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English Premier League Clubs as Iconic Brands?

A case study of three English Premier League football clubs from a cultural branding perspective

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Foreword

First of all, we would like to direct our most sincere and warmest gratitude to our eminent supervisor Emma Björner for her genuine commitment and wise insights. Thank you for challenging us to stay creative and critical, inspiring us and giving us energy. Every supervision session with you has been greatly fruitful and we could not have asked for a better right-hand to guide us through this process.

To us, you will always be an inspiration.

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We would like to emphasise that our contribution to this thesis has been equal.

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Abstract

Arsenal F.C., Manchester City F.C. and Newcastle United F.C. are three leading football clubs in the English Premier League. These three clubs are consolidated in terms of having a rich history, culture and traditions as well as local embeddedness. Douglas B. Holt's contributions to the field of branding added a new dimension to how to operate a brand and are recurrently being used in new research. Research within a football context that builds on Holt's theories of cultural branding is limited and has to our efforts not been found. Therefore, the main purpose of the study was to, through the lens of Holt's theories, provide knowledge regarding how cultural branding is practised within a football club context. This study explored how three English football clubs engage in cultural branding and whether they can be recognised as iconic brands.

In order to answer our research questions, we conducted a thematic analysis following the process of Braun & Clarke (2006). Through coding the data, several key themes were discovered and identified, all of which conductively illustrated how the clubs engage in cultural branding as well as how the supporters experience the clubs' brand. This allowed us to conclude what kind of brand these clubs should be identified as.

The study implied that all three clubs analysed actively engage in cultural branding in various ways, to different degrees and extents. However, the findings in this study allude that these clubs should not be regarded as iconic brands, but rather as identity brands that offer their consumers a high value of identity creation and a great opportunity for cultural expressions.

Keywords: Cultural branding, iconic brands, identity brands, Arsenal F.C., Manchester City F.C., Newcastle United F.C., English football clubs

Number of characters including spaces: 92.905

Sammanfattning

Arsenal F.C., Manchester City F.C. och Newcastle United F.C. är tre ledande fotbollsklubbar inom engelska Premier League som alla respektive förenas i en rik historia, kultur och tradition såväl som lokal förankring. Douglas B. Holts bidrag till forskning inom varumärkeskommunikation har tillfört en ny dimension kring hur man driver ett varumärke och är forskning som används återkommande i ny forskning än i dag. Forskning inom fotbollssammanhang som bygger på Holts teorier om kulturellt varumärke är begränsad och har till våra ansträngningar inte hittats. Därför var syftet med studien att, genom linsen av Holts teorier, bidra med kunskap kring hur cultural branding praktiseras i en fotbollsklubbkontext. Den här studien undersökte hur tre engelska fotbollsklubbar engagerar sig i cultural branding och om de kan bli lika erkända som ikoniska varumärken.

För att besvara våra forskningsfrågor genomförde vi en tematisk analys enligt processen skapad av Braun & Clarke (2006). Genom att koda data upptäcktes och identifierades flera huvudteman, som alla på ett gynnsamt sätt illustrerade hur klubbarna engagerar sig i cultural branding samt hur supportrarna upplever fotbollsklubbarnas varumärke. Detta gjorde det möjligt för oss att komma till en slutsats om vilken typ av varumärke dessa klubbar torde identifieras som.

Studien antyder att alla tre klubbar som analyserades aktivt engagerar sig i kulturellt varumärkesbyggande på olika sätt och i olika omfattningar. Resultaten i denna studie påvisar att dessa klubbar ej bör betraktas som ikoniska varumärken, snarare som identitetsvarumärken som erbjuder sina konsumenter högt värde av identitetsskapande och stora möjligheter till kulturella uttryck.

Nyckelord: Cultural branding, ikoniska varumärken, identitetsvarumärken, Arsenal F.C., Manchester City F.C., Newcastle United F.C., engelska fotbollsklubbar

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1. Introduction

In 2004, Douglas B. Holt released his book “How Brands Become Icons”, which brought something new and ground-shifting to the field of branding. In this book, Holt sheds a light on the principles of *cultural branding*. At the time, cultural branding was a seemingly unexplored way of managing brands – with functional and emotional branding as dominators among practitioners (Holt, 2004). With cultural branding, Holt argues that a brand can become an ‘icon’, meaning: “iconic brands provide extraordinary identity value because they address the collective anxieties and desires of a nation” (Holt, 2004, p. 6). According to Holt, the cultural branding model can be seen as a fourth strategy, in addition to the already existing models of “mind-share branding”, “emotional branding” and “viral branding”, where “cultural branding” is the only way of reaching the stature of ‘iconic’ (Holt, 2004).

Tapping further into Holt’s principles of cultural branding led us to recognise several mutual key components in football clubs. Several key points of cultural branding, such as myths linked to contradictions in society and identity creation (Holt, 2004) sparked the inspiration to look further into, and explore if and how, English Premier League clubs engage in cultural branding, and thus have implications for the status as “iconic brands”. Large, historical football clubs such as Manchester City F.C, Arsenal F.C., and Newcastle United F.C., have different key attributes such as a rich heritage, a significant exponential fan-base growth or a history of dominance and success – combined with the strong identity-creation and rituals football brands generate for its consumers (the football supporters) is the reason why these clubs will be explored in this study. Every football club will be viewed case by case, and rather than comparing them, we see these three cases as independently enriching for the research.

Despite the fact that Holt’s research in cultural branding strategy circles around American brands and has its inspiration coming from political aspects, with cases such as Ben n’ Jerry, Snapple and Coca-Cola (Holt, 2004), the principles he presents are still regarded fruitful within a European context as well as in a European football context. However, this stance in Holt’s research is something that has been made aware of and regarded throughout the study.

In general, historical terms, English football has not been known as acceptive, inclusive and pragmatic - on the contrary - it has been infused with a player- and fan culture dominated by toxic masculinity, male dominance and a culture that undermines minorities (Consterdine, n.d.). As society has progressed, the English football community has followed and is nowadays working increasingly to be more inclusive. However, with its history in consideration, this study is based on a critical realism stance.

The modern English football history traces all the way back to the year 1863 when The Football Association (*the government body for English football*) was established. With over 150 years in its locker, The English Football Association is the oldest of its kind in world football. Through its long and rich history, the English association, together with several other national associations, have acted as pioneers and paved the way for the modern European football that we know today in terms of structure, rules and regulations (The Football Association, 2022).

The English football leagues and their clubs, many established all back in the 1800s and at the beginning of the 1900s, have cultivated a football culture among supporters that runs long and deep. A culture dear not only to English football supporters but to supporters all over the world. The Premier League; the English top-tier football league, is considered to generate the largest numbers in terms of audience, both in stadiums and through broadcasting, economic turnover, and broadcasting deals (Wilson, 2019).

As English football has commercialised increasingly over time, clubs like Liverpool F.C., Arsenal F.C., and Chelsea F.C., have shifted the focus from how to run a football club from a sports club's point of view, towards how to also capitalise on a more brand-oriented outlook and structure of the clubs (Blumrodt, 2014). An English football club like Arsenal F.C. has a rich history, a large number of stakeholders and consumers and a worldwide fan base. Short and lightly put: a product that creates interest. To infuse more life and personality into the brand, most clubs, with the so-called 'top six' clubs (*Manchester United F.C., Manchester City F.C., Liverpool F.C., Arsenal F.C., Tottenham Hotspur F.C., Chelsea F.C.*) in front, increasingly focus on, and invest in, developing their brand through alternative campaigns to supplement their core business. With initiatives such as; streetwear clothing lines, brand

ambassadors and building a social media persona, the clubs become even more accessible, desirable and easy to assimilate and engage with (Blumrodt, 2014).

1.3 Problem definition and purpose

The purpose of this study is to through Holt's principles of cultural branding seek an understanding of how English Premier League football clubs engage in cultural branding strategies and if they can be regarded as iconic brands. By examining the brand communication presented by the football clubs as well as looking into the history and supporter culture of these clubs - we strive to gain insights as to whether these football clubs can be regarded as iconic brands or should rather be viewed as identity brands. What makes them iconic, and not?

The gap intended to fill is the one lacking research on football club brands from a cultural branding perspective; the one examining the social and cultural value and impact of the brand. As the business aspect in the football world increases, English Premier League clubs jump on the opportunities to gain international reach and fandom - the challenge is to still nurture the essence of the brand - with the culture and history it holds. Senior lecturer at Stirling University, Stephen Morrow, explains:

"[...] presents challenges for the clubs to make sure in some ways they don't lose sight of their history and their association with particular cities or regions because that, in essence, gives them the strength as international brands, too. So, it's an inevitability as the business grows, but there are risks for football clubs too, to not forget where they come from, to not forget that the strength of those clubs comes from some of that connectedness with local communities and local areas" (Johan Cruyff Institute, 2018).

There is a lack of research covering these challenges Morrow mentions above. Hence, we intend to focus on the value of the local connectedness and embeddedness which circulates around the social and cultural value of the brand. We believe Holt's cultural branding model is a suitable lens to use to dive further into this phenomenon and reach clarity on how football clubs manage their brands today from the perspective presented. There is a clear challenge regarding the balance between the heritage and the need to be innovative, progressive and move forward - to become a brand that society can count on - and through the lens of Holt - where

will it leave these football club brands? Putting a strategic communication lens on this topic can contribute to insights on how football clubs can use their brand communication to connect with their audience on a deeper level as well as make them see the challenges and opportunities in creating a valuable cultural imprint in society.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the three Premier League clubs Arsenal F.C., Manchester City F.C., and Newcastle F.C., act as brands. Can they be seen as iconic brands in accordance with Douglas Holt's theories of cultural branding? What makes them icons, and not?

