

## **Title**

Grassroots football club stakeholders' sponsorship: the role of happiness and shared values

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## **Abstract**

### *Purpose*

This research serves to determine causal configurations of corporate social responsibility (CSR) conditions that best influences grassroots football club stakeholders to meet a sponsor's goals through promotional activity.

### *Design/methodology/approach*

The research uses a case study of the Essex Alliance League, a local amateur football league in England. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were held with multiple stakeholders to understand the ecosystem of grassroots football. From here, further semi-structured interviews were held with club sponsors to identify the conditions of CSR. This allowed the research to then issue a survey from which results were analysed and discussed using fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA).

### *Findings*

The ecosystem of grassroots football is formed by a myriad of stakeholders operating at a national level, all the way to more local governance structures within which the business-club relationship exists. Sponsors identified three main conditions of CSR: shared values, self-congruity, and happiness. However, following fsQCA, two pathways were found: 1) presence of shared values, and 2) presence of happiness with the absence of self-congruity.

### *Originality*

Where fertile ground for academic analysis in grassroots football is present, this research investigates CSR activity at this level of football, where most research is more concerned with professional levels of the game. Furthermore, this research reaches into the sport ecosystem through an understanding of co-created values between organisations in this exchange of shared values to meet common objectives.

### *Practical implications*

For practitioners, adaptations can be made for clubs to attract and maintain sponsorship as businesses seek to use grassroots sport as a channel for their own CSR objectives. To attract long term sponsorship, club managers are recommended to maintain long-term relationships with business owners especially in relation to personal values, fit, and happiness. As such, the responsibility of the club to ensure its stakeholders engage in promotional activity on behalf of their sponsor will help in maximising the financial value over multiple seasons.

## **Keywords**

Grassroots football, sponsorship, corporate social responsibility, stakeholders, shared values, happiness

### **Glossary of acronyms**

CFA – County Football Association

CSR – corporate social responsibility

FA – Football Association

HAP – happiness

SCO – self-congruity

SVA - shared values

## **1. Introduction**

Both theoretically and empirically speaking, a dearth of study into grassroots football exists (O’Gorman, 2016). Such scant attention to this setting should be one that is questioned though when understanding its contribution to society with £2.050 billion in economic and £8.712 billion social wellbeing value per year in England (The FA, 2019). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, social responsibility from businesses through corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity has heightened positive response from internal and external stakeholders (Mohammed *et al.*, 2022). Yet this is without reflecting on the wider global grassroots sport environment and how individual happiness is heightened through participation (Balish *et al.*, 2016).

Given the limited scholarly coverage into community football, it is unsurprising research positioned on sponsorship of grassroots football appears limited. However, community sport clubs increasingly look to sponsorship as a source of income (Wicker *et al.*, 2012; Misener and Doherty, 2014), particularly in the wake of recent budget-reducing government policy measures (Ikramullah *et al.*, 2018). Sponsors alternatively view sponsorship as a business-to-business transaction that reaches target audiences through their CSR actions with local community groups (Zinger and O’Reilly 2010; Miragaia *et al.*, 2017). Yet sponsorship should not be reduced to solely focusing on sponsors and sport properties considering it witnesses connections being forged with many other stakeholders impacted by the relationship (Plewa *et al.*, 2015; Djaballah *et al.*, 2017). Further, a key determinant for organisations to survive rests on sustaining long-term relationships with stakeholders (Garcia de Madariaga and Valor, 2007), showing the subsequent value in accounting for such perspectives within research.

Few studies have offered exploration into stakeholder perceptions of CSR related sponsorship (Djaballah *et al.*, 2017). Some studies suggest how the CSR field could be advanced by exploring how external stakeholders (i.e., community members) attitudes and behaviours alter because of sponsorship (Mazodier *et al.*, 2015). For instance, Kim *et al.*, (2019) highlight how consumer attitudes are positively influenced by CSR-sponsorship, but only in elite sport. The question is also raised as to what conditions of CSR these stakeholders are most happy to comply with to

attract sponsorship from local businesses. Herein lies the subsequent connection to the state of internal happiness that depends on subjective judgements (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2020). This study thus aims to explore the grassroots football stakeholder ecosystem and understand the ideal conditions of CSR that help a grassroots team meet their sponsor's goals.

Research into CSR and subsequent consumer behaviour has explored some conditions of CSR activity. These include the sense of shared values, self-congruity, and happiness; all of which have been explored as a fit between sponsor and sponsee (Quester *et al.*, 2013; Demirel, 2020; Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022a). Where literature has explored the role of CSR activity in sport, and specifically football, this tends to be from a professional perspective or does not research how CSR conditions influence subsequent stakeholder behaviour (Kim *et al.*, 2018; Fifka and Jaeger, 2018). Thus, this research explores these conditions of CSR activity from the perspective of grassroots football clubs. Whilst the sponsor-club fit is still important, the sponsorship of grassroots football clubs still includes fundamental exposure goals. Therefore, upon understanding CSR objectives of businesses sponsoring grassroots football clubs, this research aims to study the influence of CSR conditions on word-of-mouth promotion as a measure of subsequent club stakeholder behaviour.

The research consequently seeks to answer three research questions through a multiple-study approach:

RQ1 Who are the main stakeholders and what is their configuration within the ecosystem of grassroots football?

RQ2 What are the conditions of CSR from the sponsors' perspective?

RQ3 What are the causal configurations and their necessity that best influences club stakeholders to meet a sponsor's goals through promotional activity?

