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Sources of identity and community among highly identified football fans in Germany. An empirical categorisation of differentiation processes¹

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‘Differentiation’ is identified as a key category, and an empirical system of differentiation is developed. The key category is divided into two subcategories, which are further dimensionalized. The analysis finds that highly identified fans differentiate themselves from other fans (both from their own club and from rival clubs) and strive for positive distinction. Violent acts as extreme forms of differentiation are identity-establishing for some of these fans. Confrontations with rival fans are actively sought to extend team competitions concerning the best support into a physical and violent plane and to enforce territorial claims.

Outline of the problem

The present analysis is concerned with the development of fan identities of highly identified fans in German professional football. Highly identified fans are understood as those who exhibit an exceptional level of support¹ and spend large amounts of money on their fan activities,² but at the same time differentiate themselves from other participants in the football context. All share the characteristics of holding a season ticket, spending a great deal of money, meeting repeatedly during the week and, in some cases, even neglecting work or school responsibilities in favour of football. Often these fans act not in isolation, but form groups, or at least belong to a specific scene. The scene is a higher level network made up of groups and individuals.³ The group or scene possesses fundamental significance for the surveyed fans and for the development of their identity.

Such highly identified fans are thus characterized not only by a focus on the collective event (the football match), but – as the data show – to a great extent a *general* structuring of everyday life through sport.⁴ In German football, these fans are often recruited from the group of ultras fans or those with significant affinities for the ultras scene.⁵

This analysis foregrounds the key category of ‘differentiation’ (for instance, from other fans, groups and security staff), that has proven essential to the construction of identity for these fans.⁶ This differentiation from other participants causes strongly identified fans to develop an increased conflict orientation that, in its extreme form,

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¹An analysis of highly identified football fans in Germany based on qualitative interviews carried out as part of the Bielefeld Football Fan Study.

can lead to violent confrontations with rival fan groups and occasionally with the police.

To date few empirical studies have systematically examined the categories and dimensions that highly identified fans, particularly ultras and ultras followers, use to differentiate themselves from other fans and groups. For the most part, differentiation strategies of football fans are discussed within the context of specific topics, such as right-wing extremism and violence.⁷ A general understanding of differentiation mechanisms is extremely important in order to understand the actual practices in groups and to develop constructive strategies for relating to these fans. Whilst Armstrong and Giulianotti have studied rivalries and differentiation in football in depth,⁸ their principal point of departure is the differences in identity development that are influenced by nationality, religion and culture, and they do not explicitly examine the differentiation of fan groups and fan scenes. Giulianotti does offer a categorization of fans based on theoretical considerations, identifying four different types.⁹ Referring to Bourdieu, Giulianotti stresses that ‘supporters’ in particular want to be more authentic than their fellow fans. Thus, that analysis supplies pointers to the concepts of differentiation.

For Germany, Grau et al. presented a categorization of football fans based on data from a large-scale survey. They conclude that fans can be categorized in five distinct groups, but the process of differentiation is not investigated.¹⁰ Kathöfer and Kotthaus conducted a large study on the views and attitudes of ultras groups in Germany.¹¹ They describe the development of the groups and present a grounded theory of an ultras scene. Their study implies that differentiation is part of the ultras identity, but does not explain it in detail. Pilz et al. also find that ultras want to be different from other groups, but it is not the main topic of their analysis.¹²

The research approach: theory and methods

Developmental psychology and identity research have shown that differentiation and distinction (of style, clothes, political preferences, etc.) are extremely important, especially for adolescents in a group context.¹³ They are required for the construction of identities and communities.¹⁴ Bourdieu underlines the importance of differentiation to safeguard the social status of an individual or a group.¹⁵ In this connection, people strive for positive distinction from others. In some groups, these attempts at differentiation remain at a more symbolic and stylistic level. In others, deviant or even delinquent expressions of differentiation develop. Such differentiation strategies contribute to the formation of a separate social identity.¹⁶ Not least, assignment *to* a specific group and differentiation *from* another group are largely responsible for the development of a positively perceived social identity. Thus, differentiation processes not only form identities, they form communities, too. Identity is defined by belonging to a group (fans of club X or fans of club Y). Claessens stresses in this context that the group itself is the source of socialization, and shapes individuals through its development.¹⁷ The significance of the collective is also one of the findings of Elias’s social theory,¹⁸ arguing that the individual needs the collective to develop identity.

