

Knowledge and Perception of 'Pay-to-Play' in Football among Sport Journalists in Ghana

Frank Appiah Kusi^{1*}, Richard Samuel Kwadwo Abieraba²

¹University of Health and Allied Sciences, Ho, Ghana, & Philippine Christian University, Manila, Philippines

²University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Football (soccer) is a major sport among the Ghanaian population, followed by Boxing and other emerging sports like Handball, Indoor Volleyball, Swimming, Field Hockey, Basketball, Badminton, and Arm Wrestling. To the Ghanaian community, 'sports is football' has attracted much attention and interest among the youth in an attempt to develop their talent and skills. With such an interest and passion among the Ghanaian youth, it is an expectation and dire hope to be featured in football competitions. This is often not the case, as there is a perceived intention of 'Pay-to-Play' to participate in national football competitions in Ghana. This study explored the knowledge and perception of 'Pay-to-Play' in football among Sports Journalists in Accra, Kumasi and Ho. The study adopted qualitative methods with semi-structured open-ended questions sent to the respondents via Email and WhatsApp. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit the respondents, and the snowball technique aided the researchers in reaching other Sports Journalists. The study identified the existence of 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana. This has resulted in the loss of interest in football consumption among the youth, particularly in the Ghana Premier League, and has led to less football development in Ghana.

Keywords: pay-to-play; sport journalists; perception; Ghana Premier League; Ghana Football Association

Corresponding author:

*Frank Appiah Kusi. University of Health and Allied Sciences, Ho, Ghana, & Philippine Christian University, Manila, Philippines.

E-mail: fkusi@uhas.edu.gh

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INTRODUCTION

The Ghana Football Association (GFA) is a private entity integrated under the laws of Ghana, which serves as the football governing body mandated by the GFA statutes for football development and promotion and also functions as a member representative of the Federal International Football Association (FIFA) and Confederation of African Football (CAF) in Ghana (GFA, 2019). As a legal and recognized body from international and continental realms, one of its main powers and or functions is to ensure fair play and equal participation in the game of football across the length and breadth of the jurisdiction of the GFA (GFA, n.d). Football is a major sport among the Ghanaian population, followed by Boxing and other emerging sports like Handball, Indoor Volleyball, Swimming, Field Hockey, Basketball, Badminton, and Arm Wrestling. To the Ghanaian community, 'sports is football', and this has attracted much attention and



interest among the youth in an attempt to develop their talent and skills, and has resulted in the rise of football academies in Ghana (GFA, n.d)

With such an interest and passion among the Ghanaian youth, it is an expectation and dire hope to be called up and featured in the various National Football Teams, especially the 'Ghana Black Stars', the senior team during international and continental tournaments. Representing one's country at international and continental tournaments presents not only prestige, boosting self-image and confidence for the players, but also places a market value on them. For example, to be able to play in the English Premier League for Non-British Citizens, a player must have participated in a minimum set percentage of their home country's senior competitive international matches during the two years or one year of under 21 preceding the date of application (The FA, 2017). Hence, all eyes point to the GFA as a governing body of football to offer a fair, transparent and equal call-up into the National Football Teams for international and continental sporting events. Interestingly, Ghana has been fortunate to appear at several international sporting tournaments such as the FIFA World Cups – for instance, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and the recent 2022 World Cup in Qatar for the national senior team and the black satellites and even won the under 20 world cup in 2009 at Cairo, Egypt after defeating Brazil 4-3 on penalties when the match ended (0-0) after extra time. Also, Ghana has appeared at CAF competitions from antiquity to the recent 2021 AFCON tournament in Cameroon. During such periods, it is the dream of many football players, particularly in the local league (called Ghana Premier League, GPL), to be called up and represent their nation, but often, the composition of the National Football Team is mainly called up Ghanaian players, who are based in abroad (Abdul-Rahaman, 2022; Zurek, 2022). This spectacle has existed for decades and has created some perception among many Ghanaian youth over the periods, suggesting that football players, most especially those based abroad that find their way into the National Football Teams, especially the Black Stars, 'pay' some amount of money (Ayamga, 2022) before being called-up and featured for sporting tournaments, but this is without empirical evidence, seemingly obstructing the less-wealthy and local players to be part of the National Football Teams.

