

How do media representations of football agents construct and perpetuate stigma?

What underlying relationships between agents, journalists and the sport itself sustain these narratives?

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how media representations construct and perpetuate stigma around football agents, and how the relationships between agents, journalists and other stakeholders sustain those narratives. Agents are central to transfers and career management, yet coverage routinely frames them as ‘greedy super-agents’, a framing that has sharpened as the game has commercialised. The study maps recurring tropes in coverage of agents, identifies the economic and cultural conditions that sustain stigma, and analyses the relationships that produce it.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, Goffman’s concept of stigma and Hall’s work on representation, the study combines the academic literature on agents with a purposive sample of media coverage centred on a case study of Neymar’s 2017 transfer from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain.

The analysis finds that tropes such as the ‘super-agent’, the ‘fixer’ and the ‘parasite’ reproduce stigma ideologically, marginalising agents while legitimising the perspectives of clubs and fans. It also identifies a symbiotic cycle: agents leak information to gain leverage, and journalists depend on those leaks for exclusives, then vilify the sources that supplied them. The Neymar case shows this cycle clearly, with agents presented as enablers of excess against a backdrop of state ownership and sportswashing.

Stigma persists, the study argues, because of discursive imbalances of power that erode trust across football’s ecosystem. The research is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and the absence of direct stakeholder voices. It recommends balanced editorial guidance on coverage of agents and greater transparency on commissions from FIFA, and it offers a CDA framework that connects economic and cultural analyses of agents.

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1. Introduction

Football is a major cultural and economic force, and the stories told about it are shaped as much by media coverage as by events on the pitch. Broadcasters and publishers such as Sky Sports and ESPN influence how the game is understood, while agents, the intermediaries in multimillion-pound transfers, have moved to the centre of it. The media frequently portrays those agents negatively, accusing them of manipulation and of inflating fees. This dissertation examines how media representations construct stigma around football agents, addressing gaps in research on coverage and stakeholder perception. By analysing how agents and the media interact, it identifies the mechanisms of stigma and the relationships that sustain it, contributing to debates about power, representation and trust in the game.

Existing scholarship traces the media's role in football's shift from a working-class pastime to a global industry (Goddard, Sloane and Wilson, 2012). Two milestones, the launch of the Premier League in 1992 and the Bosman ruling in 1995, liberalised player movement across Europe and raised the prominence of agents (Goddard, Sloane and Wilson, 2012). Economists show how agents contribute to market inefficiencies, such as hype-driven transfers that inflate wages and fees, while treating them as rational actors within a competitive system (Kuper and Szymanski, 2018). Agents nevertheless face persistent ethical scrutiny, with perceptions of greed and conflicts of interest fuelling public and media backlash (Shropshire and Davis, 2008). Historical work shows how sensationalist coverage turned figures such as the football manager into celebrities under constant scrutiny (Carter, 2006), a dynamic this study argues now extends to agents. Across this literature, agents occupy a dual role: essential facilitators, and frequent targets of vilification.

The study focuses on English and European football between 2000 and 2025, a period spanning the growth of digital media and the rapid commercialisation of the game. Other sports are excluded to allow depth. The analysis covers print, broadcast and online portrayals of agents, examining recurring tropes rather than economic data alone.

The literature offers a solid but fragmented foundation. Economic models link agents to distortions in the transfer market but rarely examine how narratives about them are constructed (Kuper and Szymanski, 2018). Ethical critiques tie stigma to fiduciary breaches and regulatory failure (Shropshire and Davis, 2008). Historical accounts trace the media's turn towards adversarial reporting on

authority figures (Carter, 2006). What remains under-examined is how digital platforms amplify stigma, and how influence runs in both directions between agents and journalists, particularly through leaks and access.

The study asks three questions:

1. How do media narratives shape the identities of agents, and which tropes recur?
2. What social, economic and cultural factors sustain stigma?
3. How do the relationships between agents, journalists and clubs affect coverage?

