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The commercialization of football as a communication crisis? An analysis of the dissatisfaction of German fans

Kommerzialisierung des Fußballs als Kommunikationskrise? Eine Analyse zur Unzufriedenheit deutscher Fans

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Summary: The paper assesses the perceived influence of commercialization on the relationship quality with clubs and the consumer behavior of German football fans. For a deep and broad understanding, this paper combines two different methodological approaches: The quantitative approach in study 1 (N = 821) focuses on fans' views on different aspects of commercialization. When differentiating between fan groups, active fans generally display a very critical attitude, which can also be attributed to their relationship and communication with the clubs. Therefore, the qualitative study 2 (27 interviews with club and association representatives as well as fans) focuses on communication of dynamics related to commercialization between football's major stakeholders. The findings show that both active fans and casual spectators express an understanding for general commercialization but feel that the limit of commercialization has been reached. The fans neither feel that their opinions are considered, nor do they feel sufficiently involved in communication processes on the issue.

Keywords: commercialization, active fans, communication, stakeholders, against modern football

Zusammenfassung: Die Studie untersucht den wahrgenommenen Einfluss der Kommerzialisierung auf die Beziehungsqualität zwischen deutschen Fußballvereinen und ihren Fans. Um ein tiefgreifendes Verständnis über die Perspektive der Stakeholder, insbesondere der Fußballfans, zu erlangen, kombiniert diese Arbeit

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zwei verschiedene methodische Ansätze: Der quantitative Ansatz in Studie 1 konzentriert sich auf die Sicht der Fans hinsichtlich verschiedener Aspekte der Kommerzialisierung (N = 821). Der Beitrag differenziert zwischen unterschiedlichen Fan-Gruppen. Dabei zeigt sich eine generell sehr kritische Haltung der aktiven Fans, was vordergründig auf die Beziehung bzw. Kommunikation mit den Vereinen zurückzuführen ist. Daher konzentriert sich die qualitative Studie 2 (27 Experteninterviews mit Vereins- und Verbandsvertretern sowie Fans) auf die Kommunikation zwischen den wichtigsten Akteuren des Fußballs. Zusammengefasst zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass sowohl aktive Fans als auch Zuschauer Verständnis für eine generelle Kommerzialisierung zeigen, dennoch die Mehrheit empfindet, dass die Grenze der Kommerzialisierung erreicht ist. Die Fans haben weder das Gefühl, dass ihre Meinung berücksichtigt wird, noch fühlen sie sich ausreichend in die Kommunikation dazu einbezogen.

Schlüsselwörter: Kommerzialisierung, Aktive Fans, Kommunikation, Stakeholder, Against Modern Football

1 Introduction

Gammelsæter (2021) asked if sports can survive its excessive commercialization. During the last decades, different authors emphasized the critical impact of commercialization on sports and the relation to its fans (García and Zheng 2017; Kim and Trail 2011; Slack 2004; Stewart 2014; Storm et al. 2017). Commercialization itself is an umbrella term summarizing dynamics of prioritizing short-term revenues e.g. by presence of sponsors, internationalization or implementing investors. This also affects sports and its fans, one of its key stakeholders (Brandt and Kurscheidt 2022; Senaux 2008). German fans, who are the focus of this paper, have a long history of protesting against the “commercial beast”. In 2000 they started a campaign called “Pro 15:30” for fan friendly kick-off times. The latest example drawing mass attention was their protest against selling parts of league stocks to external investors. As part of their protest, they interrupted matches for several minutes. In early 2024, the league officially stopped the bidding process after investors withdrew their bids (Perasović et al. 2025). The example emphasizes the relevance of understanding fans’ attitudes towards commercialization. Parallel the example indicates problems in the relationship and communication between fans, the German Football Federation (DFB) and the clubs as members of the German Football League (DFL). Kim and Trail (2011) developed a concept of five psychological elements for relationship quality and their effects on consumer behavior. Our research transfers this concept to German football fans and investigates how

aspects of commercialization affect fans and their relationship to football and its organizations.

Most of the existing literature often speaks rather unspecific of the fan's rejection of commercialization (Winell et al. 2023). Some studies, e.g. on German (Bauer et al. 2005) and Scottish (Giulianotti 2005) fans already show that fans judgement is varying on different aspects of commercialization. Although the data is more than two decade old and does not cover recent developments in sports, they emphasize that different elements of commercialization need to be distinguished to understand the dynamics.

Similarly, it is important to emphasize that there is no such thing as "the" fans that represent a club or speak with one voice per se. Hence, in recent decades, scientists have elaborated manifold typologies of fans concerning their identification, support, consumption, governance, or political attitudes (Weber et al. 2022). Some typologies (e.g., Giulianotti 2002; Jaeger 2021) identified different attitudes towards commercialization of different types of fans. This study investigates attitudes of two types of fans, called active and attendance. In addition to that the study differentiates between attitudes to commercialization of fans of different clubs, those of corporation-owned-clubs and membership-clubs. A further relevant element is to differentiate between the relations to different sport organizations. While fans have a close relationship with their club, the relationship to the national and international associations is often more negative (Kaden et al. 2023).

Based on the described background and its differentiation, the study focuses on the following questions: How do fans judge commercialization with regard to its different forms? Are there different views between fan types? How important is communication in the relationship quality between fans and clubs?

To answer these questions, a triangulation of two studies was chosen. A first study, based on a survey of football fans, aims to elaborate the attitudes of different fan types. The second study of the paper focuses on how problems of commercialization are communicated to the fans. Based on expert interviews, it examines the communication between relevant stakeholders of football: fans, clubs and associations.

Our study offers the following main contribution to sport sociology and management research. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, it includes for the first time a differentiated view of commercialization according to different fan types and club governance forms. Secondly, we show the differences and similarities in perception between fan groups, but also that active fans are not per se against commercialization, as often conveyed in the literature. Additionally the second study provides deeper insight into the fact that active fans are not sufficiently involved in communication, and our study shows for the first time that the clubs can distort communication as a black box.

2 Theoretical background

This section consists of three parts. *First*, the theoretical framework for fan club relationships, based on Kim and Trail (2011) is introduced. *Second*, the literature on commercialization affecting this relationship is reflected. While the previous sections treat fans as a homogeneous group, the *third* section reviews literature that highlights differences between fan groups and examines how commercialization affects their relationships with clubs in distinct ways. The combination of these elements culminates in the model shown in figure 1.

2.1 Fan club relationship

The article, including both sub-studies, investigates fans and their relationship towards recent developments in sport and to the organizations representing football, which is reflected in the quality of the relationship. Relationship quality describes the “[o]verall assessment of the strength of a relationship” (Palmatier et al. 2006: 139), which consists of different factors. Referring to Crosby et al. (1990), Kim and Trail (2011) elaborate a conceptual framework describing how the *relationship quality*, mediated by psychological, and demographic characteristics influences (sport-)consumers behavior. Consumer behavior includes elements like following matches as *attendance* or via *media*, *cheering* for a team, buying *merchandise* or *recommending (communication)* the sport by word of mouth to others. Relationship quality consists of *trust*, *commitment*, *intimacy*, *reciprocity*, and *self-connection*. *Trust* is when one party believes that the other party will meet their needs through their actions. *Commitment* means that one partner in a relationship thinks the relationship is so important that they will do everything they can to keep it going. They believe the relationship is worth the effort to make it last a long time. *Intimacy* means customers (fans) feeling a close relationship similar to personal relationships. *Reciprocity* describes the idea that people should return favors and act kindly towards others based on how those others have acted in the past. In relationships, like between sports fans and sports organizations, both sides need to feel that they are giving and receiving equally for the relationship to continue. *Self-connection* is how much an organization or community helps someone express important parts of their identity or who they are (Kim et al. 2011; Kim and Trail 2011). In the model, the influence of relationship quality on consumer behavior is influenced by psychological and demographic characteristics. In figure 1 the framework is mainly represented in the pillars in the middle and on the right.

