

**How can former successful European football teams capitalise on the Europa
League in order to (re-)establish their brands?**

Final Report

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Executive Summary

We started by collecting data from 19 teams which represent 15 countries: Ajax Amsterdam; Anderlecht; Aston Villa; Athletic Bilbao; Benfica Lisbon; Borussia Dortmund; Celtic Glasgow; Dinamo Zagreb; Dynamo Kiev; FC Dynamo Moscow; Hamburger SV; IFK Göteborg; Malmö; Olympique de Marseille; Panathinaikos; Partizan Belgrade; Red Star Belgrade; Steaua Bucharest; and Werder Bremen.

We followed a case analysis method. We engaged in semi-structured interviews with managers of the selected teams. Content analysis was used to give in-depth meaning to the responses of the managers. We extracted the essence of the answers provided by managers in order to let the reality emerge.

We addressed five research questions (Table 6). Our analysis enabled us to highlight:

- Ten catalyzing factors that former successful European football teams use in developing their brand identity through the Europa League (Table 1);
- Eleven hurdles that former successful European football teams encounter in developing their brand identity through the Europa League (Table 2);
- Nine strategies and actions that are used by former successful European football teams in order to build and manage their brand identity thanks to the Europa League competition (Table 3);
- Seven possible actions that UEFA could undertake to support the development of these former successful European football team brands in the Europa League (Table 4); and
- Ten lessons other European football teams, in a similar position, could learn from the former successful European teams studied (Table 5).

Admittedly, differences between the teams studied do emerge, but there are also some strong similarities. Right now, and based on the way both the Champions League and the Europa League are structured from broadcasting, financial and sporting points of view, the disparities between the Top 4 or 5 championships (England, Germany, Italy, Spain, and France) and the rest of Europe are widening.

Hence, the rebranding of the Europa League could be followed by a reflection on how the Europa League can make ‘smaller Clubs’ and former successful European teams truly part of a more balanced European football eco-system. And with the “Economic Fair-Play” coming into effect, this might be the right time to do so.

Based on our analysis, here is a sample of seven avenues that could help make the Europa League a better ‘win-win’ value proposition:

- 1) A revenue sharing system between the Champions League and the Europa league;
- 2) A reduction in the number of teams participating in the Europa League, with the abolition of the actual clause that brings eliminated teams from the Champions League into the Europa League;
- 3) A more flexible match timetable in the Europa League which would better reflects fans’ habits and climate realities in the respective countries;
- 4) A merchandising policy which gives more flexibility and revenue opportunities to Europa League teams;
- 5) A softer centralization that would allow, for instance, team sponsors and UEFA sponsors to better cohabitate;
- 6) A strategy that articulates the internationalization of UEFA, its competitions and its teams beyond the broadcasting of matches abroad; and
- 7) A commitment from UEFA to embrace the diversity of European football by supporting the smaller Clubs which represent the majority of its members.

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- Mr. Diederik Dewaele, Head of Administration, European Club Association;
- Mr. William Gaillard, President of the Jury of the UEFA Research Grant Program, UEFA;
- Mr. Antonio Giachino, Europa League Competition Manager, UEFA;
- Mr. Thomas Junod, Universities Coordinator, UEFA; and
- Mr. Grégory Lepesqueux, Marketing Legal Services Unit, UEFA.

Third, this research was also made possible thanks to the contribution of nineteen teams¹ and their respective managers who gave me some of their time and insight. To preserve the anonymity that some of them requested, we will not mention their names here but be reassured of my gratitude.

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How can former successful European football teams capitalise on the Europa League in order to (re-)establish their brands?

1) Introduction

As Bal et al. (2011, p. 26) underline it: “Whether we consider them as entertainment, business opportunities, inspiration for physical and mental strength, or social binds, sports have become embedded in today’s social intercourse”. Furthermore, “Sport generates interest from fans who attend matches, but it also generates interest from fans who watch games on television or listen to games on the radio, who [...] participate in fantasy and tipping leagues, and the like. [...] Cities and countries expend considerable resources to attract one-time events, such as the World Cup and Olympic Games” (Hone and Silvers, 2006, p. 412). Truly, “during the last decade the sports business has expanded rapidly, which has led to a growing interest in the marketing of sport” (Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012, p. 1).

In this regard, teams, leagues, players, equipment makers, federations, sponsors and other stakeholders are engaged in a battle for the heart and disposable income of their fans (McDonald, 2010). In 2011, Nike ranked first in the world’s top sports brands with an estimated brand value of US\$ 15 billion; the most valuable sporting event was the Super Bowl (US\$ 425 million in brand value); the top athlete brand was still Tiger Woods, despite all his recent setbacks (US\$ 55 million); and the most valuable team brand was the New York Yankees (US\$ 340 million) (Forbes, 2011).

Worldwide, there is probably no better manifestation of the rise of the sports business than football (or ‘soccer’ in North America). In Europe, the Champions League is UEFA’s landmark competition. Its prestige has made it a stellar Club competition and a brand worldwide valued at US\$ 132 million (Forbes, 2011).

However, as successful as the Champions League is, European football seems confronted, among others, with two challenges. First, for many teams and even for some countries, the Champions League, or the final four of the competition, is quasi unreachable at this point in time. Second, the Europa League needs to find its niche, which could happen if this competition became an instrument that would help these teams and countries emerge on the European football scene.

This may especially hold true for Clubs that have lost their lustre since the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. Because of their relatively small size, lack of resources or inability to adjust to the challenges associated with the transformation of football and sports (i.e. ‘sportainment’; Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012), some teams are today a mere shadow of their past. This holds true in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Dynamo Kiev, Red Star Belgrade, Steaua Bucharest), but in Western Europe as well (e.g. Aston Villa, Hamburger SV, IFK Göteborg).

The purpose of our research is to understand and explain how team managers of former successful European football Clubs can capitalize on the Europa League in order to build or rebuild the brand identity of their respective team. We believe this research fits nicely under the priority topics of UEFA, not only because it will bring insights to the Clubs under study, but also to the Europa League. Indeed, as Mr. William Gaillard, President of the Jury of the UEFA Research Grant Program, mentioned to us: “We have some questions, even worries, about the Europa League, especially on its long-term viability. The competition seems relatively popular in Central and Eastern Europe, but for teams from Western European championships, it can look like the second division of Europe”.

In this regard, our research could help UEFA and football teams create synergies that will nurture each other’s branding initiatives, and serve as a guideline for

European football policy development. Earlier comments from the jury on our research project have been taken into account.

The reader will find the following sections: literature review; research questions; methodology; results; conclusions, including recommendations and limits; bibliography; and appendices.

2) Literature review

By definition, a brand is “a name, a word, a sign, a symbol, a drawing, or a combination of these” (Kotler et al., 2000, p. 478). A brand identifies the goods and services of a company. It crystallizes its personality through strong brand attributes and brand associations, and differentiates itself from the competitors by underlying its ‘Unique Selling Proposition’ (USP); in other words, the unique characteristic which makes the brand stand out against the competition (Freling et al., 2011).

A brand is a promise a company makes to its customers (Kapferer, 2007). This promise is built on the coherence and continuity of the brand’s products or services that customers experience every time they are in contact with that brand (Balmer et al., 2009). The value of the brand is measured as brand equity. According to Kotler (2002, p. 470), brand equity is “based on the extent to which it has a high brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, strong brand associations and other assets such as trademarks”. Globally, strong brand equity nurtures a successful brand strategy and has an impact on purchase intentions, price premiums and brand loyalty (Spry et al., 2011).

Today, the literature views sports teams as brands in their own right (Mullin et al., 2007). The brand is considered the most important asset of sports teams (Bauer et al., 2005), and a team’s brand identity provides direction and meaning (Hill and Vincent,

2006). Brand and branding create a strategic leverage to generate value for organizations (Keller and Lehmann, 2009), and in sports specifically (Ross, 2006), from both a marketing and financial standpoint (Mizik and Jacobson, 2008). Truly, as fans identify with their team, their support translates itself into packed stadiums and merchandising purchases, among others. According to some forecasts made by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), merchandise sales for all teams and all sports combined worldwide were expected to exceed US\$ 35 billion by 2011 (PWC, 2007).

Sports teams have the characteristics of true 'products' composed of: (1) intangible benefits, such as the emotions fans experience at the stadium, the socialization they enjoy when interacting with other fans in the stands, as well as the feeling of pride when associating themselves with the team; (2) tangible dimensions, such as the result of the game, the facilities provided in the stadium, and the merchandising products they can purchase or receive as a give-away (Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012). Undoubtedly, a sports team has the potential to build its brand equity by capitalizing on the emotional connection it shares with its fans, in order to strengthen customer loyalty and long-term associations (Richelieu and Pons, 2011).

With the exceptions of entertainment, religion and politics, the emotional response from sports fans is stronger than in any other industry. Fans derive strength and pride from their affiliation with a team (Mullin et al., 2007). Success is essential for building and leveraging a brand but is not enough for building brand equity; that is why a team should count on attributes that transcend the sporting performance (Ross, 2006). In this regard, as we mentioned before, the identity of the team brand is composed of a set of attributes or values which give the brand its personality. It represents the foundation on which the team can position itself on the market versus other sports Clubs or entertainment options, and enables its managers to articulate a

Unique Selling Proposition, which would lead to, as well as sustain, marketing actions (Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012).

Furthermore, when associating themselves with a sports team, fans use the symbolic dimensions of a brand to define their own identity (Schembri et al., 2010). This identity increases consumers' preference and usage (i.e. the positive predisposition towards the brand), arouses emotions in consumers and tends to strengthen the level of trust and loyalty among consumers (Aaker, 1997; Sung and Kim, 2010). With a strong (cognitive, affective and conative) involvement and commitment to their favourite team, fans become co-creators of their experience and ambassadors of their team brand, also known as 'consumactors' (Karg and McDonald, 2011; Monga and John, 2010).

In this regard, teams must be innovative and competitive in how they seduce fans, while ensuring both affordability and accessibility, without becoming an ordinary brand (Mullin et al., 2007). One approach in doing so is to refer to 'storytelling'. Storytelling refers to the ability of building myths and legends, of articulating a romanticized story around the Club that will be passed on from one generation to the other and will crystallize the emotional bond between the team and its fans (Koll et al., 2010). As Hakala et al. (2011, p. 447-449) mention: "One way of dealing with the environmental turbulence is to convey stability and confidence. [...] Unlocking the potential hidden value of a brand's heritage may be one way of harnessing the past and the present in order to safeguard the future. [...] A good story can engage audiences, build long-term relationships and support organisational claims".

Thus, it seems relevant to study the catalyzing factors that a former successful European football team could use in developing its brand identity in the Europa League, as well as the strategies that would be the most appropriate.

3) Research Questions

The five research questions of our project focus on brand identity, but also on brand positioning and the ensuing marketing actions, which are pillars of the strategic construction of the brand (Balmer et al., 2009; Sung and Kim, 2010; Figure 1):

Figure 1

The strategic construction and management of the brand



Sources: Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012; Richelieu and Pons, 2011.

- i. What are the catalyzing factors a former successful European football team could use in developing its brand identity through the Europa League?
- ii. What are the main hurdles a former successful European football team could encounter in developing its brand identity through the Europa League?
- iii. What are the most appropriate strategies and actions that could be used by a former successful European football team in order to build and manage its brand identity thanks to the Europa League competition?
- iv. What actions could UEFA initiate to support the development of these former successful European football team brands in the Europa League?

- v. What lessons could other European teams, in a similar position, learn from the former successful European teams studied?

We should stress here that we would like our study to feed UEFA's reflection on the policy development and positioning of the Europa League for its long term viability. This aspect of our research will be emphasized in our recommendations.

4) Methodology

4.1 Methods

Considering the challenge at hand and the complexity of the issues being studied, we have decided to adopt a qualitative approach. We follow a case analysis method, as it allows us to study a limited number of organizations within a reasonable timeframe, at a reasonable cost (Yin, 2003), and with meaningful results (Lee and Lings, 2008). Eisenhardt (1989) recommends including at least between four and ten cases in order to allow an in-depth analysis of each case. Moreover, a relative diversity increases the validity of the results (Kolb, 2008).

4.2 Sampling technique

In our research proposal, submitted to UEFA in March 2011, we initially proposed to look at between six and ten football teams within Western, Central and Eastern Europe. We wanted to form a sample as diverse as possible from the standpoints of geography, cultural background and Club history in order to reflect different realities of European football. Our intent was to select teams that have had a history of good performance in European competitions in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, before falling off the radar because of their relatively small size, lack of resources or

inability to adjust to the challenges associated with the transformation of football. These teams represent the subjects of our study.

In order to select our teams, we went through the records of the Champions Cup (C1), the Cup Winners Cup (C2) and the UEFA Cup (C3) in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s (1960-1992). We stopped at the end of 1992 before the Champions Cup was transformed into the Champions League and started becoming the sporting and marketing success it is today. We identified teams that had reached the final of one of these three European competitions at least once between 1960 and 1992, in addition of winning either their National Championship or the Cup Final at least five times in their history. Indeed, we wanted to combine criteria for both European and national success in our selection process in order to avoid including in our samples some teams that have had what we can call a “meteoric success” period, such as FC Köln in Germany and KV Mechelen in Belgium. Furthermore, in order to be included in our sample, teams were participating in the first division of their National Championship at the time of the study; and ideally, these teams had participated recently (in the previous two seasons) or were about to participate in a European competition in 2011-2012. Based on these criteria, 43 teams qualified for our research.

A letter, highlighting the research, was sent to all teams, inviting them to be part of our project. Thanks to the logistical support of UEFA, we were able to contact some teams for which we did not have the information or did not initially answer our kind collaboration offer.

A total of 19 teams, representing 15 countries, accepted our invitation (i.e. 44% of our population). These teams and their respective countries, including their European and National record, are presented below in alphabetical order (note that runners-up

are only mentioned if the team has not won a European title; sources are Clubs' websites):

- Ajax Amsterdam, Netherlands, winner of C1 in 1971, 1972 and 1973, winner of C2 in 1987, winner of C3 in 1992 (30 National Championships, 18 Cup titles);
- Anderlecht, Belgium, winner of C2 in 1976 and 1978, winner of C3 in 1983 (30, 9);
- Aston Villa, England, winner of C1 in 1982 (7, 7);
- Athletic Bilbao, Spain, finalist of C3 in 1977 (8, 23);
- Benfica Lisbon, Portugal, winner of C1 in 1961 and 1962 (32, 27);
- Borussia Dortmund, Germany, winner of C2 in 1966 (7, 2);
- Celtic Glasgow, Scotland, winner of C1 in 1967 (42, 35);
- Dinamo Zagreb, Croatia, winner of C3 in 1967 (17, 18);
- Dynamo Kiev, Ukraine, winner of C2 in 1975 and 1986 (26, 18);
- FC Dynamo Moscow, Russia, finalist of C2 in 1972 (11, 7);
- Hamburger SV, Germany, winner of C1 in 1983, winner of C2 in 1977 (6, 3);
- IFK Göteborg, Sweden, winner of C3 in 1982 and 1987 (18, 5);
- Malmö, Sweden, finalist of C1 in 1979 (16, 14);
- Olympique de Marseille, France, finalist of C1 in 1991 (9, 10);
- Panathinaikos, Greece, finalist of C1 in 1971 (20, 17);
- Partizan Belgrade, Serbia, finalist of C1 in 1966 (23, 12);
- Red Star Belgrade, Serbia, winner of C1 in 1991 (25, 23);
- Steaua Bucharest, Romania, winner of C1 in 1986 (23, 21); and
- Werder Bremen, Germany, winner of C2 in 1992 (4, 6).

Please note that MTK Budapest (Hungary, finalist of C2 in 1964; 23 National Championships, 12 Cup titles) could have been included in our list, had the team not been relegated in the second Magyar division at the end of the 2010-2011 season.

4.3 Data collection

The questionnaire we developed contains fourteen open-ended questions (Appendix 1). It was pretested with a manager of a European football Club that was not included in our sample, the respective team falling just short of our selection criteria. The pre-test allowed us to make minor amendments to the questionnaire for the following interviews.

We engaged in semi-structured interviews with managers of the selected teams. Since the main criterion used in the selection process of a respondent for a case study is the quality of the information that could be obtained from the respondent (Kolb, 2008; Lee and Lings, 2008), the managers chosen were directly involved in the teams' marketing initiatives. These managers were marketing managers or marketing directors, VPs of marketing or other significant executive positions in charge of marketing activities within the organization; we also included some sports business insiders who were very close to the team and who could provide some additional insight. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. One to four people were interviewed from each team, depending on their level of expertise and availability at the time of the interview. Each interview was transcribed immediately following the encounter. Clarifications were made by e-mail and phone, when necessary. We conducted the interviews in spring and fall 2011.

Moreover, we shall mention that we organized six focus groups with football fans during one trip to Germany in early December 2011. These focus groups were

composed of 5-6 international students each. These focus groups will bring an additional perspective to our analysis, this time from consumers, which will be brought to the fore in the Results section. Even though this was not part of our initial plan, different respondents and sources of information enable the researcher to broaden the field of research and add value to the findings (Lee and Ling, 2008).

Furthermore, in order to increase the validity of our primary data, we consulted sports publications, team documents, team websites and media articles (i.e. print and electronic ones). These secondary sources also provided specific information regarding the teams, their brand building and brand management. Furthermore, we discussed with six resourceful persons (five from UEFA and one from another organization). The intent was to get a broader picture, and as accurate a perspective as possible of the situation of the Europa League, its challenges, and those that participating Clubs encounter; but these gentlemen were also very helpful in the logistical support by facilitating contacts with some football teams. These people are, in alphabetical order:

- Mr. Neil Beecroft, Education Program Assistant, UEFA;
- Mr. Diederik Dewaele, Head of Administration, European Club Association;
- Mr. William Gaillard, President of the Jury of the UEFA Research Grant Program, UEFA;
- Mr. Antonio Giachino, Europa League Competition Manager, UEFA;
- Mr. Thomas Junod, Universities Coordinator, UEFA;
- Mr. Grégory Lepsqueux, Marketing Legal Services Unit, UEFA.

4.4 Data analysis

Content analysis is used to give in-depth meaning to the responses of the managers. As mentioned before, we shall focus on policy development for European football, in general, and on the positioning of the Europa League in the coming years, specifically, in order to ensure its continuity. This means that we shall extract the essence of the answers provided by managers in order to let the reality emerge. In this regard, our research bears some similarities with the grounded theory approach (Lee and Lings, 2008).

Truly, the qualitative method enables us to carry out an in-depth case analysis of the strategic vision of team managers in relation with the Europa League (Kolb, 2008). Furthermore, they should provide concrete answers to our five research questions.

5) Results

The following pages are dedicated to the analysis of our five research questions (RQ). A synthesis table will recap the main results at the end of this section.

5.1 RQ1: What are the catalyzing factors a former successful European football team could use in developing its brand identity through the Europa League?

The nineteen teams interviewed underline ten major catalyzing factors in reviving their respective Club via their participation in the Europa League: i) Ambition/Competitiveness (19 teams), ii) Authenticity/Integrity (19), iii) Strategic management of the brand (19), iv) Internationalization (16), v) Market research (14),

vi) Regional anchor (13), vii) Youth development (13), viii) Acquisition of foreign players (11), ix) Business focus (5) and x) Iconic institution (3) (see Table 1²).

Among these ten catalyzing factors, three are strongly emphasized: Ambition/Competitiveness, Authenticity/Integrity and Strategic management of the brand. Thus, the following part of the report focuses on the catalyzing factors that a former successful European football team could use in developing its brand identity through the Europa League.

5.1.1 Ambition/Competitiveness

- Self-confidence and feeling of national pride, desire to win (19 teams).

The managers of all teams interviewed admit that self-confidence, a strong feeling of national pride, and the desire to win are the most powerful forces for the Clubs. For some Clubs the main target is to be the number one in their country both on and off the field (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). As one manager expresses it: “our duty is to be the first: first with a sponsor on the shirt, first with skyboxes in the stadium, etc.” (*Ajax Amsterdam*) which is strongly connected with their ambitions and self-confidence. “We are the main brand in our region. In itself, it differentiates us. We are number one in performance in all the different sports categories (in Sweden)” (*Malmö*). “We are a star in all aspects: on and off the field (from the team’s name, Steaua which means star in Romanian)” (*Steaua Bucharest*). “As the best Portuguese brand, [...] we are also known for being the biggest membership football Club in the world. [...] In a way, Benfica is Portugal and Portugal is Benfica. Both names are intertwined and really represent each other well” (*Benfica Lisbon*).

² Due to their size, all Tables appear in a special section, following the Bibliography.

