Understanding what a supporter representative adds to a professional English football club

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PREFACE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Some English football clubs have allowed representation from a fan-organization, a *Supporters'*
Trust (ST), on the board of directors. This thesis aimed to explore if the representative(s) that
could join the board, added any value to the board. Moreover, this thesis explored what type of
advice a supporter representative on a football club its board of directors, in the role of a non-
executive director, gave on strategic issues.

Ten (former) directors of English professional football clubs were interviewed. To be
more precise, four current supporter representatives, four former supporter representatives, one
non-executive and one executive director were interviewed. The (former) directors were (or
currently are) active at clubs in the second to fourth tier English football league system. This
population was asked to give opinions on the questions posed which related to the supporter
director role and the contributions made by the supporter director on the board. Accessing this
very hard to access population, a population which is under scrutiny from the public and media,
brought valuable insights on what supporter directors see as their role, and what they actually
contribute in the boardroom of a professional English football club.

Results indicate that supporter representatives, in the supporter director role, do add
value to the board of directors of a football club. Not only do supporter directors bring in local
knowledge and give reality checks, from the perspective of the average fan, to the board on the
topics discussed, supporter directors do also consider themselves to be an important link
between the football club and the ST (or: supporters). They see themselves as the front-facing
of the board and say to not step back whenever the football club is in troubled waters. Moreover,
they report to constantly engage with supporters to gather supporter opinions and perspectives
on important topics. All in all, supporter directors offer a higher-level perspective to other board
members and try to argue for the bigger picture of topics that are being discussed during board
meetings.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Supporters have been exposed to the transformation of English professional football clubs into private liability companies, particularly focused on chasing revenue, and feel increasingly disengaged by the club which they support (Brown, 2008; Cleland & Dixon, 2015; Hodges & Brentin, 2017; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012; Lomax, 2000; McLeod, 2016; Morrow, 2012; Supporters Direct, 2017; Welford, Garcia & Smith, 2015). Moreover, their influence on strategic issues that cover things like ticket prices, club crests and club colours has vanished (Morrow, 2012). Nowadays, most of the individuals that sit on the board, directors, decide on strategic issues without consulting the supporters each and every time. However, supporters are stakeholders, and the lifeblood, of a football club (Cleland & Dixon, 2015; D'Angelo, 2018; McLeod, 2016). Stakeholders are 'persons or groups that have, or claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present or future' (Clarkson, 1995: 106). Losing supporters, due to strategic changes that they do not feel comfortable with, is a big concern to football clubs that would like to remain operating in the long-run (Clarkson, 1995; Cleland & Dixon, 2015; Welford et al., 2015). Football clubs should therefore focus on ways to retain their supporters.

Even more concerning for football clubs is that they are poorly governed, suggesting that football club boards do not always consist of the right people and do not always make the right choices (Garcia & Welford, 2015). English professional football club's boards are one-tier boards, where executive-directors and non-executive directors sit on the same board (Judge & Talaulicar, 2017; Petrovic, 2008). Executive directors are responsible for the day-to-day running of the football club whereas the non-executive directors have to check upon the executive directors, if they are doing their job in the right way, do adhere to the strategy and vision of the organization, and set out strategy together with the other directors on the board of

directors (Ayuso & Argandona, 2007; Forbes & Milliken, 1999; McNulty & Pettigrew, 1999). Football club boards have not implemented all governance standards and recommendations to improve their governance yet (D'Angelo, 2018; Michie & Oughton, 2005; Welford et al., 2015). Implementing the governance standards and recommendations can improve the quality of decision-making at board-level and this can help clubs to be financially stable (Michie & Oughton, 2005). Considering that non-executive directors are responsible for making sure that football clubs are properly governed, these findings suggest that non-executive directors are currently not performing well and are not contributing to the football club like they should be contributing. Next to focussing on ways to retain their supporters, football clubs should also focus on ways to improve their governance.

Due to the developments and problems sketched above, over the past twenty-six years, the willingness of supporters to be involved in football governance has increased year-by-year and opportunities for football clubs have been outlined (Garcia & Welford, 2015; Supporters Direct, 2017). Football clubs can give structure to the willingness of supporters by involving them in their football club, called supporter involvement (Supporters Direct, 2017). There are several levels of supporter involvement, ranging from club led fan engagement to supporter ownership, of which one is allowing supporters to join the club's board of directors as non-executive directors (Supporter Direct, 2017). However, it is questionable whether a supporter can act as non-executive director and how the inclusion of a supporter on the board of directors affects a professional football club (Adams, Morrow, Thomson, 2016; Burnham, 2000; Giulianotti, 2005; Watkins, 2000). Table 1 displays the levels of supporter involvement.

Table 1. Levels of supporter involvement (Supporters Direct, 2017: 6).

Level	Type
1	Club led fan engagement
2	Supporter Liaison Officers
3	Structured dialogue
4	Supporter directors
5	Supporter ownership

A supporter can join the board of directors of the football club through being elected as supporter representative of a *Supporters' Trust* (ST) that is allowed to elect a member to sit on the club's board, as supporter director (Supporters Direct, 2017). A ST is an organization which manages the assets (money, shares) of its members, supporters, and tries 'to strengthen the influence of supporters in the running of the club they support' (Supporters Direct, 2017: 9). Supporters must sign up to the ST to become part of the organization. Thus, not all the supporters of a specific football club are per definition member of the ST. Many STs are supported by Supporters Direct, an organization that helps supporters to get involved in the football club they support (Cleland & Dixon, 2015; Garcia & Welford, 2015; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012; McLeod, 2016; Smith, 2000; Supporters Direct, 2017).

To examine how the inclusion of a supporter director on the board of directors affects a professional football club, this paper will explore the supporter director role and focus on the supporter director's contributions on English professional football club boards. Moreover, as it is known that the contribution of a non-executive director is shaped by several factors, including individual characteristics (i.e., occupation), role perception and institutional logics, contextual factors will be taken into account (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008; Kesner, 1988; McNulty & Pettigrew, 1999; Petrovic, 2008). Football clubs are increasingly allowing

supporters to have a seat on the board of directors of the club but base their decisions to add a supporter on little knowledge regarding the supporter director role and how a supporter director acts (Garcia & Welford, 2015; McLeod, 2016; Supporters Direct, 2017; Welford et al., 2015). The number of people that can sit on a board of directors for it to operate effectively is limited to a certain number at which point the composition and contributions of the individuals sitting on such a board becomes crucial, which suggests that football clubs must make a proper assessment of any individual that would like to join the board of directors (Guest, 2009; Lipton & Lorsch, 1992). Gaining insights on the supporter director role and how a supporter director acts will create awareness and understanding for what the supporter director position encompasses, for all stakeholders involved (football clubs, STs, supporters and policy makers), and will especially help football clubs to decide upon the addition of a supporter director in their pursuit to retain supporters and improve their governance.

Introduction to the problem definition

Adding a supporter director as non-executive to the board of directors changes the composition of the board of directors. Scholars have conducted several studies on boards and their composition in relation to organizational performance and the individual contributions of non-executive directors on the board of directors (e.g., Hermalin & Weisbach, 2003; Petra, 2005).

