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# Supporting the Cause:

How Can Football Supporters Engage with a Club's Brand Extensions

by

Peter Moane & Alessandro Solmi

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Supervisor: Ekaterini Drosou  
Examiner: Mats Urde

# Abstract

**Title:** Supporting the Cause: How Can Football Supporters Engage with a Club's Brand Extensions

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**Authors:** Peter Moane and Alessandro Solmi

**Supervisor:** Ekaterini Drosou

**Thesis Purpose:** This research aims at understanding what English supporters of football teams with a small fan base deem important in order to buy, engage or interact with the brand extensions put in place by their favourite club, thereby contributing to the club's revenue.

**Methodology:** The thesis adopts a relativist ontology and a social-constructionist epistemology, which induced authors to choose a qualitative method and an abductive approach. 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted via video-call, where participants were Fulham supporters younger than 35 years old living in England, with more male than female supporters. The collected data was analysed following a thematic analysis approach.

**Theory:** Three theories were used when approaching this study: social-identity theory (and consumer-company identification), categorisation theory, and expectancy-value theory. These theories were used as inspiration for the development of the interview guide and for data interpretation, though other aspects unrelated to the three theories emerged from the data.

**Conclusions:** English supporters of football clubs with a small fan base consider six aspects to be important when it comes to the favourite team's brand extensions: accessibility of the extensions, affordability of the extensions, respect of sentimental values, avoiding mismatch between the values attached to the club and business decisions, sense of belonging, and team performance.

**Practical Implications:** The six aforementioned aspects should be taken into account by marketing managers and practitioners within the football industry, when trying to convert supporters into consumers of the club's brand extensions.

**Keywords:** Brand Extension, Engagement, Interaction, Supporters, Football Clubs

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Peter Moane



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Alessandro Solmi



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# 1 Introduction

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*Walking up the road, you can see the bright lights shining against the clouds and into the sky. As each step draws you closer, the presence of what you're about to experience takes hold. The floodlights become visible, the sounds of stalls selling food, hats and scarves begin to take focus. Distant chants coming from the bar across the road, a feeling which is seldom rivalled. The more you take it in, the more you begin to see things - the club shop, selling the merchandise you proudly wear, or the cup you have your morning coffee in. The social media team has released the starting eleven, but with the local wine sponsors logo pinned to the top. You walk past the club's charity headquarters. Your usual Friday night takeaway comes from a company which you can see on the advertising hoardings as your heroes take the pitch. The corporate boxes you see from your seat in the stadium are either full or surprisingly empty. The underage teams playing on the hallowed turf at half time from the community's more disadvantaged areas is a great story, and you wonder why you never got the chance to play on the pitch yourself. These are all external factors to what happens on the pitch, but that's just all part of the experience, right?*

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## 1.1 Background<sup>1</sup>

As companies across the spectrum find new ways to increase their profits, they are engaging in different initiatives in order to boost sales and expand their customer base. One of these strategies is through the concept of brand extensions, where companies are moving into new product categories and markets, using the trust generated from their brand in the original market (Roper & Fill, 2012), so as to facilitate this search for revenue.

One of the industries which has increasingly adopted the idea of venturing into new arenas through brand extensions is sport. There is great potential for the sports industry to increase their revenue through building their brand, and it is something which both teams and athletes themselves have begun to utilise. For example, sports stars like David Beckham, Michael Jordan, and Roger Federer can be considered as brands themselves (Roper & Fill, 2012). In addition, sports teams as businesses are also recognising and continuously implementing the brand aspect to their operations (Brand Finance, 2020; Jaworska, 2020), and this is becoming an imperative part of the sports team and its overall business (Richelieu, 2014; Brand Finance,

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the Introduction has been taken from Moane & Solmi (2021) Research Strategy Proposal

2020). Football teams in particular are also beginning to reel in the potential of their own brand. This is exemplified by three of the top 10 sports teams in terms of value globally coming from football: Real Madrid (\$4.24 billion), Barcelona (\$4.02 billion), and Manchester United (\$3.81 billion) (Badenhausen, 2020). Some of the biggest clubs globally, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Manchester United, Manchester City and Bayern Munich also all have brand values exceeding €1 billion, despite the negative effect of the European Super League impacting brand value of the founding clubs by up to 22% (Brand Finance, 2021).

## 1.2 Problematisation & Research Question

In order to improve their financial situations, football teams are finding different ways to try and increase their revenue streams (Brand Finance, 2020). One such method is represented by the concept of the brand extension. An example of this could be when a club sells merchandising, creates a fan club, or delves into the creation of an esports team (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas, 2004; Williams, Rhenwick, Agyemang & Pantaleoni, 2015; Bertschy, Mühlbacher & Desbordes, 2019; Brand Finance, 2020). Real-life examples include Paris Saint Germain moving into merchandising with sports merchandising company Fanatics, which is expected to result in a \$40 million increase in the club's e-commerce business by 2023 (Ozanian, 2021). Real Madrid, meanwhile, have generated \$424 million from various commercial activities like advertising and sponsorship (Ozanian, 2021).

As the cream rises to the top, there is a growing disparity within football between the 'best and the rest'. The growing gap between the upper echelons and the lower reaches of football has been a cause for concern in countries across Europe as clubs, which have been successful on a more global scale, have moved ahead in terms of revenues at record pace while other clubs struggle to catch up (Jaworska, 2020).

England, in particular, shows both how football can be a lucrative business, alongside this growing gap. In fact, the English Barclays Premier League is one of the most competitive and attractive leagues in the world (McNamara, Perk & Sasson, 2013; Brand Finance, 2020). According to Deloitte (2020), the aggregated revenues generated by the teams competing in Barclays Premier League in the 2018-2019 season amounted to €5,851 million, representing a 7% growth from the previous year and constituting the highest revenue level with respect to the other European football leagues. However, there is a distinct difference between the commercial success of Premier League clubs. During the 2018/2019 season, for example, last-placed Huddersfield Town generated £122 million in revenue, with first-placed Manchester United earning £627 million (Deloitte, 2020). In fact, the average revenue in the Premier League that season stood at approximately £258 million, but this number was skewed

significantly by the revenues of the 'Top Six' clubs (Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea and Tottenham), who have a revenue stream of between £393 million and £627 million, with the other 14 teams' revenue ranging from £122 million to £193 million (Deloitte, 2020).

Furthermore, the Premier League also constitutes a high concentration of football supporters for the biggest clubs, while other clubs have smaller support bases. The league's overall popularity can't be denied, with up to 72% of English football fans supporting a Premier League team (Brand Finance, 2020). However, there is an imbalance between the popularity of the 'Top Six' teams of Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea and Tottenham, and smaller teams, particularly the bottom six teams, with the former being between 10-20% more popular, (i.e. having a favourable public opinion), than the latter (YouGov, 2018). In addition, the 'Top Six' all lie within the top 10 clubs with the highest level of crowds and match attendance in England across all 40 clubs to have ever played in the Premier League, with a quarter of current Premier League clubs in the bottom half in terms of crowd levels (Pitt-Brooke, Boshier, Harpur, Humayun & Percival, 2020). Furthermore, the 'Top Six' own the first six positions with regards to global social media ranking among the same set of 40 teams, with a considerable drop from the 'Top Six' to the other clubs, and a quarter of current Premier League teams also falling into the bottom half in terms of social media following (Pitt-Brooke et al., 2020). This highlights the concentration of support for the 'Top Six' in England, and then the diversity of support which comes below.

There is a case to be made that sports teams, and naturally football teams, are increasingly commercialising themselves and, in doing so, turning their view of supporters into something more resembling consumers (Jaworska, 2020). In an increasingly competitive market for fans' attention, and also for their disposable income, football clubs believe that there is a need to take advantage of specific supporter traits, such as fan identification, building unique experiences with them, and being a source of entertainment both on and off the field to truly strengthen the ties with their fanbase, with a failure to do this potentially having disastrous consequences (Richelieu, 2014).

However, for football clubs, it is imperative to be aware that "there is a sharp distinction between fans and customers, with the latter being primarily interested in consumption and satisfying their own needs, while fans tend to be orientated towards contribution, as they feel a part of their club" (Jaworska, 2020, p.1191). Supporters have strong ties to their club and display such a connection and loyalty which is unrivalled to other brands (Abosag, Hind & Roper, 2012). For clubs to extend into new categories, they have to be cognisant of the supporters and their potential attitudes towards possible brand extensions and commercial activities, as their outcome may be impacted by the supporters and their perceptions (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas, 2004; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Walsh & Ross, 2010; Abosag, Hind & Roper, 2012; Bertschy, Mühlbacher & Desbordes, 2019). For

example, although the main club sponsor can be deemed important for a football club, less than half of supporters can actually name it (Brand Finance, 2020).

Despite the growing tendency of professional football teams to engage in brand extension activities, there is a lack of research which has looked at brand extensions in sports (Bertschy, Mühlbacher & Desbordes, 2019), and indeed how brand extensions are perceived by consumers, more specifically by football supporters (Pritchard, Cook, Jones, Bason & Salisbury, 2020). Moreover, sports teams' brand extensions have been identified as a potential area for new research given current and future trends in sports brand management research (Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020). This area is interesting as football continues to expand its global reach, and football leagues and clubs move beyond traditional borders (Richelieu, 2014).

Therefore, this thesis will adopt a consumer-oriented perspective focusing on the match going supporters of English clubs with a low level of support and revenues. Within this research, a club is deemed of low support if it lies in the bottom half of Newton Insights (2019) ranking of Premier League clubs' cumulative social media followers, with social media following being considered an indicator of support level for the impact they have on the club's popularity and revenues (O'Connor, 2012). The revenue level is determined by Deloitte's (2020) Annual Revenue of Football Finance. The research aims to see what aspects are important for football supporters when it comes to the brand extensions employed by the football clubs they follow, so that the supporters themselves will consume, engage and interact with these activities. Supporters from Fulham FC were selected due to the club having the lowest levels of revenue and social media following in the Premier League (Newton Insight, 2019; Deloitte, 2020). Supporters were interviewed via qualitative semi-structured interviews, with the empirical data analysed by thematic analysis, to uncover the important aspects which extensions need for supporters to consume and engage with them. The decision to study low support football teams was taken after having noticed that not only there is a lack of previous research attention devoted to them, but also because these teams are engaging in brand extension strategies in order to improve their revenue levels and reduce the revenue gaps (Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020). With this in mind, the following research question has been developed for the study at hand: *What do supporters of English Premier League clubs with a small fan base consider to be important for engaging with brand extensions performed by their favourite teams?*

### 1.3 Theoretical & Practical Contributions of the Research

This research aims to contribute to different areas in academia and business practice. In terms of academic and theoretical contributions, this research attempts to add, firstly, new insights

and knowledge on the sample of match going supporters of football clubs, and what they are looking for in order to evaluate and consume the brand extension strategies of the clubs they support. There is indeed a low amount of previous research attention dedicated to football teams' brand extensions from the supporters' perspective. Considering the growing tendency of football teams to extend into markets beyond football, it is important to have more academic knowledge about what football clubs should take into account when engaging in brand extensions, so as to increase supporters' willingness to engage with them.

In addition, previous research on brand extensions has considered the following aspects as important in consumer evaluation of brand extensions: identity, the fit of the extension to the parent brand, and consumer expectations (Couvellaere & Richelieu, 2005; Buil, de Chernatony & Hem, 2009; Salinas & Pérez, 2009; Walsh & Ross, 2010). However, the chosen sample of football supporters who attend or watch games are more attached to the club, and are different from other, more traditional 'consumers' (Jaworska, 2020); and such supporters may not be focused on other aspects of the club unrelated to on-the-field matters of the football team, with the main focus being the team itself (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas, 2004; Bertschy, Mühlbacher & Desbordes, 2019). Given the unique role football supporters have in the context of their dedication to the team and brand (Abosag, Hind & Roper, 2012; Jaworska, 2020), and considering the importance that supporters have for the club's revenues due to their commitment to the team, this thesis attempts to shed light on what those supporters would like to see in those brand extensions. This adds a second contribution in academia by building on current brand extension literature to investigate a unique set of consumers, as football supporters are more passionate and dedicated to the brand (i.e. the football club) than consumers and fans of more traditional brands (Okoronkwo, n.d.).

As well as this, by looking at low support clubs, the thesis at hand develops knowledge on a relatively new demographic of football clubs. The main focus of previous literature has been on clubs with a high level of support, so this research provides valuable new insights. Gaining such knowledge from a new demographic of match going football supporters for low level clubs specifically also adds to the growing literature which looks at the consumer's perspective on brand extensions in football from a different lens, which is important given that clubs of all shapes and sizes are now engaging in brand extension activities (Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020; Okoronkwo, n.d.).

From a practical perspective, the upcoming research aims to provide a deeper understanding to sports marketing and business strategy decision makers on the factors to be aware of from the customer-facing perspective when developing a brand extension, particularly in the eyes of the sample: the more involved, match going supporters of the football team. In turn, this may help decision makers in facilitating better interaction and communication with these supporters and getting them to accept such brand extensions. Indeed, supporters see themselves as being different from the traditional consumer of football clubs (Jaworska,

2020), and for football clubs, such a contribution may allow them to better cater their brand extensions to supporters to make them feel less like a consumer, and more like a valued supporter, which is something supporters themselves want to feel from the clubs they support (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005).

In addition, the focus on England is important given the close attachment and passion which supporters have to their clubs (Brand Finance, 2020). As supporters in England become more apprehensive of the commercial activities of their clubs (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012), it is also important to remember that, on the other side of the coin, football supporters are one of a club's most powerful assets - they are passionate, ready to buy branded products and, if targeted well, can be turned to buying more from their clubs (Okoronkwo, n.d.). This research, therefore, aims to contribute to practice by giving football clubs the tools to effectively develop strategies which can bring supporters back onside; not only encouraging them to increase their views and engagement with a team's brand extensions, but also to increase the revenue of the team itself. Indeed, by having a better understanding of what supporters would like to see in the club's brand extensions, a football team may develop extensions having those specific aspects, thus increasing the likelihood that supporters decide to engage with the extensions, which would help revenues to grow.

Moreover, previous research has observed that low support Premier League clubs are now making brand extension efforts with the goal of improving revenues (Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020). Although the bigger clubs have been more successful in developing commercial and extension activities, every club across the spectrum has the opportunity to increase their revenue from extension and commercial activities, including smaller clubs (Okoronkwo, n.d.). In addition, it is up to clubs, now more than ever, to find ways to drive their own revenue streams (Deloitte, 2020). English clubs are benefiting greatly from extension activities, with the 'Top Six' clubs all enjoying increasing merchandising sales from January 2020 (Carp, 2020). Therefore, as smaller clubs continue to develop brand extension strategies, this thesis hopes to provide such clubs with knowledge that can be taken into account when pursuing the extension objectives. This knowledge can therefore contribute to the development of extension activities which can increase the potential success of future brand extension initiatives and increase the revenues which come from these activities.

## 1.4 Thesis Outline

The research begins with an overview of previous research related to the topic of the thesis at hand. The third chapter describes the framework which is used when approaching the research. Such a framework derives from theories and concepts deemed relevant for the answering of the research question. The methodology section outlines in-depth how the

research is conducted. Following this, the data has been collected and analysed, along with a discussion of the analysis in relation to previous research. The paper ends with a concluding section which recaps the research and its findings, as well as looking at managerial and theoretical implications, and also limitations and future research.

## 1.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the research into the supporters' perception of brand extension strategies undertaken by their favourite football clubs, which are of low support. The importance of the brand to sports teams has been explained, and how sports brands are now beginning to move into new product categories. In the Premier League in particular, clubs are expanding their revenue in different ways. However, due to the disparity both in popularity and revenues, there is a large gap appearing between the more popular clubs, and clubs with smaller levels of support. In addition, these sports brands are now beginning to see their fans and supporters more as consumers, though supporters are more aware of their ties to their football club, and indeed do not see themselves as consumers. Football clubs have the opportunity to engage with these supporters due to their commitment to the team, but they have to be aware of the view supporters have of themselves. There are also opportunities and potential contributions which have been elaborated on for this research in academia, theory and practice.

## 2 Literature Review

In this chapter, the authors provide an overview about previous literature related to the subject of the study. The researchers begin with a general outlook about the topic of brand extensions in general and, in particular, why this strategy is so attractive, and which risks it may entail. This is then followed by an analysis of past studies about brand extension strategies in the broader domain of sport. The following section then focuses on previous literature concerning the English and U.K. market, and the general and sport-specific research on brand extensions in that market. Finally, a discussion about research regarding the role of football supporters concludes the literature review chapter.

