

## Exploring Athletic Club de Bilbao's communication: Philosophy, identity, and fan's community

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**ENG Abstract:** Professional football teams operate today in a globalized context where communication strategies are crucial for strengthening bonds with their fanbases. The aim of this research was to explore the communication tactics of a football team by analyzing 15 documentary videos from the official YouTube channel of Athletic Club de Bilbao, a football team with a recruitment policy that is unique in the world of football and often labelled as anachronistic. Through a qualitative methodology, thematic analysis, and using Atlas.ti 23 software, the results revealed that the football club's communication tactics involve presenting a contemporary narrative in their documentary videos that embraces the linguistic and cultural diversity of Basque society, blending localism with cosmopolitanism. These findings suggest that the fans of Athletic Club experience a sense of distinction and exclusivity compared to other teams and supporters worldwide, transcending the geographical boundaries of their city.

**Keywords:** communication, football, youtube, fans, loyalty.

## <sup>ES</sup> Explorando la comunicación del Athletic Club de Bilbao: Filosofía, identidad y comunidad de fans

**Resumen:** Los equipos de fútbol profesional operan hoy en un contexto globalizado donde las estrategias de comunicación son cruciales para fortalecer los vínculos con sus seguidores. El objetivo de esta investigación fue explorar las tácticas comunicativas de un equipo de fútbol a través del análisis de 15 videos documentales del canal oficial de YouTube del Athletic Club de Bilbao, un equipo de fútbol con una política de contratación única en el mundo del fútbol y muchas veces tildado de anacrónico. A través de una metodología cualitativa, análisis temático y el uso del software Atlas.ti 23, los resultados revelaron que las tácticas de comunicación del club de fútbol implican presentar en sus videos documentales una narrativa contemporánea que abraza la diversidad lingüística y cultural de la sociedad vasca, mezclando localismo con cosmopolitismo. Estos hallazgos sugieren que los aficionados del Athletic Club experimentan una sensación de distinción y exclusividad respecto a otros equipos y aficionados a nivel mundial, trascendiendo las fronteras geográficas de su ciudad.

**Palabras clave:** comunicación, fútbol, youtube, afición, fidelización.

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## Introduction

On April 11th, the city of Bilbao experienced a massive event unlike anything seen in decades. Nearly 1 million people gathered along the banks of the Bilbao estuary to welcome the players of Athletic Club de Bilbao, who, after 40 years, won the *Copa del Rey* final in Seville. To illustrate the magnitude of the event, it's worth noting that the city of Bilbao has a population, according to the National Statistics Institute (INE, 2023), of 345,820 inhabitants, and the number of Athletic Club members is 43,699 (Athletic Club, 2024). Inevitably, these figures raise the following question: What drives this million-strong expression of support for the city's football team?

Contemporary football has emerged as a prominent means of expressing identity, especially in a globalized context, by providing a shared sense of belonging and stability in a rapidly changing world. Concurrently, many cities worldwide have become synonymous with renowned sports clubs, whose iconic stadiums such as Barcelona's Nou Camp, Milan's San Siro, and Rio de Janeiro's Maracanã, represent tourist destinations and identity symbols (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007). Despite any criticisms some citizens may express towards these famous venues, it's challenging to find someone who doesn't identify with their city's football club at some point, even if they have no interest in the sport (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007). Historically, football teams have played a significant role in representing local pride, symbolizing the identity of neighborhoods, towns, or cities (Ederson & Millington, 2008).

It's no longer news that football is not just a sport but a powerful means to examine and strengthen local and global identities. Sports clubs are more than mere teams; they reflect the culture, history, and identity of the communities and territories from which they emerge (Ederson & Millington, 2008). Meanwhile, contemporary football seeks to strengthen its ties with citizens, and traditional links based on sporting success or local identity are no longer sufficient in a globalized market (Nuriddinov, 2024). Sports clubs have adopted branding strategies to attract or retain followers, whether focusing on local or universal values (Edensor & Millington, 2008; Irianto & Kartisari, 2020). Among the strategies used, football clubs are increasingly leveraging online platforms to strengthen the emotional connection with their fan base. A well-managed YouTube channel has become an invaluable tool for cultivating fan loyalty and maintaining engagement even in times of adverse results (Merten et al., 2024).

Through exclusive and accessible content, clubs can offer fans a more immersive and personalized experience. From interviews with players and coaches to behind-the-scenes footage of training or the club's daily life, the YouTube channel provides fans with unprecedented access to the team's world. This transparency and closeness create a deeper bond between fans and the club, increasing their sense of belonging and commitment. Additionally, the YouTube channel allows clubs to expand their reach beyond the geographical boundaries of the stadium (Seone et al., 2023). Fans worldwide can closely follow the club's activities and feel part of the community, even if they are thousands of miles away. This globalization of fandom not only increases the club's fan base but also strengthens its identity and reputation internationally.