1.4 Research questions

RQ1: In what way do English Premier League Football clubs engage in cultural branding?

RQ2: Can English Premier League Football clubs be regarded as iconic brands?

1.5 Selection of cases

For this study, three different Premier League clubs will be put under examination and will be seen as three isolated cases. This is to both practically limit the study and strategically be able to reach a deeper understanding of these football clubs' work and value from a brand perspective. The clubs we have chosen to further look into, are the following:

- I. Arsenal F.C.,
- II. Manchester City F.C.,
- III. and Newcastle United F.C.

2. Previous Research

In this section, we have searched for previous research pertaining to concepts of English Premier League clubs as brands, football clubs as iconic brands, and football clubs as identity brands, as well as previous research on the cultural value of the brand, and the cultural value of football in England. Furthermore, we have also searched for previous research where Holt's theories in cultural branding have been used, in a sports context and any context.

Regarding English Premier League clubs, a wide range of research has been made. In the context of branding and brand management, the focus has mainly lied on identity and loyalty. In 2021, Arroba-Jaroso, et. al. examined the links between fan identification and loyalty toward a football team. Richelieu, A., & Desbordes, M. (2009) work focuses on the power of branding to capitalise on your football team and reach beyond local marketing to reach international awareness and support.

Douglas Holt released his work "How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding" in 2004. At the time, a new and ground-breaking way how to build and manage brands. Six years later, Holt released his second book on this topic "Cultural Strategy. Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands" together with Douglas Cameron. Despite its years, Holt's implications, suggestions, and principles presented in both of these books are still being used in new research today. In 2015, Torelli and Stoner based their work on Holt's cultural branding strategies to develop a theoretical framework for building iconic brands in globalised markets but is also used in studies on how story-telling and myth creation can help save Australian koalas (Caldwell & Henry, 2021).

Previous research has been made on how football clubs work with their brands, however, we have not found any research on English football clubs that are based on Douglas Holt's theories of the cultural value of the brand. Despite Holt's accredited research, released in 2004, "How Brands become Icons" has not been used in studies of football brands. However, regardless of its age, his work is still being used today in brand communication and consumer behaviour research. Latest in 2021, the research "The role of nostalgia in emotional connection of consumers with brands" (Baltezarević & Milić (2021) taps into the importance of nostalgia linked to the consumer.

Coombs and Osborne (2012) did a case study of Aston Villa F.C., where the research looked further into the cultural value and embeddedness of the club, and how a change of ownership may worry the supporters due to uncertainties on how the new owners will

understand, integrate and embrace their local culture and history. This research was based on different PR strategies and did not cover the brand perspective with a focus on the media and supporters.

3. Theoretical Framework

In the following section, this research's theoretical framework is presented. The theory presented is Douglas B. Holt's Cultural Branding Model, which is applied later in the analysis, in order to problematize and clarify the study's empirical data. First, definitions of central concepts are presented, followed by an explanation of the Cultural Branding Model.

3.1 Holt's Cultural Branding: Iconic Brand

Holt's (2004) cultural branding model demonstrates brands that have established compelling myths making them become cultural icons. The author claims that conventional branding strategies such as mind-share, emotional and viral branding require a deep cultural perspective in order to build iconic brands.

Cultural branding is particularly applicable in categories where people tend to value products as a tool of self-expression; clothing, automotive, entertainment etc. Holt (2004) defines an **iconic brand** as “an identity brand that approaches the identity value of a cultural icon” (p. 11). A **cultural icon** is “a person or thing regarded as a symbol, especially of a culture of movement; a person, institution [...] considered worthy of admiration or respect.” (p. 11). Further, an **identity brand** is “a brand whose value to customers derives primarily from identity value” (p. 11). **Identity value** is “the aspect of a brand's value that derives from the brand's contributions to self-expression” (p. 11).

The purpose of cultural branding and its strategic principles is, according to Holt (2004) to guide brands in the process of becoming cultural icons. Holt's (2004) cultural branding model consists of a set of tacit strategic principles which are presented in the following sections.

3.1.1 Cultural branding: Contradictions in Society

Iconic brands contribute to incredible identity value, much due to their ability to approach the collective anxieties and desires of a nation (Holt, 2004). When examining consumers' identities, researchers have found that desires and anxieties in relation to identity are extensively shared among a nation's citizens. The explanation is that people are creating their identities in response to the same historical changes which have had an impact on the whole nation (Holt, 2004).

3.1.2 Cultural Branding: Identity Myths

Performing identity myths is vital for brands to become iconic. By identity myth, Holt (2004) refers to narratives that address cultural anxieties away from the worlds consumers frequently experience in their everyday life; “a simple story that resolves cultural contradictions; a prerequisite for an icon” (p. 11). The author explains that these myths aspire to be an imaginative expression, rather than actual or true, of the consumers’ desired identity.

According to Holt (2004), iconic brands are not valued by customers for what their products do, but rather for what they symbolise. The author argues that it is through identity myths that iconic brands develop powerful symbolism (Holt, 2003). Studies have shown that icons (people, brands or objects) represent a particular story, referred to as identity myth, that consumers then adopt in order to address their own identity desires and anxieties (Holt, 2004).

“Identity myths are useful fabrications that stitch back together otherwise damaging tears in the cultural fabric of the nation” (Holt, 2004, p. 8). Furthermore, the author explains that these tears can be perceived as personal anxieties in people’s everyday life. However, myths can be seen as a tool for smoothing over these tensions and helping people find purpose in their lives and further strengthen their desired identity.

According to Holt (2003), myths are something people have always needed. Moreover, myths help make sense of the world and can provide ideals to live by. Holt (2003) states that “icons are encapsulated myths” and are powerful as they deliver myths in a tangible form and thereby making them even more accessible.

3.1.3 Cultural branding: Ritual Action

As the brand continues to perform its myth, the consumer will eventually perceive that the myth has integrated into the brand’s markers (e.g. the brand’s name, logo, and design elements). “The brand becomes a symbol, a material embodiment of the myth.” (Holt, 2004, p. 8). Holt (2004) describes ritual action as “the process through which the consumers of an icon experience the identity myth that the icon contains” (p. 11). When the customer interacts with or uses the product, they will also experience a bit of the myth. The author continues to explain that the most influential myths in today's modern societies are the ones that address people’s identities. Those who use a brand’s myth for their identities “forge tight emotional connections to the brand” (Holt, 2004, p. 9).

When it comes to iconic brands the “name of the game is symbolism” (Holt, 2003, para. 2), meaning the strategic focus is not on how the brand performs but on what it stands for. Iconic brands’ market power is based on a specific type of consumer value: myths. Icons are valued since it is through them people experience powerful myths (Holt, 2003). Iconic brands incorporate myths that pursue resolving acute tension people experience between their own lives and society’s prevailing ideology (Holt, 2003).

3.1.4 Cultural branding: Populist Worlds

Commonly, identity myths are set in a populist world. Holt (2004) defines the populist world as an “autonomous place where people’s actions are perceived to be guided by intrinsic values” and “serve as the cultural raw material from which identity myths are constructed” (Holt, 2004, p. 11). These places are separated from everyday life as well as the realms of commerce and elite control and usually exist in the margins of society.

As Holt stated, is it from the populist worlds that iconic brands’ myths and sources of materials arise. It is in these worlds that brands can create myths that are both credible and authentic (Holt, 2004).

3.1.5 Cultural branding: Activism

Iconic brands can be described to function like cultural activists. By that, Holt (2004) means that these brands are encouraging people to think differently about themselves. Iconic brands’ myths encourage people to reconsider approved ideas about themselves. “The value of a particular myth resided not in the myth itself, but in its alignment with society’s incipient identity desires.” (Holt, 2004, p. 9).

3.1.6 Cultural branding: Breakthrough Performances

A few great performances that linger for years to come, those that incorporate the myth just perfectly, can turn a brand into an icon. A few masterful performances, typically with the help of commercial media to entwine their story into the culture, can make an iconic brand phenomenally desirable (Holt, 2004). Furthermore, the author claims that iconic brands are successful not because of their trustworthy service or distinctive benefits but rather because they forge a deep connection with culture (Holt, 2003).

3.1.7 Cultural branding: Cultural Halo Effect

Brands that provide powerful myths that consumers can use in the creation of their identity. By that, Holt (2004) states that identity value can help in casting a halo on other aspects within the brand, something he calls the “cultural halo effect”. “Great myths enhance the brand’s quality reputation, distinctive benefits, and status value.” (Holt, 2004, p. 10).

Some products or services are valued more for what they symbolise than for what they actually do. This, Holt (2004) means, could indicate that customers value the brand’s story much for their identity value. Identity value is an “aspect of a brand’s value that derives from the brand’s contributions to self-expression” (Holt, 2004, p. 11). By this, the author means that the brand operates as a vessel of self-expression, imbued with stories valuable for customers when constructing their identities. According to Holt (2004), customers are drawn to brands that embody ideals they admire and desire to be perceived as.

3.1.8 Emotional branding with a Cultural Branding perspective

Everything the brand does should be “packed with emotion, personality, and sensory experience.” (Holt, 2004, p. 21). It is of great value for a brand to emphasise its personality as well as forge a personal connection with its consumers in everything they do (Holt, 2004). According to the author, communication should serve the purpose to build emotional connections between the brand and its customers for them to treat the brand close to a religion. A deep bond with the customers can be achieved when the brand communicates with “supercharge emotion”.

