

# Political Activism in Sports – a reason to stop watching games?

An analysis of fan data during the 2017/18 season in Spain in the context of Catalan teams' involvement in the referendum on independence



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By Andrea Claudio Labitzke | Student number: S123614

Supervised by PhD Joachim Lund | 15 March 2021

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# **Table of Content**

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Tables</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2. Politics and Sports</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Origins of “Sports and Politics Don’t Mix”	9
2.2 Politics and Its Historical Use of Football	10
2.3 Sports as a Public Good	12
<b>3. The Case: Catalan Referendum 2017</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 Historical Context	13
3.2 New Statute of Autonomy in 2006	14
3.3 Referendum on Independence in 2017	15
3.4 Involvement of Football Clubs in the Referendum	16
<b>4. Sports Economic Theory</b>	<b>20</b>
4.1 Demand for Football Games	20
4.2 Hypotheses	26
<b>5. Methodology</b>	<b>27</b>
5.1 Research Philosophy	27
5.2 Research Approach	30
5.3 Methodological Approach	31
5.4 Research Nature	32
5.5 Research Strategies	32
5.6 Data Collection	34
5.7 Limitations	36
<b>6. Quantitative Analysis</b>	<b>38</b>
6.1 The (not-so) Ideal Case	38
6.2 Effects on Stadium Attendance	40

6.3 Effects on Highlight-Videos	52
6.4 Discussion	60
<b>7. Qualitative Case Study</b>	<b>62</b>
7.1 Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA)	63
7.2 Case Study Analysis	66
7.3 Discussion	75
<b>8. Conclusion</b>	<b>77</b>
8.1 Combination of Results	77
8.2 Challenges for Clubs	78
8.3 Political Identity as an Opportunity	79
8.4 Further Research	80
<b>9. Bibliography</b>	<b>82</b>

## Abstract

Sports figures and teams have historically shied away from getting involved in political conflicts. If ever actors from the sports world involve themselves in political discussions, they risk facing harsh backlashes by the media and fans. This thesis investigates how Spanish fans changed their game consumption due to Catalan football teams' political involvement speaking up in the process of the Catalan referendum on independence in 2017. Based on current theory, it is hypothesized that political comments by clubs generally lead to lower consumption of games. To best study potential effects, an *explanatory sequential mixed method* research design is applied. First, this data on game attendance and views of highlight videos are analyzed with statistical regression methods. The results of the quantitative analysis suggest that there is limited statistical proof of an effects of political statements on fans' consumption behavior. Only when *home*-teams make a political statement, the stadium attendance for subsequent games decreases slightly. In a second step, FC Barcelona's case is further analyzed in a *case study* based on the theoretical basis of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA). The qualitative case study focuses on understanding Spanish football fans' and FC Barcelona fans' ideological attitudes towards mixing politics and sports and the inferred motivation behind FC Barcelona's political statements. The case study suggests that Spanish and FC Barcelona fans being accustomed to mixing sports and politics and the motivation for the club's statements offer a viable explanation of fans' non-reaction to political statements. The thesis concludes that it is difficult to generalize the obtained results. Fan reactions to political involvement of clubs might differ in other cases. Further academic research on this understudied topic is required.

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## List of Figures

Figure 1: Timeline of Catalan referendum.....	20
Figure 2: Illustration of research design adapted from Saunders et al. (2019) .....	28
Figure 3: Three levels of critical realism adapted from Egholm (2014).....	29
Figure 4: Regression equation FE-analysis.....	40
Figure 5: Conceptualization of CSR, CPA and CSA (adapted from Bhagwat et al., 2020)....	64

## List of Tables

Table 1: Game attendance in percentage over several seasons.....	46
Table 2: Game attendance in percentage per team in 2017/18 season .....	47
Table 3: Analysis of game attendance .....	48
Table 4: Views of highlight videos in 2017/18 season.....	56
Table 5: Analysis views on highlight videos .....	57

## **1. Introduction**

Political partisanship is a phenomenon that has recently attracted more attention than ever before (Carothers & O'Donhue, 2019). With an increasing polarization of the political spectrum worldwide and new possibilities to voice opinions through various new media channels anybody can at any time be confronted with individuals and organizations openly displaying different political opinions. Taking political stands is not a behavior limited to politicians anymore but can be observed everywhere in our society. Not even businesses shy away from taking sides in political conflicts, as actions by companies like Nike, Ben & Jerry's, and Starbucks and many more show (Hsu, 2018; Bain, 2018; Martin, 2020). Even though companies' political opinions might not always be well perceived, there seems to be a general shared acceptance of a company's right to voice a political opinion. Interestingly, at the same time there seems to be a shared understanding in society that sports clubs and athletes, and generally any entities associated with sports, "should stick with sports" and keep their political views to themselves. If they do not comply, they can face heavy backlashes (Kaufman, 2008). Famous recent examples include LeBron James and Colin Kaepernick in the US, who both openly pleaded for more social justice and faced harsh criticism by fans and media.

Unsurprisingly, the idea of the separation of sports and politics has been internalized by athletes and sports organizations alike (Gill, 2016; Cunningham & Regan, 2012). In football, over 60% of clubs' revenues are tied to direct consumption of games, in stadiums or through broadcasts, by fans (Ajadi et al., 2020). Hence, it is not surprising that clubs are careful not to agonize their supporters and risk a potential loss of revenue. However, evidence exists that getting involved in a political issue might just do that. Studies have shown that political activism by athletes and sports clubs result in adverse fan reactions (i.a. Mudrick et al, 2019; Fink et al., 2009; Brown & Sheridan, 2020). But is a football club making political statements enough to change fans' consumption behaviors?

A sequence where sports teams did not hold back with involving themselves in a political topic was the process of the Catalan referendum on independence in 2017. Catalan teams publicly addressed this highly emotional topic and did not hesitate to communicate their political beliefs as an organization. Therefore, this case perfectly lends itself to study a possible phenomenon of discriminatory fan behavior towards politically active clubs. Consequently, this thesis proposes the following research question:

*How did Spanish fans change their consumption behavior in the 2017/18 season based on the political involvement of Catalan football teams during the Catalan referendum for independence?*

First, the study provides a short introductory section on the origins of the tradition to separate sports and politics. In a next step, the case of Catalonia's strive for independence and Catalan football clubs' involvement in the process is described. This is followed by a part focusing on the theoretical considerations regarding factors determining game attendance and TV-spectators for football games. On the one hand, the discussion of current theoretical concepts and determinants of game attendance and of the number of TV-viewers build the basis for the conceptualization of this thesis' quantitative research model. On the other hand, combined with the case description they build the foundation for the proposition of the hypothesis guiding this analysis. Before starting the actual analysis, a full chapter is dedicated to explaining the underlying methodological assumptions and the outlining of the overall research process.

Since this study design follows a mixed method approach, the analysis is divided into two main parts. In a first step, a *quantitative* analysis of game attendance data and of data on views of highlight videos seeks to answer the question whether political statements by Catalan teams resulted in lower attendance and reduced interest in highlight videos for their games. In a second step, a *qualitative* study of the role of politics in Spanish football and FC Barcelona's club culture and history helps explain the Spanish fans' lack of change in their support for Catalan teams. The theoretical basis for the qualitative study is the relatively new concept of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA). This concept introduces a framework that explains why consumers in certain cases react negatively to businesses openly committing to a side in a partisan political issue and why in some cases they might accept and even reward enterprises for making a stand.

The final conclusion discusses the value of the quantitative findings of this research on the backdrop of the peculiarities of Spain's and FC Barcelona's fan scene. It also discusses whether other football teams, should they wish to maintain their fans, should continue to shy away from openly committing to a political view or rather change their approach of "sports and politics don't mix".



## 2. Politics and Sports

The notion of “politics and sports do not mix” is one of the most frequently used arguments to prevent actors from the sports world from making statements regarding political issues. It is critical to understand where the idea of politics and sport being two unrelated topics originates and that it is not uncontested. Sports and politics, especially football, have inherent historical connections that extend to the present day.

### 2.1 Origins of “Sports and Politics Don’t Mix”

The origins of the modern organized sports leagues lie in Great Britain. Before the institutionalization of sports activities through leagues, most sporting competitions were based on *friendly* games between private clubs. These so-called gentlemen’s clubs were a big part of English aristocrats’ lives. Allison (2001), having studied amateur sport's cultural influence on society, describes these activities as offering a break and retreat from politics (Streppelhoff, 2014). This amateur spirit was an inspiring influence in the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) foundation by Pierre de Coubertin in 1894. Inspired by the British “club life” and disheartened by European governments' increasingly aggressive political behavior, he wanted to create an apolitical international platform for enemies to interact as friends<sup>1</sup> (Næss, 2018; Streppelhoff, 2014). Consisting of National Olympic Committees (NOC) in all member states, the NOCs were supposed to be independent of national governments. Representatives of the NOCs were seen as ambassadors of the IOC in their respective countries and not vice-versa (Streppelhoff, 2014).

However, soon after the Olympic Games (OG) in Stockholm in 1914, member states realized that with its growing international reputation, the OG would represent a perfect platform to showcase the increasingly prevalent nationalism. Even when concerns were voiced within the IOC that Nazi-Germany would use the 1936 edition of the OG for political purposes, Baillet-Latour, the IOC’s president at the time, kept repeating that the Olympic movement was entirely unrelated to world politics (Streppelhoff, 2014). This stance was not abandoned but instead intensified until 1972. Only then, the IOC started acknowledging that politics in sport is inevitable (ibid). The IOC’s current president, Thomas Bach, recently stated that sport having nothing to do with politics is one of the biggest lies that has accompanied sport. The IOC is a

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<sup>1</sup> Coubertin’s intentions were reportedly not as purely apolitical as it might seem since he was supposedly also specifically concerned about the physical shape and well-being of French men after the French defeat in said Franco-Prussian war (Bairner, 2016).

neutral<sup>2</sup> organization without a political mandate but not apolitical (Germann & Wagner, 2014; Streppelhoff, 2014).

## 2.2 Politics and Its Historical Use of Football

After the foundation of the English Football Association (FA) in 1863 and the start of organized activities, football had become deeply ingrained in European culture by the 1930s. Most European countries had established domestic leagues by then, and football had become part of everyday social life. Especially in industrial urban areas, going to the stadium and following the local club's games became a part of family life (Benoit, 2008). Benoit (2008) describes that after the First World War, politics started using football for its purposes in four ways:

- as a tool for international relations,
- as a source of propaganda,
- as an instrument for public pacification,
- and to express popular protest.

Already in the 1930s, government officials, together with their respective football associations, started to strategically plan games and use them as an added *tool for their foreign policies*. In times of high geopolitical tension, citizens of European countries hardly ever met due to limited mobility. Therefore, national football teams were seen as ambassadors of their nations and presented one of the few points of contact between citizens of different nations. They played an enormous role in determining a nation's public perception of a nation (Kuper, 2003, p. 27; Benoit, 2008). International matches between Austria, England, France, Germany, and Italy were some of the most politically charged games. Benoit (2008) shows in a collection of anecdotes how political officials carefully planned these games, and players were even instructed to behave in a certain way. Even today, any World Cup or European Championship offers a host country to present itself on the international stage, and often political leaders of other countries come as guests when nations play against each other.

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<sup>2</sup> The question of neutrality of sporting organizations is in itself very interesting, but goes unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

The first politicians to see football's value as a *source of propaganda* were Europe's Fascist and authoritarian leaders. Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco<sup>3</sup> all saw the immense popularity of football as a chance to manipulate the masses and thereby secure their political leadership. Since football crossed over social and class boundaries, it came in handy as a tool to foster a shared national identity among citizens (Martin, 2004; Benoit, 2008). Mussolini publicly financed the construction of some of Italy's biggest football stadiums<sup>4</sup> in the 1930s in an attempt to show off Fascism's greatness (Wagg, 1995, p. 127; Benoit, 2008). Football has since not ceded to function as an opportunity for autocratic political leaders to self-stage. Turkish president Recep Erdoğan and Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, are just two examples of current leaders who surround themselves with football stars and use them for publicity (Ogden, 2018; Beyer, 2020)<sup>5</sup>.

During the trying times of the Second World War, football offered an instrument for the *pacification* of the general public. Going to a football game could give people some "normality" back and was much easier for governments than to provide food, security, and wealth (Benoit, 2008). The corona pandemic showed that football is still used in a similar capacity today. The pandemic brought public life to an abrupt stop in 2020, including all organized sports activities. The calls for football seasons to continue were not just argued to be for the financial survival of clubs but also to give back a certain feeling of normality in these uncertain and unsettling times (Tidey, 2020; Hodgson, 2020).

During the Second World War, football games often presented a *platform for political and protest movements* without any government representation. There are several reported incidents where the crowd in football stadiums showed resistance against Nazi-occupation by defaming and whistling German teams. Behavior that the occupiers did not tolerate outside of sports competitions (Benoit, 2008). Even today, it is not uncommon to see fans using the platform of a football stadium by holding up banners with political messages<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> It is disputed in literature if Franco's regime can be classified as Fascist. While it is undisputed that *Francoism* showed traits of Fascism it could never be clearly defined as such (Rundle & Sturge, 2010). This is also due to the development of Francoism over time (Vandaele, 2010). The role of football under Franco will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.2..

<sup>4</sup> Namely, the stadiums in Milan (San Siro/Giuseppe Meazza), in Rome (Stadio Olimpico) and Florence (Stadio Artemio Franchi - previously Giovanni Berta) were built by the Fascist regime. They are all still in use.

<sup>5</sup> Erdoğan even helped found the club of *Istanbul Basaksehir FK* and has played friendly matches with the team (Beyer, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Even though this is forbidden by UEFA and clubs are fined for their fan behavior (UEFA, 2019)

## **2.3 Sports as a Public Good**

The connection between politics and sports also is evident as it has to lean on public funding as the following three examples show.

### **2.3.1 Mega Sports Events**

Hosting a mega sports event, like the FIFA World Cup, the UEFA Euro tournament, or the Olympic games, require enormous investments by host countries (Allmers & Maennig, 2009). Estimates say that spending for the latest Olympic Games was around USD 18 billion in London, 44 billion in Beijing, and around 51 in Sochi (Zimbalist, 2016). These numbers are significant for any country in the world. Politicians argue that these investments are not just for the purpose of sports, but a lot of the money invested goes into infrastructure projects that will benefit countries in the long run<sup>7</sup>.

### **2.3.2 Stadiums**

Connected to the hosting of mega sports events is the building and financing of stadiums. The phenomenon of publicly financed stadiums is especially relevant in the US. There, governments have a long history of subsidizing multi-billion dollar stadiums for privately owned sports teams (Baumann & Matheson, 2013; Groothuis et al., 2004). In 2011 it was reported that over USD 30 billion in the US and Canada alone were invested in private sports stadiums, with over half of these costs carried by governments (Baade & Matheson, 2011; Baumann & Matheson, 2013). In European countries, the phenomenon of stadium subsidies is not as prevalent (Baade, 2003). Nevertheless, that does not mean that it does not exist. Most recently, the Tottenham Hotspurs received public money to partially fund their stadium's redevelopment in North London (BBC, 2011; The Telegraph, 2012).

### **2.3.3 Football Clubs' Debt Problem**

As much as other private companies, football clubs have been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis. Hence, it seems normal that they also would receive some sort of government support and funding. For example, the UK government supported the Tottenham Hotspurs with a loan of GBP 175 million (Olley, 2020).

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<sup>7</sup> A positive economic effect of mega sports event has yet to be proven.

It is not as well known that governments loaned extensive amounts of money to football clubs even before that. In 2016, the EU-commission decided after „three in-depth investigations“ that several Spanish football teams had to pay back excessive government aid in the form of incompatible tax cuts to the Spanish state (European Commission, 2016, p. 1). The state support varied from EUR 5-20 million per club (The Guardian, 2016). They had allowed clubs from the highest Spanish football league to amass tax debts of EUR 700 million in 2012<sup>8</sup> (Suarez & Urreiztieta, 2018).

### **3. The Case: Catalan Referendum 2017**

Sport teams making political statements as the Catalan football teams during the 2017/18 season did are still rare. Therefore, it is interesting to take a close look at a case that is so publicly and well discussed. To adequately analyze a possible effect on fan behavior, it is necessary to have an overview of the historical context of Catalonia's struggle for autonomy and the events during the 2017/18 season.

#### **3.1 Historical Context**

Catalonia's relationship with the central Spanish government has always been complex and characterized by changing hierarchy levels between Catalonia and the rest of the Iberic peninsula. After enjoying a higher degree of autonomy from the Castile kingdom, Barcelona was in 1714<sup>9</sup> conquered after supporting Karl VI in the Habsburgian succession war, and the Spanish king stripped the Catalans of their previous self-governing privileges (Jahn, 2020). The Castilian central power's rule over Catalonia proved resilient and sustained until the 20th century (ibid). In 1913, Catalonia was granted a certain degree of autonomy by the Spanish king. This autonomy was though retracted after the *coup d'état* by Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1923. After Primo de Rivera's dictatorship ended in 1931, Catalonia attained autonomy during the Second Spanish Republic, only to have it stripped again after Francisco Franco had come to power in 1938 (Guibernau, 2013). Franco, during his reign, made sure to suppress regional Catalan characteristics, after the Catalans were the last ones to capitulate during the Spanish civil war, and paint the picture of a unified Spain under the rule of the central government in Madrid (Jahn, 2020; Guibernau, 2013).

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<sup>8</sup> The Spanish state took has steadily decreased the tax debt of football clubs. By 2020, the overall debt was supposed to be reduced to EUR 50 million (Matilla, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Since 1980, the date of the capitulation (11 September) has been an official holiday in Catalonia (Jahn, 2020).

After over 35 years of being ruled by a dictator, Spain had the difficult task of creating a constitution that could deal with Francoism's legacy. One of the most challenging parts was the question of how to deal with the historical nationalities within Spain, meaning especially Catalonia and the Basque country, “which had endured years of repression topped by repeated attempts at their annihilation” (Guibernau, 2013, p. 370). With the Spanish Constitution in 1978, the Spanish state was divided into 17 autonomous communities. The idea behind this was to keep the state's territorial integrity while granting extended autonomy to the historical nationalities within Spain. The granted autonomy materialized in 1980 when Catalonia got back its own parliament and government (Guibernau, 2013). The new government received autonomy regarding various areas of public spending, such as education and health care (Martí, 2013; Real Instituto Elcano, 2019). Rather than striving for complete independence, Catalonia's government kept negotiating an increasing devolution by, for example, receiving more competencies in tax collection over time (Jahn, 2020). The semi-federal system implemented through the Constitution started being criticized by the Spanish government in 2000 (Dowling, 2019). Then prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar, decided to limit new concessions to the Catalan government. This was perceived negatively by Catalans that felt undervalued, having with their economic success helped the Spanish government overcome the 1993 economic crisis and fulfill the requirements for Spain to join the EU. Consequently, ideas emerged to entirely renegotiate Catalonia's autonomous standing within the Spanish state (Crameri, 2015).

