

An Empirical Analysis about Romanian Soccer Consumers and Their Perception on Superliga Branding and Engagement Impact

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Abstract. *Romanian soccer SuperLiga has its own visual identity and it is promoted as a standalone brand having its own sponsors and creating the possibility for fans to associate it with sentiments and emotions. Our research aims to analyze the impact of this strategy over football consumers engagement, behaviours and evoked emotions. For completeness purposes the research will compare these factors with how teams are perceived as brands outside of SuperLiga. This will allow correlations to check if teams involved in Superliga obtain additional gains by a direct association between these brands and perception transfer. These research findings are relevant for brands that act as stakeholders in sport via sponsorships, marketing or other activities as well for sport governing entities and public governing bodies that aim to increase general population involvement in sports of all natures. We found scientific proof for each analyzed item that was also included in the survey as studied variables or control variables. During the work process, a similar research methodology was found that helped with improving the quality of findings. The current study revealed that rebranding efforts of SuperLiga did change the overall perceptions of Romanian Football fans but it is not enough to impact their engagement in any phase regarding attending matches at stadion, watching on TV, online or other place and purchase of merchandising products.*

Keywords: brand relationship, football league, fans engagement, social media engagement.

Introduction

Romanian SuperLiga is defined as a top tier soccer competition composed of 16 football clubs with 30 matches per season. The competition was initiated in 1909 as a national competition. In 1932 it became “Divizia A”, in 2006 it was named as Liga I (Wikipedia, 2022) and in 2022 it was rebranded as SuperLiga coming with a new visual identity (Paleu, 2022). SuperLiga developed recently as a brand becoming a suitable model for medium developed leagues across Europe.

Our research will measure the social media impact perceived by club fans as individuals in relation with SuperLiga.

Football is recognized as an unspoken war between nationalities through sport. Some authors called it “a game of war” (Kentrotis, 2019). Soccer involves a sense of national pride for the local team. In some countries football teams are represented by different ethnicities with players of migrant origin (Sonntag & Garcia, 2020). Results regarding teams brand associations

and perception about SuperLiga in different is highly impacted by regions and cultural aspects. As an example, in Romanian SuperLiga, one of the participating clubs is Sepsi OSK that represents the Hungarian minority from Covasna County. Fans might have an altered perception because they have a higher sense of loyalty to Hungarian football but at the same time they compete in Romania.

Branding the main league as SuperLiga might help into creating a sense of national pride for supporters and induce some social cohesion among fans because a competition at national level can increase the passionate nationalism (Brand & Niemann, 2014) especially when a brand connects people in a cohesive way (Finger et al, 2023).

Having all these aspects into consideration, we structured our researched main variables into several groups. Inside each group we constructed several items backed up by literature review.

Literature review

Uncertainty of scores as key concept regarding match attendance

Fan attendance to football matches is more influenced by ranking uncertainty and by the brand rather than ticket prices (Shakina et al, 2020, p.5). Following this statement we will consider that results uncertainty is a key aspect to be analyzed regarding decisions to attend matches at stadiums. We may consider that same effects apply to SuperLiga the same way it applies to fan relations with their favorite teams. Shakina et al (2020, p.6) also demonstrated a hypothesis against the classical theory of uncertainty stating that fans prefer to attend matches when their team fights against a more powerful opponent.

Social media engagement

A paper published by Romero-Jara et al (2024) revealed that frequency of posts in social media is not driving more engagement, in fact, the perceived quality of content is the factor that will increase the social engagement online. Based on the findings, the current paper will measure if the perceived quality of posts with Superliga mentions is higher (coded as SM_QUAL_S) than without (coded as SM_QUAL_0). Using the logical deduction based on the previously mentioned paper (Romero-Jara et al, 2024) the control variable is set to check if fans believe a more qualitative content will increase their engagement on social media (coded as CT_SM_QUAL).

Branding in football

Farhana (2012, in Keller, 2008) extracted 3 elements about branding offensive roles: memorability, meaningfulness and likability and 3 defensive items that protect a brand: transferability, adaptability and protectability.

A bigger organization that encapsulates all brands participating in a league will obtain the capacity to unite fans in a similar way in which sports can unite people for the same goal or value (Tomic, 2023).

Among positive feelings a fan can have about their team are pride and ecstasy and negatives are frustration and worry (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2008). Football fans develop a strong connection with their favourite team and they feed the urge to express it in a passionate way (Romero-Jara et al, 2024).

Consumers perception regarding brands involves associated traits that can be positive and negative (Dada, 2021). There are 5 dimensions for brands that were identified by Aaker (1996) as it follows: brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand assets. Fiocchi (2023) concluded that colour assets, design, taglines, jingles, logos, trademarks, symbolic images and fonts and other brand assets are strengtheners between a brand and how its communication is made. All of these brand assets are present in the new visual identity of Superliga that were researched. Therefore, we decided to include these items into our survey analyzed data set.

