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**Co-creation and Brand Identity within the context of
a football club: do the fans co-influence the Brand
Identity of Sport Lisboa Benfica?**

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Abstract

The concept of co-creation has been extensively discussed recently both in literature and in practice. Nevertheless, researchers struggle to agree on a single universal definition. For the purpose of this dissertation we define co-creation as “joint collaborative activities by parties involved in direct interactions, aiming to contribute to the value that emerges for one or both parties” (Grönroos, 2008). Additionally, not all brands fulfill the necessary conditions to ensure co-creation. Football club brands, after thorough analysis, are assumed to be a case worthy to study in this context (Healy & McDonagh, 2013; Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). With the goal of extending knowledge on the topic, we developed a longitudinal single case study, based on qualitative in-depth interviews, studying co-creation in the context of a Portuguese football club brand – Sport Lisboa Benfica. The research brings important insights to the theory of brand identity construction and development, since it demonstrates that the interactions between consumers (i.e., fans) and the brand managers impact the brand identity. We conclude that consumers co-create with football club brands and co-influence their brand identity, together with the managers. Other implications are also discussed in this thesis.

Keywords: Co-creation; Brand Identity; Benfica; Football; Community Management; Brand Management

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1. Introduction

The subject of this dissertation revolves around brand identity management, incorporating the concept of co-creation. Co-creation is an emerging topic in marketing and brand management, both in theory and in practice. However, there is not a commonly agreed definition used by the researchers in the subject. As a starting point, we define co-creation as “joint collaborative activities by parties involved in direct interactions, aiming to contribute to the value that emerges for one or both parties” (Grönroos, 2008).

The football industry, particularly in South Europe, is characterized by very distinctive features. It is a sport for the mass public and the number one sport in terms of number of fans and revenues generated. Plus, it experiences a strong phenomenon of emotional attachment between the fans and the football clubs' brands. Fans incorporate the brand of the club that they support as part of their identity. This makes football a context in which it makes sense to study the phenomenon of co-creation.

The concept of brand identity remained static for a long period of time, being solely considered the outcome of the inputs of brand managers. Nevertheless, we live on an increasingly dynamic world, where the involvement of consumers in the process of value delivery and product/service creation is unquestionable. The increasing participation of consumers in processes that were before exclusively considered as driven by corporations leads to a reconceptualization of the idea of brand identity management, and consequently the consumer influence on it, and to new insights for brand management literature and practices (da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013).

The overall purpose of this dissertation is to understand in which way consumers (i.e., fans) co-influence the brand identity of their football club brand, within a context of co-creation between fans and managers (i.e. brand managers, staff members...), being this our research question. In order to address this objective, we used a longitudinal single case study approach, investigating the brand Sport Lisboa Benfica, from the perspective of the consumers (i.e. fans). The final goal is to contribute to the brand identity co-creation theory by further understanding how brand identity develops within the context of a co-created football brand.

2. Contextual Background (Literature Review)

a) Co-Creation and conditions to occur

Key authors defined and applied co-creation as a concept in marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Cova et al., 2011; Grönroos et al., 2015).

One of the first theories connected to the concept of co-creation, the “**service-dominant logic**” was developed by **Vargo & Lusch** (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In their research, these authors defined the service-dominant logic as a “pre-theoretic lens or perspective for viewing the economic (and social) world differently” (2011, p.218) than the traditional exchange of goods approach commonly used in marketing over the 20th century. Under the light of this theory, it is fundamental to distinguish two different notions: value-in-exchange and value-in-use. According to the notion of value-in-exchange, value is created when the firm produces goods/services and exchanges them in the market for money. Whereas according to the notion of value-in-use, value is only created when consumers actually make use of those goods/services. The service-dominant logic looks at the notion of value as value-in-use, and not value-in-exchange, which leads to the idea that the firm cannot create and/or deliver value alone and that value creation is a “joint function of the actions of the provider(s) and the customer(s), but is always determined by the customer” (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p.44). Furthermore, under the light of this “logic”, consumers on one side have an interest in trying to improve the value of the value offerings and value propositions, as service beneficiaries and resource integrators. Managers on the other side are seen primarily as the producers of inputs for the consumers process of value creation. Therefore, managers are expected to seek to maximize consumer involvement in the process of value co-creation to make the greatest value for the firm.

Vargo & Lusch came up with eight foundational premises (FPs) (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), later expanded to ten, to define co-creation, being one of the most relevant ones: “the customer is

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always a co-creator of value (FP6)”, implying consumer active participation in the process. This participation involves, according to Smith (2013) “the actions and resources supplied by customers, for example, mental (information, effort), physical (customers’ own tangibles and efforts), and emotional inputs, and (based on Plé, Lecocq, & Angot, 2010) financial (monetary costs), temporal (time spent), behavioral (interpersonal interaction and relational inputs”. Further research in consumer behavior (e.g., Cova & Dall’O, 2009) speculate that consumers actively co-produce and participate when the outcome of their participation may affect their identity and personal lives. Moreover, according to Muñiz & Schau (2007), market offerings (i.e., brands) consumers select to interact with should impact their expression of self. **So, as one may conclude, consumer co-creation is triggered by self-satisfaction and a need of personal gratification and social recognition.** Additionally, the co-created outcome must affect consumers’ personal lives.

