

The Brand Creation of an International Football Club

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze the brand creation process employed by international football clubs in relation to their brand identity.

Methodology - The methodology for this paper utilizes a qualitative research approach with a multiple case study of four different football clubs, in support of a literature review, and with a proposed theoretical brand identity framework applied to the cases. The framework is based on a modified version of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix to suit the identities of modern football clubs.

Findings - Our research findings reveal several critical insights into the brand creation process of international football clubs. We identify core aspects that the clubs make use of to build and align their brand identity. These aspects encompass elements such as heritage, synergies, brand ambassadors and community pride.

Practical Implications - Practitioners can make use of the findings in this study to apply the modified brand identity framework to inspire and boost innovation during the creation or alignment process of a football club's identity. Improvement of the club's brand strategy and an alignment in their brand identity can be used as an advantage by brand managers in the clubs in order to gain new fans and further expand the brand equity.

Original/value - This paper is the first of its kind to make use of a brand identity framework and apply it to the brand creation of an international football club.

Keywords - Brand Creation, Football Club, Club Ownership, Sports Branding, Brand Identity, Corporate Brand Identity Matrix

Paper type - Research paper

Introduction

In the contemporary world of football, clubs are much more than just teams competing on the pitch to win the match; they are also incredibly powerful brands (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2014). Nowadays the brand constitutes the most important asset of a sports organization and most of the time, the strongest brand represents the most successful teams (Bauer, Sauer & Schmitt, 2005). Gladden and Milne (1999), even argue that a club

can generate revenue independently of its team's sporting results and performance, just by utilizing the brand equity. This transformation underlines the duality of football clubs in today's environment as both competitive sporting organizations and strategic brands, with the latter increasingly regarded as the central facet of their existence (Bauer, Sauer & Schmitt, 2005). To conceptualize a football club as a brand, an understanding of simple branding theory needs to be applied within the context of sports. The fundamental aspects of a brand represent a set of

perceptions, emotions and associations held by stakeholders (Keller, 1998). Football clubs are no exception to this illustration as they embody a distinct identity, summarized by strong visual cues such as logos, colors and typography. The visual identity, in combination with the historical narrative, culture and values of a club, shapes the brand's character. Furthermore, the brand of a football club extends beyond the tangible assets and encompasses intangible elements such as fan loyalty, community engagement and club reputation (Yang & Sonmez, 2005). These elements constitute the essence of the brand of a football club. The brand is cultivated through different strategic marketing efforts such as fan experiences and of course, the club's on-field performance making it a holistic brand image. So essentially, the creation and establishment of a football club is the creation of a brand.

The creation of a football club is a complex and multifaceted process, which involves several factors including historical, geographical and economic factors (Garcia, Castro & Santos, 2007). In its simplicity, a football club is usually rooted in the local community, with different individuals coming together to form a team that represents their shared identity and passion for the sport (Walvin, 2014). In many cases, clubs originate from specific geographical areas, where the club name is related to the town or city that it calls home (Mason, 2023). This association becomes a crucial aspect of the branding of the club, as the geographical representation serves as a sense of belonging to local residents (Mason, 2023). When traction is gained and the club starts to establish itself, it begins the formalization process with its structure and governance so that it can compete in organized leagues and tournaments. Moreover, the creation of a football club often involves the need for financial resources through various means. These

funds could be deposited by sponsorship deals, ticket sales, merchandise sales and investments from individuals or organizations.

The motivational factors behind the creation of a new football club are many, with an ever-evolving landscape within the sport and the unique circumstances of each club (Bull & Whittam, 2020). Previous research has been conducted on the subject, but not in relation to the identity of football clubs with the help of a brand identity framework. The focus has previously been on branding strategies to internationalize the club, as well as the perspective of the fans in regard to brand emotion and brand loyalty (Abosag, Roper & Hind, 2012; Richelieu, 2008). Richelieu, Pawlowski & Breuer (2011) concludes that sporting success is enough for building a brand, but not enough for building brand equity, which is why teams need to look at other means than performance to leverage the brand's identity. According to their research, 25 catalyst factors were found that could have an impact on the team's brand identity, with both internal and external aspects.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze the brand creation process employed by international football clubs in relation to their brand identity. This paper aims to answer the following question:

- *Which branding-related factors are significant in shaping the identity of a football club?*

This paper includes four different case examples from football clubs, that vary in the creation process and ownership structure: Club Internacional de Fútbol Miami (*United States*), Wrexham Association Football Club (*England*), RasenBallSport Leipzig (*Germany*) and Al Nassr Football Club (*Saudi Arabia*). With the use of the knowledge gained from the cases and the literature review, this paper

will present a modified version of a framework that will contribute to the subject.

Literature review

Club ownership styles

The ownership structures of professional football clubs can vary significantly between countries, leagues and teams. Looking in more detail at the different ownership styles, four archetypes will be examined further in this paper. These are state-owned clubs, corporate-owned clubs, celebrity-owned clubs, where the celebrity is a sports personality and celebrity-owned clubs where the celebrity is a non-sports personality.

