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Europeanised identifications among football fans. The analysis of discussions in online message boards.

Regina Weber^{a*}, Alexander Brand^a, Florian Koch^b and Arne Niemann^c

Across Europe, national professional football leagues have seen increasing numbers of players from other EU states, while the Champions League and the Europa League have become a focal point for many teams. This article seeks to investigate how far this Europeanisation on the organisational level of football is reflected in identities and discourses of fans. We develop a framework to analyse Europeanisation of identities among football fans. In the empirical part we conduct a qualitative content analysis of fan discussions on publicly available message boards among fans of four first league teams in England and Austria. Our empirical findings indicate that fans' identities are to some extent Europeanised, albeit in very different ways and to varying degrees. The participation in European club competitions and the Europeanisation of player markets seem to shape fan perceptions in that respect.

Keywords: Europeanisation, football, football fans, identity, lifeworld

1 Introduction

Football is a widespread sport throughout Europe, producing many of the world's best players and attracting fans worldwide (Waele et al. 2018). Its structures have been significantly Europeanised during the past decades (Brand, Niemann and Spitaler 2013; Geeraert 2016; Manzenreiter and Spitaler 2013; Niemann, García and Grant 2011). This "Europeanisation of football" partly results from top-down pressure from the European level, i.e. rulings by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) or investigations by the European Commission (Brand et al. 2013; Niemann and Brand 2008). Most

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prominently, the Bosman rulings by the ECJ have had an impact on European football through the widespread Europeanisation (and internationalisation) of player markets. Football teams increasingly comprise players from various countries and the degree of athlete migration has increased significantly following the rulings (Frick 2009).

In addition, Europeanisation dynamics are fed by transnationalising processes, such as the cross-border coordination of football clubs and the formation of transnational lobby networks (i.e. the former G-14, now ECA) or the creation of a pan-European football league, the Champions League (Brand et al. 2013; Niemann et al. 2011). The EU is able to influence the governance of football – even if not consistently across the continent –, driving some general tendencies that shape the face of the game (Geeraert and Drieskens 2015; Niemann et al. 2011).

This article asks how such phenomena influence football fans. We develop a framework to analyse the Europeanisation of fans' perspectives and identities. The increasingly Europeanised transfer market, recurring competitions against other European clubs and continent-wide broadcasting have likely shaped the perceptions of fans (King 2003; Millward 2009; Niemann and Brand 2013). Some early research indicates that travel to European competitions and contact with fans from other countries influence how fans perceive themselves vis-à-vis Europe (King 2000; Millward 2006). In that sense, it might be more relevant for a FC Liverpool supporter to focus on what happens at Bayern Munich compared to events at Stoke or Brighton. If so, football influences collective European identities or at least indicates the Europeanisation of identities, anchored in everyday practices.

The term “identity” is often used in a fuzzy manner. A more specific concept is needed to study football fans in their specific habitat empirically. We will develop such a framework as we elaborate two analytical dimensions, *communities of belonging* and

frames of reference. These two dimensions cover the potential aspects of Europeanised patterns of individual identifications and self-understandings that football fans express, and relate to the well-established literatures on team and fan identification in sport management and sport psychology (e.g. Cialdini, Borden and Sloan 1976; Lock et al. 2012; Lock and Heere 2017; Wann and Branscombe 1993).

Our main interest lies in elucidating whether there is a structured variation in identifications along the lines of a Europeanisation of football, explained by which team is supported (competing at the European level or only nationally) and by how prevalent non-domestic players are across the competitions that are regularly watched. In that sense, variations between identification patterns of fans matter to us. Do we find Europeanised perceptions of in-groups and out-groups (*communities of belonging*)? Can we ascertain differing priorities as regards the national or European competitions (*frames of reference*)? We enrich our conceptual framework with results from an empirical analysis of football fan discussions in online message boards (fan forums) from four clubs in England and Austria. It provides insights into how far the concepts are substantiated empirically. We proceed as follows: section 2 specifies our conceptual framework. In the third part we elaborate on our case selection and data base. Section 4 illustrates our empirical analysis.

2 Conceptual framework: Communities of belonging and frames of reference

A vast and conceptually rich literature on identity dynamics among sport fans and supporters already exists. One of the main points of departure in these works is the idea of fan perceptions, behaviours and aspirations as shaped by the sporting success of the teams they follow (Cialdini et al. 1976; Lock et al. 2012:284–85; Lock et al. 2014), or to what extent an established team identification mitigates distancing effects in case of sporting failure (Wann and Branscombe 1990; Wann and Grieve 2005). More recently,

Lock and Heere (2017) made an effort to streamline the multitude of identity concepts employed in the sports-related literatures. According to them, phenomena related to “team identification” refer to *group* dynamics and mutual delineation between social groups; in contrast, “fan identification” rather focuses on individual-level perceptions and a role-taking among sport fans that is formative rather than aspirational (ibid.: 418) and hence less subject to identity management under the influence of expected benefits (e.g. of group affiliation). Against this background, we suggest exploring the identity-related aspects of any Europeanisation in the minds of football fans.

2.1 Identity

A promising, comprehensive analytic tool for analysing the Europeanisation of football fans’ identities is the tripartite identity concept that integrates identification, self-understanding and communality (Brubaker & Cooper 2000) and on which we base our framework. As for “identification”, Brubaker and Cooper argue that wherever we go, we are constantly identified by others. These can be institutions, networks, or even ourselves. Identification happens through specific markers: categorical (e.g. ethnicity or gender), relational (e.g. friends or family), or institutional (e.g. passports) (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In this sense, “markers” are latent constructs with which we can identify ourselves, through a cognitive or emotional process. The stronger our emotional ties to such “markers” become, the more visible they get in the form of specific symbols, colours, or ideas (Eder 2009:431). According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000), these markers have an influence on the process of “identification”, which typically depends on the social environment and occurs through interaction. The main advantage of Brubaker and Cooper’s conception of “identification” is that it emphasises the external component of identity, i.e. it makes visible the multitude of *ascribed* roles, and allows

for a distinction between contextual influences and the identity work internal to an actor, here: a football fan.