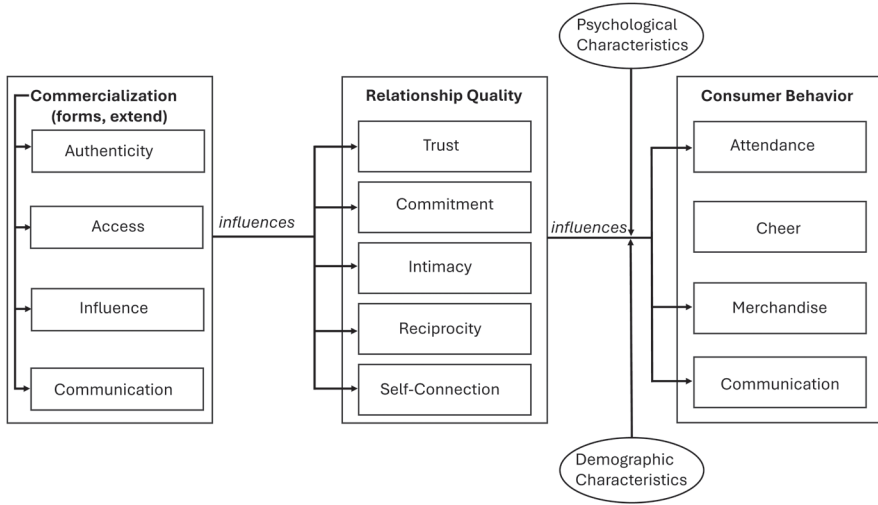


Fig. 1: Relation between commercialization, relationship quality, and consumer behavior (adapted from Kim and Trail 2011)

2.2 Commercialization

Kim and Trail (2011: 57) describe that spectators are “increasingly discontented and disconnected” from their sport and its organizations. They identified dynamics elsewhere described as commercialization for this process. Commercialization is an “indelible driving force” (Chang and Kwak 2023: 1040) in sports. It is a virulent and difficult topic for sports organizations, clubs, and fans. Ma and Kurscheidt (2022: 360) characterize commercialization as “a change process of the structures of resource allocation toward a greater use of the market mechanism” as teams’ orientation or prioritization came to generate profit and not just success (Gerrad 2004; Winell et al. 2023). In that regard, a large quantitative survey on European football fans shows their limited trust in clubs and owners, as one factor of relationship quality, as they are more concerned about money than the club (García and Llopis-Goig 2020). A recent literature review (Winell et al. 2023) clustered different effects of commercialization on sport fans, including negative effects on identity as essential elements of self-connection. A study of Kaden et al. (2024) emphasizes that fans judge different aspects of commercialization differently. They also care about the competitiveness of their teams, even in examples of an ethical controversial take-over, as in the case of Newcastle United’s take-over by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (Jones et al. 2023).

Relevant aspects of commercialization are described in the left pillar of figure 1. One important element of fandom is the perception of *authenticity*, which can be undermined by commercial influences. Judgments about what is considered “authentic” or “commercial” are shaped by fans’ subjective knowledge (Brandt and Kurscheidt 2022) and can be influenced by various factors. Among these are symbols perceived as integral to a club’s identity or DNA. Bauer et al. (2005) found that the commitment of German football fans is strongly influenced by what they call the “brand image”—including elements such as the club logo and colors, the stadium, club culture and values, and regional roots. International examples further illustrate how changes to these elements can provoke negative reactions from fans. These include relocating or redesigning stadiums (Edensor and Millington 2010), renaming clubs (Hayton et al. 2017), altering club colors (Kennedy and Kennedy 2015), or renaming stadiums to reflect sponsor interests. Another critical issue is player salaries. Internationally (Dubal 2010), and especially in Germany, fans have criticized the growing disconnect between players and supporters, who often inhabit very different social worlds and struggle to relate to one another (Kaden et al. 2024). Showing commercial sponsors placement—particularly on emotionally charged symbols like the matchday jersey—can also lead to feelings of alienation and perceptions of inauthenticity, depending on fans’ individual evaluations. The effect increases when ethical problems may occur related to that brand (Brandt and Kurscheidt 2022). Similarly, certain events or entertainment elements may be seen as inauthentic if they clash with fans’ expectations of what football should look like. A notable example from Germany is the protest against a halftime show featuring pop singer Helene Fischer during a cup final (Fritz 2019).

Another issue for fans is *access* to their club and its services. When access is limited and fans are hindered in their practices, it can lead to feelings of alienation (Kaden et al. 2026). Accessibility takes various forms depending on specific fan practices, such as the ability to watch broadcasted matches or attend home and away games. These aspects are influenced by commercialization in different ways. The existing literature discusses rising ticket prices (Webber 2017), increasing broadcasting costs (Kaden et al. 2023), and inconvenient matchday schedules, such as midweek games or impractical kick-off times, which particularly affect away fans (Numerato 2015). Once again, fans feel disrespected by sports organizations. In our survey different aspects of authenticity and access are summarized as modern football.

Several studies emphasize that German fans value the ability to *influence* their clubs through participatory rights. Some fan groups fight to keep their status as a so-called e.V., a non-profit organization based on membership (Perasović et al. 2025). Bauers et al. (2019) show that fans strongly support maintaining the 50+1 rule to ensure their influence. According to that rule more than 50% of voting rights must belong to a membership-based organization. Uhrich (2021) describes a sense

of psychological ownership among fans, noting that even those who do not actively use their participatory rights still feel more connected to their club when such rights exist. In contrast, developments linked to commercialization often reduce fan influence. Investors who acquire clubs and take control of them act primarily in accordance with their own interests (Torchia 2020). Similarly, sponsors can exert partial influence depending on a club's financial dependence on them (Slack and Amis 2004). The literature describes a shift toward viewing fans as passive consumers with diminished influence. These consumers are more easily replaceable, which reduces the sense of reciprocity and intimacy (Giulianotti 2002; Cleland 2010; Webber 2017; Brandt and Kurscheidt 2022). This shift contributes to declining fan commitment, as many supporters criticize their clubs for becoming businesses that betray their supporters and local communities (Doidge et al. 2020). As a result, fans increasingly accuse clubs and associations of prioritizing profits over fan interests.

An additional factor influencing relationship quality is *communication*, partially related to participation (Achen 2019; Lee et al. 2020). A lack of communication creates fans' estrangement, while working communication counteracts this (Kaden et al 2026). Senaux (2008: 16) criticizes communication by the clubs as "espoused objectives often differ from objectives-in-use [as the] economic maximization is rarely expressed, contrary to sporting performance which is over accentuated." Zheng and García (2017: 281) bemoan a "limited, sporadic, conditional and often rhetorical supporter engagement" given an "unwillingness to include supporters in the decision-making," which is why communication belongs to the left pillar in figure 1. Scientific research on stakeholder relations in football has concentrated primarily on the relationship between clubs and fans (Choluj et al. 2020; Junghagen 2018) or, to a lesser extent, between associations and clubs (Schubert 2014). Communication between other stakeholders is often only partially considered within these publications, if at all. According to Watzlawick et al. (2011: 13), "communication is a *conditio sine qua non* [indispensable prerequisite] of human life and social order," and all human behavior is communication. Given the importance of communication, various communication theories, models, and concepts have developed in scientific literature over time. Lasswell (1948: 37) describes the act of communication as an answer to the following questions: "Who? Says what? In which channel? To whom? With what effect?" Watzlawick et al. (2011) argue that it is impossible not to communicate, since not acting or remaining silent also has a character of communication. Another axiom is that every communication has not only a content aspect but also imposes behavior: The relationships between (active) fans and associations have been little studied so far, which is why García and Welford (2015: 525) find "significant gaps in terms of academic knowledge and debate around football supporters and their involvement in governance structures." Therefore, their involvement through communication will be examined in the second study.

2.3 Fans

Various taxonomies on fans indicate a distinction between different types of fans (Weber et al. 2022). García and Llopis-Goig (2020) elaborate a taxonomy of fans' trust in governance organizations. Giulianotti (2002) characterized supporters and followers, corresponding to his taxonomy, as individuals who have a traditional relationship with their club, focusing on traditions, and subcultural relations opposing commercialization. For this article, the taxonomy of Jaeger (2021) is relevant. Based on this, to consider fans' diversity, we distinguish between active fans and attendances ("normal" fans). Active fans are characterized by a high level of organization, high matchday involvement, and a high consumption of home and away matches. They are fans from an ultra group or a self-organized fan group, who participate with active support during (and possibly before) the match and attend many, in our study, even twice as many as attendances, matches. Active fans are described as more critical to commercialization than other fans, which we call attendances. Active fans often produce their own merchandise, which they perceive as more authentic/less commercialized. Attendances summarize Jaeger's (2021) three other types: event fans, corporation fans and passive followers. These fans attend fewer, selected or even no games, are less or not organized, and show less involvement. Their attitudes towards commercialization are described as heterogeneous. For Giulianotti (2002) fans and flaneurs, corresponding to attendance, are more consumer driven and related to practices of commercialization.

A second differentiation in this paper exists between the clubs the fans follow. German football is known for its members/fans' participatory rights (Ward and Hines 2017). Historically, all clubs are non-profit based on equal members' rights by one person one vote as a fundamental principle. Since 1998, clubs have been allowed to spin off their professional teams. Different clubs used different legal forms for that (Adam et al. 2020). But even in these cases, more than 50% of the voting rights must remain at the non-profit organization (Bauers et al. 2019). Members of these clubs can claim to still have the (at least) psychological ownership (Uhrich 2021) of their club. Therefore, we call them membership-clubs, even if their influence is limited.

