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The Carabao Cup on ESPN+

The English League Cup, this year called The Carabao Cup, is an English football competition involving English teams across several divisions. The cup games are usually played on weeknights, contributing to their somewhat reduced popularity in comparison to weekend league games. However, as the commentator of Wednesday's match between Liverpool and Chelsea pointed out, attendance and viewership of the League Cup has been higher in the last two years than in the past forty-five. This match, a spectacle between two of England's best teams, was on display for a massive television audience, local and abroad. The broadcast is a medley of media messages, many of which viewers might pass off as insignificant or routine for a sports broadcast. While the regularity and standard qualities of a sports broadcast certainly do not shock viewers or call them to action, it does affect their behavioral baseline. Brand placement (on the jerseys of teams, name of the competition, and walls of the stadium), the presence of international superstars as actors and representatives, and a sense of cultural identity and unity within the stadium are three aspects of a competition such as The Carabao Cup that work together to shape the culture of its viewership. These effects can be processed uniquely by different audiences who may be part of the local identity or may be a global spectator drawn into this foreign, cultural nexus.

A full awareness of the cultural influence of a soccer match requires literacy of media tactics and an understanding of the competition's context. The League Cup began in the 1960's after the implementation of floodlights allowed games to be played later in the night. Since its inception, the Cup has had many different sponsors, including American companies *Coca-Cola*

and *Capital One*. The current sponsor is a Thai energy drink company, *Carabao*, based on the symbol and name of a Thai rock band. Also sponsored by *Carabao* is Chelsea, one of the teams who participated in Wednesday's match, who sport the rock n roll decal of the carabao buffalo on their warmup jerseys. Their opponents, Liverpool, are also intimately connected to the cup as the leading winner with eight Cup wins, followed by Chelsea with five. Wednesday's game was played at Liverpool's historic stadium, Anfield, where the club's financial partners are flashed on field-side display screens. Most notable is Liverpool's principle sponsor, *Standard Chartered*, which marks the player's kits as well as the display screens, morphing from *Standard Chartered* into the words *Stand Red*. Beneath the *New Balance*, *Standard Chartered* red of Liverpool and the *Nike*, *Yokohama Tyres* blue of Chelsea are the superstar players and the thousands of fans on site and at home behind a television showing support for, and expressing their identification with, their favorite player and team. The broadcast audio includes an atmospheric microphone, recording the chants and jeers of the stadium's audience, inviting the television viewer into the social bond between the fans of a team. Between the LED displays of stadium partners (*among them is Carlsburg – "Probably the best beer in the world"*) and under the chorus of the teams' social mantras (*You'll Never Walk Alone*), a soccer match was played, ending two to one.

Media experts would expect the general audience of this ensemble to be drawn into the spectacle as a lifestyle, increasing their baseline to act on the effects of the media messages. The first aspect of the Cup match that probably comes to mind when considering media effects is the brand entertainment where the "brands are, in fact, part of and essential to the program" (Baran 39). On television, the brands become part of the viewing interface, wrapping the scoreboard and filling the intermission. Of course, the brands are physically present on the stadium displays and the players' jerseys. They are an identifying factor for the teams, and it is much more than just

exposure. The deal between *Barclays Bank* and the Premier League was a historic example: “This opportunity, involving football, a part of the fabric of British society, was national in character and provided a major event offering high profile association and was therefore appropriate for image enhancement” (Meenaghan, Shipley 336). As seen in Wednesday’s match, *Standard Chartered* and Liverpool have a similar relationship, woven together by values and principles (*Stand Red*). These banks bring values to a competition or club that is beneficial for both parties. They represent power, respect, modernity, and British culture (Meenaghan, Shipley 336).

Brands benefit from the association with soccer and capitalize on the opportunity to narrowcast (Baran 38) to a predominantly male audience. Meenaghan and Shipley suggest that “involvement in sports transfers the image values of being healthy, young, energetic, fast, vibrant and largely masculine” (Meenaghan, Shipley 341). This is apparent in the naming of The *Carabao* Cup, a brand that greatly benefits from the fast, masculine, and vibrant imagery of soccer, as well as *Nivea Men* and *Carlsburg* beer. In the specific and relatively benign case of a soccer club, the emotionally invested audience is more likely to have a baseline closer to the manifestation level when interpreting messages from club sponsors. The baseline factors contributing to this effect, outlined by Potter, are perhaps habitual exposure and societal identification with the peer-group (Potter 267).