### 2.1 Brand Extensions

The purpose of this section is to provide a general overview about the topic of brand extensions, which, since the 1980s, have become increasingly popular among businesses (Tauber, 1988). Previous authors considered brand extensions as strategies through which a company enters a totally different product category by leveraging a brand name that is already well-known in another product category (Tauber, 1988; Aaker & Keller, 1990; Keller & Aaker, 1992). In the following decades, the definitions of brand extensions have become a bit less extreme, with more recent research describing them as the employment of an already known brand name to introduce new products and services in a new category which is more or less related to the parent category (Sattler, Völkner, Riediger & Ringle, 2010; Hultman, Papadopoulou, Oghazi, & Opoku, 2021). So, even though the idea of entering a new market through an already familiar brand name remains central to the concept of brand extension, more recent authors do not consider the entrance of a drastically different market as necessary for a strategy to be classified as a brand extension (Sattler et al., 2010; Hultman et al., 2021). Indeed, there are several examples of brand extensions which can range from extensions in adjacent categories, for instance Mars extending from the chocolate bar market to the ice cream market, to more extreme cases, such as Bic extending from disposable items into perfumes.

The logic behind brand extensions is that customers tend to transfer the positive associations with the parent brand to the category of the extension (Sattler et al., 2010). This reduces the uncertainty deriving from the purchase of something new as well as the costs of gathering

information (Song, Zhang, Xu & Huang, 2010). Thus, there is a crucial relationship between brand extensions and the concept of brand equity, i.e. the added value of a product attributable to the brand name (Pitta & Kastanis, 1995). In fact, Roper & Fill (2012) noticed that the ability of introducing brand extensions can be used when estimating brand equity: the easier a brand extends into new categories, the greater the brand equity, as this indicates that customers find it easy to move the positive associations with the parent brand to the new category.

Companies of various industries undertake brand extensions due to the potential benefits arising for the organisation. First of all, brand extensions may increase profitability (Lane & Jacobson, 1995; Arslan & Altuna, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Hultman et al., 2021). Indeed, they allow firms to reduce the launching costs of a new product (Arslan & Altuna, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Hultman et al., 2021), by leveraging an already established brand awareness, an already gained esteem, and already recognised qualities of a brand to decrease expenses such as advertising (Kapferer, 2012). Furthermore, they can improve revenues by attracting new buyers and moving the already loyal customers to the new market (Lane & Jacobson, 1995).

Through brand extensions, companies also diversify the brand portfolio, thereby reducing the risks associated with doing business (Bloodgood & McFarland, 2004). One of the first lessons that are taught in any course of finance is the mantra “*don't keep all your eggs in one basket*”, to illustrate the importance of creating a well-balanced portfolio to distribute the risks of investing. Similarly, companies may utilise brand extensions to spread the risks incurred in their activities, thus counterbalancing the negative consequences arising from a possible failure in one market and to grow in a safer way (Arslan & Altuna, 2010). Moreover, while awareness is an important determinant for brand extension success (Pitta & Kastanis, 1995), Hussain & Rachid (2016) argued that brand awareness may even improve following brand extensions, thereby increasing the likelihood that the brand easily comes to customers' minds. Indeed, by being in several categories, the brand's visibility may be higher. Finally, brand extensions also allow organisations to deepen customer relationships (Alexander & Colgate, 2005) by providing consumers with several touch points (Davis & Halligan, 2002).

However, brand extensions also have drawbacks and possible risks that should be taken into account. First of all, a failed extension represents an inefficient use of resources and time (Brown, Sichtmann & Musante, 2011). But most importantly, a failed brand extension may generate brand dilution. Brand dilution stems from the concept of perceived fit, which comes from categorisation theory in brand extension literature (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella, 2012). Consumers can arrange parent brands into different categories in their minds, and when a new product or object falls within the same or a similar category to the parent brand, this creates a parent brand-extension fit (Klink & Smith, 2001; Sichtmann & Diamantopoulos, 2013). When brands launch products, which are coherent with the parent

brand, this results in the similar, higher match between the brand and extension, increasing acceptability and willingness to consume (Buil, de Chernatony & Hem, 2009). However, extensions of a lower fit with the parent brand may be questioned by consumers and weaken acceptability and willingness to consume (Aaker, 1992; Keller & Aaker, 1992; Dawar, 1996; Buil, de Chernatony & Hem, 2009).

A brand is said to be diluted if customers develop a negative evaluation of the parent brand following an extension (Childs, Jin & Tullar, 2018). This likely happens if the extension is perceived to be of low fit with respect to the parent brand (Salinas & Pérez, 2009), because in such a case there would be a loss of reliability and differentiation (Aaker, 2002). For this reason, there must be coherence between the image of the parent brand and of the extension, so that the brand essence spreads from one market to the other (Salinas & Pérez, 2009). At the same time, a high fit extension can still give rise to brand dilution, especially if customers are unsatisfied with it (Salinas & Pérez, 2009) and do not engage in a thorough understanding of the causes of the failure (Keller & Sood, 2003).

In light of what stated above, brand extensions constitute an attractive opportunity for company growth, as they permit the entering of new markets relatively cheaply and to expand revenues, alongside reducing business risks and deepening customer relationships. However, considering the possible negative effects represented by wasted resources and/or brand dilution, the decision to extend a brand in a new category should be taken very carefully. Among the several companies and industries undertaking brand extensions, the realm of sport, and sports teams specifically, represent an interesting case.

## 2.2 Brand Extension in Sport

The essence of a sports brand begins with being competitive in its own sport, and then creating a balance between the core product in the sport they play and the sports products secondary aspects (Richelieu, 2014). However, the base to build a successful sports brand is the success and failure of the team, which will impact the parent brand: for a brand to be successful off the pitch, it should be successful on the pitch (Walsh, Hwang, Lim & Pedersen, 2015). This section identifies previous brand extension strategies in sports, and also outlines potential keys for their outcomes, along with some gaps in the literature.

### 2.2.1 Strategies for Sports Brand Extensions

A sports brand extension can be defined as a strategy in which a sports team pushes their brand beyond the primary product category (professional sports and competitions) into new, different product categories (Walsh & Ross, 2010). This includes a sports team opening a

merchandising store, and also websites, restaurants and cafes, sports camps and schools and magazines, attracting sponsors, and using the stadium as a brand extension, all allowing for the movement of the team from their main product category into another one (D'Astous & Bitz, 1995; Walsh & Ross, 2010; Walsh & Lee, 2012; Pritchard et al., 2020).

One of the more prominent brand extension strategies coming recently to the forefront is the use of esports teams, which is popular among professional teams in various sports (Bertschy, Mühlbacher & Desbordes, 2019; McGehee, 2019; Ke & Wagner, 2020; Sallinen, 2020; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020). Licensing partnerships, although similar to brand extensions, cannot be seen as such. This is because brand extensions are indeed developed by the sports team itself, and not outsourced to other companies who would then develop and sell team products, which is the case for licensing (Walsh & Ross, 2010). Fan clubs can also be seen as brand extensions themselves (Williams et al., 2015; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2017). In the specific case of England, football clubs are both incorporating a brand portfolio of different core and non-core brands, and Premier League clubs are engaging in brand diversification strategies in order to boost revenues (Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020; Pritchard et al., 2020)

### 2.2.2 Sports Brand Extension Evaluation

There are a number of aspects which potentially impact upon the evaluation of a brand extension in professional sports. The identity of the supporter is an important concept when it comes to the outcome of an extension (Couvellaere & Richelieu, 2005; Walsh & Ross, 2010; Ross, Walsh & Shreffler, 2014; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2017). Identification of the consumer, which comes from Tajfel's & Turner's (1979) social identity theory, where people develop their self-concept through membership and attachment to specific social groups (Tajfel, 1978), has been seen as an ever-growing part of consumers' perceptions of brand extensions in previous literature (Kim, Park & Kim., 2014; Walsh et al., 2015; Shokri & Alavi, 2019). Consumers who develop strong relationships with companies also identify strongly with the company, as the consumers' values are reflected in the values which are shared by the company (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). This relationship may then result in positive evaluations and attitudes toward the extensions from the consumers themselves (Kim, Park & Kim, 2014; Shokri & Alavi, 2019).

Looking at fans' willingness to purchase brand extensions, Ross, Walsh & Shreffler (2014) noted that identity is an important part in assessing a fan's likelihood to purchase extensions of both high and low fit, and the strength of the fan's identification with the sports brand will legitimise the reasoning to purchase even low fit extensions. This builds on previous findings by Walsh & Ross (2010) stating that a high identification to the team reduces the risk of brand dilution, while low identification increases it. The level of identification to the team is also

important in enhancing the purchase likelihood of brand extensions, rather than the exposure to the extension itself (Walsh & Ross, 2010). Younger demographics, in particular, are using identification to their team to differentiate themselves, and this sense of uniqueness underlies why a consumer might accept a brand extension (Ross, Walsh & Shreffler, 2014).

For sports teams, and particularly in football, it is important to reciprocate with supporters, so they feel that the team deems them as important (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). This is cognisant to be aware of, as Bauer et al. (2008, cited in Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2017) mentioned that football fans view the teams they support in terms of being extensions of their own sense of self. The ability to garner the loyalty of supporters helps strong football teams to be more successful in brand extension initiatives (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). Having a robust fan base with a stronger recognition to the club as a brand also increases the potential success, acceptance and support of a brand extension (Walsh & Ross, 2010; Abosag, Roper & Hind, 2012), but if sports teams have a moderate or low fan base, there might be a higher chance for brand dilution (Walsh & Ross, 2010).

Looking at U.S. sports, Apostolopoulou (2002) developed several keys for successful brand extensions: the strength of the parent brand, promotional support and brand extension positioning, the extended product itself, and also the perceived fit of the extension. The perceived fit between the brand extension and parent brand has been seen as a factor itself which may determine whether or not a sports team's brand extensions will be accepted (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas 2004; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Lee, Maeng, Lee & Jun, 2019).

Sports-related extensions of a high fit are generally more positively received and evaluated by football fans if they are closely related to the football team and to what happens on the pitch (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas, 2004). In the case of Olympiakos, Greece's biggest football team, football fans are also perceived as being more willing to accept and indeed purchase football club merchandising extensions if they are of a higher fit (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas, 2004). The perceived fit of a brand extension to the parent brand itself plays a role, not only in the evaluation of the brand extensions, but also in increased loyalty (Lee et al., 2019). If the parent brand itself has a higher perception among supporters, then brand extensions will also be perceived more positively, and such positive reception is more common if the perceived fit is higher (Walsh & Ross, 2010). When there is a low fit with inconsistent associations between the extension and brand, or when the extension strays too far from the sports teams' values and heritage, then fan dilution and negative perceptions of brand extensions are also possible (Walsh & Ross, 2010).

So, in light of what stated above, it seems that previous research concerning brand extensions in the domain of football presents an interesting gap, coming from the prominent focus on teams with a strong or high level of support and fan base (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou &

Loukas, 2004; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Walsh & Ross, 2010; Bertschy, Mühlbacher & Desbordes, 2019). Therefore, there is an opportunity to conduct a study in which teams with a low level of support are investigated. These clubs can be of interest because they undertake brand extension strategies to increase revenues exactly as their more supported counterparts (Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020), so it may be important to obtain a more accurate understanding of what their fans want to see in those brand extensions.

## 2.3 The U.K. & English Market

The focus of this research is on English clubs, as the English Barclays Premier League is the European league generating the highest level of revenue (Deloitte, 2020). Therefore, having an overview of what previous research has stated about brand extensions in general, and in the sport domain in particular, within the U.K. and British market can be useful for the purposes of this thesis.

Brand extensions in the U.K. have been well researched in the past. Reast (2005) investigated the role played by brand trust in the success of brand extension strategies for British consumers, concluding that highly trusted brands have better probabilities of obtaining positive outcomes from a brand extension. Reast (2005) also argued that credibility and performance satisfaction are fundamental in generating trust: the former measures how much the brand is deemed sincere and how much its espoused values are aligned with those of the customers; the latter is more related to the perceived quality of the products sold under the banner of the brand and to the extent that those products satisfy customers' expectations.

Perceived quality was observed also by Martinez, Polo & de Chernatony (2008) in a study showing that, in comparison to their Spanish counterparts, British consumers give more importance to perceived brand quality when it comes to developing their attitude towards an extension. With regards to this, perceived quality can be defined as the consumer's assessment of a product's distinction and supremacy (Zeithaml, 1988) and derives from Fishbein's & Ajzen's (1975) expectancy-value theory. A consumer's perceived quality of a product is an attitude stemming from a (dis)confirmation of expectations which consumers have of an object, which will determine part of their own attitude to the product itself (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). With this in mind, the expectation on the quality will impact the attitude and behavioural intention toward the product (Bagozzi, 1992; Gotlieb, Grewal & Brown, 1994).

Besides perceived quality, another crucial role is played by the familiarity consumers have with the brand's products (Martinez, Polo & de Chernatony; 2008). This finding supports previous research by Laforet (2007), who argued that it is important that the brand is

well-known, because this will allow trust to be moved from the original to the new product category. Perceived fit and reputation are additional factors that can strongly determine British consumers' acceptance of brand extensions (Ahmad, Mujeeb & Rajput, 2011).

There is limited research looking at brand extensions in the world of football in the English and British market more broadly. Chadwick & Clowes (1998) investigated the brand extension strategies performed by English Premier League teams from an organisational perspective, describing which brand extension strategies are put in place by them. Some findings related to the acceptability of those brand extensions are still identifiable, despite the age of the study. For example, the alignment between the values supporters connect to the club and those they connect to the extension is deemed to be of crucial importance (Chadwick & Clowes, 1998). Moreover, coherence should be present also between the parent brand (i.e. the football club) and the extension, so that supporters recognise at least some degree of correspondence between the different product categories (Chadwick & Clowes, 1998). In addition, supporters tend to purchase an extension of their favourite football team to highlight their attachment and identification to it; and for a club's brand extension to be successful, it should not be perceived as a short-term attempt to increase revenues, but part of a coherent, well-structured and long-run credible plan (Chadwick & Clowes, 1998).

More recent studies about English football teams' brand extensions have come from Holzmayr & Schmidt (2020) and Pritchard et al. (2020). Holzmayr & Schmidt (2020) focused on the financial outcomes of brand diversification strategies adopted by teams in the English Premier League, observing that such strategies could consist in entering new product categories through offerings more or less linked to the domain of football, or in expanding into new geographical markets. In addition, Holzmayr & Schmidt (2020) reached the conclusion that, when Premier League teams opt for "related-business-diversifications" (p.292), i.e. diversifications that are substantially related to the football domain, the use of resources is much more efficient, thereby suggesting that revenues can be considerably enhanced when teams enter markets that still have an affiliation with the parent market of football. Pritchard et al. (2020) focused more on clubs of the English Football League (EFL), which covers the three divisions below the Premier League. Football teams at this level can develop a portfolio of brands as an extension strategy (Pritchard et al., 2020). EFL clubs have taken advantage in the development of a brand portfolio, which incorporates both brands and non-brands which can be connected to their stadium. The football club therefore uses the team's heritage, logo, colours, sponsorships and partners to work with other organisations (Pritchard et al., 2020).

Thus, previous literature about brand extensions in English football presents gaps when it comes to studying how supporters look at brand extension strategies adopted by their favourite teams. Indeed, Pritchard et al. (2020) mentioned that a potential area of future

research could focus on the supporter's view with regards to football clubs' brand extension strategies. There is an opportunity to garner the consumers, in this case supporters, and their perceptions on the brand extensions taking place at their favourite football teams, to have a more precise idea about which aspects these brand extensions should have in order to stimulate supporters to engage with them.

## 2.4 The Football Supporter

The sports fan has been well-covered in previous literature. Conducting such a background into the different types of football supporters is important for the research at hand as football supporters can be defined in different ways and in different contexts. Developing such an understanding allows for a better segmentation process of football supporters and how they can be defined in terms of commitment to their respective teams.

### 2.4.1 Defining the Football Supporter

To begin to understand football supporters, it is important to understand that there are different types of football supporters (Tapp, 2004; Pick & Gillett, 2019). Previous academic research distinguishes four kinds of football supporters: the fanatic, the repertoire and the casual (Tapp, 2004), followed up with an updated fourth segment, labelled as enthusiasts (Pick & Gillett, 2019). The fanatic is the most intense segment of supporters who have close attachment to the team (Tapp, 2004). The enthusiasts are similar to fanatics in their close attachment, but do not attend as many matches (Pick & Gillett, 2019). The repertoire would follow their own team, and would also watch other teams, meaning they are not as dedicated, while the casual does not follow their team intensely, and only watches matches when they want to (Tapp, 2004). In further defining football supporters, the impact on their loyalty to the team is also important. Aspects such as team performance (Yun, Rosenberger & Sweeney, 2020) and the importance of family have played a role in a supporter's loyalty and commitment to their team (Tapp, 2004; Borges, Silva & Añaña, 2014), although contradicting research mentions that family commitment is not important in a fans' own commitment to a club (Pick & Gillett, 2019). Supporters also take on a team in their identity formation, with brand image and commitment to the team impacting loyalty (Borges, Silva & Añaña, 2014).