This second dimension by Brubaker and Cooper (2000) is aptly captured by the concept of “self-understanding”. Self-understandings, in contrast to identifications, outline how people “make sense of the social world”, how they perceive of themselves, and how they react to certain situations (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). The process of forming a self-understanding is shaped by a variety of social influences (e.g. school, family, and friends), yet it occurs at the individual level. Such self-understandings can transform over time and vary in their attributes, i.e. they are fluid. The main point is that such self-understandings are subjective and vary from person to person. They are much more encompassing than individually held conceptions of team affiliation, and identity work to protect one’s self-image in the wake of defeat, which have formed the main focus of the Sport Studies literatures.

Finally Brubaker and Cooper (2000) suggest “commonality”, “connectedness” and “groupness” as one aspect of identity. “Commonality” describes a set of common attributes (e.g. ethnicity, religion or gender). “Connectedness” captures the relations people have towards each other (e.g. family, friends and network). “Groupness” is a feeling which combines categorical “commonality” and relational “connectedness”. It is described as “the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:20). This feeling is created through time spent together in the group, joint experiences, and their perceived narrative in public. Looking at “groupness” more closely, it becomes clearer that “commonality” is more important for this feeling than “connectedness”. People who share similar attributes can more easily form organised communities (e.g. football clubs). In this third dimension of “groupness” we can most strongly identify linkages to the above-referenced literatures

on team/fan identification. Again, we suggest the notion of “groupness” (based on perceived commonality and realised connectedness) to be superior for our purposes. First, it allows capturing any perceptions of belonging together as a group, including those that are *not* reducible to sporting success (Lock et al. 2014:284–85), or ego-protection following defeat on the pitch (Wann and Branscombe 1990:105). Second, the groupness-idea put forward by Brubaker and Cooper (2000) lends itself particularly well to capturing ideas about belonging and exclusion in a *comparative* mode (e.g. different fan milieus inspired by different ideas about European or local rivals). The concept of “groupness” applied to the context of football can also capture emotional attachment and the extent of discursive delineation from “others” against the background of group plurality (Brand and Niemann 2014).

2.2 Communities of belonging

This analytical dimension clusters dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, understandings of in-group and out-group, perceptions of community and discord, and adjacent “narratives”. The concept of *communities of belonging* is used to understand how football fans perceive their “sameness” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:7) within certain social groups and networks, thus setting clear boundaries. This concept addresses the distinction between “us” and “them”, how groups are constructed and what constitutes “the other”. Three aspects form the concept of *communities of belonging*: inclusion/exclusion, interaction, and the encoding of events. All this bears a close relationship to the application of Social Identity Theory to sport fans (Lock et al. 2012; Lock and Heere 2017), but our approach takes a step back to initially observe articulations of groupness and communality, no matter whether these have been triggered by sporting events, success or defeat, and without regard to the commercial

usefulness of such ideas of sameness and belonging. We focus on constructions of likeness and difference among fans, in which categories (local, national, European, or other markers of delineation) they have been grounded, and whether a patterned variation between followers of differently located teams exists, for instance between European-level champions and counterparts from the respective leagues' lower ranks.

Inclusion/exclusion

The inclusion and exclusion of people in and from a community is an essential part of identification. We analyse how football fans define their community by delineating contradistinctions between themselves and others, constructing the in-group and the out-group. We seek to understand how fans characterise others as being alien or rivals, and on what grounds they do so. In our understanding, the "other" is not limited to other teams but can also be distinguished within the context of one's own team or fellow supporters. Indirectly at least, such othering also leads to the articulation of certain self-images and contributes to the recognition of groupness. How do these characterisations come about and in how far are they shared or challenged among fans? Discursive inclusion and exclusion hence form the core of the analysis of how "we" and "they" are constructed.

A guiding aspect for our analysis is to find out to what degree assessments of players and the behaviour of supporters are shaped by constructions of national or European belonging. We seek to understand whether fans articulate their belonging primarily in national contexts and references and how they refer to Europeanised communities.

Relations among fans: coalitions and networks

The second aspect of *communities of belonging* is the relationship between fans across teams. Despite the strong sense of separation between supporters of different teams, cross-national and cross-team networks, contacts, and relations do exist. European networks such as Fans Against Racism in Europe (FARE) and Fan Supporters Europe (FSE) demonstrate the transnational dimension of coalitions between fans. Research into community-building among sport fans has made clear that many forms of such communities have developed in the age of online communication. There are brand(ed) fan communities around teams and main sponsors (Popp and Woratschek 2016) and anti-brand communities focusing on cultivating an aversion to specific teams and their supporters in a bottom-up fashion (Popp, Germelmann and Jung 2016). It is in this sense that our interest is not only geared towards the elite layer of fan activists connecting across borders in networks such as FARE and FSE but also encompasses informal groups and individual connections.

Our analysis focuses on the geographic dimension in coalitions, networks, and online communities. How are relations to other fans shaped by national borders and what cross-national coalitions exist? Are there positive or negative references to other fans across borders (i.e. interest coalitions)? The aim is to uncover the interactions, references, and allusions between fans (either fans of the same club abroad or fans of overseas clubs) to get a deeper understanding of the communities to which these supporters see themselves belonging.

