

Module 1. Club Identity: “Same song, different lyrics?”

Unit 1.1

1.1.1 The power of identity in football (club/national team)

In this unit we will describe what we mean by “club identity” and also explore the reasons why it has power as well as the potential to improve the fortunes of a club or national team and its fans.

We do not need a dictionary to define the word “identity”. Everyone knows that it is the qualities, beliefs, values, activities, ideologies, history and behaviours that distinguish or identify a person. “Identity is like a virtual home which we use as a reference to explain something, but does not have an existence in the real world” (Lévi-Strauss, as cited in Avanza & Laferté, 2017, p. 190). Football clubs are entities which, especially because they have been around for a long time, have developed their own identities.

In sport we can apply identity to a player, a club, a national team or even a way of playing. But in the context of fan engagement (exploring the emotional connection of a fan to a club or national team and understanding how to harness that power for the benefit of everyone) we will explore the connection of a fan to a club or a national team (in unit 2, theme 4.)

In other modules of this course we have explored (or you will explore) concepts of social identity and the reasons why football illustrates well the characteristics of this. So, in this module we will leave the concept of “social identity” and look at the club itself and analyse what it means to its community and what it stands for.

Let’s start with some examples. The Austrian club Sturm Graz¹ was founded as a club for the working class to pose an alternative to Grazer AK², which was founded for university students and academics.

¹ Official website: <https://www.sksturm.at/>

² Official website: <https://grazerak.at/>

There is also a rivalry between German clubs FC Köln³ and Fortuna Düsseldorf⁴, which appears to be more about city divides in the Rhineland than fundamental reasons of identity. Cologne was traditionally a working-class city, whereas Dusseldorf was more of a business and fashion centre.

That struck a chord with the professor of this course (a fan of the Northern English team Sunderland⁵), as one of the manifestations of the rivalry between “The Black Cats” and the “Magpies” of Newcastle United is the beer preferences that each club have. It is a common believe that Sunderland fans drank Double Maxim, a strong beer brewed in Sunderland by the now defunct Vaux Brewery, while Newcastle United⁶ fans (whose club is some 12 km away) preferred Newcastle Brown Ale, brewed in (guess where?) Newcastle.

But the rivalry between these two clubs is not just down to beer. Depending on who you read, there are several explanations, but the one that holds most water is that during the English Civil War (1642-1651) the city of Sunderland supported the Parliamentarians while Newcastle supported the Crown. Sunderland won that particular battle; however, Sunderland AFC was not founded until 1879 and Newcastle United until 13 years later, in 1892.

As I grew up, the Magpies always tended to get the better of the Black Cats (or ‘Mackems’ – supposedly a term based on the pronunciation of the word ‘make’ as Sunderland was a centre of munitions production–) and my father relied on increasingly implausible explanations for our apparent superiority, ranging from the fact that, at one particular point, Sunderland owned its own stadium whereas Newcastle United rented theirs from the City Council

More recently Sunderland have dropped two levels to the third tier of English professional football, so the rivalry is somewhat less strident than it was. It is now characterised by Newcastle fans turning up in small numbers to support the home team whenever Sunderland turns up as the visiting club to jeer. In return, we Sunderland fans hang on to the 6 consecutive victories over our rivals when we were last in the Premier League together. (Mark Bradley experience)

This age-old rivalry would appear to be about club identities, but, as you have read, these are usually a series of loosely researched facts designed to show one club as “better” than the other. They are not based on beliefs or ideologies of the clubs –not based on their identities–. In fact, according to Daniel Gray, in the introduction to *Us & Them: New*

³ Official website: <https://www.fc.de/start/>

⁴ Official website: <https://www.f95.de/home/>

⁵ Official website: <https://www.safc.com/>

⁶ Official website: <https://www.nufc.co.uk/>

Journeys in Football Rivalry, “Football rivalries are complex and multi-layered. Their origins and motives are never the same” (Gray et al., 2020):

So where can we search to find out more about what each club stands for or believes in? Perhaps the club crests will give us a clue. After all, they are proudly worn on the player’s shirts. So, surely, they will offer an insight into “what makes each club tick”.

The first thing you learn is that Sunderland’s crest has changed over the 141-year history of the club. The Football Crest Index⁷ explains that the club’s first crest was a heraldic version of the town’s coat of arms. It contained the black cat and a ship reflecting the coal traffic trade that was so important to this port.

One further change in the 1970s saw the club add red and white stripes to the badge and, when it moved into its current home (the Stadium of Light) in 1997, the ship was removed (perhaps thus reflecting the death of the shipyard two decades previously,) and two local monuments were brought in alongside a colliery wheel (the mechanism that drove the pit lift in the age of coal mining.) The Black Cats remain. They are there to represent the fans: the club’s most important element.

The club’s most important element (the fans) did not all agree with the change: some preferred the older badge and some argued that shipbuilding was just as much a part of the club’s history as coal mining, so one should not replace the other. Many argued that the badge seemed to look like a 19th century town hall crest and that this was an anachronism in a time when clubs are looking outward: to engage and to attract new audiences. Some, of course, did not care, as long as the team wins.

For us, the badge with the red and white stripes, the blue of the sea in the background and the ship was the favourite. It very simply described where the club was from and what made the city famous.

These days, changes of crest are driven by different motives. Glasgow Rangers⁸ new crest and “branding” was launched as recently as July 2020. Its aims were, according to a piece in UK magazine *Design Week*, to modernise the team’s image in the digital era:

The centre of the new identity work is a refreshed crest. See Saw creative director Maurice Hynds says that the new crest has been “designed to add balance, power and a stronger presence to the well-known Rangers brand”. The updated crest echoes the ‘Ready’ crest that was introduced in 1959.

⁷ Official website: www.thefootballcrestindex.com

⁸ Official website: <https://www.rangers.co.uk/>



'Ready' is the team's motto. See Saw director Cameron Syme tells Design Week that it is an important part of the team's identity, highlighting the club's resilient spirit and willingness to face challenges. (Wong, 2020, para. 8-9)

There is a common theme in all of the above examples. The decisions on crest and badge have been made internally, whereas the factors influencing rivalry are more organic and fan driven.

If club identities can more closely connect with fans' perceptions of what their clubs means to them, then, surely, that would increase the power of the club: its potential to improve the lives of people, to positively influence external perceptions, to generate improving advocacy for the club and to increase the numbers of people supporting the club (and attending matches.)

Just like we traced the emergence of fan engagement back to its roots in customer engagement, it is also useful to look at how businesses use the concept of brand and how this can help clubs looking to maximise their identities.

What if a club did what Nike⁹ did? What could we learn from such an analysis?

Nike's famous Swoosh and strapline "Just do it" have become part of the scenery, and this did not happen by accident. Rather than preferring the traditional sales approach, it built its growth around telling stories. It knew that if it was to sell more products in the long-term, it would have to resonate emotionally with customers, and it did this by creating and continuing a story.

Even today, everything the company does is backed up by a story, such as the amazing sub-two-hour marathon run by Eliud Kipchoge. This idea of telling the story of other people (not their own brand) has led them into areas such as equality where their aim was "celebrating differences and inspiring change through the power of sport".

What brand-driven storytelling needs, of course, is a story, and football is never short of those.

