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Rethinking brand management within sport: advancing towards the integrative sport brand ecosystem (ISBE)

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: Current research increasingly takes a multi-actor-dominant logic and situates sport brands within ecosystems. However, the multi-actor-dominant logic has not been captured in a holistic concept yet. We aim to advance current thinking of sport brands and therefore conceptualise the integrative sport brand ecosystem (*ISBE*), emerging around a single sport brand.

Research Methods: We adopt a qualitative single case study approach to the German football club brand FC St. Pauli. Semi-structured interviews with multiple actors ($N = 26$) and secondary data ($N = 35$) inform our conceptualisation of the *ISBE*. Following an abductive approach, the *ISBE* evolved simultaneously through theoretical and empirical work.

Results and Findings: The *ISBE* comprises all actors interested in a sport brand. Actors engage on institutional and emergent brand engagement platforms to co-create the sport brand. As the focal actor within the *ISBE*, the brand conductor develops and communicates a first brand identity and facilitates brand meaning co-creation processes. Brand identity needs to be constantly adapted and reinforced by the brand conductor.

Implications: This article provides a holistic perspective on brand co-creation among multiple actors and the role of the brand conductor. We examine the organisational brand management perspective, the network of actors actively co-creating sport brands, and the underlying structures of brand co-creation within the context of sport brands and the multi-actor-dominant logic. This opens new directions for research on sport brands, but also encourages sport practitioners to rethink their brand management.

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Introduction

Brands are considered the most valuable asset entities within the sport industry possess (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Strong brands enable sport entities to maximise their revenues (Gladden et al., 1998) and become independent from sporting success (Underwood et al., 2001). The strategic development and management of sport brands has thus become a key marketing task (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Gladden et al., 1998; Ströbel &

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Germelmann, 2020). The globalisation of the sport industry and the increasingly blurring boundaries between the sport and entertainment industry have aggravated competition between sport brands, but also between sport brands and entertainment brands (Kahiya et al., 2023; The Nielsen Company, 2020). The intensity of competition is fiercer than ever and it is essential for sport managers to build and nurture strong brands to ensure the sport entity's long-term economic success.

Perspectives on sport brand management are deeply rooted in the notion that brand owners strategically develop and control their brands. Sport brands are perceived as bundles of static brand components resulting from conscious management-led processes (Bodet & Séguin, 2021; Giroux et al., 2017). However, recent branding research implies that brand owners cannot autonomously create and control brands. Rather, brands are conceptualised as dynamic social processes co-created through resource integrating interactions between various actors initiated by the brand owner or other actors (Merz et al., 2009; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Therefore, the brand owner's role shifts from a 'brand guardian' to a 'conductor' of dynamic brand co-creation processes (Michel, 2017, p. 454). Especially in the context of sport, stakeholders e.g. fans, sponsors engage in co-creation processes (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberner, 2022; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020; Woratschek et al., 2014). Despite the clear significance of a multi-actor perspective on sport brands, only few approaches follow this branding logic (Bertschy et al., 2020; Kahiya et al., 2023; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Taks et al., 2020). Sport brands co-exist in the *sport brand ecosystem*, where they are vertically and horizontally interconnected with other sport brands and external brands. While spillover effects are present within the *sport brand ecosystem*, there is limited understanding of the interactions among brands and organisational brand management (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Current research further implies that additional actors (e.g. fans, employees) need to be considered when examining the co-creation of sport brands (Bertschy et al., 2020; Kolyperas et al., 2019) and identifies management practices to govern brand co-creation processes (Kahiya et al., 2023; Taks et al., 2020). These approaches offer valuable insights for an enhanced understanding of the co-creation of sport brands. However, they focus on very specific research gaps and, therefore, have several shortcomings. Primarily, existing approaches neglect several actors as they mainly focus on fans (Kolyperas et al., 2019) and other brands (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022). Additionally, they ignore various levels of brand co-creation and either overestimate (Kahiya et al., 2023; Taks et al., 2020) or disregard (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022; Tjandra et al., 2021) an organisational perspective.

Thus, there is a need to conceptualise a holistic perspective, which considers the aforementioned shortcomings. Drawing on the concept of integrative branding (Brodie et al., 2017), current sport branding literature (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022), and the sport ecosystem logic (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberner, 2022), we conceptualise the *integrative sport brand ecosystem (ISBE)* that formulates such a holistic perspective by considering various levels of brand co-creation. Essentially, the *ISBE* details a single brand network within the *sport brand ecosystem*. Within the *ISBE*, actors engage on inter-related brand engagement platforms to co-create brands. Brand engagement platforms provide virtual and physical contexts for various actors with an interest in the brand to exchange resources and co-create the brand (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberner, 2022; Tierney et al., 2016). Following an abductive approach, the *ISBE* evolved

simultaneously through theoretical (theory synthesis and adaption) and empirical work (semi-structured interviews and secondary data from the case of the German football club brand FC St. Pauli).

This study contributes to sport management literature as it enhances the understanding of the sport brand ecosystem (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022). The *ISBE* describes actors engaging in the co-creation of sport brands, the underlying structures of brand co-creation, and the brand conductor's internal management and integrative governing processes.

Multi-actor-dominant logic of (sport) brands

Evolving logic of brand management

Sport brands are predominantly perceived to be built, strategically managed, and controlled by the brand owner (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2021; Manoli, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Within this *brand owner-dominant logic*, sport brands are conceptualised as 'complex offering loaded with intangible and tangible attributes' deliberately created through the brand owner's implementation of 'appropriate marketing strategies that will ultimately contribute to the development of strong brand equity' (Giroux et al., 2017, p. 180). Brand owners aspire to consciously develop, maintain, and communicate a clear and stable brand identity, i.e. bundle of static brand components such as symbolic associations and physical attributes (Aaker, 2002; da Silveira et al., 2013). Brand identity is transmitted to customers through brand owner-controlled marketing activities, aiming to create brand meaning, i.e. customers' set of brand associations (Batey, 2008; Burmann et al., 2009). Customers are only considered passive targets for brand management in one-directional relationships, which are entirely controlled by the brand owner. Accordingly, brand identity, brand meaning, and brand equity are the static results of conscious management actions.

