The other rules of the game: a normative social contract for English football

MIDDLING, Mark, PLUMLEY, Daniel <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7875-0969> and WILSON, Rob

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper investigates the views of English football supporter representatives on the implicit club-supporter relationship, pertaining to a normative social contract which can be used to help to improve football club governance.

Methodology: Semi-structured interviews were conducted within an exploratory enquiry, intentionally investigating the fan perspective to understand supporters' views without the influence of owner self-interest which often leads to commercialisation and/or mis-management.

Findings: Findings show evidence of a normative social contract that reflects many supporters' dissatisfaction with current practice and provides guidance for the expectations on both parties.

Originality: This is the first academic paper linking social contract theory to football. By implementing the research findings, clubs can improve their governance, social capital, accountability, and engagement practices in ways considered equitable by both parties.

Research implications: This research aims to stimulate further academic discussion on the underlying principles behind good club and industry governance. It provides a new lens with which to view the club-supporters relationship, adding to previous studies in the area of club governance.

Practical implications: There are implications for both clubs and the forthcoming Independent Football Regulator following a parliamentary Bill that recognises the community importance of clubs and supporters' unique stakeholder position.

Article classification: Research Paper

Key Words: Football, Social Contract, Governance

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1. Introduction

This paper utilises social contract theory (SCT) to investigate the views of English football-supporter representatives on the expectations of both sides of the club-supporter relationship. It conceptualises a normative social contract for English football and suggests its use for improving club governance practices. The issue of club-supporter relations currently cuts across the state, football, and society due to the UK Government's introduction of a Football Governance Bill (DCMS, 2024), following a Fan Led Review of the game (FLR) (Crouch, 2021). The Bill will bring independent regulation to English football for the first time, mandating meaningful supporter engagement. This provides an opportunity to re-evaluate the club-supporter relationship and use it to improve club governance practices.

The FLR arose due to successive club owners being seen to be mismanaging clubs and/or treat them in a self-interested or capitalist manner, marginalising supporters and ignoring their interests and moral values that clubs are community assets with social purpose (Crouch, 2021). The FLR stated:

> Clubs are too often being run recklessly, owners make decisions with personal
> impunity frequently leaving communities and others to deal with the
> consequences/fall out of their decisions and fans are cut out of their clubs and key
> decisions. (Crouch, 2021, p. 26)

Examples include asset stripping at Blackpool FC (Fogg, 2022), financial mismanagement causing the demise of Bury FC (Maguire *et al.*, 2019), the founding of 'post-consumer' protest clubs such as FC United of Manchester by Manchester United supporters disillusioned with capitalist owners (Brandt and Kurscheidt, 2022), and an attempt by top clubs to instigate a breakaway European Super League (ESL) which failed not due to governance or legal provisions, but due to mass fan protests (Hamilton, 2021). Following the ESL failure, the European Clubs Association commented that "Football is a social contract not a legal contract" (BBC Sport, 2023 para. 13). This raises the question of what exactly is, or should be, the social contract between clubs and their supporters?

A social contract forms a set of guiding principles that act as a moral compass for parties subject to it (Peer, 2017). Such owners as above may be said to have broken the club-supporter social contract as they have acted against moral values inherent in the ecosystem. Therefore, this research deliberately canvases the views of English football supporter representatives on the implicit club-supporter relationship, taking a fan perspective aligned with the FLR approach, to avoid the influence of self-interested and/or capitalist owners.

As SCT is context specific (Molloy-Martinez, 2023), the paper begins with the context of English football governance (section 2) before analysing SCT and its use in empirical research (section 3). The methods are presented in section 4, with findings and discussion outlined in section 5. The paper concludes by recommending the use of the club-supporter social contract to improve football governance policies (section 6).

2. English football governance: a collision of social and commercial attitudes

English professional football is split into four leagues. The English Premier League (EPL) is the top tier, and below this is the English Football League (EFL) which is split into the three tiers: the Championship (tier 2), League 1 (tier 3) and League 2 (tier 4). Movement between leagues is facilitated through promotion and relegation. The financial gap between the leagues is considerable, which impacts competition. The average revenue per EPL club is c.£300m whereas in the EFL the average revenues per club are £31m, £10m and £5m respectively (Deloitte, 2024). The best performing EPL teams qualify for lucrative European competitions such as the UEFA Champions League. Owing to substantial broadcasting deals throughout its history, the EPL has established itself as the world's most commercially successful league and its revenue is c.£2bn clear of its nearest rivals in Spain and Germany (Deloitte, 2024). EFL clubs, by comparison, tend to operate more locally. Both the EPL and EFL are self-governing and this in part has led to the financial gap between teams and leagues over the last three decades.

England is the only European league to have four tiers of professional football and is thus a unique cultural phenomenon. The EPL attracts on average 40,000 fans per game, where the EFL leagues attract 22,000, 10,000 and 5,000 respectively (Transfer Markt, n.d.), therefore, collectively the EFL may be said to be just as culturally significant to English football as the EPL.

Many in England and across the globe view clubs as community assets (Crouch, 2021) with supporters' emotional attachment deep-rooted in their identity (Bauer *et al.*, 2005). To the loyalist supporters, their relationship with their club is as important to them as family members (Jones, 1998) and research shows that supporters' attachment to their club is more commonly based on non-product related aspects such as stadia, badge, colours, location and peer group acceptance, rather than product related attributes such as current players and results (Bauer *et al.* (2005). Therefore, the club-supporter relationship runs deeper than the traditional company-customer relationship, with supporters sticking with clubs through thick and thin and viewing it as a way of life (Giulianotti, 2005).

