



The Role of Star Players in building the English Premier League Brand

Oliver Fredén

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

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Abstract

Author Oliver Fredén
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<p>The aim of this study was to examine the role that star players have, and have had, in the branding of the English Premier League. The Premier League has developed since its foundation in 1992 into a global brand combining elite sports with entertainment, and in which the player's performances, personalities, and visibility are central elements of its image and global popularity. The study aimed to identify ways how individual players contribute to the Premier League's brand through factors like visibility, emotional appeal, and global growth, as well as to explore the role of media, social media, and the challenges and risks their strong public profiles may introduce.</p> <p>The research was performed using a qualitative approach based on secondary data. The data were collected from academic literature and studies, official league publications, and reliable media sources to combine theoretical perspectives with practical real-world examples. Three player example cases of David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Mohamed Salah were presented to demonstrate how players from different eras and with different attributes have contributed to the Premier League brand in terms of athletic performances, cultural impact, and global visibility.</p> <p>The results show that star players contribute in many ways for strengthening the Premier League brand by increasing visibility, building emotional connections, and creating long-term fan loyalty. At the same time, the power of the star players influence and visibility can create reputational risks that may have an effect on both the league and their clubs. The study comes to a conclusion that star players are a powerful asset for the Premier League brand, but it also has to manage the balance between allowing the players to be themselves and be expressive, with consistent brand management, control, and collective values.</p>
Key words Star players, English Premier League, Sports branding, Athlete branding

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1 Introduction

Since the English Premier League (EPL) was established in 1992, it has grown into one of the most viewed sports leagues in the world. The Premier League has transformed from a domestic football competition into a global entertainment product that attracts audiences from all over the world through its elite level of football. The Premier League's success is closely tied to its ability to build and maintain a recognizable brand identity that goes beyond the sport itself. The league's ability to attract world-class players whose athletic performances, diverse personalities, and global visibility contribute significantly to the league's international image and appeal.

In the modern-day world of sports, athletes are no longer only playing the sport, but they also act as individual brands. They embody multicultural, emotional, and social values that helps them connect and attract fans while also shaping perceptions of the organizations they are affiliated with or represent. In the Premier League context, the star players represent diverse backgrounds and personalities, global appeal, and visibility making them both athletes and ambassadors for the league. Their influence helps the Premier League strengthen its position as the top domestic football league in the world, but at the same time this visibility of the players introduces challenges related to factors such as reputation and maintaining brand control. Previous research has highlighted how strong athlete brands can enhance organizational reputation and loyalty (Arai et al., 2013; Hasaan et al., 2016), but also harm affiliated brands when individual reputational crises occur (Sato et al., 2018).

This study examines the role that star players have, and have had, in the branding of the English Premier League. It explores the ways that the players contribute to the league's visibility, emotional appeal, and global growth, while also identifying potential risks related to their influence. To understand this, the research also analyzes the Premier League's brand as a league, and its growth into a combination of elite football and global entertainment. The role of media – with a particular focus on social media – is also examined in the context of how it reinforces the player's role within the leagues brand. By combining theoretical framework and perspectives with real-world practical examples, the study provides insights into how the Premier League is able to use its star players to build a globally appealing brand, while facing challenges related to reputation, integrity, and brand management in the modern-day media.

2 Theory of Branding in Sports

2.1 Definition of a Brand

A brand is one of the most important concepts in marketing and business strategies across any industry. It is more than just a logo, name or design – it represents the entirety of perceptions, associations or experiences that customers connect with a specific product, service, organization, or individual. There are many ways to define a brand, but according to the American Marketing Association, a brand is defined as “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers” (American Marketing Association). This means that brands function as a way to identify a product or a service, and also differentiate it from other competitors in the same market. Aaker (1996) adds on to this idea by describing brands as strategic assets building trust, customer loyalty, and a way of communicating value beyond the offered service or product.

One important concept to understand and related to defining a brand is brand equity. Brand equity refers to the value that consumers attribute to a brand, and represents how well the brand is recognized, perceived, and trusted (American Marketing Association). Brand equity is developed over a longer period through consistency in positive experiences, strong associations and customer loyalty. Aaker (1996) identifies the following four components as primary in brand equity: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty. When the brand equity is high, it allows companies to charge higher prices, and increases resilience in competitive markets. Brand equity can also lay a foundation for extending the brand and growing long-term strategically.

Another significant concept is brand identity, which refers to the way an organization wants to be perceived and what it stands for. Sammut Bonnici (2015) explains that branding is not only about differentiation, but also about showcasing personality and building reputation, which together form an identity. Elements that brand identity includes are for example the brand’s name, logo, and color scheme, which create a recognizable image of the brand for the consumers (American Marketing Association). A strong brand identity defines how consumers understand and connect with the brand, and through this also strengthens brand equity.

In the modern competitive marketplace, brands can be considered as powerful strategic tools that reach beyond the services and products organizations offer. The described foundation of brands provides a base for understanding branding in the world of sports, where similar principles are

applied to teams, leagues, and athletes, and where fan loyalty is often highlighted compared to other traditional business contexts.

2.2 Theory of a Sports Brand

In the context of sports, branding often differs from many other business sectors because of the distinctive characteristics of sports products, services and consumption. A sports brand goes beyond simple identification of a product or a service. A sports brand embodies passion, cultural significance, and community, with commercialization of its product or service not being the only goal. As Janković and Jakšić Stojanović (2019) state, the consumption of sports is “based on strong emotional feelings which very often leads to high level of loyalty to clubs and teams”. This loyalty is the factor that forms the core of the value of a sports brand. The brand represents “a unique and identifiable symbol of a sports organization which makes it different from its competitors” (Janković & Jakšić Stojanović, 2019). The brand identity in sports brands includes combinations of the logo, slogan, design, or colors, with the aim of provoking positive feelings, creating a recognizable image in the minds of the consumers, and fostering a sense of belonging and identity among fans (Janković & Jakšić Stojanović, 2019).

The psychological aspect of sports brands is the one feature that further separates it from many other types of branding. Sport brands often form an identity-based connection for the fans with teams, leagues, or individual athletes. Bee and Havitz (2010) highlight that fan identification is a psychological connection, developed when a sport team becomes a part of an individual’s sense of self, shaping attitudes, behaviors and long-term loyalty. This makes the sport brand different from many other types of brands because the identification goes beyond entertainment or product consumption and ties the brand deeply into the individual’s sense of identity and belonging. Bee and Havitz (2010) also explain that when spectators identify themselves with a team, they are more likely to maintain their support through unsuccessful periods and continue to engage with the brand long-term. This leads to higher psychological commitment and loyalty, and both of these factors are crucial to maintaining the strength and value of sports brands.

The strategic importance of sports brands is emphasized through the commercial factor of them. Sarpong and Zungu (2025) found that brand image acts as a link between sports sponsorship and consumer behaviour. This means that when a sports organization has a strong and positive brand, it contributes to how people view the organizations sponsors, and through that it makes them more likely to consume their products. Therefore, sponsorships are more than just financial factors, but

also strategic branding tools that create emotional appeal and cultural significance of sports to strengthen their brand value.

In conclusion, the strength of sport brands are made of three factors that all affect each other, symbolic identity, psychological engagement and commercial impact. When a sports brand is successful, it differentiates itself from its competitors with a unique identity, by building strong emotional ties with its consumers, and transforms those factors into financial value. These qualities makes sports branding an important and powerful tool in the sports industry.

2.3 Theory of an Athlete Brand

Athlete branding is a strategic process of creating a perceived identity to the athlete in the eyes of fans and the public, with the aim of generating value for both the athlete and their associates. Athlete brands are built on human qualities, achievements, and narratives, unlike league or more traditional corporate brands. Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) define athlete brand as a set of multiple attributes that shape the way the audience perceives the athlete. Their Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) consists of three main components, athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Athletic performance consists of the athlete's skills, competitiveness, on-field achievements, sportsmanship, and rivalry. It is viewed as a product related attribute, as athlete's main role is to provide athletic performances and build their brand through athletic success. The other two components are viewed as nonperformance-related, as they are not directly linked to the athlete's athletic performance. Attractive appearance refers to the athlete's external appearance characteristics, including for example physical attractiveness, body fitness, or personal qualities like social attractiveness. Finally, marketable lifestyle involves the athlete's off-field marketable features, like life story, likeable personality, or the ability to act as a role model (Arai et al., 2013). These components together build the athlete's brand and define how the public views their brand. Parmentier and Fischer (2012) further emphasize that these individual attributes must be communicated strategically, as constructing the athlete's brands rely on presenting a recognizable image of the athlete consistently to separate them from others.

