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Exploring fields of power in the English Premier League. A qualitative study into unhealthy sponsorships

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study uses Bourdieu's sociology of practice to help understand how different actors in football consider 'unhealthy' sponsorships (defined as promoting gambling, food and drink high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS), and alcohol) in the English Premier League. Eighteen informants were interviewed including those employed by football clubs and their charitable foundations, others with a commercial interest in the football industry, and members of fan organisations. Their responses were examined using a thematic approach and reflected the distribution of economic and cultural power between the agents in the field of football. Tensions within these fields of power are illustrated diagrammatically between those in possession of economic capital (the clubs), and those who protect the cultural capital of 'their' clubs (the fans).

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Introduction

Modern football clubs' incomes are divided into matchday, broadcast and commercial revenue (Maguire 2020). As English Premier League (EPL) match viewing figures have increased globally, so broadcasting contracts, which are negotiated collectively by the EPL on behalf of its member club, have also increased. Commercial income, derived principally from sponsorship agreements, has soared, as brands are attracted by the huge global audiences of the EPL (Yonder Consulting 2023). Commercial income may match and even be greater than broadcasting income for the most successful clubs with English clubs benefiting further from the financial superiority of the Premier League (Deloitte Sports Business Group 2023). Thus, sport sponsorship has attracted considerable attention as it has developed a billion-pound industry in which transnational corporations use sport to market their brands and products. This paper seeks to examine attitudes to this marketing through 'unhealthy' sponsorship in the EPL.

It has been argued that modern sport sponsorship was initially developed by the tobacco and alcohol industries in the 1970s and 80s (Crompton 1993). Whilst most tobacco sponsorship has been removed following the ratification of the Framework Convention on

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Tobacco Control in 2005 (World Health Organisation 2003), the food and drink and gambling industries have joined the alcohol industry in using sport to promote consumption of their brands. Tobacco use, poor nutrition, and excess alcohol consumption are the principal causes of noncommunicable diseases globally (World Health Organisation 2018), which are the leading cause of premature death even in the time of coronavirus. Gambling is also now considered a public health issue (Wardle et al. 2019) with considerable concerns raised over its growing association with the English Premier League (EPL) in particular (Bunn et al. 2019).

The marketing of these industries may be considered unhealthy therefore, in that they are promoting consumption of food and drink which are high in fat (saturated), sugar and salt (HFSS), gambling products, and alcohol. These industries are described in this paper as unhealthy commodity industries (UCIs) (Knai et al. 2021). From a public health perspective, sports sponsorship is an illustration of how transnational corporations impact and determine population health, a relationship characterised as the commercial determinants of health (Kickbusch, Allen, and Franz 2016). Chanavat et al. 2017) described the key factors for successful commercial sponsorship as coherence, objectives, duration and meaning of content. Coherence (sometimes called congruence) relates to whether a company's brand values are in harmony with the sponsors (Cornwell 2020). Many will question whether an association made between a perceived healthy activity such as football and the consumption of sugary drinks or gambling products for example, can ever be described as brand coherence. This tension is key to a variety of commercial strategies to associate their brands with positive external images and narratives. To explore these efforts, we turn to the theoretical work of Bourdieu and his sociology of practice to provide a theoretical foundation for this study into unhealthy sponsorships in the EPL.

Bourdieu wrote that sport is “inserted into a universe of practices and consumptions” (Bourdieu 1990, 159) and that sport cannot be studied independently of other consumption practices. Bourdieu used the term, *capital*, to describe participation in, and ownership of, cultural and material activities and practices. Various *capitals* are placed and valued by particular groups with a dominant *habitus* often determining that value. According to Bourdieu, there is *economic*, *social* and *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986). In football, *economic capital* is clear and may be measured in terms of commercial income from a sponsorship agreement for example. *Cultural capital* may be considered as the prestige value attached to a football club including its badge, its stadium and indeed its history of playing success (or failure). In order to understand interactions between social actors, Bourdieu argued, it is necessary to examine the space in which these interactions or transactions took place. He called this social space, a *field*. He saw sport as comprising of diverse intersecting ‘fields’ reflecting different types and volumes of capital (Bourdieu 1993b). ‘Field’ explores relations between agents who are defined by their position in the structure of the distribution of capital and their access to the profits that are at stake (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Bourdieu provides a helpful lens through which to understand the power dynamics involved in commercial sport, and in the subtle ways that power is deployed in sport's cultural practices. In ‘Sport and Social Class’ (1978), Bourdieu considered the historical and social conditions of sport, describing it as a “system of agents and institutions” (821) functioning as a “field of competition” and the “site of confrontations between agents with specific interests linked to their position within the field” (821). As in other practices, Bourdieu viewed sport as shaped by a struggle between members of the dominant classes

as well as between different social classes. This struggle was determined by the position of dominant power within the field of competition and struggle. In football, the fields are dominated by the clubs who have both the economic capital and the cultural capital associated with the clubs' brands.

