Disabled people's experiences of English football fandom: Inclusion, exclusion and discrimination


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Abstract

This article employs a novel theoretical framework, rooted in the social relational model of disability alongside the concept of ableism, to critically analyse disabled football supporters lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in English Football. In seeking to shed light on this hitherto neglected field, this study utilised a dual-phased qualitative approach comprised of two complementary netnographic methods, specifically online observations of fan message boards and online semi-structured interviews with 33 disabled football supporters of clubs in the English Football League (EFL) and National League (NL). We demonstrate that while some clubs provide inclusive spectator environments where disabled people experience moments of inclusion and belonging, they nonetheless face structural, social, and psychological barriers before, during and after the matchday which create conditions that exclude, oppress, and constrain full participation in football fandom. In doing so, this paper offers new insights into how the disabling nature of contemporary capitalist society continues to systematically exclude disabled people from areas of mainstream society – such as football fandom – to which they have a right.

Keywords: Football; Fandom; Disability; Disablism; Ableism; Sport

Introduction

Between September 2015 and April 2017, the British government released three separate reports detailing the abject experiences of disabled people who attend stadia to watch live sports in the United Kingdom (UK) (DWP, 2015; CMSC, 2017; EHRC, 2017). Importantly for this article, one of these, the ‘Inclusive and Accessible Stadia’ report (DWP, 2015), highlighted a range of structural constraints affecting disabled people’s experiences of English football stadia, and outlined the systematic failings of many professional clubs in improving accessibility. Despite subsequent interventions from the government, advocacy charities, and other stakeholders, the provision of accessible facilities for disabled football supporters remains inadequate and their experiences deeply troubling. This is particularly true for match-going fans of clubs outside the top tier of the English football pyramid, specifically those in the EFL Championship, Leagues One and Two and the National League (NL), where
expectations to meet accessibility regulations receive far less scrutiny from the media. Beyond the absence of media attention, there is a paucity of academic work focused on the lived experiences of disabled football fans at any level of the game in England. There is some research offering insights into the difficulties they encounter but this does not engage with the voluminous critical disability studies literature which offers analytical tools to more richly theorise their experiences (e.g., Southby, 2011; 2013; García et al., 2017). As such there are significant gaps in our empirical knowledge of the breadth of disabled supporters’ fandom experiences, from the logistics of planning to attend a game, being in the stadium and post-match (Kitchin et al., 2022) and how this might be theorised.

To address these lacunas, this article utilises a netnographic approach involving observations of fan message boards and online semi-structured interviews (n.33), to investigate disabled fans’ perspectives and experiences of the barriers to their access, inclusion, and participation in football fandom. It employs a novel theoretical framework that draws upon the core tenets of Thomas’ (1999; 2007) social relational model of disability, in combination with the concept of ableism. This allows us to reveal that while some English football clubs are able to create environments where disabled supporters can experience momentary social inclusion and a sense of belonging, their experiences of football fandom are nonetheless contoured by ableism and forms of structural and psycho-emotional disablism that exclude, marginalise and discriminate. These findings, we argue, are sociologically important because they clearly illustrate how the disabiling nature of contemporary capitalist society continues to systematically exclude disabled people from cultural practices to which they have a right, such as football fandom. This study also pushes existing sociological research on football fandom in novel directions by focusing on a cohort of supporters whose experiences have been largely ignored.
The article begins with an exploration of how disabled football fans experiences of inclusion and exclusion have been accounted for and explained in the sparse academic literature. It then details the theoretical framework deployed in this research. Following an exposition of our methodological approach, the focus shifts to unpacking the two core themes that emerged from data analysis: (i) disabled people’s experiences of social inclusion in English football fandom, and (ii) the challenges of matchday participation for disabled people in English football fandom.

**English Football Fandom and Disability**

The academic research on inclusion and exclusion in English football fandom has tended to focus on modalities such as gender, ‘race’, and sexuality (Millward, 2023). As noted above, there is a dearth of academic work exploring the lived experiences of disabled fans. That which does exist, provides insights into both the inclusion and exclusion of disabled supporters. For instance, Southby’s (2011; 2013) research with learning-disabled fans revealed that football fandom can provide many social benefits for this group, particularly in engendering feelings of belonging and a shared identity with other fans. Being in the stadium offered these supporters a space to form social relationships with fellow fans through engaging in collective fandom practices such as talking about the game, singing, clapping, and cheering in unison (Doidge et al., 2020). These sorts of interactions in the context of football can temporarily create what McDonald et al. (2019: 937) term ‘moments of inclusion’ where marginalised individuals overcome feelings of exclusion experienced elsewhere in their lives. Indeed, Southby (2013) argued that football stadia can be seen as a ‘semi-institutional’ space where learning-disabled fans are able to feel included since the typical norms of mainstream society, which normally exclude learning-disabled people, are suspended and replaced by an alternative set of (sub)cultural rules and expectations associated with the performance of fandom.
Similarly, in exploring the role of Disabled Supporter Associations (DSA) in improving access and inclusion for disabled supporters in English football, García et al. (2017) contend that they create spaces for disabled people to interact and build social relationships both during the matchday and beyond. However, while DSAs can enable feelings of inclusion for disabled fans, they concluded that clubs are failing to promote inclusive spectating environments because they focus overwhelmingly on the physical dimension of access to the football stadia itself. Consequently, García et al. (2017) argue for a broader conceptualisation of access extending beyond the built environment to incorporate ‘softer’ dimensions based on Nind and Seale’s (2009) multi-dimensional model which includes elements such as knowledge, relationships, communication, and advocacy. This allows access to be conceived of as a crucial component of social inclusion, reflected in ‘interactions between environmental factors and personal characteristics, having access to public goods and services, […] and belonging to a supportive social network’ (Merrells et al., 2019: 13).

