All brands evolve throughout their lifecycle. Even the most successful brands, such as Levi 501, experience highs and lows. For example, the Levi brand of jeans began to differentiate itself in the 1870s with a double line of stitching on the pockets, and the styles of its riveted jeans and leather badge were patented in the 1880s. The brand grew to great strength through the 1950s, but then suffered a decline in fortunes in the 1960s and 1970s, when jeans “became politicized through student protests” (Babson nd). The company briefly shifted its attention to products other than denim jeans, such as polyester suits, but in the 1980s built the Levi 501 brand to be a leading global brand. Since this time, the fortunes of Levi 501 have fluctuated with shifts in fashion preference among its youth market.

In the case of football brands, performance is clearly linked to the on-the-pitch performance of the particular club. So a football brand can grow in awareness and popularity if a team is successful, gains promotion, and membership of leagues for which there is greater TV coverage. In the English game, promotion to the Premier League offers a prize of around £60 million, in increased TV broadcast revenue, improved match attendance and merchandise sales. As a knock-on effect, promoted teams also come to the awareness of a much larger global audience, and their performance while in the league may gain them new fans who are attracted by their style of play, on-the-pitch success, or the players in the team.

Indeed, not only teams playing in the highest tier can gain significant international following: there are recent instances of clubs such as Stockport County of the English League One (third tier) and Sheffield United of the English Coca-Cola Championship (second tier) which have gained a significant following in China because of innovative brand expansion strategies.
Stockport County, for example, capitalized on the popularity of English football as a whole by undertaking close season tours in China, and building a local fan base and an eventual joint venture with a local club.

Sheffield United has linked up with international clubs both in Hungary (Ferencváros) and in China (Chengdu Blades) to create feeder clubs and also to boost international interest in its brand.

The nature of sport, however, and the reason fans become so passionate about their clubs, is that it is never clear what the result will be in a particular match. For the good times, there are inevitably less successful periods of time.

The following section discusses what constitutes “success” in football brands.

What are successful football brands?

Success for a football brand surely relates to winning silverware and leagues. Yet, if that were the only criteria for success, fans of many league clubs would not have experienced any success in their lifetime.

*Actual success* in football relates to final league positions and winning matches. In some cases this also translates into financial benefits to clubs. So, for example, in the Spanish league system, more successful teams tend to negotiate better broadcast deals. Teams that qualify for the European Champions League or equivalent competitions gain greater gate receipts and broadcast revenue, which they can reinvest in better players. So begins a virtual cycle of success. Statistically, teams with better playing squads (as measured by average wages of the players) achieve better sporting performance (Deloitte and Touche 2009). Rich clubs tend to get richer, and the gap between successful and less successful clubs tends to perpetuate over time.

There are, however, other measures of success for football clubs. Despite high levels of sporting performance, there are clubs that, for reasons of geography, may not attract high attendances. For example, Scunthorpe United FC was promoted in 2008–09 to the English Coca-Cola Championship (second tier). When it was last in the second tier, it sold 4,000 season tickets.