Corporate and Multi-club ownership

Since the growing popularity of football in the late 19th century, professional football in Europe has been subject to massive internationalization and commercialization. Club ownership has been deregulated and many professional clubs have gradually gone from being wholly member-owned to becoming incorporated, some even publicly traded (Rohde & Breuer, 2017). Some countries like Sweden and Germany restrict private investors to minority ownership of a club through the so-called 51% rule (Lindman, 2013; Rohde & Breuer, 2017).

Generally, European football leagues have low entry barriers which make it possible for corporations and entrepreneurs to acquire lower-division teams so that they can bring them up from a lower-ranking league onto the professional stage through performance on the field made possible by investments (Rohde & Breuer, 2017). A large number of corporations and private investors have utilized this for the sake of

profiting from multi-club ownership and enjoying the benefits that come with owning more than one club under the same umbrella. The benefits vary but clubs with the same owner have an advantage in greater bargaining power in sponsorships and partner contracts. Multi-club ownership also gives a possibility of greater brand reach and the ability to benefit from collective resources such as greater ease of sharing knowledge, player mobility between clubs and scouting activities. However, voices of concern have been raised with regard to eventual conflicts of interest that arise with multi-club ownership (Court, 2023).

An important distinction is that European and US sports need to be viewed separately. As opposed to European leagues, US leagues are closed and have what resembles a monopolistic position. Private owners are therefore more or less supposed to be profit maximizers since their teams can not be relegated or promoted (Breuer, 2018). Conversely, in European leagues, wholly or partly member-owned non-profit organizations compete against clubs with commercial motives. Whether these commercial clubs are considered profit, utility or win maximizers differs between leagues and individual clubs (Rohde & Breuer, 2017). Important to note however, is that the Union of European Football Association (UEFA) does not allow clubs owned by the same organization or individual to enter into the same tournament or competition during a season (Rohde & Breuer, 2017). Additionally, Rohde & Breuer (2018) state that clubs owned by private investors have shown less efficiency than member-owned clubs in regards to both sporting and financial efficiency. However, the authors propose that efficiency may not be the primary objective of commercially run clubs because they often have a motive of profit maximization instead.

Celebrity-owned clubs

For long, companies have used celebrities as endorsers for their products and brands (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Yet, celebrity endorsements are costly and run the risk of consumers doubting the authenticity and believability of the message. Instead, some brands offer celebrities a stake in their company, making endorsements authentic and credible in return (Mostashari, 2022). Similarly, in the world of sports, clubs are using celebrity owner endorsers (COEs) to promote the club and its brand. This has proven a successful strategy and generally results in positive and favorable consumer attitudes towards teams and their merchandise. It also benefits the attitudes towards sponsors of teams employing a COE. Important though, is the credibility of the COE in question. However, this does not mean that the celebrity owner needs to be from a sports background to be a credible endorser. Equally as effective can be a celebrity with a different source of fame (Roy & Pansari, 2014).

State-owned clubs

For the past decade, football has come of interest to nations wanting to improve their image. Among these is Qatar owning the French football club Paris Saint Germain (PSG) through the investment company Qatari Sports Investment (QSI) (Chanavat & Desbordes 2017). Another is the English team Newcastle United owned by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF) (Taylor, 2023). The objective of QSI is to improve the brand equity of Qatar with the help of international sports with one major pillar being the acquisition of international sports clubs (Chanavat & Desbordes 2017). Nations engage in country branding in order to improve their national image and hence attract tourism, investment and skilled workforce (Dinnie, 2022). Contrarily, the effect of brand

origin can have an impact on how consumers regard the brand depending on where they perceive that the brand originates from. Noteworthy is that consumers' perceptions are what matters here and even if they are fully aware of where the brand has its origins, they can perceive it to originate from elsewhere (Dinnie, 2004).

Sports Branding

Traditionally, branding consists of three different types of concepts; product branding, personal branding and corporate branding. During the last decade, sports teams, especially football clubs, have become more brand-oriented. Generally, branding in sports is seen as a method of branding other consumer and industrial products through the use of sports promotions (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2014). However, there is also the aspect regarding the branding of sports products and services to consumers of sport, where the club is seen as the product (Chanavat, Desbordes & Lorgnier, 2017). In the case of sports, the focus lies on the supporters who act as consumers of the brand and where a bond between club and supporter is created. The motive for sports branding is about having the club in the center and promoting the organization as the brand (Hill, 2006). This approach transforms the most publicized and spectacularized clubs into businesses with characteristics of conventional companies.

Brand Identity

According to Kapferer (2012), brand identity is one of the two tools that is used for brand management, where it is used for "*specifying the facets of brands' uniqueness and value.*". Kapferer (2012) means that brand identity is about "*what helps an organization feel that it truly exists and that it is a coherent and unique*

being, with a history and a place of its own, different from others.”. Likewise, Melin (2002, p.118) defines brand identity as “...what the brand stands for, what gives it meaning and what makes it unique.” With the establishment of the very influential Brand Identity Prism by Kapferer (2012), he changes the perspective of the term by switching focus from an external view of the brand, more known as the brand image, to an internal view of the brand. People may argue that brand image is the concept that should be used to showcase the core of a brand. However, Kapferer (2012) means that the difference between brand identity and brand image lies in the side of who is sending the message. The identity is on the sender’s side and its purpose is to specify the brand’s meaning, aim and self-image (Kapferer, 2012). In relation to that, Kapferer points to a view where the image could be described as both the result and interpretation thereof, which is located on the receiver’s side of the message.