The composition of a board is not directly related to the performance of a firm, but it is related to the quality of the decisions that are being made by the board of directors (Hermalin & Weisbach, 2003). One-tier boards that possess non-executive directors tend to operate in a more effective way, as non-executive directors can provide inside directors with more information, so they can perform their tasks better (Petra, 2005). However, the provision of information is dependent on the individual characteristics of a non-executive director (i.e., occupation) as these determine what an individual is knowledgeable on (Kesner, 1988). A

supporter director can contribute to improve democratic processes and governance at board-level by communicating unfamiliar information to executive directors, such as supporters' views (Hamil, Michie, Oughton, & Warby, 2000; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012). It is known that many board members do not exactly know what their role is, but that they are aware of the expectations held by the different stakeholders of the organization (Petrovic, 2008; Roberts, McNulty, & Stiles, 2005; Wang & Dewhirst, 1992). Moreover, non-executive directors feel increasingly responsible to these different stakeholders, suggesting that they might have to deal with some role ambiguity and role conflict which affect their role perception and individual contribution (Biddle, 1986; Shenkar & Zeira, 1992; Wang & Dewhirst, 1992). Whenever non-executive directors do provide information, the board of directors is able to make better informed predictions and decisions for the organization during board meetings (Hermalin & Weisbach, 2003; Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009; Pfeffer, 1972).

However, past research has pointed out that the contributions of non-executive directors in the boardroom differs in different contexts (March & Olsen, 1989; McNulty & Pettigrew, 1999; Petrovic, 2008). Football club boards have to deal with an uncertain environment where weekly on-pitch performance is visible to all stakeholders, consequentially affecting stakeholder views and stakeholder actions (Söderman, 2013). As stakeholders interact with individuals of organizations, their logics enter the organization (Raynard, Johnson, & Greenwood, 2015). The logics of striving for sporting success and striving for financial stability are assumed to be the prevailing institutional logics faced by executive directors, but many more have to be dealt with due to the high number of stakeholders their organizational members interact with (Brown, 2008; Carlsson-Wall, Kraus, & Messner, 2016; Gammelsæter, 2010; Michie & Oughton, 2005; Söderman, 2013; Rhode, 2018). A non-executive director might join an institutional logic of an executive director, which is an organizational member, as well as embrace an institutional logic on its own, due to its own values and organisational

membership(s) (Gammelsæter, 2010; Greenwood et al., 2008; Raynard et al., 2015; Svenningsen, Boxenbaum, & Ravasi, 2016). Thus, institutional logics might also affect the contribution of a non-executive director and its contribution (Thornton, 2008).

Therefore, even though scholars believe that adding a non-executive director to a one-tier board can help the board of directors to make better informed predictions and decisions for the organization during board meetings, it is unknown whether a non-executive director actually provides information to make this happen (Hermalin & Weisbach, 2003; Hillman et al., 2009; Petrovic, 2008; Pfeffer, 1972). Moreover, it is still unclear what the individual characteristics of a supporter director are and how a supporter director perceives and acts upon its role, given the context of the football club (March & Olsen, 1989; McNulty & Pettigrew, 1999; Petrovic, 2008). Scholars have not yet examined how supporter-representation on the board of directors' works in practise and call upon researchers to study this matter so that the best possible way of supporter involvement in football can be designed (Garcia & Welford, 2015; McLeod, 2016; Welford et al., 2015). It is important to know how supporter-representation on the board of directors' works in practise, as directors of football clubs will have to deal with the supporter director at board-level whenever one is added. A supporter director might act differently than a non-executive director, influencing the governance of a football club, for the better or for the worse.

In conclusion, scholars have not yet addressed the supporter director's contribution on the board of directors (Garcia & Welford, 2015; McLeod, 2016; Welford et al., 2015). This study will therefore examine the actual contribution of a supporter director during board meetings to understand how a supporter director adds value to a board of directors. Moreover, as a director's contributions are subjected to contextual factors, the influence of institutional logics is taken into account when examining the actual contribution of a supporter director (Petrovic, 2008). This might help to explore what a supporter director, as a non-executive

director on the board of directors in the football industry, adds to a professional football club. However, it is questionable if adding a representative of an important stakeholder to the board of directors of a football club would add any value to the football club. It might be the case that a supporter director, within the context of a football club, does not add anything in the boardroom. The problem definition therefore is: *What does a supporter director on the board of directors add to a professional football club*?

Link between the problem definition and the research question

A supporter director is in the position to add value to football clubs whenever s/he joins the board of a professional football club as non-executive director. Non-executive directors have a very important role in advising the management and CEO, monitoring, hiring, assessing and rewarding the CEO and making sure that the organization is acting in the best interest of all shareholders (Aguilera, 2005; Finkelstein & Mooney, 2003; Hermalin & Weisbach, 2003; Huse, 2005; Levrau, 2007; Roberts et al., 2005; Petra, 2005). Moreover, non-executive directors also have a role in making sure that the board of directors considers the interests of important stakeholders when discussing issues (Aguilara, 2005; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Discussing strategic issues is arguably the most important role a board of directors have, whereas non-executive directors in the UK see their primary task as advising the management and CEO, suggesting that advising on strategic issues is the most important task of non-executive directors in the UK (Franks & Mayer, 2001; Guest, 2009; Ingly & Van der Walt, 2001; Stiles, 2001). On the other hand, stakeholder directors are likely to prioritize the interests of the stakeholder they represent first, when discussing issues during a board meeting (Golden & Zajac, 2001). However, they are supposed to put these interests aside when serving on the board of directors of an organization, and prioritize the interests of that organization (Aguilera, 2005). Supporter directors are expected to provide advice on strategic issues and prioritize the interests of the football club, but what happens in reality?

Thus, the focus of this study can formally be captured by the following research question: *What type of advice does a supporter representative, in the role of a non-executive director, give on the firm's strategic issues?*

Theoretical, managerial and practical relevance

This study aims to make theoretical contributions. From a theoretical standpoint, this study draws upon several theories and concepts from the board of directors' literature to explore the concept supporter director's contribution. This study will contribute findings from the English football industry to the concepts role ambiguity, role conflict and institutional logics. In the pursuit of exploring the supporter director's contribution, this study also responds to calls from Forbes and Milliken (1999), Pettigrew (1992), Pye and Pettigrew (2005) and Petrovic (2008) to study actual director behaviour and perceptions as well as calls from Pettigrew and McNulty (1995) and Petrovic (2008) to take contextual factors into account when doing so. Thus, this study will not only be valuable to scholars studying supporter director's behaviour, but also to scholars who are desperate for more information on what actually happens inside the boardroom.

First, this study will join the conversation of Garcia and Welford (2015), McLeod (2016), and Welford et al. (2015) about supporter director's contribution and offer insights on who supporter directors are, how directors perceive the supporter director role and what supporter directors actually contribute during board meetings. Second, this study will join the conversation of Doherty and Hoye (2011), Relvas and colleagues (2010), and Schulz and Auld (2006) about role ambiguity, Wang and Dewhirst (1992) about role ambiguity and role conflict and McLeod (2016) about role conflict by exploring the extent to which supporter directors in for-profit football clubs have to deal with role ambiguity and a form of role conflict in the football industry. This will advance the generalizability of the role ambiguity and role conflict concept to the unexplored football industry. Third, this study will join the conversation of

Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016), Gammelsæter (2010) and Greenwood et al. (2008) about institutional logics by exploring the logics which are faced and embraced by a supporter's director on a football club's board of directors.

