

The Sweetest Goal. Old celebrities, collective memory and nostalgia of the 90s and 2000s Italian football in the Facebook community “Serie A – Operazione Nostalgia”¹



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Abstract

The sports imaginary plays an increasingly central role in society, shaping values, symbols, and public narratives (Jarvie, 2006). In Italy, football has deeply influenced the collective imagination, producing a rich tapestry of heroes, legends, and memorable matches that resonate across generations (Rubio, 2018). This emotionally charged imaginary is amplified by the ritualized nature of sports events, especially in their mediatized forms (Bifulco & Tirino, 2018). Processes like mediatization (Frandsen, 2020), commercialization, and globalization have transformed football's cultural meanings, sparking nostalgia for a perceived golden age (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2013) — particularly Italy's Serie A of the 1990s and 2000s. This paper examines football nostalgia within the Facebook community “Serie A – Operazione Nostalgia” using netnographic and content analysis. The study explores how nostalgia functions ambivalently: as a comforting, idealized narrative of the past (Boym, 2001), and as a dynamic force producing affective memory, performative engagement, and consumption practices shaped by platform capitalism (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018).

Keywords

Football Celebrities | Nostalgia | Collective Memory | Sports Mediatization

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1. Introduction. Imaginary and affective nostalgia

According to Wunenburger (1991), the imaginary encompasses both a representational dimension, which is realized in symbolic systems, and an emotional dimension, connected to effects in everyday life. The relationship between social imaginary and affect has been examined by numerous studies, which – from different perspectives – have illuminated the cognitive, social, cultural and emotional processes through which collective affects are imagined, shared and processed in different historical and spatio-temporal contexts (Harris 2016, Lowry 2019).

The connection between social imaginary and nostalgia is more complex. First, the concept of nostalgia itself is problematic: although it carries with it a significant spatial element in its naming (home – *nostos*), nostalgia is essentially a temporal mode, that is, a way of dealing with time. As such, it refers primarily to the past; however, its deeper layers speak of the present and prepare the agent for the future (Horváth 2018). The concepts of the social imaginary and nostalgia, while seemingly disparate, are deeply intertwined. Both contribute to our understanding of how societies construct meaning, navigate change, and grapple with their relationship to the past. While nostalgia evokes a sentimental longing for a previous time, the social imaginary provides the framework through which that time is perceived, understood, and imbued with particular significance.

The social imaginary, as defined by Charles Taylor (2004), refers to the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, and the expectations that are normally met.

It is a shared understanding of the world, often pre-reflective and implicit, that shapes our actions and interpretations of reality. It provides the background against which individual experiences become meaningful and collective identities are formed.

This shared understanding isn't static; it evolves over time, reflecting societal changes, power dynamics, and the ongoing negotiation of collective identity.

Nostalgia, on the other hand, is a feeling of longing for a perceived better past. It's a complex emotion often triggered by personal experiences, but also influenced by cultural representations and collective memory. Svetlana Boym (2001) distinguishes between 'restorative nostalgia', which aims to rebuild the past exactly as it was perceived, and 'reflective nostalgia', which embraces the past's imperfections and acknowledges the impossibility of complete restoration. Crucially, nostalgia is rarely a simple, objective recollection of history. Instead, it's an affective filter that selectively emphasizes positive aspects of the past, often downplaying negative or complex realities.

The relationship between these two concepts becomes clear when we understand that the social imaginary provides the raw material for nostalgic sentiments.

Nostalgia relies on a pre-existing, culturally constructed understanding of the past, shaped by the social imaginary. For example, the "good old days" trope is a



common nostalgic motif that draws on a social imaginary often romanticizing family values, social cohesion, and traditional lifestyles. These idealized images are not necessarily historically accurate but reflect a collective desire for simpler times, often juxtaposed against perceived contemporary anxieties.

The sociology of nostalgia, within this framework, helps to identify how this social emotion is linked to the imaginary. Fred Davis (1979) moves beyond the simplistic view of nostalgia as a naive longing for a romanticized past, instead arguing that it is a complex and multifaceted sociocultural phenomenon with significant social functions. Davis emphasizes that nostalgia is a social construct shaped by cultural contexts and historical moments. It's a feeling often triggered by shared experiences, cultural symbols, and collective memories. He defines nostalgia as a "sentimentality of loss", where the object of longing (a past time, place, person, or experience) is understood to be irrevocably gone. This sense of loss is crucial to the experience of nostalgia. Davies identifies 'collective nostalgia' as a shared sense of longing for a past era or cultural moment, often expressed through popular culture, historical narratives, and commemorative rituals. Davis argues that the rise of modernity, with its rapid social change, technological advancements, and increasing individualism, has contributed to the prevalence of nostalgia. Modernity creates a sense of alienation and displacement, leading individuals to seek solace in the perceived stability and simplicity of the past.

Furthermore, nostalgia itself can actively shape and reshape the social imaginary.

