



Brand Value and Marketing Strategies of Professional Sports Clubs

Mengen Liu^{1,*}

¹Jinan Xinhang Experimental Foreign Language School, Jinan, 250103, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 1320963714@qq.com

Abstract. With the rapid development of the sports industry, professional sports clubs face new opportunities and challenges in brand building. This paper explores the key driving factors for enhancing club brand value through case studies of Manchester United, the Golden State Warriors, and Real Madrid. The research findings suggest that clubs must prioritize competitive performance, expand commercial development, promote digital transformation, implement global strategies, and shape a consistent brand image. This paper argues that only by adopting a comprehensive brand strategy and continuously innovating can professional sports clubs gain a sustainable competitive advantage and achieve long-term brand value growth in the face of intense competition.

Keywords: professional sports clubs, brand value, competitive performance, digital transformation, global strategy

1 Introduction

The sports industry, as one of the most dynamic and promising emerging industries in the 21st century, has been gaining increasing prominence in the global economy. With the deepening of economic globalization and the continuous improvement of people's living standards, sports are no longer merely competitive physical activities but have become a fashionable lifestyle and an essential economic form[1]. The sports industry, with its vast consumer base, diverse industrial composition, and broad development space, has become a crucial driving force for the economic transformation and upgrading of various countries[2].

Looking back at the development history of the sports industry, from the initial production and sales of tangible products such as sportswear and equipment, to the rise of service-based consumption such as sports events and fitness leisure, and then to the emergence of new formats such as online fitness and sports tourism, the connotation and extension of the sports industry have been continuously expanding[3]. Among them, professional sports clubs, as the link connecting various aspects of the sports industry, are playing an increasingly important role in industrial development. A successful professional sports club not only needs to achieve

outstanding competitive performance on the field but also needs to achieve sustainable development in commercial operations. Brand building is a key measure for clubs to realize commercial value and enhance market competitiveness.

Currently, the global sports industry is facing a new round of development opportunities and challenges[4]. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on traditional formats such as sports events and venue operations. On the other hand, the improvement of residents' health awareness, the increase in government support, and the empowerment of new technologies such as "Internet+" have given the sports industry wings to soar. In this context, how professional sports clubs seize opportunities, meet challenges, and achieve differentiated development through brand building has become a focus of attention in the industry.

2 Key Drivers of Brand Value For Professional Sports Clubs

2.1 On-Field Performance and Success

The brand value of a professional sports club largely depends on the team's performance on the field. Outstanding competitive results, especially excellent performances in top-level competitions, can greatly enhance the club's brand image. A team that consistently ranks at the top of the league and achieves remarkable results in continental and global tournaments often establishes a strong brand identity in the hearts of fans[5-7]. Take Real Madrid, a Spanish football giant, as an example. Their continued success in domestic and Champions League competitions has established the "Galácticos" as a highly popular and influential brand globally. Similarly, Juventus, with their impressive nine consecutive Serie A titles, has built itself into a super brand in Italian and even European football. In contrast, some traditional powerhouses, such as Manchester United and AC Milan, have experienced a certain degree of decline in brand value due to their sliding performance in recent years. This demonstrates that a club's on-field performance is the cornerstone of its brand value. Of course, on-field success and brand building form a virtuous cycle. On the one hand, outstanding results provide a solid foundation for brand value, while on the other hand, a strong brand appeal can attract more excellent players to join, thereby enhancing the team's competitiveness. Therefore, professional sports clubs must attach great importance to competitive performance and regard it as the foothold and starting point of brand building. Only by achieving long-term and stable success on the field can a solid foundation be laid for the continuous enhancement of brand value.

2.2 Star Players, Coaches, and Club History

The brand image of a professional sports club is often closely linked to its star players, head coaches, and long history and culture. World-class superstars, such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, are not only the face of their clubs but also globally recognized sports idols[8-10]. These superstars not only win honors for their

teams on the field but also bring tremendous commercial value to the clubs off the field. Their personal charisma and influence can attract a large number of fans to follow and support the club, making them powerful endorsers of the club's brand. Similarly, a successful head coach can also become an important asset to the club's brand. Sir Alex Ferguson, who coached Manchester United for 26 years and created the Red Devils dynasty, has his name integrated with the Manchester United brand. Pep Guardiola, during his tenure at Barcelona and Manchester City, has also injected fashionable and innovative connotations into the brands of both clubs with his outstanding tactical style and trend-leading football philosophy. In addition, a club's historical tradition and cultural heritage are also important components of its brand value. Prestigious clubs with long histories, such as Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, and Liverpool, often hold an irreplaceable position in the hearts of fans. The spirit, values, and cultural characteristics represented by these clubs constitute their unique brand personality. The historical moments of the clubs, such as Manchester United's "Munich Air Disaster" and Liverpool's "Miracle of Istanbul," have also become important parts of the clubs' brand stories, injecting deep emotional connotations into the brands. Therefore, in the process of brand building, professional sports clubs should fully utilize the star effect, attach importance to the construction of the coaching team, explore historical and cultural heritage, and tell good brand stories, so as to enhance the attractiveness and appeal of the brand.