In focusing on these three questions and overall aims, the study offers theoretical and managerial contribution. The lack of exploration into grassroots sport initially offers a "fertile ground for future academic analysis" (O'Gorman, 2016: p.797) that the subsequent study taps in to. This is even before the paper theoretically contributes to research through using stakeholder theory – a theory Tsotsos (2011) argue is overlooked in the field of sponsorship – to explore grassroots football sponsorship. Indeed, to the authors knowledge, there is little to no study that aims to comprehend the conditions of CSR that induce grassroots football club stakeholders to achieve a sponsor's objective. In turn, the paper presents managerial implications in highlighting what sponsors covet from the sponsor-sponsee relationship and how grassroots football stakeholders can assist in ensuring these sponsor objectives are realised to create long-withstanding and mutually beneficial agreements. This is vital in the view that how to maintain relationships over time holds significant credence for sport organisation practitioners (Loranca-Valle *et al.*, 2021).

To address the study's aims, the paper is structured in the following fashion. The paper initially offers a review of associated literature before outlining the study's three-stage research design. The study's results are subsequently presented in

accordance with each stage of the research prior to providing discussion into the results of the three stages, underpinned by stakeholder theory. The research finally concludes with the theoretical and practical implications drawn from the research as well as the study's limitations and future research directions.

In summary, this paper is organized into six main sections including the Introduction. Section 2 provides a review of the relevant literature on sponsorship in sport and CSR, the conditions of CSR and CSR and promotional activity and also the conceptual framework., Section 3 outlines the methodology and the three studies conducted in our paper; Section 4 presents the results of our studies and the fsQCA analysis, and Section 5 discusses the results and implications of our findings and finally in Section 6 we present the conclusions, limitations and directions for future research."

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Theoretical framework*

Despite an apparent dearth of sponsorship study grounded in theoretical explanation existing (Olkkonen, 2001; Demir and Soderman, 2015), a variety of theories have been adopted to explore the phenomenon of sponsorship. In fact, the number of theories reflects the systematic review of Walliser (2003) who underlines how exploration into sponsorship has been underpinned by a variety of theoretical perspectives which have resulted in not any one theory dominating the field.

Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) is concerned with understanding the nature of relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders who are characterised as those "who can affect or be affected by the achievement of an organizations objectives" (Freeman, 1984: p46). Consequently, a core tenant of stakeholder theory is the purpose of a business being able to create value for all stakeholders (Freeman *et al.*, 2004; Freeman *et al.*, 2010). To maintain effective relationships, a business must consequently balance their own interests against the interests of other stakeholders (Smith, 2003). It is therefore prudent for this study to attach to stakeholder theory given numerous groups and individuals hold interest on the outcomes of sponsorship (Tsiotsou, 2011). Further, empirical work grounded by stakeholder theory is argued to be non-existent despite being discussed theoretically because of the debate surrounding CSR (Garcia de Madariaga and Valor, 2007); offering a gap this research aims to broach. In this research, the role of club managers as volunteers, players as participants, and business-owners as sponsors of the club shows a wide range of stakeholders who have an invested interest in the community football club setting.

### *2.2 Sponsorship in sport and CSR*

A lack of consensus towards a universally agreed definition for sponsorship exists (Johnston and Spais, 2015). In work affixed to professional sport sponsorship, Demir and Soderman (2015) allude to three distinguishing strategies for sponsorship as: i) an investment transaction; ii) a relation between two-entities; and iii) an animation through leveraging and activation. This has been evident over time as sponsorship has moved from a one-off transaction to a practice that has evolved

through an arrangement of inter-relationships and interactions (Olkkonen, 2001; Chadwick and Thwaites 2008; Ryan and Fahy 2012).

The role CSR plays for small businesses has burgeoned with the growth in significance of small firms in society (Jenkins, 2006). CSR alludes to the actions extending beyond legal compliance by firms wishing to fulfil societal good by furthering their own social actions (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001; McWilliams *et al.*, 2006; Waldman and Siegel, 2008). In this sense, CSR is proactively integrated into the business' core strategy to address the current issues pervading a given society, especially considering brand image when using CSR for cause-related marketing strategies (Kim and Kim, 2021; Le *et al.*, 2022).

It is unsurprising that many in academia have reported CSR as one of the most sought-after objectives when businesses rationalise their sponsorship of community level sport (Slack and Bentz 1996; Lamont and Dowell 2008; Batty *et al.*, 2016; Miragaia *et al.*, 2017). With public funding becoming less accessible to community sports clubs due to austerity and Covid-19, an even more precarious financial landscape has surfaced (Grix *et al.*, 2020). The engagement of CSR-sponsorship by businesses is further salient for the grassroots sports club in noting the work of Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, (2021) which proffers non-profit sport organisations lose members, in part, because of the service quality provided by the organisation that is affected by factors including income. Through sponsorship and giving back to the local community, small firms can thus advance their relational capital with key stakeholders and gain competitive advantage with enhanced company performance (White Gunby, 2009; O'Gorman *et al.*, 2019).

### 2.3 Conditions of CSR

Shared organisational values influence consumers when there is a greater sponsorship fit between a sponsee and sponsoring organisation hoping to achieve their CSR objectives through their networks (Demirel, 2020). Furthermore, the personal values of managers are deemed an important aspect of establishing a fit between organisations in CSR activity (Maon *et al.*, 2009). When addressing shared values at a community participation level of sport, Hills *et al.* (2019) illustrated the importance of shared values between sports and business managers to ensure the successful delivery of social and business goals. Therefore, this study measures shared values in sponsorship of grassroots football clubs by exploring the sponsor-club fit, values, and similarity in brand identity (Demirel, 2020).

