

# STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CLUB IMAGE DURING PERFORMANCE DECLINE: THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE “BEAUTIFICATION”

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## *Abstract:*

*This study explores how sports clubs manage their public image during periods of declining performance by introducing the concept of historical narrative “beautification.” The research combines a conceptual framework with empirical data collected from 120 football fans to examine how this strategy is perceived by supporters. The findings show that fans are not passive recipients of club communication, but active interpreters who recognize and evaluate the use of nostalgic and selective historical narratives. While such strategies can reinforce emotional attachment and sustain engagement in the short term, their effectiveness depends on credibility and balance. Supporters demonstrate a clear preference for transparency and authenticity, even when performance is poor. The study contributes to sport management literature by highlighting the tension between symbolic communication and organizational reality and suggests that sustainable image management requires integrating storytelling with honest and consistent practices.*

*Keywords: sports management; brand image; fan loyalty; reputation management; historical narrative.*

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary sport, professional clubs have evolved beyond their traditional role as performance-oriented organizations and have become complex brands operating in highly competitive, media-driven environments. Their success is no longer determined solely by sporting results, but also by their capacity to build, maintain and strategically manage a strong public image. In this context, brand image represents a critical intangible asset that influences fan loyalty, sponsorship attractiveness and long-term financial sustainability. Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that a positive brand image is a key determinant of fan attachment and behavioural loyalty in professional team sports (Bauer et al., 2008).

The relationship between sports clubs and their supporters is fundamentally different from typical consumer–brand interactions. Fans develop deep emotional and psychological connections with their teams, often rooted in identity, tradition and social belonging. These relationships are reinforced through continuous interaction, symbolic communication and shared experiences, making sports brands particularly sensitive to fluctuations in reputation and performance (Funk & James, 2001; Bauer et al., 2008). Consequently, periods of declining performance represent critical moments for sports organizations, as they can disrupt established emotional bonds and weaken stakeholder trust.

A growing body of literature highlights that fan loyalty is influenced not only by current results but also by psychological and relational factors such as motivation, involvement, satisfaction and long-term identification with the club (Kim et al., 2020; Funk & James, 2001; Popescu et al., 2025). However, performance decline often leads to decreased engagement, reduced attendance and lower commercial revenues, placing clubs under significant pressure to maintain their symbolic and economic relevance. In such situations, organizations must adopt strategic approaches to manage their image and preserve stakeholder relationships.

Previous research indicates that sports organizations employ a variety of communication strategies to mitigate reputational risks, including increased media engagement, fan interaction and brand storytelling (Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). These practices are designed to sustain emotional attachment and reinforce the perceived identity of the club, even when on-field results are unfavourable.

One of the most prominent mechanisms used in this process is the strategic use of historical narratives. By emphasizing past achievements, iconic players and memorable moments, clubs create a sense of continuity and prestige that transcends current performance. This approach is closely related to nostalgia-based marketing and symbolic branding, which aim to strengthen emotional bonds by reconnecting fans with the club's historical identity. Research suggests that such strategies can significantly enhance fan engagement and reinforce long-term loyalty, even in challenging periods (Awad, 2025; Cho & Chiu, 2021).

However, the strategic use of history is not without limitations. When historical narratives are selectively presented or excessively idealized, they may lead to a distortion of organizational reality and raise concerns regarding authenticity and transparency. The tension between symbolic communication and factual accuracy becomes particularly relevant in the digital era, where information circulates rapidly and stakeholders have increased access to alternative perspectives. As a result,

attempts to preserve a positive image through selective storytelling may generate scepticism and erode trust if perceived as manipulative.

In this paper, this phenomenon is conceptualized as “historical narrative beautification”, defined as the strategic process through which sports clubs selectively reinterpret, emphasize or reframe elements of their past in order to maintain a favourable brand image during periods of low performance. This concept integrates elements from several theoretical perspectives, including brand management, fan loyalty theory and reputation management, and provides a framework for understanding how clubs navigate the tension between performance reality and symbolic identity.

The relevance of this concept is further supported by research on sport team reputation, which shows that perceived reputation significantly influences both fan attachment and stakeholder engagement (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Walker & Kent, 2009; Bauer et al., 2008). In addition, studies on brand equity formation indicate that emotional identification and symbolic associations play a crucial role in sustaining consumer commitment in sport contexts (Ross, 2006; Bauer et al., 2008). These findings suggest that historical narratives can function as strategic tools for reinforcing brand equity, particularly when performance outcomes are unfavourable.

At the same time, the increasing importance of digital communication has amplified the impact of these strategies. Social media platforms enable clubs to curate and disseminate historical content in a highly controlled manner, shaping fan perceptions and reinforcing desired narratives. Digital engagement mechanisms, including storytelling, interactive content and community-building initiatives, contribute significantly to the development of fan loyalty and brand attachment (Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Popescu et al., 2025). This creates both opportunities and risks, as the line between authentic storytelling and strategic image manipulation becomes increasingly blurred.