The psychological aspect of branding plays a huge role and is a defining characteristic in athlete branding, and it is also a key component of the power of an athlete brand. Hasaan et al. (2016) demonstrates how athlete brands often create a strong emotional connection between the fan and the athlete. Arai et al. (2013) note that this psychological attachment contributes to the athlete's brand equity through loyalty and engagement, while Parmentier and Fischer (2012) claim that athlete brands act as symbolic and identity related roles for audiences. The psychological

connections influence the fans behaviours, for example by the fans following the athlete's careers even if they change teams or leagues, support their commercial ventures outside of the sport, or purchase products that the athlete's endorse. These bonds often remain even if the athlete's sporting performance declines, contributing to brand resilience and longevity (Hasaan et al., 2016)

Building and maintaining an athlete brand is a combination of multiple deliberate and strategic activities. Parmentier and Fischer (2012) state that some factors crucial for athlete's brand building are athletic achievements, media appearances and building a media personality, and development of a compelling personal narrative. Early in the athlete's career, credibility and interest are earned through sporting success and athletic abilities, but if the aim is to build the athlete's brand long-term, also the other components are needed. Authenticity is viewed to be critical, as audiences respond most positively to brands that present the athlete's real values and personality. Hasaan et al. (2016) highlights the role of endorsements and sponsors as bringing visibility to the athletes and strengthening fan trust. Su et al. (2020) on the other hand show that controlled and deliberate self-presentation on different media platforms reinforce consistency and public image. When all these strategies are utilized together, they form a persisting platform for an enduring athlete brand.

In conclusion, athlete brands consist of multiple different components that are shaped by the athlete's personalities, sporting performance, commercial ventures, and psychological connections they build with their fans and followers. The strength of the brands depend on both tangible elements such as athletic success and marketability, and the intangible elements such as the emotional relationships that contribute to loyalty, fan engagement, and resilience of the brand. Also, the media and especially social media platforms are crucial to athlete brands in the modern world, and their role will be examined in more detail in a later section. To tie this all together, athlete brands are powerful strategic tools that create value not only to the athletes themselves, but also to the fans, sponsors, teams, and other affiliates of the athlete's.

3 The English Premier League: Brand and Background

The English Premier League (EPL) is the top tier of professional football in the United Kingdom, and it is widely considered as the most competitive and popular domestic football league in the world. Known for its high-quality play and the ability to attract some of the best individual players in the world, the Premier League has developed into a global sporting and cultural phenomenon with a huge audience that spans to every continent. This chapter provides an overview of the Premier League with particular attention to the Premier Leagues history, current state, and its global brand, aiming to answer one of the main research questions of this thesis: What kind of brand does the Premier League have as a sports competition and organization?

3.1 Premier League History

The English Premier League (EPL) was founded in 1992 as a product of a difficult period for English club football. The top division of English club football went by the name of Football League Division One at the time, as it had done since 1888. During the years before the Premier Leagues formation, match attendances were at a record low and the league was having problems with for example hooliganism and TV-deals. As a result of these struggles, some of the biggest clubs in the country started talking about forming a new independent league (FootballHistory.). So, in the summer of 1991 the Division One clubs signed the Founder Members Agreement, which started the process of setting up the Premier League. The idea for the new league was to have commercial independence of the English Football League (EFL), and the leagues organizer The Football Association (FA), which meant that they can organize their own broadcast and sponsorship deals. All of this came into fruition in February 1992, when the 22 First Division clubs resigned from the Football League. The Premier League was established three months later in May, and the inaugural Premier League season kicked-off on the 15th of August 1992 (Premier League.).

After the Premier League was founded, significant changes happened during the early years. The league signed new broadcasting deals for television, and especially the one with BSkyB resulted in significant growth financially and globally (Parnell et al., 2022). These financial developments allowed clubs to invest into the infrastructure, players, and facilities, which improved the quality and visibility of the league. The commercialization of the league also contributed to the global interest, as the EPL started to attract international audiences (Parnell et al., 2022).

During the 2000s the leagues growth continued, and all aspects of the league continued evolving. One significant change happened in 2003, as Roman Abramovich purchased Chelsea, a big club from London, and started a trend of foreign owners of the EPL clubs. By the 2018/2019 season, more than half of EPL clubs were under foreign ownership from overseas companies and investors, with the foreign ownerships being a result of EPL's globalization and commercialization, and they represent a characterizing feature of the EPL (Parnell et al., 2022). As the global and commercial rise of the EPL continued, it was made possible financially for the clubs to bring in foreign players and managers, changing the character of the game in the league forever (FootballHistory.).

3.2 Premier League Today

The English Premier League (EPL) is widely considered as the most competitive, commercially successful, and highest-level domestic football league in the world. In 2021, the Premier League provided 0,01% of the entire world's GDP (Wang, 2021.). This demonstrates how big the Premier League has grown even in the global economy scale. According to Opta Sports, a leading sports analytics company ranking football leagues and teams through data, the Premier League "stands in a class of its own, underpinned by unmatched commercial power and depth of quality" (Theanalyst., 2025).

Today, the EPL consists of 20 clubs that compete each season from August to May to be crowned the champions of England. Each team plays each other once at home and once away, which means each team plays 38 games every season, and in total there are 380 matches over the course of the season (Premier League.) Every year, the bottom three teams are relegated to the second tier of English club football, the Championship. The three relegated teams are replaced by three teams from the Championship. Teams placed first and second in the Championship earn direct promotion, as the third promoted team will be decided through end-of-season playoffs (Premier League.). This system ensures that the competition in the league is dynamic and intensely competitive, contributing to the league's popularity. The Premier League states on their official website, that "The principal objective of the Premier League is to stage the most competitive and compelling league with world-class players" (Premier League.).

The EPL's commercial strength and international audience are one of the main factors why it is nowadays regarded as the biggest domestic football league in the world. The EPL has become a global phenomenon, with the league being the most-watched league on the planet, and according to official league data, its matches reach 920 million homes in 189 countries across all continents. The globality of the EPL is also visible in the nationality of the players, with on average 70

nationalities represented each season. In total, there has been 126 nationalities represented in the EPL. In contrast, when the league was formed in 1992, there were only 11 players in the league who were not British or Irish (Premier League.).

The combination of highly competitive league structure, unmatched global visibility, and a diverse, multicultural pool of players has transformed the EPL into more than just a domestic football league. It is now a cultural and commercial powerhouse that sets the standard globally for every other football league in the world.