### **3.2 New Statute of Autonomy in 2006**

In 2005, a new statute of autonomy was drafted by the Catalan government, describing Catalonia as an “independent nation” with additional extensive competencies (Jahn, 2020, p. 234). This bill was after some concessions from both sides subsequently approved by the Spanish government in Madrid under the opposition of the right-wing *Partido Popular* (PP) and a popular referendum held in Catalonia. The PP, though, brought the case to the Spanish Constitutional Court (CC). The CC's ruling in 2010 declaring several articles from the new autonomy statute as unconstitutional proved to be a turning point in Catalan independence politics (Romano, 2018; Suriñach & Detinho, 2019; Martí, 2013). As a reaction to the court ruling, Catalan politicians that were previously arguing for further devolution and increased competencies for Catalonia were now suggesting full independence as the only solution. The 2012 elections were therefore proclaimed to be a vote for self-determination. The pro-independence parties under the Catalan nationalist party's (*Convergència i Unió* (CiU))

leadership ran with the promise of holding a referendum on independence (Martí, 2013). Winning a majority of seats in the parliament, but failing to win a majority in votes, the pro-independence coalition followed up on their promise and held a *consultational* referendum for independence in 2014<sup>10</sup> (Martí & Cetra, 2016). Encouraged by the result, 80.7% of voters saying “yes” to independence at a voter turnout of 36%, Artur Mas announced the 2015 Catalan election as a *de facto* referendum. Even though the pro-independence coalition again failed to win a majority of all votes, it could hold on to their majority in the parliament and the new president, Carles Puigdemont, continued the quest for independence by promising a legally binding referendum (ibid).

### **3.3 Referendum on Independence in 2017**

The Catalan parliament approved the referendum on 7 October 2016. The response of the Spanish CC was to deem it illegal (Jahn, 2020) immediately. Motivated by the previous lack of response to demands of increased autonomy, the suspension of parts of the new statute of autonomy, and an increasing fiscal deficit with the central government (Guibernau, 2013), Puigdemont's government did not stray from their path. It held the referendum a year later on 1 October 2017. A majority of 89% voted in favor of independence, with a voter turnout of around 43%. Nevertheless, rather than just the result, the central government's reaction led by prime minister Mariano Rajoy provoked strong reactions. While pictures and videos of voters facing excessive police brutality by state police corps circulated worldwide (Burgen & Jones, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017; BBC, 2017), the Spanish government reacted to the official declaration of independence on 27 October 2017 by invoking Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution. This meant imposing direct rule by the central government and suspending Catalonia's autonomy (Wagner et al., 2019). The Catalan parliament was dissolved, and the government was arrested. Puigdemont and four of his ministers fled to Brussels, while the vice-president, Oriol Junqueras, and eight ministers were interned in Madrid (Jahn, 2020). The elections to renew the Catalan parliament on 21 December 2017 again resulted in pro-independence parties capturing a majority of the seats and pro-independence Quim Torra's election as president (ibid).

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<sup>10</sup> The referendum had no legally binding character and was opposed by the Spanish CC and government (Martí & Cetra, 2016).

### 3.4 Involvement of Football Clubs in the Referendum

Questions about the legality of the Catalan referendum for independence and the appropriateness of the Spanish government's reaction dominated Spanish politics for months<sup>11</sup>. The magnitude of the conflict and its polarizing character of the topic meant that nobody was left untouched. As mentioned, this thesis's focus lies on reactions to the independence movement made by Catalan football clubs (FC Barcelona, RCD Espanyol Barcelona, Girona FC) active in LaLiga, the highest division in Spanish football, during the 2017/18 season. The clubs' public stands on the issue of the referendum are summarized in the following chapters.

#### 3.4.1 FC Barcelona

As the biggest and historically most successful Catalan club, FC Barcelona is not just in athletic terms a reference point for football teams. It is not surprising that FC Barcelona, with all the media attention it attracts, was the most vocal of all three football clubs<sup>12</sup>.

The first time representatives of FC Barcelona expressed themselves publicly regarding the Catalan referendum on independence was when then-president and leading figure of the club, Josep Bartomeu, announced during an annual member meeting that FC Barcelona supported the Catalan government's decision to hold a referendum on 16 May 2017 (Lopez Tovar, 2017). Shortly before, FC Barcelona published a statement on its Twitter account that it had joined the *Pacto Nacional por el Referendum* along with 4000 other Catalan civil society organizations, businesses, and political parties (FC Barcelona, 2017; Burns, 2017). Bartomeu reiterated in his speech that supporting the referendum does not mean that the club is being partisan and taking sides in the question of independence, but rather that it means to stand up for the democratic right of self-determination. Supporting the referendum means being a "*Barcelonista*"<sup>13</sup> and neither in favor nor against Catalonia's independence. Bartomeu continued to state that FC Barcelona is a reference point for *Catalanism* and that it can make politics as long as it does not take sides (Lopez Tovar, 2017; Aldunate, 2017).

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<sup>11</sup> The conflict is far from over as violent mass protests in Barcelona erupted as result of the verdicts of the trial against former Catalan ministers were announced in October 2019 (Binnie et al., 2019; BBC, 2019; Burgen & Jones, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> The summary concerns all public statements regarding the referendum within the 2017/18 season and not before. Former president of FC Barcelona, Sandro Rosell, already in 2013 publicly expressed FC Barcelona's support for the right of democratic self-determination of the Catalan people regarding the issue of independence. Josep Bartomeu formally signed the Catalan National Pact for Self-Determination in 2014 (FC Barcelona, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> In this context meaning being a supporter of FC Barcelona.



On 20 September 2017, FC Barcelona published a second statement regarding the referendum. After the Spanish police state, in an attempt to stop the process of the referendum, had arrested several ministers and had raided several regional government departments, FC Barcelona reacted again with a public statement condemning any act that “may impede the free exercise of rights (..) to self-determination, democracy and freedom of speech” (FC Barcelona, 2017; Castillo & Edwards, 2017). The club repeated its commitment to the referendum and let Catalan people decide on their future.

On 1 October 2017, the day the referendum was held, FC Barcelona was scheduled to play a home game against Las Palmas. After players and officials were devastated by the events during the day, the club explained in a statement that the decision was made to only play their game under protest and behind closed doors without fans present (FC Barcelona, 2017). During the game, the scoreboard displayed the words *democràcia*, while players were wearing shirts in the style of the *Senyera*, the Catalan flag (West, 2017). Josep Bartomeu followed up after the game and explained that the decision to play the game behind doors was to make a strong statement for the whole world to see how much Catalan people are suffering in these times (Tronchoni, 2017).

The following day, FC Barcelona made two statements on their Twitter account declaring that the whole organization would join the national strike in Catalonia on 3 October 2017 proclaimed by the organization *Mesa para la Democràcia* (“table for democracy”). All of the club’s employees, be it administrative or athletic personnel, would not work, and all of the facilities would remain closed (FC Barcelona, 2017; FC Barcelona, 2017).

When the Spanish government elected to activate Art. 155 of the Spanish Constitution and dissolve the Catalan parliament, FC Barcelona made another statement on 10 October 2017. While addressing club members and media at a Delegate Assembly, Josep Bartomeu made clear that FC Barcelona would stand by Catalonia's democratically elected institutions. Later on, these comments were published in an official statement on the club’s website (FC Barcelona, 2017).

On 2 November 2017, FC Barcelona published another statement criticizing the issued prison sentences against several Catalan government officials, expressing its support for the affected

people and their families as well as calling for a non-violent solution conflict resolution that respects democratic rights (FC Barcelona, 2017).

### 3.4.2 Girona FC

Girona FC is the smallest of the three Catalan clubs. Based in the North-Eastern Catalan town of Girona, the club has had limited success on a national level in Spain. Prior to the 2017/18 season, it had never played in the Spanish first division. The club shares a strong connection to the Catalan region, being located in a city that is known to be fiercely pro-independence (Cassinelli, 2017; Buck, 2017).

Additionally, the club shares a strong connection to the Catalan government holding the referendum through Carles Puigdemont. The former Catalan president used to be the mayor of Girona and is a passionate supporter and honorary member of Girona FC (López Frías, 2017). He has often been seen in the stadium on match days and has regularly been photographed with the team at public events.

Twice in the referendum process, Girona FC explicitly addressed the political situation. The first public statement by the club was on 20 September 2017. Similar to FC Barcelona, Girona FC reacted in their statement to the raids by Spanish state police. The club expressed its disappointment and condemned all actions limiting the exercising of Catalan people's democratic rights. The statement explicitly says that Girona FC takes the side of the people wanting to have the right to Catalan self-determination regarding independence (Girona FC, 2017).

The second statement by Girona FC followed on 2 October 2017. While condemning the state police's violent acts, the club expressed support for Catalonia's people and institutions. Additionally, it committed to joining the national strike on 3 October 2017. All offices would be closed, and neither athletic nor administrative staff would be working (Girona FC, 2017).

On 29 October 2017, shortly after Catalonia had declared its independence, Girona FC's upset win over Real Madrid was celebrated by many as a win of Catalonia against the Spanish state. Puigdemont, even though in exile by then, celebrated the win by suggesting precisely that on Twitter (Puigdemont, 2017). Even though no official club statement was made, it is still worth mentioning to showcase the close connection between Catalan politics and football.

### 3.4.3 RCD Espanyol Barcelona

RCD Espanyol Barcelona is the second biggest Catalan football club. In its history, it could hardly ever step out of the shadow of its big rival, FC Barcelona. Compared to its main rival, it was founded following a fundamentally different ideology. While FC Barcelona was founded as an institution of Catalonia and Catalanism, Espanyol Barcelona, as the name indicates, was a club where only Spanish players would be allowed to play (Haupt, 2020).<sup>14</sup> Even though the two clubs' historical position as pro-Catalan (FC Barcelona) and pro-Spain (Espanyol Barcelona) might not be as clear nowadays<sup>15</sup>, the RCD Espanyol Barcelona's official stance on the topic of the referendum differed significantly.

When being asked about the position RCD Espanyol Barcelona takes regarding the planned referendum, then CEO of the club Ramon Robert decidedly said in May 2017 that the club will not mix politics with sports and will never take sides in a purely political matter (Castelló, 2017). The club stuck to this position. In September, when both other Catalan clubs made statements about the Spanish police intervening in the preparations of the referendum, RCD Espanyol Barcelona abstained from doing so. Instead, the club reiterated its neutral stance in a series of Twitter-posts on 21 September 2017 (RCD Espanyol Barcelona, 2017). This netted the club criticisms from former officials and fans who had hoped for a clear statement (Mundi, 2017; Castelló, 2017).

This position slightly changed on 2 October 2017. Like the other two Catalan clubs, RCD Espanyol reacted to the events on 1 October 2017. The club released a statement announcing that it would join the general strike on 3 October 2017 due to the events when people were attempting to cast votes on the previous day. The statement also mentioned that the club respects individual employee's decisions on individual exercise and that the first team would do light training behind closed doors (RCD Espanyol Barcelona, 2017). On 3 October 2017, Espanyol followed up its original statement with a longer statement calling for dialogue between all the actors and social peace for Catalonia. Nowhere in the statement either support

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<sup>14</sup> The name was changed from the Catalan version *Espanyol* from the previous name *RCD Español Barcelona*.

<sup>15</sup> A survey by the Centre D'Estudis D'Opinió (CEO) in 2017 showed that 60% of FC Barcelona supporters are in favour of independence while only 42% of RCD Espanyol supporters support the idea of an independent Catalan nation (Camps, 2017).

for or opposition of the referendum is mentioned. Instead, the club repeats its commitment to neutrality in political questions (RCD Espanyol Barcelona, 2017).

A month later, on 3 November 2017, RCD Espanyol Barcelona released another statement. The statement repeated the same message from 3 October 2017. Again, the statement refrained from taking any political side but generally called for dialogue between the actors involved (RCD Espanyol Barcelona, 2017).

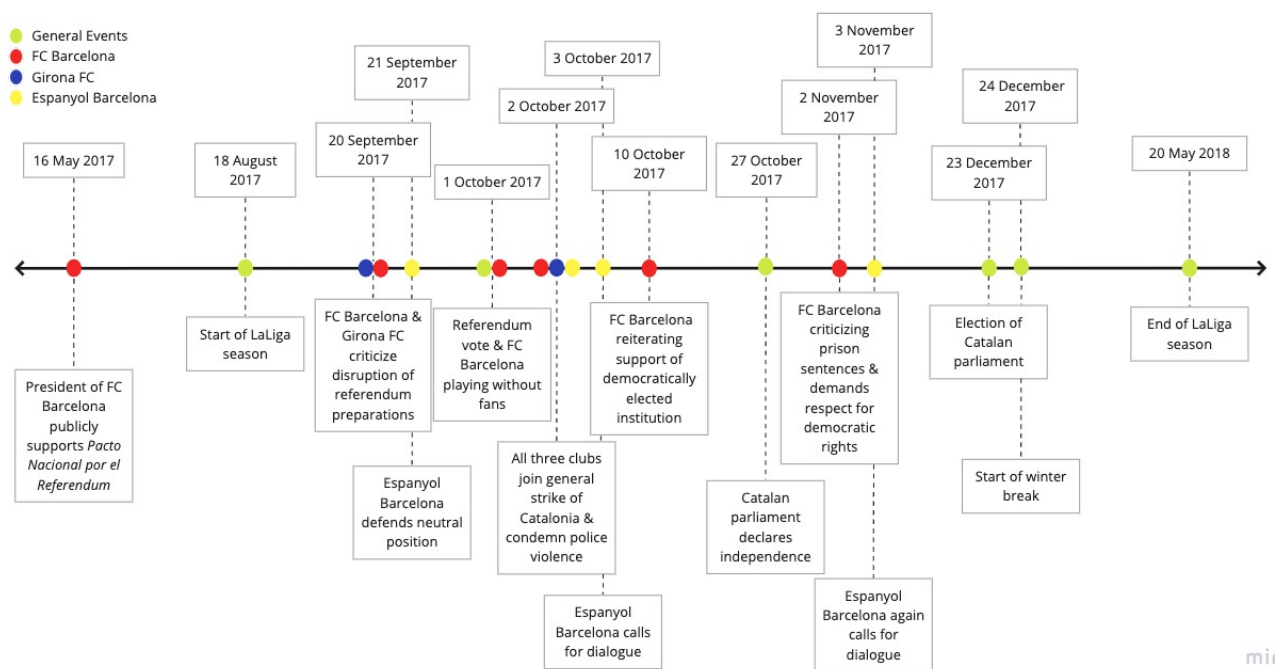


Figure 1: Timeline of Catalan referendum

## 4. Sports Economic Theory

To effectively study the impact of political statements on fans' game consumption behavior, it is necessary to understand what other determining factors for the demand of football matches exist according to the theoretical literature.

### 4.1 Demand for Football Games

The literature on the demand for sports is very vast. The various studies might vary in their research models, but overall demand drivers can be classified into five main categories: *economic determinants*, *quality of viewing*, *sporting contest*, *supply capacity*, and *consumer preferences*. These categories are used as guidelines for the following breakdown of theory around the demand for football.

#### 4.1.1 Clarifications

When discussing the demand for sports, it is necessary to differentiate between the demand for *attendance* (live sports in stadiums) and sports broadcasted on TV or other media channels. It is reasonable to assume that depending on the mode of consumption, the consumers' characteristics differ. Therefore, also the factors determining the demand will differ. Generally, it can be assumed that fans in a stadium are mostly home-team fans. On the other hand, consumers watching broadcasted game tend to include more “neutral” fans that do not necessarily have a strong affiliation for either team but watch the game for other reasons than pure “fandom” (Buraimo & Simmons, 2009). Through broadcasting anybody can easily access games, and there are no geographic restrictions for fans of either team. These assumptions might not be accurate in all cases since also hardcore and strongly biased fans watch broadcasted games, and neutral fans go to the stadium. The following theoretical explanation will still differentiate between the two groups of fans.

#### 4.1.2 Economic determinants

There are several economic factors expected to play a role in determining the demand for football games. The most obvious of them is the *price*. As with all traded goods, it can also be expected that the *price of admission* influences the demand for live football matches. Football matches are supposedly an economic good, where an increase in price leads to a negative response in demand (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). Ticket prices as determinants of fan attendance are seldom included in studies due to their difficult measurement. Many clubs have introduced dynamic pricing<sup>16</sup> which makes the estimation of average ticket prices reasonably difficult. Connected to that is the econometric difficulty of *endogeneity*. Since the ticket price is to some extent determined by the attendance (demand), the dependent variable is influencing the explanatory variable (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2002). Despite this increased complexity in the research design, Garcia & Rodriguez (2002) found evidence that shows the negative relationship between ticket price and attendance at football games.

The price of admission is though not the only cost football fans are facing. (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). Several studies have looked at how for example, the costs of traveling for

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<sup>16</sup> Fans will have to pay a premium for top games with a high demand. The price of the ticket also depends on when the ticket is purchased (Rostance, 2012).

fans of the 'away' team associated with longer geographical distances between the two teams playing relate to the attendance in football stadiums (Baimbridge et al. 1996; Garcia & Rodriguez, 2002; Falter & Perignon, 2000). Opportunity costs, mostly in the form of substitutes for football games, equally are a factor that has shown to influence attendance. The possible substitution of attending a football game by watching it on TV has been studied extensively (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). There have been mixed results so far (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2006). While some studies have found no significant effect of broadcasting on stadium attendance (Kuypers, 1996; Falter & Perignon, 2000), others have found an overall negative effect (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2002; Forrest et al., 2004), while others found evidence for a positive relationship (Czarnitzki & Stadtmann, 2002).

Lastly, there are macroeconomic considerations that can factor in determining stadium attendance. Assuming that going to a football game is a *normal* good<sup>17</sup>, the GDP of a region can be expected to positively influence attendance. Similarly, the population size in a region is positively associated with the number of people attending football games. It could also be argued that other economic factors like the unemployment rate in a region play a role (Borland & Macdonald, 2003).

Overall, economic determinants are more critical for game attendance than for viewers of broadcasted matches since the TV viewers are not bound to one location. Broadcasting instead plays a factor as an economical substitute for live attendance of games.

#### 4.1.3 Quality of Viewing

The quality of viewing does not relate to a football match's quality but rather to the viewing experience's quality. Studies have shown that, for example, in baseball, game attendance decreases with the age of stadiums (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). The quality of the infrastructure provided by clubs seems to be important to fans. This is evident by European football clubs still investing a lot of money in building new stadiums or upgrading existing ones (Siu, 2014).

Furthermore, the timing of matches is a significant determinant for viewership numbers. This holds true for game attendance as for TV viewers. It makes sense that games that are played

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<sup>17</sup> *Normal* goods are characterized by the fact that their demand increases with an increased income.

during the week and not on weekends would attract less attendance since more people are occupied and cannot afford to spend several hours getting to and seeing a football game (Schofield, 1983; Garcia & Rodriguez, 2002). Similarly, games played during prime-time attract more viewers on TV than games played in the early afternoon (Feddersen & Rott, 2011).

#### 4.1.4 Sporting Contest

The sporting contest itself is a big reason why fans go to stadiums or watch it broadcasted. The quality of a football match is vital for fans (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). The higher the quality of a match, the more people want to see it. Even though a match's quality cannot always be predicted, there can be matches between top teams with poor quality in football. The talent present on a football pitch for any given match is a good indicator for quality (Buraimo & Simmons, 2015). Fans in attendance seem not only to value the talent of the home-team but the sum of all talent present, including the visiting team's. Similarly, teams that have historically been successful or even short-term successful teams can attract more fans in stadiums and broadcasts (Caruso et al., 2019; Buraimo, 2008; Feddersen & Rott, 2011; Garcia & Rodriguez, 2002; Borland & Macdonald, 2003).

