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Commercial challenges of clubs in the English Football League Championship: the supporters' view

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ABSTRACT

Research question: The research aims to focus on fan perceptions of the commercial challenges in relation to English Football League (EFL) Championship clubs and, to discover whether there are differences between fan perceptions based on their club experiences.

Research methods: A total of 548 supporters of English Football League Championship clubs took part in the study answering a self-designed survey with twelve 5-point Likert scale questions during the 2020-2021 season.

Results and Findings: Significant differences were found in eight of the twelve questions. In relation to commercial activity driving results and success within their clubs' participants accepted this notion but this in turn did not impact their experiences as a supporter. Further findings in relation to financial risk ("gambling"), player salaries and betting and gaming were also observed.

Implications: 1) The study indicates a necessity for football club owners to engage with their key stakeholder group [the fans] to understand their desires for "their" football club, and 2) The current study presents evidence of fan perceptions of the business, financial, and sports performance management of football clubs outside the English Premier League.

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English Football League; Championship; commercial challenges; fan perceptions; football club performance

Introduction

The "business of football" often attracts criticism for its continued disenfranchising of supporters through the alleged "pricing fans out" of attending games, resulting in distancing the sport from its traditional, working-class roots (Dubal, 2019; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012; Ronald & Damiano, 2019; Wagg, 2004). Football clubs in England (and elsewhere in the United Kingdom) hover precariously between the uncertainty of being a business and a community asset resulting in the fans ultimately resisting, yet compromising with, the commercial

practices to which they are subjected (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012). The system of promotion and relegation in English football creates an annual migration between leagues at all levels. The financial "prize" available to teams playing in the English Premier League (EPL) has resulted in a perceived vast wealth gap to those clubs playing one league below in the English Football League (EFL) Championship. The projected average revenue per EPL club for 2021–2022 was £273 m (Deloitte, 2022) compared to actual average revenue per EFL club of £25.6 m (Swiss Ramble, 2022)

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has created difficulties for newly promoted clubs to compete and survive in the Premier League. For season 2022/2023, nine out of twenty EPL clubs increased their season ticket prices – at least one by 14 per cent (Chan, 2022). This pattern similarly emerged in the English Football League (EFL) Championship (Jones, 2022).

The dichotomy that exists between sporting and business/financial performance with clubs expected to remain competitive on the pitch but financially secure off it (Madsen et al., 2018) is certainly in question in the management of professional football clubs. Figure 1 isolates business (revenue generation) and financial performance (indebtedness, autonomy, profitability) on sports performance by observing the negative impact of good financial acumen on sporting results (Galariotis et al., 2018). Essentially, this provides the “green light” to a strategy of continued commercial income generation for player salary gratification.

Figure 1 isolates the poignant balance for football clubs between being a business and a cherished public asset for multiple stakeholders – fans, community groups, local authorities etc., each with expectations of on-pitch performance. As such, the focus on the perceived

wealth gap between the EPL and the EFL is so great that clubs relegated to the EFL Championship from the EPL receive “parachute payments” from the Premier League to mitigate the loss of income from relegation. This “helping hand” is designed to mitigate the potential of entering a dire financial situation (Business Rescue Expert, 2022) – £42 m in year 1, £34 m in year 2, and £15 m in year 3 (Wilson et al., 2018). However, these payments have themselves created another wealth gap between recently relegated EPL clubs and long-time EFL Championship clubs. In season 2019/2020, six clubs in the Championship received such payments totalling £228 m and in 2020/2021, seven clubs received such payments totalling £236 m. Five of the seven clubs in the 2020/2021 season finished in the top eight. According to Deloitte (2022) in the nine seasons since the significant uplift in parachute payments, 48% of the clubs promoted to the English Premier League have been in receipt of parachute payments.

This research study aims to focus on fan perceptions of these commercial challenges in relation to EFL Championship clubs and, to discover whether there are differences between fan perceptions based on their club experiences. Fans and supporters – the “citimer”

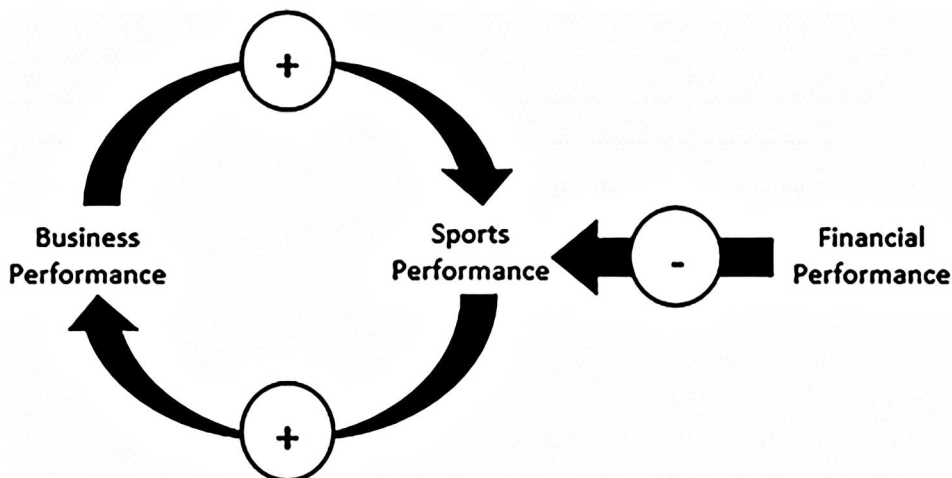


Figure 1. Adapted model of the actual dynamics of football clubs' performance (Galariotis et al., 2018).

