

Local symbol and entertainment industry: the double identity of football clubs and their supporters

Introduction and discussion of the topic

Networks of football supporters provide a great environment to experimenting with social network analysis. The process of identity formation in football clubs is complex and the result of somewhat opposing dynamics: clubs are both the symbol of a local community and its people, but also an entertainment industry with a fanbase that may not relate to the local community it, nominally, represents. The nature of the supporters and their relationship to the club may thus differ depending on the context. In this case, I am interested in analysing the extent to which international exposure may shift the nature of the network of supporters from one grounded in the local community to one where the presence and influence of the local community is more diluted. To do so, I will analyse the network of supporters from two clubs and their link to their local community: Southampton FC, which has been competing in the Premier League, the top-flight of English football, for most of the last 40 years; and Ipswich Town FC, which has spent most of the past years in the second and third divisions.

The Premier League is the most watched league in the world, with most of its audience, being international (Global Web Index, 2015), while the lower two tiers have significantly lower media coverage, the third league where Ipswich competes being only rarely broadcasted on national tv. Southampton has thus been exposed to significantly more international attention, and its image and identity has been solidly linked to the Premier League brand, making it a lot likelier than struggling Ipswich Town to attract international audience and supporters. To analyse whether this translated into differences in the nature of the relationship between the supporters and the communities of their respective cities, this network analysis will aim to answer two questions. Firstly, are the networks of supporters from both clubs similarly connected to their local community (Q1)? Secondly, are these connections similarly influential within the networks of supporters (Q2)? The intuition underlying these two questions is that while connections to the local community may stay significant even under increased international exposure, the influence of these connections may decrease by the fact that more international supporters are now also active in the club's supporter group, thus diminishing the influence of local connections in these networks.

Operationalisation

Reddit provides a useful platform to analyse social interactions. Users of Reddit interact in subreddits dedicated to discussion about specific topics. Users can interact in multiple subreddit which allows us to get a general idea of their interests and thus of their identity. For this research, investigating the connection between subreddits dedicated to the football club and subreddits dedicated to the local community the football club represents could help us to infer more about the connection between the supporters and the local community and of the importance of these connections.

To measure the connection between the two networks (Q1) and the influence of these connections (Q2), I will use measures of brokerage and of centrality. Comparing brokerage scores will allow me to identify the users that serve as bridges between the two communities and compare their importance. A more important brokerage score will show that the two communities rely on fewer points of connections to interact showing lower levels of interaction. In this research, the conceptual understanding of the role of broker is that of a “liaison role”, which understands the broker as the point of contact between two distinct groups (the club and the community) (Gould & Fernandez, 1989). Individuals with a liaison role in each network will then be analysed for their level of centrality in their network of supporters. To do so, I will be looking at closeness centrality, as a measure of the influence of these points of contact with the local community. This measure calculates the shortest paths between all nodes and can be used to identify the nodes in the network that are the most influential, i.e. those the closest on average to most other actors (Borgatti & Everett, 2020). This operationalises the idea that fans linked to the local community may be more active within networks of supporters, which could be interpreted as being more influential and thus playing a bigger role in shaping the identity of the group.

Data and results

The data came from the subreddits dedicated to the fans of each football club, from which 16 posts and comments were selected while the same was done for the subreddit dedicated to the respective cities. This created a network for the football fans and one for the local community, which were then merged to get a dataset showing the interaction between the two subreddits. This procedure was applied for both Ipswich and Southampton. Answering Q1 required looking at brokerage scores for the entire dataset (city and supporters) while the answering Q2 required looking at closeness scores for the brokers only within the network of supporters.

The Ipswich community was only connected by one individual to its supporter's group, with a brokerage score of 4, compared to Southampton which had 3 connections with thus lower brokerage scores of 2. This is in line with what could be deduced from the figure 1 where only one node connects the network of Ipswich supporters to that of their community. This suggests that the community of Southampton supporters may be more connected to their local community than that of Ipswich's although they compete in Premier League.

