

Intergenerational (In)Securities in English Football Fandom: Locality, Loyalty and Legacy

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Abstract

The article advances scholarship on intergenerational space, insecurity and risk, by examining the ongoing transformation of English football fandom as an apposite case study of the emergent uncertainties, and distrust in the generational timescape of British society. Despite significant changes in the finances, infrastructure and scale of the national sport over the past four decades, football stadia remain a key focal point for fan communities and *inter alia* distinct spaces of intergenerational connection. While research has examined the impacts of neoliberalism and globalisation on the culture of the English game, to date, no study has analysed how these processes relate to the intergenerational nature of football fandom. Addressing this gap, we interrogate how the key touchstones of fandom – the regular season ticket and established concessions for seniors and youths – have been ritualised through the intergenerational relations and social spaces of English stadia, providing a sense of ontological security for fans. Drawing on interviews with 21 fan activists from several English Premier League clubs who mobilised a new campaign (‘Stop Exploiting Loyalty’) opposing above inflation ticket price hikes and erosion of concessions in the 2024–25 season, we argue that fans’ collective emotions reveal a concern that new ticketing policies threaten to fracture the intergenerational bonds and futures of fandom as a predominantly localised cultural practice. We thus extend existing scholarship by introducing the relational-temporal role of intergenerationality and unpack the tensions, distrust and ruptures that putatively undermine the imagined intergenerational futures of football as a cultural tissue of English urban life.

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Introduction

Football clubs in England have historically been composed of important arenas of fan collective identity and community, often connecting their cultural practices to local industrial heritage. Despite significant changes in the finances, infrastructure and scale of the national sport over the past four decades, English football stadia remain a key focal point for fan communities and *inter alia* distinct spaces of intergenerational connection and bonding. Historically, the large, open, unrestricted and financially accessible football terraces helped shape new urban and industrial communities through a sense of belonging, symbolic citizenship and civic leisure life (Holt, 1989). In these historical 'privileged places of working-class communion' (Hopcraft, 1971), the development of *Gemeinschaft* community-based emotional bonds (Tonnies, 1887/1957) and bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) could take place. As such, they retain a significant amount of intergenerational cultural visibility, transmission and ontological security centred on the heritage of a secure and familiar topographical community (Mainwaring & Clark, 2012).

Yet whilst football stadia can provide a sense of intergenerational solidarity for fan communities, the conditions under which they operate and the cultural practices of football fandom have undergone significant change over the past four decades (King, 1998; M. Turner, 2023). Driven by successive processes of commercialisation and globalisation, there has been an 800% increase in the cost of admission, in terms of both regular season tickets and match-day tickets, in the English Premier League (EPL) since 1990 (Hunter, 2025). Before the acceleration of football's commercialisation in the 1990s, the season ticket was regarded as a subscription fee that sustained the football club as a public good, of which 'loyal' fans were not customers but active, regular, vociferous members (King, 1998). Yet, the rising cost of football and more exclusionary ticketing policies, which curtail concessions for seniors and youths, have transformed this membership model radically and can be seen as part of longer-term socio-economic inequalities exacerbated by globalisation and free-market capitalism.

Because they are acknowledged as habitual spaces where intergenerational bonds can be cultivated and maintained, the sociological study of football stadia and fandom offers an arena for examining perceptions of ontological security, intergenerationality and social change. This article argues that a specific social group of fan activists mobilising an emergent social movement to 'Stop Exploiting Loyalty' perceive these new ticketing policies as a threat to the intergenerational futures of fandom as a predominantly localised cultural practice. We build on the extant literature by highlighting how social and cultural transformations are eroding intergenerational bonds and civic engagement (Giddens, 1991; Putnam, 2000). Thus, the article advances both an understanding of the sociological utility of football fandom and stadia as distinct intergenerational social spaces, and, further, adds to understandings of how intergenerational practices can be used to apprehend experiences of ontological security and dynamic social processes in wider society.

We first reflect on the absence of football fandom in existing research on ontological security and assess its sociological significance. In doing so, we cross-pollinate ideas from sociology, social movement studies and the literature on football fandom, to analyse the relational-temporal role of intergenerationality in ontological (in)security studies and unpack the tensions, distrust and ruptures that characterise the imagined intergenerational futures of football as a cultural tissue of English urban life. To contextualise the contemporary moment of English football – described as a ‘critical juncture’ (M. Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025), ‘polycrisis’ and ‘state of emergency’ (Goldblatt, 2025) – in which fan anxieties over new ticketing policies are situated, we provide a general summary of the cultural transformation of elite English football and the relational collective action of a critical mass of predominantly white, male fans over the past four decades. Following a section outlining the methods used to gather data from 21 life-story interviews with self-identified fan activists from several EPL clubs during the 2024–25 season, we make three key arguments through our empirical analysis of the emergent ‘Stop Exploiting Loyalty’ movement. Together, we argue, these reveal the value of football fandom to contemporary British sociology.

First, we demonstrate a paradox of resistance and compliance of football fans (mediated by their sense of loyalty to their club) to the precarious political economies of neoliberalism within sport and wider society. Second, we illustrate the dynamics of ontological security and intergenerationality within football culture and its vulnerabilities, as a mechanism to understand wider generational dynamics of insecurity and social change in Britain. Third, we suggest sociology should pay attention to how, in moments of crisis or fear, individuals and collectives negotiate who is responsible and what should be protected. In football, these are demonstrated through predominantly senior white male fan mobilisations seeking to preserve intergenerational bonds, constituting both a story of cultural loss and perceived futurelessness. This contemporary ‘state of emergency’ in English football is of wider sociological significance because it speaks to contemporary debates on insecure political economies, generational challenges, and the complex relationship between cultural transformation, class, gender, intergenerationality and ontological (in)security in British cultural life.

