

## Social Interactions as Brand Benefits: A Sport Marketing Approach

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*Facebook has become the worlds' most popular social media platform, with over 1.3 billion active users in January 2014. As a result, in addition to physical and digital interactions between sports' fans and clubs; the interactions amongst the fans also have increased to unprecedented level. For, instance over 46.9million fans have registered on Manchester United Face Book alone in April 2014. Therefore, it is important to research on the impact of digital social interactions in building strong brands and brand equity. In sports marketing literature, Keller's (1993) "knowledge model" has been adopted by many brand equity research. They include number of brand benefits. However, they have not taken social interactions into consideration as part of brand benefits when measuring brand equity. This study aims to fill the literature gap by investigating whether "social benefits" should be included as an additional brand benefit when researching fan based brand equity in global football club brands. The study use qualitative data. The findings suggest that fans regard physical and digital interactions to be important social benefits. The authors recommend, in future, social benefit to be included as an additional brand benefit in brand equity research in football. The paper concludes with recommendations for brand managers in football clubs and suggests further research avenues.*

**Keywords:** Marketing, Brand benefits, Sports marketing, Social media, physical and social interactions

### 1. Introduction

Recent economic downturn is expected to affect stadium attendance and revenues of major football clubs (Mintel 2014). Therefore, the managers of top clubs will have to rely on "the wider match experience and capturing the more occasional spectator segment" (ibid). Increasingly, football supporters are following their clubs using digital channels such as social networking websites. They enable football clubs to interact with their fans in a more personal and direct way (Ioakimidis 2010; Mashable 2012a). Globally renowned clubs such as Real Madrid has over 58 million and Manchester United have over 46 million registered Face Book followers in April 2014 (Face Book 2014). Also Twitter (2013) revealed when Manchester United was defeated in the Champions League by Real Madrid, it caused the biggest surge in UK.

The numbers of people who use social media have outgrown the populations of many world countries (Facebook 2012a; Twitter 2012a). It is evident that the digital interactions play a crucial role between football fans and their clubs as well as interactions between the fans. Such interactions appear to be stronger in globally known football clubs given their popularity and worldwide fan base (Mintel 2013; Deloitte 2012).

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The existing literature does not acknowledge socialisation as part of brand benefits in team sports consumption. Although some authors have considered it (Gladden and Funk 2002; Bauer et al. 2004; Bodet and Chavanat 2010), socialisation has been categorised as part of the dimensions of brand benefits, not a brand benefit *per se*.

Therefore this research aims is to fill a gap in the existing literature on brand equity by including the social benefit, when Keller's "Knowledge Model" is used in measuring customer based brand equity; since it is adopted and modified by many sports researchers including Gladden and Funk (2002); Bauer et al. (2005) and Kaynuk et al. (2008). The study aims to answer the research question "*Can social interactions amongst fans; and between fans' and clubs be included as brand benefits of football clubs, when measuring brand equity?*" It aims to provide empirical evidence to show that social benefits gain from physical and digital interactions thus contribute to brand strength, hence brand equity, especially in football clubs.

The paper is organised in the following order. Section two presents the literature and the proposed theoretical framework followed by section three; discuss the methodology adopted including the sampling and data collection. Analysis and findings are presented in section four. Sections five discusses the research findings and suggest recommendations for football clubs and future research. Lastly, the conclusions and limitations of the research are presented.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Brand Equity

Brand equity is the added value caused by the combination of a product's brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations (Aaker 1991). Keller (1993) developed a framework to analyse brand equity based on the customers' knowledge about a brand and its implications to brand strategies. His customer-based brand equity model is based on two dimensions of brand knowledge: brand awareness and brand image.

In the football setting, Bauer et al. (2005) study proved that "brand equity has a high and significant effect on economic success" of a football club because it has a positive effect on purchase intentions, premiums and loyalty (p. 509). Furthermore, Bodet and Chavanat's (2010) research confirmed the results of Bauer et al. (2005) by measuring brand equity of the top four brands of the English Premier League using Chinese fans. Their study evaluate four dimensions of brand equity: perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand image, and brand associations (Bodet and Chavanat 2010).

