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Ludvigsen, J (2023) Locating the Supporter Liaison Officer in the football field: Bridges, brokers and the 'supporter gaze'. International Review for the Sociology of Sport. pp. 1-17. ISSN 1012-6902

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Locating the Supporter Liaison Officer in the football field: Bridges, brokers and the ‘supporter gaze’

International Review for the
Sociology of Sport
1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/10126902231195569

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Abstract

This article examines a relatively recent yet under-researched role in the governance of elite European football – namely, the Supporter Liaison Officer. The Supporter Liaison Officer, as appointed by football clubs, is commonly envisioned as a mediator between fans and the clubs, authorities and security actors situated in the European football field. However, following its formal inception in the 2012/2013, little is known about how stakeholders understand the evolving and heterogeneously implemented Supporter Liaison Officer role. Drawing upon documentary and interview data, this article unpacks two key themes to develop two primary arguments. First, it argues that Supporter Liaison Officers may be understood as ‘social brokers’ that bridge together stakeholders who often possess diverging viewpoints and whose relationships are impacted by social barriers. Second, Supporter Liaison Officers are perceived as possessors of what is conceptualised here as a ‘supporter gaze’. Whilst contributing to the literature on supporter engagement and dialogue, these arguments also matter because if we understand the Supporter Liaison Officer implementation as influenced by supporter activism in Europe, then this article speaks to how outcomes of supporter pressure mature over time and their implications on football’s supporter and security cultures.

Keywords

supporter engagement, Supporter Liaison Officer, football, European football, fan activism

Introduction

In the present day, questions surrounding safety, security and disorder at major sporting events have taken on a new political significance, particularly so, after the public disorder

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at the Euro 2020 final at Wembley, London, and the organisational mismanagement and heavy-handed policing that characterised the 2022 Champions League final in Paris (Pearson and Stott, 2022). Following these serious incidents, the desire to ensure safe and secure events has re-emerged as a key political imperative in Europe. As the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) President Aleksander Čeferin commented in light of the Paris final: 'Probably [...] the main topic at UEFA [is] how to make sure it doesn't happen again' (quoted in *The Independent*, 2023). Meanwhile, on the question of fans' safety, the UK's Sports Minister, Stuart Andrew, said that: 'We should be ensuring the voices of fans are listened to' (quoted in BBC, 2023). In this context, one important task for sociologists is to better understand the social and structural relationships between those actors *securing* these football events, and those actors subject to a myriad of football-specific legislation, policing, security and control policies – that is, the fans and other spectator groups subjected to social control apparatuses (Tsoukala, 2009; Turner, 2021). Importantly, all this has transpired in parallel with broader questions concerning the role of fans within the commercialised milieu of European football's governance (Numerato, 2018). Notwithstanding, within this context – since the early 2010s – a new role has emerged and evolved in European elite football's governance that is yet to receive much academic attention – namely, the Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO), which this paper zooms in on.

Indeed, the representative body for football supporters across England and Wales, Football Supporters Association, has also acknowledged that the SLO role is not 'as well known amongst fans as [they] would like'.¹ This is surprising because the SLO is intended to act as a link between – and speak directly to – the complex (social) relationships between fans, clubs and security actors of the football world that are navigated by football's securitisation and commodification processes (Fitzpatrick and Hoey, 2022; Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018; Turner, 2021). On a European level, the SLO role was implemented as a requirement by UEFA for the 2012/2013 season. This consequently came to symbolise the role which football fans *can* have in consultation processes on various issues concerning authorities, clubs, football associations and fans and how this, increasingly, was recognised by football and political authorities (Numerato, 2018). However, although SLOs have been a formal part of the European football field for a decade, it is striking that 'the actual impact of SLOs is questionable' (Ziesche, 2023: 557). Numerato (2015) also reminds us that the role, across European countries, is marked by a significant heterogeneity *vis-à-vis* its implementation and operationalisation. Hence, this article aims to drive forward our understanding of SLOs in the European football field by exploring how this role is understood by stakeholders including SLOs and other fan representatives. Whilst the idea of SLOs as 'mediators' or 'bridges' – by default – positions SLOs *via media*, or *in-between* the various stakeholders of elite football, as someone fans are likely to listen to given their supporter culture expertise and pre-existing fan relations (UEFA, 2011), little is known overall about SLOs and other stakeholders' perceptions of the role. The curious case of SLOs and its heterogeneous implementation across Europe formulate another backdrop for this article seeking to answer the following research question: What are stakeholders' experiences of the SLO role in football's governance?

