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# **Chasing a Tiger in a Network Society?: Hull City's Proposed Name Change in the Pursuit of China and East Asia's New Middle Class Consumers**

## **Introduction**

In early 2013, Hull City AFC's (hereafter Hull City) owner Assam Allam announced plans to re-name the club 'Hull City Tigers' in an attempt to re-orientate the club towards seemingly lucrative East Asian markets (*BBC*, 2014a; Conn, 2013). These plans concerned some fans with a number forming protest campaigns against challenges to the 'identity' of the club. The idea was formally rejected by the (English) Football Association (hereafter F.A.) in 2014 but Allam continued to state that the name change will take place, arguing that it will secure the long-term financial future of the club. In this article, we first, draw upon Manuel Castells' work to critically discuss the logic of Hull City's proposed reorientation to suit 'new middle class' consumers in China and the East Asian global region and second, use the example to critically engage with Castells' (2000; 2009 [1996]) idea that 'networks' replace 'hierarchies' in social structures. By doing so, we argue that while these plans might intend to strengthen the club's financial position especially in light of UEFA's financial fair play rules, they overlook a concern with local environments that Castells (2009 [1996]) guides us toward. As such, we take Castells' theory to argue that Allam should seek to understand consumer practices in the targeted countries. Specifically, we first point out that such plans need to be set against the normalisation of the production and consumption of counterfeit club-branded sportswear and television broadcasts in China and, second, we suggest that the new middle classes in the global region are unlikely to foster support for Hull City, even if it adds 'Tigers' to its name.

## **Hull City 'Tigers' and the Transnational Reach of the English Premier League**

The library of 'globalisation' of football literature is well-stocked. A brief overview shows that in 1999, Giulianotti explicitly unpacked the competing ideas of what 'globalisation' might mean in his sociological discussion of 'the global game'. Cleland (2015) has recently refreshed this set of ideas in a wide-ranging text which examines issues such as racism, governance, violence and the consumption of sport through global lenses. Similarly, Sandvoss (2003) discussed the changing consumption patterns of football fans across the world which are directed by changes in media coverage of matches. Armstrong and Giulianotti (2004) also broke new conceptual ground in their edited collection which

looked at football in Africa and served as a timely reminder that globalisation is not merely a form of Americanisation or Westernisation – a point which Giulianotti and Robertson (2009) elaborated in their encyclopaedic work on ‘football and globalisation’. As a result, it has been shown that football, like the rest of the social world, carries ‘glocalising’ and ‘globalising’ tendencies which connect the local and the global (for further details see Andrews and Ritzer, 2007; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004; 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2009).

Football in East Asia is also important in the understanding of the globalisation of the sport. Jinxia and Mangan (2001: 79) argued that football has ‘become the most popular sport in China’ but identified that ‘there is a lack of literature on Chinese football’. Manzenreiter and Horne’s (2004) edited collection on football in China, Japan and South Korea partially filled this lacuna by drawing upon ideas of business, player recruitment and fan cultures, alongside representations of the global region after the 2002 World Cup that was held in Japan and South Korea (see also Horne and Manzenreiter’s 2002 edited collection on that World Cup). The transnational spread of the English Premier League (hereafter E.P.L) is also important in the understanding of global dimensions of football in contemporary societies (Cleland, 2015). The E.P.L is broadcast to 212 countries, connecting unquantifiable numbers of people, across the world. Although still highly mediatised, the Football League ‘Championship’ - the English division immediately below the E.P.L - does not share this ubiquitous global media interest (David et al., 2015). In 2012, the E.P.L signed a host of broadcast agreements for its 2013/14 to 2015/16 seasons matches around the world. These deals were cumulatively worth £5.5bn to the E.P.L, the majority of which would be shared between its member clubs that ‘own’ the division (Harris, 2012). Cumulative overseas E.P.L broadcast rights contracts have loosely doubled with each new negotiation in the twenty-first century. Deloitte (2008) point out the largest increase in payments for rights in 2007 had been in the Middle East and East Asia (for full details of global sales deals see Harris, 2010). The E.P.L’s 2010 overseas broadcasting deals were worth £479m a year, which compared favourably to Spain’s La Liga (£132m per year), Italy’s Serie A (£74m per year) and Germany’s Bundesliga (£50m per year). The 2013 equivalent deal was a further expression of overseas television interest in the E.P.L, showing a 55 per cent increase in its value from 2010. E.P.L clubs also sell more shirts to overseas markets than clubs from other globally-leading divisions such as those in Germany, Spain, Italy and France. For instance in 2013/14 season, of those ‘official’ shirts that had players names imprinted on them, six from the top ten individuals were employed by E.P.L clubs – more than any other league around the world (*GiveMeSport*, 2014). Similarly, Harris (2012) shows that – in a table topped jointly by Manchester United and Real Madrid – the E.P.L contributes four out of ten of the clubs that

sell the most shirts in world football; Chelsea, Arsenal and Liverpool joining Manchester United in that list. Similarly, the independent intangible asset valuation consultancy, *Brand Finance* (2014) have – since 2010 - calculated the most valuable 50 'brand value' clubs in world football. In 2014, they found fifteen out of the twenty Premier League clubs to be amongst their highest valued brands in football. Indeed, England's top football division contributed more than any other in the world, beating its nearest competitor, the Bundesliga - which contributed eight clubs - and Serie A, which contributed six clubs to that list.

