



Vaasan yliopisto
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Balancing Place-based Identity and Global Brand Expansion

A Professional Football Club Perspective

School of Marketing and
Communications
Bachelor's thesis in
International Business

Vaasa 2025

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA**School of Marketing and Communication**

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Title of the Thesis: Balancing Place-based Identity and Global Brand Expansion : A Professional Football Club Perspective
Degree: Bachelor of Science in Economics
Programme: International Business
Supervisor: Aya Farag
Year: 2025 **Sivumäärä:** 50

ABSTRACT:

Globaali brändilaaientuminen on yhä keskeisempi osa organisaatioiden kansainvälistä toimintaa, mutta erityisesti kulttuurisesti ja paikkasidonnaisesti merkityksellisissä organisaatioissa se asettaa erityisiä haasteita brändin identiteetin hallinnalle. Jalkapalloseurat astuvat tässä kuvaan, sillä ne edustavat juuri tällaista organisaatiotyyppiä, jossa taloudelliset, symboliset ja yhteisölliset ulottuvuudet kietoutuvat tiiviisti toisiinsa. Näiden ulottuvuuksien yhteensovittaminen globaalissa toimintaympäristössä tekee seurojen brändilaaientumisesta analyttisesti kiinnostavan, mutta moniulotteisen aiheen. Tässä kontekstissa brändilaaientuminen ei näyttäydy ainoastaan kysymyksenä markkinoille pääsystä, vaan prosessina, jossa identiteetin merkityssisältöjä tulkitaan, hyväksytään tai vastustetaan eri markkinoilla ja eri sidosryhmien toimesta. Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tavoitteena on tarkastella, miten jalkapalloseurat laajentavat brändiään kansainvälisesti ja millaisia jännitteitä tämä prosessi synnyttää, kun seurojen paikallinen identiteetti haastetaan ja kyseenalaistetaan. Tutkielmassa vastataan kolmeen tutkimuskysymykseen: (1) miten globaali brändilaaientuminen ilmenee jalkapalloseurojen toiminnassa, (2) miten paikallinen identiteetti huomioidaan näissä strategioissa, sekä (3) millaisia jännitteitä globaalien laajentumisen ja paikkasidonnaisen identiteetin välille syntyy – seuraten loogista rakennetta. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään kirjallisuutta ja tutkimuksia aina urheilubrändäyksestä kansainväliseen liiketoimintaan, ja teoreettinen viitekehys rakentuu erityisesti brändi-identiteetin, globalisaation ja sidosryhmien yhteiskehityksen (co-creation) varaan. Näiden avulla tarkastellaan, miten seurojen identiteetti rakentuu, kehittyy ja neuvotellaan eri toimijoiden välillä globaalissa kontekstissa. Tutkielman keskeiset havainnot osoittavat, että globaali brändilaaientuminen ei ainoastaan laajenna seuran toimintaa uusille markkinoille, vaan muuttaa niitä ehtoja, joiden puitteissa seuran identiteetti koetaan autenttiseksi ja legitimiiksi. Näin globaalien laajentumisen voidaan tulkita muuttavan identiteetin hallinnan ehtoja pikemminkin laadullisesti kuin määrällisesti. Jännitteet eivät ilmenne yksiselitteisinä vastakkainasetteluina globaalien ja paikallisten välillä, vaan ne näyttäytyvät jatkuvana neuvotteluna kaupallisten tavoitteiden, kulttuurisen merkityksen sekä jatkuvuuden ja muutosten välillä. Tutkielman perusteella sidosryhmien hyväksyntä ja osallistaminen nousevat keskeisiksi tekijöiksi globaalien strategioiden onnistumiselle, etenkin jalkapalloseurojen kontekstissa. Löydökset viittaavat siihen, että identiteetti voi toimia sekä rajoitteena että kilpailuetuna riippuen siitä, miten organisaatio kykenee hallitsemaan näitä jännitteitä. Havainnot ovat soveltavissa jalkapallon lisäksi myös muihin kulttuurillisesti merkityksellisiin ja paikkasidonnaisiin toimialoihin, joissa autenttisuus on keskiössä.

KEYWORDS: Football clubs, global brand expansion, place-based brand identity, brand identity, globalization, authenticity, stakeholder co-creation

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Motivation

Professional football has undergone a major structural transformation in recent decades, as clubs that were historically community institutions anchored in specific cities and regions, now operate as global media brands and financialised enterprises. Globalisation itself in football isn't a new phenomenon, as demonstrated by Hill and Vincent (2006) and their study on Manchester United, but it has gone from being a tool of differentiation and growth to a structural necessity. Research shows how commercial revenues, international broadcasting, and digital fan engagement have grown to dominate club strategies, reshaping how clubs position themselves and who their audiences are (Dubal, 2010; Jackson & Silverwood, 2025; McCarthy et al., 2022). Simultaneously, cities and regions increasingly use football clubs as cultural symbols and place brands, integrating stadiums, colours, and narratives into broader identity and regeneration strategies (Barnes & Harland, 2025; Gómez-Bantel, 2016). As a result, clubs today aspire to fulfil local, cultural and social roles while competing in global markets that reward scale, visibility and commercial growth – a balance that requires careful positioning.

This transformation reached a particularly visible moment when the failed Super League project in 2021 highlighted how far commercial demands had diverged from supporters' expectations of sporting merit and traditions that have carried the sport (Fitzpatrick, 2025; Llopis-Goig et al., 2025). The rapid increase in multi-club ownership and state linked investment have brought another connected dimension, where questions arise about who owns and defines the club's identity, and to what extent strategic decisions are rooted in the interests of place-based communities (Chadwick et al., 2022; Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2023; Jones et al., 2024). These developments illustrate how global brand strategies can come into friction with symbolic, emotional and historical meanings supporters attach to the club, and how they will respond.

Digitalisation has deepened these dynamics further. Social media and streaming platforms allow clubs to cultivate global fanbases and communicate directly with dispersed audiences, creating new opportunities for brand expansion and revenue, but also new spaces where clubs' identity is interpreted, contested and performed (Chohan & Schmidt-Devlin, 2024; Fenton et al., 2023). As clubs reach across borders, supporters emphasise what it means for a club to remain authentic, locally rooted and recognisable.

While clubs still differ from common multinational brands by being tied to a specific place and its identity, understanding the emerging tensions is crucial for successful expansion and internationalisation. This thesis therefore examines how these tensions between place-based brand identity and global brand expansion arise, implementing existing research on each dimension and their interaction through a structured manner.

1.2 Research Objective and Questions

The aim of this thesis is to analyse how professional football clubs manage the strategic tensions between preserving their place-based brand identity and pursuing global brand expansion, focusing on how these tensions become visible. By examining how place-based brand identity is constructed, how clubs internationalise their brands, and the tensions that arise in this process, the study contributes to a better understanding of sports branding within an international business context. The main objective is supported by three research questions:

1. What are the key components of place-based brand identity in professional football clubs, and how are they constructed?
2. How do football clubs strategically expand their brands internationally while maintaining global coherence and adapting to different cultural contexts?
3. What strategic tensions and challenges arise when football clubs balance local identity with global brand expansion?

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into five chapters. The current chapter – chapter 1 – introduced the background, purpose and relevancy of the study. Chapter 2 establishes the conceptual foundations of place-based brand identity, examining how geography, community, symbolism and emotion construct the meaning of football clubs and how these elements are sustained through material, cultural and narrative practices. Chapter 3 then turns to global brand expansion, analysing how clubs internationalise through market expansion, communication, fanbase development and commercial partnerships.

Chapter 4 brings these dimensions together through a theoretical framework that centres stakeholder co-creation as the primary lens for understanding how tensions emerge when place-based identity encounters global brand strategies. Complementary theoretical perspectives of place branding and sense of place, glocalization and locally practised brands, and internationalisation and authenticity-foreignness, provide supporting insight into the structures and pressures within which co-creation occurs. Using this framework, chapter 4 examines three sets of tensions – material, communicative and commercial/ownership – and illustrates how these tensions become visible precisely through stakeholder interpretations of change.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by synthesising the key insights, answering research questions and reflecting on how these tensions shape contemporary football. It also outlines implications for international business and suggestions for future research on place-based sport branding and globalisation.

