

**Lost in Transition: Exploring the Effects of a Sports Team's Rebranding on its Supporters
and their Relationship with the Club**

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ABSTRACT

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Change never stops! Over the past two decades, the number of sports teams that have changed their logo and name has multiplied. This phenomenon, known as rebranding, is not always successful, with one out of two rebrandings generating negative reactions from fans. In this research, I investigate how fans may perceive rebranding as a betrayal and the subsequent impact on their relationship with the club. Previous research has already established the effects of rebranding on fan identification and purchase behaviour, but the exploration of their relational trajectories remains understudied. To bridge this gap, I drew on the case of the Montreal Impact's rebranding in 2021. Through in-depth interviews with club supporters, podcasts, and forums, my findings revealed that the disruption of the club's identity and lack of fan involvement in the rebranding process were perceived as moral transgressions by fans. As such, their relationships with the club were divided into three possible trajectories: some fans accepted the rebranding and adapted their self-concept, others fought for the return of the previous identity, and others terminated their relationship with the club, going through a process of loss accommodation. This paper contributes to the consumer-brand relationship literature by demonstrating that a rebranding can act as a critical juncture in the relationship between fans and clubs. For practitioners, this research provides insights into managing a rebranding process, emphasizing the importance of transparent communication, incorporating fan opinion, and encouraging evolutionary image changes to maximize retention.

Keywords: rebranding, consumer-brand relationship, sports team, brand betrayal

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1. INTRODUCTION

I am sure this has happened to you before. You love a brand, buy its products regularly, and the mere sight of its logo brings to mind all of its qualities and what you like about it. In other words, you share a real relationship with it. But then, from one day to the next, without taking the time to warn you, the brand decides to change its logo. What an upheaval! While the brand is not dead, and you can still buy the same products, you do not recognize the brand in its new guise and are disappointed by the change. This process of identity change is known as rebranding. These changes in name, colour, or logo often reflect a desire to develop a differentiated new position for the brand and have become commonplace in the business world (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). In fact, 74% of the S&P 100 companies have rebranded within their first seven years of operation (Mehta, 2025). And if I'm not taking too much of a risk in assuming your disappointment is that one in two cases of rebranding generates negative reactions from consumers (Miller et al., 2014). Yet this doesn't stop various companies, especially sports teams, from continuing to invest thousands of dollars in identity change processes. While research points to possible reasons for rebranding, such as a change in ownership structure (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006), a desire for modernization, or nostalgia (Walsh et al., 2018), the focus of this thesis is on the possible impacts of such change on the consumer-brand relationship. As described by Russell and Schau (2014), consumer-brand relationships are paved with pivotal events, called critical junctures, that redirect relationships into different trajectories. Other research on consumer-brand relationships informs us that following a brand transgression, relationships can either be strengthened or completely destroyed despite subsequent reparation attempts (Aaker et al., 2004). Returning to the literature on rebranding, several researchers have examined the impact of a change in a sports team's identity on various factors such as fan

attitudes (Williams et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2023), attendance (Agha et al., 2016), and purchase intentions (Ahn et al., 2013). They note the difference between an evolutionary rebranding when a brand makes minor developments in its aesthetics, and a revolutionary rebranding, when a major, identifiable change in positioning and aesthetics fundamentally redefines the company (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). More specifically, some elements of a sports team's identity are more "unchangeable" than others: the team name, team colours, and substantial changes to the logo are the main factors of rejection for fans and have the most impact on their level of identification with the club (Williams & Son, 2022). However, despite the demonstrated impact of sports team rebranding on fan identification, existing research has yet to examine how such identity change may affect fans' relational trajectories. My research seeks to explore this gap by drawing on Russell and Schau's (2014) approach to consumer-brand relational trajectories and their study of fans' process of loss accommodation following the death of a narrative brand. Furthermore, I will seek to understand whether a rebranding can be perceived as a brand betrayal by fans, this time drawing on the theory of Reimann et al. (2018). In their research, they defined a betrayal when the brand breaks a moral obligation in the relationship and violates the norms that a consumer perceives as fundamental (Reimann et al., 2018). In addition, they identified unique and self-focused emotions that characterize brand betrayal: indignation-focused anger, feelings of psychological loss, loss of self-concept, self-castigation, and rumination (Reimann et al., 2018).

With that in mind, my research question will be twofold:

1. Can the rebranding of a sports team be perceived as a betrayal by fans?
2. How does rebranding affect the relationship between the club and its fans?

To explore these questions, I will focus on one context and one case in particular: the rebranding of the Montreal Impact. As the first soccer club in the province of Quebec, the Impact established itself in the Montreal culture by reaching Major League Soccer (MLS), the highest soccer league in North America. After operating under this name since its inception in 1993, the club's management decided to completely change its identity in January 2021, becoming the Club de Foot de Montréal and changing its logo simultaneously. The announcement came as a shock to the fans, and many vehement reactions followed, making it an ideal research context for my thesis.

The exploration of these research questions will take a qualitative approach. My data set consists of in-depth interviews with club fans and secondary data with the examination of podcasts and a forum. This study informs the literature on consumer-brand relationships by investigating the different relational trajectories taken by fans following a rebranding. As such, this paper enriches work on rebranding by exploring this process through the prism of brand betrayal. Practitioners are given guidance on how to engage and communicate with fans in a rebranding process, as well as which historical club elements to retain for a smooth identity transition.

The remainder of this thesis flows as follows. First, I will expand on the literature exploring the relationship between consumer and brand, as well as research on brand transgression and rebranding to contextualize the gap my research bridges. Next, I will elaborate on the history of the Montreal Impact, giving more context to the club's rebranding. The following section will be dedicated to my research methodology before my findings are revealed. Finally, the various implications of my thesis for literature and sports marketers will be discussed, along with its limitations and opportunities for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Consumer-Brand Relationship

Initially seen as a metaphor, the relational phenomena between a consumer and a brand received particular attention at the end of the 20th century. Led by the work of Fournier (1998), she cemented the notion that a brand could be considered a relationship partner for a consumer in the same way as any other human being.

Just as every relationship differs between human beings, each relationship between consumer and brand varies in nature and trajectory. As Fehr and Russell pointed out (1991), every relationship between a consumer and a brand is unique, some being more superficial while others come closer to a passionate love. An indicator is relationship strength, predominant in the literature on brand relationships and broadly construed in the spirit of durability and impactfulness (Petty and Krosnick 1995). In the sports literature, Funk and James (2006) have explored how the relationship between a fan and his favourite sports team can evolve. Their results show that an individual may be attracted to a sports team to escape his everyday life or to associate himself with the team's success, but when the individual begins to place a greater symbolic and emotional meaning into the relationship, he develops an allegiance to his team, a commitment that is far more persistent and resistant to change (Funk & James, 2006).

An important point made by Fournier (1998) is that an individual does not engage in a relationship with a brand simply out of attraction to its product attributes or image. Instead, one must consider the larger whole in which that relationship is embedded. All an individual's life experiences lead him or her to create a relationship with a brand much more for a matter of perceived goal compatibility (Fournier, 1998). Moreover, as Aron and Aron report (1996), an

individual's self-concept can be changed by the relationship he or she maintains with a brand.

We find this in the world of sports with the concept of identification. Through their relationship with a sports team, the individual comes to view him or herself as a member of that social entity (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000), creating an overlap between their self-schema and the entity's schema (Carlson et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the relationship between a brand and a consumer does not remain static over time.

It evolves over the course of interactions, adopting what we call a trajectory over its life course.

As Russell and Schau point out (2014), these trajectories are rarely linear. Crucial events will act as turning points in the relationship, taking it to a higher level of intimacy or destroying essential bridges between the two parties. These critical junctures alter the relationship and trigger accommodation processes for the consumer, who has to reassess the brand's position and re-establish meaning in the relationship. Examples of critical junctures vary widely. In their research, Russell and Schau (2014) studied the death of a narrative brand in the evolution of its relationship with consumers. Their findings point to the loss of narrative evolution, characters and social structures experienced by fans following the unilateral termination of their favourite TV show. Furthermore, they describe the process of loss accommodation that followed for fans, as well as the different post-withdrawal relationship trajectories possible, depending notably on the closural force of the series (Russell & Schau, 2014). These trajectories range from complete decathexis, where consumers manage to completely detach themselves from the brand to maladaptation, where the loss accommodation process cannot be completed, with fans still holding onto the lost love object (Russell & Schau, 2014). This research is of great interest to me. Although my research context focuses on what might be considered a brand transgression, a sports team is nevertheless a narrative brand that sees its characters (the players) evolve over the

course of sporting seasons. Let's now turn to the literature on brand transgression to understand better how it might represent a critical juncture in the relationship between a brand and a consumer.

2.2. Brand Transgression & Betrayal

The notion of brand transgression is rooted in the consumer-brand relationship literature. Defined as an “act of violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding consumer-brand relationship performance and evaluation” (Metts 1994), it gained prominence with the seminal article published by Aaker et al. in 2004. In their paper, Aaker et al. (2004) studied the evolution of relationships between consumers and brands with different personalities over a two-month period. Having carefully “programmed” a transgression committed by the brand, they observed that not all consumers reacted similarly to such an act. Depending on brand personality, some consumer-brand relationships were actually strengthened after the transgression, while others showed no signs of recovery despite subsequent reparation attempts (Aaker et al., 2004). This research highlights that transgressions can serve as defining moments that distance the relationship in some instances but propel it forward in others (Fournier and Deighton 1999). Accordingly, although transgressions vary in severity and cause, they are all significant in their ability to affect the evolution of the relationship. In this sense, they constitute the hallmark of the relationship, representing perhaps the most pivotal event in the relationship's history (Aaker et al., 2004). Furthermore, even if it is antithetical for most consumers that a brand with which they have created a relationship engages in an act of transgression (Reis and Knee, 1996), the longevity and the evolution of each party's objectives make transgression inevitable (Aaker et al., 2004).

The literature on brand transgression is characterized by the numerous contexts and angles explored, such as anthropomorphism (Puzakova et al., 2013), athlete scandals (Arai et al., 2023) and sport management (Lee et al., 2016), along with different moderators such as transgression type or recovery efforts (Bitner et al., 1990; Smith et al., 1999). This literature remains predominantly studied using a micro lens focusing on individuals and their psychological processes and reactions to such acts (Khamitov et al., 2019).

Another fundamental paper in my research was published by Reimann et al. in 2018. Adhering to the literature on brand transgression, Reimann et al. (2018) take the concept further when speaking of brand betrayal. Similar to a transgression, a “betrayal occurs when a brand with which one has developed a prior relationship breaks a moral obligation, violating the norms that a consumer perceives to be fundamental to the relationship” (Reimann et al., 2018). This notion emphasizes the perceived moral obligations that consumers may place on a brand and highlights the trusting bond established between partners. Binding this to a sports context, Cocieru et al. (2018) posit that sports fans tend to believe that they own their team psychologically. Correlated with the identification process, when a fan goes to the stadium and gets involved in supporter groups, they may feel a sense of moral ownership towards their club.

How do consumers feel when a brand breaks their perceived moral obligation?

