Fan responses to ownership change in the English Premier League: Motivated ignorance, social creativity and social competition at Newcastle United F.C.

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Abstract

Over recent years there has been a significant increase in foreign ownership within the English Premier League, with 'sportswashing' being identified as a key motive for some new club owners. Whilst the effects of changes of ownership have received considerable focus, especially in terms of their impacts upon the club, less attention has been paid to the status of the owners themselves, how any perceived sportswashing strategy impacts upon fans, and how that impact is managed, especially in terms of the strategies that are used by fans to maintain a sense of identification. This paper focuses on the takeover of one Premier League football club, Newcastle United, and explores fan responses to its high-profile and controversial takeover by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF). The paper explores the identity-maintenance strategies used by fans to maintain a positive association with the club using existing frameworks related to social creativity and social competition, as well as through the application of a novel strategy that has yet to be explored within the sport fan literature, that of motivated ignorance. The results demonstrate that whilst social creativity and social competition strategies are evident, motivated ignorance also provides an additional mechanism through which social identities may be protected from identity threat.

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Introduction

The English Premier League (EPL) has, since its rebranding in the 1990s, undergone significant globalisation and commercialisation processes (Ludvigsen, 2019c). This has had implications for the crucial relationship between football clubs and their fans, a relationship which exists in an ever changing environment (Cleland, 2010).Within an increasingly fluid society, augmented through technology such as satellite communication and growing consumerism, communities have been formed around mediated rather than 'live' EPL content, allowing fans to support Premiership clubs from anywhere in the world. Lucrative television deals, all seater stadia and 'profit hunting new directors' (Ludvigsen, 2019b: 604) have further developed the EPL into a global entity, where not only fans, but players, staff, and owners come from a global, rather than a national background (Parnell et al., 2022). As a result, a development in English football over the past decade has been the growth in foreign ownership, a trend which, depending upon the perceived motives of the new owners, may provide a significant threat to the fan/club relationship. This paper explores how fans of Newcastle United Football Club have responded to such threat created by the takeover of their club by the Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF). This is explored using the well-established concepts of social creativity and social competition, as well as a novel strategy that has yet to be explored within the sport fan literature, that of motivated ignorance.

Changing ownership, sportswashing and identity threat

Owning any professional sports club is a risky venture (Marin and Lee, 2020). Despite this, Premier League football clubs are attractive investments for the global mega rich, with fourteen of the twenty EPL clubs at the time of writing being either fully or majority owned by international stakeholders. Although increased investment has had a transformative effect on the finances of some, allowing them to become highly successful in European competition (Royuela and Gasquez, 2019) such investment has also been problematic for some fans (Ludvigsen, 2019a). Often this is due to the perceived motives of the owners, with economic returns seeming to be a key reason for investing rather than the well-being of the club itself (Marin and Lee, 2020; Millward, 2011). To date, many of the concerns of fans about ownership have tended to coalesce around the potential conflict between the owner's actions (or anticipated actions) and the norms and values of the fan-base (Cleland et al., 2018; Millward, 2011), however there are other concerns as well, for example ignoring long standing club traditions (Berning and Maderer, 2017), or privileging new global markets at the expense of the traditional supporter base (Maderer and Holtbrügge, 2019: May, 2018). Even problematic ownership is not always, however, seen as negative (Fişne et al., 2021), and may have only limited impact upon the loyalty of some fans (Maderer and Holtbrügge, 2019), who accept that the risks of the 'arms race' (Ruta et al., 2019) of European club football

means that for clubs aspiring to the top prizes (such as the Champions League), ownership becomes an option only for those with such resources to risk significant losses in a 'winner takes all' market. Some fans might actually welcome such changes in ownership, for example Giulianotti's (2002) 'Hot/Consumer Spectator' who 'experiences the club, its traditions, its star players, and fellow supporters through a market-centered set of relationships' (p. 36) recognising that 'the amoral free market dominates, consequently the club's survival and successes are dependent upon greater financial contributions from all kinds of backers relative to the wealth of other clubs' (p. 37).