Engagement with this question remains sociologically important because by understanding this role and the perceptions attached to the SLO role, one may simultaneously understand wider issues related to the commercialisation and securitisation of European football. If one recognises the implementation of SLOs as influenced by supporter activism in Europe (Numerato, 2018), then this article can say something about how the outcomes of supporter pressure mature over time and its implications. Structurally, this article continues by situating the SLO role within the sociological literature on major structural changes and their impact on fan engagement. Then, the study's document and interview data are unpacked, before the article focuses on two empirically informed themes that explicate my key arguments holding that SLOs are perceived in terms of (a) 'brokerage' roles (Diani, 2013), and (b) as possessors of what is conceptualised here as the *'supporter gaze'*.

Conceptualising structural and social transformations through European football

Sociological analyses of European football can reveal important insights, and, following King (2003), European football represents a prominent field where social relations in European societies are periodically remade. Particularly, in the European setting, the changing role of football fan groups has been subjected to much academic analysis from the 1990s onwards (Fitzpatrick and Hoey, 2022; Garcia and Llopis-Goig, 2021; Giulianotti, 2002; King, 1998, 2003; Lee, 2023). To holistically understand the emergence of the SLO, it is necessary to gain a socio-historical overview of football's structural changes and fans' involvement in football's governance, since this enables an appreciation of the sociological context in which SLOs were operationalised, and currently operate within. Following Numerato and Giulianotti (2018), a series of interconnected major structural and cultural changes have – and continue – to transform men's elite football in Europe since the late 1980s. These include globalisation, commodification, securitisation, mediatisation and post-modernisation, which have embedded football within the wider global consumer culture.

Amongst these, the two most relevant conceptual tools for this article remain commodification and securitisation. These work – in isolation and tandem – to ensure that elite football preserves its position as a product in global marketplaces but concurrently remains tightly regulated by a myriad of social control mechanisms and technologies intended to monitor and 'order' football's social spaces that historically have been disrupted by football-related disorder or violence (Giulianotti, 2011; Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018; Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023). Indeed, across diverse European football contexts, prospective disorderly atmospheres were seen to impede football's commercial appeal, as well as – of course – impacting other fans' safety (Cho et al., 2020; Giulianotti, 2011).

On a wider social level, these changes may broadly be understood by more generalised turns towards risk management strategies and discourses (Beck, 2009), the politicisation of security (Tsoukala, 2009) and the recognition of the (potential) revenue streams from global sport as connected to neoliberalism (King, 1998). European football's 'securitized

commodification' (Giulianotti, 2011) has had significant implications on its fans and fan cultures. As risk and market-oriented strategies were increasingly adapted to securitise football spaces and appeal to the new consumers in European football, so has the extent to which fans are sufficiently involved in football governance become increasingly politicised (Cleland et al., 2018; Garcia and Welford, 2015).

This has led a minority of critically active fans across various European settings to mobilise against the radical transformations that made football more 'globalised, commodified and mediatised' (Numerato, 2018) and what fans perceive to be 'modern football' (Hill et al., 2018). Across Europe, fans continually contest, *inter alia*, high ticket prices (that exclude 'traditional' fan groups), oppressive security measures that sanitise fan cultures and atmospheres, and club owners' mismanagement (Millward, 2011; Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023). Another central issue that fans have contested is European and national football governance and, crucially, the need for increased supporter *involvement*. This is reflected by critical sociological work that, broadly, examines how fans, through collective actions, attempt to acquire a greater say in football's decision-making process and day-to-day running (Cleland et al., 2018; Numerato, 2018; Turner, 2021).

Notwithstanding, despite nationwide and UEFA's recognition or insistence that fans are important 'stakeholders', it remains crucial to acknowledge, as Ziesche (2023: 557) points out, that whilst fans are occasionally consulted or talked to on governance or security matters, they are 'rarely allowed into the "inner circle"' of European football's decision-making. Ziesche also highlights a contradiction between the mentioned risk and market-oriented strategies and the publicly articulated desire to involve supporters:

However, these efforts to sanitize and commodify the game and assign a passive role to supporters are seemingly at odds with UEFA's repeated embracing of issues raised by the active football supporter scene, most evident in the recognition and direct endorsement of Football Supporters Europe (FSE) and Supporters Direct Europe (SDE), the promotion of fan congresses as well as the licencing requirement of a Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) at its member clubs (p. 549).

Overall, political and commercial developments have transformed the relationship between football and its fans. Within this relationship, the involvement of supporters in football's governance circles remains a contentious issue (Stott et al., 2020). Ultimately, it is within this sociologically complex yet paradoxical context one may locate the emergence of SLOs in European football.