Brand identity as a concept is rather new, which is showcased in its absence in traditional marketing theory books such as Aaker’s (1991) book on brand equity and its mere mention in Keller’s (1998) textbook (Kapferer, 2012). However, Kapferer (2012), means that graphical manuals and frameworks are easy to locate nowadays but it is still rare to stumble upon explicit definitions of the brand identity concept. Nonetheless, Aaker (2012), would later on start to mint the concept of brand identity and describe it as a “set of brand associations that the firm aspires to create or maintain, an aspirational external brand image.”

Corporate Brand Identity Matrix

To ease the understanding of a brand's identity, several different approaches have been developed. As mentioned earlier, the

Brand Identity Prism by Kapferer (2012) is one of them, while *The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix, (CBIM)* by Greyser and Urde (2019) is another. The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix is a toolkit that provides a framework to help companies define their brand and come up with a clear corporate brand identity (Greyser and Urde, 2019). Therefore, the focus lies on the corporate side of a brand instead of on the product brand, which is showcased by Greyser and Urde (2019, p.4), who explain that “*Companies are extremely good at defining their product brands. Customers, employees, and other stakeholders know exactly what an iPhone is and means. But organizations are often less sure-footed when it comes to the corporate brand.*”. This opens up the analysis of each aspect of an organization whilst keeping the brand essence and core values at the heart of the matrix, while also having the origin inside the organization with an internal focus (Greyser and Urde, 2019). The CBIM framework consists of a 3x3 matrix with three horizontal categories or layers, depending on their nature. Connected to each box in the CBIM is an element related to the identity of the organization, with a question attached to each of the elements (Greyser & Urde, 2019).

The *internal elements* form the foundation of the identity and consist of the firm’s mission and vision, culture and competencies. *Mission* is about what engages the organization and surrounds the reason it exists, while vision refers to the direction and inspiration for the organization and where it aspires to be. *Culture* defines the firm's behavior and work ethic and what attitudes exist inside the organization. *Competences* are defined as the firm’s distinctive capabilities which give the firm its competitive advantages (Urde, 2013).

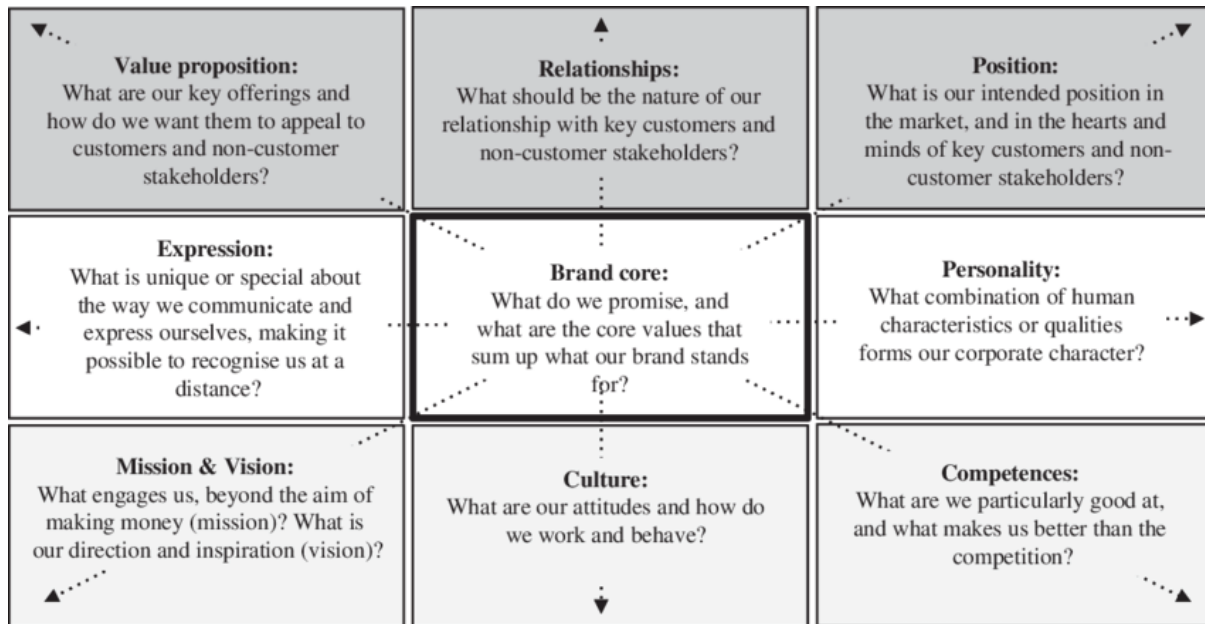


Figure 1: The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Urde, 2013)

The *external elements* relate to how the company wants to be perceived by customers and other external stakeholders by examining the value proposition, relationships, and positioning (Greyser and Urde, 2019). *Value proposition* is the reasonings that are delivered to stakeholders, while *relationship* relates to the nature of the external relationships outside the company. *Position* is the intended external position in the hearts and minds of customers and other stakeholders.