There are a number of reasons why such wealthy or powerful parties choose to invest in clubs beyond those related to economic returns. One of these reasons is that of sportswashing, a term that has become increasingly common in recent years (Skey, 2022), referring to a strategy used by individuals, organisations or authoritarian regimes to exploit the soft power of sport to improve their reputation (Søyland and Moriconi, 2022). Whilst the use of soft power is generally viewed positively, and often associated with the ability of nations to construct a desired image based on selected values and behaviours (Chadwick et al., 2020) linked to outcomes such as peace-building or nation-building (Nygård and Gates, 2013), sportswashing as a form of soft power is generally seen more negatively, whereby known moral and ethical violations (such as those related to human rights) receive less attention than they otherwise may receive through either distracting away from, minimising, or even normalising moral violations of the state (Fruh et al., 2022). As such it relies upon the state (or other agent) being aware of such violations, and making a strategic attempt to rebrand itself to a (complicit) audience rather than reforming its own behaviour. Although difficult to prove, sportswashing is usually a strategic decision on behalf of the owning or controlling party and whilst it may involve the ownership of clubs, it can also be levied through strategies such as hosting prominent sporting events. The Beijing Olympics, 2014 Sochi Olympics, the men's FIFA World Cup in Qatar have all received scrutiny in terms of sportswashing (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015; Grix, 2013; Grix and Kramareva, 2017), as has the sponsorship of clubs, such as the sponsorship of Barcelona FC by Qatar Airways (Theodoropoulou, 2019).

In 2021, a consortium led by Saudi Arabia's PIF completed a £300 million takeover of Newcastle United Football Club, with mixed reactions among Newcastle fans (Uddin, 2022). There was some celebration (Miller and Ahluwalia, 2021) in the belief that the takeover would provide financial resources for the club to compete domestically and in European competitions, a factor especially prescient given that at the time of takeover the club was languishing at the bottom of the EPL without a single win. This was particularly important given the history of the club as an underperforming 'sleeping giant'. Formed in 1892, they are the most significant men's football club in the north east of England, with historic periods of success (English champions four times, and F.A. Cup winners six times). There has been, however, a recent history of turbulence, including two relegations from the EPL together with ownership issues, specifically those related to the ownership of the club by Mike Ashley which – like the Saudi takeover of the club – had also promised – but failed – to 'bring back the glory days' (Marshall et al., 2022: 2).

The takeover was controversial, given the human rights record of Saudi Arabia, a nation long associated with human rights abuses related to the use of torture and the

death penalty, denial of freedom of expression, association and assembly, punitive treat-ment of human rights defenders, issues of women's, girls' and migrant rights, rights to health and rights to privacy (Amnesty International, 2022). Despite this controversy, the takeover was assisted by government intervention, especially when the initial process seemed to have stalled (Amin and Conn, 2022). Boykoff (2022: 348) has argued that the takeover 'expanded Riyadh's multi-front propaganda effort…designed to amend perceptions of Saudi Arabia'. Whilst it is too simplistic to see the motives of the Saudi takeover purely in terms of sportswashing, Amnesty International (2021) have made it clear that they perceive sport is being used by the Saudi regime to present a more positive image that overlooks issues such as systematic human rights abuses, show trials and torture. Sacha Desmukh, the UK CEO of Amnesty International, released the following statement:

> We wish Newcastle fans and their team well, but we remain deeply concerned about how our football clubs are being used for sportswashing. Football clubs being purchased for the purpose of trying to distract from serious human rights violations isn't confined to Newcastle, and sportswashing isn't confined to football – but the Saudi takeover has obviously brought the issue of human rights and football governance into sharp relief. Despite assurances about a supposed separation from the Saudi state, ownership of St James' Park is now very much about image management for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his government. As the season progresses we hope fans, players and Newcastle United backroom staff will look ser-iously at the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and be prepared to speak out about the jailing of people like Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, whose 20-year sentence for tweeting was upheld just hours before the Newcastle deal went through. (Amnesty, 2021)

As Skey (2022) notes, there needs to be further understanding of the impact of sports-washing, both on the sport in general, and also upon the fans of a given club. Given their role as key stakeholders in the sportswashing process (Boykoff, 2022), it is import-ant to understand how fans react to such a process. Although Skey (2022) suggests we need to know more about who supports and who resists, we would also argue that there is also a need to understand more passive reactions to the process in order to develop a full understanding of the role of sportswashing in contemporary society, and to further understand the impacts of sportswashing motivated ownerships upon 'trad-itional' fans, as highlighted by Ludvigsn (2019b).

