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Research Article

## **Non-elite conceptions of Europe: Europe as a reference frame in English football fan discussions**

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### ***Citation***

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## Abstract

Discursive approaches to Europe usually focus on elite discourses and target a narrow political understanding of Europe. Against the backdrop of rising Euroscepticism and the known elite-mass divide on issues of European identity, it seems important to shift the focus toward non-elite discourses on Europe. Given that club football is largely Europeanised (player markets, continent-wide club competitions and broadcasting of matches), we analyse how fans of the English Premier League club Manchester United discursively construct 'Europe' in relation to their sport. Our main research question aims at identifying how identifications of fans have been unconsciously Europeanised in the wake of an ongoing Europeanisation of the game. We explore online discourses on rivalry, competition and player transfers in club football as these areas are strongly influenced by the interplay of national and European inclinations. Preliminary results of our qualitative content analysis demonstrate that Manchester United fans, inasmuch as their club 'goes Europe' on a frequent basis, have developed transnational perspectives on football. Distinctions between 'us' and 'them' are not predominantly based on nationality, even though they remain complex. However, European orientations (not the European Union as such) seem to play more of a prominent role than commonly assumed.

## Keywords

European identity; Europeanisation; Football; Lifeworld; England

Analyses of how people imagine, narrate and discursively construct Europe are popular (Schmitt-Egner 2012; Risse and Grabowsky 2008; Polonska-Kimunguyi and Kimunguyi 2011; Maier and Risse 2003; Kaina and Karolewski 2013; Gillespie and Laffan 2006; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Brigeovich 2018). This literature usually casts European identity in strictly political terms such as allegiance to the European Union (EU) or its symbols (Gillespie and Laffan 2006; Bruter 2003), attention patterns among politicised citizens and merging news agendas in the media (Risse 2010: 107-174; Polonska-Kimunguyi and Kimunguyi 2011; Koopmans and Statham 2010), or overlapping values, normative ideas or shared self-understandings (Kantner 2006). These approaches cover the formation of conscious political identities, geared towards the institutions and the EU integration project and towards Europe as a space emerging from shared normative convictions.

The recent rise of anti-European political actors and Eurosceptic public attitudes in countries across the continent, with Brexit as its apex, make it more pressing to understand how citizens build their relationship with Europe outside of official politics. Especially the political analyses following the Brexit referendum underlined the severe differences between rich and poor, well and less educated, as well as a centre-periphery divide regarding public attitudes towards Europe (Hobolt 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016). Against this background, we seek to broaden the understanding of subliminal 'identity work' and discursive conceptions related to Europe resulting from leisure time activities. Linking our interest to the emerging literature on 'social transnationalism' and transboundary forms of activity, mobility and their effects on perceptions and articulations of people across Europe (Mitchell 2015; Mau 2010; Kuhn 2015, 2011), we argue that it is necessary to focus on the Europeanisation dynamics of everyday life (Hanquinet and Savage 2011; Favell, Recchi, Kuhn, Solgaard Jensen, et al. 2011; EUCROSS 2014). We use the lifeworld of football to ask to what degree identifications of fans have been Europeanised. More specifically, our main research question is: what communities of belonging do football fans relate to, and what frames of reference are relevant for them in the context of an ever-increasing Europeanisation of the game? Football provides an ideal field for an alternative approach to study how individuals understand and relate to Europe. It is an arena in which masses of people invest considerable time, effort and emotion. The field also draws in people who are known for rather varied or low levels of cosmopolitanism (Williams 2007; Mutz 2013; King 1997; Davis 2015; Cleland 2018, 2014; Cleland and Cashmore 2016). It hence presents a particularly hard case for possible emerging transnationalised identifications with Europe.

On the other hand, football as a game has been thoroughly Europeanised (Niemann, García and Grant 2011; Mittag and Legrand 2010; Brand, Niemann and Spitaler 2013; Niemann and Brand 2008; Brand and Niemann 2007). The Europeanisation of football exposes football fans regularly to Europe, even if only via their daily consumption of football news. Their clubs compete against teams from other European countries, either on the pitch or in the signing of players and managers. This is likely to affect how fans perceive such competition in the context of Europe in general. Their identification with the game might also influence how they see Europe, but the direction is not necessarily clear: would they perceive it as additional (potentially threatening) competition, or would they consider the Europeanisation as normal and establish Europe as their new reference frame (Millward 2007; Levermore and Millward 2007; King 2004)?

In order to elucidate the extent to which the Europeanisation of format and organisational structures within football has already resulted in Europeanised mind-sets, patterns of identification and articulations among the fans and spectators, we adopt a three-pronged analytical framework, consisting of three guiding concepts: subjective Europeanisation, communities of belonging (COB) and frames of reference (FOR). Much in line with the concept of "subjective globalisation" (Robertson 1992: 9; Steger and James 2011: 57, 62-65) – in its relation to material dynamics of globalisation itself – we put forms of 'subjective

Europeanisation' at the centre of our attention. This term, whose conceptual potential is explored below, allows for an analysis of the scope of ideational change (for example transformed imaginaries or perceptions) in the minds of people, even though such dynamics might be pre-reflexive, and the resulting 'identity work' might cover primarily non-conscious mechanisms of identification.

