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# FAN DRAIN DUE TO BRAND IDENTITY LOSS. EVIDENCE FROM ROMANIAN SECOND LEAGUE FOOTBALL

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Vlad I. ROȘCA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** “Fan drain” is a term used to describe the loss of stadium-goers suffered by a sports club. While there are many reasons why supporters turn their back and walk away from the terraces (e.g. better entertainment alternatives, poor sporting performances, too high admission costs etc.), this research focuses on one of the problems that Romanian football was confronted with lately: the loss of brand identity. Many football clubs, rich in tradition, went bankrupt and were dissolved, part of Romanian football’s history disappearing with them and, at the same time, important groups of fans who suddenly faced a situation where they didn’t have a club any longer for which to cheer for. Some other clubs, even if still existing, were relocated to other cities due to the loss of support (mainly financial) that they had once enjoyed in their places of origin. The relocated clubs were separated from their fans, while the people in the new places of destination did not show any particular interest in adopting the “alien” teams. A decline in stadium attendances was one of the consequences. The research uses four brand conveyors (tools through which brand meaning can be created for a football club) as independent variables and correlates them with a dependent variable (match attendance) to run a regression analysis that aims to find out whether the creation of brand meaning and its transfer towards the fans can combat the decline in attendances. Romanian Second League football has been chosen as a sample. Results indicate that focusing on sports marketing tactics, such as offering match programs, selling admission tickets or improving PR activities can facilitate the process of neutral fans to adopt “alien” teams, can help football brands with low or no identity to easier relate with (new) fans and, overall, can increase match attendances.

**Keywords:** fan drain, football branding, sports marketing, brand identity, match attendances

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## Introduction

After thirty matchdays completed in the Romanian second tier football league (2016/2017 season), the highest overall attendance at a game in the entire

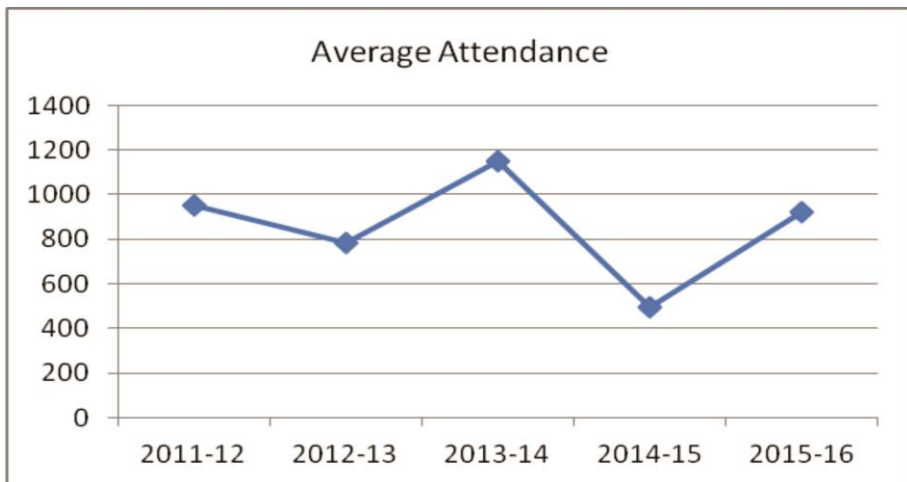
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<sup>1</sup> PhD Lecturer, Faculty of Business Administration in Foreign Languages (FABIZ), The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. E-mail: vlad\_rsc@yahoo.com

championship was witnessed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2016 in Suceava, when local side Foresta defeated Dacia Unirea Brăila with 4-0, in front of 4,100 people. What once was commonplace – fans coming to the stadium to cheer for their home team – now seems odd. Even crowds of 2,000 or 3,000 people only gather on an exceptional basis. During the aforementioned interval, no sell-out crowds were witnessed (“sell-out”, in itself, being a grandiose word-choice, as in most cases admission is free of charge), and the usual attendance figures range between a handful of tens of people and a few hundreds of them.

This article examines whether second division football clubs in Romania can increase match attendances by enhancing their brand meanings, through improved brand performance in what concerns customer service. It does so, at a time when Romanian football witnesses an unprecedented loss of stadium-goers. The decline can be easily observed both at top-tier league games, as well as at lower division matches. While first league football has been historically associated with the *crème-de-la-crème* of Romanian clubs, second tier (*Liga 2*) matches also had their slice of the cake as many of the clubs playing in the lower league(s) were highly representative for the local communities. Even though they might not have enjoyed live top-class football, the fans of second division clubs still used to find their way to the stadiums to cheer for their local teams in what Romanian popular culture came to label and to remember in the collective awareness as “*matinee football*”: the usual kick-off for Liga 2 matches was and, in many cases, still is 11 a.m.

*Figure 1: Average match attendances in Liga 2 between 2011 and 2016*



*Data source: own representation, based on raw data collected from [www.soccerway.com](http://www.soccerway.com)*

Despite strong local allegiance, match attendances in Liga 2 have witnessed hefty downfalls. The average attendance in Liga 2 during the last five seasons (between

autumn 2011 and spring 2016) was 985 fans per game (and this considering that big parts of the crowds were attracted, thanks to several traditional clubs relegated from the first division, such as Rapid Bucharest or Craiova). A closer look at the numbers, graphically displayed in Figure 1, indicates that only one season was situated above the mean (2013-2014 with an average of 1150 fans), whereas the rest was placed below average, with a minimum of less than 500 spectators per game: 951 fans in 2011-2012, 781 (2012-2013), 495 (2014-2015), 921 (2015-2016).

This “fan drain” – supporters walking away from the terraces – can be a result of several combined determinants. Research literature has largely compelled these determinants into football influencers and socio-economic influencers (Falter, Perignon, 2000). Football influencers include variables, such as league position, goals scored or win-loss ratio (Simmons, 1996), while socio-economic influencers include alternative leisure activities, disposable income, or TV broadcasting (Allan, 2004). On a global scale, it is widely acknowledged that, throughout the years, professionalization and commercialization have changed the landscape in which supporters relate to and consume football (Merkel, 2007).

