

Scope and Determinants of Multisupporterism: The Case of Union Saint-Gilloise Supporters

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Abstract

While research on football supporterism has extensively examined attachment to a single club, less attention has been paid to multisupporterism, i.e., the partisan attachment to more than one team. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the prevalence of multisupporterism and identifying factors associated with it, on the basis of an online survey conducted among supporters of Union Saint-Gilloise, a Belgian club. The results show that multisupporterism is widespread and concerns 62.3 % of Union supporters. Contrary to what the literature suggests, neither the intensity or duration of involvement nor geographical proximity or performance motivations are linked to multisupporterism. Instead, exclusive Belgian nationality and the importance attached to family tradition are negatively associated with multisupporterism. These findings suggest that multisupporterism does not necessarily reflect weak or volatile loyalties and highlight the need for investigation, including conceptual reflection on what it means to 'support' clubs in contemporary football.

Introduction

Since the end of the twentieth century, an increasingly substantial body of social science literature has focused on supporterism, understood as the full range of activities undertaken by supporters particularly in football, this 'most serious of trivial matters'¹. Compared with the mere football fan, supporters are characterized by a lasting identification with a team² and by an affective, partisan attachment to it³, expressed through a variety of practices⁴, including regular match attendance, vocal support in the stands, the display of club colours and symbols, and the expression of joy or sorrow depending on the team's performances. Research perspectives on supporterism are multiple, addressing issues such as supporterism and violence⁵, supporterism and politics⁶, styles of supporterism⁷, and 'supporter careers'⁸.

With the exception of studies on friendships between supporters of certain teams⁹, research addressing supporterism generally reduces it to 'monosupporterism'¹⁰, understood as the relationship of attachment and support that an individual maintains with one and only one club within a given sport¹¹. Hence, 'multisupporterism' defined as an individual's partisan attachment and support for several clubs, whether in an equivalent or hierarchical manner,

appears to remain largely under the radar of the literature, as if it was a marginal phenomenon unrelated to forms of supporterism directed toward a single club. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to contribute to the assessment of the prevalence of multisupporterism' and to examine whether and why certain supporters are more inclined to support multiple teams.

Examining multisupporterism appears even more relevant currently, as broader structural developments seem to promote its spread¹². First, migration flows¹³ lead to the settlement of individuals of foreign origin who may maintain ties of attachment to a club from their country of origin¹⁴, while their present geographical anchoring may also encourage them to support a club in the host country¹⁵. Second, fostered by contemporary information and communication technologies, the 'hypercommodification' of football¹⁶, resulting from the expansion of market logics into an increasing number of spheres of activity at both the European and global levels, has considerably intensified individuals' opportunities for exposure to the activities of a very wide range of clubs¹⁷. This process is notably driven by the increased broadcasting of national and continental competitions, particularly through satellite broadcasting, pay television and online streaming platforms¹⁸, the marketing of a broad array of team-branded products (jerseys, scarves, merchandise¹⁹), as well as the numerous websites and social media platforms that enable supporters to stay informed and interact about the life of a club²⁰.

From a historical perspective, however, multisupporterism should not be understood automatically as a purely contemporary phenomenon. Localised and exclusive club loyalties were themselves the product of industrialisation and urbanisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when football became embedded in working-class communities and local identities²¹. Subsequent rise of television from the 1960s onward, yet gradually expanded

supporters' horizons beyond the local club, making the support of multiple teams across different territories increasingly feasible and, eventually, commonplace²².

Another recent trend that may encourage multisupporterism nowadays is the growing multi-club ownership (MCO) phenomenon (e.g. City Football Group, Red Bull, Eagles, 777, Black Knight)²³. It is increasingly common for clubs competing in different leagues to share the same owner²⁴. However, supporter relations within such ownership structures remain underexplored. Existing research suggests tendencies toward distrust or rejection, especially among supporters of less affluent clubs toward affiliated clubs endowed with greater financial resources²⁵. Conversely, MCO may be associated with improved sporting performance²⁶, which could foster more positive perceptions among results-oriented supporters toward other clubs owned by the same investor.

By fostering forms of long-distance supporterism²⁷, these structural developments encourage a more composite form of supporterism²⁸, characterized by more flexible and less exclusive logics of attachment than those associated with traditional supporterism²⁹. They give rise to new supporter profiles whose practices are more consumer-oriented, less locally rooted³⁰, and more exposed to global narratives³¹. In the influential Giulianotti's typology of football spectators³², these developments correspond to '(modern) fans', understood as consumers of a brand associated with an internationally renowned team selected on the global market of major clubs, and to '(post-modern) flâneurs' whose cosmopolitan attachments shift from one global club to another. However, although increasing numbers of individuals report supporting clubs competing in foreign leagues, this does not necessarily imply a decline in loyalty toward the domestic team they also support³³.

To shed further light on the phenomenon of multisupporterism, we draw on an online survey conducted in mid-2023 among supporters of Union Saint-Gilloise (USG), a historic

Brussels club that returned to the Belgian first division (D1A) in 2021. The primary aim of this survey was to analyse supporters' views regarding various scenarios for a larger stadium³⁴. One question, however, invited respondents to indicate, where applicable, up to four additional clubs they supported alongside USG. Building on the dataset compiled from the 645 completed questionnaires collected, we examined the prevalence of multisupporterism and whether some characteristics were associated with a greater likelihood that a USG supporter would co-support one or more other teams. To this end, on the basis of the existing literature on supporters, we considered both standard socio-demographic factors (place of residence, nationality, and so on) and variables specific to the practice of Union supporterism (length of supporter involvement, frequency of attendance at home matches, and so forth).