King (1997) has previously explored the relationship between fan and club through interviews with informants in football. He argued that fans' demand for success facilitated their acceptance of commercialism, whilst disapproving of certain aspects of this commercialism, demonstrating a central paradox played out in debates amongst fans today. The paper does not attempt to define today's typical or 'true' fan. Indeed what defines a modern fan may be very different today to that described in a study conducted in 2008 which states that match attendance "is a given" to be a true participant in the 'living' experience of football (SIRC. 2008, 4). Given the Premier League asserts its matches are broadcast to 800 million homes in 188 countries (Yonder Consulting 2023), only a very small minority of the twenty-first century EPL consumer are likely to attend an English football match. However, this new 'type' of fan will be exposed to a stream of marketing messages in their consumption of football.

This study uses the Bourdieusian concept of 'Fields of Power' (Wacquant 1993) as a means of exploring the relationships involved in unhealthy sponsorships in the EPL. The establishment of the new league in 1992 has been described as effectively a power grab by the EPL club owners, in which they have been able to exercise fully their economic power freed from the previous controls exercised by the sport's governing body, the Football Association (Conn 2005).

Methods

A qualitative approach was adopted to explore the complex issues around football sponsorship by UCIs. It is clear that the football clubs and those who work at a senior level in them are the holders of the economic capital. After all, it is the EPL clubs who benefit from the high levels of commercial and broadcasting income which have poured into the game in recent years (Maguire 2020). Meantime fans are fiercely protective of 'their' clubs and may resist what may be seen as the corporatisation of football (Turner 2017). Many others work in associated football industries, such as marketing and financial accounting, and may be seen to benefit from the large levels of revenue now available at the top end of the English professional game. Thus a table of possible key informants and/or organisations was drawn up taking account of Bourdieu's theory of field, defined by specific stakes and interests, and reflecting the distribution of agents and institutions engaged in the struggle between these interests (Bourdieu 1993b).

A purposive approach was taken to sampling in order to gain a range of perspectives from key informants (Patton 2002). It is challenging to recruit informants for a study such as this and the interviews secured at times reflected who could be accessed using existing contacts. Those taking part in this study do not reflect the views of all individuals and organisations involved in the football industry. Given the size and complexity of today's EPL and member clubs, this would be impossible. However, the participants reflect a wide range of views which help to inform our perspectives on sponsorship within the EPL. There were some disappointing omissions such as the Football Association whose official declined an interview in a personal email which stated "Those with the expertise, have indicated

that it is not up to us (*The Football Association*) to offer a view on what sponsorship and advertising is used in association by Premier League clubs”.

The potential informants were approached predominantly through emails to the named contact. Approaches with requests for a one-to-one interview were made from January 2019 onwards and all interviews were completed between January and May 2019 (all bar one during the 2018/19 EPL season).

The table provided ([Table 1](#)) shows the 18 informants categorised by groups by role and/or title. All were interviewed individually as had been requested. Six were employed direct by a football club or its charitable foundation and a further six were working within the football industry (identified as having a commercial interest). Five represented groups of fans in some way. The final informant was employed by the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport. Given the potential lack of access to some interviewees due to the high pressure of the football industry, some decisions to interview were also made opportunistically in that an informant was able to make themselves available in the required timeframe. There were practical issues to overcome recognising the participants faced considerable pressures on time and access.

All the interviewees were asked the same questions, but a flexible approach was taken, with questions open and not necessarily in the same order. There was time for the participants to develop their own account of the issues which were most important to them (Green and Thorogood 2004). Participants were interviewed in venues of their choosing. Out of the 18 interviewees, 14 were interviewed in person at their offices or in suitable interview facilities. In four instances telephone or video call was used as in person interviews were not possible. Interviews took between 27 min and 63 min (see [Table 1](#)) with a median length of 47 min (mean = 47.28 min).

The lead researcher spent considerable time familiarizing himself with the original transcripts (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2017) by reading the transcripts (as well as checking them for accuracy), listening to the original recordings, and reminding himself of the characteristics of the individuals interviewed, before attempting any description or analysis. The second phase of the analysis was to generate initial codes to capture underlying patterns

Table 1. Summary of key informants.

ID	Informant group	Title and/or Organisation	Length of interview (time)	Setting
11	EPL football club	Commercial Director	1 hr 2 mins	Own office
09	EPL football club	Research	0 hrs 58 mins	Own office
01	EPL football club	Charitable Foundation	0 hrs 46 mins	Own office
04	EPL football club	Charitable Foundation	0 hrs 43 mins	Own office
07	EPL football club	Charitable Foundation	1 hr 3 mins	Own office
13	EPL football club	Charitable Foundation	0 hrs 27 mins	Telephone
17	Governing bodies and Govt.	DCMS	0 hrs 49 mins	Own office
08	Fans	Supporters group	0 hrs 54 mins	Borrowed office
10	Fans	Club fan Representative	0 hrs 44 mins	Borrowed office
12	Fans	National fans' organisation	0 hrs 58 mins	Video
16	Fans	National fans' organisation	0 hrs 40 mins	Borrowed office
18	Fans	Advisor	0 hrs 51 mins	Telephone
03	Commercial interest	Gambling organisation	0 hrs 37 mins	Borrowed office
02	Commercial interest	Sports Marketing company	0 hrs 54 mins	Borrowed office
05	Commercial interest	Sports Marketing company	0 hrs 40 mins	Own office
06	Commercial interest	Finance company	0 hrs 41 mins	Own office
14	Commercial interest	Media company	0 hrs 36 mins	Own office
15	Commercial interest	Broadcaster	0 hrs 48 mins	Telephone

Interviews. $N = 18$.