If a club were to emulate Nike's approach, it would follow the following steps:

1. Understand its place: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Clubs finances can be hugely impacted by the level they play at. This is best illustrated by the English Championship play-off final. Played at the Wembley national stadium, this is often described as the football's "most lucrative match", as the winner of the

⁹ Official website: www.nike.com



2019 play-off final was forecast to earn a minimum of £170 million simply by qualifying for the Premier League.

2. Set its goals. Here is where we see often a difference in attitude and it is therefore an opportunity for new clubs. Established clubs often rely on generation or performance factors and invest less effort to understand the social demographics of fan bases: where they live, work and play.
3. Identify its customers. Here is where the diversity of performance across football is the highest. According to the Fan Experience Company experience, the clubs who need to understand mostly who their fans are often correspond to those less likely to do so, quoting as reasons not to do it lack of resource, fear of being unable to meet fans' concerns, etcetera. On the other hand, larger clubs, who are less reliant on ticket revenue for their viability, do appear to invest more in finding out what their supporters need.
4. Create a voice and personality. While progressive modern businesses, like Nike, Adidas, Disney and others, create a consistent perception, football often has a tendency to be inconsistent. An example of this inconsistency is not using its natural identity, beliefs or values, when encouraging the renewal of season tickets.

These are the actions that define today's most progressive businesses, all of which are in pursuit of more than a transactional relationship with their customers. Football clubs, whose emotional pull we examine at different points of this course, have immense power in their natural identities, in which the emotional connection is already there and does not need to be built.

The emotional power of a carefully nurtured club identity can deliver many benefits to the "aware" club, from securing support at difficult times on the pitch to finding community and commercial partners who are attracted by this extraordinary "pull".

If football can learn from the story-telling genius of companies like Nike, clubs will be able to optimise the power of their identity and throw off their reliance of winning.

Exercise

Undertake some research into the club that YOU follow.

- When was it founded?
- By whom and which was the intent?
- How is the original intent of the club communicated today?
- Is its intent clear to its fans and community?
- How would you improve the way it is communicated?

1.1.2 The role of identity in Fan Engagement

In this theme we will explore how identity can generally play a part in fan engagement and also be part of a structured strategy to strengthen club/fan relationships and grow the club.

Club identity is not as simple as the colours of the shirt or the trophies won. It may be seen by club owners as part of the club branding process, but it is usually seen quite differently by fans.

Your club's identity is woven into your life in more ways than you could imagine. For example, in England, where people love football very much, it is interesting to observe just how someone new is described by a third party when introducing him or her to someone else. *This is Kevin, he's from North London and he's an Arsenal fan.* There is no denying the fact that in a football-mad country your identity as a person often contains your football allegiance.

Such is the case of the young Atletico Madrid fan who asked his father as they both travelled in their car: *Dad why do we support Atletico?* El publicista, 2010.¹⁰ The humour was that, with so few wins and trophies at the time of this clever TV commercial, the father could not answer because it is something you cannot put into words.

The fact is that Atletico Madrid fans, like most fans, do not follow the club for victories. They follow the club "forever", regardless of how the team performs, and that is the case because they see a bigger meaning in what they do.

For football fans, each club's identity is wrapped up in a number of important elements, such as where you come from, who your friends were when you began following the club, what the circumstances were that led you to follow the club, perhaps it was a family matter: your grandfather, father, mother or brothers or sisters.

If a club can tap into these connections, it can strengthen the emotional connection for existing fans and also offer something attractive for new fans to buy into. But while fans often have a clear view of their clubs' natural identities, the truth is that, in a world where there is often a high turnover of owners, the people running the club do not.

In many press conferences where a club CEO is introducing a new corporate sponsor or partner, the sponsor is almost always described (in England, anyway) as "fitting perfectly into the club's values", and yet it is extremely rare for clubs to ever articulate their values in other contexts.

¹⁰ To watch the video, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQuWxxcd9pU>



For example, when a player signs (again, in England), he or she always talks about “being attracted by the club’s ambition”. Again, this is never articulated for fans. Apart from winning matches (which is surely every club’s sporting ambition), what else is the club aspiring to?

So, how *should* a club maximise their identity in the pursuit of the benefits that fan engagement can offer?

On the assumption that—as we saw in unit 1, theme 1 above—the club has worked closely with its fan community to clarify what makes it unique, then that can be used for good: to help people.

There are a number of ways in which it can be done. FC Barcelona’s famous and well-known “Mès que un club” motto is brought to life by the Universitas and Innovation Hub. They impart information from one of the world’s most successful clubs to the **benefit** of others. Everyone else may be a rival, but FC Barcelona’s identity **requires** them to share.

Why? This is so because they represent **more** than a club. It is about more than a game of football. Heroes come and heroes go, so there must be something deeper that endures.

If (and it is a BIG if) the football ever fails in Barcelona, there must be something else to fall back on. The values present in the statement “more than a club” encapsulate this.

Liverpool is famous, of course, for its supporters’ hymn “You’ll never walk alone”. It first appeared in the 1956 film *Carousel* but was then “claimed” by the city of Liverpool when local pop group Gerry and the Pacemakers released their version of the song in 1963.

This song (the phrase and the words) is what connects the members of the club’s community to one another. But, that is not all: the song also helps to create a belief system that underpins everything the club does, even going as far as to inform some of the much-needed community work the club undertakes.

For example, the club (along with its close neighbour and rival Everton) reflects the words of the famous by reaching out to people in its community who are suffering from food poverty.

Political decisions, such as the roll out of a controversial benefit scheme called “Universal Credit” and austerity have left residents in the northern area of Liverpool twice as likely to rely on a foodbank to feed themselves and their families.

To further raise awareness of the issue, ex-Liverpool star turned TV pundit Jamie Carragher and Liverpool Chairman, Peter Moore, helped to communicate the problems being faced via social media and right outside the ground, where collections are actually made.

This is a good example of a club thinking beyond its function, as pursuing sporting glory and asking a key existential question: why Liverpool? What is our wider purpose? So, the words of the fans' favourite hymn to the club have inspired a number of community initiatives that means that the club can give a response back to the communities that support them.

You do not have to be a large successful club to have an identity that matters, either. Simon Sinek, the UK/US philosopher and writer, sets out the importance of the question "why" in his book *Start with Why: How Great Leaders inspire Everyone to Take Action* (2011). In football clubs, we often focus on the "how" and "what". We know how to put on a game, and we know what to do, but we seldom ask why. Why is it that this group of friends comes every single week, regardless of the weather, the opposition or the performance of the team?

There is no way to stress highly enough the importance of club identity when it comes to fan engagement and the key learning points that follow.

First of all, here are a series of questions which will help you refine the understanding of what the club stands for and what its identity and values may be:

- What does your club stand for?
- If your club had not been created, what would be missing? (What does the club bring to the community that would otherwise not be possible?)
- What are your club's values?
- Do such values resonate with supporters?
- Are such values absent? Are they not being articulated and/or routinely compromised?

What do we mean by "compromise"? That is simply that a club declares, in its badge, in its communications and elsewhere, one strong belief. But when it is called upon to act on this belief, it either remains silent or emerges with another contradictory position.

It is therefore of utmost importance for clubs wishing to grow through engagement to have a statement of identity, values and purpose.

