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Internationalizing Sports Brands:

The Impact of Marketing in the NFL's Entry
into the Spanish Market

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1. Introduction

Globalization is no longer just a trend; it is the defining reality of our time, seamlessly integrating foreign products, ideas, and entertainment into our daily lives. Nowadays, consumers in Spain purchase Coca-Cola, Nestlé, or Unilever products as if they were local brands. In the entertainment industry, Hollywood blockbusters reach Spanish audiences almost simultaneously with their U.S. releases, whether in cinemas or via streaming platforms like Netflix. This global flow of culture and commerce demonstrates the increasing interconnectivity of markets and societies. In addition, we live in an era of technological revolution, one that has reshaped not only economies and industries but also politics and global interactions.

The sports industry is no exception to this phenomenon. Entertainment sectors have long pursued international expansion, with musicians embarking on world tours and expanding their global reach with streaming platforms. Recognizing their potential to expand beyond domestic markets, sports leagues are following this path. If an artist can fill stadiums worldwide, why shouldn't a sport with an established fan base be able to do the same? Nonetheless, bringing a sport to a new audience involves more than just staging events abroad. Strategic marketing, cultural adaptation, and a deep understanding of consumer behavior are just a few of the challenges that sports organizations must navigate in the modern globalized landscape.

The National Football League (NFL), the most dominant professional sports league in the United States (Jones, 2025), has identified Spain as a new frontier for international expansion. Recent initiatives, such as the scheduled game between the Miami Dolphins and Washington Commanders at Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabéu stadium (2025), mark a deliberate effort to establish American football in a market traditionally dominated by soccer. The success of this venture will depend not only on commercial strategies but also on how well the NFL adapts to the Spanish sports culture, engages local audiences, and builds a sustainable fan base.

This thesis will examine the NFL's entry into Spain as a case study in the internationalization of sports brands. It will analyze the league's marketing strategies, audience engagement tactics, and the broader implications of global sports expansion in a world where national and cultural boundaries are increasingly blurred.

1.1. Background and relevance of study

The globalization of sports has long been a defining feature of modern culture, shaping how entertainment, identity, and commerce circulate across borders (Kulikov et al., 2024). Yet not all sports have traveled equally. While tennis or rugby have built robust international circuits, enjoying widespread cultural legitimacy far beyond their origins, American football seems to remain rather less popular [**Error! No se encuentra el origen de la referencia.**]. The NFL, despite its economic power and cultural centrality in the United States, has historically maintained a limited international presence, with expansion efforts often falling short of sustained engagement (Woo & Kim, 2010). Previous attempts, such as NFL Europe, struggled to gain traction, highlighting the difficulties of transplanting a sport with no organic historical presence or grassroots foundation abroad (Thibault, 2009). Unlike soccer or basketball, American football's rules, pacing, and symbolism are deeply embedded in U.S. culture (Wisner, 2011), which complicates its ability to resonate intuitively with foreign audiences.

American football is a fascinating topic for researching the difficulties of cultural globalization because of this contradiction between domestic dominance and global unfamiliarity. While the NFL continues to rank as one of the world's most valuable sports leagues, its cultural footprint outside the U.S. remains modest in comparison to other global sports entities (PwC, 2023). It is noted that Europeans "love soccer" just as much as Americans "can't get enough of football," highlighting a somewhat cultural exclusivity that resists automatic crossover. Academic perspectives on *glocalization* have long emphasized that successful internationalization requires more than export; it demands adaptation, translation, and sensitivity to local cultural frameworks (Li et al., 2025). In this regard, the NFL's effort to internationalize presents a high-stakes case of how global brands must navigate cultural friction and build new meaning from the ground up. Spain offers a uniquely rich terrain for exploring these dynamics. Unlike other target markets such as the UK, Germany, or Mexico; Spain represents a more distant cultural landscape

from the one associated with American football. Deeply rooted in its *fútbol*¹ tradition, Spanish sporting identity is shaped by the global prestige of clubs like Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, whose influence extends beyond sport into realms of politics, fashion, and media. In contrast, American football remains marginal, both in exposure and cultural familiarity. The NFL's decision to pursue growth in Spain, therefore, is not an obvious one. It challenges marketers to consider how a sport so distinctly American might evolve to engage an audience with little historical or emotional connection to it.

The NFL is adopting a new strategic strategy, according to recent developments. Through the Global Markets Program, the league has accelerated its global aspirations from 2021, assigning Spain to the Miami Dolphins and Chicago Bears in 2023. These initiatives coincide with Real Madrid's announcement of an official NFL game in 2025 at Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in Madrid (2024). With the goal of establishing American football in the local culture, this partnership represents a strategic alignment of well-known American and Spanish sports businesses.

Still, this is not just a commercial maneuver but a cultural one too. In Spain, where American football lacks historical precedent, the NFL must tell a story of meaning, curiosity, and community. As Time Magazine recently pointed out in reference to the league's global strategy, the NFL is not simply seeking viewers, it is trying to craft new habits, emotional connections, and cultural rituals in places where none previously existed (Martinez, 2024). These ambitions go to the heart of what it means to globalize a sport: not just to be seen, but to be understood, adopted, and reinterpreted.

1.2. Purpose and Motive

The motivation behind this chosen topic stems from a deep admiration for the sports and entertainment industry in the United States. As portrayed in countless Hollywood films, the U.S. has masterfully sold the idea of the "American Dream." Within its borders, it has become an expert in transforming sporting activities into grand spectacles, generating unparalleled revenue, setting new social standards, and mobilizing society in ways that

¹ "Fútbol" is the Spanish word for what Americans call "soccer." Same as British culture where they use "football" to refer to same sport known as "soccer" for the US

are rarely seen in other European countries, such as Spain. This influence extends beyond sports, shaping culture at multiple levels.

On a university level, having personally experienced what it means to be part of American sports culture has sparked my interest in the driving force behind this phenomenon: American football. Despite the wide disposition of sports available in the U.S., football consistently ranks as the main one. Whether viewed as a sporting phenomenon or as a marketing powerhouse, its significance in one of the world's largest economies is undeniable. Unlike other sports such as baseball or hockey, which have international leagues, or basketball and soccer, which are part of the Olympic Games, American football lacks a global league or shared Olympic presence.

In this regard, the NFL's ability to expand presents an interesting opportunity to analyze its strategy during past expansion efforts and how it continues to be implemented in markets such as Spain to secure its place on the global stage. Given the American mastery of marketing and entertainment, it is worth examining to what extent the actual sport itself is responsible for the league's promising internationalization.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

Given the diverse aspects that need to be taken into consideration for this work, a thorough research approach is required. The internationalization of the NFL to Spain, being a relatively recent and ongoing phenomenon, offers a compelling case to analyze from a marketing and international business perspective. It is essential to consider precedents of similar expansions and the theoretical frameworks that validate this research as both relevant and valuable. The goal is to uncover how strategic marketing can act as a driving force in entering new cultural and geographical markets, and what lessons can be learned from this specific case.

In light of this, the following research objectives have been established to guide the study:

- **OB1:** Identify the NFL's internationalization business strategy and understand how it shapes its marketing efforts in the Spanish market.

- **OB2:** Analyze the key factors involved in developing an effective marketing strategy for culturally distinct markets and how these strategies are adapted or redefined in the process of international expansion.
- **OB3:** Evaluate the role and impact of marketing in the overall success of a brand's internationalization efforts.

Given these objectives, it is convenient to set some key research questions that will serve as a compass for the development of this study:

- **Q1:** What are the core components of the NFL's internationalization strategy, and how do they influence its marketing direction in Spain?
- **Q2:** What key factors shape an effective marketing strategy for a culturally different market, and in what ways are these strategies adjusted or reimaged to suit the international context?
- **Q3:** To what extent does marketing play a decisive role in the success of a sports brand's international expansion?

This research also seeks to contribute a meaningful addition to the academic work previously done, through which I have further nurtured my knowledge of both the subject and the industry.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Internationalization of Sports Brands

Globalization in the sports era

A variety of disciplines have undertaken the challenge of explaining the globalization phenomenon, for this particular study social and economic dimensions are the relevant ones. Commonly associated with the market expansion, technological communication and interconnectivity, as well as international trade, its influence reaches much further (Held et al., 1999). It shapes the way we live, what we consume, and even what we consider normal in our day-to-day lives. Many of the products, services, and even ideas

that define us today were once geographically and socially inaccessible. But today, it is difficult to imagine a world in which commodities, media, languages, and cultural mores are not constantly changing (Tomlinson, 2007). We now view distance, access, and possibility differently as a result of this widespread connectivity. What once seemed remote, culturally or geographically, has become part of a shared global experience. These transformations have had an impact not only on economic structures but also on how societies function, how identities are constructed, and how cultures interact. While some see this as progress, others raise concerns about inequality, cultural loss, and social dislocation (Bauman, 1998). Thus, Globalization is a complex, multifaceted process that reconfigures both economies and societies (Orunbayev, 2023). Internal practices change as cultures interact more frequently, reshaping their traditions or embracing unfamiliar norms.

From an economic and business standpoint, globalization has turned local markets into global arenas. Corporations and industries now operate according to principles of profit maximization, efficiency, and competitiveness (Steger, 2017). Branding and market expansion have become central components of strategic decision-making, as firms seek to position themselves in increasingly saturated and competitive international environments (Friedman, 2005). As business activity expands across borders, it increasingly influences not only economic structures but also everyday social and cultural life (Crane et al., 2002). This reinforces the idea that globalization is not limited to the movement of goods and capital, but also shapes values, preferences, and practices on a global scale (Tomlinson, 1999).

In terms of sport, globalization can also be explored. It could be referred to as the process through which sports and their associated practices transcend traditional geographic, cultural, and social boundaries to become integrated on a worldwide scale (Andrews & Grainger, 2007). Over time, sport, once rooted in local traditions or confined to national competitions, has become more global in scope, especially in late capitalist times when sport emerged as an important vehicle for capital accumulation (Walsh & Giulianotti 2001). As a result of a synergy between sport and commercial media, athletic competitions have developed and now take part in the global entertainment industry, a clear change driven by globalization (Real 1998; Kellner 2003). Today's sporting events reach a huge global audience through live broadcasts, corporate sponsorships, and

Internet platforms, creating a shared global spectacle. Yet even as sport spreads worldwide, it remains at its core a socially regulated form of physical culture (Bairner, 2001), structured by formal rules and institutions, making competitions understandable across diverse societies. Sport can serve as an example of the erosion of traditional boundaries (Jameson, 1991): global events like the World Cup or Olympics foster collective experiences that connect communities worldwide (Tomlinson et al., 2006). As part of ‘global popular’ culture, sport could be argued to be far more influential or inclusive than institutions such as the United Nations (Kellner, 2003). This, however, does not entail cultural homogenization just because of the extent of diffusion globally. In this sense Ritzer (2004) comes up with the concept of “grobalization” explaining how global corporations promote standardized sport products, somewhat imposing them, while local cultures adapt, reinterpret, and preserve specific practices (Maguire, 2000). In short, the dynamic interaction between global integration and local specificity is reflected in the globalization of sport. It is an example of how a sport remains nationally and culturally distinctive while expanding globally. Sport, therefore, represents an important prism through which to observe the cultural and economic effects of globalization.

Market Entry Strategies

When learning about the field of international business, market entry strategies represent a foundational aspect. Market entry is not just a logistical or operational decision of expansion across borders; but a strategic process that influences a company’s long-term positioning, resource allocation, and competitive advantage (Root, 1994). Entry into foreign markets requires balancing risks and rewards, aligning with goals of internationalization, and considering institutional, cultural, and economic contexts (Kotler & Keller, 2016). It is imperative to this study to understand in detail the basic concepts and types of international market entry strategies.

