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**By the Fans, for the Future: Football Governance under  
Supporter Ownership**

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# By the Fans, for the Future: Football governance under Supporter Ownership

## Abstract

### Purpose

This paper explores the practical implications of community ownership in Scottish professional football, examining how governance, management, and strategic priorities evolve under supporter control.

### Design/methodology/approach

The study draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews with key actors from SPFL clubs under supporter ownership. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, with overlapping themes refined into three integrated areas.

### Findings

Community-owned clubs prioritise financial prudence, transparency, and community engagement, reframing football success as a by-product of stability and social value. However, persistent challenges include governance conflicts, volunteer fatigue, and tensions between supporter expectations and professional management.

### Originality/value

The paper contributes to debates on alternative ownership models by providing rare empirical evidence on post-transition governance in supporter-owned clubs. It highlights the conditions enabling successful transitions, the fragility of the model, and lessons for policy, practice, and the wider football ecosystem.

Keywords: Supporter ownership, Football governance, Scottish football, Social entrepreneurship, Sport management

## Introduction

Football clubs have long operated as complex social institutions, embedded within their local communities and shaped by deep-rooted attachments to place, identity, and tradition. Over the past three decades, however, the governance of professional football across Europe has been increasingly characterised by the ascendancy of market logics: growing commercialisation, global investment, and ownership models that prioritise performance over community value and financial sustainability (Franck, 2010), yet with financial deficits remaining widespread (UEFA, 2023; Storm & Nielsen, 2012). In this context, community ownership has emerged as a countervailing model, one that seeks to reassert football's social function and democratic accountability.

Among European professional leagues (outside countries with statutory collective ownership rules), Scotland has one of the highest proportions of clubs with majority or significant supporter/community ownership. As of 2024, at least eight SPFL clubs (Annan Athletic, Clyde, Greenock Morton, Heart of Midlothian (Hearts), Motherwell, Partick Thistle, St Mirren, and Stirling Albion) meet that criterion. Notably, these transitions have occurred without national legislative compulsion, suggesting that Scotland's football landscape offers fertile ground for examining the drivers and consequences of supporter ownership.

Within this paper we define a "fan-owned / community-owned" club as one where more than 50% of the voting rights of the club are controlled collectively by a democratic entity (i.e., incorporated on cooperative one member one vote principles) and which has an open and inclusive membership (i.e., where there are no substantial barriers to participate as a voting member, with membership open to all who are sympathetic to the aims of the club).

The two European countries most commonly cited as having statutory requirements for collective ownership are Germany and Sweden. Football Supporters Europe describe these statutory requirements as follows:

- In Germany, the German Football Association (DFB) stipulates that each club association must be the majority voting shareholder of the club's incorporated limited company. While legal structures vary, according to the DFB by-laws, members must ensure that even where individual stakeholders acquire 100% ownership of shares, they cannot control a majority of the voting rights (DFB, 2023).
- In Sweden, the Swedish Sport Federation (RF) requires that all sporting leagues and teams in Sweden must be majority owned by a non-profit, membership based, association. As a result, the majority of Swedish sports clubs are non-profits, with a few being companies owned by nonprofits, and all adhere to the laws surrounding charities and preservation of the non-profit status of the RF (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2023).

Supporter ownership in Scottish football has developed steadily since 2005, when Clyde FC became the first club to transfer into community hands after its Supporters' Trust and investors acquired a majority shareholding to rescue the club from financial crisis (Supporters Direct & University of Stirling, 2009). Stirling Albion

