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The European Super League (ESL): A Political Economy and Media Framing Analysis

by

Patrick Sidwell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a concentration in Media Studies
Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the women in my life.

To my grandmother, Carmel – you are an inspiration to everyone you meet. You are a constant source of wisdom, kindness, and selflessness. You are the strongest person I know.

Thank you.

To my mother, Janet – I would be nowhere without your constant love and support. You have always believed in me and trusted my judgement. You have always been in my corner.

Thank you.

To my sister, Katy – thank you for your achievements. They have always inspired me to try and keep up with you. We have always had each other's backs and we always will. Thank you.

To my girlfriend, Hunter – thank you for putting up with me while I wrote this thesis. There will be fewer late nights of work from now on. You love me and accept me exactly as I am, and you have sacrificed so much to help me reach this point. It will be worth it, I promise.

Thank you.

I love you all.

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Abstract

The European Super League (ESL) offers an opportunity for research as a case study which exemplifies the potential for sports to engender seismic societal events. To try to understand the ESL and the events surrounding it, this thesis examined it through the dual frameworks of political economy and framing theory to comprehend the roles played by corporate owners and working-class fans who support the game. An overview of the political economic processes of English football was conducted to create meaningful insights. From there, using framing as a theoretical guide, a thematic media analysis was performed across 251 news articles from *The Times* and *The Guardian* that discussed the ESL to uncover frames and patterns of meaning that explicate the situation, both from a standpoint of political economy and more general, non-political economy frames.

This study found that resistance to the ESL from fans arguably emerged from their being exploited as consumers and that the media supported fans' plight in criticizing the desires of greedy owners who view English football primarily as a product, rather than an institution encased in symbolic and cultural capital. It is foreshadowed in the dataset that similar attempts to exploit the sport will inevitably occur again in the future. Other frames indicated that football represents a sense of national identity among English fans of the game, who defended its historic value vehemently amid the ESL crisis. This defense was successful, for now, and similar proposals in the future should be met with the same combined ferocity from working-class people and media outlets to arrest corporate greed.

Introduction

On April 18, 2021, 12 of Europe's most elite football clubs simultaneously announced their planned involvement in a new intracontinental competition – the European Super League (ESL) (Sky Sports, 2021a). These clubs included six from England (Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur), three from Spain (Barcelona, Real Madrid, Atletico Madrid), and three from Italy (Juventus, Inter Milan, AC Milan) (ESL, 2021).

Within mere days, the proposal had effectively been disbanded entirely due to the unprecedented consternation from fans, media outlets, and institutional bodies (e.g., Bairner, 2021; McLaughlin, 2021; Singh, 2021; UEFA, 2021). In England, the backlash led to mass fan protests, discontentment among football players themselves ("Liverpool's Klopp slams", 2021), and even drew the attention of political leaders, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and leader of the opposition, Sir Keir Starmer, both voicing their discontent at the proposed breakaway league ("European Super League", 2021; Singh, 2021). Following this rapid fallout amid such wide backlash to the proposal, each of the six English Premier League (EPL) clubs proceeded to reverse their decision, announcing their withdrawal from the ESL just two days later (Panja & Smith, 2021). Elsewhere, at the time of writing, only three clubs remain committed to forming the ESL – Barcelona and Real Madrid from Spain, and Juventus from Italy. That English clubs are the only ones who have unanimously backtracked on their initial decision is part of the rationale as to why they are the focus of this study.

To uncover the reason behind the frenzied hysteria among the entire English football community, the theoretical framework of political economy offers the potential for meaningful

insights. Although an investigation into English football cannot lead to a total understanding of the entirety of European football, from a structural standpoint, examining the political economy of football across all of Europe is too large a topic to investigate thoroughly in a thesis-length work.

As such, this study first traced the history of English football's political economy, before moving on to use the theoretical framework of political economy to generate insights about the ESL. The subsequent method used was a thematic analysis employed to examine the media themes and narratives that surrounded the events of the ESL, with the implementation of framing theory guiding findings. The political economy overview engaged with consideration of key tenets of the field, such as money and capital, power relations, ownership, and class structures. More specifically, this study sought to identify the nature of four main pillars of political economy – history, social totality, moral philosophy, and praxis (Mosco, 2009) – within the landscape of English football, and how these tenets relate to the ESL.

Following an investigation into the political economic processes surrounding the ESL, framing theory was introduced to uncover the media's interpretation of the ESL and how they framed it to the public. The framing investigation utilized online news articles from *The Times* and *The Guardian* from April 18, 2021, until April 27, 2021 – the first ten days following the initial ESL announcement. These articles assisted the understanding of the media consideration of the ESL and how this event was framed by major news outlets. This was done considering frames that encompass both tenets of political economy, as established in the political economy overview, as well as looking at other non-political economy themes which emerged from the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of thematic analysis was followed to create meaningful insights from the body of qualitative data collected.

Literature Review

Political Economy

To begin to understand the reasons as to why there was such immense backlash toward the ESL proposal among the English football community, one must first consider English football through the lens of its political economy. As defined by Mosco (2009), “political economy is the study of social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (p. 12). Mosco (2009) also defines the concept of political economy more generally as “the study of control and survival in social life” (p. 12). In this instance, control is a term used to describe the organization and management of a society or community, whereas survival refers to how this society or community keeps going (Mosco, 2009). This second, more general, definition, introduced to Mosco by renowned political economy scholar Dallas Smythe, positions control as a political behavior, and survival as an economic one (Mosco, 2009). From Mosco’s (2009) work, it can be deduced that political economy, in a general sense, engages with the Marxian concepts of power, ownership, capital, and class (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016; Marx, 1977; Mosco, 2009).

Although these concepts are often considered Marxian, Karl Marx’s participation in the field of political economy derived from his criticism of the work of previous political economy scholars, such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016; Mosco, 2009). These three pioneers of classical political economy theorized during the time of the British Industrial Revolution and other similar dramatic industrial shifts across Europe in the

18th and 19th centuries (Mosco, 2009). Their work promoted the importance of labor to drive national interests, with the transition from a feudalist society to a capitalist one being a process through which monarchical wealth was no longer sufficient to ensure national financial prosperity. Instead, labor was a necessary tool for the benefit of all. This era arguably laid the financial and economic foundations for the dramatic shift toward contemporary capitalism still seen today across much of the western world, and thus featured widespread changes to the political economy landscape regarding power, ownership, capital, and class (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016; Mosco, 2009).

Critical Political Economy

The aforementioned thinkers are deemed classical political economists, who explain the political economy structures without the level of criticism that succeeded it (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016; Mosco, 2009). Marx advanced the study of political economy by making it one in which criticism was much more prevalent through explicitly challenging institutions, exposing unjust class structures, disparaging the nature of the relationships between power and money, and the structures in which these relationships occurred (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016). Marx's seminal work of this field, *Capital*, in which he cites the exploitation of the working class as fundamental for the success of capitalism, provided the building blocks for the field of critical political economy (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016). His work has been applied to separate fields, including the field of mass communication and media studies (e.g., Dart, 2014; Hardy, 2014; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008, 2014; Mosco, 2009; Wolter, 2014). For the interests of this study, the paradigm of critical political economy assists the understanding of the political power structures and financial mechanisms in place for both English football and its media landscape today, as well as offering grounds for fundamental systemic change that could benefit the fairness of the

sport. For this study, any references to the framework of political economy are referring to its critical paradigm.

For this thesis, when considering critical political economy, Vincent Mosco's (2009) work was used as a guideline. More specifically, Mosco's (2009) four pillars of critical political economy are fundamental in examining phenomena through the framework of its political economic processes. These four pillars are: history, social totality, moral philosophy, and praxis (Mosco, 2009). His categorization coincides with the work of renowned political economists Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (1991), who purported that the most crucial tenet of political economy is the exploration of the allocation of resources within a society. Namely, the relationship between classes, and the capital provided to each class is very important as it facilitates our understanding of "the balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention" (Wasko, 2005, p. 27). In other words, when capitalist elites are met with resistance, such as they were amid the ESL crisis, critical political economy seeks to not only explain why there is a clash, but also provide potential solutions on both a rational and moral level. This is where Mosco's (2009) four pillars can help to shape our understanding of phenomena like the ESL, but we must comprehend each of them if we are to comprehend the nature of their existence within English football and the ESL.

First, Mosco (2009) urges us to consider political economy on a historical level. Namely, this refers to the concept that phenomena exist today as a result of past events; to understand something, and the reasons as to why it exists in the nature that it does, we must understand its history (Mosco, 2009). For example, to understand civil unrest, we must look not only at the activating event, but also at preceding events that have led to the evidently growing frustration toward the issue at hand.

Second, there is the pillar of social totality, which Mosco (2009) classifies as an awareness of contextual situations. Phenomena do not occur within a vacuum but are the result of contextual events that surround them (Mosco, 2009). For instance, civil unrest is the result of discontentment towards societal issues and frustration at these issues. It exists not simply to achieve something, but also because of its surrounding societal context.

Third, Mosco (2009) discusses moral philosophy, which deals with the moral questions associated with political economy. This is where critical political economy engages with the idea that we need not solely criticize but must also offer solutions – this is defined as a normative approach, in which solutions to potentially complex problems are suggested so that the same problems are not repeated (Mosco, 2009).

Finally, Mosco's (2009) fourth pillar is that of praxis, a word deriving etymologically from the Greek word for "do." Its etymology is key here, as it alludes to the notion of praxis as a concept that encourages collective action among people to achieve normative outcomes and engender a resulting betterment of society (Mosco, 2009). As opposed to scholarly research that focuses on the pursuit of publication and academic success, political economy exists not only to educate, but also to inspire activism among its readership: "political economists have consistently viewed intellectual life as a means of bringing about social change and social intervention as a means of advancing knowledge" (Mosco, 2009, p. 4). In this vein, political economy serves a higher purpose than purely traditional academia – it hopes to truly inspire change on fundamental, systemic levels.

Political Economy of Media

Media is everywhere in today's world. It permeates our society on unprecedented levels when compared with all other eras in history. We are technologically advanced to the point at

which we have access to seemingly infinite channels of communication and information, through technologies that would have been scarcely believable mere decades ago. The media provides a connection between the public and the ruling classes – it is how politicians spread information, propaganda is dispersed, communities are built, activism is inspired, and offers the potential to unite and divide in equal measure.

In Mosco's (2009) work, while focusing on these four pillars and outlining their contribution toward our understanding of political economy, he delves specifically into the field of the political economy of media, focusing on this hugely influential aspect of modern society. In today's world, the proliferation of media types and media consumption, seen since the dissemination of television sets in the 1950s, renders the media a crucial aspect of society in its ability to shape public discourse and create default ideologies to which the public subscribe (Nichols & Martínez, 2019). In this sense, today's media landscape is shown to be the result of what has come before. This exemplifies Mosco's (2009) first pillar of political economy in which history is crucial to our understanding of modern phenomena.

Hardy (2014) claims that "media ownership and control are probably the most readily identified concerns of critical political economy" (p. 79), and the body of scholarship within this field indicates why it is of such great concern. Mosco (2009) builds off the work of scholars like Robert McChesney, one of the most renowned scholars in the field of the political economy of media. McChesney (2008) considers the media to have the power to behave in a way that either promotes or discredits institutions and practices that uphold democracy. McChesney (2008) believes that work within the field of the political economy of media is of importance because it facilitates an understanding of the relationship between media processes and the systems of politics and economics that exist within society.

One of the most problematic suggestions from scholars in this field is evidenced through the concerning nature of media ownership concentration:

The political economy of communication has been especially concerned with the tendency for fewer and fewer companies to grow ever larger to control more of the media market than ever before. Such concentration takes place within media, as fewer newspaper companies control more of the newspaper market. It takes place across media, as owners of newspapers buy broadcasting outlets and other media properties, a process known as cross-ownership concentration. (Mosco, 2009, p. 115)

Concentration of ownership of this nature is problematic because it leads to the potential for widespread undemocratic media ambitions (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 2009). This engages with Mosco's (2009) pillar of moral philosophy. Critical political economists consider not only what is, but also what ought to be through the lenses of morality, equality, and fairness. The potential for media corporations to behave as quasi-dictatorial autocracies contradicts the view of these scholars who believe in the possibility the media holds to be a beacon of fairness and moral righteousness.

This line of thinking has influenced a huge body of theoretical and conceptual work, including Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, in which they theorized that the media is influenced not by an altruistic desire to uphold democracy and ensure that society remains fair and balanced, but instead by the interests of owners who wish to turn a profit and benefit themselves and their stakeholders financially. This model argues that, as fewer and fewer owners control the media market, democratic tendencies within the market will diminish (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Bagdikian (2005) concurs with this concept, purporting that the

consolidation of media ownership facilitates a lack of democracy within these institutions and the potential for harm to be done as a result.

As per Mosco's (2009) pillar of praxis, critical political economists of the media offer practical solutions to improve the media landscape for the betterment of society. Notably, McChesney (2008) suggests a host of potential improvements, such as diversified ownership, media access to be considered a human right, policies that promote the distribution of reputable news sources and diminishes the dissemination of untrustworthy information. In short, McChesney (2008) supports the idea of widespread systemic change within the structures of the media.

Political Economy of Sport

As a thesis that revolves around both the industry of media and the industry of sport, recognizing how these two institutions are inextricably linked assists greatly in developing insights for both. As per Szymanski (2010), "as long as sports were popular, but not significant money-spinners, the politicians and judges could stand aside... the advent of television changed all this" (p. 79). The 1980s and 1990s saw huge upturns in the revenue generated within the sporting world, and one reason for this is the vast improvement in broadcasting technologies that facilitated massive growth in audience numbers (Szymanski, 2010).

As audiences grew, so did revenue. Initially, this was achieved through advertising, but developing technologies meant that sport could begin to be sold as a product in and of itself with lucrative broadcasting contracts sold to private companies and these companies selling subscription-based plans to grant television access to live games (Szymanski, 2010).