A second logic that attempts to define and extend literature on the topic of co-creation is the **value co-creation logic**, developed by **Prahalad & Ramaswamy** (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). According to their view on co-creation, “consumers have work, service, and risks transferred from the firm, and both the consumer and the firm benefit” (Prahalad, 2004, p.23). They add to the existing theory that one needs the following conditions to ensure consumer value co-creation: a) dialogue between the firm and the consumer; b) consumer access to information; c) collective risk assessment.

Finally, a third approach for co-creation rises with **Grönroos** and the Nordic School, the **service logic** (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). The service logic further addresses the role of the supplier and the consumer and the interactions between the two in the process of co-creation. This perspective describes the suppliers (i.e. managers) as value facilitators, assisting consumers in the creation of value for the firm and themselves. Suppliers may seek to influence the process and enhance the level of value consumers create out of a service activity

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or a good, during interactions with consumers (Grönroos, 2008). For Grönroos value co-creation happens exclusively when “the firm and the customer act together in a merged, coordinated, dialogical, and interactive process that creates value for the customer, and for the firm as well”, defining value co-creation as “joint collaborative activities by parties involved in direct interactions, aiming to contribute to the value that emerges for one or both parties” (Grönroos, 2012, p.1523), which is the definition of value co-creation chosen as a starting point for this thesis.

Based on the literature on co-creation exposed and summarized above and on recent research (da Silveira & Simões, 2017), **to assume co-creation the following foundational premises have to be ensured:** (1) consumer active participation in the process of value creation; (2) the co-created “object” must affect consumer’s identity and personal lives; (3) consumer involvement in dialogue with the firm; (4) information – i.e., the firm should ensure access to information to consumers; (5) collective acceptance of the risks (intrinsic to the co-created “object”) and (6) evidence of direct interactions between suppliers and consumers.

b) Co-creation in the context of a football club

Researchers have applied co-creation studies to the football club communities. Namely, Pongsakornrungruangsri and Schroeder (2011) studied the process of co-creation within the context of brand communities, in particular a fan-managed online football community for fans of the Liverpool football club (TIA – ThisIsAnfield). In their research, they define a co-consuming brand community as “a collective consumer community that consumers form by ‘linking value’ in order to co-construct their consumption, resistance or empowerment” (Cova & Cova, 2002). From their research it is possible to conclude firstly that interactions between single consumers contribute indeed to the value co-creation process. Consumers can act as providers or beneficiaries in the co-creation process.

Also, from their research, there is a phenomenon that occurs within the scope of value co-

creation, which is “double exploitation”, arising when the company interferes with the brand culture and when companies treat consumers as unpaid workers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000). “Even if consumers were to be regarded as producers, they are not usually able to exploit the tangible benefits obtained from their labor...” (Cova and Dalli, 2009). So, companies receive benefits from consumers, despite the fact that consumers have invested their own abilities, resources or intellect in the value co-creation process. In the case referred above, the Liverpool FC online fan community, an example of this phenomenon was found when the club fans started boycotting the club’s merchandising, not abandoning the seats after home games and chanting special songs to save the manager at the time, Rafael Benitez, from being fired by the American owners of the club. As a result of these protests, the club’s management kept the manager until the end of the season and started acknowledging the influence of the club supporters. Although many see “double exploitation” as a threat to value co-creation, it can be in fact a learning process that allows brands to grow and strengthen with it, because consumers are encouraged to protect and contribute to the brand. “The individual consumer in the co-consuming group participates in the social network in order to pursue two main goals: individual goals – information gathering, experiences, developing relationships, and social interactions – and collective goals – developing a sense of community or group identity, contributing to the group’s collective resources, supporting a brand culture, and so forth” (Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011).

Summing up the previous section, existing research uses the football sector as an example of co-creation, which made us believe that it is indeed a context worthy to study to further extend knowledge on co-creation.

Moreover, Merz, Zarantonello and Grappi mention two other relevant concepts in the scope of co-creation, within the context of football, specifically brand passion and brand commitment (Merz, Zarantonello, & Grappi, 2018). “Brand passion, admiration, or love is the

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positive and strong feeling customers develop toward brands” (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2013). This can be easily observed in the case of a football brand for example. Brand passion leads consumers to get emotionally attached and involved with the brand. Firms can take advantage of passion and commitment by extending their reach through positive word-of-mouth and by making brand enthusiasts participate in the development of new products (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Moreover, “brand commitment represents the extent to which stakeholders are willing to work for the brand and its success. Committed stakeholders help firms co-create brand value in that they take on more committed roles in developing new products co-creatively with firms and participate more actively in brand communities” (O’Hern & Rindfleisch, 2010).

