Football clubs as identity leaders: communication and club action on fan-club relationships

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Fan-club relationships

'Shock & despair' - how Southport FC helped a town in mourning

Southport manager Jim Bentley (right) and his players and staff walked from the club's ground to place flowers at the police cordon on Hart Street

Middlesbrough give refugees football kit and feeling of belonging

The Championship club, with a charity, help more than 30 refugees and asylum seekers to socialise, learn English and play football

Refugees and asylum seekers in training at the weekly ClubTogether football session led by the Middlesbrough FC Foundation and the local Methodist Asylum Project. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian
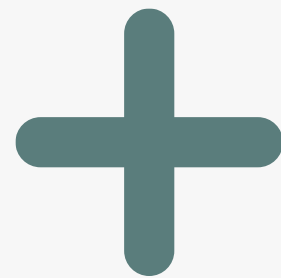

Fans stage sit-in after derby over ticket changes

7 April 2025

Manchester United fan group 'The 1958' staged a sit-in protest against the Glazer Family and the increase in ticket prices after Sunday's Manchester derby at Old Trafford.

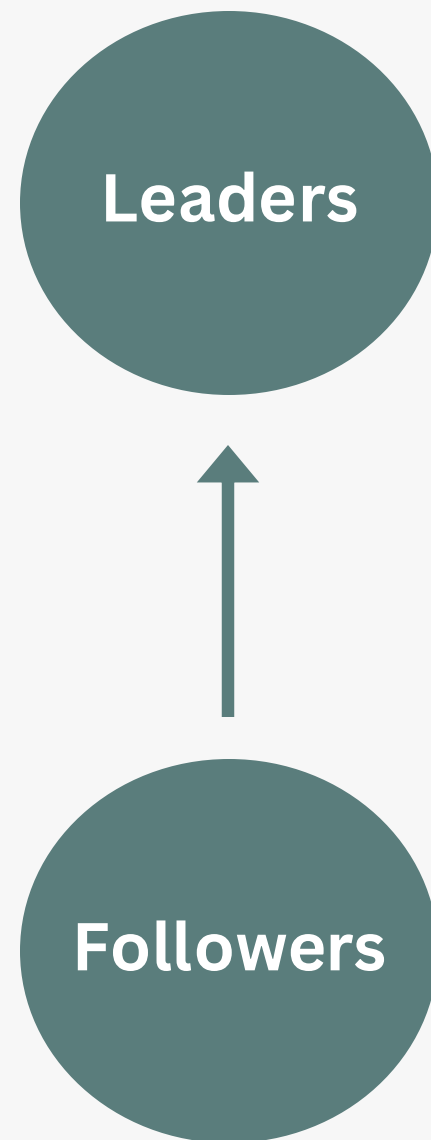Supporters group set to up protests at next Spurs home game
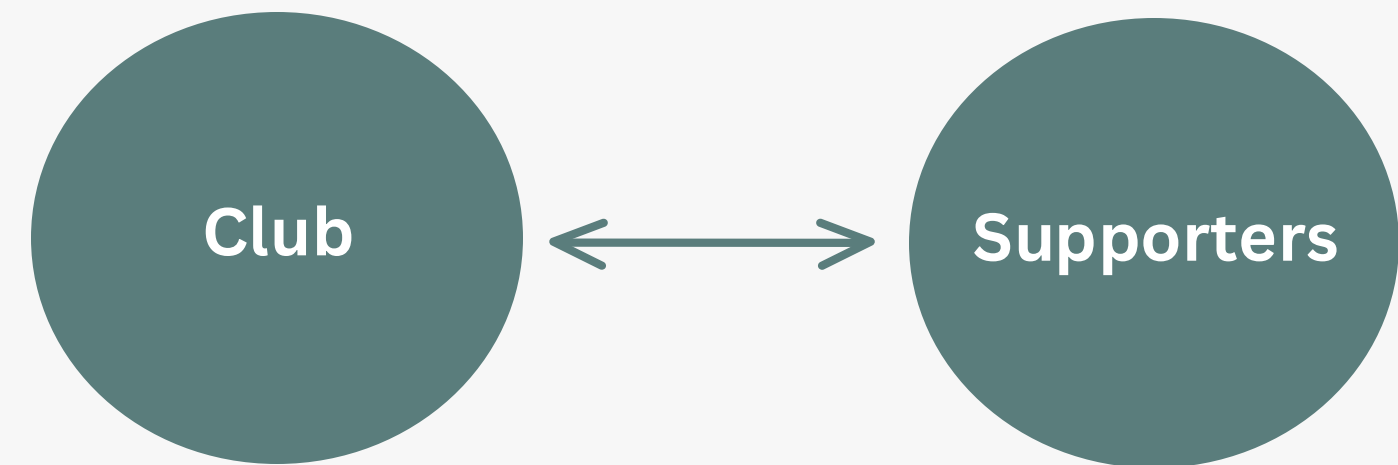
Promote sense of
community and belonging