(Saldaña 2016). All relevant text was coded, and it was possible to quickly identify text to code and initial themes representing some level of patterned response and meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In the final phase of reviewing of the themes, the researcher sought to develop and explore a deeper layer of understanding of the qualitative data. A Bourdieusian model of field theory was used to refine (Grenfell and Lebaron 2014) the initial themes. By applying the concept of ‘field’, the positions occupied by agents who compete for positions of authority and power in the football ‘field’ could be mapped out (Grenfell 2014). This enabled a discussion of the findings, considering the various positions the participants adopted when reflecting on how unhealthy sponsorship may be approached from an ethical and regulatory perspective.

Findings

The themes generated from the data are described below and illustrated by direct quotations from the interviews.

Brand

Fans are often uncomfortable with the concept of their club being a ‘brand’ as they may perceive this as reflecting the commercialisation of football (Bridgewater 2010) and some fan communities have objected to these commercial practices (Brown 2008). However, the importance of branding was reflected throughout the interviews whether this belonged to the football club, the Premier League, or a company. The clubs’ and Premier League brands’ recognition are global:

We’ve had coaches go over to, you know, various countries in Africa and straightaway the Premier League brand is recognised and they’ll talk about how people may walk three/four/five hours just to watch a Premier League football match and you could be sat in a small hut watching this Premier League football match in the middle of nowhere, and that’s how sought after that badge is. (Participant 1, Club)

In this example, the participant demonstrated the extreme lengths that some fans, who are unlikely to ever visit England to watch a Premier League game are willing to go to. Fan-consumers are willing to expend considerable time and energy on watching a game *via* television showing the appeal of English football and the attraction of this audience to transnational brands. With this recognition comes a responsibility, however, and an understanding that a brand, and its cultural capital in particular, may also need protection:

Most clubs are very careful about who they choose to work with. You know, your brand is your brand, so, you know, you have to be very, very protective of who you partner that brand with. And it’s not necessarily all about the financial return. (Participant 4, Club)

If clubs may be sensitive to associations with brands, fans may be even more protective of the values of what their club may represent:

I think supporters get those values a bit more and sometimes ... would ask themselves, well, what considerations do the club give to what we see as being our core values, who we should sponsorship with, who we should partner with. (Participant 8, Fan)

Finance

The bottom-line for many participants was the economic sustainability of football clubs:

And the more commercially successful clubs are, the better and that will mean attracting as much sponsorship and advertising into the game as possible. (Participant 17, Government)

Given UK governments have long feared accusations of ‘nanny-statism’ (Campbell 2023), this is a position you would expect, with commercial income and economic capital prioritised above any other consideration. Fans are aware of the importance of the commercialisation of all aspects of the football business but also how sponsorship may be used by companies:

It’s not going to be Holland & Barrett that want to be associated with your sport in order to prove to people that they’re healthy because people already know they’re healthy. They don’t feel that they need to gain any ground or apologise to anyone. So, it is going to be companies like McDonald’s or Cadbury or whatever. (Participant 18, Fan)

Thus, unhealthy food brands are heavily promoted in an (football) environment which is associated, in contrast, with health and physical fitness.

A return on investment (ROI) is also important from the perspective of the sponsor. This is usually about increasing sales although it can also be about promoting the image of a brand (Meenaghan 2005):

So that sales ROI [sic] is sometimes harder to track. It’s easier for the likes of Cadburys and Coke, et cetera because if they’re putting the Premier League logo on packaging, or they’re putting players on packaging, they can measure how those packs sell in comparison to ones that don’t have that. (Participant 5, Commercial interest)

Sponsorship is not about patronage or philanthropy as it may once have been considered. Corporate sponsors want to see an increase in consumption of their brands in return for their marketing spend.