Nonetheless, as Darcy et al. (2020: 210) remind us, despite situational and contextual experiences of inclusion, disabled people remain largely ‘excluded from, or at best, kept in the margins of sport’. This reflects the barriers that wholly or partially exclude disabled people from full participation in society (Kidd, 2017). But within sport, their exclusion can be accredited to the longstanding ableist assumption that disabled people are not interested in participating (or spectating) sport because of their impairment(s) (DePauw and Gavron, 2005). While there is limited research on the barriers faced by disabled football supporters, Anderson and Balandin’s (2019) scoping study revealed that social and structural barriers emerging from inaccessible facilities, poor disability provision, and negative social attitudes from stadium facility staff can discourage disabled people from attending matches. Similarly, Garcia et al. (2017) found that English clubs often fail to provide accessible information about buying tickets, arranging transport, what to expect at the stadium, and who to contact for additional
information. Evidently, as Fitzgerald (2018: 65) contends, ‘it is society that has created
conditions that restrict participation rather than situating lack of engagement in sport purely as
a choice made by disabled people’.

To provide a more nuanced and reality-congruent analyses of the barriers match-going
football fans encounter, we move beyond the social model of disability that underpins the
extant research. We argue that Thomas’ (1999; 2007) social relational understanding of
disability, in addition to the concept of ableism offers a sharper, more insightful theoretical lens
to explain the lived experiences of these supporters. Before addressing these experiences, we
sketch out this theoretical framework.

**Theoretical Framework: Social Relational Model of Disability and Ableism**

By arguing that people are disabled by societal barriers, not their impairment, the social model
of disability has undoubtably advanced the lives of disabled people by providing a tool for
advocacy and addressing material and structural inequality in several areas of society, including
sport (Fitzgerald, 2018). However, by conceptually separating impairment from disability, the
social model leaves ‘much of the real-life experience of the disabled population un-theorised
and un-interrogated’ (Watermeyer, 2012: 15). Indeed, as Brighton et al. (2023) observed, the
social model has created a misleading Cartesian dualism which rejects the importance of the
impaired body, and in turn, is unable to account for the embodied, emotive, and psychological
dynamics of the lived experience of disability.

To reshape how the contingency and interplay between the effects of impairment and
the phenomenon of disability might be better understood, Thomas (1999; 2007) pioneered the
‘social relational model’. This approach explains disability, disablism, and impairment as
manifestations of social relationships between people categorised as ‘impaired’ and those
deemed ‘normal’. This understanding emphasises the subjective experience of individuals who
live with impairment(s) and therefore its use in this study allows us to centralise disabled fans’ lived experiences. Crucially, the social relational model differentiates between the disabling effects of the biological and embodied reality of living with an impairment in a social setting from the imposed restrictions caused by external social forces (Thomas, 2007). This understanding maintains that disabled people can experience oppression in a multitude of ways both inside and outside of the body (Brighton et al., 2023).

What differentiates the social relational model from other theorising of disability is how it allows us to make sense of these various forms of oppression through its three core constituent concepts: (i) structural disablism, (ii) psycho-emotional disablism, and (iii) impairment effects (Thomas, 1999; 2007). Structural disablism borrows from the social model and refers to the barriers disabled people face that operate outside of the individual and often manifest in terms of inaccessible environments and social forms of discrimination (Thomas, 2007). Psycho-emotional disablism moves beyond forms of oppression caused by structural barriers to focus on internal forms of disablism derived from social relationships with material barriers and other (non-disabled) people (Reeve, 2020). Here, psycho-emotional disablism accounts for the direct or indirect effects of disabling conditions (i.e. structures, attitudes, and perceptions) that can hinder disabled people’s psycho-emotional well-being, and subsequently, what they can do and can become (Smith and Bundon, 2018). To ensure impairment is appropriately theorised, the social relational model employs the concept of impairment effects to acknowledge how the biological reality of living with an impairment has a direct effect on daily life which may restrict activity and damage psycho-emotional well-being, even without the presence of structural disablism (Thomas, 2007). Hence, impairment effects refer to the direct and unavoidable physical (e.g., fatigue) and social (e.g., lack of inclusive provision) effects of reduced embodied functioning in the social world (Thomas, 2007).
These concepts are invaluable in this study because they allow us to illustrate how oppression can occur both inside (i.e., psycho-emotional disablism and impairment effects) and outside (i.e., structural disablism) of the body, whereby impairment, social, environmental, and psychological barriers can operate simultaneously and limit feelings of inclusion and fandom participation. While this framework can account for the direct and indirect experiences of oppression encountered by disabled people, it cannot expound the root causes of such oppression (Peers et al., 2022). For this reason, we also use the concept of ableism to explain the experiences of disabled football fans.