Fans cherish and worship their favorite Club; this is usually the object of their personal and national pride, as the team represents their country on the national and international arena. The feeling of national pride “makes the sports brand unique and is closely associated with the Club and its fans” (*Dinamo Zagreb*) and can only be achieved by winning: “Winning is very important because it is a part of our history, it is a part of the legacy and that’s why so many fans have joined Benfica”. For example, “Since the mid-sixties and early seventies, Benfica has become a true National Club with a fan base almost unparalleled in percentage and reach within its country and in the world” (*Benfica Lisbon*).

Thus, “winning is the most important thing of all things. We need to maximise our efforts to produce more wins and attract more fans” (*Red Star Belgrade*). Managers acknowledge that winning is the only way to remain popular and have the most fans, to play in European competitions and generate strong revenues. That is why, for example, “Benfica always goes into every game with the pressure that it must win, no matter what...” (*Benfica Lisbon*). Winning for these teams is a point of honour and a part of their legacy. “Winning pushes the success of the brand, especially when it comes to public relations: when you win, you are present in the media, you benefit from a positive image” (*Borussia Dortmund*). Winning is the main motive for the teams, it is also the “engine” of the brand (*Olympique de Marseille*). This is in line with the comments made by Mr. Antonio Giachino, Europa League Competition Manager: “What makes a team win is their name, their history, their tradition: they are built to win”.

And in this regard, all the Clubs interviewed have a long history and tradition to win: “Winning is in our DNA, we have a long, long history of winning” (*Malmö*). The Clubs try to combine their glorious history and tradition to win with the ability to

transmit a message of innovation, creativity and a feeling of hope to the public. For instance, “we want to make sure that the Dynamo Moscow brand represents a very strong, ambitious Club with great history. But at the same time, the Club wants to be very progressive and modern” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). “Benfica is the biggest and the most loved Portuguese football brand. Benfica is a historic brand supported by strong values and its 107 years of glory and trophies, but it is also a modern brand that communicates with innovation, creativity and a winning feeling” (*Benfica Lisbon*).

Supporters expect their favourite team to win. And teams on their part understand that winning is the only way to remain popular and have the most fans, to play in European competitions and generate strong revenues (*Red Star Belgrade*); it “makes them (our partners and fans) join us, because they want to be associated with a winner” (*IFK Göteborg*). But it is not only a matter of prestige and glory; winning is very important commercially: “in order to get fans and partners (sponsors) to join us, same for the best players. People want to associate themselves with a winning team” (*Aston Villa*). In the end “it is all about success and reach: when you are playing in Europe and you win, people aspire to associate with you, they aspire to be like you” (*Aston Villa*).

Even though winning is extremely important, some teams admit that “it is not the most important thing” (*Borussia Dortmund*) of all things. Indeed, some teams have a strong connection with their fans and they are sure of being admired in spite of the result on the pitch, that is “the love for the Club is not affected by the way the team is playing in a particular moment” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). They confess that they have such a strong connection with their fans, win or lose; the fans will be there no matter what (*Borussia Dortmund*). Definitely, success on the field “helps the brand but even when the team does not win we have a strong DNA and loyal fans. Having a strong brand

helps us go through harsh times and cycles of performance” (*Celtic Glasgow*). In other words, a strong brand enables Clubs to transcend the on-field results, at least for a certain period of time, as we mentioned earlier in the literature review (Ross, 2006).

Thus, most of the managers acknowledge that they “need to advance as far as possible in the competition” (*HSV*). But at the same time, “craving that family is more important than just winning” (*Aston Villa*). They recommend to create a community feel around the Club. These Clubs “would like to be perceived as part of a family story, where the whole family comes to the stadium and it becomes a kind of tradition” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). That is why some teams try to transcend the winning factor; for them the success on the pitch is getting less important. They admit that “it is important for sponsors to be associated with a winning team. Definitely, it is easier to attract sponsors with success. However, as the Russian Premier League will grow, the success factor will be less important because the League itself and the football Clubs that participate in the League will have an attraction power in themselves. In our opinion the success on the pitch and commercial success should be achieved in parallel, both helping one another” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). And by managing to combine these two goals, they can strengthen their brand identity and also, ultimately, their brand equity (Richelieu and Pons, 2011).

- Focus on sports: performance on the field and beauty of the game. “Every game is like a high school exam” (19 teams).

Another powerful force for all nineteen teams is the focus on sports which presupposes excellent performance on the field and the respect of the game of football: “we are beloved nationally because we play beautiful soccer” (*Borussia Dortmund*). According to the importance and solemnity of the moment, the teams

compare every game with “a high school exam” (*IFK Göteborg*). Success on the pitch depends greatly on the performance on the field and vice versa: only with great performance on the field, beauty of the game (or style of play) and complete devotion it is possible to achieve success and high results.

Admittedly, winning and beauty of the game can be combined and become a strong trademark or a set of brand attributes of a football team. Some examples are the national Brazilian team of Pelé, the Benfica team of Eusebio, the Ajax team of Crujff or the FC Barcelona team of Messi. Unfortunately, winning and beauty of the game are sometimes, somehow, disconnected, as it was with the French national team of 1982 or the Danish national team (the ‘Danish Dynamites’) of 1986. The teams under analysis have all been successful European football Clubs in the past. They are very proud of their glorious heritage and nowadays they are fighting to find their way back into the European football community as competitive Clubs.

5.1.2 Authenticity/Integrity

Most of the teams studied understand that it is essential for every member of the Club – the management and players – to follow one way. The following quotes underline this idea: “this is to be coherent and communicate one message in public” (*Werder Bremen*); to be authentic as “authenticity is essential, you need to behave according to your values, from top to bottom” (*Aston Villa*); and display integrity in everything the Clubs are involved in as integrity is the inner sense of ‘wholeness’ deriving from qualities such as honesty and consistency of character. As such, one may judge that Clubs have integrity to the extent that they act according to the values, beliefs and principles they claim to hold. These are some ingredients that could help the brand anchor itself nationally and even beyond because it shows that the club is

genuine, authentic: it delivers on the brand promise it makes to its fans and other stakeholders, as we explained in the literature review (Balmer et al., 2009).

- Good attitude and behaviour. Democratic ambiance within the Club. Regular communication with supporters, staff, partners (19 teams).

From the point of view of all nineteen teams interviewed, together with the desire to win, it is also very important to “have a good attitude and behaviour as the mission of the team is a key to the team’s actions” (*Werder Bremen*). Teams admit the importance of creating a special friendly “team environment, on and off the field” (*Aston Villa*) and democratic ambiance within the Club that serves as a basis of the ‘healthy’ relations on all levels in the Club and helps them achieve their goals. For example, “Benfica is a true democracy and started that way a long time ago even when this country was ruled under an authoritarian regime. Benfica’s democracy inspired the management to reflect how the country was run from 1974 onwards” (*Benfica Lisbon*). The determination for democracy in football was also underlined by most of the professional European Football Leagues at their General Assembly : “Representing a universe of almost 1000 professional clubs across Europe, the EPFL member Leagues, gathered at their General Assembly in Kiev on 25 October 2011, have reinforced their determination for greater transparency and democracy within the sport, through the direct participation of the key stakeholders, such as the Leagues, in the discussions and decisions of matters in which they have serious concerns and legitimate interests” (See also the official site of European Professional Football Leagues, available at : http://www.epfl-europeanleagues.com/european_leagues_governance_reform.htm). And

communication is one of the most important, if not the most important, way of achieving this goal in football.

It is common knowledge that “communication is key to success” (Belch and Belch, 2011). So, it is a vital responsibility of every member of the Club to be able to communicate effectively, on the one hand, within the Club (with teammates, coaches and management): “from a team perspective, a player should be encouraged to communicate with all other players and understand their role in the group. Building trust amongst players is imperative - they begin to understand each other and develop rapport. Players also need to adapt their behaviour to enhance the team culture as individuals are vital to a team and their willingness to adapt their behaviour in order to enhance the team performance is crucial” (See also ‘Better Coaching: Advanced Coach’s Manual’, available at: http://www.fitness4football.com/coaching_strategies/team_spirit.htm#). On the other hand, the ability to communicate with the outside world (with fans, partners, sponsors, other teams and Leagues, etc.) is also essential as it pushes the success of the brand and makes the Club visible in Europe and worldwide. That is why each member of the Club carries a huge commitment and responsibility to build a relationship and communicate on a daily basis with their fans and partners in an innovative way via different types of mass media: “on digital social media (Facebook, Twitter), and also by e-mail, direct messaging, on TV, on the Internet, etc. We try to communicate our core values. When you communicate well, you engage fans and they come to you” (*Anderlecht*). “We communicate, we listen, we make sure that we deliver, we share our brand with our fans; it is important to realise that we do not own the brand, we share it with our fans. [...] Every time you show that you listen to your supporters and fans, it strengthens the relationship with them” (*Malmö*). The key aspect is that “you

need to build your own strong communication plan in order to bring the fans to you and make them part of the Club” (*Anderlecht*). Teams believe that it is important to relay the information about the Club “so that people then relay this information and promote it on their own” (*Anderlecht*). As a result, fans become what is called ‘consumactors’ (Monga and John, 2010): co-creators and ambassadors of the sports brand (Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012).

- Dedication, commitment, openness and loyalty to the team and to the game (17 teams).

The majority of the teams interviewed uphold their values of openness, honesty, loyalty, commitment and dedication to the game, fans, partners, community, etc., as essential components to achieve success. The following quotations illustrate that vividly: the Club “expects a lot from their people (players, coaches, managers), on and off the field. [...] We are open and honest with our community and partners, and our policy replicates this openness” (*Aston Villa*). Besides, in their Sustainability Report 2010 “Prepared for our Bright Future”, Aston Villa acknowledges that “the figure of almost £3.7m contributed to community activities is a fantastic achievement and underlines our commitment to supporting local people and local causes. [...] Aston Villa’s commitment to community activities is demonstrated through the significant annual financial contributions made through the schemes and initiatives with which the Club is involved. Villa’s calculation of community investment takes into account the money committed to our football development and community department as well as overheads including the cost of gifts in kind (facilities/tickets/merchandise, etc.); costs of programmes such as Villa Vitality and Villa Vocations; an estimate of income relinquished through Acorns shirt

sponsorship; money directly raised for charities and good causes; and money raised with the support of donations and gifts in kind from the Club” (available at: <http://www.avfc.co.uk/staticFiles/3c/4b/0,,10265~150332,00.pdf>).

And it all starts with the management, as they are the ones who show the way to other stakeholders of the team and of the brand. As a Russian proverb illustrates it well: “The fish rots from the head”. You cannot ask your fans and other stakeholders to believe in the Club if managers do not lead by example themselves. It is reassuring to see that the managers interviewed share this perspective.

- Governance: seriousness, great sense of responsibility (corporate, social) and reliability (11 teams).

The teams interviewed claim that the Clubs’ policies should run through the organization from the very top. Thus, for example, Aston Villa “formed a sustainability committee in July 2009 to address sustainable development and identify best practice. This committee will internally audit the Club to ensure that best practice and continued developments are implemented and progressed. This will ensure that further policy developments are made to maintain continued economic, environmental and social progress. Corporately, the Club has recycling and energy policies in place as well as a statement on Corporate Social Responsibility within its Customer Charter. [...] Aston Villa strives to treat all staff fairly and responsibly. The Club promotes diversity and a positive and inclusive working environment” (See also: Sustainability Report 2010, “Prepared for our Bright Future”, available at: <http://www.avfc.co.uk/staticFiles/3c/4b/0,,10265~150332,00.pdf>).

This being said, the Clubs’ achievements greatly depend on sound governance: liability, seriousness, great sense of responsibility (corporate, social), reliability and

innovation. All these components work towards one goal – achieving the highest results possible as the game of football is about winning: “Winning is very important, it is an ultimate goal. Winning championships is our mission. It cannot come at all costs; it has to come with responsible management. For instance, we have no debt and we would like to keep it that way” (*Ajax Amsterdam*).

➤ Tolerance, loyalty, transparency (4 teams).

According to four managers, transparency is an essential part of any relationship, including in sports. That is why every member of the Club carries a commitment to deal with their supporters, partners, sponsors, with transparency as “the partners should know about the interests they have and the objectives they pursue” (*IFK Göteborg*). Besides, it is absolutely necessary for the teams and their fans to be tolerant and loyal because if the fans or partners are loyal, “they will never move to our rivals!” (*Benfica Lisbon*). The teams admit that without tolerance, loyalty and harmony, the lasting peace at the stadiums during the games cannot be maintained, and loyalty for each other (teams and their fans) cannot be established. “Loyalty is born from feelings of love and affection. At a personal level the feelings of love strengthens the feelings of loyalty” (Atif, 2010). Thus, when a fan loves his/her team, he/she exhibits loyalty and devotion towards the Club. On the contrary, “lack of tolerance leads to fighting, violence, and finally it destroys the peace and security. Consequently, tolerance is needed in all spheres of life (including sport), and on every level and on every stage, because it plays a vital role to establish peace and love, from the smallest unit up to the highest unit of society. Tolerance must be shown from both sides on issues, in order for it to be effective. How nice it would be if everyone tries to express himself in a decent and respectful way with tolerance” (Atif, 2010).

5.1.3 Strategic management of the brand

- Strong emotional ties with diverse groups of fans. Ability to attract a large number of supporters, partners, sponsors (19 teams).

All teams admit that the Club's popularity and the ability to attract a large number of supporters, partners, and sponsors allow them to promote their Clubs on the national and international level. For their countries, they are national ambassadors of goodwill on the international arena (as mentioned by Panathinaikos managers). Their brands are recognized worldwide. As it is mentioned on their official sites, all the Clubs studied have supporters and supporters' groups and organizations across the globe. For instance, "Where ever you find yourself, it is likely there will be a supporters' club nearby" (*Celtic Glasgow*: http://www.celticfc.net/fans_supportersclubs).

They are loved and admired both nationally and internationally. For instance, "It is the most renowned and biggest sports Club in Belgium": a "Premium Belgian Football Club", as it appears on their website (*Anderlecht*: <http://www.rsca.be/go/en>). "It is the most loved Portuguese football brand. It has become a true National Club. Close to 50% of Portuguese football fans are Benfica fans (4.7 million supporters); we have more than 10 million supporters outside Portugal (over 14 million supporters worldwide). We have more than 200,000 members or *socios* (reached in 2009); we broke the Guinness book of record in 2006 with 160,398 paid members. [...] We collect 14.2 million Euros in membership fees annually" (*Benfica Lisbon*). This quote brings us back to the idea that branding can generate value (brand equity) for organizations from both a marketing and financial standpoint (Mizik and Jacobson, 2008).

As most of the Clubs recognize that without the support of their fans the Clubs would not exist, teams seek to show their appreciation to the supporters and continue to make special offers. For example, Dinamo Zagreb “offers free entrance at any match except the one against Hajduk (Split) and the Cup final match, 20% discount for purchase of annual tickets for the season 2011/2012 and 2012/2013, birthday greeting cards with signatures of all players and birthday coupons for 10% discount for Dinamo webshop, gifts, etc.” (<http://www.gnkdinamo.hr/membership#anchor>); Aston Villa “offers some of the lowest season ticket prices in the Premier League. Fans’ loyalty is regularly recognized and rewarded further. For example, providing free coach travel for all supporters attending our League Cup away game at Sunderland in October 2009; free flags for supporters at the Aston Villa vs. Blackburn 2nd leg semi-final in the Carling Cup; the introduction of the Aston Villa Family Fun Day, providing complimentary child friendly entertainment for the 2 hours running up to the match. These days have proved incredibly popular and we aim to do 3 in the 2009/10 season; a free-to-attend open training session during school half term. This year we included a meet-and-greet with the players on the pitch for around 800 children” (See also: Sustainability Report 2010 “Prepared for our Bright Future”, available at: <http://www.avfc.co.uk/staticFiles/3c/4b/0,,10265~150332,00.pdf>).

Football is not only the best entertainment in many countries; it is also an emotional experience. All the teams studied understand that it is crucial to feed the passion of their fans and to keep a strong emotional relationship with them. For example, “HSV is a very emotional brand, we have a strong relationship with our fans, a close relationship between the team and the city of Hamburg” (*HSV*). Fans are “an integral part of the Club and create a unique ambiance in the stadium” (*Red Star Belgrade*). That is why “every member of the Club carries a huge commitment to

build a relationship with the fans” (*Aston Villa*). Unique emotional relationship with the fans “is built from your childhood, passed on to your own children; there is a strong bond between the team and its fans” (*Panathinaikos*) (i.e. ‘from birth to death’ concept; Moore et al., 2002). That is why it is extremely important “to offer services to the whole range of supporters from young fans to VIPs” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). Besides, people working in the Club (the staff) can help better understand how fans perceive the team’s brand because they “are its biggest fans. Consequently, we are well aware of how the fans perceive our brand because the fans are amongst our friends, family, the Club’s sponsors, etc.” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). Some Clubs have numerous fans of diverse origins, like Benfica Lisbon, “due to a very large percentage of emigration and also because of our ex-colonies in Africa, Benfica has more fans outside Portugal than inside”.

The popularity of the Clubs is defined by their performance on the field: the better they perform, the more they win, the more popular they become. However, the good fortune does not always positively smiles on them. That is why it is extremely important for some Clubs to create a special feeling, ‘an aura’ around the Club in order to be perceived by their fans not only as a sports Club but also as something more personal and affectionate: “as part of a family story, where the whole family comes to our stadium and it becomes a kind of tradition. And the story of coming to the stadium and supporting the Club doesn’t depend on the team’s results, the love for the Club is not affected by the way the team is playing in a particular moment” (*Dinamo Zagreb*).

Other Clubs, in order to keep the interest of their fans and to compensate for negative emotional moments when they are less ‘lucky’ on the pitch, try to substitute good results with other services and products. For instance: “We have a network of

partners that give our members discounts for their products and services. This network has more than 1,000 partners around Portugal and in some countries where we have a significant number of members. This program allows us to compensate bad emotional moments, giving our members other rational reasons to keep being members and keeping them paying their membership fees to the Club” (*Benfica Lisbon*).

- Power of the brand. Ability to make the team’s brand “a way of life” for the fans (16 teams).

A sports brand is a very powerful tool to make a difference in many people’s lives; it also becomes an essential component of the supporters’ lives, for example, “Red Star enables people to escape from and forget about the worries of everyday life” (*Red Star Belgrade*). This is what the power of the brand consists of: a set of symbols which encompass, among others, aspirational dimensions (Kapferer, 2007).

For many people, sport in general and football in particular is a part of their culture (Hollensen, 2011). The same can be said about their favourite team, for example, “Some people live and breathe Ajax every day. Ajax is part of the Dutch lifestyle, so yes, we are also a lifestyle brand” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). Thus, sixteen teams confess that they were able to make their brands “a way of life” for fans. They underline that their Clubs are much more than a brand and football is much more than a sport, it becomes a lifestyle: “By the nature of football, we are more than a brand because football reaches beyond the game itself, it is much more than sports, it becomes a lifestyle. That’s why people buy and wear our merchandise outside of the stadium (jacket, shirt, tie, etc.)” (*Aston Villa*). So, the team’s brand is for everyone. However some teams acknowledge that only heavy users see their brand as lifestyle (*Benfica Lisbon*) but

luckily they do have many heavy users in their country and “Benfica is not only the most recognized brand and logo in Portugal, but it is also the second most written word in the press last year (the first was football)”.

Some teams are in transition now, going from pure sport to a lifestyle brand: “First, we are a sports brand. But we are more and more a lifestyle brand because there is a lively community around the team. Moreover, we introduce new merchandise like hoodies and different products that are not only related to sports. We have signed some license agreements with different manufacturers to expand our brand from sports to lifestyle. By far, we are the strongest sports brand in Sweden, going slowly towards a lifestyle brand” (*Malmö*).

But there are three Clubs that do not necessarily follow the lifestyle approach (*Borussia Dortmund, Dinamo Zagreb and HSV*); they all have different reasons for that. First, HSV is not very fond of this approach because they “want to be an authentic brand”. Second, Dinamo Zagreb confesses that they do not see themselves as a lifestyle brand like FC Barcelona, Manchester United, etc., because they believe that they are a local sports brand which has not moved beyond the realms of sports, yet. Third, Borussia Dortmund underlines that they are pure soccer because they are focused on sports: “We will not try to become lifestyle. We have our own famous people: our team, our players. We are beloved nationally because we play beautiful soccer. Our players are our stars; we do not need testimonials from outsiders” (*Borussia Dortmund*).

➤ Heritage: respect of the team’s roots, its history, values, traditions (16 teams).

Sixteen teams admit that in spite of the attempts “to make the brand more modern” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*), it is vital to remember, respect and preserve the Club’s past:

“its heritage, history, traditions and values regardless of the results” (*Athletic Bilbao*) because “past successes represent the foundations for future successes” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). Since the time of their foundation, they have grown to become the best football Clubs in their respective countries.

