

# Rise of billion pound replica kit industry has changed the design of football shirts, study finds

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The evolution of the replica kit industry and subsequent rise in fans wearing sportswear as leisurewear has affected football shirt design, new University of Sheffield research has found.

Using a statistical analysis of a database of current Premier League and Football League teams' home kits since 1888, Dr Chris Stride, a statistician from the University's Institute of Work Psychology, writing for the journal *Sport in History*, found that although new kits had become more frequent, home shirt designs had actually become more governed by tradition over the last two decades.

Though replica shirts have been produced since the late 1950s, they were initially marketed only to children, and sold as part of a full playing strip. Kit designs were also not copyrighted and at times different clubs, such as Derby County and Spurs, wore identical outfits and different manufacturers produced the same designs.

However, in the early 1970s, kit manufacturers such as Admiral and Umbro forged contracts with clubs and introduced copyrighted designs, allowing them to market their shirts with the added appeal of being exclusive and authentic.

As a result, designs became more detailed and intricate, making them unique to their specific club and promoting the manufacturer's brand,

with frequent changes boosting income.

Between 1975 and 1980, use of different coloured trim on shirts increased by 40 per cent, and manufacturers' logos soon became ubiquitous. In the last 25 years, the percentage of clubs changing their home kit at the start of any season has doubled to almost 100 per cent.

The study found the adult market for replica football shirts as leisurewear only developed significantly from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Today sales to adults provide the bulk of a billion dollar industry, Manchester United alone selling approximately 2 million shirts per year.

Dr Stride said: "Several factors were behind this shift from child to adult sales, including fashion trends towards sportswear within supporter subcultures, and also in wider society linked to the leisure boom of the 1980s. Other factors include the wider social phenomenon of 'kidulthood' in which previous generational boundaries of clothing and behaviour disappeared; the existence of a generation of fans who had grown up wearing child replica shirts; and then the commercialisation of football as the Premier League era began."

Dr Stride found the shift to a primarily adult market for replica shirts has resulted in a further change in shirt design. Many clubs now use home shirts as part of a wider nostalgia-based marketing strategy designed to portray the club as traditional and authentic, qualities perceived to appeal to older fans, both committed and new.

Flashy, intricate designs have become less common, and plainer shirts with retro stylings or historical references are very much in vogue. Changes in traditional primary colour and patterning of kits, such as the recent decision at Cardiff City, now reversed due to pressure from fans, were never common but are now exceptionally rare. As well as appealing to the nostalgia and fashion preferences of an adult market, simpler

traditional designs also provide a less intrusive background for the many logos carried by the football shirt, which has become a billboard for multiple brands, symbolic of its primary role as a leisurewear product.

Dr Stride said: "Though most clubs now change their home shirt design every season, changes usually consist of just minor details, small flashes, collar styles or trim. The innovation in football shirts has shifted from design to marketing tactics."

Provided by University of Sheffield

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