The *internal-external* elements are the factors that bridge and link together the other two layers. These consist of the organization's expression, personality and also the brand core, in the center, which is the essence of the brand identity (Greyser and Urde, 2019). *Expression* is about the distinctiveness of the organization's communication and about how it can be recognized at a distance. *Personality* refers to the characteristics that a corporate character would receive if it were a human being. *Brand core* shapes all other elements of the matrix, and is in turn echoed. It sums up the brand's promise and

the core values that the brand stands for (Greyser and Urde, 2019).

In conclusion, the CBIM allows managers to reveal if their corporate brand identity is coherent and aligned, and if not, shows where misalignments and opportunities lie. The clearer and more logical the narrative within the matrix is, the stronger the corporate brand identity will be (Greyser and Urde, 2019).

Methodology

In this paper, a qualitative research strategy has been utilized to gain a deeper understanding of the brand-creation process employed by international football clubs. The chosen research design is applied for a more comprehensive insight into the topic and to gain a deeper and more subjective understanding of the phenomenon. The research is based on an extensive literature review, which enlightens the relevant theories and models approached by different researchers. Thereafter, the theory is used as a point of departure for the case study.

To achieve the research objective, a multiple case study is applied. The study

ensures a diverse and comprehensive exploration of the brand creation process, by focusing on four different international football clubs that have undergone alterations in the club's ownership structure in recent times. This makes them relevant for the purpose of the study since it gives room for a reset of the brand creation process. The four case studies that are analyzed are *Inter Miami*, a club trying to establish itself from scratch, *Wrexham AFC*, a newly promoted club in the English fourth division with significant heritage, *RB Leipzig*, a current German powerhouse club owned by Red Bull, and *Al Nassr*, a Saudi Arabian state-owned club recognized from buying ex superstars from European football, such as Cristiano Ronaldo. The selected football clubs represent a range of geographical locations, club sizes and ownership structures to provide a holistic view of the subject. Based on the literature review and the chosen Corporate Brand Identity Matrix, the application of the factors related to each of the clubs' brand identity will be implemented on the matrix, to examine the relationship between a football club's brand creation and its brand identity.

The case study began with an introduction to the cases, with a following description of each one of them in an effort to gain an understanding of the respective football clubs. Secondly, the brand identity of each case was investigated. The use of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix developed by Urde (2013), which focuses on corporate brands, rather than product brands, makes this framework suited for the purpose of this research. Furthermore, in line with Urde's framework, the corporate brand identities for the four cases were established based on secondary research data of each respective club. Information was gathered from the clubs' websites, social media and newspaper articles to be able to fill out the matrix. Finally, based on the collected identity

factors, a modified corporate brand identity matrix was constructed. The modified matrix, which is based on the analyzed clubs and their identities, may act as a guiding tool for managers wanting deeper knowledge in the brand creation process of a football club. Additionally, it will be helpful for club managers to align their existing identities and further develop their existing clubs' brands.

Analysis

Case Introduction

As opposed to traditional football clubs with over a century of history to look back at, countries, corporations and entrepreneurs have tried to tap into the business of football club ownership both historically and in recent years. The methods of doing so vary significantly and in this paper, we will focus on four cases of football clubs and their brand management with the aim of examining the implications and effects on the brand identity of a club. The first case is that of Club Internacional de Fútbol Miami (Inter Miami), a modern example of starting a new club from scratch in a city without any prior footballing heritage (Brand Finance, 2023). The second case is Welsh club Wrexham AFC, the third oldest football club in the world (Wrexham AFC, 2023a). In 2020 it was bought by American corporation RR McReynolds Company, LLC which is in turn owned by Hollywood actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, who now are the faces of the club (BBC Sport, 2020). The third case is German football club RB Leipzig which until 2009 was named SSV Markanstädt and played in the fifth tier of German football when they were acquired by Red Bull, an acquisition which was met with protests from local supporters (Pittelkow & Schottner, 2009). The fourth case is that of the Saudi Arabian club Al Nassr, one of four Saudi clubs that was announced in

June to become transformed into companies under new ownership by the Saudi Arabian state's Public Investment Fund (PIF), the other clubs being Al Hilal, Al Ittihad and Al Ahli (Public Investment Fund, 2023).

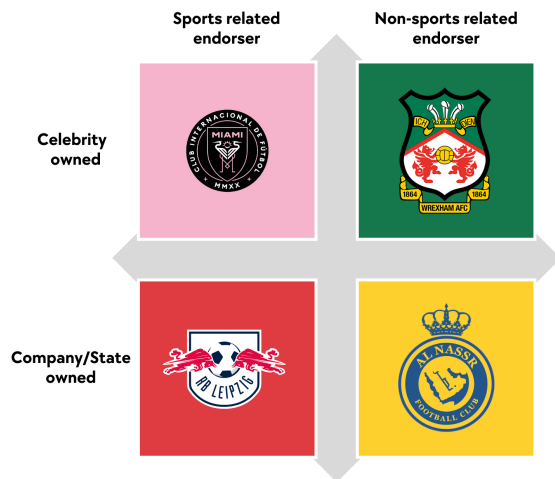


Table 1: Ownership types of clubs in the case analysis.

