

EXTERNAL CHARACTERISTICS AND SYMBOLISM OF FOOTBALL SUPPORTER GROUPS AS ELEMENTS OF SECURITY RISK ASSESSMENT¹

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ABSTRACT

Football supporter groups constitute complex subcultural communities whose identity is shaped through symbols, rituals, and a shared system of internal values. From the perspectives of criminology and criminalistics, these elements are of particular significance as they facilitate an understanding of the mechanisms of group cohesion, hierarchical structures, and the potential propensity for deviant forms of behaviour. This paper focuses on the analysis of the external characteristics of football supporter subculture, with particular emphasis on the Bad Blue Boys supporter group from Zagreb as a representative example of an urban football supporter community in Southeast Europe. Special attention is devoted to the interpretation of tattoos, colours, slogans, and other symbols that function as visual codes of identity, status, and group affiliation. Drawing upon the relevant literature and police practice, the paper highlights the importance of enhancing professional competencies for engaging with diverse communities within the framework of policing. Understanding and interpreting the symbolism of football supporter groups is of fundamental importance, as it enables the identification of potential security risks, the differentiation between identity-based expressions and extremist manifestations, and the development of more effective preventive and reactive policing strategies. The paper concludes that, when properly understood and interpreted, visual symbolism may serve as a valuable analytical tool in criminalistic assessment, thereby contributing to the advancement of contemporary policing models in relation to sporting events and other public gatherings.

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SPOLJNA OBELEŽJA I SIMBOLIKA NAVIJAČKIH GRUPA KAO ELEMENTI BEZBEDNOSNE PROCENE

APSTRAKT

Navijačke grupe predstavljaju složene subkulturne zajednice čija se identifikacija zasniva na simbolima, ritualima i sistemu internih vrednosti. Sa stanovišta kriminologije i kriminalistike, ovi elementi imaju poseban značaj jer omogućavaju razumevanje mehanizama grupne kohezije, hijerarhije i potencijalne sklonosti ka devijantnim oblicima ponašanja. Rad se fokusira na analizu spoljašnjih obeležja navijačke subkulture, sa posebnim naglaskom na grupu Bad Blue Boys iz Zagreba, kao tipičnom primeru urbane navijačke zajednice u jugoistočnoj Evropi. Posebna pažnja posvećena je interpretaciji tetovaža, boja, slogana i drugih simbola koji funkcionišu kao vizuelni kodovi identiteta, statusa i pripadnosti. Na osnovu analize dostupne literature i policijske prakse, kroz tekst rada ukazujemo na važnost unapređenja profesionalnih veština za rad sa različitim zajednicama unutar policijskog rada. Razumevanje i tumačenje simbolike navijačkih grupa od suštinskog je značaja jer omogućava prepoznavanje potencijalnih rizika, diferencijaciju između identitetskih i ekstremističkih izraza, kao i izgradnju efikasnijih preventivnih i reaktivnih strategija. Zaključuje se da vizuelna simbolika, ukoliko se pravilno razume i interpretira, može predstavljati vredan analitički instrument u kriminalističkoj proceni, te doprineti razvoju savremenih modela policijske prakse u vezi sa sportskim i drugim javnim okupljanjima.

Ključne reči: subkulture, spoljašnja obeležja, upravljanje rizicima, kriminalistika, policijski rad, Bad Blue Boys, prevencija nasilja.

Introduction

The phenomenon of football supporter groups represents a complex social and security challenge encompassing elements of collective identity, subculture, and potential violent behavior. Although football support may be viewed as an expression of solidarity, belonging, and cultural identity, certain supporter groups exhibit behavioural patterns that extend beyond the boundaries of sporting rivalry and enter the sphere of delinquent or violent conduct (Spaaij, 2008, p. 373; Marsh et al., 2005, p. 41). Such phenomena require a deeper understanding not only of their sociological and psychological dimensions but also of their criminological and criminalistic implications.

Within the context of contemporary security challenges, the study of football supporter groups has become increasingly important owing to their impact on

public order and safety, as well as the distinctive organisational structures and symbolic systems they develop. External characteristics, such as clothing, tattoos, flags, chants, and rituals, serve to distinguish clearly between “us” and “them” while simultaneously symbolising territorial claims and group affiliation (Giulianotti, 2002, p. 45). From the perspective of police operational planning, understanding these signs and symbols facilitates not only the prevention of conflict but also the development of effective strategies for engaging with supporter groups in diverse operational settings, particularly during mass gatherings and sporting events.