Next to making theoretical contributions, this study also aims to make managerial contributions. From a managerial standpoint, this study's findings will help directors of professional English football clubs to assess the value of a supporter director in their pursuit of retaining supporters and improving their governance. Moreover, it will help them properly assess any supporter representative that would like to join the board of directors (McLeod, 2016). As football clubs themselves are not electing and proposing supporter directors, this study's findings will also inform STs on if supporter representation on the board of a football club is a good thing for supporters to pursue (Supporters Direct, 2017). Findings may indicate which individual characteristics a supporter director should possess, consequentially helping ST board members to shape the job description for the supporter director role, with individual characteristics which benefit the football club's board, so that ST members can elect and propose the best candidate for the supporter director role (Garcia & Welford, 2015). This study's findings will also help football clubs, STs and policy makers to design the way in which they want to structure the dialogue with supporters by creating understanding and awareness of the supporter director role (McLeod, 2016).

In addition to theoretical and managerial contributions, this study's findings will also have practical implications. From a practical standpoint, football supporters will be informed if, and what, a supporter is able to contribute on the board of directors of a football club during board meetings (Welford et al., 2015). This information will help them (re)consider the way in which they would like to interact with a football club (Cleland, 2010). Moreover, the results will help football supporters to have realistic expectations of what they can expect from the current, or future, supporter representative of the ST (Morrow, 2012).

Methodology

  To formulate an answer to the research question in this study, qualitative research is conducted (Neuman, 2014; Yin, 2014). The method is a multiple-case study based on ten in-depth, semi-structured, interviews with the interviewees being a non-executive director, an executive director, four current supporter directors and four former supporter directors (Huse, 2005; Garcia & Welford, 2015; Neuman, 2014; Pugliese, Bezemer, Zattoni, Huse, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2009; Yin, 2009). All interviewees are (or were) active on the board of directors of an English professional football club.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the goal of this explorative paper is to gain knowledge on the supporter director role and on the individual contributions of a supporter director on a professional English football club's board of directors. The problem definition is: *What does a supporter director on the board of directors add to a professional football club*? The research question of the study is: *What type of advice does a supporter representative, in the role of a non-executive director, give on the firm's strategic issues?* This study contributes to the literature on supporter director's contribution, role ambiguity, role conflict and institutional logics and draws upon role theory and institutional theory. The research question is answered through a multiple-case study based on ten in-depth, semi-structured, interviews. The interviewees are a non-executive director, an executive director and (former) supporter directors. All interviewees are (or were) active on the board of directors of an English professional football club.

Structure of the thesis

  The structure of the rest of this thesis is as follows: first, the theories and concepts that are related to the supporter director's contribution are introduced. After this has been done, the methodology for this study is discussed in more details. The data collection, analysis, results and discussion will conclude the thesis.

CHAPTER 2

In this critical review, the two theories that are intertwined with the supporter director role are presented. The two theories of interest are: role theory and institutional theory. Moreover, the concepts role ambiguity and role conflict, which are related to role theory, and institutional logics, which is related to institutional theory, are presented at their respective theories. This chapter ends through stressing the urge to study the supporter director's contribution concept.

Role theory

Role theory was developed over time and by multiple authors (Biddle, 1979; Biddle, 1986; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). According to Banton, a role can be described as 'a set of norms and expectations applied to the incumbents of a particular position' (1965: 29), suggesting that an individual has to deal with different norms and expectations whenever s/he starts fulfilling a position in a group. Role theory is normally invoked in literature that tries to examine an individual's behaviour in a group of an organization, which is in line with what this study aims to do (Belbin, 2011; Biddle, 1986). Thus, role theory tries to explain the behaviour of individuals based on the roles they are expected by others to fulfil (Kahn et al., 1964).

Role theory assumes that an individual is part of at least one group in which s/he has to fulfil a role (Kahn et al., 1964). It could be the case that a group member is not aware of what s/he should to do in a certain role, due to role ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964). Role ambiguity is described by Srikanth and Jomon (2013: 107) as 'the lack of information available to perform one's responsibilities'. Role theory assumes that role ambiguity is caused by the absence of a role description or by the insufficient communication of recruiters, or board members (Kahn et al., 1964; Schulz & Auld, 2006). Moreover, the amount of time an individual spends in a position is assumed to be negatively correlated to role ambiguity (Schulz & Auld, 2006). Role theory predicts role ambiguity to exist in some European professional football clubs, as a lot of

these clubs do currently not have staff-role descriptions, causing a lot of staff members to basically do what they think their role encompasses (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, & Richardson, 2010). When applied to supporter directors, role theory assumes that also supporter directors might not always have their roles described in a document, consequentially causing role ambiguity. This has to be taken into account when studying the actual supporter director's contribution on the board of directors of the football club. Concluding, even though an individual is part of at least one group in which s/he has to fulfil a role, the role might not be clear to the her/him due to role ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964).

Another thing is that, as an individual is expected by others to fulfil a role, s/he might encounter different expectations on what an s/he should do in her/his role, whenever the s/he is performing the role (Kahn et al., 1964). Role theory assumes that group members exert pressure on an individual group member to adhere to their expectations, causing a form of role conflict, such as the inter-sender conflict in which several members of one group exert pressure on an individual group member (Kahn et al., 1964). Moreover, also an intra-sender, person-role and inter-role conflict can occur (Kahn et al., 1964). An intra-sender conflict can occur when just one group member pressures an individual to do things that do not match the role s/he is fulfilling whereas a person-role conflict can occur whenever the role requirements are not in line with an individual's personal values, such as having to collude with a competitor to boost an organization's profit – this might violate someone's personal ethical values (Kahn et al., 1964). Lastly, an inter-role conflict can occur whenever an individual is pressured to do contrasting things, due to performing two different roles in two sets of groups at the same time (Kahn et al., 1964). Thus, role theory expects an individual group member to experience a form of role conflict, due to the pressure applied to the individual group member to adhere to the expectations of other actors, such as group members (Kahn et al., 1964).

In line with role theory, the supporter directors are expected to act as non-executive directors by the other directors of the football club. The non-executive directors are required to make sure that the organization is acting in the best interest of all shareholders (Aguilera, 2005). However, supporter directors are also supporter representatives (Supporters Direct, 2017). ST members (supporters) do therefore expect the supporter director to represent the supporter's interests (Supporters Direct, 2017). Thus, supporter directors are expected to experience inter-role conflict. Next to taking into account the possibility of role ambiguity, the inter-role conflict should also be considered when studying the actual supporter director's contribution as this might steer a supporter director's contribution and focus to satisfying the expectations of one specific actor (Hillman, Nicholson, & Shropshire, 2008).

The supporter director's role was examined in the Scottish football industry context (McLeod, 2016). The supporter directors, in this particular context, have to deal with a conflict of interest (McLeod, 2016). Moreover, according to McLeod (2016), supporter directors have the duty, as supporter representative, to communicate with supporters and also have the duty, as director, to keep the information discussed on the board of directors of the football club confidential. To conclude, McLeod (2016) pointed out that there is a relationship between the supporter director's role and role theory.

Institutional theory

Institutional theory, or the institutions-based view, is invoked in studies studying the behaviour of organizations, on macro-level, but more recently the institutional theory is invoked to study the behaviour of individuals in organizations (Peng, Sun, Pinkham, & Chen, 2009).