Whereas 'subjective Europeanisation' denotes the domain of reality towards which our analysis is geared, the other two concepts – COB and FOR –, indicate analytic dimensions where subjective Europeanisation might become visible in articulation and ensuing identity work. Building upon sociological identity concepts (Eder 2009; Brubaker and Cooper 2000), we develop COB and FOR as two dimensions of analysis which provide leverage to capture elements of group identifications (COB) as well as spatial (or scalar) reference frames (FOR). Aspects which can be subsumed under both concepts arguably form an integral part of any fan or citizen's self-concept without being strictly or even consciously political in nature. At the same time, both COB and FOR remain flexible enough to accommodate a host of identification patterns. Even though it is plausible that the Europeanisation of football's governance structures has affected how its fans and followers of the game relate to their outside world, and that their mind-sets have accordingly been Europeanised to some extent, this is not necessarily the case.

In the remainder of the article, we flesh out the conceptual backbone of our analysis. We develop the conceptual apparatus around subjective Europeanisation, COB and FOR into an analytical grid which allows us to decipher Europeanised patterns of identification among football fans. Thereafter, we specify our research design. This is followed by the empirical analysis of online discussion among Manchester United fans about rivalries, competition and transfers

## **SUBJECTIVE EUROPEANISATION AMONG FOOTBALL FANS**

We situate fans' perceptions of football against the background of an increasingly visible Europeanisation of the structures and activities surrounding the game. These material 'objective' changes within this field of social action are referred to as the 'Europeanisation of football'. In contrast, the focus of our analysis lies in detecting subconscious identity work among football fans within this increasingly Europeanised setting. We seek to tackle what could be dubbed 'subjective Europeanisation', inspired by the work of Robertson (1992) on 'subjective globalisation' (see also Steger and James 2011; Mau 2010). Introducing 'subjective Europeanisation' as the main domain of interest in our research enables us to capture the breadth and difference of human reactions to objective cross-boundary transformation, and hence different degrees and directions of change to their perceptions, imaginations and articulations.

### **Europeanisation of Football**

The governance structures of football have been Europeanised considerably over the past two and a half decades. Europeanisation is generally understood as the process of change in the domestic arena resulting from change at the European level of governance (Schmidt 2002). However, actors at the domestic level are not merely receivers of European-level pressures, they also influence policies at the European level to which they in turn have to adjust at a later stage (Börzel 2002). Such a broader notion underlines the interdependence between the European and domestic levels to explain how Europeanisation in football takes place (Brand and Niemann 2007: 4). We distinguish between two different strands of Europeanisation (Niemann and Brand 2018; Brand, Niemann and Spitaler 2013). The first strand comprises the top-down pressure from the

European level, i.e. rulings by the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) or investigations by the European Commission, commonly referred to as downloading. They are accompanied by various attempts to influence such measures from domestic actors and contexts, commonly depicted as bottom-up Europeanisation or uploading (Börzel 2002). They must be distinguished from a second strand of Europeanisation dynamics, which is fed by transnationalising processes, such as the formation of transnational lobby networks (i.e. the former G-14, now European Club Association (ECA) or the creation of a de facto pan-European football league, the Champions League). We call this ubiquitous dynamic cross-loading (Brand, Niemann and Spitaler 2013).

There are four different Europeanisation dynamics and mechanisms which have shaped the game across Europe since the mid-1990s: the Europeanisation of broadcasting rights, the regulation of player markets after the Bosman ruling by the ECJ, the increased coordination of clubs on the European level and the development of European club leagues. Whereas the Bosman ruling has prompted the player markets across European leagues to become more internationalised and considerably more Europeanised, the European-level broadcasting rights debates fostered coordination and lobbying structures among some clubs and associations and finally made the Commission backtrack on its initial ambition to decentralise this domain. Intense coalition-building and lobbying in the wake of the broadcasting debates also helped to bring about the Commission's 'White Paper on Sport' (2007) which enshrined peculiar exemptions of football as a sport from thorough competition regulation. These examples show that EU-level pressure may at times spur only partial adjustment in football governance, while core policies remain intact despite their potential friction with EU legislation (Niemann and Brand 2008: 100-101).

As a side effect of such EU-level pressures, a more intense transnational coordination of individual clubs can be observed since the beginning of the 1990s. As football associations such as the UEFA were built as umbrella organisations of national football associations, individual clubs remained side-lined for the larger part of the 20th century. This resulted in the formation of 'top clubs' from several European countries into what became known as the G14. Their main aim was to influence UEFA (and FIFA) by using pressure and their individual power positions as 'best-selling' clubs in European football (Mittag 2018). It eventually dissolved in 2008, but the transnational club coordination remains intact through the now more encompassing ECA, which, despite its around 200 member clubs, still mainly represents the top clubs and their interests (Keller 2018).

The evolution of the former European Club competitions – European Champions Cup, the European Cup Winners' Cup and the UEFA Cup – into a de facto league system of the Champions League (CL) and the Europa League (EL) is maybe the most visible sign of the Europeanisation in football. As studies have shown, over time, a relatively stable pattern of recurrent participation of largely the same clubs in this continent-wide competition has resulted in a true pan-European 'league mode' (Pawlowski, Breuer and Hovemann 2010; Brand and Niemann 2018). Unsurprisingly, the CL has been dubbed 'an engine that supposedly makes Europe hang together more closely', but also as a 'political myth' that may contribute to more Europeanised mind sets and the European idea in general (Brand and Niemann 2018: 2).