Inter Miami

A modern example of managing a newly created football club brand can be found in the case of the US football club Inter Miami. The club was founded in 2018 and started playing in 2020 (Inter Miami, 2023a). It is co-owned by Jorge and Jose Mas and the English former football player David Beckham (Inter Miami, 2023b) who owns a 10 % stake in the club (Quaile, 2023). The process started in 2007 when Beckham transferred from Real Madrid to Major League Soccer team LA Galaxy, where a clause in the contract stated that he would later receive the rights to buy an MLS expansion team for \$25m (Keith, 2020). Since the introduction of Inter Miami, it has been widely known of Beckham's involvement and he has become a valuable endorser and spokesperson for the brand. Due to his status in the world of football, he has created international awareness for the club and improved its brand image

significantly. Furthermore, Beckham is a prime example of a celebrity owner endorser in the world of football, where his involvement in the brand gives his endorsements and ambassadorship credibility. The signing of world-class player and recent World Cup winner Lionel Messi in 2023, was also expected to have another big impact on the growth of the club's brand. Inter Miami's club worth is estimated to double over the next year, much thanks to the signing of Messi, making the "Messi effect" (Golden, 2023) comparable to that of Beckham upon his arrival to the MLS in 2007 (Brownlee & Lorgnier, 2017). The signing of Messi has also had a profound impact on fan attendance (Peterson, 2023), which further demonstrates the growth the two have had on the club. Furthermore, Inter Miami is keen on focusing on the Hispanic target group that resides in southern Florida. Especially since the official fan group is referred to as "La Familia" (Inter Miami, 2023c), as well as their choice to use the Spanish term "fútbol" for soccer all across their platforms (Inter Miami, 2023d), which further underscores their commitment to attracting the demographics of Miami's Spanish-speaking football enthusiasts.

Wrexham A.F.C.

While competing in England's Football League Two, the fourth tier of the English football league system, Wrexham AFC should not garner international recognition, according to the norms of professional football. Celebrating its 159th year of existence as a club, Wrexham ranks as the world's third oldest professional football club in existence. The turning point in the club's long-lasting history occurred in 2020 when actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney acquired the club for £2 million (BBC Sport, 2020). This switch of ownership has marked a new era and a significant shift in the

trajectory of the club, causing a boost in fan engagement, sporting success and internationalization of the club (Wrexham AFC, 2023b). In order to complete the takeover of the previously member-owned Wrexham AFC, 98 % of the supporters voted in favor of the takeover (BBC Sport, 2020). Thus, fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility between the new Hollywood stars turned club owners and supporters. Moreover, much of the behind-the-scenes and the club's journey after the owner transition were captured in a documentary that was published on streaming service Disney+ which went viral in the football community (Nicholson, 2022; Grey, 2023). This further increased the presence of the recently internationally acknowledged Welsh club. Remarkably, thanks to the rejuvenation of the club and the new financial muscles, Wrexham ascended from the bottom of the 5th league to get promoted in just three seasons. This remarkable feat was made possible thanks to synergies of enthusiastic ownership, community pride and club loyalty.

RB Leipzig

In contrast to Wrexham, RB Leipzig emerges as the most prominent club in this case study, performance-wise. This distinction arises from their consistent presence at the top of the highest German football division, the Bundesliga, where RB Leipzig placed top four for six of the last seven seasons. Their regular participation in the UEFA Champions League, the premier European championship also showcases their prominence, where a semifinal run was the culmination of their success during their 2020 campaign. However, the trajectory of RB Leipzig was far from conventional, and within just seven years they ascended from the German fifth-tier division to the Bundesliga. The catalyst for this extraordinary growth was the acquisition

of the club by the gigantic energy drink company Red Bull in 2009 (Bundesliga, 2022). RB Leipzig is now considered to have the 19th highest brand value among football clubs worldwide, making it the highest-valued club within Red Bull's multi-club ownership strategy (Brand Finance, 2023). Ever since the change of ownership, RB Leipzig has made use of their parent company in their communication and marketing, as well as by making use of synergies and other benefits caused by Red Bull's multi-club ownership (Keech, 2021). Upon the involvement of a private corporation in a football club, disagreement among the fans was to be followed (Pittelkow & Schottner, 2009). Over time, the majority of supporters now offer backing to the club, thanks to its open-mindedness and youthfulness, in combination with great sporting success (Bate, 2022).