Reimann et al. (2018) have identified unique and self-focused feelings that characterize brand betrayal. The first emotion is anger, and while it may seem obvious, they distinguish between two types of anger: frustration-centric anger that arises when consumers perceive that one of their goals has been blocked, much more prevalent in cases of brand dissatisfaction, and indignation, a variant of anger associated with moral violations and characterized by emotions of shock, outrage and disgust towards the brand (Reimann et al., 2018). Secondly, if consumers

have formed a long and strong relationship with a brand, an act of betrayal can significantly damage the relationship and even lead the consumer to discontinue the relationship altogether, evoking feelings of psychological loss (Reimann et al., 2018). These feelings of loss are often centred on the past relationship and the benefits derived but can also correspond to a loss of self-concept. Finally, research on brand betrayal suggests that an act of betrayal can lead individuals to self-direct disappointment and blame, a phenomenon called self-castigation, and to ruminate on how they were betrayed and whether the brand intended to betray them (Reimann et al., 2018).

Could the rebranding of a sports club's image be considered a betrayal by fans? To help us answer this question, let's take a look at the literature on rebranding.

2.3. Rebranding

A rebranding is broadly defined as the “creation of a new name, term, symbol, design or a combination of them for an established brand with the intention of developing a differentiated (new) position in the mind of stakeholders and competitors” (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). With the number of rebranding cases multiplying in the business world, the literature on such identity changes developed strongly in the 2000s and 2010s. The subject remains fascinating, as the risk taken by some companies in changing their image and name suggests the loss of all the values that the old name signified, challenging traditional marketing wisdom with regard to brand equity (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). In their analysis of 76 cases of rebrandings in various contexts, Miller et al. (2014) found an even proportion of positive and negative outcomes. Moreover, sports team brands have a unique feature: they are made up of both product-related attributes (e.g. players, coaches) and non-product-related attributes (e.g. logo, stadium, mascots) (Gladden & Funk, 2002). The latter being the most important brand association for fans as they

are often the first element they associate with the organization (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). Numerous papers have drawn on real-life rebranding cases to understand better the reasons driving marketers to change their image or name (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006; Walsh et al., 2018) and to provide guidance for a successful rebranding process (Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Miller et al., 2014). Researchers add nuance by differentiating between two types of rebranding: evolutionary rebranding, when a brand makes minor developments in its aesthetics, also called a relifting by some, and revolutionary rebranding, when a major, identifiable change in positioning and aesthetics fundamentally redefines the company (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006).

While numerous studies have considered the company's point of view when rebranding, others have also taken the consumer's perspective. In particular, papers on rebranding in the world of sports focus heavily on those who are undergoing the change - the fans. Several measures and approaches have been used, some measuring fan attitudes after a rebranding (Williams et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2023), attendance numbers (Agha et al., 2016), and purchase intention (Ahn et al., 2013). From this body of research, several insights can help us better understand the case of CF Montreal. Firstly, revolutionary rebrands are the hardest for fans to accept, regardless of their level of identification with the club (Williams & Son, 2022). More precisely, specific non-product-related attributes of a team are more “unchangeable” than others. Several researchers have concluded that changing a sports team's name or colours generates the most negative responses from fans (Ahn et al., 2013; Williams & Son, 2022; Simmons et al., 2023). Agha et al. (2016) found that teams that abandon unique local names see large attendance decreases and a drop in merchandise sales. In conclusion, sports teams with a long history and unique associations with which consumers identify should lean towards an evolutionary rebranding, with similarities between the old and new brand elements being an acceptance factor

for most fans (Williams et al., 2021). Moreover, fans' involvement in the rebranding process proved to be an equally important driver of buy-in (Williams et al., 2021). On the other hand, teams making revolutionary changes to a logo or changing colours can expect repercussions from fans (Creţan, 2018). Research indicates that such changes impact fan identification and loyalty (Bauer et al., 2008).

No research has yet examined the impact of rebranding on the relational trajectories between consumer and brand. My research will seek to fill this gap while also characterizing the elements of betrayal that a rebranding may constitute. Before discussing my research methodology, more context on the Montreal Impact rebranding case is needed.

3. RESEARCH CONTEXT

To investigate how the relationship between a club and its fans is affected by a rebranding, I will focus on the case of the Montreal Impact. Founded by the Saputo family, wealthy Quebec investors, the Montreal Impact FC made its debut in the American Professional Soccer League (APSL) in 1993, making it the first professional soccer team in Quebec. For its first match at the Centre Claude-Robillard, the Montreal public was out in force, with over 5,000 people in the stands (ImpactSoccer.com, 2023). Years of success followed, punctuated by APSL titles in 1994 and 2004. Successive seasons brought their share of ups and downs while the club continued to evolve. After the Saputo group sold the team to a group of local shareholders led by Joey Saputo, a new stadium with a capacity of almost 20,000 was built in 2007 in the east end of Montreal. Then came the consecration: the Montreal Impact entered the Major League Soccer (MLS) in 2012, the highest level of soccer in North America. Attendance continued to rise as soccer stars such as Alessandro Nesta, Nacho Piatti, and Didier Drogba joined the club. The

2019 season marked a change, with Joey Saputo handing over the club's presidency to Kevin Gilmore after 25 years in charge (CF Montréal, 2019). Kevin Gilmore brought with him a wealth of experience in several National Hockey League (NHL) franchises.

All of this brings us to January 14, 2021, on the club's YouTube channel. After an announcement on their social networks, a live event is broadcast called “Launch Event - Montreal Impact's New Identity.” The YouTube live, attended by thousands of club fans, brought together several key figures, including Joey Saputo, then-coach Thierry Henry and the club's two marketing executives: Kevin Gilmore and Justin Kingsley. During the event, it was revealed that the Montreal Impact would be changing its identity to become the Club de Foot de Montréal, along with a new logo, as seen in **Figure 1**. During the 57-minute live broadcast, various club members explained the motivations behind the change and presented the new identity. The multiple fans present on the livestream were quick to express their incomprehension and shock at the news. Different reactions followed on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook (Kelly, 2021). Some fan groups even went so far as to launch a petition to return to the Montreal Impact name, while others spray-painted the logo in front of Saputo Stadium (Lévesque, 2021). In conclusion, numerous fans were having trouble digesting the change in their club's identity.



Figure 1 - Old logo (left) and new club logo revealed during the YouTube live broadcast in January 2021 (right)

What followed were 2 seasons of mixed fortunes on the pitch and turmoil off it. Conflicts between ultras and management piled up. The former voicing their disagreement with the rebranding, the latter defending their work. Ultras are supporters who are more involved in the day-to-day life of a club, attend almost all matches in a section of the stadium designated for them and are responsible for leading the chants and entertainment in the stands (tifos, smoke bombs, clapping). A term that first appeared in Italy in the 1980s, today's ultras are fans who are also involved in the politics of a club, taking part in meetings with the management and representing the voice of all supporters (So Foot, 2025). Often organised in groups independent of the club, they are one of the symbols of popular football. Returning to the Montreal Impact rebranding case, the direction of the club resorted to the closure of section 132 of the stadium, banishing the ultras from the ground following repeated incidents in this stand (Gaxet, 2021). This act marked the death knell for many of the club's fans, with many ultras groups ceasing their activities in the months that followed. However, in March 2022, the club took a new turn. Former player Gabriel Gervais was appointed President and CEO of CF Montréal (CF Montréal, 2022). A month after this appointment, the club's management announced that a new logo would be unveiled and used for the 2023 season (Gaboury, 2022). On November 17, 2022, the club unveiled its new logo, created by a branding agency named Pigeons (CF Montréal, 2022; Pigeon, 2022). As shown in **Figure 2**, this new logo reconnects with the symbols of the club's history and was a great success with fans. This new rebranding marks the end of a 2-year period of instability that saw the club's fans lose their name “Impact.”



Figure 2 - New logo revealed in November 2022

As you may have gathered from reading this passage of the club's history, CF Montréal and its two successive rebrandings represent the perfect opportunity to learn more about how fans might perceive such a change in their club's identity. So, as a logical next step, I will outline my methodology for studying this context.

4. METHODOLOGY

For my research, I chose a qualitative approach. Qualitative studies are defined by their interpretative and immersive nature, drawing on the realities of their participants and taking into account the cultural, social, and personal characteristics of the context in which the data is collected (Belk et al., 2012), thus perfectly aligning with my research objective of understanding fans' reactions in a specific context: the rebranding of their club.

My research incorporated two data sources: in-depth interviews and archival data. Data were collected over a five-month period (October 2024 to February 2025). The scope of the study was limited to soccer club CF Montréal and its two rebranding between 2021 and 2023. The two sources of my data collection proved to be complementary. Indeed, archival sources provided me with fans' opinions and reactions at the time of the rebranding, while interviews enabled me to

delve deeper into the feelings of participants and the evolution of their opinions sometime after the rebranding.

My data collection process involved triangulation, drawing on several sources of data to study the phenomenon in question (Carter et al., 2014). I first collected secondary data by searching online forums of CF Montréal fans exchanging exclusively on their club's identity change.

Second, a first series of interviews was conducted with fans to better understand their experiences of rebranding. Nourished by this information, I came back to secondary data, this time focusing on podcasts held by fans discussing the change of image during the rebranding period. With each source bringing different insights, I was finally able to revisit my interview guide to conduct the latest interviews with fans. A summary of my data set can be found in

Table 1.

Methods	Sources	Data set	Goal
<i>Interviews</i>	Fans	10 semi-structured	Understanding fans' emotions and feelings, detailing their experience of the rebranding
<i>Archival data</i>	Forums	15 pages	Get real-time reactions from fans during the rebranding process
	Podcasts	3 episodes	Get the opinion of more committed fans about the identity change and learn about the discussions that agitated fans at the time of the rebranding

Table 1 – Summary of my data set

4.1. Primary Data: In-depth Interviews

As part of my research, I conducted 10 interviews between November 2024 and February 2025. Initially, it was intended that I would interview fans as well as club employees to better understand the club's marketing vision at the time of the rebranding and to see how certain employees had experienced this period. Having obtained contact at the club through my professional network, I approached the person about my thesis and my desire to interview a club employee who was already working for the Montreal Impact by the end of 2020. After several exchanges, I was told that the club was still too sensitive to answer my questions about their rebranding. Therefore, I realigned my project, focusing entirely on the sentiments of the club's fans. I ended up interviewing 10 fans with different backgrounds and attachments to the club.

First and foremost, I had to acquire ethics approval for my research. This involved obtaining the TCPS Core Certification and completing a Summary Protocol Form as well as two Information and Consent Forms (one for fans and another intended for managers). The study and the two interview guides were approved by the University's Ethics Committee before any interaction with participants.

To recruit interview participants, I contacted groups of ultra CF Montréal fans, notably the “Collectif Impact Montréal” and “ASUPMTL” by e-mail or on their social networks, explaining the purpose of my research and inviting interested group members to contact me by e-mail to set up an interview. In parallel, I joined a Facebook group called “CF Montréal - Supporters de l'Impact Montréalais,” which brings together fans of the club who want to discuss current events. I deduced that the audience of this group might have been fans of the club for at least a few years and that some of them had been affected by the rebranding and would like to share their point of view. Therefore, I published a post inviting fans to contact me by e-mail if they wanted to take

part in an interview. The recruitment post can be found in **Appendix A**. Now, let's turn our attention to the sample of participants, as seen in **Table 2**.