The results of these dynamics of Europeanisation in football can be summarised as follows: The Bosman ruling and its aftermath accelerated a development of increased Europeanisation (and internationalisation) of player markets. Football teams are increasingly comprised of overseas players and there are many indicators suggesting this does not infringe the ability of fans to identify with 'their' team (Ranc 2012). The development of the CL into a de facto European league influences the experience of football supporters: They are frequently exposed to competition between foreign clubs and clubs from 'their' league (either their club or its rivals). This suggests that the elaborated

Europeanisation influences not only the structure of domestic football structures, but also fandom.

### **Europeanised Lifeworlds and Subjective Europeanisation**

The considerable change to the game, its competition dynamics, players markets and more frequent away games across Europe should have left a mark on fans. Earlier studies on football fans (Millward 2009, 2006; King 2004, 2003, 2000) explored the idea of a growing 'European consciousness' amongst supporters of football clubs who regularly played on the European level. These fans began to see themselves as more European. Two mechanisms were propelling such change. First, the increased opportunity to travel across Europe brought about by the greater number of CL games. This brought supporters to progressively see themselves as 'European' in a cultural sense. Second, the increased coverage of European leagues on British television made supporters more aware of other European national leagues and countries, building up a European consciousness (King 2003, 2000). This indicates European identifications through 'societal' ways (Levermore and Millward 2007: 118-119).

In our own research (Niemann and Brand 2018; Brand Niemann and Spitaler 2013; Brand and Niemann 2011), we established anecdotal evidence of changed mind-sets due to the ongoing Europeanisation of football governance. We pointed to the idea that frequent interaction of club officials and high-ranking football functionaries may have altered their perspectives, for example in terms of increasingly looking at European competitors instead of national ones, and by forming interest alliances across Europe. But what about spectators, the regular people following the game? While this evident research gap in the Europeanisation as well as the sport/identity literatures has been addressed to some degree by the multi-year trans-European research project FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe 2015), the everyday aspects of continuously practised football fandom and its impact on the fans' perceptions, identifications and discourses remain largely unexplored.

We locate our interest in the recently emerging literatures on 'social transnationalism' and transboundary forms of activity, mobility and their effects on perceptions and articulations of people across Europe (Mitchell 2015; Mau 2010; Kuhn 2015, 2012, 2011; Delhey 2005). We are particularly interested in the theorised link between increased activity and attention transcending boundaries, and the presumed resulting patterns of attitudinal and/or identity change. So far, existing research has reached ambiguous conclusions on how causality might run. For instance, Mau (and colleagues) aimed to test whether increased transnationality across Europe is accompanied by higher levels of identification with Europe. He found a strong correlation within the German population but stresses causality could run both ways: attitudinal change as a result of increased transnationality, or higher propensity to move across borders resulting from an already Europeanised mind-set (Mau 2010: 118-119). Similarly, Kuhn (2012) has argued that Erasmus programmes might draw in participants which carry an already Europeanised mind set, thus rendering any 'Erasmus effect' on the participants' perceptions negligible.

Our focus on football fans, however, allows us to evade some of these problems. First, by focusing on fandom as a field of activities, we concentrate on truly 'everyday life' activities, not selective participation in student exchange programmes, or job mobility among the more educated strata of society. As the EUCROSS project defined it, 'cross-border everyday activities' resemble 'behaviours that are performed by any possible individual agent in any aspect of everyday life' thus rendering 'mundane social activities' especially interesting (Hanquinet and Savage 2011: 19). Second, we scale back on the 'identity front' in order to avoid taking identity patterns from Eurobarometer data (Kuhn 2015) or surveying people on their conscious identity conceptions only (Mau 2010: 115-123).

Our foray into the increasingly Europeanised lifeworld of football is anchored in the idea that the mind sets of fans have become Europeanised, too. In order to confirm this assumption, we tackle rather subliminal 'identity work' which is arguably prior to identity formation and mostly unconscious, at least regarding any political implications in the stricter sense, including openly articulated understandings and appreciations of 'Europe'. For this effort, we explore such a shift in perceptions and identifications via the concept of 'subjective Europeanisation'. This notion is inspired from Robertson's (1992: 9) term 'subjective globalisation' and in particular Robertson's (2009: 121) criticism of the neglect of ideational aspects of supposedly objective large-scale social change such as 'objective globalisation'. We see a similar dichotomy at play in what we have described above as the objective transformation of structures in the field of football (Europeanisation), and a likely shift of perceptions among those affected by it (grounding such a dynamic in a more 'subjective' dimension). Contrary to Robertson, though, we do not claim that such change in the minds of people need to be conscious. On this, we follow Steger and James (2011: 57) who have hinted subjective renderings of change at the macro level (such as globalisation or Europeanisation) might entail 'imaginaries' and 'modes of understanding' of a person's surrounding lifeworld which are pre-reflexive in nature. In the same vein, Mau (2010: 13) has highlighted the general usefulness of Robertson's distinction between objective dynamics and the 'cognitive level' in analysing cross-boundary social transformation. Following from that, we locate the conceptual potential of the notion of 'subjective Europeanisation' in its capacity to steer our attention towards seemingly trivial, low level and unconscious shifts in perceptions and imaginations among people which occur due to everyday activities in a lifeworld sphere which however happens to be subject to (objective) Europeanising forces. What we seek to elucidate forms an integral part of change in the domestic arena, or more localised settings, which results from changes induced on the European level of governance. It makes clear how changed policies, regulations and governance structures in football have seeped into the perceptions of people and which kind of changes have been affected in such subjective domains.

