

The Globalisation of Professional Football Clubs-A Critical Analysis of Liverpool Football Club

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Abstract: Nowadays, globalisation has become a part of everyday life. Professional sports clubs can expand their business and increase brand influence through globalisation and glocalisation. This paper aims to summarise and make recommendations on the globalisation strategies of professional sports clubs. The researcher conducted a case study of Liverpool FC in terms of research methodology. As a professional sports football club with a large global following, this paper discusses four aspects (symbols, partners, stadium and social media platforms) of the globalisation of Liverpool football club. The researcher drew two recommendations based on the discussion: simplify the logo and focus more on local characteristics.

Keywords: Sport; Globalisation; Glocalisation; Liverpool

1. Introduction

With advances in technology and increased demand, globalisation has gradually penetrated our lives. For instance, people can buy Adidas in Beijing, use three in New York, or eat at Haidilao in London. Sport, which has a wide audience worldwide and exists in a rich variety. Sport can therefore have a high degree of globalisation relatively easily. Sports mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, can often become meccas of revelry and cultural exchange for people from all over the world. The globalisation of sport has material and financial implications in addition to its spiritual ones.

Globalisation can have impact on the purchase intention of people, that is the consumer behaviour. Closer import or export links have made it easier to access products from different cultures. This means that brands can more easily enter other countries' markets and the common denominator of these brands is their high degree of internationalisation. Professional sports brands consist mainly of stars and teams. Michael Jordan created his own brand in 1984. Although the fact that he has been retired for many years, his brand generated revenues over the world of around \$ 2.9 billion in 2008 (White, 2019). The brand is also being proliferated globally by Manchester United, Liverpool, Barcelona, Real Madrid and a number of well-known professional sports teams.

Advances at the technological level have driven globalisation. The advent of Web 2.0 and social media has made it easy for people to access content and respond to it in a timely manner through and online. This can help sports brands form a long-term relationship with consumers. In addition to this, advances in televising technology will allow more fans the opportunity to watch their supported clubs live without regional restrictions. The globalisation of sports brands can bring fame and profits to professional sports. It has become a trend, so to speak, and who wouldn't want to be the next Jordan? Thus, it is something that is worth analysing and discussing.

2. Literature review

2.1 Professional sport and Globalisation

Although globalisation is not a new concept, there is still no precise definition agreed upon by all. Ferguson (1992) indicated that this is due to the different levels of globalisation in different places. The above divergence encompasses two dimensions: different parts of the world are becoming more connected, and the development is not the same in various places

and to a different degree. Traditionally, globalisation is a process of international integration resulting from exchanging world views, products, concepts and other cultural elements. Kaldor (2003) specifically suggested that globalisation had brought the world together in the political, economic, military and cultural spheres. Similarly, Tomlinson (1999, P2) referred to interconnectedness. He defines globalisation as a rapidly growing and increasingly interconnected network in life. Increasing globalisation has made different parts of the world interconnected and interdependent. The 'network' perspective of Tomlinson linked interconnectedness with integrated development. Borders will gradually merge and disappear in the development process. However, due to the complex economic and cultural contexts of various parts of the world, differences are bound to arise in integration and development. This has also given rise to the negative perception that globalisation brings back controversy and conflict rather than consensus (Ferguson, 1992; Pieterse, 2004). Although scholars have not been able to develop a firm definition of globalisation, two consensus exist Connectivity and differentiation. Globalisation is the process of their integration and the phenomena associated with it.

