

**STADIUM RELOCATION  
IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL**  
*BRAND IDENTITY, CLUB AUTHENTICITY, AND  
FAN ACCEPTANCE*

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# STADIUM RELOCATION IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL – BRAND IDENTITY, CLUB AUTHENTICITY, AND FAN ACCEPTANCE

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to conceptually illustrate the tension between commercialisation and club authenticity, which is a potential consequence of stadium relocation. There is a commercial pressure for relocating a football club to new and more modern facilities, but also a pressure from the brand identity perspective to maintain the core traditions of the club where the stadium plays a central role. This brand identity is in turn co-created by the community of stakeholders that demand authenticity from the club. These tensions are illustrated by the upcoming relocation of Atletico de Madrid from their stadium Vicente Calderón. The empirical base for the illustration consists of rich secondary data, focus group interviews with supporters and an expert interview. The results confirm the tensions identified; and future research should be conducted after the relocation is fully implemented to address the ex post effects as well.

## INTRODUCTION

Commercialisation of football has changed the scope for club management seeking increasing commercial opportunities to compete within the experience economy. This new approach to clubs have turned them into 'brands' that compete for market share with different value propositions based on their identity, history, trophies, players, etc. Many factors have determined this

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change: the improvement of communications, development of new technologies, the commercial growth of the sports sector and globalisation, are among other factors responsible for a more complex landscape. (e.g. Beech & Chadwick, 2013)

Stadiums are important assets for clubs, since they on match days provide revenue through gate takings, concessions and merchandise (e.g. Chierici, 2016; Grundy, 1998). The exploitation of stadiums outside of match days has increased its importance due to possibilities of e.g. stadium tours and non-football events (e.g. Ramshaw, Gammon, & Huang, 2013). Deloitte calculated in 2007 that since 1992 the total stadium investment was above £3 billion, pointing out how stadiums have become a remarkable element of a successful club business strategy (Kennedy, 2012). But apart from this financial perspective, stadiums as ‘homes’ of the club have contributed to their value by creating memorable experiences and representing better than any other asset the identity of a club.

This new approach of stadiums also represents an ambition to attract wider audiences, from traditional supporters to tourists or corporate clients (Hill & Green, 2000). A potential tension with traditional supporters and their reaction to this new conceptualisation of stadiums might, however occur. Even though many supporters have a good impression of the new facilities, traditional fans show their concerns about the team’s identity and the atmosphere within modern stadiums. In the same vein, it must be noted that the profile of spectators is also changing in modern stadiums due to the higher comfort of the stadium experience or the increasing VIP offers; a situation that has brought criticism from traditional fans who see themselves substituted by corporate spectators with higher economic power. Therefore one of the main tasks of stadium managers nowadays is to find the right balance between the commercial exploitation of the stadium and the preservation of traditions, social behavioural patterns and symbolism traditionally attached to a certain club and its stadium (Paramio, 2008). For instance, Kennedy (2012) points out how English football clubs traditionally had their stadiums as a central component of their identity, (even compared in a way with places of religious worship with strong emotional associations to it), and recently a more profane view has focused on the commercial opportunities to increase revenues by partnering with other industries like finance or entertainment.

In this sense, Paramio et al. (2008) highlight the importance of the emotional appeal produced by some iconic European football stadium both locally and internationally. This has driven the promotion of those stadiums as tourist

attractions and offers of experience, in which it was conceptualised as 'nostalgia sports tourism' by Gibson (2006) Stadium tours and clubs' museums captivate visitors' emotions and offer a chance to engage them for future interactions which would result on potential economic revenues. These approaches to visitors' emotions have led many teams to build statues and memorials of famous players, managers or historical moments of the club. These references to the club's past facilitate a deep identity formation and the development of a sense of place among supporters within the stadium. Penny and Redhead (2009) remark the importance of understanding personal and social experiences at the stadium, the impact of sensory aspects and the development of a sense of place at traditional stadiums when carrying out the analysis of contemporary stadiums and the development of place attachment to these new venues.

Nevertheless, not every club has been so careful in appealing fans' emotions on new stadiums, and in some cases there is an important absence of references to the club's history or gestures to former stadiums, following a standardised model of stadium that has seen a more homogenised stadium scene. These stadiums have been characterised as 'characterless' and suffer a remarkable lack of identity (Penny & Redhead 2009). The work of Augé (1995) reflects on the tendency to create 'non-places', a concept of those spaces which are not relational, historical or embrace identity. Fans who perceive new stadiums as 'non-places' feel displaced, leading to an identity crisis that can result in nostalgia for the former venues, a concept that will be later analysed.

Before advancing, an important distinction should be made between the concepts of fans and spectators to understand the stadiums context (Junghagen, Besjakov & Lund, 2016; Hunt, Bristol & Bashaw, 1999; Tapp & Clowes, 2000). Bridgewater (2010) points out that spectators are those who watch a certain sport without changing their cognitive, affective or conative behaviour, thus not developing any sense of loyalty. On the other hand, fans show a strong loyalty to a specific club and frequently an emotional and social attachment. In commercialised football, there is a tension between the commercial aspects and the more traditional values of loyal fans of a club (Guschwan, 2016). It is very relevant therefore to focus on fans' perceptions of value, as they are consumers and stakeholders of clubs. Moreover, some of the dimensions mentioned above clearly highlight their contribution to the total experience value for other spectators like team support or social activities, so they should also be conceived as co-creators of that value.