Moreover, a football match's attractiveness increases if the match can be classified as a *derby* or rivalry match (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2006). The expression *derby* refers to a game between two clubs from the same region or even city. Derbies and other rivalry games have historically attracted more fans. Getting a leg up on a bitter rival has always warmed fans' hearts.

The most researched and most disputed influence on the demand for football matches is the *uncertainty of outcome hypothesis (UOH)* (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). The UOH says that fans are more likely to watch a game if the outcome is uncertain. If one team is heavily favored to win over the other team, fans and viewers might not be interested in watching the game since the outcome is almost certain. While, at first glance, it might make sense that close games with a lot of excitement and suspense are more appealing to fans, there are legitimate doubts concerning this logic. Especially in a European football context, where clubs and fans are known to be utility maximizers, clubs and fans might not be interested in a well-balanced competition (Caruso et al., 2019). A fan's utility is maximized when her/his team wins. Following this logic, fans should be more attracted to games where their team has a high probability of winning (Buraimo & Simmons, 2009). Particularly stadium attendance, where most fans are expected to be home-team fans, could be impacted by this. Empirical studies'

results confirm the ambiguous relationship between outcome uncertainty and game attendance/TV viewership. Some studies show that the UOH should be rejected when talking about game attendance but holds for broadcasted games (ibid), while other studies say that a more balanced match does not affect TV-viewers' preferences (Pérez et al., 2017; Buraimo, 2008). Then again, some studies find no conclusive evidence at all (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2002). Overall, more research is required to come to a definite answer on the impact of outcome uncertainty on demands for games (Caruso et al., 2019; Coates & Humphreys, 2010 & 2012; Fort & Quirk, 2010; Mills & Fort, 2014; Pawlowski, 2013).

#### 4.1.5 Supply Capacity

A determinant of game attendance is, for obvious reasons, the supply capacity. Every stadium has a limited amount of seats available per match. The supply of seats offered by a club is bound to this number of seats. It is very much possible that when the stadium is sold out that the actual demand for tickets is higher than the tickets sold. The natural threshold of seats available distorts the attendance in stadiums (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). If stadiums are not sold out, the limitation does not apply. The supply of broadcasted games is not subject to any limitation since any fan can watch a game as long as they have the suitable device for it.

#### 4.1.6 Consumer Preferences

The last factor and, for this thesis at least, the critical factor affecting fans' demand for football games is consumer preferences. In a way, the aforementioned factors grouped under *quality of viewing* and *sporting contest* are already related to consumer preferences. The difference is that *consumer preferences* do not necessarily have anything to do with the product's form and quality. In the following section, some of the most influential consumer preferences broadly accepted in the literature will be discussed. These build the theoretical foundation for the claim that political statements impact fans' consumption tendencies.

If one starts to look beyond purely economic theories, it quickly becomes apparent that there is an abundance of sociological factors that strongly impact fans' consumption behavior. Wann (1995) comes up with a theoretical framework of eight motivations for sports fandom. These are *eustress (positive levels of arousal)*, *self-esteem benefits*, *escape from everyday life*, *entertainment*, *economic factors (e.g., gambling)*, *aesthetic qualities*, *group affiliation*, and *family needs*. In his study, Wann shows that all of these motivations are positively associated with fans' tendencies to watch and consume sports. Out of these eight motivations, the factor



*escape from reality* is of specific interest for this analysis. According to Wann, sport is used by spectators as an escape from daily problems. For the duration of a game, fans can forget their everyday life and flee into an imaginary “bubble” of no-care. This notion implies that every event that takes sport consumers out of this bubble and makes them aware that reality still exists will be seen as an intrusion and perceived negatively. The involvement of politics in a football game might exactly embody such an intrusion for fans. Political issues, may they be more or less complex, are a constant companion of every citizen, and a sports game might present the perfect opportunity to escape these persistent questions. This is also exemplified by Kaufman & Wolff (2010), who argue that sports and athletes “seem to exist in a world devoid of politics and social issues” (p. 165). Spectators see the world of sports as a neutral site that, according to Sage (1998), occupies a space outside of society's political, social, and economic spheres. According to this neutrality vision, there is no space for political opinions in sports (ibid; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Others have also argued that sport is a “haven free from social issues” (Sanderson et al., 2016, p. 303; van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). Mudrick et al. (2019) come to a similar conclusion. Their study about consequences for athletes that voice political opinions concludes that many fans view individual athletes as “voiceless entertainers” (Dial Creech, 2017). If sports do not fulfill their role as neutral entertainment systems, fans will respond by walking away from it, and the demand for sports will successively decrease. Brown & Sheridan (2020) produce statistical evidence for this assumption. They show that TV-ratings for games in the National Football League were lower for games where players were openly protesting the political topic of social injustice.

Another facet of consumer preference that is rarely studied is the level of *identification* with a team or with athletes fans exhibit. In a way, the degree of identification with a team shows the *strength* of a fan's fandom. Extensive research shows that a stronger fan identification with a team increases fans willingness to attend games and pay higher prices for merchandise (Fink et al., 2009; Madrigal, 1995; Wakefield, 1995; Wann & Branscombe, 1993; James & Trail, 2008). Several studies focus on how athletes' performance-unrelated-off-field actions<sup>18</sup> influence fan identification with said athletes and the teams they are playing for (Fink et al., 2009). It can be observed how sports-unrelated behavior threatens fans' social identity with their team and diminishes the feeling of identification fans experience (ibid). This is argued to

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<sup>18</sup> Most studies focus on individual athletes' off-field behavior and comments. Since the identification with individual athletes and the organization as a whole are tightly connected (Carlson & Donovan, 2016), it is assumed that team-actions have a similar effect as an individual athlete's actions.

be due to actions threatening a group by undermining its value system and norms (Branscombe et al., 1999; Sanderson et al., 2016).

The question remains what constitutes identity-threatening actions for fans. People tend to identify with social groups “with attributes that align with their self-concept” (Sanderson et al., 2016, p. 306; Fink et al., 2009). Theoretically, any action or statement supporting contradicting ideas to a group’s core beliefs could be perceived as threatening by that group. Sanderson et al. (2016) make the case that political statements by athletes (and potentially organizations) can be seen as threatening actions by fans when the views stated goes against the fans’ personal beliefs. Fans might fear that group membership is compromised (ibid; Branscombe et al., 1999). In line with these results are findings of other studies. Mudrik et al. (2019) show that political opinions voiced by athletes that are not compatible with a fan group’s beliefs result consequently in a decreased consumer behavior by said fans.

## **4.2 Hypotheses**

As illustrated, the 2017 referendum on independence in Catalonia is a prime example of sports clubs taking a public political stance. When looking at fans' comments on the clubs’ social media accounts or in the comment sections of newspaper articles reporting on the matter, it quickly becomes clear that the clubs’ statements made big waves and were perceived as controversial. However, except from stirring up discussions on how and if sports and politics should mix, did the clubs’ comments change fans’ consumption behaviors? Based on the theoretical basis for claiming that political statements negatively influence fan attendance and TV-viewership this thesis proposes several hypotheses:

*H1: Making a political statement will negatively influence game attendance for a club’s home games.*

*H2: A club hosting a team that previously made a political statement will experience a negative effect on game attendance.*

*H3: Fan attendance for games where a club is involved that made a political statement will be lower than for other games.*

As mentioned in the theoretical part, it is expected that the political topic itself might influence how fans react to the political statement. As seen in Chapter 3, the topic of Catalan independence is highly complex and deeply connected to Spain's history. Therefore, it is imaginable that in cases where teams with political statements pro-referendum are playing away games against teams from a region with strong separatist tendencies, fans of those teams might feel solidarity with the visiting teams and come in higher numbers to the stadiums.

*H4: Fan attendance will increase for home games of teams in regions with strong separatist tendencies when a team supporting the referendum on independence is the visiting team.*

Two hypotheses regarding the effect of political statements on views on game highlight videos<sup>19</sup> complement the hypotheses concerning game attendance.

*H5: Games with the involvement of a team that made a political statement are expected to have less viewers than others*

Like with game attendance, it is assumed there is an observable effect on games with teams that make a political statement and teams from a region with strong separatist tendencies.

*H6: Games with the combined involvement of teams that made a political statement and teams from a region with strong separatist tendencies are expected to have more viewers than others.*

## **5. Methodology**

The following chapter introduces the research design best suited to study the effect of football clubs' political involvement on fans' demand for football games. The chapter's structure, depicted in *Figure 2*, is primarily based on the model of the *research onion* introduced by Saunders et al. (2019) with an added section focusing on the research design's limitations.

### **5.1 Research Philosophy**

As Moses & Knutsen (2012) state, beneath every methodological choice made by a researcher lies an implicit idea of the observed natural world. In this section, this thesis's underlying

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<sup>19</sup> Highlight videos are a proxy variable for TV-viewership data (see Chapter 6.3.1).

assumptions will be introduced since they affect one's understanding of truth and objectivity for the research.

At the respective ends of the spectrum of different scientific research methodologies stand *naturalism*, also referred to as *positivism*, and *constructivism* (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 2). The research design of this thesis neither attributes to *constructivism* nor *naturalism*. Instead, it pragmatically combines the two. Hence, the research philosophy that will be followed throughout this paper can be described as *scientific realism* or *critical realism*. This approach combines ontological ideas from naturalism with the epistemological subjectivity of constructivism (Egholm, 2014).

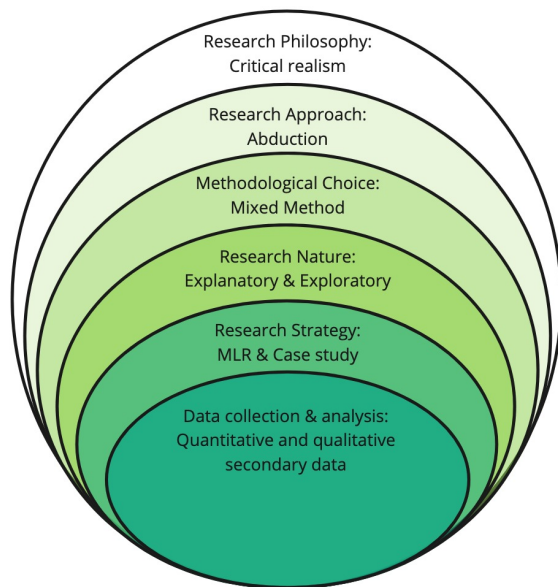


Figure 2: Illustration of research design adapted from Saunders et al. (2019)

between the *real*- and the *actual*-level are not causal but are rather open and multi-causal. Consequently, these relationships might be described but cannot be used to predict future events (Egholm, 2014).

### 5.1.1 Ontology & Epistemology

As shown in *Figure 3*, critical realism argues that the world consists of three levels: the *real*-, the *actual*-, and the *empirical*-level. The first two make up the ontological part of critical realism. The *real*-level consists of the “deep structures and mechanisms that create the possibility of actions and phenomena” (Egholm, 2014, p. 123). The *actual*-level then describes the actions and phenomena that happen based on the *real*-level structures and mechanisms. The relationships

According to critical realists, these two first levels are not observable to the human eye. Only the *empirical*-level is. This level consists of the events that researchers can perceive and experience, making up the epistemological part. Scientific analyses and the development of theories are based on those observations of the empirical level that are always influenced by our own experiences and beliefs (Egholm, 2014). This portrays well how critical realism combines naturalist and constructivist aspects. Unlike in constructivist theory, it does not deny the existence of a *Real World* as it is described in the *real*- and *actual*-levels. It rather implies that research should still be trying to describe the *Real World* in the first two levels, but we can

never be sure if the scientific results of produced research are actually true in regard to *Reality* (ibid).

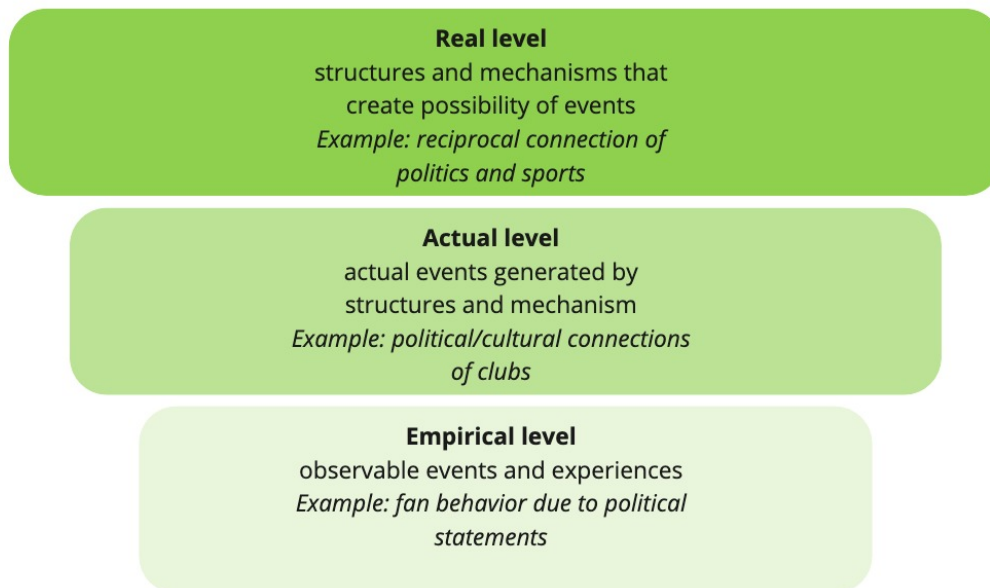


Figure 3: Three levels of critical realism adapted from Egholm (2014)

This thesis' underlying assumption, and therefore making up the *real*-level, is that there exists a reciprocal connection between politics and sports in the *Real World*. It is assumed that the *actual*-level is made up of different mechanisms. These include cultural connectivity of the Catalan football clubs with their region, the political connections of each club, and preferences of fans as well as overall the value of clubs in the lives of their supporters, players, and the general public. Based on these various mechanisms, the six hypotheses guiding this thesis are formulated. These hypotheses are then immediately tested on the *empirical*-level. The *empirical*-level consists of clubs, players, and fans' observable actions that help us check the formulated hypotheses. One should nevertheless keep in mind that results proving any hypothesis sustainable must be seen as an *indicator* for the underlying structure's existence. They do not ultimately prove their existence. For this reason, the results of this thesis do not have the aspiration to be universally true. This thesis focuses on explaining the phenomenon of connection of politics and sports in Catalan football clubs and not of football teams in general. However, the obtained results can be used as inspiration for further research and look at how the hypotheses hold up in different circumstances and when different methods are applied.

### 5.1.2 Axiology

An essential part of research philosophy and always inherently connected with each research philosophical approach is axiology or the question of value neutrality (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). In an ideal world, values should not influence scientific research at all (Egholm, 2014). Following the above-explained critical-realist approach, this is almost impossible due to the belief that observations on the empirical-level are influenced by a researcher's experiences. Therefore, the discussion shifts towards how to deal with values inherently shaping this research.

There are various ways of dealing with these inherent biases and values attached to research. Popper's solution (1972) to the problem is to choose research methods so the initial bias can be corrected when testing the formulated hypotheses. Another approach is to just be open about biases and communicate them, since we are unable to distance ourselves from the initial value attribution when choosing a research question. (Egholm, 2014).

Having been a passionate sports fan my whole life and having had a strong political interest through my academic background, I actively looked for cases to study that connected those two things. By having such a focus, I might have overlooked cases that also deserved to be studied. Having had a strong affinity for the football club FC Barcelona from a young age and having lived in Catalonia for six months during which violent demonstrations erupted due to the Spanish government's stance on Catalonia's independence might have also played a role in choosing on this case.

## 5.2 Research Approach

The classical approaches of *induction* and *deduction* are often not fit for research designs that follow more flexible research philosophies such as critical realism. The concept of *reduction* or *abduction*<sup>20</sup> is a more pragmatic alternative to overcome these classical approaches' shortcomings (Bell et al., 2018). *Abduction* combines aspects of induction and deduction to produce "qualified guesses" about correlations (Peirce, 1932; Egholm, 2014, p.174). Theories about the world's workings are developed by looking at the observable (inductive approach), which are then again tested against the empirical material (deductive approach). The *abduction*

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<sup>20</sup> The terms of reduction and abduction are describing the same phenomenon. In the following the term *abduction* will be used.

method can be described as the *natural way* of knowledge creation in critical realism. Since the *real*-level is not observable for scientists, an assumption must be made about the underlying structures that exist in the *Real World*. Researchers then generate hypotheses linked to the underlying assumption based on other contexts close to the context to be studied on the *actual*-level. These hypotheses can then again be checked against the observations and experiences made on the *empirical*-level. If the hypotheses turn out to be upheld, it can be seen as an indication that the underlying structure exists (Egholm, 2014).

With its flexibility, the abduction approach is a good fit for this analysis's research design. Since there is no overall theory for explaining how political statements influence sports fans' behavior, purely deductive theory testing is not a suitable approach for this thesis. Neither does this thesis strive to develop a general theory for the influence of political statements on fan behavior. Instead, it aims at analyzing if political statements result in discriminatory behavior by fans. Even though this thesis initially uses existing theory to build a theoretical explanation for these claims, it does not limit itself to use the obtained results to discard or confirm these theories. Rather the results are further analyzed to make *qualified guesses* about what consequences clubs making political statements might face in other cases.

### **5.3 Methodological Approach**

The research design used in this thesis is one of mixed methods, combining quantitative with qualitative methods. It is a much more pragmatic approach to research by not strictly limiting itself to a specific set of methods. Hence, it is better suited for analyzing multifaceted research questions that require more complex and multilayered answers (Tashakkori et al., 2015). The mixed-methods approach also comes with a certain set of challenges discussed in Chapter 5.7.

In this thesis, the mixed-methods approach offers the opportunity to grasp a deeper understanding of the connection between politics and sports in Catalan football. Whereas a purely quantitative analysis can give a good overview of the overall impact of a football club making political statements on fans' preferences, only a qualitative analysis can show why fans might react to political statements in a certain way in a specific case. This thesis follows an *explanatory sequential mixed-methods* model. This means that first, a quantitative analysis is conducted. After the results have been analyzed, the results are explained in more detail through qualitative research. This method is considered *explanatory* since the initial quantitative research is further explained with qualitative methods (Creswell, 2014).

A key challenge for the *explanatory sequential mixed methods* model is selecting the cases analyzed further in the study's qualitative part. It is impossible to analyze all the cases from the quantitative part in a qualitative way (Creswell, 2014). By analyzing only one of the treatment group cases, as done with FC Barcelona's case, this thesis is naturally prone to selection bias. For reasons of data availability and a workload that would go beyond this thesis's scope, analyzing more than a single case was deemed unfeasible.

#### **5.4 Research Nature**

In general, a research design has either an *explanatory*, *exploratory*, or *descriptive* nature depending on its research purpose (Saunders et al., 2019). As the name already indicates, *exploratory* studies ask open questions about problems that might not yet have been fully grasped. Study designs often include more unstructured and flexible tools that are better suited to explore a variety of aspects of a problem (ibid). *Descriptive* research instead aims at the accurate description of a phenomenon (ibid). Thus, it often functions as an added tool for an *exploratory* study. *Explanatory* studies, on the contrary, look to establish causal relationships between different variables. It is, therefore, well suited for quantitative statistical research designs (ibid).