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2  
3 followed in 2010, with their Supporters Trust purchasing the majority stake and  
4 securing debt relief from the outgoing owner. Hearts' transition began in 2014 when  
5 Ann Budge led the club out of administration and partnered with the Foundation of  
6 Hearts, which completed the move to fan ownership in 2021. Motherwell entered  
7 community ownership in 2016 and by 2020 had become debt-free for the first time in  
8 decades. St Mirren also shifted towards supporter control in 2016, with its fans'  
9 association completing a majority takeover by 2021 in partnership with local charity  
10 Kibble. Annan Athletic became the first Scottish club to incorporate as a Community  
11 Benefit Society in 2017, Greenock Morton passed into fan ownership through Morton  
12 Club Together in 2020, and Partick Thistle completed its transition in 2023 when  
13 supporters' groups assumed control of the PTFC Trust.  
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16  
17 The growth of community ownership in Scotland reflects both structural fragility and  
18 cultural continuity. In some cases, including Clyde and Hearts, supporter takeovers  
19 were driven by financial crisis, with fans acting as 'owners of last resort' to prevent  
20 collapse, a role that has not always resulted in enduring supporter ownership in other  
21 jurisdictions (Hamil, 2019). In others, such as Morton, Motherwell, Partick Thistle,  
22 and St Mirren, the transition was a proactive effort to secure long-term sustainability  
23 and mitigate the risks of speculative ownership. These developments have been  
24 reinforced by enabling policy, notably the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act  
25 2015 and the Scottish Government's 2023 "Fans Bank" loan scheme, alongside  
26 sustained advocacy by political actors such as the Scottish Green Party and the  
27 support of intermediary organisations like Supporters Direct Scotland.  
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31 In addition to the majority fan-owned Scottish clubs listed above, supporters have a  
32 significant (> 10%) ownership stake in a further five SPFL clubs (Airdrieonians,  
33 Dundee, Dunfermline Athletic, Falkirk, and Stenhousemuir), while outside the league  
34 system both Clachnacuddin and Gretna 2008 are wholly fan owned. Notably, the  
35 minority shareholding at Dunfermline Athletic helped to secure the club's survival  
36 following a period in administration in 2013 and continued until early 2025 when the  
37 club returned into private ownership, diluting the supporters' shareholding, but on  
38 terms that were acceptable to them. At Falkirk, the supporters' society was the first  
39 to access the "Fans Bank", enabling it to acquire around 25% of the club's shares  
40 within a structure it describes as a "three-legged stool" in which two other investor  
41 groups work alongside it, none of which own a controlling stake in the club. Both of  
42 these clubs demonstrate the potential for minority fan ownership to be the catalyst  
43 for a transition to stable operating models.  
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46  
47 While supporter involvement in governance including ownership has gained traction  
48 in Scotland, other jurisdictions are moving towards statutory reform. In England, for  
49 example, the UK Parliament passed the Football Governance Act in July 2025,  
50 establishing an Independent Football Regulator aimed at improving financial  
51 oversight, safeguarding club heritage, and strengthening supporter voice (BBC  
52 Sport, 2025). Unlike in Germany or now England, Scotland's football governance  
53 remains largely unregulated at a statutory level. This absence makes the Scottish  
54 case all the more significant: supporter ownership has emerged and expanded  
55 without formal legal or financial scaffolding, suggesting an alternative governance  
56 pathway that warrants critical examination.  
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3 Despite this significant growth in fan ownership, there remains a paucity of empirical  
4 research examining how club governance and management actually change  
5 following such transitions. Existing scholarship has tended to focus either on the  
6 normative appeal of supporter involvement, emphasising supporters' moral or social  
7 property interest in clubs (e.g., Margalit, 2008) and the democratic rationale  
8 underpinning trust-based models (e.g., Michie & Ramalingam, 1999), or on the legal  
9 and structural configurations of supporter ownership, such as analyses of mutual  
10 ownership structures, the 50+1 rule, or club-specific governance models (e.g.,  
11 Bauers et al., 2019; Dietl & Franck, 2007; Franck, 2010).  
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15 There has been comparatively limited attention to the lived realities of organisational  
16 change under supporter ownership, including the challenges of balancing democratic  
17 participation with professionalised management (e.g., McLeod, 2018; Torchia, 2019),  
18 negotiating tensions between heterogeneous supporter groups and executive actors  
19 (e.g., Kuper, 2022), or ensuring financial sustainability in contexts where supporters  
20 often assume ownership in crisis conditions (Porter, 2019; Ward et al., 2012). As  
21 such, there remains a need for closer empirical insight into how supporter-owned  
22 clubs negotiate competing demands around democracy, accountability, community  
23 identity and financial stewardship once ownership is transferred.  
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26 This paper addresses a gap in the literature by examining how governance and  
27 management practices change under community ownership in Scotland. Drawing on  
28 semi-structured interviews across five majority supporter-owned SPFL clubs and one  
29 minority supporter-owned club, it provides rich empirical insights into how  
30 governance is enacted, challenged, and reimagined. The analysis is informed by  
31 theoretical perspectives on hybrid governance, informal accountability, and social  
32 entrepreneurship, situating Scottish football within wider debates on ownership  
33 reform, hybrid organisational forms, and shifting boundaries of accountability in  
34 professional sport.  
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## Literature Review

### *Changing logics and social entrepreneurship*

Over the past three decades, the dominant logic in European professional football has shifted decisively towards market-based principles, typified by commercialisation, investor-led ownership, and globalisation (Franck, 2010). In this landscape, Scotland's growing cohort of community-owned clubs presents a contrasting logic, one rooted in democratic governance, social accountability, and community sustainability (Adams et al., 2017; Morrow, 2023).

Early Scottish clubs were established as member-owned associations, dedicated to the promotion of the game rather than profit (Vamplew, 1988; WGSIFC, 2015). The movement back towards supporter ownership can be interpreted as signalling a reassertion of football's social roots and as an alternative to the concentration of power in the hands of wealthy individuals or states (Morrow, 2023). This shift can be partly explained by necessity with many Scottish clubs lacking credible commercial investors. Indeed, several community ownership transitions occurred following financial crises (e.g., Clyde, Hearts and Stirling Albion). Yet, there is also a proactive agenda at work, with clubs choosing supporter ownership to embed community values and ensure long-term sustainability (Adams et al., 2024). The emphasis on the centrality of the social role of football clubs, and the willingness of the social movement of football supporters to take a lead on ownership has parallels with aspects of social entrepreneurship, where this refers to innovative approaches to satisfying social needs, including the failure of the market economy to deliver social value to some aspect of the public (Björsholm, 2017). In the distinct US context, sport entrepreneurship has been used as a lens to explore the novel concept of supporter ownership in football clubs (Smith & Smith, 2019). In the Scottish context, the willingness and alacrity with which the charitable arms of Scottish professional clubs adjusted their operational approaches during the COVID 19 pandemic was identified as an example of an entrepreneurial approach in football (Hammerschmidt et al. 2021; Oeckl & Morrow, 2022).

