



# In the eye of the public: Examining the content of implicit leadership theories about football managers across two contexts

BIRGIT SCHYNS\*, JAN SCHILLING\*\*, and PATRICK T. COYLE\*\*\*

(\*) *Centre for Leadership and Effective Organizations, Neoma Business School, Campus Reims, France*

(\*\*) *University of Applied Administrative Sciences, Hannover, Germany*

(\*\*\*) *Department of Business Administration, Lycoming College, USA*

*We examine the content of implicit leadership theories relating to football managers. While most studies of leadership and sport are interested in direct leadership, we argue here that public figures such as football managers are measured against fan and public expectations. This can contribute to consequences such as selection or dismissal. We compare the contents of implicit leadership theories between two contexts, which differ considerably in the way the sport is structured. This serves to better understand expectations. Using a mixed-method approach and a sample of participants interested in football, the results suggest differences both in the dimensions used to describe football managers and in the frequencies of characteristics within each dimension. For the United States, participants were generally more positive about football managers than the participants from the UK were. Results highlight the importance of looking into the content of ILT and include context to understand expectations better.*

KEY WORDS: .....



## Introduction

The most popular national football (soccer) league, the English Premier League (EPL), is followed by fans across the world. During the 2016/2017 season, on average, each EPL football match was viewed by 1.5 million individuals, which is slightly down from previous years (He & Abboud, 2017). In contrast, Major League Soccer (MLS) in the United States attracts a lot less

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Correspondence to: Birgit Schyns, Neoma Business School, Campus Reims, 59 rue Pierre Tattinger - 51726 REIMS, France (e-mail: [Birgit.schyns@neoma-bs.fr](mailto:Birgit.schyns@neoma-bs.fr))

viewers, with average viewing figures of 442,000 per game on television (Harris, 2015), but is growing in popularity. Football is also not just a popular sport, it is also a massive commercial industry with yearly combined revenue of all 20 EPL clubs currently estimated to be over £2.3 billion (Deloitte, 2014). Top managers in the EPL may make between £420,000 and £15 million per year (season 2017/2018; Gomez, 2017). In a recent ranking of football managers' salaries, eight of the fifteen highest earning football managers in the world were employed by EPL teams (Dawson, 2017). Compared to these figures, in MLS, head coaches' salaries were around \$250,000 a year in 2007, with the highest paid head coach being paid about \$1.2 million each year (Thyberg, 2017).

Nevertheless, the interest in the performance of football teams, from both fans and occasional followers, is immense. Very often, club managers or coaches are held directly responsible for team performance, leading to sackings (managerial dismissal) and resignations (Audas, Dobson, & Goddard, 2002; see also Desai, Lockett, & Paton, 2017). Currently, the average tenure of an EPL manager is 2.13 years (LMA, 2016), but note a few outliers in tenure such as Arsene Wenger who serves at Arsenal since over 20 years. Turnover rates in the MLS are much lower than in the EPL. According to ESPN, over the 20 years (1996-2015), 53.8% of managers have been replaced in the EPL (equating to roughly 11 managerial changes per season) as opposed to 34% in the MLS (roughly 5 changes per season). Arguably and in line with Meindl's idea of Romance of Leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985), the performance of football teams is mainly attributed to their managers. This tendency "may derive partially from the desire to believe in the effectiveness and importance of individual action, since individual action is more controllable than contextual variables" (Pfeffer, 1977, p. 109). Meindl et al. (1985) could show that such leader attributions for the explanation of outcomes are particularly linked to extreme (positive or negative) results. At the same time, there is ample research to show that frequent managerial dismissal does not achieve the desired performance improvement (e.g., Hughes, Hughes, Mellahi, & Guermat, 2010). Here, we want to have a look as to how members of the public might contribute to this phenomenon by exploring their expectations or, more specifically, their implicit leadership theories (ILTs; Eden & Leviatan, 1975; that is, everyday images of leaders) regarding football managers. Implicit leadership theories are defined briefly as "cognitive structures [...] stored in memory" (Kenney, Schwarz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996, p. 1129) which function as role schemas that others use to interpret leaders' behavior (Kenney, Blascovich, & Shaver, 1994).

Applying the notion of ILT to the context of football offers a new perspective besides the investigation of direct followers (i.e., staff and players).

In contrast to most corporate leaders, football managers are public figures whose success is highly depending on the way they are perceived by stakeholders. Certainly, the stakeholder group with the most emotional investment is the fans who likely have ILTs about football managers to which they compare 'their' manager favorably or unfavorably, thus determining if the manager is leader-like. In case of an unfavorable comparison (and, augmented, of course, by lack of success), the pressure on the club to replace a manager will mount. The hiring and firing prevalent in this sport is, arguably, partly due to media and fan pressure (Salomo & Teichmann, 2000). In that sense, managers represent the club and are easily seen as the scapegoat for lack of performance that needs to be replaced, especially if s/he is seen as not representing the ideal of a good manager. Furthermore, owing to the development of social media, the pressure from fans and a more general football-interested public is likely to get stronger in the coming years. It is therefore interesting to examine what content those ILTs about football managers have, and therefore, understand the expectations towards them better.

In our paper, we are interested in examining expectations towards football managers in general in the form of ILTs. We compare two national contexts, namely England and the USA, in which the particular sport is more or less culturally relevant. We do so to understand how the different contexts shape the contents of ILTs. By context, we are referring to two specific differences between the English and the US in terms of football: First, the actual structure in which this sport operates is very different between the two countries. Second, the cultural meaning of football is rather different in both countries. In our view, this is more important than the cultural differences between the two countries. We will outline this issue in more detail below. Consequently, we are adding towards our understanding of stakeholders' view of football managers, on the one hand. On the other hand, in terms of leadership research, we are adding to the existing knowledge about ILTs by examining ILT in a specific context. Differences between contexts found here can add to our understanding of how differentiated ILTs are in the mind of those who evaluate leaders. Our results will be important in the training and development of football managers, especially with respect to managing external expectations in terms of public relations.

