

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

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Bachelor Thesis (B.Sc.):

How can participatory practices from the Frankfurt Demokratiekonvent positively influence fan involvement in the governance of Bundesliga clubs?

University of Twente, Enschede

Bachelor Programme: Management, Society & Technology

Academic Year: 2023/2024

Bachelor circle: Co-creation for a citizen-centered urban governance

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Date of Submission: 2nd of July 2024

Word Count: 11.042

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how participatory practices from the Frankfurter Demokratiekonvent, a civic initiative aimed at fostering citizen involvement in Frankfurt, can positively influence the enhancement of fan involvement in Bundesliga clubs, the premier professional football league in Germany. The study utilizes a qualitative analysis, drawing on both primary and secondary data from FDK documentation, Bundesliga club statutes, academic literature on participatory governance, and online information sourced directly from the clubs' official websites. The findings reveal that while Bundesliga clubs are including fan input through formal instruments like the General Assembly and Supporter Liaison Officers, there are significant variations in the depth and effectiveness of these practices. Key challenges include limited transparency in decision-making processes and overly complicated procedures, which hinder more meaningful participation. This thesis concludes that Bundesliga clubs could benefit from adopting more structured and inclusive participation strategies inspired by the practices of the Frankfurter Demokratiekonvent. Ultimately this could also lead to more democratized club governance. This study contributes to the broader discourse on participatory governance in sports and offers a framework to enhance fan engagement. Future research could analyze the long-term effects of innovative participation strategies in professional sports clubs and explore how these influence club performance over time.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of German football, marked by the weekly cheers of the crowd and the vibrant rhythm of the game, a profound struggle has unfolded. The pursuit of an investor to enter the Deutsche Fußball Liga (DFL) has been a dramatic and turbulent journey. As the Bundesliga desired to redefine its future and international competitiveness through a multi-billion-euro partnership with a private equity investor, the essence of this sporting dimension, the fans, started massive protests. Banners with messages such as "The league belongs to us! Stop investors! Save football!" showed the strict rejection of the opponents of this project (Sportschau, 2023). But the fans' strong disagreement was demonstrated by a wider variety of spectacular protest actions, such as a 12-minute silent period and the symbolic throwing of chocolate coins and tennis balls onto the pitch while yelling loudly in protest. On the 15th Bundesliga matchday, the planned protest caused disruptions to the game. The multifaceted protest became a powerful expression of fan discontent and caused polarized debates in the German and European media (DW, 2023).

The response of the DFL to such a powerful opposition was marked by a strategic withdrawal. The dedication and creativity of the fans, coupled with a growing wave of solidarity, forced the DFL to reconsider its course of action (ZDF, 2024).

This conflict is about more than just winning or losing on the pitch. It has opened up a broader debate about football's essential governance. The arena of conflict is not just limited to the stadium. Instead, it involves all aspects of football governance, connecting the fate of the Bundesliga with the passionate and powerful voices of its committed fans. However, despite the passionate engagement of football fans and the profound implications of their actions, there remains a significant gap in understanding how to effectively integrate their voices into the governance structures of Bundesliga clubs. While fan protests have demonstrated the depth of their disagreement, there is limited research on practical mechanisms to incorporate fan perspectives into decision-making processes within football organizations systematically.

As trends shift towards more flexible ownership models in football, the relevance of fan ownership and involvement in the governance of football clubs becomes increasingly critical. This highlights the need for effective instruments to integrate their voices into decision-making in Bundesliga clubs.

This bachelor thesis addresses this gap by exploring the potential of participation and including fans in sports governance and decision-making processes. By delving into the complexities of fan engagement and participatory instruments, this research provides insights into how Bundesliga clubs can navigate the tensions between commercial interests and fan demands and ultimately foster more inclusive and transparent governance practices. At its core lies the research question:

"How can participatory practices from the Frankfurt Demokratiekonvent positively influence fan involvement in the governance of Bundesliga clubs?"

With the following sub-questions:

1. *"What strategies are implemented by the Frankfurter Demokratiekonvent and Bundesliga clubs to facilitate participatory engagement?"*
2. *"What challenges and opportunities do Bundesliga clubs face in integrating fan input into their governance structures?"*
3. *"What practical recommendations can be made to improve fan participation and club governance in Bundesliga clubs based on insights from the Frankfurter Demokratiekonvent?"*

Drawing on the methodologies and outcomes of the Frankfurt Democracy Convention (Frankfurter Demokratiekonvent), which engaged citizens in policy decision-making through innovative participatory methods, this thesis explores their applicability within the sports sector. The initiative represented a mix of random selection and targeted outreach, which ensures diverse and inclusive participation and offers insights into possible strategies within the Bundesliga context.

While existing literature on fan engagement and sports governance helps to understand fan-club dynamics, limited research focuses on the direct participation of fans in the sports sector and in the German Bundesliga. This thesis bridges this gap and contributes to sports management fields by providing a model for more democratic and inclusive governance practices within sports organizations.

The Bundesliga's significance to Germany extends beyond its role as a premier sports competition; it is also a major draw for fans, boasting the highest average attendances in world football (Bundesliga, 2019). The adaptation of more participation and involved fans in Bundesliga clubs holds significant social relevance by potentially enhancing engagement, trust, and overall satisfaction with club governance. Scientifically, this research extends participatory governance theories to sports management, contributing to the discourse on democratic participation (OECD, 2020).

2. THEORY

This section explores participatory governance and the key principles of sustainable participation and how they are conceptualized in relation to the German football context. By drawing from Palumbo (2017), Missimer et al. (2017), and Bauer et al. (2023) and integrating additional scholarly insights, this framework aims to explore the potential for fan engagement in football club governance.

At its core, participatory governance highlights the democratization of policy-making processes (Palumbo, 2017). The concept aims to deepen citizen participation in governmental processes beyond traditional roles such as elections. It challenges the assumptions and practices that hinder genuine participatory democracy by fostering a more equal distribution of political power, fairer resource distribution, decentralization of decision-making, transparent knowledge exchange, collaborative partnerships, inter-institutional dialogue, and greater accountability. These efforts aim to cultivate trust and enable more inclusive and effective governance by involving citizens and organizations outside government through networks and institutional arrangements (Fischer, 2012).

In the Bundesliga context, this progressive paradigm empowers fans beyond conventional roles, making them active participants in governance processes, thereby democratizing club management with a diverse array of fan insights. Moreover, participatory governance within the Bundesliga serves as a catalyst for enhancing club culture. By valuing and incorporating fan insights, clubs can cultivate a deeper sense of belonging and loyalty among their supporters which creates a more vibrant and united community. This enriched club culture not only strengthens the emotional bond between fans and clubs but also can positively influence on-field performance by fostering a supportive and motivating atmosphere (García & Welford, 2015).

To broaden the analysis beyond the traditional scope of actively included fans, this research integrates the principles of social sustainability with participatory governance. Drawing upon the work of Missimer et al., the study builds on a comprehensive set of principles that are essential for cultivating sustainable participation within the fan community of Bundesliga clubs. The model is grounded in five key principles essential for achieving social sustainability: Health, Influence, Competence, Impartiality, and Meaning-making. These principles are designed to ensure that social systems do not systematically undermine individuals' capacity to meet their needs. Essentially, this means that the principles aim to create conditions within communities, organizations, or societies that support and enable all individuals to fulfill their basic needs and rights (Missimer et al., 2017).

