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Conceptualizing sustainable participation in the context of German football supporters

Introduction

In recent years, there have been indications of resistance and dissatisfaction among supporters of European professional football, with some examples showing a link with commercialization. For instance, in Europe, the attempt to establish the Super League and the fans' resistance is worth mentioning (Meier, García, Konjer, & Jetzke, 2022), while protests in England are also well known, with Liverpool FC supporters protesting against the club's former investors, which resulted in the club being sold in 2010 (Millward, 2012). Moreover, the case of Bayern Munich and Qatar sponsorship is a current exemplar of supporters' resistance and dissatisfaction in the German Bundesliga (Herold, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2023). In some cases, there is even evidence of fans exiting and establishing new member-led clubs (Brandt & Kurscheidt, 2022; Porter, 2019). In this context, investor involvement is associated with governance structures, where corporate hierarchies are established and democratic structures displaced, such that commercialization processes can be said to limit supporters' participation.

Against this background, fans' interests should be considered. A key example that highlights the central importance of fans can be seen in relation to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Bond et al., 2022), specifically, the atmosphere (or lack thereof) in football stadiums during this period (Fischer & Haucap, 2021). Furthermore, disregarding fans' interests increases the risk of

fan dissatisfaction (Bauers, Faix, & Wolf, 2021). On the one hand, fans are emotionally bonded to their club and thus loyal to it. On the other hand, the examples from recent years just mentioned show that the limits of commercialization have been crossed from the fans' perspective. Interestingly, there are also initial signs that fans and their interests are in fact receiving more attention. In English football, efforts to expand fan participation exist, based on the belief that "giving fans a greater voice will future proof the system, and rule out scenarios where the stadiums are being sold and the identity of clubs are being altered" (UK Government, 2022, p. 7; Woodhouse, 2022).

In German football, the sustainability guideline states that supporter involvement and exchange with fans should be improved. The sustainability guideline is part of the German Football League (DFL) licensing and has been in force since January 2023. The guideline also specifically addresses the institutionalized dialog between supporters and clubs. In general, the sustainability guideline of the DFL (2022) includes all dimensions of sustainability, and various sustainability standards, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, were considered in its development. This ensures a holistic standard for the clubs.

Building on this German context, our conceptual paper highlights the importance of institutionalized supporter participation in German professional football. In addition, we hope to aid the development of supporter participation within German football member associa-

tions (*Vereine*). The investigation's objective is to identify characteristics of institutionalized supporter participation so that participation can be sustainably established and improved. Furthermore, we show that elements of social sustainability help to develop and structure the potential for improvement of supporter participation in German professional football.

In this context, we focus on the following principles of Missimer, Robèrt, and Broman (2017): health, influence, competence, impartiality, and meaning-making. We show relevant links between supporter participation and social sustainability that are drawn from participation research and sustainability research. Thus, by identifying and discussing these links, we generate a basis for approaching the idea of sustainable participation in German professional football. Sustainable participation is about creating an inclusive and sustainable fan community where fans can actively participate in decisions and actions that affect their current and future fandom environment. Therefore, sustainable participation aims to ensure that participation opportunities are in line with the principles of social sustainability and are designed for the long term. As a first step toward conceptualizing sustainable participation, we compile characteristics as they pertain to football, while also recognizing that further aspects should be targeted in future research. Finally, we answer the following research question: In which ways can sustainable institutionalized participation in football be established and improved?

To address the research question and provide a central foundation for further

research, the paper includes the following elements: the theoretical background considers the scientific discussion around supporter participation in football as well as theoretical elements concerning social sustainability. From this, a theoretical foundation merging supporter participation and social sustainability is developed. For the first time, based on these theoretical elements, we deduce approaches to address characteristics of sustainable participation in football. Finally, the limitations and nature of future research as well as the conclusion complete the paper.

Theoretical background

In this section we provide the theoretical background, which is based on a comprehensive review of relevant extant literature. We first address different forms of supporter participation, which can be distinguished particularly by the extent of engagement and the sophistication of formalized and institutionalized governance structures and processes. We then focus on social sustainability and how it can be used to address the phenomena of supporter participation in football.

Supporter participation in football

According to Critcher (1979), traditional football supporters see themselves as members who have a long-term personal and emotional investment in as well as a reciprocal relationship including rights and obligations with a club. Members distinguish themselves from football customers or consumers, whose relationship with a club is more instrumental in nature and is characterized by lower degrees of loyalty. Customers/consumers attend matches, buy merchandise, and consume football club services through the media. They are not loyal to a particular club. Instead, they gather sufficient information about the market and ultimately choose an option which they perceive as the most beneficial, such as clubs that show promise to achieve the highest sporting success. Building on Critcher's work, and referring to the extent of football supporters' personal identification with a club, Giulianotti

(2002) suggests that four ideal categories can describe football supporters: *supporter*, *follower*, *fan*, and *flaneur*. For the purpose of this article, we place particular attention on the definitions of Critcher (1979) and Giulianotti (2002) and characterize members/supporters by their long-term emotional attachment to and high degree of personal solidarity with their clubs.