Holt (2004) emphasises that strong brand characteristics such as emotional attachment are the consequence of successful mythmaking, not the cause. The author suggests that the identity myth that is embedded in the brand itself generates several benefits e.g. making customers associate the product or service with category benefits, to emote, as well as to gather together.

3.1.9 Brand loyalty

Iconic brands hold identity myths consumers can attain through ritual action, an aspect that makes consumers value the brand differently than other conventional branding strategies (Holt, 2004). Customers who strongly identify with a brand’s myth usually use the myths to meet desires and resolve anxieties that they experience in everyday life. Thus, the

consumer's devotion to the brand that is producing the myths, increases. In other words, the brand contributes to the consumers' identity needs and serves as a moral compass (Holt, 2004).

Brand loyalty relies on the shared history between the customer and the brand and the relationship between the two is where the loyalty is produced. The key factor to establish loyalty between customers and iconic brands, however, is the social network that comes with the brand that the customer is locked into. For a customer, leaving the brand would therefore also mean losing the social networks such as individual relationships and interactions with other like-minded consumers (Holt, 2004).

3.2 Cultural Innovation Theory

The Cultural Innovation Theory was developed with the aim to challenge and re-write the way the research field and practitioners look at brand communication and its strategy work. Holt felt that the field, prior to this theory, depended on outdated theories streamed from economics and that the psychology aspect of branding stood on obsolete pillars of psychology theories from the 1970s (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

To bring your cultural branding strategy alive, Holt and Cameron mean you need to dig deeper, taking both the world around you, competitors and society to account - as well as the soul and history of your brand. According to Holt and Cameron (2010), cultural innovation has historically been a random event, and the goal of their theory is to turn it into a systematic discipline.

3.2.1 "Break out of the Cultural Orthodoxy"

While businesses within the same industry and market are good at working on their unique benefits, 'Cultural Orthodoxy' however, refers to how businesses within the same industry tend to imitate each other on a cultural level. In general, businesses are poor in understanding how their offering is perceived and experienced by consumers. In fact, companies miss the key insight that your offering connects to the consumers' cultural expressions.

Recurringly, “marketing initiatives tend to end up with minor variations of the same ideology, myth, and cultural codes. As certain cultural expressions become dominant, businesses come to treat these conventions as durable taken-for-granted “facts” of the marketplace” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p. 183).

3.2.2 “Social Disruptions Produce Ideological Opportunities”

Cultural innovation is created by detecting ideological opportunities, which are found through social disruptions. Through social disruptions, you can find cultural orthodoxy and “create latent demand for new cultural expressions” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p. 185). Consumers demand new ideologies, that create new codes and myths to boost their cultural expressions.

The category's cultural norms are upended by significant historical developments, which open up new ideological alternatives. These push customers away from the products they had relied on to create the necessary symbolism and force them to look for other options. One of the most productive environments for commercial innovation is provided by ideological opportunities (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

3.2.3 “Cultural Innovations Repurpose Source Material”

“Cultural innovations adapt and repurpose what we call source material in order to take advantage of the ideological opportunity. Source material comes in three types: subcultures, media myths, and brand assets” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p. 186).

Subcultures

Alternative ideologies, beliefs, and cultural norms that are present in subcultures and social movements are adapted by innovations. For our purposes, subcultures are groups or locations that are united by an ideology that is in opposition to the cultural orthodoxy of the category. Similar to political movements, social movements directly oppose prevailing ideology. Good examples are the fair-trade, slow-foods, and organic goods movements. Because they “show” that the ideology genuinely exists in the world as a workable worldview that has value for its followers, subcultures lend a lot of credibility as the basis for brand manifestations (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

Brand assets

Cultural assets that may be used by businesses are common. These resources encompass both the company's commercial strategies with great cultural potential and the enduringly recognisable historical cultural manifestations of the brand. Documenting these attributes and demonstrating how they are revised as the brand historically develops is what enables a brand to become an iconic one.

Cultural Design

Holt and Cameron (2010) imply that designing a proposal that reacts to the ideological opportunity engagingly and uniquely while relying on the proper source materials is the last stage of cultural innovation. Each significant consumer-facing component of the brand must effectively and creatively communicate the cultural expression in order to execute the design. The "creative" element of cultural innovation is the conversion of source material into the design. Compared to normal "out-of-the-box" tabula rasa creative initiatives in the market today, it is a far more focused and limited creative endeavour. Instilling these aspects into the product throughout the market mix is typically a simple process that is much more respectful to constructive management than conventional creative tasks after the prospective innovator has acquired the appropriate philosophy, myth, and cultural rules.

Innovative cultural expressions from companies make them more potent cultural icons, or what is known as iconic brands. The fact that these brands are prized by society as a socially accepted representation of a specific philosophy for a certain demographic is what gives them tremendous influence. People encounter and express this concept through the brand in their daily lives. The brand's cultural significance in daily life is consistently emphasised and comes to be accepted. Three distinct but related types of value are produced by cultural innovations:

Symbolic value. The most significant components of human existence are sorted out by cultural expressions, which also offer practical guidance and inspiration and serve as symbolic anchors for issues related to identity, purpose, desire, and value. Customers of branded cultural expressions encounter these ideal principles and values on a visceral level in daily life (what anthropologists call ritual action).

Social value. Social identities are formed through cultural manifestations based on fundamental socioeconomic constructs including social class, gender, race, and ethnicity. They can also play a significant role in one's political identity, such as environmentalism, nationalism, and social justice principles. These social and political identities are utilised to

express status by showing others how superior one is and by forging bonds of community and solidarity.

Functional value. People prefer to believe that a brand offers greater functionality, is of higher quality, and is more reliable when they find symbolic and social significance in its cultural representation. Customers who identify with a brand's cultural expression want to think the branded goods and services are top-notch, therefore the expression has a significant impact on how people perceive attributes that don't seem to be useful. Unlike what economists and engineers believe, functional benefits are social constructions rather than absolute truths (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

4. Methodology

In this section, the study's methodological stance is introduced. This includes a scientific approach, research design, and collection method followed by a method of analysis. Finally, a reflection on the methodology is presented.

4.1 Scientific approach

This qualitative study's ontological stance is critical realism. This is a research philosophy that “focuses on explaining what we see and experience, in terms of the underlying structures of reality that shape the observable events” (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 138).

Critical realism suggests that there are three layers to reality:

1. the Empirical
2. the Actual
3. and the Real

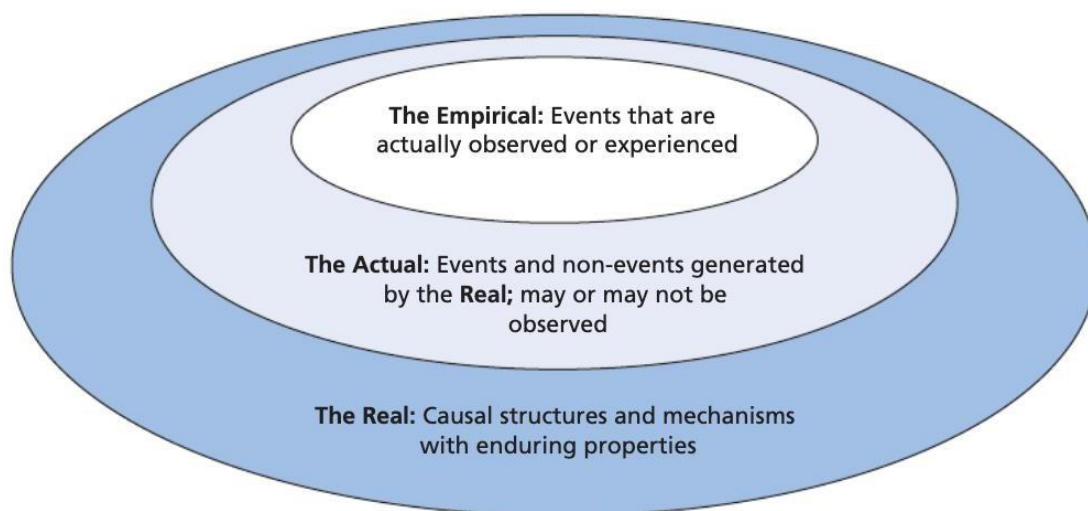


Figure 4.4 Critical realist stratified ontology

Source: Developed from Bhaskar (1978)

Figure 1: Critical Realist Stratified Ontology (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 139)

The critical realism philosophy means that reality is seen as external and independent (Saunders et al., 2009). Saunders et al. (2009) refer to Bhaskar (1989) that claims that in order to understand what is going on in the social world, it is of great importance to understand the

social structures that have given rise to the phenomena that are being examined. Therefore, critical realist research "focuses on providing an explanation for observable organisational events by looking for the underlying causes and mechanisms through which deep social structures shape everyday organisational life." (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 140). For this study, local embeddedness and culture were therefore of great importance when selecting cases as well as data.

Researchers with a critical realist approach often embrace 'epistemological relativism' as the epistemological stance. This means:

- Knowledge historically situated and transient
- Facts are social constructions
- Historical causal explanation as contribution

(Saunders et al., 2009, p. 136)

Saunders et al. (2009) refer to Bhaskar (1989) who further explains that epistemological relativism recognises knowledge as historically situated and social facts are socially constructed, accepted, and agreed on by people, instead of existing independently.

