Unfolding the sport spectacle of David Beckham

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Introduction

David Beckham is widely acclaimed as the best known pop culture icon. He is in fact a one-man media spectacle. His popularity is as significant as his football skills and achievement as a footballer. He is also a global celebrity, which combined his successfully constructed image, commodification and globalization. He is so popular that even part of the 12-week course on football culture module for a Degree course at Staffordshire University is also spared to study his phenomenon -- “Beckology”. No doubt, Beckham is a global celebrity across boundaries and cultures. In November 2003, he is voted as the greatest pop cultural icon by the VH1 (a popular music channel), which made him an integral part of the global popular culture. Apart from being a popular idol, he also becomes a national figure for England. His influence has already exceeded the Royal Family, the political leaders and even the limit of sport. He has influence over different parts of our lives. As he is so popular and become a leading force in our cultures and trends, it is interesting and important to examine this Beckology thus to enhance our understanding on this sport spectacle.

In this essay, I would try to examine this Beckham phenomenon from different perspectives and uncover the reasons for his super-stardom.

Background of David Beckham

David Beckham, whose full name is David Robert Joseph Beckham (born on May 2, 1975) is a British football player born in Leytonstone, London. Since he was a schoolboy, Beckham has discovered his talent in playing football and joined the local youth teams. Coupled with his effort (it was said that in order to feel the turning of the football, Beckham trained himself by kicking the ball in bare foot), he was an achiever and had records of match-winning performances in every team he played.

According to Wikipedia, he first signed a trainee's contract with the Manchester United F.C. In 1991, and made his League debut in 1995, aged 19. The next year he helped the side to the Premiership and FA Cup trophies and to their dominance of
domestic football. The 1996/1997 season was where Beckham made his name and the start of his celebrity. In 1998, he was part of the United Team to win the “treble” – Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League. In total, Beckham scored 86 goals in 397 games for the United. He is also famous for the quality of his crossing and ability to hit a dead ball and particularly at long-range free kicks. He is also the highest paid footballer in the world after signing a three-year with Manchester United that increases his weekly wage to around £90,000 a week.

However, everything was not always smooth for Beckham. He was given a red card for aiming a kick at Argentina’s Diego Simone in the World Cup 1998 in France. It was the first sending-off of his professional career which also made him a national pariah as England lost the game and the chance of advancing in the tournament. When he returned to England, he became the target of criticism, the attacks were so severe that to appear on almost all of the backs and fronts of the tabloids.

However, his highs have always been very high. He has won countless trophies for Manchester United, including the European Cup and made the team dominated in the domestic football. Beckham rapidly became a number one celebrity in the press and went on to become the runner-up in the BBC Sports Personality of the Year award in 2000.

On June 17, 2003, Beckham signed a four-year contract with Real Madrid of Spain – a football team of superstars, potentially worth up to USD 41 million. In fact, the Times of London has already put him on its 2003 Rich List on April 2003, he made more money than the Queen does. The money he earned is on the same level among that of goal player Tiger Woods and the auto racer Michael Sheumacher.

The Sport Spectacle – David Beckham

The concept of the ‘society of the spectacle’ was first developed by Guy Debord in 1967. For Debord (1967), spectacle ‘unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomenon’. Building on this concept, Douglas (2003) also believed that spectacle posed a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations. Thus, our experience in everyday life are shaped and mediated by different spectacles. As sports are playing a more and more important role in our society, coupled with the ever-escalating popularity of David Beckham, it is interesting to examine this sport spectacle of Beckham.

To understand this sport spectacle, it would be helpful to understand what roles sports play in our society today. According to Mike Marqusee (2000), in his titled essay –
‘Sports apocalypse’, ‘the inner life of the sports fans have been transformed into a public mania, which was being manipulated for commercial and political advantage’. The authentic fan culture has also been given ways to commercializations and commodification. Moreover, sports are powerful in commanding an increasing proportion of public discourse – in advertising, politics, newspapers, television and the Internet, which also made the sport events become valuable properties.