Literature review: Situating the SLO: Regulations, fan engagement, (inter-)national differences

The SLO introduction remains a key milestone in supporters' initiatives for an active participation in the governance of football across Europe (Numerato, 2015). Following the influence of fan networks like SD Europe, the SLO role became mandatory in European competitions in 2012/2013 as Article 35 of UEFA's *Club Licensing and Financial Fair Play Regulations* required clubs under UEFA's jurisdiction to appoint an SLO (Stott et al., 2020). Subsequently, a number of other regulations, legislations and

recommendations on the European level have also spoken (in)directly to the SLO role. This includes the Council of the EU's 'Football Handbook' and resolution on police liaison with SLOs, as well as Council of Europe's (2016) 'Convention on an Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events (CETS No. 218)' (UEFA, 2021a: Chapter 15). Collectively, this underpins how the SLO and fan engagement are structurally formalised and embedded in the European football field.

Originally, for UEFA (2011: 10), SLOs were defined as someone who liaised and mediated between fans, clubs, national associations, leagues, the police and stewards. Thus, on a basic, relational level, the SLO role relates to the mediation the socially complex relations between supporters and other stakeholders. This means that SLOs – owing to their *liaising* activities – are bound to deal with the often-contradictory demands and viewpoints from different fans, football's governing bodies, authorities, police and security (Choluj et al., 2020). Notwithstanding, despite SLOs' presence in the European football field for over a decade, scant academic work – despite some exceptions (see Madsen et al., 2019; Stott et al., 2020; Numerato, 2018) – has focused on the meanings and impacts of the role, and its evolution since 2012/2013. This, despite Numerato's nod towards the need for further research on questions emerging in line with SLO practices:

It is questionable what the SLO measure can introduce into the European football clubs. Considering the relatively recent introduction of the measure, it will become a topic of further research to examine the extent to which this tool, which originated as a product of football supporters' engagement, will help to enhance transformative processes and the extent to which it will be co-opted into neo-liberal strategies of football clubs, such as legitimizing their supporters or transforming the SLOs into allies that could promote security measures at the risk of limiting the civil liberties of fans (Numerato, 2015: 130).

Whereas this speaks to the 'questionable impact' of SLOs in football under the umbrella of fan engagement and initiatives (cf. Ziesche, 2023), another aspect that remains under-explored is the multiple and vague roles of the SLO, which undeniably are characterised by national variances in the role's development. These variances are especially interesting given, first, the efforts to coordinate the SLO implementation process on a European level, driven by SD Europe and currently Football Supporters Europe (FSE),² and second, the broader convergence of European-wide security policies in football, propelled by UEFA, Council of Europe and the EU since the 1980s (Tsoukala, 2009; Lee Ludvigsen, 2023).

A scan of the literature reveals that, in Germany, the SLO role builds on the tradition of liaison with supporters to reduce conflict through 'Fan Projects' (Giulianotti and Millward, 2014). In Swedish football, the SLO role represents an important element of the safety and security decision-making and is considered to empower supporter engagement (Stott et al., 2020). Indeed, this feeds from (and into) the notion that '[s]upporters are far more likely to trust and listen to the SLO' in comparison to other security stakeholders (UEFA, 2011: 13). In Italian football, however, Numerato (2016) described the SLO implementation as a tick-box exercise that merely existed 'on paper' and lacked a

genuine implementation. Finally, Stott et al. (2020) observe that, in some contexts, including the UK, the SLO is occasionally located within clubs' marketing teams, where 'they play little if any role in governance or conflict management' (p. 198) and are mostly deployed to solve customer and ticket-related requests or issues. In context of football's commodification, this may explain why the SLO implementation, by some fans, was regarded as 'overly formalized' (Numerato, 2018) or a tool primarily for clubs or authorities. Pearson and Stott (2022: 160) therefore contend that, in England and Wales, SLOs are often club employees, who 'typically play a more peripheral role when it comes to fan/police negotiation than their counterparts abroad'.

Taken together, it is argued that the implementation and practices of SLOs vary. Not solely between European contexts, but between different clubs in the *same* country, too (Madsen et al., 2019). Significantly, the fact that the 'application of the [SLO] concept varies significantly across Europe' was also recently recognised by the Council of the EU (2022: 6). Whilst this non-uniformity is partly explained by the differences in clubs' finances, resources and fanbases, this still remains crucial, because if – in football's governance – the SLO is intended to 'ensure that the views of fans are considered within the management processes that clubs follow' (Choluj et al., 2020: 2), then a better and empirical understanding of the role in specific contexts can tell us something about fans' ability to impact football's governance, and how supporter activism outcomes mature over time. Overall, this underpins this study's commitment to examine empirically the evolving SLO role.