Hereafter, we begin by providing a brief review of the literature on the explanatory variables of supporterism for a single team, in order to situate our research hypotheses within this body of work. We then present the characteristics of our case study and its dataset, as well as the theoretical model guiding the quantitative logistic regression we conducted. Next, we report and discuss the results of our survey, before concluding.

Literature review and research hypotheses

Attachment to a club is portrayed as the outcome of a gradual process of affective and social identification with a group³⁵. This bond is expressed through sustained emotional involvement,

nurtured by interactions among supporters, club symbols, and the repetition of supportive practices³⁶. This sense of belonging to a particular community leads individuals to openly present themselves as supporters of a given team, whether among fellow supporters, in front of outsiders, or in relation to opposing fans³⁷. The intensification of attachment to the club develops over time and through concrete acts³⁸. Such repeated forms of engagement generate symbolic capital, thereby consolidating the supporter's position within a shared community³⁹. Consistency in support tends to foster a durable and potentially exclusive attachment against multisupporterism, further reinforced through ongoing socialization within the supporters' 'in-group'⁴⁰.

What leads an individual to identify as a supporter of a team? What factors tend to generate, strengthen, weaken, or even sever the bond of partisan attachment that a supporter develops toward a given team? While studies addressing these issues generally focus on monosupporterism, the characteristics and motivations that drive support for a single club, which are commonly highlighted in the literature, can also be related with the likelihood of multisupporterism. On this basis, we develop a series of hypotheses explaining the latter.

The level of supporter involvement: a distinguishing factor in the career of a club supporter

Two criteria are commonly used to distinguish different levels of engagement in supporterism for a team, corresponding to different stages in a 'supporter career'⁴¹. On the one hand, the intensity of supporterism makes it possible to assess the strength of an individual's bond of attachment and support toward their club⁴². On the other hand, the longevity of this supporterism makes it possible to measure the supporter's 'fidelity' or 'loyalty' toward their club⁴³. Our two first hypothesis:

H1: As the intensity of supporterism for a given club increases, the likelihood of multisupporterism decreases.

H2: As the duration of supporterism for a given club increases, the likelihood of multisupporterism decreases.

Rationale reasons for supporting a club: geographical proximity, domestic origin, and club performance

One of the reasons traditionally put forward to explain why an individual becomes a supporter of a club lies in the club's location in their city, whether their city of origin or their current place of residence⁴⁴. This (socio-)territorial anchoring fosters a sense of belonging to one's city, which leads football fans to support the club, or a club, from *their* city and to maintain a high and enduring level of loyalty toward it⁴⁵. Following this argument, we formulate our third hypothesis as follows:

H3: the likelihood of multisupporterism decreases when geographical proximity is a source of supporterism for a given club.

However, the importance of present territorial anchoring as a source of supporterism for a geographically proximate team tends to be qualified⁴⁶, particularly in multicultural urban contexts, where the diversity of migratory trajectories and social identities complicates the relationship between local football fans and local clubs. In such settings, having migrated from another country may involve individuals in a process of integration into the host society through supporterism for a local club, while also remaining a vector of attachment to their country of origin and to a club associated with it⁴⁷. This is particularly the case for individuals holding a foreign nationality, who are at once more likely to occupy an early stage of settlement in the

host society and to maintain a direct, living connection to another country. Following this argument, we expect that:

H4: Individuals holding a foreign nationality are more likely to engage in multisupporterism than in monosupporterism.

Another classic explanatory factor of supporterism for a team relates to its (strong) sporting performance⁴⁸. A competitive team that consistently achieves positive results is more likely to attract new supporters, particularly younger individuals and those who are sensitive to performance-related criteria⁴⁹. Becoming a supporter of a successful team enables individuals to enhance their self-esteem and social prestige⁵⁰. ‘Victory supporters’ tend to strengthen their identification with a team during periods of success, a tendency reflected in a more frequent use of the pronoun ‘we’ under such circumstances, and to distance themselves from the team during less successful periods⁵¹. Accordingly, our fifth hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H5: When sporting performance constitutes an important motive for supporting a team, individuals are more likely to engage in multisupporterism, as this increases their chances of maintaining the benefits associated with supporting a successful team.

Subjective reasons for supporting a club: socialization and associated image

Among the more subjective reasons underlying attachment to a club is the embedding of the supported club within the social network to which the individual belongs⁵². This network may be familial or based on friendships⁵³. The anchoring of supporterism within such a context of socialization can be so strong that the motive of social bonding takes precedence over interest in matches and in the life of the club itself for the supporter concerned⁵⁴. From this perspective we make the next hypothesis:

H6: The likelihood of multisupporterism decreases as supporterism for a club is rooted in a context of family or peer socialization.

Finally, several explanatory motives for supporterism are related to what constitutes a club's 'image'⁵⁵, including the aesthetics of its jerseys or stadium, the general atmosphere in the stands, its values and history, and the political commitments of some of its supporter groups⁵⁶. When the 'cultural norms' conveyed by a club serve as structuring vectors of partisan identification, they may lead supporters to engage in explicit defensive behaviors when the image of the supported club is perceived as threatened or attacked⁵⁷. The national and international popularity of FC St. Pauli, a relatively modest German club in terms of sporting performance, can thus be explained in part by the activism of its fans, who are openly anchored on the political left⁵⁸. Similarly, although Olympique de Marseille has achieved more limited sporting success in recent years, it continues to attract broad national and international support, partly due to the distinctive atmosphere of its Stade Vélodrome, characterized by intense animation and vocal mobilization in the stands⁵⁹, turning it into a cauldron. Hence, our last hypothesis is that:

H7: The propensity for multisupporterism decreases as supporterism for a club is primarily driven by the image associated with it.

