally embedded," as it holds a specific relationship with the reality of data:

> AI-generated content […] represents something in-between: on the one hand, there is an element of machinic seriality, whereby data patterns in the training sets are identified and restructured into one, yet recognizable, form. But on the other hand, AI does not replicate the world from some detached vantage point; instead, it generates output based on – and thus renders visible – a very specific type of reality: objects, styles, and likenesses as they appear in data. For this reason, one might even say that AI-generated art is truly the art of our times: just as art generally reflects society and its relationship with technology and the natural world, AI-generated art reflects today's dominant mode of engagement with the world – data, in which humans are intimately enmeshed (Kalpokas, 2023, p. 5).

When approaching the relationship between creation and capture in the case of AI images, we must therefore consider that what technical images reproduce is no longer merely the visually perceivable "out there" world, but also numerical or datafied realities, which are increasingly becoming part of our mediatized imaginary.

Technical images between communication and art

Theorizations of Baudrillard's orders of simulacra and hyperreality have been among the most frequently employed interpretive frameworks over the past four decades for understanding transformations in the relationship between reality and visual representation (Baudrillard 1976). It would thus appear that AI-generated images can embody the idea of an image that is ontologically a "copy without an original," referring only to itself. However, there still remains an object of reference: the data on which it is trained.
Moreover, the status of the online image contradicts Baudrillard's theories in certain respects: on the one hand, the networked image acts as a dissolving agent for some of the key distinctions in visual culture (between painting and photography, between simulation and document, etc.); on the other hand, around this image, new norms and procedures for attributing value and authenticity are emerging.

Within the dynamics of the web, the construction of meaning and the success of technical images increasingly depend on their exhibition value. Thus, the appraisal and significance of artworks also rely on their dissemination as images: "the more information circulates, the more the value grows; the work itself is a derivative of the value of its simulations" (Wark in Tanni, 2021, p. 123).

From Benjamin's perspective, the democratization of art – facilitated by photography – has expanded further, finding new realization in the digital plenitude dynamics of online

socio-communicative environments (Bolter, 2019). In this “digital plenitude,” traditional hierarchical divisions – high culture, elite culture, and popular culture – collapse, thanks to an ecosystem in which influential authorities are those who hold sway within specific, fragmented fields of interest.

The idea of "Art" with a capital A – its standards and canons – has become diluted in online media culture: DeviantArt, for example, has become a platform where images intended as art can be easily shared, creating a community of enthusiasts who mutually inspire with the artist (Gemini, 2009). And it is not surprised to read on the open page of the DALL-E 2 website the bold claim of the possibility of creating hitherto unimagined artworks.

Following Kalpokas (2023, p. 2), it is worth noting that:

> there is a rich and ongoing debate over the adequacy of the term ‘art’ as applied to AI-generated content. […] It is assumed that its actual status notwithstanding, a subset of AI-generated content functions as art in a way comparable to that of, for example, photography in Benjamin’s time […] the status of AI-generated art is located in-between reproduction and inventiveness.

Hence, GVM would seem to intensify the idea of an “art dissolved into creativity”, that makes use of remix aesthetics, appropriation practices, and amateurism, rejecting traditional conceptions of originality and authorship.

However, if we want to avoid naïve technological determinism, we must underscore how changes in the aforementioned categories are also the product of artistic practices which, since the early twentieth century, have highlighted the non-coincidence between the technical medium and the artistic medium.

Marcel Duchamp was the artist who brought about a major paradigm shift in the social system of art, introducing the notion of contemporary art.

Through the *readymade*, Duchamp first dismantled the idea that an artwork must stem from an author’s manual, emotional, and subjective abilities – a cornerstone of traditional and modernist aesthetic theories – by introducing practices of appropriating preexisting, anonymous, industrially produced forms and objects, albeit presented in different ways and contexts.

This operation underpins conceptual art, enacting a process that Franco Vaccari (1979) sees as analogous to what triggers the photographic act. With Duchamp, “we see the emergence of artistic activities in which the amount of exhibited labor is minimal. What has been said about Duchamp can be repeated for photography; after all, every photograph is a ready-made” (pp.63–64).

A work of art as readymade should thus be regarded as a sign whose value depends on its relationship with the context. Like a photograph in the information society, it must make explicit “that difference which makes a difference” (Bateson, 1972), conceived in relation to its exhibition and presentation environment, as well as the accompanying texts and captions.

After Duchamp and the Dada and Futurist avant-garde movements, it was no longer possible for art to achieve a shocking effect solely through formal elaborations (Bolter, 2019). In the 1960s and 1970s, during the so-called neo-avantgarde period, rather than

focusing on formal innovation, artists used irreverent operations concerning the themes they addressed, running counter to certain moral, ethical, or political conventions.

In this sense, the contemporary art system is increasingly compelled to ground its self-description in its own communicative operations, as these descriptions can no longer reliably anchor themselves to the universality of canons or the object-based identity of the medium (Luhmann, 1995). In *L'arte espansa* (2015), Mario Perniola traces an internal path within the art system, showing how, starting in the 2000s under the impetus of aspiring artists, there was a progressive dissolution of the categories defining and interpreting the works and authors belonging to that system, ultimately rendering it impossible to identify common threads of value. A clear example of this dynamic is the opening in 2006 of the Saatchi Gallery open-access section called "Your Gallery". This is a webpage allowing anyone who considered themselves an artist to create their own site and be indexed in the dynamics of a gallery, with no preliminary critical assessment. Moving through institutional and international art exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Perniola reconstructs the erosion of the art system's internal boundaries, whereby art can potentially be anything: this is the *fringe turn* of art. Yet the moment everything can become "institutionally" labelled as art, the problem of legitimation and of who holds authority over the system's functioning emerges. Within the system, art has in fact reached the point of negating itself through its own operations.

Since then, art has been mocking itself, scorning itself, fostering disillusion and disenchantment.

Given the tendency of technical images towards exhibition value, and the dissolution of the art system's internal codes, categories and classifications of visual objects and their social meanings become ever more unstable and difficult to trace. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate whether new distinctions may arise out of the social imaginaries of audiences and users.

Here it is helpful to invoke the figure of the *trickster*. As Karl Kerenyi (1954) writes, the divine trickster par excellence is Hermes, and "to be a god means to be the creator of a world, and a world means order […] Hermes opens the ways […] that outlives the fall of empires and the flux of vanishing cultures" (pp.190-191). According to Jung (1954), the trickster should be considered a collective archetype that, within the collective imaginary, through irreverent and cunning actions, crosses thresholds meaning that have been socially established and entrenched, creating new ones. The trickster is thus positioned at the crossroads, in liminal zones (Turner, 1986) – transformative and risky spaces, rich in unexplored creative potential because of their inherent ambiguity.

Tricksters can generate new possibilities and perspectives. It is not merely a matter of contradicting "truth" as an indicative concept, within rules and norms defined by the system; rather, it is an imaginative act capable of abolishing oppositions and granting access to new worlds and social imaginaries, forging new forms of language (Hyde, 1998).

It is thus no coincidence that Lewis Hyde identifies Duchamp as a modern-day trickster figure, someone unable to remain within norms and rules, compelled to cross boundaries – even to the point of forcing himself into self-contradiction so as not to conform to his own taste. Finally, as Hyde explains, Duchamp is not merely a contradictor but rather an amused

contradictor, who seeks a “corridor of humor” that can lead him beyond established polarities.

According to Erik Davis (2015), even technological innovations can work as tricksters: neither good nor evil, they shatter the accredited meanings, imaginaries, and social systems, generating unpredictable pathways for the development of communication.

In this regard, the notion of deception related to ICTs, as highlighted by Simone Natale (2025), has been central since the earliest theories of media and communication. Classical approaches have mostly interpreted it as a malfunction of the communication process, caused by manipulative intentions, technical errors, or by the inherently deceptive nature of the media themselves. In parallel, the neo-Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt School offered a structural perspective on media deception, viewing it as a tool through which elites maintain their hegemony over the masses.

However, deception should be understood in more nuanced terms, going beyond a rigid dichotomy between what is deceptive and what is not, since it plays a substantial role in everyday life, functioning as a fundamentally social phenomenon, central to many communicative interactions, and can serve as a resource for navigating the world.

Boris Eldagsen’s case

Research methodology

In a context marked by a lack of clear distinction among technical images, artworks, and creative contents, the trickster’s action becomes productive because it forces new distintions to emerge in everyday communication and in the social imaginary. Considering Boris Eldagsen’s provocative act centered around an image with iconic potential, the case analysis refers to a *visual sociology* that originates from research *with images* (Grady, 1999). The sparked debate around *Pseudoamnesia* reflects users’ social imaginaries. To guide the analysis, two research questions are posed:

- What distinctions do users rely upon to identify technical images (photographic and AI-generated)?
- What perceived and imagined impacts accompany the advent of GVM and photorealistic AI-generated images?

Using Meta Crowdtangle, I collected all the posts published in English and Italian by public pages and groups on Facebook that reported on the news over a one-year period (02/11/2023–02/11/2024).

A search for “Boris Eldagsen” returned 513 posts. I then carried out a categorization based on their purpose: informational (71%) – posts reported the event as generic news without opinion commentary; opinion-based (17%) – posts made with the explicit intent to

express a position on the affair; further analysis (12%) – posts involved Boris Eldagsen for further insights such as interviews and seminars.

At the same time, the public pages and groups where the posts appear are categorized according to their stated field of interest, revealing eleven types of media spaces (see tab.1).

	n. opinion posts	n. news posts	n. subsequent interest posts	Total percentage of posts by fields of groups and pages interest
Photography and artist pages	34	76	42	30%
General and informative news media	11	136	3	29%
Science and technology pages	9	50	0	12%
Cultural opinion groups and authors	16	19	1	7%
Sector-specific news media (art, entertainment, media)	5	31	1	7%
GenAI and AI art tool pages	6	20	2	6%
Education, schools, colleges, universities	1	5	8	3%
Graphic design and comics pages	1	10	1	2%
Political organizations	0	11	0	2%
New age, spiritual, wellbeing, religion, ethics	1	9	0	1%
Luxury and money pages	0	4	0	1%
Total percentage of posts by purpose	17%	71%	12%	100%

Tab. 1: Numbers of posts referring to the Boris Eldagsen's case appearing in public Facebook pages and groups, categorized by the page's field of interest and the purpose of the posts.

Finally, I select the posts with the highest number of comments and interactions (55 posts), from which sampling comments based on relevance and popularity, returning 3.223 in total.

Table 2 shows the seven posts that received the most comments, meaning they garnered greater attention within the debate on Facebook: in fact, they account for approximately 50% of the total comments (1563).

Name of Facebook pages	Field of pages interest	n. of comments collected	Purpose of post
Il diario di un lettore squattrinato	Cultural opinion groups and authors	443	opinion
IGN	Sector-specific media (art, entertainment, media)	356	news
Rainews	General and informative news media	312	news
Tomorrow's World Today	Science and technology pages	129	news
CBS Sunday morning	General and informative news media	112	news
La Repubblica	General and informative news media	109	news

Fotografa Giovanna Griffo	Photography and artist pages	102	opinion

Tab. 2: Posts that received more than 100 comments.

Taking into account the relevant field of interest, a qualitative content analysis of the comments is carried out (Schreier, 2012) in order to identify: 1) further topics emerging from the discussion; 2) the dominant sentiments; 3) the expectations (hopes and concerns) expressed regarding the development of GVM.

To conduct the content analysis, a thematic grid was developed (see tab.3) – partly derived from categories recognized in the literature on visual communication (Aiello, Parry, 2022), and partly deductively obtained from textual analysis of the posts and comments. This allowed for the clustering of users' argumentative topics, sentiments and expectations.

Variables	Values
What definitions are given to the types of technical images through which factors and characteristics	• processing • textures • image representational surface • uses
How technical images are perceived in relation to their communicative and social role	• information systems • art system • creative work e visual content industry
Ethical observed and imagined repercussions	• the specific context, • political and communication field • art and creative field

Tab. 3. Thematic grid for qualitative content analysis.

In the following section (2.2), the case is presented in relation to information obtained from the analysis of informative posts, which provide context for the event, along with selected comments that bring out users' positions. The results are examined more closely in the subsequent section (2.3), it is examined more closely the results from opinion-based posts, discussing the argumentative trajectories emerging from the comment analysis and the imaginaries through which the event has been perceived.

Case analysis

An examination of the informational posts shows that the news is typically presented by emphasizing Boris Eldagsen's act of rejecting the award. By his own admission, he played the role of a "cheeky monkey," having tricked the judges. The trickster figure thus appears in the frame of the artist's operation: he carried out a provocation by submitting an AI-generated image to the SWPA, aiming to test the art world's response. Upon winning the prize, Eldagsen claimed that neither the art nor the photography community is ready for AI-generated images. In order to distinguish photography from synthetic images, he coined the term *promptography,* asserting that these two types of visual objects should compete in different categories.

However, the situation is more nuanced than what newspaper headlines suggest, as the "creative" category, in which he won first place, in fact welcomes images produced using experimental or alternative methods – ranging from cyanotypes and rayographs to cutting-edge digital practices.

From the comments made by the prize's spokesperson, it becomes clear that, following their correspondence with Eldagsen and the guarantees he provided, the judges came to believe his submission met the category's criteria and therefore endorsed his participation. In short, the judges' role is central to the story, especially since they engaged in a back-and-forth with Eldagsen: after accusing him of deception and removing his work from the website, and once the artist responded with anger, the members of CREO partially retracted their statement.

Boris Eldagsen recounted the entire chronology of events on his blog and Facebook page. The crucial point of the issue for him was not so much the awarding of a prize to an AI-generated image but rather that some members of the organizing committee, the selection committee, and the press office did not grasp the importance of clearly defining the nature of the artwork. Furthermore, they did not follow through on his proposal to organize a debate about the relationship between photography and synthetic images.

On Facebook, public opinion regarding the artist's actions is nuanced[4]. On one hand, Eldagsen's honesty and brilliance are applauded, as reflected in comments such as: "It remains, however, a fake photo that competed with other real ones (I hope). He had the honesty to admit it, but others? And what if he hadn't said anything?" (from the page "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato"). On the other, there is recognition of a possible advertising or "media spectacle" angle benefitting both the success of *Pseudomnesia: The Electrician* and the competition itself – suggesting an unspoken arrangement between the artist and the judges.