Encoding of events in narratives

The third aspect of *communities of belonging* is the collective remembrance of events and their inclusion in the narratives of supporters' communities. The analysis of core events such as World Cups, games against certain opponents and their encoding in

narratives is common in football research. Anecdotes about the relevance of “football wars” and symbolic victories are omnipresent, i.e. the 1954 World Cup for the formation of the German nation after WW2 or the narrative that the civil war-like conditions around the game between Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade in 1990 heralded the collapse of Yugoslavia.

We seek to evaluate the discourses among fans regarding the role of such events for their identifications and communities. The idea that events help to create communality and discord is central to our concept. How do certain events trigger or foster a narrative and how are such narratives shaped by European or national aspects? Our work will focus on the events that are the source for such narratives and the aspects of communities and belonging.

2.3 Frames of reference

The second dimension of analysis, “frames of reference”, includes preferences and assessments of football-related aspects at the individual level as well as a wide set of supporters’ activities (following football events, travel activities, tourist activities in the context of away games, network building) in its spatial scope. This dimension is used to understand how football fans evaluate the game and their team’s role in it from a spatial perspective (national vs. European-level competitions and their ascribed importance) and the geographic range in which they engage. The focus is on elucidating whether there has been a normalisation of cross-border action (“going Europe”), and if this connects to the Europeanisation of the match and governance structures of the game.

National competitions

The first aspect of *frames of reference* are national club competitions. These national competitions (usually the top-level national league and cup competitions) are

often assumed to be the main area of supporters' interest. Games in the national leagues are the clubs' staple fixtures and national media give them extensive airtime. We seek to capture how supporters perceive national competitions, either as the most important competition or as secondary to the "true" contest among European-level champions. How do fans understand the relevance of the national league: as a necessary evil or as a valuable competition which they principally refer to when they talk about their club? This analytic dimension also includes those activities that are related to their experience of match days in national competitions and the investment that is connected to such activities. The aim is to understand the reference frames of football fans regarding their respective national competitions and national competitors.

European competitions

The second aspect of *frames of reference* are the European club competitions. While the national matches are seen as regular fixtures, games and tournaments at the European level often seem to carry the flavour of the extraordinary. Do they still? Has the Europeanisation of football across Europe not also shifted attention to both the UEFA Champions League and the Europa League? If so, is that valid for all clubs and their supporters throughout Europe? Especially for supporters of teams which frequently qualify for and participate in the Champions League, this very European-level competition might have become the preferred and prioritised frame of reference. Moreover, the creation of a *de facto* European club league could have affected the overall perception of such competitions as rather regular (Niemann and Brand 2020). In our analysis, we therefore seek to determine whether supporters perceive these European club competitions as normal or extraordinary, both with regard to their own club as well as in general. It should also be analysed how and *why* participation in a European club competition is considered important for one's own team: is that valued

because it allows a club to represent its national league, or is participation in the competition sought in order to belong to the top tier of the best clubs continent-wide?

Relationship between national and European competitions

The third aspect of *frames of reference* is the relationship between the competitions on the national level and the European level. This aspect focuses on the spread of attention across the two different competitions. It assesses how supporters frame the different competitions regarding their respective potential rivals. What shapes the leading ideas of rivalry between fans: local, regional, national, or European-wide references? How intensively do fans devote interest to their rivals in other European countries compared to regional/local competitors and rivals? A connected, albeit distinct question regards the attention and the travel activities for different sorts of matches. How regularly do fans travel across Europe to follow their team compared to national competitions and how do they understand these travels? Are their travel activities principally motivated by touristic considerations or is the main focus on the game? These questions are analysed with a particular focus on the relationship between the two levels of competition, national and European.

3 Case selection and data base

The empirical analysis is based on data from two English Premier League (EPL) clubs and two Austrian Bundesliga (ABL) clubs. From each league, one club with a high level of participation in European competitions and one club with a very limited or non-existent record of such participation were selected. In the EPL, the club with a high participation in European competitions is Manchester United F.C. and the club with little record of recent European appearances is Newcastle United F.C. In the ABL, the

frequent European competitor is SK Sturm Graz, located in the Styrian capital, together with the less successful FC Wacker Innsbruck, located in the capital of Tyrol (Table 1).

<i>Club</i>	<i>League (as of season 18/19)</i>	<i>League level variables</i>		<i>Club level variables</i>		
		<i>Internation- alisation of player market</i>	<i>Non- native players</i>	<i>Participation in European club competitions</i>	<i>European appearances 08/09-17/18</i>	<i>First league 08/09- 17/18</i>
Sturm Graz	Bundesliga (AT)	Low	27%	High	7	10
Wacker Innsbruck	Bundesliga (AT)	Low	27%	Low	0	4
Manchester United	Premier League	High	63%	High	8	10
Newcastle United	Premier League	High	63%	Low	1	8

Table 1: Case selection and main criteria.

The selection allows the analysis of “hard cases” (Seawright & Gerring 2008), as both the UK and Austria can be seen as “belated” and rather critical Europeans. Both joined the European Communities later and remained sceptical participants, albeit for different reasons. In the British case, Europe has served as a derogative contrast to “Englishness”, especially in the Eurosceptic tabloid media, culminating in the “Brexit” decision in 2016 (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Hobolt 2016). The intricate situation of Austria during the Cold War made the country refrain from joining the European Communities until the 1990s. The Austrian public remained sceptical of the EU, the Euro-critical Austrian Freedom Party has performed well in national and regional elections, even participating in governing coalitions at times (Aichholzer et al. 2014; Gavenda and Umit 2016).