Neither of those three concepts is individually adequate to describe the nature of the study at hand. The study could partially be deemed *exploratory* since it deals with a topic that has so far been understudied. The effects of sports teams' political statements on fan behavior are not a primary emphasis in scientific literature. Additionally, elements of a *descriptive* study can be found in Chapter 3.4. The study's quantitative part can be described as clearly *explanatory* since it focuses on establishing an explanatory causal relationship between clubs' political involvement and fan behavior. The qualitative part of the study again looks to further *explain* the quantitative results but does so with an exploratory mindset. The focus does not lie on a single explanatory variable for the quantitative results but rather to *explore* the causal mechanism behind the results.

#### **5.5 Research Strategies**

As evident in the name and as explained above, mixed-method designs rely on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. However, researchers are open to combine any methods at their disposal. This thesis combines the quantitative statistical method of a *fixed*



*effect (FE) multiple linear regression analysis (MLR)* and a *multiple linear regression*, both run in *Stata*, with the qualitative method of *case study*. The combination of statistical and text analysis is a standard model for mixed-method approaches (Creswell, 2014). As is often the case in mixed-method designs, one of the two methods applied is prioritized (Ivankova et al., 2006). In this research design, the focus lies on the quantitative methods. The qualitative methods are thought to complement the shortcomings of statistical analyses when it comes to explaining causal mechanisms.

#### 5.5.1 Fixed-effect Analysis & Multiple Linear Regression (MLR)

Inferential statistics allows researchers to infer hypotheses, laws, and explanations from data by analyzing the relationship between different variables. The most common method within inferential statistics is the regression analysis which allows predicting the value of the dependent variable (DV) given a certain value of an independent variable (IV). The MLR allows the same with the difference that there can be more than one IV (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 84). This gives researchers the possibility to control for more than just one influence on a variable. By having more than one explanatory variable, one can create research models that better mirror reality.

This model is ideal for measuring the effect of political statements, as the IV, on a DV, such as stadium attendance and TV-viewers. In both cases, the DV is expected to be influenced by several variables. MLR allows controlling for each of those variables as long as one can operationalize them and find adequate data sources. When analyzing stadium attendance, the inclusion of the FE-model enables the control for non-time varying effects that could otherwise not be easily operationalized.

Nonetheless, there exist certain weaknesses of MLR that researchers should consider. The aforementioned ability to control for other influences is limited since it is only possible to control for critical influences known before the analysis is done. Unknown influences cannot be controlled for and will not be detected within the analysis (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 93). This also leads to the problem of omitted variables which will be further discussed in Chapter 5.7.

Additionally, there is the potential problem of not being able to examine and explain causal mechanisms. An MLR enables researchers to observe the effect the IVs have on the DV, but

causality is still not visible. The how and why of the effect is not evident when looking at results of an MLR-analysis since the researcher loses sight of the context in which the various analyzed cases are in (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). Combining the MLR analysis with a qualitative method can help alleviate some of these shortcomings.

### 5.5.2 Single Case Study

The *case study* method is one of the most frequently employed research methods in social sciences (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 135). According to Checkel, case studies are a beneficial tool when uncovering linear causal processes in time (2006, p. 363; Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 134). Researchers can follow causal mechanisms in detail and see how A leads to B, B to C, C to D, and henceforth. Nevertheless, the detailed qualitative analysis of single cases also comes with disadvantages. Single case studies make it hard for hypotheses to be tested systematically against empirical data that goes beyond the specific at hand. There is a lack of foundation for generalizability. Nonetheless, case studies have produced fruitful results. In combination with other methods, the limitation of generalizability can be overcome, and case studies can help confirm findings of more quantitative approaches or foster an understanding of the causal mechanisms that lead to results observed in a quantitative analysis (Moses & Knutsen, 2012).

Due to the case study's character of detailed qualitative analysis, researchers using that approach tend to have more awareness of the practical limitations that come with strictly dividing research into *inductive* and *deductive* approaches (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 143). For this thesis, the case study method leaves more flexibility to confirm the quantitative part's results or to find explanations for any unexpected results. These can potentially give rise to interesting questions and hypotheses for further research. The case study design can even be modified in the process of researching when new findings demand it. In a case study, initial decisions about the study design are not definite due to its non-static character (Yin, 2014).

## 5.6 Data Collection

Every research needs to be built on a foundation of good data. The challenge regarding building a solid data foundation for a mixed-method design is that the researcher has to collect quantitative and qualitative data and make sure that the collected data as a whole brings additional value to the research.

### 5.6.1 Quantitative Data

Since this thesis neither follows an experimental quantitative design nor works with surveys, it relies on quantitative data from secondary sources. Additionally, as research about the influence of political engagement by clubs on fan preferences is rare, there is no readily available dataset to work with. Hence, the dataset used for the MLR in this thesis is collected from various publicly accessible sources. The five main sources were *Transfermarkt.de* (market values, stadium capacity & attendance), *Fbref.com* (game scores & stadium attendance), *BDFutbol.com* (league position), *football-data.co.uk* (historical betting odds), and *Youtbe.com* (views on highlight videos). The generation of dummy variables was done with data collected from various newspaper and sports information websites. Putting together an extensive data set for a full football season (380 games) is time consuming, but also has the advantage that it includes all relevant data for the specific research design chosen.

Relying on publicly available data and doing no primary data collection has the advantage of saving time in the data collection part of the research but comes with other challenges. The researcher has to work with the already created data and adapt her/his research design accordingly. In Chapter 5.7, it will be further discussed how the availability or non-availability impacted this thesis' research design.

### 5.6.2 Qualitative Data

In many qualitative study designs, researchers collect different types of data (Creswell, 2014). This thesis will rely primarily on *documents* for its qualitative case study design. *Documents* can either be public documents like official statements, newspaper articles, or academic journals. This type of data has the significant advantage of potentially saving the researcher much time since there is no transcribing as in interviews, and it can be accessed at any time convenient to the researcher. The study can be said to be primarily relying on secondary data. Some primary data in the form of the football clubs' and their representatives' statements, interviews, and social media posts, is used in the analysis. Overall, however, the case study mainly relies on academic papers and newspaper articles as a source. Even though secondary data is not the typical data collected in case study designs, this thesis takes advantage of the flexibility a case study approach provides for data collection (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

## 5.7 Limitations

As indicated in the previous chapters, this thesis's research design comes with several limitations that will be discussed in the following chapter.

### 5.7.1 Research Design

The mixed-methods approach requires an increased workload since two different methods are applied (Tashakkori et al., 2015). In cases where a single individual does research, this can lead to questions regarding the feasibility of such study designs. Single researchers might lack the capacity to carry out the study with adequate depth and might not be able to cover the problem from different angles (ibid). If the integration of different methods comes at the cost of a lack of depth in the analysis, the advantage of a mixed-methods approach is canceled out. In an attempt to combat this problem, this thesis's research design opts to carry out a single case study rather than a multiple case study in its qualitative part. Even though the multiple case study might lead to additional value through being able to compare the different qualitative results of different case studies, the additional workload would significantly diminish the depth of the analysis.

### 5.7.2 Data<sup>21</sup>

One of the main concerns regarding quantitative data is the limited access to data. This leads to problems with the operationalization of certain variables and often requires adaptive and creative thinking in the structuring of research models. Data accessibility often has a stronger influence on a research model than commonly believed. The research model of this thesis could look differently if data generally would be freely and easily accessible. A solution to the problem of missing access to data is to work with proxy variables. However, even if proxying a variable leads to better results than omitting a variable (Wickens, 1972), it still means that the analyzed effect is only an approximation of the effect originally to be studied. In this thesis, several proxy variables are used in the statistical analysis to approximate variables that cannot be easily quantified. The missing access to holistic TV-viewer data also forces the research design to adapt and rely on views on highlight videos for matches as a DV. The proxy variables used in this thesis might not be perfect substitutes for the original variables, but as long as the limitations are transparently communicated, proxy variables offer a viable alternative.

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<sup>21</sup> Some of the concerns regarding *quantitative* data can be found in Chapter 6.1 and will not be mentioned in this chapter.

As the quantitative, the qualitative data this thesis is based on has its limitations. Since primary data is difficult to access due to language barriers, the accessibility of potential interview partners, and time limitations, this thesis relies mainly on secondary data. Relying on secondary data comes with certain limitations. Firstly, researchers give away the control over the generation of the data (Arzuaga, 2014) and might have to work with data that does not perfectly fit their study design. Secondly, it is vital to keep in mind that relying on secondary sources means that other researchers created these sources with implicit biases. It is not that simple to assess the biases of some sources (Cowton, 1998). Thirdly, a researcher working with secondary data can never be sure how rigorous the initial primary researcher's collection of data has been (Arzuaga, 2014). A way to minimize the risk of relying on invalid sources is to work with peer-reviewed and trusted sources, as done in this thesis.

### 5.7.3 Operationalization

When operationalizing a quantitative research model, the potential of the omitted variable bias arises, meaning that one or more relevant variables are left out. In that case, researchers also potentially face the problems of endogeneity and spurious relationships (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). Omitted variables can significantly distort results without researchers being aware of them. Not coming from a sports economic background myself, it is hard to assess if there are any omitted variables, especially ones that might not be obvious. Relying on existing literature and quantitative research designs and discussions with peers during the writing process have alleviated some of the concerns regarding omitted variables. However, especially when researching a fairly understudied topic, as the influence of political statements on fan behavior, the risk of leaving out an essential variable increases. Specific methods, such as FE-analysis, can control for certain omitted and confounding variables, thereby making results more robust and reliable. The risk of such biases can, however, never be entirely removed.

### 5.7.4 Generalizability & Reliability

As outlined in Chapter 5.5.2, the single case studies' character impairs the findings' generalizability (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). Not only is this thesis' qualitative part designed as a single case study, but so is the overall design. The case being studied is the particular case of Spanish football fans' reaction to Catalan teams' political statements regarding Catalonia's referendum on independence during the 2017/18 season. Although results of this study might be valid, questions remain if they can explain general reactions of fans regarding political

statements of football clubs. Football fans in different countries that are faced with statements about different political topics might react differently. The peculiarity of the case studied, combined with the small sample size, only data over one season (12 months) is studied, makes reliable generalization difficult. This thesis, therefore, does not aspire to produce results that can be used to predict future fan behavior in other cases but rather aims at creating a starting point for further research in an area that has been understudied.

## **6. Quantitative Analysis**

The data analysis is split into several parts. As the literature and economic theory suggest, this analysis differentiates between in-stadium spectators and fans consuming football through other media channels. First, the study of in-person spectator data is conducted, followed by the analysis of data from official highlight videos from the Spanish Football League. Since various factors influence demand in the two cases, the independent variables in the two analysis are expected to vary. In the following, the full operationalization of all the different variables is further explained.

### **6.1 The (not-so) Ideal Case**

As seen in Chapter 5.7, the proposed research design comes with several limitations<sup>22</sup>. Before starting the analysis, it is essential to detail the case's peculiarities and show how they further complicate researching the topic. The following chapter shortly discusses these complications and the workarounds applied to them in this research design.

In general, finding a case to study the impact of football clubs' political involvement on spectator numbers based on a quantitative research design is not an easy task. First, historically there have been relatively few cases where football teams explicitly take a stance on a political topic suitable for research<sup>23</sup>. If an appropriate case is found, it is usually an isolated case, meaning that only a single team in a league made a statement. This is in itself not a hindrance to study the effect of the political involvement of football clubs on spectators' preferences, but it diminishes the generalizability of results. Possible results can rule out or confirm an existing effect for a specific team but not for an entire league.

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<sup>22</sup> Limited data availability would also fall under this chapter, but is already discussed in Chapter 5.7

<sup>23</sup> Even though, recently there have been more cases of sport clubs making political statements, it is still not common. Some of the most recent cases are not suited to be researched yet, because complete data usually only becomes available after some time.

### 6.1.1 FC Barcelona- & Real Madrid-Effect

When it comes to data analysis, a problem in the Spanish football league is the dominance of FC Barcelona and Real Madrid (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2006; Garcia & Rodriguez, 2002). These two clubs not only dominate LaLiga from a sporting perspective but also in many other areas. Several variables<sup>24</sup> included in the statistical analysis are strongly distorted because of the values that FC Barcelona and Real Madrid carry. Some of the values are so distorted that the assumption of a normal distribution does not hold. This makes it difficult to get meaningful statistical results. Ideally, all of the clubs analyzed would have normally distributed values on variables.

Solutions to this problem include using dummy variables to control for some parts of the FC Barcelona- & Real Madrid-effect, using logarithmic functions of values to have normally distributed results, and using heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors. Nonetheless, all of these measures might not be able to compensate for the distortion-inducing outlier values. Another solution would be to exclude outliers. This is not a valid option since this would mean excluding most of FC Barcelona's games, which are a primary focus of this thesis.

### 6.1.2 Sample Size

Although several clubs in the Spanish league made political statements, the sample size of games, including a team that made a political statement, is relatively small. Considering there are 380 games in a season, only between 22-52<sup>25</sup> games qualify as being affected by political statements. The small size of the treatment group makes it more difficult to get statistically significant results. Additionally, considering the outlier-problem, smaller sample sizes are more prone to be strongly influenced by those outliers. In an ideal world, the treatment group would be more extensive and less susceptible to distortion through outliers. The problem of small sample sizes is not easily solvable since inventing new data is impossible. A solution could be to wait and see if additional data become available in the future or extend the period of analysis and thereby increase the sample size.

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<sup>24</sup> The variables will be introduced in Chapter 6.2 & 6.3.

<sup>25</sup> The sample size fluctuates depending which effect of political statements is studied.

### 6.1.3 Relegation System

A particularity of the Spanish football league and, in general, the European sports league system might prevent the strategy of increasing the sample size by extending the period of analysis. Unlike the US-sports league system, European sports leagues follow a system of promotion and relegation. The worst teams each season get replaced by the best lower league teams. This results in a continuous change in the makeup of a league. No season includes the same teams. This becomes a problem in the Spanish league's case since Girona FC is a club promoted for the 2017/18 season. The solution to exclude teams that were promoted/relegated during the research period does not work since Girona FC is a vital part of the analysis.

## 6.2 Effects on Stadium Attendance

As explained in Chapter 5.5.1, stadium attendance analysis relies on an FE-model with panel data. This simplifies the research design and data collection process. Certain independent variables assumed to be constant over the analyzed period do not have to be controlled for through an independent variable (IV). In the research design at hand, this means that no IVs have to be included for economic determinants of the demand for football<sup>26</sup>. Potential macroeconomic determinants like GDP, unemployment rate, and general population size are assumed to be constant over the timespan of the 2017/18 season. Similarly, the statistical method of FE makes it possible not to include the ticket price as a separate IV (Buraimo & Simmons, 2009). Ticket prices follow a specific pricing structure that will not change throughout a season. Equally, constant factors for each team like the fan culture, loyalty to a club, and the habit of going to a stadium that comes with it can be controlled for thanks to the FE-design (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). The regression equation for the analysis is as follows, where  $t$  stands for home game in round  $t$ ,  $i$  stands for the home-team, and control variables are expressed in the beta-vector:

$$StadiumAttendance_{it} = \delta_t + \beta_0 * polstat_{it} + X'_{it}\beta + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{it}$$

*Figure 4: Regression equation FE-analysis*

### 6.2.1 Dependent Variable (DV)

Taking the absolute number of fans at a game as a DV would result in biased results. Stadium sizes in Spain vary significantly from the smallest stadium with 8'164 seats (SD Eibar's Estadio Municipal de Ipurua) to the biggest stadium with 99'354 (FC Barcelona's Camp Nou). A

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 4.1.2



solution to this problem is to work with the *degree of capacity utilization (stadium\_attendance)* as a DV. This allows to control for the capacity threshold in stadiums. The data to calculate the degree of capacity utilization comes from two different sources. Information on stadium capacity is sourced from the online football database *Transfermarkt.com* and the individual game attendance data is taken from another online sports database *fbref.com*. The individual game attendance is divided by the stadium capacity for each game.

$$\text{capacity utilization of stadium} = \text{game attendance} / \text{stadium capacity}$$

The data for the analysis excludes all games with either a value of 0<sup>27</sup> or 1. Neither of those values does represent the willingness of fans to attend a game. In the case of the value 0, spectators were not allowed to come to the stadium. In the case the stadium is sold out for a game, which results in a value of 1 for the DV, it is, in theory, possible that more people want to see the game, but the stadium capacity prevents them from doing so.

### 6.2.2 Independent Variables (IV)

In the following, all of the research design's IV are introduced. This includes the IVs for political statements as well as all control variables.

#### 6.2.2.1 Political Statement

The most critical IVs in this research design are the ones that measure the effect political statements made by football clubs have on fan attendance. Dummy variables are best suited to measure such an effect.

The dummy variables take on either a value of 1 when a team made a political statement and 0 if a team did not. A political statement is defined as taking a clear stance pro- or contra-referendum<sup>28</sup>. As shown in Chapter 3.4, only two Catalan teams (FC Barcelona, FC Girona) support the referendum. RCD Espanyol Barcelona emphasizes its neutral stance throughout all statements. Therefore, its statements are not considered political. From the first moment a team makes a political statement, the dummy variable's value stays at 1 until the official winter break

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<sup>27</sup> The game between FC Barcelona vs. Las Palmas on 1 October 2017 had a game capacity of utilization of 0% due to FC Barcelona deciding to play the game under protest and without any fans as a direct reaction to oppressive actions by Spanish state police during the referendum in Catalonia.

<sup>28</sup> The question is not whether a team supported Catalan independence or not. Holding the referendum was in itself a political issue, since it was deemed illegal by the Spanish state.

of the Spanish league. The reason behind this is that due to the pause in sporting activity, there is less media coverage of teams. This is an excellent opportunity for clubs to change the media narrative around their season. Additionally, the political conflict between the Spanish state and Catalonia was most prominent in the media until December 2017 and not as salient in the first half of 2018.

A first variable (*polstat\_present*) measures if there is any effect on fan attendance if a team that has made a political statement is involved in the game, either as the home team or the visiting team. A second variable (*political\_statement\_h*) measures if there is any effect on fan attendance if the home-team in a match-pairing qualifies as having made a political statement. A third variable (*political\_statement\_a*) measures if the visiting team making a political statement affects fan attendance. All three variables are expected to have a negative coefficient proving existing adversity by fans against politics in sports.

The fourth variable (*proindependence\_homeeffect*) is designed to measure an effect when teams making a political statement and home teams coming from a region with strong separatist tendencies play each other. The Basque country, just like Catalonia, has historically always had a strong independence movement (Bollen & Medrano, 1998). Therefore, the Basque teams were assigned the value 1 as teams from a *pro-independence* region while all other teams were assigned the value 0. The product of the variable home-team-pro-independence and political-statement-by-away-team then creates the value for the dummy variable used in the analysis.

$$\text{proindependence\_homeeffect} = \text{political statement by away-team} \times \text{pro-independence region of home-team}$$

If both the home-team is from a *pro-independence* region and the away team made a political statement, the value of the dummy variable is 1. In any other case, the value equals 0. The coefficient of the variable is expected to be positive. Since the Catalan clubs that made political statements all spoke out in favor of political self-determination for Catalan people, it is expected that this message was perceived positively by fans in the Basque country. It is assumed that the message is in-line with home-team fans' political beliefs, and they would attend games in higher numbers out of solidarity.

