

# **The Impact of Media Globalization of English Football: The Kuwaiti Experience**

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## **Abstract**

The new technology of broadcasting, sports coverage, sports casters, and sports analysis, especially in Europe, have attracted many local sports players and fans to enjoy and imitate famed European players. The globalization of football (soccer) has affected sports culture in Kuwait. In-depth interviews with 17 interviewees including sports academics, experts, practitioners, sports coaches, sports players, fans, and sports reporters revealed that the English Premier League (EPL) not only entertained the fans in Kuwait, but also affected their popular culture behaviour and local football league performance and attendance. The EPL also affected fandom lifestyle and expenditure through expensive sports subscriptions or even traveling to Europe to attend football matches.

*Keywords:* football, soccer, sports globalization, Kuwait, fandom, popular culture

## **The Impact of Media Globalization of English Football: The Kuwaiti Experience**

This study examines, for the first time, aspects of the globalization of football (soccer) and its impact on the sporting cultures of Arab Gulf States, in particular Kuwait. The scale, scope and speed of globalization and its impact on the social and cultural formations of sport have been unrelenting in the early-21<sup>st</sup> Century. Sport, at community, national, and international levels is increasingly fashioned by transnational corporate interests, from the key sport manufacturing brands to media organisations, sponsors and advertising (Rowe, 2011). Football clubs are focusing more on commercial and media growth (Doidge et al., 2019). The modern media not only spread sport globally, but also created universal norms of specific behaviour practices that changed values and lifestyles of fans outside the proper sport environment (Bondin et al., 2020). This hyper-commodification of sport is inextricably linked to the transnational flows of televised sport and brands, which is part of wider processes of material and cultural globalization, or “media sports cultural complex” (Horne, 2006).

The processes of globalization have affected the sale of television sports rights, marketization of international sporting competitions, and new forms of media sport consumption through niche, networked and mobile media formats. Global sport media require constant critical attention to explain how these processes operate, interconnect, and change in different places and at different times. As previous research on globalization has observed, globalization is not a linear process, and has differential impact on cultures and societies (Appadurai, 1996; Robinson, 2007). This work examines the influence of the English Premier League (EPL), the premium men’s association football competition, on the cultural and capital flows of football (soccer) in Kuwait, a relatively small but influential Arab Gulf State. The focus on

Kuwait provides a specific case study on how these processes are destabilising sport in different parts of the world, impacting on modern football and its communications, and the authors believe, identifies some new knowledge on the emergent influence of Arab Gulf States on contemporary global media sport. The analysis focuses on three inter-related issues: 1) the impact of the EPL on Kuwaiti football fandom; 2) the impact of the EPL on domestic Kuwaiti football culture; and 3) the motivations for Kuwaiti commercial and cultural interests in English football. This poses further questions on the dynamics and conflicts created within the globalization of sport, and the challenges faced by those trying to defend more localised sporting cultures.

### **British Football in the Arabian State of Kuwait**

The friendly relationship between Kuwait and Britain goes back to 1899 when Kuwait signed a protectorate agreement with Britain. This relationship endured even after Kuwait gained independence in 1961 and opened the way for economic, educational, developmental and sports collaboration (Aldousari, 2004). Young British Royal Navy officers of *HMS Fox*, who played football during their station in Kuwait, are credited with the introduction of football to Kuwait. The British exported sport across the world along its trade routes, including the Middle East (Mangan, 2011; Mangan, 1992, 2001). The development of football in a colonial context cemented cultural bonds with Britain, and created a football culture in Kuwait (Hughson, 2009), and the first official game of football was played in 1933 (Al-Ebraheem, 2005). This historical strong relation with the British encouraged many Kuwaitis to study in Great Britain. Since football is number one sport in Kuwait, students became attached to the English football leagues and turn into fans for popular English teams. In 1969 satellite transmission enabled Kuwait TV to broadcast the FA Cup Final between Manchester

City and Leicester City for the first time, allowing Kuwaiti fans to watch foreign domestic football live.

Kuwait's historical association with Britain as an imperial power created a long-standing popularity for football in the country which included the televising of the FA Cup Final since 1969. More recent influences of the British Army during the Persian Gulf War (1990-91) and the influx of British oil workers introduced further interest in dominant English clubs and a general interest in the EPL. Increased television coverage of the EPL, especially by beIN SPORTS has rapidly transformed an interest and deep affiliations with English clubs among the population. Many fans have increasingly engaged with the EPL through the Internet, as well as through video games. Many fans are lured by the international stars of the EPL and the high standard of play, which is in contradistinction to the lack of professionalism in the domestic Kuwaiti leagues. The intense and constant media focus on the EPL has embedded English football in Kuwaiti popular culture, and many fans invest time and money on following English clubs at home and through travelling to the UK. This has led to supporters' clubs being established, effectively institutionalising the support for English football in Kuwait. The influence of EPL coverage through television and gaming has led to more girls and women being interested in football, a cultural departure within the traditional social and gender norms of the country.