From the perspective of sports event management, understanding the symbolism of football supporter groups extends well beyond the scope of police intervention. Event organisers, club administrations, and security services are increasingly required to anticipate potential risks, plan appropriate security measures, and ensure a safe environment for participants and spectators alike. In this regard, knowledge of the visual and behavioural patterns associated with football supporter groups constitutes an important component of risk management, crisis communication, and decision-making throughout the planning and organisation of sporting events.

A criminological and criminalistic approach to the study of football supporter subcultures enables the identification of behavioural patterns relevant to both preventive and operational policing. Symbols and rituals frequently perform functional roles within group dynamics by communicating hierarchy, status, membership, and readiness for collective action. Consequently, understanding the visual and behavioural codes displayed by members of football supporter groups contributes to the development of proactive policing models that integrate analytical and operational methods (Knežević, 2020, p. 112).

Particular attention in contemporary security analyses has been devoted to training programmes based on the Behavioural Detection Officer (BDO) concept, developed within the United Kingdom’s security framework (National Protective Security Authority (NPSA), 2023). These programmes adopt an integrated approach to observing and interpreting human behaviour by combining elements of non-verbal communication, situational psychology, and operational risk assessment. Their objective is not to label individuals but rather to facilitate the timely identification of behavioural patterns and symbolic indicators that may signal potential security risks. In this respect, BDO models constitute a valuable resource for policing agencies, as they enhance operational planning, resource allocation, and preventive action in circumstances where traditional policing methods may prove insufficient. The application of such approaches to the analysis of football supporter groups contributes to the development of proactive security practices founded upon an

understanding of subcultural codes and behavioural patterns, thereby significantly improving operational effectiveness and reducing the likelihood of violence escalation at sporting events and other public gatherings. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that effective leadership and conflict-resolution skills at the club level contribute to the development of a robust security culture and strengthen cooperation with the police (Ilić et al., 2024).

Although the phenomenon of football supporter groups has been extensively examined in the existing literature from sociological, criminological, and psychological perspectives, considerably less attention has been devoted to analysing their external characteristics and symbolism as elements of criminalistic and security risk assessment, while simultaneously linking these insights to the management of security at sporting events. In particular, insufficient research has explored the integration of visual and behavioural indicators into the planning of security measures by police authorities, sporting event organisers, and football clubs. It is precisely within this area that the present study seeks to make its principal scientific contribution.

Accordingly, the subject of this paper is an analysis of the external characteristics and behavioural indicators of football supporter groups through the prism of criminological and criminalistic approaches, with particular reference to the Bad Blue Boys supporter group from Zagreb as a case study. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate the significance of the external characteristics and symbolism of football supporter groups for criminalistic and security risk assessment, while also highlighting the potential application of these findings to risk management during sporting events. Particular attention is devoted to the practical applicability of the findings not only for the police and other security agencies but also for sporting event organisers, football clubs, and other stakeholders responsible for planning and implementing security measures.

Following these introductory considerations and the definition of the methodological framework, the paper examines the principal criminological and criminalistic approaches to the study of football supporter groups, together with their external characteristics and symbolic systems. It then presents a case study of the Bad Blue Boys supporter group, analysing the practical implications of the findings for the management of security at sporting events and for contemporary policing practice.

Methodological framework of the research

The study of the symbolism and behavioural patterns of football supporter groups, with particular emphasis on the Bad Blue Boys (hereinafter: BBB), requires the application of a combined methodological approach encompassing

qualitative content analysis, comparative analysis, and interpretative synthesis. The primary purpose of the methodological framework is to integrate theoretical insights into subculture and collective behaviour with practical policing experience and empirical observations derived from work with football supporter groups.

The research is based on the analysis of publicly available and open-source information which, following a critical assessment of its authenticity and relevance, was used as the basis for qualitative analysis. The analysed material included scholarly and professional literature, official publications and reports issued by competent authorities, publicly available photographs and video recordings from sporting events, media reports, content published on the official websites and social media profiles of football supporter groups, as well as other publicly accessible visual and textual sources depicting the external characteristics, symbolism, and behavioural patterns of the Bad Blue Boys supporter group.

The selection of research material was guided by the principle of critical source validation. Accordingly, only those sources whose authenticity could be verified through multiple independent sources, relevant academic literature, or official publications were included in the analysis. This approach was adopted to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysed data while avoiding reliance on unverified and potentially unreliable information characteristic of the digital environment.

The collected material was not used for the quantitative measurement of the frequency of particular phenomena but rather as the basis for a qualitative analysis of the meaning of symbols, their function in the construction of group identity, and an assessment of their criminalistic and security-related significance.

