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A digital ethnography of association football fandom responses to corruption

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ABSTRACT

Rationale: Despite the extant literature on sport fandom and the prevalence of corruption in sport, fans' responses to it remain widely understudied. This study focuses on fans and examines how football fans experience and react to corruption.

Design: The context is Blackpool Football Club, an English league team, which following the owners' corruption allegations, saw the fans leading a large-scale boycott of the club's matches. Qualitative data generated through cyber-ethnography are used.

Findings: We found that in response to corruption, some fans begin engaging with other football teams, while some can move away from football entirely and focus on other aspects of their lives, unsure if they would return.

Practical implications: The study shows that fans can lose contact with fellow fans as a result of not inhabiting the same space in the stadium or due to disagreements centring around the protest action, while also noting that new relationships can be built around the boycott and the protests.

Research contribution: In view of the findings, we propose an extension to the supporter's matrix to encompass the newly observed activities of fans following corruption, so that these *martyr* fans can be accurately reflected in future studies on the subject.

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Introduction

Corruption has long been an issue in professional sport and throughout the history of modern professional football, in particular, a combination of underpaid players, and dishonest managers, owners, and officials, among other issues, have offered particular challenges with respect to the upholding of the integrity of the game (Gregg & Anderson, 2002). As a result, a number of high-profile instances have emerged in recent years suggesting that

significant problems remain within the sport ecosystem. In 2006, for example, a number of football clubs from Italy's top professional leagues, Serie A and Serie B, were implicated in the *Calciopoli* scandal, in which "officials employed by five Italian clubs were found guilty of attempting to influence referee behaviour so as to enhance the winning potential of their teams in particular League fixtures" (Buraimo et al., 2016, p. 23; see also, Buraimo et al., 2012). More recently, in September

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2016, then-manager of the men's England national football team, Sam Allardyce, resigned from his post after 67 days, having managed the team for only one match, in mutual agreement with his employers, the English Football Association [FA], after he was accused of using his substantial role to negotiate a £400,000 payment for offering advice on how to circumvent the country's rules on third party ownership of players from tabloid reporters posing as businessmen (Jewell, 2016).

In the game's highest authority too, corruption by officials and associates connected with the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) has long been a feature of the governance of the game. Following almost two decades of varied corruption allegations (Yallop, 1999), the FIFAgate scandal of May 2015 saw nine FIFA officials (including two of its vice presidents) and five sport company executives indicted by the United States Department of Justice (DoJ) on "47 counts of racketeering, fraud, money laundering, bribes and kickbacks" (Baile & Rayner, 2018, p. 602). Blatter's replacement, Giovanni Infantino, has also recently (July 2020) had criminal proceedings brought against him by a Swiss "Special Federal Public Prosecutor" appointed to review complaints against the current FIFA President and the Swiss Attorney General, Michael Lauber, in relation to "abuse of public office ... , breach of official secrecy ... , assisting offenders ... and incitement to these acts" (OAG, 2020).

As the above mentioned examples illustrate, many different types of corruption within sport, including fraud, doping and financial mismanagement and their impacts have regularly been the subject of academic research (Chien et al., 2016; Gorse & Chadwick, 2010; Manoli et al., 2019; Westmattmann et al., 2020). Despite these examples (and numerous others), and the significant bodies of research and published works into corruption in football, the way in which it impacts directly upon the sport's fandom remains largely under-researched.

There has been a considerable change in the way in which professional football is experienced by its fans and supporters (Bodet et al., 2018) who have increasingly come to be regarded as "customers" and "consumers" (Oppenhuisen & van Zoonen, 2006) as the professional game has become an increasingly commodified, or hyper-commodified enterprise (Giulianotti, 2002). In a move away from its traditional, working-class cultural heritage and roots then (e.g. Duke, 2002), the emergence of "post-fandom" in 1990s saw a mixing or "blurring" of social classes and an increasing tendency for fans to support teams outside of their immediate geographic locales (Davis, 2015, p. 427), which was paired with the founding of the English Premier League (EPL) in 1992 and an influx of income to the professional game from associated broadcast deals and commercial sources (Giulianotti, 2002; Sandvoss, 2004, 2005). Alongside this, refurbished or new stadia have also been developed, with these arenas increasingly becoming more "exclusive spaces, as many – particularly young adult and working-class supporters – have been 'priced out' of attendance" (Giulianotti, 2011, p. 3302). In sum, the increasing global popularity and exposure enjoyed by the EPL in the last three decades, and the influx of money that has come from that expansion, have changed the way in which, and by whom, football is consumed (Manoli & Kenyon, 2019; Sandvoss, 2004).

Previous research by Buraimo et al. (2012) and Hill (2010) has suggested that corruption can have potential impacts on fans, by indicating reduced numbers of attendance in stadiums following corruption. However, what this literature base is lacking, is a deeper understanding of how these fans experience and react to corruption at their clubs, and whether corruption within a club can affect their fandom and their connections with other fans. In response to this, this study will focus on a case of corruption in a football setting, in order to explore the effects of corruption on fandom, the length of this impact and whether current methods

adequately capture these behaviours of fans. This is offered by a detailed investigation of corruption in a professional football team in England and the subsequent boycott of the club by the fans. Thus, an important feature of this research is to focus on the fans experiencing corruption. As such, the article begins by discussing the literature on fandom and corruption, and exploring how these concepts link together. The context, design and methods of the research are outlined, before the results are presented and discussed. The implications and limitations of this study and conclusions complete this paper.

