

International orientation of professional football beyond Europe

International
orientation of
professional
football

A digital perspective on the global reach of English, German and Spanish clubs

97

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how professional football clubs from the English Premier League, German Bundesliga and Spanish Primera División use digital media to expand their international reach in emerging football markets (EFM) outside of Europe. Based on the EPRG framework and Rugman's home-region hypothesis, the aim is to broaden the perspective where "sports go global" for a further understanding of actors' international orientation in the digital sphere.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is based on data from desk research and a qualitative survey, comprising information on international digital media activities of 58 European clubs. Cluster analysis is used to identify different international orientations with regard to digital media activities.

Findings – The data provide evidence that clubs differ strongly in their orientations towards EFM. While some global players that provide digital media content in several EFM languages and attract a large share of Facebook followers from EFM exist, other clubs focus on their home region. League-specific differences become apparent.

Originality/value – This study determines the international online orientations of European football clubs by combining two previously separated research streams in football management studies: internationalisation and digital media activities. Most clubs with a strong EFM fan base choose polycentric, multi-language digital media strategies, followed by geocentric, standardised approaches. By offering a novel angle on internationalisation in professional football, this study contributes towards optimising clubs' international online strategies for EFM, which are markets that promise high growth rates.

Keywords Football, Internationalization, Emerging markets, Digital media

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Internationalisation is a key success factor for European professional football clubs, who are increasingly aware that growth in revenues cannot only be generated at home in the future (Merkel *et al.*, 2016). Europe's developed football markets (DFM) such as the "big five" markets of Germany, England, Spain, Italy and France are becoming saturated while clubs are seeking new possibilities to increase commercial success (Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Meanwhile, emerging football markets (EFM) (Hamil and Chadwick, 2010; Maderer *et al.*, 2016) outside of Europe – such as Asia, the Middle East, Russia or the USA – are increasingly becoming interested in professional football. European football clubs enter these growing EFM to satisfy the increasing demand for professional football. In this context, clubs use several strategies to increase their reach beyond Europe. For example, they acquire EFM players (e.g. from China) or play pre-season friendly matches in the USA and Asia. Additionally, several clubs maintain offices and partnerships



outside of Europe. For example, Manchester United has an office in Hong Kong while FC Barcelona partners with a football school in China.

Worldwide, 1.6bn people are interested in football (REPUCOM, 2015), many of whom mainly follow the activities of football clubs online. In particular, social media are widely used to increase the international reach of clubs because they facilitate direct interaction with foreign fans. In many cases, these so-called satellite followers outnumber local fans (Kerr and Gladden, 2008). Consequently, digital media activities have become an important part of clubs' external communication (Sinner, 2017). Social media activities are part of the professionalisation and commercialisation of many clubs and aim to support the goal of creating additional revenue (Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Online internationalisation is less costly than reaching fans with more traditional means (Kerr and Gladden, 2008). Therefore, leagues have recognised the importance of digital channels in the internationalisation process and have included visits to their international digital presence in their measures of internationalisation success (e.g. DFL, 2017).

In football management research, revenue and staff have been identified as drivers of Facebook followers, and vice versa (e.g. Zhang and Won, 2010; Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017). However, there is a lack of knowledge around the international orientation and reach of European professional football clubs in the digital sphere (Kerr and Gladden, 2008; van Overloop, 2015). In particular, EFM are still widely neglected (Goldman and Johns, 2009). One of the few exceptions represents the work of Maderer *et al.* (2016), who compare brand associations and brand loyalty of fans from DFM and EFM. With regard to digital media activities in particular, we are unaware of studies examining social media's contribution to professional football's internationalisation beyond Europe and have not found studies analysing the country origin of social media followers (Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017).

The present research addresses this gap by assessing the international orientation of clubs in the digital sphere and by studying how European football clubs use digital media to promote the internationalisation process outside of Europe. In this paper, we distinguish clubs with different international strategic orientations according to the EPRG (i.e. ethnocentric, polycentric, regiocentric and geocentric orientations) model (Perlmutter, 1969) and assess which clubs are true global players. According to Rugman and Verbeke (2004), only an organisation that internationalises beyond the home-region – that is, to EFM in the present study – is a true global player.

We observe clubs' international presence on Facebook and Twitter social media sites and the official clubs' websites. More specifically, we use a sample of 58 clubs playing in the English Premier League (EPL), German Bundesliga (BULI) and Spanish Primera División (PRID, commonly known as La Liga) during the 2016/2017 season. We determine the international orientation of their digital media activities by assessing the national origin of Facebook likes as well as Twitter and website languages.

This study offers three contributions to sports management and international business research. First, it combines two previously separate research streams – internationalisation and digital media activities – that have received significant attention in football management research. Our analysis classifies clubs according to their international online orientation beyond Europe: it assesses the size of the digital international fan base and also the extent to which clubs tailor their digital media offers to EFM fans through the use of local language. Second, this study explores how clubs use digital media to target, reach and address EFM followers, and to promote internationalisation beyond Europe. Finally, this research investigates which internationalisation strategies underlie clubs' digital media activities. To this end, and to offer a novel angle on the topic of internationalisation in professional football, this study expands the EPRG framework (Perlmutter, 1969) and Rugman's home-region hypothesis (e.g. Rugman and Verbeke, 2004) to the context of

professional football clubs and digital media. These contributions mean that our research is timely because clubs are increasingly allocating funds to social media and digital activities. By focusing on EFM, our research places emphasis on markets that yield high growth potentials for football clubs. As sports media and society are discussing the implications of EFM influence on European professional football (e.g. Wallace, 2016), our research adds to this ongoing discussion by providing a novel, digital perspective on football's internationalisation to EFM. Finally, our research unveils league-specific differences by analysing clubs of three of the leading European football leagues.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 *Social media and professional football*

