



LUDONIA'S DECISIVE PLAY: BRAND ACTIVISM AND THE "ONE LOVE" ARMBAND DILEMMA AT THE WORLD CUP

A JOGADA DECISIVA DA LUDÔNIA: ATIVISMO DE MARCA E O DILEMA DA BRAÇADEIRA "ONE LOVE" NA COPA DO MUNDO

LA JUGADA DECISIVA DE LUDONIA: ACTIVISMO DE MARCA Y EL DILEMA DEL BRAZALETE "ONE LOVE" EN LA COPA DEL MUNDO

ABSTRACT

Dilemma: Arthur Campos, Marketing Director, and Victoria Brave, Head of Communications for the Ludonia Football Federation (LFF), face a strategic game balancing activism and institutional pragmatism. In response to FIFA's ban on the use of the "One Love" armband at the World Cup Qatar 2022 and the threat of sporting sanctions, both managers must present a recommendation to the LFF presidency. They are required to navigate a critical trade-off: sustaining the offensive in support of brand values, while accepting the risk of sporting penalties and political isolation; or retreating to a defensive position, preserving competitive viability at the cost of a crisis of inauthenticity (wokewashing) among athletes, fans, and sponsors. . Against this backdrop, what is' the best tactic for this high-pressure game: playing by FIFA's rules, or by the values of their own supporters?

Educational Objective: This case aims to lead students to: (1) analyze the risks and benefits of brand activism in global sporting events; (2) develop strategies to manage conflicts between brand values, sports regulations, and the expectations of multiple stakeholders; and (3) evaluate the importance of authenticity and strategic alignment to avoid missteps in brand activism.

Context: The case unfolds during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, a country where homosexuality is criminalized. Several European federations, including the LFF, planned a symbolic initiative in which their captains would wear the "One Love" armband to promote inclusion. However, FIFA drew a hard line, threatening sporting sanctions.

Main Subject: Brand activism in sports; reputation crisis management; decision-making; sports marketing.

Audience: Undergraduate and graduate students in business administration, marketing, social communication, sports management, and physical education.

Originality/Value: The case uses a real, high-profile event to explore the complex rules of brand activism in the international sports context, offering a space to discuss ethical, strategic, and communication dilemmas that can lead organizations to either win or lose the reputation game.

Keywords: Brand Activism; Sports Marketing; Sports Management; Crisis Management; Decision-Making.

Mariana Ribeiro Pires

Candidate PhD

Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina – Brazil

mariana.ribeiro@udesc.br

Daniel Moraes Pinheiro

PhD

Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina – Brazil

daniel.pinheiro@udesc.br

Aline Regina Santos

PhD

Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina – Brazil

aline.santos@udesc.br

Submitted on: 07/29/2025

Approved on: 04/16/2026

How to cite: Pires, M. R., Pinheiro, D. M., & Santos, A. R. (2026). Ludonia's Decisive Play: Brand Activism and the "One Love" Armband Dilemma at the World Cup. *Alcance (online)*, 33(1), 89-100. [https://doi.org/10.14210/alcance.v33n1\(jan/abr\).p89-100](https://doi.org/10.14210/alcance.v33n1(jan/abr).p89-100)

OPEN ACCESS





RESUMO

Dilema: Artur Campos, diretor de marketing, e Vitória Brave, chefe de comunicações da Federação de Futebol da Ludônia (FFL), enfrentam um jogo estratégico envolvendo o ativismo e pragmatismo institucional. Diante da proibição da FIFA do uso da braçadeira “One Love” na Copa do Mundo do Catar 2022 e da ameaça de sanções esportivas, os gestores devem arbitrar um trade-off crítico: sustentar a ofensiva em prol dos valores de marca, aceitando o risco de punições técnicas e isolamento político; ou recuar para a linha defensiva, preservando a viabilidade esportiva ao custo de uma crise de inautenticidade (wokewashing) perante atletas e torcedores. Nesse caso, mantendo a ofensiva, em defesa dos valores da campanha e da FFL, arrisca punições e conflito com a FIFA; por outro lado, recuando a linha defensiva para evitar sanções pode gerar acusações de inautenticidade, uma crise de reputação e o descontentamento de atletas, torcedores e patrocinadores. Qual a melhor tática para este jogo de alta pressão – jogar pelas regras da entidade ou pelos valores da sua própria torcida?

