

Football fans as place ambassadors: Analysing the interactions between Girona FC and its fan clubs after its purchase by City Football Group (CFG)

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The objective of this article is to analyse the relationship between “place identity” and the configuration of the identity of Girona FC fans, a franchise of the City Football Group (CFG), which is the main entertainment football holding according to *Forbes* list. The authors sent a questionnaire to all of the 24 supporters clubs of Girona FC in order to analyse how they value the influence of a global holding on a historical Catalan club (founded in 1930) and to understand the main aspects that create engagement between the supporters’ clubs and the organization. Additionally, two in-depth interviews were conducted with the Director of Communication of Girona FC and the Chief Communication Officer of CFG. This research concludes that third-party endorsement of CFG by the Girona FC local public is not robust due to the specific characteristics related to the regional identity of a historical professional Spanish football club.

Key words: Girona FC, City Football Group, place identity, team identification, football globalization

Introduction

Months before its debut in the Spanish First Division of football, Girona FC was acquired by the City Football Group (CFG), a business conglomerate whose most important asset is Manchester City FC. The CFG has three main shareholders: the Abu Dhabi United Group (77%), China Media Capital (12%) and the American firm Silver Lake (10%).¹ The investors from the United Arab Emirates came to Manchester City in 2008. But, above all, it was the arrival of a new CEO, the Catalan and former vice-president of FC Barcelona Ferran Soriano, who transformed the club’s management model, starting in 2012.

In the 2020-2021 season, the CFG is the owner of ten football clubs (Manchester City, Girona FC, New York City, Melbourne City, Yokohama Marinos, Atlético Torque, Sichuan Jiuniu, Mumbai City, Lommel SK and ESTAC Troyes), of two football service companies

(the commercial City Football Marketing and Global Football, focused on sharing football ‘know-how’), of other derivative product companies (urban fields or football schools), and it has begun an international partnership programme to advise other football clubs, the first of which are the Latin American club Bolívar and the French club Vannes OC.

A global turnover of around 800 million euros makes it one of the organizations with the highest turnover in the entire world entertainment and sports market.² According to *Forbes*, in 2021 CFG is the tenth ‘sports empire’ in the world, the only one exclusively based on football, with a market value of 4,820 million dollars.³ There is no similar conglomerate structure, either in European football market or outside Europe.

However, in the face of this situation, we could question whether the membership of clubs in a transnational business structure such as the CFG has affected their regional roots or diluted their more authentic identity. While some of the acquired clubs were newly founded – such as Melbourne City FC in the A-League, founded in 2010 as Melbourne Heart FC⁴, or New York City FC in Major League Soccer (MLS), founded in 2013 – others like Girona FC are heirs of a tradition that is much more socially rooted, especially in its hometown: Girona, a provincial capital in the region of Catalonia (Spain) with 103,369 inhabitants (2020). Girona FC was founded in 1930, and it was not until 2009 that the club needed to change its governance from a non-profit organization that belonged to its members to a public limited sports company with an initial capital of 3,23 million euros⁵. Girona FC became a public limited sports company due to its promotion to the Spanish LaLiga Segunda Division in 2008.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to understand and analyse the relationship between the place identity, or the city, and the configuration of the identity of Girona FC fans, in a time of globalization of its brand owing to the club’s membership in the CFG holding

company. In accordance with this main objective, we propose two research questions: are the social and historical roots of Girona FC in its city still the main asset for creating an identity among its supporters' clubs and fans? (RQ1); and, what role do these supporters clubs play in the dissemination of a sporting identity that maintains local roots despite the global nature of the umbrella brand they belong to? (RQ2).

Literature Review

The transformation of fans into consumers

Defining the concept of 'fan' is not an easy task. There are several, and even their normative typology has evolved over time. Hills provides an initial definition, understanding the fan as 'someone who has an interest in a certain team, celebrity, show, band and the like'.⁶ But this definition is too general, since 'being a fan is not just a label or category, it is also an identity and a performance'.⁷ And this idea of performance can serve to establish an initial first difference between what is considered a 'fan' and a 'spectator'. As Lee points out, 'fans are more active than spectators following a sport, they invest more emotions and material resources in favour of their players and teams'.⁸ Thus, while the fan is considered active, Lee (2005) conceptualizes the spectator as a passive actor in the sporting event.⁹

Mignon theorizes the fan using the concept of integration: 'Being a fan is an element of personal discovery and provides a field of experimentation through the search for differentiation and inclusion in something greater, in the framework of a movement or cause in which one can participate'.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Moller takes a more mercantilist approach: 'Being a fan involves cultivating a certain relationship with a product or service produced for consumption in the public sphere of leisure by a particular individual or a group'.¹¹