Social media, which are a part of digital media, allow the users to generate own content, to connect and to communicate with each other (e.g. Williams and Chinn, 2010). Social media have a global reach and include communities/social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), (micro) blogs (e.g. Twitter) and media-sharing sites (e.g. Instagram). One-quarter of the world's population uses these platforms. Facebook alone has 2bn users (Facebook, 2017). Social media provide an ideal platform to complement consumer experience in the entertainment industry and in sports in particular. Fans are no longer "distant consumers" but wish to participate in the media discourse and have direct access to clubs, players and media (Chadwick, 2012). Therefore, clubs use interactions on social media to strengthen their relationships with fans, expand their international brand and ultimately further commercialise the product football (Clausen *et al.*, 2018).

For the purposes of this study, we focus on Facebook and Twitter because these two platforms globally register the highest numbers of users. All clubs in the EPL, BULI and PRID maintain a presence on Facebook and Twitter (Kuzma *et al.*, 2014). Another reason for choosing Facebook and Twitter is that they represent two distinct forms of social media (networking site and microblog). Facebook is characterised by its networking character. In the case of fan pages, these networks are called brand communities (Popp and Woratschek, 2016). Twitter has 328m active users (Statista, 2017). Both of these platforms have been studied in the context of professional football (e.g. Perez, 2013; Price *et al.*, 2013; Araújo *et al.*, 2014; Parganas *et al.*, 2015; Gillooly *et al.*, 2017; Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017), but very rarely in combination and with regard to internationalisation. Only Parganas, Anagnostopoulos and Chadwick (2017) provide a country-comparative study on fan clubs using data from both Facebook and Twitter. Other than Facebook and Twitter, the clubs included in our research also have official Instagram accounts; 95 per cent of EPL clubs maintain Snapchat accounts, but only 67 per cent of BULI and 40 per cent of PRID do. Some clubs cater to the Chinese market by using Tencent, WeChat and Sina Weibo and the Russian market via VKontakte. All of these platforms allow clubs to engage with their fan base while fans have the possibility to actively comment and like their clubs' activities. Fans use their active role to share their love, criticism, aspirations and feelings of belonging (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018).

2.2 *EPRG model, home-region orientation and international activities of football clubs*

Scholars have developed various theories and models to understand international orientations of organisations. The EPRG model (initially EPG; Perlmutter, 1969; Heenan and Perlmutter, 1979) is chosen for this study. The model explains international orientation based on a framework that defines four archetypes of international organisations: ethnocentrism, polycentrism, regiocentrism and geocentrism. Ethnocentrism refers to a home-country orientation. In a polycentric organisation, country markets are addressed individually and the firm is characterised by a multinational orientation. In regiocentric organisations, geographically or culturally similar countries are integrated into regional clusters.

Finally, geocentrism refers to an orientation towards international standardisation, a “world orientation”. However, geocentric organisations do not apply the home-country standard to all foreign markets, as is the case for the ethnocentric orientation, but instead apply an international best-practice strategy to all markets (Heenan and Perlmutter, 1979; Schmid and Machulik, 2006). Most organisations will employ a mix of strategies or deploy different orientations in different functional areas (Perlmutter, 1969; Verbeke and Kano, 2016). For example, BULI and PRID clubs are almost exclusively managed by Germans and Spaniards, respectively; thus employing an ethnocentric approach in choosing their management teams. At the same time, player teams are highly diverse and usually the best available athletes are chosen irrespective of their origin, indicating a geocentric orientation. The decisions of these organisations’ managers can also influence international orientation. A fair share of international orientation is, however, beyond management’s control and instead influenced by various stakeholders (Perlmutter, 1969). In the case of professional football clubs, staff (such as international players) or customers (in the sense of international fans) are important stakeholders and can influence international orientation. While Perlmutter (1969) describes his model with regard to firms’ headquarters and foreign subsidiaries, the EPRG framework has been used to research international marketing, HR and internal communication (e.g. Bournois and Voynnet-Fourboul, 2000).

In our study of football clubs’ orientation towards EFM, we draw on the research of Rugman and co-authors (e.g. Rugman and Verbeke, 2004; Oh, 2009; Rugman and Oh, 2013). This research proposes that business activity of multinational companies is rather home-region oriented than global. The same holds true for social media internationalisation. Despite the fact that no physical geographic distances need to be bridged, multinational corporations display distance-dependent internationalisation behaviour, even on social media. They internationalise their social media activities to institutionally closer countries and, particularly, within their home region (Pogrebnyakov, 2017).