However, in the particular case of Romanian football, one of the reasons with high impact on declining attendances is the identity loss of football brands. Identity is what distinguishes a brand, what makes it noteworthy and what helps it stand out from the crowd of competitors. It is the unique touch that influences fans to follow a particular football club and not any others.

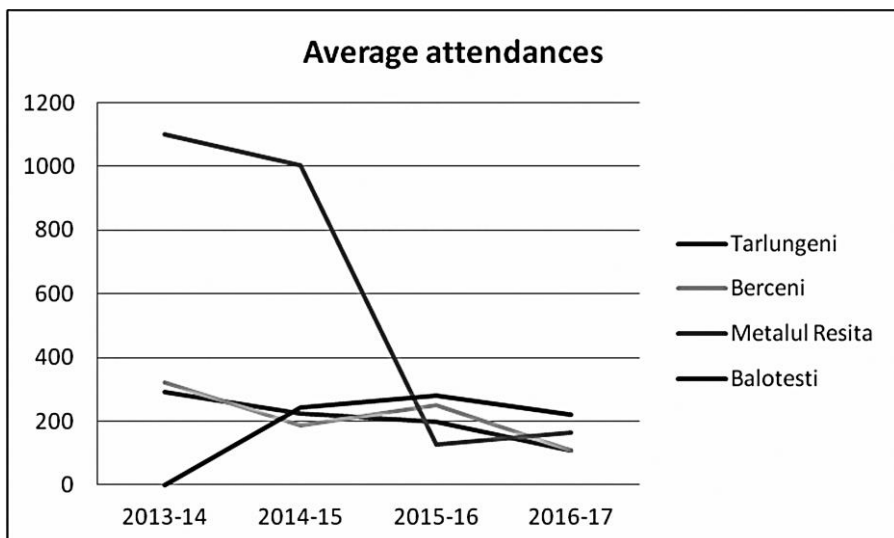
Unfortunately, during recent years many traditional football clubs (*Universitatea Cluj, FC Argeş, Gloria Buzău, Farul Constanţa, Rapid Bucharest, Oţelul Galaţi, Dunărea Galaţi, Ceablăul Piatra Neamţ, FC Bibor Oradea, Oltul Slatina, Poiana Câmpina, FC Caransebeş, FCM Baia Mare, Unirea Alba Iulia, Minerul Motru, Callatis Mangalia, Sportul Studentesc*) were dissolved due to mismanagement and financial problems. Some of them were re-established, but under different names and starting from lower leagues, others simply vanished. The void was filled by new clubs which, in spite of solid footballing quality, did not have neither the history (some of them established no longer than ten years ago), nor the appeal that the dissolved clubs used to have.

Once the traditional clubs went bankrupt, most of their fans disappeared, either because their beloved team did not exist any longer, or because they could not identify themselves with the newly re-founded teams. Another factor adding to the identity loss is that some clubs had to be relocated because they have lost the support of local authorities, who lacked the abilities or the willingness to continue pumping financial resources into the accounts of the clubs, making their mere existence a difficult problem. Since many of the clubs were private-public entities, co-owned by a private investor and the local authorities, when the financial support of the latter was lost, the owner decided to relocate the club into other towns, where public financial support was identified just as to have not the club dissolved. It was the case of ACS Berceni, relocated to Buciumeni/Buftea (45 kilometers away from Berceni), of Unirea Tărlungeni, moved to Ştefăneştii de Jos (180 kilometers away from the place of origin), or of Metalul Reşiţa, moved to Snagov (500 kilometers away). The local fans were left standing in their home towns, while the inhabitants in the destination towns didn't find any motivation to adopt the new teams, as these did not convey any particular meaning to them.

Most of these young clubs and of the relocated clubs seem to lack brand meaning that can be imparted to fans. This lack of authenticity is one of the reasons why fans do not choose to pursue football clubs any longer. Fans are no longer taking football clubs and their matches into consideration, at least not to the extent they did several years ago because they cannot identify themselves with the clubs. The newly established, young brands, could not offer any particular history or traditions to fans, which left them uninteresting. The fact is being demonstrated by the attendance figures during the first half of the current Liga 2 competitional season (2016-2017): the aforementioned maximum of 4100 and an average of several hundreds continue the downward trend of lower league football in Romania.

Probably, the most speaking example of the downfall in attendances suffered by relocated clubs is Metalul Reșița. Figure 2 shows the average attendances of Unirea Tărlungeni, ACS Berceni, Metalul Reșița and CS Balotești. The former three have all been relocated at the start of the 2016-2017 competitional season, after three years in which they have played their home games in their cities of origin. Apart from CS Balotești, a team that won promotion in the 2014-2015 season and seems to have stabilized their average attendances at around 250 people per game, the other three teams have suffered fluctuations, with the attendances decreasing below 200 people per game. The drop in the cases of Unirea Tărlungeni and ACS Berceni was milder, as these teams weren't very supported in their places of origin either. For Metalul Reșița, though, a club coming from a city and from a region known for their love for football, a dramatic, nearly tenfold decrease (from around 1500 spectators in 2013 to about 160 people per game in 2016) was witnessed.

*Figure 2: Average attendances of relocated clubs – comparison 2013-2016*



*Data source: own representation, based on raw data collected from [www.soccerway.com](http://www.soccerway.com)*

Eventhough the decrease in attendance and the loss of fans are obvious, most of the Liga 2 football clubs do not do anything to make themselves noticed, to increase their brand salience, which would help in attracting fans.

Given that many football clubs have suffered identity loss, the rationale behind this paper is to find out whether creating (new) meaning for the football brands can help in attracting (new) fans to the stadium. This can be especially true for the relocated clubs which, deprived of their home fan base, may need to create new brand meanings, in order to attract new fans from the region where they have been moved to.

The aim of this research is to verify if creating brand meaning can combat fan-drain, especially if using meaning conveyors can bring fans closer to the football brand and, hence, to the stadiums. The Null Hypothesis is that brand meaning can be an engine for attracting fans. As such, the objective of the paper is to analyze the influence that brand meaning conveyors can have on match attendance of relocated clubs and of those clubs that have suffered brand identity damages.