Objetivo Educacional: O caso visa a levar o estudante a: (1) Analisar os riscos e benefícios do ativismo de marca, como uma jogada ensaiada, em eventos esportivos globais; (2) Desenvolver estratégias para gerenciar conflitos entre valores da marca, regulamentos de órgãos esportivos e as torcidas de múltiplos stakeholders; (3) Avaliar a importância da autenticidade e do alinhamento estratégico para não cometer uma falta no ativismo de marca.

Contextualização: O caso se desenrola durante a Copa do Mundo FIFA de 2022, no Catar, um país com leis que criminalizam a homossexualidade. Federações europeias, incluindo a FFL, planejaram uma ofensiva simbólica: seus capitães usariam a braçadeira “One Love” para promover inclusão. A FIFA, porém, marcou uma falta dura, ameaçando sanções esportivas.

Tema Principal: Ativismo de Marca no Esporte; Gestão de Crises de Reputação; Tomada de Decisão; Marketing Esportivo.

Público: Graduação e Pós-Graduação em Administração, Marketing, Comunicação Social, Gestão Esportiva e Educação Física.

Originalidade/Valor: O caso utiliza um evento real de grande repercussão para explorar as complexas regras do jogo do ativismo de marca no contexto esportivo internacional, oferecendo um espaço para discutir dilemas éticos, estratégicos e de comunicação que podem levar organizações a ganhar ou perder o jogo da reputação.

Palavras-chave: Ativismo de Marca; Marketing Esportivo; Gestão Esportiva; Gestão de Crises; Tomada de Decisão.

RESUMEN

Dilema: Artur Campos, director de *marketing*, y Vitória Brave, jefa de comunicación de la Federación de Fútbol de Ludonia (FFL), se enfrentan a un dilema estratégico que combina activismo y pragmatismo institucional. Ante la prohibición de la FIFA del brazalete “One Love” en el Mundial de Catar 2022 y la amenaza de sanciones deportivas, deben recomendar medidas a la presidencia de la FFL. Los directivos deben sopesar una disyuntiva crucial: mantener la ofensiva en defensa de los valores de la marca, asumiendo el riesgo de sanciones técnicas y aislamiento político; o replegarse a la defensiva, preservando la viabilidad deportiva a costa de una crisis de autenticidad (wokewashing) entre atletas y aficionados. En este caso, mantener la ofensiva, en defensa de los valores de la campaña y de la FFL, conlleva el riesgo de sanciones y conflictos con la FIFA; por otro lado, replegarse a la defensiva para evitar sanciones podría generar acusaciones de falta de autenticidad, una crisis de reputación y el descontento de atletas, aficionados y patrocinadores. ¿Cuál es la mejor táctica para este partido de alta presión: jugar según las reglas del organismo rector o según los valores de tus propios aficionados?

Objetivo Educacional: El caso busca que los estudiantes: (1) Analicen los riesgos y beneficios del activismo de marca en eventos deportivos globales; (2) Desarrollen estrategias para gestionar conflictos entre los valores de la marca, las regulaciones de los organismos deportivos y las demandas de múltiples stakeholders; (3) Evalúen la importancia de la autenticidad y la alineación estratégica para no cometer un error en el activismo de marca.



Contextualización: El caso se desarrolla durante la Copa Mundial de la FIFA 2022 en Catar, un país con leyes que criminalizan la homosexualidad. Federaciones europeas, incluida la FFL, planearon una ofensiva simbólica: sus capitanes usarían el brazalete “One Love” para promover la inclusión. Sin embargo, la FIFA impuso una regla estricta, amenazando con sanciones deportivas.

Tema Principal: Activismo de Marca en el Deporte; Gestión de Crisis de Reputación; Toma de Decisiones; *Marketing* Deportivo.

Público: Estudiantes de Grado y Posgrado en Administración, *Marketing*, Comunicación Social, Gestión Deportiva y Educación Física.

Originalidad/Valor: El caso utiliza un evento real de gran repercusión para explorar las complejas reglas de juego del activismo de marca en el contexto deportivo internacional, ofreciendo un espacio para discutir dilemas éticos, estratégicos y de comunicación que pueden llevar a las organizaciones a ganar o perder el juego de la reputación.

Palabras Clave: Activismo de Marca; *Marketing* Deportivo; Gestión Deportiva; Gestión de Crisis; Toma de Decisiones.

