Fandom affiliation and tribal behaviour: a sports marketing application

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to identify the existence of tribal behaviour in football fans and the impact of this tribalism on the consumption of brands associated with the club. The intention is not to recognize tribal relationships between fans and their club but to identify to what extent the fan commitment level can impact the preference for sponsor brands.

Design/methodology/approach – Two focus groups were made with two distinct types of club supporters, namely the members of one supportive organized group and another with highly-devoted fans.

Findings – Research questions posed in this study were mostly confirmed: football-devoted supporters have a kind of cult with their club and it is possible to distinguish several distinct fan typologies varying with the level of fan commitment. The associative behaviour of football fans is influenced by affiliation through the need for social recognition, socialization and symbolism. The study also reveals that devoted fans assume an effective knowledge of club association with some brands but they do not manifest an effective preference towards them.

Research limitations/implications – The main limitation refers to the restricted research scope, i.e. one country, one club and one supporting associative group.

Practical implications – Managerial implications are related to the club needing to maintain an open channel with supporters. Sponsor brands should also develop a long-term strategy and support another sport besides football.

Originality/value – This paper provides exploratory research in an area of great popularity, relating tribal behaviours with brand strategies which involve millions of euros all over the world.

Keywords Sports, Marketing, Brand loyalty

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and research context

Sport activities have always constituted an essential component of free time occupation in contemporary societies. In Europe, TV broadcasting and live attendance of sport games join together every year millions of supporters. The 2006 World Cup was seen in 154 countries by a total of 345,000 of millions spectators.

As a modern sport, football was created in England in the nineteenth century. With time, football supporters have developed tribal behaviours, as the result of a great passion that links fans through shared cult meeting places and a specific terminology and symbolism. In this sport, the link is the club – the love for their club and their team is where these collective and passionate behavioural patterns originate.

Literature review

The meaning of cult and sports fandom

Why do people join cults? Why do people become devoted to certain brands? It is because the group they join tends to make them feel at ease by being among "like others". Thus, one of the most important tasks of cults and cult-like brands is that they establish their difference (Atkin, 2004).

Upon first glance it would normally be assumed that there is little, if any, relationship between sport and cults, Prebish (1993) remarks that sport is a competitive, dynamic, and sometimes individualistic activity while religion is a non-competitive process founded upon commonality of social organization. However, upon further analysis it can be realized that both sport and religion cults employ intricate rituals.

Other views like that of Novak (1995) argue against the religious defensiveness of fundamentalism by boldly stating:

> Sport is, somehow, a religion . . . sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection. The athlete may of course be pagan, but sports are, as it were, natural religions.

Sports have also an appropriated significant religious terminology as a means of expressing their sincerity, fervour, and seriousness. What it all boils down to is this: if sports can bring their advocates to an experience of the ultimate kind, and this experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and space deemed sacred then it is both proper and necessary to call sport itself a religion (Prebish and Heavenly, 1984).

Percy and Taylor (1997) presented a comparative study of trends using football as a metaphor for religion – relationship between rituals, performance and expectations of crowds; they also analysed the dynamics of tribalism and popular notions of masculinity, heroes and the like. Some sports supporters establish rituals involving the clothing they wear, the food they eat, friends with whom they gather, etc. Rituals are often performed with the use of meaningful artefacts. The objects become sacred through their involvement in the ritual or association with the team.

Brody (1979) not only gives an analytic emphasis on symbols but also details the utility of the sociology of religion. Both participants and spectators are seen to symbolize, to hold beliefs, and to support for the general contention that sport is at least quasi-religious in nature.

Fandom

The essence of demand for the game or Sporting contest is fan interest (Borland and Macdonald, 2003). Fandom allows individuals to be a part of the game without requiring any special skills, (Branscombe *et al.*, 1991). Fandom still offers such social benefits as feelings of camaraderie, community and solidarity, as well as enhanced social prestige and self-esteem (Zillmann *et al.*, 1989). It is the support of fans that underpins the sports industry and as explained by Taylor (2004) "the crowd is the supreme authority without which the golden core of the game has no currency".

Sports spectators may not necessarily be fans. Jones (1997) suggests that spectators will observe a sport and then forget about it, while fans will have more intensity and will devote part of every day to the team or the sport itself. Fandom has also been

defined as an affiliation in which a great deal of emotional significance and value are derived from group membership (Hirt *et al.*, 1992). The difference between a fan and a spectator seems to be a matter of degree of passion. Anderson (1979) notes that a fan can be defined as an individual possessed frequently by an excessive enthusiasm for sport.

Many researchers have suggested different typologies of fans, recognizing in each segment a particular behaviour. Hunt *et al.* (1999) present concepts of temporary, local, fanatical and dysfunctional fans, Tapp and Clowes (2002) distinguish among fanatics, regular and casual supporters, Tapp (2004) replaces earlier concepts with "regular fans by repertoire" and "season ticket churn" categories and Stewart and Smith (1997) prefer terms like *aficionado*, theatregoer, passionate partisan, champ follower and reclusive partner. Whatever the names given, one of the most used criteria to understand these distinct fandom levels is the concept of commitment.