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However, the game has changed over the past forty years, with more self-interested and commercially minded owners entering the game (King, 1997). Kennedy (2013) describes how football, once a weekend retreat for the working man from the weekly grind, has been captured by neo-liberal capitalist forces, attempting to fundamentally change the club-supporter relationship to one of commodification that Walsh and Giulianotti (2001, p. 56) argue is against the "unbreakable social contract" of loyal supporters, creating widening gaps between those who run football and those who watch it.

A number of authors have studied the impact of commercialisation on sports fans. Winell *et al.* (2022) investigates the impact on elite sports' fans through a literature review of 42 papers and concludes that commercialisation is a threat due to factors such as supporters feeling they are treated as customers, and a conflict between commercial and traditional fan ideologies (Fritz *et al.*, 2017). However, they also identify a number of studies that see positives in commercialisation such as better infrastructure, a more professional approach, and a better-quality product. Further, Giulianotti (2005) study Scottish supporters and find a simultaneous acceptance and denouncement of commercialism, with supporters seeing it as a diminution of the modern game, but an inevitable consequence.

However, Welford *et al.* (2015) argue that commodification is grinding down the social meaning of football and Bain *et al.* (2020, p. 5) state that fans' "cherished loyalty" is now seen by some owners as meaningless. Bain et al. (2020) use Wimbledon FC as an example where the club were moved 60 miles from their home and given a new name, Milton Keynes Dons, for the purpose of profit. There has also been the changing of team colours at Cardiff City and the change of club name at Hull FC, both again for commercial purposes (BBC Sport, 2014). Additionally, fans have endured rising prices beyond inflation which Goldblatt (2007) found had increased by 700% from 1992 to 2012. This has resulted in fan protests such as the Football Supporters' Association's 'Stop Exploiting Loyalty' campaign (FSA, 2024).

Despite increasing commercialisation, Kennedy (2013) argues that the relationship is only semi-capitalist as surplus value is not distributed as dividends but spent in a growing arms-race (Morrow, 2023) to acquire increasingly better playing talent to improve sporting success. Brandt and Kurscheidt (2022) see this as a further factor of commercialisation, driving many clubs to live on the edge of insolvency with most English clubs being loss making (Deloitte, 2024). Evans *et al.* (2022) describe this as owners 'gambling' with the long-term financial stability of clubs, betting the house on short-term success. Although this has worked for some clubs, it has led to administration at others such as Bury, Bolton Wanderers and Derby County with sporting decline rapidly following. This has partly been legislated against with Profit and Sustainability Rules (PSR) which aim to limit a

club's spending in line with revenue. However, the impact has been limited, as many clubs still engage in financially risky behaviour (Plumley *et al.*, 2018).

Further, some owners may be accused of brazen financial mis-management of their clubs beyond overspending on player wages. As well as the examples in the introduction of this article of Blackpool FC and Bury FC, clubs such as (but not limited to) Reading FC, Southend FC and Sheffield Wednesday FC have all faced winding up petitions due to unpaid player wages and taxes leading to poor relations between supporters and owners (Buckingham and Tanswell, 2024; Hardy, 2023; Shrimpers' Trust, 2023). When a club is mismanaged in these ways, it can cause great emotional harm to supporters. When Bury FC became defunct and were expelled from the league in 2019, The Guardian (2019) captured the deep negative emotions of supporters, with many requiring professional mental health support (BBC Sport, 2019).

Utilising Henry and Lee's (2004) idea of good governance (a normative view of how sports governance 'should be' versus systematic governance which explains current structures) García and Llopis-Goig (2020) find that owners' capitalist and/or self-interest views result in low fan trust. Investigating supporters' attitudes towards governance structures in six European counties including the UK, they find that many supporters believe owners are interested in success for reasons of self-interest, seeing fans as only customers. They also find that supporters have limited trust in national governments, suggesting the IFR should be independent and may struggle to obtain fan trust itself.

Thus, Cleland (2010), describes supporters' increasing desire to be active in club governance, especially through democratic supporter organisations such as Supporters' Trusts, established to gain a decision-influencing position usually through club share ownership. However, Cleland (2010) and Middling (2023) identify a lack of supporter voice in club decision-making processes, exacerbated by the commonalty of unilateral decision-making emanating from a singular, or concentrated, club ownership model, supported by neo-liberal, *laissez-faire* regulations and governance mechanisms allowing owners to ignore fan interests and social values (Kennedy, 2013). Cleland and Dixon (2015), however, warn that active supporters are outnumbered by passive fans whose lack of action is a risk that can aid financial and sporting decline in light of poor club management. This suggests expectations on the part of supporters to be active in challenging the mis-management of clubs.

Margalit (2008) argues that supporters are largely unable to exit their relationship with their club due to their emotional loyalty. However, a very small proportion of supporters, both in England and across Europe, have rebelled against football's commercialism by creating fan-owned 'post-consumer clubs' including FC United of Manchester and HFC Falke of Germany (Brandt and

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==Kurscheidt, 2022). Brandt and Kurscheidt (2022) view these as an attempt by supporters to instil traditional supporter values to modify footballs commercial problems.==

The self-interested and capitalist views of owners justified the FLR and subsequent football Bill. The Bill holds many positives and could be a powerful tool in aiding the restoration of the club-supporter relationship by fostering trust in the relationships (García and Llopis-Goig, 2020; Middling, 2023). However, there remain aspects of good governance (Henry and Lee, 2004), such as transparency, that are underdeveloped despite research demonstrating that supporters desire it (Middling, 2023), and it being used to demonstrate the authenticity of traditional values at post-consumer clubs (Brandt and Kurscheidt, 2022). Tools such as this may be vital in England as, unlike other countries such as Germany and Sweeden, fan interests in clubs governance are not, and will not be, enshrined in law (Winell *et al.*, 2022).