## **Theoretical background**

Research into ILTs (Eden & Leviatan, 1975) or everyday images of leaders stems from the tradition of information processing research in

leadership (e.g., Lord & Maher, 1993). Similar to research into stereotypes or person schemas in general, ILTs describe the cognitive images individuals have about a group of others (Kenney et al., 1994). Again, similar to stereotypes those cognitive images influence information processing (Lord, 1985). Research into ILTs has often focused on determining the content and structure of ILTs about leaders in general (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tramquon, & Topakas, 2013; Offermann et al., 1994). This, according to Lord, Foti, and DeVader (1984), refers to the differentiation between leaders and non-leaders.

In terms of the leadership process, DeRue and Ashford (2010) introduced the idea that followers grant influence to their leaders based on their ILTs: If a leader does not match his/her followers' ILTs, he/she will likely struggle to influence his/her followers. Thus, ILTs are relevant for direct followers in the immediate leadership process. We argue here that ILTs are also relevant where perceivers are not followers but other relevant stakeholder, such as fans. Fans are hugely important in sports such as football. For example, Ogbonna and Harris (2014) showed their huge influence on the culture of a football club.

Fans are, however, unlikely to have direct contact with the person they hold ILTs about. This distance to the actual leaders, is likely to make their ILTs, on the one hand, more abstract and, on the other hand, more meaningful; as we tend to use more attributions (i.e., applying more heuristics) to distant foci than to proximal ones (see construal level theory, e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2003). This is important as research into leadership perception has linked ILTs to the perception of actual leaders (for a recent overview see Hansbrough, Lord, & Schyns, 2015). That is, leadership perceptions are related to the use of heuristics, in the sense that they do not only reflect actual leader behavior but also cognitive structures of leadership. There are some conditions under which the use of ILTs and other heuristics relevant to perception and evaluation of others might be more likely than under others. One such condition is when there is little actual knowledge about the other person, that is, when the person is distant (e.g., leadership distance and the attribution of charisma, Shamir, 1992). At the same time, Lord, Brown, Harvey, and Hall (2001) propose a connectionist network model which introduces the idea of contextual constraints to explain the existence of different images for different targets. According to these authors, four types of constraints related to (national) culture, leader, follower, and task (also if applicable: actual leader behavior) form the basis of leadership prototypes. Thus, based on differences in terms of context of the sport (which includes to a point the task of the manager) and cultural differences,

we expect that we will find differences between participants rating EPL versus MLS managers in general in terms of their ILTs. According to Brown, Scott, and Lewis (2004), ILTs are flexible and fluid knowledge structures. By integrating sources of information, people generate contextually different leader prototypes.

The perception of different leader prototypes also involves an evaluation of their effectiveness with regard to leadership (cp. Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). In line with Schyns and Schilling (2011), we claim that similar leader categories can receive different effectiveness ratings. We argue that there will be differences in terms of how effective our participants will rate each characteristic that shapes their ILTs and that these ratings of effectiveness differ between the contexts. These differences will be partly due to the different structures in which the sport operates, including how much the manager actually influences the outcome (see below). Partly such differences may be caused by differences in the national culture as previous research has shown that US Americans tend to be positive about leaders (see Schneider & Schröder, 2012). Consequently, we expect possible influences on the effectiveness assumptions included in ILTs in different context. To illustrate these points further, we will briefly outline the different contexts that football operates in England versus the US.

### **Contextual differences influencing implicit leadership theories in football / soccer**

While the actual sport is the same, the meaning of football culturally is very different, as are some structural issues. A first difference can already be seen in the title given to the person in charge: In England, the title “manager” is used, while in the US, the title used is “coach”. This might already allude to some differences in how the position and its responsibilities are seen. We will describe structural differences further below.

An important difference for our context lies in the meaning of football for social identity which makes for an interesting comparison of characteristics of typical football managers across contexts, as the sport is more contextually relevant to people’s identity in England, as opposed to the United States (Stott, Adang, Livingstone, & Schreiber, 2007). At the same time, the structural differences between the two leagues are, to some extent, related to football management and, consequently, make the comparison of the processes involved in how people think about football managers interesting. In the following, we will describe both contexts in more detail.

## English Premier League

In English football, as opposed to American soccer, but in line with other leagues around the world, clubs which do not perform well face relegation to a lower league. This is important not only for fans but also commercially, as the EPL attracts a huge amount of money from TV rights (£4.5bn in 2016/17, according to David Conn in *The Guardian*). Being relegated to a lower league means that clubs lose revenue from TV money, which is a lot less for lower leagues. Thus, being relegated means a considerable loss of income for clubs. As a result, winning and losing are of huge importance, and so is identifying who is responsible for team performance. At the same time, research suggests that in the EPL (and this is very different from soccer in the United States), team performance in terms of their place in the EPL is largely influenced by how much money clubs spend in terms of wages (Bell, Brooks, & Markham, 2013). According to Gerrard (2006) about 58% of variance in team performance is explained by the team's wage bill.