> It sounds strange to me that an international jury did not 'closely examine' the image (not a photo) with all the flaws that only an inaccurate code generation can produce in an AI-generated image. So, I believe it's a sort of publicity around this topic, which can be unsettling (from the page "Giovanna Griffo Fotografa");

> Only that the jury did know and all this is staged for the press (from the page "Futurism").

The affair is therefore interpreted in relation to Eldagsen's irreverent action and the role of photography competitions within the art system, in light of the photorealism now offered by AI. Seen from this perspective, the artist's move is regarded "a test to see if the judges could tell if it's real or not" (from the page "Futurism"). Apart from speculation about a prior agreement, comments tend to highlight the judges' perceived incompetence or their inability to pinpoint what makes a photographic image distinct: "The point is the jury is ignorant of the news" (from the page "IGN news"); "Says more about the judges than the creator of the image" (from the page "ABS News"). As will be discussed in the following section, these views are also intertwined with how users conceive of and interpret the art world's social system.

Discussion of findings

Definitions and distinctions of the types of technical images

Opinion-based posts, where the authors offered personal commentary on the event, are the most useful for investigating the discussion topics, sentiments and expectations regarding the relationship between photography and AI-generated images. These posts primarily came from sources whose field of interest was classified as either "photography and art (amateur and professional)" or "cultural opinion and digital creators." Nonetheless, as revealed by the variety of media spaces where the news circulated, it becomes clear that although the link to the cultural domain of art – especially photography competitions – is crucial, the affair resonated broadly enough to reach other domains, such as political organizations or pages dedicated to spiritual and religious practices.

Moreover, in terms of user reactions – measured by the number of comments on each post, and consistent with this research's central focus – it emerges that most of the discussion by comments took place within the Facebook media spaces of general-interest news media pages. The broad impact of the Boris Eldagsen's case, therefore, made it possible to account for the varied spheres and imaginaries through which users observed and interpreted the relationship between photographic and AI-generated images, starting with the refusal of the prize awarded to *Pseudoamnesia*.

Regarding the first research question – concerning the distinctions that users establish between different categories of technical images (photographic vs. AI-generated) – it should be noted at the outset that users employ different terms to refer to photographic images and AI-generated images. Inspired by Boris Eldagsen's coinage of *promptography*, synthetic images are also described as:

- *AI-photography:* "It's AI photo" (from the group "Chatgpt Expert"); "more specifically is 'AI photography.' When you add 'AI' before photography, you're saying it's not photography, it's a form of digital image-making resembling photography" (from the page "Midjourney Official")
- *Neurophotography*: "Promptography' underlines prompting, 'neurophotography' – neural networks" (from the page "Midjourney Official").
- *Sintografia: "*When something completely new compared to the past is born, new words are also needed: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sintografia" (from the page "Fotografia Giovanna Griffo").

Each of these terms, in its own way, highlights a particular characteristic of text-to-image systems and their generative, computational processes. They illustrate how the artist's irreverent act – a border-crossing – has spurred the creation of new classifications rather than simply blurring existing categories.

It appears that users' arguments about how to define and delimit different types of technical images can be grouped into four criteria: (1) the process of capturing and creating

the image; (2) its visual texture; (3) the iconographies depicted; and (4) the intended uses of both photographic and AI systems.

The creation and acquisition process (1) are the most frequently mentioned criterion for distinguishing photography from AI-generated images. Commenters tend to emphasize how the photographic act is based on a direct, performative experience involving real-world referents, whereas the generation of images – even photorealistic ones – requires different skills and expertise, including the ability to compose prompts that match the intended representation: "photography is the art or practice of taking and processing photographs. So, a photography needs to be taken/captured from around us using a tool that can capture that (usually a camera), and then the photo gets processed" (from the page "IGN news").

Although it is generally accepted that photography entails a distinction between the moment of capture and the stage of post-production, some users raise two critical points regarding computational photography and the inherently subjective nature of photography. As is well-known, computational photography tends to collapse the act of acquisition and that of post-editing into a single process, such that a particular view of photography as purely referential becomes less representative of today's reality: "for an increasingly narrow niche, given the rise of smartphones with their computational photography" (from the page "La Repubblica"). Furthermore, some users acknowledge that photographic manipulation is intrinsic to the medium itself and its history, even when they have an indexical, analog conception of photography: "we will definitely need to pay more attention to photos and videos […] even now, a good photographer can easily falsify reality" (from the page "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato").

Digital post-production possibilities – such as those offered by Photoshop – are viewed critically: "how much post-editing is 'too much' for it to still be considered a photograph? Like if it was 90% altered in post – whether through AI or 'normal' editing software – but he still took the base photo through a lens… would that have been okay" (from the page "ABS News").

Hence, the tension between manipulated photography vs. direct photography (Fontcuberta, 1997) emerges as a bridge topic: while still preserving a process-based distinction between photography and AI-generated images, it recalls the longstanding anxieties around visual deception enabled by digital imaging technologies and post-production tools. It is no coincidence that some users assert:

> AI is another tool for photographers. I use AI all the time for noise reduction and other post-processing. In the not-so-distant future, AI will help more and more with post-processing, including culling photos, color correction, and much more on a regular basis (I mean, it's already doing that, but on a widespread basis) (from the page "Popular Photography").

Precisely for this reason, several comments emphasize that the AI-generated nature of photorealism matters more in certain contexts than in others:

> We are just saying that it is a different creation process, which means it requires different skills, demonstrates different talents, and deserves different contest categories as well as entirely different

> contests. In many commercial contexts, I don't think the difference actually matters (from the page "ABS News").

Positions focusing on the importance of the technical and procedural differences connect to how users view the AI-generated (2) visual texture, which depends heavily on the technical possibilities of production. Here, the factor of photorealism is linked to digital graphics: "these are not photographs, but graphic image" (from the page "Il Post"). Just as the nature of a technical image and its representational possibilities can be likened to those of digital painting: "it seems more like a return to a form of 'digital painting,' to which you delegate the elaboration of one of the infinite representable realities" (from the page "Rainews").

The quality of the image's texture is often deemed "low" or cartoonish. Indeed, it must be contextualized in relation to the AI's technological capabilities as of April 2023. This ties in with the noticeable errors and visual "hallucinations" commonly produced by AI. A third criterion pertains to the representational content of the image (3) and the recognition of certain "emerging iconographies" characteristic of new AI-generated images: The visual quality, anatomical errors, and AI's notorious inability to generate realistic hands become, at that time, indicators of the image's artificial origin.

> It is more than OBVIOUS that this is an AI. Look at the fingers (from the page "Popular Photography").

> It's very obviously AI art, and judges should have been capable enough to tell. Lighting mismatches, warped fingers at odd angles, a hand randomly shooting out of her chest, no iris/pupils (dead eyes) on the foreground woman… AI art is cool but has a long way to go before it's comparable to the real deal (from the page "IGN").

The fourth distinction that emerges from the comments is not so much about how to differentiate photos from AI images, but rather about the appropriateness of using these new visual objects, depending on the context (4). As highlighted earlier, users generally deem AI-generated images acceptable in contexts that do not require trust or visual credibility tied to a real event or subject, but suitable for commercial or advertising domains. The potential uses of AI-generated images, in other words, are viewed differently depending on the contexts and systems in which users imagine them circulating.

Perceptions and ethical issues of technical images related to communicative and social roles

According to the contexts and systems in which users imagine AI photorealistic images might circulate – whether in relation to the field of informational and political communication or that of art and creative work in a broader sense, two main imaginaries emerge. These exemplify users' discussion topics, sentiments and expectations about AI uses and impacts. The first one concerns the information system and its ethical implications; the second one the art system, its history, and competition among media.

AI as ICTs: Sci-Fi and dystopian imaginaries

Users identify the most problematic scenario for confusing AI-generated images with photographs as one involving manipulation of information, in which photorealism amplifies the risk of deception. This worry has long been central to the field of journalism, especially since the advent of digital photography in the 1990s and the rise of post-production software (Carlson, 2009; Keith, Schwalbe, & Silcock, 2006). As in those discussions within journalism, users' concerns about using and circulating AI-generated images in news contexts revolve around distrust of institutions and media organizations, as well as political and democratic issues.

On the cultural opinion page "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato", the author's post, referencing the Boris Eldagsen's case stresses this point.

> The gates of the (real) society of the fake are wide open. More and more often, fake photographs, fake news, and, I would add, fake books are flooding our lives, risking triggering a dangerously Orwellian drift […] in the near future, if we are not protected by governments, publishers, and distributors, we readers will find it increasingly difficult to understand whether a book was written by a human being or by software.

For many users, fake content is central to the imaginary surrounding *Pseudoamnesia: The Electrician* related case. For instance, comments on general-interest media pages read:

"I am worried about deep fakes though… in political ads, for instance" (from the page "CBS Sunday"); "The whole world is about to be fake now. We really are living in a simulation" (from the page "ABC Australia").

Photorealistic AI-image generation is thus linked to cinematic and literary scenarios of dystopia and science fiction, especially referencing Orwellian societies of control or stories akin to The Matrix or Blade Runner.

> This proves that AI should be destroyed before they become self aware and we become like in Matrix movie or other AI movie flix. (from the page "IGN").

> AI will have its space, but it has nothing to do with photography. Matrix is at our doorstep now! (from the page "Appassionati di fotografia").

> Blade Runner. Here we are (from the page "Rainews").

In these terms, the Boris Eldagsen affair extends well beyond the bounds of the art world and photography competitions, since users frame it within dystopian imaginaries and the specter of physical and social control. GVM are therefore grouped under the umbrella ICTs and are traced back to the classic dynamics of communicative deception (Natale, 2025) and media manipulation (Luhmann, 1995).

These perceptions take shape through analogies withle fictional and filmic narratives emphasizing both the relationship between humanity and technology (as manifested in cyborg or android figures) and the hopes and technological anxieties that see ICTs as tools

of emancipation or, conversely, agents of control and privacy loss at both individual and collective levels (Dumitrica, Jones, 2020).

Such imaginaries, grounded in a fictional concept of manipulation and deception, are tied to the issue of post-truth: "perhaps we need to start doubting everything before we can have a true democracy" (from the page "Tomorrow's World Today").

Thus, the topic of visual manipulation and the erosion of the concept of truth is closely linked to users' belief in photography's documentary nature – ultimately constituting one of the major ethical and social concerns that extends far beyond photography and creative work alone: "it is no coincidence that a debate has started about a sort of digital signature for photographs, because there is no longer a boundary between reality and manipulation, and this represents the denial of the very essence of the photographic document" (from the page "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato").

Value of AI artwork and conceptions of the art

The theme of AI – bound up with both technological hopes and worries, oscillating between the prospect of human emancipation and the specter of a new singularity like AGI (Bostrom 2014), in which people tend to anthropomorphize AI – also features prominently in the artistic and creative imaginary. In this context, users' main concerns revolve not only around distinguishing between two categories of technical images and recognizing them as such, but also around the age-old question of what constitutes art in relation to reproducibility, as well as how to understand human creativity versus machine automation (Canali, Pedrazzi 2024).

Some studies have already investigated how the general public conceives of and observes what "art" is (Mikalonytė, Kneer, 2022; 2025). Boris Eldagsen affair can offer a brief insight into these folk conceptions in the age of GVM.

Within this framework, users' discussion around *Pseudoamnesia: The Electrician* tend to point toward three main arguments: (1) AI as a tool that artists or photographers can use; (2) AI as the author of an artwork; (3) The artwork's value as intrinsic, regardless of the author or the tool used.

(1) AI as a tool

When viewing GVM as a tool, two perspectives emerge:

- As a resource for proof-of-concept, ideation, and creative planning: "in my opinion, artificial intelligence can be just a tool to quickly sketch out an idea…" (from the page "Il diario di un Lettore squattrinato").
- As a new tool enabling an artist to express creativity: "an AI-generated artwork needs to be attributed to a being with agency – the person who prompted the AI – in much the same way that a camera can't be called an author of art but rather a generative tool that an artist might use" (from the group "Taking photographs is not a crime").

In this conceptual framework, AI is simply a different medium from photography, due to its distinct processes and affordances.

> Without a photographer, the machine doesn't take the photo, and the same goes for AI. Setting aside the legal jargon and what we consider photography, it's just another medium. The fact that it's annoyingly simple doesn't change anything. Many things are like that: Malevich's works, the artist's excrements, the ready-mades, and, many times, simply pressing a button on a camera (from the page "Rainews").

In this view of AI as medium and tool, AI-generated visual products can qualify as artworks, whether by virtue of their automatic, easily reproducible nature or by virtue of an idea with artistic merit. If AI is simply considered a tool, the artistry of the work may depend on both its intrinsic value and the artist's talent.

(2) AI as the author

Conversely, when AI is seen as the author of a work, arguments typically hold that the products lack genuine artistic value:

> I think it's more people trying to take credit for AI generated art. The computer made it, there is not such thing a as a human AI "artist". The problem is there are people claiming that AI generated art is "their creation"....(from the page "IGN").

> Stop calling it art. As much as you want to debate that concept, it's NOT art. The software program doesn't think, it's a soulless assembly line of digital images. How are art schools going to deal with determining talent? Literally anybody can spew out these visuals. A vending machine distributes food, is that then considered a chef? (from the page "Shiften Brother Sculpting").

Here, the imaginary of the "soul" is particularly salient. On one hand, AI supposedly cannot produce artworks of value because it is not human and therefore lacks a soul. On the other hand, even the subjects depicted in AI images are perceived as soulless – indeed, some commenters suggest that this quality of "photographing the dead" is specific to AI representations:

> It looks like a photo from the last century, when people photographed the dead. Soulless, artificial (from the page "Il Messaggero");

> The woman in the background has weird dead eyes and that signature AI death glow (from the page "ABS news").

In this line of thought, "art" depends on a conception of the artist or author as a figure – often perceived as a genius – stemming from a *historical-intentional* definition of art, rooted in a romantic point of view (Collingwood, 1938; Greimas, 1957; Levinson, 1979). Not only is having a "soul" considered essential for human and artistic expression, but the seemingly effortless production of AI-generated images also draws condemnation:

> Originality, effort, and pain (to name a few). That is art. AND if in some way you don't suffer for your art, then sorry, you're not an artist & dreadfully doing it wrong (from the page "Huffpost");

> It does not come from the experiences, studies, failures, and dedication of an artist. What do those gazes mean if they are created by a cold computer? Nothing. An artistic work is nothing if separated from the artist (from the page "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato").