INTRODUCTION

On a global scale, sport is far more than a competition for results or mere entertainment; it has become a powerful arena for social and political expression. On a playing field where consumers increasingly expect brands to take a stand on controversial causes, brand activism emerges as a complex, high-stakes tactic. Major events such as the FIFA World Cup serve as the primary stage for such initiatives, subjecting federations, sponsors, and athletes to intense public scrutiny.

Ludonia is a fictional nation created for educational purposes, and its name derives from the Latin word *ludus*, meaning game or play – the same etymological root as the term “*ludic*.” This choice reinforces the symbolic connection between sport and the culture of social participation that underpins the case. Geopolitically, Ludonia was conceived as a progressive European country modeled on characteristics associated with the Netherlands: inclusive public policies,

freedom of expression, strong engagement with social causes, and a sports ecosystem committed to the values of diversity, sustainability, and innovation.

The protagonists also carry symbolic meaning. Arthur Campos, Marketing Director, represents the strategic decision-maker – a figure who operates in the game’s tactical space and the symbolic territory of brands. Victoria Brave, Head of Communications, embodies courage (brave) and the pursuit of narrative legitimacy in high-risk contexts, reinforcing communications’ role as the bridge between institutional values and organizational reputation.

This teaching case examines the dilemma faced by Arthur Campos and Victoria Brave at the Ludonia Football Federation (LFF). During the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the LFF, along with other European football federations, found itself at the center of a heated dispute when it sought to support the “One Love” campaign, an initiative promoting inclusion and opposing discrimination. FIFA’s subsequent ban on the armband, enforced under the threat of sporting sanctions, forced Campos, Brave, and the LFF to make a decisive call with profound implications for the federation’s public image, its relationships with key stakeholders, and its perceived role in society.

The case invites reflection on the limits, risks, and responsibilities of brand activism in the volatile and impassioned world of international football. After all, what is the best strategy when going on the offensive is not always the winning move?

CASE DESCRIPTION

The “One Love” campaign: A goal for inclusion

The “One Love” initiative, like a well-executed pass, was launched by the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB) in 2020 as part of a broader effort to combat racism and discrimination in Dutch football. The campaign quickly gained international momentum, promoting connection and inclusion while taking a stand against all forms of prejudice, including discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community. The campaign’s central symbol was a captain’s armband featuring a heart with multicolored stripes – not the rainbow



colors traditionally associated with LGBTQIA+ pride, but a combination that, according to its creators, represented the heritage of all races,

genders, and sexual orientations – accompanied by the words “One Love.”

Figure 1

The “One Love” armband highlighted during the match



Source: Alves (2022).

Note: The image, attributed by the report to the Dutch Football Federation, shows goalkeeper Manuel Neuer wearing the armband in support of the campaign. Taken from: “What is One Love: understand the symbol banned by FIFA on captains’ armbands at the World Cup”.

For the LFF, whose fan base is young and highly engaged, joining the campaign felt like a natural and strategically sound move. The federation had already been working to rejuvenate its brand and forge stronger connections with a younger, more socially conscious audience. Adopting a more inclusive public positioning would not only resonate with its existing fan base but also enhance global visibility, increase brand equity, and, above all, attract investors and sponsors who share those values.

Internally, athletes and coaching staff expressed genuine support for the cause. Arthur Campos and Victoria Brave viewed the campaign as an opportunity to align the LFF with the values of diversity and inclusion, reinforcing the federation’s progressive and socially engaged ima-

ge. This alignment could also resonate with key sponsors whose corporate policies emphasize social responsibility and commitment to diversity. Moreover, the initiative had the potential to attract earned media coverage, as outlets tend to amplify particular positions and causes, especially those tied to controversy. An event of the FIFA World Cup’s magnitude, set against the backdrop of the host country’s social and political profile, offered fertile ground for exactly that kind of narrative attention.

FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022: A controversial playing field

The selection of Qatar as host nation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup was, from the outset, mired in controversy. International criticism focused on the working conditions of migrant labo-



ers involved in stadium construction and, most notably, on the country's laws criminalizing homosexuality and curtailing the rights of women and the LGBTQIA+ community. Although Qatari authorities publicly declared that all visitors would be welcomed during the tournament regardless of background, they consistently reaffirmed the country's conservative position on public displays of affection. Qatar's LGBTQIA+ equity score on the Equaldex¹ index stands at just 8 out of 100 (2026 data), where zero represents the lowest and 100 the highest degree of equality — a figure that reflects a legal framework in which same-sex marriage is prohibited and homosexuality is punishable by imprisonment.