The international business literature provides several approaches to classify world regions, such as the broad triad system/three-region-system (Berrill, 2015). However, no clear-cut definition around which countries encompass Europe exists. European football associations such as UEFA not only include members from countries geographically located in Europe but also in Asia (e.g. Kazakhstan). For football, Maderer *et al.* (2016) distinguish between DFM (England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain) and EFM (BRIC and USA). For our study, we chose to expand this definition and include EU-28, Switzerland and Norway in DFM. Hence, our DFM sample spans 30 European countries that are politically, geographically and financially closely connected. However, the home-country of a club is excluded from the respective DFM sample; that is, England is excluded from DFM for EPL, and so on. Meanwhile, EFM encompass all countries outside DFM. While some EFM host sophisticated leagues themselves (e.g. Japan) or are dominated by other sports (e.g. USA), all EFM are potential growth markets, especially for the “big five” leagues because European professional football clubs are only beginning to exploit these markets (Merkel *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, for digital media activities of European football clubs, Rugman’s home-region hypothesis would imply that digital media activities focus on DFM. Only clubs that additionally expand their activities to non-European markets (i.e. EFM) can be considered true global actors because de-home-regionalisation is a prerequisite for global orientation (e.g. Rugman and Verbeke, 2004).

International fans, particularly those outside of saturated DFM, have been found to be a major source of revenue for European football clubs (Merkel *et al.*, 2016; Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Broadcasting has long been the major way to generate foreign fans and consumers in football (Meyen, 2014). In the Norwegian market, the international broadcasting of the “big five” leagues even led to a decrease in local stadium attendance (Kringstad *et al.*, 2018). International broadcasting accounts for a significant increase in

clubs' revenue. In the EPL, for example, £1.1bn/year of revenue originates from the sale of international media rights. Revenues from Asia have already surpassed those from DFM (Schreyer *et al.*, 2016). Social media are an additional way to increase awareness and revenue of a club abroad (Grimmer and Kian, 2013). One advantage is that the clubs can vastly control own social media content while they only have limited influence on broadcasting content. Moreover, traditional television consumption is decreasing, and younger media consumers are particularly likely to "cut the cord" (Evens and Lefever, 2011; Prince and Greenstein, 2017). Social media's role in reaching and expanding clubs' international fan base is, therefore, rapidly increasing. Stoll (2014) finds that more than 500m Facebook users engage with football every month. Facebook offers targeting options that enable clubs to push content to fans in specifically defined regions of the world. Facebook and Twitter are globally used with few notable exceptions, such as China and Russia, where access is restricted. With their global reach, these platforms seem to be ideal forms to internationalise within DFM and to expand to more distant EFM. EFM are of major relevance to European football clubs' internationalisation strategies because fans from these EFM frequently support foreign clubs (Maderer *et al.*, 2016).

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample characteristics and data collection

The sample of this research consists of all 58 clubs who played the 2016/2017 season in the EPL (20 clubs), BULI (18) and PRID (20). As the UEFA country coefficient ranks EPL, BULI and PRID as the strongest European football leagues at the end of the 2016/2017 season (UEFA, 2017), these three leagues were purposely selected to provide a snapshot of the main forces in European football. The present study does not focus on individual players because they constitute their own brands, even though they also add to a club's brand, social media activity and internationalisation (Green, 2016). Neither does this study include the leagues' organising bodies (e.g. DFL in Germany) nor the respective national football associations (e.g. FA in England).

For purposes of this study, we employed a two-step approach in the data collection process. First, we conducted online desk research, collecting quantitative and qualitative data on football clubs' internationalisation and digital media activities after the season in these leagues had ended in May/June 2017. We purposely selected a short, match-free post-season timeframe to avoid in-game performance and match results impacting on the data quality. In addition, we collected online data from all sources at the same point of time with the aim to enhance comparability of information and results. We used information from clubs' websites, social media accounts, annual reports, press releases and other online sources. In particular, we focused on the clubs' websites as well as the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, which we selected due to their large user base, strong global footprint and the fact that all of the analysed football clubs are present on these platforms. To determine the origin of Facebook likes, we used online tools provided by Socialbakers (2017) and FBLikecheck (2017). Facebook only provides geographical data for the 45 countries from which the highest number of likes originates. For the analysed clubs, the 45 top countries reflect at least 82 per cent of a club's Facebook likes (exceptions are FC Chelsea with 73 per cent and FC Sevilla with 72 per cent). This ensures that the data represent to a high extent the actual international fan base. To increase validity, we had all data assessed by two independent research assistants and conducted cross-referencing and integration of data.

Second, we collected data through a qualitative survey approach (Jansen, 2010) with the goal to enrich and triangulate the desk research data (Jack and Raturi, 2006) and to increase the validity of the results. Survey questionnaires were sent out via e-mail to the heads of social media at all 58 analysed clubs in the period between May and July 2017. Informants were recruited via LinkedIn, clubs' PR departments and through personal contacts. The survey was provided in the club's local language to build rapport and to increase likelihood

of participation. The qualitative survey represents a separate data source that was analysed following an inductive research strategy, independent from any prior theory (Yin, 2014). In total, 11 survey questionnaires were returned (response rate: 18.97 per cent). For the analysis of the returned survey questionnaires (between 400 and 1000 words in length) and the free-form, textual data included therein, open coding, an approach drawn from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), was performed to identify existing themes and to unveil common approaches of clubs towards international digital media activities.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Desk research. We use a set of variables that is based on findings that internationalisation success of football clubs is impacted by: linguistic diversity of online activities (van Overloop, 2015) and global reach of social media activities (Sinner, 2017; DFL, 2017). Especially in recent years, the international orientation of football clubs' digital media activities has progressed: among the 20 most valuable European clubs, the number of clubs offering their official club website in Chinese language has increased from 10 clubs in 2008 to 15 in 2014. Similar developments can be observed for Japanese, Korean and Arabian languages (van Overloop, 2015). In this context, we define the number of foreign languages available on a club's website and the number of a club's Twitter accounts available in foreign languages as two measures capturing linguistic diversity of digital media activities. To assess the global reach of digital media activities, we use the clubs' international Facebook fan base in regional split per club and in total number. The fan's country of origin is assessed based on IP address and, therefore, the current location rather than the actual nationality.