Here, Szymanski (2010) engages with concepts introduced by renowned political economist Dallas Smythe (1977) regarding the audience as a commodity. Smythe (1977) argues

that the work done by media audiences is labor in as much as it actively generates for revenue for the media industry. During sports broadcasts, the consumption of advertising and the games themselves both contribute financially towards the financial gains made by media corporations, and, as such, can be quantified as a form of labor (Smythe 1977).

Smythe's (1977) work became more applicable to the sporting world as the 1980s went on, and as the world entered increasingly sophisticated broadcasting capabilities. In the 1990s, "media corporations invested at unprecedented levels in sporting coverage and team/league ownership, particularly as pay television companies became global entities and media corporations sought cheap and ready-made programming" (Nauright, 2004, pp. 1325-1326).

The significance of these changes to the structural approach to sports media are evident in the subsequent changes in how professional sports were structured to capitalize upon this financial opportunity (Nauright, 2004). For soccer, "greater media ownership fostered expanding pan-European competitions, premier leagues and the concentration of wealth among high profile European clubs to the detriment of smaller clubs" (Nauright, 2004, p. 1326). To signify the placement of this phenomenon within the field of critical political economy, these changes highlight Mosco's (2009) pillar of social totality – the context in which these leagues existed at the time determined the changes that occurred to their structures and the changes to the sport that were felt as a result.

English Football

The Historical Political Economy of English Football

In following Mosco's (2009) pillar of history, to comprehend any phenomenon as it exists today, we must first comprehend its history. To do that for the ESL and the events that

surrounded English football around the time of its announcement and disbanding, in that case, one must examine the game's historical roots within that context.

In England, football began to gain popularity in the latter part of the 19th century, leading to the formation of many of the clubs which continue to top the English footballing pyramid today – the six maligned EPL clubs involved in the ESL, for instance, were all formed between 1878 and 1905 (Taylor, 2005). This popularity led to the creation of the Football Association (FA) in London in 1863, founded “for the purpose of forming an Association with the object of establishing a definite code of rules for the regulation of the game” (The Football Association, n.d.), and it continues to fulfil this purpose in English football today.

With a growing interest in football, the FA were keen to ensure it would not be exploited financially by the ruling elite (Conn, 2007; Jaquiss, 2015; Wallace, 2015). To do this, the FA created Rule 34 in 1899 which “allowed clubs to form limited companies, but prohibited directors from being paid” (Conn, 2007). This rule meant “that being a club director was a form of public service, that directors should be ‘custodians’, to support and look after clubs” (Conn, 2007) and subsequently meant that they could not exploit them for profit. As institutions that benefitted their communities, these clubs encouraged fan loyalty, returning spectators, and ultimately positioned them as supportive and understanding of the needs and desires of the working class (Conn, 2007; Jaquiss, 2015; Wallace, 2015).

Through its continued integration with and focus on the majority of the English population – the working class – football quickly became an integral part of national culture and folklore, with historical football events still permeating the national consciousness. England's lone World Cup success in 1966 is still referred to frequently as one of the defining national moments of the 20th century, as is the legendary Christmas Truce of 1914 during World War I, in

which British and German troops played football in no-man's-land on Christmas Day, laying down their weapons for one day with football uniting them like nothing else could, temporarily halting the bloodshed (Weintraub, 2001).

These events begin to help us understand why football is still considered the people's game in England, a phrase that alludes to English football's relationship with the working class (Webber, 2017). To understand of the inextricable link between English football and the working class, scholarship by Kennedy and Kennedy (2016) and Webber (2017) is elucidating. As Kennedy and Kennedy (2016) note, it is no coincidence that football grew simultaneously with socialism – a political ideology that champions the rights of the working class, purporting that the means of production should be owned by the people rather than the ruling elite. Around the same time that socialism gathered support among the British working class due to its focus on the rights of workers, football became a revolutionary space in which working-class people could gather in their thousands in support of a common goal, unifying the working man en masse in unprecedented fashion (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016). Developments in rights and laws for the working-class resulted in the increasing growth of the game, explained hence:

The fate of football became increasingly linked to the industrial working class with the Factory Act of 1850, a victory for the growing trade union movement which gained a shorter working week, meaning that for the first time industrial workers would have Saturday afternoons off. All factories and mills were ordered to close at 2pm. Hence the tradition of the 3pm kickoff. (Socialist Party of England and Wales, 2010)

As such, the very structure of football continues to revolve around its socialist political roots. In the EPL, the 3 p.m. slot on Saturday afternoons is still the most common kickoff time, a tradition established to purposefully coincide with the schedules of working people.

Unrest in the 1980s

For a long period of the 20th century, English football remained synonymous with the working-class and a relatively harmonious exploit until the arrival of economic hardships in England in the 1980s (Webber, 2017). A recession in 1980 severely damaged the economy, followed by high rates of unemployment in 1982, and various escalating labor movements, culminating in miners' strikes in 1984 to protest the rule and regulatory policy of then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Karak, 2016; Webber, 2017).

At this time of economic hardship, English football started to become synonymous with violence, civil unrest, and general crises both domestically and internationally (Webber, 2017). In the month of May 1985, two tragic events occurred: 56 fans were killed in a fire at Valley Parade, the stadium of Bradford City Football Club, and the infamous Heysel disaster occurred at the European Cup Final in Belgium, in which 39 Juventus fans were killed following violent clashes with Liverpool supporters, resulting in a ban of five years from European competition for all English clubs, with Liverpool handed a six-year ban (Webber, 2017). It is unsurprising, therefore, that *The Sunday Times* (1985, as cited by Webber, 2017) called English football “a slum sport played in slum stadiums increasingly watched by slum people.” The reputation of the people's game was in jeopardy.

These horrible events were followed by another tragedy in 1989 – the Hillsborough disaster in which 96 Liverpool fans were killed due to overcrowding in a fenced-in, standing-only section of Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield (Goddard & Sloane, 2015; Webber, 2017). This was the final straw for many football fans, as highlighted by Goddard and Sloane (2015): “Bradford, Heysel and Hillsborough demonstrated just how dangerous it had become to be a

football fan, and thus it seems hardly surprising that fewer and fewer people were willing to take the risk” (p. 107).

The dangerous conditions highlighted through these events, among others, led to a higher representation of violent hooligans among football-going fans, as they were one of the few demographics willing to face these risks (Goddard & Sloane, 2015). Hooliganism then facilitated a descension into financial issues for English clubs at the time:

It might be argued that the problems posed by hooliganism led to a dehumanizing of fans in the eyes of football administrators, who came to see them as a cost as much as a source of revenue. Fans had to be policed and clubs had to foot the bill, further putting pressure on their finances. (Goddard & Sloane, 2015, p. 107)

Whilst still associated with the working class, this was no longer an association that indicated a unity as it once did, but instead, had strong associations with violence and danger. English football needed to change dramatically, on a wide structural scale (Goddard & Sloane, 2015; Karak, 2016). This change was just around the corner.

The Modern Political Economy of English Football

In 1992, the English Premier League (EPL) was formed (Coombs & Osborne, 2012; Karak, 2016). From a purely political and cultural standpoint, it could be argued that the EPL was the result of the troublesome landscape of English football in 1980s. However, it would be remiss to ignore the economic interests of those who founded the EPL, with the potentially huge profits available being squandered through the previously anachronistic league structure (Coombs & Osborne, 2012). Throughout the 1980s, various British institutions – such as British Telecom, British Gas, and British Steel – were privatized, meaning they moved from government-controlled institutions funded by the taxpayer to being owned by private

corporations without the level of government regulation and red tape seen previously, thus allowing for further profit-making (Karak, 2016, 2017; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016).

Privatization directly contradicts football's socialist roots, as it removes ownership from the people, and instead places it into the hands of external investors – this is a key tenet of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism in the United Kingdom was spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher (Karak, 2016; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016), and is a political ideology which seeks to reduce government regulation of industry, and place power into the hands of private owners. Neoliberals engage with this to promote the capitalist notion of profit among the ruling elite being of more importance than the needs and desires of the general populace (Chomsky 1999; Karak, 2016; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016).

Thatcher's neoliberalist government placed a strong emphasis on the free market, signifying "the promotion of an economy unencumbered by the state and its regulatory institutions" (Webber, 2017, p. 14). As Webber (2017) points out, "in Thatcher's free market paradise, profitability was prioritized over public safety" (p. 15). That "operators were too busy making money to concern themselves with the health and well-being of their patrons" (Webber, 2017, p. 15) explains the various tragedies that occurred during this period, such as the Hillsborough disaster and the fire at Bradford City's stadium.

The forementioned examples of British industries' privatization in the country's political landscape preceded the similar processes of privatization that occurred in English football, namely seen in the formation, construction, and growth of the EPL:

A combination of two processes – the privatization of telecommunications and the conversion of football clubs into vehicles of financial speculation – paved the way for the

formation of the EPL in 1992. This enabled speculative profits from football clubs, on one hand, and the immense growth of private TV companies, on the other. (Karak, 2016, p. 588)

As such, the interest of foreign investors was piqued, as, similarly to previously nationalized British institutions, football clubs began being sold to the highest bidder (Karak, 2016). This combination of economic potential, alongside a political and cultural need for change in the English footballing landscape, was dubbed by Webber (2017) as the double movement – it was a contextually perfect time for foreign investors to capitalize upon both phenomena simultaneously.

However, the FA's Rule 34 was still in place so that directors were unable to exploit their clubs for profit (Conn, 2007; Wallace, 2015). This rule held firm in achieving its goals until 1983, when Irving Scholar, the then-chairman of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, listed the club on the stock market as a public limited company (PLC), meaning the general public could now begin free trading of its shares (Jaquiss, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Bull & Whittam, 2020). Through controlling the number of shares available, the owners could remain the majority shareholders, but were now able to pay themselves potentially endless profits not as directors, as that was outlawed in Rule 34, but as members (Jaquiss, 2015; Bull & Whittam, 2020). This circumnavigation of Rule 34 paved the way for other clubs to follow suit, and before long, directors were able to pay themselves handsomely for the profits generated by their respective clubs without upsetting the FA (Jaquiss, 2015; Bull & Whittam, 2020).

With the example set and the potential for endless profiteering now a reality, wealthy investors began to purchase equity in the league – most significantly, this manifested itself through purchasing the clubs themselves (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016; Webber, 2017). This is

epitomized most clearly a decade after the EPL's formation, when Chelsea Football Club was purchased by the Russian multi-billionaire, Roman Abramovich, a move which was followed by a swathe of foreign investors purchasing English clubs (Ludvigsen & Andre, 2019). Moving to today, of the other six EPL clubs involved in the ESL, only Tottenham Hotspur have a British majority owner, with the other clubs' owners coming from elsewhere across the globe; the owners of Arsenal, Liverpool, and Manchester United all come from the United States; and Manchester City's is from the United Arab Emirates. These clubs have not only been privatized, but had been sold to foreign investors, an issue with which English football fans have historically rejected as an act which tarnishes the sport, reducing it to a business exploit for those who have a vested interest in profits primarily, with on-field results falling into lesser significance (Ludvigsen & Andre, 2019; Nauright & Ramfjord, 2010).

The Fallacy of English Football's Meritocracy

On a structural level, English football is a meritocracy (Goddard & Sloane, 2014). This is most clearly manifested in the processes of promotion and relegation that occur at the end of each season, as explained by Goddard and Sloane (2014):

The promotion and relegation system... assigns all of the national professional league's member teams to a division or tier, with membership of each tier being determined on merit through the promotion and relegation of the best- and worst-performing teams in each tier to the adjacent one at the end of each season. (p. 23)

This meritocratic characteristic of professional European football helps us understand the furor with which the ESL was met. The proposed structure was one based not on merit, but on predetermined qualification for the so-called 12 founding clubs, which the ESL hoped to expand to 15, with qualification based on merit available to just five additional teams outside of this

group each year, with these additional teams determined each season by performance in their domestic league (ESL, 2021). These 12 clubs are among the financial elite in Europe, with all of them placing inside the top 16 for wealth across European teams (Ozanian, 2021). Their qualification was determined on wealth, not performance.

The typical performance-based meritocracy of English and European football is not only limited to promotion and relegation, but also to qualification for intracontinental tournaments. For instance, in the EPL, the top four teams qualify for Europe's leading competition – the UEFA Champions League – for the following season (The Football Association, 2020). In this process of qualification, merit itself is even specifically referenced in the Premier League Handbook: “qualification for UEFA Club Competitions shall be on sporting merit through domestic competitions controlled or sanctioned by The Football Association” (The Football Association, 2020, p. 96).

Unlike the franchise-based structure of American sports, the hierarchical nature of football, with particular regard to the meritocracy associated with the sport's insistence on the merit-based outcomes of promotion, relegation, and qualification for secondary competitions, can be highlighted as one of the issues with which the footballing world took the most issue following ESL proposal. This was exemplified on April 19, 2021 – the day after the announcement – when players from the EPL team Leeds United, during a warmup for their match against Liverpool, sported shirts that read “EARN IT” on the front, alongside a logo for the UEFA Champions League, alluding to the proposed deviation from the integral nature of football's longstanding meritocratic hierarchy (“Liverpool's Klopp slams”, 2021).

Given the forementioned hysteric reaction to the ESL among fans and media personalities alike (e.g., Bairner, 2021; “Liverpool's Klopp slams”, 2021; McLaughlin, 2021; Singh, 2021), it

could be presumed that it was a shocking revelation to the footballing community. However, this assumption would be false. As far back as 1998, there is evidence that the ESL was rumored to be a possibility (“Football: UEFA winning”, 1998; Hughes, 1998). An extremely similar proposal was rumored by media outlets in 1998.

