

Sports celebrities and retirement narratives: The case of Francesco Totti

Mario Tirino, Simona Castellano

DANS SOCIÉTÉS 2025/1 N° 167, PAGES 59 À 73
ÉDITIONS DE BOECK SUPÉRIEUR

ISSN 0765-3697

DOI 10.3917/soc.167.0059

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse

<https://shs.cairn.info/revue-societes-2025-1-page-59?lang=fr>



CAIRN · INFO

Découvrir le sommaire de ce numéro, suivre la revue par email, s'abonner...
Scannez ce QR Code pour accéder à la page de ce numéro sur Cairn.info.



Distribution électronique Cairn.info pour De Boeck Supérieur.

Vous avez l'autorisation de reproduire cet article dans les limites des conditions d'utilisation de Cairn.info ou, le cas échéant, des conditions générales de la licence souscrite par votre établissement. Détails et conditions sur cairn.info/copyright.

Sauf dispositions légales contraires, les usages numériques à des fins pédagogiques des présentes ressources sont soumises à l'autorisation de l'Éditeur ou, le cas échéant, de l'organisme de gestion collective habilité à cet effet. Il en est ainsi notamment en France avec le CFC qui est l'organisme agréé en la matière.

SPORTS CELEBRITIES AND RETIREMENT NARRATIVES: THE CASE OF FRANCESCO TOTTI

Mario TIRINO

Associate Professor, Department of Political and Social Studies, University of Salerno (Italy)

Simona CASTELLANO

Postdoctoral researcher, Department of Political and Social Studies, University of Salerno (Italy)

Abstract: Football celebrities are a category of social actors distinguished by their fame, media visibility, and outstanding athletic performance. When their sporting careers end, many footballers face a crisis that forces them to renegotiate their celebrity capital in other roles (manager, coach, etc.) or other professional contexts (business, politics, etc.). Analyzing mainstream narratives, self-narratives on social media, and fan-generated content allows us to explore, from multiple points of view, the critical dimension of career endings and post-career life. Through a mixed-methods approach, this article aims to study the traumatic end-of-career and post-career experiences of former AS Roma footballer Francesco Totti.

Keywords: sports celebrity, football celebrity, end of career, media narratives, sports imaginary

Résumé : Les célébrités du football sont un type d'acteurs sociaux qui se distinguent par leur notoriété, leur visibilité dans les médias et leurs excellentes performances sportives. À la fin de leur carrière sportive, de nombreux footballeurs traversent une crise qui les oblige à renégocier leur capital de célébrité dans d'autres rôles (manager, entraîneur, etc.) ou d'autres contextes professionnels (affaires, politique, etc.). L'analyse des récits dominants, des récits personnels sur les réseaux sociaux et des contenus générés par les fans nous permet d'explorer, sous différents points de vue, la dimension critique de la fin de carrière et de l'après-carrière. À travers une approche mixte, cet article vise à étudier la fin de carrière et l'après-carrière traumatisants de l'ancien footballeur de l'AS Roma, Francesco Totti.

Mots-clés : célébrité sportive, célébrité du football, fin de carrière, récits médiatiques, imaginaire sportif

Introduction: Football Celebrity and the Post-Career Crisis

An athlete is considered a celebrity when they are publicly recognised and honoured for their technical and personal qualities, both within and beyond the sporting sphere¹. This status increases their visibility and provides opportunities for recognition and material gain². The fame of a sports celebrity is inherently tied to their physical skills and abilities, which are developed through years of training and are perceived by the public as authentic achievements³. The phenomenon of sports celebrity is deeply intertwined with the mediatization of sport, a process that describes the pervasive influence of media on sports cultures⁴. Since the late 19th century, media narratives have shaped the public image of athletes, covering both their competitive achievements and their personal lives. The fourth phase of mediatization, characterised by the rise of digital platforms, has further complicated this relationship⁵. Social media, in particular, allows athletes to communicate directly with fans, bypassing traditional journalistic mediation and enabling them to manage their personal brand and secure sponsorships. Beyond its media dimension, sports celebrity must also be understood within the broader context of the social imaginary, which structures the symbolic frameworks of a society⁶. Sports celebrities act as a mirror of collective desires and values, serving as heroes who produce narratives of belonging and community that extend beyond the sports arena itself⁷. For example, a figure like Francesco Totti can be analysed within cultural frameworks that blend media influence, myth, and a sense of territorial identity.

1. This article is part of the research activities of the PRIN 2022 PNRR project “CELEBR-ETÀ—Ageing celebrity in contemporary media and sport contexts: a model of social and cultural well-being” (project code P2022XS937, CUP D53D23019930001), funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU. The authors conceived the entire paper together. Mario Tirino wrote the first, the third and the fourth sections; Simona Castellano wrote the second and the fifth sections. Both authors wrote the final conclusive section.