The case selection provides for variety regarding supposed influencing factors at the league and club levels. At the league level, the composition of player markets differs between a high share of non-national players in the EPL (63%) and a low level of 27% of non-national players in the ABL. While the EPL’s financial power and liberal regulations for highly skilled migrants have contributed to an ever-increasing share of

foreign players (Elliott 2017), the ABL established a programme to encourage playing time for Austrian players through financial incentives (Brand, Niemann and Spitaler 2011). Thus, the two leagues provide distinctly contrasting contexts for the analysis: for EPL fans, non-British, and in particular non-English players have become the norm (on the complex interplay between Englishness and Britishness in football see e.g. Gibbons 2017; Gibbons and Malcolm 2017). For ABL fans, it is not only common to have a high share of Austrian players in their teams, but they know that the club benefits financially from these players.

3.1 Database

The study is based on an analysis of discussions in online message boards that relate to identity aspects and Europeanisation. We apply qualitative content analysis (using Atlas.ti software) to texts produced by fans in club-related forums that are publicly available on the internet (readable without registration). Such and other fan-made online publications heighten the discursive dimension of fandom by providing spaces where any fan can debate issues. Online communication between football supporters has been extensively used for discussions around the club as well as for planning of travel, ticketing and other aspects of fandom (Pearson 2010; Pearson 2012; Mcmanus 2015). Moreover, these forums are independent of the club and other gatekeepers such as editors or journalists. Usually, every registered user can contribute. This makes those forums a particularly *open* space for discussions.

The nature of publicly available forums (private forums are not the subject of this study) is that everyone can read the messages and follow the discussion without registration. Registration does not require any credentials, and the use of fake names is widespread (Cleland 2014:417). The resulting “anonymity” lowers the threshold for expressing sentiments, especially those that contradict common social norms.

The anonymity of the participants and the lack of reliable information about the characteristics of the supporters such as gender, age and location make it impossible to claim representativeness. This has been elaborated in similar analyses before (Cleland 2014; Millward 2006).

One major advantage of message board discussions is the opportunity to access fan discussions without intervening in the field. This unobtrusiveness would be lost if any notification was given on the forum, be it during an ongoing debate or by starting one's own thread as a researcher (e.g. as in Cleland 2014). In this study, no notification was given to the forums about the research, preventing any bias caused by a researcher's intervention (Millward 2008:307). This non-obtrusive approach is common in discourse analysis of internet texts, e.g. on twitter. To minimise any potential harm to the discussants who usually do not contribute to research purposes, the names of the users will not be revealed. Additionally, full quotation will be reduced to a minimum to restrict the opportunities for tracing back posters using search engines.

3.2 Data collection procedure

For each club we identified one (usually the largest) fan forum. In one case, an additional forum was selected. The material covers two league seasons, 2016/17 and 2017/18. In total, it comprises 49 threads across the forums with 19407 individual posts (Table 2).

<i>Club</i>	<i>Message board(s)</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
Sturm Graz	austriansoccerboard.at > Sturm Graz	ASB
Wacker Innsbruck	austriansoccerboard.at > Wacker Innsbruck	ASB
	forum.tivoli12.at	T12
Manchester United	RedCafe.net	RC
Newcastle United	ToonForum.co.uk	TF

Table 2: Overview of sources for message board threads.

We expected that issues of identification would arise most prominently in discussions about rivals, competitions, and players. A term search on “Europe”, “European”, “English/Austrian”, but also football-related terms such as “UEFA”, “Premier League/Bundesliga”, “Champions League” and “Europa League” revealed that these words were mostly found in threads (grouped messages under a joint headline) covering two topics: discussions about rivals and competitions, and transfer discussions (for a list of all selected threads see Appendix).

1. Discussions about rivals and competitions

Rivalry is discussed in threads about past and upcoming matches (e.g. “Post-match discussion”, RedCafe.net and “Match thread Watford v NUFC, toonforum.co.uk), but also in separate threads (e.g. “Der Gästesektor im Fokus”, ASB > Wacker Innsbruck). These discussions cover matches in the national league as well as European competitions. Match threads are usually available for each league and cup match during a season. The threads were selected for inclusion in the corpus based on a random sample of matches across the two seasons.

2. Transfer discussions

Discussions about transfers of players to and from other clubs are prevalent in all forums. They provide the main resource for discourses on player markets. Often there is one main discussion strand for each transfer window regarding incoming players (e.g. “Der Kader 2017/18” at ASB > Wacker Innsbruck). Two threads per club, explicitly relating to one transfer window during the two seasons 2016/17 and 2017/18, have been analysed, covering all discussions about incoming and outgoing players as well as transfer discussions about other clubs during these transfer periods.

4 Empirical results: Europe in discussions about transfers and rivalries

In our empirical analysis, we applied the conceptual framework to the selected material. The threads were each summarised with regard to their main discussion trends, the general line of arguments and potential controversies. These thread summaries were further condensed and aggregated to identify common patterns within each club. The first part of the empirical section elaborates these general patterns and illustrates them with quotes from the boards (quotes from the Austrian clubs are translated into English by the authors). The second part compares the discussions within each league and across the leagues.

4.1 Fan discussions in the four clubs

Sturm Graz: The top club in an underdog league

The discussions among Sturm Graz fans indicate a self-conception of a top club in an underdog league. References to other clubs regarding player transfers and rivalries are predominantly limited to the ABL. European club competitions are seen as an exceptional opportunity for the club. Their main rival – domestically as well as at the European level – is Red Bull Salzburg.

A general notion among the fans is that the ABL is not highly valued. This attitude is prevalent in the discussions about transfers from and to the club. The fans state that the league is useless and one dominant club always wins:

“From a purely sports point of view, the league in Austria has now become completely meaningless. The same club always wins the league. Even the great league reform will not change anything here.” (*Thread: 24. Runde SK Sturm Graz RB Salzburg*)

Limited financial and infrastructural opportunities are frequently mentioned as restricting performance, which is often contrasted with clubs that are perceived as

belonging to the European elite, e.g. Paris St. Germain, Bayern München, Real Madrid or Manchester City.

