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**Turning Consumers into Supporters
Understanding Loyalty Through Football Teams**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to examine the fans' perspective of sport team loyalty and the reasons why brand loyalty is extremely high within sports.

Methodology: This paper uses a qualitative research method with both primary data and secondary data. The literature review with previous research was collected by secondary data whereas the primary data was collected by six semi-structured interviews in order to study the fans' perspective.

Findings: The findings of this paper show that brand community, brand heritage, and brand identity were all vital aspects of the strong loyalty displayed towards football teams. Furthermore, a fourth aspect was identified which was referred to as brand internalisation and was defined as the sway the brand holds over the fan, or consumer, in everyday life. Brand internalisation was also shown to be of great importance for the strong loyalty amongst football fans.

Original/value: The originality of the paper is the focus on understanding the drivers behind the supporter's strong loyalty. Previous research within sports branding have focused more on brand equity and brand extensions whereas this paper takes a new perspective from the supporters and their motivation for the strong loyalty towards sport teams.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, Brand community, Brand heritage, Brand identity, Brand internalisation, Sports branding

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction and Research aim

The year is 1950. The Swedish national football team is gearing up to participate in the grandest competition of them all; the World Cup. Ahead of the tournament, the Swedish football federation has adopted a new strategic direction. The professionals - players that are good enough to make a living out of playing football - are no longer allowed to represent the national team. The official stance is that football is solely a joyful activity and any attempt to monetise the sport needs to be annihilated. Football should not be financially driven. Fast forward 50 years and it is clear that the sport has gone in the diametrically opposed direction. Football, as well as sports in general, has experienced its own industrial revolution and the biggest teams today are operated similarly to mid-sized multinational enterprises. According to Deloitte (2023) Manchester City topped the chart with a revenue of 731 million euros last year, and the top 20 teams have together accumulated a total revenue of 9.2 billion euros over the same period. Combine these numbers with the fact that many clubs strategically target new markets and schedule pre-season tours in these regions in order to reach new consumers and it becomes unviable to not consider football teams as corporations as well.

Just like any other enterprise, football teams have their own brand. According to Statista (2023) Manchester City once again sits at the top of the table with an estimated brand value of 1.51 billion euros, with Real Madrid a close second with 1.46 billion euros. However, one distinction argued by Chadwick and Holt (2006) is that the consumers, or fans, of sport teams do not act in the same rational, economic manner as customers in sectors like fast moving consumer goods or retail. This irrationality is fostered by the extremely close relationship the fan has with their club (Jones, 1997). These close relationships forge a rock-solid

loyalty towards the club in question and acts similarly to a “reputational reservoir”, which is a concept Greyser (2009) argues to be crucial for corporate brands in times of crisis. There are numerous examples of football teams underperforming and being in a state of crisis. In 2009, English powerhouse Newcastle United were relegated to the second division having played continuously in the Premier League since its conception in 1992. This was a huge disappointment and the whole community was in a state of shock, yet when the new season started the tickets were once again sold out. Similarly, Manchester United, a team that made it a habit to win with 13 league titles between 1992-2013, have not been close to achieving the same success during the last 10 years. Still, Manchester United is one of the biggest clubs in the world in terms of fans, recognition, and revenue.

While Greyser (2009) argues that the reputational reservoir is built up of actions carried out over time and that it is crucial in times of crisis to dampen the following damage, it can be perceived that football teams’ reservoirs are bottomless. No matter the disappointment, the fans seem to keep coming back to consume match tickets, merchandise and other material produced by the club. What are the key components of this loyalty towards a football team, and can corporations try to replicate and leverage these building blocks to boost loyalty towards their own brands?

This article sets out to examine the above in an attempt to find insights of sport team loyalty that can be useful for strategic brand management in terms of strengthening brand loyalty. The bulk of the academic research within sports branding has been directed towards brand equity (e.g. Bauer et al. 2005; Gladden et al. 1998; Ross, 2006) and Brand extensions (e.g. Aposolopoulou, 2002; Chadwick & Clowes, 1998) but little focus has been placed on the supporter motivation and drivers behind this strong loyalty. The

paper commences with an overview of existing research within this sports branding field, which identifies a set of key themes that are further examined with a literature review from a corporate branding perspective. This is followed by empirical findings from a set of semi-structured interviews with acknowledged football club supporters. Subsequently, an attempt to construct a tentative framework for sports brand loyalty is made, and the possibility of the findings being leveraged by conventional corporate brands is discussed.