Therefore, the relocation process is considered to be a great issue for clubs, who have to take every detail into account in order to successfully impact the club and its stakeholders (Junghagen, 2016). Relocation from a mythical stadium to modern facilities often include a ceremonial transfer of ‘ghosts’ and traditions (Belanger, 2000), so clubs considering a move of stadium have to acknowledge these elements tied to the former venue need to be preserved in the move in order to satisfy fan identification.

The aim of this paper is to conceptually illustrate the tension between commercialisation and club authenticity, which is a potential consequence of stadium relocation. The discussion on this tension will take its point of departure from a brand management perspective, with a focus on two specific approaches to brand management, the identity approach and the community approach (Heding, Knudsen & Bjerre, 2016).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A conversation on stadium relocation can take its point of departure in a number of perspectives. As indicated in the introduction, the perspective chosen is that of the club and its ambition to manage the brand in a context of commercialisation. The perspective of supporters and fans serves as a counterweight to the commercial ambitions. The following literature review will introduce the identity approach to brand management, which can be seen as an inside-out approach; the community approach to brand management, which is more of an outside-in approach to branding; and finally a discussion on authenticity, which represents a combination of the two.

### **Approaches to brand equity and brand management**

Heding et al. (2016) identify seven different approaches to brand management, evolving from being producer focused via customer centric focused to being more focused on the context of the brand. For a football club and for this paper, two approaches become relevant; the identity approach and the community approach. The identity approach builds on the notion that a successful brand is built on the corporate identity and culture, which is in alignment with the resulting image in the market (e.g. Hatch & Schultz, 1997). The community approach takes the context into account, and the brand is seen as co-created together with the customers, who can be perceived as tribe members rather than individual consumers (e.g. Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001).

### **Stadiums as a dimension of Brand Identity**

Stadiums are visible representations of the club brand, and the atmosphere during the match helps supporting hedonistic behaviour of supporters. Clubs should influence fans' behaviour by reinforcing the aesthetic elements of the stadium as well as evoking past memories of the consumption experience when promoting the games (Junghagen, Besjakov & Lund, 2016). Exploiting a team's tradition is important to enhance the brand of the football club. (Biscaia et al., 2013) This could be achieved for a club through for instance multimedia content about important players and teams in the past, or guided tours of the stadium (Bauer et al., 2008).

Stadium management can be regarded as an antecedent of brand equity. Stadium tradition and design are important in developing the team's brand equity, as iconic venues contain remarkable histories within its walls and some are designed with nostalgic references to the past. Moreover, fans' brand associations can be built up by previous experiences attending to the stadium. (Gladden & Milne 2003)

Clubs have lately boosted the implementation and promotion of corporate seats or season ticket packs in order to attract fans to stadiums and consequently increase their revenue (Hill & Green, 2000). These strategic moves have been complemented with the development of new elements in stadiums that enhance the entertainment experience. The development of TV and internet and the consequential globalisation of football (Sandvoss, 2003) have improved the home experience and should be counteracted. Sport facilities have attempted to create nostalgic emotions by implementing elements which reference to past successful performances and appeal to authentic values of the club, such as museums, status or memorials (Seifried & Meyer, 2010). These attractions can get younger generations of fans engaged on the communal traditions and history of the team, an important issue to address since primal social experiences importantly support forming and determining the intensity of identification and attachment to a club brand (Funk & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2006; Beaton & Funk, 2008; Funk, 2008; Junghagen, Besjakov & Lund, 2016).

Essentially, sport organisations can utilise their facilities to recycle archetypes from the present and past in order to activate nostalgia-related feelings from current or potential members of a fan nation. Direct experience is also not necessary to evoke nostalgia-related feelings from sport customers because they are a group whose eagerness to escape the present allows them to be

more readily influenced through technology. Still, a more responsible examination of the past is needed to more accurately represent it to potential consumers. Clubs need to be careful they do not undermine their attempts to add to history by trying to recreate or reinvent the past inaccurately. (Seifried & Meyer - 2010)

The stadium represents in sports industry the venue in which fans consume and experience sports. Even though it has been demonstrated that the long-term attendance of stadiums is strongly linked with the quality of the team's performance, it also depends directly on the spectator experience. The consumption of live sports provides greater excitement than watching the same event on television through human's five senses (Seunghwan et. al., 2012)

It is obvious that the experience of spectatorship has been progressively transformed with the broadcasting of games. At the beginning though, spectators could perceive that being present in the stadium was special and provided a one-of-a-kind experience. But then, the great improvements on television coverage, entailed a sudden feeling that the live experience seemed to be missing something. Going to the stadium implied having a distanced view of the pitch and missing replays for instance. Progressively the games moved from a reduced availability to those attending the stadiums, to an increasing stage-managed for the television viewer. "Of course there are gains here—a new, more relaxed social space, less pressurised and intense than the stadium, brings its own pleasures of communal viewing and shared cultural experience." (Whannel, 2009).