Strategic engagement begins with meaning and identity, so any lack of values or clear identity only provides a vacuum likely to be filled with compromise and expediency. The

first step should be for clubs to have a strong dialogue with supporter groups, ideally setting out an agreed statement on what the club stands for and what its values should be.

As we have seen in this course, Dublin's Bohemian FC has a clear fan and community-focused intent, to the extent that it is estimated that as few as 5% of the people coming to games are only there for the football. The remaining 95% attend because they feel like they are taking part in something bigger. And Bohemians' eschewing of the more common "sporting glory"-based approach is one that clubs, especially outside of the elite, should consider strongly.

Being different is key. Club identity and values can be expressed in many different ways. They can ultimately contribute to affecting the way the local community perceives the club, and more importantly, encourage more people to actually come to the games.

Dulwich Hamlet is a club operating at the sixth level of English football (the National League South.) Like any other club, they aim to win games, but that is not how they go about growing interest and numbers of supporters.

Here is an article about the club and its inclusive outlook, published by *The Guardian* (2018):

Something unusual was happening – a younger, liberal outlook bleeding into the usual sporting tribalism, so that the terraces started policing themselves of a common blight (racism, homophobia, misogyny), which in turn encouraged more casual attendees. Gates kept rising, with crowds at some games pushing up to the ground's 3,000 cap. As one fan described it, Dulwich offered "a beers-in-the-air intensity, minus the toxic shit that normally goes with it. (Lamont, 2018, para. 18)

As a consequence of this, the club has attracted more women and more people whose identity and beliefs may have led them to expect that they would **not** receive a welcome from the local football club.

Another example is that of West Bromwich Albion: a club who were promoted to the English Premier League in July 2020. As we have shown in another unit in this certificate, they responded to a tweet protesting that the club was supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and withdrawing their season ticket, with the tweet "You won't be missed."

That might lead the club to lose some fans. However, this move will be welcomed by the vast majority of this club's fans and will also gain some traction in the media, and, again, it will perhaps start to alter external perceptions of the club.

So, in this theme, we have shown the principles behind using a club's identity and values to support fan engagement: growing the fans' emotional investment in the club (and benefitting as a direct result.)

Exercise

You should also consider the following questions when researching how clubs use their identity and values to engage existing and new supporters:

- What makes your club unique?
- What makes the fan experience at your club unique?
- What are your club's values?
- Are they important to fans? Are they known to fans?
- How are they demonstrated? How could they be demonstrated?

1.1.3 Examples of how football optimises identity, value and differences

In this theme will look at more examples of how clubs rely on more factors than simply winning games, especially for clubs who may not be able to regularly challenge for the top honours.

In 2006/07 shortly after my partner and I founded the Fan Experience Company to help clubs grow attendances by adapting the match day experience to the needs of different groups, we were invited by the then Football League (now, the EFL – English Football League) to attend a series of 30 games, across the country, at different stadiums, as a family seeing a game at each club for the first time.

As a devout follower of football, I had an ability to predict what the general experience would be like at the clubs and so it proved. Even though I had never been to the majority of the clubs visited, the experiences were pretty alike. In fact, with the exception of Norwich City (which we'll come to later), most of the experiences were not only similar, but broadly entirely focused on the football, to the detriment of the needs of a family.

The professor's partner observed that the experiences she had tended to be characterised by the phrase 'same song, different lyrics' (Bradley, 2007). She was, of course, commenting on the fact that different clubs often adapt a commonly known tune to deliver their support to their club.

What she wanted to see was the character and personality of each club brought to life in the match day experiences, as we travelled up and down the UK because, and this was shown in the 37% increase in junior attendance that was to follow in

the next ten seasons, without this, the experience would be of little interest to key decision-makers in the family leisure time. (Mark Bradley experience)

Given that most clubs outside of the elite need more than just their long-term loyal supporters to prosper, and given that the crowd increases clubs' need to achieve these are not all going to come from lapsed fans (i.e. those people who used to attend but no longer do so), it is very important for clubs to optimise their identities, values and differences if they are going to attract people whose immediate connection with the game of football is not so strong.

As a direct result of our exploratory work in 2006/07, The Family Excellence scheme (run by the Fan Experience Company in partnership with the English Football League) was created. It had two main aims:

1. to improve the experiences of families already attending, and
2. to attract and retain new family groups.

Each club receives two visits per season by experienced assessors (who attend with children.) Each visit mimics the exact journey that would be taken by a new family. The assessor checks the website for relevant information, follows social media messages about the game, travels to the game; makes a purchase in the club's retail store, consumes refreshments and enjoys the game, participating in any entertainment or activities provided by the club.

A report is then compiled describing the experience in detail and providing a summary report on where the strengths and weaknesses are and a list of recommendations on actions that should be taken to improve levels of family engagement: that is, to increase their emotional connection with the club from the very first experience.

Later in the season, a second visit takes place, which gives the club a chance to demonstrate the improvement actions it has taken. A final summary is provided, containing detailed information, including the club's position in its own league and overall in the 72 English Football League (EFL) clubs.

By introducing the feedback, the competition, the benchmarking and the club seminars, it has been possible to place a new focus on an area vital to the futures of clubs.

So, what was it experienced at Norwich City that left such a strong impression on the professor and his partner? It was simply that they felt welcomed at every point in an industry with a reputation for keeping fans at an arm's length (or worse).

At every point of the experience, my partner and our children (10 and 7 at the time) felt part of the match day. Stewards were welcoming, proactive in friendly, asking

my partner if they could look at a bulky purchase she had made in the city before the game. She would lock it away somewhere safe and return it to her afterwards.

The club's chief executive officer (Neil Doncaster – now CEO at the SPFL – Scottish Professional Football League) was also outside of the stadium welcoming fans and speaking to them. As a regular attendee of matches, I was surprised at this, but my wife was delighted to see a club clearly open to new fans and personally welcoming them (along with existing ones).

The positive and family-friendly experience continued inside. Because one of the owners of the club is a renowned TV chef (Delia Smith), this meant that, in the place of the usual poor-quality refreshments offering, were products that really appealed to my family, including items with locally sourced or created food. This included a steak pie made with Woodford Ale – from a local brewery. (Mark Bradley experience).

So, when we talk about identity, values and differences, you can see why Norwich made such a good impression on us. The fact is that it is all part of the club's culture: carefully nurtured over time to ensure its fans have more than just a relationship with the club based on results. The club proactively aims to connect with fans—through both good and bad times—. We were simply experiencing this as a new family.

“Whereas my partner (and kids) found it difficult to tell one experience from another, as we travelled around England in 2006/07, they (and I) all felt something different at Carrow Road, where Norwich City play” (Mark Bradley experience).

When we shared our experiences to the other 71 EFL clubs at the end of that season, one of the key messages we communicated was the following:

By emphasising what makes your club different, you cannot improve the emotional connection between existing fans and the club (therefore retaining more of them), but you can also make yourself attractive to new people, whose perceptions of the quality of the match day experience may have been negative.

There are many ways, of course, in which a club can distinguish itself, but developing a fan-focused culture is one that will bear fruit for many decades, making a major contribution to the club's continuing viability.

So, for an exercise in this particular theme, let's look at a club in the SPFL, where Neil Doncaster has worked since 2009.