In a recent attack, a renowned dancehall artist named Stonebwoy alleged on his Twitter page that the GFA refused to feature some players because of 'Pay-to-Play' (Ayamga, 2022). Still, this allegation has not received any response from the GFA.

Given this, quite recently, in 2018, the GFA was dissolved in response to an expose' by an Ace journalist, Anas Aremeyaw Anas, on a corruption scandal (BBC, 2018). Following this, the Ghana Premier League (GPL), being managed by the same governing body, has also suffered litigations leading to the suspension of matches by the Human Rights High Court in Accra (Graphic, 2018), and even in the 2022/23 betPawa Premier League (Ghana News Agency [GNA], 2022).

Accumulatively, these happenings at the GFA have garnered some perceptions on 'Pay-to-Play' concerning football in Ghana but lack research to underpin this phenomenon to inform decisions for football development. Thus, this study gathered data from Sports Journalists in Accra, Kumasi and Ho to ascertain the depth of perception and knowledge and how this may affect football development and consumption in Ghana.

'Pay-to-Play'

The phrase and concept of 'Pay-to-Play' are familiar in sports but may differ in their meaning considering the context in contention. For instance, the National Collegiate Athletic Association ([NCAA], 2016) manual hints at 'Pay-to-Play' among student-athletes. The manual directs that student-athletes should be considered amateurs when they have not used their abilities for compensation, are not being reimbursed or must not have signed a contract to engage any professional sports team, as this fosters student-athlete scholarship for engaging in intercollegiate sports. In the context of the Global North, the NCAA regulates student-athletes from earning money as it considers them amateurs. Again, in a study by Cotton (2012), the concept was juxtaposed to exchange for access to gain political favour. The study showed that the rich get better access to politicians than the less-wealthy group.

In another study conducted by Emanuel et al. (2015), the concept was linked to clinical settings, indicating that patients who pay money to be part of a clinical trial or study threaten the social value and equal selection in a comprehensive clinical research design. Furthermore, a study in Australia adopted the phrase in context to monies paid to access recreational parks (Buckley, 2010). In contrast to the context of the phrase and its meaning from the studies above, another study showed how 'Pay-to-Play' is being used in some districts in the United States of America as a new source of revenue generation (Zdroik & Veliz, 2016). From the study, 'Pay-to-Play' was implemented as a participation fee to sustain interscholastic sports programs.

Furthermore, in line with Zdroik and Veliz's (2016) findings, another study conducted by Eyer et al. (2019) revealed that the 'Pay-to-Play' concept was used to sustain sports programs even though there were budgets for sports in the school of study, state laws guided the concept. Again, in an article in the sports business journal, Gilbert (2022) notes the concerns of Rick Burton and Norm O'Reilly in addressing how the concept of 'Pay-to-Play' in sports is likely to hinder children's involvement in sports and calls for an alternative to generate revenue. More so, an article published in Sportsmanist indicates that the concept of 'Pay-to-Play' refers to monies collected from students to enable their participation in school sports (MADDOX, n.d).

It is clear from those above that the phrase 'Pay-to-Play' is not new, but its meaning changes in context to the issue of contention. Although literature in this area is limited in Ghana, the global context provides an overview of the meaning of the phrase 'Pay-to-Play' and its application in diverse ways. In Ghana, the same phrase has been adopted by many Ghanaian youth, particularly some celebrities, referring to monies paid in exchange for access to the National Football Teams for international and continental sporting tournaments (Ayamga, 2022). This study contributed to the knowledge gap in the scanty literature in Ghana to understand the perception and knowledge of the phrase and how it is being interpreted in the context of football and call-ups to the National Football Teams by the GFA during tournaments.

This study is relevant as it aided in understanding the perception and knowledge of the phrase – 'Pay-to-Play' and how it is interpreted among Sports Journalists in Accra, Kumasi and Ho, and the need to reconsider decisions at the GFA in addressing concerns of the Ghanaian community, thereby offering their love to the sports, in tandem with the GFA promoting 'BringBackTheLove' for football in Ghana (Daily Mail, 2019). Again, the study contributed to the literature on sports business as a grey area/field evolving in Ghana, thereby aiding students and academicians who may venture into this field. It is important to point out that sport is now a big business,

and misconceptions, if not dealt with and addressed appropriately, may impede development, thus this study.