Ableism refers to a set of social relations that allow one group to maintain power over another based on ideas of ‘normalcy’ and the rights and privileges afforded to those considered ‘normal’ (i.e. non-disabled people) (Wolbring, 2012). Ableism primarily manifests in two interconnected ways: through the inaccessible environment and social structures that are frequently designed by, and for, those deemed ‘normal’; and in the ableist attitudes and cultures many people are socialized into (Brittain et al., 2023). In parsing out the difference between ableism and disablism, Goodley (2014) argues that ableism accentuates discrimination in favour of non-disabled people, whereas disablism emphasises discrimination against disabled people based upon an inability to comply with the capitalist logic of economic productivity. The various manifestations of ableism induce an ‘internalisation or self-loathing which devalues disablement’ in contemporary society (Campbell, 2009: 20). This process is associated with the concept of ‘internalised ableism’ whereby the ableist norms of society become internalised by disabled people and can result in profound psycho-emotional consequences (Reeve, 2020). Accordingly, ableism describes prejudicial attitudes, structural and internalised processes, and discriminatory behaviours towards disabled people that can lead to segregation and social exclusion which may limit opportunities for their full societal participation (Brittain et al., 2023). Combining ableism with the core elements of the social
relational model provides a novel framework for theorising the lived experiences of disabled supporters by linking micro social interactions with macro social processes.

Methodology

In this study, we adopt relativist ontological and constructivist epistemological positions which recognise that observations of the social world are influenced by the observers (the researchers) and the observers are influenced by the observed (the research participants) (Levers, 2012). It is therefore important to acknowledge that the authors of this paper currently identify as non-disabled. There has been a long-standing debate about the presence of non-disabled researchers in the field of disability studies and this influenced our reflexivity. For some disabled scholars, non-disabled researchers are poorly situated to comprehend the lived experiences of disabled people (Shakespeare and Watson, 1998) and can perpetuate social inequalities and reinforce oppression (Branfield, 1998). This contention has been challenged by both disabled and non-disabled researchers as alienating for non-disabled research allies and counter-productive to advancing knowledge (Kitchin, 2000). More recently, there has been a shift away from the impairment-based insider-outsider dichotomy, with Macbeth and Powis (2023: 62) advocating for renewed focus on ‘other aspects of our identities that we share, offering elements of insiderness to each other’s worlds and lived experiences’. Berger’s (2009) advocacy for disabled and non-disabled researchers to consider how and why they develop a ‘disability consciousness’ has been important in this process and informed our reflections on our positionality.

The disability consciousness of the first author, who led the data collection, and his ability to traverse insider-outsider relations in the research process was tied to his status as a long-standing football supporter who has lived experience of attending EFL football matches with disabled family members, together with years of extensive immersion in disability
studies scholarship. The second author is also a regular attendee of live football matches across the UK, including with a close family member who is hearing impaired, and has conducted research on football fan identities and with actors in football who have experienced exclusion and marginalisation. Finally, the third author has long undertaken research with people with disabilities that has sought to challenge uneven relations of power in disability sport. Our relational positionality (see Macbeth and Powis, 2023), informed by our personal and professional experiences, therefore helped to shape the research design – including the selection of methods and development of the interview guide – interactions with participants, and data analysis. As we note below, it also shaped our intent to position disabled football fans as ‘knowers’ and to provide space for them to authentically convey their lived experiences. We contend that maintaining corporeal reflexivity throughout the research process was central for achieving the criterion of ‘engagement’, ‘expression of a reality’ and ‘show, instead of tell’ in Smith and Sparkes (2020) conception of excellent qualitative research which we uphold for this article.

This study employed a netnographic approach consisting of two phases of data collection (Kozinets, 2020). The first author collected non-elicited data through online observations of open-access fan forums located on the Level Playing Field website (https://www.levelplayingfield.org.uk/sport/football) which provides disabled people with online spaces to publish text-based reviews of disabled provision of individual football clubs. To ensure a representative set of comments were chosen for analysis, only forums tied to clubs playing within the study’s four sampled leagues were selected. Comments posted between 2016-2021 were used to provide a contemporary perspective on issues relating to football stadia accessibility and the experiences of disabled fans. A total of 79 fan comments were collected and thematically analysed. This data helped to develop our disability consciousness
of the barriers disabled fans encounter and the understanding and sensitivity that it provided, informed the questions posed during online semi-structured interviews with 33 disabled fans.