2. R. van Krieken, *Celebrity Society*, Routledge, London, 2012.

3. C. Rojek, *Celebrity*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001; B. Smart, *The Sport Star*, Sage, London, 2005.

4. K. Frandsen, *Sport and Mediatization*, Routledge, London, 2020.

5. Tirino, *La mediatizzazione dello sport. Attori sociali, processi culturali, forme mediali*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2025. On the concept of “waves of mediatization” see also N. Couldry, A. Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, Polity, Cambridge, 2017.

6. C. Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Seuil, Paris, 1975; G. Durand, *L'imaginaire*, Hatier, Paris, 1994.

7. L. Bifulco, M. Tirino, *The sports hero in the social imaginary*, in «Im@go», 11, 147–162, 2018.

Methodology

To explore the post-career crisis of a sports celebrity, this study employed a case study analysis of Francesco Totti⁸. This methodology enables an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon⁹, providing a specific example of a broader issue while also considering the unique social, cultural, and economic context¹⁰. Totti was selected for several reasons: his celebrity status is deeply intertwined with Italy's entertainment industry, his career-ending crisis was the subject of a docu-film (*Mi chiamo Francesco Totti*, 2020) and a TV series (*Speravo de morì prima*, 2021), and he maintains a significant digital presence with 5.5 million Instagram followers and numerous active fan pages.

This multi-layered analysis of Totti's post-career mediatization is guided by three research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: What are the prevailing media narratives surrounding a footballer's end-of-career?
- RQ2: How do former footballers use social media for self-narratives and self-representation in their post-career?
- RQ3: What are the main orientations of fandom for retired footballers?

To address these questions, a mixed-methods approach was utilised¹¹, combining different qualitative research techniques to analyse the heterogeneous material collected. For the audiovisual products (*Mi chiamo Francesco Totti* and *Speravo de morì prima*), we applied narrative analysis to study their narrative forms, focusing on content, structure, and audience¹². Additionally, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify the dominant themes and narrative cores within the moving sequences¹³.

For the analysis of social media content, media content analysis was used¹⁴ to identify structured content classes. This method was applied to two distinct corpora: Totti's official Instagram profile and a fan community on Facebook.

8. R.E. Stake, *Case Studies*, in Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S. (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, SAGE, London, 236-247, 1994.

9. R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, SAGE, London, 2014.

10. R.E. Stake, *Qualitative Case Studies*, in Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, SAGE, London, 443-466, 2005.

11. J. Schoonenboom, R.B. Johnson, *How to Construct a Mixed Methods Research Design*, in «Köln Z Soziol» 69(2), 107-131, 2017.

12. P. Mihas, *Qualitative research methods*, in R.J. Tierney, Rizvi F., Ercikan K. (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education*, Elsevier, Oxford, 302-313, 2023; C. K. Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, SAGE, London, 2008.

13. V. Braun, V. Clarke, *Using thematic analysis in psychology*, in «Qualitative Research in Psychology», 3(2), 77-101, 2006.

14. J. Macnamara, *Media content analysis*, in «Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal», 6(1), 1-34, 2005.

For Totti's self-narratives, his Instagram profile was chosen as it's his most active platform for self-promotion¹⁵. The corpus consists of 375 pieces of social content, including posts (309 images and videos) and stories (66 from March-June 2024, plus featured stories). The posts were collected from May 28, 2017, to May 15, 2024.

For the fan community analysis, the Facebook Page "Francesco Totti VIII Re di Roma" was selected based on its relevance, activity, and interactivity¹⁶. A corpus of 3,270 media content items was collected from May 28, 2017, to December 31, 2017, with additional data collected from May to June 2018 and 2019 to track changes. Of this corpus, 818 posts (including images and captions) were classified and analysed. The remaining 2,452 were deemed unclassifiable as they didn't specifically concern Totti. The analysis reached saturation, confirming that the collected corpus was sufficient for the study.

Totti's biography key points and the construction of his imaginary

The study of celebrity is inherently tied to life stories, as biography is a form that "celebritizes"¹⁷. This analysis of Francesco Totti's biography examines how media narratives have shaped the intersection of his sporting career and the national entertainment industry. The reconstruction draws from biographies¹⁸, autobiographies¹⁹, and audiovisual materials.