In the world of football, there is a club that, due to its peculiar strategy for recruiting and developing players, has attracted the attention of various authors (Groves, 2011; Gutiérrez-Chico, 2018; Gutiérrez-Chico, 2020; Gutiérrez-Chico, 2021; Hernández-Simal et al. 2024; Vaczi, 2020) and gives it a distinctive personality. This strategy has become its brand, an instrument to achieve loyalty to the team that does not respond to sporting results and is reflected on its website: "Our sports philosophy is governed by the principle that players who have come through our own academy and those trained in clubs from Euskal Herria (Basque Country) can play in our ranks". Euskal Herria (Basque Country) encompasses the following territorial demarcations: Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa,

Araba, Navarra, Lapurdi, Zuberoa, and Navarra Behera, as well as, of course, players who have been born in any of them.”

Adopting this player recruitment and development policy has consequences, as it entails adhering to a very restrictive player market confined to Euskal Herria (Basque Country) territory. In contrast to the globalized market for signing star players for astronomical salaries, Athletic Club de Bilbao must develop other strategies in all aspects of its management, including its communication policy. The question arises quickly: how does the Club manage to build a sense of belonging strong enough to mobilize a million people?

## Theoretical framework

Authors such as (Keaton & Geahart, 2014; Shuv-Ami & Toder Alon, 2022) have studied how loyalty to a football club is constructed and have identified various factors that intervene in this process. The sense of belonging is built in a specific context that includes territorial, cultural, and social factors. Ultimately, the cultural and social community in which the football club lives and is imbued, and through which family and friends serve as a channel for transmitting a sense of belonging.

The role of territory in forming social ties with a football team has been analyzed by authors such as (Lock & Heere, 2017; Lock & Funk, 2016; Melnick & Wann, 2011), who suggest that population density correlates with stronger bonds, facilitating identification with the local team. However, other authors, such as (Giulianotti, 2021; Hernandez-Simal et al., 2024; Putra, 2019), point out that loyalty does not depend solely on the geographical extent of the territory but also on intangible characteristics that confer a distinctive identity to a territory and are transferred to the football club.

National identity and strong territorial identity can foster a deeper affection for the local team (Baker, 2021), as evidenced by research on the link between national sentiment and football (Vaczi, 2014; Vaczi et al., 2020; Wetherton, 2023). This phenomenon, which can be combined with expressions of ethnic or civic nationalism, has been widely studied in relation to fans' identification by nationality (Arroba et al., 2021; Bravo et al., 2013; Besta & Kossakowski, 2018; Devlin et al., 2022; Mutz & Gerke, 2018; Jones et al., 2012; Mutz & Gerke, 2018; Wear et al., 2018).

Other factors such as the club's origin, history, playing style, and connection with the city promote fans' identification with the club (Blank et al., 2017; Charleston, 2009; Grieve et al., 2009). However, regarding identification factors, there is greater consensus on the elements that generate stronger attachment, namely, sporting results and admiration for a specific player, which promote the highest levels of attachment (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016; Keaton & Gearhart, 2014; Stevens et al., 2017; Woratschek et al., 2014).

All these factors of identification with a football team generate diverse and simultaneous attachments, representing the complexity of the football identity phenomenon. These identification factors with a football team generate diverse and simultaneous links, representing the complexity of the football identity phenomenon. Not in vain, Wann & James (2018) showed that the fan's identity is part of a sense of belonging that provides singularity and meaning to life. Feeling and meaning would be the keys to forming an identity linked to a football team.

Assuming this complexity, this research aims to explore the extent to which these intangible elements are assumed and used in the communication strategy of a football team, Athletic Club de Bilbao. To address this objective, this research analyzed the documentary videos available on the club's YouTube channel, produced by the red-and-white entity. These videos are used as communication tools to strengthen the bonds between the club and its followers, which has implications both in the field of sports marketing and in understanding the relationship between the city and the football team. The article contributes to filling a gap in academic literature by providing a framework for analyzing communication through videos in sports clubs and its impact on fan identification. Additionally, it offers a complementary perspective to traditional studies on city marketing by examining the relationship between Athletic Club and the identity of Bilbao.

## Methodology

This study represents the first attempt to delve into the complex dimensions of club identification. For this, a qualitative methodology is used and allows delving into the communication strategy of a football club to explore the extent to which it builds loyalties to its philosophy for an entire city. Thematic study can provide an analysis of people's experiences in relation to a theme or the factors and processes that influence phenomena (Braun et al., 2016). Therefore, in relation to the present study, thematic analysis was considered appropriate, as it allowed understanding the extent to which Athletic Club, through its YouTube channel, participates in the process of developing a co-identification Club-fans-territory.