Self-congruity is similar to shared values as a condition of CSR, except self-congruity is more about the match between a sponsor's image and how a consumer perceives themselves, which, in turn, influences sponsorship effectiveness (Quester *et al.*, 2013). For example, if a consumer deems altruistic CSR activity in sport is important for their own community and sense of self-perception, only then will a brand's image be deemed a congruent fit (Walker and Kent, 2008). As a result, Mazodier and Merunka (2012) highlight self-congruity increases brand loyalty from a consumer. Evidence of this is seen from residents of tourist destinations who exhibit voluntary word-of-mouth behaviours because of high self-congruity and tourism in their community (Segota *et al.*, 2021). However, further insight can still be drawn from self-congruity as a condition of CSR and subsequent stakeholder behaviour within a grassroots sport club setting.

As conditions of CSR are further understood, a positive relationship is recognised between stakeholder happiness and consumer behaviour through brand loyalty (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022a). Furthermore, brand strategies recognise happiness as a motivating element that influences consumer choices (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2023). Not only this, but consumer happiness has shown to be a positive variable when influencing loyalty amongst stakeholders (Núñez-Barriopedro *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, Han *et al.*, (2019) found satisfaction influences happiness and loyalty from consumers. However, this explores happiness as a concept in the fields of fashion and hospitality industries. Within sport, research has explored happiness as a measure of spectator pride or response to CSR activities of professional clubs (Kim *et al.*, 2018; Ullah *et al.*, 2021). Nonetheless, other than team identification, measures of subsequent stakeholder behaviour through actions like word-of-mouth promotion seem limited, especially when considering sponsorship as a CSR activity of businesses with grassroots football clubs.

Whilst there are multiple measures of happiness, this study adopts the fluid vision of happiness, in that stakeholder interactions offer active experiences of the sponsor through grassroots football club sponsorship (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2023). Results in recent studies suggest that greater consideration needs to be offered to explore happiness and its relationship with loyalty within sports settings (Núñez-Barriopedro *et al.*, 2021), further showing how the current study presents an academic contribution to the field of research.

#### *2.4 CSR and promotional activity*

As previously highlighted, central to a small business' decision to engage in community sport sponsorship is to achieve CSR and enhance consumer commitment to the sponsor (Lacey *et al.*, 2010; Miragaia *et al.*, 2017). Specifically in the context of community level sport sponsorship, Plewa and Quester (2011) document how CSR can strengthen customer perceptions that subsequently increase positive attitudes toward the company and heighten purchase intentions. This reaffirms other studies that report how enhancing company reputation is often coveted because of CSR through sponsorship (Slack and Bentz 1996).

According to Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, (2022b), commitment is commonly cognate to consumers showing reciprocity and loyalty whilst dismissing alternative brands. Further, word-of-mouth has been observed as an antecedent of a consumers' commitment, which is understood as the trust of consumers (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2019). Alongside increased purchase intention and enhanced positive image, word-of-mouth promotions is one of the core outcomes of sport sponsorship (Tsiotsou and Alexandris, 2009). In addition to sponsorship image, active participation from stakeholders has shown to have a positive effect on word-of-mouth promotion, particularly as sports sponsorship develops long-term relationships between sponsor and stakeholders of the sponsee (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022c). The additional advent of social media has further allowed both brands and consumers to communicate a company's CSR activities effortlessly, to the extent electronic word of mouth is more effective than offline word-of-mouth promotions (Chu and Kim, 2011). The grassroots setting has however been neglected from exploration. The next section subsequently outlines the methodology adopted to support in beginning to fill this gap in research.

### 3. Methodology

To address the study's three research questions, a three-study strategy bound within a single case study of the Essex Alliance League was implemented. Here, the study employed what mixed method researchers coin a multiphase sequential exploratory design through 'qual à QUAN analysis' (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016; Tashakkori *et al.*, 2020). In stage one, online semi-structured interviews with four stakeholders in grassroots football were undertaken to understand the landscape of community level football sponsorship. Online semi-structured interviews with five sponsors of local grassroots football clubs were then conducted in stage two to identify sponsor motivations to engage in community football sponsorship.

Finally, stage three returned 53 self-administered surveys from grassroots football club stakeholders. From this, the study applied fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) analysis that is pertinent for this paper as it allowed to capture combinations of conditions that are sufficient for an outcome to occur. FsQCA uses both qualitative and quantitative assessment and computes the degree in which a case belongs to a set (Ragin, 2000; Rihoux and Ragin, 2009), thus creating a bridge between qualitative and quantitative methods. Correlation, multiple regression analysis and structural equation models assume relationships between independent and dependent variables are symmetrical (high values for X associate with high values for Y, and low values for X associate with low value for Y). Another benefit of the fsQCA therefore is that it does not assume symmetry. Further support for using fsQCA comes from sporting research as the identification of condition combinations allows results to address multiple causes with greater details and clarity (Alguacil *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, Moreno *et al.* (2015) used similar procedures to understand future intentions of basketball spectators as stakeholders of the sport, thus providing further justification for fsQCA use in this research in the context of grassroots football.

Following the work of Ruiz-Alba *et al.* (2022), participants needed to fit in accordance with the specific objectives for each phase. For study one, the criterion for participants related to stakeholders associated to the case study. For study two, participants were required to be sponsors of local grassroots football clubs within the case study. Finally, club committee volunteers from the case study were recruited for study three.

#### 3.1 Study one and two

To address RQ1 and RQ2, study one and two consisted of nine semi-structured interviews. In study one, online semi-structured interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams with four different community football stakeholders, those being: (i) a member of the league committee, (ii) a player in the league, (iii) a club sponsor and (iv) a club within the league (sponsee). All contact details for league committee, and club stakeholders were accessed through the Essex Alliance League website (Essex Alliance League, n.d.). Here each club's information page presented links to their social media pages which subsequently allowed for the researchers to identify any club sponsors and players who could then be contacted

for interview. This initially took place over social media before email addresses were exchanged, all prior to the subsequent interview taking place. To ensure representation across the league, the player, sponsor and club stakeholders all came from different clubs in the league. For study two, semi-structured interviews with five business owners who sponsor grassroots football clubs in the case study were conducted. The process for recruiting participants for study two followed a similar process towards the initial club sponsor interview for study one.

