

# **Feyenoord and their strong bond with the city of Rotterdam**

A thematic content analysis of brand identity building on Instagram

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## **Abstract**

*Since the start of Instagram in the early 2010s, the social media platform has become one of the most important platforms for companies to communicate with their customers. Also, football clubs make use of the rise of Instagram, where the most popular clubs nowadays have more than 100 million followers. Since Instagram posts consist of photos, videos and captions, the platform is considered ideal to communicate brand identity. Moreover Instagram enables companies to interact directly with their customers by means of comments. This study aims to examine how football clubs use Instagram posts to build and sustain their brand identity and their relationship with its fans and community. This has been done by the means of a case study of Feyenoord Rotterdam in which a thematic content analysis of 148 Instagram posts (96 Feyenoord, 52 fan page FR12) has been conducted, including the first 30 comments underneath each post. The analysis resulted in the determination of four major themes and various sub-themes. The four themes entail 'Pride of Rotterdam', 'The stadium as home', 'Built on the past' and 'Thankful for fan support'. The results showed that the brand identity of Feyenoord is mainly constructed through the landmarks, identity and history of the city and Rotterdam, the second largest city of the Netherlands, which has a rich history to draw upon. Also, the working-class mentality seems to be eminent in the communication of brand identity, since the southern part of the city, where the stadium of the club is located was traditionally inhabited by harbour workers. The final theme illustrated that the club wants to communicate the fact that without their loyal fans, the club would not be as successful as they are nowadays. The analysis demonstrated as well that the fan page of FR12 took over nearly every element of brand identity construction that Feyenoord presented themselves. Within the analysed comments the two major themes of expressing love and criticism were distinguished as reactions to the posts, in line with the presented brand identity of Feyenoord. The results of the study were in line with various studies about successful brand identity construction, brand community building and social media co-creation. The research therefore provided new insights in the communication of brand identity by football clubs, in this case Feyenoord, and the way in which they built and sustain a strong relationship with their fans.*

**Keywords:** Feyenoord, brand identity, brand community, Instagram, football fandom

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# 1. Introduction

With more than two billion monthly users, Instagram is one of the largest social media platforms nowadays and therefore has a significant impact on modern communication methods (Rodriguez, 2021). The social media platform of Instagram also gives new opportunities for advertising for brands and popular culture due the general transition from traditional entertainment outlets towards new media (Virtanen et al., 2017). A lot of companies tend to invest more money into new media marketing and advertising than into traditional ways of advertising since research shows that this is the way to reach and engage with gen z and the generations after (Bahcecik et al., 2019; Rodriguez, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2017).

Also football teams or sports teams in general make use of the opportunity to engage with the audience of sports fans on Instagram and are widely followed (Machado et al., 2020). The most followed football clubs at this moment are Real Madrid with 109 million followers, Fc Barcelona with 104 million followers and Manchester United with 54.5 million followers (Jahns, 2022). This large audience gives the clubs the opportunity to build a bond with their fans, communicate values and to acquire revenue due to online sponsorship and marketing (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Since Instagram gives the brand and in this case sports teams the opportunity to communicate directly towards their fanbase, a stronger relationship between brand and consumer can be built that is different from fan relationships in the era before social media (Lomsap & Sud-on, 2019). Research into this subject could therefore provide new insights into brand identity communication strategies on social media for professional football clubs.

Since Instagram and social media in general gave football clubs the opportunity to build and communicate their own brand identity, this study aims to examine in what way this brand identity is being communicated by a football club and what (digital) reactions this evokes. This draws forward upon the previous studies on fan engagement with football clubs in the past by presenting the new concept of online engagement and identity building. The club that has been chosen for this case study is Feyenoord Rotterdam, one of the most popular teams in the Netherlands with 555k followers on Instagram, making them the 3rd most followed club in the country after Ajax Amsterdam (7.4 million followers) and PSV Eindhoven (575k followers). Feyenoord is widely known for their strong fanbase in real life, having one of the highest attendance rates in the Netherlands (NOS, 2018). The club is also known for having a strong bond with the city of Rotterdam, despite the fact that they are

followed throughout the whole country (Knipping, 2022). This together with their popularity makes this particular club interesting for brand identity research.

To get more insight in how brand identity is communicated by football clubs and how fans react to this, this study aims to answer the following research question: *'In what way do football clubs use Instagram posts to build and sustain their brand identity and their relationship with its fans and community?'*. The study will entail a thematic analysis of various Instagram posts retained from the official Feyenoord Instagram page and posts from a fan page named FR12 (103k followers). This has been done to compare the way in which Feyenoord communicates their brand identity and to see whether this is in line with the way in which the fan or brand community communicates the identity. The study has been conducted by the means of four research objectives:

1. *To examine the brand identity of Feyenoord*
2. *To identify how Feyenoord's Instagram posts communicate brand identity*
3. *To study how Feyenoord portray the relationship with the fan community on Instagram*
4. *To examine fan community's comments to Feyenoord's Instagram posts that present brand identity'*

The last research objective studies the way in which fans comment on the Instagram posts as presented by Feyenoord and if this is in line with the brand identity that the club is trying to communicate. This has been done by the means of thematic analysis as well and also contains comments on posts posted on the official Feyenoord Instagram page and the fan page of FR12.

## **1.1 Academic and societal relevance**

Although football teams have such a high number of followers on Instagram and the platform is widely used to communicate brand identity, little research has been done into the matter of brand identity communication by football teams on Instagram. The research that has been done on brand identity and new media marketing was mainly focussed on consumer goods, retail or nutrition (Butcher & Pecot, 2021; Vargas-Bianchi, 2021). These include for example studies that examine how food or beverage brands built an image around themselves and in what way they convey this to the Instagram audience (Butcher & Pecot, 2021).

Studies on sports or football clubs and their activity on Instagram are often focussed on the interaction between clubs and fans or the reason behind football fandom and the desire

to follow football clubs on Instagram in general (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Kim & Hull, 2017). A large amount of research has been conducted on the matter of football fandom and the reason for fans to engage with a football team and especially the emotional bond that people can have with their favourite team (Dixon, 2012). Various studies show that this affection people have with their football teams goes further on Instagram, also shown by the previously mentioned number of followers clubs have acquired since the start of Instagram in the early 2010s (Jahns, 2022).

The societal relevance of this study can be found in the increased popularity of Instagram use in the past ten to twelve years (Rodriguez, 2021). Instagram is nowadays used by a very large number of companies for marketing and advertising reasons and is considered to be the ideal platform to reach the younger generations (Bahcecik et al., 2019; Rodriguez, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2017). An important part of new media marketing is brand identity building. Instagram is considered the ideal platform to convey brand identity since it allows users to share quick photos or videos accompanied by short captions and immediate opportunity to engage with followers through likes and comments (Marques et al., 2021). Therefore, this research is relevant as it tries to study the way in which the new form of brand identity building is communicated and influences the thoughts and opinions of consumers.

## **1.2 Thesis Outline**

This research paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework (chapter 2) outlines various concepts in existing literature on the topics of brand identity, brand community, co-creation and football fandom. The concepts as presented in the theoretical framework will form the basis of the eventual thematic analysis. The theoretical framework is followed by the methodology section in which the methods for thematic analysis have been outlined and justified, together with the sampling method, the method used for data analysis and the reliability and validity of the research. The results chapter follows and presents the analysis of Feyenoord's official Instagram page and that of fan page FR12. The results chapter is structured by categories and patterns as discovered during the thematic analysis. The coding frames used for analysis can be found in the appendices. The last chapter draws the final conclusion and tends to answer the overarching research question. In this section the limitations of research have also been discussed and possible recommendations for future research have been done.



## **2. Theoretical framework**

This theoretical framework aims to provide an overview of existing theories concerning brand identity and brand community, specifically in the field of social media. Firstly, there will be a short introduction on Feyenoord football club to understand the image of the club that is going to be the central focus of this study. Moreover, the central concepts of this thesis: brand identity, brand community and co-creation are outlined. Finally, the concept of football fandom is covered. There are multiple elements of football fandom compared to fandom in other fields that need to be taken into account when analysing brand identity and brand community of football clubs. The introduced theories will be used systematically during the analysis of Feyenoord's Instagram page.

### **2.1 Feyenoord football club**

Feyenoord was founded in 1908 and from then grew out to be the third most successful club and second most supported football in the Netherlands with 15 national titles won (Feyenoord, 2022). They are often referred to as 'the club of the people', because they are historically from the neighbourhood Feijenoord, the working-class area of Rotterdam (Het legioen, 2022). They still have more working-class identity than for example their main rival Ajax from Amsterdam (Fangman, 2013).

The club is known for their loyal fans and high attendance rates at matches both at home and away. They had the highest attendance rate of the country in recent years. It makes it clear that the fans of Feyenoord are willing to put effort into their support. For example during the 2017 national championship hundreds of thousands of people made their way to Rotterdam to celebrate and it was the highest attendance title celebration of the Netherlands (NOS, 2017). This thesis will study in what way Feyenoord conveys their identity through Instagram and how this sustains a relationship with their loyal fans.

### **2.2 Brand Identity and sports**

This subsection will present various theories about brand identity creation and sports brands. First the theory by Kasperuniene & Zydziaunaite (2019) will be discussed, which distinguishes five different elements of successful brand identity building that are applicable on social media. Each element will be elaborated on individually. Next the concept of sports

brand will be presented by the means of the article of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) which presents a theory about fan engagement towards football teams on social media. Besides this, the identity of football clubs in general will be elaborated on by introducing the theory of Dixon (2012) around this subject.

### **2.2.1 Brand creation and identity**

Brand identity can be defined as the whole system of norms and values a company or organization communicates to the outside world (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2015). Creating an identity around a brand takes years and requires the right communication strategy in order to be understood and reproduced by followers and customers (Phillips et al., 2014). The ‘creation’ of an actual brand is the first and central in that process. By the ‘creation’ of a brand is meant that the organization uses names, logo’s, storytelling, visual language and speech in order to communicate where the brand stands for and more importantly what they want their customers to remember and therefore bond to the brand (Phillips et al., 2014). These five elements of brand creation are all used within the concept of marketing and advertising, since for example commercials or visual advertisements in general contain brand names, logo’s, storytelling, visual language and speech (Phillips et al., 2014). A marketing strategy containing these elements is often considered to be successful and complete (Phillips et al., 2014).

There are four elements that, besides brand identity creation in general, contribute to brand development over the years. They are based on image, active branding, co-branding and identity clarification (Saraniemi & Komppula, 2017). Other than the five elements of brand creation as described in the previous paragraph, these four elements draw upon active communication and interaction with consumers since for example active branding and co-branding focus on the amount of advertising and the amount of interaction (Saraniemi & Komppula, 2017). A lot of advertising does not always mean a successful campaign of identity building, a company should always search for the right amount of communication (Saraniemi & Komppula, 2017). Therefore when researching brand identity it is important to determine what images are being used to convey the message, in what way the organization is active in their communication, whether there are competitors using the same method and whether there could be any doubt about what message is being conveyed (Saraniemi & Komppula, 2017).

Furthermore, the article Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019) shows that there are certain patterns visible when it comes to 'brand construction' that define brand creation. The patterns that can be distinguished according to these authors are stereotypes, belonging, repetitiveness, public interest and ability to distinguish (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). All of these elements are important and applicable for identity creation on Instagram by brands and sports clubs. Therefore every element will be elaborated further on in this section by explaining them by the means of various studies. If all mentioned elements of brand identity construction are applied well and noticeable by consumers, the brand identity is communicated in the most efficient way (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019).

Stereotypes form the core of an identity (Appel & Weber, 2017). In western society it is common behaviour to distance yourself from stereotypes since these are usually generalizing and often seen as incorrect to what they represent (Appel & Weber, 2017). Though, stereotypes are recognised by large numbers of people and in many cases, especially when it comes to culture, understood internationally (Miller et al., 2012). The recognisability is the reason for many brands making use of stereotypes in the construction of their brand (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). This ranges from the food and beverage brand, clothing to sports clubs. An example of a beverage company that makes effective use of stereotypes is the German beer brand 'Paulaner' who usually use traditional Bavarian clothes in their advertising referring to a stereotypical image of traditional ways of dressing up (Paulaner, 2022). Sports clubs have the same possibility since they often represent a city and draw from the traditions that are common in that area. Football club Bayern Munich uses for example the same traditional way of clothing, also in collaboration with the earlier mentioned beer brand Paulaner (Blow, 2021).

Another important part of brand creation or construction is belonging to a group (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). To become successful, brands usually want to create a community of people that are all interested in the brand's style and in that way share their experiences with the brand with each other (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). This form of identity creation reaches further than just the brand itself, it has to be further elaborated on. Therefore section 2.3 'Brand Community' will go deeper into the subject and show the influence of communities on brand and their brand identity.

Repetitiveness to construct an identity is a tool to make people familiar with the identity of the brand (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). It is proven that repetition is a good way of learning and causes subjects or images to stick to the mind (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017). The tool is frequently used in advertising. For example, a common way of linear tv

advertising is to show a short image of the brand and after another advertisement has been shown, repeat the same advertisement (Deng & Mela, 2018). By seeing it twice in a short time period, the advertisement will stick to the brain significantly longer. The same counts for the repetitive use of sounds, images and recognisable buildings (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017). To stay with the example of beer brands, the German beer brand of Krombacher always shows the same video of two beers getting pulled out of a bright shining lake (Schobelt, 2017). The repetitiveness creates the identity of a fresh and natural brand. The image will automatically be linked to the brand of Krombacher.

Public interest can be a crucial part of identity creation, because this will construct a sense of familiarity to the brand (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). To take topics that are in the public interest or based on widely known public events can contribute to the image people will have of a certain brand (Sweetser et al., 2016). It will enlarge the possibility of sharing because many others know about the subject that is being discussed (Sweetser et al., 2016). The counterpart of using public interest is however that the identity is not constructed from the brand itself, but collaborates with already existing topics of public interest (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). For sports clubs and in particular football clubs this is however not a problem since football can be described as a public interest itself (Watkins, 2014). For this field of identity creation, it is rather easy to draw upon big events in the footballing world to create an identity for the club. Especially when the particular club has a brought history (Dixon, 2012). Otherwise, the identity has to be drawn more to the history of the area the club represents, in other words public interest in general.

