

# Internationalisation and branding strategy

## A case of the English Premier League's success in an emerging market

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to analyse how professional football clubs have attained success with internationalisation and branding strategies in foreign markets.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on an inductive approach, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted to analyse the perceptions of Ghanaian fans of four English Premier League teams.

**Findings** – The findings of this study highlight that the strength of professional football brand equity is jointly determined by the level of brand awareness, brand loyalty and perceived quality. However, increasing competition in international markets require professional football clubs to clearly define their marketing strategies to improve how fans perceive them.

**Originality/value** – This paper is one of the few studies to use country-of-origin paradigm and signalling theory to explain football brand equity building, thereby extending the earlier work of Chanavat and Bodet (2009). Its empirical focus on Africa is also unique and provides evidence to suggest that global marketers have the opportunity to capitalise on market expansion opportunities in developing economies.

**Keywords** Global brands, Internationalization, Emerging markets, English Premier League, Country of Origin (COO)

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The total revenue of the “Big 5” European football leagues (England, Italy, Germany, Spain and France) between 2016 and 2017 was £12.6bn (\$16.91bn), representing a 9 per cent increase from the previous year. Broadcasting rights values across European football's biggest domestic and continental competitions drove total European football market revenue beyond €25.5bn (Deloitte, 2018). The English Premier League (EPL) was the largest single contributor with revenue of £4.5bn, a 25 per cent increase from the previous year's (2017) revenue (Deloitte, 2018). The sports industry has embraced the idea of managing football teams as brands (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Doyle *et al.*, 2013) and in recent times,



football teams have developed into strong and highly visible brands (Bridgewater and Stray, 2002). Although the developments in global branding of football clubs present an excellent case study for brands that wish to attain global success, existing literature, however, exhibits three key deficiencies.

Firstly, controversy exists in current studies with inconclusive arguments about the use of branding in sports (Abosag *et al.*, 2012). Scholars such as Chadwick and Beech (2007) and Chadwick and Holt (2006) argue that supporters are likely to disapprove of and reject the thought of their favourite football club as a brand, but others such as Underwood *et al.* (2001) and Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) argue otherwise. Therefore, emerging research in the field needs to develop more meaningful linkages between theory and practice to extend the understanding and the related theoretical abstraction of football branding. For instance, the potential influence of country of origin (COO) has not been considered adequately in previous research, notwithstanding the proven significance of this construct in other service and product brand categories. In consumer durables, for example, the effect of COO on consumer attitude and purchase intention towards a brand can be considerable (Nath Sanyal and Datta, 2011). Secondly, existing literature on international/global football brand equity tends to focus on internationalisation strategies to create a global professional-sports brand (Chanavat and Bodet, 2009; Bodet and Chanavat, 2010; Klauser, 2012). Even though most of the European football teams are global brands, there are limited studies that explore the related trajectory of brand equity; thus, very little is known about how sports brands are built over time and what makes some sports clubs' market performance much stronger than others (Wetzel *et al.*, 2018). This trend calls for further examination to enhance understanding of how football clubs have attained global brand equity across the world. Third, a scrutiny into the literature on sports marketing reveals a dominance of works from Europe, Asia and America (Chanavat and Bodet, 2009; Bodet and Chanavat, 2010; Abosag *et al.*, 2012) with academic discourse on building global brand equity in developing countries in Africa, such as Ghana, parsimonious. Although the African contexts of global and international business are often characterised by inadequate infrastructure and chronic shortage of resources (Sheth, 2011; Osabutey *et al.*, 2014), there is empirical literature that suggests that to achieve success in developing economies, which are characterised by institutional constraints, the application of contemporary and unconventional management and marketing practices is required (Odoom *et al.*, 2017; Osabutey and Croucher, 2018).

As domestic markets mature and competition intensifies, many firms seek opportunities in international markets. However, international expansion can be challenging for many firms (Burt *et al.*, 2002; Ajai, 2015). Because brand awareness is crucial for success in international markets, extending brand value across geographies is extremely important. Therefore, understanding how professional football brands have been able to succeed even in different geographical regions has the potential to create a replicable model for other industries. The study also provides insights to managers about how branding strategies can improve the outcomes of internationalisation in a developing country context. The study also explores how local brands could be improved and scaled up into global brands.

In addressing these gaps in the literature, this paper aims to enhance the understanding of how football clubs have built international global brands amongst satellite fans from developing economies. Specifically, the study investigates two research questions:

- RQ1. Firstly, how have EPL clubs built strong international brands over time and
- RQ2. Secondly, does country of origin affect the branding of foreign football clubs and their brand equity?

Thus, this study not only contributes to an important aspect of the international marketing literature but also provides valuable conclusions for sports managers. The study goes beyond the current understanding of how football clubs can build global brands to examine the successful branding of some EPL clubs and using the new insights into how global/international brands can be built in other industry contexts. Theoretically, we show that COO can be used to emit signals (based on the signalling theory) to influence brand equity, thereby helping both academics and practitioners to understand and appreciate the differential relationships between brand-related constructs (Ansary and Hashim, 2017). The study offers evidence to suggest that global marketers have the opportunity to capitalise on market expansion opportunities in developing economies (Rambocas and Ramsuhag, 2018).