As societies engage in nostalgic discourse, they selectively remember and celebrate specific aspects of the past, reinforcing certain values, beliefs, and social hierarchies within the collective consciousness. This can be particularly powerful in times of rapid social change, political upheaval, or economic instability. Nostalgia can offer a sense of continuity, stability, and collective identity in the face of uncertainty, acting as a psychological buffer against the anxieties of the present. For instance, populist movements often utilize nostalgia for a mythic past to mobilize support, promising a return to traditional values and a perceived golden age.

However, when nostalgia is used to idealize a particular historical period, it can erase the experiences of marginalized groups who were excluded from the perceived benefits of that era. By reinforcing a selective and often sanitized version of history, nostalgia can contribute to the perpetuation of existing inequalities and the marginalization of dissenting voices. Therefore, critical analysis of nostalgia is crucial for understanding the dynamics of the social imaginary.

The social imaginary and nostalgia are inextricably linked. The social imaginary provides the framework for understanding the past, while nostalgia leverages and reshapes that understanding through selective memory and affective investment.

By analyzing the interplay between these two concepts, we gain valuable insights into how societies construct their identities, navigate change, and negotiate their relationship with history.



2. Media and nostalgia

The sociological study of the relationship between social imaginary and nostalgia must necessarily contemplate the role of the media in shaping nostalgic sensibilities and their impact on collective identity formation. If we conceive of nostalgia as an affective or remodelling mode of remembering, that is, as an experience of a loss of something that seems permanently unattainable (Kappes & Menke 2024), the public role of media and popular culture narratives consists in the constant promotion of remembering, reimagining, re-creating moments of the past. The crucial question for Media Studies and Sociology of Media is thus: in what mediated forms do individuals and communities consume, document, and share nostalgia?

Ways of conceiving, imagining, and experiencing nostalgic affect also confront mediatization, understood as a meta-process (Krotz 2007) through which media “increasingly come to saturate society, culture, identities and everyday life” (Fornäs 1995: 1). Mediatization theory considers media as agents of transformation that reconfigure how social practices are organized and understood (Hjarvard 2008).

This meta-process acts at the macro-social level (shaping social values and attitudes), at the meso-social level (changing the structures and norms of organizations and institutions), and at the micro-social level (impacting the everyday life of individuals). Mediatization addresses long-term, structural changes in the relationships between media and society (Hepp 2012). Media saturate everyday experience in mediatized societies (Lundby 2009, 2014). Their role, therefore, is crucial in any experience of the past.

Already electric media, capable of operating recordings and reproductions, circulated the past making it more than ever a part of the present. The constant development of media technologies and devices enables the documentation and revisiting of the past in increasingly accessible, powerful, and connected ways (Hoskins 2018). These techno-media transformations culminate in the abundance of content available and at our fingertips through digital devices, increasing our engagement with what has been in the past.

An important contribution to understanding the effect of mediatization on nostalgic practices can be found in the distinction between ‘mediated nostalgia’ and ‘media nostalgia’, proposed by Kathryn Niemeyer (2014). Mediated nostalgia refers to situations in which media function as means for us to access past periods that evoke nostalgia. An example is a TV series such as *Stranger Things* that reproduces sounds, styles, aesthetics, ways of thinking and feeling from the 1980s. Media nostalgia concerns the nostalgia of the media themselves and may concern content (what is represented by or through the media), media artifacts (objects or media on which data are stored), and apparatuses (devices that enable reproduction of the stored content, if not immediately accessible). Nostalgic sentiment invests the material, aesthetic, narrative, representational, and functional qualities of media.

Kappes and Manke (2024) have tried to outline a possible research agenda on the relationship between media and nostalgia, which concerns also the functions and characteristics of digital media, with particular reference to their ability to modify and



shape the experience of nostalgia. It is specifically to this point that I will return shortly.

3. Football heroes, glorious past and media narratives

The nexus between sport and nostalgia is characterized by a complex interplay of memory, emotion, and cultural practices. Nostalgia serves as a powerful force in how individuals experience, remember, and engage with sports. Understanding this relationship provides valuable insights into the societal and personal significance of sports across time. However, to fully understand the sports/nostalgia nexus, it is important to emphasize the functions that the phenomena, actors and cultural-historical configurations of sports have played in relation to the social imaginary.

The systems of representation within the sports imaginary are constantly expanding within the broader social imaginary, fueled by the increasingly central role that sports symbols, values, and actors play in the public scene. This expansion is not merely quantitative; it is also qualitative, reflecting a deeper integration of sports narratives into the fabric of everyday life. As Grant Jarvie (2006) argues, sport functions as a powerful cultural institution that shapes identities, values, and social relations, thereby influencing the wider social imaginary. In Italian society, football has profoundly affected the imagination of millions of spectators. The narratives surrounding footballers' exploits and landmark matches have contributed to the formation of an imaginary landscape rich in heroes, legends, and epochal events, nourishing the collective memory of different generations of fans. This constructed mythology provides a shared cultural reference point, fostering a sense of collective identity and belonging (Anderson 1983). Rubio (2018) highlights the enduring power of these stories in shaping popular cultural identity through the lens of football.