European competitions are seen as an exceptional opportunity for the club and the fans. A discussion about a Champions League qualification match against Ajax Amsterdam underlines this perspective. Opinions on Ajax were divided between those who saw the Dutch club as “a really strong team” and those that thought them beatable, but in both cases, fans express that they did not consider the match a prosaic fixture (*Thread: 2. Qualirunde Champions-League: Ajax Amsterdam - SK Sturm Graz*). The match is also discussed as a chance to represent Austria and increase its five-year UEFA coefficient (*Sturm in Europa 2018/19*).

“We would not only earn important points for the club and the 5-year ranking, but also steal important points from our closest competitor Holland in the fight for the 11th rank” (*Sturm in Europa 2018/19*)

The club’s main rivalry is seen as that with frequent ABL champions Red Bull Salzburg. The club is mentioned as a problematic competitor on the transfer market due to its financial resources, but the rival also enjoys great respect. Though a national rival, Salzburg is seen as representing Austria on the European level, which corroborates the representative character that fans ascribe to the European competitions.

“Red Bull are just professional in all respects. We must accept that. And they are "the" heroes who score points for Austria. Nothing more, nothing less.” (*24th Runde: SK Sturm Graz - RB Salzburg*)

The transfer discussions indicate a self-understanding as a club that develops young players and sells them to clubs in more prestigious leagues. The German leagues are a frequent reference point as a potential ambition for players (*Wintertransfers 17/18*). The rumours about incoming players are mostly limited to the ABL. Non-Austrian players are seldom the subject of discussion. The discussions indicate a clear

distinction between Austrian and foreign players, as the incentives for fielding Austrian players are regularly mentioned (*Wintertransfers 17/18, Sommertransfers 17/18*).

F.C. Wacker Innsbruck: The underdog in the underdog league

The discussion among Wacker Innsbruck fans indicates a self-concept as fans of an underdog club in an underdog league. They maintain a strong local perspective and seek to be the most successful club in the state of Tyrol. Their chief rival is neighbouring WSG Wattens. The ABL is seen as the natural habitat of the club and the two seasons spent in the second division are seen as only a temporary setback.

The fans' focus is on Austrian football, but they consider the national competitions as not very prestigious. Only in few cases do the fans look beyond Austria, e.g. the EPL is mentioned while discussing the financial impact of relegation (*ASB // Der Gästesektor im Fokus*). In one of these cases, fans mention other clubs to distinguish their Innsbruck from European top-level clubs in terms of infrastructure. This highlights that fans are aware of football in other countries, though they clearly distinguish it from their own club.

“A team from Barcelona, Real, Bayern Munich, etc. could never be as successful with an infrastructure (training facilities) that is just about the midfield of the 2nd division, no matter how much money they can spend on new players.” (*T12 // Kaderplanung Winter 2017*)

The most prominent rival is the club WSG Wattens (now WSG Swarovski Tirol, which used to play with the club in a team partnership and is located in the Tyrolean town of Wattens). The discussions around the derby between the two are clearly oriented towards this local rivalry (*T12 // 12. Runde WSG Wattens – FC Wacker Innsbruck*). The latter seems to be fuelled by localism, focusing on rivalry regarding spectatorship and young players.

“With Buchacher [name of a player] it is also about showing the guys from Wattens that it is still a desire and promotion for their players to move from Wattens to Innsbruck. That is why we should grab their best player every year. A small power play to strengthen our brand. The way for domestic players to become a professional should be like this: from Wattens or the Wacker Amateurs to FC Wacker I and from there probably abroad. Wattens is only a stopover to the top (to us).” (*austriansoccerboard, Kader 2018/19*)

Regarding the transfer market, the fans are aware of players from other clubs in the ABL and the second Austrian league. Additionally, the German second and third leagues are potential pools for transfers. But references to players outside of the Austrian leagues remain vague. Foreign players are regularly referred to as “legionnaires” and clearly distinguished from Austrian players (*ASB // Kader 2018/19*). A certain case demonstrates that players from abroad are exceptional: a discussion focuses on a French player who potentially needs to “acclimate” before being able to play properly (*T12 // Kaderplanung Winter 2017*). This discussion shows how fans differentiate between Austrian players that are called by their name and the “French”.

“One must wait for the transfer of the Frenchman. But before I get Kienast [name of a player], I’d rather get the Frenchman.” (*T12 // Kaderplanung Winter 2017*).

The fans express a strong identification with their region – Tyrol. The regional situation is relevant in terms of the weather conditions and their impact on matches. Some suggest that the club foremost needs Tyrolean players. A statement illustrates this attitude: the ideal way for local players towards becoming professional is as suggested above: “Starting with Wattens [...] via Wacker I and from there maybe abroad.” (*ASB // Kader 2018/19*) This describes an attitude where the limits of the club and league are recognised, and rivalries are primarily within the Austrian leagues.

Manchester United: The contested top club in the top league

The discussions among the fans of Manchester United indicate a self-concept of fans of a contested top club in a top league. Their perspective on European competitions relates to their perspective on the national league: they consider the European competitions to be a competitive place, but it is also a potential failing ground. Local rivalries (Manchester City, Liverpool) remain of utmost importance. Regarding transfers, the fans show broad interest in players across the continent, with no particular interest in English or British players.