Clubs are using social media for brand benefits like fan identification, socialization, escape, entertainment and emotions (Parganas, 2017). We think that SuperLiga has the ability to enhance these brand benefits for the 16 clubs that are associated together as a bigger community.

Methodology

We designed a survey which collected information about metrics that impact game attendance and social media interactions between fans and Romanian Superliga. From an empirical point of view, in our qualities besides current paper authorship, we believe that fans have a strong willingness to participate in surveys regarding their favourite teams and football in general because they feel satisfied to get involved for the team they admire. Keusch (2015) analyzed 11 theories that explain and impact survey participation behaviour. We observed during our research that personal interest factor was not the highest score in any theoretical framework but it obtained the most values above average which is an interesting fact that the initial author did not discuss. These findings could mean that a personal topic interest is always an important factor into decision making to participate in a survey along with the other main factors such as: attitudes towards survey research and unconditional incentives. We consider that sports fans, due to their passion level towards sports, do not need incentives and the personal topic interest is much more significant in relation with them.

Our research decision of using a web-survey also relies on the success of findings of a similar research conducted about effect of leagues on consumers of teams. Similarly with Kunkel, Funk & Lock (2017) we set a categorization of variables that measure how football consumers in Romania associate the Superliga with some branding related factors. Each factor is deducted from personal experience and backed by other research evidence. The novelty in our research methodology consists into adding paired variables to the initially analyzed items working as control variables that revalidated the initial findings. Each variable is linked with research questions inside the survey. By using this methodology we rely on academic findings and we revalidate if they are still relevant. More than that, we validate if these factors have a significance level for football teams consumers.

Data was collected using latest Lime Survey as a self hosted surveys platform. Through our platform we collected information about completion time. Elimination of responses from analyzed dataset has been made based on completion timing, filtering questions and completeness level. From a total of 284 responses, we cleaned the data totaling a valid count of 82 responses. The survey was designed in 3 sections of questions displayed in a single page layout with a single submission button. Due to the single page survey layout used all incomplete results have been lost if the participant did not press the final submission button. Authors concluded that future surveys should have a multi step page layout to create a technical possibility of storing incomplete information. Incomplete information cannot be used in final research analysis but it is

a welcomed source of information for preliminary data collection. The 3 groups “General information”, “My football fan activity” and “My opinions regarding SuperLiga and favourite local team” had 17 questions. Last 4 of these questions were on a likert scale with 5 levels (Joshi et al., 2015). Grouping of the 4 likert questions had 41 subquestions treated as research variables. During the pre-flight survey we received feedback from surveyees about the length of the survey and complexity thus having too many questions. We decided to eliminate 16 sub - questions from the survey (13 valid answers) and we removed them from analytics also. In the final survey we used in the last group only 3 sets of questions divided by their goal. The survey participants were instructed to rate several statements into each group with scores from 1 to 5 on a matrix form where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree. On mobile devices the questions were displayed in a responsive format (Chun et al., 2018).

First survey group “General data” collected information about age, gender, marital state, living place and favourite team.

Second survey group “My fan activity” collected data about fan behaviour regarding consumption. We collected information about frequency of match attendance, place of consuming matches and product purchase behaviors.

The last survey group had 3 likert question groups and an open ended question regarding brand associations as it follows:

First likert group named “How do you rate the following statements regarding associations with SuperLiga” coded as G3QSL (G3 = Group number 3 of Questions, SL = Romanian Football SuperLiga) was used to collect information about football consumers associations they do with SuperLiga as a brand.

Second likert group named “How do you rate the following statements regarding associations with your favourite Local Team?” codes as G3QFAV (FAV = Favourite) server into collecting information about established link between fan perceptions with their favourite teams. We used this group because we wanted to analyze differences between associations made by fans with their teams compared with the main league where these teams are playing.

The last likert group (G3QCTRL) was constituted as a controlling variable set with sub questions linked with other survey group questions named “My fan activity” and with checked variables in the Group 3 regarding SuperLiga and favourite team. These control variables have the essential role in validating the theory from literature review. Therefore it was needed to link them with everything else.

The last question in the survey was an open ended one with the role of collecting ideas and qualitative information about the image formed into the consumer minds regarding SuperLiga.

Results and discussions

We collected 285 responses since the testing phase. After the first data cleanup we removed 203 incomplete responses and invalidated data. A total of 73 records (43 validated) came from Facebook groups and 212 records (37 validated) from Whatsapp distribution and other sources. Testing phase of the survey collected 13 valid responses. Participants cover a good range of demographic variables with 68% men and 32% women. Regarding age, we obtained a wide distribution as seen in table 1.