Finally, as Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019) argue, the ability to distinguish brands is vital as well. In contrast with what was previously said about taking into account public interest and recognisable content, it is also very common to use less recognisable and familiar content to construct an identity for a brand (Song et al., 2008). Only using familiar content will cause a melting pot with different brands and no ability to stand out (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). When a brand really wants to be recognised because of their own identity, they have to distinguish by presenting uniqueness (Song et al., 2008). Also football clubs need to distinguish from others in order to attract interest. A straightforward example is that of Celtic Football Club from Glasgow, Scotland. They use the line 'A club like no other' in all of their public advertising including social media (Celtic Star, 2019). A simple line that shows in a very straightforward way that they as a brand want to be different from all the other football teams in the market.

In summary there are multiple elements that construct a brand identity. The five elements as presented by Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019) that are outlined throughout this section will be important in determining the brand Identity of Feyenoord from their activity on Instagram. Since Feyenoord as a football club with more than 500k followers on Instagram, can be seen as a brand that needs to construct and advertise an identity, it has to be determined if stereotypes, belonging, repetitiveness, public interest and an ability to distinguish are present in their posts. This will further communicate the identity they have as a brand and how this relates to the bonding with fans and followers.

### **2.2.2 Sports brands**

Research on online sports brands building bonds with fanbases state that social media has a major influence on brand relationship (Watkins, 2014). For example sports teams that post regularly about games, events and recordings behind the scenes such as footage from the dressing room or training, show particularly higher engagement than sports teams that use social media solely for communicating information (Watkins, 2014). These ‘high engagement’ sports teams also show a particularly higher engagement rate when it comes to comments on their social media posts, which means that fans feel more involved in the club than they would do without this social media brand image building (Watkins, 2014).

Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018) argue that a method in which an x amount of comments is gathered randomly and put into categories, can give insight into people’s reasons to comment and feel attached to a sports team. They researched the comments of Instagram posts of major English football teams and came up with the categories of ‘aspiring’, ‘belonging’, ‘criticising’ and ‘loving’ (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). The section of aspiring is mainly applicable to posts about winning prizes and important matches The section of belonging is applicable to the identity of the club as people state they belong to a club and the culture it contains. The category ‘criticizing’ is mainly focussed towards bad results or the attraction of players that are not good enough in the opinion of the fans and the last category ‘loving’ is the broadest of the four categories (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). The love for the club could be from good results, the club identity or the posts that are constructed on Instagram. These categories could be different for every sports team, because as mentioned earlier every sports club has its own identity (Dixon, 2012). Though, since every sports team wants to construct their own identity as a brand and has fans for that specific reason, these

categories can be generalizable and used in further research on the matter of interaction between fans and football clubs online.

The theory concerning fans being more involved is also confirmed by the research of Lomsap and Sud-on (2019), which stated that fans of Thai football teams are more loyal to their clubs when following them online. Also fans indicate that they go to the stadium more often after following their club online,. They are in other words being pushed towards the stadium by their club posting about matches, rivalry and identity (Lomsap & Sud-on, 2019).

### **2.3 Brand community**

Brand communities draw further upon the concept of brand identity and the construction of it since the members of a brand community are the first and most important people to take notice of what the brand identity elements are that the brand communicates (Coelho et al., 2018). Brand communities can be defined as large groups of enthusiasts or fans of a particular brand or organization (Coelho et al., 2018). Participation in a brand community requires active engagement with what the brand has to offer (Coelho et al., 2018). For example brand communities in the field of clothing will actively follow events, sales and reviewing off and online (Gordon et al., 2014). Consumers that see themselves as part of a brand community often consider the brand or organization they follow as a part of their lifestyle. For football teams this can of course be traced back to the earlier mentioned 'identity' of the city or region that a football team represents (Dixon, 2012).

A community is always built on certain elements that create recognizability. Gordon et al. (2014) display three elements that can be representative of in the majority of brand communities. These entail 'consciousness of kind', 'rituals and traditions' and 'moral responsibility'. The elements are applicable to offline brand communities as well as online communities. Since this research is focussed on Instagram, only the elements from an online perspective of brand communities are elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

First, the element 'consciousness of kind' is one of the principles of a community in general. Members of a brand community share recognizability and unity (Gordon et al., 2014). Even though many will not ever meet in real life, they create a feeling of knowing each other and being part of a large group with the same values and interests. Online and on Instagram this is reflected in the comment section underneath the posts of brands and organizations (Coelho et al., 2018). People are free to express their opinion and react to others. In this way, people with the same interests are brought together and brand

communities are formed (Coelho et al., 2018). This way of engagement in brand communities generally displays three sorts of emotional categories which entail trust, confidence and safety (Habibi et al., 2014). These three emotional categories all have in common that they convey a message of loyalty towards the brand. People tend to see the brand they are engaging with as a part of their lifestyle and identity and tend to show a high amount of loyalty (Phillips et al., 2014). It is therefore not uncommon that people will use the comment section on Instagram to participate in the community and to showcase their brand passion, even if their shared opinion is negative, this still displays a certain passion since engaging in brand community does not require positivity only (Phua et al., 2017). Brands make use of this for their own reflection.

Second, the element of 'rituals and traditions' draws upon the shared values and feelings of brand community members (Gordon et al., 2014). The rituals and traditions are usually based on brand experiences. This is also what causes a strong bond among members (Coelho et al., 2018). It is particularly important when looking at brand communities around sports teams, because those usually have a long history and a large amount of past occurrences to draw upon (Zaimakis, 2016). It is therefore that a lot of members of brand communities share their experiences online and encourage other people to reflect on it. Having the same memories and experiences also creates a sense of unity (Adams & Baden, 2020).

Finally, the element of 'moral responsibility' is also a very important part of a brand community. It draws upon a certain code or a sense of duty to engage in the right way (Gordon et al., 2014). Every group or organization has its own norms and values, and this is no different for brand communities. People who do not share the same values are not seen as part of the community (Gordon et al., 2014). This flows mainly around emotional connection with the brand and those who do not share this are generally recognizable due to their different style of engagement (Relling et al., 2016). The different form of engagement mainly revolves around bringing up values and identity aspects of other brands and comparisons to other groups (Relling et al., 2016). Members of a community have such a strong bond that distancing from the brand itself is very rare. This helps to identify members and non-members of the brand community (Relling et al., 2016). In other words, Consciousness of kind represents they recognisability of members of a certain brand community, Rituals and traditions showcase the reasons for consumers to be part of a brand community and moral responsibility demonstrates the recognizable difference between members and non-members of a brand community (Gordon et al., 2014).

Brand communities and fan communities are interchangeable and share the same norms and values (Mastromartino & Zhang, 2020). Fan communities also draw upon consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions and moral responsibility (Mastromartino & Zhang, 2020). Fan communities in football are usually formed through support groups (Weber et al., 2021).

## **2.4 Social Media & Co-creation**

This section will elaborate on the concept of co-creation and how co-creation occurs through social media. First, the concept will be explained in general while highlighting in what way it starts on social media. Second, the concept will be further explained by the means of the articles of Rathore et al (2016) and Black & Veloutsou (2017) who argue that the use of shared symbols are important for co-creation to occur in a preferable way.

### **2.4.1 Social media Co-creation**

Another important part of social media marketing and branding is co-creation. Co-creation can be defined as the way in which consumers contribute to constructing brand identity and in the expansion of a brand (Cheung et al., 2021). Co-creation can be seen as marketing by consumers themselves. A form of word-of-mouth advertising that is constructed (Cheung et al., 2021). In the case of Football clubs this entails for example the creation of fan clubs or social media fan pages in which the club is projected in the same way as they do themselves, but then through the eyes of fans themselves. A more basic way of co-creation is just the act of commenting underneath posts or the sharing of certain Instagram posts (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). In this way other people get to know a brand as well through the eyes of acquaintances and the brand identity expands in a natural way without the brand or in this case football club interfering. Co-creation on social media gives a company insight into what their followers think about them and what they would like to see from them in the future (Rathore et al., 2016). Therefore co-creation can be seen as a very important marketing tool since it directly alludes to the customers' needs (Cheung et al., 2021). It will also give the customer a feeling that they are involved in the company and that their opinion is of important value to them (Voorberg et al., 2014).

## **2.4.2 Social media co-creation & shared symbols**

Rathore et al. (2016) argue that social media and co-creation are two concepts that complement each other. Also the two earlier discussed subjects of brand identity and brand/fan community both have a strong link to social media and co-creation. Furthermore Rathore et al. (2016) state that posting on social media automatically evokes reactions and opinions and that these opinions lead to more value for the brand and new insights in creating brand identity. In other words social media closes the gap between brand and consumer. It therefore helps in building a stronger relationship between the brand and its community. Gordon et al. (2014) state with regard to brand community, that brand and fan communities foster the relationship by commenting underneath social media posts.

Social media co-creation can also lead to a better customer value since the brand can develop their posts and product up to the expectations of the consumer or fan (Rathore et al., 2016). For football teams this usually is somewhat different, since they are dependent on results and bad results will evoke negative comments (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Football teams therefore have to determine which comments and opinions will help to create the identity and relationship with its fans. Although studying the comments and opinions on social media posts has a positive impact on the development of a brand's product, identity, advertisement and general relationship with its community and fans (Rathore et al., 2014). This can be seen as the reason for the importance of co-creation on brand identity and brand community.

A good example of co-creation and its impact on communities is the advertisement around the Scottish independence referendum as described by Black & Veloutsou (2017). The national movement for independence 'Yes Scotland' created a sense of unity among their followers by sharing and showing repetitive symbols online. This created a strong bond between brand and brand community by the means of consumer engagement. These symbols were mainly Scottish national symbols such the thistle and traditional clothes, symbols that stereotype and at the same refer to the national identity (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). The interaction between organization and followers resulted in a constant flow of co-creation of meaning and identity. The campaign also showed many followers commenting separatist slogans and the organization replicating them in their campaign. The conclusion can be drawn that co-creation on social media leads to new insights and a shared identity within a brand community (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). Especially when the organization deliberately makes use of followers' comments and opinions. This concept could be applicable to football as well

since fans make use of signs such as flags and banners a lot within the stadiums (Kossakowski & Besta, 2018).

In a sense a company lets their followers build their identity. Referring to the example of the new Feyenoord stadium as described in the introduction, co-creation on social media occurred when they launched a survey on social media asking their fans for their opinion about the development of the stadium. Since the stadium is an important subject in the clubs culture, this could lead to the beginning of a new co-creative project. However, the club announced to cancel any plans regarding renovation of the old stadium or building a new one (Knipping, 2022).

## **2.5 Football fandom**

Since sports teams and football teams in particular are different from regular brands and fan communities act differently than regular brand communities, it is important to explain the phenomenon of football fandom compared to fandom in other fields. Football clubs often have their own identity and community of which people are part of (Kossakowski & Besta, 2018). This brings a kind of loyalty that cannot be easily broken or changed (Tapp, 2003). The strong identity every football club takes can be explained throughout history (Dixon, 2012). European football teams were generally founded at the end of the 19th century or beginning of the 20th century, they carry along a large part of modern history people can relate to (Dixon, 2012).

The reason that football has such a strong connection to identity can partially be found in the large popularity of the sport. Football is the most watched sport in the world and omnipresent in almost every society and culture, especially in Europe (Porat, 2010). Other sports like for example basketball and ice-hockey that can count on a large fanbase are generally more considered a niche and do not have the strong cultural dependence as football has (Dionísio et al., 2008). This large popularity resulted in many supporter groups choosing to support a club because of religion or politics. There are clubs that are widely supported by working class or middle-class people. The most eminent example is the difference between two teams from Glasgow, Scotland. Celtic fc is generally supported by Catholics and people in favour of an independent Scotland, while Rangers fc is widely seen as the protestant club and supported by unionists (Giulianotti, 2005). Two direct opposites that lead to a lot of rivalry. This also counts for national teams, where people stand behind their country to

support the team (Grodecki, 2020). This leads to nationalism around major tournaments such as the world cup (Grodecki, 2020).

Nationalism and ideology are generally communicated by shared symbols that create a sense of unity (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). This is also the case for football clubs that use a lot of symbolic communication. As with the example of the two Glasgow teams, Celtic uses a lot of catholic references in their communication, while Rangers wave Union Jack flags and make no reference at all to an independent Scotland (Giulianotti, 2005). With football clubs the symbol of unity is visible at first from the club colours that fans wear around matches. The desire to belong to a group or to have a feeling of unity lies in human nature and supporting a football club provides that (Porat, 2010).

The difference between football and fandom in other fields is that people have such a strong connection of identity with their preferred football club, that they would not support a different club in their country (Porat, 2010). This is different from fandom in for example music, where people generally are fans of a certain music style or multiple musicians (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019). The same counts for fandom in retail. People may like multiple fashion brands without having a crisis of identity. In football this is usually not the case as people solely have a preference for one particular team.

The desire to be part of a community and the search for identity often results in the support for a local club as clubs usually represent a city, a neighbourhood or a region. Supporting a certain football club thus also means supporting a certain region or city (Davis, 2014). This explains why many fans always communicate the line 'support your local', to the outside world (Davis, 2014). A leap from this local perspective and international brand building can therefore by some fans be seen as betrayal of the city or region they are from (Dixon, 2012). When researching the bond that a football club builds with its fans and their reactions to this, it is necessary to take the local part of professional football into consideration.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The analysis of Feyenoord's and FR12's Instagram page contains multiple theories as described in the preceding chapters. To examine the brand identity of Feyenoord, the 5 concepts as described by Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019) are used. The communication of Feyenoord is studied through stereotypes, belonging, repetitiveness, public interest and the ability to distinguish as presented in section 2.2.1 'Brand Creation and Identity'. The

identified patterns that belong to these pillars of brand identity will show in what way Feyenoord communicates its brand identity.