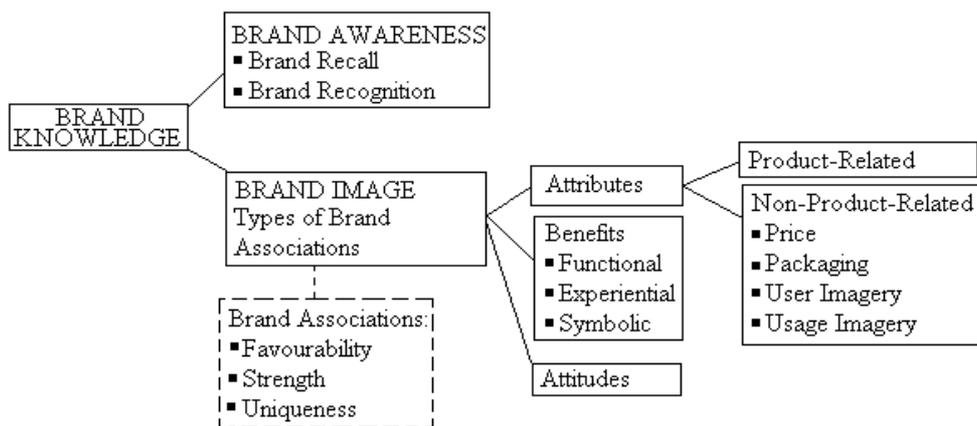
### 2.2 Brand Image

Brand image is "the visual or verbal expressions of a brand which leads to psychological or emotional associations that the brand aspires to maintain in the minds of the consumer" (Coop 2005 cited by Kotler et al. 2009). The main contributor to the brand image is Keller (1993), who defines brand image as the customers' perceptions about a brand, which are reflected in brand associations. This means that strong and successful brand image is based on a number of positive brand associations in the minds of customers.

### 2.2.1 Brand Associations

An association is defined as the “phenomenon of one memory element being linked to another” (Franzen and Bouwman 2001:49). According to Aaker (1991) that brand associations include “attributes, customer benefits, uses, users, lifestyles, product classes, competitors and country” (p.31). Keller (1993) elaborates on those brand associations by classifying them into three categories. They are attributes, benefits and attitudes. Furthermore, he states that these brand associations vary according to how favourable, strong or unique they are in the minds of the consumers (Keller 1993).

**Figure 2.1: Dimensions of Brand Knowledge (Keller 1993, p.7)**



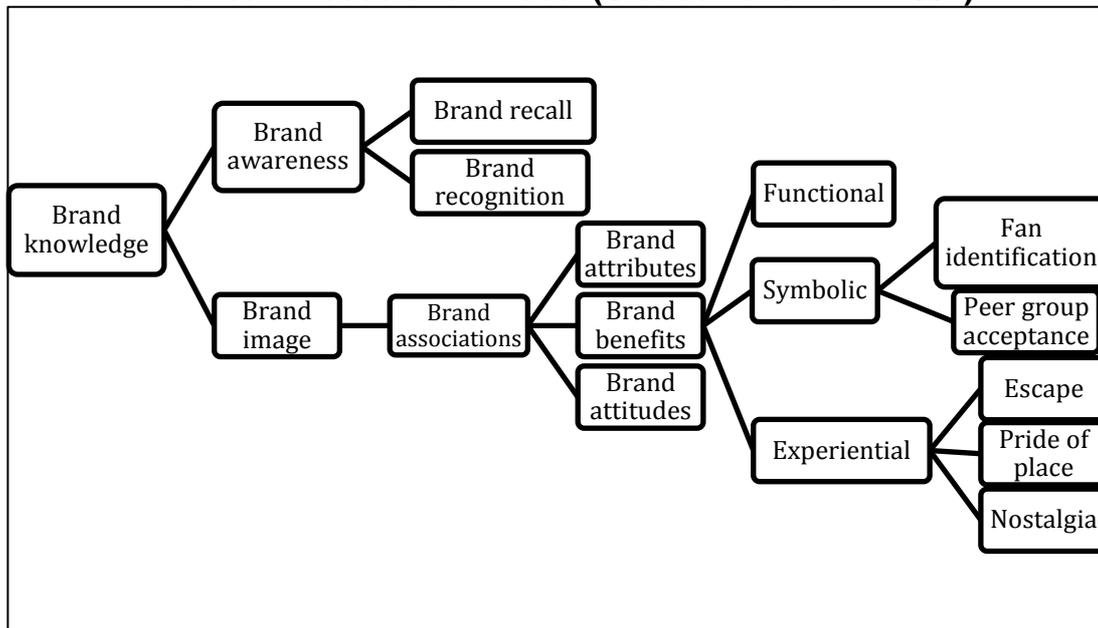
In sports, the concept of brand associations is more consistent with Aaker’s (1991) perspective because it establishes primary brand associations, elements that are very influential in sports marketing (Richelieu and Pons 2006).

