

# cdr

## Global fan activism in sports: Digital collective action and the case of #EmptyOldTrafford

Item Type	Article
Authors	Chadwick, Simon;Ahmed, Wasim;Hardey, Maz;Fenton, Alex
Citation	Chadwick, S., Ahmed, W., Hardey, M., & Fenton, A. (2025). Global fan activism in sports: Digital collective action and the case of #EmptyOldTrafford. International Journal of Organizational Analysis, 34(5), 1866–1886. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-02-2025-5226">https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-02-2025-5226</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-02-2025-5226">10.1108/IJOA-02-2025-5226</a>
Publisher	Emerald
Journal	International Journal of Organizational Analysis
Download date	2026-05-10 17:20:28
Item License	<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/</a>
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10034/629613">http://hdl.handle.net/10034/629613</a>

# **Global Fan Activism in Sports: Digital Collective Action and the Case of #EmptyOldTrafford**

Simon Chadwick, Wasim Ahmed, Mariann Hardey, Alex Fenton

## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

At a time of growing consumer activism facilitated by digital communications, the phenomenon of collective action increasingly confronts sports clubs. This study examines an episode involving fans of a globally recognized football club (Manchester United) who were able to make the hashtag #EmptyOldTrafford trend globally in protest towards the club's ownership at the time.

### **Design/methodology/approach (limit 100 words)**

Drawing on collective action theory, we focus specifically on X, where fans coalesced quickly and at scale to influence business behaviours through digital collective action. Using social network analysis techniques, we focus specifically on sampling data from when the hashtag #EmptyOldTrafford was trending. We extract 21,610 posts from this time period and identify social network shapes, key nodes in these networks, and the roles specific groups play in collective action.

### **Results and Findings**

The analysis reveals how social media facilitates global collective action among sports fans, including those without direct geographical ties to the team, enabling them to amplify calls for change and influence brand behaviour. A typology derived from the collected data provides insights into the intentions and behaviours of those engaging in collective action.

### **Originality/value**

This research contributes to understanding digital consumer activism, offering guidance to sports clubs on managing engagement with consumers displaying behaviours of collective action. Crucially, it extends collective action theory by illustrating its application within globally dispersed digital fan communities. The findings help identify key social network shapes and nodes, enhancing strategies for sports clubs to effectively respond to and engage with consumer activism.

**Keywords:** Digital Consumer Activism; Collective Action; Social Media; Social Network Analysis; Sports Fan Engagement

## Introduction

The propensity of people to gather with one another is a fundamental human trait driven by a need for security, belonging, a sense of self and social identity (Schwartz *et al.*, 2011), and a belief that one is more likely to achieve goals through group membership rather than acting alone (Chadwick *et al.*, 2008). Group membership may be self-ascribed or conferred by others, whilst communication has been identified as being the 'glue' that holds groups together and what gives them strength (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018). At its core, collective action involves individuals coming together to pursue common goals, often driven by shared grievances or beliefs, through coordinated efforts ([Gamson 1992](#)). The development of digital technology, most notably as it relates to social media, has created new ways for people to engage in collective activities - especially as a call to action ([Marinthe et al. 2025](#)). In communicating within groups, members engage in processes of co-creation that shape attitudes and perceptions, which help establish shared meaning, understanding, and behaviour. Implicit within such processes are the creation of shared beliefs and the significance of influence.

The development of digital technology, most notably as it pertains to social media, has created new ways for people to engage in collective activities (Kende *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, the speed with which communications can take place can lead to the fast formation of groups facilitated by network platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018). Hashtags, influential account owners, and contentious issues are among the reasons why collective groups are forged. Indeed, such behaviours are evident in other settings, ranging from activism to consumer boycotts (Dalakas *et al.*, 2022). In some cases, group formation and collective action have led to behavioural changes by entities outside a network, though they were nevertheless the focus of them (Friedman *et al.*, 2022). Research has recently examined content on social media platforms such as from YouTube to study public's perceptions of a speech delivered by FIFA's president

[\(Mamo et al. 2024\)](#) . Moreover, other research has analysed data from X (formerly Twitter) to study NFL's Inspire Change initiative ([Mamo et al. 2025](#)).

Although consideration of collective action is evident in research undertaken across a range of different sectors (Margetts *et al.*, 2015; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011), we note both the significance and the uniqueness of sports fans. Fandom implicitly involves collective action (Jumle, 2024), which in turn entails the processes we already identify above. Nevertheless, there are some fans who display some unique features that serve to amplify the sense of collectivism and the 'noise' of their communications. Work in this field highlights the significance of contesting, tribalism (Dionísio *et al.*, 2008) , and geography (Conner, 2014). In motivational and cognitive behavioural terms, such is the intensity of collective group membership that communications are often coordinated (Sierra and Taute, 2019; Vale and Fernandes, 2018) and may also be aggressive (Dionísio *et al.*, 2008) and, in some cases, even violent (Knijnik and Newson, 2021). This is borne out of an intensity of loyalty to a team (Duarte *et al.*, 2017) and is linked to what it means to be a fan and the nature of fandom (Ay and Kaygan, 2022) .

Set in this context, the growth of social media has provided new opportunities for fans to draw closer to and engage with teams (Vale and Fernandes, 2018), form groups (Hedlund, 2014), and engage more actively in communications with or about these teams. Studies demonstrate the various contexts and ways in which this happens. Evidence shows that this may extend into activism, with fans congregating online to address issues they feel threaten the teams they support or their own self-identities (Romani *et al.*, 2015). For the objects around which people gather, form the basis for communications among group members, and induce intended or actual behaviours, social media has often proved to be a boon (Popp *et al.*, 2016). However, the unmoderated and abusive nature of social media platforms can be threatening

and problematic(see Knijnik and Newson, 2021), necessitating the adoption of more formal, stringent approaches to communications management (Fenton *et al.*, 2023).

In our study, we have identified, observed, and analysed how fans formed as a group and came together around a social media hashtag and took online action in order to change how a sports organisation behaved.

More specifically, this case involved geographically dispersed fans of the English Premier League football club Manchester United utilising a social media platform as the means to organise boycotts of football matches. This was in response to a co-created group belief that the football club's owners were proving to be ineffective custodians of it. We contend that this is a significant episode for numerous reasons; for example, United is one of the most visible, commercially lucrative, and valuable sports organisations in the world. Its fans are numerous, with some estimates indicating that globally, there may be upwards of 650 million fans, with a revenue potential of \$2 billion, according to a study by Kantar (*Reuters*, 2023). We also note the significance of fans in the creation and delivery of sports products (Kolyperas *et al.*, 2019).

## **Background and Research Questions**

Football initially developed as a game or pastime, often associated with local rituals and celebrations (Iabaccone, 2013). Later, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the sport began to formalise, notably through the creation of governance systems and rules (Dietschy, 2013). Amateur principles nevertheless prevailed, while clubs and their fans emerged as an outcome of socio-cultural factors (Goulstone, 2000). Football became part of local identity, an embodiment of collective norms and values (Williams, 2017). For fans, their connections with a club were cognitive and behavioural in the way that team performance became a proxy for who they were, where they lived, and how they conducted themselves in daily life (Theodoropoulou, 2025).