When looking at brand communities and co-creation, Feyenoord's Instagram page is analysed by the means of, among others, the theoretical framework by Gordon et al. (2014) which states that brand communities can be recognized through the concepts of consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions and moral responsibility. This also connects to the theory of Black & Veloutsou, (2017) regarding community and co-creation. When analysing the communication of Feyenoord by the means of these theories, it is possible to distinguish patterns in communications such as the found symbolic patterns during the Scottish independence campaign (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). This facilitates a study of the brand identity of Feyenoord, the clubs relationship with the fan community and the comments from the side of the fan community itself. These separate parts eventually provide insight into how Feyenoord uses Instagram to build and sustain their brand identity and their relationship with their fans and community.

### **3. Methodology**

This research aims to answer the overarching research question: ‘In what way do Football clubs use Instagram posts to build and sustain their brand identity and their relationship with its fans and community?. This has been done by the means of the four research objectives: ‘To examine the brand identity of Feyenoord’, ‘To identify how Feyenoord’s Instagram posts communicate brand identity’, ‘To study how Feyenoord portray the relationship with the fan community on Instagram’ and ‘To examine fan community’s comments to Feyenoord’s Instagram posts that present brand identity’.

This section will provide a detailed description of the used research design including the data collection method, the sampling strategy, the key concepts for analysis and the used method for the eventual data analysis. Also, all choices made concerning the research design will be justified and explained in a clear and elaborated way. The last sub-section of this chapter will cover the validity and reliability of this research.

#### **3.1 Research design**

##### **3.1.1 Data collection method**

For this research, a qualitative approach has been adopted. Qualitative research aims to obtain deeper knowledge into phenomena and context within a certain field of study, in this case media studies (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014). By using qualitative methods, a deeper layer of implied meaning can be derived from a dataset (Gammelgaard, 2017). This study examines the meaning of and the perception on the brand image football clubs conveys through social media, a qualitative approach would therefore be the best fitting academic approach to answer the research question as the aim is to derive further meaning from a dataset of Instagram posts and comments (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014; Gammelgaard, 2017; Hyett et al., 2014).

The qualitative approach that has been used is a case study. Case studies are generally used within the academic field to gain in depth generalizable knowledge from a specific case that can be used in order to explain phenomena in different fields of academia (Gammelgaard, 2017). Case studies therefore usually make use of subjects that could give the researcher a large quantity of information about the studied subject (Gammelgaard, 2017; Hyett et al., 2014). This is because the aim of case studies is generally to gain in depth information about a very specific case that can be generalised in order to explain broader subjects (Alam, 2020).

In other words, a case study enables the researcher to narrow down a broader subject into smaller, more understandable and detailed information (Gammelgaard, 2017). For this study about the way football clubs construct brand identity through Instagram posts, a case study of football club Feyenoord is used. By getting in depth knowledge about the way in which Feyenoord builds their brand identity through Instagram posts, more can be told about the way in which football clubs can construct a brand identity on social media.

The method within the case study that has been used to derive in-depth meaning from the dataset of Instagram posts is a thematic content analysis. This method enables the researcher to understand and distinguish patterns within the comments and captions taken from the sample of Instagram posts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic content analysis aims to identify different themes that will come forth. It is as well as visual analysis a way of formulating a meaning out of a large dataset like this one (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This will be explained in more detail in sector 3.3 'Data analysis'.

### **3.1.2 Sampling strategy**

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms with more than two billion users worldwide (Rodriguez, 2021). The social media platform is also frequently used by companies and sports clubs for advertising purposes or simply to keep a connection with their fans, followers and customers (Virtanen et al., 2017). For football teams in particular, Instagram offers a new way to directly engage and communicate with their fans (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). By creating a brand identity through Instagram, fans can recognise the presented identity and feel more engaged with the club than just by visiting games. This is why brand identity construction on Instagram by football teams is an interesting topic to study.

Feyenoord is a useful subject for this case study because they are, as mentioned in chapter 1, not one of the big clubs in the world with millions of followers, yet one of the most followed in the Netherlands (555k followers). Feyenoord has one of the highest attendance rates at matches in the Netherlands (NOS, 2018). Therefore it is plausible that the loyal fan support is also noticeable on Instagram and Feyenoord has the opportunity to build a successful brand identity through the social media platform. Moreover, Feyenoord is located in the city of Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands with a long history and a large quantity of landmarks and architecture (Knipping, 2022). Being located in one of the largest cities in the Netherlands and their high popularity within the country, makes them

ideal for a case study since the likeability of gaining information about brand identity is higher than when examining for example a less popular club from a small town.

FR12 is an interesting fan page to study the fan engagement towards Feyenoord since the fan page is owned by fans, without any interference of the club itself. The page has 100k followers, one-fifth of the number of followers Feyenoord has on the official page. FR12 posts regularly about Feyenoord games, club culture, fan support and players. This is similar to the posts of Feyenoord themselves and therefore interesting to study whether they use the same brand identity style as Feyenoord does on the official page. Since FR12 is an independent platform, fans can comment freely without any interference from the club, whereas Feyenoord has the powers to delete comments on the official page. This makes it interesting to see whether the comments show similar engagement towards the club on the fan page as they do on the official page.

The sample consists of 97 Instagram posts posted on the official Feyenoord Instagram account and 51 Instagram posts of the fan page FR12. The specific number of 148 in total, will enable the researcher to study all elements in depth and code them into categories on the basis of patterns found. The number of posts is in line with the guidelines of qualitative content analysis which prescribes a dataset of about 150 posts and therefore adequate to conduct a detailed analysis of the sample (Guidelines Thesis Research 6th edition, 2022). The purposive sampling technique was used in order to obtain the sample. This entails that the sample was obtained by the means of specific criteria which every post has to meet. This method is suitable to answer the research question and accomplish the determined research objectives since having criteria that lead to thematic analysis are suitable for studying brand identity through visual images (Campbell et al., 2020). The selected posts were specifically chosen around matches, derbies and special events, since this gives the club the opportunity to convey their identity. Especially around important matches and derbies, emotion can run high by supporters since these matches are generally of high importance for football fans (Dixon, 2012). They could express their engagement with the club even more than on just regular posts around for example training. Instagram posts can include multiple images, if this was the case all images were analysed.

The sampling criteria for the selected Instagram posts were: 1) pictures displaying the city of Rotterdam, 2) pictures displaying the Feyenoord stadium 'De Kuip', 3) pictures displaying flags and other symbols of identity (For example club stickers), 4) pictures displaying interaction with fans, 5) pictures displaying history, 6) pictures displaying wins in

important matches (these entail cup finals and derbies), 7) pictures displaying stadium ambience. All selected posts needed to match at least one of these criteria.

The sampling time frame was two years and four months, from January 2020 until April 2022. This timeframe was chosen to make sure that the used data covers the recent elements Feyenoord uses to convey their brand identity. This makes the results more reliable and makes sure that the found patterns are themes that will still be applicable in present time (Bahcecik et al., 2019). Using a recent timeframe also makes sure that there are no large fluctuations in the number of followers, which can affect fan engagement and number of comments considering the number of people following the club. The time frame between 2020 and 2022 also covers the period of the Covid-19 pandemic in which not all matches could be played in a full stadium. During the time period of March until July 2020 there were no matches held because of the global pandemic. A time in which there is no football or football without a live audience requires more creativity on Instagram since there is less content to build on. This could reflect a stronger display of brand identity. For this reason the chosen time period is useful to research the brand identity of Feyenoord since it covers times with full stadiums and frequent games and a unique timeframe in which games were played without an audience. The fluctuation in environment and ambience also enables the researcher to analyse dynamic content, which could lead to a more in-depth study.

The data was collected between April 1<sup>st</sup> and April 18<sup>th</sup> 2022. The data collection process was initiated from the researcher's personal Instagram account since Instagram requires the user to be logged into an account before accessing specific pages. After having searched for Feyenoord's official page and the page of FR12, the posts were structurally selected using the sampling cratering until reaching the timeframe boundary of 1 January 2020. All selected posts were stored in separate folders on Instagram. The caption and the first 30 comments of each post were copied into separate files stored on the researcher's personal computer.

The club also has their history written down on their website. The history of a football club generally forms their identity and should therefore be studied (Kossakowski & Besta, 2018). In order to get to know from what point of view the club is communicating their identity, this research examined the website and the way they portray their own identity and history. It is especially significant to take into consideration what they write about building a new stadium or renovating the current one since this is a difficult issue among fans.

From each selected post, the first 30 comments will be analysed. These are generally the most liked comments and should therefore represent the fans' thoughts the best

(Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018). Since Feyenoord has the power to delete or switch of comments it is also relevant to look at platforms fans use without any interaction of the club. These are going to come from the Instagram account of fr12. A fan account with nearly 100k followers where fans can interact and give their opinion freely without Feyenoord interfering. These comments could therefore be considered more trustworthy. The same sampling criteria count for the posts of fr12.

### **3.1.3 Key concepts**

To perform a structural and grounded data analysis, this research makes use of several key concepts through which the data analysis is structured. Analysing on the bases of different concepts is helpful in order to recognize patterns, categories and recurring phenomena in the selected data. For this research the theories of the theoretical framework were used to create tables of analysis that form the basis of the discovered categories and patterns. This sub-section briefly summarises the theories and shows what concepts are used for the analysis itself. The concepts entail the topics of: Brand creation, recognizability, rituals and traditions and commenting and sharing.

The first concept that is important for this study is about brand identity creation by the means of five pillars as introduced in the article by Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019). The categories they introduced on which brand identity building is built were stereotypes, belonging, repetitiveness, public interest and ability to distinguish. These categories will also be used in the analysis of Feyenoord's brand identity in which the found elements of their brand identity will be compared to the five pillars of brand building as mentioned. This also counts for the comments and captions that are used with the posts as they can contain the same elements as the pictures.

The second and third key concept draws further upon the concept about identity creation and focusses recognizability and rituals and traditions. Having introduced the theory by Gordon et al. (2014) in the sub-section of brand community in the theoretical framework, the theory can also be used for the analysis of Feyenoord's Instagram page itself. The theory states that brands and brand communities are partially created by the means of recognizability and rituals and traditions. Since a lot of posts of Feyenoord are constructed around their 90 year old stadium and past success, it is important to keep in mind and base different categories upon recognizability and rituals and traditions, because this is also according to the clubs own written history, an important part of their identity. The fan relationship will be measured

through these elements. When there is a similarity noticed within the posts of FR12 and the fan comments, conclusion can be drawn towards fan engagement and co-creation (Black & Veloutsou, 2017)

The last key concept, ‘commenting’, is also in line with the previous concepts of Brand identity creation, recognizability and rituals and traditions. Since this research also draws upon fan comments and posts, it is very important to take the actions of consumers into account. In this case football fans. Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018) introduced a theory in which was stated that football fans usually use four emotional categories when speaking about their favourite football club, these were ‘aspiring’, ‘belonging’, ‘criticising’ and ‘loving’. These emotions are also taken into account during the analysis of Feyenoord’s and especially FR12’s Instagram account and the categories that will be made will be roughly based on the categories as introduced by Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018) complemented by the new categories found during the analysis. Together with the concepts on recognisability and rituals and traditions, a conclusion can be drawn upon fan engagement in the comments since these key concepts can also reflect in fan comments (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Gordon et al., 2014). Of course all the theories discussed in the theoretical framework will be taken into account when conducting this research, the discussed concepts in this subchapter will however be leading during the analysis.

### **3.1.4 Data analysis**

#### ***Thematic content analysis***

To examine the first research objective ‘To examine the brand identity of Feyenoord’ both a visual thematic content analysis and a textual thematic content analysis will be necessary, since Feyenoord uses both elements to present their identity as a brand.

In order to examine the first three research objectives ‘*To examine the brand identity of Feyenoord*’, ‘*To identify how Feyenoord’s Instagram posts communicate brand identity*’ and ‘*To study how Feyenoord portray the relationship with the fan community on Instagram*’ properly, a visual thematic content analysis is applied next to the textual thematic content analysis. Since Instagram posts consist mainly of pictures, this is the main part of the research. Visual thematic research focusses on giving meaning to pictures and enables the researcher to categorise patterns found within this visual content (McCosker et al., 2020). This ranges from the objects portrayed in the pictures, the style of photographing/painting, lighting, size, colours used and if applicable human being portrayed (McCosker et al., 2020).

This is mainly constructed by looking at the connotative and denotative meaning a researcher can retract from images (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014). Hereby can denotation be determined as objects or parts of the photos literally as they are presented (Kim, 2011). Visual analysis also tends to look for patterns in order to categorise selected photos (Rogers, 2021). Categorising pictures gives the researcher the opportunity to derive meaning from the sample since a label is being put towards it (Rogers, 2021).

Another tool that has been used to derive meaning from pictures, is looking at the connotative meaning of the data (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014). Looking at connotation enables the researcher to give cultural meaning and context to pictures (Kim, 2011). This made it easier to answer the third research object 'to study how Feyenoord portrays the bond with the city on Instagram', since a lot of the city related content is culturally derived. Visual thematic analysis also tends to look for patterns in order to categorise selected photos (Rogers, 2021). Categorising pictures gives the researcher the opportunity to derive meaning from the sample since a label is being put towards it (Rogers, 2021).

Giving meaning to images by examining connotations and categorising meanings, will enable the researcher to study the way visual content is presented (Mills, 2018). Studies show that identity and meaning in Instagram posts are often communicated through repeated patterns in Instagram posts (Alem et al., 2017). In order to ensure that the research objectives can be accomplished it has been determined what aspects and connotations Feyenoord uses in their images to convey their brand identity. Determining recurring patterns and categorising them eventually demonstrated how the brand identity has been portrayed (Mills, 2018).