2 Place-based Brand Identity in Football

To understand the meaning of place-based brand identity and its relevance in football, it is necessary to first determine what the conceptual core – brand identity – means, and what layers it has, before diving to the football world. This chapter therefore progresses step-by-step, beginning with the foundations of brand identity and moving towards its place-based dimensions, to build a comprehensive picture of how identity connects with place and how this connection becomes visible, effective, and even imperative in professional football clubs.

2.1 Defining Place-based Brand Identity

Identity in branding extends far beyond visual elements or communication tools; it represents the strategic and emotional foundation upon which the whole meaning is built (Burmam et al., 2023). Brand identity defines what a brand is before it is perceived, acting as the internal compass that connects culture, values, and vision (Aaker, 2012; Kapferer, 2008). Early frameworks emphasised managerial control and message consistency, while more recent research highlights the relational and socially constructed nature of identity, where meaning emerges through interaction between the organisation and its audiences (Mensah, 2019). The shift from control to co-creation reframes identity as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed asset (Spanjol et al., 2024) — particularly relevant in cultural and emotional industries such as sport.

While Aaker (2012) and Kapferer (2008) provide the managerial foundations of brand identity – emphasising coherence, internal clarity, and the organisation’s control over meaning – subsequent research has broadened the concept by highlighting its relational and socially constructed dimensions. De Chernatony (1999) argues that identity is simultaneously strategic and symbolic, shaped not only by managerial intent but also how stakeholders interpret the brand. Hatch and Schultz (2001) further develop this perspective by describing identity as a dynamic interplay between organisational culture, stakeholder images, and strategic vision. Christensen and Askegaard (2001) challenge

the idea of identity as a stable or controllable construct, showing instead that meaning is continuously negotiated through discourse and cultural context. Da Silveira et al. (2013) integrate these views by conceptualising brand identity as a hybrid, co-created system in which multiple stakeholders contribute to both stability and change. This body of research reframes brand identity as an evolving social process rather than a fixed managerial asset – a perspective particularly relevant for football, where identity emerges through constant interaction between the club, its supporters, and the place it represents.

Place inevitably becomes part of this negotiation. Place branding treats cities and regions as identity systems capable of communicating symbolic and emotional meaning (Grenni et al., 2020; Potapovs, 2024). Places carry narratives, values, and imagery that can be transferred to the organisations embedded within them, while those organisations simultaneously shape how the place is perceived (Ghorbanzadeh & Nordberg, 2024). This reciprocity challenges the idea that brands and places are separate entities, instead, identity is produced through the continuous dialogue between spatial context and organisational practice, a dynamic that creates authenticity but also binds the brand to its geographical and cultural environment (Källström & Ripoll González, 2025).

In football, this interdependence becomes tangible. Clubs function not only as competitive organisations, but also as cultural institutions that articulate collective belonging and operate as regionally meaningful symbols (Gómez-Bantel, 2016; Hochschild Jr, 2010). Team identity often merges with the community identity; the club becomes an ideology through which fans express local pride, values, and social narratives (Gómez-Bantel, 2016). At the supporter level, identification can become exceptionally intense through repeated shared experience which strengthens solidarity and attachment (Newson et al., 2023). The material and symbolic presence of football – stadiums, rituals, accents, colours – connects the sport itself to place, transforming the brand into an experience grounded in physical and cultural context (Crossan et al., 2024; Keenen, 2022). Localism in football branding has therefore been described as both

a strength and a vulnerability: a source of authenticity that anchors the brand in its meaning, yet one that limits how freely that meaning can evolve in global markets (Keenen, 2022).

Within this context, place-based brand identity captures how geographic origin, cultural heritage, and community narratives become integrated into the brand meaning of a football club (Gómez-Bantel, 2016; Pritchard et al., 2022). It reflects the way how place functions as an active element in shaping up a club's identity – something that provides authenticity, moral grounding, and symbolic coherence. The concept aligns with the co-creation logic of modern branding but adds spatial depth: identity is not only shared between organisation and stakeholder but also between organisation and territory (Zollo et al., 2023). This interaction defines how clubs balance belonging with ambition and tradition with transformation.

In summary, place-based brand identity represents a multidimensional synthesis of brand management, place branding, and sport identity research. It repositions football clubs as sites where commercial, cultural, and spatial meanings intersect. The next section explores how this identity materialises in practice – across geography, community, symbolism, and storytelling – revealing how local attachment continues to shape brand strategy within an increasingly globalised football industry.

2.2 Dimensions of Place-based Identity in Football

The previous section analysed the meaning, the conceptual foundations of place-based identity, while this section adds to it by providing the context to the cause – how identity becomes visible and meaningful in professional football environment. Football clubs aren't simply born with a place-based identity; they mould it, perform it through variety of interconnected layers that link geography, culture, community, symbolism and emotion into a coherent brand meaning, identity. These dimensions shape how football clubs view and understand themselves, how people connect to these institutions, and how stakeholders interpret and evolve the identity.

In football, identity is not an abstract managerial construct, but a lived and embodied phenomenon. It can be seen in the way club's origins – culture but also players, managers, stadiums – are remembered, how communities express their belonging, how symbols are used, protected, even worshipped, and how stories and all the emotions are circulated, whether it's through media or fan culture. These dimensions form the backbone to what supporters perceive as authentic, grounding the club within its territorial and cultural environment, even when global movement and commercial forces push it outward.

The aim of this section is to clarify the different mechanisms through which place becomes integrated in football brand identity, by breaking the concept down into four distinct but also overlapping dimensions. These four dimensions are drawn from sport identity and place-based branding research, which consistently highlights geography (Gómez-Bantel, 2016; Keenen, 2022), community (File & Worlledge, 2023; Hognestad, 2012), symbolism (Barnes & Harland, 2025; Kassimeris, 2024), and emotions (Keenen, 2022; Newson et al., 2023) as central, interconnected mechanisms through which brand identity becomes meaningful in football. Explicit identification of these dimensions is insufficient as a singular element such as a stadium can act as a tool that combines all dimensions, but it becomes overwhelmingly clear that the formation of place-based identity happens through them.

This doesn't only deepen the total theoretical understanding of identity formation within football clubs but also provides a solid grounding to the next chapters, where after overviewing the role of place-based identity, it can be seen how global brand expansion introduces new contexts, audiences and pressure. Understanding the dimensions in this section is therefore essential for analysing how tensions between local rootedness and global reach arise and how clubs manage them, the main goal of the thesis.

2.2.1 Geographic and Cultural Roots

Within football clubs, place is often the foundational layer of identity. Clubs are usually founded by groups of people from the local area, and these beginnings establish specific standards, values, and ideologies that the club carries forward for generations (Hochschild Jr, 2010). The pitch is chosen by them, the badge and the name, they usually reflect local symbolism, and the colours of the shirt tie the club to its place and history (Xu, 2019). A football club often comes to represent the character, values, and social identity of the community and region that shaped it (Gómez-Bantel, 2016). A working-class city, for example, is likely to see a club formed by local labourers, while a city or region that feels culturally distinct may use its club to express unity and pride (Gómez-Bantel, 2016). In this sense, the origins of a football club are inseparable from its city or region, and clubs remain tied to the social groups that shaped them. Beyond the moment of foundation, the cultural narratives that surround the club — pride, resilience, rivalries — grow out of the community's lived experiences. It is more than a creation; it becomes a shared journey.

Fans do not experience the club only as an entertainment property, they experience it as an extension of their cultural identity (Gómez-Bantel, 2016). The place becomes an emotional and symbolic anchor. The home stadium, for instance, is often perceived as a cultural landmark where geography becomes material identity, and for many communities the stadium means more than just football (Keenen, 2022; Wergeland & Hognestad, 2023). It becomes a place where supporters gather as a community, reinforcing shared belonging. The club is woven into everyday life — into routines, language, and rituals. It becomes part of who people are, where they come from, and what they value (Hochschild Jr, 2010). Ties to culture and geographic location are undeniable, and they remain influential even as clubs evolve into global institutions. These geographic and cultural foundations become truly meaningful once they are taken up and reinforced by the community itself, which forms the next dimension.