Through their membership, members/supporters have a great interest in shaping the governance structures and processes of their club (and by extension of the game itself). However, we also need to consider that member/supporter participation might also limit a professional football clubs' ability to achieve its goals. During general meetings, members are involved in policy processes and so they can modify existing goals and formulate new goals through democratic decision-making (Adam, Bauers, & Hovemann, 2020). In this context, the work of Roose and Schäfer (2017) is relevant, as they distinguish between supporter involvement and supporter participation in a club's decision-making. An example of supporter involvement is attending a football game, whereby supporters contribute to creating a unique stadium atmosphere, and hence enhance the overall (commercial) attractiveness of a football match (Edensor, 2015).

Concerning supporter participation in decision-making, Roose and Schäfer (2017) distinguish between non-institutionalized and institutionalized forms of participation. Non-institutionalized forms of participation are more informal and may arise spontaneously or through grassroots efforts. They are not established through official club channels, but structures still play a role in influencing decision-making. They may arise when supporters feel that institutionalized mechanisms are not adequately addressing their needs or when they want to draw attention to specific issues. A typical form of non-institutionalized supporter participation is supporter activism. Various studies discuss how supporter protests and mobilization have emerged as a response to several "-ization" processes of football and its cultures, such as globalization, commercialization, and

mediatization (Dixon, 2020; King, 2002; Millward, 2011). More recently, Ludvigsen (2023) discusses how football supporters have contested security-related changes, policies, and discourses related to the regulation of banners, body-checks, surveillance technologies, policing, and other security measures. Fanzines (short for fan magazines) have also played a significant role in the development of supporter activism aiming to ensure a more democratic and participatory game (Fitzpatrick & Hoey, 2022). Created and published by supporters for supporters, these forms of grassroots journalism have sought to challenge the clubs' uncritical official match day programs (Duke, 2002). They cover supporter campaigns and other sociopolitical issues affecting both the game and the club, with ticket prices, disconnections between clubs and local communities, and restrictions and regulations of supporter practices discussed (Millward, 2011). Although digital football fandom, supporter movements, and supporter media have not replaced traditional fan cultures, digital spaces such as e-zines (digital fanzines), online forums, podcasts, and fan TV channels have had a transformative effect on supporter activism and the various ways clubs engage with their supporters (Cleland, Doidge, Millward, & Widdop, 2018). Today, many clubs employ digital and social media to engage with their supporters through online forums, online surveys, or interactive sessions allowing supporters to express their opinions.

The second category of participation, institutionalized forms, refers to the formalized and structured mechanisms that are put in place by football clubs or governing bodies to involve supporters in decision-making processes. These mechanisms create a systematic framework for supporter participation and ensure that their voices are considered in key decisions. Examples of institutionalized participation discussed in the literature include supporter representation on club boards, supporters' trusts or supporter ownership, and membership structures with voting rights.

Hamil, Michie, Oughton, and Warby (2000) suggest that the inclusion of sup-

porter directors (i.e., representatives of the supporters on the board of directors or supervisory boards) will enhance democratic processes. This suggestion is based on the belief that internal constituencies, such as players, managers, owners, and supporters should have access to participation. In this context, Lomax (2000) emphasizes the potential to increase supporter satisfaction and improve accountability. This argument is supported by Adam et al. (2020), who stress that for supporter representation on clubs boards to be effective, elected supporters should have full voting power. However, McLeod, Jenkin, Walters, and Irving (2021) point to certain challenges that often inhibit supporter directors to perform effectively and therefore they provide avenues for overcoming these challenges. These avenues build on a clear understanding of the roles of a supporter director (i.e., promoting supporter interests in board meetings, acting as a conduit for information, and complying with their fiduciary duties) and an analysis of how board-level social interaction influences supporter director performance. Their analysis showed that supporter directors believed that to effectively fulfill their roles requires the ability to initiate and sustain patterns of social exchange with their board colleagues.

Stronger forms of institutionalized participation are supporters' trusts or supporter ownership. These have become popular in the UK since the early 2000s as a response to uncertainties about the directions of football clubs, having gained traction with the support of the Labour government and establishment of Supporters Direct in 2000. Since 2018, the representation of supporters' interests in the UK is within the remit of the Football Supporters' Association, which was established after a merger between Supporters Direct and the Football Supporters' Federation (Breen & Hoey, 2022). Supporters' trusts are cooperative-like organizations established by supporters with the aim of acquiring full or partial ownership of football clubs, representing supporter interests in a football club's strategic and management decisions, and strengthening the connection between the club and the community (Ward &

Parnell, 2019). While the value of the supporters' trust model in football has been successful and praised by various stakeholders, such as football governing bodies, expert groups, and trusts themselves (García & Welford, 2015), it is not without criticism. Critics argue that supporters' trusts might not truly represent the opinions and interests of all supporters, that their influence over clubs' key decisions is limited, and that their dependence on supporter contributions and fundraising and hence their limited financial capacity can restrict a trust's ability to acquire significant ownership in the club (Brown, 2007; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2007; Martin, 2007).