Participant	Age range	Supporter profile	Frequency of stadium attendance last season	Length of interview
Hugo (M)	mid-30s	Ultra group - active member	Very regularly	46 min
Steve (M)	mid-50s	Season-ticket holder	Very regularly	74 min
Raphael (M)	early 20s	Ultra group - active member	Regularly	50 min
Paul (M)	late 20s	Ultra group - active member	Very regularly	56 min
Benjamin (M)	early 30s	Season-ticket holder	Regularly	38 min
Olivier (M)	early 70s	Avid fan	Occasionally	69 min
Thomas (M)	mid-30s	Ultra group - former member	None	37 min
Florence (F)	mid-40s	Ultra group - active member	Very regularly	50 min
Antoine (M)	early 30s	Ultra group - active member	Very regularly	72 min
Samuel (M)	mid-30s	Ultra group - former member	Once	51 min

Table 2 – Sample of participants

To maintain participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each, reflecting their respective genders. The sample is made up entirely of people who define themselves or have previously defined themselves as Montreal Impact fans. As observed in the **Supporter profile** column, they are distinguished by their involvement with the club. Some are still active in ultras fan groups, participating in the creation of tifos or banners for the club's games, while others belonged to ultras groups that were dissolved following the first rebranding in 2021 or simply left active groups for various reasons. Three other participants have never belonged to ultra groups, with two currently owning season tickets. Moreover, participants were categorized according to the **Frequency of their visit** to Saputo Stadium during the 2023-2024 season. This

information allows us to distinguish between those who went to the stadium to see CF Montréal in action on a regular basis and those who went much more rarely. This criterion is important, as it partly represents the disconnection some participants may have with the club. Finally, other information such as the **Length of each interview** is given, as well as their **Age range**. We note the spread in interviewees' ages, ranging from Raphael, in his early twenties, to Olivier, who is over 70. Finally, we observe that almost all participants are men, with Florence being the only woman in this sample.

I designed my interview protocol following Arsel's (2017) guidelines. My interviews were semi-structured, leaving room for probes and allowing participants to take the discussion in a different direction (Berg and Lune 2012). I approached my interviews by focusing on themes such as their connection to the club, the impact of the rebranding in their life and the emotions that emerged. Guided by what the participants had to say, these themes served as checkpoints in the discussion, and when we started to drift away, I could return to these reference points to reorient the discussion.

After my first three interviews, adopting a reflexive approach I took the time to reread, reassess and make changes to my interview protocol. As the interpretation of the data was done in a circular way, each new interview allowed me to revise and improve the relevance of my questions (Spiggle, 1994). This “analyze, revise, repeat” (Arsel, 2017) principle continued to guide me throughout my data collection process. Ultimately, I ended up with an interview protocol addressing the themes listed in **Table 3**:

Interview protocol - Fans
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Warm-up questions 2. Connection with the club 3. First rebranding 4. Second rebranding 5. A vision of the future

Table 3 – Interview protocol themes

Detailed interview protocol can be found in **Appendix B**.

Interviews lasted between 37 and 74 minutes, with an average duration of 54 minutes.

Depending on the participants' availability, they were conducted either via Zoom or in person in study rooms at Concordia University. Before each interview, I read out the consent form, gave the context of my research and announced that the interview would be audio-recorded. The audio files of the interviews were stored in a Dropbox folder to which only my supervisor and myself had access. Interviews were then transcribed and reviewed manually for accuracy. It is important to note that nearly all interviews were conducted in French. Except for one candidate whose first language was English, all the participants were native French speakers. I therefore wanted to ensure that they could fully share their thoughts in their preferred language. The interview transcripts were kept in French, and translation to English was undertaken during the coding process

4.2. Secondary Data

4.2.a. Forum

During my research, I set out to find forums that could host discussions between fans. The aim was to get the opinions of the club's fans at the time of the rebranding, to get their reactions on the spot. I began my searches on Google using keywords such as “Forum”; “Impact”; and “CF

Montréal.” My investigation led me to the ImpactSoccer.com site, which contains several varied forums where CF fans can exchange views on a wide range of subjects, such as club news and player performances.

One forum got my particular attention called “Nouveau maillot, nouveau nom, nouveau logo” created in November 2020 and containing 982 messages. This forum gathered many fan discussions on the first rebranding. I went through all 40 pages of the forum to extract all the messages from fans talking about the rebranding and their sentiments. In the end, my data compiled 15 of the most important pages, with this selection concentrated on messages posted between November 30, 2020 and January 21, 2021. Beyond this date, messages focused on the club's current situation, on a possible sale, drifting away from thoughts on rebranding.

4.2.b. Podcasts

Afterwards, I searched for podcasts hosted by fans that would talk about the rebranding. On Spotify and YouTube, I searched for podcasts with the words “Impact”, “CF Montréal” and “rebranding” in the title. I quickly discovered the YouTube channel “Kan Football Club - Montréal Soccer”, which defines itself as a group of Quebec soccer fans who hold live podcasts on a weekly basis. These podcasts often revolve around CF Montréal, given the club's importance in Quebec. My search retrieved four episodes containing the words “rebranding” and “Impact” or “CF Montréal” in the video title or thumbnail. However, two of these episodes dated from February 2024 or later, and after listening to them, focused more on club news (new jerseys and problems with management) than on the club's rebranding and their reactions. I therefore only kept two episodes from the Kan Football Club broadcast in January and April 2021 respectively.

Furthermore, another podcast was sent to me by one of the participants interviewed. This participant is part of an ultra group whose leading members were interviewed by the “Hors-Jeu” podcast team in an episode broadcast on Spotify in December 2024. In their interview, they discussed the impact of the rebranding on the ultras and how tensions began to arise with management at the time. This episode was therefore included in my data set.

4.3. Analytical Procedures

The analysis of my data sources was carried out using triangulation, each source feeding inferences to the other (Carter et al., 2014). Being a qualitative study, the analysis of my data involved coding it. I drew inspiration from Spiggle's (1994) approach, particularly her processes of categorization and abstraction. Using ATLAS.ti software, I began by open-coding words or paragraphs from my interview transcripts and forum posts, resulting in a total of over 300 codes. Then, I created themes or categories each code could fit into, some of which were inspired by Reimann et al.'s brand betrayal theory (2018). This stage also involved defining the conceptual boundaries of each category. Examples of categories include “Rebranding Process”; “Feelings of psychological loss”; or “Indignation.” This process of axial coding enabled me to extract the most important codes in my data set. Finally, I returned to all my documents to extract the most important quotes.

5. FINDINGS

The purpose of this section is to answer my two research questions and, more generally, to understand the impact that a rebranding can have on the relationship between fans and the club. Firstly, I will draw on Reimann et al.'s theory of brand betrayal (2018) to understand how fans may have perceived the change of identity as a form of betrayal from their club. I will then

detail the different relationship trajectories that fans have taken following the rebranding. Ranging from the acceptance of the new identity to the termination of the relationship with the club, I will draw this time on Russell and Schau's paper (2014) on narrative brands' ending and their contribution to the loss accommodation process. You can find in **Figure 3** the conceptual model of my research guiding the findings section.

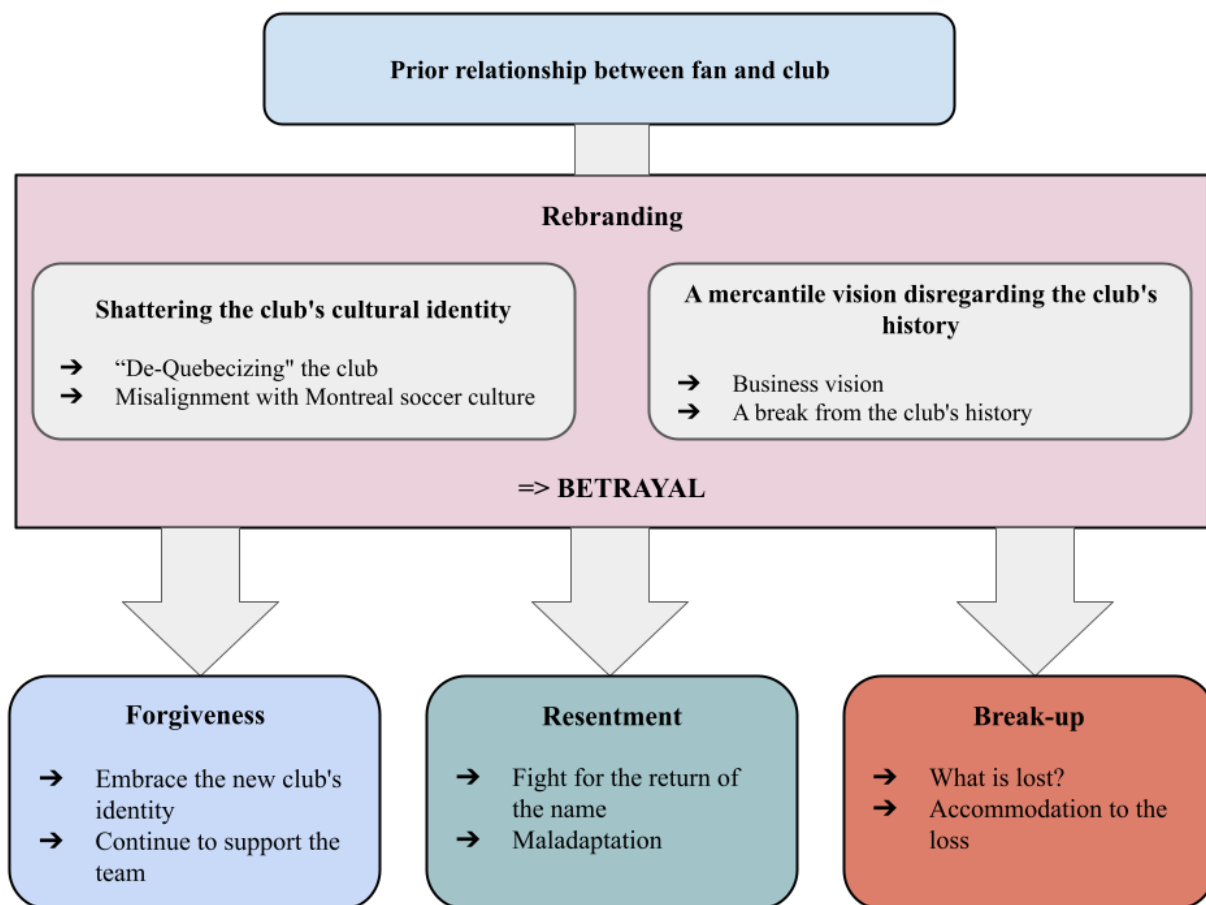


Figure 3 - Conceptual model of the impact of rebranding on fan-club relations

Let's get straight to the point, focusing on how Montreal Impact fans may have perceived their club's rebranding as a betrayal. As a reminder, in the words of Reimann et al. (2018), "a betrayal occurs when a brand with which one has developed a prior relationship breaks a moral obligation, violating the norms that a consumer perceives to be fundamental to the relationship."

From the various data sources studied, I have distinguished two moral breaches perceived by fans during the rebranding process. I will present each of them, describing the emotions experienced by fans and comparing them with the brand betrayal theory of Reimann et al. (2018).