2.3 Fan Base, Stadium Experience, and Club Culture

The brand value of a professional sports club largely comes from its vast and loyal fan base. A club with a large number of die-hard fans undoubtedly has an inherent advantage in brand building. Take Manchester United as an example. It is estimated that Manchester United has over 750 million fans and followers worldwide. Such a huge fan base not only brings direct income from tickets and peripherals to the club but also greatly enhances the club's attractiveness to sponsors. The loyalty of the fans is an important reflection of the club's brand value. Even when the team is not performing well, loyal fans will still support and encourage the club. This highly sticky brand loyalty is a valuable asset for the club. In addition to the scale of the fan base, clubs also need to focus on enhancing fan engagement and interactivity. The live viewing experience is an important way to enhance fans' sense of participation. First-class stadium facilities, stunning audiovisual effects, and a convenient service system can greatly improve the quality of the live viewing experience. By interacting with fans through activities such as meet-and-greets and open training sessions, clubs can also close the distance with fans and enhance their identification with the club's brand.

Club culture is also an important carrier of its brand value. The values, traditions, and spiritual characteristics upheld by a club constitute its unique brand cultural connotation. Barcelona's "més que un club" (more than a club), Borussia Dortmund's "Echte Liebe" (true love), and other slogans vividly reflect the clubs' cultural concepts. Liverpool's "You'll Never Walk Alone" has even become synonymous with the spirit of the Reds, deeply imprinted in the hearts of Liverpool fans worldwide. A

successful club brand must be built on distinct cultural characteristics and integrate them into all aspects of the club's operations.

In summary, the fan base, stadium experience, and club culture are the three pillars of the brand value of professional sports clubs. Clubs should establish a fan-centric business philosophy, provide high-quality viewing experiences, and strive to shape a unique brand culture, so as to achieve continuous enhancement of brand value.

3 Leveraging Commercial Opportunities To Enhance Brand Value

3.1 Media Exposure, Broadcasting Rights, and Digital Presence

In today's digital age, professional sports clubs must fully leverage media exposure, broadcasting rights, and digital presence to enhance their brand value. Traditional television broadcasting remains one of the most significant revenue sources for sports events. According to Deloitte's research, the broadcasting revenue of the top five European football leagues (Premier League, La Liga, Bundesliga, Serie A, and Ligue 1) reached €8.9 billion in the 2021/22 season, despite a 12% year-on-year decline due to the impact of the pandemic, still accounting for more than half of the clubs' total revenue.

Table 1. Revenue structure of the top five European football leagues in the 2021/22 season

Revenue Type	Amount (€ billion)	Year-on-Year Change
Commercial	6.3	+17%
Broadcasting	8.9	-12%
Matchday	2.0	+999%
Total	17.2	+10%

Data source: Deloitte Football Money League

As shown in Table 1, despite the impact of the pandemic, the total revenue of the five major leagues still achieved a 10% growth, reaching a record-breaking €17.2 billion. Among the revenue streams, commercial revenue grew by 17% to €6.3 billion, becoming the second-largest revenue source after broadcasting. With the easing of pandemic restrictions, fans returned to the stadiums, resulting in a significant increase in matchday revenue. This reflects the resilience and recovery of the business model of professional sports clubs.

In addition to traditional media, clubs need to focus on operating social media and digital platforms. According to statistics, Manchester United had over 187 million followers on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in 2022, maintaining close interaction with fans through official apps and YouTube channels. Furthermore, clubs can leverage the personal influence of star players to promote their brand through the players' social media accounts. In summary, clubs must develop a comprehensive media strategy that encompasses both traditional television media and emerging digital platforms to maximize brand exposure and influence.

