

A ‘healthy’ future? Supporters’ perceptions of the current state of English football

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Over the last few years clear public policy support in favour of fan engagement in the governance of football has developed. This is based on the assumption that supporters are dissatisfied with the current governance structures within the sport. There is, however, no robust academic evidence of whether this is indeed the case.

This article aims to contribute to the debate by presenting data from qualitative fieldwork with 21 football supporters during March-May 2013. Each participant created a photograph album over an eight-week period, and was then interviewed individually to elicit the meaning of their photographs and diaries.

This group of fans used their photographs to express dissatisfaction with several aspects of current football governance, highlighting issues with the financial, physical and social health of the sport. We suggest a number of implications of this, both for the fans and for the future state of the game.

Introduction

Modern football presents an interesting situation for the football fan. At the top level of the game, it is dominated by increasing amounts of money from TV rights and commercial revenue, foreign ownership, football brands and increasing player wages. Some suggest this is a clear sign of how football is more out of touch with its fans than ever before,¹ yet despite all its wealth, there are severe criticisms of the game being 'the worst governed sport in the UK'.² A particular point of attention of late has been the need to give a voice to the football supporters' community, as they are considered legitimate stakeholders.³ Indeed, the House of Common's Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee recently published a follow-up report to its own enquiry into football governance. In the report, the committee was strongly disheartened by the lack of progress by football authorities in implementing recommendations to improve English football governance.⁴ In particular, according to the

MPs, there has been an unwillingness to act on the recommendation that clubs implement supporter engagement to enhance good governance at football clubs. The DCMS also recommended that Supporters Direct⁵ should be given financial and practical support from the Football Association, the Premier League and the Football League to continue providing vital assistance to clubs and fans.⁶ There is clear public policy support in favour of fan engagement in the governance of the game, yet there is only a superficial understanding of how supporters feel about the current state of football, or how they might get involved in governance structures themselves, if indeed they are prepared to. This article originates in the observation of this apparent paradox. It starts to interrogate, in a comprehensive manner, the empirical base behind this public policy agenda.

Academic attention to football supporters has, so far, had a relatively narrow research focus. Most work has studied fans' behaviour – rather than their opinions and/or feelings on the game – from different perspectives. The literature on marketing has studied fans as consumers,⁷ whilst sociological and anthropological work has been done to understand supporters' identities.⁸ There is also a well-established research agenda on violence and hooliganism.⁹ The study of football governance has increased recently, but there is a limited acknowledgement of supporters' involvement.¹⁰

Football is a global game with an equally global appeal. The Premier League¹¹ is the most watched league in the world and the football world's leading revenue generating club competition, held up as an example of the popularity of English football.¹² Official attendances at Premier League matches are healthy, with 95.1% of available Premier League tickets sold during the 2012/13 season.¹³ In this respect, English football appears to be as strong as it has ever been. However, there appears to be pockets of supporter dissatisfaction, both within and outside of the Premier League. Supporters' concerns have attracted media

attention over recent seasons, with high profile protests over ticket prices and the actions of club owners.¹⁴ Interestingly, protests have not been confined solely to the fans of single clubs – there has been a visible increase in fans from rival clubs working together in campaigns to express their dissatisfaction.¹⁵ FC United of Manchester (FCUM) was formed as a community-owned football club by disenfranchised Manchester United supporters, and has been followed by the foundation and growth of other community clubs.¹⁶ 17 clubs in the English football pyramid are wholly owned by supporters through a Supporters Trust, with a further 21 part-owned.¹⁷ This suggests that fans *do* have an interest in football governance, but beyond individual cases, what do fans *really* think about the state of football today?

This article presents some preliminary results of the FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) project, a pan-European study investigating the importance of football to Europe and Europeans. Using a combination of different research methods, fans across Europe are being questioned about their interest in, and demand for, further regulation of football.¹⁸ This paper presents a first analysis of what supporters think and feel about the current state of football. This is paramount both in policy and commercial terms, because if supporters are to be given a greater role in football governance, then their opinion of this is a vital foundation to their involvement. Given our interest in real life football circumstances, the research approach adopted is inductive, based on data collected through the participants. We analyse a total of 50 photographs submitted by the 21 participants to demonstrate their thoughts on ‘the state of football today’. As Kavanagh points out, the emphasis of inductive research is on ‘explanation and understanding’.¹⁹ The objective is to produce some conceptual propositions from the structured and analytical observation of those events. We believe that fans’ perceptions need to be thoroughly explored as they may generate some interesting propositions for the development of football’s regulatory framework.

The article proceeds now in three steps. First, our methodological considerations and procedures are outlined. Second, the empirical data collected through our participants is presented. Third, the data is discussed with conclusions outlined.

Methodological considerations

From the outset, this study had the aim of prioritising the football supporter to find out what role football played in their everyday life. In order to fulfil this aim, an audio-visual methodology was utilised. To gain an interesting, in-depth and participant-centred perspective on life as a football fan, the fans themselves were asked to take and submit images that show football in their lives. Photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) with participants followed to allow them to assign their own meanings and understandings to the images.