Glasgow Celtic was founded in 1887 by Brother Walfrid, a Marist, who established the club with the purpose of alleviating poverty among the Irish immigrant population in the East End of Glasgow by raising money for charity ("Poor Children's Dinner Table").

Celtic has a long-standing fierce rivalry with Glasgow Rangers, of course, and the clubs are known as the Old Firm. The club's fanbase was estimated in 2003 as being around nine million worldwide, and there are more than 160 Celtic supporters clubs in over 20 countries. An estimated 80,000 fans –an extraordinary amount– travelled to Sevilla, in southern Spain, for the 2003 UEFA Cup Final, and their "extraordinarily loyal and sporting behaviour" (Birgit Prinz and "Zizou" – stars of the show, 2003) earned the club Fair Play awards from UEFA and FIFA. Celtic lost that game, but won a lot of people's hearts, especially in Sevilla, where the prospect of hosting 80,000 travelling supporters (the majority of whom had no tickets) would have been a source of concern for many local people.

In this description of the history of the club above, one can see some clear values, including, for example, "alleviating poverty", and also representing the Irish community, many of whom travelled to Scotland to escape the Great Famine of 1845 to 1849.

1.1.4 Football as a sub-culture (the opportunities for smaller, less resourced clubs)

At the time of writing, Celtic has won the Scottish Premiership for nine consecutive seasons. It plays in Europe every season. Many of its players represent their countries at International Level. It is a club with hundreds of thousands of followers around the world. Its prosperity does not rest alone on the number of tickets sold for games; it attracts strong commercial interest in the club, and its famous green and white hoops are recognised around the world.

But what about clubs who rely on ticket revenue to survive? Celtic, because of their size, strength and reputation, will be more immune to the effects of a pandemic like COVID-19, but smaller clubs, perhaps those outside of the top tier of football, will find the next few months and years a huge challenge. Some may not survive.

So how can identity, differences and values help smaller clubs to survive?

Let's examine the potential for smaller clubs to sustain themselves and to engage fans and the wider community through developing the characteristics of a sub-culture.

What is a sub-culture?



According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a sub-culture is

“A cultural group within a larger culture, often having beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger culture” (Subculture, n. d).

So, if we take the culture of football in general, it could be said that clubs developing a sub-culture are developing or have developed beliefs or interests (the identity, values and differences that we speak of) that convey a different message from the norm.

A quick glance at the website¹¹ of English 7th tier club Lewes FC immediately surprises you. One of the messages you see is the following:

“Equal playing budgets, Equal everything. It is not impossible. **Equality FC**”
(Equality FC, n.d.)

We will explore their approach in more detail in a separate theme.

There are many benefits for football clubs who evolve in ways that are noticeably different to the norm, and Lewes is a fine example of this. But they are not alone. Clubs like St. Pauli (from Hamburg) and Ireland’s Bohemian FC grow interest and attendances **not** through football performance or achievements, but through they representing something different from the norm.

Bohemians’ Daniel Lambert can be heard talking about some remarkable facets of his north Dublin club, where he talks about how the club speaks out on issues of importance, in contrast to mainstream clubs who rarely indulge in politics (Lambert, 2020).

You can listen to the **complete podcast** in the following link:
<https://fanexperienceco.com/podcast/special-dan-lambert-bohemians-fc/>

Most recently, the club has issued a new change shirt in support of refugees’ charities. This may be surprising, as Bohemians is not a wealthy club and needs to generate revenue to remain viable. However, as *The Independent* reported in February 2020:

Bohemian FC is not a football club that can afford to let money slip out of its grasp easily. A recent UEFA report placed the League of Ireland 36th out of the 55 UEFA nations, ranked according to revenue. The combined revenue of the ten LOI clubs is around £12.5m. That is 10 per cent of the smallest revenue recorded by any Premier League club in their latest accounts.

¹¹ <https://www.lewesfc.com/>



But some things matter more than money. This week, Bohemian announced that their away shirt this season would carry a message, rather than a sponsor: “Refugees Welcome”. “Love Football, Hate Racism” will be written on the collar. (Storey, 2020, para. 1-2)

The club remains a very clear example of a sub-culture in football because it eschews ways to make money in favour of causes it believes in. Many remarked at the time that the League of Ireland team’s new away kit not only highlights an important human rights issue, but also shows that some things matter more than money.

There are many other clubs around the world who attract fans **not** because of the football and **not** because of the traditional connections, such as family, location, friends, etc., but because they stand for something, because they believe in a cause and believe that football is a very effective way to practically support it.

Most of all, this is about thinking differently and engaging fans in different ways.

If smaller clubs think the same way that mainstream clubs do, they will find it even more difficult to differentiate themselves in a busy market, let alone attract fans to the club when better football is played elsewhere.

However, if smaller clubs think of themselves as sub-cultures and use their presence to progress beliefs in the way clubs like Lewes, Bohemians and St. Pauli do, then they may prosper even when not playing well on the pitch.

Remember: if you base everything on the football and the football fails, then your USP (unique selling point) fails too. Base your club on something more than the football, and, as Lewes, Bohemians and St. Pauli have all done, your status as a sub-culture will propel you forward in surprising ways.

Exercise

Choose one of the above clubs or a “sub-culture” club that you know personally or that is located close to you, and answer the following question:

How does the “sub-culture” status of a club impact on the potential for

- 1) Commercial partnerships?
- 2) Community partnerships?

In your analysis, identify the pros and cons of establishing commercial partnerships and sponsorships for “sub-culture” clubs. Do the same for community partnerships.

Unit 1.2

1.2.1 Developing and refining your club identity

As it has been made in this certificate, one of the key elements of a fan engagement strategy is club identity, but there are risks involved if this is undertaken without supporter and community inputs. After all, “consultation and dialogue” is one of the remaining three elements.

This theme is going to explore how to develop and refine a club identity.

As we have said, having a strong and well communicated club identity, values and beliefs is a powerful way of engaging fans: both, existing fans who we want to renew and those future fans vital to our club’s viability.

The fact is that every club has an identity, regardless of what the current owners or directors think. This is the natural identity which has evolved over the years, based on the club’s story. It is a matter of fact. It is just there and it can have positive and negative connotations.

Every club has its own identity. However, but in many clubs, such identity is not used, not articulated, and often not even understood. The key to this is the existing fan base, because the fan base has been there forever. Generations of people follow the club, so what are **their** memories?

What associations do they make when they think of the club? If they had to sum up what their club meant to them in as few words as possible, what would they say?

This is important, because it can help us to better understand external perceptions of the club and it can help us to focus on the existing positives and to address any negative elements.

In Denmark’s 3F Superliga¹², the league undertakes a detailed fan survey every season, so that fans can influence the league’s development. However, this is not just for fans’ perceptions of the League, but also to understand their perceptions of the individual clubs, their experiences, their likes and dislikes, etcetera.

The survey asks a question that we believe every league and every club should ask at least once every few seasons: **what does the club mean to you?**

¹² Official website: www.superliga.dk



AC Horsens¹³ is a club that was officially founded in 1994 and it is playing at the Casa Arena stadium just north of the east Jutland club. The club is very proud of its values; it displays them proudly inside the stadium, so that the players, especially, are motivated by them. The values include hard work, togetherness and humility, and, it can be said, the club's fortunes demonstrate them.

