

Football brand management: Minor league versus Champions League

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand and explain how managers can build a football team

brand at different levels of competition, reaching from the minor leagues to the Champions League level. Therefore, the authors analyse which catalyst factors have an impact on building a football team brand. The study uses a case analysis method, for which seven football teams were selected (three in Germany, three in France and one in Spain). The paper contributes to the existing sports marketing knowledge by presenting and discussing, first, the relative importance of the internal and external catalyst factors in developing a sports team brand identity, according to the calibre of the team, its ambition and means; and secondly, the strategies that would be the most appropriate for a sports team in order to build and manage its brand identity, depending on its calibre, ambition and means.

Keywords: brand, branding, brand identity, strategy, football

PRINCIPAL MANAGEMENT QUESTIONS

- Why are branding and brand identity important in sport?
- What makes a sports team brand strong?
- What are the catalyst factors that really matter for a sports team brand manager?
- What are the differences between a minor league and an elite team when it comes to leveraging a brand's identity?
- What are the best strategies in order to leverage a sports team brand identity?

- What differentiates a lower ranked team versus an elite club when managing a team brand?
- To what extent does brand identity matter for a sports team?

BACKGROUND

At a time when branding is increasingly recognised as a strategic leverage for organisations, both nationally and internationally,¹⁻⁴ sports teams follow suit around the globe. Truly, sports teams intend to capitalise on the unique emotional connection that exists between fans and the object of their desire.^{5,6} Previous research studies have underlined the importance of branding in sports^{7,8} and have acknowledged sports teams as brands in their own right.^{9,10} Admittedly, not every team has the potential of a Real Madrid or New York Yankees, for instance. In fact, it could be added that even lower division sports teams do not share the same potential among them; however, brand and branding have become the cornerstone of the long-term viability of sports teams.^{11,12}

Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to understand and explain how managers can build a football team brand at different levels of competition, reaching from the minor leagues to the Champions League level. In line with this, which catalyst factors have an impact on building a football team brand? Truly, it appears relevant to study the similarities and differences, in both the catalyst factors used and the strategies employed by football teams at different levels of competitiveness. These issues will be investigated in this paper, looking at seven football teams and their brand identities: three in Germany, three in France and one in Spain.

With this idea in mind, the following structure will be undertaken: first, a look at brand and branding as a strategic leverage for sports teams; secondly, a presentation of

the research methods; thirdly, a presentation of the seven teams studied; fourthly, the results and a discussion, which will emphasise the two main contributions of the paper; and finally, a conclusion and some avenues for future research, specifically to what extent these findings could be generalised to football teams and other sports teams.

BRAND AND BRANDING AS STRATEGIC LEVERAGE FOR SPORTS TEAMS

By definition, a brand is 'a name, a word, a sign, a symbol, a drawing, or a combination of these'.¹³ A brand serves the purpose of identifying the goods and services of a company and differentiating them from the competitors by its underlying 'unique selling proposition' (USP); in other words, the unique characteristic which makes the brand stand out. But a brand is, first and foremost, a promise a company makes to its customers.¹⁴ This promise is built on the coherence and continuity of the brand's products that customers experience every time they are in contact with that brand.¹⁵ Coherence is essential in influencing customers' expectations towards the brand.¹⁶

The value of the brand is measured as brand equity. According to Kotler (2002), brand equity is 'based on the extent to which it has a high brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, strong brand associations and other assets such as trademarks'.¹⁷ Globally, strong brand equity nurtures a successful brand strategy¹⁸ and has an impact on purchase intentions, price premiums and brand loyalty.¹⁹

Today, the literature views sports teams as brands in their own right.²⁰ The brand is considered the most important asset of sports teams,²¹ and a team's brand identity provides it with direction and meaning.²² Brand and branding comprise strategic

leverage to generate value for organisations in general,²³⁻²⁵ and in sports specifically,²⁶⁻²⁹ from both a marketing and financial standpoint.³⁰ Sports teams have the characteristics of true 'products', composed of:

- intangible benefits, such as emotions fans experience at the stadium and the feeling of pride when associating with the team; and
- tangible dimensions, such as the result of the game and merchandising products.³¹

A sports team has the potential to build its brand equity by capitalising on the emotional connection it shares with its fans, in order to build customer loyalty and long-term associations.³²

