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To Be Continued...on the Football Pitch: Seriality, Transmedia Storytelling, and Viewer Engagement with Non-Fictional Television Characters

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Introduction

In August 2021, FC Barcelona gave a press conference to bid farewell to Lionel Messi. The Argentinian is not only widely considered to be one of the greatest football players in the club's history, but also one of the greatest football players of all time¹ ("Leo Messi's"). The press conference begins with Messi making his way to a podium that prominently features the emblem of the club that over the years became inseparably associated with the football superstar. Before Messi addresses the audience, the broadcast cuts to images of his wife and three sons, who are seated directly in front of him. As the announcer declares that the press conference is about to begin, the audience erupts in applause, and Messi is overcome with emotion. He paces up and down the stage, visibly trying to contain his feelings as his wife hands him a tissue. While the announcer goes over the schedule of the press conference, Messi is struggling to retain a professional posture: he turns away from the cameras to blow his nose, wipes tears from his eyes, and looks distraught as he holds on to the podium. When he finally speaks, his voice sounds fragile, and his words are interrupted by audible sniffing sounds. Messi reflects on his history at FC Barcelona and declares his respect for the club, but ultimately announces that he will not be playing for Barcelona in the upcoming season since, as has been widely

¹ With FC Barcelona, Messi has won Spain's top football League (La Liga) ten times and the Champions League, the highest club competition in Europe, four times. He has been the top goal scorer of La Liga eight times and across all top European football leagues six times. With seven wins, Messi is also the record holder of the Ballon d'Or, one of the most esteemed prizes in Football, which is annually given out by the magazine *France Football* to the best football player in the world.

publicised prior to the press conference, no agreement over his contract could be reached.

Messi's departure from FC Barcelona was a massive media event that was broadcast live on television and online to viewers around the world. The comment section and the chat transcript of FC Barcelona's official YouTube coverage of Messi's farewell indicate that long-term viewer engagement and serial storytelling are crucial aspects of the ways in which viewers relate to non-fictional television characters ("Leo Messi's"). While many viewers express their feelings towards Messi's departure simply by posting cry or heart emojis underneath the video or in the live chat, others explicitly refer to their own personal history with Messi and his history within the club in their responses. One user expresses their disappointment at Messi's departure by stating "I thought you started with Barcelona and you will end with it" while other viewers proclaim that they have been "following this genius since he started at Barcelona" and will "always support Messi, wherever he goes" (MIKEY; Ashe, 89; ROCKONbaby).

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the study of fictional television characters, with media scholars being particularly fascinated with the relationship between television viewers and the protagonists of serialised "quality" television dramas (McCabe and Akass; Mittell, *Complex TV*; Schlütz). In comparison, there have not been many studies undertaken that examine the relationship between television viewers and sports stars, and the extent to which popular seriality might shape this relationship. This article will expand the ongoing discourse on television characters, seriality, and viewer engagement by investigating how viewers relate to characters from contemporary sports broadcasts. The article argues that current sports broadcasts frequently adopt narrative techniques that are commonly associated with fictional television formats (e.g., serial storytelling, transmedia storytelling) to increase the audience's engagement with the stories they tell and the characters that are featured on

them. The article begins with an overview of previous studies on television sports. This is followed by a discussion of serialised television storytelling, television characters, and viewer engagement. Using Lionel Messi's 2021 transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain as a case study, the article will then show how modern sports broadcasts adopt elements of serial and transmedia storytelling and investigate this increasing implementation of seriality in the context of viewer engagement.

With regard to its methodology, the article uses an interdisciplinary approach that mainly draws on theories from sport studies, television studies, and cognitive media theory. While this article employs netnographic research methods to collect viewer responses to sports programmes, the arguments it makes are primarily based on a close-textual analysis of contemporary sports programmes and their transmedia extensions (Kozinets). In other words, the viewer responses that are referenced over the course of this article are meant to illustrate that transmedia seriality factors into how viewers relate to non-fictional television characters, but they cannot be regarded as empirical evidence. Ultimately, this article is concerned with developing a qualitative framework for the study of viewer engagement with non-fictional television characters that could be adopted by quantitative studies in the future.

Media Sports, Viewer Engagement, and Sports Stars

When comparing studies on television sports with studies of other television genres, it immediately becomes clear that there still exists a gap regarding studies that approach television sports from a cultural studies perspective—which is somewhat surprising given how popular sports programmes are with television audiences all over the world. Yet, despite the overall lack of scholarly works on television sports, there are a few studies that have previously examined sports programmes in the context of narration and viewer engagement.

