

# **Transnational Public Attention in European Club Football – Current Trends and Driving Forces**

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## **Abstract**

Professional football is a highly globalized arena. The paper analyses the impact of globalization on football audiences in European countries. It is argued that in the course of globalization, people are not only thrown into a transnational lifestyle, but may also develop a growing interest in what is going on outside their domestic territory. With regard to football, it is hypothesized that audiences may direct more and more attention to high-class football leagues and clubs abroad. This presumed shift of attention is empirically investigated with a new indicator: search engine queries. It is argued that queries addressing football clubs in foreign countries are expressions of transnational attention. These transnational queries are systematically analysed over a period of seven seasons (2005/2006–2011/2012). Results indicate that public attention to foreign football clubs has indeed increased over time, particularly in those countries with weaker domestic football leagues. Furthermore, the fluctuation of attention to these clubs can be explained systematically: Attention increases with (a) the success of a club in European and national competitions, (b) the success of domestic players in an expatriate club and (c) the number of matches against domestic clubs in European club competitions. Although transnational attention is generally on the rise, its change over time still seems to depend largely on national identification.

## **Keywords**

Globalization, Europeanization, football, soccer, audience, public interest, Google

## 1. Introduction

Processes of globalization are particularly observable in the world of professional sports and have received much scientific attention (e.g. Bale & Maguire, 1994; Miller et al., 2001; Nauright, 2004; Roche, 2002; Rowe, 2012; Smart, 2007). For instance, global sport events, like the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup, generate global interest and reach an audience of billions worldwide (e.g. Rivenburgh, 2002; Tomlinson, 1996). International player migration in football, basketball, or ice hockey has been common practice for many years (Bale & Maguire, 1994; Cornelissen & Solberg, 2007; Poli, 2010; Richardson et al., 2012). International sports organizations like IOC (International Olympic Committee), UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale) or FIFA exemplify the global governance of sport (Chappelet & Kübler-Mabbott, 2008; Forster, 2006). Sport organizations, leagues, and clubs, but also individual athletes strive to market themselves on a global stage, to increase publicity and reach new groups of consumers (Richelieu et al., 2008; Smart, 2007; Whitson, 1998). European football clubs, for example, regularly tour Asia and the Middle East to enhance their popularity in these rapidly developing world regions, while Formula 1 strategically introduced races in Abu Dhabi, Singapore, South Korea, and India to their Grand Prix Series (Gupta, 2009) for the same reason. Scholars have thus argued that professional sport has even become the spearhead of globalization and is one of its driving forces (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007, 2012). The globalization of football in particular has recently received much scientific attention (e.g. Coombs & Osborne, 2012; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009; Gerhards et al., 2014; King, 2003; Levermore & Millward, 2007; Magee & Sugdon, 2002; Martin, 2005; Millward, 2011; Mittag & Legrand, 2010; Niemann et al., 2011; Poli, 2010; Richardson et al., 2012; Taylor, 2006; Vliegthart, 2013).

Yet despite the large and highly informative body of literature available, it remains widely unclear to date which impact globalization has on sports audiences. If professional sport is becoming a global product with highly mobile athletes and multinational sport teams, then audiences could be expected to direct more attention to the international level and to events abroad, respectively. This paper uses European club football as a test case. It examines whether or not football audiences in European countries have become more interested in foreign teams and leagues over recent years. The paper furthermore analyses which factors systematically stimulate public attention towards foreign

football teams in Europe. To this end, a new indicator (search engine queries) is introduced which allows to measure transnational public attention.

## **2. Globalization in Professional Football and Its Impact on the Football Audience**

### *Globalization and transnational public attention*

Globalization refers to such diverse phenomena as the global flow of commodities, information, or cultural goods, increasing worldwide mobility of people, the intensification of transnational political relations, the emergence of multinational institutions as well as the rise of a global civil society (Giddens, 1990; Robertson, 1992). It is widely agreed upon that globalization has economic, political, cultural, and social dimensions. In all these dimensions, the world has become increasingly interconnected over the last decades (Dreher et al., 2008). Borders have become more and more permeable for people, goods, information, and cultural assets. For this reason, the once prevalent notion of unconnected “container nation-states” (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995: 84) is increasingly losing significance. Consequently, social theorists have developed conceptions of society beyond the nation-state. Ideas of world society (Beck, 2000; Meyer et al., 1997), global network society (Castells, 1996) and transnational social spaces (Pries, 2001) occupy social science and are becoming increasingly prominent. The changing patterns of culture and lifestyle, which are closely connected with globalization, have been conceptualized as tendencies of Americanization, homogenization, creolization (Houlihan, 1994), hybridity (Archetti, 1999), globalization (Andrews & Ritzer, 2007), or glocalization (Robertson, 1992; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006, 2007, 2012). An excellent overview of these notions is given in Giulianotti and Robertson (2009).