Materials and methods

Supporters of Union Saint-Gilloise: a relevant case study for investigating multisupporterism

To contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of multisupporterism in the world of football, we took advantage of an online survey conducted in mid-2023 among supporters of the Brussels club Union Saint-Gilloise (USG). Several elements indeed suggest that supporters of USG are likely to constitute a particularly relevant case for the study of multisupporterism.

First, Union does not represent a big club competing in one of the top five national leagues, namely the German, English, Spanish, Italian, and French championships, which are the most competitive and widely followed⁶⁰. As a result, its supporters may be more inclined to follow foreign clubs that offer a more attractive level of play and achieve stronger performances on the European stage⁶¹.

Second, the club is located in Brussels, a city in which no fewer than 46 % of residents have at least one parent born abroad, and more specifically in an area of the region that concentrates a significant share of these residents of foreign origin, namely 44.4 % in Forest and 55.9 % in Saint-Gilles⁶². These populations include both long-established expatriate communities, particularly stemming from Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese migration, and more recent arrivals linked to the free movement of people within the European Union, especially French expatriates⁶³. Such a substantial presence of residents of foreign origin in the city where the club is based increases the likelihood that its supporters also support a team from their country of origin.

Third, although it remains the third most successful Belgian club in terms of titles won, Union experienced nearly half a century, from the 1973–74 to the 2020–21 season, in the lower divisions, including two years in the fourth division. Such a prolonged period of sporting decline is conducive to the development of multisupporterism among its supporters, who may

be more inclined to co-support a more successful club. Since its return to Division 1A, USG has once again become a competitive club, finishing each season in the top three and winning the national title at the end of the 2024–25 season. Its recent sporting performances have attracted many new supporters⁶⁴, some of whom were already supporting another club and did not necessarily cease to do so when they became supporters of Union.

Finally, in 2018, Union became the property of the English Langford Holdings Limited, whose majority shareholder until the summer of 2023 was Tony Bloom, who was also the majority shareholder and chairman of Brighton & Hove Albion FC, a club he led from League One to the Premier League⁶⁵. However, as both clubs had qualified for the Europa League for the 2023–24 season, Bloom has been constrained by the UEFA regulations to reduce his stake in the holding company allowing his business partner, and Union president, Alex Muzio to assume a 75% majority shareholding⁶⁶. This multi-club ownership gave rise to a special relationship between USG and Brighton, evidenced by the loan to Union of several Brighton's players. Given the Union's rebirth following its takeover in 2018, it is possible that some USG supporters may have been tempted to become Brighton supporters as well, and vice versa.

Data and method

The survey from which our dataset is derived was conducted online between 15 May and 5 July 2023. The questionnaire addressed to Union supporters comprised three sections addressing (1) views on the proposed new stadium and related scenarios, (2) supporter practices and engagement with the club, and (3) socio-demographic characteristics and political orientations⁶⁷. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent to all existing fan clubs (11) and shared on Facebook and WhatsApp fan group pages, as well as via our personal Twitter and Facebook accounts. Posters with a QR code were also displayed in the four supporters' pubs located closest to the stadium wherein supporter use to gather before and after games. A total

of 645 completed questionnaires were collected: 600 in French (93%), 26 in Dutch (4%) and 19 in English (3%). Because some questions were optional, the number of respondents (n) is lower than 645 for some items.

Is this sample representative? From a quantitative perspective, if we estimate the Union fanbase at 16,000 individuals—corresponding to the highest number of tickets sold to Union supporters during the 2022–23 season, for the Europa League match against Bayer Leverkusen on 20 April 2023—the coverage rate of our sample would be approximately 4%. From a qualitative perspective, women account for 16% of respondents (n: 637), a proportion comparable to that among season ticket holders, while 79% of respondents reside in the Brussels-Capital Region, compared with 72% of season ticket holders. No public data are available for other characteristics. The sample nevertheless displays typical online survey biases, notably the under-representation of respondents aged 60 and over (13%; n: 645) and the over-representation of higher education graduates (82%; n: 636), although these biases are less pronounced than in comparable online surveys of football fans⁶⁸.

To measure our dependent variable—whether a supporter is a single supporter or a multi-supporter—we used a survey question asking respondents to ‘rank up to four clubs they support’. Respondents who mentioned a club other than USG were classified as multi-supporters. Noteworthy, we excluded from the sample respondents who did not indicate Union among the clubs they supported and who identified themselves just as ‘spectators’ in a separate question about their relationship to the club (see below), resulting in a final sample of 607 respondents.

To measure the first independent variable (H1), i.e. the intensity of supporterism for a club, we retained five indicators from the survey, capturing both self-perception and behavioural engagement. First, whether one respondent identifies as a ‘mere’ supporter or as a more active

categories: member of a supporters' club, member of the kop, or ultra. Second, whether a respondent says that in the stadium he/she is primarily interested in the course of the match, rather than in peripheral activities, reflecting a core interest in the team's performance. Third and fourth, high attendance at home (min. $\pm 75\%$) and away league matches (min. $\pm 25\%$) was used to capture behavioural intensity, in line with established literature identifying match attendance as a key indicator of active support⁶⁹. Fifth, possession of a season ticket was included as a traditional marker of sustained engagement and investment in the club⁷⁰. Collectively, these measures provide a multidimensional assessment of supporter intensity, integrating identity, motivation, and behaviour.