2.2.2 Community and Fan Identification

While geography provides the foundations of a club's identity, it is the community that brings it to life. Supporters are not passive observers but active participants who interpret, shape, and sometimes challenge what the club represents (File & Worlledge, 2023). Fan identification is continuously shaped through interaction and shared practises such as attendance routines, rituals and collective expressions that reproduce belonging and embed the club in everyday social life, and it develops early, from generation to another (Brown, 1998; Putra, 2019). More broadly, brand meaning is negotiated rather than managerially controlled (da Silveira et al., 2013), making community identification central to identity continuity in football. Translating identity and bringing continuity across generations are therefore key for ensuring that the club remains rooted in its social environment, the place that shaped it.

This communal identification becomes visible in collective behaviour – chants, displays, and rituals that form the emotional atmosphere around the team (Hognestad, 2012). The stadium becomes a social arena where individuals merge into a community and express identity physically and emotionally. Even as global fanbases expand, local supporters typically remain as the symbolic core, the reference point through which authenticity is understood (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2023; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007). Taken together, community identification adds a participatory layer to place-based identity: geography may offer the origins, but the community sustains, adapts, and protects those meanings. This ongoing participation is crucial for understanding why identity in football is so powerful, and why it continues to influence how clubs navigate global expansion. This communal identification also shapes how meaning becomes embedded in the club's symbols, traditions, and physical spaces, forming the basis for the next dimension of place-based identity within football clubs.

2.2.3 Symbolic and Material Representations

Football clubs express who they are through a set of symbols, physical spaces, and visual traditions that make identity tangible. Real Madrid is known for the crown and colour white, Liverpool for their stadium Anfield, or Borussia Dortmund for the section “Yellow wall” and their tifos. These symbolic and material representations – badges, colours, stadiums, songs, statues, flags, murals – function as anchors through which supporters recognise the club, or articulate what it stands for (Barnes & Harland, 2025; Caro & García, 2024). They translate these abstract cultural values into something tangible, concrete forms that can be seen, heard and felt. In this sense, symbolism becomes a language of identity: a way of considering history, geography, and emotion into something recognizable that carries through generations (Gómez-Bantel, 2016). Even as clubs modernise their visual identity, these symbols retain a deep connection to the place, reflecting the culture and narratives that shaped them. This can be seen via the backlash that changing the club badge or tuning the kit colours usually receive (Barnes, 2023).

The stadium is perhaps the most powerful material expression of place-based identity. More than a sports venue, it becomes a landmark embedded in the emotional and physical landscape of its community (Barnes & Harland, 2025; Richards et al., 2021). Its architecture, location, and atmosphere carry symbolic weight that help supporters maintain continuity and belonging (Richards et al., 2021). For many clubs, the stadium acts as an archive of collective memory, where victories, heartbreaks, and stories accumulate over time. Barnes and Harland (2025) also note that when clubs relocate or significantly renovate their stadiums, debates around identity, tradition, and authenticity often intensify, highlighting the sensitivity of this deeply material anchor.

Symbolic representations also extend to visual elements such as the badge and colours, as touched on earlier, which often contain explicit references to local history, geography, or culture. Club badges most often have a story to them, a deeper connection than just a logo – something that is perhaps losing its meaning as clubs try to move on to more

simplistic and brandable badges (Barnes, 2023). Colours likewise carry their meaning: they can represent political identities, historical alliances, or cultural narratives unique to the region (Kassimeris, 2024). These symbols are not merely decorative, they serve as identity markers through which supporters express belonging in their daily lives — on clothes, tattoos, or material merchandise.

Together, symbolic and material representations reinforce the club's embeddedness in place and provide continuity across time. They are the visual and physical vocabulary through which identity is communicated, defended, and embraced. Importantly, these elements also act as reference points when clubs enter global markets, shaping how identity is translated to international audiences. This connection between representation and meaning leads directly into the final dimension of place-based identity: the narratives and emotions that tie everything together.

2.2.4 Narrative and Emotional Identity

Beyond symbols and physical spaces, football identity is also built through narratives such as the stories, emotions, and shared memories that eventually give meaning to the club. These narratives are shaped through victories, defeats, iconic players, local myths, and the cultural history surrounding the club, often anchored in concrete places and memories that supporters treat as authentic (Keenen, 2022). They offer supporters a framework through which to interpret both past and present, helping them see the broader storyline that they can emotionally invest in (Xygalatas et al., 2025). Whether a club is defined by resilience, glory, flair, or defiance, these narrative themes become central to how the club understands itself and how supporters make sense of belonging.

Emotions are inseparable from these narratives. Football is unique and clubs differ from normal brands where they can elicit intense emotional responses — joy, frustration, pride, disappointment — that reinforce identification and meaning, especially through repeated and shared experiences in and around matchdays (Newson et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). As mentioned, these emotions are not individual experiences but collective ones,

expressed not only in stadiums but homes, pubs, and online spaces where supporters celebrate or mourn together (Margolin & Liao, 2018; Newson et al., 2023). In this way, emotions function as a common denominator, binding individuals to one another through shared highs and lows. The club becomes an emotional reference point, part of people's lives in a way that far exceeds the functionality of most brands. This emotional depth explains why identity in football is so resilient and why attempts to alter traditions, values, or symbols often provoke strong reactions from supporters.

Narratives and emotions therefore add a reflective and experiential dimension to place-based identity in football. If geography provides the foundations, the community gives life to it, and symbols make the identity tangible, it is the narrative and emotional layer that ties everything together and keeps it evolving. Stories, emotions, and memories ensure that identity is not static but continuously shaped by what the club faces and how supporters feel those experiences. This dynamic quality makes identity an important factor in clubs' decision-making, influencing how supporters perceive change, modernisation, or global expansion.

Altogether these four dimensions – geographic roots, community identification, symbolic representation, and narrative-emotional meaning – form the multilayered structure through which place-based identity emerges in professional football. They show how identity is embedded in place, embraced by supporters, expressed through symbols, and carried forward through shared stories. Understanding these dimensions is essential for analysing how clubs use identity as a strategic resource and how it shapes branding practices. The next section examines the role of place-based identity within football branding more broadly, before moving into the complexities that arise when clubs expand beyond their local area and enter global markets.

2.3 Role of Place-based Identity in Football Branding

Place-based identity functions as a strategic cornerstone in the branding of professional football clubs. In a global sports industry where countless teams compete for attention,

identity rooted in place provides authenticity – a quality that is increasingly difficult to replicate (S. Wang et al., 2025). This authenticity differentiates clubs in a crowded entertainment landscape and strengthens brand equity by grounding the brand in culturally meaningful identification rather than purely commercial positioning (Biscaia et al., 2016; Keenen, 2022). Local identity offers a form of emotional credibility: supporters and external audiences perceive the club as something real, connected to history, geography, and community (Keenen, 2022). As studies on sport brand equity suggest, these emotional and cultural anchors contribute directly to how strongly fans identify with the club and how they evaluate the brand overall (Biscaia et al., 2016; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Szymoszowskyj et al., 2016).

Clubs actively take advantage of place-based identity in their branding and communication strategies. Visual elements such as colours, badges, and images are used to signal authenticity and continuity, while narratives tied to local history or cultural values help position the club in a distinct way (Pritchard et al., 2022; Xu, 2019). Slogans like “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” “Echte Liebe,” or “Més Que Un Club” illustrate how local stories can become central brand assets that provide edge with global reach (Kassimeris, 2024; Keenen, 2022; Richelieu, 2008). These elements allow clubs to create and evolve a recognisable identity that resonates with both local and international audiences, reinforcing a sense of stability even as the organisation evolves (Hill & Vincent, 2006; Richelieu, 2008). Heritage thus becomes a marketing tool: a way to communicate meaning, attract fans, and differentiate the club’s brand from other clubs and more generic brands (McCarthy et al., 2022).

However, the strategic use of place-based identity also introduces limitations as the same deeply rooted identity that strengthens the brand can restrict how freely clubs adapt when entering new markets; strong local symbols may not translate easily across cultural contexts, and attempts to alter or modernise identity – such as badge redesigns, stadium relocations, or controversial sponsorships – often trigger resistance from supporters who see these changes as threats to authenticity (S. Wang et al., 2025;

Wegner et al., 2020). Research consistently shows that authenticity is central to sport brand equity and that its erosion weakens identification (Barnes, 2023; M. C.-H. Wang & Tang, 2018), strengthening the idea that clubs must manage a delicate balance between preserving symbolic continuity and pursuing commercial growth. This challenge becomes even more visible as clubs globalise, navigating tensions between local expectations and the demands of international markets (Finger et al., 2023; Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2023).