At the micro-social level, globalization can affect the actions, attitudes and values, identities and loyalties of individuals. Ever more people consume products and cultural goods produced in foreign countries; they cross borders as tourists, migrants, exchange students, or in a professional context; they have the technical equipment and the technical knowhow to communicate over large distances with friends and acquaintances (Mau, 2012). Potentially ever more people speak foreign languages and are thus able to communicate outside their domestic countries (Gerhards, 2012). Whether they like it or not, “people are thrown into transnational lifestyles” accordingly (cf. Beck, 2000: 20).

Within such a broadly conceived globalization framework, this study investigates transnational public interest, that is, the attention given to events, people, organizations, ‘things’, etc., in foreign nation-states. It is hypothesized that in the course of globalization, people are not only thrown into a transnational lifestyle as argued by Beck (2000), but may also develop a growing interest in what is going on outside their domestic territory. In his famous definition, Robertson (1992: 8) claimed that one central aspect of globalization is the fact that ever more people have a “consciousness of the world as a whole”, that is, they perceive the world as one deeply interconnected place. Gerhards and Hans (2012) coined the term “virtual transnationalism”, which refers to perceptions of topics discussed in other national public spheres. They argue that an efficient global civil society would require that individuals develop a growing interest in issues publicly debated outside of their own nation-state. Mau (2012: 93) argues that “transnational life experience ... expands cognitive and attitudinal horizons” and may even change worldviews. Globalization is thus supposed to foster cosmopolitanism and weaken people’s bonds to a particular nation-state (Beck, 2006; Beck & Grande, 2007; Szerszynski & Urry, 2002). The cosmopolitan world citizen is not only conceived as tolerant and open minded, but also as highly interested in events, objects, current affairs, people, products, cultural goods, etc., beyond his or her own nation-state. This paper investigates transnational public attention in one particular area of popular culture, namely football.

However, it needs to be kept in mind that cosmopolitan attitudes are shaped by education and social class, being most prevalent among “transnational expert classes” (Mau, 2012). However, the field of sport may be an exception, because of its appeal to the masses as part of the global entertainment industry. Globalization of sport may thus stimulate transnational attention and curiosity among a broader public and not only in the small group of the socially privileged.

#### *European club football as a test case*

Football audiences can experience globalization in very concrete ways. This section will elaborate on the international mobility of athletes; the global media visibility of the core European leagues and core European competitions; the horizons of comparison that exist in football on a global scale; and the increasing disparities in terms of athletic quality between major and minor national football leagues.

(1) Player migration is most apparent in club football, especially since the *Bosman ruling* of 1995, which allowed athletes to change teams unrestrictedly inside the European Union and invalidated previous 'nationality clauses' (Poli, 2010). It allowed a global football economy and a worldwide player market to emerge in which the athletically strongest as well as financially most potent clubs and leagues at the core attract the most talented players. This is accompanied by a sell-out of athletic talent in poorer leagues in the periphery of the world's football economy (Alvito, 2007; Cornelissen & Solberg, 2007; Poli, 2006). As a result, international player migration received a new dynamic. In the season 2013/2014, for instance, 1,346 of 2,662 players in the 'Big-Five' European football leagues were expatriates (50.6 %).<sup>1</sup> In ice hockey, handball, or basketball, similar trends can be observed (Riedl & Cachay, 2002). Teams in these sports have become increasingly heterogeneous in terms of nationality since the mid-1990s. When greater numbers of domestic athletes are under contract in foreign countries, audiences can be expected to take greater interest in the respective sports events. International mobility of athletes can therefore be regarded as one of the driving forces fostering transnational public attention: National audiences might have a desire to watch the games and competitions of 'their' athletes and of their new teams; they might be curious to see how domestic athletes perform and to what extent they contribute to the foreign teams' success (Jijon, 2013; Levermore & Millward, 2007; Hognestad, 2006).

(2) Following the major foreign football leagues and European competitions has become much easier for fans and consumers during the last decades. Multinational media networks have secured broadcasting rights for the core European leagues and their sportscasts reach millions of people worldwide. England's Premier League, for instance, is broadcasted in 185 countries and reaches 725 million households (Premier League, 2015). The TV coverage of football leagues around the globe is a precondition for generating public attention in foreign countries. It can be argued that the availability of the world's major leagues via satellite TV increases the global popularity of these leagues, while at the same time enforcing the decline of minor domestic leagues in many countries. Some scholars thus claimed that a homogenization of sports television coverage around the globe would be a likely scenario in the long run (Jarvie, 2006; Smart, 2007). Case studies suggest that American baseball and basketball leagues and the English Premier League have become increasingly popular in Asian as well as smaller European countries, resulting from increased TV coverage in the

national media and, in particular, the transfer of domestic players to these leagues (Cho, 2009; Hognestad, 2006; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009; Rowe & Gilmour, 2010).<sup>2</sup> Hence, not only the migration of popular domestic players to football teams in foreign countries may stimulate a shift of spectator attention to clubs and leagues abroad, but also the increasing visibility of the world's best football leagues in national media around the world.