### *The governance of supporter-owned clubs*

It has been argued that many organisations are hybrid in nature, homes to coexisting logics, the integration of which is governed by accepted institutional practices (Battilana, 2018; Pache & Santos, 2013; Skelcher & Smith, 2015). This characterisation has been suggested as particularly applicable to football clubs (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Gillet & Tennent, 2018) and in particular to supporter-owned clubs, which are required to navigate competing demands between financial accountability, democratic legitimacy, and operational efficiency (Adams et al., 2025). These clubs must simultaneously serve the emotional commitments of their communities while responding to the institutional pressures of football's regulatory and commercial environment (Morrow, 2023)

In the Scottish context, the Hearts case study has become paradigmatic of this hybridity, with Adams et al. (2024) adapting Renn's (1992) social arena model as their analytical framework to study changes in its ownership and governance.. It

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3 highlights the plurality of actors and accountabilities involved in football governance,  
4 and how power must be negotiated among stakeholders including fans, politicians,  
5 the media, and football authorities (Morrow, 2023). As such, effective governance  
6 under community ownership requires both robust structures and relational agility.  
7 Adams *et al.* (2024) showed how the supporter group, the Foundation of Hearts,  
8 operated within a contested governance arena, balancing formal accounting (e.g.,  
9 reporting to Companies House, SPFL rules) with informal accountability (e.g.,  
10 building fan trust through inclusive communication, sharing narratives of community  
11 identity and belonging). They argued that trust and legitimacy in fan-owned models  
12 are often built not only through transparency and representation but also through  
13 ongoing moral and symbolic alignment with supporter expectations. In a subsequent  
14 paper the same authors focused on the institutional work undertaken in order to  
15 create a novel governance structure, in which the overlapping priorities (logics) of the  
16 Club and the Foundation of Hearts formed the basis of collaboration (Adams *et al.*,  
17 2025).  
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### 21 *Motivations and mechanisms of transition*

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24 The motivations for adopting community ownership tend to blend financial survival,  
25 normative disillusionment with private ownership, and a desire to realign clubs with  
26 their communities (Adams *et al.*, 2025; Brown, 2008; Hamil & Walters, 2010). While  
27 clubs transitioning to fan ownership in response to financial crises are often given the  
28 highest profile, there is also growing evidence of proactive planning, with clubs in  
29 Scotland using phased transitions, bespoke community centred legal structures such  
30 as Community Interest Companies (CICs) and Community Benefit Societies (CBSs),  
31 and strategic partnerships to structure community ownership in more sustainable  
32 ways (WGSIFC, 2105). For example, Kibble Education and Care Centre, one of  
33 Scotland's oldest charities, invested in a minority shareholding alongside the St  
34 Mirren Independent Supporters' Association (SMISA) which owns the controlling  
35 stake in the club (St Mirren, 2025). Both organisations share a dedication to the  
36 community and aim to address local deprivation and exclusion through youth  
37 employment, community engagement, and other initiatives. By establishing a Skills  
38 Academy within St Mirren's stadium and training complex, Kibble provide care-  
39 experienced young people with learning opportunities in real-life settings.  
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43 Kibble's co-investment enabled SMISA to accelerate the club's journey towards  
44 community ownership, with supporters' fundraising efforts targeted towards acquiring  
45 a 51% shareholding rather than their original 78% goal. Shifting their strategy  
46 required extensive member engagement and explicit approval, and exploration of  
47 strategic alignment with Kibble. It was recognised during these conversations with  
48 members, and with Kibble, that each party had distinct values and purposes, but that  
49 there was sufficient alignment that any tensions could be navigated. However, in the  
50 years following their partnership these tensions have emerged, particularly around  
51 the transparency of decision-making regarding the development and use of land  
52 owned by the football club. This culminated in legal action between a former director  
53 of the club and Kibble's two nominees to the club board (Williams, 2023).  
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57 This legal case highlights the need for ongoing discussion of values and purpose  
58 between shareholding partners, continuous focus on maintaining high levels of trust  
59 and alignment between parties, and an elevated requirement for good governance  
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3 and transparency. Football clubs with novel ownership structures often face greater  
4 scrutiny than traditionally owned clubs, and any disputes between parties can  
5 undermine perceptions of the ownership structure, regardless of the underlying  
6 reasons for the conflict. SMISA has continued to engage with its members,  
7 particularly through a "Build The Buds" campaign (following on from "Buy The Buds"  
8 which culminated in the community takeover) to ensure it has widespread support for  
9 its ongoing plans for the club and its partnership with Kibble (SMISA, 2025).  
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13 The growing role of political actors within the social arena (e.g., the Scottish Greens'  
14 advocacy for a supporter "right to buy") also demonstrates that legal and policy  
15 frameworks are evolving to facilitate and/or encourage this shift (Scottish Greens,  
16 2016; WGSIFC, 2015). Recognising the benefits of fan ownership, in 2023 the  
17 Scottish Government launched the Fans' Bank, a loan funding scheme to help fan  
18 groups purchase a share in their local sports club, thereby supporting community  
19 ownership. The scheme was launched with an interest free loan of £350,000  
20 provided to Falkirk Supporters Society in May 2023, which enabled it to increase its  
21 shareholding, thus protecting it from any future unwanted takeovers and providing  
22 security for the club going forward (Scottish Government, 2023).  
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### 25 *Organisational and operational change under community ownership*

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28 Despite the idealism often associated with fan ownership, research shows that while  
29 it has the potential to bring significant organisational change, it is not without  
30 complexity, for example around varying definitions of success, accepting the  
31 distinction between ownership and management, and overly bureaucratic decision  
32 making (see, for example, Adams et al., 2025; Baxter et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2012).  
33 Clubs must transition from opaque private control to a governance model that  
34 embeds wider participation while maintaining managerial effectiveness (Adams et  
35 al., 2025; Doherty, 2009). This includes changes in board composition, community  
36 engagement practices, and long-term strategic planning (Adams et al., 2017;  
37 Morrow, 2023; Smith & Smith, 2019).  
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41 The Hearts case reveals how supporter ownership can reconfigure internal  
42 relationships: directors becoming stewards of collective trust, and managerial  
43 autonomy being retained through a "guardianship" model that separates strategic  
44 ownership from day-to-day control (Adams et al., 2025, 2024). Similarly, fan-owned  
45 clubs have been shown to reorient corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity  
46 toward deeper community integration, leveraging the club's cultural capital to engage  
47 in education, health, and inclusion projects (WGSIFC, 2015).  
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49

### 50 *Summary*

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53 While often idealised, community ownership is no panacea. Financial precarity  
54 persists, particularly in the absence of wealthy benefactors or statutory protections  
55 such as Germany's 50+1 rule (Franck, 2010). Volunteer fatigue, decision-making  
56 inefficiencies, and the emotional burden of responsibility are all enduring challenges  
57 (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012; Potter, 2019). Moreover,  
58 clubs must balance fan engagement with operational autonomy, a tension that often  
59 emerges during periods of poor sporting performance or strategic disagreement  
60 (Adams et al, 2024).