Market entry strategies encompass the mechanisms and structures firms employ to offer products or services in a new foreign market. The choice of strategy reflects a combination of internal and external factors: the firm’s resources and capabilities, the characteristics of the target market, the nature of the product or service, and the desired degree of control (Anderson & Gatignon, 1986). At this stage, differences in approaches

are also identified as firms with global integration strategies choose either standardized approaches or entry modes that allow greater adaptation, especially for those seeking local responsiveness (Porter, 1986; Kotabe & Helsen, 2020).

Theoretically, various disciplines have clearly identified the following types of entry strategies:

1. **Exporting** presents a basic and initial form of entry, by producing goods in the home country and selling them in the foreign market, either directly to customers or indirectly through intermediaries. Exporting offers low investment requirements and limited risk exposure but provides minimal control over local marketing and customer engagement (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). It is best suited for firms testing foreign markets or with limited international experience.
2. **Licensing** entails granting a foreign firm the right to use intellectual property (e.g., trademarks, patents, production processes) in exchange for royalties. This strategy allows rapid international expansion with minimal capital investment. However, it also limits the licensor's control and may result in lower revenue potential. Licensing is particularly useful when local knowledge is critical for market penetration (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2013).
3. **Franchising** is a variant of licensing in which the franchisor not only transfers intellectual property but also provides a comprehensive business model, operational procedures, and brand standards. Franchising is common in retail and service industries and enables consistent brand experience across markets. It allows for scalability and faster market entry but requires mechanisms for monitoring franchisee compliance (Alon, 2004).
4. **Joint Ventures (JVs)** takes place as a collaborative action between local partner and a foreign one, in order to create a new business entity. Ownership, resources, risks, and profits are shared. Is an alternative that allows to maintain local expertise, distribution channels, and institutional knowledge, limiting the possibility of the effects of entry barriers. However, they also entail complex coordination and potential for conflict if partner objectives diverge (Anderson & Gatignon, 1986).
5. **Wholly Owned Subsidiaries (WOS)** is a strategy involving the establishment or acquisition of a fully owned operation in the target market. Firms seeking a more committed and strategic presence opt for this strategy as it allows increased

control and profitability. At the same time, it entails the highest levels of investment, operational risk, and exposure to local regulations (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Deciding the entry mode is determined by a list of interrelated considerations. In a central position, a crucial factor is the nature of the target market itself, including its size, growth trajectory, competitive intensity, and institutional framework. Characteristics of the firm are equally relevant, such as its financial and organizational resources, prior international experience, strategic objectives, and tolerance for risk. The nature of the product or service being offered can also play a critical role, particularly if it involves high technological complexity, strong brand elements, or a need for significant adaptation to local conditions. Also considered to be of influence in this decision is the firm's desire to maintain control over its operations, marketing, and intellectual property in the new market. Finally, Risks need to be thoroughly considered by the firms, whether they are political, economic, cultural, or legal, as these can significantly influence the attractiveness of particular entry modes (Root, 1994; Agarwal & Ramaswami, 1992).

International market entry strategies form a critical part of a firm's globalization efforts. The selection of entry mode reflects both the strategic priorities of the firm and the specific conditions of the target market. As global business environments become increasingly dynamic and competitive, the ability to select and implement the appropriate entry strategy becomes a key determinant of international success (Kotabe & Helsen, 2020)

Localization vs. Standardization

The emergence of cultures, from the understanding of globalization, homogenized or hybrid cultures have been identified, impacting not only societies but also how firms behave when entering new markets. In the business discipline, this has triggered an extensive theoretical debate around the concepts of standardization and localization, two strategic orientations that firms may adopt when designing and implementing international strategies. Approaches in this sense are not completely opposite, they are prone to interact in a more subtle middle ground where global and local aspects are blended to maximize both efficiency and cultural relevance (Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003; Vrontis et al., 2009).

Standardization is considered to be the practice where a company's domestic marketing strategy is extended into foreign markets almost barely modified. The objective is to offer a consistent product or service experience across countries, by maintaining a global brand, reducing operational complexity and leveraging economies of scale. This approach lies on the conviction that globalization has created shared consumer needs and lifestyles, therefore businesses are able to make the same value proposition globally. (Levitt, 1983; Medina & Duffy, 1998). Authors such as Nguyen (2016), add to the discussion how standardization can strengthen a firm's global image, enable knowledge transfer across markets, and make coordination easier. These efficiencies have made standardization particularly attractive to firms offering universally appealing products (Jain, 1989; Ryans et al., 2003).

There are also critical remarks in terms of standardization as it can be noted its lack of adjustment to local specificities ignoring local specificities, such as culture, language regulations, and consumer habits. Authors such as Medina and Duffy (1998) argue how standardization may lead to overly or under-designed products that don't suit local market conditions. Nguyen (2016) furthermore outlines, standardized strategies may restrict responsiveness, lower market share in culturally diverse contexts, and hinder the transfer of culturally bound information. Even if globalization allows firms to reach new markets, it does not dissolve deep-rooted cultural values, preferences, or consumption behaviors (Craig & Douglas, 2005).

In contrast, localization or adaptation is the process of tailoring products, services, and marketing strategies to the characteristics of a specific market. It acknowledges the complexity and diversity of consumer cultures across regions. According to Nguyen (2016), localization includes both compulsory adoption (due to legal or structural barriers) and voluntary migration based on local preferences, language, and culture. This approach increases customer satisfaction, fosters cultural relevance, and can boost competitive advantage, especially in industries where consumption is closely tied to identity, tradition, or lifestyle. As Douglas and Wind (1987) note, adaptation becomes essential when structural and cultural differences across countries render standardized approaches ineffective.

The downside of localization, however, lies in the fragmentation of operations. Nguyen (2016) and Theodosiou and Leonidou (2003) warn that the absence of uniformity can raise production and marketing costs, diminish economies of scale, and limit brand coherence. Moreover, localization can restrict the transfer of best practices and

complicate internal management and coordination, particularly in multinational firms operating in highly diverse cultural settings.

In addition to this duality, scholars started suggesting the interdependence in the relationship between local and global in contrast to the oppositional belief. This hybrid dynamic is encapsulated in Robertson's (1995) concept of *glocalization*, which refers to the coexistence of particularizing and universalizing tendencies. Marketing discipline defines *glocalization* as a global strategy designed with the possibility of being locally interpreted or adapted. For example, it could change in terms of promotion or slight modification while maintaining a core design or positioning worldwide (De Mooij, 2010). Moreover, Ritzer (2004) introduced the concept of "somethingness" in contrast to the uniformity of global consumerism. He argues that while globalization can lead to "nothingness", products and experiences devoid of local meaning, localization practices preserve cultural authenticity by embedding global offerings in specific contexts.

Cultural considerations thus play a central role in determining the effectiveness of standardization or localization. Hofstede (1991) defined culture as the collective programming of the mind, and consumer culture is shaped by values, beliefs, rituals, and social norms. Nguyen (2016) explains how these cultural patterns directly influence purchasing behavior and marketing outcomes. Difference in products also translate in this consideration, as products may benefit from the global appeal but in some instances, it can require careful localization given the inherited culture.

The complexity of modern consumer cultures has further increased with the rise of hybrid identities and cross-cultural flows, facilitated by global mobility, digital media, and transnational communication (Holt, 2004; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Firms that therefore adopt standardized models should also be able to anticipate and incorporate the inevitable local reinterpretations that follow.

2.2. Marketing Strategies in Sport Industry

Sport industry marketing has evolved over the last century from being a local, product-focused endeavor to a sophisticated international practice. This industry is considered nowadays a significant contributor to the global economy, with a marketing environment markedly different from that of even a few decades ago. Early on, during what Fetchko, Roy, and Clow (2018) refer to as the "monopoly era" of sport (1900–1950), marketing

was limited by media and geography: mass consumption mostly took place through newspapers and radio, while live events primarily reached local audiences. Sport marketing started off as mainly selling tickets and promoting events in a local area, either through print or radio in most cases. With the evolution of technology, the focus expanded, implementing brand development promotion, sponsorships, monetizing media rights and, ultimately, achieving overall fan engagement.

An approach based around engagement reflected the transition from treating fans as passive consumers to making them interact as active co-creators of brand value. In sports, teams or events are now cultivating identities and building communities of fans worldwide as part of their brand development. These connections serve as drivers of loyalty, advocacy and, even, merchandising sales. At the same time, media rights have exploded in value as live sports content remains highly sought-after in the age of streaming and on-demand entertainment. Indeed, global popularity and cross-border viewership have driven the value of broadcast deals for major sport leagues to unprecedented heights. It is estimated that media rights have become the sport industry's single largest revenue stream in markets like North America, surpassing gate revenues, sponsorship, and merchandise (Ourand, 2016). Correspondingly, sponsorship arrangements have become more sophisticated and international. Brands see sports as a vehicle to reach mass audiences; and sports properties leverage sponsors not only for revenue but also to enhance fan experience. The evolution of these four areas: fan engagement, brand management, media rights, and sponsorship; underlines how sport marketing has grown more complex and strategic, integrating entertainment, technology, and commerce.

In this context, it is important to understand how sport marketing contributes not only to economic value but also to cultural and social dynamics. Sports marketing can be used to increase fan interest, boost sports participation, and stimulate the consumption of sports-related products (Ratten, 2016). The promotional tools used to achieve these objectives are collectively referred to as the sports promotion mix, which includes advertising, sponsorship, public relations, personal selling, and sales promotion (Shank & Lyberger, 2015). Hopwood (2007) proposed the term "sports integrated marketing communications mix" to reflect the need for a broader and more flexible promotional framework, capable of adapting to the unique characteristics of sports products. For instance, Turner's (2017) study on the Asian Cup 2015 reveals how advertising, publicity, PR, digital communication, and sales promotions were all strategically employed to engage

audiences and maximize reach. Additionally, Ramachandran (2008) highlights how targeted marketing initiatives can elevate lesser-followed sports in countries like India. As these examples show, sport marketers must recognize what attracts audiences and creatively apply a range of tools to drive awareness, loyalty, and engagement in an increasingly competitive and globalized environment.

Marketing Mix

Building on this global and hybridized foundation, sport marketing theory turns to the practical framework of the marketing mix: the essential set of tactical tools firms use to pursue their strategic objectives. Commonly defined by the “4Ps” model (Product, Price, Place, Promotion), and later extended in sport contexts to include elements like People, Process, and Physical Evidence, the marketing mix offers a blueprint for how sport organizations deliver value to their stakeholders (Shank & Lyberger, 2015).

In the sports context, the product includes not only the core event or game but also the symbolic, emotional, and social experiences associated with the sport. As Chalip (1992) and Mullin et al. (2007) explain, sport consumption is uniquely shaped by fan identification, ritual, and emotion, making the product deeply intangible and relational. Teams and events are not just entertainment offerings: they represent identity, community, and belonging.

Price strategies in this field must balance accessibility and exclusivity, often navigating emotional value as much as economic rationale. Pricing is also influenced by loyalty programs, fan engagement levels, and social status considerations.

Place, or distribution, has expanded from physical stadiums to include digital platforms and global broadcasting, reshaping how and where fans consume content (Sedky et al., 2022). The growth of online streaming, mobile apps, and global partnerships has turned sport into an “anywhere-anytime” consumption experience. This necessitates sophisticated logistics and media management strategies, particularly when leagues internationalize their content across time zones and languages.

Promotion in sport involves integrated campaigns using traditional advertising, sponsorship, social media, public relations, and community engagement. As Turner (2017) illustrates through the Asian Cup case, successful integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategies hinge on coherence across all channels and alignment with stakeholder expectations. The use of ambassadors, digital storytelling, and culturally

adapted messaging highlights the role of IMC in navigating complex and multicultural audiences. The principles of IMC, when applied correctly, help bridge global campaigns with local resonance.

These elements work together within an increasingly global, yet locally rooted, marketing environment, again echoing the logic of *glocalization*. For example, while a global league may use universal branding and elite athletes to drive global appeal, its marketing campaigns may include locally resonant symbols, languages, and values to establish relevance within each market (Meenaghan & O'Sullivan, 1999).