## Sampling

Athletic Club de Bilbao was chosen for its unique philosophy, which only selects and competes with players from his territory. This provides a unique opportunity to study the connection that the football club offers to generate and/or co-create an identity with its fans beyond football, thereby enhancing the identity of a city. Since its foundation in 1895 in Bilbao, its identity has evolved or transformed. Due to its philosophy, Athletic Club de Bilbao has a special place in the 21st-century football landscape, marked by the conversion of football clubs into joint-stock companies, the target of major investors, and influenced by the phenomenon of globalization epitomized by the Bosman ruling. As a comparative note, Athletic Club de Bilbao had a budget of €133.6 million in the 2023-24 season compared to €1.250 billion for FC Barcelona or €939.5 million for Real Madrid. In the transfer market, data on player transfer values also reflect the context in which the Athletic Club de Bilbao's philosophy must operate.

Table 1. Comparative transfer value of 3 most expensive football players

Athletic Club de Bilbao-Players	Transfer value	Real Madrid-Players	Transfer value	Futbol Club Barcelona-player	Transfer value
Nico Williams	80 millions	Jude Bellingman	250 millions	Lamine Yamal	150 millions
Oihan Sancet	50 millions	Rodrygo Goes	200 millions	Pablo Gavi	100 millions
Iñaki Williams	30 millionss	Vinicius Junior	200 millions	Alejandro Balde	80 millions

Source: <https://football-observatory.com/Tool-value>

This research focuses on the analysis of the documentary videos that the sports entity "Athletic Club" uploads to its YouTube channel and links to its website (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube). In addition to content about the first team, information about the women's team, foundation, etc., is also shared, although the main efforts are focused on communication actions around the first team. A balance must be sought between the heritage with strong roots in the community and the appeal to make its brand transcend its territory, which can be achieved through content on social networks.

Table 2: Athletic club Bilbao (social media reach of selected channels)

Official Athletic Club Bilbao social media channel	Reach by January 2019
Facebook	1,954,028 likes
Instagram	329,561 followers
Twitter	600,947 followers
YouTube	79,239 subscribers
Sina Weibo	7,039 followers
Others	127,200 followers

Source: <https://www.athletic-club.eus/>

To address the objective of this research, 15 videos (11 hours and 50 minutes) from the official YouTube channel of Athletic Club were analyzed, selected in March 2024 (See Table 3). This sample represents the entirety of available documentaries, being part of the Club's communication strategy to connect with its followers. According to Vogan (2014), sports documentary videos construct a coherent and glamorous narrative around the sports product, ensuring loyalty to the Athletic Club brand. This allows clubs to bypass traditional media outlets (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012), attracting a wider audience (Sigismondi, 2012). YouTube, as a video-sharing platform, has emerged as an alternative medium for media consumption (Wiggins, 2014).

**Table 3. Video-Documentaries analyzed produced by the Athletic Club**

	<b>Duración</b>	<b>Link</b>
D1	1 h :30 m	Un siglo y 90 minutos. La leyenda de San Mames <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRBYJxdV3oQ&amp;t=37s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRBYJxdV3oQ&amp;t=37s</a>
D2	1 h: 03 m	El espíritu de San Mamés <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_JYQkXIBiO&amp;t=1886s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_JYQkXIBiO&amp;t=1886s</a>
D3	59 m	Athletic Club. Rey de Copas <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozLaKBxyuiM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozLaKBxyuiM</a>
D4	45 m	48.121 historia de un record en San Mames <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htkAv3eYoDc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htkAv3eYoDc</a>
D5	52 m	Zu zara nagusia <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yX2_k8T8v4o">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yX2_k8T8v4o</a>
D6	44 m	La Gabarra. 1982/83 - 1983/1984 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRV7hKamEPY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRV7hKamEPY</a>
D7	29 m	Athletic Txapeldun 83/84 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxxb1KeAEIw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxxb1KeAEIw</a>
D8	49 m	Athletic Txapeldun 82/82 parte I <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPeC-ntmmYY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPeC-ntmmYY</a>
D9	53 m	Athletic Txapeldun 82/83 parte II <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDOKgPRQVAM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDOKgPRQVAM</a>
D10	9 m	This is Athelic Club Bilbao. Basque identity versus modern football <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NStKYuBmr5g&amp;t=134s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NStKYuBmr5g&amp;t=134s</a>
D11	6 m	Athletic Club's basque only player policy explained <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSXre9HXm5U&amp;t=165s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSXre9HXm5U&amp;t=165s</a>
D12	1 h: 7 m	Athletic, Un siglo de pasión <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxD7S_AZssA&amp;t=18s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxD7S_AZssA&amp;t=18s</a>
D13	6 m	El Athletic deja su marca en el mundo del cine <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cFyUUMsu3M&amp;list=PL46SDgeYMX-zDOjYxjr-pOR_6I6C7UtbO&amp;index=13">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cFyUUMsu3M&amp;list=PL46SDgeYMX-zDOjYxjr-pOR_6I6C7UtbO&amp;index=13</a>
D14	48 m	San Mameseko arima <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp2Naj9RHew&amp;list=PL46SDgeYMX-zDOjYxjr-pOR_6I6C7UtbO&amp;index=14">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp2Naj9RHew&amp;list=PL46SDgeYMX-zDOjYxjr-pOR_6I6C7UtbO&amp;index=14</a>
D15	1 h: 30 m	Mende bat eta 90 minutu- San Mameseko kondaira <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyYQBMeFadM&amp;list=PL46SDgeYMX-zDOjYxjr-pOR_6I6C7UtbO&amp;index=15">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyYQBMeFadM&amp;list=PL46SDgeYMX-zDOjYxjr-pOR_6I6C7UtbO&amp;index=15</a>