*Fan influence on culture.* The importance of the view of fans in the context of English football has been highlighted in a study on cultural change in a football team (Ogbonna & Harris, 2014). For their case study of a failed attempt to change the culture of a football club, they interviewed a large number of club officials as well as conducted focus groups with fans. They found many references that one stumbling block for cultural change was the fan base, specifically, the die-hard fans with whom the club upheld a strong bond. The results of this study are in line with research into basking in spite of reflected failure and (BIRF) and cutting off reflected success (CORS; Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004), who argue that die-hard fans can actually distance themselves from too successful clubs due to a change in culture that goes with success. Interestingly, Ogbonna and Harris (2014) explicitly mention that the club they studied tried to uphold its existing culture and fan base by appointing managers that were former players or, at least, highlight that they had been long standing fans of the club. This shows that football clubs in England are aware of the symbolic function that managers have in representing the club to the fans.

## Major League Soccer

In the United States, there is no system featuring relegation, as MLS rules stipulate that all clubs maintain their place in the league while the team owners see fit. Indeed, the MLS recently rejected a deal that would have vastly

increased their TV revenue (from \$90 million a year reported by Chris Smith in Forbes to \$4bn a year, Krishnaiyer, 2017) as it would have required them to introduce a system of promotion/relegation (Krishnaiyer, 2017). In addition, there is a salary cap in MLS of \$3.66 million (for the year 2016), which prohibits any team in the league from spending more than this specified amount on player salaries. However, teams can nominate up to three designated players, for example, well-known international players and pay those players a higher salary that falls outside the cap. Players typically enter the MLS through a college draft where the worst teams get to select the rights to a college player first before the better teams pick their first player, while in the EPL, there is transfers are only restricted by time frames (the 'transfer window') but not determined by financial limits (other than club resources).

Overall, major differences between the two contexts chosen in this study include the cultural importance of football (much higher in England), the severity of the consequences regarding success and especially failure (higher in England), and the restriction of scope of action (finances, selection of players) for the teams (higher in the US). With regard to ILTs, we expect that the higher attention paid to football in England will result in more elaborated images of football managers. The lower level of restrictions and more severe consequences of team performance in the EPL should impact the content of ILTs as managers have to deal with much higher pressure and greater attributed responsibility for success and failure and are thus more in the focus of attention of fans and other stakeholders. This should mean that ILTs are more differentiated not only in terms of contents but also in terms of effectiveness assumptions, with the latter being more negative for the EPL than the MLS due to the more severe consequences of failure for managers. In sum, we investigated ILTs about football managers and compared those across two different contexts.

## Method

### PARTICIPANTS

Overall, 133 individuals from the US and the UK participated in this study.

*US sample.* The US sample consisted of 66 participants. Of these, 53 indicated that they were American, 3 indicated other nationalities (remaining: missing values). The majority were men ( $N = 31$ , 24 women). Thirty-two considered themselves as football fans, 24 not. Thirty-seven individuals reported having a favorite team, of which 25 reported having a favorite team located in the United States, 6 in England, and 4 in other countries (remaining: missing values).

*UK sample.* In the UK, the sample consisted of 67 participants. Of these, 41 indicated that they were British, 9 indicated other nationalities (remaining: missing values). The majority were



men ( $N = 41$ , 9 women). Forty considered themselves as football fans, 10 not. Fifty individuals reported having a favorite team. 39 of these individuals reported having a favorite team located in England; 5 in Scotland, and 6 outside the UK.

## PROCEDURE AND MEASURES

As the aim of the study was to explore ILTs in a new setting, a mixed-method design was employed, namely a questionnaire with an open-ended question about typical characteristics of a football/soccer manager and effectiveness ratings regarding their described characteristics. The questionnaires were administered in the United States and England using Qualtrics, an online survey system. Such an approach allows uncovering symbolic meanings and associations (Conger, 1998) without influencing the answers of the participants by providing predetermined alternatives.

Minimum age for participation was 18 years old. To recruit individuals to participate in the survey, posts on forums within social media websites (e.g., Facebook, forums.bigsoccer.com, onefootballforum.co.uk) were used inviting participants to take part in our study. Due to the difference in the user base for each of these social media outlets, separate messages were constructed to recruit fans vs. non-fans (e.g., people interested in football but with not specific club they support). Non-fans were included in the study as a baseline of the general public interested in football but without a specific allegiance to a club to compare their views to those of fans. As incentive for participation, participants were entered into a random drawing to win an Amazon gift cards in the amount of \$50.00. IRB approval was granted for this research.

After entering the survey, participants first gave their informed consent. Then, they were asked about their favorite team and attitude toward this team. If participants did not have a favorite team, they were asked to state their local team instead. An adjustment in terminology (e.g., soccer vs. football) was made primarily to prevent confusion between English football and American football in the United States. Participants were asked to describe their ILTs about football managers. To capture ILTs about football managers, participants were asked to list up to 6 *characteristics of a "typical soccer manager"* in the United States, or a *"typical football manager"* in England. We also asked participants to rate the characteristics they had named in terms of *effectiveness* on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 representing *completely ineffective* and 5 representing *completely effective*, similar to the technique used by Schyns and Schilling (2011). Specifically, the question was "Please select for each of the characteristics you have mentioned above whether or not it / is an effective or ineffective characteristic".

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSES: CONTENT ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

In order to analyze our data, we used qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Schilling, 2006). This approach is a combination of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with strategies from traditional content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). While qualitative content analysis is often regarded as being too quantitative for qualitative researchers (cp. Schilling, 2017), Klenke (2008) states that "the qualitative paradigm embraces a diverse array of methodologies that can be mapped on a continuum ranging from purely qualitative to highly quantitative" (p. 6). This is actually a mixed-method



approach, which seems particularly helpful as it combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods to uncover the meaning of everyday concepts. In particular, qualitative content analysis is open to both an inductive, data-driven approach of building categories and a deductive data analysis strategy with pre-defined category systems. We follow the same steps as outlined in previous research of leadership categories (Schyns & Schilling, 2011). Specifically, the following steps of qualitative content analysis were applied to the characteristics the participants of this study listed of a typical football manager in the United States first, and in England second.