To further contextualize the mix, it is essential to examine branding in sport, which extends far beyond logos and slogans. Branding in sport is deeply narrative and experiential. According to Gladden and Funk (2002), sport brands are “bundles of associations” that create symbolic value and emotional attachment. The unique characteristics of sport products: unpredictability, emotional intensity, communal experience; mean that brand loyalty can transcend rational evaluation. Consequently, branding strategies focus on authenticity, heritage, and storytelling. This often includes consistent use of colors, slogans, historic references, and star players to maintain emotional continuity.

Sport organizations strategically manage their brand architecture to create clear relationships between teams, leagues, events, and sponsors. Keller (2003) explains that this involves careful management of brand equity, particularly in global contexts where image consistency must be balanced with local differentiation. A well-managed sport brand is adaptable enough to resonate across borders, yet consistent enough to preserve its core identity.

In this context, cultural adaptation becomes a crucial strategy. As Giulianotti and Robertson (2007) note, sport is always locally interpreted, even when globally standardized. Thus, marketers must localize not only language and visuals, but also values and rituals embedded in promotional materials. A campaign that succeeds in North America may require major adjustment for Southeast Asian or Latin American audiences. Aspects like celebrity ambassadors, team values, or even humor may be interpreted differently depending on cultural frameworks. This is why understanding the target audience's cultural codes and traditions is essential.

Linked to this is the concept of consumer behavior in sport, which is marked by high emotional involvement, symbolic consumption, and tribal loyalty. Trail and James (2001) argue that sport consumers are motivated by a complex mix of psychological and social

factors, including escape, eustress, entertainment, aesthetics, group affiliation, and family bonding. These motivations vary by market, age group, and cultural background, making market segmentation and psychographic profiling vital. Moreover, sport consumers are increasingly active participants, they post, stream, comment, and even influence brand narratives in real time. This shift has given rise to what Ratten (2016) describes as “entrepreneurial fan behavior,” where fans act as co-creators of the brand.

The marketing mix in the sport industry is no longer a fixed formula but a strategic platform shaped by branding, cultural adaptation, and consumer insights. Each element is affected by globalization and must be tailored to regional contexts without diluting brand identity. The interdependence between emotional value, cultural specificity, and strategic coherence makes sport marketing a dynamic and multifaceted discipline. By combining core marketing principles with an understanding of social and cultural dynamics, sport organizations can navigate the global landscape while building lasting, locally embedded fan relationships.

Branding in Sports: Positioning and Consumer Engagement

Branding is a core strategic function within marketing, focused on creating a distinct identity and value perception for a product, service, or organization (American Marketing Association, 2025). In the sports industry, branding plays a pivotal role, the brand is often regarded as one of the most valuable assets a sport entity possesses. Through strategic branding, sports organizations differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace, cultivate fan loyalty, and ultimately drive revenue and growth. This section explores key branding concepts as they apply to sports: brand identity, brand equity, brand positioning, brand personality, and the critical role of consumer engagement (fandom, attachment, loyalty) in building strong sports brands.

Brand identity refers to the core characteristics and associations that a brand represents, from the perspective of how the brand aspires to be perceived. Aaker (1996) defines brand identity as “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain”, embodying what the brand stands for and the promise it makes to customers. Identity functions as the sender’s side, while brand image is the receiver’s side. In sports, identity can include a team’s name, logos, colors, or values. For example, a club with a

tradition of community service might emphasize being “community-driven,” reinforcing that message across all brand touchpoints.

Closely related is brand personality, how a brand would behave or speak if it were a person (Aaker, 1997). Personality humanizes a brand and facilitates emotional connections with fans. A team might be seen as “determined” or “fun,” depending on the traits it promotes. The classic framework includes five traits: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997). However, Stadler Blank et al. (2013) show that sports teams also exhibit performance-related traits like talent and character-related ones like admiration, often bridged by entertainment value. Fans often describe their teams as “underdogs,” “powerhouses,” or “resilient,” reflecting the emotional connection shaped by brand personality (Stadler Blank et al., 2013).

Brand positioning is about how a brand is placed in the minds of the target audience relative to competitors. Kotler and Armstrong (2012) define positioning as “the act of designing the company’s offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market.” For sports teams, this means claiming a unique mental space based on a compelling value proposition.

Positioning relies on differentiation. Sports organizations distinguish themselves through attributes meaningful to fans, such as legacy, values, or star power. Some emphasize tradition and success; others highlight inclusiveness or family appeal. One club might promote itself as the “winningest team,” while another focuses on fan experience or local pride.

FC Barcelona, for example, promotes itself with the motto “Més que un club” (“More than a club”), emphasizing values, community, and Catalan identity (Bühler & Nufer, 2010). This positions the team as a regional symbol rather than a mere sports entity. Conversely, Manchester United builds on its global reach, historic wins, and iconic branding. Hill and Vincent (2006) outline its brand in four dimensions: as a product (game performance), organization (values), person (traits like ambition), and symbol (logos and imagery). Success in these facets has helped the club carve out a distinct global niche.

As brands build identity and positioning, they aim to develop brand equity². Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as “the set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand’s name

² Added value linked to the brand name.

and symbol that add to (or subtract from) the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customers.”

Aaker's model outlines five components of equity as shown in Image I:

- Brand Awareness: recognition and familiarity among consumers. A well-known team begins with a head start.
- Brand Associations: mental links like success, star athletes, or values like “hard-working.”
- Perceived Quality: the fan's view of game performance or stadium experience.
- Brand Loyalty: fans' commitment through wins and losses, vital to long-term value.
- Other Proprietary Assets: trademarks or exclusive elements like unique jerseys or slogans.

Image I: Aaker's Brand Equity Model



Source: own elaboration based on Aaker (1991)

Keller's (1993) expands this model by showcasing how brand equity experiences growth with awareness, knowledge and associations in consumer's minds, driving loyalty, behavior and preference. Eventually, equity's strength can lead to brand resonance, meaning the deep internal connection and engagement of fans (e.g., lifelong supporters, fan clubs, brand evangelists). Clubs like Real Betis Balompié or the New England Patriots are often viewed as part of a fan's identity, not just a team.

A vigorous brand equity can be reflected in resilience and revenue, denoting how higher equity allows for more stable sales, or even premium pricings and better sponsorship deals. It also protects against bad seasons. As Berry (2000) puts it, “strong brands increase customers’ trust of the invisible purchase,” meaning fans stay loyal even when success isn’t immediate.

Sports brands aren’t built on colors and logos alone but rather what matters most is fan engagement. Consumers of sports are considered passionate participants rather than passive buyers. Engagement involves emotional and behavioral investment: watching games, buying merchandise, following on social media, or contributing to fan content. It can happen year-round, including the off-season. A major driver is team identification, how much being a fan becomes part of someone's identity. Wann and Branscombe (1993) define it as the psychological connection or sense of belonging to a team. Fans with strong identification feel wins and losses personally and behave accordingly buying more, attending games, and promoting the team. In fact, research shows team identification can explain over 60% of merchandise purchase intentions among college fans.

Loyalty is the long-term result of engagement and attachment. It resembles traditional brand loyalty but is often stronger in sports, as fans maintain allegiance even during losing streaks. Season after season, devoted supporters purchase new jerseys, spread the word about the brand, and return. As seen by Chicago Cubs supporters, who stuck with the team over a century-long title drought, some even support the team for generations (Bristow et al, 2001). The characteristic Keller uses to illustrate the most devoted fandoms is brand resonance. These are people who attend games in person, participate in internet forums, or instill fandom in their kids. Newer clubs find it difficult to duplicate the competitive barrier that is created by such loyalty. When it comes to creating brand value, teams with resonance and history have a huge advantage.

To nurture these bonds, teams use strategic tools: storytelling, player-focused content, fan polls, social media campaigns, loyalty programs, and community outreach. This fosters co-creation, where fans shape the brand, not just consume it.

Cultural Adaptation and Consumer Behavior

Culture poses as a decisive factor for the understanding of consumer behavior given its impact. While studying this concept, sociological, anthropological or even psychological

disciplines have investigated the culture's correlation to someone's perceptions, preferences and purchasing decisions, based on norms, shared meanings and social identity (Mooij, 2010). Fundamentally speaking culture is seen by academics such as Kotler and Keller (2012) as a determinant of this behavior, as people's actions are often guided by those socially constructed values, beliefs and expectations. Bourdieu (1984) contributes to the sociological perspective introducing the concept of *habitus* as an explanation of the patterns of consumption and how these are influenced, including the ones related to sports, which showcase cultural capital and even social class.

Sports have been addressed as products that can be associated not only as forms of entertainment but also distinct markers of social identity and as a reflection of consumer's taste.

To further develop the concept, studies in relation with culture and anthropology have emphasized the identity-related and symbolic aspects of consumption. With this idea in mind Arnould and Thompson (2005) developed a theory—The Consumer Culture Theory. The theory embodied an explanation on how the identities and meanings of consumers are constructed through the services and products they use. From this perspective, consuming a sports brand is not merely a functional choice it is an expression of affiliation, lifestyle, and personal values. Sports fandom, merchandise, and brand loyalty are all shaped by cultural narratives and symbolic systems that vary by region and group.

Psychological approaches, especially in cross-cultural consumer research, have also explored how cultural values shape consumer attitudes and motivations. One of the most widely used frameworks is Hofstede's (2001) model of cultural dimensions. These include individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation, among others. For instance, in individualistic cultures like the United States, marketing campaigns often appeal to personal success and independence, while in collectivist cultures such as Japan or China, they tend to emphasize community, family, and group harmony (De Mooij, 2010).

In the context of international sports marketing, theoretical frameworks such as the aforementioned are especially relevant. When expanding globally, sports brands must navigate the complexity of a terrain of cultural diversity. This is where the concept of *glocalization*, as articulated by Robertson (1995), becomes critical. *Glocalization* refers to the simultaneous pursuit of global standardization and local adaptation. It allows global

sport entities to maintain brand consistency while adjusting their strategies to align with local customs, values, and consumption habits.

In practice, *glocalization* in sport marketing has enabled organizations to resonate more deeply with local audiences. The incorporation of local cultural elements has always been well received in global sports events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympics, an aspect examined by Giulianotti and Robertson (2007), to foster emotional connection with local fans- This approach reflects a dual strategy: maintaining a coherent global identity while becoming culturally embedded in each market.

Cultural adaptation is again highlighted by examples in a corporate extent with relevance. As an example of Chinese themes of discipline and collective effort, Nike leveraged those aspects as part of their campaigns with features of local athletes (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). In a similar manner, with the integration of anime imagery in Japan's localized campaign, Adidas looked for the attraction of youth by tapping into a culturally significant aspect (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). These campaigns show how sports brands that engage with local cultural narratives can enhance authenticity and build stronger consumer relationships.

Therefore, an inevitable link exists between the adaptation of culture and consumer behavior. Insights come from all types of academic scenes to explain how cultural structures influence how people interpret and engage with sport brands. For marketers, this means recognizing that effective international strategies are not merely about reaching new markets, but about meaningfully connecting with culturally diverse consumers. In sport marketing, where identity, emotion, and community play central roles, culturally sensitive strategies are key to long-term brand success.

3. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative and exploratory methodology, counting with an exhaustive literature review and the analysis of a case study, as well as a number of interviews. Given the emerging nature of the internationalization of the NFL in Spain, a non-empirical approach has been chosen to understand the strategic and cultural dynamics from a theoretical and contextual perspective.

First, a systematic literature review of academic and professional literature related to the globalization of sport, brand internationalization strategies, cultural adaptation in marketing and sports branding has been carried out. To this end, primary academic sources (scientific articles, specialized manuals and book chapters) and secondary sources (institutional reports, publications in specialized media and official NFL sources) were consulted. This theoretical review has served as a conceptual basis for the analysis of the case.