Connecting with China and the East Asian global region has become increasingly important to many E.P.L clubs. The potential to grow revenues in from that region underpins this interest. It is estimated that China will have 730 million Chinese internet users, including 380 million online shoppers by 2016 (O'Neil, 2015: 4). In 2013, Manchester United commissioned Kanter to undertake research that found that it had 659m adult supporters across the world, which is one in ten of the global population (Prior, 2013). The football club had a vested interest in projecting these figures as it was then believed to be readying itself for floatation on first, the Hong Kong and then later, the Singapore stock-market (Millward, 2013). Sina Weibo (hereafter Weibo) is a Chinese micro-blogging social media outlet that is used by a large proportion of the population in the country and the wider global region. O'Neil (2015: 4) reports that there were 79 million posts about E.P.L clubs on Weibo in 2014 with 36 million Weibo accounts following those teams. He further argued that 64 per cent of all Chinese fans reportedly support an E.P.L club.

The focus of this article, Hull City, was formed in 1904. Hull City is commonly referred to by its "Tigers" nickname, the coining of which has been attributed to a *Hull Daily Mail* reporter in 1905 (BBC, 2013a). The location of Hull City within the transnational E.P.L is important: as a member of the division, its matches are broadcast to 212 countries around the world (Millward, 2011). However, its place in the division is not guaranteed in the long or middle term: when Hull City was promoted to the E.P.L at the end of 2007/8 season, it achieved a place in the top division of English football for the first time in its history. Up until the end of 2014/15, it has spent all but four seasons outside of the highest division in English football and played in a trans-European competition, the qualifying rounds of UEFA's Europa League, for the first time in its history in the 2014/15 season. Hull City could be relegated in any season, removing it from the gaze of many in countries where E.P.L matches are currently broadcast.

Hull City has experienced multiple financial difficulties, becoming the first professional Football League Club in the UK to be placed in receivership in 1982 and since then courting extinction on numerous occasions (Buckingham, 2012). In this time, the economic ownership rights to Hull City had been held by several people some of whom have even faced police investigations for various 'white collar' crimes (see Conn, 2008; 2014; Fieldhouse, 2009). As recently as November 2009, it was announced that the club had accrued debts of £35m. This situation was compounded by the club's relegation from the E.P.L in May 2010 at the end of 2009/10 season, thus losing most of its E.P.L television revenues. In the wake of this relegation, the Egyptian-born millionaire and local benefactor, Assem Allam, bought the economic rights to the club for a total of £20m, which cleared £19m of debt (*Hull Daily Mail*, 2010). However Allam's Hull City lost a further £68m between 2010 and 2013 (Conn, 2013). During this time turnover at Allam's manufacturing company almost halved due to the global recession (*Hull Daily Mail*, 2013) and, in September 2009, Union des Associations Européennes de Football (hereafter UEFA) announced 'Financial Fair Play' (hereafter FFP) regulations that would come into force from the 2011/12 season.<sup>1</sup> These points underline why Allam has sought to increase the club's capacity to generate larger sums of revenue.

There are complicated arguments over what a football 'is' and who owns 'it'. What is clear is that football clubs encompass multiple social, cultural, political and economic dimensions (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2009) which do not always sit easily together. The extent to which some of these dimensions might - under some circumstances - compete is highlighted by King (1997) in his discussion of Manchester United 'lads', a group of largely 'working class', masculine football supporters who declared themselves to 'love the team, hate the club'. King argued that the 'lads' created an imaginary incision between what they perceived to be the financial and commercial decisions of those in the Manchester United boardroom and some of the socio-cultural issues they valued. These included not only the eleven players that competed upon the pitch but also the fans' (selective) collective memories of the club's histories, the group's experiences - which may involve heavy drinking and occasionally violence - and the personal biographies of the individual members in the collective. The 'football club' is made up of both the 'club' and the 'team'. The 'lads' claimed to own the dimensions of Manchester United that were their memories and cultures. When the media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, signalled his intent to buy the financial rights to Manchester United in the late 1990s, supporter groups that included King's 'lads' mobilised with multiple complaints and were eventually successful in campaigning to the U.K government's 'monopolies and mergers commission'. The bid to buy the club was halted and the economic rights to the club continued to be floated on the London stock-exchange (Brown and Walsh, 1999).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, as many Liverpool supporters protested between 2008 and 2010 against the

apparent mistruths the 'club's' American (economic) owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett, told, they repeatedly held aloft banners and handed out leaflets that declared it to be 'their' club (Millward, 2011; 2012). Once again, the football club they 'owned' encompassed the myriad of cultural dimensions rather than, necessarily, its economic rights (Williams and Hopkins, 2011; Williams, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

## **Renaming and Rebranding a Football Club**

The above-stated points underline four key issues related to the potential renaming of the football club. First, although it is necessary to point out there are multiple expressions of football fandom, often related to the shaping of team support on the individual/s identity/ies and his/her 'regular' mode of consumption (c.f. Dixon, 2013; Giulianotti, 2002), a common cultural code held by 'traditional' fans is that an 'elastic' reading of the club's 'identity' should be upheld (c.f. Rookwood and Millward, 2011; Millward, 2011). This reading is selective and changeable across time, space and clubs. Alongside club name changes – which ignore that in the early years of the twentieth century many British football clubs changed their names (Tischler, 1981) – other 'unacceptable' changes might include: the colour of the team's jerseys (as caused consternation at Cardiff City in 2012); the composition and design of club badges and, the location of football clubs (see the example of Wimbledon's move to Milton Keynes and later renaming of the club as MK Dons in 2003). Second, while changes to a football club's name, location and badge upset many fans of British teams, such alterations are less clearly opposed in many North American sports (Lewis, 2007). Third, even in the UK 'traditional' fans do not always oppose the renaming of professional sports teams. For instance, 1996's restructure of British rugby league saw clubs tweak their names in attempt to become more marketable to potential new television audiences (Falcous, 2005). Fourth and perhaps most pertinently, in this case it is not always clear what dimension of Hull City's 'name' Allam is consistently seeking to change. To be sure, Hull City has its name logged in two places, and is branded in two additional ways. To use the distinction King's (1997) 'lads' provide, these are: first, Hull City's 'club' name - which as a limited company - its business interests are registered under and second, its 'team' name under which the F.A., E.P.L and Football League have it logged. On top of this, there are two 'brand' names it might hold. The first of these is the brand name it gives itself, and can manage, through – for instance – its website and social media accounts. The second of these is the way in which others (including media agencies) describe it, for instance whether the team is referred to as Hull City, Hull City Tigers or Hull Tigers. Football clubs cannot usually directly control this second level of brand name, which usually follows from the name the team competes under in sport competitions.