Literature review

Sports branding with the supporter at the centre

Examining the existing research regarding sports branding with a fan-centred view, a few contrasts compared to the behaviour of “regular” consumers arise. First of all, the idea of the football club as a brand would likely be rejected, or disliked, by supporters (Chadwick & Beech, 2007). Underwood et al. (2001) and Conn (1998) argue that there is a high degree of identification with the respective teams from the supporters, and that this close bond creates a sensitivity for over-commercialisation and the idea of the club as a corporate entity. This close bond between supporter and club is argued to be heavily influenced by family history(heritage), identity and self-image. Furthermore, Chadwick and Beech (2007) argue that this creates an irrational consumption. If a brand continuously breaks its promise and fails to live up to expectations, the rational action would be to cease consumption, however in sports this is seldom the case. Fisher and Wakefield (1998) concluded that fan motivation and loyalty is seemingly unrelated to club performance. In addition, the fans frequently transform from consumers to “prosumers” and are themselves involved in the product through the creation of atmosphere

inside the stadium, as well as the all-encompassing community around the club (Cherubini, 2006). The emphasis on community is also mentioned by Underwood et al. (2001) who argue that sports create an uncommon sense of community with shared symbols, a collective identity as well as a motive for solidarity. This high degree of consumer commitment and emotional involvement is argued by Sutton et al. (1997) to be a great foundation for building brands with a strong relationship to the consumers.

The above concise review of the literature on the fan perspective of sports branding has surfaced a few key elements; identity, heritage, and community. In order to facilitate the attempt of transferring insights of brand loyalty from sports branding to more conventional corporate branding, research on the three key elements from a non-sport perspective will also be summarised and scrutinised below.

Brand loyalty, brand community & brand love

Kapferer (2012) raises that brand loyalty trumps any other loyalty like price or bargain loyalty, and that managers should put emphasis on developing loyalty towards the brand. Kapferer (2012) concisely explains that it is not necessary for a brand to have the best product or service in order to build loyalty - the best is not always what is sought after by the market. It could be that the majority of customers prefer a lower performance for a cheaper price, but the fact remains that the product or service must be good enough for the customer to be willing to make repeat purchases or refer it to someone else, otherwise, brand loyalty will be non-existent. The importance of brand loyalty is also underlined by McAlexander et al. (2002) who explain that the concept has been sought after by marketers like a holy grail, but that there has been a limited understanding of the origins of loyalty and how to practically

cultivate it. In an attempt to better understand loyalty, McAlexander et al. (2002) studied loyal customers and found that together with marketers of brands they forge and strengthen a variety of different relationships. There is a collaboration between consumers and brands which results in the building of communities. While brand community has been envisioned as a triadic model with customer-customer-brand as building blocks (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), McAlexander et al. (2002) view brand community instead as a customer-centric model where the focal customer is in the centre surrounded by the brand, the product, other customers, and marketers. The idea here is that all of these blocks affect each other and together form the community. Furthermore, the authors found that marketers can help strengthen these brand communities by proactively providing contexts for these relationships to develop. The more opportunities for customers to be integrated into the brand community, the higher the development of loyalty towards the brand. Community-integrated customers are argued to bring many advantages; they serve as brand missionaries, they are less prone to reacting negatively to product failures, they are less likely to switch to another higher performing brand, they provide feedback, and they can be emotionally invested in the success and welfare of the company (McAlexander et al. 2002).

