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Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research, 2024, 103, 15–27
https://doi.org/10.2478/pcssr-2024-0009

OPEN ACCESS

The Complex Club-Fan Relationship: A Glimpse into Stakeholders' Experience With the Aggressive Interventions of Fans

Authors' contribution:

A) conception and design of the study
B) acquisition of data
C) analysis and interpretation of data
D) manuscript preparation
E) obtaining funding

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Received: 02.08.2023
Accepted: 05.12.2023

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the club-fan relationship from the standpoint of club owners, CEOs, and head coaches (i.e., managers). Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with prominent figures from professional football and basketball in Israel. The current findings indicate that while clubs need the support of their fans, they often find themselves struggling with their aggressive behavior and demands to influence the club's decision-making processes. First, this qualitative research provides an important insight into the unique experience of pivotal decision-makers in professional sports. Second, we apply the *complexity* lens to discuss the challenges faced by such stakeholders when trying to manage fans' disruptive interventions.

Keywords: sports fans, sports club, team sports, management, complexity

Introduction

Consumption of professional sporting events is a major, ever-increasing segment of the sports industry (Biscaia et al., 2021). Professional sports owe much of their existence to public interest, without which media companies would not pay such large sums for the right to broadcast these games on television (TV) and companies would not pay even larger amounts for the right to advertise during such matches. In football, for example, TV rights accounted for 38.8% of the English Premier League's (EPL) revenue in 2014–2015 (Carreras & Garcia, 2018). Without spectator attendance, clubs would encounter great difficulty generating much-needed income from gate revenue. As such, public interest, manifested through a broad fan base, is an essential element for enhancing professional sports clubs and leagues (Da Silva & Las Casas, 2017). It has even been argued that sports events transcend beyond value delivery (where fans are viewed as passive value consumers) towards interactions and value that is co-created by fans and teams (Kolyperas et al., 2019). It therefore seems that clubs and fans form a type of symbiosis, where one cannot exist without the other.

Achieving a better understanding of consumer behavior in sports is not a new field of interest among researchers, sports professionals, and clubs' stakeholders (e.g., Crawford, 2004; Funk et al., 2016; Madrigal & Dalakas, 2008). Attempts have been made to define a sports consumer typology to serve as the foundation of market segmentation models, and which could link consumer behaviors to different demographic, social, and cultural groups. In turn, such models could enable more targeted marketing activities, price sensitivity monitoring, arena reconfiguration, and customized sports experiences – to

fit the specific needs and requirements of each customer segment (Stewart et al., 2003). In general, sports fans are conceived not merely as passive receptors; they are individuals who are highly interested in a certain team or athlete, and even attempt to play an active role in the game (Da Silva & Las Casas, 2017). Samra and Wos (2014) identified three unique features of fans as consumers: (1) possessing a strong, intense, and emotional attachment to the consumption objects; (2) behaving as loyal consumers; and (3) presenting informal membership behaviors, such as co-production and investment. The relationship between fans and the object tends to be active and proactive, with active participation distinguishing fans from general consumers.

Tapp and Clowes (2002) identified several segments of fans – based on their value to the club – on a continuum from casual spectators to fanatics. Giulianotti (2002) proposed four types of football spectators: supporters, fans, followers, and flâneurs. While supporters and fans are "hot", followers and flâneurs are "cool" – referring to the degree to which the club is central in the individual's self-formation and identification. Crawford (2003) addresses the development and fluidity of sports supporters, introducing a model of the fans' induction and career progression. The career of a fan could start with a general interest that later evolves into engagement and enthusiasm. This ongoing and evolving process has the potential to create devoted fans. Hunt et al. (1999) identified several types of sports fans based on their level of attachment, in particular, at the far end of Hunt's spectrum, the dysfunctional fan relies on "being a fan" as a primary source of self-identification, engaging in behaviors that disrupt club activities and related social exchanges. In the current study, we will apply the term *dysfunctional* to denote over-involved, aggressive, and disloyal fans.

Fan behavior is often cited by coaches and players as a determinant of the club's success, rather than a consequence. This premise corresponds with Da Silva and Las Casas (2017), who emphasize that the active role of fans in games, including their presence, engagement, and involvement, influence the team's achievements. Indeed, spectators at sporting events are not just passive customers. They play an integral role in the entire service setting (Stieler et al., 2014), and their behaviors strongly impact the customer experience inside the stadium (Chen et al., 2013). Moreover, fans who are loyal and engaged co-create value with their teams by building a positive atmosphere (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010); they also generate a constant income, since their demand for tickets and merchandise is relatively immune to the potential ups and downs in on-pitch performance (Yoshida et al., 2014). Additionally, devoted fans may provide their club with logistical and financial support, organize a fan club, and even lobby for their team at the municipal level (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010). As such, much of the existing research focuses on the beneficial manifestation of fandom.