Allam is likely to want Hull City to include 'Tigers' in all of its names and brands. To these ends, Allam announced that he had renamed the club 'Hull City Tigers' in August 2013. In actual fact, he had re-registered its business/company name as 'Hull City Tigers Ltd' and intended to market it through its website name and social media accounts as 'Hull City Tigers'. This was not the name under which the team competed under or the way it was 'branded' by most media outlets. In an attempt to alter the team's moniker in all ways, Allam submitted a 'team' name change application to the F.A. in March 2014. However, one month later the F.A. Council ruled against the proposal, prompting Allam's son, Ehab, to threaten that the club may increase season ticket prices by almost 50 per cent to make up for the shortfall in projected lost sponsorship deals for the following season with global companies whose connection with the club was contingent on the word 'Tigers' being part of its name (Taylor, 2014). Shortly after announcing renaming plans, Allam said:

I know it will make a difference; shorter names have a quicker impact, it is textbook marketing. Hull is relevant. City is not relevant. Tigers: are you telling me you would drop the symbol of power? I cannot keep throwing money into it. There must be a limit. Our target is for the club to be self-financed, relying on its own resources. Manchester United are selling shirts in the Far East, selling commercial activities all over the world. We need the club to be known globally, and shortening the name will make the club known globally.

Assem Allam (quoted in Conn, 2013)

Allam stated that the football club had to explore ways of becoming self-sustaining, and identified renaming the club as a way to do this (Conn, 2013). He suggested that rebranding as the 'Tigers' was a 'textbook marketing' move as it is shorter and AFC 'meant nothing'. The logic underpinning the proposed rename was that 1.35bn people in China, along with those elsewhere in East Asia, could be targeted as potential supporters as the 'Tiger' holds mystical value there (Selvanathan and Selvanathan, 2003). In turn, Allam hoped that these new fans would carry through into increased revenues, in the light of shirt sales, sponsorship and television broadcasting opportunities that may be presented through the rebrand (BBC 2013b). Allam argued that he did not have to seek F.A. approval to change the club's name, as it had previously been registered with them as 'Hull City AFC Tigers Ltd', thus not constituting a full name change (Conn, 2013). The F.A. argued that he did, since the team do not play under this name. This dispute still continues: the 2014/15 saw the club badge remove any reference to 'Hull City AFC' (*The Guardian*, 2014) while Allam has repeatedly challenged the F.A.'s ruling. Indeed, in



March 2015 Allam won the right to make another name-change application to the F.A. Council after his legal representatives successfully argued to an arbitration panel that the Football Supporters Federation – a British-based organisation that purports to represent the interests of supporters of British football teams - had illegitimately influenced the decision-making process as its chair, Dr. Malcolm Clarke, sat on an F.A. sub-committee panel that dealt with case a year earlier. Indeed, Allam's proposals consistently broke the 'elastic cultural codes' of 'traditional' Hull City supporters and from 2013 there have been backlashes. Some of these 'traditional' Hull City fans set up the 'City Til We Die' campaign group (BBC, 2013a). When questioned about their threat to the rebranding claims Allam said that they could 'die as soon as they want', iterating that the presence of 'City' in the name was 'common' and 'lousy' (BBC, 2013a).<sup>4</sup> This article uses the work of Manuel Castells to elucidate, explain and critique the plans and takes the example of Hull City to critically engage with that theory. It is to Castells' research we now turn.

## **The Network Society and New Middle Classes in East Asia**

*The Information Age* trilogy is widely regarded as Manuel Castells' *magnus opus* (Howard, 2011; Stadler, 2006). Howard (2011: 100) points out that Google Scholar has recorded that 12,000 books, book chapters, and articles that offer some citation to the first volume of the trilogy, *The Rise of the Network Society*. The three books are an account of the role of information in a transnational contemporary society and the shift from an 'industrial society' to an 'informational society', which started in the 1970s.

In *The Information Age*, Castells (2009 [1996]; 2010 [1997]; 2010 [1998]) saw power as related to various forms of capital (including material, social, cultural and 'informational' forms). Capital was afforded mobility across a transnational 'space of flows' by increasing technological affordances. Castells argued that the network society is based upon a *new economy* that is marked by three key features. First, the economy is *informational* in that it has a capacity for generating knowledge and processing/managing information that would shape the productivity and competitiveness of economic units which may be firms, regions, or countries. Information communication technologies like the Internet are key to providing the architecture to connect such locales, which he calls 'the space of flows'. Second, the new economy of the network society is *transnational*: its financial markets and