Fandom and identity threat

One framework for exploring fan reactions to issues affecting the perceived integrity of the club emerges from the Social Identity Approach, the most common approach to explore fan identification with sport clubs (Mansfield et al., 2020). The Social Identity Approach highlights how group memberships (such as being a fan of a football club) influence the individual's sense of self. As such, people tend to seek positive social iden-tities through a sense of positive distinctiveness from out-groups (such as fans of other clubs) based on attributes such as success. This positive distinctiveness may be threatened in a variety of ways, for example through poor performance (Doyle et al., 2017), player transgressions (Fink et al., 2009) or relocation (Wegner et al., 2020) as well as changes in

club ownership (Brown, 2007). Identity threat occurs when events are inconsistent with, or harmful to the group identity (Grandey et al., 2013), and as such focused more upon the actual threat to the positive distinctiveness of the group rather than the source of the threat. Thus, in terms of changes in ownership it is not simply the case that the threat is created by a sense of xenophobia around 'foreign' ownership. Instead it is the threat that the club will lose what provides it with such positive distinctiveness. Hence for Newcastle, new ownership may be perceived as a consequence of being a threat to a club that is representative of its local community, its traditional values, and its history, through taking control away from its 'grassroots custodians' (Giulianotti, 2022: 25) rather than simply the threat being that of foreign ownership itself.

When such social identities are threatened, the fan may respond in a number of ways. In cases where the fan cannot 'repair' the conflict between the threat and their own personal values, the fan may leave the group (Hyatt and Foster, 2015), a strategy referred to as social mobility (Campo et al., 2019). This is a rarely seen strategy, especially among highly identified fans (Mudrick et al., 2021) who may be more willing to adopt other strategies that will allow them to maintain a positive social identity.

The first of these is social creativity. There are three social creativity behaviours available (Doyle et al., 2017). The first is to focus upon an alternative dimension of the fan experience, where attention is placed upon other aspects of identifying with the club that are seen as positive. Thus fans of an unsuccessful club may focus on aspects that may be more positively evaluated in comparison to other clubs, such as the style of play or club history (Jones, 2000). The second is downplaying the importance of the dimension that is seen negatively, or even reassigning that dimension a positive value, for example the fan of a losing club may argue that winning is not important compared to, for example, the financial stability of the club, or that supporting a losing club, or that 'basking in reflected failure' is actually a positive attribute (Campbell et al., 2004). Finally, fans may change the out-groups against which they compare, for example the losing fan choosing to compare their club against a club with a worse playing record rather than their more traditional rivals.

The second broad strategy is that of social competition, which focuses upon the perceived negative characteristics of out-group members (Mansfield et al., 2020) focusing on specific attributes that are more likely to provide a sense of in-group distinctiveness (Yousaf and Laber, 2020) in order to define their own group as superior (Rees et al., 2015) . This can be done physically, through actual violence (Wann, 1993), or verbally (in person or online), actions which improve the relative standing of their club compared to the out-group, or rival club (Gillooly et al., 2020), for example accusing fans of a more successful club as being 'glory hunters'.

Fandom and motivated ignorance

One further identity-maintenance strategy that has yet to receive attention within the sport fan literature is that of 'motivated ignorance' (Williams, 2021). The broader concept of ignorance has been neglected in academic research (Hertwig and Engel, 2016), and is more nuanced than it might initially seem, with several forms (Arfini and Magnani, 2021), and diverse functions (Smithson, 1985). Motivated ignorance is a specific form