Four exceptions from this exist. The clubs Bayer Leverkusen and VfL Wolfsburg are historically 100% owned by the companies Bayer and Volkswagen. TSG Hoffenheim was 100% owned by a private owner, who transferred his club in 2023 to the non-profit organization. Prior to it, the patron Hopp became a symbol figure of commercialization and target of banter by chants and banners (Meier-Vieracker 2023). The latest exception is RB Leipzig. RB Leipzig is formally registered as member based non-profit organization. However, limited access to membership exists. As a result, the club has only a small number of voting members—many of

whom are closely affiliated with Red Bull GmbH, the club's primary sponsor and de facto owner. These four exceptions limit members' possibility to participate, and the clubs were criticized by fans of other clubs as drivers of commercialization and inauthentic (Bresemann and Duttler 2017). In the following, we will use the expression corporation-owned-club, when they are majority owned by a company or single person, which is possible with special permits in Germany. In return to missing influence of these fans their clubs receive a kind of financial doping (Schubert and Hamil 2018), potentially providing advantages in the competition. Based on this general perception the article investigates whether fans of these clubs differ in their perceptions of commercialization.

Reflecting the literature shows how external dynamics, like commercialization with its characteristics, e.g. communication and participation, influence the different dimensions of relationship quality and consumer behavior. This list is not exhaustive and focusses mainly on findings about football fans in Europe. Further research may add further factors. However, the above-mentioned will be relevant in the context of both following studies (figure 2).

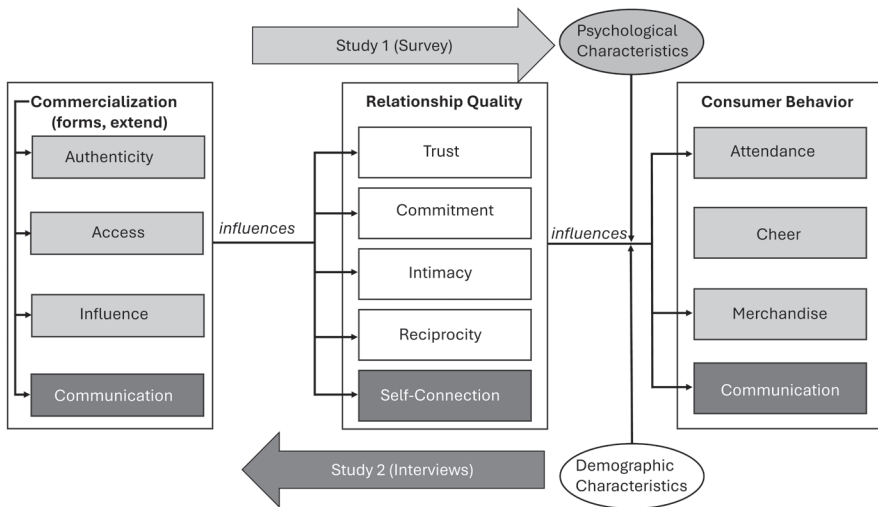


Fig. 2: Overview of the study design based on the theoretical model according to Kim and Trail (2011)

3 Study 1: Attitudes towards commercialization

3.1 Research Design and Measurement

This empirical study seeks to provide insights into supporter behavior and attitudes, with a particular focus on how different fan groups perceive the current level of commercialization in German professional football. A multipurpose, highly structured, online questionnaire was used, designed to be versatile and broad enough to capture the potentially wide range of opinions, attitudes, and preferences among respondents (Eagly and Chaiken 2007). The construction of the questionnaire is based on relevant fan research, such as the psychological attachment of sports fans to their favorite team (Biscaia et al. 2018), and is still consistent with current studies on fans' perception of aspects of commercialization (Ma et al. 2024; Reichel et al. 2024; Uhrich 2021). The questionnaire comprised a total of 19 questions addressing fan and consumer behavior. As shown in Table 1, the questions were grouped into four categories representing determinants of the overall attitude toward football commercialization: (1) consumer behavior and favorite club, (2) assessment and perceived impact of commercialization, (3) consequences and consumer reactions, and (4) sociodemographic data.

The attitude was measured by an intuitive five-point Likert scale (1 = disagree to 5 = agree) throughout that has proven to be statistically equivalent to larger scales in recent methods research (e.g., Revilla et al. 2014). Beyond the discrete statements in the questionnaire's item variables, table 1 displays factor variables that encompass three to eleven theoretically related item variables (e.g., TA_SCHEDULE on item variables linked to changes in the match schedule). These variables are utilized to test broader constructs and to ensure the robustness of analyses. Factor variables are computed based on the represented item variables, except for EDUCATION and INCOME, which are quasi-ordinal variables indicating the level of education or income. Overall, 63 ordinal variables, seven binary variables, and five metric variables for the constructs of games attended/watched and age were included in the exploratory data analysis (75 variables in total).

Tab. 1: Overview of the item and factor variables.

Variable	N	val.	M	SD	Description
<i>Consumer behavior and favorite club</i>					
FAVCLUB	821	2	0.94	0.23	Favorite club (1=yes)
HOME	743	25	8.95	7.29	Home attendance per season (metric)
AWAY	728	21	4.00	4.89	Away attendance per season (metric)
AWAYOTHER	722	20	2.74	8.16	Attendance any team per season (metric)
TVINTERNET	704	56	32.76	56.29	Watching matches live on TV/internet (metric)
CL_IDENTIFIC	774	5	4.36	0.90	Identification with the club (1–5 scale)
CL_PARTOF	774	5	3.48	1.24	I feel like I'm part of the club (1–5 s.)
CL_PLACELIFE	774	5	3.63	1.29	Club has a central place in my life (1–5 s.)
CL_RESIDENCE	774	5	1.42	0.95	Change of residence influences fav. club (1–5 s.)
CL_WINLOSS	774	5	3.27	1.15	Win or loss has a strong effect on my mood (1–5 s.)
CL_LOYAL	774	5	4.76	0.62	I am loyal to club, even if it is relegated (1–5 s.)
CL_UPTODATE	774	5	4.55	0.77	Keep up to date with club (1–5 s.)
CL_MERCHANDISE	774	5	2.85	1.31	I regularly buy fan merchandise of club (1–5 s.)
CL_ACTIVEPART	774	5	3.25	1.58	Taking part in fan chants, choreos & fan gr. (1–5 s.)
PAYTV	820	2	0.54	0.50	Pay TV subscriber (1=yes)
MEMBER	821	2	0.46	0.50	Professional football club member (1=yes)
FANCLUB	821	2	0.19	0.39	Official fan club member (1=yes)
SELFFANCLUB	821	2	0.13	0.34	Self-organised fan club member (1=yes)
ULTRA	821	2	0.09	0.28	Ultra group member (1=yes)
NOMEMBER	821	2	0.23	0.42	None of the options (1=yes)
<i>Assessment and impact of commercialization</i>					
COMNECESS	809	5	3.69	1.14	Marketing of football necessary (1–5 s.)
ACTENTERPRISES	807	5	3.99	1.13	Clubs have to act like commerc. enterprises (1–5 s.)
ENTRYINVESTORS	811	5	2.89	1.41	Entry of investors necessary to keep compet. (1–5 s.)
BENEFITCOM	798	5	3.44	1.28	Clubs benefit from commercialization (1–5 s.)
SPINOFF	752	5	2.96	1.50	Spin off the prof. teams is meaningful (1–5 s.)
FIFTY_1RULE	715	5	4.11	1.17	The 50+1 rule protects the clubs (1–5 s.)
NONPROFITPURP	787	5	2.44	1.19	Clubs continue to pursue non-profit purpose (1–5 s.)
MODERNFOOTB*	821	39	2.24	0.62	Issues of modern football (mean of 11 items)
MATCHDAY	821	5	1.84	1.06	The division of the matchday is appropriate (1–5 s.)
SALARIES	821	5	1.60	0.88	Players' salaries & high transfer fees appropri. (1–5 s.)
PROFIT	821	5	2.62	1.07	My club should aim for profits (1–5 s.)
STARS	821	5	2.34	1.15	My club should buy top stars (1–5 s.)
REPLACESEATS	821	5	1.67	1.06	Replacing standing room by seating (1–5 s.)
PRICES	821	5	2.62	1.06	Ticket prices are reasonable (1–5 s.)
PRICESEXCLUD	821	5	3.20	1.15	Fans financ. excluded due to high ticket prices (1–5 s.)
COMFORT	821	5	2.20	1.08	Comfort of new stadia (incl. boxes) is good (1–5 s.)