The following research methods were employed:

Content analysis was used for the systematic interpretation of symbols, slogans, tattoos, and other visual markers identified within the BBB subculture. The analysis also included comparisons with relevant international case studies, including research on Russian, Latin American, and Western European supporter groups, thereby facilitating the identification of both universal and context-specific elements of supporter symbolism (Shoham, 2015; Bullen, 2016).

Comparative analysis was employed to compare the phenomenon of football supporter identity with other European subcultures and to examine the

influence of broader socio-political contexts on the dynamics of violence and ritual practices.

Empirical analysis of policing practice was conducted through the secondary analysis of publicly available documents issued by the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, studies published by the Council of Europe⁴, and materials relating to the Behavioural Detection Officer (BDO) Training programme. Particular emphasis was placed on the application of behavioural detection models in risk assessment during sporting events and public gatherings.

Interpretative analysis facilitated an understanding of the symbolic functions of particular visual markers (e.g., the “ACAB” tattoo, the numerical code 1312, the Croatian chequy, and the lion’s head), as well as their significance within processes of identity formation and group dynamics. This method contributes to bridging cultural semantics and security risk assessment (Ferrell et al., 2015).

The primary objective of the research is to examine how the symbolism and behavioural patterns of football supporter groups may serve as sources of information for police risk assessment and operational planning. A secondary objective is to enhance the professional competencies of police officers in interpreting subcultural codes objectively, without prejudice or stereotyping, while recognising their potential security implications.

Like any study involving the analysis of information originating from restricted or non-public sources, this research is subject to certain methodological limitations. These primarily include the absence of direct empirical access to the internal communication channels of football supporter groups, the inability to verify certain information obtained from unverified sources, and limited access to confidential police records.

Nevertheless, by combining theoretical sources with publicly available information, the study achieves a sufficient level of reliability to support meaningful interpretation and practical evaluation of the phenomenon under examination.

Literature review and theoretical framework: Criminological Approaches to the Study of Football Supporter Groups

The criminological study of football supporter groups has evolved within the broader scholarly interest in collective violence, deviant behaviour, and

⁴ Council of Europe. (2021). Standing Committee on Spectator Violence – Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach. Strasbourg.

subcultural forms of social organisation. Since the 1970s, researchers such as Dunning, Murphy, and Williams (Dunning et al., 1988, p. 97) have argued that violence occurring on football terraces is not a manifestation of spontaneous disorder but rather a structured and ritualised form of behaviour rooted in collective identity. Within the framework of the so-called Leicester School, Dunning and his colleagues developed the concept of the civilising process, according to which football-related violence is interpreted as a manifestation of a masculine subculture that employs physical confrontation as a means of expressing status and group affiliation (Dunning et al., 1988, p. 61).

Subsequent scholarship has emphasised that the behaviour of football supporter groups is complex, context-dependent, and closely associated with collective identity and perceptions of procedural justice (Spaaij, 2008, p. 371). Police interventions that disregard the identity-related and symbolic dimensions of supporter groups may inadvertently contribute to the escalation of conflict, whereas preventive, legitimate, and proportionate policing has proved to be a more effective mechanism for maintaining public order and preventing violence (Stott et al., 2012, p. 389).

These findings confirm that an understanding of the external characteristics and communicative codes of football supporter groups is essential for the planning of policing strategies and the prevention of security incidents.

Subcultural Theories and Symbolic Communication

Subcultural theories are founded on the premise that deviant behaviour represents not merely a violation of social norms but also a form of cultural expression and resistance. Hall and Jefferson argue that subcultures develop distinctive symbolic styles through which young people articulate resistance to dominant social structures (Hall & Jefferson, 1993, p. 13). Likewise, Hebdige (1979, p. 103) emphasises that clothing, hairstyles, symbols, and rituals constitute the “language” of subcultures through which membership and distinction are expressed.

Within the context of football supporter groups, this theoretical framework explains why visual and aesthetic elements perform such a powerful communicative function. Graffiti, club colours, tattoos, and clothing brands are not merely decorative features but structural components of collective identity that provide supporter groups with recognisability, legitimacy, and continuity (Giulianotti, 2002, p. 29).