Literature review

Corruption

A universal definition of corruption remains elusive as the concept has become a byword for multiple legal and illegal acts, for example, bribery, nepotism and embezzlement (Manoli, 2018; Brooks et al., 2013; Gardiner, 2002). Among the many reasons for such complexity are the differences between individual perception, public perception, and national laws that often differ around the world (Gardiner, 2002; Masters, 2015). Despite the many definitions of corruption, their usefulness, when applied to acts of corruption in sport, is said to be limited due to differentiation between the public sector from which the definitions are given and the private sector in which most sport takes place (Brooks et al., 2013).

The definition with which this research aligns best is “the deviation from public expectations that sport will be played and administered in an honest manner” (Masters, 2015, p. 113). This definition is particularly useful within the field of sport as it considers that a wide range of acts can be described as corruption without being limited to certain corrupt acts either on or off field, and recognising that in some cases these acts may not be illegal. The definition was useful to this research as,

at the start of the boycott action by the fans, it had not been proven that the ownership of the club had been acting in an illegally corrupt manner – something which was not established until 2017 (Conn, 2018).

Fandom

Fandom can be thought of as subculture that is engaged in by people with a similar interest (Davis, 2015; Sandvoss, 2005). Modern day fandom can be observed in many different fields, including sport, films, television, and music (Sandvoss, 2004). However, this study focuses on football fandom. As football fandom has developed, so have various typologies to characterise the nature of support (Dixon, 2011), a selection of which are detailed in Table 1.

The typologies in Table 1 are all regularly cited in academic literature (for example, Bodet et al., 2018) and attempt to group fans based on a shared behaviour; for example, attendance, time or financial commitment (see; Hunt et al., 1999; Sutton et al., 1997; Wann et al., 2001). These typologies also attempt to take into account the changing nature of football fandom, with for example, Giulianotti (2002) referencing a move from traditional “fans” to post-fandom “consumers”. This is a conception that is also proffered by Tapp and Clowes (2002), who have noted the emergence of less committed fans with a

Table 1. Fandom typologies.

Source	Fan categories
Sutton et al. (1997)	Low, Medium and High
Hunt et al. (1999)	Temporary, Local, Devoted, Fanatical and Dysfunctional
Wann et al. (2001)	Low and High
Giulianotti (2002)	Flâneurs, Fans, Followers and Supporters
Tapp and Clowes (2002)	Carefree Casuals and Committed Casuals
Harris and Ogbonna (2008)	Arm-chair fans, Social Fans, Old-Timers, Leisure switchers, Anti-fans, Club-connected supporters and Die-hard fanatics
Fillis and Mackay (2014)	Social Devotee, Casual Follower, Committed Supporter and Fan

preference on an entertaining game, rather than “their” team winning. The typology proposed by Harris and Ogbonna (2008) spans from “armchair” to “die-hard” fans. Their research focused on the acceptance or rejection of marketing aimed at football fans by their clubs, with the more traditional, high involvement fans seemingly rejecting these marketing attempts (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008).

Despite the obvious contributions of these typologies, their relevance in describing the complexities of modern-day fandom can be questioned. For example, they often focus on match day attendance as a measure of the authenticity of a supporter while the advent of satellite television and the subsequent emergence of widespread internet and social media usage has allowed fans the opportunity to continue their support far away from a team’s stadium (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). A growing body of research has thus noted that fans no longer have to attend their teams matches to be considered “authentic” or “high involvement” (Crawford, 2004; Gibbons & Nuttall, 2016). Fans themselves also appear to be less concerned about match attendance as an indicator of fan involvement, understanding that it might not be possible for individuals to attend regularly (Gibbons & Nuttall, 2016).

In addition, the typologies can contradict each other. An example being the disagreement between Harris and Ogbonna (2008), Hunt et al. (1999), and Sutton et al. (1997) over the extent to which high involvement fans contribute to their club financially. Attempting to address such difficulties, Fillis and Mackay (2014) suggest that the existing typologies are too narrowly defined, leading them in consequently developing a supporter matrix in an effort to assist in further understanding fan loyalty through social integration. The matrix recognises that fans can, and do, move more fluidly across categories than previously thought (Fillis & Mackay, 2014).

“Social devotees” are individuals who look to fit in with other supporters to gain social

recognition, whereas the “casual follower” rarely embraces the social aspect of football. While both attend matches, they lack the connection to the club of the more involved fans. These individuals are known as “fans” and “committed supporters”. Fillis and Mackay (2014) understand “fans” and “committed supporters” to be individuals that are heavily involved with their teams, although how this is displayed may differ. Both use social media as a way of becoming closer to their club and other fans (something which other typographies have failed to encapsulate), though fans will use it less, preferring a real-life connection. Both display high levels of loyalty, while the other segments of supporters will look towards the committed supporters for guidance (Fillis & Mackay, 2014). This study adopts this matrix and its definitions of supporters to underpin the work and subsequent findings.

The impacts of corruption on football support can be very damaging. If an aspect of sport is (or is even considered to be) corrupt, then it can lose its supporters (Hill, 2010). For example, Buraimo et al. (2012) found that Italian football fans, when faced with the corruption associated with the aforementioned Calciopoli scandal, stopped attending as did Manoli and Antonopoulos (2015) in a study on Greek football. Hill (2010) also noted that the corruption of whole local leagues has led to a similar decline of fan attendance in Asian Football. In this instance, once corruption through match fixing put fans off attending matches, sponsors began pulling their support which subsequently led to a “collapsed league” (Hill, 2010, p. 50).

