

The Dark Side of Athlete Influence: How Social-Media Behaviour Can Dilute Club Brand Equity and What Governance Mechanisms Work

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Abstract. The present study examines how footballers' social media behaviour can be a double-edged sword for club brand equity. By applying Aaker's four brand equity dimensions as the main lens, the present study explores the underlying reasons of why star athletes act as human brands for sports clubs. The model also portrays that star athletes' scandals can create negative publicity, undermining club's brand equity. Overall, by using examples including star athletes such as Özil and Ronaldo, the present study concludes that star athletes' social media operations can be a duo-edged sword. The present study illustrates that proactive guidance is required to protect brand values and sustain brand equity.

Keywords: Club Brand Equity, Athlete Branding, Social Media Governance, Brand Co-creation

1. Introduction

Brand equity is an important aspect for any brand. In the realm of sport, sports club's brand equity represents the value of the club and the importance of its brand in the eyes of members and fans. Traditionally, club's brand equity is controlled and marketed by the club's management. However, as Pegoraro and Jinnah expressed, in an era where social media has become proliferated, club's brand equity has been increasingly connected to the personal brands of its star players [1]. In fact, many top players now have a much larger number of followers on social media than the clubs they play for [2]. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo has more followers than all of the clubs he has stayed with. As a result, elite athletes have a strong influence on social media, leading to a mix of opportunities and problems. While their accounts help clubs get more attention and engage with supporters at no expenses, any controversial content posted by these athletes can harm the club's reputation.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate how an athlete's online behaviour can have a positive and negative impacts on sport clubs. Using Aaker's brand equity model, the study examines the idea of brand co-creation between players and clubs [3]. In addition, the present study synthesizes recent literature and real cases in relation to sports management to provide a comprehensive insight into the issue.

2. Athlete brands and club brand equity

According to Pegoraro and Jinnah, high profile star athlete can be regarded as a human branding that is entwined with their club's brand. A star signing with the football club can drastically boost the club's market visibility and revenue through attracting larger fan attention and increasing merchandise sales [1]. For example, after Cristiano Ronaldo's signing with Juventus in July 2018, the club's market capitalization soared significantly (as seen in Figure 1). However, upon his departure in August 2021, Juventus's market capitalization almost restored to pre-2018 level. Thus, in branding terms, a popular player can add new positive associations to the club (as seen in the Juventus example). However, the close association between certain star players and the club can be regarded as a double-edged sword, when the player acts wrongfully, or depart the club, the player's personal brand influence can quickly become the club's troubles, adversely affecting the club's brand equity and market value.



Figure 1. Juventus market capitalisation change from 2017 to 2025 [4]

3. Social media: a double-edged sword

Drawing from the above illustration, social media has the ability to provide unprecedented marketing opportunities for football clubs. By leveraging fan engagement and global reach of its star athletes, clubs can rapidly gain value. However, such influence can also be adversarial should the clubs struggle to manage their star athletes. This is because players have become public images of the club and they can easily voice public opinions that shape the brand narrative on social media platforms [5]. A study by Firgolska and Kucharska discovered that in nowadays context, club managers' top concerns is associated with losing control of the brand's image on social media platforms, as well as balancing short-term commercial gains with long-term fan loyalty due to social media effects [2]. In essence, social media can boost revenue and growth, but it also allows individuals to become brand storytellers in unpredictable ways.

Star footballers are among the most powerful of these storytellers. With personal followings that often eclipse official club accounts, athletes effectively serve as brand ambassadors and media channels in their own right. Scholars note that brand meaning is now co-created by multiple actors across digital platforms [6,7]. Athletes, fans, sponsors and clubs all contribute to what the brand stands for. Implied herein is the insufficiency, on the parts both of athletes and clubs, in securing autonomous dominion over narratives pertaining to their public image. The interpretation-process, subject to perpetual revision, unfolds within arenas shaped by collective engagement; evident from this phenomenon is that meanings, rather than fixed, emerge through dialogic exchanges manifested

publicly. Empowerment - bestowed upon athletes via social networking platforms - is counterbalanced by an escalation, observable in instances numerous, in susceptibility encountered by club brand-identities to unforeseen behaviors enacted by those same athlete-members.

Within the current landscape of athletic engagement, observation yields that numerous sportspersons construct their digital identities with deliberation, typically in accordance with normative frameworks prescribed by their respective organizations. The orchestration of such congruence - often facilitated through collaboration with specialized communicative personnel - emerges as a salient mechanism whereby both affective bonds with supporters are consolidated and auxiliary commercial interests procured [8]. Instances manifest, nevertheless, where an antithetical comportment is discernible among select athletes; for these individuals, unmoderated expressions within virtual platforms precipitate reputational disturbances at an institutional level. Detected among scenarios are declarations involving contentious socio-political content, articulations of partiality or exclusionary rhetoric, as well as overt disparagement directed at governance structures or tactical implementations by managerial authorities. However, repercussions, seldom restricted to the originators themselves, propagate unpredictably yet persistently beyond discrete agency, resulting in enduring detriment visited upon the communal image curated by the associated sporting entity [9,10].