This collective football imaginary possesses a strong emotional resonance, reinforced by the ritualized properties of the sports event, even in its mediated form (Bifulco & Tirino 2018). The cyclical nature of the sporting calendar, the predictable rhythms of match days, and the standardized formats of televised games contribute to a sense of stability and predictability in an otherwise fluid and uncertain world (Rothenbuhler 1998). These ritualistic elements amplify the emotional impact of football, transforming spectatorship into a deeply ingrained cultural practice.

However, the meta-process of mediatization, operating in synergy with other meta-processes such as commercialization and globalization, has profoundly transformed the shared values, symbols, and social meanings of contemporary football (Frandsen 2020). Mediatization, as described by Stig Hjarvard (2008), entails the increasing influence of media logic on social institutions, including sport, leading to a focus on entertainment value, spectacle, and marketability. These interconnected processes have fundamentally reshaped the cultural landscape of football, prioritizing financial gains and global reach over traditional values and local identities (Frandsen 2020).





The influx of foreign players, the increasing commercialization of clubs, and the global broadcasting of matches have altered the very essence of the game, disrupting long-held traditions and undermining local attachments (Giulianotti 1999).

The rejection of the commercialized and hypermediatized dimensions of modern football has nurtured the “Against Modern Football” movement, which has developed according to similar dynamics in various European countries (Perasovic *et al.* 2024).

This movement is a fan-driven protest against the commodification of football: it argues that football has shifted from being a working-class, community-rooted sport to a global entertainment business (Millward 2011); it supports traditional fan values, local clubs, and the preservation of football’s grassroots identity (Giulianotti 2002), as opposed to ‘inauthentic’ fans, such as tourists and corporate spectators, who lack emotional investment in the club; it criticizes the constantly rising prices to attend matches and, more generally, the gentrification process of stadiums, which excludes the working class (Brown *et al.* 2008); drawing inspiration from ultras and punk/DIY cultures and aesthetics, it uses visual icons (such as 90s-style graphics) as cultural resistance tools (Numerato 2015).

This transformation also has fuelled a widespread nostalgia for the ‘football of the past’, particularly among fans who lament the perceived loss of authenticity and community. Gammon and Ramshaw (2013) connect this nostalgic yearning to a broader societal trend of romanticizing the past in response to the uncertainties and anxieties of globalization. The longing for a simpler, more locally rooted form of football is often framed as a critique of the hyper-commercialized and globalized game of the present.

Nostalgia for the football of the past invests both the matches and memorable events, as well as the practices and ways of experiencing football, the objects (uniforms, pennants, banners, scarves, etc.), and the set of social relations triggered by passion (with family, friends, fans in one’s own community, opposing fans, etc.).

The main driver of this rich nostalgic experience are football celebrities.

Sports celebrity is an “achieved celebrity” (Rojek 2001) based on athletic skill and competitive success. It is heavily influenced by media representation. The media shapes the symbolic environment, constructing both the visibility and the myth surrounding athletes (Tirino 2019, 2022), fostering “parasocial relationships” (Horton & Wohl 1956) with fans, and contributing to the accumulation of “celebrity capital” (Driessens 2013). This capital, derived from media visibility, can be converted into economic, social, or cultural forms, impacting athletes’ careers and post-career opportunities. Social media has amplified athletes’ ability to shape their public image and manage “celebrity capital” (Bifulco & Tirino 2019, Bifulco 2023). These environments blur the lines between private and professional life, resulting in overlapping contexts that heighten the risk of inconsistencies and contradictions in the values projected by sports celebrities (Tirino 2024). In summary, the fame of sports celebrities is inextricably linked to mediatization.

4. “Serie A – Operazione Nostalgia”: old football celebrities, collective digital memory and commercialization of nostalgia

In summary, 1) social imaginary and nostalgia are closely connected; 2) sport is a powerful activator of the nostalgic experience, helping to convey socially constructed and shared norms, values, symbols and emotions; and 3) both the ways in which we experience nostalgia and our experience of sports phenomena and practices are highly mediatized. The objective of this paper is to examine how nostalgia for past sports is expressed through social media environments, with a focus on the forms and ways in which the mediatized experience of football nostalgia contributes to the reactivation of collective memory, yet within the logics of value extraction peculiar to the platform society.

4.1 Research questions

I have identified three essential research questions:

- 1) What is the role of old football celebrities in the process of mediatized nostalgia?
- 2) What are the functions of “mediatized” nostalgia for Italian football in the 1990s and 2000s, with respect to collective memory and the social imaginary?
- 3) How do social media and platforms logic favour forms of commercialization of nostalgia?