Secondly, the case study technique has been used, focusing on the process of entry and expansion of the National Football League (NFL) in the Spanish market, with special attention to the alliance with Real Madrid and the game scheduled at the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium. The case study allows us to observe how concepts such as globalization, brand building, and sports marketing strategies are applied in practice in a context that is culturally foreign to American football. Likewise, a complementary analysis of communication and marketing materials developed by the NFL and specific franchises such as the Miami Dolphins has been incorporated, as well as the monitoring of media and social networks to examine the narrative built around the expansion. This analysis allows us to identify discursive and symbolic elements used to generate engagement with the local public. The analysis of the actions implemented in the Spanish market has been complemented by qualitative responses provided by Sergio Friede, co-founder and CEO of Group 1 Agency, responsible for the marketing strategy of the NFL league and its partner teams in Spain. The perspective of consumers from different demographic and geographic profiles was also incorporated, with the aim of analyzing perceptions and results derived from marketing strategies, as well as interests and preferences related to sports. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the reception and acceptance of the NFL in the Spanish context.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. The NFL's Global expansion

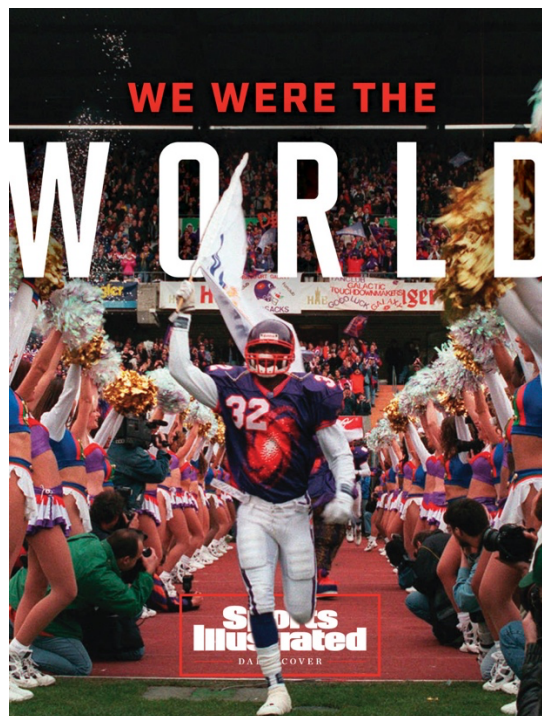
The NFL has been in the search for a reach expansion further from just only the US market since the end of the 20th century. This will for internationalization has taken form through various initiatives, some of which may have seemed as merely experiential while others

have gained consolidation, these serve us as a demonstration to understand the actions taken today in terms of their strategy (Wan Woo et al., 2010).

Past Efforts in International Expansion

One of their first significant efforts was the creation of the World League of American Football (WLAF) in 1991, conceived as an international league including teams not only from the US, but also Canada and Europe (Germany, UK and Spain). Despite its innovative potential, the WLAF league did not succeed in consolidating his home market [Image II], the US (Prewitt, 2021). After being suspended in 1993 a second attempt came in 1995, with a reactivation which exclusively focused on European franchises, serving as a prelude to what is now known as NFL Europe, launched in 1998. This new version worked until 2007 and was mostly integrated of young players transferred from NFL teams for their development. Germany served as the epicenter for the league, given five of the six existing teams were based there. Though attaining a more than acceptable rate of assistance to stadiums, economic loss and low media repercussion forced the NFL to end the project and refocus its international strategy (Martin, 2011).

Image II: The Fall of the WLAF



Source: Axel Seidemann, Sports Illustrated, 2021

In parallel, during the 80s and 90s the NFL organized exhibition games outside its frontiers through a world tour known as American Bowl. Between these, six encounters disputed in Germany between 1990 and 1994 stood up, attempting to consolidate the European audience's interest that gradually started showing sympathy for the sport. Nonetheless, the real turning point took place in 2005, when Mexico celebrated the regular season's first official game outside the US. The duel starred the Arizona Cardinals and the San Francisco 49ers, witnessed by more than 100.000 attendees of the Azteca Stadium (Gonzaga, 2022), marking a milestone that reassured the global potential of the NFL product (NFL, 2024). Since 2007, the league established the NFL's International Series, where several annual encounters taking place in London rapidly consolidated a great call event. Three of the games disputed in 2016 gathered more than 240.000 spectators (Seifert, 2016), ratifying the model's strength. Subsequently, the NFL expanded its presence in other markets, such as the systematic return to México (2016) and their debut in Germany in 2022. This rightly showcased the NFL's strategic internationalization efforts, as Goodell defined it as "monumental moment in history" to "keep growing the game around the world" (Zamorano, 2021). Today's annual programming has reinstalled this presence and league's intentions.

Rise of Global Media and its Role

This expansion of the NFL has come in hand with a significant increase in TV audiences and overall global mediatic presence. A notable example is again Germany, where in a few decades American Football has evolved from a minor sport towards a mainstream phenomenon. Fairly recent polls indicate the existence of 19 millions of NFL German fans [Image III], from which 3.6 million closely keep up with the league (Palopoli, 2023). Reflected both in audience and merchandising sales, a solidification of its presence was taking place.

In 2022, the NFL signed a new television deal in Germany whereby RTL took over free-to-air broadcasting of the games, a sign of growing interest in that market (Jones, 2022). The change of broadcaster was accompanied by solid figures: for example, the 2024 Super Bowl had an average audience of 1.9 million viewers in Germany, 13% more than the previous year (2Playbook, 2024). Even regular-season games were scheduled on

German soil - Munich (2022), Frankfurt (2023) and soon Berlin (2025) - backed by an enthusiastic audience and substantial media contracts (SportBusiness, 2024).

Image III: Germany's NFL Audience



Source: Podewils, SportFive, 2024

Alongside Germany, other European countries are also showing a growing interest in the NFL. In the United Kingdom, a pioneer in the organization of official games, coverage continues to grow stronger thanks to platforms such as Sky Sports and ITV, which broadcast matches on a weekly basis and generate exclusive content tailored to the British public. Following this trend France's the main sports media, L'Équipe has also offered free-to-air coverage of some key games, similarly Italy started the distribution of programming through DAZN and Mediaset. In Spain, the NFL has gained visibility especially since 2021 with the consolidation of Spanish-language content and recently adding on audience with the launch of the official @NFLEspaña account. Furthermore, since the 2023-24 season, the DAZN platform is the official distributor of NFL Game Pass globally [Image IV], allowing users to access all games live and on-demand with enhanced functionalities (Expansión, 2023). This partnership has enabled an unprecedented expansion of the NFL's international reach, and in markets such as Spain, it is combined with Movistar Plus+ television coverage, which includes both games and pre- and post-game analysis (DAZN, 2023). In addition, digital media such as Marca and AS actively cover the league's news, reinforcing its media presence in the Spanish-speaking market. Live broadcasts are offered through Movistar Plus+, which includes both games and pre- and post-game analysis, and through the NFL Game Pass platform.

In addition, digital media such as Marca and AS actively cover the league's news, reinforcing its media presence in the Spanish-speaking market.

Image IV: DAZN's NFL Game Pass Service



Source: DAZN, 2025

Fan growth is also not falling behind in Latin America. The NFL now estimates that it has 46 million supporters in Mexico, which has historically been its second-largest market behind the United States (Zamorano, 2021). It is anticipated that over 30 million people watched Super Bowl LIX in Mexico, making the nation a major market for the NFL and international brands that run ads during the game (El Economista, 2025; Lastra, 2025). Other Latin American nations are also noteworthy; for instance, Brazil is the second-largest Hispanic (but Portuguese-speaking) market in the area, with an estimated 50 million NFL fans, and television audiences are growing (ESPN, 2024). Overall, the NFL's television audience in Latin America has doubled in the past three years, driven by the accessibility of broadcasts (ESPN, Fox Sports and streaming platforms) and targeted marketing strategies for Spanish-speaking audiences (ESPN, 2024). The NFL has even introduced Spanish-language content and cultural campaigns such as “Por la Cultura” to connect with Latino fans, recognizing the growing importance of this segment (ESPN, 2024).

With the commitment of international media as well as the NFL’s product adaptation to different languages and cultures have been pillars for increasing the global fan base. Markets such as United Kingdom, Germany, Spain or Mexico now rival some regions of the U.S. in terms of audience and interest, validating the league's commitment to internationalize its spectacle.

Current Globalization Strategy

In 2021, the NFL took a more structured step in its global strategy by launching the International Home Marketing Area (IHMA) program, commonly referred to as the Global Markets Program. Through this initiative, the league assigned its 32 teams exclusive marketing rights in various countries around the world, with the goal of promoting the NFL brand and increasing fan base in those markets [Image V] (ESPN, 2025). In practice, this allows each franchise to conduct marketing activities, fan events, local sponsorship agreements and soccer development initiatives in its assigned country, functioning as an ambassador for the NFL in that territory.

The initial deployment of the program, at the end of 2021, covered 18 priority international markets. The program now spans 21 countries across five continents, with subsequent additions in 2022, 2023, and 2024. These countries range from established powerhouses like the United Kingdom or Mexico to up-and-coming travel destinations like Brazil, Spain, Australia, or China. For instance, up to ten NFL teams, such as the legendary Dallas Cowboys, Pittsburgh Steelers, or San Francisco 49ers, now share territory in Mexico in an effort to attract local supporters (NFL, 2025).

Image V: NFL’s Global Markets Program – Teams by Country



Source: NFL, 2025

In the United Kingdom, a pioneer international market for the NFL, 9 teams (such as Jacksonville Jaguars, Chicago Bears or Miami Dolphins) have rights to exploit their image and organize events. Other countries assigned in the program range from Canada and Germany (both with multiple teams involved) to less traditional markets such as Nigeria (Cleveland Browns) or Ghana (Philadelphia Eagles). This diversification demonstrates the league's eagerness to extend its presence globally and cultivate new fan bases beyond the usual focus.

An interesting case is Greece and the United Arab Emirates, two markets added in the 2025 expansion. This will allow big-name teams to explore budding fans where American soccer has had less penetration to date (ESPN, 2025). The philosophy behind the Global Markets Program is for each team to invest and take root locally, generating long-term identification. Marissa Solis, NFL Executive, rightly stated how “It's very important for the NFL to be in these countries year-round, to be with the fans, communicating with them.” (Pasquel, 2024). It's not just about taking single games to other countries, but about having a sustained presence: local language content, sales of customized merchandising, social media interaction with foreign fans, etc. The league thus seeks to create loyal fans in different corners of the world, relying on the identity of each franchise (colors, history, stars) to win over new followers.

The NFL Product

The NFL's internationalization strategy can be understood as a process of exporting its flagship product: the NFL game and experience. The league not only takes teams and games to other countries, but exports a unique sports entertainment concept, honed over decades in the U.S. This involves transporting all the elements that make professional American soccer attractive: the high competitive level, but also the spectacle around the game (halftime shows, entertainment, merchandising, etc.) and the fan culture (*tailgate*-style barbecues, celebrations, anthems). One analyst described the NFL as “poised to bring a superior product to the rest of Europe than it offered with the defunct NFL Europe,” alluding to the fact that it now offers top-tier official games rather than a lesser

developmental product (Zamorano, 2021). In a sense, the NFL seeks to replicate internationally the model that works so well in the U.S., adapting it to each local context.

A central aspect of this export is the “NFL experience”. Executives involved in the Spanish project point out that the intention is to bring “the whole American experience” to the new markets, not just the game itself (Ortega, 2025). “Part of the plan will be to develop all the experiences that an NFL game offers,” explains Felipe Formiga (Miami Dolphins), recognizing that” it is one of the challenges of the NFL: to create that experience in a very different environment.” (2025). This means, for example, adapting the traditional tailgates [Image VI] (festive gatherings of fans before the game, typically in the parking lots of U.S. stadiums) to European urban venues; or incorporating musical performances, cheerleaders and elements of the American soccer show in a way that connects with the local audience. In Madrid, the city is already contemplating how to carry out activities that emulate the unique atmosphere of the NFL in the heart of the city center. The logistics and production of the event play a critical role: the NFL sends personnel, special equipment (e.g., additional turf, scoreboards, replay systems) and coordinates with local partners to ensure that the game at the Bernabeu “feels” like a game in Miami or Chicago. The challenge is to maintain the authenticity of the NFL experience while respecting local idiosyncrasies.