The rest of the manuscript is organised as follows: We review the relevant literature and the related theories that focus on professional football internationalisation, marketing and branding. This is followed by the methodology section, which is succeeded by the analyses of findings. The discussions section, which relates the findings to the literature, is then followed by the conclusion section that highlights the theoretical and practical implications.

### **Internationalisation of professional football brands**

The internationalisation of marketing strategies relies on firms' specific features and the strength of brand equity, but it is also part of a general tendency promoted by globalisation (Bodet and Chanavat, 2010; Leonidou *et al.*, 2018). In the marketing literature, it is generally accepted that branded products enjoy enhanced quality and value perceptions as well as greater consumer loyalty (Iazzi *et al.*, 2016; Hepola *et al.*, 2017; Naidoo and Abratt, 2018). This is because branded products generally communicate (signal) functional quality and thereby drive brand equity (Batra *et al.*, 2000; Roth *et al.*, 2008). Brand equity comprises four dimensions, namely, brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality and brand loyalty (Keller, 1993). Therefore, strong brand equity means that customers have high brand-name awareness, maintain a favourable brand image, perceive that the brand is of high quality and are loyal to it.

In the context of professional sports clubs, internationalisation appears to be a rapidly growing phenomenon. This has been enhanced by the globalisation of sports with the professionalisation and evolution of some sports clubs (e.g. Manchester United, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid) into transnational corporations (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004; Wetzel *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, professional sports clubs are beginning to operate strategically in ways akin to traditional transnational corporations that consider global branding to be crucial to success. According to Giulianotti and Robertson (2004), the most popular and professional sports clubs, as with international sporting-goods brands, have global communities and merchandise consumers across nations. Hill and Vincent (2006) assert that in the European context and in the particular case of football, Manchester United was the first professional club to understand the potential of internationalisation and global branding. This is particularly the case in the Asian markets which still provide the club with strong brand equity. Because of the unique growth and popularity of the Manchester United brand, numerous EPL and other top and successful European clubs soon followed suit (Bodet and Chanavat, 2010; Wetzel *et al.*, 2018).

Bodet and Chanavat (2010) further highlight strategies for internationalisation and brand equity building of football clubs. They posit that the first element of brand equity is the team's on-field reputation and performances in international competitions such as the Union of European Football Associations' Champions League and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association's Club World Cup. This is bolstered by the team securing talented and

famous players, who themselves become icons and, by extension, brands (Bodet and Chanavat, 2010). David Beckham and Zinedine Zidane are clear illustrations of how professional football clubs leverage their brand equity to an international level, thanks to the popularity of their players (Kase *et al.*, 2007; Yu, 2005). Another strategy is to recruit international players because of their marketing profiles. This strategy has been particularly successful with Asian players such as Junichi Inamoto at Arsenal and Park Ji-Sung at Manchester United whose supporters and fans followed their career from the Asian football market over to the EPL (Desbordes, 2007). This strategy, however, has limitations in profitable markets that have fewer or no high-profile professional football players. Using these basic elements, some clubs have developed foreign merchandising and established international outlets or partnerships for the distribution of their products. In addition, they organise tours to such markets, such as Southeast Asia or North America, and develop club websites in foreign languages as well as set up local football schools or academies (Hill and Vincent, 2006). Internet sites and blogs appear to have significantly influenced the way satellite fans inform themselves about football-brands and perceive them (Bodet and Chanavat, 2010). Such trends have increased subscription to international channels that broadcast football live in various countries across the globe. To a large extent, in some countries, support for foreign leagues far surpasses that for local leagues. The clubs in the local leagues generally lack the brand equity and appeal of the highly globally marketed European clubs. However, literature has not sufficiently explained why support now emanates from geographical areas far removed from COO.

### Theoretical background

To analyse the perceptions of satellite fans towards foreign football brands, two theories are adopted, namely, the COO paradigm and signalling theory (Heinberg *et al.*, 2016). The effects of COO on purchase intentions have been explained by signalling theory in previous studies. The COO paradigm is useful in explaining why satellite fans patronise and support foreign football clubs and their merchandise, whereas the signalling theory gives insight into the perceptions of such fans towards foreign football clubs. We therefore rely on COO and signalling theories to develop this affective or normative consumer perception on brand equity of professional football clubs in foreign markets.