Thinking Sociologically About Intergenerational (In) Security and Football

Our research aligns with recent studies that use intergenerational social spaces to gain insights into how wider social issues, such as disconnection from locality, intergenerational disparities and ageing societies, are felt and experienced as lived realities. Such spaces are constituted by, and of, social relations, including age and generation (Vanderbeck & Worth, 2015). Similarly, cultural institutions, including match-day football fandom and its active fan associations, constitute intergenerational gathering places (McNulty, 2020), which animate diverse gatherings of young and old to associate and develop relational collective identities as a form of intergenerational civil society.

Through the concept of intergenerationality, which represents the interactions and relationships between members of different generations manifesting through both intentional practices and inherent societal dynamics (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 2002; Hu &

Zhou, 2024), sociology can analyse the continuities and discontinuities of intergenerational culture and social capital, including those who experience a foreclosing of their imagined intergenerational futures. This observation invites us to take Giddens' (1991) lead and examine how the ontological security of self is generated through the routines, narratives, biographies and relationships we develop as we function or cope in everyday life. It derives from social actors' desire to feel stable and continuous in time, to realise a sense of agency (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). However, feeling that one's intergenerational future is being foreclosed, or what we term here, ruptured, can produce anxiety or insecurity. This, we suggest, is particularly prevalent in the context of the: 'existential anxiety caused by the all-pervading individualism and consumerism of post-traditional society' (Mainwaring & Clark, 2012); the disintegration of social structures, broken community bonds and social capital (Putnam, 2000); and the decline of traditional industries brought about by globalisation (Rosenbluth & Weir, 2021).

Our novel concept of intergenerational (ontological) (in)security constitutes a contemporary anxiety over a perceived futurelessness caused by ruptures which threaten the stability and security of intergenerational collective identities. Following Giddens (1999) and Beck et al. (1994), we suggest that the insecurity, risk, anxiety and uncertainty that have come to characterise contemporary Western societies are indirect side effects of modernity. This 'runaway world' (Giddens, 1991) is characterised by new risks, the disembedding of social institutions and the breakdown of earlier traditions, categories and standard biographies (Beck et al., 1994). It is under such circumstances that ontological (in)security – as a 'state of disruption' – may emerge, whereby individuals lose their 'stabilising anchor [and] their ability to sustain a linear narrative through which they can answer questions about doing, acting, and being' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 244).

Despite the application of ontological security and (in)security to fields ranging from home ownership (Hiscock et al., 2001) to international relations (Steele, 2008), European security post-Brexit (Roshier, 2021) and environmental sustainability transitions (Von Wirth, 2025), there is limited research in football and social movement studies on the relationship between processes of collective social unrest and ontological (in)security – particularly where a sense of 'urgency for action' reflects anxieties which are perceived to be existential in nature. This, we contend, makes ontological (in)security temporally sensitive – it speaks to the various tensions that characterise our individual and collective futures and which lie at the heart of many of the key social challenges we confront in the contemporary period. Today, these challenges are enormous and precarious, ranging from the decline in democratic engagement and trust, the normalisation of authoritarianism, the polarisation of political cultures, the climate emergency and the deepening of militarism and the culture of war (Bringel, 2024; Cavari & Efrat, 2025). The contemporary sociology of social movements and critical junctures – as a new, 'momentous' contentious politics (della Porta, 2020) – must address how these temporal crises, disruptions or uncertainties are self-understood by activists and how they shape their relational network-building and repertoires of action.

These analytical insights are relevant to the sociology of football, fan culture and collective action. Yet only one study has examined the relationship between ontological security and fandom, focusing specifically on the place-related heritage of secure fan communities in English football's 'lower league' (Mainwaring & Clark, 2012). As a

counterpoint we provide an alternative perspective, investigating the ontological (in)securities of fans in *the* global league of the EPL (Millward, 2011). Whilst Mainwaring and Clark (2012) unpack the social, economic and place-related histories of football league clubs, the importance of intergenerational transmission in fandom, and on elite level football, is neglected. This gap is acute given that such transmission is key to establishing intergenerational bonds, through which the rituals and cultural practices of everyday, localised fandom crystallise. The possibility for uncertainty to stimulate collective interpretations of football's global political economy makes football sociologically important for ontological security studies. The article extends existing ontological security scholarship through a study of English football fandom and the security of access to its intergenerational social spaces, as an apposite case for exploring the intersectionality of ontological (in)security, cultural transformations and the wider generational timescape of British society, in which contemporary emergencies and uncertainties are located. In doing so, we demonstrate the significance of football fandom as a key intergenerational social space where the development of (in)security and stability is understood, lived and articulated through the collective identities and actions of specific fan communities.