Image VI: *Tailgate Culture*



Source: NFL, 2021

On the other hand, conceiving the globalization of the NFL as an export implies recognizing the strong commercial and branding component behind these initiatives. The NFL is aware that its product has enormous entertainment value that can be monetized globally, just as Formula 1 does by taking its championship to different countries. In fact, commentators have speculated that in a few years the NFL calendar could “resemble a bit [...] that of Formula 1”, with an annual tour of matches in different latitudes (although logically on a smaller scale). Each international game opens up revenue opportunities: high-priced ticket sales in NFL-hungry markets, local sponsorship deals (e.g., Spanish sponsors for the Madrid game), host country-specific TV rights and commemorative merchandise. This vision shows that beyond the sporting aspect, the NFL sees global expansion as a way to secure its economic future by conquering new audiences and sponsors.

But exporting the NFL successfully requires more than a commercial approach; it requires winning the genuine passion of local fans. That's why the strategy includes educational and cultural efforts. In new markets, the NFL organizes clinics and camps to teach the fundamentals of the sport, sends players or legends to interact with the community, and even supports the creation of grassroots leagues. One example: in Brazil, the NFL supported training with 20 coaches and 300 children, acting “as ambassadors, giving clinics... we have to help people understand the sport,” according to Pri Shumate (2025). It also seeks to connect American soccer with local cultural references: the Dolphins have collaborated with Spanish sports figures (elite European soccer players such as former Real Madrid or Barça players) and even with “Dolfan Club” fans in Spain who announced the draft picks [Image VII]. In Spain, the Dolphins stressed the importance of “understanding what already exists here” and working with existing local organizations (such as clubs and the national federation) to support the growth of American soccer from the grassroots level. This strategy of “glocalization” -globalizing by adapting locally- seeks for the NFL to take root and not be seen as a passing foreign spectacle.

Image VII: Spain's *Dolfan Club* announcement of Draft Pick 2025



Source: X (@dolfanclubspain), 2025

4.2. Strategic Positioning and Marketing

Given the process of internationalization, sports brands are set to face various challenges, especially when the sport in question is relatively unknown in the new market. In the case of the NFL, its arrival in Spain presents significant obstacles due to the low level of awareness and lack of roots of American football in the country. In the absence of local references and given the lack of familiarity with the sport, it is necessary to develop a strategy that focuses not only on the sport itself, but also on the brand, its culture, and how it can connect with the Spanish public.

With great insight, Sergio – CEO & Cofounder of Group 1 Agency— discussed the NFL as more than just a league but rather as entertainment, without limiting itself to the game. It emphasizes the spectacle of the event (halftime show, game atmosphere) and fashion products associated with the NFL, integrating itself into youth and urban culture beyond the playing field.

This positioning approach recognizes the need for patience and investment, as Friede mentioned. The NFL is investing in gradually building brand awareness before expecting deep loyalty. A key positioning milestone will be the first official NFL game in Spain, scheduled for November 2025 at the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in Madrid (Sánchez, 2025). This game, which will pit the Miami Dolphins against the Washington Commanders, will serve as a platform to showcase the NFL's value proposition to Spanish audiences live, presenting the league as a world-class sporting spectacle in an iconic local venue. NFL executives have emphasized that this event reflects their “strong commitment to the global expansion of the NFL and the recruitment of new audiences” (Pietra, 2025)

in Spain, positioning the NFL brand in association with values of innovation, exclusivity, and aspiration within the Spanish sports landscape.

Value Creation in the Spanish Landscape

For the purpose of creating value in a deeply influenced territory by soccer, the American league is in need of following several strategic steps. Taking into consideration several aspects local content campaigns begin to emerge, where strategic alliances such as merchandising agreements or unique experiences for fans rise to the occasion. A key component has been lifestyle merchandising, capitalizing on the fact that the NFL's aesthetic appeals even to those who don't follow the sport. “Merchandising is very cross-cutting” explains Freide, pointing to licensing agreements with affordable fashion chains: “collections with Primark, Zara, H&M... those kinds of agreements help us reach a wider audience.” [Imagen VIII]. Wearing clothing with NFL team logos thus becomes a statement of youthful style, creating brand value through cultural association. These commercial collaborations increase the NFL's visibility on Spanish streets and generate additional revenue, while introducing the league into the everyday life of the average consumer.

Imagen VIII: Zara's NFL Collection



THE NFL
COLLECTED BY
BACK ELUSION

**The NFL collection
inspired by the energy of
sports and the attitude of
youth.**

NFL.collection



Source: Zara, 2025

The NFL has made an investment in creating advertising that appeal to Spanish fans in terms of content and local talent. Its partnership with Spanish-Georgian fighter Ilia Topuria, a rising star in the UFC, is a noteworthy example. Topuria appears in front of the Bernabéu stadium wearing a Washington Commanders shirt in the first official NFL

advertisement for the league's arrival in Madrid (Mundo Deportivo, 2025). In order to create excitement for the 2025 game, this project takes use of Topuria's popularity among young people and links the NFL with an engaging athlete who is well-liked by the local populace. Furthermore, well-known Spanish content producers Diego Campoy, Mar Lucas, Pablogshow, Lucii_Iba, and Koko DC were featured in the game's announcement film (Méndez & García, 2025). The inclusion of these local influencers in the campaign shows how the NFL creates value by linking its brand to influential local voices, amplifying the message organically among their millions of followers.

Generating experiences is another key pillar. Even before having games in Spain, the NFL has begun offering experiential events to engage the public. For the first time in 2025, an official Super Bowl Watch Party was held in Madrid, bringing together more than 40 local content creators and influencers at a private event to experience the Super Bowl (Jouanin, 2025). This experience, featuring live musical performances and the broadcast of the game in a festive atmosphere, brought “the excitement of the Super Bowl” to Spain and served as a test for the Spanish public's receptivity to the NFL style. The Group 1 agency, the NFL's local partner, is also designing fan zones and activities around game week in Madrid, with the aim of immersing Spanish fans in the context of American sports entertainment, where “what happens off the field can matter as much or more than the game itself.” Freide explained. All these content initiatives, collaborations, and experiences seek to create multiple points of contact with the Spanish audience, providing added value beyond the game and building affinity with the NFL brand.

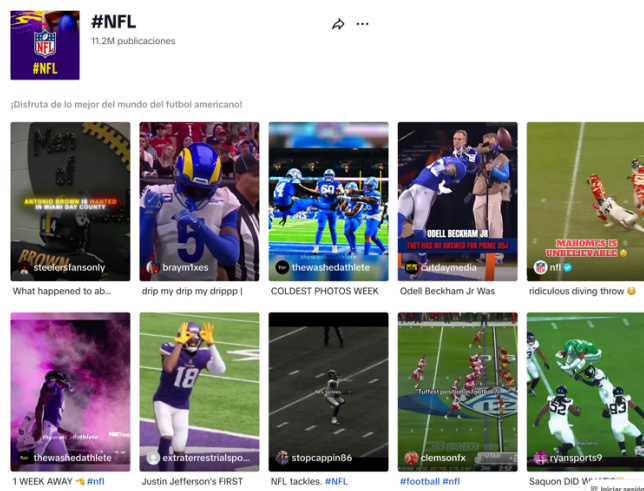
Digital Marketing and Social Media

Given the increasing presence of the digital aspect, the NFL has recognized that in order to grow in Spain, it must be present on the platforms where fans consume sports on a daily basis. A wide amount of data has cemented the consumption of sports in social media. As spoken with Sergio, engagement was central in the approach to creating a community and awareness in Spain for the league, given the lack of previous knowledge about the local's relationship with such an “unusual sport”. Sports content consumption has increasingly shifted to digital platforms in recent years, particularly among younger audiences. Fans now regularly turn to networks like Instagram and TikTok for sports

news, highlights, behind-the-scenes content, and a sense of community. Undoubtedly, the use of these is almost a priority for the strategy.

The global trend around short-form mobile content is reshaping how fans engage with sports, with platforms like TikTok leading the way. Among over-18-year-olds, 75% consider themselves sports fans, even a 59% admitting showing more interest over the related content rather than the sporting event itself (TikTok, 2025). This echoes Sergio's statement, which focused on the entertainment value of the NFL product rather than its competitive nature. Moreover, 29% of users report having become interested in a new sport after seeing it on TikTok, confirming the platform's ability not only to entertain but also to educate and convert new fans (TikTok, 2025). Offering an immersive as well as emotional connection, TikTok facilitates dissemination of content including locker room moments, team challenges or light-hearted messages from the team, irreplicable by traditional media. These insights strongly support the NFL's efforts to expand its digital footprint in Spain.

Image IX: #NFL posts on TikTok



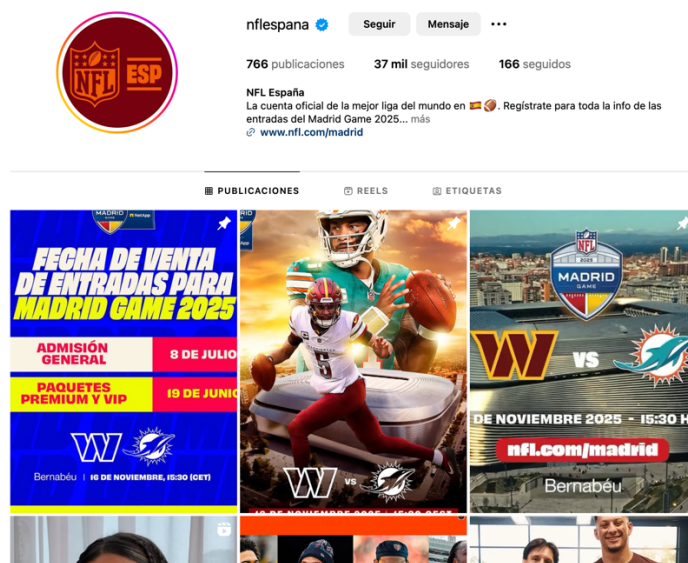
Source: TikTok, 2025

TikTok is currently proved to achieve the highest engagement in sports-related content across different platforms, with professional sports teams averaging a 2.7% engagement rate per video, far exceeding Facebook or Instagram (Rival IQ, 2025). Teams have adapted by posting more consistently on TikTok, with an average of 3 videos per week during 2024 (Rival IQ, 2024). For the NFL, this means the platform is not just an entertainment space but a strategic gateway to building visibility and emotional

engagement among younger Spanish fans. Meanwhile, Instagram remains a central component in sports marketing, providing both reach and aesthetic visual value. Its various content formats, from stories to carousels, enable dynamic brand storytelling and effective fan interaction. In 2024, sports teams posted nearly 20 times per week on Instagram, maintaining one of the highest industry engagement rates at 1.3%, second only to TikTok (Rival IQ, 2025).

Therefore, the use of Instagram remains crucial for this strategy. The official launch of the Instagram account @NFLespana, a channel dedicated exclusively to the Spanish community, set the league's social media localized presence. As an action carried out by Group 1, the NFL's Instagram disseminates league news, summaries, information about the NFL Madrid Game 2025, and adapted content (memes, local cultural references) in Spanish [Image X]. Currently, the NFL Spain Instagram account has already surpassed 37,000 followers (Instagram, 2025), reflecting significant initial interest despite the project's early stages. Instagram is being used to position the brand by showing images of iconic players, spectacular moments, and collaborations with Spanish celebrities (for example, soccer player Vinicius Jr. posing with an American football helmet) [**Error! No se encuentra el origen de la referencia.**]. However, the current followers of the official account are most likely those who already know the league or have been attracted by the aforementioned campaigns.