Against this backdrop, the decision by several European national teams, including England, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium (a neighboring country to the fictional Ludonia), Denmark, Switzerland, and Wales, to have their captains wear the "One Love" armband during matches took on heightened significance. The gesture was intended as a bold visual statement at one of the most-watched sporting events on the planet, held in a country where such messages were particularly charged and where restrictions on the LGBTQIA+ community were enshrined in law.

Arthur and Victoria were well aware that this offensive tactic, while consistent with the LFF's values, was a high-risk move on the global stage. The exposure that would inevitably follow was a double-edged sword: it could powerfully amplify the LFF's message and strengthen its brand image, or it could pull the federation into a political and cultural minefield that could ignite a full-blown battle of competing narratives.

FIFA enters the field

On the eve of the tournament's opening whistle, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the sport's global governing body, hardened its stance. Although FIFA's existing regulations, specifically Article 27 of the Equipment Regulations and Article 11 of the Disciplinary Code, already required prior approval for any message displayed on playing kit and prohibited expressions of a political, religious, or

¹ Available at: www.equaldex.com. Equaldex is an equality index that measures LGBTQIA+ rights, laws, and freedoms, as well as public attitudes toward members of the aforementioned community across countries.

personal nature, there had been some expectation of flexibility.

Instead, FIFA notified the federations that the "One Love" armband would not be permitted and that any captain wearing it could face immediate sporting sanctions, including a yellow card at the start of the match. FIFA's stated justification centered on keeping the focus on football, avoiding politicization, and respecting the host country's laws, an attempt, in effect, to keep the game neutral. The governing body also launched its own "No Discrimination" campaign, which many observers regarded as a deflection, a tactical move designed to shift attention away from the controversy rather than to engage meaningfully with it.

The dilemma facing Arthur Campos, Victoria Brave, and the LFF: Which tactic to use?

The news of FIFA's inflexibility and the concrete threat of sanctions hit the Ludonia delegation like a cold shower. Internally, the atmosphere was tense. Leo Van der Berg, the national team's experienced and widely respected captain, spoke plainly to the coaching staff, articulating the sentiments of much of the squad:

"We've been in this together from the start. This isn't just about an armband, it's about who we are as a team and as a country. If standing up for what is right means getting a yellow card, I'll take it. We cannot back down now. Our fans and our conscience would never forgive us."

Meanwhile, Arthur Campos' phone rang. On the line was Marcus Thorne, CEO of Global Energy Solutions (GES), the LFF's principal sponsor. His tone was unmistakably concerned:

"Arthur, we stand behind the values of inclusion, it is part of our corporate DNA, and we genuinely admire your courage. But our sponsorship is tied to the sport, not to a political battle with FIFA. An open conflict puts our brand in a vulnerable position in key markets and shifts the conversation away from football. We need a solution that does not drag us into this fight."



Public opinion in Ludonia was evenly split. Human rights organizations and younger segments of the population voiced strong support, while more conservative quarters called for the federation to keep politics out of sport and maintain an exclusive focus on the game itself. In other words, Ludonian fans were not on the same team. Politicians took to social media to reach their audiences: progressive voices urged support for the LFF and its players, while their conservative counterparts launched campaigns against the national football setup, urging the public to distance themselves from a sport that, in their view, “was no longer what it used to be.”

The pressure was relentless. Late that night, a WhatsApp exchange between Victoria and Arthur laid bare the weight of the dilemma and their desperate search for a way forward:

[WhatsApp conversation – start]

Victoria Brave (10:45 PM) Arthur, sorry for the late message... I can't sleep. This FIFA situation is a nightmare. Every option feels like the wrong one.

Arthur Campos (10:48 PM) Same here. I keep hearing the captain's voice in my head, saying he'll take the card... and then the GES CEO's call, reminding me their sponsorship is for football, not a political fight.

Victoria Brave (10:51 PM) And he has a point. But if we back down... our reputation goes down the drain. Everything we've done to build a brand with real values, with courage... everything turns to dust. We'll be torn apart, and rightly so.

Arthur Campos (10:55 PM) I know, but if we stand up to FIFA, the yellow card will be the least of our problems. That would mean open conflict with the sport's most powerful governing body. The fallout could be enormous for the players and the federation.

Victoria Brave (10:56 PM) Exactly. We're caught between a rock and a hard place. Every path we take seems to lead to serious harm. Is there really no other way out?

