

## **Globalization of the Premier League: A debate worth having.**

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Football is certainly a “beautiful game” but, over time, it has also developed into a global and highly visible business. In 2005-2006 the total income of the “Big 5” European football leagues stood at £12.6 billion (\$18.54 billion) (Deloitte and Touche 2007), of which the English Premier League was the largest single contributor generating €2 billion or \$2.9 billion.

Whilst it may be emotive to view fans of football as the customers of this business, the revenues from the business are intrinsic to bringing in the best players and making Premier League football attractive. Fans, as customers, are intensely loyal to their chosen club and football stars. Increasingly these clubs and football stars are referred to by media, analysts and researchers as brands. If football clubs are to be viewed as brands, however, the key questions are how these brands differ from brands in other sectors, what values of these brands matter to fans, and whether all fans value football brands in the same way?

These questions have been pushed to the forefront in recent weeks with the debate as to whether and, if so, how these brands might be brought to a broader sub-set of their global fan base. In any other global business, it would be without question that a global brand is predicated on making the product, or service, available to its customers. Hence Coca Cola’s long history of setting up local bottlers in India, China and Russia to make its products available in these markets. Closer to home, on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 2007, the NFL staged the first competitive American Football match between Miami Dolphins and New York Giants at Wembley Stadium. More than 500,000 domestic and expatriate fans of the sport registered for tickets within 72 hours of the game being announced. The match seems to be the forerunner of future initiatives in this and other sports.

The league structure of American Football is different – clubs do not necessarily play each other twice per season – and, therefore, the mechanics of whether and how such international staging might be achieved in Premier League football without affecting competitive balance is a key, and separate, debate. That said, emotions aside, from a business perspective it is hard to understand why the Premier League cannot even consider a similar international staging of events?

This paper reviews research conducted into marketing and international marketing of football over recent years to explore what can be learned about the nature of football fan support for global brands such as the Premier League.

## What do fans of the Premier League value?

Research conducted back in 2001 identified five “factors” or areas of importance to domestic fans of the Premier League (Bridgewater and Stray 2002a). These are **Team Support** – match attendance and the activities which the fans engage in if their team is successful; **Organisational Values** – the club’s management, governance and role in its community; **History and Symbols** – the traditions, mascots, historic victories, parent to child tradition of support; **Social Entertainment** – attending matches with groups of fellow fans, travel and other social activities surrounding support whereby groups of fans have been likened to “modern tribes”; and **Self-esteem** – the way in which fans feel in themselves and relate to other fans on success and victory. More detail of these is provided in Appendix 1.

Whilst all of these factors played a role in every club, the fans of different Premier League clubs had different profiles. Fans of some clubs are more emotionally and other more socially connected. More importantly, different groups, or segments, of fans existed within each fan base. Detailed research into fans of one Premier League club suggested the existence of five groups of fans with distinctly separable profiles (Bridgewater and Stray 2002b). These fans also differed in how and why they felt loyalty to their club.

### Fandom and loyal fans

Two groups of domestic fans form the bedrock support of clubs; the first “the diehards” supported their club through thick and thin, retained season tickets even when the club were not doing well on the pitch; the second, whilst similar in profile, were similarly active in their support but seemed more negatively linked to the club – it could be this group whose frustration may lead them to criticise players, management, board and referee – as a means of exhibiting their concern about the club.

The third group, the young fans, were more socially than emotionally connected to the club and showed a high interest in the identity aspects of support such as wearing team colours. The fourth group, “the Professionals,” were often no longer – or perhaps had never been - in the region where the club was based and tended not to be season ticket holders. They did, however, attend matches as much as they were able – geography and ticket availability permitting. They were also extremely active in their support of the club via the Internet, satellite TV, newspapers and demonstrated their own brand of loyalty in avid search for information. “E Loyals” exhibit similar behaviour except that geography often means that these fans never attend matches. Some were based in international markets, although their roots were predominantly in the UK.

These different profiles of support pose the question of which fans are the most loyal? The first two of these are certainly the most active in their “team support”

as this focuses mainly on match attendance and active participation in club events. They are extremely high in the emotional elements of support. Emotional links, history and symbols and concern with organization were also strongly felt, however, by other groups including the Professionals and E Loyals – who are sometimes dismissed by fellow fans as being “less loyal” for not being at every (or in some cases any) matches. Are they less loyal? No one wishes to demean the support of bedrock fans, who are the mainstay of club support and whose wish to be at every match is a major consideration in debating any globalization. There are, however, other types of supporters who play a role in the financial development of their clubs and whose support may be no less intense. Assessing loyalty depends on the definition of support. Professionals and E Loyals’ emotional links to their club and participation in aspects of support other than match attendance is equally – and sometimes more – strong than that of bedrock fans. This type of support may be similar to that exhibited by the international fan base for Premier League clubs.