3. Social Contract Theory

Within any societal relationship there is an implicit social contract that guides acceptable behaviours and expectations (Carroll and Buchholtz, 2014). This concept is widely credited to the work of philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau who argue that it is part of the foundation of both legal and political power within society (Byerly, 2013).

It has also been used to explain the relationship between organisations and society through a business ethics perspective which argues that organisations are obligated to better the welfare of society by providing employment and satisfying consumer needs without violating any general cannons of justice in return for being allowed to have independence, hire employees and generate profits (Donaldson, 1982; Hasnas, 1998). Originally applied to business organisations by authors such as Donaldson (1982, p. 42), the concept explains the relationship as implied expectations where "We the society agree to do X and you the organisation agree to do Y".

The social contract is similar to the psychological contract, however, it operates on a collective level rather than individual (Edwards and Karau, 2007). Thus, the social contract is more applicable to the study of football supporters who constitute a defined community (Blackshaw, 2013).

Gray *et al.* (2014, p. 52) advise that the social contract, in conjunction with laws and regulations, are a key part of the "rules of the game" for organisations. The club-supporter social contract is not defined in academic literature although Morrow (2023) captures the essence of it:

> It seems reasonable to suggest that there is an onus on both club and community to ensure that a living relationship exists between club and community, rather than continuing to exist simply as a consequence of history. Clubs must work to make their business sustainable and to develop their community presence. Equally, there is an onus on communities and supporters to support their club. (Morrow, 2023, p. 193)

Morrow's quote highlights the importance of 'relationship'. It is a two-way street where fans must support their clubs in return for it being well managed and an integral part of the community, providing a starting point with which to assess the X and Y.

Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) extend the construct to 'Integrated Social Contracts Theory' (ISCT), designed as an ethical decision-making tool in a micro-context community setting, such as the club-supporter relationship, and providing a pragmatic lens for normative assessment. ISCT views a community as a self-defined group who interact on the basis of shared tasks, values or goals, who establish 'norms' that validate ethical behaviour (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994; Gregory, 2020), often led by institutions (North, 1990). These norms can be seen as expectations on either side of the contract and emanate from moral attitudes and behaviours. Acting against them, breaking the social contract, usually results in punishment of some kind (Joensuu *et al.*, 2018), such as supporters protesting against clubs owners. Examples of this include the protests against mis-management at Blackpool FC, Reading FC, and Southend FC.

For norms to be authentic, Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) argue that contractors must have the right to exit and voice, or else coercion or reliance is embedded in the relationship and norms are not considered 'authentic', but forced. Therefore, allowing for the rare existence of post-consumer clubs, as the emotional attachment of most supporters to their clubs can prevent them from leaving their relationship, their free-will in their social contract with clubs may not represent authentic norms, rather those imposed on them by the capitalist ruling hegemony. Thus, it is important for this research to take the viewpoint of supporters without influence from the capitalist perspectives of many owners and officials.

To be legitimate, compliance to norms at the community level must also conform with wider ethical beliefs, which Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) define as 'hypernorms' – overarching and widespread morals that transcend nations, religions and culture such as 'lying is wrong'. In the club-supporter relationship, hypernorms could be seen as a sense of sportsmanship, altruism, integrity, loyalty, shared goals, community, and transparency.

As social contracts are implicit, obligation to comply does not need to be expressed, it can be implied by action. In this way, when purchasing a club, owners may be said to be implicitly obligated to comply with the norms and social values of the supporters of that club. This can lead to an opaque

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relationship with differing understanding on each side and no defined correct behaviour. Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) describe this as a 'moral free space' where conflict may arise due to the bounded morality of actors (Dunfee *et al.*, 1999). For example, football club owners may be bounded by their capitalist view of the world, and supporters by their social and communitarian views of the sport, creating conflict between the two. Byerly (2013) argues that in spaces like this, where law and governance are not present, the social contract becomes more paramount.

Norms are seen by ISCT as context specific, therefore the club-supporter social contract may differ from country to country as moral values and the understanding of fairness in each country differs (Molloy-Martinez, 2023). Combined with ever shifting expectations of different societies, ISCT also acknowledges that norms will change over time (Molloy-Martinez, 2023). Thus, developments such as post-consumer clubs and the IFR will alter the club-supporter social contract.

Far from a mere philosophy, Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) describe ISCT as providing a lens though which empirical research can be evaluated for its normative implications. As such, it has been utilised by many academic authors across multiple industries to assess normative expectations. Three articles in particular take a similar approach to this paper in explicitly aiming to empirically set expectations on one or both sides of the contract. Xie and Sims (2011) use interviews and surveys to develop a list of corporate social responsibility (CSR) expectations placed on companies across seven categories. Joensuu *et al.* (2018) utilise semi-structured interviews with report-users to apply SCT to the publication of sustainability reports and find that companies should produce reports that are comprehensible, usable, and indicate real change. Vartiainen (2011) uses interviews to determine expectations on all sides of the social contract between universities, students, and companies in an industry-based academic project setting, finding expectations from all parties to all parties.

Further use of SCT and ISCT in empirical academic research can also be seen across a number of professional disciplines. In education, Gregory (2020) argues that plagiarism breaks the social contract between students and educators, but stresses an expectation on educators to teach plagiarism avoidance skills. In the tech sector, Abbas *et al.* (2024) find data-relationship expectations such as data subjects being able to withdraw consent, and the need to inform subjects about the use and purpose of their data, in exchange for their permission to use it. Schmager *et al.* (2024) explore the stance of citizens towards the use of AI in public services. They find trust to be an important factor as it would be a breach of the social contract for governments to fail to prevent its misuse or fail to safeguard citizens.