Being emotionally invested in a brand to the extent of love is a concept discussed by Ahuvia et al. (2012). In their article they develop a conceptualisation of brand love containing seven clear elements: (1) passion-driven behaviours which mirror strong desires to use and invest resources into the brand, and a history of doing so; (2) self-brand integration and the brand's ability to connect to consumers' identities as well as life's deeper meaning with the purpose of providing intrinsic rewards; (3) a positive emotional connection that is wider and more

extensive than solely happiness, including a feeling of positive attachment as well as a sense of rightness; (4) predicted separation anxiety and distress if the brand were to disappear; (5) a long-term relationship with the anticipation of extensive future use and commitment; (6) a positive attitude valence; and (7) a high certainty and confidence in the held attitudes. Furthermore, Ahuvia et al. (2012) argue that these aspects all represent pathways for managers to build brand love. Chen et al. (2020) mean that brand love can be measured by the variables "brand commitment", "brand closeness", and "brand enthusiasm" and they continue to suggest that the customer-brand relationship will change from merely satisfaction into love when the customer considers the brand a manifestation of their self-identification, an argument that is also brought forward by Unal and Aydin (2013). This focus on self-identification aligns with the self-brand integration element brought forward by Ahuvia et al. (2012).

Brand Heritage

Kapferer (2002) argues that certain brands can forge very strong connections with consumers due to a passing down through generations. An example can be if the parents frequently bought from a specific brand and carried on this tradition to the coming generation, the result is a deep-rooted bond. Balmer, Greyser and Urde (2007) depart from a similar notion and argue the importance and potential value for a brand to leverage its history and heritage. They make a distinction between a heritage brand and a brand with a heritage and argue that the former is a brand with a positioning and value proposition based on its heritage, while the latter has not chosen to emphasise the heritage as a key component of its identity. Balmer, Greyser and Urde (2007) further mention that there is no clash between using and emphasising heritage while at the same time staying updated and modern in terms of technology and trends, and that there are many

advantageous points that can come from leveraging the brand's heritage. It can for instance provide a basis for clear positioning which can generate a competitive advantage through retaining or attracting customers who consider heritage to be of importance. It can also add to the authenticity and credibility of the brand in the eyes of the consumer, as well as a sense of pride and commitment to be a part of a brand bigger than oneself (Balmer, Greyser & Urde, 2007).

Brand Identity

According to Kapferer (2012) identity is a comparatively new concept in brand management literature. Going from unmentioned during the 1990's to the importance it holds today, it is fair to say that brand identity has rapidly received a paramount position in branding research. The vision, key beliefs, and core values of a brand is what is referred to as its identity and it is considered an important aspect of creating vibrant brands that breed loyalty (Kapferer, 2012). Brand identity can also draw upon aspects like origin, roots and heritage - everything that makes the brand what it is. Furthermore, Kapferer (2012) argues that brand identity has six facets and that these can be captured and illustrated via the brand identity prism, a model with six points: physique, personality, relationship, culture, reflection, and self-image. (1) Physique refers to the salient physical specifics and qualities of a brand. Together with the personality facet, they make up the part of the prism that picture the sender, the company. (2) Personality refers to the communication style of the brand and how it carries itself. (3) the culture facet encompasses the brand's vision of the world, its own ideology. Strong brands are not only driven by a culture but convey their own culture to others. This is argued to be a strong driver of the creation of communities. (4) The relationship facet defines the way the brand conducts itself in relation to consumers. It is crucial in services

overall as the service is by definition a relationship (Kapferer, 2012). (5) A brand is also a customer reflection which refers to the way customers wish to be seen as a result of using the brand. Together with self-image, they make up the point of the prism related to the picture of the recipient. (6) The self-image revolves around how an inner-relationship with ourselves is developed through the usage of a brand (Kapferer, 2012). The self-image facet of the brand identity prism can be argued to align with the concepts of self-identification and self-brand integration discussed in the literature on brand love (Chen et al. 2020; Ahuvia et al. 2012). Mapping out identity with the focus on the corporate brand has also been done by Greyser and Urde (2019) who argue that a strong identity is advantageous from multiple perspectives, but still many companies fail to define their brand identity. In an attempt to aid in this process, they developed a 9-point matrix that shares some aspects of Kapferer's identity prism. Greyser and Urde (2019) argue that corporate identity is made up of nine interrelated components: Value proposition, relationships, position, expression, brand core, personality, mission & vision, culture, and competences. This shows how intricate and all-encompassing the field of brand identity is, and how vital it can be in order to build a strong brand.