When they were first promoted to the Superliga in 2005/06, they became famous for their strong defence, as they finished in 10th place and avoided relegation. They drew 13 of 33 matches, eight of them ending 0–0. They conceded just 41 goals in 33 matches. The only three teams to concede fewer goals than AC Horsens made up the top three clubs in the Superliga that season.

How many of us support clubs who do not play sexy, attractive football but who work hard to win, tackle hard and often reflect the industrial heritage and historical hard work on which their town, city or region is based? AC Horsens is one of such clubs.

So, when fans were asked to describe the words that came to mind when thinking about their beloved club, one thing that regularly appeared in the responses was “long throw ins”.

Long throws are a characteristic of a strong, hard-working team. Teams playing Pepe Guardiola's “tiki taka”, for example, pass the ball, often hundreds of times before playing a ball into the box for the killer moment.

AC Horsens, like a lot of clubs, move the ball quickly into the opposing club's half and strongly challenge for it. So long throw ins are not just important for them, but recognised by their fans as a key characteristic of the club's personality. They are part of the club's identity and inform the ways in which the club can work with stakeholders too –not just fans, but commercial and community partners in the region. The club is about the rewards of hard work and togetherness, and this is a message which can resonate positively for the wider community, with obvious benefits for the club.

The Yellow Danger's values are already in place, but how about a club at the start of this journey. How would they approach developing them?

To achieve this, we are going to look closely at the experience of AFC Bury¹⁴, a “phoenix” club from Lancashire, in the northwest of England.

¹³ Official website: <https://achorsens.dk/>

¹⁴ For more information about the club, visit <https://buryafc.uk/news/>

Bury FC, a team in Lancashire, was founded in 1885 and plays at Gigg Lane, the eleventh oldest football stadium in the world. The club won the FA Cup twice. They beat Southampton 4-0 in 1900 and then set a record winning margin when beating Derby County 6-0 to lift the trophy again in 1903. This record has only recently been equalled when Manchester City beat Watford by the same score in the 2019 final –some 106 years later.

All of this history was endangered by the behaviours of the club’s most recent two owners leading to the club’s expulsion from the EFL in 2019: its fixtures were unfulfilled and the fans, most importantly, did not have a game to go to every fortnight –and experience unimaginable until the arrival of the pandemic in early 2020 and the cancellation of all football.

While the legal entity that is Bury FC continues, supporters of the club have set up a new “phoenix” club, AFC Bury, and this club has been accepted into a much lower level of the English league pyramid: Division One (North) of the North West Counties Football League¹⁵, several levels below the division it played in before the expulsion.

It is interesting to look at how the “phoenix” club has developed and refined its identity in its very early days.

First of all, the club is constituted as a Community Benefit Society.

Then you can access the following link:

<https://communityshares.org.uk/resources/handbook/community-benefit-societies>

A Community Benefit Society is a term in English Law that has the purpose of serving the broader interests of the community, in contrast to the Co-operative movement, which serves the interests of members.

The fact that the club’s business must be entirely for the benefit of the community removes the concern that fans of many clubs feel when they consider the motivations of the owners.

- Are they doing it with the best interests of the supporters in mind?
- Do they have the best interests of supporters at heart?

The experience of Bury FC fans was that the two previous owners did not, so they needed an operating model and a governance approach that would not only suggest that, but actually guarantee it in law. This complete transparency means that members of the new

¹⁵ Official website: www.nwcfl.com



club can vote people on and off the board. Everything is open (in contrast to the experiences of many fans, whose internal operations appear open to a privileged few.)

One of the first things the new board is doing is developing and refining the club's identity and values. Its approach is one that we would recommend to anyone studying club identity and also to anyone working in a club who wants to ensure an effective process when addressing this opportunity.

The original motto/badge of Bury FC read "Vincit Omnia Industria." When the Latin (common on Victorian-era mottos and crests in the UK) is translated, it becomes "**Hard work conquers all.**"

After speaking with Darren Bernstein (Bernstein, 2020), a board member at AFC Bury, he told me that most Bury FC fans paid little attention to the Latin motto and, it appears, neither did the club. It was never used as a filter for key decision-making or as a mechanism to identify and shape the club's culture or the way it interacts with its supporters.

So, in contrast to this, AFC Bury have re-visited the values and, with community input, re-shaped them to drive the vision of the new club.

The new club's values have been designed to meet the following criteria:

- to reflect and embrace the past and to drive the club forward;
- to guide decision-making;
- to develop a positive club culture;
- to be concise and focused; and
- to be authentic and meaningful.

To facilitate this, the Latin is replaced by the words AFC Bury on the crest, while the exact Latin words are now re-interpreted for the new age of the club.

Fan engagement is directly impacted by a club's culture, as we have studied in other modules, and having a set of values whose purpose is to create the foundation to support this will ensure the new club unifies all supporters at a time when some of them still hope that the old Bury FC will somehow be re-activated.



Exercise

Identify a “phoenix” club (e.g. Unionistas de Salamanca, the “phoenix” regeneration of UD Salamanca, in Spain.) Ideally, this would be a club in your own region and one that you can easily research.

- Has the new club created a set of values to support its growth and regeneration?
- If so, what are they and how do they specifically support the club’s ambitions?
- If not, recommend a set of values for the new club and show how they would support its future prosperity.

1.2.2 The role of the fan base, former players and other stakeholders in establishing your identity

This theme continues the exploration of club identity, beliefs and values, but sets out how a range of stakeholders may be involved in any development of refining of club values.

Back in 2019, I was present at the League One (Tier 3) Play Off Final at Wembley Stadium, London, England with my son. We were fortunate enough to watch the game from our places in the Official Hospitality Area. This meant a lot to me because I am, as the student will know by now, a lifelong fan of Sunderland AFC, a club from the north east of England.

Our club’s history is long and storied. Once known as ‘The Bank of England’ club in the late 1940s and 1950s because of its propensity to pay large sums of money for the best players in order to win trophies. Unfortunately, this plan did not work, with the club being relegated from the English First Division in 1958.

More than 60 years later, the club has experienced a dramatic collapse in status: being relegated from the Premier League in 2017 and then being relegated from the second tier (The EFL Championship) a season later. This game, in May 2019, was the club’s opportunity to be promoted back into the Championship and, to some extent, restore some of the lost faith in the supporter community.

The game was tense. Sunderland ‘scored’ early on when a Charlton Athletic player inexplicably passed the ball into his own net, but the ‘Addicks’ were level before time and, in typical Sunderland fashion, won the game with the very last kick of the game. In the Sunderland AFC Hospitality area, there was an air of expectation, rather than disappointment, given our recent travails.

Some minutes later, my son and I got into a conversation with a former player of the club. He felt, very strongly, that the club was missing a guiding set of principles – values – that would cement support for the club and get it back on track: creating a positive culture inside the club and unity of supporters outside of it. (Mark Bradley's experience)

As we have discussed in other sections of this course, the major benefit of actions such as the development of values is that the process can be controlled. Just like The Fan Experience, it does not rely on result, but on the effort and creativity of the club and its ability to engage fully with supporters.

Creating and activating a new set of values for my club would be one of the ways in which it could arrest its slide –both in terms of football and psychology–. An ex-player felt that what was missing was a set of values reflecting concepts such as “hard work”, just like at AC Horsens in Denmark.