#### 2.2.1.1 Brand Benefits

Keller (1993) states brand benefits “are the personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes –that is, what consumers think of the product or service can do for them” (Keller 1993, p.4). He classifies benefits into three different categories: functional, experiential and symbolic (See Fig. 2.1). Functional benefits are the basic advantages that a consumer obtains from the product; they correspond to the product-related attributes and are usually connected to basic needs and motivations of the consumer. The experiential benefits are associated with the product-related attributes because they relate to what it feels like to use the product. The symbolic benefits fulfil self-realisation needs such as social approval and/or self-expression, meaning that these normally correspond to non-product related attributes (Keller 1993). Keller acknowledges the importance of social interactions as part of brand benefits and highlights the need for further research in the field to ascertain the implications for marketing strategies (*ibid*).

2.3 Brand Benefits in Sports

Fig 2.2: Brand Knowledge Model (Keller 1993) and Brand Benefits Dimensions of the Team Association Model (Gladden and Funk 2002)



Based on Keller’s (1993) conceptual work, Gladden and Funk (2002) develop the Team Association Model in which they identified a number of dimensions of brand associations in sports marketing, in the context of team-based sports in America. These authors classify fan identification, peer group acceptance, escape, nostalgia and pride in place as the dimensions of brand benefits (See Fig. 2.2). Gladden and Funk (2002) recognise that there are socialising benefits that a customer can get from enjoying sporting events. Yet, they ascribe those benefits exclusively to the peer group acceptance dimension, meaning that the positive outcome is the sense of belonging to a group rather than just the advantage of interacting with others (*ibid*). Additionally, the authors agree that further research is needed “to examine the benefits derived through the experience of consuming sport (...) to understand what symbolic and experiential needs are being satisfied” (Gladden and Funk 2002, p.74).

Bauer et al. (2005) research provides a theoretical framework that simplifies Gladden and Funk’s (2002) Team Association Model and Keller’s (1993) Customer-based Brand Equity Model. They made slight modifications to Gladden and Funk’s (2002) dimensions of brand benefits and recognise that social interactions with family and friends sharing the experience of football can be regarded as one of the elements for measuring brand equity.

However, Gladden and Funk’s (2002) and Bauer et al.’s (2005) research only consider narrow segment of football fans who attend games, without considering that Football clubs are global brands with fans from all over the world (Deloitte 2014). Bodet and Chavanat (2010) also discuss the brand benefits dimension within four categories: emotional, cognitive, social and psychological. Interestingly, Bodet and Chavanat’s (2010) propositions are similar to Keller’s (1993) customer-based brand equity model. Their research suggests that social interactions are part of the benefits that only applicable to non- regular fans.

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Therefore, further research is needed to understand the underlying factors that influence physical and digital social interactions and to find out whether these are brand benefits that can contribute to brand equity in football clubs.

### 2.3.1 Social Interactions

Wann et al. (2004) identify that one of the most important benefits of team identification is socialisation. They suggest when in a group of fans, an individual “should feel the most social support, camaraderie and connections to society” (p.29). Jacobson (2003) also agrees that fan identity is beneficial to supporters because it provides a sense of community and camaraderie. None of these authors identified these as benefits gain by football fans.

Following a particular sports team facilitates “the social gratification of being with others who enjoy the same activity” (McDonald, Milne and Hong 2002, p.103). Melnick (1993) recognises that there are three factors that motivate spectators to initiate social interactions: desirability to start a conversation with another individual, and legitimacy and appropriateness of the encounter (Lofland 1973 cited by Melnick, 1993). Social interactions have an influence in consumers’ enjoyment of sport consumption (Johnson, Jocusen and West 2004; Pons et al. 2006). According to Pons *et al.* (2006), the fact that individuals choose a specific sporting event over other forms of leisure to socialise with others reflects the emotional connections with the sport. According to Eastman and Land (1997), social interactions unify the participants and create a community in which participants identify themselves.

