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Does anyone care where they are from? The importance of locally trained players in English football

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Abstract

Association football in England originated from organisations deeply rooted in community settings and were a representation of towns/cities. Social identity theory outlines how supporters feel a sense of identity and a connection with the concept of community through their football club, although there are many different sub-groups of supporters. Since the creation of the Premier League in 1992, English football has developed into a global brand boasting lucrative broadcast and sponsorship contracts, high attendances and is followed by vast worldwide television audiences. Clubs and the media reference 'local lads' and refer to locally born players as an on-field representation of the supporters and a link between fans and clubs. However, whether supporters care where players come from is an area that is under-researched. Primary research gathered opinion using an online survey with supporters distributed via fanzines (n = 661), representing 64 clubs. Headline findings outlined that local identity was important to supporters, but financial sustainability of clubs and winning trophies were the main priorities for supporters. Player identity was a minor priority. Supporters of Premier League clubs were significantly more likely to prioritise winning trophies, and significantly less likely to prioritise the financial position of their club compared to those in lower leagues, who were significantly more likely to prioritise financial position. Further research is required in this emerging area to develop our understanding the role and importance of local players in the complex and global nature of modern football supporters.

Introduction

Association football was formally codified in England in 1863.[1] The early clubs were deeply rooted in communities, created through settings such as churches, workplaces, and social groups.[2] Prominent local industries were also amongst the organisations that created clubs in England.[3] Football grounds were purposefully constructed in locations to reflect the origins of the team, for example, Sheffield United's Bramall Lane was built at the heart of the city's heritage in steel manufacturing; recognised symbolically through the club's nickname, 'The Blades'.[4] As a result, many football clubs are inherently tied to a place through wider geographical and topographic features of a particular area.[5] Football can be a representation of place.[6] It can also be where emotional attachments and bonds are formed.[7] Place, therefore, acts as a key characteristic of football and plays an important role in creating a sense of integration, community and belonging within supporters.[8]

Tim Cresswell uses political geographer John Agnew's definition of place as the basis for his own work.[9] That is, every place includes location (the actual location of the place), locale (the physical shape of a place e.g., the walls of a room / the buildings in a city), and sense of place (the attachment that people have to space). He argues that 'sense of place' is the most important of the three because it gives us a way of understanding the world; places are not simply physical spaces but are also imbued with social meaning and significance. The meaning of a place is created through the ways in which people interact with it, the memories and associations they have with it, and the stories they tell about it. Place, therefore, can play a significant role in the identity of football fans. For example, the English Football League found that 89% of supporters believe that their club is important to the social fabric of the town or city it is based in.

This research aims to understand whether having this geographical representation on the pitch is an important priority for supporters of English clubs in the modern, commercially driven game. It aims to assess the key priorities for supporters and the relevance of having a 'local identity' through the playing staff. To address the lack of research in this area and building on the FSA and EFL research around local connections, the paper aims to understand (1) whether having representation through local players is a priority for supporters' and their identity in the modern game, (2) whether this representation matters to supporters and (3) the differences in priorities between demographic sub-groups.

The period up to and since the turn of the 21st Century has seen professional football modernise intensively, with the commercial power of the newly formed Premier League a catalyst for new investment and ways of administering the game. The modern game is a far cry from the 'dark days' of English football in the 1980s, where the game was synonymous with stadiums in poor conditions, the rise and prominence of hooliganism and economic uncertainty, described as economic penury.[9] Taylor described the post-1980 developments as the rehabilitation of the game, with a clear overhaul of structure, culture, and economics, but with supporters retaining a clear desire to retain its history and nostalgia.[10]

The English FA 'Blueprint for the Future of Football' was the start of the most significant economic change, with a new top division proposed to be known as the Premier League, which was formed and operational for the 1992-93 season.[11] The creation of the new league in 1992 was driven, and then grown, by new commercial avenues from sponsorship, broadcasting, naming rights etc. Its growth has demonstrated the global consumer demand for English football, resulting in mass media coverage, increased attendances and greater TV audiences in many countries.[12] The economic conditions of the league have risen exponentially, with the

current UK broadcast deal valued at £4.46bn for 2019–22 and strong match day attendances recording an average of 95% utilisation of stadium capacity.[13] The 2018/19 Premier League saw aggregate attendances reach 14.5m.[14] Football has, however, seen resistance to elements of the commercially driven, television focused approach which has diminished local identity, for example the FC United movement which was driven by the desire for Mancunian identity with a strong affirmation of working-class origins.[15] With football being one of the few remaining places where fans have a sustained sense of shared collective experience, there are groups of supporters who want to retain this in the face of globalisation of the game.[12]

The history of professional football clubs suggests they allow common identities to be expressed and previous research suggests the commercially driven developments in football have placed a greater emphasis on retaining a sense of identity and a connection with the concept of community.[2] Fans are considered one of the most important stakeholders of professional sport teams.[16] The most traditional committed fans behave as if they possess the club and their daily agenda revolves around the football club.[17] This relationship is captured by clubs when they use local community references in commercially focussed activities such as marketing campaigns and in-house media content. The work of the community trusts which make use of the club badge to deliver community activity and outreach is another example of local community connection.

