

Beckham's Sa'Wrong. Fashioning a more flexible masculinity and the softening of soccer.

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"Football is a game of hard, physical contact, a form of combat. It is, and must remain, a man's game. Women have no place in it except to cheer on their men, wash and iron their kit, and prepare and serve refreshments."

Ted Crocker Secretary of the EFA 1988

Cited by Dunning 1999

This Paper describes a journey in research which crosses both geographical and gender boundaries to explore different contemporary expressions of masculinity in relation to male football dress and fashion. From the island of Flores in Indonesia all the way to the fashion billboards of Times Square, New York city, this paper will examine the feminisation of football culture and the deification of its most glamorous stars.

"Not for the first time, the North American development of civil society has surreptitiously illustrated one of Oscar Wilde's maxims. In this case it was his quip that soccer was perfectly good for rough girls but hardly the game for delicate boys." (Ross 2007)

This Paper will focus in on the investigation of masculine semiotic codes in fluid dress, especially as an investigation of the erosion and transformation of the world of the traditionally hegemonic universe of men's soccer. The paper will focus on the Global Sports persona of David Beckham as an archetype of all that represents the 'New Man' and a living illustration of the embodiment of "Flexible masculinity". "David Beckham is a decorous icon, through which challenges to traditional definitions of what it means to 'be a man' in the new millennium can be examined." (Gee 2014)

## Context

Accompanied by two fashion students I travelled to Indonesia where we visited indigenous fabric weavers in Waimose and Boas in Lembor Village and Liang Sola Village on the Island of Flores. We sourced locally produced and totally unique fabrics, subsequently guiding the students through the completion of two men's garment collections, which were shown at Jakarta Fashion week in November 2015.

Everywhere we went there seemed to be both a symbiosis and a clash of tradition and modernity which could be seen in the homes and village infrastructures but especially in the clothing which the locals wore. The children in particular appeared to blend western fashion branded garments featuring bands and sports branding, particularly football, with traditional cloths and accessories, whether this was from a style and adornment perspective or hand me down happenstance was not clear. The women of the villages were the craft and weaving practitioners and the keystone to the creation of income for the villages through the production of traditional hand woven Ikat fabrics, typically and most commonly used to make the sarong. "The south east Asian sarong is typically made of woven cloth and is about 100cm high and up to 220cm in circumference. The wearer steps into a sarong, secures it at the hip (or under the arms for women) either by

lapping both ends to meet in the center or by pulling the sarong taut at one side of the body and lapping the remaining fabric to the front, and then rolling the top down and tucking it in or tying the ends in a knot.” (Boehike 2010)

One of the weavers stood out to me in particular with her pairing of a counterfeit Gucci T-Shirt and her artfully woven and wrapped sarong. Many other women worn blouses made of inexpensive brightly coloured polyester lace in great contrast to the organically dyed cottons and silk filaments which they were weaving into the unique Ikat cloths. A juxtaposition of traditional craft semiotics and the aspiration of high fashion brand visibility and westernised aspiration.

Like many gatherings of people the world over there were familiar roles being played out with the female villagers providing refreshments and the menfolk observing from a slight distance, smoking and posturing on their motorbikes. The children posed and played football and chased livestock.

The Mayor of the village's wife demonstrated how men and women wear the sarong in different ways, the same piece of cloth being used in a flexible, but ultimately gender specific way.

It was fascinating to observe this versatile and functionally purposed piece of fabric used with such skill, reverence and dexterity, and observing that it had rules and meanings. Each cloth spoke of the location of its creation and its history and seemed to have been unchanged for centuries. Parallels are easily drawn across different cultures around the notion of traditionally non- masculine dress having strong social and historic connotations. Michelman and Miller- Spillman note “the Scottish kilt, still worn at many social gatherings to establish a social and cultural identity, represents the height of masculinity (Kidwell and Steel 1989)

They go on to state, “Clothing for both men and women is culturally defined. Cultural norms and expectations are related to the meaning of being a man or a woman and are closely linked to appearance. In Indonesia, parts and west Africa, and in traditional Scottish dress, men wear an article of clothing that closely resembles a western definition of a skirt. In Indonesia both men and women wear the sarong, a length of cloth wrapped to form a tube. The wrapper, a rectangular cloth tied at the waist, is worn by both sexes in parts of west Africa”.

The two things which were crystalising as inextricably linked, were fabric and football, both in terms of their symbolic interwoven meanings but also the faith, history and reverence awarded to the symbols and insignia which hold such integral relevance and integrated meaning in both activities. Each village in Indonesia has its own symbols and motifs woven within the very fabric of their cloths. Turtles, spiders, ants and birds, all representing something of the individual identity of each weaving community, telling the stories of their collective identities and community histories. Similarly, football clubs and their supporters place great importance and a reverence to their own symbols of identity and belonging. The club crest or insignia worn proudly on the chests or fans and players alike. Badges of Identity, Colour and pattern are of huge symbolic relevance in the identification of one football fraternity or tribe from another, global signifiers of tribal belonging, of kinship and allegiance.

