A Videographic Analysis of “Weird Guys”:
What Do Relationships Mean to Football Fans?

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Abstract

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Being a loyal fan to a football team is a highly meaningful activity for football fans. However, besides the relationship to the team, the ties of fans among themselves are important. This article will therefore study the meaning of social relationships to football fans and investigate how these relationships affect fan behavior. A particular group of football fans, fan tourists, who travel to away games of their team, was chosen for the analysis, because it was assumed that they are the most loyal fans. Ethnographic field work included depth interviews with football fans and observations in stadiums, fan busses and fan trains which were videotaped. The results of the study suggest that the community of football fans shares a lot of similarities with brand communities and (sub)cultures of consumption. Like in other consumption worlds, football clubs provide a basis for identification for football fans who are able to escape from everyday role models. By sharing rituals the meanings of the community are built and shared. In addition, the study revealed that football stadiums, fan busses and fan trains provide linking places where social relationships can be built and maintained. These social relationships play an important role for the relationship to the team, because by being loyal to other fans, loyalty to the club is increasing at the same time. In order to ensure loyalty of their fans, football clubs must therefore care for opportunities that function as linking places where bonds between individuals can be established.

JEL-Classification: M31

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1 Introduction

In recent years the behavior of sport spectators has received increasing attention in the academic literature. Sport is a massive and still growing industry. In particular, football is perhaps one of the great phenomena in terms of attraction to people of every age, gender and nationality. In summer 2006 billions of people around the globe were attracted by the FIFA World Cup 2006™ in Germany. More than 3.3 million people in the stadiums joined by many other millions at Fan Fests and parties all over Germany celebrated one of the greatest sporting events of all times (Bühler, 2006). Probably most noteworthy, the official slogan of the FIFA World Cup 2006™, “a time to make friends”, really came true as football fans of each creed, color and race came together to celebrate a peaceful and cosmopolitan spectacle. However, it is not only the major events in football that attract millions of people. In fact, a loyal fan base and thousands of occasional spectators come together in football stadiums around the world every week to watch the games of their team.

The commercial, cultural and even political impact of football demonstrates the important role that sport plays in contemporary life. It is also widely accepted that “the most powerful organizing forces in modern life are the activities and associated personal relationships that people undertake to give their lives meaning” (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995: 43). Being a loyal fan to a particular football team is undoubtedly a highly meaningful activity for football fans (Tapp, 2004). However, meaning is not only derived from a long-lasting relationship with a team but also from other ties that affect the relationship to the team. In particular, besides the relationship to the team, the ties of fans among themselves should be taken into account when studying football fans’ consumption behavior. Therefore, the focus of this article will be the question: What do relationships mean to football fans and how do they affect their behaviors and loyalty to a team? In order to investigate this research question a particular group of football fans, who we call fan tourists, was studied in an ethnographic approach using data from filmed observations and depth interviews.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In order to provide a theoretical basis for the subsequent investigation, first, some of the key aspects of the literatures associated with cultural meanings, subcultures, and communities are reviewed. The second subsection gives a brief overview on the sport marketing and sport economics literature regarding fan loyalty and motives of sport fans. This is followed by some illumination on the group of football fans studied. Videography as a research method is introduced and the most important themes
drawn from interviews and observation are discussed. Finally, the concluding sections point out the implications of this study for the understanding of the relations between football fans and football clubs.