To allow a more differentiated data analysis, the defined variables were split into languages and fans from DFM and EFM, respectively. By analysing EFM separately from saturated DFM, we aim to gain an in-depth understanding of these markets, which yield a high, yet relatively unexploited growth potential for football clubs and leagues (Merkel *et al.*, 2016). For language variables, we define foreign languages that are spoken in DFM and EFM alike, such as French, Spanish, Portuguese and English (e.g. DFM UK and EFM USA), as global languages. These languages are assigned to DFM and, therefore, are not included in our EFM analysis. In addition to the variables around digital media activities, we introduce club ranks at the end of the 2016/2017 season to add a measure of a club's sportive performance and to unveil any existing connections between online activities and sporting success.

3.2.2 Qualitative survey. In the qualitative survey, we used a set of eight exclusively open-ended questions to receive feedback that is unbiased from any pre-defined list of answer options. While general information on the social media channels used and the social fan base was requested from informants, the main part of the qualitative survey focused on exploring the clubs' international digital media activities with regard to: objectives, employed strategies and perceived benefits to the internationalisation process. The obtained qualitative data are primarily used to triangulate the data sourced via desk research to broaden the perspective and to add depth to our understanding of the clubs' international digital media activities.

4. Results

Other than open coding of qualitative data and descriptive statistics, we conducted hierarchical cluster analysis to identify patterns of internationalisation and international orientation of digital media activities. For our analyses, we used SPSSv.25.

4.1 Descriptives

Information for all defined variables is available for each of the 58 European football clubs. All 58 clubs use the social media platform Facebook. However, we find considerable

differences between the clubs in terms of number of EFM fans. Clubs with most EFM Facebook fans include Real Madrid (75.8m), FC Barcelona (74.6m) and Manchester United (56.4m). On the other end of the spectrum, FC Ingolstadt, Darmstadt 98, CD Leganés, SD Eibar and SC Freiburg have least EFM fans, with each club registering less than 50,000 EFM Facebook fans. This corresponds to an EFM Facebook fan share of 91 per cent for Manchester United compared to 16 per cent for Darmstadt 98, evidencing the existence of vast differences in the international fan base of European football clubs.

While Facebook offers an integrated language system that facilitates to use different languages on one (global) site, different languages need to be implemented via separate accounts on the Twitter platform (Sinner, 2017). While some clubs do not have any foreign-language Twitter accounts, FC Liverpool has as many as 16, of which 9 are EFM languages. In all, 13 of the 20 EPL clubs do not offer their content on official club websites in any foreign language (compared to 3 PRID clubs and 1 BULI clubs). On the other end of the spectrum, Manchester City has its website available in 11 foreign languages, of which 8 can be assigned to EFM.

Table I visualises the means, medians, min/max values, standard deviations and intercorrelations for all variables. The number of Facebook fans significantly correlates with the rank reached in the 2016/2017 season, irrespective of the football market (DFM: $p = -0.523$, EFM: $p = -0.502$, rank is inversely coded as 1 represents the best and 18 or 20 the worst rank depending on the examined league). In addition, a positive, significant correlation exists between the amount of website languages and the quantity of Twitter accounts in foreign languages, on the one hand, and the number of Facebook fans, on the other hand. This is true for DFM and EFM alike. Mean scores for websites in EFM languages are higher than those of Twitter accounts available in EFM languages (e.g. EFM website languages: mean = 1.03, EFM Twitter accounts in foreign language: mean = 0.74). This demonstrates that it is more common to develop EFM languages on clubs' websites than on Twitter. However, the median score for both EFM Twitter languages and EFM website languages is 0.00, which indicates that more than half of the clubs in the sample do not maintain websites or Twitter accounts in any EFM language.

4.2 Cluster analysis

To determine international orientations of clubs in their EFM digital media activities and to classify clubs using similar approaches to the challenge of going global into groups, we standardised all research variables (z-values) and conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis, using Ward's method with the squared Euclidean distance. Given that no prior research is available around number or size of groups for the researched topic, an open approach deemed appropriate because it allows to derive the number, size and composition of groups based on statistical rational rather than pre-defined cluster solutions. The EFM cluster analysis leads to a six-cluster solution from a statistical standpoint because in-group heterogeneity increases considerably afterwards (Kaufman and Rousseeuw, 2009). The classification obtained is presented in Table II and illustrated in Figure 1.