(3) Moreover, it is a particularity of elite sport that global horizons of comparison exist that enable a classification of local events on a global scale (Heintz & Werron, 2011). On the one hand, sporting competitions normally possess a local reference frame, which relates to a region, nation-state, continent, or in case of world championships, to the whole world. On the other hand, athletes and their performances can be compared and evaluated with the help of records and statistics. In football, such horizons of comparison exist in form of the FIFA world ranking, the UEFA club coefficient, in various statistical indicators that capture goals, assists, fouls, tackling or, beyond the pitch, a player's market value. Athletic performances worldwide can thus be compared and spectators can easily judge the quality of the performances, even when teams and players do not take part in the same competition (Heintz & Werron, 2011). Research on sports consumption has provided ample evidence that consumers prefer events that guarantee highest athletic quality (Borland & Macdonald, 2003; Garcia & Rodriguez, 2009). Media coverage is also highly correlated with the athletic level of a sporting competition (Gratton et al., 2012; Tomlinson & Young, 2006; Whitson, 1998). The more prestigious and athletically high-class a sport event is, the more comprehensive its media coverage and the higher consumer demand. Worldwide-marketed events, such as the UEFA Champions League, are showcased by extensive media coverage that further stimulates public interest (Smart, 2007). Smaller local sport events and lower-class leagues fade into the background. Hence, the existence of global horizons of comparison facilitate spectators in directing their attention to those teams and events which represent the highest level of athletic performance on a global scale.

(4) However, the proposed shift of attention to foreign football leagues may be moderated by the athletic quality of the domestic league. Giulianotti and Robertson (2012: 222) claimed that "national football systems ... seek to capture industries, incomes, and imaginations in both national and foreign markets". Leagues compete for attention in fast-growing markets, particularly Asia, North America, and the Middle East. In this

regard, Giulianotti and Robertson (2012: 223) speak of “neo-mercantilist struggles”. Big leagues are clearly at an advantage in these struggles for global visibility and global market share. Following Dubal (2010), these struggles may be conceived as another facet of “football neoliberalism”, where clubs and leagues become profit-oriented businesses competing for global market shares. Globalization and commercialization have thus fostered the concentration of financial power and athletic quality in top leagues and top clubs, which concurrently is accompanied by the depreciation of smaller leagues and clubs. Resulting from athletic and financial disparities, the top leagues and top clubs in Europe may attract ever more attention from media, whereas the coverage of smaller leagues and competitions is likely to decline. A shift of attention among spectators towards high-class leagues and competitions abroad may be the consequence, in particular among audiences in countries with smaller domestic leagues. For instance, many currently consider the English, German, and Spanish leagues the world’s top football leagues. Hence, for English, German, and Spanish football consumers, the national league remains highly appealing in terms of athletic quality. In countries with smaller leagues, however, audiences may lose interest in the domestic league and may direct more attention to leagues and clubs outside their national borders.

In light of these considerations, it is highly plausible that a shift of attention among football audiences in Europe has taken place, moving public interest away from domestic teams and directing ever more attention across Europe’s borders to top teams in top leagues. If society is conceived strictly within the nation-state borders, then public interest should primarily be directed towards domestic football leagues and respective football clubs. However, through the globalization of football, one may assume that public attention is less strictly focused on domestic clubs and that people have developed a growing interest in foreign football teams. This assumption will be put to a test. To analyse and further explain transnational public attention in European football, a new, yet sparsely used indicator will be introduced: search engine queries made via Google.

### **3. Measuring Transnational Public Attention**

#### *Search engine statistics as an indicator of public attention*

Search engine statistics are a relatively new data source. Scholars in some disciplines already have made use of these indicators. For instance, public health studies use Google queries for the early



detection and the surveillance of the regional spread of influenza epidemics (Ginsberg et al., 2009; Kang et al., 2013). Economists have employed respective data to forecast cinema admissions (Hand & Judge, 2012) and private consumption patterns (Vosen & Schmidt, 2011). In social science, Google searches were recently introduced as a measure of public attention (Mutz & Meier, 2014). In a general evaluation of advantages and limitations, Scheitle (2011: 285) concludes that search statistics may be “an incredibly rich source of data for social science research.”

To measure transnational public interest in football clubs, this study falls back on search engine statistics from Google. It is assumed that the number of queries including a particular search term represents public attention. The user’s current country of residence is automatically captured by the Internet Protocol address of the computer. Thereby, ‘transnational searches’ can be identified: Whenever an individual from a particular country searches for a football club located in another country, transnational interest is expressed by this operation. With the help of Google Trends (GT), respective queries can be retraced. GT, however, does not provide the absolute number of queries for a particular search term. Instead, queries for this respective search term are put into relation with the total number of searches done on Google in the respective period. Thanks to this procedure, queries from different (smaller and larger) regions and countries and from different points in time can be easily compared with each other.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Selection of countries and clubs*

Prior to the analysis, the period to be analysed and the countries as well as the football clubs to be included were determined. The selection of countries and clubs was driven by substantial as well as pragmatic considerations.