Yet negative forms of fanhood also take place, such as dysfunctional fans throwing objects onto the pitch, setting off firecrackers, and publishing offensive posts on social media. These actions have undesirable social, managerial, and sports-related consequences, which disrupt the positive atmosphere and may even endanger people; clubs may even incur fines due to the unethical or illegal behavior of their fans or suffer from decreased team performance due to stress (Huettermann et al., 2019). Even non-violent acts of silence, in which fans refuse to engage in singing and cheering, can considerably affect the game (Stieler et al., 2014).

Fans' hyper-engagement can quickly deteriorate into forceful and disruptive interventions, with fans violently rejecting certain players, based on race and ethnicity for example, while demanding the same rights as the club's managers and directors (Ben-Porat, 2008; Cleland, 2010; Lomax, 2000). In addition, organized support is expressed through a spectrum of processes, from unconditional loyalty (Neale & Funk, 2006) to boycotts and harassment of managers, often in response to long-term decreased team performance (Koerber & Zabara, 2017). Interestingly, fans' aspirations to influence sports clubs and organizations is well-documented from as early as the nineteenth century (Taylor, 1992).

The term *fan activism* (Olesen, 2018; Totten, 2015) relates to the organized impact of fans on decisions made by the various stakeholders (i.e., club owners, CEOs, managers, and even the players), aimed at creating meaningful positive changes in team performance and results (Heere & James, 2007). Fans may even demand a say in the club's financial and personnel policies (Huettermann et al., 2019). Such activism may also take the form of "domination fights", not only against the fans of other teams, but also against their own club's stakeholders (Totten, 2015). Passive and/or aggressive organized protests and direct persecution of players, managers, and owners are means for impacting a club's decision-making, as if to say, "Our club, our rules!" (Brown, 2008).

Countering stadium-related violence has presented several challenges in terms of the relations among different agencies, such as allocating powers and responsibilities to the police and the security officers at the stadium. This situation is likely to be more aggravated when the public authorities perceive a low severity of football-related violence, resulting in a less stringent response by the state. Consequently, clubs seek the middle ground between disciplinary proceedings and seeking peaceful relations with fans through informal agreements. Divišová (2023) found that in many cases the ability of clubs to maintain public order in the stadiums depends on informal relations and practices, rather than formal regulations.

Beedholm Laursen (2019) suggests that it is important that enforcement authorities are able to differentiate between the intentions of different fan groups within the crowd and understand the driving force behind the behavior of fanatics, who are able to transform small-scale incidents into violent crowd disorder.

Fan activism in Israel

Lebed and Morgulev (2023) surveyed Israel Premier League (IPL) fans to demonstrate that fans are sometimes also "players" whose interactions with the club are characterized by play-like behaviors. These authors proposed that an individual being "in play" feels and behaves differently from an ordinary customer of large-scale events. Namely, the satisfaction and disappointment of sports fans is expressed within "play space" and through play tools. Consequently, normative and law-abiding members of society can sometimes transform into antisocial elements while being immersed in this play space of fandom.

Levental et al. (2021) reinforced this idea that sports fanhood goes beyond mere enjoyment of content and consumption by showing how football fans perform superstitious rituals at home in the morning hours of a match day, hoping that such behaviors will have an impact on the outcome. The interviewees in this study perceived individual routines carried out in private space as an authentic expression of their sacrifice for the team. Cohen (2017) surveyed attendees of prominent IPL football club home matches and highlighted the role of commitment to community (i.e., being a proud member of the community, love of living in the city, encouraging friends to move there, etc.) for the forging of strong team identification.

Tamir (2022) interviewed IPL fans and specified that fanhood develops gradually and typically begins before birth. Parents, primarily fathers, attribute great importance to the continuity of the family sports heritage and engage in various actions to perpetuate this heritage. Fandom grows in intensity and peaks when fans mature and become independent. Over time, a decline in fanhood intensity is evident, mainly due to the changing priorities of fans. Sports fandom is then revitalized through the parenthood stage, when fathers play the role of mentors in diverse fanhood settings.

Levental et al. (2016) focused on sports fans' use of online platforms, studying top-tier Israeli football club Hapoel Tel Aviv as a case study. They argued that becoming more active with online tools has a major impact on fan habits and how sports content is organized and shared. Online platforms give birth to an autonomous communities, removed from the team, where fan-produced content is no longer influenced by any management agenda. Instead, fan-run sites criticize the team, players, and owners and influence the agenda and public opinion by themselves. In this vein, Shuv-Ami and Toder-Alon (2022) suggested that not only does the level of team's aggression affects fan aggression, but in fact fan aggression also affects players, coaching staff, and management. Therefore, Shuv-Ami and Toder-Alon advocate that clubs should allocate resources to encourage the positive aspects of their fans' social behavior.