English football is much more than the elite league, with three other professional divisions home to 72 clubs, with a fifth division (National League) also host to a handful of professional clubs. The greater global exposure and financial power of the Premier League is a world apart from the creation of clubs based on local community organisations, however supporters and media outlets continue to make a connection to the geographical location of the club and when

players are from the area where the club is based. When there is a 'local lad' in the first team, the media use this connection as an angle. For supporters, making it known that they have locally born supporters of their team representing them on the pitch is also prominent, for example, the chant 'Oh Harry Kane! He's one of our own' (Tottenham). It is a concept that is central to many supporters' rituals.

The Football Supporters Association national survey noted that over three quarters of respondents (78%) felt that it was important for their club to have local players representing them.[18] The representation of English players has, however, been in decline since the Premier League started, coinciding with the 1995 Bosman ruling which abolished quotas.[19] A study which quantified nationalities represented in the first 20 years of the Premier League outlined that in the first season of the Premier League almost 70% of appearances were made by English players.[19] The 1997-98 season saw English players make fewer than 50% of all appearances and the 2001-12 season saw English players record fewer appearances than overseas players.[19] The administrators of the European game deemed the presence of locally trained players important enough to protect through legislation. The introduction of the 'home-grown' rule in 2006 encouraged clubs to include players trained in their club/national association between the age of 15 and 21.[20] The rule was implemented with an aim to enhance young players development, increase opportunity, and improve competitive balance.[20] It was also designed to maintain a geographic character in leagues.[22] The rate of decline in appearances and minutes played by English players has decreased since the inception of UEFA's home-grown rule, although England was one of two nations (with Italy) where statistically significant decreases in playing opportunities for national players were recorded since the home-grown rules were introduced.[23]

Representation and identity are, therefore, important components of modern football. Brown's work asserts there are assumptions made about the role of a football club in its community, particularly around the sense common identity which remain true in the 21st Century through off-field interactions such as songs, badges, stadiums etc.[15] However, he suggests, from Bauman's work, that communities are not static and solid, but temporary and shallow, and therefore the role of common identity becomes more problematic to categorise in more contemporary times. The research to understand whether fans view on-field representation through the presence of locally born players as a priority in the modern, global game is limited. The English Football League found that just under two-thirds of fans (63%) identified that producing home-grown players was 'very important', citing reasons such as being 'good for the national team'; 'help the club financially'; 'fans love a local lad'; 'an added sense of pride'; and 'young local players care more'.[24]

Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory helps to explain the behaviour and attitudes of sports fans as sport teams can act as a representation of social categories from which fans derive social identity benefits.[25] It also makes up an individual's self-concept with their membership to social groups determined by values, knowledge, and emotions.[26] In relation to this study, social identity in football is an extension of social identity theory.

Social identity theory focuses on the connection between self, role, and society where identities develop through the distinct social roles that we play.[27] Identity theory outlines why individuals select certain identity related activities.[28] Which resonates with why some fans identify with a team or sport more strongly than others which in turn can help people to feel good about themselves.[29] This concept extends to football and how team identification is constructed. This

identification is a multidimensional construct capturing various affective aspects of individuals' relationship with a team.[30] It can also be an unidimensional construct representing the extent to which being a fan of the team is important to an individual's identity.[31] Supporters can embrace their identity by creating associations with a group. For example, Wann and Branscombe investigated two processes that assist in the maintenance of self-esteem, (1) basking-in- reflected-glory (BIRGing) and (2) cutting-off-reflected failure (CORFing). Consistent with previous research, they found that people do engage in strategic self-presentation with higher fan identification resulting in increased tendencies to BIRG and decreased tendencies to CORF.[32] Geographical location was also deemed the principal reason given for supporting a team from research undertaken in the early years of Premier League.[33]

Holt explains the role football clubs have taken as an agent for the creation and reaffirmation of collective social identities, where behavioural norms are taught and embedded, where players can be held as a representation of local spirit and differentiation between local areas.[34] As many teams adopted the town/city name as the name for their team, football clubs, for many people, became a tangible representation of that urban area.[2] Historically, geographical location was a predominant reason for being a fan of a club with supporters displaying a deep-rooted link to their childhood local team.[35] Theory also identifies how football can create a sense of identity and a connection to groups based on locality.[36] Previous research has looked to define fans and their tradition in following certain clubs, highlighting the collective sharing of experiences.[12] This is through feelings such as happiness, nervousness, excitement, and trepidation, and the shared experiences can influence attendance at sporting events in a positive manner.[37]