Many industries are being internationalised either voluntarily or by force, and the sports sector is also one of them. In a broader sense, the globalisation of sport is the diffusion of sporting ideas worldwide. Sport often contains meaning beyond the competition. The globalisation of mass sport often involves the exchange of cultures. Unlike mass sports, professional sports have commercial attributes outside of competition that deserves to be discussed in the context of globalisation. The professional sport is highly connected. For example, the rules of the same sport are standard all over the world. Professional sports are, at the same time, different. For example, in various places, people prefer distinct sports. Scholars have used several terms to define association and distinction, like homogenisation, imperialism, McDonaldisation, Disneyfication, polarisation, cosmopolitanism and westernisation (Harvey & Thibault, 1996; Holton, 2000; Turner, 2003; Andrews, 2006). However, these statements and descriptions are too extreme. To describe the integration of globalisation, Ritzer (2003) has proposed 'globalisation' and 'glocalisation'. Although there is no denying that these extreme phenomena exist, uniformity and localisation imply the failure of globalisation. Thus, a specific discussion of the globalisation of professional sport should be conducted with these two keywords.

Levitt (1983) has stated that consumers gradually accept a global market with standardised products in a globalised world. He identified and defined globalisation as the homogenisation of consumer demand in markets around the world. This was one of the earliest definitions of globalisation. The disappearance of geographical boundaries allows professional sports to develop, advertise and promote their products in multiple markets simultaneously. The study by Maguire (1999) points out that the globalisation of professional sport includes the cross-cultural promotion of athlete and team brands, the building of national images and the integration of Western and non-Western cultures through media coverage. Global marketing can help build the brand image of sports teams and increase brand equity ((Swayne & Dodds, 2011). At the same time, standardised marketing can save money financially. However, globalisation has also increased the difficulties of regulation. Phenomena such as tax evasion and gambling irregularities in sports can arise due to the club's Multi-Market Operations.

Completing homogenisation in the process of globalisation is impossible, and glocalisation is one of the situations professional sport faces. This can be interpreted as consumers' preference for local values or lifestyles (Alden et al., 2006). Many professional sports players or teams are using sports business practices originating in the USA. Donnelly (1996) stated that this promotion through the nature of entertainment is a commercial diffusion of professional sports. The main players in the promotion are brands, including star players, clubs and other professional sports-related supply companies. According to Andrews and Ritzer (2007), professional sports teams expand into international markets and increase their reach by using brands in conjunction with local culture and by seeking partnerships with local companies.

The brand became an entity in the process of globalising professional sports. A standardised branding part maintains the global presence of the sports teams. Furthermore, in the process of globalisation, the part of the brand that is integrated with the local culture can partly cater to the needs of consumers. It can be seen that a glocalisation brand plays an essential role in the globalisation of sport.

2.2 Sport brand Globalisation

According to Kotler and Turner(1997), the essence of a brand is the purposeful differentiation of its goods and services

from those of its competitors. A brand can be a name, a symbol, a design and a combination of them. The diffusion of sports brands is based on the context of brand globalisation. As McLuhan (1964) proposed the concept of a 'global village', Levitt (1983) further developed the idea of standardisation of consumer demand. In terms of branding, he also proposed that for a brand to be successful, it must first assume that consumers have the exact needs. The development of the Internet and advances in transport technology have helped to globalise brands. Kotler (1997) regarded brand standardisation as part of the globalisation strategy of brands. He believes that brands need to be standardised in four areas: product, price, promotion and place, which can help the company to develop a lasting brand image. However, as mentioned above, their view is idealistic. Complete homogenisation is an extreme situation that is almost impossible to the occurrence. Boddewyn et al. (1986) also argued that different regions have different cultures, policies and business contexts. This means that geographical factors should be taken into account when developing brand strategies in the context of globalisation. Standardisation and localisation are a matter of degree (Kotler,1997). The acceptance of a brand strategy, or adaptation strategy, has a decisive influence on globalisation. The globalisation of sports brands can benefit from the fact that sport has a vast global reach and a broad audience.

