

The clash of capital behind the European Super League

--- Comparative research on the organisational structure and the business models of European football leagues and the Major Professional Sports Leagues in the United States

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Abstract: In this study, in retrospection of the concurrent controversies surrounding the formation of the European Super League, the author seeks to uncover the rooted structural problems out of which arising the concerned disputes. With systematic review of existing literatures, the organisational structures and business models of professional sports leagues including European football leagues and US major sports leagues are comparatively analysed with reference to the measurement of organizational efficacy. Comparisons upon the organisational structures, business models and concerned sociocultural context behind the two sets of aforementioned sports leagues are included in the analytical sections. This paper finds that the design of business model and organisational structures of European football leagues and US major sports leagues are deeply influenced by the historical inheritance of the culturally formulated contexts. Functioning of the leagues, based on their incumbent models, dynamically reconstruct the cultural sphere of concerned leagues along the existing track predetermined by the past of the sports within the related societies.

Keywords: European Super League, organisational structure, business model, organisational efficiency, community culture

1. Introduction

On April 18th local time [1], an ‘earthquake’ took place in European football world, the long-held tension has broken out between some of the elite football clubs in Europe and the Union of European Football Association [2]. Under the leadership of the managements of Real Madrid, Manchester United and Juventus, 12 elite clubs in Europe decide to set up a new league that different to any of the leagues that are currently in the European football system, European Super League, or as it is later referred to officially by the coalition, the Super League [1]. This league is designed to be a commercial league that only involves the competition between the elite clubs in a closed system. The Super League accentuates on the lessened intermediary power of the organizing committee if compared to the current mechanism of UEFA Champion League. According to the press release now

publicized by the Super League authority, the league's removal of organizing intermediary may be speculated to be from the long-existing tension generated out of the current relation between the earliest member teams of UEFA Champion League and the leadership of UEFA. The Super League's partnership with UEFA and FIFA, therefore, remains unclear according to the narratives generally adopted by the Super League's official release [1].

According to the analyses within previous studies, the aforementioned long-existing tension between elite European football clubs and UEFA can be traced back to the initial stage of formation of the business model of UEFA Champion League [3]. Introduced by the year of 1955, the UEFA Champion League is organised by UEFA annually with contesting teams selected from the domestic leagues of different European countries. The organising fund, by the 1950s and 1960s, are sourced from a capital fund established by the first few top participant football clubs in Europe, sponsorship fund raised among commercial sponsors, and donations from third-party entities including fan clubs, media of collaboration, etc. According to Szymanski (2021), UEFA firstly appeared as the organising party for the UEFA Champion League as a role more inclined to the one as an intermediary. UEFA had the right of holding annual review of the functioning regulation for the UEFA Champion League to ensure the smooth running the annual competition.

1.1. The schism between the top leagues

As the result of the distribution of power in European football system which the author will analyse later, there has been a conflict for a long time, those elite clubs disagree with the benefits distribution within top cross-regional tournaments organized by UEFA. The author considers the disputes over power and benefit distribution among football clubs, the organizing institution as the performance of deep-rooted structural issues. The clash over the founding of European Super League exhibited such issue. The design of structural organization of different sport leagues is found as directly related with the types of disputes arising between the stakeholders, namely, the team funder, team management, and league organizer. G-14 organisation created by the elite clubs in 2000 to negotiate with FIFA, UEFA and other football power monopolies and strive for more interests tells this conflict continued years [1], and that makes this reform of the Super League somehow inevitable although it is out of expectation. The reason why the relationship between the elite clubs and UEFA collapses this time could be after setting up UEFA Nations League to replace the friendly matches between national teams, UEFA still wants to get more clubs to be involved in the Champions League. To the elite clubs, that will make their players play more time but the interests to share stays about same, this is undoubtedly makes the clubs worse as they already lost a lot because of the epidemic.

One of the main factors causes the conflict is that European football leagues have a horizontal structure, which is a management structure that separate the capital and power into two different institutions, in this case the football clubs in Europe are on capital, and the national associations get the power. In those clubs' point of view, in order to maximize the benefits, a better management structure is pyramidal structure, which is the management structure that the major sports leagues are using, but the national associations in Europe don't agree with that, because that will decrease their income.