Despite the growing importance of these practices, the concept of historical narrative beautification remains insufficiently explored in the academic literature. Most existing studies focus on brand image, fan loyalty or digital engagement, without explicitly addressing the role of selective historical representation as a strategic tool during performance decline. This gap highlights the need for a more integrated approach that combines theoretical insights with empirical investigation.

Therefore, the aim of this study is twofold. First, it seeks to conceptualize the process of historical narrative beautification within the broader framework of sport management and marketing. Second, it aims to analyse how this process is perceived by fans, with a particular focus on its effectiveness and ethical implications. By combining a conceptual analysis with empirical data collected from football supporters, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how sports clubs manage their image during periods of performance decline and how these strategies influence stakeholder perceptions.

Ultimately, the paper argues that while historical narrative strategies can be effective in maintaining fan engagement and brand continuity in the short term, their long-term success depends on the ability of organizations to balance symbolic communication with transparency and authenticity. This balance is essential for sustaining trust and ensuring the credibility of sports brands in an increasingly complex and interconnected environment.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Sports clubs as brands and the importance of image management**

In contemporary sport management, professional clubs are increasingly conceptualized as brands rather than merely competitive entities. This transformation reflects broader developments in the commercialization and globalization of sport, where clubs operate in complex markets characterized by intense competition for attention, loyalty and financial resources. From a theoretical perspective, sport brands can be understood through the lens of brand equity theory, which emphasizes the role of associations, perceived quality and loyalty in shaping consumer behavior (Keller, 1993). In the sport context, these elements are strongly influenced by emotional attachment and symbolic meaning, making brand management particularly significant.

Unlike traditional products, sports clubs possess a unique brand structure based on identity, heritage and community affiliation. Fans do not simply consume a service; they develop enduring psychological connections with their teams, often integrating club identity into their own social identity (Bauer et al., 2008). This distinctive characteristic transforms sports brands into powerful social institutions, where the relationship between organization and consumer is deeper and more resilient, but also more vulnerable to reputational fluctuations.

Brand image plays a central role in this dynamic. It represents the set of perceptions, associations and beliefs held by stakeholders regarding the club and directly influences attitudes and behaviors such as attendance, merchandise purchase and long-term loyalty. Research has shown that a strong and consistent brand image contributes significantly to the creation of fan commitment and enhances the overall value of the organization (Gladden & Funk, 2002). In this sense, image management becomes a strategic priority for sports clubs, particularly in environments where performance outcomes are uncertain.

Stakeholders in sport extend beyond fans and include sponsors, media partners, governing bodies and local communities. Each of these groups interacts with the club's image in different ways, shaping expectations and influencing organizational legitimacy. For instance, sponsors are particularly sensitive to brand reputation, as their association with a club directly impacts their own image (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Similarly, media narratives contribute to the construction and dissemination of the club's public identity, amplifying both positive and negative perceptions.

Given this complexity, sports clubs must adopt integrated image management strategies that align performance, communication and stakeholder engagement. The ability to maintain a coherent and credible brand image is essential not only for competitive advantage but also for organizational sustainability (Nistorescu & Barbu, 2006). In periods of instability or declining performance, this function becomes even more critical, as clubs must rely on their symbolic and relational capital to preserve stakeholder trust and support.

### **2.2. Fan loyalty and emotional attachment in sports**

Fan loyalty represents one of the most distinctive and valuable characteristics of the sports industry, differentiating it from traditional consumer markets. Unlike conventional customers, sports fans often develop deep emotional and psychological attachments to their preferred teams, which extend beyond rational evaluation of performance or outcomes. This relationship is frequently explained through social identity theory, which suggests that individuals derive part of their self-

concept from their membership in social groups, including sports teams (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As a result, identification with a club becomes a central component of personal and collective identity.

The fan–club relationship is therefore not purely transactional but highly symbolic and affective. Supporters experience victories and defeats as personal events, reinforcing their emotional investment in the team. This phenomenon has been conceptualized in the literature as team identification, which plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes, behaviors and long-term loyalty (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Highly identified fans are more likely to maintain their support even during periods of poor performance, demonstrating resilience that is rarely observed in other industries.

Loyalty in sport is thus a multidimensional construct, encompassing behavioral loyalty (e.g., match attendance, merchandise purchases) and attitudinal loyalty (emotional commitment and psychological attachment). Research indicates that emotional attachment is a stronger predictor of long-term loyalty than short-term satisfaction, as it is rooted in shared history, tradition and symbolic meaning (Funk & James, 2001). This explains why many supporters remain loyal despite declining performance or organizational challenges.

However, sporting performance still plays a significant role in shaping fan engagement. While highly identified fans tend to remain loyal, lower levels of performance can reduce overall interest, media visibility and casual supporter involvement. Studies have shown that consistent success enhances brand perception and strengthens fan identification, whereas prolonged underperformance may weaken attachment among less committed stakeholders (Trail et al., 2003).