The model is interconnected with participatory governance, emphasizing the crucial role of participation in achieving a socially sustainable society. The model includes these five principles:

1. *Health*: Missimer et al. define Health as ensuring individuals are not exposed to conditions that systematically undermine their ability to avoid injury and illness, which includes mental and emotional well-being. In the context of participatory governance, this principle emphasizes the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment for fan engagement, where fans do not experience mental or emotional harm due to their involvement in club decisions or participation processes.
2. *Influence*: this principle pertains to the accessibility and meaningfulness of participation opportunities. It suggests that individuals should have the ability to impact the systems they are part of, either directly, or through representation. Influence is directly relevant to the structure of participatory governance in football clubs because it advocates for regular and structured opportunities for fans to influence club policies and decisions, and therefore enhance the democratic nature of club governance.
3. *Competence*: the principle of competence involves removing obstacles related to understanding or forming opinions on given situations. In the Bundesliga context, ensuring fans have access to clear and comprehensible information is crucial for informed participation. This involves making club communications understandable and utilizing appropriate channels to facilitate decision-making by fans.
4. *Impartiality*: this addresses issues of unfair access and discrimination, advocating for equal opportunities in participation regardless of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic status. For football clubs, this means designing participation mechanisms that are free from discrimination and allow all fans equal chances to engage in club governance processes.
5. *Meaning-making*: this emphasizes the need for organizational clarity and a consistent purpose aligned with leadership actions. For football clubs, this principle underlines the importance of clear governance structures, transparent decision-making processes, and leadership committed to foster meaningful fan participation.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Bauer et al.'s conceptualized version of sustainable participation specifically tailored to German football supporters offers a valuable lens for reviewing the dynamics of participation within the Bundesliga. The adapted framework serves as a complementary tool to Missimer et al.'s social sustainability principles by providing specific criteria for evaluating the effectiveness and inclusiveness of fan participation in the football context. This detailed approach enables a deeper exploration of the extent to which current participatory practices align with the overarching goals of health, influence, competence, impartiality, and meaning-making within the fan communities.

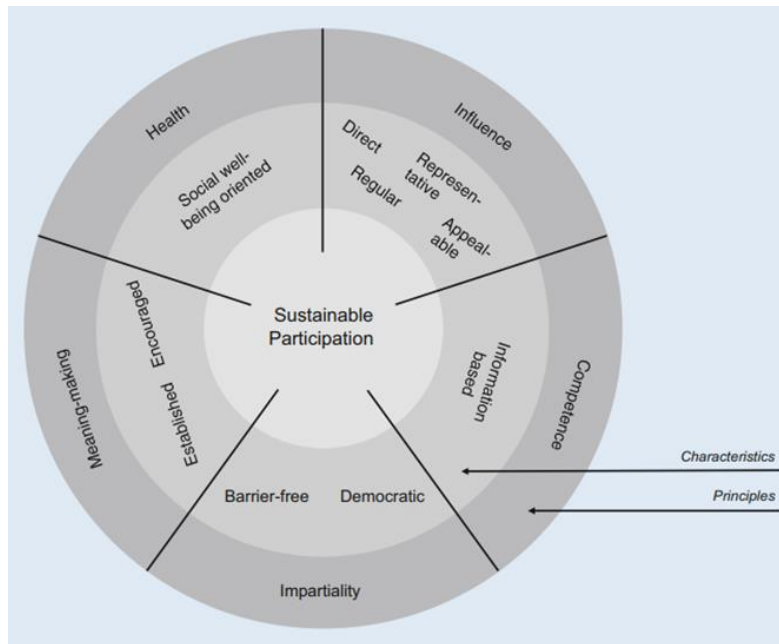


Figure 1: Conceptualization of sustainable participation in relation to German football supporters by Bauer et al.

This framework helps to state the benefits and limitations of the participation of fans in the Bundesliga and to understand how to learn from the Frankfurter Demokratiekonvent (FDK) as a successfully implemented real-world model. Also, the framework assists in creating useful recommendations for future improvements and management decisions of participation mechanisms in German football.

By incorporating lessons from the FDK, this research underscores the importance of engaging stakeholders in decision-making to foster democratic engagement and enhance policy outcomes. By adopting successful strategies from this event, such as open forums and collaborative decision-making processes, and tailoring them to the sports governance domain, the study explores pathways for Bundesliga clubs to address barriers to fan participation, thereby aligning with the principles of social sustainability and participatory governance (Christian et al., 2020).

The synthesis of theoretical perspectives from participatory governance, the principles of social sustainability, and the conceptualized framework underpin a comprehensive exploration of participation in the Bundesliga. This approach anticipates several benefits, including enhanced transparency, accountability, and deeper fan engagement. It aligns with the discourse that greater stakeholder involvement leads to more legitimate and effective governance structures. By offering a detailed analysis of the potential for democratic engagement in sports organizations, this study aims to lay the groundwork for future empirical research into the impacts of such governance models on fan engagement, club transparency, and stakeholder relations, informed by Missimer et al.'s principles of social sustainability and the conceptual insights provided by Bauer et al.

3. METHODS

The following method section is essential for outlining the systematic approach that was used to conduct the research. This section aims to provide a clear and comprehensive explanation of the research design, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. By detailing these approaches, this part ensures that the research is replicable and that its findings are based on scientific principles. It also justifies the choices made regarding the selection of certain cases and in the context of the specific research questions and demonstrates how these methods are suited to address the underlying academic investigation. Therefore, this section wants to showcase the logical progression from theoretical foundation to practical implementation, and therefore wants to highlight the credibility and value of this thesis. Practically, this chapter details the methodological approach that was used to investigate the governance and fan participation tools within Bundesliga clubs, by incorporating insights from the FDK.

3.1 CASE DESCRIPTION

On the one hand, official documents and transcripts with precise descriptions of the process were used to analyze the structure of the FDK. Furthermore, scientific reports on the convention and its efficiency were included. In particular, the research methodology benefits from a profound examination of the accompanying study by Julian Frinken and Prof. Dr. Claudia Landwehr, which was undertaken during the FDK (Frinken & Landwehr, 2023). Their investigation, conducted through detailed participant observations and structured pre- and post-event surveys, provides an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of public participation as well as the immediate and long-term effects of the initiative on participants' and Frankfurt residents' satisfaction.

The empirical evidence provided by Frinken and Landwehr's study establishes a comprehensive framework crucial for exploring how similar participatory approaches can be adapted within the Bundesliga or other governance contexts. By applying these methodologies to the clubs, the analysis seeks to improve engagement and governance models in professional sports clubs, which directly demonstrates the practical relevance of participatory frameworks in enhancing democratic involvement.

The scope of this study is grounded to Bundesliga clubs from the first German football league, which are operating under the standard 50+1 rule during the 2023/24 season. This thesis specifically excludes clubs that are legal exceptions from this rule such as Bayer Leverkusen, VfL Wolfsburg, and TSG Hoffenheim due to their unique ownership structures. The exclusion of these three clubs in this study serves to improve comparability between the analyzed clubs, which have similar characteristics in their club structure and follow the same guidelines of the German football associations. Additionally, RB Leipzig was not included as their statute was not publicly accessible nor provided upon request. Their response highlights a significant gap in transparency, noting that their statute is a "very sensitive area with immense public interest" (RB Leipzig, personal communication, May 10, 2024).

This selective approach ensures that the research focuses on clubs where member influence is maintained and therefore provides as a consistent and relevant sample to examine governance structures that could potentially incorporate FDK's participatory strategies.

3.2 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Regarding the data collection for the analysis of the Bundesliga clubs, primary data was sourced from the official statutes of the 14 Bundesliga clubs, which is publicly available through their websites. These documents are crucial as they outline the formal governance frameworks and lay down the tools for member participation.

The statutes of the clubs provide a fundamental regulatory framework and offer formal guidelines concerning the institutionalized participation of members (Schimke and Eilers, 2009). Thus, the statutes serve as key evidence for the relevant categories and indicators used in the analysis.