The fans identify the EPL as top league, but see their club failing in reaching top ranks in the league. In this context, European competition becomes relevant. The Champions League is seen as too competitive for the current team, but the Europa League is a viable option that can serve as a substitute for success at the national level:

“I think our best bet is the Europa. Keep ticking away at the PL no doubt, but I would concentrate seriously on the Europa. We are getting better and better all the time (bar the Chelsea game).” (*PostMatch v Arsenal 2016*)

A disjunction from the European competition comes about when some argue that “the current Real team is pretty much a world class 11” (*Summer Transfer Window 2017*) that can win the Champions League several times in a row. European football here is the implicit reference point, but it is a failing ground for the team. A post-match discussion following a loss against Sevilla highlights how the fans consider the opponent as only an “average Spanish side” (*Man Utd 1:2 Sevilla Post-match discussion*). Thus, the loss symbolises a greater decline of the club as the following quote illustrates:

“To know that that was the impression of the club we put out for the whole of Europe to see, on a night where no other “big” European club was playing, is truly embarrassing.” (*Man Utd 1:2 Sevilla Post-match discussion*)

The main rival is local: Manchester City. The rivalry is discussed in the context of the EPL, but Manchester City's performance at the European level also gets a great deal of attention, being identified as successful, but at the cost of being owned by "an oil rich middle eastern country" (*Man Utd 1:2 Man City Post-match discussion*).

"Let's be honest, they are a much better side. But who cares, really? I will always be a United fan. Man City are only having their moment because the club was bought by, essentially, an oil rich middle eastern country. They spend, spend, spend to guarantee results [...]" (*Man Utd 1:2 Man City Post-match discussion*)

In transfer discussions, players from all over Europe are mentioned. One important argument is the Champions League. The competition is seen as a core advantage in signing new players (*Summer Transfer Window 2017*). One specific thread (*Most hated ex united players*) indicates core aspects of an "us" vs. "them" distinction among the fans. The national background or ethnicity of the players rarely play a role. Most prominent is a resentment of players who went on to play for the rivals Manchester City or Liverpool, who are generally seen as "traitors".

Newcastle United F.C.: The underdog in the top league

The discussions among Newcastle fans indicate a self-concept as an underdog club in a top league. They see their club as an antithesis to the EPL top clubs, mainly due to its limited financial means. European competitions are not considered to be an issue, and their rivals are exclusively other English clubs. The transfer discussions are different: potential transfers from all over Europe are discussed as options, revealing a strong cross-national interest.

There is little doubt about the quality of the EPL among the fans, but they see their club in the lower regions of English top football. Teams like West Bromwich as well as Brighton & Hove Albion are described as equal competitors in the respective

leagues (Championship in 2016/17 and EPL in 2017/18). This self-understanding is underlined after Newcastle's win against Chelsea on the last match day of the season (*Final match thread - NUFC v Chelsea*), which is seen as extraordinary despite there being essentially nothing at stake. This is a sharp contrast to the match against Watford a week before, which was characterised as "a friendly" due to the game's lack of relevance for the final league results (*Match thread - Watford v NUFC*). No particular rivalry is visible within these discussions, as only the current competitive situation in the league seems to define rivalry.

"It won't be pretty to watch most of the time this season but I think we can match teams in the bottom half of the league (which will be our target) based on what I saw in the first half yesterday, so long as players treat every match the same" (*Match Thread: Newcastle vs Spurs - 13/08/17*)

The discussions on rivalry are consistent in that the reference points remain always within the EPL. European football plays no role. European competitions are discussed in separate threads and have no connection to Newcastle United (*Champions League Draw; Champions League Semis*). There is no clear perspective on European competitions regarding their representative function. A discussion evolves around supporting other EPL teams in European competitions, but there was no consistent opinion. Two positions clashed here: "Why should I support a Spanish team against an English team?" and "I dont want this [Liverpool] team to win anything, also not in international competitions" (*Saturday football: Champions League and Play Off Finals 2018*).

The transfer discussions cover players from leagues across Europe. The main arguments for or against players are based on quantitative data, e.g. on goals and assists. Their reference points are online databases (i.e. [transfermarkt.co.uk](https://www.transfermarkt.co.uk)). Players are discussed regarding their performance, backed by statistics, but there is little to no

reference to the players' home leagues (*NUFC Minor/Untrusted Transfer Rumours (Summer 2018)*) and *NUFC Minor/Untrusted Transfer Rumours (January 2017)*). A strong distinction is made from top elite clubs. Newcastle United is seen as inferior to these competitors on the transfer market:

“Bayern are linked to so many players already, we just need to find/keep the ones they don't take” (*NUFC Minor/Untrusted Transfer Rumours (Summer 2018)*).

One of the rare occasions where nationality came into play was the signing of a player to a club in the second Chinese league. This announcement was followed by several comments about salary, denying that there could be any other reason, except money, to go there (*NUFC Minor/Untrusted Transfer Rumours (January 2017)*). This is a sharp contrast to discussions about signing to other clubs in European leagues (e.g. Italy, Switzerland, and France) and indicates that differences are potentially not seen within European leagues but between European leagues and other aspiring regions.

4.2 Comparison of discussions

The case descriptions highlighted discourses within the four clubs' message boards. Table 3 summarises the results. Three comparisons guide the next section: (1) an intra-league comparison between ABL and EPL clubs, (2) cross-league differences between the two “top clubs” and the two “underdogs” and (3) an inter-league comparison between the ABL and EPL clubs.

	Sturm Graz	Wacker Innsbruck	Manchester United	Newcastle United
<i>Summary</i>	<i>Top club in underdog league</i>	<i>Underdog club in underdog league</i>	<i>Contested top club in top league</i>	<i>Underdog club in top league</i>
Competitions	Focus: ABL, ECC as extraordinary opportunity and event. ECC have representative function	ABL as main domain, 2. League as necessary evil. No further interest on ECC.	EPL as failing ground, ECC twofold: CL too high (but training ground for EPL)	EPL as focus, though self-Id as relegation battler. No perspective on ECC.