Consequently, sports organizations must carefully manage the balance between performance outcomes and emotional engagement. Maintaining fan loyalty during periods of decline requires not only competitive improvement but also strategic communication and identity reinforcement. This highlights the importance of symbolic and narrative mechanisms, which can sustain emotional bonds even when sporting results are unfavourable.

### **2.3. Reputation management strategies in periods of performance decline**

Periods of declining performance are among the most sensitive moments in the life of a sports club. Beyond the immediate impact on results, such phases tend to generate uncertainty, frustration among fans and increased scrutiny from media and sponsors. In these contexts, reputation becomes a fragile asset, and its management requires deliberate and carefully calibrated strategies.

From an organizational perspective, crisis situations in sport are not limited to scandals or external shocks; they can also emerge from sustained poor performance, which gradually erodes stakeholder confidence. Research in sport management shows that reputation is strongly influenced by both on-field results and off-field communication, meaning that clubs must actively manage how they are perceived during difficult periods (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). When performance declines, the absence of strategic communication can amplify negative perceptions and accelerate disengagement.

Public relations and communication therefore play a central role in stabilizing the club's image. Sports organizations often increase their communication efforts during such periods, using press releases, interviews, social media and fan-oriented content to maintain visibility and reinforce connection with supporters. These

practices are aligned with crisis communication theory, which emphasizes the importance of transparency, consistency and responsiveness in protecting organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Even when results are unfavourable, maintaining an open dialogue with stakeholders can reduce uncertainty and preserve trust.

At the same time, reputation management is not limited to communication tactics but reflects broader organizational strategy. Clubs must align their messaging with internal actions, such as managerial decisions, investments in player development or long-term planning. Studies suggest that stakeholders are more likely to remain supportive when they perceive coherence between what the organization communicates and what it actually does (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018).

In practice, this means that effective reputation management during performance decline requires a balance between acknowledging current challenges and projecting a credible vision for the future. While communication can mitigate negative perceptions, it cannot substitute for genuine organizational efforts to address underlying problems. Consequently, reputation management should be understood as an integrated strategic process, combining communication, leadership and long-term planning to sustain stakeholder confidence during periods of instability.

#### **2.4. Historical narrative and nostalgia as strategic tools**

In sport, the past is never just the past—it is a living resource that clubs constantly draw upon to maintain meaning, identity and emotional connection. Unlike many other industries, where history plays a secondary role, sports organizations rely heavily on their heritage to shape how they are perceived. Trophies, iconic matches and legendary players become more than memories; they are essential elements of brand storytelling.

Storytelling, in this context, represents a powerful strategic tool. Through narratives constructed around key historical moments, clubs create continuity between past and present, reinforcing a sense of identity and belonging among supporters. Research has shown that narratives help consumers make sense of brands and develop stronger emotional connections, particularly when these stories are authentic and culturally meaningful (Escalas, 2004). In sport, this effect is even more pronounced, as fans often internalize these narratives as part of their personal and social identity.

Closely related to storytelling is the use of nostalgia as a marketing and communication strategy. Nostalgia allows clubs to reconnect supporters with emotionally charged moments from the past, often associated with success, unity and pride. Studies indicate that nostalgic content can enhance positive emotions, strengthen attachment and increase loyalty, especially during periods when current performance fails to meet expectations (Fairley, 2003; Cho & Chiu, 2021). By revisiting “golden eras,” clubs can temporarily shift attention away from present difficulties and reinforce long-term identification.

Building on these perspectives, this paper introduces the concept of historical narrative beautification, understood as the strategic process through which clubs selectively emphasize, reinterpret or reframe elements of their past in order to maintain a favourable image during periods of declining performance. Unlike simple storytelling, beautification implies a degree of selectivity: positive moments are

amplified, while less successful or controversial episodes may be minimized or omitted.

This distinction is important because it highlights the dual nature of such strategies. On the one hand, historical narrative beautification can serve as an effective mechanism for sustaining fan engagement, preserving identity and stabilizing the club's image. On the other hand, excessive reliance on idealized narratives may create a disconnect between perception and reality, raising questions about authenticity and credibility.

In an era characterized by rapid information exchange and increased transparency, the effectiveness of these strategies depends largely on how they are perceived by stakeholders. When used in a balanced and credible manner, historical narratives can strengthen the relationship between clubs and their supporters. However, when perceived as manipulative, they risk undermining trust—the very foundation of long-term fan loyalty.

### **3. Research methodology**

The empirical component of this study was conducted between June 3, 2025 and July 25, 2025, using the Google Forms platform and was addressed exclusively to football fans of FCSB. The choice of this target group was not accidental, as the club represents one of the most well-known and supported football teams in Romania, offering a relevant context for analysing fan perceptions in relation to image management strategies.

The research was based on a structured questionnaire completed by 120 respondents. The instrument included 24 items and was designed to capture both the socio-demographic profile of participants and their perceptions regarding the process of “historical narrative beautification” in periods of low performance. The first set of questions focused on identifying key characteristics of the respondents, while the subsequent items explored attitudes, opinions and interpretations related to the research objectives.