Totti's career began on March 28, 1993, at the age of 16. Under coach Zdenek Zeman, he evolved into a team leader, becoming Roma's captain in October 1998. His growing fame earned him national and international media attention. A pivotal moment occurred during the Euro 2000 semifinals when Totti, with his famous phrase "mo je faccio er cucchiaio," scored a penalty with an iconic chip shot. This technical gesture and his accompanying irreverence transformed his public image, adding symbolic elements of "authenticity" and "Romanness" to his athletic reputation. His celebrity was cemented when

15. S.P. Caldeira, S. De Ridder, S. Van Bauwel, *Exploring the Politics of Gender Representation on Instagram*, in «DiGeSt», 5(1), 23-42, 2018; A. Caliendo, J. Graham, *Studying Instagram Beyond Selfies*, in «Social Media + Society», 6(2), 2020, doi: 10.1177/2056305120924779.

16. R. Kozinets, *Netnography*, SAGE, London, 2019.

17. E. Saunders, *Biography and Celebrity Studies*, in Hemecker W., Saunders E. (eds.), *Biography in Theory*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Boston, 269-275, 2017.

18. F. Acitelli, *Francesco Totti*, Limina, Arezzo, 2002; Maida E., Strano F., *Il talento di Francesco*, Edilazio, Roma, 2011; L. Angelini, *Conosci Totti?*, Clichy, Firenze, 2017; F. Repice, F. Brizi, *Un anno senza Totti*, Iacobellieditore, Guidonia, 2018; A. Ruta, *Francesco Totti*, Diarkos, Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna, 2020.

19. F. Totti, D. Rossi, *"Mo je faccio er cucchiaio"*, Mondadori, Milano, 2006; F. Totti, *La mia vita, i miei gol*, Mondadori, Milano, 2007; F. Totti, P. Condò, *Un capitano*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018.

Roma won the Scudetto in 2001, expanding his media presence beyond sports pages to gossip magazines.

The intersection of Totti's career and celebrity continued to evolve. A second turning point came on March 10, 2002, when he revealed a t-shirt with the message "6 unica" to dedicate a goal to showgirl Ilary Blasi. Their relationship became a central media narrative, portrayed as a modern fairytale and solidifying the "footballer-showgirl" stereotype. Their wedding in 2005 was a televised "media ceremony"²⁰, and Totti's appearance at the Sanremo Festival in 2006 further blurred the lines between sport and entertainment.

In 2003, Totti's public image took a third turn when he published two joke books and appeared on a talk show hosted by Maurizio Costanzo²¹. This established a new, self-mocking persona that capitalised on his perceived cultural limitations while celebrating his genuine and exuberant character. Despite a traumatic injury in 2006 that threatened his participation in the World Cup, Totti recovered and helped Italy win the tournament. He went on to set numerous club records for Roma.

His final years at AS Roma marked a fourth turning point: the public spectacle of his end-of-career, fueled by his strained relationship with coach Luciano Spalletti. This conflict became a major topic across all media platforms, from news to talk shows, as public figures exploited his immense popularity. The fifth turning point was his emotional farewell speech on May 28, 2017, broadcast live on television. In this "media ceremony," he candidly expressed his fear of life after football.

The final major turning point was the highly mediatised separation from Ilary Blasi. Their relationship had been a media spectacle from its inception, and its end was equally public, fueled by exclusive interviews, books, and even a Netflix documentary from Blasi's perspective (*Unica*, 2023). Throughout his career, Totti's biographical trajectory was closely tied to a powerful territorial imaginary. His symbolic identification with Rome and AS Roma crystallised the emotional bond between the city and its football hero, a relationship defined by sacrifice and loyalty²². Fans see football as a "form of life"²³, turning heroes like Totti into mythical figures. The image of Totti as the "Eighth King of Rome" encapsulates this convergence of biography, media representation, fandom, and city narratives into a collective representation of "Romanness."

20. D. Dayan, E. Katz, *Media Events*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

21. F. Totti, *Tutte le barzellette su Totti (raccolte da me)*, Mondadori, Milano, 2003; F. Totti, *Le nuove barzellette su Totti (raccolte ancora da me)*, Mondadori, Milano, 2004.

22. M. Klugman, F. Ricatti, "Roma non dimentica i suoi figli", in «Modern Italy», 17(2), 237-249, 2012.

23. F. Ricatti, M. Klugman, *Football is life*, in «Continuum», 34(5), 790-805, 2020.

Mainstream audiovisual narratives

The symbolic qualities of star player Francesco Totti have been examined by Matthew Guschwan, who highlights his paradoxical status as both a global figure and a deeply Roman hero²⁴. Totti is seen as an “exotic” and ultimate “bandiera” of modern football, having spent his entire career at a single club²⁵. This unique loyalty is fundamental to understanding the emotional bond between the city of Rome and its football hero²⁶. While celebrity is widely studied, the crisis of sports celebrity, particularly at the end-of-career and post-career stages, is a less common topic in Media Studies. This analysis of the documentary *Mi chiamo Francesco Totti* and the TV series *Speravo de morì prima* provides insight into how this crisis is narrated at a mainstream level.