However, it is cognisant to be aware of what supporters consider to be important themselves when it comes to supporting their team. Overall, for supporters, product-related aspects such as team performance, players and staff are not as important as non-product aspects like the club's history, the team crest and colours, other supporters, and the team's stadium (Bauer, Stockberger-Sauer and Exler, 2005). In addition, due to the ever-changing nature in which

football is consumed, supporters are not necessarily swayed by the same determinants and factors (Fillis & Mackay, 2014). People now watch football in different ways, such as on the TV and the internet and beyond more traditional methods such as physically attending games (Fillis & Mackay, 2014; Brand Finance, 2020; Deloitte, 2020). Despite this, the strongest commitments to a football club come from having a season ticket to the club and having strong personal loyalty to the team (Pick & Gillett, 2019). However, due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, supporters are confined to the TV or internet to consume football, but this does not impact on supporter status and commitment (Deloitte, 2020).

#### 2.4.2 The English Football Supporter

As English supporters constitute the subject of this research, it is important to have an idea about their key characteristics. Previous literature asserted that the main feature of English football fandom is a sense of being part of a group (Nash, 2000), so that “the club becomes a reference point for supporter identity in a fast-changing and unstable environment” (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012, p.338). Indeed, each fan culture has a set of root values forming the basis upon which union is formed and representing the lens through which members and non-members of the fan group are determined (Nash, 2000). The importance of these values explains why, nowadays, fans worry about matters related to the governance of the club, not always in line with the aforementioned root values (Welford, García & Smith, 2015). Welford, García & Smith (2015) argued that because of these concerns, several English supporters are taking a distance from top division competitions and are beginning to feel more attracted to minor leagues, because there they can find the ‘romantic’ aspects that first-class football seems to have lost. In fact, English supporters are showing an evermore mixed attitude towards the commercial activities of their favourite club, sometimes accepting them, some other times rejecting them (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012).

Moreover, English supporters wish to be involved in their favourite club (Cleland, 2010), perhaps even in governance issues as stakeholders (Welford, García & Smith, 2015). In fact, according to Cleland (2010), those clubs which involve their supporters enjoy several advantages, mainly because all the strategies which a football club undertakes to improve revenues are ineffective if a good relationship with supporters isn’t established, and if supporters are not encouraged to be active in some of the club’s businesses. This also further emphasises the importance of having the club well ingrained in its local community (Cleland, 2010; Welford, García & Smith, 2015).

#### 2.4.3 Connecting & Retaining the Football Supporter

In order to keep and retain football supporters, research on the German Bundesliga indicates that sports marketers should look into developing strong brands with supporters through

non-product related aspects, such as the stadium and its matchday atmosphere, club history and tradition (Bauer, Stockberger-Sauer & Exler, 2008). Sports teams can also take advantage of fans' loyalty and emotional connection to the team by building relationships the club shares with fans and building its brand identity (Richelieu, Lopez & Desbordes, 2008). As an implication for club managers, the ability for the team to connect with supporters may result in positive contributions to fans' behavioural loyalty such as watching and attending matches, purchasing merchandise and engaging with the teams media (Özgen & Argan, 2017). However, self-perceived loyalty doesn't seem to impact on purchasing memorabilia or whether they define football as their main activity (Pick & Gillett, 2019).

## 2.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the authors discussed previous literature related to the topic of brand extensions in general, and within the domain of sport in particular. The researchers provided an overview of former studies explaining what brand extensions consist of, which advantages they may furnish to a company and which risks they may entail. Following that, past research related to brand extension in the sport domain have been presented, to figure out what kind of brand extensions sports teams undertake and what is important for their evaluation. With the U.K. and particularly the English market being the subject of this thesis, the authors also discussed prior literature about brand extensions in general and in the sport domain within the British & English market. Furthermore, because this study focuses on the perceptions of a specific group of supporters, the chapter was concluded by a section in which the researchers provided a summary of former studies about the categorisation of supporters, as well as about the key aspects of English supporters.

## 3 Conceptual Framework

The upcoming chapter provides an overview of the main theories and concepts related to the current study with regards to the supporters' perceptions of brand extensions undertaken by football clubs. With the aid of such material, a conceptual framework is developed which allows for a comprehension and guidance to support the upcoming study.

### 3.1 Social Identity Theory & Consumer Identification

Social identity theory can be defined as people creating their own self-concepts through both personal and social identity: connections to other social groups with which they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Lam, Ahearne, Hu & Schillewaert, 2010; Shokri & Alavi, 2019). Individuals, when comprising their social identity, identify and categorise themselves with groups having shared commonalities, and the individuals see themselves as being part of a similar social category, with this group connection creating someone's social identity (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000). The idea of consumer-company identification derives from social-identity theory and from the belief that, nowadays, companies are important parts of people's social identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). By examining the identity of several organisations, consumers distinguish them in different "organisationally defined categories" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, p.77) and then they identify themselves with organisations that are closer to their own identity, thus forming strong relationships with them and creating loyalty to the company, more so than the products (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Within the context of the thesis at hand, the football team is considered to be a company and the supporters are viewed as its customers. Thus, in light of what stated above, the degree to which supporters identify with the football team could potentially influence their willingness to engage with the club's brand extensions, and whether a supporters' level of identification to the team may be important in understanding supporters' evaluation of their favourite team's brand extensions. After all, the literature review chapter had discussed the crucial role of supporters' identification with the team when it comes to brand extensions, as well as the importance of reciprocating with supporters' identity.

## 3.2 Categorisation Theory

Categorisation theory relates to the categorisation of items, objects, products and brands (Rosch & Mervis, 1975; Cohen & Basu, 1987). It originated from Rosch & Mervis (1975), who stated that consumers can segment various products and objects into different cognitive categories, in turn allowing better assistance when it comes to their own information and cognitive processing (Rosch & Mervis, 1975). For consumers, when they see a new product and perceive it as part of a certain cognitive category in their memory, they transfer both previous associations and information already in their mind about particular categories to that new product (Mervis & Rosch, 1981; Sichtmann & Diamantopoulos, 2013). If there is a successful categorisation between product and category, then those associations transfer to the new product. If there is not a successful match, then a more weighted and calculated assessment determines the product and category fit (Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986).

Categorisation theory is potentially important for the research at hand. With this in mind, the concept of ‘match’ has been developed to answer the role of categorisation theory in terms of how supporters evaluate and engage with the brand extensions of their football teams. Indeed when the parent brand and extensions are matched together, they can be perceived as similar or typical to the brand, and such associations can then transfer from the brand to the extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Bosch & Loken, 1991). The main category for this research is the football team itself and the category of professional sports, which is the main product category of a football club (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas 2004; Walsh & Ross, 2010). In addition, the authors have in mind a series of brand extensions carried out by sports teams as described by D’Astous & Bitz (1995), Walsh & Ross (2010), Walsh & Lee (2012) and Pritchard et al. (2020): merchandising (club) shops, websites, sponsors, restaurants and cafes, sports camps, schools, the stadium and other media like magazines. In relation to this research, the football supporters' potential categorisation of the brand extension activities of their clubs may determine the extent to which they feel that such an extension either matches or doesn't match with the football club, and whether they transfer the associations of the team to their extensions.

## 3.3 Expectancy-Value Theory

The expectancy-value theory was elaborated by Fishbein & Ajzen (1975). According to the authors, each person has some expectations about an object, i.e. he/she tends to positively or negatively associate many aspects, values, or ideas to the object under consideration, which will result in the individual's developed attitude towards the object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

This tendency is very important not only because ideas such as perceived quality of the object are formed through a set of expectations which can be confirmed or disconfirmed (Gotlieb, Grewal & Brown, 1994), but also because the expectations held towards an object determine consumers' general attitude towards the object itself (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), which then impacts on the consumers' behavioral intentions (Bagozzi, 1992).

Within the context of this thesis, the football club's brand extension is the object against which the consumers (in this case, the supporters) develop a set of expectations, determining not only supporters' perceived quality of the extension (Gotlieb, Grewal & Brown, 1994), but first of all the overall attitude supporters develop towards it (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), which then influences the supporters' behavioral intentions (Bagozzi, 1992). Given the elaboration above, and what mentioned in the literature review chapter, this concept may considerably impact on how a club's extension is evaluated by supporters, and therefore how supporters may then engage, interact or purchase extensions.

### 3.4 Conceptual Framework

In light of what is stated thus far, the thesis at hand will take into consideration three theories when trying to understand which aspects of low support English Premier League teams' brand extensions are considered to be important for fans' acceptance and potential engagement: social identity theory (and consumer-company identification), categorisation theory, and expectancy-value theory. Each theory provided authors with important insights to be considered when developing the framework that will form the approach to the research. This means that the authors took inspiration from the knowledge deriving from the aforementioned theories. This choice was taken after recognising that match going supporters' engagement with football clubs' brand extensions is a new area of research. Thus, it is likely that flexibility with respect to theory will be needed, which is why the researchers will be utilising the framework flexibly when approaching the research.

The resulting framework thus consists of three elements, each stemming from one of the three theories described in the previous sections. The first element is the **Supporter Identification to the Football Club**, and it arises from the social-identity theory and consumer-company identification. Identification of the supporter, for this research, describes when and how consumers identify with the football club they support. The importance of identification between supporter and team resonates in learning more about the relationship between supporter and club, and in turn may develop insights in how supporters may evaluate brand extensions in light of their relationship and identity to the club.

The second element is the **Match Between Football Club & Extension**, which originates from the categorisation theory. In this research, match relates to how the brand extensions mentioned by supporters can be seen as related to the primary category of the football club, which is professional sports, and whether any associations from the football club and the extension category occur. The potential associations of the football club and extension category, and the supporters' views of the extensions within the scope of the football team, may then impact both their view on, and their willingness to engage with, brand extensions.

The third and final element is **Supporter Expectations of the Extension** and derives from the expectancy-value theory in combination with Bagozzi's (1992) attitudes-intentions framework. With this in mind, the supporters' expectations of the extension may determine the attitude they form towards it (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), and thus have important influences on how the brand extension will be evaluated.

The three elements described above may all be considered as aspects which play a role in the supporters' evaluation of their team's brand extension. **Brand Extension Evaluation**, in this context, refers to how supporters may indeed look at the brand extensions of their favourite football teams, and in turn potentially engage with or consume them.

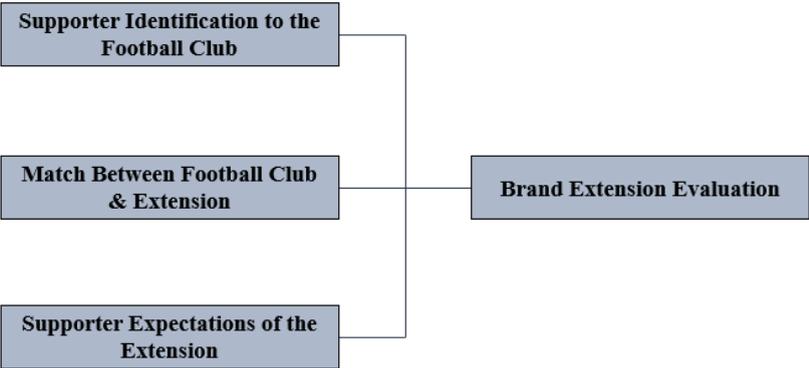


Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework (Own Figure, 2021)

### 3.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter the authors have elaborated on the framework that will determine the approach to the research. To do that, the researchers took into consideration three theories, keeping in mind the nature of the research question and literature review chapter. These three theories have built the framework, which the authors will use flexibly, to avoid excessive constraints that may restrict the researchers' ability to collect, analyse and interpret the data. Therefore, the framework will determine the approach to the rest of the research.

# 4 Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological process undertaken in this study to answer the research question. The chapter opens with an illustration of the underlying research philosophies. This is followed by the presentation of the research design, in which the research process and sample are presented. After that, the authors show which approach has been chosen for the analysis of data, followed by a discussion of the quality of the account.

## 4.1 Research Philosophy

In this section, the authors present the research philosophy underlying the thesis, beginning with the ontological and epistemological considerations made to establish the data collection method. Following this, the research approach is introduced, where the reasoning behind the choice of qualitative research method and an abductive approach is elaborated.

### 4.1.1 Ontological & Epistemological Considerations

To determine the data collection method, it is necessary to make ontological and epistemological considerations (Nilsson, 2021a). Ontology is concerned with “the nature of reality and existence” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018, p.64), i.e. what kind of reality the research is expected to provide. With this in mind, this research embraced a relativist ontology, according to which the reality depends on the point of view from which an event is inspected, thereby allowing for the existence of several truths, depending on the context which they take place in and are observed (Hunt & Hansen, 2009; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This study aims at figuring out which elements supporters may deem necessary to consume and engage with low support English football team’s brand extensions, which may vary across supporters depending on several contextual aspects.

As far as epistemology is concerned, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) considered it to be related to the most appropriate ways through which researchers acquire knowledge of a phenomenon, trying to answer the question “how do we know what we know?” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p.69). The authors took on a social-constructionist epistemological perspective, according to which reality is a social construction: how it appears is defined by people, not by external and unbiased elements (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, social

constructionists aim at producing more general knowledge about a given phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The important aspects of a team's brand extensions, from a supporter perspective, are determined by supporters themselves and their perspectives from their own constructed reality, rather than by fixed and disinterested factors. With this in mind, the data will be gathered by considering the supporters' more personal views, to develop more general knowledge around the topic of supporters' opinions of their favourite football club's brand extensions.

#### 4.1.2 Research Approach

The research undertakes an exploratory nature to understand supporters of low support Premier League teams and their view on their teams' brand extensions, and how they may decide to engage with these extensions. With this in mind, a qualitative research method was deemed most appropriate. Qualitative studies often result from a relativist and social constructionist research philosophy, like this research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). They aim to break down and understand the phenomena being studied through the lens of the participants' world and experiences, interpreting and understanding these concepts through language (Kvale, 1996; Merriam, 2002; Brennen, 2017). The suitability of qualitative research for this study stems from one of its key characteristics: that researchers look to understand the different interpretations, constructions and views people have, and learning how they experience their social world (Merriam, 2002). The researchers want to discover the supporters' own personal interpretations and views on the brand extension strategies of their favourite football clubs, and how these experiences may indeed be different depending on how each supporter has experienced respective extensions. Uncovering this information is more suitable from a qualitative method which comes from different angles and perspectives, rather than the more singular, fixed views of quantitative research (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research also carries two other key characteristics in defining its relevance for this particular research, and why the researchers considered it to be the most suitable method: that the researcher is a primary aspect of the data process; and that this method provides rich data and descriptions (Merriam, 2002; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Being part of the data collection process allows the researchers to enhance their own understanding, clarify data and also explore new areas of interest, while also monitoring themselves in how the data is shaped and collected to reduce personal bias (Merriam, 2002). The richness of data is a key differentiator and benefit of qualitative research, and for this study, as it allows for detailed and in-depth insights from the supporters themselves through their own experiences and provides details which could not be matched by a quantitative method.

This study takes an abductive approach, which is a middle ground, or mix, between inductive and deductive approaches (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Nilsson, 2021a). Abduction allows for the

iterative process of continuous movement between theory and observation from the collected empirical material, with the theoretical framework being modified and built on based on empirical findings and also from newly gained empirical and theoretical knowledge from the research process, in turn merging new insights alongside established theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Nilsson, 2021a). Abduction is deemed as an appropriate approach if the researchers are looking to gain new knowledge and insights which can build on theory and generate high-level empirical insights (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Meyer & Lunnay, 2013).

Taking this into consideration, abduction has been chosen as the most suitable approach because this research tries to gain new insights into supporters' views of a football team's brand extensions. The researchers indeed are looking at a new aspect of brand extension literature, particularly in the match going supporters perceptions. However, the researchers believe that by using the iterative process of moving back and forth between the literature and the findings, which is part of the abductive approach, that this study can then look for findings which can further enhance the current concepts and models which lie in this study, and find important high-level insights, which may not be possible through looking only from traditional theoretical parameters (Meyer & Lunnay, 2013). With this in mind, the researchers move between current literature and the framework in order to further develop and expand on the theory through the insights from this study.

## 4.2 Research Design

This section presents the research design. In the following subsections, the authors introduce the selected data collection method alongside the reasons behind such a choice, as well as how the interviews were prepared and conducted. This is followed by some ethical considerations that are specific to the selected method of data collection. The section is concluded by an explanation of the used sampling techniques and criteria.