#### 6.2.2.2 Timing of Games

In several studies, a football match's timing has shown a significant effect on stadium attendance<sup>29</sup>. In this thesis, a dummy variable (*not\_weekendholiday*) indicates if a game took place on a weekend or not. If a game was played on any day but Saturday or Sunday, the variable will take on a value of 1. If the game was played on either a weekend or a public holiday, the value of the variable is 0. The overall coefficient of this variable is expected to be negative. On weekdays, fans generally have less free time, and therefore, it might be difficult for them to invest several hours in attending a football match.

#### 6.2.2.3 Rivalry Games

As described in the review of economic literature, games between rivals tend to attract more fans. To control for the effect of *rivalry games*, this thesis again relies on a dummy variable (*rivalry\_game*) with a value of 1 if a game qualifies as a rivalry game and a value of 0 if it does not. The definition of a rivalry game can be manifold. This thesis defines a rivalry game as a game where both teams come from the same region or city. An exception is *El Clasico*, probably the world's most famous rivalry between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, which involves a cross-region rivalry. Other, historical cross-region rivalries like *El Viejo Clasico*, between Athletic Bilbao and Real Madrid, and games between Atletico Madrid and FC Sevilla, are not regarded as rivalry games since the rivalry character of these games have faded in the recent past (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Marsden, 2013; AS, 2020). The coefficient of this variable is expected to be positive.

#### 6.2.2.4 Quality

Practically all studies about the demand for football games acknowledge the role the *quality* of football games influences the demand. The research design tries to control for the factor of quality with several proxy variables. The first proxy variable is the *club's squad's total market value* at the beginning of the 17/18 season. Assuming that the international transfer market is efficient, it follows that the higher a player's talent is, the higher his value is. The sum of a team's players' values makes up the overall market value of a team. Hence, the higher the market value is, the more talent a team supposedly has. This does not mean that the team with the highest market value necessarily is the most successful, but it has, defined by market price, the best talent in its squad. The variable used to control for quality is the *away-team's market*

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<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 4.1.3

*value*, respectively, its value's natural logarithm (*lnmv\_a*). Since the market-value does not fluctuate over the season, the home team's market value is left out of the analysis. It would be treated as a FE and therefore filtered out in the analysis. The source of market value data is the football database *Transfermarkt.com* which provides team market values of current and past seasons. It is expected that the coefficient of this variable is positive.

It is essential to include a measurement of the current quality of teams. Like Garcia & Rodriguez (2002), this thesis uses the league position of the home team (*position\_h*) and the away team (*position\_a*) to indicate a team's current form. Since there are no rankings before the first round of the season, the previous season's final standings are used to indicate the position for the first-round games. According to their finish in the second Spanish division, the three promoted teams are assigned positions 18-20 according to their finish in the second Spanish division. The data is sourced from the website *BDFutbol.com*. Both variables are expected to have a negative coefficient since teams performing poorly subsequently will rank lower and, therefore, show higher values on the variable. Poorly playing teams are expected to attract less game attendance.

Another quality factor that has to be considered is the aforementioned FC Barcelona- and Real Madrid-effect. It is well-known that the two most popular teams in Spanish football attract more fans at their games. Again taking the research model of Garcia & Rodriguez (2002), the effect of FC Barcelona and Real Madrid being the visiting team is controlled for by a dummy variable (*fcborrrma\_away*) with the value 1, if the visiting team is one of the two teams, and 0 if not. The variable is hence expected to have a positive coefficient.

#### 6.2.2.5 Television

Even though the studies on TV-broadcasting's influence on football game attendance have found mixed results<sup>30</sup>, this research design controls for a potential effect. In the Spanish competition, up to one game per round is broadcasted on Free-TV. It is assumed that the availability of these freely accessible games could potentially distort fans' decision to attend games in stadiums. Hence, this research design includes a dummy variable (*publicly\_broadcasted*) with the value 1 if the game is broadcasted freely. The variable is expected to have a negative coefficient.

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<sup>30</sup> See Chapter 4.1.2

#### 6.2.2.6 Uncertainty of Outcome (UOH)

The UOH is one of the most debated and best-researched topics regarding factors driving football games' demand. Despite the extensive literature concerned with the UOH, there is no unambiguous result regarding the impact of uncertainty on fan consumption behavior<sup>31</sup>. It still makes sense to include a variable to control for a potential effect. This thesis relies on *betting odds* (Buraimo & Simmons, 2009; Pérez et al., 2017; Borland & Macdonald, 2003) to measure the uncertainty of outcome for a game. Assuming that betting markets are efficient, betting odds are supposed to incorporate all available and relevant information on the two teams and give a reasonable estimation of a game's outcome. The data on historical betting odds comes from the online database *football-data.co.uk*. Two variables are implemented in the research design. The first variable's value consists of the difference in the home team's and away team's odds to win the game (*bettingodds\_combined*), whereas the second variable's value (*bettingodds\_combined2*) is the absolute value of this difference:

$$\text{Combined betting odds} = \text{betting odd home team} - \text{betting odd away team}$$

and

$$\text{Combined betting odds}_2 = | \text{betting odd home team} - \text{betting odd away team} |$$

Assuming that fans in attendance want to see their home team win and do not care about the uncertainty of outcome, the first variable is expected to have a positive coefficient. The second variable is expected to have a negative coefficient if the UOH holds and fans favor an equal game. The smaller the difference between the betting odds, the more even the game supposedly is.

#### 6.2.3 Descriptive Statistics

Before looking at the FE-regression analysis results, it is worth taking a look at the development of the average stadium capacity used in home games. *Table 1* shows the development of these numbers for several teams from the season 14/15 up until 18/19. As can quickly be seen, most teams' average capacity is relatively constant, except for Girona FC's and UD Levante's. Their occupancy rate of stadium seats is marked by a leap in the 17/18 season. This can be explained by their promotion to LaLiga from the Spanish second division. A slight dip in the average

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 4.1.4

stadium capacity filled is visible for the 17/18 season. Espanyol Barcelona, FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, and Athletic Bilbao show lower stadium attendance. The steepest noticeable drop in attendance is observable in FC Barcelona's average, going from almost 80% of the stadium filled to below 70% percent. Real Sociedad and Atlético Madrid are the two teams that show a slightly positive trend for the 17/18 season.

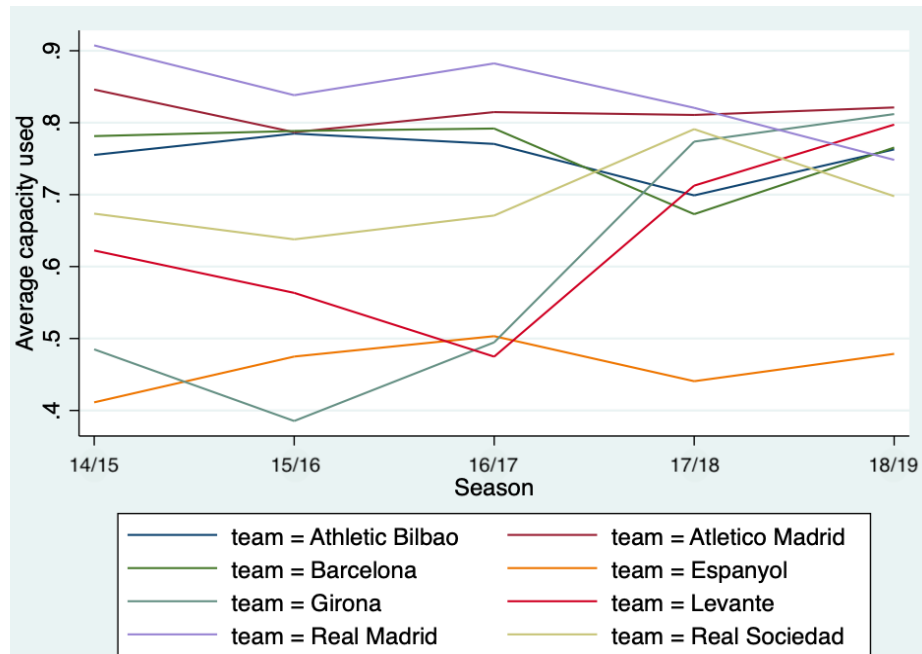


Table 1: Game attendance in percentage over several seasons

The trend of lower attendance at home games of FC Barcelona in the 17/18 season is interesting. The effect of making political statements could potentially have contributed to that development, especially since the club's decrease in fan attendance seems to be bigger than the one other teams experience. However, this is more or less speculation since the observation of trends does not take into various explanatory factors. Hence, the importance of analyzing this development further is highlighted. It is difficult to recognize any potential effect from the visualization of the game-attendance trend for Girona's home games because of the distortion the promotion presents to the trend.

When looking at the development of game attendance within the 2017/18 season (see Table 2<sup>32</sup>), the first thing that catches one's attention is the steep drop in FC Barcelona's attendance data around the fifth home game. Is due to FC Barcelona's game against Las Palmas on 1 November 2017 played without fans. Even shortly before that game, there seems to be a

<sup>32</sup> The red square marks the time span when political statements are expected to have an influence.

slight trend to less attendance for FC Barcelona's home games. After the winter break, there is a clear trend of higher game attendance with a slight dip right before the season ends.

The game attendance for home games of FC Girona seems to be following a different trend. After starting on a higher level with two peaks during the period of political statements made, the per-game-attendance drops until it slightly trends upwards again towards the end of the season. Overall, FC Girona's home attendance is slightly less prone to fluctuations than FC Barcelona's. This could potentially be due to the smaller capacity of FC Girona's stadium.

The home-game attendance data for both teams that made political statements show different trends over the entire season and during the period where political statements likely to have made an impact. Compared to teams that made no political statements, game attendance fluctuations for FC Barcelona and FC Girona's home games are not significantly different. Except for data on Alavès, which shows a remarkably high and constant game attendance over the full season, data on every team indicates minor ups and downs of game attendance during a season. Few teams like Malaga, Las Palmas & Getafe show slightly higher fluctuations similar to the one FC Barcelona has. None of the fluctuations, though, follow a clear trend. Fluctuations on a per-game basis seem to be the standard.

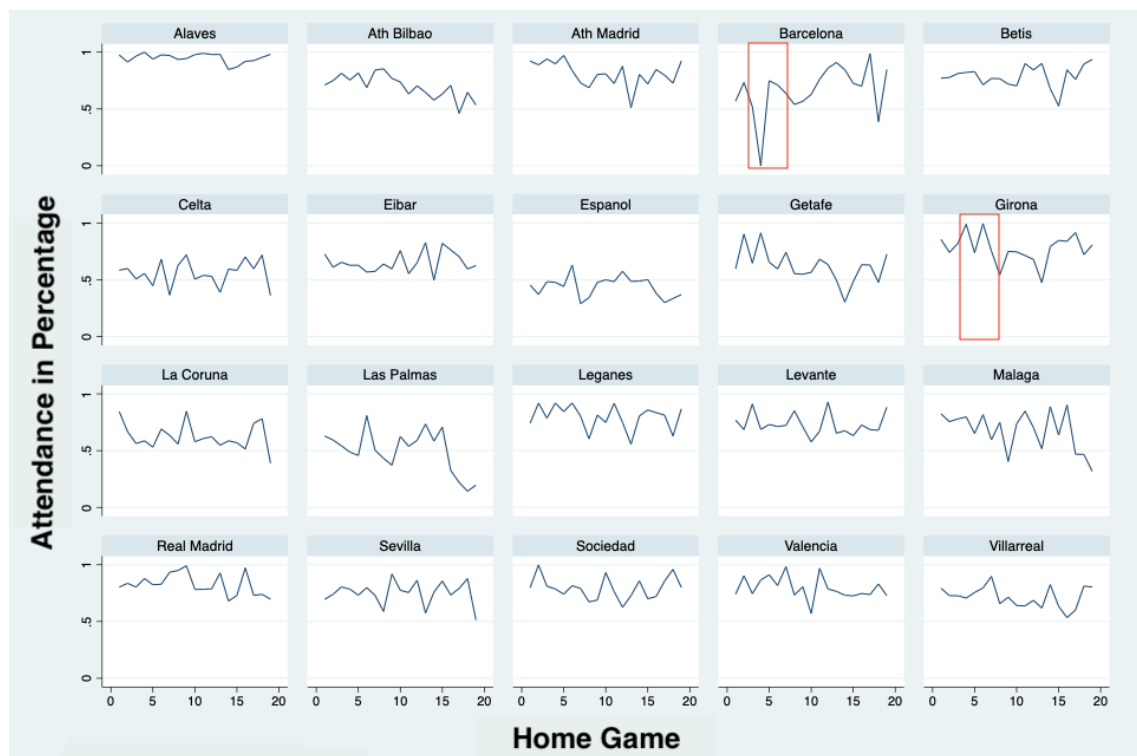


Table 2: Game attendance in percentage per team in 2017/18 season

### 6.2.4 Fixed-Effects Analysis

From the visualization of the raw data on game attendance, we have learned that indications of an effect of political statements on game attendance are not easy to detect. As described previously, the developed FE-research design can control for various factors and isolate even a possible minor effect of political statements on game attendance. All results can be found in *Table 3*.

FE-Analysis game attendance			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
PolStat_Present	-.0013 (.0150)		
Political_statement_H		-.0345** (.0138)	
Political_Statement_A		.0205 (.0131)	
ProIndependence_HomeEffect			.0066 (.0398)
Rivalry_game	.0758*** (.0207 )	.0754*** (.0207)	.0759*** (.0207)
Not_Weekend/Holiday	-.0459*** (.0151)	-.0462*** (.0152 )	-.0459*** (.0151)
Publicly Televised	-.0004 (.0275 )	-.0007 (.0276)	-.0004 (.0274)
ln(mv_a)	.0514*** (.0097)	.0530*** (.0094)	.0516*** (.0096)
Position_H	-.0024 (.0018)	-.0022 (.0019)	-.0024 (.0019)
Position_A	-.0014* (.0007)	-.0013* (.0007)	-.0013* (.0007)
bettingodds_combined	-.0036 (.0024)	-.0036 (.0023)	-.0036 (.0024)
bettingodds_combined2	-.0004 (.0017)	-.0001 (.0017)	-.0004 (.0017)
FCBorRMA_Away	.0897*** (.0186)	.0837*** (.0186)	.0891*** (.0183)
Constant	.4857*** (.0582)	.4750*** (.0570)	.4847*** (.0572)
Adj. $R^2$	.391	.392	.391
Observations	378	378	378
F-test	68.7947	47.7485	40.2716

Notes: Standard Error in parentheses;

\*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1

*Table 3: Analysis of game attendance*

#### 6.2.4.1 Political Statement Present

First, the analysis is run with the IV measuring the overall effect of political statements. Since games that have either the DV-value 0 or 1 are excluded from the analysis, the number of total observations lies at 378. Therefore, the panel data is unbalanced but the analysis can still be run in *Stata*. To counter the problem of heteroscedasticity, the regression will be run by including robust standard errors.



The results show a minimal negative effect on attendance for games where a team that made a political statement is involved. The statistical results say that the stadium capacity usage for such games would be around 0.13% lower than in other games. The negative effect would be in line with the expectation previously formulated, but since the result is not statistically significant at an acceptable level, this result's predictive value is meager.

#### 6.2.4.2 Control Variables

Factors that the various other IVs control for seem to have much more explanatory power for game attendance than the participation of a team that made a political statement.

The *timing of a game* seems to play a factor. According to the results obtained, a game played on weekdays results on average in a decrease of 4.5% of capacity used per game. The variable shows a negative effect as expected and is statistically significant at a 1%-level. Other control variables show statistically insignificant results. The fact that a game is *publicly televised* seems not to be a reason for fans to forego the chance of watching a game live in the stadium. Similarly, the variables controlling the *uncertainty of outcome* do not seem to be a determining factor for fans to watch a game. This data is in line with the findings of Garcia & Rodriguez (2002) that neither could find support for the UOH in their study of the Spanish league.

The *quality* of a football game seems to be essential in Spanish football fans' decision to attend a game. There is a significant positive effect of the visiting team's market value on the game attendance. The coefficient indicates that a one percent increase in the market value increases the stadium capacity usage by approximately 0.05%. This might seem like a very insignificant number at first glance. Since market values of teams differ so heavily in the Spanish football league<sup>33</sup>, this coefficient indicates an increase of stadium attendance of around 15% from a match where the visiting team has a market value of EUR 50 million to a match where the market value of the away team is EUR 150 million.

The variable measuring the Barcelona & Real Madrid effect also has a significant positive impact and is therefore in line with the results obtained by Garcia & Rodriguez (2002 & 2006).

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<sup>33</sup> The lowest market value is EUR 35.6 millions (FC Girona) whereas the highest value is EUR 772.5 (FC Barcelona).

Suppose either FC Barcelona or Real Madrid is the visiting team, the stadium utilization percentage increases by over 8%. This does not surprise and shows how valuable these two teams are for the entire Spanish league. Home teams can expect a significant increase in attendance when either of those team visits.

The two variables proxying current quality, form, and performance of teams through the league position of the home-/away-team also shows a negative coefficient as expected. Nevertheless, the results are not statistically significant or, in the case of the away-team position, only significant at a 10%-level. A visiting team that is ranked one position lower results in 0.1% decrease in stadium capacity utilization. The fact that the visiting team's position seems to have a significant effect compared to the position of the home team could be that fans are loyal to the home-team no matter their current performance. Fans react more to the current form of visiting teams, even though not very strongly.

The effect a *rivalry game* has on fan attendance is similar to the effect FC Barcelona and Real Madrid have as a visiting team. Home teams that play local derbies or other rivalry games can count on an increase in stadium capacity usage of around 7.5% percent. This result is in line with the expectations.

#### *6.2.4.3 Political Statement by Home-Team and Visiting-Team*

The second analysis is run with the only difference in the dummy variable for the political statement. There are two dummy variables included, either for the home- or away-team making a political statement.

Before looking at the two IV measuring the impact of political statements by either the home- or away-team, it is worth looking at the control variables' results. Compared to the results in the first analysis run, the results do not differ significantly. There are some incremental changes in either the coefficient or the t-value, but none of them significantly change. The algebraic sign indicating either a negative or positive effect also stays the same for all variables.

The first variable measuring the effect of a political statement by the home team indicates a negative effect of political statements on fan attendance during games. Home games of teams making political statements are expected to experience a decrease in stadium capacity utilization by over 3.4% at a significance level of 5%. This might seem like a low number, but

for a stadium with a capacity of close to 100'000 like the Camp Nou<sup>34</sup>, this could mean that 3'400 additional seats are empty. Accumulated over several home games, the number of sold tickets a team is missing out on could result in a loss of revenue significant enough for any team.

This result is in line with the expectations previously formulated. However, it is unclear what kind of fans drive this effect. Even though there seems to be a negative effect, fans not showing up to watch the game could either be fans of the home-team, fans of the away-team, neutral fans, or a mix of them all. Without more sophisticated data on who is attending certain games in stadiums, this is impossible to know.

The second variable estimating the impact of an away-team's political statement, shows a result that would contradict the expectations of this research. The variable's coefficient indicates that a game where the away-team previously made a political statement sees an increase of around 2% in stadium capacity usage. However, the predictive value of this variable is low since the coefficient is not statistically significant. Unlike the first variable, the second variable cannot give a definite answer on how a visiting team's political statement influences fans' decisions to attend a game. This could potentially be due to the problem with the small sample sizes previously mentioned in Chapters 5.7.4 & 6.1.2.

#### *6.2.4.4 Pro-Independence Effect*

The third analysis tests if there is an effect on football fans attending matches if the teams that made political statements in favor of the independence referendum play teams from the Basque region. Again, the same control variables are used as in the previous analyses, and as before, the coefficients and the t-values only change incrementally.

