

CORPORATE CHEERLEADERS



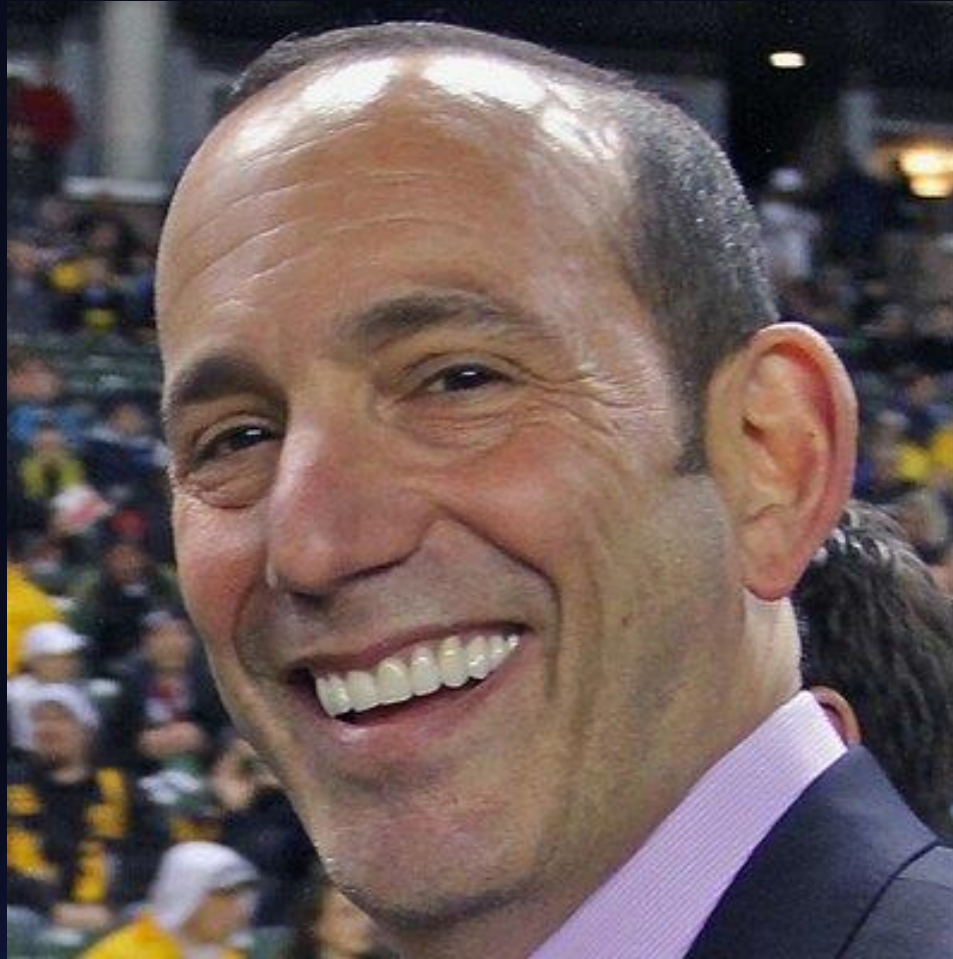
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University of Brighton

BRIGHTONS

MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER Supporter Groups



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JETS, FLARES & BANS: THE TUSSLE BETWEEN SUPPORTER GROUPS & MLS CONTINUES

Tim Hall's View From 101

On the very best of days, the relationship between a Major League Soccer team's front office and that team's supporters is delicately balanced. The fans often pledge – loudly, in unison – their undying love for their team and its players, and in turn



Independent Supporters Council Calls for Hypocritical, Unfair and Arbitrary Sanctions in MLS to End

Post on April 12, 2016 by Sean Dane

Recently Major League Soccer has taken harsh steps against DC United's supporters group the District Ultras and targeted Matt Parsons, an active leader of the District Ultras.