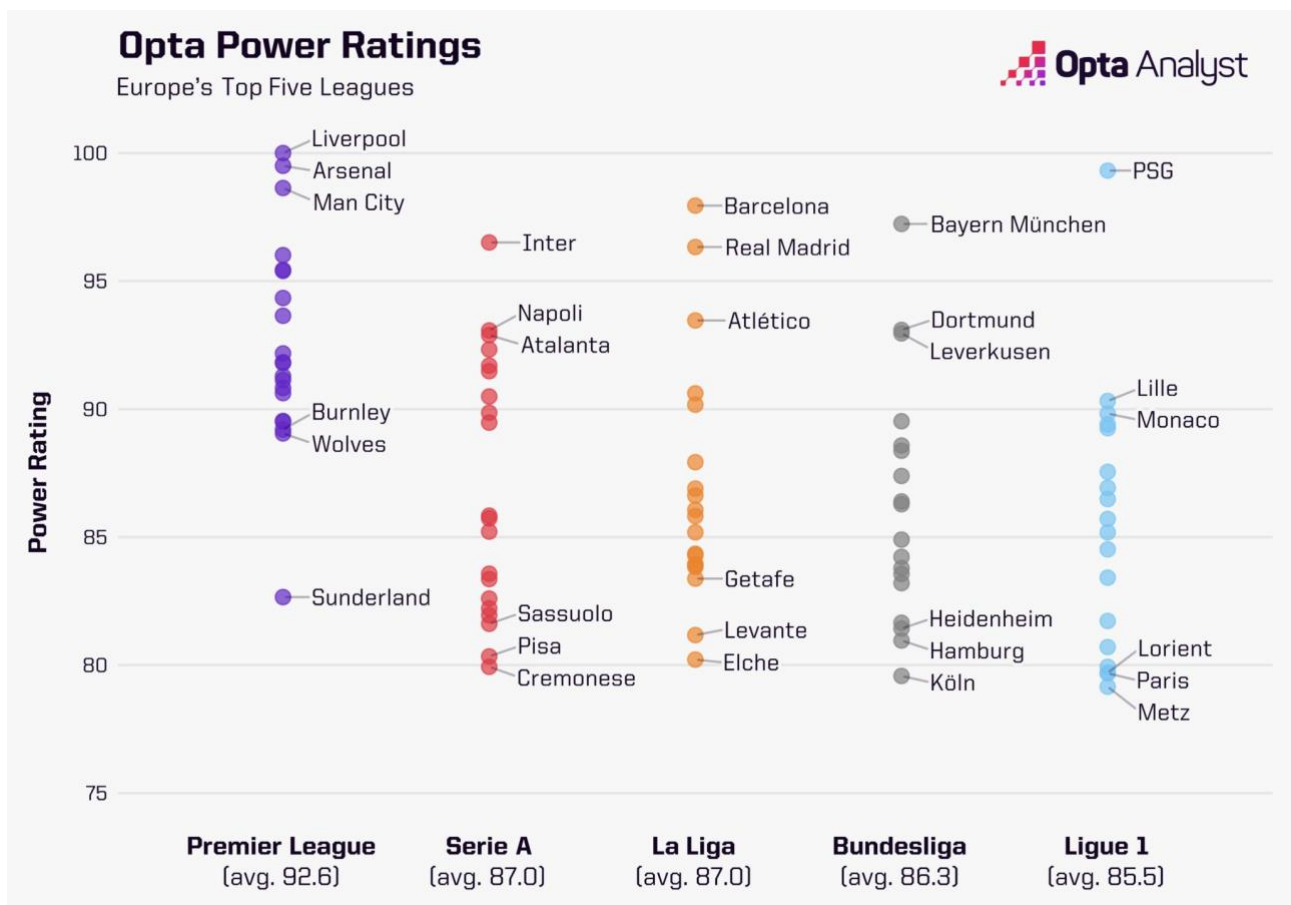


Figure 1. Opta Sports power rankings of the top five leagues in the world. (Theanalyst. The Strongest Leagues in the World: Insights from the Opta Power Rankings, 2025)

3.3 Premier League Brand

As described in the previous sections, the English Premier League (EPL) has become a global phenomenon. Since the league's foundation in 1992 up to today in 2025, the Premier League has been transformed from a domestic football league into a globally recognized brand representing excellent sports, entertainment, inclusivity, and commercial innovation. The brands' identity is built

to connect with audiences all over the world, becoming a part of culture. This section analyzes the Premier League brand's visual identity, global strategy, star power, and values.

3.3.1 Visual Identity

One central part of the Premier League brand is its recognizable visual identity, including the logo, colors, and overall design. These factors play a key role in showcasing the brand's personality, energy, and modern look. Nomad Studio, which is a brand partner for the Premier League, presents on their website covering the Premier League brand, that their aim together with the Premier League is to create a "global icon" of the brand, while inspiring the fans and the next generation of football players (Nomad Studios.). These visual elements are not only for aesthetics, but also integral components of how the league differentiates itself from others and becomes recognizable.

Since the Premier League was founded in 1992, its logo has gone through several redesigns, but it has always retained its main feature, a lion wearing a crown. The original crest featured a crowned lion standing on three legs with one paw on a football. The logo symbolized many things. The lion, a symbol of England, the crown, symbolizing that the league's top status, and the football, tying all of this into the context of football (Mansi, 2025). When the league's international reach grew, a more modern and versatile design of the logo became necessary. This culminated in a major rebrand in 2016, led by Nomad Studio, that introduced the new logo as a simplified and more modern crowned lion head as a central element of the logo (Nomad Studio.). The new design was created with the developing digital platforms and global audiences in mind, allowing the usage of the logo flexibly on broadcast graphics, clothing, and different digital platforms such as social media. The rebrand also maintained the familiar lion, and gave it a new, modern look (Nomad Studio.).

Color has also played an important role in creating and shaping the Premier League's brand identity. As a part of the 2016 rebrand, Nomad Studio and the Premier League introduced a new and vibrant color palette to be used in the league's materials on different platforms, such as the previously mentioned broadcasts, digital platforms, clothing, and billboards. The aim of the colors is to stun and capture the electric energy of the Premier League (Nomad Studio.). The main color



Figure 2. Evolution of the Premier League Logo (Mansi B.,2025, June 30. The history of the English Premiere League logo. Logome.ai.)

in the logo was changed to purple, as seen on the Nomad Studio website and Premier League materials. The visual approach contributes to the bigger change in the Premier League’s identity, developing from a domestic football competition to a modern and global entertainment product. Typography was also made more modern, aiming to be confident, expressive, and playful, but also fitting to different digital platforms (Nomad Studio.) These aspects of the rebrand ensure that the Premier League brand stands out visually and is instantly recognizable, whether it is on a billboard or digital platform.

The development of the Premier League brand and its visual identity is more than just changes in design – it represents the league’s bigger goal of becoming a global league and entertainment product. Through consistent and careful visual choices, the league has built a visual identity that is instantly recognizable and fitting for multiple platforms (Nomad Studio.). The selected design elements, such as the simplified and adaptable lion logo and the bright color palette reinforce the brand’s modern and globally recognizable product. As a result, the visual elements of the Premier League brand are not only aesthetic and pleasing for the eye, but also an essential part on how the league attracts attention and presents an exciting and global entertainment product.

3.3.2 Star Power, Global Strategy, and Market Positioning

Star players are a central part of the Premier League, its brand, and its success. As the league attracts elite footballers, the presence of those players not only strengthen the league’s quality, but also shapes how the league and its brand is perceived globally. The Premier League positions itself as home for “world-class players” and aims to deliver “the most competitive and compelling

football” in the world (Premier League.). The star players are not only athletes, but also assets for the league’s brand that contribute to the league’s visibility and global interest. Their performances, personalities, and individual global fan bases make the league more visible all over the world.

These factors form one of the key answers to the main research question of this thesis: What role do star players have, or have had, in the branding of the English Premier League?

Star players in the Premier League are at the heart of its identity. As research shows that athletes are brands in their own right – consisting of their performance, personality, and public image (Arai et al., 2013) – the EPL benefits from these individual brands by integrating them into the league’s own narrative. Hasaan et al. (2016) argue that fans develop deep psychological attachments to their favorite athletes, and they often keep following the club associated with their favorite athlete even after the athlete leaves. In the context of the Premier League, this means that the fan’s attachments to their favorite players lead to a connection with the player’s club, and through following or supporting the club it brings loyalty and following to the entire league even after the initial target of interest, their favorite player, has left. This attachment and following strengthens the league’s brand equity by connecting global audiences to not only the players or the clubs, but the league itself.

Beyond the emotional connection the star players inspire, they also enhance the brand and generate value in multiple ways for their respective clubs and through that the Premier League as a whole. Pfifer et al. (2015) found that star players can significantly boost brand equity components of their respective teams, such as brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, brand value, brand loyalty and brand reputation. These factors include for example fan engagement, merchandise sales and media visibility. The star players that appeared to have the most powerful effects seemed to be the ones with combined strong on- and off-field traits (Pfifer et al., 2015). Through bringing value and visibility to the team’s brands, the athletes indirectly also elevate the entire league’s brand. In a coming up section of this thesis, a few case examples of this finding will be examined in the context of the Premier League.

Maybe the most important factor contributing to the Premier League’s strong brand is its ability to showcase elite level football players and competition. As stated on their website, “Football drives everything the Premier League does. Watching the best players and thrilling football generates local and global interest” (Premier League.). This concentration of top-level players and football elevates the league’s competitive standard and quality of the sporting product, but it also serves as a powerful branding strategy and reputation builder. The Premier League is proud to have some world-class English players in the league, such as Bukayo Saka and Declan Rice, but also attracts big names from abroad with some of the best players in the world play in the Premier League, such

as Erling Haaland and Mohamed Salah, attracted by the competition, passionate fans and global visibility (Premier League.).

