

# United We Stand? How and When Prototypical Fan Behavior of Satellite Fans Improves Local Fans' Attitudes toward Them

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## **Aim**

Since the home markets of European football clubs are widely saturated, the teams increasingly engage in internationalization strategies, i.e. they attempt to attract new fans in other countries (referred to as “satellite fans”), especially in Asia. However, the literature addressing the internationalization of team sports brands is sparse and focusses predominantly on the perspective of satellite fans or theoretical classifications of internationalization strategies (e.g., Kerr & Gladden 2008). Since the local fans' acceptance of both the internationalization process and the new members of their team's fan base are essential for the clubs, this paper examines determinants and conditions that influence the local fans' attitudes toward satellite fans of their favorite team.

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979), theory on the formation of groups and the in-group-bias phenomenon (Mullen et al. 1992), we argue that the local fans' attitudes toward satellite fans of their team depends on the prototypicality (vs. non-prototypicality) of the satellite fans' behavior as fans of the team. Generally, large communities are based on depersonalized attraction rather than personal attributes (Prentice, Miller & Lightdale 1994). Thus, people tend to accept others who act in a way that is prototypical for the group as members of the group (Hogg, Hardie & Reynolds 1995). Thus, prototypical fan behavior should increase perceptions of entitativity, which is defined as a feeling of “group-ness” (here: of the local fans and the satellite fans) or the recognition of a social unit as a group (Blanchard, Caudill & Walker, 2018). Due to the positive in-group bias, higher entitativity should in turn be positively related to attitudes toward the satellite fans (Mullen et al. 1992). Thus, we hypothesize that prototypical fan behavior (vs. non-prototypical fan behavior) results in higher perceptions of entitativity (H1). Moreover, we suggest that prototypical fan behavior results in more positive attitudes toward satellite fans among the local fans and that this effect is mediated through perceptions of entitativity (H2). We further propose that the effect of prototypical behavior on perceptions of entitativity is moderated by the extent to which local fans fear a loss of their economic and identity-related resources to satellite fans through the process of internationalization (H3). Higher levels of such fear should reduce the effects of prototypical fan behavior on perceived entitativity.

## **Research Design and Data Analysis**

We conducted an online experiment with a one factorial between-subjects design (Fan behavior of satellite fans: prototypical vs. non-prototypical + control: prototypical behavior of local fans). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental groups and received an excerpt from a fictional documentary about Chinese satellite fans (control: local fans) of their team. Based on pretests and previous literature, we identified three aspects that determine the prototypicality of fan behavior: strong emotional responses to game outcomes (vs. indifferent responses), high loyalty regardless of the on-pitch performance (vs. loyalty that depends on success) and extensive knowledge about the club, its history and tradition (vs. limited knowledge). Participants included fans of seven clubs of the German Bundesliga

(N=307). The stimuli and measures were slightly adjusted depending on which of the seven clubs a participant followed as a fan.

### **Results and Implications**

The findings of our study provide support for H1, H2, and H3. Prototypical (vs. non-prototypical) fan behavior of the satellite fans significantly increased perceived entitativity of the group and resulted in more positive attitudes toward the satellite fans. In addition, perceived entitativity mediates the effect of prototypical behavior on attitudes. Finally, the effect of prototypical behavior on entitativity was moderated by local fans' fear of losing resources through the process of internationalization. Interestingly, for those with low fears of losing resources, the level of group entitativity in the prototypical satellite fan group was even at the same level as in the prototypical local fan control group.

### **Discussion**

This study is the first to examine the behavior of satellite fans from the perspective of the local fan community. Our findings suggest that teams should try to convey their tradition and fan culture to foreign fans in order to increase local fans' acceptance of satellite fans as new members of the community. Local fans' concerns about losing resources (e.g., lower ticket availability, less attractive kick-off times, or a decrease in the regional identity of their team) should be taken seriously and, if possible, cleaned out. The results further imply that behavioral patterns seem to be more important in defining group membership among fans than nationality.

### **References**

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