Unive



West Ham fans brawl with Columbus Crew as football hooliganism hits the US

A half-time brawl between fans of West Ham and a local team during a "friendly" game in Ohio has provided Americans with a taste of British football hooliganism.



A fight broke out at the 'soccer' game between the Columbus Crew and the West Ham United fans Photo: AP

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Purpose

- Find out who the supporter groups are
- How do they fit into the ultra culture research
- Understand their motivations/challenges
- Observe behaviour



Research process



LOS ANGELES



SAN JOSE



PORTLAND



SEATTLE



VANCOUVER



SALT LAKE CITY



COLORADO



KANSAS CITY



METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed methods research format with two stages: 1) a quantitative stage involving self-completion surveys, the results of which will then be used as a platform for, 2) a qualitative stage of research involving travelling around 25 North American States in 40 days to carry out 19 face-to-face interviews with supporter group members at MLS matches in July and August.

By the end of the research gathering process, the two sets of data were triangulated to discover the MLS supporter groups only shared part of the characteristics of football hooligans or ultras, and that their biggest issue was not with their own front offices, but rather the League officials regarding the overbearing single-entity structure of ownership.

FIXTURES



DALLAS



HOUSTON



ORLANDO



WASHINGTON DC



PHILADELPHIA



NEW YORK



CHICAGO



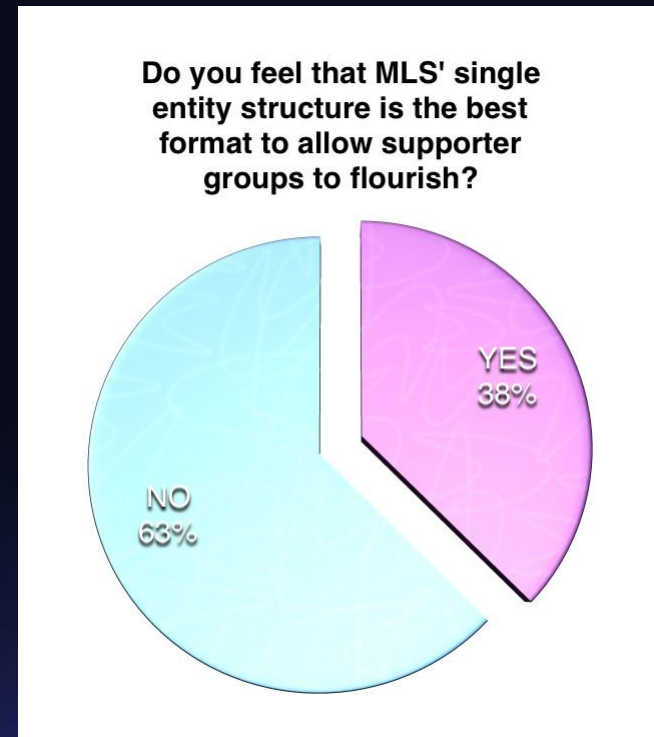
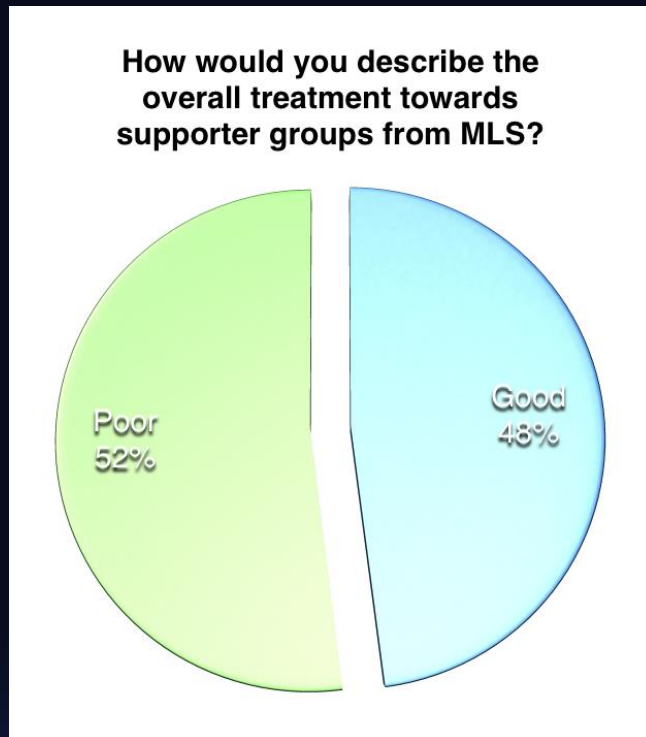
COLUMBUS