of ignorance that is actively and purposefully cultivated, rather than being ignorance that occurs through factors such as lack of either awareness of, or access to information (Hartford, 2022). It is thus a specific type of ignorance that is created by the individual who is aware that the information exists, and is freely available, but makes a conscious and deliberate decision to avoid it. Two forms of motivated ignorance exist (Williams, 2021). Personally motivated ignorance is a self-driven strategy to protect the individual from information that may be seen as harmful in some way to them as a person (e.g. the individual who ignores the results of a health test in fear of the findings). Socially motivated ignorance focuses upon the avoidance of information that may have a negative impact upon a group with which the individual identifies. A contemporary example would be fans at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar actively pursuing a strategy of deliberate ignorance regarding issues such as corruption and migrant workers' rights that might impact their involvement in watching their national team. As such, it 'drives individuals who inhabit ideological communities …to avoid acquiring any knowledge that might lead to exclusion' (Williams, 2021: 7821). Thus, it is a strategy to protect the existence of the group with which an individual identifies through a proactive and deliberate avoidance of potentially damaging knowledge. For socially motivated ignorance to occur, individuals firstly need to be aware that the information exists, and secondly, they have freely available access to it (Golman et al., 2017). There is also no need to be aware of the precise nature of the information – it is simply the possibility that the information may be harmful to the group that is relevant. Hence, in this context, motivated ignorance relates to freely available information about the Saudi regime that is actively avoided by fans in order to protect their sense of social identity as a fan of Newcastle United.

This paper has two inter-related aims. The first is to explore fan reactions to such identity threat, to explore how existing mechanisms (such as social creativity and social competition) are used by fans as identity-maintenance strategies within the context of the Newcastle United takeover. Secondly, the paper will also explore how the concept of motivated ignorance may be used as a further strategy to explain – for some fans at least – the acceptance of ownership that may transgress generally accepted moral and ethical standards.

Methodology

Data were collected by analysing posts on the official Newcastle United Fan Forum, '*Newcastle-Online*'. The use of such forums to explore fan attitudes has become increasingly common over recent years (Ludvigsen, 2019a), either through extended netnographic immersion (e.g. Wegner et al., 2020) or content analysis of posts (e.g. Kian et al., 2011; Kilvington et al., 2022). Although a number of different forums were available, the official forum was chosen as it provided the greatest amount of rich data, as well as being highly active, and interactive in terms of usage. As the forum also had a specific thread related to the takeover this was considered the most focused and richest source of data for exploring fan attitudes to the takeover. Whilst a period of immersion (consisting of approximately 10 months, from September 2021 until June 2022) was undertaken in order to ensure adequate depth of data was obtained, the study did not fully follow the key processes and epistemological focus associated with netnography (Kozinets, 2020), and

is thus more accurately described as a qualitative content analysis, whose purpose is to explore and uncover the meaning of the data (Schafer and Vogele, 2021) than a true online ethnography.

This approach to data collection was chosen for a number of reasons. It has been highlighted that fans will use online social networks to express their loyalty and emotional connection to their club (Fenton et al., 2021), including their feelings regarding threat situations (Wang et al., 2022), such as that explored here. Forums may also capture more naturalistic data, with fans able to interact with each other to develop ideas without influence from the researcher, and develop long-term, in-depth discussions (Smith et al., 2014). The Newcastle United forum chosen, founded in 2005, is independent of the club itself, and the largest forum related to the club, with over 7 million posts on various topics categorised under 'football', 'chat', 'gaming' and 'hall of fame'. It is a highly active forum with generally over 300 online participants at any one time. The amount of data accessible is significant, with the thread chosen for analysis containing 2275 postings related to the Saudi takeover of Newcastle United. A final benefit is that the anonymity associated with forums may also lower the threshold for posters to express their thoughts, especially if they may contradict social norms (Weber et al., 2021). There are also issues with such research. The personal characteristics of users cannot be verified, thus allowing the possibility of data from 'trolls' seeking to create controversy or from non-fans to be included. Within the study, this was minimised through a careful examination of users' posting history, allowing some confidence in the sources of data. If there was any doubt (e.g. some users had no history of posting before, or after), then data were discarded. Secondly, the ethics of such research remain contested. The study gained institutional ethical approval on the basis of it being a publicly accessible forum, with no password or registration requirements, and that anonymity of posters was ensured through the use of pseudonyms rather than actual usernames, as well as paraphrasing of data to minimise the possibility of identifying participants, following a similar approach to that of Weber et al. (2021).