Its objectives are to map portrayals of agents through secondary sources, to analyse relational dynamics through a detailed case study, and to identify directions for future research. Chapter 2 sets out the rationale, Chapter 3 the methodology, Chapter 4 reviews the literature and establishes the theoretical framework, Chapter 5 presents the case study, and Chapter 6 concludes.

2. Rationale

Football is now an industry worth billions each year, and agents are central to it, facilitating transfers, endorsements and career management (Bull and Faure, 2022). Despite this, they are frequently depicted as opportunistic ‘super-agents’ driven by greed (Shropshire and Davis, 2008). Sensational headlines and exposés reinforce that image, framing agents as ethical outliers in an increasingly commercial sport, a process accelerated by the Bosman ruling’s expansion of player mobility and agent influence (Goddard, Sloane and Wilson, 2012).

The topic is especially timely. FIFA’s Football Agent Regulations, introduced in 2023, brought back a licensing exam and set limits on commissions, parts of which have since faced legal challenge, while digital media has intensified scrutiny of agents through leaks and viral narratives. Existing literature offers economic analysis of agents’ role in the market (Kuper and Szymanski, 2018) and historical accounts of media behaviour (Carter, 2006), but little qualitative research on how narratives about agents are built, how digital platforms amplify them, or how agents and journalists shape each other, for instance through agents trading insider access for favourable coverage. This study addresses those gaps, reading textual sources through cultural and media theory and prioritising meaning and power over evaluative judgement.

By tracing stigma to its roots in economic anxiety, ethical perception and imbalances of power, the dissertation contributes to sports media studies. The stakes are practical: unchecked portrayals can erode trust, disadvantage young and vulnerable players who rely on good representation, and undermine football's claim to be 'the people's game'. The findings can inform policy on transparency and guide journalistic practice towards more balanced coverage. The aim is not to defend agents uncritically, but to reframe them as complex professionals in a global industry where media stories shape both perception and reality.

3. Methodology

This dissertation uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a qualitative approach suited to examining ideology and power in media texts. CDA links close analysis of language to its social and cultural context, and it has been applied in football to issues such as racism in media coverage (Alsaadi, 2026).

The study takes an interpretivist position. It treats the meaning of media coverage as socially constructed, and seeks to understand how stigma is produced rather than to measure it. It draws on secondary sources in two strands. The first is the academic literature on agents across economics, ethics, sociology and media studies (Chapter 4). The second is a purposive sample of media coverage of Neymar's 2017 transfer to Paris Saint-Germain, drawn from English, French, Spanish and international outlets including *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *The New York Times*, *L'Équipe*, *Sport*, *Der Spiegel* and ESPN, along with later reporting on the transfer's legal and financial fallout (Chapter 5).

The Neymar transfer was chosen as a critical case. It was the most expensive transfer in history, it involved two high-profile agents, and it generated sustained international coverage over several years, which makes the processes this study is interested in unusually visible. Texts were read closely and coded thematically for three things: the labels applied to agents (such as 'super-agent', 'fixer' and 'mercenary'), the sources journalists relied on, and the wider explanations offered for the deal. The analysis follows Fairclough's (2010) three dimensions: the text itself, the practices through which it was produced, and the sociocultural conditions around it.

Because the study uses publicly available texts, ethical risks are minimal. Its main limitation is that it cannot capture how agents and journalists themselves understand their relationship, which would require interviews. This is addressed as a direction for future research.

4. Literature Review

The literature on football agents spans sports economics, media studies, business ethics, sociology and journalism. Interest has grown since the late 1990s alongside football's transformation into a global commercial industry, and particularly since the 1995 Bosman ruling, which removed transfer restrictions at the end of players' contracts and greatly increased mobility across borders (Goddard, Sloane and Wilson, 2012). The ruling strengthened players' bargaining position and established agents as key facilitators of international deals, prompting research into their economic impact. Much of that research is quantitative, using regression models and panel data from sources such as FIFA's Global Transfer Reports and league financial records to assess agents' effects on wages, fees and club finances.