3.2 Sponsorships, Partnerships, and Merchandising

Sponsorships, partnerships, and merchandising are crucial commercial levers for professional sports clubs to enhance their brand value. Clubs can establish strategic partnerships with well-known brands, leveraging the resources and influence of sponsors to expand the reach of their own brand. The following table presents the top five European football clubs with the highest commercial revenue in the 2021/22 season:

Table 2. Top five European football clubs with the highest commercial revenue in the 2021/22 season.

Club	Commercial Revenue (€ million)
Barcelona	383.5
Real Madrid	354.6
Bayern Munich	360.5
Manchester United	317.0
Liverpool	210.9

Data source: Deloitte Football Money League

Successful sponsorship collaborations not only generate substantial income for clubs but also enhance their brand image and reputation. For example, the long-term partnership between Real Madrid and Emirates Airlines has enabled both brands to achieve synergy and mutual benefits. Clubs can also engage in licensing operations, collaborating with brands from other industries to launch co-branded merchandise, expanding the possibilities for brand extension. Manchester United's collaboration with Lego to launch a co-branded building block set has been well-received by fans.

Moreover, clubs should focus on developing and selling their own merchandise. In the 2021/22 season, Bayern Munich's merchandise sales revenue reached €186 million, ranking among the highest in Europe. By offering uniquely designed, high-quality jerseys, memorabilia, and other merchandise, Bayern Munich has successfully shaped a club brand image with Bavarian characteristics while generating substantial sales revenue. In conclusion, clubs must carefully select partners, develop high-quality merchandise that aligns with fans' needs, and fully utilize sponsorship, partnership, and merchandising opportunities to build a more valuable club brand.

3.3 International Expansion and Global Brand Building

For professional sports clubs, international expansion and global brand building are crucial strategic measures to enhance brand value. As the pace of globalization accelerates, the market space for the sports industry has transcended national boundaries, and club brands with global influence will hold a dominant position in future competition. In 2022, Manchester City had 11 sister clubs worldwide, forming a globalized brand matrix known as the "City Football Group", as shown in Table 3. This initiative helps Manchester City promote its brand on the global stage, attracting more international fans and commercial partners.

Table 3. Manchester City Football Group's global club layout (as of 2022).

Club Name	Country/Region
Manchester City FC	United Kingdom
New York City FC	United States
Melbourne City FC	Australia
Yokohama F. Marinos	Japan
Montevideo City Torque	Uruguay
Lommel SK	Belgium
Kawasaki Frontale	Japan
Sichuan Jiuniu FC	China
Mumbai City FC	India
Palermo FC	Italy
Troyes AC	France

Data source: Manchester City official website

In recent years, Barcelona has also been vigorously implementing an internationalization strategy. In 2021, Barcelona established an overseas office in New York, becoming the first La Liga club to set up a branch in North America. By organizing commercial activities and charity matches, Barcelona continues to expand its influence in the U.S. market.

4 Case Study Analysis: Successful Sports Club Branding Strategies

4.1 Case 1: Manchester United - Leveraging global fan base and commercial partnerships

Manchester United is one of the most successful football clubs globally, setting industry benchmarks in leveraging its worldwide fan base and commercial partnerships. As of 2022, United boasts an estimated 1.1 billion fans and followers worldwide, a vast fan base that not only generates substantial ticket and merchandise revenue but also significantly enhances the club's attractiveness to sponsors. The club has established strategic partnerships with numerous renowned brands, including Adidas, Chevrolet, and Teamviewer, expanding its brand reach through the resources and influence of these sponsors.

In the 2021/22 season, Manchester United achieved record commercial revenue of £257.8 million, an increase of 11% from the previous year. The club's sponsorship revenue rose to £147.9 million in 2022. This growth was driven by successful sponsorship deals and the club's strong global brand presence.

Table 4. Manchester United's commercial revenue and year-on-year growth from 2020 to 2022.

Year	Commercial Revenue (£ million)	Year-on-Year Growth
2022	257.8	11.0%
2021	232.2	-3.1%
2020	279.0	3.9%

Data source: Manchester United Annual Reports

As shown in Table 4, Manchester United's successful practices in leveraging its global fan base and commercial partnerships demonstrate that professional sports clubs must adopt a global perspective, cultivate local markets, and establish win-win relationships with partners to maximize brand value. The club continues to expand its global market presence, optimize its sponsorship structure, and utilize digital means to strengthen connections with fans, continuously enhancing the club's brand influence.