Institutional theory assumes that individuals are confronted with institutions, a framework of prescriptions made by society on how individuals should act (North, 1990; Raynard et al., 2015; Thornton, 2008). Institutional logics tell an individual 'how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behaviour, and how to succeed' (Thornton,

2004: 70). Moreover, institutional logics are assumed to reduce the uncertainty of individuals in organizations, when they are facing issues (Peng & Delios, 2006). Scholars have pointed out that there are different types of institutions (North, 1990; Scott, 1995; Peng et al., 2009). There are formal institutions, written rules, such as laws, and informal institutions, unwritten rules, such as norms, values and ethics (North, 1990). Whereas formal institutions can also be viewed as regulative, or coercive, structures, informal institutions can also be viewed as either a normative structure or a cognitive structure (Palthe, 2014; Peng et al., 2009; Scott, 1995). In addition to the confrontation of an individual with institutions associated to her/his role (regulations, norms), an individual's personal values, such as the customs s/he is used to, might also play a role and guide her/his behaviour. Concluding, institutional logics guide the behaviour of individuals (Thornton, 2008).

Scholars have found that each individual in an organization joins at least one logic to deal with the differences between the institutional logics faced (Raynard et al., 2015; Svenningsen et al., 2016). When applied to supporter directors, which are part of an organizational group, the board of directors of a football club, institutional theory assumes that also supporter directors embrace one or more logics as they are confronted with the institutional logics embraced by executive directors, and subsequently the logics of the organization's stakeholders (Gammelsæter, 2010). Moreover, as supporter directors are part of a stakeholder of a football club, supporters, institutional theory also assumes that they carry a logic themselves, which guides their behaviour and shapes their individual contributions on the board of directors (Gammelsæter, 2010; Greenwood et al., 2008; North, 1990; Raynard et al., 2015; Scott, 1995; Svenningsen et al., 2016). Thus, institutional logics might help explore the supporter director's contributions.

Due to the nature of the football industry, the content of the institutional logics that are surrounding a professional football club may change every week due to the on-pitch

performance of the first team (Söderman, 2013). However, scholars consider the logics striving for sporting success and striving for financial stability to be the prevailing institutional logics in professional sport organizations (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Michie & Oughton, 2005; Söderman, 2013; Rhode, 2018). The striving for sporting success logic argues that professional sport organizations should invest all of their money in players and supporting staff (such as physical coaches and performance analysts) whereas the striving for financial stability logics argues that professional sporting organizations should strive for efficient operations to make a profit (Rhode, 2018). Next to the striving for sporting success and the striving for financial stability logic, many more different logics have to be dealt by professional sporting clubs, due to high number of stakeholders their organizational members interact with (Brown, 2008; Gammelsæter, 2010; Söderman, 2013). Thus, even though the content of the logics is on-pitch result dependent, some might be more prevalent than others on boards (Söderman, 2013; Thornton, 2004). Institutional logics should therefore be considered when exploring the actual supporter director's contribution on a board of directors of a professional football club.

Supporter director's contribution

Based on the current literature, we don't know who the supporter directors are and how supporter directors might contribute during board meetings (Garcia & Welford, 2015; McLeod, 2016; Welford et al., 2015). The supporter director's contribution, the contribution of a supporter director in the boardroom of a professional English football club, is therefore to be explored (Supporters Direct, 2017). Role theory and institutional theory are not able to make clear predictions on the supporter director's contribution. However, the assumptions of role ambiguity, role conflict and institutional logics have to be taken into account when exploring the supporter director's contribution in the board of directors of a professional English football

club. Concluding, due to the uniqueness of the setting, the actual supporter director's contributions are yet to be explored by this paper (Söderman, 2013).

CHAPTER 3

In this chapter the methodology, data collection and data analysis are described, and the results are presented.

Methodology and data collection

To formulate an answer to the research question, qualitative research was conducted. Qualitative research allowed to explore and understand the perceptions of (supporter) directors on the actual contribution of a supporter director on the board of directors during board meetings of a professional English football club (Huse, 2005; Neuman, 2014; Pugliese et al., 2009; Yin, 2014). The method was a multiple-case study based on in-depth, semi-structured, interviews (Garcia & Welford, 2015; Huse, 2005; Neuman, 2014; Pugliese et al., 2009; Yin, 2014).

The snowball sampling methodology for identifying and selecting cases was used (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The snowball sampling methodology is a commonly used methodology by qualitative researchers to access hidden or hard to access populations, which was applicable to this qualitative study as a hard to access population, directors of football clubs, had to be accessed (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Pettigrew & McNulty, 1995). The snowballing methodology is a low cost and low time-consuming tool, as the network of cases is used to access cases (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). As the cases were selected by prior ones, selection bias as well as a lower external validity of the data was the associated problem with this methodology (Griffiths, Gossop, Powis, & Strang, 1993; Kaplan, Korf, & Sterk, 1987; Yin, 2014). However, it was argued by several authors that some data is better than no data, so this methodology was selected (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Pettigrew & McNulty, 1995). Through desk research, some supporter directors at English professional football clubs were identified. These supporter directors were contacted through email. Every (supporter) director was asked to nominate other current or former (supporter) directors that could be approached to participate

in this study. This was a continuous process until a particular point in time at which time was too short to conduct and analyse any additional interview. As some firm characteristics, such as the type of firm ownership (private vs. fan-owned), are likely to affect the perspectives and contributions of the directors on the board of directors of a professional football club, only current or former (supporters) directors from privately owned football clubs were approached to participate in the study. In the end, a non-executive director, an executive director, four current supporter directors and four former supporter directors of professional English football clubs participated in the study. Thus, the snowballing methodology offered the best opportunity to gain access to participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Pettigrew & McNulty, 1995). Table 1 displays the participants in this study.

The interview process is now described. All interviews were conducted in the same manner. Before each interview was conducted, interviewees were asked for permission to record the interview on a mobile device, so that the conversations could be transcribed and analysed in a structured way (Neuman, 2014). Moreover, the interviewees were explained what the general purpose of the study was, exploring the role and individual contributions of supporter directors on the board of directors during board meetings. To not lose focus, an interview protocol was used (Neuman, 2014). During each interview, questions ranging from 'what do you believe your role on the board of directors is?' to 'could you provide some anecdotal evidence of situations in which you were asked for your opinion?' were posed to the interviewee. As the way in which a supporter director acts is likely to be declared through the way in which a supporter director perceives the supporter director role, the interviewees were first asked to shed light on the supporter director role, to gain insight into how they perceived the role. Thereafter, the current (and former) supporter directors were asked what their expectations were of the position, before joining the board of directors, and how these expectations differed from the reality, when they were acting as supporter director on the

board of directors. Moreover, questions were asked on how supporter directors participated in board discussions and board decisions to explore their participation. Lastly, questions were asked to explore the qualities of the supporter director as well as on the biggest challenges of the role. Follow-up questions were asked when deemed necessary to get deeper into the material to understand the supporter director role and contribution (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Concluding, all interviews were conducted in the same manner. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1. Table of participants.

