

# The Role of Commercialisation of the European Football Business for the Emotional Bond between Fans and Clubs

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## Abstract

*Football in Europe tends to be less about the game and more about the business. At the same time criticism among fan communities against an ever-increasing commercialisation grows. On the basis of narrative interviews, we build a typology of consumer-oriented, experience-oriented and football-addicted fans. Our results show that the growing commercialisation and global expansion of football are having negative effects on the emotional relationship between fans and clubs. Fans feel that global marketing has pushed them out of the national focus of the clubs and they also fear a loss of fan culture and traditions.*

*Apart from all financial expenses for fans through increased ticket prices, merchandise items etc., fans are primarily focused on the attention of the clubs and the preservation of the fan cultures and traditions. We discuss recommendations for clubs and fan associations to engage in a joint dialogue.*

**Keywords:** Commercialisation, Conversion Model, Fan Culture, Fan Loyalty, Football Business.

## Introduction

This study's goal is to analyse the connection and the effects between decreasing fan loyalty and the increasing commercialisation in professional football.

The analysis of this alleged problem is based on the increasing criticism of the commercialisation of football by fans of all European professional leagues which e.g. manifest itself in rising player salaries, rising costs for ticket prices, a massive influence of television broadcasters and the influence of sponsors.<sup>39</sup>

In recent decades, several researchers have addressed the issue of brand loyalty and developed a conversion model based on research results that measure the strength of the relationship between people. This model is particularly designed to help the brands successfully deal with their customers.<sup>30</sup> In order to examine the strength of the bond between a fan and a club, the following question needs to be raised: Can a club be seen as a brand?

In addition, how does the emotional bond between fan and club and people and brand differ?

Since a fan is usually "born" into a club by relatives who are already followers or sympathizers of one club, or the person is born in the respective region of a football club, the clubs usually have no large losses of members due to them sympathizing with another club or becoming a fan of that club.<sup>63</sup> Here is a clear difference between the world of a fan and a club and the world of competing brands.<sup>36</sup>

The general loss of interest in football or the game represents a potential risk for the clubs, as the fans and the fan culture are of immense importance for the sports clubs, especially in terms of financial success.<sup>50</sup>

Nowadays, football clubs are forced to follow the course of commercialisation in professional football both from a financial and a competitive perspective.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, a balance must be struck between commercialisation and the spirit of football in order to prevent a decline in fan loyalty and fan culture, since such a decline would have a significant impact on the financial success of a club. It is therefore of great importance for professional football clubs, also due to the lack of scientific research, to investigate the possible effects of commercialisation on fan loyalty and the general interest in football.

Possible solutions or a modified conversion model could form a creative leeway between the preservation of the fans' interest in football and the increasing commercialisation of the sports and thus protects the emotional bond that exists between the club and its fans.

## Review of Literature

In order to analyse the possible effects of commercialisation on fan loyalty, it is not sufficient to only take a closer look at the current situation. Instead, it is vital to analyse the evolution of football, which is based on a variety of factors and perspectives. This in-depth analysis is necessary to link a possible effect of commercialisation on fan loyalty, to identify developments in the evolution of football and commercialisation and to define possible causes within this development.

The aspects, factors and topics that are examined more closely in this work have been found to be extremely important in analysing the relationship between fan loyalty and commercialisation. They are based on a wide variety of study results published in books, journals and magazine articles.<sup>3,38,48</sup>

On this basis, the work is divided into the aspects of fan evolution and its significance for society in the past and today, fan culture and the different fan groups as well as the commercialisation of football with a focus on the transformation of the football game to mass media entertainment.

**The Football Environment:** To analyse the emotions of football fans and to recognise possible effects of commercialisation on fan loyalty, it is important to define and understand the different types and dimensions of fans in the first step. In doing this, it is important to look at how these groups developed over the years - also with regard to the development of the commercialisation in the last decades and what football meant to our society in the past and today.

**The History of Football:** In the beginning, football was considered a social entertainment. It was seen as an activity, especially after the war in Europe, which the contemporary society could deal and identify with.<sup>46</sup> In the following decades, the so-called fan cultures developed out of local patriotism, they formed the game and the sport.<sup>26</sup>

Football has moved far away from its origins and has developed into a business. Football is no longer a sport of a certain class, but now appeals to all social classes. Today, football is staged as an "event" of a modern leisure culture. As a result, football is increasingly alienating itself from its base, the football-addicted fans. Football fan culture, understood as a living (sub-) culture, is increasingly disappearing from the stadiums. What remains is an

anonymous mass that is no longer rooted in sports and clubs.<sup>16</sup>

**Fan Dimensions and Motives:** Today football is a mass sport because its rules are simple and understandable for everyone. Possible motives for visiting football matches are the entertainment factor (entertainment motive), increasing well-being (recreation motive), meeting like-minded people (affiliation motive), identifying with the players and the team (identification motive), exciting experiences and adventures in the stadium (sensation-seeking motive), sharing the club's success (achievement-seeking motive) and the opportunity to reduce built-up aggression (motive for aggression).<sup>24</sup>

In literature, there is no universal opinion or model for the definition or characterisation of fans. Researchers divide fans into numerous small and detailed groups. Others concentrate on three to four groups in which the different motivations are combined.

Smith et al<sup>52</sup> and Westerbeek et al<sup>62</sup> (table 1) for example define five different classification of fans. This table shows the different types of motivation of fans or in this case so called spectators for attending a football game at the stadium or associate themselves with the club. In addition, the table defines the behaviour of the fans regarding their loyalty to the game and the club in successful and unsuccessful times respectively.

Samra and Wos have grouped the most diverse types of fans into three categories based on scientific research (table 2).

**Table 1**  
**Spectator categories and motivations<sup>62</sup>**

Type of Spectator	Motivation	Behaviour
<b>Aficionado</b>	Seeks quality performance	Loyal to 'game' rather than team, although may usually have a 'preferred' team; attends on regular basis – puts emphasis on aesthetic or skill dimension.
<b>Theatregoer</b> [casual and committed]	Seeks entertainment, close contest	Only moderate loyalty to team; frequent losses create disinterest only in team; but may attend other games.
<b>Passionate partisan</b>	Wants team to win	Loyal to team; in short term loyalty undiminished by frequent losses; strongly identifies with, and responds to teams success and failure.
<b>Champ follower</b>	Wants team to win	Short term loyalty; loyalty a function of team success; expects individual or team to dominate otherwise supports another team or spends time elsewhere.
<b>Reclusive partisan</b>	Wants team to win	Loyalty not always translated into attendance; strong identification but provides latent support only

**Table 2**  
**Fan types<sup>50</sup>**

Fan Category	Literature	Motivation	Classification
Temporary Fan	Champ follower (Stewart/ Smith1997) Theatre-goer (Stewart/ Smith 1997) Carefree/Casual (Tapp/ Clowes 2000) Aficionados (Stewart/ Smith1997) Corporate fan (Nash 2000), Modern/Fan (Boyle/ Haynes 2000) Social/fan (Sutton et al 1997) Less Loyal (Bristow/Sebastian 2001)	Emotional Stimulation (M) Group Affiliation (L) Group Disassociation (L) Economic (H) Self Identity (L) Information acquisition(M)	Brand Commitment (L) Personal Commitment (M) Enduring involvement (L) Situational/involvement (H) (Hirt et al 1992) Advocacy (L) (Oliver 1999, Tapp 2004) Usage (L) (DeSchrive/Jensen 2002, Funk et al 2002,Hansen/Gauthier 1989)
Devoted Fan	Committed casual (Hunt et al 1999) Focused Fan (Sutton et al 1997) Passionate Fan (Stewart/Smith 1997) Traditional Fan (Boyles/Haynes 2000)	Emotional Stimulation (M) Group Affiliation (H) Group Disassociation (M) Economic (H) Self Identity (M) Information acquisition(M)	Brand Commitment (M) Personal Commitment (M) Enduring involvement (M) Situational/involvement (H) Advocacy (M) Usage (M)
Fanatical Fan	Die Hard (Sebastian 2001) Fanatical Fan (Hunt et al 1999) Vested Fan (Sutton et al 1997) Passionate Fan (Stewart/Smith 1997) Traditional Fan (Boyles/Haynes 2000)	Emotional Stimulation (H) Group Affiliation (H) Group Disassociation (H) Economic (L) Self Identity (H) Information acquisition(M)	Brand Commitment (H) (Doss1999,Muniz/O'Guinn2001, Personal Commitment (H) (Funk1998,Muniz/O'Guinn 2001) Enduring involvement (H) (Redden/Steiner2000,McAlexander et al 2002) Situational/involvement (H) Advocacy (H) (Hugenberg 2002)

This table clearly shows that there are countless different types, dimensions and motives of fans found in literature. When comparing the different results in literature, it becomes apparent that it is necessary to create a basis and summarise the different fan motives in order to provide a clear allocation of the interviewed fans.