On the impact of online platforms, Ben Shalom et al. (2019) monitored the amount, timing, and hostility of traffic on social networks and reported that a build-up of tension three days before the game is correlated with the stadium violence of both fans and players. In respect to violence among Israeli football fans, Ben Porat (2016) stressed that fandom reflects the heavily polarized political situation of Israeli society in the form of ethnicity- and nationality-based frictions, which has often incited violence inside and outside the stadium. Reshef and Paltiel (1989) elaborated that Israeli sports are assimilated into the political-ideological framework, since parties appropriated and subsidized clubs as tools of partisan competition. Israeli sports became a metaphor for politics, and marginalized groups used sports loyalties to riot in support of and opposition to the political establishment (for more information on the geo-political context of sports in Israel see Galily, 2007; Kaufman, & Galily, 2009; Mizrahi et al., 2008; Nevo, 2000).

Evidently, fandom is a complex phenomenon that is comprised of a wide range of activities that could significantly impact a club. As such, this intricate yet necessary club-fan relationship raises several questions: Where is the line between fans' positive engagement and negative intervention? How and why does the club-fan synergy sometimes evolve into antagonism? What is defined as a club's success? How can clubs deal with negative manifestations of fandom? Longitudinal research studies often envelop fans as both the objects of the study and as the agents who provide the research data (e.g., Llopis-Goid, 2014; Wann et al, 2001). Others study fandom from the standpoint of sports' decision makers, such as club owners, CEOs, and managers (Davis, 2021; Huettermann et al, 2019).

The aim of this study is to improve the understanding of the dual club-fan relationship. To do so, in-depth interviews were conducted with prominent stakeholders in Israeli professional sports. At the end of the Discussion section, we attempt to interpret our findings through the *complexity approach,* which has proven to be a valid tool for understanding multifaceted dialectical relationships (see Cilliers, 2005; Dimitrov, 2005; Kelso & Engstrøm, 2006; Richardson, 2005).

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted in line with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The ob-

jective of phenomenological qualitative research is to accurately capture the way the phenomenon is experienced within its contextual setting (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). IPA offers researchers the most comprehensive means of comprehending the profound reflections behind the 'lived experiences' of research participants. Being a "participant-oriented" approach, IPA enables research participants to freely express themselves and their stories without any distortions. In IPA, the interpretation is rooted in the text, but the approach incorporates a questioning method to comprehend the participants' experiences and interactions. It does not rely solely on external theories, but also considers the perspectives from outside the participants. As a result, IPA involves a dual hermeneutic process: it seeks to understand the stories as experienced by the participants while also interpreting and understanding the broader interaction and context in which the participants are involved. This two-fold approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the participants' lived experiences and the contextual factors that shape their narratives (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA proves to be a valuable method for capturing the essence of participants' experiences and promoting genuine understanding in qualitative research (Alase, 2017).

We used semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This research method was chosen for a number of reasons, as suggested by Coombes et al. (2009) and others. First, the flexibility of the interviewing process encourages both the interviewer and the participant to explore issues at depth, while reflecting on experiences, beliefs, and feelings. Interviewers can ask for clarifications and probe for further responses if needed. In addition, as the participants are chosen thanks to their direct knowledge and experience in the researched subject, they can share "inside information" with the researcher. Therefore, the use of direct quotes in this article is a powerful means for reinforcing the validity of the research analysis. Next, in-depth interviews are especially beneficial when investigating relatively unknown topics, where predefining relevant and adequate questions (as with a questionnaire) is more difficult. Finally, the ensured confidentiality and informal atmosphere of an interview could help interviewees be more willing to open up and discuss their views in detail.

Participants

Eight participants took part in the interviews for this study (pseudonyms are used throughout this study to maintain their privacy) – two former managers (i.e., head coaches) of IPL clubs (V.H. and N.L.); an active manager of an IPL club and former captain of the Israel national team (N.K.); an active manager of an IPL club (O.U.); three former CEOs of IPL clubs (R.S., N.I., and E.D.); and one current owner of an Israel Basketball Super League club (S.M.).

The interviewees represent three key levels of club decision-making (managers, CEOs, and owners) in football and basketball, which are the most professional and popular sports in Israel. In line with the recommendations of Creswell and Creswell (2017), the initial recruitment was based on the personal acquaintance of interviewers with the interviewees and their specific background to obtain a broad understanding of stakeholders' views.

Interviews

In-person interviews were conducted with the participants, each lasting 30–60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The following three questions were presented as part of the semi-structured interviews: (1) How would you describe a healthy relationship between fans and the club? (2) Can you give an example of a disruption between fans and the club? (3) Should fan involvement be fostered? The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the affiliated academic institution of one of the authors. Prior to the interviews, the participants signed an informed written consent form. After being transcribed, the interviews were analyzed by two of the authors to identify main recurring themes.