The Premier League's ability to showcase and attract the world's top talent positions the league as the ultimate stage for elite football and transforms the individual star players into global ambassadors of its brand. Many of these players have fan bases that span continents, and their popularity makes the league's international audience significantly bigger. Hasaan et al. (2016) demonstrated in their study by interviewing football fans from Estonia, Portugal, and Pakistan, that multiple of them were fans of Premier League teams or former Premier League players, and that they had gotten into and remained engaged with the Premier League through those individual players. This also shows that when global superstar players join the Premier League, at least some fans follow them and thus make the Premier League even more popular. Abdul and Chattopadhyay (2025) state that the Premier League has the highest percentage of foreign players compared to other European football leagues (69,2), and through the league's global reach, appeal, and significant revenue through sponsorships and broadcasting, the clubs of the Premier League have been able to invest more money into acquiring the best players. Acquiring the best players also create a cycle of positive outcomes that reinforces the league's position. As star players arrive, they attract more sponsors, create more visibility, and develop the quality of play in the league, which in turn translates to better revenue. The revenue can then be reinvested back into the clubs acquiring more of the world's best players and other assets (Abdul and Chattopadhyay, 2025).

As a product of all the mentioned factors, star players are not just athletes for the Premier League – they are an important strategic asset shaping the league's global brand, sporting product, cultural impact, and commercial strength. Their influence goes beyond the football pitch, as they create connections with fans all over the world and bring new business opportunities and visibility to the league. As cited in Doyle et al. (2023), sport-based research has shown that the presence of star athletes influences the consumers' perceptions of leagues and teams. Media exposure also strengthens the global visibility star players bring to the league. Through digital storytelling, showcasing personalities, and especially social media platforms, the presence of the players reach audiences in all parts of the world, extending the Premier League's visibility beyond matchdays and matches. The effect of media and social media will be examined in more depth in a later section of this thesis. Ultimately, the league's ability to attract, promote, and leverage these stars is central to its global brand and growth, answering the core question of how they shape the Premier League's identity.

3.3.3 Values, Inclusion, and Social Responsibility

On top of the Premier League's visual brand, global reach and sporting quality through showcasing elite footballers, the Premier League's brand identity is strongly defined by the values it represents. Modern sports brands are expected – and are in a position to do so – to reflect broader societal values than just providing the sporting product, and the Premier League has positioned itself as a socially responsible and inclusive organization taking a stand in important societal matters. This dimension of the Premier League brand is essential in the way the league is perceived locally and globally, as it shows the league's commitment to equality, mental health, diversity and community. These principles are reflected in the Premier League's four core values stated in their official statement of principles: ambitious, inspiring, connected and fair (Premier League.). The league is striving to be accessible for everyone, and this is reflected especially in: "Connected: Being for everybody, everywhere." (Premier League.).

One of the most visible ways the Premier League demonstrates these values is through its long-term commitment to inclusion, equality, and anti-discrimination. According to the league's official inclusion statement, "The Premier League is committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion within football – on the pitch and off it." (Premier League.). To support this, the league has started multiple campaigns that contribute to these commitments. One of the biggest ones is the yearly "No Room For Racism" campaign, which was created to fight discrimination and racism on and off the pitch, and support those who have suffered from such abuse (Premier League.). Another campaign was the "Rainbow Laces", which was a way to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community in all of its matches through a certain time period in the 2024/2025 season (Premier League. 2024). These campaigns demonstrate how the Premier League uses its global and visible platform for being an active participant in contributing to social change and promoting equality and respect.

The league's values also promote mental health and wellbeing, which has become increasingly visible in the Premier League's campaigns and brand. On September 10th, 2025, which is World Suicide Prevention Day, the Premier League launched a "Together Against Suicide" initiative with the slogan: "You support us. Let us support you." (Premier League. 2025.). This initiative is closely connected with another Premier League Campaign "Inside Matters", which is a campaign dedicated to "Raise awareness of mental health and encourage fans to check in on the wellbeing of others." (Premier League. 2025). Both campaigns involve partnerships with mental health organizations, matchday visibility, and resourcing for those in need of help. By addressing these issues that are often considered sensitive, the Premier League uses its brand and platform to

speak out, and strengthens its image as a socially responsible organization, also off the football pitch.

Beyond high-profile campaigns, the Premier League also reinforces its values and brand by contributing heavily to the community and grassroots football. Through its “More than a game” initiative, the league supports 164 clubs financially, with 1,6 billion pounds invested into grassroots football and communities between the years 2022-2025 (Premier League.). The Football Foundation – running with funding from the Premier League, The FA (Football Association), and the English government – has among other ventures delivered thousands of football pitches and facilities since year 2000, and funded playing facilities for over 87,000 teams across the country (Premier League.). By expanding their role beyond elite competition and distributing funds to communities and grassroots football, the Premier League strengthens its identity and brand as a socially inclusive organization that gives back to the communities.

Through these initiatives, the Premier League expands the impact of its brand beyond only sports. By promoting inclusion, equality, mental health, and communities, the league uses its global platform to influence the society in a positive and meaningful way. Promoting these values and important causes the league strengthens its identity, visibility, and reputation. By doing so, deeper trust and a more positive perception is created between the Premier League and its fans, partners, and communities.

4 Star Players as Builders of the Premier League Brand

As described in the previous chapter, individual star players are a central part of how the Premier League is perceived, valued, and consumed globally. Beyond their elite performances on the pitch, they strengthen the league's brand through their individual brand value, global fan bases, and personalities. Since the league's foundation in 1992, elite players and their footballing abilities have always been central to the league, but also their individual brands and visibility have become more and more valuable for the league as the world has moved to the digital era.

As theoretical insights were presented in previous chapters, this chapter aims to answer the core research question of this thesis with practical case examples: What role have star players had, and continue to have, in the branding of the English Premier League? To address this comprehensively, this chapter will analyze the phenomenon from multiple perspectives. Three player case examples will be analyzed, two massive former Premier League superstars and one of the most influential current players. After presenting the case examples, this chapter also investigates how traditional and social media strengthens the impact of star players, including themes like fan engagement, visibility, and commercial outcomes. Finally, the chapter also considers the challenges that the league might face related to its strong connection to individual star athletes – who are often powerful brands in their own right – including issues such as player transfers, controversies, and potential misbehavior.

4.1 David Beckham – The Pioneer of Global Footballer Brands

David Beckham is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in the history of English football, the Premier League, and even in the entire world of football. He was one of the pioneers in transforming footballers into global brand icons, paving the way for generations to come after him. Beckham was born on the 2nd of May 1975 and played for Manchester United in the EPL making his Premier League debut in 1995 and spending almost a decade playing there, until eventually leaving to join Real-Madrid in the summer of 2003 (Manchester United.). During his time with the club, Beckham made 265 appearances in the Premier League, scoring 62 goals, and winning the Premier League title six times, eventually being voted to the Premier League Hall of Fame in 2021 (Premier League.). Beckham contributed heavily to the most successful period of the club's history and is being described in his official Manchester United player profile as “one of world football's biggest names”, “a global phenomenon”, and “forever a Red” (Manchester United.). Gürel & Muter (2005) argue that Beckham reached the status of a “global icon” not only through his excellent footballing abilities, but also through his attractiveness, charisma, and the ability of becoming a

brand. Through his growing global recognition, Beckham also played a crucial role in elevating the Premier League's global visibility during the early years after the league's foundation.

Beckham's rise to global stardom in the late 1990s and early 2000s happened at the same time as the Premier League was trying to gain international attention, and his attractive and diverse brand played a significant role in extending the league's appeal outside of the United Kingdom. As Beckham's global popularity through his on and off the field attributes was growing, it was very valuable for the Premier League to have him playing in one of the league's biggest and most well-known clubs. As Vincent, Hill, and Lee (2009) note, the global popularity of sport stars like Beckham gives corporations that the athletes represent – in this case Manchester United and the Premier League – a chance to gather new sponsors and audiences through the appeal of the athletes. As Beckham's rise to stardom was happening at the same time as the EPL's rise as a football league, Beckham became a massive asset for the league to attract new audiences and partners in its early years.