In the current sports industry, the relation between 'client' and 'product' is different

from that in other sectors of activity: fans are consumers with a high degree of loyalty to the organizations, which make their hobby a ‘way of life’, even reprimanding other attitudes that only focus on winning.¹² The advantage of a sports organization over any other product or brand is that, even with bad results, the fans’ loyalty never ends.¹³ Ginesta illustrates this with a quote from the former director of Barça TV, the journalist Eduard Pujol: ‘We work with emotions’.¹⁴

For this reason, it is necessary to deal with the concept of fan in all its complexity. Crawford presents us with a description of sport fans according to their level of moral involvement with the sports organization.¹⁵ First, Crawford places ‘the general public’, who have no interest or knowledge of the team.¹⁶ He then identifies the figure of the ‘interested position when the individual begins to take more of a specific interest in the subject – such as looking out for final scores in the mass media, or seeking out news reports and stories’.¹⁷ The processes of social interaction that this interested person will have, be they through the family, acquaintances, the school or community (for example, with the help of the media), will contribute to move them to the third level: the engaged individual. A person who is engaged is the prelude to the enthusiast, the fourth level: ‘The enthusiastic career position usually consists of those who are fairly dedicated in their patterns of support, and their sporting interest will occupy a comparatively important location in their everyday lives’.¹⁸

The fifth level of involvement identified by Crawford is that of the ‘devoted supporters’: long-term supporters of the team who also extend their interest to their daily lives, and with great knowledge of the rules of the game and of the history of their club.¹⁹ The last two levels concern to those supporters who make money from their passion for a particular club or sport. The professionals are ‘will usually consist of a very small “elite” group of supporters, who will usually make at least a partial amount of their income from

their involvement in their sport or enthusiasm'.²⁰ Finally, Crawford identifies 'the apparatus', those individuals who are involved in the administration of the sport or enthusiasm, such as the marketing directors, club presidents or coaches; that is, those who work directly in the sports organizations that they themselves are devoted to.²¹

Other authors have studied fans from a demographic perspective, not from their level of involvement. Malcolm, Jones and Waddington, through a data collection study based on surveys conducted between 1984 and 1997, concluded that, despite information published in the British press and the belief of club executives that football was embracing increasingly family audiences, the sociological profile of match attendees had not changed as much as was thought at the turn of the century.²² While there are always changes in the composition of the fan groups, neither the increase in women nor in middle-class audiences had been significant enough to consider that we were moving toward a more family audience.²³

This changed with the 21st century, when it became undeniable that sport, and especially football, witnessed a process of 'hypercommodification'.²⁴ Giulianotti highlights: 'As stadiums become more corporate and expensive, there is relatively less capacity to accommodate comparatively younger and working-class supporter subcultures'.²⁵ Thus, the main controversy that emerges when sport faces a process of transformation into an industry is the reclassification of fans as consumers or clients.²⁶ Giulianotti identifies four causes for this reclassification:²⁷

- The emergence of football as one of the main leisure industries. On the one hand, this fact has led to a 'worldly cosmopolitanism' that has caused the fans of less competitive teams to increase criticism of their teams for mass access to higher quality football content. On the other hand, fans have understood that if the sports product is not competitive, one can spend the money on other activities that meet the

same needs.

- Fans have developed a ‘market identity’ that causes them to understand the football industry as another aspect of the modernization of the sport.
- Some leaders of sports organizations have begun to understand the value of club fans in purely economic terms, and not as supporters.
- The entrance of the most neoliberal theses with regards to business management, which state that fans should not take part in the decisions of clubs where they do not have stakes or shares.

Giulianotti acknowledges that this new conceptualization of fans as customers presents a number of problems: sport loses its identity when compared to other leisure activities using economic criteria; there are groups of fans who may be excluded from the leisure and merchandising products that derive from the marketing of the sports product; and, finally, the price of stadium tickets has increased considerably, since the sports organizations, embracing market logic, claim to have a sports product that is increasingly competitive on the playing field.²⁸

Fan cultures in postmodernity

As Giulianotti states, ‘the postmodern world is associated with processes of “dedifferentiation” – that is, the breaking down or collapse of these modern boundaries and distinctions’.²⁹ Sport has not been left out of this process. The same author points out that

the modern development of sport had been marked by the strong spatial differentiation and segregation of audience and athlete. Postmodern dedifferentiation arises in a variety of ways: through marketing discourses that make spectators ‘part of the show’; through team mascots who mix with crowds; through the entry of individual spectators onto the

field of play to participate in shoot-out competitions; through cameras on racing cars, cricket stumps, skiers and other competitors that place viewers 'inside the action'; and in social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, that bring athletes and audiences into continual virtual contact with each other.³⁰