Cluster EFM 1 includes the clubs FC Bayern, Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, FC Chelsea and Manchester United, which offer between four and six EFM languages on their websites, between one and three EFM languages on Twitter and which all have a comparably high share of EFM Facebook fans (between 86 and 91 per cent). Cluster EFM 6 is composed of only two clubs, Manchester City and FC Liverpool. While cluster EFM 6 is very similar to cluster EFM 1 in terms of share of EFM Facebook fans, a major difference can be observed for the dimension of EFM Twitter languages: Manchester City (eight) and FC Liverpool (nine) have the broadest offer of EFM Twitter languages of all the clubs. Cluster EFM 3 comprises clubs (e.g. Borussia Dortmund, Atlético Madrid, FC Arsenal) that show a solid, mainly average performance on the three dimensions used in the analysis. The three remaining clusters, EFM 2, EFM 4 and EFM 5, are all on a similar level with regard to the

Table I.
Means, medians, min/
max values, standard
deviations and
intercorrelations

		Min.	Max.	Median	Mean	SD
1	No. of foreign website languages	0.00	3.00	1.00	0.91	0.92
2		0.00	8.00	0.00	1.03	1.75
3	No. of Twitter accounts in foreign languages	0.00	7.00	1.00	0.93	1.24
4		0.00	9.00	0.00	0.74	1.68
5	Foreign Facebook fans – share per club	0.05	0.16	0.09	0.09	0.03
6		0.16	0.92	0.71	0.66	0.22
7	Foreign Facebook fans – total number	2,913.00	7,560,888.00	71,172.50	650,776.24	1,490,066.29
8		24,219.00	75,778,688.00	506,211.50	6,794,372.03	16,585,672.62
9	2016/2017 season rank	1.00	20.00	10.00	10.19	5.66
1	No. of foreign website languages	1	2	3	4	5
2		1	1			
3	No. of Twitter accounts in foreign languages	0.485**	0.608**	1		
4		0.358**	0.768**	0.748**	1	
5	Foreign Facebook fans – share per club	0.078	-0.206	0.030	-0.158	1
6		-0.003	0.398**	0.071	0.217	-0.350**
7	Foreign Facebook fans – total number	0.474**	0.654**	0.392**	0.422**	0.392**
8		0.464**	0.682**	0.388**	0.446**	-0.093
9	2016/2017 season rank	-0.433**	-0.526**	-0.358**	-0.369**	-0.171
					-0.191	0.401**
					-0.523**	0.981**
					-0.502**	1

Notes: **, * Significant at the 0.05 and 0.01 levels, respectively

number of EFM website languages offered. Clubs in clusters EFM 2 and EFM 4 offer slightly more Twitter accounts in foreign languages than clubs in cluster EFM 5. Major differences between the three clusters can be observed in the share of EFM Facebook fans and also in the origin of clubs: Cluster EFM 2, the “German cluster”, only includes BULI clubs, all having a comparably small share of EFM Facebook fans. Cluster EFM 2 is the least internationalised group of clubs with regard to EFM. Cluster EFM 4, the “German–Spanish cluster”, only comprises BULI and PRID clubs, which are characterised by a low/average share of EFM Facebook fans. Finally, cluster EFM 5, the “Spanish–English cluster”, includes mostly PRID and EPL clubs, such as FC Villarreal, Athletic Bilbao, FC Everton, Leicester City, representing clubs with a high share of EFM Facebook fans.

One-way ANOVA (see Table II) and Tukey *post hoc* tests reveal significant differences between clusters. These results give evidence that differences between the groups exist and prove that the obtained EFM cluster solutions characterise different international orientations towards digital media activities.

	No. of members	No. of foreign website languages	No. of Twitter accounts in foreign languages	Foreign Facebook fans – share per club
EFM 1	5	2.041	0.868	1.024
EFM 2	8	−0.592	−0.144	−1.938
EFM 3	13	0.333	−0.166	0.452
EFM 4	8	−0.306	−0.218	−0.875
EFM 5	22	−0.592	−0.387	0.428
EFM 6	2	2.843	4.615	1.051
ANOVA results		$F = 70.800$ $p = 0.000$	$F = 81.548$ $p = 0.000$	$F = 78.210$ $p = 0.000$

Table II.
Segment mean scores
and ANOVA results

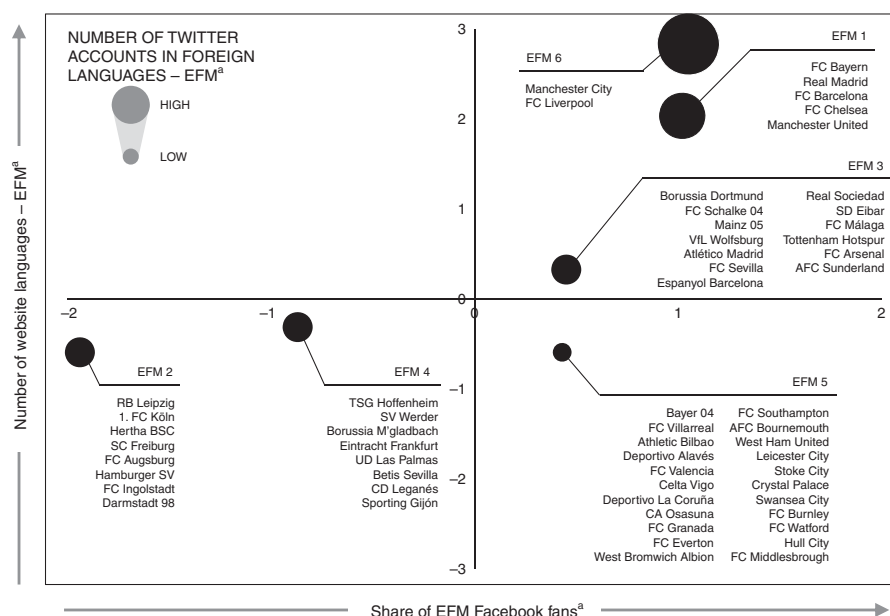


Figure 1.
Results of EFM
cluster analysis

Note: ^aDisplayed values are standardised

4.3 Open coding of qualitative data

Based on open coding, we identified three major topics with regard to clubs' digital media activities. First, we found that sporting success has an impact on a club's international digital fan base. Therefore, by being successful in the league and European club competitions, a club can increase, for example, the number of international Facebook fans. Second, digital media reveal as a cost-effective way to reach international fans, especially compared to more expensive traditional means of internationalisation, such as foreign direct investment (Kerr and Gladden, 2008). Finally, digital media have the potential to enhance fan experience and to create a loyal emotional bond with international fans. Establishing a sustained, long-lasting connection between clubs and remote international fans has been difficult with traditional means of fan engagement as these, in contrast to digital media, mostly rely on physical presence.