2 Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Cultures of Consumption

Various theoretical perspectives have been developed that emphasize the experiences, identities, social dynamics and cultural meanings associated with consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). In the 1980s some authors (Belk, 1986; 1987; Holbrook, 1987) still claimed that research of consumption and consumer behavior should be free of a managerial perspective. However, subsequent developments such as relationship marketing “have brought consumer meanings to the center of managerial concerns” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 870), because understanding consumer behavior is essential to developing successful marketing strategies. Many of the early consumer behavior studies have tried to illuminate how cognition, perceptions or traits of individuals influence their consumption behavior. Since the 1990s more and more studies have introduced the concept of community in order to get a better understanding of communal consumption (Cova, 1997). Most of these studies are based on Maffesoli’s (1996) thoughts on neotribalism, which he describes as the consumers’ response to the isolating conditions of modern societies. These conditions lead to the development of communities or tribes, which are networks of people “held together through shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs, senses of injustice and consumption practices” (Cova, 1997: 301). Consumer researchers have investigated this phenomenon of consumers pursuing common consumption interests and thereby sharing consciousness, rituals, traditions, and symbols (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Various labels have been used for these communities: subculture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), consumption world (Holt, 1995), consumption microculture (Thompson and Troester, 2002), and culture of consumption (Kozinets, 2001). One specific kind of these communities are brand communities. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001: 412) define them as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand”. The study of such brand communities has received increasing attention, because it could be shown that inter-customer relationships have important influence on customer loyalty to a brand (Holt, 1995; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Such inter-customer relationships are also a key concern of
tribal marketing, which emphasizes the contribution of products or services to establishing and/or reinforcing bonds between individuals. It has been found that consumer tribes are capable of collective action and their members are often even advocates of the product or service they support (Cova and Cova, 2002). With this theoretical focus established we now turn to an overview of the sport marketing and sport economics literature related to motives and loyalty of sport fans.

2.2 Fan Loyalty and Motives of Sport Fans

A good deal of previous research on sport spectator behavior has been conducted in the area of team sports. Most of the research from the field of sport economics is based upon the assumption that the primary reason for loyalty to a team is the so-called competitive balance (Schmidt and Berri, 2001; Vrooman, 1995). In this research tradition (Rottenberg, 1956) the assumption is that sport series where the capabilities of the teams are almost equally distributed, attract more spectators than unbalanced sport series (Knowles et al., 1992; Schmidt and Berri, 2001). That means, the more uncertain the outcome of a game, the more interesting it is for spectators and the more people go to the stadium or watch it on TV. But, other research shows that spectators actually prefer unequally distributed capabilities (Peel and Thomas, 1992). Hence, research from the field of sport economics provides inconsistent results concerning the influence of competitive balance on game attendance and fan loyalty. In addition, we believe that the perspective of the outcome of the game as the dominating motivational factor of spectators attending sport events is too narrow to describe fan behavior.

In the sport marketing literature, fan loyalty and identification with the team are seen as the main determinants of fan behavior. Within the field of fan loyalty, both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty have been investigated, e.g. game attendance (Laverie and Arnett, 2000), merchandise purchase (Derbaix et al., 2002), and self-perception of being a fan (Tapp, 2004). The popularity of fan loyalty in research is probably mainly due to the fact that loyalty of sport fans is in some ways dysfunctional. Sometimes, loyalty is increasing the worse the team is performing (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). Hence, in contrast to the assumptions in sport economic literature, satisfaction with the outcome of the game appears to have little link to loyalty at least for some of the sport fans.

In addition, loyalty of sport fans is fascinating because “loyalty is important to them in a way that it is not to consumers in most consumer sectors (how many shoppers will sing ‘loyal customers’ as they make their weekly trip to Asda?)” (Tapp, 2004: 204) Therefore, loyalty to
a team is a highly meaningful concept for sport fans. While Parker and Stuart (1997) point out that exclusive loyalty to a team is the norm and that loyalty is not affected by team success at all, other authors state that loyalty of sport fans cannot be taken for granted. They emphasize that different types of sport fans show different loyalty and different behavior depending on the team’s success (Tapp, 2004). Based on the work of Dick and Basu (1994), Tapp (2004) identified five football supporter categories based on their attitudinal and behavioral loyalty to a team. In his four-year study on British Premier League football fans he found a sizeable segment of fanatics, i.e. highly committed fans who actively and consciously expressed their loyalty to the club and in whose lives the football club plays an important role. However, on the other end of the spectrum he also found a sizeable number of supporters, who attended the games of the team only occasionally. The reactions of these two segments on the team’s success are certainly very different. Whereas fanatics will still be loyal to the team even when success is missing, casual supporters might cease to watch the games in such a situation. These different reactions are described by Cialdini et al. (1976) as BIRGing (Basking in Reflected Glory) and CORFing (Cutting off Reflected Failure) behavior. Several researchers have found that BIRGing and CORFing tendencies vary across different types of sport fans (Madrigal, 1995; Sloan, 1989). Wann and Branscombe (1990) found that individuals high in team identification were more likely to BIRG after a victory and less likely to CORF after defeat. Those fans are likely to support their team even when they drop down the league and satisfaction with the outcome of a game is not linked to their loyalty (Tapp, 2004).