Especially in the area of football, the collective of the group (fan group, fan scene) is essential. It can be assumed that in the football context, the community of fan groups is partly a product of differentiation processes between rival fans. If the processes of football fan identity formation are to be properly understood, attention

must be paid to differentiation mechanisms, which are often fuelled by the respective peer groups or scenes.

In order to clarify this issue, a qualitatively hermeneutic perspective is taken. This analysis draws on nine individual and four group interviews carried out within the context of the NAME Study of highly identified fans of clubs in the German first to third divisions. All the interviewees were adolescents; two were female. The selection of interviewees was much like the iterative process of a theoretical sampling,¹⁹ but due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, access was largely determined by gatekeepers. For purposes of evaluation, the interviews were fully coded and the various codes were condensed into dimensions or categories.²⁰

In the interviews, 'differentiation' was identified as a key category. It can be divided into two empirically grounded subcategories that highly identified fans use to differentiate themselves from other participants, and which can be seen as building blocks for fan identities. These subcategories can be further dimensionalized. The categorisation is ideal-typical; in empirical reality there is some overlap. This is seen repeatedly in the drafting process of the categories. The first subcategory is a fundamental differentiation from other less strongly identified fans and other fan groups, which may also include followers of their own club. The second subcategory is explicit rivalries and hostilities with other fans of other teams: the differentiation of highly identified fans from rival fans of opposing teams.

Empirical analysis

Subcategory 1: differentiation from ordinary fans

Dimension 'special commitment'

A special commitment is an essential, constitutive element in many areas of society, for instance, to an organization or religion. Certain groups and associations would be unthinkable without such a pronounced commitment. The commitment and passion they bring to their fan collective and club are outstanding characteristics of highly identified fans.

Some of the costs associated with this commitment have already been outlined above. Investments of money, energy and time are practically a precondition for gaining recognition and a reputation within the group and/or a scene of highly identified fans and for rising within the group's internal hierarchy.²¹ Kathöfer and Kotthaus point out that the high costs they incur differentiate ultras both from less-committed members of their own group and from other members of the fan scene as a whole.²²

Not infrequently, this commitment also means approaching personal financial and vocational limits. Participants in a group interview related how quickly expenses of several thousand Euros can mount up in a single season:

A: You could say that just one season with [team], tickets, travel and flights alone will cost 3,500 euros and that's before you've even had a bite, gotten anything to drink or some shut-eye.

Interviewer: 3,500 euros?

A: Just about. We figured it out once. 3,500 Euros at least.

B: Without meals.

A: Without meals.

[...]

B. I'll pinch every penny for [team]. I know it's not cheap, but one cent won't hurt me if it's for [team]. (Group Interview A)

It goes without saying that monetary outlays represent a special challenge for most school-age fans, but they think of them as an obligation. The same is true for any impacts on work or school.

[...] It's like you just want to try to do anything to live for the club. So it was just at the time when I was going to uni, and at some point I had to drop out because I failed my exams for the third time. (Individual interview A)

The interviewee has a clear hierarchy of areas of life and gives being a football fan priority over education – even if this means failing tests. It appears that education is simply an incidental undertaking whilst being a fan is, in a sense, equivalent to a day job and hugely influences attitudes to life. Such odd-looking priorities seems strange to outsiders and to many other fans, but it is by no means an isolated case. In fact, it is typical of strongly identified fans. This development can be problematic if membership in highly identified groups or scenes has a detrimental impact on schooling or vocational training and everyday life becomes largely structured by the demands of being a football fan.

The amount of time that highly identified fans invest in their fan activities is very closely related to both the financial outlays (and to the impact on school, training or work). Time begins to have a stabilizing effect on community where long trips to away games are made together.

Being thick with each other was really nice, doing things together. Whether it's bus trips or flying somewhere for the European Cup. Something just clicks if you're travelling somewhere together for three days, maybe spending two nights sleeping at the airport on some bench. And most people just don't want to do things like that. (Individual Interview A)

Here, the quality of time is as important as the quantity. Experiences such as spending several nights at an airport are classified as special – and not agreeable for everybody. For group activities – especially travelling to attend away games – group narratives are developed, inflated and given an unusual twist to make them stand out from everyday happenings.²³ Along with the time investment on the actual day of the match, there are also numerous gatherings during the week in football-related and other social contexts so that, as one interviewee related, hardly a day goes by without being in contact with his fan group.