4. Negative impacts on brand equity

When a high-profile player misbehaves on social media, the damage to club brand equity can be analyzed along four dimensions.

4.1. Brand awareness

A scandal can ironically boost a club's name recognition, but for negative reasons. Social-media controversies often go viral, putting the club's name in headlines for the wrong reasons. While awareness might momentarily spike, marketing scholars warn that not all publicity is good publicity. Negative publicity tends to yield negative consumer attitudes and behaviors [11,12]. In essence, a controversial tweet can make a club world-famous overnight as a tarnished brand and any short-term boost in visibility is outweighed by reputational cost.

4.2. Brand associations

Misbehavior by a player introduces undesirable traits into the club's image. A club might pride itself on values like integrity, success, or community, but one incident can make it associated with controversy or indiscipline. Psychological research on celebrity endorsers shows that negative information about an endorser becomes automatically linked to the endorsed brand in consumers' minds [13]. Likewise, a footballer essentially "endorses" his club's brand, so if he posts something offensive, audiences may transfer that offense to the club. In one survey, an athlete's scandal significantly hurt perceptions of not only the athlete but also the team, indicating a contamination of the team's image [9]. Even if the club publicly denounces the player's remarks, the association between club and controversy can linger. As one sports lawyer observed, a high-profile player's tweets will "almost always be synonymous with their employer club" in the eyes of followers and a disclaimer that "views are my own" does little to stop fans from equating the athlete's conduct with the club's identity [10]. Thus, an ill-advised social media post can inject toxic associations directly into the club's brand.

4.3. Brand loyalty

Club loyalty, especially among die-hard fans, is resilient, but it is not impervious to reputational damage. Scandals involving beloved star players can create disillusionment; those involving less popular or fringe players can prompt calls for the club to take action, potentially straining fan-club relationships. Research indicates that highly identified supporters will sometimes use moral rationalization or other strategies to maintain loyalty despite a player's transgression (e.g. "he made a mistake, but he's still our player"). For instance, fans of Tiger Woods were noted to separate their admiration for his athletic performance from disapproval of his off-field behavior in order to keep supporting him and his sponsors [14]. In a football context, devoted supporters may similarly compartmentalize a player's misconduct to continue backing the club which essentially excusing the player for the sake of the team [9]. However, not all fans forgive easily. Some fans become more critical of a misbehaving in-group member (a phenomenon known as the "black sheep" effect) because the player violated cherished norms of the club. For example, when a player makes a negative post, fans may regard such post as betraying the club's values. This can turn loyal fans against the player, and the club. In certain cases, repeated controversies on social media platforms can erode long-term goodwill of the club, particularly if the club's management does not proactively manage such controversy. Support from external stakeholders characterized by low inherent loyalty, empirical observations indicate, tends to be rapidly retracted upon the emergence of destabilizing events. Manifested occasionally by sponsors and devotees who possess a more stable brand affiliation but are not immune from withdrawal tendencies, such occurrences illustrate the instability surrounding sponsorship ecosystems. Detrimental effects on long-term brand equity and institutional loyalty are consistently associated with persistent crises that evolve across social media platforms - platforms over which comprehensive oversight or pre-emptive intervention frequently lies beyond organizational capacity. Within this contemporary digital landscape, demonstrably constrained remains the ability of such clubs to anticipate or dictate outcome trajectories regarding public incidents emergent online.

4.4. Perceived quality

To this particular dimension belongs not only the demonstrable quality of athletic performance occurring within match settings but also those auxiliary attributes attaching themselves to a club - attributes such as a professionalism perceived by external observers, together with cultural tenor and institutional integrity. It has been observed in Mehrzad's analysis that the capacity for diminution of a club's publicly construed quality arises in myriad forms from controversies involving athletes' utilization of social media platforms [10]. In instances where inappropriate behaviour is manifested online, there emerges among supporters an inclination toward scrutinisation of the administrative competence and standards embodied by their affiliated organization; thus, where star athletes persistently disseminate unsuitable content via public channels, doubts regarding both player oversight and executive discipline are liable to arise among the fanbase, who may voice speculation over failures present within internal culture or leadership structures responsible for shaping athlete comportment [15]. Visible herein is the potential erosion, subsequent to these incidents, of brand equity associated with the sporting entity itself - a process not contingent strictly upon fielded results but mediated equally by perceptions regarding backstage ethos.