4.2 Methodology

To better understand the way nostalgic feelings toward protagonists, atmospheres, and events of 1990s and 2000s Italian football is expressed on social media, I chose to examine a dedicated online community. I employed a media content analysis approach, focusing on fan-generated content shared on social networks. Facebook was selected as the primary platform for this analysis due to its inherent characteristics. As Boccia Artieri *et al.* (2017) observe, Facebook’s structure facilitates the rapid creation, dissemination, and sharing of content like images, memes, and infographics, requiring minimal effort from users to publish on their walls. This makes Facebook an ideal environment for examining content exchange within affectively-driven communities. Drawing upon Maffesoli’s (1988) insights, these communities are held together by intense, passionate engagement in collective activities, such as their shared enthusiasm for a football club or/and player.

Furthermore, Facebook enables the observation of community member interactions, encompassing both textual exchanges and various forms of visual and multimedia content. Finally, I chose a Facebook community because that social network is populated by a significant percentage of users from the Millennials generation (U’ren 2014), for multiple reasons including the fact that the years in which the platform took hold globally (2005-2015) coincide with the adolescence (as a phase of the life cycle) of many among such users.



Following standard media content analysis procedures (Prasad 2008, Stempel 1989), I addressed several methodological considerations. These steps included selecting the units of analysis, developing a framework of interpretative categories, sampling relevant content, ensuring coding reliability, and conducting the content analysis itself. To pinpoint suitable online communities, I adhered to criteria of relevance, activity, interactivity, heterogeneity, and information richness (Kozinets 2010). Based on these principles, I identified the Facebook community “Serie A – Operazione Nostalgia” (henceforth “ON”).

4.3 History of the page

The Facebook page ON has become a notable entity within Italian football fandom, evolving from a simple online forum into a multifaceted movement that celebrates the history and heritage of Serie A. The inception of ON can be traced back to 2014, when Andrea Bini conceived the idea for a Facebook page dedicated to the glory days of Italian football. Recognizing a shared sentiment among fans who fondly remembered the Serie A of the 1990s and 2000s, Bini created a platform for enthusiasts to reminisce about their favorite cult football heroes from that era.

This initiative resonated deeply with a significant segment of the football community, particularly those who experienced the league during a period widely regarded as its zenith. The page quickly garnered a following of individuals who shared a passion for the iconic players, teams, and moments that defined Serie A in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The initial content strategy of ON focused on evoking a sense of nostalgia for Italian football, particularly highlighting the period between the late 1980s and middle 2000s. Early posts likely featured discussions and images of “cult heroes” – players who, while perhaps not always lifting major trophies, captured the hearts and minds of fans through their unique skills or personalities. This approach tapped into a deep well of affection for a time when Serie A was considered the best league in the world, attracting top talent and captivating audiences globally. The use of hashtags like “#machenesanno” fostered a sense of shared understanding among fans who remembered these players and moments, creating an exclusive space for nostalgic appreciation. The page likely showcased vintage kits, further appealing to the material culture associated with this cherished era of football. This focus on a specific timeframe, roughly from 1985 to 2006, suggests a deliberate targeting of fans who grew up during that period, maximizing the generational resonance of the content. Over time, the content strategy of ON broadened while maintaining its core focus on nostalgia. The page likely incorporated a wider range of content, including not just Serie A but also nostalgic elements from football in general. This expansion could have included iconic moments from international football or other leagues that resonated with the Italian fanbase of that era. The inclusion of elements like Pro Evolution Soccer on a first-generation PlayStation at events demonstrates an understanding of the multifaceted nature of nostalgia, extending beyond just the on-field action to include related cultural touchstones like video games. This multi-layered approach,



incorporating visual media, personal stories, material culture, and even gaming, created a richer and more engaging experience for fans. The continued emphasis on specific players and moments from the 1990s and 2000s suggests that this remained a central pillar of the content strategy, consistently evoking strong emotional responses from the community.

A significant development in the history of ON was its evolution from an online community to organizing large-scale physical events. Beginning in 2015, just a year after its inception, the movement held its first gathering in Milan's Piazza San Babila, attracting over 500 fans. This initial success demonstrated the strong real-world influence of the online community. The events continued to grow in scale, moving from public squares to stadiums. By 2018, ON hosted its first "legends game" at Parma's Stadio "Tardini". These events became a hallmark of the movement, featuring the participation of over 150 former Serie A stars throughout the years.

These gatherings often incorporated fan villages, offering various activities, food, and opportunities to purchase vintage merchandise. The return of iconic figures like Roberto Baggio to the pitch at these events often carried a significant emotional weight for attendees. The organization of these successful large-scale events demonstrates the strong real-world influence and organizational capacity of ON movement, extending its impact far beyond the digital realm.

The consistent organization of numerous successful large-scale events across Italy demonstrates the movement's enduring appeal and organizational capabilities.

Securing sponsorships from recognizable brands like eToro signifies the commercial recognition and influence that "Operazione Nostalgia" has attained.

Furthermore, its collaboration with official Serie A entities, evidenced by the inclusion of an ON match as part of the "Serie A Festival", underscores its integration into the mainstream Italian football culture. The tenth anniversary of the movement in 2024 marks a significant milestone, highlighting its longevity and sustained popularity. The journey from a simple Facebook page to a recognized brand with sponsorships and collaborations with official football bodies illustrates a remarkable level of success and influence within the Italian football culture.