Media-focused research is thinner, and has gained momentum only with the rise of digital platforms. It mostly examines how athletes are represented, through content analyses of newspapers, broadcasts and social media, and rarely considers agents. Ethical and sociological studies use case studies and interviews to explore stigma, often referencing episodes such as the 2015 FIFA corruption scandal. Research on the relationship between agents and journalists is the least developed, consisting mainly of exploratory essays and historical overviews built on anecdote rather than systematic evidence. Across this literature, economic studies predominate.

Four broad approaches can be identified: economic modelling of labour markets; thematic content analysis of press narratives; normative ethical frameworks for conduct and regulation; and sociological studies of identity and power in sport. Together they offer cross-disciplinary breadth and useful evidence for regulators such as FIFA. But the dominance of quantitative economics overlooks perception and culture; media studies rarely address agents specifically; and sociological work on stigma seldom examines the media mechanisms that produce it. Two gaps stand out: little critical analysis of how digital platforms intensify stigma, and little theorisation of the reciprocal dependency between agents and journalists, in which exchanges of information shape the narrative. These gaps point to the need to treat stigma as something constructed in discourse, rather than as the sum of isolated ethical lapses.

4.1 Economic perspectives on agents' roles

The economic literature consistently identifies agents as essential actors in football's labour market, negotiating contracts, endorsements and transfers. Kuper and Szymanski (2018) argue that agents exploit asymmetric information to push up fees and wages. Using league and club financial data, they show that wage spending tracks team performance closely while transfer spending does not, so that inflated valuations and agent-driven bidding wars often lead clubs to overpay. Their strength is a data-driven challenge to popular assumptions, supported by long-run sources such as the Deloitte Football Money League (Deloitte, 2024). Their limitation, for this study, is a focus on measurable outcomes that leaves aside the cultural processes by which economic critique becomes stigmatising portrayal, such as the depiction of agents as 'parasites'. The scale of the issue has only grown since, with FIFA's own reporting showing record spending by clubs on agents' fees (FIFA, 2024).

Goddard, Sloane and Wilson (2012) examine labour mobility after Bosman, showing that agents facilitate cross-border transfers and raise player earnings while creating tension with clubs. Their analysis suggests that stigma often grows from perceptions of 'poaching', with agents seen as damaging club loyalty. The study offers robust econometric evidence and practical recommendations on transfer regulation, but it treats the media's role in amplifying stigma as a side effect rather than a constructed narrative. Across these economic studies, agents appear as facilitators of market efficiency, yet the question of how media discourse turns market 'inefficiencies' into moral failings goes unexamined. This study addresses that gap by applying CDA to the language used to frame agents' economic role.

Tedeschi (2021) offers an insider's perspective, detailing how agents negotiate and diversify into areas such as endorsements, and arguing through case studies that they add value in a globalised market. Written by a licensed agent, it provides practical knowledge, though its anecdotal basis leaves it open to bias. Overall, economic research establishes the agent's importance while largely ignoring representational stigma.

4.2 Ethical and sociological dimensions of stigma

Ethical literature attributes stigma to agents' conduct, including conflicts of interest and abusive practices. Shropshire and Davis (2008) provide a thorough legal and ethical history, examining cases from American college sport to global football in which agents induce young players with illicit benefits. Their analysis

of fiduciary duty, supported by court rulings and regulatory comparisons, shows how such breaches foster perceptions of opportunism, and their proposals for licensing anticipate reforms FIFA later adopted. Their focus on the United States, however, limits their direct relevance to European football.

Gohritz, Handle and Ehnold (2026) extend this through interviews with players in Germany's 3. Liga, documenting opportunistic behaviour such as undisclosed commissions and pressured transfers, and the sense of betrayal it leaves. Using Mayring's qualitative content analysis, they also identify how players cope, for example by relying on peer networks. Their grounding in players' own accounts is a strength; their small, lower-division sample limits how far the findings extend to the elite game. Taken together, this work shows that ethical stigma has roots in real misconduct but is amplified by coverage. What it rarely does is connect that amplification to wider ideological critique, for example of how agents are implicated in controversial state ownership and sportswashing, as with Newcastle United (Delaney, 2024).