Manifest too is a related phenomenon: off-field distractions provoked through prominent figures engaging recurrently in disputes on digital forums can prompt followers into questioning collective focus alongside team solidarity. The spectacle of high-profile players embroiled continually in

discursive conflict online leads to increased suspicion being directed at overall unity and mission, producing consequences detrimental to the conceptual standing of the organization as elite and professionally administrable [13].

Nor does the deterioration halt at questions of operational aptitude; within contemporary consumer cultures, considerations relevant to moral accountability and organizational responsibility increasingly preside [9,15]. It illustrates how transgressions occurring in virtual environments reverberate across stakeholder communities, whereby signals adverse to value perception circulate broadly - with ramifications materializing in the concrete spheres of supporter engagement metrics and prospective revenue streams, made visible amid changed commercial fortunes following highly visible breaches.

5. Brand co-creation

According to Merz et al. and Anderski et al., theories of modern brand management acknowledge that brand equity is not solely built by the organization itself, rather, it is a consolidated effort of all involved stakeholders [6,7]. In the football club's scenario, this means that brand value is built by the club and its players, fans, sponsors and other stakeholders who are closely associated with its operations [6]. Nevertheless, the club's star players and club itself are the stakeholder groups with the stronger influence. Consequently, when a star player's personal brand aligns with the club's ethos, both parties benefit from a sense of authenticity [16]. In contrast, if an athlete's behavior contradicts organizational values, the resulting discrepancy can confuse stakeholders and undermine credibility for both sides [16]. This confirms that brand value is co-created: a club cannot effectively project a positive narrative if its key representatives are telling a different, inconsistent story [17]. To illustrate this, the subsequent section analyzes real-world instances where the divergence between a club's stated values and a player's social media actions harmed brand equity.

6. Real-life examples of brand damage

6.1. Mesut Özil and Arsenal (2019)

In December 2019, Arsenal' midfielder Mesut Özil made a post on social media that criticizes the Uighur Muslim incident that occurred in China. The post became viral and Arsenal became involved in a political controversy. The Chinese government and many Chinese fans were outraged, with widespread calls to boycott against Arsenal products and matches. Arsenal's next match was even pulled from Chinese state television [18]. Club officials hurried to distance Arsenal from Özil's personal remarks, but the damage was done. Arsenal's brand associations in China turned sharply negative. The club came to be seen as embroiled in a sensitive political issue and some Chinese fans felt deeply betrayed by the club. As a result, Arsenal's progress with Chinese sponsors was also affected. This illustrates that a star player's social media post can significantly dilute the club's brand in a key international market.

6.2. Cristiano Ronaldo and Manchester United (2022)

Another illustration is between Cristiano Ronald and the Manchester United. During late 2022, Ronaldo made a highly publicized interview where he openly criticized the club's management and facilities [19]. The interview clips were widely spread on social media, which portrayed an unprofessional and dysfunctional image against the club. Ronaldo's comments shattered Manchester United's perceived quality as a top-class organization. As a result, the club's brand equity became

severely undermined. Stakeholders such as sponsors, consumers and loyal fans now associate the club with outdated facilities, unprofessional management team, and incompetent medical staff based on Ronald's remarks. The incident placed the club's brand value at jeopardy as Ronald's fans sided with the player and lost faith in the club. The club parted ways with Ronaldo shortly after to protect the club's brand from further harm [19]. These examples demonstrate that a player's online actions can impact pillars of brand equity (perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand association in this case). Both examples demonstrate why clubs must actively manage player's social media movements to prevent illustrated incidents.

7. Governance mechanisms: managing athletes' social media

From the aforementioned occurrences, it becomes apposite to examine governance mechanisms deployable by clubs intent on safeguarding the integrity and valuation of their brands. Evident from organizational experiences within club structures is the efficacy of strategies that operate simultaneously along several vectors. Not a singular tactic suffices; rather, brand preservation necessitates an approach exhibiting multiplicity: one wherein regulatory frameworks are instituted, in tandem with educational initiatives for members, vigilant observation undertaken through persistent supervision, and corrective or disciplinary measures enacted upon deviations. Within such composite assemblages, club administrations locate more resilient defenses against erosive or reputational threats directed at their distinguishing marks.