Empirical gaps remain. Much existing work focuses on the transition *to* fan ownership, rather than what happens *after*. There is still limited comparative data on how supporter ownership changes clubs' cultures, strategic trajectories, and managerial structures over time. The Scottish experience, especially given its high concentration of fan-owned clubs outside of legislative compulsion, provides a valuable opportunity to fill this gap.

## Methodology

### *Research design*

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the governance and management implications of transitioning to community ownership in Scottish professional football. Specifically, it investigates how roles, responsibilities, and strategic objectives have evolved in clubs now owned by supporters. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with individuals closely involved in these transitions, either during the change in ownership or in the subsequent period of supporter-led management.

### *Participants*

Seven participants were recruited using purposive sampling, each holding a senior role within SPFL clubs that had undergone a transition to community ownership, either as representatives of democratic supporters' organisations or as members of club governance structures. Selection was based on their firsthand involvement in and knowledge of ownership transitions, and their ability to reflect on the management practices that followed. In accordance with ethical approval obtained from the University of Stirling, participants were provided with an information sheet and gave informed consent. All interviews were anonymised, and participants retained the right to withdraw their data within 14 days of the interview.

Code	Role(s) Held	League	Ownership Model	Notes
P1	Supporters' Trust Director	SPFL Premiership	Majority fan owned	–
P2	Supporters' Trust Director	SPFL Championship	Minority fan owned	–
P3	Supporters' Trust Director	SPFL League 2	Majority fan owned	–
P4	Club Director & Supporters' Trust Director	SPFL League 2	Majority fan owned	Dual role (board + trust)
P5	Supporters' Trust Director	SPFL Premiership	Majority fan owned	–
P6	Supporters' Trust Director	SPFL Premiership	Majority fan owned	–
P7	Director of supporter organisation	SPFL Premiership	Majority fan owned	–

### *Data collection*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The format allowed participants to share their experiences while enabling the researcher to explore emerging topics in greater depth. The interview guide focused on five key areas:

1. Governance and operational changes post-transition
2. The evolving roles of supporters versus professional managers
3. Organisational motivations (e.g. financial sustainability, community engagement, footballing success)
4. CSR activities
5. Opportunities and challenges associated with the community ownership model

Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### *Data analysis*

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After initial familiarisation with the data, the first author generated open codes to capture recurring patterns in participant responses. These codes were grouped into an initial set of five themes: financial drivers, governance conflicts, supporter engagement, sustainability, and organisational identity. However, as the analysis progressed it became clear that several themes overlapped conceptually and empirically. Through a process of refinement, these were consolidated into three overarching themes that provided a clearer and more coherent analytic structure. The analysis identified three overarching themes: (1) governance transformation and strategic purpose, (2) community engagement and social responsibility, and (3) sustainability: opportunities, challenges and threats.

Importantly, data analysis was not carried out in isolation but undertaken collectively by all members of the research team. While interviews were conducted by one researcher, transcripts were shared among the team and subjected to an iterative process of joint analysis. This involved repeated cycles of coding, clustering, and theme refinement in which team members challenged each other's interpretations and negotiated meanings until consensus was reached. This collaborative approach enhanced analytical rigour and minimised individual researcher bias, providing what Miles and Huberman (1994, 50) term "intersubjective consensus."

The analysis process followed principles of iterative data reduction, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and later by Ryan and Bernard (2000). Coding was treated not simply as a technical step but as part of the analytic process itself, reflecting Miles and Huberman's view (1994, 56) that "coding is analysis." The team moved back and forth between data and emerging categories, using constant comparison to refine the codebook, search for negative cases, and test the plausibility of developing interpretations. Data displays, including provisional

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3 matrices mapping clubs against emerging themes such as governance structures,  
4 supporter engagement practices, and funding models, were used to make  
5 relationships visible and facilitate cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994).  
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8 This combined approach enabled a detailed exploration of how governance  
9 practices, strategic priorities, and organisational cultures have evolved under fan  
10 ownership, while also capturing the lived experiences, dilemmas, and tensions that  
11 characterise this distinctive governance model.  
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## 14 Findings

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16 This section presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted  
17 with individuals involved in Scottish football clubs that have transitioned to  
18 community ownership. The section is organised around the three overarching  
19 themes noted above, namely: (1) governance transformation and strategic purpose,  
20 (2) community engagement and social responsibility, and (3) sustainability:  
21 opportunities, challenges and threats.  
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### 25 *Governance Transformation and Strategic Purpose*

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27 The transition to supporter ownership has led to a substantial reconfiguration of  
28 governance practices across all participating clubs. Interviewees consistently  
29 emphasised three dominant features: a focus on financial sustainability, greater  
30 transparency, and deeper community engagement. A number of clubs such as Clyde  
31 and Motherwell adopted more conservative fiscal approaches, deliberately  
32 prioritising long-term viability over short-term risk. As one Supporters' Trust director  
33 recalled:  
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37 "We had to say to the manager, you don't have the budget,  
38 you're just [going to] have to get players that you hope will  
39 retain that position. We expected to be relegated, but if you  
40 don't cut your cloth to suit your needs, you ain't [going to] go  
41 anywhere." (P3)  
42

