

SIMPLICITY IN THE REDESIGN OF LA LIGA CLUBS' GRAPHIC BRANDS

SANTIAGO MAYORGA ESCALADA¹, FERNANDO SUÁREZ CARBALLO²

¹ International University of La Rioja, Spain ² Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyse, using simplicity as the main visual criterion, the evolution of the latest redesigns of the graphic brands of the 42 clubs that form part of La Liga (First and Second Division) in the 2023/2024 season. Using a content analysis methodology and a previously validated model that uses five variables to measure the simplicity or complexity of the identifiers, the research concludes that simplicity is the fundamental criterion in the design of the most recent versions of these football clubs, plastic modifications that are generally introduced in a very subtle way.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Corporate Visual Identity and Simplicity

O liveira and Raposo (2016) define Corporate Visual Identity (CVI) as "a system of graphic signs selected, designed and organised to visualise the identity of an entity, product or service" (p. 162). In light of this definition, it is pertinent to emphasise its symbolic translation function (Chaves, 1988; Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Cuesta Valiño, 2009). This function underscores the pivotal role of CVI signs, as graphic design products, in the visual communication of the issuer (Herrera Fernández and Fernández Iñurritegui, 2006) and contribute to the formation of the corporate personality (Contreras and San Nicolás, 2001; Salvador Rivero and Vizcaíno-Laorga, 2016).

In the context of the CVI programme, which encompasses a range of linguistic and visual elements, Olins (2009) identifies the graphic mark, commonly referred to as a logo, as a particularly prominent feature. Despite the imprecision of the term, the term 'logo' essentially refers to the textual component of the identifier. Additionally, Fernández Ignacio (2018) refers to the impact of political and economic forces on the aesthetic properties of graphic design in general and on visual identity and graphic brand design in particular:

The stylistic evolution of the creative work of graphic design professionals has consistently been shaped by the discourses developed by social actors within the political and economic spheres. It is crucial to highlight that these political and economic discourses are, in fact, aesthetic discourses. They are absorbed by all social groups through the medium of the mass media (Fernández Ignacio, 2018, p. 91).

In the context of contemporary graphic design, numerous scholars have identified simplicity as a pivotal concept in the visual structuring of messages across diverse domains. From an aesthetic perspective, this can be evaluated through the analysis of user preferences. From a cognitive standpoint, simplicity is linked to tasks such as recall and the accurate recognition of stimuli (Airey, 2015; Gamonal-Arroyo and García-García, 2015; Slade-Brooking, 2016, among others). Dondis (1998) defines simplicity as a "visual technique that imposes the direct and simple character of the elementary form, free of complications or secondary elaborations". In contrast, complexity "implies a visual complication due to the presence of numerous elementary units and forces, resulting in a difficult process of organising meaning" (p. 133).

Among the research reflecting the benefits of simplicity in the graphic message, the study by Siegel+Gale (2015) points to the undeniable weight of this principle in improving the recall of messages, according to users' perceptions. In relation to the field of interaction design, for example, Eytam et al. (2020) suggest that the simplicity (or complexity) of a product influences consumers' decision-making processes, potentially increasing or decreasing the value of the product. Similarly, visual simplicity would serve to reduce cognitive load and improve comprehension due to our limited information processing resources (Zhao and Meyer, 2007).

On the other hand, Knuth, Behe and Huddleston (2020) show how consumers find more complex messages more appealing (although the excessive amount of information makes it more difficult to make purchase decisions). At the same time, Jan, Baek et al. (2018) conclude that high visual complexity in a clothing store has a negative effect on the user when the consumer's attachment to fashion is low, while this perception decreases when the relationship with this sector is closer.

In the field of corporate visual identity, the focus of this paper, Chen et al. (2015) study identified seven elements (shape, open-closed, straight-curved, symmetry, weight, degree of angle and number of components) that can be used to measure overall simplicity in logo design. The experiment concluded that pure curved and straight shapes are generally perceived as simpler than mixed shapes, and that clearer shapes are perceived as simpler. Suárez-Carballo et al. (2018) put forth a definition of simplicity and complexity based on five binomials of extreme attributes, which can be combined in the development of a graphic brand from the perspective of these principles: economy/profusion, coherence/variation, geometry/organicity, flatness/depth and balance/instability. In their study, the authors demonstrate that the public exhibits a preference for simpler graphic brands, with younger subjects displaying an even greater acceptance of this preference.