#### *The country-of-origin (COO) paradigm*

The concept of COO has been defined as “the information about where a product is made” (Wu *et al.*, 2016, p. 216). COO effects are described as the disparities in consumer responses to a product by virtue of the country perceived as the source of the product or brand. The COO of a brand could change the position of a product in the mind of the consumer by increasing or decreasing the level of similarity between the desired and perceived positioning (Baack *et al.*, 2013). Consumers use COO as an extrinsic cue, especially in the evaluation of new products, rather than focusing on the intrinsic attributes of one specific product (Michaelis *et al.*, 2008). According to Lobb *et al.* (2007), COO is stated as a quality cue for reliability, safety and durability, reducing the perceived buying risks. Its relevance as a quality cue is particularly on the rise in buying situations where there is a lack of other information as such (Lobb *et al.*, 2007). For products whose brands are not so popular, COO may act as a brand itself, hence creating the opportunity for marketers to position their products with minimal costs associated with promotion and branding (Lee *et al.*, 2014). For products whose brands are very popular, origin tends to be less important (Schaefer, 1997), but it still can help to reinforce brand attributes (Adina *et al.*, 2015). The image of the COO can leverage attributes to the brand, acting as an external cue about product quality and

image, thereby affecting the consumer loyalty intentions (Heinberg *et al.*, 2016). Hence, consumer perceptions of COO influences buying preferences, intentions and attitudes which then increase brand equity (Panda and Misra, 2014). COO can therefore be conceptualised as an external product attribute that consumers use to evaluate brand equity (Nath Sanyal and Datta, 2011; Checchinato *et al.*, 2013; Rambocas and Ramsubhag, 2018).

### *Signalling theory*

Brand equity may also be viewed from another perspective based on signalling theory from information economics (Erdem and Swait, 2001; Erdem *et al.*, 2006). The signalling theory is, fundamentally, concerned with reducing information asymmetry between two parties (Spence, 2002). Both senders and receivers of signals have an interest in reducing information asymmetry, because it could lead to shirking and under-investment from the company's side and under-consumption from the customer's side (Heinberg *et al.*, 2016). The signalling theory has been adopted in marketing to study firms' signalling to consumers as well as firm-to-firm signalling. Some signals, however, do not clearly communicate information and quality about a product to the customer. Advertisements, prices, warranties, policies and the brand itself are examples of signals which can influence a customer's pre-purchase decision either positively or negatively.

A signal could be characterised by its clarity and credibility. The clarity of a brand signal refers to the absence of ambiguity in the information conveyed by the brand's past and present marketing mix strategies and associated activities (Erdem and Swait, 2001; Erdem *et al.*, 2006). A brand signal can be said to be credible if it reduces consumer uncertainty concerning the quality of a product in a situation before the consumer purchases the product (Dawar and Parker, 1994; Erdem *et al.*, 2006; Erdem and Swait, 2016). Signalling theory suggests that signal credibility determines whether a market signal conveys information effectively (Tirole, 1990) and would be perceived by the customer as truthful and dependable. For instance, Iqbal *et al.* (2013) suggest that, brand credibility is at the heart of signalling brand effectively. They maintain that, when a brand has more credibility amongst other competing brands or products, there is an increase in brand loyalty, which implies that brand credibility builds trust in the minds of customers about the specific brand and leads to more commitment towards the brand for a longer period. This commitment towards the brand increases loyalty (Iqbal *et al.*, 2013). In much the same way, COO of a brand can function as signals of credibility and thereby drive brand equity (Roth *et al.*, 2008; Hamzaoui-Essoussi *et al.*, 2011; Andéhn *et al.*, 2016).

Building and attaining international brand equity requires continuous and significant brand-building investment such as advertising and innovation (Datta *et al.*, 2017; Rahman *et al.*, 2018). Investments in advertising for example may positively affect "brand awareness" and "brand image" while innovation can be used to improve "perceived quality" (Rahman *et al.*, 2018). Perceived quality, brand awareness and brand image may be viewed as brand signals to customers depending on the firm's brand-building investment strategy (Karanges *et al.*, 2018; Rahman *et al.*, 2018). Hence, following from the underlying argument of the signalling theory, organisations adopt these brand signals to reduce uncertainty and help stakeholders (i.e. the receivers of brand signals) draw conclusions about the quality and value of a brand's offering (Karanges *et al.*, 2018; Heinberg *et al.*, 2018). If the brand signal helps to decrease consumer uncertainty, then it can also improve consumers' preference of one product over the other. This is because it improves perceptions about brand attribute levels, increase confidence in brands' promise and improves brand loyalty, consequently, making brand signal a determinant of consumer-based brand equity.

*Conceptual framework: dimensions of brand equity*

Understanding the needs and wants of consumers and adjusting offers to satisfy them is at the heart of successful marketing (Keller, 2008). Aaker (1991) conceptualised brand equity as an aggregate variable of the five dimensions of brand assets: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association and other proprietary assets. Since then, brand equity has generally been defined as the incremental utility with which a brand endows a product (Moore *et al.*, 2002). Brand equity may be assessed from three perspectives: customer mind set, product market outcomes and financial market outcomes (Keller and Lehmann, 2001). Keller (1993) introduced the first conceptual model of customer-based brand equity which was defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand. He conceptualised brand equity as consisting of four dimensions, namely, brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality and brand loyalty. According to Keller (2016), brand equity emerges from differences in consumer responses which result from differences of customers' knowledge about the brand. Although strongly influenced by the marketing activity of the firm, brand equity finally lies in what resides in customers' minds. These customers' differential responses, which make up brand equity, are reflected in perception, preferences and behaviour related to all aspects of brand marketing, including their choice of a brand, recall of copy points from an advert, response to a sales promotion and evaluation of a proposed brand extension (Keller, 2008; Keller, 2016).