Looking at CSR, Molloy-Martinez (2023) assess employee views on the CSR activities of employers, finding an expectation on employers to take CSR seriously. Similar results are found in the textile and

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apparel industry by LoMonaco-Benzing and Ha-Brookshire (2016) who find that organisations who are not committed to CSR initiatives violate employee and consumers perception of the social contract, resulting in distrust. Russell *et al.* (2016) use social experiments with consumers to investigate companies' licence to operate after CSR failures and find that consumers can respond by engaging in individual or collective actions due to negative emotional responses, including boycotting, legal action, petitions, and use of voice, as has occurred in football (Fogg, 2022).

The international medical industry draw strongly on the concept of social contract, seeing moral obligations towards society above financial purpose (Inui, 1992). Gibbons (1999) suggests that medical research's social contract should be to produce drugs desired by society, and in return be developed in a transparent and acceptable manner. Korn *et al.* (2020) utilise online social experiments to find that a social contract exists in relation to vaccinations, where vaccination is morally correct behaviour. Similarly, Atlani-Duault *et al.* (2021) suggests a clear and transparent, evidence-based vaccination social contract be used with differing prevention expectations on different age groups. Inui (1992) conceptually argues that US medical schools have a social contract with society whereby in accepting subsidy from state and national public funds, they have a responsibility to provide capable, medically trained professionals back to local and national areas from where funding originated. Similarly, it may be argued that in accepting fans revenue, club owners accept a responsibility to uphold fans' moral views.

Peer (2017) crosses medial and sports sectors in arguing that the social contract of sports medical professional is a personal conflict in which they are influenced by stakeholders other than athletes, such as coaches and club owners with a 'win at all costs' mentality driven by the greater commercialism in the sport – perhaps the same can also be said for owners' financial and governance attitude. Finally, in sport itself, Findlay (2015) proposes a social licence for independent global sports bodies based on the social contract. They argue that a social licence must have three things: legitimacy of the powerful, trust between parties, and consent of the affected. The social contract is therefore a useful tool to asses social injustice (Molloy-Martinez, 2023) such as the commercialisation of clubs and self-interested approach of owners. In this way, the findings of this paper may be used to form an owner's social licence of football.

4.　Methods

This paper takes an inductive exploratory inquiry approach to explore the concept of the club-supporter social contract as viewed by supporter representatives, similar to the approach taken by other social contract authors such as Abbas *et al.* (2024) and Joensuu *et al.* (2018). This approach

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advances ISCT beyond its currently space, resulting in a new conceptual framework that illustrates fan representatives' perceptions.

LoMonaco-Benzing and Ha-Brookshire (2016) advise that the focus of attitudinal research in ISCT such as this is on perceptions of the existence of morally appropriate rules within communities which is applicable to this paper's focus on fan's expectations within the club-supporter relationship. There are many different types of 'fan' (Garcia and Llopis-Goig, 2020), but this paper samples official supporter representatives, defined as people who hold a committee position at a Supporters' Trust, Official Supporters' Club or similar. This group was chosen as they are both dedicated and active supporters, demonstrating passion and loyalty, and also understand the fan base they represent. They are therefore able to speak for the collective, enabling a level of generalisability. They were also identified as the group most likely to understand wider football governance aspects, such as the football Bill. Thus, selection took a 'key informer' approach, utilising purposeful sampling which is designed to help the researcher select participants who will "best help" understand the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014, p. 189).

To recruit participants, Supporters' Trusts, the FSA and fan engagement experts were contacted via email or social media. 18 participants from across the English football pyramid agreed to be interviewed with the majority of participants coming from clubs in tiers 3 and 4 as shown in table 1.

[please insert table 1 roughly here]

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants centred on common themes in social contract literature such as relationships, engagement, transparency and accountability, governance, social purpose, and social responsibility. Interviews lasted between approximately 30 and 120 minutes, and were then transcribed using automated computer software, checked for errors, and manually corrected using recordings.

Transcriptions were analysed using template analysis (King, 1998) – a style of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2022) that provides a structured, systematic approach (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015), allowing for a-priori codes from literature to form the basis of a predefined template (King, 1998), but is flexible enough to allow for fresh codes and themes to emerge from data (King *et al.*, 2018). The researchers inductively coded sentences and blocks of text into *a priori* and fresh first-order codes, interpreting participants comments as they went. The researchers then iteratively reviewed each code, deleted, added and redefined codes, grouping them into second order codes

which became the basis of the themes once the researchers were confident that the findings both represented participants' views and made conceptual sense. For example, an a priori theme was financial sustainability which was identified in literature such as (Plumley *et al.*, 2018), where a theme that emerged was to provide hope, which was the culmination of a number of quotes being grouped and regrouped until this emerged as a key theme. Coding was performed using the software package NVivo.

5. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of findings indicate a normative club-supporter social contract that can guide behaviours and expectations on both sides (Carroll and Buchholtz, 2014) and demonstrate how the relationship *is*, and how participants wish it *to be*. The findings are discussed around a model developed to show the normative expectations perceived by participants (Figure 1). The social contract is central and the expectations of each party on either side, the equivalent of Donaldson's (1982) X and Y. Participants expressed that the club-supporter social contract should culminate in goal congruence, represented at the base.

[please insert figure 1 roughly here]

A fundamental observation is that participants perceive an embedded and inseparable link between club and owner due to concentrated ownership models, where the owner/Chairman has unilateral decision-making power. This is reflected in the way that participants understood many clubs to be managed (in a dictatorship style) and many commented that this could, and does, result in the problem of supporters' views being ignored.