Subsequently, the main motivations for attending a sports event are objective orientation, experience orientation, and social orientation. Based on the combination of literature findings, football fans can be roughly divided into three groups:

**Consumer-oriented fans:** For consumer-oriented fans, the experience is a very important motive. However, unlike the following experience-oriented fans, the performance is pivotal for this group. The game of football and the clubs is interchangeable for these fans and attending a game of a certain club is just one possible pastime among many. Consumer-oriented fans are passive observers who only come to the stadium if a club is successful over a longer

period. The increasing commercialisation does not have negative impacts for this group and is rather welcome as it increases the experience. For smaller or not so wealthy clubs, the effects could turn out to be more severe as these clubs can no longer afford the appropriate players or team managers due to rising salaries and the rising transfer fees to satisfy the consumer-oriented fans.<sup>26</sup>

**Experience-oriented fans:** Experience-oriented fans go to the stadium to feel the atmosphere as well as the tension and the adventure. The sport itself is secondary and not the most important factor. Football is seen as a spectacle, so this type of fan has no permanent place in the stadium. Those people are only interested in being in the spot where there is the most activity and where the experience reaches its highest level. Nevertheless, the experience-oriented fans have a stronger bond to the club than the consumer-oriented fans, who see football only as a leisure activity. Even though this fan group is primarily looking for experience, they still support the club and the team.<sup>29</sup>

**Football-addicted fans or supporters:** Fan groups, which represent the core of the fan culture are the football-addicted fans. There are many names for this group of fans: Hard-core fans, emotional fans, club-loving fans, ultras. What unites them all is the undivided loyalty to the football club. Football-addicted fans differ from the normal spectators (experience-oriented and consumer-oriented fans) primarily in their strong affective attachment to their club.<sup>58</sup>

For this group of fans, the game and the club are not just a leisure activity but rather a way of life. They are not only spoiled by success and loyal to their club in difficult times and these fans buy all kinds of merchandise and show their affection for the club in public. They do all this to show their solidarity with the sport and the club.<sup>26</sup>

For football-addicted fans, the experience of thrilling situations is also closely related to the performances, but they are not exclusively performance-oriented. To them, absolute loyalty counts which means that they remain loyal even in the case of failure. This also shows that football and the club are not interchangeable and that it has a high social relevance through which recognition for the individual and the group is sought.<sup>60</sup>

However, it is precisely this group that appreciates values like tradition and as such, it is an opponent of increasing commercialisation. In their world, professional players play in honour of the club and not exclusively for money.<sup>60</sup>

**Fan Culture:** The Club FC Fair Play submitted an official application to UNESCO in 2017 that fan culture should become an "immaterial world heritage" and thus an asset to be protected. This club is committed to the integrity of professional football in view of the ever-increasing commercialisation of professional football in Germany.<sup>21</sup>

Sutton et al<sup>54</sup> said that football and sports in general are based on a high level of supporter and consumer commitment because it is only through this commitment that the clubs are able to build up a high emotional relationship with its fans. Through the emotional bond the fan culture has been able to develop substantially in the last decades and has become one of the most, if not the most important factor in football history.

Hunt et al<sup>33</sup> also put forward the hypothesis that the emotional bond begins in early years and that parents, relatives or friends have a strong influence on a child's tendency to be attracted to a particular club. Passing on a fan identity is something like a tradition, which is passed down from generation to generation. For this reason, the relationship between a fan and a club also has a much greater emotional basis than the relationship between a person and a brand.

**Effect of Fan Emotions:** A clear and generally valid definition does not yet exist. To this day, the science of emotions is based only on work definitions. This shows that

emotions are unpredictable, as are the possible effects of commercialisation on sports and the loss of fan loyalty to the club.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of how people define emotions, they play a very important role in sporting events, not only for the athlete himself, but also for the fans. Emotions can influence sporting activities and change the course of a game on the pitch.<sup>28</sup> As stated, Sutton et al<sup>54</sup> said that football and sports in general are based on a high-level supporter and consumer commitment as well emotional engagement. This emotional engagement is the reason for the great enthusiasm for football and the great atmosphere in the stadiums.

As described, consumer-oriented fans and experience-oriented fans come to the stadium because of the good and emotional atmosphere, which is mostly created by the loyal football-addicted fans. Besides the positive emotions, there are also many negative emotions. Although there is hardly any scientific evidence to support this thesis, magazines or TV broadcasts are full of articles and reports dealing with negative emotions in the stadiums as a result of the increasing commercialisation.<sup>17,25,44</sup>

**Commercialisation:** The increasing capitalisation of football is leading to a process of disintegration within the subcultural fan scene. In recent years, football clubs have become commercial enterprises that operate according to market economy criteria from which other industries may benefit as well.<sup>26</sup> Sports and apparel manufacturers such as Nike or Adidas earn millions with fan merchandise such as the jersey from various clubs (table 3).

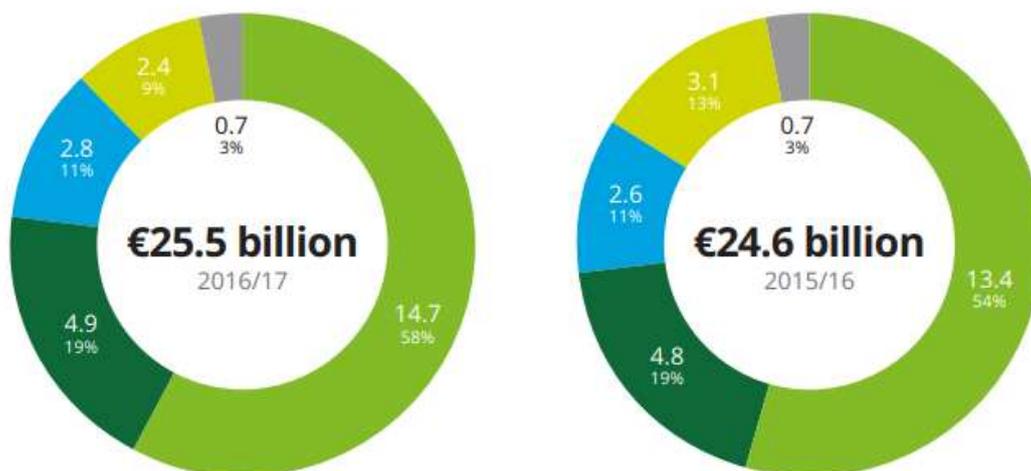
**From Football to Mass Media Entertainment:** The so-called "big-five" (the largest and most successful professional football leagues in Europe which consist of the English *Premier League*, German *Bundesliga*, Spanish *La Liga*, Italian *Serie A* and the French *Ligue 1*) were able to once again increase their revenue by selling broadcasting rights last year (2016/2017) and thus achieve a total market volume of €14.7 billion which represents 58.0 % of the total football market size (figure 1).

In addition to the increasing football market size, the revenue growth of the "big-five" increased again in 2016/2017 (figure 2). These numbers clearly show that football has developed from a people's game into a huge economic sector. As for example the average revenue of more than 50.0 % in four of the "big five European leagues", can be attributed to broadcasting (with the exception of Germany with 31.0 %).