Methods and approach

Upon proceeding, this exploratory study draws from two qualitative data collection activities. First, the study draws upon a document analysis of key policy documents relevant to the SLO role (Bowen, 2009). Importantly, these documents contain formal stakeholder *discourses*; including those of stakeholders who are particularly hard to access for academic research purposes (e.g. representatives from sport's governing bodies, political authorities, club employees) (e.g. King, 1998). Most notably, this included the two central documents published through UEFA's channels: the 55-page long *Supporter Liaison Officer Handbook* (2011), and the more recent *Practical Guide to Supporter Liaison* (2021a). Indeed, the latter manual contains 97 pages with interviews and detailed first-hand accounts from SLOs, Safety Officers and other stakeholders. In this article, these types of data may be considered especially useful sources for what Heaton (2008) calls secondary analysis of qualitative data. Given the documents' size and year of publication, it also allowed for analysing how the SLO role had evolved from its 'requested exemplar' stage (cf. Klauser, 2011) and inception, because documents as data sources 'provide a means of tracking change and development' (Bowen, 2009: 30). The analysed documents also included UEFA's (2019) safety regulations, the Council of the EU's (2022) resolution on SLOs and conventional media, website and other secondary sources.

Second, to supplement this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six purposively sampled stakeholders. These bespoke interviews included four active SLOs (two from English football, one each from Scottish and Swedish football) and two European

fan representatives (one from Germany, one from the UK) possessing professional knowledge on the SLO role in British football and in Europe more generally. Following ethical approval, these online (Microsoft Teams) interviews took place between February and March 2023 and lasted between 25 and 45 min.³ The interview guide was informed by the literature, containing themes speaking to the practicalities and policy surrounding SLOs, its implementation since 2012/2013 and context-specific issues. To ensure anonymity, interviewees are given pseudonyms and their club and/or affiliation anonymised. Concerning the participants and sampling strategy, it is important to highlight that stakeholders in football possess different interests and agendas (Cleland et al., 2018). Hence, this research's aim and sample size were not designed for the purpose of generalising stakeholder perspectives. Indeed, this would have been extremely complicated given the discussed heterogeneity characterising the SLO role (Numerato, 2015). Instead, the purpose of the interviews was to generate novel insights that, by themselves, and in tandem with document data, could facilitate further comparative and critical work in the area.

Following manual interview transcription, the data was analysed according to open, axial and selective coding processes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). These three interconnected stages were followed in the context of the key principles of grounded theory, which allows theory to transpire from the data. First, open coding was performed with reference to the research aims and literature, to identify broad yet dominant categories or themes upon the in-depth reading of every transcript. Second, axial coding was directed towards 'identifying emergent themes' and refine, align and categorise these further (Williams and Moser, 2019: 50). This process allowed for making comparisons between transcripts and exploring connections between the identified categories from the open-coding and from the documentary research. Finally, the selective coding stage re-affirmed the key categories. At this stage, quotes, passages or excerpts from documents/transcripts attaching or reflecting (qualitative) meanings to their assigned categories were selected. The latter two stages contributed to concretising the themes unpacked next – namely, (a) SLOs as bridges and as (b) possessors of what I call the 'supporter gaze'.

Bridging gaps as 'brokers'

UEFA described the introduction of SLOs as a landmark moment for club-fan relations and as underpinning the seriousness that the organisation attached to facilitating dialogue between fans and clubs (Ziesche, 2023). Indeed, Stakeholder 6 (fan representative) spoke to this, stating that: 'the voice and [fans'] collective voice in the last three-four years have definitely increased'. From UEFA's viewpoint, SLOs are the creators of 'the platforms for dialogue and communication between stakeholders, which helps to build trust' (Čeferin quoted in UEFA, 2021b: 5). In line with existing work (Madsen et al., 2019; Pearson and Stott, 2022), the theme of SLOs as *bridges* between the diverse stakeholders of football continuously appeared in the interview and documentary data.

On several occasions, stakeholders framed the SLO role in terms of mediation between fans, clubs, stadium managers, safety officers, the police and football authorities. Indeed, the reference to SLOs as 'bridges' was perhaps unsurprising, but questions could be

asked about the wider meanings of this bridge analogy. At an early stage, UEFA (2011: 10) defined SLOs in documentary form as ‘a bridge between the fans and the club [which] help to improve the dialogue between the two sides’. In compliance with this, some of the interviewed stakeholders also employed the metaphor of ‘a bridge’ when describing and elaborating on the roles and meanings of the SLO. For example, Stakeholder 1, when discussing the SLO role, admitted that: ‘it’s hard to define to you the role, because it is different in every club’. Yet, the same interviewee also explained that:

But the role is straightforwardly in my opinion. You should be interacting with the supporters the best you can. You should be trying to make a bridge between them, then the people who’s in control of them at the stadium, like the stadium manager, and then you need another bridge between the supporters and the [club] directors so that you can hold meetings and stuff (Stakeholder 1, SLO).