As briefly described in the previous paragraph, the multidimensional factors of Beckham's personality and individual brand was one of the biggest reasons why he became so popular all over the world. One factor that contributed massively to his popularity away from the football pitch was his marriage to Victoria Adams – known as Posh Spice – a member of a popular musical group called Spice Girls (Gürel & Muter, 2005). This crossover into popular culture and the music industry helped bring new audiences to Beckham, and through him the entire Premier League. Vincent, Hill, and Lee (2009) describe Beckham as a "portfolio of brands", noting that he is a unique celebrity for possessing and embracing so many different identities and assets on top of his footballing ability that make his brand strong and appealing to several different audiences. These assets include, for example, fashion, family life, physical attractiveness, celebrity marriage, and working-class roots (Vincent et al. 2009). The combination of these qualities transformed him from a traditional athlete into a mainstream celebrity figure, attracting massive global interest and appeal among people from various backgrounds. This widespread appeal indirectly strengthened the Premier League's visibility worldwide, as it gave the league access to many new audiences, with many people not introduced to the league by football itself, but through Beckham's celebrity identity and visibility.

Beckham's growing fame, diverse brand, and marketability during the years he spent at Manchester United and the Premier League quickly transformed him into one of the most commercially valuable athletes in the world. As a product of his developing brand, both Manchester United and the Premier League gained significant commercial visibility. As Parmentier and Fischer (2012) explain, playing for a prestigious club or league – in Beckham's case Manchester United,

that already enjoyed a high status in England when Beckham started his career there – creates a “co-branding benefit” which elevates the player’s image. Through this co-branding, this relationship worked for all participants. Beckham’s global celebrity status helped Manchester United and the Premier League reach new audiences and markets both commercially and for new fan bases, while the league’s and teams status strengthened his credibility and star value. Gürel & Muter (2005) list some examples of international brands and companies Beckham worked with during his time in the Premier League, with some of the biggest ones being Adidas and Vodafone among others. These partnerships benefitted not only Beckham, but also Manchester United and the Premier League by strengthening their commercial credibility and adding visibility.

Beckham’s influence and impact on the Premier League and the entire world of football was groundbreaking. The combination of his elite talent, global celebrity status, crossover abilities, and marketability helped position himself and the Premier League as an appealing entertainment product on the international stage. Beckham connected football with other areas of culture such as fashion and mainstream celebrity, being among the first footballers demonstrating how an individual player can enhance the league’s image and market reach. His career set an early example of how footballer’s personal brand can have effects on an entire league, and arguably the entire world of football.

4.2 Cristiano Ronaldo – The 21st Century Superstar

Cristiano Ronaldo is widely recognized as one of the greatest and most influential footballers of all time, with many even considering him to be the best player ever. Ronaldo’s association with the Premier League has been crucial in shaping both his personal career and legacy, and the Premier League’s global appeal. Ronaldo was born in Portugal on February 5th, 1985 and joined Manchester United in the Premier League for the first time in 2003 as an 18-year-old from Sporting Lisbon. During his first spell at the club, Ronaldo developed from a young talent into the most expensive, and officially the best footballer in the world by the time he left for Real Madrid, for a world record transfer fee at the time, of 80 million pounds in the summer of 2009. Before his departure, Ronaldo won his 1st Ballon d’Or – awarded annually to the best player in the world – in 2008, the FIFA Player of the Year award in January 2009, and three Premier League titles with Manchester United. In August 2021, as a 36-year-old, Ronaldo returned to Manchester United after adding four more Ballon d’Or awards in the previous 12 seasons. His second spell ended in November 2022 by “mutual agreement” between the player and the club (Manchester United.). In total, Ronaldo made 236 appearances for Manchester United in the Premier League, scoring 103 goals, and providing 37 assists (Premier League.). On top of Ronaldo’s elite performances, his

professionalism, work ethic, charisma, and personal brand made him one of the most recognizable athletes of the 21st century. Following in Beckham's footsteps, Ronaldo is not just a footballer, but also a global icon and an individual brand whose following promoted not only Manchester United, but also the visibility and reputation of the entire Premier League.

Cristiano Ronaldo's brand identity has always been strongly connected to his extraordinary on-field performances, qualities, and commitment to excellence. His athleticism, professionalism, and mentality has turned him into the embodiment of hard work and dedication. As Bashingwa (2022) states: "Ronaldo likes to portray himself as the perfect athlete". Wang (2024) emphasizes that the footballing success of Ronaldo demonstrates how elite athletes' performance can be transformed into "economic and cultural" assets for the sport and the league they compete in. Wang states that "the signing of football stars had positive effects on both the team and the league", and that "It was recommended that the league and clubs introduce players with strong personal abilities as needed and actively exert their social influence to promote the development and improvement of the club and league" (Wang, 2024). In the context of the Premier League, this meant that having a superstar player like Ronaldo represent his team and the league through displaying his exceptional talent, work ethic, and pursuit of perfection elevated the status of Manchester United and also the league's reputation as a competition that attracts and develops the best players in the world. The success he had in England helped the Premier League develop into the world's leading domestic league, with a reputation as the highest level of professional football.

Cristiano Ronaldo's rise to stardom was not only built on his athleticism and footballing excellence, but also on deliberate personal branding, image management, and media visibility, bringing a lot of visibility to the Premier League and Manchester United. Bashingwa (2022) argues, that it is said Ronaldo has an entire staff dedicated to keeping himself in perfect shape at all times, and that looks, and image is important to Ronaldo and his brand, going as far as detailed outfits aiming to stand out. As a result of this, during his years at Manchester United Ronaldo became one of the most visually recognizable athletes in the world. When examining Ronaldo's brand from the media and social media perspective – which will be examined in more detail in an upcoming section of this thesis – Ronaldo brought massive media attention to Manchester United and the Premier League. In a Newswhip.com article from November 2021 – about 3 months after Ronaldo joined Manchester United for a second time – Haley Corzo writes provides some statistics related to Ronaldo joining. Between August and November of 2021, Ronaldo had been written about 60,000 times, with over 21 million engagements in those articles, and with the peak coming on August 27th, the day that Ronaldo joining was announced, with over 3.8 million engagements in one day (Newswhip.com, 2021). Indirectly, this kind of visibility and media engagement produced by one

player that is associated with the Premier League, highlights the power that superstar players have for the entire image of the Premier League.

As a product of Ronaldo's elite athletic performance, global fame, and visibility, his commercial value has become immense, establishing him as one of the most marketable athletes in history. This marketability has resulted in worldwide visibility, merchandise sales, and revenue, not only benefitting himself, but also his club and the Premier League. According to "Football Shirt sales report 2021" by LovetheSales.com, following Ronaldo's 2021 return to Manchester United, his number 7 shirt became the fastest selling shirt in Premier League history, with revenue from the sales reaching 187.1 million in 2021 after the announcement of his return. The profits from the shirt sales alone were reported to have covered the transfer fee Manchester United paid to Juventus for Ronaldo's transfer (LovetheSales.com, 2021). This level of demand and merchandise success demonstrates how a single player can generate substantial revenue for clubs and leagues.

Ronaldo also has powerful brands he has separated from football in his "CR7" brand portfolio, including his "CR7 Fragrances", "CR7 Underwear", and "CR7 Footwear" among others extending his brand beyond football, along with endorsement partnerships with global companies such as Nike and WHOOP (CristianoRonaldo.com). These ventures strengthen his identity as a multidimensional global icon, the visibility of the organizations he represents, and helps him reach new audiences even if they are not traditional football fans. While these collaborations primarily benefit Ronaldo himself, they also indirectly strengthen the Premier League's brand image as a stage for the world's most influential players, attracting more world-class players and strengthening the league's global brand appeal.

In summary, Cristian Ronaldo's career in the Premier League shows how a single player can contribute to the image, visibility, and commercial strength of an entire league. Through his diverse attributes and global brand, he not only enhanced Manchester United's success but also the Premier League's reputation and rise as a global entertainment product and platform for the world's most competitive football. Ronaldo is an example of how star players act as powerful brand ambassadors whose personal visibility, influence, and sporting achievements shape the identity and global position of the league they represent.