The timing of the matches in the German *Bundesliga* or other European leagues is a great indicator for the massive influence of television broadcasters as well. To maximise advertising revenue, the games are set to different days and different times.<sup>40</sup>

**Table 3**  
**Shirt sales and supplier contracts in European football<sup>47</sup>**

Club	Number of jersey sales (in Mio.)	Supplier	Term	Volume p.a. (in Mio.)
 FC Barcelona	2	Nike	2018-2026	150
 Real Madrid	2,3	Adidas	2015-2024	125
 Manchester United	2,85	Adidas	2015-2025	83
 FC Bayern München	1,5	Adidas	2015-2030	70
 FC Chelsea	1,65 (Adidas)	Nike	2017-2032	66
 FC Liverpool	0,75	New Balance	2015-2021	55
 Arsenal London	1,25	Puma	2014-2019	33
 Juventus Turin	0,85	Adidas	2015-2021	31,5
 AC Mailand	0,65	Adidas	2013-2023	25
 Paris St. Germain	0,7	Nike	2014-2022	25



- 'Big five' European leagues
- Non 'big five' top leagues
- 'Big five' countries' other leagues
- FIFA, UEFA and National Associations
- Non 'big five' other leagues

**Figure 1: European football market size – 2015/16 and 2016/17 (€ billion)<sup>4</sup>**

This has already led to some controversy between fans and the clubs, especially in the *Bundesliga*. The recently implemented Monday matches in particular take place late in the evening and it is therefore not possible for many loyal fans to attend the game, especially at away matches.<sup>15</sup>

**Financial impacts:** When football was first invented in England in the 19th century, the English league set a minimum price for tickets to prevent a price war between clubs.<sup>35</sup> Around 1960, the English league suffered a decrease in visitors, which was the result of an increase in the minimum price. Although football recovered again as a result of successful international tournaments such as the World Cup, from 1992 onwards the TV profits generated by the introduction of the Sky channel were used to raise player salaries. Now that the best players could be hired, the public interest rose again to a point where the stadiums were mostly sold out. For this reason, the regulations to control the minimum prices have been abolished and ticket prices have increased drastically.

As a result of the commercialisation and the marketing of football by worldwide TV broadcasts and international tournaments, players have become superstars who have to promote themselves as brands, for example to acquire advertising deals. According to the Forbes list, superstars like Cristiano Ronaldo earn almost as much money with sponsoring deals as with their actual salary. In 2017, Ronaldo made an additional €35 million as a human billboard by promoting several products and companies such as Nike.<sup>51</sup>

Consequently, player salaries have risen dramatically in recent decades and football players are seen as a brand. This has created an unchangeable cycle of commercialisation (figure 3). This development proves that player salaries and player transfers are increasing leading to higher ticket prices (figure 4).



Figure 2: ‘Big five’ European league clubs’ revenue – 2016/17 (€m)<sup>4</sup>

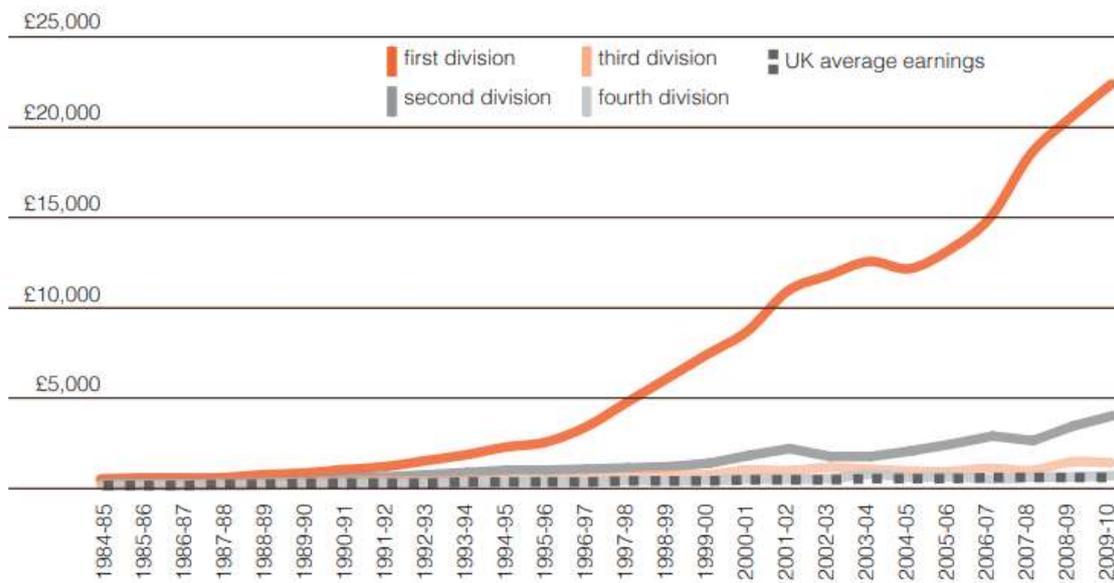


Figure 3: Weekly wages of footballers 1984-2010, by UK league division<sup>10</sup>

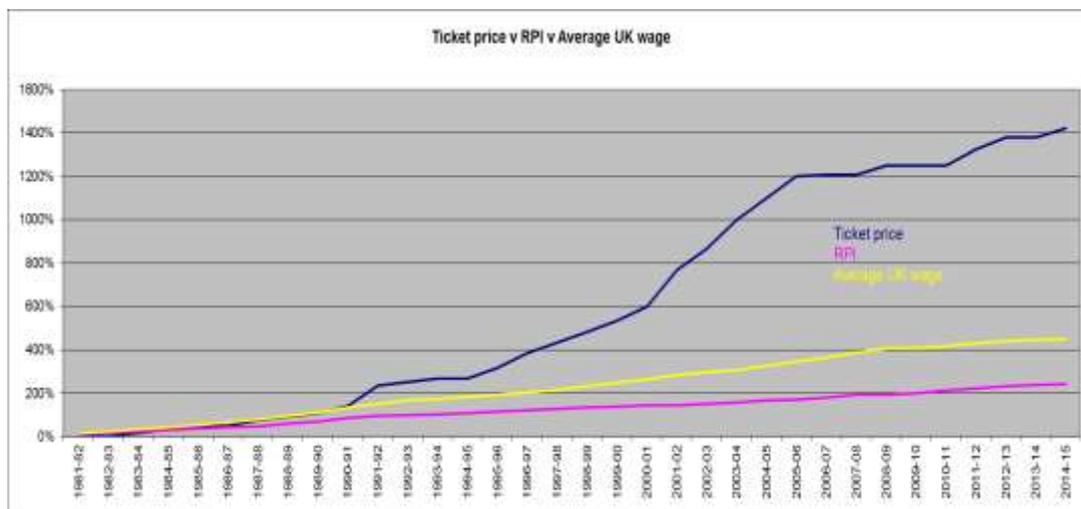


Figure 4: Ticket price evolution Arsenal FC<sup>37</sup>

**Conversion Model:** Competition on the market is becoming increasingly intense which companies are fully aware of. The literature shows approaches and studies about the durability and loyalty of customers and consumers. Studies have also shown that a long-lasting relationship between human (consumer) and brand has become of immense importance for companies.<sup>56</sup>

**Conversion Model between Human and Brand:** The Conversion Model is a psychological model that measures commitment i.e. the strength of the relationship between consumer and brand. Long-term brand loyalty can only be achieved through a strong emotional attachment to a brand.<sup>9</sup> Brand loyalty has been proven an indicator of future buying behaviour: the stronger is the relationship between consumer and brand, the greater is the probability of repurchase.<sup>1</sup>

**Conversion Model in Sports Business:** Research shows no real attempts at developing a conversion model or something similar for the sports sector. Although there are clear

differences between fan and club and consumer and brand<sup>55</sup> there are some scientific papers that see the two areas closely related.<sup>50</sup>

**Methodology**

**Data Collection:** Primary data collection is essential in making good use of the collected data due to the actuality and the good fit to the research question, which has a direct influence on the data quality. The results of the analysis can then be used to achieve the research aims and to verify the hypotheses that were initially established.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to quantitative methods, which are based on the normative paradigm, qualitative social research is based on an interpretative approach to the respective field of research. The focus of qualitative research is therefore not on external conditions but on the people themselves, as it is them to whom the central role in the constitution of social reality is ascribed.<sup>11</sup>

Qualitative research offers the possibility to describe things from the inside, from the people's perspective who are involved. This way they provide a deeper knowledge of social reality and raise awareness of processes as well as patterns of interpretation and patterns of structure that remain sheltered to non-members.<sup>2</sup> A quantitative data collection in form of a questionnaire would of course appeal to a wider range of people, but emotions can only be included in questionnaires to a limited extend.<sup>52</sup>

**Research Instrument - Narrative interviews:** One advantage of the survey method of narrative interviews is that the interviewee can tell freely and naturally. In this way, own topics can be introduced and a comprehensive survey can be carried out. Therefore, the narrative interview is particularly suitable in the explorative phase of a research area.<sup>31</sup>

Froschauer and Lueger<sup>23</sup> see the basic principle of the questioning technique of narrative interviews in narratives of what has been experienced. They thereby provide access to otherwise unobservable events and their retrospective interpretations. This interview technique will enable researchers to penetrate deeply into the emotional bond between a fan and his club, to analyse possible disturbances within the relationship and to find the grounds for their effects.