(Numerato & Giulianiotti, 2018) are of course not averse to making their views heard over club decisions regarding business, sporting, and financial performance. For instance, fan-led protests made up of various supporter groups on social media and online forums have now mobilised to create on-pitch fan demonstrations in the case of Reading FC since September 2023 with an eventual mass pitch invasion in January 2024 due to perceived asset stripping of the club by its current owner (EFL, 2024; PA Media, 2023). That said, there is limited research in seeking fan perceptions of club management in relation to commercial performance.

Financial performance of EFL Championship clubs

The lure of reaching the Premier League has been enhanced by the final EFL Championship play-off game being dubbed “the richest game in soccer” due to the winning team being guaranteed a £100 million minimum payment from the Premier League (Brennan, 2022). Commercial revenues for promoted teams also increase through the benefits of increased attendances on matchday income, the sharing of broadcast monies, and commercial opportunities such as sponsorship sales. This huge payment has certainly led to EFL Championship clubs increasing their focus on commercial activity with the aim of achieving increased revenues which can be reinvested into their squad and facilities to support this push toward promotion to EPL. This has led to the EFL Championship being described as a “bubble waiting to burst”, with the league’s clubs posting operating losses of £400 million in 2020/2021, slightly improved from the £443 million in 2019/2020 despite generating record revenues (each season impacted by Covid-19) (Deloitte, 2022; Tucker, 2019).

The EFL imposed strict financial fair play rules on Championship clubs in 2014, prohibiting them from making losses in excess of £39 m

over a three-year period, with severe penalties such as points deductions for clubs who exceed this amount – Birmingham City FC, for example, were handed a 9-point deduction as a result of breaching these rules (Covington, 2020; Taylor, 2019). Since 1992, there have been 59 insolvency events in English football (Evans et al., 2022) including several clubs from the Championship – the latest being Derby County in September 2021 (Derby County FC, 2021). Subsequent penalties of a points deduction or withdrawal of EFL membership indicate the impact upon sporting performance and sporting ambition. Nevertheless, Evans et al. (2022) note that relatively few football clubs cease to exist because the regulatory oversight imposed by “the league” legitimises annualised debt growth through budget overspend.

Nevertheless, a sharp rise in salaries paid to players and staff, along with a rise in player transfer fees, plus the effects of the pandemic on match day revenues meant that not one Championship club was profitable in season 2020/2021 (Deloitte, 2022). The ratio of player wages to revenue across the league averaged 125% in 2021/2022 (a continued rise for 4 seasons in a row) (FC Business, 2022) indicating adherence to the widely accepted premise that a higher level of expenditure on player wages and the subsequent attraction of higher quality players to the club can improve on-pitch performance that leads to promotion to the “promised land” of the EPL (Dimitropoulos & Limperopoulos, 2014; Ferri et al., 2017; Frick & Simmons, 2008; Kuper & Syzmanski, 2018).

This desire for promotion led Evans et al. (2022) to describe the phenomenon as “gambling”, in essence the process of taking excessive financial risk, and one deemed a successful strategy. On-going UK Parliamentary investigation (instigated by the current Government in 2019) has isolated this a key issue for address as the regulation of football governance moves ever closer. Noteworthy, however, is the suggestion by Evans et al. (2022) that

the “gambling” mindset permeated EFL teams finishing in the lowest quartile league position the previous season yet progressing – even being promoted – the following season.

Business performance of EFL Championship clubs

In recent years there has been increased attention towards sponsorship deals with football clubs (Sharman, 2020). Sponsorship is a key commercial revenue stream for football clubs through the potential to resonate brand communication messages to sports audiences and is commonly understood by football supporters to be a crucial revenue stream. Sports facility naming rights are amongst the fastest growing and most valuable forms of sponsorship (Chen & Zhang, 2012; Vuolteenaho et al., 2019). Income via stadium naming rights deals is considered the third most lucrative source of commercial revenue for football clubs behind shirt sponsorships and kit supplier deals, but it is a relatively unexploited revenue stream (Football Benchmark, 2020). During the 2020/2021 EFL Championship season only five (Stoke City and Bet365, Rotherham United and ASSEAL, Birmingham City and Trillion Trophy, Huddersfield Town and John Smith’s and AFC Bournemouth and Vitality) of the twenty-four clubs had stadium naming rights deals (Football Stadiums, 2015/2023). This could be due to either a lack of businesses investing in EFL Championship clubs or that these types of sponsorship deals can attract considerable scrutiny from supporters resulting in negative reactions and resistance amongst fans (Gerhardt et al., 2022; Gillooly et al., 2020; Woisetschläger et al., 2014). Football stadiums are often places that football supporters feel strongly attached – a “memory place” (Boyd, 2000) – with resistance to stadium sponsorship often born out of perceived threats from corporate renaming to a club’s and fan’s self-identity (Boyd, 2000; Reysen et al., 2012; Woisetschläger et al., 2014). For brands wishing to invest in football