Image X: @NFLespana account on Instagram



Source: Instagram, 2025

While Instagram provides reach and community, TikTok could provide virality and conversion of new fans. NFL Spain has the opportunity to leverage this locally untapped platform to launch campaigns as the 2025 game approaches. The combination of a dual Instagram–TikTok strategy would allow the NFL to both build loyalty among its already interested audience and skyrocket discovery among massive new audiences. In addition, considering high engagement as a value for the selection of platforms is critical to capturing the next generation of fans. By focusing on TikTok and Instagram, the NFL not only aligns itself with where fans already are but also adapts to how they want to experience sports: visually, interactively, and socially.

Engagement through talent: Content Creators and Celebrities

A cornerstone of the NFL's marketing strategy in Spain is its collaboration with local content creators and influencers to generate engagement and authenticity, which Freide further discussed (2025). The NFL has adopted a segmented approach by working with different digital talent profiles, ranging from specialized micro-influencers to top-tier sports celebrities, to amplify its message across successive layers of the audience. At the base of this pyramid are creators specializing in the NFL or American football, who already have an audience knowledgeable about the sport. One example is journalist and streamer Diego Campoy, who is widely followed by international soccer fans and increasingly identified with NFL content on social media. Collaborating with these profiles allows the NFL to convert existing interest into concrete actions: their messages are aimed at “conversion (for example, inviting their followers to subscribe to Game Pass, attend events, or purchase merchandise)”. If someone follows these creators, it is because they probably already have some interest in the NFL, so the league capitalizes on that affinity to encourage the next step in fan engagement.

At an intermediate level, NFL Spain works with cross-platform influencers with large audiences (ranging from 3 to 15 million followers on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram) who do not usually talk about the NFL, but whose content fits in with aspects of sports entertainment. Sergio Freide explains that the local content creation program has involved young social media stars such as “Mar, Lucas, Pablo, Koko, and Luci,” whose audiences may only be “between 1% and 5% NFL fans, but their reach is enormous.” These creators help present the NFL in an appealing way to fans of other

sports or comedy. For example, @Pablogshow, known for his viral comedy videos, participated in NFL campaigns and turned out to be a fan of the NFL aesthetic, “he was already wearing NFL merchandise before the collaboration,” according to Freide. Similarly, influencer *Mar Lucas* (focused on music and lifestyle) was linked to content about the Super Bowl halftime show, connecting the NFL with the music world that interests her followers. By employing these generalist creators, the NFL seeks to broaden the top of the funnel of potential fans, bringing American football to audiences that until now had no exposure but are open to new sports entertainment content [Image XI].

Image XI: Spanish Influencers at Super Bowl LIX



Source: @marlucas via Instagram

Finally, at the pinnacle of the engagement strategy, highly renowned sports and cultural figures in Spain are used to associate the NFL with aspirational personalities. These names include elite soccer players such as Vinicius Jr. (Real Madrid star) and Spanish sports celebrities such as Rafa Nadal, as well as popular musicians (e.g., singer Quevedo and pop star Aitana) who have expressed their interest by attending NFL events. Freide explains that although these celebrities “aren't going to post regularly about the NFL” but will maybe share their enjoyment the day of the game on Instagram, which Freide also considers valuable. This tactic leverages the enormous reach of stars, conferring prestige and curiosity about the NFL among the general public. Together, the use of influencers and ambassadors at different levels of reach forms a comprehensive communication ecosystem: micro-influencers legitimize and educate, media creators popularize and

entertain, and celebrities bring massive visibility and social validation to the NFL's presence in Spain.

Market Response and Initial Perception

The NFL's reception in Spain to date has combined momentary enthusiasm for something new with the challenges inherent in introducing a new sport. Initially, “public awareness of the NFL is low”, says Freide. Many people still don't know exactly what the game is or that there will be a game in Madrid. Therefore, the initial priority has been to generate awareness. “Do people even know what the NFL is? Do they know there's a game coming to Madrid? No,” emphasizing the need to start there.

Given the familiarity, north American fans such as Blake considered taking games to Europe a logical step for the league's global expansion strategy and an exciting opportunity to go see their favorite teams outside their country. From a Spanish point of view, fans such as Álvaro or Cristina recognize how American Football is not rooted in the country, but they acknowledge the game as a unique occasion that is attractive for an extensive audience. Cristina coinciding with Sergio—from Group 1—comments how in a first stance many find this sport “slow and boring”, but once it's understood it can be really entertaining, and she believes that the NFL's global following must be interested in this experience. Given Álvaro's interesting stance as an American football player in Tres Cantos Madrid, ideas towards the difficulty of the game were also made aware and further added to the unpopularity around his circle of friends.

However, everyone notices significant differences culturally. In the US, American football is part of everyday life, while in Spain it's a minority sport or unknown. Adding on to Sergio's idea of the lack of a local idol, Javier and Arturo advocate for their own sports teams and declare themselves “hardcore fans” of other sports teams such as the local, Real Madrid. This comes across as one of the main issues when gaining attention, since many of the Spanish consumers answer with their preferences towards the “real football” – given that in European countries what Americans call “soccer” is considered to be football. Nonetheless, most of them believed in a possible connection between Spaniards and the sport, given the athletic and physical aspect of the sport which can make it more exciting, and hold a position of novelty among the already practiced sports around the country.

Among the main points discussed within the interviewees, concerns were constantly being raised over the differences in watching a game live at a stadium. Contrasting experiences, Blake highlighted his surprise to see the lack of food and beer as well as entertainment at a Real Madrid LaLiga game at Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, to which Freide, Arturo and Javier also made these differences clear. At the same time, everyone showed intrigue over the upcoming game in Madrid and voiced their interest in attending. This experiential factor was the main point brought up by Sergio when discussing the marketing strategy, which also resonated in everyone's answers. Curiosity over the *tailgates* tradition, halftime shows or fan-oriented actions in the stands, are mentioned by most of them as a potential attractive factor. This expectation is confirmed by fans like Arturo, who admits that what motivates him most about the NFL in Madrid is "the whole American show" rather than the game itself, and that he would mainly attend for the party atmosphere, which illustrates how the entertainment aspect can serve as an initial hook and is a key part of the marketing strategy as Freide asserted.

Despite this excitement, price was also brought up as an ongoing concern by some of the locals, as US prices are known to be higher in comparison to Spain, noting the potential drawbacks it could have on attendance. There is cautious optimism about the potential for success, but no one expects an immediate mass phenomenon, as introducing a new sport takes time. Cristina observes that more and more Spaniards follow NFL teams on social media; in her opinion, with "events, media coverage, and visibility," enthusiasm could grow significantly. In summary, those interviewed see the 2025 game at the Bernabéu as a catalyst: if the NFL adapts its product to the local context (language, schedules, entertainment) and maintains that cultural connection with the public, the event will be a success and help establish American football in Spain.

All consumer profile's answers therefore suggest the foundation for growth is being built, and several responses directly or indirectly declare the impact marketing aspects are having on the upcoming game reception and the NFL's growing awareness in the country. Also gathered the relevance of certain degree of adaptiveness of the experiential product while maintaining their distinctive factors despite the difference in culture. The 2025 game may not only mark a milestone event but serve as a testing ground for the NFL's ability to turn a moment of curiosity into lasting engagement through strategic localization and brand experience.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this study, the internationalization process of the NFL through its entry into the Spanish market has been examined, focusing particularly on the strategic role of marketing in adapting, positioning, and giving meaning to a sport that is culturally foreign to the local context. The analysis carried out has allowed to deepen into not only the communication and commercial actions developed by the league and its franchises, but also into the perceptions, interests, and cultural barriers experienced by Spanish consumers when faced with a distinctly American product.

From a theoretical point of view, this study contributes to the field of sports brand internationalization by applying and contrasting concepts such as glocalization, brand equity, foreign market entry strategies, and culturally conditioned consumer behavior. The combination of standardization and adaptation, global identity and local translation, has been shown to be a key approach for brands seeking to establish themselves in markets outside their traditional sphere. Furthermore, it reinforces the importance of marketing not as a mere promotional tool, but as a profound process of symbolic negotiation, cultural insertion, and community building in globalized contexts.

In practical terms, the results obtained offer various implications for the NFL itself and for other sports organizations with international expansion aspirations. This analysis shows that, in markets such as Spain, which lacks a tradition of American football and has a highly established sports culture centered on European soccer, it is essential to prioritize experiential marketing strategies capable of offering a distinctive and attractive experience for the local audience. Collaborations were a main topic of discussion along the investigation, recognizing the value of national cultural leaders, well-known athletes, or celebrities as a crucial tool for the achievement of emotional connection and social credibility by the brand. In a similar vein, proximity and relevance can be established by tailoring digital content to the Spanish audience's languages, codes, and forms. In the end, this entire process necessitates consistent long-term investment and a cohesive story that presents the NFL as an integrated and alluring part of the country's sports and cultural landscape rather than as a fleeting alien spectacle.

This work has also shown how sport can act as a cultural consumer product which, when properly communicated, reinterpreted, and contextualized, has the capacity to generate

symbolic and emotional value beyond its origin. In this sense, the NFL's efforts in Spain can serve as a model for other leagues or brands interested in entering new markets, highlighting the need to gain in-depth knowledge of the sociocultural environment and to invest in long-term strategies beyond one-off campaigns.

As for the limitations of the research, it should be noted that the expansion phase analyzed is still at a very early stage, which makes it impossible to assess with certainty its long-term impact in terms of fanbase consolidation or economic return. Furthermore, although the interviews conducted have provided rich qualitative information, their scope is limited in terms of representativeness and generalizability. Nor has full access been granted to internal campaign performance or sales data, which would have allowed for a more robust quantitative analysis. These limitations provide additional lines of investigation. It would be relevant to conduct a longitudinal analysis of the NFL's expansion in Spain following the 2025 game, evaluating factors such as audience evolution, brand associations, media influence, and loyalty. Comparative studies with other European countries, such as Germany or the UK, can also provide insight into how different cultures respond to the same product whether utilizing similar or different methods. Last but not least, quantitative research based on market research, social media analysis, or surveys would complement the qualitative conclusions presented here and bolster the empirical validity of the analysis.

Overall, it can be said that the objectives set out at the beginning have been consistently achieved: the NFL's internationalization strategy and its specific application in Spain has been identified and explained throughout the work, key factors that shape an effective marketing strategy in culturally different contexts have been analyzed which signaled the relevance of the shift to a digital landscape while maintaining the tangible factors of the product and brand as an experience, and the extent to which marketing has been decisive in the success of the NFL as a sports brand entering a new market such as Spain. This research therefore could not only be considered as a relevant case study from an academic point of view, but also as a provider of useful tools for professional practice in the field of international sports marketing.

