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## **Media Construction of Sport Celebrities as National Heroes**

### **Abstract**

Within the broader media-sport nexus framework, sport is known for providing not only engaging performances for the entertainment market, but also important symbolic capital in terms of national identity and public diplomacy. The present paper looks at how these dimensions overlap, focusing on the centrality of the media logic within the dynamics of the social field of sport and its corollary celebrization imagery. The aim of the paper is, thus, to identify the contextual aspects and the legitimation strategies mobilized through media discourses in the overlap of the star status and the national hero image of a sport actor. When and how does media crown an athlete with the national hero aura? What does this national hero status involve in terms of identity and identification mechanisms? Focusing on a corpus of 310 online articles and 12 Facebook highlights published by two main Romanian sport newspapers during the 2014 Roland Garros Tournament, the study discusses the media construction of the raising sport star, Simona Halep (i.e. first Romanian tennis player to enter Top 3 WTA), as national hero. The analysis examines not only the symbolic power of the sport performances as national identity resources and celebrity input, but also the engaging deliberative spaces that emerge along with the national hero frame and the hybrid form of civic celebrity practices involved in legitimizing it.

**Keywords:** sport celebrity, national hero, media discourse, celebrization, HalepMania.

### **Introduction**

Sport becoming one of the great passions of the 21st Century (Boyle & Haynes, 2009) can be related to both its symbolic richness, as well as to its pole-position in the celebrity market and within the broader celebrization process (Hepp, 2012; Turner, G. 2004). On the one hand, sport “offers a rich source of stories that can, in many ways, function as a direct mirror of national identity” (Hilvoorde, Elling, & Stokvis, 2010, p. 90), serving both the construction and the celebration of national identity (Alabarces, Tomlinson, & Young, 2001; Poulton, 2004). While fuelling the sense of national pride and ‘we-ness’ feeling, it has become a strategic

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public diplomacy tool (Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Manzenreiter, 2010; Park, 2017), providing one of the most powerful form of national performance (Edensor, 2002, p.78) on the global stage. On the other hand, sport has consolidated its constant presence on the public agenda by leveraging the general media-centric nature of today's societies and the ascending wave of the popular culture (Hermes, 2006; Stevenson, 2002, 2003; Turner, B., 2001, 2002). It, thus, answered the general quest for spectacularity and intense emotional experiences that people are craving for.

In this overcrowded and dynamic popular culture spectrum, sport continues to provide us with one of the most engaging and spectacular experience worldwide. Consistent with the new dynamics of the popular culture, which answers to both being widely embraced and highly engaging, there was an important increase in the social value attached to sport, as it “carries very strong images, has a mass international audience, and appeals to all classes” (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Nevertheless, the general evolution of the sport world has been strongly influenced by the media gaining centrality (Whannel, 1992, 2009) within this social field. The media-sport nexus came as an “expression of the commercialization of in its entertainment style, its emphasis on goals and spectacles and its construction of performers as celebrities” (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 4). By understanding the powerful “seduction imagery” (Soulage, 1998, p.134) imbedded in sport, media has contributed to both reflecting and re-defining the sport ethos, providing visibility not only to sport actors and events, but also to the sport imagery itself. It is, thus, no surprise that sport metaphors, actors and practices were easily integrated and recontextualized in so many areas, including education or politics (see Jansen, & Sabo, 1994; Segrave, 2000; Semino & Masci, 1996).

With contemporary popular culture being densely populated with images and narratives about celebrities and their lives (Beer & Burrows, 2013, p. 55), the new cultural visibility of sport and the fact that it works as a “natural source of prestige” (Allison & Monnington, 2005, p. 9) secured its presence under the spotlights. Moreover, once entering the media logic, sport was converted into one of the most resourceful fields to fuel the celebrity market (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Ogden & Rosen, 2010; Smart, 2005). In this overlapping process between producing the heroic (national) models and the commercial (celebrity) ones, “in popular discourse, the concepts of hero and star, celebrity and personality are often confused and any notional boundaries between them blurred” (Whannel, 2002, p. 40). Nevertheless, they all rely on sport becoming a “powerful vehicle for mediating meanings and feelings” (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p.1). But to what extent do these celebrity-related stories overlap, compete or overshadow the ones addressing the identitary power embedded in sport narratives? What role does media play in connecting or keeping these two dimensions apart?