(3) Intrinsic Value of the AI-Generated Work

A third pivotal factor informing users' conceptions of *Pseudoamnesia: The Electrician* focuses on the image's intrinsic value, regardless of whether it's AI-generated:

> Well, in my opinion, considerations about the origin of artifacts are pointless. What does it matter who or what produced it? The purpose should be to evoke an emotion (or provoke a state of mind); if the artifact achieves that, it has fulfilled its purpose. And besides, if a human cannot distinguish between something created by a person or by a machine, it means that the difference is not important…(from the page "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato").

Here, AI-generated products fall into an *aesthetic-phenomenological* perspective, where value depends on how they trigger the observer's perceptions and experiences.[5] In such arguments, art and beauty hinge on the observer, and the value attributed to a work depends on subjective sensitivity: "the debate is whether art lies in the eye of the beholder or in the skillful hand. If you're unsure which side you're on, ask yourself this: Could you still appreciate an artistic expression even if you don't know where it comes from?" (from the page "IGN").

Consequently, while there is a broad consensus that a photorealistic AI-generated image is different from a photograph, the question of whether *Pseudoamnesia* can still be considered an artwork remains much more ambiguous. As we have seen, it depends on the conceptual framework within which users evaluate the art system – whether from a *historical-intentional* or an *aesthetic-phenomenological* viewpoint. Finally, there is a third approach that situates AI-generated work within an *institutional* conception of art (Dickie, 1974; Danto, 1981). This approach pertains directly to the role of regulations and judges in the SWPA competition: an image can be recognized as an artwork if, within certain rules, the experts deem it so; i.e. "the question here is NOT 'What is art?' – the question here is 'What are the RULES?' Because the rules were clearly stated. The artist made a brilliant statement, though, and redirected the conversation. His presentation was art. I couldn't care less about the actual image" (from the page "IGN").

In this context, a new source of tension arises around how users perceive Eldagsen's victory and subsequent refusal of the prize. Some regard the judges' decision as consistent with the existing rules for the *creative* category: "according to the competition's rules, he actually did have the right to use 'any device' to create the image" (from the page "ABS News"). Others, however, denounce a dangerous blurring of boundaries in admitting an AI-generated work to a photography competition – even if it was allowed by the rules*: "*I think there should be a different category – it's not fair to 'photographers" (from the page "Tomorrow's World Today").

Many users believe that these two technical images (photographs and AI-generated images) belong in different categories and should thus be judged separately in competitions:

> New forms and competitions for photography and digital art. In my opinion, photography contests, as well as digital art contests, should include AI but place it in a separate category, just as art contests have various categories: painting, sculpture, digital art, and now AI (from the page "Giovanna Griffo Fotografa").

Within this institutional art framework, we also find numerous user criticisms aimed at the judges. On one hand, as already noted, they are accused of lacking expertise. On the other hand, there is a broader challenge to their role as guarantors of an institutional system: "winning contests is ultimately meaningless when the results are based on the subjective opinions of a small group of people who have been chosen to do the judging" (from the page "IGN").

Art history and media competition

In user discussions – beyond the question of whether *Pseudoamnesia: The Electrician* qualifies as genuine AI art – Boris Eldagsen himself garners significant focus. His performance as a "cheeky monkey," an irreverent trickster, resonates with users' imaginaries of other subversive and boundary-pushing artistic exploits. Marcel Duchamp's figure is most frequently invoked when interpreting Eldagsen's communicative and performative act, as though he has produced an upheaval akin to the "Fountain" by Richard Mutt. In this light, what some recognize as artistically meaningful is not *Pseudoamnesia* per se but the deception and subsequent revelation aimed at challenging the role of photography competitions in a world where AI photorealism is spreading rapidly: "It's Marcel Duchamp and 'Fountain' for the 21st century" (from the page "IGN"); "stunts like this are how Marcel Duchamp changed the entire course of art history" (from the page "Shiften Brother Sculpting").

It is interesting here to note how users interpret the new medium of GVM in relation to the history of media competition in art. Particularly relevant is the historical competition between painting and photography, for two key reasons: first, the *fear* that AI might replace photography; second, the *potential loss of jobs* for photographers, graphic designers, and illustrators.[6]

> Painting was not replaced by photography; rather, with photography, a new artistic branch was born, just as cinema did not replace theater (from the page "La Repubblica").

> We are at an extremely interesting point in technological history, and I would argue that is something to embrace. As always, new tools will be co-opted into art. Photography itself was demonised in the beginning as being anti-art, but art managed to survive quite well (from the page "ABS News").

Some users' references to Duchamp are emblematic in this regard. As Rosalind Krauss (1990) observes, Duchamp's invention of the readymade – appropriating an already-made industrial object in a subversive gesture against the art system – can be seen as a painter's

reaction to the emergence of photography and all the new practices and ideas it introduced, particularly concerning amateurism, democratization of the creative process, and the erosion of boundaries within the social system of art.

For users, AI-driven generative technology might thus herald a similar paradigm shift. The ways they interpret this moment of change draw on well-established historical imaginaries, including trickster figures who pioneered new notions and opened new media and communicative frontiers.

Conclusions

Viewing Boris Eldagsen's actions as a communicative gesture – an irreverent critique of the art and media system, unveiled by exposing a deception – underscores how his move sparked a reflective and meaningful shift. Through both concealing and then clarifying the ambiguities, boundaries, and contradictions of the relationship between GVM and photography, as well as the broader notions of art and culture in the media ecosystem, Eldagsen opened a space for intense debate, making visible the underlying social imaginaries. These imaginaries highlight the distinguishing paths along which topics, sentiments and expectations emerge as individuals seek to navigate and make sense of ongoing transformations.

By putting forward arguments chiefly tied to the relationship between humans and machines, users attempt to define clear-cut distinctions between what has traditionally been photography and what is AI-generated. Two major imaginaries emerge: one relates to science-fiction and dystopian narratives, encompassing technological anxieties about simulation, control, and individual and collective manipulation; the other references art history, its theories, and the dynamics of media competition.

Although the Eldagsen case is deeply rooted in photography and art, it ultimately transcends these domains. Within the social imaginaries of Facebook users, Eldagsen appears as a contemporary Duchamp – a *trickster* operating during a technological and historical moment marked by crisis and transformation. His case has expanded into a broader dialogue about AI's technological innovations. In this sense, users' conceptions of art take center stage in discussing technological changes in visual media, serving as a sphere for critical and creative questioning of our social future.

By broadening the discussion to the role of media images, users ultimately focus on photorealism and hyperrealism as the core of anxieties surrounding diminished trust in artistic institutions and social and political dynamics. Thus, the Eldagsen affair becomes emblematic of how people interpret and worry about technology's impact: if even visual-culture and photography experts fail to carefully distinguish between photographic and AI-generated images, the anxiety that arises is that "no one can do it". Institutions and art competition juries, perceived as incompetent, lose the public's trust. Against this backdrop, Eldagsen emerges as a modern-day trickster – an honest provocateur who deftly exposes the institutional system's crisis.

Biographical note

Chiara Spaggiari is a PhD candidate in Humanities, curriculum Communication Science and Digital Culture at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo with the supervision of Prof. Laura Gemini. She was a PhD visiting student at the IT University of Copenhagen with Prof. Luca Rossi. Her research focuses on the relationship between photography, generative visual media and new media art. She holds a degree in Philosophy (BA) and in Visual Arts (MA) from the University of Bologna. She published with L. Gemini (2024) *Le Arti della Politica. Sguardo pratico e intento civile. Le responsabilità dell 'arte alla prova della guerra Israele-Hamas*, in «Comunicazione Politica» and (2023) *Forme estetiche della VR teatrale. La mappa del cuore di Lea Melandri in VR di Ateliersi fra liveness e pratica spettatoriale*, in H-ermes. Journal of Communication, Comm. 25, 43-62 (with L. Gemini and S. Brilli). Since 2017, she has been working in the field of contemporary art as an independent curator.

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Notes

[1] Scholars began to deal with the post-photographic turn in '90, a shift in photographic field that concerns: (1) the long-standing debate on image-making practices, its using and receptions, between straight and manipulated photography, intensified by the emergence of digital technologies (Ritchin, 2009); (2) the revision of ontological debates that pursue the semiotic perspective on indexicality as a defining sign of photographic medium – able to reference a real object (Peirce, 1895; Barthes, 1980; W. J. Mitchell, 1992; Marra, 2006); and (3) the growing proliferation and ubiquity of photographs in mediascapes that primarily function as a means of communication driving new performative forms of agency and relations (Fontcuberta, 2016). In this sense, post-photographic turn concerns the relationship between medium and forms of photographic, in a post-medium condition (Krauss, 1999). These positions are implicitly embedded in the theoretical discourse surrounding the relationship between photography and photorealistic AI-generated images.
[2] This methodological choice is also informed by an initial exploratory analysis conducted on the Instagram platform (02/11/2023–02/11/2024): here, the news on Boris Eldagsen's case appeared in 153 posts in English and Italian, and the media resonance (i. e. comments and sharing) was not particularly significant compared to what could be observed in the data collected from Facebook.
[3] All translations into English from Italian literary references are by the author.
[4] All translations from English to Italian of posts and comments are by the author; it concerns the following pages and groups: "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato", "Giovanna Griffo Fotografa", "La Repubblica", "Rainews", "Il Post", "Appassionati di fotografia", "Il Messaggero".
[5] This type of argumentative stance does not find a precise correlation or an established definition within the field of art theory. Rather, its alignment with a relativist framework reflects a kind of popular interpretive position regarding the artistic product, in which the linear equation *aesthetic = art* is assumed – particularly in the context of Eldagsen's case. In this regard, referring to aesthetic-phenomenological theory –I.e. the classical John Dewey's pragmatist perspective in *Art as Experience* (1934) – It is important to note that phenomenological analysis does indeed focus on the viewer's experience as aesthetic, but it consistently emphasizes the distinction between aesthetic and artistic experience. Although the two may coincide, they are operationalized differently. Consequently, the equation *aesthetic = art* is primarily rooted in users' perception and lived experience, rather than in the philosophical aesthetic-phenomenological literature on art. Here, the intrinsic value of the artwork derives solely from the subjective aesthetic experience and does not include any reflection on the expressive elements of *Pseudoamnesia* that would be necessary for an artistic experience. It could be certainly argued that this subjectivist and relativist stance – according to which everything could be art – is consistent with the dilution and crisis of the art system, as discussed in the theoretical part (see *Technical Images between Communication and Art*). However, even in this case, it would be necessary to engage in a philosophical discussion on the historical-cultural meaning of a creative and/or artistic work in relation to technologies, media and social systems, that cannot be adequately addressed within the scope of this paper.
[6] Linked to this last point, on the emergence of potential loss of jobs, the ethical issue of copyright is closely connected to. On one hand, AI can steal images, works, and artistic or photographic styles without the authors being aware or compensated for the use of their work – on which AI systems are trained. On the other hand, as of April 2023, there was still a lack of regulatory clarity regarding copyright laws for AI-generated images.

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Affect and its role in the formation of Italian political fandoms on social media*

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This article explores the phenomenon of political fandom in Italy through an analysis of Instagram posts related to Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister and leader of Fratelli d'Italia. Positioned within the discourse on the celebritization of politics, the study examines the integration of fan-like behaviours into political engagement, particularly within the algorithmically governed and fragmented spaces of contemporary social media. Drawing on Jonathan Dean's (2017) framework, the authors assess how these elements are articulated in digital interactions. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative analysis of 383 Instagram posts under the hashtag #GiorgiaMeloni with qualitative visual and multimodal analysis. The findings show that the majority of fan-like content supporting Meloni is strategically created by political actors to build a sense of community and align followers with the leader's political agenda. Conversely, anti-fandom content by ordinary users predominantly critiques Meloni in a personal or political capacity, often lacking the communal aspects typical of fandom. The study introduces the concept of fandomesque, a genre of fan-like content generated primarily by political actors rather than ordinary users. Unlike spontaneous fandom, fandomesque practices blend affective expressions with strategic political objectives, challenging traditional assumptions about the nature of fan-like behaviours. The analysis reveals that while anti-fandom content dominates among ordinary users, reflecting personal and political disapproval of Meloni, fandomesque content is largely produced by political actors seeking to shape a supportive digital discourse around the leader. The authors argue that Dean's framework requires adaptation to capture the nuances of digital political fandoms in the social media age. Specifically, the interplay of parasocial relationships and strategic motives necessitates an expanded theoretical lens that incorporates insights from celebrity politics, social media studies, and affect theory. This integrative approach enables a deeper understanding of digital political fandoms as dynamic phenomena shaped by individual affective attachments and collective strategic efforts within fragmented online spaces. This research contributes to the broader literature on political communication by highlighting the interplay between celebrity-like performances by politicians and the fan-like behaviours of their supporters. It also underscores the importance of distinguishing between spontaneous fandom and fandomesque practices to better understand how political actors leverage fan culture to achieve strategic goals. The findings provide a foundation for future empirical and theoretical studies on the role of affective publics and parasocial dynamics in political engagement on social media.

Keywords: political fandom, visual analysis, social media affect, affective engagement, celebrity politics

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Introduction

The topic of the celebritization of politics has been a pivotal part of the scholarly debates on the evolution of political communication since television became a key part of media ecosystems in Western democracies. The celebritization of politics can be understood as a multifaceted process entailing the entering of celebrities into politics, and the cultivation of "celebritized" styles of self-presentation by politicians (Street, 2003), but also the engagement in fan-like behaviours by constituents in their interaction with politicians (Dean & Andrews, 2021; Van Zoonen, 2004). Connectedly, John Street's (2004) identification of the archetype of the celebrity politician, a figure whose fame and behaviour resemble that of traditional celebrities, but are employed in the political field, became essential to scholars in the field. Furthermore, such studies have acquired further significance since the widespread adoption of social media has brought new forms of celebrity into politics (Ott & Dickinson, 2019). This article focuses on another aspect of the celebritization of politics that is relatively understudied when compared to the vast literature on celebrity politics: political fandoms. Specifically, we are interested in digital articulations of political fandoms.