### 4.2.1 Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

The selected data collection method consisted of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted via video call. Interviews are dialogues between the interviewer and the interviewee to deeply discuss a specific topic through a series of questions (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Charmaz, 2014). The choice of conducting interviews was considered as most appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study. According to Kvale (1994), interviews are well suited to pursue explorative research goals, because they allow researchers to delve into participants' opinions about a specific phenomenon in a detailed and in-depth manner (Kvale, 1996; Alvesson, 2003; Tracy, 2013; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), and also enable

them to understand why those impressions or points of view are held (King, 2004). Using semi-structured interviews allows the interviewers to induce interviewees to go more in-depth with the replies they give (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In fact, with respect to other qualitative research methods, interviews are a “more naturalistic and less structured data collection tool” (Alshenqeeti, 2014, p.40). Moreover, this method allows data to be compared, as interviewees are exposed to the same general queries in the same sequence (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

The interviews were conducted remotely, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and location of the participants and researchers. In fact, remote interviews allow for more flexibility and enable participants to be reached out to regardless of their geographical location (Seitz, 2016). The choice of using video calls was taken after having acknowledged that the main weakness of several remote interview methods (e.g. mail interviews, telephone interviews, etc.) is the lack of possibility in considering non-verbal communication arising from the respondent’s facial expressions, which often contains very relevant pieces of information (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). A video call through online platforms, instead, allows to avoid this plausible drawback as it still permits to examine the speaker’s face, thus constituting the closest substitute to real life interviews. Moreover, during a video call interview, interviewees are in their own personal environment, which makes them feel more at ease and less pressured, thereby increasing the likelihood of providing richer and more natural responses (Seitz, 2016).

In the process of selecting the method to collect data, the authors also considered some alternatives to interviews. Focus groups, i.e. group interviews where the researcher gathers a specific group of respondents for their thoughts and behaviour (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), might have been one, especially because they are particularly useful when the goal is studying the behaviour and the points of view of a specific group of people (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, such a method presents some possible drawbacks that may negatively affect the quality of the study, like a lower honesty from participants due to the social pressure generated by the focus group (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). On the other hand, a face-to-face interview setting does not create the same degree of social pressure, especially if trust is established between interviewer and interviewee (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), suggesting face-to-face interviews as more appropriate than focus groups for the purposes of this study.

Another possibility would have been netnography, i.e. ethnography of an online community (Kozinets, 2002) to figure out the reasoning behind consumers’ choices and opinions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However this method does not allow the researchers to also consider the non-verbal communication, whose importance is paramount (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Moreover, Bertilsson (2021) argued that people online tend to behave differently than in real life, being more careful of their image. As this research aims at obtaining supporters’ true opinions, semi-structured video interviews were preferred over netnography.

The chosen method, however, has limitations too. Participants may be hesitant in disclosing what they truly think due to the nature of the personal information they disclose, which requires trust and confidentiality (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, this risk may be considerably reduced if the interviewers develop a relationship of genuine trust with the interviewee (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Moreover, the presence of the interviewer may increase the likelihood that the researchers' interests bias the responses provided by participants, thereby inducing the latter to answer in analogous ways (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Therefore, the interviewers should make the effort of remaining as neutral as possible and simply show no more than an impartial but still true interest for what is told by the interviewees. Finally, conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews tends to be time-consuming (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Hence, the researchers should be efficient enough so as to interview the amount of people necessary to reach saturation within the time frame allowed for the thesis. Nevertheless, having assessed advantages and disadvantages of the aforementioned methods, the authors felt that the most acceptable method for this research is semi-structured face-to-face interviews.

#### 4.2.2 Interview Preparation

In preparation for the interview, authors developed an interview guide which ensures the conversations touch upon topics which would facilitate in answering the research question (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). An additional necessary procedure was contacting the interviewees. First contact was established through communication platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter or Facebook. This preliminary informal conversation was of crucial importance, especially to assess whether or not the person belongs to the population of interest. To incentivise potential interviewees to participate, the researchers informed them that they would be part of a lottery to win a £20 Amazon voucher. Having confirmed that the requirements were met, the authors illustrated to the potential respondent the scope of the interview and of the research, providing him/her with the consent forms and information sheet reported in Appendices A, B and C. Moreover, to make the interviewee feel at ease and to respect his/her schedule, the potential respondent was also allowed to choose the day and time of the interview. The authors committed to being flexible to accommodate the respondents' preferences. This attitude not only guaranteed the availability of the respondent, but also enabled to build trust and a positive relationship between interviewers and interviewees, which is crucial if the latter are to provide honest answers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

#### 4.2.3 Interview Structure

The researchers developed an interview guide, which consists of a list of questions accounting for specific topics to be touched upon during the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Brennan,

2017). This guide allowed for each interviewer to cover the same topics needed to answer the research question during each interview, as they both conducted interviews separately.

In developing the questions, the researchers took the role of the interviewees in how the questions were worded, as the questions need to be able to cover answering the research question and also be easy for the interviewees to understand and answer (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The interview guide was developed through a two-step process, beginning with Guest, Namey & Mitchell (2013) stepwise approach to interview guide development, which involves reviewing the research objectives of the thesis and outlining three questions to be answered by the researchers themselves: “1) what are the main research questions that the interviews are intended to answer?; 2) what are the primary domains of content that should be covered in the interview?; 3) what types of data are needed to provide these answers (opinions, experiences, knowledge, attitudes)?” (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013, p.179). This process allows for refining and reviewing of the objectives and questions to be asked through the identification of high-level research questions and objectives, then further refinement into specific subtopics and questions, and how they may be answered (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013).

Following this framework, the questions in the interview guide were developed in the second step through the process of brainstorming, phrasing and then sequencing potential questions (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). The types of questions used included: introductory and follow up questions to stir up conversation and gain initial insights, probing questions to delve deeper into specific topics, and interpretive questions to seek clarity from the participant (Kvale, 1996; Brennen, 2017). The semi-structured guide was loose, which allows flexibility in covering topics and for new lines of enquiry to emerge (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013).

The first part of the interview guide, *Introduction*, included some basic introductory and ice breaker questions, which allow researchers to learn about participants and to create an appropriate environment for the rest of the interview (Brennen, 2017; Nilsson, 2021b) as well as understanding specific demographics which they fall into.

The second section, *Relationship with the Club*, delved into the participants' relationship to the football club. This section focused on how the individuals relate to the club they support, and the dynamics of this relationship. This section attempted to learn more about how the football team potentially plays a role in the participants' self and identity, touching upon the first element of the framework: *Supporter Identification to the Football Club*. This section aimed to get supporters to open up about their feelings about the club based on previous interaction, and how the club may have a place in their own identity development. This section also aimed to increase participants' comfort to talk freely about Fulham, and the interviewers used the answers to learn about participant - club identification.

The following section, *Fulham FC's Commercial Activities*, covered the club's commercial activities, (i.e. brand extensions). The researchers attempted to gain an understanding of

whether participants have engaged in brand extension activities in the past, and to talk about their potential experiences with these activities. The main questions in this section aimed to uncover what extensions participants were aware of, and how they view specific activities in terms of previous interaction and also of their own general perceptions. Indeed, being able to garner their experiences and recognition of such extensions allowed the researchers to potentially delve more into their view of the specific activities, including how they fit in with the club, and whether they positively or negatively view the extension, touching upon predominantly the second and third elements of the framework: *Match Between Football Club & Extension* and *Supporter Expectations of the Extension*. However some questions could potentially touch upon *Supporter Identification to the Football Club* in understanding why they may have/have not consumed such activities.

The last section ended with concluding comments to see if the participant may want to add anything overlooked by the interviewer. In addition, the researchers had a list of potential sub questions and elaborative queries to allow respondents to talk freely and provide rich descriptions. With this in mind, each of the questions could end up touching upon all aspects of the framework, as well as new aspects which were not considered by the researchers themselves. The interview guide can be seen in Appendix D.

#### 4.2.4 Conducting the Interviews

Given the remote interview setting, it is fundamental to generate trust between the respondents and the researchers to guarantee honest and truthful answers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). To do that, all the interviews started with general questions to break the ice and make the supporters feel at ease. Furthermore, during the interviews, the interviewers did their best to appear friendly and interested in what was told by the participants without leaning toward specific topics. The goal was to make the interview seem like a natural conversation, so respondents could feel comfortable in disclosing their opinions.

Another crucial aspect is to avoid any kind of behaviour that may bias the interviewees' responses (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, rather than exposing supporters to a set of predetermined brand extensions and then delving into them, the researchers allowed the interviewees freedom to talk about their experience and views on their team's extension activities. Their answers were followed up in order to elaborate on supporter views to gain a more nuanced, in-depth understanding of their thoughts and answers.

Laddering techniques, consisting of asking the interviewees some follow up questions to gain more specific and detailed insights about a specific reply (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), were often adopted. Laddering can take two main forms. On one hand, laddering up stimulates the participants to move on a higher and more abstract level to figure out which values lie behind the opinion they gave (Wansink, 2003; Bourne & Jenkins, 2005), and it is often done by

asking a series of “why” questions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). On the other hand, laddering down consists in asking the interviewees to give some instances of a situation they have described, thereby inducing their replies to shift on a lower and more concrete level (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

To comply with the credibility criterion described by Lincoln & Guba (1985), during the interview the researchers were checking whether they were correctly interpreting the respondents’ words. To do that, the interviewers were often presenting to the participants their interpretation of what had just been stated and then asked whether such an interpretation was correct. Researchers should also single out particularly relevant information disclosed by the respondents (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In order to make sure this information does not get lost, the authors decided to voice record all the interviews. Moreover, to also account for nonverbal communication and for its relevant insights (Bryman & Bell, 2011), the authors also took notes which were then used in support for the transcriptions, which were done soon after each of the interviews, considering that many of the facets of the interviews were still fresh in the interviewers’ memory.

#### 4.2.5 Ethical Considerations

Considering the chosen qualitative research approach, it is important to be aware of ethical considerations, as respondents discuss their own private accounts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). In undertaking qualitative research, particularly interviews, it is important for the researchers to protect participants from any potential harm (Brennen, 2017). With this in mind, the researchers carried out necessary due diligence to ensure that participants were aware of the aspects of the study, including goals, intentions and scope of the research.

A fundamental aspect is guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality, because this may considerably enhance the researchers’ possibility of gaining access to data and, at the same time, safeguards the respondents’ privacy, thereby avoiding the risk of exposing them to any type of harm (Nilsson, 2021b). With this in mind, obtaining informed consent from the participants is imperative when agreeing to do interviews, and explaining to participants what the research is explicitly about, and how the material obtained from the respective interviews will be used (Brennen, 2017). Therefore, Diener & Crandall (1978, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2011), cited possible ethical transgressions in qualitative research, with two in particular required to be addressed: informed consent and deception.

In addressing these issues, the researchers prepared a consent form following the LUSEM Master Thesis Consent Form Template (Appendix A & B), which respondents were required to sign before the interview. The consent form was also accompanied by an information sheet (Appendix C) in which the scope of the interview was clearly outlined and in which all the measures aimed at guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity were explained. Those

measures consisted in not mentioning the respondent's name, replacing it with *P1-P12*; in the respondents' possibility to refuse to answer to specific questions and to withdraw at any moment without justifying themselves; and in informing participants that other researchers may access the collected data as long as they adhere to confidentiality and anonymity measures. In the consent form, participants were asked to declare that they understood the purpose of the interview as well as the measures taken to protect their privacy, that they agree to participate, and that the information provided by them will be utilised for the purposes of the study respecting the principles outlined in the information sheet. The participants either signed and returned the consent forms, or replied via email, attaching the forms and declaring that they had read them and agreed to take part in the research. In addition, the participants were asked to confirm they had read and agreed to consent during the interview itself.

#### 4.2.6 Sampling

The process of generating the sample was carried out through the use of two non-probability sampling techniques: purposive and snowball sampling. A non-probability sampling method ensures that participants falling into the correct criteria are found and selected for the research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Purposive sampling allows for the development of specific criteria to be used when finding participants for the study, so potential respondents also provide appropriate empirical material (Patton, 2002; Jupp, 2006; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Snowball sampling consists in identifying participants eligible to take part in the research, and then asking them to refer another person to take part (Sue & Ritter, 2017).

With this in mind, purposive sampling generated initial criteria and set of participants to be used for the study, with snowball sampling occurring for the recruitment of more participants in order to gain more perspectives and viewpoints (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013), and reach saturation. Within this study, the parameters of the potential supporters were developed by the researchers, and this was used in combination with snowball sampling of supporters of the selected club who fit the criteria in order to gather more relevant supporters.

The purposive sampling process started with the selection of the football club, which was picked from the current 2020/2021 English Premier League season, based on popularity and revenues. The most recent statistics about popularity and revenue arose from the 2018/2019 season. The popularity was based on the cumulative social media ranking of each club according to Newton Insight (2019) social media rankings. In addition, revenue was determined according to the Deloitte's (2020) Annual Review of Football 2020 revenue figures. The choice of using social media as an indicator of the size of the fan base was due to the impact of a club's social media and how having larger social media followings correlates with increased revenue for clubs (O'Connor, 2012; Ozanian, 2021). The clubs who currently compete in the Premier League and were in the bottom half of both sets of rankings, were

deemed suitable. Bournemouth, Cardiff City, Watford and Huddersfield Town were not considered, as they did not participate in the 2020/2021 Premier League season, leaving five suitable clubs: Fulham FC, Southampton, Brighton & Hove Albion, Crystal Palace and Burnley (Newton Insight, 2019; Deloitte, 2020). However, due to time and resource limitations, interviewing supporters of all five teams would not have been feasible. Therefore the authors decided to interview Fulham FC supporters, as this team had both the lowest number of fans and the smallest revenues (Newton Insight, 2019; Deloitte, 2020).

The chosen age group lies between the ages of 18 and 34 and would have attended games when possible before the pandemic, while also watching the club's games through TV or streaming services both before and during the pandemic, thus falling within the category of "enthusiasts" according to Pick & Gillet (2019). This ensures that a highly committed and sufficiently numerous group of supporters is interviewed (Pick & Gillet, 2019). The age group is due to Premier League supporters under-35 being most likely to attend games and making up 40% of match going supporters (Sportcal Insight, 2014; Sportcal Insight, 2015).

In addition, the sample, although mixed, would lean toward more male than female participants. This derives from research stating that twice the number of men watch football and the Premier League frequently compared to women (Nielsen, 2019; YouGov, 2020), and indeed 75% of match going Premier League supporters are male and 25% female (Sportcal Insight, 2014; Sportcal Insight 2015). The authors attempted to replicate such a percentage in the sample, resulting in a sample of 12 participants - 10 males and 2 females. Given the resources and time constraints, and the nature of snowball sampling, it was only possible to get close to the 75%-25% ratio, rather than meeting it precisely. Due to the nature of the snowball sampling method, and using the social networks and contacts of original participants falling within the 'enthusiast' criteria (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013), the researchers were limited to potential follow-on participants which came after each agreed interviewee, as they pass on who they believe would fit the research (Patton, 2015). An overview of the sample for this study can be found in Appendix E.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

To begin the analysis of the data, the recorded interviews were transcribed. The empirical data should be approached by gathering raw data, and then analysing it in order to develop interpretations (Thomas, 2006). This approach allows "research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data" (Thomas, 2006, p.238). The research at hand adopted thematic analysis, one of the more common approaches when patterns are to be identified, analysed and also reported in data (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). Thematic analysis was deemed relevant to the research as it allows

for providing a thick description of a large data set and can result in effective summarising and development of key findings from large data sets, which is true when conducting interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The thematic analysis at hand took on a more constructionist paradigm, in line with the philosophical underpinning of the research to coincide with “the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.85). Such analysis develops more latent themes, looking at the underlying aspects of what is captured in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The development of latent themes is more involved with the interpretations of the researchers in terms of the data at hand, which is an important part of qualitative and thematic analysis (Kvale, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data analysis followed Braun’s and Clarke’s (2006) six step guideline to conducting thematic analysis. The researchers first familiarised themselves with the data through transcribing and reading the interviews. The interviews were transcribed by hand to better understand the data. This first step also incorporated making note of non-verbal cues, such as pauses and facial expressions, which are also important vectors of information (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Initial codes were then created from the close reading and idea generation from the first analysis of the data set. Codes describe any piece of data which can be of interest to understand particular phenomena and concepts (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The development of these initial codes allows for a first assessment, structuring and grouping of data (Boyatzis, 1998; Tuckett, 2005). The codes were identified by highlighting particularly relevant information and quotes from each interview transcription, and giving them a brief code, which was placed in an excel sheet.

Following on, all of the codes collected in the initial coding phase were bucketed into potential themes, which allows for a check to see how they combine into different themes or sub themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The development of themes came after observing which codes recurred and provided the same, or similar, information. The theme was given a name suggested by the kind of information disclosed by it. For example, codes were identified which related to the cost of extensions and the cost of supporting the team, so they were bucketed into a first theme called ‘*pricing*’.

After the initial themes were generated, they were then continuously reviewed and refined in order to identify the more important themes for the final analysis, and themes which may not be relevant, or else be bucketed into other themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process ensured that all of the codes and initial themes were checked again to see if they could be added into new themes, or else be placed into a potential sub theme, or discarded for the final analysis. In elaborating on the original themes, the first theme on ‘*pricing*’ was reshaped to a final theme called ‘**affordability of the extensions**’, with the cost of extensions shaped into

the subtheme *incentivising brand extensions for supporters*, and costs of supporting the team as *using extensions to reduce match-going costs*.