Literature such as that above, however, treats fan response in a one-dimensional way in charting that they are less likely to attend matches or their attachment to brands falls. Moreover, even the existing typologies of football fandom noted above, assign a sense of commitment as fans to their behaviour. Such an approach fails to recognise that fans may still identify strongly with their club though a

boycott. Existing fan typologies including the more recent Fillis and Mackay (2014), still fall short in explaining modern day fan behaviour, as they do not make allowances for responses by the fans to “shocks” such as corruption and activism.

The devaluing of opinions and actions of fans who do not conform to the existing typologies can lead to any research that is conducted missing out on valuable data as they may fail to take into account the breadth of issues now seen in modern football, such as the activism of fans (Brown, 2007; Numerato, 2018; Porter, 2011). This issue can be illustrated by fans who boycott matches, and the problems that this action causes within pre-existing typologies. By not attending matches these fans would immediately come into conflict with the predetermined understandings of high involvement fans, in this case “supporters”. This is a point raised by Porter (2011) in his research on FC United of Manchester fans, who were formed as an alternative for those boycotting Manchester United F.C. due to the ownership of the club by the Glazer family. In his study, he argued that those fans who had boycotted, viewed themselves as being high involvement fans, even though they were not attending matches, as “they were sacrificing their cherished status as match-goers for the benefit of their club” (Porter, 2011, p. 279). Porter (2011) thus rationalises that the fans who leave their existing space of support are doing this as a last resort to maintain their existing high involvement fandom.

The concept of loyalty in football fandom is put under pressure when fans partake in activism and protest, sometimes against their own clubs. Like any other group of individuals, football fans will protest if they view actions, football related and non-football related, to be at odds with their beliefs. Football has been used as a political tool for most of its history by governments attempting to assert forms of control over supporters, by using their teams as a vehicle in which to attach

their political ideals (Power et al., 2020). Some fans will use their clubs as an extension of their political beliefs on both sides of the political spectrum (Spaij, 2015). For example, from the famously left leaning fans of St Pauli the Hamburg based German side (Daniel & Kassimeris, 2013) to more right-wing approach observed on several different terraces around the world (Doidge, 2018; Kassimeris, 2011).

It is this protest or in this case the boycott of matches, which is an issue central to this research, that existing research on fandom has viewed in a rather superficial way. With the existing typologies referencing match day attendance, fans that boycott their team’s matches would not be classified as high involvement fans (i.e. those who attend games often), but would instead be classed as low involvement fans (i.e. those who attend infrequently or never).

With the above in mind, the following research question guides the present study: How does corruption impact on football fandom in the short and long term?

Study overview

The focus of this research is Blackpool Football Club (F.C.), based in the coastal town of Blackpool in north-west England. The club currently plays in the English Football League’s (EFL) League One competition, the third tier of professional football in the country (Ashdown, 2017). This research took place during a fan-led boycott of home matches and other associated revenue streams due to the perceived mismanagement of the club by the then-owner Owen Oyston. Oyston became the club’s owner in 1988 and oversaw a change in fortunes which culminated in promotion to the top tier of English football in 2010, the EPL (Holmes, 2017; Liew, 2010). However, the club’s stay in the EPL was short-lived and they were relegated after a single season. Relegation in 2011 signalled the start of a decline in the on-field fortunes of the club as they were relegated three more times in quick succession.

Despite these adverse developments, it later became known that Oyston had paid himself an £11 m directors' salary for the single season in the Premier League, the largest ever of its kind (Conn, 2012).

A divide that was then beginning to emerge between the fans and the owners was subsequently further aggravated through several incidents. For example, in 2015 the then-owner's son, Blackpool F.C. chairman Karl Oyston, was sanctioned by the Football Association (FA) for taunting and abusing fans through text messages, while a program of suing fans who had allegedly defamed them on social media was also enacted by the Oyston family (Goodwin, 2015; Riach, 2015). Such incidents served to galvanise the 2014 "Not A Penny More" movement by fans who both refused to attend live games which would generate revenue for the club and buy any official club merchandise. The movement and protest contributed toward a fall in attendance of 23% for the 2014/2015 season, and further falls of 36% and 51%, respectively, for 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 seasons. Such was the success of the protests and boycott, and the strength of feeling and resentment toward the club's owners, that between the 2013/2014 and 2018/2019 seasons, the average attendance at Blackpool F.C.'s Bloomfield Road stadium (total capacity: 16,116) fell from 14,217 per home game to 5157.

The aim of the protests and boycott was to force the Oyston family into selling the club (Steinberg, 2017). In November 2017, a London court ruled that the owners had conducted business practices regarding Blackpool F.C. with unfair prejudice (Conn, 2018). As a result, the Oyston's were ordered to pay damages of £31.2 m plus costs to minority shareholder Valeri Belokons, with the judge stating that the ownership had "illegitimately stripped" the club of funds (Conn, 2017). In March 2019, and with the appointment of receivers to facilitate the sale of the club, the boycott was ended by Blackpool F.C. fans, 15,871 of whom attended the club's next home game

against Southend United, filling the Bloomfield Road stadium to over 98% of its 16,116 capacity (Scrafton, 2019). This case of fan protest at Blackpool F.C. thus provides both a timely and valuable opportunity to examine the impact of corruption on football fans.