After the conflict erupts, many different opinions come out, the top managers of those elite clubs in the Super League advocate it that this is a good idea to make the European football attracting more fans and attention and accessing more capital to cover the losses of the epidemic of COVID-19. However, the fans in Europe, other clubs in Europe and the associations such as UEFA, FIFA and FFF strongly suggest this reform will be devastating damage to the football world as the Super League breaks the original system and turns it to a commercial, closed league which is like the Major Sports

Leagues in US, even the British prime minister, Boris Johnson says on his Twitter: Plans for a European Super League would be very damaging for football’ [4].

On April 21st, as the six clubs in the England quit suddenly [5], the project of the Super League stops. According to Mundo Deportivo, UEFA offered England’ s six clubs a significant sum of money to leave the Super League [6]. Other reasons behind the seceding of the ‘Big Six’ could be the pressure from the fans, the players and even the prime minister. Anyway, this farce has stopped for now, but it is like a timebomb, as long as the conflict between the clubs and the associations continues, the reform will come back anytime.

Nevertheless, those clubs want to get out of this organisational structure where their organisational rights are being swallowed up and UEFA keeps corrupting by using its huge power. They want to emulate the major sports leagues in America and set up a new league to rival UEFA, which might win them a bigger organisational right even if it fails, as that this different organisational structure would make UEFA lose many power, even if it didn’t own it in the first place.

The Design of Organizational Structure

As is argued in the previous contents, sports organisations and commercial leagues have been found by scholars as greatly influenced by the organisational structure and managing framework of theirs [5]. According to the theory by Atsmon [7], the efficiency of corporate management is predetermined by the corporate organisational structure.

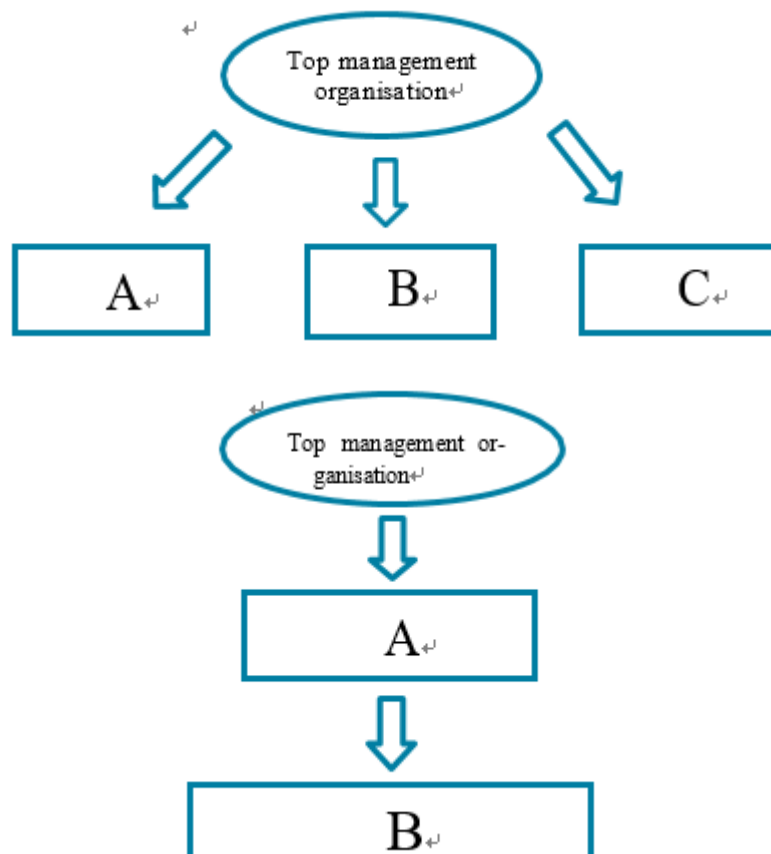


Figure 1: Stylized structures.