The strongest form of institutionalized participation is membership structures with voting rights, which is particularly characteristic for German football. Adam et al. (2020) argue that supporter participation is institutionalized at the league and club levels. The former is regulated by the so-called 50+1 Rule, which was introduced in 1998 by the German Football Association (DFB, 1999). Before 1998, German professional football clubs were all member owned, with the rule allowing clubs to outsource their professional football team (e.g., GmbH or AG). In the case of an outsourced professional football team, the rule still ensures institutionalized supporter participation of club members in German professional football (one member = one vote). Its proponents see the rule as justified since, for example, it protects clubs from the influence of external investors and preserves the identification of supporters and clubs (Bauers & Hovemann, 2019).

At the club level, supporter participation is institutionalized in such a way that through their membership, supporters have the right to participate in a club's decision-making processes. For example, membership rights grant supporters voting power, which allows them to elect a board of directors in the general meeting. However, Adam et al. (2020) highlight certain barriers to supporter participation: at league level, there are exemptions and circumventions of the 50+1 Rule, while at club level, the authors point to regulations on convening

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Abstract

Institutionalized supporter participation is a traditional part of German professional football clubs. Due to commercialization, some challenging issues have arisen in recent years regarding supporter participation. To develop new approaches for improving participation, the study uses a social sustainability perspective, illustrating that social sustainability elements help to develop and structure the potential for improvement of participation in German professional football. By identifying and discussing links between social sustainability and institutionalized supporter participation, we contribute to the conceptualization of sustainable participation. Our research supports the creation of an inclusive and sustainable fan community where fans can actively participate in decisions and actions that affect their current and future fandom environment. Based on the social sustainability principles of health, influence, competence, impartiality, and meaning-making, we compile the following characteristics of sustainable participation: social well-being oriented participation, direct influence, regular voting rights, representative participation, appealable resolutions, information-based participation, barrier-free participation, democratic voting, established constitutions, and encouraged participation. This conceptualization provides approaches and foundations for future investigations regarding participation research in football and practical implications for member associations, association members, league organizers, and other stakeholders to establish and improve institutionalized participation.

Keywords

Voting rights · Influence · Club member · Fan · Commercialization

and conducting the general meeting, club members' rights to file motions for the general meeting, and the representation of supporter interests in the supervisory bodies. Adam et al. (2020) argue that these barriers need to be overcome, oth-

erwise a transformation into a purely corporate model of professional football, as can be found in other countries, is inevitable.

To summarize, the academic literature surveyed analyzes supporter participation in decision-making, particularly from a supporter-engagement (e.g., supporter activism) and governance (e.g., formalization and institutionalization) approach. What can be concluded from the focus of these theoretical approaches to analyzing supporter participation is that, first, they emphasize the involvement and participation of supporters in their clubs, or in the football ecosystem more widely. Second, a long-term perspective guides these approaches, with supporter engagement aiming to foster strong and enduring connections between supporters and their clubs, while governance aims to establish structures and processes ensuring that supporters can participate in shaping club policies and strategies on an ongoing basis. Third, they recognize that football is community driven. Supporters aim to positively impact local communities within football but to an increasing extent also through football, such as with community outreach initiatives. Building on these arguments, we suggest that for the most part, these characteristics essentially correspond to those that describe the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, which will be discussed below.

Social sustainability

Sustainable development (SD) aims to combine economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (UN, 2015). Thus, taking a systems approach to SD, these three dimensions (economic, social, and environmental) are interlinked and contain both trade-offs and complementarities (Barbier & Burgess, 2017). The mechanisms of participation, introduced in the previous section, can be described as an important aspect of SD as illustrated by SDG 16 of Agenda 2030, which explicitly calls for “responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels” (UN, 2015, p. 30). While

keeping in mind that sustainability dimensions often overlap in practice, we argue that participation is most relevant when considering the social dimension. This becomes clear from the definition of the latter by Olawumi and Chan (2018, p. 232) as “social well-being of the populace, balancing the need of an individual with the need for the group (equity), public awareness and cohesion, and participation.” While the authors demonstrate that social sustainability entails more than the participation of certain stakeholders, they also clarify that participation plays a crucial role within the concept. Accordingly, in the current paper, we focus mainly on aspects of social sustainability related to participation.

In this context, we have chosen the approach of Missimer et al. (2017) as a basis for our study for several reasons. First, it is built on the holistic and established Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development which has evolved since the early 1990s (Broman & Robèrt, 2017). Second, while the model aims to challenge the vagueness that often surrounds the concept of social sustainability, it is general enough to allow application across different disciplines (Broman & Robèrt, 2017). Third, it has served as a basis for the development of frameworks (e.g., Haller, Jonsson, & Fröling, 2018; Wilson & Van Der Velden, 2022) and has been extensively discussed in other recent peer-reviewed research (e.g., Roca-Puig, 2019).