To add depth and richness and given the heterogeneity of disability and the small number of studies focused on disabled supporters, the sample population included fans with various physical impairments who supported clubs across the four sampled leagues. Drawing on the social-relational concept of impairment effects, physical impairment is conceptualised as ‘those restrictions of bodily activity and behaviour that are directly attributable to bodily variations’ (Thomas, 2007:136) in combination with the social and cultural context in which an impairment is lived. A ‘call for participants’ advert was posted on the Level Playing Field website and was shared on social media to attract participants. Snowball sampling techniques – including direct email and telephone communication – were also used to extend the sample population. Participants were purposively selected to include those who had experienced a range of physical impairments, from people living with multiple sclerosis and cerebral palsy, to others with amputations, limb and spinal cord injuries. The final sample comprised five fans requiring ambulant disabled seating areas at English football stadia, while 28 used wheelchair seating sections. All were aged between 20-71 and all but two participants were white (the exceptions being one black British and one British Asian fan). Eight participants identified as female, while the remaining 25 identified as male. All interviews were conducted on Zoom between January 2021 and March 2022.

The initial data collection strategy planned for this study was an in-depth ethnography with disabled football supporters of English clubs. However, the timing of the data collection coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent periods of lock-down. This made conducting qualitative, face-to-face research unviable and necessitated pivoting to netnographic methods. The revised approach, particularly the use of online semi-structured interviews, was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, online interviews provided a flexible,
convenient and ‘COVID-19 safe’ alternative to face-to-face interviews (Lobe et al., 2020). Secondly, because football fans are geographically dispersed, online interviews enabled the researcher to engage with a broad sample population. And lastly, while the internet is not universally available and accessible to all (Scholz et al., 2017), online interviews provided the disabled participants with a way to navigate some of the barriers they face simply to have their voices heard in academic research (see Bundon and Hurd Clarke, 2015). Thus, the two complementary data collection methods employed for this study provided opportunities to capture the opinions, emotions and beliefs of participants based on their lived experiences of attending live football matches in England. The prioritising and foregrounding of the disabled voice that this enabled, has allowed this study to challenge the underrepresentation of disabled peoples’ perspectives on their experiences of sports settings in the extant research.

Alongside the online observation data, all 33 semi-structured interviews were recorded electronically, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed according to the six-stage process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). An abductive approach to thematic analysis was adopted (Ryba et al., 2012). This helped to foreground and explore participants’ experiences of inclusion and exclusion, the various social, structural and psychological barriers they encounter (inductive), as well as establishing whether their lived experiences could be understood through the theoretical framework outlined above (deductive). The themes and subthemes developed through the data analysis process form the foundation for the arguments explored below.

Finally, confidentiality and anonymity of participants was assured throughout the research process via the use of pseudonyms. All other elements of the research conformed to the ethical guidelines of Ulster University as well as those of the British Sociological Association.

Findings
We begin this discussion section by exploring disabled fans’ experiences of inclusion through football fandom, and in doing so, reveal a series of material and non-material prerequisites required to cultivate contextual and situational feelings of inclusivity. We then document the contradictory nature of football fandom for disabled people by analysing the structural, social, and psychological barriers they encounter before, during and after the matchday. In turn, we demonstrate the existence and operation of ableism and disablism within the context of English football, and how these processes contribute to the whole and/or partial exclusion of disabled football supporters from fandom participation.

**Experiences of Social Inclusion**

In explaining disabled people’s positive experiences of attending football matches, we found Merrells’ et al (2019) interpretation of social inclusion as involving a multitude of material and non-material factors to be salient. Many of the fans interviewed indicated how physical access to stadia was critical in terms of their experiences of social inclusion in the context of their football fandom. Most recognised the importance of legislation such as the Accessible Stadia Guide and its supplementary iterations (SGSA, 2004; 2015), Article 30 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the Equality Act 2010 in enabling suitable levels of physical access to English football stadia (Penfold and Kitchin, 2020).

Some participants were keen to highlight clubs who they felt demonstrated industry-leading provision. For example, James, a fan of a League One club, referenced his experience at one of these clubs, indicating how good levels of physical access with clear sightlines, allowed him to interact with fellow supporters:

> At [this stadium] you’re wheeling in already a tier up. So, you don’t need to worry about your view, and you’re just there, in amongst it, and you can intermingle with your own fans and your mates because it’s all open concourse.
This welcoming and inclusive spectator environment, created by ensuring disabled fans are not restricted by structural barriers and can experience unrestricted circulation and movement, support facilities, and most importantly, a good view of the pitch, have been identified as important in the disabled supporter experience (SGSA, 2004; 2015).

Such is the importance of accessible stadium design for feelings of inclusion among disabled supporters that Leo decided to stop watching matches at an English Premier League (EPL) club with poor facilities and inadequate levels of provision in favour of attending matches at a League One club:

I think the accessibility instigated a level of inclusion for me, and participation. I started to build up a relationship with the club, going to the stadium, getting into the stadium, watching the game with my friends, leaving the stadium, the accessibility became so embedded into a routine.