### **Co-creation of the football product**

Ross (2006) introduces a framework for understanding Spectator-Based brand equity, stressing the need to acknowledge the service-orientation nature of sports, and the significance of consumer experience role in creating and shaping equity for a sport organization. Ross upholds that the nature of sport-spectator experiences induces the need of analysis of brand equity development on sport; as managers are not able to control the outcome of the games, the strategic management of other aspects of the experience emerge as crucial. Biscaia et al. (2013) have shown that social interaction and concessions are significant predictors of brand associations suggesting that the experiential benefits are important aspects of spectators' consumption experience. They uphold that sharing the stadium experience with other fans can be another way of contributing to influence team's brand. Thus, it could be

argued that by the improvement of concession areas, teams would boost opportunities for fans to socialize and consequently increase their levels of identification, their experience and then brand equity.

As it has been suggested by the new service-dominant logic as well as in Ross' brand equity theory, the consumer-based nature of sport highlights the contribution of spectators in creating equity. Thus, fans must be conceptualized as co-creators of the football experience, and so it is a very relevant factor that clubs should take into account. The atmosphere generated by devoted supporters in the stadium is in fact an important ingredient of the total experience product for the non-regular spectators (Mehus, 2010).

Payne et al. (2008) introduced the co-creation of value, developing a process-based conceptual framework for gaining a better understanding of value co-creation in service dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This view considers the relation between customer and supplier as a dynamic and interactive collection of experiences performed by the consumer and the service provider, on a certain context by both deliberated actions and unconscious behaviour.

### **Co-Creation of Brand Communities**

Hatch & Schultz (2010) point out how customers gather creating brand communities, and how the cultures maintained by them and the moral responsibility related to the brand can either back it up or harm the organization, and thus it has to be considered a potential risk or help. Fyrberg Yngfalk, (2013) remarks that the behaviour of consumers gathering in communities is more influenced by the internal conduct than outside actions like those coming from marketing strategies and media reports.

Muniz and O'Guin (2001) analyse the social dynamics that generate brand communities and show that their foundations lie in shared consciousness, rituals and traditions of the group, and a common sense of moral responsibility, all of which fundamentally guide their relationships with the brands. They also point out that the knowledge shared by them amplifies the need of transparency from the company behind the brand in all its communications and decisions (Hatch & Schultz - 2010) In the involvement with the brand, they hold that the enterprise brand symbolize not just the organization but the relationships with all the stakeholders as result of its interactivity. Consequently, the enterprise brand isn't just materialized as a co-creation of the different stakeholders, but compelled by an identity created collectively that covers the exchange of products and services as well as the

expression of their perspectives, wishes and fears about the brand (Hatch & Schultz - 2010)

Along this lines, Richelieu & Lessard (2014) states that at the time to associate with a certain sports team, fans take advantage of the symbolic features of a brand to outline their own identity. The resulting identity increases customers' choice and usage towards the brand or team, evokes emotions in their minds and reinforces the level of trust and loyalty among them (Aaker, 1997). Then, this strong attachment and engagement to their beloved team enhances the role of fans as co-creators of their experience and brand ambassadors of the team. Consequently, teams have to stay innovative and competitive in order to attract fans, while securing both affordability and accessibility, avoiding to become an ordinary brand (Mullin et al., 2007). Ramaswamy & Ozcan (2013) advocate for increasing cooperation and communication in the co-creation context, as they believe that a strategy in the era of co-creation cannot be successful if it remains a top down, isolated process. They suggest that strategies nowadays should focus on "engage and discover" instead of "command and cascade."

Football clubs have several ways to enhance co-creation with fans and encourage social interactions among them, like for instance the establishment of fan-zones, branded concessions or club museums. Selling merchandise articles within this context complements the experience perfectly and raises fan identification up (Woratschek, Horbel & Popp, 2014). Promotion of a team's social media and the engagement of fans posting contents on it, use of the stadium to host fan tournaments or easing fans' away trips together are other propositions of Richelieu & Lessard (2014) in order to strengthen the identification of fans with the brand.

### **Authenticity**

As it has been stated, one of the main contributions of fans' co-creation is to enhance the brand equity of the team and its fans. On their quest to create and preserve an identity, the quest for authenticity arises and is next presented as a key concept to understand fans' behaviour. In many acts of consumption, customers ask for authenticity, and if there's an industry that is affected by this assumption is the sports industry. In a hard-competition context between sports and teams to attract potential fans, the need for authenticity and identity stands strongly.

Authenticity has been characterised by several academic as a crucial aspect of contemporary life, a real concern of western cultures. Some studies have even pointed out that increasing commercialisation can weak away the foundations of authenticity (Grayson & Martinec 2004). This view is shared by Persson & Söderman (2015) who, regarding the demand for authenticity in football, warn about the risks of changing elements such as colour, logos or stadium due to commercialisation, as it can potentially harm the team's originality. They maintain though, that further research is needed around this relationship between authenticity and commercialisation, as well as an increased attention to active supporters as they are part of the experience. Among the six kinds of clues that Persson & Söderman (2015) identify regarding authenticity, three of them are directly linked to the stadium experience: place and local ties, traditions and history and brand heritage. All these clues would be affected by stadium relocation, generating a desperate search of authenticity in short-term in order to protect or create cues of authenticity. Regarding authenticity and stadiums, (Relph, 1976) discussed the concept of an 'authentic sense of place', as that of being at and belonging to a place at an individual and community levels without thinking about it. Bale (2000) maintains that this kind of authenticity is menaced by the development of safe, modern but "placeless" facilities which Incorporate less identifiable elements for the fans to embrace and enjoy. (Penny & Redhead 2009) Penny and Redhead hold the importance of the visual dimension to the stadium experience for supporters who appreciate diversity over homogeneity and other visual elements that enhance the presence of the team's identity within the stadium.