The aim of this paper is to address the relation between the sport performance as celebrity input and sport performance as symbolic capital for the national identity discourses and practices. Thus, starting from the general premise of the media-centric nature of sport, the study addresses the dynamic relation between celebrity and national hero as social constructs. In doing so, it focuses on the legitimating strategies used by media in framing sport actors and their performances in terms of celebrities or in terms of national heroes rather than on the content of the two media frames. When and how does media mobilize these frames? To what extent do they overlap and what favours this process?

The study focuses on Simona Halep, the first Romanian tennis player to enter Top 3 WTA, thus triggering an entire *HalepMania* phenomenon in and outside her home-country. This case study is relevant not only for the celebrity logic and fandom practices, but also for the

national hero media framing and the corollary legitimation mechanisms. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Halep's rising sport star story is not the mere focus of the paper, but rather the context that allows for understanding when and how media links or switches between the star rhetoric and the national hero frame.

### **Celebrities and national heroes: from competing frames to converging frames**

The study is placed within a constructivist framework, where both the celebrity and the hero concepts are addressed as social constructs, object to constant social negotiation and (re)definition. On the one hand, the celebrity status of sport actors is mainly "constituted discursively, by the way in which the individual is represented" (Turner, Bonner, & Marshall, 2000, p. 11). On the other hand, alike celebrities, heroes are socially shaped, „as a continuous process of social construction rather than the performance of an individual courageous act or as a social condition that emphasizes narratives of heroism and sacrifice" (Scheipers, 2014, p. 5). This, in turn, moves the focus from understanding who the celebrities or heroes are towards how they are socially built and redefined.

If considering sport as one of the main fields to fuel the celebrity market has become as axiomatic as its symbolic value for the national identity discourses and practices, celebrity and national identity have been mainly approached as alternative logics in discussing the social significance of sport performances and spectatorship experiences. Nevertheless, we argue that there are some constitutive aspects for these frames that allow for a more integrative approach.

Both celebrity and national identity constructs are highly *emotionally* rooted. From joy, pride or excitement, to disappointment, shame or anger, sport is "primarily about shared experiences" (Hilvoorde, Elling & Stokvis, 2010) that bring people together as much as they divide them. People relate to both celebrities and national identity topics in terms of the feelings they arouse and the emotional engagement they trigger. This is strongly connected to the fact that both are activating significant identity and identification mechanisms. While the worship logic triggered by national heroes is linked with the "we-ness" feeling, the fan-community culture of celebrity plays an important role in terms of social cohesion and identity formation (e.g., Marshall, 2010; Sternheimer, 2011). Based on this aspirational and inspirational identification mechanisms, alike celebrities, who mould the cultures in terms of power relations, expectations, identity formation and self-presentation (Driessens, 2013), heroes themselves work as agents of social influence (Goethals & Allison, 2012, p. 222). They are as much relevant in defining oneself and revealing their values and preferences, as they are in terms of providing role-models people choose to relate to. In other words, besides its entertaining role, a sport celebrity is someone who captivates and inspires, someone people identify with and wish to be like. Similarly, sport national heroes speak about (self)defining values and beliefs, inspiring and fascinating masses that, to a very large extent, feel they can identify with them. Starting from this general framework, it can be argued that celebrity and national identity can work together in enhancing one another's power to attract and engage people.

Nevertheless, celebrities and national heroes also act as very *controversial* constructs. Unifying and dividing forces are both embedded in them, as they generate strong in-group and out-group identification processes. Thus, sport celebrities and national heroes are open

to a highly emotional and engaging public debate, generating waves of enthusiastic support and admiration, as well as contra-waves of criticism and rejection.