Political fandoms can be understood as collective social phenomena characterised by supporters (or detractors, for anti-fandom) of a politician articulating their attitudes towards them with behaviours that are normally relegated to the relationship established by admirers with their preferred celebrities. This study seeks to further current understandings of political fandoms by looking at the Italian political landscape, to set the ground for the development of a cohesive body of literature focusing on fan-like practices employed by supporters of high-visibility politicians.

To achieve this aim, this article is structured as follows. First, we introduce Jonathan Dean's (2017) framing of political fandoms, the theoretical ground upon which this research is developed. Specifically, we focus on his identification of four essential characteristics of political fandoms: prosumption, affect, community, and contestation. Second, we focus on affect, reading Dean's reflections in conjunction with what social media scholars have said about the role of affect in social media interactions. Specifically, we stress the relevancy of this concept, which is employed to better understand political fandoms, social media phenomena at large, and how fame is constructed and maintained on digital platforms. Third, we focus on how recent findings on the latest transformations of social media platforms have criticised current understandings of digital communities, the ways they form and the very forms they take online. In few words, the hierarchical, formal communities such as Facebook groups or the horizontal entities that were Twitter's networks in the early days of Web 2.0 show characteristics that cannot be traced in the highly fragmented, informally constituted and volatile communities that form spontaneously on contemporary social media platforms. We argue that the integration of these concepts in research designs focused on collective entities such as political fandoms is much needed, especially for our aim of furthering current understandings of digital political fandoms. Based on these reasonings,

we propose two research questions to tackle the study of digital political fandoms in empirical terms:

> RQ1. Considering the liminality of digital spaces, does Jonathan Dean's understanding of political fandom fit their study in the context of contemporary social media?
>
> RQ2. If not, what theoretical and methodological tools can help us bridge the gap between Dean's framework and digital articulations of political fandom?

Connectedly, we present and employ a methodology that highlights the tensions between Dean's approach and the complex and nuanced context of contemporary social media. Briefly, this method allows us to develop a preliminary, quali-quantitative analysis of the articulations of the political fandom revolving around Italian politician Giorgia Meloni on Instagram. Finally, we propose our key takeaways as we set the ground for the development of a typology to identify and codify expressions of political fandom online distinguishing them from content shared by actors that may have more than an attachment to a politician to justify their engagement in fan-like behaviours. Given the blurriness of the very concept of affectivity that we reflect upon in the dedicated section, we focused on developing a sound theoretical ground that integrates the analysis of affectivity with the identity of those publishing fan-like, political content online. Thanks to this analysis, we identify a new genre, tangent to but not completely fitting within the realm of fandom, that we named *fandomesque*. Thus, our main contention is that even if affect plays a crucial role in political fandom phenomena, its measurement can potentially mislead social media analyses on the topic due to the pervasiveness of affectivity in all social media interactions.

A mix of prosumption practices, communal identity and affective relationships

To properly address the study of political fandoms, we need to consider the shifts that came with the advent of televised politics and impacted how constituents and candidates interact with each other in contemporary mediascapes. It was observed that the affordances of audiovisual media shaped voting preferences, as constituents started to be increasingly interested in the previously inaccessible intimate aspects of the private lives of politicians (Meyrowitz, 1977). What was once inaccessible, such as the everyday life, mannerisms, and personalities of candidates are now on continuous display thanks to camera lenses and continuous media coverage (Meyrowitz, 1986). In a nutshell, voters shifted their preferences to be increasingly based on the individual characteristics of the politicians, and less focused on ideological elements.

As a result, politicians in Western democracies tend to become savvier in employing communication strategies related to marketing principles, than they are at giving a precise

ideological footprint to their political activity and to their parties (Manin, 1997; Needham, 2005).

We interpret political fandom as looking at the other side of the outcome of this process: how constituencies adapted and reacted to celebrity politics. Cornel Sandvoss (2013) first conceptualised political fandoms as communities of politically active citizens engaging in fan-like performances within their political environments, mainly referring to the production and reproduction of texts that is also typical of other fandoms. However, this articulation of political fandom has become an object of interest from media scholars relatively recently, and the works produced often make a case for the need to reconsider the relevance of the phenomenon (e.g.: Antenore, 2020; Cantale, 2022; Campus et al., 2024; Dean & Andrews, 2021). Thus, the development of a cohesive theoretical framework based on a methodologically varied set of empirical observations is still in its early stages. This is especially evident in comparison with studies on the overlaps of politics and celebrity mentioned above, and with those on non-political characters leveraging their fame to advocate for candidates or societal changes (Gray et al., 2007).

This article builds upon current understandings of political fandom phenomena integrating them with insights drawn from the fields of celebrity politics and social media studies. Specifically, we identified Dean's (2017) synthesis of the defining characteristics of political fandom as the theoretical ground providing the necessary tools in the identification of posts expressing a fan-like attitude. Dean identifies four essential characteristics of political fandoms: (1) production and consumption, (2) affect, (3) community, and (4) contestation. As a premise, Dean considers these three dimensions to apply equally to fandom and anti-fandom.

Production and consumption

Members of a fandom are not simply passive consumers of political content: they shape the politician's image as they create and disseminate digital content articulating their parasocial relationship with them and other fans. This participatory culture fosters their sense of ownership and influence, establishing a dynamic relationship where fans and politicians mutually influence each other. This element of "prosumption" is a crucial component of fandoms, that result in a two-way flow within media, generating a "socially produced reciprocity" (Stavrakakis, 2015).

Affect

Affect can be described as the emotionally charged mechanism that pushes people to act and react in relation to others (Tomkins, 2014). Essentially, it can be seen as a change in the body-mind state that pushes those experiencing it to undertake an action or communicate a message. In other words, affect resides in a spectrum that can include

multiple emotional and bodily responses. Thus, as affect resides the single elements composing an affect-based interaction tend to be indeterminable when derived from the messages they push people to put forward (Clough, 2007). For Dean (2017), its role in political fandoms is to be found in the fans' motivating factor being their strong emotional attachment to a politician. This attachment can be driven by positive feelings in the case of supporters of the politician, and it can be driven by negative ones in the case of detractors.

It is important to clarify that the complex epistemological matters related to current conceptualisations of affectivity do not pertain to our study. Rather, we are interested in better identifying and analysing the messages circulating on social media that are relevant to political fandom phenomena. Nonetheless, the affective dimension cannot be overlooked as it has also been identified as a key element of social media interactions. Zizi Papacharissi describes social media as made of affective publics, meaning: "*(...) networked public formations that are mobilised and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment*" (2015, p. 125). Building upon these observations that put affectivity at the centre of digital political fandoms, we considered the identification of the presence or absence of affectivity and its directionality pertaining to a political character or not, a necessary element for our analysis.

Community

The third key element of political fandoms is the awareness of fans of being part of a larger community of fans. This communal element is crucial as it provides a supportive network where fans can exchange ideas, reinforce shared beliefs, and collectivise their supportive action for the politician. In other words, Dean argues that a political fandom is fully constructed only if its members see themselves as members of an imagined community (Anderson, 2006). It is important to note that the very notion of imagined communities has been reframed when it comes to their relation to digital environments, given the increasing disintegration of the materialities that shape communities offline. Specifically, imagined communities have been reconceptualised as entities that can put formal borders and hierarchical, strictly formal structures in tension, as the relative networks are constantly recreated and repurposed (Gruzd et al., 2011). Hence, we see the communities established by political fans as potentially fragmented, liminal spaces, and their members as individuals inhabiting, contaminating and being contaminated as they overlap and interact with multiple virtual spaces.

Contestation

The fourth dimension inherent to political fandoms according to Dean, is the element of contestation. Specifically, he argues that political communities, fandoms included, can be seen as collectives compacted around a series of shared representative claims. As much as the substantiation of the contestation element can be a rather chaotic and blurry process,

according to Dean it is important to state its inherent presence in any fandom to be able to define it as political. That is, because even whenever no precise claim is consistently being presented by fans, their preferred politician must stake claims throughout their political activity. Thus, fans of a politician are inherently endorsing the claims that this politician is making. Given the inherent nature of this element in any political attack or endorsement to a politician, we consider it present in any message showing an affectively charged attitude towards the leader. In other words, following Dean's interpretation we considered those showing a fan or anti-fan behaviour to be respectively supporting or opposing their agendas. Moreover, given the importance of contestation in Dean's framework, we deemed it necessary to distinguish in our analysis between fan-like statements centred around political themes and messages whose political aspect was implicitly transmitted.

In the following sections, we read the dimensions described by Dean in conjunction with the latest findings on how social media affordances impacted how constituents interact with the political dimension in the digital sphere. We mainly focus on the need to extend current understandings of the ways affect is expressed, and communities take form in the context of digital political fandoms.

The pervasive affectivity of social media fame

The pervasiveness of affect in social media spaces was apparent even in the early stages of the spread of social media usage, when high-visibility personalities started reaching fame status online constructing and maintaining public personae that differed greatly from those typical of Hollywood actors or rockstars (Senft, 2008). This difference resides in the exploitation of the disintermediated communication allowed by Social Networking Sites (also SNS) performed by internet celebrities. Differently from legacy media celebrities, they scarcely tap into the extraordinariness of their fame. Preferably, internet celebrities present themselves as ordinary people to foster their followers' feelings of mutual trust and personal connection towards them (Abidin, 2017a; Khamis et al., 2017). The outcome of this strategy, when employed successfully, is the establishment of a parasocial relationship, where followers feel that they can trust their preferred celebrity just like they can trust their loved ones.

These shifts in fame mechanics have influenced political communication as well, as leaders turned to social media to increase their reach and gain more control over the construction of their public persona. An example of this transition is Matteo Salvini, party leader of the League, a far-right, nativist political organisation. Salvini has been defined as an example of an "influencer politician", due to his adoption of social media vernaculars and heavy use of social media (Starita & Trillò, 2022). Most importantly, Salvini is an example of a political leader that brings elements characteristic of his communication on social media and integrates them in his public appearances both on other media and during live events (Diamanti & Pregliasco, 2019; Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2021). This results in an extremely

informal style of communication, the use of simplified and emotionally charged tropes, and a continuous coverage of his offline activities to fuel his digital presence (Carone & Cavallaro, 2019).

Displays of political fandom mirrors these shifts impacting celebrity politics. As politicians increasingly adopt celebrity vernaculars, constituents relate to high-visibility politicians in ways akin to those normally used to interact with non-political celebrities. Thus, to better understand political fandoms we now move to reflect on affectivity, and on the role of emotionality in shaping social media communication.

The study of digital political fandom through the lenses of affect and parasociality

We have already mentioned Zizi Papacharissi's conceptualisation of digital platforms as sets of affective publics, where people engage and disengage with each other through emotionally charged expressions. Building upon this notion, Crystal Abidin (2021) expanded on Papacharissi's work to integrate key trends that have started to characterise social media after Papacharissi's work. To summarise, Abidin argues that to better identify, understand and describe the forms taken by affective publics on contemporary social media, researchers need to fully and explicitly integrate in their works some elements that became central to the governance of social media. In other words, she states that the fake and bite news, the perpetual content saturation, and the hyper-competitive attention economies that are established and reinforced by algorithmic governance on social media have shaped them to become sets of "social silos": blocks of information inaccessible and unknown to users not specifically interested in and looking for a specific type of content (Tiidenberg et al., 2021).

In such virtual spaces formed by arrays of sub-spaces and sub-amcommunities, users adapted to develop a "silosociality", repurposing their content and practices to be effective despite the ephemerality and the reduced discoverability that comes with this infrastructure. The result of this collective effort is the establishment of what Abidin defines as refracted publics: "*(1) the space constructed out of the desire for refracted perceptions and (2) the collection of subversive or circumvention practices as a result of analogue and algorithmic manipulations of vision and access*" (2021, p. 1).

We argue that this notion of refracted publics can be a great fit for the study of political fandoms. With parasociality, we refer to a concept first defined by media scholars as a form of psychological displacement: the friend-like relationships that are constructed by fans with their preferred celebrities serve as a substitute for interactions in the real world that may be unsatisfactory or absent in the fans' lives (Evans & Wilson, 1999; Marshall, 2014).

Most importantly, despite the identification of parasociality in these terms being consolidated in media psychology, there have been studies showing that parasociality encompasses other affect-based mechanisms, beyond the mere psychological

displacement that was originally considered its key motivator. In a nutshell, the parasocial element in fan-celebrity relationships implies that we should look at the fans and their practices as responding to affect-based mechanisms, rather than being a mere adherence to social and economic constructs. Fans should be conceived as wannabe friends (or enemies, in the case of anti-fandom) of their preferred (or despised) celebrity, with all the complex, multi-layered sociality that comes with affect-based relationships (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011). In other words the fan turns from being part of a plethora of consumers and takes an active role in the processes of cultural production that characterise their object of adoration or abhorrence (Hills, 2016). The lens of social media as affective publics allows us to look at such parasocialities addressing the affect-based mechanisms that characterise them.

Arguably, these are aspects that ongoing studies on social media cannot ignore, as they are shifting the principles according to which content is created and circulated in digital settings. A clear example of this is provided by silosociality, which can prevent the scalability of social media interactions. As a result, the potential virality of content published on social media is reduced, as it is increasingly published only to be seen by some, specific eyes (Abidin, 2021). In other words, the objective of social media users in the context of refracted publics is that of surviving by pushing their content to be seen only by those that already want to see it. Finally, as much as Abidin's observations were rooted in her analysis of fringes on digital platforms, we deem them employable for the study of any phenomenon on contemporary social media. That is, due to the increasing influence that the algorithmic governance and partiality of access have on all virtual spaces established on social media since the spread of use of TikTok and the adaptation of other platforms to its affordances (Reviglio & Agosti, 2020; Zurovac et al., 2023).

Wrapping up, we observed that the celebritization of politics entails an increasing adoption of celebrity-like performances undertaken by politicians, but also brought significant shifts in the behaviours of some constituents, as they borrow the vernaculars of fandoms to support their preferred politicians. Underpinning both these processes is what can be reduced to a shift in the communicative repertoires of both constituents and candidates. In other words, the celebritization of politics turned leaders into celebrities and supporters into fans. To address these matters in empirical terms, we propose to consider the following as our operational definition of digital political fandoms: *spontaneously emerged, virtual spaces constructed by social media users undertaking fan-like performances to relate with political characters*. These spaces share the key dimensions of all virtual spaces established on contemporary SNSs: fragmentation, volatility and adaptation to algorithmic governances and affordances shaping the vernaculars of digital platforms.