From the perspective of criminalistic practice, these elements also possess significant operational value. The analysis of symbols, logos, and colours used by different football supporter groups enables the police to distinguish between

rival factions, assess the level of security risk, and identify potential forms of cooperation or conflict among groups (Tsoukala, 2009, p. 57). Such analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach, as symbols cannot be interpreted in isolation but must be understood in relation to the historical, ideological, and social contexts in which they emerge (Frosdick & Marsh, 2010, p. 116).⁵

Theories of control and prevention

Theories of social control are founded on the premise that deviant behaviour emerges when an individual's bonds with society are weakened. Applied to football supporter groups, this theoretical perspective suggests that a lack of trust in public institutions, feelings of marginalisation, and accumulated frustration may contribute to processes of radicalisation and the emergence of violent behaviour (Hirschi, 2002, p. 34).

For this reason, researchers have consistently emphasised the importance of the relationship between the police and football supporters. Where policing measures are perceived as unfair or discriminatory, solidarity within supporter groups tends to increase, together with their willingness to engage in confrontation (Stott et al., 2012, p. 390). Conversely, legitimate and proportionate policing may strengthen mechanisms of self-regulation within supporter groups and reduce the likelihood of security incidents (Waddington, 2008, p. 211).

⁵ Within the framework of criminalistic and security analysis, the interpretation of the external characteristics of football supporter groups is of considerable practical significance. For example, within the BBB supporter group, symbols such as the numbers 1950 and 1986, displayed on clothing, caps, or banners, denote the years in which the football club and the supporter group were founded, respectively. In an operational context, however, these symbols may also indicate affiliation with the group's most organised core membership. The colour dark blue, which constitutes the primary element of the group's visual identity, symbolises loyalty to CFC Dinamo Zagreb while simultaneously functioning as a visual marker that facilitates the identification of group members during gatherings and collective movement. Symbols such as the Croatian chequy or the lion's head carry multiple meanings, ranging from expressions of national identity to internal representations of courage and honour. Similarly, tattoos bearing inscriptions such as "BBB," "ZG," "Blue Brotherhood," or "No one likes us, we don't care" may indicate an individual's degree of affiliation and loyalty to the group, whereas larger and more elaborate tattoos, such as depictions of lions, warriors, or Gothic-style inscriptions, often signify status within the group and a stronger level of identification with its values. Graffiti displaying slogans such as "Zagreb City Firm" or "North Side" are frequently used to mark territorial presence or control, while supporter chants incorporating themes of resistance and brotherhood function as verbal expressions of collective identity and group mobilisation.

From a criminalistic perspective, it is essential to distinguish between aesthetic forms of expression, which constitute a legitimate aspect of supporter culture, and indicators that may suggest potentially high-risk activity, such as calls for violent confrontation or iconography associated with extremist ideologies.

Security Management of Sporting Events

The management of security at sporting events constitutes an important component of contemporary sports management, as the organisation of sporting events extends beyond the technical preparation of competitions to include the planning, coordination, and control of security risks. In this context, sports clubs and event organisers play a pivotal role in creating the conditions necessary for the safe conduct of sporting events, the protection of spectators, athletes, and match officials, and the preservation of the club's reputation.

Contemporary approaches to sports event management are based on an integrated model of cooperation involving sports organisations, steward services, private security providers, the police, local authorities, and other relevant stakeholders. Within this framework, security risk assessment cannot be confined solely to police action but must form part of a broader risk management process in which sports clubs assume an active and preventive role. The identification of the visual and behavioural patterns associated with football supporter groups enables event organisers to assess risk levels in a timely manner, adapt entry control procedures, organise spectator movement, improve communication with supporters, and develop effective crisis communication strategies.

Of particular importance for sports management is the fact that certain forms of supporter symbolism may have not only security implications but also organisational, reputational, and financial consequences for sports clubs. The display of extremist, discriminatory, or offensive symbols and slogans may result in disciplinary proceedings, financial sanctions, the partial closure of stadiums, or matches being played behind closed doors. Consequently, an understanding of football supporter symbolism is important not only for police risk assessment but also for the strategic management of sports clubs and the protection of their institutional reputation and commercial standing.

Conflict Theory and Social Tensions

Conflict theories conceptualise deviance as a product of social inequality and struggles for power. From this perspective, football supporter groups may be understood as microsocial communities of resistance that express frustrations arising from political, economic, and identity-based tensions (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007, p. 139).

Under such circumstances, external characteristics become more than merely visual expressions; they function as communicative signals of power and territorial control. Graffiti, flags, and tattoos operate as "visual boundaries" between groups and territories, while rituals and chants serve to reinforce collective identity and sustain readiness for confrontation (Dunning et al., 2002,

p. 147). From the standpoint of criminalistic analysis, monitoring and interpreting these signs facilitates not only the identification of potential points of tension but also a broader understanding of the social context in which violence emerges.