Once the brokers identified, their closeness scores were calculated and the position of their score compared to the rest of their network to determine the extent to which the linkage between the supporters and their local community was influential. Therefore, it is not the absolute value of closeness centrality that is compared, but rather whether closeness centrality is relatively more important for brokers compared to the rest of the network. For Ipswich the only individual present in both communities was in the top 30% of the most ‘influential’ members of the supporters while the three individuals linking Southampton FC supporters to their city were in the top: 70%, 45% and 6%. There is thus a significant amount of variation in the level of influence of the brokers within their network. However, most brokers have above average levels of influence which suggests that the links to the local community tend to be more influential in both groups of supporters. It can be difficult to make general statements about both clubs considering the small amount of data available in this analysis. However, as the network of Southampton supporters contains three different points of connection with the local community, some of which with very high levels of influence within the network, the connection to and influence of the local community on the network of supporters seems more important in Southampton.

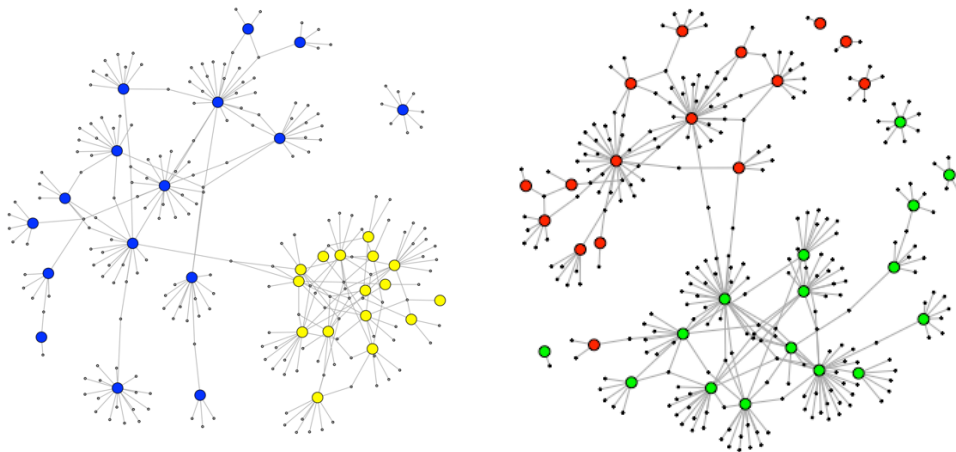


Figure 1. Network of Ipswich (club is yellow, community in blue) compared to the network of Southampton (club is red, community in green)

Discussion

The result show that, for Southampton, the international exposure that comes with playing in the Premier League does not seem to have resulted in lower anchorage to its local community. On the contrary, it seems to have a stronger anchorage than Ipswich Town's supporter community although the club currently competes two leagues above Ipswich. Interestingly, the network of Ipswich Town fans is a lot denser, with a lot more interactions than that of Southampton (figure 1). This could show that while the identity of the club and of its supporters is not as grounded in the identity of the local community anymore, it is nonetheless very much vibrant. There are many potential reasons that could be given to interpret these results. Firstly, the owners of Southampton are the London-based investment firm Sport Republic ([Tanswell, 2023](#)), while Ipswich Town was recently acquired by American owners ([Ames, 2021](#)), could this contribute to significantly changing the identity of the club and its supporters? Alternatively, the much denser nature of the Ipswich supporters' network compared to Southampton's could be explained by the clubs' performances. Ipswich Town has had a remarkable season. It is currently second of its division and assured to be promoted to the second division, while Southampton has struggled this season and is currently last, with relegation almost certain. A successful team may create more engagement and attract more occasional fans who are less likely to be connected to the local community while a struggling team may instead see lower levels of engagement, but a proportionately more important presence of local actors, relocating the identity of the club and its supporters back closer to that of the local community.

Overall, this paper aimed to provide an illustration of how social network analysis could investigate questions of identity within networks of supporters. In order to make more general claims, it could be interesting to expand the scope of this research to an entire season and compare more teams, possibly covering different divisions.

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