Arthur Campos (10:58 PM) That's what I've been trying to figure out all day. Nothing feels good enough. Tomorrow, we have to walk into Dubois' office with something... and right now, I have no idea what that will be.

Victoria Brave (11:06 PM) What a day... Let's talk tomorrow. Good night!

[WhatsApp conversation – end]

While the two managers wrestled with the dilemma, news began to filter through: under mounting pressure and FIFA's firm stance, several major footballing nations announced that their captains would not wear the “One Love” armband. The coordinated retreat reshaped the landscape.

At the same time, global media coverage of the armband controversy intensified. Coverage extended well beyond traditional prestige outlets, including *The Guardian* and *Time*, both of which reported that the armband ban was merely the most visible element of a far broader crackdown. The coverage spread rapidly across social media. Journalists, human rights experts, and prominent public figures lined up to voice support for the cause, criticizing both FIFA's conduct and the federations' decision to abandon their position, while drawing renewed attention to Qatar's treatment of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Early the following morning, Arthur and Victoria met to map out their options and structure the arguments they would need to present. The LFF could align with the other withdrawing nations, thereby diluting its individual responsibility, or it could chart a different course. The options to be presented to Mr. Dubois, President of the LFF, were as follows:

- Maintain the attack (challenge FIFA): wear the armband and accept the resulting sporting sanctions. This would signal an unambiguous commitment to the cause but risk harming the team's competitive standing and triggering open conflict with the tournament's organizing authority or even the host country's government, potentially escalating into a diplomatic incident.



- Retreat to the defensive line (do not wear the armband): comply with FIFA's ruling to avoid sanctions. This would shield the players from immediate consequences but invite criticism for a lack of conviction, inauthenticity, and failure to honor the values the LFF had publicly championed, particularly among an audience that could prove strategically important to the long-term future of football in the country.
- Seek an alternative course of action: devise a symbolic gesture that did not directly breach the regulations but still conveyed a meaningful message. The risk was being perceived as a half-measure, ineffective, unlikely to satisfy either side, and potentially as cowardice or excessive caution.

Mr. Dubois was awaiting Campos and Brave's recommendation. A decision was urgently needed before Ludonia's opening match. What should the two advise? How should the LFF position itself, and how should it communicate its decision to minimize reputational damage while, if possible, extracting some positive value from an extraordinarily complex and high-stakes situation?



TEACHING NOTES

1. Educational objectives

This case was developed to enable students to:

- Identify the motivating factors and inherent risks of brand and organizational engagement in socio-political activism, particularly in complex international contexts
- Analyze the tensions between brand and organizational values, commercial and performance goals, stakeholder pressures (both internal and external), and restrictive regulatory environments
- Discuss the concept of authenticity in brand activism and the dangers of wokewashing (term describing the superficial appropriation of social causes by brands for marketing purposes, without genuine underlying commitment) or of strategies perceived as merely performative
- Evaluate the roles and responsibilities of global governing bodies, such as FIFA, in managing political and social expression at major sporting events.
- Propose various courses of action and communication strategies for managing reputation crises and ethical dilemmas arising from controversial public positions
- Compare different possible courses of action by mapping out likely scenarios and assessing the implications of each choice.
- Reflect on the potential of sport as a platform for dialogue and social change, even in the face of institutional constraints and strategic retreats.

This case is suitable for courses across a range of programs, including business administration (marketing and communications, strategy, business ethics and/or public administration ethics, organizational studies and behavior, risk management, ESG, and corporate social responsibility), marketing (brand management, integrated marketing communications, sports marketing, brand positioning and image), communications (public relations, crisis management), physical education (marketing, communications and management), and sports management (sports marketing, communications and sports manage-

ment). It is intended for use at both undergraduate and graduate levels, including specialization, master's, and doctoral programs.

Suggested lesson plan

Prior preparation (individual reading):

- Full reading of the case "Ludonia's Decisive Play: Brand Activism and the 'One Love' Armband Dilemma at the FIFA World Cup."
- Supplementary research on the "One Love" campaign, Qatari legislation on LGBTQIA+ rights, and FIFA's track record regarding political expression.