Lassar *et al.* (1995) as cited in Wang *et al.* (2008) noted that customer-based brand equity occurs when consumers are familiar with the brand and hold unique, favourable and strong brand associations in memory. Lassar *et al.* (1995) additionally suggested that customer-based brand equity consists of two components: brand strength and brand value. Brand strength refers to the brand associations held by customers and brand values are the gains that accrue when brand strength is leveraged to obtain superior current and future profits. Basically, they believe that brand equity originates from the greater confidence that consumers place in a specific brand as compared with competing brands. This confidence is then expected to translate into customer loyalty and willingness to pay a premium price for the brand.

Keller (1993, 2016) conceptualises brand equity as consisting of four dimensions, as opposed to Aaker's five dimensions, which include perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness and brand image. Precisely, strong brand equity means that customers have high brand-name awareness, maintain a favourable brand image, perceive that the brand is of high, quality and are loyal to the brand. Keller (1993, 2016) suggested a theoretical framework on brand knowledge and its components: brand awareness and brand image. Firstly, brand awareness is related to the strength of the brand node or trace in memory which reflects in the ability of consumers to identify the brand under different conditions. Particularly, brand name awareness is manifested in the ease and likelihood with which a brand name would come to the mind of a consumer (Çifci *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, brand recall and brand recognition demonstrate strong brand awareness. Brand recall relates to the ability of consumers to retrieve the brand when given the product category. The needs fulfilled by the category, or some other type of probe, also serve as additional cues. Keller and Brexendorf (2017) postulated that brand image is defined by types of brand associations that consumers hold in memory. They are defined in turn by three dimensions: attributes (non-product related and product-related), benefits (functional, experiential and symbolic) and attitudes towards the brand. The conceptual framework for this study is adapted from Keller's "Customer-Based Brand Equity" defined above to analyse the perceived brand

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equity of professional football clubs on foreign markets as they seek to expand and reach a global brand status. Internationalisation and branding strategy

### Context of the study

Ghana was the context chosen to explore how football clubs have built international global brands amongst satellite fans of a developing economy. Ghana is considered a football nation, with football being the nation's most popular sport and indeed the passion of the nation. Ghana has also won the African Cup of Nations four times and was the first to achieve this feat. The national men's football team, Ghana Black Stars, advanced to the second round of the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany during their first appearance and advanced to the quarter finals in their second appearance in the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. Many Ghanaians have developed a strong taste for foreign products and regard products from other countries as having a higher quality and value than locally produced ones (Frimpong, 2013). This strong taste for foreign products seems to extend beyond simple consumer goods and is reflected in the Ghanaians' taste for foreign football brands. According to Kuseh (2013), most Ghanaian males have passionate interest in football and avidly support one preferred club. The support for the local football leagues in many countries has been eclipsed by intense dedication to the top European leagues. Major European leagues, such as the EPL, are perceived as being more exciting and consequently, more Ghanaian football fans have been drawn to foreign clubs and patronise replica jerseys and other related merchandise (Twumasi, 2010). Global viewership has therefore led to the EPL generating most of their income from broadcasting rights, sponsorship deals and ticketing on an international scale (Deloitte, 2018). Following Bodet and Chanavat (2010), this study adopts a qualitative method to evaluate the opinions of Ghanaian satellite fans to understand how brands can target and gain global recognition.

### Methodology

#### *Empirical context*

We conducted the study in an emerging market of Ghana. Our respondents were sports enthusiasts who are particularly knowledgeable and actively follow the EPL. The selected respondents were also working professionals and executive master's students at Ghana's premier university, the University of Ghana. Their interests and backgrounds enabled them to provide more extensive evidence of real-life experiences. The university setting, on the other hand, provided a demographically diverse pool of respondents. Also, the choice of context enabled the researchers to have sample control, thus, the ability to effectively and efficiently reach the units specified in the sample (Malhotra, 2013).

#### *Data collection techniques*

In line with the research objective, this study used in-depth interviews and drew on insights from Chanavat and Bodet's (2009) work on analysing brand equity of professional clubs in foreign markets. This technique is "designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic" (Milena *et al.*, 2008, p. 1279). Moreover, the approach provided "much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys" (Boyce and Neale, 2006, p. 3). Hence, this qualitative approach helped in providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon based on personal feelings, opinions and experiences of participants (Boyce and Neale, 2006; Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

The study used the purposive sampling method in selecting graduate student participants who are satellite fans of the EPL on a voluntary basis. Respondents were

recruited through an announcement made by the course representatives to students enrolled on the six executive master's programmes. The programmes selected captured individuals from wide and diverse backgrounds. The respondents included a range of managers and senior managers across the public and private sectors of the Ghanaian economy as shown by the profiles of respondents in [Table I](#). A total of 77 students indicated their intention to participate in the study. To enhance the quality of data and ensure more in-depth data administration and analysis ([Perry, 1998](#); [Dworkin, 2012](#); [Boddy, 2016](#)), a series of initial sets of questions about general football knowledge and the EPL were posed to all 77 participants and from the group, 27 participants demonstrated exceptional and deeper knowledge of the game and the EPL and thus were selected for the interviews.