All Middle East sport fans are particularly passionate about football, although there is a split along gender lines, with more men being emotionally connected to particular clubs than women (Theodorakis et al., 2019). Families and friends are considered strong influencers in the selection of local support (Theodorakis et al., 2017). Gulf States fans predominantly pursue their passion for football through television, increasingly using online platforms to view European domestic

competitions rather than local leagues and competitions (Theodorakis et al., 2019; Theodorakis et al., 2017). In 2016, Sports MENA conducted a survey of over 100,000 respondents in the Middle East which found that football is the most popular sports in the region (SMG Insight, 2016). For many, televised football produces “effective tools in improving global communications and bridging relationships between individuals and countries” (Al Ganideh & Good, 2016, p. 12).

### **Kuwait Football and its Position in Global Sport**

The Kuwait Football Association was established in 1952, and it was acknowledged in 1957. It joined FIFA in 1962, became part of Asian Football Confederation in 1964 and joined Union of Arab Football Associations 1974. The Kuwaiti football league officially started in the 1961-1962 season with seven teams. In the 70s and the 80s the Kuwait National Team was the best in the Gulf and Asia leagues. It qualified for the World Cup in 1982. In 1998, FIFA ranked the Kuwait football team 24th, but this has fallen to 148th in 2021, with 97th average position since FIFA created world rankings (FIFA, 2021). One of the unique characteristics of football fan culture in Kuwait is rooted back into early stage of their childhood due to the fact it was the only popular sport at that time. Traditionally, most of the games were played around local neighbourhoods “*alferjan*” or in the high school league where most of the crowd watch the games standing around the field until sunset. These games were essential for local clubs scouting to find talented players (Abbas, 2004). In early days, the fans get ready a week prior to any football match especially if it was between top rival teams, and during the match they get involved through clapping, shouting, dancing and singing. Each team had its own fan club leader who guided the fans through the game with local musical instrument such as *Haban* ‘Scottish bagpipe’ and *Altabel* ‘Drum’ (Behehaneh, 19-7-2020).

In Kuwait, there are many factors influencing the decision making process such as the politicians, the government, and the royal household creating a bureaucratic system that causes a resilient barriers for change in which the person not the position has the authority which is based on “customs and precedence” (Aldousari, 2004, p. 12). Those individuals have the power to hire people who have good social ties with for the organizations to be under their control but not necessarily have technical skills or a sport administration background.

Currently, there are 15 local teams in the league. The Kuwaiti league is not professional, but each team can have four professional players with one stateless (person without a nationality) player. The local teams compete in six competitions: the Premier League which is the top division, the First Division League, the Emir’s Cup, the Crown Prince’s Cup, The Super Cup, and the Association Cup. There are also leagues for players under 19, under 17, under 15 and under 13.

Today, most, if not all, print newspapers in Kuwait allocate two pages or more to cover European leagues (English, Italian, Spanish, German and French). Also Kuwait local TV channels (KTV Sports, KTV Sports Plus, Al-Adala ‘private’ & Alrai ‘private’) and radio stations provide results and news of European football including EPL. Many Kuwaitis are active and loyal fans of European teams. Fewer fans attend local Kuwaiti league matches, where the stadiums are almost empty, except for top teams, and even for them the stadiums are not full. Kuwaitis stay late at night watching European games and many of them purchase tickets and travel to attend the football games. In 2018, the rise of Mohammad Salah with Liverpool and wining the best player in EPL enticed not only Kuwaitis, but many Arab football fans to watch EPL.

To attract more customers (Kuwaitis and expatriates), almost all the coffee shops (offering Shisha) outdoor and indoor provide at least two big TV screens (some coffee shops have at least five and, in fact, one popular coffee shop is called “Man United”) to broadcast the European leagues including EPL. One year’s subscription for beIN SPORTS (a spinoff of Al Jazeera Media Network 2003-2013) cost about 300 dollars. Abu Dhabi Sports TV channel (part of the government-owned media) who had the rights to broadcast the EPL for the amount of \$360 million (Jones, 2013), lost the rights to beIN SPORTS who started broadcasting the EPL in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 23 countries that include TV, the Internet and mobile phones accessing to 19 HD high-definition channels (12 in the Arabic language) broadcasting 380 games per season until the end of the 2018/19 season (Al Arabiya News, 2013; aljazeera.com, 2013; Connolly, 2015; Ferris, 2013). The cost of obtaining the rights of EPL was not revealed, but Orbit Showtime Network (OSN) executive David Butorac claimed that the price of broadcasting the EPL went beyond the “level at which broadcasters can make a profit” (Jones, 2013). In 2018, EPL granted beIN SPORTS broadcasting rights of 380 matches per season exclusively live in MENA until 2022 (Premier League, 2018). It believed to be worth around US \$315 million (Connolly, 2015). Before switching to beIN SPORTS, Al Jazeera contracted with Sky former sports broadcasters Richard Keys and Andy Gray to host the English coverage of EPL.