For example, “Benfica is a historic brand supported by its 107 years of glory and trophies. But it is also a modern brand that communicates with innovation, creativity and a winning feeling” (*Benfica Lisbon*). According to Partizan Belgrade: “As a proof that sport, in this case football, is an important factor of active and healthy life, we have our football veterans who ‘never really hanged their boots’, and are seen playing over 50 matches a year with various veteran clubs around the country and abroad” (<http://www.partizan.rs/en/istorija-kluba/veterani/>).

So teams cherish their great history: “the Dynamo brand has a great history, our past successes represent the foundations for future successes (for instance, former great goalkeeper Lev Yashin is very present on the Dynamo’s website: <http://www.fcdynamo.ru/>). We try to provide the most modern and required service to our supporters, sponsors and partners, make sure the team is open for the fans and the media but at the same time we cherish the great Dynamo veterans that have made a huge impact on the Club’s history” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). This approach is called ‘storytelling’ which refers to the ability of building myths and legends, of articulating a romanticized story around the Club that will be passed on from one generation to the other and crystallize the emotional bond between the team and its fans (Koll et al., 2010). It is in line with what Hakala et al. (2011, p. 449) underline: “it is possible to develop a modern brand without throwing away the history that made it what it is, in other words something that customers can trust”.

All the Clubs identified in our research have a glorious history. As we presented in our methodology section, they reached the final of one of the European competitions (the Champions Cup [C1], the Cup Winners Cup [C2] and the UEFA Cup [C3]) at least once between 1960 and 1992, in addition to winning either their National Championship or the Cup final at least five times in their history. But because their success occurred in the past these teams are working hard to re-experience the glory days.

In this regard the level of their performance and also the contribution of sponsors are of key importance: “FC Dynamo Moscow is one of the oldest, most popular and successful teams in the country, since it was established in 1923. FC Dynamo Moscow has a great history; it is the oldest Russian football Club which has never been relegated to the second division (11 Championship titles; 7 Cups). Most of the success of the FC Dynamo Moscow occurred in the past (last Championship title in 1976; last Cup title in 1995) but we are working hard to recapture the glory days with the main shareholder (VTB Bank, one of the biggest banks in Russia) which is making a lot of investment into the Club. As a result, the team has won a bronze medal in 2008 and is currently 3rd in the Premier League this season, competing for the qualification to European competitions” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*).

➤ Emphasis on merchandising (14 teams).

According to the European Football Merchandising Report 2010 (available at: <http://www.sportundmarkt.com/index.php?id=5195>), “For many, football is a passion – even more so in economically tough times. We do not expect people to cut back heavily on their passion. They will tighten their belts in other areas”. So, as the report claims: “English fans spend an average 65.40 euros per year for merchandising,

followed by the Dutch (46.50), Spanish (44.90), French (42.60), Germans (35.40) and Italians (23.30)".

Thus, our research revealed that in order to gain or nurture their popularity among their fans, a strong emphasis should be put on merchandising (according to fourteen teams interviewed), which also helps them become a lifestyle brand: "that's why people buy and wear our merchandise outside of the stadium (jackets, shirts, ties, etc.)" (*Aston Villa*). For this purpose some Clubs have signed license agreements with different manufacturers to expand their brand from sports to lifestyle (*Malmö*), introduce new details in clothing lines and produce different products that are not only related to sports: "we have a mascot, it is a lion puppy; we put it on baby products, as we are called 'the lions' in the Spanish League" (*Athletic Bilbao*). The Clubs offer a lot of merchandising (training collection, essentials collection, etc.) in their official stores and online for the fans of every age group (men's, women's, boys' and girls' fashion, nightwear, baby products, fashion accessories, home and family, gifts, etc.). Here are some examples : Celtic Glasgow (<http://celticsuperstore.co.uk/stores/celtic/default.aspx?portal=SI2NJA2K>), Olympique de Marseille (<http://boutique.om.net/index.php?language=en&partner=1wsom>), Athletic Bilbao (<http://www.athletic-club.net/web/main.asp?a=7&b=100&c=0&d=0&idi=2>), Aston Villa (<http://www.avfc.co.uk/page/Shopping>) and others. As a result, "more and more merchandise is worn by people today than ever before" (*IFK Göteborg*).

Besides, teams make sure that the way they handle the brand is respectful of the history of the Club: "this coming year, we will introduce a third jersey for the European competition we are involved in. The jersey is white, a replica of an older model worn in the good old days in the 1950s" (*Malmö*). Most of the Clubs admit that

good performance on the field and high results are the main mottos of good merchandising sales; if the performance is poor, sales are affected even though the teams introduce different lines of products, such as cola, beer, champagne, school supplies, bicycles, etc. (*Steaua Bucharest*).

➤ Inner strength and identity (10 teams).

As it was mentioned above, some teams are sure of being admired in spite of the result on the pitch because they believe in their inner power and strong emotional bond with their fans: “The power of the brand comes from the brand itself and we have a strong brand. [...] Win or lose, the fans will be there no matter what” (*Borussia Dortmund*). These teams are convinced that they have “a strong DNA and loyal fans. Having a strong brand helps us go through harsh times and cycles of performance” (*Celtic Glasgow*).

Besides, the power of the team also depends greatly on the prestige of the League they are playing in: “as the Russian Premier League will grow, the success factor will be less important because the League itself and the football Clubs that participate in the League will have an attraction power in themselves” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*).

5.1.4 Internationalization

➤ Ability to make the team visible internationally (16 teams).

In order to build a sports brand beyond their region (a national or even an international brand), the Clubs should be visible internationally. To achieve this goal, different teams have different initiatives.

First of all they use different types of media, for example, “we are working with new media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, through which we inform our fans

around the world of our developments and products” (*Athletic Bilbao*). “It has become easier with social media that we use in three different languages (French, Dutch and English). On the team website, four languages are offered to fans: French, Dutch, English and Spanish. Anderlecht has 76 fan Clubs, of which four are abroad (one in France, one in Poland, one in Texas, USA, and one in Montreal, Canada” (*Anderlecht*). “We have more fans outside of the Netherlands than in Holland, they are widespread, not necessarily as loyal as our local fans but they are reached by different media, the Internet (Ajax website is in 5 languages), social media, etc. The USA have a little higher affiliation to Ajax than other countries (English is used as the main language); [...] China is also a focus of ours because our sponsors are interested in that country (they use Ajax as an entry point and vice versa: Aegon, a Dutch insurance company, and Adidas, our equipment maker) and because of a good relationship between Ajax and the Chinese Football Federation” (*Ajax Amsterdam*).

Second, in order to develop the brand awareness and build brand loyalty towards the Club, some teams initiate different projects, such as, for example, “a grassroots project in India, in partnership with a major local company. We opened a football academy there in order to get young children to develop their skills and grow our brand in this market (i.e. ‘from birth to death’ concept); we also have soccer camps with affiliated Clubs in Boston and Philadelphia” (*Celtic Glasgow*). Besides, every year Celtic Glasgow organizes tours in different parts of the world where they can connect with their fans (‘Celtic Diaspora’) and reach potential new fans (in North America, Australia, etc.). Moreover, “This year, camps will be held in Serbia, Bosnia, Slovenia, but also the US and Sweden” (*Partizan Belgrade*). “We have four football academies abroad, in St Louis (USA), Australia, Serbia, Cyprus: Greek immigrants

know the team and they can connect with the team via these academies” (*Panathinaikos*).

Thus, a powerful tool for the internationalization of the brand is to connect with the national communities abroad: “the first step for Steaua is to internationalize its brand in Italy, Spain, Germany, France and Ireland, where there are a lot of Romanians (strong Romanian communities)” (*Steaua Bucharest*). But also to enter and develop new markets: “the next step is to enter and develop the United States market. Steaua plans to play some games in the USA in the near future (it should come in two years from now, capitalizing on a strong Romanian community based there)” (*Steaua Bucharest*). Thus, cultural similarities enable a team’s entry into a specific foreign market as they provide a fertile ground to nurture the emotional bond between the organization and its potential customers (Hollensen, 2011).

Together with this, Clubs take part in some events organized by UEFA, participate in exhibition or friendly games abroad. For instance, “we organize exhibition games in the Balkans and in Russia. Since last year, Gazprom is the sponsor of the Club. The team will launch a website in Russian in the coming months. Video material and matches will be provided on the Internet for those fans who cannot see the games live or on TV” (*Red Star Belgrade*). “There were games in Hong Kong for the Barclay’s Trophy in July 2011, the first time the pro squad went to Asia. Two markets are key for us: Hong Kong (because we have partners in that region: Nike and our shirt sponsor, Genting [and its affiliate Star Cruises]), Malaysia, Singapore and Ireland (because of the proximity and closeness factor: there is a huge Irish community in Birmingham, big Aston Villa fan Clubs in Dublin and some Irish players on the Aston Villa squad)” (*Aston Villa*). Besides, some teams participate in some international sports business conferences, make presentation for students, are involved with

regional universities, etc. (*HSV, Olympique de Marseille, Partizan Belgrade, FC Dynamo Moscow and others*).

5.1.5 Market research

- Receiving feedback from supporters, partners, sponsors (14 teams).

In order to make sure that there is coherence between the way teams see their brand and what the fans perceive their brand to be, the Clubs implement different types of research regularly over the phone and face to face. Examples include annual surveys, game surveys, online surveys, etc., “with people who attend games and those who watch games on TV” (*IFK Göteborg*). “Research is done during every match day and before the season: we conduct e-mail and face-to-face interviews, focus groups, meetings with stakeholders, etc.” (*Werder Bremen*). “Surveys are done in depth which provides very accurate information” (*Malmö*) and are extremely important because teams try to align their practices with the demands from fans (*Ajax Amsterdam*). The teams interviewed collect data from their fans on everything they do and offer: ticket prices, comfort at the stadium, catering, the way tickets are sold, what fans like, what they do not like, etc.: “We try to improve what we offer to our fans and increase our fan data base and attendance from one year to the other” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). “We have questions on our brand attributes and the attitude of fans towards us, how sympathetic is HSV to people, do they know our sponsors, our actions; we do this research twice a year” (*HSV*).

The feedback from the supporters, partners and sponsors is very helpful to understand how the brand is perceived. Any feedback is precious to the teams: “a complaint for us is also a piece of feedback: our objective is to turn an unhappy fan into a delighted fan at the end of the process. It is very important to listen and take the

feedback back to the Board. It is not about being defensive, but rather listening and improving the experience for the fan by taking concrete actions afterwards. And if we cannot fix the problem now, we explain why and we post it on our website, for instance. We do not slam the door” (*Aston Villa*).

As we can see it, most of the teams pay due attention to conducting research and capitalizing on it. But at the same time, nine teams confess that they are able to do little marketing research due to the limited resources and insufficient marketing strategies: Ajax Amsterdam, Borussia Dortmund, Celtic Glasgow, Dinamo Zagreb, Olympique de Marseille, Panathinaikos, Red Star Belgrade, Steaua Bucharest and Werder Bremen (see also Table 2, “Hurdles: Financial constraints”).

Thus, one of the reasons of conducting a research is to compare how fans see and perceive the team with what managers see and perceive about themselves. At the same time some of them acknowledge that despite the results of the research they would not change their strategy or their behaviour if the results were not as they wished, because they believe that “the power of the brand comes from the brand itself and we have a strong brand” (*Borussia Dortmund*). This quote highlights the challenge organizations face in evolving their brand while preserving their authenticity (Hakala et al., 2011; Kapferer, 2007).

5.1.6 Regional anchor

➤ Focus on the region (13 teams).

Thirteen team managers interviewed admit that they prefer to focus on their region first as “it is easier to gain regional strength and support. It is also a better use of the Club’s resources” (*IFK Göteborg, Malmö and others*) and helps create an image of

being the people's Club (*IFK Göteborg*) (See also Table 3, "Strategies and actions: Anchor the team in its region").

In order to anchor the team in the community, some teams, for example, depict the regional flag on their official shirt as they play only with players born in their region (*Athletic Bilbao*). Besides, they admit that it is important to give back to the community, be socially responsible and participate in charities, as it is done by Celtic Glasgow: "our Club was formed for charitable purposes to help the poor, the Irish and Scottish community of the east end of Glasgow". Hence, most of the Clubs interviewed consider the local communities of huge importance to them; that is why the Clubs have a great tradition of supporting local communities: they raise money to help people who are ill, disabled, or very poor.

Another example is "Aston Villa's commitment to community activities is demonstrated through the significant annual financial contributions (more than £6million) made through the schemes and initiatives with which the Club is involved. Thus, Aston Villa understands the huge importance of education in building stronger communities, and leads a number of initiatives within the local area. 'Villa Vitality' is a key programme, run in partnership with local NHS Primary Care Trusts, aiming to encourage young people (school years 5, 6 and 7) to get involved with playing sport and to eat healthily. The pupils learn about food and drink, record a radio show and take part in football challenges at the Club's Indoor Academy. 'Playing for Success' is another education programme that the Club supports. Delivered from the Villa Learning Zone within Villa Park, students work on the key skills of numeracy, literacy and ICT – the cornerstones of modern education. The children leave Villa with improved skills, motivation and self-esteem. This gives them a real boost which they can build on further back at school. The players at Aston Villa support the

scheme by giving awards to the pupils at a celebration evening held at Villa Park, upon completion of each course. ‘Villa Vocations’ is another education initiative with which the Club is involved. This project enables physically disabled students aged 16-19 to spend four full-time days a week studying the Aston Villa Disability Life Skills Programme. This includes two days of class-based learning, one day of experiential learning at Aston Villa and one day of community/work-based learning experiences. The course is accredited, as the young people have the chance to gain the following qualifications in conjunction with ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network): Certificate of Life Skills, Employability Award/Work right, Disability and Sports Awareness Award” (For more details see also the Sustainability Report 2010 “Prepared for our Bright Future”, available at: <http://www.avfc.co.uk/staticFiles/3c/4b/0,,10265~150332,00.pdf>).

Others teams support young people, especially those from a difficult social background (*Borussia Dortmund*). This provides the Clubs with a positive brand association related to social involvement, social responsibility, caring, etc.

5.1.7 Youth development

- Ability to make stars of almost unknown young players through the Clubs’ football academies, soccer camps, etc. (13 teams).

From the point of view of thirteen team managers, every Club should pay special attention to the upbringing of the younger generation of players. That is, they should focus on youth development. For example, “the Club has a football philosophy of developing young players and giving them the opportunity to be a part of the first team (professional first division team). These youths are part of the selection and training policy of our team, which is quite unique in the Netherlands and in Europe”

(*Ajax Amsterdam*). “We are also contributing to the development of players in Greece for our team with grassroots programs, with youth academies in Greece and abroad, which is a big difference with other teams in Greece” (*Panathinaikos*). There are “very good Portuguese players, developed in the Club, who have entered the Portuguese football Hall of Fame, such as Eusebio, Bento, Chalana, Diamantino, Simões, Simão, Humberto Coelho, Coluna, Jose Aguas, José Augusto, Costa Pereira, Joao Pinto, Rui Costa, etc.” (*Benfica Lisbon*).

“Partizan FC Youth Academy was founded in the 1950’s. This football school has no equal in the region for decades now and is rubbing shoulders with the best ones in Europe. During the last eight years, Partizan FC youth sides participated in 61 tournaments around Europe and achieved 16 top spots, 10 runner-up positions and 12 third place final standings. Our Club organized seven international U-17’s tournaments with participation of some of the top European clubs: Real Madrid (5 appearances), Bayern, Panathinaikos, Roma, Olympique de Marseille, Porto, CSKA Moscow, Barcelona, Fiorentina, Olympiakos. Our youngsters won this tournament on four and Real Madrid on three occasions. This year, the last week of August, we are hosting the 8th international U-17’s tournament with participation of Real Madrid, Fiorentina and PAOK Thessaloniki” (*Partizan Belgrade*: <http://www.partizan.rs/en/omladinska-skola-fudbala/>).

Thus, the youth development focus helps these Clubs distinguish themselves from other European Clubs, from a sporting and a brand identity perspective. This is also a way for these Clubs to survive as they cannot compete financially with other Clubs who can afford to buy foreign players (see also Table 2, “Hurdles: Financial constraints”): “We need to train young players for our team as we cannot buy

expensive players as some teams do in England, Spain, Italy or Germany” (*Ajax Amsterdam*).

➤ Excellent facilities and conditions to play (3 teams).

It is obvious that in order to improve their performance on the field, excellent conditions to play and train are of high importance for any Club. No doubt that they all pay due attention to the development of the stadium and training centres, but during our research only three of the Club managers interviewed underlined this element explicitly. The following site, stadiums.football.co.uk, provides a comprehensive guide to stadiums and grounds across Europe with detailed information and pictures. For instance, “The stadium (Estádio da Luz), Portugal’s largest, known also as the ‘Cathedral’ is an icon of the country and the proud home for all benfiquistas” (*Benfica Lisbon*). The stadium is always important for the fans and partners. Nowadays “football is on the rise in Russia, there is a lot of interest towards football partly due to the 2018 World Cup which will be hosted by Russia. New stadiums will be built in Russia comparable with the best stadiums in Europe and North America because the stadium itself is very important for fans and new potential supporters. Right now, the Dynamo stadium is under reconstruction, it will re-open in 2016 and will host World Cup matches in 2018” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*).

5.1.8 Acquisition of foreign players

- Signing foreign players who have character, charisma and can contribute to the Club's popularity, and help the team enter countries where they come from (11 teams).

According to eleven teams interviewed, signing the best players from around the world is a way to capitalize on them as the Club's ambassadors in their home countries (*Anderlecht*). Some teams believe that their international players make it easier for them to enter a new market where they have "some kind of relationship via a player (e.g. a South Korean player attracted a new sponsor from South Korea). We try to act together with the player and the sponsor to penetrate these respective markets (South Korea, Denmark)" (*HSV*; See also Table 1, "Catalyzing factors: Internationalization"). These players also help contribute to the Club's popularity in the countries where they come from, "especially in the countries that have no international successful football Clubs such as Kosovo, the birth country of our player Beqiraj" (*Dinamo Zagreb*). Once again, these quotes refer to the concept of players as emotional anchors for a Club's international expansion (Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012).

5.1.9 Business focus

- Understanding that football is a business (sport business and 'sportainment').
Investments into the Club made by sponsors (5 teams).

Some teams interviewed acknowledge that it is important to run the Club in a professional business manner, as football nowadays is less about the game and more about the business. "Structurally, football Clubs are businesses, and should be run according to the rules and regulations of any other commercial entities. And yet, in

function, they are more than businesses due to their unique standing within the community and the great potential they have to provide social benefits. This added dimension calls for football clubs to be even more considerate of their stakeholders than other commercial businesses, which are primarily concerned with delivering financial returns to their shareholders” (See also “Football Governance”, written evidence submitted by Schwery Consulting to the UK Parliament, available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmcumeds/writev/792/fg54.htm>).

Thus, in our studies five Clubs underline that football is business (in this regard we can speak about sport business and ‘sportainment’) and they depend on the market (*Ajax Amsterdam, Dinamo Zagreb, FC Dynamo Moscow, IFK Göteborg and Red Star Belgrade*). According to FIFA president Sepp Blatter: “the game of football has become a product – a very good product in marketing terms. Along the way big partners like the television and the market (spectators and businesses involved in football) have come on board, making football one of the most lucrative businesses in the world” (available at: <http://www.southafrica.info/2010/soccerex-271107.htm>).

However, the Eastern European teams interviewed confess that a lot of investments should be made by sponsors into their Clubs in order to foster the bond and the business collaboration: for example, “by the VTB Bank, one of the biggest banks in Russia” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*), by Gazprom (*Red Star Belgrade*), etc. (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Internationalization”). So, the Clubs under analysis do not just offer their fans attractive football, but they also provide their partners with attractive surroundings. Looking through the official sites of the Clubs, we can see that all of them collaborate with a lot of partners (for instance, Werder Bremen: http://www.werder.de/en/business/sponsoring/editorial_en.php; Celtic Glasgow:

<http://www.celticfc.net/mainindex>; Steaua Bucharest: http://www.steauafc.com/en/parteneri_oficiali/; Anderlecht: <http://www.rsca.be/go/en>; Aston Villa: <http://www.avfc.co.uk/page/PartnersIndex>; Dinamo Zagreb: <http://www.gnkdinamo.hr/sponsors>, and others). But only five of them mentioned this item during our interviews.

5.1.10 Iconic institution

- Uniqueness and recognition: the biggest sports society in the country which represents a number of different sports and leagues (Dinamo/Dynamo society) (3 teams).