The science-based and systematic structuring discussed by Missimer et al. (2017) elaborates on principles for social sustainability. The authors conclude that “in a socially sustainable society, people are not subject to structural obstacles to” (1) health, (2) influence, (3) competence, (4) impartiality, and (5) meaning-making (Missimer et al., 2017, p. 7). We use these five principles as pillars to structure the sustainability elements we deem helpful to develop participation. We identified these elements of social sustainability through an examination of international frameworks related to sustainability (e.g., the GRI or ESG). The outcome of integrating these principles and the relevant elements from various

frameworks is depicted in [Table 1](#), with each discussed in turn below.

Health

When defining health, Missimer et al. (2017, p. 6) state “this means that people are not exposed to social conditions that systematically undermine their possibilities to avoid injury and illness; physically, mentally, or emotionally, e.g., dangerous working conditions or insufficient wages.” Although we found the relevance of the physical component negligible in our context, where workplace safety and injuries do not play a role in supporter participation, we find that mental and emotional elements are relevant. These elements are also highlighted in Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015), which stresses the importance of mental and social well-being for all. Further, the ESG framework (EBA, 2021) underlines the importance of customer health issues. Accordingly, we focus on aspects of mental and emotional health.

Influence

According to Missimer et al. (2017), influence refers to problems regarding general access to participation. People must not be prevented from influencing systems they belong to. Most basically, several frameworks (e.g., GRI, 2023; UN, 2015) refer to possibilities to participate either directly or via a credible representative (the latter also has implications on the structure and diversity of the organizations’ board). Further, analyzed documents underline the importance of regularity (e.g., ongoing, quarterly, or annually) and long-term orientation within stakeholder relations as opposed to these being spontaneous or random in terms of purpose and time (e.g., EBA, 2021; UN Global Compact, 2014). Moreover, persons that see their rights violated should have access to remedies (UN, 1992; UN, 2015), while the OECD (2011) also states internal, non-judicial dispute settlement mechanisms.

Competence

As a third principle, Missimer et al. (2017) describe competence, which entails obstacles regarding the formation of opinions on or understandings of given

Table 1 Sustainability principles and identified elements with reference to supporter participation

Principles	Identified elements	Frameworks considered
Health	Social well-being	EBA (2021, p. 26); UN (2015, p. 7)
Influence	Possibility to participate directly	GRI (2023, p. 87); UN (1992, p. 3); UN (2015, p. 30)
	Possibility to participate via representatives	GRI (2023, pp. 87, 106, 865); UN (2015, p. 25)
	Possibility to participate regularly	GRI (2023, p. 87)
	Possibility to participate permanently	EBA (2021, p. 31); UN Global Compact (2014, p. 9)
	Access to internal and external remedies	OECD (2011, p. 51); UN (1992, p. 3); UN (2012, p. 7); UN (2015, p. 30)
Competence	Access to information	EBA (2021, p. 27); GRI (2023, pp. 87, 88, 782, 783); OECD (2011, pp. 27, 51); UN (1992, p. 3); UN (2012, p. 7); UN (2015, p. 30); UN Global Compact (2014, pp. 9, 39)
Impartiality	Discrimination-free participation	EBA (2021, p. 26); GRI (2023, pp. 106, 704); UN (2012, p. 7); UN (2015, pp. 25, 30)
	Democratic procedures and equal opportunities	EBA (2021, p. 26); UN (2012, p. 2); UN (2015, pp. 5, 7)
Meaning-making	Regulated processes	EBA (2021, pp. 26, 27); OECD (2011, p. 19); UN (1992, p. 16); UN Global Compact (2014, p. 8)
	Encourage participation	UN (2012, pp. 7, 13)
	Leadership commitment	UN Global Compact (2014, pp. 9, 35)
	Adequate allocation of resources to participation management	EBA (2021, p. 27); GRI (2023, p. 87); OECD (2011, p. 19)

situations. In line with this, the need to grant stakeholders easy access to information to allow informed decisions is, among other documents, clearly stated in the original Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (UN, 1992). In addition, communication should be understandable, transported via appropriate channels, and be as barrier-free as possible (e.g., regarding language; GRI, 2023). Lastly, information and communication technology can play a facilitating role towards achieving this purpose (UN, 2012).

Impartiality

Fourth, Missimer et al. (2017) discuss impartiality, which comprises problems regarding unfair access and discrimination. Accordingly, equal opportunity is a major principle in the ESG (EBA, 2021) framework and democratic procedures are similarly highlighted in UN documents (e.g., UN, 2012). Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015) stresses the importance of the absence of any kind of discrimination when it comes to access to decision-making processes, i.e., the possibility to participate must be detached from age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic status. This should hold true for both direct participation as well as participation via representation.