Dimension 'uniqueness'

Stylistic creativity and the pursuit of uniqueness are essential elements of identity formation in groups and scenes.²⁴ This search for stylistic uniqueness or exclusivity is also evident among highly identified fans. One important part of this process is differentiation via purism.

We are not like people who tie twenty greasy scarves around their waist. We care more about the real thing. (Group Interview A)

The interviewee implicitly criticizes fans who attend matches wearing typical fan merchandise, such as scarves and club shirts. This fan gear is frowned upon by many highly identified fans, especially in the ultras scene, who criticize the commercialization of club merchandise marketing.²⁵ Instead, highly identified fans prefer a more purist dress style, limited to a T-shirt or a scarf of their club or group. Here, parallels to hooligan groups can be seen, where people fitted out with so much fan merchandise are pejoratively referred to as ‘Christmas trees’,²⁶ in stark contrast to their own coolness and casual style.²⁷

We need also to consider the question of ‘authenticity’, which has fundamental significance for young people’s identity construction.²⁸ This is not a matter of external attribution of authenticity, but rather fans’ self-classification as important factors and reliable driving forces in their fan scene. The claim to authenticity is implicit in the interview quote above. It appears especially clearly, however, in the attitude of highly identified towards so-called event fans, which are consistently characterized as weakly identified, unreliable and not seriously interested. The highly identified fans interviewed had no trouble devaluing other fan images – sometimes implicitly – and asserting power of definition of what a genuine, reliable – and therefore authentic – fan is.

Examination of the dimension of ‘critical self-image’ (below) reveals claims of intellectual and moral superiority in addition to authenticity.

Dimension ‘superiority of the group/scene’

Young people’s affinity for and affiliation to groups or more fluid scenes can be observed in many fields (for example, sports, politics and music).²⁹ It is a well-established finding of youth and identity research that important identity development takes place in groups.³⁰

In football, groups already play a significant role in the system of the game itself, where two teams confront each other. Consequently, in the realm of the fans too, belonging to groups is of major importance.

Out interviews show that a significant proportion of highly identified fans belong to a group or are at least close to a group or scene. Furthermore, they attribute tremendous importance to their own group – in a form that clearly sets itself apart from the attention that less-identified fans interviewed in the same study give to their reference groups (for instance, conventional fan clubs). The great relevance of the group is underscored by the family metaphor.

If I were to say that it’s just a football club like for other people, I think that’s an understatement. I really think that for us it’s a second family. You know, I come from a quite solid family background. It’s not like some people think, that I’m from a broken family or something like that and am looking for a second family. But that’s what it really was, a second family. [...] It was, really was, just like a real family, for sure. (Single Interview B)

The interviewee states that the group does not merely have the meaning of a football club *like for other people*, but that it is more similar to a family. Such comparisons serving to strengthen a sense of community and belonging are familiar in group research.³¹ In particular, Eckert et al. point out that self designation as a family both creates internal homogeneity and achieves differentiation from outgroups.³² Although the actual, enduring importance of the family metaphor for the interviewees should

be regarded with caution, the relevance of the group and the time devoted to it are obvious.³³ In many cases, groups and friends overlap. Given the relative importance of football and the group, it is not surprising that alternative social circles are relatively rare in highly identified fans. Here, the lack of alternatives can also widen distinctions and cause differentiation.³⁴

Another aspect is the relationship between the reference group and the club it is associated with.

It's just that way because things depend on more than just you and that's why our scene means much more to me than the club. (Single Interview C)

But, you know, I just couldn't imagine what it would be like if the group didn't exist one day, whether I'd still go to football matches anymore, I'm not even sure that I could answer 'yes' to that because, of course, I wouldn't travel 600 km by myself on the train to go somewhere. (Single Interview D)

These two interview quotes clearly illustrate the primacy of the group over the club. The opportunities the group supplies for creating an image are an important theme (see Dimension '*Critical self-image*'). The emphasis is on individual creativity and agency, whilst the club is perceived as an abstract concept upon which fans have little influence.

Especially in the second quote, it is obvious that the broader relationship to football depends partly on the fate of the group when the interviewee questions whether he would even still go to football matches if the group ceased to exist. The interviewee also values group-specific activities, such as the trips to away games he mentions, which can give rise to group narratives and be idealized in the process (see Dimension '*Special Commitment*'). In the long run, it is the joint projects and activities that characterize group life, and to a large extent define the attractiveness of the collective.