Association football is the most popular sport worldwide.[38] In 2018 3.57 billion viewers watched the FIFA World Cup.[39] Football has been described as a global social phenomenon.[40] Football fandom literature suggests that what it means to be a fan has changed from what it once was, reflecting shifts in culture, society, and politics. During the 1970's and 1980's disorder at football matches was on the rise and hooliganism became synonymous with British football culture.[3] Early academic studies on the behaviour of football fans reflected this.[41] In more recent times, research has developed to understand football fandom more broadly in terms of typologies of fans, identity, loyalty and the everyday fan.[8]

Fandom and fan typology

One of the largest forms of leisure is sport spectatorship, although this can take various forms.[42] Sports fans look to establish a psychological connection with the team, whereas spectators merely observe a sporting event.[29] Sport has been described as being characterised by fierce, loyal and passionate fans that experience a strong, vicarious identification with their favourite players and teams.[43] Fandom is a term used to refer a subculture of fans characterised by a feeling of sympathy and camaraderie with others who share a common interest.[44] In the context of football, the term 'football fandom' is used to describe an individual's affiliation to a specific football club although this can vary between locations and cultures.[17] Understanding the different typology of football supporters is an important element in this discussion, particularly as the game has become more commercial leading to a changing demographic of supporters of English clubs alongside increased ticket prices, and increased provision of corporate hospitality.[45] Researchers suggested that fans' experience attending games at the stadium is a factor that helps to create stronger links between fans and their team.[46] In addition, fans expressing their identity increases the intention to attend future games.[47]

Football fans are not homogenous, however, and it is important to recognise the typologies within the game from previous research. A summary of key literature around fan typologies outlines that early work distinguished between groups using binary dichotomies such as 'genuine' fans and 'other' fans Clarke (1978) [48], 'active' and 'passive' (Redhead, 1993) [49], 'irrational' and 'rational' Quick (2000) [50], and 'traditionalists' and 'modernisers' (Boyle and Haynes, 2009)[51]. Most of these binary categories differentiate between the traditional and modern supporter and are based on characteristics including attendance, link to local community, cultural norms etc.[52] The concept of different dimensions and stages to reflect fan types was introduced to broaden the range of typologies.[49] Reflections on such typologies has created further discussions regarding the greater emphasis put on certain attributes (locality and attendance) ahead of other important aspects of modern clubs' identity from global, digitally based supporters.[53]

Tapp discussed the priorities and allegiance of football supporters and agreed to Parker and Stuart's assertion that football is an important priority in people's lives.[54] Tapp furthered the discussion to demonstrate how team success is a factor in assessing loyalty, making the link between crowd sizes and on-field success. A traditional fan is deeply in love with football and to some fans it is their way of life.[17] This is evident by the high number of football fans in England who attend fixtures and average match-day attendances continuing to increase. The 2018/19 Premier League saw aggregate attendances reach 14.5m, the Championship recorded 11.1m, League One 4.8m and League Two 2.5m.[14] Moreover, fans continue to support their team during unsuccessful periods just as much as they do during periods of success. For example, a 2019 survey by the EFL outlined that for some fans, winning is not everything and other aspects of the match day experience are more important, including experiencing the highs and lows and feeling a sense of belonging to their town or city's club.[24] This degree of fan

loyalty produces a low cross elasticity of demand, which means that one form of sporting product cannot easily be replaced by another.[43] This inelastic demand and limited availability of substitutes means demand for a club can be maintained even when teams regularly under-perform, therefore sustainability and experience can, for some, be prioritised over tangible rewards.

Globalisation, Commercialisation, and identity

Much of the literature alludes to football fan culture being associated with local identity and the idea of supporting your local team. However, because of globalisation, particularly in the Premier League with fans worldwide, this notion has become more complicated. For example, Manchester United have been highlighted as the club most synonymous with English football's globalisation and their broad geographical support base are often mocked for representing the non-local, inauthentic face of modern football culture.[55] This opposes the suggestion that distant fans do not attend games and loyalty is only associated with attendance.[33] Previous work concluded that high levels of fan loyalty can sometimes outweigh commercial objectives, with consumers and clubs weighting wins and trophies more highly than healthy financial statements.[56] Conversely, they also suggest that commercial pressures can instigate the demise of longstanding traditions if they are thwarting future success. However, they also argued that fans who value tradition will often use it to resist club attempts to commercialise the management process. Interestingly, Gibbons discussed how England national team fans test one another to assess how 'authentic' their support is, focused on the proximity of one's home or place of birth to the club.[57] This is a demonstration of the importance of local identity retained by some supporters in an era of globalisation.[58] In a modern and globalised professional sport where supporters are scattered, the sense and importance of 'place' has changed and broadened.