However, as the twentieth century progressed, so football changed, initially through professionalisation, commercialisation, and industrialisation of the game (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2013), later because of globalisation and digitalisation (Beek et al., 2018). Commercial and industrial pressures impacted upon the way in which clubs were owned and run, notably in terms of a new focus on revenue generation (Solberg and Haugen, 2010) and different forms of ownership model (Holt, 2007). In this context, intensifying globalisation led both to new investors engaging in football club ownership, and clubs themselves seeking entry into new overseas markets (Solberg and Turner, 2010). Among the former, floating club shares on a stock exchange or attracting a foreign investors became commonplace (Evans et al., 2024).

As for the latter, the commercial appeal of global mass markets, underpinned by the commercial ambitions of new owners, saw clubs building their fan bases that extended way beyond the cities and countries in which they were founded (Burton et al., 2019). The growth of digital technologies – satellite television and social media being especially important – resulted in clubs being able to establish and sustain engagement with geographically dispersed audiences (Fleischmann and Fleischmann, 2019). This was important as these audiences become commercially valuable, though they have also sought to remotely express their views as they view themselves as being part of a collective fandom (McCarthy et al, 2022).

Manchester United epitomises the transformation through which football has gone over the last one hundred and fifty years. Established in 1878, the club was an important part of its local community, emerging as an outcome of the city's economic and industrial development (James, 2019). Initially, the club's fan base was local, although growing success on the field led to national and subsequently international audiences engaging with the club (Porter, 2008). The status and iconography of United was further strengthened when its men's team became

the first English club to win the European Cup in 1968 (a competition now known as the UEFA Champions League).

United's prominence and iconography of was further enhanced when it dominated the early years of the newly established English Premier League, which was established in 1992. The club won this competition thirteen times between 1992 and 2012. This coincided with the league's aggressive pursuit of television rights deals – both domestically and internationally – which ultimately proved to be very successful, resulting in EPL matches being screened in more than two hundred territories (Nalbantis and Pawlowski, 2024). Earlier, Manchester United had floated on the London Stock Exchange, which imposed a strong commercial imperative upon the club to secure new revenue streams, of which overseas markets were one source (Hill et al., 2014). Later, in 2005, the club was sold to American sports entrepreneurs – the Glazer family who, amongst other assets were also owners of the American Football team Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

When the Glazers acquired United, the club was successful both on and off the field; in addition to Premier League titles, it also won the UEFA Champions League and frequently identified as the most valuable club (Szymanski, 1998). The acquisition was undertaken in the form of a leveraged buyout whereby the new owners borrowed money set against the club's value to generate the funding needed to buy United. This has subsequently imposed a significant financial burden upon the organisations, as it must service the significant debt incurred through regular interest payments (Austin and Phalippou, 2023).

At the same time as doing so, United's playing performances have declined with the club notably having failed to win the Premier League title for more than ten years. It is assessed

by several observers that this is a direct consequence of the player acquisition and development being sacrificed in favour of the financial obligations which the Glazers and the club must fulfil. Such has been the perceived decline in the club's standing that supporters of it have increasingly engaging in forms of direct-action protest (Winskowski, 2022), in one stance this resulted in a stadium invasion and occupation. In another instance, an apparently orchestrated social media campaign resulted in online calls for fans to stage a match boycott. It is this episode that forms the basis for the study presented here.

Given the convergence of collective action, combined with issues concerning motivation and group formation, set in the context of digital means of communication, we, therefore, pose the following research questions:

- **RQ1: (Geography of fans):** How does the geographical dispersion impact collective action, and what does collective action theory say about such distributed movements? What was the geography of fans engaged in online collective action?
- **RQ2: (Nature and shape of social networks):** How do network structures facilitate or hinder collective action, and what types of networks are theoretically conducive to collective action? What was the nature and shape of the social networks in which online collective action was being discussed?
- **RQ3: (Homogeneity/differences):** How do differences within a group impact the effectiveness or nature of collective action, according to relevant theories? You touch upon "group identity building", which is a direct link to collective identity in collective action. Did those engaged in online collective action display homogeneity and uniformity, or were there differences between them?

This study offers significant insights for the broader understanding of digital consumer activism in sports. We argue that analysing social media collective action, as demonstrated here, can serve as a crucial diagnostic cue for clubs and organizations in evaluating fan collective action.

### **The collective action of sports fans online**

The concept of 'collective action' is central to online interactions and the perceived group identity of sports fans, providing vital insights into the impact of fan debates on influencing behaviour and action (Doidge et al., 2020; Kirkwood et al., n.d.; e.g.,(Doidge *et al.*, 2020; Kirkwood *et al.*, n.d.; e.g. Phua, 2010). We employ this framework as it directly addresses how shared grievances and a sense of 'we-ness' motivate individuals to pursue common goals through organized group efforts, even in digitally dispersed contexts ([Priante et al. 2018](#)). The scale of the online network, the frequency of posts, the most popular themes, and fans' general sentiment or disposition all present opportunities for collective action (Besta *et al.*, 2018). Numerous sports and club profiles on social media sites aim to share game content with supporters.

Often, game content is repackaged and rebranded to promote a specific narrative (Thompson *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, there have been recent calls for more critical research into how fans interact with social media content (MacPherson and Kerr, 2021), how platforms impact fan discourse (Cleland, 2014), and how apps encourage collective action by redistributing posts (Cleland *et al.*, 2018). It is the latter we are concerned with in this article. We base our discussions on social movement theory and sports fan collective identity literature to understand the dynamics of this online mobilization

As fans shared their experiences during the global pandemic, group identity building became more crucial than ever, with fan behaviour aiming to increase team loyalty and directly influence future access to teams and games (Mastromartino et al., 2020, p. 171). This context highlights how social media empowers sports fans to bypass traditional club gatekeepers, allowing collective action to emerge organically from the fan community and motivate coordinated efforts ([Grover et al. 2025](#)). As Snow has observed, the social movement literature considers collective identity to be actively formed by groups of individuals and "cobbled together" to achieve an interactive sense of "we-ness." (2001, p. 2). For sports fans, 'we-ness' corresponds directly with their sense of a sociocultural base and is fundamental to the social interaction that coalesces around their favourite club, team or player/s. The literature on sports management has emphasised the uses and gratifications framework to provide novel options for sports organisations trying to promote fan participation through such 'we-ness' (Vale and Fernandes, 2018).

While acknowledging the utility of users and gratifications framework for understanding individual fan motivations, our study preliminary employs collective action theory to analyse the coordinated group efforts and broader social dynamics of fan activism. This focus allows us to examine how shared grievances translate into organised online movements aimed at influencing external entities. Indeed, Stravros et al. (2014, p. 455) propose social media are a means to strengthen fan motivations and connection to the team through 'passion, hope, esteem and camaraderie.' This study examines fan motivation and bonding behaviour online; it also raises questions about the escalation of collective action and relational desires of sports fans, which could harm the reputation of a club, team, or player.

Research examining the formation of a "us" and "them" split or identifying target groups (such as opposing teams, club owners, and players) helps to characterise the motivations behind fan collection action. Chiu and Won's (2022, p. 26) study of Taiwanese baseball fans

focuses on sports fans' ethnocentrism concerning their attitudes towards the game content and media consumption, which are seen as 'driving forces for fans' behavioural intentions' and favouring of 'we-group' over the 'other-group'. Kim et al.'s (2022, p. 126) research highlights the relationship between sports media consumption, team identification and perceived team performance. The authors describe the interaction as a 'flow experience' that reflects fans' hedonic needs and catalyses future fan activity. The research suggests the possibility of identifying a set of diagnostic cues to determine future direct fan action. In this context, scholars have identified various forms of engagement associated with sports fan collective action: advocacy for particular issues to create public acts of resistance (Stevens and Adams, 2013) and the strength of social links within the network (Cleland et al., 2018; Hodges, 2020).