- The analyses focus on a period of seven football seasons from 2005/2006 through 2011/2012. Google queries were counted for every season. The season was defined to span from July through June of the subsequent year.
- Eight countries (from which Google searches were conducted) were selected for the analysis. As a first condition for the inclusion of a country into the study, high internet coverage among the population was required, with Google being the predominantly used search engine. Second, football had to be the most popular sport in the respective country, so that generally a high search

volume concerning foreign football clubs could be expected. Third, it was required that at least some football players from the respective country were under contract at top-level European football clubs during the period in question. Eight countries (France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden) fulfilled all conditions and were included. Thus, only queries coming from these eight countries were analysed.

- European top-level clubs were selected (being the ‘objects’ of the Google queries). For the period considered, the UEFA club coefficient was initially used to determine the 30 most efficient teams. Some of these teams, however, could not be included in the analysis because of a marginal search volume from the selected countries. GT determines a threshold of search traffic for search terms and when a search volume for a particular term is below this threshold, data are not available. Due to this reason, some cases were excluded. Sufficient GT data from the chosen countries was available for 18 teams from the pool of teams. These teams include Arsenal FC, Chelsea FC, Manchester City FC, Manchester United FC, Liverpool FC, AC Milan, AS Roma, FC Internazionale Milano, Club Atlético de Madrid, FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, Sevilla FC, Valencia CF, FC Bayern Munich, FC Schalke 04, SV Werder Bremen, Olympique Lyonnais and FC Porto. Only queries addressing these 18 football clubs were analysed for this study.
- Great importance was attached to national variations of search terms that people from the different European countries may use when searching for the respective clubs. For example, Italians may likely search for ‘FC Bayern Monaco’ instead of ‘FC Bayern Munich’. These search terms were combined in these cases. Furthermore, it was ensured that the search term was unambiguously directed to the respective football club. Someone searching ‘Chelsea London’ does not necessarily seek information about the football club of Chelsea FC, but may actually be interested in the central London borough. Thus, all such inconclusive search terms were eliminated.

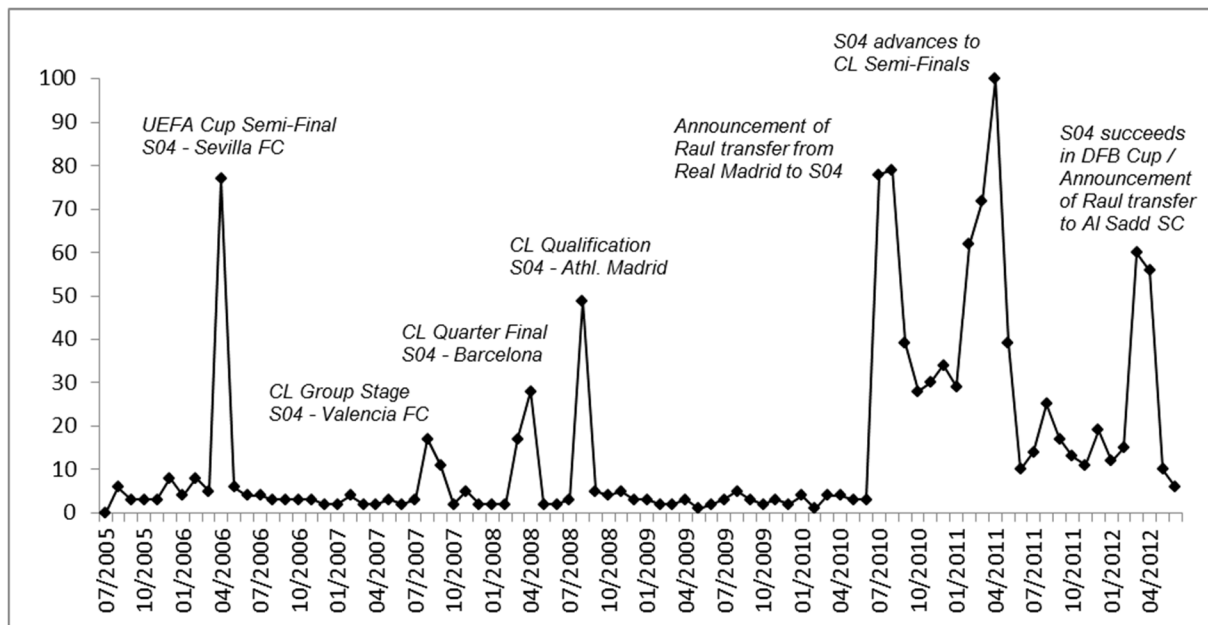
From the remaining 18 teams, search statistics were available from 8 countries for the analysis. From the resulting 144 possible combinations of countries (from which the queries were posed) and clubs (to which the queries refer), those 18 combinations had to be eliminated that did not capture transnational interest (e.g. the search for FC Barcelona from Spain or AC Milan from Italy). The remaining 126 combinations captured transnational interest and were included in the analyses. For each combination