### **Conceptualising Subjective Europeanisation**

Our interest focuses on how fandom experiences and exposure to football change perceptions, unwittingly and more subtly than can be caught by the language of political integration or 'pan-Europeanism (as a political project). Such a shift of perceptions will materialise in articulations and discourse over time. At the same time, it is indicative of identity work' under way, however subconscious it might be. If mindsets and perceptions of football spectators have become Europeanised to some extent as well, where would we be able to detect such forms of subjective Europeanisation?

In line with Brubaker and Cooper (2000) we ground the ambiguous term 'identity' in more robust concepts such as 'identifications', 'self-understanding' and 'communality, connectedness and groupness'. With Eder (2009) we put emphasis on the narrated character of such understandings, as well as that they function to delineate boundaries between actors. On this basis, we explore an analytical framework with two main dimensions of subjective Europeanisation among football fans and spectators: 'communities of belonging' (COB) and 'frames of reference' (FOR). COB aims to capture group-based forms of identification (in-group/out-group phenomena, perceptions of 'foreignness' and delineations vis-à-vis other groups). FOR highlights spatial or scalar aspects relevant to someone's concept of self. Regarding football, this includes the attractiveness assigned to different forms of competition (national versus European level), the reasons for such orientation and the eventual normalisation of 'going Europe' (Millward 2006) – travelling to football matches and experiencing Europe along the way.

## Communities of Belonging

Communities of belonging (COB) addresses dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, understandings of in-group and out-group, perceptions of community and discord, as well as the process of identification and accompanying narratives. In that sense, we use the term to summarise the different ways people perceive and articulate their 'sameness' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 7) within social groups and networks, thus setting clear boundaries towards outsiders. This is a different notion of COB than that of Verdasco (2019) who reserves the term for strong bonds of commonality and mutual support, or Alm and Martinsson's (2016) analysis of the emotional and affective aspects of community building among political activists. Our usage of COB allows us to approach our object of interest in a more general fashion. It encapsulates three questions which can be translated into empirically oriented research. First, on what grounds is a distinction between 'us' and 'them' forged in a given social group? Second, how are such groups constructed, both through words and non-verbal interaction? Third, what or who constitutes the 'other'? Following from that, we propose to analyse articulations of football fans regarding the patterns and underlying dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, the discursive construction of coalitions and networks among fans and the encoding of outstanding football events in narratives among fans which might contribute to community formation as well as to the drawing of boundaries vis-à-vis other fan communities.

### *Inclusion/exclusion*

The inclusion and exclusion of people into and from a community is perhaps the most essential part of identification. Accordingly, this captures how football fans define their own community and necessitates to investigate the identification process of the in-group and the out-group. What characterises an in-group and what an out-group? How far are the related perceptions shared or challenged among fans? As the discursive inclusion and exclusion forms the core of how the 'we' and the 'them' are constructed, it needs to be stressed that the notion of the 'other' is not necessarily limited to supporters, players or officials of other teams, but can also apply to persons formally belonging to the same team or club.

Linking back to the Europeanisation of the structures of football governance, an obvious starting point here is to analyse fans' reactions to the Europeanisation of player markets. Has there been a normalisation of 'Europeanness', for instance, or is (different types of) "foreignness" still debated, and if so, to what extent?

### *Relations among fans: coalitions and networks*

The second aspect of the COB dimension is the relationship between fans across teams and countries. Despite the strong sense of separation between supporters of different teams, cross-national and cross-team networks, contacts and relations exist. This seems self-evident on the individual level, but it stretches far beyond that. European networks such as Fans Against Racism in Europe (FARE) and Fan Supporters Europe (FSE) demonstrate the transnational dimension of coalitions between fans.

The analysis here seeks to uncover the extent to which the relationship to other fans is shaped by national borders and which cross-national coalitions between groups of fans exist, and why. Are there positive or negative references to other fans or groups of fans across borders (i.e. are they regarded as allies in some interest coalition or as "natural" rivals)? The aim is to grasp knowledge about the interactions, references and allusions between fans (either of the same club across borders or of different clubs) to get a deeper understanding of the communities that these supporters see themselves belonging to.



### *Encoding of events in narratives*

The third aspect of COB is the collective remembrance of events and its inclusion in the narrative of the supporters' communities. The analysis of core events such as World Cups, games against certain opponents and their encoding in narratives has played a role in prior football research (Young 2007; Pyta and Havemann 2015; Meier, Utesch, Raue, Uhlenbrock, et al. 2019; Bishop and Jaworski 2003). It may be expected that these aspects are also relevant for subliminal identity formation in the contexts of communities of belonging.

We seek to evaluate the discourses among fans regarding the role of club-related events (for example certain matches or winning a specific trophy) for their communities. The idea that events help to create community and discord is central to our concept. How do certain events trigger or foster a narrative? How are such narratives shaped by European or solely by national aspects? Our work focuses on the events that are the source for such narratives and eventually ensuing aspects of community-building.