Few scholars have examined how sports fans have utilised social media over a sustained period to encourage collective action aimed at changing the status of an issue. Collective action at the grassroots level of football has recently provided a new opportunity to modify the game's existing structures (Kossakowski, 2021; Luguetti *et al.*, 2022). Zaimakis (2022, p. 2) argues that such action is concurrent with the rise in popularity of politically motivated fan activities and the bottom-up social movement of Antifa DIY sports clubs. This process of politicisation of sports fan culture is evident from recent fan-group initiatives and the political symbolism shared on social media by the groups. The globalisation of youth culture and sport indicates the politicisation of grassroots action to organise and connect collective action, according to Thorpe and Ahmad's (2015) study of youth action sports organisations. In comparison, Sullivan, Chadwick, and Gow (2019, p. 493) describe the effectiveness of football in China as a tool for coordinated action by the state to promote broad economic interests and socio-political messaging as opposed to grassroots activism. For both studies, digital content strengthens the mobilisation of messaging, forming fan engagement that may be represented through sports as a means of collective action. In the theoretical sense, collective action for this

study entails an active process where individuals, driven by shared grievances and the creation of shared beliefs, coalesce to achieve common goals through coordinated efforts ([see Bottalico and Murgia 2024](#)). Our study focused on the fan content spread through social media trends, which, we contend, reveals the sports clubs' growing willingness to participate in and exert control over symbolic messaging. There are other comparable cases of online collective action, for instance, the trending hashtags of #BoycottCocaCola and #BoycottMcDonalds.

We expand on Bliuc et al.'s (2019, p. 1784) assertions that the escalation of online content results from organisations interested in compiling members' outward manifestations of identity and framing these in terms of the ideological underpinnings of a group membership. It has been suggested that, due to the pandemic, there has been a rise in interest in socio-political online communities, where the collective identity and action of members enable individuals to connect globally under a shared cause or ideology. This is evident, especially in youth action groups (Kwan, 2022; Milan and Treré, 2020) and groups organised around sports fan bases (Cable *et al.*, 2022; Howell, 2021). Some scholars have raised concerns about the inequality between wealthy and poor clubs as a result of the politicisation of fan culture in football. Fans who have traditionally viewed themselves as the centre of the community feel relegated to consumers within market-driven decision-making and collective action managed by the club (Derbaix and Decrop, 2011; Dubal, 2010; Zaimakis, 2022). In this aspect, the manner in which football fans organise collective action is integrally linked to their perception of mistreatment or injustice and engagement via social media.

Social media trends allow users to quickly identify and join together around a topic to discuss, connect and share opinions in an open environment ([Dumitrica and Felt 2020](#)). A unique component of these interactions is the self-organising opportunities for fans to promote and spread content using a particular hashtag so that other fans can find and interact with the content. While X markets itself as a platform that 'serves the public conversation,' its policy

distinguishes it from a broadcast news channel regarding how users might treat live news content. This context is crucial when examining digital activism, as platforms' structural characteristics can influence mobilization patterns.

Schradie's (2018) work, for instance, highlights how broader power relations embedded in a platform's structural context are a key component of digital activism and collective identity practices. Her research on 'the digital activism gap' considers the impact of social class, arguing that while digital engagement can facilitate mobilization, the costs associated with digital access and literacy can create barriers, disproportionately affecting lower social classes and shaping who participates and how in online collective action. This structural reality, coupled with the platform's content moderation challenges, is evident in how X, for example, has failed to prevent users from posting and spreading conspiracy theories, hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation on the platform (Das and Ahmed, 2022; Domenico *et al.*, 2021)..

This understanding of structural inequalities and access reflects the variations in fan engagement and the forms of collective action undertaken within fandoms (Cleland *et al.* 2018). Collective action theory, particularly its resource mobilization aspect, emphasizes that the ability to participate is influenced by the resources available to potential actors (He and Li 2023). Therefore, different social groups within a fanbase may have differential access to the digital tools and time required for effective online mobilization, thereby shaping the landscape of fan activism and the ultimate reach and composition of a collective movement.

This dynamic, where digital access and platform structures influence who can effectively participate, directly contributes to phenomena such as X witnessing a steep spike in extremist trending topics and messages that urge specific populations toward particular behaviours, causes, and collective action. This observation aligns with Munk's (2024) study of extremist Far Right groups, further underscoring the platform's role in mobilization. Elon Musk's acquisition and rebranding of Twitter to X has emboldened right-wing and extremist

users, while the laissez-faire approach to content moderation has allowed hate speech to flourish. These issues have hurt the platform and its users, highlighting the need for continued monitoring and action to address them (Knight, 2022; Malik, 2022; Wendling, 2023). Ultimately, these considerations of access, platform dynamics, and external influences are critical for a comprehensive understanding of how collective action forms, propagates, and manifests within online fan communities.

This paper explores the dynamics of collective action among football fans on social media, particularly on X. We examine the topics being discussed, the geographic distribution of fans involved, the nature of the social networks in which these discussions occur, and the homogeneity or diversity among those engaged in online collective action. Through this analysis, we aim to create a further understanding of the role of social media in shaping fan identity and facilitating collective action in the football context. We employ a social network analysis approach to address our research questions. We gathered quantitative data from X to examine the topics, locations, and networks of online collective action.

## **Methods**

### **Data Retrieval**

The empirical results presented in this study are based on a dataset gathered from X during our longitudinal analysis of the topic and the posts in this sample were sent between Saturday, August 13 and Monday, August 15, 2022. We focus on examining a specific set of 21,610 posts related to the trending #EmptyOldTrafford hashtag because this covers a time period when the hashtag was trending and generating a large volume of posts. The data was captured officially using Twitter's Academic Track Application Programming Interface (API) as it was known at the time and prior to the API closing and the rebrand to X. This specific API was unique and offered to academics and was able to retrieve all posts. This study fell under a study which has ethical approval from the University of Newcastle (Ref: 24674/2022).

## Data Analysis

SNA is a valuable technique to study the patterns and ties between people in an online community. The study made use of SNA to identify the key topics of discussion. The NodeXL Pro application was used alongside NodeXL Pro Insights (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022) to retrieve and analyse data. In regards to data cleaning and preparation, NodeXL Pro has several data cleaning and preparation features built into it. These include duplicate removal , and text cleaning features by removing control characters. It also helps to extract screen names, display names, and hashtags into a structured column.

Within the social network visualisation (Figure 5), each circle represents an X user, and the lines connecting them indicate a relationship, such as a retweet, reply, or quote tweet. In terms of the segmentation applied to the network, we used the Clauset-Newman-Moore algorithm (Clauset *et al.*, 2004), and the map layout was created using the Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale layout algorithm (Koren and Harel, 2004). The 'group in the box' format is used, and each community is grouped starting from the largest to smallest, and the labels, e.g., G1, correspond to the group numbers. The location, sentiment, and word analysis were produced in NodeXL Pro Insights.

## Results

### Transnational Fandom

Figure 1 provides an overview of the location of users posting from around the world plotted onto a map.