Finally, football fans represent an interesting focus of study, since they are particularly loyal (“fan equity” – Hamil, 1999), because for example fans do not tend to switch allegiances (Richardson, 2007; Sandvoss 2003). Moreover, community is important for many fans and there is a shared sense of emotional ownership (King, 2000). Also, fandom is co-creative in the sense that the stadium atmosphere, for instance, is produced and consumed by fans (Holt, 1995; King, 2002; Pongsakornrunsilp, 2010). As such, this emotional ownership may stimulate fan participation in the co-creation process (Healy & McDonagh, 2013).

c) Brand Identity

Brand identity has been defined as what brand managers would like the brand to be, what the brand stands for and what makes it unique (Kapferer, 2008). As such, initially, brand identity was considered static and stable over time (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008). However, gradually research has proposed brand identity as a dynamic concept developed over time through mutually influencing inputs from managers and other social constituents, namely consumers (da Silveira et al., 2013). This is a consequence of the co-creation paradigm. Within the concept of brand identity, it is crucial to distinguish between two different facets of brand

identity – Brand Identity Claims and Brand Identity Understandings. Brand Identity Claims is the facet of the Brand Identity that brand members share with each other and with external stakeholders (Gioia et al., 2010, p.5). In this sense, Brand Identity Claims can be seen as the aspects of the Brand Identity that are predominantly externalized. Oppositely, authors associate the social construction perspective to Brand Identity Understandings, delineated as the members' shared meanings about "who we are as an organization" (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010). As such, this facet can be seen as the aspects of the Brand Identity that are predominantly internalized.

Several frameworks are used, in the literature, to specify brand identity. In the context of this research, we use the framework for brand identity developed by Kapferer (1986), the Brand Identity Prism. This framework establishes Brand Identity as the sum of 6 different facets: physical (more salient brand features), relationship (counterpart given by the brand to its consumers/users), customer reflection (brand "projected/desired" consumer type), personality (if the brand was a person, what kind of person would it be?), culture (set of values feeding the brand inspiration, core of the brand) and self-image (brand aspired target's internal mirror).

3. Addressing the Work Project Objectives

In order to address the Work Project objectives, the research methodology developed for this thesis follows a longitudinal single case study research, based on primary data collection.

- Research Methodology

a) Why qualitative research? Why a case study design? Why a single case study?

To address this dissertation's main research question - how fans co-influence the brand identity of Benfica, in a context of co-creation - **qualitative research** was the chosen methodology because it provided the only possible way to assess correctly our object of study. Quantitative research would not be appropriate to conduct such analysis.

Moreover, a **case study** methodology was chosen, because the case study method is adequate when the questions of the research "seek to explain some present circumstance, for instance "how" or "why" some phenomenon works, and when it requires an extensive and "in-depth" description of that same phenomenon" (Yin, 2009, p.4). A football club brand and the research question addressed meet the most significant criteria to choose a single case approach as it is a critical, representative, and a longitudinal case (Yin, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A **single case** study is appropriate when it is believed that the case meets all the requirements and conditions for testing an assumption or a theory (versus multiple cases). Moreover, another rational to justify a single case study approach according to Robert K. Yin is when the case can also be considered a critical case, because "the theory has specified a clear set of propositions as well as the circumstances within which the propositions are believed to be true. A single case, meeting all of the conditions for testing the theory can confirm, challenge or extend the theory." (Yin, 2009).

For this thesis we have chosen a **longitudinal case study** approach: "studying the same single case at two or more different points in time. The theory of interest would likely specify how certain conditions change over time, and the desired time intervals would presumably reflect the

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anticipated stages at which the changes should reveal themselves.” (Yin, 2009). As such we studied the events connected to a particular football club in Portugal, asking participants to restore their experience as club supporters throughout time since day one. When demonstrating causation in longitudinal research, time can be captured through real time analysis and through retrospection (Pettigrew, 1990; Abbott, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Abbott (1992) suggests using the historian’s method of “followability”. Stories are analysed as a flow of connected events in context. In this way “qualitative research can sort out the temporal dimension showing clearly what preceded what either through direct observation or retrospection” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this research we pursued a **retrospective** approach to address the longitudinal aspect of the case study.

b) Case Selection – Sport Lisboa Benfica

The case selected was the case of the sports brand Benfica, which englobes the football club Sport Lisboa Benfica. Founded on 28 February 1904, Sport Lisboa Benfica started by being a Portuguese sports club based in Lisbon, best known for its professional football team, but has become a complete sports brand. The strength of the brand is materialized by its iconic brand elements such as the red colour, the eagle and its stadium (“Estádio da Luz”), but above all by its 14 million supporters worldwide and 184.264 members (estimation, source: Benfica’s Annual Report 2016), being the most supported Portuguese club and the European club with the highest percentage of supporters in its own country. In the context of this case study the unit of analysis is the brand Benfica. Below one may find the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2008) applied to the brand Benfica.