4.4 Results

This community has, on 30 April 2025, around 1 million followers. My analysis focused on the period between 2 October 2024 and 30 April 2025. The analysis stopped when data saturation occurred, whereby the acquisition of new data no longer yielded any significant new information or themes relevant to the study.

The average weekly post frequency during this period (5.46). A corpus of 153 posts was then extracted and analyzed manually. To ensure reliability, two researchers collaboratively developed and refined a set of interpretative categories, employing a double-check procedure². The content was sorted according to two criteria: the subject of the nostalgic evocation (celebrities, other

² I would like to thank my colleague Michelle Grillo for her cooperation.



phenomena/characters from the 1990s and 2000s) and the prevailing target size (local, national).

According to these criteria, the posts were classified into four homogeneous categories: posts dedicated to celebrities with a predominantly national and international impact (26.80%, i.e. 41 posts); posts dedicated to celebrities with a predominantly local impact (27.45%, i.e. 42); engaging posts (often linked to logistical-organizational elements) (36.60%, i.e. 56); “pure” nostalgic posts (aimed at nostalgic re-evocation without any other purpose) (7.84%, i.e. 12).

Several types of content about football celebrities have likely resonated most strongly with the ON audience.

The first category includes celebrities of predominantly national and international prominence, whose nostalgic re-enactment engages fans and followers of any club, regardless of the teams in which these players played. The instances with the highest engagement capacity of the page's followers concern a post dedicated Hristo Stoichkov, Bulgarian striker of Parma (April 10, 10694 likes, 384 comments), the video announcement of the participation of Adriano, Brazilian striker of Parma, Inter and Roma (April 25, 10429 likes, 472 comments), the video announcement of the participation of Gabriel Omar Batistuta, striker of Fiorentina, Roma and Inter (April 29, 4515 likes, 399 comments). Posts featuring iconic players from the 1990s and 2000s, particularly those considered “cult heroes”, would likely generate significant engagement due to the personal and emotional connections fans have with these figures from their past.

Stoichkov's case confirms the supranational dimension of these stars: the Bulgarian footballer played only one season in Serie A (1995-96), with the Parma jersey, with disappointing results, while his memorable performances can almost all be located in his years at Barcelona (1990-95). However, comments on his participation in the Parma event (June 8, 2025) express the admiration of fans from many different teams, especially since Stoichkov's own arrival in Italy (1995) was accompanied by the legendary aura of the footballer. In many comments, Stoichkov's name is the activator of a reenactment involving first Parma players of the 1990s and then the best Serie A talents of those years.

Equally interesting is the case of Adriano. Accompanied by an emphatic description by the page's editors, described with the nickname “Emperor”, the post announcing the Brazilian striker's return to Italy, after several years in which he had to deal with many serious personal problems (such as alcoholism and some judicial cases) – preceded and followed by further dedicated content is experienced as a ‘poetic’ and ‘magical’ return, celebrated with nostalgic remembrance of his technical qualities (the powerful shot, for example) but also - in some comments - with expressions of regret for a talent that was not fully manifested due to extra-football problems. The nostalgic celebration of this star also crosses the boundaries between fans.

The very short video with which Batistuta confirms, after various clues and spoilers, his participation in one of the 2025 events, from its introduction attests to the star's national and global appeal. The striker shows up, in fact, wearing the



uniform of the Argentine national team (and not one of the Italian clubs he played for). The same dynamic previously noted for Stoickov and Adriano (the celebration by fans of many different teams) can be traced here as well, although – compared to the other two – Batistuta was a hero for at least two fanbases, Fiorentina and Roma (with whom he won a historic Scudetto).

This strategy is confirmed by the involvement, in various events, of such stars as Roberto Baggio and Francesco Totti, whose privileged place in the Italian sports imagination is cyclically reaffirmed by numerous posts from administrators and enthusiastic comments from followers.

“Then and now” comparisons of players and teams are also popular, visually highlighting the passage of time and evoking nostalgic feelings. Videos showcasing legendary goals, skills, or memorable match moments from the targeted era would undoubtedly capture the attention of fans, allowing them to relive cherished memories. Discussions sparking debates and shared recollections about specific games or seasons would foster interaction and strengthen the sense of community.

This category encompasses posts predominantly directed at nostalgically evoking the most beloved stars of the past to highlight the excellence and unattainability of the Serie A of the 1990s and 2000s compared to Italian football of the following decades. In these cases, page administrators seem to stimulate evocations that enhance the “restorative” function of nostalgia (Boym 2001): by celebrating an idealized past, such evocations strengthen community cohesion through the narrative of the 1990s and 2000s Serie A as the most competitive, talented, and fascinating league of the era.