Although there has been an increase in attention on the supporter and their relationship with networks of governance, the majority of work to date has been from a top-down perspective, focusing on the broader issues of policy, networks of power and regulation. The FREE project, however, takes an alternative approach, placing the supporter at the centre of the research. In order to ensure this throughout, the methodology was designed to give the participant the maximum opportunity, space and resources to guide the research. Visual methods are gaining a significant amount of attention in qualitative research due to this advantage – the participant is actively engaged in the production and interpretation of the image as data.²⁰ There is an acceptance in the social sciences that this can centralise and empower the participant, and visual images can act as unique and powerful forms of data.²¹

In this 21st century Western industrialised society, many people inhabit an increasingly visually mediated world. Adopting visual methods can enhance our understanding of this social world,²² and while we live in an oral culture where talk is

important and researchers textualise lived experience, but we also live in an ocular culture where our eyes and immersion in a visually saturated world shapes the body, behaviour, tastes, emotions, and identity. Research intending to gain an insight into a culture must, therefore, acknowledge the centrality of the visual. Moreover, increased participant control of data generation through production of images may also help to illuminate important aspects of lived experience that might otherwise be invisible to outsiders.²³ Visual materials have the power to 'show' rather than just 'tell' things about our lives. They are capable of 'saying the unsayable'. They can offer a different form for researchers and participants to express their experience and present themselves and their perspectives.²⁴ Visual material can act as unique forms of data that have the ability to amass complexly layered meanings in a format that is both accessible and easily retrievable to researchers, participants and audiences alike. The use of photography can also increase participation, involvement, and the power of the participants in the research process as it is typically a method led by participants. The photographs they produce are then used as a basis for a discussion to elicit their meaning. It is necessary to understand what the photographs mean to the person who took them, and analyse them in credible ways²⁵. This involves using their photographs to invoke memory and elicit comments, stories and accounts from participants in the course of an interview, potentially adding depth and richness by triggering stories about experiences, memories and reflections, and taking conversations where researchers may not expect.²⁶

This methodology followed steps as recommended by Sparkes and Smith.²⁷

Participants were either given a digital camera, or used their own camera or phone, and were asked to take 20-30 photographs over an eight week period at the end of the 2012/13 season to show the role that football plays in their life. Whilst this was intended to be open and flexible to allow for participant interpretation, they were given guidance in the form of five categories to consider whilst taking and selecting images. One of these categories was titled

‘the state of football today’, to encourage participants to reflect on issues of governance. At the end of the eight week period, a PEI was conducted with each participant where they explained the context, meaning and importance of their images.

Twenty-one fans took part in the study (Table 1), recruited through criterion-based purposeful sampling, or the selection of individuals or groups to provide ‘information rich’ cases²⁸. They were selected for their high level of engagement with football, with all but one being either a season ticket holder or members of an organised supporter group or trust; over half were both.

Table 1. Sample of participants

#	League	Gender	Age	Season ticket holder	Supporter organisation member
1	Premier League	Male	26	Yes	Yes
2	Premier League	Female	59	Yes	Yes
3	Premier League	Female	26	Yes	Yes
4	Premier League	Male	24	Yes	No
5	Premier League	Male	36	No	Yes
6	Championship	Female	45	Yes	Yes
7	Championship	Male	19	Yes	Yes
8	Championship	Male	25	No	Yes
9	Championship	Female	65	Yes	Yes
10	Championship	Male	65	Yes	Yes
11	Championship	Male	62	Yes	Yes
12	Championship	Male	39	Yes	Yes
13	Championship	Male	27	Yes	Yes
14	League 1	Male	53	Yes	No
15	League 2	Male	38	No	Yes
16	League 2	Male	44	Yes	Yes
17	League 2	Male	50	No	Yes
18	League 2	Male	43	No	Yes
19	League 2	Male	47	No	Yes
20	Non-League	Male	43	Yes	Yes
21	Scotland	Male	39	No	No

The group was overwhelmingly male, with four of the twenty-one participants being female, representing 19% of our sample. Whilst it is indeed male-dominated, this male:female ratio is very similar to the gender (im)balance of the wider football supporter population.²⁹ The average age was 41 and all were White British. Over half (62%) of the sample supported clubs in the top two divisions of English football.

After the images had been collected, and PEIs had been conducted, all images were combined with the participant-led comments and explanations. The images were coded by the category assigned by the taker and then by the content, as per their interpretations. Categorising in this way directed us to early themes and patterns, with the participants' explanations crucial to the analysis of the content of the photos to avoid mislabelling and misinterpretation, as analysing the photograph without knowing the intention of the photographer leaves an incomplete picture.³⁰ Images and accompanying text was analysed together thematically.³¹ The following results and discussion relates solely to those photographs that participants chose to represent 'the state of football today'.

Results: The 'health of English football'

The category 'the state of football today' was an attempt at encouraging participants to think about governance and management issues without being too prescriptive. It was the second most popular category or 'tag' that participants gave their photographs (behind 'sharing football experiences'). Whilst not inferring any significant meaning from this, the popularity of this category suggests that supporters do indeed have an interest in issues of football governance and regulation, and wish to express their opinions on it.