This perspective highlights the importance disabled people place on being able to exercise their right of choice in an accessible society and to participate in sporting contexts in the manner they choose (Christiaens and Brittain, 2021). Leo’s subjective experiences of access led him to choose to disassociate himself from a club playing at the highest level of the English game in favour of the better matchday experience provided by the League One club. This not only allowed him to participate in football fandom in the way he wanted – a crucial component of social inclusion (Merrells et al., 2019) – but also to develop a sense of solidarity with the club he now supports. This emphasises the view that where disabled people are able to participate in accessible matchday experiences they are likely to develop loyalties and affiliations to particular clubs (Anderson and Balandin, 2019).

Beyond physical dimensions of access to stadia, several participants outlined the social benefits of attending live football matches. As Rory, a fan of a League Two club explained:
Going to football is so important for a lot of disabled people, because so much of the outside world isn’t accessible. Football is far from accessible, but going to a match and being able to watch a game is an opportunity to get out of an isolated social environment and actually mix with other people.

This was echoed by Darius, a supporter of a Championship club, who expressed his enjoyment of attending matches and the value of the social interaction offered through football:

I love meeting and chatting to the people who have been there from day one with me in our disability section. And I’ve made some really good friends going [to the football]. Football gives me an excuse to get out of the house, meet other people, and become part of a community.

Evidently, the benefits of participation in football fandom for disabled people are social in nature, enabling senses of enjoyment, belonging, and community. This is particularly important when we consider that disabled people are more likely to experience loneliness and social isolation compared to non-disabled people because of significant disabling barriers (Macdonald et al., 2018). Leo and Darius’s experiences underline how football fandom can provide an entry point and access to wider social networks for disabled people (García et al., 2017). This reveals the importance of expanding our understanding of access beyond the physical environment and to recognise that access should also incorporate safe and inclusive social spaces where disabled people can experience ‘moments of inclusion’ (McDonald et al., 2019).

**The Challenges of Matchday Participation**

Despite the positive experiences outlined above, virtually all participants highlighted how they routinely encountered barriers and exclusionary practices in football. In particular, they reported drastic differences in their matchday experiences for home and away games. The majority of supporters involved in this study held a season ticket for their respective club during the 2021/22 football season. For many of these supporters, planning, traveling to, watching the
match, and returning home after home fixtures did not present any substantial challenges. However, negotiating the working practices of clubs while planning to attend away matches involved significant challenges for disabled supporters. As Declan, a fan of a League Two club, explained:

I’ve got to pre plan everything; where can I park? How can I get in through the turnstiles? Can I get up the stairs? Will I be able to see the game? Will I be able to get to the toilet? Will I be able to get a drink? There are all these things you’ve got to consider and process, and it is very taxing because most of the time the answer is no.

Similar issues were identified by Jimmy, who supports a League One club, leading him to conclude that despite his desire to travel to away games, the prior planning required was too complicated to justify attending:

If you look at some of our away matches, you can’t do it in a day, so I’d have to stay overnight somewhere. And I need a hoist and a special mattress on the bed, and it becomes just too tiresome. So I don’t bother with away games now, the planning and travel are just too much for me physically and mentally.

When understood against the backdrop of ableism, these testimonies demonstrate how the physical world, replete with inaccessible environments, maintains and reproduces unequal outcomes for disabled people (Campbell, 2009). In the case of attending football matches, disabled supporters must engage in careful planning to ensure their accessibility needs are going to be met which frequently remain unfulfilled by various institutions in society, including football clubs. Hence, when viewed social-relationally, disabled supporters encounter what Thomas (2007) refers to as ‘barriers to doing’ before they even leave their homes. Here, disabled fans encounter socially imposed restrictions caused by inaccessible environments. However, as highlighted by Jimmy, barriers to attending matches cannot solely be explained as structural or social in nature since the biological reality of living with an impairment may also influence decision-making processes about whether to attend a match or not. His words
also reveal that the combination of ‘barriers to doing’ and impairment effects can indirectly impact psycho-emotional well-being by inducing feelings of anxiety and frustration which serve to restrict participation in football fandom.

As part of the planning process, disabled supporters emphasised the difficulties involved in securing matchday tickets, accessing transport, and parking. When buying tickets, particularly for away matches, several fans expressed their frustration that many club websites do not provide them with the choice to book tickets in an accessible seating area online. As Chad, a fan of a League One club, described:

Because I’m a wheelchair user I can’t purchase a wheelchair space online, the websites always say you need to phone the club. So, when tickets go on sale online on a Friday, I can’t order a ticket straightaway because the ticket office is shut.

