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### **SOCIAL INCLUSION AROUND NEWLY PROMOTED FOOTBALL CLUBS**

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## **Social Inclusion around Newly Promoted Football Clubs**

Vlad I. ROSCA<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The research investigates the role of demography in fostering social inclusion around newly promoted football clubs. After addressing the role of being a ‘fan’, the literature review explains the sports-specific promotion/relegation system and how this can influence the coming together of fans in bonding ties with their local communities. Although the Null Hypothesis is invalidated, showing that a certain connection might exist between the variables, the regression results indicate that demographics alone are not sufficient in order to explain if and how promoted clubs can support social inclusion. The Discussions expand on factors that have to be taken into consideration alongside demographics if social inclusion via football clubs is a matter of interest.

*Keywords:* social inclusion, football, promotion; relegation, fandom, sports economics.

### **Introduction**

A far-flung credence postulates that football can be an accelerator of social inclusion (Tacon, 2007). Southby (2013), though, draws attention about the fact that what the football environment understands under ‘*social inclusion*’ does not necessarily match the government’s policy-making view of it. Kiernan and Porter (2014) mention that governments look at social inclusion policies as political instruments to help achieve their promises. Football clubs take a more relaxed, un-interested approach to social inclusion, rarely making a policy out of it. Social inclusion in football rather happens by itself (fans coming to matches or gathering around the club). Football clubs simply focus on their main activity: to provide sports entertainment. While governments are often a source of controversy within

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the civic society, football clubs are adored, respected and sometimes even regarded as a nest of joy during austerity, especially within their local communities.

Sound recent research has shown that social inclusion is a topic not to be neglected when discussing the roles of football clubs in civic affairs (Coalter, 2007; Cleland, 2010; Kidd, 2008). This research operates with a broader view of social inclusion, avoiding to go down to an exhaustive definition that would direct the study towards several politics-specific views. When talking about football, the relationship between the individual (the football fan) and the larger whole that he belongs to (the community) has to be considered. Social inclusion is a particular type of conduct aiming to help people, grouped within communities, to perceive themselves as significant for the community that they belong to and, thus, to feel valued by that community (Nkambule, 2012; Papadimitriou, Skamnakis & Lazarescu, 2011). Existing research identifies several methods of social inclusion through football, like bringing people endangered by social exclusion to play football together, setting up community schemes together with football clubs, or football inclusion through '*fandom*' (Block & Gibbs, 2017; Dukic, McDonald & Spaaij, 2017; Ekholm & Dahlstedt, 2017).

## Literature Review

This research focuses on the use of '*fandom*' to stimulate inclusion. Fandom describes the state of being a *fan*, a person characterized as an enthusiastic admirer and follower of a football club (Pope, 2017). Following a club helps the fan communicate a statement which describes his condition within the community (e.g. enthusiastic, passionate, sometimes even fearful when thinking about ultras or hooligan groups) and which offers ranking in a certain hierarchy of friends, relatives, fellow supporters etc. (Laursen, 2017; Porat, 2011). Nevertheless, not only fervid fans approach football clubs, but also spectators, maybe not as passionate as fans, but, still, interested observers of the game (Da Silva & Las Casas, 2017; Gillentine, 2003). For the purpose of this research, '*fandom*' is widely defined, so as to encompass all types of people interested in following the matches of a football club, irrespective of their amount of passion.

Following a football club gives the individual an occasion to relate to something bigger than the self (Wann, Hackathorn & Sherman, 2017), to an ideal holding a certain importance for the community. Going to the stadium is an opportunity for social participation at a shared experience alongside other members of the community (Bale, 2000; McGuire, 2008; Parnell, Pringle, Widdop & Zwolinsky, 2015; Watson, 2000). As a sport of the masses with rules easy to understand, football is not restricted to specific social categories, but addresses people from all walks of life, encouraging social interaction (Burdsey, 2006; Jeacle, 2017).