To measure the longevity of supporterism (H2), we used the self-reported year in which respondents began supporting the club. Responses expressed in years were aggregated into four periods corresponding to key moments in Union's recent history. First, the earliest period, prior to 2015, the year the club was promoted to Division 2. Second, the period 2015–2017, corresponding to the seasons spent in Division 2 (later D1B), with the objective of avoiding relegation. Third, the period 2018–2021, during which, following the acquisition of the club by English investors, USG competed in D1B and eventually won the title. Finally, the most recent period, since 2021, the year the club was promoted to D1A. We considered supporterism to be long-standing when it dated back at least to before 2018, that is, prior to the arrival of the English investors, whose ambitious sporting objectives quickly translated into top finishes in D1B, a semi-final appearance in the Belgian Cup, and the first home matches played to sold-out crowds.

To test next hypothesis (H3)—geographical proximity as a reason for supporting a club—we used two complementary indicators. First, respondents' postal codes provided an objective measure of current proximity to the club. Second, respondents rated the importance

of the club's location as a reason for their support, providing a subjective measure of proximity-driven supporterism. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of different reasons for supporting Union on a scale from 1, 'not important', to 5, 'very important'. Among these reasons was the 'geographical proximity of the Marien stadium', the venue that has hosted USG's home matches for over a century.

We measure the foreign nationality of a supporter (H4) by respondents' reported nationality, distinguishing respondents who report a nationality other than Belgian from those who report Belgian nationality exclusively. To measure sporting performance as a reason for supporting Union (H5), we use the survey question described above, in which respondents rated the importance of various reasons for supporting the Union, and more specifically the responses to the reason 'club performance'. Finally, we measure the embedding of supporterism in a socialization context (H6) and the importance attached to the club's image as a reason for being a supporter with the same question. For the former, we used two reasons: 'family tradition' and 'to meet friends and acquaintances. For the latter (H7), we took into account three reasons: the 'general atmosphere', commonly described as particularly friendly and positive⁷¹, the 'values promoted by the club', including anti-racism, anti-fascism and social and cultural diversity—the three most important values for the Union supporters⁷²—, and the 'history of the club', referring to its glorious and popular past.

Results

We now turn to the presentation of our results. As expected, among Union supporters (n: 607), a significant proportion support other teams as well. No less than 62.3 % of them stated that they support at least one other club in addition to USG, confirming the relevance of studying the phenomenon of multisupporterism. Among the 378 Union multisupporters, 157 (41.5%) support one additional club, 98 (26%) support two, and 123 (33%) support more than two other clubs.

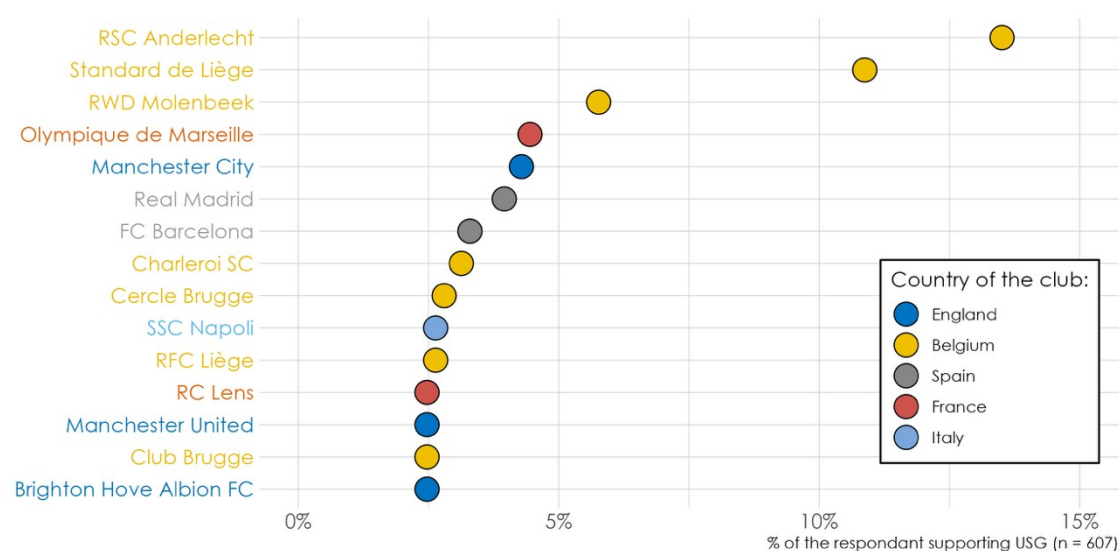
Figure 1 presents the fifteen clubs most frequently mentioned by Union multisupporters. The three most frequently co-supported clubs are Belgian. RSC Anderlecht (RSCA) and Standard de Liège are the only clubs exceeding 10% of mentions among all Union supporters and 18% among multisupporters. Historically successful alongside Club Brugge, RSCA and Standard dominated Belgian football during periods when Union was in decline⁷³. The third most co-supported club, RWDMolenbeek, is also Brussels-based and historically linked to Union as a former rival. These patterns suggest that co-support across Brussels clubs is more common than the often-assumed strict rivalry among the capital's main teams⁷⁴.