The data collected were processed using Microsoft Office Excel and analysed through univariate, bivariate and multivariate methods, allowing for a structured interpretation of the responses. Although the study does not aim for statistical generalization, it provides valuable insights into the perceptions of a highly engaged fan base.

In terms of respondent profile, the results indicate that 72% of participants are male and 28% are female. The age distribution shows that the largest group (44%) is represented by individuals aged between 20 and 30 years. Participants aged between 30 and 40 account for 21%, those between 40 and 50 represent 29%, while respondents over 50 years old make up 6% of the sample. This distribution suggests a predominance of young and middle-aged supporters, which is consistent with the active fan base typically engaged in online surveys.

Regarding educational background, most respondents have completed high school (44%), followed by those with higher education (19%) and middle school (22%), while a smaller percentage (6%) have post-university studies. This diversity provides a relatively balanced perspective in terms of educational experience.

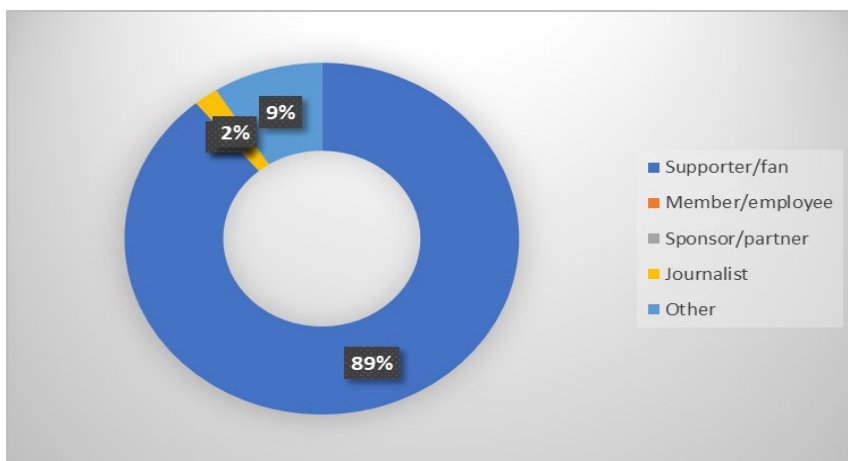
In terms of residence, the majority of participants (72%) come from urban areas, while 28% live in rural environments. This distribution reflects the higher concentration of active football supporters in urban settings, where access to media and club-related content is generally more consistent.

Overall, the methodological approach adopted in this study allows for a clear and structured understanding of how fans perceive the use of historical narrative strategies in maintaining club image during periods of declining performance.

#### 4. Findings and discussions

The results of this study offer a nuanced understanding of how fans perceive the use of historical narrative beautification during periods of declining performance. Rather than being passive recipients of club communication, supporters demonstrate both emotional attachment and critical awareness, shaping a complex interpretative framework around these strategies.

The sample is dominated by highly engaged supporters, with the majority identifying directly as fans of the club. This aspect is particularly important, as it ensures that the responses reflect informed perceptions shaped by long-term emotional involvement rather than superficial consumption. Consequently, the findings can be interpreted as representative of a core stakeholder group, whose attitudes are critical for the sustainability of the club's image.



**Figure. 1 Relationship between respondents and the club**

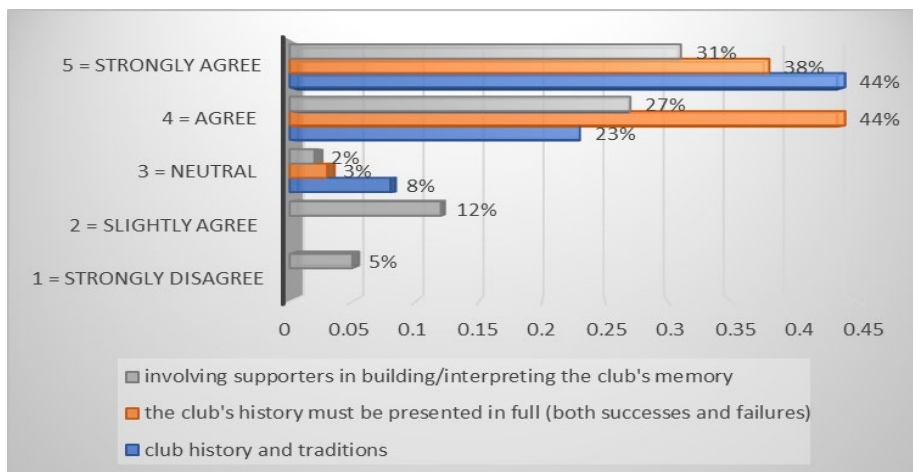
The data clearly show that the overwhelming majority of respondents are active supporters of the club. This aspect is particularly important, as it confirms that the analysis is grounded in the perceptions of individuals who are deeply emotionally invested in the team, not casual observers.