**Table 1:** Research architecture (own representation)

Research question	Null Hypothesis	Research objective
Can the creation of brand meaning combat fan drain?	Brand meaning can combat fan-drain, as it is an engine for attracting fans to the stadium ( <i>for football brands with anyor low identity</i> ). Brand meaning can impact on improving attendance figures.	Analyze the influence that brand meaning conveyors can have on match attendance ( <i>for football brands with anyor low identity</i> ).

## Literature Review

Knijnik (2015) characterizes football fandomship as a transcendental experience that helps people go beyond the limits of the ordinary conscious events which make up their individual daily lives. Being a fan is closely linked to the idea of membership to a group consisting of other people sharing the same interest in following a particular chosen football team. Following the team, either individually or collectively, creates an identity of belonging to that group of followers. The individual comes to be integrated into the “fan society” (group of fans), taking part to an experience, particularly different from daily life occurrences (Derbaix, Decrop, 2011). Keeping the idea, but moving it from a social to a commercial perspective, it can be claimed that the relationship created between fan and football team is intermediated by the football brand. The fan relates not merely to the team, but to its identity, reflected by the club’s brand. A football fan is, thus, a believer in the particular ideas and values that are being reflected by the club’s brand identity, becoming an advocate of that identity.

Fans follow football brands to satisfy their inner necessities (mind and spirit combined). Such intrinsic needs include building and expressing one’s self-identity, used both for the psychological well-being of the self, as well as creating that sort of individuality, needed for standing out and differentiating from others (Ball, Tasaki, 1992).

According to Levy (1959), people do not only buy goods for their functionality, but also for their symbolic meaning. Purchase and consumption behaviors are strongly influenced by the emotionality of the brands. For sports fans – who are highly emotional individuals following a particular sports team, because of the excitements that a match or that this allegiance in itself can bring – brand choice is also a notion of self-identity. Fans introduce themselves through their preference for a particular brand. That brand becomes an elongation of the self, contributing to the creation of the individual's identity. This is true for individuals, but can also apply to groups of people sharing a common interest (in this case, fan groups), to whom association with a brand bring a distinguishing character. For brands to breed distinguishing character, they need to have meaning. Brands themselves need to stand for something particular, in order to transfer and implant that uniqueness of theirs to the followers.

That particularity comes from meaning. *Meaningful* or *particular* brands are so-called grown-up or authoritative brands, having the capacity to influence or even command thought, opinion, or behavior of their followers. Such brands are warrants of quality, able to produce an effect. Through their power of influence, they often come up as decisive, shaping the marketplace and fit enough to deal with distinct situations (Klink, 2003). They are clearly accurate (their significance being easy to understand), knowledgeable, acting as wardens of a particular idea/ideal, and always up-to-date (Klink, 2000; Klink, 2001). At the same time, such brands are deeply rooted in their history, a value that safeguards their durability, helping them to exist for a long time, without any significant deterioration.

Football brands share a set of notions pertaining to sector specifics. The differentiation is done at a deeper level of understanding, with the authenticity of each brand deriving from its interaction with fans and stakeholders. This corresponds to a school of interpretation that looks at brands as 'social processes', conditioning their existence on the interaction with consumers. Brands can only generate value, as long as they possess an idea that they can communicate to the consumer, and as long as the consumer receives, analyzes and perceives that idea, then sends its feedback.

The latest developments in marketing suggest a shift from brand-induced impressions to co-created meanings (Cova et. al., 2011; Fisher, Smith, 2011; Healy, McDonagh, 2013). Brands no longer impose to consumers, but work together with them for breeding impressions (Arvidsson, 2005; Cova, Pace, 2006; Cova, Dalli, 2009; Zwick et. al., 2008). As such, a brand is no longer what it believes itself to be, but what the consumers think it is. (Humphreys, Grayson, 2008; Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer et. al., 2012). The social and psychological needs of consumers play a role in creating brand meaning. A brand is the reflection of how a consumer is treated. The consumer perceives the brand through his own lenses: he will designate cues to classify the brand based on how he experienced his interaction with the brand (Martínez-López et al., 2016). Brand imagery becomes an answer of the respect and attention with which the brand has treated the consumer, and it is often down to instants of interaction or even individual points of contact to make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful brand (Balmer et. al., 2017).

Given the co-creation of value and the mirror-relationship that exists with consumers, football brands have to welcome their fans with marketing activities that can transform watching a game into a unique and unforgettable experience. This would leave fans with the option to associate the brand with positive feelings and meanings. Unfortunately, many local football clubs lack this marketing “*arsenal*” they could use for offering fans memorable ideas.

Brand meaning refers to the ideas, ideals, values, experiences or knowledge that a brand possesses (Mumby, 2016; Vásquez et. al., 2013). Meaning is the logical connotation of a brand, its signification. Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010) believe that brand meaning is made up by three items: brand-related discourses, interpretations, and sense-making. Brand discourse is an expression of thought on the identity of the brand. As discourse is usually perceived as a verbal interchange of ideas, in terms of branding this also involves the necessity of a communication-flow-process with a sender and at least a receiver of the conception. Discourse as a process of doing is a social interaction between an emitter and a receiver. Inferring this to branding, it lets understand that a brand can only exist in its capacity of meaning carrier having to act upon some meaning receiver. A brand conveys meaning which it communicates onto the market. Communication occurs by signs, sounds or gestures, each of them having their understood signification. “Understood” in this case refers to the synonymy existing with the receiver, who has a similar comprehension of the signs, sounds or gestures through which he can decode the meaning that the sender has loaded them with. Brand discourse, thus, is a mode of organizing brand ideas, brand ideals, brand values, brand experiences or brand knowledge (all in all brand meaning) in a language (consisting of signs, sounds, gestures) that can be sent to a receiver and easily understood and deciphered by him.

Since discourse is a behavioristic process based on mutual dependence (of the deliverer to send the message and the receiver to decode, interpret and understand it), it cannot exist without the second item stated by Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010): interpretation. Once the message acquired, the receiver has to make its meaning clear. The “fit of meaning” is essential to marketing success, as the consumer has to understand and resonate with the brand. Just by feeling the same values with the brand, can the consumer echo the brand’s meaning. Else said, coming down to the third brick of the previously mentioned author’s model, a brand has to make sense to the consumer. “Sense-making” is critical for a brand’s success. If the brand does not make any sense to the customer, then the customer will not understand, nor follow it or consume it. A brand makes sense through the symbolic meanings that it communicates to the consumer. In view of the foregoing, a brand has to be loaded with meanings.