Meaning-making

Lastly, Missimer et al. (2017) mention the principle of meaning-making, which they outline as the need for organizational clarity, an inherently consistent organizational purpose, and the alignment of leadership action to that purpose. Within this context, clear, written rules and procedures, such as a code of conduct, play an important role regarding stakeholder participation (EBA, 2021), which should be managed with adequate financial and human capital (GRI, 2023). Finally, several documents mention that organizations should actively encourage stakeholder engagement, e.g., via a clear leadership commitment (UN Global Compact, 2014) or competent management (GRI, 2023).

Need for a new approach

Building on our discussion, we suggest that supporter participation and social sustainability are interconnected approaches. Effective governance mechanisms can enhance supporter engagement by promoting financial stability and transparent decision-making. In turn, actively engaged supporters contribute to the sustainability of football by supporting their clubs as well as responsible behaviors within the sport. Therefore, approaching supporter participation in

decision-making from a social sustainability perspective offers an alternative that both complements and extends the perspectives of existing supporter participation approaches. Meanwhile, although a growing body of research discusses social sustainability and sustainable development in sport, there are no studies that focus on (social) sustainability aspects of decision-making in football organizations themselves. Thus, our article fills a gap in the current sport management literature. We are using the context of German football clubs and the possibilities for their supporters to participate in decision-making in a socially sustainable way. However, we also suggest that our discussion has implications for member organizations in other contexts in and outside of sport.

Conceptualization of sustainable participation

The following section will elaborate on the previously introduced five principles (health, influence, competence, impartiality, and meaning-making) and the relevant elements previously mentioned in **Table 1**. It will do so specifically in relation to German football. Thus, we show that elements of social sustainability help to develop and structure the potential for

improvement of supporter participation in German professional football.

Health

Social well-being

The gratification of football supporters' basic needs (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2014) are also related to institutionalized participation. For example, the opportunity to participate in the association may be relevant for the experience of self-determination (e.g., Funk, Beaton, & Alexandris, 2012). In addition, successful participation can lead to the satisfaction of members' experience of competence (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2014). Furthermore, interpersonal relatedness (Kim, 2016) can be promoted through institutionalized participation and member meetings. Therefore, institutionalized participation can create incentives for supporters to actively and self-determinedly participate in the association to meet individual needs and improve social well-being (Bauers et al., 2022).

Influence

Direct influence

The institutional structure affects supporter participation. For example, a spin-off of a professional football team from a member association in a corporation as well as an additional investor's involvement causes significant changes in a club's structure. In this context, we distinguish between three scenarios: (1) In the first case, the professional football team is part of the *Verein*. As a result, in the general meeting of the member association, members have an influence on the professional football team in the form of direct participation. (2) In the case that the professional football team is part of an external spin-off company, members can only indirectly influence the decision-making processes of the professional football team and control their management bodies during the general meeting. With regard to this indirect participation, the constitution of the *Verein* needs to specify the representation of the member association in the supervisory bodies of the spin-off professional football corporation. In order for effective and efficient

membership-based supporter participation to take place, these representatives should have the majority of voting rights in the supervisory bodies and be elected at the member association's general meeting (Adam et al., 2020). (3) The third possible case builds on the second: investors can acquire shares of the spin-off company. Moreover, because a majority share acquisition is possible, different research papers criticize the terms of the 50+1 Rule (Lammert, Hovemann, Wieschemann, & Richter, 2009; Bauers, Lammert, & Hovemann, 2015). Should a *Verein* experience financial difficulties, the investor can enforce its interests if it holds most of the shares. Due to this financial influence, supporter participation may be impaired.

Regular voting right

Most member associations in German professional football conduct their general meeting at least once a year, which corresponds to established governance standards. This offers members the opportunity to exercise their voting rights on a regular basis. However, a few clubs hold general meetings more often. Such arrangements appear to be critical in terms of transparency and accountability, as members may not be informed in a timely manner about the situation and activities of the club, and therefore cannot respond adequately to potential maladministration (Adam et al., 2020). In addition, Adam, Lammert, and Hovemann (2019) detect that the majority of member associations stipulate the general meeting to be a gathering, which allows all members to participate. Some member associations institute a delegate meeting, which appears to be disadvantageous as not all club members can participate and be involved in decision-making processes.