Many fans also criticised clubs over the lack of easily obtainable information concerning how and where to purchase tickets for accessible seating areas, arrangements regarding personal assistants, and who to contact for disability related issues. Despite the majority of participants holding a season ticket at the time of their interview, most raised concerns about the lack of accessible parking at stadia with only around one fifth able to purchase accessible parking alongside their season ticket. This resulted in many disabled supporters having to ‘fight for a carparking space at their own stadium’ (Chad). Even where supporters secured accessible parking alongside their season ticket, significant challenges remained in retaining this space. As Dave observed:

You’ll lose your parking space if you don’t turn up every week. The club keep track and will offer your space to someone else. And I think that’s unfair and unjust because it’s a lack of awareness about how you could be ill or unwell.

This issue also manifests when fans wish to travel to away matches and are unable to book parking alongside their matchday ticket. A lack of accessible parking provision for both home
and away supporters presents a key structural barrier for disabled people who rely on their car and is an issue that clearly influences their inclusion. Moreover, even when accessible parking is available, clubs’ narrow understanding of the experience of living with impairment(s), as demonstrated by Dave, may negatively impact some fans’ opportunities to return if their permanent space is removed due to restrictions emerging from impairment effects. Hence, when examined social-relationally, by failing to provide adequate accessible parking, some football clubs are complicit in creating forms of structural disabling (Thomas, 2007). They do so by placing socially imposed, and avoidable restrictions on opportunities for disabled people to engage in a cultural practice that is inherently valuable to their lives.

For many supporters, making and accessing alternative pre- and post-match travel arrangements also prove challenging. As Killian, a fan of a Championship club, notes; ‘public transport isn’t accessible for disabled people to get to games independently’. While the existence of barriers to public transport cannot be attributed to any particular football club, what can be questioned is why the majority of clubs supported by participants in this research fail to provide accessible transport for disabled fans wishing to attend away matches. This was a common issue raised by participants. The sense of exclusion that this elicited among interviewees was captured by James:

There are coaches that go to airports which are great for me and my wheelchair. So, it’s not beyond the realms of possibility that football coaches could be better and more accessible. But it just seems that football clubs don’t want to fork out for those types of coaches.

Clubs who fail to provide accessible transport for disabled supporters are restricting disabled people’s choice and are complicit in perpetuating ableist discourses which discriminate both in favour of non-disabled people via opportunity hoarding (i.e. granting them access to away travel) and against disabled people by marginalising them from social opportunities necessary to experience moments of inclusion in football fandom contexts (i.e., traveling together,
interacting with fellow supporters, and watching the live match) (Goodley, 2014). This situation highlights the intersectionality of structural and social barriers, whereby the lack of accessible transport is facilitated by ableist decision making processes made by personnel at various football clubs who are either ignorant of the needs of disabled people or assume they are not interested in participating in the away matchday experience. Based on the experiences recounted here, the organisational practices of the clubs that our participants supported, create conditions of structural disablement that restrict disabled people’s participation and inclusion at away matches, particularly for those supporters who cannot find alternative means of travel.

**Barriers to Inclusion at Football Stadia**

Most participants were critical of the accessibility of stadia and provision for disabled fans offered by the clubs they supported. This is a consequence of many clubs’ failure to comply with international legislation to protect the rights of disabled people and ignore both national and European best practice guidelines regarding the treatment of disabled spectators (CMSC, 2017; Kitchin et al., 2022). This has created significant barriers to inclusion in English football fandom. For instance, many participants raised concerns regarding structural barriers related to poor or dysfunctional facilities such as toilets, lifts, bars, and seating areas, arguing that they not only impacted their matchday experience, but in some instances, prevented matchday participation altogether.

The most prevalent structural concern raised by supporters related to the state of accessible seating areas. Mounting evidence shows that many football clubs in England fail to provide the minimum provision of spaces for wheelchair users (CMSC, 2017; DWP, 2015; Wilson, 2022). Interestingly, participants were less concerned with the number of seats provided, but rather the quality of these seats and the sightlines they afforded. Many expressed concerns about accessible seating areas located at pitch level, which provided ‘a crap view of
the game’ (Isaac) and offered ‘no cover from the elements’ (Lauren). This led to a view, voiced
by Joel, that clubs treat disabled people as an ‘afterthought’:

It’s an issue with facilities at some clubs because we don’t have any choice, we get told
where we have to sit because clubs just retrofitted places for us, and they don’t have
disabled sections in each of their stands.

The limited accessible seating provision for wheelchair users and their personal assistants
provided by some clubs demonstrates how the built environment within which fandom occurs,
reduces disabled people’s autonomy and choice and negatively impacts their matchday
experience. Hence, if choice is considered an essential aspect of inclusion (Misener and Darcy,
2014), the configuration of seating provision is such that many football clubs are not
necessarily becoming more inclusive even where they are meeting statutory requirements
around the number of seats that should be made available for disabled supporters.

Problems also arose for disabled people who make use of raised accessible seating
platforms at some stadiums, with instances of fellow supporters standing up during matches
impeding on an inclusive matchday experience. Darius recounted one instance of this and its
implications:

Other fans started to stand up in front of me during home matches and I couldn’t see
anything. […] And the stewards didn’t do anything, so it just felt like as a disabled
supporter our matchday experience had been forgotten. You know, if your own fans
don’t even care enough to sit down for you, what does that say? And I just thought, if
the club don’t give a monkeys about me, why should I carry on going?