In practical terms, we hypothesise that these virtual spaces can be individuated in the communities constructed by the content published on social media under the same hashtag (Dawson, 2020). As much as said hashtag may contain also (and most likely mainly) not fan-like content, we argue that the fans' decision to employ certain hashtags is a sign of their awareness that their content will construct and fuel said space together with that

published by other, like-minded users, to participate to a larger debate that ultimately contributes to construct a certain public image of the candidate the employed hashtag refers to. It is true that to tackle the topic in this way we will find the challenges posed by the lack of clearly identifiable fandoms that are defined and conceptualised by the very fans composing them. However, we also sustain that these non-hierarchical, fragmented spaces are where most fans engage in public discourses and express their fan-like attitudes with appropriate behaviours. This perspective aligns with Abidin's (2021) conceptualisation of refracted publics (and our repurposing of such notion) that social media often force their own users to adapt to. Hence, to focus on such spaces would pave the way for new and original research pathways, as it takes into full consideration the specific affordances of the currently most widespread social media platforms.

Analysing Meloni's fandom on Instagram

Wrapping up, Dean (2017) conceptualises political fandoms as composed by the prosumption practices of the members of the fandom that are underpinned by their feeling a sense of community with fellow members and due to their affective attachment to the object of their fandom. As we have described above, the reading of Dean's theoretical framework through the lenses of the latest findings on the impact of social media affordances on fame mechanics and political communication phenomena shows some tensions. Hence, we deem it necessary to employ Dean's framework to build upon it developing analytical tools and theoretical conceptualisations that allow us to read the phenomenon of digital political fandoms coherently with the ways content is produced and disseminated on digital platforms.

Before moving on to the empirical section of this article, a brief background information about the leader this study focuses on seems necessary. In this article, we analyse the fandom practices related to Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, or FdI) and Prime Minister at the time of writing this article. We selected this leader for a twofold reason: on one hand she is the leader of the party that obtained the highest percentages of seats in the latest general elections of 2022; on the other hand, even before becoming Prime Minister, Meloni's public persona has increasingly been related to her social media presence. Considering this, it should not come as a surprise that Meloni has already been a highly interesting case study for political communication scholars, especially those focusing on social media (i.e.: Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018; Martella & Roncarolo, 2022).

In a nutshell, given her visibility as Prime Minister and party leader, and how relevant her social media presence is to understand her electoral endeavours, we deemed the fandom related to Giorgia Meloni a fitting unit of analysis to test the validity of our classification. In the remainder of this article, we test the validity of our deductions on the essential characteristics of political fandom content circulating on social media. As we show in the

discussion, there are some elements that could only be discerned thanks to the empirical observations that follow, that should be considered for future attempts to conceptualise political fandoms on a theoretical level.

Method

To select our sample, we retrieved metadata (date of publication, URL) through the Python-based package Instaloader (instaloader.github.io) for the posts published by public accounts on Instagram using the hashtag: #GiorgiaMeloni in March 2024. Subsequently, we manually extracted all still images published by the politician using the URLs, resulting in an initial dataset of 1,703 images. Based on Dean's (2017) framework, we deductively devised a classification of political fandom content, as shown in Table 1. In a nutshell, we hypothesise that each post will show predominantly one of the three key aspects that we identified above as pivotal to digital articulations of political fandom. Additionally, this classification follows Dean's argument that supportive fandom and anti-fandom share the same working mechanisms. Thereafter, we excluded images that did not contain any of the features included in our classification. In other words, we excluded all posts whose photos and captions did not contain a reference to the leader, their personal or political character, or alternatively did not refer to the community of supporters of the leader. As a result, we identified 383 posts for our analysis.

FANDOM OR ANTI-FANDOM	CATEGORY	DEFINITION
Fandom	Personal Admiration	The post showcases the publisher's positive recognition of the leader based on qualities or features that are not explicitly linked to their political role
	Political Approval	The post expresses the publisher's approval of the politician due to their political role, statements or actions
	Support to the community of the backers of the leader	The post demonstrates the publisher's positive recognition of the community of supporters of the leader
Anti-Fandom	Personal Disdain	The post criticises the leader for elements that are unrelated to their job

	Political Disapproval	The post expresses the publisher's disapproval of the politician due to their political role, statements or actions
	Antagonism towards the community of backers of the leader	The post addresses the community of supporters of the leader showing the publisher's negative attitude towards them

Table 1. Categories codifying the attitude of the publisher towards Meloni, and related definitions

Another coding layer was added, to identify what type of accounts were publishing such posts. Hence, the resulting codebook categories with relative definitions are shown in Table 1 and Table 2 below. After a pilot phase, three coders (one internal to the writing of this article, two external) conducted an intercoder reliability test on a sample of 50 images extracted from the corpus, passing Krippendorf's alpha threshold for exploratory studies (α=0.746).

CATEGORY	DEFINITION
Ordinary User	The publisher is an individual with no visible relation to the leader or his/her party
Political Actor	The account belongs to an individual or collective political organisation (i.e.: professional politician, political candidate, to a party, or to the local branch of a party)
Non-professional news accounts	The account belongs to someone whose identity is not clear, they share memetic content, or alternatively news events
Political (anti)Fan Communities	The account belongs to someone whose identity is not clear, they share content to support or oppose to certain political parties or politicians or to the political elite in general
Media & Celebrities	The account belongs to journalist, entertainment celebrity, influencer or is the official page of national or local newspapers, news websites, tv channels, radio, televisions or radio programs, magazines regularly registered in the Italian courts

Table 2. Categories codifying the different types of accounts publishing the analysed sample

To better understand and test the validity of our classification, we then moved to develop a qualitative focus, analysing a photo for each category of fandom and anti-fandom content. Specifically, we selected an example for each category shown in Table 1 based on which type of users were most contributing to it according to the categories shown in Table 2. For our qualitative analysis, we employed the well-established framework for visual analysis provided by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in "Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design". In particular, we looked at their conceptualisations of represented participants, modality, and circumstances related to space and accompaniment, to correctly identify and

analyse the symbolic processes attributed by the publisher to their post. These analytical concepts can be described as follows:

- Represented subjects: all human and non-human objects occupying a pivotal part of the framed space in a photograph. Precisely, key aspects shaping the significance of represented subjects are their collocation in the framed space and their positioning compared to the camera.
- Modality: a photo can be of high modality (meaning it is an accurate representation of whatever it depicts) or low modality[1] (meaning that the representation shown in the photo has been altered).
- Circumstances of accompaniment: for this article, we refer specifically to the relations that represented participants, show in the shot, with the leader but also among each other.
- Spatial circumstances: the setting the subjects are immersed in, and background elements discernible in a shot, that may confer additional meanings to the shot.

Moreover, given the multimodality inherent to the posts published on Instagram, we integrated this approach with the principles of multimodal analysis (Kress, 2013), to analyse the caption attached to the shared photo in each post. It is important to clarify that in line with multimodal analysis principles, the caption was never analysed as something meaningful on its own, but it was only understood and interpreted in relation to the photo it was attached to by its publisher. However, its interpretation is crucial in our understanding of the dominant message codified by a single post. As described by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, pp. 76-78), a visual can codify multiple messages within a single narrative process. In other words, more than one meaning can be conveyed with a single image. However, the analysis of the attached caption brings further elements to interpret the publisher's own interpretation of their post and clarify the pillar upon which their narrative process is constructed. Hence, by looking at the texts attached to these posts, we can infer which meaning is pivotal for the users sharing the post we are analysing.

Quantitative summary

In Tables 3 and 4 below, we summarise the coding results for the 383 posts we identified as showing a parasocial relationship between the publisher and Meloni. These 383 posts are our selected sample. Starting from Table 3, roughly a third (125 posts, 32.64% of the selected sample) of these posts are published by ordinary users. The rest of the sample is mainly composed of posts published by political actors (109 posts, 28.46%), and by accounts covering news in a partisan, subjective or humoristic way (83 posts, 21.67%). The top-down managed fan accounts (re)producing and collecting user content and diffusing it

are at the fringes of the selected sample, as with 34 relevant posts they are accountable only for 8.88% of the selected sample.

Looking at the predominance of anti-fandom in their subsample, these are arguably communities opposing Meloni, either as the result of a personal dislike or due to their support of Meloni's opponents. Moreover, the type of content published by each actor can vary substantially. As shown in Table 3, 84.80% of all posts published by ordinary users is anti-fandom. The balance between fandom and anti-fandom is virtually reversed for political actors, whose posts were critical towards Meloni only in 11.93% of the instances. The other types of actors predominantly publish anti-fandom in varying degrees, but none published predominantly supportive fandom as political actors did.

	Ordinary User	Political Actor	Nonprofessional news accounts	Political (anti)Fan Communities	Media & Celebrities	*Total*
Fandom	15.20%	88.07%	8.43%	14.71%	43.75%	*36.81%*
Anti-Fandom	84.80%	11.93%	91.57%	85.29%	56.25%	*63.19%*
Total	*100.00%* *125*	*100.00%* *109*	*100.00%* *83*	*100.00%* *34*	*100.00%* *32*	*100.00%* *383*

Table 3. Fandom/anti-fandom per type of publisher (Column percentage/N)

With the data shown in Table 4, we are able to discern more closely what type of attitude is more commonly shown by each type of publisher. For ordinary users, the most common type of attitude is *personal disdain* towards Meloni, with a total of 66 posts, that are more than half (52.80%) of all the posts these users published. Political actors publish consistently more fandom in relation to other publishers. Specifically, they consistently express support for the political actions of Meloni (35.78% of their subsample) and for the community of backers of the leader (33.94% of the selected sample). Additionally, we can observe that the 96 posts published by political actors in support of Giorgia Meloni compose 88.07% of their subsample, and 68.09% of the fandom posts identified in the sample. This means that the bulk of posts showing a parasocial relationship that is in approval of Meloni is predominantly composed by actors that are actively engaging with the political arena as party employees or as elected officials. Interestingly, the most frequent type of posts in this subsample articulates the publishers' approval of her political actions (39 posts), followed by posts expressing adherence to the community of Meloni's supporters (37 posts).

Coding Category	Ordinary User	Political Actor	Nonprofessional News Accounts	Political (anti)Fan Communities	Media & Celebrities	*Total*
Personal Admiration	7.20% 9	18.35% 20	1.20% 1	2.94% 1	15.63% 5	*9.40%* *36*
Political Approval	4.00% 5	35.78% 39	6.02% 5	2.94% 1	18.75% 6	*14.62%* *56*
Support to the community of the backers of the leader	4.00% 5	33.94% 37	1.20% 1	8.82% 3	9.38% 3	*12.79%* *49*
Personal Disdain	52.80% 66	1.83% 2	39.76% 33	23.53% 8	9.38% 3	*29.24%* *112*
Political Disapproval	28.00% 35	10.09% 11	46.99% 39	47.06% 16	43.75% 14	*30.03%* *115*
Antagonism towards the community of backers of the leader	4.00% 5	None	4.82% 4	14.71% 5	3.13% 1	*3.92%* *15*
Total	*100%* *125*	*100%* *109*	*100%* *83*	*100%* *34*	*100%* *32*	*100%* *383*

Table 4. Attitude towards the leader per type of publisher (Column percentage/N)

Based on the data summarised in Table 3 and Table 4, we can lay out some basic characteristics of the fandom participating to the liminal space of #giorgiameloni on Instagram. First, top-down managed communities of political fans are merely at the margins of #giorgiameloni, and of the fan-like content circulating in it, as they contribute to less than 10% of the sample, with precisely 32 posts. Second, anti-fandom content in opposition to Meloni is more present than supportive content. Third, it seems that the supportive, fan-like content in this space is scarcely produced and circulated by ordinary users, whose main contribution to the fan-like practices related to the leader belong to the anti-fandom category.

To better understand how the fan-like practices are articulated by ordinary users and by political actors we turn to a qualitative focus based on a few selected examples for each type of attitude shown towards the leader. The examples were selected based on which between these two types of publishers (ordinary people and political actors) shared the most content relevant to each type of attitude. Thus, we are able to better understand the predominant characteristics for the posts present in each category, and to gather insights on the implications of politicians and parties sharing fan-like content online.

Qualitative analysis

Figure 1. Example of a post showing personal support for the leader

Figure 1 is an example of a post sharing appreciation for the leader without referring to her political role in any specific way, thus classified as "personal fandom". Figure 1 shows a photo of Meloni surrounded and embraced by a group of supporters, publisher included, at what looks like the side stage of a public rally, as suggested by the banner held by one of the supporters. The leader and those surrounding her are smiling,[2] as they look towards the camera. The picture has a high modality: seemingly unaltered, it depicts the represented moment in a realistic way. The caption states: "Freedom of speech, freedom of mind, freedom of mobility", followed by blue heart emoji, and it closes with a quote from Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci stating her resilience in standing up against those opposing her freedom of expression. In other words, the caption highlights the user's appreciation for the value of liberty and there are no specific mentions of Meloni's actions as Prime Minister or party leader.

The user is associating specific values to Meloni's image. Hence, the main message codified by the publisher in the post is the association of the value of freedom with Meloni's character, something that goes beyond her role as a politician and directly attributes these values to her as an individual. Additionally, the publisher displays their attendance at a public gathering alongside the leader, emphasising their value-driven deep connection with her. Thus, as much as Figure 1 is a personal fandom post, we can also observe elements related to the communal and to the political aspects of fandom.