7.1. Preventive measures

A multiplicity of precautionary strategems, it may be inferable from contemporary management praxis, lie within the purview of football clubs when seeking to preempt social media disturbances linked to prominent members. Initially apparent is a requirement for codified stipulations, explicitly articulated protocols being those that players are mandated to observe - among which fall prohibitions on speech characterized by hostility and any comportment construed as detrimental to institutional reputation, occurrences identifiable in numerous precedential episodes. Noteworthy here remains an additional dimension: delivery of sustained pedagogical interventions by club authorities, wherein athletes receive systematic instruction through exemplifications culled from actual events and sanctions historically imposed, this apparatus serving both admonitory and deterrent purposes with regard to online comportmental lapses.

Not terminated there is the obligation; uniform extension of these dictates transpires, irrespective of individual digital prominence belonging to athletes—the appearance of differentiated enforcement thus actively eschewed. It becomes discernible, too, that consequences for infractions—such as monetary penalties, competitive suspensions, or analogous corrective enactments—are administered post-detection, their application neither arbitrary nor capricious but embedded within procedural regularities derived from previously observed regulatory frameworks [14].

Supplementing the operational schema of club administration, an allocation of personnel specifically dedicated to surveilling in real time the social media trajectories maintained by players is warranted. Evident from instances wherein digital communications deviate from institutionally sanctioned norms or manifest content misaligned with collective ethos, recommendations both immediate and corrective may be furnished to implicated individuals - suggestions encompassing deletion of contentious material and issuance of public contrition preceding aggravation of potential disputes. Within this framework of oversight, the probability associated with emergent crises

originating within social media ecosystems undergoes attenuation, as can be demonstrated by such interventions applied preemptively.

7.2. Reactive measures

In occurrences of untoward events, a necessity for clubs to execute responses with alacrity and unwavering regularity emerges, aiming at diminution of consequent ramification. From this it may be discerned that the deployment of reactive stratagems functions as an integral element within the governance apparatus which clubs are compelled to employ. To illustrate, penalties by club management must issue without deference to hierarchical standing within team rosters: evident from numerous episodes is the expectation that even luminaries among players would incur fines or temporary exclusion comparable to their lesser-known counterparts should infractions against articulated social media protocols materialize.

Manifestations such as these reinforce an observable capacity - the structural resolve inherent in club organizations - to implement policy strictures regardless of individual prominence. The prioritization found within these enforcement actions places institutional values above personal considerations. By recourse to *Mason v Huddersfield Giants*, confirmation arises; one notes player termination ensued subsequent to transgression of prescribed digital codes, exemplifying both adherence and consequence under regulatory frameworks established by club authorities [20]. Fan endorsement, attained by the club's resolution, can be observed as engendering a reinforcement of its organizational worth. Manifested was an accession to collective approval within the supporter base, a consequence reflected in the aggregation of valuation attributable to the club itself.

Additionally, upon the occurrence of a social media incident, public relation management by club authorities must be undertaken in order to address crisis and restrain reputational detriment. Released by the organizational entity, statements situating themselves with regard to the episode frequently are issued; through these declarations it is emphasized that expressions originating from individual players constitute private opinions rather than institutional perspectives proper to the club itself. Evident from such communicative interventions is an orientation whereby not only are the foundational values reaffirmed, but also clear demarcation is constructed between the collective identity of the club and the controversy's origin. In leveraging the episode thusly, what emerges is the possibility for clubs to rearticulate their normative positions, distancing institutionality from isolated acts whose consequences threaten cohesion or image [21]. Should conditions permit, an obligation emerges for the club to furnish the player with pertinent guidance, compelling in nature, that presses upon the individual the necessity of remedial measures - among which public address upon open platforms may be enumerated - in order to temper both reputational detriment and reverberations engendered by disputatious circumstances. Visible throughout contemporary practice is a tendency among clubs toward responsive management marked by discernibility and equity; through such courses of action, containment of digital controversies within manageable bounds frequently materializes, insulating organizational identity from enduring compromise.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, athlete's social media behaviour has become an important and closely connected factor of club's brand management. The present study illustrated that a controversial social media post by a player can sabotage the club's carefully cultivated brand equity. Both Ozil and Ronaldo's case showed that all four pillars of brand equity can be undermined by star player's online presence and global reach. Thus, in nowadays context, clubs must manage players and their social media

profile carefully to co-create brand values. Essentially, in an era of social media, players have become the club's sub-brands and their personal brand equity can influence and be influenced by the club's identity. Therefore, a club must take proactive measures to manage the players so that controversies can be mitigated.

The present study found that football clubs are learning to navigate this new terrain by adopting comprehensive governance strategies. In essence, setting clear expectations and coaching players in advance is far more effective than frantic damage control after the incident occurs [14]. When players act with the club's values in mind and understand the influence of their social media actions, they become genuine partners in brand co-creation. Conversely, clubs that fail to govern players may have their brand equity sabotaged by a careless social media post.

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