Each transcript was read by the principal investigator and second author with emerging themes discussed with investigator triangulation used to assure the reliability of emerging stakeholders (study one) and themes of grassroots sponsorship (study two) (Joslin and Müller, 2016; Clark *et al.*, 2021). The themes generated from study two, subsequently informed study three's development collection tool (online survey).

### *3.2 Study three*

This study sought to analyse the calibration of three CSR variables as causal conditions leading to an outcome of stakeholder commitment to promotional activity. These three CSR variables were: shared values (SVA), self-congruity (SCO) and happiness (HAP). A survey was created using Online Surveys, adopting statements that had measured these constructs in previously validated surveys, before sharing a link to the survey via email with stakeholders of Essex Alliance Football League member clubs.

A total of 53 survey responses were collected for analysis. The application of fsQCA starts with the transformation of the raw variables scores into fuzzy-set membership scores (i.e., the data calibration process). Calibrated variables are the input data for fsQCA. Fuzzy-set scores range from 0 to 1 and reflect the degree of membership in the target set. Thus, the three causal conditions: shared values (SVA), self-congruity (SCO) and happiness (HAP) and the outcome commitment to promotional activity should be and were calibrated.

The three causal conditions of this research and the outcome are constructs that have been measured with multiple items. The fuzzy-set membership scores were obtained from constructs, through the computation of one value per construct to be used as input in fsQCA. To get this value, the researchers computed the median of all the items making up each construct.

After the transformation of the constructs into single variables, the researchers calibrated the variables using the direct method of calibration (Ragin, 2008a). This method requires the specification of three breakpoints or anchor points, which define the level of membership in the fuzzy-set for each case. The researchers used fuzzy values of 0.95 for full membership, 0.50 for the crossover point, and 0.05 for the full non-membership. To assign which values in the dataset correspond to the three anchor points, the researchers fixed the calibration measures on the endpoints and midpoint on the seven-point Likert scale following Wu *et al.* (2014) recommendations. Therefore, the full membership threshold was fixed at the rating of 7, the crossover point was fixed at 5, and the full non-membership threshold at the rating of 3.



Subsequently, the researchers progressed to the data calibration in fsQCA 2.0 free software. The cases that were exactly on 0.50 were dropped from the analysis because it represents the point of maximum ambiguity (Ragin, 2008b). To overcome this, Fiss (2011) suggests adding a constant of 0.001 to the causal conditions below full membership scores of 1. After the calibration of all variables, the researchers proceeded to identify which causal conditions were necessary and sufficient for a commitment to promotion activity.

The study now subsequently turns to the results garnered because of the three-phased sequential exploratory design methodology adopted.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Study 1 results

Practitioners involved in the enactment of grassroots football identified a myriad of stakeholders who had an interest or influence in sponsorship to varying degrees. Figure 1 depicts what the researchers label as the 'grassroots football sponsorship ecosystem'. In accordance with the scale of their operations, the ecosystem positions the key stakeholders associated with sponsorship and how they interconnect with one another. The internal and micro setting corresponds to those directly influencing or are affected by the sponsor-sponsee relationship. Stakeholders alternatively positioned to the local, regional, and national scale have reduced impact from the relationship but may still hold degrees of power as to how sponsorship can be practiced.

Figure 1: Grassroots football sponsorship ecosystem (Own compilation)

At the micro-level, as exemplified by participant C1 who commented "*you will normally get sponsored by somebody who knows you or knows your club or knows someone who plays for your club or is connected in some way*", players, volunteers, family and friends, business owners, and employees often influenced the management of sponsorship via using their networks to initially forge the agreement. Such actors impacted on the sponsor-sponsee relationship further by adding value to the partnership through actions including "*order[ing] food and drink, shar[ing] posts to all contacts, and follow[ing] pages on social media*" in return for sponsorship (Participant S1-C). The business owner's sponsorship contributed to the clubs' capacity to fulfil their mandate of delivering sporting opportunity to their members via allowing them to "*provide football at a low or almost free basis*" (Participant L1-C-CFA). In doing so, this affected not just the players as the revenue allowed the club to reduce membership fees, but also the business owner as it "*hit the businesses' bottom line*" (Participant S1-C).

On a local scale, the (limited) value the community place on grassroots football clubs was acknowledged as a determinant towards an individual's (i.e., potential sponsors or otherwise) impetus to engage with the club in some shape. Indeed, participant C1 stressed how unlike in America "*where everyone from that town supports every team from that town, here there's a detachment from community sports and the actual community that makes it really hard to generate that [sponsorship] interest.*" The difficulties in procuring sponsorship were then amplified further by other

community sport clubs vying and competing for commercial investment from the same companies prepared to sponsor. For instance, participant C1 alluded to the fact *“it's not like there's a pool of businesses to the hundreds of clubs that are like, 'yeah, we really wanna sponsor someone'”*. In similar respect, other small companies could be argued as impacting the relationship given a greater willingness from companies to sponsor would open more commercial relationships for the grassroots football club. Finally, local councils affected the need for commercial partnerships to financially offset the rising pitch costs that had impinged clubs for a decade with participant L1-C-CFA eliciting how *“when we moved into the ground, we were probably paying just over £1000 a season for a pitch... Now that's getting close to £1400 and that's within five to six years”*.