With the exception of entertainment, religion and politics, the emotional response from sports fans is stronger than in any other industry.³³ Fans derive strength and a sense of pride from their affiliation with a team.³⁴ Fans often see the team as an extension of themselves: team success is personal success and team failure is personal failure. Success is essential for building and leveraging a brand,³⁵ but not enough for building brand equity, which is why a team should count on other attributes rather than just its sporting performance.³⁶ In this regard, the identity of the team brand is composed of a set of attributes or values which give the brand its personality. It represents the foundations on which the team can position itself in the market versus other sports clubs or entertainment options, and enables its managers to articulate a USP, which would lead to and at the same time be sustained by marketing actions.³⁷ This identity increases consumer preference and usage, arouses emotions in consumers and tends to strengthen the level of trust and loyalty among consumers.^{38,39} In order to promote their development,

teams must be innovative and competitive in how they seduce fans, while ensuring both affordability and accessibility,⁴⁰ but without becoming an ordinary brand.⁴¹ Therefore, it is important for teams to know about the importance of different catalyst factors and their respective impact on the sports team brand, according to the sporting level of the club. Furthermore, what is the link between brand strategy, brand identity, and internal and external catalysts for a football team (Figure 1)? How much of this is context specific to the realities of the level of competitiveness of any given football team? If branding is becoming of importance to football teams at large, to what extent are the strategies and catalyst factors different between teams, beyond the general stereotypes that might be entertained towards a lower ranked team versus a top-tier football club? Thus, it seems relevant to study the similarities and differences, in terms of both the catalyst factors used and the strategies employed, of football teams at different levels of competitiveness (Figure 1).

METHOD

Considering the complexity of the issue under study (branding strategies) and the value of branding in sport, a qualitative approach was adopted. A case analysis method was chosen because it allows the study of a limited number of companies within a reasonable timeframe, at a reasonable cost,⁴² and with meaningful results.⁴³ Eisenhardt (1989) recommends using between four and ten cases in order to allow an in-depth analysis of each case, and a relative diversity to increase the validity of the results.⁴⁴

In this paper, seven football teams were looked at, selected by convenience: three in Germany (SpVgg Vreden (SPV, 7th division), SC Fortuna Köln (FK, 5th division), SC Paderborn 07 (SCP, 3rd divi-

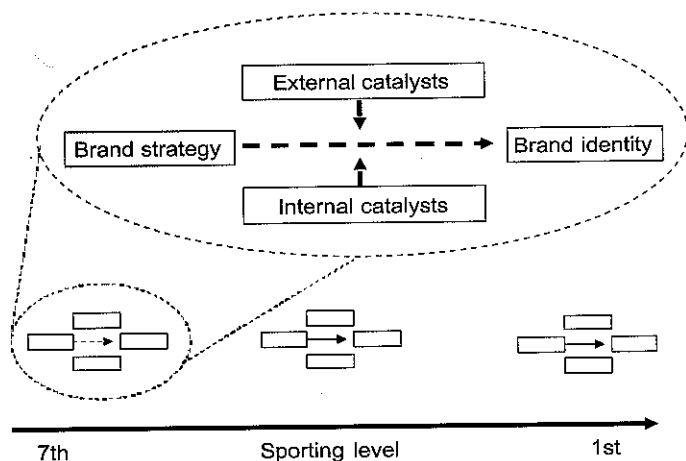


Figure 1 The relations between brand strategy, brand identity and catalyst factors

sion)), three in France (Olympique Lyonnais (OL, 1st division and Champions League participant in 2009–10), Olympique de Marseille (OM, 1st division and Champions League participant in 2009–10) and Paris Saint-Germain (PSG, 1st division)), and one in Spain (FC Barcelona (FCB, 1st division and Champions League participant in 2009–10)). Table 1 provides an overview of the seven different clubs.

The authors engaged in semi-structured interviews with managers of the seven teams. Cases were selected according to the researchers' observation skills and the cases' ability to provide relevant information, instead of a sample size.⁴⁵ Given that the main criterion in the choice of a respondent for a case study was the quality of the information that could be obtained from the respondent,^{46,47} the managers chosen were directly involved in the teams' marketing initiatives. These managers were marketing directors, vice presidents of marketing or presidents of the clubs. Each one-to-one interview was conducted at the headquarters of the respective team and lasted for between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Between one and three representatives were interviewed for

each team, depending on the level of expertise and availability of the respondents. Interviews were transcribed within 24 hours.⁴⁸

In order to increase the validity of the primary data, sports publications, team documents, team websites and media articles (print and electronic) were consulted. These secondary sources also provided specific information regarding the team, as well as their brand building and brand management.⁴⁹ Content analysis was used to give meaning to the responses of the managers, focusing on the teams' brand building and brand management strategy. The qualitative method enabled in-depth case analysis of the strategic vision of team managers in terms of their plans to build and manage their brand.