All photographs submitted under 'the state of football today' were coded according to their content alongside the interpretation provided by the participant. Codes were then grouped into three themes, considered to represent the state or the 'health' of football today. These themes are: financial health, social health and physical health. Table 2 gives a raw overview of the popularity of each theme. Coding the photographs in this way provided a useful base for examining the different themes that emerged, as well as giving an overview of how popular certain themes were, and whether perceptions were positive or negative based on the participants explanations of their images. This is, of course, a crude breakdown of

what are visual representations of complex fan insights and understandings. When discussing their images in interviews the participants assigned varying meanings to them.

Table 2: Photo coding and frequency

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Number of photographs submitted</i>	
	<i>Positive aspects</i>	<i>Negative aspects</i>
Financial Health	2	15
Social Health	12	11
Physical Health	5	13

This section turns now to analyse in detail each of the three main themes described above, with examples of the images produced by participants alongside their interpretations.

Although these themes are heavily interlinked, for the sake of clarity they will be examined individually.

Financial health

The financial health of the game has money as a primary concern. This was a very pessimistic theme, and dissatisfaction was expressed with many different features of modern professional football.

Images that were coded and placed in this theme included TV cameras on the pitch, tickets, adverts, branded items, corporate areas inside stadiums, news stories about money and football and club merchandise. Participants explained their inclusion in relation to the financial health of the game, and their explanations were mostly critical. The only two photographs that expressed a positive perspective on the finances of the game were taken at non-league clubs in the UK. One showed the help given to grassroots clubs through the Football Foundation,³² and the other was an entry fee sign at a non-league club (with the comment ‘same price to both fans, take note Arsenal’).³³

The images included in this theme covered a variety of aspects that we will review in turn below. Photographs submitted by fans will be presented, alongside passages from the participant who took it. The quotes are either in the written form that accompanied their photo submission or the transcription from the discussion of the image during the photo-elicitation interview.

Football dominated by financial concerns

Figure 1 shows one of the photographs submitted within this category, and the author's explanation reveals how, to this fan, financial concerns dominate modern football, having an impact on the supporter:

This is modern football today. Amongst celebrating a great football manager's achievements there has to be comment and analysis from the city to see how the share prices will be affected. This impacts on supporters who start analysing why a football manager should be appointed as it affects their ability to compete financially. It turns me off as a supporter. (Premier League club fan, male, age 36)



Figure 1. Fan photograph – ‘Financial analysis’

The suggestion that business concerns override footballing ones at the top level of the game, and that this may ‘turn off’ fans, highlights a potential social impact of a financial problem.

The power held over football by the media

Another dominant dimension within this theme concerned the influence the media have on the top level of football, particularly Sky Sports. This is a concern not exclusive of Premier League fans. For example, Figure 2 and the explanation below belong to a supporter of Leicester City, a club playing in the Championship³⁴ when the picture was taken (although at the time of writing the club had just secured promotion to the Premier League). Again, our participants focus on the impact that this media dominance, here represented by scheduling games outside of the weekend can have on the fan and the atmosphere in grounds. This demonstrates that fans are able to reflect on the consequences that the current economic structures of English football have on wider issues within the game.



Figure 2. Fan photograph – ‘Small away crowd for a game on Sky TV’

A view of the Millwall fans as they visit the King Power stadium, one of the fewest away attendances to visit all season, undoubtedly affected due to the game being moved to Sky for a Friday night... TV has got such a stronghold over football fans, and no-one wants to step up and do anything about it. (Championship club fan, male, aged 19)

Again the issue under discussion is financial in nature – the power that Sky Sports and other television broadcasters hold over football because of the money they put into it³⁵ – yet there is an impact of this on the social health of the game if attendances are lower. Furthermore, this participant feels that fans accept this negative facet of the game, demonstrating how fans, whilst aware of intricate problems in football governance, also understand the limit of their influence on the game. He continues to describe how fans are not necessarily willing to take action that may put their club at risk:

I think the only thing that would really do anything is to boycott matches that are on Sky, but football fans would never do that. The power of money and TV is just too powerful (Championship club fan, male, aged 19)

Although fan boycotts are not unheard of,³⁶ to this participant it is not an option. The power of television in the fixture schedule alludes to the privileging of TV audiences over the fans in the stadium. The conflicting dynamics between TV audience and stadium spectators was also captured by another of our participants whose picture showed an ‘opening ceremony’ before the Europa League final. The participant explained that the show ‘doesn't work if you are there [in the stadium], it gets in the way to the build-up of atmosphere’ (League 1 club fan, male, aged 53). Again, this picture and the accompanying comment, refers to the negative impact that a show designed for TV audiences has on those supporters attending the match live at the stadium.