A thematic map was created to see if the themes correlate with the data set and codes. In addition, further ongoing analysis continued, which is necessary to refine and define each theme to develop a clear story and to understand each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The process concluded with the presentation of the data and developed themes through a storied narrative, which consists of selecting particularly relevant examples from the themes and data to bring the analysis to life, answer the research question, and relate back to literature and theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved the description of the initial findings, which were supported by quotes, and then followed by the analysis of the findings underneath, along with any additional supporting quotes. An example of the thematic analysis coding process, and the developed thematic map, can be seen in Appendix F.

## 4.4 Quality of the Account

It is important that a qualitative study is considered to be trustworthy (Amankwaa, 2016). Within qualitative research, trustworthiness can be generated by meeting four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following subsections are dedicated to each criteria in what they are, how in general each of them can be obtained, and of how the thesis at hand meets each.

### 4.4.1 Credibility

Lincoln & Guba (1985) argued that qualitative research can be deemed credible if its findings can reasonably be believed to be true. Among the several drivers of credibility, two are particularly important: asking respondents whether the researchers' interpretations of their answers are correct; and making the study as transparent as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this study, when interviews were being conducted, the authors checked whether they correctly understood what the interviewees meant by exposing them to the researchers' interpretation of his/her words, and then asking them whether the interpretation was correct. In such a way, the authors could be more certain that they did not misinterpret the interviewees' opinion, so as not to jeopardise the quality of data collection and data interpretation. Thus, this clarification with respondents enabled authors to generate credibility. Furthermore, the researchers provided precise and detailed descriptions especially for the methodology section. In this way, the readers can easily comprehend what procedure was followed to conduct the study and the reasoning behind the authors' choices. This contributed

to giving the thesis a sense of transparency, whose direct consequence was rendering the study more credible.

#### 4.4.2 Transferability

The idea behind transferability is whether or not what qualitative research finds out can be applied also in other contexts and situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Therefore, it seems that the concept of transferability reminds the notion of generalisability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, making a qualitative study generalisable is often complicated, because the collected data often tends to derive from specific and stand-alone circumstances. With this in mind, Lincoln & Guba (1985) observed that providing a detailed depiction of observations may be an effective way to make the findings transferable. The reason is that, if authors thoroughly describe their observations, future readers will be enabled to assess on their own whether or not they can transfer the outcomes of the study to a different context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Indeed, it is the reader's responsibility to establish if and to what extent findings can be moved to different settings (Merriam, 1995).

Consequently, the authors described precisely what was stated by supporters during the interviews, supplementing the report with some particularly illustrative quotes for a given theme. In addition, Lincoln & Guba (1985) considered that the practice of purposive sampling is another measure that can be adopted in order to furnish a thick description. As already explained, the researchers engaged in purposive sampling, interviewing only supporters meeting the predefined criteria. These two measures allowed to improve the level of transferability that can be attributed to the research at hand.

#### 4.4.3 Dependability

Dependability can be described as “showing that the findings are consistent and can be repeated” (Amankwaa, 2016, p.121). Dependability relies on whether the study can be repeated in similar circumstances, but in different locations and times (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). In naturalistic inquiry, dependability is also seen as the data being described as ‘stable’ rather than dependable, and researchers “must make allowance for apparent instabilities arising either because different realities are being tapped or because of instrumental shifts stemming from developing insights on the part of the investigator-as-instrument” (Guba, 1981, p.86). In addition, due to the constructionist nature of the study, transparency can be deemed as an important metric for suggesting that studies can be deemed as believable and credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

With this in mind, the researchers ensured to transparently outline each step of the method and analysis process to ensure that they could be evaluated by other researchers in terms of dependability. This process includes how the sample is generated, how the data is captured and analysed, and also how this data turns into specific themes (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The documents were also made available upon request, so as to check if the empirical data fit with the interpretations in the findings and analysis of chapter 5.

#### 4.4.4 Confirmability

The notion of confirmability relates to the “degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest” (Amankwaa, 2016, p.121). In order to assess confirmability, Lincoln & Guba (1985) recommended taking on two possible options: triangulation, i.e. the collecting data from various viewpoints and perspectives; and reflexivity, i.e. being aware of, and uncovering, the researchers’ underlying epistemological assumptions, and their reasoning which results in how research is formulated and also answered (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

For this research, the authors attempted to meet triangulation through source triangulation, looking at different sources used within a single method to check for consistency (Amankwaa, 2016). Within this, triangulation was met by obtaining the empirical data from multiple sources, differing through genders, socio-economic status and potential age differences. Regarding reflexivity, the research worked toward ensuring confirmability through two specific lenses: 1) multiple researchers and 2) reporting their own perspectives and positions in the research (Amankwaa, 2016). Throughout this study, the two researchers continuously worked together in order to understand their own positions and develop both similar and divergent understandings of the research, catering to the development of a suitable study (Amankwaa, 2016). Researchers stated their own ontological and epistemological standpoints to clarify their own viewpoints, and as this may ensure transparency in how these standpoints may have played a role in the development of the research (Amankwaa, 2016).

## 4.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter the authors illustrated why a qualitative research approach through semi-structured interviews was selected to conduct this study. The researchers also explained how the research process was developed as well as the characteristics of the sample. Following this, the approach to analyse the data was described, alongside the reasoning behind such a choice. A last section argued for the quality of the account, showing how the study meets the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

## 5 Findings & Analysis

This chapter describes the analysis of the empirical material which has been created through the 12 conducted interviews. Following Braun's & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, six main themes have been developed through analysis of the interview transcripts, along with sets of sub-themes: *Accessibility to the Club*, *Affordability of the Extensions*, *Sentimental Values*, *Mismatch Between Values and Practice*, *Sense of Belonging*, and *Team Performance*. These themes flesh out the perceptions of Fulham's match going supporters on their team's brand extension activities, and what they want to see in those brand extension activities if they are to engage and consume them. Each will be discussed in the following sections, alongside the respective subthemes.

### 5.1 Accessibility to the Extensions

One of the most striking themes was supporters' desire to make the club's extensions more accessible, both to themselves and to other demographics. In the eyes of supporters, although they would be attending games and engaging with the club off-the-pitch to differing degrees, they felt that the club and its extension activities should be more accessible to them, in terms of two subthemes: making extensions more visible; and creating potential extensions which are more tailored to the supporters specifically.

#### *Making Extensions More Visible to Supporters*

Supporters have been willing in the past to engage with potential extensions of the club when they have been exposed and made available to them. This has been exemplified through one of the more important extensions in the eyes of supporters: the Fulham Foundation charity. The foundation has been prominent in the community and has a wide outreach across the spectrum of Fulham's supporters, particularly locally. The foundation itself is quite visible and accessible to supporters, who have indeed interacted with it on many levels: from donating leftover change from match tickets, to taking part in the charity 10k race, to being part of the football camps as youngsters, to working with the foundation as a football coach.

*[...] that's what got me into football, the Fulham foundation, running a football school for, for me on my holidays. So that that's definitely what makes it quite special. (P10)*

*I started working for them doing, like, after school clubs and kind of Saturday morning coaching and stuff [...] and after my undergrad, I went back to work for them in a similar capacity, just working more hours, really, and doing a bit more kind of PE lessons. (P7)*

However, even with the work of the Fulham Foundation being recognised and engaged with by supporters, supporters believe that Fulham could do more to make the club and its extensions easier to reach and more accessible, both to themselves and the wider community. For example, although the Fulham Foundation is home to the ladies team, they do not get a lot of exposure from the football club itself, to the point that some supporters do not even know of its existence and believe that creating a ladies team would be important for the club.

*I would like to see something like that [a ladies team] because I think there is a, there's a good level of kind of female support, and I think particularly, you know, young kids, young girls, there is a Chelsea, there is a Man United, there are all of these teams, you know, make it at Fulham [...] why wouldn't you try and grow the club in that way? (P1)*

This further point on the lack of visibility extends from the ladies to underage teams as well.

*And it's good to have good teams in all aspects, so if you've got good under[age], good ladies, good men, [...] if you go back to teams in every aspect and every division, every different level, you're gonna be, you're gonna have more fans around. (P4)*

The lack of exposure generated by the football club for specific extensions therefore limits the accessibility supporters have, because there is not enough awareness created for them. If awareness increases, and if brand extensions are more visible and accessible, supporters would like to engage with them. Making these extensions more available to supporters may be positive for Fulham in terms of a higher willingness to engage, and in garnering new generations of supporters through availability and access to extensions like the ladies team.

*I do kind of keep up to date with it [the ladies team], but I don't follow it as much as I would like the men's team. I don't go to their games. Um, unless they play at the Cottage and they're doing like, they used to do like a pound for a game if you had a season ticket, which was also very good because it got people to start supporting the youngsters as well. (P3)*

### ***Create Bespoke Extensions for Supporters***

According to supporters, the club's off-the-field activities should also be aimed at creating extensions which are bespoke and unique for them. Supporters believe that the club should be able to provide specific activities for them, more so than what is currently on offer. This point is well emphasised when comparing Fulham to clubs in other European countries, and how the latter create specific activities for all supporters, both in the community and on match day.

*[...] actually increase the amount of things that we provide to the community that we provide to fans. I think fan engagement in the UK in general, not just for my club, is quite bad, uh, because I've been to a lot of games, for example, to Germany, because I lived in Belgium, and their fan engagement is a lot better in the sense that there are activities that kids do beforehand, there are things to do in and around the ground. (P6)*

Supporters believe that something more can be done for them, especially as the club itself may benefit from more engagement with the supporters. Supporters would like to see extensions which are more tailored to them specifically, especially for the more dedicated supporters who believe that their commitment should be acknowledged.

*I'd probably go there, like if they did like a training ground, like where you can watch them train[ing] or something, I'd probably go. [...] And obviously if you're getting more personal with the players then they'll have a better relationship with the fans. (P2)*

*Don't get me wrong. It won't stop me going and I'll still go, but it would just, I think it would just, it would just feel nice to give something back to the fans. (P5)*

Thus, even if the club already organises initiatives to interact with supporters, some respondents felt that more can be done. Public relations and events may be helpful in deepening the relationships with the fans, so that they feel more committed. However fostering interaction between the club and supporters and making extensions more catered to them may result in a positive view on the club with a favourable relationship, and therefore a potential increase in brand extension engagement and purchasing. In addition, such a move toward accessibility may allow supporters to spend money in other off-the-field activities with the club. This may also enlarge the fan base, which would further have a positive effect on the club's revenues, because the presence of more supporters means that there would be more people paying to attend matches and interact with the teams' extensions.

*If there was something simple, like a football tournament for fans, you know, something like that [...]. You can attract different fans as well. You can get more people to the club because they see you getting involved in these things. (P12)*

## 5.2 Affordability of the Extensions

A second emerging theme is the affordability of the extensions. For supporters, brand extensions are sometimes too expensive to engage with. For example, multiple supporters believe that the cost of supporting the team and attending matches is enough, to the point where they won't purchase other extensions. It is costly to be a Fulham match-going

supporter, let alone to also buy other commercial products and services. This results in supporters viewing the costs of (1) going to matches to support the team, and then (2) the added cost of engaging with other extensions, as not being affordable, which has an impact on the potential engagement with the club's brand extensions.

*I wouldn't say I buy too much into it [merchandise] because, or I don't want to spend too much money because, you know, going into the games are ridiculous, expensive as it is. (P9)*

### **Using Extensions to Reduce Match-Going Costs**

For some, the cost of supporting Fulham and attending home matches alone can be estimated to be in the hundreds to even thousands of pounds, accounting for things from season tickets, to travel, to potential purchasing of jerseys and also food and drink.

*So £600 about for the Premier [League], I think when, when we got relegated to the Championship I think it [the season ticket] was £490 for my, where my seat was [...] (P2)*

In terms of affordability, supporters have gripes with the cost of supporting the team. For those who follow Fulham all over the country, the cost does add up, and there is a common consensus that the club could find ways to make supporting the team cheaper. With this in mind, supporters have mentioned that the club could indeed use extensions such as transport as one way to reduce the costs of supporting the team.

*[...] recognise that actually putting on a bus or a series of buses that are going back to London, even if it's, even if it's, uh, you know; the club do run buses for matches, but actually it's like, you know, makes it a little bit more available. (P1)*

For Fulham, being able to find ways to reduce the cost of supporting the club, and making it more affordable to support the team through the use of specific extensions would allow for a better view of the club in the eyes of supporters, and also encourage them to use such extension activities; whether it be taking the club coach to a game, utilising an offer for food and drink in the stadium, or making other facilities like club bars available for fans to use to support the team. When this has been done in the past, supporters have appreciated it, with similar activities potentially bringing other positive perceptions of the team and their extension activities.

*[...] just before lockdown last year, the Leeds away game was also free travel. Um, which obviously is really good, cause Leeds ticket prices are like £42 per adult. So if, you see, if you've got a family of four and then you've got to pay for the coach travel plus the food, plus if you're staying over plus like [it] mounts up, so I think it was quite good where the club did three free coach travel or discounted travel. (P3)*

### *Incentivising Brand Extensions for Supporters*

In addition, the supporters are apprehensive about the cost of brand extensions, particularly merchandising. For the most part, the supporters would only have been inclined to purchase merchandising when they were on sale or special offer with their season ticket, rather than paying the full price for something which may change every year anyway, or for something they don't see the value in.

*I think we've got nice kits, but uh, they're overpriced [...] I think they should be cheaper. That's why I wait until the end of the season, because by the end of the season, they get, they get a lot cheaper, but when you try and buy them as soon as they come out, they're a very expensive price. (P5)*

*But recently, to be honest, I actually haven't really rated any of the kits that they brought out. So I can't really warrant paying £70 for this top. (P2)*

There have been initiatives which the club has brought out for season ticket holders to incentivise the purchasing of extensions such as merchandising and also food and drink at the stadium. However, supporters have not generally been made fully aware of the range of initiatives and discounts which have been made available to them in the past.

*I'm not sure if they, they don't really communicate it [merchandising discount] very well, because I didn't even know I had this discount, like I was in a store and the person behind the counter just said, "if you have a season ticket, you get a discount". (P7)*

Moreover, these discounts, which have been available in the past, appear to no longer be available.

*They used to, they used to give you discount in the shop, um, but I know they stopped doing that [...] but there were certain games where you'd get like a pie & pint, a pie and a pint for a certain amount of money as well, which obviously meant that, that the hospitality industry within the club was like excelling because they did that, but they didn't do it, they stopped doing a lot of it at the moment or recently. (P3)*

The price of some of the club's extensions is something which most certainly decreases the supporters' willingness to engage and purchase. Providing certain discounts to supporters and finding ways to make extensions such as merchandising more affordable could certainly increase the potential for such extensions to be purchased and engaged with by supporters in the future. In addition, being able to promote these discounts may also result in a higher increase in supporters taking up, and in turn engaging with, the club's extensions.

## 5.3 Sentimental Values

The third theme arising from the interviews was a set of emotional and sentimental values associated with the club which impact supporters' view on the team's brand extension activities. Those extensions which can hit on the emotional and sentimental pieces of the supporters' overall perception of the club would perhaps be viewed in a more positive light. For Fulham, there is an opportunity to use the values supporters portray on the club to incentivise them to engage in their commercial activities. Supporters came back to three specific sentimental traits they place on the club, constituting the three subthemes below.

### *Authentic & Traditional Club*

An important sentimental value comes through viewing the club in terms of its authenticity and tradition. According to supporters, the brand extension that best embodies the Fulham history and tradition is the stadium, Craven Cottage.

*[...] just a really lovely ground like not a soulless bowl [...] you know, vintage. It has all his character and things like that [...] I love Craven Cottage. (P11)*

*You have the Johnny Haynes Stand with like wooden seats [...] It's [the Cottage] quite intimate and it has more of like a family feel rather than if you went to a bigger stadium, if you went to Emirates or like Tottenham's new stadium, it's really big and feels quite um, like a franchise, like commercialised almost. Whereas Fulham, it feels a bit more of an old school kind of authentic football club. (P7)*

According to the interviewees, Craven Cottage is special not only because of the traditional and classical taste it has, but also because supporters have a deep emotional connection with Fulham through the stadium. It is somewhere that they have spent a significant amount of their time in during their life and have significant memories in as well, almost to the point of considering it a second home.

*I've got that connection [to Craven Cottage]. I've sat there with my life really. It's a second home, really. (P5)*

*When you are in there [smiling] you feel a part of it. (P4)*

The aspect of authenticity and tradition, which is encapsulated in the supporters' views of the stadium, is something which is repeated across the supporters as an important value for them. For the brand extensions of Fulham to be more positively viewed, reflecting authenticity and tradition can be beneficial for supporters' potential engagement with the club's extensions.