Some brands carry more meanings than others. The brands full of meaning are the so-called “*emblematic*” or “*representative*” brands. Marked by forceful expression, they manifest, embody and symbolize a particular condition of being. This condition of being is what mostly determines the brand identity, as each brand will stand for another state of existence, being suggestive and distinctive from its competition. Representative brands, hence brands full of meaning, are able to speak for themselves, are able to express themselves clearly or effectively. The ideals that they stand for are items of meaning that are communicated onto the market, giving authority to the brands and helping them serve as characteristic examples. Powerful brands are also influencers that can easily help in shaping consumption behaviour.

Their “antonyms” are “non-symbolic” brands: brands with none or too little meaning (identity) or values to allow them to stand for something. Lacking positive characteristics, they cannot be marked by any significant worth, and, hence, cannot contribute to the well-being of their prospects or followers. Lacking meaning, these brands are also lacking sense.

Meaning conveyors are features indicating the nature of something perceived (in this case, the nature of that particular brand meaning). Conveyors are cues/hints pointing out to the meaning of the brand. A brand discourse is then framed through a set of such cues. Once received and decoded, the cues help the brand follower to make sense of the brand’s meaning and of what it searches to transmit.

As it often happens in football, fans end up following a team after having been influenced by forces such as the stadium’s proximity to the habitation area or instilled passion (e.g. through parenthood or friendship). In such circumstances, alliance to a football team is less a matter of choice and more of a given, the fan having been influenced to follow that team, whatever its meanings. Consequently, the fan will transfer brand meanings onto himself which will shape his identity. On the other hand, there is the category of fans who choose to follow a team based on an act of judgement (after having looked at different options available). Here, the fan will choose that brand whose meaning is most closely to the fan’s own set of values and believes. In both the cases, however, brand meaning is of importance as it shapes the long-term relationship between fan and football brand and how the former relates to the brand.

Conveying meaning is the act of “getting meaning into” a brand. Once meaning has been created, it needs to be instilled within the brand. This occurs through “brand discourse” (Hollenbeck, Zinkhan, 2010), as meaning is only valued when it makes sense to the receiver. Therefore, the marketing communications policy plays a role in breeding brands with meaning. Marketing communication tactics – such as advertising, public relations, spreading the word, exhibition, events, promotion – are tools through which (by using language of signs, sounds, gestures etc.) meaning can be “inserted” in/ transferred to the brand, and communicated to the brand followers. Apart from marketing communications (that also serve as a vector for moving meaning from the brand to the market and vice-versa), meaning can also be created through the product (quality, delivery, innovation, research etc.), brand ethos (the guiding believes of the brand), symbols, or organizational culture.

## Methodology

Six clubs that have competed in the 2016/2017 season of Liga 2 have been selected as sample for this study: Juventus Colentina, Sepsi OSK Sfântu Gheorghe, CS Balotești, Metalul Reșița, ACS Berceni, and Unirea Tărlungeni.

Juventus Colentina and Sepsi OSK Sfântu Gheorghe are both representative clubs for their local communities. Juventus represents the neighborhood of Colentina situated in the north-eastern of Bucharest. Colentina is part of Bucharest’s 2<sup>nd</sup> District (population ~305,000), with Juventus probably the second most important team of the district after Dinamo Bucharest. Established in 2011, as a continuator of the dissolved traditional club



„Oltul”, Sepsi OSK is the most important football club in the city of Sfântu Gheorghe (population ~54,000), as well as for the entire Covasna County (population ~206,000). It is the highest-playing club in the county, accounting for some of the best attendance figures during the 2016/2017 Liga 2 championship season (amongst others, because, as the flagship team of the city, it attracts the entire attention, with fans not being split by local rivalries). In a similar fashion, CS Balotești is the representative team of the commune of Balotești, 25 kilometers away from Bucharest’s city center. Important differences to Sepsi OSK are that Balotești only has a population of ~8300, and that it is part of Ilfov county, a territorial division that has put forward six of the twenty clubs starting the 2016/2017 Liga 2 championship, facts reflected in the lower attendances.

At the other end, Metalul Reșița, ACS Berceni, and Unirea Tărlungeni are all clubs that have been relocated just before the start of the season and which have lost their brand-identity and fan support once dislocated from the city of origin. Losing financial and logistical support from local authorities, the clubs were budgeted to new locations with the hope of receiving better assistance. Berceni was moved 45 kilometers away from its original commune (population ~6,000) to the Buciumeni area of Buftea city (population ~3,000/~22,000). Unirea was moved 180 kilometers away from Tărlungeni (population ~3,700) to Ștefănești de Jos (population ~5,800). The most striking example in terms of distance is Metalul, displaced 500 kilometers away from hometown Reșița (population ~73,000) to Ghermănești/Snagov (population ~2,000/~7,300). These are striking examples not only for the high distance between the place of origin and the place of destination, but also due to the impact on sporting performances, fan-relationships, branding and marketing quality. In terms of playing squad, the players of the team were either fired and left back home – just for the club to take over the squad of the team from the place of destination that it replaced (Unirea Tărlungeni Ștefănești) – either moved hundreds of kilometers away to the new destination (Metalul Reșița Snagov), or left to commute extra miles to reach to the new stadium (ACS Berceni Buftea). Any of the three tactics wasn’t suitable for obtaining good sporting performances, as the league tables would ultimately show. The inhabitants from the places of destination could not find motivation to relate to the new team, either because it acted as a „stranger” or because it simply stepped in over the identity of the existing local team and disbanded it. All three teams were perceived as „alien” teams, simply implanted into a new destination, with no emotional bounds to that place. Thirdly, all of the teams were moved to the same county of Ilfov, at the outskirts of Bucharest, leading to an influx of football teams in the area. At the start of the season, out of the twenty competing teams, seven were from Bucharest and Ilfov (Juventus Colentina, CS Balotești, CS Afumați, Academica Clinceni, plus the three relocated teams), which led to sort of a satiety for the inhabitants of this geographical region, who, anyway, were known to consume less live football than those from the original cities. With almost no brand meaning and no connection to the inhabitants of the destination places, the relocated teams suffered both sporting- and marketing-wise.