Director	Director's Role	Current League Level
Director 1	Current supporter director	English Football League Championship
Director 2	Current supporter director	English Football League Championship
Director 3	Current supporter director	English Football League Two
Director 4	Current supporter director	English Football League Two
Director 5	Former supporter director	English Football League Championship
Director 6	Former supporter director	English Football League One
Director 7	Former supporter director	English Football League One
Director 8	Former supporter director	English Football League One
Director 9	Non-executive director	English Football League Championship
Director 10	Executive director	English Football League Two

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted through using *Atlas.ti* (Yin, 2014). The thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the transcribed interview data, to identify common themes and patterns in the data set, as the nature of this paper has an exploratory nature and as

this approach is commonly used by qualitative researchers to increase their understanding of a specific topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcriptions were done after the interviews were conducted. Each interview was transcribed first at a slow speed and was thereafter re-listened at a normal speed to check for errors. Following the transcription, each interview was coded according to the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006), as it is summarized in Table 2. After every interview was coded, the codes were reviewed, compared and re-categorized. A preliminary analysis was conducted after three interviews were transcribed, re-listened and coded. This analysis showed that the interviewees talked too long on all roles they occupied, instead of talking about the supporter director role, effectively limiting the time they were able to talk on the role and contributions as supporter director. Therefore, thereafter the first question was shaped a bit different, to ensure more time was spent by interviewees talking on the role and contributions of the supporter director on the board of directors. The first question stated at first 'how do you see your role?' and was altered to 'what do you believe your role on the board of directors is?' (see Appendix A, Interview protocol).

*Table 2.* Phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 16-23).

Phase	Description of the phase
Familiarize yourself with the data	Transcription of verbal data.
	Reading of the entire set of data, a couple of times.
	Identification of early patterns in the data set.
Generating initial codes	Production of initial codes and coding the data set.
	Collation of data within each code.
Searching for themes	Sorting codes and collating data extracts into potential themes.
Reviewing themes	Refinement of themes.

	Checking if collated extracts form a coherent pattern.
	Forming thematic maps of the data set.
	Re-read entire data set.
Defining and naming themes	Define and further refine themes.
	Analyse data within them.
	Identify interesting things.
Producing the report	Final analysis of the themes.
	Writing the report.

Results

As the purpose of this paper is an explorative one, inductive coding was used, and three levels of coding were identified (Langley, 1999). Roles not captured and communicated, people's expectations and supporter director gets along well were identified as the first-order indicators. Moreover, broad role and possibility to contribute were labelled as the second-order themes whereas influence of the owner was identified as the aggregate dimension. To ensure the data was interpreted correctly, checks were done with interviewees, when the transcriptions and coding of the interviews was complete, to ensure that the identified themes were correctly attached to the transcribed answers to the posed questions (Yin, 2014). Table 3 displays the final coding structure.

Table 3. Final coding structure.
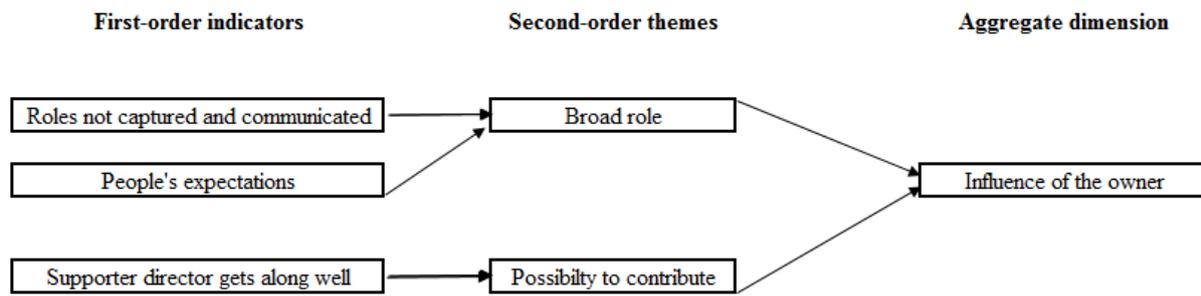
First, the first-order indicators, with their respective second-order theme are presented. Thus, roles not captured and communicated, and people's expectations are presented first, after which broad role is discussed second. Thereafter, the first-order indicator supporter director gets along well and the second-order theme possibility to contribute is presented. Finally, the aggregate dimension influence of the owner is touched upon.

First-order indicator: Roles not captured and communicated

First, this study found that the all current supporter directors as well as three former supporter directors acted as a non-executive director on a football club's board. Moreover, they performed non-executive tasks, similar to the non-executive tasks in other industries, such as advising and monitoring the executive director (Aguilera, 2005; Finkelstein & Mooney, 2003; Hermalin & Weisbach, 2003; Huse, 2005; Levrau, 2007; Roberts et al., 2005; Petra, 2005). However, six of the supporter directors interviewed indicated that their roles were not captured in a document. There was no documentation of the supporter director role, not at the ST nor at the football club, which listed the supporter director's role, duties and connected expectations. In one occasion, there was documentation of the role, but the supporter director was not aware of the content of the document.

It, [my role], wasn't really captured in a document, no. Not really. (Director 4; current supporter director)

The lack of documentation of director 4's role at the football club, contributed to his expectation that the supporter director role encompassed having a say in the running of the football club. However, his prior expectations did not completely match reality.

I do not have a lot of influence on the topics discussed [during board meetings]. (Director 4; current supporter director).

Thus, instead of being able to completely influence the topics discussed during board meetings, his role was somewhat limited. Director 1 was also not confronted with a job description, outlining the supporter director role. However, he was able to tell from experience what his non-executive role encompassed.

The job is to help guide the executives' decision making, not in a way which undermines them and takes away their responsibility, in a way which does have enough scrutiny and governance that you're happy with. (Director 1; current supporter director)

Director 1 had occupied director roles, guiding him what he was supposed to do as a non-executive director on the board of the professional football club. In addition to inadequate descriptions of the supporter director role, also a lack of communication of what the supporter role encompassed was reported.

I wasn't informed what my role was going to be. There was no document. Not at all. There isn't even a document now. There isn't anything specified with what my role is. I can do everything, or nothing, look on the bright side, haha. (Director 2; current supporter director)

Thus, most supporter directors were not aware of their actual role, due to the lack of a supporter role descriptions and communication, causing mismatches between prior and actual expectations. However, even though there was a lack of a detailed role description, one director was aware of what the non-executive director's role encompassed.

First-order indicator: People's expectations

The director that was clearly able to communicate the non-executive role, director 1, also pointed out that the expectations of other people of the supporter director role did not match his non-executive role interpretation.

I think most people pigeonhole supporter directors as being some kind of customer-service representative. It understates the fundamental role of a supporter director. That you're a director of a business and that you have to act as a director of a business, in the whole of totality of that sense, focussed on the long-term sustainability of the football club. (Director 1; current supporter director)

Whereas he was able to clearly outline what the supporter director role meant, another supporter director, which experienced some role ambiguity, due to not being aware of what his role exactly encompassed, believed himself to be such a customer-service representative.

I have to represent the supporters, so I am constantly asking supporters for their views. (Director 4; current supporter director)

In addition to this supporter director, also an executive director pointed out that supporter directors should represent supporters on the board of the football club.

The Trust has never been about, we only represent our members, they represent any supporter that wants to engage with us. (Director 10; executive director)

Director 10 here meant here that the supporter director on the board of the club was not only there for the members of the ST, but also there to represent all other supporters. Next to the expectations related to who to represent, supporter directors also had to deal with a mismatch between the expectations of the supporters and the board of directors on one specific part of the role: the communication of board meeting information. Director 7, a former supporter director, highlighted the expectations of fans.

They [supporters] always wanted the sexy information, what was going on here, what was going on with that. You felt sometimes that you were withholding information, and then you were to an extent, but only because, you can't, you can't talk about some of that stuff. (Director 7; former supporter director)

Whereas director 7 pointed out what the expectations of fans were, regarding the communication of information, director 1 was able to point out the conflict.