To access the data, it was not required to get in touch with each club separately. As a result, disruptive reactions like the interviewer effects, test fabrications, or other response distortions could be avoided. To complement this primary data, additional information on formal and informal fan engagement practices was collected from club websites, focusing on the relationship between clubs and their fans and the roles of Supporter Liaison Officers (SLO's). These sources are helpful for understanding the broader spectrum of fan engagement, ranging from formal participation to more dynamic informal practices.

To analyze and manage the previously collected data, this study employs a qualitative content analysis by using the software ATLAS.ti. This is a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the systematic coding, analysis, and interpretation of complex datasets, and therefore supports in-depth insights into the research materials. The application involved developing a precise coding scheme based on the theoretical ground of participatory governance and the selected institutionalized participation instruments of the clubs. Initially, codes were predefined after identifying institutionalized and non-institutionalized instruments of participation. But as the coding process progressed, it became apparent that only institutionalized instruments are described sufficiently in the statutes of the clubs to analyze and compare them in detail. Therefore, non-institutionalized instruments were not included in the following analysis and in the determination of the codes.

After the first coding round it became evident that additional codes were necessary to capture emerging themes such as financial transparency, digital engagement tools, and the varying opportunities offered by the different clubs. These additional codes provide more information on whether and to what extent the clubs work transparently and in harmony with the members and where possible weaknesses can be found.

In total, the refined coding framework comprised 32 distinct codes which were grouped into six thematic categories. This categorization facilitated a structured analysis of the data and allows for an examination of each club's approach to governance and fan participation. This methodological approach ensures that the findings are robust and provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of participatory practices within the first German football league.

3.3 ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The framework of the analysis section in this thesis was structured to comprehensively examine the participatory instruments within the Bundesliga and draw insights from the FDK. The analysis began by outlining the participatory tools and structure that was employed by the FDK. After that, the study involved a dive into the 50+1 rule, which is critical for maintaining majority control within the hands of club members and therefore protects clubs from external influences. This was followed by a detailed exploration of similar participation tools within the selected Bundesliga clubs.

The statutes of these clubs were scrutinized to extract data on the General Assembly and Supervisory Board, which are the key entities in club governance and decision-making processes. Subsequently, the focus shifted to the information regarding Supporter Liaison Officers (SLO's) and structures that deal with the relationship between the club and the fans, by analyzing the information available on the websites of the clubs. This part of the analysis was crucial for understanding how clubs engage with their fans beyond formal mechanisms that are mentioned in the statutes and legal documents.

By building on the gathered data, the thesis then applied the identified barriers to the sustainable participation principles in relation to German football supporters (Bauer et al., 2023). This creates a comprehensive understanding of the current challenges and limitations faced by the clubs in implementing effective participation.

Finally, the analysis completed in drawing lessons and recommendations from the FDK, suggesting ways in which Bundesliga clubs could enhance their governance structure and participatory practices. These conclusions were reached by applying the Bauer et al. framework, which emphasizes sustainable participation principles that are important in the Bundesliga context, such as transparency, inclusivity, and effectiveness. The framework served as a suitable approach to evaluate the existing practices against established best practices from the FDK.

Furthermore, specific criteria for evaluating club practices included the scope of stakeholder engagement, the accessibility of participation channels, and the effectiveness of integrating fan input into club processes. The recommendations were also created by identifying common barriers across the clubs, such as limited decision-making transparency. Besides those current challenges, the analysis highlighted innovative strategies employed by individual clubs that have successfully enhanced fan engagement. By applying these best practices and learning from the identified barriers, the study provided a comprehensive set of strategies that clubs could adopt to improve their participatory processes. This evaluative approach helped to develop tailored strategies which address identified challenges and ensure that the recommendations guide clubs towards more democratic internal structures.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 THE FRANKFURTER DEMOKRATIEKONVENT (FDK)

The FDK represents a pioneering effort in participatory governance, aimed at enhancing citizen engagement and democratizing the policy-making processes within Frankfurt. Initiated in response to growing demands for more inclusive and transparent governance, the FDK seeks to bridge the gap between citizens and local government by providing a structured platform for public deliberation and decision-making. The event was organized by "Mehr als wählen e.V.", a non-profit organization that is dedicated to promote democracy and political education, with financial support from the city of Frankfurt and other institutions such as universities, sports clubs, or private companies (Frinken & Landwehr, 2023).

The FDK was conceived as part of a broader movement towards participatory democracy, which emphasizes the active involvement of citizens in governance beyond traditional election processes. By providing a platform for direct participation, the initiative helps to build trust between citizens and Frankfurt's municipality and aims to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of public policies. The event is particularly significant in the context of Frankfurt, a city that is characterized by its diverse population and dynamic social landscape. In Frankfurt about 30% of residents hold a foreign passport, and roughly 54% come from migration backgrounds, which highlights the city's diverse and multicultural character. (Amt für multikulturelle Angelegenheiten der Stadt Frankfurt am Main, 2021). The impact of the FDK extends beyond the immediate policy proposals generated. It fosters a culture of active citizenship and empowers individuals to take an active role in shaping their community. The event is strategically divided into three distinct phases (Mehr als wählen e.V., 2023):

1. Inspiration Phase:

The process begins with the "Inspiration Phase", where participants are introduced to various successful participatory practices from other regions. This stage is critical as it serves to inform and inspire the participants by showcasing a range of effective examples of civic engagement and participatory democracy. For instance, during this phase, attendees might learn about innovative participatory budgeting models from other German cities or community-led urban planning initiatives from abroad. The goal is to provide a broad perspective on what has been successful elsewhere and what could be adapted to their local context.

2. Working Phase:

Following the inspiration, participants enter the "Working Phase". During this period, citizens are organized into thematic groups where they engage deeply with specific local issues identified earlier. Facilitated by moderators, these groups discuss the challenges and opportunities specific to Frankfurt, drawing on insights from the previous phase. Each group's task is to develop initial proposals that address these issues. For example, one group might focus on enhancing public transportation accessibility, while another might draft proposals to improve green spaces within the city neighborhoods. A particularly citizen-initiated proposal was the "Babbel-Bänksche", which is an energy-autonomous gathering space that stands out as

an example for fast implementation and enhances community engagement through sustainable design (Frinken & Landwehr, 2023).

3. Realization Phase:

In the final “Realization Phase”, the proposals crafted by participants are refined and finalized. This involves a critical review and improvement of the ideas, which often incorporates feedback from various stakeholders, like local experts, other participant groups, or public officials. The objective is to ensure that the proposals are not only innovative but also realistic and feasible for implementation. Once refined, these proposals are prepared for formal presentation to the city council. This presentation is a crucial component of the phase, as it transitions the participatory efforts from discussion to potential implementation and offers a pathway for these community-generated ideas to influence actual policy.

Each of these phases is designed to build upon the last, ensuring that the process moves smoothly from educational and inspirational activities to concrete, actionable outcomes. This structured approach facilitates involvement from all participants, which ultimately leads to well-considered proposals that reflect diverse perspectives of Frankfurt's citizens. The results are proposals that have a real potential to impact local governance. By providing a platform for direct participation, the FDK helps to build trust between citizens and local government and enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of public policies (Mehr als wählen e.V., 2023).