The next part of the analysis falls under the umbrella of textual thematic analysis is the textual parts of Instagram posts. Instagram posts do not only consist of photos themselves, it is also crucial to conduct a thematic content analysis alongside the visual thematic content analysis. Instagram posts are generally accompanied by a 'caption', a short piece of text to add to the photo. This can for example be used to make a statement or to explain what can be seen in the photo. Since this adds to the value of the posts and can contain information on brand identity, it is necessary to research those in order to accomplish the first three research objectives (H. M. Kim, 2020). For Instagram users it is possible to 'comment' on posts. This section is generally used to give an opinion about the post or to make a short statement. The last research object 'To examine fans' comments to Feyenoord's Instagram posts that present city and brand identity' specifically focusses on fans' reactions which can be exclusively found in the comment section. The thematic content analysis made clear what meaning to derive from these fan reactions (H. M. Kim, 2020).

Textual thematic content analysis has been the main tool to understand and distinguish patterns within the comments and captions taken from the sample of Instagram posts. This aims to identify different themes that will come forth. It is as well as visual analysis a way of formulating a meaning out of a large dataset like this one (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) there are three steps in taking a meaning and identifying patterns from a set of data, in this case comments. These are open, axial and selective coding. Open coding will measure engagement and derive meaning from that. Axial coding will provide categories and will give an overview of which comment belongs to which categories. Selective coding allows the researcher to identify connections between the themes that are found and will in this case help by answering the research question and the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, similar to visual analysis, thematic analysis strives to distinguish recurring patterns in writing from which identity and meaning can be derived (Moreno & Quinn, 2019). For this research, it was one of the tools to answer the question in what way the fans see the brand identity of the club and in what way they connected to football club Feyenoord.

### ***Process of data analysis***

This research based on thematic content analysis used the six phases of thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). This means the researcher codes the selected data step by step until a complete coding frame is formed (see appendix A). The first phase is to get familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was collected and stored in separate folders within the personal Instagram account of the researcher in order to distinguish the posts from the official Feyenoord Instagram page and those of fan forum FR12. Getting familiar with the data means, according to the authors, to get in mind what is in each photo and to form a first idea of possible patterns and categories. Phase two enables the researcher to actively form initial themes and patterns such as the themes ‘Workers mentality’ or ‘City landmarks’ as these were recurring items within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All of these sort of noticeable patterns were redeemed from the images and captions which include text, emoticons and hashtags. The next phase allows the researcher to group the data together on the found patterns to have a better overview of each pattern that eventually leads to an overarching category for all themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this research, the sub-themes were found and distinguished and later grouped together to four overarching main themes. The last phase is to actively review the formed categories including themes and sub-themes and create a clear table in which every category is visible and easy to recognise

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this particular research the categories and themes were searched for by taking into account the key concepts as presented in the theoretical framework. The categories, themes and sub-themes as presented in Appendix A, are elaborated on in the results chapter of this research paper.

The coding of the Instagram comments was performed following the same phases as described by Braun & Clark (2006). The first 30 comments were collected from the dataset of 138 Instagram posts (92 of Feyenoord and 48 of FR12) and stored in separate documents on the personal computer of the researcher. After the first step of familiarisation with the selected data, the next steps were followed to come to the eventual coding frames of Instagram comments (Appendix B and C). Also the coding of patterns and themes was performed by the means of the key concepts. In particular the concept as presented in the research by Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018) was taken into account when creating the categories and themes. For both the analysis (posts and comment) open coding, axial coding and selective coding were used.

### **3.2 validity and reliability**

Qualitative research is generally dependent on interpretation of the researcher. It is acknowledged that interpretation and manipulation of qualitative research methods contains a form of subjectivity. This is, however, also the reason that qualitative research needs high transparency when it comes to the methods used. To ensure that the research is highly transparent, the validity and reliability need to be stretched out and elaborated on.

Validity refers to the accuracy of method. This means whether the used methods accurately and genuinely measure what is intended by the researcher. For this thematic content analysis, the validity is being ensured by treating the data as precise and structured as possible. The analysis itself was done through structured methods by the means of the concepts as discussed in the theoretical framework and the previous sub-chapter. The main themes and sub-themes that have been found are written down in the same precise and structured way so that there cannot be any doubt whether the found themes are in the right position. During the process of coding the researcher tried to be as critical as possible. When coding different themes and patterns the researcher has taken time to reflect on the findings and make sure that every category is deliberately chosen. This enhances the validity of the research and makes it less plausible that any mistakes occurred.

Reliability on the other hand refers to the consistency of research methods. This means that the research could be replicated at any time using the same methods and implications. Considering the fact that this qualitative research contains elements of interpretation, the reliability has to be found in the transparency of method and used concepts and theories. All used theories and concepts on which the eventual themes are based have been outlined in a transparent way in the theoretical framework, methodology and results section. This could lead to the replicability of the research although the interpretation of different researchers could always lead to different results.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This research aims to answer the overarching research question: *'In what way do Football clubs use Instagram posts to build and sustain their brand identity and their relationship with its fans and community?'* by the means of a case study of football club Feyenoord using a thematic content analysis. The thematic content analysis consists of 92 posts of the official Feyenoord Instagram page, 47 posts of the Feyenoord fan page FR12 and the first thirty comments generated four main themes. This chapter will present the results of both the posts and comments analysis structured by four main themes and various sub-themes. The four main themes are 'Pride of Rotterdam', 'Stadium as home', 'Building on the past' and 'Thankful for fan support'. Accompanied by quotes and images from the dataset, this chapter will draw upon the found themes and explain them by the means of the in the theoretical framework discussed literature on brand identity and brand community. The analysis shows that Feyenoord creates its brand identity mainly around the landmarks and traditional identity of the city of Rotterdam, the past sporting accomplishments and the loyal support of their highly appreciated fans. The comments reflect on these themes and show that the fans take over and replicate the identity that Feyenoord communicates themselves.

The first section will provide a short overview of how the club has written down their history and traditional identity on the official website. The second section, which elaborates on the first theme 'Pride of Rotterdam' will demonstrate that Feyenoord uses various elements of the city of Rotterdam to communicate their own brand identity. These elements entail both landmarks and cultural elements. The section also shows that mainly the cultural references are replicated by the fan page FR12 and positively received in the comments. The second theme 'Stadium as home' stresses the importance of the stadium in the brand identity building of the club as it is presented as the beating heart of the football club, this is also what the fans take over the most, according to the analysis. The third theme 'Building on the past' shows that shared memories among fan creates a sense of unity and are widely shared over both analysed Instagram pages. This theme is crucial in sustaining a relationship with the fans. The last theme 'Thankful for fan support' demonstrates the importance of appreciation of fan support. It shows that Feyenoord reflects their brand identity on their fans and in that way tries to create a stronger relationship with the fans and again tries to create a sense of unity among them. The last section will also show the most eminent differences in brand identity communication of the official Feyenoord Instagram page and that of FR12. This difference

can be found in the way of supporting the team and the criticism on the clubs actions that is expressed in the comments.

#### **4.1 A working-class club**

Feyenoord was formed in 1908 in the southern neighbourhood of Rotterdam carrying the same name 'Feijenoord'. The area was mainly inhabited by harbour workers who lived in poverty (Feyenoord, 2022). The club never took a distance from this working mentality although the neighbourhood is not necessarily inhabited by harbour workers anymore. On the official Feyenoord website where the history of the club is written down. They mention this working mentality and label themselves as a club that never gives up, especially not in bad times (Feyenoord, 2022). The club motto 'Sterker door strijd' (Stronger through effort) is mentioned multiple times throughout the explanation of the clubs footballing history, insinuating a club of hard work without talking too much.

Another eminent element of their history as written down on the website is the fact that they belong specifically to the southern part of the city. They mention: 'Even though we moved a couple of times in history, we belong to the south' (Feyenoord, 2022). They also state one of the nicknames that are still in use nowadays 'the proudness of the south' (Feyenoord, 2022). In other words, they want to make clear that the south is the place where the club is most proud of and wants to connect its identity to, including the workers' mentality that is culturally connected to this neighbourhood. They also state specifically on the other hand that 'the whole of Rotterdam glows' when Feyenoord has success (Feyenoord, 2022). This probably to create unity instead of focusing solely on the south.

#### **4.2 Pride of Rotterdam**

The first main theme found in the dataset was 'pride of Rotterdam' as various elements of the city of Rotterdam are frequently used to build the brand identity of the club. The sub-themes that were distinguished were the recurring presence of the south of the city in the posts, the workers mentality of the people of Rotterdam and the use of general city landmarks. All of these sub-themes form the main theme 'pride of Rotterdam' and contain brand identity constructing elements accompanied by elements enhancing brand community engagement and co-creation as discussed in the theoretical framework.

#### 4.2.1 The south feels like home

The analysis showed that ‘pride of Rotterdam’ is one of the most eminent categories that were redeemed from the dataset. A sub-theme was found throughout the dataset that showed that Feyenoord as a football club is the representation and pride of the city of Rotterdam and especially the southern part of the city where the stadium (de Kuip) is located. The fact that the football club tries to represent the city that they are from is in line with the research of Dixon (2012) which states that fans often see their favourite football teams as a direct representation of the city or region they are from.

The dataset makes clear that Feyenoord wants to communicate that besides that they want to represent the city of Rotterdam as a whole, they are particularly proud to be the club from the south of the city, having two other professional football clubs in the western part of the city (Sparta) and the eastern part of the city (Excelsior). As seen in ‘Figure 1’, the club shows multiple photos of Feyenoord flags taken from the southern area of the city stating ‘Rotterdam-Zuid’ accompanied by three heart emoticons in the club colours of red, white and black. This post was posted before the match against Ajax Amsterdam who are considered to be the main rival of the club and one of the most important matches of the season for the club and the fans. Even though this is not a match against one of the other two Rotterdam clubs, the club still wants to make clear that their home is in the south.

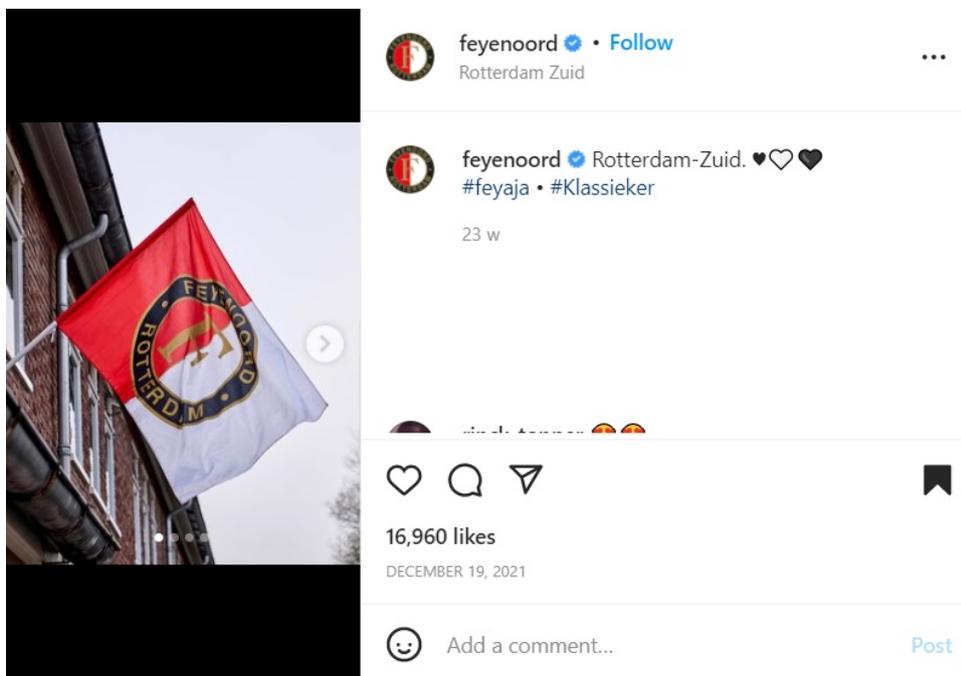


Figure 1. Feyenoord official. December 19, 2021. Rotterdam-Zuid

Another sub-theme that shows the specific appreciation of the southern part of the city is the use of famous buildings and viewpoints in the south. When giving an overview of Rotterdam from the sky, Feyenoord usually does this from a southern perspective, often with the stadium as a central part of the narrative. In 'Figure 2' this is highlighted by using the eye-catching old building 'de Maassilo', an old grain silo that nowadays is used as a nightclub. On top of the building stands Feyenoord player Luis Sinisterra who just renewed his contract at the club. He overlooks the city and the southern part of it towards the stadium in a proud and powerful way wearing the team jersey. This attitude raises the impression of proudness and the feeling of being home. The south and its buildings being the home and the start of the club's identity.

As mentioned in the article of Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019), public interest is one of the pillars of constructing brand identity. The use of public spaces such as famous buildings fall within the field of public interest and help construct the identity of a brand and in this case that of football club Feyenoord. The major buildings in the south remind the people of Rotterdam of the home area of their club, so that also fans from outside of the neighbourhood feel attached to it. As Feyenoord also has a lot of fans outside of Rotterdam and even outside of the Netherlands, the use of local public space, such as the Maassilo building, will increase their knowledge of the city and make them again feel attached to the neighbourhood without having been there in real life (Sweetser et al., 2016). This finding therefore supports the theories of both Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019) and Sweetser et al. (2016) that state that the usage of symbolic places of public interest create unity among followers and therefore help to create a similar idea of brand identity among fans by using the identity of existing public spaces, in this case the well known Maassilo.