From a broader perspective, this strong identification reinforces the idea that sports fans are fundamentally different from traditional consumers. Their relationship with the club is not transactional, but symbolic and identity-driven. Supporting a team often becomes part of who they are, influencing how they interpret both success and failure.

At the same time, this level of attachment has important implications for image management strategies. Highly involved fans are more exposed to club communication, but also more capable of critically evaluating it. In this context, strategies such as historical narrative beautification are not simply accepted at face value. Instead, they are filtered through personal experience, memory and expectations.



This finding suggests that clubs operate in a delicate space: while emotional attachment provides a strong foundation for loyalty, it also increases the level of scrutiny. Fans are willing to support the club during difficult times, but they also expect coherence, authenticity and respect for the club's true history.



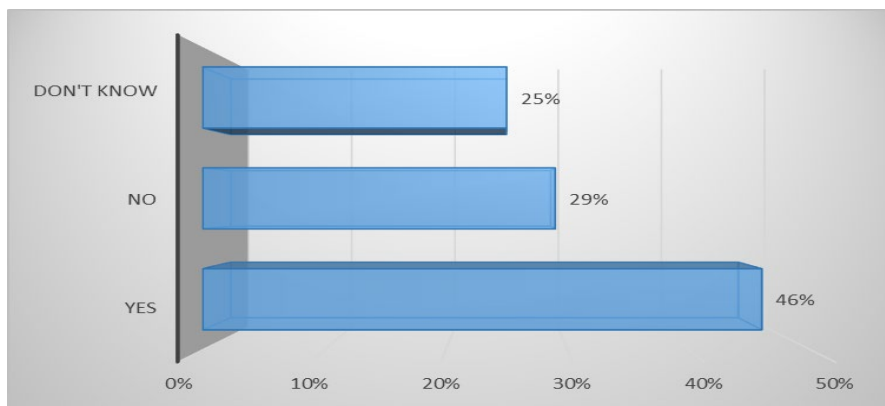
**Figure. 2 Attitudes towards history, transparency and fan involvement**

The results reveal a strong attachment of supporters to the club's history, with most respondents indicating that they are familiar with its traditions and past achievements. However, what is particularly interesting is not just this familiarity, but the expectations that come with it.

Fans clearly express a preference for a balanced presentation of history—one that includes both successes and failures. This suggests that supporters do not idealize the past in a simplistic way; instead, they value authenticity and completeness. For them, the club's identity is built not only on victories, but also on difficult moments that contribute to its narrative depth.

Another important aspect concerns fan involvement in shaping the club's memory. While a significant proportion of respondents support participatory approaches, there is also a segment that believes this responsibility should remain within the club's management. This reflects an ongoing tension between traditional, centralized communication and more modern, participatory models.

Overall, the findings highlight that fans are not merely consumers of history, but active stakeholders in how it is constructed and communicated. This has direct implications for clubs: any attempt to selectively present history must take into account not only emotional attachment, but also the growing demand for transparency and inclusion.



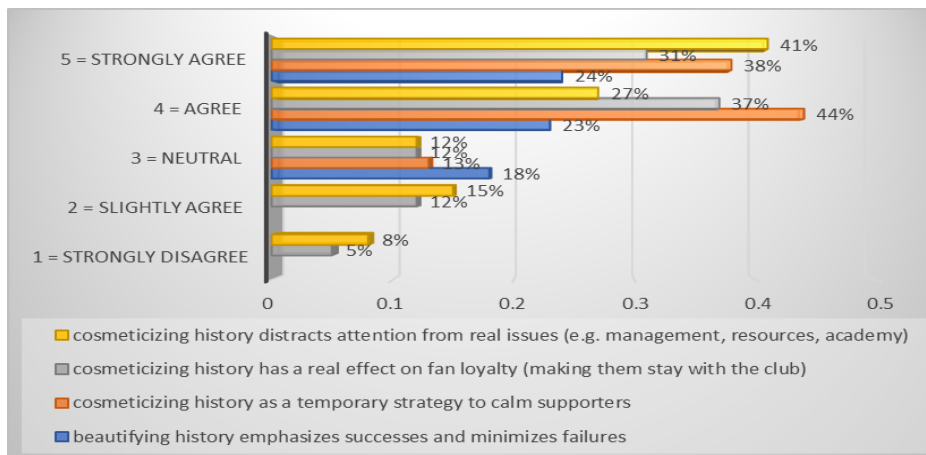
**Figure. 3 Awareness of nostalgia-based campaigns**

The findings indicate that a significant proportion of respondents recall campaigns focused on the club's "glory moments," particularly during periods of poor performance. This suggests that nostalgia-based communication is not only present, but also visible enough to be recognized by fans.

From a strategic point of view, this confirms that clubs actively use historical references as a tool to maintain engagement when current results are not favourable. By bringing back iconic moments, legendary players or past successes, organizations attempt to reinforce a sense of continuity and stability.

However, the results also reveal that not all respondents clearly remember such campaigns, while some are uncertain about their existence. This indicates that the effectiveness of these strategies is not uniform. Visibility, frequency and credibility all play a role in determining their impact.