The FDK includes a diverse group of 50 individuals, selected through a process that combined random selection with deliberate strategies to include underrepresented demographics. The convention spanned three days, ensured a wide array of viewpoints and encompassed participants aged 16 to 83. This demographic breadth was critical, as it mirrored the city’s diverse population, allowing for a richer and more comprehensive discourse on public participation issues. This hybrid model of participant selection was instrumental in capturing a truly representative cross-section of Frankfurt’s population. Such a composition not only enhanced the legitimacy of the convention’s deliberative processes but also ensured that the outcomes reflected the collective input of the city itself. Thereby, this promotes a more inclusive approach to governance (Frinken & Landwehr, 2023). This methodological approach aimed to democratize participation and enhances the relevance and impact of the recommendations they produced.

To underscore the effectiveness of the FDK, significant data from participant feedback before and after the process highlights the substantial impact of the event on increasing knowledge and engagement among citizens. In the survey, participants reported a noticeable improvement in their understanding of climate policy, with the average self-assessment rating increasing from 4.19, categorized as "medium," to 4.76, considered "rather high" (Frinken & Landwehr, 2023). This marks a significant increase of +0.57. Additionally, expertise with the various activities and responsibilities of the city of Frankfurt in the field of climate protection also saw a marked improvement. Initially, the average response was 3.29, indicating "somewhat disagree," which shifted to an "indifferent" stance of 4.00, an enhancement by +0.71 (Frinken & Landwehr, 2023). These metrics demonstrate a clear elevation in participant knowledge and also validate the FDK’s role in fostering informed civic engagement.

4.2 THE 50+1 RULE

The 50+1 rule represents a fundamental governance mechanism within German football, which is designed to ensure that the majority control of clubs remains with their members (DFL, 2018). Understanding this regulation is fundamental to gain an insight into football culture and the traditional role of participation in Germany. The rule mandates that at least 50% plus one additional share of a club must be owned by its members, and therefore protects clubs from the overwhelming influence of external investors (DFL, 2018).

Implemented in 1998, the 50+1 rule was introduced among the growing commercialization of European football, which saw substantial financial investments transforming clubs across the continent. The Deutsche Fußball Liga (DFL) aimed to prevent potential dominance by commercial motives that could overshadow traditional club values and the cultural standards of German football. It encourages a governance model that promotes fan participation, essential for maintaining competitive balance and continuity within the clubs. (DFB, 1999).

Despite its general acceptance, the 50+1 rule has faced criticisms and legal challenges, particularly regarding its impact on the financial competitiveness of Bundesliga clubs. Three approved exceptions to the rule by the DFL have sparked debates about fairness and competition, as these clubs enjoy financial advantages that others, strictly adhering to the rule, do not have.

A club may qualify for an exception if a company or individual has provided consistent and substantial support to the member's association for over 20 years (Bauer, 2020). Historically, such exemptions were exclusive to Bayer Leverkusen and VfL Wolfsburg, where the professional football operations are fully owned by Bayer AG and Volkswagen AG. In these instances, the clubs operate as owned subsidiaries, which eliminates the possibility for member-driven governance (Hovemann et al., 2019). Also, the club 1899 Hoffenheim, under the patronage of Dietmar Hopp, successfully utilized an exemption to the 50+1 rule, as did Hannover 96, which is under consideration regarding its investor Martin Kind (Sportschau, 2022).

In November 2021, the DFL defended the exceptions in a statement to the German Federal Cartel Office (Bundeskartellamt), responding to the authority's prior criticisms. The DFL argued that the exceptions do not contradict the objectives pursued by the 50+1 rule but rather continue them in a different form (Bundeskartellamt, 2021). As the number of clubs that circumvent these rules is constantly growing, the need for clearly defined and transparent criteria becomes critical. Presently, the statutes from both DFB and DFL mention the requirement for continuous and significant support by a business entity or individual but lack specific, binding details (Hovemann et al., 2019).

The 50+1 rule has been reaffirmed through significant votes, such as the one in 2009, which former league president Reinhard Rauball highlighted as a success for maintaining the essence of German professional football. However, the rule's rigidity was questioned in 2011, leading to softened applications under specific conditions, thus allowing for some flexibility in its implementation (Wallrodt, 2015).

4.3 PARTICIPATION INSTRUMENTS IN THE BUNDESLIGA

To provide a clear understanding of the mechanisms through which Bundesliga clubs engage both institutionally and informally with their members and fans, this section delves into various participatory instruments utilized within the league.

According to Roose und Schäfer (2017), the distinction between institutionalized and non-institutionalized member participation in Bundesliga clubs is marked by formal and informal mechanisms of influence. Institutionalized participation is characterized by established, formal structures within the club's governance, such as the General Assembly (Mitgliederversammlung) and the Supervisory Board (Aufsichtsrat), which allow members to exercise legally binding decision-making powers. In contrast, non-institutionalized participation refers to more spontaneous and informal ways, in which members and fans express their opinions and influence club policies, such as through protests or social media engagement, which, while being influential, do not have formal decision-making authority within the club's governance structure.

4.3.1 Institutionalized Participation

One of the most important institutionalized instruments to include their members and fans into decision making processes is the *General Assembly*. It serves as the cornerstone of participation within Bundesliga clubs by functioning as the primary democratic platform where members can exercise their voting rights. It is during these assemblies where critical decisions regarding the club's operations are made. These include amendments to statutes, approval of financial statements, and elections of the supervisory board members (Roose & Schäfer, 2017). For instance, at Bayern München's General Assembly, members have attempted to influence significant sponsorship decisions regarding Bayern München's cooperation with Qatar Airways (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2021).

Moreover, the *Supervisory Board* offers members a direct link to engage with and oversee the club's management. This board plays a pivotal role in monitoring the club's operations and ensuring that management decisions align with the broader interests of the membership base. Even though a high percentage of fans is not actively participating in this process, it is possible for members to join and to be elected to the supervisory board. It functions as a governance body that not only holds the club's executive officers accountable but also approves major strategic decisions and integrates member perspectives into the club's strategic planning processes (Adam et al, 2019).

Moreover, the implementation of *Supporter Liaison Officers (SLO's)* in football clubs is a pivotal element of institutionalized participation that directly connects fans with club management and operations. With its roots in Germany, the SLO role was first introduced in 1992 as part of the National Concept for Sport and Security (NKSS), aimed at addressing issues of hooliganism and violence prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s (UEFA, 2011). This initiative was a collaborative effort among the German Football Association (DFB), the German Sports Confederation (DSB), and government ministries, leading to a comprehensive strategy that included fan liaison, stadium safety, and stakeholder coordination (Roose & Schäfer, 2017).

The SLO's role has proven so pivotal that it became a mandatory requirement in the licensing standards to participate in European club competitions such as the Champions League (DFL, 2019). An essential aspect of the SLO's function in Germany includes prevention and security integration. SLO's foster a vital communication bridge between fans and club security officers and enhance mutual understanding and facilitating for smoother match-day operations.

They are therefore tasked with a dual communication role: providing fans with insights into the club's decisions while bringing fans' perspectives to the management. This dual role is crucial for maintaining a transparent dialogue, which not only enhances the matchday experience but also strengthens the overall governance of the club (UEFA, 2011). The institutionalization of the SLO role is a significant development in the democratization of club operations, aligning club objectives with supporter expectations and contributing to a more inclusive club environment.

Another tool that allows for members participation and is a German characteristic of football governance is the implementation of a *fan advisory board (Fanbeirat)*. This mechanism, which meets regularly, discusses issues specifically related to fan interests such as ticket pricing, club merchandise policies and matchday experiences from fans and stakeholders. Recommendations regarding future plans and strategies are typically taken into consideration by the club management, which provides a structured pathway for fan concerns to influence club policies (Roose & Schäfer, 2017).