Remarkably, coverage of European leagues continues in the local press, local TV, and Radio. The local newspapers still allocate at least two pages for European football leagues including EPL covering scores, news, reports, pictures, and players traded to news teams (see figures 1 & 2). Local TV stations also allocate programs covering European football leagues including EPL games, scores, and news. The fans



can listen to live EPL games in BBC English broadcast on FM 100.1 and latest news and discussion in local AM and FM radio stations. There are many English fan clubs in Kuwait including *Liverpool Fan Club Kuwait, Manchester United Supporters Club, Arsenal Kuwait Supporters Club and Chelsea FC Supporters Club Kuwait*. The activities of these associations include gathering, fund raising, sports activities, and collaboration with other fan associations. Lately, many official football academies have been established in Kuwait, including *British Football Academy, Arsenal Soccer School Kuwait, Chelsea Academy, Manchester Academy and Royal Liverpool Academy Kuwait*.

Kuwaiti engagement in the world of football, is therefore worthy of critical attention, to explain the increasingly global political economy of the game. However, we can never hope to understand all the profound influences in the complex field global media sport (Rowe, 2011). What we provide here is one case study of a dispersed phenomenon, an analysis of its specific influence on one nation's relationship with global media sport, and a critical engagement with our existing knowledge on the interconnectedness between sport and globalization. Arab fans were attracted to international football teams, especially the European football leagues, creating a bridge between individuals and countries, while decreasing individual animosity toward foreign countries (Al Ganideh & Good, 2016). Drawing on previous work of one of the authors, we examine four ways that media sports connect with the values of nationhood: constructing historical bonds (norms and values connected to the past), sharing national identities (comradeship), national geographical boundaries (mapping media territories), and popular culture (flagging the nation daily) (Haynes, 2015). Thus, the study poses three research questions:

**RQ1:** What kind of impacts does the globalization of the EPL have on Kuwaiti sport fandom?

**RQ2:** How and to what extent has the EPL impacted on the culture of domestic Kuwaiti league football?

**RQ3:** How has the globalisation of the EPL affected business and commercial interest in English football?

### **Methodology**

The aim of this study is to show how and in which way the EPL affected football (soccer) popular culture in Kuwait by focusing on globalization factors that are transforming fandom from the local to the global. The researchers conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews to develop rich data and allow the participants to freely express their views (Weerakkody, 2015). The study remained flexible throughout the work process until an explanation surfaced, in order to minimize any bias in the work (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Weerakkody, 2015). Purposeful sampling was based on specific characters or expertise in football as player, fan, coach, sports journalist and academic to meet the purpose of the investigation (Keyton, 2018; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This sampling procedure helps the researchers to obtain a list of potential participants for the study, and then select the desired number of people from the list (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

The researchers recruited 35 participants, but only 17 met the inclusion criteria of the purposeful sample, which were that they must be a football fan, player, or expert in football, and also an EPL fan. The participants consisted of female football players and fans (4), male coaches, fans, players, sports journalists, former EPL team owner (12), and former Serbian coach for the Kuwait international football team (1). The authors conducted 17 in-depth interviews each lasting between 32–55 minutes in

order to have sufficient data to formulate an understanding of the cultural sphere or phenomenon as suggested by other researchers (Bernard, 2017; Hennink et al., 2020). The participants were recruited through different English football fan clubs in Kuwait, Kuwait Football Association, and from Kuwait University mass communications special topic sports course. The initial contact with the participants was done by phone to setup day and time for an online meeting or face-to-face personal in-depth interview.

The period of data collection took six months starting from February to July 2020. All the interviews except one were conducted in Arabic, so the researchers had the questions and respondents' answers translated into English by a certified translation expert for authenticity. A set of questions were formulated and assessed for efficacy in answering the research questions and testing the hypothesis. The in-depth interviews were audiotaped and transcribed then inserted into ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software. All participants gave verbal and written consent to use their names and titles in the study. Comparisons of the notes taken with the data of the interviews were examined to find commonalties among the respondents to establish certain codes. Then these codes were introduced into ATLAS.ti for additional analysis in of themes, patterns, and recurrence of certain quotes to show connections among the respondents' quotes.