#### 2.3.1.1 Physical Interactions

The authors classify social interactions in stadiums, bars, clubs and gatherings at homes as physical interactions. In stadiums, consumers are part of the spectacle, which enhance the sense of community and allow social interactions to occur more fluently (Patterson and Johnstone 2009). This leads to the creation of positive feelings that translate into emotional attachment and sense of belonging to the sports team (Giulianotti 2002 cited by Patterson and Johnstone 2009). Also sports consumption in other public spaces such as bars are able to produce that same sense of community to some extent (Eastman and Land 1997). However, they argue regardless of the ambiance and the presence of other fans, such experience could not be replicated when watching sports at home (Eastman and Land 1997). This notion is reiterated by Wann et al.’s (2004) study, showing that fans respond more positively when experiencing the sports event at the stadium than when watching matches at home.

#### 2.3.1.2 Digital Interactions

Digital interactions are defined as the exchange of information between individuals and/or individual companies through the Internet by Gummerus et al. (2012). The internet brings people closer by shortening distances between family members, friends and peers through online interactions (Mueller, Agamanolis and Piccard 2003). These exchanges allow participants to create specific content, voice their comments and opinions; and passively to read and search for content (Ioakimidis 2010; Gummerus et al. 2012).

Online brand communities of sports, connect using multiple social media platforms (Smith 2009; Mashable 2012a). These social media sites allow access to a vast array of

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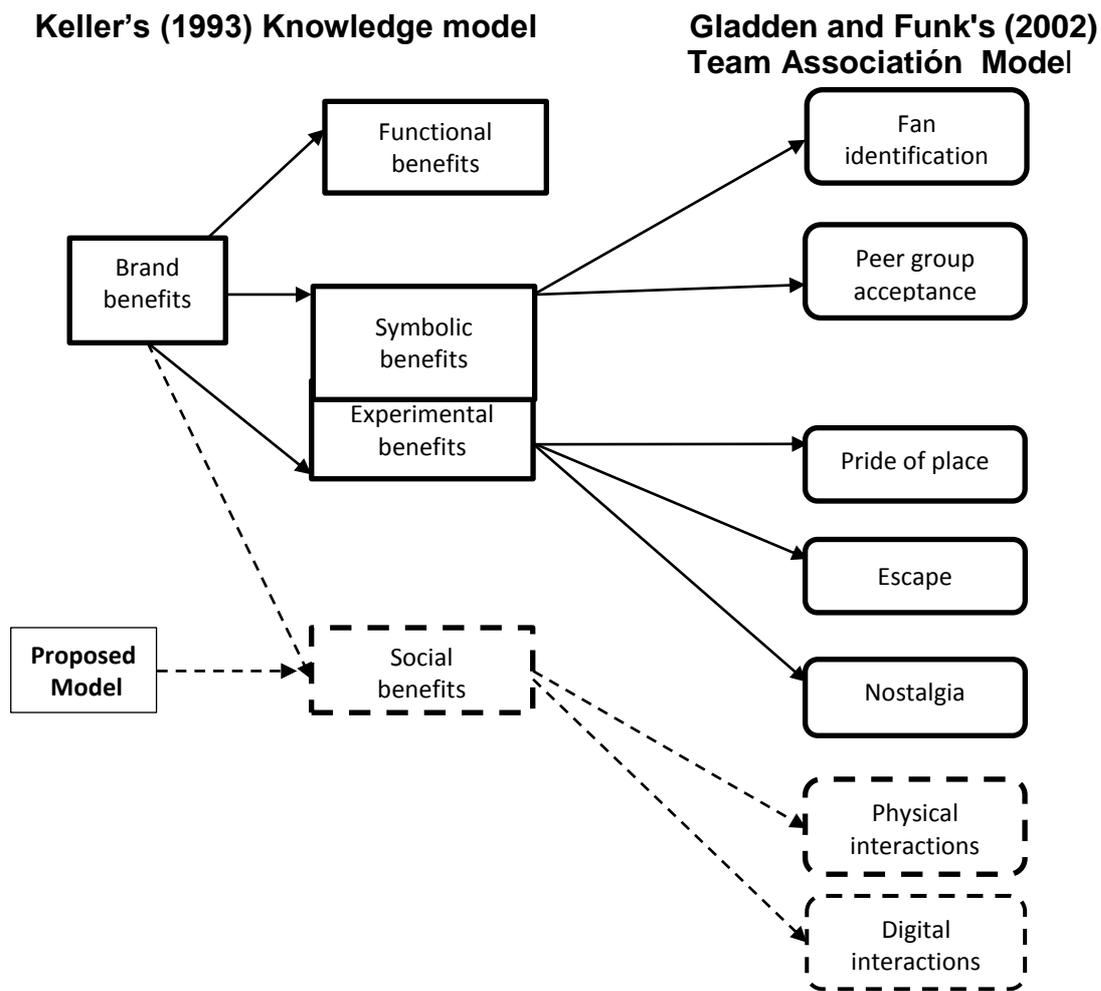
information on clubs they support as well as the rivalry. Also they allow the fans to access information on past and future matches; live feed of current matches, information about the players and multiple statistics twenty four hours a day. Also fans are able to share the information and engage in constant conversations with each other and with clubs. This is evident when Twitter revealed when Manchester United was defeated in the Champions League by Real Madrid caused the biggest surge in UK Twitter chat in 2013 (Twitter 2013). This type of social media engagement by sports fans show their appetite for digital social interactions making football clubs to continuously create valuable content for their audiences because they recognised that consumers constantly demand “more benefits from online experiences; including the development of social ties” (Richelieu 2005 cited by Ioakimidis 2010, p. 274).