The commercialisation and internationalisation of sport have deepened in recent years. Swayne et al. (2011) proposed this as a proactive act of sports branding. Sports brands aim to expand their international markets to increase the fan base and thereby gain profits while evolving communication technologies and economic globalisation can provide support for such action. The North American sports leagues and European sports clubs are leading the world, especially in brand globalisation. For instance, Ozsoy (2011) has indicated that fans in different parts of the world are drawn to follow the team via social media. The study of Liverpool's social media accounts has shown that professional sports team brands communicate with and receive feedback from their global fans through social media (Parganas & Chadwick, 2015). Through interaction, brands can learn directly from consumers about their needs in which localised demand is included. Social media represent a communication medium through which brands can build their brand image and expand their reach globally, benefiting from the development of communication technologies. Beyond this, professional sports brands, particularly sports teams, are exceptional to a certain extent. Sports clubs are often in a sports league. According to Fort (2000), the professional sport requires a high level of cooperation among team members in order to seek a higher position in the market. There is often more than one team in a sports league, which means that every single club's brand has to have some element of the same homogeneity as the league. Similarly, most professional athletes have to play in a club or team. This means that professional athletes also have to consider the team's globalisation strategy when promoting their brand.

It can be seen that the brand has essentially become a global entity in the globalisation of professional sport. The evolving medium of communication and the broad audience for the sport itself has contributed to professional sport's globalisation. North American and European professional sports brands are undoubtedly leading the way in globalisation. Therefore, the case of European professional football clubs can be used as an example for other brands to follow. However, as each single team brand is in a different league, its brand globalisation strategy differs. The brand globalisation strategy for a specific club may also take into account the cultural background, the level of competition, the development of the professional league and other factors.

3. The case of Liverpool football club

This paper aims to have a critical discussion about the globalisation of professional football clubs by focus on the case of Liverpool football club. As one of the most globalised football club, Liverpool has over 80 million followers on the internet (Deloitte, 2020). Meanwhile, focus on the case of Liverpool football club can contribute to have a depth insight on the topic. Thus, this section will based on four aspects: symbols, partners, stadium and social media platforms to structure the discussion. Recommendations will be rose base on the case. Besides, this paper also contain a reviewing part in the conclusion section to propose some direction for future discussion or study.

3.1 Brief introduction

Liverpool Football club is a leading professional football club located in Liverpool, England, currently competing in the

English Premier League, Champions League, FA Cup, League Cup and other football tournaments (Liverpool, 2022).

The club was founded in 1892, stemming from the disagreement between John Houlding and the other shareholders of Everton. He was the owner of Anfield Road at the time and left Everton to found Liverpool after the clashes. As one of the most successful clubs in England and Europe, Liverpool has won over twenty English top titles and six European titles.

Fenway Sports Group acquired most of the shares of Liverpool FC through New England Sports in 2010 and took control of the club (Liverpool, 2022). Before that, Liverpool's worldwide fan base and brand value had fallen significantly due to competitive results (Deloitte, 2010). Fenway brings to the club a commercial operation similar to that of North America and focuses more on the global operation of the club. They were also bringing Klopp, the German manager, to the team. Based on improved performance in competitions and international expansion, Liverpool has grown year on year in terms of global fan base and brand value.

This section will analyse Liverpool's current globalisation strategy in 4 areas: logo, partners, stadium and social media accounts. There will also be a discussion on the impact of the pandemic.

3.2 Symbols

Liverpool FC promotes the globalisation of business and culture by using a unified symbol worldwide. In general, the club's symbol includes the team logo and the slogan.



(figure 1)

The main body of the club's crest is the Liverpool bird, a symbol of the city of Liverpool (see figure 1 for details) (Liverpool, 2022). This brand body remains the same regardless of the markets Liverpool develops in any region or country. The unifying logo can allow Liverpool to be recognisable as a professional football club (Parganas & Chadwick, 2015). In other words, fans of different football clubs need such a logo to separate the teams they support, a homogeneous need. At the same time, the logo will have the opportunity to spread its cultural connotations as a symbol of the city of Liverpool as it diffuses over the world. Similarly, the club's slogan is consistent across the world, "You'll never walk alone" in English. English as the "international language" can help people to better understand the meaning of sentences and motivates them. Fixed symbols can help Liverpool maintain its identity in globalisation and also objectively reduces the extra expense required to change the team logo or slogan. At the same time, when these symbols become carriers of culture and quality, they will also increase cultural exchange and inspire people in the context of intercultural communication. It may also help to increase the depth of Liverpool's global spread. However, the complexity of the Liverpool logo and slogan may affect the breadth of its global diffusion.