This exemplifies how the SLO role was understood in terms of bridging the gaps between the variety of stakeholders in football ‘in control’ of the fans. As seen, this includes those with roles in the management of safety (e.g. stadium managers, but also stewards and police) but also ‘another bridge’ to other club employees like club directors. The links that SLOs bridge are thus envisioned to stretch from fans, on the one hand, to separate stakeholders, on the other. In other interviews, SLOs’ capacities to facilitate lines of communication were also outlined as, in some cases, extensive and complex. Interestingly, some stakeholders also spoke of the mismatch between what some fans believe fall within the remit of the SLO and the issues that SLOs are actually in the role to solve and the links they are to maintain. One such example was evident in Stakeholder 2’s description of the role in their club:

We meet with the police, we meet with the local stewarding company, and we know our own on fans and we *kind of form a bridge, if you like, to make sure that there’s good communication so that people are aware of what they can and can’t do [...]* So I think over the piece it will probably help to just keep a lid on things. And, I would say that’s probably the most important role of the SLO. *But it can be fairly extensive because people think you’re here to fix the roof and fix broken seats and make sure we get better pies, which isn’t really our job* (Stakeholder 2, SLO (emphasis added)).

Again, the variety of stakeholders that SLOs are seen to bridge together is evident. Emphasised here is also the importance of ensuring ‘good communication’, which resonates with Stott et al.’s (2020) work, where SLOs are described as ‘mediators’ and ‘interpreters’. Based on the Swedish context, they observed how the most important bridge building mission in the SLO role related to the construction of the club’s understanding of the fans and, in turn, for supporters to understand the club’s decision-making. Yet, as apparent above, this also relates to those regarded to be in control of the fans, whom decide what the fans ‘*can and can’t do*’.

SLOs’ capacity to bridge gaps – often relating to actors’ different understanding on specific issues – meant, according to some interviewees, that work needed to be done

on and in-between match-days in order to best liaise with club, police and security stakeholders:

Yeah, supporter liaison and the and the way it was established in Germany and has been matched in Sweden and in other countries, it's about getting involved in the match-day operations, attending the pre-match security meetings, dealing with the police, working alongside the safety officers, but from a prevention point of view. So, not trying to enforce the safety and security regulations, but trying to, through engaging with fans and talking to fans, to try and prevent problems from arising in the first place or to find out what the fans want from their club on a home game; what they need at an away game; how they can be better treated. How we can avoid conflict? How we can avoid misunderstandings? All these things which have a very... it's a very security... someone from the German SLOs said: 'We work in in security but we have a different approach'. (Stakeholder 4, fan representative)

In the context of football policing, Pearson and Stott (2022: 328) submit that 'dialogue with fans is not merely a matter for the police'. As such, what is remarkable in the above quote is that this interviewee does not merely see SLOs as a bridge between nodes belonging to diverse social groups but, in terms of safety and security, as adapting a position that sets SLOs *apart* from other security enforcers (e.g. 'not trying to enforce'). Concurrently, the above quote shows how SLOs, in some leagues, are connected to the social world of football's 'security networks' to which they may have a level of access to (e.g. 'pre-match security meetings'), through the recognition of the SLO role. Notwithstanding, some interviewees highlighted how acting as a bridge occasionally could be problematic, as exemplified by the acknowledgement that: 'I can't be acting for the fans, and punishing the fans, as well' (Stakeholder 1).

In making sociological sense of the 'bridge' metaphor and the notion of being 'in-between' fans and other stakeholders, one may turn towards the social network literature and borrow the concept of 'social brokers'. This includes Burt's (2007) work on brokerage and social capital that, subsequently, influenced the social movement literature where the concept captures social interactions between groups (Diani, 2013; Zhou and Yang, 2021). In the study of football fans, Numerato (2018: 76) also uses the term 'brokers' to explain the role of politicians who, for example, are 'willing to actively listen to the ideas expressed by critically engaged fans' and mediate these to the wider football governance field. For Diani (2003: 107), a broker is 'an actor connecting other actors which are not directly related to each other'. Their 'main property' is their capacity to enable communications between actors that are disengaged in communication due to 'social barriers'. Therefore, brokers are critical for the 'survival of chains of interactions' and mediation of diverging interests and worldviews (110). This, arguably, resonates directly with the above accounts. Given that brokers can assist the flow of information and knowledge across social gaps and 'establish communication between the different clusters of a network, which might remain disconnected without their bridging role' (Valle and Bravo, 2018: 65), this section argues that this concept remains valuable for advancing our understanding of SLOs as 'bridges'. Indeed, data suggests that SLO's ability to act as bridges relates to their social broker role, which largely depends on establishing links between various networked stakeholders with (often)