The documentary film *Mi chiamo Francesco Totti* narrates the champion's career. The narrative analysis of the film, directed by Alex Infascelli, enables us to identify several thematic cores (see Table 1), but two thematic cores are particularly relevant to his end-of-career narrative. On the one hand, the film reconstructs the mediatization of Totti's relationship with Ilary Blasi, which led to his cross-celebrification and integration into the Italian entertainment system through commercials and TV appearances. Their romance was portrayed as a public spectacle, transcending the typical “footballer-showgirl” stereotype. While the documentary covers Totti's entire mythical career, on the other hand the end-of-career storyline has a powerful impact. A key difference from the TV series is that the film focuses on the public significance of Totti's farewell as a major event for Rome, Italy, and world football.

The TV series *Speravo de morì prima*, based on Totti's autobiography, is a six-episode fictionalized account of his final years. The analysis identified five key thematic cores: “Post-Career Drama,” “Family,” “Conflict with Spalletti,” “Roman-ness/Cult,” and “Fall and Rise Biography” (see Table 2). Several sequences have been associated with each of these cores, but we will focus here primarily on the “Post-Career” category.

24. M. Guschwan, *Francesco Totti*, in «Soccer & Society», 24(5), 712-724, 2023.

25. L. Bifulco, M. Tirino, S. Castellano, *Celebrità calcistica e media*, in Lupo M., Emina A., Benati I. (eds.), *Visioni di gioco. Volume secondo*, il Mulino, Bologna, 237-251, 2022.

26. M. Klugman, F. Ricatti, “*Roma non dimentica i suoi figli*”.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of “Mi chiamo Francesco Totti” movie

CORES	SEQUENCES
BUILDING THE LEGEND	Predestination (beach scene, ‘duckie’ game, Lodigiani youth sector), debut (Primavera sequence), first goal (Foggia), 2001 Scudetto, Italian Cups, farewell to football.
SHYNESS/RETROPHY	First participation in a local TV programme.
FALL AND RISE BIOGRAPHY	Conflict with Bianchi, Scudetto Lazio 2000, temptation Real Madrid, injury 2006, moments of anger (kick at Balotelli in the C. Italia final, spit at Poulsen Poulsen in the C. Italia final. Italia final, spit at Poulsen, shove at Vito Scala).
CHAIN OF SPORTING TRADITIONS	Scudetto Roma 1982-1983, idol Beppe Giannini, Sensi’s purchase of the club, paternal relationship with Carlo Mazzone.
CONSTANT PRESENCE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS	Parents’ first trip abroad to follow their son (Italy vs England at Wembley).
RELATIONSHIP WITH ICONIC FIGURES	Cassano (‘symbiotic’ game actions), Vito Scala (Totti’s shadow in public and in private).
HISTORY WITH ILARY (CONSTANT MEDIA EXPOSURE)	Ilary ‘letterina’, ‘6 unica’ t-shirt, paparazzi and fans outside the circus, Sky exclusive wedding, etc.
END OF CAREER: BREAK-UP WITH SPALLETTI	Totti’s loneliness inside an Olimpico lit only by electronic flashes, images of the last match.

Table 2. Thematic analysis of *Speravo de mori prima* TV series

CORES	SEQUENCES
POST-CAREER DRAMA	Pre-game farewell outburst (1x06)
FAMILY ROLE	Angelo and Giancarlo’s advice (1x01), Ilary’s speech on the need to think about the future (1x01)
CONFLICT WITH SPALLETTI	Post Atalanta-Roma 3-3 outburst (1x03)
ROMANISATION/CULTURISATION	Doormat theft (1x01), night-time restaurant escape (1x02), car ride before Roma v Palermo (1x02)
FALL AND RISE BIOGRAPHY	Recovery after injury (2006) (1x03)

The series highlights Totti’s inability to envision a future outside of football, a struggle captured by his poignant line, “Now the lights go out, what do I do?” (Ep. 1x06). This internal conflict leads to psychological distress, even

depression. The series portrays his family as a refuge from this existential dread. His wife, Ilary, plays a crucial role, while his parents and close friends form a protective inner circle.

