

Effect of Arsene Wenger's Tenure on Arsenal Football Club's Brand Image

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Arsene Wenger has contributed to Arsenal's brand image through three distinct channels: (1) team tactic & performance, (2) relationship with players, and (3) individual character. This analysis proves useful as Wenger's role at the club is akin to the role of visionary CEOs at modern-day technology companies. I also provide an analysis of Arsenal's brand image by adopting a theoretical reference framework for professional sports clubs developed in Schilhaneck (2008).

1. Introduction

For many firms, their brand equity is heavily tied to the persona of their CEOs. Apple's products embody the legendary aura of Steve Jobs, and SpaceX's new launches speak to the imaginative aspirations of Elon Musk. This trend is especially salient among high-technology firms, where it is often argued that CEO attention is a critical driver of innovation.¹

For football² clubs, on the other hand, the manager is often seen as an agent employed by the board and often his influence tends to be restricted to personal character or a certain style of play. For example, José Mourinho — perhaps the most celebrated manager of our time — is well known for his tactical knowledge, personal charisma, and fiery language, but he is rarely thought to represent an ethos of a specific club. Another illustrative example is Marcelo Bielsa, an Argentine football manager, who is mainly known for bringing his signature 3-3-3-1 formation to the front of the world's mainstream football scene.

This lack of association between the manager and the brand of any single club is exacerbated by the fact that managers at top clubs suffer from very short tenure. According to a study by Sky Sports, the average tenure for a departing manager in the 2016-17 season of the English Premier League was just 423 days.

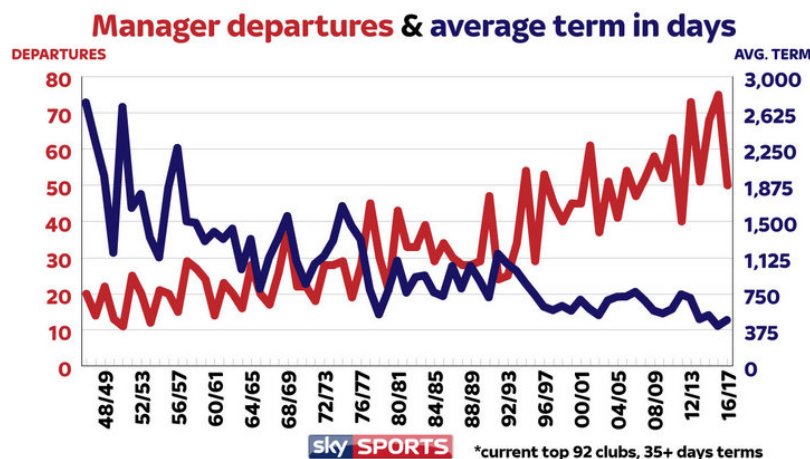


Figure 1: Manager Departures & Average Term in Days (Source: Sky Sports)

The most striking anomaly in this trend is Arsene Wenger, a French football manager who has been in charge of Arsenal Football Club since 1996. This is a pleasant surprise as Arsenal, based

¹ See Hambrick & Mason (1984), Balkin (2000)

² I will use the term "football" instead of "soccer."

in North London, is one of the most influential clubs in the world. It currently ranks 6th on KPMG's list of most valuable teams and 8th on Brand Finance's ranking of most valuable Football brands. Perhaps Arsenal's global popularity is best illustrated by this map that shows the most popular Premier League club by region (the yellow dots represent Arsenal):