diverging interests and viewpoints, situated within football's governance, security and clubs. Here, however, the distinction 'brokers' and 'bridges' emerges from the idea that in order to operate as a bridge, SLOs capitalise on extant social capital, networks and – as explained next – biographies. Hence, although the SLO role is often prescribed, defined or envisaged in terms of the *bridge analogy*, it is ultimately the SLO's 'brokerage ability' – that is, ability to cover the 'structural holes' between different social worlds, actors and networks (Numerato, 2018; Burt, 2007) – that feed into their bridging capacity.

The supporter gaze(s): seeing like a fan

A second dominant theme from the data underpins what is conceptualised here as the 'supporter gaze'. This gaze captures a notion that was emphasised as essential in order to do the SLO job efficiently – namely, to be able to see various situations or issues from the supporters' perspectives despite being a club representative or employee. It was evident earlier how Stakeholder 1 cited difficulties in balancing between acting *for* the fans, but also potentially being viewed as, or positioned, *against* the fans. The 'SLO Handbook' was also alive to this dilemma:

In liaising between the club on the one side and the fans on the other, the role of the SLO has been likened to trying to ride two horses at the same time. The SLO has to make sure they stay close together. If the SLO puts too much weight on only one horse, i.e., representing the interests of one side more than the other, they are not doing their job properly and will not be effective (UEFA, 2011: 12).

However, despite this, the SLO's ability to understand and approach diverse situations as a supporter – aided by a 'supporter gaze' – was frequently referred to as advantageous yet dependent upon an understanding of fan cultures and pre-existing relationships with the relevant fan base, its subgroups and wider networks. Indeed, extensive knowledge of, and relationships with wider fan bases and networks surfaced in the interviewed SLOs' accounts of their backgrounds, resonating with the idea that SLOs in many cases are 'headhunted' or recruited from a team's fan base (Millward, 2023), or a position as informal 'soft leader' (cf. Hill et al., 2018) within a club's supporters' group.

I had previously worked closely with the Official Supporters Club at [club] so had experience working with large groups of fans and was approached by the Head of Matchday at the club to take on the SLO role (Stakeholder 3, SLO).

Obviously [over many years as a fan I] built up a lot of relationships with individual fans, with fan groups, with supporter's clubs, all of that. So, I had good connections, so I think that [the club] can have felt that the previous experience that I had and the contacts and connections that I had with the supporters, probably I was a good fit for what they were looking for (Stakeholder 2).

These accounts remain important here because they support, as Stott et al. (2020: 200) write, how the 'processes of recruiting fans from, or who have achieved credibility

within, the supporter base have constituted a form of “mandate” and worked to legitimise the SLO role amongst fan groups (Stott et al., 2020: 200). Similarly, Stakeholder 1 spoke about their historical connection to their club and as a fan representative on a national level:

I mean, for about 25 or 30 years, I’ve been a fan representative, so working with the supporters’ clubs and the supporters’ trust, etc. So, I have actively campaigned mainly against club policies and things and stuff I didn’t agree with or [football] banning orders. That’s my background, really. I’m supporting the club as well, obviously (Stakeholder 1).

In Swedish football, Madsen et al. (2019) suggest that SLOs are regularly brought into discussions by clubs and organisations: ‘to give a supporter perspective on issues that in one way or another affect supporters’. They also suggest that SLO’s legitimacy within the supporter group is impacted by their ability to ‘influence key decision-making that affects the supporter environment’ (12). Building on this, this article argues that being able to *view* issues through the fans’ lens was emphasised by stakeholders, but particularly in the interviewed SLOs’ own accounts, as a key attribute setting SLOs apart from other club-specific or football governance actors.

For instance, as Stakeholder 1 acknowledged: ‘I’m very fortunate that I know so many people, I know the fan base’, and later continued: ‘But you need to be... I don’t know how I would say it, but you need to be on the side of the supporters at all times’. The emphasis on knowing, understanding and seeing like fans also emerged in other interviews:

But I just always try and make sure that, you know, from a personal perspective in terms of how you view the match, you know, the positions that you take, *you’re obviously representing the club. So, you’re obviously always on your best behaviour but I think the fact that you go in as one of the supporters, then you’re seen as one of them as well, so you get more capability in their role, so people identify with you.* You know what I mean? They know that you’re a fan like them and you’re experiencing [...] overzealous policing or stewarding or difficult access problems that we sometimes face at away stadiums. *You’re in and about it, so you can comment on it. You’re seeing it first hand and I think that’s very important within the role. You’ve got to be living and breathing it to be honest with you. Otherwise, you can’t really comment on it* (Stakeholder 2, emphasis added).