In addition to the study of different supporter segments there is a substantial literature on hooliganism, which examines the socio-cultural backgrounds of hooligans and their impact on other fans as well as on society (Hahn et al., 1988; Pilz et al., 1987; Pilz et al., 2006).

Motives of sport spectators are another important area of research related to sport fan behavior (Trail et al., 2000; Wann, 1995). Motives of sport fans have an effect on fan behavior because they do not only directly influence their expectancies for event outcomes, but also indirectly through identification with the team (Trail et al., 2003). Hence, motives of sport fans also influence their loyalty to a team. Wann (1995) developed a sport fan motivation scale (SFMS) including eight motivational factors. Based upon this scale and an extensive literature review, Trail et al. (2000) proposed nine different motives that explain

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1 This stream of research will not be discussed here in more detail, because hooligans were explicitly excluded from the study.
why individuals attend sport events or why they are sport fans. These motives are general motives of sport fans. However, we assume that different motives influence the behavior of the various fan segments. The focus of our study was on the particular group of fan tourists, who we believe to have very special characteristics.

2.3 Fan Tourists

As fan tourism we define a specific form of both sport tourism (Standeven and DeKnop, 1999) and event tourism (Getz, 1997), where a passive interest in sport is the main reason for traveling. In other words, a fan tourist is a fan who travels to watch an away game of a team. In our study a number of fans told us that they travel to each out-of-town game of their team, which means every second weekend during an eight-months-season. As this is very time-consuming and also very costly, you might say that these people are “weird guys”. Studying this very special group of football fans led us to the assumption that general theories on sport fan behavior are probably not applicable. Not only do we look at a particular segment of sport fans, but also have many of the previous studies been undertaken in North America in basketball or baseball. The type of sport under consideration might influence the results. Football does not play a big role in North America. For these reasons we believe that not all of the earlier findings might be relevant for our research, but additional motives and behaviors of the fans might play a role.

Furthermore, we believe that fans showing such a high level of behavioral loyalty as well as a high degree of identification with a team, like the fan tourists in our study, have a lot in common with members of (sub)cultures of consumption (Kozinets, 2001; Schouten and McAAlexander, 1995) or brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). We therefore believe that the social relationships of these fans are meaningful for them and shape their behavior, which leads us to our overall research question for this study: What do relationships mean to football fans and how do they affect their behaviors and loyalty to a team? To answer this rather complex research question, we divided it into three separate questions for the subsequent analysis:

(1) How can loyalty of football fans be explained?

(2) How can the behavior of some football fans to follow their team to away games be explained?

(3) What is the influence of their social relationships on their behavior?
3 Methodology

In our study we collaborated with three clubs of the first, second and third German football league. We conducted our ethnographic field work at home games and away games of the teams. In addition, data were collected in fan busses or fan trains, which were used by the fans to travel to away games. The study consists of two major elements: (1) face-to-face depth interviews conducted directly before or after home and away games, mainly in front of the stadiums or in fan busses and fan trains, and (2) observations in stadiums, fan busses and trains, and in front of stadiums. Observed events and depth interviews were recorded with a digital video camcorder. This method, which is also referred to as videography, is “a form of visual anthropology encompassing the collection, analysis, and presentation of visual data” (Kozinets and Belk, 2006: 318-319). Video-based data collection and analysis was chosen for several reasons. Most important, it enabled us to “capture the subtle temporal, social, and spatial dimensions” (Kozinets and Belk, 2006: 320) of the football fans’ behavior. In particular, it provides for the analysis of emotional expressions and body language (Belk and Kozinets, 2005). This was important, because football fans’ behavior and body language, e.g. singing battle chants, is special for this particular group and an expression of their loyalty. Further, peoples’ behavioral interactions, for example with other fans, are expressions of their relationships to other people.