Other co-supported Belgian clubs include those with friendly ties to Union (RFC Liège, Cercle Brugge), as well as Royal Charleroi SC (the second Wallon club) and Club Brugge (Belgium's most successful club in recent years). Foreign clubs come from top European leagues, though the Bundesliga is absent. Alongside a few global heavyweights (Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, Manchester City, Manchester United), respondents also support less prominent clubs, such as Olympique de Marseille (OM) and RC Lens in France or SSC Napoli in Italy. The support for less successful clubs such as Liège, OM and Lens—but also for Standard—is no doubt linked to a shared commitment to left-wing values (anti-racism, anti-fascism, social and cultural diversity) among the main supporters' groups involved. Finally,

Brighton is also mentioned, likely reflecting the 2018 acquisition of Union by the chairman of Brighton, T. Bloom, and subsequent sporting achievements, which may have inspired dual support among both original Union or and Brighton fans.

Figure 1: Top 15 of the co-supported clubs, ranked by decreasing frequency of mention (n: 607)

Short Description : Dot plot showing the fifteen most co-supported clubs among Union Saint-Gilloise supporters, ranked by decreasing share of respondents along a horizontal axis from zero to fifteen percent; each club's point is coloured by its country.



We now turn to explaining multisupporterism, as our dependent variable is dichotomous (multisupporter vs. monosupporter), we used binomial logistic regression to test our

hypotheses. As is common in the literature, we controlled for respondents' age and gender in our analyses. Table 1 presents the results of the regression.

Table 1: Results of the Logistic regression

Variable	Coefficient (β) (Std. Error)
Level of supporterism for USG	
Self-identification with an active supporter category	-0.36 (0.28)
Possession of a USG season ticket	1.52 (1.01)
High attendance at home matches	0.31 (0.48)
High attendance at away matches	0.09 (0.27)
Primary interest in match outcome	0.13 (0.28)
Longevity of supporterism	0.18 (0.30)
Rational motives	
Current residence in Brussels-Capital Region	-0.57 (0.31)
Geographical proximity as a reason for supporting USG	0.05 (0.08)
Exclusively Belgian nationality	-1.36* (0.35)
Sporting performance as a reason	0.14 (0.10)
Subjective motives	
Family tradition as a reason	-0.12* (0.08)
Friendship ties as a reason	-0.30 (0.16)
Club values	-0.06 (0.13)
Club atmosphere	0.28 (0.22)
Club history	-0.16 (0.12)
Control variables	
Year of birth	0.02 (0.01)
Gender: Masculine	1.38* (0.33)

Variable	Coefficient (β) (Std. Error)
Model fit statistics	
Observations	607
Log-likelihood	-229.86
AIC	497.73
BIC	572.94
McFadden Pseudo R ²	0.1244

Note: * $p < 0.05$. standard error in parenthesis.

If we look to the indicators whose effect on the dependent variable, namely multisupporterism, is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), we see that only two show a significant relation with multisupporterism, both in a negative direction: exclusive possession of Belgian nationality and family tradition as an important reason for supporting Union. All the other indicators we tested are not significant at the 0.05 threshold. Let us now examine each of the explanatory variables and hypotheses we identified in light of these results.

Hypotheses 1 and 2, according to which a high level of supporterism for Union would be associated with a lower propensity for multisupporterism, are not supported. Neither a high intensity of supporterism for Union, regardless of the indicator considered (H1), nor a long-standing history of such supporterism (H2), shows any significant association with multisupporterism.

Hypothesis 3, according to which geographical proximity to the supported club would be associated with monosupporterism, and therefore with a lower propensity for multisupporterism, is likewise not supported, whether one considers an objective indicator (a postal code corresponding to a current place of residence in Brussels) or a subjective one (geographical proximity cited as an important reason for supporting Union).

By contrast, Hypothesis 4, which suggested that foreign supporters are more likely to engage in multisupporterism seems to be supported insofar as we observe a negative relationship between exclusive Belgian nationality and multisupporterism. The hypothesis of a greater propensity for multisupporterism among foreign supporters may thus confirm the assumption that such individuals tend to combine support for a club in the country where they reside with the maintenance of an attachment to a club from their country of origin.

Hypothesis 5, which suggested a greater propensity for multisupporterism among supporters who consider sporting performance to be an important reason for supporting their club, is not supported. A similar conclusion applies in part to Hypothesis 6, insofar as it suggested a lower propensity for multisupporterism among supporters whose attachment to a club is embedded in a context of friendship-based socialization.

By contrast, this is not the case when supporterism is rooted in a context of family socialization, as the negative correlation between multisupporterism and considering family tradition to be an important reason for supporting Union proves to be statistically significant. Supporting a club as a family tradition therefore seems to make people more inclined to support it exclusively.

Finally, the last hypothesis (H7), which posited a negative relationship between multisupporterism and supporting a club because of its image, is likewise not supported, regardless of the indicator considered concerning the importance of certain reasons for supporting Union, whether the general atmosphere, the values promoted by the club, or its history.

Discussion

First and foremost, the results proceeding from a single-case study, the absence of comparable surveys conducted on other cases does not allow us to interpret the findings through comparison. It is therefore impossible to determine whether the 62.3% share of multisupporters among Union supporters represents a high proportion relative to other clubs, whether Belgian or foreign. Likewise, to what extent is it truly unusual, as suggested in the literature⁷⁵, that in a city with several professional football teams, a small proportion of supporters of one club also support another club from the same city, especially when the clubs concerned are not, or have not long been, direct competitors in the same competition⁷⁶ ?

Regarding our hypotheses to explain multisupporterism, although derived from the existing literature on supporterism, most of them have not been confirmed. Only two hypotheses were supported, revealing significant negative correlations with multisupporterism.