An initial framework

The above literature review has unearthed vital building blocks for sports brand loyalty that can also be transferred to the domain of more conventional corporate branding. The review suggests that brand community, heritage, and identity are all important aspects for mapping out the source and drivers of superior strength loyalty. Figure 1 shows these initial findings in a tentative model, with each building block being connected to the perceived solidity of sports brand loyalty. Since these building blocks are all known and present concepts in the world of corporate

branding as well, it can be argued that there is a case to be had for businesses being able to develop and strengthen all these areas in order to receive a solid loyalty themselves. The framework illustrated by figure 1 will be used as the departing point for the empirical analysis where the conducted semi-structured interviews will be used as support for, or against, the importance of each building block, and to ascertain whether or not additional blocks are needed.



Figure 1: Initial framework

Methodology

Research design

This research paper takes a qualitative approach with focus on primary data collection. A qualitative approach emphasises the understanding and analysing of words rather than quantifying data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This aligns well with the purpose of the research paper as it aims to investigate the reasons why football fans are extremely loyal to their respective clubs. Although a quantitative approach could be used to measure the brand loyalty of the football fans, a qualitative research strategy was deemed more suitable in order to understand the reasons behind football fans' loyalty through an in-depth study. Since the paper investigates football fans' subjective feelings and thoughts a survey was not considered to be sufficient enough as it does not provide the

in-depth understanding as qualitative interviews do.

Data collection

The research paper combined both primary data in the form of interviews and secondary data from the literature review. In order to collect the primary data, six semi-structured interviews were conducted to study football fans' loyalty towards their clubs. In accordance with Bryman and Bell (2015), a thought-out framework with predestined themes was created as a guide for the interviews (see appendix 1). In this case, the themes were supporters' background, emotional connection, and consumption habits all of which were regarded to be important to cover different aspects of brand loyalty. Adams (2015) mentions how this is suitable with open-ended questions where the opportunity for follow-up questions exists if necessary. Furthermore, it is especially relevant when researchers examine a topic that has not been thoroughly researched before and additional insight is relevant to spot useful leads (Adams, 2015).

The interviews all took place online through Zoom and lasted on average approximately 30 minutes. This to facilitate an easier interview process in terms of not being restricted geographically when choosing the interviewees. To ensure that the meaning of the interviewees' answers was not misinterpreted or lost in translation, a choice was made to conduct the interviews in English. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed to have an overview of the empirical data and to enable a thematic analysis. This was used to categorise aspects of brand loyalty that were of interest for this research paper.

Sample selection

An essential part of conducting interviews is to choose relevant interviewees for the study. As the people who were interviewed were

chosen within the authors' vicinity due to the short time frame for this paper, a convenience sampling method was used (Tracy, 2013). However, there were two prerequisites for the people that were interviewed which was; (1) that they were football fans, and (2) that they supported a foreign club. The purpose of the second prerequisite was to eliminate answers that could be connected to the geographical aspect of someone supporting the local club. The two prerequisites were followed up as all interviews started with two control questions to ensure that the requirements were fulfilled.

Empirical Results and Analysis

Brand Community

The literature review refers to the brand *community* as a customer-centric approach. According to McAlexander et al. (2002), the existence and value of a brand community originates from the customer experience and the interactions within the community rather than the brand itself. To analyse this perspective of brand community, the fans were asked questions regarding the existence of communities and their meaningfulness to respondents. Within this area the questions "How often do you think or talk about this club? See their games?" and "How do you engage and follow your club, besides watching games?" were asked. The interviews showed a recurring theme among all the participants with a rather high engagement as the majority indicated that the football club was part of their everyday life by one means or another.

Respondent 2: *"I go on Twitter and my whole Twitter is about football. So, I think about them every day and then, talk about them... You know I play football twice a week and I have football-interested people at work. So we talk about football and we talk about football at practice."*

Respondent 3: *"I also follow several social media accounts related to the club, basically fan accounts, but also obviously the official accounts of the club. And then I guess just talk with friends about it as well, discussing the games and transfers and the news about the club as well, so daily for sure, probably several times a day."*

A common theme can be found within these responses with social media serving as a platform of community building. This provides evidence that a social media presence of football clubs provides context for football fans to develop stronger communities. Social media in this instance acts as a channel where football fans have the opportunity to read about their club and take part in meaningful interactions with other supporters. The second discovery concerns how a community is built around friends, enabling the supporters to partake in discussions about their club and football in general. Within this theme, one sample contrasts with the others.