Gummerus et al. (2012) recognise that social benefits are important in the online context. Such benefits include engaging in conversations and discussions with other members, sharing and accumulating knowledge, giving and receiving support, participating on special activities, and receiving special offers or rewards. Moreover, Gummerus et al. (2012) acknowledge the main social benefit of digital interactions is social enhancement because online communities allow their participants to feel that their participation and contribution are important. Consequently, it is necessary to make a comparison between football fans perceptions of the social benefits that include both physical and digital interactions. This is reiterated by Ioakimidis (2010) who recommends that online brand communities should include “both physical and virtual spaces” to make the sports consumption experience more pleasurable (p. 274).

### 2.4 Proposed Theoretical Framework

The aim of this research is to provide a better understanding of social benefits, physical and digital interactions, of global football club brands and their contribution in measuring brand equity. After the review of the literature on the related topics, the authors concluded that a combination of existing frameworks would be the best way to measure customer based brand equity for team sports, especially in the context of football. As shown in Fig. 2, the authors propose an amended theoretical model that combines both Keller's (1993) “Knowledge model” and Gladden and Funk's (2002) team association model. The propose model adds “social benefit” as the fourth brand benefits. Also they propose physical interactions and digital interactions to be included as part of social benefit constructs.

Fig 2.3: Proposed theoretical framework



### 3. Methodology

This section provides a description of the research strategy adopted.

#### 3.1 Research Strategy

The sports brand marketing research consists of qualitative or quantitative research methods (Bauer et al. 2008; Kaynak et al. 2008; Bodet and Chanavat 2010). Those who sought deeper insights into fans' perceptions of sports brands employed qualitative research methodology (Richelieu and Pons 2004; Chavanat and Bodet 2009). Therefore this research follows the same approach in line with Chanavat and Bodet's (2009) research; investigating brand perceptions that influenced sport fans' attitudes and behaviour.

#### 3.2 Sample

##### 3.2.1 Type and Size

Saunders et al. (2012) suggest non-random, purposive, homogeneous sampling to be the most accurate method to select the sample as it allows the researcher to identify

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participants that have the characteristics needed for answering the questions and meeting the objectives of a specific study. Most researchers agree that for qualitative studies it is best to collect data until data saturation is reached (Sekaran and Bougie 2010; Iacobucci and Churchill 2010; Bryman and Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2012). According to Guest and Johnson (2006) the sample size for in-depth and semi-structured interviews is around 12 participants. Bauer et al. (2008) and Kaynak et al. (2008) found that male participants are more likely to have strong personal connections with football. Also Bauer et al. (2008) found that United Kingdom nationals prefer British football teams over others. Therefore this study is based on 12 male football fans that support different football clubs. Six of the participants support two major Spanish teams (Real Madrid and Barcelona) and the others support English teams (Manchester United and Arsenal) fans.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

This study used exploratory research first and then followed by an explanatory study using in-depth interviews.

#### **3.3.1 Exploratory Research**

Data collection during the exploratory stage consists of systematic collection and analysis of secondary data using many scholarly journal articles and specialised publications. The analysis is based on three key criteria: the relevance to the research, its contributions for the area of study and criticality (Bryman and Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2012). Additional data is collected using social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter pages of football club brands.