The so called 'business approach stadia' or 'smart stadiums' are one of the main examples of sport in postmodernity.³¹ The transformation of the fan into a consumer, as well as the conversion of this new sports consumer to a prosumer thanks to the capacity of fans to interact with social media,³² becomes real in a context where sport facilities are built according to the principles of the entertainment-based model, consumerism and the transformation of the city into a 'fantasy city', where 'shopertainment', 'eatertainment' and 'edutainment' become essential for postmodern citizenship.³³ Hence, modern fan identities based on working-class subcultures tend to despair. 'The establishment of relatively controlled, sanitized and pacified spaces inside and outside sport arenas contributes strongly to the neoliberal project of commercializing sport in order to attract wealthier, more bourgeois audiences'.³⁴

In this vein, and adopting Bauman's notion about the liquid society,³⁵ 'postmodernity has been associated with the emergence of new types of social identity [...] Social identities are no longer as fixed as during modern times but, instead, have become much more complex and fluid'.³⁶ Ginesta adopts Bauman's perspective and applies it to the analysis of Catalan professional football, and considers that the three Catalan clubs (FC Barcelona, RCD Espanyol and Girona FC) that participate in LaLiga constantly reshape their identity and values in the global sports market.³⁷ On the one hand, FC Barcelona has to permanently manage a local-global tension between its local Catalan fans and its historical values (Catalanism, multi-sport, democracy and universalism) and the need to expand the brand globally to improve its revenues. On the other hand, both RCD Espanyol and Girona FC have

recently been bought by Asian corporations, Rastar Group and CFG, whose management routines have had the capacity to modify clubs' corporate values and fan loyalties.

Taking into account the transformation of fan cultures in a context of liquid modernity,³⁸ and the fact that team loyalties and affiliations become more fluid, we can consider a new differentiation between what Giulianotti calls 'supporters' and 'flâneurs':

Supporters have relatively fixed forms of team identification, particularly towards local clubs. Flâneurs do not have these hot forms of solidarity and instead shift their sport interests and allegiances quite freely; they tend to buy into the commodity signifiers of sport teams through consumer culture.³⁹

Therefore, 'in elite sport, we may see how leading clubs endeavour to build and extend their modern ties with supporters while seeking to sell products to transnational flâneurs'.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the same author assumes that postmodernity allows us to study the "post-fan". According to Giulianotti, a post-fan

is a spectator who adopts a playful, ironic, detached attitude towards the social construction of sport. At sport tournaments, she may playfully enjoy public events that are stage-managed by the organizing authorities. She may recognize too that debates and issues within sport are heavily 'spun' by public relations employees; indeed, partly as a response, she is liable to produce her own media (such as through fanzines or blogs) and to engage actively in social media, providing content that is satirical and sharply critical.⁴¹

'Place identity', the 'sense of place' and team identification in football

'The liquid modern fan is unlikely to be faithful to the team and support the team in adverse circumstances, such as when the team are regularly losing and facing relegation'.⁴² However, 'traditional theories of fandom were concerned with the degree to which support for a team could be correlated with other key variables, such as class, gender, age or ethnicity'.⁴³ In that sense, Best highlights that 'fan identity was read as something that was tightly bound, non-

contradictory and “pure”’.⁴⁴

One of the traditional variables, which has been determinant in order to strengthen team identification, has been the place, or where the club is located. On the one hand, according to Kerr & Wijeratne ‘team identification is critical for sport organizations because those supporters who are more highly identified are more engaged with the brand, actively consume the sport product and represent a lucrative revenue stream’.⁴⁵ On the other hand, place identity has an emotional meaning and it refers ‘to the symbolic importance of a place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life’.⁴⁶ In line with the above, in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, ‘sense of place’ is defined as ‘the attitudes and feelings that individuals and groups hold vis à vis the geographical areas in which they live. It further commonly suggests intimate, personal and emotional relationships between self and place’.⁴⁷

Therefore, as Best points out after analysing how team identification in English League One fans is created, ‘place identity can enhance an individual’s self-esteem and supporting the local teams increases, based upon feelings and belonging to the community’.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Oppenhuisen and Van Zoonen analyse how Dutch football fans perceive their clubs in terms cultural and social values.⁴⁹ In their research, they conclude that, although tension between commercialization and the sport discourse is common in the context of elite sport and the football industry, the difference among small professional clubs (such as Excelsior or Sparta operating near Rotterdam, or MVV and Fortuna Sittard, both in the region of Limburg) ‘have more to do with geographical location and historical sentiment than any real difference in value associations’.⁵⁰

The object of this study, Girona FC, is also a small professional football club of the Spanish LaLiga, whose social influence and membership base is more regional than national.