[A European Super League] has two enticing attractions for the founder members: A larger proportion of the television and advertising revenue they generate, without the burden that UEFA, the governing body of European soccer, currently imposes by distributing some profits to smaller clubs and national associations. The other attraction is a guarantee of permanent membership, without the tedious business of having to merit inclusion by qualifying year after year. (Hughes, 1998)

Despite the 23-year gap between this rumored proposition, also made by European football’s governing body UEFA, and the one that finally came to fruition in 2021, the rationale behind a desire to create the ESL for the mega-rich among European football’s elite clubs remained remarkably consistent. This consistency goes beyond the proposed structure, and is also prominent in the fears of 1998, which mirror those seen in 2021, at the prospect of the ESL:

The idea has two damning drawbacks: If private investors, as well as elite clubs, reap the dividends, then the pyramid that sustains soccer, from the bottom up, will perish. And if permanency is allowed, the competitive essence of sport is destroyed. The new league would... reduce top European soccer to exhibition status. (Hughes, 1998)

The imminent threat to the very nature of European and English football, even then, was apparent. The warning signs were there, decades before. Despite the supposed meritocracy inherent in the structure of the sport itself, the fact that teams have vastly differing amounts of wealth render the concept of this meritocracy a mere fallacy. There is an uneven playing field for

those chasing even meritocratic results as a consequence of the financial dominance of some teams over others.

The Political Economy of English Football Media

As noted by Karak (2016), “the privatization of telecommunications,” in part, “paved the way for the formation of the EPL in 1992” (p. 588). One can therefore deduce that the relationship between neoliberal privatization of football clubs and the neoliberal privatization of telecommunications is one of great significance. Both phenomena occurred simultaneously, propelling English football into its new era of financial fixation.

The privatization of telecommunications was crucial for the EPL’s formation (Karak, 2016), which is dramatically substantiated in the history of the EPL’s television rights deals due to the vast financial investments made upon the league’s inception. In 1988, before the EPL even started, the TV broadcast rights deal for live football in the U.K. was signed for £47 million (about \$63 million USD) (“Timeline: a history”, 2003). The EPL was formed in 1992, and in that year the broadcasting rights were sold for £304 million (around \$410 million USD) to a privatized cable-based broadcasting company – Sky Sports – moving live broadcasts away from free-to-air terrestrial television for the first time in the history of English football (Koutroumanides et al., 2019; “Timeline: a history,” 2003). This represented a rough 6-and-a-half-fold increase from the previous deal signed four years prior.

Moving forward to the present day, these same rights were sold for over £5.1 billion (around \$7 billion USD) in 2016 (Connolly, 2018; Koutroumanides et al., 2019). From the depths of the 1980s, the EPL is now just second to the National Football League (NFL) in wealth across global sports leagues (Koutroumanides et al., 2019). The NFL’s vast financial wealth comes through many revenue streams, one of which is the media (Mondello, 2012; Yost, 2006).

In the 1960s, a new phenomenon began when television deals began to permeate the sports media landscape, introducing the concept of cable companies' exclusive rights to broadcast live sports (Jhally, 1984). In the 1970s and 1980s, the value of these deals began to increase sharply, with the NFL in particular paving the way for other sports leagues by establishing increasingly lucrative broadcasting contracts with cable companies (Jhally, 1984; Mondello, 2012; Yost, 2006). They spearheaded the transition towards the symbiotic relationship between sports leagues and media companies, as explained by Mondello (2012):

Today, sport and the media have established a powerful nexus signifying how each entity has strengthened their individual status by associating with the other. Perhaps no other professional sport league has financially capitalized on these relationships as well as the NFL. (p. 91)

As such, a mutual financial benefit was created between these two entities. Leagues like the EPL soon followed suit with remunerative broadcasting contracts. On the surface, this appears beneficial – more money for the EPL would logically produce a higher quality product, and the drastic upward trend in the cost of television rights deals indicates the significance of the EPL's formation in changing the landscape of English football. But this event was the springboard for the mass commodification and commercialization of the game – a process achieved with help from the privatized media companies who packaged this new shiny product for consumers to absorb, subsequently filling the pockets of the ruling elite, both in the media and within the football clubs themselves.

This would be of no surprise to scholars who critique neoliberalism. As per the tendency of neoliberally structured institutions, the EPL's increasing profits were always unlikely to be fed back into the league (Karak, 2016; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016; Porter, 2019). Critical Marxist

thinking on neoliberalism readily purports that the profits accrued through such institutions will not aid grassroots campaigns or benefit the people working within that field (e.g., Chomsky, 1999). Instead, this money goes to owners who sit atop the classist chain.

Framing Theory

Atop this chain sit owners of media conglomerates who maintain the power to shape public opinion and create widely agreed-upon ideologies. With the political economic aspect of this classist power established, this study will now move to consider one of the most prolific ways that the media carries out its efforts in shaping discourse – framing, and the theory that surrounds it.

While its true origin is contested, framing theory can be traced back to Bateson's scholarship in the 1950s (Bateson, 1972), where the term "frame" was originally coined in his work in the field of anthropology. Bateson (1972) later developed his thinking on framing, using the visual representation of a Venn diagram to explicate how items within a Venn diagram are just as important as those outside of it – in other words, inclusion and exclusion are both noteworthy. The phrase "framing theory" is credited to Goffman (1974), the first scholar to indicate that a cumulation of framed stories over time had the power to shape public discourse depending upon the frames through which they are presented.

Framing and the Media

Toward the end of the 1970s, framing theory made its way more concretely to the field of mass communications, supported by work from Gans (1979) and Gitlin (1980). Initially, framing in the media was described as the process of selection and omission of information, with these decisions playing a crucial role in shaping public perception (Gitlin, 1980).

Framing theory has continued to see refinements. Scheufele (1999) operationalized frames into two distinct categories: media frames and individual frames. Media frames refer to Gamson and Modigliani's (1987) definition of a frame: "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events... The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (p. 143).

Entman's (1993) scholarship has developed framing theory further, bringing the role of salience into the picture. This was the point at which framing reached its defining qualifications still largely used today. It is the process through which the media highlights certain pieces of information, whilst ignoring others, to raise the salience and focus on certain issues and topics (Entman, 1993).

In essence, media frames are the process of assigning meaning and salience to an event, allowing the media to package stories into meaningful, readily comprehensible information, taking away the necessity for the audience to interpret meaning. Scheufele (1999) uses Entman's (1993) work to define individual frames as "mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals' processing of information" (p. 53). Individual frames, then, come from two sources: "global and long-term political views and short-term, issue-related frames of reference" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 107).

Scheufele (1999) is not the last scholar who has attempted to create distinct categories of framing. Druckman's (2001) work looked to categorize frames as based on either emphasis or equivalence. Equivalency frames are employed when the same set of information is portrayed as either a loss or a gain (Druckman, 2001). From the body of proverbial expressions in the English language, this is exemplified in the popular phrase that refers to a glass as either half full or half empty; in this case, this metaphor shows a respective positive or negative outlook on a situation,

despite still including the same logical information. This, ultimately, has the same functionality of an equivalency frame, presenting the same set of information from a different perspective to elicit specific responses from the audience. Emphasis frames, however, do not focus on presenting the same information in a different light, but instead revolve around emphasizing certain pieces of information, whilst ignoring others (Druckman, 2001). Emphasis frames engage with Entman's (1993) concept of salience, as well as the traditional tenets of omission and inclusion of information to shape public perception (Gitlin, 1980).

Episodic and Thematic Framing

Although these refinements have assisted the advancement of framing theory in the field of mass communications, Cacciatore et al. (2016) argue that the plethora of categorization and operationalization can lead to ambiguous research findings. To help avoid any confusion and ambiguity, specific framing types should be the focus of any research that employs this theoretical framework (Cacciatore et al., 2016). For this study, Iyengar's (1990) work that binarily distinguishes frames as either thematic or episodic was the distinct refinement of framing theory employed.

Iyengar's (1990) scholarship focuses not only on the types of frame used within a story, but also centers heavily on the effect of this frame on message recipients. More specifically, he argues that the use of either thematic or episodic frames is a significant indicator of the public's perception of responsibility surrounding an issue. For the purposes of this study, in which an examination of public opinion in the form of the aggressive backlash towards the ESL is the focus, Iyengar's (1990) framework offers the opportunity to explain this event through an examination of framing types employed and the subsequent public reaction to the debacle.

A thematic frame is described as a frame in which the issue at hand is described in broad, societal, impersonal terms (Iyengar, 1990). This could mean that the historical context surrounding an issue is emphasized, or that the situation at hand is described in terms of the preceding and recurring trends which accompany said phenomenon (Iyengar, 1990). For instance, in Iyengar's (1990) work, in which thematic and episodic framing of poverty in broadcast news is the central focus, thematic frames he identifies include the trends and statistics surrounding poverty rates over a number of years, as well as the public policy decisions made by the Regan administration at the time. Thematic frames are "abstract and impersonal" (Iyengar, 1990, p. 22).

Conversely, episodic frames are ones that depict personal experiences (Iyengar, 1990). This could be a specific case study of an individual's experiences or their actions in the face of a situation (Iyengar, 1990). Where thematic frames are oriented in trends, episodic frames deal with specific events and focus on one-off instances to explicate an issue (Iyengar, 1990). For instance, Iyengar (1990) identifies the use of individual case studies of those living in poverty as episodic frames utilized in the context of stories surrounding this issue.

While understanding the nature of these frames is important, to achieve meaningful research using Iyengar's (1990) framework, understanding why media utilize each is crucial. In other words, what are the effects of thematic frames compared with episodic frames?

Iyengar (1990) found that thematic frames are more likely to cause message recipients to place responsibility and blame on society at large, whereas episodic frames put this culpability on the individual person or event portrayed. Further research has shown the merits of both episodic and thematic framing in the media to engage audiences and elicit responses to their messaging. Springer and Harwood (2015) found that episodic frames are far more likely to

produce opinions among the public that concur with the messaging portrayed by the media. Per Gross' (2008) work, episodic frames are also seen to be a useful tool, as they tend to elicit emotional responses among message recipients more so than thematic frames. Aarøe (2011) argues that episodic frames are more useful in engaging audiences emotionally when there is a predetermined strong emotional response to an issue or situation. Aarøe's (2011) work indicates that thematic frames are more useful in situations that are unlikely to elicit an emotional response, as they engage consumers' cognitive and rational mindsets. As well as being useful in emotionally charged situations, Aarøe's (2011) scholarship also shows the media's tendency to use episodic framing more frequently in such instances.

In light of the information presented in the literature review, this study can now reveal its three research questions:

RQ1: How does the framework of political economy explain events surrounding the ESL?

RQ2: Are there more episodic or thematic frames in the ESL articles?

RQ3: What political economy frames were used to describe the ESL?

RQ4: What non-political economy frames were used to describe the ESL?

Method

Methodology

For this study, with framing theory as a theoretical guide, a thematic analysis was used as a method for uncovering frames and themes within the data set of 251 news articles. Thematic analysis is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within qualitative data” (p. 79).

Per the study’s research questions, uncovering frames and subsequent meaning was essential to the research process and ambitions of this work. As the research questions regarding framing are divided into political economy frames and non-political economy frames, this study first had to understand the political economy of the ESL. To do this, Mosco’s (2009) four pillars of political economy were used to classify various aspects of English football. More specifically, this research process utilized each of the four pillars to trace ownership models of the six EPL teams, the social totality of English football’s current societal context seen through its owners, fans, and the media, the moral philosophy of these structures, as well as the praxis of fans and media who chose to retaliate against the ESL. This was performed by analyzing various documents, including financial statements, news articles and statistics reports. Owners, the media, and fans were the three main subsets of the English footballing community that this study engaged with. Findings from this portion of research were presented through RQ1 and were essential in providing context for meaningful results and discussion of the subsequent framing-based research questions.

Thematic Analysis

Sample

To answer the proposed research questions surrounding framing, RQ2, RQ3 and RQ4, this study looked at online news articles from two of the U.K.'s leading news publications – *The Times* and *The Guardian*. Articles from the first ten days following the ESL's announcement were used, giving a date range of April 18, 2021, until April 27, 2021.

Articles from *The Times* were retrieved using *Newsbank's Access World News* database, whereas articles from *The Guardian* were collected via its website's personal advanced search feature. Using these tools, every article from these publications including the phrase "European Super League" or "ESL" within the body of the text was identified for the date range, with *The Times* having 109 in this time period, and *The Guardian* having 142, giving a total of 251 articles. The data retrieval process was conducted alone by the researcher.

While articles from before the day of the initial announcement could have facilitated fascinating insights prior to the event, these two publications did not publish anything on the ESL until after the announcement had already been made. This ten-day window was deemed an appropriate time span to provide ample context in which events could be considered as they emerged, then as the situation became a crisis, and finally, as the dust began to settle. Beyond this point, the publication of articles on the subject matter declined significantly, indicating that public interest in the issue had already begun to decline.

Coding Process

The coding process was conducted by the sole author of this project and was recorded within a spreadsheet on Microsoft Excel to store information for the final writeup. The coder was

trained in qualitative research methods in preparation to complete a Master of Arts (MA) program in mass communications, with a concentration in media studies.

The data set ($n = 251$) was analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of thematic analysis, defining it as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). This process begins with familiarization of the data, before codifying it, and ultimately generating the themes. Codes were generated inductively through examination of the data and a codebook was developed. The codebook was not tested, which is a limitation of this study. To diminish this limitation, ample evidence was provided verbatim through quotations in the results and discussion sections to support the PI's interpretation of the data.