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Figure 1.1 - Brand Identity Prism for Benfica (according to research and primary data collection and based on the framework developed by Kapferer)

A preliminary pilot research was conducted to verify if the brand Benfica would fulfil all the necessary conditions to be considered an appropriate case of co-creation. A preliminary study refers to a small-scale version, or trial run, developed in preparation for a major study (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Several case study researchers (e.g., Janesick, 1998; Yin, 2014) state that preliminary studies such as pilot studies provide substantial insights into the issues being studied. Yin recommends conducting a preliminary study at an early stage of the research process. In this sense, six in-depth pilot interviews were performed in order to: 1) verify if, as initially assumed, Benfica could indeed be considered a solid case of co-creation; 2) get preliminary insights, crucial to develop the final research interview guide. Those 6 in-depth interviews were conducted within a sample composed by 4 Benfica supporters and 2 Benfica sports commentators¹.

From this preliminary research, and as the analysis below demonstrates, it was possible to conclude that the football brand Benfica would constitute a case worthy to be study in the context of co-creation, with the goal of extending the existing theory, because it fulfills all the necessary conditions to be considered a case of co-creation.

¹ In Portugal, one of the most popular formats of TV sports shows is a debate between several football commentators ("experts"), each of them representing a different football club, in which they discuss the football clubs' performance.

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First, there has to be “(1) consumer active participation in the process of value creation”. This is possible to witness in the context of Benfica, since consumers proactively share their insights with the brand either directly or through “super fans” who have a direct communication channel with the brand (explained further on). The purpose of those interactions with the brand is to improve the brand’s performance, so it implies the creation of value for the brand, regardless of the form that value takes. The second condition necessary to assume co-creation is “(2) the co-creation ‘object’ must affect consumers’ identity and personal lives”. The Latin and Southern European cultures are characterized by a huge involvement of the fans with the football club brands, to a point in which the club becomes part of one’s identity, being one of the first aspects that comes to mind when a person is presenting himself/herself to others. From the in-depth interviews conducted in the aim of this pilot research several of the interviewed said that being a Benfica fan was part of their identity:

“Being a Benfica supporter is part of my identity as a man.” (Benfica Supporter 1)

“Being a Benfica fan is part of my identity. Is something that I say when I present myself in casual situations or when I want to start a conversation with others.” (Benfica Supporter 3)

Furthermore, more than being part of one’s identity, it also has an impact on that person’s life, for example one fan from the sample interviewed stated:

“I become very sad, capable of crying, when Benfica loses a match, but I have to control myself to try not to let that affect my life so much.” (Benfica Supporter 2)

As a third condition for co-creation to occur, one must ensure “(3) consumer involvement in dialogue with the firm”. The fans of Benfica are in constant dialogue with the brand, by different means and through different channels. If we consider the majority of the fans, they try to reach the brand constantly and directly through social networks, where they share their opinions and thoughts on how the brand is being managed. More active and participative fans even go further and send emails and letters to the club. There is also a very particular group of fans, named “super fans”, which is composed by Benfica supporters who exercise the role of Benfica representatives as sports commentators on TV or radio programs, or writers in sports journals, or even online influencers by managing dedicated blogs or fan communities. Through the research, we

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concluded that it is very common for these group of supporters to have a direct channel of communication with the brand, such as contacts with management people, or by participating in private semi-annual meetings:

“Two or three time per year, Benfica gathers in a room all the people who speak on television or write in some journals (mainly sports journals) in behalf of Benfica, a bit more than 20 people, to discuss what is going on with the club”. (Benfica Super Fan 1)

These “super fans” use those private channels to share their own thoughts and suggestions with the brand managers, but also to share opinions and insights that other ordinary fans and supporters shared with them hoping that it would be conveyed to Benfica, and vice versa. As a consequence, it makes sense that Benfica ensures “(4) information – i.e., the firm should ensure access to information to consumers”. In the case of Benfica, the club and its managers often share relevant information beforehand with the “super fans” to convey specific messages in vital moments for the club, hoping that these “super fans” in turn will transmit that information to other fans.

“In these organized meetings, we align the message that we will convey when speaking or writing on public forums (radio, television, magazines, journals, blogs...) about Benfica”. (Benfica Super Fan 1)

Moreover, it is obvious in the case of Benfica that there is “(5) collective acceptance of the risks (intrinsic to the co-created “object”). When Benfica supporters adopt the brand as part of their personal identity, they are inherently accepting to share the risks (but also the benefits) intrinsically connected to the brand. This gives them an incentive to help the brand managers in mitigating issues that represent a risk/threat to the brand:

“I want to be there for my club in good moments, to celebrate, but especially in bad moments, because then is when they really need my support”. (Benfica Supporter 4)

Finally, the last necessary condition for co-creation is “(6) evidence of direct interactions between suppliers and consumers”. As stated above, there are several occasions in which there are direct interactions between the two parties, Benfica management and Benfica supporters. Namely, on social networks, on organized meetings, in football matches and through the “super fans”.