**Research Design:** The target group for the interviews consists of the fan groups listed and defined in chapter 2.1.2 Fan dimensions and motives in order to determine the differences in emotional perception and the different weighting of the possible effects of commercialisation on the bond between a fan and a club.

At the beginning of the interviews, the research project was presented, the principle of the interview was outlined and the interviewed person was made aware of the tape recording as well as the anonymization of the tape recording. Afterwards an open introductory question was posed that should enable a broad spectrum of answers and stimulate the beginning of a longer narrative to provide answers about the emotional bond between a fan and a club, as well as the possible effects of commercialisation on this emotional bond.

“Please tell me how you became a fan of your club and what the club means to you?”

The main narrative should not be interrupted by detailed questions, as the meaning of a story's individual episodes can only be reconstructed both in the experience of that time and in the performance today. This process would not be comprehensible by posing interrupting questions.

After the main narrative, further questions (questions 1-9 from the interview guideline) were asked in case they have not been answered sufficiently in the course of the narrative. In the final phase, questions have been asked about possible

solutions from the fans' point of view in order to develop a possible basis for the development of practical recommendations for action and to find out what is important for a fan and his emotional bond with his club. The length of the interviews was based on the narrative structure of the fans. As already mentioned above, the answers were not interrupted. It is therefore difficult to limit the time frame of the interviews.

The interview guideline is shown in figure 6. Here the additional questions apart from the open introductory question were listed and clustered into different areas.

**Validity and Reliability of Findings:** Information quality is the measure for the fulfilment of all the requirements for an information in the sense of its suitability for the fulfilment of given information needs. Statements on the quality of information relate, for example, to how exactly it describes reality or how reliable it is, e.g. to what extent it can be used as a basis for planning one's own actions.<sup>42</sup>

The reliability of data is closely related to the information quality. Since the basis for information is data, the data quality affects the quality of the information obtained from the corresponding data.<sup>27</sup>

According to various literature findings, there are several types of data validity:

- conclusion validity
- internal validity
- construct validity
- external validity

The different types provide a framework for the validity of the data. For the data to fall within the validity framework, some aspects must be fulfilled. A precise definition of the research question is required in order to generate an exact answer to the hypothesis, more specifically to clearly confirm or disprove the theory.<sup>13,45</sup>

**Limitations of the Methodology:** One of the problems of the narrative interview lies in the representativeness of the selection. It is important to think carefully about who to ask in order to get the most valid result possible despite a small sample.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the weaknesses of interviews, only male supporters of German football clubs were interviewed and analysed within this research. Emotional bonds to the football clubs can be influenced by a different age structure or cultural background. This can lead to different results. The main objective of the research is to analyse the effect of commercialisation on the emotional bond between the fans and their club. As commercialisation has more or less the same impact and extent in all European top leagues, it is not necessary to interview fans of foreign clubs.

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## Interview questions

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### Demographic Data & Classification

Information on demographic data and classification in fan groups.

#### Objective of the question and theoretical background:

Possibility to classify different target groups and fan categories in order to evaluate whether such data lead to different results.

### Introductory question

#### Question:

Please tell me how you became a fan of your club and what the club means to you?

#### Objective of the question and theoretical background:

The introductory questions should enable a broad spectrum of answers and stimulate the narrative flow which hopefully provides answers about the emotional bond between a fan and a club.

### Question 01

#### Question:

What does football mean to you and your life?

#### Objective of the question and theoretical background:

This question is intended to clarify the importance of football for the individual fan in order to identify any differences between the bond with football in general and the bond to the club. It also should provide information to verify the classification of the interview partner to the three defined fan groups (consumer-orientated, experience-orientated, football-addicted fans).

### Question 02

#### Question:

Why do you go to the stadium or why do you watch football on television?

#### Objective of the question and theoretical background:

This question should also provide information about the classification of the interview partner as well as the level of support for the club.

### Questions 03

#### Question:

How do you feel about the atmosphere in the stadium and has it changed in recent years?

#### Objective of the question and theoretical background:

This question is intended to provide information about the atmosphere in the stadium and whether there has been any change in the support of the fans due to commercialisation from the point of view of the target group/fans.

**Questions 04****Question:**

How important is fan culture to you, how do you experience it in your club and have you observed changes in recent years?

**Objective of the question and theoretical background:**

This question should clarify whether fans can observe a change in fan culture and above all how important the fan culture is for the atmosphere in the stadium and for the sport itself.

**Questions 05****Question:**

What do you think about the commercialisation of football and in what areas do you think it is most noticeable?

**Objective of the question and theoretical background:**

To ask the question so openly is to the effect that the fan should share his own experiences and not just answer specific questions with pre-defined areas of commercialisation like increasing ticket prices, salaries or merchandising.

**Questions 06****Question:**

Do the effects of commercialization affect your loyalty and bond to the club?

**Objective of the question and theoretical background:**

With this question, the author wants to gain insights into the perspective and emotional situation of the fans in relation to commercialisation. Which effects the fans notice the most and which is a threat to the bond to their club.

**Questions 07****Question:**

Do you see the growing commercialisation as a threat to the game of football?

**Objective of the question and theoretical background:**

This question is intended to clarify whether commercialisation threatens football in general and whether the impact on the general interest is different from the bond to the club.

**Questions 08****Question:**

Could you imagine that due to the current development of commercialisation you might lose interest in football and your bond to the club?

**Objective of the question and theoretical background:**

This question is about clarifying whether, in the opinion of the fans, commercialisation has already had a negative effect on the bond between the fans and the club.

**Questions 09**

**Question:**  
 What do you think the club or the associations can/must do better? What do you expect from the club or the football association to deal with increasing commercialisation?

**Objective of the question and theoretical background:**  
 This question is about the fans' estimation of possible solutions. With this final question the fan can summarise what is important to him in football and what must happen so that the bond continues to exist.

**Note:** If the person interviewed should already answer some of the questions below in the course of the introductory question, these will obviously be ignored in the course of the interview.

**Figure 5: Interview Guideline**

**Data Analysis and Result**

First, the demographic data is analysed and presented (table 7). Based on the responses of the interviews, a master table including all important results and information was created (table 8). It illustrates how fans evaluate the commercialisation and its development and how this, in turn, affects the bond with the club and the sports in general.

Subsequently, the results of the interviews are compared and the relationship (or the interrelations) between them is (are) established (table 9). This enables the analysis and identification of the relationships, impacts and origins of commercialisation and fan identification.

**Research Characteristics:** Altogether 10 qualitative interviews have been conducted for this study. Among the 10 respondents, 10 participants were male (100.0 %) and 0 participants (0.0 %) were female (table 7).

The different age structures show a broad and realistic picture of the various fan generations. No fans were under the age of 20 participated (0.0 %), as the focus of this study is on the comparison between the old traditional times and the times of commercialisation and how this change affects the long-term relationship between fan and club. 50.0 % of the respondents are between 21-30 years, 30.0 % between 31-40 years and 20.0 % between 41-50 years. 80.0 % of the respondents were active players and have another emotional level of bonding with the sport. 40.0 % are still active today and 20.0 % are coaches of youth and men's teams.

The focus of this study was on the analysis of the football-addicted and experience-oriented fans, as these two groups have in particular a strong bond to the club. Nevertheless, a consumer-oriented fan was also interviewed for reasons of comparability. The target group consists of 10.0 % of consumer-oriented fans, 50.0 % of experience-oriented fans and 40.0 % of football-addicted fans.

**Table 4  
 Demographic Data**

Gender	Number	Percent
Male	10	100.0
Female	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Age	Number	Percent
< 20 years	0	0.0
21-30 years	5	50.0
31-40 years	3	30.0
41-50 years	2	20.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Active in football	Number	Percent
Former player	8	80.0
Still active	4	40.0
Trainer	2	20.0

**Data Objectives:** The master table (table 8), made by the authors, structures the results of the interviews and enables a good comparison between the secondary data of the literature review in the first part of this study and the primary data collection of the conducted interviews. The table is divided into four main fields: Fan identification and bond, changes in the game, commercialisation and the effects of commercialisation in relation to the bond between fan and club and sports in general. The structure enables to find evidence to answer the research question.