These themes underwent Tracy's (2019) phronetic iterative approach, which involves moving back-and-forth between existing literature and emergent data. This is classified by Tracy (2019) as an abductive approach, in which more flexibility exists than a deductive approach that centers around theory and existing literature, and an inductive approach that focuses on the emergent data. A phronetic iterative approach is not held to the guidelines of theory and literature, or to the findings of a study, and instead provides a researcher with flexibility to adjust a study to create the most meaningful insights possible. For instance, if a dataset reveals surprising phenomena, Tracy's (2019) phronetic iterative approach gives a researcher the flexibility to return to existing literature to understand the reason for its emergence from the data. For this study, this iteration occurred not only between emergent data and existing literature, but also between emergent data from the thematic analysis, and information retrieved in consideration of political economy.

Clarke and Braun (2017) also state that “the aim of thematic analysis is not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question” (p. 297). As such, this methodological framework was used to guide an analysis toward meaningful insights and establish consistent frames, given its focus on finding the most important details and themes within the body of data.

Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2017) guidance, coupled with Tracy’s (2019) phronetic iterative approach, collectively combine to provide this study with sufficient rigor to reduce the impact of the limitation of having a sole coder. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) work provide a process to ensure a stringent process open, axial, and selective coding.

Per the guidance of Nowell et al. (2017), transparency is crucial when conducting qualitative data analysis. For the sake of transparency, and to mitigate the study’s limitation in having a single coder, the coding process will now be outlined more specifically. Having collected the 251 articles, the PI began to familiarize himself with the data, whilst storing links to each article in a spreadsheet to aid future ease of access. The initial familiarization largely focused on headlines and subheadings to see the recurring themes and phrases employed throughout, collecting a list of things mentioned on multiple occasions. This portion of research comprised the open coding phase.

Following this, research entered its axial and selective coding phases. The articles were coded more closely, read through twice each in full to outline the subject matter and emergent themes from every article, grouping articles into their themes that corresponded with other pieces within the dataset. The articles were ranked on a scale of 1-10 for usefulness, per the researcher’s interpretation and the article’s relevance to political economy and the evidence and quotations that could be used from it, to provide the opportunity to more closely consider data of high

significance that could provide meaningful insights, especially within the framing process. During the coding process, quotations were compiled and categorized into themes, both of political economy for RQ3 and non-political economy for RQ4. At this point, saturation was reached given the repetitive nature of themes that began to emerge across the two sources.

For RQ2, to operationalize whether an article frames the ESL as either thematic or episodic, the first three paragraphs were used, and the results were listed in the coding spreadsheet. This coincides with Pöttker's (2003) explanation of the inverted pyramid model of news reporting, in which the most important information is presented at the beginning of a news article. From this, the lead can be inferred as featuring the most important information within a story, and for the purposes of this study, following the example set by previous scholarship (e.g., Bell et al., 2019), the first three paragraphs are considered the lead, and were therefore used to categorize an article as centered on episodic or thematic frames. This offsets any potential issue of an article being ambiguous in this regard, in the instance of it dealing with both of these framing types. In articles of fewer than three paragraphs – for example, those which contain a short body of text to accompany a video clip – the entirety of the written text was used.

Results

RQ1

To address RQ1, this study examined the political economy of the English footballing landscape to shed light on the processes that surrounded the ESL, in terms of both the clubs' initial decision to sign up for the project, as well as the vitriolic backlash to it among sports media and fans alike. More specifically, the six EPL clubs that signed up were considered. To conduct this political economy overview, two main aspects of political economy were used: ownership of the six EPL teams, and the cost for fans to support their teams, both in-person and via the media. The study of these teams' ownership structures helped elucidate why the clubs felt it a wise and necessary to sign up for the ESL, and the realities faced by today's EPL fans explain their anger at the decision.

The examination of ownership encompassed Mosco's (2009) pillar of history as essential to our understanding of modern phenomena. By tracing the history of each club's ownership, one is better aligned to understand the nature of its existence today. Both ownership and the cost for fans deals with Mosco's (2009) pillar of social totality, in that it exists in its current form due to the impact of societal structures and influences. Fans' behavior in retaliating against the ESL can be considered through Mosco's (2009) pillar of praxis, in that their activism is indicative of their desire to better society through their behavior, as well as these protests and synergetic outrage at the ESL proposal raising questions of moral philosophy, with fans and media alike arguing for the injustice of the ESL.

Ownership

This study considered ownership in three separate ways – the owners themselves, including the history of their ownership of the club, the revenue generated by the clubs during their tenure as owner, and finally, whether the club has experienced on-field success during their time in charge. These three elements give a broad understanding of the success of their ownership, as well as granting us the ability to infer their motives in obtaining and maintaining control of the team, along with commenting upon the moral philosophy – one of Mosco's (2009) pillars of political economy – of the power structures inherent in English football.

Arsenal. Arsenal Football Club is owned by American real estate mogul Stanley Kroenke (Arsenal, n.d.). After purchasing initial shares into the club in 2007 (Karen, 2016), Kroenke became the majority shareholder in 2011 after increasing his share to 62% (Scott, 2011). Several years later, in 2018, Kroenke took undivided control of Arsenal, with his ownership percentage rising to 100% after he bought the remainder of the club's 30% share for \$720 million (Conn, 2018b).

Kroenke is estimated to be worth somewhere around \$11 billion, and is a serial investor in sports teams, notably owning the Los Angeles Rams in the National Football League (NFL) and the Denver Nuggets in the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Bloomberg, 2022b; Forbes, 2022d).

After his first season as the majority shareholder – 2011/2012 – Arsenal Football Club generated \$327 million (Lange, 2021c). This revenue climbed up to \$549 million after the 2016/17 season (Lange, 2020a, 2021c). Despite small losses in the following seasons from there, revenue remained fairly consistent at Arsenal, but, as seen across all six of the ESL teams from England, the 2019/20 season caused a drastic loss in revenue due to the postponement of matches

due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the playing of matches in empty stadiums (e.g., Garavelli, 2020) to reduce the risk of infection in large crowds near the beginning of the pandemic; their revenue from the 2019/20 season dropped to its lowest point since the 2013/14 season, six years prior (Lange, 2020a, 2021c). Bloomberg's (2022) estimations regarding Kroenke's personal net worth indicate that it has increased from \$7.8 billion to \$11.9 billion since buying Arsenal outright in 2018.

As for Arsenal's on-field performance, until Kroenke bought a majority of Arsenal's shares in 2011, they had not finished outside the top four places in the EPL, granting them automatic qualification for the UEFA Champions League, since 1996 (Premier League, n.d.-a). Since this purchase of a share majority, Arsenal has finished outside the top four in half of the ten completed seasons since 2011, with Kroenke's team never finishing inside these places since buying 100% of the shares in 2018 (Premier League, n.d.-a). Here, there is a juxtaposition between on-field and off-field success. Arsenal has gradually increased its revenue stream under the ownership of Kroenke, but has declined in on-field performance and success. In political economic terms, their cultural product has diminished in quality, providing less value for fans through diminished on-field performance, while their financial capital has increased, meaning that the monetary value of the club has increased. There is a disconnect here between financial and symbolic value, signifying that financial capital among the ruling classes is of higher importance to those in charge than the symbolic value of a club's on-field success.

Chelsea. In 2003, Russian oil tycoon Roman Abramovich bought 95% of Chelsea Football Club ("How a football", 2003; Treanor & Finch, 2003), with that figure later rising to 100% (Chelsea Football Club, n.d.-a).

He had a net worth of \$5.7 billion when he bought Chelsea in 2003 (Treanor & Finch, 2003), but over the years, his net worth has fluctuated dramatically, peaking at \$23.5 billion in 2008, and now lying somewhere between \$13 billion and \$17 billion (Bloomberg, 2022a; Forbes, 2022c).

Chelsea's revenue has fluctuated simultaneously with Abramovich's (Lange, 2020b, 2021d). This revenue dropped not only in 2019/20 due to the pandemic, but also saw drops in 2010/11, 2012/13, and 2016/17 (Lange, 2020b, 2021d). To understand exactly why these drops occurred, the on-field performance of the team is elucidating. Notably, the sharpest drop, coming in 2016/17, comes directly after a season in which Chelsea finished 10th in the EPL, their lowest finish since 1996 (Premier League, n.d-b). As a result of that season's performance, Chelsea's revenue decreased significantly, interrupting the chain of gradual growth that was evident in the three years preceding that season (Lange, 2020b, 2021d). Here, one can gather that on-field performance impacts revenue streams for clubs. Logically, this is a reasonable assumption, given that finishing outside of the places in which qualification for European competitions is awarded means that a club will play fewer matches, and resultingly avoid marquee matchups with intracontinental opponents, reducing television revenue, and sales from match tickets.

In general, however, Abramovich's reign as owner of Chelsea has been fruitful for on-field performance, with this timespan giving the team all five of their EPL league titles, as well as two UEFA Champions League titles, alongside a host of other trophies (Premier League, n.d.-b; Chelsea FC, n.d.-b). To contextualize the magnitude of this success, Chelsea won 15 major trophies in the 98 years between their 1905 founding, and Abramovich's 2003 purchase (Chelsea FC, n.d.-b). In the 18 full seasons since the arrival of the Russian billionaire, Chelsea have won a

further 20 major trophies, more than one per season, on average, and more than doubling their number since before Abramovich's arrival (Chelsea FC, n.d.-b).

Therefore, unlike most of the other EPL clubs involved in this study, Chelsea's foreign ownership has led to not only the sort of off-field financial success seen elsewhere, but has also brought extraordinary on-field performance to the club, rendering Chelsea the most successful side, in terms of major trophies won, since its new ownership took over in 2003. This may, in part, be due to Abramovich's willingness to spend money on the team, with Fifield (2022) reporting that Chelsea's debt to their owner now amasses over \$2 billion (£1.5 billion), indicating a certain level of financial generosity required to obtain prolonged success through the current structural model of ownership seen in the EPL.

Liverpool. Liverpool Football Club is owned by Fenway Sports Group (FSG), after the American company bought the club and its historic stadium, Anfield, in 2010, under their then-name New England Sports Ventures (NESV) (Lake, 2020; Williams, 2010). The company is run primarily by its biggest shareholder, John W Henry, who is listed as the primary owner of Liverpool on the club's website (Liverpool Football Club, n.d.-a). FSG made an instant impression at Liverpool, clearing \$320 million (£200 million) of debt the club had accrued from poor ownership that preceded their takeover (Conn, 2018a).

Henry is worth an estimated \$3.6 billion, having made his fortune through trading, and has also owned the Boston Red Sox in Major League Baseball (MLB) since 2002 (Forbes, 2022b). During FSG's time in charge of Liverpool, since 2010, the team has seen a consistent increase in revenue each year until the end of the 2019/20 COVID-19-impacted-season, in which they faced a decline in revenue similar to that experienced by all six EPL teams in this study

(Lange, 2021d). Trebling revenue over the course of their ownership shows the strong financial success that accompanies experienced sports ownership (Lange, 2020c, 2021e).

On the field, Liverpool have improved gradually since FSG's takeover, finally ending their search for a Premier League title in 2020 after a 30-year wait since their last league title (Premier League, n.d.-c). This was preceded by a Champions League victory in 2019, and sustained efforts to win major trophies coming just short, including a loss in the Champions League final in 2018, and two close-run title challenges for the Premier League falling just short to Manchester City in 2014 and 2019 (Liverpool Football Club, n.d.-b). These efforts did not bring major honors or trophies, but they show a notable improvement from the mediocrity that preceded the FSG era and the early years after their takeover of Liverpool (Premier League, n.d.-c). As such, Henry's ownership has brought success both financially off the field and on the field.

Manchester City. In 2008, ownership of Manchester City Football club was taken over by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan – commonly known and referred to as Sheikh Mansour (“Man City takeover”, 2008; “Manchester City: Timeline”, 2018). A member of the Abu Dhabi royal family, his family's wealth is estimated to lie around an astonishing \$1tn figure (Armitstead, 2008). His personal wealth is tough to measure due to its ties to his family, but it is assumed to be around \$15bn today (Neate, 2021).

The move sent immediate shockwaves through the English football community, with the immediate arrival of a star-studded player in Brazilian superstar Robinho – for a record-high fee among Premier League teams – announced the same day as the ownership change was announced (“Manchester City: Timeline”, 2018).

At the time, their new owner released a statement upon his takeover of the club, in which he makes a fascinating comment:

In cold business terms, Premiership football is one of the best entertainment products in the world and we see this as a sound business investment. That being said, we understand that we need to put money in to get the club to where we believe it can be – and where we think you the fans want it to be. (Mansour, 2008)

Seemingly, Mansour was attempting to show transparency about the nature of his takeover as a business decision, as well as showing his understanding of the need to spend money to find success in English football. He was true to his word, investing \$1.8bn (\$1.3bn) in the club during his first 10 years in charge (Conn, 2018c).

His continued ownership saw Manchester City increase their revenue six-fold between 2008 and 2019, with the only decrease in revenue, again, coming as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on football (Lange, 2020d, 2021f). Along with improvements in financial success, Manchester City have been astronomically successful in the 13 fully completed Premier League seasons since Mansour's takeover, winning their first Premier League title in 2012 in a dramatic final-day finish, and following this success with four further Premier League titles, including amassing a record points tally in the 2018/19 season (Manchester City, n.d.; Premier League, n.d.-e). They have competed in the Champions League in every season since 2011 – a competition for which they had never previously qualified (City Football Group, n.d.; Manchester City, n.d.). As noted by Neate (2021), “since Mansour's takeover, City have won 13 league titles of cups, compared with nine in the previous 128 years since the club was formed in 1880.” Comparisons, in this regard, can be drawn with Chelsea, who have experienced a similar upturn in fortune under their owner, Roman Abramovich, winning more major honors in a short

period of time under wealthy owners than previously possible in a century, or more, before the influx of a seemingly bottomless pit of money to support their ambitions. In a fascinating coincidence, Manchester City faced Chelsea in the Champions League final in 2021, a contest dubbed by Neate (2021) as “Oligarch v sheikh... battle of the billionaires,” drawing further allusions to the similarities between the two clubs’ ownership models. Both models indicate that increased expenditure can facilitate not only increased revenues for a football club, but also can increase the symbolic capital of their cultural product – on-field performance.