Respondent 1: *"I don't talk about them that much. Like I said, no one follows Spanish football. So if they haven't played Madrid, there's no one that has watched the game, so I don't really have anyone to talk about it with."*

This sample indicates a lack of community to interact with and is implied to negatively affect the respondent's brand loyalty to the club. The absence of community is further emphasised as having an impact on the respondent's consumption behaviour regarding tickets to home games but also purchases of club merchandise.

Respondent 1: *"If there were a Barca Fan club, of course, there is a Barca fan club in Sweden, but if it was more arranging meetings to watch the games and stuff, then I would also buy merchandise. Social surroundings. I guess it's the important factor."*

This finding displays the importance of communities for football supporters' decisions to be engaged with the club. This respondent explicitly states the desire for more opportunities to be integrated into the brand community. A clear influence on sales can be seen which essentially would incentivize football clubs to build and strengthen brand communities by providing context for relationships between the club and its supporters (McAlexander et al. 2002).

Brand heritage

Since this paper takes the perspective of the fans, brand heritage will not be discussed in the case of whether the football clubs are using their heritage as their positioning and value proposition as defined by Balmer, Greyser and Urde (2007). Instead, it will be discussed from the sense that the fans can have a strong connection with the club due to family members passing down their support through different generations as mentioned by Kapferer (2002). To examine this aspect, questions such as "Why do you support this particular football club?" and "Have you ever tried to influence others to become a fan of the club you support?" were asked. From the interviews, the respondents could be divided between those who had been heavily influenced by their family to support a certain club and others who were not influenced at all or to a very low degree.

Respondent 4: *"Apart from the fact that my brother supports Arsenal which is the initial reason. I looked up to him and wanted to be him and there was an easy way to do so by supporting Arsenal."*

Respondent 2: *"It's because my dad supports them, so growing up there was only one team. So, I didn't really have a choice haha [...] one time I said that I want to support Manchester United instead but my mother said that my father's weren't gonna be happy about that so I didn't."*

One common theme was identified as to the reason if someone was influenced by their family or not. The decisive aspect seemed to be the degree of how much the family members were engaged in football or not and how the respondents wanted to fit in. As seen above, the respondents were heavily affected by which club to support when the family members had a high involvement. This indicates the big impact a strong brand heritage among football clubs can have in the initial stage of a fan's connection to the club. Similarly, when the involvement was low among the family members, respondents felt that they were not influenced at all.

Respondent 1: *"Well my parents weren't interested in football so I guess I began to support Barcelona more because of the good players they had and that it is one of my first memories of football, watching them on the TV."*

Furthermore, although the respondent had not been influenced by his family members to support a certain club, when answering the second question did they explain how they had tried to influence others to become a supporter of Barcelona.

Respondent 1: *"I have tried to make my nephew a Barca fan. I gave him a shirt and a football with the Barcelona logo in the hope that he will be influenced to become a Barca fan."*

This further strengthens brand heritage's impact on brand loyalty in terms of having a connection to the club, especially in the early stages when a potential supporter chooses a club to support. The important aspect is the involvement and engagement with the club from the family members of the potential supporter. Additionally, even if a fan is not affected by the heritage from the beginning, it can still improve the fan's loyalty to the club as they themselves try to influence others and become a part of the heritage.

Brand Identity

To capture brand identity given the context of football clubs, respondents were asked to justify their support for their respective clubs with several descriptive questions. The initial question asked participants to respond to "Why do you support this particular football club?" and "What do you value with your club?". Through said questions, common themes could be found among respondents and their responses. One theme found was the recognition of football clubs' identities. A portion of the samples described their football club with personal attributes together with positive associations with which they could recognize themselves. For the first question, the following respondents emphasised the identity of the club and what they represent as an important aspect of their choice of club.