In his seminal work on television sports, Whannel uses the rivalry between British runners Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett as his main case study to explore how television broadcasts fictionalise sporting events to appeal to the audience:

Clearly television did not invent this story, or create its importance within the scheme of things. It did, however, draw on it heavily as part of its appeal to viewers. In doing so it constantly foregrounded the events precisely as a story, which can be understood in terms of the workings of the hermeneutic code. The hermeneutic code poses the initial enigma of a narrative, and gives the text its forward progression towards the resolution of the enigma. So as not to answer the question too soon, a number of strategies are adopted. The most relevant here are constant reformulation of the question, the promise that there will be an answer, and the provision of a partial answer. (132)

As Whannel here highlights, sports programmes primarily fictionalise sports events by introducing narrative questions, thus increasing audience investment. Whannel's example underlines that the narrative enigma that sports programmes create can be simple questions that fit in with sports' competitive nature and focus on athletic ability such as "Who will win?" and "Who is the best?" Sports broadcasts further fictionalise the events they depict by ascribing a mythological quality to them. Perhaps most famously, Roland Barthes has argued in favour of the Tour de France as a modern epic, akin to Homer's *Odyssey* (75). Similarly, Whannel states that the way in which the Coe/Ovett rivalry was rendered in the media prior to their confrontation at the 1980 Olympic Games purposely recalled "gods, Titans and mythic confrontations" (138).

In addition to these fictionalization techniques, modern sports programmes have embraced serial and transmedia storytelling—both of which are narrative strategies most commonly associated with fictional storytelling. As a result, many of today's sports programmes resemble the narrative complexity of television drama (Mittell, *Complex TV*). Stauff uses the Tour de France to highlight this aspect of modern sports broadcasts:

To articulate their take on the disqualification of the Tour de France rider, fans refer to comparable past events, activate knowledge about rivalries between cyclists, or

note character traits that they condensed from the alleged perpetrator's prior appearances. Sport thus creates a continuously evolving and recursive storyworld that, like all popular seriality, proliferates across different media forms (texts, photos, films, etc.) and different media platforms (television, social media, etc.). (Stauff)

These observations highlight that the narration of modern sports programmes increasingly resembles the complex serialised storytelling of fictional television, extends across different types of media, and has changed how viewers interact with sports programmes. However, there has not been much research undertaken on how the evolution of sports programmes has affected viewer engagement with the characters that are featured on them. Before discussing this aspect in detail, it makes sense to look more generally at viewer engagement in television sports.

Wenner and Gantz argue that main motivators for watching television sports can be found at the "crossroads of identity and ambiguity" (234). What primarily distinguishes sports from fictional television genres is that it provides "live and unscripted drama, but one that guarantees resolution" (Wenner and Gantz 235). Following teams or players is consequently an essential aspect of watching sports since it provides the ideal combination of identification and ambiguity: the audience does not know if their favourite will succeed, which makes it particularly gratifying if they do (Wenner and Gantz 236).

With regard to viewer engagement, the genre that perhaps resembles sports most closely is reality television since both genres appeal to their viewers by combining constructed "storylines that pack an emotional punch" with "moments of real human experience" (Hill 122). Kavka highlights that 'feeling' is one of the main differences between fictional and factual television, arguing that "in terms of emotive function, feeling has no place in information programming" (94). In contrast, fictional programmes are largely concerned with eliciting emotional responses in the audience. According to Kavka, as a result of the ongoing "tabloidization" of television, fictional and factual television have begun to mix: fictional programmes have added a sense of reality to their

narratives to increase spectacle whereas factual programmes have adopted elements of fictional television to intensify emotional engagement (94). While my analysis of the Messi transfer saga in this article is primarily concerned with the impact of transmedia seriality on viewer engagement with non-fictional television characters, it should be noted that it also functions as a prime example for “tabloidization.”