(country, club), data are available for seven football seasons. In the following, the variation of search interest over these seven seasons is analysed and systematically explained.<sup>4</sup>

### *Hypotheses*

Figure 1 illustrates an example of the kind of time series that underpins this analysis, showing the interest from Spain in the German football club FC Schalke 04. The figure clearly shows that the queries from Spain are not consistent over time, but rather underlie strong variations. Some distinctive incidents that structure the Spanish interest in the German club are shown. Success in European competitions and duels against Spanish clubs in the Champions League led to short eruptions of public interest in Spain regarding the German club. However, particularly the signing of the Spanish star player and former captain of the Spanish national team, Raul Gonzales, had a strong and enduring impact on public interest from Spain. These examples already demonstrate some of the influencing factors that may systematically be associated with transnational public interest in football clubs.

**Figure 1:** Attention to German football club FC Schalke 04 from Spain measured by Google queries, and major events that stimulated public interest from Spain



*Note:* The figure illustrates the fluctuation in Google queries addressing “Schalke 04”, “FC Schalke”, or “FC Schalke 04” from Spain in the period from July 2005 through May 2012.

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(a) In view of current trends of an appreciation of European competitions and, in parallel, a depreciation of domestic leagues, it can be assumed that interest in European top-level football clubs is successively increasing. Since the analysis comprises seven seasons, this assumption can be put to a test. However, it has been argued that such a rise in transnational attention is more likely in countries with minor domestic football leagues, that is, leagues whose clubs are hardly competitive at the European level and whose athletic quality is not perceived as high-class, respectively. Hence, the first hypotheses read:

*H1a: Public interest in foreign European football clubs has increased from season 2005/2006 through 2011/2012, that is, is positively associated with the year of observation.*

*H1b: The assumed increase in public interest in foreign European football clubs is more pronounced in countries with minor domestic football leagues compared to countries with football leagues of superior athletic quality.*

(b) Secondly, transnational public attention should positively correlate with a team's success. In a successful season, teams get greater attention from foreign countries than in less successful ones. The success of a team can be depicted by two indicators: the success in the national championship and the success in European club competitions (Champions League, Europa League). The following hypotheses can thus be formulated:

*H2a: Public interest in a foreign European football club increases with the success of the respective club in the national championship.*

*H2b: Public interest in a foreign European football club increases with the success of the respective club in European club competitions.*

(c) Apart from that, public attention to football clubs in European foreign countries might also be shaped by national categories. One crucial motive for the interest in a foreign football club is that a given club has one or more players from one's own country under contract who contribute(s) to the foreign team's success. Indicators with which a player's contribution to a team's success can be roughly estimated are the number of games in which the player participates or the number of goals scored. In this regard, the following hypotheses can be derived:

*H3a: Public interest in a foreign European football club increases with the number of domestic players who are under contract with the respective club.*

*H3b: Public interest in a foreign European football club increases with the contribution of domestic players to the success of the respective club.*

(d) Finally, a fourth hypothesis also states that transnational interest is structured by a national sense of belonging. For instance, the interest in a foreign club may increase if the respective club encounters a club from one's own country in a European club competition. In that case, one is not interested in the foreign club per se, but rather because the club is the opponent of the 'own' domestic team.

*H4: Public interest in a foreign European football club increases with the number of matches in European club competitions against domestic teams.*

Hence, according to these hypotheses transnational public attention is structured by the club's national and international success, its team composition with regard to nationality as well as international matches. Details about measurement and coding of the independent variables are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Measurement and coding of independent variables

Time	Values from (6) = season 2005/06 to (12) = season 2011/12.
Success in domestic league	Success of the club in the domestic league, measured by rank in the league at the end of the season. Coding: (1) = national champion, (2) runner-up, (3) 3 <sup>rd</sup> or lower rank.
Success in European club competition	Success in UEFA Champions League or UEFA Europa League (resp. UEFA-Cup). Coding: (0) = no participation, (1) = group stage (incl. round of last 32 in Europa League), (2) = round of final 16, (3) = quarter final, (4) = semi-final, (5) final.
Domestic players in squad	Number of domestic players under contract. Coding: (0) = no domestic player under contract, (1) = one player, (2) = two players, (3) = three or more players.
Matches by domestic players	Number of matches played by domestic players. Original values ranging from 0 to 193 (M = 14.0, SD = 25.1).
Goals by domestic players	Number of goals scored by domestic players. Original values ranging from 0 to 46 (M = 2.3, SD = 6.0).
Matches against domestic clubs	Matches in UEFA Champions League or UEFA Europa League (resp. UEFA-Cup) against domestic clubs. Original values ranging from 0 to 6 (M = 0.9, SD = 1.3).

#### 4. Explaining Variations in Transnational Public Attention to Football Clubs

To test the hypotheses, bivariate correlations as well as multiple regression analyses were used. The first regression model includes all main effects. A second model additionally includes a subset of interaction terms. These terms test for differences between countries with a major domestic football league (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, UK) and countries without such a league (The Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden). Results are shown in Table 2.