multinational production firms have the capacity to work as a unit on a global scale in real time or chosen time. The actors in the global network proceed by linking up all that has 'value' and discarding anything/anyone that does not. Third, the new economy of the network society is *networked* with the *network enterprise* at its core. In short, this is a network made from either firms and/or segments of firms. These co-operations are often based on the sharing of informational capital. Castells (2009 [1996]) argued that key agents in the 'space of flows' will occupy the most profitable (defined in terms of material and immaterial capital, including money, people, images and information) – often global - spaces in the network society. Research that uses sport as sites to explore social issues rarely engages with Castells' theories, but in one such piece Millward (2011) suggests the E.P.L to be a concrete example of how the 'space of flows' operates, noting that only English and Welsh clubs are allowed into competition but that i) recruitment of players and managers is from a global labour market, ii) with legions of 'overseas' fans following the tournament's narratives through mediated images/sounds and iii) sometimes personal travel while iv) many of its clubs have received 'foreign' investment that allow them to compete. In its production and consumption, the E.P.L simultaneously connects 'local' spaces, people and corporate interests from around the world.<sup>5</sup> In making our engagement with Castells' to understand – and critique – the logic underpinning Hull City's possible rename and rebrand, and thus shed further light on the globalisation of elite level English football, we engage with two touchstones in Castells' trilogy: first, *the relationship between networks and hierarchies*; and second, *the connection of locales around the world through forces of cultural, social, economic, political and informational production and consumption*. We now explain these individually.

*The relationship between networks and hierarchies:* For Castells, a network is a set of interconnected nodes. He argues that even before the dawning of information age, networks were advantaged over other social configurations such as centralised hierarchies in that they were more flexible and adaptable and thus able to evolve with their environment and their nodal points. However, before the information age, networks tended to experience difficulty in their co-ordination. Castells (2000: 15) calls networks 'natural forms of social expression' but which were outperformed by hierarchical organisations that were setup with obvious control of resources and the targeting of centrally defined goals, 'achieved through the implementation of tasks in rationalized, vertical chains of command and control'. Castells (2000: 19) makes the binary social structures of hierarchies and networks clearer still by arguing that 'historically, power was embedded in organizations and institutions, organized around a hierarchy of centres. Networks dissolve centres, disorganize hierarchy, and make materially impossible the exercise of hierarchical power without processing instructions in the network,

according to the network's morphological rules'. As such, for Castells, networked structures do not have anything more permanent than temporary hierarchies of value or importance.

*The connection of locales around the world through forces of cultural, social, economic, political and informational production and consumption:* The network society is transnational but not deterritorialised or placeless. Rather for Castells' (2000 [1996]) networks enable any particular place to be bypassed but for action to take place, flows have to come from and go somewhere. Places can be played off against each other, but capital investment in particular regions create new locales as network hubs, particularly where cultural, social, economic and political informational goods are produced, traded and/or consumed. In short, location – and locales as physical spaces in which creative production and consumption is undertaken through dense networks of interaction - is important, irrespective of whether those places are Hull or Beijing, where local consumers will have consumer tastes that are shaped by the local environment and culture.

In the context of Hull City, Castells' long-standing interest in social and economic change in China and the East Asian 'Tiger' economies connects to our research. To be clear, Castells pays special attention to China and the 'Tiger' economies as sites both within a network society and the role of the state in such social formations. Specifically, Castells (2009 [1996]: 188-215) points out that in the second half of the 20th century East Asia began to realise an economic boom. Spearheaded by Japan – East Asia's original 'Tiger' economy – the region's newly industrialising countries were undergoing rapid economic expansion due to processes of industrialisation, modernisation and motorisation. This economic development occurred in waves or generations and it is widely accepted that, alongside Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan are first generation Asian 'Tiger economies'. To this effect, the term 'Tiger economy' refers to 'advancing' East Asian economies. Castells (2009 [1996]) explores China as a key country which gave rise to the network society. To do so, he suggests that in 1978 the Chinese government implemented a series of market-orientated reforms which facilitated a transition to an economy that promoted economic cooperation and competition with networks of global businesses networks.<sup>6</sup> Castells (2009 [1996]) argues that China's economic reforms brought about greater consumer autonomy and individualism, particularly in urbanised locales, leading to a cultural revolution and the growth of the new middle classes (Castells, 2009 [1996]). Although concretely defining a 'social class' in China (as with elsewhere) is difficult, Song and Cui (2009) argue that the middle classes in the country earn between \$6,000 and \$25,000 each year. The number of people that fall into this range grew exponentially between 1995 and 2005, from close to zero to an estimated 87 million in 2005 (Song and Cui, 2009). They estimate that this new middle class will further grow to 340 million people in China by 2016. Thus, they state that in 2006 around 39 percent of urban

households were in the new middle class but by 2016 that percentage will rise to 60 percent. The group is marked by their purchasing power, accounting for more than 40 percent of disposable income in urban China in 2015 (Song and Cui, 2009).

This new middle class is thus marked by their consumer habits that are more than items of subsistence, thus representing a global market segment who actors in local and transnational business networks seek to capture. Castells' concern with China and East Asia continues in his recent work. For instance, Castells *et al's* (2012) collection that was put together in the wake of the social transformations offered by global economic crisis, pointed out that the new capitalist economies of China and the Asian 'Tigers' continued to produce huge profit surpluses. Using the framework outlined in Castells (2009 [1996]), Hsing (2012) argued that corporate organisations based in the largest cities in this global region were actively repositioning themselves in the 'new global network economy'. Hsing (2012) suggested that the social distance between the poorest people and the new middle classes is growing (see also Castells, 2009 [1996]: 77-147). The promise of the affluence of the new middle classes in East Asia enticed Allam to formulate plans to rebrand Hull City. We now explore this by first, looking to the presence of the E.P.L in China and the East Asian global region to explore whether Castells is correct that all nodes within a network are without hierarchies and second, whether the new middle classes in China and East Asia are likely to become supporters that can be monetised by Hull City 'Tigers', should Allam's plan to change the name of the team be approved.