Representative participation

There are indications in the research that suggest club members are interested in controlling a board's activities (Coates, Fahrner, & Pawlowski, 2021). Members can exercise control via their membership rights in the general meeting of the member association. However, high transaction costs (Demsetz, 1983) and

their "rational apathy" (Hardin, 1982) prevent members from exercising effective control. To solve this problem, Adam et al. (2020) recommend that German professional football clubs' constitutions require specialized representatives with controlling and monitoring functions, such as a supervisory board. Hence, controlling a board's activities is possible by incorporating fan representatives when staffing or filling positions in the supervisory board of the spin-off company or the *Verein* (Adam et al., 2020; Klenk & Nagel, 2012). This institutionalized control enhances the indirect participation of club members. To maintain at least indirect possibilities for members to shape club policy, Adam et al. (2020) recommend the general meeting of the member association elects their representatives in the professional football corporation's supervisory board. Furthermore, these elected representatives should also have the majority of the voting rights in the professional football corporation's supervisory board. At least one representative of active supporters or supporters' organizations should be involved in the supervisory board of the member association, since active supporters are definitive stakeholders within the clubs' governance structures (Adam et al., 2020). According to Hamil, Holt, Michie, Oughton, and Shailer (2004), the institutionalization of supporters' interests can positively impact the governance of the clubs in a variety of ways, such as, providing for higher levels of transparency and accountability, a better connectedness between the supporter base and the club, and access to specific knowledge and networks. In addition to institutionalized control, the consideration of supporter representatives filling positions in the club's supervisory board, along with other definitive stakeholders, such as athletes, owners, and sponsors, enhances democratic processes.

Appealable resolutions

Furthermore, supporters who see their rights violated should have the option to appeal resolutions regarding their participation (UN, 1992; UN, 2015). In accordance with the OECD (2011), opportunities for supporters to file motions through

an internal arbitration court regarding membership or participation should exist (Adam et al., 2020). An internal arbitration court allows for the internal settlement of legal matters, such as disputes between association members and association bodies, and in this way, civil courts can be avoided in the first instance. Should, for example, the board of directors decide to expel a member from the club, the member could contact the arbitration court and submit a complaint against this decision. The arbitrator would then review the case and overrule or confirm the expulsion. However, affected members can appeal against internal arbitration court decisions by later applying to the ordinary courts. In addition and in accordance with the OECD (2011), it is also worth noting that opportunities for supporters to file motions through the internal association court regarding membership or participation should exist (Adam et al., 2020).

Competence

Information-based participation

In order to enable members to make well-informed decisions, sharing relevant information is especially important. Depending on the constitutions of the association, supervisory boards have a range of rights regarding information they can access. With this in mind, the appointment of fan representatives when staffing positions on the supervisory board should be taken into consideration (Adam et al., 2020; Klenk & Nagel, 2012). In addition, members also have the right to file a motion at the general meeting. The constitutions of association determine periods and forms to file a motion prior to the general meeting. Hence, members can extend and exercise their information rights to receive more relevant club-related information and to make well-informed decisions. In general, information should be understandable, transported via appropriate channels, and as barrier-free as possible (e.g., regarding language in shared documents or on the website; GRI, 2023). In this context, information and communication technology can be relevant for this purpose (UN, 2012).

Impartiality

Barrier-free participation

Ideally, the general meeting of a *Verein* is organized as a meeting involving all club members. The exercise of voting rights in the general meeting represents a central element of influencing club policy (Coates et al., 2021). Therefore, it seems to be beneficial for each member with voting power to exercise their voting rights, even if they cannot attend the general meeting in person; however, there are various reasons why members are not able to attend. First, in-person attendance may not be possible due to high cost, such as for long-distance travel in the case of supra-regional clubs. Second, in-person attendance may not be possible due to physical limitations, such as illness or age. Against this background, member associations can increase participation through barrier-free participation by proxy and postal voting, as well as by online participation, although this is an option that currently remains largely unexplored (Bauers et al., 2022). Adam et al. (2020) recommend that clubs codify the possibility of proxy, postal, or online voting in their constitutions; however, distance voting options are also criticized (Coates et al., 2021).

Democratic voting

In German professional football, members can exercise their voice as a form of democratic participation in the general meeting of the member association (Roose & Schäfer, 2017). Due to the 50+1 Rule, these democratic structures still exist in Germany because the rule secures the supremacy of the *Verein* and their supporters. Therefore, club members can exert influence on “their club,” with all members having the same voting rights and the same influence with their vote. In the event of a repeal of the 50+1 Rule, a professional football team could be run autonomously by the club’s investors. Because of this, it broadens the possibility of investor participation by means of enforcing their property rights (Alchian & Demsetz, 1973). This is associated with an oligarchic power structure, where corporate hierarchies are established, and democratic structures are

displaced (Heinemann & Horch, 1981; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2001). Findings show that club members tend to reject this system of control and investor influence, preferring to secure their participation in the general meeting of a *Verein* and endorsing democratic structures. As a result, preventing evasions of and exceptions to the 50+1 Rule are important to secure democratic participation (Bauers et al., 2015).

Against this background, it is understandable that German clubs are not yet active on Socios.com, which an online platform for fan engagement that allows fans to buy, trade, and use their voting rights in their preferred club. Currently, democratic participation is not mandatory when it comes to executing voting rights. However, this platform offers innovative digital opportunities for supporters to extend their participation, for example, through polls on merchandise design.