Sociologically, stigma intersects with wider hierarchies in sport. Anderson and Kian (2012) show how coverage of head trauma in the NFL began to contest dominant ideals of masculinity; football's comparable culture helps explain why 'non-playing' outsiders such as agents are treated with suspicion. Their work is useful but centred on the United States, and does not address class. Nuhrat (2013) examines the unwritten codes of Turkish football and how those outside accepted norms are marginalised, a process that parallels the treatment of agents as figures outside the 'sporting' community. Holden (2024) explores regional identity in German football, where commercial actors are cast as threats to fan-owned club models; the account is rich in detail but largely descriptive. Collectively, this work suggests stigma is socially embedded and constructed in discourse, but it has not been examined in relation to agents specifically, which supports the use of CDA here.

4.3 Media portrayals and journalistic relationships

Research on sports media is extensive, but studies of agents are scarce. Clavio, Burch and Frederick (2012) analyse fan networks on Twitter, showing how social media reshapes the relationship between athletes and audiences; agents, however, are absent. Kian and Hardin (2009) find that female sports journalists counter traditional gendered framing, suggesting that coverage can shift when newsroom perspectives change. Vincent et al. (2010) show how World Cup journalism builds national narratives of heroes and villains, a framework easily

extended to agents cast as disruptors. Billings (2004) exposes implicit racial stereotyping in broadcast commentary, and Petty and Pope (2019) find persistent bias in coverage of women's football despite progress. Lewis, Brown and Billings (2017) show how social and traditional media now blend, accelerating the spread of scandal. These studies establish how media framing works, but they focus on athletes; none examines agents.

Research on the relationship between agents and journalists is at an early stage. Carter (2006) traces how relations between managers and the media became more adversarial, and his account of information traded for access parallels the dynamic between agents and reporters, although it predates digital media. Buzzelli et al. (2020) show how digital platforms such as The Athletic have reshaped sports journalism, drawing talent away from local newspapers and reducing the depth of their coverage. Media research, then, addresses representation and stigma, but rarely in relation to agents: the gap this study seeks to fill.

4.4 Gaps and justification for this study

The literature is strong in interdisciplinary and empirical terms, but limited by its reliance on quantitative methods, its neglect of agents in media research, and its anecdotal treatment of the relationship between agents and journalists. This study responds by applying CDA to agents directly, conceptualising stigma as sustained through ideology and discourse, building on economic research through textual analysis, and proposing discursive rather than purely regulatory responses.

4.5 Theoretical framework

The study draws on three concepts. Following Fairclough (2010), discourse is understood as a social practice that reproduces ideology, analysed across three dimensions: the text (vocabulary, labels and framing), discursive practice (how texts are produced and circulated, including sourcing), and sociocultural practice (the economic and cultural conditions the text reflects and reinforces). Goffman (1963, p. 3) defines stigma as an attribute that reduces a person 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one'; applied here, the label 'agent' itself works as a discrediting mark. Hall's (1997) account of representation, including his encoding and decoding model, treats meaning as constructed rather than reflected: journalists encode agents in particular ways, and audiences decode those portrayals through existing beliefs about money and loyalty in

football. Together, these concepts allow an interpretivist analysis that connects economic and cultural explanations of stigma.

5. Case Study: Neymar's 2017 transfer to Paris Saint-Germain

Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior's €222 million move from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in August 2017 was a turning point for modern football. It more than doubled the previous world record, Paul Pogba's €105 million move to Manchester United a year earlier (Swatman, 2017). It redefined the financial limits of recruitment, and it illustrates this dissertation's central questions: how media representations construct stigma around agents, and how the relationships between agents, journalists and the sport sustain it. The deal put 'super-agents' in the foreground, and coverage repeatedly cast them as self-interested intermediaries profiting from football's commercialisation.