As one may conclude, Benfica fulfills all the conditions for co-creation stated in the literature review.

c) Sampling and Population of Study

To be able to extract valuable insights and find patterns, it was established a goal of 30 in-depth interviews for the main research. From these 30 in-depth interviews, 24 were conducted with Benfica supporters: 1) mostly men²; 2) with an aged comprised between 18 and 55 years old³. The representativeness of the population was a concern in terms of having people from different economic backgrounds and social strata. The other 6 interviews were conducted with 6 professional sports commentators considered “super fans”, who write on sports blogs and journals, who manage online fan communities or are commentators on sports TV shows. The need to interview this group of people in particular emerged from the findings of the pilot interviews conducted, since they seem to influence our object of study, which is explained later in this thesis. The people interviewed were chosen through a pre-recruiting questionnaire based on an array of preliminary filter criteria, namely: being a fan of Sport Lisboa Benfica, being considered an active supporter through the assessment of past interactions with the brand, and availability to be interviewed.

d) Research Tools – Interviews

In-person in-depth interviews were the chosen method for data gathering, since they are considered the most appropriate research tool to do exploratory research and uncover motives and patterns that would go unnoticed through more standardized tools. The interviews performed were semi-structured, meaning that they had a set of introductory questions used as starting point for the conversation and topics to be explored throughout, but they allowed for some flexibility and adaptation according to the information that was being provided by the interviewee. This structure would allow for the discussion of emerging insights (Gillham, 2005).

² Because it is a given fact that the majority of football fans is composed by men and football remains a dominantly male sport.

³ Because children, teenagers and the elderly are in a stage of their lives in which the interactions they can have with the brand Benfica and that are relevant in the scope of this study are limited by external factors.

e) Main Research Insights

- Super Fans

Several insights can be drawn from the research conducted. First, it became clear through the interviews that there is a group of Benfica fans who acquire particular importance for the process of co-creation, since they serve as intermediaries between ordinary fans and the brand. These people tend to be either 1) sports commentators or journalists, as explained earlier, or 2) spontaneous leaders of Benfica communities (e.g., online fan forums). The first group (sports commentators) tend to have access to direct channels of communication with Benfica's management and, as a consequence, access to privileged information to some extent. The ones that were interviewed in the aim of this research stated that two or three times per year Benfica gathers them all in a room to discuss what is going on with the club and align the message to be conveyed by them when speaking or writing on public forums about Benfica. They are seen by the other supporters as official representatives (or even "spokespersons") of the club and people who have both the best interests of the club at heart but also a direct line of communication with Benfica's management.

"The other Benfica supporters approach me on the street, by phone, through email or social media, and share their opinions regarding comments I should make and things I should say on television. They look at me as a spokesperson for the club." (Benfica Super Fan 1)

Besides them, there is a second group, which is composed by other fans who are considered spontaneous leaders, found to be responsible for managing online communities of Benfica fans, such as online forums and blogs (e.g. SerBenfiquista.com) and smaller scale private Facebook groups, and/or offline communities (e.g., "Casa do Benfica"). These fans ascend to the level of being able to influence a lot the community's opinion around a specific topic, able to trigger actions and organizing meetings and physical gatherings (on football matches, but also on a more social level). Two former managers of big online communities of Benfica fans in Portugal were even hired later on and are currently working for Benfica (in sports related roles).

"In these fan forums, people feel free to openly talk about the clubs' issues and to criticize the club both positively and negatively. The sports journals follow very closely these forums and sometimes they base news on items written and posted on these forums." (Benfica Supporter 8)

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“There are very active users on fan forums and social media who are actually heard by most of the community members. They are regular fans in the sense that they do not have formal ties with Benfica, but they are respected due to their elevated level of commitment and involvement with the club and the community.” (Benfica Supporter 13)

For the purpose of this thesis, the two groups will be aggregated under the name “super fans”. This “intermediary” role exists, because due to the dimension of the fan community it becomes impossible for the brand to have direct lines of communications with all the fans. Summing up, the “super fans” play the role of intermediaries between ordinary fans and the brand managers, which is crucial for the process of transmitting feedback between both parties and influencing the process of brand identity development. Furthermore, the brand identity of Benfica is shaped because the managers involve the super fans in the resolution of brand issues, as discussed later in this project.

- **Brand Issues**

It is also undeniable that the brand identity of Benfica is in fact impacted, and to a certain extent shaped, by the club’s supporters. Throughout the history of the brand, several issues appeared and threatened the brand, on more than one occasion. These issues may have an internal or external origin and affect the brand’s performance. These issues tend to be identified by the fans a lot of times, since they affect the morale of the fans and consequently impact the brand identity. As such, fans trigger actions in an attempt to solve those issues.