5.1. Perceived Moral Breach n°1: Shattering the Club's Cultural Identity

A cultural identity is defined as “a set of values internalized from the groups to which one belongs” (Schwartz et al., 2008). In this research, I am considering the values that fans associate with the Montreal Impact and the supporters' groups to which they belong. While it is certain that not all supporters retain or attach the same importance to many of the club's values, any action contrary to the club's cultural identity can appear as a moral violation, tarnishing the relationship between fans and the club. With my research context of the Montreal Impact, the question that arises is how do fans define the club's cultural identity? In my discussions with fans, two important aspects of the club's identity came to the fore: its attachment to the province of Quebec and its cultural impact on soccer in Montreal. Building on this, I will examine how the Montreal Impact's rebranding may have been perceived by fans as conflicting with its cultural identity.

5.1.a. “De-Quebecizing” the club

First of all, the Montreal Impact is the soccer club of the city of Montreal, but it also represents the entire province of Quebec. Historically, it became the first professional soccer club in the province when it was founded in 1993. Competing in a North American league, the club's roots and language are what make it unique in the hearts of its fans. In interviews, participants have asserted the pride the club represents for Quebecers. Notably for Samuel, who shares that one aspect that drew him to the Montreal Impact was his attachment to its local roots:

I'm a person who really likes local things. I've always loved soccer and there we had a local club at home. Saputo Stadium is really close to home. I grew up a 15-minute walk from Saputo Stadium, so it was even more local. I just couldn't not go. It just made sense. It was logical, logical, logical. It's a club that represented Quebec too. I have a great love for Quebec, so it was quite logical.

As indicated by Wann et al. (1996), geographical attachment is one of the main reasons fans originally follow a sports team, making it an important club value for Quebecers like Samuel. This love and pride for Quebec is also reflected in the players who have passed through the club. While everyone remembers world stars such as Alessandro Nesta, Didier Drogba, and Pablo Piatti, the attachment and devotion to the young Quebec players remain stronger:

We've also got some Quebec players who are starting to be... Ismaël Koné, things like that, it's great, we're starting to realize that there's talent here. So maybe that's how they'll manage to get good results, by building a team with local youngsters and then bringing in a few foreign players at a higher price. *(Steve)*

We're always excited when there's a new youngster. When it's a youngster coming from the academy, we're really proud, we keep an eye on him, we give him so much attention. *(Florence)*

Indeed, CF Montréal represents the pinnacle of the soccer pyramid in Quebec and a destination for the region's young players. Some arrive at the club at the age of 14, joining the Academy and working their way up to the professional squad. Another aspect, and surely one of the most important, linking the club's identity to that of the province is found in the Montreal Impact logo. As you can see in **Figure 4**, several Quebec symbols are featured, notably the fleur-de-lys.



Figure 4 - Montreal Impact logo between 2012 and 2021

Present on the official flag of the province of Quebec since 1948, the fleur-de-lis symbolizes the region's French past. Emblematic of French royalty, it has been associated with the Quebec flag's royal blue on the Impact's logo since its arrival in MLS in 2012. However, all that was about to change when, during a YouTube live broadcast in January 2021, the club management announced a complete change to their identity, see **Figure 5**.



Figure 5 - Club de Foot de Montréal's new logo unveiled in January 2021

First shock for fans, the Quebec royal blue has disappeared, replaced by an assortment of black, grey and dark blue called “Sacré bleu” during the presentation. Besides the use of the term “Sacrébleu”, considered by many fans to be awkward and unrepresentative of today's spoken language, this rebranding is seen as a move by the management to distance itself from the

province of Quebec. This fear is echoed by Steve, who points to the sidelining of the fleur-de-lys in the new logo:

It was nonsense. It was completely disembodied. It had nothing to do with Montreal or Quebec. It was a complete failure. So you see, there's a little fleur-de-lys on the side, there, tiny, you can hardly see it, you know, like, yes, yes, OK, Quebecers, we don't want to upset you. We're just putting a little piece there, so you'll be happy and you'll shut up.

Gilmore and Kingsley convinced him (i.e. Joey Saputo) that he would never find “fans” in the rest of Quebec and that he had to disassociate himself from it to try to find ones internationally by reshaping the club's image with the ideology of multiculturalism more convenient to this market. (*Forum user*)

The marginalization of the fleur-de-lys represents, for some fans, the club's disassociation with Quebec in a desire to refocus on Montreal and its interculturalism. This vision was notably put forward by then-president Kevin Gilmore during the YouTube live broadcast, describing the numerous arrows on the logo as individuals from different cultures and backgrounds coming together for a common goal. However, not all the club's supporters embraced this message. Debates and conflicts over the importance of the French language and the Quebecois identity are very common in the province's history. The removal of the fleur-de-lys has rekindled the conflicts that can exist between anglophones and francophones in Montreal. On the Impact Soccer forum, one user calls it a “racist removal of the Fleur De Lys”, and Steve suspects that the change was made for ideological reasons: “I'd heard rumours that there were English speakers saying things like, ‘The fleur-de-lys has to go. It has to go. We're too associated with Quebec. It's not good’.” There are several important points here. Firstly, it shows the conflicts and differences of opinion that can exist between supporters of the same club. Particularly in a city as global as Montreal, not all fans attach the same importance to the club's Quebec roots. On the other hand, it underlines the influence of politics on today's sports world, where changing a team's logo is seen by some as an ideological move.

These identity debates are also reflected in the club's new name. As a reminder, in addition to changing the logo, the management also decided to change the name to “Club de Foot de Montréal.” While this name may suggest a refocusing on Montreal, it is above all the use of the word “foot” that has generated much debate among fans. Indeed, for Quebecers and North Americans alike, the sport is referred to as soccer. It is only in Europe and South America that we hear “football” or “foot.” This choice to replace a bilingual word like “Impact” with “Club de Foot” evokes for fans a desire on the part of management to win over a European audience, as Florence mentioned in her interview:

Already, in the League, there are other clubs that use the word soccer. I don't have anything between “soccer” and “football.” I don't have a favourite, and I understand the reasons. But to call it “Club de Foot” when the league is called Major League Soccer, it didn't make any sense to me. We don't use the word “football” here in Montreal, nobody uses that except our friends on the plateau (...) We don't use those terms, we're not European.

This “de-Quebecization” of the club's name and logo is seen as a betrayal by fans. In their theory, Reimann et al. (2018) state that subsequent to a betrayal, consumers experience a specific variant of anger called indignation-focused anger. Derived from the belief that the brand has misled them, this type of anger is characterized by feelings of disgust, shock and disbelief.

I've had a taste of vomit in my mouth since this morning. (*Forum user*)

The fans were completely surprised, not just surprised, but shocked, because where did this thing come from? What was wrong with the logo we had before? What was wrong with it? We didn't understand (...) I was very angry. It was really a slap in the face.
(*Steve*)

These strong reactions highlight the importance that fans attach to their club's identity and roots. The changes made during the rebranding were perceived by some fans as a renunciation of a Quebec identity. Fans attached to the province, therefore, saw the rebranding as a violation of the fundamental norms in their relationship with the club.

5.1.b. Misalignment with Montreal soccer culture

The second important point in the definition of the Montreal Impact's cultural identity is the representation of the city and sport in the club's image. The club has been based in the metropolis since its creation and today has become one of the city's cultural icons. While the team's first matches were held at the Claude-Robillard sports complex in Montreal's north end, the construction of the Saputo stadium in 2007, located in the heart of the island, marked the management's vision to offer a soccer team to all Montreal families. Nevertheless, soccer is by no means the only exponent of the city's sporting patrimony. In Montreal, and in the province more generally, the number 1 sport for most residents remains ice hockey. A true regional treasure, the Montreal Canadiens unleash passion at every match, dominating media attention and family dinner debates. In this podcast excerpt, a Montreal Impact ultra fan talks about the popularity of soccer in Montreal:

Soccer in Montreal and North America is not one of the main sports at the moment. Even if soccer has been the most popular sport in the country for several years, it's still a marginal sport that's on the rise, but it's still very small and worth discovering.

This marginality and lack of media coverage have endowed the Montreal Impact with an underdog image. As Paharia et al. define it (2011), an underdog is characterized by the external disadvantage he suffers and by the passion and determination he displays. In the world of sports, it is common to define a team as an underdog when it has very little chance of winning a contest (Frazier & Snyder, 1991). This is reflected in the case of the CF Montréal, which in 2024 had the smallest salary payroll of the 30 MLS teams (Capology, 2024), see **Figure 6**.

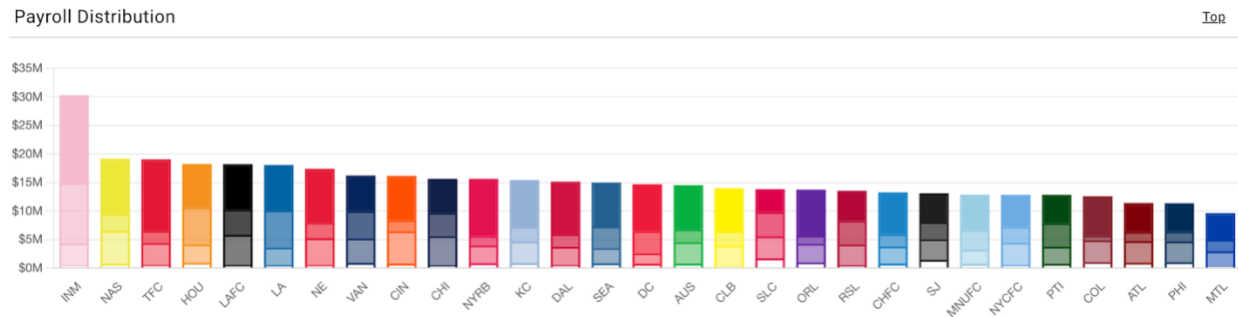


Figure 6 - 2024 MLS Salary Payroll for Each Team (Capology, 2024)

This underdog image resonates with fans and their identification with the club. Aware of CF Montréal's small budget, they find in this underdog narrative a parallel with the history of the city of Montreal and remain convinced of its ability to transcend itself and defeat the biggest teams in the league.

I think it's the smallest team in terms of payroll, and value. What's more, we don't even own our stadium, because it's an amphitheotic lease with the city of Montreal. So we can't even consider the increase in value of the stadium over the years. No, that's not going into the team's pockets. Because we don't own the stadium. So, really, we're starting out with several handicaps. But then, the role of the little pushover, the neglected one, the David against Goliath, we know all about that in Montreal. So we fall back on the moments, the beautiful moments, when things work out and we start believing. (Steve)

We find in these words this Montreal pride and identification with being an underdog. These elements contribute to the cultural identity of the city and the club. However, when the logo was changed, this identification with the city was disrupted. While Kevin Gilmore and Justin Kingsley intended to emphasize the city's symbols in the new logo, notably the blue circle symbolizing the rivers surrounding the island and the various hidden “M’s.” However, it was the appearance of the snowflake in the center of the logo that sparked much debate among fans:

In what universe is a snowflake representative of Montreal? Is snow and winter a particularly Montreal symbol? As opposed to whom exactly? The rest of Canada? The northern United States? The Scandinavian countries, the Baltic states, Russia? Every mountainous region on Earth? How is this typically Montreal? (Forum user)

I mean, there's nothing that ties me to the snowflake. I don't have much of an opinion on a snowflake logo. I don't think it represents Montreal in particular. *(Raphael)*

Not sufficiently associated with the soccer culture, the choice of a snowflake as the main element is damaging the club's reputation. The word “Snowflake”, used as an insult in the English language, does not sit well with the fans, who fear that it will compromise the club's credibility. Moreover, some point out the incongruity of using a Nordic and wintry identity for a sport played mainly in spring and summer in a city where soccer fields are covered in snow for many months of the year.