4.3 Mohamed Salah – The Cultural Icon and Global Ambassador

Mohamed Salah is often regarded as one of the most influential footballers of his generation and he is one of the defining figures of the modern Premier League era. In recent seasons since 2017 joining Liverpool in the Premier League, Salah has been one of the best forwards on the planet

(Liverpool FC.). Salah was born in Nagrig, Egypt, in 1992, and has played for two Premier League teams during his career, Chelsea and Liverpool. He first joined Chelsea in 2014 from Basel in Switzerland. After loan spells with Fiorentina and Roma in Italy, and even a permanent transfer from Chelsea to Roma after his loan spell, he returned to the Premier League and signed with Liverpool in 2017 (Transfermarkt.). Since joining Liverpool, Salah has earned multiple individual honors, such as three Premier League Golden Boots (most goals scored in a season), two PFA Players' Player of the Year awards, and two Football Writers' Association Footballer of the Year awards. On top of the individual accolades, Salah has helped Liverpool lift the Premier League trophy twice (2020 and 2025), and the UEFA Champions League trophy in 2019 (Liverpool FC.). Salah also ranks at number four on the Premier League all time goals scored list with 188 goals (Premier League.). On top of his achievements on the pitch, Salah has become an influential figure of Liverpool's and the Premier League's global identity, contributing to the Premier League's image as a diverse and international competition. As an Arab and Muslim athlete, Salah is an ambassador for the Premier League's inclusive and multicultural nature. Nicknamed on his official player profile on Liverpool's website, Salah is "Liverpool's Egyptian King" (Liverpool FC.).

Mohamed salah will go down as one of the best players ever in the Premier League when he eventually retires, but his impact on the Premier League will extend far beyond only football. As it was mentioned, Salah is an Arab and a Muslim, and has become a global cultural figure who bridges Western and Middle Eastern identities and cultures through football. His public faith has made him an ambassador for Islam in the western world. Ali (2021) describes how Salah's gestures on the pitch, such as putting his head to the grass or pointing his finger towards the skies resonates with hundreds of millions of Muslims worldwide. Ali (2021) also notes, that "Salah has been praised for his role in combating Islamophobia". As he has publicly showed his religious faith, Salah has contributed to what the British media has referred to as the "Salah effect", resulting in a more positive view on Islam across the United Kingdom (Marino, 2022). According to a Stanford University (2019) study, hate crimes against Muslims in the Merseyside – the county where Liverpool is located – had decreased since Salah joined the club, along with the decline of anti-Muslim speech on Twitter. These factors show, that through his faith and conduct, Salah has not only shaped Liverpool's identity, but also brought social change in the United Kingdom, reinforcing the Premier League's image as a culturally diverse and inclusive competition.

Salah's personal brand and image is also very different to many other football superstars, including Beckham and Ronaldo. "There is no doubt, that Mohamed Salah defies the general idea of what a football star looks like" (Marino, 2022). Unlike many international football stars, Salah does not have any tattoos, his physique is "normal", and he does not pay particular attention to his physical appearance, personal fashion, or self-display, resulting in Salah being perceived as modest, non-

narcissistic, and ordinary (Marino, 2022). In the Premier League context, being associated with a humble superstar player whose attributes reflect simplicity and authenticity that makes the player more relatable for the public, is an important asset to have to appeal to many kinds of people. Salah's perceived morality combined with his athletic excellence has earned him the nickname – "The pride of the Arabs" – in the Arab media (Marino, 2022).

Salah's success on the field and his authentic persona have also translated into remarkable commercial value, making him one of the most marketable footballers in the world. According to Think Marketing (2019), Salah's commercial value has been built around the combination of his "nice guy" persona, as well as his charismatic and humble personality, allowing him to work with companies such as Vodafone, Adidas, and Pepsi. One example of the power of Salah's presence for his affiliates is his involvement with the Egyptian Anti-Addiction Treatment Fund, where his appearing in the fund's ads increased calls to their call centers by 400% in 2019 (Think Marketing.). As reported by OneFootball (2024), Salah's partnerships in the Middle East and North Africa are immense, with his image appearing on countless billboards, contributing to his brand visibility in the area. His extraordinary popularity in Egypt was evident during the 2018 presidential elections, when Salah was the third most voted candidate despite of not even being a candidate (Marino, 2022). This level of influence, visibility, and popularity has strengthened the Premier League's reach in the Arab market, attracting new audiences and reinforcing the league's global identity and multiculturalism.

Mohamed Salah's influence goes beyond football, the Premier League, and the United Kingdom. Salah represents the ideal of a global athlete through diversity, humility, and excellence. His career reflects how the Premier League's global success is closely related to players who are not only excellent footballers, but also possess values that resonate across continents and diverse groups of people. Salah's cultural and moral symbolism – from his goal celebrations to his public faith – combined with his commercial and social impact has strengthened the Premier League's global appeal and helped reach new markets especially in the Middle East and North Africa. Salah is an example of how not every superstar has to live a pop-cultural celebrity lifestyle outside of football to become influential but can also help the league reach diverse global audiences through authenticity and integrity. As a result, Salah strengthens the Premier League's identity as an inclusive and multicultural competition.

4.4 Media and Social Media as Branding Tools

The digitalization of the world and sports has changed how fans communicate with brands, clubs, and athletes. Traditional media channels such as television and magazines remain important for visibility and broadcasts, but the growing presence of social media has allowed athletes and leagues to become direct mediators of their own image and engagement without any third parties. Perogaro (2010) identified that already in the early stages of social media platform Twitter's rise that social media provided athletes with the ability to bypass journalists and engage with their audiences without any intermediaries. Before these platforms, the fans only chance to engage with their favorite athletes was through mediators and environments such as autograph signings, corporate events, or traditional media, resulting in making the gap between athletes and fans bigger (Perogaro, 2010). Since then, social media platforms have become essential branding, marketing, and engagement tools shaping how fans perceive both the athletes and leagues. Su, Baker, Doyle, and Kunkel (2020) note that social media allows athletes to shape their individual brand for little financial investment, and that research has shown that individual athletes have an effect on the consumer demand of specific leagues and events, on top of impacting perceptions of team brands. Similarly, McCarthy, Rowley, and Keegan (2022) found that social media marketing strategies have become essential to Premier League teams, and that clubs use social media as a tool to grow their global visibility and take advantage of the Premier League's global appeal. These developments mean that Premier League players, clubs, and the league itself act as global media actors whose visibility reach far beyond traditional media.

The Premier League has established itself as the most watched football league in the world, and the leagues presence across both traditional and social media strengthens this position. The league has integrated its clubs, players, and digital platforms into a single global entertainment product. McCarthy et al. (2022) demonstrate how Premier League clubs have used social media as a central tool of communicating with their local and international fanbases, and through this creating long-term fan loyalty. They also reference a study by Parganos and Anagnostopoulos on Liverpool FC, giving a specific example on how Liverpool was found to strengthen brand awareness and engagement through social media, leading to better attraction of sponsors and commercial partnerships (McCarthy et al., 2022). Gao (2024) adds, that on top of social media the Premier League also uses traditional media outlets effectively, for example in the form of partnerships with large media outlets in different parts of the world. China is a good example, where Premier League matches are broadcasted with Mandarin commentary and lots of content is posted in Chinese, which strengthens the leagues global appeal and presence in the Asian market (Gao, 2024). The Premier League's presence on these platforms has strengthened its position as a globally appealing entertainment product blending sports, social media content, and culture.