Al Nassr FC

As the fourth category of football club brand creation, Al Nassr underwent a significant change of ownership when it was officially acquired in 2023 by the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia (PIF), an organization with strong ties to the Saudi royal family (Robarts, 2023). Notably, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman serves as chairman of the organization (PIF, 2023). This can be considered a controversial appointment since bin Salman generally is considered to be associated with the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi (Carlén, 2021; Slow & Davies, 2022). This type of state ownership presents a rather unique scenario, as the PIF holds majority stakes in three additional clubs within the Saudi league. It can also be seen as an additional example of a multi-club ownership structure. This quartet of clubs has received international attention due to their contract offerings, with staggering wages offered to world-class players to join the

up-and-coming league. The most remarkable signing was when 37-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo agreed on a two-and-a-half-year contract to join Al Nassr in late 2022 (Romano, 2022). This rather new phenomenon captured considerable interest among many and ignited debates internationally. Data shows that the signings of Ronaldo and other star players spiked the interest for Al Nassr and Saudi football internationally, with significant growth in fan engagement and broadcasting revenues (Abueish, 2023). The extravagant investments and acquisitions of the clubs and players have raised questions about the concept of sportswashing (Michaelson, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023; Berman, 2023). In this practice, entities use sports to enhance their public image or deflect from other, more controversial activities (Skey, 2023).

Corporate Brand Identity Matrix

To throw more light on the process of brand creation of an international football club, the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix can be applied. Each of the four clubs that make out the cases above is analyzed and the most significant attributes are used to form a modified matrix.

In regards to the external aspects of the matrix, as for the *value proposition*, the four cases of clubs follow different approaches to appeal to their stakeholders. Inter Miami's recent introduction to the US football scene can be interpreted as the club aiming to provide a better quality of football entertainment for football enthusiasts in southern Florida. The apparent improvement in the team's qualities due to signing Messi further demonstrates this. It is also clear that this goes for Wrexham AFC as they have rejuvenated the brand. The influx of capital and marketing possibilities that come with the new owners also make it

possible for them to, similar to Inter Miami, offer a higher quality of football and entertainment to their fans than before. This is proven by the club's hard promises of strong financial support to the team manager and renovating the club's facilities. Other promises include utilizing the club for the good of the community and always maintaining its residence in the city of Wrexham (Wrexham AFC, 2023c). The value proposition of RB Leipzig is about showcasing attractive football and atmosphere in a family-friendly environment (RB Leipzig, 2023). Similar to previous clubs, the quality of football displayed remains central. The same goes for Al Nassr who, through multiple signings of world-class players, i.e. Cristiano Ronaldo, are able to encourage the improvement of football quality and attractiveness in Saudi Arabia.

As for *relationships*, Inter Miami has, as the sole MLS team in Miami, already established relationships with its fans, its local community and other stakeholders through the development of several supporter groups and referring to fans as "*La Familia*" (Inter Miami, 2023c). The relationship aspect of Wrexham could be characterized by respect and continuous dialogue, both with its fans and with the local community as a whole, demonstrated by the overwhelming support from fans for the acquisition of the club. Endorsements are wholesome and made credible by the fact that the endorsers are personally invested in the club which reinforces the sense of togetherness. Concerning RB Leipzig, relationships with external stakeholders are shared with Red Bull to a great extent, and the club can be viewed as one of many representatives of the mother brand. Furthermore, the relationships with supporters have grown and stabilized since the acquisition of the former fifth-division club (Bate, 2022), which can be due to the club's performances on the pitch. Standing out from the rest, Al Nassr has one of its most important stakeholder relationships

in the form of the Saudi state, through its ownership by the Saudi investment fund PIF. However, having signed prominent players such as Ronaldo, the club's international fanbase has grown significantly (Abueish, 2023).

From the *position* aspect, Inter Miami holds a position as the only provider of elite football in Miami, a unique position created by the way US professional football is governed. However, one can also view the club as a pioneer due to the prior inexistence of MLS football in Miami. The position of Wrexham can be considered as that of a club with a deep Welsh and British footballing heritage having lost its competitive qualities throughout the past decades. However, the rejuvenation brings back ambitions of competitiveness and the new owners have goals of getting the club promoted all the way to the top (Wrexham AFC, 2023c). Concerning RB Leipzig, the acquisition by Red Bull, switched the desired position of the club into a top contender in European football, which has now become a reality. Additionally, Al Nassr holds a position as a top team in Saudi, largely attributed to the substantial financial investments made by PIF. Additionally, the club's success has led to it being utilized as an alleged sportswashing tool for the country of Saudi Arabia, aimed at cleansing controversies on a geopolitical level and enhancing the nation's brand image internationally (Michaelson, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023; Berman, 2023).

Moving to the combined external and internal aspects of the CBIM, the *expressions* utilized by the examined clubs are extensive in clear and diverse ways. In the case of Inter Miami, the incorporation of the distinct pink color in all of their communication, through their logo, team attire and fan merchandise, make it a clear connotation of the club's identity. Moreover, the club leverages co-owner

David Beckham as an ambassador on its behalf to express themselves through his persona. Similar to what can be seen in the case of Wrexham. In connection to Miami's Hispanic demographics, the use of Spanish is a common feature seen in Inter Miami's communications, serving as a direct means of engagement with the Spanish-speaking populace of the city. On the other hand, Wrexham expresses their club through a well-received documentary streaming on Disney+. Within the documentary, the club's identity prominently emerges, portraying it as authentically Welsh but also humoristic and passionate through the club's celebrity owners. Through the communications of RB Leipzig, it is obvious to observers that the club is an extension of its mother brand. The distinct Red Bull logo is visible throughout their communications, clearly featured in the club's crest and even the stadium name. As for Al Nassr, it can be argued that the club's expression solely relies on the recently signed prominent players in the team. Coming from more internationally established clubs in European football these act as strong ambassadors not only for the club but also for the state of Saudi Arabia, further following the club's and the country's strategy of internationalizing Saudi football.