Furthermore, like Excelsior and Sparta in relation to Feyenoord, all near Rotterdam, Girona FC operates in a region (Catalonia) where a big football club (FC Barcelona) monopolizes the sports narrative of the region and congregates the majority of football fans.

Analysing team identification variables in Champions League football clubs is more complex. For example, Ginesta highlights how FC Barcelona have to deal with at least two types of devoted fans: those in Spain who base their identification on the traditional values of the club, and a global fandom that identify FC Barcelona as one of the most successful football giants with some of the best-known football stars on the pitch.⁵¹ Hence, FC Barcelona can be considered, in the contemporary sports industry, a good example of what is called a *glocal* (global and local) phenomenon.⁵² In this vein, Oppenhuiser and Van Zoonen state:

To achieve a successful brand strategy in football, then, it is essential that the communications about the club ('the brand') match the supporters' experience of the team. Marketing research has shown that social and cultural values are key to product differentiation.⁵³

Tensions between fandom and branding have also been analysed in depth by Guschwan.⁵⁴ In his research focused on the struggle for power between Lazio Irriducibili ultras and the club's ownership, he juxtaposed 'the language of fandom with the language of brands'⁵⁵, that is to say the tensions between how fan culture can be the basis of creating social identities and, at the same time, how fan culture is 'rooted in a consumer culture that constantly quantifies, monetizes and leverages human impulses under legal regimes that do not recognize any value in fan sentiment'.⁵⁶ In his conclusion, Guschwan uses the concept of 'brandom' [from branding and fandom] 'to describe the pseudo-fan culture engineered by brand managers eager to cultivate consumer labor and loyalty while preempting the possibility of resistance that participatory fan culture promises'.⁵⁷

Girona FC: A new franchise of the City Football Group

Girona FC is a football club founded in 1930 in the city of Girona, capital of the Spanish province of the same name. In the history of First Division football in Spain, however, the club is relatively new. The first season it played in the top division was 2017-18, and it managed to endure two consecutive seasons before returning to the Second Division, in the 2020-21 season, where it has played 23 times.⁵⁸

Although Girona FC is currently the club with the most potential in its province, it has not always been so. Clubs such as Palamós CF (in the town of Palamós) or UE Figueras (in the city of Figueras) have also played in the Second Division, with the consequent economic, social and media impact that this has had. Thus, and added to the social influence that FC Barcelona and RCD Espanyol have in the province, no Girona team had managed to construct a predominant team identification among the football fans of the region.

Girona FC's promotion to the First Division coincided with the arrival of a new owner at the club: the City Football Group (CFG). In the 2020-21 season, the CFG owns 47% of the shares, 35% belong to the Bolivian businessman Marcelo Claure – who is also president of Club Bolívar and the MLS franchise, Inter Miami FC – and 16% to the businessman Pere Guardiola.⁵⁹ In his study on the matrix structure of the CFG, Ginesta states: 'The horizontal diversification allows the City Football Group to present, in each market it invests in, a global product (the Premier League) and one that is more rooted in the region', through the clubs it has invested in.⁶⁰ In fact, this idea sums up its mission, vision and values perfectly: from the vicinity of the old church of St. Mark, where it was founded, to the world.⁶¹ The CFG offers separate products, without asking for shared affiliations, because sport is consumed in an emotional manner.⁶² Ginesta concludes: for CFG franchises, such as Girona FC,

being part of this holding company allows them to seek a competitive advantage over other local competitors, since there is an exchange of knowledge and a pooling of services, both in the area of sports and in the management of organizations. The clubs have access to the know-how of the Manchester City football school and their experience in executive, financial, ticketing and marketing management.⁶³

In this regard, the aim of this research is to analyse the interrelationship between Girona FC's desire to benefit from the advantages of participating in a global holding company like the CFG, its regional roots and the way Girona FC supporters clubs contribute to it.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research project applying a dual approach, which was deployed during the 2019-20 season. In that season, the club achieved the maximum number of season ticket holders in its history (9.501), as well as the highest percentage of women among them (20%). In fact, since the season 2016-17, the percentage of women that hold a season ticket increased from 15% to 20%.⁶⁴ All the season ticket holders are also members of the club, and there are 1.500 members more that do not hold a season ticket. Girona FC has consolidated a strong young fanbase, with 47% of its members having less than 35 years old.⁶⁵ These members have the possibility to be enrolled in one of the 24 supporters' clubs accepted for Girona FC. 27% of the members belong to supporters' clubs.

First of all, a pre-established questionnaire was sent to each of the supporter's clubs of Girona FC, in total 24, mainly formed by enthusiastic or devoted fans⁶⁶. With pre-established questionnaires, researchers can compare answers and look for broad questions that affect the whole collective.⁶⁷ All of the supporters' clubs were informed on the clubs' website, and neither the club nor the researchers found other supporters' clubs outside those listed on the official website.