Whilst these negative perceptions on the power of television in football are quite general among our participants, the direct impact of TV coverage on match attendance is a complex issue. On one hand, regulations by UEFA, also adopted by the FA in England, provide for a 'blackout period' whereby live matches cannot be broadcasted. In England, for example, football games cannot be shown live on television in the traditional Saturday 3pm kick-off time slot. This suggests an acknowledgement by the governing bodies that live football on television may have a negative impact on stadium attendance. However, turnout figures in both the Premier League and the Football League suggest that stadium attendances are at a higher point exactly when most football games are broadcasted than ever.³⁷ Thus, it may be safe to affirm that there is a socially constructed, and dominating, image among this group of fans that demonises Sky Sports and other television broadcasters. Sky Sports is taken as a symbol of a disliked modernisation of the game, even if the macroeconomic data may not always confirm their own personal feelings. Here, the tension between the modern commercialisation of the game and the perception of an idealised past, where atmospheres in stadia were 'better', is at its peak. This observation confirms the arguments put forward by Giulianotti and others on the conflicts and redefinitions of football fandom in the modern era.³⁸

The corporate side of football

A third aspect relating to concerns over the financial health of the game was the dominance of corporate aspects of elite football. Interestingly, when this was discussed for the lower levels of the game, it was seen as a positive and, perhaps, essential fundraising strategy. One participant included a photograph of Wembley Stadium (Figure 3), highlighting how the 'corporate ring' (middle tier) is partially empty despite being close to kick off for an FA Cup semi-final. She explains the relevance of this:

Whilst it [the new Wembley] is obviously an impressive stadium the atmosphere is not as good as previously at old Wembley or in club grounds. The main reason for this I believe is the corporate middle tier which separates fans making it difficult to get the momentum of singing... what atmosphere is that? It just doesn't appeal to me. (Premier League club fan, female, aged 26)

This passage again references a perceived decline in atmosphere in football grounds. It suggests the impact this is having on the fan of the appeal of elite professional football.



Figure 3. Fan photograph – ‘The corporate ring at Wembley’

Other images relating to the theme of financial health include excessive adverts, club merchandising, the dominance of sponsorship and branding. These are all presented as negative aspects of the state of football today.

However one surprise in our analysis of this theme is that the issue of rising ticket prices was not strongly addressed by our participants. This is of interest because there are

currently campaigns being organised by supporters' organisations to protest against the high price of tickets in English football³⁹. In our study the only two images that related to this currently prevalent issue were examples of low ticket prices at a non-league and a German Bundesliga club respectively. Interestingly, however, pictures were included of the financial costs to fans *outside* of the ticket price, such as train travel to away games and the price of food inside grounds. This suggests that the overall costs associated with watching football are still of concern, yet it is the extra financial outlay after the purchase of a ticket that these fans wanted to highlight.

Not only did fans use their images to show what they believe to be negative financial aspects of the state of football today, they used them to explain the impact they are having on the life of the supporter. Our participants demonstrated a very articulated understanding of the consequences of wider dynamics on their day-to-day life as fans. In all cases above, the impact of the economic development of football is negative for the fan experience. Participants define the commercialisation of the game as having the potential to turn them away. Yet all of these fans were still attending football matches regularly, even at the elite level that they so strongly criticised. Supporters are expressing an internal dichotomy between their dislike of the (bad) financial health of the game and the continuous support of their teams. This is particularly complex for the fan of smaller clubs whose survival is more reliant on match-day income. Our participants have clearly painted a negative picture and they are able to articulate their concerns very aptly. However, they still feel unable to walk away from their passion. It is quite clear for our focus on governance that supporters would like to see this commercial dominance redressed somehow.

Physical health

Physical health is the second theme emerging from our analysis. Participants submitted a large number of images of what they perceived to be sub-standard facilities, both in the professional and grassroots game. Arguably, this is the most tangible theme – it is easy to take pictures of football grounds and their facilities – so it is perhaps unsurprising that the participants selected a large number of pictures.

Poor facilities

What was interesting about this group of images was the importance to which some supporters attached issues surrounding poor facilities, and the desire for this to be addressed. At professional clubs, this could be explained by the rise in ticket prices and the ‘value for money’ implication of this (i.e. perceived service quality). Poor facilities at grassroots were considered in a different way, representing a lack of investment in the future of the game. Two participants commented on the poor facilities at their clubs when discussing images of toilet facilities and an old stand respectively:

That to me is something the governing body should make more money available to clubs. You know, can we have a grant that's for toilet facilities, or something. That is something they could do. What's the cost of that relative to the amount of money that comes into football? (League 1 club fan, male, aged 53)

Without money clubs like Exeter City can't redevelop older stands. Need a way for TV money to be fairly given to all football league clubs... being trust owned is great for the city but money is always in short supply (League 2 club fan, male, aged 44)

A lack of money to upgrade facilities is understood as a problem that could be addressed by the governing bodies, if they so wished. They are still perceived to have control over the

distribution of money at the lower level of the game. It is interesting that some participants attributed competences to the FA that it does not have. Turning the argument around, it can be said that this category shows an important level of support for better regulation in football, especially relating to the redistribution of income through the game's pyramid. The report of the House of Commons Select Committee argued the need for a stronger FA to govern football across the country at all levels.⁴⁰ Our data lends some support to this point from the perspective of the fans.