In contrast to this brand owner-dominant logic of sport brands, general branding research increasingly perceives brands from a multi-actor perspective. Within this *multi-actor-dominant logic*, brands are conceptualised as collaborative, open, and dynamic social constructs co-created among various actors (Merz et al., 2009; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). Multiple actors integrate resources (e.g. individual brand meaning, creativity) in mutual interactions to co-create brands. Current research identifies customers, employees, competitors, media, B2B partners, and the public as actors engaging in brand co-creation (Baker, Fehrer, et al., 2022; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Accordingly, brands are not created solely through brand communication controlled by the brand owner. Multiple actors actively co-create brands in (1) brand owner-initiated, (2) actor-initiated, and (3) brand owner-facilitated interactions (Sarasvuo et al., 2022).

Integrative branding

Integrative branding represents a specific conceptual approach of the multi-actor-dominant logic (Brodie et al., 2017). The concept builds on the premise that multiple actors co-create brand meaning in collaborative social processes, with brand identity serving as the foundation of these processes. It comprises two interdependent sub-processes: building

brand identity and co-creating brand meaning. In the *first sub-process*, the brand conductor develops the identity and intended meaning of the brand and communicates it to internal and external actors. Building brand identity expands on the brand owner-dominant logic of brand management, which remains vital to ensure brand awareness and convey brand meaning propositions (Brodie et al., 2017). For instance, the German Football Association created and communicated the brand identity 'Die Mannschaft' for the German men's national team, which is intended to convey meanings such as team spirit, unity, and success (DFB, 2022). In the *second sub-process*, the brand conductor provides access to interactions where multiple actors integrate resources to co-create shared brand meaning (Brodie et al., 2017). As the focal actor, the brand conductor is obligated to initiate, facilitate, and coordinate interactive brand meaning co-creation processes (Michel, 2017). However, the brand conductor is not capable of fully controlling the co-creation processes since interactions are also initiated by external actors (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Building on our example above, 'Die Mannschaft' has constantly been criticised by fans and other actors in Germany. It was hardly associated with its intended meanings (DFB, 2022).

Both sub-processes are *mutually interdependent*. Actors use, change, and integrate the brand meaning proposition to co-create brand meaning and brand conductors need to constantly (re-)integrate co-created brand meanings into the brand identity to reinforce congruence and the development of collective brand meaning (Baker, Fehrer, et al., 2022; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). However, a uniform brand identity congruent with brand meaning is only a temporary state in a continuous process of change (Brodie et al., 2017). In this sense, brand identity is not an autonomous construct, but something the brand conductor needs to constantly seek, absorb, and adapt through the integrative processes of brand co-creation. Brand identity is indirectly co-created through the activities of various actors (Iglesias et al., 2020; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Accordingly, brand management is conceptualised as iterative process of facilitating brand meaning co-creation processes and dynamically adapting brand identity to ensure the development of a successful brand (Brodie et al., 2017). Using the example of 'Die Mannschaft' again, the DFB decided to dispense with the brand name and to open up to emerging meanings for the men's national team (DFB, 2022).

Towards a multi-actor-dominant logic of sport brands

Research on sport brands has predominantly taken a brand owner-dominant logic. However, recent studies increasingly acknowledge the influence of multiple actors on sport brands (Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020). We identified four approaches towards a multi-actor-dominant logic of sport brands: the sport brand ecosystem (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), brand co-creation through fans (Kolyperas et al., 2019), brand governance (Kahiya et al., 2023; Seguin & Abeza, 2019), and co-creation of brand meaning (Bertschy et al., 2020; Tjandra et al., 2021).

Kunkel and Biscaia (2020) argue that in the (1) *sport brand ecosystem*, sport brands (federation-, league-, club-, human-brand) and external brands (sponsors, media, venues, host city) co-exist and affiliated brands influence each other's brand meanings through spillover effects (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022; McCracken, 1986). For instance, negative publicity surrounding an athlete brand creates negative attitudes towards club

brands (Doyle et al., 2014) and perceptions of a sponsor brand influence attitudes towards the sport brand (Kelly et al., 2016). Although the sport brand ecosystem acknowledges the significance of other brands on a sport brand, the framework neglects the relevance of multiple actors (fans, politics, and employees). Further, from a multi-actor-dominant logic, other sport brands or actors not only passively influence brand meaning through spillover effects, but also actively engage in brand meaning co-creation processes (Grohs et al., 2020; Merz et al., 2009). The *sport brand ecosystem* does not take an organisational branding perspective nor does it offer approaches to the (internal) management of sport brands. Nevertheless, it provides an overarching framework for our study.

In contrast to passive meaning transfers between brands, sport brands are increasingly perceived to be (2) *co-created through fans* (Kolyperas et al., 2019). Fans are characterised by irrational passion and identification with sport brands (Abosag et al., 2012; Smith & Stewart, 2010; Sutton et al., 1997). Fans want to get involved, collaborate, and participate in decisions about the brand (Biscaia et al., 2018; Parganas et al., 2015) and start their own activities, e.g. choreographies, that become part of the sport brand (Hüttermann et al., 2022; Kolyperas et al., 2019). Thus, sport brands are perceived to be co-created through ‘the passion, excitement and involvement expressed by fans’ (Kolyperas et al., 2019, p. 204) and might be transformed into a version not intended by club management (Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020). This research stream offers insights into fans’ extraordinary role in the co-creation of sport brands, while neglecting the active engagement of other actors. For instance, competing and related sport brands communicate brand meanings via social media (Bertschy et al., 2020; Tjandra et al., 2021), sponsors integrate resources such as innovative ideas to leverage their sponsorship (Buser, Woratschek, & Schönberner, 2022), and media independently conveys meanings of the sport brand to a wide audience (Baker, Fehrer, et al., 2022).