In-Class Discussion (total time: approximately 2.5 to 3 hours):

- **Opening and contextualization (15 minutes):** The instructor introduces the case, recaps the context of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, and frames the central dilemma facing Campos and Brave. Relevant video material on the topic may be used to open the session.
- **Small-group dilemma analysis (30 minutes):**
 - Objective: To identify the key pressures and stakeholders relevant to Campos, Brave, and the LFF
 - **Activity:** Working in groups, students map the main stakeholders, their expectations and interests, and the options available to the two managers. If all groups converge on the same recommended course of action, the instructor may assign or randomly allocate different positions across groups to generate productive debate.
- **Plenary discussion of options and risks (45 minutes):**
 - Objective: To debate the implications of each available course of action, including challenging FIFA, backing down, or pursuing an alternative approach
 - Activity: Each group briefly presents its analysis. The instructor facilitates the discussion, explicitly connecting it to the theoretical concepts to be explored in depth during the session, including brand activism, authenticity, and crisis management.



· **Application of theoretical concepts (30 minutes):**

· Objective: To provide the theoretical grounding necessary for deeper analysis.

· Activity: Instructor-led presentation or guided discussion on brand activism, authenticity, and stakeholder management in professional sports.

· **Solution proposal and communication plan (45 minutes):**

· Objective: To develop a practical, actionable solution to the dilemma.

· Activity: Groups formulate the recommendation that Arthur Campos and Victoria Brave should present to Mr. Dubois, encompassing both the decision on the armband and an outline of the communication strategy for conveying that decision to each relevant audience.

· **Presentation of solutions and debate (30 minutes):**

· Objective: To compare approaches and learn from peers' proposals

· Activity: Selected groups present their solutions. Presentations may take the form of a brief visual deck created in class using platforms such as Canva, Prezi, or PowerPoint, or alternatively a poster produced on card or craft paper with colored markers and magazine cutouts supplied by the instructor. Presentations should be followed by a structured debate on the merits and potential shortcomings of each proposed solution.

· **Wrap-up and lessons learned (15 minutes):**

· Objective: To consolidate learning.

· Activity: The instructor summarizes the key takeaways from the case, including how sport can catalyze dialogue, the importance of strategic preparation before committing to brand activism, and the complexity of decision-making in multicultural environments under significant pressure.

2. Data sources

· This case was constructed from publicly

available secondary sources, including:

· News articles and reports from internationally credible media outlets that provided extensive coverage of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and the "One Love" armband controversy (Alves, 2022; Reuters, 2022; Syed, 2022).

· Academic articles on brand activism, sports marketing, crisis communication, and corporate identity, including works by Balmer (2001); Cammarota et al. (2023); Forni (2022); Melewar (2003); Nuortimo et al. (2024); Pimentel, Suter, and Didonet (2023); Podnar (2024); Rindell and Strandvik (2010); and Vredenburg et al. (2020).

· Instructors and students may wish to supplement these sources with official statements from FIFA, the football federations involved, and relevant human rights organizations, when available and pertinent to the discussion.

3. Discussion questions

1. Place yourself in the position of Arthur Campos and Victoria Brave and formulate a strategic recommendation for the LFF President. **Which of the three options (challenging FIFA, backing down entirely, or pursuing an alternative approach) would you recommend, and why?** Justify your position by considering both the short- and long-term implications for the LFF's reputation and its relationships with athletes, fans, sponsors, and FIFA itself.

2. Assess the risks associated with FIFA's decision to ban the "One Love" armband, identifying the arguments both for and against that decision.

3. FIFA's ban raises a broader question about institutional integrity: did FIFA act in a manner consistent with its role as football's supreme governing body, or did it prioritize other interests? In your response, also consider whether FIFA could have managed the situation more effectively to balance its regulatory responsibilities with the growing demands for greater social engagement.

4. Adopt the perspective of a marketing manager at one of the LFF's sponsors and analyze how you would advise the brand to position itself in the aftermath of the incident. What spe-



cific actions could be taken to mitigate reputational damage, drawing on the principles of crisis communication?

5. Considering Podnar's (2024) assertion that genuine brand activism requires the courage to challenge prevailing norms and resist institutional pressure — alongside the idea that “the best move is not always to attack, assess the extent to which the “One Love” incident advanced or failed to advance the agenda of inclusion and LGBTQIA+ rights in sport. Can the repercussions of the case be regarded as a positive outcome, even though the specific action was ultimately withdrawn?

6. Drawing on Balmer's (2001) framework of corporate identity — encompassing real, communicated, conceived, ideal, and desired identities — explain how the LFF could use these concepts to rebuild or reinforce its brand strategy in the aftermath of the World Cup.