Method

This research employed a cyber-ethnography design. Cyber-ethnography is the process of collecting data through traditional ethnographic methods within virtual spaces, in this case, fan forums. As such, the discussions and responses by fans to topics started by other fans within these forums were analysed (Keeley-Browne, 2011). It has been found that traditional ethnographic methods of data collection are well suited to this online method of research, as the data field can easily remain undisturbed, allowing the researcher to observe authentic behaviour (Hine, 2000; Pearson, 2012).

The advantages of online data collection methods have played a part in accelerating its growth and popularity among researchers (Cleland, 2014). Key of these are access to large amounts of internet-based forum data, often stretching back over many years (Fielding et al., 2008), which in turn presents an opportunity to explore any potential change in behaviour (Adair et al., 2006).

Participants

To select the forums that would be of most use, this research is informed by Weslowski's (2014) work who suggests using those aligned with the research and populated by a large member base. Taking this view into account, two online fan forums specifically used by Blackpool F.C. fans were selected due to their popularity among the fan group, and the regular discussions surrounding the ownership of the football club, the actions of fans, and hopes expressed for the future. In addition, members of these forums have also been

involved in the past litigation of individuals by the owners of Blackpool FC (Conn, 2017). In addition, the forums were selected for their practical benefits as well, as both were open source meaning that they did not require preregistration and/or a signing in process in order to view the discussions (i.e. they were publicly available).

Materials

Data were collected in the months of August and November in 2017 by an observation of posts made by fans. These months were selected due to the increased number of posts and interaction observed on the forums at these times. August is traditionally the start of the English football league season and this coincides with many posts and discussions on the forum. In total, the month of August yielded 1013 threads for this research. The rationale for selecting November as a time period was the conclusion of the court battle between the then owner of the football club, Owen Oyston and minority shareholder, Valeri Belokons. This produced a significant level of discussion between forum users and there was subsequently an almost constant stream of activity on the forums over the course of the month. In total, 1645 threads were collected during November, meaning that, when combined, the months of August and November produced 2658 threads across the two forums for consideration in the initial analysis. The months of September and October were excluded for the data collection, in order to maintain the manageability of the data and to facilitate data analysis, as previous studies adopting digital ethnography recommend (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Walker, 2010).

Procedures

Drawing on previous research by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012); the following protocol was designed in order to conduct the cyber-

ethnography. The first step in cyber-ethnography protocol involves familiarisation with the context in which this study is taking place. This can be achieved by the researchers' prior personal knowledge, by reading an array of news reports and by engaging with the existing research if available. In this case, the familiarisation came from the existing knowledge of the research team and a detailed reading of news reports detailing the ongoing situation at the club. The next stage involves securing data that are to be used. Information on internet forums can disappear if the site is taken offline. As such the data was recorded and stored securely in line with the ethical policies of the research conducted (Kytölä, 2013). The analysis of data then follows beginning with an initial screen of the forums used to refine the data before further analysis. Topics on the forums which were filtered out in this initial phase, and labelled "Off Topic", included discussions on television shows, politics and local interest matters unrelated to football. This reduced the initial collection of forum threads down to 492. The process of the thematic analysis, where key themes are researched, is presented below (Table 2).

Data analysis

Following the procedures detailed in the Cyber-Ethnography Protocol above, and the initial

Table 2. Cyber-ethnography protocol.

1 Familiarise with Context	The researcher will have to identify the potential media to use for investigation.
2 Select Forums	Selection of appropriate forums to use within research and define data collection period. Including ease of use, private or public, well used.
3 Secure Data	Store the data from online area to offline area
4 Analyse Data (First Phase)	Initial assessment made on usable forum threads to reduce amount and increase focus of data
5 Analyse Data (Second Phase)	Further analysis of forum threads to produce in depth data codes and themes including reliability measures

screening of the data the final phase of data analysis commenced. The relevant forum threads identified in the fourth phase of the protocol (described above) were analysed to develop codes and themes through a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a way of seeing the patterns that emerge from the raw data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). When conducting thematic analysis, this study used the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), while NVivo was used to code the data (Nowell et al., 2017). After a process of data familiarisation some initial codes were determined, using a data driven approach based on the observed raw data outlined by Boyatzis (1998). Following on from the initial code generation, themes were then constructed out of smaller, similar codes, to capture important and patterned data which relate to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes that did not fit into any of the themes were not discarded but put into a separate miscellaneous theme to be kept until the themes were reviewed and their usefulness was properly ascertained (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In phase six of the thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2006) argue in their work, and while the themes had been reviewed and the research team were in the process of finalising the analysis and producing a “concise, coherent, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes” (p. 23), the main themes indicated that fandom behaviour and personal relations, the two main themes that emerged through this study, as well as their corresponding sub-themes, pointed towards the existence of a rather discreet fan category that better captures the impact of corruption on football fandom, as it will be detailed in the analysis below.