The researchers contacted the president or spokesperson of each supporter's club and asked them to answer the questionnaire, with ten responding positively four months after having sent it. This is why in Table 1 the respondents are codified with the word 'Interviewee' and a number 1-10. The researchers accept that a possible limitation of this study is that we were unable to monitor all of the 24 Girona FC supporters' clubs. However, those that responded to the questionnaire were the supporters' clubs that are most active and committed to the social life of the organization, according with the Supporters Clubs Federation, which is the entity that coordinates their activity and relationships with the club.

Table 1. List of Girona FC supporters' clubs in the 2019-20 season that answered the questionnaire.⁶⁸ Each questionnaire was answered by the spokesperson of the fan club (Interviewee).

Name of the Supporters Club	Location	Country	Year of Foundation	Coding
Penya Eloi Amagat	Vilablareix	Spain	2015	Interviewee 1
Penya Els Papparres Gironins	Girona	Spain	2017	Interviewee 2
Penya Girona Costa Brava Sud-Lloret de Mar	Lloret de Mar	Spain	2018	Interviewee 3
Penya Gironina Vall de Llémèna	Sant Gregori	Spain	2018	Interviewee 4

Penya Gironista Esquenapelats	L'Escala	Spain	2018	Interviewee 5
Penya Immortal Girona	Girona	Spain	1992	Interviewee 6
Penya Jovent Gironí	Girona	Spain	2017	Interviewee 7
Penya Pablo Machine	Girona	Spain	2014	Interviewee 8
Penya Pere Pons	Sant Joan de Mollet	Spain	2016	Interviewee 9
Penya Saltenca	Salt	Spain	2014	Interviewee 10

We asked the following open-ended questions to the spokesperson of each supporters club, which allowed us collecting qualitative data for this research: a) Why was the supporters club created?; b) What values do you associate with the Girona FC brand?; c) Which of these values generate more involvement in the club?; d) What relationship would the supporters club like to have with the club?; e) What relationship would the supporters club like to have with the players of the first team?; f) What relationship between the supporters club and the club would you like?; g) What are the advantages or disadvantages of Girona FC being part of the City Football Group holding company?; h) How does the link with the holding company impact the regional influence of the club?; i) Has the link with the holding company changed the values of Girona FC, why / why not?; j) What values do you associate with the city of Girona?; k) What activities does the supporters club organize on its own initiative, and what activities organized by the club does it do?; l) What adjectives do you associate with the stadium and atmosphere of Montilivi? Using these questions, the researchers sought a global overview of the relationship of each supporter's club with Girona

FC, considering all the possible spheres of interaction that they have in common (inside the stadium of Montilivi or in other activities organized in the city of Girona).

Secondly, the questionnaires sent to the supporters' clubs were complemented by two in-depth interviews: one with David Torras, Director of Communication and Head of the Department of Support for Members and Supporters Clubs and employed by Girona FC to manage corporate communication and the relationship between the club and its supporters' clubs; and the other with Vicky Kloss, Chief Communication Officer at City Football Group, who manages the communication strategy of CFG and the relationships with all the directors of communication of the club members of the holding.

The purpose of these in-depth interviews was to extract comparable information from a list of items or themes to be covered, but without having a formalized questionnaire to guide the order or content of the questions.⁶⁹ The themes covered in the interview with Torras were: a) the activities that Girona FC organizes in order to create a bond between the organization and the city and its citizens; b) the relationship between the Girona FC board of directors and the CFG managers; c) the Girona FC social responsibility programme and d) the actions the club carries out in order to engage new fans and be in touch with the supporters clubs. The topics covered in the interview with Kloss were: a) the structure of CFG; b) how the Manchester headquarters deal with the club members; c) the global communication strategy of the holding; and d) the tensions between the global communication strategy of the holding and the local media systems that cover the information of each franchise.

Results and discussion

Although the president of Girona FC, Delfi Geli, emphasized in an interview with *Televisió de Catalunya* the 'respect for the heritage of the clubs'⁷⁰ that the new owner (CFG) has, organizations such as the Girona FC are rooted in a local fabric whose interests could

sometimes be difficult to reconcile with those of global brands.⁷¹

Therefore, and in accordance with the interview conducted with Vicky Kloss, the new owners had to consider the differences between intervening in an organization like Melbourne City (founded in 2009) and New York City (created in 2013) and in a club such as Girona FC, whose history dates back to 1930. Due to history and social context – football in the United States and Australia does not have the social significance that it has in Spain – the acquisition of Girona FC also poses challenges for the evolution of the business model of City Football Group.