Terraces and the 'Safe Standing' debate

Two participants included an image of supporters standing on terracing in Germany. One explains:

It shows that 'safe standing' is possible at football matches. This season St Pauli built a new stand. The fans were included in the consultation and rejected the first plans because there was not enough standing. It seems to me that all-seater stadia in England is more politically motivated than about safety. (League 2 club, male, aged 50)

The issue of safe standing is a current debate between fan groups and the football authorities,⁴¹ with the 'successful' model in Germany heralded in Britain as evidence that safe standing is possible. Although this is a physical aspect of the game – it is fundamentally a discussion about facilities – the social aspect of fan regulation that frames the debate is key. These are ultimately concerns about the social impact of facility design and quality. Participants also commented on how stadiums, not just a lack of standing, could contribute to a poor atmosphere and, therefore, impact fan enjoyment inside the ground. Furthermore, this led to discussions about the (over)regulation of the fan experience, something fans dominantly believed was a negative aspect of modern football. Our participants clearly felt supporters are excessively 'policed' and patronised by the authorities. This notion was

supported by the repeated inclusion of images showing large numbers of police and stewards inside grounds.

Facility development

One image that was included to ‘sum up’ the debate between the old and new in terms of stadiums and facilities was of a new-build ground that retained an old-style standing terrace (Figure 4). The interpretation of this image by its creator sums up this juxtaposition nicely, and shows how financial and social aspects of football are related to the physical aspect of facilities:

Purpose built stadium on the edge of town, corporate boxes, that is now called the Green King Terrace, so corporate sponsorship of the stadium, a dying image of football today is a standing terrace behind the goal, integration with local schools, getting kids involved, that's a positive sign of football today. Sums it up quite well. That's the modern and the old fashioned together. (League 2 club fan, male, aged 47)



Figure 4. Fan photograph– ‘A combination of the traditional and modern’

Again, participants were eager to highlight the impact that the state of the physical health of football could have on the fan, although this did not emerge as strongly as for the impact of financial concerns. The key here is a different understanding of what the fan wants. With ‘the football fan’ being representative of such a diverse group of people, opinions are inevitably going to differ greatly. Our participants struggled to position themselves at either end of a ‘new-old’ continuum in terms of stadium facilities. The picture and comment above reflects both this difficulty for fans, and the increasingly common blend of old and new, traditional and modern, in the state of football today.

Social health

Finally, the most prominent theme in our data is what can be termed as the social health of football. This is a reflection that football is, above all, a social activity that supporters are eager to share with others. This theme contained the most images, so is quantitatively the most important. The difference, however, is not sufficient to encourage definitive conclusions about the dominance of this theme over the other two identified above. This is particularly interesting given that this area is arguably the least tangible theme and may, therefore, be the one that requires more thought and imagination to provide a visual image.

The images that have been categorised as reflecting the social health of football today are complex and rich in details and nuances for the participants. The images demonstrate that this is a complex theme, with multiple dynamics and sub-themes that are inter-related. In this section we present these sub-dimensions in turn for the sake of analysis, but it needs to be understood they are highly interconnected. In this theme, images reflected a more even division of positive and negative aspects of football today. Again, those with positive interpretations were primarily from outside the elite level of football in the UK.

Football clubs and community links

Some participants used ‘the state of football’ to present images that demonstrate how football *should* be. Images in this category highlight aspects such as community, loyalty, pride, spirit, inclusion, and tradition. Two participants captured this by including images of statues outside the grounds of their respective teams, explaining the relevance of these and how they reflect aspects of football that have been lost (Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5. Fan photograph – ‘Club statue 1’

It sums up both Vale and what football should be about. In the foreground is Roy Sproson who was a local lad who played for Vale 842 times. [Figure 5] This level of commitment is rare in football these days and reflects I believe a dislocation of football from its core community. You just don't see players today either one, being local or two, staying with the club. They will follow the money. (League 2 club fan, male, aged 50)



Figure 6. Fan photograph – ‘Club statue 2’

The statue of Jack Walker [Figure 6] stands outside the Blackburn End as a permanent reminder of how the soul of the club has been ripped apart since we were bought by the Venkys. Everything that the club stood for in my childhood – community spirit, honesty, integrity, modesty it seems has been systematically dismantled under the ownership of the Venkys. A lot of that pride has been taken away from us. (Championship club fan, male, aged 26)

It is interesting that two participants chose to include images of past club heroes to represent the contrast between what they believe football 'should' be about and the social health of football today. Both heroes are local to the club, considered an important factor in maintaining a link between club and community. The perceived loss of this aspect of football is explained as rooted in financial concerns – players moving clubs for higher wages, foreign ownership, and financial greed – but the impact of this is very much a social one regarding the loss of community.

Some fans chose to use this category to demonstrate the positive social aspects of football, and how, despite their concerns over the financial state of the game, they believe that football does still have links to the community. Images of children on the pitch at half time, charitable foundations and fan group meetings were all described positively by respondents. However, on closer inspection, many of the positive images, although described initially in this way by participants, were also used to highlight how this is *not* something that is experienced throughout football in the UK. In other words, our participants felt some of the positive social aspects of their football engagement were a minority or rare occurrence in wider British football.