Tab. 1 (continued)

Variable	N	val.	M	SD	Description
COMPETSPONSORS	821	5	4.11	0.95	Without sponsors, clubs are not competitive (1–5 s.)
SPONSORS	821	5	2.74	1.08	Presence of sponsors in stadia is good (1–5 s.)
NAMING	821	5	2.12	1.23	Selling naming rights of stadia is good (1–5 s.)
SHOW	821	5	2.09	1.17	Show elements on matchdays are good (1–5 s.)
COMPOSEFF	821	5	2.37	1.14	Positive effect commercialis. on prof. footb. (1–5 s.)
REJECTCOM	821	5	3.18	1.32	I generally reject commercialis. in prof. footb (1–5 s.)
LIMITREACHED	821	5	3.68	1.27	Limit of commercialis. has been reached (1–5 s.)
COMMERCE	821	5	3.93	1.13	Commercialization harms the fans (1–5 s.)
FANRIGHTS	821	5	4.03	1.03	Interests of the fans are not taken into account (1–5 s.)
FANS_SAYMEMAS	750	5	2.77	1.10	Fans have a say via the members' assembly (1–5 s.)
FANS_IMPORT	798	5	2.82	1.02	Clubs perceive fans as import/respect interests (1–5 s.)
FANS_LOSEINVEST	788	5	4.13	0.92	With entry of investors, fans lose influence (1–5 s.)
FANS_COMLIMITRI	763	5	4.00	1.02	Increasing commercialis. limiting fan rights (1–5 s.)
<i>Consequences and consumer reactions</i>					
LESSDEMAND*	821	25	2.31	1.04	Will demand less club services (mean of 6 items)
LESSATT	821	5	2.57	1.40	Will attend less games of my club (1–5 s.)
NOMERCH	821	5	3.16	1.48	Won't buy club merchandise anymore (1–5 s.)
LESSCHEER	821	5	1.86	1.15	Will cheer less for the club (1–5 s.)
GIVEUPFAN	821	5	2.08	1.25	Will give up lived fan culture (1–5 s.)
LOWERDIV	821	5	1.91	1.24	Would rather go to a lower div. club (1–5 s.)
TURNAWAY	821	5	2.28	1.37	Will quit football (1–5 s.)
TA_SCHEDULE*	447	18	4.08	0.75	Turn away: changes match schedule (mean of 4 items)
TA_GAMESAWAY	447	5	4.30	1.04	Turn away: games played in other countries (1–5 s.)
TA_KICKOFFTIMES	447	5	4.49	0.81	Turn away: kick-off times comply abroad (1–5 s.)
TA_EVENT	447	5	3.64	1.08	Turn away: game day becoming more event (1–5 s.)
TA_GAMESFRAGM	447	5	3.88	0.98	Turn away: game day is fragmented further (1–5 s.)
TA_DNA*	447	13	4.41	0.90	Turn away: changes name, logo, col. (mean of 3 ite.)
TA_CHANGENAME	447	5	4.38	0.98	Turn away: club changes name due to investor (1–5 s.)
TA_CHANGELOGO	447	5	4.40	0.97	Turn away: club changes logo due to investor (1–5 s.)
TA_CHANGECOL	447	5	4.45	0.94	Turn away: club changes colors due to invest. (1–5 s.)
TA_DECRATMOS	447	5	4.03	0.93	Turn away: stadium atmosphere decreases (1–5 s.)
TA_FIFTY_1ABOL	447	5	3.55	1.18	Turn away: 50+1 rule is abolished (1–5 s.)
TA_REPLSTANDS	447	5	3.51	1.18	Turn away: stands will replaced by seats (1–5 s.)
TA_SEVPAYTV	447	5	3.74	1.33	Turn away: several pay-TV subscr. are needed (1–5 s.)
TA_CLOSEDLEAG	447	5	3.58	1.35	Turn away: biggest europ. clubs form league (1–5 s.)
TA_BLSPONSOR	447	5	2.98	1.25	Turn away: Bundesliga gets a name sponsor (1–5 s.)

Tab. 1 (continued)

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>val.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Description
TA_FLAGSBANNED	447	5	3.51	1.29	Turn away: large flags, double-hol. be banned (1–5 s.)
TA_PYROLEGAL	447	5	2.04	1.34	Turn away: pyrotechnics is legalized (1–5 s.)
TA_TICKETINCR	447	5	4.07	0.88	Turn away: ticket prices will strongly increase (1–5 s.)
TA_MOREINVEST	447	5	3.82	0.93	Turn away: clubs offer investors more rights (1–5 s.)
<i>Sociodemographic data</i>					
GENDER	798	3	1.20	0.90	Gender (1=male, 2=female, 3=divers)
AGE	798	60	35.81	13.46	Age (years) [15; 78]
AGE2	798	60	1462	1098	Age (years) squared
EDUCATION	797	6	4.58	1.36	Education (1=no certificate; 6=Master's degree)
INCOME	767	6	3.42	1.52	Monthly net income (1<500€; 6>4,000€)

Notes: Variables are categorized by the item batteries in the questionnaire. *Factor variables* are marked by * and appear above the theoretically related *item variables* on discrete statements in the questionnaire, measured by five-point Likert scales and therefore, computed by the “quasi metric” means of the related three to eleven ordinal item variables, generating 13 to 39 unique values in function of the distribution of distinct “quasi metric” means. However, EDUCATION and INCOME (and GENDER) is “self-constructed” ordinal. In addition, further variables, e.g. SEAT and stadium COMPANIONSHIP are available and measured in dummy variables, but are not relevant for the results of the study.

To control common method bias we implemented (soft) methodological safeguards, because CMB is infrequently addressed by sport management researchers (Kaltsonoudi et al. 2021) and there is “no single best method for handling the problem” (Podsakoff et al. 2003: 899). Participants were informed that their personal opinions are very important to encourage honest and unbiased responses. Further, anonymity and confidentiality of the answers were also guaranteed. After a pretest phase, the questionnaire was distributed from July 26th to August 7th, 2019, the last season before the long interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, this data set is also of great importance in retrospect. The target population of the present survey consists of German-speaking football fans of the top three men's leagues who have access to the internet. Since it is not feasible to survey all individuals within the population, data were collected from a subset (partial survey) that “most accurately reflects the characteristics of the target population relevant to the study” (sample) (Micheel 2010: 66). The aim of the sample is to achieve what is known as representational inference—generalizing the findings obtained from the sample to the entire population (Raithel 2008). Therefore, the study employed a convenience sampling approach, whereby participants were recruited based on their availabil-

ity and accessibility rather than through random selection. While this non-probability sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings, it is commonly used in empirical research when practical constraints restrict access to the target population (Bornstein et al. 2013; Etikan et al. 2016).

The questionnaire was distributed via a link and a QR code in social networks (Facebook groups) and news services as the primary distribution channels. In addition, the fan representatives of all Bundesliga clubs were contacted by email with the request to distribute the survey via their own channels and to forward it to the fan clubs. Feedback was received from 18 of 56 clubs, and half of them supported the research by forwarding the questionnaire link. Ultimately, the response rate always depends on the personal interest and motivation of the participants. Accordingly, the current survey involves passive recruitment, i.e., self-selection by respondents, and is therefore classified as a convenience sample (Döring and Bortz 2016; Scholl 2018). Furthermore, it must be noted that the comparatively higher willingness to participate among individuals with a higher level of education in online surveys may lead to additional sample selectivity (Micheel 2010).

3.2 Data and description of the sample

A convenience sample of 1107 football fans took part in the survey, 768 of whom completed the questionnaire. In addition, all questionnaires completed up to and including Q12 were considered in the analysis ($n = 53$). The limit was set at Q12, as Q11 included the perception and Q12 the reactions of participants, which are relevant for the analysis.¹ Therefore, a total sample of $N = 821$ was used for the data evaluation. Most of the participants were male (80%), with a mean age of $M = 35.8$ years ($SD = 13.46$, range 15 to 78 years). The overwhelming majority of participants (94%) have a favorite club: 54% of those support a club from the 1st Bundesliga ($n = 416$), 32% a club from the 2nd Bundesliga ($n = 245$), and 14% of the participants favor a club from the 3rd division ($n = 113$).

Respondents were asked for information about their *fan status*. Those who stated that they were part of an ultra group, or a self-organized fan group were assigned to the group of “active fans” (19%), all others were summarized as a group of “attendance” (81%). Active fans visit on average 23.3 (home and away) matches, attendance on average 10.3 matches per season. Additionally, according to the respondents’ favorite clubs and the exceptions explained above, fans of TSG

¹ In addition, a questionnaire from an eleven-year-old participant was excluded, as it is assumed that at the age of eleven there is not yet a sufficient understanding of the topic of commercialization in professional football.

Hoffenheim (56), Bayer Leverkusen (16), VfL Wolfsburg (3) and RB Leipzig (6) were defined as “*corporation-owned-club fans/attendance*” (10%), all others as “*membership-club fans/attendance*” (90%). This distribution of fan groups, which at first glance appears uneven, reflects realistically the actual number of fans to be classified.² Table 2 shows the group distribution.

Tab. 2: Clustering of respondents according to fan status and favorite club

	<i>favorite club</i>	<i>membership-club</i>	<i>corporation-owned-club</i>
<i>fan status</i>	<i>N (%)</i>	740 (90.1%)	81 (9.9%)
<i>active fans</i>	153 (18.6%)	group 1 (124; 15.1%)	group 2 (29; 3.6%)
		<i>membership-club active fans</i>	<i>corporation-owned-club active fans</i>
<i>attendance</i>	668 (81.4%)	group 3 (616; 75.0%)	group 4 (52; 6.3%)
		(3) <i>membership-club attendance</i>	<i>corporation-owned club attendance</i>

From the preliminary theoretical consideration, it can be assumed that different spectator groups evaluate aspects of commercialization in football differently, so that the following analysis compares these groups of spectators.