Girona FC at the midpoint between local and global identities

Although New York City and Melbourne City are products of globalization, the Catalan club places its local identity in a dialectical relationship with its need for global projection. It could become a good example, in terms of sport, of what Roland Robertson calls ‘glocalization’, that is to say ‘the universalization of the particular and the particularization of the universal’.⁷²

In the city of Girona, a club that has played two consecutive seasons (2017-18 and 2018-19) in the Spanish First Division for the first time in its history, has sheltered its authenticity – the ‘my real self’, in Bauman words⁷³ – under the uniforming umbrella of a global holding company and, consequently, its corporate identity could also be affected in times of postmodernity. However, as Vicky Kloss stated in her interview, CFG is very sensitive to the local ecosystems of each of its franchises. This means that a basic communication directive that Manchester headquarters gives to the directors of Communication of each franchise is to be ‘apolitical’ and to communicate on the basis of ‘what we have done, rather than what we have to do’.

In Girona, many of the actions carried out by the Social Area in recent years shows that, despite the globalizing umbrella of the CFG, the team does not wish to lose its social roots. For example, in the 2018-19 season, the sending of new membership cards was done in a very emotional way: they arrived at members' homes with a letter signed by Àlex Granell, the captain of the first team that season, who also took the opportunity to give each member a reproduction, also nominal, of the captain's bracelet with the four Catalan bars –representing the Catalan regional flag– and the club's coat of arms. In fact, Àlex Granell is a player who defines himself on social media as a 'teacher' before a professional footballer – a true statement of intent.

This action is in addition to the extensive collaboration with third sector organizations of the province of Girona and involvement in community development and educational projects with the local government, as is shown in Table 2 below.

Taula 2. Actions of the Girona FC Social Area in the 2018-19 season.⁷⁴

Action	Objective of the action
Girona FC Genuine	Participation in the <i>Lliga Genuine</i> with a team formed from the Social Area, and which has the involvement of Girona FC and foundations that work with people with intellectual disabilities.
The "Girona Est" football school	Together with Girona City Council and the Marlex Foundation, to use sport as a vehicle of social transformation in one of

	the poorest neighbourhoods of the city and of Catalonia: <i>Font de la Pólvora</i> .
The "Grada Suma" project	In collaboration with the Girona Sports Council, bringing together 13 schools with the aim of educating children by eradicating violent and xenophobic attitudes through sport. 650 invitations were distributed for schoolchildren to access the Montilivi stadium.
Campanya de Reis (Campaign of the Three Kings)	During the festive week of the Three Kings, on January 5 and 6, the players visited the children in the Josep Trueta hospital and the children's home in Girona.
Relationship with local foundations and social organizations	Girona maintains links with third sector organizations, including Els Jones, a social business formed by people with intellectual disabilities in charge of cleaning the stadium; the Ramon Noguera foundation, with whom a solidarity jewellery campaign inspired by Girona FC has been carried out; the Red Cross, with whom toy collection actions

	<p>have been carried out; Arrels Foundation and Homeless Entrepreneurs, with whom the “Nobody Sleeping in the Street” campaign was carried out.</p>
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Based on the information obtained from the in-depth interview with David Torres conducted for this study, the current owners of the club seem to be clear that Girona FC must continue positioning itself as a local club, one that is humble and does not lose its roots. This is also the reason for the creation of an advisory council of devoted notables, which ensures that the regional sensibility is not lost despite the new ‘apparatus’⁷⁵—to use Crawford’s terminology- depending on the CFG, and the policy of ‘open doors’ of the first team training in different football fields of the province of Girona (761,947 inhabitants) during the season.

The creation of an advisory council of devoted notables, as well as the social projects of Girona FC with local institutions, follow a basic communication directive coming from the CFG board of directors, as stated by Vicky Kloss: the need to search for a third-party endorsement in each of the local markets where CFG operates. We can thus consider the supporters’ clubs to be one of the strategic audiences that CFG should communicate with and search for their commitment, so that they could become new ambassadors of the club.

In fact, for some time now there has also been a desire to become the leading club in the province of Girona, not just the emblem of a city. The club has had a historic rivalry with the UE Figueres team when this played in the highest categories of Spanish football: the desire to become the ‘Girona club par excellence’ is seen in initiatives such as promotion and recruitment campaigns for club members throughout the province to generate a sense of belonging and pride of affiliation. At the economic level, a Girona Chamber of Commerce

study estimates the club's impact at 22,563,720 euros in the 2017-18 season, the first season that it played in the First Division.⁷⁶

The city of Girona, the main asset for building the identity of the supporters clubs

The motto 'Girona pride', the product of a participation campaign among members and that has been successful in other clubs of the capital such as Bàsquet Girona, sums up the desire not to relinquish its origins and highlights the club's historical resilience, which had to overcome several periods of economic and sporting instability that almost led to its demise.

