



The Disneyization of Football: Sports Journalism and Public Perception of Club Ownership through *Welcome to Wrexham*


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Abstract. Football has evolved beyond its athletic dimension to become a global cultural and media phenomenon. The concept of Disneyization, when applied to football, refers to its transformation into a spectacle designed for mass consumption, structured through emotionally charged and inspirational narratives. This article analyses the role of sports journalism in the Disneyization of Wrexham AFC, focusing on how journalistic narratives have presented the club's acquisition by actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney as a success story grounded in entertainment logic. Using a mixed-methods approach—combining a survey with three focus groups—the study examines how audiences perceive and evaluate the media narratives that contribute to the club's spectacularisation and the legitimisation of celebrity-led ownership models. Findings reveal that Wrexham's global image is largely constructed through affective storytelling promoted by journalism and streaming platforms, particularly the docuseries *Welcome to Wrexham*. While celebrity ownership is associated with narratives of authenticity and emotional involvement, state-backed models are more frequently linked to controversy and soft power strategies. This research highlights the narrative asymmetries that shape public perceptions of club ownership. It argues that sports journalism no longer acts merely as a transmitter of information but operates as a discursive agent producing cultural legitimacy. The case of Wrexham illustrates how football's reconfiguration as transmedia entertainment reflects broader dynamics of commodification, narrative economy, and symbolic value.

Keywords. Disneyization, sports journalism, storytelling, celebrities, football.

^{ES} La disneyización del fútbol: el periodismo deportivo y la percepción pública sobre la propiedad de los clubes a través de *Welcome to Wrexham*

Resumen. El fútbol ha evolucionado más allá de su dimensión atlética para convertirse en un fenómeno cultural y mediático global. El concepto de «disneyización», aplicado al fútbol, alude a su transformación en espectáculo orientado al consumo masivo, estructurado mediante narrativas emocionales e inspiradoras. Este artículo analiza el papel del periodismo deportivo en la disneyización del club Wrexham AFC, con énfasis en cómo las narrativas periodísticas han presentado la adquisición del club por los actores Ryan Reynolds y Rob McElhenney como una historia de éxito articulada desde la lógica del entretenimiento. A partir de una metodología mixta —que combina una encuesta con tres grupos focales—, el estudio examina cómo las audiencias perciben y valoran las narrativas mediáticas que contribuyen a la espectacularización del club y a la legitimación de modelos de propiedad liderados por celebridades. Los resultados revelan que la imagen global de Wrexham se construye en gran medida a través de relatos afectivos promovidos por el periodismo y las plataformas de streaming, en particular la docuserie *Welcome to Wrexham*. Mientras que la propiedad por parte de celebridades se asocia con discursos de autenticidad y compromiso emocional, los modelos respaldados por Estados suelen vincularse con controversia y estrategias de poder blando. Esta investigación evidencia las asimetrías narrativas que configuran la percepción pública sobre la propiedad de los clubes. Se sostiene que el periodismo deportivo actúa como agente discursivo que produce legitimidad cultural, y que la reconfiguración del fútbol como entretenimiento transmedia refleja dinámicas más amplias de mercantilización, economía narrativa y valor simbólico.

Palabras clave. Disneyización, periodismo deportivo, narrativas, celebridades, fútbol.

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1. Introduction

Currently, journalistic coverage of football does not merely report match results and statistics but actively constructs spectacular narratives that transform clubs into entertainment products. Through formats such as documentaries, social media, and opinion pieces, sports journalism has played a pivotal role in promoting ownership models that contribute to the spectacularisation of the sport (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Rowe, 1999). The growing influence of streaming platforms and digital media has enabled certain football-related stories to be framed within discourses of success and overcoming adversity, turning them into global consumer phenomena. This aligns with the idea of football clubs evolving into global entertainment multinationals—a process thoroughly examined by Ginesta (2020, 2021), who analyses how sociological, technological, and geopolitical factors have reshaped the sport into a complex industry of spectacle and diplomacy.

One of the most prominent recent examples of this trend is the case of Wrexham AFC, a club acquired in 2021 by actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney. The purchase of the Welsh club—documented in the series *Welcome to Wrexham* and amplified by both traditional and digital sports media—has established the team as a global media phenomenon. The sports press has played a fundamental role in this narrative construction, portraying the club's story not merely as an instance of sports management but as an emotionally charged account of revival, community, and identity. From media outlets such as *The Athletic* and ESPN to streaming platforms like Disney+ and FX, journalism has consolidated the narrative of Wrexham as a “football fairy tale,” thereby contributing to the Disneyization of the sport (Giulianotti, 2015; Whannel, 2002).