Manchester United. Malcolm Glazer took control of Manchester United Football Club in 2005, taking an initial 57% of the club’s shares, before increasing this to a dominant 98% of shares later the same year (“Glazer takes control”, 2005; “Timeline: Glazers and”, 2021). At the time of the takeover, the Glazer family was spearheaded by Malcolm, who died in 2014, to be succeeded in his role by his six children (Manchester United, n.d.-a; “Timeline: Glazers and”, 2021; “Who owns your”, 2021).

The Glazer family was estimated to be worth \$4.7bn in 2015 (Forbes, 2015), with an update on this figure seemingly unattainable from a reliable source. Their ownership of Manchester United is not their sole financial endeavor into the world of sports – Malcolm purchased the NFL’s Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1995 with the family overseeing two Super Bowl victories during their time in charge of the team (Birnbaum, 2021).

The ownership of the Glazer family has overseen a significant increase in financial revenue between 2005 and the present day, with a slight dip in 2020 impacting the club similarly to the others in light of the pandemic (Lange, 2021g). Nevertheless, revenue has nearly tripled in the 16 completed seasons since their takeover (Lange, 2021g). Between 2005 and 2013, the club also experienced great success on the field, winning five Premier League titles and one

Champions League, as well as losing to an exceptionally talented Barcelona team in two Champions League finals during that span too (Manchester United, n.d.-b). This, however, is difficult to attribute to the Glazers' ownership, as such enormity of success was commonplace for Manchester United prior to their arrival under the leadership of the first team's manager – Sir Alex Ferguson, the most decorated manager in English football history (Premier League, n.d.-d). It was in 2013, upon Ferguson's retirement, that the team's fortunes declined drastically. Having won 13 of the first 21 Premier League titles between 1993 and 2013, all under Ferguson's stewardship, the club has not tasted Premier League victory since his retirement (Manchester United, n.d.-b; Premier League, n.d.-f), finishing the next four seasons in lower standing in the table than Ferguson achieved during his 21-year rule in the Premier League era (Premier League, n.d.-d).

Manchester United's sharp decline in form directly correlates with Ferguson's retirement, and implies that the generational talent of his footballing management painted a false visage of the team's success during the early years of Glazer ownership. The post-Ferguson era has seen a continued rise in revenue generated by the club, but vastly inferior results to those experienced on the field. This is a theme for teams operated by the Glazers, who experienced “years of mediocrity” with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers before the arrival of Tom Brady ended their 18-year Super Bowl drought (Birnbaum, 2021) – their failings in ownership are masked over by the acquisition of, or good fortune in obtaining, generational sporting talent.

Tottenham Hotspur. ENIC Sports and Development Holdings Limited (ENIC) took a majority ownership of Tottenham Hotspur Football club in 2000, representing the longest standing ownership structure of the six teams in this study (Chaudhary & Cassy, 2000). Today, ENIC's share of Tottenham Hotspur is 85.55%, with British businessman Joe Lewis owning

70.6% of ENIC (Tottenham Hotspur, n.d.-c; “Who owns your”, 2021). Although Tottenham Hotspur is the only team in this study owned by a Briton, ENIC is based in The Bahamas – a tax haven – creating ambiguity as to whether the club’s ownership is truly British or not (Conn, 2009). Lewis is estimated to be worth \$4.9bn (Forbes, 2022a).

In recent years, Tottenham Hotspur has seen a remarkable rise in revenue, doubling in four years between 2015 and 2019 (Lange, 2020e, 2021h). This period of time also saw the team move into a new state-of-the-art \$1bn stadium in 2019 (Smith, 2019), increasing their maximum home attendance from 36,000 fans to 62,000, opening a potentially lucrative means of increasing revenue in the process (Jack, 2019). The true effects of this increase were not fully realized in 2020 due to the financial strain placed on the club amid the pandemic (Lange, 2021b). This invokes a second aspect of a club’s cultural product – facilities and infrastructure. Improved fan experience and prestige attached to an upgrade in infrastructure increases the value of Tottenham Hotspur’s cultural product.

The on-field performance for the team has not quite matched the astronomical financial success experienced under ENIC’s ownership, with just one major trophy won during their rule, back in 2008 (Tottenham Hotspur, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). However, before ENIC’s arrival, Tottenham Hotspur had never finished higher than seventh place in the Premier League table, a feat they have bettered 13 times during their rule, coming inside the top four places on six occasions, being the runner-up in the Premier League in the 2016/17 season, as well as featuring five consecutive losses in finals since triumphing in 2008 (Premier League, n.d.-g; Tottenham Hotspur, n.d.-b). While not providing the glittering success of copious amounts of silverware during their reign, the ENIC era at Tottenham Hotspur has seen the team move from sustained mediocrity in the 1990s to consistently challenging for major honors among English football’s

elite clubs. There is a notable improvement on the field, but a far more notable one seen in the revenue generated by the club during this period of ownership.

The Cost for Fans

Understanding the realities faced by EPL fans was crucial to gain a clear understanding of their rationale for such vehement protests to the ESL. These protests were arguably the strongest form of backlash that the ESL figureheads faced, and are the clearest form of Mosco's (2009) pillar of praxis seen within this study's political economy overview. As noted by Hamilton (2021), fans from each of the clubs voiced their discontentment toward the proposal. Praxis came through when all six clubs' official supporters' groups releasing statements that condemned the decision, while several of these fanbases – Arsenal, Chelsea, and Tottenham Hotspur – held protests outside of their respective team's stadiums (Hamilton, 2021). Liverpool fans threatened to take down historic banners that lined their home ground, while Manchester United fans took it one step further, breaking into the club's training facilities and speaking directly with the team's manager, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (Hamilton, 2021). What linked these efforts was one consistent criticism – ownership (Hamilton, 2021). Banners, cardboard signs, and trending hashtags on social media all permeated declaring that owners resign and sell the club, inculcated with accusations of greed (Hamilton, 2021). Fans unknowingly participated in not only the pillar of praxis, but also in Mosco's (2009) pillar of moral philosophy – they rejected the current power structures and voiced their desire to improve them on moral grounds.

To understand why fans felt frustration and rejected the ESL proposal, it is essential to understand the realities of EPL fandom in today's political economy landscape, and offer explanations as to why they felt that ownership structures were immoral and unjust. For fans of the EPL, there are two main avenues through which they can watch their favorite teams and

players – television, and going to the matches themselves. This section of the study’s political economy overview covers both phenomena. As indicated in this study’s literature review, when thinking about political economy, the media represents a crucial subset of political economy. Particularly within the world of professional sports, the media and sport are inextricably linked – there is a symbiotic link between these two institutions in their financial co-dependence (Mondello, 2012).

Television. For fans of the EPL in the United Kingdom, live broadcasts of matches are shared across three separate companies – Sky Sports, BT Sport, and Amazon Prime (Premier League, 2021a). These three companies all offer subscription-based packages to watch EPL games: Sky Sports costs £41 (\$56) per month for an 18-month subscription, BT Sport costs £15 (\$20) per month for a 24-month subscription (with an additional £30 (\$41) sign-up fee), and Amazon Prime can be bought for £8 (\$11) per month (Amazon, n.d.-a; BT, n.d.; Sky, n.d.-a). This brings the annual total to £798 (\$1,085) for the three channels.

To foot this bill for the current 2021/22 season gives fans access to 200 live games – 128 on Sky Sports, 52 on BT Sport and 20 on Amazon Prime (Amazon, n.d.-b; BT, 2022; Sky, n.d.-b). Amazingly, this makes up just 52.6% of the 380 matches hosted each season, meaning that nearly half of the games are not televised live. This brings about questions of moral philosophy. Fans are forced to invest significantly into television subscriptions if they wish to watch football matches, which may be financially unviable for many, including children, whose lack of exposure to the sport may reduce the potential to inspire them as the next generation of star athletes and loyal fans. In this sense, even watching football on television becomes a classist issue. Those without the financial security to invest in the luxury of the required subscription packages are disadvantaged as to being unable to watch their favorite teams and players.

It is a significant financial investment for television viewers in the United Kingdom to access the various subscription channels required for the maximum number of games. This may be, in part, to subsidize these companies from the enormity of their own costs in securing the rights to the games. As mentioned in the literature review, television rights for the EPL in the U.K. have reached as high as £5.1bn (Connolly, 2018; Koutroumanides et al., 2019).

Yet despite the investment from these broadcasting companies, their viewership remains miniscule in the U.K. compared to that of terrestrial television channels, such as BBC and Independent Television (ITV). Sky Sports, the dominant figure in EPL broadcasting, reached its highest ever daily viewership in 2021, amassing 4.5 million simultaneous viewers across multiple channels (Sky Sports, 2021b). This pales in significance compared to viewing figures attained by the BBC during their most popular broadcast of 2021 alone – the European Championship final played between England and Italy in July – which had a peak audience of 31 million people (“Euro 2020 final”, 2021). It is important to recognize, however, that the European Championship final was a hugely significant event, whereas the average EPL game would never attract a similar audience regardless of its broadcasting streams. The point, here, is not that EPL games are losing tens of millions of viewers for their broadcasts. Instead, it is that there is significant interest in football among the population at large, and there would almost certainly be an increase in viewership figures should the games be shown on more accessible television channels.

This argument is supported by other recent events in which viewership figures for national tournaments obliterated those seen for EPL games. Looking back to the England national team’s run to the semi-final at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, data from the Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board (BARB) is enlightening. All of England’s six matches

until their eventual defeat against Croatia in the semi-final placed inside the top nine for most watched broadcasts in the country that year, ranging from 13 million viewers to 21 million (BARB, 2018). This tournament was broadcast across BBC and ITV, who showed three of these six matches each on their respective free-to-air channels (BARB, 2018).

This vast disparity in viewership figures shows that there the significant national interest in watching live football is restricted by the financial strain caused by the extortionate subscription prices for EPL games. There is slight solace for fans who wish to watch international football, and particularly international tournaments, as the BBC and ITV continue to obtain rights for major competitions like the World Cup, continuing through to the 2022 Qatar World Cup (“BBC and ITV”, 2014).

Match-Going Fans. While many fans are forced to settle for the comforts of their sofa and the small screen to watch their favorite teams and players, one must also consider those who attend these matches in-person at the stadiums.

In the final season of English football before the beginning of the Premier League, the average ticket price for attendance to the top tier – then called Division One – was £7.56 (around \$10) (Gibson, 2009). Moving forward to today, these prices have risen hugely, with the average Premier League match ticket setting fans back £32 (\$44), according to a study conducted by the league during the 2019/20 season (Premier League, 2021b).

This figure is slightly reduced for those who make the investment to purchase a season ticket, which grants them access to all 19 home Premier League matches over the course of a season, averaging the cost out to £27 (\$36) per match during the 2019/20 season, for the cheapest season ticket offered by each team (Lange, 2019). This brings the average cost of the cheapest season ticket per team to £507 (\$690) (Lange, 2019).

However, this number inflates when considering season ticket prices for the six EPL teams in question in this study, rising to £34 (\$46) per match for the cheapest ticket available, and £637 (\$867) for the whole season (Lange, 2019).

An investment of this nature would allow a fan to watch all of one team's 19 Premier League home fixtures, but does not account for the other 19 games played away from home. Following lengthy protests at the rising cost of away tickets, the Premier League made a fan-friendly decision to cap the cost of away tickets £30 (\$40), beginning in the 2016/17 season – a measure still in place today (Conn, 2019; Jackson, 2016). The same forementioned study found the average cost of away tickets to lie just below this cap at £29 (\$39) (Premier League, 2021b). Therefore, when including the cost of 19 away games, the total investment required for fans the six EPL teams involved in the ESL to watch all 38 Premier League games in a season comes to £1,188 (\$1,616) (Lange, 2019; Premier League, 2021b).

On top of the significance of this investment, one must also consider that the figures for individual matchday tickets and season tickets do not include any additional expenses shipped by match-going fans. There are additional financial costs involved with travel, be that via public transport or to drive and park, and other expenses such as refreshments and team merchandise, not to mention the potentially lengthy time taken to commute to and from matches, particularly away matches, which do not just take place on the weekends, but also during the working week for evening matches. It is undoubtedly a huge investment for fans who wish to support their team.

Considering the cost for fans, it is unsurprising that they retaliated against the ESL proposal. Perhaps this event indicated a critical juncture for fans who wished to voice their frustrations through the political economic pillar of praxis (Mosco, 2009) in acting to better the

nature of English football's power structures. Fans used the pillar of moral philosophy (Mosco, 2009) when considering the perceived injustice of the ESL. Despite these structures existing for decades through neoliberal tendencies that have increasingly pervaded the sporting world along with threats for similar breakaway proposals, exactly why this event in particular ignited fans' desire to protest so vehemently is grounds for future research.

Media Framing Analysis

To conduct the media framing analysis and provide answers for RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, a stringent coding process took place on the 251 ESL articles retrieved from *The Guardian* and *The Times* published between April 18, 2021, and April 27, 2021.

RQ2

From insight garnered from previous scholarship (e.g., Aarøe, 2011; Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1990), RQ2 asked if there were more episodic frames than thematic ones within the data set. From the coding process, 206 of the 251 articles were episodic, with just 45 being thematic.

Episodic frames typically showcased the events of the ESL, discussing it in its current form through the initial announcement, resulting backlash, and ultimate withdrawal from the six teams. Thematic frames tended to revolve around the historical similarity between this event and previous attempts to form breakaway leagues, as well as showing support for systemic change on a social level, rather than focusing on the outrage felt in the immediate aftermath of the situation.