clubs, this may act as a deterrent with episodes generating negative publicity for the parties involved (Crompton, 2014). There appears less opposition to stadium naming rights when the stadium in question is newly built (Crompton & Howard, 2003; Medway et al., 2018). However, by using the backdrop of “off-pitch” business performance to push through stadium naming rights deals, clubs may face less resistance from supporters who often justify their acceptance of such deals if it is seen to help the club to survive financially or to succeed on the pitch (Gillooly et al., 2020).

The work of Jones et al. (2020) concentrates on the role football plays in promoting and encouraging betting and gaming behaviour. The increased exposure toward shirt logos, pitch side banners, logos on training kit, logo boards at press conferences and post-match interviews are all commercial opportunities for betting and gaming organisations through association with the football club. Sharman et al. (2019) further identified the matchday programme as a point of exposure, and worryingly, the frequency of betting and gaming marketing in child specific sections of such publications (N.B. there is now no compulsion for production and sale of a matchday programme). During the 2022/2023 SkyBet EFL Championship season, eleven of the twenty-four clubs were sponsored by betting and gaming companies in some capacity (down from seventeen in 2019/2020). Bunn et al. (2019) determined the betting and gaming effect on football fans to be a public health concern and interestingly, ahead of the Gambling Act Review published by the UK Government in October 2023, EPL clubs voluntarily voted to withdraw front of matchday shirt betting and gaming sponsorship from the start of the 2025/2026 season (Barwick, 2023). However, betting and gaming, arguably, can be viewed as a normal leisure activity and a natural extension of the sport, yet its restricted nature does affect how fans perceive this form of sponsorship in the EFL Championship

(Bunn et al., 2019). The inception of an independent regulator for men's professional football in England will bring more scrutiny to the commercial realities of the sport. Such implementation is likely to be controversial for some clubs across the leagues.

Football fans

The humble football fan sits at the heart of this three-headed disunion. Defining fans has been a continued debate and discussion within research related to psychology, consumer behaviours and marketing (Finch et al., 2022; Foster et al., 2020; Mullin et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2003). Segmenting consumer groups such as fans must incorporate ideals such as trust, satisfaction, loyalty, commitment and to this point a range of continuums and typologies have been proposed such as Psychological Commitment to Team Scale (Mahony et al., 2000), Psychological Continuum Model (Funk, 2002; Funk & James, 2001) or Sports Relationship Marketing Model (Abeza et al., 2019) amongst others. These definitions and scales focus on the fans self-identification: (1) as fans; and (2) loyalty with a specific club (Finch et al., 2022). From this broad understanding of being "a fan" of football, Kennedy and Kennedy (2012) go further through framing fans as traditionalists ("cultural conservative's" or "legacy" fans) or those that hold a market-led attitude. Regardless, a significant proportion of fans have supported their club for many years and believe their club to be important in the social fabric of their locality (EFL, 2022). These devoted and fanatical fans (Hunt et al., 1999) are those who specifically define themselves as fans and attach themselves to "their" club. They are not bounded by time or distance and go "above and beyond" to support that club. Being a fan of an EFL Championship club does not necessitate a formal membership but instead can be attributed to a strong historical connection through family, friends, or community (Fillis & Mackay, 2014).

Most EFL Championship teams have a long history and are rooted in their community and local culture (Pritchard et al., 2022). As such, this study asserts that a fan is someone who self-identifies as a fan of a specific football team and is enthusiastic about their club, with a high interest in the property of that club and is invested in the long-term sustainability of that club.

Fans and supporters continue their fandom even when living away from the area and validate their connection to "their" club by engaging with online forums, blogs, podcasts, vlogs, and various other fan focused materials. These fan communities through social networks are an essential component of fandom, as fans are not all located in close proximity to their club and are potentially overseas (Bale, 2000; Fillis & Mackay, 2014; Owonikoko & Rookwood, 2022). It is one of the reasons why football clubs have such a rich heritage and are rooted in communities as they have an extensive history and culture but now are also media and entertainment companies that create and distribute visual content to connect with these networked devoted and fanatical fans wherever they are in the world (Yilancioglu, 2021). As Fillis and Mackay (2014) in their work focused on Hibernian Football Club in Scotland, they propose that fans create "online brand communities" through fan forums, websites, fanzines to develop their community which football clubs then fuel through consumption forces. Football clubs including those in the EFL Championship are now competing institutions in the social media space, the streaming sphere, sports gaming, and the broader visual entertainment industry. It has become a place where clubs can build on fan relationships and can contribute to commercial development and success (McCarthy et al., 2022).