The conflict with coach Spalletti is another critical thematic core. It's depicted as a cold war punctuated by verbal clashes, stemming from Spalletti's difficulty in managing the "legend" and Totti's struggle to accept his reduced role on the team. The theme of "Roman-ness" also runs through the series, emphasising Totti's deep identification with the team and the city of Rome. This identification is mythologised through "miraculous" stories and a physical presence on the city's walls through murals. However, this obsessive public identification also restricts his private life. Finally, the series frames Totti's career as a classic "fall and rise biography"²⁷. His miraculous recovery from a 2006 injury attests to his resilience and heroic qualities. However, this struggle against adversity also highlights his resistance to ageing, which he views as a curse to be fought at all costs.

There are both similarities and differences between the two productions. The documentary is a first-person narrative, with Totti's voiceover shaping the dominant perspective. Both products cover similar events, but the documentary's focus on the end of his career is more limited, whereas it forms the central drama of the series. Consequently, the series provides more behind-the-scenes details, such as locker-room conflicts, that are only briefly mentioned in the film. The portrayal of Totti's final match also shows a convergence of storytelling styles. While the documentary begins with an exterior, public view of the stadium before moving to an intimate, behind-the-scenes shot, the series uses a dramatic substitution of actors to transition from a fictional character to the real Totti, ultimately using the same televised footage of the farewell speech. The series' authors claim the power of the imaginary, even creating a fictional moment where the ghost of former Roma president Franco Sensi offers Totti another contract, presenting a romantic triumph over the reality of ageing and retirement.

Self-Narratives and Fandom

Crisis and Post-Career Self-Narrative Processes on Instagram

A preliminary analysis of Francesco Totti's Instagram content shows a consistent narrative that mirrors his public persona, built on a blend of authenticity, sincerity, and (self-)irony²⁸. This strategic control over his image high-

27. L. Bifulco, M. Tirino, *The sports hero in the social imaginary*.

28. M. A. Polesana, *Influencer e social media*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2023; G. Franssen, *Sincerity and Authenticity in Celebrity Culture: Introduction*, in «Celebrity Studies», 10(3), 315-319, 2019.

lights a “rhetoric of authenticity” common in celebrity culture²⁹. The media content analysis on Totti’s profile allowed for the classification of content into several key categories: “Nostalgia”, “Activities and Post-Career”, “Family”, “Commercialisation”, “Self-Branding”, “Romanness, Romanism and Territorial Belonging” (see Table 3).

Table 3. Media content analysis of Francesco Totti’s official Instagram account

CLASS OF CONTENT	NUMBER OF CONTENT	% (ANALYSED CONTENT)
SELF-BRANDING	93	24.81
FAMILY	74	19.73
ACTIVITIES AND POST-CAREER	67	17.87
COMMERCIALISATION	56	14.93
ROMANITY, ROMANNESS AND TERRITORIAL BELONGING	44	11.73
NOSTALGIA	41	10.93
TOTAL CONTENT ANALYSED	375	/

“Nostalgia”: A significant portion of Totti’s post-retirement content is nostalgic, recalling his glorious past as a footballer. Posts often feature fellow players and reference iconic moments, such as Italy’s 2006 World Cup victory. This reliance on a successful past is consistent with how “aged” celebrities are often portrayed in mainstream media³⁰ and underscores his apparent difficulty in moving beyond his identity as a football player.

“Activities and Post-Career”: This content class reveals Totti’s post-career activities and his struggle to redefine his identity. He remains involved in football-related activities, such as charity matches and youth programs, but also explores new sports like padel, a common practice for retired athletes³¹. However, his future remains uncertain. Unlike many of his peers, he has not

29. R. Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, Routledge, London, 2004.
30. A. Jerslev, L.N. Petersen, *Introduction*, in «Celebrity Studies», 9(2), 157-165, 2018.
31. K. Douglas, D. Carless, *Abandoning the performance narrative*, in «Journal of Applied Sport Psychology», 21(2), 213-230, 2009; L. Jones, Z. Avner, J. Denison, *After the Dust Settles*, in «Frontiers in Sports and Active Living», 4, 901308, 2022, doi: 10.3389/fspor.2022.90130.

secured an official institutional role in the football world, and his attempts at management have not been successful. This difficulty in transitioning, a theme also present in audiovisual narratives about him, suggests he experienced his retirement as an abrupt event rather than a gradual process³².

“Family”: Totti’s family serves as a central pillar of his post-career narrative. Before his 2024 separation, his posts often featured his family, emphasising their support and stability during his retirement crisis.

Commercialisation: Totti’s entry into the market is evident through sponsored content. While this process began with the mediatization of his career³³, it intensified on social media after 2019, with collaborations with brands such as Volkswagen, Netflix, and Betsson. These partnerships showcase Totti as an endorser, whose persona aligns with the brands’ values, representing an attempt to convert his celebrity capital into commercial success. This also highlights the “paradox of authenticity” in contemporary celebrity culture, where commercial activities are carefully curated to appear genuine.