All fan postings from the takeover thread were read, and the concepts of social creativity, social competition, and motivated ignorance used as a guiding framework to identify relevant posts, allowing a total of 132 conceptually relevant posts to be identified. Whilst this might seem to be a relatively low proportion, the data were useful in demonstrating the existence of all three concepts within the takeover through a 'subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1278) rather than exploring the extent to which they occurred. The data were then thematically analysed (Neuendorf, 2018) using a reflexive thematic analysis approach, as this allows for such subjective interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2020) than any form of quantification. A number of different forms of content analysis exist, this study used what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) refer to as conventional content analysis, with the key aim being to describe a phenomenon, especially where there is limited knowledge, as is the case with motivated ignorance and identity threat. Whilst data regarding the more well understood mechanisms related to social creativity, social mobility and social competition were coded deductively into these broad themes, insights about motivated ignorance were, due to the lack of knowledge about the phenomenon, allowed to emerge from the data

inductively. As Hsieh and Shannon note, one potential limitation of this approach of simply identifying and then coding relevant data is failing to understand its context and meaning. To minimise this risk, two strategies identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were adopted, specifically the long-term immersion within the setting, and the persistent observation of data to develop understanding.

Results and discussion

Fans posting on the forum seemed, unsurprisingly, to be highly identified with the club, and as such more likely to be affected by threats to their social identity than less identified fans (Chalabaev et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2017). Following the approach of Wegner et al., (2020) this was ascertained by exploring qualitative aspects related to both cognitive elements of identification, such as fans using 'we', usernames (many of which were club related), the use of club related images and avatars, and evaluative elements such as the emotional responses evident in many posts. Overall, it was clear that a broad range of reactions to the Saudi takeover were apparent, ranging from the overwhelmingly supportive, to those clearly against the takeover. Much of the data consisted of 'live' reactions to the process, although occasionally there was a more considered, reflective element to fan postings. Adding a layer of complexity to the analysis was the broader context, specifically that, for some fans, it was not simply the question of the impact of the Saudi takeover, but also the legacy of the previous owner, Mike Ashley. Ashley had owned Newcastle United since 2007, and over time had angered many Newcastle fans through his poor managerial decisions, treatment of club heroes, renaming of the stadium, and lack of investment (Marshall et al., 2022). As such, it is important to view the Saudi takeover within this context, whereby Newcastle fans in general were generally predisposed towards a takeover, given Ashley's reputation as an owner (Crafton, 2022; Marshall et al., 2022) and the likely improvements in the playing record of the club (Srivastava et al., 2022).

Social creativity, social mobility and social competition strategies

Social creativity strategies, with their focus on positive dimensions of the takeover, were strongly evident. In terms of such strategies, the perceived benefits for the club and the city emerged:

> I think fans associated with the city should feel happy that they have owners who genuinely want to invest in the future of both the club and the city… let's get behind our new owners and support the team with passion and pride, and hope that the best years in the history of both the club and the city are coming (Geordiefan)

> If the PIF do invest and improve the city where I, my friends and family live for the better, raising aspirations and standards of living, particularly for the young, where the government of this country has been happy to let slide and erode for over ten years then I'll absolutely welcome it. We fucking need it. And that makes me a massive hypocrite and to be honest I'm comfortable with that (NUFCFollower)

It was interesting to note that fans identified the benefits to the wider community, perhaps reflecting the historically strong club/community relationship, and also providing an additional rationalisation for the takeover going beyond that of only benefiting the club itself. As well as the perceived benefits to the city and club, fans saw the takeover as having potential benefits to Saudi Arabia:

> We should still highlight where we disagree with their regime. This is also a chance to help progress ideas in Saudi too, amazingly. (ToonArmy)

> Simply by the PIF being involved with us, there will be increased integration of Saudi and UK culture. There will be huge opportunities for us to influence them (in this regard) more than the other way round. OK, they are already hugely active in the UK but the PIF and NUFC link will take it to another level, publicity-wise. This deal over the coming years will be very transformative (quietly perhaps at first) for the people of Saudi Arabia. It is a VERY good thing all round. (NUFCGeordie)

The takeover was thus seen as facilitating more of a balanced outcome, which, although ethnocentric in nature in terms of its potential to change Saudi domestic policy towards a model closer to that of the UK, was seen to provide more widespread benefits beyond that of simple sporting success. Thus, positive distinctiveness is achieved through the selective focus upon having owners who would have a positive impact upon not just the club, but, importantly for a club so strongly rooted within its community, positive outcomes for the local region.