Stage One

Self-completion surveys to Supporter Groups (May-June 2016)

- Age - 22-35 (87%), 36-65 (13%)
- More than two-thirds (69%) spent between \$1-2000 on supporter group activities per year



Stage two: ethnography & interviews

Friday, July 15, 2016. StubHub Center. Los Angeles. Focus group: The Black Army

Saturday July 16, 2016. Avaya Stadium, San Jose: Focus Group: The 1906 Ultras

Monday July 18, 2016. Providence Park, Portland. Focus Group: Timbers Army

Monday July 18, 2016. Away supporters bus, Portland to Seattle. Focus Group: Emerald City Supporters

Tuesday, July 19, 2016. BC Place, Vancouver. Focus Group: The Southsiders

Saturday 23rd July Rio Tinto Stadium, Salt Lake City. Focus group: non-supporter group spectator

Sunday 24th July. Dick's Sporting Goods Park, Colorado. Focus Group: Centennial 38

Monday 25th July, Children's Mercy Stadium, Kansas City. Focus Group: The Cauldron

Wednesday 27th July, British Beverage Co, Dallas. Focus group: Dallas Beer Guardians.

Friday 29th July, BBVA Compass Stadium, Houston. Focus group: Texian Army

Saturday July 30th, FIU Stadium, Miami. Focus group: Dade Brigade

Sunday, July 31st The Citrus Bowl, Orlando. Focus group: The Ruckus

Saturday August 6th, Robert F Kennedy Memorial Stadium, Washington DC. Focus Group: District Ultras

Saturday, August 6th, Talen Energy Stadium, Philadelphia. Focus group: Sons of Ben

Sunday, August 7th, James H Stuart Stadium, Long Island. Focus group: The Five Points

Tuesday August 9th, Gillette Stadium, New England. Focus group: Midnight Riders

Thursday August 11th, Scallywags Bar, Toronto. Focus group: Kings of the North

Saturday August 13th, Mapfre Stadium, Columbus. Focus groups: Hudson Street Hooligans

Sunday August 14th, Toyota Park, Chicago. Focus group: Section 8

Friday August 19th, Red Bull Arena, New Jersey. Focus Group: Empire Supporters Club

Saturday August 20, Yankee Stadium, New York. Focus group: The Third Rail.



Ultra Culture

‘axis for social organization’ & ‘originally formed for the purpose of distributing tickets, arranging trips to away games and expressive/colourful support of team’ (Guschwan 2007)

Tailgate culture means alcohol consumption is prominent in many match-day going fans’ experience - resembling the football hooligan research, but without the need to use violence to intimidate opposition supporters.

‘centred around nationalism’ (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001)

Moved beyond the ‘deterministic exceptionalist model’ and part of the mainstream (Collett, 2016)

Corporate Interference

The supporter groups of Centennial 38 (Colorado Rapids), Southsiders (Vancouver Whitecaps), District Ultras (DC United) and Black Army (LAFC) all reported a relationship breakdown with MLS with regard to how the groups are marketed.