Three Clubs admit that it is also crucial to create a sports society around the Club which represents a number of different popular sports (hockey, volleyball, basketball, etc.) and Leagues (Dinamo/Dynamo society): “Dynamo is the biggest society in the country (Dynamo society). There is a Dynamo team, facility or a stadium in different cities and towns across Russia. Dynamo is probably the most recognized and famous sports brand in Russia. The unique quality of the Dynamo brand is that it represents a number of different sports at the same time, which are very popular sports (hockey, volleyball, basketball and etc.)” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*).

However, we should mention that this type of structure is very specific to the former Soviet and Eastern bloc sports organizations; thus, the leverage it might provide from a sports, political and financial perspective is very much dependent on a unique environment and legacy.

For a detailed presentation of the catalyzing factors used by the football Clubs studied, team by team, the reader is invited to read the Table in Appendix 2.

5.2 RQ2: What are the main hurdles a former successful European football team could encounter in developing its brand identity through the Europa League?

Eleven hurdles have been underlined by the managers interviewed. These are: i) The lack of prestige of the Europa League; ii) Financial constraints; iii) The lack of support from the National League; iv) The lack of success at the European level; v) Broadcast restrictions; vi) Tight control by UEFA; vii) A weak brand; viii) “Competitors”; ix) Governance issues; x) Hooliganism; and xi) Analytical skills. Out of these eleven hurdles, two are underlined by the majority of respondents: The lack of prestige of the Europa League and Financial constraints faced by teams (Table 2).

The following part of the report deals, in details, with the main hurdles that a former successful European football team encounters in developing its brand identity through the Europa League.

5.2.1 Lack of prestige of the Europa League

- Lack of prestige, awareness and financial reward for the teams participating in the Europa League (16 teams).

Most of the teams underline the lack of prestige of the Europa League, its life in the shadow of the Champions League. As a consequence, it does not provide as many benefits for the Clubs as the Champions League and the teams participating in this competition experience a lack of exposure, visibility, awareness and financial reward (*Steaua Bucharest*). For most of the Clubs “taking part in the Europa League is better than nothing but is very close to being a participation by default” (*HSV*) and it seems even more exacerbated for teams with a decent history. Thus, it is crucial to nurture

the prestige of the Europa League as “people want to watch the best teams and associate with the most prestigious competition” (*Panathinaikos*). Mr. Diederik Dewaele, Head of Administration of the European Club Association, states the same idea: “For the biggest Clubs which usually play in the Champions League, it is not interesting to play in the Europa League. [...] One year, you play against Manchester United or Barcelona, the year after you face a team from Israel or from the Czech Republic (no offense intended!). It is demotivating for players and their teams”. And Mr. Antonio Giachino, Europa League Competition Manager, adds: “For the successful Clubs, the Europa League is not interesting. It is as if we asked Ferrari to race in Formula 2!”

Furthermore, reduced revenues for teams from small European countries seem problematic. In this regard, “there is a huge disproportion in revenues between the Europa League and the Champions League (1.5 million Euros per team in TV rights for the group stage of the Europa League vs. 10 million per team in the Champions League)” (*Steaua Bucharest*). That “makes things difficult to sustain where we are” (*Panathinaikos*). The same idea is expressed by Mr. Grégory Lepesqueux from the UEFA Marketing Legal Services Unit: “It is roughly a ten to one ratio when we compare what a Club gets from the Champions League and the Europa League. [...] Each team keeps its ticket and hospitality revenues but assumes the fixed costs of the games. The amounts distributed by UEFA in the Europa League are indeed small, compared to the ones associated with the Champions League [...]. The revenues are reduced because of the types of matches presented in the Europa League but the fixed costs stay more or less the same for the Clubs. [...] The revenues for 2012-15 will be higher for the teams involved in the Europa League; the gap tends to be narrowed with the Champions League. In 2010-11, 1.1 billion Euros were distributed to the

Clubs taking part in the Champions League; and 200 million Euros for teams participating in the Europa League”.

- Over crowdedness of the Europa League: “the competition loses its rarity and exclusivity, and thus, its prestige” (3 teams).

It is well known that “the international dimension of the European competition attracts players, sponsors; it is good for the image of the Club and the self-esteem of its members (stakeholders). Furthermore, an international competition provides international recognition and prestige to a team” (*HSV*). But at the same time some managers underline that nowadays the Europa League competition is overcrowded: “There are too many teams in the Europa League, too many games. The Europa League is very (too) crowded; it really becomes important after the ¼ finals” (*HSV*). “There are a lot of teams involved in the competition, teams we sometimes do not know, even a lot of teams from Romania (four Romanian teams qualified in 2011-2012)” (*Steaua Bucharest*). As a result, “the competition loses its rarity and exclusivity, and thus, its prestige” (*HSV*).

Truly, as Mr. Giachino, Europa League Competition Manager, underlines it, “the main idea of the Europa League is to offer an access to Europe to smaller teams and teams from smaller countries and their fans who, otherwise, wouldn’t be able to experience a European competition. [...] It provides these countries the opportunity to develop their local football, their national team and eventually to qualify for the Champions League a few years later”. For the 2011-12 competition, there were 194 teams involved, representing 53 UEFA associations.

5.2.2 Financial constraints faced by teams

- Financial instability: revenues, resources, proper financing and investment in the team to penetrate international markets (11 teams).

Eleven teams confess that they experience a lack of financial stability (in revenues, resources, proper financing and investment in the Club made by owners, sponsors, etc. to penetrate international markets) and also some logistical problems (counterfeiting, difficulty to find partners ready to support the team's steps abroad, etc.). That is why expanding and building their sports brand beyond their region is an everyday battle for resources (*IFK Göteborg*).

Besides, some of them experience difficulties in transforming the fans' interest into commercial opportunities ('to monetize'; *Olympique de Marseille*). Some teams seem simply too fragile financially: "Clubs cannot survive without the financial involvement of the owner. 30-40% of the budget comes from the owner's pockets. We are behind 20-30 years in what is happening in Western Europe on how teams are managed" (*Steaua Bucharest*). In the same vein: "if we qualify for the Europa League, our games will be broadcasted nationally and internationally, it would help us expand beyond our region. [...] Just the qualification money will help us a lot, and we will use it to get better regionally and nationally. We want to feed the development of the Club in the long term, based on what we get, when we get it; more revenues will help us develop the team and the brand beyond our region. [...] Right now, our revenues are only 1/3 of the Norwegian champion! How can we think about growing now?! We are good enough nationally, but we need to be stronger to get to the next level" (*Malmö*).

➤ Little market research due to the limited resources (9 teams).

Nine teams experience some problems conducting a regular market research due to their limited financial resources. They confess that “there is not a lot of money left for research!” (*Steaua Bucharest*). For example, IFK Göteborg focuses especially on fans from Göteborg because the team’s resources are limited. Olympique de Marseille conducted a research in 2005 with focus groups to work out the leading marketing platform of the Club. Werder Bremen undertakes marketing actions but only with the financial support of its commercial partners because “a lot of media activity is necessary and it is very expensive”.

Besides, the National League is not very helpful either: “it is not the best marketing base for national and international actions” (*Borussia Dortmund*). As a result teams have to rely on their own strengths while conducting research because they “are not in a position to hire external consultants” (*Red Star Belgrade*).

Moreover, Clubs sometimes experience a lack of power on marketing and business decisions at the Stadium. According to one person close to the team, “the power is in the hands of the subsidiary company of Bouygues (AREVA). Therefore, the team cannot integrate the physical support, the experience of consumption and the marketing of match days” (*Olympique de Marceille*). At the same time, even without all the financial constraints that the Clubs face, some of them consider that any kind of investment in marketing through the Europa League would have no effect on their brands because they are mostly local sports brands at this point in time (*Dinamo Zagreb*).

- Financial inequalities between the teams (the Top 5 Leagues and the rest of Europe) (5 teams).

In order to succeed in Europe, the Clubs need “a more financially robust domestic environment (e.g. a League with stronger commercial revenues and consequently more investments in the team to compete internationally); in other words, a stronger domestic base is an essential asset to succeed in Europe. But right now, it is also the main obstacles, not only for us, but also for teams in Belgium, Netherlands and Switzerland” (*Celtic Glasgow*). Even though some domestic Leagues help their teams nationally (e.g. the Swedish League), they acknowledge that there is still a big difference between top teams and lower teams in terms of resources. “The Swedish League is the 27th European league in Europe based on continental results. We have a long way to go to improve the situation” (*IFK Göteborg*).

Thus, to compete internationally, the main obstacles right now for different European Clubs are the difference in revenues and investments in the Clubs: “the gap in revenues is so huge!” (*Malmö*); “lower teams do not have the TV revenues the Top 5 Leagues in Europe have (England, Italy, Spain, Germany and France)” (*Celtic Glasgow*). Furthermore, there is a lack of visibility: Clubs from small countries do not get the same exposure as Clubs from England, Spain or Italy and they do not have their financial means either (*Panathinaikos*). Moreover, there is a severe financial crisis in some European countries (like Greece) which “makes things even more difficult” for the respective Clubs (e.g. *Panathinaikos*).

As it was mentioned above, some Clubs cannot compete at the financial level with others. “Every day, it is a battle for resources. We need to put our resources where we get a good return on our investment. That is why most of the focus is on our region” (*IFK Göteborg*). Consequently, some teams prefer bringing up young players for their

teams as they cannot afford buying expensive foreign players, like some teams in England, Spain, Italy, France or Germany do (*Ajax Amsterdam*) (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Invest in youth development”).

➤ Trade of the best players every year (1 team).

One team admits that they have to trade their best players every year because “off the field, the power is with the players who ask more money or to be traded. You cannot have unhappy players in your team, that is why we sell some of them every year as they want to play for the top Clubs” (*Aston Villa*). Furthermore, the Club experiences difficulties to enter some foreign markets (e.g. the American market) because it is very expensive. That is why they acquire affordable foreign players as they believe that “foreign players in the team can definitely help to penetrate new markets” (*Aston Villa*) as they act as emotional anchors (Desbordes and Richelieu, 2012).

5.2.3 Lack of support from the National League (9 teams).

Nine teams appear to have complicated relations with their National Leagues. They admit that the main obstacles are the weakness of the Leagues and the lack of professional management. According to the manager from Red Star Belgrade “our obstacle is a weak League in which we play; we need a stronger competition to gain experience in the domestic League so we are ready to play with top European Clubs. [...] Without a strong League, it is pretty much impossible to be competitive in Europe” (*Serbian League – Red Star Belgrade*).

Others confess that their League is not very helpful: “it is not the best marketing base for national and international actions (they do not do much)” (*German League –*

Borussia Dortmund). “The League does not help at all, each Club is basically on its own, and what we actually see is that the League enters a commercial conflict with the Clubs, trying to gather their own sponsors, taking visibility from the Clubs, etc. The Portuguese League does not promote internationally our brand or our Championship: this is the only place where we can grow, since internally we have reached maximum market maturity. Our League should be offered to Far East markets and other rapid expansion markets around the globe so that our ‘Liga’ and its players start getting recognized and followed. However, nothing has happened so far in respect to this” (*Portuguese League – Benfica*). So, it is evident that teams need a stronger competition in order to gain experience in the domestic League to be ready to play with top European Clubs.

Thus, teams have to do marketing on their own and take the initiative in their own hands because “the League does not function as a company, only as a gathering of different Clubs’ presidents. It is because of that that we proposed changes on how the League is managed (infrastructure [floodlights for night game on TV], TV rights, etc.). Within two years, all stadiums should have floodlights (key elements for TV revenues, because night games will be broadcasted with the support of sponsors which can only appear on TV in the evening, such as beer companies). But there appears to be a conflict with the League and the Federation” (*Serbian League – Red Star Belgrade*). The Scottish League itself has a lack of strength, because “there is a limited TV exposure and therefore it is difficult to generate significant TV revenues, compared to the English Premier League, for instance (or any of the Top 5 European Leagues for that matter)” (*Scottish League – Celtic Glasgow*).

Teams acknowledge that there is a lack of support from their respective National League to help them grow their brands nationally and internationally: “they work on a

general basis, which is quite different from the English or Spanish Football Leagues. [...] The Belgian League does not really hinder Clubs' willingness to expand, but it does not do anything to help them either" (*Belgian League – Anderlecht*). As a result, "the Club itself has to put more efforts than the League on growing the brand internationally" (*Dutch League – Ajax Amsterdam*). Moreover, "the country's National Football League is preventing our brand from growing because of its low quality and the League's willingness to make smaller Clubs play in a bigger League. For example, this season, we played in a League with 16 Clubs instead of a smaller League with the 10 strongest Clubs, which would of course be commercially more profitable and far more interesting for the viewers, like in Scotland" (*Croatian League – Dinamo Zagreb*).

Sometimes a National League is focused only on its particular country. For example, "the focus of the Dutch League is on Holland. The Dutch League is the number 6 League in Europe. We put more efforts than the League in growing our brand internationally" (*Dutch League – Ajax Amsterdam*). Moreover, "the Greek League is focused on the Greek Championship. As a consequence, the team does not get any real support to grow its brand internationally (beyond Greece): we give them more information than they give us!" (*Greek League – Panathinaikos*).

To make a long story short, teams need a more financially robust domestic environment (a League with stronger commercial revenues and consequently more investments in the team to compete internationally), as "a stronger domestic base is an essential asset to succeed in Europe" (*Scottish League – Celtic Glasgow*).

5.2.4 Lack of success at the European level (9 teams).

The lack of success at the European level is indeed problematic. For instance, “Swedish teams have not been very successful in European competitions as of late. It would be presumptuous to build plans for anything at this point in time. We have to make many efforts to qualify, first. If we do, it would totally change our financial situation because it would raise our revenues by 80%. [...] If we qualify for the Europa League, our games will be broadcasted nationally and internationally, it would help us expand beyond our region” (*Malmö*). Thus, the performance on the field is crucial, as mentioned by our respondents: “Succeeding will help us: just the qualification money will help us a lot, and we will use it to get better” (*Malmö*).

But the good sign is that, despite all the hardships, teams look towards the future with optimism: “good times will come in a few years: but Steaua must start by winning, exiting the group stage of European competitions (either the Champions or the Europa League). Five years ago, Steaua took part in the semi-finals of the Europa League” (*Steaua Bucharest*).

5.2.5 Broadcast restrictions

- Lack of TV and media coverage: limited TV exposure and insignificant TV revenues (5 teams).

Five teams admit that the biggest restriction from the National League and UEFA relates to TV rights: “Clubs have no rights to use images (of national championship games) on Club TV or website. But we have the rights to use highlights of the UEFA or Champions League games! The lack of coherence is striking” (*Steaua Bucharest*).

In addition, there is insufficient TV and media coverage in the Europa League in comparison with the Champions League: “The Europa League does not have the same

TV and media coverage because it does not seem so attractive” (*Werder Bremen*). “There is a limited TV exposure and therefore it is difficult to generate significant TV revenues, compared to the English Premier League, for instance (or any of the Top 5 European Leagues for that matter). [...] TV revenues have gone through the roof in the Top 5 European Leagues, which have contributed in increasing the disparities with the rest of Europe: the TV revenues for the English Premier League are 1.5 billion GBP compared to 15 million GBP for the Scottish League. Even a team at the bottom of the standings in England gets more TV revenues than we do!” (*Celtic Glasgow*). That is why some teams predict a potential collapse of the TV market: “the TV rights bubble could explode anytime [...] Meanwhile, there is too little investment in digital media experience and integrated marketing communications” (*Anderlecht*).

To clarify these comments, we should refer to Mr. Lepesqueux from the UEFA’s Marketing Legal Services Unit. He underlines that “UEFA has exclusive media rights for UEFA’s games from kickoff until midnight, and for all media platforms. The revenues that are distributed to the Clubs are based on this window. Outside of this time window, Clubs manage their TV rights as they wish”. Hence, European teams might be harsh towards UEFA’s Europa League, first and foremost, because of the huge discrepancy that exists between the revenues distributed to the Clubs that participated in the Champions League versus the ones for the Europa League (1.1 billion Euros vs. 200 million Euros in 2010-11, based on numbers provided by Mr. Lepesqueux). It is possible that some team managers interviewed are victims, to some extent, of the so-called ‘halo effect’, which is a cognitive bias that implies that one trait influences others in one's judgement of another person or object (Kardes et al., 2011).

5.2.6 Tight control by UEFA

- Lack of flexibility: centralized marketing from UEFA for the Champions League and partly for the Europa League (4 teams).

Our research revealed that, on the one hand, there are four Clubs that experience a lack of freedom and flexibility, as “UEFA takes care of a lot of marketing issues, if not all of them” (*Panathinaikos*). They are not happy that UEFA tries to take control of all business decisions including TV rights: “UEFA tries to maximize TV rights but to the detriment of the calibre of play and the value of the competition” (*HSV*). As a result, teams do not feel a personalised approach: “UEFA’s interests are not necessarily to promote Clubs’ interests” (*Ajax Amsterdam*).

Another reason for the teams to feel themselves in strained circumstances is the “centralized marketing from UEFA for the Champions League and partly in place for the Europa League. UEFA acts towards more centralization in marketing of European competitions: consequently, we cannot fully expose our sponsors. Who markets what is the big (financial) issue in European competitions for teams and their sponsors that are overtaken by UEFA’s centralization” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). As a result there is a conflict between different sponsors as “merchandising is controlled by UEFA when teams want to use the logo of the European competitions. We understand the rationale but there must not be conflict between sponsors (those of the team and those of UEFA)” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). Thus, “if there was a possibility to advertise our own sponsors to generate extra income during the group stage that would be great!” (*Panathinaikos*). In this regard, Mr. Lepesqueux justifies this centralization for the Europa League in the following statement: “Before the TV rights and the management of the competition were centralized, teams were spending more money than they generated revenues”.

On the other hand teams appreciate the logistics provided by UEFA: “in general, the system works quite well. UEFA has created something attractive for the Clubs” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). “UEFA is very organized, we are learning a lot, we are very fond of the organization (logistics) done by UEFA; it adds to the perceived value for our fans” (*Panathinaikos*). “We follow the media strategy of UEFA, but there is no specific action per se. We do not deploy any special strategy or action in order to strengthen our brand through the Europa or the Champions League. There is no need for that because UEFA takes care of it. Everything is very centralized” (*Werder Bremen*). “By strengthening the level of organization, marketing and TV production of the Champions League, and recently the Europa League, UEFA is helping all of the competitors improve the quality of their own brand” (*Dinamo Zagreb*).

5.2.7 Weak brand

- Lack of knowledge/expertise to leverage the team’s brand in the Europa League (3 teams).

Our analysis revealed that three teams experience a lack of knowledge/expertise on how to leverage the team’s brand in the Europa League. They admit that “if the team does not advance far enough in the competition and does not play against good teams, it is impossible to leverage the brand” (*Borussia Dortmund*). In other words, teams need to advance to the latest stages of the competition in order to be able to leverage their brand in the Europa League.

- Not enough efforts to attract diverse ethnic groups (1 team).

According to the manager of Aston Villa, one of the team’s tasks is to “create a community feel around the Club”. Even though some communities start to associate

themselves with the team (e.g. the Muslim community in Birmingham), it is just one example as “historically the Club was not making enough efforts with diverse ethnic groups to make them join the Aston Villa family” (*Aston Villa*). Thus, even though an organization cannot please everybody and should not try to do it, being inclusive can very much help a team anchor itself in the community and strengthen its foundations, before moving towards becoming a national and even an international brand.

➤ Weakness of the team’s brand (1 team).

One Club acknowledges the weakness of their brand and the importance of winning in order to build the legitimacy of the brand. The manager admits that “winning is a very important aspect of our brand because we still do not have a strong brand to be totally independent from the result on the pitch” (*Dinamo Zagreb*).

5.2.8 ‘Competitors’

➤ Competition for resources, sponsors, results, fans’ attention, etc. within the country (at the national level) (3 teams).

For three teams, one of the hurdles on their way to achieving success is other competitors within the country which causes a battle for almost everything: resources, sponsors, fans’ attention, etc. “There are Russian competitors; a lot of money is invested in football right now. There is a competition for resources, sponsors, results, especially for the top five positions in the Russian League that provide qualification for European tournaments” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*).

Besides, at the national level two teams experience a lack of support from the fans because, on the one hand, the schedule of the European games is very late (10:05 pm;

Steaua Bucharest); on the other hand, fans' attention is dispersed because the team is "one of many teams and people tend to support their local or regional team" (*Malmö*).

5.2.9 Governance issues

- Interference of "the local mafia", ownership battle, etc. (3 teams).

Three teams interviewed admitted that they experience some governance issues, that is the interference of "the local mafia who decides on quite a lot of things connected with the elected representatives" (*Olympique de Marseille*; as mentioned by a source close to the Club but not within the Club). Another issue is the ownership battle: "right now, two ownership groups are fighting to take control of the Club; this is not conducive to growing the brand internationally!" (*Panathinaikos*). Thus, in order to achieve good results, the team needs not only success on the pitch but also peaceful atmosphere within the Club, vision from owners and managers, as well as financial and administrative stability.