First, the hypothesis of a greater propensity for multisupporterism among supporters of a club holding a foreign nationality is confirmed. Having Belgian nationality exclusively has a negative effect on being a multisupporter, suggesting that foreign supporters maintain a continued engagement with football tied to their country of nationality. This finding suggests that football may function as a vector of integration rather than assimilation, allowing individuals of foreign origin to maintain a symbolic and affective link with their country of origin while simultaneously fostering social anchoring in the host country⁷⁷. This plurality of attachments would be consistent with ‘hybrid’ forms of identification, in which sporting affiliations are shaped by migratory experiences and transnational socializations rather than by a strictly national framework.

However, it should be noted that our administrative indicator of holding only Belgian nationality does not exclusively capture individuals without foreign origins. Indeed, among respondents who hold only Belgian nationality there may also be individuals of foreign origin,

either born abroad or with at least one parent of foreign nationality, circumstances that may favour co-supporting a club from the country of origin. Unfortunately, the survey on which we base our findings did not include any questions relating to this information. It was therefore impossible for us to isolate, amongst the respondents who hold only Belgian nationality, those of foreign origin. This is an avenue for further research focusing on this aspect of the multisupporters profile.

Second, the importance given to the family tradition among the reasons for supporting a club has a negative relationship with being a multi-supporter. It therefore appears that when supporterism for a club is grounded in an inheritance transmitted from one generation to the next, and/or sustained through the sharing of this common passion within the family, the bond of attachment to the club tends not only toward greater loyalty, but also toward a more exclusive form of support⁷⁸. When supporterism is embedded in a family socialization context, supporting a club is not merely a matter of individual preferences (for football or for a particular club), which may be volatile. Rather, it is anchored in the continuity of shared relationships and life experiences, as well as in the reproduction of a family's affective memory and common history that extend far beyond simple penchant for a given football team.

Conclusion

The first and central finding is that no less than 62.3 % of Union supporters also support at least one other club, including other professional clubs in Brussels. This suggests that multisupporterism, , albeit neglected in academic research, is a relevant phenomenon in modern football fandom. Such results therefore put into question the common implicit assumption in the existing literature that supporters only support one club. Yet, most of our hypotheses, drawn from the literature to explain multisupporterism, were not confirmed by our analysis. Contrary to our expectations, we did not find evidence that intensity or duration of supporterism,

geographical proximity, friendship-based socialization, or the importance attributed to sporting performance or club image are linked to mono- or multisupporterism. Only two hypotheses were supported: Union supporters holding a foreign nationality display a greater propensity for multisupporterism as well as Union supporters for whom family tradition is not an important reason to support USG. Our analysis therefore suggests that past embeddedness, whether linked to transnational ties with another country of nationality or to a family tradition, is crucial in determining whether supporters lean towards single-supporter or multi-supporters.

The limitation of our study, which is restricted to a single case, nevertheless calls for further research on multisupporterism. Indeed, one could examine whether our results apply to other cases and assess differences exist between teams. Moreover, we felt somewhat short in explaining multisupporterism, which points to the need for additional research on why our expectations were not met and which factors account for (mono-)multisupporterism. Further work is also required to better understand the practices associated with multisupporterism and how these differ from monosupporterism, for instance, by investigating whether multisupporters display forms of attachment and support that differ from those of monosupporters. In that perspective, future research would benefit from more qualitative methods, which would provide a more refined and contextualized understanding of supporterism within respondents' life trajectories.

More conceptually, one key avenue opened up by our results concerns the very definition of what it means to 'support' one or several teams, that is, what constitutes the genuine identity of a supporter. In our study, we considered respondents to be supporters if they declared themselves to be 'supporters' of a club. Yet, without entering into the often-heated debate among supporters about what objectively distinguishes 'true supporters' from others, it seems necessary to clarify the threshold at which a simple penchant for a club becomes supporterism. Even acknowledging that supporterism may take highly diverse forms⁷⁹, while

many football fans in Belgium appear to ‘root’ for a team in each major European league, does this necessarily make them genuine supporters⁸⁰?

In this respect, the current vocabulary, often tied to an outdated dichotomous distinction⁸¹, may lack intermediate categories to describe individuals who display an attachment to a club that is stronger than a simple ‘spectator’ but weaker than a true ‘supporter’. In this regard, it might be interesting to refine the threshold between ‘attraction’ (level 2) and ‘attachment’ (level 3) in the Funk and James’s multi-level typology aimed to understand the underlying social-psychological process accounting for an individual’s shift from a simple ‘awareness’ of a team (level 1) to eventual allegiance (level 4)⁸². Beyond the need for further empirical investigations, the phenomenon of multisupporterism thus calls for conceptual refinement that could benefit research on football fandom more broadly, in the wake of the pioneering work of Giulianotti and other authors after him⁸³.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Use of IA

The authors used DeepL (version 26.3.14124477), ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4 version), and Copilot (Microsoft 365, GPT-5 version) solely for language editing, stylistic improvements, and assistance with formatting references. No generative AI tools were used to produce research content, analyses, or interpretations. All intellectual content, arguments, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

GDPR

The online survey used by this article was subject to prior approval by UCLouvain GDPR Delegate in accordance with the legal regulations in force in Belgium.