The second category includes posts dedicated to football stars of predominantly local impact. This type of content enhances the connection between football history, collective memory and territorial identity. To fully understand this nexus, it is necessary to point out the marketing choices that underlie the choice of cities in which the gatherings are held. To this category of content (the third) I will return shortly. However, it is important now to specify that the geographical spread of these events across Italy, including locations like Novara, Salerno, Ferrara, and Cesena, indicates an effort to connect with fans nationwide and cater to regional nostalgia for specific clubs and players. On the one hand, this business strategy is based on the “football hunger” of spectators in whose cities no Serie A matches have been hosted for years, for various reasons. In this way, the chance for fans to see their heroes in person fostered a strong sense of community and allowed for direct interaction with legendary players. On the other hand, the “squares” chosen to host ON’s gatherings are often cities that have had a glorious past in the big leagues. This creates the basis for such gatherings to turn into genuine nostalgic ceremonies with the participation of the leading football stars of past glories.

The three cities chosen for the 2025 gatherings (Vicenza, Parma and Reggio Calabria) are a clear example of such a “football nostalgia marketing” policy.

“Lanerossi Vicenza,” better known as “Vicenza,” is a club with a rich sporting tradition, enriched by a Scudetto final (1910-11) and a second-place finish in Serie A



(1977-78) and the enrollment of football celebrities such as Paolo Rossi (hero of Italy's 1982 World Cup victory) and Roberto Baggio (both awarded the Ballon d'or).

The club experienced a golden period between 1995-96 and 2000-01: in particular, in 1996-97 Vicenza won the Coppa Italia and, in the following season, made it all the way to the semi-finals of the Cup Winners' Cup. However, the club has been absent from Serie A since 2000-01.

The 1990s is also the golden age of Parma. Promoted for the first time to Serie A at the end of the 1989-90 season, the club won three Italian Cups (1991-92, 1998-99, 2001-02), a Cup Winners' Cup (1992-93), a UEFA Super Cup (1993-94), and two UEFA Cups (1994-95, 1998-99). Thanks to the economic possibilities of owner Calisto Tanzi, the club hired numerous star players and contended for the Scudetto with the big Serie A teams, also counting on the tactical innovations of coaches such as Nevio Scala, Carlo Ancelotti, and Alberto Malesani. Tanzi's financial crisis ushered in a phase of great uncertainty for the club, which, after various vicissitudes, led the club to bankruptcy (2014-15 season) and Serie D, returning to Serie A in the 2018-19 season and, in subsequent seasons, oscillating between Serie A and Serie B, without ever returning to the glories of the Tanzi era.

The period from 1998-99 (the year of the first promotion to Serie A) and 2008-09 (the last season in Serie A), on the other hand, is the most glorious period in Reggina's history. In the following years, the club's affairs include bankruptcies, relegations, and court proceedings. Today the team plays in the fourth series (Serie D).

Returning to the second category, then, I can attest with three examples how, through the celebration of past stars, the nexus between football history, collective memory and territorial identity is configured. The first example is the post (Dec. 5, 2024, 1041 likes, 90 comments) announcing the participation in the Vicenza rally of former midfielder Mimmo Di Carlo, who, during his years in Vicenza (1990-99), went from Serie C to the Cup Winners' Cup semifinal against Chelsea (the photo chosen by the page administrators refers precisely to that match). Fan comments to the announcement recall the epic of Vicenza coached by coach Guidolin by identifying Di Carlo as the proletarian hero, who – although he only made his debut in Serie A at the age of 31 – expresses the resilience, tenacity and self-sacrifice of the Vicenza team – in contrast to the post (Oct. 10, 2024, 659 likes, 64 comments) dedicated to the announcement of the participation of Lamberto Zauli, whose class and talent fans recall through the memory of memorable plays and goals. nouncement of Alessandro Lucarelli's participation in the Parma rally (March 28, 2025, 2895 likes, 182 comments). Although Lucarelli's militancy in Parma (from 2008-09 to 2017-18) is in a period after the 1990s, his parable of a captain who decides to start again, together with the team, from Serie D – also recounted in the documentary *Il mestiere del capitano* (2022) – constitutes the emblem of the core content of "Operation Nostalgia". In many comments, fans celebrate Lucarelli's loyalty to Parma by pointing out that the values he expresses are those of "another football" – precisely the Serie A of the 1990s – somehow claiming an ideal connection between the footballer and his predecessors of Parma's golden era. The third example concerns a post



announcing Rolando Bianchi's participation in the Reggio Calabria rally (March 25, 2025, 2175 likes, 120 comments). Reggina fans' comments revolve around Bianchi's exploits, especially in the 2006-07 season, when the team, coached by Walter Mazzarri, performed an authentic sporting miracle, managing to achieve salvation in Serie A despite a 15-point penalty in the standings. The collective re-enactment of that feat nurtures identity pride and territorial belonging, reinvigorating a community cohesion cemented by football.

Content related to football stars of predominantly local interest, however, also engages the more general public. Such stories, in fact, often embodying the "David vs. Goliath" trope or the parable of the underdog (Vandello *et al.* 2016), refer back to that ideal of 'romantic football' placed in an idealized past, beloved and celebrated - precisely through nostalgic practices and re-enactments - by all fans.