“Self-Branding”: Beyond direct commercialisation, Totti engages in self-branding by promoting his involvement in other media products, like his autobiography *Un Capitano* and the TV series *Speravo de mori prima*. He also leverages “vicarious celebrity status” by posting photos with other famous figures, such as actor Russell Crowe, to enhance his own media profile³⁴. This class of content portrays a positive, highly spectacularized routine, contrasting with the emotional turmoil of his retirement.

“Romanness, Romanism, and Territorial Belonging”: Totti’s strong connection to Rome and AS Roma is a core theme. His posts feature iconic city landmarks and express his enduring loyalty to the club and its fans. An image he published celebrating his “one-club man” status, a symbol of loyalty, reinforces the equation “Totti is Rome,” a concept further explored in fan narratives³⁵. His inability to detach from this identity underscores his powerful bond with the team and the city.

Fandom Narratives and Media Affectivity

Social media platforms act as affective environments that reconfigure football emotions and reshape fandom³⁶. Fans are not just consumers; they are active content producers who reinforce their sense of belonging through their

32. M. Torregrossa, M.B. Anglès, L. Valiente, J. Cruz, ‘Elite athletes’ image of retirement, in «Psychology of Sport and Exercise», 5(1), 35-43, 2004.

33. J. Horne, *Sport in Consumer Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2006; E. Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, Routledge, London, 2006.

34. V. Codeluppi, *Mi metto in vetrina*, Mimesis, Milano, 2015.

35. M. Guschwani, *Francesco Totti*.

36. M. Tirino, S. Castellano, *Football Re(me)mediation*, in «H-ermes», 16, 49-80, 2020.

online communities³⁷. The analysis of the Facebook fan page “Francesco Totti VIII Re di Roma” identified several content classes that both mirror and diverge from Totti’s self-narratives (see Table 4).

Table 4. Media content analysis of “Francesco Totti VIII Re di Roma” Facebook Page

CLASS OF CONTENT	NUMBER OF CONTENT	% (ANALYSED CONTENT)
MYTH AND LEGEND	224	27.3
ROME AND ROMANNESS	155	19.3
NOSTALGIA AND MEMORIES	143	17.4
ABOUT HIM	118	14.4
FUTURE	111	13.5
IRONY	67	8.1
TOTAL CONTENT ANALYSED	818	/
NON CLASSIFIED CONTENT	2452	/

“Nostalgia and Memories”: Similar to Totti, fans express nostalgia for his career, celebrating key plays and dedicating posts to #TottiDay. This sentiment is rooted in the belief that no one can replace the “essence” of Totti, a reflection on the changing nature of football where one-club players are increasingly rare.

“Myth and Legend”: According to his fans, Totti’s farewell cemented his status as a myth and legend, a figure of “uniqueness and extraordinariness”³⁸. They often connect him to other Giallorossi legends, creating an “emotional legacy”³⁹. He remains “the number 10,” a powerful symbol of their collective identity.

37. L. R. Berg, *The Sports Hero Meets Mediated Celebrityhood*, in L. A. Wenner (ed.), *MediaSport*, Routledge, London, 134-153, 1998; C. Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves*, Routledge, London, 2003; J. Williams, *Rethinking Sports Fandom*, in «Leisure Studies», 26(2), 127-146, 2007; M. Hills, *Peter Capaldi’s “enduring fandom” and the intersectionality of ageing male fan-celebrity*, in «Celebrity Studies», 9(2), 202-215, 2018.

38. L. Bifulco, M. Tirino, *The sports hero in the social imaginary*.

39. M. Klugman, F. Ricatti, “*Roma non dimentica i suoi figli*”.

“Rome and Romanness”: Fans use symbolism to equate Totti with the city of Rome, referring to him as the “eighth King of Rome” and comparing him to gladiators. This reinforces the idea that for Roma fans, football is deeply rooted in the local context, and Totti is the ultimate representation of “authentic Romanness.”

“Future”: Fans remain invested in Totti’s future, sharing news about his new projects and charitable work, showing their continued attachment to Totti “the footballer”.

“Irony”: Fan-generated content often employs irony, particularly in memes targeting rival teams such as Lazio or former coaches like Luciano Spalletti. This creative participation reflects the community’s engagement in shaping Totti’s public representation⁴⁰.

“About Him”: This content class features posts from other football players, athletes, and media figures who express respect and admiration for Totti. By reposting these positive messages, fans further consolidate his public image as a captain and a legend.