Audience

The English Premier League has a huge global audience (Elliott 2017) which is critical to clubs and sponsors alike. Major clubs now act like transnational brands (Hamil 2008) and brand expansion is a key element of neoliberal globalisation where companies are constantly seeking new fans for their products (Cleland 2015). Of those interviewed, an informant from a club was open about the marketing opportunities available to their club:

Yeah, well ultimately, we want to create fans; that’s the prize for us. But we are competing in a global market, particularly for (*Club Name*) because of the profile of the Premier League and its broadcast distribution, we have this amazing opportunity, global opportunity to connect with fans around the world. (Participant 9, Club)

Whilst the club and commercial participants are aware of the marketing opportunities available, their brands target a younger male demographic, the traditional bedrock support for football:

I think it’s fairly generic and kind of typical brands that you’d expect to see trying to reach kind of the male audience. It’s very male focussed a lot of it, the sponsorship, commercial advertising; so, cars, beer, betting. (Participant 9, Club)

We know we're targeting a young male demographic, 18 to 30 and therefore we're going to put lots of shaving adverts there. (Participant 6, Commercial interest)

The established marketplace of male football fans (Sandvoss 2003) is thus still observed, particularly from the perspective of the sponsor. The gambling industry in particular has used football to market its brands to young men (Jones, Pinder, and Robinson 2020).

Football viewers include many young people and children and there are implications therefore of this type of marketing. Interview participants raised the issue of sports sponsorship and child audiences:

Kids are such an important audience for football and they are the future fans that will, you know, be paying throughout their lives to go to see games or watching them on TV or whatever. (Participant 14, Commercial interest)

This participant worked for a media company and was very conscious of the amount companies spend on advertising, which, in their mind, showed how effective this marketing was. They were frustrated that sport “has the potential to be such an amazing force for health” and yet “it is being co-opted by these brands that are turning the impact of sport into a negative one” (Participant 14).

Another participant was also concerned about the impact of unhealthy brands on children. It was brought home to them in a particularly powerful and personal way:

I still have a card that my niece and nephew made for me when I'd taken them to a match when they were little, a little thank you card that they'd made with a picture of a footballer on the front, you know, a Liverpool player. The only thing that is really recognisable from this child's drawing is the Carlsberg logo. (Participant 18, Fan)

Shirt sponsorship is the highest value commercial partnership (Maguire 2020) and its value to brand marketers can be recognised here. Whilst gambling and alcohol brands are no longer displayed on the front of child size football shirts (Reuben 2018), children obviously aspire to wear the shirts of their heroes and iconic shirts such as Liverpool's “Carlsberg” kit (worn between 1992 and 2010) live long in the memory whilst creating a strong and positive association between an alcohol brand and football club brand.

Children form an important component of the EPL's television audience whether acknowledged formally or not. As Participant 5 (Commercial interest) expressed very clearly:

We have all these rules about what is allowed on children's advertising, like with kids' TV shows and things like that. You'd never have a gambling advert on CBBC and stuff like that. Why is it okay just because it's on a football channel? All of the stuff is pre-watershed. You're telling me that five-year-olds don't sit there with their dads or with their mums and watch football?

Sponsors and clubs clearly understand their audiences. Whilst marketing unhealthy brands to adults may be of less concern to some, there was a clear understanding from nearly all the interview participants (including those from the clubs), that any marketing to children needed to be considered carefully.

Unhealthy commodities

Gambling brands are highly visible particularly through shirt sponsorship (Bunn et al. 2019), and gambling was raised regularly during the interviews by the participants in terms

of the industry's marketing and the normalisation of gambling through football. One interviewee from a marketing organisation was very clear about the effect of this:

The kind of messaging that is being portrayed, and again particularly to a younger and more vulnerable audience, it normalises gambling in a way that previous generations hadn't necessarily seen. (Participant 2, Commercial interest)

A fan, subjected to this marketing, saw the inconsistencies of the 'responsible gambling' aspect of the messaging and its likely outcome:

When you look at betting in football at its most basic level, it is really bizarre that we allow betting companies to sponsor our football matches and then complain about footballers betting on games, and complain about the debt and the problems that betting causes, and match fixing and stuff like that. (Participant 8, Fan)

Whilst gambling brands stand out because of their ubiquity, other unhealthy commodity industries are also seeking new markets and often these include young people:

It's clearly where their brand strategy lies, isn't it? We've saturated the Western market. Let's go and get nations (sic) like Africa and continents, and Coca-Cola is everywhere. And it's a brand that brings young people ... they'll buy that bottle of Coke, because it's kind of all the imagery that they associate with it. (Participant 7, Club)

Celebrity endorsement was also raised by some of the participants who suggested that children are likely to be influenced by their football heroes:

I think, role models are immensely important in kid's lives, and research says that, and so when you have ... after the World Cup all everyone was talking about was Harry Kane, next thing you know he's been sponsored by McDonalds. (Participant 14, Commercial interest)

Several participants felt an association with unhealthy food and drinks was wrong partly because it may influence children:

Yeah because they're impressionable, aren't they, so if they see a player for example drinking a can of Coke or Lucozade or whatever, or a can of Monster. (Participant 13, Club)

This view was clearly expressed by most of the participants employed by club foundations who were aware of the contradictions between the health campaigns they ran in their local communities and some of the commercial partners of their host clubs. Football, considered as a healthy activity, is used consistently to promote unhealthy brands and their consumption. Fans see and understand this but consider themselves as having no power to change or even to comment on it.