The concept of Disneyization, when applied to sport, refers to the transformation of football into a spectacle designed for mass consumption. This transformation is marked by narrative simplification, heightened commercialisation, and a deliberate emphasis on emotional appeal (Bryman, 1999). Within this context, sports journalism assumes a central role in producing stories that conform to these dynamics, highlighting the conversion of football clubs into global entertainment assets. As Debord (1967) argues, the society of the spectacle reconfigures sport as a cultural commodity, wherein the symbolic value of spectacle surpasses the intrinsic value of competition. In this sense, the case of Wrexham AFC serves as a compelling example of how media narratives frame the acquisition of football clubs by celebrities within a discourse of authenticity and success, allowing their media resonance to transcend sporting performance.

Recent scholarly work has begun to examine Wrexham AFC as an emerging media and touristic phenomenon, particularly in the context of sports documentaries and global fan engagement (Sarkar & Soni, 2023; Tobar, Ramshaw, & Oliveira, 2024). While this growing body of literature often focuses on media narratives or content analysis, the present study adopts a different perspective: it explores how audiences perceive and interpret the narratives constructed by sports journalism and streaming platforms around Wrexham AFC.

Unlike other forms of club ownership—such as sportswashing, often driven by states with geopolitical or financial interests—the model involving celebrity acquisition tends to receive more favourable treatment in the press. While coverage of clubs such as Manchester City or Newcastle United frequently focuses on political controversy and ethical tensions, these state-backed projects are often analysed within the broader framework of soft power and international image-building (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). In contrast, the narrative surrounding Wrexham AFC is framed in terms of transparency, emotional engagement, and football resurgence. This divergence in journalistic framing suggests that media discourse not only informs public debate about club ownership but also legitimises certain models, shaping broader perceptions within the footballing public (Boyle, 2017).

Based on these premises, the present study aims to examine the role of sports journalism in the Disneyization of football, taking Wrexham AFC as a case study. It investigates how narrative construction in sports media and audiovisual content—particularly documentaries—contributes to the spectacularisation of the club and the legitimisation of specific ownership models within contemporary football. To this end, a mixed-methods approach is employed, combining surveys and focus groups with Wrexham supporters, in order to assess global audience perceptions of the phenomenon. From the analysis of these data, the study explores how media coverage shapes perceptions of ownership legitimacy in modern football, and the implications this carries for the reconfiguration of the sport as a transnational consumer product.

2. State of the art

The evolution of modern football into a global cultural and media product is inseparable from the transformation of sports journalism and its increasing entanglement with entertainment logics. No longer confined to reporting results or statistics, sports journalism has emerged as a central agent in constructing narratives that elevate football into a transmedia spectacle. This shift is best understood through the conceptual lens of *Disneyization*, which illustrates how football is increasingly organized around emotional appeal, commercial viability, and mass accessibility (Bryman, 2004).

2.1. Disneyization and the Spectacularization of Sport

Disneyization refers to the process of simplifying complex cultural products into emotionally engaging experiences tailored for mass audiences. Bryman (1999) identifies four core dimensions of this phenomenon—thematization, hybrid consumption, merchandising, and performative control—all of which are clearly manifested in contemporary football. These elements can be situated within Debord's (1967) theory of the *society of the spectacle*, in which representations of reality replace direct lived experience. While Bryman (1999) provides the theoretical foundation for Disneyization, its application to sport has also been explored in relation to mega-events. Tomlinson (2020) argues that the Olympic Games increasingly resemble themed spectacles, embracing fantasy, fun, and corporate theatre—traits that are also visible in contemporary football.

These symbolic transformations occur within an increasingly commercialised and globalised football industry. As Pifer *et al.* (2018) argue, the sport's international growth has been driven by lucrative media rights, transnational branding, and investment, which elevate clubs into cultural assets that operate beyond traditional sporting logic. This process, whereby athletic competition is subsumed under visual and symbolic representation, is not unique to modern sport. As Carroll (1988) notes, wrestling was extremely popular with the ancient Egyptians, as evidenced by its frequent depiction in Egyptian art, including the Old Kingdom tomb of Ptahhotep (c. 2300 BCE). Nubian wrestlers appear at least five times across the corpus of Egyptian iconography, underscoring the symbolic and performative nature of sport even in antiquity.