Figure 1. Geographical Distribution of Users Across X

As shown in Figure 1, the geographic distribution of posts for the #EmptyOldTrafford hashtag reveals a strong presence from England, closely followed by Nigeria, with significant activity also originating from India, Kenya, Ireland, Uganda, Ghana, the USA, Bangalore, and South Africa. The widespread activity, as indicated by the various coloured clusters and groups of users on the maps, directly underscores X's critical role in facilitating transnational fandom.

The colours on the maps represent different clusters and groups of users.

This global reach, particularly the considerable activity from countries in Africa and Asia, demonstrates social media's capacity to connect fans across borders, forming a global community united by their shared passion for the sport. From the perspective of collective

action theory, this phenomenon strongly supports the concept of 'connective action', where digital networks enable loosely organized individuals to act collectively without needing traditional hierarchical structures or strong pre-existing organizational ties ([Yadav et al. 2023](#)). The #EmptyOldTrafford campaign illustrates how a locally rooted grievance—the protest against Manchester United's ownership—gained global traction, thereby exemplifying 'glocal activism', ([Harlow and Harp 2012](#); [Showden et al. 2025](#)) This spotlights social media's transformative impact, allowing local issues to resonate with and mobilize a globally dispersed fanbase, demonstrating that geographical proximity is no longer a prerequisite for participation in significant collective action.

The colours across the network visualisation correspond to the clusters and themes from Table 1.

Table 1 Classification of Users

Colour	Cluster Theme	Characteristics
Dark blue	Glazerphobes	Posts calling for the ousting of the Glazer family as owners
Light blue	Club Loyalists	Posts demanding loyalty to the club as the basis for a boycott
Orange	Hopeful Expressives	Posts expressing hope that other fans will boycott the match
Pink	Inflammatory Aggressives	Posts using inflammatory language or exhibiting aggressive sentiment



The words "Fault" and "Mediocre" point directly at the management's shortcomings, holding them accountable for the club's dismal performance. "Hell" captures the intensity of fans' despair, their frustration boiling over into a fiery expression of discontent.

"Glazers" stands as a stark indictment of the family's ownership, their name synonymous with the fans' disillusionment. The word "Disgrace" reflects the profound disapproval of the protesters, their disappointment morphing into a deep sense of betrayal. The incendiary word "Bastards" unveils the raw emotions bubbling beneath the surface, manifesting the fans' utter contempt for the Glazer's. These terms collectively establish a clear diagnostic frame, identifying the problem and attributing blame, a key component in mobilizing collective action. Lüpnitz (2025) considers a similar diagnostic framing to explain how actors collectively deal with environmental tensions and activism in Germany.

The word cloud shown in Figure 2 is a potent testament to the simmering unrest among Manchester United fans. Their voices, amplified through social media, have transformed into a relentless chorus of dissent, demanding change and accountability from the Glazer family. The word "hurt" not only represents the physical absence of fans from Old Trafford but also symbolises the perceived void between the Glazer ownership and the club's supporters. Fans feel disconnected from the decision-making process and alienated by the Glazers' apparent disregard for their concerns. Overall, the word cloud reveals a deep-seated concern among fans about the erosion of Manchester United's identity and traditions. The Glazer family's perceived detachment from the club's heritage and their commercial approach have alienated fans who cherish the club's rich history. This shared sense of alienation and betrayal forms the motivational frame, providing a strong emotional impetus for collective action. Behrens's (2024) work on youth activists highlights the significance of emotional attachment to a cause—a factor particularly relevant for young people—in driving purposeful collective action.

## Join Date Analysis

Figure 3 provides insights into the dates that the accounts within the hashtag were set up. The year with the most accounts being set up is 2022, and we are only into August. There are noticeable peaks in June and July. This suggests that accounts were set up to tweet and campaign the hashtag.

User count by year and month													
Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2008	1	1		1			2	4			2	5	16
2009	11	28	32	28	16	41	56	34	43	27	33	23	372
2010	39	32	29	32	50	29	39	38	43	41	44	49	465
2011	68	47	71	62	85	74	59	79	60	44	51	71	771
2012	81	58	57	57	51	63	45	67	50	47	46	44	666
2013	49	43	50	38	40	31	45	40	37	38	43	29	483
2014	42	31	40	35	32	35	37	33	28	27	23	32	395
2015	40	29	25	32	35	33	47	43	32	21	27	38	402
2016	39	34	25	27	35	35	27	37	48	25	25	36	393
2017	31	25	36	22	22	36	42	39	27	37	41	30	388
2018	46	29	38	28	33	44	46	40	39	42	43	33	461
2019	49	51	48	34	53	54	56	63	51	64	36	68	627
2020	99	57	61	82	87	93	85	126	92	110	68	72	1,032
2021	101	78	62	84	93	75	85	136	96	121	131	107	1,169
2022	144	129	157	171	157	209	256	168					1,391
<b>Total</b>	<b>840</b>	<b>672</b>	<b>731</b>	<b>733</b>	<b>790</b>	<b>852</b>	<b>928</b>	<b>947</b>	<b>646</b>	<b>644</b>	<b>613</b>	<b>637</b>	<b>9,033</b>

Figure 3 Visual Overview of User Join Date

## Social Network Analysis: The rise of influential opinion leaders

Figure 4 provides insight into the social protest network surrounding the #EmptyOldTrafford campaign, revealing the interconnectedness and influential dynamics among users. The network, composed of 9,704 X users, represents a virtual community united in opposition to the Glazer family's ownership of Manchester United.

