European soccer is a $29 billion industry (Deloitte, 2015), with the world’s 20 most valuable soccer clubs all playing in European cities (Forbes, 2015). As with all organizations, professional soccer clubs rely on certain sets of resources to survive and flourish in their competitive environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Lawrence, 2008). For this reason, club strategies will focus on the acquisition and allocation of such resources; those that are successful in doing so will gain in status, while at the same time those have higher status may have greater access to the resources that confer competitive advantage. Status is the widely shared perception on the ordering of individuals or organizations within a social system (Podolny, 1993; 1996; Washington & Zajac, 2005). Research has shown that status can provide competitive advantages for organizations (Podolny, 1996; 2001). For a professional soccer club, a variety of benefits might be associated with higher status, including the increased value of its relationship with sponsors (Amis, Slack, & Berrett, 1996; Gwinner & Swanson 2003; CNN, 2015), opportunities to recruit quality players and coaches (Magee & Sugden, 2002; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004), higher revenues from sources such as merchandise sales (Hill & Vincent, 2006; Richelieu, Lopez, & Desbordes, 2008), as well as other benefits such as preferential seeding (Monks & Husch, 2009) or even receiving referees’ favorable calls (BBC, 2012a; 2012b).

Elsewhere, researchers have found that a variety of resources can confer status, described as status signals (Podolny 2005; Bowman & Bastedo 2009; Mason, Washington, & Buist, 2015). Thus, top managers of professional soccer clubs will identify those resources—serving as status signals—that will best serve to increase status, by acquiring or retaining them in the course of operating their respective clubs. However, previous research has not examined how resources are employed in such a manner; therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore how status manifests itself in the strategies employed by the European soccer clubs and which resources the clubs believe will confer status. In doing so, we hope to identify the status signals that clubs consider the most critical in gaining competitive advantage over other elite clubs.

An obvious place where this discourse will appear will be in clubs’ annual reports, since that is where a club’s leadership communicates to its board members and shareholders, justifying and arguing for the merits of the club’s strategic decisions. In this study, it is assumed that status will be an important consideration in the allocation of club resources and that certain resources will be discussed in the clubs’ annual reports because of their potential to confer status. Overall, 172 documents were collected from 28 European clubs’ official websites. Sample clubs are from 8 countries (Spain, the UK, Germany, Italy, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Ukraine) and 10 different leagues, representing a wide range within the status hierarchy of European soccer. Global names such as Real Madrid (Spain), Manchester United (England) and Juventus (Italy), second-tier continental elites like Borussia Dortmund (Germany), FC Porto (Portugal), Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukraine) and Lyon (France), smaller, regional clubs like Norwich City FC (England), Sheffield United (England) and Aberdeen FC (Scotland) are all included in the sample. The annual reports are dated from 2004, when a number of clubs started publishing annual reports online, and 2015, when the latest annual reports of the financial year (2014/15) were released.

The study is currently in progress. A qualitative content analysis will be conducted to examine the annual reports (variously titled “annual statements”, “group management statements” or “director’s reports”) published by the clubs. Words and phrases relevant to status, such as “prestige”, “prominence”, “rank”, “reputation”, or “image” will be the focus of initial coding, and serve to identify those resources that might confer status (for example, the acquisition of a high-profile player or coach, or the construction of a new, state of the art facility). Once these signals have been identified, the data will be examined using the propositions developed in Mason, Washington, and Buist (2015), where status signals are discussed in terms of a status hierarchy and movement within the hierarchy. For example, in the case of European soccer clubs, we predict that clubs will reference other clubs (both above and below them) when arguing for the merits of acquiring certain resources.
Because the study is currently ongoing, results cannot be discussed here. However, there are several important implications that should emerge from the analysis. First, examination of the reports from a status perspective will inform us as to what extent status is a key consideration in managing elite soccer clubs. Moreover, the results will provide insights on what specific resources clubs leverage as status signals and where different clubs position themselves within the status hierarchy of elite professional soccer. The results will also have important practical implications for clubs that are looking to allocate resources more efficiently to gain status, and ultimately help to understand why certain resources are valued as they are within the industry.