3.3 Data analysis

The two-way ANOVA model was selected to assess the statistical significance of the differences in the mean values between quantitative regressands (here quasi-metric five-point Likert scales) and qualitative regressors (here four groups of football fans). If the value of each F-test exceeds the chance value, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted as having a probability of occurrence significantly above chance (Gujarati and Porter 2008). Since the ANOVA model does not indicate how strong the differences between the four groups of fans are, post-hoc analysis (Games and Howell, and for robustness check the Bonferroni test)³ is required. All data analyses were carried out with the statistical package Stata/SE 17.0.⁴

² It is difficult to estimate the exact number of fans per club, but a valid estimate of the respective order of magnitude can be made using a variety of sources (e.g., DFL 2025; Schmidt 2025).

³ The test for normal distribution was carried out using the Shapiro-Wilk test. In the present sample, there is mostly no normal distribution of the data that is why the non-parametric Games and Howell test is used. But due to the sufficiently large sample ($n \geq 30$), a normal distribution of the data set (central limit theorem) can nevertheless be assumed, so that the parametric Bonferroni test controls for robustness (Döring and Bortz 2016).

⁴ Additional details on the survey, data, and analysis are available upon request.

3.4 Results

Acceptance, rejection, and concerns of commercialization

The majority of fans accept a certain degree of commercialization as they predominantly agree with the statement that ‘The marketing of football is generally necessary’ (COMNECESS: $n = 809$; $M = 3.69$; $SD = 1.14$; with 1 = lowest and 5 = highest level of consent). With regard to ANOVA⁵, the estimated average evaluation per fan category by fan status (active fans/attendance) and favorite club (membership-club/corporation-owned-club), as displayed in table 3, is highly significant, but shows a low effect size of all groups⁶ ($F(3, 805) = 8.30, p < .00$).

Tab. 3: Consent to statement ‘The marketing of football is generally necessary’ (COMNECESS; $n = 809$), and significant differences between fan groups

ANOVA		M (Marg.)	SD	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
fan_status	active fans	3.288	.093	35.20	.001	3.104	3.471
	attendance	3.773	.043	85.81	.001	3.686	3.859
favorite_club	membership-club	3.655	.041	87.77	.001	3.573	3.736
	corporation-owned-club	3.930	.133	29.35	.001	3.667	4.193
fan_group	(1) memb-cl. act. fans	3.242	.101	32.12	.001	3.044	3.440
	(2) corp-ow. act. fans	3.714	.212	17.49	.001	3.297	4.131
	(3) memb-cl. att.	3.751	.046	82.16	.001	3.661	3.840
	(4) corp-ow. att.	3.980	.157	25.29	.001	3.671	4.289
post hoc test (Games and Howell)		Diff.					
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (3) memb-cl. att.		-.508	.112		.001	-.216	-.800
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.		-.738	.176		.001	-.276	-1.200

Although the active fans show a lower level of approval, they do not seem to be fundamentally opposed to the commercialization of football, but (clearly) more critical than attendance. There is also a slight, but not statistically significant, difference in the evaluation between membership-club and corporation-owned-club fans. Additionally, the Games and Howell⁷ post hoc test clarifies that there are signifi-

⁵ ANOVA results were computed using Type I sums of squares (Stata default). As the interaction term was not significant ($F(1, 805) = .72, p = .397$), the choice between Type I and Type III does not materially affect the main effects.

⁶ fan_status: $\eta^2 = .009$; favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .007$; fan_status#favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .001$

⁷ With the aforementioned assumption of the central limit theorem, further post hoc analyses were performed to check robustness using the Bonferroni test (parametric test). All the results mentioned in this section are clearly confirmed by this.

cant differences between (1) membership-club active fans and (3) membership-club attendance ($p < .001$), as well as (1) membership-club active fans and (4) corporation-owned-club attendance ($p < .001$).

Even if respondents accept a certain degree of commercialization, it shows highly significant differences between the groups, with small effect sizes⁸, with regard to the assessment 'The limit of football commercialization in Germany has been reached' (LIMITREACHED: $F(3,817) = 13.76$, $p < .001$; see table 4).⁹ Especially between the groups of (1) membership-club active fans and (4) corporation-owned-club attendance, Games and Howell post hoc test indicates strong significant differences (table 4).

Tab. 4: Consent to statement 'The limit of football commercialization in Germany has been reached' (LIMITREACHED; $n = 821$), and significant differences between fan groups

ANOVA		M (Marg.)	SD	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
fan_status	active fans	4.223	.103	40.94	.001	4.020	4.425
	attendance	3.550	.048	73.60	.001	3.455	3.644
favorite_	membership-club	3.722	.045	81.35	.001	3.632	3.812
club	corporation-owned-club	3.250	.146	22.16	.001	2.962	3.538
fan_group	(1) memb-cl. act. fans	4.274	.112	38.29	.001	4.055	4.493
	(2) corp-ow. act. fans	3.759	.231	16.28	.001	3.306	4.212
	(3) memb-cl. att.	3.596	.050	71.80	.001	3.497	3.694
	(4) corp-ow. att.	3.135	.172	18.18	.001	2.796	3.473
post hoc test (Games and Howell)	Diff.						
	(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (3) memb-cl. att.	.678	.109		.001	.394	.963
	(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.	1.139	.200		.001	.613	1.666
	(3) memb-cl. att. vs (4) corp-ow. att.	.461	.183		.062	-.023	.954

When looking at specific aspects regarding changes or interventions in traditional football habits, summarized as issues of modern football, it becomes clear that the four groups of football supporters rate these statements significant differently¹⁰ (factor variable MODERNFOOTB¹¹: $F(3,817) = 31.52$, $p < .001$; see table 5).¹² It turns out that (1) membership-club active fans are clearly more critical in all aspects than (4) corporation-owned-club attendance ($p < .001$).

8 fan_status: $\eta^2 = .021$; favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .012$; fan_status#favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .000$

9 No significant interaction effect of fan status and favorite club ($F(1,817) = .03$, $p < .862$).

10 The differences between the groups show low effect sizes: fan_status: $\eta^2 = .054$; favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .017$; fan_status#favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .000$

11 The selected items ($n = 11$) showing Cronbach's alpha scores of $\alpha = .79$.

12 No significant interaction effect of fan status and favorite club ($F(1,817) = .03$, $p < .866$).

Tab. 5: Consent to statements of issues of modern football (MODERNFOOTB; $n = 821$), and significant differences between fan groups

ANOVA		M (Marg.)	SD	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
fan_status	active fans	1.835	.049	37.35	.001	1.739	1.932
	attendance	2.334	.023	101.5	.001	2.289	2.379
favorite_club	membership-club	2.212	.022	101.5	.001	2.170	2.255
	corporation-owned-club	2.503	.070	35.81	.001	2.365	2.640
fan_group	(1) memb-cl. act. fans	1.809	.091	34.02	.001	1.704	1.913
	(2) corp-ow. act. fans	2.078	.042	18.90	.001	1.863	2.294
	(3) memb-cl. att.	2.305	.040	96.62	.001	2.258	2.352
	(4) corp-ow. att.	2.600	.082	31.66	.001	2.439	2.761
post hoc test (Games and Howell)		Diff.					
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (3) memb-cl. att.		-.496	.051		.001	-.362	-.630
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.		-.790	.097		.001	-.560	-1.021
(2) corp-ow. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.		-.521	.137		.001	-.203	-.839
(3) memb-cl. att. vs (4) corp-ow. att.		-.294	.085		.004	-.085	-.504

A central reason for active fans' critical assessment of commercialization may be their concern about losing influence and decision-making power. Therefore, the majority of fans (strongly) feel that the 'commercialization in German professional football harms the fan scene' (COMMERCE; $n = 821$; $M = 3.93$; $SD = 1.13$). Despite this overwhelming approval, there are clear differences between the groups ($F(3,817) = 19.51$, $p < .001$)¹³, with the very high approval ($p < .001$) of active fans differing significantly from that of attendance (with low effect sizes between the groups¹⁴, table 6).

Tab. 6: Consent to statement 'Commercialization in German professional football harms the fan scene' (COMMERCE; $n = 821$), and significant differences between fan groups

ANOVA		M (Marg.)	SD	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
fan_status	active fans	4.496	.090	49.62	.001	4.318	4.674
	attendance	3.796	.042	89.58	.001	3.712	3.879
favorite_club	membership-club	3.975	.040	98.90	.001	3.896	4.053
	corporation-owned-club	3.484	.128	27.04	.001	3.231	3.737
fan_group	(1) memb-cl. act. fans	4.532	.098	46.22	.001	4.340	4.725
	(2) corp-ow. act. fans	4.172	.203	20.58	.001	3.774	4.570
	(3) memb-cl. att.	3.847	.044	87.45	.001	3.761	3.934
	(4) corp-ow. att.	3.327	.151	21.97	.001	3.030	3.624
post hoc test (Games and Howell)		Diff.					