As football becomes increasingly mediated, its core value shifts from athletic competition to symbolic storytelling and brand visibility. In this context, the emotional aesthetics and global reach of football are harnessed not merely for commercial gain, but also for constructing national and corporate narratives in the international arena (Alshikhy *et al.*, 2025). Further theoretical contributions by Ritzer (1993) and Sorkin (1992) underscore how *Disneyization* neutralizes conflict and flattens social complexity, producing emotionally sanitized environments. Rojek (2001) extends this analysis to the celebrity economy, showing how entertainment logics privilege marketable simplicity over authenticity or depth. In football, this materializes through narratives of struggle, redemption, and belonging that transcend the sporting field.

The case of Wrexham AFC, whose global prominence rose following its acquisition by actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, is a paradigmatic illustration. The story of a lower-league club is recast as an emotionally resonant narrative of revival and community, reaching global audiences through streaming platforms, traditional media, and social networks. The sport itself becomes a backdrop for a larger tale centered on human connection and celebrity authenticity—hallmarks of the Disneyfied model.

2.2. Journalism and true Narrative Construction of Football

The role of sports journalism in this transformation is pivotal. Rather than functioning solely as an objective observer, journalism increasingly acts as a narrative force that shapes public perceptions of clubs, athletes, and sport at large (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Rowe, 1999). This trend aligns with the broader hybridization of journalism and entertainment. Boyle (2017) notes that sports journalism has incorporated the affective and serialized strategies of popular media, employing emotional resonance and storytelling as core techniques. Helland (2007) complements this view by characterizing the evolving relationship between sport and media as a “media-sports complex”, where multiple actors—from clubs to broadcasters—collaborate, intentionally or not, in shaping compelling narratives. Ginesta (2011) and Rojas Torrijos (2012) further emphasize that journalism no longer simply reports on sport but actively participates in its symbolic construction, especially as clubs become media producers.

Journalism's symbolic function, however, has a long historical precedent. As Castillo (2021) shows, during the Franco regime, Spanish sports journalism helped construct athletes like Federico Martín Bahamontes as symbolic national heroes. The press framed them within a “quixotic” ideal—marked by perseverance, moral virtue, and sacrifice—which contributed to shaping a cohesive sense of national identity. This historical precedent underscores journalism's long-standing role in producing emotionally resonant sporting narratives that extend beyond athletic performance.

This shift is not only stylistic but also structural. The emergence of club-owned media channels, the proliferation of documentary series, and the growth of sports content on streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, and Disney+ reflect a tightly integrated narrative ecosystem. Sarkar and Soni (2023) argue that the proliferation of sports documentaries, accelerated during the COVID-19 lockdowns, has contributed to a new form of mediated fandom grounded in emotional engagement and curated authenticity. Football documentaries now play a central role in how audiences emotionally relate to teams and athletes. While sports content still comprises a relatively small proportion of total programming on these platforms, high-profile productions such as *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, *The Last Dance*, and *Welcome to Wrexham* exert an outsized cultural impact, turning clubs into global symbolic assets and increasing fan engagement.

These documentaries—often co-produced with the clubs—blur the boundary between journalism and public relations. Helland (2007) characterizes this phenomenon as part of the media-sports complex, in which multiple stakeholders—clubs, journalists, and producers—collaborate, intentionally or not, to construct emotionally charged narratives. The ability to reach transnational audiences through digital content further enhances the symbolic value of clubs like Wrexham, whose media presence now exceeds their sporting performance. This symbolic projection aligns with the logic of sports diplomacy, where cultural appeal and soft power intersect to advance broader reputational goals beyond the field of play (Trunkos & Heere, 2017).

Moreover, recent studies (Higham *et al.*, 2023; Shah & Williams, 2024) show that docuseries not only boost engagement but also reshape audience perceptions of team identity and values. Their narrative frameworks—often centered on adversity, human emotion, and celebrity participation—insert clubs into broader mythologies of authenticity and perseverance. According to Dixon (2014), this is not incidental but structural: the contemporary fan experience is increasingly defined by narrative immersion as much as by the sport itself.

2.3. Disintermediation and the Changing Media

The traditional gatekeeping function of journalism is being challenged by disintermediation. Clubs now communicate directly with their audiences through proprietary content ecosystems, including branded documentaries and daily social media engagement (Becerra, 2014; Mañas-Viniegra, 2018). This development, described by Ginesta (2011) and Rojas Torrijos

(2012) as a reconfiguration of the media-business nexus, has been accelerated by digital platforms. As Ginesta & Faedo (2022) argue, this process not only transforms the communicative strategies of clubs but also reshapes the power relations between sports institutions, journalists, and audiences.