3.3 Partners

Liverpool's sponsors and partners come from all over the world, and this collaboration promotes the glocalisation of Liverpool football club (see figure 2 for details) (Liverpool, 2022).

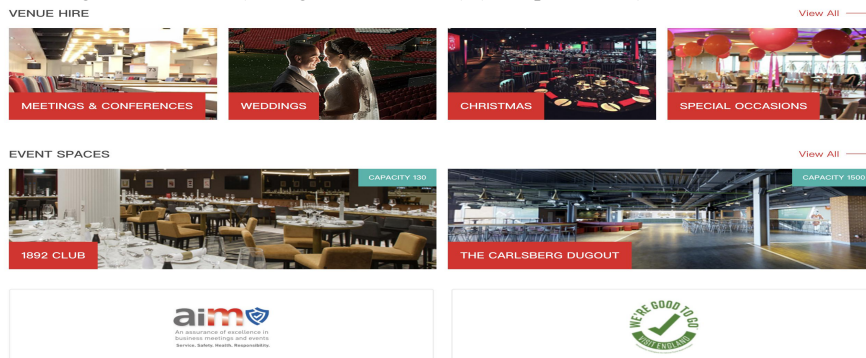


(figure 2)

The diverse background of Liverpool's sponsors and partners can help Liverpool to more easily understand the differentiated needs of the local market. Moreover, the partners also differ in terms of the type of products they offer. For instance, EA Sports focuses on video games, Carlsberg mainly produces beer, and MG is a well-known car brand. This demonstrates the globalisation of professional sports clubs through their integration with other industries. The involvement of sponsors in partnerships no longer results in purely commercial purposes, and professional sports clubs can further expand their global reach through partners with different regional backgrounds and different industries. However, the club's main collaborators are from the USA and Europe. Further development of commercial partnerships with companies in other countries and regions will contribute to Liverpool's globalisation.

3.4 Stadium

Liverpool has also been able to capture the attention of fans worldwide and showcase the club's culture by hosting major events at the club's home ground, Anfield (see figure 3 for details) (Liverpool, 2022).



(figure 3)

Anfield, the team's home ground, is used in its free time for concerts, festivities and tours. Although the club may not be the main protagonist in hosting major world events, Liverpool can still rely on the decor and facilities inside the venue to extend its reach. Festive celebrations, on the other hand, often contain cultural significance. Hosting festivals in sports stadiums can raise funds while promoting the exposure of clubs to more diverse cultures and can even contribute to the globalisation of local cultures. A tour of the stadium helps visitors to understand the history and presence of the club in more detail. However, the use of the club's home ground could be more extensive, especially in terms of festive celebrations. Specific recommendations will be discussed in the next section.

3.5 Social media platforms

Liverpool Football Club has official accounts on several well-known social media platforms. These include the popular Facebook, YouTube and other online social media platforms, as well as country-specific ones such as Weibo, WeChat and Douyin. Take Facebook for example, Liverpool has registered several official accounts depending on the region and language. Most of the content posted by these accounts is the same, mainly about fixtures, player information and other team related information. However, each account posts messages with a local flavour, based on localised factors such as the club's specific partners in different regions and local festivals. Chinese social media has a higher degree of freedom to publish content due to

the limitations of the internet and the difference in political systems. It is fair to say that social media is a channel well suited to globalisation. The club can communicate directly with fans and receive feedback from them, which could help the club take a better look at its globalisation strategy. For instance, when the Russian-Ukrainian war began, some Chinese netizens expressed their opposition to the Premier League's involvement in the sanctions. The Chinese social media accounts of Liverpool FC then made no mention of sanction-related issues, avoiding confrontation and possible clashes with some fans.