¹³ No significant interaction effect of fan status and favorite club ($F(1,817) = .34$, $p < .559$).

¹⁴ fan_status: $\eta^2 = .037$; favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .012$; fan_status#favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .000$

Tab. 6 (continued)

ANOVA	M (Marg.)	SD	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (3) memb-cl. att.	.685	.086		.001	.461 .908
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.	1.205	.188		.001	.710 1.700
(2) corp-ow. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.	.845	.281		.005	.100 1.590
(3) memb-cl. att. vs (4) corp-ow. att.	.521	.178		.006	.047 .993

Consequences and consumer reactions of increasing commercialization

The survey includes items on various potential (negative) implications of consumer behavior, like cheering less for the club (LESSCHEER), attending less games (LESSATT), or buying no longer merchandise (NOMERCH). Much stronger stated reactions could be giving up lived fan culture (GIVEUPFAN) or leaving for clubs in lower divisions (LOWERDIV). The strongest consequence would be an exit, meaning turning away from German professional football if commercialization of the Bundesliga increases (strongly) (TURNAWAY). The factor variable LESSDEMAND¹⁵ reveals strong differences in the stated reactions between the groups of football supporters ($F(3,817) = 15.15, p < .001$).¹⁶ Again, (1) membership-club active fans feel most affected in their stated consumer reaction and differ (strongly) from (3) membership-club attendance ($p < .001$) as well as (4) corporation-owned-club attendance ($p < .001$). Additionally, (4) corporation-owned-club attendance differs significantly from all other groups (table 7).¹⁷

Tab. 7: Consent to statements of issues of consumer reactions (LESSDEMAND; $n = 821$), and significant differences between fan groups

ANOVA	M (Marg.)	SD	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]
fan_group active fans	2.763	.083	33.01	.001	2.599 2.927
attendance	2.203	.039	56.28	.001	2.126 2.279
favorite_club membership-club	2.349	.037	63.29	.001	2.276 2.422
corporation-owned-club	1.922	.119	16.15	.001	1.688 2.156

¹⁵ The selected items ($n = 6$) showing Cronbach's alpha scores of $\alpha = .87$.

¹⁶ No significant interaction effect of fan status and favorite club ($F(1,817) = .39, p < .534$).

¹⁷ The differences between the groups show low effect sizes: fan_status: $\eta p^2 = .029$; favorite_club: $\eta p^2 = .011$; fan_status#favorite_club: $\eta p^2 = .000$

Tab. 7 (continued)

ANOVA		M (Marg.)	SD	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
fan_group	(1) memb-cl. act. fans	2.793	.091	30.83	.001	2.615	2.071
	(2) corp-ow. act. fans	2.494	.187	13.32	.001	2.127	2.862
	(3) memb-cl. att.	2.248	.041	55.32	.001	2.168	2.328
	(4) corp-ow. att.	1.792	.140	12.81	.001	1.517	2.066
post hoc test (Games and Howell)		Diff.					
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (3) memb-cl. att.		.544	.100		.001	.284	.805
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.		1.001	.137		.001	.642	1.360
(2) corp-ow. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.		.702	.211		.015	.138	1.266
(3) memb-cl. att. vs (4) corp-ow. att.		.456	.110		.010	.164	.748

The results mentioned so far have shown how the (general) commercialization of professional football is assessed by the respective fan groups, and which aspects (e.g., modern football) are particularly criticized. Further, possible supporter reactions were identified. Finally, in order to clarify previous findings, respondents, who (little to completely) apply to an exit from professional football, were asked to state their reasons ($n = 447$).

The consequences of a generally formulated increase in commercialization are rated rather moderately. Conversely, changes regarding the match schedule (factor variable TA_SCHEDULE¹⁸, $n = 447$; $M = 4.08$; $SD = .75$)¹⁹ and in particular the club identity, due to the involvement of an investor, are considered non-negotiable. All groups of supporters show rejection, summarized in the factor variable TA_DNA²⁰ ($n = 447$; $M = 4.41$; $SD = .90$)²¹. Significant differences (TA_SCHEDULE) only exist between the groups of (1) membership-club active fans and (3) membership-club attendance ($p < .004$) or, according to TA_DNA, between the groups of (1) membership-club active fans and (3) membership-club attendance ($p < .001$) as well as (1) membership-club active fans and (4) corporation-owned-club attendance ($p < .001$)²² (table 8).

¹⁸ The selected items (TA_GAMESAWAY, TA_KICKOFFTIMES, TA_EVENT, TA_GAMESFRAGM) showing Cronbach's alpha scores of $\alpha = .76$.

¹⁹ ANOVA reveals significant differences between the groups of fans ($F(3,443) = 4.13$, $p < .006$) with no significant interaction effect of fan status and favorite club ($F(1,443) = .89$, $p < .346$).

²⁰ The selected items (TA_CHANGENAME, TA_CHANGELOGO, TA_CHANGECOLORS) showing Cronbach's alpha scores of $\alpha = .93$.

²¹ ANOVA reveals significant differences between the groups of fans ($F(3,443) = 7.37$, $p < .001$) with no significant interaction effect of fan status and favorite club ($F(1,443) = .29$, $p < .592$).

²² The differences between the groups show low effect sizes: fan_status: $\eta^2 = .022$; favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .014$; fan_status#favorite_club: $\eta^2 = .000$

Tab. 8: Consent to statements of issues of club identity (TA_DNA; n = 447), and significant differences between fan groups

ANOVA		M (Marg.)	SD	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
fan_group	active fans	4.741	.089	52.73	.001	4.564	4.918
	attendance	4.306	.047	90.00	.001	4.212	4.400
favorite_club	membership-club	4.438	.043	102.32	.001	4.353	4.524
	corporation-owned-club	3.990	.176	22.56	.001	3.642	4.338
fan_group	(1) memb-cl. act. fans	4.765	.096	49.85	.001	4.577	4.953
	(2) corp-ow. act. fans	4.451	.214	20.83	.001	4.031	4.871
	(3) memb-cl. att.	4.343	.049	89.38	.001	4.247	4.438
	(4) corp-ow. att.	3.854	.220	17.49	.001	3.421	4.287
post hoc test (Games and Howell)		Diff.					
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (3) memb-cl. att.		.422	.079		.001	.217	.627
(1) memb-cl. act. fans vs (4) corp-ow. att.		.910	.353		.001	.101	1.922

In summary, all groups of fans see a (moderate) necessity for marketing of football, and they are not fundamentally opposed to commercialization. This result is contrary to existing studies (Doidge et al. 2020). As studies by Bauer et al. (2005) and Giulianotti (2005) show, a more nuanced picture of fans' attitudes on commercialization is needed. This picture shows that some aspects of commercialization are accepted by fans and, similar to Bauer et al. (2005), mostly those rejected, which change the club's and therefore fans' identity.

Concerning the differences between the groups of fans with their heterogeneous assessments, we can conclude that active fans see forms of commercialization in football more critically than attendance, regardless of their favorite club.

Here, attitudes and probably general values behind them are shared overall in Germany's active fan scene, beyond club boundaries. Their rejection is related to their fear of no longer being able to experience their fan culture to the desired extent or the changes concerning their club's identity. Therefore, it is apparent that further commercialization can lead to effects that are opposite to those planned by clubs and associations. Taking this into account, there is a potential risk for clubs to lose some of their (loyal) supporters due to increasing commercialization, especially when the club's DNA is being addressed. This response is typical for an important stakeholder who feels that his interests have not been adequately considered.

Furthermore, membership-club fans/attendance see forms of commercialization in football more critically than corporation-owned-club fans/attendance (regardless of their fan status). This shows that a differentiation between clubs is useful, not only between fan types. Whereby fans with more opportunities to participate see themselves more threatened by commercialization. One possible explanation is that these fans perceive participatory opportunities as potential

losses, whereas other fans do not possess such opportunities and therefore cannot perceive them as being threatened. Overall, when considering the fan status and the favorite club, (1) membership-club active fans see forms of commercialization in professional football more critically than (3) membership-club attendance and especially (4) corporation-owned-club attendance, but we didn't find significant differences between the (membership-club and corporation-owned-club) active fans. However, the latter findings should be viewed with caution due to the significantly smaller group size of the (2) corporation-owned-club active fans ($n = 29$).

4 Study 2: Communication between involved stakeholders

The example of the 2023/24 protest indicates, that commercialization per se is just one aspect of the quality of the relationship between fans, clubs, and the league. In figure 1, communication belongs to the right pillar but is not directly related to commercialization. While the literature already points to the lack of communication between fans and clubs or associations, it remains unclear how these communication deficits actually arise. Therefore, study 2 investigates the relationship quality of clubs, the fans, and the league in more details, based on the communication on dynamics related to commercialization.

4.1 Methodology

As part of a larger study on fan behavior and fan misconduct, expert interviews were conducted with club representatives and with representatives of the most important stakeholders of clubs. The stakeholder groups were selected based on the scientific work of Anagnostopoulos (2011), Cicut et al. (2017), and Senaux (2008) and included representatives of clubs, the association, the police, sponsors, media, and active fans, as table 9 shows. Most interview partners were recruited using the snowball principle through recommendations.