As previously noted, many studies that have investigated athletes in relation to viewer engagement, have examined them through the lens of mythology. Yet modern celebrity culture has reshaped the audience’s relationship with sports stars. Marshall argues that, for the last two centuries, different types of media (e.g. books, newspapers, magazines, film)—the majority of which are controlled by large public and private media organisations—have represented culture. In our current age of convergence culture, a shift has been taking place towards presentational media, which is not controlled by media organisations, but individuals. This shift is noteworthy since it has reshaped our perception and engagement with contemporary sports stars. Cashmore claims that, unlike some modern celebrities who are simply famous for being famous, sport stars typically still become famous for their athletic abilities (136). Yet, he also notes that “celebrity culture is inclusive and rewards anything that fans find gratifying, whether a series of electrifying performances on the field of play, a lifestyle of excess or even an amusing Twitter account” (Cashmore 137). The most relevant aspect of the “proliferation of the public self” in the context of this article is that enables sports stars to actively shape the stories the media tells about them (Marshall). Messi’s transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain F.C. in many ways encapsulates the shift from representational to presentational media since, as the story unfolded across different media, Messi directly intervened through social media (e.g. Twitter, Instagram) to control how it was being told.

Seriality, Character Arcs, and Viewer Engagement

Television serials are primarily defined by their open-endedness. They typically tell a continuous story over multiple episodes or seasons of a programme. Since the story unfolds across multiple episodes, the audience has to construct the diegesis based on her knowledge of the entire history of the show, which—particularly in the case of long-running serials (e.g. soap operas, dramas)—can encompass a vast amount of narrative information. Allen acknowledges this aspect of serialised television narration by stating that, in the context of the serial, “each episode, each new character, each new plot becomes a ‘theme’ to be assessed against the horizon supplied by the reader’s perception of the text up to that point” (86). Similarly, Creeber asserts that, since television serials are able to develop their stories over an extended period of time, they are able to achieve a narrative scope and level of viewer engagement that is only equalled by few contemporary storytelling formats (4). In serial television, plotlines are rarely fully resolved, and if they are, they are immediately replaced by “more suspenseful or engrossing narrative enigmas to keep viewers watching” (Mittell, “Film” 164). Rather than providing an ultimate narrative telos, television serials usually feature a number of overlapping “mini-closures” that resolve a particular narrative question, but do not move the text closer to an ultimate resolution (Allen 75). Thus, serialised television narration might be best described as a cycle of interim questions and answers, in which current questions are emphasised while those already answered slowly fade and retreat into the background (Allen 76).

Serial television places more emphasis on characters than most other television formats. One of the main reasons for this is that “continuing stories make characters more likely to undergo significant live events and changes” which often leads to the characters themselves changing or at least growing (Newman 23). The potential for character change can increase the audience’s investment in the characters—viewers

are not only interested in how a story will develop, but they also want to see how characters will be affected by new plot developments.

In his work on television poetics, Michael Newman examines the notion of character arcs at length. He states that, since the plot of television serials slowly accumulates over time, viewers are meant to watch episodes in sequence in order to trace the progression of the plot and the characters (23). Newman stresses the crucial role that character arcs play for viewer engagement and clarifies how they relate to the plot of television serials:

The device that best ensures [the viewer's] commitment to the narrative is the character arc. Arc is to character as plot is to story. Put slightly differently, arc is plot stated in terms of character. An arc is a character's journey from A through B, C, and D to E [...] Character arcs may stretch across many episodes, seasons, and the entirety of a series. (23)

This means that, although character arcs are closely-tied to a television serial's story, they do not progress at the same pace, but climax or resolve at different points as plotlines. Character arcs are carefully planned out by television producers and usually include significant turning points—plot events that all further action of the character is based on. Moving a character's arc along too slowly may result in viewers getting bored with a character while moving an arc along too quickly suggests that a programme might not take advantage of the serial format's quality of imitating the "protracted rhythms of real life" (Smith 84).

Kelleter has argued that all forms of popular seriality (including television) are essentially capitalist since they are based on the belief of their continued existence (30). Character arcs are inseparably tied to the capitalist underpinnings of serial narratives since they create interest in the development of characters to convince viewers to come back to a programme (Newman 25). Yet, in addition to such commercial functions, character arcs also fulfil "aesthetic functions" such as "generating interest in character,

of engaging the audience in the struggles and discoveries, the lives and loves of their TV friends, and of maximizing formal unity” (Newman 25). In the context of this article, character arcs are relevant because they provide a character-based framework to organise the plot of a television serial and trace the audience’s engagement with the characters.