The traditional notion of domestic match-going supporters being the only fans with the right to have a say in "their" clubs should be set aside given the outreach of TV deals, streaming and other forms of online

touchpoints for fans to be part of match day. As Owonikoko and Rookwood (2022) argue many football fans watch matches in pubs and supporters clubs but this is not exclusively a practice by those who live abroad. Indeed, the wearing of club colours, reaching out and being part of offline and online fan spaces aids the construction of knowledge and emotional investment in “their” club. Fan forums set up for or by supporters of EFL Championship clubs provide a dynamic environment where fans can interact with each other (Smedley & Coulson, 2021). These may be virtual communities and members are unlikely to know each other in person but online forums, blogs, podcasts, vlogs, and various other fan focused materials can bring fans together from across England, the United Kingdom and beyond. They are an extension of the fan community which has been traditionally based around the club, stadium, and local area (Fillis & Mackay, 2014).

According to Mudrick and Lupinek (2015, p. 51) fans who demonstrate “positive behavioural and attitudinal associations” with teams are often the most reliable and active consumers. A fan’s social identity is often formed through their support of a particular clubs and Wann et al. (2003) have demonstrated that highly identified fans’ lives are often dictated by their daily schedule of keeping up to date about what is happening with “their” club. As Mudrick and Lupinek (2015) argue, the choice of, and use of media to, satiate those desires lies solely with the consumer, making the selection a deliberate action to keep constant monitoring of social channels etc. Through this commitment and loyalty to keep updated with “their” EFL club, fans are demonstrating a range of gratification through media (Finch et al., 2022). The work of Mudrick and Lupinek (2015) in particular raised two main areas around fans relevant to this study, firstly fans who feel an ability to develop bonds among those with similar fandoms aid a sense of community and as such fan forums or various

subscription based networks provide an ideal location for this type of activity. Secondly, fan immersion in team related content, be that online or offline sites can increase both intrinsic and extrinsic fan behaviour resulting in increased fandom. As football clubs are embedded in communities and have a strong emotional connection with fans, Cayolla et al. (2023) argue that the interaction between the organisation and their stakeholders (of which fans are a part) is crucial. Therefore, to discover supporters’ views on the commercial challenges faced by EFL Championship clubs, this research aims to discover fans perceptions on topics related to business, financial, and sports performance. The study investigates whether there is a desire and drive to move toward promotion to the EPL through gambling, or a desire and drive to ensure a sustainable league position and maintain a long-term stability.

Method

Design

A self-designed online survey was utilised for this study. The survey contained four sections with questions regarding participants age, the football club they support, game attendance in the previous season (due to COVID containment measures being in place during the data collection period), and how often they engage with club activities. The survey had twelve 5-point Likert scale questions (1 Strongly Disagree – 5 Strongly Agree) on a range of topics focusing on fan perceptions around ticket prices, player salaries and transfer fees, gambling sponsorship, and the desire for promotion to the EPL related to commercial challenges of their club in the EFL Championship. The twelve questions were:

1. Do you agree that achieving promotion to the Premier League is a realistic long-term goal for your club?

2. Do you agree with clubs taking a financial risk to achieve promotion to the Premier League?
3. Do you feel that achieving promotion to the Premier League should be the main focus for your club?
4. Do you agree with the proposed ban on gambling companies appearing as the “front of shirt” sponsors for football clubs despite knowing it could reduce the revenue of the club?
5. Do you agree with clubs spending large amounts of money on player wages even if it means operating beyond their means and increasing reliance on owner funding?
6. Do you feel the increased spending on player wages and transfer fees across the league in recent years has improved the quality of football played in the league?
7. Do you agree with stadium naming rights being sold to companies to raise additional revenue?
8. Do you feel that the club you support price tickets too high?
9. Do you feel that ticket prices are a barrier to you attending your club’s games?
10. Do you feel that increased commercial activity has improved your club’s results and success?
11. Do you feel that increased commercial activity has improved your experience as a supporter?
12. Do you feel that EFL Championship clubs should continue to increase their levels of commercial activity with the aim of increasing their chances of on pitch success?

Procedure

Online collection of data was chosen due to its flexibility thus allowing for the collection of data from participants covering a large geographical area. The study received approval from the Research Ethics Panel for the College of Business, Psychology and Sport at the

University of Worcester prior to the hyperlink to access the online survey (www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk) being placed on EFL Championship fan forum platforms through websites, Facebook and Reddit during the 2020/2021 season. Fan forums are used almost exclusively to discuss matters of concern about a specific EFL Championship club (examples here are Preston North End fan forum website www.pne-online/forum/indx.php or Facebook fans forum @Preston-NorthEndFansForum) including issues around player transfers, on-field sporting performance, and thoughts and debates around their club’s business performance (Holtz et al., 2012; Smedley & Coulson, 2021). The outline and purpose of the study was available to the participants and informed consent was provided by all participants. To widen the reach of the survey, participants were encouraged to share the survey invitation with similar candidates, spreading it to a greater number of users and creating a snowball effect (Dusek et al., 2015). The survey was open for a period of 5 weeks during January – February 2021.