This dual nature of place-based identity as both a valuable asset and a potential constraint plays a central role in how football clubs build and manage their brands. Understanding this complexity is essential before examining how clubs approach branding beyond their local environment. The next chapter explores how football clubs expand into global markets and later how place-based identity influences, shapes, and sometimes complicates these internationalisation strategies.

3 Global Brand Expansion of Football Clubs

Most top-tier football clubs tend to operate as global entertainment brands in today's world, and thus their strategic planning will extend beyond the local communities. This internationalisation of football has transformed clubs from local entities to global phenomena that attract worldwide recognition, cross-border sponsorships, and diverse revenue streams. This chapter examines how football clubs expand into international markets, what strategies they employ, and how the brand evolves as the club navigates through different markets – firstly understanding what global brand expansion means within football. To understand and examine the tensions between place-based identity and global brand expansion, it is crucial to comprehend how this expansion happens, through which strategies and dimensions, to eventually analyse how the identity affects those decisions.

In this thesis, these expansion logics are read through the lens of brand identity and place-based branding, thus rather than treating clubs as neutral companies entering new markets, the analysis considers how their pre-existing identities and local attachments shape, enable, and challenge these globalisation strategies.

3.1 Understanding Global Brand Expansion in Football

Richelieu et al. (2008) define global brand expansion in football as the strategic use of branding to extend clubs' visibility, fan engagement, and commercial activities beyond domestic markets, as a progression in brand status. Their perspective emphasises branding as a deliberate tool for international market entry and the cultivation of global audiences. Bodet and Chanavat (2010) build on this by highlighting the importance of translating brand meaning across cultural contexts while preserving core identity elements, linking international expansion to long-term brand equity development. Similarly, Wang and Tang (2018) demonstrate how international expansion shapes sport team brand equity in non-European markets, further illustrating how clubs actively manage brand perception across borders. Flamengo's – one of Brazil's most supported

clubs – partnership with a U.S.-focused marketing agency to strengthen its English-language presence provides an example of how these strategies are applied in practise (Springer, 2022).

The global expansion of football clubs is largely driven by strategic motivations that extend beyond sporting performance, something the fans don't always agree on, as noted earlier in the study. As domestic markets reach saturation, clubs increasingly look abroad to expand the fanbase, for larger and diversified revenue streams, and broader commercial partnerships, as shown by Hill and Vincent (2006) and their study on Manchester United. International audiences offer significant potential in areas such as merchandise sales, broadcasting rights, sponsorship deals, or even digital media engagement (Romero-Jara et al., 2024; Varea Calero et al., 2025). The current economic structure of modern football, characterised by high player salaries, record-breaking transfer fees, and escalating competition (Jackson & Silverwood, 2025), further incentivises clubs to seek financial growth that goes beyond their local regions. For many clubs, internationalisation becomes a necessary strategic response to be able to remain competitive in an industry that is shaped by global financial dynamics.

This development takes place within a wider transformation of football into a global entertainment industry. Advances in technology, streaming platforms, social media, have enabled clubs to reach supporters across the globe instantaneously (McCarthy et al., 2022). They also note how at the league level, major leagues have positioned themselves as worldwide products with their match schedules, pre-season tours, and media partnerships designed explicitly for global visibility, which in turn shapes the operating environment of clubs. As football has become embedded in global consumer culture, clubs have taken roles similar to multinational brands: navigating diverse markets, cultural expectations, and commercial networks (Richardson, 2023). This shift provides the structural conditions through which global brand expansion has become both possible and increasingly essential.

A central tension in this process lies between global consistency and local adaptation, often framed through Robertson's (1995) concept of glocalization. Rather than adopting fully standardised strategies, successful clubs integrate global and local elements: they maintain recognisable symbols and values while adapting communication, sponsorship, and fan activation to specific markets (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010; M. C.-H. Wang & Tang, 2018). This adaptive approach allows clubs to expand without losing coherence that makes their brand distinctive. As clubs move towards international global brand status, the scope, visibility, and symbolic weight of their decisions expand, increasing the likelihood of identity related tensions, depending on the balance between brand coherence and cultural responsiveness.

3.2 Strategic Approaches to Global Expansion

Global brand expansion does not happen through a single action or operation, but through a set of interrelated strategic approaches that enable football clubs to position themselves in international markets as competitive global brands. Through the transformation from a local sport into a global entertainment industry, football clubs in the current era increasingly rely on structured strategies to reach new audiences, secure international partnerships and strengthen their competitive position (McCarthy et al., 2022; Richardson, 2023) – supported by Hill and Vincent's (2006) idea of improved revenue meaning better facilities and players, which most likely leads to success on the field, which again may add more visibility. These strategies reflect broader patterns of commercialisation and globalisation in football, requiring clubs to operate similarly to multinational brands, while still responding to the local pressure and needs.

The purpose of this section is to outline the key strategic dimensions through which football clubs expand globally. Internationalisation models and sport marketing research view global brand expansion as a combination of market entry, communication, commercial alliances and fan engagement strategies, rather than a single dimension move (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2022; Richelieu, 2008). This forms the basis of this section of the study, where global brand expansion within football is

divided into three different dimensions. These include market expansion and localisation, brand communication and fanbase development, and commercial partnerships and sponsorship networks. Together, these capture the diverse mechanisms that clubs employ to attract new fans, improved media presence, and grow beyond borders. Understanding these strategic approaches is essential for analysing how global expansion happens in practise within football clubs, how it continues, and how it intersects with place-based identity. As these strategies evolve, they begin to generate different forms of pressure, expectations, and cultural negotiations – the tensions that will be examined in the next chapter.

3.2.1 Market Expansion and Localisation

Market expansion and localisation operate as interdependent strategic processes through which football clubs position themselves in international markets – among the most prominent approaches as football clubs try to expand beyond their borders as they seek for growth and increased revenue. Conceptually, these strategies build on models of brand internationalisation, where organisations move from local to global presence in staged progression, each level requiring different levels of identity translation (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Richelieu, 2008). Robertson's (1995) notion of glocalization further highlights that global expansion always requires local sensitivity, as homogenising and differentiating forces operate simultaneously. In football, this tension is also reflected through non-football frameworks such as Aaker's (1996) brand identity model (Hill & Vincent, 2006), which emphasises the importance of a stable core identity across markets, and recent work on authenticity management during internationalisation, which outlines strategic responses to balancing foreignness and place-based identity (S. Wang et al., 2025). These perspectives show that clubs must strategically adapt and combine market entry with cultural adaptation.

In practise, clubs operationalise market expansion through a combination of geographic targeting, brand communication, and identity management. The multi-club ownership model exemplified by City Football Group demonstrates one approach: a global network

of teams sharing selected brand elements while adapting to local sporting cultures (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2023). Traditional expansion strategies such as Manchester United's early 2000s tours in Asia and the establishment of overseas outlets, show how clubs actively take advantage of their success and cultivate international fanbases and commercial partnerships (Hill & Vincent, 2006). Clubs also rely on digital internationalisation, using social media platforms and multilingual content to reach global audiences while maintaining engagement with their local supporters (McCarthy et al., 2022). Visual identity forms another key tool: Juventus' badge redesign reflects an attempt to appeal to global entertainment markets, while resistance to badge changes are common and demonstrate how symbolic heritage limits standardisation (Barnes, 2023). These examples suggest that market expansion depends on the selective reinforcement or adaptation of place-based identity to suit new contexts.

These strategies reveal clear limitations as global expansion often increases pressure on local identity, creating cultural or emotional tensions among supporters. As mentioned earlier, the study on Girona (part of CFG), for instance, shows that although fans accept the economic value of global investment, they remain wary of losing regional distinctiveness and resist being treated as mere "feeder clubs" (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2023). Fan resistance has emerged in other contexts as well: ownership changes at Newcastle United or community displacement linked to stadium development illustrate how commercial growth can clash with local expectations and values (Jones et al., 2024; Putra, 2019). Broader critiques of financialisation argue that global expansion risks turning clubs into tradable assets, potentially undermining the cultural foundations that give the brand meaning (Jackson & Silverwood, 2025). These examples suggest that market expansion and localisation are not separate processes but continuous negotiations between commercial objectives and place-based identity – the underlying tension that shapes how global expansion unfolds within football. These dynamics set the stage for the next strategic dimension of global expansion: how clubs communicate their brand across borders and use media, storytelling, and visibility to reach international audiences.