Research Question (RQ)

This study aimed at responding to the following research questions:

1. How is 'Pay-to-Play' perceived in football among sports journalists in Ghana?
2. How will the perception of 'Pay-to-Play' affect football development in Ghana?
3. How will the perception of 'Pay-to-Play' affect football consumption in Ghana?
 What will be the best practice to mitigate 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study used a qualitative research method with semi-structured open-ended questions designed on Google Forms and shared with Sports Journalists in Accra, Kumasi and Ho via Email and WhatsApp. This approach aids in gathering in-depth understanding, feelings, and opinions on a research subject (Skinner et al., 2015). In an attempt to discover and explore the understanding of a new concept in a new environment, it is ideal to choose a research method that will build on exploring in-depth perceptions, thoughts, feelings and views to better comprehend an ideology in context (Skinner et al., 2015). A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit respondents in Accra, and the snowball technique aided the researchers in reaching other Sports Journalists in Kumasi and Ho. Data was analysed using thematic content analysis to determine the perception, knowledge and interpretation of 'Pay-to-Play'. Sports Journalists aged 18 and above were qualified to participate in the study and willingly consented. Due to the online nature of data collection, individuals unavailable on WhatsApp and or without email addresses could not participate and were excluded from the study. A sample size (N= 18) was gathered, of which five (5) were females and thirteen (13) were males. Ethical approval was sought from the Graduate School of Business and Management of Philippine Christian University and indicated on the Google form. Confidentiality and anonymity were highly adhered to in this study, as respondents' identities, places of work, and positions were withheld.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Demographics of Data

Respondents	Gender	Location	Age
Participant 1	Male	Accra	25
Participant 2	Male	Accra	30
Participant 3	Male	Accra	33
Participant 4	Female	Kumasi	35
Participant 5	Female	Kumasi	28
Participant 6	Male	Kumasi	38
Participant 7	Male	Accra	26
Participant 8	Male	Ho	40
Participant 9	Male	Ho	41
Participant 10	Male	Ho	37
Participant 11	Female	Accra	36
Participant 12	Male	Kumasi	33
Participant 13	Male	Kumasi	29
Participant 14	Male	Kumasi	39
Participant 15	Male	Kumasi	40
Participant 16	Male	Accra	41

Participant 17	Female	Accra	42
Participant 18	Female	Accra	39

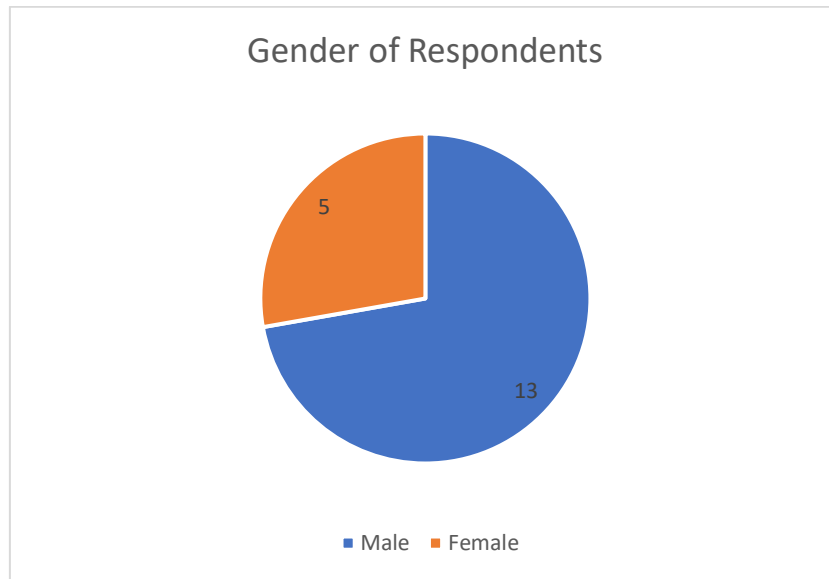


Figure 1. Gender of Respondents

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of male to female respondents in the study. There were 13 male respondents, representing 72.22% of the sample. There were five female respondents, representing 27.77% of the sample. The data, therefore, showed more male sports journalists participated in the study than female sports journalists.