A qualitative research approach was chosen for a deeper understanding of the field of study (Froschauer and Lueger 2020). Furthermore, semi-structured expert interviews were used, as they allow for basic comparability, respectively a narrative flow, and aim at "discovering the experiential world of the respondent" (McIntosh and Morse 2015: 4).

Tab. 9: Interview partner

<i>Organization</i>		<i>Representative</i>		
Association	A01, A02, A03, A04, A05, A06, A07			
Police	P			
Sponsors	S01, S02, S03, S04			
Media	M			
	<i>1st Bundesliga</i>	<i>2nd Bundesliga</i>	<i>3rd Division</i>	
Club	C11, C12, C13, C14, C15	C21, C22, C23, C24	C31, C32	
Fan scene	F11	F21, F22		

The interviews were conducted between June 2019 and May 2020 and in German. To increase the participants' willingness to answer and cooperate, most of the interviews took place face-to-face in the working or living environment of the interviewees. In general, the interviews took between one and two hours. Only the sponsors and club officials provided information via telephone; these interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews focused on diverse issues, and thus only the parts on commercialization and communication were used for this paper.

4.2 Data

The interviews with the police and the active fans were group interviews. For the active fans, there were between two and four representatives in each interview, two of whom acted as "capo" (leader of an ultra group). Two of the three fan scenes supported a 2nd Bundesliga club, and one supported a 1st Bundesliga club, all membership-clubs. One group belonged to a club in South Germany, one to a club in West Germany, and one to a club in East Germany. All fans belong to group 1 active fans of membership clubs. They were chosen as the researchers estimated that these group shows the largest rejection on commercialization, are mostly involved in club conflicts and therefore most relevant to understand. All representatives of the clubs were in charge of larger departments (managing directors, directors of fan relations, or security departments) and had been active in the sports business for a long time. The sample consisted of clubs from all parts of Germany, clubs with a large fan base, and smaller clubs.

4.3 Data analysis

The interviews were evaluated using qualitative content analysis, also called qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz 2014). Therefore, the data material obtained was analyzed interpretatively (Döring and Bortz 2016) to capture the properties and characteristics of the object of study “as precisely as possible, [to] differentiate and [to] be close to the object” (Raithel 2008: 8). The main categories of analysis were initially developed from the main topics of the semi-structured interview guide (deductive). After a thorough review of the transcribed interview material, further categories were inductively formed based on the text, and the prior categorization was expanded and adjusted. Subsequently, all categories were systematically organized into a category system. Additionally, all identified categories, and their sub-categories have been assigned with category definitions.

Within the framework of the larger study on fan behavior and fan misconduct, six main categories were identified (Table 10), two of which are relevant for this study. The main category *Stakeholder* describes the individual interest groups and how their influence is perceived or what impact they see. The main category *Communication* outlines how communication takes place among and between fans, as well as clubs and the association, where communication is disrupted, and what accusations are made. The content analysis was computerized in MAXQDA, the coding material was run several times, and memos were created during the qualitative content analysis to guarantee quality criteria such as reliability and trustworthiness. Furthermore, two independent coders separately allocated all coding to the category system developed by one author. Based on this, intercoder reliability of 77.3% was revealed.

Tab. 10: Main and subcategories

Main categories	Sub categories
<i>Stakeholder</i>	Individual interest Influence own group Influence other groups
<i>Communication</i>	Among fans Fans club Fans association Club association
<i>Stadium safety</i> <i>Fan (mis)behavior</i> <i>Punishment of fan (mis)behavior</i> <i>Opportunities for improvement</i>	(For readability the subcategories are not listed here, as they are not relevant for this article)

4.4 Results

The presentation of study 2 focuses specifically on communication-related dynamics concerning commercialization and consumer behavior, while other aspects of commercialization are also addressed in the interviews. Direct communication between active fans and associations no longer takes place in Germany during research.²³ Speaking for the active fan scene in Germany, one ultra fan stated that “at the moment, talks with the DFB have been suspended and there are no plans to talk in the future either.” (F21). The fans abandoned the dialogue in 2018 because they believed that the DFB never had a real intention to communicate on equal terms, which emphasizes their distrust. Even though the dialogue was broken off, one of Watzlawick et al. (2011) axioms emphasizes the impossibility of not communicating. While the association continues to seek direct communication, both parties still use indirect communication, which reflects their poor relationship quality. According to Lasswell (1948), they still communicate. They only changed the channel for transmitting the message and partly the recipient.

In general, active fans communicate via a wide variety of channels. They communicate in the stadium area through applause, whistles, singing, their clothes, flags, banners, pyrotechnics, choreographies, violence, and in some cases, they make statements through silence or non-appearance. In addition, each group “has its own medium, be it a matchday flyer, blogs, channels or websites” (F21) or “fan-zines” (F22). Since active fans no longer communicate directly with the association, they can use these channels to contact the association or, in some cases, to approach the clubs, other fans, or other stakeholders in general so that these parties can pass on the concerns of the active fans to the association. These messages also reach the association: “[Banners like] ‘Fucking DFB’ leaves no one unaffected. When I sit in a stadium as a member of the DFB board and read that, I feel addressed” (A12).

The association has established, among other things, working groups called “fan culture” or a nationwide “club-fan dialogue”, “which we accompany, evaluate and report on” (A11) as means of direct communication. Generally, however, they try to reach the fans through their clubs. As representatives of the association “think because of the mass [of fans], the DFB as an umbrella organization can’t do that much [...] this mediation work, can only be done by the club itself” (A15). Therefore, it is essential to work directly with the fan coordinators first “to set guidelines for the minimum number of fan workers, [...] to provide them with qualifications

²³ Although the association holds talks with various fan groups, the active fans interviewed criticised the fact that ultras are hardly ever included in these talks.

and further training [...] steering, networking [...] and organizing a balance of interests, which is not always easy” (A11).

Clubs as mediators

The interviews showed that the association and the fans use the clubs as mediators or mouthpieces for their communication. All the fan scenes interviewed are fully aware that “the associations are the clubs” (F11): “The clubs form the DFB and if they say ‘yes’, then the rest have to do the same” (F11) or “if everyone at their own club simply manages to vote against Monday matches, [...] then there will be no Monday matches” (F22). They conclude that “if you have a good connection to the managing director, he acts differently at the association’s general meeting than someone who is completely far away from the fan scene” (F22). “Therefore, it is always pointed out how they should best behave, that it is fan-friendly, at a vote at the DFL or DFB” (F21).

All fan scenes interviewed reported good and mostly easy communication with club officials, showing the good relationship quality: “The contacts exist, so if there is a need, you can get together quickly, but you don’t have to organize a regular jamboree” (F22). While “contact can also be established very quickly with club officials” (F11), it is “rarely sought specifically” (F21). The quality of communication would depend very much on the people involved, both sender and receiver, their trust and reciprocity. The club officials see it the same way. They sum up that dealing with the fans is “exciting and characterized by ups and downs” (C15). Mostly clubs confirm a “very good exchange” (C23, C32), or that “over the years we have built up a certain relationship of trust” (C31). In general, “there are certainly conflicts [...], but at least we listen to each other. We talk to each other, and the connection is so good that the people from the active fan scene have my mobile number. They call me when they want something” (C24). Having mobile numbers creates an intimacy and trust, and generally, a certain reciprocity exists between clubs and supporters.

The association, in turn, imposes various requirements on the clubs within the licensing framework to achieve good communication between the club and the fans. For example, “a [1st] Bundesliga club has to employ three full-time fan coordinators” (A11). There are requirements regarding behavior in the stadium and penalties for their violations. In addition, they “check, monitor and see how each club implements [the defaults], but then help is also given as to how improvements can be made” (A11).

For the most part, the association’s officials see a “very good exchange” (A11) and confirm that they “have a good connection to many club representatives and make an effort to appear at fan meetings and talk to them there” (J13). Relations

between the parties would have “improved considerably because communication has become better” (J11). Most of the club managers acknowledge that “the DFB and DFL have done a lot in recent years” (C15) or “that a lot has already happened and that we know our colleagues very well” (C12), which is reflected in a good relationship. Clubs positively highlighted the regular meetings (‘Klausurtagungen’). However, they also mention a “feeling of being left alone by the associations” (C24), as the fans sometimes “flout the standards” (C22) set by the associations, and the clubs found themselves in the position to defend these standards.

Clubs as “black box”

Since the fans and associations communicate primarily via the clubs, in contrast to direct communication, not only the channel (In which channel?) and the receiver (To whom?) of the communication changed, but it is also not always clear whether the right message is being sent (Says what?) (Lasswell 1948). If the message is changed, it can also happen that the desired effects are not achieved (With what effect?). In the worst case, only one (Who?) of the five components of the act of communication remains and severely disrupts it.