The Cultural Transformation of English Football and Fan Activism: Emergencies and Uncertainties

The decade following the mid-1980s marked the 'end of the terraces' (King, 1998). As football and political authorities sought to rehabilitate the game's image and elite clubs diversified football consumption to enhance revenues, its political economy and the rituals of the 'traditional' match-day experience were transformed (M. Turner, 2023). The ascendant commercialisation of English football and all-seated stadia, supported by the wider entrenchment of free-market logic in the 1980s and 1990s, prompted feelings of alienation and disquiet amongst some 'traditional' fan communities, who were framed by political elites as 'enemies within', castigated for the so-called 'English disease' of football hooliganism (Stott, 2007), and held culpable for the stadium disasters at Bradford, Heysel and Hillsborough¹ (M. Turner, 2023). These anxieties led to the emergence of fan-based collective action and the formation of a national social movement organisation – the Football Supporters' Association (FSA). This fan-led social movement, now 40 years old, has displayed both resistance to and compliance with the colonising effects of neoliberalism and globalisation on fan cultural identities, rituals and social capital (M. Turner, 2023). This, we suggest, reflects the difficulties of measuring social movement outcomes (Corry & Reiner, 2021) and the paradox of social movement 'victories' and 'successes' (Useem & Goldstone, 2022).

Notwithstanding, the FSA has coordinated several movements against 'modern' football in coalition with independent fan groups at local clubs over the past four decades, occupying a growing presence in the public and political sphere (Fitzpatrick, 2024). Relational fan networks have utilised the emotional attachment to football to address both football-specific and broader social and political issues (Fitzpatrick & Hoey, 2022), representing a 'fan activism complex' (Numerato, 2018). This multifaceted social movement field encompasses mobilisations ranging from socio-cultural aspects and symbolic assets, including protests against the rebranding of club names for new middle-class

consumers in overseas markets (Hayton et al., 2015), to stadium atmosphere and fan experience, including the campaign to reintroduce 'safe standing' in all-seated stadia (M. Turner, 2023) and to cap away ticket prices at £20 (Cleland et al., 2018).

Perhaps most significant are contestations related to *football governance* and the democratic rights and engagement of fans in club decision making and national policy on corporate governance and financial sustainability (M. Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025). English football's governance is set to be radically transformed via the establishment of the first independent football regulator (IFR). This new regulatory regime, ushered in by the Football Governance Act (2025), aims to protect and promote the sustainability of the sport for the benefit of fans and the local communities that clubs serve.

The new legislation broadly adheres to the recommendations of the Fan-Led Review of Football Governance, set up in 2021, which was prompted by a series of exogenous shocks and endogenous changes to English football in the wake of the global pandemic. In the post-Covid period, English football – beset by volatility and upheaval due to secret 'backroom deals' on restructuring, 'breakaway' 'European Super Leagues (ESL)'² and serious organisational and safety failures at high-profile events – stands at a critical juncture. This juncture is marked by a perceived futurelessness by organised fan groups: a particular mode of relating to, and feeling about, the future that is characteristic of contemporary European societies (Tutton, 2022). For Goldblatt (2025), English football's 'state of emergency' connects with a wider story of: economic decline, disparity and political instability in British society; ongoing climate issues; war in Europe and political unrest in relation to the rise and fall of Russian oligarchs; the influence of American private equity investors; and the soft power projects of oil rich Gulf states.

Divergent, if not contradictory, trends can be identified at this contemporary critical juncture. First, English football is undergoing an accelerated phase of further globalisation and commercialisation, as domestic and overseas broadcasting rights continue to appreciate (exceeding £3 billion in aggregate revenue in the 2023/24 season) and EPL clubs seek to deepen and diversify their fan engagement strategies in existing and emerging overseas markets, such as the USA, China, Thailand and the Middle East (Deloitte, 2025). Recent studies have examined how English clubs have become targets for overseas investors, especially in North America, due to their relatively low prices and distinctive 'brand loyalty' that enjoys global appeal (Maguire & Philippou, 2024). Although the flows of capital (whether through foreign ownership, commercial sponsorship or broadcasting rights) are now overwhelmingly international, the traditional localism and intergenerationality of English football fandom still endures, albeit to varying degrees, at the elite level. Paradoxically, the EPL is both thriving and ailing; it has top talent, record crowds, TV saturation and improved facilities as well as absentee owners, higher ticket prices, growing fan unrest and an ageing crowd demographic.

Where sociologists have studied fandom, globalisation and social change, they have tended to focus on individual club-based fan mobilisations against specific ownership regimes (Millward, 2011) and paid little attention to the generational field in which these movements are situated (M. Turner & Ludvigsen, 2024). Hence, it remains unclear how precisely fan activism is guided by the generational legacies of long-term social movements in football and directed at intergenerational insecurities of social change.

To address this puzzle, we analyse the contemporary national movement to ‘Stop Exploiting Loyalty’ and focus on cross-club coalition networks, tactics and mobilisations by fans to unpack how the long-term cultural (global) transformation of elite English football is experienced at this critical juncture by a distinct social group in practice. In doing so, we pay attention to the temporality of globalisation, ritual and social change, analysing how insecurities and social unrest are experienced and the role they play in mobilising relational collective action. What is permitted or perceived as a legitimate form of protest target or actions is characterised by interpretations of the lifeworld, in which historical rituals, practices and collectives are embedded, and these do constitute, and can reinforce, dominant racialised and gendered social practices. In the case of English football fandom, these practices remain informed by historically, and generationally significant, imagined constructions of white working-class identity and authenticity, and thus ‘Stop Exploiting Loyalty’ insecurities and protests are framed as ‘protecting’ or ‘in defence of’ established fan structures and power relations.