The *pro-independence effect* variable shows a very slight positive correlation through its coefficient. The positive effect of the combination of the two variables theoretically confirms the expectations that were previously outlined, but again the relationship between stadium capacity usage and the *pro-independence effect*-variable cannot be proven on a statistically significant level. As before, a potential explanation could be found in the sample size. It is even

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<sup>34</sup> The Camp Nou, FC Barcelona's stadium, has a capacity of up to 99'354.

smaller than the sample sizes used in estimating the effect of political statements by the away-/home-teams.

### 6.3 Effects on Highlight-Videos

The analysis of highlight videos is carried out in form of a multiple linear regression. Before running the regression analysis, the different variables included in the design of the analysis are introduced.

#### 6.3.1 Dependent Variable (DV)

As explained in Chapter 5.7.2, detailed TV-viewership data is not readily available. Therefore, the research design uses the *number of views of Youtube-Highlights* as a proxy variable (*logviews\_hl*) for TV-viewership of games. To create a normal distribution of values on the DV, the common logarithm of the number of views is used. The highlight videos analyzed are official uncommented highlight videos uploaded to Youtube by LaLiga. The videos are uploaded for each game of the season and show a short 2-minute summary of a game's best scenes. Data on highlight video views cannot perfectly replace TV-viewership data, but still, it can be viewed as a good proxy in some regards. Youtube-videos do not know any geographical restrictions, and fans from anywhere can view them conveniently. Therefore, the bias of a higher percentage of home-fans watching games is not given as in attendance data. Since the access to football games through highlight videos means much less effort than going to a stadium, it can also be expected that, similar as with broadcast of football games, more *neutral* spectators that do not directly identify as a fan for either team playing would watch the highlight videos.

For a view to count as one, Youtube does not require the viewer to watch the complete video. Only a set percentage of the entire video has to be viewed to count as an official view (Aggrawal et al., 2018, p. 151). Nonetheless, people clicking on a video and watching parts of it reflects their interest in it. It is fair to assume that a person who does not want to watch a match with the involvement of a team that made political statements would not even click on that highlight video. Youtube's counting method for views on videos also makes sure that there is a minimum amount of repeated views for each video. Youtube considers views from the same IP-address in an interval of 6-8 hours. This makes it impossible to have views from one person count as more than 4-5 views per day, even if they would click on the video 1000 times

(ibid). To not have biased data, the data on highlight videos was collected on the same date (10 December 2020) for all of the 380 videos.

### 6.3.2 Independent Variables (IV)

Several of the IVs in the analysis of the views of highlight videos are the same or a slightly adapted version of the ones used to analyze game attendance. These are complemented by new IVs fit to control for specific effects expected to determine the number of viewers of highlight videos. IVs controlling for timing, public broadcasting of games, and uncertainty of outcome are omitted since they are not expected to significantly affect views on highlight videos.

#### 6.3.2.1 Political Statement

To measure the effect of a political statement, the before explained variable *polstat\_present* is used. It is not being differentiated between an effect of the home- or away-team. The coefficient is expected to have a negative value.

The second variable measuring the impact of a political statement on views of highlight videos is a slightly adapted version of the variable *proindependence\_homeeffect*. Instead of just measuring an effect in case the home-team is a team from a region that supports the Spanish state, it measures an effect if either the home- or away-team is from the Basque region and either home- or away-team have made a political statement. As in the previous analysis, the coefficient of the variable is expected to be positive. Dummy variables' values follow the same logic as in the previous analysis.

*proindependence\_effect = political statement by either home-/away-team x home-/away-team coming from the Basque region*

#### 6.3.2.2 Quality, Uncertainty of Outcome & Rivalry Games

Several control variables are incorporated in the research design to increase the validity of the results in the linear regression analysis.

Similarly to the analysis of game attendance, a control variable for the *current quality* of teams involved in a match is implemented in the research design. Instead of using the home- and away-team's current league position as two separate control variables, the current ranking of two teams combined functions as a single variable controlling for current quality in a matchup

(*position\_combined*). Like the variables used in the analysis of stadium attendance, the variable's coefficient is expected to be negative since two teams with lower team rankings (and therefore higher values on the IV) are expected to attract fewer viewers<sup>35</sup>.

Additionally, a new variable measuring goals scored (*goals\_total*) in a game is added to indicate a game's quality. Since video highlights are uploaded after games have been played, many viewers watch the highlights when they are already aware of the game's final score. A high-scoring game is expected to attract more viewers since it promises a higher entertainment value. The data for goals scored is collected from *fbref.com*. The variable's coefficient is expected to be positive since more viewers are expected to be attracted with each additional goal scored. Lastly, like for stadium attendance, *rivalry games* are expected to positively influence the views of highlight videos for the same reason as explained before.

#### 6.3.2.3 Online Presence

Because the official highlight videos of LaLiga are posted on the internet, each team's online presence is expected to influence how many views its highlight videos receive. Teams often share links to the video directly on their social media accounts. The more followers a club has, the more people are more likely to view highlight videos. The IV measuring the online presence (*log10fans\_sm*) therefore has the natural logarithm of the total number of social media followers as an indicator. The data for the number of social media followers is collected from the 2017 *Nielsen Sports Report* (2019) about Social Media in Spanish football. The number of followers shows the combined number of followers from the three major social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) in December 2016, before the season 2017/18 started. The numbers for the three newly promoted teams in the 2017/18 season (Getafe C.F, Girona FC, UD Levante) were sourced from the website *Meetricol.com*'s analysis of Spanish football clubs' social media followers after the 2017/18 season. The coefficient of the variable is expected to be positive.

#### 6.3.3 Descriptive Statistics

As in the FE-analysis of the stadium attendance, first, the highlight video views data is analyzed on a *per team* basis (see *Table 4*). The first thing that catches the eye is that the views on videos,

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<sup>35</sup> Since the variable of the combined market value shows almost perfect collinearity with the variable controlling for online presence of clubs, it is not included in the final analysis.

including FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, have a visibly higher average. Most of the other teams have a relatively steady base of views. They instead show several peaks throughout the season. It is noticeable that most teams show around four peaks. When looking at the peaks in more detail, it can be seen that most of these peaks fall together with teams' games against either FC Barcelona or Real Madrid. This hints at a potent Real Madrid- and Barcelona-effect as could be found in the game-attendance data.

Another observation is that there seems to be a slight increase in views for videos towards the end of the season. This is especially evident in the cases of FC Barcelona & Real Madrid. However, other teams also seem to show a slight increase in views on their videos after the winter break. This could be since the importance of games in the second half of the season increases. The longer a season goes, the more important games are in determining a team's final position or in determining the league's winner. Since this could distort the result of the analysis<sup>36</sup>, this observation led to inserting an additional control variable in the form of a dummy variable for all games played before the winter break (*pre\_wb*). The variable has a value of 1 for games pre-winter break and a value of 0 for the rest of the games. Hence its coefficient is expected to be negative.

When looking at the development of views per game by FC Barcelona and FC Girona, there is, at first sight, no clear indication that their highlight videos were less popular when they made political statements<sup>37</sup>. FC Barcelona's data shows a steady level of views, whereas FC Girona's data shows some small downward swings in the graph after a peak at the beginning of the season. The peak can be explained by Girona playing FC Barcelona in the 6th round of the season. However, the slight downward trend observable in Girona's data does not seem clear enough to indicate a noticeable negative effect. Looking at Espanyol Barcelona's views, there seems not a clear difference in a trend, even though that would be expected based on Espanyol Barcelona's efforts not to make any political statements.

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<sup>36</sup> According to definition outlined in Chapter 6.2.2.1, all games that qualify for the political statement-treatment group of games are in the first half of the season

<sup>37</sup> The red square in *Table 4* indicates the time span where political statements are expected to have an influence

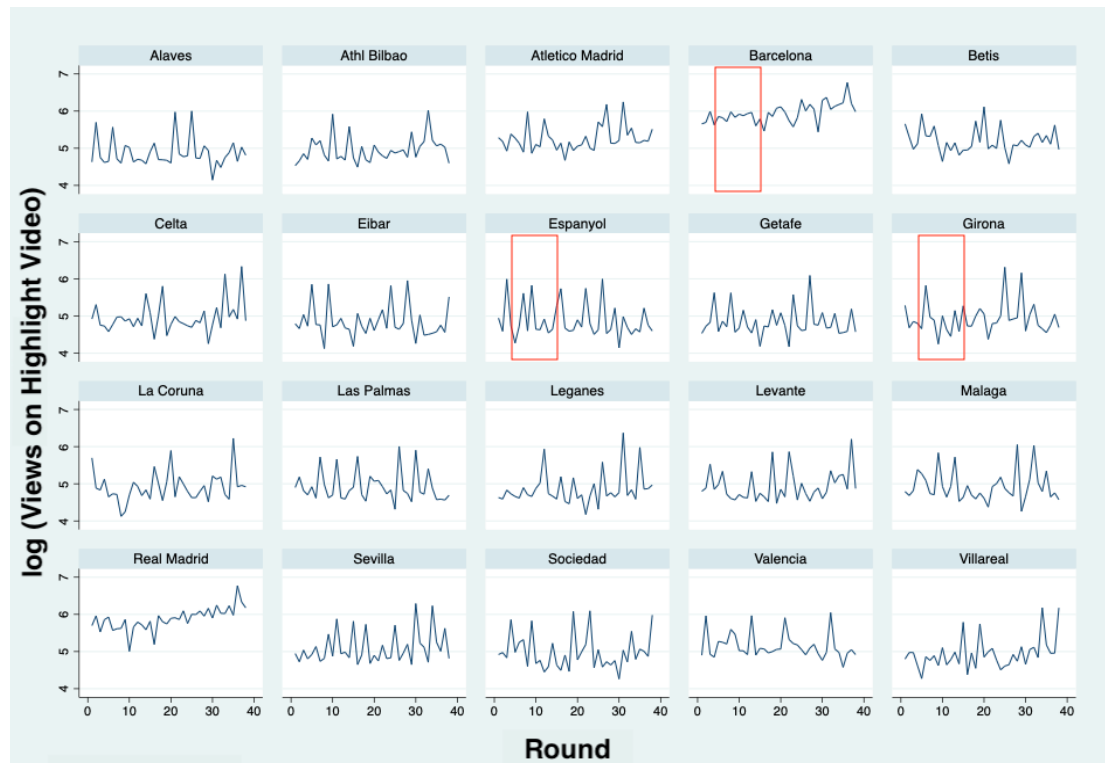


Table 4: Views of highlight videos in 2017/18 season

### 6.3.4 Regression Analysis

Once more, the conducted descriptive analysis of raw data on views of highlight videos shows that effects of political statements on fans' consumption decisions are not easily detectable. The linear regression analysis conducted in the following is well suited to detect finer nuances of a possible effect political statements have on the number of views on highlight views by controlling for various factors. As in Chapter 6.2.4, the analysis is split into several parts. The first part looks at whether the involvement of a team that made a political statement in a game affects the number of views. In the second part, it will be analyzed if the matchup of a team that made a political statement with a team from the Basque region has an effect on the number of views of said game. The results can be found in *Table 5*.



### Analysis of Highlight-Views

	Model 1	Model 2
PolStat_Present	-.0248 (.0380)	
Pro_IndepEffect		.0833 (.0701)
Log10(Fans_SM)	.3166*** (.0283)	.3216*** (.0283)
position_combined	-.0060*** (.0016)	-.0058*** (.0017)
Goals_Total	.0692*** (.0057)	.0690*** (.0057)
FCBorRM	.3404*** (.0512)	.3295*** (.0498)
Rivalry_game	.0125 (.0354)	.0139 (.0354)
Pre_WB	-.0672*** (.0186)	-.0726*** (.0182)
Constant	4.7305*** (.0500)	4.7253*** (.0501)
Adj. $R^2$	.864	.864
Observations	378	378
F-test	274.5406	277.0455

Notes: Standard Error in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

*Table 5: Analysis views on highlight videos*

#### *6.3.4.1 Political Statement Present*

A first look at the results shows a negative coefficient for the variable dummyming the presence of a team having made a political statement. This is in line with the expectation that making a political statement would lead to fans having less interest in highlight videos. The coefficient indicates a decrease of a little over 5.5% in views for games involving teams that made political statements. However, the result lacks any statistical significance, and therefore it is impossible to draw any reliable conclusions from the obtained results.

Several factors could explain these findings. Firstly, there is the possibility that fans do not react strongly enough to teams making political statements so that they would change their consumption behavior. Therefore, a linear connection cannot be found in the data at hand. Similarly, it could be argued that the change in behavior is so small that the effect cannot be captured with the research design applied in this analysis. As mentioned earlier, it is also

possible that the value obtained is not statistically significant due to a small sample size with high variance in values. These can lead to distorted results lacking statistical significance.

#### 6.3.4.2 Control Variables

In contrast to the dummy variable measuring political statements' impact, several other IVs show statistically significant effects on the DV.

A matchup's *quality* seems to be an essential factor for fans' decision to watch a highlight video. Several control variables measuring the quality of a game show strong effects on the number of views. As expected, the number of goals scored (*goals\_total*) shows a positive effect and is highly statistically significant at a 1%-level. Every additional goal scored by either team increases views by more than 17%, meaning that high-scoring games can expect a significant increase in views than low-scoring matches.

An even more significant effect on the DV is found in the coefficient of the dummy variable controlling for an FC Barcelona- or Real Madrid-effect (*fcborrm*). As expected, the variable has a positive coefficient that indicates an increase in views of over 118% when either FC Barcelona or Real Madrid is part of a matchup. The result is statistically significant at a 1%-level. Like in the analysis on stadium attendance, this shows that these two teams are major fan magnets and validates their importance to the Spanish league overall.

A statistically significant effect can also be found in the current quality of teams involved in a matchup (*position\_combined*). The combined current league position of two teams before a game shows, akin to the same variable in the analysis of stadium attendance, the expected negative coefficient. With increasingly lower rankings, the videos have fewer views. Namely, with each combined lower ranking follows a decrease of around 1.4% in views. This result is statistically significant at a 1%-level. The negative effect of 1.4% might at first seem very small, but it has to be considered that in a game of the 19th and 20th ranked team, the findings can explain an over 53% decrease in views on the highlight video.

The only variable not measuring an aspect of quality that does not show a significant result is the dummy variable for rivalry games (*rivalry\_game*). Unlike in the game attendance analysis, games that qualify as rivalry games do not seem to attract more views than other games. The variable does have a positive coefficient, but it does not have any predictive value since it is

not statistically significant. This result is interesting since it indicates that fans watching games in stadiums and fans watching video highlights have different consumption behaviors. This result could even hint at that fans who watch these highlight videos are more *objective* football fans that enjoy a good game than hardcore fans that might be more incentivized to watch games against local rivals, no matter the quality of the game.

As expected, the variable measuring the combined number of *social media fans* of both teams in a matchup (*log10fans\_sm*) shows an overwhelmingly positive influence on the number of views of highlight videos. With every increase of 1% in the combined number of social media fans, the views on a highlight video increases by about 0.32%. This means that games with teams with a high number of social media followers have a significantly higher number of views.

The dummy variable controlling for an increase in views of games that happened after the winter break in the second half of the season confirms the observation made in Chapter 6.3.3. There seems to be, on average, over 14% fewer views on highlight videos from games in the first half of the season. The result is statistically significant at a 1%-level. Such a result could also indicate the difference in consumer preferences for fans attending games and fans that consume videos and broadcasted games. Whereas no apparent *pre-winter break effect* can be found in data on stadium attendance, more fans watched highlight videos toward the end of the season where the games had more *meaning* for the final league placement of teams.

#### 6.3.4.3 Pro-Independence Effect

The control IVs are the same as in the previous analysis. The coefficients of these variables only vary incrementally, and the estimated effects stay the same as explained above. It is therefore not necessary to go into more detail about these results.

The statistical results show a positive coefficient for the *pro-independence* variable, thereby implying that games between teams from the Basque region and teams that made political statements in favor of the Catalan referendum have more views. Again, the result is lacking statistical significance, and therefore the suggested substantial increase of 21% in views on highlight videos of qualifying games has very little actual predictive value. Again, this could, on the one hand, be a sign that there is no clear trend detectable trend that would support the hypothesis that specific political topics can motivate more fans to watch videos of certain

teams. Since the result indicates a relatively strong positive effect, it could also be that the reason for a lacking statistical significance lies in shortcomings of the data set. As in the analysis of stadium attendance, the treatment group's sample size for the measurement of a possible *pro-independence effect* is very small. Hence, it is harder to achieve statistically significant results.

## 6.4 Discussion

Having completed several individual analyses, it is crucial to summarize and combine the obtained results. In an attempt to create a refined research design and control for possibly distorting effects, the FE-analysis of stadium attendance data came up with several results for variables measuring a possible impact of political statements on stadium attendance. Results for different variables measuring either an overall impact of political statements, an away-team effect, or a possible positive *pro-independence effect* all show no statistically significant effect on stadium attendance. Only the variable measuring the effect of a political statement by the home-team shows a statistically significant, slightly negative, impact on stadium attendance. Looking at the hypotheses formulated in Chapter 4.2, this means that H2, H3, and H4 must be rejected based on these results. The analysis can only provide evidence for the assumptions made in H1.

The regression analysis of data on views of highlight videos also does not indicate statistically significant results. Even though both variables testing for either the effect of making a political statement or a potential “*pro-independence*” effect show the expected direction of an effect, the results in both cases lack statistical explanatory power. Based on these results, the H5 and H6 must also be rejected.

However, the absence of any statistically significant findings does not mean that the research should be disregarded. Firstly, the lack of statistical significance could be explained by the challenges related to obtaining adequate data. With increased sample sizes, some of the analysis' results could potentially be strengthened and increase their statistical significance. The only solution to this problem is to further research different cases of football clubs making political statements or develop new quantitative research models that allow the incorporation of additional data. This data-dependency of results indicates a primary weakness of quantitative analyses. An analysis is only as good as the data it is based on. If access to data is not given, the analysis is strongly limited. Proxy variables and other statistical methods can only help to

a limited extent to work around data limitations. For example, if all data needed (i.e., TV-viewership data) were fully available more representative results on the strength of potential effects could potentially have been found.

Secondly, finding no results is in itself an interesting result. With all the considerations given to how data access and small sample sizes can limit an analysis, it must not be forgotten that finding no results could mean that the initially expected effect of fans discriminating against teams making political statements does not exist. Football fans might not be affected in their consumption decisions when football teams get involved in political topics. This argument gains further validity when considering that despite different approaches to the analysis of a possible effect, almost all resulted in the outcome of showing no effect.

Additionally, it must be stated that a quantitative research approach neglects many qualitative aspects that potentially play a crucial role in determining the effect of political statements. In a purely quantitative analysis, factors like the formulation of political statements, the nature, and form of communication, the salience of the topic of Catalan independence with football fans are disregarded, despite their potential explanatory value. These factors could be decisive in determining the strength of political statements' effects on fan behavior. Especially, since fans are expected to react differently to political statements depending on if the statements are compatible with their personal beliefs (Mudrik et al., 2019; Sanderson et al., 2016). Therefore, it is crucial not to consider these quantitative results as the definite answer to a complex problem but rather as an initial starting point to explore the matter further with additional methods and research questions.

