
ARE ULTRAS MORE VIOLENT THAN OTHER FAN GROUPS? EVIDENCE ON REPORTED INCIDENCES IN GERMAN FOOTBALL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Synopsis:

The Ultra movement has become a popular fan group in European football with Germany being a stronghold. Lately, supporters in general and specifically the Ultras have been accused for tendencies to violent behaviour. Yet, broader and rigorous empirical evidence is missing in the literature. The present study therefore performs a quantitative content analysis of reported incidences ($N=107$) in German football over five seasons. It is shown, *inter alia*, that the Ultras are less violent than alleged but rather engage in partially dangerous use of pyros. Current fan policies may thus be modified.

Abstract:

Aim of abstract/paper – research question

While the Ultras' fan groups have spread from 1960's Italy all over Europe, maybe, this supporters' movement has one of their strongest footholds in Germany (Pilz & Wölki-Schumacher, 2010). The governing bodies of the German Bundesliga are comparatively aware of the notion of "fan culture" and supporters' sensitivity towards "overcommercialization." So the German Football League corporation (DFL) decided to preserve standing areas in the stadia and keep the ticket prices stable, particularly in the low categories. Today, Ultra groups are seen as the most prominent fan movement in Germany and respected for their dedication and travelling to away games, choreographies and continuous chants in the stadium as well as for their social engagement and opposition to right tendencies in the stands (Gabler, 2010). However, Ultras are repeatedly criticized for their provocative self-staging, use of pyros and alleged readiness to violence (Pilz & Wölki-Schumacher, 2010). The media coverage and public debate in Germany literally escalated after heavy use of pyros and a massive pitch invasion at the relegation match of Fortuna Düsseldorf against Hertha BSC Berlin on 15 May 2012. Still, the public sensitivity for hooliganism in football is high and comes up at every report of

even minor incidences. However, the allegation of a growth of violence among supporters in German football and the specific role of the Ultras warrants closer empirical scrutiny in order to design an effective fan governance.

Literature review

The Ultra phenomenon is increasingly dealt with in the sport sociological literature (Gabler, 2010; Pilz & Wölki-Schumacher, 2010). The roots of the movement, the behaviour of the groups as well as its expansion in diverse countries across Europe is described and discussed. The relation of Ultras to violence is always a subject of special consideration. However, apart from police reports and the like, it is only lately that systematic empirical research is done on the measurement and perception of the prevalence of violence among football fans. So Anthonj, Emrich and Pierdzioch (2013) calculate ratios of incidences reported by officials per attendance and compare them over time and to other offenses. Moreover, they interview a sample of fan workers and conclude that there is no increase of fan violence over time nor is the prevalence higher than in other areas of society. This is in line with Ranc (2011) who discusses the exaggerations on the topic in his media analysis. On the other hand, Avgerinou and Giakoumatis (2012) show for the case of Greece that there is indeed a threat that attendance may decline in presence of hooliganism. Yet, the empirical situation remains unclear and undifferentiated.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Therefore, the present study performs a quantitative content analysis of reported violent incidences in German football by matchdays of the three top divisions, relegation fixtures, friendly and FA Cup matches. So far, five seasons from 2007/08 to 2011/12 are covered by the data collection comprising N=107 incidences. But currently, the empirical work is ongoing to add the latest seasons to the dataset. Sources are official websites of football governing bodies, the police union, diverse sport and news portals as well as Ultra forums which are searched by relevant key words. Assessed categories are, inter alia, date, season, competition, fixture, involved clubs and fan groups, location (outside/inside the stadium, fan curve, train station etc.), type of incidence and violence (riots, use of pyros, throwing objects, assaults etc.). The categories are counted, partly censored to capture, e.g., intensities of violence and analysed by both descriptive and inference statistics using Stata 13.0 SE.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

In line with Anthonj et al. (2013), the number of incidences show a discontinuous pattern over the seasons with a substantial decline in season 2009/10 and a constant increase thereafter. Therefore, it is imperative to update the data for the period after 2012 when the public debate was at its high. Yet, distinguishing incidences by location and type of violence reveals that the increase after 2009 is largely explained by a stricter reporting of the use of pyros with no one having been hurt. Finally, this is the major offense regularly committed by the Ultras as part of their culture while more severe violent acts are rather attributable to other fan groups who, moreover, misbehave more often outside the stadium in less controllable environments. Though further data analyses remain to do, it may already be concluded that anti-violence policies should better adapt to these differences in behaviour.

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