Social competition strategies, in terms of derogating out-groups to maintain the standing of Newcastle United emerged in two ways. Firstly, a number of fans highlighted that both the Premier League itself and other Premier League clubs also had links with 'problematic' stakeholders:

> The Saudis are a despotic regime but the Premier League sold its soul to the devil long before they rocked up and that's without forgetting how much other business this country does with them. (ToonFan)

> I don't like where the money is coming from but I'd say that about most owners (NUFCFollower)

In a broader vein, the complicity of other governments was highlighted:

> If the Government and the Royal Family are happy to deal with Saudi Arabia, I don't see why a football club should be singled out for doing so. Ideally our club would be run by local people, but that would make us the extreme exception, not the rule. No other competitive club has local owners. The UK Government was elected by the British people, so any appeasement from it toward any foreign power could potentially be stopped by the electorate, people currently claiming the high ground and attacking NUFC fans in spite of delivering Johnson, Truss etc. to power. It's not for a football fan to bring Saudi Arabia's human rights record to the world's attention when governments around the world turn a blind eye to it (JohnNUFC)

Of course I have misgivings about the way that Saudi Arabia operates but I find it easy to sub-scribe to the If My Country Sells Them Weapons Then I Don't See Why They Can't Bankroll My Club school of thought. (Keeganfan)

Or that others were generally happy to buy Saudi Arabian produce, such as petrol or oil:

The overwhelming majority of people, by necessity, have to compartmentalise issues which link their everyday world and what they deem moral impropriety.

For some supporting a club funded by a state they deem immoral is not okay, but queueing up for Shell petrol with links to the same regime is acceptable. (LocalHero)

Personally I have the mental capacity to separate the football club from the other activities of its owners. i.e. if the Saudis own 80% of NUFC or not this has no bearing on whether they will or won't commit atrocities elsewhere. We all compartmentalise issues like this to a degree, other-wise we would be doing prayers of repentance every time we fill the car up with petrol. (Shearer9)

Many fans also saw the previous owner (Mike Ashley) negatively, and thus comparing the new regime to a previous owner that was not seen to have the club's best interests at heart allowed the takeover to be justified:

I still don't know where I stand on it but Newcastle United is a football club and for the sporting integrity of the club it was imperative that Ashley was replaced by people with a vision. The consortium have that vision and I'll judge them primarily as their actions as owners. (Howay22)

Be happy we're rid of the worst owner and manager we've had in possibly anyone's living memory to be transformed into possibly the wealthiest and most successful club in the world over the next 20 years (which will see me out) and people start shite like this. Enjoy the fkin ride man and stick ya predispositions up yer arse honestly FO man (StJames11)

Rather than compete against a more obvious out-group (such as a rival team), the pre-vious ownership was thus the focus of social competition, hence positive distinctiveness was achieved by a relative assessment (that the new owners were 'better' than the previ-ous ownership), rather than an absolute measure (focusing solely on the attributes of the new ownership) or a measure against other clubs.

Finally, some social mobility strategies were evident, although rare, with fans happy to reduce or even cease their sense of identification with the club:

It's part of the reason I'll never truly fall in love with football again. Nothing has changed, the 'product' still comes before the fans and corruption is still rife…So while I'm delighted I have a club that tries again, I'm certainly not enamoured with the new ownership. I think my general apathy is more based in the way the game is going than anything the club has done. This take-over is just the symptom of a much wider disease. (DurhamLad12)

I mean, you either feel the need or you don't. You don't HAVE to. Supporting the club to me was (and deep down, is) about family, community, and tribalism. That has good and bad points. There were always other aspects of the club itself and football that were problematic. Those other aspects just became more and more prominent until they reached a tipping point for me. (UpEddie)

The strategies outlined above are essentially *post hoc* coping mechanisms to deal with actual (even if inaccurate) knowledge. For some fans, however, prior avoidance of any information that may threaten their identity was clear, through a strategy of motivated ignorance.