Focussing on the ingroup whilst drawing boundaries against the outgroup ultimately leads not only to a strengthening of internal cohesion, but is also highly conflictual (for discussion see Subcategory 2 below).³⁵

Although the majority of interviewed fans belonged to a relatively consolidated group (or did when they were active), group membership is not constitutive for the self-image of a highly identified fan. Some fans feel more part of a 'parent' scene, such as the ultras scene as a whole. In this context, the scene consists of all highly identified fans and fan groups of one club. At this point, the concepts of group and scene begin to blur because a scene can also mean cohesion and belonging, and thus play a similar for the fans as the smaller groups.

Dimension 'critical self-image'

It has hopefully become clear by now that highly identified fans differentiate themselves in a number of ways from what they regard as mundane or ordinary. Yet another facet is added when we consider the intellectual aspects. These play a role in various youth and protest movements – especially in those with an ideological superstructure, such as political groups. As other research has shown, protests – especially those against commercialization in football – are part of the repertoire of large segments of the active fan scene.³⁶ A critical analysis of capitalist interests can be found throughout the interviews.

This self-image may be embedded in an attitude that includes a critical study of structures and processes as well as a more or less intellectual sense of superiority with respect to other fans or fan groups.

I think that relatively often young people – now this isn't so strange – because other people give them a hand now and then, and in any case they think about things more and maybe a bit cleverer than an ordinary young bloke who never even thinks about such things. So it's not just always about football and brawling, but it has quite a few other sides. And you know there are all kinds of social components that you somehow make, it's really quite a big picture. (Single Interview D)

Several aspects emerge in this interview excerpt. First of all, the interviewee points out the mediating effect of the group/scene of highly identified fans. Membership in this scene makes experiences possible that go beyond the football or group context. Collective activities produce recognition and suggest that specific learning experiences – in the sense of peer group socialization – may be acquired even if the influence of peer groups on identity development varies.³⁷

Such an applied aesthetic practice can also help to strengthen ingroup identity, devalue other people or groups and establish a hierarchy of groups.³⁸ Obviously, this inequality is based on the statement that strongly identified fans *maybe have more on the ball than the everyday bloke*. This is thus not merely a visual/stylistic matter but also one involving intellectual detachment. This is also expressed as well in the ways support is expressed.

Well now, we have been trying to avoid certain songs that others might think are funny. [...] Some people think it's hilarious, I personally find that it just sucks. And we're just trying to put a stop to things like that. [...] but we're also trying to do some things that are a little more ambitious. (Group Interview B)

In this statement it is clear that even songs and chants have to meet certain creative, intellectual expectations – otherwise there is an effort *to put a stop to things like that*.³⁹ It would appear that a 'veiled elitism' is emerging in the circles of highly identified fans.⁴⁰ This intellectually and critically charged expectation is worth noting, at least against the background that football itself is regarded as conservative and traditional and the fan cultures that have taken root there have not been particularly well known for their progressive attitudes.

Dimension 'provoking authorities'

The final dimension of the first subcategory is the differentiation of highly identified from less highly identified fans by their attitudes towards authorities, such as the police and club rules. As will become even clearer in the second subcategory, highly identified fans are highly relevant for law enforcement. Conflictual forms of behaviour, such as setting off pyrotechnic devices or confrontations with rival groups, are a constant that defines the group identity of highly identified fans. One interviewee described that self-image as follows:

We're against laws just by our philosophy when we say: We don't respect the ban on pyrotechnics. We do it anyway. (Single Interview C)

In a sense, the interviewee here raises deviance to an anthropological constant of the group. As Durkheim pointed out, deviance is a normal social component.⁴¹ The teenage years especially are an experimental phase in which deviant behaviour is

used to strengthen group identity and challenge systems of authority.⁴² Direct confrontations with the police are also not necessarily sought out because of the clear technical inferiority, but they can arise, for instance, when travelling. Rather, police and stewards are provoked by the aforementioned actions, such as pyrotechnics and confrontations with other fan groups. Drastic disciplinary measures, such as long-term stadium bans, have to be reckoned with.