### **The Hierarchical Contours of the East Asian Networked Market**

To recap, for Castells, hierarchies do not exist within networks. The E.P.L is a globally networked league, with respect to its 'ownership' structure (where each of its 20 member clubs owns an equal share), its transnational recruitment of players and other staff from across the world and its 'out flows' of images of football matches and other related images across the world (Millward, 2011). It is 'equal' in that its television broadcast rights are collectively 'owned' and 'sold' by the E.P.L and distributed to clubs according to a formula based upon membership within the division, final league placing and the number of times that club has its matches broadcast live on subscription television. Unlike in Spain, its clubs do not individually sell the rights to broadcast their matches. However, the E.P.L as a test case for Castells' premise that networks decentre hierarchical organisation. If this premise were to hold up, over the course of a temporal period clubs like Hull City – who tend not to win the E.P.L – would 'match' those that do. This means that they would connect similar numbers of people into the global network society. However, this clearly does not happen. For instance, Song and Chadwick (2014) surveyed

football fans from across China and found that the best two supported European football clubs were Arsenal and Manchester United (with strong support for Real Madrid and Barcelona too). Similarly, *Liverpool F.C.'s* (n.d.) website shows it has thirteen different 'official' supporters clubs in the global region and Slack et al. (2005: 256) reported that when Everton signed a sponsorship deal with Chinese mobile telephone manufacturers Keijian, the deal involved the club taking two players, Li-Tie and Li Wei Feng on loan. Their presence increased the club's profile in China, making them 'the most popular football club in a nation of 1.2 billion people' (Atkin, 2002: 62). It was this presence of Chinese players that resulted in an Everton and Manchester City match (which had Dalian-born Sun Jihai playing right back) which drew in a television audience in China of around 300m people (Gaunt, 2003). These figures might suggest that many in the targeted demographic in the East Asian global region might have existing loyalties to E.P.L clubs and – while not discounting the possibility that these might be displaced or joined by a support for Hull City 'Tigers' – this might make accruing such fans difficult. Similarly, take data found in Table 1 (below).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Castells (2013 [2009]) is keen to point out the role of social media in shaping the contours of the network society and so it makes sense to look toward data given on Weibo to judge the relative informational and socio-cultural importance given to each E.P.L club. Data in Table 1 shows that Manchester United has almost twice as many mentions on Weibo than its nearest competitor, Arsenal. In turn, Arsenal has around seven times more mentions on the platform than the sixth most mentioned club, Tottenham Hotspur. Hull City had just 284,556 mentions on Weibo in 2014, Manchester United's mentions multiplied this figure 86 times in the same time period (24,546,048). This was despite Hull City reaching an F.A. Cup final in May of that year. Newcastle United had averaged fewer than 1,000 Weibo mentions per week across the year. Similarly, Manchester City (8.3 million), then Manchester United (8 million) has the most followers on their Weibo account. After this, the next closest is Arsenal with 3.3 million followers. Sunderland has just 16,409 Weibo followers and twelve out of the twenty E.P.L clubs from 2014/15 season do not even have a Weibo account to service this – apparently – emerging market. Hull City is an example of such a club. Neither, along with eleven other E.P.L clubs, does it have a Chinese website. Therefore the difference in weighting of football clubs – the nodal points within the networked league – in China and the East Asian global region could not be clearer. There is an obvious hierarchy in the way in informational capital, as social media 'follows' and

'mentions', is dispersed between the clubs. This hierarchy has Manchester United and Manchester City at the top of it and Hull City much lower, towards the bottom of the E.P.L clubs. It seems unlikely that those Hull City supporters would have been upset had 'their' club aggressively marketed itself toward the Chinese and East Asian global region new middle class sector by setting up social media and other websites. Rather than growing the 'brand' this way, and then aligning the club to suit that market if it yields informational and economic capital, Allam's strategy was that a rename and rebrand would automatically grow the supporter-base in China and the East Asian global region. In the next section we draw critical questions about the likelihood of this happening, by examining the consumer habits of the new middle classes there.

### **Local Consumer Patterns: Gaining Support from the East Asian New Middle Classes?**

Castells is clear that neither the network society nor its nodal points – as cities around the world – are 'placeless'. Rather, in common with the 'glocalisation of football' thesis offered by Giulianotti and Robertson (2009), transnational 'flows' are produced, consumed, interpreted and re-interpreted in the locales that they connect across the world. As such, in this section we accept Castells' claim that a network society is connected but not deterritorialised to explore two issues: first, whether the new middle classes are likely to become Hull City supporters after a name change and second, if this would happen, how easily would these fans be monetised. To do this, we look at the consumer habits of the new demographic in issues in and away from sport.

In answering these questions, evidence from *KPMG* (2012) which suggests that the new middle classes in China and the East Asian global region most value consumer products that reflect positively on their sense of self-identity/social status is worth considering. Would a rename/rebrand bestow the necessary status on to Hull City 'Tigers' and attract fans to it? Song and Chadwick (2014) suggest the clubs with the biggest support in China are those who have glamorous players and have a recent history of winning football tournaments. Quite reasonably, support for teams with such players and a track record of winning prestigious trophies may positively reflect on fans' senses of social identity and status. Although precise figures are difficult to acquire, *The Telegraph* (2011) suggests that when Chelsea won its first E.P.L title in 2004/5 season its economic owner, Roman Abramovich, financed £213.5m in transfer fees over the previous two seasons and that when Manchester City won its inaugural E.P.L title in 2011/12 season, its owner, Sheikh Mansour, had spent £488.7m on transfer fees

over the previous four seasons. These figures do not take into account player wages which are likely to have grown as a result of such recruitment drives. Hull City does not compete in these markets, acquiring lower quality players for smaller sums of money than Chelsea or Manchester City (BBC 2014c). Acquiring the 'brand' to attract the new middle class supporters in China and the East Asian global region is likely to cost more than Allam is willing to pay, given that his decision is seemingly underpinned by a desire to make the club self-sufficient.