Note: Organisational Structures as is shown are derived from the theory by Wolfenzon & Almeida[8]

Figure 1 presents the idea of pyramidal organizational structure and horizontal organizational structure, for the purposes of this model, a pyramidal structure is one in which firm B is set up as a subsidiary of firm A[8], a horizontal structure is one in which firm A and firm B are set up as independent concerns, and while in the pyramidal structure the entrepreneur allocates the verifiable value of the new firm to the parent firm's share-holders, in the horizontal structure he receives this value entirely [8]. From the conclusion of Malagila et al. the management structure of England professional football teams affects their performance [3], based on the premise of previous literature analysis, the author infer that the organizational managements of a company and sport leagues are similar as that the performances of the company and the sport will be both affected by the organizational structure.

In this case, the first graph in figure 1 can be applied to the organizational structure of the sports leagues in US, as that the 'top management organisation' is the NBA executives like Adam Sliver, as the places in the graph lower, the authority and earning lower, but there are more people involved as going down the graph, which makes it like a pyramid. The second graph can be applied to the organizational structure of the European football leagues, the 'top management organisation' is UEFA and the firms under UEFA are national football associations and the sports leagues that they hold. The 'top management organisation' has most authority and it is responsible for the distribution of income.

In this EPQ project, the author will explore further behind the conflict and compare the business models of the European Football leagues and the Major Sports Leagues in US, based on the Super League. The author will use the theory of multiparty balancing in social economics to explore and compare two types of sports leagues. The author will compare the European football leagues and the Major Sports Leagues using Comparative economics of the comparing the business operation and management modes behind different business entities to find the similarities and differences, included their business organizational structure, their management modes and whether there are opportunities and mechanisms that can be interrelated between organizations within the business organization structure Theory analysis.

2. Research method

The author uses the method of archival research for this EPQ project to find the previous studies on the business models and the management structures that relate to the sports leagues. The key words for the previous research can be European football leagues, UEFA, the major sports leagues, the Super League, pyramidal structure, horizontal structure and mutiparty balancing. Elsevier, Springer, and Google Scholar are using for research. Based on the key words, the studies that been selected be relate to sports leagues, and the pyramidal business structure or the horizontal business structure, and the published year should be limited to near 10 years as that the legislation and the environment of the sports leagues keep changing. The author adapted the research on the organizational structure of horizontal and pyramidal because there are more previous studies on that, and the author can use those data, knowledge and theories to develop and apply on the situation of sports leagues in Europe and America. Another methodology for this project consisted of collecting information available from reports (financial reports from FIFA, UEFA, etc.), official documents (organizational papers, marketing analysis of UEFA, etc.), and online sources (UEFA, official websites of UEFA, FIFA, the Super League, etc.).

3. Discussion

3.1. The history of development of European football leagues and American Sports Leagues

The modern football first started to formalise in the 18th century Britain, on 1862, Nottingham County set up in the first football club in the world, and next year, which is 1863, the FA had been set up and they held a meeting, standardize the basic rules of football which laid the future development of the sport [2]. The football regularization turned this sport that was already popular among the people into a craze, in many places of Britain people began to form their own community teams and clubs, gradually, the teams and clubs organized by working class and students got involved in. In 1888, the first football league was established, formed by six professional clubs from northwest England and six from midlands [9](Jolly, 2010), and with the spread of football across the European continent, football exchanges between European countries are becoming more and more frequent. On 1954, UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) was founded in Basel, Switzerland, it is responsible for managing the European all football affairs, and on behalf of European football. After UEFA was founded, it organizes and holds many competitions representing the highest level of European football (such as UEFA Champions League and Europa League), hold the national competitions (such as European Football Championship and European National League) and gain benefits and power from those competitions, UEFA started with 25 member associations and now has 55 [2](UEFA, 2021). There is a principle of promotion and relegation in every league in Europe and intercontinental competition is only possible for the teams that are at the top of their highest league in their countries. The centralization of media and commercial rights by UEFA, led to significant increases in revenue, reaching by 2014 almost 10 times the value of income in 1994, incomes resulting only from this competition. And this successful format was quickly adopted and applied, using the same coordinates, by the second European interclubs competition, UEFA Europa League (UEL), starting in 2009 [10](Dima, 2015). The staff (included players, coaches and any other employees) turnover is allowed as the clubs or member associations don't violate the rules that set by UEFA and the member associations, such as FFP (Financial Fair Play).