The semi-structured interview guide questions were adopted from [Bodet and Chanavat \(2010\)](#) to ascertain respondents' perceptions of brand awareness, brand image and brand association. On the average, the interviews lasted for about 45 min to an hour. All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. All recordings were later transcribed for the analysis. Because social phenomena need not be explained numerically, the focus should rather be on the quality and richness of the response to a social situation ([Basit, 2003](#)). This study therefore sought to maintain quality and richness alongside giving an idea of the proportion of respondents who shared a given view or theme. The profile of respondents is shown in [Table I](#) below.

Name	Gender	Age	Profession	Medium of EPL followership
R1	Male	54	Marketing	Television
R2	Male	42	Insurance	Television, internet, radio
R3	Male	38	Agri-business	Television
R4	Male	38	Finance	Television
R5	Male	31	Administrator/transport coordinator	Television and internet
R6	Male	39	Retail advisor	Television and internet
R7	Female	40	Self-employed	Television
R8	Male	30	Biomedical laboratory scientist	Television
R9	Male	29	Marketing	Television
R10	Male	30	Consultant	Television and internet
R11	Male	30	Graphic designer	Internet
R12	Female	27	Marketer	Television
R13	Male	30	Pharmacist	Television
R14	Male	24	Journalist	Television
R15	Male	31	Fuel management	Television
R16	Female	32	Bank official	Television
R17	Female	52	Sales executive	Television
R18	Male	39	Pharmacy technician	Television, internet, newspaper
R19	Male	38	Banking	Television
R20	Male	38	Banking	Television
R21	Male	23	Student/entrepreneur	Television and internet
R22	Male	32	Marketing	Television
R23	Male	23	Student/entrepreneur	Television and internet
R24	Male	36	Business development manager	Internet
R25	Male	45	Industrialist	Television
R26	Female	24	Administrator	Television
R27	Male	44	Chemist	Television

**Table I.**  
Respondents' profiles



## Data analysis

The inductive research approach was used to explore brand perceptions that have an impact on the attitudes and behaviour of foreign sports fans (Chanavat and Bodet, 2009). This was done by identifying patterns, themes and categories in the collected data (Patton, 1990). After recording and transcribing the interviews, the data was distilled, reduced, condensed, grouped and classified into themes through a process of manual coding (Basit, 2003; Creswell, 2012). In manual coding, the transcripts were examined and the cut-and-paste method was used to link similar themes with the research objective (primary codes) and assist to find answers to the research questions. The conceptual framework, dimensions of brand equity, provided an idea for the initial code (primary codes) and some subthemes (secondary codes) also emerged from the data (Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2015; Crick, 2018). For the categorisation, individual responses were integrated with cross case analysis to test the comparability of responses (Flick, 2002), until all new units could be placed into an appropriate category (Parveen *et al.*, 2015).

## Findings

The results of the findings were organised and presented based on the primary and sub-themes identified within the empirical findings. The primary themes for the findings were the four dimensions of brand equity: perceived brand quality, brand awareness, brand associations and brand loyalty (coded respectively as themes C1, C2, C3 and C4). Brand quality and brand awareness both had one sub-theme: COO (coded as theme C1a) and marketing communication (media followership) (coded as theme C2a), respectively. An additional sub-theme, brand identification (coded as theme C3/4a) which was classified under both brand associations and brand loyalty, was also identified. In presenting the results, the qualitative data was quantified to elucidate events and views and to give an idea about the extent to which respondents agreed to views or themes (Basit, 2003). A summary of the respondents' views and themes are presented in Table II.

### *Perceived Brand quality*

Across the sample, all respondents agreed that the EPL offered higher quality and standards. Responses suggest that perceived brand quality could be measured based on the style of play (on-field performance), history and tradition, record of wins or victories, current members of the club and the perceived strength and level of entertainment offered by the league.

Therefore, with regard to these factors, most respondents (74.07 per cent) seem to distinguish the top clubs such as Manchester United, Manchester City, Arsenal and Chelsea football clubs with a strong reference to style of play (on-field performance). Although interviewees were quick to indicate the teams they were associated with, a majority of the respondents (55.55 per cent) acknowledged that Manchester United and Manchester City were the first teams which come to mind at the mention of the EPL. This they attributed to the team's victories or wins over the years (particularly in more recent years). To emphasise the importance of quality of the local league as compared foreign league, a participant commented:

[. . .] the time I spend watching a Premier League game is worth it [. . .] because it is the most difficult league in the world and of a higher quality standard (R25).

### *Country of origin*

More than half of the respondents (62.96 per cent) associated the quality of the EPL to its COO. This link shows that the COO can affect consumers' perceptions of quality.

