

*Football brand managers perspectives how to deal with  
fans emotions*

Ricardo Roseira Cayolla  
Sandra Maria Correia Loureiro

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Football brand managers are part of the sport industry. With structured in-depth personal interviews to seven of the top half Portuguese football clubs, our aim is to have a deeper knowledge about the professional perspective, strategies and actions to attract fans and maintain their relationship with the club (i.e. brand). Negativity effect, fan identity, and memory are the three major themes that emerged and also discussed in the light of known literature.

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## **Introduction**

In Primeira LIGA NOS Portugal (football first league in Portugal), there are 18 teams, 502 players (31.4% Portuguese), with a market value of almost one billion euros (Transfermarket, 2020). It's our aim to gain more knowledge about the point of view of sport brand managers and the relationships the consumers make with their loved brand (Fetscherin, Cayolla, Guzmán, & Veloutsou, 2016). Football (soccer in USA) is the area analyzed. There is one major objective: to learn more how professionals think and act concerning the unstable and random emotional field linked to the biggest sporting phenomenon: the love the fans have for their football team.

## Theoretical underpinnings

In the Consumer-brand relationship field, brand love is a more narrow type of love if we consider only one type of relationship (Ahuvia, 2005). Fan identity is a new concept for brand managers, specially in sport (Biscaia, Hedlund, Dickson, & Naylor, 2018) and is most of the times overlapped to the concept of team identity (Lock and Heere, 2017). The negativity effect, in psychology, is irrefutable: bad is stronger than good (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Consumer neuroscience is a new area that tries to help to “understand the consumer decision making in a holistic manner” (Agarwal & Dutta, 2015, p. 460).

## Methodology

Through interviews with football brand managers (i.e., marketing directors), the aim is to have a better understanding of strategies and their “modus operandi”. This study is composed of seven structured in-depth personal interviews from the top half football teams in the LIGA NOS competition (with an average age of 41 years). Interviews were made at the beginning of the 2019-2020 season. The average time of each interview was 90 minutes. These interviews are part of a project that includes fMRI sessions with football fans and football brand managers (Duarte et al., 2017; Duarte, Brito-Costa, Cayolla, & Castelo-Branco, 2018; Duarte et al., 2020).

In a field so emotional and where trust is key, we used a snowball sampling (Harsh, 2011). In order to maintain coherence and a global unity of work (Fournier, 1998), all interviews were conducted and analysed by the authors. The process of data analysis was done from the particular to the global (McCracken, 1988) and NVIVO was used. Starting from one early grouping made by the authors, and later with the assistance of two experts, professors, the final categorization is composed of three themes: negativity effect, fan identity, and memory.

## Discussion

*For fans what is negative is suppressed.* Stopping the negative (i.e. emotions) and fostering the positive is essential. For the fan, what is positive is valued and what is negative is suppressed (Park et al., 2009). Fragmenting to have a stronger brand as a final result can be a path to follow with regard to communication between the club and the spectator/fan. On the communicational level, dozens of positive aspects can be removed from a match (e.g. the result itself, the coach’s reaction, the goal celebration, the smile from one player to the next, the cel-

eboration of the public). By dividing the content, positive details are nurtured. Differentiation, and subsequent reinforcement of the positive, makes the brand stronger.

*The higher the level of the fan's identity, the less control of cognitive processes.* The level of the fan's identity is a dynamic process, which evolves over time (Biscaia et al., 2018) and has consequences (Cayolla & Loureiro, 2013). For the football brand manager the most important thing is the connection between the brand and the fans. The brand community is essential. The club must have a strong community, a strong connection to the fans (Loureiro, Pires, & Cayolla, 2014). Fans have to feel that, even in moments of lack of control (i.e. defeats) it is possible to regain control. Managing defeat and victory is a must for football brand managers. Developing the work based on the club's values and never on the results is a hypothesis. Initiatives such as, during the pandemic of the corona virus, members over 60 years of age being contacted by doctors affiliated with the club reinforce the community spirit, not only in the age group, but also in the entire universe of the club.

*The brand's memories are not only in the sphere of explicit memories but also of implicit memories.* Implicit memories are unconsciously processed memories (Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012). Football brand managers need to escape from the win/lose binomial. Their final aim is to be as independent on the final result as possible. One hypothesis could be the creation of positive memories to the fan unconscious memory (i.e. intrinsic). Other way can be for the brand to have an aspirational component, allowing the consumer to project himself through the brand. At the end, the fan aspires to what he lives, what he consumes, what he experiences. Preferences are “constructed” rather than “innate” (Smidts et al., 2014, p. 263)

## Conclusion and further direction

It is not possible to control the uncertainty of the result. But it is possible to control the lack of control. Victory and defeat can be uncontrolled triggers for the fans behaviors. The more overlapping they are, the more controllable. Each beginning of the season and everything starts all over again for the fan. It is like a new life, a new beginning. A new set of opportunities. The fan has a huge desire to believe. Sport managers and sport marketers have to find ways for fans to be able to trust what is announced about the future of their club, nurturing a relationship that can endure for life (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Fournier, 1998).

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