In the period 1999/2001, Sunderland finished 7th in the Premier League in two consecutive seasons. This player had played a part in that success and he felt that the atmosphere in the dressing room was built on values familiar to the former shipbuilding and mining town. In Sunderland, it was once said that if you needed to form a football team, all you needed to do was “whistle down a pit shaft”¹⁶: the club was built on industry and hard work. There would always be a hard-tackling midfielder, a strong defender and a tall forward.

There should be no “tiki taka” at Sunderland. So, perhaps, the AFC Bury interpretation of “industria” could also be applied to a club of the size of Sunderland.

Former players are therefore valuable participants in the process of creating values, as they have a completely unique sense of the club's identity.

At south London club Millwall FC¹⁷, they celebrate Dockers Day every season by inviting former workers of the famous local dockyards to attend a game, where their industry and hard work are celebrated.

The retired workers do a lap of the pitch to the applause of the fans. Why? Because the club has famous ties to the River Thames and the industry on it. Many of the clubs fans (and players) have or had connections to the docking industry, and by celebrating this, the club gives a nod to its past and also reminds everyone why it has a tradition of hard work, of hard players and, as most people would agree, uncompromising support too.

¹⁶ The lift that took miners down to the seam where they would work

¹⁷ Official website: <https://www.millwallfc.co.uk/>

Supporter groups, trusts or other representative groups are vital to the development of club identity and values, since their support (usually) transcends ownership of the club. The owners come and go, but the supporters are always there. They may all experience in their own individual ways, but if their perspectives were brought together, there would be many overlapping phrases: collections of word and phrases that do not only show why football is important in the lives of its followers, but why **this specific club** matters so much.

Involving fans in the refinement or development of club identity and values is one of the best examples of fan engagement in practice, because it explores the emotional ties that bind the fan to the club and attempts to describe them. For clubs, it allows them to demonstrate their role as custodians and protectors, as well as being a filter for key decision-making (as we have explored in this course), and for fans, it promotes their role as true partners.

The best way to involve fans is informally at first. In fact, over the years in surveys, focus groups and chats over a pint of two, I've asked supporters what their club – and going to the match – means to them”.

The answers are sometimes deeply moving. Sometimes they are specific football memories: an FA Cup win, a goal or a special moment, but more often than not they are memories of close family members: Mum, Dad, Granddad, best friends, etc., or places where you would hang out before the game. It is what we did *together* then, what we do together now: our routines, rituals and associations and our irrational but meaningful habits. (Mark Bradley experience)

A consequence of this deeper meaning is that supporters sub-consciously endow their clubs with clear values. It may sound obvious to you after taking this course, but the vast majority of clubs seem to be oblivious to the opportunity it presents.

A few are, though. Middlesbrough¹⁸ fans helped the club articulate theirs several seasons ago. Middlesbrough is a town built on steel and, more recently, chemicals. Like Sunderland, Millwall and many other clubs borne out of industry, its natural values were solid. One of these is “honesty”, and this is now reflected by the “honesty flags” worn by their youngest fans during games. Doncaster Rovers¹⁹ is another club whose fans have influenced the refinement and activation of the clubs’ natural identity.

¹⁸ Official website: www.mfc.co.uk

¹⁹ Official website: <https://www.doncasterroversfc.co.uk/>

You can see why a sense of self-deprecation is strong at that club, where a former chairman once attempted to burn down their original and beloved Belle Vue home for the insurance money. The club hurtled down towards the fifth tier of English football and then came all of the way back to win the third tier play off final at Wembley against their rivals Leeds United.

Rovers fans are ready for anything, so in the process of refining the club's values with key club officers several seasons ago, they developed their own take on Kipling's poem "If—" (Kipling, 1895) to reflect this sense of self-deprecation and "not taking anything too seriously": **"If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same [...] / Or ... 'just a pub team having a laugh."**

This may only be one strand of the club's DNA, but it is been recently reflected in things like their amusing 18-second summary of the "highlights" of a dreadful 0-0 game and the decision to allow a perennially unhappy fan to tweet one season's first new signing from his own Twitter account. Ultimately, it is helped to underpin the work the club has done in partnership with fans to bring to life the South Stand at the Keepmoat, now re-named "The Black Bank" and organised by the fans themselves.

So here lies the contradiction: businesses use values to underpin engagement, sales and growth, where the "product" is often a fairly meaningless commodity. Football, by contrast, has the most meaningful and emotionally engaging "product" of them all and sells **all of this**— as a ticket—, largely, due to ignorance of the power of identity and values.

The fact that so few club owners understand the nature of values, the meaning of their club to supporters and the opportunity this presents is evident in much of what I study about the game. However, to the student of fan engagement, it represents a path to unifying the fan base around concepts that can be controlled and which can improve the lives of everyone that the club touches.

Exercise

Consider the club you support and answer the following question:

- Historically, who are your club's most famous players?
- Is there any characteristic that connects them: the way they played, their beliefs or background, etc.?
- What themes can you identify in former players?
- How could they inform development of the club's values?

1.2.3 How Lewes FC took the world by storm with the launch of Equality FC

In order to illustrate the benefits of developing a clear and distinct identity, in this theme we will explore Lewes FC.

It operates at the seventh tier of English football. It is a small welcoming club, perfectly positioned right next to the town's railway station and close to the south coast, only a few miles from Brighton. It is the same age as Bury FC, founded in 1885, but its fortunes on the pitch have been regional, rather than national in reach. Its greatest footballing achievement was to reach the fifth tier of the English Football League system, while it has only ever reached the first round of the FA Cup (there are seven more before the final) and the quarter finals of the FA Vase for non-League clubs in 2001/02.

Historically, it has been mostly known for the curious name of its ground: The Dripping Pan²⁰. If you research the club on the web, that is all that you will find. Growing crowds is going to be difficult at Lewes (where around 400-500 fans attend), especially with Brighton's Amex Stadium, only a ten-minute car journey from the town and many large London-based Premier League clubs within easy reach and a nice beach close by too!

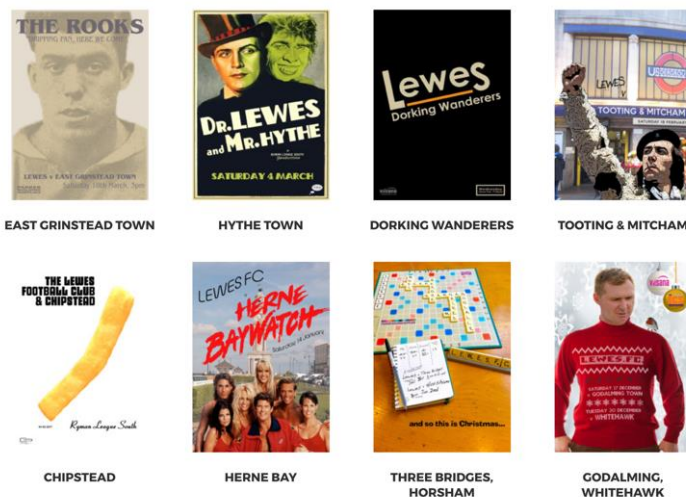
As current chairman, Stuart Fuller, observed to me in an interview in July 2020 (Fuller, 2020), the club wasn't going to prosper through football so needed another path. It was fan-owned and, on the board were some creative people, including the playwright Patrick Marber, who lived in the town and who had been intrigued by the club's positive presence.