This suggests that the social contract, as normatively perceived by participants, is not currently working correctly, leaving a moral free space between clubs and supporters (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994). Coupled with supporters' usual inability to leave the relationship due to their emotional loyalty (allowing for the rare existence of post-consumer clubs), though not coerced, supporters rely on owners to make decisions that affect them, and are largely unable to exercise the right to exit the relationship, and are left with only voice which may or may not be heard depending on owners' views (Margalit, 2008). Therefore, regulation may be the only option left to enact the normative social contract as if a dictator style position is assumed by owners, as they currently do not need to adhere to a social contract due to their hegemonic position. However, as this is not aligned with supporters' views, we may conclude that owners' attitudes need to change, and the social contract

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may help them to achieve this psychological shift.

Ensure Financial Sustainability

The first expectation identified is for clubs to ensure they are managed in a financially sustainable manner. Aligning with the views of Morrow (2023), participants viewed this as a key factor in clubs' long-term success, as well as enabling positive social initiatives such as clubs' community projects:

> a club will not be successful on the field if it is not successful off the field. In the short-term… chancers and dodgers can achieve success, often by going up in a puff of crimson smoke - we've all seen that. But in the long-term, that won't happen. P7
>
> The financial sustainability, particularly now, is absolutely crucial. Without that you can't have any of the other [community and social] stuff. P2

However, the paradox between on-pitch competitiveness and financial sustainability was also noted by participants. Although they felt clubs need to provide sporting hope, most expressed concern over the irrational 'gambling' (Evans et al., 2022) by some owners in extending their short-term financial risk to dangerous levels to attempt to secure sporting success (Plumley *et al.*, 2018):

> …it's all about not getting sucked into the gamble. And the championship is the craziest of all leagues… you've got millions and millions of pounds being lost, gambled on this dream of the Premier League. P1

This suggests many supporters are both attuned to, and against, short-terminist financial management policies and do not fully support the perceived 'win at all cost' view of some owners (Peer, 2017). The normative social contract therefore demands a balance between financial propriety and sporting success. However, as the talent arms-race (Morrow, 2023) is engrained in industry, regulation and governance improvements may be required, as suggested by the FLR, as clubs and owners have not brought this under control themselves despite PSR rules and concerns from supporters.

Provide sporting hope

Despite financial stability being perceived as a key expectation of clubs, participants largely argued that club should provide sporting hope. However, this was not expressed as clubs aiming for the stars, but rather it was relative for each club. This may be promotion for some, but for others it was maintaining league position or avoiding relegation. The significant aspect here, however, was the effort from players to try to win each game. If this was perceived to be the case, and player spending was in line with a clubs' size and budget, this was seen as satisfactory by most participants, even if losing was the outcome:

> ...you go along against the odds believing you're going to be successful; you're expecting to win. And you know, as long as they put in a reasonable effort, you sort of cope with it when you do lose... P15

This quote supports the argument that, although supporters want their teams to have a reasonable chance of winning, it is not the most important aspect (Giulianotti, 2005). Therefore club governance and regulatory practice should balance sporting and business logics (Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016) to enable strong teams within the constraints of budgets.

Transparency of operations

Participants largely felt that clubs should be more transparent, especially in lower-leagues where fileted accounts are regularly adopted (Middling, 2023). Despite this being an *a priori* theme, some participants explained it was already on their agenda, viewing it as critical to supporter confidence and good management:

> one of the best ways of making sure that clubs are being run sustainably is that they are also run transparently... Unless we've got transparency, we're not going to be able to have regulators and supporters being satisfied that a club is being run in the right way. P2

In practice, however, transparency is lacking. This was especially the case where club owners were perceived as dictators who viewed the club as a private business. A lack of transparency resulted in a lack of trust between supporters and club:

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…two words, transparency and communication for me. Transparency, because basically, the trust [of supporters] has gone in a lot of cases. And even where clubs are well run, there's still sections of fans that don't trust what goes on. P9

Participants felt that meaningful operational and financial information provided to supporters in accessible ways could see them become informal shadow regulators and create and early warning system of financial distress (Adams *et al.*, 2024). This is supported by previous social contract research into corporate reporting (Joensuu *et al.*, 2018) and the ideas of Middling (2023) that making a club's finances and operation's transparent can be a driver for supporter trust and improve clubs' financial health. However, participants did acknowledge that full transparency could be difficult due to sporting rivalries between clubs and a perceived view of owners demanding commercial confidentiality:

[Our owner] is quite wary of giving too much information in general public. He feels if other teams know what you are doing, or agents know what you're doing, then they'll exploit the situation. He doesn't like either agents or other clubs knowing what his business is. P8

This may be the result of some owners having bounded morality in their capitalist views (Dunfee *et al.*, 1999), seeing clubs as businesses and being unable to empathise with the moral values of supporters. This suggests that true transparency could be difficult to achieve. Therefore, it may have to come through regulation rather than club/owner initiatives.

Effective communication

Similarly, clear, honest communication was seen as a conduit to positive supporter engagement. Participants also felt that it aids the relationship and benefits clubs:

…if you understand the mechanics of what goes on at any football club then you're better served to understand why your owners aren't doing this, that, and the other and it stops some of the resentment. P12

In practice, however, participants reported differing levels of communication across clubs. Despite EFL rules stating that clubs should hold meaningful fans' forums at least twice annually, P5's club had not held one for over two years. P5 expressed that this was symptomatic of the owner's attitude to communication:

> …a couple of years ago, [the owner] was asked 'have you met recently with fan groups?' [He replied] 'We haven't met recently with fan groups as we do not feel there are things that we need to discuss.' P5

Though this was reflected by the majority of participants, P14 and P17 expressed that good communication at their clubs leads to increased owner trust and greater goal congruence. This supports the findings of Cleland (2010), who found mixed attitudes to supporter voice at different clubs and also emphasises the pivotal role of owner attitudes in the governance of clubs and suggests that minimum standards should be set by, or for, clubs to ensure a consistent minimal level of engagement.