Football clubs can be regarded as members of the third sector of the economy (Dejonghe, 2004). The origins of the game are closely linked to the coming

together of individuals (Schulze-Marmeling, 2000). Football has started spreading out from a scholastic environment and has then very fast moved on to similar social groups such as churches, pubs, universities or factories, under whose patronage teams were formed in order to offer leisure activities to the group members. The representative communities for football clubs nowadays are the geographical areas they belong to (countries, municipalities, towns etc.). By allowing individuals to foster ties to their local geographical communities, football clubs generate a sense of belonging to particular values of that area and provide locals with civic honor, fulfilment and delight (Brown, Crabbe & Mellor, 2008; Cleland & Dixon, 2015). The football club transforms into a common denominator of shared values partook by a mass of people (Wright, Leong, Webb & Chia, 2010: 21). These common values synergize into a shared urban identity ideal of club support, glueing disparate community members together into a common pursuit to defend their cities' representative clubs' crest and colors in '*battles*' with clubs of other communities (Eckstein & Delaney, 2002).

A peculiar method of breeding social inclusion belongs to newly promoted clubs. The Promotion/Relegation system, based on a pyramidal architecture, is specific to most football leagues in the world (Mathis, 2013: 203). At the end of a season, the lowest ranked teams in a division relegate to the next inferior division, changing places with the best placed teams in the lower division. The number of teams descending is matched by the number of teams ascending (Morrow, 2003). Winning promotion is regarded as an achievement, since the club needs to finish top of its division in order to be granted access to the superior level (Thomas, 2014). Consequently, promotion is celebrated by the fans, who tend to come closer to teams performing well (Schubert, 2010). Generally, a football club gains a boost in popularity between seasons (after it has won promotion and prior to the start of the new championship). The euphoria that is generated within the local community accompanies the promoted club throughout the new season in the upper division. With the newly promoted football club becoming an icon of the local community, people also start finding their ways to the stadium (Cante, 1999: 260). Not only is the competition a novelty, but the opposing teams also display better squads, with more experienced footballers, representing real value contest for the promoted team, drawing attention within local communities.

What sparks fan attention is a kind feeling of benevolent support for the promoted team. Irrespective of how well or poor the team is going to perform in the new league, the community stands by it as an act of thankfulness for the joy that it has brought by winning promotion and by offering the chance to witness upscale matches and unprecedented 'big-brand' opponents in the near future. Taylor (2004: 39-40) discusses about a mutually beneficial relationship between the football club and the local community, whereby people offer their unconditioned support for the club, and the club pays back with a sense of civic pride that people can associate with. To a certain extent, people can also accept defeat, compensated by the previously obtained performance of promotion. Insofar, an 'uninterested' fan

loyalty can be observed, with people standing by their team as an act of gratitude, regardless of the sporting results in the upper division. Promoted teams raise such an interest in their local communities that they attract not only the usual hardcore fans ('bad weather' fans), but people from all walks of life in the community who want to be part of the experience ('good weather' fans). Therefore, greater populations should also lead to greater crowds at the stadiums and to better social inclusion. Promotion of the local team thrills community members and empowers them to manifest. What starts from the core of several few acquainted fans extends to other members of the local community. People begin making themselves evident (visible and heard) by showing or displaying support for the local football club. In acting so, these 'connectors' (Gladwell, 2000: 38) spread an epidemic and attract the attention of fellow community members. Connectors become brand advocates who can help in increasing match attendances and, theoretically, based on the 'connectors-epidemics' hypothesis, also social inclusion. The glueing factor that brings community members together is a shared passion for the promoted team. Under this set of circumstances, community can be defined as a unified body of individuals with shared interests, living in a particular area and interacting amongst themselves within the boundaries of that common location (Voinea, 2015: 109).

## Research Question and Research Hypotheses

The aim of this research is to test whether any correlation exists between demography and the attendance figures of the promoted clubs in their first competition season in the upper league, i.e. whether the size of the urban communities where the promoted club originates from influences attendances. The research question is: *How do demographics foster social inclusion around newly promoted football clubs?*

The variable used to measure the size of inhabited areas is 'population': the aggregate number of people or inhabitants occupying a particular area or place (in this case, the football club's place of origin) regularly or for a specific period of time. The variable used for defining the 'social inclusion' is the average attendance at home games per season, measured for each of the newly promoted clubs.

The Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) claims that no connection exists between population and spectator attendances. In the case  $H_0$  is rejected, the Alternative Hypothesis ( $H_a$ ) stipulates that the higher the population of an urban community, the higher also the attendance figures at games, so the more people included within the civic ideal.