In the heart of the matrix, the *brand core* resides. Inter Miami demonstrates a brand promise of being multinational by bringing internationally recognized footballers to the city. However, they also cater to their local community by creating a club for the city's football enthusiasts to embrace. Similarly, Wrexham can be seen as committing its brand to becoming a source of community pride by blending its rich heritage with its rejuvenated identity and aiming for the top under its new ownership. Conversely, RB Leipzig underscores a commitment to progressive and modern football driven by youth and innovation, something which has led to the

club's recent years of relative success. Similar to Inter Miami, Al Nassr can be seen as bringing renowned footballers into the emerging Saudi Pro League which strengthens the country's footballing reputation and sets them on the path of becoming an internationally recognized footballing nation.

Analyzing the *personality* aspect of the clubs, Inter Miami can benefit from the personas of Messi, a recent World Cup winner, and Beckham becoming connected to the brand. However, the club can also be characterized as having a young, adventurous and Latin spirit, which resonates from its position as a pioneer and continuous Spanish-clinging communication. Wrexham is also largely characterized by its owners, Reynolds and McElhenney. Known to many as actors, they now act as an important human factor in staying loyal to the fans and watching over the club. On the other hand, RB Leipzig can be seen as mainly focusing on the qualities and competitiveness of the team. Their character is distinguished by being modern, youthful, energetic and hard-working (RB Leipzig, 2023). As for Al Nassr, the Saudi Arabian financial support and the competitive character coming from its recent player signings and following rise to international recognition are aspects that display the club's personality.

For the internal aspects of the matrix and concerning *mission and vision*, Inter Miami describes its long-term vision and motto to "*Be The Reference of Fútbol in North America*" and "*And Harness the Power of Fútbol To Do Good*" (Inter Miami, 2023d). For its mission, the club is about creating a passion for soccer in their city (Inter Miami, 2023a). Wrexham's owners express the long-term goals of reaching the top division of football in England and Wales, the Premier League. They further emphasize wanting this journey to benefit the local community

(Wrexham AFC, 2023c). The philosophy of RB Leipzig stands for attractive, dynamic football, and at the same time inspiring individuals to reach their fullest potential (RB Leipzig, 2023). Considering Al Nassr, it is clear that the club works toward the internationalization of football in the region, as well as for enhancing the image of Saudi Arabia (Berman, 2023). From a bigger perspective, it is reasonable to argue that it aligns with Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030*, a strategy by the government to diversify its economy (Vision 2030, 2023).

Regarding the *culture* aspect, Inter Miami states: "*...our club is fueled by passion, brings people together, is local & international.*" (Inter Miami, 2023d). This can be seen as implying the integration of Miami's various demographics and also gaining an international presence. Wrexham also indicates that its culture is about the local spirit, enthusiasm for the community, and respect for the supporters. Furthermore, the tone of the club is often humorous, bringing a younger, more modern type of communication that demonstrates the culture within the club. RB Leipzig emphasizes an open-minded, dynamic and innovative spirit, with a young and modern touch (RB Leipzig, 2023). The young and modern culture can also be interpreted through the club's mother brand Red Bull which is often connected with a youthful spirit. Furthermore, Al Nassr's culture can be found in the strive to become more international and combine values from Saudi Arabia with those of Western societies. In signing prominent players the club might be able to integrate the two.

In regards to the *competence* aspect, Inter Miami is blessed with having both Beckham and Messi in the club, benefiting from their respective brand images and having one as a world-famous endorser for the brand. Beckham can be seen as representing the business side of the club

while Messi is the front figure for the club's sporting prowess. Concerning Wrexham, they also benefit from famous owners acting as endorsers, even though they come from a background not related to sports. The rich history and heritage is also a hard-to-imitate competence they utilize in their brand-building process. For RB Leipzig, being backed by its mother brand and through them connected to multiple other Red Bull clubs, synergy-creation from this multi-club ownership is able to assist them in gaining success. Similarly, Al Nassr is included in a multi-club network in accordance with PIF's stake in the club. Therefore, they could also benefit from synergies such as resource-sharing and additional advantages caused by state ownership.

managing the brand identity of an international football club in today's modern society has become more and more complex, much due to the amount of club ownership structures that exist. Furthermore, the focus on brand creation of the clubs in the football industry has increased in relevance during the last years and the amount of possible aspects that could be incorporated into a club's identity are many. Therefore, an adaptation of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix by Urde (2013) is used to illustrate positive takeaways of the brand creation process of a football club lacking an established brand identity or possessing a relatively weak one. The modified CBIM is presented in the Football Club Identity Matrix (Fig. 2).