Field work took place from February till May 2005. Within this period 86 depth interviews with football fans were conducted and about 2:45 hours of observations were videotaped. The interviews were of varying duration: videotaped interviews ranged from 5 to 40 minutes. Male informants constituted nearly 90% of the sample and participants were aged between 15 and 65. Since not only fans of the collaborating clubs were interviewed, but also some of the opponent teams, altogether fans of eight different German football clubs were included in the study. Videotaped observations and interviews were coded and analyzed using content analytic techniques (Krippendorff, 2004). Two researchers participated in the interpretive process. Each researcher first analyzed the responses from the interviews on his/her own. Then both researchers compared and discussed the analyses in an iterative process until the themes presented in the following section were derived. For publication purposes parts of the interviews were translated into English. We now turn to the themes drawn from interviews and observations.
4 Findings

As suggested by previous research on sport fan behavior, absolute identification with the team is most important to many fans and one of the major driving forces for their behavior. But why does identification with the club mean so much to the fans? One of our informants answered as follows:

\[ M68: \text{“We are simply Nuremberg fans, and a Nuremberg fan is a Nuremberg fan, once you have been a Nuremberg fan you are always a Nuremberg fan”}. \]

Another fan told us:

\[ M41: \text{“Actually, every game is positive, whether you win or lose, you are just committed to the club – and that is what is most important to me.”} \]

For some fans identification with the club also comes with local patriotism:

\[ M20: \text{“I am a fan of Darmstadt by conviction. Darmstadt fans are their own people anyway – either you are a fan or you’re not. And if you are a fan you are a fan with body and soul. And as a person with strong local bonds [being a fan of] this sports club comes with the territory.”} \]

In addition to these quotes from participants videography showed that identification with a team is to a great extent emotionally driven. Delivering information about the emotional state of the informants, which can, for example, be drawn from their body language, pitch of the voice, and intonation is one of the powerful advantages of this method.

Brand communities and (sub)cultures of consumption are typical sources of identities for their members (Kozinets, 2001; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). This obvious analogy can serve as a first indicator, that the community of highly committed football fans can be analysed using theories from brand communities and (sub)cultures of consumption.

4.1 Social Relationships

In the interviews we found that establishing and maintaining social relationships to other fans seem to be essential parts of being a loyal fan of a football club. Therefore, it is not surprising, that many fans have been brought to a football stadium by relatives or acquaintances for the first time:
It starts with your friends. I am part of a circle of friends. These friends go to the 98ers. So, I am doing what my friends are doing. This is the first step.”

Being a part of a larger group is also an important motivation:

“It makes you getting closer to the others. At home, in front of a TV, you sit alone, or together with one, two, or sometimes ten other people. But, in the stadium, there are 2,000, 3,000, or 4,000 other fans at an away game, at a home game even 20,000 or 30,000 - that unites with the other fans.”

For many fans it is also important to use the time they spend in the stadium or in a fan bus or fan train to maintain their existing social relationships, to get together with their friends:

“It means, many of your social contacts are related to it. These are people you can’t meet every day because of your job, but, at the weekends you have time. You meet there. It is the environment where you can meet your friends. And that is very important.”

“That is the reason why we go there: because we always meet our whole circle of friends there. Besides the mere game, being together with your friends is the main reason to go there.”

Particularly at trips to away games, fans appreciate that they meet many friends and acquaintances every time:

“The special thing about away games is, you meet more people you know than at home games. At away games there are always the same people. I really meet more people at away games, no matter where we go, than at home games.”

Being together with the other fans can also be a family substitute:

“Hansa Rostock – and then you are there, and you travel to away games and that is like a family.”