In Spain, for instance, clubs such as Real Madrid and FC Barcelona have become full-fledged media entities, operating their own broadcast channels and international branding operations (Lee-Ludvigsen & Petersen Wagner, 2022). These efforts are not merely communicative but strategic, functioning as exercises in identity engineering. Media narratives are now central to how clubs project their global image. Soriano (2009) argues that branding and media control are inseparable from modern club management.

Simultaneously, the rise of athletes and coaches as direct communicators—through platforms like Twitch, YouTube, and Twitter—further undermines journalism's traditional role. The case of Spanish coach Luis Enrique, who livestreamed during the Qatar World Cup, illustrates the blurring of lines between journalistic coverage and institutional messaging (García Chamizo *et al.*, 2023). This changing environment places new demands on sports journalists, who must now adopt more participatory, emotionally engaging, and narrative-driven formats to remain culturally relevant.

2.4. Social Media, Transmedia Branding, and Global Fandom

The Disneyization of football is deeply entwined with the logics of social media. As McGillivray and McLaughlin (2018) argue, digital platforms allow clubs to construct transnational identities by engaging audiences through transmedia strategies. Annamalai *et al.* (2021) and Filo *et al.* (2015) emphasize that social media is now central to cultivating emotional engagement, reinforcing fan loyalty, and articulating brand values.

Social media platforms not only enable strategic branding but also serve as interactive tools for engaging supporters, particularly in contexts with limited financial or media exposure. As Schubert and Seyffert (2017) demonstrate in their study of the International Table Tennis Federation, even niche sport organisations may enhance brand awareness and cultivate closer ties with their audience by offering targeted, gratification-oriented digital content. Their findings underscore the importance of understanding fan motives in the design of emotionally resonant and participatory communication strategies.

TikTok has emerged as a key site for algorithmic storytelling. Bhandari & Bimo (2022) and Reunanen (2022) demonstrate that TikTok's algorithms prioritize interaction and virality over follower counts, enabling strategic content to rapidly amplify brand narratives. Wrexham's own strategy on the platform—culminating in a historic sponsorship agreement (Charlesworth, 2021)—illustrates how media production doubles as revenue generation.

This convergence of brand, identity, and algorithmic exposure generates what Yoshida *et al.* (2018) call a *community effect*: a sense of intimacy and shared narrative that fosters brand allegiance.

Osei-Frimpong *et al.* (2023) add that such digital engagement cultivates long-term emotional investment, especially when paired with consistent, affective storytelling.

2.5. Ownership Models and Journalistic Hierarchies

One of the core elements of football's spectacularization is the journalistic framing of club ownership. Celebrity owners are frequently portrayed in emotionally favourable terms, whereas state and corporate ownership is often viewed through critical or ethical lenses. This dichotomy reflects both ideological positioning and the political economy of media discourse. Hutchins *et al.* (2019) highlight how media platforms selectively amplify ownership models that resonate with liberal-democratic ideals or entertainment values.

The celebrity ownership model—as in Wrexham's case—is legitimized through discourses of authenticity, emotional engagement, and fan accessibility. Scholars such as McCracken (1989), Min *et al.* (2019), Pansari and Roy (2014), and Upadhyay & Singh (2010) conceptualise celebrity involvement as brand ambassadorship: leveraging public recognition to generate positive brand association. With over 100 million followers, Ryan Reynolds serves not only as an investor but also as a narrative asset whose personal brand shapes the club's public image.

Although operating on a smaller scale than the Olympic Games or other mega-events, Wrexham's global visibility—facilitated through streaming platforms, social media, and documentary formats—can be interpreted through comparable logics of media-driven legitimacy. As Kasimati (2003) notes, large-scale sporting events have long been framed as catalysts for economic and reputational benefits—discourses often used to justify public and private investment. The visibility generated by Wrexham's celebrity ownership follows comparable patterns of symbolic valuation, even in the absence of elite sporting success.

Conversely, *sportswashing* refers to the use of sport by states or corporations to rehabilitate reputations or distract from controversial agendas. As Bergkvist and Skeiseid (2024) explain, sportswashing is the deliberate use of a sports property to counteract negative information, often by leveraging the emotional and symbolic capital of sport to rehabilitate public image. Tracing its origins to imperial spectacles such as the 1936 Berlin Olympics (Sgouros, 2023), the practice has become increasingly visible in the twenty-first century (Akhundova, 2015; Pearce *et al.*, 2015). Boykoff (2022) proposes a more systematic theory of sportswashing, arguing that it functions as a soft-power strategy used not only by autocracies but also by democracies to manage internal dissent and project international legitimacy.