Action (or lack of) leading to
tension and protests

Identity Leadership

Previous literature

Present research

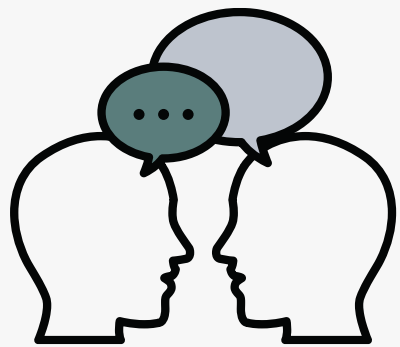
Football club as 'leaders of identity'?

Non-hierarchical relationship

"The fans make the club"

Present study

What do football fans feel their relationships with their clubs are like, and what do they feel contributes to these relationships?

Online interviews (*N* = 15)
Across three leagues of
English Football

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

1.1. Communicating to fans about club information and decisions

Club engagement in communication to their fans can contribute to feelings of togetherness, where a lack of communication can create feelings of mistrust and an 'us versus them' dynamic

> It still feels very **us and them**, **not particularly transparent** and, you know, not enough explanation about what's happening [...] so I-I you just kind of feel that, you know, **they always want to keep us at sort of at least arm's length**, barge poles length most of the time (Int: mm-hmm) and there's no trust cause there's **no transparency** [...] so **people rightly feel that it is us against them** (P10, League 2)

1.2. Creating opportunities for fans to communicate back to the club

Providing opportunities for fans to communicate back to the club promoted feelings of togetherness, whereas a lack of opportunities contributed to fan-club separation

> They do lots of things, they have fan representatives as well […] they have eh lots of different fan groups, I'm sure they still do this […] I never go but uh, part of my supporters club, I know they always put on you can go to these [Premier League Club] meetings […] we never go because they're mainly on like a Monday or Tuesday night, but **I think that's good because that to me is their attempt to stay in touch with the fans** (P27, Premier League)

2. Acting on issues raised by fans

Acting on fan concerns/issues can contribute to a sense of fan-club connection, whereas a lack of action contributes to feelings of divide and beliefs that the club were not working on behalf of the fans

> Int: Do you feel you can approach your club with any issues that you're having?
>
> P28: Yeah ehm definitely and I have done that previously […] they was really good uh my wife broke her ankle a few years ago […] we had tickets to an away game and a home game […] they actually come come back and said 'look we can give you disabled seats for both the away game and the home game and parking passes for both' and it was **whoa** it so **that fostered quite a bit** […] **connection the fact that they weren't just a big corporate machine** (P28, Premier League)

Key message

Positive fan-club relationships could be facilitated through principles of identity leadership (entrepreneurship and advancement)

Future research

IN PROGRESS

LATER 2025

LATER 2025

How clubs currently communicate togetherness/identity leadership

How clubs can utilise identity leadership in communications to promote positive fan-club relationships

How club engagement in identity leadership can contribute to fan experience and feelings of safety at events

Questions?

We wish to acknowledge the passing of our collaborator Darren Whitehouse. Darren played a key role in funding acquisition, conceptualisation, and supervision within this project. We are grateful for his contributions, enthusiasm, and dedication towards this project.

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Pre-print available! →