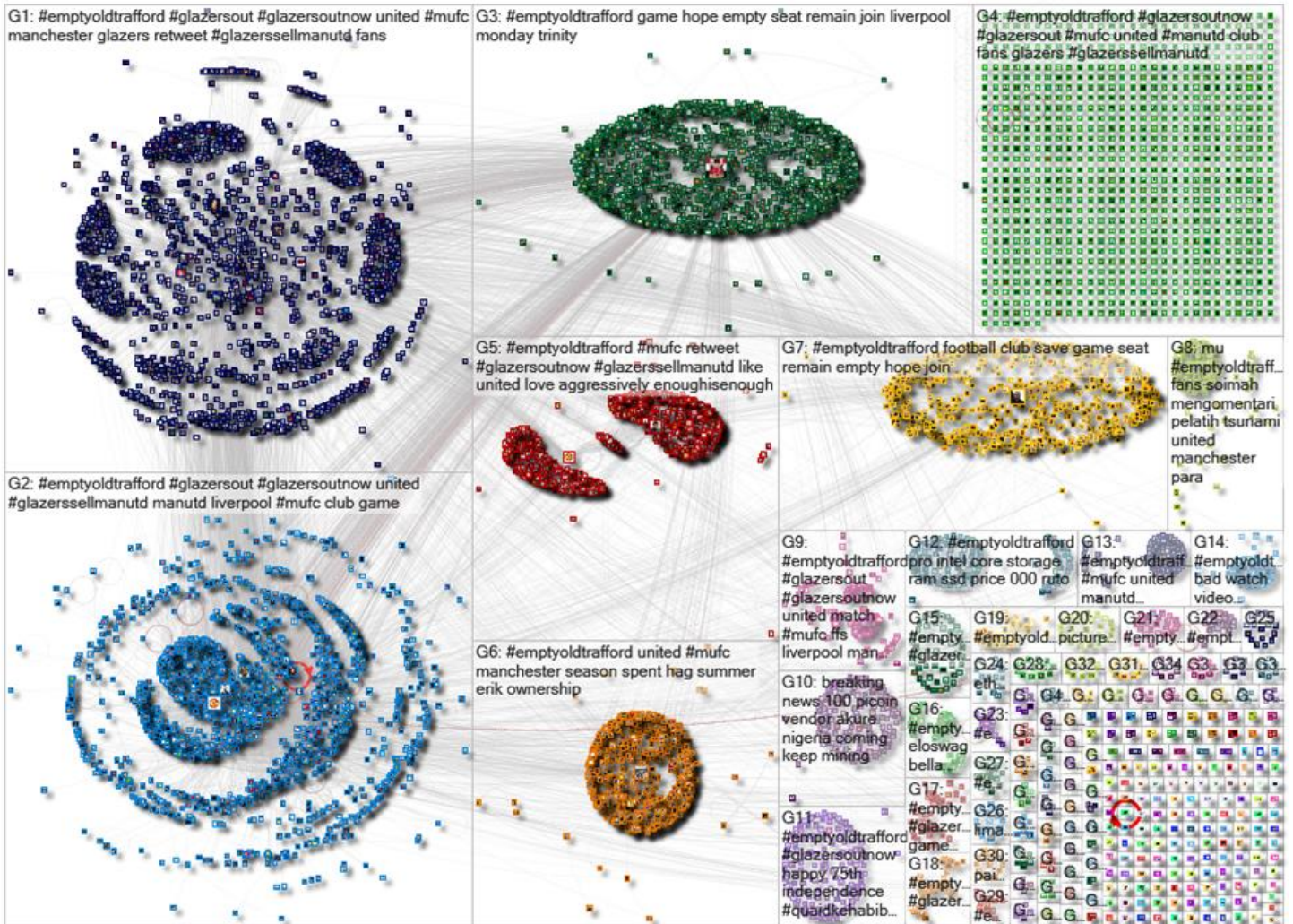


Figure 4. Social Network visualisation of #EmptyOldTrafford

Much like how topographic maps highlight the summits of mountain ranges, network maps are designed to showcase the most significant conversations and users within a network's terrain. Each circle within the network graph represents an individual user, and the lines between users indicate relationships such as a repost or mention. The users are grouped in their own boxes and areas in the visual, which indicates that they communicate more frequently with one another. The groups are ordered by size, with the largest group appearing on the left-hand side. Drawing upon Smith et al's classification of social media networks, as outlined in the methodology, the network visual is further interpreted below.

### ***Hubs of Influence and Virtual Crowds***

Towards the centre of the network, distinct clusters emerge, each representing groups of users actively engaged in the campaign. These clusters act as hubs of influence, where key individuals drive the conversation and amplify the protest message. One prominent cluster, labelled G2 in the bottom left corner of the figure, revolves around the official Manchester United X account. This cluster resembles a virtual crowd, with users actively retweeting and replying to the club's protest-related content. The high volume of reposts, reaching over 14,000, underscores the resonance of the protest message within the network.

### ***Cross-Communication and Shared Interests***

The network's interconnectedness, particularly among the larger clusters (Groups 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7), highlights the prevalence of cross-communication and shared interests. These interconnections demonstrate the fluidity of the protest movement as users engage with content from various sources and amplify it across the network.

### ***Influential Opinion Leaders and Sub-Communities***

The network shapes reveal the crucial role of influential opinion leaders in driving the campaign. Clusters 3, 7, 6, and 10, in particular, exhibit a central user whose content is actively reposted and replied to, amplifying their influence and shaping the protest narrative. Interestingly, the network shapes in groups 1 and 2 suggest the formation of sub-communities within the broader protest movement. These sub-communities consist of a tightly connected core group of users who converse frequently, forming a distinct identity within the more extensive network.

### ***A Visual Representation of Collective Action***

The social network visualisation in Figure 4 provides a compelling visual representation of collective action in the digital sphere. It highlights the interconnectedness of users, the

emergence of influential opinion leaders, and the formation of sub-communities within the broader protest movement. By analysing this network, we gain valuable insights into the dynamics of online activism and the power of social media to amplify dissent and demand change. The #EmptyOldTrafford campaign has demonstrated the immense force of collective action. By leveraging social media platforms' extensive reach and interconnectivity, fans have successfully mobilised and augmented their voices to advocate for transformative measures as a virtual community.

The collective action is visually depicted in the visualisation of social networks (Figure 4), which exposes the interdependence of users, the rise of influential opinion leaders, and the development of sub-communities within the more significant protest movement. The discernible concentrations within the network, specifically those encircling the Manchester United X account and other influential users, emphasise the centres of activity and how the protest message was amplified.

The hashtag #EmptyOldTrafford enabled supporters to connect, exchange information, and coordinate their actions by serving as a unifying rallying cry. The real-time functionality of X facilitated the rapid distribution of protest messages, which additionally ensured that the campaign garnered international attention due to the platform's global reach. The #EmptyOldTrafford movement is a compelling illustration of how social media can facilitate organised resistance and magnify opposing viewpoints, thereby effecting profound change. Through the strategic use of digital tools, supporters have successfully contested the prevailing norms and called upon those in authority to accept responsibility.

### **Collective Action and Business Consequences**

The salient detail of the #EmptyOldTrafford collective action is that, ultimately, none of Manchester United's football games were ever boycotted, at least not in significant numbers.

This implies that intention and action are not directly connected, though the act of posting messages on social media platforms may itself be deemed a form of action. As such, although the significance of focal nodes – people and groups who instigate, lead, and shape discussions - in networks of collective action should not be underestimated, their ability to influence other members of a collective can sometimes be a hollow threat. It was not within the parameters of our research to examine this, but what social media exchanges may result in is a growing sense of distrust amongst consumers (in this case, football fans) or the erosion of consumer or brand equity. Furthermore, such communications may prove to have a temporal dimension in the way they accumulate and contribute to future calls for action. For leaders and managers, there is surely some reassurance in these observations – threatening or negative social media activity may ultimately prove to be laden with intent and bereft of tangible behaviours. Monitoring and being vigilant to the use of hashtags must therefore be an important part of what social media teams must engage in, albeit without always feeling a need to instigate mitigating actions.

In this study, we first noted the geographic location of collective actors who were calling for a boycott of the football club's games. There was a clear dichotomy between remote agitators and proximate attenders; that is, whilst it was fans in overseas territories calling for a boycott, decisions regarding whether to do so were taken on a more local basis (often in Manchester itself). The extent to which there is a disconnect between those leading calls for collective action and those in a position to act is significant for several reasons. For businesses operating across multiple locations, our findings suggest that issues or problems in one market may have spill-over effects into other markets. Nevertheless, as this study shows, the nature of engagement between business and consumer is likely to be a moderator of collective action. Engagement may be based upon, among other things, geographic (such as proximity) and psychological factors (including perceptions and attitudes), which could mitigate the threats posed by online collective action. For geographically remote online actors, their distance from

a business may serve to amplify feelings of injustice, disenfranchisement, and alienation. The ways in which diverse groups engage together in collective action is thus an important detail for managers seeking to understand it. Likewise, establishing the existence and understanding of causal links between proximate and remote consumers seems equally as significant. In other words, in what ways, if at all, do they influence one another.