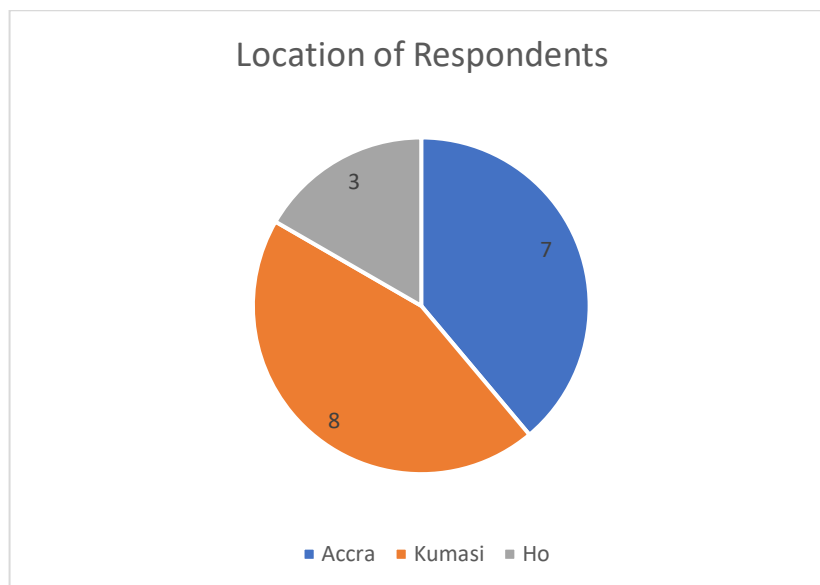


Figure 2. Location of Respondents.

Figure 2 depicts the number of respondents from the location of the study. The data revealed that 7 participants came from Accra, the capital of Ghana, representing 38.88% of the sample. Kumasi, the second largest city in Ghana, recorded 8 participants, representing 44.44% of the sample. The capital of the Volta Region, Ho, a fast-growing region in Ghana in the southern sector, recorded 3 participants, representing 16.66% of the sample. The data showed that nearly half of the sample

came from Kumasi sports journalists, followed by Accra and Ho, which recorded the lowest.

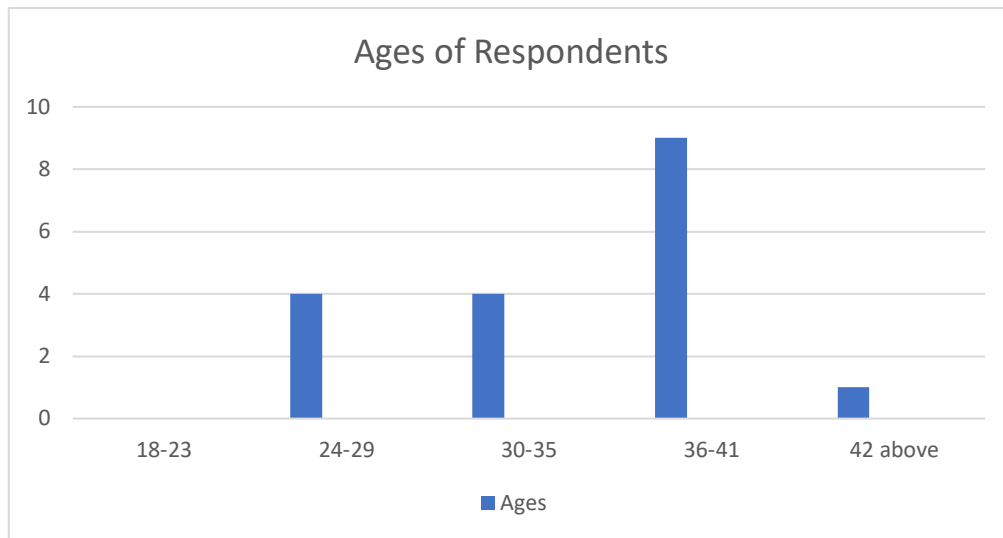


Figure 3. Ages of Respondents

Figure 3 shows the age ranges of participants from the three locations of the study. The data showed the age range (36-41) recorded the highest number of participants, representing 50% of the sample. The age ranges (30-35 and 24-29) recorded equal numbers of participants from the study locations, representing 22.22% each. The age 42 and above recorded 1 participant from the study locations, representing 5.55% of the sample.