Within the sporty, masculine culture of British football are artificially separated “bounded cultures” for each team. These cultures are worthy of being their own bounded culture because of how much the audience buys into the team mentality and separation. The team culture defines its members in some way, even if incompletely (Baran 11). On the television broadcast, the identification with a team’s social group is represented through color. The players’ jerseys

and the audience's scarves and banners lure the remote viewer into the conflict with contrasting colors, where there is no middle ground, only red and blue. The color is a unifying force between fans and the club which raises their degree of identification, one of Potter's factors of media influence. Additionally, this identification is effective on a young, male audience observing young, male athletes because "people identify with characters who have similarities to them but who also have qualities that they would like to have but do not" (Potter 270). Also, fans do not have the knowledge structure to be able to properly understand what it is like to be an athlete at this level, so media portrayals are more effective (Potter 266). A positive effect of team-based subcultures is local character and aesthetic. In the biggest English cities like Liverpool and London, as well as other cities and towns around the world, "soccer seems to be used as a tool to build local identity in resistance to globalization and exploitation" (Veseth 182). The bounded culture identification builds upon the brand identification for each club, and both aspects of the game are highlighted by camera pans over the color coordinated audience and close-ups on the branded jerseys.

Global audiences like myself are affected by televised media such as the Cup match between Liverpool and Chelsea and its media messages no less than the local viewership. Global fans also buy into the color scheme and brands associated with their favorite club. However, I believe fans who are external to the English football ecosystem are impacted more by the media messages of individual players than clubs. In Veseth's analysis of global soccer, he describes how players from around the world are centralized in European clubs, drawing more viewership and merchandise sales. Countries with great talent but little financial power like Brazil, Argentina, Nigeria, and Senegal have players in games such as this English League Cup match, securing fans from around the world. English teams "bid talent away from the countries and

teams in the soccer periphery and then sell the finished products-games, shirts, images-back to them” (Veseth 182). The best example of this is Mo Salah, who’s journey from Egypt to the Premier League provides a religious connection and an escape from the politization of soccer in his home country, because “for Egyptians, Salah’s existence alone feels like a win. As the Liverpool fans say, ‘Mo Salah is a gift from Allah’” (El Rashidi). Another factor relevant to the global audience is knowledge structures. Because a remote audience is not part of the day to day environment and lacks the knowledge structure to properly interpret British media regarding British soccer, the imagery of the Cup is filtered entirely through the media. Therefore, such viewers are more likely to believe the illustrious depiction of the English matches (Potter 266).

My own experience viewing The Carabao Cup match on Wednesday was the young American soccer viewing experience. The rights to broadcast soccer competitions in the USA are segmented not just by region, but by each competition. The broadcaster for The Carabao Cup is ESPN. I do not have a television, only a laptop where I can stream the games. Watching soccer is different from my usual television viewing in the sense that I do not watch any other sports, only a select few narrative series on HBO and Netflix. In other words, soccer matches are my only exposure to sports media. In the case of ESPN, there is not the usual fanfare that one might find on an NBC broadcast of the Premier League or a Fox Sports broadcast of the World Cup, whose live streams are equivalent in production value to a standard television broadcast. On ESPN, the stream starts when the match starts, and the stream ends when the match ends.

As a global viewer, I too am influenced by the lack of a knowledge structure around English football. No matter how much I know about the game, I will never know what it is like to be either a professional player or a local, diehard spectator. Hence, the way I perceive ESPN’s broadcast of the Carabao cup is only a glimpse into that world. The narrowness of my

perspective shapes what I am actually able to perceive (Potter 266). There is a feeling of being excluded as well. There are no pre-game or post-game analysts discussing the match for the American live stream, and there is only one commentator providing truly lonely commentary. Why would I watch a foreign sport like soccer over a local sport like baseball? Veseth describes one possible reason, saying that in America “soccer has generally been presented as a foreign sport”, a strategy that appeals to “some well-educated Americans who sought status and elevated self-esteem by identifying with an international sport” (Veseth 192). I believe this is true, and I find value from streaming Wednesday’s Carabao Cup match because it is a glimpse into a foreign country playing a foreign sport. Under Potter’s media influence architecture, this might be described as the effect of a personal locus, where I have a goal for what media I want to consume and become more knowledgeable about and I construct my behavior around that goal (Potter 268).