Such global polarity poses questions for social media teams, communications managers, and businesses in general. There is clearly a need to establish systems that ensure network vigilance; indeed we advocate the use by practitioners of social network analysis methods of a nature that is similar to those deployed in this study. In doing this, regular monitoring of social media platforms is required, access to relevant and reliable data is paramount, and methods for assessing risk are essential. Above all, managers need to develop thresholds and protocols in if, when, and how they might intervene in response to any threat of collective action. As was specified above, for officials at Manchester United the convergence of homogeneity and difference was a challenge. Fans globally were in broad agreement pertaining to concerns about the football club's ownership, though there were significant differences between its globally distributed fans about how to effect or induce changes at the club. As such, we note that United did not respond in any way to #EmptyOldTrafford, managers perhaps concluding that division diminished the ultimate prospect of coordinated collective action. Nevertheless, we contend that in cases where network consensus appears to be strengthening, then sports clubs will have no option other than to make appropriate social media (or other communications) interventions.

In making such decisions, we advise that managers consider two further issues: whether collective is episodic, and who or what are the key nodes in a network coalescing around a hashtag. Pertaining to the former, we note that in United's case, calls for a boycott of matches

using #EmptyOldTrafford were of an episodic nature, that is the life of this hashtag was relatively short and ultimately ineffective. Notwithstanding issues of inelastic demand for match tickets - which often characterises fan attendance at English Premier League football games – this serves to illustrate that there are limits to collective action among consumers. In the case of United, this may be the judgement that club officials made hence their decision not to respond to the hashtag. Accordingly, we believe that managers should have a clear sense of the nature of consumer demand for their products, and how this might lead to and shape either social media episodes or sustained and significant collective action among consumers of its products. Partly, as our study demonstrates, the anatomy of collective action may depend upon the power and influence of focal network nodes. We recommend that organisations routinely monitor whether it is certain individuals, groups, or other communities who perform an outsize role in creating narratives around a sports club. This may serve as an early warning instrument, especially if patterns of behaviour can be deduced by regular monitoring of highly active nodes, as it will enable sports clubs to identify and type the importance of collective activists. As the typology we derived from the data illustrates, such activists are unlikely to be uniform in their behaviours and we recommend that sports clubs have a firm, established sense of the collective activist who are commonly present on social media and engage in interaction about them.

Our study specifically set out to create further understanding of the concept of collective action with regards to sports fans social media interactions and perceived group identity. We build on existing research which demonstrated that these online traces form patterns that significantly influence fans' behaviour and interactions. We conducted an SNA study of Manchester United as one of the largest global sports brands, who are experiencing global collective action against the club's owners. SNA is an appropriate method to analyse at scale the post frequency, popular themes, geography and fan sentiments concerning collective action and protest. The results demonstrated that fans from all over the world, including Africa are

engaged in this action by posting and reposting content and using specific hashtags on X to join these online traces into collective action. This creates collective identity and even though many fans have never and will never visit England or Manchester United's stadium Old Trafford, they are seen to be engaging and inflating calls for stadium boycotts.

Studying social media in this way enables a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political implications of social media use, power dynamics, communication patterns, and mobilisation strategies. Although Manchester United is an example of one of the most discussed brands on social media - many lessons can be drawn from this research for brand managers. Firstly, brands should utilise social media data both quantitatively and qualitatively to effectively listen to audiences linked to their brand and those of competitors. Listening to fans and visualising/interpreting social media data to create actionable insights is critical to maximising the opportunity presented from this data and acts as both an early warning system and an opportunity. Secondly, brands need to consider that as they expand and become known nationally and internationally, social media posts can spiral out of control and users can feel incredibly passionate about brands, even if they are not directly geographically connected to them.

Finally, we call for brands to invest more, not just in the tools and social media analytics, but in artificial intelligence and humans to assist brands to maximise the opportunity to engage effectively and positively with global audiences. The ultimate goal is to become more digitally mature, people focussed and data driven. This would enable 360 degrees, AI powered live and actionable insights.

## **Conclusion**

We selected Manchester United as an example of a brand which has a very well established global fanbase at a time where social media is being used for collective action,

which is counter to the brand values of the club. In doing so, we responded to calls for future research in social media, fans and collective action. Regarding RQ1, our findings highlight that online collective action, even for a physically located event like a sports stadium boycott, shows significant geographical dispersion amongst users on X. This was evident as a substantial volume of collective activists originated from Africa rather than the UK, participating in collective action through social media despite their inability to physically boycott the stadium. This demonstrates how digital platforms enable ‘connected action’ among geographically disparate groups, challenging traditional notions of physical proximity in collective movements. Despite the lack of a physical boycott, the digital activism persisted, deepening collective action theory’s concerning how grievances can mobilise a global fanbase and resonate beyond immediate geographical ties.

Our analysis for RQ2 showed how the online collective action network had a core centralised structure, with key influences prominently driving the conversation. This core network configuration, characterised by repeated hashtags and shared narratives, reinforced the group’s sense of identity and facilitated rapid mobilisation. Such a centralised network structure, as for our findings, highlights the role of opinion leaders and focal nodes in shaping collective action dynamics in digital environments, aligning with collective action theory emphasis on resources mobilisation and coordination efforts.

In addressing RQ3, we explored diversity within this collective action movement. While fans were unified by shared concern for Manchester United’s management actions, their engagement strategies were varied and encompassed different tactics to raise awareness. These included, humour and memes to more traditional forms of protest around a boycott. The heterogeneity in tactics, rather than fragmenting the movement, served to strengthen and help to consolidate the overall group identity. This finding illustrates how diverse forms of participation collective reinforce shared objectives and solidify group action around a cause,

particularly in digital mediated environments where different forms of digital activism can coexist and feed into the broader movement.

Sports clubs with global reach should be aware of potential spillover effects from one market to another. Identifying key nodes and monitoring network trends through social network analysis methods is crucial for early risk detection. Our research shows collective action like boycotts can be episodic and pose significant risks, especially when this forms part of an individual's identity that has an existing collective base (such as sports fans, but this could also be applied to brands and organisations). Our findings highlight the need for proactive engagement through robust risk management strategies, including establishing thresholds and protocols for intervention based on social media network dynamics, to mitigate potential threats from online collective action. Future research should utilise SNA to explore other fan activism groups and hashtags in other contexts. Furthermore, there is excellent scope to employ other evolving tools and methods to explore social media and fan activism. This includes qualitative approaches like netnography and the rapidly developing predictive, AI driven analytics tools to form mixed methods approaches. Data analysis tools and insights are improving, and these allow us to understand audiences and their complex relationships with brands.