Table 2. Research Question 1 Quotations

Research Question	Quotation Reference
RQ1: How is 'Pay-to-Play' perceived in football among sport journalists in Ghana?	"I've been familiar with this phenomenon for some years now even before I ventured into the field of sports broadcasting" "Money is demanded from teams/players before participating in any form" "Witness to some of these things". "Lack of transparency in player selection, poor governance systems in soccer and lack of talent identification structures" "Poor remuneration for scouts and coaches in Ghana"

Respondents expressed that 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana is very familiar with them and that it involves money taken from players/ teams to enable them participate in football competition. A respondent (Participant 5) stated she was a witness to 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana. Explicitly, themes of thoughts expressed by respondents are captured in Table 2.

Table 3. Research Question 2 Quotations

Research Question	Quotation Reference
RQ2: How will the perception of 'Pay-to-Play' affect football development in Ghana?	<p>"Pay-to-Play in soccer in Ghana must stop because we are not able fetch the talented ones"</p> <p>"It's a very bad habit and is destroying the Ghanaian football"</p> <p>"Is killing Ghana football"</p> <p>"It has the potential of halting the talented players who don't have the funds to pay and play. It doesn't present a level play grounds for talents to showcase their quality"</p> <p>"There are players who are supposed to be in the squad and are not called up and those who get called up sometimes pay money to some officials to get some playing time. It was very evident after the 2022 World Cup in Qatar when an expose showed that some players who were called up to the Black Stars for the World Cup had to pay monies to officials to get playing time"</p> <p>"Bad leadership and inadequate remuneration of people in sports and greed"</p> <p>"It cut across all the national of which the Black Stars is of no exception"</p> <p>"About 80% of the call up is pay to play"</p> <p>"Through the influence of politicians"</p> <p>"Local players who may not be able to afford the amount being charged, will end up not selected. Loss of talent in soccer, less diversity and team quality will be lost"</p> <p>"If this canker continues it won't give room for players who have talent to exhibit their God given talent on the green rectangle, it will dwindle our football and send it down the drain"</p> <p>"Because it will be a slot to the highest bidder and that means less quality players"</p>

Respondents shared that 'Pay-to-Play' in the Ghanaian football is due to bad leadership, inadequate remuneration for scouts and coaches, lack of transparency in player selection, poor governance systems in football, and lack of talent identification structures affecting football development in Ghana. Explicitly, thematic contents from respondents are indicated in Table 3. In spite of all these, majority of respondents expressed that 'Pay-to-Play' is centered at the Ghana Football Association, and particularly their interactions with some players revealed that they paid monies to be

call-up to the Black Star team for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. As a matter of fact, a respondent expressed that 80% of the call-up to the Black Star team is hinged on 'Pay-to-Play'.

In addition, respondents shared that 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana will affect call-up to the National Football Teams if this menace is not addressed immediately. Respondents are of the view that local based players in Ghana may not have the chance to exhibit their talents if they have to pay monies, and this will breed lack of diversity and team quality. Again, majority of respondents shared that 'Pay-to-Play' would not proffer a level playing ground for all and this will eventually fade talents for football in Ghana. Arguably, some of the thematic contents shared by respondents are indicated in Table 3.

Table 4. Research Question 3 Quotations

Research Question	Quotation Reference
RQ3: How will the perception of 'Pay-to-Play' affect football consumption in Ghana?	"People will stop following our game if it continues"
	"Reduces our desire to watch Ghanaian football"
	"Once people begin to question the integrity of the sports in any way, it affects its consumption. More so if players pay to play at the expense of the genuinely talented players it takes some quality away from the game"
	"The interest of the people will die with time, if fans realize the sports is not open, transparent and allow participation for all"
	"It will destroy football in Ghana"
	"Poor stadium attendance"
	"It's driving people's interest away"

More so, respondents expressed that 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana is negatively affecting consumption of football as low quality will results in low patronage, supporters are denied the opportunity to watch great talents and will not consume football in Ghana, and ultimately will lead to low stadium attendance and affects revenue and ticket sales. Respondents further shared that 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana is a canker and affects talent selection mainly because management decisions to select players are influenced by some people in authority, and this is gradually wiping away the interest of the Ghanaian populace for football. Clearly, some of the thematic thoughts expressed by respondents are indicated in Table 4.