The example above about the statues sums up this perception. Although the participants attached a positive feeling to the statues themselves, when discussing the pictures in the interviews were used to highlight negative aspects of football today.⁴² In another example, one fan submitted an image of alcohol inside a non-league ground, with the caption 'to show the difference between league and non-league – I am trusted to drink alcohol on the terraces at non-league' (Non-League club fan, male, aged 48). This, again, demonstrates a positive aspect in a non-league environment (being trusted to drink alcohol) that is not possible in the higher tiers of the professional game in England. Similarly another participant

submitted an image of drinking alcohol during a German Bundesliga game. Both of these use an image of something perceived to be good about the game to criticise the areas of football where this does not exist.

The fan experience

Essential to the social health of football, the 'fan experience' is a concept that was mentioned by many of the participants. The fan experience is relevant because, for our participants, football has mostly a social dimension. Football is something they share with other people and the 'fan experience' of watching a game is the way in which they share it. A positive or negative match experience is, therefore, one of the maximum expressions of the social health of football. As such, 'the fan experience' can of course be seen as another socially constructed concept, yet it features so prominently in the data that it needs to be considered as an essential part of the social sphere of football. It is the participants' belief that being a football fan is about much more than the 90 minutes of play. This would certainly link with the increasing amount of literature that investigates football, and sports, fans as customers.⁴³

The range of images that were submitted gave an initial indication of what this 'fan experience' is about. Throughout the discussions this became much more apparent.



Figure 7. Fan photograph – ‘The game is about glory’

The construction we have found of this ‘fan experience’ presents a mixture of purely service quality aspects, even if not framed directly this way, with other social, historical and less tangible dimensions. Improved facilities would make attending football a better ‘experience’, with atmosphere and build-up to the game is a key contributor to this. The importance of fan experience is taken to its highest relevance by a participant arguing that sometimes football is not just about winning and getting a result, but about something else that needs to be preserved:

‘The game is about glory’ is part of a quote from Danny Blanchflower. The Tottenham style of play and identity has grown largely from that team and the quote itself is something I believe is very true in football. The game isn’t just about winning, it’s about playing in style and being entertaining. Football clubs today are obsessed with winning at all costs. Clubs expect to grow by winning games but it is much more than that for the fan. What is important to the fan is the whole experience. (PL club fan, female, aged 26)

This was stated when discussing a picture of supporters inside Tottenham Hotspurs’ White Hart Lane (Figure 7). The evolution of this participant’s discourse demonstrates the difficulty

in separating different aspects of the fan experience and modern football. On one hand, the participant seems to recognise the importance of the whole experience (as above), whilst on the other, the need for modernisation is supported in relation to the need to achieve success:

The Tottenham branding around the stadium... is something that a lot of fans don't like to think about, the club being a brand. And I understand why they don't, but I think people need to understand that football is a business and the club is a business and it won't be successful if it isn't run as a business. Especially in the modern world, yes it's a club but it is a brand. So I think actually Spurs have made it quite nice in that it's our traditional colours, white and blue, and there are quotes going round the stadium from our legends of the past. (PL club fan, female, aged 26)

Consequently, in this case it is acceptable to commodify the past of the club because the 'brand' is a positive one, with links to the club's tradition through past success. It is also a necessary step if the club is to achieve success in the future. This contrasts with the claim that success is less important than style and the fan experience. Football as a game and football as a business are two competing, yet increasingly overlapping features of modern sport, perhaps explaining the difficulty here in separating the two. Returning to the original question we asked about fan involvement in governance, this difficulty in separating success and experience – or perhaps the ability to recognise that they overlap – only adds complexity and, as a result, uncertainty.

This section has presented our thematic analysis of the photographs received and the fans' interpretations of their own images. It is necessary to acknowledge that our analysis is not theory driven, but has emerged from an inductive examination of the data submitted. The typology of the perceptions on the current health of the game in England and Europe is comprehensive. It reflects the main concerns of supporters and it is linked to both regulatory and academic debates.

Conclusion

In listening to this group of supporters, it is apparent that, for them, issues of governance and regulation are of concern. The three themes of financial, physical and social health introduce a number of varied but interlinked concerns. It is important to also acknowledge the positive facets that they highlighted in showing the breadth of this topic. The use of a visual methodology encouraged supporters to 'show', as well as 'tell', how they feel about football, and we believe this added increased depth and interest to the data.

So what does this mean for the fan? There was evidence of an increasing detachment from the top level of football. Although all fans involved in the study still attended football regularly, there was a suggestion that their concerns could detach them to the extent that they may be 'turned off' the game. Whether, and when, this would be a total turn-off is unclear. Although their passion for the sport suggests giving up on football is unlikely, several participants spoke about the appeal of lower league football as representing what they felt that the top level of the sport had 'lost'.

