

***POLITICS AMONG SPORTS:
FC BARCELONA AS THE SHAPERS OF CATALAN IDENTITY***

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Received: November 5, 2023; Revised: March 13, 2024; Approved: March 31, 2024

ABSTRACT

The article explores how FC Barcelona has played a significant role in shaping Catalan identity on a global scale. Through the lens of the Transnational Advocacy Network framework, the research delves into the club's international influence and its impact on catalyzing awareness and recognition of Catalonia as a distinct cultural and political entity. The study investigates how FC Barcelona's global fan base, iconic players, and strategic branding efforts have contributed to projecting Catalonia's identity beyond Spain's borders. By examining the club's role as a transnational advocate for Catalan culture and aspirations, the article sheds light on the intricate interplay between football, identity, and transnational networks in shaping the perceptions of Catalonia in the global arena.

Keywords: FC Barcelona, Catalan, Transnational Advocacy Networks, Politics of Identity

INTRODUCTION

Football Club Barcelona, or more commonly known as FC Barcelona, is one of the largest football clubs in the world hailing from the city of Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain. This football club was founded in 1899 and was initiated by Joan Gamper (Juventeny Berdún, 2017). The establishment of FC Barcelona was influenced by the wave of football popularity sweeping through Spain in the late 19th century. The creation of this football club had not only sported intentions but also strong political reasons behind it (Shobe, 2008) which was considered a vital element in uniting the masses. Football could serve as a tool for representing identity. The foundation of this club also served as a construction of political, national, or regional identities in Catalonia (Tuñón &

Brey, 2016).

Football is widely acknowledged for its role in shaping collective identities (Shobe, 2008). The identity formation fostered by a football club is of an imaginary nature. An imagined community can be defined as a group of people who identify themselves as common people, even if they have never met each other (Anderson, 1991). The captivating and competitive nature of football seems suitable for building such an imagined community. Football embodies an ideal condition for shaping an imagined community. It's easier to imagine a nation and confirm a national or regional identity when eleven players represent a nation or region, competing against eleven players from a different nation or region (Oonk, 2020). Football makes amorphous notions of 'community' or 'nation' appear more tangible (Duke & Crolley, 1996). Identity formation is not only based on the football team itself but also on the club's home stadium, the city it belongs to, rituals related to football fandom, and even specific figures associated with the club (Gaffney & Bale, 2005; Hague & Mercer, 1998). The stadium also functions as a facilitator in the process of strengthening group identity while becoming a prestigious symbol of a club (Shobe, 2008).

In the case of FC Barcelona, football is utilized to represent the local identity of Catalonia to the world (Mendez, 2021). The branding of this identity by FC Barcelona employs elements of soft politics by creating a football club that garners sympathy from supporters, both locally in Catalonia and from various countries, thus generating a global spotlight on supporter enthusiasm. Catalonia is one of the 17 autonomous regions under the governance of Spain, situated in the northeastern part of the country, bordering Andorra and neighboring France. Its capital is Barcelona, which is also the second-largest city in Spain. As an autonomous region with the freedom to manage its own affairs, Catalonia has its own president, parliament, judiciary, and flag (Burg, 2015). This reflects the structure of Spain's parliamentary monarchy governance. The people of Catalonia have an identity distinct from the broader