Notes

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- ¹ Bromberger, *Football: la bagatelle la plus sérieuse du monde*.
- ² De Waele and Husting, *Football et identités*; Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs'; Heck et al., 'Football Fandom Research', 67.
- ³ Bromberger, Hayot, and Mariottini, *Le match de football*, 29.
- ⁴ Hourcade, 'La place des supporters dans le monde du football', 76–78; Nuytens, *La popularité du football*, 44–45; Lestrelin, *Sociologie des supporters*, chap. 2.
- ⁵ Elias and Dunning, *Sport et civilisation*; Tsoukala, *Hooliganisme en Europe*.
- ⁶ Busset and Gasparini, *Aux frontières du football et du politique*; Spaaij et al., 'Football and Politics'.
- ⁷ Hourcade, 'La place des supporters dans le monde du football'; Nuytens, *La popularité du football*.
- ⁸ Lestrelin, 'Entering into, Staying and Being Active in a Group of Football Supporters'; Lestrelin, 'De l'avantage de comparer les carrières supportéristes à des carrières militantes'.
- ⁹ Bora and Şenyuva, 'Nationalism, Europeanization and Football'; McDougall, 'Kicking from the Left'.
- ¹⁰ De Waele et al., *The Palgrave International Handbook of Football and Politics*.
- ¹¹ Therefore, this abstracts from any possible concurrent support for a national team (see De Waele and Husting, *Football et identités*).
- ¹² Giulianotti and Robertson, *Globalization and Football*.
- ¹³ Salt, 'Évolution actuelle des migrations internationales en Europe'; Icard, *Les flux migratoires au sein de l'Union européenne*.
- ¹⁴ Bromberger, Hayot, and Mariottini, *Le match de football*, 54.
- ¹⁵ Bradley, 'Sport and the Contestation of Ethnic Identity'; Fillis and Mackay, 'Moving beyond Fan Typologies'.
- ¹⁶ Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs'.
- ¹⁷ Biel et al., 'A European Public Sphere United by Football', 5–7.
- ¹⁸ Charbonnier and Smith, 'Ce que suivre le football révèle des identifications territoriales', 109–114; Gong, 'Reading European Football, Critiquing China'.
- ¹⁹ Hofmann, 'Why We Wear It', 176–191.
- ²⁰ Araújo et al., 'Top European Football Clubs and Social Networks', 250–264.
- ²¹ Mason, *Association Football and English Society*; Holt, *Sport and the British*.
- ²² Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*.
- ²³ See the dedicated website 'Multi Club Ownership Insights': <https://www.mcoinsights.com/insights>
- ²⁴ Arrondel and Duhautois, 'La multipropriété, c'est l'envol'.
- ²⁵ Breuer, 'Multi-club Ownership'.
- ²⁶ Dias, 'Moving the ball forward'.
- ²⁷ Lestrelin and Basson, 'Le supportérisme à distance'.

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- ²⁸ Kennedy and Kennedy, 'Football Supporters and the Commercialisation of Football'.
- ²⁹ Giulianotti and Robertson, *Globalization and Football*.
- ³⁰ Weber et al., 'A European Mind?'.
- ³¹ Merten et al., 'Fan Identification in Football'.
- ³² Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs'.
- ³³ Dóczy and Tóth, 'Football Fandom in England', 36–37.
- ³⁴ Paye et al., 'A New Stadium for Union Saint-Gilloise. The Opinions of Fans'.
- ³⁵ Wann and Schrader, 'Controllability and Stability in Sport Spectators' Attributions'; Richardson and O'Dwyer, 'Football Supporters and Football Team Brands'.
- ³⁶ Jacobson, 'The Social Psychology of the Creation of a Sports Fan Identity'; Lin and Lin, 'Factors Influencing Brand Loyalty'.
- ³⁷ Wann and Schrader, 'Controllability and Stability in Sport Spectators' Attributions'.
- ³⁸ Ben Azouz, Dellech, and Debabi, 'Attachment and Commitment of Fans to Their Sports Team'.
- ³⁹ Tucker, 'Football Capital', 52–53.
- ⁴⁰ Ben Azouz, Dellech, and Debabi, 'Attachment and Commitment of Fans to Their Sports Team'.
- ⁴¹ Hourcade, 'La place des supporters dans le monde du football', 76–78; Lestrelin, 'De l'avantage de comparer les carrières supportéristes à des carrières militantes'.
- ⁴² Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs'; Nuytens, *La popularité du football*, part 2, sect. 1; Heck et al., 'Football Fandom Research'.
- ⁴³ Molina-Luque, 'Le profil sociologique des amateurs de football'; Ben Azouz, Dellech, and Debabi, 'Attachment and Commitment of Fans to Their Sports Team'.
- ⁴⁴ Bromberger, Hayot, and Mariottini, *Le match de football*; Fontaine, 'RC Lens, de la mine au terrain ?'.
- ⁴⁵ Jacobson, 'The Social Psychology of the Creation of a Sports Fan Identity'; Heere and James, 'Sports Teams and Their Communities'.
- ⁴⁶ Basson and Lestrelin, 'Le supportérisme à distance'; Bromberger et al., *Le match de football*, 54.
- ⁴⁷ Merten et al., 'Fan Identification in Football'.
- ⁴⁸ Mignon, *La passion du football*, 216; Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs'; Merten et al., 'Fan Identification in Football'.
- ⁴⁹ Sutton et al., 'Creating and Fostering Fan Identification in Professional Sports'.
- ⁵⁰ Sutton et al., 'Creating and Fostering Fan Identification in Professional Sports'.
- ⁵¹ Cialdini et al., 'Basking in Reflected Glory'.
- ⁵² Reifurth, 'Child Sport Fan Behavior', 14; Lestrelin, *Sociologie des supporters*, 61–62.
- ⁵³ Fillis and Mackay, 'Moving beyond Fan Typologies'.
- ⁵⁴ Nuytens, *La popularité du football*, part 2, sect. 1.