The search for authenticity is also generated in response to the increasing standardisation and homogenisation. Arnould and Price (2000) also recognise self-authentication as a driver of preserving authenticity and distinguish two means by which consumers seek to do so: either by co-creating the consumption experience as part of an authenticating act, or by the cultural display of those aspects representative of a community.

Therefore, the need to preserve authenticity is crucial for football teams at the time of relocating stadiums. Fans ties with the former venue will be searched in the new stadium and as it has been shown, their co-creation and the preservation of their traditions and rituals is key to minimise the negative impacts of relocating and enhancing the club's authenticity on their new home.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This conceptual paper takes its point of departure in a theoretical conversation on clubs, stadiums, brands and their interrelations. In order to illustrate this a single case (Yin, 2014) will be elaborated upon and is founded in an interpretivist research philosophy (Saunders, 2016). The chosen illustration is that of Atletico de Madrid and the planned relocation from their home stadium Vicente Calderón. The case is interesting due to several reasons. Atletico de Madrid is not the strongest brand in Spanish football, but can be considered the third club after FC Barcelona and Real Madrid. In spite of this, Atletico de Madrid has been quite successful in the European Competitions, exposing their brand to a global audience. The club is now planning a move to a modern stadium to accommodate new spectator segments and football tourists, that are supposed to be attracted by the club brand.

A qualitative research design is employed, based on secondary and primary qualitative data. Firstly, online research on media and Atletico de Madrid supporters' forums, specifically *colchonero.com*, was conducted. The extensive secondary data that has been extracted from both sources has been analysed and filtered in order to focus on two topics of research:

- The review of the impact of the atmosphere of Vicente Calderon on event experience
- The information and fans' reaction regarding the upcoming relocation of the stadium.

Then, a focus group was performed with six Atletico de Madrid fans. The group was homogeneous, with a shared passion for the team and aged between thirty to sixty years old. The goal was to identify shared cultural meanings attached to the stadium experience, social constructs on stadium-identity relation, as well as revealing opinions on the upcoming relocation. Although the drawback of this method is that it just offers one spontaneous reaction and then tends to agreement, the group dynamic provided a more sentimental discussion about the stadium and their identity, while showing a general concern about several aspects of the new venue and a deep fear of losing their beloved 'home' where so many memories have been experienced.

In order to further validate the findings from secondary data analysis and the focus group interview, an expert interview was conducted with a university professor in Madrid, author of two biographies of Atletico players, and above all, a long-term season ticket holder of Atletico de Madrid. The ambition of this

interview was to capture his insights on identity and relocation topics in which he stands out with his active involvement on the club's issues.

## **THE CASE OF ATLETICO MADRID AND THE RELOCATION**

Atletico de Madrid is a Spanish football club based on Madrid, founded in 1903 by a group of Basque students. It is considered the third team of the country according to La Liga historical table and number of supporters, just behind the two Spanish giants: Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. In 1992, the club became a public limited sports company because of a statutory order, and Jesus Gil y Gil assumed the form of the main owner of the club. The years that followed the conversion were quite bad and even saw the team relegating to second division in 2000 for the first time after 61 consecutive years in the main division of the Spanish League. After promoting two years later, the results were slightly improving until 2010 when the victory of the Europa League provided a European trophy for the club again. But it was with the arrival of former Atletico player Diego Simeone in December 2011 when Atletico were boosted back again to the top.

In 2016 Atletico was valued by Forbes at \$732 million ranking the 16th club in the world; and by April 2016 the estimated value has already jumped to \$633 million. Deloitte's Football Money League report placed Atletico 15<sup>th</sup> in the list of revenues by team with a 2015 revenue of €187.1 million, continuing a remarkable ascending dynamic during last years.

### **Club Identity**

The club's visual identity is based on the red and white colors, which has given them the nickname of 'Los rojiblancos' (Red and Whites) or 'Los Colchoneros' (Mattressers) as those were the traditional colours for mattresses on the beginning of the twentieth century. They are also known as 'Indians' because of the localisation of their stadium by the bank of river Manzanares and their hate towards the 'blancos' (Real Madrid). When referring to the club, most of the people in Spain just call them 'Atletico' or 'Atleti' in a more affectionate manner. The dramatic way in which they lost the 1974 European final gave them the nickname of 'El Pupas', translated in something like 'the poor losers'; which has been maintained in time specially from other club's supporters to point out Atleti's bad luck and tease them.

One of the main distinctive traits of Atletico is without doubts its supporters which are known for being extremely loyal and strongly attached to their club, a good example is the fact that after relegating to second division in 2000, the club increased the season tickets sold. During the games at Vicente Calderón, fans sing and cheer for the team with lots of passion, creating a unique atmosphere in Spanish football that also has received praise from all around the world. Atletico supporters are also known for creating a great community that oversteps football itself and characterises their social relations, conceiving each other as a huge family, and which can be observed on game days before, during and after the games.