Methodology

Our data collection took place between March and December 2024, during an unprecedented rise in admission prices for EPL fixtures, coupled with reductions in, and in some cases the abolition of, long-held concessionary rates for senior and youth fans. In the context of a wider cost-of-living crisis, these price hikes drew criticism from UK government ministers and instigated a summer of discontent amongst active fan groups, who coordinated relational collective action.

To inform our empirical research, we first purposively sampled newspapers, radio programmes, fanzines, and other public-made social media content, including fan podcasts, blogs and posts on X (formerly Twitter), focusing on the FSA and three EPL clubs that had generated significant public interest and reaction to their proposed ticket price increases and erosion of senior concessions. Initial analysis involved multiple readings of and listenings to these sources, resulting in a network of reflexive fan accounts. We then conducted in-depth activist life-story interviews with 21 fan activists, of whom 20 were white men, drawn from a purposive sample of 10 EPL clubs whose fan associations had been identified as expressing discontent with new ticketing price strategies. This ensured we were able to capture accounts at the point of ontological (in)security, through a puzzling out of ‘what is happening’ and ‘what might appropriate collective action be’.

Whilst the sample lacks diversity in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and age, it is illustrative of a social movement scene in football fandom, which broadly, historically and contemporarily, coalesces around formalised social movement organisation structures at the national and local level (M. Turner, 2023), distinguished by mobilisations both *in* and *through* football. The focus here is on the former, but future research should explore the intersectionality of age, class, gender, race and ethnicity across this wider activism complex and engage with marginalised fans and fan groups who often use football to campaign on wider social issues. The intergenerational dynamics we analyse are firmly within football, exploring how intergenerational bonds, may, or may not, survive where intergenerational transmission is threatened or weakened by the rising cost of elite football and new ticket models. Future research should thus also sample, via different

mixed-methods, wider fan perspectives that are not limited to activism *in* football, as well as broaden the focus across the whole league pyramid.

Approaching social movements, in emergence, as relational networks of interaction (Crossley, 2011), we were interested in the ways in which formally independent actors, in our case fan activists at different EPL clubs, were linked through various forms of cooperation, network histories and influential switchers (M. Turner, 2023). In football, these networks are a complex and diverse hierarchy of generational status groups that coalesce and unify at specific clubs and, occasionally, at a cross-club and national level, develop relational fan cultures. Having prior access to the field, we identified core activists in positions of chair or vice-chair, serving as ‘formal’ or ‘soft leaders’ (Cleland et al., 2018).

We followed della Porta’s (2014) approach to activist life-stories by creating four stages of analysis as a summary for each. These were: a chronology of their biography; a semi-codified scheme examining their emotions, narratives, memories and anxieties of the past and uncertainties about the future; their networks, tactics and resources of interaction; their perception of what successful mobilisations might be; and a synthesis of those main themes. This interpretivist approach attends to the practices of elaborating different socially constructed versions of the lifeworld and networks that build relational collective action. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. We followed the British Sociological Association’s (2017) ethical recommendation on risk, consent, recording and confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms in the write-up.

Findings and Discussion

The findings below reveal important themes as per the perspectives and experiences of this social group in practice. It is important to note that we are not essentialising the ‘fan’ perspective. We recognise how supporter attitudes, as well as pricing policies, concession structures, club-fan power relations and ownership models vary across the EPL. Nevertheless, our findings explain how fan ontological insecurities, as demonstrated through the mobilisations of a critical mass of cross-club networked EPL activists, unfold through the temporal tensions and disruptions that characterise English football’s contemporary critical juncture. We recognise that a limitation of our study is that we do not provide an overall account of English football and its culture across the diverse social structures of the professional, semi-professional and local club pyramid. Indeed, we anticipate that at the local, lower-division level, clubs may be continuing to function, or thrive even, in more traditional intergenerational ways. Future work should examine these diverse contexts.

We start by explaining how insecurities emerge from the experience of sudden, significant changes to EPL clubs’ ticketing policies, as a rupturing moment, where the perceived failures and ‘disloyalties’ of English football’s latest phase of globalisation trigger fan suspicion, distrust and anger. Following this, we explain how insecurities persist amid the challenges of building and sustaining relational collective action in a highly tribalised, ageing match-day fan culture and activist scene. Here, the subtle and continuous negotiation of power and agency is revealed through generational claims seeking to challenge the prevailing power dynamics of globalisation and the EPL’s neoliberal model of fan engagement. Finally, we show how insecurities concerning the potential fracturing

of intergenerational bonds and the disintegration of generational structures engender ongoing activism in loyalty-focused football fan movements that both challenge and exhibit the institutional legacies of prevailing, precarious political economies.

'The Clubs are Colluding Together Against Fans': The Insecure Political Economy of English Football

At the start of the 2024–25 season, during a cost-of-living crisis, 19 out of the 20 EPL clubs raised ticket prices (Sutcliffe, 2025). At some clubs, the increases jumped as high as 28% (and included one case of a 111% price increase for a child's season ticket); at others, the price hikes were coupled with increased restrictions and even full removal of concessionary prices for children and seniors (65 years of age or above). In response, activists expressed general suspicion that clubs were colluding to adopt similar ticketing policies to minimise reputational damage.