“There were certain moments in which Benfica payed attention to the opinion of its supporters and made changes based on that. Probably when the issues were too obvious to miss out, or when the issues were more important and would affect the big picture of the club.” (Benfica Supporter 15)

The super fans serve as intermediaries in communicating the issues identified by the fans to the managers and subsequently work with the managers in solving those issues and aligning the message and actions to be taken with the ordinary fans. This combined work between managers and fans ends up shaping the brand identity.

We illustrate this process with two issues that impacted key dimensions of the brand identity and were highlighted during the research conducted. The first is when a significant issue is challenging the brand, becoming a serious issue for the fans and, as a consequence, a serious issue for the brand

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managers. So, immediate actions are taken to address the issue, influencing the identity of the brand almost symbiotically. This is the example of the issue with the blue logo on the players' shirts (see Table 1.1). On the football season of 2010/2011, one of the main sponsors of the club was the telecommunications company TMN, as such the logo of this company was on the uniforms of the football club players. However, the logo of TMN was blue, and blue is also the color of one of Benfica's main competitors. The fans became very upset about it and there was an uprising against the uniforms of the players and the color of the logo. The fans even started an online petition demanding the removal of the blue logo from the uniforms. In response to this, later in that year, the President of the club Benfica announced that in the next season (2011/2012), the players would play with a new uniform, with the TMN logo on a different color. On Table 1.1, we evaluate the impact of this issue in the key dimension "red" (physical dimension) of Benfica's Brand Identity. As one may conclude, the dimension "red" gained relevance and was fortified as a consequence of the interactions between the fans and the managers on addressing this issue.

On the other hand, when the issues tend to be more complex, namely the example of the debt and financial issues undermining the club's performance (see Table 1.2), all the supporters get involved, but this time not in a direct way, because they can't find a proper channel or a direct line of communication with the club's managers. So, in those cases, they constantly express their opinions, recommendations, wishes, frustrations and ideas among themselves and to the "super fans", which in turn transmit that message to the management team of Benfica, who ends up taking actions, using the help of the "super fans" as an instrumental tool in the problem solving. The debt and financial problems of Benfica report back to 2002, when they caught the public eye and the attention of media for the first time. However, they have escalated throughout the years and led to a recent decision of the management team to sell a lot of valuable players, especially during the summer of 2017. The sale of key players for the team threatened the brand performance (i.e., the ability of the club to win matches and championships). Therefore, the debt and financial issues of the brand lead

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to other issues, namely sports and performance issues, since the club is losing matches consequently, which are weakening the dimension “leader” of the brand identity. Furthermore, in order to restore the debt balance of the club and solve some of its financial problems, the management decided to increase the price of the tickets, which received vast backlash and reactions from its fans, as the fans felt that their support was unappreciated and that *“the club does not want its fans in the stadium”* (Benfica Supporter 23), affecting once more the brand identity. We evaluate the impact of this issue in the key dimension “leader” (culture dimension) of Benfica’s Brand Identity, on Table 1.2. As one may conclude, the dimension “leader” ended up hurt and lost some of its initial strength, stabilizing around a lower level, as a result of the current situation of the club, but it did not lose all of its relevance as a key dimension of the brand identity, due to the actions took by the brand managers and the conjoint work with super fans to manage the issue.

- **Brand Identity**

Lastly, a final insight was possible to extract from this study. Benfica fans start developing their brand identity understandings from early on, since they were kids, because they became fans of Benfica through “heritage”, meaning that they were born and raised in a family in which the members were already Benfica supporters. However, as described by one of the fans interviewed:

“When it comes to football the possibility of changing club is inexistent. I can change my mobile phone brand, and go from Apple to Samsung, for example, but I can’t switch between football clubs. So, one has to work for the well-being of the brand” (Benfica Supporter 6).

Hence, fans have an incentive to maintain a positive brand image, since they are bound to the club and switching allegiances is not an option for them. That also explains the gap between brand identity claims and brand identity understandings, observable in the two situations analyzed on Tables 1.1 and 1.2. Because although the perceptions of the brand by fans are deeply affected and changed by the issue (BI understandings), they will never make complete honest and negative claims about the brand. As such, the BI claims will never be as negatively impacted by issues as the BI understandings.

“We (Benfica supporters) should not expose our club’s weaknesses to others”. (Benfica Supporter 5)













Phases		Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5
		Before 2010	2010	Early 2011 (1 year later)	2011	End of 2011 / Beginning of 2012
		The dimension “red” is strong	“Red” starts to lose strength as a BI understanding dimension	“Red” dimension significantly weakens as a BI understanding and starts declining as a BI claim	Slight rise of “red” as a BI understanding	“Red” stabilizes as a medium/high level in BI claims and rather medium/low level in BI understandings
Strength of the “red” dimension in BI claims and BI understandings	High					
	Low					
Brand Issue			Shirts of the football players with a blue logo of a main sponsor			
Brand Issue interpretations			Blue is the official color of the logo of one of Benfica’s biggest opponents (F.C. Porto). That was interpreted as an offense to the club.			
Processing and actions on the Brand Issue				<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The Benfica supporters wanted the blue color out of the Benfica shirt, so they created an online petition. 2) In the following season, the uniforms of the players were changed, and the blue square was removed. 		
Perceived impact of Brand Issue processing				<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The Brand Managers are now more careful when deciding on the new uniforms of the players. 2) The Brand Managers reinforce the “red” dimension as a core feature of the brand’s identity. 		