The ATLAS.ti data analysis software produced rich data with 191 different quotations and 49 codes. The in-depth interviews formed four main themes: *Technology and EPL Media Coverage*, *EPL Global Effect on Local League and Pop Culture*, *EPL Features of Attractions* and *Fandom* answering the two research questions and testing the hypothesis (see Table 1).

(Insert Table 1 about here)

## Results

### The Impact of the EPL on Kuwaiti Sport Fandom

Many participants cited access to digital technologies, in particular new multi-channel platforms and the internet, as vital for opening up access to EPL matches and transforming Kuwaiti sport fandom. The former coach of the Kuwait National and local team, Mohammed Ibrahim a 57-year-oldyear-old, explained how the EPL became part of everyday media consumption:

[The] EPL became part of their daily lives, especially for those born in year the 2000 and later, because the technology changed everything that meant kids knew everything about EPL and players' names. The current media technologies, media culture and media coverage made everybody follow the EPL (Ibrahim, 1-3-2020).

The belief that new media technologies began to transform the consumption of football was supported by leading supporters of English football in Kuwait. Yahya Zakariya, a 35-year-oldyear-old banker, and the head of Arsenal Fan Association, noted that social media and new broadcasting technologies was crucial in opening up access to EPL games. Zakariya explained how the limited exposure to English football on terrestrial television soon switched to multi-platform digital television as access became more accessible and flexible:

In my teenager days, I remember how KTV3 (Kuwait TV sports channel) broadcasts a few EPL games via regular antenna, then the rights went to Art cable, then ShowTime and now beIN SPORTS... so with the new broadcast technological advancement I think we will definitely go into online which allows us to watch sports anywhere everywhere and at any time ).

English football has become the most popular sport in Kuwait with extensive coverage attracting advertising revenue, leading to the expansion of sport journalism as a profession. Jasim Ashkanani a 68-year-old, Deputy Managing Editor of Alqabas local newspaper and sports editor, identified the main reason his newspaper is interested in covering the EPL, which is focused on meeting the loyal dedication of Kuwaiti fans to the open and free-scoring nature of English football. He also acknowledges the impact it has had on domestic football:

Our youth are open to the English league, Spanish league, German league, and Italian league no one is following the Kuwaiti local league. I would rather be in an empty stadium without players in England than watching the local league. The local football league's players and fans try to imitate the players in the EPL... just look to the street you will see people wearing EPL shirts. They consider the players in the EPL role models for them (Ashkanani).

The regular reporting and normalization of English football in Kuwaiti media coverage has given the EPL a cultural hegemony within the nation's sporting culture (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007). Abdul-Aziz Attiyah a 47-year-old an engineer and a TV sport host, explained how the significance given to English football by Kuwaiti media has fostered more interest in particular clubs, players and, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, travelling to England to watch important EPL games (Attiyah). By supplementing match reports with analysis of star players and elite clubs, including tactics, skills, playing styles, performance data, and even lifestyle choices of star players (hairstyles, tastes and opinions) Kuwaiti fans develop deeper bonds with the English game. Former national coach Ibrahim emphasized how Kuwaiti fan and media interest is focused on the star quality of players in England:

It is a big league that includes very well-known players in England, Europe and the world... in fact we follow the EPL from the beginning to the end even more than following our local league. That is why all the media in Kuwait including newspapers, radio, TV and even online cover the EPL. This is good for the English because they attract people around the world to watch their organized and exciting league (Ibrahim).

Beyond live coverage, the paratexts of European football more broadly play an important role in cementing the cultural hegemony elite clubs and players have in the Kuwaiti context. Respondents mentioned the importance of football video gaming for exposure to top European leagues, teams, and players for the first time. Zainab Al-Tamimi, a 21-year-old female player for Kuwait University women's football team, explained how PlayStation introduced her to elite European men's football:

I was first introduced to the EPL and European leagues when I started playing PlayStation games and knew the name of the players and teams from FIFA games. I then became a fan for Real Madrid and moved to EPL league because it's very competitive and you cannot predict who will be the champion every year (Al-Tamimi).

For some young women video games offered a space to develop their fandom away from public scrutiny and transition to watching live EPL games on that platform. Alwasf Alsalahat, a 23-year-old Kuwait University a law student and EPL fan, explains when she was a child it was not popular for girls to play football outside the house and TV games were the best way to learn about football (Al-Salahat). She added:

I started to love football from an early age while I was playing Sony PlayStation with my brothers. I used to be a fan of Al-Arabi local team, but I

stopped watching local football games because the league really raises my blood pressure so I did not want to waste my time on it. One day, I saw my brother was watching a game with Chelsea and I started watching the matches until I became a fan of Chelsea too (Al-Salahat).