5. Discussion

The following section provides a detailed discussion and integration of quantitative and qualitative results. We show that: clubs can be classified into six clusters that describe different levels of international online orientation, clubs strategically use social and digital media as a key tool for their international expansion and despite strategically internationalising, most clubs are far from being global players. Therefore, international growth potentials for most European football clubs are not fully exploited.

5.1 Classification of European football clubs by international online orientation

This study combines the intensively discussed but previously separated research streams of internationalisation and digital media to assess clubs' international online orientations. We focus on markets beyond Europe because EFM, compared to DFM, have a higher potential for generating additional revenue and for increasing overall commercial success (e.g. Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Maderer *et al.*, 2016). Regarding EFM, clubs differ in the extent and structure of their international digital media activities and fan base.

The results of our study show highly different total numbers of EFM Facebook fans for clubs, ranging from 24,219 EFM fans for FC Ingolstadt to 75.8m EFM fans for Real Madrid. On average, 66 per cent of a football club's Facebook fans come from EFM while DFM account for an average of 9 per cent of fans. Consequently, EFM are an important addition to the virtual fan base that must not be neglected. For EFM, this study identifies six club clusters, representing different levels of digital internationalisation. While all clubs have a certain level of internationality in their digital media activities, cluster analysis reveals vast differences. Several clubs, especially clubs in clusters EFM 1 and EFM 6, have recognised and addressed the importance of foreign fans, in general, and EFM fans, in particular. Manchester City (EFM 6) and FC Chelsea (EFM 1) provide website content in eight or six EFM languages, respectively. However, the sample also includes clubs that provide neither website content nor a Twitter account in any foreign language. This is particularly common in the EPL, where 11 clubs do not have any foreign-language online presence. We attribute this fact to English being the home language of EPL clubs and the world's lingua franca that is, therefore, commonly used to communicate with international, external stakeholders (Nickerson and Camiciottoli, 2013).

The number of EFM Facebook fans and the rank reached in the 2016/2017 season show a significant correlation, which supports findings that sporting success has an impact on the size of the international fan base (Araújo *et al.*, 2014; Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos and Chadwick, 2017). This is confirmed by qualitative results:

[For social media], sportive performance is a decisive factor. After our victory over [another football club] in the [knock-out stage of a competition], we gained almost 100,000 followers. In the past season, that did not go so well, numbers rose very slowly. (EFM 3 club C)

Other than sporting success, observed differences in number and share of foreign Facebook fans most likely originate from the historically grown fan base of the clubs but can also be explained by the individual design of the clubs' Facebook sites (Pronschinske *et al.*, 2012; Hodge *et al.*, 2015) or a combination of different aspects (Kainz *et al.*, 2014).

5.2 *International expansion through digital media activities*

Clubs choose to use different digital media activities to promote their international expansion beyond Europe. In particular, clubs in clusters EFM 1 and EFM 6, and also – to a lesser extent – in clusters EFM 2, EFM 3 and EFM 4 offer their websites and Twitter accounts in a wide range of languages. Results evidence that the amount of website languages and the quantity of Twitter accounts in foreign languages positively and significantly correlates with the number of Facebook fans. This suggests that a diverse language offer on club websites and Twitter may broaden and increase the number of international fans. Clubs are generally more likely to provide websites in EFM languages than Twitter accounts. However, several exceptions show that smaller clubs tend to establish Twitter accounts in an EFM language rather than a website when they have players from a certain EFM country. For example, FC Augsburg (EFM 2) has an English-language website and Twitter account but – most likely due to having Japanese and South Korean players in its roster – also caters to EFM fans via Twitter accounts in Japanese and Korean languages. Because addressing international audiences in local languages has proven to promote engagement and conveying closeness with the sender of information (e.g. Nickerson and Camiciottoli, 2013), clubs are able to increase the impact of their digital media activities with fans via a diverse language offer. Furthermore, by deploying different international languages in digital media activities, clubs are able to cost effectively reach their international fan base because internationalisation costs and effort are perceived to be lower than the more traditional methods of internationalisation, such as foreign direct investment (Kerr and Gladden, 2008):

Social media offer an easy and cheap solution to target international football fans and particularly our own fans in their native language, and to realize a global reach. (EFM 2 club A)

Social media help – with manageable effort – a lot to enter new foreign markets und to gain first insights into the potential of these markets. (EFM 4 club B)

Clubs bridge the geographical distance between their physical location and those of their fans with the help of digital media, creating emotional closeness, enhancing the fan experience and, ultimately, establishing a sustained connection between fans and clubs:

[Digital media] provide [the club] with the opportunity to communicate with a majority of our fans that are – due to geographical distance – not able to experience matches of [our club] in the stadium. That is how we create emotional intimacy across national borders. (EFM 3 club G)

[Social media] help to build our image, emotionalise our fans and create loyalty. (EFM 3 club H)

Social media allow us to connect with our fans in Europe, US, Asia and Africa, build relationships with them and make them feel a part of the club they support. (EFM 5 club D)

While viewing social media as a major means to communicate with foreign fans, one social media manager stresses the importance of complementing the virtual experience with an on-site presence (e.g. through playing pre-season friendlies in Asia; EFM 3 club G). Overall, digital media activities of clubs represent a key tool in internationalising abroad, especially towards EFM, offering a cost-effective way to directly engage and connect with international fans.