These comments are interesting because they explicitly refer to the importance of identifying with, and encountering similar experiences as the fans. It is evident how the interviewee attached importance to going through and experiencing (despite being a club employee) what may be common issues for supporters like poor stadium accessibility or heavy-handed policing or stewarding. As the ‘SLO Handbook’ highlights, ‘[f]ans are particularly sensitive to the issue of security, mostly based on negative experiences in the past’ (UEFA, 2011: 49). Indeed, various scholars (Numerato, 2018; Turner, 2021; Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023; Lee Ludvigsen, 2022) demonstrate that oppressive policing and security techniques in football – and their impacts on match-day experiences – are also heavily contested amongst some football fans in different European leagues. In that sense, for SLOs, the ‘supporter gaze’ enables them to – with enhanced

credibility – see and ‘comment on’ relevant issues and be viewed by other fans as a ‘*fan like them*’. Stakeholder 3 echoed this:

We were keen never to be seen as employees of the club, we didn’t believe that fit in our idea of what a good SLO is. But conversely that meant it took members of the club a while to take us seriously and realise that we were here to help, not criticise. Things are now better, with more of the club supporting the role but of course there are still some who aren’t going to change their ways [...] *Sometimes this can be hard - we see things from the fans point of view* whilst the staff in the shop have to follow club policy (emphasis added).

It is worth highlighting here that this interviewee’s idea of a ‘good SLO’ is one that is not considered, first and foremost, as a club employee or appointee. Instead, it is someone who is immersed in, and sees various fan-related issues from the fans’ ‘point of view’. These insights, however, were nuanced by Stakeholder 5 (SLO), who emphasised how their role as a ‘messenger’ for supporters’ viewpoints was often misunderstood in their club:

I would always say that the thing that needs to be remembered when you accept the role as the SLO [is that] you become a club representative. That’s it. Obviously, I still support my team, but as an SLO I represent the club [...] and it’s important to remember, however, one of the biggest challenges we do see that SLO have all across is that there’s often a misunderstanding internally in the clubs that all the messages you bring in to the club, it’s confused with your own opinion. *And believe me when I say, most of the time, the messages I come with is not my own opinion* (Stakeholder 5, emphasis added).

Concerning the challenges of SLO implementation, this remains important because it empirically documents the perceived importance of deploying SLOs with knowledge about fan culture and practices. Moreover, it reveals the possible issues of clubs potentially perceiving SLOs’ feedback as the relevant SLO’s own opinion. Brought together, this all feeds into what is advanced here as the ‘supporter gaze’. This captures the references made by the interviewees to gazing at, and seeing situations that fans encounter or are exposed to – *inter alia*, repressive policing or stewarding, lack of dialogue, poor access, service or club management – from the perspective of those fans. It is therefore suggested that the SLO role is perceived to be reliant upon individuals with football-related cultural capital and ‘a high level of competency in communicating supporter cultures’ core values to key stakeholders’ (Madsen et al., 2019: 16). By advancing this one step further, it is argued here that the possession of a ‘supporter gaze’ is regarded an essential SLO attribute. Here, it should be acknowledged, however, that fans compose a diversified social group, therefore this section only tentatively advances the ‘supporter gaze’ which, to capture various fan typologies (e.g. ‘traditional fans’ or ‘consumer fans’, see Giulianotti, 2002), should be empirically elaborated-upon as pluralised supporter gazes in future work. This gaze, however, was seen as related to a personal background as a fan, (pre-)existing relations with fan groups, the ability to see issues from fans’ perspectives and, crucially, to *maintain* this perspective despite the club employee or representative status arriving with being appointed as SLO. Notwithstanding, in this context,

further work is required to understand how (and if) supporters and match-goers understand, trust and engage with the SLO.

Conclusions

It is well-established that processes of commercialisation and securitisation have transformed European football. Consequently, risk and profit-oriented strategies have negatively impacted supporters across Europe by impeding their ability to have a say in football's governance and on various issues that directly affect them (Garcia and Llopis-Goig, 2021; Hill et al., 2018; Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018; Turner, 2021). The SLO emerged in a response to this, and came about following 'systematic pressure' from fans at European level (Numerato, 2018: 75). Against this canvas, this article's purpose was to throw a light on this under-researched and commonly misunderstood role that has evolved in European football since 2012/2013. As recognised by academics (Numerato, 2018; Stott et al., 2020), the media (The Guardian, 2019), fan networks (FSE, 2022) and the Council of the EU (2022), the implementation of SLOs has not been straightforward across Europe. As FSE (2022) puts it, one SLO-related challenge 'has been the inconsistent implementation of the role at clubs and national associations, whilst it's also still not properly recognised by police in a number of countries'.