It doesn't take a genius to work out that clubs have done this together. The EPL officially tells the FSA there has been no coordination on tickets but there clearly has, because it's not just the price increases, it's the attack on the concession – and that's probably what's uniting fans more. (James, Fan Association 10)

The EPL absolutely sit there and agree the same stuff. I've said to my club again this year, all the clubs have suddenly started trying to put their season ticket prices up or doing stuff on concessions, you've all just randomly decided to do that? You're telling me they just randomly decided to do this just by chance at the same time? (Jim, Fan Association 2)

Similar sentiments were expressed towards the value that clubs now place on the season ticket model, with most activists taking the view that there was a hidden motive: namely, an intention to reduce the number of regular season ticket holders to free up seats for one-off tourist visitors to maximise revenue and, in turn, limit the capacity for collective action amongst the more engaged, regularly attending fans.

My club has stopped selling new season tickets. Our capacity is around 52k and there's 32k season ticket holders, so take away the away fan allocation (3k) and that's 17k individual tickets going on general sale every game charging minimum £44–74 and selling them out so there is concern that they're trying to get rid of some season ticket holders and sell out every game at £44. (Alan, Fan Association 8)

There's a genuine concern here that clubs think – 'why do we need season ticket holders because we can just sell out every game at £45' so is there an attack here on season tickets and wanting to get of them, or lessen the amount there are. (Danny, Fan Association 11)

We've been here before with club ownership, away tickets, the Super League. Now they're doing ticket prices again; there's more American owners, more European matches, it's all come at once and I'm starting wonder if that's deliberate – for them it solves a problem as it's season ticket holders who are most likely to protest. (Jim, Fan Association 2)

Themes of suspicion and distrust were apparent in several interviews and centre on an insecurity that clubs were using the new (financial) regulatory climate to justify rupturing the most important right of all – ‘the *secure* passport to being a fan’ (Mark, Fan Association 3).

The club’s official reason is ‘Profit and Sustainability Rules (PSR)’ but that’s codswallop because the ticket revenue is such a small proportion of their actual overall revenue. It comes from the broadcasting rights so that doesn’t wash. (Tom, Fan Association 3)

I think football has felt threatened by independent regulation – clubs feel they’re not going to have as much freedom as what they’d like to have when they’ve paid so much money to own these clubs and now it feels like a power grab in certain areas. (Alan, Fan Association 8)

Indeed, whilst many US-owners or shareholders of EPL clubs have publicly justified the decision to increase prices due to dynamic regulatory requirements on profit and financial sustainability, ticket revenue tends to account for a diminishing proportion of a club’s income; as such, raising the cost of admission has a negligible impact on compliance with these measures (FSA, 2025). At one high-profile EPL club, for example, only £72m of their overall £713m income in 2022/23 came from match-day revenue. Despite this, the club has increased prices and is ceasing to sell new season tickets, instead introducing a ‘flexi gold’ (paid membership) scheme that requires fans to confirm their intention to purchase match-day tickets with three weeks’ notice. For Darren, this becomes an intergenerational issue, as he expressed:

In the past, clubs were grateful that you had a season ticket, now its fans who are grateful that we still have a season ticket and so clubs are making a cost benefit analysis – they are able to risk losing the fans who have that generational link and instead welcome those who are prepared to pay more for those match day tickets. (Darren, Fan Association 9)

The suspicion that clubs are prioritising more lucrative overseas and ‘tourist fans’ who are more willing to pay higher prices and spend more money on merchandise, constitutes an *insecure* contemporary political economy, characterised by a growing sense of fan vulnerability, particularly amongst ‘loyal’ fans drawn predominantly from the local area, and who, through intergenerational transmission, have ‘stuck with football’, despite the game’s long-term neoliberal transformation and the recent rupture of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There has been a general murmur of what football was becoming for a long time, and it was difficult to justify it for a while because what underlines it all is that the EPL itself is an incredibly successful commercial product so they could say ‘look would you rather go back to the days when people were pissing in your pocket on the terraces and there was violence?’, and people didn’t have an answer because whilst they had a sense of something culturally had gone, they could see better facilities, but recently, clubs have taken such a series of ridiculous decisions, people are starting to ask, when do we get something back? (Geoff, Fan Association 1)

We were told so many times throughout the pandemic that ‘we were the lifeblood of the game’. You saw how shit it was when there were no fans there and we all expected a bit better when we got back. But we are the club’s DNA which goes back generations and generations. (Jen, Fan Association 3)

The social contract between clubs and their ‘traditional’ fans, which runs deeper than typical company–consumer relationships, is thus built on the notion that ‘loyalty’ secures a permanent right to access, as an ontological ‘stabilising anchor’ (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). The suspicion that clubs are colluding to increase prices, reconfigure the season ticket model and remove concessions thus produces a new hermeneutic struggle over what constitutes loyalty in contemporary English football. Moreover, the suspicion of a particular social group of fans emerges at a time when there are new, greater demands for EPL football from different communities of potential fans and thus novel forms of ticketing can work as a mechanism to further diversify the consumption of football by opening up the game to new categories of fans who have previously been excluded, including more women and more people of colour. Fan engagement policies at the local and national level are looking to respond more progressively to these shifting local patterns of club support. Through this lens, the emotions, and indeed the demands, of a generation of activists must be situated in the wider context of the game’s globalisation and Americanisation, and the ‘puzzling out’ of where football is and where it goes at this juncture (M. Turner & Fitzpatrick, 2025).