Globally-leading transnational clubs have looked to monetise their overseas fan-base in multiple ways, and - in line with Castells' (2009 [1996]) suggestion - it is important to contextualise these plans within the localised consumer tastes and practices in a transnational business-model. In China, counterfeit goods have to be high quality to satisfy the tastes of the young middle classes in the domestic market and, as Yi-Chieh Lin (2011) suggests, this has led to a segment of a new informal export industry around the world. Indeed *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* figures suggest that, between 2008 and 2010, 75 per cent of all seized counterfeit goods originated in East Asia, valuing this at £15bn (UNODC, 2013). Yi-Chieh Lin makes no reference to football in her discussions, but the culture of counterfeit consumer goods might reasonably affect money spent by fans on football-related goods too. In the specific context of football, Szymanski (2010) has suggested that clubs monetise fans through the sale of two products: first, club-endorsed team merchandise and second, overseas broadcasting rights. We now consider the sale of official merchandise and broadcasting rights in the light of Hull City 'Tigers'.

Manchester United has led in developing a transnational fan-base that offers the potential to be monetised, particularly in relation to the production and sale of official merchandise. Sonmez and Yang (2005) have pointed out that the club has experienced difficulty in registering its trademark in several Asian markets, particularly in China. In previous applications, the word 'Manchester' had to be erased from the club crest – which is transferred onto much of the club's merchandise – leaving only the word 'United' in connection with the club logos. This was on the grounds that the name of a city should not be used exclusively as part of one football club's name (ibid). However 'United' can be attributed to three clubs that competed in the E.P.L's 2014/15 competition and a further thirteen across the Football League (which are the three professional divisions, comprised of 72 clubs, in the tiers of English football below the E.P.L). Allam should be aware that Hull City's attempts to sell official club merchandise to Chinese and East Asian markets might be undercut by the high quality counterfeit

products that Yi-Chieh Lin (2011) discusses. Indeed, if Manchester United is the standard of the 'global' brand to which Hull City aspire, it is worth noting that the 'underground' economy of counterfeit goods have meant that the club could not capitalise on the large sums of revenue that it had hoped to capture (Sugden, 2011 [2002]; 2004; Sonmez and Yang, 2005). Indeed, sports clothing is an extremely popular counterfeit market (Sugden, 2011 [2002]; 2004; Burgess and Power, 2008). Where once imitation and forged wares were poor quality and displayed distinctively fake features, licensing problems in Asian factories contracted by official retailers to produce authentic merchandise, such as replica kits, has encouraged manufacturers to produce far greater quantities of those items than were contractually agreed (Ross, 2004; Sonmez and Yang, 2005). Consequently, these contractors have the means and materials to manufacture counterfeit replica merchandise which is almost indistinguishable in style and quality to that of the official goods (Sugden, 2011 [2002]). Unlicensed sellers of counterfeit garments thus have the capacity to undercut officially registered traders by a considerable margin, distributing them worldwide under the radar of even the most advanced anti-counterfeiting measures (Sonmez and Yang, 2005).

*U.S. Customs and Border Protection* (2014) reported that it seized 390 cartons of counterfeit 'soccer t-shirts, socks, shorts and other merchandise' in its Savannah (Georgia) port in March 2014. *U.S. Customs and Border Protection* (2014) reported that the apparel was emblazoned with the counterfeited brands of Arsenal, Barcelona, Celtic, Chelsea, Mexican Federation, Paris Saint-Germain, and Real Madrid football clubs. In the network society, nodal points such as important ports are connected in 'spaces of flows' (Castells, 2009 [1996]). In this case, the export port was believed to be Guangzhou (China) where the products were likely to have been produced, where they were sent to Savannah to be sold on. In this case, the transfer of English, Spanish, Scottish, Mexican and French themed goods were produced and likely to be consumed in locales away from these countries. Although accurate estimates of value are difficult to make, *U.S. Customs and Border Protection* (2014) stated that the goods cumulatively had a manufacturer's suggested retail price of \$1,016,399 [USD]. If Allam's rebranded 'Hull City Tigers' were successful in locating a fan-base in China and the Tiger markets, it seems likely that it would fail to transfer into revenues that could be sourced from merchandise in a way that they might for supporters in the UK and Western Europe. As Castells (2009 [1996]) points out, the local tastes and practice in the consumption of overseas products would need to be factored into Allam's analysis.