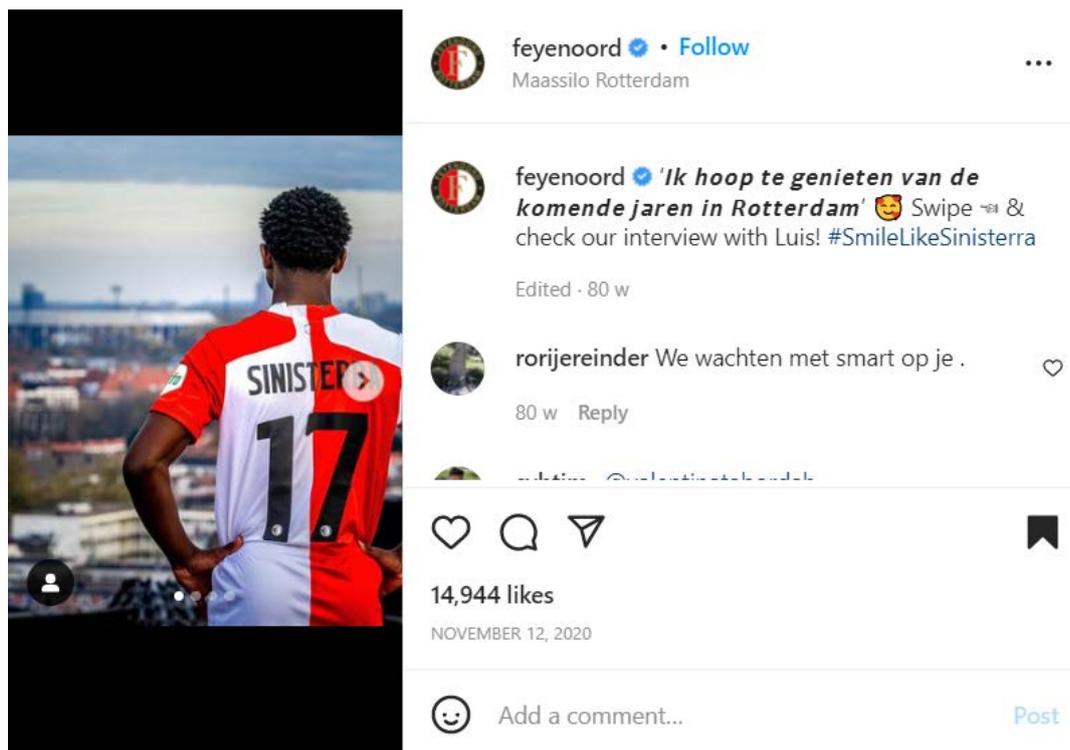


Figure 2. Feyenoord official. November 12, 2020. Maassilo

#### 4.2.2 Workers mentality and fan criticism

The motto ‘sterker door strijd’ is mentioned in almost all posts regarding important matches, especially after winning (see Figure 3). The fact that this sub-theme is interchangeable with the posts of fan platform FR12 means that the motto is widely known and communicated by the club as well as by the fans. In other words the club and the fans have the same identity as people of hard work and taking distance from bourgeoisie and upper class. Communication of this particular one-liner over and over also creates a sense of repetitiveness, as explained by Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019) as one of the five pillars of constructing brand identity. This form of repetition as taken over by the fans can also be seen as a form of co-creation through brand communities. After all the fans communicate and replicate the same message as the brand or this case the club. This phenomenon was explained by Gordon et al. (2014) as consciousness of kind. The followers of the club recognise the motto and use it themselves in large numbers. Without knowing each other fans will always acknowledge the club motto and the identity of the working class through the shared motto of ‘sterker door strijd’. Seen as just a marketing tool, this repetition keeps the identity alive and flowing, using it in various posts (See Figure 3). Figure 3 also represents the passion of fans following their club through the additional line ‘Wat een passie’ (What a passion). The usage

of the motto ‘sterker door strijd’ are therefore in line with the research of Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019) and Martí-Parreño et al. (2017) that state that repetitiveness helps constructing brand identity by making sure that certain brand identity elements stick to the brain of the consumer, in this case a motto. It is shown that this leads to the ‘consciousness of kind’, a sense of recognisability, as described by Gordon et al. (2014).



Figure 3. FR12. May 4, 2022. Sterker door strijd

The identity of hard working people is also communicated by Feyenoord by mostly showing players in a struggle during the game and always encouraging them to keep on doing their best (see Figure 4). This should not be seen as a major form of constructing identity, considering the fact that pictures from football games will have a sports struggling and hardworking undertone in general since sports is considered hard work. Feyenoord uses this however in their advantage to link the struggle of the game with the earlier mentioned motto of ‘sterker door strijd’. Illustrated by ‘Figure 4’ when they added the caption ‘keep pushing’, insinuating Feyenoord players will keep on working hard until the end of the game and the desired goal is being reached. This form of communication can be seen as an element of brand identity building by using repetitiveness by shared motto’s and could be seen as an example that confirms the theories around successful brand identity building by Black & Veloutsou (2017) and Martí-Parreño et al. (2017). The success is being confirmed by the fact that FR12 uses the same motto.



**Figure 4. Feyenoord official. April 2, 2022. Keep pushing**

A noticeable subtheme in the comments concerning the workers' mentality is that of criticism. It is eminent that the comment section is generally used to express opinions and the dataset indicates that these opinions are both positive and negative. When the team does not perform according to the expectations of the fans, they tend to express their dissatisfaction by communicating directly to the club using strong direct language such as 'They have to improve', 'we need better players' and 'they weren't there today' (Feyenoord 2021). What stands out besides these comments concerning direct game results, is the criticism that is aimed at the club or the players not obeying to the club's identity of hard-working people. As shown on 'Figure 5', when Feyenoord posts the green and white flag with a caption containing the Rotterdam motto if 'Sterker door strijd' the fans unitedly comment 'Welke strijd' (which effort) referring to bad performances by the team.

However, this type of criticism aimed at the workers' mentality of the club shows that the brand identity building strategy used by Feyenoord is successfully received by the fans since they react directly when they notice that the teams lacks the mentality that is communicated by the club (Relling et al., 2016). The theory on brand communities by Relling et al. (2016) showed that brand identity building is successful when the community recognises it and responds accordingly as demonstrated by the comments in 'Figure 5'.

Criticism is, however, ubiquitous among football fans, especially when teams do not perform according to the expectations of the fans, the analysis shows that this is also the case for Feyenoord (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). The phenomenon of criticism, despite the fact of engaged fandom, can be explained through the fact that football fans usually only support

one football team and do not change clubs (Porad, 2010). Whereas in other fields such as music or theatre, it is easy to change interest towards a different artist when fans are dissatisfied about the performance, football fans stay with the same team (Porad, 2010). The only way of coping with dissatisfaction is therefore expressing critique directly.

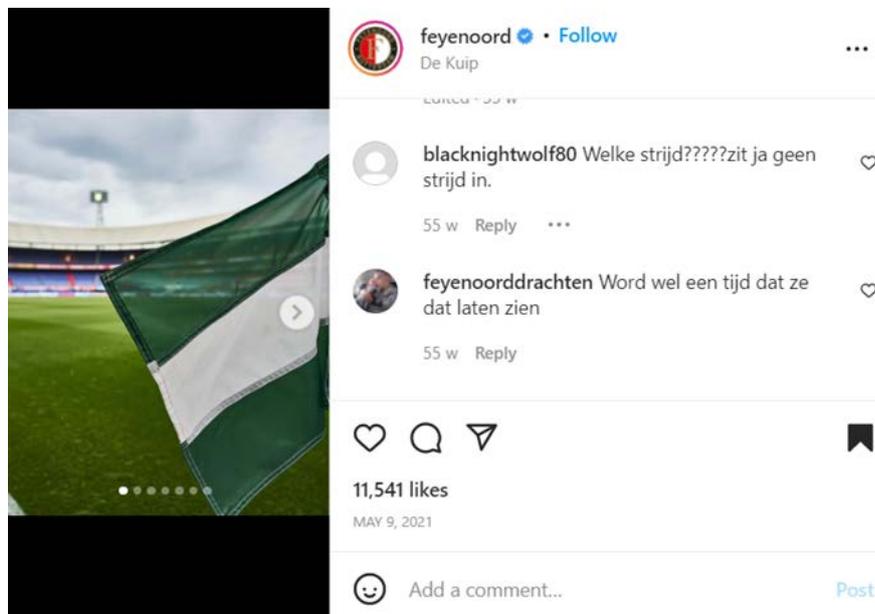


Figure 5. Feyenoord official, May 9 2021. Which effort?

#### 4.2.3 City landmarks, common signs and the expression of love

In addition to the earlier mentioned structural use of eye-catching buildings of the south in particular, Feyenoord also makes structural use of the city skyline containing multiple landmarks and points of recognition that refer to the city of Rotterdam. So is the Erasmus bridge that leads from the centre of the city towards the southern neighbourhood of Feijenoord, a recurring landmark that keeps on being posted around important events such as personal accomplishments by players and around important matches such as the derby against Sparta, the club from the west of the city. This also counts for the town hall (where championships are usually celebrated), the Willems bridge and of course their stadium. All accompanied by positive and proud captions such as ‘this city’ or ‘for the city of Rotterdam’ (Feyenoord, 2021) indicating that they are proud to represent the city as whole, instead of just the south, although as mentioned before images from a southern perspective seem more eminent.

As discussed in sub-section 4.2.1, using public space in a brand identity strategy causes the brand to take over the identity of the public space that has been used. Therefore it is also possible for consumers to identify with these objects of public space. The strategy of Feyenoord to include multiple city landmarks in their brand identity communication is therefore in line with the pillars of successful brand identity building as shown by Sweetser et al. (2016). Also the fact that Feyenoord does not only use the landmarks of the south, but deliberately those from all over the city insinuates that they want to create a sense of unity between fans from all over the city. This confirms the findings by Rathore et al. (2016), in which it was shown that unity is one of the main concepts of high fan or consumer engagement.

Moreover, a very important visible pattern is that of common signs and in this case specifically flags and banners. Although the club colours of Feyenoord are red and white, most of the posts contain the flag of the city, which is green and white. Almost all posts before matches contain an image of the corner flag, which is used in game to indicate where the playing field ends (see Figure 5). Feyenoord chose to make these flags in the colours of the city of Rotterdam instead of the colours of the club. After matches the club tends to post a lot of pictures of fans waving the green and white flag of Rotterdam. What results in a form of unity instead of only making sure to highlight the southern part of the city as being the most important (Rathore et al., 2016). Highlighting the Rotterdam flag as a symbol of unity attracts people from all over the city.

The sign of unity again as seen with the Rotterdam motto 'Sterker door strijd' creates a form of co-creation as the images of fans in the stadium waving the green and white flag is being replicated multiple times by FR12 in exactly the same manner as Feyenoord uses it themselves (See figure 3). The study by Black & Veloutsou (2017) showed that unity through co-creation is mainly being constructed by the use of symbols of unity such as flags and motto's. In the case of Black and Veloutsou's study these were the national symbols of Scotland that created a form of unity between independence voters. The use of the Rotterdam flag is similar since it is easy to recognize and even more easy to replicate. The fact that the use of the common sign of the flag is also confirmed by the fact that FR12 uses the same sign and the colours green and white are used frequently in the comments underneath the posts.

Feyenoord therefore makes use of the flag to build their own brand identity through co-creation as people will relate the flag not only to the city of Rotterdam, but also to the club of Feyenoord as this is where the flag is shown the most. Even for the important game against rivals Ajax Amsterdam, Feyenoord made use of the Rotterdam flag to announce the game (see

Figure 6). The red and white of the club could have been an option, yet the club chose to highlight the city as a whole even accompanied by the caption ‘Show your support with a green heart’, instead of with a red and white heart which would be more fitting with the club itself. This means that they seem to use the common sign of the city flag to complement their brand identity to create a sense of unity and evoke co-creation (Black & Veloutsou, 2016).



Figure 6. Feyenoord official. March 20, 2022. Support with a green heart

### 4.3 Stadium as home

The most eminent theme when it comes to the buildings and landmarks in the Instagram posts of Feyenoord is the stadium ‘de kuip’. Since there were plans of building a new stadium two major sub-themes were found concerning the stadium. That of the positive posting and commenting about the current stadium and that of the visible negative posting and commenting about the new stadium. It becomes clear that Feyenoord tries to build their brand identity around the current stadium as a place that feels safe like home. The data shows that this is in line with the in the theoretical framework discussed theory about brand communities being stronger when holding on to rituals and traditions (Gordon et al., 2014)

There are many pictures in the dataset taken from the sky and the roof of the stadium, as the club is often referring to it directly as home using captions such as ‘Home is where the heart is’ and ‘Home at last’ also together with green or red heart emoticons (Feyenoord, 2022). The club places the stadium into an idyllic perspective by structurally posting images of the stadium with a golden sky or sunset in the background or accompanied by moving

images of the harbour in the background referring to the stadium as idyllic home in between the hard work that is going on in the harbour (see Figure 7).

The club probably tries to get to the sentiments and emotions of the supporters by making the stadium into a home like scenery. Best portrayed by a post during the Covid pandemic when no fans at football were allowed. The club posted a photo of the stadium saying 'comment home if you miss this place like we do' (see Figure 8). As the research by Habibi et al. (2014) showed, a brand community get stronger and more unified when the brand, company or organization creates a sense of confidence and safety. Using the stadium to create a sense of home and idealising it to get to the sentiments of fans would therefore be a plausible brand identity communication tool by Feyenoord. Also, the frequent and structural use of stadium in posts again shows that Feyenoord uses repetitiveness, public interest and a unifying object to communicate brand identity as described by Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019). This action of the club can be described as a successful strategy since the fans frequently express their love towards the stadium, both by posts of FR12 and the comments underneath the posts.