[...] then the police get involved, you get a stadium ban, and that's the classic cycle of an ultra. (Single Interview C)

The mention of police involvement and stadium bans as part of the *classic cycle of an ultra* suggests that disciplinary measures are treated as an honour within the scene. It is not unreasonable, then, to observe a form of mystification by fans who were sentenced to a stadium ban. Thus, with highly identified fans, a level of flirtation with the role of deviant is striking. This role is attractive, but also provides another mode of differentiation from the ordinary and is thus connected with self-stylization as exceptional. Yet there are not simply penalties for individuals, but rather there are also penalties for the club they are associated with. One interviewee commented on this by saying: *Good fans just take their toll*.

What is most problematic about this is that deviance is part of the group norms, and individual group members are ready to engage in deviant acts within the context of the group or scene. This makes communication between police and fans difficult, and can also create considerable disadvantages for individual fans. Whilst many groups of highly identified fans stress their great cohesion, penalties are dealt out to individual group members, so the group can hardly come to their support. As one interviewee put it, everyone ultimately has to take responsibility for their own deviant behaviour.

Subcategory 2: differentiation from rival fans

Dimension 'justification narratives'

Apart from the basic differentiation from other fans, striving to be distinct from opposing fans – particularly rival and hostile ones – is a central function in the development of identity. Historic rivalries with fans from other clubs (especially local or rooted in violent events) are of outstanding importance. These histories may be rooted in the collective memory of a group or an entire scene.⁴³ In the dimension '*Special Commitment*' (above), we found evidence of collective experiences, such as away games, serving as extraordinary events to stabilize the group. In his survey of hooliganism, King emphasizes the relevance of collective memory.⁴⁴ Using empirical case analysis, he describes how collective memories of violence in group interactions can stabilize the group and become fundamental for its survival.⁴⁵ He concludes that collective memories can on the one hand consolidate individual memories and on the other hand may displace individual attitudes due to the 'intensity of the interaction ritual' in groups.⁴⁶

Highly identified fans also use events from the past to justify rivalries.

- A: Then the punching started, then more and more people started fighting with me [...] So I know why I hate them so much. There are just always experiences like that. And these experiences, they happened fifteen years ago, they're still alive. I won't forget that for the rest of my life. They're burnt into

my memory. I think everybody here has been knocked on the head and has hit somebody else in the head. That will never change.

B: Everybody has their own story about some kind of club or fans [...].

C: Yeah, you have to expect things like that. Well, I remember two years ago, the amateurs were having a match and we just went there [...] and then like we got to a spot, and [...] and then forty of them were just coming [...] around the corner and then like they all just started jumping over the fences and then we chased them through the city. (Group Interview A)

In the group interviews, participants interactively condensed their feelings of rivalry towards other clubs, jointly telling stories about events they have taken part in. From the point of view of the interviewees, the rivalry assumes an understandable, objective justification. Rivalries are thus maintained and passed on. Another informant underscores this.

[...] And like they're just rivals because of the neighbourhood or certain incidents, then I say, 'okay'. It's just a tradition that we're carrying on [...]. (Individual Interview E)

The quote suggests an interpretation that rivalries are natural and can be passed on from one generation of fans to another. This gives rivalries the status of always having existed and no longer needing any explicit justification. Sometimes this leads to the differentiation from rival fans being extended into everyday life: the opponents' city is partly taken out of the football context or journeys outside the home town (say to the rival city) are regarded as unacceptable. Territory perceived as home turf is thus meaningful for the identity construction of highly identified fans.

Dimension 'symbolic and territorial competitions'

There is a spectrum of expressions of rivalry, from symbolic conflicts to the staking of territorial claims both inside and outside the stadium. Both forms have great relevance for highly identified fans, and sometimes merge. Violence may feature, but is not equally important for all highly identified fans. Now simple rivalries turn into enmities.

Symbolic contests mostly take the form of so-called team competitions in the stands, and play a fundamental role in the conflict hierarchy of fan groups and scenes.⁴⁷ The fans compete to see who has the loudest support, the most spectacular pyrotechnics show or the most impressive choreography.

In one sense it's a match for us too, whatever sparks rivalries is just another match [...] I thought we had a super-cool stadium show. We showed the guys on the other side that day that we were flat-out better and we stayed in the stadium forty-five minutes after the match and were still that way, so we sang ourselves into a kind of ecstasy and showed the other side that we topped them hugely [...] we were totally the best, number one [...]. (Group Interview C)

Driven by their positive expressions of support during the game, the fans continue their activities even after the final whistle, so that the interviewee's comparison with a state of euphoria also comes as no surprise. The fans succeed in presenting themselves as the dominant group and reinforcing their own group identity.