### *Frames of reference*

An analysis of subjective Europeanisation would be incomplete if it was solely focused on group formation and delineation processes. The discussion of spatial (or scalar) reference frames employed by football fans is equally important. The notion of 'frames of references' has received a less stringent treatment in existing scholarship on identity and related sociological literatures, at least compared to the aspects and phenomena summarised under the COB-label above. Eder (2009: 435-438), for instance, addresses the question whether there are reference objects for a collective European identity, and Mau (2010: 116, 119) hints at the importance of a person's perceived affiliation with a particular level of action for subjective identity-formation. Usually 'frames of reference' denotes the existence of several different such frames – local, regional, national, continental, global – as well as the need for more conceptual clarity in depicting their interplay (Pries 2005: 174; Deacon and Schwartz 2007: 292).

In contrast, we employ frames of reference as a container category which allows us to analyse different types of social arenas and accompanying subjective assessments that share one specific trait. References to spatial distinctions such as national/international, home/away, domestic/European, local/national and so on arguably play an important role regarding the perceptions and imaginaries which we seek to elucidate. With a view on our field of study, frames of reference therefore include articulations as well as spaces for action and attention resulting from actions (following football events, travel activities, tourist activities in the context of away games, network building). The focus is on the assigned importance and normalisation of cross-border action ('going Europe'). Beyond this, the analytic dimension of FOR also incorporates an analysis of the fans' perspectives on national competitions, European competitions and the respective degrees of importance assigned to these two.

### *National competitions*

The first aspect of FOR is the perspective on national club competitions. National competitions (usually the first national league and cup competitions) are often seen as supporters' main area of focus. These games are most prevalent and tend to form the core narrative in national media. We seek to capture how supporters perceive the national competitions as their presumably natural field of attention and interest, and how they understand their relevance (for example as pre-eminent over any other competition, or as mere springboard to European-level competition). Such understandings and assessment are to be gathered from their discursive activities in talking about their club. This includes the activities related to match days and the investment that is connected to such activities. The aim is to understand the reference frames of football fans regarding the national competitions and the national competitors.

### *European competitions*

The second aspect of FOR are European club competitions. National competitions have been the norm in the past and competitions on the European level are often seen as extraordinary. But the creation of a de facto European club league could influence the perception of such competitions as rather regular. We seek to capture whether supporters perceive European club competitions as normal or extraordinary, both regarding their own club and in general. It should also be analysed how and why participation in a European club competition is considered important. Do fans see their club as representing their own national league or simply in competition with the best (European) clubs? The aim is to understand the reference to the European club competitions among fans.

### *Context of national and European competitions*

The third aspect of FOR is the context of national and European competition. This aspect focuses on the distribution of attention across the different competitions. It assesses how supporters frame the different competitions regarding the respective potential rivals. What shapes ideas of rivalry between fans? How do fans devote interest to their rivals in other European countries and to national or regional rivals? A connected, albeit distinct, question concerns the attention and the travel activities for different sorts of matches. How intensively do fans travel across Europe to follow their team compared to national competitions and how do they understand these travels? Are their travel activities rather connected with tourist activities or is the focus on the match? These questions are analysed with a focus on the relation between the two levels of competition, national and European.

**Table 1: analytical framework with the two dimensions communities of belonging and frames of reference**

Dimension	Category	Aspects
Communities of belonging (COB)	Inclusion and exclusion	In-group and out-group phenomena, targeting fans, players and other actors
	Relations among fans	Coalitions and network with fans across clubs and borders
	Encoding of events in narratives	Narrations related to event creating community and discord
Frames of reference (FOR)	National competitions	Relevance and perception of national competitions
	European competitions	Relevance and role of European competitions (representation vs. competition)
	Context of competitions	Rivalries, travel and match attention

Table 1 summarises our analytical grid for making the subliminal 'identity work' among football fans empirically approachable. The categories provided are to elucidate whether, and to what extent, the subjective Europeanisation among football fans – more Europeanised mind sets among regular people in their lifeworld driven by leisure activities in an increasingly Europeanised field (football) – can be said to exist.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The empirical application of the analytical framework builds on a qualitative text analysis of online discourses of football fans of the English Premier League club Manchester United. It focuses on the discussions among the fans about rivalries, competitions and transfers, covering issues that are not explicitly or officially related to Europe, but inherently influenced by the ongoing Europeanisation of football. These texts allow us to uncover subliminal identification patterns and reference points to Europe.

### Case Selection

Analysing Manchester United fans provides the case of a club that is a global brand in a globalised league within a country with a rather Eurosceptic public attitude.

The political attitudes in the United Kingdom (UK) are, compared to the EU27, by far the most sceptical towards Europe, both historically and today (Carl, Dennison and Evans 2018; Anderson and Hecht 2018). This scepticism has been connected with the traditionally low level of European identification among British citizens; a high level of national identification correlates with Euroscepticism, and it is exceptionally high in the United Kingdom (Carl Dennison and Evans 2018). The 2016 Brexit referendum revealed that the UK 'had, on the issues of EU membership and immigration, become divided by social class, generation and geography' (Goodwin and Heath 2016). The highest support for leaving the EU was predominantly expressed in English constituencies with higher proportions of older groups, those in low-skilled jobs and the less well-educated. Though age seems not as relevant for the target group of this study, social status and region are. England as country context represents a hard case to probe whether attitudes that emphasise national identity are predominantly reflected in football fans' discourses or if a (subtle) Europeanisation can be identified.

Additionally, sport in general and football especially, has served as a means to express a separate English identity. Gibbons (2014) dates the establishment of the St. George's flag as a symbol of English identity back to the Euro Cup 1996 as England played the Scottish national team for the first time in an international tournament. The fact that the four British countries have separate national teams and separate national football leagues has however fostered such identity before. Both the Premier League and the English national team are generally seen as superior over the football of the other nations, due to the value of the league and the past success of the national team.