3.2.2 Communication and Fanbase Development

Brand communication and fanbase development form an integrated strategic dimension through which football clubs construct visibility, identity, and community beyond domestic borders. Football's transformation into a global entertainment industry has forced clubs to increasingly operate as media organisations that compete not only on the pitch but also in the attention economy (McCarthy et al., 2022; Richardson, 2023). Digitalisation, streaming platforms, and social media have fundamentally altered how clubs communicate, enabling what is often called virtual fandom, where emotional attachment forms independently of geographic proximity (Chohan & Schmidt-Devlin, 2024; Fenton et al., 2023). Fans, whether local match-going supporters or globally dispersed digital audiences, actively contribute through engagement practises to brand equity, legitimacy, and long-term visibility, making communication and fanbase development mutually reinforcing processes (Keenen, 2022; Richelieu, 2008).

Clubs operationalise media-driven expansion and fan engagement through a combination of multilingual communication, platform-specific content, and narrative storytelling. Digital channels – particularly TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and club-owned media – allow clubs to speak directly to global audiences and maintain continuous engagement (McCarthy et al., 2022). Multilingual websites or region-specific social media accounts help clubs localise their message without altering the core identity (Hill & Vincent, 2006). Pre-season tours, club documentary series, and tailored digital content enhance international fans' inclusion in the club's identity, while official international fan clubs and membership schemes provide ways for supporters abroad to access exclusive content and feel part of the club's everyday life (Chohan & Schmidt-Devlin, 2024; Hill & Vincent, 2006; Richelieu, 2008). In this way, global fan communities emerge as a layered formation: local match-going supporters, international branches, and digital communities that combine global brand elements with local practices (Keenen, 2022; Llopis-Goig et al., 2025).

These strategies generate clear advantages but also highlight limits and risks. Strong global fanbases create attention and consumption that attract commercial partners, yet large audiences do not automatically translate into proportional financial returns, and cultural differences or distinct digital habits can fragment the supporter base (Hill & Vincent, 2006; Llopis-Goig et al., 2025). Digital ecosystems intensify these dynamics as social media brand communities help maintain engagement and trust but also create risks of homogenised messaging, negative online behaviour, or ineffective communication strategies that fail to resonate across markets (Fenton et al., 2023; Romero-Jara et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). Expanding globally can also risk diluting local authenticity, as supporters may perceive globalised branding or distant ownership structures as distancing the club from its cultural roots (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2023). Clubs must therefore calibrate visibility and inclusion so that global narratives and new forms of community do not undermine the place-based meanings that have historically sustained identity. Brand communication and fanbase development therefore illustrate how clubs navigate the interplay between global reach and local authenticity: communication shapes how identity is expressed and perceived, while fan communities determine how it is lived, adapted, or resisted in different contexts. Since these communication and engagement efforts operate closely alongside commercial objectives, the next section examines how sponsorships and commercial partnerships form another crucial strategy dimension of global brand expansion.

3.2.3 Commercial Partnerships and Sponsorships

Commercial partnerships and sponsorships networks form an essential part of how football clubs project commercial presence and visibility globally, shaping how supporters around the world perceive the clubs' identity. Sponsorships are not only core revenue drivers in modern football, but they also play a central role in how a club becomes recognisable through shirt sponsors, stadium names, or even hospitality offerings (Barnes, 2023; Varea Calero et al., 2025). They provide feedback on global brand expansion, reshaping the identity rather than acting merely as one-directional revenue tools (Herold et al., 2022). Fans often associate specific brands with particular

clubs, which reinforces the emotional and symbolic meaning of both the partnership and the club itself (Biscaia et al., 2016). As clubs begin to operate similarly to multinational brands, when entering new markets, partnerships with companies already established in those regions may serve as a bridge – reducing cultural distance and offering an additional channel through which club can introduce itself to a new market (Criaco et al., 2022; Fenton et al., 2023). In this sense, a clearer brand identity and stronger visibility enable access to more relevant partners, which in further extend the club’s global reach.

Clubs use sponsorships and partnerships as deliberate tools to expand into new markets and build recognisable brands beyond their domestic fanbase. Many top clubs collaborate with regional airlines, global consumer brands or Asian betting companies, combining the best possible financial incentives with access to audiences that may be otherwise challenging to reach (Chadwick et al., 2022). Fly Emirates, for example, has become closely associated with both Arsenal and Real Madrid, appearing prominently on their kits and, in Arsenal’s case, even giving its name to the Emirates Stadium (Barnes & Harland, 2025). The brand’s global reach and high-quality service align with traditional, premium identity promoted by these clubs. More recently, Arsenal’s partnerships with the trending American lifestyle brand Stanley – known for its iconic, durable drinkware – illustrates a contemporary example on how clubs can use relevant, matching image and culturally resonant partners to strengthen brand positioning in specific markets (S. Wang et al., 2025). Collaborations like these not only provide significant revenue but also broaden the club’s brand portfolio, increasing visibility, shaping international perception, and supporting global expansion even further.

These partnerships require careful management, as they shape how the club’s identity is interpreted both locally and globally. Sponsorships bring visibility but also expectations: the partner’s values, reputation, and cultural position inevitably become tied to the club’s own brand narrative (Chanavat et al., 2010). Well-aligned sponsorships can strengthen the brand by signalling shared values or aspirations, while poor alignment may harm the club’s image or disrupt its perceived authenticity (Junghagen, 2018). This

becomes increasingly important as clubs develop large sponsorship portfolios that operate across regions with very different cultural norms and ideologies and balance these differing responses without harming or fragmenting their identity. Ultimately, the effectiveness of sponsorship networks depends on how well they support the broader brand image (Varea Calero et al., 2025), the story of the club, and how they connect with supporters who live and breathe the club, locally or globally. As these global-local dynamics intensify, tensions appear, and that leads us to the core focus of this thesis and next chapter: examining the tensions that emerge when place-based identity interacts with pressures and opportunities of global brand expansion.

4 Tensions Between Place-based Identity and Global Brand Expansion

This chapter shifts from describing place-based identity and global brand expansion separately to analysing how these two collide. Chapter 2 showed how football clubs develop place-based identities anchored in regions, cities, stadiums, colours, symbols and shared memories, drawing on theories of place branding and sense of place, to explain how clubs become locally meaningful. Chapter 3 then examined how clubs pursue global brand expansion through market entry, communication, fanbase development and commercial partnerships, using glocalization, internationalisation and authenticity-foreignness frameworks to explain why global growth has become crucial and structural and how clubs strategize for it, and what risks occur. Combined, these chapters established that most football clubs now operate simultaneously as place-based cultural institutions and as global entertainment brands.

When these two roles collide, tensions appear. Rather than treating tensions merely as side-effects of globalisation, this analysis approaches them through the lens of stakeholder co-creation. This perspective is based on the idea that brand identity is not defined solely by managers, but co-produced, in this case, by supporters, communities, sponsors, authorities and media who adopt roles such as ambassadors, critics or partners, depending on their perceived legitimacy and influence within the club's stakeholder network (Jaeger, 2021; Jones et al., 2024; Källström & Ripoll González, 2025). When clubs alter stadiums, symbols, narratives or ownership structures to support global strategies, these stakeholders do not just receive the changes; they interpret, negotiate and resist them in the light of what they believe the club should be (Barnes & Harland, 2025; Putra, 2019). Recent co-creation research further conceptualises these dynamics as observable brand co-creation performances, such as communicating, contesting and negotiating, through which identity tensions become enacted rather than merely perceived (Brand et al., 2025). Tensions therefore become visible precisely at the

point where stakeholder interpretations diverge from strategic intentions, and authenticity and legitimacy are questioned or withdrawn.