UEFA Champions league is a competition held by UEFA, it is recognized as one of the most influential and highest-level club competitions in the world and one of the highest prize money football competition and sporting events in the world. Gabriel Hanot (a French footballer and journalist, the editor of L'Equipe) came up the idea of setting up an intercontinental club competition, that idea got supported by the major football clubs at that time, such as Real Madrid, AC Milan and Anderlecht, those major clubs was hoping to get more attraction and more revenue from the competition, but either of them has the power to organise international competition, so they asked UEFA to set this competition and let UEFA to become the operator of the competition and those funding club can get more attraction and profit sharing. The Champions League began as the European Champion Clubs' Cup in 1955, and it changes its name in 1992. There are 16 teams that are in the first Champions League in the season of 1955/56 [2] (UEFA, 2021). After that UEFA expanded it to 24 places, and since the 1998/99 season, each member association can have 1-4 places, according to their European points ranking, and the number of places was added to 32. On April 19th, less than 20 hours after the biggest clubs announced the creation of the European Super League to 36 teams to 36 from 2024 [2](UEFA, 2021). There will be 100 more games per season after the expansion [2](UEFA, 2021).

However, in US, the development of sports leagues is different. Professional sports in the United States began to commercialize in the 19th century, and developed rapidly after World War 2, and the sports derivative industry developed professionally. The first professional sports league was the National Baseball Association, formed in 1871 [2](UEFA, 2021). It named in 1875 [2](UEFA, 2021).

The league set the rules and developed the market for leagues. The sports leagues in US are all using a closed-system, which means there is no principle of promotion and relegation.

UEFA as the organisation that governs European football and the intermediary that organise matches, has enormous power to organise and distribute profits and the national associations of each country follow the jurisdiction of UEFA. The competitions and other activities that hold by national associations and UEFA can bring more attraction (media) and more revenue (sponsors) to the clubs and the good performance of the club can help UEFA to expand its influence, so if all the parts in this structure performs their best functions, it will bring a win-win-win situation and it will also promote the development of European football.

The structure of the European football leagues is horizontal with UEFA in charge of the operation of Champions League and organising regulation and member football clubs as the major participants of most authority and be responsible for the distribution of commercial income. The football associations under UEFA in each country are parallel that they are all the members of UEFA and follow the rules that set by UEFA and in an association model with national association management means that the league is entirely managed by the national football association [11](Boillat & Poli, 2014). UEFA has the power to allow national associations to become members, they will expand their club competitions or national competitions to let other countries get involved and as UEFA has more member associations, more authority they will have. In some countries in this category, club licensing proceedings are shared between the national association and the league. In England, for example, the FA oversees UEFA club licensing regulations and any additional rules stipulated within FA documents. It should be noted, however, that some aspects of club licensing (finance, club ownership, infrastructure, etc.) are managed by the Premier League [11] (Boillat & Poli, 2014). The movement of personal between clubs (player transfers, staff changes, manager changes, etc.) is much freer in the organisational structure of European football than in the pyramidal structure of American sports leagues. For example, in NBA, complex rules such as the salary cap and luxury tax have been set up to limit player movement.

3.2. Clashes between UEFA and Elite European Football Clubs

As the Champions League becomes the world's biggest professional football event, the profits created by this competition is huge, including competition broadcast, peripheral products, and sponsors etc., UEFA which has operating power to this competition, distributes the revenue to the teams in the form of bonuses based on their results. Nonetheless, those bigger clubs consider getting more share of profits as they have best performance to get more attraction and they have most fans that can bring revenue, and the bigger club usually cost more to keep at highest level of competition. But UEFA didn't raise the share of profits very much, whereas the revenue raising year by year and it keeps expanding the Champions League. Group-element relation, firstly accentuated by scholars from fields of public administration studies, is utilised by researchers of business administration as a notion to uncover the influence of interpersonal relation on the formation and processing of a common entity [12]. The theory of group-element relation suggests that when different organisations work together in a group, a little influence might bring a serious of problems in this structure. In this horizontal structure of European football leagues, the excessive split between operating rights and independent financial rights has caused problems, and the unfair distribution of income makes the clash between major clubs and UEFA gets bigger and bigger, which leads to the incident, such as the Super League. The author collected the information and data of the most market value football clubs past five years, the Champions League yearly profits in last five years and the share of revenue that those clubs got from Champions League, because the distribution of profits of Champions League can be the epitome of unequal sharing, as that the elite clubs with high market value bring higher performance and more

attraction, also, it requires a sustained high level of investment to keep their high-performance level, which requires more income.