Similarly, Fajer Ahmed, a 30-year-old an accountant and a football player at Kuwait Women's National Team illustrates how the online sports activities affected the Kuwaiti sports culture. She explains:

Look at the EPL and see how the games are interestingly broadcast. It's very exciting. If you want to compare check out the Twitter trends and you will find that the tweets of Kuwaiti of EPL and European leagues is more than the local league (Ahmad).

The development of fandom through video gaming platforms is a direct result of the global licensing of the EPL brand via the FIFA game and international popularity of video game playing. This has broadened exposure to leading English teams and their array of international star players.

The Gulf and the local media coverage of EPL games has led to deep passions for English domestic football. Bader Hasan, founder of the Liverpool Fan Association in Kuwait and EPL ticket seller, explained why for many the EPL is considered more attractive than other leagues:

The EPL is the most expensive league in the world. The players' transfers, media coverage, financial support from the English sport union, which is different from other leagues, especially with TV broadcasting where it is divided equally between the teams without any discrimination that make all teams have equal opportunity to appear in TV, make the league fun to

watch... If you see, for example, Spanish league 70% for two teams (Real Madrid and Barcelona) and 30% for the rest of the teams (B. Hasan).

The competitiveness of the EPL was considered a key aspect of its attractiveness. Many respondents agreed that the attraction of the unpredictability of EPL games is one important factor that fascinates football viewers. Ali Al-Khaldi, a 23-year-old with a mass communications degree observes that EPL popularity in the Kuwaiti culture is due to the fact that, “You can’t predict who will win the championship, unlike the Spanish league which is only between two teams like Tom and Jerry”. He added that EPL got a touch of enjoyment that no other leagues got such as the fast pace of the game and the players football skills (Al-Khaldi). Another respondent said, "What is exciting about the EPL is that the competition is so fierce you don’t know who will win” (A. Hasan). The EPL also has more big matches between the top clubs than other European leagues, and the English football fans have an encouraging style that differs from other fans with enthusiasm, singing, and cheering. Yousef Assad, a 68-year-old retired English teacher and a loyal fan of Liverpool since 1971 explained, “Having sports channels covering EPL and other European football leagues with the latest advanced broadcasting techniques encourages Kuwaiti fans to watch and become loyal fans” (Assad).

Finally, the timing of EPL games and the English commentators has been key to the attraction of many Kuwaiti football fans. Ahmad Dashti 62-year-old and a former goalkeeper coach for Kuwait National and currently a goalkeeper coach for Al-Yarmouk local team with more than 35 years’ experience as a player and coach believes the EPL is increasingly given undue prominence to the EPL in Kuwaiti print media and broadcasting. As Mohammad Dashti, a 39-year-old working in Kuwait Fire



Force explained: “The time of the EPL matches is perfect for our timing - mainly afternoon - while the English commentators made EPL even more popular because they provide rich football information” (M. Dashti).

### **Analyzing Impacts of the EPL on Domestic Kuwaiti Football Culture**

Existing studies of the globalization of sport place emphasis on how the diffusion of modern sport, through standardization and organizational norms, have influenced the structures and cultures of sport, with first European dominance and subsequently North American influences creating a ‘global idiom’ of sport (Maguire, 2015, 2011). In this context, interviewees were asked what they thought about the dominance of non-Kuwaiti sporting leagues, primarily the EPL, and whether they were shaping the structure and cultures of sport in the country. On this subject, interviewees focused on the differences in the quality of football, differences in media coverage, as well as its influence on the wider popular cultural dynamics of football.

Interviewees discussed how they felt about the influence of the EPL on how football is organized and played in Kuwait. Goran Tufegdžić, coach of Kuwait National Team from 2009 to 2013, stressed the EPL had limited effect on local leagues and players largely because of the lack of infrastructure and financial support. However, he did recognize there is a desire to mimic global stars, albeit poorly due to an impoverished standard of player.

I don’t think local players or coaches try to imitate the EPL playing style because the local league has different playing style than the English. The mentality of the players in local league is different from English mentality. But from my experience, I saw some local players who like famous football stars in the EPL try to imitate their style of playing, but they fail to do so. If the media focus on the organizational management and the benefit they can

get from the EPL, and if the officials seriously adopt the management in the EPL, it can make some positive development in the local league in Kuwait (Tufegdžić).