In research utilising a comparable methodology to the aforementioned study, it has been demonstrated that simple, symmetrical, natural and harmonious typefaces and logos evoke a more favourable response than complex, asymmetrical, artificial and contrast-based designs (Henderson and Cote, 1998; Henderson et al., 2004; Veryzer, 1999). Additionally, symmetrical, simple and well-proportioned designs have been found to be more attractive than asymmetrical, complex and disproportionate designs (Raghubir and Greenleaf, 2006).

1.2. CVI in Football

In the present era, the economic and social dimensions of football have become integral to its mass appeal in certain countries. Ginesta Portet (2011) posits that the convergence of economic, cultural, media and sporting factors provides an explanation for the contemporary reality of major modern competitions. Similarly, José Ignacio Rivero, former vice-president of Real Madrid, discusses the implications of this sport in today's society:

The marketing of sport, the significance of a brand with global reach, sponsorship, the governance of a fortnightly spectacle in which over 2,500 individuals participate and which is attended by more than 80,000 people, the economic impact of triumph and defeat (less prominent than the sporting impact, but no less significant for that) and numerous other factors that interweave emotions, aspirations, economic responsibilities, ethical influences and social and cultural responsibilities (Alcaide, 2009, p. 13).

In the contemporary era, one of the primary objectives of professional football clubs is to foster and maintain the loyalty of their fanbases (Cano Tenorio, 2017). In response to this challenge, marketing and communication have emerged as key instruments employed by football companies with the objective of ensuring that these audiences enjoy a comprehensive experience of football as a product (Thrassou et al., 2012). As Tejedor et al. (2010) observe, major football teams have evolved into entertainment multinationals, necessitating the development of effective communication strategies to meet the challenges of this new environment.

Such sporting entities serve as representatives of cultural identities and ambassadors for their cities or regions. In order to reflect the cultural heritage and traditions of the community they represent, it is essential that graphic attributes such as colours and logos are employed (Kassimeris, 2016). Similarly, as Michailidis et al. (2016) posit, football club logos possess a robust semantic capacity, thereby functioning as symbols of collective identities, reflecting values and stereotypes of the broader social milieu, serving as a conduit between disparate social groups, transcending class or ethnic boundaries, and providing a context for people to congregate.

A substantial corpus of scientific literature explores the reality of marketing and communication in the context of professional football. Such studies address the presence of football in social networks, as evidenced by the research conducted by Sotelo González (2012), the aforementioned text by Tejedor Calvo et al. (2010) on the use of Facebook by the leading European teams, and the work of Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí (2020) on the marketing carried out on Instagram by the captains of the Spanish First Division clubs. Other studies address the corporate communication of Spanish sports clubs (Sanahuja Peris, 2012), the strategic brand management of Professional Football League clubs (Mayorga-Escalada, 2014), sponsorships associated with identity (Mayorga-Escalada, 2023) and digital marketing applied to football (Vargas Arboleda et al., 2022). These are just a few examples of recent studies on the aforementioned fields.

Nevertheless, despite the growing interest in the fields of communication and marketing in football, there is a paucity of studies in the scientific literature on visual communication, particularly in this specific sport. These include the recent work of Suárez-Carballo (2022), which analyses the role of graphic design in the construction of the visual identity on Instagram of the main Premier League clubs; or that of Ramos et al. (2023), which reveals the importance of this discipline in the creation of brands in football and emphasises the need for a visual identity manual to improve brand recognition and consumer loyalty.

Similarly, it is worthwhile to consider the role of heraldry in the visual identity of football clubs. The coat of arms, as defined by Costa (2004) as "a mark of identity in constant movement, a strong visual

impact, an advertisement of itself and its identity message" (p. 72), constitutes a popular type of identifier in the sporting, governmental or university sphere (García, 2018). Fernández Ignacio (2018) posits that this variant "facilitates the recognition of public institutions as entities differentiated from private business initiatives" (p. 87). Although not directly related to the field of football, the study by Droulers (2016) on the comparative simplicity of modern logos compared to medieval coats of arms is worthy of note.

In this context, the present research aims to examine the design solutions employed by football clubs in their visual identity, with a particular focus on the role of simplicity as a significant variable in this process.