## Procedure

To immerse in the data, a first inductive cycle was conducted by simultaneously viewing and reading the transcriptions of the 15 available documentary videos on the Athletic Club's official

channel. Codes were generated to label key features, using the “ATLAS.ti version 23” software (Braun et al., 2016). An upward inductive approach was followed, developing codes as analysis units were reviewed, i.e., relevant phrases from each video. From a list of codes, central themes were identified, which Braun et al. (2016) explain as unique and important characteristics of the data. These themes form the thematic axes of debate, supported by selected direct quotes based on their representativeness (Hemmonsby & Knott, 2016). Based on the grounding data (codes frequency) and density (frequency of relationships between codes) of the coding process, the categories form 3 thematic axes: the fans as the main pillar on which to build the connection with the Club; the sense of belonging underlying that athletic community; the Athletic Philosophy, the key values for fostering a sense of belonging in the fans (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Grounded and density of codification cycles**

<b>Thematic Axis</b>	<b>Grounded (fr)</b>	<b>Density (fr)</b>	<b>Documents Contribution</b>
Fan as main pillar	57 codess	23 codes	(D2: 42 codes; D6: 7 codes; D9:7 codes; D11: 1 code)
Feeling of belonging	68 codes	20 codes	D 9 (28 codess); D 2 (27 codess); D 8 (6 codes) D11 (5 codes). D 4; 1 codes; D6 :1 codes
Filosofy Athletic	53 codes	29 codes	D8 (12 codes) D11 (11 codes) D1( 10 codes)

The themes were reviewed in relation to the codes data to ensure their accurate representation and coherence with the research objectives. A verification process was conducted by the research team to verify the accuracy and coherence of the coding and construction of the thematic axes (Birt et al., 2016).

The three thematic axes perfectly represent, through their connections, how Athletic Club de Bilbao, with its unique philosophy of hiring only local players, has fostered a strong sense of belonging among its followers. This approach not only keeps the traditional values of the Basque community alive but also resists the pressures of globalization and commercialization in modern football (Vaczi, 2014), reinforcing the identity with the club.

## **Results analysis and discussion**

The Athletic Club de Bilbao philosophy emerges as the main axis, both in terms of its grounding and density. This represents, from a discursive standpoint, that this philosophy is the foundation upon which a strong sense of belonging to the club and the territory is built.

The fans are the main pillar on which the identification with the Athletic Club is based. The club makes a great communication effort to showcase the characteristics of the fans.

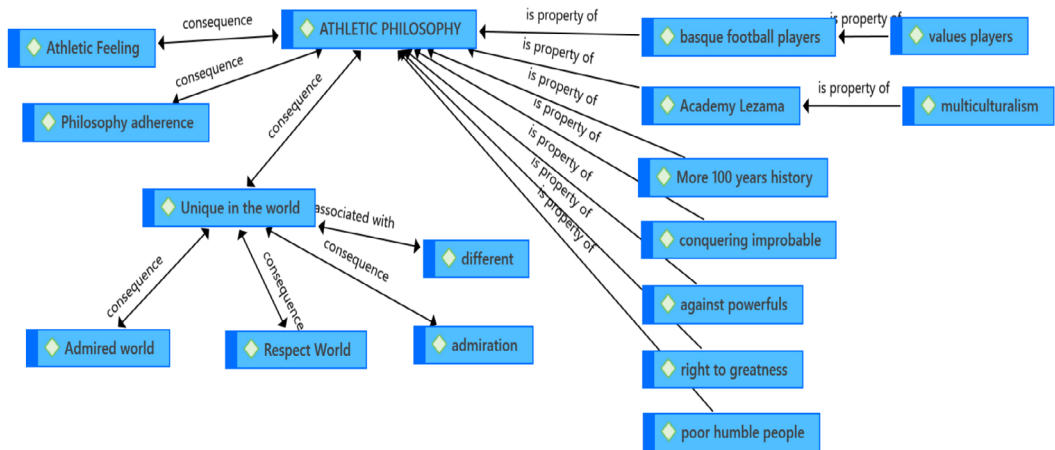
### **Athletic Philosophy, Backbone.**

The philosophy of Athletic Club conditions the recruitment and promotion policy of players, as they have to be born or raised in Basque Country. The club's academy, called Lezama plays a fundamental role in this, being the main factory of players for the first team. In this academy, a type of player closely linked to the territory is forged. A series of values are instilled in this academy in clear harmony with Basque culture.