$H_a$ : *Population size supports the development of social inclusion (and community spirit) around newly promoted football clubs.*

However, looking at aggregate demographics could diffuse outputs since a great part of the total population would not even fall under the 'targeted' segment

of football fans. One of the factors influencing attendance figures can be male demographics. It is commonsense that most football spectators are males, so:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Male demographics have got a higher impact on generating social inclusion around the football club than aggregate demographics.*

Accordingly, the opposite claims that:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Female demographics have got a lower impact than male demographics have on generating social inclusion around the football club.*

## Methodology

The thesis statement starts from several interconnected facts, namely that: (1) Winning promotion is an achievement that directs the attention of civic society towards the football club; (2) This is mostly true for clubs from urban areas with mid- to upper-sized demographics, with strong local networking roots; (3) People within the local community wish to come closer to the football club and attend the upper division games; (4) The bigger the population, the wider the share of the local civic society that can be influenced by an '*epidemics of passion*' initiated by a handful of loyal fans; (5) Once the shared passion is generated within the local community, the more people will want to be part of the unique experience of live stadium attendance.

For supporting the research rationale and the research question, this study starts from a belief that *football clubs in greater inhabited areas can hope for better civic support than those in less inhabited ones*. The research wants to test the veridicity of this belief. The '*inhabited area*' (city of residence of the football club) is banalized to the population number (subset of demographics), which becomes the independent variable. The study tests whether population (as an aggregate number) motivates the civic society to manifest any sort of community spirit (and determine people to go to the stadium). '*Community spirit*', at its turn, is flattened, and introduced as variable in the statistical study through the average match attendance per season at home games.

The Romanian football league (*Liga1*) has been chosen as a case study. Promotion from the second to the first division is considered. Raw data about population has been collected from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (INSS), based on the national census from 2011, as well as on additional studies in 2016. Data about match attendances was gathered from the databases of [www.soccerway.com](http://www.soccerway.com). Average match attendance is calculated as the aggregate number of people who have visited the matches played by the football club at its home venue in the first season after promotion, then divided by the number of fixtures concerned. The study takes into consideration seven *Liga1* seasons (2010-2017). Each promotion was considered independently, irrespective of how many times the same team has been promoted or relegated. 23 situations of promotion to

Liga1 have been identified between 2010 and 2017. Two of them were excluded from the study: Sportul Studentesc (2010-2011) and Rapid (2014-2015) are clubs from Bucharest, the city with the most registered teams in Romania. Sportul and Rapid are not the only representative clubs for Bucharest. The attention of the civic society in Bucharest is divided amongst several representative teams, and even neighborhoods traditionally associated with one club (i.e. *Giulesti* for Rapid) accomodate supporters of rival clubs. Attention for a newly promoted club in Bucharest is diffused amongst different neighborhoods, making it difficult to identify a „den” that provides the vast majority of supporters, as it happens in mono-club cities.

The statistical analyses that have been conducted with the help of the Data Analysis Tools in Microsoft Excel were: (1) A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a F-Test to test the Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ); (2) A Correlation Analysis to determine the strength of the relationship between the variables; (3) A Regression Analysis to find out whether average attendance figures/season can be predicted based on population. The regression equation used is:

$$y_{Att.} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Pop. + \varepsilon$$

where  $y_{Att.}$  is the dependent variable,  $\beta_0$  the intercept value,  $\beta_1 Pop.$  is the coefficient of population for prediction, and  $\varepsilon$  the error term.

## Results

The results of the statistical analyses invalidate  $H_0$ . In the case of the F-Test, the higher value of F as opposed to the F Critical one-tail value (3.92 vs. 0.47) rejects  $H_0$ . This is indicated by the ANOVA analysis as well, where  $F > F_{crit}$  (21.74 vs. 4.08). The results of the correlation analysis are displayed in *Table 1*. The 0.3 correlation value indicates a weak uphill positive linear relationship between aggregate population and average match attendances. Values close to 0.3 also exist for the relationships between match attendance and masculine, respectively feminine population, with a rather unexpected result which shows a slightly higher influence of the female population (0.31 vs. 0.30).