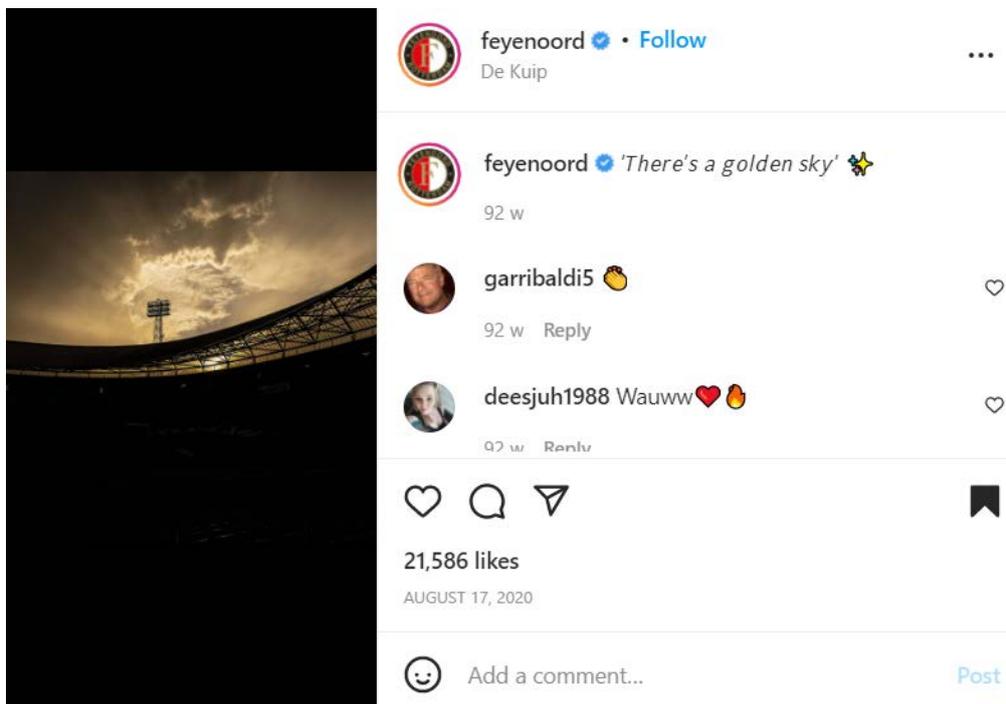


Figure 7. Feyenoord official. August 17, 2020. Golden sky

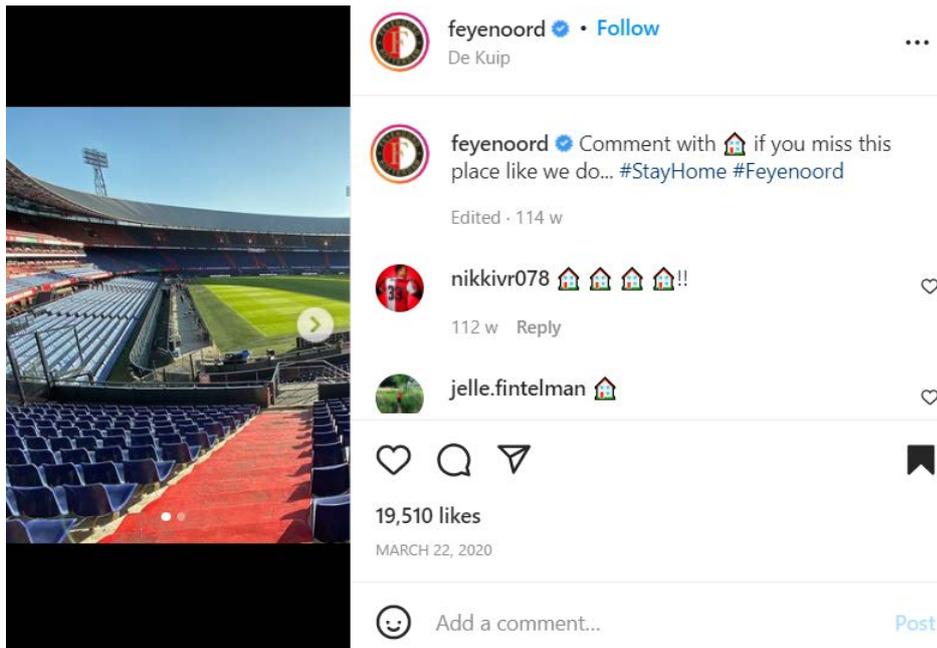


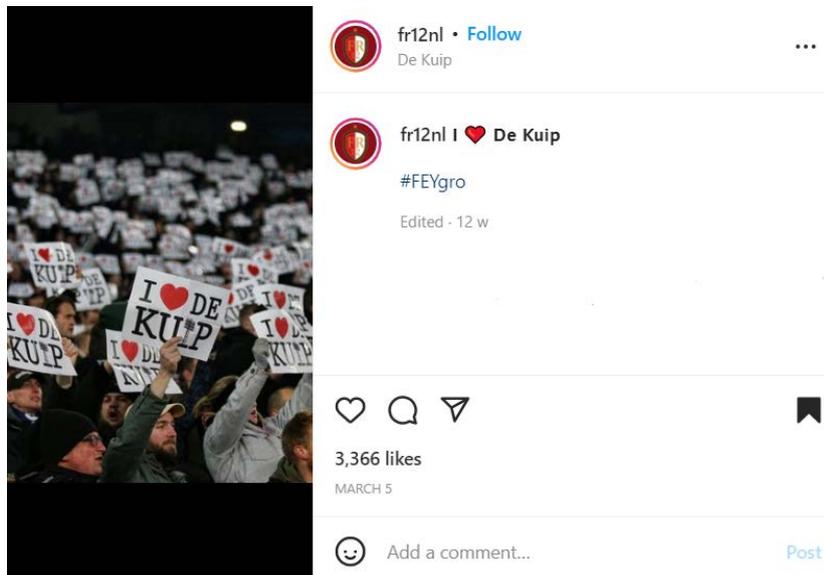
Figure 8. Feyenoord official. March 22, 2022. Stadium as home

#### 4.3.1 Red de Kuip (save de Kuip)

Red de Kuip is a term that was created by fans in order to express their dissatisfaction with the club's plans of building a new stadium in the future as a majority of fans want the original stadium to stay as it is right now. Which makes the most eminent difference between the fan page of FR12 and the official page of Feyenoord. FR12 posted (before the plans for a new stadium got cancelled) a large amount of pictures particularly about the fact that they wanted to keep de Kuip as a stadium. Usually with expressions of love such as red hearts. These photos entail for example a full stadium with all fans holding a small banner or postcard containing the words 'I love de Kuip'.

Feyenoord never posts images like this, only sign affection to the stadium in general. FR12 does this as well, but the difference in posting about red de Kuip is worth mentioning since this is one of the few differences in posting between the two platforms. This can be explained by the fact that Feyenoord was far ahead with plans of building a new, modern and state of the art stadium that should replace their current stadium 'de Kuip' (Klok, 2021). This plan however created a dichotomy between fans who were in favour of the new stadium and those who strongly condemned the plans (NU.nl, 2021). This eventually escalated in 2021 when multiple investors and members of the board of directors of Feyenoord received death threats and the million euro plans were cancelled, leaving the club in financial trouble (Liukku, 2021). This strong objection against leaving the old stadium can be found in the fact that the city has been bombed in the second world war and the old stadium from the 1930s is

one of the few buildings remaining (Groenendijk, 2021). For the community it therefore has an incredible monumental value. Feyenoord also uses this monumental value in their Instagram posts.



**Figure 8. FR12. March 5, 2022. Red de Kuip**

What stands out from the dataset of comments is the recurring expression of love, what can be determined as a sub-theme within the dataset of comments, especially towards the stadium 'de Kuip'. The emotion of love is generally expressed through short comments or the single use of love expressing emoticons as shown in the captions of the posts themselves (see Figure 7, 9, 10 & 11). The caption in general seems to have a big influence on the use of emoticons to express love. For example, when a question is asked people seem to respond solely to the question. For example when a green heart is asked for they will comment with a green heart and when a house emoticon is asked for they will comment accordingly (see Figure 6 & 8). Therefore it can be concluded that the romanticising of the stadium as Feyenoord does on their official page, is a successful tool in order to keep a good relationship with the fans since the love that Feyenoord expresses themselves is taken over by the fans. This corresponds with the findings of Rathore et al. (2016) and Black & Veloutsou (2017) that state that using common images in a positive way causes fans and consumers to be more engaged and eager to co-create. As is shown by the love that Feyenoord themselves express towards the stadium goes on towards fan page FR12 and the comments underneath the posts of both pages. This is for example portrayed in 'Figure 9' by the caption 'I love de Kuip'.

There is, however, a difference in the way fans express their love for the club, stadium and acts of fandom in the comments of Feyenoord's official Instagram page and the fan page

of FR12. The main difference in patterns lay's in the type of language used. The comments underneath the posts of FR12 contain significantly more superlatives and more emoticons in general. Superlatives such as 'Most beautiful', 'Amazing' or 'This should become a canvas' when speaking about a photo of the stadium (see Figure 10). Similar photos posted on the official page generally get more moderate responses such as 'wow', 'nice' or 'wallpaper' (see Figure 11). Also the use of emoticons is more moderate, where people use one emoticon, whereas in comments of FR12's page the use of multiple is very common (see Figure 11).

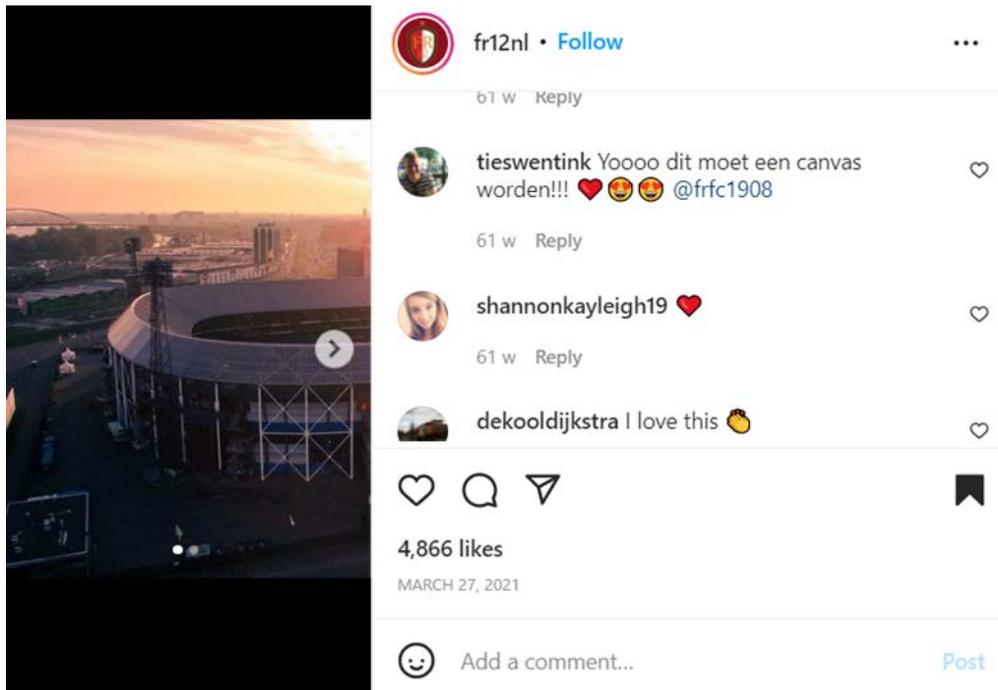


Figure 9. FR12. March 27, 2021. Expression of love

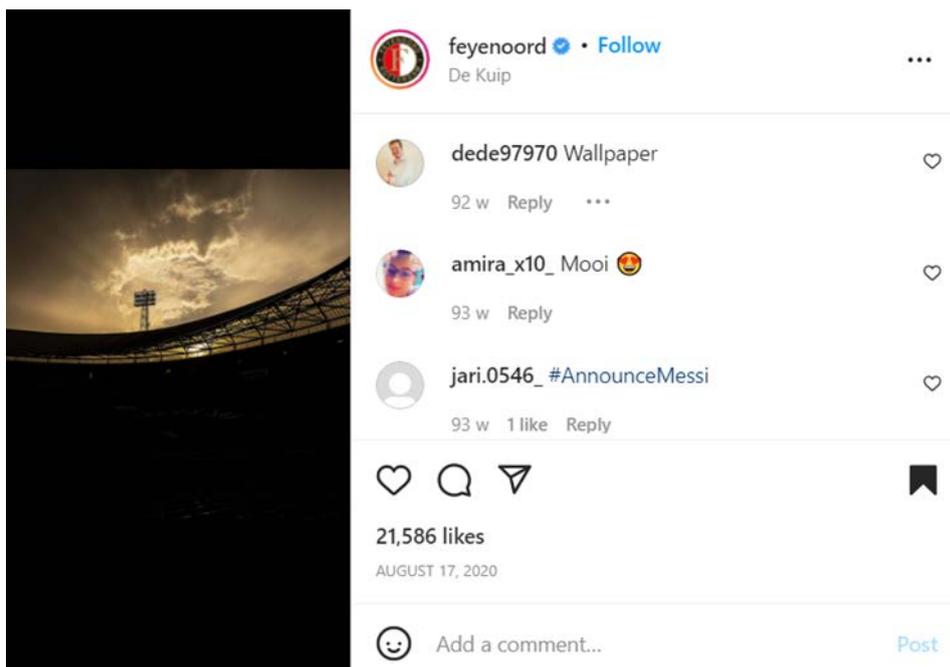


Figure 10. Feyenoord official. August 17, 2020. Expression of love

### 4.3.2 New stadium

The fact that the majority of fans disagree with plans of building a new stadium, as described in section 4.2.1, explained the fact that Feyenoord barely posted about the plans on their Instagram brand page. Since building a brand identity is mostly about being in line with your followers and fans, it is not recommendable to post images of which a company already knows that it is going to cause discussion (Phillips et al., 2014). Companies always want their posts to be reproducible and liked by the community in order to make co-creation possible (Black & veloutsou, 2017). They communicated the plans one time in very down to earth posts. The news was brought as a news article without expressions of proudness or happiness as they do normally (Figure 9). Also the notion of a new home is missing. The colours used are only red, white and black and therefore the sign of unity, the green and white flag is also not present. In short, Feyenoord seems to know that these posts would not be liked by the community and decided not to use the elements of brand identity construction as presented in the whole of chapter 4.