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7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix I: Image and Figures

Figure I: Top 10 Most Popular Sports 2025

Rank	Sport	Estimated Fans	Regional Popularity
1.	Soccer / Association Football	3.5 Billion	Europe, Africa, Asia, America
2.	Cricket	2.5 Billion	Asia, Australia, UK
3.	Basketball	2.2 Billion	US, Canada, China, and the Philippines
4.	Field Hockey	2 Billion	Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia
5.	Tennis	1 Billion	Europe, Americas, and Asia
6.	Volleyball	900 Million	Asia, Europe, Americas, and Australia
7.	Table Tennis	850 Million	Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas
8.	Baseball	500 Million	US, Japan, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic
9.	American Football / Rugby	410 Million	USA mainly France, England, New Zealand, South Africa
10.	Golf	390 Million	Europe, Asia, America, Canada

Source: SportsBrowser, 2025

Image I: Vinicius Jr with Miami Dolphins attire



Source: beIN Sports, 2025

7.2. Appendix II: Interviews

Interview I: Group 1 Agency

Interview:	<i>Madrid, Th 05/06/2025, 17:30</i>
Company: Group 1 Agency	Duration: 22 minutes
Interviewee: Sergio Freide	Interviewer/Transcriber*: Sofia Mora
Position: Cofounder & CEO	Format: Video Call via Teams
	<small>*Translated from Spanish to English</small>
Q1: Within the framework of your collaboration with the NFL, how does the agency work: with the NFL (as a global brand) or only with the teams assigned to Spain within the Global Markets program?	<p>SF: We, [the agency], are working with the NFL as a league in its landing in Spain. We are developing several initiatives [...] That is, we are helping the league to land in this new market, where there will also be a game at the end of the year.</p> <p>We are also working with specific teams. In the case of the Miami Dolphins, for example, as you were saying, they are part of the Global Markets program and have rights in Spain. With them we have done actions here, but we are also in contact with other teams that have rights in the UK, or in the UAE, where they have been incorporated since last month.</p> <p>In short, our clients are two: on the one hand, the league (NFL), and on the other, the teams, such as the Dolphins.</p>
Q2: From your experience, what would you say are the 3 key pillars to successfully internationalize a sports brand in a culturally different market such as the Spanish one?	<p>SF: Yes, let's see, if I had to say key in 3 keys they would be: Patience, because it is not easy; perseverance; and economic investment is also worth, you have to invest to grow your fan base.</p>
Q3: How do you build value for a brand like the NFL in a country so rooted in traditional soccer? What elements are prioritized when introducing a 'new' sport?	<p>SF: What is very important is that in Spain, in particular, the NFL does not have a, let's say, local idol, right? I mean, there is no Spanish player competing in the NFL. Then, the kids here don't play football [...]. So, what we do is a strategy that goes around other pillars. For example, in the case of the NFL it's very clear: Music. Everybody talks about the halftime show at the Super Bowl.</p> <p>Another clear element is merchandising. You don't even have to know what team the Miami Dolphins are to wear a Dolphins cap, just because it's cool.... Merchandising is something that is super cross-cutting, around collections with Primark, with Zara, with H&M... those kind of licensing deals that they do to reach a wider audience.</p> <p>And then there is a very important part of all that is content and talent: those collaborations with Vinicius</p>

or Ilia Topuria ... and how they also help you to position your brand among the local public.

Q4: American sports are closely tied to a very unique live experience—with tailgates, halftime shows, and a festive atmosphere—while in Spain, the experience of sports takes place in other formats, such as pre-game gatherings, chants, or social drinking in bars. How could such a unique experience from one cultural context be translated to a completely different one, like the Spanish one?

SF: That's one of the ongoing battles I've faced throughout my career, you know? I mean, here in Spain, people show up to football matches five minutes before kickoff, each with their sandwich, and everyone leaves early so the metro isn't too crowded. In the U.S., it's the complete opposite — you get there three hours before the game, spend a hundred dollars on food and drinks. I think culturally it's just very different, because in the U.S., sports are entertainment, and in Spain, they're competition.

[...] What happens is that when a product like the NFL comes here [Spain], it's true that inside the *Bernabéu*, there will be some core fans of the Miami Dolphins or the Commanders [...]. But I'd say 90% of the people who go will be there for the experience, for the chance to see an NFL game live for the first time, to witness the whole show that's built around it.

So, between the different mindset of the fans and everything that gets organized around the game week: there'll be a FanZone, the teams will activate around the city too. I think what you're really doing is immersing people in that more American, entertainment-driven context, where what happens off the field can matter just as much, if not more, than the game itself.

Q5: In this adaptation process, what role does digital play? How do you manage to convey or recreate that experiential dimension of American sports on social media or through digital activations in a market where sports are experienced differently?

SF: It's key, right? I spent seven and a half years at the NBA, which is a league where 90% of the games start while you're asleep and end before you wake up. Digital was essential.

I think the focus has to be on building a community, and that community needs to be fueled by content, by experiences... It's about making people feel close. For example, in the case of the Miami Dolphins — who are 9,000 kilometers away — how can fans feel connected to the team?

One of the things we did with them was announcing their fifth-round draft pick from Madrid's Plaza Mayor, with the president of the local fan club. That's what it's

about: making people feel truly close to a team that's thousands of kilometers away and that they're not going to see play every week or every other week, like they would with a local football team.

And then, influencer and content creator strategies are crucial. In fact, the very first thing we did with the NFL was working with them — so they could convey to their local audiences what the brand is all about and everything they're getting to experience.

Q6: What kind of profiles — digital creators or established sports figures — do you consider most effective for engaging the target audience? What value does a profile like his bring in terms of emotional connection or the credibility of the message?

SF: Look, you have to break down the different types of talent we work with, right? If we start at the bottom of the pyramid—or the funnel—you've got influencers or content creators who are very specific to the NFL. For example, Diego Campoy, who has an audience that, let's say, the NFL kind of already has indirectly. Because if you follow Diego Campoy, it's probably because you already have some interest in the NFL. That type of creator is used more for conversion. And what do we mean by conversion? Things like: subscribe to Game Pass, go to a game, buy this jersey, watch the Christmas games on Netflix, right? Then, in the middle of the funnel, you have creators like the ones we're using in our content program: Mar, Lucas, Pablo, Coco, or Luci. These are people with between 3 and 15 million followers. Maybe only 1% to 5% of their audience are NFL fans, but their reach is huge. If you look at it, Luci and Coco are really focused on soccer, so you're already targeting fans of another sport who might be more open to it than someone who doesn't like sports at all. Pablo's more in the comedy space, more viral videos... and he's actually a big fan of NFL merch — he was already wearing it before the collab. Then there's Mar, who's really into music, so with her we tie in things [like the halftime show].

And at the top, you have the big names — Vinicius, Ilia [Topuria], and all the celebrities who attend the game, like Aitana, Quevedo... These people won't regularly post about the NFL, but maybe on game day they'll share something like 'so cool to be down on the field' on Instagram. That helps us a lot, because they have massive reach. So we collaborate with them in ways that they genuinely enjoy — if Ilia's into being in the commercial, then great.

Q7: At this early stage of entering the market, is the main objective brand awareness, or are you already aiming to build a community and a fanbase around the NFL?

SF: Yes, look, I think you have to look at the funnel. I mean, you have to start with awareness: do people even know what the NFL is? Do they know there's a game coming to Madrid? No. So you have to start there. And then continue on social media, check the results, look at some highlights... It's true that the NFL faces the challenge of not being an easy sport to understand. You really have to make an effort to get it, and that's something we're not used to. Because soccer, you understand, you play it... tennis, you understand... So in that sense, it's more complicated.

Q8: We have touched upon a bit of this but... Since this is a league without local teams, how are you working to create an emotional connection with Spanish fans? Is the approach to build support for specific teams, for the NFL as a show, or for the sport in general?

SF: That's where what we were talking about comes in, right? On a digital level, through merch... — it's about creating those touchpoints that make the audience feel close to your brand. In the end, the game is going to be a golden opportunity, obviously. So I think the NFL has to find that balance between rewarding the existing fans — the ones who've been around for a while, even though they're a minority, that's the reality — and, at the same time, attracting new fans and growing the funnel, which is ultimately what they really care about. I believe that everything related to content, media, influencers, and digital is what helps the pie keep getting bigger.

Q9: To finish up: What do you think is the main challenge (and the biggest opportunity) of this project in Spain, looking ahead to the game at the Santiago Bernabéu and the future of the league in Europe?

SF: The main challenge... well, it's also true that in Europe, markets like the UK and Germany are much more advanced than Spain on every level — in terms of fandom, revenue, even participation. The biggest challenge is that the sport is not popular at all in the Spanish market — I'm speaking about Spain specifically — and I think it's going to take time until the NFL has its own 'Gasol' moment. That is, a player everyone knows, who made the NBA explode in popularity and got everyone to follow the league here. The opportunity lies in the fact that it's a league that... well, American culture is cool. That's the reality. And people want to be drawn to that — you said it yourself,

right? Based on your own experience studying there. And then, I think once you understand the basics of the sport — the rules, how it works, the different types of players — it can really hook you. Especially because it's a league with a very short season. Since it's such a physical sport, teams only play 17 games. So every game is do or die, really. That's the reality — every game really matters. It's not like the NBA, where each team plays 82 games and the regular season doesn't feel as meaningful. And another good thing is that the NFL has a great product: on Sundays at 7:00 p.m. Spanish time, you've got RedZone, which broadcasts a ton of games at once. It's true that sometimes it competes with LaLiga matches here, and it's tough if Real Madrid or Barça are playing, but I think the time slots are way more friendly than the NBA's, for example.

Interview 2: Consumer Profiles

<i>Name:</i>	<i>Age & Origin:</i>	<i>Description</i>
Blake Mahmood	24, Minnesota, USA	Baseball Student Athlete Alumni, New York based and lived in Madrid for 4 months
Álvaro Cuenca	24, Madrid, Spain	Amateur Football Player at <i>Jabatos</i> Tres Cantos Team
Cristina Hott	22, Bilbao, Spain	E4 Alumni (Comillas – Tulane University), Student Assisant for Football Team
Arturo López	..., La Rioja, Spain	
Javier Bossi	30, Madrid, Spain	Real Madrid Fan and devoting follower of all Spanish soccer leagues
Javier Bossi	30, Madrid, Spain	Real Madrid Fan and devoting follower of all Spanish soccer leagues

Q1: Are you a fan of any sport? Do you follow specific teams or leagues

BM: I'm a fan of baseball, NFL football, and golf. I would say I follow all three sports, but the NFL the most.

JB: Yes, I'm a fan of team sports, especially football (soccer). I really like Real Madrid—I'm a die-hard *Madridista* to the core. I enjoy following them in every match, both in domestic competitions like La Liga Santander and in European tournaments such as the Champions League. In fact, the Club World Cup is coming up soon, where the best clubs in the world compete. I also enjoy Formula 1.

CH: I wouldn't call myself a hardcore fan of any sport, but we watch a lot of soccer at home. For example, we always support Spain or Alcaraz in big matches. If I had to say I'm a fan of something, it would be soccer—I support Atlético de Madrid. I follow La Liga and the Champions League, although I'm not super strict about it. Mostly just football, and tennis a bit too.

AL: Yes, I'm a big football fan—real football, that is. I've always supported Real Madrid and follow LaLiga very closely.

AC: Yes, I love sports in general but especially American football. I play in an amateur team called Jabatos Tres Cantos, and I also follow soccer, I'm an Atlético de Madrid fan.

Q2: How present has American football (NFL) been in your life? Do you watch it regularly? Which team do you support, if any?

BM: Football season is a big deal in my household. My dad and I are fans of different teams, and we watch games every Sunday, [...]. I grew up in Minnesota, so I support the Minnesota Vikings.

JB: Well, if you can call that sport "football," then yes, I know about it, but I'm not a follower. I don't really know all the rules or how it's played, and it doesn't grab my attention, so I'm not a big fan and don't support any particular team.

CH: American football wasn't really present in my life until I studied in the U.S. Before that, I didn't understand it at all. At Tulane, it became part of my social life: going to games, tailgates, parties... At first, I didn't care much for the sport itself, but then I started working with the football team, supporting the sports medicine department. I attended every training session, and that's when I got into it. I ended up liking it a lot. I wouldn't say I watch it regularly now, but while in the U.S. I followed college football, especially when the Super Bowl came to New Orleans. I follow the NFL in social media too.

AL: Not really present. I've seen clips online and I know the Super Bowl is a huge thing, but I've never followed a team.

AC: Very present. In terms of NFL, I might watch games every other week when the season is on. I like the Packers, but I mostly enjoy the sport itself.

Q3: How would you describe what the NFL represents within American culture?

BM: The NFL brings people together beyond race, socioeconomic status, or background. It allows people to connect and take a break from the stresses of daily life.

JB: From my point of view, football-American is among the top three sports in U.S. culture. Basketball, American football, and baseball are, in my opinion, the three most-followed sports. American football, specifically, embodies values I'd call almost extraordinary: teamwork,

looking out for one another, empathy, sacrifice, and constant effort to achieve goals. I think those are core pillars of the American character.