(3) *Brand governance* refers to building brand equity based on the entity’s mission, vision, and values, as key components of brand identity (Seguin & Abeza, 2019; Taks et al., 2020). It suggests that sport brands should incorporate actors in all stages of brand thinking and implementation to ensure consistency between their activities and brand identity. For instance, brand conductors could bring the expertise of external actors inside the organisation to develop brand governance processes (Taks et al., 2020). Additionally, brand conductors actively engage actors on the operational level to systematically co-create a sport brand’s equity in collaboration with various actors (Kahiya et al., 2023). Although acknowledging the active role of external actors, the concept of brand governance is not formulated from a multi-actor-dominant logic of brands. From such a logic, brand conductors are not fully capable to consciously initiate and manage brand co-creation processes to strategically access resources from different actors whenever necessary.

Rather, actors can (4) *co-create the meaning of sport brands* also outside the brand conductor’s sphere of control. Tjandra et al. (2021) illustrate how brand meanings of the Olympic brand are fluid, dynamic and decentralised as they are socially constructed and negotiated in narratives of multiple actors’ brand experiences. Therefore, brand conductors are encouraged to facilitate collaborations between actors. Similarly, Bertschy et al. (2020) find that eSport commitments of traditional sport brands increase the number of actors that participate in brand-related interactions and co-create new

brand meanings. Bertschy et al. (2020) and Tjandra et al. (2021) show in their studies that multiple actors actively co-create brand meanings in interactions at various brand touch-points. Although, they go beyond focusing solely on fans as actors in brand co-creation, they mainly offer snapshots of co-created brand meanings and lack a systematic and organisational perspective on brand co-creation.

To sum up, our literature review reveals that sport branding research is fragmented and does not sufficiently capture brand co-creation as it is discussed in brand management literature. While there is emergent literature adapting a multi-actor-dominant logic of sport brands, most studies focus on relationships between a limited set of actors and specific contexts. Thus, there is no approach to understand the number and variety of actors actively engaging in the co-creation of a sport brand within the *sport brand ecosystem*.

Ecosystem perspective of sport brands

Sport management research increasingly advocates for an ecosystem perspective to capture the nature and complexity of co-creation (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberner, 2022; Stegmann et al., 2023). Recently, Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, and Schönberner (2022) conceptualised the sport ecosystem logic as holistic perspective on the interconnectedness of all actors and engagement platforms within a sport context. The sport ecosystem is organised among various levels and assumes that actors with a joint interest in sporting activities integrate and exchange resources to co-create value (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberner, 2022). At the *microlevel*, the focus is on reciprocal dyadic and triadic exchanges among actors (e.g. sport brand-fan interactions, sponsor-sponsee interactions). These dyadic interactions occur on engagement platforms at the *mesolevel* (Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Storbacka et al., 2016). Engagement platforms refer to digital, physical, or integrated touchpoints provided by focal actors as a resource to enable and facilitate the integration of multiple actors' resources within the sport ecosystem. As actors integrate resources on more than one engagement platform, they are mutually dependent (Breidbach et al., 2014; Stegmann et al., 2023). The emerging network of interdependent engagement platforms constitutes the sport ecosystem at the *macrolevel*. Within the sport ecosystem, focal actors aim to systemically govern co-creation processes of multiple actors on mutually dependent engagement platforms (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberner, 2022).

Brand management research increasingly situates the branding process in ecosystems (Baker, Fehrer, et al., 2022; Giannopoulos et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2016). Sport branding research has yet taken an ecosystem perspective that takes into account the interrelationships among all actors who engage in co-creating a sport brand. It enables to zoom out beyond dyadic exchanges (*microlevel*) and single engagement platforms (*mesolevel*) to regard brand co-creation from a systemic perspective (*macrolevel*). The ecosystem perspective offers additional avenues for sport brands, which enable a comprehensive understanding of the processes, structures, and interrelationships among all actors in the co-creation of sport brands. However, current knowledge about actors and engagement platforms constituting a sport brand ecosystem is scarce. Further, it is unclear how focal actors (e.g. the brand conductor) can systemically

orchestrate mutually dependent sport engagement platforms (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberner, 2022; Stegmann et al., 2023).

Research design

We adopted a qualitative single case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989) and followed an abductive approach, which is recognised for its ability to develop novel theories (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010; Rashid et al., 2019). The initial phase of an abductive approach comprises the construction of a preliminary theoretical framework (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). Drawing on approaches towards a multi-actor-dominant logic of sport brands, we adapt the concept of integrative branding in the context of sport (Brodie et al., 2017). Hence, we synthesised existing literature to conceptualise an initial version of the *ISBE* (Jaakkola, 2020). Within the next phases, the *ISBE* evolved in an iterative process of constantly expanding and adapting our theoretical preconceptions based on emerging theoretical domains (i.e. ecosystem perspective of sport brands) and empirical data. Thus, the *ISBE* evolved simultaneously by going back and forth between theoretical and empirical work (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Sampling logic

Building theory from case studies requires the application of theoretical sampling to select a meaningful case. The deliberate selection of FC St. Pauli was made in accordance with the recommendation of Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), Patton (1990), and Pettigrew (1990), who suggest that case study research should be carried out in exceptionally meaningful and unusually revelatory contexts. Despite a lack of any notable sporting success, FC St. Pauli has become one of the most popular sport brands around the world. FC St. Pauli is especially recognised for its skull and crossbones symbol, which was adopted by fans in the 1980s as their own unofficial emblem. In the 1990s, FC St. Pauli became the first club in Germany to officially ban fascist activities and racism in its stadium, became a worldwide symbol for punk and related subcultures, and started being recognised for its political, anti-fascism, anti-homophobic, and anti-sexism attitude. These brand meanings mainly emerged from the fan scene and other actors surrounding the club and did not follow an overall plan of the club's management. In 1999, FC St. Pauli became the first football club in Germany to actively manage its brand. Today, FC St. Pauli is popular for taking a clear stance on social topics, its left-wing tendencies, social activism, and values such as diversity, social responsibility, anti-discrimination, and tolerance. Particularly due to the unique brand management strategies of the club and its participative character, FC St. Pauli is one of the strongest sport brands in Germany (Woisetschläger et al., 2019) and sells approximately 9 Million € merchandise a year. Although the club plays second Bundesliga for more than 10 years, this valueranks among the top seven of all football club brands in Germany (Neumann, 2022). The club's management acknowledges the multi-actor-dominant logic of sport brands. It perceives the brand as a 'platform of possibilities' where 'people can be creative and things can arise' (Zimmer, 2018). Thus, FC St. Pauli provides a rich context in which the *ISBE* becomes transparently observable.