More importantly, the fact that fans are aware of these campaigns suggests that nostalgia is no longer a subtle mechanism, but a recognizable communication strategy. As a result, its effectiveness depends less on its presence and more on how it is perceived - whether as a genuine celebration of history or as a deliberate attempt to shift attention away from present difficulties.



**Figure. 4 Perceptions of the "beautification" process**

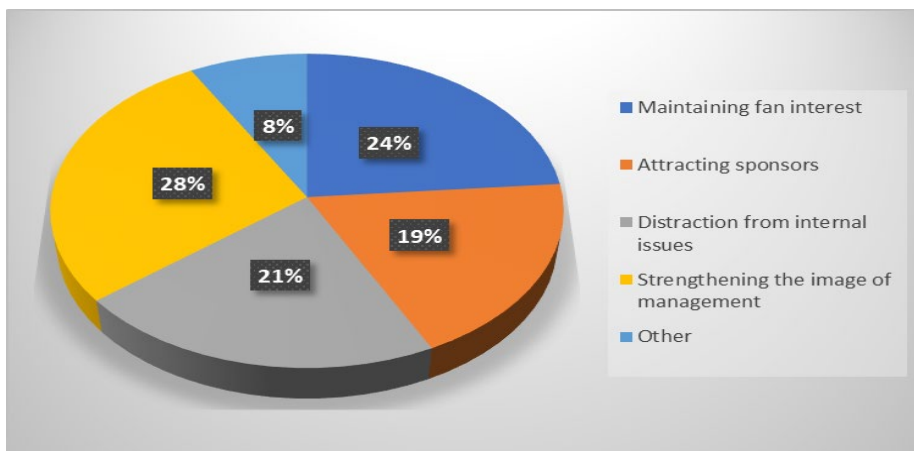
One of the most significant findings of the study is the high level of agreement among respondents regarding the definitions of historical narrative beautification. Fans largely recognize this process as a deliberate and recurring strategy used by clubs during periods of underperformance.

What stands out is the clarity with which respondents understand the multiple functions of this strategy. They perceive it not only as a way to highlight past successes, but also as a temporary tool aimed at calming supporters, maintaining loyalty and, in some cases, diverting attention from deeper organizational issues.

This awareness is particularly important because it challenges the assumption that such strategies operate at an implicit level. Instead, fans appear to be fully conscious of the mechanisms behind them. They understand both the emotional appeal and the strategic intent.

At the same time, this does not necessarily lead to rejection. Rather, it creates a more nuanced perception in which fans accept the existence of such strategies, but evaluate them critically. The key issue becomes not whether beautification is used, but how it is used.

This finding strongly supports the conceptual contribution of the paper, confirming that historical narrative beautification is not only a theoretical construct, but also a phenomenon recognized and interpreted by the audience it targets.



**Figure. 5 Perceived objectives of beautification**

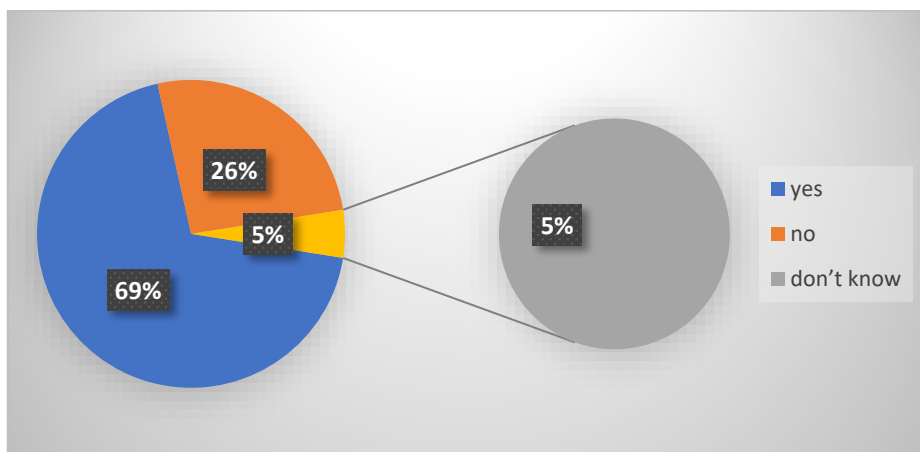
Respondents identify multiple purposes behind the use of historical narrative beautification, reflecting a complex understanding of the strategy. Among the most frequently mentioned objectives are strengthening the club's image, maintaining fan loyalty, attracting sponsors and diverting attention from internal problems.

This multi-dimensional perception highlights that fans do not see beautification as a purely symbolic act. Instead, they recognize its strategic role within the broader context of club management. In their view, communication is not only about storytelling, but also about protecting the club's economic and reputational interests.

Interestingly, the idea that beautification can distract attention from real issues appears prominently in the responses. This suggests that fans are aware of the potential risks associated with over-reliance on image management strategies, especially when they are not accompanied by concrete organizational improvements.