Most the interviewees stated that EPL's attractions were: unpredictability and competition; skill level and the fast-paced playing style and tactics; professionalism and player fitness; star players and coaches; and the richness of sportscasting information. Kuwaiti coaches, in particular, emphasized how the information and insight into the world's top players and coaches have influenced some practices in Kuwaiti football. For instance, football coach Dashti explained that when he was a player in a local team, he used to follow the EPL to learn new ideas, styles, strategy, and tricks which he tried to apply in games. This mimicry of the EPL also raises hopes that the level of Kuwaiti football might someday improve. The reach of English football coverage into local media markets has been a key influence on fan allegiances, often to the detriment of supporters of Kuwaiti club football. Coach Dashti fears Kuwaiti media consumers have effectively moved from following news and coverage of local leagues to EPL games, reducing the number of fans attending the local league, as they prefer to stay in front of the TV watching the EPL or other European leagues (A. Dashti). As coach Dashti explains this also has an impact on the quality of Kuwaiti football:

If you look to the coverage of the EPL as an advantage for the football players playing style or the coaches, I don't see any benefits. On the field, I do not see a positive reflection on the players nor the coaches. It is only useful for entertainment as a fan. I do not see the EPL positively useful for management, coaching, playing or even for fans.

Coach Ibrahim had similar views:

I do get ideas when I watch the EPL games, and I went to Manchester United and attended a workshop, but the basic facilities we have in our team or league will not allow to practice the ideas we learned from the EPL because we don't have a professional league. You cannot apply what you see in the EPL in our local league. You may apply a small portion, but not the idea as a whole. We work here more than what the coaches do over there because the EPL has a well-organized management, the coach only works with his team, but in our local league we work as coach, administrator, employee almost everything to get the team succeed (Ibrahim).

Another interviewee, Al-Khaldi confirmed why most football fans stopped watching the local league:

The local league has no skills, no competitions, no good stadiums, and the football fields are so bad, I don't blame the fans for shifting to European leagues to compensate for the bad local football league (Al-Khaldi).

The lack of professionalism featured in other responses. Coach Tufegdžić explained that the immaturity and lack of professionalism in Kuwaiti football league may, ultimately, gain some benefit from exposure to the EPL and other European leagues:

Media have great power to affect the local team through their coverage of EPL, and they can help develop the local football teams focusing on EPL federation that may bring up the idea of professionalizing the local league which will positively help improve the football in Kuwait through analyzing each match, share good opinions of the games, report on issues that will help the players and coaches in the local league (Tufegdžić).

Such views were supported by others, including Ashkanani, who argued the key problem for Kuwaiti football was the lack of a culture of professionalism.

I wish media academics would help us find a way to bring up the local league to a more exciting level than currently. I wish we will be on the level of the fourth league in England, at least. We will have the right football system of coaching and players, and sport administrators (Ashkanani).

Other coaches took a similar optimistic tone on the potential for the EPL to have a positive impact on local football. Ibrahim explained that the broader organizational structures of the EPL and European leagues offer insights to how the sport might be organized in Kuwait: “there is a playing culture, management culture, coaching culture, and refereeing culture and advertising makes the money to create pleasure” (Ibrahim). This argument was further elaborated by coach Dashti, with the caveat that in his experience Kuwaiti players were more interested in the style of players than the technical substance of their play:

As coaches we are benefiting from EPL... the way they play, players’ fitness, players’ 90 minute endurance which give a technique for the coach to manage the game, but our players only care about the physical part of the EPL players like imitating the way they dress, their haircut, and the shoes the popular players wear in the EPL or their tattoos. What Mohammad Salah wears in the game next day it is purchased by players locally, but Mohammad Salah’s fitness or style is not their interest (A. Dashti).

Coach Dashti’s comments underline his ultimate belief as a coach that the EPL does not have a positive impact on Kuwait local football. ‘Professionalism’, Dashti argues, ‘doesn’t exist in Kuwait’ and local players do not even follow the basic principles of diet (M. Dashti). Other interviewees noted Kuwaiti players try to impersonate the

EPL playing style, style of striking, standing and even when they celebrate scoring a goal, because players were also fans of the EPL.

The influence on the presentational style of the EPL has not stopped on the pitch but has also influenced sports programs:

In the media, we try to imitate the English league how to cover the games.

Media sports casters try to learn from Sky or BBC coverage of the games such as the analysis, production, scores and we try to imitate their coverage for our local media (Attiyah).

The cultural effect of the EPL has led to some progressive social change in Kuwaiti sport. The encouragement of girls and women to become either football fans or football players, which runs counter to traditional Kuwaiti culture, reflects the complex cultural dynamics of the globalization of sport. For example, Alsalahat explained how football had changed some of the everyday social relations in her family. Her parents supported her watching football games and her mother started to watch and cheer her favorite team, but she wryly noted, “When my team loses, I don’t talk to my family for the entire day” (Al-Salahat).