TV commercials have been an important strategic element remarking Atleti's identity during the hard times of the late 1990s and early 2000's. The club hired a publicity agency to create a series of advertisings that became really popular. Trying to show in a funny way Atletico fans' identity and reinforce their attachment during hard times, some of the most famous commercials were for example a kid asking his parent "Dad, why are we Atleti fans?" which the dad is not able to answer and just remains silent, or others titled after 'It kills me, it gives me life' and 'the heart has reasons that the head doesn't understand'. These commercials were a notable marketing action that projected Atleti fans' identity of high attachment and unconditional love for their team no matter their performance.

### **Stadiums timeline**

During the first twenty years, Atletico played in two different stadiums— Retiro and O'Donell— of small capacity as the Spanish league and the club were in an early stage of growth. The consolidation arrived with the construction of the Metropolitan Stadium, at the northwest area of Madrid. The venue had capacity for 25.000 spectators and was characterised by a huge stand known as 'La Gradona'. During the Spanish Civil War, the stadium was almost ruined and, once the war finished, it required hard work and more than three years to repair it and reopen again. Posterior upgrades increased the capacity of the stadium to 50.000, with reports of the era highlighting that in certain games up to 70.000 spectators were fitted into the stadium.

In 1966, Atletico de Madrid inaugurated their new stadium: The Manzanares Stadium, named after the location where it was built by the bank of the Manzanares river, with a capacity for 62.000 people. Five years later the name of the stadium was changed to Vicente Calderon as it has been since then. In this stadium, Atletico have won many titles and have experienced the best

moments of its centenary history. For security and accessibility reasons, the stadium has seen its capacity reduced to 54.907, and was awarded with the five stars by UEFA as an elite stadium. Although along its history many rumours have suggested a potential remodelling of the venue, the club decided to relocate to a new stadium in 2017.

The projected stadium, Wanda Metropolitano, is currently under construction in San Blas, a neighbourhood in the East part of Madrid, and will have a capacity around 70.000. Equipped with the latest technological systems, improved accessibility and a large offer of services, it aims to be one of the best stadiums in Spain and a platform for boosting Atleti's image worldwide and generating additional revenue that allows the club to keep fighting with clubs with a much higher budget.

### **Vicente Calderón and Identity**

The Atletico de Madrid stadium has been operating for 50 years since it first opened in 1966. During those years, many games and historic moments have turned the stadium into a second home for many fans. On the *colchoner.com* forum, a user started a certain conversation about the first experience of each fan on the stadium; the comments on it were full of different anecdotes and details but the strong memory that respondents showed, demonstrated the intensity of the experience and the impact that caused to all of them. It is remarkable that there weren't much differences between those that have been in the stadium just a couple of times and those that have been going to every game for thirty years for example, both had clear memories about that first day. The vast majority remembered those first moments in the stadium together with their families that had tradition to support Atletico, but interestingly some users said that they went to Vicente Calderón without being a fan of the club, neither of football. Nevertheless, they maintain that the experience was life-changing and since then they became active supporters of the club until now.

During the focus group, participants also clearly remembered their first experience at Vicente Calderón; however, their emotions attached to the venue arose stronger in the forum posts, for instance one of them stated regarding his first experience:

*"I will never forget my first impression; I was just a kid when my family brought me to a game. I clearly remember the electrifying feeling of walking the stairs into the stadium and seeing thousands of fans*

*dressed in red and white clothes waving many flags and cheering loud. I was so impressed that I barely talked to my family until we left the stadium, when I began asking when was the next time we were going to come.”*

Another participant then replied:

*“For me it was quite the opposite, I remember how excited I was the whole afternoon. I was about seven and went there with my grandpa who apparently knew everybody around. I couldn’t stop asking questions to him but he patiently managed to answer all of them with a big smile even during the action. With the perspective of time, I’ve realised how joyful he was for doing so and that he actually he didn’t know everybody but was part of the Atleti’s community culture. Still every time I step on Vicente Calderón I feel like he is there with me.”*

All these moments and memories have forged an identity for the stadium as a central part of the Atletico’s identity. When asked about the stadium’s contribution to team’s identity, members of the focus group agreed on its huge relevance. Many different reasons were pointed out: the nickname “Indians” by which Atletico fans are known has its origins on the localisation of the stadium by the bank of the river Manzanares, the reinforcement of the sense of belonging at each game at Vicente Calderón, or just the traditions and rituals that surround the stadium on game days and that has become an integral part of Atletico on fans’ minds.

*“The hymn itself starts saying ‘I go to Manzanares, to the stadium Vicente Calderón’...the neighborhood is rooted on the club’s soul, there are a lot of traditions on game days such as restaurants, pubs, meeting points...all this is a crucial component of the club’s culture.” (Expert interview)*

But what is it that makes Vicente Calderón so different and special for them? On another forum topic where fans were discussing about the stadium experience, many users argued about the importance of the people sharing an unrivalled sense of community that even reached the conceptualisation as a ‘family with different blood’. Personal anecdotes meeting new people on the surroundings of the stadium, hugging their seat neighbours after a goal or the ease with which you might get engaged into a discussion with other fans while waiting for some food or waiting in the toilet line, were some of the best given examples of how important the sense of community is for the supporters while attending games. Other comments pointed out that consequence of that

camaraderie, everybody cheer and sing together in perfect harmony before, during, and after the game creating the unique atmosphere that characterises Vicente Calderón.