Then the snowflake thing. The whole snowflake thing. Damn, it's a summer sport. Come on! We're not playing in the snow. What is this? Normally, there are repairs, but in general, when it's cold, we had games in February, so we played at the Olympic Stadium. *(Steve)*

In conclusion, the rebranding represents an identity upheaval for fans. Going from a logo and name rooted in Quebec identity to a Nordic symbol that is not representative enough of soccer in Montreal unsettles most. Relying on symbols of the city, such as its underdog history or Mount Royal, might have resonated more with fans.

5.2. Perceived Moral Breach n°2: A Mercantile Vision Disregarding the Club's History

A long period of uncertainty surrounded the club's supporters following the launch event. On the one hand, the announcement came as a shock to many fans, who were not expecting a complete change of identity. On the other hand, the explanations given, detailed in press conferences in the weeks that followed, did not reassure or convince everyone. In this section, I will focus first on how fans may have interpreted the rebranding as a business- and profit-oriented vision on the

part of management. Secondly, I will discuss the absence of fan involvement in the rebranding process and how the new identity represents a break with the club's history.

5.2.a. Business vision

It all began on the YouTube live when Kevin Gilmore announced his decision to retire the “Impact” name. He explained that the club's historic president Joey Saputo had originally chosen the name Impact because he wanted to have an impact on the Quebec region and the sport. Declaring his objective accomplished, he presented the identity of Club de Foot Montréal, a European-influenced name, with a desire to internationalize the brand. While the desire to see their club shine around the world appeals to fans, some still find it hard to understand how the name change would benefit the club's internationalization. Especially for a club that has already played international competitions against Mexican and Costa Rican teams under the name “Montreal Impact.” These misunderstandings are echoed in Paul's interview and by a fan on the Impact Soccer forum:

Management wanted to be international. We were already starting to be. We were a recognized club, often, relatively speaking, in the Champions League, winning the Canadian championship too. We played teams from Mexico in the Champions League. We were already international in a sense. *(Paul)*

What is this obsession with the international? Why would a kid in Vietnam be into the Impact (oops, the "Club de Foot")? Because it's got an international-sounding name. The reasons would rather be, it has global stars, it's successful or it's a club deeply rooted in its community that thrills. In short, stop looking the other way. Build on what's original and different in Montreal. *(Forum user)*

As you can see, the explanations given by management for the internationalization of the Club de Foot Montréal are struggling to win over fans. Some are even beginning to think that the rebranding may have been carried out for different reasons, notably mercantile. Changing the name and logo could have helped the club sell more merchandise, leveraging the hype and

novelty to attract new fans. In their research, Ahn et al. (2013) found that a change in a sports team's logo significantly increased purchase intention among all the club's fans.

We were already like, accepting the perspective that they wanted to sell merch. It's important for the club. It's a big part of their revenue, selling jerseys. I'm thinking that maybe it's a strategy to sell merch outside Montreal. *(Paul)*

While supporters are aware of the club's financial needs, none define their relationship with the club as a business relationship. Emotional attachment and fan culture make this relationship much more like a friendship or love. This rebranding came as a shock, changing the perception of some. Discussions about profit and brand influence create a corporate identity for the club, a far cry from the family image the club represented in its early days.

Another aspect of this corporate identity is based on how sports teams are managed in North America. Unlike in Europe, here we talk about franchises. Clubs do not enter the league through promotion or good results but with the acquisition of a spot to install a franchise. What's more, while some clubs in Europe may be partly owned by their fans (Braneck, 2021), franchises are generally owned by private shareholders. Franchise management is therefore characterized by the search for profitability, without which a sale or relocation becomes the only solution, as expressed by CF fans in this podcast excerpt:

The way the clubs are run, they want to turn them into franchises, in fact they really want to turn the club into a means of making money (...) It doesn't matter if they do anything with the club, if they destroy its identity. "It doesn't matter, it's just a franchise." The idea of a franchise, as we've seen in the NBA for example, is that a franchise isn't even tied to a city, it can move from territory to territory. And we don't want our soccer club to become a bastardized franchise that can be shuffled around with no identity and no soul.

This loss of “soul”, as this fan put it, is one of the risks associated with rebranding a sports team. Furthermore, many Montreal Impact fans found the new logo to be blander and superficial as if the club wanted to smooth out its image to please. But to please whom? That’s the question. In

several of my interviews, the possibility was raised that the club wanted to change its identity to “fit in” with the global MLS image. In fact, when you visit the MLS website presenting the league's various clubs, one thing is obvious: most of the logos are circles, see **Figure 7**.

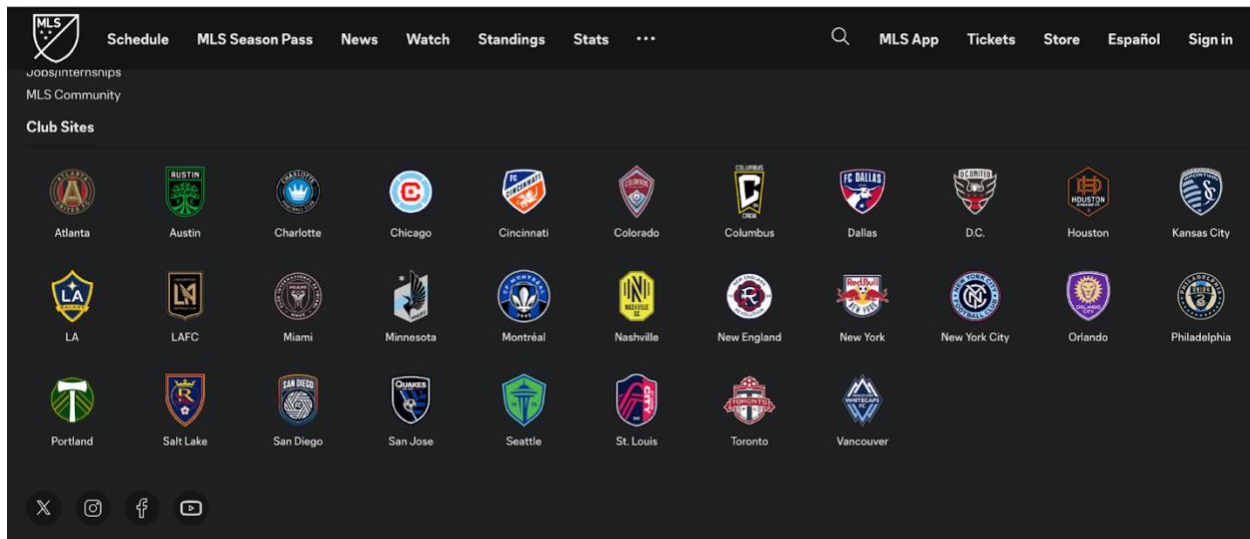


Figure 7 - Screenshot from the official Major League Soccer website

Whereas the previous Impact logo adopted a shield shape contributing to its originality, this new round logo struggles to stand out from the other emblems. This choice reinforces the sense of belonging to the North American league, possibly to the detriment of what made the Impact logo special. Furthermore, an extract from the KAN Football Club podcast sheds light on the possible reasons behind this new identity:

They have their own vision, it's a team, they still have the same idea to go and get additional revenue, which in my opinion is a false good idea: to become the international francophone team for MLS. But no. If there are ever foreign customers, regardless of language, who are going to be interested in MLS, they'll be interested in the stars and the teams, they won't follow it because they speak their own language - in my opinion, that's a really simplistic strategy for attracting an audience.

The newly rebranded Club de Foot de Montréal could become the league's “Francophone team”, drawing on the city's French origins and the use of the word “foot” in the club's name.

A final concern for fans regarding the club's business vision lies in the club's desire to expand its fan base. While no one is against expanding the number of fans to fill the stands at Saputo Stadium, some suspect the club is looking to change the demographics of its supporters. While CF Montréal stands out for its ultra supporters' section and festive atmosphere in the stands, some ultra groups believe the club wants to change its target audience to attract supporters who are less emotionally attached but have greater means of investing in jerseys, tickets and VIP boxes at the stadium.

What I actually think was happening was, I think Joey Saputo and him personally always had a problem with who was actually going to the games, who was showing up, who was a fan of his team. I think he always wanted to attract more of a business community, more of a... And this is just my opinion. I think he always wanted to attract more of an Anglophone community to the team (...) I think it was purely just a decision that he wanted to stop selling to the people that were going there and had always been going there and had always been supporting the team to people who potentially could buy luxury boxes or pay hundreds of dollars for seats. *(Thomas)*

So, it was really a reason to attract a branch of investors and more... So, investors, but also more corporate supporters, so to go get these people who necessarily bring more money to the club than people like me who buy the cheaper ticket. *(Antoine)*

These suspicions, fuelled in part by the banning and closure of the ultras section in the wake of conflicts with the management, demonstrate the adversarial atmosphere that reigns between fans and the club. While the fans' thoughts have never been confirmed by the club, this nonetheless contributes to damaging their relationship and emotional attachment. With these theories, fans seek to make sense of the rebranding, which for the majority has lacked explanation and transparency. These actions mirror Reimann et al.'s paper on brand betrayal (2018), in which they advance that betrayed consumers will tend to ruminate about the transgression, notably about the brand's intentions and why they were betrayed. This rumination can also be seen in fans' desire to express themselves through an interview years after the change. This allows us to

further characterize the betrayal that the rebranding may have represented and explains in part how certain groups may have distanced themselves from the club, no longer feeling they were the target audience of the new identity.

5.2.b. A break from the club's history

The second part of this moral breach focuses on the rupture felt by fans when the rebranding was announced. To put it into context, the Montreal Impact had the same logo for 9 years. It was an established MLS club, and fans were growing in numbers for a sport that was undergoing great evolution across the country. When the new logo was unveiled, it came as a shock to many fans. One of the first points of dissonance was the replacement of the Impact's emblematic colours. For the first 27 years of its history, the club had always evolved in its blue, white and black colours, and suddenly black and gray dominated the logo and the new jerseys presented a few months later. The literature tells us that changing the colours of a sports team is one of the most significant factors in fans' rejection of a rebranding (Simmons et al., 2023; Williams & Son, 2022). Samuel laments the loss of the Impact's historic colours: “The gray, silver colour that stood out had nothing to do with it. Impact is blue-white-black. Montreal's impact is blue-white-black. It's not silver-gray. That's what it is.”.