5.2.10 Hooliganism

- Problem of violence and hooliganism in football stadiums; problem of wearing official team merchandise because of hooligans (3 teams).

Our research revealed that three teams have to deal with the problem of fans wearing official team merchandise because of hooligans (*Partizan Belgrade*) and the problem of violence and hooliganism in football stadiums: "We have a broad fan base [...]. We have a wide range of fans. Our main target is less passionate but loyal fans because there is a huge problem of violence and hooliganism in football stadiums in Greece" (*Panathinaikos*). But teams try to find the way out and teach their fans "how to be passionate but at the same time good fans" (*IFK Göteborg*).

5.2.11 Analytical skills

- Difficulties to draw conclusion from the market research that the team conducts (1 team).

As it was mentioned above, most of the teams conduct regular market research (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Conduct market research”). However, eight of them experience some problems conducting a regular marketing research due to their limited financial resources (See also Table 2, “Hurdles: Financial constraints faced by teams”). Among them there is one team that conducts different types of research regularly (annual surveys, game surveys, online surveys, etc.), but they experience “difficulties in drawing conclusions” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). This means that they deal with weaknesses in their analytical skills.

For a detailed presentation of the hurdles, team by team, the reader is invited to read the Table in Appendix 3.

5.3 RQ3: What are the most appropriate strategies and actions that could be used by a former successful European football team in order to build and manage its brand identity thanks to the Europa League competition?

Based on the interviews with our 19 team managers, we can underline nine sets of strategies and actions: i) Develop and manage the brand; ii) Provide a unique fan experience; iii) Improve and sustain on-field performance; iv) Internationalize your team’s brand; v) Conduct market research; vi) Broaden the media coverage; vii) Invest in youth development; viii) Anchor the team in its region; and ix) Manage the players’ roster strategically. The first three are massively supported by our team managers, followed not far behind by “Internationalize your team’s brand” (Table 3).

In the following part of the report we will focus our attention on the most appropriate strategies and actions that could be used by a former successful European football team in order to build and manage its brand identity thanks to the Europa League.

5.3.1 Develop and manage the brand

- Strengthen, promote and modernize the brand by developing brand awareness and building brand loyalty towards the Club (19 teams).

In order to promote the fact that the Clubs take part in the Europa League, managers understand that it is of key importance to pay special attention to branding. That is to strengthen, promote and modernize the team's brand by developing brand awareness and building brand loyalty towards the Club, developing strong emotional ties with their fans, focusing on the results, generating innovative ideas and products, initiating PR activities ("contest on social media, special launches with fans, etc.") (*Anderlecht*).

It is common knowledge that football is not only the best entertainment in many countries; it is also, first and foremost, an emotional experience. All the teams studied understand that it is essential to feed the passion of their fans and to keep a strong emotional relationship with them. For example, "HSV is a very emotional brand, we have a strong relationship with our fans, a close relationship between the team and the city of Hamburg" (*HSV*). Unique emotional relationship with the fans "is built from your childhood, passed on to your own children; there is a strong bond between the team and its fans" (*Panathinaikos*) ('from birth to death' concept).

Hence, teams try to reach every group of supporters (present at the game, as well as remote ones) and make them feel connected to the team by all possible means:

directly (at the stadium during the game) and indirectly (by acting through fan Clubs and their websites). For example, FC Dynamo Moscow tries to create opportunities for fans to come to Moscow or to attend away games. They have created an official Dynamo website (<http://www.fcdynamo.ru/media/dinamo-tv/>) which shows interviews with players and coaches, game highlights, how the team trains, etc. (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). This enables the Clubs to foster fan identification, fan loyalty and the consumption of team merchandise (Ross, 2006). In this vein, teams underline that their Clubs are much more than a brand and football is much more than a sport, it becomes a lifestyle: “By the nature of football, we are more than a brand because football reaches beyond the game itself; it is much more than sports, it becomes a lifestyle. That is why people buy and wear our merchandise outside of the stadium (jacket, shirt, tie, etc.)” (*Aston Villa*). “Werder Bremen is a brand for its fans, but not only a sports or football brand. Fans are ‘Lifelong green and white!’ as the slogan says. It is not like buying a Nike product that you change afterwards for another brand. Werder Bremen is a brand for life (‘from birth to death’ concept). We have products and actions for babies and every age group. Very early, we try to create a special bond with our fans, actual and potential ones” (*Werder Bremen*).

The team’s brand is for everyone. Teams offer different services and products to the whole range of supporters “from young fans to VIPs [...]. The blue and white colours are sacred among fans. Sport is a healthy way of life and we try to communicate this message to our fans. Football players are young, famous, wealthy, healthy and attractive, so it is definitely not a bad example to follow” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). Teams try to create a special bond with their fans by releasing products and actions for babies and fans of every age group (*Werder Bremen*). Thus, one team has designed a product line to celebrate their qualification for the UEFA Europa League

(*Athletic Bilbao*). Some Clubs have their own mobile service (with BelgaCom), a leisure line of clothing, a credit card, etc. (*Anderlecht*). Others extend their brand: “cola, beer, candies were introduced in supermarkets under the FCSB brand” (*Steaua Bucharest*). Steaua also plans to introduce bicycles for kids and a full range of school products (but the team runs the risk of over-extending its brand and as a result of diluting it). Thus, developing new products allows teams to keep sales afloat: “merchandising represents 25% of our budget; sponsorship – 50%; ticketing – 25%” (*Steaua Bucharest*).

As a means to promote the team’s brand, some of them undertake local actions: “we promote our matches in the Europa League in newspapers, radio and on our official web site” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). Others collaborate with celebrities who are also fans of the team (actors, singers, sportsmen, musicians, politicians, etc.) and show their support to the team when they come to the stadium or through the Clubs’ media (e.g. there are interviews with celebrities who support the Club in match day programmes and on the Club’s website). These celebrities are potential emotional anchors and at the origin of shrewd co-branding initiatives when done properly (Spry et al., 2011). “Since Dynamo has been traditionally related to a government structure (Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs), we can reach different government structures, their employees to support Dynamo, as well as students from schools and universities all over Moscow and Moscow Region” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). Teams also promote games through their sponsors, partners, campaigns in the mass media, etc.

Playing in the qualification round of the Europa League is also a powerful promotional tool for teams which makes them even more attractive to fans and partners. However, in order to strengthen their brand and also because of the sports aspect of playing in a prestigious competition, most of the teams wish that they would

be able to qualify for the Champions League. Most of them acknowledge that “the Champions League is higher class” (*Borussia Dortmund*) and the teams can leverage their brands because they play against the best teams and brands in the world. Consequently, the brand is nurtured when a team plays against the most successful Clubs and it is leveraged from the other team’s brand when participating in European matches. It is also a way to strengthen the brand which nurtures the team’s image and helps the teams go through harsh times and cycles of performance: “even when the team does not win we have a strong DNA and loyal fans” (*Celtic Glasgow*). These points were highlighted by both Mr. Giachino and Mr. Dewaele, whom we quoted in previous sections.

But for now, the most important thing for most of the teams interviewed is a positive result on the pitch which will strengthen their position on the international market and bring them some financial benefits (*Dinamo Zagreb*). Hence, their sports results is the key element to build a sports brand beyond their region (nationally or internationally) because “winning pushes the success of the brand, especially when it comes to public relations and general perception: when you win, you are present in the media, you benefit from a positive image in the media” (*Borussia Dortmund*) and “it is only with significant sports results that we can attract international fans and sponsors” (*Dinamo Zagreb*).

However, some teams admit that the strategies implemented in order to strengthen their brand through the Europa League are decided and centralized by UEFA (*Panathinaikos*). In fact, “everything is very centralized by UEFA” (*Werder Bremen*). All the events around the European competitions (the Champions and the Europa Leagues) are controlled by UEFA, according to our respondents who express some obvious frustration: “the objective seems to make sure that UEFA and its sponsors

have priority and exclusivity during these events” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). Nevertheless, as it was mentioned above, it is extremely important for the teams to participate in the UEFA Champions League or the Europa League on a regular basis in order to build a sports brand beyond their region (a national or even an international brand). The best strategy, according to one manager interviewed, is “a good performance on the pitch and qualification as far as possible in the European competitions” (*Dynamo Kiev*). Thus, teams follow the media strategy of UEFA, participate in friendly games abroad and in some other events organized by UEFA.

This being said, as Mr. William Gaillard, President of the Jury of the UEFA Research Grant Program underlines: “There is some kind of contradiction from European Clubs: on the one hand, they claim that they do everything to qualify for Europe, but on the other hand, if they do qualify only for the Europa League, they send their third team (a reserve team). Consequently, players, fans, TV networks and sponsors are less and less interested, and the competition suffers. It sounds like their secret desire is to take part in the Champions League and only the Champions League!” Thus this would reflect an all or nothing attitude from some European Clubs.

Undoubtedly, you need two persons to dance the tango and both European football teams and UEFA need to find a way to make the Europa League more attractive to play, support and follow.

➤ Emphasis on the Club’s history and heritage (16 teams).

The history of the Club is very important to explain the growth of its brand. Admittedly, sixteen teams attempt “to make the brand more modern providing the best service for the supporters, sponsors and partners, making sure that the team is

open to the fans and the media” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). However, it is vital to remember, respect and preserve the Club’s past: “its heritage, history, traditions and values regardless of the results” (*Athletic Bilbao*). That is why managers pay special attention to how they handle the brand, respecting the history of the Club, for instance with merchandising: “this coming year, we will introduce a third jersey for the European competition we are involved in. The jersey is white, based on the jersey of the 1950s” (*Malmö*).

Besides, teams cherish their roots, the Club’s veterans “that have made a huge impact on the Club’s history”, as they believe that their “past successes represent the foundations for future successes” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). Even though most of their success occurred in the past, teams are working hard to re-experience the glorious days (see also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Strategic management of the brand – Heritage: respect the team’s roots, its history, traditions and values”). Here, we refer once more to the concept of ‘storytelling’ which can strengthen the brand by successfully bridging the gap between the past and the future of the team’s brand (Hakala et al., 2011).

- Merchandising: targeting new markets to sale team merchandise. Development of merchandising techniques. Collaboration with equipment manufacturers (14 teams).

Fourteen teams try to reach out to diverse groups of fans. The key platform, here, is merchandising which also helps them become a lifestyle brand. For this purpose Clubs sign license agreements with different manufacturers to expand their brand from sports to lifestyle (*Malmö*), introduce new details in clothing lines (*Athletic Bilbao*) and manufacture different products that are not only related to sports.

More examples include: “we have our own mobile service (with BelgaCom), a leisure line of clothing, a credit card, etc. It seems that it has become a way of life to be associated with the Anderlecht brand” (*Anderlecht*). “There is merchandising development, both for adults and especially for kids. We need to do like Sony’s Playstation: when kids get accustomed to play at an early age, they will stick to it for a very long time” (relates to the concept of ‘from birth to death’). There is another attraction point: the Steaua World (with its museum in the Gencea Stadium, the fan credit card with Raiffeisen Bank, the soccer Academy [300 kids registered now], the Club magazine, the game day magazine, the mascot [launched on June 1, 2009, with over 500 kids; called Stelio]). Steaua tries to create a world in which the fans can experience the brand through different interfaces (touch points) and situations” (*Steaua Bucharest*). Furthermore, in order to build a sports brand beyond their region, “Steaua plans to open 22 points of sales in the country for merchandise sale. It is the first Club in Romania to introduce online ticket sales” (*Steaua Bucharest*). As a result of all these efforts, “more and more merchandise is worn by people today than ever before” (*IFK Göteborg*).

In order to build a sports brand in and beyond their region, on national and international levels, teams work closely with equipment manufacturers. For instance with Nike, making sure that the local sports stores carry their merchandise (*Celtic Glasgow*) or with Adidas (Olympique de Marseille has launched a new jersey, organizes ‘street actions’ and promotions in Adidas stores, including Paris where there are many OM’s fans). Olympique de Marseille intends to open more boutiques and notably one in Paris for the supporters from Ile-de-France and tourists. They also plan to develop their brand abroad, “by targeting the Middle East, Africa, Asia (China) and the American continent (Canada and the USA)”. Another team, Athletic

Bilbao, made their own clothing line, signing up a contract with Umbro International and currently maintaining their collection of sportswear and accessories.

Other teams prepare “question and answer sessions” with their fans, organize meetings with local supporters’ Clubs, do store visits and open training sessions, undertake civic visits and target high profile media appearances, etc. (*Celtic Glasgow*). Besides, in order to ensure coherence between the way the team sees its brand and what the fans perceive the brand to be, they study the evolution of sales, enhance the dialogue with their customers in the stores and try to respond to all their demands. In other words, teams stay in direct contact with their supporters: “we ask people who work in our shops what customers think about our products, our shops, etc.” (*Athletic Bilbao*).

Thus, as we can see, in developing merchandising techniques, teams try to reach out to diverse groups of supporters. They have product lines for each profile: baby, junior, adult men and women. Their references include gift, home, jewelry, school supplies, etc.: “Every fan, regardless of age or profile, can find a product in our stores” (*Athletic Bilbao*).

5.3.2 Provide a unique fan experience

- Focus on the atmosphere in the arena. Organization of targeted events, meetings, tours, match packages’ offers, promotion of the matches on TV and radio, in newspapers and on the Internet, etc. (19 teams).

All the team managers interviewed admit that it is important to create a special ambiance for the fans and, first of all, focus on the atmosphere in the arena by organizing special activities for each group of fans in every section of the stadium. An example is “a mascot for younger fans, face painting, balloons; hard-core fans teach

younger fans some songs, how to be passionate but also to be good fans (we have problems with hooligans in Sweden). For older fans, there are activities in a bar close to the stadium before the game” (*IFK Göteborg*). Besides, there is an anthem song on youtube, similar to ‘You’ll never walk alone’, uniting all fans, no matter their profile: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOuAI48tMVo&feature=related> (*IFK Göteborg*).

“Football reaches out to all segments of the society, from young to old” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). All nineteen teams underline that it is essential for the Club to strengthen the emotional bond with the fans via targeted events, meetings, tours, match packages’ offers, promotion of the matches in newspapers, radio, on TV and on the Internet, etc., because fans are “an integral part of the Club and create a unique ambiance in the stadium” (*Red Star Belgrade*). That is why “every member of the Club carries a huge commitment to build a relationship with the fans” (*Aston Villa*). It is important to involve the fans in the life of the Club and make them part of the Club’s history, leaving no one indifferent, as it was done, for instance, by *Olympique de Marseille*: the Club “triggers a passionate response from the fans” (*Olympique de Marseille*) who either love or hate them.

Let us have a look at some examples. Thus, in order to tighten the emotional bond with their fans (actual and potential ones), HSV tries “to get closer to the fans with Facebook, some public events in the northern part of Germany, we have the world’s biggest soccer school (10,000 kids each year), a kids’ Club, our own new TV channel will be released next season; we try to integrate different platforms in order to send a coherent message to our fans”. HSV brings people closer to the Club “thanks to stories, good memories, our players, and the overall Club’s involvement” (similar to a ‘storytelling approach’) (*HSV*).

Celtic Glasgow's fans were one of the first to do huddles before the beginning of each game, or during the game, in the 1990s (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzadQJhJSis>). This involves the fans and helps them connect with their team and the players; Celtic fans feel that they are part of the game (they become 'consumactors'). Celtic fans adopted the song 'Just can't get enough' which has become a theme song for them. The team used this to emphasize the passion of their fans and trigger a strong emotional response (encourage fans to renew their season tickets): "We listen to our fans and market the message accordingly" (*Celtic Glasgow*).

Dinamo Zagreb organizes events before every major match, where the players can socialize with the fans. They offer visits to their stadium for school and kindergarten kids and participate in many humanitarian actions (such as the 'Step in life' program for children in need, donations for the restoration of the Petrova's Hospital Maternity department in Zagreb, contributions for the cleaning of mines throughout Croatia, etc.).

In order to strengthen the emotional bond with their fans, Partizan Belgrade initiated a project 'Remember Day' which targets kids between 6 and 10 years old: "parents register their kids for going out on the field on official match day with the players. Twenty kids went out on the field and all of them got Adidas equipment as a gift" (*Partizan Belgrade*). Besides, the team organizes summer and winter camps for kids: "this year camps will be held in Serbia, Bosnia, Slovenia, but also the US and Sweden" (*Partizan Belgrade*).

Red Star Belgrade organizes regular meetings with their fans, makes a series of events to entertain them, creates a promotional video to engage the fans, to make them part of the experience ('consumactors' concept). They regularly work with different

target groups of fans, such as via the program called 'My first game': 30 kids were invited for their first game of their life at the stadium. The team relies on them to be their fans in the future (from 'birth to death' concept). They set up a membership structure in 2010 where fans make decisions: "socios have a say on what happens in the Club, they can even elect the President of the Club" (*Red Star Belgrade*). Red Star Belgrade makes their fans part of the experience (once more, the 'consumactors' concept). The average attendance at their game is 15,000 fans; there are 2,000 spectators on average in Serbia, according to the Red Star Belgrade manager interviewed.

As far as it is concerned, Ajax Amsterdam has more fans outside of the Netherlands than in Holland. These fans are reached by different media, such as the Internet (the Ajax website is in 5 languages). Ajax Amsterdam has just opened the 'Ajax Experience' complex (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sacqRFwgsYI>), a journey in the heart of Ajax. "It presents our philosophy, possibilities for young children, opportunities to sit in the locker room, in a small stadium in the centre of Amsterdam, create an emotional connection with our fans". They also reach their fans by organizing camps and clinics (training sessions for youth around the world); they even sell licenses for their academy (quality control is ensured, we are told), etc.; they "try to stay ahead of the curve" (*Ajax Amsterdam*). They pay special attention to the experience fans enjoy in the stadium, inviting sponsors during away matches to foster the bond and the business collaboration, etc. Ajax managers believe it is up to the team management to promote their brand.

In order to strengthen the emotional bond with their fans, Dynamo Kiev introduced the 'old' (original) logo, which the Club had during the Soviet times, a fan Club and also organized training sessions opened to the public.

Werder Bremen gives its fans the possibility to upload the application of the Club's anthem on their iPhone (in collaboration with a radio company, Radio Bremen, and another sponsor, the German car maker, Volkswagen).

Malmö keeps a close eye on families in order to foster new supporters in the future: "We offer special prices and have specific sections for families in the stadium. But otherwise, we are very open and are there for everyone who wants to be our fan" (*Malmö*).

Athletic Bilbao keeps in touch with its supporters via the Internet, answers all the e-mails and questions from the customers. They seem to favor proximity between the players and fans in order to strengthen the emotional bond that fans share with the team. In this regard, they introduce promotions involving the fans, like awards delivered by the players, the possibility to travel with the team, to participate in different activities with the Club, etc.

Benfica Lisbon has a loyalty programme for its members targeting especially the ones that have a closer relationship with the Club. They provide their members with the opportunity to participate "in experiences that cannot be bought": going on the field and calling the eagle (the symbol of the Club) to fly over the stadium and land in the center of the pitch (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsUNGE2D1BY&feature=related>). Besides the items we have already underlined about Benfica in previous sections, the Club makes promotions that enable their fans to win international football trips to follow the team. They have created a travel agency, Benfica Viagens, and they benefit from international fan Clubs.

Panathinaikos builds and maintains a unique relationship with their fans, creates a positive experience for them. "The main campaign for the season ticket renewal is

‘Eternally Faithful’: no matter the result, our fans are loyal fans of the Club for all their life. They remain true to the ‘Shamrock’. The team organizes some events for the fans: “every match day, one fan is chosen to go on the field, be taken picture of with a player, giving him the chance to be next to the team, to enjoy a positive emotional experience, etc.” Besides, they have launched the official credit card of the team: Panathinaikos FC Visa. Members collect points and at different levels (called clover points), fans can receive some gifts (<http://www.piraeusbank.gr/ecPage.asp?id=245180&nt=96&lang=2>).

Aston Villa has held research groups recently with season ticket holders who felt like they were taken for granted, not taken care of. The Club organizes contests among season ticket holders (e.g., one person was taken to Hong Kong on a special trip last summer), they give them a free access to AVTV (online TV station of the Club), a visit to some training sessions or to the pitch before the game, etc.: “We have a strong focus on season ticket holders now”.

FC Dynamo Moscow is also quite active to attract new supporters and families to the stadium: they say that they have a modern understanding of a sporting event by offering an entertainment at the stadium which families can enjoy during their free time. Examples are the Moscow Day activities, the loyalty program and the social events for kids we have described earlier. Furthermore, they want to create a special event for big games (European or Russian) to make sure that fans come, learn something new about the Club, spend quality time and buy Club services or products at the gift shop.