Stuart explained the club's challenge simply: *'Get big, get niche or get out'*. If the club couldn't grow through winning, it had to create a niche and the niche created has led to the club becoming globally known and able to sustain itself on much more than just income from people wanting to watch a winning team. (Mark Bradley's experience)

The first thing the club addressed was the fan experience, since (as all fans of football know) you cannot control the football. They created a theme, link or subject for every game, and promoted them through imaginative posters, based on existing iconic imagery such as street art, film posters or album covers.

²⁰ A shallow pan placed under roasting meat to catch the dripping (fat.)

Figure 1: Lewes Fan Club official website



Lewes Fan Club official website, posters category (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.lewesfc.com/category/posters>. Screenshot by author.

As can be seen in the image above, each visiting club suggested a theme, and this was conveyed on the posters, which are now sold globally from the club's online store.

Quite by accident, they also came across a unique approach to traditional refreshments. Ordinarily, this would mean pies and pints, chocolate and tea. One day someone organising a banquet for a wedding heard that the event had been cancelled. He was left with food that he offered to the football club, and this high-quality offering has continued until today.

For example, on any given match you might expect to eat Thai Green Curry, Garlic-roasted Pork Loin or Chili Chicken Wings, as well as enjoying a pint of locally brewed ale.

Even the match day programme—a stalwart of the English match day—is void of statistics and punditry but full of abstract content, such as that enjoyed by the readers of *When Saturday Comes*²¹ and *The Blizzard*²².

Most importantly, they, like Bohemian FC in Dublin, Ireland, have beliefs and are not frightened to share them and support related campaigns. In July 2017, it announced that it was the world's first professional club to pay its men's and women's players equally.

In the accompanying press release, Jacquie Agnew, Lewes FC Director (as cited in Christenson, 2017), announced the following:

²¹ www.wsc.co.uk – the original national football fanzine

²² www.theblizzard.co.uk – long form reading for football fans

By committing to paying our women's and men's teams equally, and providing equal resource for coaching, training and facilities, we hope to spark a change across the UK that will help put an end to the excuses for why such a deep pay disparity has persisted in our sport. Together with our owners, donors and sponsors, Lewes FC can show that equal pay can be implemented to the benefit of both women and men in sport and beyond. (para. 3)

In addition to the equal budget, under the message "Equality FC", the club announced that it would be doing the following:

- providing equal resource for coaching, performance and strength as well as conditioning staff;
- upgrading equipment and facilities to meet the standards required by higher football divisions; and
- investing in local grassroots outreach to drive equal participation in football from girls and boys. (Christenson, 2017)

As a result of this, and over a period of time since the board established the club's strategy, both attendances and associated revenues have grown.

A visit to the website now highlights the uniqueness of the club. You may also find the information about the following topics displayed proudly there:

- details of Jess King's new single "Raise Us Up", in which the Lewes Women player raps about the struggles of women's football;
- Home Heroes Child Nomination Scheme;
- details of the club's unique match day posters (inc. webpage);
- support for the Open Stadiums movement (a movement of Iranian women seeking to end discrimination and to allow women to attend football matches in Iran); and
- a Community Help scheme where the club supports its local community in many ways, including picking up shopping, medical supplies, etc., or just visiting people who may be lonely for a chat and some emotional support.

The club's ground was paid for in part by a Pink Floyd concert there in 1968. The freedom, imagination and creativity of that period in music seem to be an appropriate launchpad for a club whose Board of Directors are all volunteers and where the football, while still very important, is used as a platform for helping to promote and address causes the club believes in. You can pay to be an owner of Lewes FC and to be part of that sub-culture.

Exercise

What, in your opinion, prevents football clubs from taking a different path, such as Lewes FC?

1.2.4 Bringing identity/values to life on a match day

In this final theme of unit 2, we will look at the match day experience and explore how club identity and values can enhance the experience, leading to higher levels of fan engagement and, crucially, to clubs outside of the elite, higher levels of retention and associated income.

Earlier in this module, we shared a comment from someone new to football, someone key to the leisure spend decision-making process, someone without whom her football-mad son may not be able to fulfil his dream of going to a football match.

“Same Song. Different Lyrics” (Bradley, 2007).

This phrase epitomises the challenge football has when it comes to attracting new fans, who are vital to the viability of most clubs outside of football’s elite. If all the club is (subconsciously) selling is the 90 minutes of football, then that becomes the product. So, it follows that, if it fails and if it can be found better or more affordable elsewhere, then the potential new fan may go elsewhere.

In our experience of working in football for nearly 20 years and operating our business in this area for 15 years, all clubs would like to attract more fans to games, since the pool of lapsed fans may not be sufficient, however well targeted, to fill the desired attendance gap. All of the people in football that we have spoken to over the years agree that part of the club’s intended attendance growth must come from new fans.

So, what are we doing to attract them?

Many will already have connections to the club through family, friends or workplace. There may already be advocacy for the club among these people, and they may even be happy to take the new fan along to a game. This works well, and there have been several clubs in our experience who have offered season ticket holders the chance to bring a friend for free (for certain games) to try to increase attendance.

For those clubs with strong identities, the way that difference is promoted and communicated in the community may also be a strong factor influencing attendance while examples such as shirts carrying messages supporting the causes the clubs believe

in (see the Bohemian FC Welcome to Refugees change kit in the 2019/20 season, where all money made will be donated to refugee charities) can also attract the intention of potential new fans.

But what about the match day experience?

The match day itself (and the process of finding information and purchasing tickets) is a very effective way of conveying the identity, values and beliefs of a club, though this area is comparatively underused, in our experiences, by clubs wishing to grow through presenting something different.

Let's remind ourselves of the new fan journey by looking at the consecutive groupings of touch points we apply to our fan experience assessment work:

1. Finding information
2. Ticket purchase
3. Social media
4. Travel & arrival
5. Stadium vicinity
6. Retail & merchandise
7. Refreshments
8. Inside the stadium
9. Departure
10. Club representatives & volunteers

Each of these areas offers opportunities to underline the club's intrinsic difference with, in the professor's opinion, the contribution of match day club representatives and volunteers having the greatest potential. This is because football, in most parts of the world and for a variety of historical and social reasons, tends to keep fans at an arm's length. By demonstrating a real interest in connecting with fans, greeting them with warmth and pro-actively helping them (assisted by information lanyards, among other ways), standard perceptions of a club can be overturned.

To do this, clubs must invest resources in developing, motivating and training match day representatives, and, where the club has a strong identity and stands for something, this process is much easier.

I once read that when Changi General Hospital²³ in Singapore was being constructed in 1981, the CEO asked that the customer experience should be 'what your mother would expect if she was coming to visit.' This may be apocryphal (and

²³ Official website: www.cghmc.com



no source or reference can be found) but when you think about things that way, the desired experience begins to form. Rather than trying to build an experience 'from the inside', by putting themselves in the shoes of a specific patient or visitor, they are more able to articulate the level of service and care to be delivered. (Mark Bradley's experience)

As a result of this approach, they are able to offer promises like the following:

We deliver exceptional guest experiences and good old-fashioned hospitality, in addition to excellent healthcare. So, when you enter the hospital's main lobby, friendly, knowledgeable volunteers are there to greet you at the door or the reception desk.