#### **3.3.2 Explanatory Research**

While it is customary for explanatory research to follow quantitative methods to test the hypotheses and to determine the relationships between the variables, authors such as Saunders et al. (2012) suggest that qualitative data can be used to explain the cause-effect relationship between variables as well. Previous research in football by Richelieu and Pons (2004) and Chavanat and Bodet (2009) also have followed qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews in their explanatory studies.

##### **3.3.2.1 Interviews**

The study used semi-structured interviews as well as open-ended questions to allow the interviewees to provide a wider perspective of the subject, and used specific questions to pinpoint the interviewees' position/opinion within a specific aspect (Iacobucci and Churchill 2010; Sekaran and Bouie 2010). An interview guide with sample questions were written down to ensure that all the topics related to the study is covered (Sekaran and Bougie 2010; Bryman and Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2012).

###### **3.3.2.1.1 Interview Process**

Twelve interviews were held during two weeks. All interviews were conducted in English to facilitate the transcribing and data analysis processes. Each interview consisted of an average of 10 questions and lasted for approximately 30 minutes. All the interviews followed the same procedure: ethical information and consent form, introduction,

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questioning and closure (Sekaran and Bougie 2010; Bryman and Bell 2011; Saunders *et al.* 2012).

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

The anonymity of all participants was guaranteed and an ethical consent form was used according to University ethical code of practice.

### 3.5 Reliability and Validity

Creswell's (1997) recommendations are followed for the validity and reliability; applying triangulation techniques in which the results were compared and contrasted with the existing literature on each of the relevant concept. The reliability of this investigation consists of thorough revision and comparison between the audio recordings, transcriptions and notes of the interviews. The research followed this procedure four times *per* interview; to guarantee that all the relevant data is included in the study.

## 4. Data Analysis & Findings

### 4.1 Data Analysis Process

The data analysis consists of selecting, coding and categorising the data according to the research criteria (Sekaran and Bougie 2010; Iacobucci and Churchill 2010; Bryman and Bell 2011). The results of this process is compared, contrasted and even integrated to the theories studied in the literature review to reach the final conclusions (Sekaran and Bougie 2010; Bryman and Bell 2011). All the notes and transcriptions of the interviews are analysed under specific codes by identifying words, sentences or quotes according to each categories in literature (Bryman and Bell 2011).

### 4.2 Brand Benefits

Brand benefits are the core element of this research, therefore the responses of the participants were analysed in depth by comparing them to the three types of brand benefits established by Keller (1993); functional, experiential and symbolic. The results are summarised in the table below:

**Table 4.1: Responses on brand benefits**

<b>Brand benefits</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Functional	0
Experiential	5
Symbolic	7
<b>Total</b>	12

#### 4.2.1 Experiential Benefits

Five of the interviewees' answers correspond with Keller's (1993) experiential benefits. The respondents expressed their feelings being a fan of a particular team. They expressed that being with other supporters of the club is very important to them. Also they mentioned the experience evoke many emotions. This shows that shared experiences seem to bare significant importance to these persons.

### 4.2.2 Symbolic Benefits

Symbolic benefits seem to contribute to the fulfilment of self-realisation needs of self-expression (Gladden and Funk 2002). The responses indicated that, to some extent, being a fan of a specific team is embedded so deeply into their personalities; for some individuals that it has become part of who they are and how they define themselves.

#### 4.2.2.1 Peer Group Acceptance

According to Gladden and Funk's (2002) team association model, peer group acceptance is one of the constructs of symbolic brand benefits. According to this construct, individuals seek social approval based on their preferences over a sport team. The responses are categorised as shown in the following table:

**Table 4.2: Responses on peer group acceptance**

Level of importance	Respondents
Not important	7
Somewhat important	2
Important	2
Very important	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

The results show that only one out of twelve participants mentioned peer group acceptance influence their decision to support a particular club. The others confirm that peer group acceptance has little influence in their team choice. However, two of the six UK respondents acknowledged that peer group acceptance does influence team choice, but they did not confirm or specify whether they were personally influenced or not. Therefore, their responses are recorded as "somewhat important".