The disparity in the presence of significantly more episodic frames is unsurprising due to the immediacy of the timeframe applied to this study for the news at hand, and the socially visible intense emotional response to the ESL seen in mass protests among fans. As scholarship on episodic and thematic framing highlights, episodic frames imply a strong emotional response among message recipients (e.g., Aarøe, 2011; Gross, 2008). The mass fan protests towards the

ESL show the intensity of this emotional response, arguably heightened by the episodic news coverage of the events surrounding the ESL.

On top of these protests showing the strength of emotion towards the ESL among fans, they also show an overwhelmingly negative reaction towards the ESL, implying a negative depiction of the phenomenon among the media. This implication was shown to be true in the coding process, with 184 of the 251 articles portraying the ESL in a negative light, and just 10 discussing it in an actively favorable manor. 57 articles dealt with the ESL neutrally, generally through either recounting events with no mention of backlash.

RQ3

To identify political economy frames, concepts from both Marx (1977) and Mosco (2009) were used to guide thinking. Frames were considered to fall under the umbrella of political economy when they encompassed typical Marxian concepts of power, class structures, and capital – be that financial, cultural, or symbolic capital. Furthermore, Mosco’s (2009) binary categorization of political economy into processes of either control and survival – representing politics and economics respectively – also assisted the process, providing two major concepts to identify within the data set. Mosco’s (2009) four pillars generated meaningful insights and analyses of the data.

Through the coding process, frames that incorporated aspects of political economy appeared frequently. Two main themes emerged: money and support for fans. To provide an answer for RQ3, this study will first discuss the most commonly found theme of money, manifesting itself into frames surrounding greed, hypocrisy, and the inevitability of the ESL as a result of capitalist ideals. Then, this study will move on to outline and analyze the pro-fan discourse that permeated the articles, moving from frames of outrage at the exploitation of fans,

and, finally, onto the celebratory frame of the fans' power in derailing the ESL. Fan support within the dataset encompassed aspects of Mosco's (2009) pillar of moral philosophy – the media was outraged on fans' behalf due to the perceived injustice of the situation.

Money. Money was at the forefront of much of the narrative focus throughout the data set. It was mostly directed towards owners, who were lambasted for their financially driven prerogatives in pursuing entry to the ESL. Glendenning (2021) epitomized this with his use of currency symbols to replace letters in the words “European Super League”, instead including the name of the competition in his headline as “European \$uper £eague.” Alongside narrative frames of greed, there was a prevalence of hypocrisy and an acceptance of the inevitability of capitalism throughout the articles. This study will now tackle these three money-based frames.

Greed. When coding the data, frames of greed permeated the articles heavily. This came largely through criticism of ownership and the perception of the decision to join the ESL being money-driven for those whose pockets were already full. This frame engaged heavily with Mosco's (2009) pillar of social totality, in acknowledging that societal structures have not only permitted these owners to become extraordinarily wealthy, but also encourage them to pursue even higher financial gain as a result of political capitalistic structures and the free market's potential for infinite wealth.

With many articles featuring quotes and snippets of the backlash to the ESL across the footballing community, the words of Gary Neville were highlighted. Neville, a former Manchester United player and England international, now turned regular pundit on Sky Sports, labeled the plan “pure greed” (McLaughlin, 2021). Neville's tirade came on the same evening that the ESL was announced, and was mentioned in articles from both *The Guardian* and *The Times*, described in the latter as an “icon” of Manchester United (Ziegler & Lawton, 2021). The

significance of this rant comes not only due to its permeation across media channels, racking up millions of views across various platforms, but also due to Neville's visibility and influence as a sporting pundit, featuring heavily in EPL broadcasting. This tirade provided meaningful insights for various sections of this study.

Neville's sentiment was echoed by fans in open letters to *The Guardian*, with one fan saying, "it's all about money and greed," and another saying, "it's just greed" (Wolfe-Robinson, 2021). Fans who wrote to *The Times* said similar things, with one particularly strong condemnation of the clubs' greedy owners, arguing that "this proposal is built on arrogance, greed and desperation, and has been proposed by parties who understand money better than football" ("Times letters: 'Big'", 2021).

The Times went further, strongly criticizing the greedy motivations of the plan in an article attributed not to one journalist, but as one of their newspaper-at-large opinion pieces, referred to as "The Times View":

Of course, it is not hard to see through this self-serving nonsense. The clubs' true motivation is clear enough. The European Super League is simply the latest installment in a long-running campaign by Europe's top clubs to get their hands on an ever larger share of football's financial pot. ("The Times view", 2021)

That this searing indictment of the ESL plot was attributed to the newspaper's general view, by *The Times* nonetheless, the oldest and biggest selling newspaper in the United Kingdom (The Times, n.d.), signifies the collective acknowledgement of the greed at hand in the ESL plot. References to greed throughout the articles indicate the discontentment felt towards owners of clubs who ultimately made the perceptively greedy decision to sign up for the ESL.

The Inevitability of the ESL. Under the macro umbrella of the money theme comes a frame which typically dealt with the ESL with more formal political economy jargon and terminology: the inevitability of the ESL as a result of capitalist ideals.

Liew (2021a) invokes a Marxian reference to “capital,” claiming that “capital has never merely contented itself with a seat at the table, but will invariably demand the power to make its own rules. This, in large part, is what appears to have happened here.” Liew (2021a) invokes Mosco’s (2009) pillars of history and social totality, showing an awareness of capitalism’s history in encouraging the pursuit of infinite financial wealth, as well as recognizing the societal structures that facilitate this pursuit. The direct reference to tenets of political economy is extremely useful for this study, as it provides criticism of capitalist institutions and outcomes which can be used to analyze the media’s response to the situation.

Similarly, Ronay (2021) operationalizes greed as a tenet of capitalism:

Greed is good. Greed will make your market work... But another thing about greed is that it has no off switch or end point. The grabbing hands will grab all they can – and then raise their eyes in search of a little more.

Here, Ronay (2021) summarizes the paradox of neoliberalist free-market capitalism in this statement – greed is essential but endless. It serves to both create and support a product, whilst simultaneously being responsible for its ultimate change or degradation. The idea that the ESL was a shock revelation was rejected throughout the articles, including by Ronay (2021), who writes that “the barbarians have not stormed the gates. They’re already here, sitting at the top table, cramming their maws with quivering slabs of fat, eyeing the pantry door.” In this vein, the ESL was framed as the inevitable outcome of neoliberalist free-market capitalism within the data. In terms of social totality, Ronay (2021) argues that the damage has already been done, and

that the so-called “barbarians” have been granted access to English football and have been dismantling it before the ESL events of 2021.

This is seen consistently, with an acknowledgement that “the central idea behind the Super League was born a long time ago” (Chiles, 2021), a headline that called it “decades in the making” (Goldblatt, 2021), and is traced back to the beginning of the commercialized Premier League in 1992 (Ronay, 2021; Conn, 2021). There is an explicit awareness among journalists within the dataset as to the importance of Mosco’s (2009) pillar of history – what comes before is indicative of, and crucial in understanding, today’s phenomena. Ronay (2021) discusses the political processes of the 1992 formation with reference to Thatcherite neoliberalism:

Many will trace the latest move towards a breakaway back to the formation of the Premier League: Thatcherism in a pair of shorts, and the moment football’s richest clubs were encouraged to open themselves up to a subscription model, creating a wonderfully successful product that money, and the forces of money, were always going to come for in the end.

When phrased like this, Ronay (2021) makes the fascinating point that the formation of the Premier League was not too dissimilar to that proposed for the ESL. The writing was on the wall and was foreshadowed for decades.

Hypocrisy. The hypocrisy of the anguished outcries towards the Super League was not lost on all throughout the articles. Syed (2021) published an especially scathing report on the hypocrisy of the situation in *The Times*, bluntly titled: “Hypocrisy over Super League stinks.” One of the most insightful opinion pieces observed within the entire data set, Syed (2012) claims “the Premier League severed the umbilical link with the rest of the game in 1992,” whilst also

blaming the “demise of Rule 34” which “turned clubs from community assets into profit-making companies.”

As such, he believes the histrionics were “hysterical,” attacking the imbalance within the game due to differing quantities of wealth across clubs, as well as subscription-based cable channels’ blatant hypocrisy in condemning the ESL for commercializing football when they have generated many billions in revenue from doing the exact same thing (Syed, 2021). Along these lines, Gary Neville’s labelling of the plan as “pure greed” on Sky Sports (McLaughlin, 2021) was specifically mocked by David Squires (2021), with Neville ironically portrayed as a caricature of Che Guevara – a key figure in the Cuban Revolution who championed the rights of the working classes – donning a beret and saying, “the revolution will not be on free-to-air.” Where Squires (2021) uses irony to deride outcries of elitism behind paywall subscriptions, Moore (2021) did not have to be as creative in his reporting of the news that Sky Sports, along with the other two licensed Premier League broadcasters, BT Sport and Amazon, publicly criticized the ESL, too. This news alone signifies the hypocrisy of those who have profited lucratively from the commercialization of English football, criticizing the same phenomenon.

As it would be argued following McChesney’s (2008) work, in thinking about the political economy of media, the rejection and outcries from subscription-based broadcasters toward the ESL is hypocritical to the extreme. These companies have contributed toward the concentration of media ownership and reducing access to working-class people and subsequently creating further class divides through disparity in accessibility. Without the media, sport would not be the mega-rich institution that it is today – their financial relationship is symbiotic (Mondello, 2012). *The Times* and *The Guardian* have existed since long before the advent of the television, so these newspapers, along with other traditional forms of media, have more grounds

to criticize the ESL proposal, given that they do not rely on subscriptions and live broadcasting packages.

In this context, one interpretation for the media's hypocrisy comes from Daws' (2009) explanation that "effective communication about social issues is rarely the primary motive of media executives – what is most important is that the content produced is profitable" (p. 148). In this vein, the implication for the ESL and the media's hypocritical desperation to purport the injustice of the ESL despite perpetuating the societal structures that facilitate such proposals is that these companies deemed it most profitable to side with the people, in this instance. Perhaps the hysterical backlash among English football fans indicated that it would be best for profits if shown to side with the discontented people, rather than the ruling elite. These subscription-based companies, like Sky Sports, are simply posturing to feign unity and solidarity with the plight of working people who are exploited by owners and ruling elites – including those within their own boardroom.

Other members of the footballing community displayed similar levels of hypocrisy throughout the crisis. Following protests among Arsenal fans, largely directed at owner Stan Kroenke (Hamilton, 2021), news broke that Spotify co-founder and CEO, Daniel Ek, was prepared to buy Arsenal from Kroenke (Ziegler, 2021). Following these reports, previous Arsenal players – Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira, and Dennis Bergkamp – were reported as being in favor of the takeover (Ziegler, 2021). Whilst Arsenal's wealthy owner faced a barrage of protesting fans requesting his resignation, other members of the club were ready to welcome the next multimillionaire into the boardroom with open arms.

Chelsea fans faced similar complaints of hypocrisy. Following their protests at the ESL, Rudd (2021) criticized their behavior:

The air was heavy with irony. Chelsea fans are viewed as spoilt. They follow a club prepared to spend £72 million on a goalkeeper that few regard as particularly special. They can afford to pay millions in compensation to a succession of sacked managers. Chelsea fans regularly see their team at Wembley or dancing and gurning under sprayed champagne after winning the Premier League title, yet here they were chanting like miners suffering under Margaret Thatcher or French revolutionaries taunting Marie Antoinette.

Here, Rudd (2021) highlights the hypocrisy of fans who wish to be considered champions of the traditional working-class tropes which historically surrounded English football, yet now are the benefactors of a system in which the ruling elite succeed as a result of financial dominance and structurally encouraged free-market capitalism.

Complaints about money and greed were rife with hypocrisy throughout the data sample. As Syed (2021) aptly puts it: “When these guys talk about greed, what they mean, I think, is they object to greed that cuts them out of the pie.” Whether it is broadcasters, pundits, fans, or players, an influx of money is only acceptable when it benefits themselves. This brings into question issues of moral philosophy – one of Mosco’s (2009) four pillars – in that fans who purport for injustice are quick to adjust their moral standing when perceptive similar situations, in terms of morality, occur that benefit them. Again, this is an example of greed.

Support for Fans. In this study’s second political economy frame, the articles coded showed overwhelming support for fans. This frame aligns with political economy in its championing of the general population from which consumers of the Premier League come. Traditionally, these fans were working class, but as outlined in the political economy overview, this may not be quite the case nowadays due to the financial cost required to maintain support for

a Premier League team. The frame of support for fans has two subcategories of more specific frames: outrage on fans' behalf, and praise of fans' power in subverting the ESL plot.

Outrage on Fans' Behalf. To show support for fans, both *The Guardian* and *The Times* made consistent references to the term “legacy fan,” a phrase used by those involved with the ESL to describe clubs’ “traditional fans” who already support their teams, as opposed to “fans of the future” who will be drawn in by the superstardom of the ESL (Devlin, 2021). This term was treated scornfully throughout the data set, with articles quick to brandish this term disrespectful towards those who have been essential to the financial prosperity of the sport.

More explicit support for fans also featured heavily. Graham Potter, manager of Premier League team Brighton and Hove Albion, gave a telling condemnation of the ESL, employing political economy diction in saying, “the fans are supporters, not consumers” (Steinberg, 2021). Potter’s words strike at the ESL’s planned exploitation of football fans, offering support for the ever-increasing financial commitments made by these fans over the years to support their teams amid the rising costs of television subscriptions and tickets for matches. This explicit support for fans pertains to Mosco’s (2009) pillars of moral philosophy and praxis. Outrage here adjudges the situation to be unjust and immoral, with these sentiments encouraging praxis on fans’ behalf through retaliation against the ESL scheme.

The Guardian and *The Times* also showed support for fans through providing them with multiple platforms upon which they could share their opinions on the ESL during the 10-day sample. These took the form of letters to the editor, as well as interviews with fans from various teams’ fanbases – both those six who planned to be in the ESL, and those from other clubs, too. Fans outlined their planned responses to the proposal – cancelling television subscriptions, not

renewing season tickets, protesting outside stadiums, supporting a different non-ESL team and writing to local members of government were all outlined as options (Bannock & Obordo, 2021).