In fact, all the spokespeople of the supporters' clubs interviewed state the crucial need to maintain the club's relationships with its local roots (be it the city or province). The sense of place, its link with the socio-cultural environment, therefore, is essential for the creation of the identity of the supporters clubs and for identification with the team.⁷⁷ In this way, the supporters clubs see the city of Girona 'as our home' (Interviewee 2), or that the club must reflect the values of the city – 'family-oriented, close and responsible' (Interviewee 1) – although there are also those who demand that the club have a projection that goes beyond the capital. In particular, those supporters clubs furthest from the city of Girona that insist that the club be an ambassador for the whole province (interviewee 5), not just for its capital, a desire also expressed by the club's directors.

It is notable that the supporters clubs refuse to consider Girona FC a 'brand', especially when they contrast it with the economic rationality with which the CFG frames its business project. As Guschwan warns us when studying Italian football, this study also perceives a tension between the construction of the fans' identity and the permanent need of the current football industry to market its brands.⁷⁸ For the supporters clubs, being part of Girona FC is a significant part of their identity, putting, above all, the values of 'humility', 'effort', 'simplicity', 'proximity' and 'resilience' as values that unite the supporters with the

club. Best, considering the new roles of fans using Bauman's liquid society approach, also points out that 'the attitude of football fans to their team is different from the attitude of consumers to the commodities they purchase'.⁷⁹

For this reason, the interviewees become critical of the relationship between the club and the supporters clubs. On the one hand, because they consider that belonging to a global holding company can blur the historical values of the club; and on the other hand, because they perceive a constant remoteness of the club from the activity of the supporters' clubs, especially regarding the relationship between the first team and the activities organized by them.

This distance is also seen when analysing the relationship between them and their club, since they all show little enthusiasm for the activities that are organized institutionally by the entity: either they do not feel taken into account, or they respond with a 'when they need us, we are there' (Interviewee 4). 'The tension between commercial discourse ("customer") and sports discourse ("supporter") is a result of the changed political economy of professional football', conclude Oppenhuizer and Van Zoonen.⁸⁰

City Football Group and Girona FC supporters clubs: a complex relationship

However, despite playing in the Second Division, in the 2019-20 season the club maintained an average of 9,000 spectators at the Montilivi stadium and managed to surpass the number of members of the previous year (9,501). David Torras, Director of Communication and Head of the Department of Support for Members and Supporters Clubs, concludes:

The CFG project is long term. Relegation to the Second Division was already contemplated. First, the fans greatly reduced the relationship between the City and the club to the transfer of players. But now they have seen that there is something more, such as investments in the stadium and the future sports city.

The approach of a 'long-term' sports project grates when it is related to the perception that the supporters clubs have of the new ownership (CFG). As for the advantages of belonging to the CFG, all those interviewed consider that the arrival of the new owners has enabled the club to restructure and has provided it with economic stability, which allows Girona FC to play with the elite of Spanish football: 'I don't know what Girona would be like today without being part of City', said Interviewee 5; 'We can stay in the elite', continues Interviewee 10; Girona FC has 'solid finances that the club didn't have until now', concludes Interviewee 8.

However, the representatives of the supporters' clubs interviewed showed two real fears. On the one hand, that the (economic and sportive) investment stops flowing, and that eventually the CFG leaves Girona FC in the lurch. 'From the outside we don't know what the real goals [of CFG] are', states Interviewee 2. 'At the sporting level, we have missed a clear commitment to Girona FC in terms of transfers of important players', commented Interviewee 3. On the other hand, despite the economic strength that being part of the CFG affords, the current club is distancing itself from its regional roots. 'In my view, I can't see a connection with the city, the institutions and our foundation. Nor with the members and supporters. The new owner is cold and denotes arrogance', explains Interviewee 1. Interviewee 6 sums it up forcefully: 'People see it as a *degironization* of the club'. For this reason, Interviewee 7 calls for the club to be 'of the people of Girona'. The noun '*degironization*', understood as the process in which the club (located in Girona) loses its identity due to the global project of the new ownership (CFG), brings us to one of the main characteristics of the liquid society, theorized by Bauman: the process whereby local sport identities blur and become more complex and fluid in today's world.⁸¹

Nevertheless, moving beyond the local borders is key to making the club grow, both

in terms of number of fans and income.⁸² ‘A local and historical positioning does provide a clear means of identification, but at the same time it automatically restricts the club’s appeal to a relatively small local market’, highlight Oppenhuiser and Van Zoonen.⁸³ In this sense, the possible transformation of fans into consumers,⁸⁴ as marked by the dynamics of global sport, hovers over the answers of the members of the Girona FC supporters clubs. ‘We have the perception that the club’s identity is being lost. The aim is to imprint [...] an image of a Girona fan that does not correspond with reality’, complains Interviewee 8.