Table 1. Participants age groups

Answer	Count	Percentage
18-24 years	8	9.76%
25-34 years	19	23.17%
35-44 years	20	24.39%
45-54 years	23	28.05%
Over 55 years	12	14.63%

Source: Authors' own research.

SuperLiga Brand associations

Shakina et al (2020, p.5) concluded that a sports brand is most responsible for game attendance rather than ticket price. Our study revealed that Romania is untypical as fans do not have a willingness to attend matches when marketing effort is increased nor branding improved. All analyzed variables shown in Table 2 are statistically valid since they are contained inside the confidence interval. We analyzed at a 5% level of significance to investigate critical t values. (where t values > 1.96). Taking into consideration that we analyzed a normal population, we decided to test the mean value for confidence interval. General agreement of interpreted variables is mostly consistent including mixed responses and many neutral responses. Disagreement is consistent in several important variables. It has been observed that some completions wiht strong agreements had also negative comments or low engagement levels regarding SuperLiga. All means do represent opinions of respondents in a reliable way for the analyzed sample. We decided to analyze the perspective of a β Weight implication regarding brand associations and overall SuperLiga engagement. The results revealed that most important factors that trigger fans to consume football online, at stadiums and to engage with SuperLiga are: favourite team being part of the SuperLiga (brand association, high competition), knowledge increase about football, better league management and organization, sponsorship partners. No positive impact is weighted in variables like SuperLiga as a symbol of football and national identity, SuperLiga brand keeping the tradition alive, branding assets (logo, colors), imprevisible results of superliga matches, social media posts, matches organizing quality.

Table 2. Branding perceptions regarding SuperLiga (group G3QSL)

Variable	Mean	SE	SD	MoE	Confidence Interval	β Weight
SL_IDENT	3.57	0.13	1.15	0.26	[3.31-3.83]	-2.88
SL_PROUD	4.00	0.12	1.05	0.24	[3.76-4.24]	0.00
SL_ENVOL	3.51	0.14	1.21	0.27	[3.24-3.78]	3.39
SL_TRADI	3.76	0.13	1.12	0.25	[3.51-4.01]	-1.61
SL_LOGO	3.80	0.13	1.14	0.25	[3.54-4.05]	-1.36
SL_COLOR	3.75	0.12	1.07	0.24	[3.51-3.99]	-1.70
SL_KNOW	3.30	0.12	1.10	0.25	[3.06-3.55]	2.04
SL_IMPR	3.57	0.12	1.11	0.25	[3.32-3.82]	-2.88
SL_SM_Q	3.43	0.13	1.13	0.25	[3.18-3.68]	-3.82
SL_MANAG	3.18	0.14	1.21	0.27	[2.91-3.45]	1.19
SL_MATCH	3.25	0.13	1.17	0.26	[2.99-3.52]	-5.00
SL_SPONS	3.14	0.12	1.05	0.23	[2.90-3.37]	0.93

Source: Authors' own research.

Local Teams Brand associations

Regarding local teams, there is an interesting result. The Variable SL_PROUD that measures the link between a club brand and Superliga brand had best positive results among respondents with generally positive attitudes regarding matches in Romania. This variable was designed to measure if football consumers feel proud to be part of SuperLiga with their team because of a higher ranking. At the same time, there are many cases of respondents with negative attitudes regarding all matches at national level in Romania, therefore they decided to not watch or attend these matches, instead to engage with other major leagues internationally. This behaviour is changing the final results regarding perceptions of superliga and might be an important factor that needs further investigation in other researches.

Table 3 shows that all elements regarding a club brand are important in some way. All values on likert scales are higher regarding their local teams than SuperLiga for each related variable.

Table 3. Branding perceptions regarding favourite teams (group G3QFAV)

Variable	Mean	SE	SD	MoE	Confidence Interval
FAV_IDENT	3.62	0.13	1.14	0.25	[3.37-3.87]
FAV_TRADI	4.14	0.12	1.07	0.24	[3.09-4.38]
FAV_LOGO	3.89	0.13	1.12	0.25	[3.64-4.14]
FAV_COLOR	4.18	0.12	1.03	0.23	[3.95-4.41]
FAV_IMPR	3.63	0.12	1.08	0.24	[3.39-3.87]
FAV_MATCH	3.90	0.13	1.12	0.25	[3.65-4.15]
FAV_MANAG	3.49	0.15	1.30	0.29	[3.20-3.78]
FAV_SPONS	3.44	0.12	1.09	0.25	[3.20-3.69]

Source: Authors' own research.

Football consumers engagement

In table 4 we analyzed the football consumers engagement along with other research variables in the survey. All variables inside G3QCTRL group have been included in the survey based on the literature review. An interesting fact is about CT_IMPR variable ("Uncertainty of the match results increase my willingness to buy tickets") because it revealed a disagreement that is also significantly valid into contradiction with Shakina et al (2020).