While public opinion pieces are a traditional feature of news publications, the frequency with which they appeared during this time span showed the support for fans and desire among the media to disseminate the feeling of near-universal vexation among Premier League fans at the concept of the ESL breakaway.

Praise of Fans' Power. Although writers like Rudd (2021) were quick to point out the irony of Chelsea fans' ESL complaints, she also found time to praise their efforts in the face of the ESL. During the protests outside the club's home stadium, Chelsea became the first team to officially announce its withdrawal from the ESL. Rudd (2021) called it "a homespun revolt of warm beer and scribbled banners," alluding to this behavior being akin to revolutionary activity among the working class. Fans' efforts were deemed remarkable: "This simply does not happen. Supporters had cried foul and their club had taken note and made a U-Turn" (Rudd, 2021). That the withdrawal came during the disruptive protests indicated that fans had sufficient power with ownership to force a withdrawal on the original decision.

Praise of fans' power was abundant throughout the data set. Spiers (2021) writes that "rarely have such powerful men in sport been rendered powerless so quickly. Football supporters, I'm glad to learn anew, hold the balance of power." Here, we see the rare inversion of an aspect of Mosco's (2009) pillar of social totality. In this instance, rather than the elite ruling classes being victorious, as societally expected, instead they are defeated by the efforts of the working classes. Winter (2021) praises the specific actions of fans from various clubs following their withdrawals:

So fair play to the fans of Chelsea who inundated their chairman, Bruce Buck, with sulfurous letters and emails talking of their sadness about ending long, emotional associations with their club. So fair play to the Liverpool fans who so embarrassed the club by demanding their famous banners, homages to Anfield legends, be removed from the Kop in disgust at Henry's actions. So fair play to the heartbroken City fans who have gone on daytime TV and called out their owners.

These seemingly small actions are framed as having the summative power to dismantle the efforts of greedy owners in their pursuit of the ESL. It is framed throughout as a glorious victory against the odds, as a David and Goliath story in which the ivory towers have come crushing down from the mobilized efforts of the peasantry.

Such was the optimism that followed fans' efforts to disassemble the ESL that people throughout the articles began to question the impact that similar efforts could have on other facets of football and society at large. Ian Wright, former Arsenal and England player, posted a video to his Instagram page that was subsequently published and transcribed in *The Guardian*. He said, "it's very difficult to ignore what can be done by everybody when they come together. Can you imagine how wonderful this world would be if everybody motorized themselves like that for racism or inequality?" (Wright, 2021). One victory seemingly showed the power of the masses when they mobilize for a united cause. That, in its very essence, is the process involved in revolution. Fans' power was shown to be vast, and they were praised for their efforts.

RQ4

Despite the permeation of political economy frames, there are still two frames throughout the articles which do not engage with political economy. From the coding process, two main frames emerged: depictions of the ESL as a crime against football, and football as a part of

national identity. As for the ESL being shown as a crime against football, this study will discuss this theme with its three subcategories of anti-meritocracy, calls for punishment, and calls for reform. Within the discussion of the theme of football as a part of national identity, it is divided into two: national identity for Britons, and xenophobic undertones when discussing foreign involvement in the Premier League, particularly directed towards Americans.

A Crime Against Football. As evidenced in the discussion of RQ3, the ESL was criticized heavily as a subversive plot to financially exploit the consumers of the sport and maximize profit for mega-rich owners. However, from a non-political economic standpoint, and instead from one that discusses football's ideals and core principles, the frame of the ESL as being the antithesis of English football's meritocracy came through strongly in the data set. There were also significant calls for both punishment and reform to avoid similar situations in the future through either determent or regulation.

Anti-Meritocracy. Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola's comments on the ESL featured in articles from both publications (e.g., Hirst, 2021; Jackson, 2021). In a heated press conference, he gave a scathing indictment of the ESL:

It is not a sport where success is already guaranteed or it is not a sport when it doesn't matter if you lose. It is not fair when one team fights to arrive at the top and cannot [qualify] because the success is already guaranteed just for a few teams. (Hirst, 2021)

Here, Guardiola is outlining the essence of how the ESL is contrary to the nature of English football – success is not a guarantee, it must be earned. The possibility of promotion, relegation, qualification for tournaments, and victory are all determined by a teams' performances over a number of seasons. Just like the shirts worn by Leeds United players before their match against Liverpool amid the ESL crisis, you have to earn it. For instance, you must come inside the top

four places in the Premier League to qualify for the Champions League each season – success, in this case manifested as mere qualification to an elite competition, is determined by past performances.

Liew's (2021a) article, the quickest to be published by either publication in response to the ESL crisis, claimed that "this is an idea that could only have been devised by someone who truly hates football to its bones." In this vein, the ESL is seen as a hateful act against the meritocratic nature of football. Liew (2021a), in reference to football, claims that the people who planned the ESL "want to prune it, gut it, dismember it, from the grassroots game to the World Cup" and that they "find the very idea of competitive sport offensive." It is the idea of being contrary to the competitive nature of sport that condemns the ESL to villainy among many of the writers within the data set.

The beauty of this meritocracy was explained in *The Times* thus:

For football fans, the magic of the sport lies in its boundless capacity to conjure up surprises. It is the belief that anything is possible, that dreams can come true, that just once in a while David really can beat Goliath. It is the drama of Leicester City's 5000-1 Premier League title win in 2016, or Lincoln City's 2017 FA Cup run. ("The Times view", 2021).

As noted when previously citing from this article, this is a newspaper-wide attributed piece. This is the view of the publication-at-large, offering the strength of this opinion to publish it en masse. Operationalizing references to events that were scarcely believable at the time in recent English footballing history is a powerful tool used to remind the public of the awe-inspiring potential facilitated by English football's meritocracy. In 2016, Leicester City won the Premier League after barely staying in the division the previous year, only narrowly avoiding

relegation (James, 2016). In 2017, Lincoln City, a team from the fifth tier of English football – one tier below the barometer for professional sides – became the first non-league team to reach the FA Cup quarter finals in 103 years (Hunter, 2017).

These remarkable events were made possible through the meritocracy that lies intrinsically within the structural foundations of English football. Minnows can, and do, win. That the ESL planned on allowing teams to have predetermined qualification based on financial merit rather than sporting merit was seen as a crime against football as it contradicted the meritocracy that makes it worthwhile for many.

Calls for Punishment. Where there is crime, punishment often follows. Liew (2021b) suggests “we do something about it right now, when the big clubs are at their weakest and most penitent,” referring to the 12 ESL teams as “Europe’s dirty dozen.” Calling it “the time to get vindictive,” (Liew, 2021b) summarizes the possibilities:

Points deductions, suspensions, expulsions, eye-watering fines, transfer embargoes: none of this should be taken off the table at this stage. A two-year ban from European competition for all 12 clubs would be a good start (even if Arsenal seem well equipped to impose their own exile).

These sentiments were echoed by many others in the data set. Gary Neville’s famous tirade on Sky Sports upon the initial announcement of the ESL, similarly to Liew (2021b), suggested that the teams should be deducted points, put at the bottom of the league, and had their money taken away (McLaughlin, 2021). Neville said that “it’s a criminal act against football fans in this country. Punish them” (McLaughlin, 2021). The fact that Neville immediately turned to calls for punishment on the same day the ESL was announced shows that punishment was at the forefront of the narrative focus from the very beginning of the debacle.

It was a view shared by fans as well, with a survey published in *The Guardian* finding that 60% of EPL fans – including more than half of those who support the six teams in question – wanted the six EPL teams to face punishment, more than a quarter advocating for heavy fines, and a fifth of fans in favor of a points deduction (Townsend, 2021).

Calls for Reform. Amid the cries for strict punishments to be dished out to the six EPL teams in question, there was also a significant amount of more measured responses that favored structural reform over punitive justice for the complicit parties.

This came from myriad sources all reported within the data – fans, journalists, and even went as high as the British government. Following the ESL announcement, politicians from both the Conservative and Labour Parties were willing to unify in supporting emergency legislation to block the proposal from coming to fruition (Crace, 2021). Crace (2021) remarks that the ESL did something that some thought impossible – uniting the government with the general populace.

Once the dust settled in the wake of the proposal, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced his intention to consider reforms and regulation to English football to remove the possibility of a similar heist occurring in the future (Walker, 2021). Walker (2021) outlined various options for the government in providing reform: implementing salary caps, requiring independent regulators to police the league, setting financial boundaries for clubs, limiting profits for media companies, and reducing government support for teams (such as providing emergency work authorizations for foreign players, and requiring teams to provide their own security exclusively rather than relying on the police to do so). These potential maneuvers have their own benefits and pitfalls, but even the threat of legislative action surely rippled through boardrooms and signified the strength of rejection among the British public. Although the specifics of these reforms may be more appropriate when placed within a political economy

frame, the calls for reform frame, on a wider level, signifies an emotional reaction to the ESL, rather than a political economic one.

This emotional reaction, albeit less hyperbolic than the calls for strict punitive justice, was similarly found in articles that shared fans' opinions. Supporters trusts from all six clubs provided statements berating the decision to join the ESL, with some calling for fan representation in boardrooms and more frequent communication between fans and directors when making decisions about the club (Taylor, 2021). In the months that followed the ESL, this desire was fulfilled by some clubs who now have fan representation on their boards (Chelsea, Liverpool, and Tottenham) and others who have specific forums for fans to speak directly with directors (Arsenal and Manchester United).

However, when it comes to the calls for reform frame, one dominant theme emerged consistently throughout the articles: a desire for the Premier League to employ the German model of ownership. Within the articles, Hesse (2021) explains this model:

In 1998, the German football association changed its laws and allowed clubs to turn their professional football teams into limited companies. However, there was a twist. In order to make takeovers, foreign or otherwise, impossible, the now famous 50+1 rule was put into place, which says that more than 50% of the voting shares must remain in the possession of the parent club, and therefore its members.

In short, the 50+1 rule means that fans still control the clubs. Seemingly, in preventing a scheme like the ESL, this rule worked, as no German clubs agreed to join, despite invitations for both Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund to do so. Throughout the articles, cries for the German model to be introduced to the Premier League are frequent. This came from fans and journalists alike, purported as some sort of miracle fix for the structural issues that plague the

Premier League's current ownership structure. These cries ignored the issues with the German model – four teams in Germany's top league, the Bundesliga, have found loopholes (Hesse, 2021), and, as noted Uersfeld (2021) from the data set, “the wealthy can still bend the rules.” Fans legally have a controlling interest in the clubs, but are “kept on a long leash” (Uersfeld, 2021) when it comes to financial decisions surrounding the teams. Money clearly talks in the Bundesliga, with Bayern Munich, the team with the highest wage bill by some distance (Lange, 2021a), having won the last nine league titles in a row, looking set to win a tenth in the 2021/22 season, hardly illustrating a picture of fair competition. German football is not a utopian paradise as suggested by those who claim the German model will solve all the ills of the Premier League. It is framed by most in the data set, with the exception of Uersfeld (2021) who provides a rational explanation of its pitfalls and loopholes.

The calls for reform frame, whilst being less histrionic than the calls for punishment, is still overly optimistic in seeking an immediate solution to a complex structural problem that has evolved over decades. Government reform and regulation have the political red tape to cut through as a barrier, fan representation appears an appeasement strategy to quell fans' consternation in the wake of the ESL, and the German model is a fairytale fantasy that does not provide the financial integrity and competitive balance that is commonly thought among the data set.

Both the calls for reform and calls for punishment frames, while not strictly political economic in nature, do seemingly invoke one of Mosco's (2009) pillars – praxis. The dataset is actively encouraging systemic change and reform to be applied to the game for the normative betterment of English football. By its very nature, this is encouraging and condoning praxis.

Football as National Identity. With regard to the frame of football as national identity, there is a two-fold discussion to be had. There is firstly football is described as a quintessential pastime within British culture, and second, there are xenophobic undertones with mention of foreign involvement and ownership within the country's footballing landscape, much of which is target towards American involvement.

A British Pastime. Throughout the articles, the ESL ignites impassioned references to football's significance in British culture and history. Again, Gary Neville's ranting tirade provides a good starting point, calling the owners "imposters" who "have nothing to do with football in this country" (McLaughlin, 2021). Boris Johnson spoke about it similarly, acknowledging clubs as "great global brands" who are "also clubs that have originated historically from their towns, from their cities, from their local communities" (Walker, 2021).

Johnson's published comments show not only the awareness and history that surrounds these clubs, but the importance of this history in creating cultural identity for local communities from where Premier League clubs originated. He said clubs "should have a link with those fans, and with the community... It is very, very important that that continues to be the case" (Walker, 2021). A member of Johnson's government, his culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, said in a parliamentary forum that "football is in the national DNA. We invented it and it has helped to define communities. The six clubs that have signed up for the ESL had been tone deaf to this" (Crace, 2021). In this sense, Dowden summarizes the pride felt by the British towards football, both through its invention and its growth in shaping large parts of the country.

Articles demonstrated an awareness among other parts of the Premier League of football as integral to British football, ironically coming from a foreign owner in Everton's Farhad Moshiri:

Every facet of this is against the very idea of British football. Football clubs are community assets, they belong to fans and their communities. This just takes much of the romance away. It just makes it a money game – it’s not football anymore. This is six clubs attacking the very heart of the Premier League. (Hunter, 2021)

From the mouth of an Iranian-born multibillionaire, Moshiri demonstrates an implicit awareness of what makes British football unique – its history. Clubs formed in working class towns and became pillars of local communities – many still exist this way today. One article discusses the “paradox that global fans like football as it is” (Wilson, 2021). Wilson (2021) is aware that the Premier League no longer relies on the British public to finance them as they once did, but instead that the majority of their revenue comes from global fans through broadcasting deals across the world. While that may be true, it is a paradox to believe they would favor a new league filled with dominant teams and controlled by money, because those same fans “have been drawn in by football as it is now” (Wilson, 2021). It is loved by the British for its ties to the country’s history and culture, which is the same reason it attracts billions across the globe.