Meaning-making

Established constitutions

Constitutions represent a central regulatory framework for member associations and provide formal regulations regarding the institutional participation of members (Schimke & Eilers, 2009). Furthermore, association members can make binding agreements in the constitution by defining collective goals and structures for the association, thus, creating certainty of expectations (Nagel, 2007). Due to their written specifications, the regulations in constitutions have a long-term character, which is increased by the fact that changes are only possible at the general meeting, which is held at least once a year. Members can vote on changes to the constitution. Such far-reaching decisions should always require qualified majority voting in the general meeting of the member association (Adam et al., 2020). In addition, associations can secure supporter participation to consider potential cases in the future. Especially in the case of a (planned) spin-off professional football team, Adam et al. (2020) advise laying down clear rules in the constitutions of associations that govern the

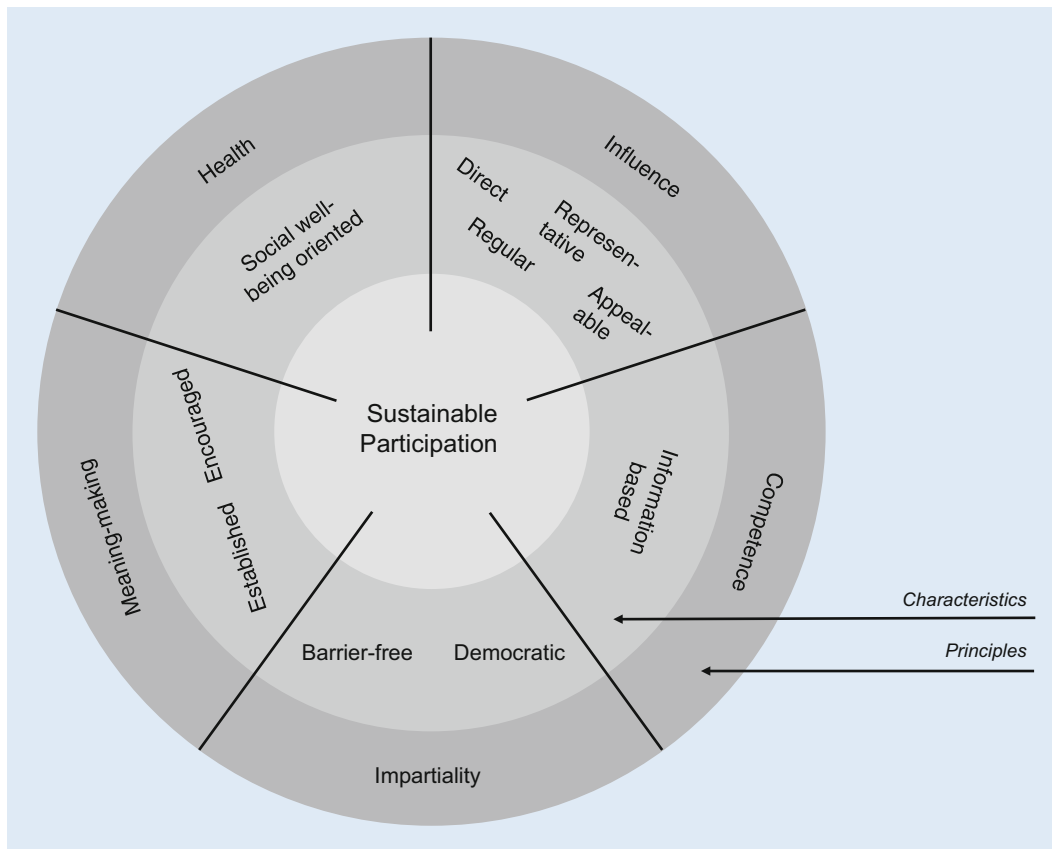


Fig. 1 ◀ Conceptualization of sustainable participation in relation to German football supporters

relationship between the member association and the spin-off.

Encouraged participation

There are indicators in participation research outside of sports that people are more interested in participating when they are encouraged (Warner, 2006). In particular, associations and their management team have the opportunity to encourage supporters. In this context, one opportunity is to establish the 50+1 Rule as an essential element within any constitution of member associations in German professional football. This would have a symbolic and representative character, with two benefits for member-based clubs: first, members are ultimately encouraged to become involved in shaping policy for the professional football team, and second, the association signals that they do not desire investors to have the controlling majority (Adam et al., 2020; Bauers et al., 2022). In general, encouraging members to exercise their voice (Hirschman, 1970) could help to overcome their “rational apathy” (Hardin, 1982) and create “fan welfare”

through increased member participation in the club’s opinion formation and decision making.

An overview of the previous specifications is depicted in **Fig. 1**, whereby the outermost ring shows the principles, and the second ring lists the characteristics included and summarized.