The atmosphere at Vicente Calderón has been praised around the world and it is considered one of the main distinctive traits of Atletico de Madrid. During the 2016/17 season, it showed among the highest capacity utilisation in the Spanish League games according to official statistics ([transfermarkt.co.uk](http://transfermarkt.co.uk)). During the season's final fixtures it was sold out seven matches in a row, twelve in total during the year. With Atletico immersed battling for the domestic league and Champions League, many media reports have reflected the atmosphere of the stadium as crucial for the team's success on the pitch.

Atletico marched on to the Champions League 2016 final for third time in its 113 years' history. Home games of each of the three eliminatory rounds were concluded with clean sheets, proving the difficulty for rivals to win there, and media, managers and players and have acknowledged the importance of the stadium's impressive atmosphere on helping the home team to achieve big wins. For instance, German's Deutsche Welle published an article after Bayern Munchen's game at Madrid for the first leg of the European semifinal titled "An evening for the supporters: How Atletico' fans won their match against Bayern". The article develops remarking how "the early goal transformed the stadium into a deafening football temple. It wasn't long before it became clear to every Bayern fan present that their team were up against more than just the 11 players on the pitch" or how "The supporters cheered on their team passionately, while demonstrating an impeccable sense of timing, knowing when the right moment to try to give their team a lift.". To conclude, it illustrates the overall feeling of German fans after the game: "What went on in the stadium was impressive". This is just a meaningful and representative example of how worldwide media reflects on the Atletico's stadium atmosphere.

Besides that, players and managers of rival teams have acknowledged many times the relevance of the crowd's pressure when playing at Vicente Calderón. Categorized as "the best atmosphere in Europe" by Pep Guardiola, one of the most successful coaches in the recent times, many managers have remarked the challenge that represents playing at the Atletico stadium like Roger Schmidt (Bayer 04 Leverkusen): "there's a heated atmosphere there, so we know we have to keep the head cold and take this as a huge test for our players". Apart from the pressure on the rival, former Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho also remarked the quality of the atmosphere created by the fans of

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Vicente Calderón: “For me Atletico fans are fantastic, even though they are losing 1-3 and freezing to death at 10 in the evening, they are there filling the stadium and warming the game until the end”.

The observation on the Atletico fans forum before and after the games reveal the pride supporters take for bringing in such terrific atmosphere. Many users share ideas of songs or mosaics aiming to boost the team and keep the stadium full of life during the 90 minutes. After the games, fans who haven't been able to attend congratulate those who were there, praise their continuous cheering and get engaged in conversations about aspects that could be improved in upcoming matches.

Indeed, players are not an exception and show gratitude to them for their constant support and encouragement through the worst moments of the game. Connected to this, during the focus group it was highlighted the existing communion between the people on the stands and the players on the field. From their view, team and fans reciprocally strengthen one another and that's the key to create such impressive atmospheres.

*“Atletico supporters right now don't just go to the stadium to watch the games, people go to the stadium to play it, to feel it. And it's pure fire on the stands that obviously is transferred to the players on the pitch”  
(Expert Interview)*

All these statements and feedback compiled evidence the dimension and meaning of a shared identity among Atletico fans. With Vicente Calderón being a crucial component of their shared culture, it is time to review the upcoming relocation in order to understand the impact that can have for Atletico de Madrid.

### **Upcoming stadium relocation**

The fact that stadium relocation can be traumatic at first for the fans, is something that clubs assume and therefore work on it to reduce its impact. One of the priorities reported by Atleti's top management officials is to keep the spirit of Vicente Calderón on the new venue. Spanish newspaper 'Mundo Deportivo' addressed club's focus is on recreating the experience from the surroundings of the stadium where fans usually gather before games, to the characteristic atmosphere inside. To do so, plans are to create fan zones taking advantage of the increased area available on the new location, aiming to provide different experiences with gaming areas for kids and families or music

stages where supporters can meet around to take some drinks before entering the stadium. These initiatives intend to align with one of the main distinctive traits of attendees at Atletico's stadium which is the aforementioned gathering of fans before and after the games, enhancing the sense of community existing among them.

Fans though, are afraid of losing these pre-game traditions. When the focus group was talking about the biggest threats that the relocation to a new stadium represent, they showed a huge concern about all the traditions that surround a game well prior to its beginning. The rooted restaurants, pubs and areas around the stadium were pointed out as a crucial part of the game day experience and the most important moment to embrace the community of fans. Management plans to implement fan zones where supporters could gather are mistrusted as people assemble where they want by any reason, which cannot be substituted by the club implementing drinking areas or stages.

Then, another key aspect while relocating stadium is to show respect for the history of the club as well as rituals, symbols and traditions of its fan base. The first step was local government's decision to name the avenue surrounding the stadium 'Luis Aragonés Avenue', in tribute to the former legendary player and coach of Atletico, and manager of the Spanish national team when they won the 2008 European Cup. To make sure none of this history and traditions is diminished because of the relocation, Atletico has created a section on their webpage where fans can suggest their ideas to implement on the new stadium. This initiative is believed to involve fans into the process of moving to a new home for the team, making them feel part of it and improving their perception; but according to the feedback compiled online supporters remain sceptical and don't think their contributions will be considered "as the club never counts with our opinion for anything, why would this be any different?" could be read in the comments of a post talking about this initiative.