Table 1: The European Football Clubs with Top-5 Estimates of Valuation from 2016 to 2020

Temporal period	The Top-5 clubs
2016	Real Madrid, Barcelona, Manchester United, Bayern Munich, Arsenal
2017	Manchester United, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Manchester City
2018	Manchester United, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Manchester City
2019	Real Madrid, Barcelona, Manchester United, Bayern Munich, Manchester City
2020	Barcelona, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Manchester United, Liverpool

Table 2: The Top-5 Valued European Football Clubs' Share of UEFA Award and Share of UEFA Champions' Overall Profit

Temporal period	The Top-5 club's share of UEFA Champions' award	The Top-5 club's share of UEFA Champions' award/UEFA champions' overall profit
2016	13.7%	9.8%
2017	12.3%	9.3%
2018	13.1%	9.4%
2019	14.5%	8.8%
2020	12.8%	7.5%

(Note: The data were acquired from 2016-2020 Deloitte Football Money League report, retrieved from: <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/sports-business-group/articles/deloitte-football-money-league.html>, on 22nd June, 2021)

The tables above shows that as the revenue of Champions League increased year by year from 2016 to 2020, the top-5 European football clubs with highest market valuation have been receiving decreasing share of overall profit and funding of the concerned awards. From the statistical evidences of such, it can be seen that the problem of unequal distribution of profits in this horizontal structure formulated with top European football clubs and UEFA. The irresistible forces presented by COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the already malign situations faced by many clubs. Several European football clubs, regardless of their past honour and withheld properties, they have been reported as heavily in debts. The reasons behind those problems are the authority of UEFA is continuing increasing and the bigger clubs can't have a voice for themselves, their interests are constantly being violated, so they have no choice but to get out of the old structure and start rebuilding a new structure, a corporate management and operation structure, like the structure of American major sports leagues, such as NBA.

The operating structure of the major sports leagues in America is a vertical and pyramidal structure and in that structure, the operating and organising powers increase as the financial rights increase, the

top management of the league is responsible for the league's decision-making, revenue and coordination of various departments within the organisation. However, the operating structure of European football leagues is away more complex than the structure of the major sports leagues, the football association of each country manage the competitions in their country and the system consists of a hierarchy of leagues, bound together by the principle of promotion and relegation. Unlike the rules that are set for balancing the competition level of each team in American sports leagues such as draft lottery and luxury tax, all the clubs in Europe can operating and expanding freely as long as they follow the legislation. UEFA controls the operating and organising powers of the leagues and the clubs have autonomous management and financial rights.

The European football leagues can't use the operating structure by their US counterpart. Given that the European football leagues can be traced back to their long and profound history and culture, most of the football clubs started with students, workers and other civilian organisations, those teams or clubs symbolises the spiritual sustenance of the common class, so the relationship between the fans and the local team is strong. Even the development of European football is getting better and better, and many clubs invested a lot of capital, some from abroad, most of them still remain close relationship with their fans and keep their community property, "football is a glue in our society," says Carsten Cramer, Borussia Dortmund's chief executive. However, different clubs have different way to develop and explore, some of them choose to let large foreign capital flow into the clubs, so they can increase their level of performance level fast as that have more investment to help them to get better players, better equipment, and even build a bigger stadium to allow more people can watch the game. The downside of the massive capital injection is that the club might not have enough chances to communicate and interact with their fans which leads to the growing estranged from the fans, and also the large foreign capital means the owners of the club changes to someone from abroad, compare to those local owners, the owners from abroad are usually less concerned about local market and local culture, which brings the decreasing of the local community property of the club, therefore the massive capital injection from abroad might causing the loss of local fans and the scorn of fans of other clubs in the same region.