Regionally, as demonstrated by participant L1-C-CFA, the county football association (CFA) influences grassroots football sponsorship through being *“the sanctioning authority for football in each region and are therefore accountable to ensure clubs adhere to the regulations that they set and oversee any issues”*. In considering sponsorship, CFAs were noted to be the body regulating policy – including advertising – set by the Football Association (FA), while also seeing part of their responsibilities being to devote time *“to the development and maintaining of clubs in which sponsorship is one element”* (Participant L1-C-CFA). Yet participant L1-C-CFA continued to elicit how such tasks *“would not be seen as a priority [given] their driver is increasing participation”* with support in developing skills relating to managing sponsorship often falling to the Essex Alliance League who, for example, hold *“a development month which they put out some content on and one of those is about sponsorship and raising money for clubs.”* Like the CFA and local council, a monetary interest was also held by the league whereby sponsorship was used to *“pay for affiliation”* (Participant C1).

Considering the national scale, as the governing body for football and responsible for all regulatory aspects in England, with respect to sponsorship, the FA were recognised to determine the advertising regulations community football clubs must adhere to. Participant C1, for example, delineated how the FA are *“the ones that sort of set the rules and then, you know, send that out to all the clubs and powers that be... but they tend to leave grassroots matters down to the local CFA's, who are more aware of the more localized issues that are taking place. The FA just kind of have a strategic level involvement.”* Here, because of this strategic level involvement of the FA, participant S1-C stressed how sponsorship is an aspect the FA *“do not really get involved with”*. Yet, other national bodies with a like-minded strategic responsibility for community sport influenced the ecosystem with Sport England being identified as an organisation creating and disseminating a *“set of resources that they provide through their website which are available to clubs various different sizes”* (Participant L1-C-CFA). Finally, participant P1 identified the role government served in the ecosystem given their autonomy over allocating public funds which then affects the desire for a community sport club to acquire sponsorship or alternative revenue streams as *“different fund levels mean this may not be spread out as much amongst the local regional clubs”*.

## 4.2 Study 2 results

#### 4.2.1 Shared values

Shared values between the sponsor and sponsee is a key aspect for why local business are willing to engage in CSR through grassroots football. However, before any agreement is formalised, all interviews specified a sponsorship fit being determined through relationship building after initial informal conversations. S2-P indicated that *"usually I like to sit down with the club owners, club management and figure out what their vision is."* This is a sentiment matched by S5-C who highlighted an importance to *"marry up the business and the club from a culture and demographic perspective."* Further, shared identity is paramount to long-term mutual benefits as *"it is aligned to ... how we're both trying to get to a similar level using similar methods"* (S3-P).

In another important aspect of understanding whether there are shared values between business and club, local business owners indicated the importance of having a personal relationship with stewards of the club they sponsor. S1-C questions, *"would I sponsor had I not known him? If I'm honest, probably no."* S2-P echoes these sentiments as *"it's more to do with the people that I've got a good, healthy working and personal relationship with."* S5-C cements this by referencing the intangibility of an actual football club and how *"the relationship is with the person. When you speak to a business, you don't speak to a business, you speak to a person. So, I invest in the person."*

However, grassroots football sponsorship and shared values must also be understood from a strategic CSR perspective. Sponsors are *"trying to use CSR as a vehicle for promoting the work of my business"* (S4-S) and take *"a shared vision and gain brand awareness"* (S2-P). Nonetheless, some business owners highlight a more altruistic CSR commitment as *"you just want to try and help, that's the most important thing"* (S1-C).

#### 4.2.2 Self-congruity

Sometimes there is a case for CSR activity through grassroots football as a way for local businesses to help alter a sponsee's perception and image of themselves. *"I want to lead by example at grassroots level, where other clubs can look and say, look at this business with this team, why can't we go and do something like that"* (S2-P). Even the presence of a logo where *"people take your kit more seriously and therefore the team more seriously"* (S3-P) shows how the visuals of the relationship help alter perceptions. S4-S indicates that their reason for portraying their business through this CSR channel stems from *"pushing community work and our support to promote an alteration of mindsets"*, highlighting a perceptual change from the club to the local businesses that support them. As such, *"if somebody goes, 'oh what's that?' And they're curious, they are now aware of you and the work you do, and it changes something in them"* (S1-C).

#### 4.2.3 Happiness

It would seem as though the curiosity through self-congruity maybe the first step towards a sponsee indicating happiness through brand loyalty. In its simplest sense, *"you'd hope they would be happy and appreciate that somebody sponsored the kit, made football cheaper for them, and maybe be happy to support us in return"* (S1-C).

Once again, the visual impact of a business' logo on the kit is noted as *"people see the logo and get a buzz you know. There's a real satisfaction"* (S3-P). This satisfaction draws loyalty from players as *"it'll make them feel better about who they represent"* (S4-S). But once again an altruistic nature is indicated as S3-P mentions *"it doesn't have to be full on, it's not what I'm really doing it for. If they're wearing it and look good, they'll feel better, and maybe that will be beneficial for me as they'll talk about it and so will others."* This also indicates the need for CSR activity in grassroots football sponsorship to lead to some form of action as the happiness of club members creates *"a willingness of the people involved to do almost whatever the company will want from them, for our benefit"* (S3-P).

#### 4.2.4 A commitment to promotional activity

The impact the sponsorship of a community sports club has on club members is pivotal to enhancing the sponsor's reputation amongst the group. S2-P talks of how their sponsorship means they *"got a wider circle to attract because my reputation increases then that's how the spider's web starts."* One of the reasons for this is because of *"the grassroots club doing it the right way and therefore helping to increase our reputation"* (S3-P).