Fan behaviour
There are many ways of defining a typology of sports supporters: we can use concepts like loyalty, value to the club or the number of games attended in a season. However, any analysis of supporter loyalty cannot be split from the concept of commitment to the club. According to their commitment level, supporters manifest distinct behaviour anywhere ranging from an occasional attendance to the point that they assume the successes and losses of their club as their own (Hirt *et al.*, 1992).

A good deal of previous research examined the influence of a winning record on consumer behaviour. For instance, utilizing data from college football fans, Kahle *et al.* (1996) cited identification with a winning team as a key component for game attendance. Moreover, Greenstein and Marcum (1981) found that 25 per cent of variance in attendance could be attributed to team performance in major league baseball. Across various sports, team success ranked as the primary reason for currently following a team (Wann *et al.*, 1996). Quite often it seems that a sports fan's ultimate desire is simply to see their favourite team win (Zillmann and Paulus, 1993).

The way fans relate to teams is by what is called the Social Identity Theory. The primary assumption of this theory is that individuals will seek to resolve attitudes that are not balanced or equitable. The phenomenon of basking (BIRG in reflected glory) is well documented and reflects the psychological nature of fandom and the premise of vicarious achievement. On the other hand, when an athlete or team fails, fans tend to distance themselves through a process labelled "cutting off reflected failure" (CORF) (Synder *et al.*, 1986).

While these constructs are critical to understanding fan behaviour, a great deal of evidence suggests that there is much more to fan behaviour than just BIRGing and CORFing. Campbell *et al.* (2004) propose an extension of the current model relating team-success factors to fan-associative behaviours: basking in spite of reflected failure and cutting off reflected success (CORS).

Kimble and Cooper (1992) defend that fans attain a feeling of vicarious achievement simply through being fans while Hirt *et al.* (1992) found that fan's mood and self-esteem were impacted by the outcome of Sporting events.

The insufficient theoretical discussion of masculinity in sport corresponds to the uncertainty of the male in modern society in general. This is somehow regrettable as sports are undoubtedly connected with gender identity and the favourite sport in

society is determined by masculine patterns. Sports can be perceived as a male retreat and a realm of masculinity (Klein, 1990). Wann and Waddill (2003) examine the usefulness of anatomical sex, masculinity, and femininity in predicting fan motivation. As expected, masculinity was the most powerful predictor of motivation, with the exception of family motivation where femininity accounted for the greatest amount of unique variance.

Commitment
Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) suggest that ultimate fans are those who are affectively committed to the team and are proactively engaging in sustained behaviours. They use the term devoted fans – those that can be expected to continue supporting the team under any circumstance. Wann and Pierce (2003) propose that because the reactions of sport fans are so often a function of their level of commitment and identification with the team, the accurate measurement of identification/commitment is of utmost importance to sport psychologists and marketers.

Instead of treating commitment as a binary variable, Malhotra and Galletta (2003) defend that commitment can be better represented through a continuum, ranging from negligible or partial commitment to absolute commitment.

Allen and Meyer (1996) developed and tested a three-component model of commitment whose components are continuance, normative and affective. They also defend that some fans experience a sacralisation through inheritance – they inherit the team just as they would inherit a valued family value.

Richardson (2004) remarks that high-identified fans display a far greater propensity for self-serving bias, i.e. team victories explicable in terms of internal controllable factors such as ability or fans and defeat explicable through external factors such as poor refereeing or other external and uncontrollable factors. For Madrigal (2002), most committed fans also have higher pre-game expectations and strong emotional reactions during a game and are less inclined to be objective about the team's likely future success. Wann and Grieve (2005) suggest that this bias effect would be most pronounced in situations involving a threat to one's social identity (e.g. their group has come under attack). Research on sport spectators and sport fans is examined by Funk and James (2001) to develop the psychological continuum model, which analyses the psychological connections that individuals experience with sports or sports teams.

Affiliation through social recognition, symbolism and socialisation (S3)
What determines a group affiliation? Group affiliation is motivated by a desire for positive distinctiveness from other social groups (Madrigal, 2002). In affiliation, one important part of the identification process with the group is rituals like collecting, pilgrimages and viewing the club as a part of one's self identity. Consuming some brands becomes part of the integration.

Individuals derive strength and a sense of identity from their connections to social groups. Tajfel (1982) argues that individuals are unable to form self-images in the absence of a social identity derived from group affiliations. Stronger identification leads the individual to attribute desirable characteristics of the group to the self, and to assume a greater similarity with other group members (Fisher and Wakefield, 1988). Past research demonstrates the positive effect of identification on sports fans: using a sports context, Donavan *et al.* (2005) investigated some dispositional antecedents of identification.

The findings showed that the basic personally traits of extraversion, agreeability, need for arousal and materialism positively affect the need for affiliation which in turn positively influences the level of identification with the team. Curry and Weaner (1987) present some measurement procedures for the study of sport identity, and demonstrate the utility of these procedures by testing similar hypotheses on religious role behaviour.