*Step 1: Reducing and organizing the material.*

Following Schyns and Schilling's (2011) approach to focus on characteristics (i.e., trait-or-state-like variables useable to describe the nature of people and differentiate between different persons) only, the data were first roughly scanned by one researcher for items that obviously were not related to describing the characteristics of people (e.g., xbox). The deleted items (in total: 10 for the US and 2 for the UK sample) were later examined by a second researcher to make sure that they did not meet our definition (see above) of a characteristic. After the initial deletion of obviously irrelevant statements, the data were organized in an alphabetical order to facilitate the coding of the material (so that raters would not have to search how they coded the same item before). Using this procedure, an initial list of 201 unique characteristics (not including characteristics listed multiple times, such as intelligent) was cut down to 191 unique characteristics for MLS in the United States (total number including characteristics listed multiple times: 312). An initial list of 159 unique characteristics (again, not including characteristics listed multiple times, such as intelligent) was cut down to 150 unique characteristics for the EPL in England (total number including characteristics listed multiple times: 290).

*Step 2: Application and extension of a preliminary category system.*

In order to develop a category system, we considered both previously developed sets of categories and newly emerging categories. Specifically, we used existing categories identified by Offermann et al. (1994) as well as Schyns and Schilling (2011) which guided our content analysis. Doing so would also allow us to compare our results to previous studies. Two coders from the research team independently categorized the alphabetical list of items for the first half of the data (UK sample) and achieved a satisfying concordance (Cohen's Kappa = 0.56)<sup>1</sup>. After this coding, the raters discussed cases of doubt and agreed which categories they belong to.

*Step 3: Coding of the material and check of inter-coder agreement.*

In the final step, the second data set (US sample) was coded by two independent raters based on the experiences with and refinements of the category system. This time, inter-coder agreement achieved a good concordance with Cohen's Kappa = 0.81<sup>2</sup>. Where differences emerged in terms of a fit of characteristics to a category, these were discussed until consensus between the coders was achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> As Kappa can only be computed for categories that each of the two coders use at least once (symmetric two-way table), eight of 290 codings had to be excluded from the calculation.

<sup>2</sup> As Kappa can only be computed for categories that each of the two coders use at least once (symmetric two-way table), four of 313 codings had to be excluded from the calculation.

## QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

In addition to the qualitative analysis of the data and in line with Schyns and Schilling's (2011) approach, we used absolute frequency (i.e., total number of times a category is addressed by the interviewees), relative frequency (i.e., average percentage of a category), and person frequency (i.e., how many of the participants address a certain theme at all) to better describe our results. For our analysis regarding favorability/unfavorability, we reverted to category evaluations by Offermann et al. (1994) and, most importantly, followed Schyns and Schilling's (2011) ratings. Offermann et al. (1994) simply divided their categories into prototypical and antiprototypical (most notably "tyranny"), while Schyns and Schilling (2011) explicitly used a more nuanced approach including positive and negative anchors for each category deducted.

## Results

### *United States soccer manager implicit leadership theories*

Participants from the United States reported 322 total statements concerning the characteristics of typical soccer manager. After step 1 of the content analysis procedures, 312 total characteristics emerged for further consideration. Following the content analysis, two new categories not previously addressed by Schyns and Schilling (2011) surfaced during the final stages of the categorization process, namely sports oriented and business oriented (see Appendix for categories and example statements). During this coding, 27 characteristics were deemed not assignable, and 38 were categorized as miscellaneous. Statements were considered not assignable when they did not constitute a clear characteristic but were very abstract (which was the main reason for this categorization; e.g., "leadership") or where incomprehensible (e.g., "big jacket") or stated a behavior (e.g., "develops individual talent"; see Schyns & Schilling, 2011).

**Frequencies.** The most used subcategories for United States soccer managers were Organized (32), Intelligent (30), and Strong (30). Negative categories emerged much less frequently: Tyrannical (9), Hard (7), and Narrow-minded (3) were the most endorsed categories with a negative valence. For a total of 10 of the subcategories from the Schyns and Schilling coding system, we found no characteristics at all. Those were: Introvert, Not-communicative, Individualist, Not-charismatic, Disinterested, Stupid, Unattractive, Unorganised, Not conscientious, and Dishonest. It is notable, that these categories all fall under the unfavorable pole of the dimensions. Figure 1 depicts the frequencies per category.

Because our sample contained both fans and non-fans, we also examined differences between those two groups in terms of the characteristics they