Limitations and further research

This article discusses how existing opportunities for participation can be strengthened and operationalized. Especially in the football sector, the concept of participation has been subject to various interpretations of definitions and mechanisms of implementation. In light of this, the article refers to institutionalized participation rather than to forms of non-institutionalized participation, such as active involvement when supporting the team in the stadium, helping with a stadium’s renovation, or the commitment of club members to other members. This focus notwithstanding, those fields are important pillars of participation in sports and should be examined in fu-

ture research, which might ask, for example, which non-institutionalized participation opportunities exist for supporters? In this context, a systematic overview, like the study by Bauers et al. 2022 addressing institutionalized supporter participation, is possible. Furthermore, a conceptualization of sustainable non-institutionalized participation could also be investigated.

Our new approach provides useful starting points for future empirical studies regarding institutionalized supporter participation. In this context, the following question arises: which conceptual and practical improvements are needed to extend the value for supporters and contribute to social sustainability overall? This could include further research through qualitative and/or quantitative studies. For instance, for the former, expert interviews could be conducted to validate the conceptualization of sustainable participation. Qualitative studies could also provide insights regarding the specific benefits of the identified principles and characteristics of sustainable participation. In this context, studies by Cleland

(2010) and Brandt and Kurscheidt (2022) employ valuable approaches that may be applied.

Furthermore, quantitative studies could focus on the relevance of the characteristics. In this case, a football supporter survey could be used to determine the relevance of the characteristics and classify them as optional or obligatory. Due to the innovative nature of our described concept, a longitudinal study is also conceivable, in which supporters could be surveyed at several measurement points to evaluate the relevance and the attitude of the described characteristics.

By including German professional football clubs, a further limitation comes into force, as in this example the special features and restrictions of the 50+1 Rule must be taken into account. On the one hand, it will be possible to examine which German football clubs are most likely to exhibit sustainable participation. Furthermore, we hope to aid the development of German supporter participation. On the other hand, there is the question regarding possibilities and limits to generalize our conceptualization of sustainable participations. Regarding possibilities to generalize the concept, we expect that associations outside the sports sector like cultural associations, or sectors with similar organizational structures may also benefit from sustainable participation. Similar organizational structures like membership, a constitution, and a general meeting would help implement sustainable participation. In addition, associations with a large number of members as well as other clubs with fewer members can also benefit from sustainable participation. In the context of multiple but differing concerned entities, the organization-specific adaption of sustainable participation seems to be possible. For example, the adaption to local conditions, which is also highlighted in the frameworks we used (e.g., UN Global Compact, 2014), shows a further approach regarding generalization. Finally, it seems possible to pursue sustainable participation in all communities that want to actively involve community members in decision-

making with an inclusive and sustainable approach.

It should also be mentioned that the fields of participation research in sport and social sustainability research are relatively new and uncharted. This includes a promising dynamic of development in the upcoming years and a possible overhaul of the characteristics described, also in relation to future, innovative digitization processes.

Conclusion

Our paper has focused on institutionalized supporter participation in German professional football. We provide a new conceptional and systematic approach to study supporter participation from a social sustainability perspective. In particular, we demonstrated that social sustainability elements help to structure the potential for improvement of participation in German football. Furthermore, we showed that social sustainability elements help researchers to discuss new aspects of supporter participation. Based on the principles of Missimer et al. (2017), we compiled and structured the following characteristics of sustainable participation in football: social well-being oriented participation, direct influence, regular voting rights, representative participation, appealable resolutions, information-based participation, barrier-free participation, democratic voting, established constitutions, and encouraged participation.

Finally, the inclusion of social sustainability research and frameworks adds value to participation research because it is the first step in conceptualizing and defining sustainable participation. This approach extends the way supporter participation has been researched thus far. We perceive our examination to be extendable and believe it can offer a useful starting point for empirical studies to refine or modify the model. In addition to the theoretical implications, there are also relevant practical implications arising from this study as our approach can be used to analyze and support decision-making in football organizations. Previous research already investigated issues regarding supporter participation.

Nevertheless, problems regarding the 50+1 Rule, supporter participation, and potential for improvement still exist in German professional football (Adam et al., 2020; Bauers, Lammert, Faix, & Hovemann, 2020). Against these existing issues, the paper has provided structured recommendations to improve institutionalized supporter participation from a social sustainability perspective.

In addition, we have provided suggestions for further research, for example, regarding qualitative and quantitative studies to enhance and validate the conceptualization of sustainable participation in sports. Nevertheless, the current conceptualization and the characteristics of sustainable participation are already meaningful indications and recommendations for different stakeholders in sports to improve supporter participation, for example, (1) member associations in football and other sports. Furthermore, (2) association members who intend to strengthen their influence in a sustainable way can use the characteristics as a guideline. The deliberations are also relevant for (3) league organizers. It is conceivable that the characteristics can be implemented into licensing regulations. Moreover, (4) other stakeholders, like investors, sponsors, and media organizations, may also be interested in sustainable participation, as they can better achieve their own social sustainability goals through cooperation with member associations.

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Declarations

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For this article no studies with human participants or animals were performed by any of the authors. All studies mentioned were in accordance with the ethical standards indicated in each case.

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