Communications

The communication strategies used by clubs and brands alike are increasingly sophisticated and are tailored to their global audiences. Club officials are aware however that content must be 'glocalised' and thus address the needs of the local fan.

We have a kind of regional content team now; so people in local markets, in some of our key markets, who are on the ground close to the kind of football culture in Brazil, for example, and they are creating bespoke content for that market. And the Portuguese, so the tone of

voice and everything is right for what the Brazilian football fan wants to know and hear from the Premier League football club. (Participant 9, Club)

The tone of the marketing content is important whether it is to convey the excitement of the sport or to be aimed at a particular market (this may be as simple as using a local language).

The Premier League is a global product and clubs work with sponsors as described in the Brazilian context. Brands want to be associated with English football. For example, the importance of the Asian market to the EPL was underlined as this commercial informant confirms:

That's why you see so many more sponsorships that are targeting audiences away from these shores. And you'll see lots of shirt sponsors with Chinese writing on, because there's such an appeal in the Far East, and that's just because the product has grown so big, globally, that there is a huge appeal for it. (Participant 2, Commercial)

Communications are smooth, slick and sophisticated and brand activation incorporates much more than simply paying for digital advertising. Brand activation is key to fan engagement and immediately understood by those with commercial interests:

They (*brands*) buy loads of advertising spots, they do loads of things like giving away tickets, but in really imaginative ways through social media, through Youtube, like, they create really good content around it. (Participant 5, Commercial)

There is considerable investment in ensuring clubs and brands have the most penetration into the global marketplace. EPL clubs make sure they have the necessary expertise in both staff and technical resources to maximise fan engagement. These modern communications methods enable football supporters to identify with English teams from across the world, and their consumer spending habits, in terms of merchandise, television subscriptions and match tickets, reflects this.

Ethics

All participants were asked, "Do you think there should be an ethical framework around the sponsorship and marketing used in Premier League football?". Fundamentally, most felt an ethical framework would be helpful, but responses reflected the economic capital of the positions of those responding. Those with an indirect commercial interest in football (not directly employed by a club) were often, paradoxically, more direct in their responses with one stating bluntly: "Well, you have to say, generally speaking, morality in football is not a high priority." (Participant 15, Commercial interests).

The football club Commercial Director (Participant 11) who was interviewed responded taking a position often adopted by corporate interests who place the burden of 'appropriate' levels of consumption on individuals when unhealthy brands are marketed: "I would be very much in the everything's fine in moderation camp, so beer is fine in moderation, betting is fine in moderation". Allen (2021) described this as a "common industry argument and framing tactic" (1). Arguments and narratives that focus on individual responsibility, rather than corporate, are used regularly by commercial actors to distract or refute public health campaigns.

State interference is strongly resisted by economic libertarians (Harvey 2007) and such a position was articulated by Participant 6 (Finance Company) who argued, “it comes down to your personal perspective around ... people’s right to spend their money how they see fit, versus ... the view of the state intervening to stop problem gambling”. He continued:

And so Cadbury and Coca-Cola, I can see why, you know, a very nanny state view of the world would be, yes, we should ban it (*the sponsorship*), kids shouldn’t be exposed to it, but they are legal businesses going about their business ... and therefore I don’t have a problem with it being advertised and associated with sport.

Within the club setting, those working for the club’s charitable foundation were aware of the community and social objectives of their own organisation which may be different from those of the football club. They were also aware that the club’s brand was very powerful, evoking passion and connection, and thus played an important and influential role in all their activities. The community coaches display the sponsoring brands on their clothing which may have a particular impact on children who see the same brands worn by the players:

... obviously children who idolise players and would do anything to meet their heroes if they’re seeing them, you know, running around with a particular brand on their shirts, they do recognise that brand. (Participant 1, Club)

Whilst those employed in a community role have limited economic capital, they fully appreciate the cultural assets of their club.

Fans were aware of this cultural capital and had less concern for economic interests, enabling them to reflect on sponsorship and the issues arising from unhealthy sponsorship. They were aware that they (the fans) provided a market for the brands being promoted and felt that because these companies were trading on the love of the club, care needed to be taken. “So, anything being advertised I think that supporters are way more susceptible to following suit because it’s part of the football club” and “supporters love their club to another level” (Participant 12, Fan). Whilst recognising that fans have high cultural capital, it is also clear that there are very clear differences of acceptance to commercial messaging. Participant 12 from a national fans’ organisation saw this as a split between those who are “really sensitive to betting and certain ads and being bombarded” and those who really do not care “whatever the football club does as long as they can keep going”.

Brand congruence

It was recognised that sponsorship needed to be congruent with the club brand particularly by those representing commercial interests as any deviation from this could damage a club and have a negative economic impact. A broadcaster (Participant 15), very aware of the industry he worked in, stated, “the authorities have to be very careful that sponsorship doesn’t spread to affecting the core values of what football clubs are all about”. Another senior football club representative (Participant 9) was clear that any inconsistencies in messaging could affect “reputational damage” so “our communications and brand teams would look at what kind of signal or message does that say if we align ourselves with a particular brand”.