The transfer took place against PSG's pursuit of European dominance under Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), a state-linked owner using the club for soft-power purposes ahead of the 2022 World Cup. At 25, Neymar was signed as the marquee player to lift PSG beyond domestic success. The deal raised questions about Financial Fair Play (FFP), tax and ethics, and coverage mixed sensationalism with moral critique, framing it as a symbol of football's decline. This chapter examines the transfer through the study's framework, showing how stigma was constructed and how the relationship between agents and journalists, in which leaks served both sides, reinforced the image of agents as villains in a sport shaped by inequality and geopolitics.

5.1 Background and motivations

Neymar had joined Barcelona from Santos in 2013 for a reported €57 million; later investigations revealed undisclosed payments that took the total to €86.2 million and led to fraud allegations against club officials. At Barcelona he formed the 'MSN' attack with Lionel Messi and Luis Suárez, won the 2015 treble and scored 105 goals in 186 appearances. By 2017, however, he was reported to be frustrated at playing in Messi's shadow and wanted a leading role in pursuit of the Ballon d'Or. Some reports suggest his father, Neymar Sr, initially advised him to stay, but Neymar came to see PSG as a 'new challenge' and a chance to build his own legacy.

PSG's motives were calculated. Since QSI's takeover in 2011 the club had invested around \$1 billion, signing players such as Zlatan Ibrahimović and

Edinson Cavani, without winning the Champions League (AFP, 2018). Neymar offered sporting quality and commercial reach: shirt sales, sponsorship from brands such as Nike and Qatar Airways, and more than 100 million Instagram followers by 2017, all of which served Qatar's wider sportswashing objectives amid regional rivalry and criticism of its human rights record (AFP, 2017). The reported terms were unprecedented, including a five-year contract worth around €30 million a year net, with bonuses for 'ethical behaviour' such as punctuality and engagement with fans (Settimi, 2017).

Coverage quickly framed the move as mercenary. Neymar insisted he had followed his 'heart', but outlets such as *The New York Times* foregrounded the size of the package, and agents were cast as the enablers of greed. What this framing left out was the relationship behind it: journalists relied on agents for leaks, while agents used the media to build momentum, in a cycle where economic ambition was vilified as a corruption of football's purity.

5.2 Timeline of the transfer

The deal came together over three weeks in July and August 2017, amid secrecy and constant speculation (L'Équipe, 2017b). In early July, Neymar's camp, led by Neymar Sr and agent Pini Zahavi, approached PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi, reviving interest from a failed approach in 2016. Zahavi, a former journalist known as 'Mr Fix It', managed confidential talks using the network he had built during Neymar's move from Santos to Barcelona.

Between 18 and 21 July the story broke. *L'Équipe* and the Catalan paper *Sport* reported PSG's €222 million bid, and media attention intensified. Barcelona teammates including Messi, Suárez and Gerard Piqué publicly urged Neymar to stay; Piqué's 'Se queda' ('He stays') post on 23 July was widely shared and became a meme once the transfer was confirmed. On Barcelona's pre-season tour of the United States, tensions surfaced when Neymar clashed with teammate Néelson Semedo in training on 26 July and left the session. PSG reportedly considered Alexis Sánchez as an alternative, wary of FFP sanctions.

The deal was briefly jeopardised at the end of July when Neymar Sr sought a loyalty bonus from Barcelona, prompting last-minute negotiations. Contracts were finalised on 2 August, PSG paid the release clause on 3 August (L'Équipe, 2017a), and Neymar was presented at the Parc des Princes on 4 August, calling the move a 'new challenge' (The Sun, 2017a).

The timeline shows how the media built drama from inside information. Leaks from the agents' side, with Brazilian reporter Marcelo Bechler first to break the story, created a feedback loop in which speculation fed both hype and stigma, and Zahavi was cast as a secretive orchestrator. Journalists' dependence on insiders drove the saga forward, while agents used the coverage to put pressure on both clubs: the symbiotic tension at the centre of this dissertation.