At the moment of conducting the research, three of the last five places in the league standings were held by Unirea Tărlungeni (16<sup>th</sup> out of 20), Metalul Reșița (18<sup>th</sup>) and ACS Berceni (20<sup>th</sup>), in between them standing CS Balotești (17<sup>th</sup>). Lacking brand identity and fan-ties, the average attracted attendances were all less than 200 people per game, while social media engagement was at a critical low. In contrast to them, Juventus

Colentina and Sepsi OSK Sfântu Gheorghe, the only teams in this study to enjoy the backing of strong local communities and a certain degree of history and tradition associated with their brands, ranked first and fourth in the league, drawing average crowds of 400, respectively 1560 people per game.

The sample of six clubs has been chosen to answer the research question as it included three brands lacking meaning and fan support (those of the relocated clubs), two brands meaningful for the local communities with decent support (Juventus Colentina and Sepsi OSK) and another one lying at the intersection of the two categories (CS Balotești). For testing the research objective, five meaning conveyors were attributed to each of the clubs, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Meaning conveyors for the football brands

	Average attendance (home games)	Match Program	Entry ticket	Displays on www.liga2.prosport.ro	Table position
JUVENTUS COLENTINA	400	5	1	104	1
CS BALOTEȘTI	219	3	0	79	17
METALUL REȘIȚA (SNAGOV)	164	1	0	86	18
ACS BERCENI (BUFTEA)	107	0	0	77	20
UNIREA TÂRLUNGENI (ȘTEFĂNEȘTI)	108	1	0	91	16
SEPSI OSK SF. GHEORGHE	1560	4	2	101	4

*Data source: own representation, based on raw data collected from www.soccerway.com, from www.liga2.prosport.ro, and from own observations*

The „average attendance at home games” shows the average number of people that have visited the home games of the football team, by the time when the study was conducted, and was computed by summing up the total amount of visitors at all home games in question, then dividing it by the number of games. This conveyor is an indicator of the overall sporting, branding and marketing capabilities of the football club, as a successful and appreciated football club draws the attention of fans.

Two of the meaning conveyors („Match Programme” and „Entry Ticket”) depend on the club’s willingness and ability to reach out to fans and offer them unique experiences when attending a game. The „Match Programme” asserts if the football club offers match programs to the fans coming at the stadium. This indicator was ranked between 0 (lowest) and 5 (highest). ACS Berceni was ranked with zero because, during the analyzed period, it did not offer any match programme at all to the spectators attending its games. Metalul Reșița and Unirea Tărlungeni received 1 point as they did offer A4 pages with the starting line-ups, but not in an organized fashion: the pages were not actually a true match-day programme offering exclusive content to the fans (such as articles, interviews, analyses, statistics, photographs etc.), but were simple black and

white copies of the mandatory starting line-ups that match officials have to put up and hand in to the referees and supervisors prior to the game. Moreover, the number of the copies was randomly chosen in a limited edition, not enough for all spectators, and the distribution also randomly occurred (not at the entrance into the stadium, but in the stands to just several people). CS Balotești was graded with 3 as their match program was closer to what football fans are used to. Even if it was a simple production (a folded A4 page), it came in color and it had a front page setting the scene (announcing opponent, kick-off time, venue and referees), then came content pertaining to results of the previous match-day, current match-day fixtures, league standing and starting line-ups, as well as displaying a list of sponsors. Similar to the matchdays of CS Balotești were those of Sepsi OSK Sfântu Gheorghe, which received a better grade (4), as they provided more relevant content (including interviews with players and intros from behind the scenes) and they were distributed to all fans once with the purchase of the ticket. The best match programmes out of all analyzed (ranked with 5) were produced by Juventus Colentina: four full A4 size glossy papers in color, including the official poster of the game on the front page, a player interview on the second, statistics and details on the third, and the national anthem on the fourth page (the anthem being played at the beginning of each home game of Juventus), with the programme being distributed to all fans at the entrance into the stadium.

„**Entry ticket**” is a conveyor where only Sepsi OSK Sfântu Gheorghe and Juventus Colentina scored points as they were the only two teams out of the six conditioning stadium entrance on match ticket. CS Balotești, Metalul Reșița, ACS Berceni, and Unirea Tărlungeni all offered free entrance without ticket. Juventus Colentina also offered free entrance, but based on an invitation ticket that the fans would request and receive together with the match programme at the entrance in the stadium. The only club out of the six to actually sell match tickets was Sepsi OSK, at a price of 10 Lei general admission. The reason why „entry ticket” was selected as a meaning conveyor is that, just as the match programme, the ticket often serves as a memorabilia for fans who choose to keep or collect them. Hence, a match admission ticket can hold an emotional value and carry reminders with itself. Moreover, the entry ticket adds to the effort that a fan has to make in order to follow a game. Each game has its costs, be it opportunity costs (time needed to go to and to spend at the stadium, cost of transportation etc.), or real financial costs (price of the ticket). To a certain degree, having to pay for an admission ticket which would also serve as a memorabilia, adds value to the matchday experience of the football fan, encapsulating more emotionality within (knowing that watching the match won't come for free but it requires some financial efforts, the fan will pay more attention to the game and watch it with more intensity, in order to make the most use possible of what he has paid for, just as not to lose any value of the purchase, which leads to a higher emotional involvement and to a stronger discourse with the football brand).

„**Displays on [www.liga2.prosport.ro](http://www.liga2.prosport.ro)**” serves as a PR tool. [www.liga2.prosport.ro](http://www.liga2.prosport.ro) is a website dedicated to lower league football in Romania, offering only dedicated content to the subject matter, a positioning and a strategy that helped it acquire a dominant position onto the Romanian football market, in terms of lower league football news. It is a website with national coverage and focus, currently market leader in what concerns second division news. Being present with news onto this website can increase the

popularity of the football brand, as it offers brand-related content to the wider public and it keeps brand discourse ongoing.