Active fans and association’s representatives criticized clubs for changing the message and emphasize the impossibility of tracing whether the correct message has been communicated. Representatives of the association observe “a kind of black box. No one likes to talk about their own conflict in front of others, and sometimes it is pure powerlessness” (A11). The representatives of the association ask themselves: “What did you [the clubs] do at such a round table [with the fans]? The clubs do not properly explain what they have planned internally with the fan groups” (J13). The fans also say that they sometimes “feel like they are being made fools of” (F21) because before the vote at the association, “they [clubs] tell us [fans]: ‘We see it the same way as you do, we don’t want it either’ [...], and afterwards, it turns out that they did not vote against it” (F21). The black box makes it “difficult to verify in detail” (F22) whether the intended message is actually communicated:

“Of course, the association also makes mistakes, including communication mistakes, but I think that the criticism is not always entirely fair. At some point, we as clubs would have to say: Let’s say we are against Monday matches, then we can, of course, also vote that way. That’s why we can’t hide behind the association” (C13).

5 Discussion and implications

The paper aimed to analyze how aspects of commercialization are evaluated by different fan groups and to what extent the dimension of commercialization influences the relationship between fans and football organizations from the fans' perspective. In summary, the results of both studies show that commercialization affects customer or fan behavior, which is influenced by relationship behavior.

Both studies show that fans feel their influence has been weakened by commercialization and that they are not involved in decisions regarding overall football policy, nor are they heard enough. This affects the quality of the relationship, including trust, commitment, intimacy, and reciprocity (Kim and Trail 2011). Study 1 finds that attendance and active fans, as well as membership-club and corporation-owned-club fans, perceive that increasing commercialization harms the fan scene and their relationship to related organizations. Meanwhile, all fans accept the necessity of acting as an enterprise and, therefore, a certain degree of commercialization. These insights are in line with Giulianotti's (2005) results, which describe a pragmatic or ambivalent attitude of fans to commercialization. Even active fans in Germany do not show a fundamental opposition, as the contributions of Bresemann and Duttler (2017), Doigde et al. (2020), Hill et al. (2018), Numerato (2015), or Webber (2017) suggested. Understanding commercialization as a development consisting of different elements allows for minimizing its adverse effects on relationship quality. The results emphasize that clubs should handle aspects related to the club's DNA, such as the coat of arms and colors, with care. Changing these elements negatively affects commitment, intimacy of the relationship, and fan behavior. Associations and clubs should also be cautious about dynamics directly related to matchdays (kick-off times, days, locations), as these directly influence fans' ability to participate and their self-connection to the club.

However, our approach highlights the need to differentiate between various fan types concerning different aspects of commercialization and types of organizations. In study 1 active fans, in contrast to attendance, mainly stronger reject issues related to changes in club identity or the football league, such as the further fragmentation of matchdays. In addition, the active fans in study 2 only addressed problems primarily originating from the association's decisions. They do not perceive a significant risk of clubs changing their identity (e.g., logo or name) as part of self-connection, as they believe there are sufficient opportunities to be involved in such decisions. This is easier in clubs, which are smaller entities, as they have better relationships, including trust as a relevant element. This emphasizes the relevance of participation and communication as relevant aspects related to the dynamics of commercialization.

Recent studies (Achen 2019; Lee et al. 2020) highlight communication as the essential tool for good fan relationship management, and it forecasts problems and

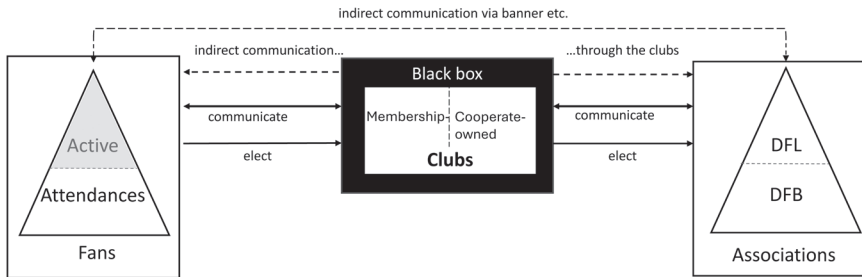


Figure 3: Black box of communication between stakeholders

conflicts if it is inadequate. As study 2 underlines, there is inadequate communication between active fans and the association, resulting in less trust, intimacy, and reciprocity. Negatively influencing the overall relationship of both groups. Figure 3 summarizes the interconnections: The communication and relationship between fans (both active and attendances) and the clubs is predominantly considered to be good and working well. Even though the clubs communicate to all the fans (directly or indirectly), the active ones are the spearhead and receive the most attention, given their relatively small numbers. The relationship and communication between the clubs and the association are also described as predominantly good, as direct communication takes place. Between fans and the association, the relationship is more negative. There is mainly indirect communication via banners or chants by active fans or press statements by different stakeholders. This communication provokes disrespect and distrust towards each other. Another channel of indirect communication is via the clubs as intermediaries. Unfortunately, there is a risk that the message of the fans respectively the association (solid arrows in Figure 3) is transmitted incompletely or incorrectly by the clubs (dashed arrows). Additionally, the clubs could simply conceal the opinion of fans or the association. They are a black box for associations and fans. Therefore, there is a structural risk for the communication relations between fans and clubs.

Different methods of communication are needed to strengthen the relationship between the league/association and fans. In the past, they organized official dialogues called forums, which fans perceived as inadequate. At the club level, where better communication and relationships exist, a different perspective is offered. Here, fans appreciate the possibility of informal communication, which fosters trust and intimacy. Associations should consider similar approaches, despite the challenge of maintaining transparency. In Figure 3, this would add a direct arrow between fans and the association.

The findings of both studies indicate that fans perceive a weakening of their influence due to commercialization and they are not involved in decisions regarding

overall football policy, nor are they heard enough. This influences the relationship quality, including trust, commitment, intimacy, and reciprocity (Kim and Trail 2011).

In addition, the risk of intransparency increases due to the differentiation of the fans, which we encouraged in study 1. In study 2, the fan representatives argue to represent the fans per se. Related to study 1, they belong to membership-club and active fans. But the results show significant differences from company-owned attendance. When they express a general criticism of further commercialization, they could represent the interests of different fan groups. However, if they stress a specific issue, the attitudes of other fan groups could differ. That makes it difficult for representatives of fans to negotiate on details and single issues, as it is easier to express just a general rejection. As a result, they united under an abstract notion of rejecting commercialization – even if they generally accept the necessity of marketing. Further studies should consider these differences and investigate the relationship and communication between different types of fans.

The results also indicate practical implications. On the club level, clubs should communicate commercialization in a differentiated way according to their fan groups and specifically involve the fan groups. Furthermore, clubs can recognize that even active fans are willing to accept a certain level of commercialization; therefore, they could jointly evolve this level. On the level of the association, communication between active fans and the association is essential and should be significantly improved. As long as this is not established, it would be an essential step to make the black box more transparent, e.g., through the disclosure of meeting minutes and voting behaviors.

6 Limitations and further research

Although both studies were conducted in a similar period, study 1 surveyed both attendance and active fans. In contrast, study 2 only focused on active fans because only the most essential stakeholders were interviewed, and the literature sees the active fans and not the fans as a whole. Nevertheless, attendance are the larger group of fans and should also be included in open questions in future research. In addition, when interpreting the sample, it should be noted that study 1 used a convenience sample and that the different group sizes should be considered in the statistical ANOVA calculations. Although these differences are not statistically problematic, the results of the smallest groups (corporation-owned-club active fans) in particular should be supported in further studies. Furthermore, there are predominantly statistically (highly) significant differences between the groups, but with rather low effect sizes.

The paper focuses on German fans of professional football. German football and its fans have a certain cultural tradition and a specific structure of involvement, which differs from those in other countries. Given national differences, García and Welford (2015) plead to include different countries in observations, as García and Llopis-Goig (2020) have done. Even though our results are very similar to previous findings and to those from other countries, future research could take a more cross-national approach.

The studies were conducted in 2019. Potentially, COVID-19 or other developments could significantly change fan attitudes or the communication between clubs and fans. In fact, the German football league abolished matches played on Monday and created a task force, including various stakeholders, to discuss the future of football in 2020. Hoffenheim became a member-owned club recently. However, the results of the task force still lack implementation, and conflicts between the league/association and the fans remain, or have even increased, as shown by the protests around the planned and failed sale of broadcasting stocks to investors. The problem of the black box of clubs became more evident during the voting process on the implementation, as one club representative probably voted for the implementation of an investor, although the club and fans advised him to vote against it.

Both studies asked fans about potential personal consequences of further commercialization, but this does not necessarily mean they will behave in the future as they expressed during the survey or the interview. In previous decades, fans and officials in Germany had already complained that commercialization harms the game (Havemann 2013). Nevertheless, they continued to attend matches, and the spectator numbers grew significantly during the last, more commercialized decades (Merkel 2012). Therefore, it would also be very informative if future research were to look at changes over time in the context of longitudinal analysis.

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