Respect history and culture

Participants expressed concern that some modern owners do not appreciate, or truly understand, club history and culture. Concern was raised over some owners who viewed clubs from a capitalist viewpoint, and that their interests did not include the moral values of supporters:

> There was a campaign a few years ago to get that old badge back, rather than [the current one] the chairman said no, he didn't like it... what he didn't realise was the whole significance of the [emblem] and he saw it for what it appears. P5

This is particularly important due to the association of supporters to non-product related aspects of their club (Bauer *et al.*, 2005) and suggests that owners are not understanding this important relational factor. This can be further understood by participants' views on the ESL, which they felt was based on capitalist greed by club owners that ignored the history and culture of both the clubs involved and European football's ecosystem. Participants felt that the ESL was a good example of clubs breaking the social contract due to an over-commercialisation that allowed owners to ignore

consultation with supporters and disrespect the history and traditions of clubs:

> It's an attack on the fabric of the football pyramid and further erodes the integrity of the
> leagues. Another example of monies screwing the lower-league teams and creaming off the
> big bucks. P5

This leads onto the next expectation of clubs, which is to involve supporters in decision-making practices.

Involving Fans in decision-making

Again, here there were contrasting experiences of participants depending on the attitude of owners. Some reported good involvement (P17, P12), but others reported the opposite:

> No, fans aren't involved at all (scornful tone). He does fairly frequent radio interviews and…
> how can I put it? He talks a lot, but he doesn't consult on anything. P5

These findings agree with authors such as Cleland (2010) and Middling (2023) who find a willingness from supporters to engage in club governance, and Giulianotti (2005) who argues that supporters wish for clubs to be participatory democracies, but also identifies that not all clubs and owners are willing to listen. Partly, participants saw this as a result of owners' perceived neo-liberal, capitalist viewpoint:

> [owners think] it's their own business and they want to make the decisions… they would argue
> 'it's my money, I'm going to decide on what happens… you're allowed in at three o'clock on
> Saturday, and you go home at five and that's it'. P9

This suggests that the relationship is not the same as the social contract for a traditional business as participants perceived their role in the club-support relationship as greater than customers in a commercial relationship (Morrow, 2023), something they felt was misunderstood by owners due to

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the commodification of the game. Therefore, regulation may again be required to enforce transparent decision-making that involves supporters.

Be a good citizen

The final expectation perceived on the side of clubs and owners is to be a 'good citizen' through their link with the community. Participants spoke with pride about their club's being engaged in this work and expressed that they encourage of clubs to do more of it:

> …there's a huge amount of positive things around football these days. Community Trust work, there's some quite incredible examples …in this city where there's real issues with literacy or health in kids or just them causing trouble, linking educational aspects or health aspects or behaviour aspects of football can have incredibly positive and measurable results... P1

Participants' views aligned with authors such as Hyndman and Liguori (2024) that football can be a force for good in the community and in particular, football clubs are excellent vehicles to execute CSR initiatives (Walters and Chadwick, 2009). This was seen by participants as a key part of the social contract and should be encouraged.

The paper has now presented findings in relations to club/owner expectations (see Figure 1), where participants forwarded several key challenges that would clearly impact the normative social contract. The paper now presents findings regarding the expectations of supporters.

Support the club - fan equity

The first expectation, perceived by all participants, is to support the club through thick and thin, echoing the concept of irrational loyalty that embodies the fan relationship (Morrow, 2023)

> …in the end, the only reason we're interested is not because it's a product or service to purchase. It's because it's in our gut, or it's in our heart… in our family line. And we're not making rational decisions about this… in the end, the reason we do it is the irrationality of being a fan. P19

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Participants argued that they are more than customers, further highlighting their irrational commitment by using synergies to traditional businesses such as supermarkets (P5, P16) where loyalty is consumer driven (King, 1997). Their views also supported research by Giulianotti (2005) that this is more profound in lower leagues, where glory is much less obtainable. However, participants feared their irrational loyalty could be exploited by owners whose views may not align with their moral values (LoMonaco-Benzing and Ha-Brookshire, 2016). This exploitation could take the form of owners reneging on perceived expectations, as owners could easily ignore them with limited ramifications as supporters rarely walk away from their club. This suggests that better governance and regulation needs to be put in place to protect supporters loyalty which effectively renders clubs as local monopolies (Giulianotti, 2005).

Provide income

Participants identified that a primary expectation was to provide income to support clubs' financial sustainability, in line with previous research by Giulianotti (2005):

> you have to try and provide part of the provision of a certain guaranteed income to the club so it can sustain and survive… the responsibilities of fans that, yes, you turn up, hopefully, not just because you're going to win, but you turn up through thick and thin in bad weather, to guarantee the club an income… that's your role as a fan. P7

In times of serious dispute between supporters and owners, supporters often withhold income as a form of protest (Fogg, 2022). Yet the results here suggest that in normal circumstances supporters are responsible for at least part of the club's income, irrespective of on-pitch performance. Due to lesser television and commercial income, this was seen as more important to lower league clubs. This argument accepts the need for, at least in part, a commercial approach to be applied as revenue is required for clubs to compete by buying and remunerating players and developing club infrastructure (Winell *et al.*, 2022). Although supporters feel an unease of the commercialism of football, to an extent they must work with it to provide the necessary resources for their clubs to compete (Welford *et al.* (2015). Striking a balance is also key and clubs should not take this for granted as some participants expressed concern at increasing ticket prices (Goldblatt, 2007), arguing that many fans struggle to afford them:

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> …it costs more now to go to some away games because the 'twenty's plenty' doesn't count in [our league], and [we] are seen as a big fish, so everybody ups their prices, it means our fans are paying more… that's bad… some [local people] don't go on holiday in order to pay for their season ticket… we are from a deprived area. P12

This reiterates the need for clubs to balance financial and sporting logics. Although supporters are willing to provide income and accept a commercial element to the game, clubs should be mindful not to exploit fans by overpricing tickets and viewing supporters in solely monetary terms. Therefore, clubs need to be more attuned to their fan base, in turn strengthening the togetherness of clubs and supporters.