Rigor and trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the study was established using the techniques to enhance credibility, dependability and confirmability, as suggested by others (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014): (a) credibility was obtained using critical friends procedure and member reflections (McGannon et al., 2021; Smith & McGannon, 2018), and (b) dependability and confirmability were obtained using an audit trail with thick description, which enable the reader to study the transparency of the research path (Tracy, 2010).

Results

The eight interviews conducted in this study yielded a 48-page transcript (double-spaced) in Hebrew[1]. Prior to expanding on the themes that emerged in this study, it is important to note that a *mutual dependency* was clearly seen in the texts, comprised of the following two categories: (1) fans who tend to intervene, cause trouble, are disloyal, and are over-involved (i.e., dysfunctional fans); and (2) supporters, fans, and followers who are loyal (from slightly to extremely loyal) and who create a positive spectatorship environment.

[1] English translations tend to be about 40% longer than the original Hebrew texts.

When asked about the most desirable and suitable club-fan relationship, most interviewees offered general responses, such as "It would be worth finding a balance between the fans' desires and the entire range of organized sports activities," or "The trick is finding a balance." A few general suggestions for doing so were offered by the interviewees: "It's important to conduct regular dialogs with fans from time to time," or "Fans should be helped with ticket purchasing and they should also be helped with logistical aspects, such as transport to games or clearly marked directions, or even arranging meetings and events [for them] at the club."

Based on the input received through the interviews, it is the first category of fans that should receive most attention, that is, the dysfunctional over-involved fans. Indeed, this was indicated in all eight interviews and addressed through a range of behaviors, from disloyal behavior to extreme cases of violence. As such, this became the focus of our analysis. Our generalizations show that fans were perceived as (1) a hierarchical organization that operates in an organized manner, with agendas, economic and substantive goals, and even an ideology; (2) those who ultimately determine the course (destiny) of the club and its stakeholders; (3) people who are involved on a daily basis, at the physical level, attend training sessions, maintain relationships with officials, and develop relationships with players, CEOs, managers, and even club owners; (4) fans who do not necessarily represent the majority opinion, yet consider themselves "owners"; and (5) fans who would not hesitate to fire a certain player or manager if their performance is perceived as unsatisfactory.

Despite their being a minority, their potential damage of such group is vast. As such, owners and CEOs, as well as managers and players, must be equipped with a well-defined set of principles and guidelines for preventing this "volcano" from erupting. N.K. highlights this issue in the following quote:

> In the past, we had decided to remove certain players from the team, but the fans would not accept our decision. This so-called hardcore [of fans] was very disturbed [by our decision] so they hurt the team in a very overt and fearless way, without any apprehension whatsoever. They disrupted training sessions and used profane language towards the players during warm-ups. They didn't care about the team. They perceived their protest as a project… Later, however, during the season, when the team played three games in the [European] Champions League, fans bought 25,000 subscriptions for these games. This was very, very moving. Twenty-five thousand people bought tickets for three Champions League games, expressing their complete support for the team, despite the 2000–3000 minority of fans who continued to protest.

As both the support and the disruptive actions of fans have an impact on the club and on the players, sports decision-makers face a range of challenges. For example: Which group of fans should be contacted when necessary? To what extent should their involvement be permitted? How should radical and violent behaviors be combatted? Should the club succumb to the pressures of dissatisfied fans from time to time?

The following four main themes emerged from the interviews conducted in this study: (1) Sports stakeholders' attitudes towards their clubs' relationship with dysfunctional fans; (2) the impact of dysfunctional fans on sports stakeholders' views; (3) the impact of dysfunctional fans on the club's decision-making processes; and (4) stakeholders' proactive interventions regarding the activities of dysfunctional fans.

Theme 1: Sports stakeholders' attitudes towards their clubs' relationship with dysfunctional fans

This theme, which included negative feelings and experiences (such as sadness, disappointment, and frustration), was reflected in the interviews as a rather overarching issue. Prior to analyzing the verbal data, we would like to address the tone of speech that was used by the interviewees during the interviews. Naturally, interviews enable participants to describe behaviors and express their thoughts and feelings (Coombes et al., 2009). Yet they also contain non-verbal messages, especially when discussing sensitive topics. While analysis of non-verbal messages was not within the scope of this current study, we could not overlook the fact whereby most interviewees were imbued with a tone of speech that expressed sadness, disappointment, and frustration. In this sense, a fit was seen between the verbal content of the matter at hand and the emotional messages that were conveyed through the interviewees' tone of speech. Some examples of messages that were delivered with sadness, disappointment, frustration, and even fear:

> *"We were required to appoint a new manager; however, the fans felt that the chosen candidate lacked competence. The morning after announcing the manager to the fans, I awoke to a flood of threatening messages on my mobile phone—threats directed at me, my life, and my family. These were violent threats. The impact of such threats on the team owner and the managerial staff cannot be overstated. Consequently, that manager was not appointed, and a less suitable replacement, aligned with the fans' ideology, was chosen instead."*

> *"A billionaire led the team for several years, during which the club achieved remarkable success. In one particular year when the achievements were not at the top of the league, the fans confronted him in his*

office, and he promptly disassociated himself from the club. Subsequently, less qualified individuals took his place." (N.L.)