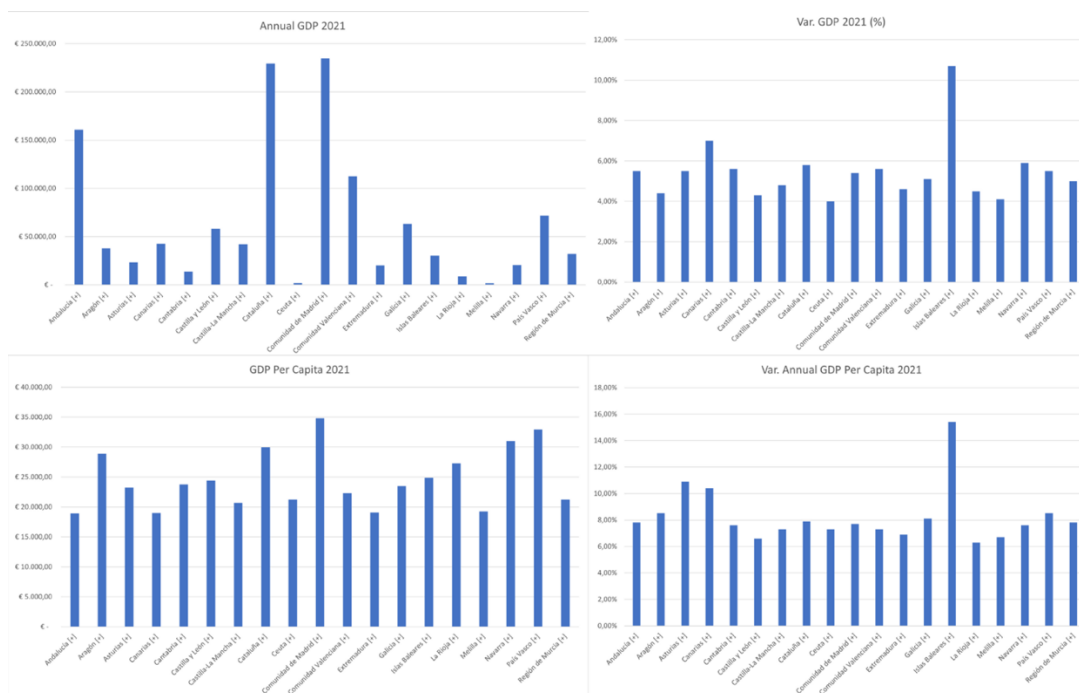
Spanish identity. Their identity is a blend of Spanish and French influences, encompassing culture and language (Burg, 2015). Catalonia is also economically productive, especially in the tourism sector, with its extensive coastline along Barcelona contributing to nearly 40% of the region's total revenue (della Porta & Portos, 2020).

Regional identity of Catalonia builds through a longing support from the fans of FC Barcelona, popularly known as Barca. The promotes from barca had taken meaning and an effort to rise differences in social context (King, 2014). This phenomenon is often shown in football where teams are responsible as an anchor that able individuals and groups strengthened its attachment to a certain community or nations (Pulleiro Méndez, 2021). FC Barcelona's behavior in shaping identity is not the only one in the world. Many other clubs use football as a unifying force for identity, like Athletic Club Bilbao representing the regional Basque identity, VfB Stuttgart representing the regional Württemberg identity, and Celtic representing the identity of Glasgow (Pulleiro Méndez, 2021). This is quite reasonable given the stigma that football can nurture a sense of unity, particularly concerning the identity of a group, in addition to its primary function as a sport played by two teams.

Even though FC Barcelona is founded in 1899 by a Swiss immigrant, Joan Gamper as a Catalan descendant rapidly attached the club to Catalan identity. This effort was obviously practiced with its president club to do so. The periods of Spanish Civil War were a turning point for Barca association (Tuñón & Brey, 2016). Moreover, the wider repression of the period impacted the club that best represents the capital of Catalonia. The impact of civil war leads to a murder of Josep Sunyol as club president in 1936. The murder was attempted by President Franco's forces to eradicate potential rise of separatist movement within Catalan identity (Wagner et al., 2019). In the next few years, FC Barcelona were suffered from Franco's dictatorship and his tendency to promote FC Barcelona biggest rival, Real Madrid. Barcelona was thriving to compete in unequal field. While the dictatorship tried to homogenize Spanish

culture under Castilian culture, Barça took on a stronger meaning as a Catalan symbol.

Figure 1. GDP Per Capita and Annual GDP of Spain Community Region



Source: Datosmacro.com (2022)

This demand is fueled by the disappointment of the Catalan population, as the Catalonia province contributes about 20% of Spain's GDP. In fact, Catalonia's GDP is one of the largest contributors to Spain's GDP, amounting to €29.942 billion, with an annual growth rate of 5.8%. These figures make Catalonia the fourth-largest community with the highest annual growth rate, surpassing Madrid, the capital of Spain, which ranks only 11th. However, the financial allocation in Spain's national budget for Catalonia does not reach 10% of the total budget (Alejandro Esteller Moré & Rizzo, 2021). This means that Catalonia experiences a fiscal deficit, with a larger percentage of tax payments compared to the funds received from the Spanish government. Spanish government investments in Catalonia are also minimal, leading to a slowdown in various development projects in the region (Lago-Peñas et al., 2017).