The study's analysis will take a hermeneutic scientific theoretical perspective. Gilje (2020) refers to Gadamer who explains that understanding and new knowledge are achieved in the interplay between part and whole. Furthermore, Gadamer states that hermeneutic understanding "always includes an application of the text in relation to a contemporary situation" (Gilje, 2020, p. 186). Therefore, the context, as well as time, have been taken into consideration when conducting this study and its collected data. Additionally, the hermeneutic circle enables the researcher to avoid immediate and superficial interpretations of the collected empirical material (Bertilsson, 2014).

The study takes an abductive approach as this is appropriate reasoning in situations of uncertainty e.g. studies that require increased understanding or explanation for a phenomenon (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). An abductive approach means that the researcher includes an understanding of a phenomenon, by also including underlying structures (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2017), an abductive approach often occurs in case-based studies.

An abductive approach implies that an "individual case is interpreted on the basis of a hypothetical overall pattern, which, if it were true, explains the case in question" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017, p.13). This interpretation should then be substantiated with the help of new

observations (new cases). This correlates well with the purpose of this study which is that, through theory and analytical interpretation of collected data, achieve a greater or new understanding of cultural branding. Moreover, the work of Holt is a source of inspiration in order to obtain patterns and structures of this study's researched phenomenon. This is what Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2017) believe increases the understanding of the empirics when conducting the analysis.

The abductive approach can be seen as a process where the focus between empiricism and theory alternates and where they are gradually reinterpreted from each other (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). An abductive approach is therefore suitable for this study when establishing codes and themes within the collected data. Furthermore, this study's abductive and hermeneutic reasoning improves the possibility to achieve a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon as the analysis alternates between empirical and theoretical as well as parts and the whole.

4.2 Research design

The study's research strategy is a multiple case study. A case study is considered an appropriate method as it allows the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge about complex phenomena (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Common for a case study is its considerable depth and it being as comprehensive as possible (6 & Bellamy, 2012). Further, the authors explain that case-based research is defined by the interactions between factors, and searches for the effects emerging from these interactions. Therefore, case-based research is beneficial in order to achieve a greater understanding of the complexity and nuances of e.g. social life, conceived holistically. The purpose of the selected cases (football clubs) is to answer the research question and provide a greater understanding of the studied phenomenon. Furthermore, selecting three different football clubs (cases) enables the study to explore the dynamics amongst the cases considered as *wholes*, rather than the relationships across them (6 & Bellamy, 2012). Additionally, case-based designs are flexible and make it easier to identify and follow interesting findings of important issues that might not have been acknowledged before the research began (6 & Bellamy, 2012).

4.3 Collection method and selection

This study's sampling method is purposive sampling. Purposive sampling means that the selection of units, e.g. documents, organisations or cases has a close connection with the research question (Bryman, 2018). It is the research questions that decide what units are of importance, meaning the research question acts as guidance to what analysis units are of value for the study's purpose and therefore should be selected (Bryman, 2018).

For this study, the selection of cases is based on the relevance of the research question. By selecting three different football clubs within the same nation and league increases the possibility to find contributing aspects as well as aspects that complement each other. Moreover, it increases the possibility of a greater understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied. The selected football clubs and selected units can each exemplify and portray the studied phenomenon in various ways. Just as Bryman (2018) explains, when adopting a purposive sampling method, the units should be selected based on the relevance they have in order to gain a greater understanding of one or more social phenomena.

When conducting a multiple case study it is of relevance to select several units within the cases. In order to do this, there are a number of principles (selection levels) within purposive sampling to help do so (Bryman, 2018). This study's cases are selected based on a purposive sampling method at three different selection levels.

The first selection level is a contextual selection where three football clubs within the English Premier League are selected. The three clubs; Arsenal F.C., Manchester City F.C. and Newcastle United F.C., are the study's units (cases) of which this study will construct its analysis. The homogeneity of these samples can be detected as they are great Premier League clubs originating from cities that have a long and rich football history, culture, and traditions.

The heterogeneity is that these three clubs are located in different parts of England meaning they all exist in different contexts (cities and cultures) with several different key attributes which are considered fruitful for the purpose of the study's research questions (Bryman, 2018).

The intention for selecting these three cases is for them to provide relevant perspectives of the studied phenomenon in a complementing manner, not a comparative one. The three cases can together contribute to answering the research question as they reveal and provide different aspects of the same phenomenon. The data for each case is selected based on relevance in regard to the research questions as well as including a broad perspective to provide an accurate understanding of the phenomenon. As Bryman (2018) argues, a purposive sampling method is to strategically choose cases that proved a relevant contribution to the research questions.

The second selection level is the “selection of a typical case” for collecting the data from each case. The examples from each case are selected as they demonstrate and provide a coherent explanation that is relevant to this study’s research question. The purpose of the selected cases is to “exemplify a dimension that is of interest” (Bryman, 2018, p. 497). The data is selected based on the themes that emerge when coding the data within each case. The data is collected from first-hand sources such as club statements, articles and media content as well as secondary sources such as media articles and documentaries.

In order to assure the selected cases are the most relevant ones, this study adopts a third selection level, generic purposive selection, where criteria for a case are decided *a priori* and are applied based on the research questions. With a generic purposive selection, it is possible to select cases and contexts based on criteria that are essential for the research question (Bryman, 2018). After identifying relevant cases which all fulfilled one or more of the criteria, we could then make a selection of the cases most suitable. All cases in this study are located in England. However, it is also important that they differ in terms of cities, history and culture. These are some criteria that were established from the start and therefore determined the selection of cases. By selecting cases in three different cities in England, it has the potential to offer a variation of perspectives to illustrate the studied phenomena in the best way possible. The selected cases also include more than one perspective; supporter-perspectives and brand perspectives, to reflect multiple different aspects of the phenomenon. By searching and selecting articles and other content such as videos from 1) The football club's own website 2) external data, articles from local newspapers and 3) external data with a fan-perspective e.g. documentaries. The data is selected by coding the data by its theme:

<p>Theme 1 Myth and identity creation</p>
<p>Codes Storytelling - community - social network - local embeddedness</p>

Appendix I

<p>Theme 2 Community work: diversity and inclusion</p>

<p>Codes Social contradictions - ritual actions - subgroups - cultural activism</p>
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Appendix II

<p>Theme 3 Loyalty</p>
<p>Codes Social network - identity value - identity crisis - moral dilemma</p>

Appendix III

The data is collected from first-hand sources as well as secondary sources gathered from the internet; websites, online articles and videos. Collecting data from both first and secondary sources can be beneficial when wanting to illustrate a phenomenon as accurately and coherently as possible. Using both first and secondary sources can also provide the study with a range of perspectives and the researcher a critical lens e.g. a football club's statement compared to an article regarding the same matter.

A delimitation of the collected data is its local connection as local embeddedness is of great importance for the purpose of the study. In order to obtain data that reflects the local aspect of the football club's impact, the majority of the secondary sources are articles from local newspapers or locally produced media content e.g. documentaries.

4.4 Analysis method

This study's analytical approach is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an appropriate method for identifying patterns within the collected data. The thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) provides an accessible analytic process, from familiarising with the data to producing the report.

4.4.1 Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis is considered a good method for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). This can be argued to be a suitable method for this research as it aims to explore football clubs' engagement in cultural branding as well as being regarded as iconic brands. This analysis is an abductive thematic analysis where patterns and codes (see appendix I, II, III) discovered are put into the

theoretical concepts introduced in chapter two. Furthermore, the study's thematic analysis is motivated by a particular analytic question.

Thematic analysis is beneficial in terms of its flexibility as it can be applied across a series of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Due to its flexibility, it has great potential to provide rich and detailed data that is nevertheless complex (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This goes well with this study's abductive approach. Further, the authors also suggest that thematic analysis is a suitable method for researchers with a critical realistic approach as the method reflects reality as well as unravels the surface of "reality".

This study adopts the thematic analysis process presented by Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 35), which consists of the six following steps:

Table 1: Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Figure 2: Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 35)

4.5 Methodological reflections

In order to attain high reliability, meaning consistent results, we have established codes. For a coding system to be reliable it has to produce the same result when being applied to the same data (6 & Bellamy, 2012). However, as Heide and Simonsson (2014) emphasise, when conducting a qualitative case study the theories and data are selected based on the researcher's own background and interest. For that reason, it would be very unlikely for two different researchers to reach the exact same result. Nevertheless, by measuring the inter-rater reliability we can ensure that the codes, which are created on subjective interpretations, are in unison. The lack of inter-rater consistency is a strong indication that the researchers are not in unison with what they are observing and therefore the measure is not valid (Bryman, 2016).

When conducting a qualitative case study, ensuring total validity, i.e. to what degree the method measures what it intends to measure, can be somewhat problematic since it advocates that there is only one true perception of reality (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). However, we have been able to establish internal validity, meaning there should be a high level of concurrence between the researchers' observations and the theoretical ideas that are developed (Bryman, 2018). To ensure internal validity we have developed a coding scheme as well as frequent discussions about the collected material throughout the collecting, selecting, and analysing process.

The intention of qualitative research is not to reach one true image of social reality (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Ensuring reliability and validity in qualitative case studies can therefore be ambiguous (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). In order to ensure the quality of this study, we also reflect on the credibility, transferability, and dependability aspects. The three criteria are suggested by researchers Lincoln and Guba (1985) who are of belief that social reality can be described in various ways (Bryman, 2018).