*Table 1: Correlation between average match attendance and Average Population, Male Population, and Female Population*

	Pop. Masc.	Pop. Fem.	Average Attendance	Total Population
Pop. Masc.	1			
Pop. Fem.	0.999011653	1		
Average Attendance	0.303755969	0.317064513	1	
Total Population	0.999743113	0.999762464	0.310617224	1

*Note:* own representation

The regression analysis (*Table 2*) is coherent with the rest of statistical tests carried out. The Significance F value of 0.264 lets understand that the analysis is not statistically relevant. The Multiple R (0.28) indicates a weak relationship: match attendances of newly promoted teams cannot be predicted even if population figures are known. Population alone is not enough to predict how many people will go to the stadium to watch the matches of the promoted team in the new division, nor does it have any influence on social togetherness or civic spirit.

*Table 2: Regression statistics, ANOVA and Intercept results*

REGRESSION STATISTICS			ANOVA					
				df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Multiple R	0.286543761		Regression	1	3893246.295	3893246.295	1.34177	0.2648
R Square	0.082107327		Residual	15	43523305.23	2901553.682		
Adjusted R Square	0.020914482		Total	16	47416551.53			
Standard Error	1703.394752							
Observations	17							
	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	2955.64152	637.0090415	4.639873735	0.000320631	1597.888888	4313.394152	1597.888	4313.39
	0.002020066	0.001743913	1.158352218	0.26483093	0.001696997	0.003737129	-0.001696	0.0057

*Note:* own representation

## Discussions

Even if the  $H_0$  is invalidated by the F-Tests, letting understand that population size might support social inclusion through newly promoted clubs, the results of the correlation analysis and of the regression analysis are too feeble for allowing predictions of social inclusion to be made solely based on demographics. Results show that population size alone is not an evidence for and cannot support social inclusion around newly promoted clubs. While winning promotion usually generates euphoria within the community, it is not the mere size of the community that backs up this exhilaration.



As an example, Victoria Branesti, whose home city has a population of only 4097, has managed a better social inclusion for its community than did other bigger and more powerful towns. Victoria has been a club with a rather powerful ‘stickiness’ factor during the 2010-2011 season, if thinking that it has ‘glued’ 57% of the cities’ inhabitants around it (average attendance 2328), becoming an icon for the locals and letting them draw domestic pride and appreciation from the fact that a tiny club from the outskirts of Bucharest offered the opportunity of top division football. In comparison, larger cities, such as Bistrița (pop. 286225, av. att. 2018) or Medias (pop. 58571, av. att. 1681), were nowhere near Branesti when it came to social inclusion. Table 3 shows the percentage of people from the local community that have attended the football games of their team in the season after promotion (computed as percentage of the average match attendance within the total population).

Table 3: Percentage of population that has attended the games of the local club in the first season after promotion

Club	%	Club	%
2010-2011		2013-2014	
Victoria Branesti	57%	Corona Brasov	0,18%
U Cluj	0,43%	ACS Poli	1%
2011-2012		FC Botosani	1%
Ceahlaul	3%	Sageata Navodari	4%
Concordia Chiajna	15%	2014-2015	
Petrolul Ploiesti	3%	ASA Tîrgu Mures	4%
CS Mioveni	7%	CSU Craiova	2%
Voința Sibiu	1%	Poli Iasi	1%
2012-2013		2015-2016	
Viitorul Constanța	18%	ACS Poli	1%
Gloria Bistrița	1%	FC Voluntari	3%
CSMS Iasi	0,49%	2016-2017	
Gaz Metan Severin	4%	Gaz Metan Medias	3%

Note: own representation

Branesti (pop. 4097) and Chiajna (pop. 14259), with two of the lowest populations, attained the best “supporters-to-population” ratios overall: 57% of

the population of Branesti and 15% of the population of Chiajna visited the home matches of the local teams in the first season after promotion.