The existence of the Athletic Club academy serves a dual function. On the one hand, it detects and develops sporting talent in the community and in the territories where it has affiliated clubs, thus feeding the needs of the first team.

It allows minors to play football under the auspices of Athletic Club, which is an example of a youth academy and key to the development of the first team. But moreover, playing in this academy reinforces the connections between the club and its fans. This academy-first team association fosters early loyalty to the Athletic Club, providing committed fans in the long term (Abosag et al., 2012).

Figure 1. Graphic Representation of the Thematic Axis 1



At the same time, the function of training players in the Academy provides the opportunity to meet the criteria of the Philosophy since players can be born anywhere in the world, contributing to a multicultural image of the club and its philosophy that breaks away from the notion of a racist philosophy, exclusive to Basques. While not forgetting that national and territorial identity fosters the attachment of the fans (Baker, 2021; García, 2012), multiculturalism is already a characteristic of Basque society, reflected in the Lezama's academy. The clearest example is the two current players in the first team of Ghanaian origin. The Williams brothers, born in Basque territory but trained in the Lezama academy. This distances Athletic Club from presenting itself as a nationalist team with ethnic overtones, leaning more towards the idea of Athletic as a representative of civic nationalism described for the Athletic Club (Vaczi et al., 2020; Wetherton, 2023).

In addition to the appropriation of elements of Basque identity incorporated into the philosophy, from the analysis of YouTube videos, other elements are extracted on which adherence to the philosophy is built.

More than a century of history, its permanence in the First Division since its foundation, as well as representing a modest team against the big football teams with large budgets, are factors that foster a sense of pride that enhances the connection to the Athletic Club supporter's community (Maderer et al., 2016; Irianto & Kartikasari, 2020).

But undoubtedly, the slogan "Unique in the world" is one of the symbolic elements that gains the most relevance in this thematic axis. Athletic Bilbao proposes a model that clashes with the logic of sport as a commercialized product in the global world. Maintaining players trained in the academy involves dispensing with signings in the international market. As Vaczi (2011) points out, it is a construction of difference that fuels a process of "self-exoticism". Hence, Athletic Club's followers use the slogan "We are different". A slogan that any person from Bilbao adopts and internalizes as an identity element.

This construction of difference is also fueled by another slogan "Unique in the world" (Figure 1) that links the local with a transcendence beyond the limits of the city. It combines uniqueness, authenticity with a cosmopolitan image. It is a clear indicator of Appiah's (2005) notion of the "rooted cosmopolitan" and which Chen & Rocha (2022) apply to football. The slogan implies a re-modeling of the identity linked to the followers, accused of localism due to their philosophy that



only counts on players born and/or trained in the academy and affiliated clubs. It is a clear resource that stimulates authenticity of the local and the global and marks a difference with other followers of other clubs. It is a slogan that follows a parasitic strategy of cultural meanings that arises from the particular context of Athletic and that, thanks to the new image of the city, after a paradigmatic urban regeneration process, enables the club, its fans, and its city to catapult themselves into the world. A symbiotic relationship between city and club.

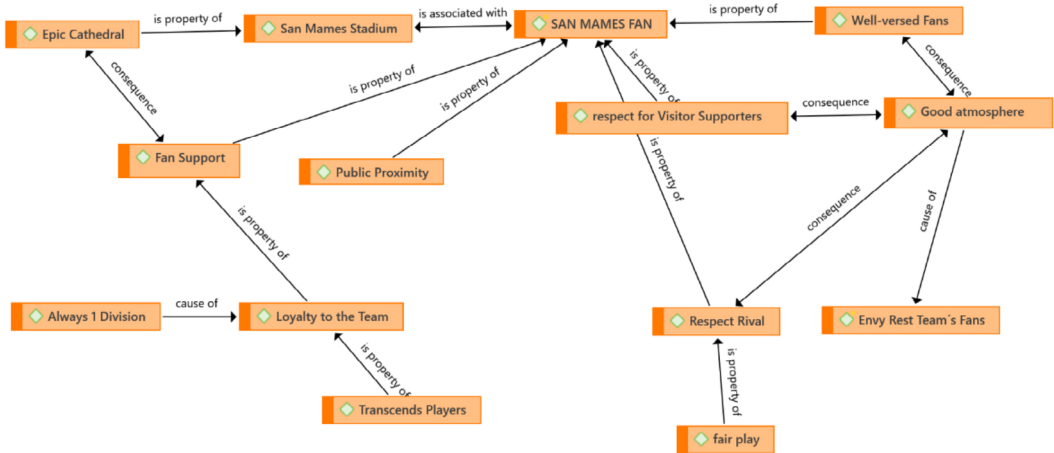
This slogan has accompanied the team and its fans in the dispute of the Copa del Rey Final in La Cartuja in 2024. Undoubtedly, achieving that victory has fueled the meaning of that slogan which, together with the experiential benefit experienced in that final and the subsequent celebration in the city of the triumph with the departure of *La Gabarra* along the Nervión river, will represent a boost to the maintenance of Athletic Club's philosophy due to its ability to evoke beautiful memories to the fans.