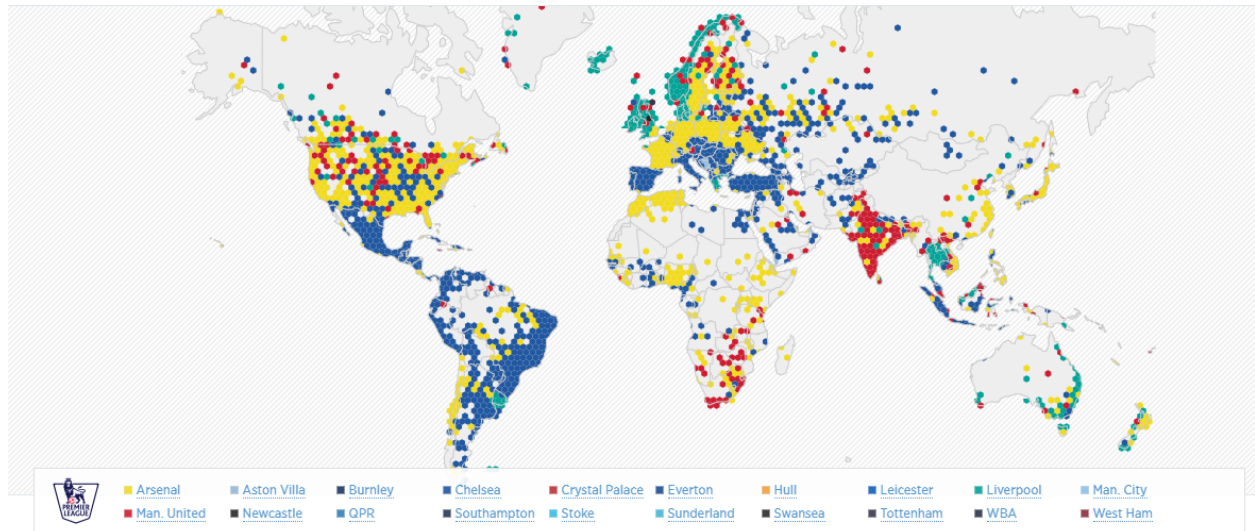


Figure 2: Most Popular Premier League Club by Region
(Source: <https://interactive.twitter.com/premierleague/>)

Given that its global presence has been achieved only recently during Wenger's tenure, it is natural to ask the extent to which Wenger has contributed to the club's dominance as a brand. In this paper, I argue that Arsene Wenger has contributed to Arsenal's brand image through three distinct channels: (1) team tactic & performance, (2) relationship with players, and (3) individual character. Especially during current times when Wenger is under pressure to resign, it seems to be an opportune moment to examine his influence to the Arsenal brand.

2. Arsenal's Brand Elements

To illuminate sources of brand image for a generic football club, I adopt a theoretical reference framework for professional sports clubs developed in Schilhaneck (2008). This model is an adaptation of a framework initially proposed in Meffert and Burmann (1996; 2002) and identifies four types of brand elements: product-related, symbol-related, organization-related, and person-related. In this section, we explore Arsenal's efforts relevant to each brand element.

Product-related Brand Elements

They include qualitative features such as performance of the team, pricing, experience marketing, and club merchandising. Most notably, Arsenal is most famous for its distinct style of play — emphasis on possession-based tactics, augmented by silky smooth passes and daft finishing touches by the lone striker. Additionally, Arsenal is most known for its legendary unbeaten 2003-2004 campaign, hence their nickname “The Invincibles.”

Arsenal is also at the forefront of product-related brand marketing among soccer clubs. It has been one of the pioneers in the social media marketing space³, maintaining diverse presence through youtube videos and heavy Instagram-based communication. Interestingly, Arsenal also offers the most expensive admission: it costs £97 for games that the club classifies as “category A” against its most important opponents. There are three forces at play that have led to this pricing. First, the club actively targets the local, wealthy segment in North London and positions themselves as a high-end football experience. Second, they have incurred large investment cost in the construction of the Emirates Stadium in 2006 and the high ticket prices are partly intended to cover this cost. Finally, given the club’s large fan base, the demand for the tickets have been constantly growing while the supply has remained static, constrained by the number of seats available in the stadium.

Symbol-related Brand Elements

They include the club’s name, the logo, the colors, and the club’s history and tradition. Arsenal received its name and the cannon-shaped crest from the coat of arms of Borough of Woolwich as a reference to the military influence in Woolwich. The cannon theme has developed throughout the years and now remains an integral part of the Arsenal identity. The club’s official nickname is “The Gunners” and the fans refer to themselves as “The Gooners.” The flagship store is appropriately called “The Armoury” and sports channels use an animated graphic of a cannon blasting away to depict Arsenal’s dominance.

Organization-related Brand Elements

They include behavior of the players and management, strategic cooperations, and youth development programs. In fact, the club is quite aggressive in forging relationships with sponsors across wide range of industries, including Indesit (domestic appliance), Europcar (car rental) and Hansa Pilsener (brewery).

³ In 2016, Arsenal fans were ranked as the most active Twitter users in the English premier league.