We have confidentiality about the football club, and I wouldn't tell you confidential things, and the media, etcetera. Now the Supporters' Trust is interesting, because everyone knows I am their representative of the Supporters' Trust. Everyone knows that I have the duty to be transparent to the board of the Supporters' Trust, that's different from the supporters per se. (Director 1; current supporter director)

Director 1's explanation points out that, even though supporters were demanding the supporter director for information, the supporter director only has some sort of accountability towards the ST board members. However, these ST board members are also supporters (Supporters Direct, 2017). Director 7 pointed out that, whenever a vote is casted at the AGM of the ST, he is expected to go with the majority vote, even if it's not his own opinion.

I had to go with what the majority wanted. We would take votes at our trust meetings, and even if it was 51 percent, and there is nearly half the room that don't agree with it. But, majority rules, right? So, that's what I took back to the board and that's how I represented the members. (Director 7; former supporter director)

Thus, supporter directors have to deal with being between a rock and a hard place, having to choose between two options which are neither good. Supporter directors are not allowed to share much about every topic that is discussed inside the boardroom, due to the confidentiality of what is being said during board meetings at the football club, but the supporter director's role requires them to be as open as they can be with what topics they are confronted with during board meetings. Supporter directors primarily believe they can only communicate what's being said during board meetings to the trust, supporters and the community, when they erase some bits of information, so nothing is really revealed to the 'outside-world'.

So, yeah, I would give a review after every meeting, kind of summarize the key points. I might say 'we are meeting with the manager, he is looking at three players, striker, defender, midfielder' and it would be kind of a filtered version of what's discussed to keep out any sensitivities, because I had to be very conscious, that I couldn't speak talk publicly or even privately on the trust board about a lot of the issues, because it was quite sensitive information. (Director 7; former supporter director)

Supporter directors think it's very difficult to deal with this situation in which they are between a rock and a hard place. One supporter director reported to be suffering from this heavily and thinks about quitting the supporter director role every day (director 4). Moreover, another supporter director reported a problematic situation in which the ST had to deal with a problem (director 6). The supporter director had the information that could solve the problem instantly, but the supporter director withheld the information from the ST, as the individual was not allowed to speak on that topic due to confidentiality reasons. Concluding, people's expectations also influence the role and contributions of supporter directors.

Second-order theme: Broad role

The inadequate description and communication, as well as the expectations of people, contributed to supporter directors believing their role to be a broad role, being unaware of what the supporter director role actually meant.

I can be a broad director of the football club, I can be a director in every sense (Director 1; current supporter director)

Next to performing non-executive tasks, six supporter directors saw their role also as being the bridge between the supporters and the club's board. These supporters provide a connection between supporters and the football club, through advising and contributing to board discussion according to the supporter's views.

You're the link to the fans, you're the link to the community, you're the link to the heritage, you're the person that's there to explain to the owners and the other directors, who are often not from that locality, what it means to the people and what each decision [that the board might make] might mean to your average fan. (Director 6; former supporter director)

Supporter directors believe their role to be actively assisting fans, the community, to make a difference. This ranges from writing articles for the matchday-programme to working in committees which focus on improving one part of the club's operations. Moreover, two former supporter directors (director 6 and 7) pointed out that directors and owners are not individuals that like to be confronted by stakeholders, and especially fans, on sensitive decisions they made.

Where a lot of football owners and directors, they never have that interaction, so they are quite often oblivious to it, they won't even follow social media's. They will get driven off in their Rolls Royce and never have to confront any of that … and don't care anyway. (Director 6; former supporter director)

Both former supporter directors believe that supporter directors have the role to fill this kind of gap, between the board of directors and the supporters. Director 7 made sure he was accessible for fans to talk to.

I felt my role was partially to be the front facing of the board [for supporters]. I was [the] most accessible [board member]. The executives were not as accessible as I was. I generally went to fans' meetings and was always chatting to fans at the ground before matches. (Director 7; former supporter director)

Concluding, the interview data indicates that supporter directors are mostly not aware of the scope of their role and consider it to be a broad role, taking on a wide variety of tasks.

First-order indicator: supporter director gets along well

All supporter directors, implicit or explicit, reported that there was a good board atmosphere, where every director more or less worked on an equal basis. In addition, nearly all supporter directors indicated that they were valued by the other board members, probably because they felt they all brought in something the other board members felt they did not possess in the board yet.

The reason why I am valued on the board at the moment is because of my marketing skills. (Director 2; current supporter director)

Bringing something rare and valuable in, seems to be a requirement for acceptance by the other directors, some supporter directors reported. Any duplication of knowledge and tasks would therefore not be the best for a football club's board of directors. However, the non-executive director interviewed indicated a duplication of roles, so supporter directors doing or having things similar to other directors, happened on the board of directors (director 9).

X has skills that other directors have, so it seems there is some duplication (Director 9; non-executive director)

Director 9 later indicated that any duplication of roles should not happen on a board of directors. It can therefore be assumed that this director felt that the board of directors should be well composed. In order to contribute, one current supporter director (director 4) reported that a good atmosphere is needed, as a supporter director cannot influence anything whenever board members organize their own meetings.

I'm not saying to people that the board are not doing anything, but you're always at the risk, that the other directors say 'right, we will have our own meetings'. They don't have to tell you where they are and when they are. (Director 4; current supporter director)

Even though director 4 did not really feel valued by the other board members, he indicated that he was involved by the other directors during board meetings. Moreover, he does try to keep pushing for the things he wants the club to address. In conclusion, not only do supporter directors indicate that they are more or less valued by the other directors, a good board atmosphere is also felt needed to contribute to boardroom discussions.

Second-order theme: Possibility to contribute

All except one supporter director (director 4) can influence topics discussed during board meetings. Topics range from operational, what to do with the manager (in charge of day-to-day football trainings and the matchday coaching) its contract, to strategic, like stadium development. Moreover, supporter directors can submit topics to the chairman of the board which they would like to address during a board meeting, for the board's agenda. Thus,

supporter directors can operate like any other director on the football club's board. Supporter directors also keep watchful eyes on how things are going and put arguments forward whenever they feel necessary to. Even though supporter directors can contribute to all sorts of things, supporter directors do report to be primarily active to make sure the club exists in the future. Six supporter directors identify with the professional football club as it were a business they have to support to run and focus on, keeping the club alive.

I do what I think is best … to ensure [the club] exists in twenty-years' time, fifty-years' time, a hundred-years' time, and a football club exists to be a successful football club. That should not be success at the risk of the club going bankrupt or disappearing …. I decide what the best way of doing is. (Director 1; current supporter director)

The possibility to contribute is not only influenced by other board members, which help a person to speak and contribute, but also by individual characteristics (i.e., occupation) (Kesner, 1988). Supporter directors contribute the most to things that relate to their professional background, such as director 2 (i.e., if a supporter director has been working in marketing all his life, the supporter director most actively contributes to issues regarding marketing). All current and former (supporter) directors have a business background. Only one supporter director had worked in the sports industry before joining the club (director 3). One supporter director indicated to have benefit from his business background, as he acquired understanding and negotiation skills.

Working in X, dealing with clients, you develop skills. Understanding and negotiation, we did that every day. I suppose, there's that. (Director 2; current supporter director)

Through having some experience, supporter directors were a bit aware before joining the club's board of directors, of what they could expect of the board, and were more easily able to recognize board processes and make their points (such as, director 6). Only one supporter director knew a bit about the dynamics of the football industry, and even though this supporter director was aware of the dynamics, this supporter director still felt the supporter director job was very hard to do.