EPL’s effect can also be seen through both the behavioral and consumer cultures it promotes. In the imitation of hairstyles, acts on the field especially after scoring, global branded sportswear or shoes, and sport tourism to the UK to cheer the team on the football field. Dashti explained:

I spend around 1,500 KD (\$5,000) plus 500 KD (\$1,600) on uniforms. I take my wife and my little kid to watch the EPL live. On my honeymoon, I took my wife to an Arsenal game (M. Dashti).

Similarly, Zakariya assigns money from his salary every year for traveling to watch EPL and European games, and his bank makes efforts to promote champion leagues

and to involve fans in watching football games in a live environment (Zakariya). He adds:

My annual budget for EPL games is between 5 to 6 thousand KD (\$16,000 to \$19,500) which I start to plan my travel trips upon the games of Arsenal. I have to travel between three to five times every season to watch at least two matches, but we purchase the tickets first then we arrange the rest of the traveling preparations (Zakariya).

Other participants even use their school allowance, not to buy textbooks or school supplies, but EPL T-shirts, as explained by Al-Salahat: “I use my university allowance to buy my favourite EPL T-shirts”. Al-Timimi argues that EPL has negatively affected the local league but has a positive effect on people. She explains that the “impact was seen through the female football new private academies, the hair style trends of Ronaldo and other famous players and the T-shirt purchase habit” (Al-Tamimi). Hussain Al-Ali, a 23-year-old with a radio and TV degree added that some female university students wear their teams’ T-shirts on campus right after certain games to show off in front of other students that their teams have won (Al-Ali). Other Kuwaiti football, Noura Al-Hashash, 22-year-old fans look at the famous football players as a ‘role model’ which encourages them imitate their life style (Al-Hashash).

An analysis of how the EPL has influenced the football culture in Kuwait reflects broader aspects of the globalization of sport and pressures many nations face to embed professional norms and commercialization as the driver of their sporting cultures and infrastructure (Maguire, 2015, 2011). Like many media across the world, the Kuwaiti media has both succumb and promoted the virtues of dominant sport leagues like the EPL in order to service a growing desire among its readers, listeners and viewers for such globally elite sport competitions. However, these processes

have impacted on Kuwaiti sport culture in contradictory way, both illustrating the differences in the infrastructure of the sport, as well as introducing some key cultural changes.

### **The Appeal of the EPL for Kuwaiti Investment and Commerce**

Another motivation for Kuwaiti interest in English football occurred following the acquisition of Championship side and former European Cup winners Nottingham Forest by wealthy businessman Fawaz Al-Hasawi in 2012. Al-Hasawi had previously invested in Kuwaiti league champions Qadsia SC and his investment in English football opened further motivations for Kuwaiti media to report on the English game. As Hasan notes: “Mr. Fawaz Al-Hasawi made it easy for the local press to come to England to cover his team, making a positive impact on the local teams” (B. Hasan).

Even though Forest played in the second tier of English football, the acquisition produced a fillip to the local media’s interest in English football and the Premier League. ‘After buying Nottingham Forest, we noticed the fans became interested in the EPL, either from the calls we get through our TV show, Twitter or sport sites’ (Attiyah). Fawaz Al-Hasawi, former owner of Nottingham Forest, explains the main reason behind buying the club: ‘It has a history as a brand, and one of the best clubs in England who won the European Cup in 1979 and 1980’. This sense of Gulf investors buying into an English football club with heritage had occurred with the sale of Manchester City to Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan, a billionaire member of the Abu Dhabi ruling family in 2008 and, in 2021 the sale of Newcastle United to the Public Investment Fund the investment arm of the Saudi Arabian state.

Al-Hasawi's intentions when buying Forest in 2012 were to rekindle the fortunes of the club which had dropped out of the EPL in 1999. He explains how his investment transformed interest in the club from Kuwaiti perspective:

Many Kuwaitis became fans of Nottingham Forest because I bought the club. Also the media in Kuwait became interested on covering the Nottingham Forest games after I became the owner. I made the stadium look like a Kuwaiti club with the flag and Amir's picture hanged there. When I was young, one of my dreams was to own an English football club and this came true in 2012 (Al-Hasawi).

Al-Hasawi claimed that he invested in Nottingham because he had full ownership and the team's excellent history. He believes his purchase increased the popularity of Kuwait sports and improved the Kuwaiti local football teams (Al-Hasawi, 3-5-2020). He even brought some local players to join the team, including striker Badar Al-Mutawa and goalkeeper Khalid Al-Rashidi. The special characteristics of EPL, the weakness of the local leagues, and the advancement of media coverage all encouraged Kuwaiti football lovers to become fans of English teams. For some, the level of support became intense and deeply loyal. In terms of Forest, fans invested money, time and strong sentiments to support the club, including visiting the UK to attend matches. The Kuwaiti fanbase for forest was underpinned by extensive reporting in the Kuwaiti press, such as the newspaper Alrai which constantly covered Forest during Al-Hasawi reign. However, the media coverage and support for Forest was soon diminished once Al Hasawi relinquished ownership of the club in May 2017. However, the club's fortunes never improved and the fan base in Nottingham became increasingly frustrated with some of the decisions he made and the directions in which it led the club (BBC News, 2017). British journalist Paul