5.3 The role of agents and the construction of stigma

Zahavi, an Israeli super-agent, orchestrated the transfer and reportedly received more than €10 million in commission, with further annual payments tied to Neymar remaining at PSG (Philippin and Dolev, 2018). His background as a journalist is significant: his media connections allowed strategic leaks that built momentum while keeping the substance of negotiations confidential. Neymar Sr acted as co-agent, reportedly receiving comparable commission and controlling his son's image rights, which limited PSG's ability to exploit sponsorship. His handling of image rights and tax arrangements drew critical coverage and fed portrayals of exploitation.

The media constructed stigma by presenting agents as destabilising forces. *Der Spiegel* described it as the most political transfer in history, positioning the agents as facilitators of excess. This fits a wider consensus that agents inflate the market and put commission before loyalty, a narrative sustained by the mutual reliance between agents and journalists. Leaks to Bechler produced exclusives, yet Neymar's camp also tried to identify the source of those leaks, exposing the tension underneath. The agents also used the press directly: Neymar's agent publicly claimed that Barcelona had tried to block the move (The Sun, 2017b). The effect was to make agents scapegoats for football's commercialisation while overlooking their advocacy role, including the practical and cultural support they give players who move abroad. The coverage treated agents as 'necessary evils': journalists depended on them for content while vilifying them in terms that matched fans' ideals of sporting purity.

5.4 Controversies and legal fallout

The controversies that followed deepened the stigma. La Liga president Javier Tebas accused PSG of 'financial doping' through state funding, and UEFA opened an FFP investigation, closing it in 2018 before later reopening it after further leaks. QSI was alleged to have covered the cost through overvalued sponsorship deals, adding to concerns about sportswashing.

Tax questions emerged later. In 2024, French investigators searched the Economy Ministry as part of an inquiry into whether PSG had received favourable tax treatment on the deal (AFP, 2024), and Mediapart reported on alleged lobbying for that treatment. Separately, Neymar's earlier move from Santos to Barcelona led to a fraud trial in Spain, from which he and the club were acquitted in 2022. Further disputes concerned the employment of members of Neymar's entourage and his residency status.

Coverage often presented these issues as schemes orchestrated by agents, with Zahavi characterised as a 'fixer', while structural factors such as state ownership received less attention. Investigative reporting, such as Mediapart's, itself relied on insider information, so each round of exposure further entrenched the image of agents as the sport's ethical liability.

5.5 Media portrayals and sustaining narratives

Coverage turned the transfer into a symbol of excess. *The Sun* portrayed Neymar as a 'mercenary', comparing the move to Luís Figo's switch from Barcelona to Real Madrid in 2000. *The Guardian* offered detailed timelines and framed the deal as politically significant. French outlets such as RMC later judged it a failure, citing Neymar's injuries and PSG's failure to win the Champions League during his time there, despite his 118 goals in 173 appearances.

Social media amplified the stigma. Posts on Twitter (now X) linked the deal to ego and corruption, and fans later protested about Neymar's lifestyle. The same relationships sustained the narrative here: Neymar defended his 'heart'-led decision in interviews, including with ESPN's Natalie Gedra, yet coverage repeatedly returned to greed. Agents leaked to build hype and journalists relied on them, in a cycle where stigma also served as clickbait. The media constructed agents as villains while concealing its own reliance on them in producing the story.

5.6 Applying the framework

Read through Fairclough's (2010) three dimensions, the coverage of the Neymar transfer shows how stigma is produced at each level.

At the level of text, the vocabulary did much of the work. Zahavi was 'Mr Fix It'; agents more broadly were 'super-agents', 'fixers' and, in harsher registers, 'vultures'. Each label compresses a complex professional role into a single discrediting attribute, which is Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma in miniature.

Neymar himself was allowed to speak of his ‘heart’ and a ‘new challenge’; the financial motive was displaced onto the people around him.

At the level of discursive practice, the coverage depended on the agents it condemned. The story was broken through leaks, most prominently by Bechler, and sustained by *L'Équipe* and *Sport*; the drama of a three-week saga was built from information that could only have come from inside the negotiation. Journalists relied on agents for access while presenting them as the problem, a contradiction the coverage never acknowledged.