External characteristics of football supporter subculture

External characteristics represent the most visible dimension of football supporter group identity and are essential for understanding their functioning and internal dynamics. They operate as a symbolic language of the group, enabling members to recognise one another, communicate, and affirm their affiliation (Giulianotti, 2002, p. 32). From a criminalistic perspective, this layer of identity has significant operational value, as it enables the identification of group structures, levels of radicalisation, internal hierarchies, and potential risks of violence (Stott & Pearson, 2007, p. 42). External characteristics do not represent merely aesthetic expressions; they also function as instruments of social and subcultural control. Within football supporter subcultures, control is exercised through unwritten rules concerning appearance, clothing, tattoos, and symbols that members are expected or permitted to display. In this way, internal discipline and group recognisability are maintained⁶. For criminalistic analysis, understanding this context enables the identification of points at which symbolic expressions may transition into the need for reactive measures, particularly in situations where cultural expressions (chants, colours, gestures) become organisational signals and instruments of mobilisation.

Clothing and Brands

Clothing represents one of the primary means through which football supporter groups express and communicate their identity. Within the BBB supporter group, the dark blue colour represents the central visual marker of affiliation with CFC Dinamo Zagreb. Commonly used items include hoodies, jackets, and T-shirts displaying inscriptions such as “BBB,” “Blue Army,” and “Zagreb City Firm,” as well as symbols such as the lion’s head and the Croatian chequy. Clothing also has a functional dimension, as it may contribute to uniformity and, in certain high-risk situations, facilitate the concealment of individual identities (Frosdick & Marsh, 2005, p. 118).

From the perspective of criminalistic practice, knowledge of brands and clothing patterns may assist in identifying different factions (for example, younger or older members), as well as detecting groups appearing at international gatherings or away fixtures (Fussey & Coaffee, 2012, p. 78). Furthermore, uniformity in clothing often indicates a higher level of organisation and preparedness.

⁶ This represents an element that, from a theoretical perspective, is consistent with Becker’s concept of “labelling” and the construction of group identity through visible markers.

Tattoos and Bodily Symbols

Tattoos occupy a particularly significant place within the visual culture of football supporter subcultures. They represent both personal and collective markers of identity, enabling individuals to permanently demonstrate their affiliation with a group, city, or ideology (Spaaij, 2008, p. 373). From a criminalistic perspective, tattoos may serve as indicators of the depth of identification and may reveal connections with particular factions. For example, tattoos located on visible parts of the body (such as the neck or forearms) are often associated with long-standing members and individuals holding a higher status within the group, whereas more discreet tattoos are frequently characteristic of younger members undergoing processes of integration (Stott et al., 2012, p. 389).

Furthermore, the presence of extremist symbols (e.g., runic signs or fascist-related references) may require security monitoring, as such symbols may indicate links with radical movements. However, in many cases, they function primarily as expressions of an ultras identity rather than as manifestations of a coherent political programme (Tsoukala, 2009, p. 58).

Beyond their criminalistic and security dimensions, the use of extremist, racist, or discriminatory symbols at sporting events also produces significant consequences for sports organisations. Disciplinary regulations of international sporting bodies provide for sanctions against clubs in cases involving the display of prohibited symbols, banners, or other forms of hate speech by supporters. Such consequences may include financial penalties, partial or complete stadium closures, matches played behind closed doors, and other disciplinary measures that directly affect sporting outcomes, financial operations, and the reputation of clubs. Therefore, the identification and timely assessment of potentially problematic symbols are important not only for police authorities but also for sports event organisers and club management, which have legal and organisational responsibilities to implement measures aimed at preventing such occurrences.

Graffiti, Flags, and Spatial Symbolism

Graffiti represent a visual form of territorial communication and a means of maintaining group identity within urban spaces (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007, p. 439). In Zagreb, inscriptions such as “BBB,” “North Side,” “Zagreb City Firm,” and “Blue Army” most frequently appear in neighbourhoods where this supporter group has a dominant presence. Graffiti depicting the Croatian chequy, lion’s head, or blue-and-white shield function as symbolic representations of the group and visual markers of territorial presence and control. Flags, banners, and displays are used during matches and gatherings as mobile symbols of collective identity. Their size and positioning often indicate status and prestige within the group hierarchy. For example, a centrally

positioned banner reading “Bad Blue Boys – North Side” represents the organisational core of the group, whereas smaller banners usually carry the names or symbols of neighbourhood-based subgroups.