Figure 3: Arsenal's Current Club Crest and the 125th Anniversary Crest
(Source: Arsenal.com)

Furthermore, Arsenal is famous for investing heavily in its youth academy, culminating into top-notch performance as well as smooth within-team transition from older players to younger players. The club is in fact branching out globally through Arsenal Soccer Schools⁴, at which they teach young players “the Arsenal way” of playing football. The club also values providing league opportunities for younger, fledgling players, as evidenced by their famous squad in the 2008 Carling Cup final in which the average age of the squad was 19.

Person-related brand elements

They encompass the personnel involved in the club, including the shareholders, the manager, and the fan community. Unlike those at clubs such as Real Madrid or Chelsea, the Arsenal Board rarely receives media spotlight. In most cases, it falls on Arsene Wenger, the manager, whose tenure at Arsenal will be analyzed in the next section.

3. Arsene Wenger's Influence

Prior to Wenger's arrival, the club had been traditionally derided as “boring, boring Arsenal” for a lack of creativity on the field. Also, thanks to its roots in the Woolwich munitions workers, the club has traditionally garnered support from the working class. Performance-wise, the club was one of the top contenders in the league — they have never been relegated to the Championship league after the Premier League was launched — but it did not have a brand that is now associated with innovation, energy, and youth.

When Arsene Wenger was hired as the new manager in 1996, he was granted control over a gamut of decisions involving transfers, contracts, and training sessions. This level of autonomy

⁴ Arsenal recently opened a new Arsenal FC Academy in Mount Olive, NJ in May 2016.

for the manager was unprecedented, and naturally Wenger had a lot of room for influence. In fact, I would like to argue that he has been the main force that enabled Arsenal to reach its world-wide influence.

4.1 Brand Image via Team Tactic & Performance

Wenger helped create the Arsenal brand of **technically strong** football through improvements in team tactic and performance. In football, players are considered technically strong if their handling of the ball is more adroit, the passes more accurate, and dribbles more successful. This notion of technical prowess is distinguished from physical strength, which many clubs have traditionally emphasized in organizing their team. In the Premier League, Arsenal stands for this technically strong football; Stoke City, with its average squad height of 6'1" as opposed to Arsenal's 5'10", represents more physical and aggressive style of play.

It was Wenger who established Arsenal's emphasis on technique. Wenger achieved this by scouting young, undervalued players — especially from France. Talented and technically capable players like Patrick Vieira, Robert Pires, Thierry Henry, and Santi Cazorla flourished under Wenger's regime. He also frequently argued that "the important thing is to develop creative and skilled players with good confidence"⁵ and modeled the style of play accordingly. Without him, Arsenal would have retained its infamy as "boring boring Arsenal."

Another particular image of Arsenal that resonates in most fans is that it is very **efficient**. In other words, it is much more frugal in spending than the competitor clubs, yet it achieves similar results. In the Premier League, finishing in the top 4 of the league is a significant priority, as these teams are then allowed to compete in the Champions League against clubs from across Europe. There is also a financial incentive to finish in the top 4: the qualifying clubs for the league get to share over 4 billion euros worth of revenue generated by the competition.⁶ During his tenure, Wenger has successfully placed Arsenal in the competition for the past 19 years, and he has contributed to the image of consistency and world-class performance associated with the Arsenal brand.

⁵<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/arsenal/6247528/Arsene-Wenger-Arsenal-managers-best-quotes.html>

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2017/may/19/champions-league-still-financial-sporting-lure-premier-league-clubs>