Respondent 4: *"I support Arsenal more because of the brand I would say. Arsenal represents victory through harmony, being a very elegant brand that you want to associate with. Success, elegance and a sense of class"*

Respondent 5: *"I support that I see them as nice teams, teams that have an aura of protagonists about them. It just adds up and feels clean in a way, well rounded."*

A parallel can be drawn to the reflection facet of the brand identity prism in Kapferer (2012), where customers identify themselves with a brand and are reflected in the way they wish to be perceived by usage of the brand. The reflection used by the clubs provides an identity in which their supporters desire and want to become a part of. Success and elegance are mentioned as brand associations and drivers of club choice for respondent number 4, while the role of protagonist appeals to respondent number 5. The common factor is the value creation of a brand protagonist which consumers of the brand idealise. This is further strengthened by the majority of respondents' indication that the club they support suits their self-image

with reference to how they view their club. Or as respondent number 5 put it:

"Yes, it does. I feel like I identify with that protagonistic aura I described Arsenal as."

The answer given can be connected to the self-identification created by the usage of the brand which is stated in the sixth facet of the brand identity prism; self-image, as the user's own reflection of themselves (I feel, I am..). In this instance, I feel like a protagonist.

For the second question regarding what each respondent values with their club, a distinct emphasis can be placed on the culture of the club, where consistency and the philosophy of the club are mentioned as valuable characteristics of a club. Two similar answers recognize the same values as important.

Respondent 1 *"I value the philosophy of the style of play. It shouldn't matter if they change coach or anything because everyone knows how Barca is supposed to play. I value that there is a meaning outside the pitch, you see the Catalan flag in the stands. And I also value that they are owned by the members."*

Respondent 3: *"It's always been the style of playing football, the philosophy behind basically the way they play their game. I think that is deeply rooted in Barcelona's culture. Ever since with Johan Crujff, it's always been this sort of possession-focused football which appeals to me a lot(...) that's sort of always been their style of playing, and that has never changed because of shifts in coaches and in things."*

Both answers indicate a perception of consistency in the philosophy and core values of the club. It is apparent that the club, seen as a brand, has remained with a certain recognizable brand identity over the years. Both respondents point out the recognizable style of football which has been used by the club for a long time. This can be linked to the competitive power formed over time by consistency and staying power in the

development of a brand identity (Melin, 2002). As argued by Kapferer (2012), brand identity stems from the brands' products, thus values of the brand must be captured in the product offered to its customers. The style of playing football in these answers indicates how FC Barcelonas has been consistent in capturing its philosophy through its core product, football.

The importance of brand identity gets even more prominent and interesting when questions regarding a change in brand identity are asked. In an attempt to capture the interviewee's thoughts on actions that are not coherent with their club's brand identity and core values, respondents were asked: "Would you feel less attached to your club if they carried out actions that do not align with your values?" and "What type of actions would that be?". Two themes can be found. The first theme indicates a strong avoidance behaviour where attachment to the club is negatively affected.

Respondent 4: *"I would strongly not feel as aligned with Arsenal anymore. So yes, I would not want to be associated with them anymore. However it would have to be systematic and happen repeatedly without anything being done to solve it, I would seriously question my loyalty to it"*

Respondent 1: *"I think I felt that during a few years, I have felt less attached to the club because all various homegrown players left the club, like Xavi, Iniesta and Messi. They changed the way of playing with a more direct approach to the game with longer balls, etc. At that point, it began to feel like Barca was just one of those commercial clubs like everyone else. At that point, I felt less attached."*

While the respondents' answers concern different actions and football clubs, the answers imply that when a brand's identity gets lost or is difficult to recognize, attachment to the brand can be impacted.

Both answers indicate damage to loyalty with negative associations connected to a shift in identity. Here a correlation to a lack of shared value, described as a common ethos by Kapferer (2012) where brand identity must be recognizable and maintained through certain elements of the brand, can be made. Brand coherence can in this instance be noted as an essential factor contributing to brand loyalty.

However, a second theme of loyalty exceeding the impact of a brand identity change can be found among other respondents. The following answers referred to their loyalty towards their club as rather imperishable with an emphasis on the attachment that always would be there.

Respondent 2: *"My support will always be there I think. Of course, if they made the wrong decisions, I would still be angry about it, but the love is still there. I will always support them but things that they do can still be wrong."*

Respondent 5: *"I am not sure if I would feel less attached, it would feel wrong to change teams. Maybe I would lose a bit of engagement in Arsenal but I would not change teams and I would have a belief that the fans eventually would get their way through"*

The answers illustrate a high level of loyalty towards the club even when the club is associated unfavourably. An interpretation can be made that a mishap in brand identity can be capitalised on a supporter's brand loyalty which should be seen as a valuable asset for a company or football club.