This means that community sports clubs, despite being voluntarily run, must showcase professionalism to ensure the wider ecosystem of grassroots football talking positively of socially responsible brands. S5-C specified how an impression can easily be made as community sports clubs help by *"getting us out there to have people talk positively about our cause."* These sentiments are matched by S4-P who found *"even more people are talking about the work we are doing"* due to their community sports club sponsorship. This justified why local business are taking responsibility to engage community sports clubs in sponsorship deals as *"it allows us to put it out to the community that we're there, working with grassroots football"* (S3-P).

However, even with benefits of grassroots football sponsorship, word-of-mouth exposure via social media is still a primary outcome for local business supporting a grassroots football club. In its simplest sense, *"we all know what we're getting here. You're going to get some kits, and my logo is going to get exposed on social media with it"* (S5-C). This reason for CSR activity to activate social media exposure is *"obvious because my target market is people who play football, so when people follow them online, they see them promoting my company on social media"* (S1-C). The importance of the target market stems from the fact that *"a lot of these boys are on social media, so they can interact with the company on social media too"* (S3-P). However, electronic word-of-mouth must be sustained as S2-P specifies that ongoing social media marketing is important *"throughout the season and through their games or events so that we have continued brand exposure."*

#### 4.2.5 Summary

It is apparent local businesses that sponsor grassroots football clubs do so with a degree of altruistic action. However, it is also evident there appears to be conditions to the goodwill offered by the sponsor, to ensure the appropriate professionalism increases exposure and enhances the company's reputation. Therefore, the conditions of CSR activity are identified as SVA, SCO, and HAP, with an outcome of

CSR being the commitment of club stakeholders to promoting the brand sponsoring their club. Therefore, this research now extends to determine the presence of these CSR conditions from a club stakeholder perspective, and what combination of the conditions exist to increase their commitment to promotional activity.

### *4.3 Study 3 results*

#### *4.3.1 Necessity analysis*

The analysis of necessary conditions examines whether any of the three causal conditions (SVA, HAP and SCO) can be regarded as necessary for the outcome of committing to promotional activity. If a condition is present every time the outcome is present, then it is considered as necessary (i.e., the condition must be present for an outcome to occur). Empirically, a condition is necessary when its consistency and coverage values are above the 0.90 and 0.50 thresholds, respectively (Ragin, 2008a).

Table I displays the results of the analysis of necessary conditions. The results indicate the consistency of the conditions was below 0.90 in all cases. Thus, none of the conditions were considered necessary to lead commitment to promotional activity.

Table I: Analysis of necessary conditions

#### *4.3.2 Sufficiency analysis*

A condition is considered sufficient if the outcome is present each time the condition is present. Following Schneider and Wagemann (2010), the analysis of sufficient conditions includes three steps: creating a truth table, the simplification of the truth table, and obtaining the final solution.

First, fsQCA applies Boolean algebra rules to build a truth table which includes all logically possible combinations of the causal conditions in rows (Ragin, 2008a). In the study's case, the truth table contains eight rows ( $= 2^k$ , where  $k$  corresponds to the number of causal conditions considered for the analysis). The frequency is also presented (i.e., the number of cases in the study's subsamples displaying each possible combination).

Second, simplification of the truth table based on frequency and consistency thresholds to select the configurations of conditions that are relevant and consistent with the outcome (business performance). The researchers set the cut-off points for frequency at 2 capturing more than 80% of cases. The minimum consistency threshold was set at 0.80 for both subsamples (Ragin, 2008a; Fiss, 2011).

Finally, fsQCA evaluates which configurations of causal conditions or pathways constantly lead to high levels of commitment to promotional activity (i.e., sufficient conditions). FsQCA software provides three solutions: complex, parsimonious, and intermediate solutions. Following Ragin's (2008a) recommendation, the researchers report the last one that is the most interpretable. Thus, Table II displays the intermediate solution for the analysis of sufficient conditions where the

solution's overall consistency (= 0.8862) and coverage (0.8860) surpass Ragin's (2008a) thresholds; 0.740 and 0.450 for the consistency and coverage indicators, respectively.

Table II: Sufficient configurations of conditions for commitment to promotional activity

Observing the results, the study has two different and separate ways to enhance commitment to promotional activity: to SVA with clubs or to promote HAP with the absence of SCO. That is, the researchers found two pathways to enhance commitment to promotional activity: pathway 1: shared values (SVA) and pathway 2: happiness (HAP) and the absence of self-congruity (~SCO).

(SVA) or (HAP and ~SCO) => commitment to promotional activity

The first pathway is the most empirically relevant (raw coverage = 0.854, unique coverage = 0.574, consistency = 0.897). The second pathway presents lower coverage and consistency indicators (raw coverage = 0.312, unique coverage = 0.032, consistency = 0.896). The following section subsequently discusses these results from the study against the associated literature before outlining their contribution in both a theoretical and practical sense.

## **5. Discussion**

This research found that shared values should be present to increase commitment to promotional activity from club stakeholders. Importantly, sponsors themselves highlighted the significance of shared values through sponsorship fit in study two. This is in line with Demirel (2020) who expressed the value of a sponsor-sponsee fit when trying to meet CSR objectives. Furthermore, a personal relationship can also help foster these shared values, which all sponsors and club stakeholders' express value for across study two and three. This coincides with Maon *et al.* (2009), where establishing fit between organisations is supported by the shared personal values of managers.

Initially, this fit and set of shared values appears to owe to relationship developments between an individual running their own business and another person running their own football team. However, results suggest shared values represented through a personal relationship still exhibit a strategic CSR outlook from local business owners. Understanding the person in charge of a grassroots football club helps a business owner understand the infrastructure of the club, meaning important social and business objectives are met before implementing their CSR strategy (Fifka and Jaeger, 2018; Hills *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, a commitment to promotional activity being influenced by shared values as a condition of CSR in community football may offer more similarities with the use of CSR activity in professional football than first recognised.