3.6 The impact of the pandemic

The arrival of the pandemic objectively restricted the movement of people and the normal running of the game. But reinforces Liverpool's strategy of globalisation on line. The pandemic caused the suspension of the game forcing Liverpool's to suspend operations at Anfield, as well as causing some international sponsors to leave. Fans were allowed back into the stadium as the pandemic turned around late on, however the boundary restrictions remained in place. Internet-based advocacy avoids the movement of people and border restrictions. This includes increased use of social media platforms and cooperation with international broadcasters at League level.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Recommendations

The first suggestion is to simplify the symbols. Liverpool's current logo has a distinct and culturally relevant body, but the liver bird is still a complex part of the brand. Thus it is proposed to use the letters "L.F.C." in red as the main logo of the club during international promotion. The liver bird is a representative of the Liverpool city, but not the club. The acronym "L.F.C.", which stands for Liverpool Football Club, is a clear indication to consumers that this is the club's brand logo. It may be argued that LFC may be taken to mean something else at the same time. For instance, it may be associated with the names of other brands or banned from use in countries and regions since it may have some particular meaning. This therefore requires the club to understand the local culture and laws in advance when implementing specific strategies and to register the trademark of the brand logo in advance. Also, the club's tagline can be simplified when it comes to global publicity. "YNWA" has been used by some fans and the media as a shorthand for the club's slogan "You will never walk alone". The club could consider these four letters as a kind of brand logo.

The second recommendation is to focus more on local characteristics. This recommendation is based on three specific channels: increasing the number of partners, opening the stadium in foreign festivals and increasing the "Freedom" of social media platforms. Partnerships with a wider range of local brands can help the club to better understand the needs of local consumers and thus contribute in its initial market development period. In addition, clubs may also consider using the stadium for celebrations on some holidays in other cultural. For example, celebrations can take place during Chinese New Year period. Chinese New Year is a festival with a wide audience and at the same time is not a traditional Western holiday. This may attract people who are not interested in football but like Chinese culture to the stadium. Finally, social media is a place where you can interact with your fans directly and in a timely manner. As a result, social account operators are likely to have a better understanding of the specific demand of local users than club managers. For instance, the Chinese language media of many Premier League clubs is operated by Chinese companies. Simply translating and transferring the English content does not satisfy the interest of Chinese speakers of the team. The club should consider content changes as they further enhance their presence on Chinese social media platforms. Giving publishers more freedom to choose what to post would therefore help the club's globalisation. However, it is important not to let up on any content that could have a negative impact on the club's brand image.

4.2 Conclusion

As one of the most successful professional football clubs in the world, Liverpool has achieved global success in four aspects: symbols, partners, stadium and social media platforms. The unique symbol gives a homogeneity to the club in globalisation and helps Liverpool improve its brand identity. However, a cleaner logo and slogan could make a greater

contribution to the club's global promotion. As for partners, although Liverpool already works with brands from many different countries and regions, the range of collaborators could be expanded further (for instance, brands from Asia, Africa and Latin America). In addition, Liverpool has created a wide-open stadium. The use of the stadium for major international events and festivals can broaden the international reach of the club by improving its attractiveness. Finally, the club's extensive social media accounts have contributed to the localisation of its brand. Increasing the “Content Freedom” of social media accounts in different regions is the next step in the club's development strategy that could be considered.

In general, the pandemic has had an impact on the club's strategy to globalise its brand. The decommissioning of the stadium and the broadcast problems have not only limited the club's international promotion but have also led to losses. But there are two sides to the same coin, and the growth of users during the social media pandemic is an advantage that Liverpool could use. In the future, Liverpool can focus on a strategy of using social media as the main medium of communication for globalisation.

4.3 Further discussion

As a course paper, it was not possible to collect some primary data as a basis for discussion in this paper. In future discussions, people can try to base on first-hand data to conduct the discussion or research, which will ensure the accuracy of the club's current branding strategy. At the same time, discussions against other clubs in the Premier League and even other sports clubs are worthwhile.

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