According to Douglas, professional sports are one of the major spectacles of media culture. Sports have long been major sites of entertainment and spectacle. Sports celebrated the values of competition and success, which were part of the reproduction of the capitalist ethic. Thus, it is not surprising that Beckham – who possessed such outstanding athletic skills and was famous for the ability of hitting a dead ball, bend the ball as he likes, and his records of the match-winning performances, can provide the audiences with the thrill of intense competition and getting the final goal in the last minute of the game. He embodies the success ethic and the quintessential capitalist ideal of competition and winning.

According to the Google search engine, Beckham is the most famous sports personality in the world. In the Yahoo search engine, there are more than 145,000 websites related to Beckham. Being the most well known football player in this era, Beckham has high entertainment value. He put his athletic triumphs into commercial product endorsements. He became a very high paid celebrity advertising figure and made huge profits from merchandising, especially in Asia where his is enormously popular. Just before transferred to the Real Madrid, Beckham and his wife (Victoria) were on a week-long tour of Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand promoting beauty products, chocolate, motor oil and mobile phones. It was also reported that this would earn them more than the entire first year of his Real Madrid contract. On the day (1 July 2003) which his transfer was completed and he was presented with the squad number of 23 on the next day (it was also said that Beckham chose the number 23 to play tribute to his idol, Michael Jordan), Real Madrid were expected to receive almost USD $800,000 for the sale of his shirts. Beckham also has his own line of products. By all this, Beckham has become more than a sport spectacle and he is now become bigger than the sport he excels in.

**The Globalization of the Sport Spectacle**

Globalization has played an important role in this global Beckham phenomenon. He has more of a universalizing iconic effect as a global popularity, who represents a fusion of sports culture and star power and commodity culture. There is the global circulation on the products of Beckham. Take the example of England, according to
Brick (2003), Beckham's transfer to Spain (transferred to the Real Madrid) has provoked about of national mourning not seen after the death of the Princess Diana in 1997. There was the sense of grief across the TV programmes and the radio phone-ins that followed the news of Beckham's transfer. For the case in the Far East, all along, even the most popular American sport stars, e.g. Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods and even the Asian American tennis player – Michael Chang has never been as famous and popular as Beckham in Asia. One of the major reasons of this is that sports are not as important and integral part of the lives of Asians as their American and British counterparts. However, the Beckham spectacle has become more than a sports business, it has become an international cultural icon. The Beckham phenomenon has been articulated through different other spectacles, e.g. global sports extravaganzas, advertising campaigns, product promotions, films and websites. In many Asian nations, Beckham's celebrity has led to a kind of hysteria.

According to Sato (2002), after the World Cup 2002, Beckham has suddenly started him fame in Japan which later also led to the intense adoration. In the heyday of the last World Cup, the Beckham mania reached the Far East, teenage boys in every corner of Japan rushed to hairdresser's asking for the Beckham's hairstyle of the day. Thousands of girls also followed Beckham wherever he went and many cried in abandonment, reportedly, when he was leaving Japan, begging him not to go. Besides, the local authority of Tsuna, a remote town England chose as a training campsite, is contemplating building a statue of the superstar. For James (2003), Beckham was so popular in Japan that the name “Bekkamu” has the recognition of over 90%. Thus, it is not surprising that almost half of the corporate sponsors of Beckham – such as the Tokyo Beauty Centre and Meiji confectionery, concentrate on the Asia-Pacific region. During his visits in Vietnam and Thailand this year, there are also thousands of fans staying in the airport of hotels to wait for him. Moreover, for his popularity, he has also become the first westerner to have his advertisement (an advertisement selling oil) broadcasted in Iran ever since 1979. Undoubtedly, Beckham has already firmly assured his position in the Asia. Nevertheless, for his global fame, he also has some global commercial partners, for example, the Adidas, Pepsi and Marks & Spencer.

One of the reasons for Beckham's celebrity among different nations is said to be related to his belief of equality among different races (Beckham Unwrapped 2003). He also has proudly admitted of being one-quarter Jewish. No matter which countries he went to, he respected the religions and customs of that countries, e.g. when he went to Vietnam and Thailand during the promotional tours in 2003, he greeted the people there with their religious greetings. He showed respect to them but not a kind of superiority over them. As a result, in the Far East, there was only a short step to deity of Beckham, a Beckham statue has also been cast in gold for a Thai Buddhist temple.
In sum, he was very successful in earning the multicultural goodwill, which made him the godlike status in some parts of the world.