Last but not least, the fifth and final meaning conveyor is „**Table position**”, capturing the position held by the teams in the league standings at the moment of collecting the data for research. Table position is an indicator of sporting performances (i.e. of the quality of football produced by the team, else told, the quality of the product offered to fans) – the better the performances of the team, the higher it is situated in the standings.

These meaning conveyors have been chosen because they were not used at their full potential, or even not used at all by the clubs involved in the analysis. A research hypothesis would be that, if these meaning conveyors are better used by the clubs, they can lead to higher attendances. In order to test this hypothesis and ultimately answer to the research question, a regression analysis was carried out, with the Average Attendance at Home Games being the Criterion Variable (Dependent Variable), and the other four variables included in the set of Predictor Variables (Independent Variables). The aim of the regression was to predict if and in which way home match attendances are influenced by the other four variables, which all serve as brand meaning conveyors.

## Results and interpretations

Figure 3 fully displays the results of the regression analysis carried out for this research.

*Figure 3: Results of the regression analysis*

Regression Statistics								
Multiple R	0.999624443							
R Square	0.999249027							
Adjusted R Square	0.996245135							
Standard Error	34.67441134							
Observations	6							
ANOVA								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
Regression	4	1599807.019	399951.7546	332.6514437	0.04109554			
Residual	1	1202.314802	1202.314802					
Total	5	1601009.333						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95,0%</i>	<i>Upper 95,0%</i>
Intercept	-3120.697246	638.9738884	-4.883919832	0.12857306	-11239.63029	4998.235801	-11239.63029	4998.235801
Match Program	118.9812392	23.99567896	4.95844437	0.126691618	-185.9127704	423.8752489	-185.9127704	423.8752489
Entry ticket	1039.479518	38.86408636	26.74653171	0.023790875	545.6644799	1533.294556	545.6644799	1533.294556
PR on Liga2	17.26953528	5.018706613	3.441033042	0.180049046	-46.49917845	81.03824902	-46.49917845	81.03824902
Table position	94.82891566	12.38908842	7.654228658	0.082703873	-62.58937835	252.2472097	-62.58937835	252.2472097

*Source: own representation*

The value of the Significance F (0,04109554) strengthens the solidity of the regression output, pointing out that the regression result has not been obtained by chance. There is only a minor 4.1% chance that the output was a hazard episode. The R Square of 0,99924 indicates that a significant part of the Attendance at Home Games can be explained by the set of independent variables. This couple of descriptive statistics lets know that offering a match program, offering or selling admission tickets, the amount of PR around the brand and the league position of the club strongly influence the fans' decision to follow a team live from the stadium. These independent variables have got a strong influence on football brand salience, i.e. the degree to which the football brand is thought about when it comes to the fan to decide on how he spends his leisure time (e.g. by consuming the match offered by that football club or by choosing other leisure activities, football or non-football related).

Research results confirm the Null Hypothesis, showing that creating brand meaning and communicating it through marketing tools can combat fan-drain. One of the most striking problems of re-located football clubs is that they have lost their brand authenticity once with the move to another location, which hinders them from having a proper brand discourse. The brand identity of relocated clubs has been damaged: these clubs mean almost nothing to fans. They have actually been separated from their home-based fans once with the relocation and moved into communities where they don't mean almost nothing at all. Empty of meaning, they aren't using any brand conveyors. Since no brand meaning exists, there aren't either any marketing communications tactics used for the fans – as there is nothing to be communicated.

As could be seen in Table 2, there is a striking difference between the re-located clubs and the traditional clubs in what concerns brand meaning and its communication towards the market of fans. While the two established clubs – Juventus Colentina and Sepsi OSK Sf. Gheorghe – offer Match Programs to fans and give entry tickets (Sepsi OSK sells them, Juventus offers the ticket for free), the three relocated clubs don't use any of the two in order to create meaning. Metalul Reșița and Unirea Tărlungeni have been rated with „1” for Match Programme as they actually offered a copied page official referee's report, though that isn't a match program in its true meaning, with content especially created for fans, but simply a page that has to exist either way for the referees. In opposition to Juventus Colentina and Sepsi OSK, the three relocated clubs don't create match programs because they don't stir too much of an interest amongst the inhabitants of the relocated venue, who have been more than slow in adopting the „new” team. They have hardly gathered between 100-170 average attendances per game, free of charge, as people would not pay to see a team that does not mean anything to them. As such, it is difficult to create brand meaning for the re-located clubs, because their brand meanings are rooted in the original place of origin, not in the place of destination, with which they find it difficult to associate with.

Juventus Colentina and Sepsi OSK, on the other hand side, do have a symbolic meaning for their local communities. They both enjoy own and distinctive cues which helps them position their brands against fellow competitors, offering them a noticeable position. These are not a bunch of relocated clubs, but two clubs with powerful local symbolism, projecting a salient image amongst their fans, which helps them be above average.

The *probability value* presented in Table 3 indicates that only 12,6% of the influence that offering a Match Program to the fans can have on attendance figures is obtained by chance, while only 2,3% of the influence of selling match tickets is down to chance.

**Table 3:** Probability values

	<i>P-value</i>
Match Program	0.126691618
Entry ticket	0.023790875
PR on Liga2	0.180049046
Table position	0.082703873

*Source of data: own representation*

This means that the cost of an entry ticket can account for up to 97.7% in a fan's decision to visit a game live, offering a match program up to 87.4%, a favorable PR up to 82% and the table position before the start of the game up to 91,8%. Else told, fans will decide, in an overwhelming manner, to go and watch a game from the stands depending on the cost of admission, on the position of the team in the league standings, on the favorable PR and on whether they will or will not receive a match program. Therefore, while the league position is rather harder to control, clubs should at least strive to improve PR, offer match programs as well as admission tickets, as these all strongly influence fan's decisions to follow the team.

The analysis of regression coefficients (displayed in Figure 4) shows that increases in match attendance can be expected if brand meaning conveyors are properly created and used by football clubs.