Crawford (2003) presents a theorization of the induction and patterns of behaviour of the sport supporter along a social and moral career path. Effects of the sportscape as well as personal attachment to sport and team were studied by Hill and Green (2000).

The mechanism of the role adoption is a constituent of identity reinforcement or social recognition in sport. The fan social recognition facet is particularly relevant as sport takes place unequivocally within the context of society's significant symbols with impact on the actors' self-perception and self-esteem, i.e. combining self-recognition with social recognition. Role analysis and symbolic interactions were reviewed by Weiss (2001) for their potential to further develop this dimension of sport's place in modern societies.

Individuals strive to maintain or enhance a positive social identity by affiliating themselves with attractive social groups (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). After being categorized as a group member, individuals achieve positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their own group in comparison with an "out-group" on some valued dimension (Tajfel and Turnet, 1986).

Socialization is, in essence, learning. The process of socialization can be seen as a deliberated act of identity construction – the neophyte member begins to deliberately adopt mannerisms, attitudes, and styles of dress, speech, and behaviour that he or she perceives to be characteristic of established members. Such perceptions among neophytes are frequently stereotypical (Donnelly and Young, 1998).

This socialization can be traced back to childhood sports socialization constructed primarily by friends and family. Jacobson (2003) refers to the fact that boys are traditionally socialized into sports at a young age through both parental influences and marketing means. In addition to socialization, individuals could become fans as a way to achieve group membership or to be a part of a collective unit.

Individuals tend to incorporate both public and private fandom from each level when creating and maintaining a fan identity. Richardson (2004) suggests that in a socialization process, a fan acquires a kind of a cultural capital (a knowledge of how to consume the product sport) from the team as a means of preserving distinctions – not only between classes but also between categories of fans as well.

The utilization of cult symbolism is inherent to fan groups, products become social tools serving as means of communication between the individual and his significant references (Banister and Hogg, 2004). Consumption emerges as the linking value surrounding a common passion. Sports and football clubs, in particular, are full of symbols ranging from T-shirts, flags and scarves to a huge diversity of memorabilia.

Tribal brands and associative behaviour
Sports fans tribal consumption – a postmodern approach
The sacralisation necessity of western society impacts the area of consumption which emphasizes the return of rituals, but in a profane and not religious manifestation. Having lost all faith in unity and totality of achievement, postmodernism has

reinforced the importance of living and enjoying the fragmented moments of consumers' life experiences (Firat, 1992). The consumer no longer consumes products by their material utility but because of their symbolic meaning, which represent images. Each consumer becomes an illusion consumer that buys images not products (Ellliot, 1999).

McGee-Cooper (2005) suggests that the impulse to join others is universal and natural because we want to belong. The word "tribe" refers to the re-emergence of quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiousness, syncretism, group narcissism… (Cova, 1997). For Maffesoli (1996) post-modern communities are inherently unstable, small-scale, and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society. In contrast to a market segment, a tribe can be defined as a network of heterogeneous persons, in terms of gender, age, sex and income, who are linked by a shared passion or emotion. Its members are not just only consumers but also advocates.

According to Cova and Pace (2005), one of critical aspects in tribal marketing is that companies risk to loose control over the brand that is somehow expropriated by group members. The main problem usually encountered with tribal brands is the fact that they constitute a force of opposition to the company.

One of the ways of expressing the "we-ness" of a community is through consumption. So, football fans and the most devoted ones in particular, try to co-manage the brand interfering with management decisions and the sponsor's choice since these sponsor brands became undoubtedly linked with the club brand. It seems, then, reasonable to investigate to what extent the passion for the club transfers to these linked brands throughout the acceptance and preference for these brands. The question is: will the club fans understand that these supporting and sponsor brands are emotionally linked to the club or are they seen as intrusive and opportunistic supporters?

Muniz and O'Guinn (2000) have approached the concept of brand community which they consider a common understanding of a shared identity. Recognizing that both concepts tend to form around brands with a strong image, these authors distinguish between brand community and tribalism suggesting that the former is normally less ephemeral, less geographically limited and more explicitly commercial than the latter. They also defend the existence of three major components in brand communities: a shared consciousness, rituals and a sense of responsibility which may lead their members to recruit other members for the community. In the same vein, Muniz and Schau (2005) acknowledge that rituals, traditions and behavioural expectations characterize brand communities.

Distinguishing between communities whose primary bases of identification are brands from those who mostly shared consumption activities, McAlexander *et al.* (2002) agree with the viewing of Muniz and O'Guinn that a brand community is "a specialized, non geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand" but expand the concept to include the relationships between customers and the product, the company and even among customers. They stress that these communities have been observed to share meaningful consumption experiences.

Belk and Tumbat (2005) introduce the notion of "brand cult" to better understand the extreme brand-focused devotion. In the same paper, they explicit some differences

between this concept and devotion that sport fans usually feel about their club. The main difference is that in brand cults the product dominates the personalities of the group members while in sports the play and the players are typically more important than club merchandise.