Looking for a patient? Wondering where to get your x-ray? Whether you're here to visit or are being admitted to the hospital for medical care, we can help you get there, and we are here to answer your questions. (Visiting Information, n.d., para. 2-3)

Of course, there are examples of this in sport, such as the following, from the New York Knicks website:

Whether it is your first or 50th time at Madison Square Garden taking in a sporting or entertainment event, you're bound to be in need of a few recommendations to ensure you have the most epic experience possible. These tips are sure to make your visit with us unforgettable. (Madison Square Garden. FAQs, n.d., para. 1)

As we have explored, there is emerging evidence of football clubs doing exactly this to engage new fans or, indeed, a specific fan group, such as disabled fans at Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur²⁴:

The stadium has been designed to be truly inclusive, placing accessible facilities throughout the ground, giving fans the opportunity to sit in all areas of the ground including the single-tier South Stand.

We want to ensure that all fans can enjoy the same exceptional fan experience with excellent amenities and other facilities. (Supporters with Access Requirement, n.d., para. 3-4)

²⁴ Official website: www.tottenhamhotspur.com

Sponsor activation can also help to bring to life a club's values on a match day, such as the example of Middlesbrough FC²⁵, currently a Championship English club (second tier), whose hugely popular family experience zone (Generation Red) is supported by a national leisure operator Everyone Active²⁶.

The partnership allows the club to deliver an exciting and immersive whole match day experience²⁷ that was rewarded when the club was chosen as the EFL Championship Family Club of the year in 2019.

So, these are all examples of how to engage fans with excellent customer service and an engaging experience. But how can we go one step further and provide an overall experience that somehow reflects the identity and values of the club or national team where the game is taking place?

A fantastic example is the Norwegian national team and Football Association. In recent years, in fact, until the team's recent achievement of a play-off place for UEFA European Championship qualification (to be played in October 2020), sporting glory had been infrequent. Indeed, the last example of on-pitch success was in 2000, when Norway qualified for the Group Stage of the UEFA European Championship.

The people in the Norwegian FA, based in the famous Ullevaal Stadium in the capital, Oslo, began to explore how they could build an emotional connection to the match day experience, so that, while actual on-pitch glory could not be promised, fans could "feel" something essentially Norwegian –something that no other country could create.

One of the elements being planned was that, exactly at the moment of kick off for any internal fixture played at the stadium, all of the ships in Oslo port would sound their sirens, signifying a national event. Taking his cue from advanced service design techniques, Ted Matthews (the then Design Leader at the Norway Football Association) and Head of Digital Services Pearse Connolly, sought to create an experience that would resonate emotionally as well as provide a good experience.

So, rather than simply "branding" their matches in the traditional way, Ted and Pearse used a sociological approach to re-imagine the entire match day experience, concentrating on the traditional symbols, rituals and stories of Norwegian football (Clarke, 2019).

²⁵ Official website: www.mfc.co.uk

²⁶ Official website: www.everyoneactive.com

²⁷ To read about things to do in the GRFZ (Generation Red family zone), visit <https://www.mfc.co.uk/supporter-services/matchday-at-the-riverside/generation-red-family-zone/things-to-do-in-the-grfz>

Those studying this certificate are asked to consider the benefits of taking this approach into the development of club fan engagement strategies –thereby linking two key elements to produce a heightened emotional connection between the fan and the club or the fan and the national team:

identity/meaning + fan experience

In summary, this theme has set out the value of exploring the role that club or national team identity could play in deepening the emotional connection of match-attending fans, thereby strengthening fan engagement and delivering the benefits that it entails, whether in increased attraction, retention, advocacy and/or improving external perceptions.

Exercise

Consider your national team and your national symbols, rituals and stories.

How could they be brought to life throughout the national team game experience to deepen the emotional connection between fans and team?

References

[Screenshot of Lewes FC official page, posters category] (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.lewesfc.com/category/posters>

Avanza, M. & Laferté, G. (2017) “¿Trascender la “construcción de identidades”? Identificación, imagen social, pertenencia”. *Revista colombiana de antropología*, 53(1), 187-212. <https://doi.org/10.22380/2539472X.83>

Bernstein, D. (2020, 27 July) Unpublished Interview conducted by Mark Bradley.

Bradley, A. (2007, 31 May) Unpublished interview conducted by Mark Bradley.

Birgit Prinz and “Zizou” – stars of the show, 2003 (2003, 15 December). *FIFA.com* <https://www.fifa.com/the-best-fifa-football-awards/news/birgit-prinz-and-zizou-stars-the-show-90250>

Christenson, M. (2017, 12 July) Lewes FC become first professional club to pay women and men equally. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2017/jul/12/lewes-fc-first-club-equal-pay-men-women>

Clarke, R. (Mr. Richard Clarke) (2018, December 18) *Sports Content Strategy* [audio podcast] <http://www.mrrichardclarke.com/sportdigitalandsocial/connolly?rq=Norwegian%20football>

El publicista. (2010, 8 June). '*Papá, por qué somos del Atleti, de Sra. Rushmore para Atlético de Madrid.* [Video file] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQuWxxcd9pU>

Equality FC (n.d.) *Lewes FC*. <https://www.lewesfc.com/>

Gray, D., et al. (2020) *Us and Them: New Journeys in Football Rivalry* <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2017/jul/12/lewes-fc-first-club-equal-pay-men-women>

Kipling, R. (1895) 'If —' est. 1895

Lambert, D. (The Fan Experience Experience Company) (2020, June 11) [audio podcast]. *The Fan Experience Company. Episode 11.*



Lamont, T. (2018) Dulwich Hamlet: the improbable tale of a tiny football club that lost its home to developers – and won it back; *The Guardian*; available in <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/oct/26/dulwich-hamlet-fc-champion-hill-improbable-tale-tiny-football-club-that-lost-its-home-to-developers-and-won-it-back>

Madison Square Garden. FAQs. (n.d.) Madison Squarer Garden. <https://www.msg.com/madison-square-garden/faqs>

Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) Sub-culture. In *Oxford English Dictionary* [lexico.com dictionary](https://www.lexico.com/definition/sub-culture). Retrieved 2020 from <https://www.lexico.com/definition/sub-culture>

Sinek, S. (2011). *Start with Why: How Great Leaders inspire Everyone to Take Action*. (2nd ed.) Portfolio.

Storey, S. (2020) 'Bohemian FC's 'Refugees Welcome' shirt is a breath of fresh air in this era of rampant greed' *The Independent Newspaper*, available in <https://inews.co.uk/sport/football/bohemian-fc-refugees-welcome-shirt-kit-amnesty-international-397499>

Supporters with Access Requirements. (n.d.) *Tottenham Hotspur FC*. <https://ask.tottenhamhotspur.com/hc/en-us/articles/115003227325-Supporters-with-Access-Requirements>

Visiting information. (n.d.) *CGH Medical Center*. <https://www.cghmc.com/patients-visitors/visiting-information/>

Wong, H. (2020) Rangers FC reveals new crest and visual identity for digital era. *Design Week magazine*. <https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/7-july-13-july-2020/rangers-fc-reveals-new-crest-and-visual-identity-for-digital-era/#:~:text=Scottish%20football%20club%20Rangers%20has,assets%20for%20the%200premier%20team>