The fiscal deficit in Catalonia is a result of Spain's tax policy, which

mandates that regions with high GDP and wealth act as distributors of profits to poorer regions as recipients. This tax policy is overseen by the State Tax Administration Agency (AEAT). The calculation of tax payments is based on annual GDP, population, poverty rates, and fiscal pressure levels. With Catalonia's GDP reaching 20% of Spain's GDP, the tax contributions it has to pay to Spain range from 6.3% to 8.7% of their total GDP. In other words, Catalonia's tax payments to the Spanish government amount to 13-17 million euros annually. The autonomous government of Catalonia has actually proposed to manage its own taxes, similar to what the Basque Country and Navarre have done. However, this proposal was rejected by the Spanish government due to objections from the Extremadura Regional Government, which hoped that the distribution of Spanish government taxes would not change in order to achieve equal development across Spain. Another consideration is that Catalonia is the most prosperous region in Spain, so the tax revenue from Catalonia is expected to support other regions with lower per capita income.

Due to these various differences, Catalonia has become a region that seeks to separate from Spain. This is further supported by the results of a referendum in October 2017, when Catalonia, led by President Carles Puigdemont, declared that 92.01% of the Catalan population (2,044,038 people) agreed that Catalonia should secede from Spain and establish the state of Catalonia.

In this context, it's interesting to explore the extent of the political limitations of sport. Additionally, it's worth investigating the political stance of FC Barcelona regarding the existing conditions in Catalonia. These questions help researchers analyse the causality between the Catalonia independence process and the political stance of FC Barcelona. The focus of the analysis is on the efforts made by sports institutions to maintain their sporting commitment in the context of national conflict politics. Furthermore, this article seeks to examine the relationship between politics and sport, whether they can coexist

in the same realm or if they only influence each other but cannot operate in the same sphere.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing the Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) framework to explore FC Barcelona's role in shaping Catalan identity. Primary sources include interviews with club officials, fans, and local residents, along with archival data from the club's historical documents. Secondary sources comprise academic journals, books, and news articles that provide insights into the cultural and political impacts of FC Barcelona both locally and internationally. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of how FC Barcelona acts as a catalyst in the advocacy for Catalan identity, examining the narratives that link the club to regional nationalism and its resonance across the global fan base.

Data collection focuses on specific events and statements that highlight FC Barcelona's involvement in political issues, particularly those relating to Catalan independence. Content analysis of public communications from the club, such as official statements and social media posts, will be conducted to discern the extent of its political engagement. Additionally, fan reactions and participation in club-sponsored events that have political undertones are analyzed to gauge public perception and support. This dual approach of examining both the club's output and the community's response provides a detailed view of the interaction between sport, identity, and politics, thus enabling a nuanced understanding of the symbiotic relationship between FC Barcelona and Catalan identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Football, as the most popular sport in the world, often garners significant attention from various circles. Moreover, it's not uncommon for political elements to use football as a means to gain public attention. The

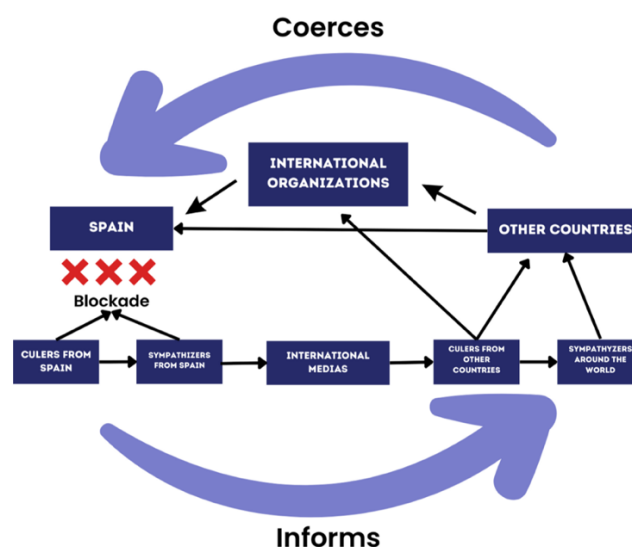
interconnection between football and politics, when explored, reveals their deep interplay. According to Bale (2001), football's role in influencing politics can be potent due to its soft power nature and persuasive character (Bale, 2001). This is because football can be a social construct of regional and national identities (Shobe, 2008).