When considering what supporters could or should 'do' about their concerns over football governance, the authors suggests that acceptance of problems depends on the depth of the issues. Broad concerns such as financial dominance and the power of the media were seen as beyond their control, and were more likely to be accepted as 'the way it is'. However, for their own club, change, such as the need for better facilities, or improved atmosphere, was considered as more viable. In terms of supporter action, this is more likely on a small or local scale, and this may have more chance of success due to its inability to affect the overall power dynamics of the sport. This implication is evidenced in the increase in supporter involvement at club level, but lack of supporter representation at the national level of governance.

Across all of the themes, there is one constant: this group of supporters demonstrate that although they are dissatisfied with a variety of facets of modern football, they continue to attend matches. One fan summed up the complex and contradictory position that a fan of the modern game can find themselves in. Firstly, he submitted an image of a half empty stadium (Figure 8), describing how this reflects not just his own dissatisfaction with the current state of the game, but also many others:

Empty seats are becoming a common match-day feature of Ewood Park these days. It is symbolic for me, because as I become detached from football the sparse attendances at Ewood tell me that I'm not alone in my disillusion. I feel as though my relationship with football has changed over the last few years. During my teens and early twenties watching Rovers was everything to me. In those days Rovers gave me an immense sense of pride ... [now] I feel more detached from the game than ever before. (Championship club fan, male, aged 26)



Figure 8. Fan photograph – ‘Declining attendances’

Yet this image was supplemented by one that showed the crowd celebrating after a goal, and the contrast between the two images, as well as his comment on this, paints an interesting picture of the current dilemma facing football fans:

No matter how disillusioned I feel, moments like this mean that I will never be able to detach myself fully from the game. This was taken at the final whistle of our home game against rivals Burnley this season. We had equalised in the last minute, and I'll always remember the united outpouring of relief, joy and excitement that reverberated around the stadium as I was taking this photo. Nothing in life can give you the same buzz, and as angry as I am at how football is being run, moments like this are why I could never turn my back on the game completely.

(Championship club fan, male, aged 26)

The supporter clearly respects certain aspects of football, often connected with history and tradition. As such, this group of fans believe that football should maintain its links to the local community, yet are concerned that in the professional game at least, this is no longer evident. For them, there is a constructed perception that ‘football is not what it used to be’ or ‘it is losing its roots and its appeal’, but supporters continue to support. Football clubs and authorities may be complacent given the high levels of attendance and turnout, and some may be tempted to dismiss these concerns about the negative aspects of football reflected in our study. However, negative perceptions need to be addressed. There is nothing as powerful as a socially constructed perception, and the case of Italian football is a clear example where attendances and income have declined over the last decade. Amongst other motives, this is linked to fans’ perception of a lack of safety, quality and interest.⁴⁴

As outlined at the outset of this discussion, the idea that supporters could, and should, be involved in football governance as key stakeholders is increasingly gaining merit, both in

policy and practice. Yet, policy recommendations do not consider a critical question: if supporters were given a voice, what would they say? Our data highlights a number of areas where they would like to see changes. The power of the television media, declining attendances, diminishing links with the community, poor quality facilities, problematic club ownership and fan (over)regulation, are all important. On the surface, this appears simple enough, but the data also demonstrates the many complexities facing the fan, and the difficulties they have in reconciling these. Add this to the diverse fan experiences, positions and understandings, and you have an intricate combination of perspectives, beliefs and priorities that both compliment and contradict each other. They overlap, contrast, and alter depending on any number of circumstances. A more pertinent question at this stage is, therefore, if supporters were given a voice, not what would they say, but whose voice would it be? Questions such as the ones posed by this paper are vital in furthering the debate on supporter involvement in the future of football governance.

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Notes

¹ Conn, *The beautiful game?*

² Henry Winter, 'Hugh Robertson: Football is the worst governed sport in Britain', *The Telegraph*, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/england/8272697/Hugh-Robertson-football-is-the-worst-governed-sport-in-Britain.html>.

³ The All Party Parliamentary Football Group's 2009 report into football governance criticised the exclusion of supporters from decision-making structures at all levels of the game. Their enquiry found 'widespread agreement that the one group that are most under-represented in the sport are the people who should have the most say; the fans. ' This has been echoed in the DCMS 2011 enquiry and 2013 follow-up report.

⁴ DCMS, *Football Governance* and *Football Governance Follow-Up*.

⁵ Supporters Direct was formed in 2000 by the Labour Government of the time, in response to reports by the Football Task Force in the late 1990s expressing enthusiasm for the potential for supporters to become owners of their football clubs. Supporters Direct provide assistance to supporters and clubs in establishing Supporter Trusts and once established, gaining an influence at their club. See Faulkner, 'The legacy of the Football Task Force', Smith, 'Strengthening the voice of supporters', and <http://www.supporters-direct.org/homepage/aboutsupportersdirect/history>.

⁶ DCMS, *Football Governance and Football Governance Follow-Up*.

⁷ See for example Bodet, 'Loyalty in Sports Participation Services'; Bernache-Assollant et al, 'Measuring Sport Spectators' Coping Strategies'.

⁸ See for example Harkin and Bairner, 'Sky blue and green'; Giulianotti and Robertson, 'Forms of glocalization'.