As noted, a second way that Szymanski (2010) suggests that football clubs try to monetise overseas supporters is through the sale of television broadcast rights. In the latest overseas broadcast rights contracts, the biggest percentile increases in the fees paid to broadcast matches from the E.P.L came from Burma (12,400 per cent), Thailand (432 per cent), 'the Americas' (280.9 per cent), the United States (273.8 per cent), Vietnam (267 per cent), India (225 per cent), Malaysia (114 per cent) and Indonesia (100 per cent). In China, the E.P.L sold the rights on a six-year basis from 2013, not a three-year deal, for £76m - representing a 22.5 per cent increase on 2012-11/2012-13 seasons while Japan and Korea have seen increased deals but not on the scale of some other countries. Indeed, Harris (2013) argued that agreements saw the E.P.L acquire £941m from broadcasters in Asia alone for live rights to matches between 2013/14 and 2015/2016 seasons.<sup>7</sup> However, Harris (2013) breaks the Asia figures down by their broadcasting agreements. His findings are presented in Table 2 (below).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Figures in Table 2 show a wide variation in the final column, which moves beyond the total values of individual national broadcasting contracts to indicate how this value is relative to the size of the population. East Asian markets vary wildly in this analysis. For instance, in Singapore - which has the highest GDP per capita, at \$55,182<sup>8</sup> - television deals for the three seasons are worth £35.20 to each person in its population. Japan and Hong Kong have very similar GDP per capita levels (\$38,492 and \$38,124, respectively) but in the former, E.P.L broadcasting deals are worth 19p per person for the three seasons, whereas in the latter the equivalent figure is much larger, at £17.78 for the same time duration, while SBS ESPN pays the equivalent of 51p per resident in South Korea (GDP per capita, \$25,977) for three years of E.P.L broadcasts. GDP per capita does not appear to have a linear relationship with the E.P.L broadcasting rights values (per capita) in the Tiger economy countries. As earlier noted, in the current round SkyNet paid a much higher price than any broadcaster had ever paid in previous negotiations for the right to broadcast the E.P.L in Burma. This is one of the world's poorest countries where workers earn an average of £819 per year (Harris, 2012). However, SkyNet paid around twenty times more per capita for E.P.L rights in that country than BesTV/SSMG paid for China and Macau, at 2p for each person in the population over three seasons. The reason for such small sums of money per capita paid for E.P.L broadcasts in China (and Macau) may be more attributable to cultural than economic reasons. For instance, in its 'Internet football piracy alert' report, *BBC News* (2009) suggested that many legally ambiguous streams of E.P.L matches were 'pirated' in China. The

cultural practices of the new middle classes across China and the Tiger economy countries vary but the number of supporters in the region should not be assumed to have a linear relationship to an increase in revenues. Rather, specifically in China, it seems that football fans in the country financially pay for their consumer actions in a different way to those in the UK. In the unlikely event that Allam's proposed rebrand would entice sizable numbers of the new middle class in East Asian to support Hull City 'Tigers', transferring such increased numbers of support into increased levels of generated revenue is not straightforward: patterns of consumer behaviour are different in a networked world.

### **Conclusion: Manuel Castells and Hull City 'Tigers' as a Brand in East Asian Markets**

Castells and Ince (2003) call for empirically-driven theoretical analyses of the contemporary social world. Football – and, in particular, the structure and organisation of the E.P.L – with flows of information, people and the various forms of capital across transnational spaces provides a paradigmatic case of Castells' 'network society' in action. The use of Castells' theory leads us to suggest that Allam's rebranding of Hull City may be undermined by the club's position – and likely future position – in the transnational space of elite football clubs.

Castells suggests that locality is important in the transnational space afforded through the network society. Allam's concern should be that Hull City's rebrand for consumers in the Chinese market, which is the biggest in East Asia in respect of population and GDP,<sup>9</sup> operates differently to those in Western Europe with a greater prevalence of counterfeit items, including football club-themed merchandise/sportswear and live-streams of television broadcasts. Should the club be able to grow a fan-base in East Asia, the monetisation of those supporters should not be assumed.

Our use of Castells to understand the potential rebranding allows us to also appraise two important issues in the theory around the rise and development of the network society. First, Castells tells us that in the network society, local sites may connect through transnational flows. The case of Hull City supports this argument. Through its participation in the E.P.L, Hull City exists in a transnational 'space of flows' but these flows have to come from - and go to - a nodal point, which is not abstract but based in a physical locale. These locales could be – for instance - in Hull or Beijing, but consumer practices exist in each, even if the two places are connected by the movement of television broadcasts, brands or cultural object. These practices are not necessarily shared and shaped by cultures that are likely to be removed from the common experience of being a fan. Second, Castells (2009 [1996]) argues that in

the network society, all nodal points contain equal 'power', which is defined in terms of their abilities to absorb, generate and use material, cultural, social and/or informational capital. In the East Asian global region - specifically including China - a trend exists where new middle class consumers strongly favour those products they perceive to reflect positively on how others see them. As a nodal point in the network society with less money, 'prestige' and status than the 'superclubs' of world football, such as Manchester United, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich, it is clear that contrary to Castells (2009 [1996]) suggestion, the case of Hull City shows that hierarchies *can* and *do* exist in networks.

Football fans in East Asia tend to be drawn to those football clubs in European leagues which regularly win trophies that are considered 'prestigious', such as Manchester United and Real Madrid (Deloitte, 2014). Unless Hull City AFC can establish itself as such a club, the promise that Allam believes that the 'Hull City Tigers' brand can confer is likely to prove elusive. What is more, the production and consumption of counterfeit goods is rife in East Asia. Counterfeited merchandise is markedly cheaper than official forms and likely to continue to appeal to E.P.L teams' new middle class fans in East Asia. To this end, Allam and Hull City are not only vying against rival football teams but must contend with the prevalent underground economies which have proven difficult for other football clubs and anti-counterfeit agencies to police (Sugden, 2011 [2002]). It is clear that football fans in East Asian countries have access to and utilise alternative forms of consumption that blur or transgress legal boundaries. For example, despite having the largest population of all Tiger countries, with over 1.3 billion inhabitants, and demonstrating high consumer demand to watch E.P.L football, China paid almost five times less than Singapore (with a population of 5.4m people) to broadcasting rights for the E.P.L (Harris, 2013). Such consumer practices reflect a trend seen in the majority of Tiger countries and can be attributed, at least in part, to the pirate broadcasting of live football. The selling of TV broadcast rights represents the most lucrative form of revenue generation for football clubs and the 'legally ambiguous' streaming of live matches limits the royalties distributed to E.P.L teams and further compounds the challenges that Allam might face when competing in Tiger markets.