The use of football as a political tool is entirely feasible. This approach is often considered a shortcut for disseminating specific political ideologies. However, FIFA, the global governing body for football, explicitly prohibits all forms of political practices within football. Article 3 of FIFA's statutes discuss neutrality and the prohibition of political interference. The article states: "Members and officials shall manage their affairs independently and ensure that their football is not influenced by any political motives." This means that members, officials, and all parties involved in football under FIFA's jurisdiction are expected to maintain football activities free from political motives. Furthermore, FIFA enforces serious sanctions against anyone introducing political elements into football. These sanctions can include freezing a team or national team from participating in various football events under FIFA's jurisdiction, including friendly matches with clubs or countries still under FIFA. In other words, FIFA will block anyone, both clubs and national teams, attempting to inject political elements into football. This aims to preserve football's neutrality as a sport free from political interests and to uphold the principles of sportsmanship. Football also wields a powerful influence in the integration process of group or community identities. Football clubs invariably have passionate fan bases that create solidarity among themselves. This fan base extends beyond the city of the club and spreads globally. Building upon this sense of solidarity, coupled with specific cultural elements, gives rise to a new identity rooted in the football club.

FC Barcelona is one of the football clubs that has been vocal in creating a distinct identity separate from Spain's national identity. Although administratively a Spanish club, FC Barcelona has never branded itself as a

pride of Spain. Instead, it has branded itself as a club from Catalonia. This is also a form of FC Barcelona's support for Catalonia's independence efforts and its endorsement of the Catalonia referendums, which have been deemed illegal by the Spanish government. However, FC Barcelona employs legal means, refraining from directly declaring its support for Catalonia's independence. Using the tagline "*Mes que un club*," meaning "more than a club," FC Barcelona indicates that its focus isn't solely on elevating itself as a football club, but also on forging a Catalan identity within FC Barcelona that aims to garner global sympathy. Viewing the club as a family and mutually supporting all issues brought forward by FC Barcelona, including Catalonia's separation from Spanish sovereignty, can exert external pressure on the Spanish government. Another tagline frequently echoed by notable players like Messi, Xavi Hernandez, and Andres Iniesta is "*visca el Barça i visca Catalunya!*" This phrase is often uttered during significant moments, such as when Barça clinches a title or during farewell speeches by FC Barcelona players. This tagline translates to "long live Barcelona and long live Catalonia." Indirectly, this phrase holds propagandistic elements used to ignite unity for Catalonia's independence movement.

Figure 2. Boomerang Pattern of FC Barcelona Influence



FC Barcelona's actions can be analyzed using the Boomerang Pattern of

Transnational Advocacy Networks. Catalan figures spreading Catalanist political ideologies were suppressed and blocked by the Spanish government. These figures then utilized FC Barcelona as a tool to project the Catalanist issue outward, aiming to capture global attention and sympathy. The involvement of FC Barcelona as a club was also backed by individual actors like FC Barcelona players and coaching staff. With FC Barcelona's popularity as one of the world's best football clubs and its famous players like Lionel Messi, the Catalanist issue could gain traction and influence the global community. This, in turn, applies pressure on the Spanish government regarding Catalonia's separatist struggle, supported by factual information accessible to the public. The growing significance of the Catalan populace's desire for independence from Spain is evident. This stems from their perception of being neglected by the Spanish government in terms of development and economic focus. Additionally, differences in cultural identity and the use of Catalan language, distinct from Spanish, provide a strong reason for Catalonia's secession from Spanish sovereignty. Catalan culture and language have overlaps with both Spanish and French, yet they are not entirely the same, owing to Catalonia's proximity to France.

The Catalan identity carried by the Catalan populace has successfully garnered global attention through FC Barcelona's branding efforts. While FC Barcelona does not overtly state that its political stance supports Catalonia's independence, its actions have elicited global attention in rallying support for secession from Spanish sovereignty. FC Barcelona's stance, manifested through various symbols seemingly supportive of Catalonia's independence, is not without cause. FC Barcelona seeks to infuse Catalanist ideologies through emphasizing being a "Catalan-origin club" rather than a "Spanish-origin club." Additionally, the prominent display of the red and yellow flag, synonymous with Catalonia, is visible in FC Barcelona's social media and even incorporated into its logo. This was driven by multiple referendums conducted by Catalan political figures attempting to break away from Spain. However, all such

attempts were consistently failed by the Spanish constitution, deeming these movements illegal and labeling them as separatist actions. Consequently, Catalonia has been repeatedly categorized as an autonomous region in constant rebellion.