2. Design and Method

2.1. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to examine the extent to which the redesign of the graphic brands of professional football clubs in Spain – particularly those that are part of La Liga – employs simplicity as a fundamental variable.

Two further objectives arise from this primary objective.

- To evaluate the visual techniques that are most relevant to obtain simpler versions of identifiers.
- To ascertain whether the time variable, defined as the date of the last redesign process, exerts an influence on the degree of simplicity observed in the new visual solutions.

2.2. Hypotheses

In light of the aforementioned objectives, the study puts forth the following working hypotheses:

H1. In their redesigns, the graphic brands have elected to adopt a more streamlined design than that of the previous version.

H2. The modifications primarily impact the plastic properties, while the iconic sign remains unaltered.

H3. The fundamental techniques employed in the visual simplification of the badges of the La Liga football clubs are based on the principles of geometry and coherence.

H4. The more recent redesigns demonstrate a greater emphasis on simplicity in comparison to the older design processes.

2.3. Methodology and Variables

The research is based on quantitative content analysis (CA), a technique that, through the application of systematic and objective procedures, enables the description of message content and the inference of knowledge regarding the conditions of its production or reception (Bardin, 2002). It is a widely used method in the scientific field of visual communication and graphic design. In this context, it is noteworthy to mention research such as that of Gómez Company (2022), which falls within the domain of journalistic design. Notable recent examples include the work of Sanz-Peralta et al. (2023), which examines the visual identity of Spanish financial institutions, and Iglesias Abad (2023), who analyses some emblematic covers of rock music albums.

In order to measure simplicity, the study employs the model developed by Suárez-Carballo et al. (2018). This model is used to analyse the preference for simplicity in graphic brands. The proposal is based on the use of five variables, which are inspired by the visual communication techniques of Dondis (1998). Figure 1 provides a visual illustration of the meaning of each of these techniques, as well as their association with the simplicity vs. complexity dichotomy.

The following variables are considered:

- Economy/profusion: the number of elements, shapes or parts (smaller/larger).
- Coherence/variation: the number of visual ingredients (minor/major).

- Geometry/organicity: the degree of rationalisation or formal spontaneity.
- Flatness/depth: the absence or use of perspective.
- Equilibrium/instability: the degree of counterbalance or decompensation of forces.

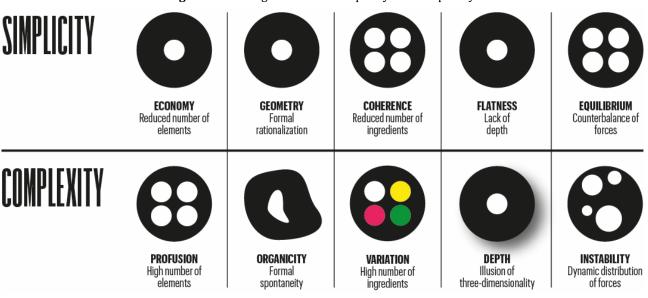


Figure 1. Defining variables of simplicity and complexity.

Source: Suárez-Carballo et al. (2018) and own elaboration.

Furthermore, this research will examine whether there is a significant alteration to the iconic graphic mark, or whether the modifications are primarily limited to the utilisation of plastic resources, in accordance with the categorisation established by Groupe μ (1993) and Joly (1999), among others.

2.4. Sample

This study employs a purposive sampling approach to examine the graphic brands of Spain's La Liga, which currently ranks second in Europe in terms of UEFA coefficient (2024) and second in domestic competition revenue according to Deloitte's *Annual Review of Football Finance study* (2023). This places La Liga second only to the English Premier League in both indicators.

The analysis is centred on the Spanish La Liga clubs that participated in both the Primera División (EA Sports) and its second tier (Hypermotion) during the 2023/2024 season. In the current season, the two competitions comprise 20 and 22 teams, respectively, resulting in a total population of 42 teams. However, an examination of the ratio reveals that Villarreal C.F. has its first team competing in the First Division and its reserve team participating in the Second Division. This implies that the analysis will focus on the single brand, which is associated with the first team. Consequently, the study will reflect the results of 20 clubs (48.8%) in the First Division and 21 clubs (51.2%) in the Second Division.