Journalistic distinctions between celebrity and state ownership are often structured by the underlying logics of media production, which privilege affective storytelling and marketable authenticity over geopolitical complexity. These dynamics contribute to a media environment in which celebrity owners are framed through narratives of emotional

accessibility and personal investment, while state-backed clubs face moral scrutiny. As Sarkar & Soni (2023) observe, this asymmetry reflects broader tensions between entertainment imperatives and critical representation. In Wrexham's case, media narratives highlight continuity, community reinvestment, and tradition—features that contrast sharply with how Manchester City or Newcastle United are typically framed. Yet even this celebratory framing is not without its critics.

Catsam (2023) presents a dissenting view, suggesting that Wrexham's acquisition may amount to a vanity project. However, this position has been marginalised by the prevailing celebratory narrative shaped by *Welcome to Wrexham* and extensive media enthusiasm. Winston (2000) cautions that even ostensibly neutral storytelling can reinforce ideological norms and shape perceptions of ownership legitimacy.

3. Objectives and methodology

This study investigates the role of sports journalism in the Disneyization of football by exploring how emotionally resonant narratives shape public perceptions of club ownership. Taking Wrexham AFC as a case study, the research examines how audiences perceive the contribution of journalistic storytelling to the spectacularisation of the club, how they interpret and emotionally respond to celebrity-led ownership models, and how they assess the role of sports media in legitimising different forms of ownership within the broader dynamics of football's commodification and symbolic economy.

To address these aims, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to explore audience perceptions of media coverage surrounding Wrexham AFC. Rather than engaging in content analysis, the research investigates how audiences themselves interpret and respond to the narratives associated with the club.

The methodological design is aligned with the theoretical framework and seeks to capture both broad patterns and nuanced interpretations. The research follows a sequential explanatory design, as defined by Ivankova et al. (2006) and Wipulanusat et al. (2020), whereby the quantitative phase precedes the qualitative stage. This structure enables the identification of general trends through survey data, which are subsequently explored in depth via focus group discussions. Such triangulation enhances the robustness and interpretative richness of the study.

3.1. Participant Recruitment and Profiles

Participants in both phases of the study were recruited through digital channels. For the quantitative survey, a Qualtrics XM questionnaire was distributed via social media platforms, online football forums, and digital communities affiliated with Wrexham AFC. The survey link was accompanied by an open invitation explaining the academic nature of the research, its focus on media narratives, and voluntary, anonymous participation. To ensure relevance, respondents were screened based on their exposure to the club primarily through media platforms (e.g., streaming content, sports journalism, social media).

The sample consisted exclusively of participants aged 18 or older. Although no gender quota was applied, responses were collected from both male and female participants, with a predominance of men, which reflects the gender distribution typically observed in online football communities. No responses were manually discarded; incomplete or inconsistent entries were automatically filtered by the survey platform.

For the qualitative phase, survey respondents were invited—via a voluntary final question—to leave contact details if they were open to participating in follow-up research. From this pool, 18 participants were selected to form three distinct focus groups, each comprising six individuals. Group segmentation was based on self-reported fandom profiles: 1) Local Welsh supporters with long-term ties to the club, 2) International fans who discovered Wrexham through the documentary, and 3) Football fans of other clubs who encountered Wrexham through broader media coverage.

This purposeful sampling allowed for comparative exploration of perceptions across different audience types. Participants were selected based on their active engagement with Wrexham content, not their demographic representativeness of the entire fandom. Nonetheless, the selection aimed to reflect the diversity of Wrexham's new global audience in terms of geography and media exposure. The focus groups were conducted via Zoom, recorded with consent, and fully transcribed for thematic analysis. No participants were excluded at this stage.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The first phase consisted of a quantitative survey conducted between January and March 2024. A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants through social media groups, football forums, and online communities affiliated with Wrexham AFC. To ensure meaningful engagement with the media narratives under investigation, respondents were selected based on their familiarity with the club primarily through media exposure, including streaming platforms and sports journalism.

The online questionnaire was designed to assess perceptions of various dimensions related to the club's media portrayal. Likert-scale items addressed the influence of the *Welcome to Wrexham* documentary, the perceived authenticity of the celebrity owners, comparative evaluations of different ownership models, and the role of sports journalism in constructing Wrexham's public image. A total of 600 valid responses were collected. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS, including descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), and inferential procedures such as chi-square tests and one-way ANOVA to detect significant differences based on variables such as age, nationality, and level of football engagement.