For security structures, the analysis of visual symbols within urban spaces enables the mapping of subcultural territories and the monitoring of relations between different groups. The removal or covering of another group’s graffiti often precedes direct confrontation; therefore, such incidents may possess predictive value in security risk assessment (Waddington, 2008, p. 215).

Supporter Chants, Rituals, and Verbal Symbolism - Supporter chants and songs play a central role in constructing collective identity. They function as verbal codes in which rhythm, lyrics, and repetition create a sense of unity and emotional belonging (Dunning, 2002, p. 147). Within the BBB group, well-known chants such as “For Dinamo, for Zagreb!” and “Always loyal to the blue” emphasise local patriotism, while songs containing themes of resistance reflect the subcultural ideology of independence and defiance.

Within police and intelligence practice, monitoring verbal expressions and chanting patterns has analytical significance. The emergence of new songs or slogans may indicate changes in group sentiment, whether directed towards the club, club management, state authorities, or rival groups (Stott, 2007, p. 46). In addition, chanting methods (synchronised movements, coordination, and the use of pyrotechnics) may indicate the level of organisation and the group’s capacity for mobilisation. In crisis situations, these ritualised patterns may serve as triggers for collective action.

From the perspective of sports management, supporter songs, chants, and slogans do not represent merely elements of group mobilisation but also constitute a specific form of communication between supporters, club management, and other relevant stakeholders. The content of messages expressed during sporting events may indicate supporters’ level of trust in club leadership, dissatisfaction with sporting results, opposition to particular managerial decisions, or the emergence of internal crises that may affect the stability of the club. In this regard, systematic monitoring and analysis of supporter communication represent an important source of information for managing supporter relations and planning crisis communication strategies.

Criminological and criminalistic analysis of the Bad Blue Boys (BBB) supporter group

Symbolic Practices and Structural Elements of the BBB Group⁷

The Bad Blue Boys supporter group was established in 1986 and has since developed a distinctive iconography and behavioural patterns that represent stable markers of collective identity. Within the hierarchy of the terraces, group affiliation is expressed through: *colours and visual symbols* – dark blue, the Croatian chequy, the lion's head, and inscriptions such as “BBB” and “Blue Brotherhood”;⁸ *space* – the northern stand of Maksimir Stadium (known as the North Side), which functions as the ritual centre of the group;⁹ *rituals and chants* – coordinated cheering, the use of flares, chanting, and verbal expressions of collective identity;¹⁰ *tattoos and bodily markers* – personal expressions of affiliation and symbols of status.¹¹ These patterns enable the

⁷ The Bad Blue Boys group was used in this paper as a representative example of an urban football supporter subculture, rather than as an object of stigmatisation or criminalisation (author's note).

⁸ In practice, the dark blue colour represents not only the club identity but also a marker of territorial affiliation. The Croatian chequy, a traditional Croatian symbol, acquires layered meanings within the BBB supporter context: it functions as a symbol of patriotism as well as local pride. In graffiti, it is frequently combined with lion's head motifs, which symbolise strength and courage. Such iconography, when combined with inscriptions such as “North Side” or “ZG”, is interpreted in criminalistic practice as an indicator of the group's central core.

⁹ The “North Side” area holds the status of a sacred place within BBB culture. During high-risk matches, this is precisely the location where the highest concentration of the group's visual and verbal symbols appears. Observations indicate a pattern whereby supporters occupy the same section of the stand over many years, through which the space acquires a ritual character and functions as a symbolic territory.

¹⁰ BBB chants and songs, such as “For Dinamo, for Zagreb!” and “Always loyal to the blue”, serve to reproduce group solidarity and reinforce collective identity. Empirical observations conducted by the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia (MUP RH) indicate that changes in the rhythm and content of chants often precede coordinated actions or attempts at protest. The use of flares and synchronised hand movements signify group cohesion and, within security analysis, may represent indicators of the initiation of organised activity.

¹¹ The most common tattoos within the BBB subculture include inscriptions such as “BBB,” “ZG,” “Blue Brotherhood,” and “1986.” However, international symbols associated with supporter resistance are also present, including the inscription “ACAB” (All Cops Are Bastards) and the numerical form “1312.” In criminological analysis, such markers represent expressions of anti-authoritarian attitudes rather than necessarily indicating planned forms of violence; however, their presence may suggest ideological proximity to more radical ultras groups. Tattoos depicting lions, Roman numerals, or warrior motifs have also been observed, indicating the level of commitment and status of individuals within the group.

group to maintain internal cohesion and, through the repetition of collective activities, create a sense of continuity and belonging.