"One of the most potent influences is when the arrows are directed towards the manager – it alleviates the pressure from the players. This means that players are more comfortable when the blame is on the manager. They receive fewer complaints. Players who play less or are less valued – they have no issue in voicing stories about the quality of training, quality of meetings, or the manager's method in the team. This implies that such behavior from the audience undermines the manager's authority. It simply weakens him within the system. This is the most significant disturbance because if a manager knew that the owner wouldn't budge despite those protests, if he knew that the players stood completely behind him despite those protests and even being escorted out with a police escort – he could continue to lead the team if he's strong enough in character and can stand by these things. But as soon as these cracks begin within the team and in the players' relationship with him, and the authority he projects towards the players – then it starts to falter and impact less favourably." (V.H.)

Moreover, although the interviewees were asked about both negative and positive aspects of fan behavior, their remarks mainly revolved around harsh and painful examples. For example:

"You have to put things into perspective. The same fans who carry you on their shoulders and pay you compliments are the first to shout profanities at you and yell, 'go home!' when the team doesn't perform well." (N.L.).

Another example is related to the disappointment from the nationalistically colored attitude of dysfunctional fans towards players:

"They were so ungracious. Usually, such criticism is seen in retrospect, with them hating a certain player. There was a guy (S.A.S.) who played throughout the championship season. The crowd was extremely bitter towards him." (R.S.)

Theme 2: The impact of dysfunctional fans on sports stakeholders' views.

The interviews showed that fan intervention occurs at almost all levels of the club, with owners, CEOs, and managers receiving the brunt of the fans' interference and criticism. This can be seen in the following examples from an interview with a CEO:

...Then contact is made with the spectators [and a popular player who was fired from the team]. With the hardcore fans who call themselves 'ultras'... Such groups emerged for Maccabi [...]... They were the first. There was one guy, Head of the 'Ohadim-[...]' [fan club] called [...]. He wrote nicely, you could tell that he's well-educated. But during games, he sits in Gate [...] together with the 'baboons'. The gate where the violence began. A group of fans who became violent towards L.H. [the owner] and N. K. [the manager] who was employed by L.H. There was awful violence. (R.S.)

A similar message can be seen in the following example, also given by a CEO:

... We had to appoint a [new] manager because... you can have an organization that works amazingly well, but not without a good manager who knows how to retain players and promote them... [The new manager] somehow attacked the fans... One night, when I was asleep, I received thousands of threatening messages... I can't describe them any other way than as violent threats. (N.I.)

One manager also conveyed similar feelings:

The unstable attitude of the fans... depends on the results. [I say this] from the perspective of a manager who has coached teams for several consecutive years, and who has experienced good times and bad times. It has an emotional effect [on you]. It hurts, and you find asking yourself, why do I need it? ... So yes, it hurts! (O.U.)

I can inform you that in specific scenarios, this is also an element of the game plan. It implies that when playing against a team and recognizing the existing pressure, if, within a short time frame, they fail to score, you convey to your players, as part of motivation, that by executing certain tactics, the audience will start jeering and the opposing team's players will be under pressure, ultimately benefiting us. It is undeniably a strategy taken into consideration. (R.S.)

Theme 3: The impact of dysfunctional fans on the club's

In general, all interviewees mentioned the active pressure on sports stakeholders when the team is going through a bad patch.

Things start to have a greater impact during bad times, especially in large clubs... I can recall two incidences where I had to be escorted out of the training complex by police vehicles... during bad times when the team

was not performing well. The fans demand that you resign, they do things. This is obviously very stressful. It creates stress within the system, stress among the coaching staff, stress among the players. It happens to you, just like it happens to the players. It's mainly directed towards the leading players and owners, which means that the entire system is under pressure from the crowd. (N.L.)

However, two very different opinions emerged from this common viewpoint: "Yes, they really do!" and "It's not like that at all. They don't affect my decision-making in any way!" The first type of response was expressed by former stakeholders who were not in an active position at the time of the interviews. For example, "We had an owner who was greatly influenced by what the [dysfunctional] fans said… The negotiations [with a prospective candidate for the position of team manager] were somehow leaked to the fans, and then the owner seemed to feel great pressure to listen to their opinions." (N.I.)

Such negative feelings towards the interference of disloyal and over-involved fans can be seen in dramatic expressions, such as:

There was something very fake about disqualifying the manager that we wanted and hiring another person who suited them [the fans] better. An ideology that is only convenient when everything goes well for them. But when it doesn't suit them, the ideology disappears… That was the case and I think that it [eventually] led to the collapse of the club. Any decision based on fan pressure is harmful. (N.I.)