The second phase involved qualitative inquiry through three online focus groups, conducted after the preliminary survey analysis. Each group comprised six participants, totalling eighteen individuals. The groups were strategically composed to reflect three distinct audience profiles: local fans

based in Wales, international supporters introduced to Wrexham through the documentary, and football fans of other clubs who had encountered Wrexham via media coverage. This segmentation allowed for a comparative exploration of perceptions across different audience types.

Focus groups followed a semi-structured format, with sessions lasting approximately 90 minutes. All participants were fans of Wrexham AFC or regular followers of football media who had encountered the club through different forms of coverage. Participants were invited to discuss their impressions of the documentary, their views on the club's media image, the representation of the owners, and comparisons with clubs under alternative ownership structures. All sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted manually, without the use of qualitative data analysis software, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. An inductive coding approach identified recurrent patterns in participant discourse, with attention to emotional language, perceived authenticity, and the construction of narrative legitimacy. Three dominant themes emerged: the framing of Wrexham as a football fairy tale; the symbolic centrality of the owners; and perceived asymmetry in media treatment between celebrity- and state-owned clubs.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data facilitated a multidimensional understanding of how sports journalism functions as a discursive agent shaping the symbolic economy of modern football. The convergence between survey results and focus group interpretations enhanced the study's internal validity and depth of insight. While the sample was international in scope, the findings reflect perceptions influenced by English-speaking and Western media environments, and may not be generalisable to all global football cultures.

All research procedures adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (WMA, 2013). Participants were fully informed of the study's aims and provided written consent. All participants signed informed consent forms approved under the study's ethical protocol. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and no personal data were retained beyond the research context. The study received no funding from the club or its owners, ensuring complete independence and academic impartiality.

4. Results

The analysis of data obtained from both the quantitative survey and the qualitative focus groups provides valuable insight into how audiences perceive Wrexham AFC's media coverage and the role of sports journalism in its spectacularisation. This section is structured to first present the findings from the quantitative phase, followed by a thematic analysis of the focus group discussions, with a particular emphasis on the convergence between both data sources in addressing the central research objective.

4.1. Quantitative Findings: Audience Perception Through Survey Data

The survey results demonstrate that media narratives play a pivotal role in shaping the global image of Wrexham AFC. A substantial majority of respondents (82%) reported that their initial contact with the club occurred through the *Welcome to Wrexham* documentary, rather than through conventional sports coverage or actual match results. This finding strongly suggests that the audience's awareness and interest in the club are grounded less in sporting performance and more in the emotional and narrative framing facilitated by media platforms.

Moreover, 78% of participants agreed that the media have constructed a positive image of the club, frequently highlighting themes of resurgence, community involvement, and the distinctiveness of its ownership model. However, a more critical dimension emerges when considering the prioritisation of storytelling over sporting analysis. Sixty percent of respondents noted that traditional sports outlets—such as ESPN, *The Athletic*, and BBC Sport—tend to emphasise the club's media appeal and celebrity-driven narrative rather than its on-field performance or competitive context. Another noteworthy finding concerns the personalisation of the club's image through its celebrity owners. A striking 85% of respondents directly associated Wrexham AFC with Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, indicating that the ownership narrative serves as a highly effective branding mechanism. Furthermore, 71% of the sample stated that these owners are portrayed by the media as accessible, authentic, and emotionally invested in the club, standing in sharp contrast to the more opaque and distant portrayal of owners associated with state-backed entities.

In comparative terms, 68% of respondents believed that Wrexham AFC has received more

Table 1. Audience perceptions on media coverage and ownership narratives of Wrexham AFC (N = 600).

Survey item	Agreement (%)
First contact with Wrexham AFC occurred through the <i>Welcome to Wrexham</i> documentary	82%
Media coverage has constructed a positive image of the club	78%
Traditional sports journalism prioritizes narrative over performance	60%
Club identity is directly linked to celebrity owners Reynolds and McElhenney	85%
Media portray the owners as emotionally engaged and authentic	71%
Wrexham receives more favorable coverage than state-backed clubs like Manchester City	68%
Media are more critical of sovereign fund ownership models	54%

Source: Own production.

favourable media treatment than clubs such as Manchester City or Newcastle United. When asked to assess the tone of coverage, 54% reported that the press has adopted a more critical stance towards clubs financed by sovereign wealth funds, while framing Wrexham within narratives of redemption, transparency, and grassroots revival. These findings reinforce the idea that sports journalism does not merely report on football events but actively constructs and legitimises specific ownership models, thereby shaping the moral and emotional framework through which fans engage with the sport.