#### 4.2.2.2 Self-Identification

Self-identification with a specific team satisfies a fan's need of being involved with something that is successful (Gladden and Funk 2002). The responses are recorded using the four-level scale, as noted in the following table:

**Table 4.3: Responses on self-identification**

Level	Respondents
Low	4
Medium	1
Medium-High	3
High	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

The level of self-identification with the football clubs is more balanced than those of peer group acceptance. The majority of the opinions expressed high levels of self-identification with their clubs. Finally, three respondents mentioned that being a fan is important to them but up to a certain level. The issue with these statements are not a matter of self-identification but about the level of attachment that these individuals have towards their teams. However, it is considered that their comments are strong enough to be categorised as 'mid-high'.

### 4.2.3 Social Interactions

Social interactions are crucial element of this study. This concept is measured by organising the responses of the interviewees through a four-level scale, as follows:

**Table 4.4: Responses on social interactions**

<b>Level of importance</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Not important	1
Somewhat important	1
Important	6
Very important	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

Most of the respondents agreed that social interactions play an important role in football fans behaviour. Four out of twelve respondents agreed that these interactions are crucial for the enjoyment of the game. Likewise, six out of twelve respondents also mentioned that social interactions make the football-watching experience more pleasurable but to a lesser degree.

#### 4.2.3.1 Physical Interactions

Unlike the broader concept of social interactions, all twelve respondents highlighted that physical social exchanges are being important.

**Table 4.5: Responses on physical interactions**

<b>Level of importance</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Not important	0
Somewhat important	0
Important	6
Very important	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

As shown in the table above, six out of twelve participants identified them as very important. They found that “going to the stadium” is the only way to experience these types of social interactions amongst fans. The rest of the respondents found meeting friends in a bar/pub or gathering at home also important but to a lesser extent.

#### 4.2.3.2 Digital Interactions

Contrary to physical interactions, digital exchanges showed a significant lower level of importance to the participants of this study. Table 4.6 shows that half of the twelve respondents agreed that digital interactions are ‘somewhat important’ to them and they seem to have no effect on their perceptions about their favourite football club or their feelings towards it.

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**Table 4.6: Responses on digital interactions**

Level of importance	Respondents
Not important	0
Somewhat important	6
Important	3
Very important	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

Most participants stated that, although they visit the social networking pages of their clubs, they rarely engage or participate in activities for multiple reasons:

*“I don’t retweet because I know my friends follow the same accounts so they’ve probably seen it too” (7R)*

*“I barely post comments because I don’t feel like it (my comment) will make any difference, it’s not like I’m an expert or anything” (3R)*

The six remaining participants agreed that digital interactions are important. For three of them, digital interactions are very important because it allows them to connect with other fans from all over the world. They all highlighted both types of interactions are important and beneficial; but physical interactions seem to be more influential than digital interactions –

*“I think it’s easier because, you know, you can communicate from wherever you are and voice your opinions (...) discuss things, but it’s not the same as interacting, like if you were going out with friends or family to a match and then you meet other people from... you’re supporting the same team, then you automatically become friends.” (1R)*

## 5. Discussion

This research sought to determine if fans perceive social interactions as part of the brand benefits of football clubs. The findings confirmed the importance of social interactions in sports marketing. The results of this research are consistent with other studies (Melnick 1993; Eastman and Lamb 1997; Gladden and Funk 2002; Bauer et al. 2004; Pons et al. 2006; Patterson and Johnstone 2009; Bodet and Chavanat 2010). More specifically, these findings provide a positive response to the main research question: *“Can social interactions amongst fans and between fans and clubs perceived as brand benefits of global football club brands?”*

### 5.1 Social Interactions as Brand Benefits

The analysis showed football fans perceive social interactions are part of brand benefits. It also confirms Keller’s (1993) original brand benefits. Although functional benefits were not recognised by participants, the results show that experiential and symbolic benefits are significant, since sports consumption is a service with intangible characteristics.

#### 5.1.1 Physical and Digital Interactions

This research is to identify the types of social interactions that are most influential to football fans. When compared with the literature (Patterson and Johnstone 2009;

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Ioakimidis 2010) results show that, while physical interactions are of higher benefit, digital interactions also remain as an important benefit. Some participants stated that they do not actively participate in social networking sites but they use them to find and read information about their 'team', which is consistent with previous studies that classified online brand community participation as either active or passive (Ioakimidis 2010; Gummerus et al. 2012).