Within this co-creation lens, the literature converges around three recurring dimensions of tensions. Material identity tensions arise when global ambitions reshape the physical and symbolic anchors of place-based identity, such as stadiums, colours, badges or heritage assets. Communicative tensions emerge when clubs translate identity into global narratives, media strategies and digital content, raising questions about whose stories are told, in what tone, and for which audiences. Finally, commercial and ownership tensions concern who controls the club, how value is defined, and how financial and governance decisions affect perceptions of authenticity and belonging. Across all three dimensions, stakeholder co-creation remains as the central mechanism: supporters and their response bring the visibility and decide whether strategies are normalised, contested, or turned into sources of conflict. The following sections explore each tension type in turn, showing how they connect back to theoretical dimensions outlined in previous chapters, but interpreted through a shared co-creation perspective.

4.1 Material Identity Tensions

Material identity tensions arise when the physical and symbolic foundations that tie a football club to its place, local identity, encounter pressures generated by global brand expansion. The local identity is embedded in regions, cities, stadiums, colours, badges, rituals, and other forms of graphical or architectural heritage that gives supporters a concrete experience of belongingness and collective memories (Barnes & Harland, 2025; Richards et al., 2021). These elements are not superficial; they are mechanisms that allow a place to become emotionally meaningful, historically grounded, and socially lived (Hochschild Jr, 2010). Any alteration to them inevitably reshapes how supporters interpret the club's origins and values. Because identity is co-created rather than managerially imposed (da Silveira et al., 2013), these interpretations become decisive: it is supporters' acceptance, negotiation, or rejection of changes that can determine whether strategic decisions gain or lose legitimacy (Brandt & Kurscheidt, 2022). This is

supported by views on stakeholder co-creation and brand citizenship that show that identity is sustained, or contested, through stakeholder interpretation: supporters actively evaluate changes to stadiums, visual identity, or spatial traditions, adopting roles such as ambassadors, silent critics or opponents (Putra, 2019), through co-creation performances, depending on whether they perceive these changes as protective or threatening authenticity (Brand et al., 2025). Because these elements function as anchors of meaning, strategic decisions driven by global ambitions often collide with deeply rooted culture and expectations of continuity (Källström & Ripoll González, 2025; Putra, 2019). Material identity tensions therefore emerge at the intersection of two forces: the strategic need to modernise and globalise the brand, and stakeholder-driven process through which supporters actively defend or reinterpret the physical and symbolic foundations that sustain the identity.

Stadiums and club facilities are logically the most visible sites where tensions between local identity and global strategy become concrete. New stadium projects and urban regeneration schemes are framed by clubs and city authorities as necessary modernisation, promising economic uplift, higher capacities, and improved facilities that support global competitiveness (Barnes & Harland, 2025; Källström & Ripoll González, 2025). Yet ethnographic work around stadium relocation and expansion also documents how these projects can displace residents or reshape the residential zone, or alter matchday rituals, leading long-term supporters feel that their clubs have physically moved away from them, even when it remains in the same city (Putra, 2019; Richards et al., 2021). For local communities, the stadium is not just infrastructure but a memory arena where everyday life, work, and social networks are organised or built around matchdays (Barnes & Harland, 2025). When global ambitions translate into corporate boxes, hospitality zones, or tourist-focused facilities, the material environment that once symbolised local belonging begins to encode stratification and exclusion (Keenen, 2022). Tensions appear when the same development is viewed as progress by global stakeholders and as loss of home by those who experience the place regularly. These divergent evaluations illustrate the co-creation dynamic where identity is negotiated

situationally, and stadium developments become legitimate only when key supporter groups read them as extensions rather than distortions of their spatial and social experience (Jaeger, 2021; Putra, 2019).

Similar tensions emerge around badges, colours, and other elements of visual identity that have become globally tradable brand assets. Badge redesigns and colour changes show that clubs often justify simplification or rebranding as necessary for international recognition, digital usability, or alignment with wider entertainment markets (Barnes, 2023). As Barnes (2023) notes, from a strategic standpoint, minimalist logos and flexible graphic systems promise greater versatility across platforms and products. However, supporters frequently read these changes through the lens of local history: badges and colours are seen as carriers of municipal symbols, political memory, or long-standing narratives about class, region, or culture (Kassimeris, 2024). Cases such as Cardiff City's temporary shift from blue to red, or resistance to badge alterations at Everton, illustrate how attempts to optimise the brand for global audiences can be perceived as challenging or even erasing local codes of belonging (Barnes, 2023). The resulting conflicts are not simply aesthetic disagreements but disputes over who has the authority to refine what the club looks like and, by extension, what it stands for (Fenton et al., 2023). From co-creation perspective, these disputes reflect supporters' sense of co-ownership over the club's visual identity, particularly when symbolic elements are perceived as subject to unilateral commercial control rather than negotiated governance (Brandt & Kurscheidt, 2022). Global expansion strategies therefore turn visual identity into a negotiation between legibility in international markets and loyalty to historically embedded symbols.

Heritage assets and rituals such as chants, tifos, murals, memorials and matchday routines add a further layer to these material tensions, as they are increasingly utilised as content for global storytelling. Clubs use atmospheres, iconic stories and places, and emotionally charged traditions as key narrative resources in campaigns aimed at international audiences (Keenen, 2022; McCarthy et al., 2022). In these narratives, local practices are packaged as proof of authenticity and passion, turning supporter culture

into a form of exportable spectacle, while many of these rituals were originally self-organised, emerging from grassroots groups rather than top-down design to gain differentiation or advantage (Jones et al., 2024). When clubs seek to regulate, modify, or selectively showcase these practices – to fit sponsor or broadcasting demands – supporters can interpret this as expropriation of their cultural heritage (Keenen, 2022). These reactions reflect the broader principle that rituals exist within a shared interpretive space, as clubs may commodify them, but supporters feel they collectively produce and maintain them (Brand et al., 2025). The tension lies in the double status of heritage and ritual: they are both critical assets for global brand differentiation and lived practices that communities feel they own (Jones et al., 2024; Keenen, 2022). Questions arise, whether local heritage is being shared with world or extracted and repackaged for others.

These conflicts show how physical and symbolic anchors of identity become sites where global ambitions and local expectations collide most visibly. Material identity tensions do not arise simply from aesthetic or infrastructural change, but from deeper disagreements over ownership of meaning and the legitimacy of redefining what the club represents. Because these anchors form the experiential core of place-based identity, disruptions to them often trigger broader concerns about authenticity, continuity, and the legitimacy of stakeholder voice. These dynamics form the foundation for the next section, where the focus shifts from physical structures to the communicative processes through which clubs translate identity in global markets.

4.2 Communicative Tensions

Communicative tensions emerge not from physical changes to identity, but from how clubs narrate, frame, and mediate who they are as they expand globally. Modern clubs function simultaneously as community symbols and as global media brands, and identity is therefore negotiated in communicative environments rather than simply transmitted through official channels. Glocalization theory explains that global messages are always interpreted locally (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007), while Keenen's (2022) work on

“locally practised brands” shows that supporters in different contexts reconstruct and personalise the club’s narrative in their own environments. From a stakeholder co-creation perspective, fans do not merely receive communication; they contest, reshape, or defend it depending on their stakeholder position and the communicative performances through which identity is proposed (Brand et al., 2025; Jaeger, 2021). A space emerges between the story the club wants to tell, and the stories supporters recognise as true (de Chernatony, 1999). Communicative tensions therefore surface precisely when the meanings clubs attempt to project globally diverge from the meanings supporters co-create locally.

A first fault line concerns the transformation of local histories into globally marketable brand narratives. Clubs consistently draw on heritage – stadium mythology, neighbourhood identity, working-class roots, or iconic matches and players – as core material for campaigns designed for global visibility (Hill & Vincent, 2006; Keenen, 2022). This strategy is effective commercially as place-based stories differentiate the brand and provide symbolic depth that attracts international audiences searching for cultural meaning rather than generic entertainment (Pritchard et al., 2022). Yet studies on Liverpool and Arsenal illustrate the tension: once heritage becomes content, it is curated, simplified, and detached from the everyday life that produced it (Barnes & Harland, 2025; Grenni et al., 2020; Keenen, 2022). Local supporters may read this stylisation as reductive, especially when campaigns omit conflictual aspects of identity – class politics, supporter protest, community struggles – or present history as a timeless aesthetic rather than an evolving lived experience (Grenni et al., 2020). Meanwhile, international supporters often re-localise these narratives in fan bars, digital communities, or supporter festivals abroad (Jones et al., 2024; Keenen, 2022). Heritage thus shifts between three states: lived, packaged, and re-interpreted. From co-creation perspective, this movement between forms matter because heritage only retains legitimacy when supporters recognise themselves in the story being told, and selective or stylised retellings can trigger contestation or re-interpretation beyond the club’s original intent (Fitzpatrick &

Hoey, 2022). The friction between these forms constitutes a core communicative tension.