Of course, fans also like celebrating parties in the stadiums, the busses, or trains:

“We have fun together, we party together.”
In our study a number of observations of these celebrations have been made and videotaped. Again, the videos expressed the emotions and vibes involved in the parties and proved that the fan tourists behavior is according to that of members of (sub)cultures of consumption. One impression of the fans celebrating on the train is shown in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: CELEBRATION IN THE FAN TRAIN

On the other hand, besides meeting friends and acquaintances, there is also the opportunity to meet new people at football games, particularly at away games. So, both establishing new social relationships and keeping up with existing ones is valued by the fans:

*M32:* “You meet a lot of football friends you would not have met in front of the stadium. It is a good way to mingle with people. And I like that time and time again.”

*F06:* “What really fascinates me und what I did not know before is that [I get the chance] to mingle with people I usually never would have met.”

Fans who go to many away games of their team often mention another interesting group of people they build relationships with: they even build friendships with fans of other teams and games against these teams belong to the highlights of the season.
Hence, football seems to provide the “linking value” that is proposed by the advocates of tribal marketing (Cova, 1997). Football games, and even more common travels to away games, are a platform where people can meet and social relationships can be developed and maintained. By remaining loyal to the other fans, consequently loyalty to the club is built.

Reducing social isolation and building personal relationships to others is a theme which has also been found in other studies of (sub)cultures of consumption which again supports the assumption that highly loyal football fans can be characterized as a (sub)culture of consumption (Kozinets, 2002).

4.2 Distance from Occasional Spectators

Fan tourists also see themselves as a special group within the broader community of football fans and spectators. They characterize themselves as the “hard core” of fans and appreciate to be “special”:

M43: “Yes, because the hard core travels along. And that the hard core is present. That is the bottom line because at home, people like to show up with their family simply because they want to see a football game; whoever comes along here – to Nuremberg – of course comes here because he is a die-hard Rostock fan.”

F03: “Only the hard core takes part of it, and not only those people are along, who merely go to one good game per season, but instead those people, who are interested in it and go along often.”

For some fans, this relatively small community of “hard core” fans, who always travel to away games, and the common interest they have, supporting the club, is the centre of their lives:

M24: “If the hard core, what I really can’t and don’t want to imagine, would not stick together any longer, I probably would not watch every game. It is very important, that if you go to football games like us you need your group, your environment.”

Fan tourists who regularly travel to away games not only perceive themselves as “hard core” fans and like to be special they are even proud of being “extreme”. A 65-year-old male informant has already traveled many hundred thousands of kilometers to see games of his team.
M32: “Well, football-traveling record, I am proud of it, you know, I already traveled many hundred thousands of kilometers. This week, I wrote up a record of the distances and came up with 760,000 kilometers – counting all games – all compulsory games.”

In addition, traveling to away games is prestigious and can even lead to achieving a higher status within the fan community:

M36: “Of course, a fan who always travels everywhere and goes to his limit for the club claims a certain, higher rank for himself.”

Interviewer: “Farther distances are more interesting?”

M38: “Of course; actually, they are more interesting – the less people that come along from Stuttgart, the more interesting it is…because not everyone went along and because we can be proud of it or because we travelled quite far.”

Distancing from others is a theme which has also been found essential for brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) and other (sub)cultures of consumption (Kozinets, 2002). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001: 418) even see consciousness of kind as “the most important element of community”. They found similar comments of brand community members who referred to themselves as being “different” or “special” in comparison to other brand users.

4.3 Rituals

Rituals play an important role for football fans. Most obvious, battle chants and merchandising items are an integral part of football fan culture. More and more, football fans even train whole choreographies to present in the stadium:

M36: “At the one hand, it is a gift of the fans, that means from us to the other fans and of course, primarily to the team. And in the end, it is a fantastic feeling if you get it right to make such a big choreography work.”

Battle chants are organized in the stadium, very often by one person who acts as a conductor and sometimes even like a drill sergeant. Our videos very powerfully show the emotions involved in the battle chants and choreographies, because noises, people movements, and body language are depicted.
One of these rituals, showing fans in the stadium supporting their team directed by one fan standing in front of the others is shown in figure 2.

FIGURE 2: RITUALS: ORGANIZED BATTLE CHANTS IN THE STADIUM

Rituals are typically centered around the shared experience with the team, i.e. the games of the team:

*M45:* “The team just feels that in a certain moment – whether someone is there or not. Now when three hundred fans are somewhere or a thousand fans are in a stadium, and you root a little – I think that the team does notice that.”