From a criminological perspective, BBB symbols function as mechanisms of group control and social communication: they do not merely express identity but also establish boundaries between “us” and “them” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 52). From an operational perspective, the analysis of these characteristics is significant for early risk identification, as certain changes in symbolism (e.g., the introduction of new slogans or motifs on banners) may indicate changes in the organisational patterns of the group.

Structure, Hierarchy, and Operational Communication

Within the BBB structure, several levels of organisation can be identified: the core group, active members, and sympathisers. The core consists of long-standing members who organise activities, prepare banners, and maintain contacts with related groups domestically and internationally. This hierarchy operates according to the principle of subcultural capital, whereby status is acquired through experience, loyalty, and demonstrated commitment to group activities (Thornton, 1995, p. 118).

Communication within the group frequently takes place through closed channels (social networks, encrypted messages, and informal arrangements), whereas public expressions (songs, graffiti, and clothing) serve primarily to maintain identity and deter rivals. From a criminalistic perspective, these forms of communication constitute a symbolic system without a formal hierarchy, yet characterised by a high degree of coordination and discipline.

A particularly significant phenomenon is the existence of an internal moral code. Within BBB, certain behaviours (e.g., failure to attend high-risk matches or violations of established rules of conduct on the terraces) are perceived as forms of betrayal. In this way, an informal criminological norm is established, functioning as a parallel system of discipline and sanctions (Frosdick & Marsh, 2005, p. 120).

The symbols and rituals of BBB are not merely cultural artefacts but also operational indicators. From a criminalistic perspective, they may be analysed through three dimensions: *communication function* – symbols serve the purpose of identification, but also facilitate the transmission of information among members (for example, a particular motif displayed on a flag or a slogan incorporated into a chant may indicate the gathering of a specific “core” group or convey a message directed towards rivals); *mobilisation function* – rituals and chants may operate as emotional triggers that motivate the group and create a sense of collective purpose (Stott, 2007, p. 42); and *concealment function* – the use of common brands and characteristic clothing has a dual role: on the one hand, it represents a subcultural expression; on the other hand, it

serves a functional purpose by making identification and individual differentiation within police records more difficult (Doidge, 2015, p. 76).

The concealment function of characteristic clothing and visual uniformity is also significant from the perspective of sports event security management. In conditions of mass gatherings, similar clothing patterns, face coverings, or identical visual markers may complicate the identification of individuals through video surveillance systems, as well as the implementation of access control systems and personalised ticketing procedures. Therefore, when planning security measures, sports event organisers must take into account the possibility of organised identity concealment in order to adequately adjust the deployment of technical resources, stewarding services, and other control mechanisms.

Practical implications for sports event security management and policing practice

The results of the research indicate that knowledge of the external characteristics and symbolism of supporter groups has practical applications in the work of various actors involved in the organisation and security provision of sporting events. In addition to the police, the acquired knowledge may be of importance to sports event organisers, sports clubs, stewarding services, private security companies, and other institutions involved in the planning, implementation, and assessment of security measures.

Contemporary policing in the context of public gatherings and high-risk sporting events requires an integrated and multidimensional approach. The foundation of modern security practice lies in the understanding that symbolism (colours, tattoos, inscriptions, and clothing) should not be analysed in isolation, but rather in combination with behavioural indicators (gestures, movements, formations, and the tone of chanting) and the broader context of the event. The objective of such an approach is not labelling or stigmatisation, but rather the understanding of subcultural codes and the timely identification of potential risks (Perović & Đukić, 2024, p. 105; Gavrilović & Gajić-Glamočlija, 2024, p. 41).

Within European public security practice, models have been developed that combine the interpretation of behaviour and symbolism in real time. One of the most recognised examples is the Behaviour Detection Officer (BDO) Training Program, implemented within Scotland Yard and the British Metropolitan Police Service. This programme trains police officers to recognise non-verbal and contextual behavioural indicators, facial expressions, gestures, body posture, and symbols, with the aim of identifying early signs of tension, stress, or planned aggression (Bullen, 2016, pp. 5–6).

A similar approach has been developed by the British organisation specialising in security training, infrastructure protection, and behavioural detection (British Protective Services Limited - BPS Ltd.), whose Behavioural Detection Officer programme enables participants to identify suspicious behaviour within crowds, particularly at sporting events, through the analysis of body language, micro-movements, and behavioural patterns (BPS Ltd., Behavioural Detection Officer Course). The British National Protective Security Authority (NPSA) defines “behavioural detection” as a systematic method of identifying individuals with potentially hostile intentions through the observation of their behaviour and activities (NPSA, 2023).

