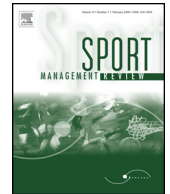




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr

Review

Supporters and football governance, from customers to stakeholders: A literature review and agenda for research



Borja García*, Jo Welford

School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 July 2014

Received in revised form 24 August 2015

Accepted 24 August 2015

Available online 1 October 2015

Keywords:

Football

Soccer

Supporters

Activism

Governance

Research

Policy

Literature review

ABSTRACT

The commercial and political development of association football (soccer) in Europe has transformed the relationship between the sport and its fans. A growing political discourse has argued that football has lost the connection with its (core and traditional) supporters; a connection that should be regained by allowing them a greater say in the governance of the game as legitimate stakeholders. This article reviews the emerging academic literature on the role of supporters. It suggests that the evidence to support a case in favour of increased supporter involvement in football governance is limited. This group of literature is theoretically and conceptually incongruent and fraught with contradictions. Academic attention thus far is broadly divided into two areas with little overlap between them: analysis of supporter engagement at the macro (government/policy) level with a top-down focus, and sociological 'bottom-up' case studies of supporter engagement and activism at the micro level (individual clubs/supporter groups). The study of supporters has predominantly focused on them as customers/fans and it needs to articulate a new narrative around this 'governance turn' to consider supporters as stakeholders, hence responding to ongoing policy developments. By doing so, it will be possible to reconcile the existing disparate bodies of work to gain a greater understanding of the new demands from the supporters and, moreover, the literature will be better placed to have an impact, hence contributing to policy-making if public authorities decide to continue their existing agenda in favour of supporter involvement in football governance.

© 2015 Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

On 29th May 2015, a capacity crowd of 4000 FC United of Manchester (FCUM) fans watched their local non-league football¹ team take on Portuguese giants Benfica in a friendly match to open their new Broadhurst Park stadium. What was notable about the game, however, was not the international opposition (twice winners of the European Cup in 1961 and 1962) but the home club. FCUM was founded only in 2005 by fans of another European giant, Manchester United (MU), that were disillusioned with the takeover of MU by the American Glazer family. According to those disenchanted MU fans, their club's new owners did not respect the traditions of the club, prioritising profits over any sense of community (Brown, 2007). Moreover, those MU supporters felt their opinions were not taken into account by their club. Thus, they decided to leave

* Corresponding author at: School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: b.garcia-garcia@lboro.ac.uk (B. García).

¹ This article refers to association football, also known as soccer. The term football would be used for the sake of simplicity throughout the article.

Manchester United to form a community-oriented club at the very bottom of amateur football in England. That was the birth of FCUM in 2005. The fact that in ten years FCUM has been able to develop, build its own stadium and attract a crowd of over 4000 people is testimony to the possibilities of what has been called fan-power; that is, a group of committed football supporters working together for the benefit of their club and their local community.

In the decade since its formation, FCUM has seen four promotions whilst remaining true to its ethos as a transparent, open and democratic co-operative. FCUM supporters can buy so-called 'community shares', hence becoming members of the co-operative and co-owners of the club. Supporters (as owners) vote on everything from committee elections to facilities at the new stadium, and the club board is democratically elected and fully accountable.² Manchester United, on the other hand, is operated like a commercial franchise by its owners, the Glazer family. Therefore, supporters do not have the possibility to become shareholders unless the owners decide to sell some of their shares. Consequently, supporters cannot participate in the democratic life of MU. Their main relationship to the club is a commercial one, whereby they buy tickets and/or merchandise and attend matches. MU supporters are basically customers of their club, whereas FCUM supporters can, if they so wish, become co-owners and play a vital role in theirs. The case of these two Manchester clubs exemplifies perfectly the role of different stakeholder groups in football governance. In this article we review recent academic and political interest on the role of supporters in the game. But before going any further it is necessary to clarify the differences between those different stakeholder groups involved in football, if only to help those unfamiliar with the jargon and structures of European football. Throughout this paper we will refer to fans, supporters, customers, shareholders and stakeholders. The terms fan and supporter are used here interchangeably (for stylistic reasons) to refer, generically, to individuals who have an interest or an allegiance towards a particular football club. Thus, fans or supporters are groups who follow football and their club, but the level of engagement will differ amongst different sub-groups.