Table 1.1 – Impact of the issue “blue logo” on the Brand Identity dimension “red” (brand identity claims and brand identity understandings), from 2010 to 2012.

Label

 = brand identity claims
 = brand identity understandings









Phases		Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5
		Before June 2017	June 2017	July – September 2017	October 2017	November 2017
		The dimension “leader” is strong	“Leader” starts to lose strength as a BI understanding dimension	“Leader” dimension significantly weakens as a BI understanding and starts declining as a BI claim	Slight rise of “leader” as a BI understanding	“Leader” stabilizes as a medium/low level in BI claims and rather low level in BI understandings
Strength of the “leader” dimension in BI claims and BI understandings	High					
	Low					
<u>Brand Issue 1</u>			Debt Issues and Financial Troubles of the Club aggravate			
Brand Issue interpretations			It affects the football club’s ability to win matches and leagues			
Processing and actions on the Brand Issue (1)				1) Sale of key players during the summer of 2017 2) Increase in the price of the tickets (“redpass”) in August 2017 (beginning of the season)		
<u>Brand Issue 2</u>				The brand sells valuable players		
Brand Issue interpretations				The fans started seeing the brand weakened and with less chances to score well in the season		
<u>Brand Issue 3</u>				The brand increases the price of the stadium tickets		
Brand Issue interpretations				Fans interpret the tickets price increase as “the club does not want its supporters there; it does not value them”		
Processing and actions on the Brand Issues (2 and 3)					Benfica managers use the “super fans” to pull the supporters together and defend the club publicly, raising the morale of the club	

Table 1.2 – Impact of the issue “debt” on the brand identity dimension “leader” (brand identity claims and brand identity understandings), from June to November 2017.

4. Discussion

Common to all the interviews is the fact that having direct lines of communication with Benfica is somehow difficult, not to say almost impossible sometimes, because of the high number of fans that the brand has. So, contrarily to Grönroos definition of co-creation stated in the literature review, in which value co-creation happens exclusively when “the firm and the customer act together in a merged, coordinated, dialogical, and interactive process...” (2012), this research shows that it is not necessary to exist direct interactions between the two parties to ensure co-creation, within this context. In fact, when the community has millions of fans, this is impossible in practice. Most of the times the interactions between fans and managers do not happen directly, on a one-on-one and regular basis, but through intermediaries (e.g., “super fans”). Benfica supporters frequently interact with the “super fans” on online communities (e.g., forums, blogs...), via email or even physically in the street, to share with them their opinions, ideas and thoughts on the brand’s performance and asking them to convey those messages publicly on their platforms and/or directly to Benfica’s management team, and the brand itself gives feedback through them and works with the “super fans” to co-create solutions to arising issues.

Additionally, fans tend to form communities of Benfica supporters within their own personal or work communities. For example, from the sample interviewed some were students from the same university and they all mentioned a Facebook Private Group composed solely by students from that university who are Benfica fans, in which they share opinions about Benfica and comment on Benfica’s performances. Others mentioned Whatsapp groups with work colleagues (all Benfica fans) for the same purpose. So, as one may conclude, there is this constant need of exchange of information and ideas between fans and a predisposal for the creation of Benfica communities within the consumers’ social communities. Hence, our research highlights how belonging to these communities is in fact part of the identity of its members and that they see

the brand as a vehicle for the development of social bonds. This goes in line with existing literature on co-creation, namely Cova & Cova (2002) and Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder (2011), who state that the “individual consumer in the co-consuming group participates in the social network in order to pursue two main goals: individual goals (...) and collective goals – developing a sense of community or group identity, contributing to the group’s collective resources, supporting a brand culture, and so forth” (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011).

Moreover, one of the most surprising and valuable assumptions derived from this study is that the dimensions of the brand identity are fixed and are there since the identity of the brand was first created. However, over the course of time, some dimensions become stronger and others weaker according to how the brand is being managed. Oppositely to what one might thought, co-creation in the context of a football club does not mean the constant redefinition of the club’s brand identity, or any restructuring changes, but the reinforcement or diminishing of core dimensions that were always present in the brand’s identity and which acquire different degrees of relevance over time, due to the issues that the club faces and the way those issues are managed. The two issues depicted in the previous section confirm the assumption that the fans actually co-influence the brand identity of Sport Lisboa Benfca. On the first case, this happens in a direct form, where fans identified an issue and by their own means triggered actions to alert the management team and demand changes, resulting in the reinforcement of the dimension “red” as a key dimension of Benfca’s brand identity. On the second case, “super fans” played an intermediary role both in communicating the issue as in helping the managers mitigating the same by delivering tailored messages on the public forums in which they talk or write, preventing the loss of the dimension “leader” as a key dimension of Benfca’s brand identity. Nonetheless, both cases support the dynamic concept of brand identity proposed by recent research (da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013), which advances that brand identity develops over time through mutually influencing inputs from managers and consumers.