Research quality and ethics

With respect to research quality and ethics in the field of cyber-ethnography, it should be

noted first that misrepresentation can occur through posters setting up multiple profiles to offer similar or contradictory stances or by siding with a view that they do not truly hold giving an unclear picture of the collected data. This is referred to as identity play (Hine, 2000) and can lead to difficulty in determining if a post on a forum is a genuinely held belief by the poster. However, Hine also states that this identity play is no more prevalent in the online world than in offline methods and should not discourage its use within studies such as this (Hine, 2000). A further complication is that of the identity of online participants being masked. This could lead to a situation where the researcher inadvertently interacts with “vulnerable groups” including the young, elderly and those with mental health issues (Eynon et al., 2008). While there is potential for misrepresentation to occur online, it has been argued that this behaviour is no more prevalent online than offline (Correll, 1995; Hine, 2000), which offers some confidence that consistent and truthful responses could be gathered from users of these online spaces.

There are also ethical implications connected with the covert observation of fans. The justification for operating covertly is that a researcher wishes to maintain the natural environment which they are researching (Roberts, 2015). There are different methods of covert observation online, including varying forms of deception, such as interaction with the forum participants to stimulate discussion (Eynon et al., 2008; Wilkerson, 2016). As the aim of this study is to merely observe rather than interact with the participants, this research does not engage in such deception. A further ethical challenge with this type of data collection occurs when considering the participants’ informed consent. Informed consent in internet-based studies is rarely straightforward especially when considering the difficult distinction between public and private communication in the online

space (Griggs, 2011). If the forum is accessed via a password, then it could be a place where participants expect a level of privacy and thus its use should be considered further (Mayer & Till, 1996). In this situation the data were freely accessible to any user who visits either forum without the need to register or sign up – thus breach of privacy was not an issue.

As the researchers were aware that legal action had, in the past, been taken by the Oystons against fans for posting on social media (Conn, 2017), there was an obligation by the researcher to obscure the identity of the posters in analysis (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Bruckman (2002) has suggested adopting several steps on a scale of disguise; none, light, moderate, or heavy. The disguise employed in this study could be classified as between moderate and heavy. As such, data were fully anonymised to protect the privacy of the individuals within the forum (Svenningson, 2003). This was accomplished by removing all identifiable markers, such as posting name, date, time and the name of the forum in which the post appears (Cleland, 2014).

Results

Following the analysis of the collected data, two main themes emerged, Fandom Behaviour and Personal Relationships, these themes, and sub-themes, are shown in Table 3. All themes that emerged through the data analysis indicated that fandom behaviour and personal relationships could point towards a discreet fan category that more accurately captures the impact of corruption on football fandom, as it will be detailed in this section below. As it is illustrated in Table 3 below, each of the sub-themes that emerged indicated towards a discreet characteristic fandom as impacted by corruption, that is summarised in the comments column of the table.

The first theme, Fandom, developed out of insight into the way in which fans behaved during the protest. There was an observable change in fandom behaviours by Blackpool F.C. fans stemming from the supporter-led Not A Penny More (NAPM) campaign. This was undertaken to show displeasure at the actions of the owners, to reduce income into the football club and make it more difficult for it to be a profitable business, with the ultimate goal

Table 3. Themes and sub themes summary with comments.

Themes	Sub-themes	Comments
Fandom behaviour	Habit Change	Traditional match attendance is altered
	Anti-Fan Behaviour	Support remains a lived experience for the committed supporter with sacrifice but the other elements including pride, allegiance and loyalty are negatively impacted
	Reshaping Fandom	Consumption and support elements will decrease with match attendance but will take place at protests and supporter led meetings
	Reflection on Futility	Will actively use social media to heighten their connection with the club and with other supporters
	Future Fan Loss	Invents barriers between new fans and club and associated businesses
	Long-Term Change	Traditional match attendance is altered
	Fan Return	Invents barriers between new fans and club and associated businesses
	Fan Involvement Support	Will actively use social media to heighten their connection with the club and with other supporters
	Fan Involvement Attendance	May remain part of dense network Traditional match attendance is altered
Personal relations	Fan Discourse	Invents barriers between new fans and club and associated businesses
	Long-Term Damage	Invents barriers between new fans and club and associated businesses
	Loss of Connections	Invents barriers between new fans and club and associated businesses
	New Connections	May remain highly socially active

being that the owners would need to sell the club. Thus, the differences in fan behaviour within this context include a deviation from the normal habits of fans outlined in previous fan typologies such as attending matches or patronising the club shop. These actions were carried out by supporters to remain “NAPM compliant”, in view of both themselves and other supporters. Some supporters were even willing to increase their financial investment in other clubs or forms of entertainment. For example, “It would cost me nothing to get there, but I am not going. AFC Fylde in a month will have to do as a substitute”.

As this quote shows, despite one of the key components of the NAPM campaign being to boycott attendance at Blackpool F.C.’s home matches, the fans regularly discussed the need for a replacement “football fix”, and where and how they aimed to find it. For example, in the quote above, the forum poster mentions attending an AFC Fylde match, a lower level team in the nearby village of Kirkham, instead of a Blackpool F.C. fixture. In this instance, this individual opted to travel a further distance, presumably with an extra associated cost, to attend a game at a lower level rather than break the NAPM boycott. This behaviour that emerged through the data, is a significant finding of the research, illustrating an unusual and previously undocumented behaviour for fans. Football fans are known for their passionate rivalries and strong sense of loyalty, but with corruption as the catalyst, we can show that football fans can behave in unfamiliar ways including switching teams. Data gleaned from the forums also suggest that fans have taken to attending more away fixtures for their “football fix” whilst remaining compliant with the fan boycott, as the following quote shows: “People still need a footy fix now and then so attending away games is the only option. It maintains a certain level of interest”.