The dichotomy between a club promoting themselves as a global brand whilst retaining a sense of local identity means supporters can be conflicted around their priorities for their club. The importance of retaining a geographical link, including within the playing squad, is an important facet of this, particularly as an area UEFA felt necessary to intervene on. The 'home-grown' rules phased in between 2006-2008 required European clubs to include players developed through their own club or national association in their squad (irrespective of nationality). The headline aims of this rule were to improve training, increase opportunity, improve competitive balance and allow leagues to maintain geographical character.[23] The latter point is important contextually for this research, as the Governing body of the European game felt in necessary to legislate citing protection of geographic character, with little empirical evidence from clubs or supporters underpinning this rationale. A further factor is now relevant in England with the post-Brexit Governing Body Endorsement (GBE) plan in place. This prevents clubs from signing overseas players until they are 18 and players will subject to points-based visa requirements, thus increasing the complications of player recruitment and development strategies, and, potentially, the focus on developing English players.[59]

Priorities – the Club versus Country dichotomy

The notion of 'club versus country' refers to an individual's allegiance to their respective club and national teams and is important in this debate when discussing priorities for football supporters, and their identity through football.[60] Clubs developing and then playing English players is a vital part of the structure to supply a strong national team, particularly in the Premier League. The recruitment and inclusion of local players is part of this process. England, however, produces fewer elite players, fewer playing opportunities in their elite league and in the Champions League than other major European countries.[61] It is a popular debate between

fans, clubs, and the media in English football every two years, subject to qualification, when major international tournaments take place.[62] The consensus from previous research is that fans' interest in the Premier League outweighs that of the England national team.[60] Gibbons outlined that many fans do not feel represented by the England national team and that their support for club carried greater importance, although fans of larger clubs suggest the England national team serves the interests of fans of unsuccessful, smaller, lower-level clubs to a greater extent.[63] Hart found that national team attitudinal loyalty is higher from fans in lower divisions; fans of Premier League teams have lower levels of attitudinal loyalty (i.e., commitment) towards the national team compared to fans of clubs outside the top-flight. It has been suggested that there is a greater dependent relationship between national identity and the sense of representation provided by the England team which is linked to success.[63] There is a more complex relationship between club and county compared to the strength of local identity felt at club level.[63] This research includes the national team when assessing priorities.

Football and Community Trusts

One area of football which has developed alongside the commercialisation is the additional outreach work clubs do in their community, to strengthen and develop the relationship between clubs and supporters locally. Professional football clubs across England have been recognised as playing a key role in their local communities, helping to reinforce a sense of place and local identity.[64] In the mid-1980s a formalised approach to community-facing work was launched when the Football League and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) started a 'Football in the Community' (FITC) scheme with six clubs in the north west of England before being rolled out at all clubs.[65]

It was originally suggested that FITC schemes were introduced as an intervention measure to combat widespread football hooliganism in and around grounds.[66] Since the 1990s FITC schemes started to diversify and use football to combat social issues, with clubs remodelling into charitable entities to access public sector funding. These Community Club Organisations (CCOs) as charitable trusts or foundations are distinct from clubs but utilise their club's influence and status, often referred to as 'power of the badge', to create meaningful change via linking their work more easily to local, regional and national priorities.[65] The links made with the local communities (e.g., match day opportunities, community outreach work, delivering community programmes and visits to hospitals and schools. There have been 29,687 instances of players engaging in community initiatives, including those focusing on health, education, social inclusion, anti-racism, promotion of women, girls and disability football worth an estimated £5.96m.[65] The EFL also found that 90% of fans saw clubs interacting with their community in this manner was important.[24]

It is clear from the literature that, historically in England, community and locality are important manifestations of football supporters, how they view their club, their own identity and the link to their culture and heritage. The bond between clubs and local fans has strengthened through the work of the collective community Trusts in their local area, even as the game has globalised through enhanced commercial attention. A key research question emerging from the gap in the literature is the role of local representation on the pitch, and whether supporters see this representation as a priority, or worthwhile in the modern, commercial game.

Materials and methods

The data was collected using an online survey, with researchers asking football supporters clubs and fanzines to distribute an online survey link on their social media channels/forum. The

research aimed to collect responses from highly engaged participants, therefore the fanzine approach enabled the survey distribution network to target those with a direct link to English teams.

Following a search of prominent fanzines across clubs in all four leagues, an initial approach was made to a fanzine editor of each of the 92 league clubs. If the identified fanzine was dormant, a replacement fanzine contact was contacted. Where no fanzine was active, researchers approached a prominent fans forum for that club to try and ensure every club was included. The sampling was a form of non-probability voluntary response sampling, described as 'river' or 'intercept' sampling[67] rather than a structured probability-based approach. This non-probability approach for online surveys has limitations for representation around access, digital literacy, frequency, and type of access. The researchers aimed to mitigate this by including as many clubs as possible, encourage the distribution of the survey link through a range of forums and platforms to reach a wider audience and collect a large sample size. Topical bias can affect the representation, with those more likely to have a strong opinion more likely to respond.[67,] However, the research aimed to sample highly engaged supporters to investigate the research questions.