Despite the fact that the U.S. has all along been a hard-to-crack market for football players, as the sports market has already been dominated by the basketball and the baseball, Beckham started his fame in the U.S. market after his promotional tour in this summer. He is also the latest high-profile British to appear on the famous animation -- the Simpsons, along side with other famous British stars, e.g Sir Paul McCartney and the British Prime Minister – Tony Blair. It seems that with the help of globalization, this sport spectacle has extended its influence to different parts of the world. For Hutton and Giddens (2001), ‘cultural globalization’ is just a synonym for ‘Americanization’, but in this case, Beckham has successfully broken this tradition.

Apart from the impact of globalization, there are many other reasons for the popularity of Beckham. Beckham is one of the most successfully managed idols. Let's explore the making of the image of Beckham.

**Dedication to the game**

Beckham is a highly successful football player. However, it was also very often highlighted of his efforts and determination in earning such achievements and honors. In many of his biographies, it was highlighted that he came from a working class family in Leytonstone in Britain. All along, playing football is his dream. Ever since he was 3, he played football with his father in the parks nearby their home. His success did not come from fortune, but came from his talents and hard work, which was a very encouraging story which matched with the ideology of the capitalist society – once you are talented and work hard, you will succeed, regardless of which social class you are from.

Beckham was shaped as a hard working young man, it was said that he was in the youth team, even when most of his team-mates have given up the practices and returned home, he insisted to stay in the field and continue his own practice. Finally, he was discovered by the local teams and started his career. In the 1998 World Cup Finals in France, he was severely criticized by people all over the world for being sent off for a foul on Diego Simeone of Argentina which finally cost England the game and the chance of advancing in the tournament. However, this was the turning point of his career. For his efforts and dedication in the game, he kept up his performances, which he was later being promoted to the captain of the team. Taking the role of captain seems to have helped to mature him, in both skills and temperament. Under his leadership, England was qualified for the 2002 World Cup Finals and an
unprecedented 5-1 defeat of Germany in Munich. He has also made the last-ditch free kick that secured England's automatic qualification for World Cup 2002. In the summer of 2003, Beckham was even made an Officer in the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE) in Queen Elizabeth II's honors list. For his strong dedication to the game and continuous hard work, he served as a role model for people in facing adversities and obstacles.

A Family Man

Despite his successful career and high popularity, Beckham kept the British tradition and got married with the Spice Girl and media celebrity Victoria Adams at his young age of 24 in July 1999. They have two sons, Brooklyn, born March 1999 and Romeo, born September 2002. His marriage and the births of his sons were widely covered by the press over the world. Beckham has Brooklyn’s name tattooed on his lower back and also had Victoria’s name tattooed on his arm. He is the role model of a happily married man. He speaks with great affection of his two young sons, who, he said, have changed his priorities forever. He claimed that he was very clean, tidy and love to cook too. He always mentions his family to thousands of tabloids and attended different functions with his wife and sons.

Even for the visit of the Real Madrid to Hong Kong in August 2003, the press of Hong Kong also helped to construct the image of a ‘family man’ of Beckham. On August 7 2003, the team of Real Madrid, after arriving at Hong Kong the day before, went to the pubs in Hong Kong for leisure – they went to the Felix of the Peninsula Hotel and the dragon-i in Central. Beckham talked on his mobile for a long time when he was in dragon-i, then, the press reported that he must have talked to his wife – Victoria as he missed her very much. As tabloids, there was no proof of whom was Beckham talking to, but the press has indirectly constructed the image of a family man of Beckham.