### San Mamés Fans As Main Pillar

The Athletic Club's fans cannot understand their passion without San Mamés, their stadium. San Mamés has a series of characteristics that give it an almost mystical character, being recognized as the cathedral of football. It is a stadium that is famous for the unique atmosphere it generates, especially highlighted by the strong pressure exerted by its fans on visiting teams, as evidenced in the testimonies of players from other teams participating in the different videos.

The vibrant atmosphere of San Mamés is largely due to a fan base that, while passionate, also shows respect towards the opponent and recognizes their footballing quality, as well as towards the opposing fans. This balance between passion and respect is what makes the Athletic Club's fans admired and, at times, envied by other supporters.

Figure 2. Graphic representation of the Thematic Axis 2



In the documentaries analysed, three players from other teams assert that one of the characteristics of the San Mamés fans is their respect for the opponent. Xavi, a former Barça player, stated: *"I felt at home, as if I were playing at Camp Nou, the people here are amazing, they respect you, there's always a sense of brotherhood"*. In the same way, Johann Cruyff, a former player and coach of Barça, said: *"Off the field, after the match or when I was substituted, they always applauded me and this is greatness"*. Sporting's former player, Joaquín Alonso, acknowledges that it's an informed fan base, an audience that values the quality of players even if they are rivals, *"above all, it's an informed audience that also knew how to appreciate when you did things well (...) in my case, it happened that they applauded actions I did, this never happened anywhere else"*. A former Athletic player, Julen Guerrero, sums up in this sentence what San Mamés represents: *"I think it's*



where everyone wants to play, the truth is that everyone who comes here leaves the field delighted with the atmosphere (...).”

The unwavering support of the fans also has its manifestations outside the stadium. At the end of 2009, more than 50,000 fans traveled to the city of Valencia where the match against Barcelona was held. And in the last Copa del Rey Final held on April 6, 2024, in Seville, a total of 60,000 fans traveled to Seville. It should be noted that the availability of tickets to see that match was “20,000” for Athletic Club Bilbao fans, which means that there were fans who traveled to that city without a ticket to the stadium. All the forecasts reflected by newspapers and media were surpassed by the actual figures of fans that day (Doncel, 2024, April 4; Eitb, 2024, April,5)

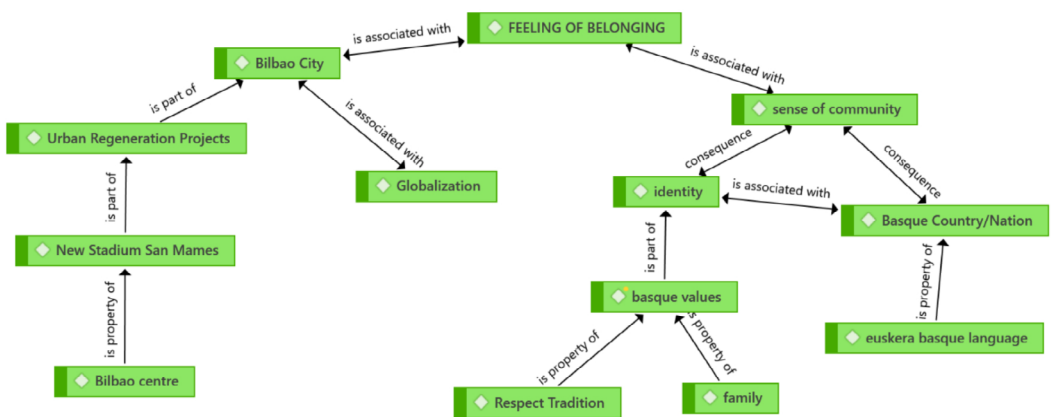
On the other hand, San Mamés Fans are recognized for their loyalty to Athletic Club that transcends any commitment to the Club due to the prestige or quality of the players; it’s a loyalty that is sustained by the fact of remaining in the First Division since its foundation. Along with Real Madrid and Barcelona, they are the only three teams that have never been relegated to the second division, and this while maintaining their philosophy of playing with players born or trained in the Basque Country. This is a “symbolic asset of loyalty” that goes beyond sporting results. Loyalty to the team is backed by the fact that 76% of fans would prefer to see the team relegated to the second division than to change its philosophy (Nili, 2009).