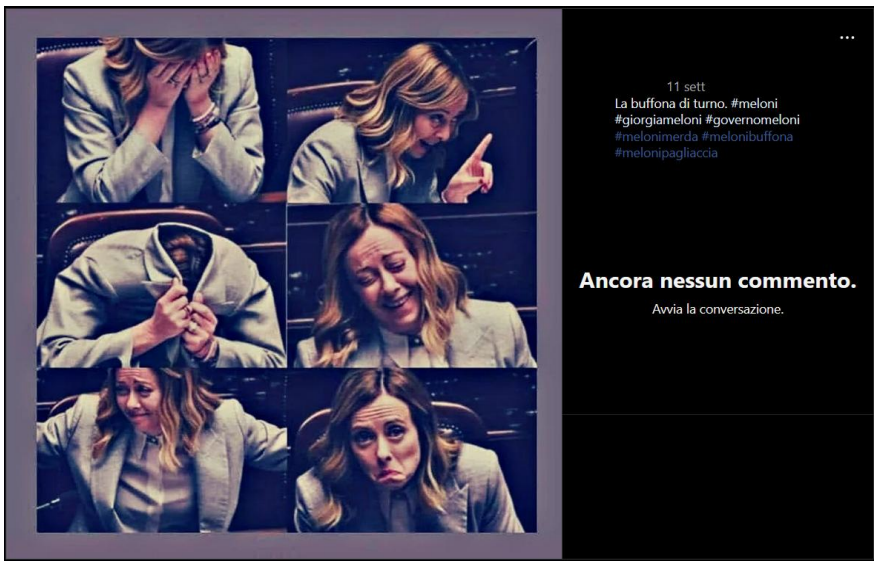

Figure 2. Example of a post showing personal disapproval of the leader

Figure 2 is an example of personal anti-fandom content. Specifically, the post shown in Figure 2 contains a collage of portraits of Giorgia Meloni, depicting some peculiar facial expressions she made during a parliamentary session. Additionally, the photo has been modified with seemingly the addition of an Instagram filter. The final effect of this edit is that the contrast is enhanced, lowering the modality of the shot and fostering an emotional layer that stresses the drama conveyed by Meloni's expressions. The attached caption says: "Clown on duty", stating the strong, negative connotation attributed by the user to Meloni's behaviour. Crucially for our analysis, this post does not connect the inappropriateness of Meloni's facial expressions to her role as a Prime Minister, or to the venue where she engaged in this behaviour (i.e.: the Italian Parliament). Similarly to the post shown in Figure 1, its framing as personal is related to the lack of direct references of the publisher to political or communal aspects of Meloni's public persona.

Figure 3. Example of a post showing support for the political endeavours of the leader

Figure 3 shows that even elected officials can engage in fan-like behaviours. Carlo Fidanza, the publisher of the post shown in Figure 3, is a member of the European Parliament elected with the party led by Meloni. The photo displays Meloni happily posing with the Italian flag and her party's emblem to highlight her accomplishments, stated in a superimposed text. The meaning of the post specifically focuses on the poverty index dropping from 20.00% to 18.80% under Meloni's presidency, despite her government's decision to repeal a welfare measure that was supported by previous governments named "citizens' income". Specifically, the politician turned fan stresses his support for the right-wing leader in the attached caption by stating: "(...) now, with Giorgia Meloni, we managed to turn the tide".

Figure 4. Example of a post showing political disapproval towards the leader

In Figure 4 we present a post displaying the same photo as Figure 2. However, the message channelled in Figure 4 is explicitly related to the political dimension. Hence, its classification in our analysis varies from that of Figure 2. That is, because the post shown in Figure 4 focuses on the Prime Minister and the socio-political significance of the setting Meloni was immersed in as she was being photographed. Specifically, the caption says: "These pictures portray the Prime Minister when someone criticises her. Really serious politics!". Moreover, the modality is lowered by a filter. However, here the filter lowers the contrast and enhances the brightness of the image. The result is that the setting where these photos were taken, and the expressions that they depict are much more quickly discerned by the viewer.

The posts shown in Figure 2 and Figure 4 are examples of how significant the captions attached to an Instagram post can be in reframing the overall meaning of the shared visual messages. While the two collages convey different messages, the element of prosumption, through which the publisher expresses hostility towards the leader, is evident in both cases.

Figure 5. Example of a fandom post showing support towards the community of Meloni's supporters

The photo in Figure 5 does not involve Meloni directly, as it shows a group of activists engaging in campaigning activities for the 2024 European elections, as they advocate for the party led by Meloni in public. More precisely, it shows a practice common to many Italian activists: campaigning in public spaces with gazebos.[3] The main subjects of the photograph are assembled in a public area outdoors, in front of the gazebo. The photo[4] remains untouched, conveying the normalcy and genuineness of the moment with no alterations or filters, except for the addition in the bottom right corner of a symbol of FdI. The attached caption underlines the communal aspect of the picture, stating that the represented participants were: "Ready and united for #equalopportunities, #equalfreedoms and as an info-point on the #premiership".[5]

Crucially for our analysis, the caption is closed with: "For a tangible and strong Italy even in Europe, we always stand next to our President @giorgiameloni". Hence, what should be strictly a party activity, as campaigning to provide information on the agenda of FdI, becomes an opportunity for party members to reiterate their support to Meloni. Support that is framed by the publisher as a key motivator for their campaigning activities. The significance of this stance is furthered by the nature of account sharing the post, belonging to the local committee of Fratelli d'Italia of Venetia. Hence, as much as the post promotes fan-like attitudes and behaviours, its publisher cannot be merely considered a fan with a parasocial relationship with Meloni just as any individual, ordinary user.

Figure 6. Example of a post showing antagonism towards the community of backers of the leader

This is the clearest example we found within this category of the blurriness of fan-like practices addressing communities at large. Its publisher, the EuropaViva fanpage, often posts content showing support for Renzi. The post contains a photo with a superimposed text with seemingly a quote from Renzi: “Europe must make a move. It is time to be daring, we are ready”. The publisher’s caption states: “If you support incompetence and inefficiency, avoid selecting Matteo Renzi and go for Meloni or a different leader instead”. Although Giorgia Meloni is not the main politician this post is referring to, this post articulates a confrontational stance towards her supporting base. Figure 6 shows that the support for a politician or their supporters can overlap with anti-fandom stances of hostility towards an adversary of the supported politician, and that such attitude can extend to refer to the community supporting that adversary. In other words, fandom and anti-fandom stances towards different political characters can mix and co-exist within the fan-like attitude of a single user.

Discussion and conclusion

From this analysis, it is evident that at least one of the three dimensions identified by Dean (2017) as constitutive of political fandoms can be traced in the analysed sample. Hence, each relevant post has a dominant theme referring to the personal, political, or communal aspects of political fandom. As we mentioned in our analysis of Figure 1, all three aspects can all be articulated within the same post and reinforce the fan-like aspect of one another when they are represented in conjunction.

A first key finding is that ordinary users are only circulating a fraction of the content showing the presence of a parasocial relationship addressing Meloni. Most importantly, the supportive fandom is largely produced and circulated by political actors, whereas ordinary users and other types of publishers prefer to publish fan-like content that express disapproval towards Meloni or her constituency. An example of this is provided with Figure 6, which is published by a local committee of the party Meloni leads. Hence, its production cannot be overlapped with that of an ordinary user, whose fan-like behaviour cannot be considered a somewhat ideological or electorally motivated effort as one could argue is the case for the represented subjects in Figure 6.

Nonetheless, they are clearly showing a fan-like attitude towards Meloni, using the party account to foster the visibility of their passion for and attachment to the leader. In other words, we argue that these posts contain and communicate the elements typical of fandom identified by Dean (2017), just as those published by ordinary users. For this reason, we decided not to exclude them from our analysis. Still, they do not originate from actors that are normally considered fans, as their support for Meloni may be driven more from their personal goals, and not from a disinterested, parasocial relationship they developed with the party leader themselves. Given the evident influence of fan-like content on these posts, and their centrality in the liminal space #giorgiameloni, we identified these posts as part of a genre, which we labelled "*fandomesque*". *Fandomesque* content resembles articulations of political fandom, whose spread is linked to the activities of political actors, individual and collective.

We deem it necessary to distinguish *fandomesque* posts from fan-like content published by ordinary users due to their potentially different epistemologies, potential attached goals, and impact on the digital infosphere. In other words, even if the messages channelled by *fandomesque* and fandom content may substantially overlap, the spread of *fandomesque* posts may not be underpinned by an affectively charged, parasocial relationship between the politician and the publisher. Rather, it may be underpinned by the personal political interests of the actors involved in the publication of these posts. Moreover, whatever the underlying reason for their publication, *fandomesque* posts may not be consumed by political fans in the same way as they consume ordinary fandom content.

Interestingly, most of the content addressing the community of Meloni's supporters comes from these actors. Arguably, this overwhelming presence of *fandomesque* content in support of Meloni suggests the presence of an effort to stimulate a supportive discourse revolving around Meloni in relevant digital spaces is developed for electoral purposes. Nonetheless, this argument cannot accurately weigh in the nuances of the phenomenon. In other words, just as political candidates and parties may pretend to be Meloni's fans to project a large grassroot support for the leader, it is also possible that fans got into politics due to their attachment to the leader.

Consequently, we do not argue that *fandomesque* content cannot be produced based on affective motives, but that it is impossible for spectators to distinguish between *fandomesque* posts published to gather consensus, and those that are a product of a genuine parasocial relationship between the account manager and the leader. Hence, the distinction between

fandom and *fandomesque* is necessary if we are to reach a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the existence and reproduction of political fandoms. The two posts shown in Figure 4 and Figure 6 are fit instances of *fandomesque* content showing potentially different motivations. Both posts were published by two of FdI's local committees.

Finally, to tackle our research questions directly, we can argue that the study of top-down managed communities can provide a partial insight into the reality of political fandoms, which is seemingly adapting to the fragmentation, refraction and liminality that increasingly characterises social media. By selecting thematic hashtags for our sample selection, instead of top-down managed, well known, and clearly defined fandom communities, we were able to observe fan-like patterns and practices that would have remained unexplored otherwise. Most importantly, the possibility of distinguishing the *fandomesque* from the fandom content. To the least, this outcome poses the question of whether we should consider the parasocial relations shown by individuals with personal investment in the electoral game to be automatically excluded from being (political) fans.

Wrapping up, this article proposes a novel approach to the study of political fandom and anti-fandom content published on social media. Specifically, we have integrated Dean's (2017) understanding of political fandoms within a sound, replicable methodology for the analysis of digital content relevant to the phenomenon. Crucially, tackling the topic empirically and measuring the frequency of political fandom content published online about Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, we observed that the binary distinction between fans and ordinary "consumers" may be detrimental to the analysis of phenomena relevant to constituents performing fan-like behaviours. In particular, we integrated Dean's theoretical perspective with the analytical lens of celebrity politics and the latest findings on the impact of social media affordances on user-generated content circulating on those same platforms. We set a call for future research to engage with the blurriness and nuance of current understandings of political fandoms, to put in tension current understandings of fan-like digital practices and verify the validity and scope of the *fandomesque* genre in other democratic regimes and for other Italian party leaders.

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Notes

[1] A clear example of an element lowering the modality of a photo is the use of aesthetic filters to alter the colours, brightness and contrast of an image.
[2] For privacy reasons, we blurred the faces of represented subjects that do not have a high-visibility status comparable to that of Meloni.
[3] To better understand the importance of Gazebos in Italian political activism, see: Favero & Zulianello, 2023; Pasquino, 2016.
[4] The faces of the represented human participants were blurred by the authors to protect their privacies.
[5] A reform of the political system proposed and strongly supported by Meloni.

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Between diaspora and Greater Israel: symbolic meanings of Netanyahu's Policy*

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The war that started with the massacre on 7 October 2023 and saw Israel fighting on many fronts, from Gaza to southern Lebanon has been a constant story in the news for over a year. Everything has been said, geopolitically and emotionally. If, however, we wanted to move on to the deep level of collective imaginaries, a factor that remains fundamental in every war and every type of conflict, a central question arises: what does Israel really propose? What does it intend to achieve in terms of symbolism and identity? What is really at stake seems to be the annexation of the West Bank and, therefore, the construction of Greater Israel. Looking at the question from the point of view of the sociology of imaginaries, it is perhaps possible to go deeper into the actions and reveal their symbolic and identity-based purpose. The construction of Greater Israel implies the annihilation of Jewish diasporic identity, that is, of the millennial Jewish constitutive structure. But is this really the case? Or is Greater Israel in danger of becoming another immense ghetto within the global diaspora?

Keywords: diaspora; imaginary; enclave; Palestine; Israel.

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Geopolitics and Imaginaries

Everything that can be said about the Gaza war has already been discussed. Political and geopolitical issues have been thoroughly analyzed: the strategies of Hamas and Hezbollah within their vision of regional hegemony, and Israel's approach, which oscillates between the need for security and the pursuit of territorial expansion. On the opposite side, driven by pure instinct and emotion, global outrage has accumulated from both factions - pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli. Even from the most superficial analysis of imagery, much has been asserted: it has been claimed that in this region of the Middle East, a state like Israel cannot afford to appear weak; that such a significant "violation" by the enemy, such as that of October 7, 2023, must necessarily be met with an even stronger response.

This is because, within a predominantly religious framework - which has now permeated even a state originally founded on secular Zionist principles - and in the context of a "holy war" with biblical connotations, any offense against the people of the Covenant is perceived as an offense against God. Consequently, it falls upon this people to respond as if it were God acting through them - not with the measured, all-too-human precept of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," but with the conviction that such a war must be waged in divine proportions, on an incomparably larger scale, as if reenacting a new Great Flood, a new Sodom, or a new Gomorrah.

However, if we shift our focus to the deeper level of collective imaginaries - a fundamental factor in any war or conflict - a central question arises: what is the true objective of Netanyahu's government in launching this offensive in response to the massacre of October 7, 2023? From a symbolic and identity-based perspective, what does it seek to achieve with the defeat of Hamas and subsequently Hezbollah, assuming such an outcome is attainable?

From a strictly theoretical and methodological standpoint, we argue that an approach rooted in the sociology of imaginaries can provide a different lens through which to interpret the phenomena unfolding before our eyes[1]. He events unfolding before our eyes each day, relentlessly narrated by the media, create clusters of stereotypes that ultimately obscure the underlying archetypes, as Marshall McLuhan observed (McLuhan 1970). This results in a form of synchronic compression, which can only be unraveled through a diachronic 'analysis'. Archetypes are revealed not through immediate observation but through the gradual process of cultural evolution, emerging and taking shape over time. It is these archetypes that form the foundation of collective imaginaries, just as imaginaries themselves generate the symbolic structures that sustain identities and, in turn, drive collective action.