Finally, regardless of their opinion concerning the current performance of the brand (i.e., brand identity understandings) and possible issues threatening the brand, Benfica supporters would never share a negative opinion in public about Benfica, in other words, they would never make a negative brand identity claim, because by extension that would not be favorable for them as brand members. They only allow themselves to share their true opinion on brand issues (to a certain extent) inside the community – privately only with other brand members (e.g., Online Forum or Facebook Group composed solely by Benfica supporters). In those community groups, Benfica supporters feel free to share their honest opinions and to critic the brand's management, but they all confirm that they would never do it outside the community in order not to hurt the brand identity and defend the brand from opponent brand supporters. Thus, another relevant insight from this research is that Brand Identity is partially static, since the brand understandings change, as a consequence of brand issues and how they are addressed, but the claims tend not to change that much, being almost the same throughout time. In this sense, there is a gap between Brand Identity Understandings and Brand Identity Claims, indicating that fans have an incentive to maintain a favorable brand image, alongside the brand manager, since by extension that will also be favorable for them as brand members. Furthermore, in the light of the research insights found, it is possible to say that the issues that are affecting the brand become issues of the fans, because they affect the identity of the two, in other words, they impact on a first level the brand identity, and since fans incorporate the identity of the brand in their own personal identity, it impacts on a second level, consequently, the personal identity of the fan. This confirms what Healy & McDonagh (2013) earlier said about this phenomenon: “emotional ownership may stimulate fan participation in the co-creation process”.

In conclusion, we can say that consumers co-create with football club brands and co-influence their brand identity, together with the managers.

5. Managerial Implications to Benfica

After conducting this research, it is possible to translate some of the insights to practical business recommendations that can be of use to the management team of Benfica, particularly to its brand managers.

- Building a sense of community and using influencers (i.e., “super fans”) to manage fans and surpass brand issues – It is undeniable that supporters are determinant in helping the brand surpassing obstacles and solving arising issues. So, it should be on the club’s best interest to provide the necessary information to the brand supporters and work with them in a symbiotic way. For that to happen, there is a need to establish new channels in which the two parties can exchange information and share insights. “Super fans” play a crucial role on managing fan communities that are almost unmanageable by the brand alone, due to the dimension of the fan community (e.g., millions). As such, the brand managers should work with the “supper fans” (i.e., brand supporters that are followed by the other fans and consequently gain a higher exposure and reach) to address issues and to ensure that they pursue a common strategy in solving the problem threatening the brand. They should be seen as public representatives of the brand and represent a bridging channel between both parties.

- Creating a new job function – The brand should have someone formally in charge of managing the community and whose responsibilities would include: monitoring what the supporters are saying online (e.g., social networks or specialty blogs/websites), coordinating the message with “influencers” and “super fans” and listening to their feedback, articulating the online and offline message to be conveyed by the club specifically to its supporters, and organizing formal touchpoint moments between the two parties. It is very common for companies that have fan communities composed by millions of supporters, such as Apple or Google for example, to have employees with the function of Community Manager.

6. Work Project Main Limitations

- A very common limitation of single case studies is the risk of misrepresentation and the difficulty in generalizing the conclusions reached for other cases. Moreover, although this case meets most significant criteria for a single case as it is a critical, representative, and longitudinal case (Yin, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994), the research endures the usual limitations of studying a single brand. Also, the findings are likely to relate to only certain types of brand – brands that present an underlying context of co-creation, having consumers acting as brand co-creators.
- Representativeness and diversity of the sample interviewed - the majority of Benfica supporters is male, and football remains a male dominated sport.
- By using a retrospective approach in longitudinal case study, instead of interviewing several times the same people over a particular interval of time, one is limited and conditioned to the extent to which the interviewed people can precisely recall and reconstitute past events, experiences and feelings. This introduces a bias to the process, because the way in which one recalls the past and the way past information is interpreted by the researchers will be undeniably partially biased.
- The scope of this dissertation covers exclusively one side of the question, in the sense that we only interviewed consumers. In order to fully address the research question posed it would be crucial to extend this research by interviewing the brand managers of Sport Lisboa Benfica and extract further insights after analyzing those interviews. Putting the two sides together (suppliers and consumers) appears to be the most accurate way to address the research problem stated above, leaving a hint for future research to be developed in order to continue the discussion on this subject.

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