## Notes

1. In summary, these regulations were established to prevent professional football clubs spending more than they earn in the pursuit of success and in doing so getting into financial problems which might threaten their long-term survival. The most severe penalty UEFA announced for flouting these regulations was the possibility of a club being disqualified from trans-European competitions while other penalties included fines, the withholding of prize money, and player transfer bans. In 2015, after the club's inaugural season competing in a trans-European competition (UEFA's Europa League tournament) its accounts showed it to have breached FFP regulations, spending more than it generated in 2012/13, as it chased promotion back to the E.P.L. The club agreed to pay a €200,000 fine as punishment and were allowed to compete in the tournament.

2. This remained the case until Malcolm Glazer and his family acquired a majority shareholding in Manchester United in 2005, and delisted it from the stock-exchange. This move was not popular amongst many supporters either, who similarly protested against the way the purchase was financed but did not stop the moves this time (see Millward, 2011; 2013).
3. See also Cleland and Dixon's (2015) discussion of the relative powerlessness of most fan protests.
4. The elastic boundaries of sport's cultural politics are clearly felt in attitudes toward club name changes. For instance, around the turn of the twenty-century, many football clubs in England changed their names to reflect their professionalisation and move away from their historical base of amateur works or church teams while more recently many elite British rugby league clubs altered their names to replicate marketing strategies found in some North American sports.
5. Hutchins and Rowe (2012) provide another rare example of work which centrally uses Castells ideas in the broad area of the 'sociology of sport'. Specifically, their book explores issues emerging in a newly networked media-sport age, facilitated by the maturation of practices of using the Internet – which is now widely available through multiple devices.
6. This became a blueprint which India later replicated in 1991, following an economic crisis owing to external debt (Castells, 2009 [1996]). Today, when combined, China and India are home to over one-third of the world's population and in 2011, China and India were estimated to make up approximately 20 per cent of world GDP (The World Bank, 2014).
7. Harris (2013) points out that for 2013/14-2015/16 seasons, the Asian market's television broadcasts are worth £940.8m, Europe (excluding the UK) is £607.2m, Sub-Saharan Africa is £205m, the Middle-East and North Africa is £204.8m, North America and the Caribbean is £179.2m and South America is £96m.
8. Gross Domestic Product, GDP, per capita figures are in USD, based on 2013 figures and have been sourced from The World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>
9. According to The World Bank, China's total GDP in 2013 was \$9,240,270,452,050 [USD]. This made it the second largest economy, after USA. Source: The World Bank: [http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?order=wbapi\\_data\\_value\\_2013+wbapi\\_data\\_value+wbapi\\_data\\_value-last&sort=desc](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?order=wbapi_data_value_2013+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc)

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TABLE 1: EPL club's social media presence in East Asia.

Club	Total Mentions on Weibo	Weibo Account	Weibo Followers	Chinese Website
<b>Manchester United</b>	24,546,048	Yes	8,201,445	Yes
<b>Arsenal</b>	13,205,048	Yes	3,397,815	Yes
<b>Chelsea</b>	12,912,244	Yes	2,384,037	Yes
<b>Liverpool</b>	11,406,984	Yes	2,395,135	Yes
<b>Manchester City</b>	7,480,936	Yes	8,340,729	Yes
<b>Tottenham Hotspur</b>	1,987,768	Yes	1,339,918	Yes
<b>Everton</b>	1,455,772	No	-	No
<b>Southampton</b>	1,105,232	No	-	No
<b>Sunderland</b>	936,148	Yes	16,409	No
<b>Crystal Palace</b>	874,288	No	-	No
<b>Swansea City</b>	828,924	No	-	Yes
<b>Stoke City</b>	573,036	No	-	No
<b>West Ham United</b>	350,540	No	-	No
<b>Aston Villa</b>	313,424	Yes	276,800	Yes
<b>Hull City</b>	284,556	No	-	No
<b>Burnley</b>	197,952	No	-	No
<b>Leicester City</b>	164,363	No	-	No
<b>West Bromwich Albion</b>	140,216	No	-	No
<b>Queens Park Rangers</b>	133,321	No	-	No
<b>Newcastle United</b>	49,488	No	-	No

Source O'Neil in *FCBusiness*, March 2015: 9.

TABLE 2: EPL television broadcasting deals in Asia, 2013-16.

Country	£ (m)	Population (m)	£ per person
<b>Thailand (including Laos and Cambodia)</b>	204.8	88.9	2.30
<b>Singapore</b>	190.1	5.4	35.20
<b>Hong Kong</b>	128.0	7.2	17.78
<b>Malaysia</b>	128.0	30.5	4.20
<b>India &amp; W Asia (including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives)</b>	92.8	1,644	0.06
<b>Indonesia</b>	51.2	249	0.21
<b>China</b>	32.0	1357	0.02
<b>South Korea</b>	25.6	50.4	0.51
<b>Burma</b>	25.6	62	0.41
<b>Japan</b>	24.3	127	0.19
<b>Vietnam</b>	22.4	90	0.25
<b>Others</b>	16.0	489	0.03
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>940.8</b>	<b>4,200</b>	<b>0.22</b>

Source: Harris (2013).