##### *Time trend in transnational public interest*

A first hypothesis assumed growing transnational public attention among football audiences from the 2005/2006 season through the 2011/2012 season. One can in fact demonstrate that public interest in foreign European football clubs increased during this period. Transnational search interest and the years of observation are significantly and positively correlated ( $r=.08$ ,  $p=.04$ ). However, this increase may result either because more domestic players were transferred to clubs abroad in the respective period or because the clubs selected were more successful in the European competitions during the more recent years. In a multivariate model, these influencing factors are thus controlled for statistically. Even with controls for possible confounding factors, the significant relationship persists ( $b=.05$ ,  $p=.01$ , model 1), buttressing H1a. However, the second model shows that transnational attention hardly increased in countries whose domestic football league is considered high-class. In these countries, namely France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Spain, transnational public interest did not significantly rise over the years ( $b=.03$ ,  $p=.11$ ). In contrast, in countries with smaller domestic leagues, respective search queries increased steeply. The interaction between countries with/without a major domestic football league is significant ( $b=.04$ ,  $p=.02$ ). Hence, from 2005/2006 through 2011/2012, public interest in European top football clubs abroad has significantly increased only in countries with weaker national football leagues.

##### *Success in domestic leagues and in European club competitions*

Secondly, it was argued that more successful foreign clubs would receive a greater share of public attention. Success in football may be measured either by a club's ranking in the domestic league or by its standing in European club competitions.

The simple correlation reveals that sporting success in the national league stimulates transnational public interest ( $r=-.16, p<.01$ ). The better the final standing in the national championship, that is, the lower the rank, the more attention a club receives from foreign countries' audiences. Precisely in those years when a club wins the national championship or at least finishes the season as runner-up, it receives greater public attention from foreign countries. This effect of domestic success on transnational public attention remains significant even in the multivariate model ( $b=-.09, p=.03$ ). However, the second model, which includes interaction effects, indicates that football consumers in countries with major domestic leagues direct less attention towards the respective top-ranked teams abroad ( $b=-.03, p=.60$ ) compared to audiences in countries without a high-class domestic league ( $b=-.17, p=.02$ ). Although this effect was not hypothesized at the outset, it is still plausible that audiences in countries with a weaker national league are more reactive to the success of foreign clubs in their respective national leagues.

Compared to this rather small effect of success in the national league, there is a much greater dependency of transnational attention on a club's performance at the European level. Success in European club competitions is the strongest predictor for public attention from foreign countries in both the bivariate as well as the multivariate models. The bivariate analysis indicates a rather strong, positive and highly significant correlation ( $r=.34, p<.01$ ). Likewise, a marked and positive effect is shown in the multiple regression ( $b=.16, p<.01$ ). If a team, for example, advances to the round of the final 16 in one of the European competitions, the models would then predict an average growth in transnational public attention of 0.32 standard deviations (compared to a year in which the club did not take part in one of the European Cups). In the event that the respective club would make it to the final, a huge increase in transnational public attention of 0.80 standard deviations is predicted.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Migration of domestic players to foreign clubs*

H3a and H3b claimed that the transfer of domestic players to top football clubs in foreign European countries might increase attention directed at these foreign clubs. It was theorized that the more domestic players are under contract in a foreign club, the more frequently these players appear on the field and the more goals these players score, the more attention international audiences would then direct at this club.

Bivariate correlations are positive, but only moderate in size: The public attention to a foreign club increases slightly when more players from one's own nation are under contract there ( $r=.07$ ,  $p=.06$ ). The correlation between the number of games in which domestic players appeared and the interest in the respective club is even smaller ( $r=.06$ ,  $p=.11$ ). Both correlations are insignificant, albeit very close to the .05-level of significance. However, the number of goals which domestic players score is more strongly and significantly associated with the national audience's interest in a foreign football club ( $r=.13$ ,  $p=.01$ ). Because the three indicators are highly correlated, it is advisable only to incorporate one of the three indicators into the multivariate model. Therefore, only the indicator with the strongest bivariate correlation with transnational attention was considered, that is, the number of goals that domestic players have scored. The regression model indicates a significant, positive effect ( $b=.013$ ,  $p=.01$ , model 1): Public interest in foreign clubs increases with every goal contributed by domestic players.

#### *Matches in European competitions against domestic clubs*

A final hypothesis (H4) assumed that public interest in a foreign football team increases when this team faces domestic clubs in European club competitions. In a bivariate analysis, this indicator is, as was expected, positively correlated with transnational public attention ( $r=.22$ ,  $p<.01$ ): The more often teams from country A encounter a certain club from country B in the Champions League or the Europa League, the higher the public attention in country A to the respective foreign team is. The multiple regression analysis confirms this association ( $b=.11$ ,  $p<.01$ ): With every match between domestic clubs and a given foreign club, the interest of national audiences in the foreign team is stimulated. In countries with a weaker domestic league, however, matches between a domestic and a foreign team may encourage transnational attention to a greater degree. This is suggested by tentative results from model 2 ( $b=.13$ ,  $p=.07$ ). It may be conjectured that matches at the European level involving a domestic team receive more appreciation and attention in said countries simply because these are rare events. In countries with stronger teams in the national league, audiences may become accustomed to these matches because more domestic teams are able to compete at the European level.