Building a New Coalition of Football Rivalries and Legacies

Most of the core white middle-class male activists we interviewed were aged approximately 55 years or older. They represent a generational cohort of politically engaged fans, whose origins and influence lie within the leftist sections of the professional middle-class generation of the 1960s and 1970s, and a mythic affiliation with what they view as traditional, authentic working-class culture (King, 1998). We have observed similar findings in our prior work on the generational field of fan activism in England – indeed, at the national level, the long-term professionalisation of the FSA from the 1980s onwards remains led by a small homophilous network who successfully switched the networked practices of different, and occasionally rival, fan associations to become important political actors in football through ‘third way’ diplomacy building with institutional structures of state power (M. Turner, 2023).

In this study, we observed that the organisational culture and capacity to mobilise the cross-club fan coalition to ‘Stop Exploiting Loyalty’ were characterised by the legacy of network switching and social movement reprogramming that had occurred over several decades (Castells, 2009/2013). Indeed, the symbolic capital present in social and cultural forms, including the knowledge, trust and resources to build fan coalitions, was in part achieved through both formal and informal networks within and around the FSA, which helped connect disparate and rival fan associations. Significantly, the chairs or vice-chairs of activist groups we interviewed, drawn from rival clubs, had recently worked together to mobilise a successful national movement against the ESL in 2021. For some EPL club owners, such activism is populated by what they have disparagingly labelled,

a vocal minority of ‘legacy fans’: an older generation whose support often stems from childhood, family tradition or long-standing local ties before the 1992 EPL era began and whose opposition to football’s commercialisation reveals a process of both resistance and compliance (M. Turner, 2023).

According to several ‘legacy fans’ we interviewed, recent mobilisations against the ESL had strengthened both a collective identity and intergenerational insecurity that ‘these owners were continuing to pose an existential threat to the very heart of what English football *means* as a sport and the future enculturation of youth into fan culture and activism (Alan, Fan Association 11). Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments:

Post-Covid the biggest group effected were the early 20s because they couldn’t get out and see their mates and now, they’re seeing big price increases in football and can’t afford to go. I [older generation] can afford to go to the theatre, and my golf club fees but younger fans I can’t begin to imagine how they would feel and that’s where I think people are coming together to fight. (David, Fan Association 4)

I’m not massively hopeful of younger activists coming through – most of the activists are middle aged and middle class and the average age of season ticket holders in the EPL is above 40. (Tim, Fan Association 5)

Engaging younger fans in formal political structures of activism has become a key challenge and insecurity amongst established football fan activists. The ageing social movement scene of fandom reflects the wider absence of youth in civic and political engagement (Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2022). In football, long-term social transformations are most fully experienced by those with a historical narrative or collective memory of prior transformative events and cultural practices, and the capacity, or not, to prefigure a future of new, younger generations of political actors (della Porta, 2020). Through this lens, the fan cultures and power relations involved in football ticketing are embedded in the construction of generational collective memories and identities, and in perceptions of *the* legitimate future for the ageing lifeworld. Thus, the development and impact of new ticketing policies across this generational lifeworld are connected to wider civic-political participation challenges and (in)securities in Britain. Such is reflected by other ‘legacy’ fan activists interviewed on the intergenerational opportunities and constraints posed:

The job for us now is to try bringing through a different generation but the challenges on tickets are the best organising tool as they are existential threats to us as fans, because if they can’t go the match, they’re not going to stand outside the club and fight for it. (Ted, Fan Association 9)

If there are aging fan bases, how do we get younger generations of fans in if there are no season tickets for sale and some clubs addressing concessionary policies is their way of tackling this issue. (Anthony, Fan Association 1)

In recent years, as a result of the legacy of the wider Europeanisation of English football (King, 2003), there has been a proliferation of ‘atmosphere-focused’ ultra fan groups at

EPL clubs which have drawn the active participation of some younger fans through common rituals, including pyrotechnics and tifo displays which are part of a wider movement ‘against modern football’ (M. Turner, 2023). Tactically, this has been effective in establishing new, discursive frames on ticketing seeking to legitimise and reclaim the value of ‘traditional’ fandom at this insecure critical juncture. It is precisely these ritualised, sub-cultural, fan-led atmospheres that individual EPL clubs use to market their brands globally. As one fan noted:

We need the younger atmosphere groups because ticket pricing is essential to that. Fans are realising that we are an intrinsic part of not only the match-day experience, but also of the actual product they’re getting a lot of money for. (Jen, Fan Association 3)

Here, we see how relational repertoires of contention are developed through coalitions, thereby fostering fan counter-hegemony that seeks to challenge prevailing power dynamics in EPL and in fan consumer engagement. This is important, because it evidences the ways in which fan activists are often embedded within such dominant social discourses – in this case, the EPL ‘product’ – and often employ categories and ideas that they provide (Steinberg, 1999). This, in turn, helps establish an ‘ethical definition’ (R. H. Turner & Killian, 1987) of the (in)secure exploitation of the *loyal* fans who generate the atmosphere that is so integral to the EPL brand and global exportation of its ‘product’.