Hold clubs to account

Participants expressed an expectation that supporters hold their clubs to account for their decision-making practices. As such, participants viewed themselves as custodians of their club:

> We talk about owners being custodians, but supporters are custodians as well. Because [we] have the ability to challenge, even if you're not given the information to challenge, to try and preserve your football club, and they have the responsibility to hold [clubs and owners] to account. P8

A key aspect to this was seen as transparency. The desire of supporters to have transparency again aligns with the views of Middling (2023) that clubs should be accountable to supporters and should provide information to supporters in a manner accessible to them, helping supporters become a form of 'shadow governance', an essential part of good governance (Henry and Lee, 2004).

Protect the future of the club

Closely linked to holding clubs to account is an expectation on supporters to help protect the future of their club. The want of supporters to protect their club's future corresponds with the FLR (Crouch, 2021) and is confirmed in part by the findings of this paper:

> Fans have got to take responsibility. Don't moan because your club's in a right old state when you have an opportunity to do something about it. You want to turn up on a Saturday, pay your money and then go home again, then fair enough, but don't moan. P9

These findings align with Cleland and Dixon (2015) that too many passive fans can allow self-interested owners to act in ways that do not align with supporters' moral values. However, in times of dispute, participants expressed that supporters should feel permitted, or even obliged, to non-violently protest. Participants expressed through lived experience that this was a crucial element of their plight:

> I would say protesting is a form of support. Because what you're supporting is the club… the protests that went on against [our ex-owner]… were really important in bringing the attention of what was going on to wider society... got proper national newspaper coverage and led to things like one of our MPs getting a pre-arranged question at… [Prime Minister's Questions time in the House of Commons]. None of that would have happened if we hadn't had the initial fan marches to the gates of [our stadium]... P6

The need for fan protest can be seen as a consequence of owners not fulfilling their expectations and therefore breaking the social contract, breaking the 'rules of the game' (Gray *et al.*, 2014), and is thus a form of punishment by fans (Joensuu *et al.*, 2018). However, the ability by fans to punish owners is limited as they cannot remove them from their position, or choose to leave their relationship with their club, so the contract is at best skewed towards the power of club owners. However, the need for action does support the findings of Russell *et al.* (2016) that boycott and action can used in response to a perceived breaking of a social contract.

Behave responsibly

The final expectation is for supporters to behave responsibly. A strong body of literature on fan hooliganism (e.g. Frodsdick and Walley, 1997), identifies that it is not as prevalent as it was in the 1980s, which is a perceived benefit of commercialisation in football (King, 1997; Winell *et al.*, 2022). However, there is still evidence of racism and prejudice in football crowds (Burdsey, 2020). Participants commented against discriminatory conduct in any form and were generally negative

towards antisocial behaviour such as homophobia and pyrotechnics being used in stadia:

> …There's a certain sort of responsibility for every fan that when they… enter a football ground… there's a certain amount of responsibility that they have to abide by. Conduct themselves in such a way that they would normally do in public life. P9

In line with ISCT, hooliganism may be said to not pass a hypernorm test (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994) as violence is condemned in almost all walks of life. Therefore, it may be seen as against the club-supporter social contract. However, fans are permitted to protest in legal and peaceful ways should they have a dispute with their club and/or owner.

Culmination – Goal congruence

The culmination is a desired sense of goal congruence between supporters, clubs, owners, and other stakeholders. This reiterates the social logic of the game, which is argued to be the most important aspect, even above winning matches. Participants argued that winning and success can be found elsewhere to their hometown club but that this is not the point. The point is to have a local club, run for local people by owners who care for the club, supporters, and community. In return owners would have the loyalty and care of supporters:

> [fans want] loyalty from the owner… fans want to feel [they have] a loyalty to the club… want to feel that everybody is sort of in it together… we want to have an identity with the club. You know, we want to feel part of the club. We want to build relationships with a club… and it isn't just a cash nexus [for the owner]… and they don't like to see what our owner's doing - the way he's treated his managers because that's breaking the sort of emotional, social contracts. P7
>
> Success for me would be a community club… where there is a real town involvement and with a benevolent chairman. P5

Supporters know their team cannot win every match or trophy, but fandom is much more about shared meaning, culture and history (Bauer *et al.*, 2005; Crouch, 2021) highlighting the importance of owners respecting the culture and heritage of the club. Although in the minority, a number of participants conveyed that their club owner was actually fulfilling the social contract by

communicating with supporters, involving them in decision-making, and providing as much transparency as possible, enabling a feeling of goal congruence at their clubs:

> Everything [our club owner] wants to do, he says 'this is what I'm going to do, this is why I'm going to do it. Are you happy, yes, or no? If not, why not?'. 'Ok, you're not happy, I'll discuss it again', and he takes everyone with him, so everybody buys into the journey, everybody is on the same page… everybody understand what's going on therefore we don't get a great clambering for selling the farm to buy promotion. People understand what we are, what we're doing, what we're trying to achieve and how we're going to achieve it. P17

A sense of goal congruence relies partly on trust, which for the most part remains low from fans to owners (García and Llopis-Goig (2020), but would allow for a social licence to be given by supporters to owners (Findlay, 2015). Therefore, owners are advised to observe their expectations in the social contract to foster greater trust allowing goal congruence within a close and communal relationship to flourish.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented a normative social contract for the club-supporter relationship, pertaining to the 'other rules of the game' that can provide a set of guiding principles to both parties (Peer, 2017). In doing so, this paper provides both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretical contributions are threefold. Firstly, in looking at the club-supporter relationship, the paper breaks new ground into a field that is ripe for benefiting from the approach and philosophy of SCT. The findings demonstrate a normative club-supporter social contract, involving expectations on both sides that can help prepare clubs, owners, supporters and regulators to better explore the moral free space prevalent in the current relationship. Secondly, the research also enhances extant football governance literature as it expands the idea of normative good beyond lists provided by authors such as Henry and Lee (2004) to a relational realm with responsibilities on both sides encompassing the social nature professional football. Thirdly, the research helps to develop the understanding of supporters' needs in their relationship with cubs, building on previous work such as Giulianotti (2005) and García and Llopis-Goig (2020).