Brand internalisation

Beside brand community, brand identity, and brand heritage, all of which have been discussed in the literature review, a fourth aspect that seemed to affect the brand loyalty of the fans was identified. Although it was not a result that was anticipated, an interesting aspect of brand loyalty could be detected in

the respondents' answers. In this paper this specific aspect will be called brand internalisation, and it is about how much the fans are thinking about and engaging with the club in their everyday life. It is more than brand awareness and from the interviews it can be described as the football fans had a constant top of mind regarding their club. When answering the question "How often do you think or talk about this club?", it became evident that the interviewees were highly engaged with the club in different regards. Firstly, all respondents mentioned how they thought about the club every day which indicates a very high degree of brand internalisation amongst football fans.

Respondent 1: *"I think about Barcelona almost every day. There is always something to read about in the newspaper or on social media about the club and the players."*

Respondent 2: *"Well, I think about them every day."*

Secondly, along with thinking about the club are the fans actively looking to engage with the club through social media and newspapers. The fans expressed how they actively are searching for information about updates regarding the clubs' players, news, and information about the club in general. This indicates an even higher degree of brand internalisation where the fans are not only thinking about the club everyday but are actively engaging with the club in different mediums almost every day.

Respondent 4: *"Every day. I stay updated in news channels to see any news. I look at pictures and so on, so every day."*

Respondent 6: *"besides the games I love to read a lot of newspapers, sport newspapers, both Swedish and Spanish. I also follow several social media accounts related to the club."*

Thirdly, another way the fans engaged with the club was of course by watching the

games. Whereas it can seem obvious that the fans would engage in watching the games of the club they support, the interesting part was that they would go out of their way to make sure that they will not miss a game. Although not all respondents displayed the same degree of willingness to not miss a game, multiple showed a very high degree of this.

Respondent 2: *"I plan my schedule to adjust it to the games on television so I don't miss one game."*

Respondent 6: *"I watch every single game more or less and try my best to not miss one."*

Three different themes of how the fans engaged with the club could be identified and relate to brand internalisation. The fans showed a high degree of all three themes, especially the first two where all respondents mentioned that they thought about the club and actively engaged with the club on different platforms almost every day. The third theme of actively going out of their way to be able to watch the club's games was not as eminent even though multiple respondents mentioned this. However, even if a respondent is not watching every game do they still keep track of the club's matches as evident from the first two themes. All three themes connect with brand internalisation where the football fans have an extremely high degree of consuming and engaging with their club. Moreover, this relates back to brand loyalty where the definition of brand loyalty is repeat purchases of the brand. In relation to football clubs, repeat engagement and consumption of the club would be the translation of purchases and therefore, brand internalisation would be strongly correlated to brand loyalty.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to discern the key components of the strong loyalty a football team enjoys, and whether these findings

could be transferred from the world of sports branding to the domain of corporate branding in order for companies to boost loyalty towards their own brands. Derived from the conducted literature review, figure 1 was used as a starting point for the empirical analysis. It can be concluded that heritage, identity, and community were all shown to be vital aspects of the strong loyalty displayed towards football teams. The brand identity plays a role in the initial choice of club, but also in how supporters view their club over time and how that tightens the relationship by corresponding with their own self-image. Culture and consistency were also brought up as important sub-topics in relation to the brand identity, where for instance FC Barcelona was highly appreciated for their commitment to a certain playing style, no matter the coach or players. Brand heritage from the supporter, or customer, perspective was also shown to be an important aspect for loyalty, especially in terms of the initial choice of team to support with a common theme being that supportership was carried down and influenced through generations. This shows that pre-existing relationships, especially within the family, can play a vital role in the choice of team and the subsequent loyal feelings. This emphasis on relationships is also illustrated by the building block concerning brand community. The interviews show that having an active community to share the interest and belong with can foster a strong loyalty, with respondents also indicating that a lack of community subsequently has a negative effect on consumption.