So, a garment collection was created and photographed by combining and juxtaposing traditional Indonesian fabrics and craft techniques with western influences, through sports kit and counterfeit designer garments, and introducing other global craft practices.

Patterson and Elliott (2002) state that "hegemonic masculinity is changing in order to maintain its privileged position, it must adapt to meet the demands of contemporary society and to ward off the threat posed to it by an increasingly powerful and vocal women's movement. Such an adaptation has involved the increasing feminization of masculinities (Barthel 1994), as men are encouraged to partake in the carnival of consumption, to become concerned about their appearance, to get in touch with their emotions, and as male bodies to become objects for display subject to the male gaze."

### Feminisation of Football

Using popular football cultural references and materials gleaned from a hyper-masculine past and combining local & global craft techniques, this paper will explore the new feminisation of football through the removal of boundaries in men's sports dressing and creating a more fluid approach which celebrates & deifies the modern football fashionista. The Photographic images created to accompany this investigation explore movement and kinetic strength and juxtapose the semiotics of hyper -masculinity against more recognised feminine forms and fabrications. Michelman and Miller Spillman explain that, "The biological continuum of genes, Chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive physiology helps us produce a script for appearing and behaving male and female. Viewing gender as a fluid concept allows scholars studying clothing and appearance to understand gender relations as more than men and women "dressing their parts" (Michelman and Kaiser 2000)"

Sport in itself has undergone a radical transformation and is continuing to evolve against and in direct counteraction to its traditionally grounded structures and entrenched boundaries, both in relation to gender, sexuality, appearance, behaviours and perceived roles. Messner proposes that the traditionally hegemonic infrastructure was initially the cause of the feminist reaction against it but then by the law of action and reaction also became the reason for its reinforcement. "In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modernization and women's continued movement into public life created wide-spread "fears of social feminization," especially among middle class men (Hantover, 1978; Kimmel, 1987). One result of these fears was the creation of organized sport as a homosocial sphere in which competition and (often violent) physicality was valued, while the "feminine" was devalued.

When we think back to the footballers of my father's youth we think of Stanley Matthews, George Best, Bobby Charlton, Kevin Keegan and Pelé, we are presented with Men's Men with moustaches, mistresses and Playboy Lifestyles Bristling with 'Christian Muscularity'. An era in which as Messner states "Activities in the

classroom or on the playground are presented to children as sex-segregated activities and gender is marked by teachers and other adults (“boys line up here, girls over there”)

If Sport Equals Sex then the soccer stars were the Superstars of the day. But they were Men! Straight, virile and uber masculine. As Whannel (1999) states, “Sport for boys has, since the mid-nineteenth century, had a close association with the inculcation of the values of dominant masculinity, and those left marginalized, those who were oppositional, those who sought alternatives, have been relatively voiceless within dominant masculine culture. Sabo and Jansen (1992) draw attention to the socially structured silences that marginalize the physically unfit, gays and lesbians, the disabled, and the old”.

When Beckham wore ‘that’ sarong, in France during the 1998 world cup, everything changed! In one sartorial second we segued from ‘Old Man’ footballer to ‘New Man’ fashionista and what some perceive to be a misnomer ‘Uber - Metrosexual’ (Simpson 1994); was struck.

The feminisation of football had begun and the previous patriarchal hegemonic world of players, managers, promoters and coach’s past, was to spawn a new breed of prospective deified super player who was wasn’t afraid to dress up or strip off in the pursuit of brand advancement and a new super soccer star societal identity. As Cashmore and Parker (2003) state, as a result of teaming up with his partner Victoria Adams “his identity changed, largely, many would argue as a consequence of his wife’s influence, He developed a new social network, an altogether more public lifestyle, and an extravagant and exotic dress sense (most famously wearing a sarong on one occasion) and an alleged penchant for wearing his wife’s underwear.”

A collision of elements from different constellations within the football and popular media, music and marketing universes had triggered the nascence of a new postmodern, soft – sport icon whose commercial and Omni-sexual powers of persuasion was to see the combination of commodification and consumerism on a hitherto unparalleled level.

“Instead of reading these elements in straightforward terms as a product of the commercial logic that ‘sex sells’, they can be interpreted more specifically as a manifestation of the heightened emphasis on the visual in late twentieth- century society and, on a wider level, as an expression of the intensified levels of commodification generated by capitalism”, (Annesley 1998: 50).

Ironically it is required of the vast majority of the male football following masses to undertake a huge suspension of disbelief in order to accept either the hyper-masculine iconography of the ‘Old Man’ ideology of half cyborg, Terminator style stereotypes of the hegemonic Muscular Christian creed; or also subscribe in any real way to the ‘New Man’ vision of oiled and groomed flexibly gendered male body, presented more recently in a virtual ‘re-boot’ if you like.