'There is a tendency for MLS to forget that supporters are ultimately the paying customer and not employees/interns. They quickly claim the marketable end of supporter culture when it is beneficial to them and heavy handed when it is not. MLS routinely uses advertisements that include smoke bombs and flares for advertisements, but tend to ban the individuals that held those devices on game day. A bit of consistency and uniform expectations would go a long way.'



University

Centennial 38 Member



Financial Independence

The nature of the 'financial independence' between the supporter groups and their own Front Office was repeatedly raised in the qualitative stage of the research process. One by-product of this commercial relationship is an ongoing friction regarding censorship from the Front Office towards supporter group. For instance, Timbers Army, Dallas Beer Guardians and Emerald City Supporters all admitted to needing Front Office approval before displaying their tifos on matchdays.

'A lot of so-called supporter groups are an absolute disgrace as they take the money. That's why our club hates us. They try and tell us to do something, offer us money to do it, and we still tell them to go away. Other supporter groups can't do that as they take the money. Our front office tried offering us \$3,000 recently, for away travel or something, and I told them to f **CENSORED** f. As soon as you take their money, they control how you behave'



University of California

San Jose Ultras Member



Communication failure

When the supporters groups were asked to explain the evidence from stage one of this research project which showed that 52 per cent of respondents felt supporter groups were poorly treated by the league, they suggested poor communication as the key reason.

'The key is for the FOs to actually listen to the SGs. There is a wealth of understanding of the fan experience from supporters that front office folks don't get. They hire young, motivated folks which is great, but they are often new to the culture and try and force ideas into the culture that really are disruptive and counter intuitive. Work together, listen, and grow. Also, FOs are in the business of generating revenue. SGs need to understand that for good and bad, but FO's can't try and monetize every aspect.'



Structural Issues

When reviewing the data from the quantitative stage, the clearest sign of unhappiness from supporter groups was with regard to the treatment of MLS towards them. More than one in two (52 per cent) described the relationship as 'poor'. The League has chosen the overall stability of the league at the risk of continuing the ongoing upset over the structure from the fans.

'It (single-entity) cannot continue. They [MLS] have too much power and they are not accountable to anyone as it stands. We feel that we are not listened to, and as our Front Offices are only really shareholders in the League, we don't really think they have the power to represent us, even if they want to. The problem is, single-entity's not going anywhere, anytime soon. It's like turkeys voting for Christmas. Why would a League deconstruct something that makes them richer every year?'



Collective responsibility

Despite evidence of geo-specific rivalries between Portland and Seattle, DC United and New York, San Jose and Los Angeles, Montreal and Toronto and Dallas and Houston, when asked in the semi-structured interviews who they felt their biggest enemy was, 16 out of 19 supporter groups answered either 'The League', 'MLS' or 'Don Garber' (MLS Commissioner).

'MLS turns 21 next year, and it makes sense that we are now aiming to create a fan culture in our own image rather than copy anyone else.

When we raised our 50 ft Freddy Kreuger tifo before the Seattle game, our group got a lot of criticism online from European fans saying things like 'just when you think the US is about to get soccer, they go and unveil a 50ft Freddy Kreuger'. I'm sick of this. So what if we don't use bad language or beat each other up, we should do things in our own way from now on.'

Emerald City Alliance Member



University

RIGHTS

Conclusions

MLS Supporter Groups carry some traits of hooliganism (prevalence of alcohol) and Italian ultra movement (co-ordinated displays of support in tifos). However, also display behaviour unique to US sport market (tailgate culture)

Anecdotal assumption that SGs and their own FOs suffered from a poor relationship was dismissed at quantitative stage (only 13 per cent felt they did not get enough support)

Triangulating data leads to the following:

1. **A clear negative perception** of MLS 'lack of transparency' and 'lack of trust'
2. **Single-entity structure** led to SGs feeling 'bullied' on single issues
3. **ISC** do not have enough influence on their own future
4. **Adolescent identity** - US ultra culture approaching maturity

LIMITATIONS - Quantative stage (representative) and qualitative stage (interviewer bias)



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