Whilst the study participants were clear that football has the potential to promote health:

So, kids love sport and it has the potential to be such an amazing force for health and, you know, it makes them run around at lunchtime, it makes them excited to get better at sport and it's also, obviously, it has so many benefits in terms of, like, social cohesion and ultimately it's a brilliant brilliant thing. (Participant 14, Commercial interest)

Those placed with some economic and high cultural capital within the club's charitable foundations were aware of the incongruence between their club's commercial partnerships while their own work was about promoting health.

But economic capital has bought brand presence in the spaces in which football's cultural capital is reproduced. Those working within clubs for charitable foundations were very conscious of their role in providing a platform for their club's sponsors. Participant 1 (from a club foundation) noted that all their community coaches carried sponsors' brands on their clothing. This awareness was carried forward into concerns about the children the foundations work with, recognising that children idolise players and can identify a particular brand carried on players' shirts. This was echoed by a commercial participant (from a media company): "when you think about the significant influence of sport in their lives, then you start to ask the questions, well is that influence promoting their health or detracting from it?" (Participant 14).

Fans too, with less economic capital, but were very aware of the responsibilities of their club through its cultural capital, appreciated these contradictions in health messaging:

We are saying that we need to encourage more kids to play sports, but if, at the same time, that sport is counter acting that whether through sugary drinks or alcohol, or mental health through gambling problems, then, to some extent, those things are working against each other. (Participant 16, Fan)

Whilst playing football is generally perceived as 'good for health', watching sport may in fact be detrimental to health given the unhealthy nature of many sponsors.

Responsibility and regulation

Whilst the possibility of an ethical framework around the sponsorship and advertising used in the Premier League was considered, the participants were not clear how this could be achieved or where the responsibility for this might lie. It recalls the discussion about brand in that it is not always clear who is the true 'owner' of football. Whilst the clubs and the Premier League claim the economic capital, it is the fans who may lay claim to the philosophical and social ownership of the sport: "the current runners of the game, the FA and the Premier League, they're custodians of it. The game will still exist post-them" (Participant 8, Fan).

In many ways, and taking into account that economic capital is of lower value to them, fans may be more protective of their sport and be acutely aware of the impact that the marketing of unhealthy brands may have in their communities:

I kind of think the FA could lead by example but it's between the leagues and the clubs ... to effect change and consider the impact that their marketing, sponsorship has on people, their community. (Participant 12, Fan)

Club representatives, reflecting any pressure on their independence and their economic interests, are more likely to challenge attempts at establishing an ethical framework around

the commercial relationships in the EPL placing this responsibility on the UK government: “It wouldn’t be a league decision, it would need to be a government decision” (Participant 11, Commercial Director).

The site of sporting struggle is complex. Whilst the positioning of fans and clubs is clear, it is less so when it comes to the Government and the governing body of the rules of football, the Football Association (FA). The 20 member clubs of the EPL manage their own affairs as “separate businesses coming together collectively” (Participant 17, Government). The UK Government derives economic and cultural capital from football and given the complexity of the field, may be unwilling to take any regulatory role and leaves the responsibility of football to the sport itself:

it’s ultimately football’s responsibility...the government doesn’t dictate. You know, these are commercial businesses ... You know, it’s for those clubs to, kind of, have those commercial discussions. (Participant 17, Government)

The UK Government Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) has both a responsibility to promote culture (including sport) but also to ensure social responsibility (DCMS 2020). The participant is here prioritising the economic dimension of practice over any consideration of social responsibility and well-being. Government is in a position to influence and pressure the Premier League, and indeed regulate where this may be considered necessary, but it chooses not to do.

The field is structured in such a way that those with economic capital seek to maximise this capital:

I think you’ll find that across a lot of football clubs in particular is that they will go with the best deal possible. There are no scruples necessarily in the game. (Participant 17, Government)

Nevertheless, these economic interests are dependent on the game’s cultural capital as represented by the fans. The fans’ frustration can be aired in many ways:

The Premier League isn’t owned by us [fans], and I think people think it is. They think that it’s our game. And it’s not, it’s a private company. They can do what they want and we can’t stop them. (Participant 8, Fan)

The regulation of football is possible but only by challenging the economic capital possessed by the clubs. The fans, the arbiters of cultural capital, feel disenfranchised from the commercial interests of the sport they love.

Fan opposition to owners’ values is framed around an awareness that tradition and culture are very important and should be protected against excess commercialisation. As Participant 8 (Fan) said:

We have this very valuable asset, financially, culturally and socially, and civic, and yet we don’t protect it in the same way that we protect other things that fall within the same category.