43 Other clubs, however, embraced entrepreneurial and adaptive strategies, introducing  
44 new revenue streams through community fundraising, digital platforms, and  
45 enhanced sponsorship models. As one interviewee noted:  
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48 "Fans piled money to the lottery. They came to fundraising  
49 events. We raised a good amount of cash every year to try and  
50 plug those holes." (P4)  
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52 One club developed partnerships with technology firms that not only provided vital  
53 digital infrastructure but also acted as sponsors. At the same time, the club aligned  
54 its shirt sponsorship with a well-known international charity, strengthening both  
55 revenue streams and community credibility.  
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58 This shift was often accompanied by structural reforms. Clubs formalised board  
59 roles, improved financial reporting, and introduced clearer decision-making  
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3 procedures. Financial prudence became a cornerstone of governance, particularly  
4 for clubs that had previously experienced financial distress. As one Director  
5 explained: “We had to be creative. We couldn’t just rely on the old ways of doing  
6 things.” (P4)  
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9 A key development across cases was the emergence of a functional separation  
10 between ownership and management. In most clubs, operational control was  
11 delegated to professional staff, while strategic oversight remained the responsibility  
12 of supporter-elected boards. This hybrid governance model was widely regarded as  
13 effective in balancing democratic legitimacy with professional competence. As one  
14 former supporter organisation director explained:  
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16  
17 “Supporters are the bank of last resort. But the way we did it at  
18 [club] was to balance that democratic legitimacy with  
19 professional competence. [The owner] was running the club  
20 day-to-day, while the Trust kept the long-term oversight.” (P7)  
21

22  
23 While interviewees frequently described supporter ownership as a form of ‘last  
24 resort’ intervention to secure club survival, this role has not always translated into  
25 enduring supporter control across all national contexts. Reflecting on the experience  
26 of England and Wales, Hamil (2019) argues that supporter trusts have often  
27 assumed ownership only when private investors were deterred by the scale of  
28 financial crisis, before stabilising clubs and subsequently returning them to private  
29 ownership. He characterises this pattern as a form of community-resourced financial  
30 “accident and emergency service”, raising critical questions about whether supporter  
31 ownership has sometimes functioned primarily as a low-cost restructuring  
32 mechanism rather than a long-term governance alternative. This critique is  
33 instructive when contrasted with the Scottish cases examined here, where enabling  
34 policy frameworks, institutional support, and deliberate governance design appear to  
35 have contributed to more durable forms of supporter ownership.  
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39 Supporter ownership also encouraged more embedded civic relationships. At one  
40 club, for example, fans participate in discretionary spending decisions and shape  
41 community-facing initiatives, as one Supporters’ Trust director recounted:  
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44 “The whole idea was that members’ contributions didn’t just  
45 keep the lights on. A portion went into reserves [50%], some  
46 went into the youth academy [30%], some to the charitable  
47 foundation [10%], and the rest was voted on by members to  
48 improve the fan experience. That gave people a real sense of  
49 ownership.” (P1)  
50

51  
52 While financial crisis often acted as the catalyst for transitions, interviewees stressed  
53 that motivations extended beyond survival. Supporter ownership was widely  
54 understood as a means to re-align clubs with their communities, safeguard local  
55 identity, and embed values of sustainability, accountability, and participation. As one  
56 supporter organisation director explained:  
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58  
59 “You need a crisis and we had a crisis. The football club was  
60 about to disappear. But what drove it wasn’t just saving [the

club], it was the sense that the club had to belong to its people, that supporters are the bank of last resort.” (P7)

Others emphasised that ownership changes reflected a desire to redefine the purpose of clubs as community institutions:

“[The former owner] always wanted to give something back to the community he’d been brought up in. Fan ownership wasn’t about him stepping away; it was about making sure the club became rooted in the community for the long term.” (P5)

“We agreed with the council that instead of just paying off debt, we’d take on responsibility for coaching young players and working in areas of deprivation. That was about building the community connection as much as running a football team.” (P3)

“Step one was simply to secure the club, because it was heading for liquidation. But what kept people going was the bigger idea, the club wasn’t just about football anymore, it was about being a proper community institution.” (P4)

“We’ve always said, get the culture right, and the football will follow.” (P2)

Together, these accounts illustrate how governance reforms were not merely operational adjustments but part of a broader redefinition of clubs’ strategic purpose.

### ***Community Engagement and Social Responsibility***

Supporter ownership appears to have significantly enhanced clubs’ commitment to CSR and broader community engagement. Interviewees across clubs described an expansion of social programmes following the transition to fan ownership, with initiatives spanning education, health, social inclusion, and charitable partnerships. One supporters’ organisation director noted:

“You often hear that supporters are the bank of last resort. But it also means they expect us to be more than a football club. That’s why the [community foundation] was central from day one.” (P7)

While this framing is common among supporter organisations, previous research cautions that such interventions have, in some contexts, functioned as temporary stabilisation mechanisms rather than permanent ownership solutions (Hamil, 2019).