In practical terms, the research has two main implications, Firstly, findings can be used as a guide for clubs to foster trust and goal congruence with supporters. Understanding the social contract through

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the use of the paper's proposed framework can improve harmony within the club-supporter relationship. By doing so, clubs (and owners), can gain supporters trust, which can have mutual benefits in that it will increase social capital for owners, allowing them more space to err, so long as they do it within the parameters of goal congruence and the moral values of supporters. This is in line with previous social contract studies such as LoMonaco-Benzing and Ha-Brookshire (2016).

However, history shows that some club owners may be unwilling to voluntarily engage in these actions, hence the introduction of the IFR. Therefore, secondly, this research can aid the IFR in setting the parameters of engagement and club governance around the aspects identified in this paper. As argued by Russell *et al.* (2016), the empowerment of parties, such as supporters, to aid in the enforcement of corporate accountability can have positive effects. Thus, a social contract approach can aid the IFR in ensuring supporters' interests and involvement in their clubs to ensure that the implicit 'other rules of the game' are followed.

Limitations and future research direction

There are two main limitations to this research. Firstly, the context specific nature of SCT requires further studies to be undertaken at both higher-level clubs and in other countries to further test the model in this paper. Secondly, a true social contract requires agreement on both sides, and future studies should consider providing the club side of the argument.

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Participant (P) code Assigned	League of club supported (at time of interview)	Type of Organisation Represented	Position in organisation
P1	L1	FSA	Supporter Engagement and Governance Director
P2	Championship	FSA	Governance Representative
P3	EPL	FSA	Financial Representative
P4	L2	Supporters' Trust	Vice-Chair
P5	L2	Supporters' Trust	Secretary
P6	L1	Supporters' Trust	Chair
P7	L2	Supporters' Trust	Chair
P8	L1	Supporters' Trust	Chair
P9	L1	Supporters' Trust	Treasurer
P10	L2	Official Supporters' Club	Chair
P11	L2	Official Supporters' club	Chair
P12	Championship	Supporters' Council	Chair
P13	L2	Supporters' Trust	Chair
P14	L1	Supporters' Trust	Chair
P15	L2	Supporters' Trust	Secretary
P16	Championship	Supporters' Trust	Chair
P17	L1	Official Supporters' Club	Chair
P18	L2	Fan Engagement expert	Business owner

Table 1: List of participants

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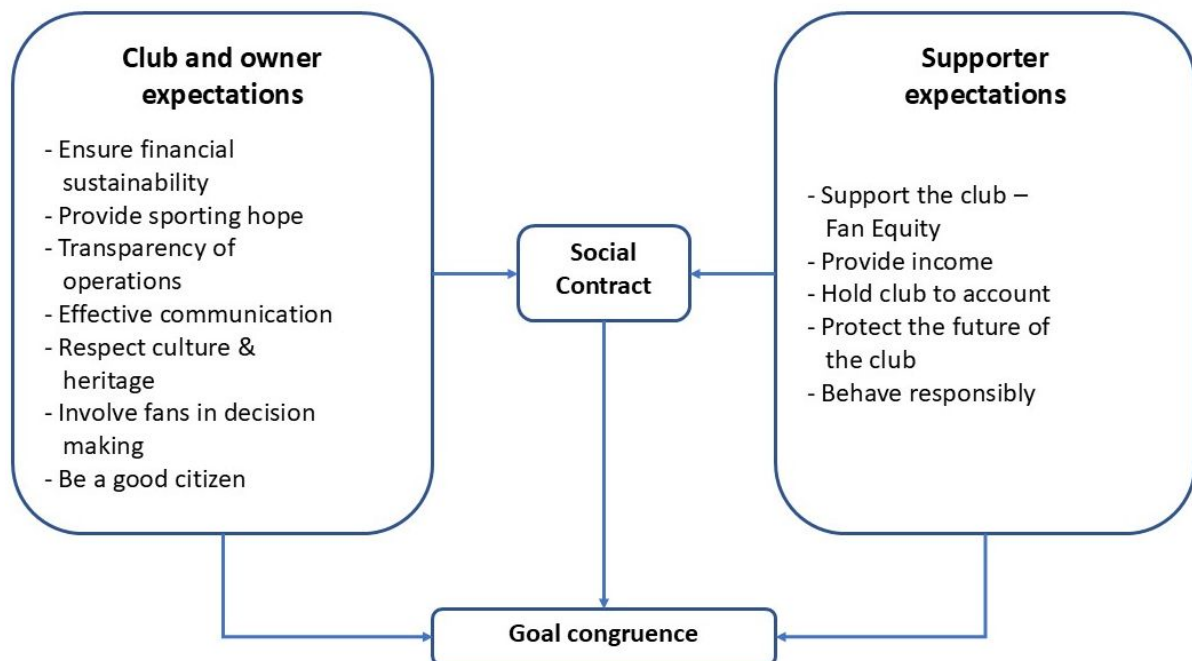
Figure 1: Summarised normative social contract between clubs and owners, and supporters