4. Literature review and analysis

4.1 Identity at stake: Analyzing activism, authenticity, and risk

Brand activism has emerged as a central phenomenon in strategic marketing, defined by brands' deliberate engagement with social, political, or environmental issues, often controversial or sensitive. This approach differs from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in several important respects: while CSR typically addresses high-consensus, low-risk issues (Pimentel et al., 2023), brand activism engages directly with contested and polarizing questions (Camarrota et al., 2023; Podnar, 2024), seeking to provoke meaningful change rather than simply bolster organizational reputation (Pimentel et al., 2023).

This high-risk orientation, however, brings the so-called “authenticity paradox”: while stakeholders increasingly demand that organizations take clear positions, they also scrutinize the sincerity of those positions, remaining alert to the possibility of purely commercial motivations — or wokewashing, i.e., activist stances perceived as superficial or disingenuous (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

According to the literature, the resolution to this paradox lies in establishing a deep, coherent connection between activism and corporate identity. For Balmer (2001), identity is the very essence of an organization, encompassing its core attributes, values, and culture. Melewar (2003) extends this argument, proposing that identity manifests in both tangible elements (symbols and design) and intangible ones (organizational behavior and reputation), ultimately expressing how the organization wishes to be perceived by its various audiences. It follows that, to be regarded as authentic, brand activism must arise organically from this core identity rather than serve as a superficial overlay of strategic communication.

The way organizational identity is perceived by external audiences is, moreover, a dynamic and evolving process. Rindell and Strandvik (2010) advance an evolutionary view of brand image, distinguishing between image heritage — the accumulated body of past perceptions and experiences that generates a collective memory and shapes expectations about the brand — and image-in-use — the living, present-tense perception formed through recent interactions and the current context. Any misalignment between what the brand “has always stood for” (its heritage) and what it “is doing now” (its image-in-use) risks triggering a credibility crisis.

4.2 Communication in a minefield: Crisis and reputation management

The strategic dilemma facing the LFF, in which its stated identity and values are placed on a direct collision course with an institutional authority, creates the conditions for what the literature defines as a crisis: a disruption of normality that threatens an organization's most fragile and valuable asset, namely its reputation (Forni, 2022).

Forni (2022) argues that crises rarely occur without warning and typically stem from overlooked or inadequately managed reputational risks. In the LFF's case, the risk was identifiable from the outset: aligning a progressive institutional identity (image heritage) with a politically charged cause in an overtly hostile environment (Rindell & Strandvik, 2010).



FIFA's decision to ban the armband transformed a latent risk into an imminent crisis. Backing down at that point would place the LFF in direct conflict with its stated identity and erode the trust it had cultivated among its stakeholders. The perception of inconsistency between organizational rhetoric and institutional behavior is particularly damaging in sport, where the bond between governing bodies and their supporters is rooted in deep emotional investment. Conversely, holding firm and openly challenging FIFA would expose the federation to sporting sanctions and institutional conflict.

It is precisely in this context that crisis communication becomes the decisive move. As Nuortimo et al. (2024) caution, the digital environment exponentially amplifies the magnitude and velocity of a crisis, with narratives and reputational perceptions taking shape at viral speed. Forni (2022) observes that in critical moments, the absence of a clear, timely position, or any attempt to remain silent, tends to worsen the situation, because the resulting information vacuum is rapidly filled with speculation and criticism. The author identifies transparency about the facts, agility of response, and empathy toward affected publics as foundational pillars of effective crisis containment. This proactive alignment of identity, communication, and practice ultimately protects and strengthens an organization's reputation, even under adverse conditions.

Whatever course of action the LFF ultimately chooses, it must be communicated strategically and coherently to all relevant audiences. Maintaining its position and challenging FIFA would require assertive communication focused on defending the cause's legitimacy and the federation's core values. Backing down, on the other hand, would require a crisis communication approach distinguished by exceptional transparency and empathy, one that explains the institutional pressures at play and preemptively counters accusations of inconsistency. The situation illustrates what Forni (2022) describes as the symbolic face of the crisis: the challenge lies not only in managing the event itself but also in shaping the perceptions and meanings that will arise from the decision, perceptions that will ultimately crystallize the LFF's reputation and define its institutional future.