**Table 5**  
**Evaluation data of conducted interviews**

	number	General percentage (%) distribution				Percentage (%) distribution by fan motives			
		percent	Consumer-oriented fans	Experience-oriented fans	Football-addicted fans	percent	Consumer-oriented fans	Experience-oriented fans	Football-addicted fans
<b>Different fan motives</b>									
Interviewed consumer-oriented fans	1	10,0							
Interviewed experience-oriented fans	5	50,0							
Interviewed football-addicted fans:	4	40,0							
<b>Question background &amp; areas</b>									
Fan identification & bond	Answers	number	percent	Consumer-oriented fans	Experience-oriented fans	Football-addicted fans			
Becoming a fan through	family	4	40,0	0,0	25,0	75,0			
	friends	1	10,0	0,0	100,0	0,0			
	local closeness	2	20,0	0,0	100,0	0,0			
	Experience	1	10,0	0,0	100,0	0,0			
	Other	2	20,0	50,0	0,0	50,0			
Meaning of football	very important	8	80,0	12,5	62,5	25,0			
	important	1	10,0	0,0	0,0	100,0			
	not so important	1	10,0	0,0	0,0	100,0			
Stadium visit due to	atmosphere	7	70,0	14,3	57,1	28,6			
	supporting the team	2	20,0	0,0	0,0	100,0			
	fun	1	10,0	0,0	100,0	0,0			
Importance of fan culture	yes	9	90,0	11,1	44,4	44,4			
	no	0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0			
	no opinion	1	10,0	0,0	100,0	0,0			
<b>Noticeable changes in the game</b>									
Noticeball changes of the atmosphere in the stadium	yes	8	80,0	12,5	37,5	50,0			
	no	1	10,0	0,0	100,0	0,0			
	no opinion	1	10,0	0,0	100,0	0,0			
Reasons for the changing atmosphere	more "Event-fans" than real fans	2	20,0	0,0	0,0	100,0			
	commercialisation	3	30,0	0,0	66,7	33,3			
	more aggressive mood	5	50,0	20,0	80,0	0,0			

Commercialisation							
Noticeability of commercialisation	yes	10	100,0	10,0	50,0	40,0	
	no	0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	
Noticeable areas of commercialisation (multiple answers p.p.)	no opinion	0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	
	ticket prices	3	7,9	0,0	66,7	33,3	
	merchandising	6	15,8	0,0	83,3	16,7	
	TV-broadcasting rights/subscriptions	9	23,7	0,0	66,7	33,3	
	player salaries & transfer sums	6	15,8	16,7	50,0	33,3	
	marketing	2	5,3	0,0	100,0	0,0	
	sponsors & financial-based clubs	7	18,4	0,0	57,1	42,9	
	match days and kick-off times	5	13,2	0,0	40,0	60,0	
	(Possible) effects of commercialisation according to fans (multiple answers p.p.)	fans are no longer the focus of attention	7	20,0	14,3	42,9	42,9
		distribution of match days and kick-off times	4	11,4	0,0	50,0	50,0
more "event-fans" than real fans		4	11,4	0,0	25,0	75,0	
negative influence on the bond to the club		3	8,6	0,0	33,3	66,7	
more clubs without tradition and fan culture		5	14,3	0,0	60,0	40,0	
deteriorated atmosphere in the stadium		4	11,4	0,0	25,0	75,0	
sponsors do not identify with the club		1	2,9	0,0	0,0	100,0	
submission of the season ticket		1	2,9	0,0	0,0	100,0	
TV subscriptions are no longer purchased		3	8,6	0,0	100,0	0,0	
fewer games are watched live or on TV		4	11,4	0,0	75,0	25,0	
Impacts of commercialisation							
Impact on the bond to the club	yes	0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	
	no	10	100,0	10,0	50,0	40,0	
	no opinion	0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	
Losing interest in football	yes	1	10,0	0,0	0,0	100,0	
	no	4	40,0	25,0	25,0	50,0	
	possible	5	50,0	0,0	80,0	20,0	
Danger for sport in the future	yes	8	80,0	12,5	50,0	37,5	
	no	0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	
	possible	2	20,0	0,0	50,0	50,0	

**Fan Identification and Bond:** The identification of a fan with his club is an immensely important factor for this study. The interviews revealed that the higher and deeper the emotional bond to the club is, the more the fans are personally affected when decisions are made that are directed against them or their fan culture.

**Becoming a Fan:** The club is seen as a family. A fan goes to the stadium with family members or friends. One reason for this family bond is that family members or friends have introduced many fans to the club. The conducted interviews revealed that family members (40.0 %) and friends (10.0 %)

introduced 50.0 % of the participants to the club. Due to the family bond, many see the club not only as a hobby or pastime, but also as a part of the family (table 8).

Local patriotism also plays an important role in the bond between a fan and a club. 20.0 % became aware of the club through the regional proximity. The remaining 30.0 % of the participants became aware of their clubs through sports experiences (football matches in the stadium or on television) or other reasons such as the admiration of individual players.

**Meaning of Football:** In order to find out what the general connection to the sport looks like, the participants were asked what football generally means to them. For 80.0 % of the participants football has a very high value in their lives or is very important.

**Stadium Visits:** The majority of fans including the consumer-oriented fans and experience-oriented fans, prefer to go to the stadium and watch the games live. The conducted interviews showed that football-addicted fans have the highest tendency to watch games in the stadium instead of on television.

For 70.0 % of the participants, the atmosphere is the main reason to watch games in the stadium. For 50.0 % (two out of four) of the football-addicted fans, the support of the team in the stadium comes first. In this category, only football addicted fans stated that they go to the stadium for this particular reason. This shows that the atmosphere is an essential part of football and a key factor in ensuring that fans from all fan groups go to the stadium and thus financial revenues are generated for the clubs.

**Fan Culture:** Another important factor for the fans is fan culture. 90.0 % of the participants think that fan culture is an important value and one of the main reasons for the extraordinary atmosphere in the stadiums. Although the conducted interviews revealed different emotional moods within the fan groups on this topic, all groups consider fan culture to be important.

**Noticeable Changes in the Game:** The atmosphere in the stadiums is an important element for the majority of the fans. The atmosphere is a symbol of the prevailing fan culture in the respective clubs and shows how much the fans support their teams.

**Noticeable Changes:** In the interviews, 80.0 % of the participants stated that they had noticed a change in the atmosphere in and around the stadium (table 8). The changes mostly relate to negative aspects. On this question, there are no significant differences within the different fan groups. Everyone believes that the atmosphere has recently changed.

**Reasons for the changes:** 20.0 % of the participants see the so-called "event fans" as being responsible for this development. Event fans can be compared with the target group of consumer-oriented fans. The visit to the stadium is only motivated by the event or the show and not by a passion for the team or the club. Another 30.0 % see a reason of atmospheric degradation in the growing commercialisation in general. The general dissatisfaction of many fans affects the entire atmosphere in the stadium. Nowadays more negative banners and slogans against the Football Association and officials are being used at matches to place a statement against commercialisation. Even though some of the participants were not able to name precise reasons, 50.0 % considered an increased aggressive mood to be the reason

for the changed atmosphere. Some felt that the aggressive mood could be explained by the development of commercialisation. As a result, it can be said that the atmosphere is progressively deteriorating.

**Commercialisation:** "...der Fan steht überhaupt nicht mehr im Mittelpunkt des Ganzen, sondern es ist ein rein finanzieller Gedanke der im Fokus steht und dadurch zerbricht der Fußball in meinen Augen."  
(Quotation of Interview Partner 1)

**Noticeability of commercialisation:** This quotation was recorded and transcribed during an interview for this study. The translation of this quote is as follows: "...the fan is no longer the focus at all, it is a purely financial thought that is in the focus and thus the football collapses."

This statement shows that commercialisation is a major threat to the sport. All respondents (100.0 %) stated that the commercialisation of football is noticeable. This result shows parallels to the results of the literature review where commercial reasons such as ticket prices, player salaries or broadcasting rights are responsible for the change of the sport.<sup>4,26,51,53</sup>

**Noticeable Areas of Commercialisation:** During the interviews, the participants were asked how they perceive commercialisation and in which areas they most notice it. There were several different and multiple answers to this question by each of the interviewed participants. Clear tendencies can be observed which show the problematic areas of commercialisation. The area that is most noticeable to fans is the marketing of television rights and subscriptions to watch games on television. Almost a quarter of the total answers can be attributed to this area (23.7 %). In this context, the main criticism relates to the subscriptions that have to be purchased in order to watch matches on television. In the *German Bundesliga* and *Champions League*, three different subscriptions must be purchased from three different providers (Sky, DAZN, Eurosport) in order to watch all matches, both national and international.