As shown in Table 1, 82% of respondents stated that their first exposure to Wrexham came via the documentary *Welcome to Wrexham*, and 85% directly linked the club's identity with its celebrity owners. These patterns reflect a significant shift in the mediation of football culture through narrative-driven content.

4.2. Qualitative Findings: Focus Groups and Narrative Perception

The focus group discussions provided a more nuanced understanding of the symbolic and affective dimensions through which audiences interpret the media coverage of Wrexham AFC. Across the three groups—comprising local Welsh fans, international newcomers, and comparative observers—participants consistently underscored the emotional depth of the club's media portrayal, particularly as shaped by the *Welcome to Wrexham* series.

A dominant theme that emerged was the framing of the club as a “football fairy tale.” Participants characterised the media representation as a story of redemption, grassroots resilience, and underdog triumph, often using emotionally charged language. One international participant remarked: “I don’t really know much about the league they play in, but after the documentary, Wrexham feels like the most important club in the world.” This statement exemplifies how narrative structure and emotional engagement can transcend conventional sporting metrics, aligning strongly with the logic of Disneyization.

Another recurrent theme was the humanisation and symbolic capital of the celebrity owners. Reynolds and McElhenney were repeatedly

described as more than just investors; they were perceived as emotionally invested, authentic figures who genuinely care about the club and its community. As one local fan expressed: “The media has shown them as real people, not just rich outsiders. That makes you trust the whole project more.” This portrayal was frequently contrasted with other ownership models. A comparative participant observed: “When a state buys a club, the media calls it sportswashing. When it’s celebrities, they make it a feel-good story.” Such comments underscore a discernible asymmetry in media framing, whereby celebrity ownership is normalised and legitimised through emotionally resonant storytelling, while state or corporate ownership is subjected to more critical scrutiny.

Participants also reflected on the broader media ecosystem that sustains Wrexham's narrative construction. Social media platforms, documentary formats, and traditional journalism were all perceived as working in concert to reinforce a coherent and emotionally engaging image of the club. The sentiment that “Wrexham is a media club now” surfaced in multiple discussions—not as a criticism, but as a recognition of its hybrid identity as both a football institution and a media product.

These qualitative insights closely align with the quantitative findings and further affirm that sports journalism—broadly defined to include documentaries and transmedia content—functions not only as a medium of information but also as a powerful narrative agent that participates actively in the symbolic redefinition of contemporary football.

As shown in Table 2, there are notable differences in the media framing of football club ownership depending on whether the owners are celebrities or state-backed entities. This comparison synthesizes insights drawn primarily from the qualitative analysis of focus group data and discourse patterns observed throughout the study.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study confirm the central role of media narratives—particularly those produced through sports journalism and audiovisual platforms—in the redefinition of football as a global

Table 2. Comparative analysis of football club ownership models and their media coverage.

Aspect	Celebrity Ownership (Wrexham)	State/Sovereign Fund Ownership (Manchester City, Newcastle)
Dominant media narrative	'Fairy tale', authenticity, emotional proximity	Controversy, suspicion, political critique
Public perception (findings)	Emotionally positive, linked to community values	More critical and distant, tied to geopolitical interests
Tone in documentaries and press	Humanizing, inspiring, owners take center stage	Technically critical, focused on financial power
Visibility instruments	Docuseries, TikTok, social media	Traditional reporting, investigative journalism
Symbolic construction	Underdog redemption	Sportswashing through spectacle
Notable examples	Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney	Saudi fund (Newcastle), UAE (Manchester City)
Journalistic role	Symbolic and emotional legitimizer	Partial watchdog, critical tone
Symbolic outcome	Validation of emotional-media ownership model	Ethical scrutiny of political-economic ownership

Source: Own production.

entertainment product. The case of Wrexham AFC illustrates that the media, far from serving merely as channels of information, function as active agents of symbolic construction, shaping club identities and legitimising specific models of ownership. This dynamic aligns directly with Bryman's (1999) concept of Disneyization, whereby cultural phenomena are transformed into emotionally charged, commercially attractive experiences tailored for mass consumption.

From the perspective of sports journalism, the results highlight a significant evolution from conventional reporting to narrative-oriented content, in which emotional storytelling, serialisation, and character-driven plots dominate the portrayal of football clubs. As evidenced by the widespread reception of *Welcome to Wrexham*, media narratives have prioritised themes of resilience, authenticity, and belonging—elements that resonate deeply with audiences and embody what Rowe (1999) describes as the spectacularisation of sport. In this context, the documentary format becomes an extension of journalistic practice, blurring the boundaries between factual reporting and entertainment production.