Motivated ignorance and identity threat

Unlike previous studies into strategies used by fans to cope with identity threat (i.e. Delia, 2017; Sanderson, 2016) a new strategy – that of motivated ignorance – emerged from the forums. As noted above, this involves an active avoidance of freely available information that may threaten the club, and thus individual's subsequent sense of social identification. Thus, it is a strategy that actively avoids threatening information rather than – as with strategies such as social mobility and social competition – acting as a coping mechanism (Mansfield et al., 2020). Motivated ignorance is difficult to evidence, given that it is a behaviour that does not leave any observable trace, and hence data is limited. At its most basic level, this was a simple avoidance of any discussion about the takeover:

I dont like this thread goodbye (NorthEast)

There are plenty of other incidental things which improve my life but are not essentials that I should have ethical misgivings about which I choose to ignore; this will be another one. That might be reprehensible, but I've squared it with my conscience and by the same token personally speaking I don't give a fuck about anybody who chooses to celebrate with a Saudi flag or whatever. I'm long past being embarrassed on behalf of other people, or feeling that their actions reflect on me. (JohnNUFC)

Other rationalisations were evident from fans, specifically the idea that football fans shouldn't be aware of, or interested in the broader political issues:

I sometimes think people dont live in the real world. Like it or not, politics, human rights, sportswashing etc isn't even in the conscious of some lad in Byker wanting to go and watch his team. I mean each to their own but I wont be questioning anything……..Quite easy for me to support NUFC and not think about human rights/Saudi atrocities… I wasn't remotely interested before the take over, Im not now. Who am I to tell a country how it should act when I have no real knowledge on the situation. Im not interested in PIF either. (SoccerFan)

Part of me is like, why is it down to Newcastle United supporters to be up in arms about the record in a country which prior to this takeover next to no football fan probably paid any attention to. All of a sudden, because they now own us and if looks from the outside in like a PSG, Man City type takeover, everyone is an expert on MBS, the war in Yemen, et cetera. Fuck off.

Man City fans probably got this and probably still do. Why should a lad from Burnage be questioned by some writer from a pay wall newspaper for supporting the club he always has done? Same for us. That's the mentality I'm taking. I should care, I don't. I've wanted just some sort of change at the top for years and didn't care what that was. We've got it, and I'm happy. (OnlineFan1)

It's an odd one. Whenever I'm asked about this, I tend to say I'm a bit conflicted. But I'm not conflicted at all and I've realised I've just been lying to make myself look good. I did not go to bed on Thursday night fretting about Saudi Arabia one bit is the honest truth. Likewise, I'm not going to get drawn into justifying them either, or lobbying to change how a foreign country runs itself. (Park117)

The lack of broader interest in the issues related to the Saudi regime was also highlighted:

I think it's totally reasonable to have reservations. I also think it's reasonable for people to not give a shit. Ultimately we're just fans, and it's ridiculous to expect people to wrestle with some pretty weighty questions when they just want to watch people kick a football around for 90 minutes. The same questions that wider polite society refuses to answer (NUFCPL)

This was supported by an argument that watching the team play was the key dimension of importance for fans:

Is there any way to put a topic on ignore? You either watch top level football or you don't. (TynesideFan)

I'm avoiding this thread, nothing to do with football (Robson20)

In a similar vein, fans suggested that they could not be held responsible for ownership, as suggested by Fruh et al. (2022), allowing the club to be separated from the misdeeds of the owners, as highlighted by one participant:

I actually think it's perfectly reasonable to not want to worry at all about ownership, who owns us not the decision of any of us fans (tragically) and not our responsibility (blackandwhitefan)

Fans thus demonstrated a sense of collective identification with the football team, rather than a club as a whole, thus seeing the Saudi takeover as less relevant, and less of a threat to their own sense of identity as a Newcastle United fan. For some fans, the issue was redefined not in terms of a Saudi takeover *per se*, but as a takeover from the previous regime, and the Mike Ashley ownership era was again cited as a justification for ignorance of the key issues:

That's the mentality I'm taking. I should care, I don't. I've wanted just some sort of change at the top for years and didn't care what that was. We've got it, and I'm happy. (Park117)

> Like personally I'm perfectly fine in admitting that I couldn't give a shit who owns us as long as I can enjoy watching football again. Adolf Hitler could have rose from the grave to buy out Ashley and I'd have shook the blokes hand (Darsley)

> Personally, I've adopted the same approach I took to other regimes, whether McKeag et al., (lesser) concerns about the Halls and Shepherd, and the previous shitshow. A bit head in the sand maybe, but as long as I can identify with and respect the values of the leadership closest to the players, and most involved in the direction the club is taking, then I am in. (Wilson9)

> I'm glad Ashley is gone, that's the biggest thing for me. Other than that, I guess I'm kinda just focusing on the positive aspects of the ownership like Amanda Staveley and I guess the Reubens? Idk much about them. So basically turning a blind eye a bit, which is terrible, but that's just where I'm at right now. My feelings about the whole thing have varied so much already who tf knows how I'll feel down the line :lol: (Isaak)

There is some overlap between the key concepts of social creativity and motivated ignorance, and the boundaries between the two may be, as seen here, more blurred than distinct. Here, for example, there are elements of both social creativity and socially motivated ignorance, with the redefining of the key elements of group membership, with a focus upon moving away from the perceived negativity of the Mike Ashley ownership period. Instead, focus is placed on a club where he was no longer in charge, rather than issues related to the Saudi PIF, thus allowing the fans to justify ignorance about the new owners themselves.

For some fans, political issues were something to be avoided through watching football, rather than being directly involved within the sport:

> As someone with who is quite left wing politically, I really should care about being de facto owned by Saudi Arabia; how they treat women, LGBTQs, what they're doing in Yemen, et cetera. But, rightly or wrongly, I don't. My life already choke full with personal issues/problems that I really don't have any energy left to worry about problem that far away from me in another country. I support NUFC to forget about my problems not to add another (Rafa2016)

> However, having said all that, football is my escape from the realities of the world, I just don't have the energy, capacity or mental strength to be able to take a moral stance in every single issue that's out there and so ultimately, I feel comfortable continuing to support Newcastle and be genuinely excited for both the club's future as well as the city and region as a whole (Magpie)

The idea of fandom as escape has received previous attention (e.g. Wann, 1995), and it seems that elements of negative escapism (Astakhova et al., 2022) may motivate fans to be ignorant of the issues related to the Saudi regime. Whilst positive escapism refers to activities that are short term, temporary breaks from stressful situations (Rojek, 1993), negative escapism involves the creation of an illusion that the unpleasant reality from which the fan is escaping no longer exists (Astakhova et al., 2022). It could be argued that ignorance of the issues related to the Saudi takeover could be an example of negative

escape, whereby fans maintain their sense of identification through denial of any abuses in much the same way that, for example, fans of the banned cyclist Lance Armstrong maintained their sense of identification by insisting that no doping offences had actually taken place, despite strong evidence to the contrary (Jones, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a number of responses to the Saudi takeover of Newcastle United F.C. Many of the fan responses reflected those evident in previous work, where fans responded with social competition based and social creativity based strategies. The data has also, however, highlighted the use of a further strategy – that of motivated ignorance – that has not to date been explored as a strategy by fans. It seems clear that this deliberate form of ignorance, even when relevant information is readily and freely available, can act as a further identity protection strategy amongst some fans when their identity is threatened. This was demonstrated by a number of fans and justified through arguments such as those related to fans not being interested in broader politics, the need to maintain a sense of loyalty to the club, the contrast with previous ownership, and the role of football as an escape from politics and the 'real world'. Whilst the paper has introduced the concept of motivated ignorance to the sport fan literature, and described how it may act as a strategy by which fans might avoid identity threat, more empirical work is certainly required to understand its role in maintaining a sense of positive social identity, especially in light of growing threats to fan identities, not only related to fan ownership, but within other contexts where threat may occur, for example, the hosting of the 2022 Men's Football World Cup within Qatar, or even athlete transgressions.

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