The list of graphic brands under study, comprising the current graphic brand of each La Liga club and its previous version, along with the years in which each redesign was produced, has been extracted from the La Futbolteca database (n.d.). The reliability of the data was verified by cross-referencing it with information from other relevant sources, including club websites, the La Liga website, global consultancy reports, and media reports. The Annex provides detailed information on the 41 graphic brands that were subjected to evaluation.

3. Fieldwork and Data Analysis

The content analysis is conducted in five phases. The initial phase entails the utilisation of the information previously developed throughout the research process for the preparation of an analysis and data collection sheet. The second phase is concerned with the development of the analysis by the primary researcher, which is conducted through the completion of individual data sheets for each La Liga club. In the third phase, the second researcher conducts a comprehensive review of the analysis

undertaken by the first researcher. The fourth phase entails a synthesis of the analysis conducted by both researchers, addressing discrepancies in criteria where they may exist.

In the fifth phase, the researchers transfer the data from the analysis sheets to the statistical programme SPSS (version 25) for further analysis. The data collection is conducted in a systematic manner, with consideration given to the various study variables addressed throughout the research process. Once all the data have been recorded, they are subjected to descriptive statistical analysis through cross-tabulation, which enables a series of results to be obtained.

Similarly, the objective is to quantify the intensity of change with respect to the variables of simplicity and complexity in the most recent versions of each club's graphic brands, as opposed to their previous versions. This is to be achieved by comparing the latest redesigns with their predecessors. In order to achieve this, the aforementioned trend, which has three possible values (commitment to greater simplicity, inclination towards complexity, no significant changes), must be reflected in the magnitude of the change, which is based on five possible degrees: The degree of importance is classified as follows: very important (when the use of five variables is employed in the redesign), important (four), moderate (three), subtle (two) and very subtle (one).

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of the Five Dimensions

This analysis of the trend towards simplicity or complexity in the redesign of the graphic brands of the clubs belonging to La Liga during the 2023/2024 season presents the results divided according to the five main dimensions identified in the theoretical framework.

Economy (simplicity) and profusion (complexity). A total of 12 clubs (29.3%) in La Liga employ economic criteria in their graphic branding, while three clubs (7.3%) demonstrate a commitment to greater profusion. The remaining 26 clubs exhibit no significant changes in their graphic branding in this dimension.

Coherence (simplicity) versus variation (complexity). A total of 16 clubs (39%) in La Liga have been identified as incorporating coherence criteria into their graphic branding. Three clubs have graphic marks that exhibit variation, while 22 clubs (53.7%) do not demonstrate notable alterations in this regard within their graphic marks.

Geometry (simplicity) vs. Organicity (complexity). A total of 11 clubs (26.8%) of La Liga appear in the study with geometry criteria in their graphic branding. Additionally, the redesign of the graphic branding of two clubs (4.9%) incorporates elements identified with organicity. Conversely, 28 clubs (68.3%) do not present significant changes within this dimension.

Flatness (simplicity) vs. depth (complexity). A total of 16 clubs (39%) of La Liga have graphic marks that function on the basis of flatness criteria. Three clubs (7.3%) utilise depth variables in their graphic marks, while 23 clubs (53.7%) do not exhibit significant changes of relevance within this dimension.

Balance (simplicity) vs. instability (complexity). A total of 10 clubs (24.4 %) are characterised by graphic markings that meet the criteria of balance (simplicity). One team (2.4 %) has a graphic marking identified with instability criteria. The remaining 30 clubs (73.2 %) do not present significant changes relevant to this dimension in their graphic markings. Of these, 15 are in the first category (75 %) and 15 in the second (71.4 %).

4.2. General Trends (Simplicity or Complexity)

This section presents a joint analysis of the five dimensions considered in the study on the tendency towards simplicity or complexity. The results are presented in the Annex.

The initial presentation of the data focuses on the clubs whose new graphic marks are simpler than their previous versions. In this initial category, 11 clubs (26.8%) have adopted visual proposals that are markedly simpler, while seven (17.1%) have undergone subtle changes. Three clubs (7.3%) have moderately simpler graphic marks, and one club (2.4%) has made a significant shift in this direction. Five clubs (12.2%) have demonstrated a notable commitment to simplicity.