Moreover, as it was mentioned above, every member of the Club carries a huge commitment to build a relationship with the fans. Teams realize that they need to behave according to their values, “from top to bottom and communicate them. [...]

That is why it is important to communicate, to listen and take the feedback back to the Board to improve the experience for the fans by taking concrete actions afterwards” (*Aston Villa*). For this purpose each team builds its strong communication plan to bring their fans to the team and make them part of the Club. They keep in touch with fans regularly because “when you communicate well, you engage the fans and they come to you” (*Anderlecht*). That way they get feedback from the fans, supporters, sponsors and everybody who wants to be a part of the team’s brand; in a word, they stay in touch with their stakeholders, they value their opinion. Indeed, a brand needs to evolve while preserving its coherence, and stakeholders are a good starting point as it usually challenges the brand in a constructive way (Kapferer, 2007).

5.3.3 Improve and sustain on-field performance

- Willingness to improve the performance on the field that would help increase revenues, build and leverage the team’s brand (19 teams).

Nineteen teams stress that “the performance on the field is crucial” (*Malmö*) as it increases the popularity of the Club among fans: the better they perform, the more often they win, the more popular they become. The performance on the field is also important “to gain momentum and create some synergies with the marketing actions that are initiated by the team” (*IFK Göteborg*). Furthermore, if teams perform well, that can change their financial situation radically as it might give the Clubs a significant raise in revenues: “we will use it to get better regionally and nationally. [...] More revenues will help us develop the team and the brand beyond our region. [...] We are good enough nationally, but we need to be stronger to get to the next level” (*Malmö*). Moreover, a good performance on the pitch and qualification as far as possible through the European competitions is seen as a way to strengthen the teams’

brand. (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Develop and manage the brand – Strengthen, promote, modernize the brand by developing brand awareness and building brand loyalty towards the Club”).

5.3.4 Internationalize your team’s brand

- Making the team visible internationally as “an international competition provides international recognition and prestige to the team” (16 teams).

While building and strengthening the Club’s brand, a due attention should be paid to the process of internationalization; that is making the team visible internationally as “an international competition provides international recognition and prestige to the team” (*HSV*) (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Internationalization”). There are different ways to internationalize, such as taking part in some events organized by UEFA, participating in exhibition or friendly games abroad, making tours abroad and setting up training camps and football academies, grassroots projects where they can connect with their fans and fan communities, etc. But the most effective way to internationalize the team’s brand, according to the managers interviewed, is an international performance which represents an international recognition and platform for the teams (*Ajax Amsterdam, Borussia Dortmund, and others*): “we are playing matches that are seen elsewhere, across other continents; it is an important way to be visible internationally. However, it is not only participating that matters but doing it well” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). Performing at the international level is vital for the teams as it provides a chance “to play with the best teams in Europe, and with our participation and a positive result we can increase our Clubs market value. And of course, with a European result we can attract more fans and sponsors, both local and international ones” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). Apart from that, “the international dimension of the

competition is good for the image of the Club and the self-esteem of its members (stakeholders)” (*HSV*). That is why it is the responsibility of each Club to build international policies in order to reinforce their presence in target countries, which is also important for the Club’s image and marketing. And at the same time, this international strategy helps “implement into life the commercial opportunities which appear in foreign markets” (*Olympique de Marseille*).

Another initiative used by the teams in order to build a sports brand beyond their region, develop their brand awareness and build brand loyalty towards the Club, is grassroots projects in foreign countries. For example, Celtic Glasgow has a project in India where they “opened a football academy in order to get young children to develop their skills and grow our brand in this market” (‘from birth to death’ concept). Celtic Glasgow also has soccer camps with affiliated Clubs in Boston and Philadelphia. Panathinaikos has four football academies abroad, in St. Louis (the USA), Australia, Serbia, and Cyprus: Greek immigrants are able to connect with the team via these academies.

A special attention is also paid to maintaining tight relations with the teams’ fan Clubs abroad, for example, “Anderlecht has 76 fan Clubs, of which four are abroad (one in France, one in Poland, one in Texas, USA, and one in Montreal, Canada)” (*Anderlecht*). Aston Villa has 160 fan Clubs internationally and supports them. Together with this, every year some teams “have tours in different parts of the world where they can connect with their fans (e.g. ‘Celtic Diaspora’) and reach potential new fans (North America, Australia, etc.)” (*Celtic Glasgow*).

Aston Villa organizes games abroad: in Hong Kong, in July 2011, for the Barclays Trophy. The Club wants to capitalize on its jersey sponsor to expand further in Asia, such as in Malaysia and Singapore; and in Ireland because “there is a huge Irish

community in Birmingham, big Aston Villa fan Clubs in Dublin and Irish players on the team squad”.

Steaua Bucharest intends to internationalize its brand in Italy, Spain, Germany, France and Ireland where there are strong Romanian communities. The next step is entering and developing the United States market. Steaua plans to play some games in the USA within two years.

Red Star Belgrade organizes exhibition games in the Balkans and in Russia. Besides, the Serbian team has launched a website in Russian, but also in English, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek and German in order to connect with its worldwide fans and create a virtual proximity. Video material and matches are provided on the Internet for those fans who cannot see the games live or on TV (http://translate.googleusercontent.com/translate_c?client=tmpg&hl=en&langpair=sr%7Cen&rurl=translate.google.com&u=http://redstarbelgrade.info/&usg=ALkJrhi5Lt3DL5Vfd0IFSo4pU01zfEEB-w).

Borussia Dortmund targets specific countries, which arises from the set of players in their team: Polish and Japanese players (Piszczek, Kagawa). They played some international exhibition games in Poland; but in Japan the games were cancelled because of the nuclear plant accident in Fukushima.

Looking to build a sports brand beyond their region, HSV organized a winter training camp in Dubai; they play some friendly games abroad, and “there are also some appearances on TV of the star players of the team”. However, HSV has not enough success to expand internationally on their own right now. They need the support from the National League to get a better visibility (see also Table 2, “Hurdles: Lack of support from the National League”). So, they do not have a concrete plan to internationalize but rather a concept which aims at “getting in some markets where we

have some kind of relationship via a player (a South Korean player on the roster attracted a new sponsor from South Korea to the team). We try to act together with the player and the sponsor to penetrate these respective markets (South Korea, Denmark); there is no finished concept yet, it is a working process” (*HSV*). Hence, players and sponsors can act as emotional anchors for a team’s entry into a foreign market, and the help of their respective League is definitely an asset.

In order to attract an international attention to their Club, some participate in special projects and co-branding initiatives with other sports, such as, for example, the Superleague Formula. This is an open wheel single seated motor racing formula. The Superleague Formula introduced team sponsorship by association with football Clubs; Anderlecht is one of them.

To make a long story short, teams do their best to be present in as many countries as possible, trying to reach out to their fan Clubs and communities across Europe and beyond, as they are the most obvious potential supporters (ambassadors) of the Clubs.

5.3.5 Conduct market research

- The implementation of market research: annual surveys, game surveys, etc., conducted on line, face to face or over the phone, etc. (14 teams).

Most of the teams conduct market research regularly, even though some teams confess that “there is not a lot of money left for research!” (*Steaua Bucharest*) (see also Table 2, “Hurdles: Financial constraints faced by the team – Little market research due to the limited resources”). Thus, Celtic Glasgow just conveys messages that are true to the brand (coherence). Borussia Dortmund initiated a few actions for the German Championship: they introduced some guerrilla marketing actions, and they also make sure that fans see them as they see themselves. But according to the

Borussia Dortmund's manager, "we wouldn't change our strategy, our behaviour if the results were not as we wished. The power of the brand comes from the brand itself and we have a strong brand" (*Borussia Dortmund*).

Most of the Club managers interviewed organize regular market research once or twice a year (qualitative and quantitative research) "over the phone and face to face" (*Benfica Lisbon*), among season ticket holders and the general public. They use the results in their communication and tactical decisions (*Panathinaikos*) (See also Table 1, "Catalyzing factors: Market research"). They have questions on "the brand attributes and the attitude of the fans towards the Club, how sympathetic the Club is to people, do they know their sponsors, their actions, etc." (*HSV*). Some conduct annual marketing researches on people who attend games and those who watch games on TV. Others do regular research during every match day and before the season (they conduct e-mail and face-to-face interviews, focus groups, meetings with stakeholders, etc.). Moreover, they conduct regular studies on the evolution of sales, enhance dialogue with customers in stores and try to respond to all the demands: "We are in direct contact with our customers—supporters; we ask people who work in our shops what customers think about our products, our shops, etc." (*Athletic Bilbao*).

Sometimes teams are supported by the national Football Association. Thus, in Russia, for instance, in order to support the Clubs a regular research is also conducted by the Russian Football Union on attendance, the place of football in society, etc. Moreover the team itself tries to collect data from the fans on everything they do and offer: ticket prices, comfort at the stadium, catering, the way tickets are sold, what fans like, what they do not like, etc. This is done in order to "improve what we offer to our fans (both tangible and intangible dimensions of our offering) and increase our

fan data base and attendance from one year to the other” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). So, teams try to align their practices with the demands of the fans (*Ajax Amsterdam*).

Thus, as we can see it, an effective way to make tight relations with the fans, sponsors, partners, etc., is to communicate with the team stakeholders worldwide “in an innovative way on digital social media (Facebook, Twitter), and also by e-mail, direct messaging, on TV, on the Internet in different languages (e.g. Anderlecht offers four languages on the team’s website: French, Dutch, English and Spanish). Besides, teams undertake different types of research: annual surveys, game surveys, online surveys, face to face or over the phone, etc. “Surveys are done in depth which provides very accurate information” (*Malmö*). But once you gather the data, the value comes from how you use it in order to make decisions that will improve the overall organization, in general, and the team’s brand, in particular (Mullin et al., 2007).

5.3.6 Broaden the media coverage

- Support from TV stations, development of a powerful network of media coverage (cable, satellite, etc.) and work with different types of media (13 teams).

In order to grow their brand nationally and internationally, teams use their own TV stations to broadcast games in other countries and continents (e.g. Africa, Asia, etc.; *Aston Villa*). Moreover, judging by the official sites of the teams studied, most of them have their own TV station which offers different packages to viewers. For example, Celtic TV includes live video of every Celtic match, full match replays, the huddle on line (available at: <http://www.celticfc.tv/>). Athletic Bilbao TV includes video of matches, conferences with players, coaches, etc. (available at: <http://www.athletic-club.net/web/main.asp?a=6&b=1&c=0&d=0&idi=2>).

Teams also get support from foreign TV stations which arrange some interviews with the players and broadcast some background information about the Clubs and their city of origin and their Club, and arrange some interviews with the players: as one manager underlined it, “by promoting Hamburg we promote HSV, and vice versa” (*HSV*).

As a means to strengthen their brand and to build a sports brand beyond their region, teams are working with new media platforms, which are part of mainstream marketing now and have become an important tool that helps Clubs understand how the fans perceive their brand. Examples include Facebook and Twitter. Teams inform their fans around the world of their developments and products (*Athletic Bilbao*). Besides, teams keep in touch with their fans via their website (e.g. Ajax Amsterdam’s website is in 5 languages) and cell phones (*Steaua Bucharest*). Olympique de Marseille has also developed a very powerful network of media coverage by cable (e.g. for the region of Marseilles) and satellite (4 million subscribers in France), they have a website with 16 million visitors a year (6th place for football Clubs in Europe, according to them). They plan on creating a community site in order to interact with their fans on every subject under the sun, not only official news but also rumours. In this regard, matches of the Champions League and those of the French championship broadcasted abroad are a powerful potential tool for the international growth of the Club (but not as powerful as the Europa League, according to them). Thus, the support from TV stations and the development of a powerful network of media coverage help teams to be known and appreciated by local and foreign viewers.

5.3.7 Invest in youth development

- Ability to develop young players through the Clubs' football academies, soccer camps, etc.; making stars of almost unknown players (13 teams).

Among the teams interviewed, there are thirteen which pay special attention to the development of young players from the regions where they come from, bringing up and making stars of young players through their football academies (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Youth development”). For example, Olympique de Marseille prides itself in making stars out of almost unknown players in a short period of time (Papin, Nasri, Ribéry, Mandanda, Valbuena, etc.) thanks to their youth development focus and the unique media coverage the team receives. Another case in point is Benfica Lisbon which has won with a handful of Portuguese players on their squad in the past; they developed very good Portuguese players that have entered into the Portuguese football Hall of Fame, such as Eusebio, Bento, Chalana, Diamantino, Simões, Simão, Humberto Coelho, Coluna, Jose Aguas, José Augusto, Costa Pereira, Joao Pinto, Rui Costa, etc. In Greece, Panathinaikos is contributing to the development of players for their team with a “grassroots program” via youth academies in Greece and abroad, “which is a major difference with other teams in Greece”. IFK Göteborg also has a grassroots plan, named “the IFK model”: they develop young players from their region through their football academy, in which they invest a significant amount of resources every year.

Hence, on the one hand, teams “give a chance to young players to perform in the first division” (*Ajax Amsterdam*); on the other hand, their “youth development focus” is a chance for these Clubs to survive as they cannot compete financially with the top European Football Clubs or afford acquiring expensive foreign players. In this regard, for example, Ajax Amsterdam has a football philosophy of developing young players

and giving them the opportunity to be promoted to the first division team. These youths are part of the selection policy of the team, which is quite unique in the Netherlands and in Europe: “It is the youth development focus that sets us apart from other Dutch and European Clubs. It is also a way for us to survive as we cannot compete at the financial level with other Clubs. We need to form young players for our team as we cannot buy expensive players like some teams do in England, France, Spain, Italy or Germany” (*Ajax Amsterdam*) (See also Table 2, “Hurdles: Financial constraints”).

5.3.8 Anchor the team in its region

- Focus on the community/region. Participation in charities, giving back to the community, being socially responsible, etc. (13 teams).

Thirteen team managers interviewed confess that they prefer to focus on their region first as “it is easier to gain regional strength and support first. It is also a better use of our resources; we try to become stronger regionally before spreading our wings too far” (*Malmö*). At the same time, a regional focus helps create an image of being “the people’s Club” (*IFK Göteborg*). There is one team which consists only of players who were born in that respective region: “we are the only team in the world whose players are born in our region” (*Athletic Bilbao*). However, there is another reason why they focus mostly (only) on their region: for many of them, it is an everyday battle for resources to build a sports brand beyond their region. That is why teams put their resources where they can get a good return on their investments (*IFK Göteborg*).

According to the team managers interviewed, it is vital for the Club to maintain close relations with the community where they come from and remember that the football Club is much more than just a brand, it is a family: “‘Loyalty beyond reason’

would be the best way to describe this approach” (*Aston Villa*). Thus, according to the manager interviewed, Aston Villa feels like a Club that is an integral part of the community by going towards the people who live in the community: they employ coaches and a ‘fan squad’ that go out into the community. For example, the Birmingham Muslim community starts to associate itself with the team and joins the Aston Villa family.

Other teams help young people, especially those from a difficult social background (*Borussia Dortmund, Dinamo Zagreb and others*): “we have initiated a lot of projects that help people regionally (help young people develop, make them the best they can be, help youngsters who come from challenging economic backgrounds, etc.” [*Borussia Dortmund*]); “We participated in many humanitarian actions such as ‘Step in life’ (a program for orphan kids who want to continue their college education); we donated money for the restoration of the Petrova’s hospital Maternity department in Zagreb, for the cleaning of mines throughout Croatia and many more. All the actions will be named and described on our web site” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). All these provide the Clubs with a positive brand association in the eyes of their communities. (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Regional anchor”).

- Collaboration with universities in the region, involving students in the research, etc. (4 teams).

In order to build a sports brand beyond their region (a national or even an international brand), some teams collaborate with universities in their regions to better understand the social and economic phenomena that their Clubs represent. They make presentation for students, involve students in their research, participate in academic research projects, etc. Some involve anthropologists and sociologists: “it will then be

possible to refocus the commercial discourse because we will be able to better understand what the team really means to people” (*Olympique de Marseille*).

5.3.9 Manage the players’ roster strategically

- Acquisition of players from specific countries that are true and faithful to the brand”. Targeting new markets via foreign players, sponsors, etc. (11 teams).

Together with bringing up young players for their team, eleven teams also give preference to recruiting international players who have character and identity (*Olympique de Marseille*); players who are true and faithful to the brand and “contribute to the Club’s popularity in the countries where the players come from, especially in the countries that have no international successful football Clubs, such as Kosovo, the birth country of our player Beqiraj” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). Signing foreign players helps the teams get in some markets where they have some kind of relationship via a player. That is, they capitalize on foreign players in their home markets (*Anderlecht*) and act together with the player and the sponsor to penetrate these respective markets (South Korea, Japan, Denmark, Poland, etc.) (*Borussia Dortmund and others*). In this regard, the player acts as an emotional anchor and the sponsor as a commercial ‘legitimiser’ of the Club’s foreign market entry (Hollensen, 2011).

And since most of the teams interviewed do not have “the mega budget of Real, Barça, Chelsea, Manchester United and others” (*Benfica Lisbon*), their strategy consists in developing “a circle of interests” which means “having a strong and experienced back-bone of players who stay with the Club for at least 5 to 6 years. [...] We buy some potentially interesting 19 and 20 year old players, mostly from South America, but also Portuguese who are then raised and brought up in our academy.

[...] By increasing their potential we make at least 30M€ sales per year in players rights. This money basically helps us balance the books and gives us enough leverage to buy other interesting and potential players to do the same the following season” (*Benfica Lisbon*). Basically, this is a circle of interests that teams must develop every year.

For a detailed presentation of the strategies and actions, team by team, the reader is invited to read the Table in Appendix 4.

5.4 RQ4: What actions could UEFA initiate to support the development of these former successful European football team brands in the Europa League?

There are two major sets of issues that team managers see with the Europa League: i) The Europa League lacks prestige: it is seen as the second division of Europe, according to them; it should be more special to play in the Europa League; ii) The gap between the Europa and the Champions League is too big.

In this regard, in December 2011, we conducted six focus groups in Germany, as we mentioned in the Methodology section. From these focus groups, the following key points emerged. On the one hand, the Europa League is seen as i) “open to many teams” (inclusive), ii) it provides “a chance for smaller Clubs to get international attention”, and iii) it even brings some kind of “prestige to little teams”. On the other hand, the Europa League is considered as i) “small”, ii) “in the shadow of the Champions League”, iii) with “little awareness”, iv) the “second best”, v) the “second choice”, vi) the “losers’ League”, vii) the competition comprised of “teams that nobody knows”, viii) it is “only for football fanatics”, ix) it is an “obscure competition”, x) it “doesn’t have a top of mind positioning”, xi) it is “interesting (for the fans) as long as there is a national representative in the competition”, and xii) it

has a “lower financial potential for participating Clubs”. These comments reinforce the need to find some concrete actions for the Europa league.

Truly, based on our analysis, we can articulate seven recommendations for UEFA in order to support the development of the former successful European football team brands via the Europa League. These are: i) Provide marketing expertise/support; ii) Level the playing field; iii) Improve the level of competition, the calibre of play; iv) Challenge its broadcasting strategy; v) Stimulate branding initiatives with the Clubs; vi) Enhance communications; and vii) Accelerate its internationalization (Table 4). None of these recommendations is supported by the majority of the respondents. However, we see them as potential guidelines for our reflection.

Hence, the following part of the report focuses on the actions that UEFA could initiate to support the development of the former successful European football team brands in the Europa League (from the point of view of the teams’ managers interviewed). Please note that in order to avoid too many repetitions with what has been said before, quotes have been limited in this section and in 5.5 (RQ5).

5.4.1 Provide marketing expertise/support

- UEFA should help all of the competitors improve the quality of their brand (6 teams).

In order to help teams better capitalize on the Europa League for their branding strategy, it is recommended that UEFA “helps all of the competitors improve the quality of their own brand by strengthening the level of organization, marketing and TV production of the Europa League” (*Dinamo Zagreb*).

- UEFA could create the opportunity to meet with specialists from UEFA, FIFA and major European Clubs (1 team).

It is mentioned that “UEFA could create the opportunity for the teams to meet with the specialists from UEFA, FIFA and big European Clubs on a regular basis during sports forums and conferences in order to help managers from smaller teams learn from their experience” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*) in order to improve their brand, in particular, and their organization, generally speaking.

- “UEFA could give a Club an introduction before each game. At the final of the Europa League, UEFA could make a short presentation of all the Clubs having participated in the entire competition” (1 team).