The team competition in the stands is associated with relatively low social cost compared to other forms of rivalry and, at least for a subculture, offers a high degree of recognition.⁴⁸

The development of large-scale choreographies and setting off spectacular flares are part of the standard repertoire. They are so characteristic of the group of highly identified football fans that they feature in fan magazines. These publications by fan groups and fan scenes, such as the magazine *Blickfang Ultra* [Ultra Eye-catcher] and related websites, are tools that go beyond the stadium impressions to show an interested audience – even if it is a subculture – the creative skills of individual fan groups and scenes in order to reinforce their own group and differentiate it from an outgroup.⁴⁹

As touched upon in the dimension ‘*Justification Narratives*’, territorial claims play a prominent role alongside team competitions. In most cases, the home town is constructed as native territory to which fans impute great importance and which must be protected from occupation by followers of the ‘enemy’.⁵⁰ Such conflicts over territorial boundaries are familiar from research on gangs and the like.⁵¹ As regards football fans, Benkwitz has investigated territorial conflicts between fans of the Aston Villa Football Club and the Birmingham City Football Club.⁵² He identifies the struggle for territory as one of three central themes relevant to rivalry relationships. By asserting territorial claims, fans generate ‘territorial capital’ that is conducive to dominance as well as reinforcing identity for the fan scenes in question.⁵³

Our interview data shows that this territorial capital is relevant for the highly identified fans – and not just on match days.

Yes, now let’s just get around to violence again. For instance, no matter which club, I don’t want to see any other scenes here in front of my front stands or any running around in front of our stands. [...] But that’s just the way it is with this territorial thinking, so these are our stands, we have this thing, so we are the representatives of the stands, the city and in some ways then we have to keep things in front of them clean. And it’s like the same is true for the city too. Then every so often a couple of blokes show up here and run around town and think they just gotta go shopping at the outlets for the latest sneakers and run all over the place and stick out. It’s always the same thing. Shirts, gym bags, jackets, whatever. Then it always gets to the point that somebody says ‘Hey, I don’t think you blokes belong around here.’ So this is kind of a way of keeping things cleaned up and it’s the same for us too. Somebody gets the idea of doing something in cities like [city], [city] or [city], and we’re careful to go undercover and not run around wearing scene shirts because we know that people in other cities would act the same way that we do. (Group Interview C)

The stands and the city are claimed as a kind of property, as territory, and must be kept ‘clean’. In a metaphorical sense, opposing fans are considered an impurity. These territorial claims, and the implied threats, also extend to times other than match days. Thus, it is obvious that the territorial borders must be defended, not only on match days, but also in everyday experience – and consequently the rivalry with strongly identified fans can also spill over into the private sphere.

However, this low-key appearance in the home towns of opposing teams is largely limited to times when there is no match. Things are different with away games. It is not unusual, especially at highly charged matches such as local derbies, for there to be organized group marches from the railway station to the stadium. Here, the space that opposing fans claim as their own territory is deliberately violated. If the March comes off, then advances into enemy territory can be chalked up. On the other hand, such archaic actions – resembling invasions by enemy armies – are constantly subject to the risk of violent attack. The behaviour and attitudes of highly

identified fans during these symbolic and territorial competitions are, in the final analysis, comparable to military confrontations.

Dimension 'demonstrations of violence'

In the dimension of violence, the interviews shed light on another form of differentiation between rival fans. Although violence is an extreme expression of conflict, it plays an important role for some of the highly identified fans.

Yes, I can speak from personal experience because that's really just a way of life. You just feel that somehow, you're alive. Somehow it's an experience. These are things that you'll talk about even years later [...] A lasting memory and as I said: If things are just about even, if nobody ends up in hospital, somehow it just all clicks.

[...]

So then you realise: Oh, okay, you can't really whip them. They just keep it together, they're somehow a group or a scene; you have to respect them for that. (Single Interview C)

This interview excerpt illustrates how violence – and especially intergroup violence against rival, hostile fans and fan groups – plays a community-building role. Staying together in an act of violence can represent an affirmation for a group or a scene. One fan group holding firm against another one can heighten the prestige of the group within the entire scene of highly identified fans and is at the same time a badge of prowess.