The study's rich and extensive empirical data is a way to attain a high level of credibility (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). By engaging in various types of data e.g. articles, statements, and documentaries from different sources, both first and secondary, as well as perspectives e.g. the organisation, the media and fan interactions, we can obtain a good sense and idea regarding the organisation and culture. The quality of a case study increases when including various perspectives and thereby provides a wider representation of "reality" (Heide & Simonsson, 2014).

The wide range and amount of data increase the possibilities to describe and explain the context of the selected cases which is necessary for the study's transferability. As it is

impossible for a case study's result to be completely transferable to another case or situation, a "thick description" is a great premise for the reader to apply the knowledge to other situations (Heide & Simonsson, 2014).

Selecting a smaller and local football club would increase the possibilities of getting closer to the organisation and the studied phenomenon. In this case, in-depth interviews would be an appropriate method. This would allow us to further ensure the study's dependability with participant or respondent validation (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Further, the possibility of gathering "thick descriptions" could increase and improve the study's transferability (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). However, due to limitations of time, resources, and the scope of the study, as well as getting in contact with foreign organisations, we decided against this method.

The choice of selecting these three specific football clubs was made based on several determining factors. England as a nation has a rich history of football, and the football culture is deeply rooted and established in the cities of the three football clubs selected for this study. Furthermore, the amount of data i.e. articles, statements, and fan stories are wide in range and amount and therefore fruitful for the purpose of this study. The three football clubs selected for this study are all big, well-known organisations located in England. In other words, the organisations are hard to reach out to and the chances of getting in contact with the right people for this study are slim.

Due to the wide amount of data, a suitable analysis method for the purpose of this study is thematic analysis. The method is effective as it allows the researcher to identify patterns and form themes with its six-step process. With the help of the defined codes (Appendix I, II, III) we could navigate through the data and select the most fruitful cases. The six steps of thematic analysis (see 4.4.1) as well as the codes (see 4.3) give the reader a good indication of the work process, further increasing the quality of the study (Heide & Simonsson, 2014).

Saunders et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of being attentive to one's socio-cultural background and experiences as this might influence one's research and the risk of being biased and subjective. Further, Gilje (2020) implies the importance of having a pre-understanding in order to enter a hermeneutic circle. In addition, Ödman (1979) claims that pre-understanding also determines what aspect the researcher will take on the phenomenon that is being studied, which the researcher must be aware of. These are some aspects important to consider in the process of producing the analysis. The established coding scheme can provide the reader with a better understanding of why the selected data is selected and therefore to some extent the researchers' approach when analysing the phenomenon.

Because of the extensive collection of data, the saturation principle is a necessary step in order to avoid an abundance of data. When already identified key themes frequently reoccur in the collected data without contributing with any new knowledge or insight, we conclude the data collection (Bertilsson, 2014).

5. Analysis

In this section, the collected empirical data is presented. The analysis is divided into three different themes that were found using a purposive sampling method guided by the coding scheme (Appendix I, II, III). Each theme presents three cases, one from each club, in order to explore the studied phenomenon in correlation to Holt's theory in an exploratory and fruitful way.

5.1 “It Is Just Not a Football Club, It Is a Way of Life”

The first theme examines myth and identity value through storytelling and branding campaigns. Myths and identity creations are two key attributes within cultural branding and iconic brands (Holt, 2004). Each case illustrates these characteristics from a supporter and/or a brand perspective.

<p>Theme 1 Myth and identity creation</p>
<p>Codes Storytelling - community - social network - local embeddedness</p>

(Appendix I)

5.1.1 Maria ‘the Gooner’

Arsenal supporters are often referred to as “Gooners”, which derives from the team’s nickname, “The Gunners” (Goal, 2020). The 83-year-old Maria Petri has been a Gooner since she was a little girl. Since the late 60s, she has hardly missed a match (Bird, 2021).

“I’m in love with the Arsenal. That's all I can say. Because **I don't have a family of my own [...]. Arsenal are my family.**” – Maria Petri (Bird, 2021).

It can be argued that Maria not only identifies strongly with Arsenal, so much that she calls them her family, but also uses its myths to smooth over tensions and anxieties in her life.

This correlates with Holt (2004) who argues that myths help people find purpose in their lives. Maria calling Arsenal her family could indicate just that – giving her life purpose. Moreover, the brand (Arsenal) provides Marie with something she is lacking (the anxiety) – a family. It can also be argued that Arsenal and its myths are a compass Maria uses to make sense of the world and thereby provide desirable ideals to live by, which also corresponds with Holt's idea of cultural branding.

“As soon as I get to the game, I see so many people that I've known from coming to so many games over the years, **it feels like home.**” – Maria Petri (Bird, 2021).

Another significant pillar in the cultural branding model which can be recognised in this example is the importance of ritual action. By attending a football match (the ritual) Maria experiences the brand's identity myth. Myths that address a person's identity is the most influential one and produces strong emotional connections to the brand (Holt, 2004). As the example above suggests, Maria's ritual actions (attending football matches for many years) through which she experiences the club's myth, have led her to forge such a tight relationship with the brand (club) and its community that she calls it home. Another important aspect is how the brand provides Maria with a social network. This is a contributing factor for Maria to stay within the Arsenal community, as a social network creates loyalty amongst consumers (Holt, 2004).

It can be argued that Maria herself can be described as an icon within the Arsenal community. Her enthusiasm and endless support for the club is excellent storytelling, something the club takes advantage of. Maria is a recurrent face on Arsenal's official YouTube channel, Social media, and campaigns (Adidas Football, 2019; Arsenal, 2020, 2022). It can be argued that Maria herself is living the myths Arsenal produce, which the club uses in e.g. campaigns as a form of storytelling further establishing their myths. However, it is most likely that Maria only can be described as an icon *within* Arsenal. For outsiders, she might not be regarded as iconic.

Arsenal paid tribute to Maria due to her passing earlier this year by wearing black armbands in a fixture to honour her memory (Instagram, 2022). By doing this, not only do they celebrate her but also the brand's myth she lived and kept alive for years. In a statement,

Arsenal self-stated that Maria “transmitted Arsenal values” (Arsenal, 2022).

“I shall be oh so upset when I die, I won’t be able to watch Arsenal anymore.”
– Maria Petri (Arsenal, 2022)

5.1.2 The Toons

Newcastle United F.C.'s official website presents the city’s (Newcastle upon Tyne) many characteristics and attributes it is known for. However, according to the club, the city might best be known for “its beloved football club and the club's incredible supporters – the Toon Army.” (NUFC, n.d.). One of the football club’s nicknames is ‘Toon’ which comes from the local pronunciation of the word ‘town’. The word is now so synonymous with the city that it is heavily linked with the football club Newcastle United F.C. The supporters of the club are called “the Toon Army” as a reference to the club’s nickname ‘Toon’ (Goal, 2021). The club was founded in 1892 and has a long and rich history.

In 2020 a short film was launched portraying the “forgotten faces of modern football” – namely the supporters (IMDb, 2020). The documentary interviews and introduces several supporters of Newcastle United Football Club.

The first lines truly set the tone for the entirety of the documentary (Dale, 2020):

“The **loyalty** and the passion is second to none. But, it is not just that, it is the noise, it is the atmosphere, it is **the feeling of belonging**. A lot of the time, you have personal problems in your own life. When you go to a Newcastle United game, that is an opportunity to forget everything. You know, it is just not a football club, it is **a way of life.**” (Dale, 2020).

The following statement correlates well with Holt’s ideas about ritual actions, functional value, and identity creation:

“We all **identify** really strongly with Newcastle as a city and a massive part of that is the football club. Without it we wonder **what we would do on the weekends.**” (Dale, 2020).

As Holt (2004) explains, those who interact with a brand's services or products experience a bit of the myth. Attending football matches every week can arguably be an example of an interaction. Meaning, by attending football matches the individual also experiences the brand's (football club's) myth. The most powerful myth addresses people's identities and helps in forging an emotional relationship between the consumer and the brand (Holt, 2004). This can be interpreted as through ritual action (attending a football match, through which the individual experiences the myth) comes the creation of identity.

As Holt (2004) illuminates, everything a brand does should be packed with emotion, personality, and sensory experience in order to forge a personal connection with its consumers. Emotional connections to a brand can lead consumers to treat the brand near to a religion. In this case, a sensory experience can be attending a football match. Behind every title and match – win or lose – regardless of whether it is experienced in the stadium, in the pub, or on the television, is packed with emotions and creates memories that resonate with Toons all around the world.

In relation to this, Holt (2004) makes a declaration that suggests that identity myths embedded in the brand make customers emote and gather together. The author continues to explain that customers stay loyal to an iconic brand much due to the social network it provides them with. In other words, leaving a brand would also mean losing a social network, relationships, and interactions with other like-minded consumers. Both of the examples above as well as the following statement illustrate this:

“It [the club] is the closest thing I have to a **religion**, it is something to get behind [...], especially in a city like Newcastle where **it really does unite the whole place.**” (Dale, 2020).

Another supporter expresses how the club is a source of relief and freedom after a week's work of being shouted at and stressed. He states that it is a way for him to express how he feels, something he can't express at work.

“It just gives you that **release**, gives you that **anxiety break**, it just gives you **something to feed off** [...] “ (Dale, 2020).