In addition, the kick-off times and match days are being pulled ever further apart. 13.2 % believe that commercialisation is the reason for this development. Through different kick-off times and different match days, the football industry tries to draw as many people as possible to the television. The late kick-off times coincide with the opinion of the fans that the associations in Europe want to conquer new markets. The most significant matches in particular are scheduled very late so that other continents are able to follow the matches.

Almost 40.0 % of the total answers are related to merchandising, ticket prices, player salaries and transfer sums. Most fans agree that player salaries are getting out of control and causing a lot of damage to football.

“Wie kann man einem normalen Bürger erklären, wenn ein Fußballspieler 20 Millionen verdient im Jahr.“

(Quotation of Interview Partner 8)

This quote was also recorded and transcribed in the course of an interview. The translation means "How can you explain to a normal citizen when a football player earns 20 million a year". Many fans are afraid that the ever-increasing salaries of players will be passed on to the fan – whether it is through increased ticket prices or prices of merchandise items.

**Effects of Commercialisation:** Similar to the areas of commercialisation, the question of possible effects and consequences of commercialisation was answered in multiple responses. The most drastic effect the fans see is that the fan is no longer in the focus of the football clubs. 20.0 % of all answers were aimed towards this issue. The fans think that all decisions are made with the aim of promoting the club or the league and no longer in the interest of the fans. Although many of the participants understand a certain degree of commercialisation, even among football-addicted fans, many still feel disregarded and unappreciated as a fan.

The fear of the fans is that the development of the commercialisation will increasingly turn football into a show, causing the decline of fan culture and tradition. An example, which was given in the course of an interview, is the consideration of the associations to hold national matches abroad in order to generate as much attention as possible and thereby conquer new markets (Interview 4). The real local or national fans would be exposed to extreme travel burdens, and not everyone would be willing to sacrifice the money and time for it. This would not only affect the bond with the club, but also the atmosphere and the experience in the stadium, especially for experience-oriented fans who go to the stadium not only to support the club, but also because of the experience and the atmosphere in the stadium.

Although most fans are loyal to their club even in bad times, some are already experiencing the first signs of their loyalty suffering. A football-addicted fan has indicated within the interview that he is considering selling his season ticket because the development of commercialisation is depriving him of the fun of the game (Interview 8).

**Impact of Commercialisation:** By asking specific questions during the interviews, it was possible to capture the feelings and opinions of the different fan groups. This part clearly showed that experience-oriented fans and football-addicted fans in particular have a strong bond to the club. Although the football-addicted fans have a slightly stronger emotional bond with the club, a strong bond to the club could also be observed among the experience-oriented fans. At the end of the interviews, all participants were asked if commercialisation was a threat to football causing them to

lose interest in football and if commercialisation had an effect on the bond to the club. The evaluation of the results shows that 80.0 % of the respondents see commercialisation as a threat to football. 20.0 % were not sure and considered the threat as "possible". This shows that commercialisation affects every fan regardless of the emotional bond or the fan group.

A clear signal is also given by the analysis of the question whether the participants can imagine losing interest in football. Although only one of the respondents (10.0 %) answered “yes”, 50.0 % consider it “possible”. The reasons mostly refer to the increased costs for the fans and the decline of fan culture. The fans feel that they have to compensate the increased expenses of the club in the form of player salaries, transfer sums etc., through more expensive ticket prices, merchandise items or pricey TV subscriptions. Interestingly, all participants (100.0 %) have stated that they would never lose their interest in the club.

Although many see a conflict of interest in sport in general, no one can imagine losing their bond with the club. In the conversations, tendencies could be determined that the commercialisation causes the connection to slightly suffer, but not in such a way that fans would turn away from their club as is often the case with the relationship between humans and brands.

**Dependencies and Connections of Commercialisation:** In order to create a clearer picture of the relationships and effects of commercialisation, a second table (table 9) was created as part of this study. The contents in table 9 are based on the results of the conducted interviews in table 8. The results in table 9 are intended to illustrate in more detail the dependencies and connections as well as the effects of commercialisation and the emotional bond between fan and club. In the course of the analysis of the interviews, four main fields were identified, based on the responses of the participants from table 8.

**A: Cost for fans:** In this section, all areas are listed where fans have the feeling of paying more than before because of the commercialisation.

**B: Barriers for fans:** This section focuses on the effects of commercialisation on the fans who feel that they are losing interest in sport for reasons of conviction or for financial reasons.

**C: Marketing / Commercialisation:** European associations in particular are trying to promote football on other continents in order to access new markets, which, in the eyes of the fans, leads to the disappearance of the fans from the focus.

**D: Financial causes:** This section discusses the current financial implications of commercialisation and how this affects the loyalty of fans towards the club.

**Section A - Cost for Fans:** By taking a closer look at the costs for the fans in section A, it is clear that (according to the fans) most of the costs (A1-A3: ticket prices, TV subscriptions and merchandising) are caused by the increased expenses of the clubs for player salaries and transfer sums (D2). These costs represent a barrier and discourage the fans from making these investments and expenditures in the future. In the course of the interviews, some fans confirmed that the costs have already become too high for them and that they are no longer willing to buy all TV subscriptions, for example (Interview 7).

A further cost factor for the fans is the journeys to games (A4). In addition, the associations are considering holding national matches such as the national cup final, (D1). The costs for the fan, who want to watch this particular match, would increase immensely.

**Section B - Barriers for fans:** Section B describes both the financial and the emotional barriers for fans. Points B1-B3 (late kick-off times, Monday games, national games that are played abroad) are mainly caused by the generation of new markets (C2 and C3). Kick-off times are set as late as possible so that other markets such as China and USA are able to watch the games. The time problems of the fans can also be added to this point (B5) which are also caused by C2 and C3. TV broadcasting rights play an important role because the providers try to distribute the games as widely as possible in order to make fans watch a game on television

almost all day long. This means that games are scheduled in late evening hours or on a Monday which makes it difficult for the fans to take part due to time constraints.

An extremely strong emotional barrier for the fans is the feeling that they are no longer in the focus (B6) and that all marketing decisions aim at international fans and no longer on national fans. In conclusion, each area in the commercialisation of football gives the fans a feeling of no longer being the focus of attention (C1-C5).

Another factor is the loss of tradition and fan culture due to commercialisation (B7). The interviews have shown that many fans are opponents of finance-based clubs such as Hoffenheim and Leipzig which have no fan culture and cause the loss of tradition (D1). Furthermore, the enormous player salaries (D2) can no longer be understood or accepted by fans. Many fans think that it is a shame that players only play for the money and not because of the values of the club. The same applies to sponsors. Sponsors no longer identify themselves with the club and usually only have a financial interest in cooperation with a club or even a takeover of a club.

This creates a danger for the bond to the club and to the sport (B8). Due to the growing commercialisation (B7) and the development of traditional football into a show (C5), the bond to sport in general could suffer.

**Table 6**  
**Dependencies and connections of commercialisation**

A	Costs for fans	Caused by	Affects
A1	Ticket prices	D2	B4
A2	More TV subscriptions needed (Sky, DAZN, Eurosport)	D2	B4
A3	Merchandising	D2	B4
A4	Journeys to games	C1	B4
B	Barriers for fans	Caused by	Affects
B1	Late kick-off times	C2,C3	B5
B2	Monday games	C2,C3	B5
B3	National games that are played abroad	C3	A4
B4	High expenses (tickets, merchandising, TV subscriptions)	C4, D2	A1,A2,A3
B5	Times issues due to kick-of times and game-day distribution	C2,C3, C4	A4
B6	National fans are no longer the focus of attention	C1, C2, C3, C4, C5	B8
B7	Commerce over tradition	D1, D2, D3	B6
B8	Identification with the club, sponsors, players, etc.	B7, C5,	B6
C	Marketing / Commercialisation	Caused by	Affects
C1	National games that are played abroad	B7, C5	A4, B6
C2	Late kick-off times for other markets (e.g. China)	B7, C5	B5, B6
C3	Generating new markets and sponsors (e.g. China or USA)	B7, C5	A2, B6
C4	TV-broadcasting rights	B7, C5	A2, B4, B6
C5	Football is more show than sport	B7, C3	B6, B7, B8
D	Financial causes	Caused by	Affects
D1	Financial-based clubs with no tradition	C3	B6, B7
D2	Player and transfer salaries & fees	C5	A1,A2,A3
D3	More sponsors	C3	B6, B7, B8

**Section C - Marketing / Commercialisation:** Section C contains the different marketing areas of football which are considered negative by the fans. The points C1-C4 result from the growing commercialisation (B7) and the transformation of traditional football into pure show entertainment (C5). Marketing strategies are affecting fans in the way that they present financial and emotional barriers. According to fans, the change of traditional football can be traced back to the generation of new markets such as China and USA. Since the international fans usually have no emotional or traditional bond to the club, these fans are mainly interested in the show and the entertainment experience. Therefore, only the top clubs in Europe have a followership outside Europe. Smaller traditional clubs are largely unknown abroad.