⁹ Football hooliganism has been studied extensively. Armstrong, *Football Hooligans: Knowing the score* gives a good insight.

¹⁰ The attention given to this area has been minimal, with papers mostly either small case studies or policy critiques. See for example Cleland, 'From passive to active'; Kennedy and Kennedy, 'Supporter Trusts and Third Way Politics'; Martin, 'Football, Community and Cooperation'; Millward, 'Reclaiming the Kop?'

¹¹ The Premier League is the top level of English football.

¹² See <http://www.premierleague.com/en-gb/about/the-worlds-most-watched-league/>; also Deloitte, *Annual Review of Football Finance*.

¹³ This represented a 3.8% growth on the previous season. See

<http://www.stadiumguide.com/2012-13-premier-league-attendances/>.

¹⁴ There are many examples of Premier League clubs protests in the last year. The high cost of Premier League match tickets received a great deal of media attention when Manchester City fans protested against ticket prices for their match away at Arsenal; this season, fans of Cardiff City, Hull City and Newcastle United have all protested against their club owners.

¹⁵ The best example of this is the protest against rising ticket prices, particularly for away fans. See for example *The Guardian*, available at

<http://www.theguardian.com/football/2013/jun/19/premier-league-protest-ticket-prices>.

¹⁶ See Brown, 'Our club, our rules' and 'Not for Sale?'

¹⁷ Supporters Direct, 'Supporter Share Ownership'.

¹⁸ For more information, visit <http://www.free-project.eu/Pages/Welcome.aspx>

¹⁹ Kavanagh, 'Why political science needs history', 482.

²⁰ Guillemin and Drew, 'Questions of process in participant-generated visual methodologies'.

²¹ Phoenix, 'Seeing the world of physical culture'.

²² Ibid.

²³ Guillemin and Drew, 'Questions of process in participant-generated visual methodologies'.

²⁴ Mills and Hoerber, 'Using photo-elicitation to examine artefacts in a sport club'.

²⁵ Pink, *Doing visual ethnography*.

²⁶ Mills and Hoerber, 'Using photo-elicitation to examine artefacts in a sport club'; Clark-Ibáñez, 'Framing the social world with photo-elicitation interviews'; Meo, 'Picturing Students' Habitus'.

²⁷ Sparkes and Smith, *Qualitative Research Methods in Sport, Exercise and Health*.

²⁸ Patton, *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*; Sparkes and Smith, *Qualitative Research Methods in Sport, Exercise and Health*.

²⁹ For discussions of female fandom, see for example Pope and Williams, 'White Shoes to a Football Match!'

³⁰ Guillemin and Drew, 'Questions of process in participant-generated visual methodologies'.

³¹ Following steps as outlined by Braun and Clarke, ‘Using thematic analysis in psychology’.

³² The Football Foundation is the largest sports charity in the UK, funded by the Premier League, The FA and Government (via Sport England).

³³ This is a reference to the aforementioned protest by Manchester City fans at the price they were charged for tickets by Arsenal.

³⁴ The Championship is the second tier of English football.

³⁵ For the 2013-14 season, the Premier League announced a new TV deal worth £3 billion over the following three years, a 71% increase on the previous deal. See *The Guardian*, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/jun/13/premier-league-tv-rights-3-billion-sky-bt>

³⁶ For example the recent proposal of Coventry City fans to boycott their team’s home games because they are being played in Northampton: see *The Telegraph*, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/coventry-city/10234320/Coventry-City-fans-boycott-clubs-move-to-Sixfields-Stadium-in-Northampton.html>

³⁷ Ofcom, *Premier League Football*.

³⁸ Giulianotti and Robertson, *Globalisation and football*.

³⁹ The Football Supporters Federation (FSF) is running a campaign for clubs to trial ‘safe standing’ areas in grounds for fans, similar to those found in German stadia. For more details see <http://www.fsf.org.uk/campaigns/safe-standing/>.

⁴⁰ DCMS, *Football Governance and Football Governance Follow-Up*

⁴¹ The FSF, <http://www.fsf.org.uk/campaigns/safe-standing/>.

⁴² As a methodological contribution and reflection in this article, this also highlights the importance of the elicitation interview when using audio-visual methods. Whilst audio-visual ethnography empowers our participants enormously, it is not without its limitations like any other research methods.

⁴³ Bodet, ‘Loyalty in Sports Participation Services’

⁴⁴ Croci, Porro and Russo, *The least of the great leagues?*

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List of Tables

Table 1. Sample of participants

Table 2. Photo coding and frequency

List of Images

Figure 1. Fan photograph – ‘Financial analysis’

Figure 2. Fan photograph – ‘Small away crowd for a game on Sky TV’

Figure 3. Fan photograph – ‘The corporate ring at Wembley’

Figure 4. Fan photograph– ‘A combination of the traditional and modern’

Figure 5. Fan photograph – ‘Club statue 1’

Figure 6. Fan photograph – ‘Club statue 2’

Figure 7. Fan photograph – ‘The game is about glory’

Figure 8. Fan photograph – ‘Declining attendances’