SEVEN TEAMS, SEVEN REALITIES

This section will look at the profile of each sports team, which will lead to the presentation and analysis of the strategic options for each team in the next section.

SpVgg Vreden 1921 eV (SPV)

SPV is an amateur soccer club in the 7th division. With more than 1,000 members

Table 1: An overview of the seven clubs and their characteristics

Logo							
Name	SpVgg Vreden 1921	SC Fortuna Köln	SC Paderborn 07	Olympique Lyonnais	Paris Saint-Germain	Olympique de Marseille	FC Barcelona
Country							
Division	7th	5th	2nd	1st	1st	1st	1st
City of location	Vreden, Germany	Cologne, Germany	Paderborn, Germany	Lyon, France	Paris, France	Marseilles, France	Barcelona, Spain
Population size	22,650	998,105	145,320	480,660	2,215,197	860,363	1,503,884
Club members	1,000	9,262	1,700	—	—	—	174,949
Average attendance	300*	1,500	6,134	34,551	28,860	52,114	63,500
Principal sponsors	clipping24.com, TEKA, CKM, Wefapress, BayWa, Bengfort & Lammers, Lansing, Papierfabrik Vreden	HIT, Techniker Krankenkasse, Junited Autoglas, Gaffel Kölsch, Jako, Sinalco, Kaloderma, Jakobs, Remagen	Finke, Energieteam, Bremer AG, Warsteiner, Westfalen-Blatt, Stiftung Westfalen, Puma, Coca-Cola, Burger King, eon Westfalen Weser AG	BetClic, adidas, Everest Poker, MDA, Electromanager, Groupama, Araldite, Orange	Emirates, Nike, Winamax, Orange, Poweo, Elior	BetClic, adidas, Intersport, Groupama, Caisse d'Epargne, Orange	Audi, Nike, la Caxia, Turkish Airlines, Televisió de Catalunya, Estrella Damm
Revenues	NA	1,000,000*	10,000,000*	139,600,000	100,800,000	133,200,000	365,900,000
Brand range	Local/regional	Supra-regional	Supra-regional	National/international ambition	National/international potential	National/international recognition	International/global

*estimates

and 30 junior teams of youths aged 5–19, the club has one of the biggest junior sections in the Münsterland region. The challenges are financial, as it is hard to acquire sponsors at the amateur level, and caused by the exodus of youths leaving the club early, as leisure programmes are numerous. These weaknesses are intended to be solved by a pilot project (focused on quality improvements in offers for youths, PR and sponsoring) with the German Sport University (GSU) in Cologne. This pilot project marked the beginning of the first marketing and brand strategies for the club

built on the club's mission statement: 'strong partners for youth'. Furthermore, the club tries to capitalise on the city's image (small, but financially strong, and traditional) and the credibility it draws from its partnership with the GSU.

SC Fortuna Köln (FK)

Right now, FK is a 5th division soccer team. The club, founded in 1948, is the most successful team in the history of the German 2nd division, but was relegated several times due to some financial turbulence. Recently, FK started an innovative

project called 'deinfussballclub.de' (DFC), which is based on the concept introduced by Ebbsfleet United Football Club (in England) and myfootballclub.co. The main idea of DFC is that supporters pay an annual fee to be part of a unique Web 2.0 community (11,000 members, 350,000 visits per month) and then act as managers. While their sports objective is to promote the 2nd Bundesliga by 2015–16, the main marketing objectives of DFC are to increase revenue, awareness, image and sympathy, as well as to 'emotionalise' the brand and tighten relationships with the club's partners.

SC Paderborn 07 (SCP)

SCP is a 2nd division soccer team. The club was founded in 1985 when TuS Schloß Neuhaus and FC Paderborn merged. The club was recently promoted to the 2nd Bundesliga. The long-term objectives are to 'develop a tradition', to acquire players with whom fans can identify, to foster the development of youth with better training conditions, and to build new training facilities and a high-performance centre. The strength of the club is predominantly the stadium: 'without the arena, the relegation in 2008 would have been the end for SCP'. The weakness of the club is mainly the absence of tradition. Furthermore, everything highly depends on the sporting success of the first senior team: even short-term attendance shows high volatility. The people in charge try to communicate the image of a small, family oriented club, with an attractive style of play and a team spirit.