Data collection and analysis

In order to arrive at rich empirical descriptions and to ensure the validity, objectivity, and reliability of our research, we collected primary (semi-structured interviews with multiple actors) and secondary data (internal brand-related documents, media content analysis) (Eisenhardt, 1989; Meyer, 2001). Table 1 provides an overview of the empirical data. Overall, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with different actors. Interview partners were selected based on theoretical considerations (e.g. actors involved in brand meaning co-creation in previous research), exchanges with the club management and based on empirical discoveries emerging from the continuous interview process. Supplementary material contains the interview guide, which was slightly adjusted depending on the actor interviewed. The questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing respondents to bring up additional aspects. Questions were developed based on the two sub-processes within the theoretical concept of integrative branding and derived from illustrative examples in previous research (Iglesias et al., 2020; Kahiya et al., 2023). Interviews were conducted online between November 2021 and March 2022 and spanned an average of 66 minutes (minimum: 47 min; maximum: 104 min). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure our study's credibility, we collected secondary data in parallel to the primary data collection. Secondary data includes internal brand-related documents (e.g. brand-related reports to the supervisory board) and media content analysis (e.g. online media coverage) that allowed us to triangulate the primary data. Secondary data were used to deliberately enrich and contextualise themes emerging from the interviews.

Data analysis followed the process of content analysis proposed by Mayring (2015) and comprised four overlapping phases. First, we deductively coded the interview data and secondary data based on a codebook derived from our theoretical preconceptions. This allowed us to match quotes from actors with our framework. Second, we used inductive coding to search for unanticipated emerging themes in the data. In both phases, two researchers coded the data independently. Third, the theoretical framework evolved from ongoing discussions and negotiations of our coding and emerging theoretical domains (i.e. ecosystem perspective on brands) within the research team. This cooperative research process was utilised to discuss inconsistencies, verify the interpretation of the data and the adaption of the theoretical framework. Our evolving theoretical framework further directed our search for empirical data and theoretical concepts. For instance, the conceptualisation of the brand management platform and the distinction between institutional and emergent brand engagement platforms was included in the

Table 1. Data sources.

	Data Sources	No. of interviews/documents	Length
Primary Data	Semi-structured interviews	26	Ø 66min
	Official	5	Ø 61min
	Management	4	Ø 56 min
	Employee	8	Ø 65min
	Partner/ Sponsor	3	Ø 66 min
	Media	2	Ø 84min
	Fan	4	Ø 76min
Secondary Data	Internal brand-related documents (ID)	5	
	Media content analysis (ED)	34	

framework following the discussions of empirical data among the research team. Fourth, based on the theoretical framework developed, two members of the research team reviewed the data again. In order to ensure the quality of our findings, we conducted an intercoder reliability test, which yielded a high level of reliability ($r = .86$) (Perreault & Leigh, 1989).

Integrative sport brand ecosystem

Ecosystem perspective based on the multi-actor-dominant logic of sport brands

Approaching sport brands from an ecosystem perspective implies that every actor engaging with the sport brand is involved in brand co-creation – whether or not the brand conductor intends this or the actor does so intentionally. A sport brand's ecosystem is an open space that comprises multiple actors (fans, sponsors, media, other sport brands, employees, and political actors; cf. Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022; Kahiya et al., 2023) directly engaging with the sport brand or interacting with other actors related to the sport brand. For instance, the FC St. Pauli brand is referred to as ‘an ecosystem’ (I-8, Club Official) and ‘a grown biotope’ (ID-2), which constantly evolves in interactions among multiple actors and cannot be defined autonomously by the brand conductor.

FC Sankt Pauli is [...] a construct built by many different actors who are not only controlled by the corporation but have certain independence. [...]. It is a large field and ecosystem with thousands of actors who somehow produce the brand. (I-22, Partner)

In the case of FC St. Pauli, the brand is at the centre of a broad network of actors that has evolved around the club. This network comprises club officials, management, and employees; active fan scene and club members; passive and international fans; sponsors and partners; athletes and coaches; football associations; opposing sport brands; media; the public; non-sport celebrities; politics; the city of Hamburg and the district of St. Pauli; and civic organisations. However, the boundaries of the ecosystem are not rigid and no enumeration of actors can be complete. The ecosystem is open to every actor who has an interest in the brand: ‘everyone has the opportunity to create something at FC St. Pauli’ (I-13, Employee). Yet the influence of the actors on the sport brand varies depending on the context and the actor, which has also been described in distinctions made between primary and secondary actors in sport management literature (I-18, Employee; cf. Parent et al., 2018; Taks et al., 2020). Our results provide some indications that primary actors possess higher salience (i.e. power, legitimacy, urgency, and proximity) within the *ISBE* than secondary actors (Driscoll & Starik, 2004; Mitchell et al., 1997). Typically, primary actors seem to comprise employees, club management, club officials, sponsors and partners, athletes and coaches, club members, and the active fan scene. Primary actors appear to have more legitimate (e.g. contractual relationships with sponsors, institutionalised relationships through committees) and proximate (e.g. spatial distance of the active fan scene compared to international fans) relationships with the brand conductor, to regularly engage in brand co-creation, to launch their own activities in the name of the sport brand, to be considered with higher urgency by the brand conductor (e.g. claims from the active fan scene are given immediate attention by the brand conductor), and to have greater power to influence the sport brand in

interactions with the brand conductor (e.g. the active fan scene expresses coercive power by boycotting home games). For instance, club members initiated FC St. Pauli's sustainability efforts at the general meeting in 2016 (I-5, Club Management). In contrast, secondary actors seem to be less salient according to our data. They appear to be less legitimate, to have a greater spatial distance, to be not able to interact directly with the brand conductor regularly, to be not considered as urgently by the brand conductor, and therefore to have less coercive, utilitarian, or social power and influence on the brand conductor. In this case, they include passive and international fans, football associations, opposing sport brands, media, the public, non-sport celebrities, politics, the city of Hamburg and the district of St. Pauli, and civic organisations. However, they still participate in interactions related to the sport brand and co-create brand meanings. For instance, fans and non-sport celebrities act as brand ambassadors to transport FC St. Pauli's image: 'There are people [...] who somehow appear in some form as FC St. Pauli sympathisers. [They do] not necessarily shape the club, but transport an image' (I-2, Club Management). Although secondary actors may be relevant for sport brands to disseminate their meanings, they are – in contrast to primary actors – hardly able to shape its brand identity.