**Table II.**  
Descriptions of  
internationalisation  
and brand building  
strategy dimensions

Issue	Interview responses
Perceived brand quality	<p>“... you can’t quantify the excitement that comes with it, the style of play and field of play, even the branding everything is of a different class of quality” (R22)</p> <p>“... the local league lacks excitement. One is almost able to predict the winner. ... because the standard in my local league is low” (R1)</p> <p>“... it (the EPL) is a well-organized competitive, interesting, well promoted and of high quality” (R13)</p>
COO	<p>“... we should not be surprised that the EPL is the best league in the world, we are talking about England, and there is a lot of investment in quality” (R1)</p> <p>“... You cannot compare our local league to the EPL. ... as a country what have we invested in which is better than what the English have to offer. ... let us not even limit it to Ghana but Africa” (R18)</p> <p>“... It is simple; they invest in a high-quality standard; that is why the EPL games are of a high quality compared to our local league. We do not just care, how much do we pay our local players? In fact, if they have the opportunity to go play outside I would be the first to ask them to leave” (R5)</p>
Brand awareness	<p>“... mentioned that Ghanaian midfielder Michael Essien used to play for Chelsea some years ago” (R12)</p> <p>“... I do not miss any of their (Chelsea) games because I have a DSTV at home. Even with that I sometimes go to pub to watch the game” (R9)</p> <p>“... I am aware of the current news relating to my Man U, I get updates on my tweeter feed, I follow them on Facebook, I follow the United stand on YouTube, and Citi FM provides me with daily updates every morning” (R3)</p> <p>“... thanks to social media, I am not only aware of what goes on in my club but what the other EPL clubs are doing” (R27)</p>
Brand association	<p>“... I prefer Manchester because I love the players, I love the coach. But I will still support the team even without them” (R3)</p> <p>“... although I support Liverpool, I have a soft heart for Chelsea because of the presence of African players” (R8)</p> <p>“... I like Arsenal because some time ago, they had African players like Kanu and Adebayor” (R12)</p> <p>“... I am only concerned about the results, so if they perform badly and are still able to win, I will be fine” (R5)</p>
Brand loyalty	<p>“... I am United forever, United forever, United forever, we are a top club and we show everyone what we are about” (R3)</p> <p>“... United forever, win or lose” (R19)</p>
Brand identification	<p>“... You cannot say anything bad about Man U, I will defend them anywhere and time and day ... if you criticize them, for me it feels like a personal attack because when did those other EPL teams start performing” (R21)</p> <p>“... I am United forever, but since Sir Alex left, Man U has lost its identity. The playing style is not interesting any longer. It has made it difficult for me to watch their games nowadays. At first, I found it hard to miss a United game but now I do not even care will check live scores for updates” (R19)</p>

### *Brand awareness*

All respondents had knowledge of the EPL and indicated followership of the league through television, radio, the internet and newspapers. The majority of respondents showed a good level of awareness of Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool and Arsenal football clubs. They were able to independently state the names of managers, club nicknames, as well as identify respective club sponsors. Respondents were also particularly aware of the past and present players of Ghanaian origin or lineage in the EPL. This shows that brand awareness is an important aspect of international brand building and is achieved through constant

communication. In communication, a mixture of the new and traditional media can be used, especially with elements of celebrity brand ambassadors.

However, very few respondents (22.22 per cent) were aware of the history of the teams. R7 was the only respondent who was able to provide a brief history of the origin of Liverpool football club. When asked about the most recent achievements of teams, most interviewees were able to significantly recall victories or wins of Manchester United and Chelsea. Most respondents stated that they could not remember any recent achievement of Arsenal and Liverpool. This account could be seen as one of the reasons why teams such as Liverpool and Arsenal were mentioned sparingly and the level of brand awareness was comparably lower. As indicated by a participant's comment:

[. . .] I cannot remember any recent achievements for Liverpool [. . .] and Arsenal, it is even worse (R8).

With regard to the record on recent wins and victories, respondents were able to recall respective matches and details of goals scored. A Liverpool fan stated:

[. . .] I remember 2008 champions' league when we lost 3-1 to Chelsea, I could not even eat (R1).

Other respondents were influenced by the traditions and history of the football clubs and R10, for example, stated that:

[. . .] Arsenal! That is the team I cherished during my childhood days when I used to hear of Dennis Bergkamp and Thierry Henry. (R22)

It also appears that, respondents associate themselves with various values adopted by the clubs. In the case of Liverpool, R7, R18 and R19, for instance highlighted the historical fighting spirit derived from the motto "You will never walk alone".

### *Brand association*

In this study, brand association was derived from perceived club attributes and benefits. These two dimensions were extracted from Keller's "Customer-Based Brand Equity". Responses on brand attributes were measured with the following factors: quality of play (on-field performance), record of recent achievement, players and managers and history and traditions. For responses based on brand attributes, R1, R2 and R3 indicated their association with Manchester United and further stated that they are attracted by the style of play adopted by the team.

Others identified with teams that field more players of African descent with particular interests if the players were Ghanaian. The presence of African/Ghanaian players in a club had an effect on their association with a team. This emphasises that the presence of players from a given country would enhance the brand of the team in that country. In addition, the responses suggest that a team having players from the African continent also had a similar effect, even if the players do not directly have their origins from the same country as respondents.