Individual star footballers have become powerful digital influencers who strengthen both their own brands and the league's visibility through traditional and social media. The combination of global broadcasting and social media has given elite athletes a platform to become media personalities with massive worldwide reach. Wise (2025) describes modern footballers as "walking media companies" and emphasizes that the most powerful personal brands are built through connection, as fans want authenticity, and the opportunity to get to know the players. As described in a report by Jobs in Sports (2025), top athletes with large amounts of followers use platforms like Instagram to build their brand, connect and interact with fans, and showcase their personalities and lifestyles outside of sports, giving the fans a "behind the scenes" look into the athletes lives leading to stronger connections. In the Premier League context, this level of visibility and following also indirectly promotes the league. One example on how an individual player can affect the social media visibility of his club – and through that the entire league – was Cristiano Ronaldo's transfer to Italian club Juventus in 2018. After Ronaldo joined Juventus, the club's Instagram followers increased by 1.4 million, Twitter followers by 1.1 million, and Facebook followers by 500,000 (Wang, 2024). Even though this example is not directly connected with the Premier League, it shows how the world's biggest players can influence a club's and league's social media presence. Gao (2024) adds to this, by arguing that as Mohamed Salah of Liverpool uses his social media platforms to post on-field performances and off-field life to create a strong personal brand, it enhances both Salah's and the Premier League's value. Ultimately, the social media presence of Premier League players demonstrates how individual athletes use social media as a central tool of building their personal brands, which has become an extension of the league's own marketing power and international growth.

The evolution of media and social media has transformed the Premier League and its players into constantly visible and interactive brands that can cooperate with each other. The league, its clubs, and its players are now all a part of a shared digital platform, where storytelling, engagement, and authenticity result in attention, visibility, and loyalty. Working together, these three levels enhance each other's brand value and help each other reach new audiences. The individual players have a central role in this collaboration, as their personalities, lifestyles, and interactions with fans strengthens the emotional connection fans can develop with also the clubs and the entire league. Through their online presence, the players have become brand ambassadors who add to the Premier League's visibility beyond the matches and broadcasts. The ability that star players have to humanize and make the league's image multidimensional – by sharing their stories, lifestyles, and personal values on different platforms – shows that the global strength of the Premier League is not only based on its level of competition, but also by how the individual players communicate and connect with fans around the world.

4.5 Premier League Branding Challenges and Risks Related to Star Players

As star players are among the most valuable assets for the Premier League brand, benefits that they bring to the league in terms of visibility also come with some challenges and risks. As they are central figures for the Premier League's global marketing, these athletes represent both themselves and their affiliates, which presents potential vulnerabilities. When an individual player finds gets into a controversy in the media, the results can also harm others, affecting sponsors, clubs, and even the league's image and reputation. Sato, Ko, Chang, and Kay (2018) demonstrate that an athlete reputational crisis can cause a "spillover effect" that harms the brands that the athlete is affiliated with. Furthermore, the authors note that the scale of these effects depend on the strength of the relationship the athlete has with the brand and the consumers familiarity with the athlete, meaning that the more known the athlete is, the greater potential damage (Sato et al., 2018). In the context of the Premier League, this means that if its players face controversy or misconduct, it can directly have a negative effect on the league's reputation and image. The balance of taking advantage of star power while trying to minimize the image risks is a branding challenge the Premier League faces.

One branding challenge that is connected with star player visibility is related to issues of integrity and compliance with the rules within the sport. The reputation of the Premier League as the world's leading domestic football league relies heavily on its level of competition, which includes factors like integrity, fair play, and professionalism. Star player scandals related to gambling, corruption, or match fixing can have a significant effect on the league's credibility. A recent example is Ivan Toney, the Brentford and England striker at the time, who as reported by the Guardian (2023), received an eight month ban from football after admitting to breaching the Football Associations rule that prohibits players from gambling on football 232 times between the years of 2017 and 2021. Toney even bet 13 times on his own team to lose, although he did not play in those games himself (Guardian, 2023). Such behavior from a high-profile Premier League striker and England international drew a lot of media attention and set off debate about the integrity and responsibility among players. Incidents like these can cause harm for the entire Premier League regarding its reputation and image as a fair, and professional competition. Wang (2024) adds to this, by stating that "immoral and unlawful activity by sports stars can have severe societal impact". In the Premier League context, maintaining the perception of credibility and integrity is a critical aspect of brand management.

Another branding challenge related to the visibility of star players is allowing the players to be individuals and express their personal values, without leading into political or cultural controversies

harming the league's image or leading to commercial backlash. As star players are global, public figures, their actions and statements – for example in the media or online – are followed carefully by international audiences, and their personal opinions can have consequences affecting their clubs and the league as a whole. A notable example is Mesut Özil, former star midfielder who played for Arsenal in the Premier League. As reported by Goal (2019), his comments in 2019 publicly criticizing China's treatment of the Uighur Muslim minority resulted in a strong reaction from Chinese government, removing Arsenal's next Premier League match from Chinese tv, on top of individual consequences for Özil himself such as him being removed from Chinese versions of football video games. Arsenal immediately distanced themselves from the statements of Özil, by making a post of their own claiming that Özil's views were not the views of the club, in fear of bigger damage to the club's position in the Chinese market (Goal, 2019). This shows how Özil's statements not only hurt his own reputation in China, but also the reputation of the organizations he was affiliated with, Arsenal and the Premier League, resulting in limiting their visibility in this case. The incident also demonstrated how an individual player can cause direct economic consequences through his behavior and opinions, especially in commercially significant markets such as China. As the Premier League is a global brand, incidents like these highlight the importance of the league staying neutral in politically sensitive situations, while balancing with allowing its players to express themselves and their personal values.

As the Premier League benefits from star players in many ways, the league and its clubs can also become dependent on the individual players for visibility and appeal. If the athlete who is strongly part of an entire clubs or leagues brand image leaves, gets injured, or faces controversy internally within the club they play for, it can cause negative effects on the club and the league. An interesting example of this, even though not from the Premier League, is when Cristiano Ronaldo left Real Madrid in Spain for Juventus in 2018. As noted by Wang (2024), Real Madrid's social media fan base decreased by one million followers within just 24 hours of the announcement that Ronaldo was leaving. This demonstrates the power that a superstar like Ronaldo can have on a club's popularity, and through the club, indirectly the entire leagues. Another negative example was when Ronaldo left Manchester United and the Premier League for the second time in December 2022 and heavily criticized the club's manager Erik Ten Hag for lacking ambition and told the club that "they need to rebuild everything" (BBC, 2024). The fallout demonstrated how an individual player can lower the perceived value of one of the biggest Premier League teams through his public statements. These examples show how individual players can also have negative effects on their clubs and the visibility of the entire Premier League.

In summary, the visibility and influence of star players can create multiple challenges for the Premier League and its clubs. Incidents such as gambling or rule breaches, political statements,

player transfers, or public internal conflicts between a player and a club show that the actions of individual star players can influence both themselves, their clubs, and the league. The players act as global ambassadors for the organizations that they represent, increasing their responsibility in terms of credibility, reputation, and integrity. As the Premier League's global brand is heavily connected to the players, maintaining control of the brand while allowing the players to be themselves and be expressive is very important for growing and maintaining the Premier League's position as a leading football competition.

5 Aims and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine the role that star players have, and have had, in the branding of the English Premier League. The Premier League is widely considered as the most competitive and globally appealing domestic football league in the world, and the role that its players have as a part of its brand is essential. Star players are not only excellent footballers, but also represent cultural influence, global recognition, and visibility. Their impact goes beyond the football pitch, influencing the following, value, and global appeal of the league. To understand the role that the star players have, the brand of the entire league also needs to be viewed. Therefore, the study aims to examine the Premier League brand as a whole, from visual, global, and value perspectives.

The purpose of this research is to understand how the visibility, diverse personalities, and sporting performances of individual players contribute to the Premier League brand. The study also seeks to identify some challenges and risks that may present themselves as the league's image has become strongly connected to individual players.

To achieve these aims, the following research questions guided the study:

Main Research question

What role have star players had, and continue to have, in the branding of the English Premier League?

Sub-questions

What kind of brand does the Premier League have as a sports competition and organization?

How do social media and traditional media reinforce the players role in the league's brand?

What branding challenges and risks related to star players exist for the Premier League?

6 Research methods

The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach based on secondary data. The purpose of the chosen method was to get an understanding of the role that star players have, and have had, in the Premier League brand. A qualitative approach was chosen as the research focuses on interpretation and meaning instead of measurable numbers or statistical analysis. The research methods and areas of the study were also selected based on the author's own interest.

The target group of the study includes the Premier League as a sports organization and its star players, with some slight overlap to the clubs. The players that were chosen as case examples represent both former and current Premier League stars, who have had a significant impact across different eras of the league. The case examples of David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Mohamed Salah also demonstrate the multiple ways in which the star players can influence the league's brand, from international growth and global appeal to professional and cultural influence.