**Section D - Financial causes:** Section D refers to the financial impact of commercialisation on football. This development is mainly caused by the effort to generate new markets (C3). Making football known worldwide causes most of the problems regarding the bond between fan and club by not only confronting the fan with financial difficulties, but also by pushing him out of the focus.

**Future Key Drivers against Commercialisation:** The future key drivers against commercialisation play an important role in this study. Many of the fans see the associations as a driving force behind the commercialisation of football. They accuse the associations of prioritising economic aspects over tradition and fan culture. The accusations are manifold: the transfer fees explode, football matches become an event for the upper class, TV stations determine the kick-off times, football disappears from free TV, the players only chase the money, and there is no longer any club loyalty.

The conducted interviews have shown that the majority of fans desire a dialogue with the associations. The priorities of the clubs and especially of the associations are increasingly moving in the direction of economic aspects. For some, a solution can be found in the form of a fan dialogue. This means that a work council of fan representatives is set up which works together with the associations and clubs to make decisions or at least represents the opinions of the fan scene.

Another frequently mentioned demand in the interviews is the abolition of Monday games and the distribution of match days and kick-off times (Interview 5, 7, 8 and 10). For many fans, the late kick-off times cause problems, especially for fans with families. The journeys to away games on a Sunday evening and a Monday evening are no longer feasible for many working people. The fans' demand on the associations is to have regular and family-friendly kick-off times at the weekend.

As described in the analysis, for many fans, the development of transfer costs and player salaries are no longer

understandable. Some fear that this development will not only damage the football game but will also lead to increased costs for the fans. Many suspects that the growing costs for the club in terms of transfer sums and player salaries will be transferred to the fans in the form of higher ticket prices, merchandise items and TV subscriptions.

A further solution would be the recruitment of self-trained youth players. The clubs do not have to buy a large number of new players every year in order to ensure the needed size of the squad. According to a fan (Interview 7), this would also ensure that many players feel more bonded with the club and do not only play for a club for financial reasons.

Regardless of the many possible solutions, some interviews revealed a certain degree of resignation among the fans. Due to the current market development, they cannot imagine any functioning solutions. Although many of the participants have become accustomed to commercialisation and find it acceptable to a small extent, this attitude shows the advanced degree of commercialisation in the football business.

## Discussion

**Fan Identification and Bond:** The conducted interviews revealed that the majority of the interviewed fans were introduced to the club by family members. This is supported by Hunt's thesis that family and friends have a strong influence on a child's choice of a club.<sup>33</sup>

Giulianotti<sup>26</sup> also discussed this topic and speaks of a local patriotism in the course of the formation of fan groups. Due to the family and the regional proximity, the club is partly seen as a family that is supported unconditionally. Although this unconditional dedication for the club could primarily be found among the football-addicted fans, there is also a stable relationship between fan and club among fans from the experience-oriented fan group. The different fan groups are based on models from the literature and were formed using various models.<sup>50,52,62</sup>

Regardless of the fan group, none of the interviewed fans were able to imagine that commercialisation would cause them to lose interest in the club, which is a clear sign towards the associations and especially towards the clubs. Many of the interviewed fans stated that even though they are holding on to the club, they are losing interest in football as a result of growing commercialisation. This development would inevitably affect the clubs and cause them financial damage.

When it comes to fan culture, the majority of fans see a major problem. During the conducted interviews it became evident that fan culture is one of the most important values among clubs and football in general. Due to the commercialisation through finance-oriented clubs, fan culture is becoming obsolete which in turn causes a deteriorated atmosphere in the stadium. Fans are trying to defend themselves against commercialisation in the form of banners, songs and protests and are demanding more fan rights. In conclusion, it can be

argued that the bond with the club has a strong foundation which cannot be weakened by the growing commercialisation – at least in the short and the medium term. However, trends have been observed in which the interest of fans in the club and especially in football in general has been challenged by the growing commercialisation and can cause major problems for the clubs on a long-term basis.

**Commercialisation:** According to the fans, one of the biggest effects of commercialisation is the banishment of the fan from the focus of the clubs. While many of the participants have some understanding for an appropriate degree of commercialisation, many believe that clubs and associations prioritise economic aspects over the fan community. The focus on the economic aspects leads to a growing marketing of football in all areas. The TV broadcasting rights reveal these problems in particular. Nowadays, fans have to buy three different TV subscriptions in order to be able to watch the German games both nationally and internationally. Fans not only have to deal with logistical problems by having to purchase three different subscriptions, but also with financial problems.

A resulting problem is the distribution of match days and kick-off times in order to ensure a maximum use of broadcasting time. In particular, the late kick-off times on Sunday and the scheduling of matches on Monday confront fans with problems. Some consider that the late kick-off times should satisfy other markets such as China or the USA. In addition, long journeys to away games on Sundays and Mondays are not feasible for many working fans and families. In the interviews, there were reports of current protests in the stadiums against the distribution of match days and kick-off times. Although most people still go to the stadium to support their team or enjoy the atmosphere, this is threatening to change.

Fan culture and tradition are still important values for the fans. The rise of finance-oriented clubs is causing discontent among many fans. In their eyes, football suffers from clubs that have made it to the top of professional football purely out of financial support. Football in its original form as described by Giulianotti<sup>26</sup> as being "a game about honour, belonging and emotions" will be replaced by commerce.

It is a common perception among fans that the players are only playing for a club for financial reasons and not because of the values the club represents. This could lead to the development that at some point the fans will no longer be able to identify emotionally with the team or the club. Although the results of the interviews show that this bond is still strong, there is an immense potential risk for the football.

Another point in this chapter is the increased cost of tickets and merchandise products. This assessment is also supported by the literature findings which clearly shows a tendency

towards growing costs.<sup>35</sup> Although a large number of the interviewed fans have identified this trend as a noticeable effect of commercialisation, the interviews have also shown that increased costs are not the overall problem. In today's changing times and market conditions, many fans can understand commercialisation to a certain extent. Even one of the interviewed football-addicted fans stated in the course of the interview that he managed to understand commercialisation (Interview 2).

However, nearly no fan understands the ever-growing process of commercialisation which seems to be endless. While most fans have no problem spending more money on their clubs, they are unwilling to shoulder the additional costs of the clubs caused by growing player salaries and transfer sums. Considering the literature findings and the results of the interviews, this is one important finding of this study. The fans feel that they have to compensate for the rising costs of the clubs through higher player salaries and transfer sums.

**Future Key Drivers:** The Future Key Drivers against commercialisation can be seen as recommendations for the clubs. Besides the already analysed emotional situation of the fans, the Future Key Drivers represent the exact issues that are significant for fans. In addition to the emotional situation, fans also describe their desire to find solutions for the growing commercialisation and the loss of traditional football. Although it has already been observed that all fans would remain loyal to their club, there is a certain danger to sport in general.

Some of these barriers are reflected, for example, in the distribution of match days and kick-off times. As already described by König,<sup>40</sup> match days and kick-off times are set at different times to maximize advertising revenue. At this point, the literature findings and the results of the qualitative interviews overlap. In both cases, the results show that football distances itself from the fan and that economic aspects are becoming more important. Although clubs and associations generate more advertising revenue through the distribution of matches and times, the relationship between fan and club suffers. In particular, the late matches on Sunday or Monday cause a negative atmosphere among the fans. Many working people are unable to attend the matches due to work on the next day. For families with children it is difficult as well. More and more fans are demanding the abolition of the Monday games and more fan rights in stadiums. Most of the protest and the hatred is directed against the associations and not the club.