Much of this growth has been facilitated by formal governance arrangements. In several cases, clubs developed or deepened relationships with affiliated social enterprises, such as charitable arms or community interest companies, which

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3 enabled more coordinated delivery of social programmes and access to external  
4 funding. One interviewee reflected:

5  
6 “Without the [supporters’ organisation] structure, we couldn’t  
7 have delivered the number of community programmes we do  
8 now. The governance model itself puts community at the heart  
9 of the club.” (P5)  
10  
11

12 The governance model itself was widely regarded as an enabler of CSR, embedding  
13 social value into the club’s purpose and creating a culture where community benefit  
14 was both expected and prioritised. However, tensions were also evident. Some clubs  
15 experienced internal disagreement over the balance between sporting investment  
16 and community activity, with parts of the supporter base expressing concern that off-  
17 field engagement could detract from on-field competitiveness. One interviewee  
18 explained:  
19

20  
21 “There’s a generation of fans now who don’t remember the  
22 debt crisis. They want us to throw money at promotion, but our  
23 responsibility is making sure we stay financially stable and  
24 continue our community role.” (P3)  
25  
26

27 Other clubs emphasised transparency through regular communication and structured  
28 engagement with supporters, particularly around matchdays. As one Club and Trust  
29 director put it:  
30

31  
32 “We had to change how the club communicated. Fans were no  
33 longer kept at arm’s length, we started doing things like  
34 opening up board decisions and running the club shop  
35 ourselves, because those small things really mattered.” (P4)  
36  
37

38 The rise of digital communication, particularly social media, brought both benefits  
39 and risks. While platforms enabled greater transparency and supporter dialogue,  
40 they also increased scrutiny of board members and volunteers, occasionally  
41 undermining morale and cohesion. As one Supporters’ Trust director described:  
42

43  
44 “We had to be careful with the language we used, one wrong  
45 word online and you’d be accused of working against the  
46 supporters. Transparency was important, but it also made the  
47 role exhausting at times.” (P2)  
48

### 49 ***Sustainability: Opportunities, Challenges, and Threats***

50  
51 While the model offers a viable alternative to private ownership, its sustainability  
52 depends on navigating a complex set of opportunities and challenges. Interviewees  
53 identified enhanced legitimacy, stronger stakeholder trust, and deeper emotional  
54 connection between clubs and their supporters as major benefits. Several clubs  
55 reported improved relationships with local authorities, increased volunteer  
56 involvement, and a broader alignment between club values and community priorities.  
57 One interviewee reflected:  
58  
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1  
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3 “When you get down to it, supporters are the bank of last  
4 resort, and that gives you legitimacy, because everyone knows  
5 you’re acting for the good of the club, not to make money.” (P4)  
6  
7

8 These factors contributed to improved governance transparency, strategic clarity,  
9 and, in some cases, innovative funding models. As one Supporters’ Trust director  
10 recalled:  
11

12 “We set up an e-commerce website ... and in six weeks we  
13 raised £150,000. That kind of creativity came from the fact we  
14 were accountable to supporters and had to find new ways to  
15 keep the club alive.” (P2)  
16  
17

18 Financial innovation did not stop once clubs became supporter-owned. Hearts, for  
19 example, attracted almost £10m in investment in return for non-voting shares, while  
20 Greenock Morton established a matched-funding model linking supporter fundraising  
21 with sponsorship contributions.  
22

23 However, the model also presents persistent challenges. A common concern was  
24 the reliance on a small number of committed volunteers, raising issues around  
25 burnout, continuity, and operational capacity. As one interviewee admitted:  
26  
27

28 “I knew nothing about this when I started, I’m a mechanical  
29 engineer to trade. We had the passion, but not always the  
30 professional background.” (P2)  
31  
32

33 Skills gaps on supporter-elected boards, particularly in areas such as commercial  
34 strategy, legal compliance, and football operations, were seen as limiting  
35 organisational effectiveness. Internal governance tensions were also evident. Clubs  
36 experienced disputes over board responsibilities and decision-making authority,  
37 highlighting the need for clearer role delineation and more formalised structures. As  
38 one Supporters’ Trust director explained:  
39  
40

41 “Our naivety was that we all thought we were there to do one  
42 thing, the benefit of [the Club]. But we hadn’t built the  
43 structures. We learned the hard way and eventually had to put  
44 in place a working agreement that meant the trust and club  
45 board had to work in harmony.” (P3)  
46  
47

48 Managing a volunteer-led governance body alongside the demands of a professional  
49 football operation was widely acknowledged as a delicate balancing act. At one club,  
50 the relationship between the executive board and the Supporters’ Trust board has  
51 been a recurring issue since the transition to full fan ownership. As the Supporters’  
52 Trust director explained:  
53  
54

55 “Anybody who says they didn’t have concerns about full fan  
56 ownership is lying. You’re always asking, what if? We had to  
57 find ways to make it work, but that means constant negotiation  
58 between boards.” (P5)  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Another challenge related to the role of supporter representatives on club boards.  
4 The position was seen as vital for ensuring accountability, but it also created tension  
5 around confidentiality. One Supporters' Trust director explained:  
6

7  
8 "You're elected by the fans, but once you're in the boardroom  
9 you're bound by confidentiality. You can't just walk back out  
10 and tell everyone everything, and that creates frustration." (P4)  
11

12 Balancing transparency with the legal and fiduciary duties of board membership was  
13 frequently described as one of the most difficult aspects of community ownership.  
14 Supporter engagement, while a clear strength, brought its own complications. As one  
15 Club director put it:  
16

17  
18 "You're an idiot if you put your name in the hat, because the  
19 board takes an absolute tanking. The vocal ones are always on  
20 your back, but the silent majority are harder to hear." (P4)  
21

22 Leadership sustainability was also raised as a pressing threat. At Clyde,  
23 interviewees described a reliance on a small group of dedicated volunteers, leading  
24 to fatigue, skill gaps, and operational bottlenecks. As one director admitted:  
25

26  
27 "I think I was the one who saw the car crash coming. But when  
28 you look around, it's always the same handful of people  
29 carrying the load. Others don't want to put their head above the  
30 parapet because you just get a tanking. That's the problem,  
31 succession never really happens." (P4)  
32

33 Financial viability remains fragile. Although supporter donations and local fundraising  
34 have sustained many clubs, these income streams are volatile. One interviewee  
35 noted:  
36