Sport brand engagement platforms

Sport brands are not co-created in a loose network of actors and interactions, but within dynamically emerging structures of an ecosystem. Such a macrolevel ecosystem of sport brands is formed by interdependent mesolevel brand engagement platforms, which provide touchpoints for dyadic microlevel interactions between actors within the brand network (Stegmann et al., 2023). Brand engagement platforms enable multilateral interactions among actors with an interest in the brand and provide structural support for the exchange of resources and brand co-creation processes in virtual and physical contexts (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberner, 2022; Tierney et al., 2016). They are initiated either by the brand conductor (*institutional brand engagement platforms*) or by other actors within the ecosystem (*emergent brand engagement platforms*) (Kahiya et al., 2023; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). *Institutional brand engagement platforms* are resources integrated by the brand conductor, aiming to 'create a breeding ground' (I-13, Employee) to facilitate and coordinate interactions among actors. This was also described by an interviewee from the club management: 'Many issues are not in the hands of the [brand conductor], we do not have to do everything ourselves, but give them [actors] the platform to build it' (I-5, Club Management). Further, a partner requested that 'the [brand conductor] has the responsibility to moderate the process. They must facilitate and guide the co-creation process, stimulate, and structure it repeatedly. The [brand conductor] is a focal actor' (I-22, Partner). *Emergent brand engagement platforms*, initiated by external actors, emerge out of the brand conductor's sphere of control. An employee stated that 'there are many voluntary committees and [...] working groups. [...] These are all things with which we [brand conductor] have nothing to do. That is driven from the outside' (I-18, Employee). However, the brand conductor may participate as an actor.

Towards the integrative sport brand ecosystem

Building on the fundamental perspective of sport brands as systems of mutually interdependent brand engagement platforms connecting all actors interested in the sport brand, we conceptualise the *ISBE*. To structure the *ISBE*, we argue along the two interrelated sub-processes of integrative branding: *building brand identity* and *co-creating brand meaning*.

Building brand identity comprises the development and communication of a unique brand identity. Multiple actors engage on the internal and institutional ‘brand management platform’. There is a ‘core group’ (I-21, Employee) consisting of club officials, club management, and employees that discusses about the brand’s identity and strategic direction on this brand engagement platform, thus performing the constructed and aggregated actor ‘brand conductor’. However, depending on the context, also other actors become part of that platform. For instance, members from different departments engage on the platform to make derivations from brand identity for their department. Accordingly, a member of the club management described his task to ‘work with colleagues [...] to make derivations from the brand [identity]’ (I-2, Club Management) for the departments (e.g. merchandising, communication). Overall, the development of brand identity is still perceived as a core task of the brand conductor, since its impulses are required for brand development: ‘FC St. Pauli’s profile needs to be sharpened by the club itself. [...]. They cannot just rely on their fans and leave the decision to those who are above’ (I-17, Employee).

The *ISBE* offers a more structured perspective on how the brand conductor communicates brand identity. The brand conductor constantly engages in interactions with multiple actors, thereby integrating the proposed brand meaning, deducted from interactions on the brand management platform, as a resource on institutional brand engagement platforms. Primarily, the brand owner communicates brand meanings via social media. These digital channels are perceived as most important, because of their ‘interactivity, velocity, and proximity’ (I-15, Employee). In communicating brand identity, the brand conductor is contextual and comprises every actor officially acting on behalf of the sport brand at the corporate level (e.g. social media manager). Thus, the communicating brand conductor may not necessarily be a permanent part of the brand management platform, where brand identity is co-created.

We have employees who shape the club, if only because they communicate with the outside world, they are visible to the outside world, and they do things [...]. It starts with the ticket centre and ends with the media department. (I-6, Club Official)

Co-creating brand meaning refers to multiple actors integrating their resources in interactions on interdependent institutional and emergent brand engagement platforms. Within the ecosystem, the brand conductor (as in *communicating brand identity*) is obligated to enable and facilitate interactions through the provision of brand engagement platforms. On *institutional brand engagement platforms*, the brand conductor deliberately integrates brand identity as a resource, partially determines the participants of the platform, and coordinates brand meaning co-creation processes. FC St. Pauli enables interactions across various institutional brand engagement platforms, which differ in their objectives. Most institutional brand engagement platforms aim to solidify

existing brand meanings. For instance, the institutional brand engagement platform ‘sponsoring’ is utilised to co-create brand meanings that align with brand identity. FC St. Pauli and sponsors jointly implement initiatives in specific thematic areas of the brand identity. Sponsoring is perceived as ‘an essential and significant factor when it comes to brand communication and building up the brand, sharpening the brand, but possibly also transforming the brand’ (I-13, Employee). Often, sponsors suggest creative ideas to leverage their sponsorships. However, these joint projects also bring brand identity to life. One sponsor, for instance, initiated an anti-racism campaign together with FC St. Pauli, in which the fan scene, journalists, activists, athletes, and anti-racism foundations actively participated and integrated their resources on the institutional brand engagement platform ‘FC St. Pauli social media channels’.