The application of these models in the context of supporter groups enables risk assessment without prejudice, through the integration of external symbols and behavioural indicators. For example, a combination of symbols (inscriptions such as “ACAB,” the numbers “1312,” and the blue chequy) and group behavioural patterns (synchronised movements, face coverings, and compact formations) may indicate potential group mobilisation. Such observations represent indicators of operational risk or supporter mobilisation, enabling the timely allocation of police resources and more rational planning of interventions.

Contemporary security practice demonstrates that the success of police operations largely depends on organisational capacities and the quality of communication with the public.

Security plans are based on a clear division of responsibilities and effective two-way communication with spectators and supporters (Gavrilović & Gajić-Glamočlija, 2024, p. 46; Perović & Đukić, 2024, p. 104). Furthermore, leadership, trust, and conflict-resolution capabilities represent the foundations for establishing a security culture and improving cooperation between clubs, supporters, and the police (Ilić, Ostojić, & Brezljev, 2024, pp. 10–15).

One of the most successful cooperation models is the Police Liaison Team (PLT) approach, developed in the United Kingdom. This model involves the establishment of specialised police units responsible for communication with supporters before, during, and after events, the interpretation of symbols and chanting patterns, and the early identification of indicators of tension. Empirical research conducted within the Policing Football in England project demonstrated that the implementation of the PLT approach reduces the number of incidents by more than 30% and significantly increases public confidence in the police (Stott, West, & Radburn, 2018, p. 12). This model confirms that dialogue, understanding, and recognition of symbolism possess greater preventive value than purely repressive measures.

Over the past decade, the symbolism of supporter subcultures has increasingly expanded into the digital environment through online profiles, posts, and visual content on social networks. This development has led police structures in Europe and worldwide to establish analytical databases and OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) tools for monitoring and interpreting digital symbols (Ralph et al., 2024). The integration of data obtained through open-source intelligence analysis with criminalistic assessment of supporter symbolism and behavioural patterns enables earlier identification of security risks, improved planning of preventive measures, and more efficient allocation of police and other resources engaged in securing sporting events (Stott et al., 2018; Hope et al., 2023). Digital literacy and the ability to interpret symbols within online environments have therefore become indispensable components of contemporary police training.

Sports event security management represents a process in which criminalistic knowledge achieves its full practical value only when integrated into the system of planning, organisation, and implementation of security measures by all relevant stakeholders.

Conclusion

Supporter subcultures, such as the Bad Blue Boys group, represent a complex social phenomenon that extends beyond the boundaries of sporting support and becomes a form of identity expression, collective solidarity, and, under certain circumstances, a potential security challenge. Their study requires simultaneous consideration of cultural, criminological, and security perspectives, as none of these approaches alone can fully explain all dimensions of this phenomenon.

The analysis of external characteristics – colours, symbols, tattoos, rituals, and spatial practices – demonstrates that these elements do not function merely as aesthetic expressions of affiliation, but rather as communication codes through which the group defines boundaries, values, and internal hierarchy. In this regard, symbolism becomes the language of supporter subculture while its understanding represents a key prerequisite for interpreting the behaviour, emotions and conflicts associated with supporter identity.

Contemporary policing and security systems face the challenge of interpreting these codes without creating additional tensions. The solution does not lie in the simple application of repressive measures, but in understanding the cultural context, that is, in developing the ability to recognise and interpret the cultural patterns that shape group behaviour. When police officers understand the symbols, history, and rituals of supporter groups, they are able to act in a more informed, precise, and professionally controlled manner. This creates the foundation for a model of policing that does not function solely as an instrument

of coercion, but also as an actor of understanding and prevention. However, the effectiveness of police action depends not only on the ability to observe and detect risks but also on the proper transmission and interpretation of such information within the hierarchical structure, from frontline officers to analytical units.

The obtained results indicate that the analysis of external characteristics and symbolism of supporter groups does not have significance solely in terms of criminalistic detection and evidentiary procedures but also represents an important instrument of sports event security management. Timely recognition of symbols, clothing patterns, banners, supporter messages, and other visual indicators enables more accurate risk assessment, more efficient planning of security measures, and improved coordination among all stakeholders involved in the organisation of sporting events. Ultimately, it must be emphasised that the symbolism of supporter groups, within the framework of criminalistic assessment, functions as an indicator of potential risk rather than as evidence of criminal responsibility.

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