**Figure 4:** Regression Coefficients

	<i>Coefficients</i>
Intercept	-3120.697246
Match Program	118.9812392
Entry ticket	1039.479518
PR on Liga 2	17.26953528
Table position	94.82891566

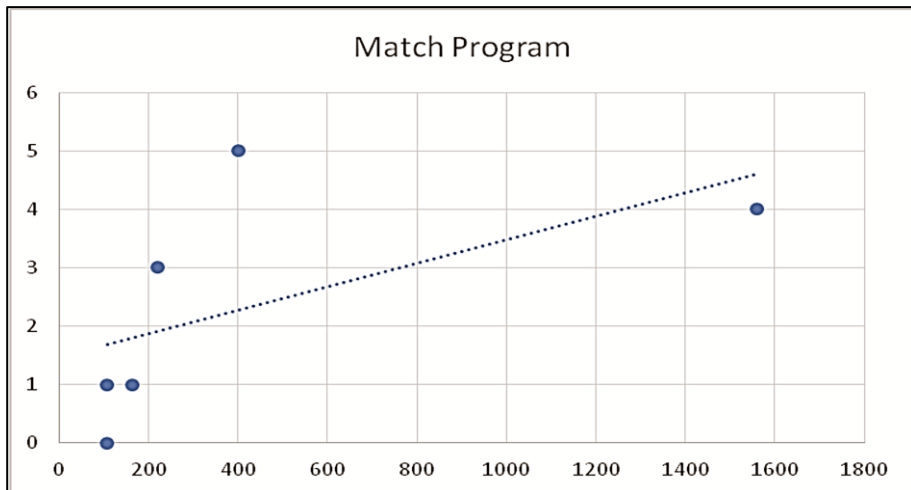
*Source of data: own representation*

The match program and the entry ticket turn out to be the predictor variables with one of the highest possible impacts on match attendances. This research has rated match programs from 0 to 5 depending on their quality. 0 was given if a club did not offer any match program at all to the fans at the stadium, 1 was given if a match program – but with a poor quality – was distributed to the fans, and so on up to 5 with increases in points depending on the quality of the program. Quality was asserted as to the number of pages, the quality of the paper on which the program is printed, its content volume and accuracy. The regression coefficient shows that with every increase of a unit of

quality of the match program, this latter brand meaning conveyor can possibly bring up to almost 119 fans to the game. A club that offers a minimal quality match program (rated 1) compared to a club that offers no program can enjoy about 119 fans more at a game. Multiplying by 5 (considering the best program quality possible), a state of the art match program can bring up to roughly 595 fans to the game. The relationship can be explained through the fact that fans look at match programs as souvenirs that they can collect in order to have a memory of the experienced they have enjoyed at that particular game when the program was offered to them. Not only that match programs serve as memorabilia for fans, but they also induce extra meaning to the game being attended. A football game gains in importance when it receives widespread attention. The more attention is shifted towards a game, the higher the momentum that is built up around that game. Match programs can build momentum as they serve as PR tools where every facet of the game can be addressed in writing. Fans use match programs to research the ins and outs of the game that they will be attending shortly (as match programs are distributed at the entry into the stadium at matchdays, so they are read just moments before the kick-off of the game – as such, match programs help fans enter into the specific atmosphere of that game and live it more intensely).

Figure 5 shows the scatterplot diagram of the relationship between the quality of the match program and the average gameday attendances. The dots indicate that the relationship is not perfect, and this can be explained that the match program is not the only and most powerful influencer in fan’s decision to go to a match. Some fans will ultimately attend a game irrespective if they receive a matchday program or not – it is to be taken into consideration, however, that if a ritual would be instilled to offer fans programs at each game, then fans would probably enjoy the gameday experience better and would then choose to return and attend future games as well.

*Figure 5: Scatterplot Match Program,*



*Source of data: own representation*

Theoretically, interpolating on the scatterplot trendline, it can be observed that offering even a medium quality program (3) can account for up to 800 fans at a game, while upping the ante to a 4\* program can bring up to 1200 fans.

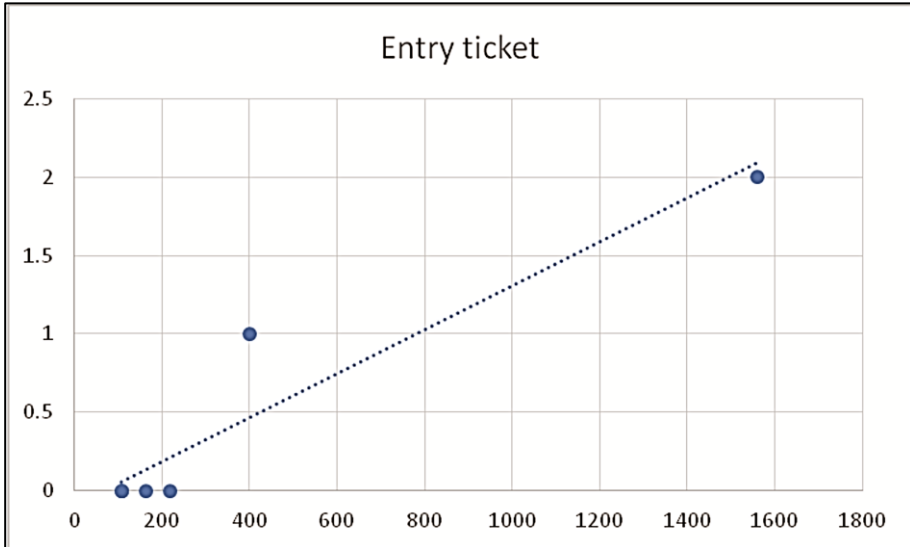
Looking at the “entry tickets” variable, the regression coefficient indicates that the potential sale of match tickets to fans could bring up to 1039 fans to a game. On the one hand side, this result turns out as a surprise given that many of the Liga 2 matches analyzed here have been offering free admission. Nevertheless, on the other hand side, Sepsi OSK, a club that sold entry tickets for 10 Lei per game during the 2016-2017 season has accounted for the best average attendance in the study, while Juventus, a club that offered tickets (for free) for the second best. The clubs that did not offer match tickets had the lowest attendance figures. Such a phenomenon can be explained through several factors. First of all, the admission ticket is also a memorabilia that fans can collect and it also gives momentum to a game. Usually, friendly matches or matches lacking importance (e.g. in lower leagues) can be attended free of charge because of a lower quality and because they do not mean very much to fans. However, true fans want their beloved team to stand for something and would be ready to pay an admission charge in order to see it play. Charging an admission fee is a symbol of the importance of the game. The higher the importance, the higher also the admission price. Fans would rather pay extra to see an important game than to attend a trivial game for free. If a league or a club strives to increase its quality, then it should promote its games as being important games to follow, which would mean charging admission fees. The price elasticity must be also taken into account, as charging too much would keep fans away, but, on the other hand side, charging a reasonable fee should not ward off fans. Moreover, in many instances, fans themselves are the ones willing to pay admission charges, as that money flows to the revenue streams of their beloved club, this being a financial aid that fans are happy to offer to their favorite club, hoping that the money that they have paid will ultimately reflect in higher investments made by the club and, consequently, better footballing quality or better matchday experiences that the fans can enjoy. Statistics show that fans would be ready to pay to attend a game and Liga 2 would actually benefit of this. The scatterplot in Figure 6 indicates this relationship: the bottom left corner displays that for matches where no entry ticket was given to fans (either free of charge or against money), the attendance figures were situated at roughly 200, whereas cases in which tickets were offered or sold accounted for better attendances.