I don't think anything could prepare you for what you actually face. It's a very different world, to be sitting in a boardroom discussing the details of the players' contracts, in terms of salaries. All of a sudden, you're exposed to different things. (Director 7; former supporter director)

Having time, local knowledge, communication skills and being approachable and frequently seen on match days were reported as the most important qualities of the supporter directors. Some supporter directors also reported patience and being thick-skinned as their qualities as well (director 6, director 7). Therefore, supporter directors bring in a lot of different skills which are similar to non-executive directors (Petrovic, 2008).

Aggregate dimension: Influence of the owner

The influence of the owner on the professional football club is deemed very important. Even though most owners do not directly influence the topics discussed during board meetings, a few supporter directors indicated that the owner, in fact, determines where his money goes. Director 1 explains the procedure during board meetings of his club.

We don't do voting. We have a topic of conversation, someone will normally provide a paper to support it, we will talk around the subject and get everyone's perspectives on it. Then either way X will agree and say, 'carry on' or X will say 'not sure about these angles, I think you need to change something and then carry on' or X will say 'not quite sure about it, you need to change a lot about it and then come back, or X will just say 'no'. (Director 1; current supporter director)

Supporter directors were, like the other directors, still able to submit an agenda-item, but the owner had the final say if it was going to be discussed during the board meeting or moved to another meeting.

Ultimately, it's X's money. If X says, I don't want to spend my money on it. Then there's no decision to make. X makes the final call. That's really a black and white scenario. If we are talking more about how's something done, than X wouldn't get involved in any of that detail at all. Then the final call is the board. (Director 1; current supporter director)

Most owners did not join board meetings, such as in the case of director 4. These owners were fine with the board just running the club. Director 1 reported that the owner of his particular club did give his opinion on topics that were going to be discussed by the board during the following board meeting, to an executive. The executive then brought the owners' views into the board discussion during the board meeting. The board of directors set out the strategy and one executive then presented this strategy to the owner. Whenever the owner agreed, the board of directors' main task was to make sure the strategy was followed.

We end up with a situation where we have an agreed strategy with our owner. Our owner kind of sets out the ambitions that X wants to achieve with the club and how X wants us to go about achieving it and what level of money X is ready to put in to achieve it. Then, the board of directors, try to manage the club and manage that strategy to the best affect. So, there's a minimal chance there for a kind of escalation. (Director 1; current supporter director)

Thus, the influence of the owner was crucial in the contribution of supporter directors during board meetings.

CHAPTER 4

In this chapter the results of this study are discussed, and the limitations are presented.

Discussion

This thesis aimed to answer the research question: *What type of advice does a supporter representative, in the role of a non-executive director, give on the firm's strategic issues?* This study tried to answer the research question by conducting ten semi-structured interviews, as this study had an explorative nature to discover more about the supporter director's role and contribution. Both have not been studied a lot before by scholars. The context of the study was the football industry, an industry which offers different dynamics than other business industries to everyone involved on the board of directors (Söderman, 2013). More specifically, the context was the English professional football industry.

The most important novel insight from the data is that supporter representatives feel their mission to be ensuring that the professional football club is there in twenty, fifty years. Therefore, the type of advice of supporter director's is focussed on sustaining the football club. Instead of discussing primarily operational matters, brought up by fans, supporter representatives do plead for creation of long-term strategy as well as for stadium developments, when they are active in their supporter director role. Moreover, supporter directors can contribute, at all clubs, to everything discussed during board meetings and operate on an equal basis with the other directors, however they are not always consulted by the other directors on football matters.

The data gathered also explored assumptions that were what was found by other scholars. First, supporter representatives have to deal with some conflict of interest in their supporter director role on the football club its board of directors (Biddle, 1986; Hillman et al., 2008; McLeod, 2016). Wearing two hats at the same time is perceived to be very difficult for some supporter directors. Supporter directors indicated that the only way of communication,

and fulfilling expectations of the ST, supporters and community, is through erasing important bits from the story they tell those stakeholders on what's discussed inside the boardroom of the football club. Moreover, role ambiguity is encountered by supporter directors, at several clubs and supporter directors (Kahn et al., 1964). Most supporter representatives were not exactly aware of their supporter director role, and one supporter director indicated that laziness could occur, as there was no documentation of the role (director 2). This supporter director basically had to decide what he wanted to do as a director of the football club. An important addition to the literature on actual director behaviour as supporter director's contribution, is that that supporter representatives do possess similar traits as regular non-executive directors (Petrovic, 2008; McLeod, 2016). However, this study pointed out that knowledge on what supporter's view is the major trait embraced by supporter directors, as they interact with supporters.

The short answer to the research question is that supporter representatives offer higher-level advice to other directors active on the football club its board of directors. Supporter representatives provide the bigger picture for other directors to consider, primarily based on local perspectives, what the average fan of a football club might think of the (important) topic that is discussed. Even though supporter representatives can contribute to all topics discussed during board meetings, they do report to be most active on long-term strategic issues, as they share the same purpose of making sure that the football club exists in twenty, fifty years' time. The type of advice is affected by personal traits, such as qualities, the professional background and beliefs as well as by board members, the board atmosphere and the football club's owner. Moreover, the type of advice is also influenced by outside pressures, which are there due to the dynamics of the football industry. Opinions, and the institutional logics, of stakeholders do constantly change, and influence the supporter director's opinion, in terms of what view is supposed to be represented during board meetings.

Theoretical implications

Role conflict

Results indicate that some inter-role conflict and conflict of interest is experienced by supporter representatives active as supporter directors at English professional football clubs. The findings of this study are thus in the line of what role theory assumed (Aguilera, 2005; Hillman et al., 2008; McLeod, 2016).

Data shows that supporter representatives must perform two roles, that are partially overlapping but different in terms of the expectations and responsibilities that come with each role (Banton, 1965; Biddle, 1986; Shenkar & Zeira, 1992). Supporter representatives have a hard time deciding what to communicate and what not to communicate. So, due to the presence of some sort of role conflict, the reason for the opponents of the idea of the inclusion of a supporter representative at board-level is partially supported (McLeod, 2016). Some supporter directors do have stress in dealing with the role conflict (Floyd & Lane, 2000).

Moreover, supporter representatives do promote the interest of supporters but are all aware of the fact that they are contributing to the running of a business on the board of directors of the football club. Supporter representatives do not really experience role conflict in that sense and are aware of the interest of the shareholders. However, supporter representatives are not particularly interested in making sure that shareholder-value increases. Some supporter representatives, for example, indicated that moving stadiums wasn't really what they wanted, but were fine with it, as long as moving stadiums didn't mean moving out of a local area and the club benefited from it. So, data says that supporter representatives aren't conservative on strategic changes and make a careful assessment before deciding what to do. This is not in line with what was expected before the data was gathered and can be labelled as a new insight and an addition to the literature on role conflict (Brown, 2008; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012).

Results of this study indicate that there are, next to the conflict of interest identified at Scottish football (fan-)directors, also signs of role conflict at English football (fan-)directors and therefore supports the findings by McLeod (2016).