We wanted to be more involved in the issue of anti-racism. I talked to St. Pauli about it, they thought it was good, so I briefed a creative agency, and they came up with this idea of ‘No place for racism’, against the backdrop of giving initiatives on a match day space to take over and use St. Pauli’s social media channels. We extended this to the [sponsor] channels. (I-25, Sponsor)

These official brand-owned social media channels especially engage fans to perpetuate brand meanings with their liking and comments. In contrast to platforms where the brand conductor aims to co-create brand meanings that align with brand identity, the brand conductor also initiates platforms to get feedback and impulses for the development of the brand. For instance, FC St. Pauli has initiated brand engagement platforms to allow multiple actors to exchange about the strategic implementation of sustainability into the club brand.

We set up a process with a steering group made up of equal numbers of fans, members and applicants, and a large number of full-time staff. We broke it down into eight areas of action with clear criteria where we needed to develop goals. There were 51 people involved in regular workshop formats [...] and wrote a concept for these eight areas of action. (I-5, Club Management)

Further, in order to seek feedback and actively participate in brand-related discussions within the fan scene, FC St. Pauli initiates platforms like its social media channels, the general meeting, the permanent fan committee, and town hall meetings. These platforms are aimed at exchanging mainly with fans and members, to get feedback and impulses for current and potential brand developments and to negotiate brand meaning. For instance, current brand strategies adhering to more sustainability build on a club member’s request for more sustainability in merchandising at the general meeting.

In 2016, there was a request for more sustainability in merchandising. [...]. Motion at the general meeting, working group with full-time staff and the applicant [...] and we then successively started to make Fairtrade and ‘Global Organic Textile Standard’ conversion. (I-5, Club Management)

This transformation of operations further contributes to building brand identity. One interviewee describes the decision to produce jerseys independently as an ‘exclamation mark’ (I-2, Club Management) to convey intended sustainability-brand meanings.

However, actors co-create brand meaning not only on institutional brand engagement platforms, but also on *emergent brand engagement platforms* that develop out of the

brand conductor's sphere of control. Actors engage in the name of the sport brand on emergent brand engagement platforms that can, but do not have to, be focused on the sport brand. For instance, fans and members of the club regularly represent FC St. Pauli at the Christopher Street Day, thus co-creating the meaning of the brand as diverse and tolerant on a platform that is not directly linked to the brand conductor. Similarly, the fans of FC St. Pauli organise every year the 'Run against Fascism', a running event to raise awareness and money for anti-fascism projects, and holocaust memorial days. However, on these emergent platforms the brand conductor and other primary actors (e.g. athletes) are called upon to participate and integrate their resources.

In 2018 the [Christopher Street Day]: several members said, we also want to show our colours. Have designed a shirt together, black with rainbow skull and 'Love who you want' on the back, and several hundred have participated in the CSD. (I-9, Club Official)

Further, social media fan accounts, online forums, blogs, and traditional media represent emergent brand engagement platforms. On these platforms, fans and journalists share developments around the club and their interpretations of brand meaning with a wide audience, thus co-creating brand meaning. Fan blogs and traditional media represent a 'critical public' (I-20, Media) fighting for the sovereignty of interpretation of brand meaning within the *ISBE* and thus take an important role in the emergence of brand meaning. For instance, an interviewee emphasised that 'media are quite decisive for the image of FC St. Pauli among the general public' (I-2, Club Management). Additionally, fans use media to publish their opinions: 'The Ultras of FC St. Pauli issued a statement on the matter, which was adopted by Kicker and Spiegel [popular German newspapers]' (I-20, Media).

Online forums and social media fan accounts offer a platform to negotiate brand meanings and to develop opinions about the brand. Especially, fan accounts perpetuate but also question existing brand meanings out of the brand conductor's sphere of control. In a physical context, fan club meetings and the 'Fan Rooms', which are located in the stadium but belong to the fans, offer additional platforms for interactions among fans. An employee of FC St. Pauli emphasised the fan rooms' relevance as she expressed 'that these fan rooms are extremely important as a place to meet, but also as a place where issues can simply arise' (I-23, Employee). To exemplify, the active fan scene uses the 'Fan Rooms' to prepare choreographies, organise activities (e.g. holocaust memorial days), host fan clubs parties, and organise topic-specific talks to discuss political and social issues – generally and in relation to the FC St. Pauli brand.

Building brand identity and co-creating brand meaning are *interrelated*. Building brand identity refers to the brand conductor's integration of brand identity as a resource in brand meaning co-creating interactions on brand engagement platforms. However, the interrelated process of integrative branding implies that the brand conductor is also required to (re-) integrate brand meanings emerging from interactions among multiple actors on institutional and emergent brand engagement platforms into brand identity. Brand engagement platforms within the *ISBE* are mutually dependent as actors integrate brand meanings and resources on various platforms and in interactions with the brand conductor. Actors of the internal brand management platform need to pick up currents and integrate, discuss, and negotiate these brand meanings within the brand management platform to decide how brand identity should resonate, reflect,

and reinforce emerging brand meanings or deliberately challenge them. ‘In the end, [what the brand stands for] is the cosmos from all currents, opinions, which, of course centralized with [the brand conductor] somehow run up, and in which the implementation then finds itself’, was concluded by an employee (I-10, Employee).

This adheres to the interrelationship of both sub-processes: brand meanings from brand engagement platforms are integrated as a resource into the brand management platform. Thus, brand identity is constantly adapted and reinforced through its integration into brand communication on brand engagement platforms. Brand management is perceived as a constant ‘checks and balances’ (I-13, Employee) and requires diplomacy, negotiation, and mediation towards achieving congruence in brand meaning within the *ISBE*. This adheres to the perspective of sport brands as dynamic social processes, co-created through the interactions of multiple actors.