In terms of graphic marks that have evolved towards greater complexity, a total of five clubs are identified. One club (2.4 %) has undergone a very subtle evolution, while two clubs (4.9 %) have exhibited a subtle evolution. Two other clubs (4.9 %) have graphic marks with moderate criteria

towards greater complexity. No clubs have been identified with significant or very significant elements in their graphic marks moving towards greater complexity.

Finally, nine clubs (22%) exhibited no notable alterations in their graphic marks, neither exhibiting criteria indicative of greater simplicity nor greater complexity.

The results of the analysis, within this dichotomy between simplicity and complexity, indicate that 27 clubs (65.9%) have graphic marks that, with respect to the immediately preceding ones, have criteria aimed at greater simplicity, while five clubs (12.2%) have simpler marks. In other words, modifications of varying degrees of intensity, towards either simpler or more complex versions, can be observed in 29 clubs.

The aforementioned alterations predominantly impact the plastic variables. Among the clubs analysed, only three – Alcorcón, Andorra and Cartagena – have undergone significant changes to their iconic signs, with the latter two having undergone complete redesigns of their graphic brands. Additionally, one club, Real Valladolid, has undergone a major modification by removing one of its emblematic elements.

4.3. Validity of the Current Graphic Branding

In terms of the current branding of the clubs that form part of La Liga during the 2023/2024 season, it can be observed that seven clubs (17.1%) have a graphic branding that is less than five years old, eight clubs (19.5%) have a graphic branding that is between six and ten years old, and 13 clubs (31.7%) have a graphic branding that is between 11 and 25 years old. The remaining five clubs (12.2%) have been using their current graphic brand for between 16 and 20 years, while three clubs (7.3%) have been utilising their current graphic brand for between 21 and 25 years. Finally, five clubs (12.2%) have been using their current graphic brand for more than 25 years.

In this same section, an attempt is made to cross-reference the time variable with the dimension relating to the level of intensity of change. No significant results are observed except in the categories of transformation, where there is a notable shift towards simplicity. This is evidenced by the redesigns occurring within five years (five cases) or between six and ten years (one case), respectively. In other words, all the graphic brands showing a major shift towards simplicity were designed in the last ten years.

5. Conclusions

The results obtained corroborate the initial working hypothesis, indicating that in the majority of instances (approximately two-thirds of the total sample), the graphic brands of football clubs participating in professional competitions in Spain exhibit a tendency towards greater simplicity (H1). It is important to note, however, that this evolution is typically subtle or moderate. In most cases, the redesigns are minor restylings of the previous proposal, and in some graphic brands (eight, 19%), no significant differences can be observed. In the remaining six clubs (Athletic Club de Bilbao, Cádiz, Getafe, Mallorca, Sevilla and Racing de Ferrol), which account for only 14% of the sample, there is an evolution towards more complex models, changes which also occur with visible moderation.

Moreover, instances of modification, removal, or addition of significant motifs (thereby altering the iconic sign) are particularly uncommon. Notable examples include Alcorcón, Andorra, Cartagena, and Real Valladolid, whose controversial elimination of the coat of arms—a component of their graphic brand since 1962—has prompted a strong negative reaction from fans. Accordingly, in accordance with the second hypothesis (H2), most of the observed modifications pertain to the plastic component. This finding indicates that the preservation of visual symbols plays an instrumental role in safeguarding the intangible values associated with clubs.

The study, however, is unable to confirm the predominance of any variable – of the five dipoles considered – in the processes leading to greater graphic simplicity, as suggested by the third hypothesis (H3). This indicates that the special relevance of any quality in the construction of visual simplicity in the design of graphic brands cannot be confirmed. It could be argued that visual tailoring responds to the particular needs of the original versions, the visual nature of which is highly variable.

Ultimately, there is a discernible correlation between the temporal variable (date of launch of the most recent design iteration) and the extent of the shift towards greater simplicity, as postulated by H4.

In this regard, the redesign of the six graphic brands exhibiting greater simplicity in comparison to their most recent version occurred within the past nine years (between 2016 and 2022), with four of them occurring between 2020 and 2022. It thus appears that there is an increasing inclination towards aesthetic discourses that espouse a preference for greater simplicity. It must be noted, however, that this conclusion should be regarded with some caution, as three other brands whose redesigns do not exhibit the same trend can be observed in the same period. Once more, the formal specifics of each original graphic brand appear to exert a pivotal influence on the necessities of the alteration.