N.L. also expressed similar experiences:

These things [activities of different groups of fans who "manage" the football arena without really understanding it] seep into the system from the crowd, i.e., into professional teams (who may or may not be affected by this) or team owners (who may or may not be affected by this). I know that there are some team owners who are influenced by all sorts of people who provide them with data (correct or incorrect) and emphasize certain things. These things have an impact. (N.L.)

Similar experiences were also voiced by V.H.:

Nowadays, if you lose three games, [you hear:] "Go home!" They're waiting for you by the gate, shouting: "If you come to tomorrow's training session, you're a dead man". Those crazy fans who write the script for you. That's why in the tenth cycle of the major league championship, ten [managers] were fired. It's unbelievable. There was one manager who was fired even before the beginning of the season. It's absurd. Because of the fans. Because of their impact. Their pressure. Owners are afraid of losing their fans, so they fire the manager.

The powerful impact of dysfunctional fans on decision-making in elite clubs in Israel was also indirectly expressed in some interviews. For example:

Fans are a dramatic issue, for better or for worse. Large clubs around the world understand this. I think that it's different in American sports. I don't know how relevant your research will be to the Yankees. I'm sure fans there don't get to decide what happens. (N.I.)

Interestingly, unlike interviewees who no longer held active positions, those who were employed in the field at the time of the interviews tended to negate any noticeable influence of fans on the club's decision-making processes. For example:

I've rarely seen an organization [of fans] that is really, really involved. Owners are as cautious of this as they are of fire. They don't let them get a foot in the door, not even the slightest opening, because that causes problems. I'm not aware of any [fan] involvement in the goings-on of the club and the team. The only involvement that can be seen may be personal relationships between fans and the team's players and manager – through social media. (N.K.)

An additional example along the same lines was conveyed by E.D.:

When I was CEO of [...] football club, there was a case regarding a leading player. The manager didn't want the player to continue playing for the team, so he made a professional decision. His decision was backed by the board… [But then a large group of fans] tried to influence this decision with all their might... We did everything we could to try to avoid the fans' influence. For us, the club comes first. No player is above the club. But a very stubborn war was held, a type of blockade that couldn't work.

Finally, the message conveyed by S.M. presented similar thoughts:

You need to be attentive, show them that you're listening to what they have to say, but don't let them run the club. Absolutely not. Don't accept things that are based on whims. There are also groups of those who call themselves "Ultras"... You have to know how to

maintain balance and restraint. The key is knowing how to maneuver, without succumbing to such and such whims.

Semantically, these three statements are of a declarative nature, addressing the efforts that are made by the club, or the necessity of the club-fan relationship; yet they do not explicitly say, "The fans do not influence the club's decisions."

Theme 4: Stakeholders' proactive interventions regarding the dysfunctional activities of fans

The fourth and final theme found in this study relates to proactive relations, indicated in statements that reflect the initiation of club-fan dynamics – both supportive and destructive. The former is expressed through periodic dialog, special ticket sales, logistical assistance for fan groups, and assigning a contact person to liaise between the fans and the club. This was seen in the input provided by V.H.:

A "fan officer" is responsible for the fans. He initiates meetings with them as a symbol of appreciation. It's not mandatory, but if you want to be a self-respecting club, then you should have one. Many times, for example, the club will ask its fans to refrain from using racist slogans – in an attempt to encourage principles of fair play. The [club's] relationship with the fans is very important. Someone who can be contacted via email and telephone, so that anyone can talk to him. That's his job.

The second type of proactive relations focuses on significantly decreasing fan violence, as discussed by N.I.:

As soon as an organization [of fans] starts to resemble the violent branch of a terrorist organization or a small mafia organization, and you're not sure what it wants or why it's behaving violently towards you, you must take action to dismantle it. I don't know if I would want [to start] a war, but I think if someone behaved violently [towards me], I would take them to court… There are sophisticated means that won't hurt you personally: lawsuits, private detective agencies, and even companies that specialize in dismantling this kind of organization.

Another example is given by N.L:

I have consistently stated that the fans are an integral part of the club. I recommended to the owner the importance of maintaining a connection and seriously considering the fans' demands and opinions, emphasizing that these cannot be disregarded. I proposed ongoing communication with delegates representing the majority of the fans, advocating that the club should not engage with individuals representing smaller factions. Furthermore, I suggested the inclusion of family and children's fan sections within the stands.

Finally, S.M. notes the need for conducting permanent, ongoing dialog with fans:

As I see it, the perfect relationship between the club and the fans is [created] through frequent conversations. Being attentive to the fans' needs and wishes, listening to what they have to say... every month or so… To educate the fans so that they don't cause the club to incur penalties because of their behavior.