*M35:* “That is definitely what I think – that it definitely – that it helps the club when people are along who root for them, particularly in the out-of-town stadium.”

But, besides battle chants and other rituals associated with the support of the team, there is the always same course of activities undertaken before, during and after a game that unites the fans:

*M22:* “For home games, you leave forty-five minutes ahead of time and then arrive and drink two or three beers and are pleased and watch the game.”
M24: “In a home game you meet three hours ahead of time, get everything set up, carry the things into the stand and so forth.”

Rituals are also an analogy with brand communities and (sub)cultures of consumption. Rituals serve as a means to maintain the culture of the community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Other members of the community can be identified because of the rituals they carry out, they support cohesion between the fans of one team, they support the expression of feelings, and they have symbolic meanings to the fans (Derbaix et al., 2002; Kozinets, 2001).

4.4 Escape

Being a football fan and even more traveling to away games of the team, for some fans functions as a means to break out from roles they play in everyday life:

M46: “It is possible to put yourself into a completely different role, I mean, by wearing these outfits, no one would believe that I am going back to work for the Deutsche Bank tomorrow again.”

Sometimes it is not only an escape from everyday role models, but also from other difficulties in life, for example unemployment and frustration:

M12: “Even if this club – and that’s what I believe – even if this club should be relegated to the Amateur League, I would go there time and time again. Because I am – I have to put it like this – like four million others, I am out of work. I’m at home all day long – during the whole week. You go to the Darmstadt 98 games because that is the only thing you are left with, yes – you are practically living it out.”

This quotation from a 38 year old unemployed fan already gives an impression of his frustration with his personal situation. However, the videotape of this interview carries his emotions and feelings in a much more explicit way.

Another informant even expresses that in his role as football fan he is able to compensate a lack of self-confidence:

M46: “Now I’m 5’2”, I usually get picked on, people step to the side, you let your beard grow for five weeks, you walk through the streets, you are perceived
differently, you approach people differently…and it’s amazing, you sit in the urban railway and can be a bit of a bully, without being one.”

A confession like this could only be articulated in a setting where the informant was feeling comfortable and trusted in the interviewer. In this particular situation the informant was even a little bit excited because it was right before the game. The relaxed atmosphere, which is very obvious on the videotape, because he is also joking around with a friend, enabled him to talk freely about his feelings, what he would probably not have done in a laboratory setting.

Figure 3 shows fans at an away game of their team arriving at the train station. Although arriving at opponents’ territory, they feel powerful as can be noticed by studying their body language.

FIGURE 3: ESCAPE: FANS IN FAN OUTFITS ARRIVING AT THE TRAIN STATION

Living out other roles has also been found to be an important element of (sub)cultures of consumption. For example, “Burning Man offers its participants a social arena where they are encouraged to experimentally express and re-create their identities…” (Kozinets, 2002: 30). Also, for Star Trek fans, the whole Star Trek world serves as a utopian refuge (Kozinets, 2001: 71).
5 Discussion