Survey sample

In total, 138 fanzines/online forums were approached from 92 clubs in the top four tiers, which generated 661 survey responses, representing supporters from 64 different clubs from all four professional leagues, based on their status in the 2021-22 season. Most responses (47%) came from UK-born supporters of Premier League clubs, 25% Championship clubs, 15% League 1 clubs, 12% League 2 clubs and 1% National League clubs. The average age was 44 years; most respondents supported the England national team (91%); 71% have been a season ticket holder

at their club; fans attended an average of 17 games per season (although 25% went to fewer than 5 games a season and 7% had never been to watch their team live). Wann and Branscombe outlined this is an important distinction to make between fans (active followers) and spectators (physically witnessing sporting events) and the various fan typologies.[32] Finally, 78% had a birth or a parental birth link to their club's location; and 22% had no family or geographical link to their club.

Respondents were asked their year of birth, place of birth, connection to their club (location, family etc.), frequency of attendance and the national teams they supported. This level of demographic data allowed differences to be investigated around different attitudes between age groups, association with their club, attendance type, and between different club types (e.g., established Premier League, smaller lower league etc.). Twenty, five-point scale questions were asked to gauge opinion, themed into (1) club identity (2) importance of local players and (3) priorities and expectations, with three open text questions included. Differences between groups were investigated using Z scores, comparing sub-group scores to the sample average, employing a statistical measurement to describe the relationship of a value to the mean of a group of values.

Results

In the introduction it was outlined how 78% of respondents to The Football Supporters Association national survey felt that it was important for their club to have local players representing them.[18] The results from the sample of supporters in this study looked at this in more detail, specifically in comparison to other areas of priority and different supporter categories. There are two main question banks, agreement ratings (Table 1), followed by

priority areas (Table 2). Table 1 indicates the question and the overall scores, then the breakdown by age range, birth link, geographical link and attendance frequency.

Table 1 – Agreement by sub-groups - here

The top 5 highest scoring areas on the agreement questions were all directly linked to the feeling of pride supporters feel when local players from their club transition to play for their first team, and when their clubs players play for the national team (all at or above 4.5/5), with local identity of players secondary. The lowest level of agreement emerged from the questions on adopting short-term strategies such as purchasing high value players, a desire to consistently breaking transfer records and fast-tracking players. It was clear from the overall results that having local identity in the first team was in the middle ground, with *'having local players in the team is an important part of my clubs' identity'* (3.93) and *'I would like to see my club try to have locally born players in the first team every game'* (3.77) scoring modestly. Respondents outlined a low level of agreement with *'I care where the players in my club originate'* (2.81). The answers scoring greater agreement were linked to feelings of pride.

However, when asked about priorities, the importance participants attached to an on-field local identity was diluted when compared with other areas. Overall, 80% of the sample identified that either 'Your club winning a trophy' (40.3%) or 'Financial position of your club' (39.6%) was their main priority. This finding fits previous thinking from social identity theory that some sports fans aim to use team identity to create a sense of positivity about themselves, therefore the feeling of winning projects positive feelings.[29] The desire to see financial security was also prominent, particularly as some clubs face financial pressure, and the desire for clubs to be there for future generations. However, within the sample there were some clear differences in

priorities linked to different typologies, particularly depending on age, and the type of club supported (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Priorities split by sub-groups - here

Table 2 outlines that only seventeen data points have a significant variance from the sample mean, eight of which are in the club type category. It is noticeable that, for supporters of Premier League clubs, financial position is much less of a priority (26%) than those supporters in the lower tiers (all more than 50%). Supporters of Premier League clubs are significantly less likely to prioritise the financial position of their club compared to those in lower leagues, who are significantly more likely to prioritise financial position. With many lower league clubs facing financial difficulties and some examples of clubs going into liquidation, this is a genuine concern for supporters of non-Premier League clubs. Those with a birthplace link to their clubs location were also significantly more likely to prioritise financial security of their club. Premier League club supporters are significantly more likely to prioritise winning trophies. For those supporters of the six "ever-present" Premier League teams, winning a trophy was the main priority (68%), and only 4% cited financial sustainability. This resonated with the open questions, where answers from those outside the top Premier League clubs frequently alluded to the club being there for future generations and the camaraderie with others usurping trophies as a main priority. Additionally, those supporters that attend their club games frequently (16+ games a season) were significantly less likely to prioritise the national team winning and had the highest proportion of the sub-group prioritising financial security of their club.