On the other hand, he said:

As an owner, it is imperative that we strategize ways to disband the Ultras. This is an exceedingly violent organization that must reform its behavior or be disbanded entirely.

Discussion

This qualitative study strives to analyze club-fan relationship from the stakeholders' point-of-view. Our findings demonstrate that stakeholders are influenced by fans' conduct, both positive and negative – on an *emotional*, *personal*, *cognitional*, and *behavioral* level. The evident positive-negative club-fan reciprocity corresponds with the previous literature and also extends the existing knowledge. The current findings are especially important in the quest to resolve overt and covert conflicts with aggressive "our-club-our-rules" fans, which could significantly undermine the activity of sports clubs.

Combined, the emerging themes convey a rather pessimistic landscape of relationships, in which the stakeholders are often left to deal with the challenges and disturbances created by dysfunctional (i.e., disloyal and over-involved) fans who frequently disrupt the club's control and even the integrity of the system. Indeed, this reciprocal relationship and general dependence of the system on fans is expressed in the difficulty stakeholders have in ignoring the interventions of aggressive fans when making managerial decisions. And the greater the aggressiveness of the intervention, the greater the problem.

In this vein, the findings seen in this study could be interpreted from two discrete yet complementary viewpoints: the local aspect and the universal one. From an Israeli standpoint, this rather distressing situation could be viewed as a local cultural phenomenon. Studies show that

Israeli football is characterized by destructive aggression and violence, exhibited by fans and ultras on-pitch and off-pitch alike (e.g., Ben Porat, 2016; Ben Shalom et al, 2019). Scholars have also addressed the high levels of aggression displayed by Israeli football professionals, namely, how the players relate to their opponents, the managers' aggression towards the referees, and insufficient managerial efforts to put a stop to such aggression (Shuv-Ami & Toder-Alon, 2022).

The sports aggression that is typical of dysfunctional Israeli fans and which has a significant impact on sports clubs could be related to each of the following sociological-cultural aspects:

1. High levels of aggression in Israeli society that are associated with the permanent state of stress across the country. This stems from the history of the Jewish People, who were subjected to persecution and threats over the centuries (Landau & Beit-Hallahmi, 1983), combined with the country's permanent embattled state with neighboring countries and within Israel itself (Efrat-Treister & Rafaeli, 2011; Landau, 2003; Nuttman-Shwartz, & Weinberg, 2008). Israelis seem to live in a continuous state of anxiety and stress, which is further exasperated by the increasingly dense population, which has resulted in overpopulated educational institutions (see Selah-Shayovits, 2004), hospitals, and emergency departments, as well as heavily congested roads (see Granek et al, 2018; Landau & Raveh, 1987; van Londen et al, 1990).
2. Ideological views on sports, ranging from mere tension to outright hatred that stem from irreconcilable political differences between parties and people. This can be seen specifically in the targeted funding of politically identified sports societies, and through the mutual aggression of teams and fans – a situation that has been going on for decades.
3. The sharp differences between distinct subgroups of Israeli society (ethnic, religious, or cultural) in the way violence is treated, accepted, or even encouraged (see Carmi-Iluz et al, 2005; Efrat-Treister & Rafaeli, 2011; Galin & Avraham, 2009).

In the current study, the interviewees expressed their frustration regarding their relationship with dysfunctional fans and their impact on decision-making processes and outcomes in football and basketball clubs in Israel. These findings are in line with studies from outside Israel, demonstrating that this phenomenon is universal rather than local (albeit to a different extent in different countries). This phenomenon, therefore, should be addressed as a generalized global one that is in dire need of effective and applicable solutions. As such, we need to reformulate how we discuss the findings of this study. Instead of seeking answers about how to deal with dysfunctional fans, we need to strive to understand why managing sports clubs is so very complicated. The first step in doing so is the need to redefine the violent, "burning down the club" group of fans. They should be excluded from the category of supporters or consumers (as suggested by Woratschek et al., 2014, for example) – classifying them instead as a new category. They could perhaps be called the "small party" or "partisans" (Dixon, 2001, 2015; Russel, 2012) as they muscle their way to take over the entire club (i.e., "big party").

Consequently, we will now address the conflict between "small" and "big" parties through the complexity approach (Bar-Yam, 1997; Dimitrov, 2005; Richardson, 2005; Wolfram, 2002), which has been widely used in understanding socio-psychological and managerial processes in team sports over the past 20 years (see Balague et al., 2013; Davids et al., 2013; Lebed, 2006). In the case of club-fan relationships, large and small parties can be represented as an interaction between two complex systems. When theoretically analyzing this conflict or interaction, three prominent differences emerge, which largely determine their level of organization and manageability, as well as how they attempt to achieve their goals.