Contrary to the membership model based on football results as in the case of Real Madrid or Barcelona (Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020), Athletic Club maintains a connection with its fans and followers that is not affected by the unpredictable outcome of a match; rather, its brand is its fan base. That loyalty becomes in itself a sense, a vital principle that causes the fans to endure the uncertainty of winning and losing in the stadium. A fan base that, in turn, creates value for the team, to the extent that its own players acknowledge the high value of their fans and supporters, as reflected in the documentary videos.

### Sense Of Belonging: City-Basque Country Belonging

Many authors have analyzed football as a particularly prominent way of expressing identity in contemporary times, through an affective and cognitive sense of belonging to a place, a tradition, and a group. The identity promoted by Athletic Club is associated with the conception of a community steeped in entrenched values. But this community is not a fictitious one; it is based on tradition and sentiment that are strengthened through local community programs worked on by the Football Club.

Figure 3. Graphic Representation of the Thematic Axis 3



The sense of community Athletic Club Fans is based on a series of values built on two main elements: the consideration of the people or nation (Euskal Herria), reflected in the philosophy of Athletic Club (Thematic Axis 3), and testimonials collected in various videos:

'I have always thought that San Mamés encapsulates the essence of Athletic, as well as that of the Basque people: respect for tradition, the value of what is one's own, the conquest of the improbable. It was improbable that our stadium would last 100 years, as it was also improbable that Athletic, made up only of Basque players, would become applauded and admired worldwide' (Jose Ángel Iribar, former Athletic Club player).

*'They are emotions, all emotions and feelings, it's a feeling inside, the feeling of an entire people'* (Johan Cruyff, former player and coach of Futbol Club Barcelona).

Football serves as a socially acceptable outlet to exhibit these collective identities. Hobsbawm (1992) clearly expresses this by highlighting the importance of sport in the realm of nationalism: 'What has made sport such a uniquely effective medium for instilling national feelings... is the ease with which even the least political or public individuals can identify with the nation symbolized by young people excelling in what virtually everyone wants, or what one of them wants at some point in their life, to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven individuals with a name' (p. 143).

When asked about the meaning of being Basque, Athletic Club fans highlighted two elements: the territory and the language (Wetherthon, 2023). Although Basque is spoken by a majority of Athletic fans who self-identify as Basque, Spanish predominates as the majority language in the fan base as a whole. This underscores a linguistic duality that reflects the diversity and flexibility of Basque identity in the context of football. The integration of players who do not speak Basque natively into the team, and the fact that club communications are conducted in both languages, demonstrates how the fan base can embrace linguistic diversity as an essential component of its social identity. The acceptance of this linguistic and cultural diversity can be considered a reflection of the contemporary narrative of Athletic Club, whose anthem in Basque symbolizes not only a sense of belonging to the Club but also a celebration of the cultural and linguistic plurality of the Basque Country.

On the other hand, the results showed that Athletic Club provides Fans with a sense and feeling of belonging to the city of Bilbao as the geographical space of support, but it is not only confined to the city and goes beyond the city limits, the metropolitan area, and even surpasses the territory of Bizkaia.

Talking about the city of Bilbao undoubtedly refers to Athletic Club de Bilbao, as both figures, city and football club, have undergone similar processes when facing the phenomenon of globalization. This harmony is reflected in the testimonials in the documentary videos, when political and social agents acknowledge that the city of Bilbao underwent a process of urban regeneration that positioned it as a city in the ranking of world cities. This process was complemented by Athletic Club with the construction of a new stadium in the city centre. The testimony of the Deputy Regional Authority, Jose Luis Bilbao, indicates that at the time of the urban regeneration in which the city was immersed 'the occasion was seized (...) the modifications of the general plan of Bilbao and the opportunity offered by the terrain of the Bilbao Trade Fair to build a stadium, the occasion was to carry out an important urban operation that was not only a stadium, it's the access to the university... (...) to the future' (Document 1).

The location of the new San Mamés Stadium in the center of Bilbao allows Fans to maintain the same rituals before entering the stadium. Traditions like *potear*, that is, meeting with friends, family, and neighbors to have wines and beers in the bars and taverns surrounding the stadium, are a clear indicator of what Williams (2006:106) calls shared and collective anchoring elements, which provide a sense of stability and meaning in a rapidly globalizing world. The commitment to this centrality of the stadium has enabled the maintenance of certain traditions and rituals linked to the Athletic Club fans that other stadiums have lost in this race for the commodification of football.