In contrast to its national context, the English Premier League is strongly shaped by its European and international focus. It is often dubbed 'the global football league' (Millward 2011) and it can claim to have among the highest influx of players, managers and owners from around the world. It is followed by fans in more than 200 countries and many of its clubs are considered global brands (Ludvigsen 2019; Elliott 2017; Cleland 2015). Recent analysis underlines the Europeaness of the league, where more than 60 per cent of the players are not English and the vast majority of the foreign players are nationals of continental Europe, making it more a "European" than a global league (Poli, Ravenel and Besson 2019).

Manchester United has historically been one of the biggest European football clubs. It has successfully competed both at the national and European level for several decades. It has won more trophies than any other English football team and has been identified as the most valuable football team in the world in 2017 and 2018 (euronews 2018). Despite this impressive background, its recent success on the European level is limited to the Europa League, the second tier of European competition. Though the club is often characterised as global, the dominance of Europe stands out. Almost half of the official supporter clubs outside the UK are located in European countries. The club's global image is not limited to, but dominated by Europe. The club's image might be reflected in the attitudes of fans that

are used to players and fellow supporters outside of England and predominantly from all over Europe. Despite Manchester United's recent 'relegation' to the Europa League, its very globalised and Europeanised brand may, to some extent, soften the 'hardness' of the case.

Identity research in the context of the club needs to take into consideration that the club has a strong image among both its fans and opponents. Earlier analysis of fan attitudes towards the club shows that both fans and fans of rivals have a clear idea of the club: it is considered to be a big club, and its economic dominance engenders explicit antipathy (King 2003: 192). Historical rivalries between the club and its main opponents (Manchester City, Liverpool and Leeds) are generally seen as based on locality and contest between different industrial centres, but also in part due to their rivalry at the European club football level (Taylor 2018; King 2003).

### **Data and Modes of Analysis**

The study is based on an analysis of discussions on an online message board that relate to identity aspects and Europeanisation. A qualitative text analysis is done based on texts produced by fans on club-related online forums that are publicly available on the internet. Such fan-made online publications heighten the discursive dimension of fandom by providing spaces where any fan can leave comments. These forms of 'online talk' (Paulus, Warren and Lester 2016: 2) are forms of communication based on digital media technology and thus part of the 'new media'.

Online communication between football supporters grew together with widening internet availability. Fan forums have been extensively used for communication about the team and the club as well as for planning of travel, ticketing and other organisational aspects of fandom (Pearson 2012; Pearson 2010; Mcmanus 2015). They can be counted as part of activist or alternative media (Waltz 2005; Lievrouw 2011), as they are usually organised bottom-up by a group of fans of a specific club. They are independent of the club and other typical gatekeepers such as editors or journalists. Usually, everyone who registers as a user may contribute to discussions. This makes such forums an open space for discussions. Registration usually does not require credentials. The use of fake names is wide-spread, participants are effectively anonymous, albeit some might know each other in real life (Cleland 2014: 417). Such anonymity might lower the threshold to express sentiments that contradict common social norms.

It must be emphasised that the participation in forums as well as the selection of posts are not necessarily representative of the clubs' wider fan base. Participation in match discussions that take place during the games is possible only for those who do not go to the stadium, thus excluding regular match visitors. The anonymity of participants and the lack of reliable information about characteristics of the supporters such as gender, age and location make it impossible to claim representativeness (Millward 2006; Cleland 2014). Despite these shortcomings, forums provide a valuable data source for prevailing discussions of fans, both those who regularly visit the stadium and those who are emotionally involved but do not participate actively for various reasons. It thus provides broad insights into active supporters' discussion, which is valuable for our research objective.

This article aims to analyse the latent aspects of identification. This aim supports an approach that intervenes as little as possible in the discussions. One major advantage of message board discussions to fandom research has been described as the chance to access supporter discussions as a researcher without intervening in the field. In this study, no notification was given to the forums about the research to avoid bias caused by a researcher's intervention (Millward 2008: 307). Such non-intervening approach means that the publicly available texts from fan forums are used for analysis without asking for explicit consent of each participating poster. Such consent would not only be practically unobtainable, as the number of discussants runs to several hundreds and a lacking consent

of one discussant in a longer discussion could compromise the analysis of the discourse as a whole. The chosen unobtrusive approach is common in discourse analysis of internet texts, for example on Twitter.

Our text base stems from the "RedCafe" ([www.redcafe.net](http://www.redcafe.net)), the largest Manchester United message board by number of users and posts. Our pilot studies (Brand and Niemann 2014) suggested that a larger time frame is necessary to generate sufficient data since the density of relevant topics varies over time. Thus, the material covers two league seasons: 2016/17 and 2017/18. From the message board, we purposively sampled thematic contributions. We expected that issues of identification arise most prominently in discussions about rivals, competitions and players. A term search was undertaken using the whole material to confirm that words relating to 'Europe', 'European', 'English', but also football related terms such as 'UEFA', 'Premier League', 'Champions League' and 'Europa League' were mostly found in threads covering three topics: competitions, transfers, and travel/ticketing. Discussion threads with these topics were sampled as material for the analysis (see Table 2):

- Discussions about rivals and competition: Discussions of rivalry take place in forum discussions about matches, both in the national league and the European competitions. The threads have been selected into the corpus based on a random sample of matches across the two seasons.
- Transfer discussions: Discussions about transfers of players to other clubs and from other clubs are prevalent in all forums. Two threads explicitly relating to one particular transfer window during the two seasons 2016/17 and 2017/18 have been analysed as well as one special thread covering discussions about previous players.
- Travel and ticketing discussion: Travel and ticketing both for home and away games in the national league and European competitions is the third type of discussion thread. Each season has a strand where both ticket offers/searches and information about the organisation of travel is shared.