As has previously been noted, fans often display high levels of loyalty towards their

football club and try to attend every match that they can, home and away, and so these findings demonstrate the lengths these fans are prepared to go to maintain their involvement with the club. Other fans, who are not able to (or choose not to) attend away games or the matches of other teams, attempted to maintain their sense of belonging to the club by becoming involved in independent supporter-led organisations and protest activities. Such fans regularly discussed the joining of these organisations, while the organisations regularly used the message boards to disseminate information to the other supporters. For example:

The committee of Blackpool Supporters Trust is meeting this evening to review and strategize the implications of yesterday's historic High Court ruling. Thank you to everyone who has supported the cause to date. BST will issue a detailed statement tomorrow regarding next steps.

As this quote shows, supporters were still partaking in events, just ones that were not focused towards the club. These events included protest marches at both the club and the governing body, the EFL, attending supporters’ club meetings or the various court cases that took place over this period. In this particular example, supporters had attended a meeting in the midst of the boycott, close to Blackpool F.C.’s Bloomfield Road stadium to update the fan base on the current issues at the club and what would happen next, while supporters at the meeting were providing a commentary for those who could not make it, resembling the live broadcast of a football matches as the quote shows: “For those who couldn’t make it a great meeting in progress with loads of good questions being asked. 100s here!”

In the data presented thus far, it is not yet clear whether the behaviours exhibited are temporary or more permanent, though there were discussions that do offer some insight, while the future of the club support, both on

an individual and collective basis, is a point several posters raise. For some fans, the measures and behaviours relating to NAPM campaign were widely viewed as temporary and such fans suggested that their pre-NAPM, match-going behaviours would return once the goal of the movement had been realised and a change in ownership was brought about. For example, "I think I have made it quite clear I love only one club and will be back there at the first chance there is with different majority owners". However, there were also indications that a permanent change to fandom behaviours might also occur. Messages of this nature seemed to indicate that even a change of ownership might not reinvigorate support, and such was the strength of long-term negative feelings towards the club that these posters suggested would impact on their support in the future. For these fans it appeared that they would not return to active support to the levels previously experienced. For some, other non-football-related interests have been taken up, replacing the time and money that they had once committed to supporting Blackpool F.C.

Certainly, I will be attending games but like the OP don't envisage doing it anywhere near as often as I used to and although will never say never, I can't see me buying a season ticket or attending in the region of 10-12 away matches a season as I used to. Really enjoyed doing other things at weekends.

Related to the above, another area of note was the fear of the impact on attracting new generations of fans to supporting Blackpool F.C. One of chief concerns was that potential younger fans had not been able to attend games with their boycotting parents, who they would have gone with previously. Indeed, as is indicated above, some of those parents have now replaced their support for Blackpool with alternative activities. Accordingly, fans on the forum were anxious that this decline in younger fans will not just last for the duration

of the boycott but for much longer. The potential younger, fans of Blackpool F.C. may instead turn to bigger clubs, further afield, outside of the town, and possibly take their parents with them, as the following quote shows "Just another sad legacy from the [Oyston's] regime. The fanbase has been decimated & [in my opinion] as mentioned on another thread has been set back a generation".

Concerns about generational fan loss were often viewed in tandem with concerns about feelings of a lack of ability of the fans to affect meaningful change and of disempowerment where their club is concerned. In the following quotes, the supporters at Blackpool F.C. also demonstrated behaviours that go against the supposed high levels of loyalty, allegiance, and pride that they should show, according to Fillis and Mackay (2014). They view the owners of the football club, the Oyston family, as untrustworthy and dishonourable. While it is perhaps not unusual for supporters of a club to disagree with their club's hierarchy, calling into question their motives and integrity is less common; for example, "I doubt honourable and graceful are in their vocabulary". The relationship between the supporters and the owners has caused feelings towards the club as an entity to suffer. Responding to questions on whether or not they would return to their previous support of Blackpool F.C., responses, like in the example below, were very cautious. It appeared that the current situation had not only impacted on the last few seasons when they were not attending matches but on the previous memories of the club going back many further years: "My team is totally tainted & I honestly don't know how I will feel". Such views exemplified a complete lack of pride felt by the supporters in their team, resulting from ownership mistrust and leading to an increasing lack of allegiance.

The findings of this cyber-ethnography also revealed further discussions around how personal relationships between the fans had been altered, and there were many who had

lamented over the fact that such relationships had either become less regular or broke down completely. Relationships even amongst those supporters that had tried to stay involved in club or supporter organisation activities had felt a loss with respect to their relationships, with one post in particular summing up the feelings of many others: "It's not the money, it's the camaraderie and sense of belonging I miss". Going beyond that, there was also evidence of a divide emerging amongst fans which had developed according to positions concerning the boycott: "I have fallen out with people I've known for a long time, real mates long term friendships due to different opinions". There were also many reported incidents of mistrust among the fan base which largely centred around the truthfulness of certain supporter posts on the message boards concerning things like: game attendance, views on the boycott, and abiding by the NAPM stance. Some supporters also noted a feeling of superiority over one another due to their behaviour during the boycott, asserting that the side of the action they are on makes them the real fans of the club. For example, "This is why I cannot accept anyone who condones their ownership in anyway. This includes having dialogue, with them or any of the Scabs that still fund them".