Since demographics alone cannot explain if or how football clubs manage social inclusion, other influential factors have to be searched for in order to clarify what determines locals to gather around their football club after promotion. Several of these factors can be:

- a) The importance held by the football club in the community. When promoted in 2013-2014, Corona Brasov only attracted 0,18% of Brasov's population at its games, the lowest figure of all 21 clubs analyzed. Not only that Corona lacked history and tradition (having only been founded in 2010 and winning back-to-back promotions from the fourth to the first division in the space of four years), but they also competed in the same town with FC Brasov, the main club of the town (established 1936). The difference in history and tradition was accentuated by a difference in the fan-base: Corona has been nothing more than a second-choice for a handful of Brasov's inhabitants of watching some extra football beyond their favorite club, FC Brasov. In cities with divided attention, social attention is usually directed towards the club with the richest tradition;
- b) The number of times that the promoted team has gained access to the first division. Victoria Branesti has generated such a high degree of social inclusion because 2010-2011 was the first and the only season ever when the team played in the top division. The local population drew closer to witness an aureate performance which they knew that the small club would have probably find it difficult to sustain on the long run. On the other hand side, 'yo-yo' teams such as Iasi or Medias, which alternate between divisions and whose fans have seen top flight football previously, did not manage good inclusion, once because top division was not a novelty any longer for them, and second, because top league was actually the norm, the place where the cities' inhabitants expected their teams to be, as opposed to Branesti, where promotion to the first division has been regarded as an unexpected accomplishment;
- c) Rival leisure offerings in the community. In many cases, the smaller the city of residence, the fewer also the leisure activities for its inhabitants. If football is the only or one of the few things that people can enjoy in their time-off, then the local club will also attract people close to it and accelerate their inclusion. It is yet once again the case of Branesti or even Mioveni (7%), communities with no theatres, cinemas, concert halls, or shopping centers, and with a reduced number of parks and recreation grounds. Watching football becomes one of the few opportunities that motivates people to come together;
- d) The ownership/management. During recent years, a widespread behavior of owners/managers considered by football fans as being unprofessional and often even unethical has led to a self-imposed social exclusion of football fans;

- e) Branding. Due to the aforementioned mismanagement, several Romanian football clubs have lost their brands in judicial actions and were obliged to form new entities, under new registration numbers and with new names. These ‘*phoenix clubs*’ have led to a justifiable questioning about the authenticity of the club: once the real brand has been lost, is the new club actually the old one, or not any longer? Even if the phoenix club has continued under the same organizational structure, with the same management and with the same roster, most of the fans only saw it as an imitation of the authentic club and withdrew their support and societal involvement. In spite of having won promotion to the first league, CSMS Iasi (2012-2013), ACS Poli Timisoara (2013-2014, 2015-2016) and CSU Craiova (2014-2015) did not have (in fans’ perception) connections any longer to the former, authentic and emblematic clubs of their communities: Politehnica Iasi, Politehnica Timisoara and Universitatea Craiova. The ‘*un-branding*’ of traditional clubs has actually led to social exclusion, with people moving away from the stadiums and breaking their community ties.

## Conclusion

Although existing, the connection between population and spectator attendances is too weak in order to demonstrate that population size by itself can explain attendance figures. One of the research limitations would be its simplicity: it only looks at one single, rather static variable (population), to explain a complex and dynamic phenomenon (match attendances). Spectator numbers depend on a synergy of factors, some of which have been described in the Discussions section. Only when correlated with these other factors can population reveal anything about attendance figures. The paper showed that some of the promoted football clubs have set up a better participation, however, not thanks to population size, but to the other factors discussed. Another limitation is that this research has only focused on the case of Romanian football, which makes the extrapolation of findings difficult. A further research idea could consist of comparative studies between the findings of this article and the situation in other countries (mainly the Western European football leagues) in order to test if the same situation applies there as well.

### *Limitations*

In spite of the statistical results not being relevant enough, a notion still worthy of consideration is the ‘*epidemics of passion*’. Psychological studies have demonstrated that this sort of euphoria generates a come-together desire amongst members of a community (Godin & Gladwell, 2001). The concept holds seeds of reality in football as well (with the promotion of the local club generating joy

within the local community and motivating fans to come to the stadium), so it would be interesting to dig in deeper and find connections to the third sector of the economy. What this study was confronted with is that, often, not economics can explain certain movements (less so the mere demographics in this case), but knowledge transfer from interdisciplinary approaches is needed to reveal in-depth backgrounds.

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