Findings from this research further show the presence of happiness in absence of self-congruity is an empirically relevant CSR calibration pathway of a stakeholder's commitment to promotional activity. Although, this pathway presented a reduced coverage and consistency, indicated when compared with the presence of shared values. This appears at odds with Mazodier and Merunka's (2012) idea that brand loyalty through grassroots football sponsorship would be congruent with how stakeholders perceive themselves after receiving local business sponsorship with the club. Whilst some sponsors did indicate this as a strategic reason for using grassroots football, it is clear an altruistic nature to make others feel happy because of their contribution offers a better way to evoke brand loyalty from club stakeholders (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022a).

With both sponsors and club stakeholders indicating this notion of happiness met without self-congruity, further similarities are drawn on how community football and the professional game adopt CSR activities to influence stakeholder response (Kim *et al.*, 2018; Ullah *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, cross-industry comparisons can begin to be drawn with fashion and hospitality where stakeholder response is also influenced by happiness and subsequent loyalty (Han *et al.*, 2019). This would suggest that despite the unique nature of grassroots football clubs, there may be scope for professionalism and commerciality as a strategic objective for these clubs continued functioning.

The business owner and the football club managers sit at the heart of the relationships explored within the grassroots football ecosystem. However, it is important to remember both entities within the grassroots football ecosystem recognise the degrees of power held by other stakeholders to ensure the long-term future of grassroots teams. Sponsorship is a revenue stream many grassroots clubs struggle to obtain, and without the time to develop personal relationships with local business owners it seems as though this struggle may continue. The role of regional and national scale actors is further very relevant despite study two and study three focussing on the micro-level relationship of sponsors and the clubs. These key actors can help resolve grassroots football clubs' discontent by prioritising sponsorship support, rather than seeing the diminishing pool of public funds spread out thinly. As such, the role of sponsorship agencies or signposting from a national or regional pool could strengthen relationships at a more local level – as long as this support mechanism emphasises the pathways offered through shared values and happiness in absence of self-congruity.

### *5.1 Theoretical implications*

The research extends the theoretical body of knowledge centred on sponsorship through pinning sponsorship to stakeholder theory; a theory showing limited coverage in sponsorship-related research (Tsotsou 2011), and thus offers part of the originality and academic significance attached to the current study. Here, central

to stakeholder theory is the recognition of stakeholders and the prioritisation of these stakeholders to ensure all needs are considered to maintain fruitful relationships (Tsiotsou, 2011). To the authors knowledge, this study is the first to offer a community sport sponsorship ecosystem outlining the myriad of stakeholders at the local, regional, and national level that are influenced or affected by the sponsor-sponsee relationship (see Figure 1). The development of this ecosystem strengthens understanding of sponsorship through this theory as it serves to inform managerial decision-making which is vital given proponents of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Smith, 2003) highlight an organisations success is dependent on the motivations of all those who impact or are impacted by the actions of such organisation.

The fact companies, at times, engaged with the community for philanthropic purposes further conforms to notions of stakeholder theory presented by Freeman *et al.*, (2010) who outline companies that involve themselves with CSR-related activities do so in response to being responsible for the communities they operate within. Additionally, with sponsorship transitioning to a relational exchange activity (Ryan and Fahy 2012), this study unpacks how this exchange engenders the outcome of commitment to promotional activity by ensuring the conditions of shared values and happiness without self-congruity are met. This finding contributes to stakeholder theory as Freeman (1984) emphasises if a split of opinion between a company and its stakeholders values occurs “then it is a small wonder that successful transactions ever occur” (pg. 97). Indeed, stakeholder theory is grounded in creating value for all stakeholders (Freeman *et al.*, 2010) with profit being the result of the value creation (Freeman *et al.*, 2004). This is reflected in this study by the sponsor forging happiness with a view of creating commitment to promoting the company by the stakeholder.

## *5.2 Managerial implications*

As previously alluded to, the importance of maintaining long-withstanding relationships is one which has not gone amiss by practitioners (Loranca-Valle *et al.*, 2021). Research such as this study thus offers value in presenting the opportunity for advancing understanding in respect of how to address this need for an enduring sponsorship partnership. The study presents several managerial considerations in a bid to allow these relationships to flourish regardless of the ecosystem the sponsor and sponsee find themselves in.

Initially, practitioners would be advised to combine their personal networks with more strategic principals when attempting to establish sponsorship relationships. While personal networks serve as the tool to gain a ‘foot in the door’, it is the strategic and sponsorship-related determinants which convert this first step into a fully agreed deal. For instance, given the importance of shared values highlighted both by previous research (e.g., Hills *et al.*, 2019; Demirel 2020) as well as this study



in terms of strengthening the likelihood of a stakeholder's commitment to promotional activity of the sponsor, actions developing this condition are vital. To do this, the community sports club must show the perceived sponsor-sponsee fit via disseminating through proposals and other communication methods the personal (i.e., trust and honesty) and organisational values (i.e., winning vs participation) that may be shared by individuals throughout the organisation. This is before then adhering to these values throughout the partnership entirety.

Alternatively, with happiness in the absence of self-congruity positively affecting a stakeholder's commitment to promotional activity of a company, sponsors must accordingly ensure community sports clubs and their respective individuals are gratified sufficiently. Actions including the sponsor avoiding shirking responsibilities or instead leveraging the deal through activities other than the sponsorship itself are useful examples which may strengthen happiness with stakeholders. Taken together, and underpinned with stakeholder theory (Smith, 2003; Tsiotsou, 2011), adapting to the needs of each stakeholder, along with consistent engagement and dialogue between organisations and their stakeholders is therefore required.

The next and final section of the paper summarises the current research and outlines the future lines for research based on the study's limitations and key results.