As the example above shows, contained within these posts were instances of abuse directed at others on the forum, with some even mentioning the possibility of physical violence against other supporters. For some, these negative feelings were expected to continue in the long-term, with several offering views that those who had continued to attend home matches during this period be moved or segregated away from the returning NAPM and boycott supporters when they eventually returned to the ground: "I would be in favour of them being segregated when we get our club back. Would hate to be sat next to one of them". This comment points to a future relationship that could continue to be tarnished

by the current choices that fans on both sides of the divide make. This, in some sense, contradicts other comments from the forum which pointed to a development of new connections made between fans due to the boycott action. For example, "We've made true lifetime friends because of the Oyston regime and we all count you as one of them". Forum participants noted that other supporters who had not previously interacted when supporters had been attending the matches, have been brought together by the boycott. This could both be seen in an online context and offline, in the real world, as fans often met up at protests or court dates.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of corruption on football fandom through a cyber-ethnography of football fan forums, in order to shed light to the rather understudied issue of football fandom following corruption. The findings suggest that as previously noted (Buraimo et al., 2012; Hill, 2010), fans will remove their support for an entity if they perceive it to be corrupt, be that, in a sporting context, a club, an organisation, or a league. In the context of this research, this was typified by the many fans on the forums who suggested that they were no longer inhabiting the match day spaces they once did (pre-NAPM), and similar to Millward's (2012, p. 636) work into the fans of Liverpool F.C. and the mobilisation of the Spirit of Shankly supporter group, the more "committed" fans were "making a conscious decision to give up their tickets because of its financial cost". The findings of this research, however, advance the literature by offering insight into what happens after the corruption acts associated with the supported entity (in this case, Blackpool F.C.) cease and the fandom resumes or, in the case of this research, sometimes not.

Fans and supporters also appeared to be no longer as socially active with some pre-existing

relationships, even amongst those considered the closest of friends, declining. Many a social group disintegrated, with those supporters who continued to attend matches criticised by those who considered themselves more involved or more committed supporters by virtue of their involvement or support for the NAPM movement. Such a finding offers further insight into how sport in general, and football in particular, both facilitates and is facilitated by the socialising nature of its fandom (see, for example, Dixon, 2013). Further insights emerge in the form of the new relationships that have developed during NAPM protest, with evidence suggesting that committed supporters have become socially active in spaces away from the stadium; for example, supporting other fans in court cases against the ownership.

There was also evidence to suggest that supporters became more active within supporter groups due to the corruption, joining protests or supporter-led organisations, with most noting that the act of corruption at the football club was a catalyst for their behaviour; another finding that resonates with the work of Millward (2012) as well as Brown's (2008) research into fan communities at F.C. United of Manchester – a club set-up in opposition to the Glazer family's ownership of Manchester United F.C. Such changes in behaviour and attitudes resulting from corruption are a common thread running through the collected data. For example, feelings of loyalty, allegiance, and notably pride had, not surprisingly, changed throughout the duration of the boycott. Supporters no longer viewed their club in a positive light, stating that their positive view of all things Blackpool F.C. had been substantially decreased by the events of the previous years. Extending the work of Hyatt (2007) some even adopted the view that it would be preferable for the team to lose so as to hasten the departure of the ownership.

In sum, this study suggests that the loss of fandom due to corruption may be harder to

recover than previously considered. Under normal circumstances, existing research has suggested that committed fans would stick by their club in the face of poor results or even relegation to lower leagues (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010; Malcolm et al., 2000; Matsuoka et al., 2003). However, it can now be suggested that corruption may be the tipping point over which supporters will not only no longer attend matches themselves but forgo other associated normal fandom behaviours, such as maintaining relationships with other fans, thus losing aspects of their fandom potentially permanently.

The reasons for the fans permanent absence are different, some have found other things to do within the football community, for example, watching other teams. Others have found things outside of football to do which they are unwilling to give up with previous regularity, when football has again become an option. Arguably, the most damaging group to football are those fans who have fallen out of love with the game and not only cannot see themselves back at the ground but have removed themselves from all forms of football, which is a concern for both clubs and those that oversee them.

Managerial and policy implications

Football clubs should view this research as illustrating the importance of operating in a socially acceptable and non-corrupt manner with greater transparency. The case at Blackpool has highlighted that supporters, even those that are highly invested in within their support, can and will alter this support when aware of corruption taking place. When committed supporters, those who encourage new fans, that invest heavily time wise and financially in the club, become disenfranchised with the club's actions it can be incredibly dangerous for the club's business. Attendances and associated matchday revenues in this case declined markedly as fans boycotted them.

Sponsorship agreements followed suit with agreements at Blackpool F.C. being cancelled with the club due to supporter intervention (Watt, 2015). The management of football clubs and governance organisations may seek to avoid situations like this by allowing for fans' greater input into the running of their clubs, by including the option for a potential move to fan ownership models and increasing their own accountability (Cocieru et al., 2018).

The findings of this research are also particularly interesting when considered in the context of supporter typographies. In the case of the Fillis and Mackay's (2014) supporter matrix discussed above, both "fans" and "committed supporters" displayed very different behaviour to what is expected of them by this matrix. For example, while communication online has been unaffected, the topics of discussion have changed, and traditional match attendance, a staple of the committed supporter, is no longer taking place. Further, the refusal to buy merchandise from the club shop was also typical of such supporters as was the encouragement of other supporters to follow their lead. In considering the findings of this research in the context of Fillis and Mackay's (2014) supporter matrix, we propose an extension to the matrix by adding the previously neglected category of the *martyr* fans, which incorporates the fans' reactions identified in this study (for the fans who exhibit the previously discussed discreet fandom behaviour and personal relations) and thus takes into account the impact of corruption on football fandom. Table 4 thus encapsulates the extended support matrix, in which the newly identified category of fans is included, alongside its discreet characteristics, as they emerged from the analysis of the data.