4.3 Analyzing the scoreboard: A synthesis of risks and opportunities

The world of professional sport operates under a complex set of institutional norms and power structures, often invisible yet decisive in shaping what organizations can and cannot do. FIFA, as football's supreme global governing body, exercises regulatory authority over federations, clubs, and athletes that extends well beyond the technical dimensions of the game, including control over which forms of political or social expression are permissible in its competitions. This institutional governance sets firm boundaries for brand activism: even when brands are encouraged by their audiences to take a stand, they encounter structural barriers that can turn legitimate advocacy into significant sporting and financial risks.

The impasse faced by the LFF becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of the complex activism ecosystem in which the federation operates, a concept developed by Podnar (2024). Within this ecosystem, actors with divergent interests exert simultaneous, often competing, pressure on the organization.

On one side, FIFA represents an institutional-regulatory force demanding compliance. On the other, athletes, supporters, and human rights organizations constitute a community- and identity-driven activist force, pressing the LFF to act in accordance with its publicly stated values. Sponsors, meanwhile, function as a market force with inherently ambivalent interests, supportive of inclusive values in principle yet wary of institutional conflict in practice. In this configuration, the decision facing Arthur Campos and Victoria Brave transcends a straightforward communications choice: it becomes a strategic negotiation over which force within the ecosystem the LFF will align with or position itself against.

The analysis of the LFF case ultimately centers on a dilemma central to any brand committed to activism: the tension between fidelity to organizational identity and the pressures imposed by regulatory and market environments. On one side stands a strong organizational identity (Balmer, 2001; Melewar, 2003) aligned with progressive values; on the other, the global institutional forces that constrain its public expression



(Podnar, 2024). No decision is cost-free: retraining risks undermining the coherence between stated identity and observable practice, generating perceptions of hypocrisy or opportunism (Vredenburg et al., 2020); while holding firm entails accepting real institutional risk and the possibility of a sustained reputational crisis (Forni, 2022).

The LFF's situation captures the essential tension at the heart of the brand activism debate: to what extent should organizations remain true to their convictions when operating in adverse regulatory environments? The decision marks a critical juncture where identity, reputation, institutional risk, and strategic judgment converge. The Ludonia case invites managers, academics, and students alike to reflect on the boundaries of brand activism and the symbolic and material costs of every decisive move at the intersection of marketing, ethics, and global governance.

REFERENCES

- Alves, C. (2022, 22 de novembro). O que é One Love: entenda símbolo proibido pela Fifa nas braçadeiras dos capitães na Copa. Portal Globo Esporte. <https://ge.globo.com/futebol/copa-do-mundo/noticia/2022/11/21/copa-2022-entenda-polemica-sobre-bracadeira-one-love.ghtml>
- Balmer, J. M. T. (2001). Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing: Seeing through the fog. *European Journal of Marketing*, 35(3/4), 248-291.
- Cammarota, A., D'Arco, M., Marino, V., & Resciniti, R. (2023). Brand activism: A literature review and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 47(5), 1669-1691. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12967>
- Forni, J. J. (2022). *Gestão de crises e comunicação: O que gestores e profissionais de comunicação precisam saber para enfrentar crises corporativas* (3ª ed.). Atlas.
- Melewar, T. C. (2003). Determinants of the corporate identity construct: A review of the literature. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 9(4), 195-220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1352726032000119161>
- Nuortimo, K., Harkonen, J., & Breznik, K. (2024). Exploring corporate reputation and crisis communication. *Journal of Marketing Analytics*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41270-024-00353-8>
- Pimentel, P. C., Suter, M. B., & Didonet, S. R. (2023). Brand activism as a marketing strategy: An integrative framework and research agenda. *Journal of Brand Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-023-00335-8>
- Podnar, K. (2024). Brands and activism: Ecosystem and paradoxes. *Journal of Brand Management*, 31, 95-107. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-024-00355-y>
- Reuters. (2022, 24 de novembro). World Cup 2022: What is the OneLove armband and why did FIFA ban it? <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/world-cup-2022-what-is-onelove-armband-why-did-fifa-ban-it-2022-11-24/>
- Rindell, A., & Strandvik, T. (2010). Corporate brand evolution: Corporate brand images evolving in consumers' everyday life. *European Business Review*, 22(3), 276-286. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09555341011040976>
- Syed, A. (2022, 21 de novembro). The 'One Love' LGBTQ rights armband is causing a stir at the Qatar World Cup. *Time*. <https://time.com/6235503/one-love-armband-qatar-world-cup/>
- Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A. (2020). Brands taking a stand: Authentic brand activism or woke washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(4), 444-460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620re947359>