Table 5. Research Question 4 Quotations

Research Question	Quotation Reference
RQ4: What will be the best practice to mitigate 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana?	"Develop proper academic systems, find a collaboration between school sports and mainstream sports. Invest in grass root football to give every talent equal opportunity. Pay scouts and coaches decently"

"Strict and stringent measures such as openness and transparency in call -ups. Criteria selection should be made known by the GFA"

"We should put in place structures which can help monitor any form of pay to play and secondly our officials should leave the right people to do their job rather than tiring their hands. Thirdly we should stop putting square pegs into round holes"

Lastly, respondents shared that it is necessary to curtail this menace by putting structures in place to monitor any form of 'Pay-to-Play' in football, players should be selected on merit and qualification, while remunerating coaches well. Again, the need to develop proper academic systems and a collaboration between mainstream sports and school sports to recruit talents, and investing in grass root football to offer equal opportunity was also revealed. Opinions and views expressed by respondents on a thematic analysis are indicated in Table 5.

DISCUSSION

Indeed, from the results and research question 1, 'Pay-to-Play' is perceived and interpreted as an exchange of money for selection to participate in football in Ghana. It is also clear without doubt from the findings of the study that 'Pay-to-Play' exist in Ghana football, and this is wiping away the interest of fans in football. Sports Journalists harbour many views, opinions and feelings on this subject of study due to their daily interactions with the people in the various communities and key stakeholders in sports. It is evident how their thoughts and feelings have been poured into depicting the existence of the exchange of money for player selection in football in Ghana. Such occurrences deprive the less privileged who may have great talent and skill for football and hinder their ability to showcase their prowess to the world. This could also mean that parents who may desire their wards to play football at the professional level and cannot pay money for their ward's selection may end up not fulfilling their dreams. This unfair and unequal selection or recruitment of players for football competition is on the rise and continues to grow in the football ecosystem in Ghana, and requires a dire solution to curtail it.

Furthermore, in reference to research question 2 relative to research question 1, the existence of 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana is negatively affecting football development as there is a lack of talent identification program, poor governance and regulation systems emanating from poor leadership at the Ghana Football Association. Football consumption in Ghana has been low, particularly in the Ghana Premier League, and this comes with low stadium attendance. This phenomenon of low patronage of football in Ghana sought to be addressed in research question 3. The study thus establishes that such a perception of 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana is gradually pulling away the youth's passion, love and interest in football consumption. Thus, it behoves the Ghana Football Association to address this concern as a matter of urgency and be transparent and open in the administration and management of football to bring back the love of the Ghanaian youth to football, as research question 4 sought to achieve. This is not surprising, as a respondent noted, "Pay-to-play is a very hazardous canker which is hurting our football in Ghana, and we will call on the

authorities to put the right measures in place to help clamp down on this phenomenon which is doing more harm than good".

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research identified the existence of 'Pay-to-Play' in football in Ghana as the exchange of money for players' selection into national football teams. This creates a bad image for football in Ghana, which has resulted in the loss of interest in football consumption among the youth, particularly in the Ghana Premier League, leading to less development in football in Ghana. Hence, the owners and managers of football should be up and doing in addressing this concern among the Ghanaian youth to ensure future embracement and consumption of football to generate revenue for the major sports in Ghana while building on the integrity and confidence of the sports. The GFA should engage sports journalists nationwide to aid in this resolve as they harbour many unaddressed concerns about football in Ghana.

Future studies should look at engaging more stakeholders from the majority of the regions in Ghana in the football ecosystem. This study was limited to engaging sports journalists from three out of 16 regions in Ghana. Again, a further engagement of the chapters of the supporters' union across the country may bring on board diversity of opinions and feelings to better under

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare that this manuscript has no conflict of interest with any party.

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