Further research on football clubs' social networking sites prove fans are constantly engaging in active participation. For instance, a post on Real Madrid's Facebook page had 392 comments within the hour since it was posted (Facebook 2012a). Many global football clubs are connected to millions of their fans through social networking sites. Facebook alone has; Barcelona with 63 million, Real Madrid with 59 million, and Manchester United 47 million registered fans (Facebook 2014). Therefore, it can be argued that the impact of both types of social interactions; physical and digital interactions are important social benefits. Overall the proposed modifications to the Knowledge model (Keller 1993) and to the Team association model (Gladden and Funk 2002), with "social benefits" as the fourth benefit dimension is well supported by the research evidence. Also the research findings confirm social benefits consist of both physical and digital interactions. Therefore, they should be included as the constructs of social benefits.

Many companies provide goods and services with digital presence. The proposed modified Keller's (1993) knowledge model can provide much deeper understanding between their customers and the brand benefits, and the contribution to brand equity. In the sports context the proposed modified Team associations' model (Gladden and Funk 2002) will be able to measure customer based brand equity in sports more holistically. Also it can help to implement brand management strategies to enhance fans physical and digital social interaction to increase brand equity, especially in football clubs.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The results suggest that social benefits are important to fans. It means that it is necessary for sports managers to provide their consumers with spaces in which they could participate and interact with each other physically and virtually enhancing their social experiences and to increase revenue (Ioakimidis 2010). Such activities may involve special events sponsored by the clubs, in which fans can meet and socialise with players, coaches, and other supporters, to engage with the club physically and emotionally. These events are beneficial for the clubs' sponsors as well, because such events increase their brand exposure; increasing brand awareness and brand associations among fans.

The promotion of hashtags (conversation topics) on Twitter for fans, who are at stadium during matches, can be beneficial. This can be facilitated by introducing free Wi-Fi access to all fans attend games. Clubs such as Liverpool has already introduced such initiatives (Mintel 2014).

Also in the world wide explosion of smartphones, tablets and laptop computers ownership together with wider access to faster broadband connections making it easier for the fans around the globe to be connected twenty four hours a day with their clubs and other fans (Mintel 2014). Clubs can increase their revenue though developing content using many different social media platforms. They need to make sure all the

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players, managers and other personnel that are important included in their social media strategy. The players should be encourage to share their personal opinions and experiences with the fans using many different types of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram to name a few. Also they can increase live feeds of football games, news, videos, forums, blogs etc. Another way to increase revenue is by introducing different on line games where fans can play with anyone from any corner of the world.

The reports produced by Mintel (2014) and Deloitte (2014) show that explosive growth of social media and the appetite amongst younger generations to be connected with their clubs twenty four hours a day is unprecedented. Also with the introduction of digital wearable jewellery with SMART technologies been available; clubs need to really adopt a strategic view in relation to digital social interactions as they offer too many opportunities such as social communities, social publishing, social entertainment and social commerce. These opportunities are beyond the scope of this paper. However it is vital, that any brand equity studies integrate social benefits as the fourth benefit to measure customer based brand equity.

Finally, it is important to carry out further research to develop scales to measure “social benefits” using physical and social interactions in the context of football clubs. Keller’s (1993) model is based on products. These brands are also engaging in digital interactions through social media (Ioakimidis 2010; Gummerus et al. 2012); therefore future research should extend to other industries including events and entertainment. Also to achieve generalizability, future research should integrate use of both qualitative and quantitative data.

## 6. Conclusions

This research provided strong evidence that global football fans perceive social interactions as brand benefits. The research suggests that physical and digital interactions are the two important constructs that create and determine social benefits. These findings are relevant to both academics and practitioners in the sports marketing and strategic brand management.

The paper achieved the objectives of this study by answering the research question as well as providing: a theoretical framework that fills a gap in previous literature on measuring brand equity, especially in the domain of football. The paper provides many recommendations to brand practitioners, especially in football clubs and provide further research avenues for academics.

### 6.1 Limitations

Although the procedures and methodology followed in this study are properly supported by literature (Iacobucci and Churchill 2010; Sekaran and Bougie 2010; Bryman and Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2012) the authors recognise that these findings should be further validated by a quantitative research to determine the extent to which this results can be generalised. Also lack of standardisation may raise concerns about reliability of qualitative data. The interviewer bias may have caused here, by the tone, or non –verbal behaviour of the interviewer; influencing the way that the interviewees responded to the questions being asked; since the interviewees consist of many different nationalities. It is also uncertain whether there is any gender related bias has taken place since the interviewer is female and all the interviewees have been male (Saunders et al. 2012).

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