### ***Family & Inclusive Club***

In addition, most of the supporters see Fulham as a true family club. This is an aspect which they personally epitomise, as they have been Fulham supporters through their family as multigenerational supporters of the club.

*So this came obviously from my father who supported from the sixties, 1960s. Uh, and then also first recollection that we have, or the first memory that we have, or my grandfather has, was 1932 and something, something in the family since 1932, uh, where obviously we were fortunate enough to be able to go with three generation suits with quite a few games when I was very young. (P6)*

However, Fulham is more than just the family club of the traditional family. Supporters feel that they themselves make up one big family. There is a sense of the supporters being very open and friendly, and there is an atmosphere around the club among supporters that everyone is also part of the Fulham Family, whatever demographic or background.

*I've met so many close people that I don't even class them as friends, they're literally my friends and Fulham family. (P3)*

*I'd say it's a good family club [...] inclusive to everyone. (P4)*

Once again, supporters demonstrated to particularly appreciate Craven Cottage, since it typifies this family and inclusive club values pretty well.

*When people say "family club", you think of designated family areas with, you know, the soft play area for kids, you know, at the football match. (P1)*

*We're the only ground which has a mixed, uh, stand behind the goal. So home and away fans could actually mix. So, for example, if I want to go with you to the game, but you support the other team but you're a good friend or a family member, we can sit in this, in this stand. (P6)*

Having this perceived importance by supporters with regards to being a family club in various aspects shows that it is a fundamental value which supporters associate with Fulham. This is something which should be reflected in how the business operates, and also in how the brand extensions are reflected and shown to supporters as well.

### ***Unique & Local Community Club***

The third emerging value is that Fulham supporters see themselves as a truly unique and local community club, whether it be the case of 'Fulhamish' or being 'London's Originals'. The team is different from other clubs in the area, bound by a view of the club having a unique experience compared to other teams.

*[...] having been to the likes of QPR, Crystal Palace, you know, similar sized clubs in and around London, I think Fulham has a kind of, um, it feels a little bit kind of classier or a little bit more unique experience. (P1)*

The Corporate Social Responsibility activities Fulham does through the Fulham Foundation are considered a particularly important brand extension with regards to this. Indeed, the work in the community is something which is truly part and parcel of the club's own identity in the eyes of supporters, a value which simply cannot be forgotten.

*If they stopped doing stuff within the community within, within the local area is, is, is when the club will lose a part of its soul. (P6)*

*I also like, you know, the stuff that they're doing with the foundation, um, the Fulham Foundation, I think that's, that's really, really good work in the community. (P9)*

Supporters also appreciated when some of the sentimental values have been combined together in brand extensions, which certainly increases their willingness to engage with the team's extension activities. An excellent example to replicate, tying into the importance of sentimentality for supporters through the aspects of authenticity & tradition, and also the sense of the unique community club, is the 150-year anniversary jerseys. Fulham released a special, limited edition set of jerseys to mark the occasion of the club reaching the milestone of 150 years since its creation. Not only did the jerseys point to the tradition and history of the club but, in addition, the club launched the jersey with a bespoke event, inviting some of the club's more loyal supporters of all ages to attend, marrying the tradition of the club to bringing together the community of loyal supporters to celebrate the occasion.

*A great example of that was the release of the 150 years jerseys, which was a special run of jerseys [...] but actually to release it, what they did was inviting some of the clubs most loyal fans and kind of a diverse group of fans, you know, from young to old, um, you know, and did quite a bit of about that, um, to bring them all together. (P1)*

## 5.4 Mismatch Between Values & Practice

The fourth theme which occurred comes from the potential impact of the club going against the values which supporters have of Fulham. The importance of the sentimental values which supporters place on the team cannot be understated. The club has to be cognisant of them, and these have to be present in everything the club does off the pitch, as extensions moving away from these views are met negatively by supporters. To be seen in the following subtheme, a

potential mismatch with supporter sentimentality and the business decisions of the club can discourage supporters from engaging with the club's brand extensions.

### ***Mismatch with Sentimental Values and Business Decisions***

There is a paradox which is apparent between the club values and the club's business decisions, which can negatively impact on the supporters' view of their team's brand extensions, and also on their potential engagement with these extensions as well. This can be seen in the club's stadium, which is of great importance to supporters. In recent times, the stadium has been undergoing a redevelopment of one of the stands, the Riverside Stand. This development has shown the potential mismatch between supporters' sentimental values, and the club's own decision-making process. For example, the development was deemed as successful for supporters because it did well to marry in specific values of the football club which they personally see as important, i.e. the authenticity and tradition of Craven Cottage and its history with the club, along with keeping the club in the local community in its Southwest London home.

*So it's investment in the, in the stadium itself. It's not the idea of moving it to a lay-by of a motorway and like so many other clubs have done. So it's kind of retaining investing in the, in the, in the history and, and building on it a bit. (P1)*

But on the other side of the coin, there are certain aspects of the stand development diverging from the club values and characteristics. Some parts of the development are seen as too 'corporate', and not in tune with their perception of the football club, thereby giving a negative view on the development. When the development moves away from their view of the football stadium, their tune begins to change on their overall view of the stand development.

*[...] it's a bit, it's quite corporate in a way. I know we need to make money and have everything, but the commentators are always talking about a rooftop pool and it kind of looks more like a hotel than a football stadium. (P10)*

It is also important to mention that supporters indeed believe that these decisions need to be made for the club to make more money and is something which they accept.

*I think the investment in the stadium is, again, it's a business decision, isn't it? It's to increase capacity, that's to get more money. (P1)*

However, at the end of the day, the supporters in general, although satisfied with the stadium development, do not take kindly to the aspects of this project going against the sentimental values held for the team. This is exemplified by the move away from authenticity and tradition in some of the stand development. Similar decisions could cause a negative impact

on supporters' views of the team's brand extensions, and the club should be cognisant of a potential mismatch with the supporters' sentimental thoughts of the club.

*So in a way I don't like [...]. We're losing a bit of authenticity, but I mean, if it's done, that's nice, it looks good. But the old plans looked more like a real football stadium. (P10)*

Supporters also noted this paradox between the club's values and the business practice when it comes to sponsorship deals. The club's shirt sponsor, BetVictor, is a betting company, which supporters believe goes against what the club stands for and its values, particularly as being a family club. They think the club should be bigger than this in its commercial activities and should keep both the club values and supporters in mind when conducting such business.

*I don't think it [BetVictor] aligns well with the club brand and the message they're trying to send. (P1)*

Overall, supporters feel that the aspect of Fulham as a family club has been somewhat lost in the decisions regarding corporate and commercial activities. Given the importance of the family aspect, supporters are disappointed that the club may deviate from this facet in their extension activities, especially when it comes to sponsorships on merchandising.

*We talk about Fulham and being associated with, you know, you still have family values and being this unique club, you know, we don't always see [it] in the corporate, corporate decisions. (P9)*

In digging deeper into the potential mismatch between the values and sentiments of the supporters, and the extension activities which the club undertakes, there is an important point when it comes to the potential negative impact, and the potential decrease of possible interaction and engagement with extensions. Indeed, if the club engages in any commercial activity which goes against the sentiments which supporters have of the football club, then they are indeed negatively perceived, and it is something for the football club to be aware of if they want supporters to have a more positive view and potentially engage with extensions.

*If the club is going to be reflective of its support base and be reflective of the tradition of the club as a family club, multi-generational club that they should probably just be aware of that type of thing. (P1)*

## 5.5 Sense of Belonging

The fifth theme stemming from the interviews is represented by supporters' need to identify with Fulham, showing that they belong to that club's fandom. Fulham supporters' willingness

to engage with the club's brand extension activities indeed seems to stem from a deep sense of belonging, which makes fans feel the need to be identified as Fulham supporters. According to the supporters' responses, this need manifests itself in two main ways, which will be discussed in the following two subthemes.

### ***Showing Identification to the Team***

Most of the interviewees declared that it is important for them to always be identified as Fulham supporters. For this reason, they said that they often engage with extensions on occasions other than watching a game.

*You have to represent your club, so you have to have a couple of these merchandise [...] (P4)*

*You can easily recognise that I'm a Fulham fan because I'm wearing a Fulham shirt. (P11)*

One of the most common situations in which supporters use the club's merchandise to identify as Fulham fans is while they are practicing sports. For example, P5 told that he often wears Fulham kits while he is playing football because:

*I make no bones about the fact that I support them [Fulham] and I'm not ashamed to support them. I'm very proud to support. [...] I'm just happy to show it off, to be fair.*

This aspect was also illustrated by P8, who puts on Fulham kits as:

*There's not many Fulham fans in the area where I live. So kind of wearing it [...] signifies something as well.*

Interestingly, being identified as Fulham supporters through the use of merchandise was also deemed to be a way to socialise with strangers or on holidays abroad.

*There's a bit of novelty, a potential point of discussion, maybe bumping into someone. (P1)*

*[...] when I used to go on holiday with my parents to Spain or wherever, [...] I always had to pack a Fulham shirt that always came with me like no, no matter what. (P3)*

Supporters said to use merchandise to be identified as belonging to the Fulham fan base also on special occasions. One of them was the initiative of the so-called "white wall", which took place during the 2017-2018 play-off final. On that occasion, Fulham supporters decided to wear a white Fulham jersey to create choreography and to feel part of something big:

*[...] when you enter[ed] that sort of play-off final game, you know, there was that white wall and it was about being part of something. (P9)*

Therefore, it seems that supporters show more willingness to engage with the club's merchandise because this brand extension allows them to be identified as Fulham fans, regardless of the situation in which they wear the club merchandise.

Moreover, supporters also declared to engage or interact with brand extension activities just to feel close to the club, a need stemming from a strong sense of belonging and identification. For instance, when Fulham was relegated to the Championship, almost none of its matches were broadcast, making it difficult to watch all the team's games unless attending matches. To make up for this inconvenience and still demonstrate the dedication to the club, P9 decided to pay a subscription to Fulham TV, a media service belonging to Fulham:

*When we were in the Championship I signed up for like Fulham TV [...]. It was just audio commentary at the games, just to listen.*

The necessity to be close to the club became even more pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has prevented supporters from going to the stadium to watch Fulham play. Within this context, wearing some of the club's merchandise proved to be an effective way to feel close to the club.

*Especially in times like these where we can't be close to our clubs really outside our place, because we can't go to games, [...] I think having something like that [merchandise] goes a long way showing your support to the club. (P11)*

*[...] at the moment, I tend to just kind of wear them [the shirts] like I'm working from home and I'll wear them during the day at home. (P3)*

Some other participants stated that they demonstrate their dedication and closeness to the team by purchasing pieces of merchandise for the sole purpose of collecting them or to have memories of a specific season.

*I mean, besides obviously using them [the kits] for sports, there are some that I don't even use anymore. I just collect them. (P12)*

*So I just buy it [the kit] for like a collection. (P5)*

*[I buy] the kit every season or two, I like to get [it] as kind of a memory of the season. (P8)*

In light of stated above, it appears that the willingness to engage with some of the club's brand extensions, such as merchandise or media services, is particularly prominent if supporters experience a strong identification to the team, making them feel the need to show their dedication and closeness to the club on a constant basis. Such a desire was reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic, because it prevented fans from going to the stadium and forced them to be physically distant from the team.

### ***Showing Support for the Local Team***

For many supporters, it is also important to be identified as Fulham supporters because they want to be seen as belonging to the fan base of the local team and thus distinguish themselves from supporters of other London teams. In fact, Fulham is based in London, where other bigger clubs, such as Chelsea, Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspur and West Ham United are based. As a consequence, there is competition among supporters of different teams and, for supporters, it is crucial to be recognised as followers of a given team.

*I think people have a lot of pride in their club and the team they support because [...] they're in London [...] where there's a lot of competition with big sports clubs [...] but they're not supporting Chelsea up the road, they're not supporting Spurs, they're supporting Fulham.*  
(P1)

*[...] I support my, my local team and, and I'm a lot more passionate and I care a lot more about my club and have a closer connection with my club than you [referring to other supporters].* (P9)

*I also like the fact that, that we are London's oldest professional club, um, obviously which is something to be quite proud of.* (P6)

For Fulham supporters it is important to be recognised as supporting the local team also for reasons related to the area where they are from. Some of the supporters, indeed, explained that their fandom is influenced by the fact that they live or grew up close to the stadium or, in general, in the part of London where Fulham is based.

*It's quite easy for me to get to [Craven Cottage]. [...] [It's] about 20 minutes drive or probably 40 minutes by train.* (P5)

*Growing up in Southwest London, obviously, it's basically the local team or one of the local teams.* (P7)

So, it appears that supporters are more willing to engage with Fulham brand extension activities, mainly merchandise, because in this way they can be recognised as fans of the local team, thus as different from the supporters of other London football teams. There is an emphasis placed on supporting Fulham, rather than another bigger team in London, and this aspect is something which supporters really want to proudly emphasise through the engagement with the club's off-the-field activities.

## 5.6 Team Performance

The sixth and last theme is represented by the performance of the team. Infact, the evaluation and acceptance of a football team's brand extensions seem also to depend on the on-the-pitch performance of the club:

*As soon as you start losing you just end up with everything that's going on wrong with the club [...] if you're winning every week, no one cares what's happening. (P4)*

P12 explained that he purchases Fulham merchandise for the following reasons:

*Maybe the design, the way the team is performing, the players that there are.*

Sometimes supporters decide to buy merchandise to remember successful seasons. P12, for instance, declared that he sometimes bought Fulham kits as a memory for a specific season, one of which was the 2009-2010, when Fulham reached the Europa League final:

*So you kind of look back and remember that year through the kits.*

Therefore, from what stated by supporters, team performance may reinforce the willingness to interact with the team's off-the-field activities. When the club is obtaining good results, supporters may be so enthusiastic about it that they may feel more willing to engage with the clubs' brand extensions, whereas the frustration deriving from unsatisfactory performances may discourage them from interacting with the off-the-field activities.

## 5.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter the authors provided an analysis of Fulham supporters' responses to questions related to what they consider to be important to engage with the brand extensions performed by their favourite football team. The thematic analysis revealed six recurring themes: ***Accessibility to the Club*** with subthemes focused on visibility and extensions created specifically for supporters; ***Affordability of the Extensions*** and its emphasis on making extensions to ease match going costs and also making other extensions cheaper; ***Sentimental Values*** of the club as authentic and traditional, family focused and inclusive, and unique and local with a community focus; ***Mismatch Between Values and Practice*** through a mismatch and paradox between supporter values and the clubs business decisions; ***Sense of Belonging*** and its subthemes on showing identification to the team and the importance of supporting the local team; and the sixth and final theme on ***Team Performance***

## 6 Discussion

In this discussion chapter, the analysis of the empirical data is looked at through the lens of previous literature. The richness of the collected data allowed researchers to also get sentimental, emotional and family-related insights, a kind of knowledge that was possible to be obtained thanks to the qualitative, rather than quantitative, nature of the chosen method, which permitted supporters to go in-depth with the answers they gave. Through a structure similar to that of the analysis chapter, this chapter will discuss the six themes stemming from the empirical material in light of the literature and the theories described in chapters 2 and 3.

### 6.1 Supporters Want Extensions to be More Accessible

Supporters have the desire for a club's extension strategies to be made more accessible to them. For managers and decision makers, it is important for them to find ways to increase visibility and promote extensions for match going supporters, so they can indeed be made aware and potentially engage with them. Indeed, marketing managers can potentially improve the brand extension engagement of their match going supporters by further developing activities and initiatives which are targeted at supporters specifically. This was an unexpected finding in the context of the study, but relates to the literature in some insightful ways, and can be used to help develop and build on brand extension literature. In order for extensions to be engaged and interacted with, they should be more visible and available in the eyes of supporters so they can be aware of and engage with them. This is in line with Pitta & Kastanis (1995) notion that consumers' awareness of an extension is important for the potential success of said extension, and also in encouraging customers to engage and purchase extensions of a brand in different product categories. The findings also state that extensions which indeed can create awareness would be more likely to be accepted by supporters; however, if they are not aware of them, the potential for engagement and interaction may decrease. This supports Apostolopoulou's (2002) framework for brand extension success needing promotional support and extension positioning.

Supporters want there to be bespoke extensions created for them, and something unique for supporters to interact with. A positive view of extensions can be generated if the extensions are developed and tailored with the supporter in mind, and this would be beneficial in further developing a club-supporter relationship. There is an opportunity here for managers to create

extensions which can emphasise the supporters specifically and find ways to build relationships with them through brand extensions. The ability to offer specific extensions to supporters touches and also builds on the idea in literature that, when extensions are offered to consumers, particularly at multiple touchpoints and different areas, that it might increase their loyalty (Davis & Halligan, 2002; Alexander & Colgate, 2005), as supporters here would see a better relationship with the club. In addition, being able to offer extensions to supporters is important with regards to Couvelaere & Richelieu (2005), as creating such a reciprocation between supporter and club through extensions may allow the supporters to feel more valued, something which was concurrent in this research. English supporters, in particular, want to be involved with their team (Cleland, 2010), with extensions as one potential way to do this. In turn, the creation of this value among supporters can be taken advantage of by clubs for their own brand identity purposes (Richelieu, Lopez & Desbordes, 2008), and also for creating a positive impact on fans' loyalty and engagement with extensions (Özgen & Argan, 2017).