To return to Bourdieu’s field of struggle in sporting practice, those who both have some economic capital and use the club’s cultural capital to promote health, namely those who work for the clubs’ charitable foundations, appreciate that football should be no different from other businesses:

It can be a hard industry to reconcile from a moral perspective, but I think particularly when you’re doing something that is designed to say, we as a club, or, we as a governing body endorse this product, I think you have to be open to scrutiny. (Participant 2, Charitable Foundation)

Discussion

Sport is highly commercialised and, through its neoliberal structures, encourages and normalises consumption by its fans (Andrews and Silk 2018). Clubs argue that sponsorship is essential to the financial model they use, and any attempt to regulate this would reduce income into the sport and may indeed damage the EPL commercial model. EPL clubs see sponsorship deals as becoming similar and as competitive as the transfer market for players (Buckingham 2023). As their sport has become increasingly commodified, EPL fans have become accustomed to marketing messages being displayed across their stadiums and television screens (Ireland et al. 2022). The process in which many fans have been forced to accept the increased commercialisation of their sport may be considered a form of ‘cultural imperialism’. Whilst Bourdieu used a theory of the cultural field which encompassed literature and artistic works (Bourdieu 1993a), the power relationships between those in football who have possession of economic capital, and the fans who seek to protect the cultural capital of ‘their’ clubs generate constant friction even amongst those fans who welcome increased income into the sport. These power structures reflect the changes in the elite level of English football signified by the establishment of the Premier League without any involvement or consultation with football fans (Bower 2003).

The symbolic power that shapes the football world helps form the dispositions of Bourdieu’s *habitus*. As described in the discourse around the ‘unhealthy commodities’ theme, fans understand the incongruence of unhealthy sponsorship but consider themselves as having no power to change it. Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) may characterise this as symbolic violence from those who wield the economic power within the EPL.

This paper has considered how various actors in the football field have viewed unhealthy marketing messages resulting from EPL clubs’ sponsorship agreements. Thus, following Bourdieu, sport may be considered as comprising of a number of fields in which different forms of capital are both the subject of competition and the resources deployed in that competition. In the findings above, it is useful to understand them from a perspective which recognises that the interviewees may occupy very different positions in relation to economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu (1978, 821) described sport as a “*field of competition*, the site of confrontations between agents with specific agents linked to their positions within the field”. He continued in ‘Sport and Social Class’ (1978) to describe sport as “an object of political struggle” (832).

Bourdieu used the concepts of *social space* and *field of power* (Bourdieu 1998) to describe how individuals or groups exist relative to one another. The social space is a field of forces where agents confront each other “contributing to conserving or transforming its structure” (Bourdieu 1998, 32). Bourdieu saw sport as a field of practices in which there was a struggle over definitions and legitimate functions of sporting activity (Bourdieu 1993b). In this study, the field of power demonstrates the struggle between fans and owners of clubs for the moral ownership of football. Cultural ‘goods’ may be considered as a football club badge, images and memories of a club’s history and players, its shirts, scarves, programmes and even the songs that the supporters sing. Whilst some aspects of cultural capital such as merchandise and replica shirts are tangible (Bourdieu calls these “*objectified*” (Bourdieu 1986, 243), others are “*embodied*” (243), in that they are incorporated into the individual as “principles of consciousness” (Moore 2014, 102), as a history that fans share and embody.

Whilst there has been considerable change in the nature of the ownership of clubs in the EPL (Robinson and Clegg 2019), this has not impacted on clubs’ approach to the

accumulation of commercial capital as sponsorship income has continued to increase in line with television exposure. Manchester City’s shirt sponsorship was recently valued at £72.8 million a year (Allcock 2023) following the club’s successful treble (winning the EPL, the FA Cup, and the UEFA Champions’ League). Whilst the owners of clubs clearly possess the economic capital, fans consider themselves the custodians of the cultural capital. The EPL clubs themselves are trying to position themselves as favourably as they can economically, so they can compete for success globally, whilst being holders of the collective tradition and culture which the club represents historically and which the fans see themselves as protecting. Of course, this supposes that fans think collectively, when, as has been seen, they are conflicted between wishing their club to be successful at any price whilst being concerned at some of the manifestations of the commercialisation of modern football. Indeed, as the subjects of *symbolic violence*, fans may practically and perhaps unconsciously accept that unhealthy sponsorship is simply a modern-day requirement for their club to be a member of the Premier League.

In Figure 1, we have applied Bourdieu’s model to aid an understanding of the football industry as a “*field of struggles* aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 101). The clubs in the EPL are shown at the very top of the football field as they represent the highest accumulation of economic and cultural capital. Fans possess the highest cultural capital but very little economic capital when matchday income in the EPL is proportionately a very low percentage of total revenue for clubs (this changes in lower leagues). We have placed the actors from this qualitative study onto this grid using Bourdieu’s analytical approach. Each interview participant shared certain fundamental presuppositions depending on the economic and cultural context of the roles they played within football. Thus, their positionality is not individual but represents the collective disposition determined by the quantities of different types of capital they may possess and reflects the relations between economic and cultural agents within the field.