The discussion of the quantitative results can hence be best concluded by stating that catching the effect of political statements on fan behavior through purely quantitative methods is a complex project. This is also reflected by the fact that there has not been much research done in this field. Most of the academic literature on the topic uses a more qualitative approach, and not many empirical cases have been analyzed. A strong argument can be made that a purely quantitative approach might fall short in analyzing such cases. Only in combination with more qualitative approaches, the validity of findings can be increased.

## **7. Qualitative Case Study**

The discussion of the quantitative analysis' results once more is a reminder of how difficult it can be to work with a research design that relies on only one set of methods. Especially in cases where results do not necessarily match the expectations previously formulated, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows to create a deeper understanding of the obtained results. As outlined in Chapter 5.3, the expansion of quantitative analysis with a qualitative case study approach is an excellent way to understand the causal mechanisms at work.

Therefore, to better understand the lack of a significant effect of football teams making political statements on fans' preferences to consume games, FC Barcelona's case will be studied in more depth. Focusing on FC Barcelona's case has the advantage that finding data on FC Barcelona's political statements is much easier due to the club being nationally and internationally renowned. Not only have the club's actions been discussed extensively in newspapers and other media outlets, but there is also extended academic research on FC Barcelona's historical and current standing and significance for the Catalan society. Due to the small size of Girona FC, its political statements resulted in much fewer media reactions, and the club has hardly ever been the subject of academic research.

It is worth emphasizing that the qualitative part of this research does not aim to analyze the public discourse on whether football teams are supposed to engage in political processes that followed the political statements by FC Barcelona and Girona FC. The case study aims at analyzing FC Barcelona's case in detail to see if the historical connection between politics and sports in Spain and specifically in FC Barcelona's club culture offers any explanatory factors for fans boycotting or not boycotting the club's games.

Before going into more details about FC Barcelona's case, the concept of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA) will be introduced. This fairly new concept serves as this case study's theoretical guideline. The case analysis is structured in three parts. First, it is established whether the political statements made by FC Barcelona can be considered an act of CSA. In a second step, the club's ideological environment will be analyzed with a particular focus on Spanish fan culture. Lastly, FC Barcelona's motives for making political statements will be looked at. According to CSA-theory, these can play a crucial determinant in how consumers react to an actor's CSA-activities.

## 7.1 Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA)

The concept of CSA recently came into focus with an increase of high-profile cases of companies, like Starbucks, Delta Airlines, Papa John's, and Nike taking a stance in the discussion surrounding highly-debated topics like same-sex marriage, structural racism, climate change, or gun control (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Leak et al., 2015). In all these cases, companies took sides in highly divisive topics. The concept of companies being engaged in social issues is not a recent phenomenon as the topic of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) takes on an increasing role also in annual shareholder reports. The idea of businesses trying to influence and work directly with political issues neither is new, as companies' ongoing lobbying activities, from here on referred to as Corporate Political Activity (CPA), prove. However, the cases mentioned cannot be categorized as either CSR or CPA (Bhagwat et al., 2020). This sparked several attempts to define a new concept fitting to this new development.

### 7.1.1 Definition

Before defining CSA, it is worth mentioning that there are different terms (e.g., *corporate activism*, *corporate social advocacy*) in the academic literature referring to the same concept of CSA. For simplification, the concept will be referred to as *CSA*.

CSA is defined by Eilert & Nappier Cherup as a company's "willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change (...)" (2020, p. 463). In their definition, Bhagwat et al. (2020) focus on that the support or opposition of a certain topic should be done *publicly* and the topic itself is of a *partisan nature* for it to qualify as CSA. Looking at these two attempts of defining the phenomenon, three key aspects emerge: the intention to create change in society, engaging in a topic that is controversial and results in widely differing opinions, and a public campaign that leaves no doubt about the company's position for stakeholders. It is difficult to define this concept without setting it in relation to existing concepts such as CSR and CPA. *Figure 5* shows how CSA fits within the context of different types of firm activities.

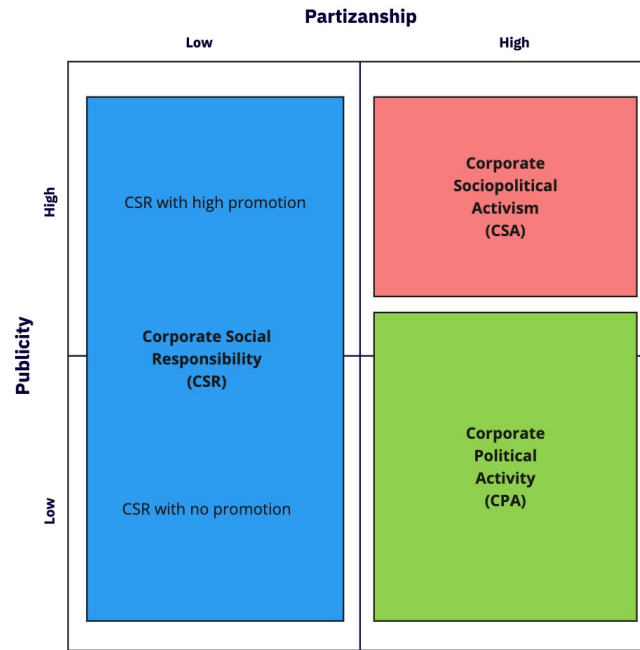


Figure 5: Conceptualization of CSR, CPA and CSA (adapted from Bhagwat et al., 2020)

#### 7.1.1.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and CSA

The concept of CSR is well established and part of most strategies of multinational companies. An extensive amount of literature exists on the topic, which includes a wide array of definitions. In general, the various definitions agree that CSR is seen as a company's activities to further the well-being of society by engaging with a "feel-good" topic to the extent that goes beyond what is legally required and beyond the firm's fundamental economic interests (Kang et al., 2016; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). However, economic interests are considered compatible with CSR activities (Ellen et al., 2006; Ellert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). CSR is therefore often employed by firms as a strategic tool and a subject of cost-benefit considerations. It is generally expected to positively affect a firm's value (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Bhagwat et al., 2020).

This definition already shows vital differences compared to CSA. Generally, the topic chosen for a firm's CSR activities is an issue that stakeholders and society widely support (e.g., education, malnourishment, curing certain diseases), whereas CSA focuses on partisan topics with a high polarization (Bhagwat et al., 2020). While CSR focuses on improving stakeholder-relationships (Mishra & Modi, 2016; Bhagwat et al., 2020), reactions to a firm's CSA can differentiate strongly and depend on the institutional environment's socio-political values (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Bhagwat et al., 2020). CSR centers around increasing a firm's



reputation and earnings, while CSA can be seen as an attempt to emphasize a company's core values when confronted with polarizing social issues (Wilcox, 2018; Kim et al., 2020).

#### *7.1.1.2 Corporate Political Activity (CPA) and CSA*

As with CSR, there exists a vast amount of academic literature on companies' lobbying efforts. In general, CPA can be described as a company's attempts to influence political processes in a favorable way to position itself to gain competitive advantages in its respective markets (Lux et al., 2011; Bhagwat et al., 2020). In contrast to CSR, the goal of CPA is to create direct financial gains while not pursuing any positive social impact (Hillman et al., 2004; Bhagwat et al., 2020). Additionally, most CPA efforts happen behind closed doors. The picture painted of lobbyists as semi-clandestine figures walking around with a black suitcase full of money might be invented by the film industry, but companies still prefer to handle their relations with politics quietly. The few times a firm's CPA becomes public, it is mainly due to accidental leaks (Lux et al., 2011; Werner, 2017; Bhagwat et al., 2020).

This is also one of the main differentiators to CSA. While CSA efforts are by design made to garner public attention, businesses are trying to keep a low profile with their CPA (Lux et al., 2011). Additionally, CPA is generally believed to be a strategic tool that positively affects a firm's value. On the contrary, CSA activities might not be aligned with government regulators and policymakers; therefore, its effect on a firm's value is unclear (Lux et al., 2011; Werner, 2017; Bhagwat et al., 2020).

#### *7.1.2 Consequences of CSA*

It is uncertain what effect CSA has on a firm's value. The novelty of the concept and its partisan characteristics make it difficult to predict the expected consequences for a firm engaging in CSA. Recent literature on the topic has therefore focused on establishing a grounded theory of the CSA's differing effects on a firm's value and customer base (Eiler & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020).

In their study, Bhagwat et al. (2020) work with the assumption that CSA efforts due to the high partisanship of the topics can have a varying effect on a firm. Depending on whether the CSA stance a firm takes overlaps with key stakeholders' sociopolitical values, they observe either a negative or a positive development of sales. In cases where consumers' ideological values are in line with a company's stand on a CSA topic, there was either no or a slightly positive effect

observable in sales numbers. On the contrary, when CSA strongly deviated from stakeholders' ideology, there was a negative trend (ibid). In conclusion, it can be said that if CSA highly differs from the values in a company's constitutional environment, it is more likely that it will be punished by consumers (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Kim et al. (2020) identify the aspect of motivation for CSA as a critical determinant for consumer reactions. They establish four different inferred motives for CSA: egoistic-driven, value-driven, strategy-driven, stakeholder-driven. Depending on what is perceived as the main driver for CSA efforts, stakeholders' perceptions of a company shift. The study specifically looks at how consumers perceived Nike's engagement for social justice. The results show that if the motives for Nike's CSA were perceived as driven by egoistic reasons, meaning the company used the cause as a tool to advance their own interest and manipulate consumers (Foreh & Grier, 2003; Kim et al. 2020), consumers' attitudes towards the company worsened. Similarly, consumers reacted poorly to CSA when perceived as being driven by stakeholder pressure (Kim et al., 2020). For strategy-driven CSA, the results were mixed and showed no apparent positive or negative connection to consumer perception (ibid). Only when CSA was perceived as value-driven, meaning companies were seen as engaging in CSA because they see it as their moral and ethical obligation, a positive correlation with consumer perception was observed (ibid).

These results show that even though the content of the message sent to consumers and other stakeholders through CSA is essential, it is not singularly decisive for how consumers react to CSA. Consumers care strongly about why firms engage in CSA and how it is implemented (Kim et al., 2020; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020).

## **7.2 Case Study Analysis**

The definition of CSA established in the previous chapter leaves three main questions that guide the case study of FC Barcelona and its political statements: Can FC Barcelona's statements be qualified as CSA? What are the prevailing ideological views of stakeholders surrounding FC Barcelona? What are the motives behind FC Barcelona's decision to become politically active? These questions will subsequently guide the analysis and help shed light on the causal mechanisms behind the quantitative results.

### 7.2.1 Type of Activism

In Chapter 3.4.1, the statements made by FC Barcelona regarding the referendum on Catalonia's independence were already discussed in detail. What has not yet been established is whether these statements should be considered as CSA. Looking at the established definition, two of CSA's key attributes are a high partisanship of the topic and a high degree of publicity.

#### 7.2.1.1 Partisanship

The topic of the Catalan referendum and with it the discussion around Catalan independence have been highly emotional. The high partisanship of the topic is also reflected in the media coverage over the years. Micó & Carbonell (2017) analyzed over 7000 journalistic contributions to more than 100 media outlets after the demonstration following the Spanish CC's decision to declare essential parts of the new statute of Catalonia invalid. Their findings show a clear division in reporting depending on whether the media outlet was Catalan or Spanish, meaning non-Catalan. Spanish media reported in an overwhelmingly negative way about the independence process, whereas Catalan media's coverage was mostly in favor of independence (ibid). A similar division in media attitudes is described by Dowling (2019) following the actual referendum in 2017, where Spanish media was portraying the referendum as an attempted undemocratic *coup d'état* in contrast to Catalan media that saw the referendum as an expression of democratic rights.

#### 7.2.1.2 Publicity

The statements by FC Barcelona during the 2017/18 season regarding the Catalan referendum on independence were without a doubt made in the most public way possible. As already described in Chapter 3.4.1, FC Barcelona published the statements through their social media accounts and their website. Additionally, comments by the club's president, Josep Bartomeu, regarding the support of the referendum were made with media presence (Lopez Tovar, 2017; Aldunate, 2017). Being aware of the club's prestige and widespread media presence, it can be assumed that FC Barcelona's leadership was fully aware that the support of the referendum would resonate in Spanish and international media. There is no sign of club officials attempting to decrease the high level of publicity the comments received.

#### 7.2.1.3 Delimitation from CSR and CPA

To better display their CSA-character, it helps to look at FC Barcelona's statements compared to the club's CSR- and CPA-activities.

### *CSR at FC Barcelona*

As in other industries, CSR plays a vital role in sports. Sports entities have realized that CSR-initiatives add value to an organization on more than just a philanthropic level (Walters & Tacon, 2010). Moreover, through the high standing and visibility of sports in society, sports teams are offered a privileged position to address social issues (Filizöz & Fişne, 2011). FC Barcelona has incorporated this belief of improving society through sport throughout over 100 years of its existence. The official club motto *més que un club* (*more than a club*) is proof of that (Marek, 2018). The club's commitment to local and global communities is visible through various initiatives<sup>38</sup>.

The most prominent of those initiatives highlighting FC Barcelona's commitment to CSR is its partnership with UNICEF. After having foregone the opportunity to sell their playing kit's prime advertisement potential, the club opted for the first time to wear shirts with a sponsor's name on them when signing a deal with UNICEF. Instead of UNICEF paying FC Barcelona, the club wore the shirts for free while paying UNICEF up to USD 2 million per year in donations (Marek, 2018; UNICEF, 2018)<sup>39</sup>. In general, FC Barcelona's CSR efforts are manifested in the *Barça Foundation*. Supporting children by teaching values through sport and raising awareness for social issues in over 58 countries, the foundation is financially connected to the club. 0.7% of the club's overall earnings are invested in the foundation, and 0.5% of players' salaries are donated yearly to secure the operations of the foundation (Barça Foundation, 2021).

FC Barcelona's ongoing CSR efforts differ clearly in the degree of partisanship to the statements made during the 2017/18 season. Supporting children world-wide does not qualify as a partisan topic and does not stir up controversy.

### *CPA at FC Barcelona*

As should be expected, due to the secretive character of CPA, it is hard to find any explicit example of FC Barcelona's lobbying activities. However, it is a fact that the club has ties to the

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<sup>38</sup> Going into every CSR-related initiative would exceed the scope of this case study. A collection of the most recent initiatives can be found in FC Barcelona's Annual Report (FC Barcelona, 2019) and in the Barça Foundation's Annual Report (Barça Foundation, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> While FC Barcelona has since then signed a paying sponsorship deal for their shirts, the partnership with UNICEF is still ongoing (UNICEF, 2018).

highest political offices in the Catalan and the Spanish government due to its economic value and socio-political standing. Catalan and Spanish politicians have either been seen in FC Barcelona's offices or watching games in the Camp Nou accompanied by FC Barcelona's presidents (Tremlett, 2010; Mundo Deportivo, 2017 & 2017). A former vice-president of the club has also claimed that the Catalan government "always has had an interest" in who the president of FC Barcelona is (Marca, 2020). The example of Joan Laporta, the current second-time president of the club<sup>40</sup>, also shows the club's direct access to politics. After his second term as president, he turned to politics and was elected as a Catalan parliament member (Tremlett, 2010).

The access and interaction of FC Barcelona officials with Spanish and Catalan politicians do not necessarily prove that FC Barcelona engages actively in CPA but in comparison with the statements made regarding the support of the referendum, it shows that the club seems to be selective about the level of publicity it gives to its political interactions.

### 7.2.2 Consumer Ideology

To define a single ideology of Spanish football fans is an impossible task. Data from 2010 shows that over 60% of people over the age of 16 would describe themselves as football fans or sympathize with a club (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2010). This means that football fans in Spain are most likely not a homogenous group but consist of people with different ideological backgrounds. Therefore, this chapter's focus lies on establishing the attitudes Spanish and specifically fans of FC Barcelona have towards the involvement of politics in sports. This helps to better understand the reaction of fans to the political statements by Catalan teams.

#### 7.2.2.1 Football and Politics in Spain

In Chapters 2.2 & 2.3, several examples of the wide-reaching connections of politics and sports were introduced. Spain's political history of the last century, maybe more than any other European country's history, is a prime example of how strongly the football world and the political sphere are interwoven. An explanation for this can be found in Francisco Franco's instrumentalization of sports for political purposes during his long-lasting dictatorship.

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<sup>40</sup> Joan Laporta was elected as the successor of Josep Bartomeu on 7 March 2021 (Panja, 2021).

### 7.2.2.2 *Franco and Football*

From an early stage on, Franco's government saw the political value sports, and in particular, football, offered. After the end of the Civil war and thereby the end of the Second Republic, sport became part of the "State's machinery" (Goig, 2008, p. 59). Football during the democratic Second Republic was considered to have been a "red orgy of the lowest and vilest regional passions" by journalists of the newly founded sports newspaper *Marca* (Bahamonde, 2000, p. 185; Quiroga, 2015; Goig, 2008). Sport was not only seen as a tool for the state to foster obedience, submission, and military discipline (Goig, 2008), but the Franco regime wanted to turn Spanish football stadiums into places where the Spanish values could be frenetically celebrated, and people could indulge in patriotic pride (Quiroga, 2015). This idea of increasing national cohesion through football followed two main strategies. On the one hand, the government tried to promote the joint support of Spanish *super teams* that emulated Spanish values, while on the other hand trying to eradicate all regionalist and non-Spanish symbols in Spanish football (Quiroga, 2015).

The Spanish national team played a key role in implementing the first strategy. Franco and his government realized the value presented by the Spanish national team. The government changed the national team's shirt color from the standard red to a dark blue, which was associated with the Fascist movement in Spain, and started developing the narrative of the Spanish *Furia*<sup>41</sup> (meaning: *fury*) (Quiroga, 2015). The national team was associated with a passionate and brave playing style, fighting for the Spanish homeland. Live games and broadcasts of games were used to show the nation's support for Franco, and victories over (political) rivals were celebrated by the government as its own victories (ibid). This culminated in the win of the European Championship in 1964 in Spain. In the final, played in Madrid, Spain defeated the Soviet Union. Franco did not miss the opportunity to personally attend the game and celebrate Spain's victory as a victory of Fascism over Communism and a proof of Spanish superiority (Tuñón & Brey, 2012; Quiroga, 2015).

Besides the national team, Franco's government also supported local teams and promoted national champions with international success, as the example of Real Madrid shows. The club

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<sup>41</sup> Unlike today, the Spanish national team was not known for playing aesthetically pleasing football, but rather had won their only international prize by that point, in the form of the silver medal at the 1920 Olympic games, through a rustical playing style. After journalists had described the team as winning through "furia", the term was born (Quiroga, 2015).

from the capital was considered the regime's club throughout Franco's dictatorship<sup>42</sup>. The international success of Real Madrid, winning several times the European Cup, the prestigious forerunner competition of the UEFA Champions League, made the club a perfect ambassador for the regime by representing Spain's centrist and nationalist identity (Tuñón & Brey, 2012; Quiroga, 2015; Goig, 2008).

Parallel to this strategy, Franco's regime was continuously working on freeing Spanish football from regionalist attitudes. Having realized that local football teams are a good breeding spot for counter-hegemonistic thoughts, the government reacted by installing members of the Francoist movement in the governing boards of the most important Spanish football clubs and making Castilian Spanish the official and only language (Shaw, 1985; Quiroga, 2020; Quiroga, 2015). The linguistic *cleansing* of the Spanish football scene also resulted in football clubs being renamed since their original names included non-Castilian terms (Quiroga, 2020). Interestingly, the government never forbade the existence of regional football teams that might have functioned as symbols for resistance against the centralist government. Instead, the regime opted to use clubs like Athletic Bilbao or FC Barcelona to create regional support for Francoism (Quiroga, 2015).