The integration of fan support like fan advisory boards and SLO's into Bundesliga clubs exhibits a varied landscape, with each club adopting unique approaches to fan engagement. The fan advisory board serves as a possible mechanism to gather and incorporate fan insights into club policies, while the SLO model acts as critical link between the fans and club operations and therefore addresses immediate concerns and fosters a sense of community and safety (Bauers et al., 2022). However, the specifics of these roles, including their functions and impact, can differ significantly from club to club.

A notable characteristic, but also a challenge in analysing these roles across different clubs is the variability in the availability of information regarding their operations and outcomes. Especially for SLO's, detailed information about their activities and the extent of their influence is often not publicly disclosed to ensure that the dialog with fans and members is low-threshold. This makes it difficult to assess the full scope of their impact. This lack of transparency can obscure the understanding of how these roles function within the broader context of club governance and fan interaction.

4.3.2 Non-Institutionalized Participation

Another way of fans to express their views is to utilize public demonstrations, such as banners at games, organized protests outside club facilities, or vocal opposition during matches. These actions, although not officially part of the governance structure, can significantly impact the club's public relations and management decisions. Such forms of participation are especially potent in drawing media attention and public support and can pressure club leaders to address the concerns raised (Bauers et al., 2022). Notably in the last season, such demonstrations have played a crucial role in interrupting the entry of external investors into Bundesliga clubs to

preserve the traditional club ownership structure. Especially the fans of Eintracht Frankfurt have effectively used such methods to protest against the club structure of the VFL Wolfsburg and thus started a debate about the possible entry of investors into the league (FAZ, 2024).

Also, clubs often engage with fans through informal channels like social media, where feedback can be more immediate and less filtered than in formal settings. These interactions, while not officially recognized as governance mechanisms, are crucial for management to quickly interpret the fans positions and respond to emerging issues. They also provide a platform for fans who may not have formal membership but whose support and loyalty are vital to the club (Bauers et al., 2022).

4.4 ANALYSIS OF CLUB STATUTES

To illustrate the utilization of the diverse instruments of participation within Bundesliga clubs, this section delves into an in-depth analysis of both formal participation structures and online engagement strategies, which are portrayed in the club statutes.

4.4.1 The General Assembly

The importance of the general assembly in democratic participation across Bundesliga clubs becomes visible with all 14 clubs explicitly detailing its power, structure, frequency, and tasks within their statutes. This consistent mention across clubs underscores the general assembly's critical role as the main body through which members exercise their influence over key club decisions, including financial management and policy development within their clubs.

The general assembly's involvement in setting membership fees is particularly notable as it reflects the depth of member control. This varies from direct decision-making authority, as seen in clubs like Heidenheim. There the general assembly sets both membership fees and additional service obligations autonomously and therefore has a comparatively high level of influence. On the other hand, some clubs have more moderated roles where the general assembly's approval is necessary as a following step of board proposals. This arrangement ensures that members have a substantive say in the financial commitments they undertake, which is also a members influence on the club in a different way. In all the statutes examined, it was possible to find ways for the members to influence the membership fees.

However, the examination of the general assembly's role highlights a significant correlation between club size and the complexity of member involvement in governance structures. In smaller clubs such as Heidenheim or Augsburg, the general assembly has a higher degree of autonomy and can directly set membership fees and other obligations without needing further approvals. This level of influence indicates a more simplistic governance structure that values and promotes direct member participation and decision-making power.

Conversely, larger clubs like Borussia Dortmund or FC Bayern München require general assembly approval for board proposals concerning membership fees and do not give them the initiative to decide. This indicates a more structured and perhaps bureaucratic approach to

member involvement. The difference most likely results from the larger membership base and more complex organizational structures that larger clubs deal with, and which demand for more regulation to keep up effective management practices (Statista, 2024).

This can be clearly illustrated by the presence of multiple governing bodies in the club of FC Bayern München. Their statute outlines a more sophisticated system involving a presidium, administrative advisory board, supervisory board, and honorary board, each with clearly defined roles and extensive involvement in governance processes. This intricate structure contrasts sharply with smaller clubs, which tend to have fewer governing bodies and simpler administrative processes.

The same can be seen at Eintracht Frankfurt's establishment of a structured youth representation. Their governance structure exemplifies another layer of nuanced member involvement, which presents larger clubs' efforts to develop more complex structures to fit to a diverse membership base. The so-called "Jugendordnung" at Eintracht Frankfurt not only highlights the club's commitment to inclusivity but also underpins a deliberate effort to integrate the perspectives of younger members into its decision-making fabric.

Additionally, the statutes often empower the general assembly to elect the executive board and the presidency, which plays a crucial role in defining the strategic direction and operational management of the club. This provision underscores the significant influence members have through their voting rights, by directly impacting leadership selection and club governance.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals diversity in the age at which members can participate in voting in the general assembly. While the standard age is 18, clubs like Heidenheim, Freiburg, Mainz, and Köln allow younger members aged 16 and above to vote. Therefore, only 4 out of the 14 clubs analyzed, allow young people that are aged between 16 and 18 to exercise their right to vote. This indicates a more progressive approach towards inclusivity of younger members. Allowing this lowers the threshold for youth engagement, potentially fostering a more engaged future membership base.

Another variance in membership requirements for voting rights, as exemplified by VfB Stuttgart, where only members of at least six months' standing are eligible, highlights a common method clubs use to ensure that voters have a demonstrated commitment to the club, thereby stabilizing the governance process. This requirement can be seen as both a barrier to immediate participation for new members and as a safeguard against fleeting or uncommitted membership.

In summary, the general assembly across Bundesliga clubs not only serves as a fundamental mechanism for institutionalized member participation but also reflects varied levels of member control and inclusivity.

4.4.2 The Supervisory Board

While all Bundesliga clubs have supervisory boards, there are significant variations in how new chairpersons are appointed and in the inclusivity of their composition. This analysis explores the mentions of supervisory boards within club statutes and examines the structural opportunities and limitations provided in the regulations. The analysis of club statutes reveals

varying degrees of explicit mention and roles assigned to supervisory boards, which appears to also correlate with club size and the complexity of their organizational structures.

In the analyzed statutes, 8 out of 14 clubs explicitly mention and define the role of the supervisory board. This explicit mention is significant as it typically outlines the board's functions, responsibilities, and its composition, providing a clear framework for member involvement in oversight activities. The clubs Borussia Dortmund, FC Augsburg, SC Freiburg, 1. FC Heidenheim, Borussia Mönchengladbach, FC Bayern München, 1. FSV Mainz 05, and 1. FC Union Berlin have detailed provisions regarding their supervisory boards, which suggests a more structured and direct approach to incorporate members into this committee.

A notable aspect of the statute where the supervisory board is mentioned is the inclusion of club members in the election or appointment processes. For instance, Mainz 05's statute is exemplary in integrating members into the managing process, with one seat on the supervisory board always reserved specifically for a representative from the fan department. This practice not only enhances member representation but also ensures that fan interests are directly considered in club decisions.

The presence or absence of a supervisory board and its detailed mention in club statutes often reflects the administrative complexity and member engagement strategies of the clubs. Larger clubs with more intricate governance structures, like FC Bayern München, typically have multiple layers within their frameworks, including a supervisory board with well-defined roles. This complexity can serve to both broaden the scope of member involvement and potentially increase the bureaucratic aspects of participation. In contrast, clubs that do not explicitly mention a supervisory board in their statute or have less detailed provisions may not necessarily lack such a body but might integrate members and fill these positions differently or less effectively.

4.4.3 Digital Participation Opportunities

The analysis of Bundesliga club statutes also highlights differences across the clubs' efforts in financial transparency and digital participation opportunities for the members.