The table presented advances both the Fillis and Mackay (2014) supporter matrix and others by highlighting the previously unreported behaviours of fans following corruption. Following acts of corruption, many behaviours that would have been considered normal for

football fans, including traditional match attendance by the committed supporters, have been altered. There has been a decision by the fans to stop attending games involving the club as a response to corruption. This behaviour, along with changes in loyalty and pride, would previously mean that these fans would not be considered to be in any high involvement or committed supporter categories. We argue that despite the lack of attendance by fans, the vast majority retain their committed supporter status as their focus, albeit within their new *martyr* status, and sacrifices usually made attending matches and supporting the team, are turned to protest activities with the goal of effecting change within the club. Furthermore, previous typologies have often shown that highly involved supporters will act in a way that would encourage other, and new, fans to attend the club's matches. However, while these highly involved supporters are still looked at for guidance by the less involved fans, in this case *martyr* supporters are actively discouraging attendance by other fans. Future studies must now be aware that the typologies, discussed earlier on the article, struggle to accurately represent issues and behaviours that occur within modern day fandom as supporter engagement has changed, and thus the extended typology presented above could be used to better capture a more realistic image of today's fandom.

Finally, there are several conclusions that can be drawn from this piece of work. As a result of the findings of this research, existing theory into the impacts of corruption has to be rethought. For example, we suggest that, following corruption, commitment is not solely about attendance; Fans can show commitment, and loyalty, through their response to corruption which does not have to be focused on matches and attending the stadium. Additionally, corruption can have a detrimental impact for the club as fans, both old and new, appear to drift away from the club they had previously

Table 4. Extended supporter matrix (adapted from Fillis & Mackay, 2014, p. 49).

Social devotee	Casual follower	Fan	Committed supporter	Martyr supporter
Looks to fit in	Initial limited social integration	Displays attachment to the team through match attendance and conveys a degree of subcultural capital through wearing of team shirts, scarves, etc.	Highly socially active	May remain highly socially active
Seeks group attachment within a community	Less inclined to attend matches but interested in the team and their performance	Gains experience of the team over time	Dense network	May remain part of dense network
Sees football as day-out experience at stadium, pub, or other venue	Lacks knowledge and experience	Impacted less socially	Traditional match attendance	Traditional match attendance is altered
Craves social recognition and belonging	Loose connection with others	Expresses lower level of affinity with others	Followers, fans, and social devotees depend on supporter for inspiration and motivation	Invents barriers between new fans and club and associated businesses
Supports team through match attendance and online forums	Less committed followers forget the experience over time	Although individual lived experience is important, affected more by specific memories and incidents	Catalyst behind creation of new fans	Support remains a lived experience for the committed supporter with sacrifice but the other elements including pride, allegiance and loyalty are negatively impacted
Lower chance of acquiring and displaying subcultural capital attributes	Do not attend regularly	Differs to Giulianotti's fan who switches attention when dissatisfied by consumption experience	Relies on other groups to lend support	Will actively use social media to heighten their connection with the club and with other supporters
	Consume at a distance	May also use electronic media to follow the team, but level of intensity is less than the committed supporter	Support is lived experience involving sacrifice, ritual, high levels of loyalty, allegiance, fanaticism, religiosity, and pride	Consumption and support elements will decrease with match attendance but will take place at protests and supporter led meetings
	Use technology to collect information but do not become part of virtual community		Will actively use social media to heighten their connection with the club and with other supporters	
	Exhibits some flaneur characteristics but has different motives		Exhibit high levels of subcultural capital, not only through wearing of club shirts but also through singing, chanting, and feelings of togetherness during match day and other times of the week	
	No real possibility of exhibiting subcultural capital characteristics			

supported. This research supports the idea that corruption is the tipping point for fandom, potentially losing or decreasing their feelings of fandom altogether. Some fans may even switch teams involving new or additional costs and corruption might be the catalyst for that cost.

Limitations and further research

Despite the contributions of this research, however, its limitations need to also be acknowledged. Further research could be conducted, using face to face interviews to cross reference the findings from this study. This would remove some of the limitations, such as concerns regarding fan authenticity, and perhaps open the study up to more participants, who do not participate in online discussions. It would also allow researchers to note at what level the supporters being interviewed sit at within the matrix, how their behaviour has been altered and which direction they have moved along the matrix, if at all. Furthermore, future research into corruption could use this developed matrix to better understand different fandom behaviours within their own contexts. On the subject of limitations, this research represents a single case, and so its findings should be treated with a certain degree of caution in respect to validity, rigour and transferability (King et al., 1994). However, as the aim is to understand a complex situation Flyvberg suggests that “a-typical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors...and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 13). While the forums used are popular with Blackpool fans, they are only two of the many media that fans utilised for discussion. This potentially limits the transferability of data. It should be noted that even though only two forums were selected, there remained a vast quantity of data available. Further research could look to expand the scope of the research and include other forms of social media where

fans are known to regularly communicate, for example, Twitter or Facebook or alternatively extend the selection of forum posts to increase the amount of raw data collected.

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