4.2 Case 2: Golden State Warriors - Engaging fans through innovative digital experiences

The Golden State Warriors are a powerhouse in the National Basketball Association (NBA), not only achieving remarkable success on the court but also leading the industry in attracting and engaging fans through digital innovation. The Warriors fully utilize mobile internet, big data, and other technological means to create a series of immersive digital experiences for their fans. The Warriors' official mobile app is a prime example of their digital strategy. It integrates a wealth of features, including live game streaming, player stats, exclusive content, interactive games, and more, providing fans with comprehensive services. In Table 5, the app has been a key driver of fan engagement, with monthly active users reaching 203.5 million in the 2019-20 season, a 12.6% increase from the previous year.

Table 5. Golden State Warriors' official app monthly active users and growth from 2017 to 2020.

Season	Warriors Official App Monthly Active Users (millions)	Year-on-Year Growth
2019-20	203.5	12.6%
2018-19	180.7	21.3%
2017-18	149.0	34.2%

Data source: Warriors official website

The Warriors have also been at the forefront of adopting cutting-edge technologies like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). In 2017, they launched a VR-based game broadcast service, enabling fans to "attend" games and watch from close proximity using VR devices. The Chase Center arena, opened in 2019, features AR technology that pushes personalized content based on fans' location and displays real-time player data. These innovations have greatly enhanced the viewing experience and engagement of fans.

The Golden State Warriors' technology-driven approach to fan engagement sets a high standard in the sports industry. By creating unique and immersive digital experiences, the club has strengthened the bond with its fans and boosted brand loyalty. As the Warriors continue to explore innovative possibilities in areas like 5G and AI, they are well-positioned to remain at the forefront of the digital transformation in sports.

4.3 Case 3: Real Madrid - Building a consistent brand identity across touchpoints

Real Madrid, one of the most valuable football club brands globally, has consistently shaped a unique brand image across various consumer touchpoints, creating an immersive "Real Madrid experience" for its massive fan base. The club's iconic white jerseys, the grandeur of the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, and the galáctico player recruitment strategy are all instantly recognizable brand assets that reflect the club's values and aspirations. Real Madrid places great emphasis on maintaining a consistent brand identity across digital channels. As shown in Table 6, the club has over 290 million followers across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with official accounts continuously producing high-quality content that showcases the club's rich history, star players, and behind-the-scenes stories. This engaging digital presence enables Real Madrid to connect with its global fan base and reinforce its brand personality.

Table 6. Real Madrid's social media followers as of 2022.

Platform	Followers (millions)
Facebook	121.0
Instagram	129.6
Twitter	39.9

Data source: Real Madrid official website

Real Madrid has also been successful in extending its brand beyond football through strategic partnerships with leading brands such as Adidas and Emirates. These collaborations not only generate significant commercial revenue but also help the club reach a wider audience and enhance its global reputation. The club's extensive community outreach programs, such as the Real Madrid Foundation's initiatives to promote education and social integration through football, further demonstrate its commitment to its brand values.

By consistently delivering a unified brand message across all touchpoints, Real Madrid has built a loyal and passionate fan base that spans the globe. The club's ability to create an emotional connection with its followers through compelling storytelling and immersive experiences sets a high standard for sports branding. As Real Madrid continues to innovate and adapt to the evolving digital landscape, it is well-positioned to maintain its status as one of the most powerful and recognizable brands in the world of sports.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, building and sustaining brand value is a critical imperative for professional sports clubs in an increasingly competitive and globalized industry. The case studies of Manchester United, Golden State Warriors, and Real Madrid demonstrate that a multi-faceted approach, encompassing on-field success, fan engagement, commercial partnerships, and a consistent brand identity, is essential for driving brand equity. Manchester United's ability to leverage its massive global fan base and extensive commercial partnerships has enabled the club to generate

substantial revenue and maintain its position as one of the most valuable sports brands worldwide. The Golden State Warriors' innovative use of digital technologies to create immersive fan experiences sets a new standard for fan engagement and highlights the importance of adapting to the evolving preferences of younger generations. Real Madrid's unwavering commitment to a consistent brand identity across all touchpoints, coupled with its success on the pitch and strategic partnerships, has helped the club build a loyal and passionate global following. As the sports industry continues to evolve, driven by technological advancements, changing consumer behaviors, and the growing importance of international markets, clubs that can effectively leverage these key brand value drivers while remaining agile and adaptable will be best positioned for long-term success. By prioritizing fan engagement, fostering emotional connections, and consistently delivering on their brand promise, clubs can build resilient and valuable brands that transcend the sport itself and establish a lasting legacy in the hearts and minds of fans around the world.

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