Interestingly, this finding does not seem to fit within the framework and theory derived in chapter 3. This finding was indeed unexpected in the context of this research and presents a potentially new dimension which can impact consumers' evaluation of brand extensions: the accessibility of the extension to consumers. With this in mind, looking at the potential accessibility of an extension could be potentially seen as a new concept which can impact brand extension evaluation among consumers in general, as well as sports team supporters.

## 6.2 Considering the Costs of Supporting the Team

When it comes to the potential engagement and purchasing of extensions, supporters find that the cost of both supporting the team and of specific extensions has been seen as detrimental and decreasing the potential for supporters to indeed purchase or engage in a club's brand extensions. The costs of supporting the team have been found to be very expensive, and supporters would appreciate ways to reduce the costs. In addition, the price of other extensions is also something which supporters do not like, and indeed reduces the potential engagement with them. Supporters indeed would like the club to find ways to make extensions off-the-pitch more affordable to them as well. This is an important finding for managers, as they can't necessarily rely on extensions to be closely associated with the football team to ensure success. They need to be further aware of the costs which supporters incur when supporting their team and use initiatives such as discounts and promotions to incentivise supporters to engage and purchase brand extensions. These findings were not expected, and were not overly prominent in literature. However, they are aspects which can be used to build on new theory and insights into brand extension literature.

One of the more striking relations to the literature on brand extensions in general, and in sports, comes from potential brand dilution. Supporters' negative associations of the brand and its extensions due to costs is consistent with the potential damage which can be done by brand dilution, where the pricing and lack of affordability of extensions may further push negative evaluations of the parent brand (Childs, Jin & Tullar, 2018). Although some extensions, like merchandising, may be seen as high-fit, supporters' willingness to accept and purchase may only go so far, with the price and affordability potentially impacting this. Such a result contradicts the findings of Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas (2004), who mentioned that fans would be more willing to purchase extensions of a high fit, but supports Salinas & Pérez (2009), who mentioned that even high-fit extensions can be negatively associated and impact the parent brand image which, in this case, is due to the price.

The findings on price also correspond and add some interesting insights on the theory in the framework. Regarding categorisation theory, and the potential of match between the football club and extension, the importance of pricing and affordability shows that the potential match of an extension may not push the positive associations to the extension because of price issues. In addition, the importance of affordability relates to expectancy-value theory in the context of brand extensions. In this case of the findings on affordability, if the pricing impacts the consumer evaluation, then willingness to purchase decreases. On the other hand, if the pricing is seen as more affordable, then both the perception will be higher, and indeed willingness to purchase will also increase. This argues for expectancy-value theory and the disconfirmation of expectations (Gotlieb, Grewal & Brown, 1994), as the pricing may create lower expectations on the extensions themselves. This will result in a negative attitude toward the product and indeed impact the consumers' behavioural intentions (Bagozzi, 1992).

### 6.3 Supporters Would Like their Sentimental Values Reflected

The findings deriving from the analysis of the interviews revealed that supporters have a set of sentimental values that they associate with the club. The importance of sentimental values was not something which was originally expected to come from the findings. However, its prominence has some interesting implications for brand extension research. Supporters showed more willingness to engage with the extensions reflecting sentimental values, thus inviting the clubs to take them into consideration when developing a brand extension activity. This aspect is in congruence with previous research regarding brand extensions in general. In fact, Salinas & Pérez (2009) had explained the importance of having coherence between the image of the extension and the image of the brand, i.e. of respecting the key values of the brand, so as to transfer the brand essence between the different markets.

The result also agrees with past research about English football teams' brand extensions, as Chadwick & Clowes (1998) argued that the values supporters connect to the extension must be aligned with those that they connect to the club, so as to generate a sense of coherence between the football team and the extension, enabling fans to recognise some equivalence between the different categories. Moreover, the importance of respecting the sentimental values associated with the club supports Nash (2000), who described the fundamental relevance that specific root values have for each English fan group. When one of the sentimental values associated with the team is the tradition, there is further agreement with Bauer, Stockberger-Sauer & Exler (2005), who illustrated the key role played by the history and the tradition of the club in involving supporters in off-the-pitch activities; with history as important for brand extensions in the context of English clubs (Pritchard et al., 2020).

The findings thus emphasise that something supporters deem fundamental to engage with the club's brand extensions is a match in terms of sentimental values, rather than in terms of product categories. This aspect allows to build on the framework in chapter 3, particularly with categorisation theory, according to which there needs to be similarity between the different product categories, as such a match enables consumers to move brand associations from category to category (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Bosch & Loken, 1991). Therefore, the theoretical concept of match can be developed and extended beyond the mere level of product category, to the less tangible but crucial level of sentimental values associated with the club. Therefore, managers have to make sure that these sentimental values are reflected in the brand extensions they develop, to increase supporters' willingness to engage with them.

## 6.4 Going Against Supporter Values Can be Detrimental

One of the most interesting findings comes from the importance of matching the values of the club which the supporters have to the extension strategies the club undertakes. There is a danger for clubs when it comes to potentially going against the values held in the eyes of supporters. Extensions displaying a potential paradox between the supporter values and commercial decisions can have very negative consequences in terms of a supporter's potential engagement and purchasing of sports teams' extensions. In terms of translating into business practice, managers need to stay on the pulse of what supporters consider as important for the football club, and to keep this in mind with every decision they make, as it will impact their overall view and potential engagement with any brand extensions. This is a finding which, although tying in with the literature and the theory, was not expected to be as prominent, allowing for some intriguing additions to current practice and implications in terms of the consumer mindset in evaluating and engaging in brand extensions.

In relating back to the literature, there are some interesting findings which can evolve from previous research. For supporters, when the extensions move away and deviate from their own personal ideas and values of the parent brand, this can result in extensions having a smaller chance of being accepted and consumed. This is consistent with previous research, which states that for a general brand extension to be successful and for consumers to accept and consume it, the extension itself should be consistent and coherent with the parent brand (Buil, de Chernatony & Hem, 2009; Salinas & Pérez, 2009). The findings also generally support the concept for sports teams extensions that, when a team diverges from its own values, this may result in both brand dilution and negative associations and perceptions of the extension itself (Walsh & Ross, 2010), and also in the parent brand as well in the aftermath of the extension (Childs, Jin & Tullar, 2018). In addition, if extensions fail to fit with supporters' team views, then it will be negatively perceived (Apostolopoulou, 2002).

The findings on the potential mismatch between sentimental values and practice also build on the notion of perceived fit, which has been prominent in brand extension literature. Sports teams have to be aware of supporters' sentimental values, and of the potential perceived fit between the extension and the values which the supporters have. The higher the fit, the better the evaluation; if the fit of the brand and extension is low in terms of values, it will be detrimental and result in a negative evaluation of the brand, even if the fit between product category and parent brand is high. This is in line with Chadwick & Clowes (1998), who stated that the values supporters connect to the club and the extension are crucially important, and this alignment and coherence between the club and the extension needs to be present. The findings indeed also support the notion that the perceived fit of the extension to the parent brand has been impactful in terms of the extensions evaluation (Ahmad, Mujeeb & Rajput, 2011; Lee et al., 2019), with a higher fit and view of the extension among supporters resulting in a positive evaluation of the extension itself (Walsh & Ross, 2010).

Regarding theory which derives from the framework in chapter 3, the finding on the potential mismatch of values to the extension is important in terms of further understanding the consumer evaluation and engagement with brand extensions. What derives from this research is that the fit is not as important in terms of product category, but in terms of the values: if the values are similar between brand and extension, then there will be positive associations; otherwise, associations will be negative. This results in potential new insights which can build on categorisation theory which may focus on values rather than the general focus in the past on how it is the match between the object to the product categories which is important (Mervis & Rosch, 1981; Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986; Sichtmann & Diamantopoulos, 2013). This finding is also related to expectancy-value theory. This research shows that potentially negative associations arise when the extension itself is contrary to consumer's expectations of the object, in this case the extension, reinforcing the notion that a consumer's view of an object comes from their own expectation of it, whether it be positive or negative (Fishbein &

Ajzen, 1975). For example, having a betting company on a football shirt may go against the consumer's expectation of merchandise, as it differs to the supporter perception of the club values. This, in turn, creates a lower expectation and attitude as the extension is negatively associated.

## 6.5 Supporters Like to Identify & Belong to their Team

The findings revealed that supporters are more willing to engage with the club's brand extensions because they want to be identified with the team and be distinguished from other supporters, also on occasions not necessarily related to attending a game. What matters to them is being constantly identified as supporters of their favourite team and engaging with the club's brand extensions is an effective way to do that. Moreover, the purchase or interaction with the club's brand extensions allows them to feel close to the team, despite any lack of physical proximity. Thus, when developing brand extensions, managers should make sure that when supporters engage with them, they can be identified as belonging to the team's fan base.

Such a finding shows a strong support to several previous studies highlighting the crucial role played by supporters' identification within the context of brand extensions performed by sport teams (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Walsh & Ross, 2010; Ross, Walsh & Shreffler, 2014; Bauer et al., 2008 cited in Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2017). Couvelaere & Richelieu (2005) had indeed described the significance for the club to reciprocate with its supporters, so that the latter feel that the former consider them to be important. The finding is further in line with Ross & Walsh (2010) and Ross, Walsh & Shreffler (2014), according to whom it is more likely that fans engage with one of their favourite club's brand extensions if they highly identify with the team. This is also in congruence with Bauer et al. (2008, cited in Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2017), who argued that football supporters consider the team as extensions of their identity and themselves, a tendency that had also been noted by Borges, Silva & Añaña (2014).

Furthermore, fans' willingness to purchase some of their favourite club's brand extensions to display their commitment and attachment was also observed in past research concerning English football teams' brand extensions (Chadwick & Clowes, 1998). Moreover, the fact that supporters use brand extensions to be distinguished from fans of other teams agrees with Ross, Walsh & Shreffler (2014), who explained that younger demographics in particular identify themselves to a team to make a distinction between themselves and others, and it is this wish for differentiation that may strongly encourage them to purchase an extension. This aspect is also in congruence with previous literature about British supporters. Indeed, Nash (2000) had argued that what distinguishes English football supporters is the importance of

being part of a circle. Additionally, the finding supports Kennedy & Kennedy (2012), according to which the club is a baseline for the identity of English supporters.

Thus, supporters engage with the club's brand extensions so that they can be identified as supporters of their favourite team and as belonging to a specific fan base. This outcome has a deep connection with the theory from the framework via social-identity theory, according to which people develop their own self-concepts through the relationships with other social groups they feel part of (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Lam et al., 2010; Shokri & Alavi, 2019), and more precisely with the theoretical concept of consumer-company identification. Indeed, Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) observed that when consumers identify themselves with a company, very solid relationships will be established, because identification incentivises consumers (in this case supporters) to mentally connect to the company (in this case the team), and this aspect intensifies consumers' loyalty for everything sold under the company's (club's) brand. Furthermore, the finding supports Kim, Park & Kim (2014) and Shokri & Alavi (2019), who claimed that the above-mentioned special relationship between consumers and company may end up in the former positively evaluating the latter's brand extensions.

## 6.6 Supporters Prefer Good Team Performance

From the interviews it emerged that how the team performs on the pitch is important when it comes to the evaluation of the club's brand extensions. In fact, supporters explained that their willingness to engage with the team's off-the-field activities is greater when the club is having good performances in the competitions in which it takes part, whilst negative results obtained in said competitions discourage fans to interact with the brand extensions. In some situations, supporters may even decide to purchase something like a club's jersey or kit to remember a particularly successful year, so that in the future they can remember that season. Therefore, marketing managers should be aware that supporters' willingness to engage with the club's extensions also depends on the club's on-the-pitch performances; with positive performance increasing the potential engagement, and poor performances having an adverse effect.

This finding agrees with Richelieu (2014), according to whom the roots of a sport brand are in the competitions it takes part in. According to the author, a club should find a balance between the basic product in the sport they play and the more supplementary features of the sport product. The importance given to the team's performance also supports Walsh et al. (2015), who argued that a team may have positive outcomes off-the-pitch if it is first having good results during competitions. The finding discussed in this section is further in congruence with previous literature related to the relationship between a sport team and its supporters. In fact, Yun, Rosenberger & Sweeney (2020) claimed that fans tend to be more

loyal to a club if they are satisfied with how the team performs in the tournaments, and such a loyalty is crucial to stimulate supporters to have more engagement with the off-the-field activities undergone by the club. As a result, a satisfactory team performance is a fundamental aspect within the domain of sport teams' brand extensions, because fans tend to be more willing to engage if they are delighted with what the club offers on the pitch.

Similar to the first theme on accessibility, this finding is not necessarily related to the framework established in chapter 3. With this in mind, this is another potentially important element which can build on the developed framework as a possibly important element impacting the consumers' evaluation of a brand extension. However, due to the specific nature of this team in terms of sports, it may not fully translate to more general brand extension evaluations for more traditional brands.

## 6.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the authors illustrated how the six themes emerged from the data analysis are important for supporters' engagement with the brand extensions undergone by their favourite club. These six themes have been discussed by comparing them with previous literature and theories, described in chapters 2 and 3, respectively. The researchers highlighted how the findings support or contradict what was argued by several former pieces of research about brand extensions in general, and in the domain of football in particular, also within the British market, as well as about the role of supporters, with a special attention devoted to the English supporters. Moreover, the authors also showed how the findings not only connect to the three theories presented in chapter 3, but also how they can help in developing and building on some of the theories themselves. In addition, some findings could be considered as new insights and be helpful in terms of developing further understanding of brand extension engagement and evaluation by consumers.

# 7 Conclusion

This final chapter recaps the main conclusions from the research on supporters' view of the brand extension strategies of English football teams with a small fan base, and the factors they consider to be important in order to engage and consume these extensions. This is followed by the theoretical and managerial implications and what learnings can be taken in terms of academia and business practice. Following on, some limitations and potential areas for future research have been addressed which can follow on from this study.

## 7.1 Conclusions

This research aimed to outline the most important aspects for football supporters of English teams with a low fan base when it comes to the potential engagement, interaction and/or purchase of the brand extensions of their favourite football club. With this in mind, through a qualitative approach of 12 semi-structured interviews with match going supporters of Fulham FC and a thematic analysis approach, six themes appeared, allowing for some in-depth insights into the factors which supporters of low support teams consider as important for the brand extension strategies of their clubs. Interestingly, not only did this research find that there were potential factors encouraging brand extension engagement among supporters, but there also were aspects which may negatively impact and decrease the extension interaction and purchasing among supporters of low support football teams.

The first theme is the desire for accessibility in the extensions. Supporters of low support Premier League clubs want the extensions to be more visible and available in order to interact with them. In addition, supporters would like extensions to be tailored and bespoke. Overall, the need for accessibility is in line with previous findings in terms of creating awareness of extensions for consumers (Pitta & Kastanis, 1995; Apostolopoulou, 2002). Creating bespoke extensions may allow for increased loyalty through interaction with the brand in different areas as well (Davis & Halligan, 2002; Alexander & Colgate, 2005). In addition, introducing extensions for supporters could help craft and solidify the relationship with fans, especially considering English supporters' desire of being involved with the club (Cleland, 2010), as well as the potential of increased engagement with other extensions as well (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Richelieu, Lopez & Desbordes, 2008; Özgen & Argan, 2017). This finding may also build on theory as a new element for consumer brand extension evaluation.

The second theme comes from the importance of affordability. Fans believe that supporting the team is costly and hinders their ability to engage with other extensions. In addition, the extensions themselves are also seen as too expensive, and supporters would like extensions, and indeed supporting the team itself, to become more affordable. This finding ties in well with previous literature but can be seen as a new specific insight for brand extension research. High costs may indeed create the concept of brand dilution, and push negative associations onto the brand (Childs, Jin & Tullar, 2018). Even for high fit extensions, pricing may create a negative association and decrease purchase or engagement willingness (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Loukas, 2004; Salinas & Pérez, 2009), particularly for low support teams (Walsh & Ross, 2010). In addition, affordability builds on categorisation theory to show that price might impact the potential associations transferred from a product brand to the extensions. Affordability may also impact expectancy-value theory, as it creates negative attitudes toward the brand and impacts behavioural intention.