According to the Sports Grounds Safety Authority (SGSA) – the UK Government’s leading
advisory body for sport ground safety – all spectators should have a clear view of the live
football spectacle, one free from obstruction by people, roof or railing stanchions, or other
means related to seating provision (SGSA, 2004). However, this is clearly not the reality for
many disabled supporters. This was also reflected in a Level Playing Field (2022) survey where
48% of 634 disabled supporters reported poor sightlines of the pitch to be a significant barrier to participation.

These issues, however, do not only occur because football clubs are negligent in providing adequate accessible seating provision for disabled supporters. As alluded to above by Darius, they are also a consequence of the actions of non-disabled supporters and stewards. These behaviours can be understood as ‘acts of invalidation’ (Reeve, 2020) by non-disabled strangers which can result in direct psycho-emotional disablism. Whilst the act of standing in front of a disabled supporter may not be a deliberate act of disablism per se, the consequences of failing to consider how the disabled fan may feel still impacts on the psycho-emotional well-being of the disabled person involved, particularly if matchday stewards fail to intervene. Hence, football clubs that fall short in their provision for disabled people, including access to facilities such as adequate accessible seating areas and toilet facilities, create conditions which can exclude, oppress, and make it difficult to participate fully in football fandom.

Beyond issues of access, many participants highlighted how their presence in stadia can, at times, result in more subtle experiences of discrimination and exclusion. Returning to the theme of the role of stewards as a mediating influence of their matchday experience, some fans recounted experiences of discrimination. Killian, for example, recalled incidents where stewards did not directly address him in conversation about his accessibility needs but rather spoke to his personal assistant. He interpreted this starkly in the following terms: ‘They think because I’m in a wheelchair I can’t speak for myself’. Similarly, data from an online fan forum revealed that: ‘The matchday staff offered zero assistance throughout and completely ignored our request for help. [We were] told quote “it’s not our fault, you shouldn’t be here”’ (fan who attended a match at a Championship club in 2019). While SGSA (2004) guidelines stipulate that full-time staff and matchday stewards should be well trained and sensitive to the needs of disabled people, in some cases the exchanges between stewards and disabled supporters can
result in infantilising and exclusionary interactions that can undermine disabled supporter’s psycho-emotional wellbeing.

Another recurrent theme was that attending away fixtures frequently created scenarios where disabled people experienced direct forms of discrimination and exclusion. For example, a mutual concern mentioned by supporters related to the lack of raised accessible seating platforms in the away sections of some English football stadia – which were only offered within the sections of the stadium populated by home fans. In some instances, this scenario created feelings of exclusion. Leo’s experiences illustrate this clearly:

I was sat right behind the goal, so I asked to move because I’m just gonna be terrified of the ball hitting me all game. […] So, they moved me to a side home stand [with a raised platform], but it was a stand that was closed, so there’s no other fans in the stand. But, of course, whenever my team scored, you felt so detached from it, because all the players would run to the away end. And you’re sitting there on your own and you feel so disconnected from the team because this is their offer of accessibility. Their form of accessibility is a form of exclusion.

In this example, disabled people are encouraged to participate in primarily non-disabled settings (e.g., the football stadia), but do not experience the same activity in the same way as non-disabled people (Christiaens and Brittain, 2021). In essence, this creates a segregated approach to ‘inclusion’ where disabled people cannot experience the same emotions, camaraderie, and belonging as their fellow away supporters, especially in cases such as Leo’s where he was separated from other away fans due to a lack of accessible provision. While it should be acknowledged that there are some practical reasons for this segregation, not least outdated stadium design, Leo’s experience exposes English football’s ableist approach towards inclusion whereby disabled people are excluded from the same matchday experience as non-disabled people through ‘processes of othering by having special or, as others have put it, segregated areas’ (Dickson et al., 2016: 535).
More concerningly, however, is the fact that the overwhelming majority of supporters in this study have experienced the problem of segregation at some stadia, where clubs do not provide any accessible seating areas for away supporters to sit in the away end of the ground and are instead forced to sit with the home supporters. Participants were unanimous in their view that clubs who allow this are creating exclusionary environments for disabled people. It should be noted that the EFL have introduced new regulations for the 2024/25 season which require all clubs to enable disabled supporters to be situated with fellow away club supporters (EFL, 2024). However, those participants in this study who had yet to experience this provision, were unanimous in their view that clubs who allowed this scenario were creating exclusionary environments for disabled people. James astutely observed the ableist discourses at play in this scenario:

If you were told as an able-bodied person, the only way you can go to a football match is to sit in the opposition fans and you’ve got to keep quiet for your own safety, that would completely put you off.