At the same time, the importance attributed to loyalty and sponsor attraction confirms that supporters understand the economic realities of modern sport. They recognize that maintaining a strong image is essential for the club's survival, even if the methods used are sometimes debatable.

Overall, this finding reinforces the idea that fans interpret club strategies through both an emotional and a rational lens, balancing their attachment with a critical understanding of organizational dynamics.



**Figure. 6 Willingness to participate in hybrid initiatives (nostalgia and transparency)**

A particularly revealing result of the study is the high level of willingness among respondents to engage in initiatives that combine historical celebration with transparency. The majority express openness to participating in events that acknowledge both the club's achievements and its difficult periods.

This finding is important because it challenges the assumption that fans prefer idealized narratives. On the contrary, supporters appear ready to engage with more honest and balanced forms of communication, as long as they feel included and respected.

At the same time, the presence of a segment that is less willing to participate indicates that not all fans perceive their role in the same way. For some, supporting the club remains a more passive activity, while others embrace a more active, participatory role.

From a managerial perspective, this suggests an opportunity for clubs to rethink their communication strategies. Rather than relying exclusively on nostalgia, they could develop hybrid approaches that combine storytelling with transparency and dialogue.

Such strategies have the potential not only to maintain loyalty, but also to strengthen trust, which appears to be a central expectation among modern sports fans.

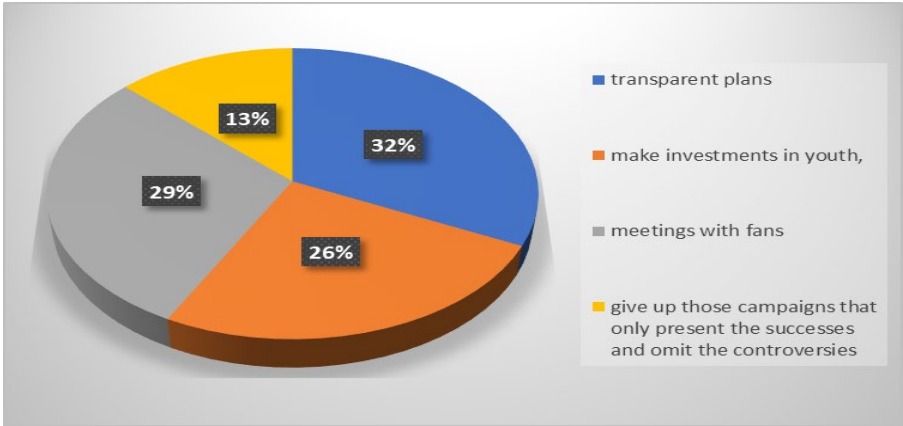


Figure. 7 Alternatives proposed by fans

The alternatives proposed by respondents provide valuable insight into what fans actually expect from clubs during periods of decline. Rather than rejecting communication strategies altogether, supporters suggest a shift towards more transparent and action-oriented approaches.

Among the most common recommendations are clear explanations of the causes behind poor performance, increased investment in youth development, direct interaction with fans and a reduction in purely nostalgic campaigns. These proposals reflect a desire for authenticity, accountability and long-term vision.

What is particularly interesting is that fans do not oppose the use of history, but rather its selective or excessive use. They seem to prefer a balanced approach in which the past is acknowledged, but not used as a substitute for present action.

This finding indicates a maturation of fan expectations. Supporters are no longer satisfied with symbolic reassurance alone; they seek evidence of real commitment to improvement.

For clubs, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity. While it increases the pressure for transparency, it also creates the potential for deeper and more meaningful engagement with supporters.

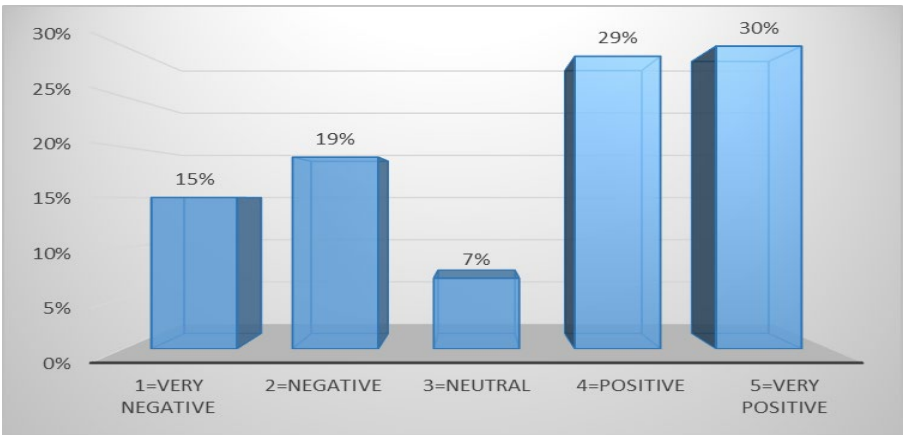


Figure. 8 Long-term impact on reputation

The final set of results reveals a divided perception regarding the long-term impact of historical narrative beautification. Some respondents view it as beneficial when used responsibly, while others associate it with risks such as loss of trust and credibility.