Another controversial layer is added by the media tabloidization and the high volatility of the *walk of fame – walk of shame* narratives, *hero to zero* stories that come to highlight the fact that, in the realm of sport heroism, stardom, and celebrity, we ended up to face “the truth of the scandal” (Rowe, 1997, cited in Wenner, 2013, p. 4). These resourceful fandom reactions and corollary public debates generated by and around celebrities and heroes are the ones that media is involved in, by means of both triggering and leveraging them to keep the public highly engaged.

Moreover, there is the debate around the mere celebrity and hero concepts, which have been subject to a continuous democratization and redefinition process. When it comes to the celebrity culture, the “demotic turn” (Turner, G., 2010) set the premises for the rise of micro-celebrities and empowered the ordinary people as potential celebrity prodigy. This brought along a shift from achieved celebrity to (media) attributed celebrity (Rojek, 2001), which intensified the discussions and criticism upon the devaluation of meritocracy in the celebrity culture (Cashmore, 2006; Marshall, 1997). It also came with a rather pejorative sense for the celebrity label and the rise *celetoids* (Rojek, 2001; Turner, G., 2006), referring to persons who are instantaneously in the spotlight, but unable to hold attention in the long run.

As for the hero rhetoric, it also shifted from an exclusive to a more inclusive approach (Frisk, 2018), going beyond the debate over personological versus situational factors and looking more closely to the “banality of heroism” (Zimbardo, 2007). This allowed for heroic figures and actions to migrate towards new source-fields and embrace such relatively mundane figures as celebrities (Frisk, 2018, p. 4). The broadening sense of heroes and heroic narratives led people question the hero status of sport actors (Reid, 2017), as they are merely pseudo-heroes (Drucker, 1997), being given an undeserved status based on a celebrity extrapolation bias.

Following „the myth of the mediated centre” (Couldry, 2003), another aspect that is worth addressing in laying emphasis on the common grounds of celebrity and national identity is the central role played by *media* in shaping both constructs. On the one hand, celebrities are merely done and undone by media (Smart, 2005), as media coverage is a constitutive part of their existence. On the other hand, media is the one that provides visibility for the national identity discourses and practices, becoming the main stage for the national identity debates and the social imagery to be displayed. In both cases, it is not only about mediating, but also about an active role of media in contributing to the ongoing process of redefining both celebrity and national identity constructs. But, besides these general points of convergence that speak about the shared media-dependency and the strong emotional engagement and identification mechanisms triggered by both celebrity and national identity, what is really at stake in trying to understand and link between these two constructs when it comes to sport stars?

When speaking about sport actors, who act as representatives of their nations in competitions, the national identity component is merely embedded in their performances. Therefore, the media coverage they enjoy and their crowning as stars on the celebrity market take this national identity as default part of the whole construct. Moreover, it is a resourceful input that media discourses and corollary celebrity practices can leverage in terms of visibility and engaging public debates. This comes to, somehow, fulfil the nostalgic quest for meritocratic-based celebrity and hero status, as sport itself stands as the as “ultimate meritocracy” (Bell, 2009, p. 54).

There is also a more silent, yet strategic link between celebrity and national identity that could be better understood within the broader framework of cultural citizenship and the use of popular culture as valuable resource for the public sphere. Once popular culture has become more and “more influential in arenas of social and political life beyond the realm of entertainment/leisure” (Grindstaff, 2008, p. 207), it started to be used as an alternative way to draw attention on distinct public interest topics that people were more willing to engage with. It became rather common, and, moreover, socially expected and valued for (sport) celebrities to get involved in supporting social causes, national branding efforts, discussing economic or political issues or reviving civic culture practices, thus, contributing, as much as reflecting, the celebrization broader process.

To some extent, we can argue that there is a win-win relation in overlapping celebrity and national identity. On the one hand, celebrity can leverage the symbolic capital that the national identity activates and the opportunities it brings in terms of public debate and media interest. On the other hand, national identity can leverage the media exposure of celebrity, the magnetism and the engaging debates it triggers. This, in turn, can generate new forms of involvement in civic debates, overcoming the “cynical distance that more and more people take from politics and the public sphere” (Hermes, 2006, p. 40) when nation and national identity are to be addressed.