It would also be rational to conclude that I am affected by globalization. The Carabao Cup was once named after American companies like *Coca-Cola* and *Capital One*. In 1991, the Cup draw was taken to Trump Tower, where Donald Trump was to make the draws for the fifth round. Against Leeds United, he drew Manchester United (*that’s Big League*), who went on to win the tournament. The Footballization of America has not reached the dominant American culture, but it certainly has some bearing on smaller American cultures, and it makes sense that I might be affected by it. Perhaps my social connection with friends who are adamant soccer players (Potter’s Sociological Factors) and my involvement in sub-cultures such as videogames (FIFA) contributed to my gravitation to soccer. My interpretation of Wednesday’s match is thus a combination of baseline factors, albeit different than those factors that may affect a British or non-American viewer.

The soccer broadcast from ESPN on Wednesday was a flurry of media effects that were interpreted in many ways by a global audience. The brand entertainment and colorful team associations created an identity for both sides, pulling the audience into a social identification with the group and the products. The international superstar lineups not only attracted a global audience, but created culturally significant storylines, culminating in an unmistakably English event. My experience as a viewer on the ESPN livestream was filtered by my foreign, narrow perspective and the societal forces that brought about my interest in the sport. By analyzing the messages of the broadcast, and thinking about how different audiences, including myself, might digest those messages, I believe that all spectators are influenced by the media messages from the program as well as the cultural context that binds them to the game.

Work Cited

Baran, Stanley J. *Introduction to Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture*. McGraw-Hill, 2019.

El Rashidi, Yasmine. "Mo Salah Gives Egyptians What We Need." *The New York Times*, Cairo. 18 June 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/opinion/mo-salah-egypt-world-cup-soccer.html.

Annotation: This is an opinion article from the New York Times by Yasmine El Rashidi, a Journalist who lives in Cairo. It is written around the time of the 2018 World Cup in Russia, where the Egyptian team played and lost in the group stage. She writes about how Mo Salah became a symbol not of Egypt, but of Egyptians. The political situation of Egypt is complicated, but Salah seems to have a unifying effect. Many Egyptians were angry at the European football world at the time because Salah was badly injured in the Champions League final only months earlier, and the offending defender may not have been rightly punished.

Gallagher, Joe. "Video Emerges of Donald Trump Conducting 1992 League Cup Draw." *Bleacher Report*, Bleacher Report, 30 Sept. 2017, bleacherreport.com/articles/2613419-video-emerges-of-donald-trump-conducting-1992-league-cup-draw

Annotation: Donald Trump draws number 6, Manchester United, then puckers his lips at the camera (1:18). Jimmy Greaves reacts by saying "Oh Donald, you don't realize what you've done there". Donald Trump later informs the British hosts that in America, it's called soccer.

Meenaghan, Tony, and David Shipley. "Media Effect in Commercial Sponsorship." *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 33, no. 3/4, 1999, pp. 328–348.

Annotation: Meenaghan and Shipley discuss the effectiveness of sponsorship over advertisements. They argue that sponsorships are more effective because they create a circular identity between the sponsor and the competition or team. The differing values of the organization and the sponsor complement each other to create a valuable brand image. Audiences are more sympathetic to sponsors because they see it as an investment into their community.

Potter, W. James. "Proactive Perspective on Media Effects" *Media Literacy*. Sage, 2015.

Veseth, Michael. "The Beautiful Game and the American Exception." *International Journals*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2006, pp. 181–197.

Annotation: Veseth's article describes the parallels between general globalization and the globalization of soccer. He describes the business model of European soccer as a cultural nexus drawing in talent from around the world and profiting from global interest. Additionally, soccer's influence in peripheral nations serves a dual purpose: it homogenizes cultures around a single sport while also strengthening distinct cultural identities. This influence is weakened in America by the presence of other sports and the foreign nature of the game.