This polarization is particularly significant, as it highlights the conditional nature of the strategy's effectiveness. Beautification is not inherently positive or negative; its impact depends on how it is implemented and perceived.

When used in a balanced and ethical manner, it can reinforce emotional attachment and maintain continuity. However, when it is perceived as manipulative or disconnected from reality, it can undermine trust—arguably the most important asset in the relationship between a club and its fans.

This finding directly supports the central argument of the study: that historical narrative beautification must be carefully managed, as its long-term consequences extend beyond immediate image benefits.

Ultimately, the results suggest that the sustainability of such strategies depends on achieving a delicate balance between storytelling and authenticity, between symbolic communication and real organizational change.

The findings of this study clearly show that historical narrative beautification is not a hidden or subtle strategy, but one that fans actively recognize and interpret. Supporters understand why clubs use these approaches and what they are trying to achieve, which suggests that such communication no longer operates implicitly. At the same time, the results highlight an important balance: strong emotional attachment to the club does not eliminate critical thinking. On the contrary, even highly loyal fans expect honesty, transparency and respect for the club's real history. Moreover, the effectiveness of these strategies appears to depend largely on how they are implemented. When used in a balanced and credible way, they can strengthen the relationship between the club and its supporters. However, when perceived as excessive or manipulative, they risk damaging trust. In this sense, the findings underline the importance of combining storytelling with transparency, ensuring that the club's image is supported by real actions and consistent organisational behaviour.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study set out to explore a phenomenon that is often visible in practice but rarely discussed explicitly in academic literature: the strategic use of a club's past to compensate for present difficulties. By introducing and examining the concept of historical narrative beautification, the research provides a clearer understanding of how sports organizations attempt to preserve their image and maintain fan engagement during periods of declining performance.

What emerges from both the theoretical framework and the empirical findings is that this strategy is neither invisible nor misunderstood. On the contrary, fans are fully aware of it. They recognize when clubs turn to nostalgic narratives, highlight iconic moments or emphasize past achievements in order to soften the impact of current results. This awareness changes the way such strategies function. They are no longer subtle mechanisms that operate in the background, but visible and interpretable actions that are evaluated by supporters.

At the same time, the study highlights an important nuance in the relationship between fans and clubs. Emotional attachment remains strong, even in difficult

periods, but it does not eliminate the capacity for critical thinking. Supporters continue to identify with the club, but they also expect honesty and coherence. They are willing to accept difficult moments, as long as these are acknowledged rather than hidden behind selectively constructed narratives.

This duality is perhaps one of the most important insights of the research. It shows that loyalty in sport is not blind. It is resilient, but also reflexive. Fans do not necessarily reject the use of history, but they are sensitive to how it is used. When historical narratives are presented in a balanced and credible way, they can strengthen the emotional bond between the club and its supporters. When they are perceived as exaggerated or disconnected from reality, they risk producing the opposite effect.

From a theoretical perspective, the paper contributes by positioning historical narrative beautification at the intersection of brand management, fan loyalty and reputation management. It extends existing discussions by showing that the strategic use of history is not only a communication tool, but also a mechanism through which organizations attempt to manage the tension between symbolic identity and actual performance. In this sense, the concept helps explain how clubs navigate periods of instability without relying exclusively on sporting results.

From a managerial point of view, the findings suggest that relying solely on nostalgic communication is not a sustainable solution. While such strategies may offer short-term relief in terms of image and engagement, their long-term effectiveness depends on credibility. Clubs that overuse idealized narratives without addressing underlying problems risk eroding trust, which is much harder to rebuild than to maintain.

Instead, a more balanced approach appears to be both necessary and expected. This involves combining storytelling with transparency, acknowledging both achievements and shortcomings, and maintaining open communication with supporters. The results of the study indicate that fans are not only receptive to such approaches, but also willing to actively engage with them. This opens the door for more participatory forms of communication, where supporters are not just audiences, but contributors to the club's evolving narrative.

At the same time, several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The research is based on a relatively small sample, focused on supporters of a single football club, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Cultural, organizational and sport-specific differences may influence how these strategies are perceived in other contexts. Future research could expand the analysis to multiple clubs, different sports or international settings in order to capture a broader range of perspectives.

Further studies could also explore the long-term effects of historical narrative strategies on fan behaviour, trust and brand equity, as well as the role of digital media in amplifying or reshaping these processes. In an environment where communication is increasingly immediate and interactive, understanding how narratives are constructed, shared and challenged becomes even more relevant.

In the end, the use of history in sport is not problematic in itself. Every club has a story, and that story is a valuable resource. The challenge lies in how it is told. When used with balance and respect for reality, historical narratives can inspire, connect and sustain. When used as a substitute for present action, they risk becoming fragile constructions that fail under closer scrutiny. The difference between the two lies not in the past itself, but in the way it is integrated into the present.

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