A second layer relates to the voice through which identity is communicated. As clubs have become media producers, their communication increasingly follows corporate logics: polished tone, branded storytelling, sponsor alignment, and tightly managed messaging (McCarthy et al., 2022; Richardson, 2023). By contrast, supporter communication – fan media, ultras’ outputs, forums, social channels – remains raw, emotional, partisan, and often confrontational. Research on social media brand communities shows how these spaces enhance belonging but also conflict and exclusion, particularly when global audiences join local discourses at scale (Fenton et al., 2023). Clubs often describe their platforms as vehicles for transparency, yet simultaneously manage openness carefully to avoid reputational risk or sponsor backlash (McCarthy et al., 2022). This asymmetry creates communicative friction: supporters question the authenticity of official messaging, while clubs perceive unmoderated fan discourse as volatile, divisive, or commercially risky. The disagreement is not about the content alone, but about who is authorised to represent the club. Stakeholder theory suggests that legitimacy in these exchanges is never fully controlled by the club, rather it is granted or withheld through ongoing evaluation by supporters who decide whether the communicative voice reflects shared values or corporate distance (Källström & Ripoll González, 2025). In practice, communicative legitimacy becomes a form of identity power, exercised across both offline and digital spaces where local grievances are projected into global discourse (Lee Ludvigsen, 2023).

A third communicative tension concerns what becomes visible once a club participates in transnational media ecosystems. Research on European football media demonstrates that global storytelling tends to privilege major markets, elite competitions, and commercially attractive narratives (Biel et al., 2025). This shapes not only what the world sees of a club, but also how supporters see themselves reflected, or not, within the mediated image. Local struggles, such as housing conflicts around stadium, conflicts over

regeneration, or political concerns around controversial ownership and even human rights, often receive minimal representation in global communications, even when they are central to how many supporters experience the club and place (Gómez-Bantel, 2016; Putra, 2019). Instead, the global brand emphasises spectacle, success, star players, and lifestyle imagery. This imbalance produces what is described as communicative disconnectivity (Biel et al., 2025; Finger et al., 2023): a widening gap between the mediated global version of the club and the lived, place-based realities that give the club cultural grounding. For many supporters, the tension lies not in what the club says, but in what it omits.

Together, these dynamics show that communication is more than a channel; it is an environment in which identity is negotiated, authorised, and sometimes contested. Global expansion requires narrative clarity and scalable messaging, but place-based identity depends on complexity, memory, and situated experience. As these demands collide, communicative tensions surface in the form of selective heritage, corporate tone, contested voice, and uneven visibility. These issues become sharper when communication intersects with ownership structures, capital flows, and sponsorship arrangements – areas where questions of legitimacy, authenticity, and identity move from symbolic terrain into political and economic conflict. These interpretive struggles form the bridge to commercial and ownership tensions, where questions of brand identity, legitimacy and stakeholder voice intensify further as branding decisions intersect with financial and governance structures.

4.3 Commercial and Ownership Tensions

As the strategic logics that enable football clubs to scale globally collide with the normative expectations of local community ownership, legitimacy, and cultural continuity, commercial and ownership tensions arise. Unlike material tensions, which concern the physical expression of identity, or communicative tensions, which focus on narrative authority, commercial and governance tensions centre on who controls the club, what purposes it serves, and how value is defined. Internationalisation frameworks

show that global expansion requires increasing integration across markets and revenue systems (Richardson, 2023; Richelieu, 2008), while the integration-responsiveness logic applied to football suggests that clubs must operate simultaneously as global financial actors and locally embedded institutions (Richardson, 2023). The CASE model adds a further layer by demonstrating how ownership and commercial decisions reposition authenticity and foreignness either as liabilities to be softened or assets to be showcased (S. Wang et al., 2025). Across these processes, stakeholder co-creation remains the mechanism through which legitimacy is granted or withdrawn as supporters evaluate commercial and ownership decisions against moral, cultural and pragmatic expectations (Herold et al., 2022; Jaeger, 2021). When these interpretations diverge from strategic objectives, commercial and ownership tensions surface. To conclude, commercial tensions are not technical or financial outcomes but identity negotiations, where supporters evaluate whether commercial decisions align with their expectations of what the club represents.

A first set of tensions arise from the financialisation of club operations, where internationalisation shifts clubs from community-rooted organisations to globally exposed entertainment assets. In elite leagues, broadcasting and commercial revenues vastly exceed matchday income, restructuring the revenue model around global attention rather than local participation (Hill & Vincent, 2006; Jackson & Silverwood, 2025). This dependence has promoted a new trend where clubs engage in debt-leveraged growth, borrowing against future broadcasting income or securitising stadium revenues in ways that embed them within global financial markets (Jackson & Silverwood, 2025). From the perspective of hybrid-organisational theory, such financialization introduces mission drift: social demands such as affordability, embeddedness and community representation become structurally subordinate to financial imperatives (Zollo et al., 2023). Local supporters often interpret these developments not merely as economic choices but as a redefinition of the club's character – from a shared social institution to a monetised asset. This interpretive process is central to co-creation theory, which argues that legitimacy is sustained only

when stakeholder evaluations remain compatible with strategic direction (Herold et al., 2022). The resulting tensions are therefore not only financial but ontological: whereas supporters continue to view the club as a shared cultural good rooted in community, owners increasingly manage it as a monetizable entertainment asset whose value depends on global rather than local demand. Such shifts often reposition authenticity and foreignness, determining whether local identity is softened, reframed, or strategically showcased to support global revenue strategies (S. Wang et al., 2025).

Commercial tensions extend to the way clubs construct sponsorship portfolios and brand architectures. As clubs seek global expansion, they transform into brand platforms composed of naming rights, regional partners, merchandise categories, hospitality ventures and entertainment sub-brands (Chadwick et al., 2022; Varea Calero et al., 2025). Visual identity becomes a commercial tool: minimalist badges, redesigned kits, and simplified colour systems are justified as necessary for digital scalability and international market recognition (Barnes, 2023). Yet supporters often read these modifications as commodification of heritage, particularly when municipal symbols or historically embedded colours are altered (Biscaia et al., 2016). Co-creation becomes visible in the form of resistance, as supporters contest whether commercial optimisation undermines the symbolic anchors they view as non-negotiable components of the brand identity (Brand et al., 2025), particularly when sponsorships are perceived to violate the club's moral self-image rather than merely its economic logic (Herold et al., 2022). Sponsorships themselves generate additional ambiguity: football sponsorships frequently behave more like relational signalling or elite philanthropy than efficient advertising, with owners more inclined toward sponsorships than institutional shareholders (Naidenova et al., 2016). In emerging or commercially immature markets, sponsorship value often in fact lies in local brokerage rather than global exposure (Junghagen, 2018). These structural features deepen tensions as clubs must simultaneously present themselves as flexible commercial vehicles to global partners while assuring local supporters – who actively co-create and interpret the brand – that identity is not being sold. The risk is producing the perception, observed by Couvelaere

and Richelieu (2005), that excessive commercialisation comes at the expense of sporting authenticity.