## References

- Ahmed, W., Meier, H. and Smith, M. (2022), "NodeXL: Twitter social media network insights in just a few clicks", *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP, pp. 487–502.
- Anagnostopoulos, C., Parganas, P., Chadwick, S. and Fenton, A. (2018), "Branding in pictures: using Instagram as a brand management tool in professional team sport organisations", *European Sport Management Quarterly*, Routledge, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 413–438.
- Austin, Neroli, and Ludovic Phalippou. "Decomposing value gains—The case of the best leveraged buy-out ever." *Journal of Corporate Finance* 81 (2023): 102317.
- Ay, U. and Kaygan, H. (2022), "Autonomy or loyalty? Community-within-community interactions of a local football fandom group", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, SAGE Publications, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 437–455.
- Beek, Remco M., Martijn Ernest, and Jos Verschueren. "Global football Defining the rules of the changing game." In *Routledge Handbook of Football Business and Management*, pp. 20-32. Routledge, 2018.
- Besta, T., Jaśkiewicz, M., Kosakowska-Berezecka, N., Lawendowski, R. and Zawadzka, A.M. (2018), "What do I gain from joining crowds? Does self-expansion help to explain the relationship between identity fusion, group efficacy and collective action?", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Wiley, Vol. 48 No. 2, pp. O152–O167.
- Bliuc, A.-M., Betts, J., Vergani, M., Iqbal, M. and Dunn, K. (2019), "Collective identity changes in far-right online communities: The role of offline intergroup conflict", *New Media & Society*, SAGE Publications, Vol. 21 No. 8, pp. 1770–1786.
- Cable, J., Kilvington, D. and Mottershead, G. (2022), "'Racist behaviour is interfering with the game': exploring football fans' online responses to accusations of racism in football", *Soccer and Society*, Informa UK Limited, pp. 1–14.

- Chadwick, S., Garford, W., Guimaraes, G. and O'Reilly, D. (2008), "The formation, organisation and management of MyFootballClub: Implications for marketing practice", *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, Springer, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 150–160.
- Chen, Z., Oh, P. and Chen, A. (2021), "The Role of Online Media in Mobilizing Large-Scale Collective Action", *Social Media + Society*, SAGE Publications Ltd, Vol. 7 No. 3, p. 20563051211033808.
- Chiu, W. and Won, D. (2022), "Influence of sports fan ethnocentrism on identification and media consumption intention: a preliminary investigation with Taiwanese baseball fans", *Sport in Society*, Routledge, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 23–41.
- Clauset, A., Newman, M.E.J. and Moore, C. (2004), "Finding community structure in very large networks", *Physical Review. E, Statistical, Nonlinear, and Soft Matter Physics*, APS, Vol. 70 No. 6 Pt 2, p. 066111.
- Cleland, J. (2014), "Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards: How Social Media Has Added a New Dimension to Racist Discourse in English Football", *Journal Of Sport & Social Issues*, SAGE Publications Inc, Vol. 38 No. 5, pp. 415–431.
- Cleland, J., Doidge, M., Millward, P. and Widdop, P. (2018), "Relational Sociology, Collective Action, and Football Fandom", in Cleland, J., Doidge, M., Millward, P. and Widdop, P. (Eds.), *Collective Action and Football Fandom: A Relational Sociological Approach*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 1–28.
- Conner, N. (2014), "Global cultural flows and the routes of identity: the imagined worlds of Celtic FC", *Social & Cultural Geography*, Routledge, Vol. 15 No. 5, pp. 525–546.
- Dalakas, V., Phillips, M.J. and Szczytynski, I. (2022), "Brands in the eye of the storm: navigating political consumerism and boycott calls on social media", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 1–

18.

- Dambo, T.H., Ersoy, M., Auwal, A.M., Olorunsola, V.O. and Saydam, M.B. (2021), “Office of the citizen: a qualitative analysis of Twitter activity during the Lekki shooting in Nigeria’s #EndSARS protests”, *Information, Communication and Society*, Informa UK Limited, pp. 1–18.
- Das, R. and Ahmed, W. (2022), “Rethinking Fake News: Disinformation and Ideology during the time of COVID-19 Global Pandemic”, *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review*, SAGE Publications India, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 146–159.
- Derbaix, C. and Decrop, A. (2011), “Colours and scarves: an ethnographic account of football fans and their paraphernalia”, *Leisure Studies*, Routledge, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 271–291.
- Dietschy, Paul. "Making football global? FIFA, Europe, and the non-European football world, 1912–74." *Journal of Global History* 8, no. 2 (2013): 279-298.
- Dionísio, P., Leal, C. and Moutinho, L. (2008), “Fandom affiliation and tribal behaviour: a sports marketing application”, *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 17–39.
- Doidge, M., Kossakowski, R. and Mintert, S.-M. (2020), *Ultras: The Passion and Performance of Contemporary Football Fandom*, Manchester University Press.
- Domenico, G.D., Sit, J., Ishizaka, A. and Nunan, D. (2021), “Fake news, social media and marketing: A systematic review”, *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 124, pp. 329–341.
- Duarte, I.C., Afonso, S., Jorge, H., Cayolla, R., Ferreira, C. and Castelo-Branco, M. (2017), “Tribal love: the neural correlates of passionate engagement in football fans”, *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, Vol. 12 No. 5, pp. 718–728.
- Dubal, S. (2010), “The neoliberalization of football: Rethinking neoliberalism through the commercialization of the beautiful game”, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, SAGE Publications Ltd, Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 123–146.

- Evans, Richard, Geoff Walters, and Sean Hamil. "Football club ownership and sporting ambition." *Managing Sport and Leisure* (2024): 1-13.
- Evans, Richard, Geoff Walters, and Sean Hamil. "Football club ownership and sporting ambition." *Managing Sport and Leisure* (2024): 1-13.
- Fenton, A., Keegan, B.J. and Parry, K.D. (2023), "Understanding Sporting Social Media Brand Communities, Place and Social Capital: A Netnography of Football Fans", *Communication & Sport*, SAGE Publications Inc, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 313–333.
- Fleischmann, A. Carolin, and Martin Fleischmann. "International orientation of professional football beyond Europe: A digital perspective on the global reach of English, German and Spanish clubs." *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal* 9, no. 1 (2019): 97-114.
- Friedman, V.J., Wright, C.J.C., Molenaar, A., McCaffrey, T., Brennan, L. and Lim, M.S.C. (2022), "The Use of Social Media as a Persuasive Platform to Facilitate Nutrition and Health Behavior Change in Young Adults: Web-Based Conversation Study", *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, jmir.org, Vol. 24 No. 5, p. e28063.
- Goulstone, John. "The working-class origins of modern football." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 17, no. 1 (2000): 135-143.
- Hedlund, D.P. (2014), "Creating value through membership and participation in sport fan consumption communities", *European Sport Management Quarterly*, Informa UK Limited, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 50–71.
- Hill, John S., John Vincent, and Matthew Curtner-Smith. "The worldwide diffusion of football: Temporal and spatial perspectives." *Global Sport Business Journal* 2, no. 2 (2014): 1-27.
- Hodges, A. (2020), "Football and supporter activism in Europe: Whose Game Is It?", *Soccer & Society*, Routledge, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 115–120.

