

# **Brand Image and Fandom of Professional Football Clubs - An Empirical Study of Brand Characteristics and Facets of Fandom in Social Media for Germany as Point in Case**

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## **Aim and Theoretical Background**

In sports, particularly in football, brand image plays an increasingly important role for clubs and their (financial) success. However, media usage has changed dramatically in recent years and so has the relationship between brands and their consumers. In sports digital media enable new types of interactions between clubs and fans, which makes optimizing brand image and communication indispensable for staying competitive. Our proposed contribution shall elaborate the characteristics of football clubs' brand images based on specific types of fandom and their engagement in social media as well as their consumption of football content across different media categories in general by investigating what differences in fans' loyalty, fandom and media usage concerning their favorite club brand exist, what they could be based on and how they depend on each other. To find out, we took the German Bundesliga as a point in case. Although there are several publications on partial aspects, there is no such encompassing study yet highlighting contrasting aspects of clubs as brands and their fan's media usage patterns, specifically in social media, and linking both of them into a coherent construct. Using established measuring instruments and applying them to the new possibilities of communication should guarantee a realistic assessment of the current situation.

While Stokburger-Sauer, Bauer and Exler (2008) offer a theoretical underpinning of brand image and a related instrument to its measurement, do Trail, Robinson and Kim (2008) provide a general typology of fandom in context of the Points of Attachment (PAI) Scale and the Sport Interest Inventory (SII) scale by Funk, Ridinger and Moorman (2003). How football fandom is performed in social media, we try to understand on the basis of the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) by Wann & Branscombe (1993), Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) by Wann (1995) and a later investigation by Stewart, Smith, and Nicholson (2003). In addition to that, brand engagement in social media shall be studied along the lines proposed by Kolo et al. (2018).

Although already in 2001 Gladden and Funk developed dimensions of brand image in professional sports and associated these to brand loyalty and in 2008 Stokburger-Sauer, Bauer and Exler studied the individual dimensions of brand image on the basis of German Bundesliga in general, no categories that may serve as specific differentiator between clubs were derived. Furthermore, the relation of brand characteristics with media usage (particularly the active use of social media as a fan) remained obscure.

## **Research Questions**

The previous investigations lead to the following research questions for this paper:

- 1: How is the new media usage changing the relationship between football brands and their fans?
- 2: What are the existing differences between characterizations of individual football brands and their fandoms in social media and are they qualitatively diverse?

3: How shows the current media usage behavior of football fans off and does brands (clubs, sponsors, etc.) have to react on it?

### **Methods**

To shed light on these issues, 1.637 football fans of German Bundesliga clubs were questioned about their favorite club and their behavior in social media.

In a first step we want to understand the relationships of brand image and fandom for the Bundesliga clubs. We study that by applying a principal component analysis on brand characteristics and general aspects of fandom respectively, based on validated instruments from Bauer's Brand Image Concept, SII, SSIS and SFMS (see above). The result suggests a factorization into 4 respectively 5 components. A cluster analyses will show whether clusters related to brand characteristics and general aspects of fandom correspond.

These clusters are then in a second step studied in the light of different patterns of general media usage, concerning contents of the clubs. A third step shall shed light on how these general patterns translate to specific aspects of fandom in social media and specific patterns of social media usage respectively.

To control for sociodemographic patterns, age groups, formal education, gender as well as regional roots and current place of residence were distinguished. However, the survey is not representative along these dimensions.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Ultimately, our proposed contribution leads to a better understanding of German football clubs as brands and their fans. The results definitely elucidate the relationship of football clubs and their fans engagement beyond Bundesliga and even football. They serve also as a framework for managerial decisions on the sports club level. Leveraging brand impact by directed social media activities and an efficient integration of content of the club, its players as well as football in general shall improve commercial activities comprising sales of merchandise as well as sponsoring contracts. Differentiating the different Bundesliga clubs' activities concerning fandom in social media and its success therein based on audience measures highlight best practices for clubs with international ambitions as well as for the clubs playing rather a domestic role.

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