Ownership structures intensify these pressures by reshaping control, legitimacy, and the symbolic meaning of the club. Foreign investment and sportswashing concerns create identity instability, as investors often lack historic ties to place and may pursue political or reputational objectives rather than custodianship of local heritage (Gómez-Bantel, 2016; Jones et al., 2024). Cases such as Newcastle United illustrate through co-creation theory how supporters confront identity threats produced by controversial ownership and respond through social creativity or competition, or motivated ignorance (Jones et al., 2024). Multi-club ownership models, such as City Football Group, further complicate identity by embedding clubs in transnational portfolios where strategic imperatives such as talent circulation, brand consistency and global projection, may override local meanings (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2023). Girona supporters' concerns about "degironisation" – where distant ownership prioritises the group's portfolio logic over the club's historic Catalan character – reflect how global portfolio control can be experienced as distancing, technocratic, or indifferent to local narratives (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2023; Richardson, 2023). In some contexts, ownership tensions escalate into institutional exit: fan-owned breakaway clubs such as FC United of Manchester and AFC Wimbledon represent attempts to reclaim legitimacy and authenticity through institutionalised co-creation by establishing alternative governance structures rooted explicitly in localism and democratic participation (Brandt & Kurscheidt, 2022; Hognestad, 2012), reflecting on co-creation in its most radical form. Across these cases, the central question becomes who the club belongs to: the community, a holding group, a sovereign fund, or the global consumer base?

A further dimension of commercial tension emerges from the competitive structures that underpin the commercial product of football. Global broadcasting economies and expanded European competitions have produced a stratified hierarchy in which a small group of economically dominant clubs concentrate both symbolic and financial power

(Biel et al., 2025; Llopis-Goig et al., 2025). Proposals such as the European Super League exemplify a commercial logic that prioritises predictable, high-value matchups and transnational audiences over the traditional structure, open competition, and the principles of sporting merit (Finger et al., 2023; Llopis-Goig et al., 2025). Fans mobilised against the Super League partly because it violated place-based identity: local derbies, national rivalries, and the narrative of upward mobility within the league system are core components of how supporters understand their club's meaning and the sporting aspects of the game (Llopis-Goig et al., 2025). When competitions are redesigned around global entertainment rather than local belonging, the club's obligations to its place come into conflict with its ambitions as a global entertainment brand.

Across these layers of financialisation, sponsorship systems, ownership models, and competitive restructuring, commercial globalisation pushes clubs further into strategic logics optimised for scale, integration, and global visibility. Yet place-based identity depends on local legitimacy, historical continuity, and the perception that the club ultimately serves its community. Stakeholder co-creation is therefore the space in which these tensions are adjudicated, where supporters may act as ambassadors, critics, or founders of alternative institutions depending on how they interpret commercial and governance decisions. Together, these commercial and ownership tensions capture the core contradiction of global club expansion: the more the club behaves like a scalable financial asset, the harder it becomes to sustain the fiction that it belongs to its place and people. This dynamic completes the triad of tensions examined in this chapter and highlights why global expansion remains an inherently contested process, highly dependent on the co-creation by stakeholders.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Synthesis of the Study

This thesis examined how tensions emerge when football clubs rooted in specific places, histories and communities pursue global brand expansion. The findings show that these tensions are not occasional disruptions but structural features of modern football, arising from the coexistence of two logics: the cultural logic of place-based identity and the commercial logic of global brand expansion.

The theoretical framework positioned stakeholder co-creation and brand citizenship as the central lens through which identity and tensions were analysed. This perspective emphasises that brand identity is not defined solely by managers but co-produced through continuous interpretation by supporters, communities, sponsors, authorities and media. Place-based branding and sense of place theories illuminate how identity becomes embedded in different elements that supporters use to interpret authenticity and belonging. Glocalization, integration-responsiveness and authenticity-foreignness frameworks explain how global expansion pressures clubs to scale, standardise and simplify their brand while still responding to local expectations, whether it's the original location or expanded market. These supporting theories map the structures within which co-creation occurs, while co-creation lens clarifies why tensions surface: brand identity is negotiated, not imposed.

These dimensions show that tensions arise not simply because clubs alter stadiums, visual identity, narratives, or structures, but because stakeholders interpret these changes through their own understanding of what the club represents. Tensions materialise when global strategies modify the material, communicative or governance foundations through which identity is lived and recognised, and when these modifications diverge from stakeholder expectations of authenticity and legitimacy. The conflict is therefore not a binary between tradition and modernity, but a negotiation between different systems of meaning: one grounded in place, memory and emotional

continuity, the other in scale, efficiency and global opportunity. These forces cannot be fully reconciled because both express legitimate demands: clubs must remain globally competitive, yet they remain meaningful only when supporters experience their identity as authentic and locally grounded. The result is that tensions become inherent to contemporary football, and their negotiation through stakeholder co-creation shapes both sporting and commercial outcomes.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The first research question asked how place-based brand identity is constructed. The findings show that identity emerges through intertwined material, symbolic and emotional dimensions. Stadiums act as memory sites and community houses; colours and badges embody communal recognition; and rituals, narratives and local culture embed the club within its social environment. These elements do not function independently but reinforce each other, producing a coherent sense of place-based belonging.

The second research question examined how global brand expansion reshapes this identity. Global strategies – such as international marketing, portfolio branding, digital expansion and multi-club ownership – require consistency, recognisability and scalability. In practice, this often means simplifying narratives, reworking visual identity, reframing heritage as content, or redesigning stadium spaces for commercial and revenue benefits. While these strategies support international competitiveness, they may also compress the cultural complexity that gives identity its depth, which aligns with the integration-responsiveness logic.

The third research question focused on how tensions arise and why they become contested. The analysis across three dimensions showed that tensions appear when stakeholders perceive strategic decisions as misaligned with their expectations of what the club represents. Material tensions emerge when physical anchors such as stadiums or badges are altered; communicative tensions arise when global narratives conflict with

lived local experiences; and commercial or ownership tensions surface when financial or strategic decisions appear to prioritise global audiences and financial benefits over the place-based community. Supporter responses, ranging from co-creation to active resistance, demonstrate that legitimacy is negotiated, not guaranteed. These tensions are not only related to football, but likely to emerge in most hybrid organisations.

Across the three questions, the central finding is that global brand expansion does not add a new layer onto identity, it changes the conditions under which identity is recognised as legitimate, because it shifts who the club is speaking to, building for, and economically accountable to. Together, these findings show that tensions between place-based identity and global expansion are inherent to the contemporary football landscape. The challenge for clubs is not to choose one or the other, but to navigate the space where the two meet, where global opportunity must be balanced with the cultural, symbolic and emotional foundations that give the club meaning.

5.3 Implications for International Business

The findings carry clear implications for international business, especially for organisations that operate simultaneously as culturally embedded institutions and global commercial actors. Football clubs illustrate that internationalisation is not solely a question of market entry or brand extension; it is also a question of authenticity, identity and stakeholder expectations. Cultural assets such as heritage, symbols and place-based meaning behave differently from typical commercial resources as they can't be standardised without risking the loss of the very qualities that generate their value.

The thesis therefore highlights three broader implications for international business. First, brand expansion in culturally rooted industries highlights the need to balance global integration with local responsiveness more carefully than traditional internationalisation models typically account for. Second, stakeholder co-creation is as an important condition for global strategies, which gain traction only when supporters, communities and other actors recognise them as legitimate, illustrating how backlash,

support, accept or resistance become strategic constraints. Third, identity itself can become either a constraint or an advantage depending on how organisations navigate the tensions between continuity and change. These insights extend beyond football to organisations whose brand identity depends on cultural meaning, including tourism, entertainment, heritage industries, and other place-based consumer brands

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could deepen these findings by examining how specific stakeholder groups – such as local authorities, global fan communities or supporters – shape or resist globalisation strategies in practice. This study was heavily focused on European clubs but also analysing examples and strategies from Asia and South America, while there was a severe lack of studies around U.S.-based football clubs – a large operator in international business, but a marginal producer in football? The upcoming World Cup in the U.S., Canada and Mexico in 2026 may improve football's stance within the American community and therefore force for more investment and global reach within U.S. football clubs. An upcoming change like this could provide for an interesting landscape and untraditional strategies, as other U.S. sports differ heavily from traditional football clubs as relocations and expansion drafted teams are a core part of the growth of each sport.

While most of the example clubs analysed within this study have formed their identity through decades or centuries of belongingness and continuity, there is a gap in the literature regarding clubs formed in the past few decades and their creation of the place-based identity, if there is one. Another interesting dimension forms around multi-club models such as the Red Bull franchise, who promote a recognisable identity built on non-local elements, which may limit place-based differentiation while still enabling global brand scalability. This also raises deeper questions about the evolving purpose of football: should clubs be valued primarily as financial assets, or as cultural institutions that promote local and global belonging?

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