Role ambiguity

Results indicate that role ambiguity exists for current and former English (supporter) directors as well. Directors are mostly not aware of the role and the expectations they must fulfil and are barely verbally informed by football club directors as well as ST directors. The amount of time supporter representatives spend in the director role is limited, as nearly all interviewees reported that supporter representatives must stand for election every two, three or four years. This might also partially declare why some supporter representatives must deal with high levels of role ambiguity (Doherty & Hoye, 2011; Schulz & Auld, 2006). This study contributes to the concept role ambiguity by offering insights from the English professional football context, where the concept has not been fully explored before (Doherty & Hoye, 2011; Hoye, 2007; McLeod, 2016). Supporter representatives do not actively seek information, from directors of the football club and directors of the ST, to become more aware of their role. Data indicates that supporter representatives just do what they think is right to do, without knowing if what they're doing is part of their role, where they've been assigned to and elected for. As many supporter representatives do have a professional background in businesses, of which some have served in boards, it is however expected that the supporter representatives are partially aware of what they are supposed to do, which might declare their behaviour.

Concluding, results indicate that role ambiguity does exist in English professional football clubs, as many do not have job-descriptions or code of conducts where the role is described, causing a lot of them to basically do what they think their role encompasses. These findings are in line with what Relvas et al. (2010) found earlier and are now confirmed in a different section of the football industry landscape.

Institutional logics

The idealism and identity logics were found in the data, and displayed by the (ex-) supporter directors (Gammelsæter, 2010). Five (ex-) supporter directors showed sign signs of the idealism logic, whereas all (ex-) supporter directors displayed the identity logic. Moreover, also evidence for the striving for sporting success logic and striving for financial stability logic was found (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Michie & Oughton, 2005; Söderman, 2013; Rhode, 2018). This study does not only offer new findings regarding logics in the football industry contextualized to English professional football clubs, it does also highlight that the dynamics of the football industry might mix opinions up. During one board meeting, a supporter representative might be explaining something though one logic, whereas in other meetings the supporter representative explains something from the perspective of the other logic. This study therefore adds to the conversation of Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016).

No real conflicting logics were found between directors, however, supporter representatives reported struggles and difference of opinions on subjects during board meetings. This study therefore also contributes to Reay and Hinings (2009).

Supporter director's contribution

Results show that English supporter representatives are able bring in valuable knowledge and social network ties. This study adds to the literature, that a supporter representative brings in his/her own views, background and qualities as well as some sort of approachability and patience to board discussions (Garcia & Welford, 2015; McLeod, 2016; Welford et al., 2015). Moreover, supporter representatives can contribute to board discussions, as board members value the qualities and abilities they bring to the board of directors (Doherty & Hoye, 2011).

Most supporter directors are involved in day-to-day operations of the football club; however, it is possible that supporter representatives do engage with day-to-day operations due to role ambiguity. The involvement in the day-to-day operations of the football club is not

reported to harm the performance of the supporter representative in terms of the monitoring duty the supporter representative has as director of the football club. The supporter representatives, being active as outside directors, do report to have look with the same view at executive performance, as when they were not engaged in day-to-day stuff yet. This study therefore also adds to the findings of Petra (2005). Last, results show that supporter representatives can deliver critique as director whenever they feel necessary to do so (Wang & Dewhirst, 1992).

Managerial implications

This study conducted only ten semi-structured interviews with current and former directors that have (had) experience as or with fan-directors, so the generalizability of what was reported and discussed is therefore limited to a certain extent (Yin, 2014). However, the results do indicate that there are some implications for managers, directors and owners, whenever fan-representation is discussed and seriously thought about.

Whenever the owner or the directors of the professional football club decide to allow fan-representation on the board of directors, they should make sure that the supporter director role is clearly demarcated and communicated to the supporter representative, as well as to ST, who have a major role in the recruitment of supporter directors (Kahn et al., 1964). This can help supporter directors deal with their role and help professional English football clubs improve their governance and help retain their supporters (McLeod, 2016; Morrow, 2012). Moreover, the supporter representative should be aware of the things s/he might communicate to stakeholders, like ST members, other supporters and the community.

There is not only a role to play for football clubs, but also for the organization that stimulates fan-representation on football club boards, Supporters Direct. Also, the FA, EFL and Premier League must play a role (Supporters Direct, 2017). All named organizations are encouraged to speak to each other, given the positive contributions supporter representatives

can make, and to seriously think about making fan-representation a necessary requirement for football clubs active in the English professional leagues. Moreover, whatever they may decide on the inclusion, all those organizations, or at least Supporters Direct, are encouraged to draw up exact recruitment protocols for STs and football clubs (including the communication process – when to tell what) together, as well as define what exact role a supporter representative is supposed to take on when joining a football clubs its board. Clubs are then there to decide upon what can be communicated, and what cannot. Clubs are advised to also make a general statement about what their supporter representative can tell, and what not, to the stakeholders of the football club on what's generally discussed in board meetings.

Limitations and future research opportunities

First, this study conducted only ten semi-structured interviews with current and former directors that have (had) experience as or with fan-directors. Even though this population is a hard to access population, future researchers are called upon to confirm the findings presented in this thesis as well as extend the study in numbers, as well as to other countries where there are also supporter directors active in board of directors (McLeod, 2016).

Second, this study did not consider the other forms of supporter involvement, providing an avenue for other scholars to engage with. Brown (2008) did complete research on a fan-owned club, but lower level supporter involvement forms have not been studied yet in practise.

Third, another limitation of this study is that interviewees were not tracked during their whole period of being active on the board. Tracking and talking to supporter directors over a period of time might offer more insights on the contributions made, as well as on the influence of internal and external factors on the contributions. Future researchers might need to go and see supporter representatives a few times in a year, to discover if there are changes in their behaviour and thoughts (McLeod, 2016). Moreover, future researchers might also try to join board meeting(s) of professional football clubs, to discover what happens inside the boardroom

during board meetings, to open-up the black box of the boardroom (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007).

Sitting in the boardroom during board meetings and taking notes, recording what's being said

by the supporter director as well as by other directors, is believed to offer extremely valuable

insights on the supporter director supporter involvement form (McLeod, 2016; Petrovic, 2008).

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APPENDIX A, Interview protocol

<u>**Interview protocol current supporter director**</u>

1. What do you believe your role on the board of directors is? (was: how do you see your role?)

2. What were your expectations of your role before you joined the board of directors?

3. To what extend does your role live up to the expectations you had before you joined the board of directors?

4. What were the main strategic issues the club faced when you joined the board?

5. Could you provide some anecdotal evidence of a board decision in which you were very involved in?

6. Could you provide some anecdotal evidence of situations in which you were asked for your opinion?

<u>**Interview protocol former supporter director**</u>

1. What do you believe your role on the board of directors was?

2. What were your expectations of your role before you joined the board of directors?

3. To what extend did your role live up to the expectations you had before you joined the board of directors?

4. What were the main strategic issues the club faced when you joined the board?

5. Could you provide some anecdotal evidence of a board decision in which you were very involved?

6. Could you provide some anecdotal evidence of situations in which you were asked for your opinion?

Interview protocol (non-)executive director

1. What do you believe the role of the supporter director on the board of directors is?

2. What do you see as your supporter director its qualities?

3. In what topics do you see the supporter director add value?

4. In what topics do you see the supporter director add no value?

5. Could you provide some anecdotal evidence of a board decision in s/he was very involved in?

6. Could you provide some anecdotal evidence of situations in which you asked the supporter director for her/his opinion?