I do not think there is one person who can decide [what the brand stands for]. It is not top-down. It is a co-creative process that arises in a cooperation between the environment and the corporate leadership of the club. (I-22, Partner)

Contributions

Theoretical contributions

Following emerging branding research that perceives brands from an ecosystem perspective (Baker, Fehrer, et al., 2022; Giannopoulos et al., 2021), we originally take an integrative ecosystem perspective on sport brands. Sport brands co-exist within the overarching framework of the *sport brand ecosystem* and are subject to reciprocal spillover effects between brands (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022). Current sport branding research further points out that additional actors actively co-create sport brands within the network of actors emerging around a single sport brand (Bertschy et al., 2020; Kahiya et al., 2023). However, there is limited understanding about the brand conductor’s role and the underlying structures of brand co-creation. The *ISBE* implies that brand meaning co-creation processes enfold (1) among all actors interested in the sport brand, (2) as they integrate resources in interactions on interdependent institutional and emergent brand engagement platforms, (3) which cannot be controlled, but only coordinated and governed by the brand conductor. Further, the *ISBE* implies that (4) brand co-creation also comprises the co-creation of brand identity by the aggregated brand conductor on the internal brand management platform. The *ISBE* extends existing sport branding research towards an integrative ecosystem perspective, providing a holistic understanding of structures and interrelationships among all actors in the co-creation of sport brands.

First, we contribute to sport branding research by examining the network of actors emerging around a sport brand and enhancing the understanding of the variety of actors engaging in brand co-creation. The *ISBE* has no rigid borders, but is open to every actor interested in the sport brand. Thus, all actors engaging in interactions with the brand conductor or in interactions related to the brand are part of the *ISBE* and co-create the sport brand. This confirms, converges, but also extends previous research that neglected various actors (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022; Bertschy et al., 2020; Kahiya et al., 2023; Kolyperas et al., 2019; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). While acknowledging that

no enumeration of actors within the *ISBE* can be complete, we systematically specify typical actors engaging in the co-creation of sport brands. We also find that the influence of actors within the *ISBE* varies. Actors are distinguished into primary and secondary actors, which differ in their salience and are therefore more or less influential. This complements and extends previous research that has highlighted the extraordinary role of fans in brand co-creation (Kolyperas et al., 2019), as it allows for a differentiated classification of all actors.

Second, the *ISBE* provides a comprehensive perspective on the structures of brand co-creation. Building on the sport ecosystem logic (Buser, Woratschek, Dickson, & Schönberger, 2022), actors engage in dyadic interactions on brand engagement platforms that form the dynamic structure of the *ISBE*. Existing research neglects these interrelated levels of brand co-creation and examines exclusively dyadic interactions (Kolyperas et al., 2019), interactions on isolated brand engagement platforms (Kahiya et al., 2023), or the broad sport brand ecosystem (Baker, Kunkel et al., 2022). The *ISBE* recognises these contributions and integrates them into a holistic perspective that considers the interrelated micro-, meso-, and macrolevel of brand co-creation. This advances the understanding of the relationships among the network of actors within the *sport brand ecosystem* (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022). Brand engagement platforms are interdependent and actors integrate brand meanings in various contexts to negotiate brand meaning. This implies the active engagement of actors in co-creating brands (Kolyperas et al., 2019; Taks et al., 2020; Tjandra et al., 2021) rather than passive spillover effects (Baker, Kunkel, et al., 2022). We distinguish between institutional and emergent brand engagement platforms. Institutional brand engagement platforms adhere to the brand governance approach, where the brand conductor can consciously initiate and coordinate brand co-creation (Kahiya et al., 2023; Taks et al., 2020). They comprise social media channels of the sport brand, infrastructure like the stadium, sport and cultural events organised by the sport brand, sponsoring, committees, and forums (e.g. general meeting; Figure 1). Institutional brand engagement platforms aim to facilitate the co-creation of brand meanings that align with brand identity or to receive feedback and impulses for brand development. Emergent brand engagement platforms comprise media, social media fan pages and blogs, online forums, and fan initiatives (Figure 1). This conceptualisation aligns with Bertschy et al. (2020), Kolyperas et al. (2019) and Tjandra et al. (2021), who demonstrate how brands are co-created outside the brand conductor's sphere of control.

Third, we contribute to sport branding research by taking an organisational perspective and detailing how sport brands are managed within the *sport brand ecosystem*. With the exception of approaches to brand governance (Kahiya et al., 2023; Taks et al., 2020), an organisational perspective is largely disregarded in previous research. The *ISBE* enhances the understanding of the brand conductor's role and activities in brand co-creation. The brand conductor represents a focal actor within the *ISBE*, obligated to build brand identity and facilitate brand meaning co-creation. However, in extension to previous research (Kahiya et al., 2023; Taks et al., 2020), the brand conductor is no single actor. Rather, in developing brand identity, the brand conductor is a construct consisting of multiple internal actors that engage on the institutional 'brand management platform'. In communicating brand identity, we conceptualise the brand conductor as a contextual and multi-layered actor, which comprises every actor officially acting on behalf of the