Rivalries	Main rivalry: Red Bull Salzburg (national)	Main rivalry: WSG Tyrol (local), aim for Tyrolean dominance	Main rivalry: ManCity, Liverpool (local), but ManCity rivalry also on European level	Main rivalry: other EPL clubs in the lower parts of the table. No one in particular. Strong alienation from top clubs in the EPL
Transfers	Focus on Austrian clubs and players, minor interest in German leagues	Focus on Austrian clubs and players, minor interest in German 2. & 3. leagues	Focus on players from across European leagues, nationality irrelevant. One exception. Strong information base across the continent.	Focus on players from across European leagues, nationality not relevant. Strong information base, reference to other medium level club.

Table 3: Summary of results.

Intra-Bundesliga comparison: Sturm Graz vs. Wacker Innsbruck

There are two similarities evident in the fan discussions of the Austrian clubs: (1) fans share a rather self-deprecating view of the ABL, mainly due to a supposed lack of money and prestige. (2) Their main transfer focus is on Austrian players from teams in the same league, and their extended area of attention regarding potential transfers rarely reaches beyond the German speaking area (German and Swiss leagues).

Four differences can be identified: (1) the self-image as an underdog at Innsbruck differs from the Graz perspective of being a top club in an underdog league. (2) The strong emphasis on regional identification at Wacker Innsbruck stands out. (3) The self-image of an educating club for other (better) leagues is distinct at Sturm Graz. (4) The perspective on European club competitions: while they are irrelevant for the fans of Wacker Innsbruck, they matter for Sturm Graz fans. Nevertheless, the latter see such participation as an exceptional, albeit realistic aspiration.

Intra-Premier League comparison: Manchester United vs. Newcastle United

The similarities between the two EPL clubs are found in their perspectives on the league and on transfer options. They both share the following: (1) they share the perspective of playing in a European top league. (2) Players from all over Europe are considered when talking about potential transfers. (3) The discussions about transfers are led by information about quantitative data on player performance. (4) They identify their main rivals among clubs in their respective “segment” of the EPL.

The clubs differ in their self-image. (1) While fans of Manchester see their club as a (contested) top club, Newcastle supporters’ image of their club is that of an underdog. (2) Accordingly, for Manchester fans, playing in European competitions is a must, while it is not relevant for Newcastle fans. This translates into different attitudes towards European transfers: while Manchester fans argue for major transfer advantages through Champions League participation, Newcastle fans distinguish themselves from the top clubs by being unable to afford potential top players.

Comparison across leagues: top clubs vs. underdogs

The fans of Sturm Graz and Manchester United are similar in that they show a moderately European focus with a strong national league imprint. The main rivals of the self-perceived top clubs are other top clubs in their domestic league. They both emphasise the significance of European club competitions but differ in their expectations. The fans of Sturm Graz view European club competitions as exceptional while for Manchester supporters participation in them is a must.

The fans of Newcastle United and Wacker Innsbruck are alike in that for them European club competitions are not relevant. They also resemble each other in that they see their club as an antithesis to top clubs in their leagues and beyond, based on their lack of financial means. But they differ strongly in their perspective on potential

transfers. While the Newcastle United fans centre their discussions on statistical information about performances of players from all around Europe, the Wacker Innsbruck supporters mainly discuss players from Austrian leagues that they seem to know well.

Comparison of leagues: ABL clubs vs. EPL clubs.

The EPL clubs differ from the ABL clubs in their respective perceptions of their own leagues and in their reference frame for potential player signings. The EPL is universally understood to be a top league and the fans have internalised that their clubs are attractive for players from other leagues. The transfer discussions indicate that they do not mind about the background of the players, but rather focus on “neutral” criteria such as data on goals, assists, etc. The articulations of Manchester United and Newcastle United fans also reveal that it is in part the economic might of the EPL that opens windows of opportunity for considering the broader European and international player market for signings. For the Austrian fans, their reference frame is mainly the national league, even though it is seen as a second-tier league in the context of Europe. Here, “being Austrian” also matters for their view on players.

5 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to evaluate how football fans in different contexts reflect the Europeanisation of football in terms of identity. We specified an analytical framework with two dimensions that cover Europeanisation of identities in football: *communities of belonging* and *frames of reference*. The aspects laid out in these dimensions can be traced in online message board debates of fans from the four selected clubs in the ABL and EPL. Inclusion and exclusion are connected to “being Austrian” in the two ABL

clubs. In contrast, the EPL fans have an inclusive perspective on players from all over Europe, their inclusion and exclusion are mainly based on individual performance.

Fans' reference frames differ within and across leagues. The fans of the clubs that rarely make European appearances have little perspective on these games. For the two clubs frequently playing in Europe, the relevance of this competitive level diverges. The Manchester fans see "Europe" as necessary arena, but as a potential ground for failure. The Sturm Graz fans have a more relaxed view on European competitions as "extraordinary moments". But both clubs' fans seem to agree that their eventual focus is on the national competition.

Our study compared two clubs in a league which is at the forefront of European football and two clubs in a league which is a minor one at the European level. These differences are traceable in the debates of the supporters. The EPL fans are focused on Europe and, to a lesser extent, beyond when discussing players, resembling the notion of their league as the first "global football league" (Millward 2011), where local rivalries remain relevant, but transnational spaces shape the business (Taylor 2018). The ABL fans mirror the reluctant Europeanisation of Austrian football, which has been influenced by political intervention. The public discussions of the increase in "foreign players" and potential measures against it, e.g. the introduction of a financial compensation based on the playing time of Austrian players (Brand et al. 2011; Niemann et al. 2011a), seems to have left its traces on the minds of football fans.

Also, the context of the clubs and their past, current and potential future appearances on the European stage seem to leave an impact on the minds of fans. The fans of the two clubs that did not play in European club competitions in the past decade have a sole focus on the national competition. Clubs with the opportunity to play

European competitions are also focused on this competitive level, but still their main concentration remains national.