Xenophobia and Anti-Americanism. In its references to football as a British pastime, the frame of national identity is somewhat celebratory and advocates for national pride, but it also encompasses more concerning undertones of xenophobia and, in particular, anti-Americanism.

This is present both lightheartedly and in more sinister intolerance. In his article for *The Guardian* within the data set, comedian and writer David Baddiel (2021) comments that “there’s something American here” with the ESL. His quip that “Americans have never quite taken to football, because it is a sport that requires a certain tolerance of boredom” (Baddiel, 2021) humorously offers insight into why football is not quite as popular west of the Atlantic Ocean.

However, Baddiel's sentiments are not widely echoed in the same manner – there is a plethora of those who treat the presence of Americanism, both the American owners and in the proposed structure of the ESL as a sports league mirroring that of American sports' franchised competitions, as a poisonous and unwelcome presence in English football. Szymanski (2021) wrote that the “Super League is entirely logical (if you're American).” He goes on to call the American sports system “the villain... where the super-rich join forces to slam the door shut on the underdog” (Szymanski, 2021). He expands:

If you come from a small town playing in a small town league, in other words, you are doomed to remain there forever. That is how American professional sports are organized, with unsurprising results: fans lose interest in anything but the elite teams of the closed league at the top, which in each Major League American sport contains about 30 teams for the entire country of 330 million people. (Szymanski, 2021)

In the proposed ESL, the league would be structured in a similar fashion, with no promotion and relegation, and only a small group of elite teams competing for the top prize. This is one of the anti-American tropes that resonates throughout the articles.

As for the clubs' foreign owners, they are scorned repeatedly in the data set. *The Times* published that “the scheme is a naked attempt by billionaire club owners to incorporate the worst elements of the American football and baseball leagues with their lucrative franchises, shielded from the threat of relegation” (“The Times view”, 2021). Americanization, then, appears to be a cause for concern among the media when discussing the ESL. It is seen as a threat to the traditional values of English football and as an attempt to replicate the structure of American sports leagues and eradicate its pre-existing and long-standing meritocracy. Winter (2021) labeled the American owners of Arsenal, Liverpool, and Manchester United, as well as

Tottenham's British tax-dodging Bahamian-resident owner, as "carpetbaggers," whilst seemingly giving a pass to Chelsea's Abramovich and Manchester City's Mansour, writing, "their motivation seemed more about enhancing their image in the West, not swelling their bank balance."

From the same data set that actively encourages the employment of a foreign country's ownership model – Germany's – there is more than a hint of irony in lambasting others for trying to enforce their own structural change. Furthermore, there is a presumption of cultural understanding from the British media, here, in analyzing the nature of American sports. The concerning presence of xenophobic undertones seems strangely acceptable in the context of the ESL articles. This could provide a fascinating topic for future research, whether such intolerant views, bordering on discriminatory, at times, are more readily accepted in the sporting context of English football.

Discussion

This study's political economy overview established the nature of each of the six clubs' ownership models and relative success, both financial and on-field, as well as the realities faced by fans who wish to watch and support their favorite teams, there are adequate grounds to respond to RQ1 – how does the framework of political economy explain events surrounding the ESL? The information gathered for RQ1 was essential in giving more context for the subsequent research questions

The events in question for RQ1 are the clubs' decisions to join the ESL, and the backlash they faced from EPL fans as a result of this decision.

First, the overview indicates that club owners and directors chose to join the ESL with one main prerogative in mind: money. While there is inconsistency in the on-field performances of each team during their current ownership, with some, like Chelsea and Manchester City, enjoying the most successful eras in their history, and others, like Arsenal and Manchester United, seeing a drastic decline in their performances under their current ownership, there is a consistent feature that each club's ownership shares: an increase in revenue generated by the clubs during their tenure. Further research should consider an investigation into the relationship between expenditure and on-field success. There are myriad streams of expenditure to consider in such a study – infrastructure, buying players, and wage bills could be a good place to begin.

The fixation with money comes through in the framing analysis in the frames of greed, and the inevitability of the ESL. Per Mosco's (2009) pillar of moral philosophy, the greed frame brings about questions of immorality, while the inevitability of the ESL frame highlights the

social totality of neoliberal free market capitalism's support and encouragement of societal structures to exist in which the wealthy are allowed to generate seemingly infinite pits of wealth. The importance of this study is shown here through the injustice of these structures that create unequal wealth distribution and resulting class divides.

These clubs' owners also collectively saw this revenue decline as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which caused them financial strain due to the postponement of fixtures upon the initial outbreak of the virus in March 2020, as well as playing in front of empty stadiums once the league was resumed. This indicates that income from both television and ticket sales was eradicated or reduced hugely for a large portion of time. The financial impact of the pandemic was highlighted in the ESL's announcement press release: "in exchange for their commitment, Founding Clubs will receive an amount of €3.5 billion solely to support their infrastructure investment plans and to offset the impact of the COVID pandemic" (ESL, 2021).

The owners are invoking one of Mosco's (2009) pillars of political economy here – social totality. Current contextual events have shaped the outcomes of their financial revenue, in this instance. They attempt to use the COVID-19 pandemic as a shield for their greed.

Even for those owners who have invested significantly into their clubs, such as Chelsea's Roman Abramovich and Manchester City's Sheikh Mansour, figures and estimates surrounding their continued vast, seemingly ever growing, net worth indicate that obtaining bottomless pits of financial strength is among these owners' collective priorities.

Although COVID-19 caused a reduction in revenue for these clubs, they were still generating vast amounts of money. It is quite possible that the pandemic was a coverup used in an attempt to trick the public into believing in the legitimacy and appropriateness of the ESL plan – a plan which, it is worth noting, has existed for decades, as highlighted in the literature

review, invoking the political economic pillar of history (“Football: UEFA winning”, 1998; Hughes, 1998; Mosco, 2009). Perhaps the pandemic was an excuse operationalized by owners to justify the crassness of this plan.

Fans certainly saw it this way, considering it a thinly veiled attempt to exploit them even further. Having begrudgingly accepted the degradation in fan appreciation from owners and ruling elites over the course of the Premier League, with the price of television subscriptions mounting with the arrival of each new licensed broadcaster, and the elevation of ticket prices throughout the years, this was a bridge too far for the fans of these teams. Their protests toward the ESL proposal all featured discontentment towards clubs’ owners, and were the result of pent-up frustration at the perennially growing disassociation between the corporate billionaires in ivory towers and the fans who have been there for generations and will continue to be there long after their departure. Future research should focus on why exactly the ESL was the critical juncture for many fans, and was the springboard for such widespread praxis (Mosco, 2009).

For both match-going fans and those who watch on television, there is a huge financial burden on match-going fans who simply wish to support their team. It was once a pastime for the working class, who would spend their Saturday mornings lining factory benches, and their afternoons lining football terraces. That world has disappeared, as just watching a game of football is now a luxury afforded to only those with the financial security and stability required to mount the cost. The ESL marked the boiling point for these fans, whose voices were thankfully heard. Their praxis offers the opportunity for normative change and the betterment and fairness of the English football landscape. They unknowingly but actively engaged with tenets of political economy in fighting for a fairer world.

Political Economy Frames

With the information gathered from the political economy overview, this study can now delve more closely into discussing the media framing analysis. The political economy frames of money and support for fans were rife throughout the dataset. There are several reasons as to why this may have been done.

Firstly, criticism of greedy owners and support for fans both show an understanding of the vast symbolic capital inherent in English football. To showcase this awareness promotes unity between media and their audiences, the latter of whom showed strong discontentment from both in-person and online protests from the outset of the proposal. From a cynical standpoint, to resonate with their audiences, these outlets may have felt pressure to disseminate messages with similar vitriolic sentiments. Per Aarøe's (2011) scholarship, the prevalence of episodic themes catered to the strong emotional responses that pervaded the situation.

From a less cynical standpoint, the journalists and columnists throughout the data set are presumably, for the most part, football fans themselves. This is a safe assumption to make given that their professions lie either specifically in the field of football journalism, or in another form of journalism to which they felt a strong enough connection with the ESL debacle to spread their desired messages.

From a media perspective, although these articles were retrieved from online databases, these articles remain a vestige of traditional print media from historic publications. It is possible that those who work for these outlets felt growing frustration at the increase of new reporting channels and subscription-based models that reduced their ability to shape discourse and outcomes around the sport. Given the chance to throw scorn at 21st century media conglomerates, traditional print journalists obliged.

It is heartening to see such explicit awareness of political economy within the data set. It shows a high quality of journalistic rigor to convey the issues at hand not as surface-level and superficial, but instead as the result of myriad political and economic processes that date back centuries. It is similarly heartening to see support for the people in these newspapers. Rather than siding with big industry and corporate greed – as both *The Times* and *The Guardian* may have done given that they are hugely successful financial enterprises themselves – they chose instead to almost unanimously decry greedy owners and show support for fans, allowing them to voice their opinions and empathizing with them. Although the media’s participation in calls for normative solutions may have been the result of horizontal integration and self-serving efforts to profiteer from the situation, there is unprecedented collectivism at play here between various subsections of the English football community. The synergy between football media, fans, managers and players offers a uniquely collective effort toward a single goal of normative betterment of society.

Non-Political Economy Frames

The non-political economy frames also carried purpose, both in the crime against football frame and football as national identity frame. The former was carried out to show inherent structural issues and highlight the necessity for reform within the game. In doing this, these outlets were able to move the narrative of the ESL from a purely critical scathing one, to one in which normative solutions became available. This hopeful message coincided with an increase in thematic frames towards the end of the timeframe, and again referring to Aarøe’s (2011) work, imply that this approach was more suited to a rational outlook that possibly coincided with fans’ gradual reduction in emotional responses to the issues at hand. More research is necessary on the influence of timeframes following a crisis and whether episodic frames feature more heavily in

the immediacy of the event, to then be followed by thematic frames once the proverbial dust settles. Toward the chronological end of the dataset, thematic frames appeared more readily, including calls for reform to the game, highlighting the rational thinking that, with time, removes emotionally driven interpretations of events.

The consistency with which football was described as a part of British national identity indicates an element of patriotic news reporting to feature throughout the dataset. In political economic terms, this shows an awareness of the cultural capital of football across the country's communities. However, the narrative frame of xenophobia and anti-Americanism raise concerns as to the prevalence of racial discrimination and intolerance within the world of English football. In other contexts, the language used would have been deemed unprofessional, inappropriate, and dangerous. More research is needed to understand why it is tolerated within the media when discussing English football when in other contexts it would not have been printed.

Limitations

This study was not without its limitations. First, the coding process was conducted individually, without multiple coders to provide intercoder reliability. Furthermore, the two sources used to retrieve data were very similar in nature – traditional news publications. For a study in which subscription-based media channels were a central focus, including this type of media in the dataset may have offered more varied insights across the sources. Finally, the ESL is a unique case study given its historic significance, which offers wonderful research benefits into seismic societal events, but may not be externally valid as a result of this uniqueness.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Conclusion

This thesis provides a look into the ESL debacle. Whether it becomes a historically significant event in coming decades is yet to be seen, yet indications from the political economy overview and the analysis of the British media's reaction to the debacle signify that similar attempts to create breakaway European leagues built on financial dominance over competitive performance may happen again. This potential inevitability renders this work's findings important, as similar future events may be understood more quickly both as a result of political economy processes and through the lens of media reporting that surround them. For journalists and fans, the backlash seemingly worked sufficiently to quell the efforts of the beast, and should be replicated if necessary in the face of similar breakaway proposals, be they in football or in other sports. The synergy from all sides of the English football community was powerful, and was strong enough to stem the tide of inevitable capitalistic greed and render the desire for evermore financial profit to be redundant in this instance.

In the political economy overview, the ownership structures of each of the six EPL teams were ultimately shown to have one thing in common: increasing the revenue production of their product. With varying on-field success across the teams under their current ownership, increasing revenue streams throughout these tenures were found across all teams in question. Following an investigation into ownership models and the possible intentions of these owners, it was shown that, through the perennially growing cost of broadcasting subscriptions and tickets for matches, the cost of EPL fandom is increasing. This study hopes to provide evidence as to the

immorality of this aspect of English football. This is unjust on fans and creates further class divides.

As for the media framing analysis, it was shown that episodic frames permeated the data set considerably more than thematic frames. Political economy frames encompassed money, with a focus on greed, and a championing of the traditional working-class fans of the EPL and their power in subverting the ESL plot. Non-political economic frames were also identified, being the frame of the ESL as a crime against football's meritocratic structures and calls for punishment and reform, as well as a frame that linked football with national identity, both in support of British culture and in criticism of foreign cultures, particularly the United States.

Directions for Future Research

From this study's findings, there are three main aspects of future research that are suggested. First, as the ESL announcement was seemingly a tipping point for fans, future scholarship should seek to uncover exactly why it was the case that this critical juncture existed.

Second, this study suggests that future research consider the difference in political economy frames between traditional media outlets and commercialized subscription-based media companies, as they may show differing levels of support, synergy and criticism across different class statuses. This work should encompass horizontal integration – the process by which media companies purchase other media companies to control a greater proportion of messaging (Bagdikian, 2005; McChesney, 1999). This work could examine the exact ownership of each channel and see whether there is consistency across media channels owned by the same conglomerates.

The third and final suggestion for future research is the acceptance of discriminatory language and messaging in the context of English football. The frequent presence of xenophobic

and anti-American sentiments was not only surprising, but of great concern. Scholars should examine why it is tolerated in this context so readily.

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