In addition to the colours, some of the club's historic symbols also disappeared from the logo, such as the fleur-de-lys, the blue and black vertical stripes and the four stars representing Montreal's founding nations. Fans viewed this change as a break with the club's identity and history. Very attached to the name and logo with which they enjoyed international success, years later, Antoine and Olivier describe the shock they experienced:

I think it's a night that marks most Impact fans. It's a night that stays with you because there's literally a before and an after. In the before, 30 years of history are swept under

the carpet, and then it seems as if they no longer exist, that they no longer matter. It's a new name, a new colour. It feels like new visions. (*Antoine*)

I thought it was totally stupid. I interpreted this gesture as: OK, let's forget history. History doesn't matter anymore, so the twenty-odd years in the second division, which when the Impact was playing in the USL, then the APSL, was really the highest level of soccer in North America. It's like crossing out all that history, like it doesn't matter anymore (...) What it means is that you're turning the page on everything that's gone before. (*Olivier*)

For many fans, this rupture was very hard to swallow. The lack of explanation from management as to why they had strayed so far from the Impact identity was troubling. This change emerged as a breach of trust, calling into question the self-concept of many fans. Reimann et al. (2018) support that when consumers believe in a brand that turns out to be misleading, they may experience a loss of self-concept. Their identity was partly built around the Montreal Impact, through its image and the social circle formed by the supporters' groups. Disrupting the club's name and identity prompted fans to embark on a process of identity reconstruction, as evoked by a fan on the forum:

The announcement of this rebranding went deep inside me to find the unconditional supporter who had been sleeping there. It awakened the feeling of belonging that had taken years (since the mid-00s in my case) to build up through victories, defeats, experiences at the stadium and in front of my TV screen, the initiation of my two boys to these, etc. It showed me how close I held the Impact to my heart despite the distances I'd taken in recent years. In my case, this rebranding is like wiping the slate clean on everything I just described. It's having to start again from scratch, especially as the team on the ground has nothing to raise passion about. (*Forum user*)

Moreover, what makes the reconstruction process even more painful for supporters is the fact that the rebranding was imposed on them. Indeed, in some rebranding cases, the club decides to involve fans in the research process to incorporate their opinions. One example is AS Saint-Etienne, who in 2022 had their fans vote on the club's new logo from a shortlist (D'Angelo,

2022). However, the rebranding process of the Club de Foot Montréal did not involve any focus groups or fan consultations, which contributed to the shock of the announcement.

Then it was the summer of anger. We were like: ‘No, it can't be true that we support this club, which we've loved for so long, and then they do this to us without any consultation, out of nowhere’ (...) If there had been a consultation, I don't think the name would have been rebranded. In any case, it would have been a really firm position if we'd been consulted, they wouldn't have found many people in the impact community who would have been keen on the idea of changing the name. If there had been a rebrand, it would only have been the logo, I think. *(Hugo)*

In fact, the message was: ‘This is our new image’. But I felt more like: ‘This is our new image, we don't really care what you think. It's not a proposal, it's an imposition’.
(Benjamin)

The lack of consultation and the surprise effect of the announcement left fans powerless in the face of the identity change. Ultras groups raised their voices and petitions to bring back the Impact name and logo were signed, but the announcement of the rebranding in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in Montreal prevented fans from mobilizing around the stadium to make their voices heard. With the club's management defending its ideas, an opposition arose between fans and management.

I would add that a team's branding is its fans. That's why, when we travel, when we go and play in other cities, and the fans cheer really loudly and turn out in large numbers, that's the team's marketing. That's what shows how passionate the fans are about the club, and how threatening we are. I think that's what I have to say. *(Florence)*

Florence is echoing a sentiment shared by many supporters: that they represent the foundations of the club and act, in a sense, as “guardians of the temple.” They must defend the club's historic values and fight to preserve the Impact's identity. This reflects Cocieru et al.'s paper (2019) in which they state that sports fans tend to believe that they own their team psychologically.

While fans had no say in the club's first rebranding in 2021, two years later, the new logo appears to be a hand extended to the fans. While the Impact name has yet to return, the new logo reconnects with the club's history by reemphasizing its symbols, **Figure 8**.



Figure 8 - New logo revealed in November 2022

The fleur-de-lys is back in its central place, the colours and vertical stripes are back, and the mention of 1993 as the club's founding date rekindles the flame in many fans' hearts. New president Gabriel Gervais said he relied on supporters to create a logo that would best represent the club's identity. While smiles returned to fans' faces, some could not forget the betrayal of the first rebranding.

In conclusion, the depiction of the two moral breaches informs us about how the Montreal Impact's rebranding could have been perceived as a betrayal by fans. For many, this change signalled a breach of trust and a misleading act on the part of the club. In comparison with Reimann et al.'s article (2018), numerous associations of a brand betrayal were found. The shock of the announcement generated indignation-focused anger among fans and a feeling of disbelief, with most thinking that the new identity would not last and that after a few months, the Impact name would return. We also noted the loss of self-concept that the change of identity represented

with the subsequent reconstruction process. Lastly, supporters expressed various theories about the reasons behind the rebranding, indicative of the rumination that followed a betrayal. All this contributed to characterizing the betrayal that the rebranding symbolized. What follows are the various impacts that the breach of trust had on relations between supporters and the club.

5.3. Relational Trajectories

As we have seen in the literature review section, consumer-brand relationships adopt diverse paths and trajectories. While each relationship may differ in its nature, ranging from a simple affect to a closeness akin to strong friendship or love, all will be marked by critical junctures either strengthening or altering the ties between consumers and brands (Russell & Schau, 2014).

As demonstrated in the previous two sections, CF Montréal's rebranding represents a critical event for all fans in their relationship with the club. Although this event is crucial for everyone, each fan reacts and interprets the rebranding personally. In this way, each fan has seen the rebranding impact his or her relationship with the club in a unique and personal way.

Nevertheless, from my discussions with fans, I have identified three main relational trajectories between fans and the club following the rebranding. Firstly, the fans who have forgiven and accepted the club's change of identity and continue to support it. Secondly, the fans who are still very attached to the Impact and who continue to mobilize for the return of the name. And finally, the fans who have detached themselves from the club, going through a process similar to that of grief.

5.3.a. Forgiveness

Once the shock of the rebranding had passed, it was time for reflection. While the feeling of betrayal remains, the desire and attachment to the club convinced some fans to accept the

change. After all, a club, like any brand, evolves and changes over the course of its life. What's more, certain elements have kept fans attached to the club. The first was the club's change of president in November 2021. Kevin Gilmore, the man behind the rebranding stepped down and was replaced by former Impact player Gabriel Gervais. With his history with the club and his more fan-friendly approach, Gabriel Gervais rekindled the flame drawing on the club's rich heritage.

Finally, with the arrival of a former player, Gabriel Gervais, as team president, at least the history has been brought back to the fore with the Wall of Legends. There really is a place for former players to come back. They did this season at some point, I think it was the 30th anniversary, I think, something like that. They invited all the former players to come. At least on that side, you can see that even for Gabriel Gervais, there were things that weren't going through, who finally put some sense back into it. *(Olivier)*

For me, the appointment of Gabriel Gervais was made precisely to repair the damage done to the relationship with supporters. *(Antoine)*

This “repair” between fans and management was also greatly facilitated by the second logo change carried out a few months after the appointment of the new president. As mentioned in the previous section, this logo reconnected with the club's history and symbols, featuring the blue-white-black colours of the Impact. This time, the approach was different: Gabriel Gervais exchanged ideas with fans and had the logo created by the same company that designed the Montreal Impact logo when it entered MLS in 2012 (Pigeon, 2022). The result is striking: most fans are delighted with the new logo.

I think the second rebranding did some good. It really brought back what was the impact in a sense, what it represented, the club I started to support, it brought it back a little... It restored some of what I had lost in the first rebranding (...) For me, it was really, I think, in people's minds, a bit of fresh air, the new logo. *(Paul)*

He didn't go so far as to bring it back to Montreal Impact, but you can clearly see that everything is being done to bring back the history with the fleur-de-lys, the shield, the year the team was founded in the second division and not in MLS, in 1993. So, we're bringing history back, we're giving it a place again. So... I really liked it, I really

appreciated it (...) There was a dip with the first logo, then with the second, the enthusiasm, the sense of belonging was completely back, because they've really lived up to the expectations of those for whom the Impact has a very special place in their hearts. *(Olivier)*

As Olivier shared in his interview, the new logo triggers fans' sense of belonging to the club, as if the unfortunate episode of the “snowflake” logo had been left behind. In other words, the second rebranding corresponds to another critical juncture in the relationship, this time reinvigorating the emotional connection and helping reestablish meaning.

Another important point in fans' renewed relationship with the club is the emphasis they place on the consumption sociality surrounding CF Montréal. Indeed, supporting the club means going to the stadium, meeting fellow fans and cheering on the team with a single voice. For many, the friendships they have made and the weekly get-togethers at Saputo stadium are too precious to pass up. We note these social resources and their importance in Paul's interview:

For me, it's also a feeling of community, of being a supporter. You know, going to see the club get beaten on a Saturday night in heavy April rain with your friends, with your supporters, all that, with the world. It's like you can't beat the feeling of being soaking wet and cold, and still cheering for the Impact. Or, on the contrary, it's 40 degrees and you're in the stands, you're jumping up and down, everyone's shirtless. (...) I also think that if there weren't any fans, if there wasn't this community, my relationship with the club would be different. (...) There's also this mentality that at the end of the day, it's a show, it's entertainment. For me, it's more than that. It's really part of my identity, it's part of who I am. It's a big part of my social relationships too, in a sense outside school, outside the job. It allowed me to meet people who are like me. What the club means to me is like a big party on a Saturday night in the summer, drinking beers in the parking lot. At the end of the day, the club is all about the friends we've made along the way, it's funny to say. Of course, it's the greatness of the Montreal Impact, all that too. All the emotional moments. There's nothing that beats a 90th minute goal or a draw, but that feels like a win. There's nothing that beats that for me. The emotions of soccer, I've never been able to find that anywhere else. Obviously, for me, that's what it represents.

Listening to Paul, we understand that a change of name or logo cannot take away the emotions of the sport and sharing these moments with people who resemble you. This illustrates the relevance of considering the social structures associated with the relationship between a

consumer and a brand. Their value to fans contributes to maintaining their relationship with the club. In a way, it is a new relationship with the CF Montréal that begins with the need to create new positive memories, which often translate into victories on the pitch.

5.3.b. Resentment

Another relational trajectory mentioned in the interviews is that of resentment. While, as we have seen, part of the fanbase has accepted the change of identity, some fans remain too attached to the Montreal Impact to turn the page. Specifically, they are still fighting for the return of the “Impact” name and are unable to refer to the club as CF Montréal. As previous research has shown, changing the name of a sports team is considered revolutionary rebranding and is one of the hardest decisions for fans to accept (Agha et al., 2016). The attachment to the “Impact” name was felt in the interviews:

The name too, the impact of Montreal. Is it a beautiful name, a great name? I don't know, but it was ours. It was rooted in the Montreal community, at least the soccer community. It was the impact, it was so easy to say, it was so ingrained in us.

- Is it important for you to always keep the name Impact in the conversation, to never put it aside?