Compared to that of hooligans, the violence of highly identified fans has an intrinsic value that is not negligible and does not merely follow reactive or defensive patterns. Here, the symbolic and territorial competitions discussed earlier may lead to acts of violence. For highly identified fans, these represent a highly valued conflict resolution tool.

Added to this is the engaging nature of violent actions for the group narratives (see the *'Justification Narratives' dimension*).

Belonging to a highly identified fan group always implies a latent risk of violence. In the interviewee's groups and scenes, however, participation in acts of violence is not forced on anyone. As our interviews reveal, the question of violence is one that has caused groups to part ways and individual group members to drop out. Nevertheless, the willingness of some individuals to escalate rivalries with opposing fans into violence can give the group stability and confer status on individuals within the group.

It is striking that whilst representatives of authority such as the police are identified as problematic interaction partners, manifest violent conflicts with them occur rarely and are not necessarily sought. A professionally equipped police unit is an unequal foe for a fan group – a fact of which most groups are also aware. Clashing with rival fans, for which the subjective group narratives can offer ample justification, is much more appealing. This is not the only context for brawls between fans; they can also serve to stake out territorial boundaries and assert claims to dominance.

In addition to such violence-prone intergroup contests, another factor influencing the violent practices of highly identified fans is protecting objects (such as flags, banners) that become treated as sacred. All the interviewees regarded

violence as an option in the event of an attack on their own material and thus also on their own territory.

Conclusion

The present article develops an empirically based differentiation system for highly identified football fans in Germany. It is surprising how little research has addressed this topic, given that highly identified fans, such as ultras or ultra followers, occupy prominent locations in the stadiums in many European countries and are frequently involved in conflicts. This analysis of differentiation categories contributes to a better understanding of the importance of the group experience for football fans. Moreover, the study of the differentiation categories provides an insight into the tendency towards confrontation and thus also contributes to conflict research on youth and deviant groups in general.

Work on identity can be carried out using differentiation, and fan identities can be constructed. Such fan identities are often collective identities where highly identified fans associate with a specific group or scene. Our research shows a clear striving for positive distinction on the part of highly identified fans.

In the context of differentiation from rival fan groups, the tendency of some strongly identified fans to engage in violence is evident. Whilst this aspect is not in fact dominant, and is not shared by all fans, it still serves an extremely important function in the construction of identity. Our interview data shows that violence performed by highly identified fans is not simply defensive; confrontations with rival fans are actively sought to expand team competitions concerning the best support into a physical and violent plane or to assert territorial claims.

The analysis relates to findings on differentiation, identity and community by Tajfel and Turner, Eckert, Claessens and Bourdieu introduced in the first two sections of this paper. The research focuses on aspects that are absolutely vital if we are to make sense of the ultras in German football stadiums. It shows the importance of differentiation for the development of both identity and community, and outlines how the concepts of differentiation, identity and community work within the football fan context. The construction of boundaries towards other fans in general (not only rival ones) is an important mechanism for highly identified football fans.

Our analysis of differentiation processes between fan groups adds to and expands the cited studies of rivalries and differentiations by Armstrong and Giulianotti.⁵⁴ Especially Giulianotti's taxonomy, which is linked to Bourdieu's distinction theory, offers productive starting points.⁵⁵ Giulianotti underlines how supporters want to be more authentic than other spectators.

The analysis presented in this paper adds to the latest study on the ultras in Germany by Kathöfer and Kotthaus.⁵⁶ Whilst Kathöfer and Kotthaus provide an insider's perspective on highly identified fans, the study at hand more focuses on the outside view. In addition, the paper at hand gives an inside perspective on the process of distinction.

In future research, the focus should be directed more towards which factors are salient and under what conditions and to what extent the differentiation dimensions interact with each other. Moreover, questions should be asked about the turning points where symbolic and territorial competitions turn into violence.