Figure 11. Feyenoord official. September 17, 2020. New stadium

Feyenoord broke their own pattern of posting when posting about the stadium since it is known that the new stadium is a debatable subject among fans. The comments underneath contain indeed negative one-liners such as ‘red de kuip’ (save de Kuip), and ‘stop Feyenoord city’ (the name of the new stadium) (Feyenoord, 2020). On the contrary, when it comes to the plans of a new stadium, the fans comment more nuanced on the page of FR12. Where the pattern of expression of love showed that the used language was stronger on the fan page, the

criticism seems milder and more nuanced. People give their opinion instead of expressing their dissatisfaction directly to the club. The FR12 comments are longer and express that it is a shame that the plans are cancelled (see figure 13). This can be explained by the fact of unity among the fans where there is no reason to speak directly to the club. On the official page people use the comments to share their thoughts to the club instead of discussing important issues such as the new stadium between each other. Moreover, the criticism on the stadium again seems to be in line with the statement by Porad (2010) that football fans criticise their club more than fans do in other fields of fandom. This because football fans only have one team and no other supporting options as described in sub-section 4.1.2. It is also clear that Feyenoord recognises this subject as a possible cause of dissatisfaction and acts accordingly to keep their brand community happy (Phillips et al., 2014)

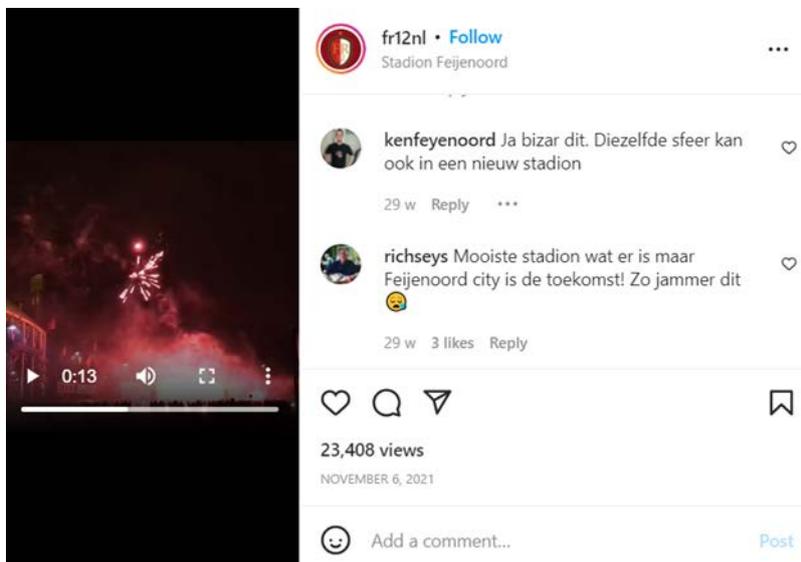


Figure 12. FR12, November 6, 2021. Nuanced comments about the new stadium

#### 4.4 Build on past success

History is according to the club themselves a very important part of the identity of the club and past success must be treasured. They often refer to the past as being the most successful club of Rotterdam. Two sub-themes were being distinguished as Feyenoord draws mainly upon past success in terms of championships and success in terms of players that have done a lot for the club. Especially the frequent use of legends of the past in Feyenoord's Instagram posts causes the brand community to have a shared memory and therefore unity over multiple generations enhancing the fan relationship and co-creation of brand identity (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017; Gordon et al., 2014; Adams & Baden, 2020).

#### **4.4.1 Past championships & honoured legends**

Being one of the most successful football clubs of the Netherlands together with Ajax Amsterdam and PSV Eindhoven, Feyenoord has the position to build a winners mentality by the means of their conquered prizes in the past. This is also something that comes forth from the analysis of the dataset in which there is a clear pattern of recurring posts of past success. The last national championship dates from 2017 and is recapped every year with footage of the whole city celebrating and captioning 'Where were you on the big day?' or using the hashtag #onthistday, while posting about the won European cup in 2002.

As brand communities usually form among rituals and traditions, it is clear why Feyenoord uses so much past success to build trust and share the winners mentality. These big moments from the past will be remembered and create unity among fans who lived through the same special moment. Special and important moments help to trigger the human brain in remembering details in general (Friedman, 1993). It is clear that this strategy works, considering the fact that FR12 replicates the posts of won prizes in the past accompanied with captions expressing love and admiring feelings such as 'The team' or 'What a club' often together with the previously mentioned heart emoticons (see Figure 15 & 17). Another recurring theme is again the green and white Rotterdam flag that is always shown when speaking about prizes won, also in order to create a sense of unity among fans. Building on past successful moments and using shared symbols creates unity and a strong bond within a brand community (Gordon et al., 2014; Black & Veloutsou, 2017).

Together with past success there is the notion of club legends (Players that had a particular big influence on the club in the past) and successful teams in general. Past success is being celebrated over and over again and players that had a big impact on that success will have separate posts dedicated to them. For example Rinus Israel who played more than 200 games for the club in the early 1970s was there when Feyenoord won the Europa Cup I, the most important European prize at the time as the first Dutch club ever. Being a familiar face for many followers, Israel is a recurring figure when it comes to celebrating past success and honouring the legend as he is. On figure 10 he is displayed with the Europa Cup I lifted above his head (on the right). The post also contains the hashtag #onthistday, referring to the day in 1970 when the club won the prize and as mentioned that is a part of the phenomenon of building identity on past success.

Reliving happy moments hands the follower more change of unity and will prevent a gap between brand and consumer or club and fans (Coelho et al., 2018). Nevertheless, posts

about club legends do not have to be positive. Another sub-theme that has been discovered from the dataset is that of honouring former players' death through tribute, something which causes even more unity between club and fans than sharing of past success. For example both Feyenoord as well as FR12 posted about the funeral of former player Wim Jansen, which was attended by many fans (see Figure 15). These club legends and the fact of keeping them and their achievements alive can also be seen as a shared symbol like a flag or a banner. At least they seem to have the same effect as using direct common signs such as flags and colours, because they create shared memory and therefore unity among different generations as described by Adams & Baden (2020). The former achievements are being used as common knowledge among followers and causes every Feyenoord fan to know them even though they might not have been alive at the time the success was being achieved (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017). The theme of using past success and club legend in Instagram posts can therefore be categorised as a separate brand identity tool than that of the usage of common signs. These carry unity among fan communities over different generations and build a very strong bond between fan or consumer and brand (Gordon et al., 2014; Adams & Baden, 2020).

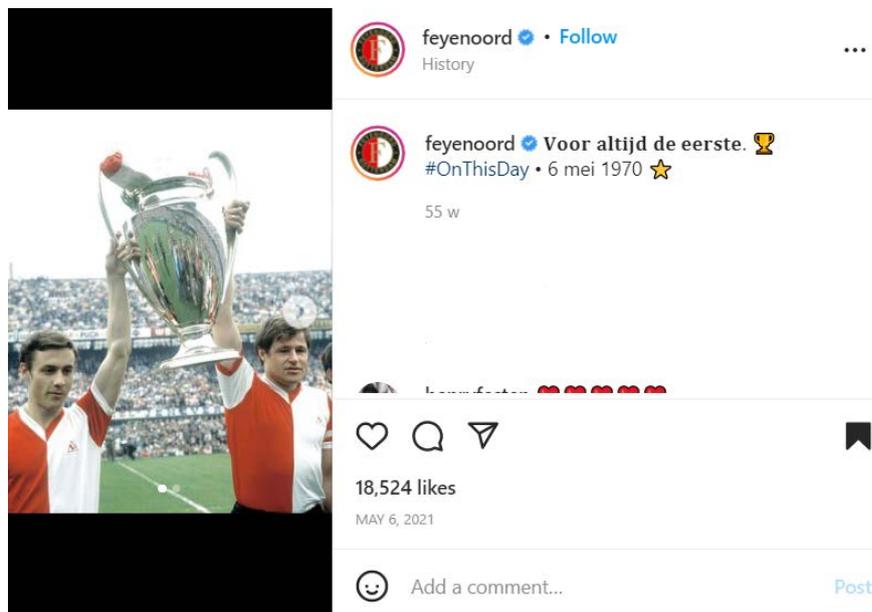


Figure 13. Feyenoord official. May 6, 2021. Rinus Israel



Figure 14. FR12. January 29, 2022. Wim Jansen

## 4.5 Thankful for fan support

The fans play an important role in the Instagram posts of Feyenoord and are the creators of the page FR12. From the dataset it becomes clear that Feyenoord projects the brand identity as constructed through the elements discussed in the previous sections of chapter 4 onto the fans. Where the workers' mentality and the loyalty of the fans stands central. The fact that this appreciation is replicated by FR12 and shown in the comment section shows that the branding strategy enhances the relationship between Feyenoord and its fans (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). However it also became clear that there is a difference in the perception of true fan support by the fans and the club itself. The communicated identity by the club as well as by the fans, however, stays the same (Gordon et al., 2014).

### 4.5.1 Without fans no Feyenoord

The last sub-theme shows the bond between Feyenoord and its fan community as one of the most eminent themes. It shows the affection Feyenoord expresses towards their fans. As shown already, most of the dataset contains pictures of a full stadium and fan actions of ambience. After every game the club thanks its fans for their support and their attendance at the stadium. Also they mention it very often when the stadium is sold out and generally use the sign of affection such as hearts and love showing emoticons. They tend to use happy

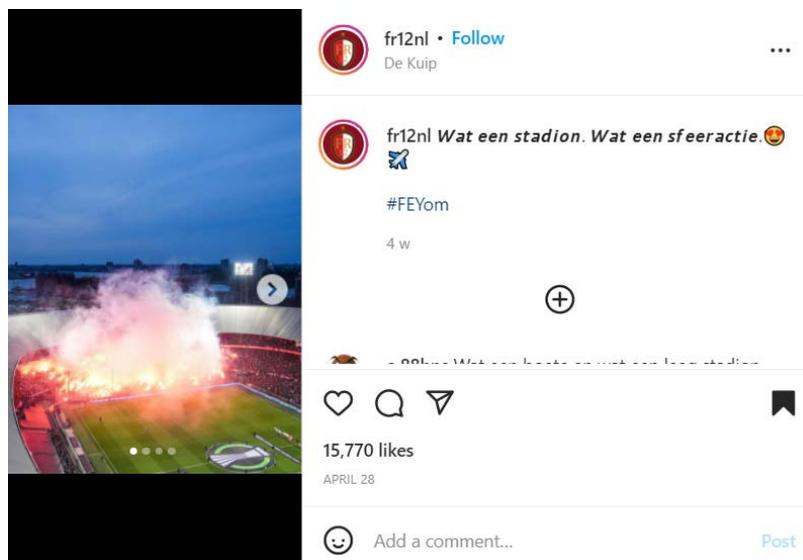
images of people cheering as well as pictures of people suffering while still supporting the club. This is shown in ‘Figure 16’ as fans walk through the rain towards the stadium to support their club. Feyenoord makes use of the occurrence by thanking the fans for their support ‘through every type of weather’ (see Figure 16). Highlighting the loyalty and again the workers mentality as mentioned in chapter 4.1.1. This kind of support and the act of thanking the fans also falls under the umbrella of the earlier mentioned Rotterdam motto of ‘sterker door strijd’ (Stronger through effort). The identity of the club is highlighted in a subtle way by just thanking the supporters for their unconditional support while reminding them of the brand identity of the club which is constructed through belonging to a group, repetitiveness, public interest, consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions and common signs as described by Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019), Gordon et al. (2014) and Black & Veloutsou (2017). Figure 12 represents all of the previous categories and can be seen as the ideal example of the brand identity as communicated by Feyenoord.



**Figure 15. Feyenoord official. February 20, 2022. Being fan through every weather condition**

FR12 uses the same category of images as Feyenoord when it comes to showing their fan involvement. The posts contain a lot of full stadiums, flags and banners, accompanied by expressions of love and pride for the club (see Figure 9, 17 & 18). This in the form of heart emoticons, sharing the same workers mentality of loyalty and always being there to support. There is however one difference in themes noticeable in the number of posts containing

fireworks on the FR12 page. Fireworks are illegal inside European stadiums and Feyenoord received multiple fines in the past for the use of fireworks by their fans. Feyenoord does not use any images containing fireworks and focusses on the use of flags and banners, which as explained create unity and community. FR12 however uses posts containing fireworks in order to express their active support. The platform generally uses captions that show affection and pride about the actions containing fireworks inside the stadium such as ‘What an ambience’ and ‘What an atmospheric action’, accompanied as seen previously by love showing emoticons (see Figure 17). It is eminent that there is a difference in how Feyenoord expresses true support and how the fan page of FR12 does this. It however comes down to the same conclusion and identity, namely that of unconditional support showcased by full stadium, where only the way of expression differs. This is explained through the use of flags as a symbol of unity that Feyenoord will always prefer, over the use of fireworks which are not proven to create a sense of unity and are above all illegal actions within the stadium. This means that the club is successful in building brand community and starting co-creation according to the theories by Gordon et al. (2014) and Black & Veloutsou (2017) as explained in the theoretical framework.



**Figure 16. Ambience as showcased by FR12**

This appreciation of posts containing fan actions accompanied by fireworks also reflects in the comments. In sub-section 4.2.1 it was mentioned that stronger language is used for expressing love in the comments concerning the stadium ‘de Kuip’. This difference is also visible for comments underneath posts containing fan actions. Most of the fan action pictures containing fireworks, are accompanied by love showing comments carrying again a lot of

superlatives and emoticons. The fans' comments seem to highlight the fact that, according to them, Feyenoord has the best fans. Superlatives such as 'The best fans ever', 'This is pure emotion and passion' and 'We are Feyenoord' are common underneath posts containing fan actions (see Figure 18). In comments containing fan actions on the official Instagram page of Feyenoord fans are again more moderate in their expressions and more influenced by captions. For example when questions are asked such as 'who is Feyenoord's best player?', people just answer the question shortly without any further comment or show of affection. Nevertheless as shown in the research of Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018), football fans express love for the club in various ways, whereas this patterns is also eminent with the official page as FR12's, the difference lay's especially in the way in which the supports express their love, the expression and category itself is ubiquitous on both pages. This finding is also still in line with the findings of Gordon et al., (2014) which state that the showing of appreciation towards followers enhances the engagement between brand and consumer. As became clear from the theme of love expression in the comment section, the love that Feyenoord shows to their fans is being replicated and even stronger expressed on the fan page FR12. Therefore the co-creation is enhanced and the brand identity of the club communicated by club and fans at the same time (Rathore et al., 2016).