Of a different kind are the modes of re-enactment activated by local and national/global football stars: nostalgia for the glorious past, in fact, can be collectively shared through the recall of technical feats or memorable matches, but also through mediatized experiences, such as the presence of celebrities in the Panini sticker exchange, as avatars in sports video games (particularly FIFA and PES), as fantasy football players. Moreover, content related to vintage football kits and memorabilia (such as jersey and gadgets) likely appeals to a sense of material nostalgia, where physical objects serve as powerful reminders of the past. This passion for the material culture of football is also expressed in those posts (and related comments) celebrating "historical" sponsors (this is the case of Pal Zileri for Vicenza) or iconic advertisements (such as the one for the football footwear brand "Valsport" that had striker Marco Simone as its testimonial).

Attachment to material objects, on the one hand, and the mediatized experience of football nostalgia, on the other, allow for the introduction of the third and fourth categories of content, respectively.

The third category is the most substantial of all. It includes all posts dedicated by page administrators to stimulate follower engagement. The focus of these posts is almost always placed on gatherings. To engage followers, the posts contain clues, spoilers, and anticipations about participants. Part of this content contains logistical-organizational information about the location of events, services offered, and how to purchase tickets. Taking advantage of the affordances of the Facebook platform, the page adopts a top-bottom communication style: however, the marketing operation of ON is always based on the search for complicity with fans, based on the common nostalgic passion for Italian football of the 1990s and 2000s. ON's engagement policies also include the marketing of worn shirts from the past, donated by Serie A football players during gatherings (Nov. 24, 303 likes, 27 comments).

This commercial choice was also challenged by some fans, who suggested creating a museum of Serie A instead of profiting from the nostalgic passion of the fans. The success of such engagement strategies can largely be attributed to the performative and euphorizing dimension of the rally. The reunions constitute true passionate and memorial performances, in which nostalgic desire is satisfied through participation in matches in which the past celebrities so beloved return to



play. ON's communication strategy makes excellent use of this euphorizing dimension of the gathering, transforming the anticipation of the reunion into a space where fans let memories of the past, declarations of love for their favorites, and utopian desires to rewind time flow.

Utopia is often present in the imagination of fans – for example, in fantasies in which they dream of two players from the same club, but from different eras, playing together (specifically, e.g., Stefan Schwoch and Lamberto Zauli in Vicenza or Marco Osio and Zola in Parma) or of seeing two talents who have never played together on the same team (e.g., Totti and Baggio).

Finally, the fourth category, although smaller in the number of posts (12), houses the content with the highest level of interaction. Such posts are dedicated to the evocation of “pure” remembrance, untethered from commercial operations. In most cases, the administrator challenges followers simply to comment, pointing to the first “nostalgic” football player that comes to their mind, sometimes specifying the origin (Brazil or Argentina, for example). However, the two posts with the most interactions involved memorializing figures strongly connected with the mediatization of football. These are the post dedicated to sports journalist Bruno Pizzul (March 5, 9429 likes, 310 comments, 794 reposts), celebrated by the community as the authentic “voice” of “romantic” football in the past, and the one dedicated to Idris and Suor Paola [Sister Paola], famous guests of the football talk show *Quelli che il calcio* (April 2, 3125 likes, 820 comments, 74 reposts). The same program is honored by the idea, submitted by the administrators to the followers, to create an amateur team with football stars of the past, which is proposed to be called “Athletic Van Goof,” exactly like the goliardic team created in the program conceived by Fabio Fazio (April 5, 2025, 505 likes, 288 comments).

4.5 Discussion

The analysis of the content posted by the page and its comments allows us to draw some interpretive lines of the ways in which the relationship between nostalgia, collective memory and social imaginary is delineated in reference to ON's media practices.

First, the symbolic function of past soccer sports celebrities within mediatized environments such as social communities should be highlighted. Based on the common passion for soccer in the 1990s and 2000s, page administrators develop forms of fanbase engagement around the crucial figures of past soccer stars. Posts, photos, videos, and other digital materials activate collective memory through idealized narratives of the past, which – exploiting the mechanism of “basking in reflected glory” (Cialdini *et al.* 1976) – solidify a solid emotional bond shared in the community. A decisive role in such dynamics is played by the intertwining of celebrity and aging. The passage of time, attested by the marks on the aged bodies of celebrities, inevitably prompts fans to reflect on their own aging, often citing – as a measure of the mutations that have occurred – the passage from different transitory stages of their existence. Emblematic turns out to be the comment of a Vicenza fan,





taken up by the same administrators (April 9, 219 likes), who recalls that the first time he went to the stadium he was only engaged, while he will return to the Vicenza rally with his grandchildren. Recovering Davis's (1979) fundamental categories, football celebrities foster mediatized nostalgic practices that can be traced back to both anchor (when nostalgia provides a sense of continuity and stability in the face of rapid change and uncertainty, grounding individuals in a familiar past); cleanser (when nostalgia can offer emotional comfort and reassurance, especially during times of stress, anxiety, or disruption); and bond (when nostalgia can foster social cohesion and strengthen group identity by creating shared memories and experiences, allowing people to connect with others who share a similar nostalgic orientation). Davis (1979) defines "brace" as that typical function of nostalgia when it can help individuals prepare for the future by reminding them of past successes and lessons learned. This function seems to us to be minority or absent: the enthusiastic and idealized celebration of the past Serie A allows us to classify these contents as forms of what Boym (2001) calls "restorative nostalgia."