### **Football Brands and Globalization**

Recent research into the perceptions of the England national football brand in China showed that fan support for football does not follow the same pattern in every culture (Bridgewater 2007). For example, 96% of Chinese fans said that if their national team were not playing in a major tournament, they would support another national team rather than either a) not following the tournament or b) watching without adopting a “favourite” team. Similar behaviour was seen during the Japan and South Korea World Cup in 2002, when local fans dressed in the team colours of a range of international teams, as well as in those of Japan and South Korea. Does this make these fans less loyal to their own teams? What proportion of England fans will adopt another team to support during Euro 2008?

As might be expected, football support seems to follow different patterns in different cultures, just as the nature of fan support varies club by club. Indeed many Chinese fans owned several football shirts, reflecting support of different international national and club sides, but were still active in their attendance and support of local football (Bridgewater 2007 *ibid*). This would seem to run counter to the fears of National Football Associations that attendance and interest in Premier League Football would adversely affect support for local leagues. Conversely, this may well raise overall interest in the game and bring increased grass roots participation and support for local clubs. Many domestic Premier league fans link their interest in football to a particular memorable match during childhood.

This “dual” support behaviour can be seen in England between club and national teams. These allegiances are often more complex than pure club and country – many Sunderland fans currently wear scarves which are half Sunderland and half Irish colours to reflect the composition of the playing team and management structure of the club.

International support for Premier League clubs has grown up around particular players, for example the Japanese interest in Arsenal when Inamoto joined the club, in Greek support for Bolton after the signing of Stelios and most recently the tie up between Charlton and Shandong Luneng after the signing of Zheng Zhi last summer

([http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/teams/c/charlton\\_athletic/7252503.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/teams/c/charlton_athletic/7252503.stm))

Many football brands have grown to be international, if not global, in their fan base. The global fanbase of the leading international football brands such as Real Madrid and Manchester United can be counted in millions globally and interest “shows no sign of waning” (Deloitte “Football Money League 2008).

International fans of these football clubs – the customers of these brands – may not exhibit “bedrock” types of support. The nature of their support is more akin to that of the E Loyal fans but, in many ways, no less strongly felt. Having recently, and admittedly with a degree of cultural imperialism, debated his reasons for support with an Australia-based Arsenal fan, I discovered that these were second generation father- to- son, much like my father-to-daughter Sunderland support (excepting the level of on-the-pitch success and their emigration to Australia). Similarly, a heated debate with the Limassol branch of the Manchester United supporter club revealed an intense and active level of support. Yes, many of these fans had never seen a live, competitive match, but then capacity constraints also mitigate against many UK-based fans demonstrating their support in this way. Should we at least look at how these “differently loyal” international fans of Premier League might be rewarded by a taste of match attendance? Surely the answer is yes. The mechanics of how are the challenge.

## **Conclusions**

Fan loyalty to football clubs has many forms. Whether it is more emotional or social, match attendance based or engaged in via digital media, varies with age, geography and reasons for support. It varies between groups of supporters within clubs as well as between Premier League clubs. Different cultural contexts seem to have developed different patterns of support. The mutually exclusive fan rivalry of the English and European context may translate into broader dual support patterns in Asia Pacific cultures more used to accepting yin and yang antitheses. There is certainly a high level of awareness and interest in Premier League football across many international markets and the globalization of interest in sports seems to go alongside the growth in global media. This has contributed to the globalization debate, which is happening across a whole range of sports from American Football to basketball and football. For the world’s richest single football league to engage in the debate of whether to follow in the path of American football does not seem such a surprising step.

## **Appendix 1**

### **1. Team Support**

This relates to match attendance and fan emotions and activities in support of their team, particularly if the team does well. High scores relate to a positive response to success which seems fans engaging in “increased support for the team.” If the brand performs well (on-the-pitch), then fans are more likely to talk about it, attend matches, take others to matches, wear a replica shirt, buy club merchandise, visit official club and fanzine web sites, subscribe to a club magazine and become more interested in football as a whole.

### **2. Organisational Values**

High scores on this dimension reflect fans concerns that their club has financial stability, that it has funds to buy new players and a plan for future growth (in the case of football brands this translates into a concern that there is a strong youth academy, a top manager and coaches and a go-ahead board of directors). Ethics and community relations are also important. Fans value honesty and integrity in the club they support and it matters to them that the club has a good relationship with the community.

### **3. History, symbols and perceived knowledge**

Football has a considerable history and this and the symbols that are linked with the football brand matter to fans. High scorers on this dimension can identify the team logo, motto, sponsors, the mascot, and the team’s nickname. They also have knowledge of classic victories, goal scorers and opponents in cup runs and other past successes.

### **4. Social Activities**

This captures the frequency with which fans attend matches and take part in other activities relating to the brand. High scorers on this brand value attend more matches, both home and away and cup and league. They are also more likely to participate in official transport to matches and attend events organized by the club. The fans may also participate in informal match related activities such as sharing transport to matches and making informal swaps of seats.

### **5. Self-esteem**

High scores on this dimension suggest that fans experience a personal emotional response to how the brand performs. Rather than translating into actions as in (1), this emotional response indicates how fans feel about themselves in success

and failure. Fans scoring highly here feel better about themselves and consider that they gain respect from friends and colleagues if the team they support is successful.

## Appendix 2