On the Atletico forums, numerous topics can be found about new ideas and suggestions regarding the implementation of Atletico history on the new stadium. Some of the thoughts are widespread like the convenience of building up statues of legendary players or the placement of big pictures celebrating the most important achievements of the team's history. But above all the worries, the club idea of selling the naming rights of the stadium to the highest bidder stands out. The same concern was expressed in the focus group, pointing out that even though a majority of the fans are against a commercial name for the stadium, the biggest worry is the lack of an original name that represents the

club's identity, and by which the fans could refer to, even if later the naming rights were acquired by a company. Juan Esteban maintained that at least it would have been a nice detail with club members to vote a symbolic name for the stadium; especially considering that losing the 'Vicente Calderón' name represents a huge loss of identity for the club, as it was named after one of the best presidents of club history, and it implies losing an emotional memory that plays a key role for projecting the club to the future. After the data collection for this study, the name of the stadium has been announced: Wanda Metropolitano, which actually reflects a part of Atleti's history since the "Metropolitano" name refers to the old stadium they had more than 50 years ago.

Reports point out that Atletico managers have travelled to some of the most representative stadiums in Europe like the Emirates, Allianz Arena or Da Luz in order to learn from their relocation experiences and identify strengths and weaknesses to apply on the construction of the new stadiums. They also travelled to the US to analyse NBA and NFL stadiums, and the game day experience which is something that Atletico wants to improve at the new stadium with entertainment offers and the use of the latest technological systems. In that direction, the club reached an agreement with CenterplateISG, a joint venture by Centerplate and International Stadia Group aiming to design the hospitality, ticketing and marketing solutions for the new stadium.

Fans are quite suspicious about these plans, as they showed on the focus group when presented with this issue. They all agreed that the experience at Vicente Calderón is outstanding and is just missing some improvement of the stadium services like concessions and toilets; instead they fear that the new stadium is going to be Americanised, full of services and technology but changing the nature of the Atletico experience. One of them unveiled what, in his opinion, was the reason behind this plans: to attract more tourists and corporate visitors who spend higher on tickets and services. The rest of the participants reacted vehemently, stating that it shouldn't be forgotten that Atletico fans are historically from the working classes and that filling the stadium with VIP visitors would affect the atmosphere and therefore Atletico's identity. It is actually true that the increased VIP services is one of the most highlighted aspects of the new facilities, as Atletico's CEO Miguel Angel Gil Marín has proudly remarked many times that the new stadium is going to have over 7.000 VIP seats that will help to increase revenue.

*“They want to attract corporations that can pay thousands of euros per season ticket. But, are those fans going to cheer with energy? Are they going to contribute to create the fearing atmosphere that characterises Vicente Calderon? Maybe that atmosphere provides revenue too; to have thousands of crazy fans cheering loud, intimidating the rival...doesn't that creates value to the club? When you advance rounds in Europe partly because of the crowd pressure, doesn't that increases revenue? What about the fans and sponsors worldwide that come to Calderón attracted by its magic? They should definitely take that into account because it creates a fundamental added value.” (Expert interview)*

Fans on the forum also showed their concerns about that loss of atmosphere, pointing it as the main driver for visitors to choose Vicente Calderón over its neighbour Santiago Bernabeu for instance. Some remark that Barcelona and Real Madrid attract many fans worldwide because of their well-known star players but with silent crowds full of tourists; instead, Atletico draws the attention of all those looking for loud crowd on the stands, the atmosphere, or the special feeling of enjoying a game live there. Other reflected that all these characteristics were on spectators' minds when thinking about Vicente Calderón, as it happens with other stadiums like Anfield or La Bombonera.

Spanish media has repeatedly reported the many legal obstacles and critics among the fanbase that the relocation has aroused. Since the signing of the agreement with the local government in 2008 by which Atletico would own the projected Madrid Olympic Stadium once the Olympics finished, many issues have delayed the construction. After Madrid failed for the third straight time to host the Olympics in 2013, the project was redesigned and it was conceived just for football purposes. The legal battles regarding the sale of Vicente Calderon's land to the construction company FCC in exchange of the construction of the new stadium have jeopardised and delayed the progress. As result of the continuous setbacks, many Atletico fans have mistrusted the viability of the relocation and its economic impact on the club's financial stability.

Supporters participating in the focus group stressed that the club has systematically failed to fulfil the promises made about the stadium development: from the first steps when Atleti was going to be able to restructure its debt plus getting a modern stadium, to then assuring that Atletico was going to exchange the land of Vicente Calderón for a brand new stadium without cost, to the current situation where the construction company

has left the project because of the doubts on the profitability of the exchange due to legal restrictions. Apart from all these plan changes which participants understand are not just club's fault, they agree to point out as their biggest disappointments the lack of transparency of the process and the absence of a referendum among the members to decide the relocation of the club. One of the participants remarked that the information supporters receive is very limited, especially considering the amount of doubts surrounding the project, and its therefore harming the conceptualisation of the new stadium amidst supporters. The expert interview revealed the differences with the previous relocation in 1966: "When the club moved from the Metropolitano, delegate members had the chance to vote. The result was favourable to the change and members of the club decided to pay five years of their annual fee in advance in order to fund the increase of the construction costs."