The third theme comes from the importance of recognising supporter sentimentality in extensions. Supporters would be more willing to engage and purchase extensions if they reflect the sentimental values which they place on the club. This supports research which states that coherence is needed between the brand and the extension (Salinas & Pérez, 2009), which is also important for sports clubs in ensuring that the values not only connect the club to the extension, but that they are also important in ensuring supporter involvement in extensions (Chadwick & Clowes, 1998; Bauer, Stockberger-Sauer & Exler, 2005; Pritchard et al., 2020). This is especially true for English teams, which are characterised by a set of root values that need to be present in each of the club's activities (Nash, 2000). In addition, this theme builds on categorisation theory, and the concept of match in brand extension literature. It is indeed more important for clubs' extensions to match with the values of the supporters, rather than matching just with the product category of the team.

The fourth theme states the importance for extensions to not deviate from the values which supporters place on their team. If a club goes against these values, then the extensions and parent brand are likely to suffer and be negatively perceived, thus decreasing supporters' willingness to engage with or to purchase the extensions. This relates back to the importance of consistency between the parent brand and extension for its potential success (Buil, de Chernatony & Hem, 2009; Salinas & Pérez, 2009). In addition there is reinforced support for the potential damage of brand dilution and negative associations if clubs move away from their values and history (Chadwick & Clowes, 1998; Apostolopoulou, 2002; Walsh & Ross, 2010; Childs, Jin & Tullar, 2018). The perceived fit of the extension is also important, as this theme builds on previous findings to state that if the match is low on values, then there will be negative consequences, even if the product category fit is high (Walsh & Ross, 2010; Ahmad, Mujeeb & Rajput, 2011; Lee et al., 2019). The potential paradox between supporter values and business decisions is important for the theoretical underpinning of this study. For

categorisation theory, this finding has shown that it is the need to have a match between values and the extension, rather than the primary product category and extension, which impacts the potential extension evaluation. In addition, for expectancy-value theory, negative associations of an extension arise when the expectations of the consumer are different to what the extension ends up as.

The penultimate theme comes from supporters' sense of belonging to the team's fan base, and from their willingness to engage with or purchase the club's extensions in order to show their identification to it. This outcome supported several studies emphasising the link between identification and brand extensions, in terms of how fans are likely to engage with extensions to identify with the team (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Walsh & Ross, 2010; Ross, Walsh & Shreffler, 2014) and also differentiate themselves from other supporters (Chadwick & Clowes, 1998; Ross, Walsh & Shreffler, 2014). Identification is also important as supporters use identity to the club to show their own identity (Borges, Silva & Añaña, 2014; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2017). This finding is particularly relevant for England, where not only the football club is the basis of supporters' identity (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012), but also supporting a team means belonging to a group of like-minded individuals (Nash, 2000). The importance of identity deeply ties into social identity theory and consumer-company identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Lam et al., 2010; Shokri & Alavi, 2019), as when supporters engage with extensions, they show their identity and build their relationship with the team, which in turn impacts positively on the potential to evaluate, engage and purchase brand extensions (Kim, Park & Kim, 2014; Shokri & Alavi, 2019).

The final theme relates to the team's performance. Good performances indeed encourage the supporters to engage with or purchase the club's brand extensions, while poor performances have the opposite effect. This finding is in line with literature stating that success off the pitch has to begin with success on the pitch (Richelieu, 2014; Walsh et al., 2015), and this success impacts the potential for supporters' loyalty and engagement with extensions (Yun, Rosenberger & Sweeney, 2020). Similar to accessibility, this finding could be seen as a new concept in brand extension evaluation in terms of team and brand performance in the context of how consumers view the performance, and indeed evaluate extensions based on that performance.

## 7.2 Theoretical & Managerial Implications

This research has come up with some interesting theoretical and managerial implications which can contribute to the respective fields of academia and business practice. With regards to theory and academia, this research further builds on the increasing base of sports brand

extension literature, and takes on the consumer perception of brand extensions, but for a committed consumer in match going supporters of low support teams. Looking at this sample indeed allows for the development of knowledge and insights on a new and different sample of low support football clubs. This research, therefore, should be able to create a better picture on sports consumers' evaluations of brand extensions overall, and build on previous research which has looked at clubs of greater support levels, providing both recurring and new insights on the supporters' evaluation and engagement of brand extensions.

More specifically, this research extends previous theory on brand extension engagement by building on the potential importance of identity, the match between the extension and product category, and of consumer expectations. Indeed, some new insights derived from this study, including the importance of accessibility of the extension, the urge to make extensions more affordable, the significance of sentimental and club values, and team performance. These all represent potential new dimensions which can impact a consumer's acceptance and evaluation of a brand extension for their favourite sports teams, both positively and negatively.

Furthermore, the research extended the theoretical concept of match stemming from categorisation theory within the domain of brand extensions. Whereas previous studies highlighted the importance of having a match in terms of product category, the findings of this thesis build upon categorisation theory, emphasising the significance of creating a match with the values that are distinct to the club in the eyes of supporters, thus moving the concept of match to another dimension. With this in mind, there is an implication in looking at categorisation theory from a potentially new lens away from product category match to a match more based on sentimental values of the consumer.

For managers and business practitioners, this study provides some important insights on one of the more dedicated segments of the football club - match going supporters. Firstly, this research allows for business practitioners to see what match-going supporters consider as important when it comes to potentially engaging with the commercial activities of the club, and which activities are more important to them. This permits business practitioners to focus on specific brand extension activities which are already of importance to supporters, and which ones potentially need to be made further aware to match going supporters so that they can potentially engage with and consume them in order to increase revenues.

Moreover, a second implication from the findings enable team marketing managers to acknowledge aspects that should be present in the club's brand extensions if they are to appeal to supporters to interact with them. In addition, although not among the authors' initial intentions, the research shows that there are indeed some aspects that tend to discourage supporters' willingness to engage with the team's brand extensions. Practitioners should keep these aspects in mind when creating brand extension strategies in order to create more appealing extensions with tailored offerings for match going supporters in a way which makes

them more appealing according to these aspects and allow the supporters to feel more valued and less like a consumer, increasing the extensions' potential success and club revenues.

A third implication arises from looking at the sample in terms of supporters from clubs with a low level of support. This research has developed insights which can aid clubs which are either small in terms of their support base, or indeed not as advanced as other clubs, in terms of potential factors to take into account when creating and developing brand extension offerings for supporters. Such clubs with a smaller support base and lower level of commercial activities can use the insights from this study to develop strategies for brand extension activities which have an increased chance of success, and therefore generate new or increased commercial revenues streams. Interestingly, an additional impact of developing such strategies for small-support clubs should be focused on cementing the new generations of supporters and give practitioners the potential tools to go out into the support base and be able to develop initiatives and extension activities which will garner and hopefully bring about new match-going supporters.

### 7.3 Limitations & Future Research

The research at hand presents some limitations to be acknowledged. An initial limitation is constituted by the chosen method, i.e. qualitative rather than quantitative. This implied that the analysis of the data derived from the researchers' interpretations of what was told by supporters, opening to the possibility that other fieldworkers might have interpreted part of the empirical material in a different way. If the study had been conducted by other scientists, different insights may have been obtained.

Secondly, because of time and resource constraints, fans of only one low support English football team have been interviewed, thereby overlooking the supporters of the other four teams meeting the criteria established by the authors for the choice of the clubs considered of low support. Therefore, future research should involve also the fans of the other teams to check whether the outcomes of this thesis can be confirmed.

Moreover, because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and due to the location of interviewees and interviewees, all the interviews were conducted remotely through video call. Even though video calls represent the closest substitute to face-to-face interviews, the remote setting still constitutes a limit to a full understanding of what the interviewee explicitly and implicitly reports. Thus, when the health crisis is over, future research could take on this study from different angles, whether it be interviewing in real life face-to-face settings, or through other methods which may have been hindered due to the pandemic, like ethnography.

As an additional input for future studies, this research focused on the most prominent segment of English supporters, represented mostly by men aged 18-34 (Sportcal Insights 2014; Sportcal Insights, 2015; Nielsen, 2019; YouGov, 2020). At the same time, however, English people of other age groups support a Premier League team and attend the matches, though in a smaller proportion with respect to the sample of the study at hand. As a consequence, future research can dedicate attention to a new sample whose members are of a different age.

Another suggestion for future research stems from noticing that the study investigated supporters' opinion about brand extension strategies undergone by English football teams having a small support base. However, football teams all over the world extend their brand outside of the domain of football. Therefore, it could be interesting to replicate the study in other countries, to check how the perceptions of a club's off-the-field activities change across supporters of different nationalities, and thus what teams from other countries should take into consideration to stimulate their supporters to interact with their brand extensions. Other potentially intriguing markets to focus on may be the other four championships constituting the top five European Leagues: La Liga, Bundesliga, Serie A and Ligue 1 due to the big revenue numbers generated by these competitions (Jaworska, 2020).

## 7.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has drawn the conclusions of the research, enlisting six themes that English supporters of clubs with a low support level deem important for the engagement with the team's brand extensions: accessibility of the extensions, affordability of the extensions, respect of sentimental values, match with the values attached to the club, supporter identification to the club, and good performances on the pitch. The chapter also discussed the theoretical implications of the research, consisting in developing knowledge on a new sample and type of football teams and in building on and extending pre-existing theories, as well as the practical ones, being found in aspects that marketing managers of low support English football teams should add or avoid when developing the club's off-the-pitch activities. Finally, the limitations and the suggestions for future research have been described, consisting mainly in other possible methods to be used (especially in a post-pandemic scenario) and in other teams and markets to consider.

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# Appendix A - Master Thesis Consent Form



LUND UNIVERSITY  
School of Economics and Management

***Supporting the Cause: How Football Supporters Engage with a Club’s Brand Extensions - Peter Moane & Alessandro Solmi***

***Interview Consent Form.***

I have been given information about *Supporting the Cause: How Can Football Supporters Engage with a Club’s Brand Extensions* and discussed the research project with Peter Moane and Alessandro Solmi who are conducting this research as a part of a Master’s in International Marketing and Brand Management supervised by Ekaterini Drosou.

I understand that, if I consent to participate in this project, I will be asked to give the researcher a duration of approximately 60 minutes of my time to participate in the process.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research as it has been described to me. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for thesis and journal publications, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Name: .....

Email: .....

Telephone: .....

Signed: .....

# Appendix B - Master Thesis Consent Checklist



**LUND UNIVERSITY**  
School of Economics and Management

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick the appropriate box):

1.	I understand the information about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	Select only <b>one</b> of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised.</li> <li>• I do not want my name used in this project.</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Participant:**

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

**Researcher:**

*Alessandro Solmi*

*Peter Moane*

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

# Appendix C - Information Sheet

## INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

By taking part in this interview, you are contributing for the master thesis titled “*Supporting the Cause: How Football Supporters Can Engage with a Club’s Brand Extensions*”, which is part of the Master’s Programme in International Marketing & Brand Management at Lund University-School of Economics and Management (Sweden). The authors of the thesis are the master students Peter Moane and Alessandro Solmi, and the supervisor is professor Ekaterini Drosou.

The purpose of the thesis is investigating the supporters’ perceptions of the brand extension strategies undertaken by their favourite football teams, whereby “brand extensions” the authors mean any occasion in which the football team uses its brand name to market products, services, or initiatives which are not directly related to the on-the-pitch activities and which the supporter can buy or interact with (e.g. merchandising, CSR, sponsorships...).

In the following bullet points, we will enlist all the principles upon which the interview will be based, and in particular all the **measures taken by the researchers to guarantee the protection of the participants’ privacy and anonymity**. We therefore encourage you to **read it very carefully before signing the consent form**:

- The participation in the interview is totally voluntary and thus we express our gratitude for your time in advance. However, if you want, you can participate in a lottery where you will have the chance to win a £20 Amazon voucher.
- The interview will be conducted through a video call. Zoom is the preferred platform to use for video calls, however there is the possibility to switch to an alternative platform (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Skype, Google Meet) in case you cannot have access to Zoom.
- The interview will be anonymous: the interviewers will never mention your true name or whatever may hint your identity throughout the course of the interview, and you will be addressed by a pseudonym consisting either in a random fake name or a number (e.g. Participant 1 / P1). The use of pseudonyms will be adopted also when writing the thesis draft. However, if you prefer, you are free to choose to have your name being used. In such a case, please express your preference in the consent form document with the table.
- You are allowed to leave the interview at any time, regardless of how many questions the interviewer still wants to ask you. If you decide to suddenly terminate the interview, you will not be required to provide any kind of explanation or justification for it.

- You are free to ask any kind of question during the interview. The researchers are more than happy to answer to whatever doubt you may have.
- The interviewers will voice record the interview with the aid of a voice recording app. Those voice recordings will be used by the researchers only and with the sole purpose of transcribing the interview.
- Other researchers or professors may have access to the collected data (in the form of transcriptions) if and only if they adhere to the measures taken by the authors aimed at guaranteeing your anonymity, as established in this document.
- If you wish, you can request to read the parts related to your interview that the authors of the thesis are using in the thesis draft. If you wish to do so and if you realize that you prefer a specific part not to be reported in the draft, feel free to communicate it to the researchers.

If you have any other type of question you would like to ask, please feel free to contact one of the researchers.

Otherwise, if you agree with the measures described above, we kindly ask you to sign the consent form and to send it back to the researchers.

Thank you very much for your attention and first of all for your time.

Peter Moane & Alessandro Solmi

# Appendix D - Interview Guide

## **Introduction**

*This is interview number X for the master thesis of Peter Moane and Alessandro Solmi at Lund University. Thank you for taking the time to sit down with us, and I am just confirming that participation is voluntary, and you can indeed stop the interview at any time. All of your views and insights are helpful, so please feel free to elaborate on any topic. There are no right or wrong answers, we are just interested in your thoughts. This interview and the data we collect is also completely anonymous and for our research only - no one will gain access to your details from this interview.*

*With this in mind, can I confirm that you have read the consent forms and agree to participate in the upcoming research? (Yes/no)*

*Thank you, so, let's begin...*

## **Introduction Questions**

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you based?
3. What is your education level?
4. What is your occupation?
5. Do you have a partner? And kids?

## **Relationship with the Club:**

6. Can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with Fulham?
7. How have you watched their games traditionally?
8. Does the club play a role/have a presence in your day-to-day life?
9. How would you describe Fulham to me?

## **Fulham FC's Commercial Activities:**

10. Have you ever seen your club's name/logo/presence off the pitch (for example aside from the matches and the football team)?
11. Can you tell us about your experience with them?
12. What is your opinion about Fulham engaging in activities not related to football?
13. Would there be an area which you would like the club to go into?

## **Concluding Questions & Remarks**

14. Is there anything which we haven't mentioned which you would like to add?

*And with that, we have finished the interview. Thank you so much for your insights and answers to the questions, you gave some great material which will help us get to the bottom of your research. Do you have any last comments or anything you'd like to say before I wrap up? (Yes/no).*

## Appendix E - Interview Sample

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Location	Employment Status	Interview Duration
P1	28	Male	Reading	Employed	45:21
P2	20	Male	Reading	Employed	42:14
P3	25	Female	London	Employed	40:51
P4	27	Male	Reading	Employed	35:33
P5	20	Male	London	Employed + Student	40:17
P6	33	Male	Liverpool	Employed	42:40
P7	28	Male	London	Employed	30:43
P8	21	Male	London	Employed + Student	35:50
P9	29	Male	Manchester	Employed	42:30
P10	20	Male	Birmingham	Employed + Student	43:30
P11	21	Female	London	Employed + Student	31:50
P12	31	Male	London	Employed	38:08

# Appendix F - Theme Development Example & Thematic Map

Initial Code	First Theme	Sub Theme	Theme Refinement	Quote
Would like to see a women's team to grow the club into new supporters	Extensions Awareness to new support	<i>Making Extensions More Visible to Supporters</i>	<b>Accessibility of the Extensions</b>	<i>I would like to see something like that [ladies team] because I think there is a, there's a good level of kind of female support, and I think particularly, you know, young kids, young girls, there is a Chelsea, there is a Man United, there are all of these teams, you know, make it at Fulham [...] why wouldn't you try and grow the club in that way?</i>
Would like interaction with club and support	Extensions for Supporter - club interaction	<i>Create Bespoke Extensions for Supporters</i>	<b>Accessibility of the Extensions</b>	<i>If there was something simple, like a football tournament for fans, you know, something like that [...]. You can attract different fans as well. You can get more people to the club because they see you getting involved in these things.</i>
The price of supporting Fulham is so expensive	Price of Support	<i>Using Extensions to Reduce Match Going Costs</i>	<b>Affordability of the Extensions</b>	<i>I wouldn't say I buy too much into it [merchandise] because, or I don't want to spend too much money because, you know, going into the games are ridiculous, expensive as it is.</i>
Cost of kits is too much to warrant	Quality & Price of Extensions	<i>Incentivising Brand Extensions For Supporters</i>	<b>Affordability of the Extensions</b>	<i>I'm not sure if they, they don't really communicate it [merchandising discount] very well, because I didn't even know I had this discount, like I was in a store and the person behind the counter just said, "if you have a season ticket, you get a discount".</i>