Ideal Model for the Young

Apart from the image of a family man, it cannot be denied that Beckham is the ideal model figure for the young. As he self claimed in an interview that he has never got drunk in a night club, nor involved in fighting or anything like that on or off the pitch. Even being brought up in a working class family, Beckham does not drink, smoke or get touch with any drugs, but kept very close relationships with his parents.
Diplomacy of David Beckham

Apart from maintaining his healthy and positive cultural image, Beckham took one step further. With all the affection and publicity he received from societies and his fans, he just wanted to give something back. Thus, he and his wife had set up a charitable foundation and they support the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and groups that combat childhood illnesses. The couple has not only visited an NSPCC advisory center in East London, but also spent their precious time on talking and sharing with the children. Their heartfelt support for the young people were also widely reported by the press. The couple has participated in high-profile charity undertakings. For example, Beckham has took Kristy Howard (the terminally ill 7-year old who acts as the England team mascot for the World Cup 2002 qualifier against Greece) to different functions to raise money for cancer patients. For his superstardom, he has been the ambassador of the UN Children’s Fund UNICEF and had made the declaration on the protection of children rights with the accompany of the UN Secretary General – Kofi Annan. The spokesman of the Prime Minister Tony Blair also described Beckham as ‘a great ambassador for the country on and off the pitch’. All these also strengthen the domestic and international reputation of Beckham and made him a national diplomat of Britain. This also made him a distinct angelic figure, which was totally different from the violent and apathetic images of his athletic counterparts.

Transformation of the perceptions of British Masculinity

With his gifted talent on football, it was often said that Beckham can bring miracles in the football pitch. However, he can also bring miracles in the reality. All along, it just seems to be a universal truth that sport is the games of the men. Almost all of the athletic celebrities have the majorities of their fans are males. Nevertheless, Beckham is the exception (again). Even though football has all along been the game of the male of the lower working class, the majority of the Beckham’ fans are females. His fan base goes far beyond sports and males, many of them even do not care about football. As mentioned in the documentary 【Beckham Unwrapped, 2003】，Beckham has fans from both sexes. Males often admired him for his gifted athletic skills and great success whilst females worshipped him for his handsome outlook and his love for his family. He is the first super celebrity from the sport field that can attract such a large number of fans from both sexes. This may related to his gender identities that he can attract such a large spectrum of fans. He is also described to be the most famous heterosexual.
Beckham has portrayed in an interview that ‘I am not scared of my feminine side and I think quite a lot of the things I do come from that side of my character’ (Lemos, 2002). Thus, he dares to celebrate and emphasize his ‘feminine side’ along with his maternal side. Just like he disclosed that once his wife told him that she was pregnant, he cried with tears of joy. He also wore Sarongs, diamond earrings, wooly hats and designer suits that made him a walking wardrobe. He was also an athlete who cared much about his outlook, he was willing to spend several hundreds pounds for trying a new haircut or going to the beauty salons. His hair, another focus under the spotlight, is described to be very similar to the UK weather, which is different everyday. He dared to try the avant-garde hairstyles, from floppy fringe to Mohican, to baldly to a very modern space age effort. Nevertheless, no matter how ‘special / strange’ his hairstyle was, there are lots of people from different parts of the world to follow at once.

Undoubtedly, he is one of the most important icons for fashion and hairstyles. However, more importantly, he created a new culture for the identity of the two genders, to be more specific, he changed the stereotypes over the gender order. In the past, personal grooming and beauty products are regarded as the domains of the females or the homosexual men, whilst heterosexual men are assumed to be causal in clothing and should not care too much on one’s appearance. However, Beckham has successfully broken its culture, his well-dressed image was widely accepted. This leads to a new kind of culture, which emphasizes much on clueless males should put more time and efforts in looking after their appearances as their female counterparts. This is also the theme advocated by the widely popular American show – “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” (粉紅救兵) which has an average of 2 million American audiences. In each episode, the five homosexual presenters will help to dress up a heterosexual man, re-decorate his home and to help him to improve his taste. According to the Time Magazine (December 29, 2003), the show may do little on enhancing gay rights, but it is inspiring legions of well-dressed metrosexuals. On the Mingpao Weekly (November 8, 2003), it also reported that in view of this arising culture, a new word was also created as – Metrosexual (都市玉男), which is the combinations of two words – “Metro” and “Heterosexual” and the word is used to describe the heterosexual men who care much about their appearance and well dressed.