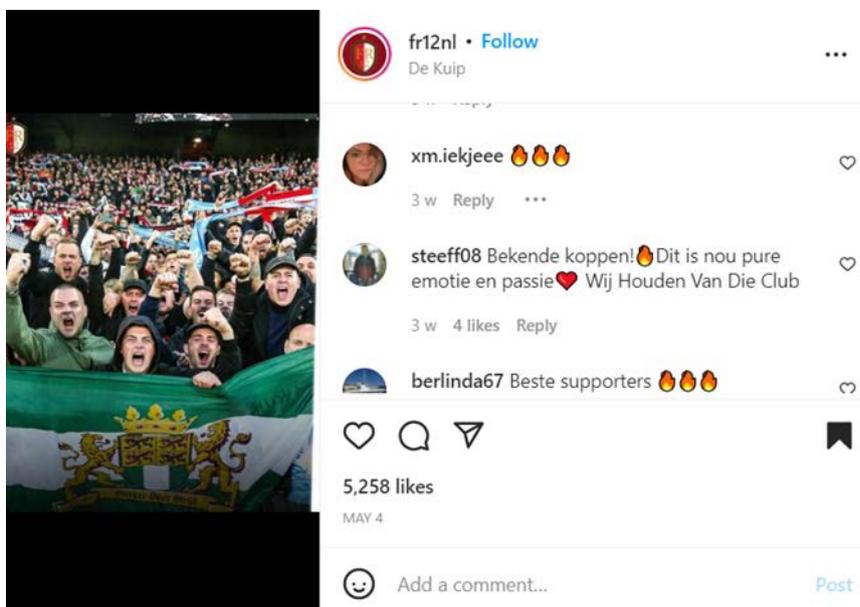


Figure 17. FR12. May 4, 2022. Expression of love for fan action

From the dataset, it can be taken that Feyenoord mainly constructs its brand identity through the various city landmarks and cultural aspects of the city of Rotterdam and

communicates to be proud to represent this city. They tend to stage the stadium as the beating heart of the club that functions as a home for their fans. The club also tries to use past success and players that have meant a lot for the club in past to create a collective memory for fans that lasts over generations. The last theme that has been distinguished showed the appreciation for the fanaticism and loyalty of the fans. All of these themes were found within the dataset of FR12 and the comments as well, which means that after elaborating on the results using the literature as presented in the theoretical framework, Feyenoord communicates its brand identity in a way in which the relationship with the fan community gets stronger and the possibility of co-creation is being enhanced (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017; Gordon et al., 2014; Adams & Baden, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the research question: *'In what way do Football clubs use Instagram posts to build and sustain their brand identity and their relationship with its fans and community?'*. Followed by the four research objectives: *'To examine the brand identity of Feyenoord'*, *'To identify how Feyenoord's Instagram posts communicate brand identity'* and *'To study how Feyenoord portray the relationship with the fan community on Instagram'*. The thematic analysis of 148 Instagram posts resulted in four main Themes: 'Pride of Rotterdam', 'The stadium as home', 'Built on the past' and 'Thankful for fan support'.

The first research objective 'To examine the brand identity of Feyenoord' was met after studying Feyenoord's website and Instagram page thoroughly. Feyenoord communicates their brand identity mainly through their connection with the city of Rotterdam. The analysis showed that they are referring a lot to multiple elements of the City they come from. Their posts contain various city landmarks and points of recognition, mainly from the southern part of the city where the stadium 'de Kuip' is located. Another big part of the city mentality that Feyenoord tries to include in their brand identity is the hard working mentality since the southern part of the city was traditionally inhabited by harbour labourers. They show this among other elements by stating the city motto 'sterker door strijd' (stronger through effort) very frequently (Feyenoord, 2022).

Concerning the second research objective 'To identify how Feyenoord's Instagram posts communicate brand identity', Feyenoord communicates their identity on Instagram mainly through showing of city landmarks, the shared cultural element of working-class people, the stadium and their appreciation of loyal fan support. According to the results this often goes along with the Rotterdam motto of 'Sterker door strijd' (stronger through effort). Through posting a lot of photos containing the green and white Rotterdam flag, they try to create a sense of unity and include the shared symbol of the city into the club's brand identity. The pictures often contain fans waving the green and white flag inside a full stadium. This conclusion was in line with the researches of Gorden et al., (2012) and Black & Veloutsou (2017) which state that symbols of unity such as flags create unanimity among groups of people and enhance the change of co-creation happening and being successful.

This way of building brand identity through the landmarks and identity of the city was followed naturally by the identified theme around the stadium. The stadium, of course, is home to the club when they play competitive games and idealised by the club as the beating heart of Feyenoord. As the analysis demonstrated, the stadium is presented as an idyllic place

where fans live through happy moments. Posts about the possible new stadium were therefore posted in a different more moderate style, since negativity about it would harm the clubs identity. The distinguished theme concerning past success showed that Feyenoord's identity built for a large part upon their rich history containing quality teams and a lot of prizes won, always keeping in mind the mentality of hard working people the motto of hard work pays off. In their case by winning prizes in the end. This can also be seen as a strong strategy to create unity between club and fans, since a strong bond between brand communities is usually conveyed through happy moments lived together (Coelho et al., 2018). Even if these moments were before a person was born, the sense of shared value still forms a strong bond.

The third research objective ‘‘To study how Feyenoord portrays the relationship with the fan community on Instagram’ was fulfilled by all found themes as it became clear that fan page FR12 replicated a lot of the style content as posted by Feyenoord itself. Feyenoord also showed their appreciation for the strong support by their frequent posting of fan actions and full stadium. This was noticeable in particular during the Covid 19 pandemic when Feyenoord particularly made clear when football was played for empty stadiums how much the fans were missed. These posts were the posts in which all elements of brand identity building and brand community came together as the brand identity of the club is constructed through belonging to a group, repetitiveness, public interest, consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions and common signs (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019; Gordon et al., 2014; Black & Veloutsou, 2017).

A conclusion that can be drawn from this research objective is therefore that all elements of brand identity building were taken over by the fan page of FR12. This means a very strong bond between fans and club as their ideas about the clubs identity are apparently unanimous. The only difference that could be found was that FR12 posts images of fireworks inside the stadium very frequently as they see this clearly as strong fan support. The reason that Feyenoord does not do this is probably because the lighting of fireworks is prohibited within the stadium and the club does not approve these actions.

The last research objective ‘To examine fan community’s comments to Feyenoord’s Instagram posts that present city and brand identity’, was met since the analysis of comments showed that there are various themes present in the comment section that relate directly to Feyenoord’s Instagram posts. The most eminent theme found was the showing of love for the club, especially when a post referred to the city of Rotterdam or the stadium. Moreover, criticism was a recurrent theme in the comment’s specifically around bad results and plans to build a new stadium. This shows that most fans are very engaged with the club’s brand

identity, since emotions are shown when posted about these subjects. This also means that the brand identity as communicated by Feyenoord was received very well since all elements were taken over by FR12 and the expression of love was the most eminent found category in the comments.

The findings concerning comments were partially in line with the literature as presented in the theoretical framework. The research of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) showed that football fans tend to show 'love', 'criticism', 'belonging' and 'aspiring feelings'. The showing of love was ubiquitous throughout the comments underneath Feyenoord's and FR12's Instagram page as well. Just like the category of critique, which was explained by the fact that football fans compared to other fields of fandom only have one favourite football team and are critically involved instead of absent when they do not like what is happening (Porad, 2010).

Taking the answers to the research objectives into account, it can be concluded that football clubs, in this case Feyenoord, built and sustain their brand identity and their relationship with the fans and community mainly through local elements of the city where they are located, both physical in the shape of city landmark as well as cultural in the mentality of the people living in that specific area. Besides this, past success and commonly known players from the past are used to build a shared memory among fans to build a sense of unity and a strong relationship between them (Adams & Baden, 2020). This also counts for the use of shared symbols such as flags and colours that are recognisable for fans and followers (Gordon et al., 2014; Black & veloutsou, 2017). The last element is the appreciation for loyal fan support as this is picked up easily by the fans and creates a stronger relationship between them and the club.

## **5.1 Theoretical and practical implications**

The findings of this research contribute to the academic literature concerning brand identity construction, brand communities and social media co-creation, especially in the field of professional sports. The results of this study are partially in line with various previously conducted researches and therefore extend the existing literature in this field of research. The results support the theory of Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite (2019) which provided various elements of successful online brand identity construction since the analysis of Feyenoord's Instagram page showed the frequent use of for example repetitiveness and public space. Moreover the results show that Feyenoord has a strong relationship with their fans online

since many brand identity elements are taken over in fan communication. This adds to the research of Gordon et al. (2014) and Black & Veloutsou (2017) who demonstrate successful acts of brand community building and the occurrence of co-creation. This research, however, presents a brand identity construction strategy which focusses on the relationship with fans in the specific field of professional football. Future research can draw upon the results of study when further researching this subject.

The practical implications of this research can be found in the field of brand identity construction on Instagram by professional football clubs. The results show that Feyenoord actively uses city landmarks and cultural aspects from the city where they are from, their past success and their appreciation of fan support to create a brand identity on Instagram. Since this seems to be improving the relationship with fans online, other football clubs can draw upon these brand identity building aspects when setting up an Instagram page, or wanting to improve fan relations. Other professional football clubs can for example use the local aspects that are available for them and also make use of common signs to create a sense of unity as shown by Feyenoord by using the green and white flag of Rotterdam in a majority of Instagram posts. Moreover, the relationship with fans can be improved by other football teams by the means of supporters reactions to posts. The strategy of Instagram posts can be adjusted accordingly. Future research has to prove whether the results of this study are also applicable in other fields of sports.

## **5.2 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

Like most research, this study contained several limitations and implications that could be improved in the future. Firstly the dataset was collected through purposive sampling and the chosen posts are therefore, despite the strict criteria, always selected under the influence of subjectivity. This also counts for the qualitative thematic content analysis where a different researcher could always determine different results due to the fact of interpretation. Another limitation was the fact that only Instagram was chosen to research as a social media platform. Perhaps, when studying other social media platforms, different results will arise concerning brand identity. Also making use of Interviews could enhance the quantity of information about Feyenoord's preferred brand identity and the opinion of the fans about this. Furthermore, the timeframe of the dataset was two years, which measured the recent branding strategy of Feyenoord. Taking a larger time frame, for example from the beginning of the official account could lead to different patterns and strategies.

This research focussed on football club Feyenoord and its fan community. Feyenoord is a popular club from Rotterdam, the second largest city of the Netherlands with nearly one million inhabitants. Moreover, the city has a very rich history and identity that was evidently taken over by Feyenoord. Future research could focus on popular clubs with a large number of followers that are from a town with a less prominent history and identity. This could lead to different and insightful results about brand identity communication by football clubs. However, this research provided insightful results in how football clubs communicate their brand identity and how they sustain their bond with the brand or fan communities.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A.

Coding frame Instagram posts

Categories	Themes/patterns	Sub-themes
Pride of Rotterdam	Showing love	Hearts
		Best part of the city
	Home in the south	Views from above
		Views from southern buildings
	Workers mentality	Club motto 'geen woorden maar daden'
		Praise hard work
		Particular showing of players effort.
	City Landmarks	Erasmus bridge
		Skylines
		Stadium
		Maassilo
	Common Signs	Flags
		Banners
		Art
	Unity	Merchandise
People of Rotterdam		
Overviews of the city		
Stadium as Home	'Red de Kuip' (Save de Kuip)	Progress as a club
		Pictures from the sky
		#reddekuip
		Golden skies
	New stadium	Progress as a club

		New Success
		Financial growth Compete with other clubs
	Fortress	Succes
		Fighting spirit
		Positivity
Built on past success	The club of Rotterdam	Derby wins
		“punten op zuid’ (Points to the south)
		Referring to the south
	Past championships	Bring back memories
		Celebrate each year on specific dates
		Show old prices
	Honour legends	Wins
		Deaths
		Successful teams from the past
	Recap big moments	Championships
		Fan actions
		City moments
	Club of traditions	Traditional events
		Workers mentality
		Stadium as tradition
Family to Family	From father to son	
	Family events	
	Old footage	
Thankful for fan support	Fans are the club	Show fan ambience
		Mention the 12th man

		Full stadiums
	Traditions	From father to son
		Season ticketholders
		All weather conditions
	Without fans no Feyenoord	Banner during pandemic
		Acknowledging better results with fans

## Appendix B.

Coding frame Instagram comments (Feyenoord)

Category	Theme/pattern	Sub-theme
Love	Expression of love for the club	Hearts emoticons
		Answer to questions
		Memories
	Love for the stadium	Home emoticons
		Memories

		I love de Kuip
Hate/criticism	Hate by rivals	Violent language
		Expressing other clubs superiority
		Mocking Feyenoord
	Criticising own club	Expressions of dissatisfaction
		New stadium plans
		Bad team performances
Nostalgia	Admiring the past	Desire for better times
		Desire for past results

### Appendix C.

Coding frame Instagram comments (FR12)

Category	Themes/patterns	Subthemes
Love	Love for Feyenoord	Heart emoticons
		Superlatives
		Memories
	Love for the stadium	Red de Kuip

		Home emoticons
		Superlatives
	Love for fan actions	Expressions of admiring
		Superlatives
		Praises
Nostalgia	Admiring the past	Desire for better times
		Desire for past succes
	Honouring legends	Expressions of pride
		Heart emoticons
		Admiring success
Criticism	Criticising own club	Violent language
		Critique on players
		Critique on club management