Conclusions

Francesco Totti’s Instagram self-narratives portrays a former footballer navigating a post-career crisis with apparent positivity. His public persona, built on naturalness and authenticity, struggles with the paradoxical nature of his celebrity. While his status is built on visibility, he finds it challenging to move around Rome unnoticed. This is a testament to his status as the “Eighth King of Rome”, a title that both honours and restricts him.

Totti attempts to rebuild his life by clinging to the core elements of his career and personal life, including his family. He aims to renegotiate his celebrity capital in sports and business, yet his future remains uncertain, particularly regarding a potential role at AS Roma, a path common for many sports celebrities. Fans, for their part, have followed these developments with intense loyalty, viewing anyone who “hindered” his career, such as coach Spalletti, in a negative light. Totti’s image as a myth and a legend remains untouchable, a source of collective pride and an embodiment of “Romanness” for his fans.

This suggests that the post-career crisis is not merely personal but also collective. The myth of Totti as the “Eighth King of Rome” is a shared symbolic construction that fuses urban history, sporting achievements, and popular devotion. While this imaginary offers recognition, it simultaneously “imprisons” the celebrity in a glorious past, complicating his search for new professional trajectories. This tension is further explored in the different media narratives.

40. H. Jenkins, M. Ito, D. Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, Polity, Cambridge, 2016.

The TV series, in contrast to the documentary and Totti's self-narratives, more explicitly portrays the psychological drama of his final season, highlighting his difficulties and the emotional strain on his family. All analysed media products, however, ultimately present the image of a celebrity in need of reinvention amidst difficulties, opportunities, and desires. The mythopoetic narrative of Totti's suffering, a feature of both the documentary and the series, reinforces the champion's disorientation upon his retirement. The constant recirculation of his exploits in digital media, a process of celebrification and celebritization⁴¹, further traps him in his past.

This situation appears to be confirmed by a recent statement from Totti himself, who, at 48, hinted at a potential return to professional football⁴². This seemingly paradoxical statement underscores the profound difficulty for the former footballer to find a new path and to truly detach from his identity as a player. The enduring myth and the weight of the "imaginary" continue to make reinventing himself in new contexts a complex challenge.

References

- Acitelli F., *Francesco Totti*, Limina, Arezzo, 2002.
- Angelini L., *Conosci Totti?*, Clichy, Firenze, 2017.
- Berg L. R., *The Sports Hero Meets Mediated Celebrityhood*, in Wenner L.A. (ed.), *MediaSport*, Routledge, London, 134-153, 1998.
- Bifulco L., Tirino M., *The sports hero in the social imaginary*, in «Im@go», 147-162, 2018.
- Bifulco L., Tirino M., Castellano S., *Celebrità calcistica e media*, in Lupo M., Emina A., Benati I. (eds.), *Visioni di gioco. Volume secondo*, ilMulino, Bologna, 237-251, 2022.
- Braun V., Clarke V., *Using thematic analysis in psychology*, in «Qualitative Research in Psychology», 3(2), 77-101.
- Caldeira S.P., De Ridder S., Van Bauwel S., *Exploring the Politics of Gender Representation on Instagram*, in «DiGeSt», 5(1), 23-42, 2018.
- Caliandro A., Graham J., *Studying Instagram Beyond Selfies*, in «Social Media + Society», 6(2), 2020, doi:10.1177/2056305120924779.
- Cashmore E., *Celebrity/Culture*, Routledge, London, 2006.
- Castoriadis C., *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Seuil, Paris, 1975.
- Coakley J.J., *Leaving Competitive Sport*, in «Quest», 35, 1-11, 1983.
- Codeluppi V., *Mi metto in vetrina*, Mimesis, Milano, 2015.
- Couldry N., Hepp A., *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, Polity, Cambridge, 2016.
- Dayan D., Katz E., *Media Events*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1992.
- Douglas K., Carless D., *Abandoning the performance narrative*, in «Journal of Applied Sport Psychology», 21(2), 213-230, 2009.

41. C. Rojek, *Celebrity*; O. Driessens, *Celebrity capital*.

42. A. Romano, *Francesco Totti e il ritorno al calcio: «Lo vuole il Como»*, in «Open», 28.10.2024, <https://www.open.online/2024/10/28/francesco-totti-ritorno-calcio-como/> [last accessed 15.11.2024].