A further consideration should be made in order to forestall certain recurring objections, in particular that the study of collective imaginaries risks being subjective, interpretive and based on personal impressions. This objection is vitiated by the unfounded idea that the study of imaginaries derives from a kind of 'poetic' and intuitive approach. In reality, such a study starts from a knowledge, which must naturally be deepened, of the metaphorical and narrative mechanisms that define and constitute a given culture or collective identity. The representations that derive from them, and their relationship with socio-political construction, are anything but random and respond to precise space-time coordinates. The analysis of imaginaries tends, therefore, towards a deep and basic knowledge of the way of thinking of

certain collective identities and has no need at all for empirical findings and evidence, which belong to other approaches and disciplinary fields. It can be said that empirical studies are in fact tactical and spur-of-the-moment detections, often already outdated a few months later. We could, for example, carry out empirical and quantitative surveys to understand how many Israeli settlers want the extermination of the Palestinians, but they would give us no answers about the deep-seated, symbolic or even pathological motivations for this desire. It would be like wanting to give, for example, the analysis of non-verbal behaviour a deep analysis value. Non-verbal analysis explains superficial attitudes (e.g. defence, or embarrassment) but not their motivations, it does not delve into the why. It is the same for empirical studies that give contingent but not deep explanations.In this sense, studies on the imaginary can do without empirical studies, but the latter cannot do without studies on the imaginary, which analyse and unveil the hidden, radical and identity layer of metaphor.

Infinite Diaspora

A few years ago, Robert Darnton (Darnton 1984) wrote that it is often in minor episodes and seemingly incomprehensible details that we find the key to understanding the “other” mentalities of the past. Let us, then, take a moment to go back to June 7, 1967 - to the moment when it all began. It is 9:45 a.m. in Jerusalem. Israeli Sherman tanks open fire toward the Lion’s Gate. Captain Zammush, Commander Motta Gur, and his paratroopers, race along the Via Dolorosa, under fire from Jordanian riflemen. Reaching the Temple Mount but unsure how to access the Western Wall below, they ask an elderly Arab man for directions. He points them to the correct path: they break down an old wrought-iron gate, descend a few steps, and finally find themselves in the narrow space between the Wall and the shacks of the Maghreb Quarter.

In an extraordinary photograph taken at that fateful moment, we see the first vanguard of the IDF filling this confined space (the houses visible in the image were later demolished to create the current esplanade). It is the details that prove most striking, revealing a kind of illumination unique to the photographic medium, as Walter Benjamin eloquently explained. Looking more closely, we see that while the Israeli soldiers’ faces express joy, they also reveal bewilderment, even a sense of being lost. This is the famous detail - or perhaps the fleeting glimpse - of which Darnton spoke.

It is likely that Abraham Yehoshua had this very episode in mind when he wrote one of the most powerful scenes in his masterpiece, *Mr. Mani*. In his novel, set in 1899, characters Ephraim and Linka Shapiro, along with Dr. Mani, travel to Jerusalem. Upon arriving at the Western Wall, Ephraim, like the soldiers in 1967, is overwhelmed by what he calls “the last station in history” - a place that strikes him with its simplicity and profound significance.

The shock of feeling as though one has reached the journey’s end provokes an inverted resurrection - not from the diaspora to Jerusalem, but from Jerusalem back to the diaspora; not from exile to the Promised Land, but from the Wall of Zion to the remote Polish village

where the character was born and from which he had once set out for the Holy City. Within the reassuring confines of that village, he had first heard this strange tale as a child:

> The Christians would rise from their graves where they lay, but we Jews would crawl through underground caves and emerge in the Land of Israel [...] which is exactly what I have done these days, but in the opposite direction - from there to here - crawling through caves and turning over in many graves - as if traveling not on the globe, but deep beneath its surface - with the coaches groaning and moving in such a way that they can no longer drive [...] as if traveling not on the globe but beneath its surface - with the carriages rumbling and the locomotive lamenting and the smoke and soot and the great showers of sparks at night - from one tunnel to another and from one remote station to another - each time the same flickering of gas lamps, and the same wave of darkness, and then the same total nothingness - and where one looked into the distance in the mist, our flour mills standing like titans - speaking of resurrection! I am happy, Father; because, for a little while we did not grieve [...] (Yehoshua 1993, 201)

It is this return to the diaspora that ultimately brings about the tragedy. Dr. Mani, who had pleaded with Ephraim to at least leave him his sister Linka, a fervent Zionist, takes his own life. For Yehoshua, the diaspora is the true problem. He perceives it as a neurosis - a perpetual oscillation between dispersion and centrality, a mechanism that deliberately prevents a definitive choice between religion and nation, between being Jewish and being Israeli. Yehoshua's solution is straightforward: Israel should become a normal state, where citizenship is determined by nationality rather than religion (Yehoshua 2004). And so, what could have left the Israeli soldiers so astonished, if not the unconscious, almost primordial realization that their oscillating journey had come to an end? Is their unease at the Western Wall - or Yehoshua's character fleeing hastily back to his shtetl in Poland - justified? What is at the heart of this reaction? Is it a fear of stability? A fear of maturity? A reluctance to leave behind the familiar shores of a neurosis that has shaped Jewish identity for nearly two thousand years? After all, Freud taught us that neuroses, despite their precarious and often distressing nature, provide a form of stability - ritualistic, even - offering a security far greater than the uncertainty of questioning and change.

What is most striking here is that, according to Yehoshua, this psychological mechanism is so deeply ingrained that it extends even to the spatial organization (Bachelard 1957; Castells 1996; Castells 1997; Lotman 1969; McLuhan 1964) of the Jewish state. He interprets the settlements and colonial outposts in the West Bank as a new form of diaspora. The settlers live within their fortified enclaves while simultaneously looking toward the center – Jerusalem - which, though only a few kilometers away, remains an object of perpetual longing. They oscillate continuously between the central identity of return and the isolation of the ghetto.

The fundamental difference between this structure and the traditional diasporic experience is that, in the past, the surrounding environment was not inherently hostile - at least during the day. Instead, it served as a space for commerce and cultural exchange, fostering a degree of integration. In contrast, this West Bank pseudo-diaspora perceives the surrounding territory as dangerous and impassable - a no-man's-land inhabited by hostile peoples, viewed with unyielding suspicion and confronted as such. Moreover, this new diaspora is not solely rooted in an imagined connection to a center. For 1,900 years, the Jewish diaspora lacked any tangible means of linking its scattered communities to its

foundational nucleus. As a result, the "mythologization" and "imagination" of the primordial identity reached its highest level of expression. When no direct connection exists, imaginative fantasy flourishes - just as the virtualization of identity intensifies. By contrast, today's "diasporas" - which, more accurately, should be termed migrations - such as those from Pakistan or North Africa, maintain direct communication with their homelands. This ongoing connection allows for minimal integration with host communities. Historically, Jews, however, were "forced" to engage deeply with these communities. Today, the situation has shifted. With modern communication technologies, the internet, social media, and, in the specific case of the West Bank, an intricate network of fortified roads linking settlements to Jerusalem, the ancient diasporic condition has been fundamentally transformed. It persists, but only as a rigidified mental framework - one that defines a closed, encircled community in an entirely different geopolitical landscape. In this context, the dream of a protective wall has become a tangible reality. The space surrounding the "ghetto", once full of opportunities (Zanini 1997), has instead turned into a nightmare - while simultaneously becoming a space to be "liberated" and "occupied," as West Bank settlers have been doing for over twenty years in their relentless expansion and systematic carving up of land for new outposts.

Maps and territory: between diaspora and the imperfect state

One constant protagonist in the representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the map. It is said that in 1995, when Yasser Arafat was presented with a map outlining the proposed Palestinian state - a fragmented entity resembling a collection of floating islets within Israeli territory - he reacted with indignation, exclaiming: "But these are just cantons! You expect me to accept cantons? Then you want to destroy me!"[2]. The map serves as a symbolic representation of territorial organization, offering a spatial abstraction of the land (Weizman 2007). However, it also marks the endpoint of a conceptual journey - one that envisions territorial presence not merely as physical occupation but as a symbolic assertion of identity and redefinition. Observing these maps, one can perhaps gain a clearer understanding of the history of the past 70 years.

Let us begin, then, with Map 1, which illustrates Zionist presence in Palestine prior to 1947, the year of the UN partition plan. The Zionist "settlers" were, in essence, modern diasporic Jews transplanted to the land of their ancestors. For the most part, they did not envision the creation of a state; rather, they reproduced an identity shaped by millennia of dispersion - one that, by day, enabled them to engage with the surrounding world, and by night, in a universe that had turned increasingly hostile, allowed them to mentally reunite with their spiritual center, the safety of Jerusalem. Amos Oz captures this sentiment beautifully in the following excerpt from *A Tale of Love and Darkness*:

> During my childhood, at the end of the British Mandate, all of Jerusalem was confined indoors [...]. At eight in the evening, the city shut itself in due to the curfew imposed by the British, and when there was no curfew, it voluntarily stayed inside [...]. The whole house, in short, was sealed every night and gradually sank like a submarine beneath the surface of winter. And indeed, right near us, the world suddenly ended: it was enough to turn left outside the courtyard, walk about two hundred meters to the end of Amos Street, then left again and after another three hundred meters, to the last house on Zephaniah Street, which was

> also the end of the road and the end of the city and the end of the world: from there on, only steep, empty rocky terrains in the thick darkness, cliffs, caves, barren heights, valleys, stone villages lashed by rain and darkness [...]. All around, we were surrounded [...] (Oz 2004)

Oz's submarine is nothing more than a metaphorical descent into the unconscious - a space that harbors the enduring longing for Jerusalem, the eternal ideal pursued for millennia. All around lies nothingness, darkness, and danger. Indeed, at that moment, historic Jerusalem - the Old City, with the Western Wall - remains but a dream, a virtual destination, something to be imagined rather than possessed. What is taking shape is a paradoxical reality: a *diaspora within the Promised Land*.

The two-state hypothesis emerges later: first with the UN partition proposal (Fig. 2), and then with the actual territorial reorganization following the 1948 war (Fig. 3) and the subsequent Palestinian dispersal. At this point, one might cynically argue that the framework is nearly set. Two distinct entities exist - though riddled with contradictions - alongside the millions of refugees who have fled to neighboring states and the continued political control exerted by Egypt over Gaza and Jordan over the West Bank.

Yet, the newly established Jewish state retains a paradoxical characteristic: while founded on Jewish religious and cultural identity, it remains orphaned from its symbolic core - East Jerusalem, the Old City, the "End of History" toward which Jewish aspirations have been directed for two millennia. Paradoxically, even a secular-Zionist state continues to define itself in relation to this unattained ideal, gravitating toward its symbolic center while never fully claiming it. In this sense, the modern Jewish state is born without a nucleus, still carrying within it the syndrome of diaspora.

The Six-Day War or 'Creation' Failed

The true turning point came later, with the 1967 war and Israel's conquest of Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and Sinai. At that moment, the state became unified, extending its control over the entire territory from the Jordan River to the sea (Fig. 4). The symbolic center had been reclaimed. And here we return to the bewilderment of the Israeli soldiers standing before the Wall. Is the diaspora over? Must a new model of identity now be constructed? The IDF vanguards might have believed their journey had reached its conclusion - but in reality, this was not the case. From the very beginning, the West Bank paradoxically became a new opportunity to continue the historical narrative, opening up yet another horizon, one that seemed to suggest that the journey was far from over.

Beyond its implications for international politics and internal governance - ranging from demographic challenges to territorial control, from economic considerations to geopolitical and strategic concerns[3] - the West Bank immediately takes on a deeper significance. It becomes a materialization of a mental space, a laboratory where identity solutions are tested, as if on a vast, unfolded map - a new frontier, in short.

Each of the proposed solutions for reorganizing this space serves as an answer to a fundamental question about Jewish identity. Thus, in the West Bank, beyond the material

tragedies unfolding before the world's eyes, we also witness a profound act of symbolic communication - a dialogue in which Israel negotiates with itself and, above all, with its own diasporic roots.

Let us now examine these proposed solutions.

1) The first is the extremist vision of Greater Israel, championed by Menachem Begin - initially a minister without portfolio in the government of national unity formed during the 1967 war, and later Prime Minister (1977–1983). Begin sought to incorporate all the newly conquered territories, aligning with a vision of an imagined community that could be traced back to vague "historical" borders (Bright 2000), oscillating between the eras of the First and Second Temples (Yehoshua 2004). This idea is also linked to geopolitical theology, particularly the concept of Greater Israel (Hashlemà Yisra'el), which, based on a literal reading of *Genesis 15:18*, envisions the land promised by God to the chosen people as stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates (Caracciolo 2024, 25). However, both territorial expansionist hypotheses remain unrealizable, given the presence of neighboring states. As a result, an alternative vision of Israel as a state confined between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River has increasingly taken shape.

2) The second idea, positioned at the opposite end of the spectrum, was proposed by Abba Eban, Israel's Foreign Minister (1966–1974). He advocated for the return of all occupied territories to Jordan, supporting a vision of a Small Israel - a modern but geographically reduced state, reverting to its pre-1967 borders.

3) A third hypothesis was formulated by Moshe Dayan, Israel's Defense Minister (1967–1974). As a military strategist, Dayan doubted the feasibility of maintaining full military control over the West Bank. He thus proposed the "four fists" strategy - establishing four military and civilian settlements strategically positioned from north to south in the West Bank: Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, and Hebron.

4) A fourth approach (Fig. 5) was put forward as early as 1969 by Yigal Allon, who briefly served as Prime Minister. He envisioned placing outposts and settlements just beyond the Green Line, forming a belt of settlements that would annex the Jordan Valley in the northeast and the Judean Desert in the southeast. This configuration would allow for Palestinian territorial continuity, but in practice, the Palestinian state would be encircled on three sides by Israel, making it highly controllable. Allon's idea later influenced Ehud Barak's plan (2000–2001) and, more drastically, Ariel Sharon's vision, first conceived in 1978 but implemented during his premiership (2003–2006). Sharon coupled Allon's concept with the separation wall, roughly following the pre-1967 border, to prepare for a strategic withdrawal of settlers behind it. This approach was continued under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (2006–2009), who proposed the complete withdrawal from the West Bank, except for the annexed territories beyond the Green Line, which would be compensated with land of equivalent size in southern Israel.

5) The fifth solution (Fig. 6) has, in practice, been progressively envisioned and implemented over the fifteen years of Netanyahu's government (starting in 2009, with some intervals). In this approach, the government has actively supported settlers, facilitating a policy of territorial appropriation in the West Bank.