For Lemos (2002), most of the successful contemporary football player’s public image is coded for homophobia and strong discrimination towards homosexuals, but this was not the case for Beckham. After his recent appearances as the cover man of the gay magazine – “Attitude” in 2002, he told the press that he loved to be a gay icon and got “a big fan zone in the male area”. It seems that by wearing diamond earrings
or sarong, Beckham has just managed his femininity on such a level that he can be welcomed by homosexuals but not to be regarded as too effeminate. Once again, he has been successful in abolishing the macho culture of football.

For Dr. Andrew Parker of the Warwick University, Beckham is a huge important figure in popular culture and probably be the most influential male figure of anyone in Britain aged 5 to 60. It has also shown that he has helped to create a complex new concept of masculinity. With his popularity and influence, he may has the potential to encourage a whole generation of young men to act more like him in sense of combining the traditional and more radical modern identities – aggressive competitor on the pitch, but loving husband and doting father at home. He has created different new faces as a “new” man (for example, nurturer, compassionate partner) and “new” father (doting and fashionable). He has broken many traditional stereotypes for men and for sure, he has brought a new culture for the “new” men.

The Film Spectacle – Bend it like Beckham

In this part of the essay, I would like to use the example of the worldwide popular British movie – “Bend it Like Beckham” (2002) to capture different distinct features of this sport spectacle – David Beckham.

This low cost British movie is based on a simple story on an Indian girl – Jess, who was born in England. She had great talent on playing football and who loved the game very much for her idol, David Beckham; but her traditional family refused to even consider it. Every night, she lied in bed talking to “Beckham”, whose poster was taped to her ceiling. The poster was the only real image of Beckham in the movie. With the help of her new friend, Jess secretly joined a girl’s team and realized her dream by her determination and continuous hard work. In fact, Beckham has not even appeared in the movie, but his spirit was all there. The film can also portray different features of the Beckham phenomenon.

Firstly, the main character is an Indian Girl, indicating that Beckham was so popular in the Far East and have great influence on the girl that Jess, even with the opposition of her parents and violations of the Indian tradition, was determined to play in a girls’ football team, pursuing the same dream as her idol and role model. On the other hand, her gifted talent on football, for example, her skills on playing the brilliant free kicks or bending the ball to any direction she wanted was just like that of Beckham, whose was said to be capable of playing magic (even under pressure) in the pitch. Most importantly, her enthusiasms and passion on playing football, her hard work in striving for excellence in her skills and her determination in realizing her dream were
all embedding the images of Beckham. Similarly, she was loved and supported by her parents, friends and teammates, all these just like the real Beckham. In fact, we can say that she was just the reproduction of Beckham. Her story was also very similar to that of Beckham too.

Conclusion

As Mike Marqusee has once mentioned, the sport spectacle has played a more and more important role in the present society. With the development of the techno-culture, the once local sport tournaments now become global sport events and sports industries that involved large numbers of global audience, large amount of commerce and commodities. The champions of such games not only become national heroes, but also the targets of global adoration. Beckham is one of these fortunate, he is able to have such global celebrity. However, it is obvious that the celebrity of Beckham is not just based on luck. His combination of traditional and more radical modern identities – aggressive competitor on the pitch, loving husband, doting father and fashion model, have helped to give men a healthy role model, a popular commodity and a global cultural icon.

In concluding my paper, I would like to site the viewpoints of Professor Ellis Cashmore (*), who teaches football culture at the University of Staffordshire and wrote a book on Beckham, examining his phenomenon from the sociological perspectives. According to Cashmore, Beckham is the creature of public imagination for which he is a blank screen that can let us to refract our dreams and fit all attractions. By making use of the sports and the high entertainment values of his family, Beckham allows us to displace our fantasies. As such, his blankness is the key to understand his cultural power. To put it this way, Beckham is a global dream – a global mythology, combining the values of individualism, hard work, competition, success, and unparalleled athletic achievement with morality, family values, honestly and rectitude, in which all of us can reflect our dreams and fantasies on. The sport spectacle of Beckham, just like films, is also our dream factory.

*Remarks: The viewpoints of Professor Ellis Cashmore are sited from the website of the Observer – *No Beckham, No England.*
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