Yes, we do it on purpose. We even do it more than necessary. In any case, we only talk about the Impact with each other. Nobody is ever going to hear anyone in the parking lot before the game saying: “We're going to see the CF tonight. I've almost never heard that. But yes, whether it's communication on social networks or between us, it's always Impact, but it's natural. It's not even forced, it's just the way it is. (*Hugo*)

The fight for the return of the Impact name is largely led by ultras. Following the rebranding, many ultras groups saw their members leave, leading to the dissolution of most ultras groups. However, out of its ashes emerged the new “Collectif Impact Montréal”, a name meticulously chosen since its existence is in part dedicated to the fight for the return of the name. This mobilization constitutes one of the pillars of their relationship with the club. Here, I am talking

about fans who disagree with their club's identity but who remain too emotionally attached to end the relationship. Acceptance of the new identity is impossible, and the relationship is nurtured by the hope of one day seeing the club returning to the Montreal Impact name. To this end, fans are mobilizing both in and out of the stands. The heated reactions in the wake of the rebranding, such as the open letter from ultras fans, the launch of a petition or the tagging of the new logo at Saputo stadium, did not bear fruit. Yet mobilization continues years later as supporters continue to find new ways to get their message across. At meetings between fan group representatives and club management, the subject of the name's return is constantly brought up, as it is on social networks, demonstrating their determination not to let the Impact die. At home games, fans wear their old Impact shirts and scarves, chants refer to the Montreal Impact, and banners and tifos are raised calling for the return of the name.

We took several actions. We printed T-shirts, we made stickers, we made petitions. We even rented a plane with a banner behind it to fly over the stadium with a message: Bring back the impact. (...) We made a banner "Bring back the Impact" and put it in front of our section. We did a very nice tifo a few months ago against Toronto. The front of the tifo was Impact Montréal FC. Whenever we can, we put the name upfront. We printed scarves, it says Impact Montréal on them, little things like that (...) We even printed T-shirts with the new logo, then we just changed the name to Impact Montréal. I can even show it to you. Yeah, we completely boycotted all merchandise that had CF Montreal on it. *(Hugo)*

This boycott of CF Montréal's merchandising perfectly reflects the “love-hate” relationship maintained by this segment of the fan base. On the one hand, they are determined not to give anything to the club, not to support it financially by not buying any merchandise or consuming anything at the stadium. But on the other hand, they continue to come every weekend, cheer on the players on the pitch and keep their relationship with the club alive in the hope of one day seeing the Montreal Impact again. Russell and Schau (2014) refer to maladaptation when consumers' accommodation to the loss of a brand is incomplete or maladaptive. Reflecting a

denial, repression or avoidance of all aspects of the loss and its pain, consumers hold on to the lost love object (Russell & Schau, 2014). All these mobilization efforts could therefore signify a refusal to accept the loss of the Impact and come to terms with the new identity. What's more, their hope was particularly fuelled by the second change of logo announced for the 2023 season. Many saw in it the return of the Montreal Impact identity, even if the name remains a source of frustration.

What would have been even better is just to go back to the name, because when you think about it, they rechanged everything, they brought back the blue as the main colour, they rechanged the logo, they helped bring the ultra tribune back to the stadium. I mean, what's actually left to get it back to impact? It's just like six letters. *(Raphael)*

There's one thing missing. That's it. They're so close. They're so, so close. But there's still one thing really, really important to me missing. And that's the name. That's how I felt, especially considering that they're literally giving in on everything else. So what is stopping them from just adding an I after that CF, and we'll call it a day, and everyone will be happy, and we can go back to what it was before, and we will move on. And we'll just say that it was a blip during the long and glorious history of the Montreal Impact soccer team, that the mistake was made and it was fixed eventually. *(Thomas)*

The frustration of seeing all the elements of the Montreal Impact come back, except the name, has fans scratching their heads. Some are wondering why management is still preventing the return of the name. Interview participants mentioned the failure that this would represent for the club, acknowledging that the CF Montréal chapter was a mistake. Others suggested that it is the league that is blocking the return of the name. Whatever the reasons, the fear remains that the Impact name will never return. A fear materialized by the club's new supporters. These fans, who have discovered the club in recent years, proudly wear CF Montréal jerseys. A certain separation can sometimes occur between Impact fans and CF fans as if they represent two different clubs. For ultras supporters, this represents a challenge to educate young fans.

My fear, my great real fear, and my motivation for still being at the stadium today, is to say: If the wave of supporters who experienced this break in 2021 disappears, it becomes

people who... I can see it, there are young people in the stands right now who more or less understand this attachment. We've got 15, 16 and 17 year olds in the stands who haven't experienced that break as much. Our reason for being vocal and being present at the stadium, when I say we, I mean me. But my reason for being present and getting involved is precisely to ensure that this culture remains. (...) I see it as an educational challenge. It's something that when I see someone wearing a CF Montréal jersey, I'm not going to shy away from having a chat with them. And of course, the approach... I know people who have very reactionary approaches to that. I've been involved a lot in education, in training people. So, it's something that's important to me. So I see it as an educational challenge. Then, again, I find that it's not in the supporters' group's motivations, but my own personal motivations to propagate this vision. It's a challenge to present this vision to them, and to make them understand where it comes from. Because I think it's central to all our decisions in life. *(Antoine)*

Antoine indicates here that this educational challenge adds meaning to his relationship with the club, contributing to its evolution. However, this motivation is not eternal for all fans. As the seasons go by without the name returning, some fans grow weary. The emotional connection and sense of belonging are no longer as strong without the Impact name. Mobilization efforts dwindle in the face of management's immobility.

Of course, as time goes by, some people get a little tired and believe in it less and less. (...) Will we still be around? That's another question. Because the more the years go by, the more there are people who step aside and are a bit fed up, to tell the truth. Including me, to be honest. *(Antoine)*

Fatigue and lassitude cast doubt on the future of their relationship with the club. With no guarantee that the battle for the Impact's return will ever be won, fervour is slowly giving way to doubts.

5.3.c. Break-up

Finally, another path taken by some fans following the rebranding is to cut ties with the club. This is the most extreme case, where fans do not forgive the name change and decide to end their relationship with the club. This decision to distance themselves from the club represents a difficult separation for fans. Indeed, one has to consider all the elements that are lost. For this, I

will draw on Russell and Schau's paper (2014) on narrative brand ending and their study of the process of loss accommodation.

i. What is lost?

As mentioned in the previous sections, what is primarily lost are the emotions associated with supporting a club. The joy of victory and the intense sadness of defeat vanish. The passion and time invested in the relationship with the club are wiped out. Russell and Schau (2014) speak of a loss of narrative evolution, creating feelings of emptiness and numbness among consumers. My research context is somewhat unusual in that while fans may decide to distance themselves from the club, the latter is not dead and continues to develop its narration season after season. As we will see in the next section, this greatly complicates the accommodation process for fans who know that their club continues to play every week and to evolve.

Another very important aspect that is lost in this break-up is the consumption sociality associated with the club. Supporters' groups, discussions about the club with friends and, most importantly, games experienced from the stands, chanting and cheering along with an entire stadium. It is all these social bonds created with other fans that are jeopardized by a separation from the club.

We were known for having a great atmosphere, the Montreal ultras were putting on a crazy show, with fireworks, singing and drumming. What we could see, we reproduced what was happening in Europe. We copied the chants too. And that's normal because we wanted to sing in French, so we copied the songs of Olympique de Marseille or Rennes. There were lots of clubs, it was just fun. It was just fun. It really was a great pleasure, I miss it. I miss it. That's the fun. (*Antoine*)

Supporting a club in the stands is, by its very nature, a social consumption. The communities that are created, the bonds born in the stands, and pulling the plug on all that is a real ordeal for fans. Finally, ending the relationship also represents a loss of identity. When a brand is integral to one's identity, the end of active production triggers an adjustment as consumers reestablish their

identity without the live brand (Russel & Schau, 2014). This is particularly important in the world of sports, where fans' loyalty to their sports team is an important part of their identity. The termination of their relationship with the club therefore requires a colossal effort to redefine their self-concept.

ii. Accommodation to the loss

The first dimension of this break-up is psychological. Fans no longer wishing to maintain their relationship with the club must accept the loss this represents. For some, it is as if the Montreal Impact had died with the creation of CF Montréal. The latter became an entirely new club, divorced from the Impact's history.

For me, my big years were really from 2008 to 2020, until the death of the Impact (...) Well yes. For me, it's like another team. It's like another team in my city, so obviously I can't take their side. My club is the Montreal Impact. If there was a match between Montreal Impact and CF Montréal, I would root for the Impact. As in many cities around the world, there are several clubs, sometimes there are three, four, five in the same city. No, that's it, it's another team, so I couldn't take for them. Personally, I stayed true to the Impact. (*Samuel*)

Here, Samuel shares his vision of the death of his club and the creation of a rival club. The rebranding takes on a different nature, as it is no longer a change of image but the destruction of one club for the creation of another. This point is important because it underlines the internal identity debates experienced by fans. By treating CF Montréal as a new club in its own right, they partly resolve the discrepancy in their self-concept. They no longer have to accept the club's new identity; they are solely fans of the Montreal Impact, so have no reason to remain emotionally and identity-bound to CF Montréal. This contributes to the re-establishment of a (sufficiently) coherent self-narrative and resolves the incongruity between reality and the meaning one gives to this loss (Russell and Schau, 2014). Fans like Samuel must then cope with the disappearance of their club. Theories on loss inform us that the initial numbness may be

interrupted by outbursts of anger or deep despair (Russell & Schau, 2014). A process similar to that of grief.

Yeah, it was grief. I felt like I lost my friend. I felt like I lost my best friend. I felt like someone took it from me. And I went through the stages of grief. So I went through anger, I went through denial, I went through acceptance, everything. I did it all. And yeah, at a certain point, I realized that there was no compromising. And the reason I realized was because I knew members of the group who were in contact with members of the Impact organization. They had meetings with Joey, who essentially told them, this is it. Fuck you. Get on board or get out. When it was put into that many terms, I decided, I don't need this anymore. I pretty much stopped going regularly. *(Thomas)*

Thomas emphasizes the strength of his former relationship with the club, which he considered a best friend. The club's sudden demise complicates the loss accommodation process. As Russell and Schau note (2014), when a narrative brand sustains narrative evolution upon its death, acceptance is made more difficult and may require more than an intrapsychic transformation process. For Impact fans, it is even worse, as their club suddenly disappears and another club continues the narrative with the same players, in the same stadium, making it difficult to cut ties completely. Some will return to the stadium sporadically, watch a few games on TV or follow the team's results for a few months. Then, as time goes by, a gradual emotional detachment develops among fans.