Besides, the similarities that may exist between tribal relationships among neo-tribe members and brand communities, the fact is that both are symbolically constructed and based on a system of values, norms and codes – mental constructs that allow group members to formulate their own meaning. As stressed by Komaromi (2003), consumers perceive brands as a promise for a specific experience that, socially shared with others, leads to the formation of a community and a shared sense of identity. This link may or not lead to a shared acceptance and consumption of other brands linked with the major brand.

In explaining consumption behaviour, winning can relate to an internalised positive self-definition, as well as an internalised enhanced position in the social environment (Kahle *et al.*, 1996). Thus, external fan behaviour can be linked to internal psychological factors of self-image management as well as external sociological factors related to perceptions from others (the "ideal social self" discussed by Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Fisher (1998) reported a study which examined the impact of similarity and attractiveness on identification and consumption choices, in relation to sports fans. Kwon and Armstrong (2002) examined the impulse tendencies to purchase sport team licensed merchandise reporting that team identification also influences the amount of money spent on impulsive sport purchases.

Conceptual model explanation
The main purpose of this study is to analyse the linkage of sport consumption association and tribal behaviour. A concept model has been developed and applied to case of football fans in order to dissect fan typologies, their behavioural patterns and, as a consequence, associative behaviour and its relation with consumption of tribal brands. Figure 1 shows the constructs of research model.

The first components of our model are sports fandom and cult. Fandom experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and space deemed sacred by its worshipers. Percy and Taylor (1997) also use football as metaphor for religion, especially regarding the implicit relationship between rituals, performance and expectations of crowds. Brody (1979) defends that both participants and spectators are seen to symbolize, and that sport is at least quasi-religious in nature. Therefore, our first research question is then:

RQ1. Devoted football supporters have with their club a kind of a cult that however profane in essence is similar to that of members of a religious cult in its manifestations.

Regarding the relationship between fan behaviour and demographic profile, some sociodemographic variables have been found to influence sport consumption (Armstrong and Peretto Stratta, 2004). Furthermore, sports can be perceived as a realm of masculinity (Klein, 1990). Wann and Waddill (2003) conclude that masculinity is the most powerful predictor of motivation to sport.
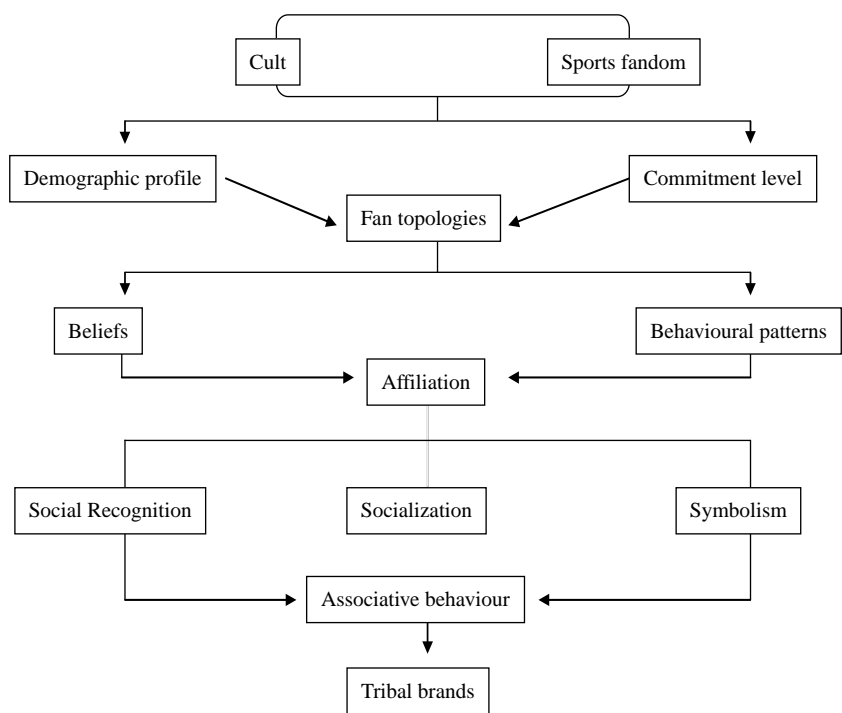
Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) suggest that ultimate fans are those who are committed to the team. To acknowledge the transcendent behaviour of their commitment, these authors use the term "devoted fans".

As explained before, many researchers have purposed fan typologies (Hunt *et al.*, 1999; Tapp and Clowes, 2002; Tapp, 2004; Stewart and Smith, 1997). Besides, the distinctiveness of the typologies, the underlying concept has to do with passion and commitment to the club. So, since commitment appears to be the critical factor for understanding distinct supporters' behavioural patterns according to their level of commitment, our second research question is:

RQ2. Among devoted football fans it is possible to differentiate distinct fan types with distinct behavioural patterns varying with the level of fan commitment to the club.