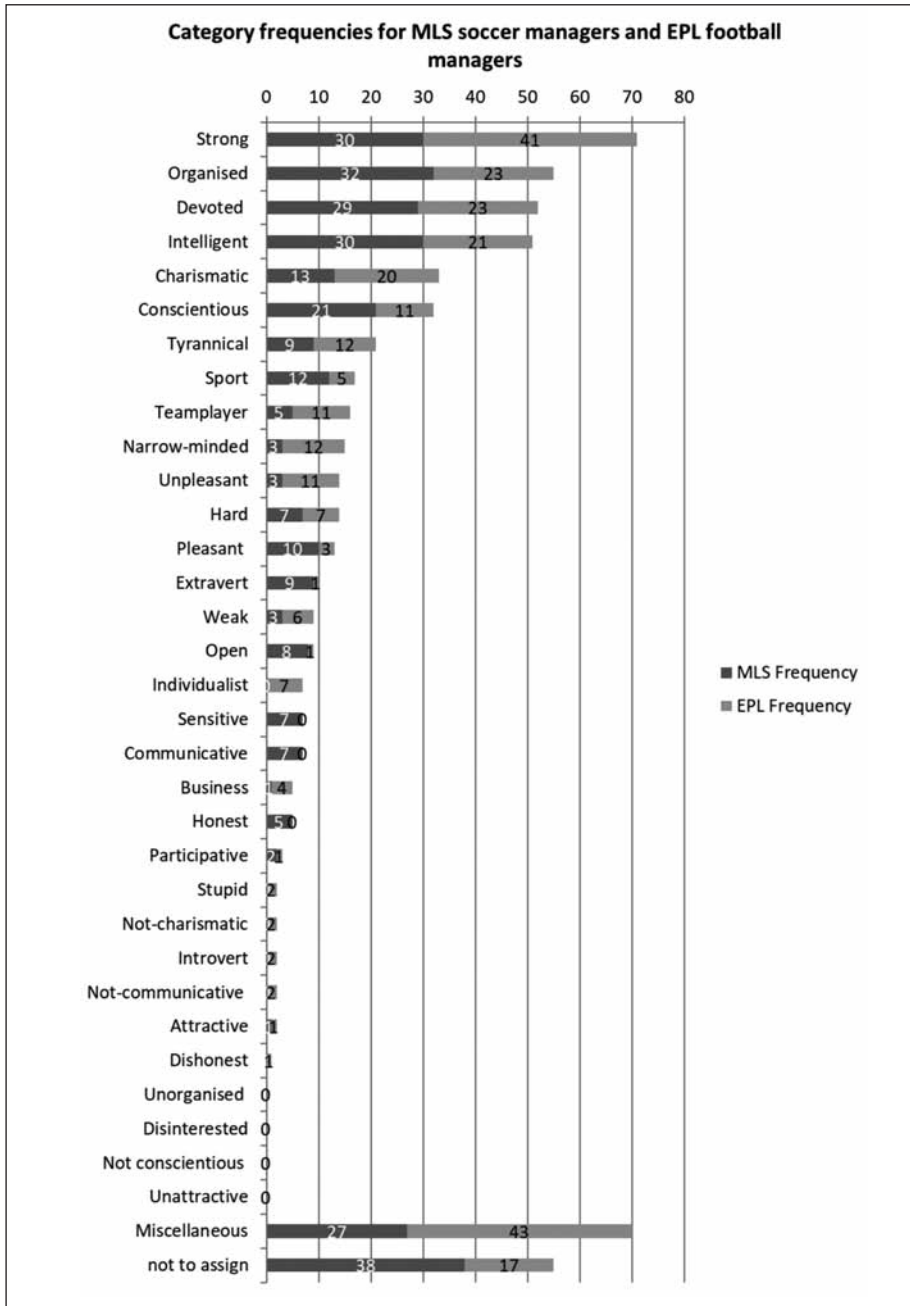


Fig. 1. - Category frequencies for MLS soccer managers and EPL football managers.

named. The percentages of negative and non-assignable statements are comparable between fans and non-fans. The respective percentage for favorable, unfavorable, and non-assignable statements overall were 70.8%, 8.3%, and 20.8%. For non-fans, the respective percentage for positive, negative, and non-assignable statements overall were 72.1%, 9.6%, and 18.3%. We, therefore, used the complete sample for the following analyses as non-fans do not generally seem to differ in their views on football managers even though they do not have a specific allegiance to a certain club.

### EFFECTIVENESS RATINGS AND FAVORABILITY

In line with Schyns and Schilling (2011), we analyzed the effectiveness ratings our participants gave for each characteristic they named. All sixty-six participants rated their characteristics in terms of effectiveness on a scale from 1 to 5. The average rating was 3.95<sup>3</sup> based on the ratings of each characteristic. Fans ( $M = 3.96$ ) did not differ significantly from non-fans ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $t = -.77$ , *n.s.*) on average effectiveness. The vast majority of characteristic named fell on the favorable pole of our dimensions ( $N = 221$ ; 89.5%;  $N$  unfavorable = 26, 10.5%). As can be seen in Figure 2, not all of those favorable characteristics were also seen as effective, though the large majority were (91.35%).

### ENGLISH SOCCER MANAGER CHARACTERISTICS

Participants from the United Kingdom reported 300 total statements concerning the characteristics of typical soccer manager. The average number of statements made per participant was 4.55. After step 1 of the content analysis procedures, a total of 298 total characteristics emerged for further consideration. Following the content analysis, a total of 16 categories emerged during coding for further analysis (see above).

**Frequencies.** The positive subcategories with the greatest frequency of statements were Strong (41), Organized (23), Devoted (23). Again, negative categories were used less often though more often than in the case of US soccer managers: The negative subcategories with the most statements were

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<sup>3</sup> One participant's ratings were excluded as they were all rated as "very ineffective", though the statements were clearly very positive. We assumed that the participant misread the instructions. With this participant, the average rating was 4.05.