However, the supporters clubs interviewed have not yet come to categorize the stadium as a space for consumption, as happens in other European football clubs and the stadiums where the franchises of the US leagues play.⁸⁵ In this regard, the supporters clubs have an ambivalent feeling when it comes to the Montilivi stadium, where Girona FC plays. On the one hand, most of them consider that it is a ‘cold’ stadium, but there is also esteem for a stadium that is seen as a space for ‘communion, passion, effort, solidarity and belonging’ (Interviewee 9).

Conclusions, limitations and future research

At a time when professional football has become globalized, the aim of this article was to study the relationship between the sense of place and the configuration of the identity of Girona FC fans, a team that in the 2020-21 season plays in the second division of LaLiga.

In this regard, the interest of the research lies in the fact that Girona FC was acquired, in the 2017-18 season, by the holding company of City Football Group (CFG), which has implemented a model of football franchises in different countries since 2012.⁸⁶ In this way, we were able to ask how the identity of the club has changed as a result of its belonging to a business group that has its headquarters in Manchester and manages its properties by implementing a broad and global strategy, which has as its main asset Manchester City of the

Premier league. This study is relevant due to the global significance of CFG, which is the largest football company in the world according to the *Forbes* list of the main entertainment and sports companies, and the deep social and local roots of one of its properties: Girona FC, founded in 1930.

With regards to the first research question (RQ1) –are the social and historical roots of Girona FC in its city the main asset for creating an identity among its supporters clubs and fans?–, it was shown that, despite belonging to a holding company since 2017, the Girona FC fans have built their identity upon a dual base: the meaning and legacy of the city of Girona as a ‘birthplace’ and natural space of the club; and the values of humility, perseverance and resilience that have marked the history of Girona FC from its inception in 1930. In this regard, despite the globalizing umbrella of the global sports holding companies,⁸⁷ the supporters clubs build an identity of resistance to any globalizing brand, but the latter ends up converting, exclusively, supporters into mere consumers.⁸⁸

As for the second research question (RQ2) –what role do these supporters clubs play in the dissemination of a sporting identity that maintains local roots despite the global nature of the umbrella brand they belong to?–, there is a clear distance between the activities of the supporters clubs and the efforts of the club to expand its brand. The supporters clubs, by their nature, are ambassadors of the club in their region, but they do not carry out a coordinated activity of expansion of the Girona FC brand as one might initially assume. The supporters clubs, which have adopted the motto ‘Girona pride’ –due to the participatory process that gave rise to it– are critical of the way in which the CFG has orchestrated the relationship with them, criticizing the distance between the ownership and the supporters groups. In fact, there are fears about how the owners will react in the long term: while in the short term they accept that without CFG Girona FC would not be able to play in the elite of Spanish football

(LaLiga), there are also fears with regard to when investment will stop, the transparency of information that comes out of the entity, and the way in which the ownership understands the unique and historical values of the club.

This research shows that there is still work to be done to achieve an effective third-party endorsement of CFG corporate values by the local public in Girona. On the one hand, the club has certainly made efforts (as Table 2 shows) to not abandon the values of proximity and respect for the origins of the club. The various social activities that are organized demonstrate this. On the other hand, there seems to be a need to study actions that can help these values linked to the notion of proximity enter the milieu of the supporters clubs more fully, perhaps through visualizing these values through actions that lead the players of the first team towards the activities that they organize. The current football economy, which has converted the players into commodities and mercenaries,⁸⁹ has led to a huge distance between the professional players and their fans. Historically, however, the players have been the main vehicle for clubs to maintain a conveyor belt to communicate their vision and mission to the fans.

Some limitations of the research need to be pointed out. First, due to the limits of the EU General Data Protection Regulation, the authors were unable to use the Girona FC supporters' database to contact the fans. We therefore had to use the open data provided by the club, which was the list of the supporters clubs. Second, we only received ten answers to the questionnaire sent to the supporters' clubs, although it should be pointed out that, according to the club, close to 50% of the answers provide a clear representation of the daily life of these supporters clubs.

Finally, regarding future research, this study provides new insights into tensions between fans and ownership in an era of football commodification. In fact, these tensions

were prominent in the recent failure of the European Super League, in April 2021. Those English clubs that announced their support for the initiative (Arsenal FC, Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea FC, Liverpool FC, Manchester United and Manchester City) had to cope with the protest of their most active supporter groups, and rapidly abandoned the initiative. To sum up, as David Conn stated in *The Guardian*, after the Super League fiasco different governance reforms should be considered in Europe to give fans more power in the management structures of the clubs.⁹⁰

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