Most of the teams seem to depend a lot on the decisions of UEFA, its support and expertise: “UEFA is very organized, we are learning a lot, we are very fond of the organization (logistics) provided by UEFA” (*Panathinaikos*). But there is always room for improvement. That is why, in order to help teams better capitalize on the Europa League, “UEFA could give the Clubs a short introduction before each game, like at Eurovision. Besides, at the final of the Europa League, UEFA could make a short presentation of all the Clubs having participated at the whole competition (and not only the biggest teams)” (*Anderlecht*).

5.4.2 Level the playing field

- UEFA should provide more equal opportunities to all teams across Europe (5 teams).

In order to compete internationally, the main obstacles right now for the smaller European football Clubs in comparison with the Top Four or Five (whether you

include France or not in the mix) are the differences in revenues and investments in the Clubs: “the gap in revenues is so huge!” (*Malmö*); “lower teams do not have the TV revenues the Top 5 Leagues in Europe have (England, Italy, Spain, Germany and France)” (*Celtic Glasgow*).

Furthermore, there is a lack of visibility: “Clubs from small countries do not get the same exposure as Clubs from England, Spain or Italy and they do not have their financial means either” (*Panathinaikos*). As a result, some Clubs cannot compete at the financial level with others (See also Table 2, “Hurdles: Financial inequalities between the teams”). That is why some managers recommend that UEFA provides all teams across Europe with equal opportunities.

5.4.3 Improve the level of competition, the calibre of play

- UEFA should “find a way to reduce the gap between the Champions League and the Europa League” (5 teams).

“Everybody dreams to participate in the Champions League” (*Steaua Bucharest*). But UEFA should make it more special for the teams to participate in the Europa League. That is why, from the point of view of five teams interviewed, it is absolutely necessary for UEFA to “find a way to reduce the gap between the Champions League and the Europa League” (*Celtic Glasgow*) in terms of the quality of the competition and the revenues generated. The following items might give some directions in order to achieve this goal.

- UEFA should rethink the system and make sure that the level of soccer improves in the Europa League (3 teams).

It is recommended that UEFA rethinks the system and makes sure that the level of soccer improves in the Europa League. This point relates to what we discussed before: in order for the Europa League to grow as a competition of its own, it is essential that it provides some kind of relevance as a sporting and commercial brand.

- UEFA should restrict the number of teams in the Europa League (3 teams).

According to three managers interviewed, “the Europa League is very (too) crowded [...] The competition loses its rarity and exclusivity, and thus, its prestige” (*HSV*). “There are too many teams with no names, no big names in the Europa League. The former UEFA Cup was much better than the actual Europa League, even though it did not change much since then” (*Borussia Dortmund*). (See also Table 2, “Hurdles: Lack of the prestige of the Europa League – Over crowdedness of the Europa League”). In line with these comments, Mr. Giachino, Europa League Competition Manager replies: “Qualitatively speaking, the level of the UEFA Cup in the 1980s and 1990s was comparable to what we have now in the Champions League. There is a little bit of nostalgia (among team managers), but we must compare what is comparable! Today, it is very difficult that the Champions League eludes teams from the biggest football association (England, Italy, Germany and Spain)”.

Some Clubs believe that “the Europa League does not provide as many benefits because there are a lot of teams involved in the competition, teams we sometimes do not know, even a lot of teams from Romania (four teams in 2011-12)” (*Steaua Bucharest*). As a result, lack of prestige, visibility and awareness seem problematic for the Europa League and for teams participating in the competition. That is why

there is a suggestion, from three managers, to restrict the number of teams taking part in the Europa League. These points were also raised during the focus groups we conducted in Germany in December 2011, as we underlined a few pages before.

5.4.4 Challenge its broadcasting strategy

- “The long term objective of UEFA should be the branding of the Europa League, not TV rights” (3 teams).

It is recommended that UEFA does not focus so much on TV rights but on branding of the Europa League, making it a strong competition that would be attractive for the participating teams. We shall come back to this point in the Recommendations section.

- “TV rights should not be centralized” (2 teams).

Some teams stress that “TV rights should not be centralized (by UEFA)” (*Steaua Bucharest*), as that would give more autonomy and broaden the margin of manoeuvre of the Clubs participating in the Europa League.

- UEFA should look more at the audience (2 teams).

It is recommended that UEFA pays more attention to the audience (e.g. “games should be available to most people, respecting the nature of football which could be the most uniting thing” [*IFK Göteborg*]) and specific “habits” of the local supporters (e.g. earlier kick-off time for the European competition matches) (*Dynamo Kiev*). As they say, “we should not get too greedy, excluding people. We should include people” (*IFK Göteborg*). In relation with the kick-off time, according to the information we gathered from UEFA, the home team sets the kick-off time for all matches of the

qualifying phase and the play-offs of the Europa League; then, games start at either 19:00 or 21:05 CET until the round of sixteen; at 21:05 CET starting with the quarter-finals; and the Europa League Final kicks off at 20.45 CET (from Mr. Antonio Giachino and the document on the Regulations of the UEFA Europa League 2011-12).

5.4.5 Stimulate branding initiatives with the Clubs

- UEFA could allow teams to use the logo of UEFA or/and UEFA competitions
(3 teams).

Nowadays, merchandising seems to be controlled by UEFA when teams want to use the logo of the European competitions. “We understand but there must not be a conflict between sponsors (those of the team and those of UEFA)” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). In order to help teams better capitalize on the Europa League for their branding strategy, team managers suggest that UEFA grants them “the right to use the logo of the League for official merchandise according to the standards of the local market” (*Partizan Belgrade*). Besides, UEFA could enable the association of the team’s brand with UEFA: allowing the team to develop products with the Europa League logo, for instance (*Athletic Bilbao*). Thus, teams want to be allowed to use the logo of UEFA and/or UEFA’s competitions. It appears that beyond the centralization of UEFA football activities, there is a lack of clarity on what teams can do and cannot do, especially in terms of merchandising.

- UEFA could give teams the possibility to advertise their own sponsors to generate extra income during the group stage (2 teams).

There seems to be a strong centralized marketing from UEFA: “Who markets what is a big (financial) issue in European competitions for teams and their sponsors that are overtaken by UEFA’s centralization. The events around the European competitions (the Champions and the Europa Leagues) are controlled by UEFA. The objective seems to make sure that UEFA and its sponsors have priority and exclusivity during these events. [...] It is a key issue” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). Thus, as it follows from the interviews, it would be beneficial if teams had a possibility to advertise their own sponsors to generate extra income during the group stage (*Panathinaikos*) as “there must not be a conflict between sponsors (those of the team and those of UEFA)” (*Ajax Amsterdam*). (See also Table 2, “Hurdles: Tight control by UEFA – Lack of flexibility: centralized marketing from UEFA for the Champions League and partly for the Europa League”).

Admittedly, one issue that could then arise is how to preserve the coherence of the overall marketing strategy of the Europa League, and especially the promotional aspect of it if everything starts being customized by the teams themselves. But we believe that there could be some middle ground reached in this area and in others. The Europa League and the participating teams need each other: however, it seems that we still have to figure out the optimal ‘win-win’ situation.

- For the UEFA finals there could be some co-branding initiatives with other sports (1 team).

Another idea that emerged is that for the UEFA finals, there could be some co-branding initiatives with other sports, such as, e.g. Formula 1, athletics, etc.

(*Anderlecht*). This could help leverage the final game, especially in the case of the Europa League Final which could then become an event of a stronger magnitude than it is today. Right now, during the discussions we had with team managers and our focus groups, several respondents bluntly admitted that they neither follow the Europa League final nor do they know which teams are playing. This is an alarming indifference that we notice in North America for the NFL Pro Bowl, the equivalent of the All Star Game, which precedes by a week the Super Bowl game. To the point that the NFL is seriously considering cancelling the Pro Bowl game. We do not believe that UEFA should do the same with the Europa League, but we sense urgency.

5.4.6 Enhance communications

- UEFA should increase investments in digital media experience and integrated marketing communications (IMC) (2 teams).

Communication is key to success. In order to strengthen the brand through the Europa League, teams communicate specifically on European games: “It is important to relay the information about Anderlecht so that people then relay that information about our Club and promote it on their own” (*Anderlecht*). Furthermore, UEFA could increase its investments in digital media experience and integrated marketing communications (IMC) (*Anderlecht*) to sustain the efforts made by the Clubs to promote their participation in the Europa League.

- To help teams better capitalize on the Europa League, UEFA should provide “a more trans-European approach in communication with the Clubs.” (1 team).

In order to help teams better capitalize on the Europa or the Champions League, UEFA should provide “a more trans-European approach in communication with the

Clubs, integrate more input from the Clubs to show their contribution and strength in marketing and event organization” (*Anderlecht*). Teams want to feel involved and valued. Team managers expressed in different ways during our interviews that they need a commitment from UEFA towards them, as they feel neglected to the profit of the biggest and most successful Clubs, especially the ones playing the late stages of the Champions League.

5.4.7 Accelerate its internationalization

- UEFA could establish some links with other football associations, such as in North America and South East Asia (2 teams).

It might be very useful if UEFA could establish some links with other football associations, such as in North America and South East Asia to broaden their horizon; otherwise it misses some opportunities to become global, according to some of our respondents.

These comments highlight a willingness to make the partnership between UEFA and European Clubs a successful relationship. There seems to be a lack of communication or understanding (or both), in terms of expectations and benefits that teams have towards UEFA. With increasing discrepancies emerging between the ‘big Clubs’ and the ‘small Clubs’ of Europe, the latter clearly feel more vulnerable. And they seem to wish for the establishment of a system that would get their ‘small Clubs’ a chance to survive and even prosper in today’s economic model of European football.

The Europa League might definitely be a platform to do so but one thing is for sure: very few managers of the teams we interviewed believe it can be done with the actual format of the competition. In fact, it clearly appears that managers believe that

taking part in the Europa League might crystallize the fracture between the ‘haves’ and the ‘haves not’ of European football. To use an analogy, it is as if the ‘big Clubs’ get to eat the warm apple pie and the ‘small Clubs’ are left with the crumbs.

Indeed, beyond the critics made by managers on the lack of prestige of the Europa League, we decipher an alarm signal that might underline some more structural issues that European football is facing nowadays. Finding the right value proposition for the Europa League could be a major part of the equation for ‘smaller Clubs’ or generally speaking, teams that had their glory days in the past which are now starting to feel left out in the actual sports business model that emerges. And in this regard, we especially refer to the German teams of our sample (Borussia Dortmund, Hamburger SV, Werder Bremen) but also to teams such as Benfica Lisbon and Olympique de Marseille.

In other words, the rebranding of the Europa League could be followed by an in-depth reflection on how the Europa League can make ‘smaller Clubs’ and former successful European teams truly part of a more balanced European football ecosystem. And with the ‘Economic Fair-Play’ coming into effect, this might be the right timing to do so. But as long as the Europa League is perceived as the second-tier of European competitions, it appears that its rebranding will only be seen as cosmetics by team managers. We will come back on this discussion when we address our recommendations in the Conclusions section.

For a detailed presentation of the actions that UEFA might initiate, team by team, the reader is invited to the Table which is inserted in Appendix 5.

5.5 RQ5: What lessons could other European teams, in a similar position, learn from the former successful European teams studied?

There are ten lessons that we can extract from our analysis: i) Develop a culture of excellence; ii) Be authentic, demonstrate integrity; iii) Create a unique fan experience; iv) Build and manage your brand; v) Pursue international expansion; vi) Implement market research; vii) Position yourself as a regional anchor; viii) Focus on players' development; ix) Work on communication and new media; and x) Become business savvy. With the exception of the last item, all of them receive support from a majority of respondents (Table 5).

The following part of the report focuses on the lessons that could be learnt by other European teams, which are in a similar position, from the former successful European teams studied. Admittedly, these recommendations are idiosyncratic but they provide some interesting guidelines.

5.5.1 Develop a culture of excellence through sports

- Be passionate, ambitious with a great attitude towards the game and strive to achieve high results, as “winning pushes the success of the brand” (19 teams).

From the point of view of all nineteen teams, any Club in general and any player in particular should be ambitious and passionate on the pitch, have a great attitude towards the game and strive to achieve high results and win. Winning is the number one priority, “the core value of the brand” (*Anderlecht*) as it “pushes the success of the brand” (*Borussia Dortmund*) and “makes private partners and fans join the Club because they want to be associated with a winner” (*IFK Göteborg*). Winning brings a lot of advantages: “when you win, you are present in the media, you benefit from a positive image in the media” (*Borussia Dortmund*).

Moreover, “the success on the pitch positively influences the sales” (*Athletic Bilbao*), “nourishes the team and increases the number of fans” (*Olympique de Marseille*). “It is only with significant sports results that the team can attract international fans and sponsors” and build the sports brand beyond its region (*Dinamo Zagreb*). (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Ambition/Competitiveness – Self-confidence and feeling of national pride, desire to win”). These comments underline the importance of the core product in building a team’s brand. Winning might not be enough, but it is seen by all managers interviewed as a necessary condition in building the brand’s foundations.

But together with this, five teams are highly self-assured and believe that fans love them independently of the result. According to these managers, the success factor is less important because these football Clubs seem to have an attraction power in themselves and “the love for the Club is not affected by the way the team is playing in a particular moment” (*Athletic Bilbao, Borussia Dortmund, Celtic Glasgow, Dinamo Zagreb, FC Dynamo Moscow*). This highlights the power of the brand, the ability that some teams have to transcend the performance on the pitch, and the strength of the brand equity that some Clubs enjoy, which we underlined earlier in the literature review (Ross, 2006).

- Focus on sports: “play beautiful soccer” and try to make every game unique.
Develop your own style of play (19 teams).

All the teams interviewed seem to advise first of all to focus on sports, the beauty of the game and the performance on the field. They also claim that each Club should work out its own unique style of play. These appear to be key factors for teams if they want to gain success on the pitch, become popular and beloved both nationally and

internationally (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Ambition/Competitiveness – Focus on sport: performance on the field and beauty of the game. “Every game is like a high school exam”).

5.5.2 Be authentic, demonstrate integrity

- Be genuine, open, transparent, respectful and authentic with fans and other stakeholders. Behave according to your values (19 teams).

The teams under analysis understand that it is essential for every member of the Club (managers and players) to be authentic as “authenticity is essential, you need to behave according to your values, from top to bottom” (*Aston Villa*). It is also vital to be genuine, open, transparent and respectful with the community, with private and public partners, and to be there for everyone who wants to be a Club’s fan. (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Authenticity/Integrity”).

- Communicate regularly with the supporters, staff, and partners. “Communicate one message”, as coherent communication is key to success (19 teams).

All teams insist that the members of the Club should follow one way: “this is to be coherent and communicate one message in public” (*Werder Bremen*). As it is common knowledge, communication is key to success in any relationship (Belch and Belch, 2011). Each member of the Club should take on the responsibility to communicate regularly with the fans, partners, sponsors, UEFA, the Leagues and other teams. It is a way to get feedback on a regular basis from the supporters, sponsors and everybody who wants to be a part of the team’s brand, namely the stakeholders. (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Authenticity/Integrity – Good

attitude and behaviour. Democratic ambiance within the Club. Regular communication with supporters, staff, partners, etc.”).

- Preserve a democratic atmosphere in the Club. Have a positive attitude. Create a special environment on and off the field (19 teams).

According to all nineteen teams interviewed, together with the desire to win, it is also very important to “have a good attitude and behaviour” (*Werder Bremen*). Teams admit the importance of creating a healthy team environment “on and off the field” (*Aston Villa*) and a democratic ambiance within the Club that helps them concentrate on the game and achieve better results. (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Authenticity/Integrity – Good attitude and behaviour. Democratic ambiance within the Club. Regular communication with supporters, staff, partners, etc.”).

- Display commitment and loyalty to the team and to the game. Be devoted on and off the field. Love your team, love what you do (17 teams).

A substantial majority of managers interviewed underline that loyalty, commitment and dedication of the players, staff and management, on and off the field, are essential in portraying the team as genuine and close to its community. The proximity between the Club and its fans enables the team to crystallize the emotional connection it shares with its fans and deepen the loyalty of the latter towards the former (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Authenticity/Intensity”).

- Display integrity and follow your principles. Respect your players. Hire responsible management (17 teams).

Most of the teams admit that it is important for every Club to display integrity in everything they are involved in as integrity is the inner sense of “wholeness” deriving from qualities such as honesty and consistency of character. As such, one may judge that Clubs “have integrity” to the extent that they act according to the values, beliefs and principles they claim to hold. Besides, they also underline the importance of hiring capable responsible management and treating the players and managers with respect, as the success of the Club depends greatly on the people working for it. (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Authenticity/Integrity”).

This is all the more important since we live in an era where ‘social consciousness’, ‘social responsibility’, ‘integrity’ and the likes are officially espoused by organizations but very few indeed follow them in reality. Fans, like any consumers, expect their team to be held accountable to deliver on these values in reality and not only in words.

5.5.3 Create a unique fan experience

- Deliver memorable events in and outside the stadium; involve fans as co-creators and ambassadors of the team brand (i.e. ‘consumactors’) (19 teams).

All nineteen teams underscore the importance of strengthening the emotional bond with fans via targeted events, activities for each group of fans in and outside the stadium. Examples include meetings, tours, match packages, promotion of the matches in newspapers, radio, on TV and on the Internet, etc., because fans are “an integral part of the Club and create a unique ambiance in the stadium” (*Red Star*

Belgrade). That is why “every member of the Club carries a huge commitment to build a relationship with the fans” (*Aston Villa*).

Football teams are looking to involve supporters, partners, and sponsors in the life of the Club, encourage them to promote the Clubs’ brand on the national and international level, make them the Clubs’ ambassadors of goodwill, and a part of the Club’s experience and history (i.e. ‘consumactors’ concept); leaving no one indifferent, as “the main objective is to turn an unhappy fan into a delighted fan at the end of the process” (*Aston Villa*) (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Provide a unique fan experience”). For this purpose, each team builds its strong communication plan to bring the fans to the team and make them part of the Club, by internalizing the values and the symbolic associations of the brand (Mittins et al., 2011).

5.5.4 Build and manage your brand

- Pay attention to branding inside and outside the stadium. Develop brand awareness beyond your region and build brand loyalty towards your Club (19 teams).

It is recommended by nineteen team managers interviewed to pay special attention to the branding inside and outside the stadium. That is to strengthen, promote and modernize the team’s brand at the Europa League level by developing brand awareness beyond the region (i.e. to internationalize the brand both in Europe and overseas) and building brand loyalty towards the Club; but also maintaining a good collaboration with UEFA, developing strong emotional ties with fans, focusing on the results, generating innovative ideas and products, initiating PR activities, etc. (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Develop and manage the brand”).

- Develop, strengthen and nurture tight relationships with fans (19 teams).

It is common knowledge that a Club does not exist without its supporters. That is why one of the Club's priorities should be to develop tight relationships with its fans, to reward them for their involvement in and commitment to the team. It is recommended to involve fans in making decisions as "they have a say on what happens in the Club" (*Red Star Belgrade*), and "feed their passion" (*IFK Göteborg*) by organizing special activities before every major match. The more involved and committed fans are, the less likely will they be to withdraw emotionally from the Club. By engaging fans in the Club's life, managers find a way to positively reinforce how fans feel and behave towards the team and thus, they foster the emotional bond between their fans and the team (Kardes et al., 2011).

Other potential avenues could consider actions where the players socialize with the fans; making a promotional video to engage the fans; organizing tours in different parts of the world to connect with out of market fans or 'satellite supporters' (Kerr, 2009); integrating different media platforms to send a coherent message to the fans, etc. It is also essential to bring people closer to the Club thanks to stories, good memories, the players, and an overall Club's involvement (similar to a 'storytelling approach'). (See also Table 1, "Catalyzing factors: Strategic management of the brand").

- Consider making your brand a part of lifestyle, "a way of life" for your fans ('from birth to death' concept) (16 teams).

A sports brand is a very powerful tool to make a difference in many people's lives; it also becomes an essential component of the supporters' lives. Hence, sixteen teams advise to make the team's brand "a way of life" for the fans ('from birth to death'

concept): “by the nature of football, we are more than a brand because football reaches beyond the game itself, it is much more than sports, it becomes a lifestyle. That’s why people buy and wear our merchandise outside of the stadium (jacket, shirt, tie, etc.)” (*Aston Villa*). (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Strategic management of the brand”). But by doing so, teams should be careful not to alienate their fans who might see their Club first and foremost as a sports brand and not necessarily as a lifestyle brand. Furthermore, when the brand extension goes very far from the sports product, lifestyle merchandise should be distributed in specific retailers, separated from ‘pure’ sports stores. That is how teams can expand their brand commercially without diluting their brand identity, their essence (Manivet and Richelieu, 2008).

- Be proud of your team, its roots and traditions; respect its heritage, cherish the history of the Club and its great veterans (16 teams).