The study design followed a descriptive and interpretive framework. The secondary data used for the research is collected from academic literature and other studies, official league publications, and credible media sources. The academic sources were used to establish the theoretical framework for relevant topics such as brand theory, sports branding, and athlete branding. Some academic sources also provided some insights into the league brand, or player case examples. Media materials and reports were analyzed to provide practical, real-life examples of player influence on the leagues brand involving Premier League players. The data were selected for their relevance, reliability, and ability to demonstrate the connection the Premier League brand has with its star players. No statistical methods were applied, as the analysis relied on qualitative interpretation and thematic analysis rather than measurements of statistics. No primary data or surveys were conducted. The existing materials chosen were reviewed and interpreted from the research questions point of view. No statistical methods were applied, as the analysis based on thematic interpretation to present understanding over measurement. Only a small number of statistics were introduced in different sections to give context to the topic of the specific section.

This approach allowed the study to combine theoretical framework with practical examples from real-life, explaining how star players contribute to the Premier League brand.

7 Results

The findings of this study highlight the versatile role that star players have in the entire English Premier League brand. The analysis showed that star players act as a powerful asset to the league's brand by bringing visibility, emotional engagement, and global recognition. Their presence as an important element of the brand helps the league reach diverse audiences worldwide and builds loyalty among the fans leading to long-term interest in the league and its teams. Emotional connections the players create with fans leads to the fans starting to support their clubs, and indirectly the entire league. Social media has given this factor of the brand a stronger platform, turning the players into highly visible and influential figures who can communicate directly with their fans all over the world. However, on top of the many positive effects the players have on the league and its brand, there can also be some negatives. The same visibility and recognition the players bring for the league can present some challenges and reputational risks. Cases such as Ivan Toney's gambling scandal, Mesut Özil's political controversy, and Cristiano Ronaldo's public conflicts with his club show that the behavior and statements of these high-profile players can have negative effects on the credibility and integrity of both the clubs and the league.

The analysis of official league sources and academic literature also provided insights into what kind of brand the Premier League has become since its foundation in 1992. The Premier League has developed into a multidimensional brand that combines both elite sports and entertainment value. It is perceived not only as the most competitive and highest-level domestic football league in the world, but also a global entertainment product that is built on international broadcasting, vibrant and modern visual image, and storytelling around its players. The league's brand identity promotes excellence, inclusivity, equality, and global appeal, while its emotional and multicultural factors are largely portrayed by the players who possess these attributes. Through these factors and values, the Premier League has become the most popular and highest-level football league in the world, and its brand is largely built on the league's world class clubs and players it attracts.

The analysis of player case examples demonstrated how different individuals have contributed to the league's visibility and appeal in different eras, through many different personal and professional characteristics. David Beckham was one of football's first global superstars, embodying style, global appeal, and celebrity lifestyle. Cristiano Ronaldo represented elite performance, professionalism, and ambition, becoming one of the best players ever. Mohamed Salah represents cultural and religious attributes, humility, and likeable personality, growing the Premier League's appeal especially in Muslim communities, and in the Middle East and North Africa regions. Together, they show how global interest in the Premier League has been shaped

and grown through superstar players who combine sporting excellence with different personality and off the pitch attributes that appeal to diverse groups of people.

Media and especially social media have become an essential part of the Premier League's, and the individual players brands. Traditional broadcasting established the base for the league's local and global reach in the 1990s and early 2000s, while the development of digital and social media has expanded its visibility. Social media in particular has changed how brands are produced, perceived, and consumed. Individual players now act as independent brands online, controlling their own content and relationships with their fans. This has brought more power to the players, reducing the league's control over its image and affiliates, but at the same time it has increased overall engagement and reach.

On top of the perceived benefits, the analysis also revealed challenges and risks associated with the players being a central element of the Premier League brand. Incidents involving rule violations risking integrity, political controversies, and star players internal conflicts with their clubs show that reputational management involving star players has become a factor the Premier League has to be aware of. The Premier League has to manage the fine line between allowing the players to be themselves and express their lifestyles and opinions, while maintaining their own brand image, reputation, and ability to act according to its values.

Overall, the findings show that star players have significantly strengthened the Premier League's global brand. However, their visibility may also present some risks and challenges for the reputation of the league.

8 Discussion

When analyzed through the theoretical frameworks of athlete and brand literature, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research. Arai et al. (2013) presented in their Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) that an athlete's brand marketability and appeal consists of athletic performance, appearance, and lifestyle. These factors were clearly visible in the case examples analyzed. This aligns with Aaker's (1996) theory of brand equity, as players strengthen the league's brand awareness, fan loyalty, and perceived quality. Hasaan et al. (2016) also argued that the emotional connections fans develop with athletes can deepen fan loyalty, with the Premier League's long-term global appeal seeming to be consistent with this argument. However, Sato et al. (2018) presented that individual athlete's reputational crisis can extend to harming the brands they are affiliated with. Therefore, the star players visible and central role as a part of the Premier League brand represents both a source of brand equity and potential risks.

The findings also reflect the power that media and especially social media has and the balance between the players and the league in the digital era. As Su et al. (2020) note, that through social media presence athletes are able to shape their own brand images, also influencing perceptions of the entire league. The Premier League can benefit from the visibility and global appeal of its star players, but the individuality and independence of the players on digital platforms can create challenges in maintaining consistent brand communication and alignment with the league's values. Therefore, maintaining alignment between the league, its clubs, and players is essential for preserving credibility and trust. When player's behavior and public image is in line with the Premier League's principles of fair competition, inclusion and professionalism, they strengthen the league's core values. However, as the Premier League brand is heavily connected with the individual players, it also makes its brand more vulnerable and effected by the behavior of the players. To achieve and maintain strong brand resilience long-term, the league must be able to balance individuality and collective identity.

Looking ahead, the Premier League faces the challenge of adapting to an evolving landscape of media, global demand, and individual player brands, as digital platforms and communication continues to grow in influence. The amount of strong and visible individual athlete brands is likely to grow if the direction of the developments we have seen in the past 20 years stays the same, which makes maintaining centralized control of the league's image more complex. Similar trends that were found in the Premier League can be seen in other sports leagues too, especially in the American major sports leagues (NBA, NFL, MLB, NHL), where the role of the top players is massive in terms of the entire league's brand and visibility. To remain relevant and globally appealing, the Premier League must first and foremost maintain its level of excellent football and

world-class players, but it also needs to respond to the demands regarding its brand in the modern society. Supporting the players personalities and authenticity, while promoting responsibility and acknowledging the influence both the league and the players have on global fan bases will help maintain the leagues credibility and strengthen its position as the leading football league in the world.

Finally, it is important to recognize the limitations of this study. The analysis relied on secondary data and a limited selection of player case studies, meaning that the findings are interpretive and may not represent the Premier League brand and the star players role in it from all perspectives, but only the ones chosen. Future research could expand on these results by analyzing the brand through audience-based studies, for example through surveys or interviews, to explore how fans perceive the relationship between the Premier League brand and its star players. Comparative research could also be conducted, to determine how well other major football or sports leagues have succeeded in leveraging the star power the players in their leagues possess. Quantitative research to examine the relationship of the Premier League brand and star players from a more commercial, statistical, and measurable point of view to cover aspects such as audience growth, sponsorship value or online engagement would be interesting. Despite these limitations, this study provides a theoretical and practical base for understanding what role do star players have, or have had, in the branding of the English Premier League.

9 Conclusion

This study explored the role of star players as a part of the English Premier League brand. The analysis showed that the players are key contributors to the Premier League brand's visibility and global appeal, shaping its identity and position as a modern sports and entertainment product. While the players influence has strengthened the league's international status, they have also introduced challenges regarding reputation, integrity, and public image. The findings emphasize that sustainable brand success in the Premier League requires maintaining its level of competition, adapting to the expectations of modern society, and ensuring responsibility in the way both the league and its players act. Ultimately, the league's position at the top of world football will depend on how well the league is able to balance these factors.

From conducting this research, I deepened my knowledge about how sport, culture, and media are very connected in terms of building global sports brands. The process strengthened my understanding of how individual athletes act as both assets and risks inside of a global organizational brand like the Premier League, and how complex it is to manage authenticity, reputation, and individuality in the modern day.

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