8 out of the 14 clubs analyzed implemented practices for financial transparency and member and stakeholder insight. A notable example for financial transparency is Eintracht Frankfurt, where the board of administration (Verwaltungsrat) appoints an independent auditor to review the annual financial statements and to act as a kind of additional financial control on the club's own initiative, also underscoring a robust approach to financial accountability. Similar practices can be found in clubs such as 1. FC Köln, Mainz 05, SV Werder Bremen, FC Bayern München, 1. FC Heidenheim, Borussia Mönchengladbach, and VfL Bochum, each incorporating measures to ensure the clarity and accuracy of financial reporting. These measures foster a transparent environment where members can assess the financial health and decision-making processes of their clubs, thus reinforcing trust and involvement in club affairs.

Furthermore, clubs are increasingly leveraging technology to facilitate member engagement and participation. 5 out of the 14 clubs describe the implementation of digital participation opportunities for members in their statutes. For example, Eintracht Frankfurt has implemented

electronic voting to enable members to cast their votes during meetings from remote locations. As one of a few clubs, 1. FC Köln simplifies new member registration through online forms instead of written applications, which makes it easier for fans to join the club community and register. Additionally, Mainz 05 and SV Darmstadt 98 provide options for members to participate in the sessions of the General Assembly virtually. This is a crucial adaptation especially necessary during times when gathering in person is not feasible. Also, Borussia Mönchengladbach allows new proposals to be submitted electronically and therefore encourages more active member involvement.

These initiatives reflect a conscious effort by clubs to integrate more sophisticated technological solutions to engage their membership base effectively, catering to the needs of a digitally oriented generation of fans and ensuring their participation in the club. It is crucial, however, to view these digital tools as supplements rather than replacements for traditional, in-person methods to prevent the exclusion of groups such as older members who may prefer conventional engagement opportunities.

4.5 ANALYSIS OF CLUB WEBSITES

To delve deeper into how Bundesliga clubs foster fan engagement through the SLO's, this section analyzes this role and effectiveness in the clubs, as mandated by the Deutsche Fußball Liga (DFL). This examination focuses on the actual implementation of these roles across the league and explores the extent to which clubs adhere to DFL minimum requirements or implement unique and more advanced tools. This analysis is based on information sourced from the clubs' websites.

The DFL mandates it as a basic requirement for the clubs in their licensing procedure that they need to employ at least three full-time supporter liaison officers, with the requirement reduced to two for 2. Bundesliga clubs. From the 2022/2023 season, this becomes compulsory in the 3. Liga as well (DFB, 2020). This trend underlines the commitment to ensuring that clubs maintain active and structured dialogue with their supporters, recognizing the critical role fans and members play in the football ecosystem.

Despite this direction, the analysis reveals that a notable disparity among the 14 Bundesliga clubs can be identified, with exactly half (7 out of 14) not establishing structures beyond the DFL's minimum requirements of hiring supporter liaison officers. These refer to club-initiated measures and frameworks that are not legally mandated and represent additional efforts to enhance fan engagement. This observation may stem from various factors including budget constraints or other administrative priorities. The absence of extra structures could also imply an approach which possibly aims to minimize bureaucracy or maintain a direct line of communication without the complexity of additional layers. On the other hand, this could also suggest a potential underutilization of the opportunities that structured fan engagement provides, such as enhanced fan loyalty and improved club-public relations.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. For clubs, adhering strictly to DFL mandates without additional initiatives, this might limit the potential benefits it can bring, such as increased fan investment and more nuanced feedback. For fans, this could translate to a less versatile engagement experience, potentially affecting their sense of actual influence or

connection to the club. Conversely, clubs that choose to establish more elaborate structures possibly enjoy a more dynamic and diverse relationship with their supporters, which can lead to a broader and more satisfying engagement.

Furthermore, the clubs show differences in the amount of information they give about tasks and areas of their fan advisors. In addition, the contact details of the responsible employees can be found online at all the clubs analyzed, which must be highlighted as a positive and transparent aspect.

Nevertheless, transparency regarding fan engagement on digital platforms is notably limited among the clubs studied. Among the 14 Bundesliga clubs analyzed, 4 show a notable lack of transparency regarding detailed information about fan engagement practices on their websites and social media platforms. This limited transparency in their communication does not provide direct insights into the tasks, responsibilities, and ongoing initiatives.

4.5.1 Innovative Fan Engagement Strategies in Bundesliga Clubs

From the analyzed clubs, half of them (7 out of 14) have developed advanced structures that go well beyond the previously mentioned minimum requirements set by the DFL and demonstrate further dedication. These clubs have instituted unique, club-specific initiatives that demonstrate a robust commitment to integrating fan input through innovative approaches.

Eintracht Frankfurt has established a distinct “Fan- und Förderabteilung”, which is a dedicated department that not only addresses fan interests on a larger scale but is also managed by an additional honorary board (Eintracht Frankfurt, 2024). Further supporting their proactive approach, the “Frankfurter Fanprojekt”, financed with €53,000 from the state of Hesse, focuses on reducing violence and promoting tolerance. This illustrates more commitment to social responsibility and fan welfare (FAZ, 2016).

Borussia Dortmund enhances their fan engagement through specialized areas focusing on international fans and fan clubs which provides detailed attention to diverse fan segments. Additionally, the establishment of a “Fanrat” offers a platform for extensive network-based work and supports anti-discrimination efforts (Borussia Dortmund, 2024). Werder Bremen is also pursuing a similar claim with their specialized “Fankultur & Antidiskriminierung” department, which focuses on anti-discrimination to foster a more inclusive fan environment. This department also aims to influence broader national policies through its work with German football associations (Werder Bremen, 2024).

Mainz 05 has differentiated itself by appointing a specific representative for their U23 team, alongside a detailed setup of four fan representatives who oversee various fan-related activities. This structured approach ensures that all fan segments are given attention and that their concerns are addressed systematically (Mainz 05, 2024).

FC Bayern München operates an own dialog-oriented department, which actively includes fan input in club decisions. This initiative is supported by regular participation from the club's executive board, ensuring that those perspectives directly influence club policies (FC Bayern, 2024). Moreover, Bayern München employs local fan representatives across different regions, which refers to its large and geographically dispersed global fan base.

Moreover, 1. FC Union Berlin has integrated its efforts into the core of its club structure through the “Fan and Member Department” (FuMA). This department actively involves ideas to strengthen the bond between fans and the club and aims to develop new strategies to practically include marginalized groups (Union Berlin, 2024).

A dual-pillar approach to fan support is employed by Borussia Mönchengladbach, combining internal resources with external fan organization. This model maintains a direct line of communication with the fan base. The FPMG Supporters Club, which is recognized as the primary fan organization, plays a crucial role in mediating between the fans and various stakeholders and is further facilitated by a local project which focuses on educational and community-oriented purposes (Borussia Mönchengladbach, 2024).

These examples illustrate that the clubs investing in these extended structures not only adhere to DFL regulations but also proactively enhance fan involvement efforts, setting benchmarks for effective fan engagement in the sporting world. Also, these initiatives promote the aim to foster long-term loyalty and active participation within a club’s fan bases. Moreover, these innovative practices could serve as potential role models or blueprints for other clubs that seek to strengthen their connection with fans and enhance their community involvement.