Providing a comprehensive overview of how the relationship between television viewers and characters has previously been theorised would go beyond the scope of this article. Thus, my discussion of television characters, viewer engagement, and serial television will largely focus on one key element, namely the extent to which the temporal setup of television serials shapes the viewer/character relationship. What primarily distinguishes characters from television serials from characters who exist within non-serialised stories is that they have histories and memories (Allen). When viewers relate to these characters, and their relationships with other characters, they read that relationship against its history up to that point in the story which, in the case of long-running soap operas, could span five, ten, or in some cases twenty years (Allen 72). The open-endedness of the serial encourages a more intimate relationship between viewers and characters through giving the audience “a sense of becoming part of the lives and actions of the characters they see” (Newcomb 253). Since television serials unfold over an extended period of time, they are able to provide viewers with an intimate, slow-building portrait of a person’s life that cannot be easily matched by other contemporary visual storytelling formats such as film (Gorton 124).

Harrington and Bielby have previously examined the complex ways in which fandom is intertwined with the different stages of a person’s life. In their work on life course and fandom, they argue that long-term fandom can “provide structure to life narratives, as fans employ specific cultural texts to segment or divide their lives into different periods” (Harrington and Bielby 438). The authors also indicate that long-term fandom can lead to

distinct types of emotional engagement— for example, viewers might not only feel sad at the end of a beloved television series as a result of their attachment to its characters, but also because the ending marks the end of an era in their own life (Harrington and Bielby 431). In their work on long-term viewer engagement with characters from contemporary television drama, Blanchet and Vaage echo this argument and develop it further. They argue that, based on the history viewers share with television characters, they form a bond with them that “cannot be reduced to the processes of empathy and sympathy” (Blanchet and Vaage 28). This “shared history account” enables television serials to create emotionally affecting character moments at any point in time since the audience is already familiar with the characters and the story world (Blanchet and Vaage 28; Warhol 110). The effects of seriality on viewer engagement have already been studied at length in the context of fictional television, but rarely in the context of non-fictional television such as sports broadcasts.

From FC Barcelona to Serialised Drama

Various media outlets referred to Lionel Messi’s transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain F.C. in the summer of 2021 as a soap opera. The use of the term is relevant in the context of this article since the soap opera is a television genre that is commonly associated with melodramatic serialised storytelling. The remainder of this article will trace Messi’s transfer and analyse it in the context of viewer engagement, arguing that it is a prime example for the impact that transmedia seriality has had on how viewers engage with non-fictional television characters.

Fractures between FC Barcelona and Lionel Messi first started to publicly show in early 2020 (“The Timeline”). In February, shortly after FC Barcelona’s team manager Ernesto Valverde was fired, the club’s sporting director Eric Abidal gave an interview to the Catalan publication *Sport* in which he stated that, among other reasons, the manager

was let go because some players weren't working hard enough. The following day, Messi publicly responded to Abidal's accusations via Twitter, defending the players and stating that "the sporting direction should also face up to their responsibilities and, above all, take charge of their own decisions" (@goal). Messi further demanded that Abidal should name names when making accusations since, otherwise, the image of every player would be tainted. In March 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Messi again voiced his dissatisfaction with FC Barcelona's leadership—this time on Instagram. He confirmed that the club's players agreed to a seventy percent reduction in pay to combat FC Barcelona's financial losses during the pandemic, but also criticised the club for putting pressure on the players to comply with this drastic pay cut. In August 2020, Barcelona were eliminated from the Champions League, Europe's most prestigious club tournament, after losing 2-8 to Bayern Munich.²

After the defeat, which was portrayed in the media as one of the club's most humiliating losses, the events leading to Messi's departure accelerated within a span of days. Barcelona's manager and the club's sporting director were fired and Ronald Koeman, one of the club's legendary former players, took over as new manager. At this point in time, it was reported that Koeman had plans to radically restructure the club and told Messi during a private meeting that he does not have any privileges within the squad anymore. Upon the arrival of the new manager, Barcelona also released several star players including Messi's close friend Luis Suarez. On August 25th, 2020, Messi sent an official letter to the club leadership, informing them of his intention to leave FC Barcelona before the start of the new season in September. Messi and his legal staff claimed that a clause in his contract would allow him to leave on a free transfer immediately. However, LaLiga deemed that the 700 million Euro transfer fee that FC Barcelona set for Messi was

²<https://www.uefa.com/uefachampionsleague/news/0260-1020a197123b-5848d2b10d39-1000--barcelona-2-8-bayern-record-breaking-win-for-rampant-germans/>

valid, which essentially forced him to stay in Barcelona for another year since no football team in the world was willing or able to pay this excessive transfer fee. In September 2020, Messi gave a candid interview to the football fan site Goal in which he discussed his problems with FC Barcelona in detail while also confirming that he was going to remain at the club for another year. At the time of writing, the interview has been viewed over four million times (“Messi”).