5.3 *Clubs' internationalisation strategies*

This research uses the EPRG model (Perlmutter, 1969) to determine internationalisation strategies that underlie clubs' international activities in the digital sphere. Accordingly, we

characterise clubs in cluster EFM 2 as ethnocentric. These exclusively German clubs have between 16 and 31 per cent of EFM Facebook fans. In addition, they do not maintain websites in any EFM languages while most of them have an English-language website. When a club focusses on English as an online communication language, this might also hint at a geocentric orientation where one standardised best-practice approach is used worldwide. However, the fact that between 57 and 77 per cent of EFM 2 clubs' Facebook fans originate from Germany indicates that cluster EFM 2 is rather ethnocentrically oriented; that is, focused on the home market rather than geocentric.

At the other end of the spectrum, clusters EFM 6 and EFM 1, which include clubs such as Manchester City, FC Bayern and FC Barcelona, are characterised by a high number of website and Twitter languages and a high share of EFM Facebook fans. Clubs in these two clusters display a polycentric multinational orientation, which means that they cater to many different EFM markets individually rather than following a standardised approach that is applied worldwide. Clusters EFM 3, 4 and 5 are neither ethnocentric nor do they display a strong polycentric orientation. They are differentiated by a focus on select international digital media activities and channels but none of these three clusters is strong in all areas of international digital media presence. EFM 3 and 4 have more EFM language Twitter accounts, while EFM 5 clubs have a high share of EFM Facebook fans but focus on few languages on their website and on Twitter. EFM 5 is a geocentric cluster that is characterised by one standardised approach to reach fans all over the world. The EPL clubs in EFM 5 use the lingua franca English as a standardised communication language, whereas PRID clubs focus on Spanish language offers and cater to, for example, Latin American countries and fans.

With regard to EFM, Clusters 1, 3 and 6 have begun tapping into the great potential of these markets, while Clusters 2, 4 and 5 display only minimal digital media activity that is specifically catered towards EFM. In light of the increasing importance of EFM (Merkel *et al.*, 2016; Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos and Chadwick, 2017), it is crucial for clubs to explore these markets. Several clubs actively promote digital internationalisation to EFM by maintaining "digital dependencies" (EFM 3 Club G) in Asia. These dependencies specifically address Asian fans and are an attempt to strategically move beyond the home region towards being a global club (e.g. Rugman and Verbeke, 2004). EFM 1 and 6 are global players and have a strong digital media presence in EFM. Although clubs in EFM 4 may be strong not only nationally but also in all of Europe, their home region, they do not focus their international digital media activities beyond the home region. EFM 2 can be characterised as home market rather than home region oriented, with clubs focusing their activities on a local or national fan base. EFM 5 not actively promotes de-home-regionalisation by providing EFM language digital media content but has a large number of Facebook fans from EFM. EFM 5 consists mostly of EPL and PRID clubs. Thus, EFM fans access content in the world-languages English for EPL and Spanish for PRID. EFM 3 clubs actively promote de-home-regionalisation by maintaining several Twitter accounts in EFM languages. They have an equally strong EFM fan base as EFM 5, a cluster that applies a standardised rather than EFM specific approach. Therefore, the clubs' international orientation is not solely influenced by management decisions but also by fan behaviour, which is beyond management's control (Perlmutter, 1969).

League-specific differences become apparent in clusters EFM 2, 4 and 5, which are only beginning to orient their activities to markets beyond Europe. Most BULI clubs tend to lag behind in the number of EFM Facebook fans and are rather home region oriented and ethnocentric. EPL clubs choose either geocentric or polycentric orientations. The high international fan base of EPL clubs compared with BULI and PRID clubs may be partially caused by the advanced international commercialisation of broadcasting rights. Most PRID clubs employ ethnocentric or geocentric approaches, with FC Barcelona and Real Madrid standing out as polycentrically oriented, global players.

In conclusion, the cluster analysis reveals that clubs vary in their international online orientation. A few clubs are true global players that provide digital media content in various EFM languages and attract large numbers of Facebook fans from EFM. These global players share the characteristics of digital media internationalisation with their peers from other leagues rather than other clubs from their own league.

6. Contributions for theory and managerial practice

Our research offers a number of contributions for both theory and managerial practice. First, our results allow for a more nuanced understanding of football clubs' international digital media activities and add to the scarce literature on international orientation of European professional football clubs. More specifically, our study sheds light on clubs' internationalisation status, unveiling how and to what extent clubs' digital media activity is catered towards EFM. These insights complement and expand existing sports management research, helping to close the research gap around international orientation and reach of European professional football clubs in the digital sphere, particularly with regard to social media (Kerr and Gladden, 2008; van Overloop, 2015). For club management, present research provides a holistic overview of the status of clubs' digital internationalisation. Consequently, results serve as a new, cross-country benchmark for a club's level of digital media internationalisation, diagnosing strengths and weaknesses, and facilitating a differentiated understanding of the opportunities for its future development.