Olympique Lyonnais (OL)

OL has established itself as a national brand by winning seven straight French championships; however, it was unsuccessful in finalising a tour in China because of its lack of recognition abroad, which sup-

ports the view that brand awareness and brand recognition are essential in establishing a brand across markets.^{50,51} There are also two concerns: the perceived lower level of the French League and the over extensions of the brand that OL has initiated. The former could alter the perceived quality of the OL brand outside France, while the latter could dilute the value of the OL brand, as some of these extensions are considered illegitimate by fans (pizza delivery service, hairdresser, driver's licence classes etc).

Paris Saint-Germain (PSG)

PSG might have the possibility to capitalise on its recognition. In this regard, co-branding is an option for PSG, through the city of Paris and international star players, as co-branding creates synergies through the complementary nature of the brands that are combined.⁵² However, as PSG is the team of the French capital city, it does not benefit from a positive image outside of Paris, which makes it difficult for some sponsors to activate their sponsorship nationwide. In addition, because its record is pretty thin and remote, PSG cannot present itself as a national or continental brand of any stature. A winning record, or some tradition, is essential when building an international sports team brand.⁵³

Olympique de Marseille (OM)

The Champions League win against AC Milan, in 1993, is quite remote; however, the team won the French national championship in 2010. OM is a national brand with some international exposure, especially in Africa where it benefits from a strong brand recognition and reputation. Furthermore, because of its history, tradition, decent record and a strong connection with its fans nationwide, OM can capitalise on emotions and the development of a privileged bond with support-

ers. Its strong identity and an important fan base are legitimate assets for the club in its ambition to become more than just a national football team brand. Thus, OM could take advantage of legitimate product and brand extensions, via merchandising, to crystallise the emotions of its fans and establish the brand as an international player.⁵⁴

Football Club Barcelona (FCB)

FCB is one of the most successful sports teams: 20 Spanish Leagues, 25 Spanish Cups, eight Spanish Super Cups, two European Champions Cups, two European Super Cups and four European Cup Winners Cups. But the club also benefits from and nurtures a unique emotional connection with its fans. FCB seems to be able to combine a strong regional identity with an international brand appeal among all football fans. Its website is translated into several languages, the team tours Asia and America regularly, it opens stores worldwide and fans connect via online communities around the world. FCB presents itself as an international continental brand with an international global brand potential.⁵⁵ FCB could follow a co-branding approach, first, by partnering with foreign clubs, which would allow it to enter new markets on a long-term basis, in Asia and America; and secondly, by capitalising on its partnership with Unicef to strengthen the values of the club and distinguish it from other sports brands.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the seven teams enabled the creation of Tables 2 and 3, which underline the internal and external catalysts at the disposal of each club, as well as their impact on building the corresponding sports team brand identity.

First, 25 catalyst factors were identified

and their respective impact on the team brand. For instance, sports infrastructures and the team website seem to have a very strong impact, independent of the team calibre, whereas on-field performance and merchandising clearly have a stronger impact on the brand of higher-calibre teams than on lower division ones. In this regard, the following catalyst factors appear to have a very strong impact on the brand identity of all first division teams which have both a national strength and some international ambition (OL, PSG, OM and FCB):

- *Internal catalysts:*
 - on-field performance, past and present;
 - foreign stars;
 - local stars;
 - team store and merchandising;
 - sponsoring communication and activation platforms;
 - sports infrastructures;
 - team website;
 - financial resources available.
- *External catalysts:*
 - development of new means of communication;
 - club location (metropolitan versus rural area).

Concerning lower division teams, some of the above-mentioned catalysts do not have any impact on their brand identity, as they do not play a role at a lower level of competition (eg foreign stars). The following internal catalysts do appear to have a very strong impact on the brand of SPV, FK and SCP:

- competent team managers;
- sports infrastructures;
- team website.

As for external catalysts, it is more difficult to detect a single common factor for

Table 2: Internal catalysts and their impact on building the corresponding sports team brand identity

Internal catalysts							
History/tradition	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
On-field performance	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Style of play	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Foreign stars	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Local stars	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Competent team managers	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Logo	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Team jersey	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Team store and merchandising	○	○	○	●	●	●	●
Mascot	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Co-branding initiatives	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sponsoring communication platforms	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sports infrastructures	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Stadium as a sport/entertainment facility	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Rituals at stadium	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Community involvement and public relations	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
CRM	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Team website	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Tours and exhibition games abroad	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Financial resources available	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

○ no impact, ○ low impact, ○ some impact, ● strong impact, ● very strong impact on sports team brand








lower division teams. The importance of the catalysts varies between the sporting levels and might even be influenced by the existing projects and initiatives of the clubs.

All in all, the sports infrastructure and team website are two internal catalysts with a very strong impact on a team brand identity for all clubs; and the club location is an external catalyst with at least as strong

an impact on sports team brand identity (Tables 2 and 3).