This correlates well with Holt's (2004) idea regarding the brands' contribution to identity value by approaching anxieties and desires across e.g., a society. In this case, one can

say that the individual who states the quote above is using the club as a relief, to fill the gap between society and his own desires. Meaning, the club addresses acute contradictions in society and anxieties the individual experience in his everyday life. Many strive to live up to the nation's ideals, however, a lot of people can experience that their lives do not act in accordance with these ideals. National ideologies can be described to create models for a way of living. The tensions between this model and an individual's experience create intense desires and anxieties. The example above demonstrates how the nation's ideology and the individual's everyday life do not correspond, meaning there is a demand for myths in order to manage these differences. As the person explains, the myths of Newcastle United F.C. act to fill this gap and resolve this tension. The club's embedded myths that are locally embedded further enhance concepts about community and class.

In relation to this Holt's (2004) explanation is that people create their identity in response to the same historical changes that have had an impact on the whole nation. Furthermore, just as Holt (2004) explains, brand desirability derives from myths that address important social tensions in the nation. In order for the myths that iconic brands establish to be successful, they must derive from a populist world that rings true with their customers (Holt, 2004). It becomes clear that this might actually be the case in Newcastle:

“One of the reasons why **football has so much importance in Newcastle is because it is a part of the working class culture** that we have **all grown up with.**” She continues to explain how **Newcastle United is an integrated part of the working class**, something she describes is being **lost elsewhere**. “[...] many aspects of it; the industry that often supported it [the working class] has gone and is changing.” (Dale, 2020).

This could demonstrate what Holt (2003) suggests an iconic brand's myth is aimed to do; namely, to resolve acute tensions people experience between their own lives and society's ideology. Furthermore, Newcastle United F.C. is forging a deep connection with culture by (1) referring to their supporters as ‘Toons’, the local pronunciation of the word ‘town’ and (2) being a substitute for their supporters, the club (brand) is there for the working class while everything else is changing or lost. Meeting their supporters who experienced anxieties as well as creating myths for them to use as self-expression is greatly beneficial for the brand's success

(Holt, 2003). Another example of how Newcastle United F.C. is further forging a deep connection to the city's history:

“We've seen a lot of **hardship** with regard to the **closure of a lot of industry**, but **with the football club there has been something to hold on to.**” (Dale, 2020).

It becomes clear that loyalty does not depend on the 90 minutes on the field, rather it is the club's long history and the brand being deeply rooted in the city itself and its culture and social contractions. Holt (2004) explains that brand loyalty relies on the shared history between the customer and the brand.

“It [supporting their club] is worth it, no matter win, lose, draw. [...], it is passion, it is pride, it is belief, that is **what Newcastle stands for.**” (Dale, 2020).

5.1.3 “This Is Our City”

In 2005 Manchester City F.C. launched the campaign “Our City”. The club's assistant secretary Matt Lowery explains that the campaign is a celebration of the long relationship between the football club's supporters and the city (Manchester Evening News, 2005). 50 billboards with the words “This Is Our City” were displayed all around Manchester (Manchester Evening News, 2005). The campaign is still used today as a marketing strategy e.g. before particular fixtures, on merchandise, before the start of a new season or being displayed around the club's Etihad Stadium (Man City, 2021, 2019; Bray, 2021; Slater, 2019). The phrase “This Is Our City” can imply that ‘real’ Manchester citizens support Manchester City F.C. and not the local rivals Manchester United F.C. Furthermore, what can be said is that the campaign is locally embedded and aimed towards the local supporters and the city of Manchester.

Another example of how Manchester City F.C. market itself almost as if the club *is* the city is the big billboard displaying football player Carlos Tevez with the message “Welcome to Manchester”. In 2009, Tevez transferred from Manchester United F.C. to its prime rivals Manchester City F.C., hence the billboard which explicitly excluded the word “city” in its message “Welcome to Manchester” (Slater, 2019). This can be interpreted as an effort from the club trying to market itself as the city itself, playing at the rivalry between them and the

other Manchester team, Manchester United F.C. As Holt (2004) states, brands are often valued by customers not for what they do but for what they symbolise. If Manchester City F.C. symbolises the city of Manchester, it also creates a myth which many locals and supporters can identify with as it draws from the city's history and culture – they (the club) symbolise the city. It is also to be said that in regard to this, the campaign can be perceived as an effort to cultivate the loyalty of local supporters.

The supporters of Manchester City F.C. are called “Cityzens” which can be argued to further play on the local embeddedness and the club's effort to market themselves as the city or, at least that the city (Manchester) belongs to them and not to their rivals.

Another reason for the club's interest in locally embedded marketing is the change of the club's home address. In 2003, the club left their former stadium, Maine Road, to move into its new, more central stadium which today is called the Etihad Stadium. Etihad is the name of a global, corporate airline from the United Arab Emirates airline (Etihad, n.d.), meaning it does not appear as local to many Mancunians. Therefore, the campaign, which is largely characterised by local embeddedness, can be seen as a strategy to maintain their myths which are rooted in the city's history and culture.

The club's history is one of the biggest assets when forming myths as myth-making should be formed from contradictions in society in order for them to be credible and authentic (Holt, 2004). With the campaign “This is Our City” the club incorporates not only their history but the city or regions they are associated with. Therefore, the closeness to local communities and areas is to the club's advantage in regard to myths as well as success. As Holt (2004) states, a brand's success comes from its ability to forge a deep connection with culture. Manchester City F.C.'s myths could draw from cultural anxieties such as local identity and class identity.

Another reason to further integrate locally embedded marketing deriving from the city's history and culture is the change of ownership in 2008. It can be discussed if the main purpose of the campaign was due to the club being bought by the Emirati Sheikh Mansour in 2008 (Manchester City, n.d.). The purpose of the campaign can in this context be to create a story, making Manchester City F.C. appear more ‘homemade’, contrary to the now very rich club they now are and, with a foreign owner.

Despite the money now pouring into the club, the club's values and myths have to be kept in mind. Manchester City F.C.'s campaign “This is Our City” is partially built on myths created in local surroundings, rooted in traditional working-class communities. In other words, the campaign approaches working-class identities and also implies a concept of community the

brand can offer – this is **our** city. Just like the Toons and Newcastle United F.C. case (see 5.1.2) exemplifies, the bond between a football club and the community in which they were formed, is very tight. Therefore, it can be argued that a club, which is strongly tied to a town or city, symbolises a degree of pride. The campaign itself, therefore, attracts local, middle-class supporters. The myth that Manchester City F.C. 's campaign taps into are based on social contradictions, relatable to the city's middle-class, both socially and culturally. In other words, they associate themselves with the working-class of Manchester. As Holt (2004) explains, myths have to engage directly with current social issues or social contradictions in order to generate identity value.

5.2 Taking a stand: diversity and inclusion as an important part of the football club

Research shows that consumers want brands to take a stand on social matters, and consumers believe that brands have an impact and can contribute to real change (Holt & Cameron, 2010). From Nike to Airbnb, and Budweiser to Tommy Hilfiger, brands have historically been taking a stand on societal issues such as racism, poverty, inequality, and homophobia by launching various campaigns shining a light on these topics (Holt and Cameron, 2010). Holt (2004) touches upon this when tapping into how brands become icons and explains these brands as 'cultural activists'. The 'cultural activism' is connected to the cultural branding strategies where brands challenge their consumers to re-think and re-evaluate their stance on certain things. Hence, the goals do not always deliver the expected, the wanted, the obvious, or the comfortable - rather attempt to push the boundaries - and act as an institution of inspiration to spark a change (Holt, 2004).

<p>Theme 2 Community work: diversity and inclusion</p>
<p>Codes Social contradictions - ritual actions - subgroups - cultural activism</p>

(Appendix II)

5.2.1 Gay Gooners

Looking further into what has been presented above, there are several initiatives from these football clubs that show efforts of a more diverse and inclusive football world. In 2013, supporters of Arsenal F.C. founded a new fan group called “Gay Gooners”, which became the first of its kind in the English top leagues and today acts as the world’s biggest LGBT+ fan group with over 1000 members (Morris, 2017). Since the establishment of this fan group, Arsenal has shown its support by standing behind the group, and its values, and promoting it on its website. Furthermore, Hector Bellerin, an Arsenal player at the time, collaborated with the Gay Gooners in December 2020, by participating in an interview on Sky Sports, showing support for the LGBT+ community by discussing diversity and inclusion in the football world, saying:

“About the abuse [in the world of football] I experienced it myself. Even when I had my long hair, I had homophobic abuse. Football is rooted in a very masculine culture, very toxic many times.” (Arsenal, n.d.).

Joe White, a member of the Gay Gooners, says:

“To have someone who is a player for our club, part of our family, putting themselves out there saying; “I support you, I support your group, who you are, you are a valid part of our family, and the Arsenal Community” really spoke volumes, something many professional footballers I think have or would not really do, and using your platform, Hector, is something that shows how much of an ally you are to us and it means a lot to us to know that we have the support of players on the pitch as of the people in the stand.” (Arsenal, n.d.).

Further, Joe White tells, that when he first told his father about him identifying as non-binary and being gay in his late teenage years, his father did not receive it well, and they eventually had a spell of four years without having any contact. It was through his father he became an Arsenal fan, saying:

“I think that is why something like Gay Gooners really does feel like a family, because, it is the family we get to choose.” (Arsenal, n.d.).

He later goes on to tell that today, he and his father have a great relationship and he is his biggest advocator in anything he chooses to do - and for the person he is. Joe explains that if his father can change his perception of these matters, anyone can.