Arsenal's Premier League Finishes

Wenger's first 9 years v last 10 years

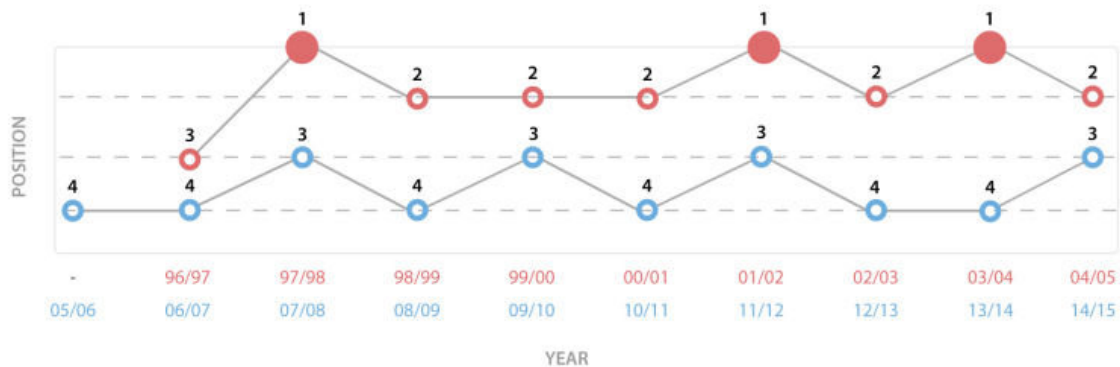


Figure 4: Arsenal's Premier League Finishes in the Wenger Era (Source: Sky Sports)

Wenger, however, is often blamed for Arsenal's popular **image as a feeder club**. A feeder team generally refers to a club that usually provides experience and training for young players, who choose to move on to a more prestigious club after starting their career. As a top European club, it is a surprise that Arsenal is considered a "feeder club," but Wenger's policy for player transfer has been partially responsible. Among the top clubs, it is not usual for a player to switch teams and usually the manager blocks the transfer from happening.



Figure 5: Angry Fan at an Arsenal Game (Source: Associated Press)

But Wenger has been quite liberal with the policy and has been selling players — often the super-stars in the team — to rival clubs. The most recent examples include Alexis Sanchez to Manchester United (2017), Robin van Persie to Manchester United (2013), and Cesc Fabregas to

FC Barcelona (2012). This set of decisions has helped perpetuate the club's brand image as young and inexperienced, a phenomenon that many fans now come to resent.

On the positive side, Wenger has contributed to Arsenal's association with **innovation**. For example, he is well-known for introducing the scientific approach to the diets of the team. Inspired by the food he'd eaten in Japan, Wenger demanded that the club cafeteria stop serving burgers and chips and replace them entirely with fish or chicken, potatoes, and vegetables. Since his arrival in 1996, his methods have been incorporated at other Premier League clubs.

Wenger also relied on science rather than tradition in his training. He replaced the lackadaisical approach to warm-ups with carefully timed training sequence and custom drills to sharpen passing skills. He also overhauled the club's entire training center to introduce the latest fitness equipment and revamped the recovery methods by bringing in an osteopath and an acupuncturist.

4.2 Brand Image via Relationships with Players

An important part of the Arsenal brand is that the club significantly values its **relationship** with its players. Especially in an era with football sugar daddies and record-high turnover rate for players, Wenger's approach to finding new players and interacting with them as a mentor has been hugely influential in Arsenal's brand image. Numerous accounts of former Arsenal players appreciating Arsene Wenger's mentorship abound. Some notable examples include:

George Weah, former football player and current president of Liberia

"He was a father figure and regarded me as his son. This was a man, when racism was at its peak, who showed me love. He wanted me to be on the pitch for him every day."⁷

Thierry Henry, retired French professional football player

"...Arsene is more than just a great manager to me because he was a father figure and a mentor. I will never forget his advice and guidance over the years and without him I wouldn't have achieved half the milestones in my career."⁸

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2017/dec/25/george-weah-arsene-wenger-chelsea-liberia-president>

⁸ <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/sport/football/370742/Arsenal-legend-Thierry-Henry-Arsene-Wenger-was-like-my-father>

Cesc Fabregas, *former Arsenal player*

"I love Arsene, the man. I love him of course as a coach too. This is a decision he made. I always said that he's like a father to me, and he will always be."⁹

Furthermore, Wenger's presence on the team has often enabled the acquisition of **world-class** players. His presence at the club has motivated many to decline offers from other clubs to join Arsenal. The most recent example is that of Mesut Ozil, who recently revealed in an interview that he "joined Arsenal for Arsene Wenger's brand of football."¹⁰ Wenger's favorite tactic is to call the players individually — by directly talking to the player, he successfully communicates the Arsenal brand in an intimate setting.

Wenger is also instrumental in Arsenal's **global** presence. In Africa, he is known for advancing the careers of many African players, including Nwankwo Kanu from Nigeria, Emmanuel Adebayor from Togo, George Weah from Liberia, and now Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang from Gabong.¹¹ In Japan, Wenger is admired for his legacy at Nagoya Grampus from 1994 to 1996. In fact, Wenger is known to utilize players from all over the world — Arsenal has lined up without an English player 155 times in Premier League history; the second-placed Wigan has only done so just 26 times. This fact is a testimony to the fact that Wenger's presence is a big lure for international players and a driving force behind the club's global influence.