- Driessens O., *Celebrity capital*, in «Theory and Society», 42(5), 543-560, 2013.
- Durand G., *L'imaginaire*, Hatier, Paris, 1994.
- Dyer R., *Heavenly Bodies*, Routledge, London, 2004.
- Frandsen K., *Sport and Mediatization*, Routledge, London, 2020.
- Franssen G., *Sincerity and Authenticity in Celebrity Culture: Introduction*, in «Celebrity Studies», 10(3), 315-319, 2019.
- Guschwan M., *Francesco Totti*, in «Soccer & Society», 24(5), 712-724, 2023.
- Hlasová H., Ronkainen N.J., *A dialogical self approach to understanding identity as negotiated in retirement from elite sport*, in «Current Issues in Sport Science», 8(2), 075, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.36950/2023.2ciss075>.
- Hills M., *Peter Capaldi's "enduring fandom" and the intersectionality of ageing male fan-celebrity*, in «Celebrity Studies», 9(2), 202-215, 2018.
- Horne J., *Sport in Consumer Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2006.
- Jenkins H., Ito M., boyd d., *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, Polity, Cambridge, 2016.
- Jerslev A., Petersen L.N., *Introduction*, in «Celebrity Studies», 9(2), 157-165, 2018.
- Jones L., Avner Z., Denison J., *After the Dust Settles in «Frontiers in Sports and Active Living»*, 4, 901308, 2022, doi:10.3389/fspor.2022.901308.
- Klugman M., Ricatti F., «*Roma non dimentica i suoi figli*», in «Modern Italy», 17(2), 237-249, 2012.
- Kozinets R., *Netnography*, SAGE, London, 2019.
- Macnamara J., *Media content analysis*, in «Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal», 6(1), 1-34, 2005.
- Maida E., Strano F., *Il talento di Francesco*, Edilazio, Roma, 2011.
- Mihás P., *Qualitative research methods*, in Tierney R.J., Rizvi F., Ercikan K. (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education*, Elsevier, Oxford, 302-313, 2023.
- Polesana M.A., *Influencer e social media*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2023.
- Repice F., Brizi F., *Un anno senza Totti*, Iacobellieditore, Guidonia, 2018.
- Ricatti F., Klugman M., *Football is life*, in «Continuum», 34(5), 790-805, 2020.
- Riessman C.K., *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, SAGE, London, 2008.
- Rojek C., *Celebrity*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001.
- Romano A., *Francesco Totti e il ritorno al calcio: «Lo vuole il Como»*, in «Open», 28.10.2024, <https://www.open.online/2024/10/28/francesco-totti-ritorno-calcio-como/> [last accessed 15.11.2024], 2024.
- Ruta A., *Francesco Totti*, Diarkos, Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna, 2020.
- Saunders E., *Biography and Celebrity Studies*, in Hemecker W., Saunders E. (eds.), *Biography in Theory*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Boston, 269-275, 2017.
- Schoonenboom J., Johnson R.B., *How to Construct a Mixed Methods Research Design*, in «Köln Z Soziol» 69(2), 107-131, 2017.
- Sandvoss C., *A Game of Two Halves*, Routledge, London, 2003.
- Smart B., *The Sport Star*, SAGE, London, 2005.
- Stake R.E., *Case Studies*, in Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S. (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, SAGE, London, 236-247, 1994.
- Stake R.E., *Qualitative Case Studies*, in Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, SAGE, London, 443-466, 2005.

- Tirino M., *Mediatization and Platformization of Cycling Cultures*, in «Eracle», 5(1), 5-32, 2022.
- Tirino M., Castellano S., *Football Re(me)mediation*, in «H-ermes», 16, 49-80, 2020.
- Tirino M., *La mediatizzazione dello sport. Attori sociali, processi culturali, forme medi-ali*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2025.
- Torregrossa M., Anglès M.B., Valiente L., Cruz J., 'Elite athletes' image of retirement, in «Psychology of Sport and Exercise», 5(1), 35-43, 2004.
- Totti F., *Tutte le barzellette su Totti (raccolte da me)*, Mondadori, Milano, 2003.
- Totti F., *Le nuove barzellette su Totti (raccolte ancora da me)*, Mondadori, Milano, 2004.
- Totti F., *La mia vita, i miei gol*, Mondadori, Milano, 2007.
- Totti F., Condò P., *Un capitano*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018.
- Totti F., Rossi D., "Mo je faccio er cucchiaio", Mondadori, Milano, 2006.
- Turner G., *Approaching Celebrity Studies*, in «Celebrity Studies», 1(1), 11-20, 2010.
- van Krieken R., *Celebrity Society*, Routledge, London, 2012.
- Voorheis P., Silver M., Consonni J., *Adaptation to life after sport for retired athletes*, in «PLoS ONE», 18(9), e0291683, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0291683>.
- Williams J., *Rethinking Sports Fandom*, in «Leisure Studies», 26(2), 127-146, 2007.
- Yin R.K., *Case study research design and methods*, SAGE, London, 2014.