The third component of this research model deals with affiliation which requires a social recognition of the member as a club fan. This social classification defines the member in the social environment (Ashforth and Mael, 1999) labelling him as having the values which are coherent with theirs or with those he wants to identify. Group affiliation – suggests Madrigal (2002) – is motivated by a desire for positive distinctiveness from other social groups. Jacobson (2003) defends that a motivation to affiliate with the group may be due to that this group provides to its members a sense

of community. Zillmann *et al.* (1989) stress the low level of skills required to participate in the group and the low cost of this decision, while other authors like Branscombe *et al.* (1991) explain that being a club fan is a way of playing without major effort and skills. Richardson (2004) remarks that high-identification fans display a far greater propensity for self-serving bias.

Boys are traditionally socialized into sports at a young age through both parental influences and marketing means (Jacobson, 2003). In addition to socialization, individuals could become fans as a way to achieve group membership or to be a part of a collective unit.

The utilization of cult symbolism is inherent to fan groups. Football is itself a symbol of some of the most positive qualities: courage, stamina, and coordinated efficiency.

All fans do not participate in fan activities with the same level of intensity. Sometimes, fans assume an extreme fanaticism as referred by Thorne and Bruner (2006) while Taylor (1992) discusses intolerance in terms of focus, personalised view of the world, resistance to change, dismissal and uncertainty, and Redden and Steiner (2000) stress the fanatical intolerance of some fans and their incoherence. However, as Gardner (1997) remarks, "one man's religion is another man's fanaticism".

Since, affiliation impacts fans' associative behaviour because of the need to socialize, be socially recognized, and also by the symbolism inherent to the club, our third research question is:

RQ3. Football fans associative behaviour is influenced by the tendency towards the club as expressed by:

RQ3a. fans associative behaviour is influenced club by affiliation through the desire of social recognition;

RQ3b. fans associative behaviour is influenced club by affiliation through the desire of socialization; and

RQ3c. fans associative behaviour is influenced club by affiliation through the impact of club symbolism.

The last element of the research model, which is a direct consequence of affiliation, is some sort of tribal behaviour expressed in the preference and selection of tribal brands with regard to football fans. Behavioural patterns form a kind of tribalism affecting consuming brands since neo-tribes usually affirm their tribal nature through consumption. The utility function of objects loses relevance regarding the symbolic side of tribal brands for a group whose members have nothing to share besides their passion for the club. These post-modern communities, suggests Maffesoli (1996), are inherently unstable. They can be held together through shared emotions, lifestyles, and consumption practices (Cova, 1997).

As suggested by Venkatesh *et al.* (1993), postmodern individuals do not perceive consumption and production as separate processes, showing a clear propensity to act like co-producers. Consumption becomes production as stressed by Christensen *et al.* (2005). The fourth research question is therefore:

RQ4. Football tribalism confers upon devoted fans a tendency to prefer commonly accepted tribal brands at the following levels:

RQ4a. Devoted football fans assume an effective knowledge of club association with some brands.

RQ4b. Devoted football fans manifest an affective preference for tribe-related brands.

Methodology

In order to test the research model, the context of the research of this study being centred on football, the study was developed with a football club – the Sporting Clube de Portugal, one of the three greatest clubs in Portugal.

According to Cova and Cova (2002) tribe members can assume different roles:

- *sympathizers*;
- *participants in tribe meetings*;
- *associates* – the "apostles"; and
- *practitioners* – members involved with the tribe in a quasi-daily basis.

Following the same methodology, the application of the concept model was made with two focus group meetings with different levels of commitment to the club, namely a group of participant members – the devoted fans of Hunt *et al.* (1999) and another group of highly fanatic fans organized in a supporting group (in the Portuguese language, a "claque") called "Torcida Verde" known as the most supportive and less aggressive group.

We define "devoted fans" those that are Sporting associates that regularly pay club fees and not only tickets for the games. They usually go to the stadium exhibiting club symbols. In each macht, Sporting has around 15,000 associates; approximately one third uses these club symbols like T-shirts and scarves.

The main difference between the groups in the study is that "Torcida Verde" is an organized group, with a management board of direction, a body of rules, hierarchical levels and regular activities. On the contrary "Devoted fans" group is composed by fans that regularly go to the stadium and normally use external signs of the club (scarves, T-shirts...) and do not have any king of formal organization.

The recruitment for the devoted fans focus group was made in a random way during a home match, through the seats of the club associates. Associated supporting fans – the Torcida Verde group (whose 150 members besides paying club fees also pay fees for the supporting group) – were approached in their specific stadium site.

Devoted fan group was composed of seven male and three female participants with ages ranging from 26 to 56 while the ten members of "Torcida Verde" included eight male and two female elements with ages between 17 and 48.

Focus group meetings took place in April 2006. All the participants were offered a T-shirt from a very well-known sports brand.

The focus groups, metrics and data analysis

Owing to the phenomenological nature of the study, the protocol of analysis was developed in order to reflect the research analysis. A wide range of subjects was approached in the meetings ranging from motivation and football fandom to behavioural group patterns as well as intra and inter-group relationships.

