

Does the Transformation of Professional Soccer Clubs into Brands Lead to Increasing Nomadism among Players? Reflections from the Case of French Soccer

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Abstract

Introduction

In about the last twenty years, professional soccer has become a key element of the show business scene, attracting increasingly larger audiences and television viewers, with the result that its financial issues are now those of a real industry, concerned about maximizing direct and indirect income, like gate money, the sale of TV rights or merchandising. In this new context, players are but volatile resources and their careers are characterized by a phenomenon of nomadism, with accelerated transfers from one club to another. The attachment of audiences to a club is becoming independent from its players, the main issue is now brand loyalty, one of the most well known cases being that of Manchester United. Hence the now central question: is the transformation of professional clubs into brands a factor explaining player nomadism and what are its consequences?

Theoretical Background

As with any enterprise, professional soccer clubs obviously try to build supporter (consumer) loyalty, so that they go to matches, but also and mainly so that their attachment to clubs results in a ceaseless flow of purchases, such as shirts, scarves and other merchandising. But professional soccer, as a component of the show business society, has undergone a major transformation in its way of managing its human capital (the players) and this transformation gives rise to numerous problems, particularly supporter (consumer) loyalty. The French case is, from this viewpoint, highly revealing. To make it simple, the old regulation was based on a life contract in which a professional player linked the whole of his career to a given club, which was the only decision-maker in potentially accepting a transfer while the contract was in force. Following the Seguin Report [6] at the beginning of the 1970s, a new regulation introduced a fixed-time contract where, like any conventional salaried employee, professional players were able to control their life by associating themselves with a club for a variable period. This break introduces an abrupt change in the way of considering the emotional and commercial relationship between supporters (consumers) and clubs. As Wahl & Lanfranchi [8] showed in their sociological study on the evolution of the status of professional soccer players from the 1930s to the

present, supporter loyalty to a club manifested itself, up to the beginning of the 1970s, through players with a lasting relationship with the club. It was not so much the club that mattered than the players belonging to it, according to the myth of the Gods of the Stadium defending the same colors during several seasons, identified with a club or even a city. The fixed-time contract is a complete break with this pattern and creates a real labor market, divided according to each player's distinctive skills [1]. It therefore becomes impossible for supporters to identify with a given club via the current players, as they know these may play for a rival club a few months from now. The book dedicated by Peres et al. [3] to the stormy relations between OM (Marseille) and PSG (Paris) shows the actual connivance between clubs to institutionalize this human capital fluidity between them. Other supporter (consumer) loyalty dynamics must consequently come into play, valuing clubs as brands independently from the human capital constituting them. The creation of two transfer markets during a single season (at the beginning and in the middle of the season) only enhances the phenomenon.

Discussion and Implications

The authors would like to suggest and explore paths for reflection and analysis about the impact of brand strategies on the nomadization of professional players' careers. Numerous works have examined the emergence of a brand strategy in the area of professional soccer [2,4,5,7]. But they do not establish a direct connection with career management. Practices in player recruitment and player valorisation to attract the attention of supporters (consumers) obey new efficiency criteria, any professional club obviously needs players attracting media attention and coverage to make the best use of investments, but it is becoming impossible to associate a brand (a club) too closely to this or that player, in view of their volatile behaviour in respect to club values. A suitable strategy therefore becomes essential for strengthening the club image despite human capital instability. We present several current French examples following a documentary research in the specialized press. These examples help understanding and anticipating the changes in the professional soccer industry, particularly in player training.

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