A further issue is the high transfer sums and player salaries which are no longer understandable for the fans. Many fans have the feeling that they are bearing the consequences of this development and that the clubs are passing the growing costs for transfers and salaries on to the fans in form of increased ticket prices etc. As the interviews have shown, because of marketing and commercialisation football is

increasingly developing into a show that has nothing to do with traditional football. Many fans think that the atmosphere is already suffering because of this phenomenon. Due to the loss of fan culture and tradition, more and more event fans are attracted to the matches causing the atmosphere to suffer. Thus, the experience in the stadium could be lost in the future.

One of the most interesting findings is that many fans simply want to be involved in the decision-making process. Although they have some understanding for commercialisation, there is an increasing desire for a fan dialogue between fan representatives and the clubs and associations. In fact, it is not a question of having a concrete voice in decisions such as the distribution of match days. The fan community simply wants to be heard and understood and wishes to return to the traditional values that have shaped football over the past decades. In addition to the sport itself the clubs should focus on the fan, because it was the fan communities that created sports so popular in the first place. In addition, many fans are not worried about paying more money for a ticket. Almost all the interviewed fans go to the stadium regardless of the increased costs. The primary concern of the fans is to avoid bearing the consequences of commercialisation. That a certain degree of commercialisation is necessary in the current football era, is recognised by almost every fan, but not at the cost of the fan community.

**Contribution of this Research:** The results of this research are of scientific and practical value. In terms of scientific contribution, this research provides evidence of the impact of commercialisation on the bond between fan and club and enables a practical implementation in the form of joint dialogues with the fans by understanding their needs and wishes as a fan. The outcome of this study was aimed at providing insights into the connection between fan loyalty and commercialisation in order to provide recommended actions for football clubs. The recommendations for action are of great importance, as the clubs would lose a lot of financial support if the fans lost their interest in football. The atmosphere, which is one of the main reasons to watch a game live for the fans, would deteriorate. This would also have a financial impact on the clubs. As described in the literature review, possible effects have already been seen in Italy, where stadiums are no longer crowded and clubs suffer financial losses as a result. Based on the results of this study, follow-up studies can also focus on the precise financial effects.

The current literature provides limited research data concerning the needs of fans in the context of growing commercialisation. To close the gap in knowledge, this research provides evidence that clubs and associations need to find a way to put fan rights at the centre of football again. Due to the general acceptance of commercialisation up to a certain point, clubs and associations have the opportunity to engage in an open and honest dialogue with their fans. One

of the main findings of this work is the observation that the emotional bond between fan and club is stronger than previously assumed.

In addition, the categorisation of the fans into different fan groups, based on different models from the literature, allows a research matrix for future work. This study has also shown that despite the emotional differences within the fan groups, commercialisation affects almost every football fan.

**Limitations and Future Research Directions:** Concerning the research approach of this study, limitations in the primary data result from the regional selection. As described above, one of the main findings is that the emotional bond between a fan and his club is stronger than previously assumed. For this reason, no conversion model can be developed and was regarded as not practical as a club cannot be perceived as a brand, and as the relationship between a human and a brand cannot be compared to the strong relationship between a fan and a club.

Without doubt, the national boundaries of the survey are also among the limitations of this study. Even though all European top leagues are exposed to commercialisation, the interviews were only conducted with fans of German clubs from the 1st and 2nd *Bundesliga*. Hence, although the results of the interviews can only be traced back to a local and national range, the author represents the opinion that the results are also partly applicable and can be used for other clubs from Germany as well as international clubs. At this point, further investigations can be made whether there are differences in the emotional bond between fans and their clubs in other international leagues and to what extent commercialisation influences this bond.

Although limitations are acknowledged, it is evident that the present study makes a valuable contribution to the current literature. As commercialisation is developing and most fans are currently still on the side of sports clubs, the development of the results and the emotional bond should be analysed again in the near future.

## Conclusion

This study attempts to answer the question of the dependence and effects of the commercialisation of the football business on the emotional bond between fans and a football club. For this purpose, secondary data was collected in the first part of this work to present and analyse the current state of knowledge. In the second part of this work, primary data was collected to ensure that the data is highly up-to-date and that it fits the research question. In the course of the primary data collection a qualitative study in the form of narrative interviews with fans of German football clubs was conducted in order to provide evidence in support of or against the hypothesis.

A targeted interpretation of the results in relation to the hypothesis is presented. Furthermore, a list of limitations and

weaknesses of the study is presented and acknowledged. Finally, the scientific and practical value of the study and possibilities for future research are shown.

In summary, it can be stated that commercialisation has an impact on the emotional bond between the fan and the club. The growing commercialisation as well as the global expansion of football is having many negative effects on the fandom. Fans feel pushed out of the clubs' focus and are concerned about the future of football. Due to rising player salaries and transfer sums, football loses its relation to reality and gives the fans the feeling of bearing the rising costs of the clubs in the form of rising prices for the fans (ticket prices, merchandise articles etc.) The global expansion in particular is seen as a big problem by the fans. Because of the efforts of clubs and associations to conquer new markets, decisions are increasingly being made in terms of economic aspects. Distributed match days, late kick-off times and the marketing of TV broadcasting rights or national matches abroad have an impact on the bond between fan and club.

In conclusion, it can be said that despite the negative perception of fans of growing commercialisation, the emotional attachment of fans to their club is strong and withstands the negative effects of commercialisation. However, it can be stated that clubs and associations should re-focus their decisions and interests on the fans in order to prevent a loss of the fan base. Although the study revealed that the current situation of commercialisation does not influence the bond between fan and club as much as initially assumed, tendencies were identified which indicate a gradual deterioration of the bond in the medium to long term. The current threat to clubs and associations relates more to the loss of interest in football in general.

As explained above, the bond between fan and club is currently still too strong to be affected in the short term by commercialisation. However, in addition to the findings regarding the bond between a fan and a club, it was observed that commercialisation already has a major impact on the interest in football in general. Among the interviewed fans, some stated that the interest had already decreased and that the focus is more on the club itself. This would inevitably have a financial impact on the clubs and associations.

In reflection of the results and the detailed analysis of fan statements, clubs and associations must attempt to establish a dialogue with their fans. Results indicate that despite the rising negative atmosphere in stadiums and rising prices, fans continue to support their clubs, although the current degree of commercialisation is seen as damaging. This clearly shows that the fans are primarily looking for more appreciation on the side of the clubs and that decisions are not only made in terms of economic aspects.

There is no static model or guideline that can be developed, the aim here is to establish direct contact with the fans and to establish a dialogue with each other. The findings in this

study can serve as a guide for a possible cooperation with the fans. Due to the strong emotional bond between fans and clubs, clubs and associations are provided with the opportunity of not losing fans in the medium to long term through commercialisation.

The interviewed fans also showed a certain understanding for commercialisation in the conducted interviews, but the future of football has to be shaped together in collaborative dialogues so that both sides benefit from it and football does not lose its values such as fan culture and tradition.

It should also be mentioned that despite all expectations, the study showed a much deeper bond between fans and clubs than was initially assumed. Even fans from the experience-oriented fan group declared a strong bond to the club. This shows that the bond to the club is not only reserved for members of the football-addicted fan group, but that instead almost every fan feels a certain bond to the club. This can be explained for example by the family-based introduction or the regional proximity to the club. These results lead to the assumption that clubs and associations will not lose the fans in the short term despite the current commercial situation, but that they need to think about possible solutions in the medium to long term.

Although important results have been obtained within this study, this work also reveals certain limitations. Narrative interviews stimulate emotions and the narrative flow. However, due to the different emotional situations of the participants, the statements cannot always be perfectly overlaid and compared. The selection of the fans is also limited to a local as well as a national level in the range of German football clubs. A conversion model for the sports sector could not be developed. In the course of the study, it was found that the bond between fan and club is not comparable with the bond between human and brand. No transitional forms were found in which fans lose interest in the club and look for a new club.

The current literature only provides evidence of the increasing commercialisation. It usually provides only the effects, without taking into account the correlations of the commercialisation on the bond or the needs of the fans. Therefore, the results of this research are of scientific and practical value. Since commercialisation is a growing process, the development of the results and the emotional bond between fan and club should be analysed again in the near future.

Even though a strong bond could be observed despite the current degree of commercialisation, it would be an opportunity to re-examine the identified tendencies of a deterioration in this bond in the near future. Only then it is possible to determine whether the bond between fan and club can withstand the development of commercialisation in the long term.

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