Nevertheless, this overlap between celebrity and national hero can bring to the fore important face management threats for both the signifier (the sport actor), as well as the signified (national identity), which are even higher when we deal with such competitive and dynamic fields like sport-related events. The constant media scrutiny and exposure, the blurring lines between public and private life and the digging up for controversies and spectacularity beyond professional performances is a significant part of the celebrity-related practices. This, in turn, can enter in conflict with the social expectations and the normative framework of the national identity practices and the role-model status that the national hero is expected to consistently perform. While celebrity comes with less pressure, as it is expected to be merely about entertainment and spectacularity, being a national hero seems to be more about a ritualized conduct, values and responsibilities that act as social constraints in terms of who, when and how can the national identity card be played by and through sport actors. For the latter is not longer the image of the performer that is at stake, but the image of an entire nation that is mimetically connected to the performance of the sport hero.

### **The methodological framework of the study**

When addressing the sport performance and the sport actor in general, media “is consequently pushed to engage in discursive practices that [...] are instrumental in directing viewers [the public] toward specific understandings of the on-field action” (Desmarais & Bruce, 2010, p. 339), as much as its broader off-field social significance. The media framing process providing schemes of interpretation (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Iyengar, 2005; Scheufele, 2000; Reese, 2001; de Vreese, 2005) for the sport actor’s performance is, implicitly, embedded in discussing the sport star – national hero approach. Nevertheless, this is rather the silent methodological layer of the study, as its aim is to move the focus from the content of the frames to the legitimation mechanisms beyond them and the dynamics of their use in media discourse.

Trying to understand this process, there were two main dimensions in defining the corpus of the media discourse analysis: Simona Halep's case study as object of both a raising sport star and a national hero – this is the actor-based corpus logic; and the 2014 Roland Garros Tournament media coverage as a symbolic moment for the raising star-national hero dyad – this is the event-based corpus logic. Thus, with the Roland Garros time-frame as nucleus (25 May-8 June 2014), the corpus gathered 310 online articles and 12 Facebook highlights posts published by two main Romanian sport newspapers, *ProSport* and *Gazeta Sporturilor*, not only during the event, but also one week pre and post competition, to better understand the evolution of the media discourse (i.e. all the articles that referred to Simona Halep during the 15 May-15 June 2014). Moreover, focus on “rising” star and national hero phase was relevant in understanding the emergence process of the two frames, when media is highly active both in building them and in legitimizing their use. Therefore, the main research dimensions that structured the entire analysis of the media discourse were: identifying the contextual aspects and the legitimation strategies mobilized by the media in crowning the rising sport star as national hero (i.e. What makes a sport star be framed as national hero?) and understanding the new construct that emerged once overlapping the two statuses.

### **Findings: when rising star's charm meets the national hero's halo**

#### The contextual aspects of Simona Halep's heroization

Celebrities, like heroes, are as much about the person and his/ her action as they are about the context in which they perform. This context-dependency is very important in understanding the ritualized dimension of both the celebrity and the hero media crowning, as their status quest for extra-ordinary settings, which need to be spectacular and symbolic in themselves.

In discussing the performance of Simona Halep at the 2014 Roland Garros tournament, one important contextual aspect refers to the symbolic power of the sport event itself. The Roland Garros Grand Slam tournament is one of the sport mega-events, defined by a high media exposure and generating a strong “vortextual” character (Whannel, 2002), i.e. a rapid diffusion of all elements connected to the event towards a large and heterogeneous public worldwide. These well-known international competitions act as real *media events*, working as “high holydays of mass communication” (Dayan & Kats, 1992, p. 1) that people are attracted by and engaged with. Moreover, in terms of sport geopolitics, they rise significant interest and engagement too, as they are perceived to host strategic symbolic battles not only between sport actors, but also between the countries they represent on the sport battlefield. Mega sport events, hence, provide a high visibility for national identity discourse to be displayed and reshaped, investing the athlete with the responsibility of acting as ambassadors for their nation on the international stage (Kilcline, 2014; Park, 2017; Vincent et al., 2010).