When it comes to LGTBQ+ matters and men’s football, a lingering reluctance among supporters has been the recurring theme, as the football world is known as being infused with “toxic masculinity” (Consterdine, n.d.). On the contrary, within female football, this does not seem to be the case, where a more open culture can be found. Since the Arsenal brand represents all things Arsenal, including both youth teams, the men’s first team, and the women’s first team, it is important to make sure the brand embraces and represents all parts of the organisation. Studies show that taking a stand for these kinds of matters leads to a more attractive workplace as the environment is experienced as more accepting and open among both new and existing employees (Griek, 2017). For instance, since there is a large number of players that are open about their homosexuality in the women’s team, while history shows a narrow-minded, non-acceptance towards LGTBQ+ within men’s football, with only one English male player who is open about being homosexual (Crabtree, 2022), there is double the importance to firstly embrace, reflect and represent their own people, but also to push the environment within and around Arsenal forward to break this obsolete culture. These initiatives are just as important for the organisation internally as to send signals externally toward supporters and society as a whole.

Furthermore, for Arsenal to make these efforts to position itself as a club that embraces differences and diversity bolsters its brand as well as acts as an asset to the brand. According to Holt and Cameron’s (2010) theories, these initiatives can be seen as an attempt to try and break the cultural orthodoxy, and act as cultural activists, wanting to challenge their supporters to think more openly and inclusive about the club and its brand. However, one retaining hook that Arsenal face is the fact that all supporters do not feel positive about these initiatives. For many supporters, watching Arsenal in North London, at the Emirates Stadium, is all about

identity creation, adding to one's self, and a clear form of ritual action (Holt & Cameron, 2010). It is a way to relieve yourself from reality, dive into the football match and release feelings by letting yourself be emotional, expressive, shouting, and swearing. These are not the moments where it has historically been the norm to be politically correct, sensitive to others' feelings, and stay aware of your behaviour. In that sense, these efforts made by Arsenal are both inclusive and exclusive, at the same time. It may let a certain subgroup of their supporters feel lost and marginalised, at the same time, make another subgroup feel valued and included. The best way forward would be for Arsenal to continue working with these initiatives, and at the same time, try to close the gap between these different support groups. Instead, make them unite and come together as one. That would be bolstering for the brand as a whole.

5.2.2 Arsenal campaign: "No More Red"

In 2022, Arsenal F.C. teamed up with Adidas and launched a campaign named "No More Red" following the increased youth violence in London. They presented the campaign as a "long-term commitment to the London community" by launching an all-white football clothing set, without Arsenal's classic red, with even the iconic red badge being all white, saying:

"2021 saw the highest number of teenage murders in a year in London since records began – most of which involved knife attacks. Our No More Red initiative with Adidas aims to tackle the root causes of youth violence, and provide safe spaces and more opportunities for our young people." (Arsenal, 2022)

Moreover, they also describe how they invest in their community to go from words to action and show genuine commitment:

"1) Investing in creating and refurbishing safe spaces to play football – starting with the pitch on Harvist Estate just minutes away from Emirates Stadium, 2) Creating a No More Red mentorship scheme where young people doing positive work in the community will be supported by creative talent including Idris Elba, Ian Wright, DJ

Emerald Rose Lewis and artist Reuben Dangoor among others, 3) Providing access to its talent network who will make regular contributions to Arsenal in the Community programmes that provide a wide range of training, quality spaces, positive role models and tangible opportunities for young people.” (Arsenal, 2022).

These efforts, made by Arsenal, not only shine a light on, and acknowledge these issues in society, but also team up with Adidas to bring further forces into helping the community in an attempt to contribute to change, showing their aim to be a real institution of influence. Arsenal seems to have tried to make an effort to bridge the gap between contradictions in society, to bring people together, and to present an alternative for these young people to choose something else. This effort to showcase football and other activities as a safe space and a way to another life, a better life, implies that Arsenal strives to use its brand to make an impact and change things for the better. Holt (2004) explains that iconic brands have this ability to approach collective anxieties and desires of a nation, or a place, due to their contributions to identity value. When examining consumers' identities, researchers have found that desires and anxieties concerning identity are extensively shared among a nation's citizens. The explanation is that people are creating their identities in response to the same historical changes which have had an impact on the whole nation (Holt 2004).

5.2.3 When taking a stand does not feel entirely genuine

Even if brands want to engage in cultural branding, meaning; create a deeper connection with its consumers through different methods, such as storytelling and wanting to align themselves with certain people and values (Holt & Cameron, 2010) it can sometimes be received with scepticism among the public and brands can face criticism if the initiatives do not feel genuine. When Newcastle United F.C. tweeted out a message in support of Josh Cavallo, an Australian professional footballer who became the first active male footballer to come out as gay (Kelly, 2021) - scepticism and criticism were to a large extent the response the brand received. Why? Earlier in that year, Newcastle had changed owners, an event that in itself was regarded as a controversial affair by the media people involved and interested in football. The new owners are from Saudi Arabia, a country known for having the strictest laws against same-sex relationships. One journalist said: “Newcastle United football club was

recently bought by Saudi Arabia, which has some of the most draconian anti-gay laws in the world. When the club now supports footballer Josh Cavallo for coming out as gay, that's some kind of world record for hypocrisy isn't it?" (Dahlström, 2021).

Furthermore, when it comes to Newcastle United F.C.'s efforts in engaging in human rights issues like the one mentioned above, the criticism and scepticism mostly come from media and other supporters, rather than their own. At least, one cannot find plenty of openly critical fans, speaking out online. It may show the loyalty that the football clubs have among their consumers. The brand of Newcastle is wavering high due to the supporters' love and devotion for their club, and how it fulfils social value as well as functional value in their supporters' lives. That means that these matters may be overlooked by the consumers, and it also makes the brand not succeed in making that imprint and impact on the society and nation scale.

5.2.4 "City In The Community": Manchester City's way to give back to the city of Manchester

Manchester City has a community programme that runs back to 1986 when they founded "City In The Community". Through the community, Manchester City focuses on bringing health and exercise forward to different groups in society. Among others, they have an initiative called "City Play Together" where the aim is to offer families to play football together. They also have an initiative for military veterans to gather and play football together (Man City, n.d.).

Manchester City's community work is impactful and meaningful when it comes to football, exercising, and sports when they focus on their core. When it comes to engaging in other areas, such as human rights-related challenges that the society faces, there is a risk their work will not be regarded as authentic and therefore will not end up as impactful in society. As similar to other cases when a club is owned by businesspeople from a country which do not embrace the English culture, norms, rules and regulations, there is a risk of criticism. The criticism will most likely come from the media and support from other football clubs, as well as from people in society in general. The own consumers, and supporters, may not always be as critical of their own club and as objective as other stakeholders. As Manchester City does engage in several human rights campaigns, such as; Black Lives Matter and Stonewall's "Rainbow Laces Campaign" (Man City, 2019), which on one hand show commitment

to drive change, the foreign ownership, with origin from the United Arab Emirates, risks to hinder the credibility, and therefore, the impact of their actions. The United Arab Emirates has been criticised for its human rights issues, with racial and religious discrimination as well as towards homosexual people (Amnesty, 2020). Therefore, according to Holt's theory about brand assets, these efforts go against the organic nature of the organisation (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

5.3 Supporters' unwavering loyalty: an asset and obstacle

The third theme examines supporter loyalty towards a brand. The cases presented in this section all highlights key aspects that Holt (2004) means are key characteristics when further establishing brand loyalty with your consumers.

<p>Theme 3 Loyalty</p>
<p>Codes Social network - identity value - identity crisis - moral dilemma</p>

(Appendix III)

5.3.1 "Fans, football, owners – in that order": Manchester City F.C.'s entrance (and exit) in the European Super League in less than 48 hours

On the 18th of April 2021, Manchester City F.C., along with 11 other leading European football clubs, announced their participation in a newly established competition called "European Super League" (hereinafter referred to as ESL). Manchester City F.C. explained that their inclusion in the ESL is a step towards a "continued engagement with supporters and other important stakeholders." (Man City, 2021). The ESL is a closed competition where twelve leading European football clubs compete against each other (Man City, 2021).

48 hours after the club's announcement, Manchester City F.C. released the following statement:

“Manchester City Football Club can confirm that it has formally enacted the procedures to withdraw from the group developing plans for a European Super League.” – Manchester City F.C., 2021

During those 48 hours, Manchester City F.C. supporters gathered outside of the Etihad Stadium to show their opposition to their beloved club’s inclusion of the ESL. Many were of the belief that the club’s decision to join the ESL was made out of greed for more money as the closed competition would generate billions of euros in revenue for the participating clubs (Panja & Smith, 2021). The Etihad Stadium was soon filled with banners reading “RIP MCFC 1894-2021”, “127 YEARS DESTROYED BY GREED” and “FANS, FOOTBALL, OWNERS, IN THAT ORDER” left by protesters. Manchester City F.C.’s Official Supporter’s Club condemned the club’s decision to join the ESL and stated that it was “motivated by greed” (Bray, 2022).

It becomes clear that the club underestimated the supporters’ unwavering loyalty and devotion they hold for the club. The power of the supporters is not to be overlooked even by the biggest of brands. Just like Holt (2004) mentions the number one ingredient for brands to establish loyalty is to lock their consumers into a social network. Within the football community, being a loyal supporter of a football club is recognised as something desirable and can almost be considered an achievement. Furthermore, the football community has a tradition of “loyal supporters” being true and authentic. In this case, one could suggest that the true and loyal supporters of Manchester City F.C. stayed and fought for the club’s traditions. Another aspect of the matter is the relation between football fan identity or club identity and loyalty. As stated earlier, loyalty within the football community is praised and celebrated both by the club and other football supporters. Therefore, it is possible for loyalty to be a characteristic in the creation of a football fan identity. Therefore, leaving the brand not only means losing the social networks – the community (Holt, 2004), but also a part of their football supporter identity in which loyalty is integrated. Both brand identification and social network (community) increase a consumer’s loyalty (Holt, 2004).