Some respondents also seemed to distinguish between on-field performance and victories or wins. Despite this response, some still maintained that, they were affected by team performance because it induces excitement, the urge to keep watching, and the desire for defending respective clubs at any time:

[. . .] Performance drives a team, when a team is not performing I wonder what you get from them (R2).

This response seems to lay a greater weight on team performance as being significant in driving the marketing of European football teams in Ghana.

They further indicated that this attribute brings Liverpool into mind anytime the EPL is mentioned. The main benefits respondents indicate seem to cluster around feelings of emotion and social interaction (have a common subject matter to discuss with friends). They described their feeling as being happy, sad, exciting, worried, etc. One example is:

[. . .] I feel very sad upon the loss of a match because of the teasing by colleagues associated with other clubs. (R18).

The comment of R18 above suggests that respondents are able to have discussions with friends before, during, and after every match. Most respondents (70.37 per cent) build their confidence on team wins which they also discuss with friends. These findings correspond to the interactive and supporter profiles identified by Bourgeon and Bouchet (2001) and socialisation orientations towards sporting events defined by Pons (2006).

### *Brand loyalty*

The research reveals that respondents maintain the support for and positive mindset developed about a particular team. Respondents are able to state their preference for a particular team even when recent performances have rather declined. Liverpool FC and Arsenal FC fans identified in the study indicated that they could not remember any recent major achievement or winnings, but they still supported their teams. From the study, it seems the presence of competitors has not changed the perception of fans about the various teams they follow. Some seem to have developed strong attachment to clubs and passionately expressed followership by making time to watch matches, acquire club souvenirs, etc. The finding suggests that most Ghanaian EPL fans have built strong brand loyalty over the years of following the EPL to the extent that star players in various teams seem to have little effect on their brand loyalty. Respondents also seem to be well informed about the record of victories and losses their teams had encountered over the years.

### *Brand identification*

In relations to brand association and loyalty themes, one of the sub-themes that emerged was brand identification as a majority (81.48 per cent) of the respondents that were interviewed perceived the clubs they support to be an extension of themselves. According to Du *et al.* (2007), consumer-brand identification refers to a consumers' psychological attachment to a brand based on a considerable overlap between their perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of the brand. Thus, association and loyalty are a result of perceived identity in customers' minds about the brand. Therefore, association and loyalty are a result of not only emotional attachment but also identity-based brand attachment.

## **Discussion**

Given that most football clubs are now global brands, it is surprising that very little literature has focused on how football clubs' brands are built over time (Wetzel *et al.*, 2018). This study contributes to the literature by adding perspectives from developing countries about how some football clubs have become international brands. Our findings agree with Özsoy and Altaras's (2008) conceptualisation that brand quality affects global attitude towards a brand that translates into global brand purchase likelihood. The evidence also advocates for the need for inclusion of perceived brand quality in internationalisation and brand building strategies. Theoretically, it can be seen that the perceived quality of the league is based on the country of origin. According to the COO Paradigm, normative and affective processes may bypass the cognitive process and have an immediate effect on consumer attitudes and behaviour (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1989; Verlegh and

Steenkamp, 1999). For developing country consumers, this is best demonstrated in the animosity literature, which argues that consumers may have unbiased judgments of a product's quality (cognitive) but display animosity towards the country of origin (normative) and thus refuse purchase (Klein *et al.*, 1998). We note in this study, however, that even though perceived quality derived from COO is important, the attendant brand awareness is crucial to create the emotional attachments. The respondents' expression of COO strongly influenced consumers' perceptions of a brand's quality and their purchase intentions and final brand evaluation (Lu and Xu, 2015; Jin *et al.*, 2018). The promotional activity (Keller, 2008) and deliberate investments into building brand credibility is at the heart of signalling brands effectively (Iqbal *et al.*, 2013). This has, inevitably, led to brand recall and brand recognition which is manifest in strong brand awareness (Keller, 1993).

Our study also revealed that identity-based attachment is an important antecedent or mediator/moderator to brand association and brand loyalty. This is in line with the arguments made by Deng and Xu (2017) and Marin *et al.* (2009) that intense and active loyalty relationships link self-definition to brand identification which engenders brand resonance and brand association. Beyond the branding capability of these international football clubs, their ability to deliver exciting performances increases the brand association and loyalty. The perceived benefits consumers derive from foreign leagues therefore enhances brand loyalty. This study reveals that the brand image is dependent on on-field performance, record of victories or wins and members of each team (i.e. coaches and players). Therefore building football brands depends largely on on-field results. This is consistent with the assertion by Wetzel *et al.* (2018) indicated that the essential goal of sports is winning and winning and winning clubs attract supporters.

It is noteworthy to mention that although supporters would have preferred African players to play in their chosen teams, the absence of such players appears to have very little effect on brand loyalty. Nevertheless, there are some links to Jones's (1997) assertion that the geographic bond is an important reason for people supporting a football club. In essence, recruiting players from across the globe in a football club can increase the club's reach and fan base. In terms of team image, respondents were able to identify unique characteristics of the teams they supported.