More worryingly, as Lewis noted, is that direct abuse is more likely in situations where away disabled supporters are seated with home fans:

It’s an obvious scenario for abuse isn’t it? The abuse I’ve had over the years is unbelievable. It happened to me at [this club], where I celebrated a goal, and you get the ‘you fucking cripple, you fucking spaz’.

Leo disclosed a similar experience: ‘all game all we got was “you shouldn’t be sat in this end”, “you shouldn’t be sitting here you fucking spastic [sic.]”, and the stewards wouldn’t do anything they would just be so passive’. As these accounts demonstrate, English football stadiums are a social space where disabled people are subjected to direct forms of disablism. These incidents constitute disability hate crimes and mark English football as another area of society that can socially exclude, marginalize, and oppress disabled people (Sherry, 2012). For Mia, the negative experiences resulting from repeated disablist interactions with opposition
home supporters, and the physical barriers created by football clubs who only provide seats for disabled away supporters in sections of the stadia populated by home fans had profound psycho-emotional consequences:

There was me and my helper, and we got put in with the home fans. We were getting abused because we were away fans in their end. And I ended up sitting in my car because I said to the [non-disabled] person I was with, ‘listen, just go and sit with our [away] fans and I’ll just listen to it on the radio in my car’, I can’t deal with this again. It makes me feel like I’m not worthy to be there, not worthy to be a football fan. And that I shouldn’t be there and that I shouldn’t be following a football club. You know, sometimes it makes me feel like I’m not worthy to be a person. It makes the likes of me feel horrible and useless when we’re not treated fairly.

In this instance, Mia’s experience of attending away fixtures resulted in internalised ableism (Reeve, 2020), where she internalised the prejudice that ‘the likes of me’ do not belong in football fandom settings. As such, what she recounts demonstrates the convergent nature of ‘barriers to doing’ and ‘barriers to being’ (Thomas, 2007). Indeed, the segregated seating provision in English football stadia creates a structural barrier which places limits on what the disabled person can do, but the psycho-emotional disablism experienced through interactions with non-disabled people creates a social barrier which places limits on who they can be by shaping one’s sense of self, confidence, and social behaviour (Thomas, 2007). It is clear, therefore, that the intersecting and compounded nature of the barriers arising from segregated seating provision in football stadia can, and often does, impact on disabled people’s self-esteem rendering them more susceptible to psycho-emotional barriers that can exclude them from participating in football fandom.

**Conclusion**

This article illustrates that the experience and practice of football fandom for disabled people in England is one of contradiction and complexity. It reveals on the one hand that football stadia can function as sites that allow disabled people to experience moments of inclusion and feelings
of belonging. Our findings extend previous research (Southby, 2011; 2013; García et al., 2017) by highlighting a series of material and non-material prerequisites required to cultivate feelings of inclusivity for disabled football supporters. However, this study also provides new insights into the multifaceted and persistent barriers to access, inclusion, and participation encountered by disabled supporters emanating from inadequate facilities such as toilets and accessible seating areas, access to accessible transport, parking provision, and matchday tickets, as well as interactions with non-disabled stewards and spectators.

By theorising disabled supporters’ experiences via Thomas’ (1999; 2007) social relational model of disability, alongside the concept of ableism, this article is the first to bring the wider, and growing, scholarship on football fandom into conversation with broader sociological questions concerning the disabling nature of contemporary society which continues to systematically exclude and oppress disabled people. This allows us to make further original contributions to knowledge by exposing how disabled people’s experiences of football fandom are contoured by processes of ableism and forms of structural and psycho-emotional disablism that contribute to the whole or partial exclusion of disabled supporters from a cultural space and social practice to which they have a right.

The netnographic methodology applied in this study signposts a further, methodological, contribution of this article. As noted earlier, given that the data collection period coincided with the global pandemic and its attendant restrictions on travel and social interaction, it was necessary to transition from ethnography to netnography. Rather than constituting a limitation of this study, in hindsight, this aided in the process of data collection. In fact, the adoption of a netnographic research design enhanced accessibility and provided an opportunity for disabled participants to fully participate and have their often-marginalised voices heard in social scientific inquiry. Based on this, we would argue that future research on the experiences of disabled people in sport fandom settings should consider online research
methods as a way of helping to create more accessible, and potentially, co-produced approaches.

Irrespective of the methodology applied, given the paucity of academic scholarship on disabled football fandom and the importance of mitigating the exclusion and marginalisation of disabled people in this space, there is clearly a need for further research. One potentially productive focus emerges out of the fact that disability entwines with other experiences of oppression resulting from the intersections of ‘race’, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and class (Brighton et al., 2023). There is scope, therefore, to build upon existing work and move it in novel directions by not only investigating how disabled people with other physical, sensory, and/or cognitive impairments experience and practice football fandom, but also by exploring how these experiences may be impacted through the intersections of other social positionalities. Regardless of its focus, future research must actively challenge the oppressive social structures which currently hold disabled people in the margins of sport to ensure they are able to access and experience the freedoms and opportunities in cultural life to which they have a right.

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