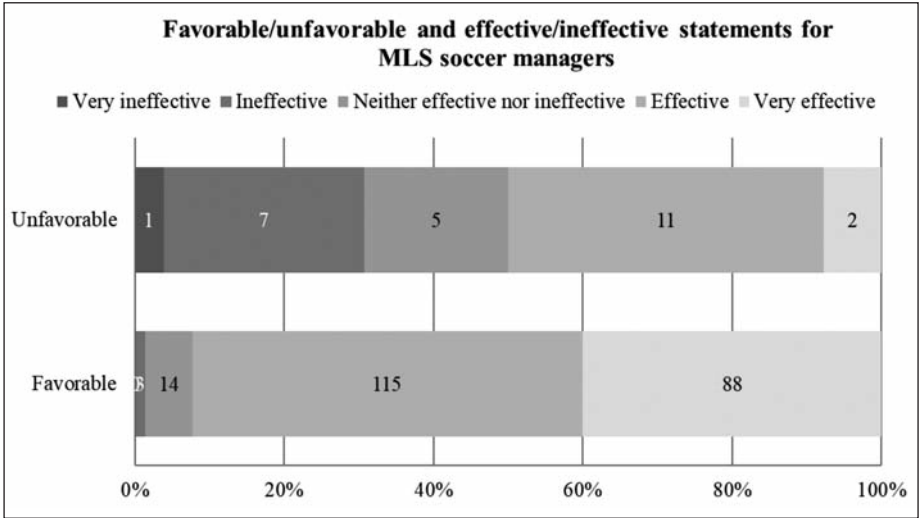


Fig. 2. - Cross-tabulation on the percentages of favorable/unfavorable and effective/ineffective statements for MLS soccer managers.

Narrow-minded (12), Tyrannical (12), and Unpleasant (11). A total of seven subcategories were not used by the participants (Communicative, Sensitive, Disinterested, Unattractive, Unorganized, Not Conscientious, and Honest). Note that in contrast to the US sample, not all of those categories are negative.

The overall frequency of positive characteristics was higher than the negative characteristics. Not taking into account no-assignable statements, more than two thirds of all characteristics were favorable (N = 162; 70%) compared to only a third of characteristics being unfavorable (N = 68; 30%). The distribution of favorable and unfavorable characteristics is less extreme in the UK than the US sample (see Figure 3).

For The EPL Data, We Also Examined Differences Between Fans And Non-Fans In Terms Of The Characteristics They Named. The Percentages Of Negative And Non-Assignable Statements Were Higher Among Non-Fans Than Among Fans. The Respective Percentage For Positive, Negative, And Non-Assignable Statements Overall Were 55.9%, 23.4%, And 20.7%. For Non-Fans, The Respective Percentage For Favorable, Unfavorable, And Non-Assignable Statements Overall Were 26.5%, 42.9%, And 30.6%. As We Found Some Differences here, we will discuss those further in the discussion section.

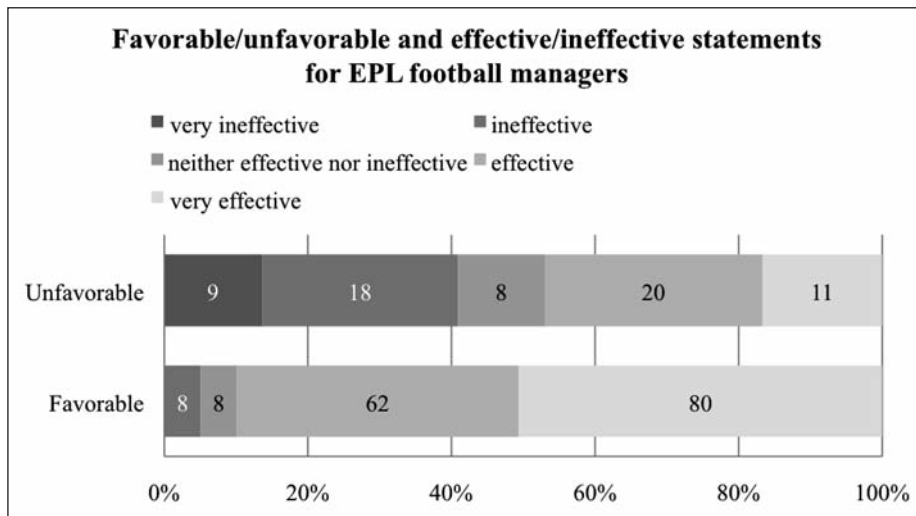


Fig. 3. - Cross-tabulation on the percentages of favorable/unfavorable and effective/ineffective statements for English Premier League football managers.

#### EFFECTIVE RATINGS OF PARTICIPANTS

We analyzed the effectiveness ratings our participants gave for each characteristic they named for the EPL data. As can be seen in Figure 3, not all of those favorable characteristics were deemed effective, though the large majority was (89.46%). Sixty-five participants rated their statements in terms of effectiveness on a scale from 1 to 5. The average rating was 3.92 based on the ratings of each characteristic. For the EPL data, fans ( $M = 3.85$ ) also did not differ significantly from non-fans ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $t = -.75$ ,  $n.s.$ ) on average effectiveness.

#### Discussion

The current study sought to investigate ILTs about football managers and to compare those across two different contexts. Specifically, we assessed statements describing characteristics of football managers. We drew two samples, one from the US, rating typical MLS managers, and one from the UK, rating typical EPL managers. While we were using the same target (football managers) for the description, we wanted to examine the degree to which the description of typical leaders differ depending on specific con-

texts. We identified a number of substantial differences in how football is structured in the US versus England, for example, the lack of relegation in the US (making failure less costly) and the stronger financial constraints in the US that we think are relevant to typical images of leaders. Our study aimed at contributing to the existing knowledge regarding differences in the content of ILTs differs depending on the specificity of the target leaders. Ultimately, we wanted to demonstrate using the example of football how ILTs are shaped by context in terms of both their contents and their effectiveness assumptions.