Participants

The study sought participants who self-identified as a fan and were members of a fan forum of a football club participating in the English Football League Championship during the 2020–2021 season. A total of 548 participants responded with an age range of 18–89. No incentives were offered to participants and their participation was completely voluntary.

Data analysis

The final league position for the 24 teams from the EFL Championship was used to group participants into 4 quartiles (Q1 = League positions 1–6; Q2 = League positions 7–12; Q3 = League positions 13–18; Q4 = League positions 19–24) (see Table 1) in an attempt to fully understand

Table 1. Final League Positions 2020–2021 EFL Championship.

Final League Position	Team	Quartile (Q)	Number of participants per quartile (n)
1	Norwich City	Q1	187
2	Watford		
3	Brentford		
4	Swansea City		
5	Barnsley		
6	Bournemouth		
7	Reading	Q2	78
8	Cardiff City		
9	Queens Park Rangers		
10	Middlesbrough		
11	Millwall		
12	Luton Town		
13	Preston North End	Q3	189
14	Stoke City		
15	Blackburn Rovers		
16	Coventry City		
17	Nottingham Forest		
18	Birmingham City		
19	Bristol City	Q4	94
20	Huddersfield Town		
21	Derby County		
22	Wycombe Wanderers		
23	Rotherham United		
24	Sheffield Wednesday		

the differences between fan perceptions. **Table 1** also includes the number of participants per Quartile. A Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted to compare the 4 quartile groups for each question contained in the survey. When significant differences were identified a post-hoc Mann–Whitney paired comparison test was conducted.

Results

548 participants took part in the survey with an age range of 18–89 years. The age groups of participants were: 164 (30%) 18–24 years, 126 (23%) 25–29 years, 116 (21%) 30–39 years, 82 (15%) 40–54 years, and 60 (11%) 55 years +.

Supporters of twenty-three of the twenty-four clubs were represented within the data set and participants indicated that their game attendance in the previous season (due to COVID containment measures being in place during data collection period), was within a 0–34+ range. The participant's attendance was: 80 (14%) 0 games, 160 (29%) 1–5 games, 71 (13%) 6–10 games, 86 (16%) 11–22 games, 97 (18%) 23–28 games, 54 (10%) 29–34+ games. Participants indicated engagement with club activities from never to multiple times per day. The participant's engagement activity was: 289 (53%) multiple times per day, 77 (14%) once a day, 65 (12%) almost every day, 67 (12%) 3–4 times a week, 46 (8%) match days only, and 4 (1%) never.

Table 2 provides mean responses for each question by quartile and outcomes of Kruskal–Wallis Tests. The table also provides results of the post-hoc Mann–Whitney paired comparison tests conducted on results indicating significant differences.

The results demonstrate that significant differences were found in eight of the twelve questions. This resulted in identifying Questions one (promotion to EPL is realistic) and ten (increased commercial activity has improved results on the pitch) as indicating significant differences between Quartile 1 (top 6) and Quartiles 2 (positions 7–12), 3 (positions 13–18), and 4 (bottom 6). Questions two (agree with financial risk for promotion to EPL) and three (promotion to EPL is main focus) as indicating significant differences between Quartile 2 and Quartiles 1, 3 and 4. Questions eight (ticket prices too high) and nine (ticket prices a barrier to attending) as indicating significant differences between Quartile 4 and Quartiles 1, 2, and 3. Questions three (promotion to EPL is main focus), five (spending big on player wages) and seven (the sale of stadium naming rights) indicated significant differences between some pairs but not consistently for one identified Quartile.

Table 2. Results of the Kruskal-Wallis and resulting post-hoc Mann-Whitney paired comparison tests.