The reality is that the club is not on member's hands anymore since 1992, when by law it was transformed into a public limited sports company. Fans believe though that for decisions as important as stadium relocation, members should be consulted. A participant of the focus group mentioned the cases of other clubs like West Ham or Everton where members have been able to vote and approve/refuse the change of stadium, engaging then into a conversation of how in that way, even if the relocation was approved, they will accept it without further complains. At some point one of them stated that this not happening at all, so all of them should assume that the only thing they were going to be able to vote is the seat they want to pay for in the stadium.

*"They might own the majority of the club shares, but not the emotional heritage of Atletico de Madrid. I mean, football is an irrational act of consumption because you consume it from an emotional standpoint without caring the actual performance of the team. Thus the shares have value because are linked to an emotional heritage that is owned by the supporters. It's not right to treat fans as consumers of a service".*  
(Expert interview)

Apart from the aforementioned criticism, the neighbours of San Blas where the new stadium is being built have shown their concerns about the insufficient infrastructures to absorb thousands of fans each game day. The lack of parking spots and foremost the access to the neighbourhood from one of the main ring roads of the city present a real threat for both the people going to the stadium and the inhabitants of the area on their daily lives. On the other hand, the neighbours of Arganzuela, area where Vicente Calderón stands, are also worried about the economic impact that the relocation is going to have,

reducing the consumption on their business attached to match days. These concerns have been extracted from the forum conversations, showing foremost their discomfort with the club and the lack of communication with them.

Regarding the resistance of fans to the relocation, Juan Esteban maintained that it has been influenced by the good times that the team is living, being actively fighting for titles. This entails that fans place all their attention to the actual games, and leave the relocation second. Participants on the focus group showed a common resignation with club management as the main motive behind the lack of a stronger opposition; as one stated:

*“No matter what we do and say, they are going to do what they consider best as they have been doing for the last two decades...”*

At the early stages of the relocation plans, Juan Esteban states that there was a firmly opposition among the vast majority of supporters, but as time passes by only the association ‘Señales de Humo’ has continued an active opposition to the relocation. In fact, they collected more than 20.000 thousand signatures against relocation and have brought the club to court several times for aspects related with the relocation and the violation of urban planning laws.

Even though fans don’t show an active opposition against the move, many supporters are pessimistic about the effects it will have on club’s identity. When focus group discussed about the long-term impact of relocation, participants agreed that Atletico will not be the same without their beloved Vicente Calderón a participant reflected;

*“...it doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s going to be worst but...it’s going to feel so different losing a place that has provided some of the best moments of our life”*

They all agreed that upcoming generations not being able to experience the atmosphere at Manzanares will have a harder time to embrace Atleti’s identity, risking the perpetuation of its essence, traditions and values. Another aspect that was pointed out unanimously was that nowadays Atletico is enjoying a nice period of winning and being a top European club and that will ease the transition as well as attracting new fans. But in the long term, when things get worse, many spectators like corporate visitors will not go that much to the stadium, and the traditional Atleti identity of unconditional support will be needed more than ever to preserve the club where it belongs, to a great extent thanks to the magical moments lived at Vicente Calderón.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

As a conclusion, it can be argued that relocations can affect brand equity for two main reasons. Firstly, from an identity approach to brand management, the stadium is an important vehicle for brand identity and club traditions. Secondly, from a community approach to brand management, – since fans have been conceptualised as co-creators of the experience and of the brand – if the relocation has a negative impact on the behaviour of loyal fans, a relocation might change the nature of the experience product for spectators and reduce brand equity.

It remains very important to make sure the impact on the brand community is as positive as possible, so they continue adding value to the brand, and preserve the existing brand awareness and brand associations by enhancing the identity of the team. Observing recent trends on new stadium construction and the increasing commercial approach that is being taken, it remains crucial to keep fans' contribution in mind and understand that are not just consumers of a service, but co-producers of it by creating a certain atmosphere or engaging in activities based on a set of memories, traditions and rituals that conform the identity of a club.

This impact on brand's identity can also be identified directly by the relevance that certain stadiums have for their clubs, first of all because are well recognized valuable assets that are going to be substituted. Traditional stadiums have long histories and are filled with memories and traditions of several generations that obviously form a very important element of a club's identity. By losing these distinctive traits, the club risks a part of its identity and requires an understanding of the whole picture, as well as an effort to implement properly the brand in the new venue so it's not perceived as 'placeness'.

Regarding the particular case of Atletico de Madrid, a remarkable lack of communication has been found between top management and stakeholders, as well as lack of transparency during the whole relocation process which has resulted in a negative perception of the change among Atletico supporters. The situation has led to an obvious misalignment between the internal and external elements of brand identity, and top management should place effort on addressing the issue in order to prevent the erosion of identity that projecting an image of disunity can provoke.

As the nature of this study is proactive it would be interesting to revisit the Atletico case in the future, both in the short term just after relocation have taken place and in a longer term. Thus, the assumptions of this paper would be tested against the reflections of fans after the relocation has taken place and the impact on identity, co-creation or stadium experience would be observable.

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