By drawing upon the extant literature and new empirical insights extracted from document and interview data, this exploratory article makes two central but inter-connected arguments. First, it argues that whilst SLOs are often described as 'bridges' (Madsen et al., 2019; Pearson and Stott, 2022), their bridging capacity relies on their position as 'social brokers' and ability to create or maintain connections across structural holes (cf. Burt, 2007; Diani, 2003; Numerato, 2018). Like 'brokers', SLOs are positioned to ensure that communication is established and occurs between actors characterised by disparity, social barriers and diverging views on social, cultural and political issues. SLOs may be considered 'brokers' who link together networks that – without the SLOs – could be characterised by a larger disconnect. Second, this article argues that being in possession of what is conceptualised here as a 'supporter gaze' is considered a key tool for an SLO's credibility and for the role as a whole. This speaks to SLOs ability to subscribe to and maintain supporters' perspectives on various issues whilst being hired by clubs. Thus, the SLO role is largely seen as dependent on extensive knowledge about fan cultures, issues and relevant fan bases.

Taken together, whilst contributing with new empirical insights to the limited literature on SLOs (Numerato, 2018; Madsen et al., 2019; Stott et al., 2020), these arguments remain important as they extend our understanding of a substantive issue – namely, supporter involvement in Europe, and how the SLO role, as an outcome of supporter activism and pressure, matures over time. From a sociological vantage point, supporter involvement remains an important field of inquiry in European football's commercialised and securitised milieu, whereby football's governance and the *roles* of football fans are both rising on the political agenda in European countries and on a European level (Garcia and Llopis-Goig, 2021). For example, the positions of supporters and SLOs were mentioned in the recent independent review into the safety and security at the 2022 Champions League final in Paris. Here, one of the 21 recommendations from the Independent Panel Report stated that, for future UEFA events: 'The role of the SLO

should be made clear, including involvement in security planning and supporting information dialogue between event organisers and supporters' (UEFA Independent Review Panel, 2023: 202). Moreover, the Council of the EU's (2022) resolution on police and SLO coordination (October 2022) also reflects SLOs' concerted role in football's governance, and hence exactly why this paper's arguments possess a sociological importance in addition to a practical dimension speaking to the vitality of SLOs that are accustomed to supporter cultures, the fan base and who hold an awareness of the potential dilemmas that may arise when trying to balance the desires of the fan base and those of the clubs or other authorities (Stott et al., 2020).

Naturally, there are limitations attached to this paper given its exploratory approach and interview sample. Yet, it must be reiterated that the study's intention was never to draw generalisable conclusions that can be unfolded across *all* European contexts. Indeed, this is extremely complicated and impractical in research on SLOs, football stakeholders and fans given the heterogeneous nature of these (social) groups. Rather, this article and its conceptual extensions *vis-à-vis* 'social brokers' (Diani, 2003) and the 'supporter gaze' can ignite and inform future research on SLOs, their social relationships with other stakeholders and impact. To this end, there are especially four paths that researchers are encouraged to traverse. First, given that brokerage depends on an actor's ability to bridge specific social milieus (Diani, 2013), future work can investigate how fans or fan representatives may proceed from possessing 'informal' or 'soft leader' roles within a fan group (see Hill et al., 2018) towards becoming an SLO. Second, in line with this article and earlier work (Stott et al., 2020), future research should consider more specifically how SLOs socially interact with law enforcers, stewards, stadium managers and safety officers within football's security governance, and the power struggles that arise in various national leagues or European competitions. Third, scholars are encouraged to examine how fan networks like SD Europe and FSE have acted as SLO 'agenda-setters', and mechanisms through which 'good' and 'best practices' of SLOs are circulated on a European-wide level. Fourth, researchers could also examine the extent to which various supporter groups are aware of, and trust, their club's SLOs. Importantly, such academic research will not solely drive forward our understanding of SLOs, but speak to wider sociological and political topics like (supporter) activism, security governance, social movements and fandom.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank John Hayton and Peter Millward for their helpful feedback on a draft version of this paper. Thanks also to the Editor-in-Chief and the three anonymous peer-reviewers for constructive comments and suggestions.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. See: <https://thefsa.org.uk/our-work/slos-and-dlas/> (accessed 16 May 2023).
2. FSE and SD Europe merged into one European-wide supporter organisation in October 2022.
3. For practical reasons, one of the interviews (S3) took place via email.

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