**Table 2: list of all discussion threads and posts included into the analysis (as of 30 April 2019)**

Rivalry and Competition				
	Season 16/17		Posts	
Nat.	Man Utd 1:1 Arsenal Post-match discussion	711		<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-arsenal.423841/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-arsenal.423841/</a>
	West Ham 0:2 Man Utd Post-match discussion	354		<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-west-ham-united.425161/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-west-ham-united.425161/</a>
Eur.	St. Etienne 0:1 Man Utd Post-match discussion	155		<a href="https://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-saint-etienne.426666/">https://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-saint-etienne.426666/</a>
	Season 17/18			
Nat.	Man Utd 1:2 Man City Post-match discussion	885		<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-manchester-city.434412/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-manchester-city.434412/</a>
	Newcastle 1:0 Man Utd Post-match discussion	649		<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-newcastle-united.436488/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-newcastle-united.436488/</a>
Eur.	Man Utd 1:2 Sevilla Post-match discussion	996		<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-sevilla.437260/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-sevilla.437260/</a>
	Moscow 1:4 Man Utd Post-match discussion	250		<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-cska-moscow.432758/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-cska-moscow.432758/</a>

Rivalry and Competition			
Transfer			
	Most hated ex-united player	387	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/most-hated-ex-united-player.439133/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/most-hated-ex-united-player.439133/</a>
	Season 16/17		
	Summer Transfer Window 2017	736	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/summer-transfer-window-2017.429333/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/summer-transfer-window-2017.429333/</a>
	Season 17/18		
	Your ideal 11 - 2018/19 and outs (being realistic)	522	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/your-ideal-11-2018-19-and-outs-being-realistic.438172/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/your-ideal-11-2018-19-and-outs-being-realistic.438172/</a>
Travel			
	All ticket/travel information thread - 2017/18	1826	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/all-ticket-travel-information-thread-2017-18-touting-will-not-be-tolerated-on-the-site.429886/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/all-ticket-travel-information-thread-2017-18-touting-will-not-be-tolerated-on-the-site.429886/</a>
	All ticket/travel information thread - 2016/17	1907	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/all-ticket-travel-information-thread-2016-17-touting-will-not-be-tolerated-on-the-site.417803/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/all-ticket-travel-information-thread-2016-17-touting-will-not-be-tolerated-on-the-site.417803/</a>
	Total	9378	

In total, 9,378 forum posts were analysed using Atlas.ti. The relevant material was marked and categorised into a coding scheme based on the conceptual framework with the two dimensions COB and FOR (see Table 3 for the full coding scheme). The following section analyses general trends of expressions that were coded with the respective sub-categories.

**Table 3: full coding scheme for the qualitative content analysis**

Dimension & category	Subcategory		Definition/description
Community of belonging			Patterns of identification, inclusion and exclusion as well as event related narrations that form commonality and discord
Inclusion and in-groups	Definitions of in-group(s)		Expressions of inclusion, definitions of in-groups and positive references to fans, players and others
	Fans	Own club Other clubs (National) Other clubs (European)	
	Players	Own club Other clubs (National) Other clubs (European)	
	Others	Own club Other clubs (National) Other clubs (European)	

Dimension & category	Subcategory		Definition/description
Community of belonging			Patterns of identification, inclusion and exclusion as well as event related narrations that form commonality and discord
Inclusion and in-groups	Definitions of in-group(s)		Expressions of inclusion, definitions of in-groups and positive references to fans, players and others
	Fans	Own club Other clubs (National) Other clubs (European)	
Exclusion and out-groups	Definitions of out-group(s)		Expressions of exclusion, definitions of out-groups and negative references to fans, players and others.
	Fans	Own club Other clubs (National) Other clubs (European)	
	Players	Own club Other clubs (National) Other clubs (European)	
	Others	Own club Other clubs (National) Other clubs (European)	
Relations to other fans	Networks	National European	Expressions of relations to other fans regarding joint interests and (potential) coalitions as well as networks between fans and/or their associations.
	Interest groups and coalitions	National European	
Encoding of events in narratives	Creating communality	National European	Expressions that hint at encoding of events in narratives that either contribute to the creation of community or discord.
	Creating discord	National European	
Frames of reference			Patterns of the relation between national and European club competitions, the relevance of each and attention, travel and rivalry.

Dimension & category	Subcategory		Definition/description
Community of belonging			Patterns of identification, inclusion and exclusion as well as event related narrations that form commonality and discord
Inclusion and in-groups	Definitions of in-group(s)		Expressions of inclusion, definitions of in-groups and positive references to fans, players and others
	Fans	Own club Other clubs (National) Other clubs (European)	
European competitions	Perception of European competitions	Normal	References to European competitions regarding the perception and relevance of these competitions both in general and with regards to the own club.
European competitions	Perception of European competitions	Exceptional	
	Relevance of European competitions	Representing the nation Compete with the best	
National competitions	Perception of national competitions	Normal Exceptional	References to national competitions regarding the perception and relevance both in general and with regards to the own club.
	Relevance of national competitions	Necessary evil Valuable competition	
Context of national and European competitions	Attention	National	References to the context of competitions on the national and European level.
		European	
	Travel	National European	
	Rivals	National European	



## EUROPE IN FOOTBALL FAN DISCUSSIONS

### Communities of Belonging

COB are reflected in how fans include and exclude the important actors in football, fans and players, in their discussions. The results show that aspects of in-group and out-group criteria are prevalent within the debates, whereas references to other fans and narrative references to events are not present.