Taylor subsequently summarized Al-Hasawi's tenure as person who wanted to be loved and adored but without a plan (Taylor, 2020). During Al-Hasawi's tenure, Forest had eight managers in four years. The entire episode served as a warning to international investors in football clubs where new owners failed to understand the history and traditions of the club they had bought, and in spite of best intentions, were advised wrongly in terms of core management staff and investment in players.

### **Conclusion**

This study addresses the impact of EPL globalization on the football (soccer) popular culture on the Arab Middle East, particularly the State of Kuwait. In-depth interviews with people closely associated with Kuwaiti football (soccer), including coaches, players, fans, sports media, academics, and a club owner revealed that EPL has positively and negatively impacted the Kuwaiti local football league, media and popular culture. The interviewees provide evidence of both positive and negative influences on Kuwaiti sporting cultures, in particular its impact on support for international club football and its impact on the domestic league in Kuwait. It has also explored the motivations behind investment in English football from the Gulf state and its fleeting impact on media and fan interest in Championship club Nottingham Forest.

The feedback from the youth revealed high level of pessimistic views and frustrations regarding the reality of Kuwait football environment. They felt that the Kuwaiti sport administrators shutdown the communication with young athletes and fans without listening to their concerns to boost football sport in Kuwait. On the other hand, the football sport veterans (academics and professionals) provided a thick feedback description about the millstone of Kuwait football history showing a pattern

of reoccurring conflicts and disagreements among government sport officials, athletes, and coaches without a futuristic vision for Kuwait glob football sport.

However, the media and supporter focus on the EPL has arguably harmed interest in Kuwaiti domestic football and investment in it. Fans have abandoned the local league to follow EPL or other European leagues, poorly reflecting the standard and lack of professionalism of local players. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the EPL affected the style of football in Kuwait, with several coaches criticising the mimicry of hairstyles and behaviour of players. Many believe this has negatively impacted on the quality of football played in the country, although there is also hope that the professional ethic of the EPL could have a positive influence on domestic players in Kuwait. The unsuccessful attempt to integrate Kuwaiti club players into English Championship side Nottingham Forest, suggests the gap between the levels of skill and fitness remains significantly wide.

Commercial interest in English football has led to investment by wealthy Kuwaiti's in English clubs. Unlike investments in Manchester City, Paris Saint Germaine and Newcastle United by wealthy Gulf state investment funds, Al-Hasawi's investment in Nottingham Forest came from an individual wealthy businessman with a passion for English football. The flow of capital from Kuwait into English football provides evidence that globalization is not a linear process but has varying impacts on sporting cultures and economies. Al Hasawi's control of Forest ended in acrimony for many supporters, led to multiple court cases due to unpaid bills and ultimately damaged the club he hoped to rebuild. The mistakes and ill-judged decisions were mainly due to his lack of knowledge about professional football, having no previous experience of running a professional club with a long heritage and diverse stakeholders. Nevertheless, the international ownership of EPL clubs has driven an

ever more globalised and mediatized (Frandsen, 2020) sport to expand its reach around the world seeking more and more consumers of its clubs which now operate as global brands. This case study suggests these relationships can be culturally complex, and potentially damaging to local sporting infrastructure.

The research suggests the influence of the EPL is mainly focused on transformations in the wider popular cultures around football rather than indigenous Kuwaiti football structures per se. Based on the findings of this study, EPL affected the popular culture behaviour of the fans in Kuwait as well as the performance of local football league leading to the decline of the games attendance. EPL also affected the fans' lifestyle and expenditure through expensive sports subscriptions or traveling to Europe to attend football matches. The long term effect of these results on the Kuwaiti young generation will force them to become fans to either neighbouring countries that have more professional leagues such as Saudi Arabi, Qatar and United Arab Emirates or increase their involvements with Europeans leagues, unless the government seriously tackle the issues mentioned in this study to reform and improve the football in Kuwait

### **Limitations**

This cultural study has some limitations should be considered for future studies. There was not much literature about Kuwait's football fan which forced the authors to rely mainly on sport historians and some historical events. Time constraints were due to the COVID-19 outbreak made it difficult to commence all the in-depth interviews while all sports activities were halted locally and globally. The authors were limited to find more female stakeholders who were willing to be interviewed due to cultural constraints. Future comparison studies between professional and amateur

football leagues in the Gulf States will help understand more about EPL effect in the Gulf region.

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