‘No Country for Old (or Young) Men’: Colonising the Intergenerational Lifeworld

The personal reflections on the ticketing *rupture* of the 2024–25 season demonstrate a significant insight on the part of a generation of ‘legacy fan’ activists who talked about the importance of protecting the intergenerationality of fandom in the wake of new insecurities. This was particularly evident through an anxiety over the potential fracturing of intergenerational bonds between older and younger fans and the disintegration of generational social structures. This included the capacity for multigenerational family members and friends to attend matches together, the right to pass on season tickets to younger generations, and the importance of rewarding the loyalty of senior fans who have demonstrated loyalty through lifetime support of the club. These once-stabilising practices and anchors are hence increasingly characterised by precarity (Giddens, 1991). As some fans expressed:

A lot of clubs now are trying to clamp down on that passing tickets through the generations, you’re just not allowed to do it anymore, you hand it back, so if I die, I couldn’t pass it on to my son, because I own that season ticket as me, but I can’t make that available to someone else and that is the case at a lot of clubs and you do wonder why the clubs are so precious to have that back. (Alan, Fan Association 8)

I know a season ticket holder who sits with a family of five, they can’t all afford the season ticket price increase, but equally, they can’t move because there’s nowhere else in the ground where they can sit together. (Alan, Fan Association 8)

My mate who's 72 who's been going to the game with me for the last 25 years has decided not to renew next year and I've said to him, I'll give you the money, there's a group of 7 of us who are always looking for a spare ticket and I'll have no problem at all selling it [when he can't go] and I'll know who's going to be sitting next to me. (Paddy, Fan Association 10)

For these activists, there is a normative justification for maintaining football's intergenerational nature. Through the rituals and cultural practices of fandom, a sense of security of access to intergenerational social spaces has crystallised into a right. This security of (intergenerational) access operates as a routine and narrative fans develop as they function and cope in everyday life, deriving from a desire to feel stable and realise a sense of agency (Giddens, 1991; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). The potential rupture of intergenerational bonds reveals an anxiety about what we term here 'consuming alone'. In his seminal work, Putnam (2000) diagnosed how the breaking of social and community bonds can have significant, harmful impacts upon the physical and civic health of societies. In English football, Putnam's lessons have been strikingly evident over the past two decades, specifically, through the interpretative struggle fans have, and continue to face on a wide range of issues that are intergenerationally significant. For Peter, this concern has materially grown:

The situation at our club is we've seen a price increase of 25% across the board. We know one guy who has been going to games with his two sons (16 and 19), and ours is the only club who do not have a concession for 18–19-year-olds and in one part of the stadium, an 18yr old paying £190 last season, will be paying £850 next year. This guy now can't afford to take both his sons. (Peter, Fan Association 13)

Putnam (2000) suggested that much of the decline in civic engagement in America during the last third of the twentieth century is attributable to the replacement of a typically civic generation by several generations less embedded in community life. For younger cohorts, according to Putnam, strong ties remain important, but they are no longer complemented and reinforced by ties to the wider community. The contemporary game is characterised by the dissolution of an established national sporting ritual; an era in which the establishment of intergenerational solidarities and enculturation (of what it means to grow up supporting the same club as one's parent or grandparent) are under an acute threat, particularly in the EPL. This is significant because, despite the EPL's hyper-commercialisation and globalisation, football, as a form of associational life and participatory lived culture, remains a rare lifeworld in which the capacity for bridging and bonding social capital can be realised through intergenerational social relations and distinct civic opportunities within fan associations and communities. An erosion of these routines can, hence, be considered to disrupt the framework and systems of meaning that Giddens (1991) considers essential to ontological security.

It is precisely the (in)security that such intergenerational social structures might not be preserved, through the attack on age concessions, that is uniting rival fans we spoke with, as expressed by the following:

No new children's or OAP tickets will be available except in the cheapest seats, so if you've got a family who've been going for years you've probably always had at least one concession seat.

It was probably grandads, and then you've got a kids concession seat and then they get older, and dad becomes grandad and that's not going to happen in future and that means the price of a child and OAP seat is going to double so families are going to be wrenched apart. (Tom, Fan Association 3)

Our club said we won't be making season tickets available at concessionary prices, 'this is because there are increasing numbers of OAPs, and this is not sustainable'. Hold on a minute, you're saying, 'we're not dying quick enough' and I wrote a blog titled 'sorry we're not dead yet' and we have a banner with 'no club for old fans' and people are genuinely furious about this. (Geoff, Fan Association 1)

I've got some good news for the board. I'm 68 now. Both my parents were dead by the time they were 70. Seems obvious to me that the club are irritated by too many of us veterans living so long, and dying could be my final act of support, because my seat will become available. At full price. (Alan, Blogger, 2024)

The erosion of subsidised concessionary rates for senior and youth fans connects with wider debates in sociology on ageing populations and intergenerational disparities, evidenced in the UK, for example, by new forecasts that the state pension triple lock will be three times higher by the end of the decade (Peachy, 2025). In football, the challenge of preserving intergenerational bonds and opportunities for intergenerational civic participation is confronting the fan movement, who led by an older generation, are seeking to mobilise in ways that reinforce and reimagine intergenerational solidarity.