Social media engagement of fans is higher on local teams (mean = 3.62) than engagement with SuperLiga (mean = 3.00). During research we observed that SuperLiga and a few clubs have intense activity on social media. Regarding match attendance at stadiums, they prefer to take part when a stronger opponent comes to play in the current city of the club.

Table 4. Football consumers engagement (group G3QCTRL)

Variable	Mean	SE	SD	MoE	Confidence interval
CT_SM_SL	3.00	0.15	1.34	0.30	[2.70-3.30]
CT_SM_FAV	3.62	0.15	1.36	0.30	[3.32-3.93]
CT_IMPR	2.77	0.15	1.35	0.30	[2.47-3.07]
CT_IMPR2	3.44	0.15	1.30	0.29	[3.15-3.73]
CT_IMPR3	3.62	0.14	1.28	0.29	[3.33-3.91]

Source: Authors' own research.

Limitations

Collected responses had a high rate of incomplete records that have been removed. Future research should improve the fan incentivisation in order to make them complete all the required information. Even though we discovered a greater willingness to complete surveys among football fans due to high fan involvement, this behaviour may not be strong enough compared to perceived effort for a successful submission of data. The communication mode of surveys could be the cause of low completion rate and may also impact results as shown in other research (Grandjean et al, 2009).

Regarding socio-demographics, we noticed that 90% of respondents live in urban places meaning this could produce altered results with exaggerated differences. Also, 53% were from Bucharest, which is the Capital city. More on that, 24 counties of a total of 42 did not have respondents. This metric is relevant because fans linked with teams inside SuperLiga live in their natal cities where their teams belong too. Differences might be produced also by cultural aspects from a local team to another.

Future research

Brand elements are important in forming a brand equity and into a differentiation strategy (Farhana, 2012). It could be worth researching if SuperLiga can differentiate from other major leagues in Europe through its branding elements and if it's essential in the sport industry given the fact that major leagues might not be in a direct competition for the same customers.

More research has to be done regarding why fans have negative attitudes regarding Romanian football while at the same time having strong nationality imbolds.

Our study should be improved with different approaches for survey tools using a multi step layout, allocating more time to collect data and gathering more respondents from all counties that could have better representativity for each club that is present in SuperLiga.

Conclusion

This paper revealed that Romanian Football market is not a typical one because consumers are engaged with their clubs, tradition and probably a glance of hope for better quality of matches. They perceive that Romanian matches are low quality, believing that betting companies are too connected with Superliga. The opinions are polarized. The enthusiastic side of fans believe there is a high competition, professionalism and SuperLiga is better due to its new branding and presence. The decision to watch and attend matches in SuperLiga is highly linked with the local team and less with SuperLiga as a brand. A club being part of SuperLiga ranking is a reason to be proud for its fans having a strong impact over engagement and attendance.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Analyzed factors in descriptive statistics

Variable	Item analyzed / factors
G3QSL	<i>SuperLiga associations</i>
SL_IDENT	SuperLiga is a symbol of romanian football and national identity
SL_PROUD	I am proud because my team is active in SuperLiga
SL_ENVOL	I feel more involved regarding my favourite team because it is a part of Superliga
SL_TRADI	SuperLiga brand keeps alive the romanian football tradition
SL_LOGO	I like the SuperLiga logo that is shaped as a trophy
SL_COLOR	I like the SuperLiga colors
SL_KNOW	Watching and following Superliga increases my knowledge about football
SL_IMPR	Superliga matches have imprevisible results
SL_SM_Q	Social media posts have good quality
SL_MANAG	SuperLiga is well managed
SL_MATCH	Matches organized in SuperLiga are at a good quality
SL_SPONS	Actual sponsors are a benefic association with the league
G3QFAV	<i>Favourite Team Associations</i>
FAV_IDENT	My favourite local team successfully resemble its city representation and identity
FAV_TRADI	My favourite local team has a strong tradition
FAV_LOGO	I like my favourite local team's logo
FAV_COLOR	I like my favourite local team's colors
FAV_IMPR	When my favourite team plays, the results are imprevisible
FAV_MATCH	My favourite team plays good matches
FAV_MANAG	My favourite team is well managed
FAV_SPONS	Actual sponsors are a benefic association with the club
G3QCTRL	<i>Control variables</i>
CT_SM_SL	I actively follow Social media content about SuperLiga
CT_SM_FAV	I actively follow Social media content about my favourite team
CT_IMPR	Uncertainty of the match results increase my willingness to buy tickets
CT_IMPR2	I prefer to attend matches when my favourite team plays against a stronger opponent
CT_IMPR3	I prefer to attend matches when a stronger opponent comes to my team's city