To assure the spontaneity of the answers and in order avoid restricting the participants' speech, meetings were recorded and videotaped but no one was present in the room besides the participants and the group moderator – researchers stayed in a

contiguous room overseeing the meeting and evaluating fan reactions by ways of a plasma monitor.

During the focus meetings, the moderator used several techniques in order to obtain a high level of participation. The questions were followed by a set of computerised projective techniques (CPT).

Computerised projective techniques

Scott *et al.* (2000) stressed the scientific status of projective techniques, while Bornstein (1999) explains the criteria for the validity of objective and projective dependency tests and Cramer (1999) has studied the then-future directions for the thematic apperception tests.

In this research, projective techniques were used with the support of a computer and a projector which allowed the moderator to project two PowerPoint presentations and so allowing participants to visualize the referred situations and the allusive questions. The purpose was to clarify every aspect of the approached themes (Appendix 1). Balloon tests were also used to identify the main characteristics of football supporters and "claque" members (Appendix 2).

Program assisted designed techniques

During the focus groups each participant had a computer in front of him and all the computers were linked to a central server. This infrastructure allowed the development of program assisted designed (PAD) techniques which were used to identify some constructs like commitment, involvement to the club as well as sports fandom analysis. Participants were required to express their accordance level to some images regarding several fans' behavioural situations in a continuum ranging from 1 to 10. Each person expressed his opinion in the computer application about his commitment to the club or the sport (Appendix 3).

Focus groups content was fully transcribed from videotape to paper. Data analysis followed the sequence of research questions and their constructs. A comparative analysis between the data of the two groups was conducted along with a summary assessment (Tables I-IV).

Findings

Cult and fandom

The main constructs linked with the cult and fandom concepts in the research reviews are rituals, symbols, locals and beliefs (Table I). There are a set of common ideas between devoted fans which regularly attend Sporting football matches and the members of organized supporting groups. These common ideas range from cult items, like stadium, to club symbolism, but the organized group still has other symbolisms as is the case of its headquarter – a quite sacred place furnished by their own – the production of choreographies which involve the members for several days, the support of other sports events, their own logo and, above all, a great sense of loyalty to the club's other group members. Therefore, these findings do confirm *RQ1*, which referred to the existence of a kind of cult among the most devoted football team supporters regarding their club.

| | Major opinions from | | |
	Devoted fans	Fans organized in claques	Summary assessment
Sacred places	Club stadium	Club stadium and group headquarter Their headquarter refurnished by the group	The club stadium is the common sacred place; for claque members, Torcida Verde headquarter is even more important
Rituals	Team entrance in stadium and applauses Commemoration of team goals	Choreographies production and their performance They support the team, not a special player	For devoted fans, rituals are linked to, team entrance and goals For organized fans, rituals are constructed y themselves
Symbolism	The lion of the logo and the green colour	Club symbols (lion and green colour),their own logo in T-shirts and flags	Besides the common symbols organized fans have their own symbols

Values	An eclectic club with a wide range of sports champions	Collective values of the club with:
		    A club with passionate fans
		    Against merchandise sales
			An eclectic club
			Several sports
			Lots of champions and medals
			There is a kind of ideological discourse from the claque leader

Associated	*RQ1* – Devoted football supporters have with their club a kind of a cult that however profane in essence is similar to that of members of a religious cult in its manifestations		Phenomenological outcome: *RQ1* was confirmed

Table I.
Cult and fandom

Commitment, demographic profile and typologies
The commitment concept was evaluated through open questions about match attendance, the level of support to the football team and also regarding the degree of support given to the club (Table II).

Organized group members do not care about weather conditions when deciding to attend a match. They also assume that they would miss their best friend's birthday party for one match and half of them consider selling his favourite jacket to get the money to attend a match. However, the majority of these group members would not leave his girl or boyfriend because he or she belongs to a rival club.

Among the devoted fans, the majority of participants also assumed to go to a match with very bad weather conditions but half of them hesitate between his best friend's birthday and a football match. The most part of devoted fans in this group would not sell his favourite jacket because of a club match and definitively would not leave the boy or girlfriend because of sports-related reasons.

Several opinions emerged from pictures showing supporting behaviours to the team – fans consider that a supporter waving a flag is a clear sign of club commitment and assume that celebrating a team goal also shows a high level of commitment. On the other hand, both groups considered provoking other fans a bad behaviour and disapprove the image of a half-naked fan waving a flag in a very aggressive manner.