After the 1960s, towards the end of Franco's life, the regime started to instrumentalize football differently, which led to a decrease in the presence of nationalism in Spanish football. Rather than using it as a propaganda tool, football and sports, in general, were seen as a possibility to depoliticize a population that was increasingly dissatisfied with its political situation. Through the increased broadcasting of football through state-controlled media, Spanish society was supposed to be distracted from the political sphere (Quiroga, 2015).

### 7.2.2.3 Football in Catalonia & FC Barcelona

While trying to cultivate a centralist culture of nationalism in Spain, Franco's regime's concerns about removing regionalist symbols in football were not baseless. Throughout and especially towards the end of Franco's dictatorship, football clubs had indeed been used by opponents of the regime as symbols of resistance. FC Barcelona in Catalonia and Athletic Bilbao in the Basque country are the most famous examples (Tuñón & Brey, 2012). To better

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<sup>42</sup> Real Madrid's longtime president and name giver of the club's current stadium, Santiago Bernabéu, was a convinced Francoist (Goig, 2008)

understand the general attitude of supporters of FC Barcelona towards the club's involvement in politics, it is critical to look at the club's historical commitment to a democratic Spain and Catalonia.

### *FC Barcelona During Franco's Dictatorship*

Founded in 1899 by Joan (born: *Hans*) Gamper, a Swiss citizen that immigrated to Catalonia, FC Barcelona was early on associated with a distinct Catalan nationalism. Gamper, in search of funding for the club, turned to a growing and increasingly nationalist Catalan middle class and specifically advertised the club as *Catalan*. Thereby, he laid the groundwork for the club's strong Catalan identity (Hamil et al., 2010). FC Barcelona's value for a Catalan nationalist identity is also reflected in its importance as a tool for protest against Primo de Rivera's dictatorship (1923-1929). The FC Barcelona-flag replaced the banned *Senyera* as a symbol to showcase the disagreement with the regime, as would later happen again during Franco's dictatorship (Tuñón & Brey, 2012).

With the installation of the Francoist government after the civil war and the repression of Catalanism, going to games and supporting FC Barcelona became an outlet for Catalans to live their culture and speak their mother tongue (Goig, 2008). Supporters saw chants and waving flags as the only form of political protest that the central government tolerated. (Tuñón & Brey, 2012). While the club faced repressions by the government, having to change its name to a more Spanish name of *Barcelona Club de Fútbol*, any win over the *government club* Real Madrid was celebrated as a small victory over Franco's regime (Burns, 1999, p.128; Carabén et al., 2000; Hamil et al., 2010). As pointed out before, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, FC Barcelona's effort to promote Catalan culture became more explicit by reintroducing the *Senyera* flag in the stadium, the explicit use of Catalan in the club's magazine and for stadium announcements, and finally adopting Catalan as the official club language shortly before Franco's death (Quiroga, 2015). It is also from these times that the club motto *més que un club* was introduced, referring to the fact that FC Barcelona was, unlike other sports clubs, transcending sports into a social and political sphere (Hamil et al., 2010; Quiroga, 2015; Quiroga 2020).

### *FC Barcelona after 1975*

The status FC Barcelona achieved among Catalan people due to its role during Franco's reign even transcends to modern times. Ever since, the club has been described as a civil religion



(Xifra, 2008) and an unofficial representative of the stateless nation of Catalonia (Xifra, 2009; García, 2012). It is also interesting to note that no other football team enjoys a similar status in Catalan society. To this point, Espanyol Barcelona, as the only other club remotely comparable in size, is considered a centralist club also due to its inactivity during the Franco regime (Goig, 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that FC Barcelona is generally the Catalan club with the highest percentage of pro-independence supporters in Catalonia (Camps, 2017).

However, with the internationalization of the football world, FC Barcelona's popularity over time has reached a level beyond Catalonia and Spain. With the start of Joan Laporta's presidency in 2003, a commercial turnaround took place at the club. While the club motto of *més que un club* was not abandoned, the administration aimed at marketing the *Barça* brand to increase the financial revenue in order to be able to compete with other international top clubs (Hamil et al., 2010). As a result, many of today's fans are internationals with neither strong affiliations to Spain nor Catalonia, as is also emphasized by García (2012). He is adamant that most FC Barcelona supporters might not identify with the club as a symbol of Catalan regionalism. Many fans might not connect the club with any societal or political affiliations but instead, appreciate FC Barcelona for its sporting success and style of football.

#### 7.2.2.4 Football and Politics in Today's Spain

When studying the historical development of the involvement of politics in Spanish football, the question emerges that if the connection of politics and sports is so strongly linked to Franco's dictatorship, did it not stop after Franco's death? The answer is that the politicization of sports is still very present. However, it might look different today. There are no claims that the Spanish national team is currently used to foster Francoist propaganda, but the term *Furia Roja* is still widely accepted when referring to the national team (e.g., Ismer, 2011; Castro-Ramos, 2008; Krentscher, 2020). So is the use of the dark blue shirt for the Spanish national team that was introduced by the Francoist government<sup>43</sup> (Marca, 2010). This connection between sports and politics is not as blatant as before, but it is still inherent. A more obvious connection is how teams like FC Barcelona and Atletico Bilbao carry their pride for their historical engagement for a Spain free from authoritarian rule. Even though the clubs do not necessarily explicitly communicate it, they are still linked to anti-Francoism and seen as symbols of regional identity for fans due to their history (Quiroga, 2015).

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<sup>43</sup> The Spanish National team won the 2010 World Cup wearing the dark blue shirts as a second kit.

### 7.2.3 Motivation for CSA

As the consumer ideology, an organization's motivation for CSA activities plays a role in how CSA is perceived by consumers and other stakeholders (Kim et al., 2020). In the following, FC Barcelona's motivation for their political statements will be discussed based on the four types of inferred motivations introduced by Kim et al. (2020).

#### 7.2.3.1 *Value-Driven Motives*

Having seen the socio-political standing and significance FC Barcelona has in Catalan society, it seems evident that its historical organizational values drive the club's motivation for its political involvement. The support of Catalan people's right to democratic self-determination has to be looked at in the context of FC Barcelona's historical support of Catalonia during Franco's dictatorship. Being considered an authentic symbol of regional identity (Gómez-Bantel, 2016) gives the clubs' actions credibility that would lack if made by clubs without the same level of regional integration.

#### 7.2.3.2 *Stakeholder-Driven Motives*

It can also be argued that part of the motivation for FC Barcelona's political statements is being perceived as driven by pressure and interests of various stakeholders. A first stakeholder group that could drive the club to make pro-referendum statements is local fans supporting a referendum. As Camps (2017) states, a study from the Centre D'Estudis D'Opinió (CEO) showed that 60% of FC Barcelona fans support a referendum. Although this poll does not necessarily reflect international fans' opinion, domestic Catalan FC Barcelona supporters make up an influential part of the fan group. This is also due to the club's ownership structure. FC Barcelona follows a participatory democratic member-run ownership model (Marek, 2018; Hamil et al., 2010). The club is currently run by over 110'000 *socios* that are eligible to vote (FC Barcelona, 2021) in the presidential elections every six years. Generally, anybody is eligible to apply for a membership, but the lengthy application process favors people that are residents in Catalonia. The membership card has to be renewed on an annual basis in person in Barcelona. This is also reflected in the numbers published in the club's annual report showing that only 7.6% of all *socios* are located outside Catalonia (FC Barcelona, 2019).

Another potential stakeholder group that could have driven the organization to make political statements are former officials, players, and club managers. Given that FC Barcelona represents

an essential symbol for supporters of an independent Catalan nation, it is not further surprising that many former associates of the club are ardent proponents of Catalan independence. Joan Laporta is an example of that, heading a pro-independence political movement after his exit as president (Tremlett, 2010; García, 2012), but so is Pep Guardiola, former team-captain and most successful coach in the history of the club (Burgen & Jones, 2017) or the current player and former team captain Gerard Piqué (Müller, 2018). Such *heavy-weight Barça* officials might still be able to have a certain influence on the workings of the club.

#### *7.2.3.3 Egoistic- & Strategic-Driven Motives*

Lastly, it could also be argued that egoistic and strategic motives could have been drivers for FC Barcelona's actions. Voices accusing the club of hypocrisy have been raised as a reaction to the political statements made, claiming that the club is acting in a calculating and strategic way. If the club's values would indeed lie in standing up for Catalonia's right to democratic self-determination and independence, making political statements is not enough. Consequent actions would mean stopping to participate in Spanish competitions (Müller, 2018). This would result in massive financial losses since FC Barcelona's participation in any European competition is tied to their participation in a domestic league system acknowledged by UEFA. Therefore, it is doubtful if the club would welcome full independence of Catalonia since its own future would be put into question (Badcock, 2017; Aziz, 2017). Similar feelings are also expressed towards FC Barcelona's decision to play their game against Las Palmas behind closed doors<sup>44</sup>. Josep Bartomeu stated the game was played without spectators out of protest, but when going through the comments on FC Barcelona's Twitter-statement, several comments can be found accusing the club of only playing the game since refusing to play would have resulted in forfeiture of the game (FC Barcelona, 2017). This again would have hurt the club's chance of winning the league title and therefore resulted in possible financial losses.

### **7.3 Discussion**

Summarizing the case study's results, it can first be said that FC Barcelona's statements on the Catalan independence referendum qualify as CSA. Looking at FC Barcelona's CSR- and CPA-activities, the statements differ both in their degree of partisanship and publicity compared to the club's conventional CSR- or CPA-activities. The club publicly positions itself in a bi-partisan discussion and leaves no doubt about its convictions.

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<sup>44</sup> See Chapter 3

A second finding is that football fans in Spain and specifically FC Barcelona fans have historically been highly politicized fan groups or have been used to the blending of politics and football. The mixing of politics and sports that happened through FC Barcelona's statements could not have come as a surprise to fans that are remotely familiar with the Spanish football culture and the historical role of FC Barcelona. It can be expected that somebody who identifies as an FC Barcelona fan has a remote understanding of FC Barcelona's role for Catalonia's fight for autonomy and national sentiments.

A third conclusion is that the motivations for FC Barcelona's actions are not as straightforward as they might seem. It is plausible that at a certain level, each of the four inferred motivations for CSA developed by Kim et al. (2020) played a role in the club's decision to publicly support the referendum on independence. Looking at FC Barcelona's historical commitment to a strong Catalonia, it is evident that value-driven motivation played a big part. Nonetheless, the club's structure and environment lead to the belief that particular stakeholder interests might have factored into the club's decision to show public support for the referendum. It is also not unlikely that strategic and egoistic motivations influenced the way FC Barcelona supported the referendum. One has to be aware that it is difficult to determine the motivation behind FC Barcelona's reaction based on secondary data and without access to the club's decision-makers. To reconstruct a representative picture of the situation, in-depth interviews with leading figures in the club and Catalan politics at the time should be conducted. However, through the available data in this thesis, it is still possible to reconstruct some of the tensions the club faced when deciding on engaging in CSA in the way it did.

Overall, these findings create a picture of a heterogeneous fan group that, based on its historical experiences, is generally used to the mixing of politics and sports on an ideological level. The results also show a variety of possible motivations behind FC Barcelona's political statements. Combining the findings, it could be argued that fans of Spanish football and FC Barcelona would, in general, show a tendency to not react specifically negatively to FC Barcelona's political involvement. The analysis suggests that there is reason to believe that FC Barcelona's CSA is strongly value-driven and fans' are not firmly ideologically opposed to mixing sports and politics. It could even be further argued that this gives rise to the belief that FC Barcelona's fans could react in a positive way to the club's political statements and express increased support for the club. However, based on the data collected and the subsequent results, it is not

possible to formulate a final and comprehensive answer as to why FC Barcelona decided to engage in CSA or how fans perceived it. This case study, primarily based on secondary data in the form of academic journals and newspaper articles, instead offers an initial approach to the interpretation of the motivations behind FC Barcelona's political statements and potential fan reactions. Questions remain regarding the nature and strength of the various pressures the club and its decision-makers were facing before engaging in CSA. To develop a complete understanding of FC Barcelona's case of political statements, more profound and in-depth qualitative research, in the form of interviews and surveys among fans and club officials, is required.

## **8. Conclusion**

As outlined in the introduction, this thesis's final chapter is dedicated to combining the quantitative and qualitative results. This integration of results allows to better understand fans' reactions to political statements and creates a deeper understanding of causal mechanisms behind the results.

### **8.1 Combination of Results**

As a reminder, all but one of the initially formulated hypotheses can be rejected based on the quantitative results. Although some of the statistical insignificance of the results can be attributed to challenges with sample size and outlier values in the data set, there is still no convincing evidence for a change in fan behavior due to football teams' political statements. Considering that Spanish football and FC Barcelona fans are relatively used to the connection of football and politics, these results are less surprising. Fans in Spanish football might have accepted and incorporated the connection of politics and sports in their fandom. Consequently, their consumption preferences might not be affected if a team makes political statements. Additionally, the inferred motivations behind FC Barcelona's political statements are not directly related to adverse consumer reactions as formulated by Kim et al. (2020). This offers a further explanation for the absence of an observable change in fan behavior.

Assuming that consumers could even reward value-driven CSA-activities, H1, the only hypothesis held up by the quantitative results, might have to be reevaluated. H1 claims that home-teams making political statements are expected to experience a decrease of fans attending games. Assuming that FC Barcelona's primary inferred motivation is value-driven,

the hypothesis could be reformulated, saying that an *increase* in stadium attendance could be expected. This sheds a different light on the quantitative results, and the formerly *expected* results could be classified as *unexpected*.

Circling back to the initial research question guiding this research, it can be stated that in the analyzed case results suggest that football fans do not, or only to a small extent, change their consumption behavior due to political statements. However, this does not necessarily mean that fans everywhere in the world would react in the same way. Overall, the significance of these findings for other cases still has to be established. Limitations to the generalizability have already been discussed in Chapter 5.7.4. The qualitative case study shows that the fans' reaction is potentially highly dependent on a fan base's ideological attitude towards the involvement of politics in sports as well on the club's perceived motivation behind its statements. Thus, it would be hasty to call for football clubs to become defining drivers of social and political change since they should not fear experiencing any potential repercussions by fans. Nonetheless, it should be stated that the strict separation of sports and politics is neither natural nor universally accepted. Standing up for a social or political cause does not necessarily result in a loss of supporters and a negative economic impact for a club.

## 8.2 Challenges for Clubs

In today's world, where through Social Media, people and organizations have easy access to wide-reaching communication channels, the likelihood of more sports organizations publicly supporting a particular political cause is relatively high going forward. Each case will face its challenges in determining if their social commitment is detrimental to their business.

International football clubs will always face the challenge of running a global business while having a largely local identity. Generally, international companies outside the sports industry might be locally rooted but are usually not defined by these roots and their original "home" markets<sup>45</sup>. The case study about FC Barcelona shows how football clubs' identities are strongly shaped locally (Gómez-Bantel, 2016). If a football club gets involved in a local political topic, the many international fans a club has might have a different attitude towards the issue. From a business perspective, creating a balanced product catering to the diverse preferences of a

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<sup>45</sup> As an example, IKEA is still strongly connected to its Swedish roots, but is not defined by the Swedish market and can still have its headquarters in the Netherlands. FC Barcelona, suddenly having its main base in New York is on the other hand unimaginable.

heterogeneous fan base is a crucial challenge for football clubs. It is therefore essential to also emphasize international fans' reaction to political statements in future research. This could be done by focusing future analyses on games in international competitions, like the UEFA Champions League, instead of local competitions.

Another challenge not being covered in this thesis is that not all potential negative economic consequences caused by political statements are connected to fan preferences. The case of Arsenal F.C. in 2019 illustrates this problem. After Mesut Özil's<sup>46</sup> criticism of the Chinese government's treatment of Uighur people, Arsenal F.C.'s games were banned in China (BBC, 2019; Kuo & MacInnes, 2019; Reuters, 2019). Similarly, the Chinese government censored NBA games when the Houston Rockets' general manager expressed support for Hong Kong protesters (He, 2019). It did not matter what the Chinese fans' attitudes towards the clubs' political involvement were in these cases. The restriction of market access by the government resulted in direct financial losses. There exists a real danger of losing access to an entire market through censorship for clubs being vocal on political issues. Similarly, teams' main sponsors might decide to stop their commercial agreements with teams based on political statements. Such repercussions must always be considered by a club when making political statements.

### **8.3 Political Identity as an Opportunity**

Having talked about the possible challenges teams making political statements face, it is important to note that making *being political* a part of a club's identity can also represent an opportunity. FC St. Pauli, a football club from Hamburg currently playing in Germany's second division, is an impressive example of that. The club regularly speaks up on controversial political issues, even releasing players who disregard its values (FC St. Pauli, 2019). It has successfully branded itself as a socially inclusive club standing for anti-fascism, -sexism, and -homophobia. This inclusive image has helped this small club located in Hamburg's red-light district to legendary status among fans worldwide. With its political image, the club can reach non-prototypical fans and increase its consumer base (Daniel & Kassimeris, 2013). In an industry where smaller entities often struggle financially, this strategy has proven to secure the club's ongoing operations for years.

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<sup>46</sup> The club distanced itself from the player's comments and refused to make any political statement.

Although speaking up for a specific political topic and basing a whole club identity on a political fight are not the same things, clubs can look at the example of FC St. Pauli and see that being politically vocal can sharpen identities and bring additional economic value. However, adding a political aspect to a club identity is not a simple endeavor and might be much easier for a smaller team. It is easier to find a political topic which most fans agree with when a club has a smaller and more homogenous fan base. Likewise, a topic with a very high degree of partisanship might make it challenging to attract a substantial following.

#### **8.4 Further Research**

Several potential starting points for further research within and around the topic of politically involved football clubs have already been mentioned throughout this study. One concrete area that requires further detailed analysis is the observed negative effect on game attendance at home games. Future research could look into questions previously raised in Chapter 6.4 regarding the make-up of the section of fans that stop attending games. It needs to be investigated whether away- or home-team fans, season ticket holders, or rather *neutral* fans decided against attending games. Another area that warrants further analysis is the qualitative case study. As mentioned in Chapter 7.3, to fully understand the drivers behind FC Barcelona's political statements, more in-depth interviews and collection of primary data are needed. Additionally, it would be interesting to expand the single case study and include FC Girona's case.

In general, more research on the subject of football clubs', or generally sports clubs', political involvement and its consequences is needed. As mentioned in Chapter 6.1, there are only a limited number of cases to be studied, and even fewer of those are suitable for a quantitative research design. Nevertheless, in today's political and social climate, more cases of sports teams making political statements might emerge over time that are better suited for research. These offer new opportunities for further research. A concrete example to be studied in the future could come in the form of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022. The host country has repeatedly been heavily criticized due to reported human rights violations during the building of stadiums (Pattison & McIntyre, 2021). This has even led to national teams discussing boycotting the tournament (Harding, 2021). An analysis of spectator numbers of the 2022 World Cup compared to other World Cups could deliver new insights into how fans react to the involvement of politics in football. Altogether, the analysis of existing and future cases



through creative mixed-methods approaches can provide interesting and necessary results for an understudied field.

## 9. Bibliography

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