37  
38 "We've always said we're just one bad season away from a  
39 crisis. If gates drop, the money dries up very quickly. That's the  
40 reality at our level." (P3)  
41

42  
43 The absence of external equity or large commercial sponsorships places further  
44 pressure on clubs to maintain both competitive relevance and community service.  
45 Recent years have also seen the rise of external investment in Scottish football,  
46 creating new tensions for fan-owned clubs. Several clubs have benefited from  
47 foreign investment, while at supporter-owned Hearts, a wealthy benefactor invested  
48 almost £10m in return for non-voting shares. The challenges around this dilemma  
49 were summed up by one interviewee:  
50

51  
52 "Even with [the owner] and other wealthy backers, thousands of  
53 people kept paying their monthly pledges. That showed the  
54 strength of commitment to the fan model, but it also raised  
55 questions about how much say supporters should have when  
56 millions are coming in from elsewhere." (P7)  
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3 Together, these accounts highlight the fragility of supporter ownership: its long-term  
4 sustainability depends not only on stable leadership and reliable membership income  
5 but also on navigating the pressures of external investment and the risk that sections  
6 of the fan base may view dilution of ownership as preferable to financial insecurity.  
7  
8

## 9 **Discussion**

10  
11 This paper set out to explore how governance, management, and organisational  
12 priorities change when football clubs transition to community ownership, drawing on  
13 qualitative evidence from five SPFL clubs. The findings illuminate how community  
14 ownership in Scotland is not merely a structural change in who owns the club, but a  
15 broader organisational reconfiguration: a shift in decision-making logics, stakeholder  
16 accountability, and cultural identity. The analysis contributes to a growing body of  
17 scholarship on hybrid organisations, supporter governance, and institutional logics in  
18 sport (e.g. Adams et al., 2025, 2024, 2017; Battilana, 2018; Carlsson-Wall et al.,  
19 2016; Doherty, 2009), while offering new empirical insights from one of the most  
20 concentrated supporter-owned ecosystems in Europe.  
21  
22

### 23 ***Hybrid governance in practice***

24  
25 Supporter-owned clubs in Scotland display many characteristics of hybrid  
26 organisations (Battilana & Lee, 2014), entities that mediate between competing  
27 institutional logics (Pache & Santos, 2010). On one hand, clubs must operate as  
28 professional football businesses: managing costs, pursuing performance goals, and  
29 complying with league regulations. On the other hand, they must fulfil a democratic  
30 and participatory ethos, reflecting the interests and social values of their member-  
31 owners and wider community stakeholders. Moreover, many of those charged with  
32 delivering these outcomes are volunteers.  
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36  
37 This duality generates inherent tensions. As interviewees observed, supporter-  
38 elected directors often lack specialist knowledge in football operations or commercial  
39 management. While some clubs have developed sophisticated governance  
40 frameworks to delineate roles and responsibilities, separating strategic oversight  
41 from day-to-day management, others remain reliant on informal arrangements and  
42 goodwill. A key development across cases was the emergence of a functional  
43 separation between ownership and management. In most clubs, operational control  
44 was delegated to professional staff, while strategic oversight remained the  
45 responsibility of supporter-elected boards. This model aligns with Adams et al.'s  
46 (2025) conceptualisation of hybrid organisations that navigate both social and  
47 sporting logics.  
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50  
51 Our findings also support Adams et al.'s (2024) contention that legitimacy in fan-  
52 owned clubs is often built through informal mechanisms, such as storytelling, civic  
53 responsiveness, and ethical alignment, as much as through formal reporting  
54 processes. Several interviewees emphasised the responsiveness of community-  
55 owned clubs to local needs, particularly during periods of social crisis, such as the  
56 COVID-19 pandemic.  
57

### 58 ***Supporter ownership as social entrepreneurialism***

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2  
3 One of the strongest cross-cutting themes is that supporter ownership in Scotland  
4 can be understood as a form of social entrepreneurialism. Entrepreneurialism here  
5 was not confined to generating financial returns, but extended to safeguarding,  
6 protecting, and nurturing clubs as community assets. Participants described adopting  
7 conservatively fiscal approaches, ensuring that expenditure was limited to what  
8 could be sustained, while also experimenting with new forms of fundraising,  
9 sponsorship, and community engagement. Both strategies, defensive conservatism  
10 and proactive development, can be seen as entrepreneurial, in that they sought to  
11 protect and grow the club without exposing it to existential risk. Both are also  
12 examples of social entrepreneurship, where the emphasis of the supporter owners is  
13 on protecting and enhancing the club as a social institution, one whose value and  
14 contribution extends well beyond finance or even football success.  
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17  
18 This resonates with Battilana's (2018) work on social enterprises, which highlights  
19 the distinctive challenge of pursuing social and financial goals simultaneously. Like  
20 social enterprises, supporter-owned clubs operate in an ecosystem structured  
21 around private capital and profit-maximisation, yet their legitimacy derives from their  
22 ability to balance economic survival with community benefit. In this sense, Scottish  
23 fan-owned clubs exemplify hybrid organisations that must continually manage the  
24 tensions between sustainability and participation, prudence and innovation.  
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27  
28 Adams et al.'s (2017) conceptualisation of football clubs as "boundary objects" is  
29 also informative here, in understanding the behaviour of those involved in supporter  
30 owned clubs. Clubs positioned themselves not merely as sporting organisations but  
31 as community anchors, mediating the expectations of multiple stakeholder groups  
32 across sporting, social, and economic domains. The lived practices of social  
33 entrepreneurialism, from reinvesting surplus into youth academies, to ring-fencing  
34 reserves for crises, to developing charitable arms, enabled clubs to negotiate these  
35 competing demands while reinforcing their civic purpose.  
36  
37