Messi continued to play for Barcelona until his contract expired in June 2021, which officially made him a free agent and allowed him to move to another club without a transfer fee. Throughout the summer of 2021, FC Barcelona kept reassuring the public that—although no deal has been finalised—Messi was keen to stay in Barcelona. In August 2021, the club surprisingly announced that a deal between Messi and FC Barcelona could not be reached since the financial details of the deal both parties agreed-upon violate the rules of LaLiga. After giving an emotional farewell at a press conference, Messi joined Paris Saint-Germain on a two-year contract.

As mentioned above, the narrative structure of sports broadcasts is not exclusively episodic—for example, many popular team sports are divided by seasons, thereby encouraging viewers to view the current season in relation to prior seasons. Moreover, many sports offer viewers the chance to experience the sort of pleasures that are primarily reserved for serial storytelling in the form of cups or tournaments in which the winners progress and the losers are eliminated. Even more so than a season, this condensed format encourages viewers to trace the progress of a team or player and reflect on their progression throughout the tournament. However, unlike these serial elements that are interwoven into the fabric of television sports (e.g. seasons, cups), Messi’s transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain more resembles the storylines of serialised television drama. In fact, it seems difficult to imagine how in a fictional context the ‘plotline’ of Messi’s transfer could have been played out more dramatically.

Similar to plotlines of serialised television drama, the story of Messi's transfer slowly accumulated over an extended period of time. It began in the summer of 2020, evolved over the course of an entire year, and culminated in Messi's transfer to Paris Saint-Germain in the summer of 2021. Yet, in true serial fashion, the ending to this story was not definitive. Rather, it functions as a "mini-closure" that ties up one plotline while posing new questions (e.g., Will Messi be able to repeat his successes in a completely different environment? How will FC Barcelona react to the loss of its biggest star player?) (Allen 75). In addition to the slow build-up and its open-endedness, the story of Messi's transfer resembles contemporary "complex" television in that it unfolded across different types of media (e.g. newspapers, fan sites, social media, television). Also, it is safe to assume that viewers who followed FC Barcelona during the 2020/21 season would be caught up on current developments in the Messi transfer saga during the team's weekly games by the game's commentators. For example, on the German iteration of the international sports streaming service DAZN, the commentary team frequently discussed FC Barcelona's performances in relation to the drama that was unfolding at the club behind the scenes. More specifically, many of Messi's actions during games—positive or negative—were filtered through the superstar's assumed feelings and motivations, thus providing viewers with an incentive to tune in on a weekly basis that went beyond FC Barcelona's success as a team. Yet, as with fictional transmedia stories, those viewers who were willing to follow the story across multiple platforms over an extended period of time would be rewarded with a more comprehensive experience.

Messi's departure from Barcelona and eventual transfer to Paris not only played out in serial fashion on a plot level, but it also featured a compelling character arc. Up until the events that led to his departure from FC Barcelona, Messi's public persona had been that of the ideal Barca player. He had spent most of his professional career at the club and emphasised on numerous occasions that he intended to finish his career in

Barcelona. Thus, when Barcelona's sporting director criticised the team's players for their attitude, and Messi shifted the blame for lacklustre performances to the club leadership and soon after handed in his resignation, this marked a significant change in attitude for the Argentinian superstar. Messi's eventual departure from FC Barcelona in 2021 can also be interpreted as a plot event that advanced his character arc. In contrast to the previous year, which was dominated by headlines stating that Messi had been forced to stay at FC Barcelona against his will, Messi claimed during his farewell press conference that things had changed for him from the previous year. He explained that, while he did want to leave in 2020, it was now his wish to stay at Barcelona—yet the financial regulations of LaLiga made it impossible for him to stay.

As with the overall story of Messi's transfer, which unfolded akin to fictional plotlines from serialised television drama, the character arc that progressed alongside this plot strongly resembles the sort of character development that television characters from fictional narratives typically undergo over the course of a season. Messi begins his arc as the loyal team captain of FC Barcelona, who has been with the club over twenty years. After a number of disagreements with the management, he wants to leave, but is forced to stay for contractual reasons. In what would be considered a poetic turnaround in a fictional context, Messi then claims that he has rediscovered his passion for FC Barcelona, but this time has to leave—again for contractual reasons.