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- ⁵⁵ Merkel, 'Milestones in the Development of Football Fandom in Germany'; Yoshida et al., 'Predicting Behavioral Loyalty through Community'; Yohanes and Ardiansyahmiraja, 'Unwavering Allegiance beyond Borders'.
- ⁵⁶ Schleifer and Tamir, 'Sport, the Arts, and Fans' Loyalty'; Bale, 'Football and Topophilia'; Cournoyer-Gendron, Trudelle, and Devisme, 'Un nouveau stade pour Nantes ?'; Rannou, 'Le rapport affectif et émotionnel des supporters avec le lieu du stade'; Bromberger, Hayot, and Mariottini, *Le match de football*; Fontaine, 'RC Lens, de la mine au terrain ?'; Abosag et al., 'Examining the Relationship between Brand Emotion and Brand Extension among Supporters of Professional Football Clubs'.
- ⁵⁷ Jacobson, 'The Social Psychology of the Creation of a Sports Fan Identity'; Fitzpatrick and Hoey, 'From Fanzines to Foodbanks'.
- ⁵⁸ Merkel, 'Milestones in the Development of Football Fandom in Germany'; Daniel and Kassimeris, 'The Politics and Culture of FC St. Pauli'.
- ⁵⁹ Bromberger, Hayot, and Mariottini, *Le match de football*; Lestrelin and Basson, 'Le supportérisme à distance'.
- ⁶⁰ Biel et al., 'A European Public Sphere United by Football', 14–15.
- ⁶¹ Sugihartati, 'Youth Fans of Global Popular Culture'; Merten et al., 'Fan Identification in Football'.
- ⁶² Statbel, 'Belgian official statistics, population and migrations, Data for the year 2021'. Statbel. <https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/themes/census/population/migrations> (accessed December 2, 2025).
- ⁶³ Brussels Institute for Statistics and Analysis (IBSA) and the Brussels-Capital Health and Social Observatory, 'Zoom sur les communes 2024: zoom sur Forest'. IBSA. https://ibsa.brussels/sites/default/files/publication/documents/Forest_FR_cor.pdf (accessed December 2, 2025).
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- ⁶⁴ Vincent Miller, 'Qui sont vraiment les supporters de l'Union Saint-Gilloise ?', *Le Soir*, October 14, 2021; Kathleen Wuyard, 'Comment l'Union Saint-Gilloise est devenue si hype (et a donné le goût du foot aux branchés)', *Le Vif Week-end*, May 23, 2023; Lorraine Kihl, "'J'aime pas le foot, j'aime l'Union'", *Le Soir*, April 20, 2023; Vincent Miller, "'On entend parler toutes les langues dans les tribunes". Voici qui sont les supporters de l'Union', *Le Soir*, October 14, 2025.
- ⁶⁵ 'Brighton Chairman Buys Brussels Football Club', VRT News (website of the Belgian Flemish Public Radio Television), May 21, 2018. https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2018/05/21/brighton_chairmanbuysbrusselsfootballclub-1-3201430/

⁶⁶ Jason Stephens, 'Anthony Bloom – MCO', *Multi Clubs Ownership Insights*, March 15, 2025.

<https://www.mcoinsights.com/insights/anthony-bloom-mco>

See also information available on the Union's website : <https://rusg.brussels/en/club/board>

⁶⁷ Paye et al., 'Quel stade pour l'Union Saint-Gilloise? L'avis des supporters', §6-8.

⁶⁸ Charbonnier and Smith, 'Ce que suivre le football révèle des identifications territoriales', 99–100.

⁶⁹ Lestrelin, 'De l'avantage de comparer les carrières supportéristes à des carrières militantes', 63–64, 72.

⁷⁰ Molina-Luque, 'Le profil sociologique des amateurs de football'; Tapp, 'The Loyalty of Football Fans'; Nuytens, *La popularité du football*, 44–45.

⁷¹ Sébastien Pocognoli, 'Les racines élémentaires (entretien avec)'. *Le Soir*, August 29, 2025.

⁷² Lacrosse, 'Le rôle des valeurs dans l'adhésion des supporters à un club de football', part. 3.

⁷³ De Waele and Sterck, 'Belgium'.

⁷⁴ Benkwitz and Molnar, 'Interpreting and Exploring Football Fan Rivalries'.

⁷⁵ Benkwitz and Molnar, 'Interpreting and Exploring Football Fan Rivalries'.

⁷⁶ Pugsley and Rookwood, 'The "Friendly" Derby?'.

⁷⁷ Bromberger, Hayot, and Mariottini, *Le match de football*; Fontaine, 'RC Lens, de la mine au terrain ?', 11–14.

⁷⁸ Molina-Luque, 'Le profil sociologique des amateurs de football', 80; Fillis and Mackay, 'Moving beyond Fan Typologies'.

⁷⁹ Osborne and Coombs, 'Performative Sport Fandom'; Humphries and Kucek, 'Examining Soccer Fan Performances through Performative Sport Fandom Theory'.

⁸⁰ Osborne and Coombs, 'Performative Sport Fandom'; Humphries and Kucek, 'Examining Soccer Fan Performances through Performative Sport Fandom Theory'.

⁸¹ Pooley, 'The sport fan'.

⁸² Funk and James, 'The Psychological Continuum Model', 140. See also Wann and Branscombe, 'Sport Fans'; Samra and Wos, 'Consumer in Sports'.

⁸³ Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs'; Heck et al., 'Football Fandom Research'.

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