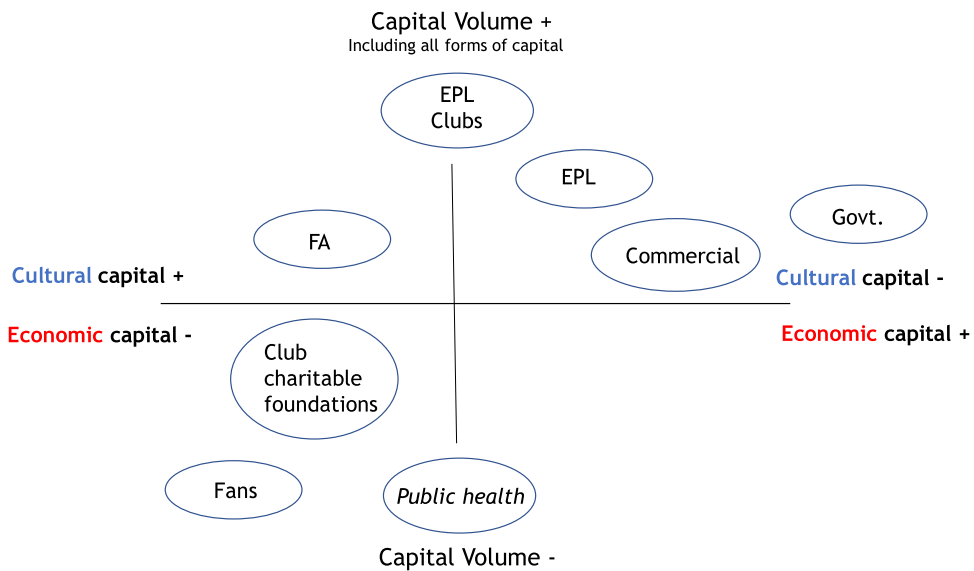


Figure 1. A map of relations between the agents in the football field.

In Bourdieu's terms, football is a site of struggle between forms of capital (Bourdieu 1999) in which economic capital holders seek to exercise dominance over cultural capital. In today's football field of practice, football clubs, the EPL and the UK government (through taxation) derive high economic benefit. The figure shows the interconnections between agents, with the model illustrating the groupings the interviewees are linked to as shown in the table. Their accounts represent their group's economic and cultural capital and are placed accordingly in the map of relations. We have placed the group identified as 'commercial' as possessing economic capital. Many commercial interests such as sport economists or marketeers could be argued not to be contributing any capital at all but act more in a subsidiary role to other actors within football. We have also included club charitable foundations separately from the clubs themselves. Senior figures within these foundations may have similar perspectives to the club officials but, given the health promotion work they often do in their local communities, they are likely to be aware of the contradictions between the marketing of their club's unhealthy sponsors and the healthy lifestyles they advocate. Foundations also have less economic capital as their income is entirely separate from their host club. We have separated the Football Association (FA) and the Premier League itself as the former has considerable cultural capital and is seen as the governing body of football including the national team, albeit with no control over the EPL itself since the latter's formation. The government clearly has economic capital but not cultural capital.

Whilst we are not suggesting that the model illustrated in [Figure 1](#) is comprehensive, it demonstrates that fans are in a very different position in a field of power from the EPL clubs, the EPL itself and indeed the UK government, and that the economic and cultural capital of football is actively contested. The role of those who may claim ownership and control of football should be considered in relation to sponsorship decisions. The legal control of sport is determined by its rule formations and disciplinary procedures and may change according to status or commercial reasons (Vamplew 2019). The call from some fans for ethical leadership may be difficult to resolve albeit the *symbolic violence* of the power relationships described is not always self-evident to some fans. Hardman (2019) argued for a moral ownership of sport "through beneficent institutions that effectively balance the pursuit of ends and means for humanistic good" (18). Further, the balance between economic pursuit and public health (Wiist 2010) is an argument that is played out regularly in any analysis of corporate activities and sport is no different.

The Fan-Led Review of Football Governance (DCMS. 2021), in English Football arose as a result of the football industry's inability to control its excesses in its decision making and culture (Maguire 2022). The review's principal recommendation of an Independent Regulator for English Football (IREF) was accepted by the UK Government (BBC. 2022) despite the objections of the Premier League. However, it is clear that whilst the role of the IREF will consider better financial regulation, it will not be concerned with the commercial decisions football clubs such as their sponsorship agreements and will play no part in examining how football is used to promote unhealthy commodities. The fields of power are clear, and, for example, despite the opposition of many fans to the marketing of gambling brands within football, the recent decision by the Premier League to ban match-day front of shirt sponsorship by gambling companies from 2026-27, has been interpreted as the EPL's best way of avoiding the imposition of legislation. It completely disregards the prevalence of gambling brands on pitchside advertising and, indeed, on other parts of footballers' uniforms including shirt sleeves and training wear (Taylor 2023).

This study adds to our understanding of how ‘unhealthy sponsorships’ are viewed by people who have economic and cultural capital in the EPL. It may help to guide those seeking to understand the brand strategies of those corporations seeking to benefit from their association with football and to challenge these ‘unhealthy’ relationships between EPL club and sponsors.

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