CH: Besides how passionate Americans are about sports, what really stood out to me is how the entire country gets behind both the NFL and college football. That really surprised me — in Spain we don't support university teams like that. In the fall semester, there was football every day: Thursday Night Football, Friday, Saturday, Monday... it was everywhere. People would plan BBQs, get-togethers, events... The Super Bowl especially felt like a national celebration. When it was held in New Orleans, the city shut down — there were concerts, famous people, street festivals. It's part of their culture, just like tortilla de patatas is part of ours.

AL: It represents a sport that was invented and created entirely by them—100% American. With a mix of strength, strategy, and spectacle. It's like their religion. It's completely embedded in their lives.

AC: It's huge, it defines lots of the sports and entertainment culture in the U.S. From what I've learned playing, is a tradition, and identity component.

Q4: *The NFL is organizing an official game in Madrid in 2025 between the Miami Dolphins and the Washington Commanders. What do you think about the league bringing games to Europe?*

BM: Personally, I think the games in Europe are great for the sport and for the rest of the world. I know some teams and players have concerns about traveling that far for just one game — which makes sense given the violent nature of football and the recovery time needed after jet lag. Still, I think it's exciting for fans to see their favorite teams while also traveling. The NFL is already the biggest sport in the U.S., and since the domestic market is somewhat saturated, expanding *internationally* is the next logical step for growth.

JB: I think it's a great initiative for the NFL to bring games to Europe. The sport is deeply rooted in the U.S. but not so much here, and staging these games could spark interest and be a starting point for more people to get into it

CH: I think it's a great idea. I'd personally love it, since I lived in the U.S. and it would bring back good memories. It's true that the NFL isn't very rooted in Spain, but this kind of event can attract all kinds of people — even internationally. The NFL has global followers. At first, people might think it's a slow or boring game, but once you understand it, it's actually really entertaining. Plus, I've noticed there are American football teams in Spain, like the Madrid Bravos, which I didn't even know existed. So yeah, I think bringing an official game here could work well.

AL: I think it's an opportunity to bring a spectacular sport to other cultures. It's interesting, especially for fans of American culture. It's something different, and for me, the main attraction is really the show surrounding the game.

AC: It's a big step. I think it helps promote the sport and creates unique opportunities for people like me who don't usually travel to the U.S.

Q5: Do you think Europeans (and specifically Spaniards) can connect with this sport? What cultural barriers do you see?

BM: While most Europeans — especially Spaniards — didn't grow up playing or watching the NFL, hosting games locally will build interest and make people more likely to watch other games in the U.S. One barrier might be the violent nature of the sport. Europeans are used to soccer players flopping after minimal contact, but that could also be a point of intrigue. Another cultural barrier is how the league functions. Europeans are used to relegation systems, while in the NFL, the worst teams get the best draft picks. Finally, even if holding games in Europe sparks interest, the time difference makes it difficult for Europeans to follow the NFL regularly.

JB: I do believe it's a very compatible sport for Europeans, with similarities to sports already played here, like rugby. It's a team game with some shared characteristics. We have the right conditions for it to catch on, although if people haven't learned it in school—as they do in the U.S.—it can take longer.

CH: Yes, I think Europeans, and Spaniards in particular, can definitely connect with the sport. The biggest barrier would be how long and slow the game feels compared to soccer — there's less constant movement. In a single play, they might only gain 10 yards. But the entertainment around it — the cheerleaders, the mascots, the crowd games — makes the whole day feel like an event. And since people here already enjoy the pre-game atmosphere of soccer matches, I think American football's culture could translate well. Watching it live might be easier to follow than on TV, though, where it's hard to track the ball and understand the plays.

AL: The games are very long compared to what we're used to here. I think we could, but it's not natural for us. Most of us don't even know the rules, and the games are slow compared to what we're used to.

AC: It's possible, but the problem is the lack of knowledge. Most of my friends and family think it's slow or confusing because they don't understand the rules or the gameplay.

Q6: What elements of the American "game day experience" do you think would be most appealing to a foreign audience?

BM: There are a few elements that I think would really appeal to Europeans. First, the food — game days usually include grilling lots of meat, chips and dips, and homemade dishes like my favorite, buffalo chicken dip. Second, tailgating is a big deal. In the U.S., most people drive to games, so they can bring lots of stuff and set up a tailgate with food, drinks, music, games — it's a whole social event. Lastly, and most importantly, I was shocked when I went to a Real Madrid game and realized they don't serve beer in the stadium. In the U.S., beer and food are staples of the stadium experience.

JB: What matters most is making it attractive and, above all, a sport for everyone. Ticket prices could be a hurdle: if they're too high, many people might skip it for financial reasons. Competitive pricing and large stadiums that can hold plenty of fans would help it succeed.

CH: Definitely the cheerleaders, the mascots, and the fan engagement during breaks — like giveaways and games — are very entertaining. The halftime shows are amazing, like watching a mini-concert from a major artist. The whole pre-game vibe is also great: in the U.S., families show up hours before, set up tents, bring food, and have concerts outside the stadium. That whole “game day experience” is a huge part of what makes it so fun. It’s something that could really appeal to European audiences.

AL: The whole show—tailgating, the halftime performances, how the fans are involved in the game. That’s the part that catches my attention. But I think there should also be a good explanation of the game taking advantage of all the breaks.

AC: From what I’ve seen and what my team has tried to replicate, the American game day is much more than just a match—it’s a full event. Tailgating, music, food, fan activities, and entertainment throughout the game make it really engaging. In Spain, we’re not used to that kind of atmosphere at sporting events.

Q7: Would you attend an NFL game outside of the U.S., as a tourist or resident? Why or why not?

BM: I’d love to attend an NFL game abroad, especially in Madrid. As a tourist, it would be amazing to watch my team play in another country while exploring that place. As a resident, it would be cool to experience something live that isn’t normally available.

JB: Generally, I’m not big on social media. For example, I follow Formula 1, which I often watch on my phone because most races are abroad—although Spain hosts one in Barcelona and soon Madrid. To keep up, you really have to watch it live. Sometimes I watch in English, other times in Spanish, and occasionally in French; it depends on the day.

CH: Yes, I would attend an NFL game outside the U.S. For me, it would be very emotional — I worked directly with the Tulane team, on the field, at every practice and game. I’ve lived that life, and it brings back great memories. I know some of my friends might find it boring, but for me, it’s special. Plus, imagine if at the halftime of a Dolphins vs. Commanders game in Madrid they brought someone like Rihanna to perform — I’d be there even just for that!

AL: Yes, I’d definitely go. Not so much for the sport, but because I want to experience what a real American sports event feels like.

AC: Of course. I’ll be the first one in line. For fans like me, this is a dream come true. And I really enjoy both teams.

Q8: Would you attend an NFL game outside of the U.S., as a tourist or resident? Why or why not?

BM: I think for the NFL to succeed globally, it needs to adjust game times to make them more accessible for audiences in Europe or Asia. Time zones are a major barrier.

JB: Yes, I would attend an NFL game outside the United States, whether as a tourist or a resident. Promoting the sport is vital, and this would reward fans in Spain by letting them experience it live without traveling to the U.S. We’ve already seen other sports move matches

abroad—like the Copa del Rey going to Saudi Arabia—for economic and expansion reasons. Making that experience available seems positive.

CH: Yes, I believe the NFL could succeed outside the U.S., though it'll take time. People are already interested, and I've seen Spanish fans getting involved. The sport is exciting once you get it, but you need to create that excitement through events, media, and visibility. It might not be massive right away, but with time and the right approach, it could grow a lot.

AL: Only if they adapt. They need to keep the “wow” factor, but also localize things—language, schedules, maybe even explain the rules better.

AC: Yes, but it'll take time. There aren't enough schools or programs to develop talent here, in my experience there isn't a lot of interest in the sport either. If the league wants real growth, they'll need to invest in grassroots too.

Q9: Do you think the NFL can achieve real success outside the United States?

BM: I'd recommend starting from the grassroots — investing in youth leagues, flag football programs, and coaching clinics across Europe. That way, interest can grow with the next generation. Also, hosting more games in cities like Paris, Berlin, and Madrid would help. They should also create more documentaries, highlight reels, and behind-the-scenes content tailored to European audiences — especially stories of European players making it to the NFL. Lastly, offering flexible streaming options, like condensed games or real-time highlights, would make following the league easier.

JB: I do think the NFL could succeed outside the U.S., though not in the short term. It will take time and gradual investment. The sport requires extensive logistics: specialized gear, facilities, and large squads. It's not as simple as renting a court for football or basketball. But in the medium to long run, with the right strategy, it could gain real traction internationally. I'd recommend that the NFL adapt the spectacle and everything around the event to the European or Spanish context. In the U.S., the atmosphere—food, activities, entertainment—is essential to the game-day experience. Replicating that here, in a culturally tailored way, would be very effective. Accessibility matters too: high ticket prices can be a barrier. Competitive pricing and staging games in large venues that welcome many fans would help reach new audiences.

CH: I'd suggest they bring all those extra layers of entertainment to Europe: mascots, performances, food, pre-game shows, and keep prices reasonable to make it accessible. People love events and spectacles, and if you make it a full-day experience, even those who aren't hardcore fans will come for the vibe and might stay for the sport.

AL: Make it more accessible. Promote the entertainment, make it visible on TV and social media. Also, prices should be adapted to what people here can afford.

AC: Education. Teach the rules, create academies, bring players and coaches here. Also, market the sport through relatable content and maybe even create a team here to have more chances to see it live.

Q10: *Have you seen NFL content on social media in other languages or adapted to other countries? Do you think it's a good strategy?*

BM: I think adapting content to local languages is the most important thing. Personally, I'd find it tough to get into a new sport if the broadcast were in an unfamiliar language. In the U.S., we often say that Spanish broadcasts sound more exciting and livelier. I think it's a good strategy overall, but they could do more — like creating an ESPN-style NFL show in Europe, adapted to each country's language.

JB: I'm generally not very active on social media, but I do follow Formula 1, and I often watch coverage in different languages—English, Spanish, or French, depending on the day. Although I haven't seen NFL content in other languages, I think localizing digital content is a good strategy. Tailoring material to each country can help connect better with local audiences and make the sport feel more familiar.

CH: Yes, I've seen some American football content on social media in Spain — I didn't even know teams existed here until then! Platforms like TikTok or Instagram are great for this because they show how passionate some local fans are. I think adapting content to each country is key, and it's a good strategy to build awareness and interest.

AL: I've seen some clips, mostly in English, but adapting content to local culture and language is a must. It's a good move.

AC: Yes, I follow their account, and I think it's good and I enjoy it and it's necessary for people to get to know the sport and the league. Content in Spanish, with familiar references, helps a lot to connect new fans.

Declaración de Uso de Herramientas de IA Generativa en Trabajos Fin de Grado en Relaciones Internacionales.

Por la presente, yo, Sofía Mora Martín, estudiante de Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad Pontificia Comillas al presentar mi Trabajo Fin de Grado titulado "*Internationalizing Sports Brands: The Impact of Marketing in the NFL's Entry into the Spanish Market*", declaro que he utilizado la herramienta de IA Generativa ChatGPT u otras similares de IAG de código sólo en el contexto de las actividades descritas a continuación:

1. **Sintetizador y divulgador de libros complicados:** Para resumir y comprender literatura compleja.
2. **Traductor:** Para traducir textos de un lenguaje a otro.
3. **Transcripción:** Para facilitar la redacción e interpretación de las entrevistas realizadas
4. **Referencias:** Para estructurar la bibliografía conforme al formato APA7.
5. **Mejora de Redacción:** Para corregir estructuras y faltas gramaticales.

Afirmo que toda la información y contenido presentados en este trabajo son producto de mi investigación y esfuerzo individual, excepto donde se ha indicado lo contrario y se han dado los créditos correspondientes (he incluido las referencias adecuadas en el TFG y he explicitado para qué se ha usado ChatGPT u otras herramientas similares). Soy consciente de las implicaciones académicas y éticas de presentar un trabajo no original y acepto las consecuencias de cualquier violación a esta declaración.

Fecha: 16/06/2025

Firma: Sofía Mora Martín