

Football Passions

Research commissioned by Canon

Executive summary

Methods

The Football Passions report summarises extensive sociological research across 18 countries in Europe. The objectives of the study were to capture the emotions of being a football fan and to compare the feelings, expressions and behaviour of fans associated with support of their football teams. Fieldwork was conducted in six of these countries — Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Spain — involving observation, recordings of heart rates at matches, interviews and in-depth discussions with fans. In the remaining 11 countries, online and telephone interviews were conducted with fans. A pan-European online poll of approximately 2,000 fans was also conducted.

The research revealed that while there are differences between countries in the way fans express their emotions and behaviour, we ultimately all speak one language, the language of football. The research, however, did unearth a number of quirks and national differences that may challenge our conventional stereotypes.

Themes of Football Emotions Research

Passion and emotion

Football is associated with passion, emotion, excitement and dedication across Europe. References to extreme emotional experiences at football games characterised all aspects of discussions with fans — some referring to the 'pure joy' and exhilaration of being at football games. Such is the intensity of the experience that two thirds of fans have cried at football matches — mostly through joy, but occasionally because of despair. Football provides for many fans an opportunity to let themselves go emotionally — to release the frustrations of everyday life.

What defines a fan

To be a 'true' fan requires the 'living' experience of football. It is not about being a mere spectator — it is about being a participant. Match attendance is a given, of course, but there is also a duty to engage emotionally in the life of the team in order to impact positively on a team's performance. Attending away games is an important ritual for fans involving a number of psychological and logistical challenges. Away supporters are always out-numbered and mostly out-sung. In our discussions with fans there was a defiant stance against 'fair-weather supporters' — those who only attend matches occasionally or when their team is doing well. Such fans lack dedication and resilience and the detailed knowledge of team statistics, standings, players and

history that is characteristic of 'true' fans. Football fandom is seen as a rite of passage involving a process akin to apprenticeship. It involves years of instruction, of 'practice', of dedication and of demonstrating your own knowledge in the presence of others before being accepted by 'real' fans.

The Twelfth Man

Football fans describe themselves as the 'twelfth man' — as essential to the success of the team as the players and coaching staff. It is the actions performed by fans during the game — the ritual chants, songs, banner waving, etc. — that motivates the team, intimidates the opposition players and perhaps even influences referees' decisions. The fans truly believe they must attend the game to 'help the team to win', not just to observe the event.

Rituals

In addition to the actions performed in the stadiums during the match, pre- and post-game rituals are important in creating a sense of community among fans. From meeting up with other fans for a drink before and after the game to the orchestrated coordination of fabric squares to make up a larger banner, rituals foster a strong sense of belonging to the fan group. What might otherwise be forgettable, everyday actions become as meaningful and important to fans as, say, a church Mass, and generate powerful bonds. These rituals often have a superstitious quality — wearing the same 'lucky' shirt to every game or following the same routine during the build-up — even eating two pies just before the kick-off because that made the team win last time. In many European countries the presence of drummers, horn blowers etc. in the sections occupied by 'true' fans, each performing their rehearsed ritual roles, generates an emotionally charged atmosphere that is unparalleled in any other sport.

Friends and belonging

Football is an important means for people to form and maintain strong friendships that might otherwise not exist. These social bonds between fans are so strong that many describe them in familial, kinship terms — 'my brotherhood' or 'my family'. 'Football friends' are different from friends in other areas of life. Something special is shared and exchanged by them. The football team is also a 'friend' to many fans. Over half of all fans feel that being a fan of the team is like having a long-term girlfriend/boyfriend.

Family

Football plays a key role in family life in much of Europe, linking the shared experiences of family members across generations and creating a lasting sense of tradition and belonging. The strongest of these relationships is that of father and son. Most men become fans because their father would take them to matches as a child, and many older fans still retain strong memories of these formative experiences. As football fandom is socially inherited within the family, matches regularly comprise ritualised days out for all members — toddlers and grandmothers included — and the passion for football is a unifying event that frequently leads to animated conversations at home in front of the television or around the family dinner table. The role that football plays in

this context is very important given fears about the break down of the traditional family unit and its values across Europe.

History & national identity

There is a strong commonality among all fans across Europe — football unites rather than divides in this sense. The specific social and cultural role that football plays in any given country, however, is heavily influenced by historical factors. These include whether a major side or national team has won an important tournament at a decisive time in the past or whether the sport was traditionally played by upper or lower classes. Similarly, historically poignant football rivalries between some nations (e.g. Holland v Germany, England v Scotland) play a role in defining specific national football characteristics. These influence how people relate to football in their country and how they support teams at the local, regional, national and international level. Fans in countries with strong local and regional identities have a slightly different relationship to the sport than fans in countries where regionalism is of less importance. In some countries such as Norway and Sweden, allegiance to the local team is much stronger than that associated with the national side. In contrast, in France, Poland and Portugal have stronger allegiances to their national side.

Gender

The large majority of football fans in Europe are men. Both male and female fans acknowledge that football is a largely masculine domain in which the world of the fan is organised around typically male-oriented social spaces — pubs, bars, and large-scale sports arenas. In such spaces, men are permitted to express their emotions and passions — having women present, it is felt can inhibit this sometimes 'unmanly' behaviour. The predominance of males, however, does not preclude the involvement of women in the world of the football fan. Women's participation in and, and their 'consumption' of, the sport has increased significantly over the past few decades. Several fan clubs across Europe are now dedicated exclusively to women and they are increasingly accepted as 'authentic' fans, not just the wives, girlfriends or daughters of male fans.

The Internet

The Internet is now a significant resource in the world of football — fixture schedules, statistics, injuries, purchases and sales of players, team selections, ticket prices and day-to-day news about football politics. European fans spend increasing amounts of their time on football web sites accessing up-to-the-minute information about events specific to their team, keeping abreast of local, national and international developments in football politics and commenting on the play during matches. A minority of very dedicated fans browse such sites for up to 6 or 7 hours a day. In many ways, the fans' use of the Internet is an extension of their activities in the stadium. Online fans constitute fan families — groups of people with close personal relationships that are as strong at home or work in front of a desk as they are at the games themselves. Older fans, however, are not only less likely to access the Internet for these reasons than younger age groups, many see it as inconsistent with being a 'real' fan.

Conclusion

While much of the European media coverage of football fans has, since the late 1960s, focused on the negative — on hooliganism and violence — our research reveals a much more positive side to football and its passionate supporters. Our work, one of the most extensive pieces of research done on European football fans in recent years, highlights the passions and emotions that are associated with the game and the positive role that being a true fan plays in the lives of millions of Europeans. While there are strong rivalries between fans at local and national levels, the striking feature of the research is the high degree to which football unites people from varied backgrounds across the whole of Europe, and undoubtedly beyond.