Patterson and Elliott (2002) state, “Thus, the last two decades have been witness to a number of marketing led forces with significant import for the construction of male identities. At a fundamental level, there has been a growing feminization of hegemonic masculinity, designed to encourage greater male participation in consumption activities and with the added benefit of protection patriarchy; The result is that, now, more than

ever, men are being encouraged to gaze upon images of other men and, thus the gaze, as it is traditionally conceived, is being turned in upon itself”.

This idea translates the visual idea of male nudity from nakedness as virility and machismo to nudity as sensuality and persuasion. And yet the idea that a soccer star could be homosexual is an enigma, a mystery and totally Taboo. Elliott et al, (1995; Hopkins 2000) warn that “In short. The pleasure derived by men from looking at images of other men may induce “homosexual Panic”

Cashmore and Parker (2003) cite Julie Burchill in stating that “More recently, it has emerged that he (Beckham) has significant kudos as a gay icon, an “accolade” never before placed upon an English soccer hero. Thus, while his talent and aura on the field make him something of a sporting “legend”. There are aspects of his personality (or representations of it) that appear to question his masculinity and, in turn, attract resentment and criticism from football fans and social commentators alike.”

And yet traditionally identified feminine forms, rituals and behaviours, are both adopted and more importantly branded and marketed; skin care, shaving, pubic topiary, back, sack and crack waxing. Spray tanning, constantly changing hairstyles and surgery for physical enhancement.

Ross (2002) states “Moreover the Beckham effect is widely seen as meritocratic at its core; with a little hair gel, body toning, and cuffs worn at all the right lengths, straight men could forego the Queer Eye to do their self-fashioning thing. Beckham’s “new man” was a passport to a different country, but not a world away from Oscar Wilde’s “delicate boys.”

Cashmore and Parker propose that Beckham ‘is the precise juncture at which “new man” meets the masculine remnants of a bygone age, where caring husband and father meets physical labourer and breadwinner’.

This journey or transformation from working class boy to globally recognized brand was in no large part to the power of visual imagery and the kind of work and the collaborative projects that Beckham were both aspirational, traditional, feminine, homoerotic and homosocial in nature. Never before had we seen a sports star appeal to as diverse a range of markets and consumers. Something in the commodification of Beckham from boy with a ball to Global brand ambassador had struck a chord with an extraordinarily broad sphere of influence. “His portfolio of fashion photography is not made up entirely of the kinds of images the majority of professional footballers would necessarily want to portray. Likewise, his dress sense has raised eyebrows in certain quarters”. (Cashmore and Parker 2003)

With the explosion of newly softened and feminised male bodies appearing in advertising for products previously targeted at a female audience, Soccer stars such as David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo were able to use their appearance, and its new acceptance within the sphere of the inverted male gaze, to rapidly and dramatically increase consumer ‘buy in’ at the earliest points of customer interaction. Patterson and Elliott propose that “Here male bodies are raised to the level of the spectacle (Saco 1992) and spectators are inspired by them and aspire to be like them. Although these idealized images might be recognized as

unattainable, spectators often suspend disbelief in an attempt to accept such bodies as a possibility for themselves. (Hirschman and Thompson 1997).

This representation of “bodies” has become central to the promotion and consumption of products and ideals, it has become ordinary and surrounds us in everyday life.

“It has been suggested that representation of idealised bodies can usefully be employed by a variety of organizations as a means of increasing of marketing effectiveness. Apparently, images of physically attractive bodies can have a dramatic influence on the exchange decision, and can transfer value to neutral products”. (Caballero et al., 1989)

The sports and soccer heroes of the past had evolved into a new ‘animal’, a newly commercialized human branded product. In the past, men’s bodies had been ‘tools of their trade’ bodies fit for purpose, for doing the job, scoring the goals, saving the day and topping the league. Patterson and Elliott (2002) observe that, in essence, the male body was being separated from conceptions of it as a body for use and it was fast becoming a body for display. (Benson 1997).

## Conclusion

Players/celebrities like Beckham, using their carefully constructed and controlled public, professional and even ‘pseudo’ private social media personas have utilised this new era’s developments as a visually centric society where the persuasive power of the image, whether that is photographic or cinematic brings their brand into the psyche of an enormous global community. ‘Gen Vis’ increasingly communicate through visual mediums and symbols, rejecting ‘archaic’ notions of text, grammar and vocabulary. The picture has the power. “His (Beckham’s) commodified persona represents a range of diverse elements collectively promoting specific conceptions of gender, sexuality and style’. (Cashmore and Elliott, 2003)

Going Forward this Paper will inform a new series of photographic images which explore the notion of the narcissistic inverted male gaze, continuing to use the visual codes and signifiers associated with the football world.

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