However, though, it is difficult for a relocated club to charge admission fees, as fans would most probably not be ready to pay for watching a team they cannot identify with. Selling tickets would ripe benefits for clubs properly anchored within their local communities, where their local/regional brand symbolism means something special to fans, and the latter ones would be ready to make the financial effort to pay in order to be granted associations with that brand. Nevertheless, even if not charging money, relocated clubs should at least try an effort to offer tickets for free, as Juventus Colentina did throughout the 2016-2017 season. The symbols on the scatterplot diagram stand for no ticket at all (“0”), ticket handed in for free (“1”) and ticket sold against money (“2”). Even offering a ticket for free would mean more for fans than offering no ticket at all, because that piece of papers acts as a souvenir for them and



creates some memories. According to the scatterplot, relocated clubs would enjoy about 200 fans more if they included free-of-charge tickets into their matchday experience.

*Figure 6: Scatterplot Entry Ticket*



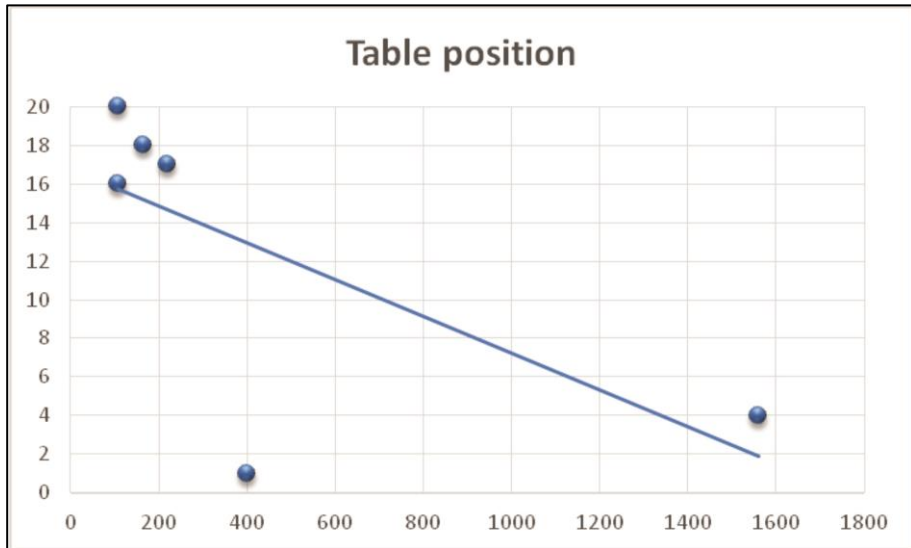
*Data source: own representation*

A problem of the analyzed relocated clubs was their poor sporting performances, aside the poor branding and marketing communications initiatives. The regression coefficient indicates that one-unit increase in the league’s standings can account for 95 fans more, a fact also demonstrated by the trendline in Figure 7. Fans are attracted by the sporting performances and wish to see a good game if they go to the stadium, so the better the team’s position in the rankings, the higher their brand impact on fans. At the moment of collecting the data for the study, the relocated clubs were all at bottom of the league’s table, between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> position, out of twenty teams competing in the league, which meant they had to struggle with attendances of around 200. A proper management on a longer run can help a team ascend in the league tables, which would also mean drawing the attention of fans.

Last but not least, the PR that the football brands enjoy on the website portal *www.liga2.prosport.ro* is important. PR constitutes of free advertising which can lead to higher brand awareness amongst the fans. The more familiar one is with the football brand, the higher the chances that he desires to follow that team to the stadium. Research results show that one unit of good PR can influence up to 17 people to come to the stadium. Given that PR is a marketing communications tool that can be internally employed by football clubs as well (e.g. press conferences, videos, interviews, brochures, posters, promotions, publicity etc.), clubs should invest more in creating and

delivering PR content as this would improve brand reputation and brand recognition that would determine fans to come closer to the club.

*Figure 7: Scatterplot for Table Position*



*Data source: own representation*

## Conclusions

Research results confirm the Null Hypothesis, indicating that second division Romanian football clubs that have been relocated and have consequently lost their local fan-base and relevance can use branding strategies and tactics to create and communicate brand meaning to combat fan-drain. For the moment, most of the relocated clubs do not have any brand discourse at all. The management of the football clubs should engage in using meaning conveyors and create new meaning for the football brands so that they can increase brand salience and help the clubs stand out: as shown in the research, this would help in attracting fans. Research findings can be extrapolated to other leagues in Romanian football, but this study has particularly chosen to focus on the second division, as this is a competition that hosts a mix of traditional and “non-traditional” (colloquially known as “*plastic*” clubs). Clubs that have been relocated from their places of origin can still use the power of marketing communications and branding in order to improve their fan communication and combat one of the most severe problems of Romanian football at the moment: “fan drain”.

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\*\*\* [www.soccerway.com](http://www.soccerway.com)

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