- Holt, Matthew. "The ownership and control of elite club competition in European football." *Soccer & Society* 8, no. 1 (2007): 50-67.
- Howell, C.E. (2021), "The 2020 National Women's Soccer League Challenge Cup Anthem Protests: The Limits of Symbolic White Allyship", *The Velvet Light Trap*, University of Texas Press, Vol. 87 No. 1, pp. 76–79.
- Iannaccone, Antonio. "Football: an introduction to a rite of rites." *Italian Sociological Review* 3, no. 2 (2013): 121-121.
- James, Gary. "The emergence of footballing cultures: Manchester, 1840–1919." In *The emergence of footballing cultures*. Manchester University Press, 2019.
- Jumle, V. (2024), *Sports and Nationalism: When Imagined Communities Become National Nations and Nationalism*.
- Kende, A., van Zomeren, M., Ujhelyi, A. and Lantos, N.A. (2016), "The social affirmation use of social media as a motivator of collective action", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Wiley, Vol. 46 No. 8, pp. 453–469.
- Kennedy, Peter, and David Kennedy. "Football supporters and the commercialisation of football: Comparative responses across Europe." *Soccer & Society* 13, no. 3 (2012): 327-340.
- Kim, D., Kim, A., Kim, J. and Ko, Y.J. (2022), "Symbiotic Relationship Between Sport Media Consumption and Spectatorship: The Role of Flow Experience and Hedonic Need Fulfillment", *Journal of Global Sport Management*, Routledge, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 112–134.
- Kirkwood, M., Yap, S.-F. and Xu, Y. (n.d.). "An Exploration of Sport Fandom in Online Communities", *International Journal of Sport Communication*, Human Kinetics, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 55–78.
- Knight, W. (2022), "Here's Proof Hate Speech Is More Viral on Elon Musk's Twitter", *Wired*,

22 November.

- Knijnik, J. and Newson, M. (2021), “‘Tribalism’, identity fusion and football fandom in Australia: the case of Western Sydney”, *Soccer & Society*, Routledge, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 248–265.
- Kolyperas, D., Maglaras, G. and Sparks, L. (2019), “Sport fans’ roles in value co-creation”, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, Informa UK Limited, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 201–220.
- Koren, Y. and Harel, D. (2004), “Axis-by-Axis Stress Minimization”, *Graph Drawing*, Springer Berlin Heidelberg, pp. 450–459.
- Kossakowski, R. (2021), “Activism, Collective Action and Supporters’ Associations”, *Hooligans, Ultras, Activists*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 205–232.
- Kwan, J.Y. (2022), “Youth civic and community engagement under Singapore’s COVID-19 lockdown: motivations, online mobilization, action, and future directions”, *Journal of Community Practice*, Taylor & Francis, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 234–254.
- Lugueti, C., Singehebhuve, L. and Spaaij, R. (2022), “‘Stop mocking, start respecting’: an activist approach meets African Australian refugee-background young women in grassroots football”, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, Informa UK Limited, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 119–136.
- MacPherson, E. and Kerr, G. (2021), “Sport fans’ perspectives of public shaming of professional athletes on social media”, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, Informa UK Limited, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 146–165.
- Malik, N. (2022), “Elon Musk’s Twitter is fast proving that free speech at all costs is a dangerous fantasy”, *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 28 November.
- Margetts, H., John, P., Hale, S. and Yasseri, T. (2015), *Political Turbulence*, Princeton University Press.

- Mastromartino, B., Ross, W.J., Wear, H. and Naraine, M.L. (2020), “Thinking outside the ‘box’: a discussion of sports fans, teams, and the environment in the context of COVID-19”, *Sport in Society*, Informa UK Limited, Vol. 23 No. 11, pp. 1707–1723.
- McCarthy, Jeff, Jenny Rowley, and Brendan J. Keegan. "Social media marketing strategy in English football clubs." *Soccer & Society* 23, no. 4-5 (2022): 513-528.
- Milan, S. and Treré, E. (2020), “The Rise of the Data Poor: The COVID-19 Pandemic Seen From the Margins”, *Social Media + Society*, SAGE Publications Ltd, Vol. 6 No. 3, p. 2056305120948233.
- Nalbantis, Georgios, and Tim Pawlowski. "The effects of overseas exhibition games on consumer interest: the case of the English Premier League." *European Sport Management Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2024): 1278-1297.
- Phua, J.J. (2010), “Sports Fans and Media Use: Influence on Sports Fan Identification and Collective Self-Esteem”, *International Journal of Sport Communication*, Human Kinetics, Inc., Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 190–206.
- Popp, B., Christian, G.C. and Jung, B. (2016), “We love to hate them! Social media-based anti-brand communities in professional football”, *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 349–367.
- Porter, Chris. "Manchester United, global capitalism and local resistance." *Belgeo. Revue Belge de Géographie* 2 (2008): 181-192.
- Reuters. (2023), “Man United can gain up to \$2 billion via global fan base, says finance expert”, 15 June.
- Romani, S., Grappi, S., Zarantonello, L. and Bagozzi, R.P. (2015), “The revenge of the consumer! How brand moral violations lead to consumer anti-brand activism”, *Journal of Brand Management*, Springer Science and Business Media LLC, Vol. 22 No. 8, pp. 658–672.

- Schwartz, S.J., Luyckx, K. and Vignoles, V.L. (2011), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, Springer Science & Business Media.
- Segerberg, A. and Bennett, W.L. (2011), “Social Media and the Organization of Collective Action: Using Twitter to Explore the Ecologies of Two Climate Change Protests”, *The Communication Review*, Routledge, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 197–215.
- Sierra, J.J. and Taute, H.A. (2019), “Brand tribalism in technology and sport: determinants and outcomes”, *Journal of Brand Management*, Springer Science and Business Media LLC, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 209–225.
- Snow, D. (2001), “Collective Identity and Expressive Forms”.
- Solberg, Harry Arne, and Kjetil K. Haugen. "European club football: why enormous revenues are not enough?." *Sport in Society* 13, no. 2 (2010): 329-343.
- Solberg, Harry Arne, and Paul Turner. "Exporting sports rights to overseas markets: the case of European football." *Sport in Society* 13, no. 2 (2010): 354-366.
- Stavros, C., Meng, M.D., Westberg, K. and Farrelly, F. (2014), “Understanding fan motivation for interacting on social media”, *Sport Management Review*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 455–469.
- Stevens, J. and Adams, C. (2013), “‘Together we can make it better’: Collective action and governance in a girls’ ice hockey association”, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, SAGE Publications, Vol. 48 No. 6, pp. 658–672.
- Sullivan, J., Chadwick, S. and Gow, M. (2019), “China’s football dream: Sport, citizenship, symbolic power, and civic spaces”, *Journal Of Sport & Social Issues*, SAGE Publications, Vol. 43 No. 6, pp. 493–514.
- Szymanski, Stefan. "Why is Manchester United so successful?." *Business Strategy Review* 9, no. 4 (1998): 47-54.
- Theodoropoulou, Maria. "football club is family: Metaphor and the reconstruction of collective identity." *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 23, no. 1 (2025): 90-130.

- Thompson, A.-J., Martin, A.J., Gee, S. and Geurin, A.N. (2017), “Fans’ perceptions of professional tennis events’ social media presence: Interaction, insight, and brand anthropomorphism”, *Communication & Sport*, SAGE Publications Sage CA: Los Angeles, CA, Vol. 5 No. 5, pp. 579–603.
- Thorpe, H. and Ahmad, N. (2015), “Youth, action sports and political agency in the Middle East: Lessons from a grassroots parkour group in Gaza”, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, SAGE Publications Ltd, Vol. 50 No. 6, pp. 678–704.
- Vale, L. and Fernandes, T. (2018), “Social media and sports: driving fan engagement with football clubs on Facebook”, *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, Routledge, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 37–55.
- Wendling, M. (2023), “Twitter and hate speech: What’s the evidence?”, *BBC*, 13 April.
- Williams, John. *Games without frontiers: Football, identity and modernity*. Routledge, 2017.
- Zaimakis, Y. (2022), “Reclaiming the football commons: self-organized Antifa sport clubs against modern football in crisis-stricken Greece”, *Soccer & Society*, Routledge, pp. 1–16.