**Table 2:** Transnational public attention towards European football clubs

	Bivariate Correlation	Multiple linear regression			
		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>Pearson's r</i>	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	$\beta$
Time trend 2005/2006-2011/2012	.08*	.05**	.09	.03	.06
Success in national league	-.16**	-.09*	-.08	-.03	-.02
Success in European competitions	.34**	.16**	.27	.16**	.27
Domestic players in squad	.07+	---	---	---	---
Games by domestic players	.06	---	---	---	---
Goals by domestic players	.13**	.013*	.09	.011*	.08
Matches vs. domestic clubs	.22**	.11**	.16	.10**	.15
IA minor domestic league* time trend 2005/2006- 2011/2012	-	-	-	.04*	.23
IA minor domestic league* success in national league	-	-	-	-.17*	-.22
IA minor domestic league* matches vs. domestic clubs	-	-	-	.13+	.07
R <sup>2</sup>		.159		.171	

*Note:* Transnational public attention measured by Google queries. Significance: +p<.10; \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01. Interaction terms (IA) estimate transnational public attention in countries with minor domestic football league compared to countries with a major domestic football league (Big-Five Leagues).

All in all, the multiple regression models show that public interest in foreign football clubs can be explained systematically: It generally increases when (a) a foreign team is more successful in European club competitions and in their national championships, (b) players from one's own country are involved in these teams and contribute to the foreign team's success (especially by scoring goals), (c) foreign clubs meet domestic clubs in European competitions. Finally, there is (d) a systematic trend over the course of time: During the seven football seasons analysed here, a growing interest in foreign football clubs was identified. On strict search, however, this trend applies only to countries with weaker domestic leagues. In countries with one of Europe's 'Big-Five'-leagues, transnational public attention has hardly increased. The regression models had a goodness-of-fit ( $R^2$ ) of .16 and .17, respectively. Hence, about 17 % of the variation in transnational public attention can be explained by the factors considered.

## 5. Conclusion

Processes of globalization broadly and profoundly influence today's world and the everyday life worlds of individuals. This also applies to the field of sport. With the advancing globalization of elite sports, that is, with the increasing global mobility of athletes, the existence of global horizons of comparison and with international sports events which attract millions of spectators (live or via television) around the globe, it is self-evident that sport is a highly globalized field. This, however, does not leave sports audiences unaffected. It was this paper's assumption that followers are directing an increasing amount of their attention to events, leagues, teams, or players in foreign countries. Using European club football as an example, this basic assumption was empirically put to test. For the measurement of transnational public attention, search engine statistics were analysed, in particular queries made via Google. These queries generally mirror public attention and, in the event that the search object (i.e. the football club) relates to a foreign country, they can capture transnational public attention as well.

The findings generally support the notion of increasing transnational interest among football audiences. However, differences between European countries do figure in: Only a slight, insignificant increase of public interest in European football clubs was observed within countries with major domestic leagues. By contrast, in countries with minor national football leagues, European top clubs abroad constantly receive more and more attention from football audiences. This finding has two implications: Firstly, it can be regarded as evidence of a globalization of everyday life. Objects and affairs of foreign countries, here football clubs, are ever more present in the minds of people and in public discourse. Football audiences, accordingly, have an increasing awareness of what is transpiring beyond their nation's (football) borders. Secondly, it is obvious that the globalization of football affects local football cultures differently. Whereas Europe's top clubs receive steady attention from domestic audiences as well as increasing attention from foreign countries, smaller clubs, and minor football leagues are falling behind and may become marginalized in the long run.<sup>6</sup> It may be conjectured that competitive disparities in European football will further increase in the future, given that differences in public attention are related to a club's or a league's potential to generate revenues. This notion is in line with Giulianotti and Robertson (2009) who argued that ongoing neoliberal struggles for market power, media visibility, and public attention will increase the dominance of the 'core' clubs and leagues and will come at the expense of leagues in the world's football periphery or semi-periphery.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, this paper aimed to investigate the variations of transnational public interest and to detect factors which stimulate (or inhibit) public attention from abroad. In this regard, initial hypotheses are generally strongly supported: Transnational attention increases with the success of a club in European and national competitions. Particularly the success in European club competitions is a strong influential factor, which defines the ups and downs of transnational public interest in a football club: Those clubs that advance to the final rounds of one of these competitions can expect to stand in the spotlight not only of the national audience, but also of football spectators all across Europe. It should be noted that UEFA has put substantial resources into the marketing of its European club competitions. The huge interest in successful European football clubs – supposedly not only from all over Europe but also from countries outside Europe – may reflect the success of UEFA's commercial approach to establishing the Champions League and the Europa League as the world's premier club competitions (Holt, 2007).