It is also apparent that older supporters (pre-1970s), those born in the same town/city and with a geographical link to their club (birth or parents) and those that attend more live fixtures (16+

games per season) all reported financial security being more important than winning trophies. The results also suggest that supporters born since 1980 were more interested in seeing their national team win a trophy (19.2%) that those born pre-1980 (5.4%), and those born pre-1960 (2.2%), many of whom will remember World Cup 1966. When looking in more detail at sub-groups, there were some differences in the sample. Supporters from the town/city who also attended 16+ games a season much more concerned with financial sustainability than those regular attendees with no geographical link (48% v 32%). Non-local regular attenders viewed trophies as the main priority much more than locals (53% v 38%). Stewart and Smith outlined fan loyalty can sometimes outweigh commercial objectives, with some consumers and clubs weighting wins and trophies more highly than a healthy balance sheet.[56] The results suggest that this would appear to be somewhat dependent on your geographical link to the club.

"We have had hugely successful teams with no home-grown talent in. It is great to enjoy success, but it is hugely important to retain that link between fans and players. Home-grown players are more aware of rivalries and traditions that separate you from other clubs."

Interestingly, 'having English players in the first team' (2.4%), 'having local academy graduates in the team' (6.5%) and 'your national team winning a trophy' (11.2%) were viewed as much lower priority. Hart found that loyalty to the national team is greater from fans in lower divisions, however that was not the case in this sample of fans.[60] Local identity through having local academy players in the team, was deemed neither important nor unimportant when tested against other indicators, as summarised in one response.

"Local players are important but give me success with anyone rather than average or failure with local lads."

The financial security sentiment was evident in the comments, as respondents cited 'passing the club on to your kids to enjoy', 'protecting the experience for other generations' and 'still having a club to follow' as major concerns, rather than acquiring the next piece of silverware, while still retaining a burning desire to win every game your club play. As Lock noted, clubs can represent social identity, with respondents outlining the importance attached to their own historical and family ties to their club.[25] Stryker's assertion of social identity being a connection of yourself and your role with society, is a representation of the values and emotional significance supporters have with their club, and their corner of society.[27] One description of fans outlined that this importance was increasingly one way as the game has become more global, with local supporters of some clubs being left as silent and powerless custodians.

"My kids go, and we meet people there, have an afternoon away from life. I might be naive but that to me is what football is about - the experience, the fans, the banter".

A three-pronged question regarding priorities pitched a strong local identity, financial position, and winning trophies against each other. Results showed 41% of the sample outlining a strong financial position as the main priority of the three, 34% winning a trophy and 25% a strong local identity, with all three options significantly different at the 95% confidence interval (Z score). When cross-referenced with the highest priority question, respondents prioritising winning a trophy and strong financially also selected these values as most important in the either/or scenarios. The strength of feeling for local players in the first team was lowest. The comments saw two themes emerging around priorities centring on the counterbalance between

"glory and existence". Rather than concerning themselves with the origins of their players, participants were much more interested in their club still being there for future generations to enjoy, and the importance of the relationships cultivated through football (friends and family). The ability of their club to compete and be in the mix to win trophies/promotions and watch a winning team was the second main theme. With clubs such as Bury FC and Macclesfield Town recently going into liquidation and expulsion from the league due to financial issues, and the Covid-19 pandemic threatening the future financial sustainability of many lower league clubs, existence was the most prominent feature. Respondents frequently said that your football club is the connection between friends and families, not the incumbent owners, players, staff or trophies, but described by one as the "collective cry of delight or of anguish" which acts as a representation of the club's soul.

Having local players representing the club was not identified as a primary priority from the survey results, more of a secondary consideration that would immediately be replaced should financial security be threatened or the chance of winning a trophy emerged. One aspect of local identity on the pitch that was highlighted as important to fans was the process of transition for emerging players, for example if academy graduates/young players go on loan, supporters take an interest in their progress in case they show the necessary ability to contribute on their return. This has different success factors which interested fans, such as getting a more developed player back, an altruistic happiness in seeing players from their academy doing well and being able to sell players on to generate income. However, as also demonstrated in the survey sample, the relevance of these aspects demonstrated a partial generational divide. Younger participants (under 40) cited the academy, local players and the connection between fans and the players much less frequently than older supporters. Suggestions from older supporters outlined significant changes ("a lot of younger lads support a Premier League team too", "fans and

players used to live and socialise often" and "nice to see a local lad come through but matters less now"). It was also frequently remarked that there is a higher turnover of playing staff in the professional game with modern players more transient, which is a contributing factor in reducing the difference locality makes to fans. The work of the Community Trust, for example, was highlighted much more frequently in the comments as the most important link between the fans and the club, rather than the players on the pitch.