This level of action is defined by the other three terms we will be using throughout the article. Customers (see [Giulianotti, 2002](#)) refer to those fans or supporters who simply follow their team by attending matches, buying merchandise or through the media. Whereas they feel an allegiance to their colours, these fans do not demonstrate an interest in becoming involved in the governance or management of the club. Thus, these fans simply vote with their feet or their wallets, showing more or less interest in the club by the amount of matches they watch, merchandise they buy or media they consume to be informed about their team. Stakeholders, on the other hand, refer to the supporters who have an interest in becoming involved in the management of their club, and by extension in the management of the game at the macro and meso-level. The form of that involvement differs from country to country according to the legal structures of football club ownership. These fans form associations in order to have formal dialogue with their club and even the governing bodies. In England, fans can form supporters trusts (see further below), whose objective is to gain partial or full ownership of the club. Therefore, a fan who joins a supporters trust will no longer be just a customer, but they will become a stakeholder. This paper explores precisely that transition, whereby supporters have been encouraged to organise themselves in order to become stakeholders in the governance of football. Whereas football governing bodies in Europe struggled for some time to recognise supporters as legitimate stakeholders, academic authors elsewhere have long considered fans as stakeholders in sport (see for example [Cunningham, 2009](#); [Trail & Chelladurai, 2000](#)).

Finally, 'shareholders' is a more technical term that we use much less in this article. It basically refers to those fans who have managed to obtain (total or partial) ownership of their football club. Unless they are multimillionaires, this can only be done through cooperatives, trusts or similar legal figures where individual fans pull together their resources to buy shares of the club. Hence, supporters can be at the same time shareholders and stakeholders if they have managed to obtain some degree of ownership of their club.

In recent years, debates about the governance of European football have increasingly focussed on the role of the fans. This is due to a growing concern that the increasing commercialisation of the game might be having harmful effects on its socio-cultural dimensions (see for example [Conn, 1997](#); [Giulianotti, 2005](#)). Indeed, some of the governance pitfalls of football are being associated with a lack of engagement with supporters ([Hamil, 1999](#); [Hudson, 2001](#)). In very broad terms, it is argued that opening the game up to the supporters will not only connect the game to the community, but also increase transparency and accountability.

Thus, the [All Party Parliamentary Football Group's \(2009, p. 14\)](#) enquiry into English football governance stressed that "the one group that are most under-represented in the sport are the people who should have the most say; the fans." Moreover, the British government has highlighted its desire for football supporters to be recognised as key stakeholders in the game (see [DCMS, 2011, 2013](#)). An 'Expert Working Group on Football Supporter Ownership and Engagement' was launched by the government in October 2014 to explore ways to increase fan engagement ([DCMS, 2014](#)).

One can see here a clear policy discourse in favour of encouraging supporters' involvement in football governance. However, the evidence upon which this is based has not been articulated by the policy-makers or in the academic literature. Not many have questioned the extent to which fans are actually eager to become activists in football governance. Given the growing political importance of this issue, it is imperative that this gap is addressed. Our objective here is to synthesise existing knowledge on supporters and football governance. Specifically, we (a) give a timely review of the existing

² For more background on the formation of FC United, their new stadium and their community work see [Brown \(2007, 2008\)](#); see also the following websites <http://www.supporters-direct.org/homepage/what-we-do/case-studies/fcunited#sthash.V7dfU0kP.dpuf>; <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/fc-united-new-stadium-benfica-9357971>; <http://www.fc-utd.co.uk/>

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/140803>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/140803>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)