Secondly, six core strategic options were articulated that football teams could undertake in building and managing their brand identity, according to their respective calibre, ambition (ie reaching the second division or becoming a global sports team brand) and means. These six options are structured around the supply,

Table 3: External catalysts and their impact on building the corresponding sports team brand identity

External catalysts							
Development of new means of communications	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Online team communities	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Club location (metropolitan or rural area)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Competitors (clubs/other entertainment)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Management system of the league	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

○ no impact, ◐ low impact, ◑ some impact, ◒ strong impact, ◓ very strong impact on sports team brand

direct demand and indirect demand involved:⁵⁶

- focus on youth development (supply);
- focus on first senior team (supply);
- focus on emotional connection with fans (direct demand);
- focus on the media (indirect demand);
- focus on sponsors (indirect demand);
- focus on merchandising (indirect demand).

All of these strategic options appear as major priorities for all of the first division teams, with the exception of one strategy for OM (emotional connection with fans), mainly because of its elitist and regional image in France. As extensively discussed in the previous section, sports teams at a lower division level try to focus on other strategic options that take into account their calibre, potential and means. It could be said that supply (youth development) and indirect demand strategies (media and








sponsors) are favoured in this case. Furthermore, for teams at lower levels, (eg SPV), the first senior team (supply) does not play a crucial role for developing its brand, as stakeholders of the club (eg regional sponsors) place emphasis on the development of the youth teams.

Table 4 summarises the different strategies pursued by the football teams at different competitive levels. This table highlights that the more competitive the team becomes, the more stakeholders its managers need to take into account in the strategic development of the club's brand, which is in line with what other authors have underlined before.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to understand and explain how managers can build a football team brand at different levels of competition, reaching from the minor league to the Champions League level. The

Table 4: Strategic options pursued by football teams

Strategic option with focus on:							
Youth development (supply)	●	◐	◐	●	●	●	●
First senior team (supply)	○	●	●	●	●	●	●
Emotional connection with fans (direct demand)	○	◐	◐	◐	●	●	●
The media (indirect demand)	◐	●	◐	●	●	●	●
Sponsors (indirect demand)	◐	●	◐	●	●	●	●
Merchandising (indirect demand)	○	◐	◐	●	●	●	●

○ not pursued, ◐ pursued in some way, ◑ pursued, ◒ pursued actively, ● major priority for the team

authors focused here on brand identity, starting with the idea that this identity increases consumer preference and usage, arouses emotions in consumers and tends to strengthen the level of trust and loyalty among consumers.^{58,59} Indeed, brands and branding have become the cornerstone of the long-term viability of sports teams⁶⁰ and, as such, a sports team has the potential to build its brand equity by capitalising on the emotional connection it shares with its fans, in order to build customer loyalty and long-term associations.⁶¹ Based on the derived 25 catalyst factors and their relative importance, the authors came up with a set of options that would enable soccer team brands to navigate through the strategic construction and management of their brand. In this regard, sports infrastructure and team websites are two internal catalysts with very strong impacts on brand identity for all clubs studied, while club location is an external catalyst with at least as strong an impact on soccer team brand identity.

Furthermore, six potential strategies were identified. Supply, direct and indirect

demand strategies are followed by national and international teams' brands. Meanwhile, clubs with a lower level of team competitiveness seem to be more focused on strategic options. The reasons for this could be two-fold: first, teams at the highest level of competition have the means to follow a mass market strategy, whereas a lower level team might be forced to focus on a niche strategy which is more coherent with the reality of its actual status; secondly, a national or international sports team brand might not have the choice, whether it likes it or not, to interact with a large group of stakeholders and display a set of strategies to reach out to them and nurture the respective relationships. Lower level teams do not have the same obligations because they do not necessarily manage the same expectations.

Admittedly, the derived importance of the catalyst factors postulates that all team managers have the same definition of a sports team brand in mind, which might not be true. Furthermore, these cases are unique in many ways, with different cali-

bres of play and different cultures involved. Consequently, transcending these results to apply the conclusions to other teams should be done with caution;⁶² however, this study provides a first set of guidelines, for football as well as other sports teams, in answering the question: 'Are there some best practices that could transcend the sports domain and apply to other industries and other countries?' These guidelines could be validated in an empirical study, where the relative importance of each catalyst factor could be numerically weighted for the different categories of teams, in the next stage of this research. Another avenue would be to take a closer look at how sports teams could capitalise on fans' enthusiasm through virtual brand communities, as depicted by Cova and Pace (2006) for Nutella lovers.⁶³

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