Today, that's it. I've become so detached. I'm hardly aware of the players who play on my team. I keep a distant eye, perhaps. I watch from a distance. I stay informed, but it's not like before. It used to be 100% there, now I'm 10%, but a little informed all the same. I watch out of the corner of my eye, but I've certainly wished them ill at times. I'm not going to hide from that, except against Toronto. Against Toronto, I still want us to beat them, but otherwise, I'll sometimes wish they lose this game, lose that, because I want the Montreal Impact era to be so much more glorious. I don't wish them any trophies. I don't wish them any great victories. I don't wish them any designated players coming in because that would lead people to love what isn't my club. It's my rival club now, and I don't want it. We're always interested in the rival club too. You want to know what they're doing. But that's it, I have a really detached eye. *(Samuel)*

Samuel's testimony demonstrates just how difficult it is to completely cut ties with a club that has been part of your identity and daily life for decades. His reaction of not wanting to see the club succeed under its new identity shows the maladaptation and the pain he still holds onto the lost love object. It is impossible for him to reach a complete deatthexis and completely detach himself from his club. Furthermore, it is important to consider the role of sociality in the accommodation process. As Russell and Schau noted (2014), when the lost object is directly part of a social network, "adjusting to its loss requires taking into account the social structure in which the loss occurred." For Impact fans attached to the community aspect and the festive atmosphere in the stands, the accommodation process will involve transitive resources. On the one hand, they will share their dismay and disappointment with their proximal social network and with other fans who have terminated their relationship with the club. On the other hand, for those who want to reconnect with the sociality of a stadium they will go and support other teams in the region playing in lower divisions.

It's fun you mentioned that, because last year I had a lot of fun going and watch CS Saint Laurent against Toronto FC in the Canadian Cup final, and there was a very, very good ambiance, and it's enough to make me go to Vanier College to check them out. *(Thomas)*

A lot of people went to support CS Saint-Laurent. That's right, because we don't have any other clubs nearby. For example, I've been following the Vermont Football Club a bit, because it's really not far from here. It's 1h20 from here. For us, it's not far. *(Samuel)*

In this way, they rediscover the consumption sociality and atmosphere of a stadium and can slowly rebuild their fan identity by cheering on another team.

In conclusion, I have discussed how the rebranding of the Montreal Impact may have affected the club's fans profoundly. Drawing first on Reimann et al.'s paper (2018), I characterized the various elements of the rebranding that were perceived as a betrayal. First, the shift in the club's cultural identity away from its Quebec roots and Montreal's soccer culture. Secondly, the new

profit-oriented vision of the management imposed without giving a voice to the fans during the rebranding process. These two moral breaches constituted a betrayal, as evoked by the feelings of indignation and rumination that impacted fans' self-concept. The rebranding marks a constitutive act in each fan's relationship with the club. And while some will accept the new identity and continue to support the club, others will go to war against it. Finally, some fans will detach themselves emotionally from the club, going through a process of rupture comparable to that of grief.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Theoretical Implications

First of all, this paper contributes to the literature on consumer-brand relationships. It advances the concept of relational trajectories, drawing on an event not often considered in this area of research: a rebranding. My findings support that such an event can constitute a critical juncture in the relationship between fans and their club, splitting their trajectories in several directions. Some fans accept the change and maintain their relationship with the club. Others make it evolve and redefine the norms of the relationship: reflecting a maladaptation following the loss of the name, these supporters militate for the return of the Impact. In this respect, this research also contributes to the field of anti-brand activism, explaining how poor marketing management can lead to repercussions such as boycotts and consumer mobilization. Previous research has established that the sale of naming rights of a Romanian football club led to protests and demonstrations by fans (Crețan, 2018). My thesis captures this mobilization in a culture different from European supporterism and describes the different demonstration tools used by fans to get their message across: banners, protest T-shirts, boycotting club merchandise and tagging outside

the stadium. Finally, some supporters decide to end their relationship with the club, seeing the change in identity as the death of the team they have always supported. Thus, my thesis contributes to Russell and Schau's (2014) theory of relational trajectories by developing three paths taken by fans following a moral transgression by their club, one of which leads to the dissolution of the relationship, with supporters undergoing a process of loss accommodation similar to that described by Russell and Schau (2014).

Moreover, this paper is also relevant to the literature on rebranding and brand transgression. Drawing on Reimann et al.'s theory (2018), I found that the Montreal Impact's rebranding constituted a moral breach for fans in two respects: firstly, by disrupting the club's cultural identity, and secondly, owing to the club's profit-driven vision and lack of fan involvement. This thesis takes a different approach to rebranding, as past research has measured reactions using measures such as fan attitudes (Williams et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2023), attendance numbers (Agha et al., 2016), or purchase intention (Ahn et al., 2013). My research diverges from the existing literature by delving into fan sentiment and exploring the betrayal components of such change. Rebranding is treated differently: as a violating act that breaks the moral trust established between supporters and the club. This leads to feelings of indignation, rumination, and loss of self-concept among fans.

6.2. Practical Implications

This paper presents implications for sports marketers, specifically in managing a rebranding process. First, it cannot be stressed enough how important it is to take consumers' opinions and feelings into account in anticipation of an identity change, as this is the most important factor determining their acceptance. This involvement can take various forms, such as polls on social networks, focus groups, surveys, or simply reaching out to different segments of the fan base

(ultra fans, casual fans, season ticket holders). In addition, sports marketers should anticipate that such a change may represent an upheaval for the club's supporters and communicate transparently and continuously throughout the rebranding process. This will limit the risk of perceived moral breach and betrayal among fans. Consistent with the literature on rebranding, marketers should favour evolutionary changes, leaving the team's name and colours untouched, as they are too important to fan identification. Furthermore, sports marketers should also consider the historical identity and roots of their sports team when rebranding, as straying too far from the latter creates negative reactions.

The presentation of a new identity is crucial, and marketers must prepare it with special attention to clearly explain the reasons for the rebranding and building on the historical elements of the club that remain unchanged. In this way, fans can grasp the evolving nature of the rebranding and hold on to the remaining symbols to adapt their self-image. Finally, in the months following the announcement, maintaining an open and honest exchange with fans, especially those who have difficulty accepting the change, increases the chances that they will not terminate their relationship with the club. Considering and accompanying them will increase the retention rate, along with the new fans you may have reached with the rebranding.

My research on CF Montreal also shows how a rebranding can be revisited years later to help change what fans perceived to be wrong. By bringing back elements of the club's history, such as the colours and the fleur-de-lys, the second change to the CF Montreal logo contributed to recreating an emotional connection for fans. Any element changed in a rebranding should not be set in stone and remains susceptible to correction based on fan feedback.

6.3. Limitations

There are several limitations to this research that could serve as recommendations for future research. The first limitation was the inability to interview CF Montreal employees during the data collection process. I am convinced that for research exploring the relationship between brand and consumer, it is valuable to obtain the reactions and sensations of both parties.

Interviewing club managers would have enabled me to learn more about the rebranding process, their objectives and the different elements they considered more or less important. It would also have allowed me to understand how a brand reacts when its consumers show serious dissatisfaction following a marketing initiative. Therefore, I encourage future researchers who wish to study the context of rebranding using consumer-brand relationship theory to consider the feelings of both parties to obtain a holistic and global view.

Another limitation of my research is tied to my findings. While I was able to identify the different relational trajectories taken by consumers following a brand betrayal, I am still missing the reasons why some fans tend to forgive, harbour resentment, or end their relationship with the club. No question in my interview protocol explored this topic in depth. Future research could therefore investigate different factors such as consumers' personalities, their degree of identification with the brand or others that might lead them to choose one path rather than another after such an event.


Another limitation of my thesis would be the analysis of the two rebrandings of the Montreal Impact. My findings presented, firstly, how the first rebranding constituted a betrayal for supporters and, secondly, the different relational trajectories of fans following the second rebranding. More detail could have been provided on the different effects of each rebranding on fans' relationships and feelings, particularly the benefits of the second rebranding. Future

research could also analyse the instability caused to consumers by two successive rebrandings in a short period of time.

Finally, my findings are tied to my research context of the Montreal Impact rebranding. It would be relevant to see if other cases of rebranding can generate different moral breaches and if the relational trajectories of fans are similar to those found in my research. Since each sports team has a different fan culture and fervour, a name or logo change could have a different impact on fan identification.

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Participant Recruitment Facebook Post



Jules Wimez ▸ CF Montreal - Supporters de l'Impact
Montréalais

18 novembre 2024 · 🌐

Bonjour,

Je me présente je m'appelle Jules, je suis un étudiant à l'université de Concordia. Dans le cadre de mon master de Marketing, j'écris actuellement une thèse sur le changement de logo et de nom de l'Impact de Montréal en 2021 et ses répercussions sur les fans.



Dans le cadre de ma recherche, j'aimerais beaucoup échanger avec un ou plusieurs fans de l'Impact / CF Montréal. Ces entretiens dureraient entre 45 et 60 minutes et porteraient sur vos expériences personnelles et vos réflexions concernant le changement d'identité du club, et sur la façon dont il a pu affecter votre relation avec l'équipe. Votre perspective serait extrêmement précieuse pour m'aider à mieux comprendre le point de vue des supporters pendant cette période de changement.


L'entretien pourra se dérouler au moment et à l'endroit qui vous conviennent, soit en personne, soit virtuellement. La participation est entièrement volontaire et vous êtes libre de vous retirer à tout moment. Toutes vos réponses resteront confidentielles et seront anonymisées dans le rapport final.


Si vous souhaitez participer à un entretien, merci de m'envoyer un mail à l'adresse: jules.wimez@gmail.com


Merci pour votre temps 😊

Jules

 15

 J'aime

 Commenter

 Envoyer

Appendix B - Interview Protocol

Themes	Main Question	Probes
Warm-up questions	Can you start by telling me a little about yourself?	- What are your passions and hobbies?
Connection with the club	Can you tell me about the first time you heard of the Montreal Impact?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What attracted you to this particular club rather than another? - Is there anyone in your entourage who is a supporter of the club? - Can you describe the first game you went to see the Montreal Impact? What stood out for you? - What made you want to come back and follow the team more?
	What does being a fan of this team mean to you personally?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How has your support for the club evolved over the years? - Are you part of a supporters' group? How does this impact the way you support the team?
First rebranding	In 2021, the club's management decided to change the club's logo and name. The name Montreal	- What were your initial reactions to the change?

	Impact became Club de Foot Montréal. Can you tell me how you first heard about this change?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did you immediately think of the new logo and colours? - What emotions did you feel following the rebranding? - What does the name change mean to you?
	What surprised you most about the rebranding process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has this rebranding had an impact on your attachment to the club? - How does this change affect your perception of the club? - Do you think the club has adequately explained the reasons behind the rebranding? - Are there any elements of the rebranding that you may have perceived as a betrayal? - Do you think the fans were consulted during the rebranding process?
	What actions have you taken individually and collectively to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have you shared your thoughts on the rebranding with others?

	express your opinion on the rebranding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did the rebranding influence your decision to buy new merchandise from the club? - How important is the Montreal Impact name to you? - What did you think of the collective reaction of the fan base during the rebranding?
Second rebranding	In 2023, the club's management decided to change the logo once again. Can you tell me how you first heard about this logo change?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What were your initial reactions to the new look? - How do you rate the new logo and colours compared to the old one? - How do these 2 rebrandings impact your connection and commitment to the club? - What is your perception of the club after these 2 rebrandings?
A vision of the future	What does the CF Montréal represent for you today?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think the club still represents the values and identity that originally attracted you? Why or why not?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Should the club retain this new identity in the long term? - What do you think will be the long-term impact of the rebranding on the club and its supporters?
	Looking ahead, what are your hopes and expectations for the club's future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are there any changes or improvements you'd like to see in the way the club engages with its supporters? - What do you hope the club has learned from these two rebrands? - What would it take for you to feel closer to the club in the future? - Finally, is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't talked about yet?

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