Practically, this study confirms that international brand equity relates to brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality and brand loyalty. With regard to the four dimensions of brand equity, respondents can be considered as loyal to a particular EPL team. This shows that brand awareness contributes more to building global international brands. Respondents' ability to independently identify and provide details about a number of top teams demonstrates brand awareness.

This was made possible by the globalised promotion and marketing communications of the EPL coupled with the perceived quality of the league. These clear and credible brand signals increase quality perceptions and therefore encourage consumer utility (Erdem and Swait, 1998). In support of this findings, Wetzel *et al.* (2018) note that creating awareness via publicity is essential in building sports brands, as it triggers a shift in consumer perceptions to help develop stronger brand associations (Stephen and Galak, 2012; Chandrasekaran *et al.*, 2017). Information and communications technologies and globalisation have also ensured that these loyal fans were well-informed about their teams in the same way that supporters in the home countries would be. This is a clear demonstration of how successfully the EPL and their clubs have built a global brand.

As indicated in the literature, an increase in quality perceptions of one brand can be achieved by the signalling function of its partner brand (Rao and Ruekert, 1994; Rao *et al.*, 1999). This explains why even the lower teams in the EPL also enjoy some brand awareness.

The quality signallers sent out by the top EPL clubs in relation to their style of play (on-field performance), record of wins or victories and current players affect the overall quality perception of the EPL. According to [Heinberg et al. \(2016\)](#) the signalling theory also explains why a signal from an established brand results in higher quality expectations. Therefore, the quality expectations from the EPL continuously draw fans from across the world. In practice, it is evident that consumers do not rely on the promise or expectation of quality alone, but more importantly on being able to receive the quality as expected. The growing popularity of global football brands is, therefore, premised on the delivery of high-quality performance to sustain and build stronger brand equity. Based on the data, this study offers implications for research and theory of branding as well as practice.

#### *Implications for research and theory*

While previous studies concentrated on traditional product brands in building international brands based on brand equity, this study focuses on exploring how international brands can be built using a non-traditional brand like football ([Wetzel et al., 2018](#)) within the context of a developing economy. Specifically, important antecedents or/and moderators/mediators were identified. In the case of football branding, it was found that favourable brand associations and brand loyalty are influenced by brand identity-based attachment. The study also found that marketing communication influences brand awareness. Finally, it was identified that COO emits signals of brand quality. Future studies need to explore how different traditional and non-traditional international brands are built using the marketing communication, identity based and emotional based attachment and COO as antecedents or/and moderators/mediators. Such a study could generate valuable theoretical insights regarding the importance of identity-based attachment, as well as COO and marketing communication in enhancing brand equity and building strong international brands.

#### *Implications for practice*

There are opportunities in foreign markets for brands that derive brand equity from a country that is perceived to have a good image in the minds of the consumers, especially if the brand can leverage on the COO in their marketing communication programmes. However, it is vital that international marketing managers consider the relevance of the brand identity for their potential target customers ([Marin et al., 2009](#)). Therefore, [Marin et al. \(2009, p. 75\)](#) argued that:

Communications that attempt to connect a brand to a social identity must consider the extent to which that social identity is valued by the target consumers, and what aspects can be leveraged to increase perceptions of self-importance associated with that identity.

This is because individual's self-importance associated with the identity that the brand communicates is a key predictor of behavioural intentions such as association and loyalty.

#### **Conclusion**

The goal of this research was to identify factors behind the global success of the EPL in foreign markets. From an investigation of perceived brand equity of the top four EPL clubs among Ghanaian fans, the findings emphasised the necessity for professional football clubs to fully capture emerging markets. Marketing activities of global football brands is increasing loyalty of fans in other countries because of strong brand association and brand loyalty. The composition of players within a team can also influence the nature, breadth and size of the global fan base. Apart from gaining interest of satellite fans through the purchase of African stars, as revealed in this study, there is the need for the EPL teams to build a long-

lasting brand image in the minds of their fans. Theoretically, team composition and global reach have not been adequately expounded as has been done in this study. This study also contributes to the literature by revealing the extent of passion and interest in football in an African country. These two contributions extend the work of [Chanavat and Bodet \(2009\)](#) and [Bodet and Chanavat \(2010\)](#).

Practically, football clubs could perhaps increase marketing communications in some of these countries where they have a multitude of satellite fans. This may be done through setting up of club offices in such countries to expand the availability of football paraphernalia. The evidence from Ghana points to the need for more original souvenirs. Team managers of the various EPL teams can visit countries with a huge number of satellite fans and possibly engage in scouting activities which can aid in generating brand awareness and brand loyalty. The globalisation of football clubs needs to expand attention to markets in developing countries and Africa. Despite our attempt to throw light on the much-neglected phenomenon of growing support for global football brands, particularly in developing countries, our study has limitations with respect to its breadth and scope. Being a purely qualitative enquiry with a limited scope, it is difficult to generalise. A quantitative study that encompasses a wider geographical coverage in Africa could reveal further nuances. In addition, studies need to explore why the EPL appears to have a stronger and more passionate fan base compared to the other top European leagues.

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