Conclusion

The findings analysed demonstrate that intergenerational (in)securities are situated within a context of the long-term cultural transformation of elite English football and the colonisation of 'traditional' fan rituals and cultural practices that frame intergenerationality as the social glue that bridges football's past and future. This has important policy implications for the new IFR, and the development of fan engagement plans at individual clubs, particularly given that intergenerationality remains neglected and constitutes an important intangible form of cultural heritage. Expanding the IFR remit to also make sure marginalised fan groups and demographics at individual clubs are represented on fan advisory boards and consulted in the formation of fan engagement plans, can ensure that intergenerationality and intersectionality are operationalised within new government frameworks. Clubs would thus be legally mandated to demonstrate how they are consulting multigenerational groups of fans on issues including ticket prices and ensure intergenerationality becomes a key focus within the safeguarding of English football heritage.

Contemporary mobilisations of 'Stop Exploiting Loyalty' are, we argue, linked to prior historical, transformative events – namely, the antecedent conditions of English football's neoliberal revolution during the 1980s and 1990s, and the discursive turns and institutional legacies brought about by the move to diversify football consumption. Hence, the contingent unfolding of an intergenerational (in)security, we posit, produces interpretations of sudden ruptures or breaks in established social, cultural and political patterns of fandom, which give the security of self its meaning. This (in)security also reflects broader

societal shifts in which citizens are losing trust and confidence in established political and economic structures. Talking about loyalty, season tickets, the rights of fandom and the importance of concessionary prices was a means to explore and express dynamic feelings of intergenerationality and belonging, particularly when they arise at the intersection of generational continuities and changes, and wider social transformations. Importantly, these observations were permeated by a story of loss and perceived futurelessness – through a complex relationship among historical and contemporary events in football, public discourse, and master narratives that bind them. However, our analysis is not without limitations. Pricing policies, concession structures and ownership models vary, and thus future comparative work should seek to unpack the ways in which other, informal fan groups respond and what conditions intensify or dampen (in)security.

Our analysis makes three important contributions, which we outline here. First, it demonstrates how fan movements reveal an important paradox: they challenge but also exhibit the institutional legacies of prevailing, precarious political economies through a textured pattern of consent and resistance. Here, desire for security and the reward of loyalty has led fans to positions where they support football's neoliberalisation through their ongoing, long-term commitment to, and consumption of, 'modern' football, which, at other moments, they resist because these developments threaten the expression of loyalty and intergenerationality. Arguably, the neoliberal cultural transformation of football and fandom post-Hillsborough may, albeit imperfectly, have helped 'save' elite English football from earlier self-destructive excesses, and ensure the reconfiguration of intergenerationality via the advent of more sanitised and 'family-friendly' stadia and matchday experience.

Importantly, loyalty and ontological security constitute a shared interest between clubs and fans that textures social relations in complex ways. Future research should pay closer attention to the contradictions and complexities of wide-ranging changes, especially where football appears to remain deeply meaningful for those who watch and attend it. Moreover, legacy fandom works to both include and exclude specific social groups through both a compliance with, and resistance to, hierarchies of gender, race and class. Indeed, gender and race are constitutive of such intergenerational fandom and insecurity, and future research should focus on their structuring absences in social movements where 'legacy fans' seek to preserve intergenerational transmission mechanisms.

Second, our analysis establishes the conceptual value of ontological security for sociological and social movement studies of football fandom, ageing populations, and the long-term impacts of globalisation, neoliberalism and deindustrialisation – namely, through a focus on the potential disintegration of generational social structures. While transformative events have been recognised as sparking, spurring and changing bouts of fan-led collective action in football, little research has examined how these social movement dynamics play out at the intersection of ontological security and intergenerationality.

Third, we suggest it demonstrates what is an emergent, perpetual cultural trauma narrative (Schmidt, 2014) within the society of football fan activism, centred on the future dangers posed by new ticketing policies to the intergenerational futures of fan communities in England. Extending classic work on cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004) which argues that trauma emerges as a collective experience in the wake of a horrendous event,

perpetual trauma narratives are the ongoing social construction and maintenance of a collective trauma within a society, and the potentiality of events coupled with the mediation of fears and anxieties. This, we suggest, makes trauma compatible with ontological (in)security through the reconstruction efforts of fan activist groups to interpret and understand their (in)securities and anxieties.

Through this lens, future research in sociology should pay attention to how, in moments of crisis or fear, individuals and collectives negotiate who is responsible and what should be protected. Football fandom matters because such intergenerational bonds create lasting, shared family traditions that foster social cohesion, bridging social capital, strengthen community identity across generations and transmit important civic values like loyalty and resilience. In a contemporary era marked by increasing intergenerational conflict, and fracturing of the intergenerational contract, football matters because these relationships can bridge divides, provide emotional continuity against change, be a resource for shared, collective memories, and cement a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing world.

As English football's state of emergency heads into 'injury time' (Goldblatt, 2025), it remains unclear what the legacies of 'legacy fan' activism will be.

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Notes

1. The Bradford (1985), Heysel (1985) and Hillsborough (1989) disasters were major UK football tragedies that killed nearly 250 people, leading to the introduction of all-seated stadia and improved crowd management policies. To varying degrees, football supporters were initially blamed for causing all three disasters. Official inquiries (Popplewell, 1986; Taylor, 1990) into Bradford and Hillsborough explicitly cleared fans of any wrongdoing and cited a lack of stadium safety and crowd management as the key causes. While crowd disorder and violence were a central factor at Heysel, even here there were several intervening causes that contributed to the fatalities and injuries.
2. The ESL was a proposed football competition for 20 leading European clubs, including six from England and their attempt to establish a breakaway competition, threatening to unravel the cultural heritage and financial sustainability of respective national leagues.

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