The history of the Club is very important to explain the growth and popularity of its brand. Sixteen teams underline that it is vital to cherish their roots, the Club’s famous players “that have made a huge impact on the Club’s history” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*), to remember, respect and preserve the Club’s past: “its heritage, history, traditions and values” (*Athletic Bilbao*) as they believe that their “past successes represent the foundations for future successes” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). Even though most of the success of the teams studied occurred in the past, they are working hard to re-experience the glory days (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Strategic management of the brand”).

- Target new markets to sale your merchandise. Collaborate with equipment manufacturers (14 teams).

As we mentioned a few paragraphs ago, some managers underline the importance of putting a strong emphasis on merchandising to expand the brand from sports to lifestyle, developing the merchandising portfolio for both adults and kids. They offer to target new markets in order to sale their merchandise, organize meetings of local supporters' Clubs with the team, do store visits and open training sessions, undertake civic visits and target high profile media appearances, etc. In this regard, it is recommended to collaborate with equipment manufacturers, introduce innovations in materials and products, and pay special attention to the details in clothing lines and other products (*Athletic Bilbao*). (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Develop and manage the brand – Merchandising”).

- Work in collaboration with UEFA; participate in its competitions to help make your brand more visible, more attractive and more valuable in Europe (8 teams).

As it was mentioned above, it is extremely important for the teams to participate in the UEFA Champions League or the Europa League on a regular basis in order to make the team's brand more visible, more attractive and more valuable in Europa and to build a sports brand beyond their region (a national or even an international brand): “any chance to play in a European competition increases the importance of the Club, it gives us prestige and helps us to be known abroad” (*Athletic Bilbao*). In this regard, the best strategy, according to one manager interviewed, is “a good performance on the pitch and qualification as far as possible in the European competitions” (*Dynamo Kiev*).

Furthermore, teams follow the media strategy of UEFA, participate in friendly games abroad and in some other events organized by UEFA. (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Develop and manage the brand – Strengthen, promote and modernize the brand by developing brand awareness and building brand loyalty towards the Club”).

➤ Involve celebrities to promote your brand (2 teams).

In order to promote the Club’s brand, it is recommended to collaborate with celebrities who are also fans of the team (actors, singers, sportsmen, musicians, politicians, etc.) and let them show their support to the team when they come to the stadium or through the Clubs’ media.

More generally, teams should be encouraged to capitalize on their network: “Since Dynamo has been traditionally related to a government structure (i.e. Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs), we can reach different government structures, their employees to support Dynamo, as well as students from schools and universities all over Moscow and the Moscow Region” (*FC Dynamo Moscow*). Hence, teams promote games through their sponsors, partners, campaigns in the mass media, etc.

5.5.5 Pursue international expansion

➤ Make your team visible internationally (16 teams) by:

- a) taking part in some events/competitions organized by UEFA;
- b) performing internationally and participating in exhibition or friendly games abroad;
- c) using different types of media to communicate with fans, partners, sponsors and expose the brand worldwide;

- d) keeping in touch with your fans and communities worldwide, supporting fan Clubs in other countries;
- e) participating in international sports business conferences;
- f) making tours abroad, setting up training camps, football academies and grassroots projects, etc.

While building and strengthening the Club's brand, a due attention should be paid to the process of internationalization. That is making the team visible internationally as "an international competition provides international recognition and prestige to the team; it attracts players, sponsors; it is good for the image of the Club and the self-esteem of its members (stakeholders)" (*HSV*).

The team managers interviewed identify different ways to internationalize, such as, for instance, taking part in some events organized by UEFA; participating in exhibition or friendly games abroad; keeping in touch with their fans worldwide; supporting fan Clubs in other countries; making tours abroad and setting up training camps, football academies and grassroots projects; collaborating with academia and taking part in international sports business conferences, etc. (See also Table 1, "Catalyzing factors: Internationalization").

Communicating with fans worldwide via different types of media is also a powerful tool nowadays: "it has become easier with social media that we use in three different languages (French, Dutch and English)" (*Ajax Amsterdam*). But the most effective way to internationalize the team's brand is to perform internationally which represents an international recognition and platform for the team: "we are playing matches that are seen elsewhere, across other continents; it is an important way to be visible internationally. However, it is not only participating that matters but doing it well" (*Ajax Amsterdam*). And of course, "with a European result we can attract more

fans and sponsors, both local and international ones” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). That is why it should be the responsibility of each Club to build international policies in order to reinforce their presence in target countries.

- Try to hire players of different origins who might help the Club “enter foreign markets”, attract a new sponsor, and strengthen the Club’s presence in target countries (11 teams).

Eleven teams give preference to recruiting potentially interesting foreign players who have character and identity as they might help the Club “get in some markets” (*Aston Villa*) where they have some kind of relationship via a player, attract a new sponsor, etc., and “contribute to the Club’s popularity in the countries where they come from” (*Dinamo Zagreb*). It is recommended to act together with the player and the sponsor to penetrate the respective markets. (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Manage players’ roster strategically”).

5.5.6 Implement market research

- Conduct market research regularly. Collaborate with commercial partners. Get the feedback from your supporters, partners, sponsors (14 teams).

Most of the teams believe that it is essential to conduct a market research regularly on the progression of their sales, the popularity of the brand, the perception of the Club by fans, the awareness of the Club’s sponsors, their actions, etc. (*HSV*). The objective here is to make sure that there is coherence between the way teams see their brand and what fans perceive the brands to be. It is absolutely necessary to get the feedback on a regular basis from the supporters (those who attend games and those who watch games on TV), partners, sponsors, etc. The feedback from the Club’s

stakeholders is very helpful to understand how the brand is perceived and how managers can make it evolve in time (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Conduct market research”).

5.5.7 Position yourself as a regional anchor

- Focus on your region/community. Be socially responsible. Give back to the community. Be active in charities. Create a community feeling around the Club (13 teams).

People tend to support the sports team from their region. Hence, thirteen managers advise to focus on the team’s own region first and to anchor the team in the community as “it is easier to gain regional strength and support first; it is also a better use of the Club’s resources” (*IFK Göteborg; Malmö*). It also helps create an image of being the people’s Club (*IFK Göteborg*). As people from the region take an active part in the life of the Club, it is also necessary to give back to the community, to be socially responsible, to create a community feeling around the Club, to initiate some projects that could “help people regionally” (*Borussia Dortmund*), to be active in charities, etc. (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Anchor the team in its region”).

- Collaborate with the universities of your region. (4 teams).

Four teams suggest collaborating with universities of their respective region and involving students while conducting a marketing research, as it provides more trustworthy results. These four managers interviewed believe that it can be helpful for their research and mutually beneficial to participate in sports business seminars, conferences, etc. In fact, teams benefit by engaging the different community

stakeholders, including students, as it can foster the emotional bond they share with their fans for years to come (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Anchor the team in its region”).

5.5.8 Focus on players’ development

- Make stars of your own young players (youth development focus) (13 teams).

From the point of view of thirteen team managers interviewed, every Club should pay special attention to the upbringing of the younger generation of players (i.e. “making stars out of your own players” [*Borussia Dortmund, Olympique de Marseille*]). The idea is to strengthen the “the back-bone” (*Benfica Lisbon*) of the team with good national players. (See also Table 3, “Strategies and actions: Invest in youth development”).

Based on the information that teams display on their websites, this item appears to be extremely important, especially for Clubs with limited resources which do not have the means to attract expensive players. They must rely on a shrewd selection and development of local talent; a situation similar to what we see in the North American Major League Baseball (MLB) where there is no salary cap, with small market teams, such as Kansas City, Milwaukee and, once upon a time, Montreal.

- Build good training and playing facilities (3 teams).

Three teams underline that in order to improve the Club’s performance on the field, excellent facilities should be created for players to have the possibilities to train and prepare properly for the game. (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Youth development – Excellent facilities and conditions to play”).

5.5.9 Work on communication and new media

- Work with different types of media and with new media platforms. Develop a network of media coverage. Use the appropriate languages to attract new supporters, partners, sponsors, etc. (13 teams).

In order to leverage the team's brand, it is recommended to work with new media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. It is also suggested to use different languages on the Club's website in order to attract new supporters, partners, sponsors, etc., and reach out to what we called 'satellite supporters' (Kerr, 2009). However, team managers should understand that social media was first created for consumers, not for companies, and that the level of control an organization has on social media can be very limited. Entering the social media platforms does not mean, by any stretch of imagination, that a brand should try to please everybody; the brand must remain authentic and true to its values it encapsulates (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

This being said, support from mass media is crucial as it provides a wide coverage of the games, but more importantly, the ability for fans to interact on a constant basis with their favourite team, while providing content and emotional touch points to the team's supporters. Developing a network of media coverage via cable, satellite and Internet is a must today for every team (See also Table 3, "Strategies and actions: Broaden the media coverage").

5.5.10 Become business savvy

- Regard the Club as a business, as football has become a business (i.e. sport business and ‘sportainment’). Collaborate with sponsors and business partners (5 teams).

Five Clubs acknowledge that football has transcended sports to become a versatile business; in this regard, we can relate to sport business and ‘sportainment’. A market focus is now essential (*FC Dinamo Zagreb*). The same can be said of a strong partnership between the team and different stakeholders who can bring additional investments into the Club (*Dynamo Moscow*). Sponsors are a good case in point as they can promote and support the Club (See also Table 1, “Catalyzing factors: Business focus”).

For a detailed presentation of the lessons learnt, team by team, the reader is invited to read the Table in Appendix 6. And Table 6 highlights the findings to our five research questions, in order to crystallize the learning.

6) Conclusions, Recommendations and Limits

6.1 Conclusions

This report intended to take stock on our findings in relation with the research project entitled “How can former successful European football teams capitalise on the Europa League in order to (re-)establish their brands?”

As mentioned before, we collected data from 19 teams which represent 15 countries: Belgium (*Anderlecht*); Croatia (*Dinamo Zagreb*); England (*Aston Villa*); France (*Olympique de Marseille*); Germany (*Borussia Dortmund*, *Hamburger SV*, *Werder Bremen*); Greece (*Panathinaikos*); Netherlands (*Ajax Amsterdam*); Portugal (*Benfica Lisbon*); Romania (*Steaua Bucharest*); Russia (*FC Dynamo Moscow*);

Scotland (Celtic Glasgow); Serbia (Partizan Belgrade, Red Star Belgrade); Spain (Athletic Bilbao); Sweden (IFK Göteborg, Malmö); and Ukraine (Dynamo Kiev). We believe that this fits nicely with the recommendations of the 2011 UEFA Research Grant Program Jury to form a sample as diverse as possible from the standpoints of geography, cultural background and Club history in order to reflect different realities of European football.

We followed a case analysis method. We engaged in semi-structured interviews with managers of the selected teams. Content analysis was used to give in-depth meaning to the responses of the managers. We extracted the essence of the answers provided by managers in order to let the reality emerge. In this regard, our research bears some similarities with the grounded theory approach (Lee and Lings, 2008).

We addressed five research questions, with a synthesis provided in Table 6. Our analysis enabled us to highlight:

- Ten catalyzing factors that former successful European football teams use in developing their brand identity through the Europa League (Table 1);
- Eleven hurdles that former successful European football teams encounter in developing their brand identity through the Europa League (Table 2);
- Nine strategies and actions that are used by former successful European football teams in order to build and manage their brand identity, thanks to the Europa League competition (Table 3);
- Seven possible actions that UEFA could undertake to support the development of these former successful European football team brands in the Europa League (Table 4); and
- Ten lessons other European football teams, in a similar position, could learn from the former successful European teams studied (Table 5).

Admittedly, differences between the teams studied do emerge, but there are also some strong similarities. In fact, eight out of ten catalyzing factors are supported by the majority of the Clubs (Table 1); all the strategies and actions are in this situation (Table 3); and nine out of ten lessons are shared by the majority of respondents (Table 5). Discrepancies are mostly obvious in the hurdles (Table 2) and the recommendations made to UEFA (Table 4). This is a reflection of the diversity of our sample which we previously underlined.

In addition, there seems to be a split in the answers between teams which absolutely need a participation in the Champions League in order to financially fuel their growth (e.g. Ajax Amsterdam, Benfica Lisbon, Borussia Dortmund, Hamburger SV, Olympique de Marseille) and some other teams that are engaged in a (re-) building mode and would use the Europa League as a springboard towards European respectability (e.g. Aston Villa, Athletic Bilbao, IFK Göteborg, Malmö and most of the Eastern European teams interviewed). The team's own commercial and branding objective (e.g. prestige, reputation, international expansion, revenues, etc.) has an impact on the perception managers have of the Europa League. But Clubs' managers do seem to agree on the "Lack of prestige of the Europa League" and the "Financial constraints faced by teams" (Table 2).

Clearly, the managers interviewed recognize that a football Club starts with a good product on the field and the ability to convey hope to their fans. The quality of the core product remains essential in order to crystallize the emotional bond with their fans, especially when the Club's brand is not that strong or established yet (Richelieu et al., 2011). As it is underlined by Dinamo Zagreb: "winning is a very important aspect of our brand because we still do not have such a strong a brand to be totally independent from the result on the pitch."

However, as mentioned by Celtic Glasgow: “Success helps the brand but even when the team does not win we have a strong DNA and loyal fans. Having a strong brand helps us go through harsh times and cycles of performance.” And some teams go a step further in this regard, such as Aston Villa: “Aston Villa is [...] much more than a brand, it is a family, which is unique to sports. [...] Craving that family is more important than just winning, you must create a community feel around the Club.”

In other words, who you are, as well as the values that you encapsulate and live in your daily actions seem to represent the essence of the team’s brand, eventually even transcending sports to become a lifestyle brand, and a determinant of its strength. A brand is by definition a promise, which is delivered thanks to its coherence and continuity (Kapferer, 2007), on and off the pitch. Managers realize that they must reconcile the sports dimensions with the experience they deliver to their fans every time these stakeholders interact with the Club; eventually, this should lead to a strong brand equity (Richelieu and Pons, 2011; Figure 1). Showing integrity is first and foremost the ability to demonstrate that the organization makes one; it combines what it says it is (values) and what it does (actions). In other words, the Club is able to ‘walk its talk’.

For the managers interviewed, the Europa League can be a decent platform to showcase the team, as this competition helps participating teams expand beyond their region: it is seen as a transition path towards success and respectability. However, this springboard is as strong as the prestige of the Europa League, which is limited at this point in time as underlined by team managers interviewed, but also the focus group participants and even UEFA managers themselves. Truly, the competition remains very much second tier compared to the Champions League.

6.2 Recommendations

The Europa League has definitely a potential to grow and it “needs time to develop” (*Steaua Bucharest*). Beyond the fact that it lives in the shadow of the Champions League, there appears to be a strong positioning issue which needs to be resolved in order to make the Europa League more appealing to Clubs across the Old Continent. Indeed, we decipher an alarm signal sent by the managers interviewed which might underline some more structural issues European football is facing nowadays.

Right now, and based on the way both the Champions League and the Europa League are structured from broadcasting, financial and sporting points of view, the disparities between the Top 4 or 5 championships (England, Germany, Italy and Spain, and eventually France) and the rest of Europe are widening. It is as if two football universes are cohabitating on the continent. With increasing discrepancies emerging between the ‘big Clubs’ and the ‘small Clubs’ of Europe, the latter clearly feel more vulnerable. And they seem to wish for the establishment of a system that would get their ‘small Club’ a chance to survive and even prosper in today’s economic model of European football.

The Europa League might definitely be one platform to do so but one thing is for sure: very few managers of the teams we interviewed believe it can be done with the actual format of the competition. In fact, it clearly appears that managers think that taking part in the Europa League might crystallize this fracture between the ‘haves’ and the ‘haves not’ of European football. The managers interviewed feel, among other things, that all the energy, attention, resources, etc., are allocated to the best teams which compete in the Champions League, and that not much is left for the large majority of Clubs which represent European football in all its diversity. Finding the

right value proposition for the Europa League could be part of the equation for ‘smaller Clubs’ or teams that had their glory days in the past which are now starting to feel left out in the actual sports business model that emerges.

One avenue to help bridge the gap and help the Europa League achieve some kind of legitimacy would be for UEFA to provide an increased institutional support and commitment to the Europa League. In other words, the rebranding of the Europa League could be followed by an in-depth reflection on how the Europa League can make ‘smaller Clubs’ and former successful European teams truly a part of a more balanced European football eco-system. And with the ‘Financial Fair-Play’ coming into effect, this might be the right time to do so. As Mr. Giachino, Europa League Competition Manager underlines: “With the Financial Fair-Play, we are trying to build the perpetuity of European football”. But as long as the Europa League is perceived as the second-tier of European competitions, it appears that its rebranding will only be seen as cosmetics by team managers. This is by no means an indication to dilute the Champions League but rather to find ways to strengthen the Europa League from a sporting and financial point of view.

According to Mr. Dewaele, Head of Administration of the European Club Association, “Sharing the revenues between the Champions League and the Europa League could help make the Europa League more attractive (to participating teams). [...] There is a limit to the revenues we can generate with football, especially those from TV rights with the Champions League. Indeed, the TV rights bubble could explode at any time, even though we do not know when the collapse will occur”. “But it will happen”, as was strongly emphasized by the manager of Anderlecht who continued by saying: “that’s why we need to invest in new media and integrated

marketing communications [...] and European football needs to pursue emerging markets (in North America and Asia) more proactively”.

In summary, UEFA could help smaller teams or former established Clubs’ brands by restructuring the Europa League (broadcasting, financial and sporting dimensions) and increasing the size of the ‘revenue pie’ by internationalizing more, especially in North America (the so-called last frontier of football) and Asia.

Concretely, here is a sample of seven avenues that could be considered by UEFA in order to help make the Europa League a better ‘win-win’ value proposition:

- 1) A revenue sharing system between the Champions League and the Europa League;
- 2) A reduction in the number of teams participating in the Europa League, with the abolition of the actual clause that allows eliminated teams from the Champions League to being brought into the Europa League;
- 3) A more flexible match timetable in the Europa League which would better reflects fans’ habits and climate realities in the respective countries;
- 4) A merchandising policy which gives more flexibility and revenue opportunities to the Europa League teams;
- 5) A softer centralization that would allow, for instance, team sponsors and UEFA sponsors to better cohabitate;
- 6) A strategy that articulates the internationalization of UEFA, its competitions and its teams beyond the broadcasting of matches abroad (to include, for instance, the growth via social media, the Internet, an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) strategy, merchandising, partnerships to develop the game of football, charity initiatives, etc.); and, based on several comments made by team managers in this regard; and

- 7) A concrete commitment from UEFA to embrace the diversity of European football by supporting its smaller Clubs which represent the majority of its members.

These recommendations will be discussed during our presentation in Nyon, in May 2012.

Furthermore, as much as the managers interviewed can sound critical, they very much appreciate the logistics support of UEFA and are looking for more involvement from the European Federation. There seems to be a willingness to make the partnership between UEFA and European Clubs a successful relationship. There appears to be a lack of communication or understanding (or both), in terms of expectations and benefits that teams have towards UEFA. Based on our understanding of the managers' point of view, this is an area where UEFA could act to promote the Europa League in the interest of both the European Federation and the Clubs. Team managers also very much understand that they need to do their part in order to improve what they can change, for instance from a branding perspective. They are convinced that branding is a strong potential catalyst for the renewal and the long term viability of their organization (Table 1, Table 3 and Table 4). And they seem willing to work on the problems they face internally, even though some Clubs appear to be confronted to a dysfunctional managerial culture.

6.3 Limits

Admittedly, and despite all the rigor of our research, our work presents some limits.

The first one relates to the qualitative nature of our research and the size of our sample. With nineteen teams included in our sample, we were able to portray the

diversity of European football to a certain extent, but there are probably as many realities in European football as there are teams. Thus, the external validity of our results can be affected.

Second, some managers were very cautious in their answers, trying not to offend any stakeholder (UEFA, other team managers, fans, sponsors, etc.). As such, there is inevitably a response bias from some team managers, which affected, partly, the data collected and consequently our analysis.

Third, there were some time and resource constraints that prevented us from collecting more data and analyze it, especially when teams were late in answering our invitation to collaborate. Thus, it would be interesting to expand our research to more teams, ideally one from each country affiliated to UEFA. We should, however, mention that we initially planned to collect data from between six to ten teams; but in the end, we were able to speak with nineteen Clubs and complete this massive project in less than ten months.

Fourth, we will underline an item that could be seen as a weakness or a strength. Being an outsider to UEFA, the Europa League and European football, in general, gave us a perspective and an objectivity that we might not have had otherwise.

Fifth, we are aware of the fact that there might be some repetitions in the text from time to time, as some items might intertwine with others during the presentation of the analysis. We have tried to minimize these to make the reading of our report as enjoyable as possible.

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TABLES