Question		m	SD	r	H	p	Paired Comparisons	Adj. Sig. ^a
1	Q1	4.53	0.74	341.87	63.262 ^a	<.001	Q1-Q2	.000
	Q2	3.95	0.79	222.17			Q1-Q3	.000
	Q3	4.06	0.82	244.60			Q1-Q4	.000
	Q4	3.96	1.04	244.02			Q2-Q3	1.000
2	Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4	2.56	1.03	266.05	20.929	<.001	Q2-Q4	1.000
		2.18	0.95	211.51			Q3-Q4	1.000
		2.83	1.07	301.24			Q1-Q2	.045
		2.78	1.27	289.81			Q1-Q3	.146
							Q1-Q4	1.000
							Q2-Q3	.000
							Q2-Q4	.004
3	Q1	3.67	1.10	279.39	26.986	<.001	Q3-Q4	1.000
	Q2	2.96	1.28	196.76			Q1-Q2	.000
	Q3	3.83	1.12	301.71			Q1-Q3	.913
	Q4	3.61	1.19	274.57			Q1-Q4	1.000
4	Q1	4.02	1.11	274.00	6.532	.088	Q2-Q3	.000
	Q2	4.21	1.21	311.71			Q2-Q4	.005
	Q3	4.01	1.08	268.53			Q3-Q4	.928
	Q4	3.79	1.34	256.63			Q3-Q4	.928
5	Q1	1.84	0.83	258.65	26.636	<.001	-	-
	Q2	1.62	0.72	217.49			Q1-Q2	.219
	Q3	2.15	0.89	312.06			Q1-Q3	.002
	Q4	2.00	0.99	277.81			Q1-Q4	1.000
6	Q1	3.11	1.00	280.01	2.949	.400	Q2-Q3	.000
	Q2	2.95	0.91	255.29			Q2-Q4	.042
	Q3	3.13	1.00	283.64			Q3-Q4	.379
	Q4	2.97	1.11	261.12			Q3-Q4	.379
7	Q1	3.14	1.15	305.52	13.758	.003	-	-
	Q2	2.62	1.16	239.87			Q1-Q2	.009
	Q3	2.75	1.34	258.15			Q1-Q3	.017
	Q4	2.88	1.29	274.40			Q1-Q4	.653
8	Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4				43.712	<.001	Q2-Q3	1.000
							Q2-Q4	.851
							Q3-Q4	1.000
							Q1-Q2	1.000
							Q1-Q3	.006
							Q1-Q4	.000
							Q2-Q3	.134
9	Q1	1.99	0.92	247.98	20.179	<.001	Q2-Q4	.000
	Q2	2.06	1.18	245.67			Q3-Q4	.003
	Q3	2.33	1.16	288.30			Q1-Q2	1.000
	Q4	2.63	1.25	323.44			Q1-Q3	.057
10	Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4				63.842	<.001	Q1-Q4	.000
							Q2-Q3	.212
							Q2-Q4	.004
							Q3-Q4	.387
							Q1-Q2	.000
							Q1-Q3	.000
							Q1-Q4	.000
11	Q1	2.84	0.87	293.58	5.023	.170	Q2-Q3	1.000
	Q2	2.67	0.83	257.49			Q2-Q4	.831
	Q3	2.70	0.87	264.41			Q3-Q4	1.000
	Q4	2.74	0.92	270.94			Q3-Q4	1.000
12	Q1	3.68	0.82	285.84	9.330	0.25	-	-

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Question	m	SD	r	H	p	Paired Comparisons	Adj. Sig. ^a
Q2	3.35	0.83	228.62				
Q3	3.64	0.92	281.15				
Q4	3.64	0.85	276.65				

^aSignificance values have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.

Discussion

The research aims were to focus on fan perceptions of the commercial challenges in relation to EFL Championship clubs and to discover whether there are differences between fan perceptions based on the club they support. The participants game attendance was varied with 311 (56%) of the participants attending between 0 and 10 games, and 237 (44%) participants attending between 11 and 34+ games. Participants indicated high levels of engagement with online club activities. 289 (53%) of participants accessed digital touchpoints with their club multiple times per day, and another 142 (26%) accessed digital touchpoints at least once or almost every day. With the remaining 116 (20%) participants accessing digital content 3–4 times a week, or on match days only. Only 4 participants (1%) stated that they had never accessed online digital content with their club. This engagement with “their” club through online forums, blogs, podcasts, vlogs, and other social media related materials is high and affirms the positionality of fans being loyal, engaged and observant of club performance. It also demonstrates that the traditional notion of domestic match-going supporters being the only fans with the right to have a “say” has moved on. The work of Holtz et al. (2012); Owonikoko and Rookwood (2022); Smedley and Coulson (2021); and Wann et al. (2003) describe fans of football in virtual communities that bring them together from across the country and the world. In particular, fan forums (which is where all the research participants were generated) are often set-up exclusively to discuss matters of concern about their EFL

Championship club including issues around player transfer, on-field sporting performance, and thoughts and debates around their clubs’ financial and business performance (Holtz et al., 2012; Smedley & Coulson, 2021).

Fan perceptions of commercial activity improving their results and on-pitch success demonstrate confidence that fans of EFL clubs in Quartile 1 (top six teams – see Table 1) are significantly different (Q1–Q2 .000; Q1–Q3 .000; Q1–Q4 .000) to those in the other Quartiles (see Table 2). This result is replicated in relation to whether fans agree that achieving promotion is a realistic long-term goal for their club. That said, it should be noted that all fans provided high mean scores (3.95–4.53) indicating a general agreement with promotion being a realistic ambition for their club. Given that three of the six clubs in Quartile 1 were in receipt of parachute payments due to being relegated from the Premier League (Deloitte, 2022; 2023) at the end of the previous season, potentially has had an impact on fan perception around commercial activity resulting in good sporting performance and confidence in promotion back to the Premier League. This finding agrees with Evans et al. (2022) that those clubs in receipt of parachute payments have a much greater chance of re-promotion to the EPL. Further research is required with fans of recently relegated clubs from the EPL to the EFL Championship to discover how aware they are of the influence of parachute payments, and increased commercial activity being needed to facilitate and support sporting performance to achieve promotion.