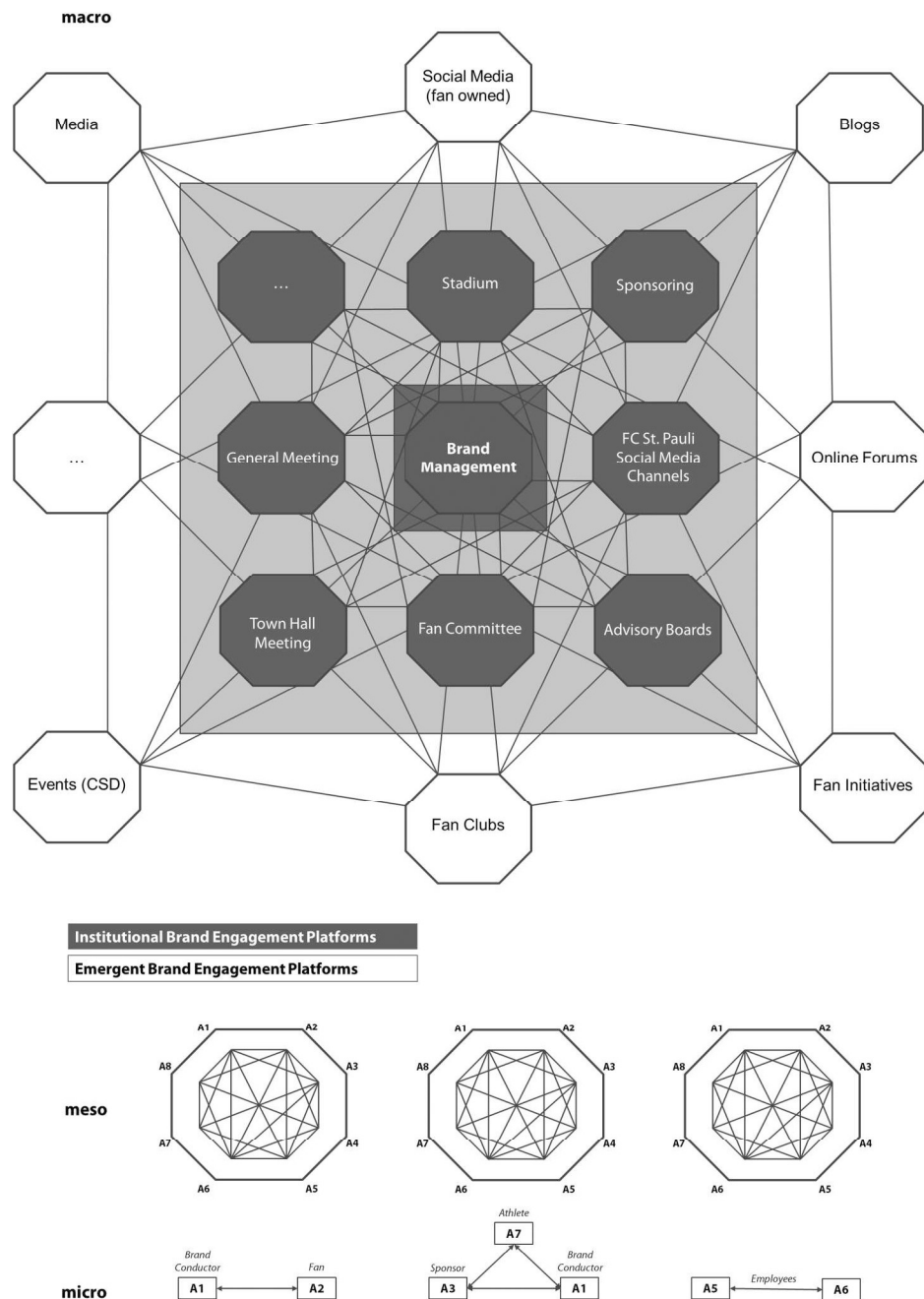


Figure 1. The Integrative Sport Brand Ecosystem.

sport brand at the corporate level. Brand conductors integrate brand identity as a resource into interactions on brand engagement platforms. Brand meanings emerging on institutional and emergent brand engagement platforms are integrated and negotiated among the actors of the brand management platform and either incorporated into brand identity or deliberately rejected. Thus, brand identity is constantly assessed and adapted

in internal interactions on the brand management platform based on emerging brand meanings.

Managerial contributions

The *ISBE* offers manifold implications for sport management practice by providing a holistic perspective on sport branding. In contrast to existing management-oriented perspectives, the *ISBE* suggests that brand managers cannot autonomously control and develop their brands.

First, practitioners need to be aware that multiple actors affect their brand. Thus, they should systematically analyse and map actors and brand engagement platforms constituting the *ISBE* of their sport brand. Further, actors should be classified according to their salience on the sport brand. Developing a structured overview of the *ISBE* allows practitioners to understand where and by whom their sport brand is co-created. It further provides guidance to assess how much the brand conductor already adheres to a multi-actor-dominant logic within an ecosystem perspective and provides a starting point for concrete brand management measures. Therefore, practitioners should conduct workshops or interviews with selected actors identified in this study to develop a systematic overview of their *ISBE*.

Second, building on the systematic analysis of the sport brand's *ISBE*, practitioners should establish an internal brand management platform, determine participating members, and set up regular meetings (i.e. brand tribe in the case of FC St. Pauli). On the brand management platform, actors perform the brand conductor aggregate and constantly assess, negotiate, develop, and adapt brand identity. Additionally, they collaboratively derive implications with other departments engaging in communicating brand identity. Thus, leveraging a brand management platform enhances the internal development and the consistent communication of the sport brand.

Third, practitioners are obligated to provide brand engagement platforms in order to facilitate brand co-creation among multiple actors. For instance, social media provides an institutional brand engagement platform to co-create brand meanings that align with brand identity (e.g. FC St. Pauli's 'No place for racism' campaign) and exchange formats provide an opportunity to receive feedback from actors and participate in brand-related discussions (e.g. town hall meetings). On brand engagement platforms, brand conductors should constantly integrate brand identity as a resource and absorb emerging brand meanings. These emerging brand meanings are constantly negotiated to either refuse them or integrate them into brand identity (e.g. FC St. Pauli followed the demand for sustainability at the general meeting). Thus, brand managers need to remain open for dynamic changes of their brand.

Limitations and future research

The focus on a single sport brand limits the generalisability and transferability of the *ISBE*. It is essential to examine additional sport brands within the framework of the *ISBE*. In line with the bottom-up logic of the *ISBE*, we detail directions for future sport branding research along the micro-, meso-, and macrolevel. On the macrolevel, future research could assess how the *ISBE* translates to other sport brands (e.g. athlete

brands) as well as if and how actors and their salience for brand co-creation varies across the *ISBE* of different sport brands (e.g. across different sports). Additionally, macrolevel research should examine the measurement of evolving brand meanings, strategies to balance and govern diverging brand meanings within the *ISBE*, and network designs of institutional brand engagement platforms to facilitate interactions. Mesolevel future research may address the governance, design, and infrastructure of individual institutional brand engagement platforms, detail how actors interact on brand engagement platforms to co-create and negotiate brand meaning, and study how brand meanings are absorbed and brand identity is adapted within the internal brand management platform. Further, future research could assess, how brand conductors can participate authentically on emergent brand engagement platforms. On the microlevel, future research is needed regarding the understanding of brand conductors' management capabilities, the authentic and consistent communication of brand identity, and actors' motivation to engage in brand co-creation. Additionally, future research could examine the extent to which an actor's brand meaning evolves over time and what factors influence brand meaning.

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