Second, the multifarious practices of nostalgic evocation, centered essentially on the symbolic power of football stars, also exhibit a generational dimension. Football-themed generational memories mainly invest the Millennials generation (Berger 2017. Pomarico 2019) for some specific sociocultural reasons: the exposure to common cultural influences; the circumstance of having lived through one of the greatest periods of series A growth (1990-2009) in their teenage years; and the transition from analog to digital media cultures. Millennials' relationship with football nostalgia takes the form of 'mediated nostalgia' and 'media nostalgia' practices (Niemeyer 2014). In general, all content generated in the ON community can be considered as mediated nostalgia products, that is, capable of providing access to affective memories of the football past. However, the constant references to TV and radio broadcasts, video games, posters and other media materials confirm how football imagery is also experienced primarily in a mediatized form.

Within a mediascape saturated with images (La Rocca 2018) circulating virally through the affective circuits of digital media, media nostalgia concerns the digital reenactment of analog media that have chronicled past football, as well as environments, devices, and objects related to such media. The nostalgic memory of past football reinforces generational ties, performing a cohesive and connective function, similarly to other cultural experiences, for the broader social imaginary.

Third, football stars of prevalent local impact (such as Stefan Schwoch for Vicenza or David Di Michele for Reggina) reinforce the bond of identity belonging to the city and the territory, often also acting as activators of intergenerational transmission processes of "pieces" of collective memory. Such football celebrities of predominantly local significance, however, arouse a much broader interest related to the symbolic value of so-called "romantic soccer."

5. Conclusion

ON is one of the cultural spaces in which, by promoting the cult of football of the 1990s and 2000s in idealized form, the ideal of “romantic football” is constructed and disseminated. Such an ideal is cultivated in so many narratives, within blogs, communities, web heads, and so on, that celebrate heroes, coaches, fans, often through a concealed or explicit claim of difference from the commercialized and mediatized football of the present.

However, ON is also a concrete example of the constituent power of imagination and imaginary (Castoriadis 1975). The journey of the ON Facebook page exemplifies the power of nostalgia in fostering online communities and translating digital enthusiasm into real-world experiences. What began as a simple online forum for fans to reminisce about the “glorious time warp” of Serie A in the 1990s and early 2000s has evolved into a significant cultural phenomenon within Italian football fandom. By tapping into the strong emotional connections fans have with the past, ON has not only created a space for nostalgia but has also fostered a sense of shared identity and camaraderie among supporters.

Finally, the fact that operations such as ON occur within environments strongly shaped by the economic and symbolic logics of platforms (van Dijck *et al.* 2018) stimulates some observations on the relationship between mediatization, cultures of nostalgia, and the social imaginary. The pervasive dimension of mediatization involves as much the modes and practices of nostalgia (Niemeyer 2014) as it does the relationships and experiences fans have with sport (Sandvoss 2003, Nosal *et al.* 2024). The pervasive dimension of mediatization involves as much the modes and practices of nostalgia (Niemeyer 2014) as it does the relationships and experiences fans have with sport (Frandsen 2020). This explains the profound (but also productive) contradictions underlying the digital celebration of “football of the past”.

On the one hand, such “cults” of the soccer past are based on the rejection of the drifts of so-called “contemporary soccer,” narrated as a commercialized and mediatized derivation of the “authentic” sport of the 1990s and 2000s; on the other hand, the celebration of the past takes place in media environments which are based precisely on the pervasive mediatization of football stars – starting with the more or less direct management of social pages and profiles by old football celebrity (Bifulco *et al.* 2022, Tirino *et al.* 2022) –, on the commercialization of nostalgic sentiment (starting with the sale of user data for the marketing of gadgets and memorabilia from the past) and finally on the economic valorization of a global (rather than national or local) football market.

Finally, nostalgia for the past Serie A also shows some mechanisms of the utopian and performative dimensions of nostalgia. The reference is to the numerous contents in which both page administrators and, more importantly, fans formulate desires to “force” the course of history and ordinary temporality by imagining footballers from different eras or footballers from the same era, but from different teams, playing together. This performative dimension of nostalgia constitutes the real “connective tissue” between page administrators and followers, as it allows for



the exploration of the impossible desire to see retired players on the field again, in a kind of “magical” ritual of eternal return of the sports myth.

In conclusion, new ways of addressing and experiencing football nostalgia in social media and digital environments, albeit in the contradictory and complex forms

I have highlighted, reflect the contemporary processes by which individuals find new ways to make sense of an uncertain present by taking refuge in the idealized glories and successes of the past – in other words, by constructing social imaginaries within the fragmented, mediatized life of the present through the cohesive power of football nostalgia.



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