Interestingly, fans from all the Quartiles agree that commercial activity within their club does not necessarily improve their

experience as a fan (mean scores of 2.67–2.84). Although, no significant differences were found, for all clubs it appears that commercial activity which improves results and sporting performance within clubs as discussed is mostly accepted by fans, but they do not perceive that commercial activity has an impact upon their experience as a fan. Given that sponsorship at football clubs is a key revenue stream (Sharman, 2020) and that the participants are active fans through various media platforms (79% of participants accessed digital touchpoints at least once or multiple times per day) it appears as though fans either do not resonate with any brand communications or do not see it as valuable to their experience. Further research is required to discover what types of experiences supporters want so they can see added value in their support other than “just” winning games and being top of the league. It would be useful to observe any differences between in-person and mediated fan experiences and given that betting and gaming is a normal activity within football (Bunn et al., 2019), it is possible that gambling sponsorships are not viewed as value added to the football fan. The work of Sayan and Aksan (2020), and the concept of the “neo-tribe” could be an interesting investigation of the “replica” experience for mediated consumption, especially considering the number of football fans who participated in this study who connect through mediated channels such as social media and fan forum spaces. The growth and revenue generation potential of these mediated fans should be a priority for football clubs to contribute to furthering fan relationships and commercial development (McCarthy et al., 2022).

Building on the understanding that fans do not necessarily perceive their fan experience to have improved because of increased commercial activity, they do tend to want their club to spend more to increase successful sporting performance. In an interesting paradox, fans also do not want their clubs to

take financial risk to increase their success. Fans provided general disagreement mean scores of between 2.18–2.83 about their club and promotion to the EPL through financial risk and an unclear stance on whether promotion should be the main focus for their club with mean scores of 2.96–3.83 (see Table 2). The results demonstrate significant differences from the fans of clubs in Quartile 2 in their responses to take a financial risk to achieve promotion (Q2–Q1 0.45; Q2–Q3 .000; Q2–Q4 .004) along with a willingness for promotion to be the main focus for their club (Q2–Q1 .000; Q2–Q3 .000; Q2–Q4 .005). This indicates a contrasting application of the fundamental principles of a football club’s performance identified by Galariotis et al. (2018) (see Figure 1) with Q2 (league positions 7–12) fans taking a more consistent view on financial risk taking. This may be a “moment-in-time” response or a signal of the trajectory of the club viewed with the league position in mind at the time of data collection. It should be noted that only one club (Middlesbrough) was sitting in Q2 at the time of data collection, one club (Reading) positioned in Q1 with the remainder in Q3 (positions 13–18) and Q4 (bottom 6). Furthermore, of the clubs in League positions 7–12 (Q2) at the end of the season only one of these clubs (Cardiff City) was in receipt of parachute payments (year 2). As a result, the notion of fans being consistent in their acknowledgement to take a risk is one that needs further consideration. Quartile 2 fans are more consistent in their responses to “gambling” (Evans et al., 2022) with the future financial performance of their club than those in Quartile 1, three of which (Norwich City, Watford, and Bournemouth) were in Year 1 of parachute payments due to being relegated at the end of the 2019/2020 EPL season (Deloitte, 2022; 2023). With the benefit of hindsight, and in line with the work of Galariotis et al. (2018), where consistent positive focus is brought to business and financial performance the outcome is promotion (Luton Town)

compared to the contrasting fortunes of Reading FC around their issues of ownership. Further observation of this phenomenon and investigation as to why fans feel differently is required.

In response to questions around player wages there was a general sentiment toward strongly disagree/disagree mean scores of 1.62–2.15 from all fans to their club spending large amounts of money on player wages, especially if this meant spending beyond the means of the club and increasing reliance on owner funding. Significant differences were found between Q2 and Q3 (.000), Q2 and Q4 (.042) and, between Q1 and Q3 (.002). So, although some fans are happier to support financial risk for promotion, they did not agree that risk taking should be focused on spending more on player wages and increasing the reliance on owner funding. This result could potentially indicate that fans want to support a financially sustainable club and are aware of the deductions that could be given to clubs for breaching financial fair play rules and for insolvency events (Covington, 2020; Evans, 2024; Taylor, 2019). They also echo the findings of Ronald and Damiano (2019), that fans are afraid of the drain of player salaries on their club. If, as the data suggests, and fans do not want clubs to take financial risks and go beyond operating costs, this may consequently increase prices on tickets and merchandise and impact further on the fans experience with their club. Building on that understanding, the fans response to whether they agree that an increase of spending on player wages and transfer fees across the EFL Championship has improved the quality of the football also brought no significant differences. Mean scores of 2.97–3.13 demonstrate that fans were generally non-committal in their perception of improvement in play across the League (“intangible” sporting performance) which further impacts upon their experience as a fan.