Theoretical implications

While support for all building blocks in the tentative framework illustrated by figure 1 was found, the empirical analysis unearthed an additional aspect vital to the understanding of the strength of loyalty towards football teams. This aspect is in this paper referred to as “brand internalisation” and refers to the

sway the brand holds over the fan, or consumer, in everyday life. The interviews showed that the interviewees’ respective clubs are constantly top of mind for them and that they actively seek out additional ways to engage with their team. Additionally, respondents also showed an inclination to alter their days and schedules based on the team, for instance in the regard of kick-off times. This constitutes that the tentative framework needs to be expanded to include this fourth dimension. The framework illustrated in figure 2 shows the building blocks of loyalty towards a sports team and represents the theoretical contribution brought by this article. While the bulk of the academic research within sports branding has been directed towards brand equity (e.g. Bauer et al. 2005; Gladden et al. 1998; Ross, 2006) and brand extensions (e.g. Aposolopoulou, 2002; Chadwick & Clowes, 1998), this article contributes to the limited field of research into sports brand loyalty and the fan perspective.



Figure 2: Brand internalisation added to the initial framework

Managerial implications

The second facet of this paper was to transfer the insights from sports branding to conventional corporate branding in order to ascertain if they could be used for managers to boost loyalty towards their own brands. The research ascertained that sports brand loyalty is facilitated by four vital building blocks: identity, community, heritage, and

internalisation. In the literature review, the three former building blocks were found to be influenceable by management. Brand identity can be mapped out and developed with the help of the different frameworks developed by Kapferer (2012) and Greyser and Urde (2019). The brand community can be strengthened by managers continuously working to provide contexts for these relationships to develop, and for more customers to be integrated into the community (McAlexander et al. 2002). The brand heritage can be emphasised and utilised by proper brand stewardship of the track record, the longevity, core values, use of symbols, and the history important to the brand (Balmer, Greyser & Urde, 2007). The emphasis on heritage can in turn influence customers to pass down the brands to the next generation.

While these three building blocks can be developed and improved by management, it can be questioned whether they can reach the same strength displayed by sport teams. Furthermore, the fourth building block titled “brand internalisation” can be argued to showcase this lack of strength. The football teams have shown to assert significant power over the minds and lives of their fans to the point where supporters actively seek out ways to connect with the brand themselves. At this stage, it creates a continuous loop where each interaction strengthens the loyalty. While fields such as brand love can partially be paralleled to this phenomenon, the authors of this article argue that there is no clear roadmap for managers to develop this brand internalisation and that it in this way becomes significantly difficult to obtain the same loyalty shown towards sport team brands. Developing a way to find this brand internalisation would be a huge advantage for managers.

Limitations and further research

The main limitation for this paper is the small sample size of interviews that the empirical result is based on. A more in-depth investigation with a broader sample size would give the findings of the paper more credibility in a wider context. Due to this limitation, it is not possible to generalise the findings on a greater scale but can only be seen as indications. For further research, it would be interesting to do a case study on one of the leading football clubs to investigate the brand’s perspective of how they work with brand loyalty. From this perspective would it be possible to further investigate the managerial aspect of brand loyalty within the sporting world. Another possible future research could be to investigate another sport and include a broader sample size to examine if general deductions regarding brand loyalty within sports can be drawn.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview guide:

Control Questions:

- Would you consider yourself a football fan?
- What football team do you support?

Supporters Background

- Why do you support this particular team?
- How did it start?
- Why not another team?
- How long have you supported this team?
- How would you describe your club?

Emotional connection

- Would you feel less attached to your club if they carried out actions that do not align with your values? What type of actions would that be?
- Have you been disappointed in your team for something they did (scandal)?
- If so, how did it affect you? Did it change your perspective on the club?
- What do you value with your club?

- Would you feel less attached to your club if they underperformed?
- How does your attachment to the club you support affect your everyday mood?
- Can you think of something that would make you support another club? Or at least not support the current club? Why, why not?

- What would your life feel like without your club?

- Does the club fit your self-image?

- If you had to choose a club to support today from a clean slate, would you still support the same team?
- Have you ever tried to influence others to become a fan of the club you support, if so how?

Consumption habits

- Have you bought a ticket to a home game? How often?
- Have you bought shirts, kits, or other things related to the club? How often?
- Would anything make you more or less inclined to purchase tickets or merchandise?

- How often do you think or talk about this club? See their games?
- How do you engage and follow your club, besides watching games?