38 One governance difference identified between the Scottish clubs and those in  
39 Germany and Sweden, related to how fans identified themselves. In countries with  
40 statutory requirements, by virtue of their membership, many member/supporters  
41 willingly play a role in shaping the governance structures and processes of their club,  
42 driven by the objective that club management should align their interests with those  
43 of the member/supporters (Adam et al., 2020). However, membership typically also  
44 confers priority ticket access in addition to democratic rights, driving very high  
45 engagement. FC Schalke in Germany, for example, has in excess of 200,000  
46 members – far beyond its stadium capacity of 62,000 (FC Schalke, 2025). In  
47 contrast, in Scotland among professional clubs following the supporter ownership  
48 model, membership numbers are typically lower than attendances. For example,  
49 Hearts has 8,000 members but average attendances close to 19,000 (Foundation of  
50 Hearts, 2025). None of the fan-owned clubs in Scotland offer ticket access as a  
51 benefit of membership, although they do offer other material benefits. Fan  
52 involvement in democratic processes is therefore a conscious governance choice  
53 and an expression of personal values, rather than a routine part of being a fan.  
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### 58 ***Structural constraints and the role of policy***

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Despite the opportunities arising out of supporter ownership, clubs remain constrained by the wider political economy of Scottish football. Community-owned clubs operate within a system that is structured around private capital and sporting performance maximisation. The absence of redistributive financial mechanisms, such as meaningful TV revenue sharing, solidarity payments, or league-wide cost controls, places limits on what supporter ownership and clubs which are supporter owned can achieve in practice. As one interviewee observed, *“The model works, but only just, and only because we care enough to make it work.”*

This underscores the importance of supportive policy and regulatory environments. Scotland has taken steps to facilitate supporter ownership through the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the creation of a “Fans Bank.” While government is an explicit political actor within the social arena of football, it is, of course, governing bodies and leagues which are the most visible rule enforcers and indeed rule creators, these rules ostensibly being predicated on the wishes of their member clubs (Adams et al., 2024). Yet interviewees expressed frustration at the lack of systemic support from football’s governing bodies for the concept and operationalisation of supporter ownership. Unlike Germany’s 50+1 rule or Sweden’s Allmännyttig förening model, there is no legal or regulatory safeguard that ensures long-term fan influence in governance or protects community ownership from erosion.

This means that supporter-owned clubs are often left to innovate and improvise in order to survive, with supporters taking on the role of social entrepreneurs by default, rather than being embedded in a structure that supports their dual mission. As Battilana (2018) argues, hybrids thrive when institutional environments allow them to hold together both financial and social logics. In the Scottish case, the absence of structural scaffolding risks leaving clubs over-reliant on exceptional individuals committed to the social mission and purpose associated with their football club, and/or vulnerable to external investor pressures.

While the commitment of groups of individuals acting together as effective social entrepreneurs is inspiring, it also leaves clubs vulnerable. Future development of the supporter ownership model in the Scottish football arena is likely to depend on deeper integration of the structure into national sport policy and regulatory support, including access to capacity-building support, leadership training, and regulatory recognition of supporter governance structures. Without such scaffolding, community ownership risks plateauing or drifting, despite its potential to embed resilience, accountability, and civic value into Scottish football.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the governance, management, and organisational transformations associated with community ownership in Scottish football. Drawing on interview data from five SPFL clubs, it has shown that supporter ownership reconfigures not only who owns the club, but how it is run, what it prioritises, and how it interacts with its community. These changes are shaped by hybrid governance arrangements, new forms of accountability, and a reorientation toward social value and long-term sustainability.

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3 The study makes several contributions. First, it extends the literature on supporter  
4 ownership and governance by focusing on *post-transition* change, rather than solely  
5 on ownership acquisition. Second, it provides empirical evidence from a unique  
6 national context, Scotland, where supporter ownership is relatively widespread  
7 despite the absence of legal compulsion. Third, it highlights the role of informal  
8 accountability, narrative legitimacy, and emotional stewardship in the governance of  
9 sport organisations.  
10

11  
12 However, the study also identifies key risks and constraints. These include limited  
13 organisational capacity, governance fragility, and systemic inequalities within  
14 Scottish football, these inequalities often exacerbated by SPFL agreed rules and  
15 regulations. While community ownership holds significant promise, it cannot thrive  
16 without structural support. Sustainable growth of the model will require not just local  
17 commitment, but policy alignment and institutional reform.  
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21 Recent developments in England, most notably the introduction of an independent  
22 football regulator, highlight the growing political appetite for structural reform in  
23 football governance. In contrast, Scotland continues to rely on informal mechanisms,  
24 voluntary governance models, and club-level innovation. While this has enabled the  
25 organic growth of supporter ownership, it also exposes clubs to systemic risks. As  
26 this study has shown, the success of community ownership depends heavily on local  
27 entrepreneurial leadership, volunteer commitment, and community legitimacy.  
28 Without complementary institutional support, these models risk becoming fragile or  
29 unsustainable in the long term. The English regulatory agenda may offer lessons or  
30 prompts for future reform in the Scottish context.  
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32

33 Further research is needed to explore the long-term trajectories of fan-owned clubs,  
34 including comparative analysis with jurisdictions where legal frameworks protect  
35 democratic control. There is also scope to examine the interaction between  
36 supporter ownership and on-field performance, commercial strategy, and gender  
37 equity. For policymakers, football authorities, and communities alike, this study  
38 provides evidence that community ownership is a viable, and at times transformative,  
39 model. But it is one that requires active stewardship, continuous innovation, and  
40 collective resolve.  
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