The football-based elements utilized by FC Barcelona to strengthen the Catalan identity can be considered a success. The integration created by FC Barcelona forms an imagined community mobilized by the club. Through this, FC Barcelona has established banal nationalism. Banal nationalism refers to everyday practices that reinforce and fortify national identity without explicitly employing national symbols or rhetoric. In this case, FC Barcelona encourages its fans, known as Culers, to become sympathizers of Catalonia's independence process, both directly and indirectly. The result of this imagined community creates a situation where society's identity becomes fragmented based on regions and the football clubs they support. Consider clubs like FC Barcelona and RCD Espanyol, which are synonymous with representing Catalonia's resistance. Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad are linked to representing the Basque community, while Real Madrid is associated with the power of the Spanish government. In fact, Athletic Bilbao takes this identity emphasis to an extreme level within its club. The club's staff, players, and coaches are entirely of Basque descent, and this identity remains preserved to this day. This fragmentation gives rise to a new political intrigue in Spain, driven by identity differences that extend into the parliamentary realm. The dedication of Culers, FC Barcelona's fans, serves as evidence that the influence of a football club in cultivating banal nationalism should not be underestimated. Habits like singing songs in Catalan and chanting throughout Camp Nou stadium can create lasting memories for Culers. This is akin to the impact of propaganda during wartime. The goal is the same – to instill influence in sympathizers to support a country or identity.

Table 1. Total Supporters of FC Barcelona in Comparison

<i>Region</i>	Total Supporters
<i>Spain</i>	15 Million
<i>Catalonia</i>	9 Million
<i>World</i>	300 Million

Source: YouGov (2022)

Barcelona has a large fan base worldwide. In fact, according to a survey conducted by YouGov in 2022, FC Barcelona was ranked as the football club with the largest number of supporters in the world. YouGov's assessment indicators include social media followers, stadium attendance data, FC Barcelona's match viewership data, and the average number of spectators in each FC Barcelona game. Another factor that makes FC Barcelona so popular around the world is the presence of influential football figures, both players and coaches. Names like Lionel Messi, Ronaldinho, David Villa, Patrick Kluivert, Tito Villanova, Pep Guardiola, and Johan Cruyff come to mind. These figures have successfully become icons that enhance FC Barcelona's marketability beyond being just a football club. They also play a role in branding and promoting the club to the global community.

Figure 3. Most Popular Club by Engagement in All Social Media



Source: YouGov (2022)

The high global popularity of FC Barcelona has also brought attention to the name Catalonia as a distinct region from the rest of Spain. This resurgence of identity differences harks back to the era of Francesc Franco's leadership (1939 - 1975). Under Franco's rule, Spain operated in a highly dictatorial manner, with a predominantly left-wing political parliament. The policies implemented during that time were largely centralized in the capital region, with development priorities focused on Madrid. As a result, an impression emerged that pitted the Castilian (bourgeois) population against the Catalan (proletarian) population. Castile was associated with the Spanish populace and considered the "Spanish people," while Catalonia was linked to the Catalan people from the Catalonia region.

This resistance arose due to several discriminatory policies by Franco that targeted the Catalan community. Some forms of discrimination during Franco's regime included the prohibition of using the Catalan language in all daily activities. This ban on the use of the Catalan language wasn't the first of its kind. It echoed a previous incident in the the reign of Philip V de Bourbon in the early 18th century, which also banned all activities conducted in Catalan within Spanish territory. The aim of these prohibitions was to standardize the Spanish cultural identity and eliminate Catalan culture from Spanish land, as Catalan culture in Spain carried a stigma of being rebellious and anarchic.

The impact of this cultural discrimination during Franco's leadership led to the political conflict manifesting itself in the realm of football. The intensifying conflict between Castilians and Catalans found representation in the Real Madrid club, symbolizing the Castilian population, and FC Barcelona, which represented the Catalan resistance movement. This dynamic elevated the significance of matches between these two teams. The matches between these rival clubs are often referred to as "el clásico" and are considered to hold the highest prestige in Spain, and even in the world.

Conclusion

FC Barcelona creates a new identity in an effort to support the movement for Catalan independence. FC Barcelona, through its fanatics known as culers, created an imagined community gathered from the large number of culers spread throughout the world. The values spread by Culers tend to spread the Catalanism movement which is trying to be developed through a new approach, namely through football elements as a medium for spreading it. FC Barcelona did not violate FIFA statutes, because FC Barcelona did not explicitly state that it was pro-Catalonia's independence. However, Barcelona played more tactically by taking advantage of its electability in various international media. They play elements of soft politics by gaining global sympathy.

FC Barcelona is trying to strengthen Catalonia's identity politics through the various movements it promotes. Starting from using the motto "mes que un club", recognizing itself as a football club originating from Catalonia rather than a club from Spain, to raising the Catalan flag and including elements of the Catalan flag in its official logo. This is the main indicator of FC Barcelona's alignment in supporting the movement for the secession of the Catalonia region.

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