The extent to which Messi's transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain resembles the serialised storytelling of contemporary television drama is relevant since it offers audiences opportunities for viewer engagement that have historically not been associated with television sports. More traditional sports viewers might be mainly interested in the athletic performances of Messi or FC Barcelona. For such viewers, the viewing pleasures that have historically been associated with sports programmes—identifying with a team or player in the context of an athletic competition in which the

outcome is uncertain—are still dominant. However, as I have discussed over the course of this article, the serial nature of the story of Messi’s transfer also offers viewers opportunities for engagement that are more commonly associated with fictional serial television narratives. As previously noted, what primarily distinguishes the audience’s relationship with serial characters from their relationship with non-fictional characters is that serial characters have histories and memories, and the ability to change or, at least, grow (Mittell, “Complex TV” 133-42). The global online reception to Messi’s transfer makes clear that viewers were engaged in this story based on a combination of their interest in how the story would resolve, their investment in the player’s character arc, and their shared history with Messi. For example, in the YouTube comments to Messi’s interview with Goal, user Shivam states that “at the end of the season, it would be very satisfying to see him leave for free” while Zizzy7 wishes for Messi to get “everything he wants and deserves at the end of the season” (Shivam; Zizzy7). Another viewer expresses their hopes that Messi “can find happiness in his football wearing a Barca shirt again” whereas Anonymous Boiii_69 demands: “Let Messi out, he is being forced to stay” (No, I’m Spartacus; Anonymous Boiii_69).

These responses mainly underline the audience’s interest in the story of Messi’s transfer and the arc of his public persona. Meanwhile, in their responses to Messi’s farewell press conference, viewers frequently reflect on the player’s transfer in relation to their own lives:

This is a wound that I’m afraid will never heal, Messi was the reason I became a fan of a wonderful club back in 09. Each week I would look forward to seeing him play for Barca. I never imagined I would be here watching this video, only when he retired as a Barca player. My heart is broken but it is what it is. Life is full of surprises, only way to deal with it is to move forward and be hopeful. Thank you Leo, for the wonderful memories you gave me, thank you for making me a fan, and thank you for all that you’ve done for this club and its fans. You’ll be back, maybe not as a player but just know, we’ll be waiting for your return. I guess it’s true what they say, every journey has its end, and what a beautiful journey it has been. (Aaron Garcia)

This comment, which is exemplary for many of the responses that can be found in the comment section to Messi's farewell press conference, makes clear that the history viewers share with a character does not only guide viewer engagement with fictional television characters, but also affects how viewers relate to characters from non-fictional television programmes. It would go beyond the scope of this article to examine if long-term viewer engagement with non-fictional television characters from sports programmes leads to specific emotional responses, yet this overview of the reception of Messi's departure from FC Barcelona highlights the ability of serial storytelling to intensify the audience's emotional engagement with a story and its characters.

Conclusion

My analysis of football superstar Lionel Messi's long-gestating transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain in this article has shown that the serialisation of non-fictional sports events across different platforms offers sports viewers the opportunity to experience viewing pleasures that have in the past been primarily associated with fictional television storytelling. Of course, sport programmes have always featured serial elements (e.g. tournaments, seasons). However, with regard to viewer engagement, these serial elements have historically been dominated by what might be considered more traditional appeals of watching television sports such as identifying with a team or player and watching them compete in unscripted athletic competitions. These viewing pleasures of sports programmes still remain intact, but the ongoing trend towards the serialisation of non-fictional television programmes (e.g. true crime documentaries) provides viewers with more options to engage with their favourite athletes on and off the pitch. More specifically, while some viewers might still choose to engage with sports programmes in a more traditional sense (e.g. only following the weekly games), other viewers might get more emotionally invested in the performance of a player based on

their knowledge of off-pitch plotlines, their shared history with a player, or their interest in her character arc. Within the broader discourse on seriality and non-fiction, my analysis in this article is meant to be understood as an initial step. I also want to acknowledge that the main case study of this article provided an ideal example for how transmedia seriality can enhance viewer engagement with non-fictional television characters. The reason for this is that Messi's transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain essentially unfolded like a fictional storyline and even included a clear character arc. Thus, future research on this subject needs to investigate how it affects viewer engagement if the 'plot' of a non-fictional television programmes does not develop or resolve in a way that exactly resembles the carefully constructed plots of fictional serial television. Additionally, future studies on this subject need to examine if the increasing serialisation of non-fictional events elicits distinct emotional responses (e.g. sympathy, antipathy) in viewers and pay more attention to the extent to which the interweaving of on and off-pitch plotlines (e.g. How much does the drama surrounding Messi's transfer affect his performances in individual games?) shapes viewer engagement.

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