	General Assembly Involvement	Supervisory Board Presence	Voting Rights from Age 16	Digital Participation Tools	Financial Transparency	Supporter Liaison Officers	Innovative Fan Engagement Structures	Transparency Issues in Fan Engagement
Eintracht Frankfurt	X			X	X	X	X	
1. FC Köln	X		X	X	X	X		X
Borussia Dortmund	X	X				X	X	
Mainz 05	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
VFB Stuttgart	X					X		X
Werder Bremen	X				X	X	X	
SC Freiburg	X	X	X			X		X
FC Bayern München	X	X			X	X	X	
FC Heidenheim	X	X	X		X	X		
SV Darmstadt 98	X			X		X		X
Union Berlin	X	X				X	X	
Borussia Mönchengladbach	X	X		X	X	X	X	
FC Augsburg	X	X				X		
VFL Bochum	X				X	X		

Figure 2: Self-Compiled Overview of Participation Instruments in Bundesliga Clubs

Note: General Assembly and Supporter Liaison Officers are mandated by DFL regulations

4.6 INTEGRATING SUSTAINABLE PARTICIPATION PRINCIPLES

In a next step, applying the sustainable participation principles in relation to German football supporters by Bauer et. Al, to analyze the clubs' participation structures, reveals critical insights into how overcoming the visible barriers can enhance the influence of fans and members in decision-making processes within the clubs. Here's an integration of the analysis with the sustainability principles, focusing on identified barriers and weaknesses in the Bundesliga clubs:

4.6.1 Health

The principle of health primarily addresses the well-being and social dimensions of communities. In Bundesliga clubs, this principle can be addressed by examining the emotional impacts of club participation on fans with a particular focus on transparency.

A fundamental aspect of health in a fan community context is the feeling of being informed and involved. Many Bundesliga clubs, however, show significant transparency and communication gaps, especially in the functioning of supporter liaison officers. This role is crucial as it serves as the primary channel, next to the general assembly, for fans to communicate their concerns and receive information from the club. The lack of clarity can lead to a lacking sense of belonging and loyalty among fans. When they are unclear about decision-making processes or feel their voices are not heard, it can lead to decreased mental well-being. Furthermore, clubs without a structured youth engagement strategy miss out on building foundational relationships already from a young age. In some clubs, younger members (16-18 years old) are allowed to vote, but this practice is not widespread. The exclusion of younger supporters from voting can hinder their ability to influence club policies that affect their interests and engagement levels.

4.6.2 Influence

In the Bundesliga context, the principle of influence can be crucial in determining how much actual power and input fans have over club decisions.

Regular voting at general assemblies in all analyzed clubs is a standard practice, which is beneficial for maintaining member involvement. Nevertheless, many fans are unable to attend or participate in meetings and votes due to procedural complexities, as seen in the case of VfB Stuttgart. Also, more frequent meetings could include members more regularly but on the other hand, can overwhelm them if they are not properly informed in advance. Regarding the category of representative participation, there is a significant deficiency in the inclusion of fan representatives in the supervisory board across the analyzed clubs. A positive example in this case is Mainz 05, which includes a dedicated spot for a fan representative in the supervisory board, which promotes transparency and accountability.

4.6.3 Competence

The Competence principle, as defined by Bauer et. al, emphasizes the necessity for members of an organization to be well-informed so they can make effective decisions.

While members generally have defined rights to access information, the extent and depth of this information vary significantly across the analyzed clubs. Especially regarding financial dealings or strategic decisions, some clubs are not fully disclosing information in a timely and comprehensive manner, which hinders the ability of members to make informed decisions. Also in this principle, missing fan representatives in supervisory boards, can limit the scope of

information shared with the wider membership base and contradict with encouraging inclusive representation.

4.6.4 Impartiality

The principle of impartiality in the Bundesliga's context involves ensuring that all club members can participate without excluding barriers. This principle is crucial for maintaining fair and democratic governance within football clubs and each member's voice is given equal weight and opportunity to influence club policy.

Many clubs do not facilitate participation for members who cannot attend meetings in person due to distance, cost, or physical limitations. Despite some teams implementing online instruments, the majority of Bundesliga clubs have not fully implemented online tools that could facilitate broader participation in general assemblies or voting processes. Furthermore, the processes involved in registering for membership are not standardized across clubs and often present a barriers for fans. The situation is similar with fans and their opportunities to fill motions, because it is often not possible to file a motion individually or they need approval by a club body. Regarding democratic voting, clubs where investors have significant influence, especially the 50+1 Rule exceptions, underutilize the potential democratic processes and move towards an oligarchic structure where decisions are made by a few rather than by the collective membership.

4.6.5 Meaning-Making

Meaning making within Bundesliga clubs is centred around the constitution and the way it establishes an effective framework for member participation and influence. This principle focuses on how participation is encouraged to foster a deeper commitment from the members in an effective manner.

Changes to club constitutions can only be made during the general meeting, typically held annually. This infrequency limits the clubs' agility in responding to emerging challenges. The long-term nature of these statutes means that once decisions are made, they are difficult to reverse or adapt, which can potentially lead to outdated practices. Despite the potential to encourage participation by embedding mechanisms like the 50+1 rule, the actual effectiveness of these initiatives is difficult to measure. There is a notable lack of mechanisms to evaluate whether the efforts actually lead to increased satisfaction or if it merely exists as a formal provision.

4.7 RECOMMENDATIONS AND LESSONS FROM THE FDK

Building on the analysis of the clubs and insights derived from applying Bauers' principles, we can look to innovative public participation tools and ways to enhance these frameworks further. The FDK offers a robust example of structured, inclusive, and technologically enabled public engagement that can inform potential improvements in Bundesliga club governance. By learning from the FDK's methodologies, Bundesliga clubs could better align their participation structures with the needs and expectations of their fans and foster a more engaged fanbase.

4.7.1 Enhancing Club Governance through Phased Participation

To ensure that fans, members, and all other stakeholders are well-informed and actively involved in the club's decision-making processes, adopting a structured phase-based approach can be supportive in this case. With the lessons from the FDK this method can foster fan engagement and participation significantly.

The first step in this adapted approach involves establishing an initial consultation phase, which could serve as a foundational stage to introduce fans to the club's internal workings. This phase, inspired by the FDK's "Inspiration Phase," could focus on educating about various aspects like the complexities of club governance, financial realities, and strategic challenges facing the club. During this phase, clubs can already use tools like workshops, informational sessions, and open forums to provide deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the club. This informed base equips fans with the necessary knowledge to engage effectively in subsequent phases.

Following this educational outreach, clubs could then move into a deliberation phase. In this stage, fans would be invited to join thematic working groups or committees that focus on specific aspects of club operations, such as youth development, matchday experiences, and community outreach efforts. These groups could function similarly to the FDK's working committees and offer a structured environment where all stakeholders can discuss, debate, and develop proposals related to their areas of interest. This phase ensures that contributions are well-considered and aligned with the club's strategic objectives.

The finalization of the process is the decision-making phase. Here, the proposals and ideas refined during the deliberation phase are brought forward for final discussion and approval. In democratic voting processes, clubs could decide on these initiatives. This stage is vital as it translates the collaborative efforts into actionable decisions that can have a real impact on the club's direction and policies.

At VfB Stuttgart for example, the recent replacement of long-standing supervisory board chairman Claus Vogt with Tanja Gönner, a representative from the economic sector, has sparked significant fan criticism and feelings of betrayal (SWR, 2024). This situation exemplifies the need for better inclusion and transparency within the club. By integrating the phased model, VfB Stuttgart could avoid such dissatisfaction and foster more collaborative decision-making. Involving fans in working groups during the deliberation phase could enhance

transparency regarding the decision of appointing a new chairman. This offers fans greater rights and a sense of inclusion. Ultimately, this could lead to more active participation and a higher number of participants at VFB Stuttgart's general assembly meeting, which has been poorly attended for many years (Stuttgarter Nachrichten, 2017).

4.7.2 Promoting Inclusivity and Representation

Building on the implementation of structured phases, the next crucial element Bundesliga clubs can learn from the FDK involves cultivating a more inclusive and representative framework for participation.