Another important aspect relates to the mere profile of the athlete, who then was a fresh sport figure going through a symbolic “media baptizing” on the celebrity market, due to her performance *crescendo* during the previous months: “*Simona Halep ends up impressing more and more people due to her extraordinary achievements during the last year. The Romanian has reached the 4th WTA place and entered the exclusive circle of top performers at Roland Garros!*” (gsp.ro, 22.05.2014). Her underdog profile added to both the general interest in her evolution, as well as to a higher identification on the *mimetic mechanism* axis, replicating the

entire nation's geopolitical status and struggle as "small" country. This resonates with previous studies stating that people are significantly more likely to sympathize and identify with underdogs because of their hard time overcoming being young, small, or historically unsuccessful (Allison & Burnette, 2009; Goethals & Allison, 2012; Kim et al., 2008).

In a celebrity-saturated world, where everyone seems to be involved in either producing or consuming celebrities (Rein, Kotler & Stoller, 1997), new actors coming on the celebrity radar can generate a supporting and somehow enthusiastic reaction from the public, who gives them credit and expects them to challenge the *status quo* within the sport hierarchies. Hence, the buzz effect generated by Simona Halep's fast climb from Top 30 to Top 3 WTA within less than a year draw everyone's attention. Her outstanding performance within a tennis mega-event, where you usually expect a clash between well-established sport titans, have been amplified by her outsider's position. It is this mere element of unexpected achievement, as well as the fast growth that humanizes the new born hero and made it easy for the people to identify with her and her success story: "*A result that was unthinkable a year ago, for which our little champion has knock off a good deal of work*" (gsp.ro, 1.06.2014).

The fact that she was not only a fresh figure on the celebrity market, but also "an anti-star" who challenged the celebrity laws, converted her into a hero prodigy for both the media and the general public: "*Because she doesn't show the vanity and the impertinence of the divas from the tennis circuit [ ...] She doesn't get intimidated and she is no actress in the field. She is, instead, hardworking, focused and dynamic*" (gsp.ro, 16.05.2014). This success story, entirely grounded on sport performance and the underdog struggle, was seen as opposed to the shortcut of the celebrity and, thus, closer to the meritocratic concept of both stars and heroes. And what better context for the rise of a new sport star and national hero than a mega-event with such high media visibility and tradition?

Moreover, Simona Halep's performance at the 2014 French Open came within a general context defined by a scarcity of high-level performances of Romanian athletes/teams in sport mega-events and an intense public debate around national identity-related issues. On the one hand, her performance marked a historic moment as she became the first Romanian woman tennis player that managed to enter the Top 3 WTA and the second one to reach a Roland Garros Grand Slam Final (after Virginia Ruzici in 1978): "*Florența Mihai 1977. Virginia Ruzici 1978 and 1980. Simona Halep 2014. These names are the history of the Romanian tennis at its highest level, the only Romanian tennis players who managed to reach a Women Grand Slam finals*" (pro.ro, 7.06.2014). On the other hand, Simona's achievement came to fill this void and to provide Romanians with a symbolic anchor in terms of national pride and collective success that they could relate to.

These contextual aspects made Halep's performance stand out and generate an intense emotional reaction among the Romanian public. Everything was fuelled by a media discourse that focused on the sensationalism of the performance and used a rather "hyperbolic" register to define the symbolic value of this performance: "*The first global star born after Revolution (i.e. 1989). From the 1994 World Cup probably no other Romanian team or athlete enjoyed such a media exposure like Simona Halep*" (pro.ro, 9.06.2014). Nevertheless, this is consistent with the media logic and the celebration of the sport field, since emotionalization and dramatization strategies are mobilized to capture people's attention (Driessens, 2013a) and get them engaged with both the persona (star or hero), the story and the media content that built them both within this "new melodramatic imagination" (Beer & Penfold-Mounce, 2009).

### Legitimizing the national hero status

In crowning Simona Halep as national hero, media was involved as much in building a consistent hero-framing, as it was in justifying it. Therefore, in building this image of “*Simona Halep, our heroine that seems to come from cartoons*” (Facebook highlight post from Pro, 4.06, 2014, relating to the SuperWoman representation of Simona Halep), there were four main legitimization strategies that the Romanian media discourses used.