In addition, following up on highly identified fans is recommended, as an element of long-term research investigating group and contextual influences on later

personal development. Particularly with regard to deviance, the question should be asked whether deviant and delinquent behaviour patterns become permanent or whether they are merely temporary stages, as is well documented in research on adolescents.⁵⁷

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Notes

1. Cf. Kathöfer and Kotthaus, *Block X – Unter Ultras*.
2. Cf. Claessens, *Gruppe und Gruppenverbände*, 18ff; Giulianotti, ‘Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs’, 33f.
3. Cf. Hitzler and Niederbacher, *Leben in Szenen*, 20f.
4. See Stone, ‘The Role of Football in Everyday Life’, 181.
5. See Merkel, ‘Football fans and clubs in Germany’.
6. See Henri Tajfel and John Turner, ‘The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior’.
7. Cf. e.g. Stott et al., ‘Tackling Football Hooliganism’; Testa and Gary, *Football, Fascism and Fandom*; Giulianotti, Bonney and Hepworth, *Football, Violence, and Social Identity*.
8. Cf. Armstrong and Giulianotti, *Fear and Loathing in World Football*.
9. Cf. Giulianotti, ‘Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs’.
10. Cf. Grau et al., ‘Football Fans in Germany’.
11. Cf. Kathöfer and Kotthaus, *Block X – Unter Ultras*.
12. Cf. Pilz et al., *Wandlungen des Zuschauerhaltens im Profifußball*.
13. Cf. Eckert, *Die Dynamik jugendlicher Gruppen*, 34ff.
14. See Sayers, ‘Identity and Community’.
15. Cf. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique*.
16. Cf. Tajfel and Turner, ‘The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior’.
17. cf. Claessens, *Gruppe und Gruppenverbände*, 5.
18. Cf. Elias, *The Society of Individuals*.
19. Cf. Strauss, *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*, 38.
20. Cf. *Ibid.*, 27.
21. Cf. Giulianotti, ‘Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs’, 34.
22. Cf. Kathöfer and Kotthaus, *Block X – Unter Ultras*, 123.
23. See Saleebey, ‘Culture, Theory, and Narrative’.
24. Cf. Eckert, Reis and Wetzstein, ‘*Ich will halt anders sein wie die anderen!*’ 400.
25. Cf. Kathöfer and Kotthaus, *Block X – Unter Ultras*, 115.
26. Dart, ‘Confessional Tales from Former Football Hooligans’, 44.
27. See Spaaij, ‘Aspects of Hooligan Violence’; Thornton, *Casuals: Football, Fighting and Fashion*.
28. Cf. Jenß, ‘Dressed in History’, 388, see Richardson and Turley, ‘Support Your Local Team’.
29. Cf. Hitzler and Niederbacher, *Leben in Szenen*.

30. Cf. Tarrant, 'Adolescent Peer Groups and Social Identity', 110f.
31. Cf. Spaaij, 'Aspects of Hooligan Violence', 25f.
32. Cf. Eckert, Reis and Wetzstein, '*Ich will halt anders sein wie die anderen!*' 418.
33. Cf. Sánchez-Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*, 148; Spaaij, 'Aspects of Hooligan Violence', 27; Ronald Hitzler and Michaela Pfadenhauer, 'Existential Strategies: The Making of Community', 97f.
34. See note 25 above.
35. See note 10 above.
36. See note 1 above.
37. Cf. Brown, Eicher and Petrie, 'The Importance of Peer Group', 95.
38. Cf. Eckert, *Die Dynamik jugendlicher Gruppen*, 41.
39. See Winands, *Interaktionen von Fußballfans*.
40. Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 5.
41. Cf. Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*.
42. Cf. Moffitt and Caspi, 'Childhood Predictors Differentiate Life-course Persistent and Adolescence-limited Antisocial Pathways Among Males and Females', 356.
43. Cf. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.
44. Cf. King, 'Violent Pasts'.
45. Cf. *Ibid.*, 583f.
46. *Ibid.*, 582.
47. Cf. Winands, *Interaktionen von Fußballfans*; Clark, 'I'm Scunthorpe "Til I Die"'; Armstrong and Young, 'Fanatic Football Chants: Creating and Controlling the Carnival'; Goffman, *Frame analysis. An essay on the organization of experience*.
48. Cf. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture*, 15.
49. Cf. Schwier, 'Soccer Fans and Subcultural Media'.
50. Cf. Spaaij, 'Aspects of Hooligan Violence', 24; see Armstrong and Giulianotti, 'Avenues of Contestation'.
51. Brantigham et al., 'The Ecology of Gang Territorial Boundaries', 878.
52. Cf. Benkwitz, *Clashing Sub-cultures*.
53. *Ibid.*, 168.
54. Cf. Armstrong and Giulianotti, *Fear and Loathing in World Football*.
55. Cf. Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs'.
56. Cf. Kathöfer and Kotthaus, *Block X – Unter Ultras*.
57. Cf. Siegel and Welsh, *Juvenile delinquency*, 57f.

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