The highest proportion of the sample outlined that the importance they attach to having local players in their team had not changed since they started following their team (46%), although 33% stated it was slightly more important and 12% said it was much more important; 9% said it was less important now. Older supporters and those that attended games more frequently attached greater importance to this than younger supporters (under 40) and those that did not go to matches. This is similar to the greatest priorities (Table 1) and alludes to the importance of the connection to club locality via local players being more remote for supporters growing up watching the Premier League and those who do not attend live games. One theme developing from the comments was the role of local players and fan engagement through commercial avenues for marketing purposes but, importantly, their position and influence on the work of the community trust linked to the clubs.

Discussion

The research aimed to understand whether representation through local players is a priority, and whether this representation matters to supporters in the modern game and the differences in priorities between supporter sub-groups. Football clubs are clearly important institutions within the fabric of their local community however the idea of clubs being solely for the local population has changed significantly since the Premier League began and global support has

become more accessible via broadcast and media outlets. The range of supporter typologies is more complex than at any time before and the priorities of different sub-groups is dependent on various factors, with age, location, and the type of engagement prominent variables. The research findings suggest that local identity is a lesser factor than winning and financial sustainability. Furthermore, it is suggested that the community link is more important through avenues such as the community trust than having local players, in what are global leagues.

Football is an important part of the economy and culture across the towns and cities where clubs are based, however staying in existence is, for many, a real fear despite more money coming into the English game than ever before. The emotional attachment football provides remains significant to many, creating identities, a sense of belonging and a purpose which brings wider communities together. However, the financial disparity which has heightened since the Premier League was created means this may be more important for smaller, local clubs than the big clubs with global brands, global fan bases and expectations to win trophies every year. The process of developing players through academies has been in place for decades. However, academies are filled with players from across the UK and overseas as catchment rules were relaxed and the home-grown rule does not account for nationality. This means many of the players coming through academies are not local to the area which may result in some of the relative apathy towards having a local identity seen here.

The findings in this research reinforce the view that supporters have a strong emotional and social connection to their football clubs. Long-held family connections are influential in determining fans' allegiances to a team while proximity to the club also plays a significant role. The literature demonstrates that football clubs are part of the fabric of the communities they serve. Although some fans expressed that it is important to have local player representation on

the pitch more responses outlined the value and importance of community engagement activities. It could, therefore, be argued that the increase in the work clubs do in local communities has lessened the need for local representation on the pitch. The data does not suggest that supporters prioritise local identity on the pitch, and the link with the local community are more important via off-pitch activities. For those participants supporting clubs in the Premier League, and particularly from the ever-present 6 clubs, the priority to win trophies links to the concept of BIRGing (basking-in- reflected-glory). Future research could explore this from the perspective of supporters from outside of the UK.

UEFA were very clear in their rationale for heightening the prominence of developing young, home-grown talents through their 2006 "home-grown" rule. However, if as suggested in the results, the nationality of players on the pitch and transitioning home-grown local players through the academy is not identified as a high priority by supporters, does this dilute the rationale for UEFAs desire to increase home-grown pathways? As outlined, some prominent English clubs do not generate many players for their own first team.[23] One of the headline aims of the rule was to allow leagues to maintain geographical character which requires clubs to source and play those from their own national association.[22] This may, however, reduce the ability to win in the short-term which is a key priority for many supporters in the global market. This is important contextually for this research, as the governing body of the European game felt in necessary to legislate citing protection of geographic character, with little empirical evidence from clubs or supporters underpinning this rationale.

Future research is required in this emerging area to develop our understanding of local players in the complex and global nature of modern football supporters, particularly outside England, and whether locality is an important factor in different parts of the world. UEFA clearly

consider this an important element of the game, as the legislation to protect geographical identity through the home-grown rules suggest. However, the evidence presented here to suggest this is an immediate priority of English football supporters is limited. The assumption that the link clubs have between their fan base and the players can be enhanced where locally born home-grown players emerge from the academy into the first team is also not evident here. The narrative reflects the shifting nature of clubs from locally run community enterprises to multi-million global businesses where priorities are aligned more with finance and trophies.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the study participants.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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Table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages)