Survey data indicate that audiences are highly responsive to these forms of media construction. For instance, 85% of respondents associate the club's identity directly with its celebrity owners, while a significant portion acknowledged the media's tendency to privilege emotional appeal over sporting performance. This perception was echoed in the qualitative findings, where participants repeatedly characterised Wrexham as a "football fairy tale," further validating the power of media discourse in fostering affective affiliations. These insights support the arguments of Giulianotti (2015) and Dixon (2014), who contend that contemporary football consumption is increasingly shaped by narratives and identity politics, rather than purely competitive outcomes.

Crucially, this study contributes to the expanding literature on media hierarchies in the legitimisation of ownership models by demonstrating that sports journalism often adopts a more benevolent discourse towards celebrity-led ownership than towards state-backed or corporate alternatives. As Hutchins et al. (2019) argue, media outlets are not neutral observers in the football economy; rather, they are embedded within networks of commercial interests and cultural affinities. The comparative treatment of clubs such as Wrexham versus Manchester City or Newcastle United—observed consistently by both survey respondents and focus group participants—illustrates this selective framing and supports Whitson's (2023) contention that media legitimacy is unequally distributed, shaped by geopolitical and narrative capital.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the Disneyization of football is not merely a theoretical construct but a materialised phenomenon evident in audience perception. The transformation of football clubs into transmedia products—designed to be emotional, accessible, and exportable—mirrors broader trends of commodification in global sport. In this regard, the present study builds on the contributions of scholars such as Sarkar and Soni (2023) and Shah and Williams (2024), by demonstrating how documentary storytelling and digital

journalism are not simply reflectors of sporting reality, but key participants in football's symbolic and commercial economy.

At the methodological level, the application of a sequential mixed-methods design facilitated a nuanced interpretation of both the breadth of public perception (through the survey data) and the depth of narrative framing (via the focus groups). The triangulation of these findings enhances the robustness of the analysis and supports the theoretical proposition that contemporary sports journalism operates as a cultural industry engaged in the production of meaning, rather than merely the transmission of information.

In conclusion, the case of Wrexham AFC exemplifies a paradigmatic shift in the role of sports journalism—from neutral reporting to narrative construction, from analytical detachment to emotional framing, and from independent observation to synergy with entertainment logic. Across multiple platforms, the media have constructed a favourable and emotionally resonant image of celebrity ownership that stands in stark contrast to the coverage of other ownership models. This dynamic contributes directly to the broader Disneyization of football, whereby the sport becomes not only a competitive activity but also a narrative commodity optimised for global media circulation and consumption.

Future research could expand upon these findings by comparing media coverage across different cultural contexts, examining editorial strategies employed by specific media outlets, or conducting longitudinal analyses of audience perception over time. Additionally, further exploration of the ethical implications of media complicity in the legitimisation of ownership models—particularly in the context of sportswashing—would provide a more critical understanding of journalism's evolving role within the modern football ecosystem.

By foregrounding audience perception, this study offers a reception-oriented contribution to understanding how sports journalism shapes the symbolic economy of contemporary football.

6. Limitations of the Study

As with any single-case research, this study presents certain limitations. By focusing exclusively on Wrexham AFC—a highly mediatized and atypical case—the generalisability of the findings to other ownership models or football contexts is necessarily constrained. The use of non-probability sampling may have introduced selection bias, particularly among English-speaking, media-engaged, and digitally literate participants over the age of 18. Additionally, time constraints limited the extent of fieldwork; the sample size and diversity could be further expanded in future research to enhance representativeness and allow for comparative analysis. As the study was conducted in English and distributed mainly via Western platforms, perspectives from non-Anglophone or non-Western football cultures may be underrepresented. Finally, while the study centres on audience perceptions, it does not include direct content analysis of media outputs, which could offer a complementary perspective on narrative construction.

8. Authors' contribution

Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims.	Authors 1, 2
Data curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later re-use.	Authors 1, 2
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyse or synthesize study data.	Author 1
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection.	Authors 1, 2
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models.	Autor 1, 2
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution.	Authors 1
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components.	Authors 1, 2
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team.	Authors 1
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs.	Author 2
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Writing / original draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).	Authors 1, 2, 3
Writing / review & editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision –including pre– or post-publication stages.	Authors 1, 2, 3

8. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

This article was originally written in English. AI tools (Grammarly and DeepL Write) were used solely for language editing and style refinement. No AI was used for content generation or data analysis.

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