Beliefs, behavioural patterns, affiliation and S3
From the relationships between the concepts of beliefs, behavioural patterns and affiliation, emerge three relevant outputs: social recognition, socialisation and symbolism (S3) (Table III).

| | Major opinions | | |
	Devoted fans	Fans organized in claques	Summary assessment
Commitment			
Match attendance	Attend to home matches and some away games Some do not loose a match and some have other interests	Do not loose a football match (most devoted) Sometimes attend to other sports' games Prefer a game to other activities	Bigger presence in away matches and in other sports
Football team support	Support the team especially in away matches Usually support the team but react differently when they are loosing	Support the team, not a special player and not in a disruptive way Use chants, flags, banners	Both groups support the football team but devoted fans make their attitude depend on team results
To the club	Support all the club sports (club dues, club merchandising and voting for the direction board)	Support the club in the main sports. Most of them pay club associate dues and associate claque dues but reject the club merchandise	Both groups support the overall club sports but Torcida Verde have a more intense and support Organized fans reject club merchandising
Demographic profile	Are mostly man Female fans and children are increasing	Gender and age profile of group supporters have significantly changed in the last 20 years but had little changes recently Most supporters are male	Devoted fans recognize an increasing number of female fans in games attendance. Organized fans do not Demographic profile is not a segmentation criterion
Perceived fans typologies	Organized supporting groups Highly devoted fans Other supporters	Four groups perceived: Destructive (other supporting groups) Organized supporting groups (claques) Non-supporting regular fans occasional fans	Both groups acknowledge the existence of fan typologies Demographic profile is neither a segmentation nor a commitment criterion

Associated *RQ2* – among devoted football fans it is possible to differentiate distinct fan types with distinct behavioural patterns varying with the level of fan commitment to the club

Phenomenological outcome: *RQ2* was confirmed

Table II.
Commitment,
demographic profile and
fan typologies

	Major opinions		
	Devoted fans	Fans organized in claques	Summary assessment
Social recognition	Other clubs' fans consider them a little aristocratic. Consider themselves different from the fans of supporting organized groups except for Torcida Verde which have a more civic behaviour	Other club's fans members consider them "angels". Do not recognize any difference between this group and other organized groups	Both groups think they have a special image (an aristocratic image for devoted fans and a angel image for Torcida Verde)
Symbolism	Normally use scarves and club shirts in the day of the match	The main symbol is their own logo, T-shirts and sweat-shirts. They like the "Centenarium club T-shirt" because it reflects the club history	Both groups use club symbols while going to the stadium. Torcida Verde prefer its own logo
Socialization	Usually begin as sympathizers somehow between four and nine since at least one parent is also a Sporting sympathizer. Usually associate to the club with different ages depending on their personal income. Sometimes shout during the matches. Think the club needs easier chants. Regret not having other socializing moments besides the match meetings	Begin in childhood as sympathizers (between four and seven) and became members of Torcida Verde between 15 and 20. Clearly assume having had a strong influence to become Sporting sympathizers and members of Torcida Verde. Are organized in town nucleons and assume a great deal of socialization when producing choreographies and when following the team	Great familiar influence over the members to become Sporting sympathizers and later to become more supporting active. The decision was taken by the moment they had their own source of income (devoted fans) and in youth, in the Torcida Verde' case. Both groups evaluate positively the importance of togetherness
			Phenomenological outcome: RQ3 was totally confirmed

Associated RQ3 – football fans associative behaviour is influenced by the tendency towards the club as expressed by:
RQ3a – fans associative behaviour is influenced by club affiliation through the desire of social recognition
RQ 3b – fans associative behaviour is influenced by club affiliation through the desire of socialization
RQ3c – fans associative behaviour is influenced by club affiliation through the impact of club symbolism

Table III.
Beliefs, behavioural patterns and (S3) – social recognition, symbolism and socialization

	Devoted fans	Major opinions Fans organized in claques	Summary assessment
Knowledge of club association with some brands	Are aware of the fact that some brands sponsor their club and know the Portuguese League sponsor brand	Are aware of the fact that some brands sponsor their club and know the Portuguese League sponsor brand	Very large awareness of Sporting brand sponsorships
Effective preference for tribe related brands	Tend to dislike T-shirts or sweat-shirts with big sponsor brand logos Do not assume a significant preference for these sponsor brands	Mostly reject T-shirts with sponsor logos Think that the relative importance of Sporting can be lost near a very large sponsor logo Manifest some doubts about the destiny of sponsorship revenues Would like this money to support other sports	Few changes in brand preference among devoted fans and organized supporting fan members

Associated *RQ4* – football tribalism confers devoted fans a tendency to prefer tribal commonly accepted brands
at the following levels:
RQ4a – devoted football fans assume an effective knowledge of club association with some brands
RQ4b – devoted football fans manifest an effective preference for tribe-related brands

Phenomenological outcome:
RQ4a was confirmed
RQ4b was not confirmed

Table IV.
Associative behaviour
and tribal brands

Both inquired groups consider that they are perceived as different because they really have different beliefs – Torcida Verde because of its recognized non-violence approach (comparing to the other associated supporting groups) and the devoted fans group for the supposed aristocratic origin they borrowed from the club image, their social classes and behaviours.

Both groups use common symbols like T-shirts and scarves. Some elements of the devoted group declared the preference of the Stromp equipment (a specific equipment inspired in the 1920s) while Torcida Verde members prefer the Centenarium T-shirt because they think this equipment adequately represents 100 years of the club as well as its history.