These empirical insights indicate that the assumed factors, Europeanisation of the player markets and appearance in European club competitions, can indeed be said to influence the mindsets of football fans. Their identity – meant as their community of belonging and their frames of reference – show traces of “Europeanisation”, albeit influenced by the extent to which “Europe” is normal and accessible for their clubs and thus prevalent in their everyday experience of football.

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Appendix

Sturm Graz

Rivalry

<i>Season 16/17</i>	<i>Posts</i>	
Graz vs Red Bull Salzburg, 11.12.16	189	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109561-19-runde-sturm-graz-vs-red-bull-salzburg/
SV Ried - Graz, 17.12.2016	234	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109623-20-runde-sv-ried-sk-sturm-graz/
<i>Season 17/18</i>		
Graz - RB Salzburg, 25.02.18	578	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/113141-24-runde-sk-sturm-graz-rb-salzburg/
FK Austria Wien - Graz, 17.12.2017	498	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/112720-20-runde-fk-austria-wien-sk-sturm-graz/
Ajax vs. Graz, CL Quali, 25.07.18	426	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/114667-2-qualirunde-champions-league-sk-sturm-graz-ajax-amsterdam/
Graz - Larnaca, EL Quali, 09.08.18	735	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/114729-3-qualirunde-europa-league-sk-sturm-graz-aek-larnaca/

Transfer

<i>Season 16/17</i>		
Sommertransfers 17/18	180	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109905-sommertransfers-1718/
<i>Season 17/18</i>		
Wintertransfers 17/18	2238	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/111822-wintertransfers-1718/

Misc.

<i>Season 17/18</i>		
Sturm in Europa 2018/19	743	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/112738-sturm-in-europa-201819/
Total (Sturm Graz)	5821	

Wacker Innsbruck

Rivalry

<i>Season 16/17</i>	<i>No of Posts</i>	
Spielethread 16/17	361	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/107737-spielthread-201617/
Der Gästesektor im Fokus	93	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/105991-der-g%C3%A4stesektor-im-fokus/
Erste Liga Saison 16/17	97	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=4305
3. Runde: FC Wacker Innsbruck - WSG Wattens	235	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=4310
12. Runde: WSG Wattens - FC Wacker Innsbruck	284	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=4324
10. Runde: FAC Wien - FC Wacker Innsbruck	199	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=4321
<i>Season 17/18</i>		
Spielethread 17/18	448	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/111371-spielthread-201718/
Erste Liga Saison 17/18	75	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=4363

19. Runde: FC Blau Weiss Linz - FC Wacker Innsbruck	57	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=4396
35. Runde: SC Wiener Neustadt - FC Wacker Innsbruck	17	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=4424
14. Runde: FC Wacker Innsbruck - WSG Wattens	75	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=4387
Transfer		
<i>Season 16/17</i>		
Kader 17/18	401	https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/110313-kader-201718/
<i>Season 17/18</i>		
Kaderplanung Winter 17	133	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&t=4397 https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/113713-kader-201819/
Kader 18/19	277	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&t=4413
Kaderplanung Somer 2018	512	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&t=4413
Misc.		
EL / CL 2016/17	17	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&t=4309
EL / CL 2017/18	18	https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&t=4371
Total (Wacker Innsbruck)	3299	

Manchester United

Rivalry

	<i>No of Posts</i>	
<i>Season 16/17</i>		
Man Utd 1:1 Arsenal Post-match discussion	711	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-arsenal.423841/
West Ham 0:2 Man Utd Post-match discussion	354	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-west-ham-united.425161/
St. Etienne 0:1 Man Utd Post-match discussion	155	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-as-saint-etienne.426515/
<i>Season 17/18</i>		
Man Utd 1:2 Man City Post-match discussion	885	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-manchester-city.434412/
Newcastle 1:0 Man Utd Post-match discussion	649	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-newcastle-united.436488/
Man Utd 1:2 Sevilla Post-match discussion	996	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-sevilla.437260/
Moscow 1:4 Man Utd Post-match discussion	250	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-cska-moscow.432758/

Transfer

<i>Season 16/17</i>		
Summer Transfer Window 2017	736	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/summer-transfer-window-2017.429333/
<i>Season 17/18</i>		
Your ideal 11 - 2018/19 and outs (being realistic)	522	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/your-ideal-11-2018-19-and-outs-being-realistic.438172/
Misc.		
Most hated ex-united player	387	http://www.redcafe.net/threads/most-hated-ex-united-player.439133/
Total (Manchester United)	5645	

Newcastle United

Rivalry

	<i>No of Posts</i>	
<i>Season 16/17</i>		
Match day thread - NUFC v Leeds	283	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=8820

Match day thread - Brighton & HA v NUFC <i>Season 17/18</i>	595	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=8760
Match day thread - NUFC vs. Liverpool	215	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9044
Match thread - Watford v NUFC	58	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9357
Final match thread - NUFC v Chelsea	74	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9370
Match Thread: Newcastle vs Spurs - 13/08/17	298	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=8979
Match day thread WBA v NUFC	256	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9123
Transfer		
<hr/>		
<i>Season 16/17</i>		
NUFC minor untrusted transfer rumours winter 2017	998	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=8612
<i>Season 17/18</i>		
NUFC minor untrusted transfer rumours summer 2018	1461	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9285
Other Clubs Transfers Summer 2018/19	300	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9390
Misc.		
<hr/>		
Champions League Draw	5	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9274
Champions League Semis	7	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=8834
Saturday football: Champions League and Play Off Finals 2018	92	https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9388
<hr/>		
Total (Newcastle United)	4642	_

Table A1: Overview of all threads, the links (as of April 10th 2019) and the number of posts in each thread and in total.