This colonial vision seeks to establish a network of fortified strongholds within external territories, resembling modern ghettos - initially conceived as defensive enclaves but later evolving into strategic outposts, gradually transforming foreign lands into Israeli national space. These fortified outpost-colonies are seamlessly connected to the Israeli heartland through an intricate network of bypass roads, which crisscross the West Bank. These fenced-off roads disrupt the territorial continuity of the West Bank, effectively dividing and fragmenting Palestinian lands into isolated enclaves.

Small outpost settlements, often inhabited by ultra-Orthodox settlers, are in continuous expansion, pushing outward from central settlements. As many have noted, this process has turned the West Bank into a Middle Eastern equivalent of the Far West (Baquis 2005, 33-40). The colonial minorities of the 'capturing the hilltops' project are constantly moving in for illegal occupation, carrying out real raids. From the original settlement usually placed on a hill and fortified, they choose a nearby deserted hill. Suddenly they attack it, occupying and defending it with caravans set up in a circle, water supplies, a camp synagogue. The "capturing the hilltops" strategy has fueled a cycle of perpetual illegal expansion, characterized by strategic raids: settlers establish an initial fortified settlement on a hilltop, then target an adjacent unoccupied hill, which they suddenly seize, occupy, and defend - using encircling caravans, water supplies, and even temporary synagogues. The new outpost then holds its ground until a connecting road is built to link it with the original settlement. At that point, the annexation is complete, and the expansion process moves on to the next hilltop.

In essence, this strategy represents a gradual, stage-by-stage expansion, aimed at territorial conquest and the appropriation of Palestinian land. However, its true strategic objective is the consolidation of space in pursuit of the Greater Israel project. The network of elevated fortifications, interconnected by a labyrinth of Israeli roads, is guarded and defended primarily by settler patrols - with military intervention occurring only in exceptional cases. This approach introduces a new symbolic paradigm within Jewish historical imagination - one that has no clear precedent in the 2,000-year diasporic experience, nor in the modern history of the State of Israel. It can be seen as a reconfiguration of the frontier concept, adapted to the restricted geography of the Middle East - a regional reinterpretation of the frontier ideology that shaped the expansion of the United States. However, unlike the European model, where a frontier functions as a fixed border (limes) demarcating and resisting the separation between two states, this Middle Eastern frontier is envisioned as an ever-shifting space, one that does not seek to repel but rather to assimilate and expand - a space in perpetual transformation that, rather than imposing limits, actively invites incursion (Tarzia & Ilardi, 2015, 211-217).

According to Abraham Yehoshua, this repositioning in the West Bank represents nothing more than an almost unconscious and admittedly neurotic reproduction of the diaspora - a scattering in foreign territory that nevertheless remains symbolically and psychologically

oriented toward the center, Jerusalem (Yehoshua 2004, 58). This interpretation may hold some validity in the early stages of West Bank colonization. However, as settlement expansion has intensified - particularly under the Netanyahu government - the ultimate objective has become increasingly clear: the creation of a large Jewish state and the prevention of a neighboring Palestinian state.

Within such a state, the Palestinian entity would not possess a contiguous territorial structure, as envisioned in the Barak-Sharon-Holmer project. Instead, it would be fragmented into a network of isolated enclaves - effectively ghettos, sealed off from the outside world and tightly controlled. In this sense, the ideological objective is no longer a reiteration of the diaspora model, but rather the construction of a Jewish state firmly rooted in cultural and religious identity. More significantly, it represents an exorcistic reversal of the millennia-old diasporic condition - one in which the identity of exile is not abolished but rather displaced, reimposed onto the Palestinian population.

Assumptions about the future

To conclude. Attempting to outline possible future scenarios, despite the extraordinarily complex and ever-evolving nature of the situation, we can envision three potential trajectories.

1) The first scenario is the one rhetorically invoked by Western media narratives and endorsed by many governments, including the Biden administration (though not Trump's, of course) and the Vatican: the creation of two neighboring states. However, we believe that the last viable opportunity to implement this solution was Ehud Olmert's 2008 proposal. At present, this scenario appears practically impossible. There are approximately 700,000 settlers in the West Bank, and relocating them beyond the separation wall - behind the Green Line - would be politically and logistically feasible only at the risk of inciting a civil war within Israel.

2) The second scenario is the opposite hypothesis - the establishment of a single, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious state, incorporating both Jews and Palestinian Arabs as equal citizens with the same legal and political rights. Yet, this prospect also seems highly unlikely at the moment - unless there is a radical shift in Israeli public opinion, which would, in turn, drive future governments toward a different political course. It is worth noting, however, that this idea is not entirely foreign to Israel's historical foundations. Early Zionist thought, for instance, envisioned a network of interwoven territorial spaces, fostering a relationship of coexistence with Palestinian territorial enclaves. In many respects, the original 1947 UN partition plan (Fig. 2) was conceptually aligned with this vision - although structured in macro-regional divisions rather than the decentralized constellation originally imagined.

3) Finally, the third hypothesis - the one we have sought to describe throughout these pages: the creation of an expanded Jewish state, incorporating a series of Palestinian enclaves,

fragmented into a constellation-like arrangement, with Gaza as the most significant and geopolitically relevant enclave. This weakening of Palestinian territorial cohesion would also be pursued through a policy of demographic depletion.

According to Israeli military strategists and the ultra-Orthodox right-wing factions that dominate much of the government, the targeted actions in Gaza and the West Bank should lead to the forced expatriation of as many Palestinians as possible to Egypt and Jordan. The plan envisions Israel financing well-equipped refugee camps in these neighboring countries and persuading their governments to accept Palestinian displacement through substantial economic incentives (Caracciolo 2024, 12-16)[4]. The plausibility of this scenario is already evident in the first statements of newly elected U.S. President Donald Trump, who has openly entertained the possibility of such population transfers.

In essence, the military elimination of Hamas and its expulsion from Gaza would serve a primarily tactical purpose within this broader strategy. Gaza, rather than being an independent entity, is expected to become a secure enclave within Israeli territory, much like the Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank. The strategic objective is clear: to abandon both the path leading to two contiguous states and the alternative of a single, multi-ethnic, and multicultural state with equal citizenship rights for Jews and Palestinians. Instead, the vision is the establishment of a singular Jewish state, incorporating tightly controlled Palestinian enclaves, a modern reconfiguration of Eretz Yisrael.

In this framework, the separation wall along the Green Line would transition from being a front-line defense to a secondary barrier, and over time, it could even be dismantled to facilitate greater Israeli territorial continuity. Meanwhile, smaller walls would be constructed to systematically confine and “internalize” Palestinian settlements within Israel’s territorial domain.

This vision represents not a return to the original Zionist conception of the Jewish state, but rather its distortion - a reinterpretation shaped by Netanyahu’s policies (i.e., the faction of the Israeli government that still nominally identifies as secular). The Orthodox perspective, in contrast, is even more extreme, deeply religious, and apocalyptic in its outlook.

However, even before Netanyahu, this ideological shift can be traced back to Menachem Begin and, ultimately, to the right-wing Zionism of Ze’ev Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky’s vision for Israel originally proposed the formation of a multi-ethnic but predominantly Jewish state, in which Jewish demographic and political dominance would be clearly maintained (Caracciolo 2024, 24-32). This fundamental principle remains at the core of Israeli governmental strategy, driven by the awareness that Palestinian population growth far outpaces Jewish demographic expansion.

Thus, the ghettoization of Palestinian enclaves is not an accidental consequence but a deliberate mechanism of demographic and territorial control, rooted in the aspiration to ensure Jewish numerical supremacy. What is entirely erased from this framework, however, is the principle of equal national identity among different ethnic groups - a notion that was once embedded in early Zionist thought but has now been largely abandoned.

A final issue that must be addressed is what we might call the counter-indications of this transformation. The new configuration of the Israeli state would, from a symbolic and identity-based perspective, carry an even deeper significance: the transition from a diasporic

identity to a national-state identity - a true anthropological reversal. The people of the diaspora would finally become a people like any other, within a state like any other.

This was Yehoshua's vision, but not in the form of a "container" state, where all Jews are absorbed into a single geopolitical entity. Instead, he imagined it through a two-state solution, where Jewish and Palestinian identities would remain distinct yet coexisting.

And here we return to the aforementioned counter-indications. To fully understand them, we must revisit the very concept of the diaspora and reorganize some of the ideas previously discussed.

One interpretation - Yehoshua's own - views the eternal oscillation between the shtetl and Jerusalem as a spatial manifestation of the perpetual oscillation between nationality and religion. This unresolved movement allows the Jewish people not to choose, to avoid the necessity of defining themselves solely by either national identity or religious identity. In short, it represents a neurotic diaspora - a condition that, while precarious, has endured for centuries.

A second perspective, introduced by Stefano Levi Della Torre, attributes the oscillatory process a completely opposite meaning. In this view, the diaspora is not a neurosis, but a vital and adaptive identity mechanism - one that has ensured Jewish survival for over two millennia (Levi Della Torre, 1995). The historical anchor of this mechanism has always been the ghetto - a space of forced enclosure, yet also of cultural and spiritual preservation. The closed ghetto at night allowed for an idealized reconnection with the spiritual center - Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the gates opening in the morning enabled economic and cultural engagement with the surrounding nations 'of belonging' (Zanini 1997). This, according to Levi Della Torre, constitutes a salvific and vital diaspora - one that balances tradition with integration.

However, there is also a third interpretation - one that we have already encountered, and which represents, in a sense, a degeneration of the latter. Here, the ghetto never opens - not even during the day. It ceases to engage with the external world, sealing itself off completely as a means of defending tradition. This is precisely the model evoked by Amos Oz's metaphors - the fortified house, the submerged submarine, the darkness beyond that is insidious and dangerous. Though Oz himself was an advocate for dialogue, his imagery points to a deep-seated historical imprint on the Jewish people, one that has re-emerged in the territorial reality of the 20th century: the idea that the diaspora must be defensive, vigilant, even suffocating - a state of self-exclusion and self-reflection.

It is this last vision that underpins the logic of the current territorial restructuring in the West Bank and Gaza. The settler expansion operates under two spatial conceptions: one that sees territory as a frontier to be conquered, and another that views it as a wilderness in which to implant fortified strongholds, impermeable to the outside world.

The final act of this process will be the complete inversion of spatial categories: the wilderness (Es) will be transformed into the internalized space (In), as the West Bank is annexed to Israel. In parallel, the network of Israeli settlements - once resembling scattered enclaves - will be consolidated into a unified whole, while the remaining Palestinian areas will be fragmented into a constellation of isolated ghettos, embedded within the redefined Israeli space of Judea and Samaria - what was once the West Bank.

If this is the case, then a deeply paradoxical consequence follows from this great symbolic reversal. What was envisioned - and indeed founded - as a new homeland, a safe refuge for Jews worldwide, risks becoming nothing more than an immense ghetto. This time, however, it is not enclosed by physical walls, but by the hostility of the surrounding world, where antisemitism continues to rise with each passing day (Foa 2024).

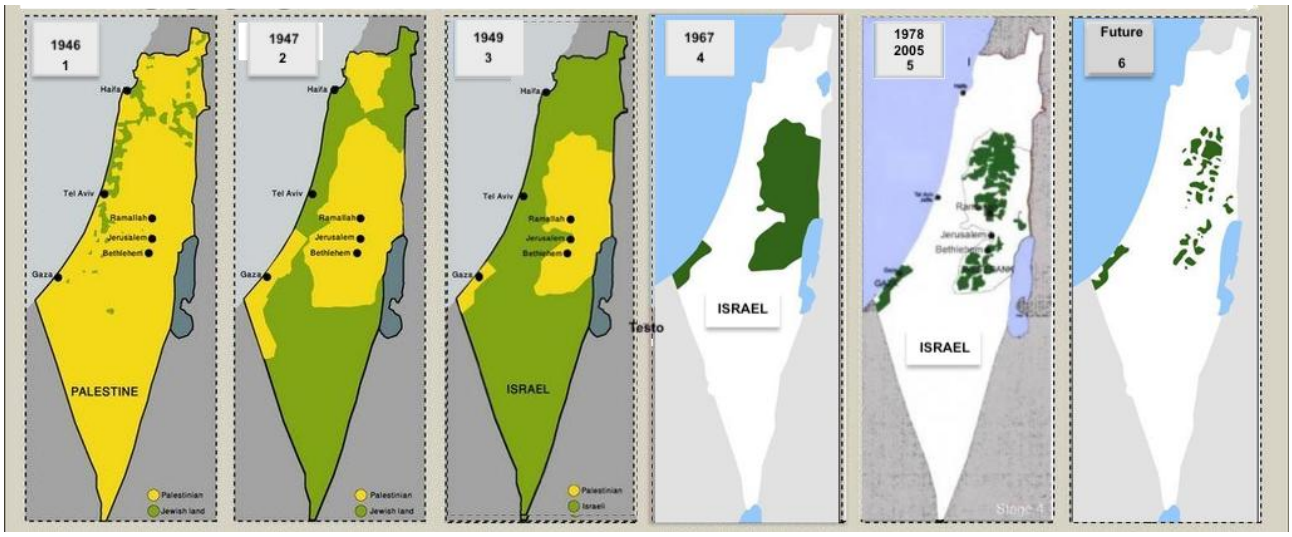

Fig. 1-6_ Territorial distribution between Palestine and Israel from 1946 to the present and future projections

Nota biografica

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Note

[1] For an in-depth study of this angle, we refer at least to the following texts: Morin, E. (1962). *L'esprit du temps 1. Nevrose*. Paris: Édition Grasset & Fasquelle; Durand, G. (1963). *Les structures anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; Abruzzese, A. (1973). *Forme estetiche e società di massa*. *Arte e pubblico nell'età del capitalismo.* Venezia: Marsilio; Debray, R. (1992). *Vie et mort de l'image*. Paris: Édition Gallimard.
[2] https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/shari-motro/2018/04/13/mappe-pace-israele-palestina
[3] Cfr. *Limes*, 10 (2023). *Guerra grande in Terrasanta*; *Limes*, 3 (2005). *La potenza di Israele; Limes*, 9 (2024). *La notte di Israele*.
[4] Cfr. Israel's "Generals" Plan explained: Controversial strategy to "starve" Gaza civilians until Hamas surrenders. *The Week*, 12/10/2024.