"We call Leipzig's supporters 'customers,' because that's what they are," says Sue Rudolph. A fan activist for Fortuna Dusseldorf, a team struggling to avoid relegation (Schoenfeld, 2020), this quote from an article with the title of 'Why RB Leipzig is the most hated soccer team in the Bundesliga' suggests that even the fans of the club that has worse performance looks down on RB Leipzig and their fans, the reason why RB Leipzig is despised in Bundesliga is that the way they develop is not recognised by other clubs and fans in the league. RB Leipzig is Europe's equivalent of an American expansion team [13](Schoenfeld, 2020), in 2009, Red Bull took over a club in the German fifth division (SSV Markranstadt), they changed the name, the logo, basically everything that with local culture, 'My club was founded in order to play football,' a fan of the city's former major club Lokomotiv Leipzig told Sportsmail. 'RB Leipzig was founded to make money. To sell an energy drink' [14](Holden, 2016). It bought a 10-year lease on the city's 43,000-seat stadium, broke ground on a palatial training facility. In just eight seasons, RB Leipzig reached the Bundesliga, and now they are a serious contender for the champion of Bundesliga. Actually, the German association encourage ethical and localised development, so they set many rules to avoid an individual or a company controls a club which distance the fans from the decision making of the club, such as '50+1' rule and sponsorship rule. RB Leipzig is owned by Red Bull chief Dietrich Mateschitz, but he had to invent a name that got round the sponsorship rule and they quashed the 50+1 rule by hiking membership prices. However, it has to be said that Red Bull Leipzig is succeed and their performance is undoubtedly commendable, but they go against the culture of European football, not just RB Leipzig, there are also other clubs in Europe such as Paris Saint-Germain that they are more like a commercial club than a professional club. RB Leipzig is an epitome, or as Schoenfeld said, they are 'Europe's

equivalent of an American expansion team', the example of RB Leipzig shows that, unlike NBA and other

major sports leagues in America, the history, culture and of European decide that it is impossible to change the current horizontal structure of European football to a commercial league with pyramidal structure.

Changing the system and structure of European football will definitely bring the decreasing of competitive level of European football if it changes to the Super League, which just like NBA. It is a closed system, that all the elite teams compete together, there is no promotion or relegation and the top management will try to make the competition fair by balancing the competitive level of each team, which let all the teams have less pressure. Maybe in the Super League, the fans can always watch the best team in the world play against another best team, but in a long term, the fans will be less exciting about it, and still less, in a closed system, it is improbable for smaller clubs to join in as there is no promotion and relegation, so it makes it harder for smaller clubs to survive as that the top league attracts all the fans. Changing the current structure is likely increasing polarisation of European football leagues, which damages the balance of development of European football, and that is why almost all the fans, former players, and football commentators are against the Super League.

4. Conclusion

In this study, to explore the reasons behind the formation and temporary collapse of the European Super League, the author has analysed the organisational structures and business models of European football leagues and using American major sports leagues as the objective for comparison. The author suggests that the internal organising structures of sports leagues are similar to most corporate equities., The pyramidal and horizontal organisational structures have both been widely adopted by organising bodies of sports leagues. The Super League, if successfully being held, shall essentially transform the current horizontal structure of European football leagues into a pyramid structure similar to that of the professional sports leagues in the United States. However, within the further study, the author found that such a closed system would be almost impossible for European football as the sociocultural context behind European football has determined the infeasibility of a cross-regional league with a closed system on the land of community-based football competition.

The above theoretical conclusions are drawn by consulting materials, studying previous literature and reading relevant reports, if empirical data are to be obtained, more authoritative data (including UEFA, NBA financial reports, etc.) can be obtained through further research in the future. Not just quantity data, in this topic, there are also many quality data required, because it is just an EPQ project, the author has limited resources to refer, maybe in the future, there will be an opportunity to investigate thoroughly by interviewing and visiting different participants (fans, players, managers of the club, internal management personnel of the football associations, etc.).

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