## **6. Conclusion**

Sponsorship serves as an inter-organisational strategy which engenders a mutually beneficial relationship. At this point though, like in other sponsorship contexts (Plewa *et al.*, 2015; Djaballah *et al.*, 2017) it must not go unnoticed that several stakeholders other than sponsors and sponsees play a role in the outcomes forged from community level sport sponsorship. Yet whilst attention has been drawn to football and CSR related activity, a lack of research on the community level environment and how local businesses use CSR activity through sponsorship to influence stakeholder behaviour exists (Kim *et al.*, 2018; Fifka and Jaeger, 2018). It was subsequently set against this context that this paper arose from – with the purpose of the research to identify the grassroots football ecosystem, investigate conditions of CSR, and examine how the calibration of these conditions influences promotional activity from club stakeholders.

Consequently, a case study of the Essex Alliance League in England shed light on the myriad of stakeholders connected to grassroots football sponsorship ecosystem (Figure 1) and addressed how shared values, self-congruity, and happiness make up the conditions of CSR. Such results go to further evidence the transition of sponsorship from a single transition to a two-sided partnership (Olkkonen, 2001; Ryan and Fahy 2012) that necessitates each party to reciprocate the others' actions for both self and collective interest. Indeed, the study's calibrations determined the presence of shared values, and the presence of happiness in absence of self-congruity are most likely to induce promotional activity from club stakeholders,

which was observed as the key outcome to CSR-sponsorship. At times, this study thus supplements previous scholarly coverage which emphasises the significance of shared values to achieve a successful partnership (Hills *et al.*, 2019) while offer results not previously acknowledged in sponsorship-related literature in terms of happiness without self-congruity being a way for the sponsor to receive reciprocity through commitment to promotional activity.

Based on the study's limitations, avenues for future research are visible. As the research is bound to a single case study, difficulties may arise generalising the findings to contexts outside the parameters of this study (Yin, 2013). Despite researcher confidence in data saturation being met (Fusch and Ness, 2015), it remains difficult to generalise findings to other community sports environments where CSR-led sponsorship is common. As a theoretical implication though, an opportunity for continued research is apparent as any subsequent study on this topic may use a similar approach with another single-case study design (Yin, 2013). Similarities or differences from findings may provide further adaptations into how CSR conditions and the commitment to promotional activity can be studied in a community sport setting.

Research positioned within other grassroots football leagues or different sport settings would be prudent given community sport organisations can vary in respect of their culture and formality that, amongst other factors, impact on how a club and sport operates their sponsorships and their ultimate effectiveness in achieving each entities desired outcomes. Underserved groups within local community sport may be a further useful context to make sense of as it would extend on the current study given these could be more niche markets for local businesses to engage in CSR activity through community sport sponsorship. Finally, it was beyond the intended scope of the study to investigate how the conditions shown to furnish a commitment to promote a sponsor were established. Researching the antecedents towards generating shared values and stakeholder happiness is thus called for. Such a study would be sagacious given various barriers have been shown to impinge on an individual's level of commitment (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022b) and exploring the antecedents would culminate in developing a sponsors' understanding of how they can further induce club stakeholders' commitment to promotional activity.

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## Appendices

Table I: Analysis of necessary conditions

Conditions tested	Consistency	Coverage
SVA	0.854	0.987
~SVA	0.296	0.771
SCO	0.760	0.920
~SCO	0.398	0.780
HAP	0.752	0.931
~HAP	0.385	0.730

Outcome variable: CPA

Source: Own compilation



Table II: Sufficient configurations of conditions for CPA

The configurations leading CPA	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
SVA	0.854	0.574	0.897
HAP * ~SCO	0.312	0.032	0.896

Solution coverage: 0.8862

Solution consistency: 0.8860

Note: SVA = Shared values; HAP = Happiness; SCO = Self-congruity

~ = absence of the condition

Source: Own compilation

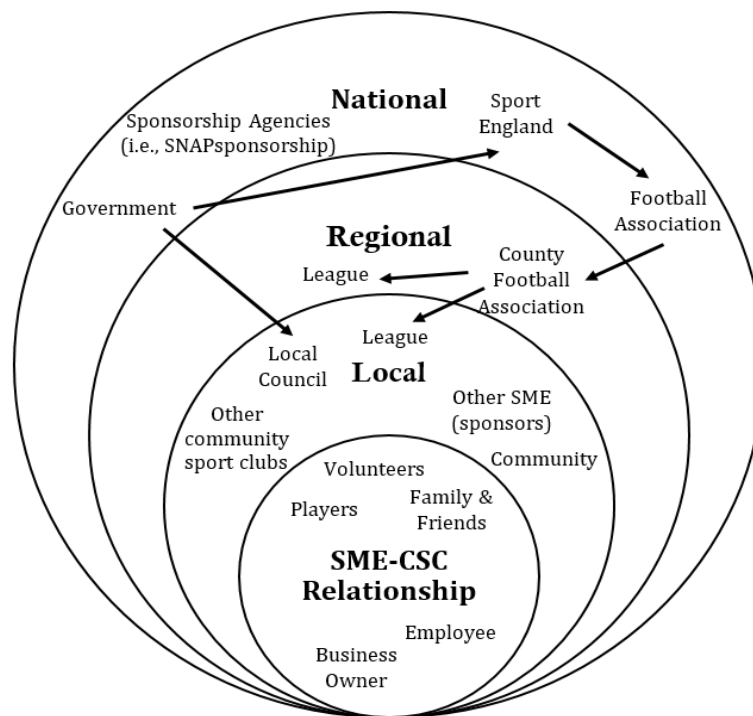


Figure 1: Grassroots football sponsorship ecosystem (Own compilation)