4.3 Brand Image via Individual Character

Combined with the club's visually appealing style of football, Wenger's individual character has contributed to the image of **elegance** to the Arsenal brand. The first of his salient traits is his studious and eclectic demeanor - he holds a degree in economics from Strabourg University and speaks French, German, English, Spanish, Italian, and a bit of Japanese. In fact, he is known to read numerous volumes on politics, history, and religion passionately.¹² He makes commentaries on geopolitical matters too — in a 2009 interview with the *Times* and the *Daily Mail*, he argues for a government that can address the stark wealth inequality that we see today. Furthermore, Wenger has a penchant for eloquent quotes that are rare in the football world. For example, when Sepp Blatter, then president of FIFA, criticized top clubs for poaching young

⁹ <http://www.skysports.com/football/news/11668/11037156/cesc-fabregas-exclusive-arsene-wenger-is-like-a-father-to-me>

¹⁰ <https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/mesut-ozil-i-joined-arsenal-for-arsene-wengers-brand-of-football-a2947726.html>

¹¹ In a survey by Daily Star on the countries with most Arsenal fans, five out of the top ten countries were in Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Nigeria, and Egypt.

¹² <http://timeontheball.net/2015/04/02/le-professeur/>

players, Wenger responded: “If you have a child who is a good musician, what is your first reaction? It is to put them into a good music school, not in an average one. So why should that not happen in football?” These anecdotes well illustrate how Wenger’s studious nature earned him the nickname *le professeur* and consequently added to the club’s unique appeal among football fans all around the world.

Wenger is also known for fashion, which again reinforces the image of **stylish** football that his club demonstrates. In 2015, he has featured on the cover of L’Equipe Sport & Style as a model:



Figure 6: Arsene Wenger as a Fashion Model (Source: L’Equipe Sport & Style)

This appearance has generated viral reaction from Twitter, some examples of which include:

@Coral / November 6, 2015

“ Wenger making his case to oust David Beckham and front the H&M winter range “

@BeardedGenius / November 6, 2015

“Why does Arsene Wenger look like he's about to drop the most fire M&S advert featuring Myleene Klass of the year?”

@Dunmoreorless / November 6, 2015

“Wenger is out-dressing us all at 66 years old. Give it all up.”

Finally, Wenger has served Arsenal over 20 years, and this elongated partnership reinforces Arsenal's emphasis on its **relationship** with players. Arsenal shines especially in contrast with rival clubs like Chelsea or Manchester United where the club manager is replaced almost every year. This point of differentiation is crucial as fans are mostly looking for more than just good football performances and results. Ultimately, they want a holistic experience as a football fan. Wenger's two-decade tenure will be seen as a testimony to the fact that the club takes its stakeholders very seriously, the scope of which includes the players, the staff, the manager, and ultimately the fans.

5. Conclusion

Prior to writing this paper, I did a quick survey on an Arsenal fan page (highbury.co.uk). I asked the members to comment on the role Wenger has played in their choice to become Arsenal fans. Most fans expressed that they were initially hooked on by individual players like Thierry Henry or Dennis Bergkamp, but they remained fans after their departure thanks to Wenger. Some considered him to be their personal role model, and others appreciated the fact that he was "loyal" to the club. A few even expressed frustration with the way Wenger has influenced Arsenal's brand, but their allegiance has not softened.

This paper was intended to shed light on the specific channels through which Wenger has contributed to Arsenal's brand image. I first analyzed the elements of Arsenal brand using a framework developed in Schilhanek (2008). I then illustrated the three ways through which Wenger has contributed: team tactic & performance, relationships with players, and individual character.

In a 2007 interview, Wenger has compared his relationship with Arsenal to a marriage:

"Being manager of Arsenal is like a marriage. It just becomes part of your life. You don't imagine yourself anywhere else. In the first years you think: Will it work? But after a while, it just becomes like your family. That's what Arsenal is to me now."

Ten years later, he is still in charge, admired for his contributions by both loving and frustrated fans. In recent times where he is under immense pressure to resign, it perhaps helps to take a step back and examine his role in shaping the modern-day Arsenal brand.

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