The first strategy is built on the historic achievement argument and plays on the factual card of statistics and track records. To some extent, this works as a form of rationalization in defining sport success and speaks about what Hughson (2009) refers to as the modern sport fascination with quantification. Nevertheless, it is not only about the mere index of achievement – “*She fights to brake the records! Incredible performance for Simona Halep! Only one player managed to do this in the last 15 years!*” (gsp.ro, 6.06.2014), as it is about the “historical sense” of the achievement (Hughson, 2009, p. 87): “*Today Simona Halep relives Virginiei Ruzici’s chance (i.e. the only Romanian player to have won the Roland Garros title), three decades apart*” (gsp.ro, 7.06.2014); “*Ilie Năstase and Virginia Ruzici have made their way to the top on the French capital field [ ...] Now, Simona Halep, junior winner in 2008, is the one that carries the hopes of an entire country for another trophy to come*” (gsp.ro, 27.05.2014). In this regard, the athlete’s performance is no longer an individual, but a collective one that activates the national pride and the corollary national identification mechanisms.

The next three legitimization strategies are all somehow connected to the circulation of the celebrity capital (Cronin & Shaw, 2002; Driessens, 2013b; Hunter, Burgers, & Davidsson, 2009). One is based on an in-group Hall of Fame validation, which uses well-established sport national heroes to confirm the status of a new one. In doing so, media turns to Romanian sport legends, such as former footballer Gheorghe Hagi, former tennis champion Ilie Năstase and gymnastics legend Nadia Comăneci, to show their support and acceptance for the new born hero: “*<The king> Hagi speaks about <the queen>: She is extraordinary; she can become number 1*” (headline, gsp.ro, 5.06.2014); “*A champion message to another champion! Nadia Comăneci after Simona Halep lost the final: <You wrote history>!*” (headline, gsp.ro, 7.06.2014). This works as a symbolic transfer of celebrity capital and national identity value. Moreover, it enables a hero-reproduction cycle that both the media and the public were waiting for: “*At her 22 years, Halep has already made important steps for being part of the same gallery as Romanian great athletes, Ilie Năstase, Nadia Comăneci and Gheorghe Hagi. The tennis player is actually the first authentic Romanian sport product born after 1990 and she is promoted in the entire world[ ...] The <Halep> phenomenon has a future*” (pro.ro, 9.06.2014).

Another source of legitimization for the national hero status was, ironically, the mere media interest generated by the athlete within the global media community. To some extent, the fact that Simona Halep appeared on the international press radar worked as an additional pressure for the national rhetorical arena (Desmarais & Wallace, 2018) to acknowledge her global star status and the potential it has in terms of national branding. This acted as an external validation of the sport star on the global scene: “*The international press is now more and more interested in our Romanian, and Euro British insists in getting a short interview*” (prosort.ro, 28.05.2014); “*The international press is at her feet*” (pro.ro, 5.06.2014), but also as an opportunity for promoting Romania’s country image – “*Simona Halep writes history for Romania at the Roland Garros*” (gsp.ro, 5.06.2014).

The last aspect that I will address in terms of legitimating the national hero frame is the highly visible national fandom wave, engaging both online and offline fans-structures and prac-

tices. People's enthusiastic reactions to Simona Halep's performance echoed and, moreover, provided consistency to the national hero media framing.

On the one hand, there was an impressive display of fan support for the athlete on social media, where fans mainly stated their gratitude and pride. Their worship discourse went beyond the sport performance itself and brought into question not only the sport prowess hero, but also the *moral hero* (Hughson, 2009). Simona Halep's performance and public figure ended up triggering a form of civic fandom, which translated in engaging in deliberative spaces about the wider significance of the sport performance and the sport star status.

This form of civic fandom is as much about worship and enthusiasm, as it is about (self)-reflection and deliberation. It encompasses criticism directed towards the lack of government support for sport, scepticism regarding the authenticity of patriotic discourses, sport geopolitics or debates about what it means and is expected from a celebrity role-model.