There is also an expressed common desire to preserve the old symbols. On the contrary, the new merchandise sold in the club store causes some protests from Torcida Verde members that accuse the club of promoting consuming behaviours clearly disagreeing with Sporting values.

Socialization was assumed to be influenced by family relationships in childhood. To be a Sporting sympathizer seems to be a heritage matter. While assuming the relevance of group socialization, devoted members regret not having more and easier songs to sing together because they are aware that singing reinforces togetherness. They also would like that "green trains" or "green buses" be back as in older days – i.e. ways of transporting Sporting supporters all together without the claques.

Torcida Verde also takes very seriously the socialization process when preparing the choreographies and between its nucleons and the headquarter. They naturally go to the stadium together.

Tribalism and tribal brands
Both groups are quite aware of the club sponsor's brands. However, they do not manifest a great preference for these brands (Table IV).

Referring to the recent rebranding of the Sporting Academy, which is now prepared to change its name to Sporting Puma Academy, devoted fans agree with it since the new brand necessarily includes the name Sporting.

On the contrary, Torcida Verde members express some resistance against the exacerbated visibility of the sponsor logo. They consider that the bigger the sponsor logo dimension, the smallest the importance of the Sporting brand. For example, in the players T-shirts, they prefer that the sponsor logo could be smaller.

Another subject is the destiny of the club dues. Torcida Verde assumes that a vast majority of money goes directly to football and not to supporting the other sports.

Managerial implications
These findings reveal some managerial implications to the different organizations involved. Football clubs have already a tribe community composed by club fans. Wanting to come more competitive, clubs must invest in better professional players and sponsoring is, indeed, a way to reach increased revenues.

On the other hand, sponsor companies are willing to invest in clubs that might offer a better return on their investment in sponsorship. The return on investment can be evaluated at different levels, from media exposure until sponsorship awareness and brand preference.

In this research it was found a certain degree of resistance against sponsor brands in both the "organized supporting group" and in the "devoted fans" group because they do not consider these companies as having a real emotional link with the club but on the contrary, fans think these sponsor brands may eventually risk the exposure of the club brand.

This kind of reaction may be linked to the fact that sponsor brands usually have a sponsorship strategy for a short time period and simultaneously sponsor the three big football clubs because they do not want to assume a strong association with just one club. Companies do not risk to be seen has having a club preference and so they are eventually seen as opportunistic.

In order to change this perception from fans, football clubs must develop a educational strategy to explain to their fans the benefits of the club sponsorship, namely the fact that they help the club to contract better players for the team and so increase club competitiveness.

Furthermore, sponsor brands can also develop a soft approach to club fans. For instance, equipment producers can develop product lines with club signs but in a more discrete way in order to allow club fans to use these clothes in their daily life.

Other kind of sponsor must try to consolidate a long-term relationship with fans and the club in order to express their emotional link with them. For instance, these companies can support the club in their activities other than football.

Limitations and further research
Main limitations are related to the restricted research scope: one country, one club and one claque.

Further research will be capitalising on the phenomenological research study conducted to test and validate the conceptual model, followed by a statistical modelling process which entails the use of a generalised linear model approach, as well as the application of a neural network topology.

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Appendix 1. Example of slides of the PowerPoint presentation

Appendix 2. Example of balloon test

How is the Torcida Verde member?
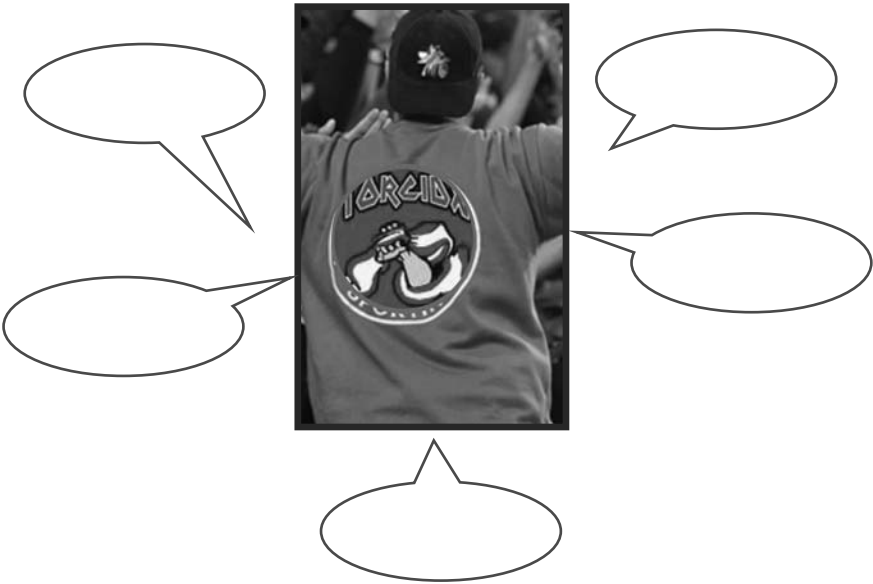
Appendix 3. Example of PAD test

Please classify the commitment level towards the club/sport in the situations below:

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