One of the significant barriers in Bundesliga clubs is the often exclusive nature of decision-making bodies. A more inclusive approach could be modeled after the FDK's method of selecting participants through a combination of random selection and intentional inclusion of underrepresented demographics. For Bundesliga clubs, this could mean to ensure a broader representation in their entities. This would mirror the FDK's commitment to diversity, which has proven to deepen the discourse and enrich the decision-making process (Frinken & Landwehr, 2023).

Practically, for Borussia Dortmund, implementing a more inclusive approach to selecting supervisory board members could significantly enhance the diversity in their club. Currently, the club's statute specifies that supervisory board members are elected by the general assembly, but with candidates proposed by a special nomination committee, which may limit the scope of representation. To improve this, Borussia Dortmund could adopt a method inspired by the FDK, which utilizes an intentional inclusion of underrepresented demographics.

Currently, some clubs are not providing sufficient advance notice about the agendas of general meetings, which can prevent members from fully engaging in the discussions. By strategically following the FDK, clubs could improve transparency by publishing detailed agendas and related materials well before meetings. This would ensure that all members, regardless of their geographical or social status, have enough time to understand the issues at hand, prepare their contributions, and decide on their voting preferences.

While some clubs like Mainz 05, have made efforts in including fan representatives in their supervisory board, this practice is not widespread. Inspired by the FDK's representative participation from various communities, Bundesliga clubs could enhance their structures by ensuring diverse fan representation. This can involve setting mandatory quotas for fan representatives in the supervisory board, which could ensure that the boards reflect the clubs' diversity.

4.7.3 Addressing Digital Participation Gaps / Feedback and Evaluation

Furthermore, current gaps in digital participation could be bridged by adopting new practices. The FDK effectively used digital platforms to facilitate discussions and gather diverse inputs from participants. An integration of similar online forums in the Bundesliga allows fans to

discuss upcoming decisions, club policies, and other relevant topics. These platforms would serve as a forerunner to general assemblies or other meetings. It also ensures that members are well-prepared and have had the opportunity to voice their concerns and suggestions beforehand. Additionally, integrating online voting systems help to overcome the challenges of physical attendance at meetings, which has been a significant barrier for many members, especially those residing far from the club's location or those with physical disabilities.

Moreover, some Bundesliga clubs have complex registration processes that can discourage potential members. As an example, the membership registration process at FC Bayern München represents the complexities that potential members face and highlights barriers to fan participation. In accordance with paragraph 7 of the club's statute, any individual wishing to become a member must support the club's goals and apply for membership either by July 1st or January 1st, with a minimum duration of one or one and a half years. In addition, the application must always be submitted in written form and the club may request a copy of the person's identity card or passport. Only then does the steering committee decide on the application for admission.

By simplifying these processes, possibly through a user-friendly online platform, clubs can attract a broader base of members. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned here how important it is to ensure that the adoption of digital tools does not exclude those who may prefer or rely on traditional methods of engagement, such as in-person meetings or paper-based communications. Maintaining a balance between innovative and conventional participation methods is essential to integrate the diverse preferences and capabilities of all club members.

Continuous feedback mechanisms are pivotal in refining participation processes. Regular reports on the outcomes and impacts of engagement activities, like the FDK's accompanying study report, can provide clubs and their members with insights into what is working and what needs to be changed. Annual reviews could identify areas for improvement and ensure that the club's strategies remain effective.

Implementing these strategies could address the current barriers faced by Bundesliga clubs, where limited digital tools, complex registration processes, and insufficient feedback mechanisms often hinder effective member engagement. By adopting the FDK's proven methods of digital engagement, continuous evaluation, and rewarding participation, Bundesliga clubs can foster a more vibrant and inclusive community.

5. CONCLUSION

All in all, this thesis addresses the question *"How can participatory practices from the Frankfurt Demokratiekonvent positively influence fan involvement in the governance of Bundesliga clubs?"* by delving into the nuances of participatory governance as practiced within German football clubs and drawing on the innovative strategies of the FDK. The key insights have demonstrated that there are profound possibilities for enhancing fan engagement and democratizing decision-making within Bundesliga clubs.

The findings reveal that although many Bundesliga clubs have implemented structures that nominally support fan participation, there is notable variability in how these structures function and in the depth of the fans' effective influence. Specifically, the study identified evident inconsistencies in the operational effectiveness of the general assemblies and supporter liaison officers across clubs. Although these instruments are designed to integrate fans and members, their application often lacks the necessary requirements to empower them fully in decision-making processes. Therefore, tools such as the general assembly or supervisory boards, though institutionalized, often do not fully include the whole potential of engagement. The FDK's method of inclusive, structured, and phased engagement provides a scheme for Bundesliga clubs that aim to deepen fan involvement and thereby enhance transparency in the organization.

By practically applying the conceptualized sustainable participation principles outlined by Bauer et al., this study has identified critical barriers and facilitated a better understanding of the changes needed to improve fan influence in club structures. This thesis fills a knowledge gap regarding the integration of participation tools into sports governance and also offers actionable strategies that clubs can implement to improve the fan-club relationship.

The analytical component of this thesis not only enhances current scholars on participation within sports organizations but also introduces a nuanced perspective specific to the Bundesliga. This research contributes in a unique way by integrating models from a successful non-sporting context into the sports governance field. Moreover, this study goes beyond the typical analyses found in existing literature, which predominantly focuses on English football clubs. Consequently, it addresses a significant research gap in German sports governance and provides insights that are culturally and operationally specific to Germany. This also highlights the unique aspects of German fan culture and club management.

However, the study also acknowledges several limitations that define the scope of its contributions and set the stage for future research. Firstly, the application of participatory instruments derived from public contexts like the FDK to the private, commercially driven environment of the Bundesliga presents challenges, as these prioritize different outcomes. These are particularly competitive performance and financial success over broad stakeholder participation. Recognizing this challenge underscores the need for more tailored approaches that can better combine the dual objectives of competitive success and stakeholder engagement.

Additionally, the reliance on publicly available data, while being necessary for this study, limits the depth of the analysis that could be achieved through more personalized data collection methods, such as interviews with club officials or direct surveys of fans. This approach can serve to a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics in the clubs and reveal unpublished strategies that could significantly influence future practices.

Future research could also benefit from a more detailed examination of the individual clubs, potentially through case studies or long-term analysis, to better understand the effects of new and already existing initiatives. Including various stakeholder perspectives like expert opinions and direct interviews with club officials or fan representatives could also provide more nuanced insights that public documents cannot capture. In sum, while this thesis advances the understanding of participation in the Bundesliga, it also highlights the need for more courageous and unconventional exploration in the unique context of German football governance.

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7. CODING TABLE

Codegroup Category	Associated Codes	Notes/Descriptions
General Assembly (Mitgliederversammlung)	GA_Frequency; GA_Powers; GA_Structure	Details the frequency, powers, and structure of the GA.
Supervisory Board (Aufsichtsrat)	SB_Composition; SB_Election; SB_Powers	Outlines the composition, election process, and powers of the SB.
Fan Advisory Board (Fanbeirat)	FAB_Existence; FAB_Influence; FAB_Role	Explains the existence, influence, and roles within the FAB.
Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO's)	SLO_Impact; SLO_Integration; SLO_Role	Discusses the impact, integration, and roles of SLO's.
Non-Institutionalized Participation	Informal Feedback Mechanisms; Media and Public Action	Covers mechanisms for informal feedback and public engagement.
Structural Enablers and Limitations	Accessibility; Conflict Resolution; Decision-Making Power; Digital Participation Opportunities; Feedback and Documentation; Financial Transparency; Inclusivity; Participation Barriers; Transparency	Describes each factor's role in enabling or limiting structural participation.