Our results from participants in the US and the UK indicate that we can derive 16 categories to describe football managers in both countries. This is an extension of the 12 categories originally designed by Offermann et al. (1994) and extended to 15 by Schyns and Schilling (2011) to describe leaders in general. We found that most categories that emerged in previous studies on ILTs about leaders in general, also emerged in our study on more specific ILTs. Notably, there were some differences in the use of categories. For example, one of the most frequently used categories in our study, more specifically, “organized” (which was the strongest category in the US sample and the second strongest in the UK sample), did not emerge very strongly in the Schyns and Schilling (2011) study on ILTs about leaders in general. However, in their study, the categories team player/ individuals and communicative/ non-communicative were mentioned more frequently than in our study. That is, the relative importance of the categories differs. This is important to keep in mind when examining the impact of ILTs on perceptions of leaders in future studies: Potentially, ILTs need to be weighted differently in terms of their influence on the perception of leaders in different contexts.

We also found two new categories in our study, namely, business oriented and sports oriented. These categories seem of particular relevance to our specific level ILTs, as an addition to the categories describing typical leaders in general. Again, this finding is in line with the leader categorization approach (Lord et al., 1984), in so far that lower level abstraction ILTs might need to be extended with specific content. This also means that if we had just used an existing category approach, we would have missed information about the contents of football ILTs. Therefore, based on our results, we recommend that researchers first assess specific ILTs in an inductive way in order to make sure that no information is undiscovered.

We compared two contexts, namely, England and the US. Arguably, these two countries are often considered culturally similar. However, in terms of football, they are quite different. We refer here to the cultural meaning of football, to the structure in which football operates, particularly in terms of



the presence or absence relegation and existing money constraints, and to the scope of tasks that a manager has within the club. Indeed, we found that there were some remarkable differences in the use of categories between the US and England.

In both samples, favorable characteristics were mentioned more often than unfavorable ones. This is interesting in comparison to Schyns and Schilling (2011) who also found more favorable characteristics mentioned for ILTs about leaders in general but this finding was less pronounced (65% compared to 89.5% in the US and 70% in England). There are several possible explanations for this result. First, the Dutch sample in Schyns and Schilling's (2011) study might generally be more skeptical about leaders than our UK and US samples are. Specifically, as we outlined above, Americans seem to be more positive about leaders in general (Schneider & Schroeder, 2012). Second, rather than followers rating leaders, we asked fans to rate managers. Here, our raters are more distant to the leaders they rate which might have contributed to a romanticizing effect (Meindl et al., 1985), making the results more positive. Finally, our study focused on a target that people generally see in their leisure time which might put them in a more positive state than thinking about work.

In addition, fans might be basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) or Cutting off from failure (CORFing; Calдини et al., 1976). That is, when a team is successful, they might identify more with the team and, thus with the representatives of the team, including the managers, while the opposite would be true for unsuccessful teams. An interesting question for future research would be in how far, BIRGing and CORFing might also influence images of football managers in general, not only of the respective football manager of one's favorite team. The fact that fans are likely to react more strongly to success and failure of their team (Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004) is likely to spill over to their views of managers of the sport in general, leading to possibly stronger reactions towards them.

With respect to the categories used to describe football managers, we found passion (devoted/disinterested categorization), knowledge (intelligent/stupid categorization), long-term orientation (organized/unorganized categorization), and decisiveness (strong/weak categorization) to be important categories used to describe football managers. In examining UK participants' ILTs of football managers, we found "strong", "organized", and "devoted" to be the most used categories, while for the US sample it was "organized", "intelligent", and "strong". That is, two categories overlap ("organized" and "strong"). However, generally speaking, UK participants used more negative categories than US participants. Indeed, all of the 10 cat-

egories that were not found in the US sample were negative. The particular importance of being “strong” in the UK sample may reflect the more hazardous conditions for football managers in the EPL.

In terms of negative characteristics mentioned, one of the strongest categories in the UK sample, “narrow-minded”, is hardly mentioned in the US sample, even though it is still under the most mentioned of the three negative categories (with three mentions) due to the low number of negative category use in the US). In terms of the category “tyrannical”, the samples are fairly similar. However, the category “unpleasant” is again much stronger in the UK. Also interesting is that this category is used in both samples but in the UK it is considered slightly less effective by the participants who named it than by US participants (3.5 versus 3.7). The second strongest negative category in the US, “hard”, is possibly more ambivalent in valence than some of the other unfavorable categories and indeed carries an average effectiveness rating of roughly the same value: 4.1 in the US and 4.2 in the UK sample. It is interesting to see that even within the same categories, the US sample seems more positive about football managers. Overall and lending support to the impression that our English sample is more negative about football managers, the effectiveness ratings differ. While in both countries, the majority of characteristics were considered effective, the proportion is lower in the English sample. However, in both samples it is still higher than in Schyns and Schilling’s (2011) ratings of ILTs about leaders in general (64% compared to 77% in the UK and 88% in the US). While we are dealing with very small numbers here, these results lend support to our approach of asking participants to rate the effectiveness of the characteristics they mention as this adds meaningfully to the interpretation of results.

In summary, the results indicate that the English sample was much more ambiguous about football managers. The characteristics with a positive valence (e.g., determined) accounted for 70% of the total responses for the English sample while the characteristics with a positive valence accounted for 89.5% of the total responses in the US sample. In addition, the English ILTs about football managers contained a more balanced distribution of characteristics across category compared to the US soccer manager ILTs where 10 negative categories were not even mentioned. Consequently, while generally similar categories were used to describe football managers in general, the descriptions of English football managers in general were more ambivalent. This might reflect the cultural meaning of football, in general, and the attribution of meaning to football managers, in specific. In England, the job of the manager of the national football team is often referred to as “the second most important job in the country” (Edworthy, 1999). The more

negative view on EPL football managers might, in part, explain why there is a stronger culture of sacking in England as the expectations towards football managers are not unequivocally positive and that might make it easier to blame managers for failure.