On the other hand, media provided visibility to the Romanian fans from all over the world, focusing on their messages, practices and display of national symbols (e.g. the Romanian flag). This, in turn, underscored the wide-scale support and acceptance of Simona Halep as national hero; it also pushed further the snowball effect of the HalepMania phenomenon. From taxi drivers and TV stars, to politicians or singers, everyone felt the need to embrace the trend or to react to HalepMania, contributing to the prominence of the topic on the national media agenda – "*Simona Halep, the 5th tennis player world-wide reached a moment appreciated by the whole white sport community. From Romanian fans to fans from the countries she wins her titles in, to the written press and televisions, everyone is watching her*" (pro.ro, 18.05.2014). Simona Halep's achievements worked as a binding agent between the local and the diasporic community, enhancing the power that sport has in shaping, as well as empowering what Anderson ([1983] 2006) called the "imagined communities".

Looking at the dynamics of the two media framings of Simona Halep's performance, we could say that the raising sport star status builds mostly on the *spectacularity* of the outsider's (underdog) success and on the logic of "the few, known by the many" (Evans, 2005, p. 19) embedded in the media exposure and the acknowledgement of public recognizability. When it comes to the national hero, the focus is moved from the interest and admiration for the athlete and her performance towards the identification and worship for the broader success model that both Simona and her sport achievements stand for. Thus, even though both are socially valued, while the raising star frame is strongly rooted in the celebrity as token of success (Bell, 2010, p. 49), the national hero frame works as a category of social recognition (Frisk, 2018, p. 10) placed within what Goode (1978) called the economy of respect and, moreover, the economy of aspirational (national) identity. As, Whannel (2002, p. 52) noted, it is only through transforming sport stars doings into the form of stories that they come to signify, and the national hero comes to build on this symbolic meaning-making process.

## Conclusion

To investigate when and how media crowns an athlete with the national hero status, this paper focused on the contextual aspects and the legitimating strategies that favour the use and the overlap between the sport celebrity and national hero frames. The consistent emotional component of both celebrities and national heroes, as well as their high media-dependen-

cy provide the general premises for a successful overlap between the two frames in terms of symbolic capital and public engagement.

The study revealed that the intense fandom reaction to Simona Halep's top performance at the 2014 Roland Garros, labelled the HalepMania phenomenon, was favoured by four types of extra-ordinary contextual aspects: the symbolic value and global visibility of the sport mega- event (i.e. the Grand Slam Tournament), the scarcity of Romanian top performances in international sport competitions, the intense identity-related debates in the national public sphere, and the underdog status that Simona had before her acclaimed international recognition as a top tennis player.

In terms of legitimating Halep's national hero status, on the one hand, there was the factual logic that build around the sport statistics and the historic sense of the achievement index logic. On the other hand, there was the celebrity-system validation done by already established sport national heroes, the international press and fans. Nevertheless, the most insightful part lies in the mere content and legitimation strategies and refers to the overall process of building this sport star as national hero frame.

The consistency of the national hero status came from the dynamic co-construction process, which involved not only the national media, but also other actors from the global media-community, celebrities and public figures, as well as the various fandom structures. Furthermore, it was the dialogic and deliberative nature of building the national hero status that fuelled the intensity and the widescale recognition of Simona Halep's performance. Beyond the general enthusiasm and the high emotional engagement that people usually invest in rising stars like Simona Halep, the national hero aura is not only about national pride and identification, but also about a form of civic fandom. What is really at stake in the emergence of civic fandom practices is that they convert sport performances into valuable resources for the public sphere, triggering deliberative spaces that people find easy to engage within, and addressing public issues that go beyond sport itself, such as the national identity rhetoric.

Nevertheless, as both celebrities and national heroes are more about a social construction process than a static position, this dynamic view raises the question of their long-term consistency and redefinition. To what extent was Simona Halep more than a *trending* or a *transitory* national hero (Goethals & Allison, 2012, pp. 222 -229)? Did she go through or beyond the *sport celetoid* one-hit luck? To address these (in)stability and (in)consistency issues embedded in both the sport celebrity and hero status a broader time-frame longitudinal analysis should be undertaken to examine the dynamic redefinition of the two frames.

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