Second, by conducting a cluster analysis that is complemented by an explorative, qualitative survey, our study unveils six levels of international online orientation that describe different strategic approaches to the use of social and digital media within the digital media internationalisation process and when addressing an international fan base. In a scarcely researched field, these findings generate novel insights around the role of digital media in the internationalisation of professional football clubs, and complement and broaden extant research. More specifically, our study shows that international digital media activities on club websites and social media are a strategic key tool for an impactful, cost-efficient internationalisation of a club. Digital media activities facilitate a direct interaction with fans across the world and offer the opportunity to establish a long-lasting, emotional bond between international fans and clubs. Therefore, this study provides guidance on how practitioners in the sports business are able to leverage digital media activities in internationalisation processes.

Third, our research expands the use of the EPRG framework (Perlmutter, 1969) and Rugman's home-region orientation hypothesis (e.g. Rugman and Verbeke, 2004) by applying it in a digital media context in the professional football industry. Pogrebnyakov (2017) finds that internationalisation on social media follows many of the same patterns as traditional internationalisation. The same is true for international orientation according to the EPRG framework. Football clubs' international digital media strategies are either ethnocentric, polycentric or geocentric. Our insights provide a fresh perspective on the topic of internationalisation of professional football clubs and identify different strategies towards the challenge of internationalisation. As such, our findings add to extant literature and unveil strategic approaches to internationalising a club. They also indicate how to assess and fine-tune approaches to internationalisation.

Overall, our research is relevant for business practice because it focuses on the analysis of markets that promise to yield the highest growth potentials for football clubs (Merkel *et al.*, 2016; Maderer *et al.*, 2016) and create novel insights into internationalisation in EFM (Goldman and Johns, 2009). By including clubs from EPL, BULI and PRID, our research provides a comprehensive understanding of the leading forces of European football. At the same time, by exposing league-specific differences, our study creates a nuanced and detailed understanding of single European leagues and clubs.

7. Limitations and future research

This research contributes to the understanding of the international orientations of European professional football clubs' digital media activities and strategies. However, this study has several limitations, which indicate possible areas for future research. First, we assess international orientation of digital media communication activities only. Other indicators of clubs' international orientation have been neglected in this study, such as foreign revenue or investors, foreign broadcasting, fan clubs abroad, foreign staff (e.g. players, coaches, managers) and eSports, although eSports, for example, are a new and increasingly popular way of creating international value (Kay, 2016). By including international commercial and sportive performance data as well as other indicators, future research can paint a more detailed picture of the clubs' general international orientation as digital media activities capture only a part of it. Including multiple variables to explain international orientation is particularly important because large organisations have started to buy fake Facebook likes that are created by bots, thus influencing research results (De Cristofaro *et al.*, 2014).

Second, we only use data from three of the "big five" football leagues (i.e. EPL, BULI and PRID). Therefore, our results are not exhaustive. Other leagues will display league-specific characteristics that are not captured by the present study. Further research may include other leagues, both strong European leagues (such as the Italian Serie A), smaller European leagues (such as the Dutch Eredivisie) and EFM leagues in Asia or Latin America (such as the Japanese J1 League). To compare research results from different leagues, future research should consider individual league structures and regulations regarding investors, players, broadcasting and also macro-economic factors, such as currency exchange rates and the size of the home market. The comparability of leagues is further impeded because English and Spanish are world languages. Thus, PRID and EPL have an advantage over Germany in their internationalisation efforts. More EFM fans can access their digital media content in their native language, even for clubs that do not offer any foreign-language content.

Third, our research explores a club's international online orientation in comparison to other clubs. To investigate the international online orientation of a club in more depth, future research may focus on single clubs and explore the individual approach to digital media internationalisation in further qualitative or case study research designs.

A fourth limitation is low sample size. This is a well-known and common limitation in sports management research (van Overloop, 2015). Conducting advanced statistical analysis is nevertheless justifiable because the sample encompasses the entire population of EPL, BULI and PRID clubs in the 2016/2017 season. Further research should consider longitudinal panel data to study the long-term developments in clubs' international digital media activities. These data may be combined with sportive and commercial performance data to assess relationships between internationalisation and performance in football. These results will be highly valuable to guide the decisions made by clubs' management.

Finally, further research may split EFM into several market clusters. Our approach of addressing all EFM jointly has limited the information on regiocentric international strategies. Therefore, with a more detailed classification of world regions, further research will be able to identify whether clubs employ regiocentric internationalisation approaches in the sense that they focus their activities on specific regions of the world.

8. Conclusion

This paper investigates how professional football clubs from the EPL, BULI and PRID use digital media to expand their international reach in EFM. This study combines two highly relevant but previously unconnected research streams – internationalisation and digital media use of European professional football clubs. Our results allow a classification of clubs and an assessment of clubs' digital media activities catered towards EFM. Drawing on the EPRG framework and Rugman's home-region hypothesis, some clubs, such as Manchester

United, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid, are identified as global players while other clubs focus on their home region and are not (yet) exploiting the growth potential of EFM. Overall, clubs employ a wide variety of digital internationalisation strategies in EFM that include ethnocentric, geocentric and polycentric orientations. Some clubs also establish mixed strategies that focus on select international digital media activities and markets.

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