We can speculate here that the reason that our English sample are more differentiated in their views about football managers might lie in the amount of information available about football managers. Level of construal theory suggests that "... people mentally construe objects that are psychologically near in terms of low-level, detailed, and contextualized features, whereas at a distance they construe the same objects or events in terms of high-level, abstract, and stable characteristics." (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007, p. 83). Thus, it might be that the ILTs about EPL managers are more differentiated than those for MLS managers as for our UK sample, football managers are nearer. This is due to more readily available information but also an assumed higher interest in the game and the managers involved (as outlined above, the focus is likely due to the costs of failure) and thus seen as less abstract and more differentiated.

While this was not the focus of our study, an interesting result emerged relating to differences between fans and non-fans in both leagues. When we compared fans and non-fans in the MLS data, we found little differences. However, in the EPL context, some differences emerged. We would argue that this supports our assumption that due to the lower cultural meaning of football in general and football managers, specifically, and the lower amount of information available in the MLS context, fans and non-fans are not that different in their view of managers. In contrast, in the EPL context, being a fan might involve much more cultural meaning and more access to information, which can account for the fan/non-fan differences.

Our results show that ILTs may be target specific (i.e., leader in general vs. football manager) and that the context in which leadership operates is meaningful. Our results imply that the specificity of ILTs results less in new categories needed to describe leaders at that level but more in a different distribution of frequencies within the category system, meaning that the weight related to the categories differs on different levels of abstraction. We found that the specific target addressed in the ILTs assessed as well as cultural and contextual aspects are important in refining the contents and measurement of ILTs. Overall, our results provide insights for the research into ILTs such that instruments assessing ILTs may need to be carefully designed to address the specific leadership roles and contexts under study.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

We chose the focus on the comparison between England and US not because of the cultural similarity, but because of the differences in the constraints in which football operates in those two countries. A comparison between other leagues might have found fewer differences based on context but potentially more based on cultural differences. However, this approach would have produced issues concerning the use of a categorization scheme as a starting point that has originated in the US and has been tested in the UK. So while the choice of the US and England might be considered a limitation, it is also a potential strength of our study. Ideally, of course, additional football leagues could be included in future research to further investigate the role of context in ILTs referring to the same target leader group.

A limitation of our study is the way we phrased the question about participants' favorite teams. Oftentimes, football fans have several favorite teams (e.g., their local team plus a team that is in the highest league; or teams for different leagues; there are even some fan clubs that have explicit links with other fans clubs, e.g., the German fan club of Sankt Pauli has a partnership with the Celtic Glasgow in Scotland). We should have worded the question to ask more specifically, which team participants follow most closely or even give the option of indicating several teams. Future research should take this limitation into account.

As the study employed a convenience sample, it is necessary to discuss if and how this may have biased the results (sampling validity; cp. Schilling, 2017). As an explorative study, the results cannot claim representativeness for the English or US fan population, but rather stimulate follow-up studies. It still can be stated that the number of participants is rather high for an explorative study. Concerning initial studies in the area of leadership, Parry (1998) advocates for a diverse sample of subjects, which was implemented in the present investigation by two different contexts and different ways of survey distribution.

Instead of assessing ILTs from direct followers, we used a sample of fans/non-fans. This can be a limitation as in this case ILTs will not relate to direct experiences. Some of the previously found categories for typical leaders in general were not frequently named in this study, and this could be potentially because our sample does not directly work with the type of leader they describe. We can assume that statements categorized under, for example, "tyranny" and "communicative" are more relevant for direct leader-follower relationship than for stakeholders who only experience leaders from a distance. Future research should investigate the direct link between ILTs and

manager characteristics and examine if less leader-like managers are more prone to be sacked. For example, a future study could focus on a representative sample of one team and assess to what degree the characteristics of their managers over time as depicted in the press (i.e., information that is readily available to fans) fit with those ILTs. Length of tenure would then be the outcome variable of interest.

In summary, if fans are unhappy with their team's performance, this is likely to contribute to managerial dismissal. If ILTs are relevant in this context, this is important to know as managerial dismissals are costly (Frick, Barros, & Prinz, 2010) but do not improve performance (Hughes et al., 2010, see also Gerrard & Locket, 2016, for a study on managers' human capital and its effect on team performance).

## APPENDIX

<b>Favorable</b>	<b>Unfavorable</b>
Introvert	Extravert
Calm	Extravert, outgoing
Pleasant	Unpleasant
Likeable, personable	Grumpy, livid
Communicative	Not-communicative
Forthright	Inarticulate
Strong	Weak
Decisive, tough	Despairing, stressed
Sensitive	Hard
Understanding	Strict, stern
Teamplayer	Individualist
Teamplayer, team-oriented	Self-interested,
Charismatic	Not-charismatic
Charismatic, transformational	Boring
Devoted	Disinterested
Ambitious, passionate	
Participative	Tyrannical
Delegating, collaborative	Pushy, loud
Intelligent	Stupid
Smart, clever	Thick
Attractive	Unattractive
Well-dressed, well-dressed	
Organised	Unorganised
Tactical, strategic	
Conscientious	Not conscientious
Thorough, timely	
Honest	Dishonest
Trustworthy	Duplicious
Open-minded	Narrow-minded
Inquisitive, unconventional	Short-sighted, conservative
Sport	Business
Athletic, fit	Business-minded, financially-minded

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