Table 1 – Agreement by sub-group

	Ave	Age < 40	> 40	PL	Team Champ	L1	L2	Local No	Yes	No. None	Games 1-4	5-9	10-15	16+
I am proud when a local player from 'our' Academy makes it to the first team	**4.74**	4.67	4.79	4.72	4.77	4.83	4.66	4.68	4.76	4.65	4.63	4.70	4.76	4.79
I am proud when any player from 'our' Academy makes it to the first team	**4.56**	4.44	4.66	4.53	4.66	4.67	4.41	4.61	4.55	4.49	4.41	4.53	4.62	4.62
I am proud when local players from my club play for their national team	**4.56**	4.50	4.60	4.58	4.66	4.56	4.29	4.47	4.58	4.30	4.59	4.56	4.56	4.58
I am proud when players from my club play for their national team	**4.48**	4.47	4.49	4.48	4.55	4.58	4.27	4.44	4.49	4.13	4.52	4.49	4.52	4.50
I am prouder when a local player makes their debut compared to a non-local player	**4.01**	3.94	4.06	4.09	3.95	3.88	4.00	3.97	4.02	3.91	4.00	4.04	4.03	4.02
Having local players in the team is an important part of my clubs' identity	**3.93**	3.89	3.96	3.97	3.99	3.89	3.70	4.01	3.91	3.98	3.87	3.92	3.85	3.96
I would like to see my club have locally born players in the first team every game	**3.77**	3.77	3.76	3.64	3.86	3.96	3.82	3.74	3.77	3.63	3.80	3.76	3.67	3.79
I would rather my club win the league than my country wins the World Cup	**3.66**	3.49	3.78	3.63	3.80	3.47	3.78	3.80	3.62	3.59	3.43	3.21	3.61	3.85
I don't care where players are from as long as they win	**3.63**	3.73	3.56	3.65	3.42	3.78	3.78	3.55	3.65	3.53	3.57	3.44	3.57	3.71
There is more pressure on the local players, as they know how their supporters feel	**3.39**	3.51	3.30	3.45	3.17	3.45	3.49	3.30	3.41	3.28	3.48	3.34	3.38	3.38
I care where the players in my club originate	**2.81**	2.63	2.94	2.81	3.03	2.56	2.67	2.80	2.81	2.73	2.86	2.96	2.78	2.78
I expect more from local players than from overseas	**2.77**	2.73	2.81	2.79	2.73	2.67	2.90	2.81	2.76	2.72	2.72	2.87	2.65	2.80
I expect more from local players than others from around the UK	**2.71**	2.71	2.72	2.75	2.61	2.69	2.80	2.71	2.72	2.70	2.68	2.71	2.61	2.75
Local players get criticised first when things go wrong on the pitch	**2.56**	2.57	2.56	2.62	2.43	2.60	2.56	2.57	2.56	2.59	2.61	2.50	2.59	2.55
I would rather buy a ready-made player than promote a player from the Academy	**2.31**	2.45	2.20	2.36	2.07	2.40	2.46	2.18	2.34	2.35	2.23	2.26	2.30	2.34
Local players get easier route to the 1st team	**2.27**	2.36	2.21	2.30	2.27	2.21	2.24	2.34	2.25	2.30	2.28	2.23	2.26	2.28
I want my club to break its transfer record every summer	**2.02**	2.11	1.95	2.37	1.60	1.72	1.84	1.99	2.02	1.98	2.03	2.05	1.86	2.04

Table 2 – Priorities split by sub-groups

		N	Financial position of your club	Having local Academy graduates in the team	English players in the first team	Club winning a trophy	National team winning a trophy
	OVERALL	661	39.6%	6.5%	2.4%	40.3%	11.2%
What was your decade of birth?	Pre-1950s	36	40.0%	11.4%	2.9%	40.0%	5.7%
	1950s	105	*50.0%**	5.8%	3.8%	39.4%	*1.0%**
	1960s	135	48.4%	6.3%	3.1%	35.2%	7.0%
	1970s	108	39.0%	6.0%	3.0%	44.0%	8.0%
	1980s	103	32.3%	7.1%	2.0%	41.4%	17.2%
	1990s	140	33.3%	5.9%	0.7%	40.0%	*20.0%**
	2000s	34	*19.4%**	6.5%	*0.0%**	51.6%	22.6%
Club Type (2019/20 season)	Premier League	315	*25.8%**	7.7%	3.7%	*48.2%**	14.7%
	Championship	162	*53.2%**	6.3%	1.3%	*30.4%**	8.9%
	League 1	100	*51.0%**	4.2%	2.1%	34.4%	8.3%
	League 2	80	*51.3%**	3.9%	*0.0%**	39.5%	*5.3%**
Birthplace?	No	271	*30.6%**	7.5%	3.0%	44.9%	14.0%
	Yes	390	*46.0%**	5.7%	1.9%	37.1%	9.3%
Geographical link?	No	148	31.3%	7.6%	4.2%	48.6%	8.3%
	Yes	513	42.0%	6.1%	1.8%	37.9%	12.1%
Attendance category	No games	46	27.3%	11.4%	4.5%	45.5%	11.4%
	1-4 games	116	30.6%	7.4%	1.9%	37.0%	*23.1%**
	5-9 games	76	41.1%	9.6%	2.7%	34.2%	12.3%
	10-15 games,	66	33.3%	4.8%	1.6%	46.0%	14.3%
	16+ games	357	44.8%	5.2%	2.3%	41.0%	*6.7%**

* denotes a significance difference from the sample average at >0.05