A football club’s community is, as exemplified in two other cases (see 5.1.1 and 5.1.2), valuable to a supporter, not only because of its social value but identity value. It can be argued that these are the two key factors for unwavering loyalty (Holt, 2004). Without the club, supporters would lose both. Hence the strong reaction from the supporters, as the club’s action goes against what it symbolises; its tradition, history and culture, which does not ring true to their supporters nor the brand’s myths and therefore what their supporters identify with.

5.3.2 "Our club, our history, our traditions (...)" : The 48-hour rise and fall of Arsenal F.C.'s European Super League inclusion

On the 19th of April 2021, Arsenal released the official statement that they too were one of the 12 European clubs joining the ESL (Arsenal, 2021).

Although the 'Gooners' response was very similar to the 'Cityzens', their critique was not directed to the club in general but to its owner Kroenke. "~~HISTORY, TRADITION, CLASS, KROENKE OUT~~", "OUR CLUB, OUR HISTORY, OUR TRADITIONS, KROENKE OUT " and "FAN OWNERSHIP NOW" read the banners outside the Emirates Stadium where thousands of Arsenal supporters had gathered (Mehta, 2021).

The supporters' rage at the club's decision could be perceived as a strong emotional attachment to the club. As Holt (2004) states, emotional attachment to a brand is the consequence of successful mythmaking, not the cause. The supporters claim that the decision alone is an act of betrayal of the club's tradition and history. Therefore, it can be argued that Arsenal's myths are heavily rooted in its culture as well as history. These myths are strongly embedded in supporters' self-expression and are therefore inevitable to dismiss as they (the myths) are important for their identity. Brands whose myths meet consumers' desires and anxieties are what increase their brand loyalty (Holt, 2004), this exemplifies the depth of the supporter's loyalty to the club. Despite Arsenal's intentions to join the ESL, which did not sit well with their supporters, the supporters did not abandon their club. Instead, they resisted, even claiming that the club belongs to them (the supporters). As the banners suggest, the supporters themselves, identify as the club – the club is theirs, they are the club, the traditions and everything the club stands for. Moreover, they would rather have their club sold than for it to dishonour their traditions and history – on which the brand's myths are built and what the club symbolises for them.

As a response to the supporters' expressed dissatisfaction, Arsenal withdrew their involvement in the ESL two days after they announced their inclusion in the ESL.

On the 20th of April 2021, the Arsenal Board published an open letter to their supporters.

"As a result of listening to you and the wider football community over recent days we are withdrawing from the proposed Super League. We made a mistake, and we apologise for it." – The Arsenal Board, 2021.

The apology indicates that the club's supporters' disapproval of their inclusion of ESL did not fall on deaf ears.

In an online video call on the 22nd of April 2021, Arsenal director Josh Kroenke had to answer external stakeholders regarding the club's involvement in ESL. In the video call, it was stated that the supporters were concerned about the club's effort to uphold the club's values. Kroenke admitted that the decision of joining the ESL did not honour those traditions. Another issue brought up was the supporters' mistrust and apprehension of the Arsenal owners who even encouraged him to consider his ownership of the club (Arsenal, 2021). The statements further prove that the supporter's strong opposition derives from the club not respecting the club's tradition or history. Just as Holt (2004) states, brand loyalty is produced and maintained by the history and relationship between the brand and customer share.

It can however be discussed whether the supporters' loyalty is a blessing or a curse. Although the supporters are the heart of the club and seemingly have some influence and power in a club's decision-making, their loyalty might also be restricting the club's effort to be innovative. Seeing as much of the club's brand is built on tradition, history and culture, maybe the supporters do not request or desire a progressive brand. Therefore, one has to consider to what degree supporters' loyalty is an asset as it is a limitation. Maybe a supporter's loyalty to a brand, whose myths and what it symbolises, is so intertwined with tradition, history and culture, that it stagnates the brand's development and innovation.

5.3.3 Newcastle F.C: Change of ownership

In 2021, Newcastle United's supporters faced a moral dilemma when their club was acquired by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund. This fund has direct links to the government of Saudi Arabia, however, the club ensured that there were no direct links between the Saudi Arabian government and Newcastle United. Regardless of the case, this acquisition caused a stir in the football world - and once again fuelled the fire into the topic of how football has become more of a business and lost its nature of association and being a simple sport. Many Newcastle supporters were conflicted between being overjoyed that the club finally had the financial backing to compete at the highest level; now having the funds to buy world-class players as well as other necessary investments in the club. On the other hand, many faced a crisis when it comes to the moral aspect as well as the identity and history of the club. The

club, which has such a strong local link and has all its charm in the local history - what will this change lead to? Supporters wondered how their local culture will be able to emerge and align with the culture of the Saudi Arabian culture and its owners, or if it is held separately. Will the new owners' influence lead to any change that the supports are not comfortable with? (Bashiti, 2020).

In 2022, Newcastle United released their new football kits ahead of the upcoming season, and the third kit showed a green and white kit - interestingly - just like the colours of the Saudi Arabian flag. In addition, the historical badge, with its original colours being blue, black and white, was also removed and could instead be found in a green colour tone. Looking into Holt and Cameron's (2010) research on "cultural design", he highlights the significance of how the visual symbols and expressions are important for consumers to identify with the brand - how for example a badge becomes something meaningful, something with a deeper symbolic and cultural meaning - and these cultural meanings embedded in the symbols should be highly taken into consideration whenever considering a swift change. Hence, this change did not only challenge the fans' emotional attachment to the club, the badge, and all that is linked to it, media also raised question marks as to whether this could be seen as a way to try and promote the country of Saudi Arabia - the country the new founders and the club had been clear there were no direct links with. Media stated from the beginning of the new ownership how this was a case of sport washing, where Saudi Arabia used Newcastle United as a way of receiving access to the democratic fine rooms, gaining influence, being able to make an imprint via soft power and sports diplomacy (Patel, 2021).

Prior to the new owner's takeover, Newcastle United has been run by owners who, according to the supporters, did not invest enough finances into the club. There had been suffering seeing the team they love dearly and are highly emotionally attached to losing time after time, several times risking relegation from the Premier League. When the possibility of these new owners came by, a takeover that would make Newcastle United the richest football club in the world, the supporters could not resist but were filled with happiness (Storey, 2021). Football-wise, this meant heaven. This case vividly showcases how protected the brand of football clubs is among its own most loyal consumers. The majority of the Newcastle United supporters were not going to leave the club, despite facing cultural disruptions, the symbolic meaning, and history being tested, and the creation of one-self being challenged; they stayed put with their football club.

6. Discussions and conclusions

As the analysis suggests, all three football clubs attempt to engage cultural branding to different degrees of success and in various means. Furthermore, the analysis illustrates the complexity of Holt's cultural branding as one must consider the different contexts each case operates in. One can see they all want to be reliable institutions in their local communities – by connecting their branding efforts closely with their clubs and each city's local history and culture. However, when addressing certain contradictions in society, it was found that in the selected cases, not all club's efforts are enough in order to inspire and create change outside of the football community. Although, when the efforts are genuine and driven out of determination, from within the organisation, the consumers can feel that it can make a real difference in the consumers lives, as well as inspire change in society.

Another finding is the identity value the clubs offer their supporters, particularly their local supporters. As the analysis proposes, the clubs' myths that are rooted in the anxieties of society are important to the supporters as it contributes to identity creation immensely. Furthermore, the community surrounding the clubs as well as the identity value they hold are the two key components for creating strong loyalty amongst supporters.

The analysis suggests that the supporters of football clubs have a uniquely strong sense of loyalty toward their respective clubs. However, many supporters' devotion and love for the club have to do with other things than primarily the brand. For each club, it is important that the supporters are proud of the brand, but the reason why consumers support a certain club is rarely due to brand-related efforts. Often, it has to do with geographical reasons or traditions, such as; being born in a specific city or family traditions.

The clubs analysed all engage in *cultural branding*, although, not to the extent required in order to be identified as *iconic brands*. Despite having several key attributes that Holt means are necessary for a brand to become iconic, such as; identity myths, ritual actions, and efforts to meet contradictions in society, we found that they lack influence on a global scale. Meaning, within the football world among supporters, they may be regarded as *cultural icons* due to their success on the football pitch. However, as the analysis implies, the local embeddedness and the

geographical origin of the club are of great importance in regard to the brand, which makes the imprint on society on a broader horizon difficult.

Therefore, this study instead suggests that the studied football clubs rather can be recognised as *identity brands* that offer their supporters substantial *identity value* in their self-creation process.

6.1 Proposal for future research

We suggest that this study can be further developed and deepened, for instance by continuing to focus on these three football clubs, but instead shifting the focus to supporters outside of England. Through such a study, the findings in this study can act as a reference point. It could then be possible to explore whether the results reach a similar conclusion regarding Holt's theories about cultural branding and iconic brands when focusing on a club's international supporters.

It would also be of interest to study other football clubs in other countries as they may differ in terms of culture and could therefore contribute with new findings and conclusions.

Expanding or shifting the focus and perspectives to other sports could further enrich and amplify Holt's theories. By looking at cultural branding efforts among clubs in other sports, one could compare the different consumers.

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