1. *The intrinsic dynamics* of these two systems differ from one another. In the sports context, the small system of dysfunctional fans has a relatively simple network and a one-level organization. It also self-organizes and adapts to changes relatively quickly. The large system of the sports club, on the other hand, is a five-level complex system (Lebed & Bar-Eli, 2013). While the lowest level relates to athletes' kinesiological and psycho-biological abilities, the higher levels envelop the athletes, competing teams, and coaching staff. Finally, the highest level consists of the club's stakeholders (such as managers, CEOs, owners, and board members). The survival of the club as a multi-level complex system is an intricate challenge. Theoretically, if all five levels are interconnected and organized, then each level should structurally encompass the levels below it and absorb their problematic complexity, such as free will, information entropy, and unpredictability (Lebed, 2017).
2. *The degree of freedom* between these two systems also differs, especially in relation to counteractions and how they express themselves. Disloyal, over-involved fans, who comprise the smaller party, do not hesitate to use their aggressive voices, often overstepping the borders of what is considered civil conflict management. In extreme

cases, they will not hesitate to "burn down the club", in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Stakeholders, on the other hand, are expected to act within the boundaries of institutional norms and structures.

3. *The targeted audiences* of the two parties also differ greatly. Organized groups of dysfunctional fans choose their "victims" from any level of the club's hierarchy, embarking on focused attacks that could even harm a person's health and safety. Sports organizations, on the other hand, strive to behave in a positive and constructive manner towards their community and consumers, while adhering to an ethical code, even when dealing with dysfunctional fans who try to undermine the system.

Complex systems may attempt to adapt to the menacing environment by employing a range of suitable reactions (e.g., Davids et al., 2013) and proactive initiatives (e.g., Lebed, 2017), or by simply ignoring the interference. While the two conflicting systems at hand claim to share the same positive motivation (i.e., club success), the smaller undesirable one has three significant advantages: (a) a simpler structure that enables better and faster self-organization; (b) morally unlimited means of conducting the conflict; and (c) personification of aggression or violence. This situation is further aggravated by the fact that although the small system declares the same goals as the large one, it often is not obligated to be held accountable for its deeds. Moreover, by employing "partisan" strategies, the aggressively competing small system creates entropy and uncertainty that cannot be absorbed or overcome by any of the five levels of the large system. In other words, this menacing and perturbing small system is not and cannot be a part of the larger system.

In the light of our findings, this fundamental weakness can be partially resolved by sports club authorities using "carrots and sticks". One such solution that seems to work well with loyal supporters is including them in ongoing discourse through creation of official fans' representatives council and even inclusion on the board of directors (see Bee and Havitz, 2010; Brown and Walsh, 2000; Taylor, 1992). Such practices are in line with S.M's. notions of the essential ability to balance and maneuver through the relationship with marginal groups of fans. According to Beedholm Laursen (2019), the dialog strategy is an anticipatory strategy that ideally has the potential to monitor fan crowds in a friendly atmosphere, prevent conflicts from escalating and/or reduces the magnitude of an escalating conflict. In this vein, Divišová (2023) argues that clubs are sometimes able to reach agreements with the fans when they trade concessions in security measures in exchange for fans regulating their own behavior in the stands.

However, in the occasional case of severe aggression, the large disrupted system seems to have only two feasible solutions: flight or fight. Yet neither of these solutions are adequate, as seen in some extreme cases, where radical interferences have resulted in stakeholders experiencing heart attacks, athletes bursting into tears, and radical dysfunctional fans being criminally prosecuted for their actions. This was also sensed through the pessimistic tone and bitter emotions of our interviewees, expressed in relation to their interactions with dysfunctional fans. Frustration of the clubs' stakeholders was also evident in their frequent use of the term "should be" rather than "is" during the interviews.

In biology various complex systems co-exist in symbiosis, as their activities complement each other in facilitating reproduction and survival. In social systems, however, co-existence through symbiosis is more problematic. Even when the two systems successfully utilize each other's activities for their own benefit, complex social systems tend to transform into support-conflict relationships. Such dialectical relations (Lebed, 2022) emphasize the need for developing novel analytical tools that could provide managers with predictive models of unique organizational risks. Adapting the complex systems approach could offer a fruitful framework for studying the dynamic self-organization of sports clubs that are subject to ongoing aggressive disruptions.

Conclusion

Regarding groups of dysfunctional fans, our findings indicate that stakeholders should be aware of and consider ways to minimize the inevitable extrinsic interference upon ongoing operations of the club. The current study advances understanding of the intricate club-fan dynamics by providing a unique glimpse into prominent stakeholders' experiences, perceptions, feelings, and ideas. All in all, it seems that one possible solution to club-fan frictions could stem from involving a larger group of supporting spectators and their families in a wide range of face-to-face and online activities where marginal parties of aggressive "troublemakers" may simply become less prominent over time.

Ethics approval and informed consent

All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interest.

Funding

This research did not receive specific public or private funding from any agency.

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