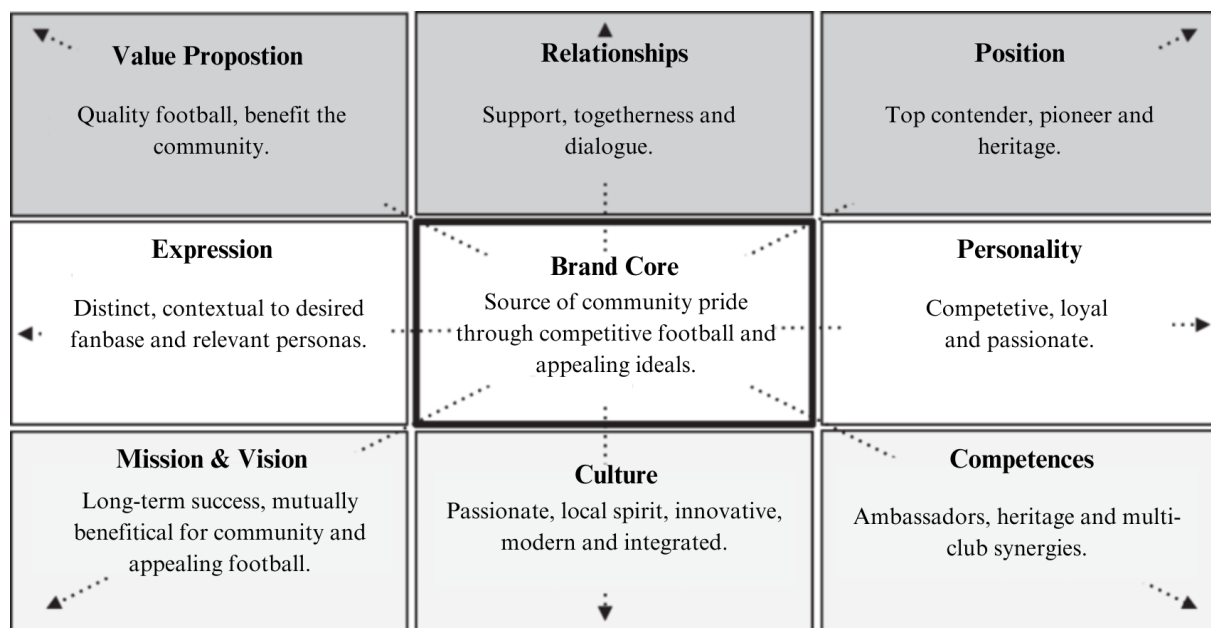


Figure 2: Football Club Identity Matrix, based on the CBIM by Urde, (2013).

Discussion

Through the analysis, it becomes clear that the four cases of different professional football clubs have several similarities, which in this section will be mapped into the CBIM. However, there are also several contrasts between the clubs. Creating and

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to discuss and examine the brand creation process of an international football club in relation to its brand identity. This was done with the help of four case studies, applied to the CBIM, in order to conclude important takeaways that could be used when creating or aligning the brand identity of a football club. The analysis has highlighted

the importance of understanding the unique context of each football club when creating a brand identity. While there are some commonalities between successful football clubs, each club is unique in many ways, and brand managers need to tailor their brand strategy accordingly. Therefore, a modified framework (*Fig. 2*), based on the CBIM developed by Urde (2013), was introduced so that key takeaways and significant similarities from the studied clubs could be visually applied for easier understanding. In conclusion, there is no such thing as the best or the ideal aspect; it depends on a variety of factors, therefore cautiousness should be taken into account.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

While prior research has addressed the subject of football club branding, this paper places a specific emphasis on the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM). Furthermore, the majority of the field's theoretical focus is placed on sports marketing by football clubs, and not as much on the marketing of the club itself, performed by branding activities. This paper provides theoretical implications by reshaping an existing brand identity matrix, thereby showing the potential possibilities for the integration of existing brand management frameworks into the context of sports entities. A key theoretical contribution of this study is the systematizing and synthesizing of the prior research within the subject, formulation and modification of a theoretical framework, allowing operationalization of a football club's brand identity.

Managerial Implications

As for the managerial implications, practitioners can make use of the findings

in this paper by utilizing the Football Club Identity Matrix (*Fig. 2*) as a strategic tool to stimulate inspiration and innovation in the process of brand identity creation. Hence, the matrix provides a valuable resource, albeit the suitability of these aspects may vary according to each individual club's circumstances. Furthermore, this paper can be used as a reference point for brand managers to establish a strong and coherent brand identity for their respective clubs, with the goal of increasing the club's brand equity.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research paper that make further research necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the brand identity process in relation to the creation of football club brands. With regard to that, this paper is based upon the case of four different football clubs within separate leagues, countries and with incomparable resources, the findings could not be generalized to all clubs. However, having a case-based approach allowed the opportunity to identify and analyze similarities between them. Furthermore, all clubs are unique in many ways, with different cultures involved and various objectives and visions to be reached, which might make the brand identity creation process dissimilar. Consequently, transcending these findings to other contexts should be done with caution.

Future Research

Further similar research should therefore be conducted with more extensive empirical material, through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to increase the generalizability and reliability. In-depth interviews with brand managers who work with brand identity management in football clubs would be beneficial. Applying an alternative framework, such

as the Brand Identity Prism could put a new perspective of identity within the clubs and thus make the conclusion different. Furthermore, research with focus groups or surveys could also be conducted to examine if there are differences in perceptions of football clubs' brand identity and gain knowledge about the fans' perspective.

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