At the sociocultural level, the agents stood in for forces that were harder to name. The deal was made possible by state ownership, an escalating transfer market and a club pursuing soft-power objectives for Qatar. Criticising ‘greedy agents’ offered an easier target than criticising a state-backed owner or the commercial structure of the game, and it aligned with a fan ideology of loyalty and sporting purity. In Hall’s (1997) terms, the coverage was encoded around a familiar villain, and readers already primed to distrust money in football decoded it that way. The result is a discourse in which agents absorb the blame for the system they operate within.

5.7 Long-term fallout and legacy

The transfer’s legacy is mixed. It contributed to inflation across the market, helping to normalise fees above €100 million, such as Chelsea’s signing of Enzo Fernández. Barcelona’s finances deteriorated after expensive replacements, Ousmane Dembélé for €145 million and Philippe Coutinho for €160 million, and the club’s difficulties culminated in Messi’s departure in 2021. PSG moved away from its superstar model after Neymar left for Al-Hilal in 2023 and built a younger squad, going on to win the Champions League for the first time in 2025. The transfer also added to the scrutiny of agents that preceded FIFA’s 2023 regulatory reforms.

5.8 Case study conclusion

Neymar’s transfer shows the media’s role in stigmatising agents. Zahavi and Neymar Sr were presented as embodiments of greed, and those portrayals were sustained by the interdependence between journalists and agents. The case answers the dissertation’s central question directly: coverage reproduced an unequal distribution of blame, while the agents’ essential, if contested, role in the deal went largely unexamined.

6. Conclusion

This dissertation has shown that media representations construct and perpetuate stigma around football agents through recurring tropes, such as the ‘greedy super-agent’ and the ‘manipulative parasite’, which position agents as ethical outliers in a commercialised sport. These portrayals are sustained by relationships of mutual dependence between agents, journalists and other stakeholders. Agents supply inside information in return for strategic coverage; journalists rely on them for exclusives; and the result is a feedback loop that intensifies sensationalism. The Neymar transfer illustrates this clearly. Zahavi was cast as ‘Mr Fix It’, the facilitator of excess, and the €222 million deal was presented as a sign of moral decline, while the shared benefits of the hype were rarely acknowledged. Economic inefficiency (Kuper and Szymanski, 2018) and ethical breaches (Shropshire and Davis, 2008) are real, but CDA shows how language reproduces an imbalance of power that marginalises agents and legitimises the perspectives of clubs and fans.

Applying Fairclough’s three dimensions proved effective. At the level of text, labels reduced agents to a single discrediting attribute. At the level of practice, coverage depended on the agents it condemned. At the sociocultural level, agents absorbed blame for structures, such as state ownership and an inflating market, that were harder to criticise. The analysis also highlighted how digital media accelerates stigma through viral leaks, a factor economic models tend to overlook (Goddard, Sloane and Wilson, 2012). Because the study relies on secondary sources, however, it cannot show how agents and journalists themselves experience this relationship.

Two practical recommendations follow. Media outlets could adopt editorial guidance that places agents’ conduct in the context of their role and economic contribution, reducing sensationalism without restricting legitimate scrutiny. FIFA could strengthen transparency, for example through fuller public disclosure of agents’ commissions, to reduce perceptions of opportunism and protect trust, particularly for young and vulnerable players.

Future research could build on this study through interviews with agents and journalists; extend the analysis to South American and Asian markets; use quantitative content analysis to track how often particular tropes appear across platforms over time; and compare football with other sports, such as agents in the NBA, to test the framework more widely.

The dissertation contributes to the field by connecting economic and cultural analysis, and by reframing agents not as inherently villainous but as contested figures within power structures sustained by discourse. That matters because unchecked stigma distorts a multi-billion-pound industry, can disadvantage emerging players who need good representation, and undermines football's claim to be the people's game (Anani, 2023). By making these dynamics visible, the research argues for fairer and more accurate coverage of the people who make the modern game work.

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