Furthermore, the success of domestic players in foreign clubs and the number of matches of the respective foreign club against domestic teams in European competitions are crucial factors that explain variations in transnational public attention. This indicates that public interest in expatriate football teams still depends very much on national loyalties. Events that fuel public interest in football clubs in foreign countries are particularly those, which are somehow relevant to the spectator's own nation, i.e. for domestic football teams or domestic players. One example of such an event is the transfer of a domestic player to a foreign football club. Findings indicate that the transfer of a domestic player does not per se lead to increased attention directed at the respective foreign team. Instead, audiences only direct more attention to this club if the domestic player contributes essentially to the team's success, in particular with goals. Transnational interest is possibly motivated here by the pride of witnessing how a domestic player succeeds in one of Europe's top clubs. Another example of events with relevance to national football is the encounter of national and expatriate football clubs in European competitions. Whenever national and expatriate teams compete in a match, the national public is then increasingly interested in the respective expatriate club. Here too, it is not the genuine interest in the given foreign country or the foreign club which motivates spectators to take an interest in the foreign team, but rather, presumably, the need to inform oneself about the strengths and weaknesses of the 'own' team's opponents.

Both examples illustrate that transnational public attention may likely have its roots in national affiliation and commitment to domestic teams and players. Thus, the attention of football audiences does not attach boundlessly (and boundary-lessly) to the best leagues and teams. Instead, the bonds to national clubs and players may often provide the motivation to take an interest in particular events, leagues, or clubs outside the own national state. In this light, sports spectators are not per se cosmopolitan world citizens, but rather 'transnational patriots' who follow football in foreign countries through national lenses that is selectively and shaped by national loyalty.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Own calculations based on numbers from [www.transfermarkt.de](http://www.transfermarkt.de). The 'Big-Five' European leagues include England's *Premier League*, Spanish *Primera Division*, German *Bundesliga*, Italian *Serie A*, and French *Ligue 1*.

<sup>2</sup> According to these studies, the transfer of popular Asian players enhanced the media presence of the respective leagues in Asian countries and therefore stimulated public interest in the NBA, MLB (Major League Baseball) and English Premier League games. The transfers of Park Ji-Sung to Manchester United, Yao Ming to the Houston Rockets or Chan-ho Park to the Los Angeles Dodgers are prime examples.

<sup>3</sup> The number of Internet users has increased in the period covered by this study. In the eight countries included here, Internet user numbers increased from 56% of the population in 2005 up to 75% of the population in 2011 (author's calculations based on statistics provided by the International Telecommunication Union, [www.itu.int](http://www.itu.int)). Hence, a positive time trend for transnational public attention, as shown in the subsequent analysis, means that the increase in transnational football-related search queries was more pronounced than the increase in general search activity in the same period. Data on the demographics of Internet users are also available for a variety of Western countries (e.g. Räsänen, 2006; Helsper, 2010; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). These data indicate that younger age groups, highly educated people and males are overrepresented among Internet users. Time trends from Germany further show, however, that demographics of Internet users have not changed considerably during the respective period (cf. [www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de](http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de)).

<sup>4</sup> GT data are always displayed on a scale ranging from 0 to 100, with 100 indicating the period with the highest search traffic concerning a particular search term. For this reason, different plots are not comparable, as they do not share the same original highest value before scaling. Before the 126 different time trends analysed in the study at hand could be compared with each other, they had to be standardised. Thus, mean values and standard deviations were calculated for each of the 126 time trends, and standard scores (z-values) were added to the data set. These z-values are used in the subsequent analyses.

<sup>5</sup> It may be assumed that success in the prestigious Champions League would lead to a stronger increase of transnational public interest than success in the Europa League. This assumption, however, cannot be confirmed: Additional analyses, which are not documented here, show that the effect on public attention does not differ between the two competitions. Somewhat surprisingly, success in the Europa League has almost the identical effect on transnational public attention as success in the Champions League.

<sup>6</sup> Smaller clubs and leagues are disadvantaged in the neo-mercantilist struggle for global visibility. However, it is a matter of debate whether national audiences will also lose interest in their respective league over the long run. Stadium attendance, for instance, is currently only declining in some of the smaller football leagues, whereas in other leagues (e.g. the Dutch Eredivisie) demand has even increased. Stadium audience, however, is mostly composed of supporters with strong loyalty to the respective club. Google search activity, in contrast, measures attention within a broader public, which also includes 'armchair audiences'. Hence, stadium attendance and general public interest must not necessarily be influenced by the same set of factors.

<sup>7</sup> The core-periphery model, adapted from world system theory (Wallerstein, 1974), has been widely acknowledged to be a useful framework for analyzing power relations in the global football economy (e.g. Darby, 2013; Poli, 2006).

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