In consideration of the constraints of the project, it is important to note that quantifying the presence of each of the five variables described in the redesign is a challenging task. In order to ensure the greatest possible objectivity, this intensity is evaluated according to the model described on the basis of the number of variables that have undergone a transformation. However, no qualitative approximation is made to the modification of these variables. Consequently, a change of a single dimension (such as the geometrisation of shapes) could represent a more significant variation than the sum of all the qualities analysed. It is therefore advisable to view the conclusion regarding the degree of transformation with a degree of caution. It should be noted that the study does not include an evaluation of the intensity of the change in the redesign per se, but only of those changes that affect the simplicity of the graphic brand. There could be a redesign of a certain magnitude that does not observe any significant alteration in the criterion of simplicity or complexity, as exemplified by the case of Villarreal C.F.

Similarly, the study does not assess the level of simplicity or complexity of the symbols in isolation, nor the successive changes throughout history. Instead, it focuses on the transformations produced around these qualities in the latest redesign process, thereby concentrating on the most recent trend. Nevertheless, the findings associated with hypotheses H3 and H4 indicate that the progression towards enhanced simplicity may be driven by the visual configuration exhibited by each graphic brand prior to the redesign. Consequently, the requirements vary considerably from one case to another. The analysis of the level of simplicity and complexity of the graphic marks separately is of particular importance in order to explain the potential motivations for each redesign. Furthermore, it seems pertinent to examine whether the time elapsed between the two versions under consideration affects the level of simplicity or complexity of the change. It could be hypothesised that shorter periods do not necessitate such significant alterations.

Ultimately, given the challenging nature of accessing the original sources (the clubs), the information pertaining to the sample (graphic marks, year of the redesign) has been derived from an informative platform on the world of football. While this platform is comprehensive and well-established, it lacks a scientific basis. However, the rigor of this data has been validated through cross-referencing with other online sources, thereby ensuring its reliability. Furthermore, the research considers the primary graphic brand of each club, although there are some initiatives – such as that of Sevilla F.C. (Summa Branding, n.d.) – that introduce secondary formulas with an unequal level of simplicity. Consequently, it would be beneficial to access the visual identity manuals of each team in order to ascertain the requirements of their respective programmes.

A number of avenues for further research are worthy of consideration in order to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between football (as a mass phenomenon in which marketing plays a significant role) and graphic design. The initial objective is to expand the scope of this study to encompass an analysis of the simplicity of the redesign of the graphic brands of other countries with a longstanding tradition of association football, or of those clubs of particular significance within the European context. Furthermore, a content analysis of the morphology of the most popular football clubs will be conducted to ascertain whether, as this research suggests, heraldic motifs are predominant in the most important international championships. Finally, it would be beneficial to investigate the relationship between the quality of the graphic design, the magnitude of the change, and the reception of the new versions of the graphic marks by supporters, in comparison to the immediately previous ones. This is due to the conflict that has arisen among the fans of some teams that have undergone these transformations, such as Atlético de Madrid (González, 2022) or the more recent one mentioned above, Real Valladolid (Castañeda, 2023). These controversies have forced their managers to rethink their decisions.

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Annex

List of equipment, graphic marks, years of the two versions (before and after) of the last redesign and level of simplicity/complexity of the change, with five values: Very important (5); Important (4); Moderate (3); Subtle (2) and Very subtle (1).

FIRST DIVISION		SECOND DIVISION	
FORMER COAT OF ARMS	CURRENT COAT OF ARMS	FORMER COAT OF ARMS	CURRENT COAT OF ARMS
ALAVES FUNDADO EN 1821	DEPORTIZO 19 DA 21 FLAVES		
DEPORTIVO ALAVÉS (2013-2020) Simplicity (5)		ALBACETE BALOMPIÉ (1996-2009) Simplicity (1)	
U.D. ALMERIA (2011-2015) Simplicity (1)		A.D. ALCORCÓN (2011-2016) Simplicity (5) + iconic sign	







VILLARREAL C.F. (1995-2009) No relevant changes	REAL VALLADOLID (1998-2022) Simplicity (5) + iconic sign	
	REAL ZARAGOZA	
	REAL ZARAGOZA (2008-2012) Simplicity (1)	

Source: La Futbolteca (n.d.) and own elaboration.