This ethnography study analyzes some of the articulations and behaviors of a specific group of football fans, who we label fan tourists. Evident throughout these articulations are a number of analogies with (sub)cultures of consumption and brand communities, which have been studied extensively in marketing and consumer research (Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Like (sub)cultures of consumption or brand communities which are formed around one particular object, e.g. Star Trek (Kozinets, 2001) or a product or service brand, e.g. Harley Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), fan tourists can be described as a community formed around a particular sports club brand. Communities typically provide a basis for identification for their members. In our study on fan tourists, identification with the team was one of the major themes articulated by participants. Football brings together people, who very often share no other connection than an interest in the club and in football in general, as they come from very different social backgrounds. Football gives the opportunity for context-rich interaction and for sharing meaningful consumption experiences, which strengthens interpersonal ties. Football stadiums and even more so, fan buses and fan trains, are “linking places” (Cova, 1997: 313) that support the construction and maintenance of social relationships. These relationships are highly valued by the fans, sometimes they are even the main reason to watch a game. Hence, the social ties have a favorable impact on the loyalty to the team. This phenomenon has also been observed in brand communities. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) found evidence in their work on brand communities that relationships between customers account considerably for customer loyalty. Whereas identification with the team and valuing the opportunity to establish and maintain social relationships are to some degree true for all football fans, one theme was mainly articulated by fan tourists: they characterized themselves as being “special”, because they go to the extremes to support their team. Hereby, they differentiate between “true” members of the community and those who are not. This “consciousness of kind”, where members “note a critical demarcation between users of their brand and users of other brands” has also been found a characteristic of brand communities. Sharing rituals is also an element that can be found in (sub)cultures of consumption. Whether it is “burning the man” (Kozinets, 2001: 21) at the Burning Man Festival, greeting the drivers of the same car brand by beeping or flashing the lights (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), or singing battle chants in a football stadium; all these rituals represent social processes by which the meanings of the community are built and shared. Within the community of football fans, people are able to escape from everyday life and their usual role...
models. (Sub)cultures of consumption and brand communities are likewise used for escapes from those behaviors that are permissible in everyday society to more radical types of self-expression.

This ethnography suggests that the community of football fans and in particular the community of fan tourists shares a lot of similarities with brand communities and (sub)cultures of consumption. These concepts are extensively discussed in marketing and consumer research literature and their implications might be transferred to the management of sports clubs.

The notion that the relationship of the fans to the club alone serves as a repository for meaning overlooks other relationships that supply significant value to fans (McAlexander et al., 2002). In particular, value is derived from social relationships to other fans. These relationships play an important role for the loyalty to the club, because by being loyal to other fans, loyalty to the club is increasing at the same time. Hence, in contrast to sport economic literature that sees constructs like competitive balance or the uncertainty of the outcome of the game, i.e. the quality of the games, as major forces driving fan attendance at sport games, “the link is more important than the thing” (Cova, 1997: 314). In order to ensure loyalty of their fans, football clubs must therefore care for opportunities that function as linking places where bonds between individuals can be established and/or reinforced.

6 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyze what relationships mean to soccer fans and how they affect their behaviors and loyalty to a team. An ethnographic approach using videography was applied. For the investigation of this particular research question videography proved to have some very powerful advantages. Most noteworthy, it enabled us to gather information about the emotions of the informants by analyzing their body language, pitch of the voice, or intonation.

The conclusion of this work is that sport fan loyalty to a team is much more complex than is suggested by only looking at the relationship between a fan and the team. Studies on game attendance from the field of sport economics, which are focused on the uncertainty of the outcome of the game as main driver for customer loyalty, deliver inconsistent results. But, in addition, they overlook other factors that have probably a more substantial influence on fan loyalty. The fan is part of a whole network of relationships that all provide meaning to him or
her and also to his or her relationship to the team. Consequently, a holistic approach is necessary when looking at fan loyalty.

Sports clubs managers must find ways to contribute to the process of community building by creating the context in which fan interaction occurs. The opportunity to establish and maintain relationships to other fans accounts considerably to fan loyalty. The benefits from high levels of fan loyalty are many and diverse. Loyal fans are less likely to cease watching the games in a period of lacking performance, they are motivated to function as advocates, thereby supporting the extension of the fan base, they constitute a strong market for merchandising products and they are emotionally involved with the team, which leads to a desire to contribute to the team’s success. In order to be able to provide linking places, a deeper understanding of the fans is necessary.

The findings of this study are subject to limitations that must be noted. Our research has inherent methodological limitations. Some of the drawbacks are associated with the use of videography. Participants’ reactions on the video camera were diverse. Whereas some people were almost magically attracted by the sight of the camera, others might have felt uncomfortable to be filmed. So, the sample mainly comprises of people who had no negative emotions about being filmed. Recordings in fan busses and trains were constrained by the limited space and shakes of the means of transportation, so that in some cases not all advantages of the video could be used.

Our research touches on the issue that football clubs should provide linking places for the establishment of social ties between fans. For the future, it would be valuable to examine, for example, how such opportunities can be created.
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