In response to questions focused on ticket pricing, the data indicates fans perceive that

ticket prices are not a barrier to attendance (mean scores of 1.99–2.63). These findings contrast with that found by Putra (2019); Slater (2013); Torchia (2016); Kennedy and Kennedy (2012); and Cox (2017). The findings suggest that EFL Championship clubs in Quartiles 1, 2, and 3 may have found a favourable position with fans regarding ticket pricing, ensuring that their supporters are not disenfranchised and unable to financially support the club through match day attendance. Nevertheless, the data indicates that fans of clubs in Q4 demonstrate a significant difference in relation to their club pricing tickets too high. Quartile 4 mean scores of 3.60 indicate a tendency to agree that ticket prices are perceived as too high for some of the participants at the time of data collection. League position, a consequence of sporting performance, may be the influencing factor here for fans. In the knowledge that ticket prices variably increase from season to season this is certainly a factor ripe for continued scrutiny.

Whilst this study did not find significant differences from the means scores in relation to the proposed ban on betting and gaming companies as “front of shirt” sponsors for EPL clubs starting in season 2025–2026, the responses from EFL fans indicated an agreement around the front of shirt betting and gaming sponsor ban. Further research is required to explore the deeper feelings that fans hold towards betting and gaming organisations and their ongoing partnerships with both the League and their respective clubs. The results do suggest a general agreement with mean scores of 3.79–4.21 that fans from all clubs would support the removal of betting and gaming companies appearing as front of shirt sponsors, even if this could potentially reduce the revenue of their club. Given the publication of “High stakes: gambling reform for the digital age” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2023a) a UK Government review of the Gambling Act 2005, the government has already worked with the EFL to

allow betting and gaming sponsorships to continue on front of shirts and as naming rights partner for the Sky Bet Championship. As such sponsorship will cease for EPL clubs for the start of the 2025/2026 season this will have implications for EFL Championship clubs who gain promotion in the future.

Conclusion

This research study aimed to determine fan perceptions of the commercial challenges of EFL Championship clubs. The focus on business, financial and sport performance reflects the delicate balance of being a business and a much-loved community asset. The novel approach of focusing on fans within this context emphasises and acknowledges fans as a key stakeholder group for a football club.

Results indicate that fans have an awareness of the commercial challenges of their football clubs, and that they appreciate the necessity to create a successful business model to enhance sporting performance. Fans also are aware of the risks that football clubs must take to maintain league position or to challenge for promotion but do not want to increase reliance upon the owner to take this risk. There is general sentiment that risk is good, especially when the sporting performance of their club is going well but managed risk is preferable to all fans regardless of sporting performance to maintain a healthy and sustainable future for their club. Given these findings, it is clear that fans appreciate the fine margins between success and failure but want well managed and viable clubs. These findings certainly align with the key points of the policy paper on reforming club football governance (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2023b) about clubs being more financially resilient to ensure future success and prosperity.

Findings in relation to betting and gaming need further investigation. Fans indicate that they are happy to step away from that “type”

of sponsorship and taken positively this reflects the changing face of football instigated by the Government and the EPL to step away from betting and gaming organisations in future football seasons.

The fan experience also requires further investigation as commercial activity and increased spending on player wages did not positively impact upon the “on-field” experience of the fan. Given that such a high proportion of the participants of this study access online platforms frequently through fan forums, websites, and fanzines, it is important to note that they do not “feel” that commercial activity is impacting on them positively. As discussed, EFL Championship clubs are already present in the social media space and the broader visual entertainment industry, but clubs need to emphasise and build on fan relationships in a mediated space which in turn can contribute to commercial development and ultimately sporting performance success.

This study supports the notion that a fan is someone who self-identifies as a fan of a specific football team and is enthusiastic about their club, and that they also have a high interest in the property of that club and is therefore invested in the long-term sustainability of it. Certainly, fans are changing in football with mediated fans have an increasing influence in how “their” club is consumed and perceived outside of their host community and so research is also required in this space. Engaging with fans to increase understanding of their views about club commercial performance through focus groups and participant-centred research projects may help to appreciate and explain the influence they have within their club.

Finally, fans have demonstrated that there is an understanding of the complexity of risk and reward through business and financial performance but not at the expense of their club’s future. This study indicates that there is work to be done by football clubs to create an

improved fan experience in mediated spaces that could generate additional revenues. Furthermore, financial performance through sound club management is necessary through the agreement from all fans across the Championship to reduce owner reliance. Future research focusing on the unique interaction of a football club, their fans, and fandom through online and offline communities is the next move.

Disclosure statement

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