## Conclusions

Research on Athletic Club de Bilbao reveals several fundamental conclusions that highlight the club's unique philosophy, the role of its fans, and the sense of belonging this football team generates within its community. In this strategy of communion between the club's identity and the sense

of belonging to that club and its territory, the documentary videos presented by the club on its channel have proven to be a good opportunity to reinforce the club's brand identity (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). As Vogann (2014) points out, these sports documentary videos tell a coherent and well-constructed story, which contributes to nurturing the mythology surrounding Athletic Club and deepening the sense of belonging to the club.

This coherent story is supported by Athletic Club's unique philosophy, which is fundamental for the team to transcend in the world of football. It would be too simplistic to suggest that this philosophy is the key, as behind it lie several factors that link the inspiring values of this philosophy with the culture of a city and a territory.

The analysis conducted has shown that the key to Athletic Club's philosophy does not solely lie in the geographical origin of its players, but in deeper values. Thus, the team's philosophy is not simply a sporting strategy that has proven effective in competing with football giants. Changing this philosophy would be equivalent to betraying the loyalty and passion of generations of fans, which would undoubtedly weaken the emotional bond that has so defined the club.

Contrary to what might be thought in a context of globalization and commercialization of football, Athletic Club's philosophy can be considered an anachronism, but nonetheless, it serves to demonstrate its enormous value compared to those who have considered this philosophy outdated. The true strength of the club lies in its unique philosophy, which goes beyond results and generates unwavering loyalty in its fans. Its perpetuation serves to show the fans and, therefore, the Basque citizenry that joining the philosophy imparts a character of uniqueness and cosmopolitanism that builds a community bond. Athletic Club supporters are not just fans; they are guardians of a centuries-old tradition, custodians of a philosophy that represents the identity and pride of an entire community. There are no stronger bonds than these.

Athletic Club's philosophy, which focuses on recruiting and promoting only players born or raised in the Basque Country, is a central pillar of the club's identity. This policy is primarily executed through its academy, Lezama, which not only develops sporting talent but also instills values aligned with Basque culture. The academy not only detects and nurtures talent in the community and affiliated territories but also strengthens the bonds between the club and its followers from an early age, fostering long-term loyalty (Abosag et al., 2012). Moreover, this philosophy, although seemingly exclusive, reflects the multiculturalism of Basque society, as demonstrated by the Ghanaian-origin players in the first team, the Williams brothers, positioning Athletic as a representative of civic nationalism (Vaczi et al., 2020; Wetherton, 2023). Historical and symbolic elements, such as the slogan "Unique in the world," enhance the pride and connection with followers, highlighting the club's resilience against globalization and commercialization (Maderer et al., 2016; Irianto & Kartikasari, 2020).

San Mamés, known as the "cathedral of football," is the heart of Athletic Club fans' passion. This stadium is famous for its unique atmosphere, characterized by the vibrant and respectful passion of its followers, which is admired and envied by others. Testimonials from players of other teams highlight the respect and brotherhood felt at San Mamés, creating a reputation for greatness and hospitality (Xavi, Cruyff, Alonso). The unwavering loyalty of the fans manifests both inside and outside the stadium, with thousands traveling to support the team in important matches, such as the 2024 Copa del Rey Final. This loyalty is not tied solely to sporting results but to the team's permanence in the First Division and its philosophy of local players, reinforcing a "symbolic asset of loyalty" that is unique (Nili, 2009).

Athletic Club fosters a strong sense of belonging through a community identity based on deeply rooted values. This identity is not fictional; it is grounded in tradition and sentiment, reinforced by local community programs. The club acts as a symbol of Basque culture and values, reflected in the loyalty of its fans, who consider the team an extension of their local and national identity. The linguistic diversity within the fan base, with communications in both Basque and Spanish, highlights the acceptance of diversity as an essential component of its social identity. Moreover, the location of the new stadium in the center of Bilbao has allowed the maintenance of traditions and rituals that further strengthen the bond between the club, the city, and its followers, reflecting a symbiotic relationship that propels the club and the city onto the global stage.

In summary, Athletic Club de Bilbao presents itself as a unique model in the world of football, where the philosophy of local players, the unwavering passion of its fans, and a deep sense of belonging to the city and Basque culture intertwine to create a distinctive and lasting identity. These elements not only strengthen the bond between the club and its followers but also highlight the club's resilience and adaptation in a globalized context. As demonstrated, Athletic Club negotiates positions of localism, globalism, and cosmopolitanism, but most importantly for adherence to a community project, whether sporting or identity-based, is that it allows one to feel part of a dream; it allows one to dream. Bizi Ametsa (Live a dream), thus read many of the shirts worn by the fans.

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