#### *In-group definition and self-understanding*

The fans define the in-group (Manchester United as a club, its followers, actors and players) in two different ways; the first defining line is based on success, while the second line is connected to Englishness and the main rival Manchester City.

The success-based understanding of the in-group includes strong references to Europe. Several fans emphasise their aim to be among the elite of European football clubs. Being counted among the best teams in Europe is the dominant self-understanding. They characterise their team as 'one of the most defensively competent teams in Europe' (Thread: Post-match discussion against Man City), and compare team performance with other teams on the European level: 'I was speaking more broadly re 'countless' teams - across Europe, you know the level we aspire to be at' (Thread: Post-match discussion against Arsenal).

Both these comments appeared in discussions about matches in the national league, but their references are European.

A different aspect of self-understanding is related to the composition of the squad. A recurring topic is the discussion about the integration of younger players into the professional team. Though not necessarily needed, it is often connected with the demand that the squad should feature at least a few English (or at least British) players: 'Are people honestly happy with not having a single British player, never mind English, never mind homegrown (disregarding pogba, who we brought in from france), in our starting XI?' (Thread: Your Ideal 11 – 2018-19).

This self-understanding as a club that incorporates home-grown and English players also serves as distinction from the local rivals Manchester City. Belonging is connected with values such as hard work and local embeddedness through youth football. In a discussion about a game against Manchester City, this is a prominent theme: 'United still tries to promote youth and has a soul and only spends what they have earned through generations of hard work' (Thread: Post-match vs. Man City). This self-understanding is used to differentiate explicitly between their club and their local rivals.

The construction of belonging and the 'us' is based on references to Europe and locality. Europe gets a positive imprint as the place where the adequate competition is found. At the same time, the local connection and Englishness matter as well. This dualism between European and local references regarding the club in general is replicated in how fans discuss the inclusion and exclusion of fans and players.

#### *Who belongs to 'us'? Local fans and players from the continent*

Criteria for inclusion into the in-group of fans is match attendance, whereas those attending home matches (and paying the high price for a season ticket) are accorded greater prestige on account of their investment in seeing the club play. However, such dominance for local fans is challenged by others not living in the area. They argue that their mobility ('have moved away') does not allow them to attend matches, but they remain strong supporters. This still holds the idea that a 'top fan' should attend all (home) games, but it allows to include those that do not share the locality with the club anymore. Belonging to the group

of fans is negotiated using locality as an argument, since also those who are not living nearby emphasise that they are originally from the area. Within this talk, Europe becomes explicitly relevant as it adds to the problem of money and time, especially because European matches take place during weekdays. For European games, the duty to attend matches is not seen as strong: 'No one does these games [referring to an away match against CSKA Moscow] except people like me who will do everything regardless and have the cash / holiday' (Thread: Ticket-travel 2017/18).

These sequences highlight that mobility to attend games is a relevant factor in the self-understanding of the fans. Once the club plays at the European level, attendance becomes more difficult and costly, leaving it open to only a few fans, while attendance at home matches remains a prominent criterion.

The inclusion of players is related to the self-image of the club as a European top club. This implies the need for world class players, from all over Europe:

So i still say, it's not enough if we sign one attacker who goes par with Zlatan. Real, Bayern, Barca and even Juve are far ahead of us. And last year Chelsea were too. If we are aiming to top of the Europe, signings should be from top of the Europe too. (Thread: Summer Transfer Window 2017)

Playing at the European level is brought in as an argument to attract good players from abroad. The fans discuss players from other European leagues and present some sound knowledge about players, the leagues and how they would fit into their club's squad, implying that they pay a reasonable amount of attention to football in other countries. The Premier League is in this context identified as overpriced and low-quality while (continental) Europe serves as a positive counterpart:

I never understood what Fergie was doing in those years, buying mediocrity from the Premier League when, for a little more money, City and Chelsea were getting top quality from the continent. (Thread: PostMatch v Man City)

The attention of the writers is clearly oriented towards other European countries, focussing on football there. This contrasts with the emphasised self-differentiation from Manchester City regarding the role of home-grown players and implies that local connection as regards players is mainly used as differentiation with the local rival rather than a genuinely important issue for all fans. Yet it is clear this is not a universal feeling among fans, as positive references to local identity occur in few cases without reference to the quality of the players:

why would you want to sell Lingard? We are talking about a player who grew up through the United system. He loves United through and through. You don't sell that for any amount. (Thread: Your Ideal 11 - 2018-19)

The discussion about players shows that the references to aspects beyond the national borders are generally very positive, and that the European level and football in other European countries has a positive image. While some fans emphasise local (and English) belonging as relevant for their team, a widespread attitude is that players from the continent are valuable and necessary to fulfil the club's role as a European top team.

#### *Who is out? Exclusion of fans and players*

The exclusion of individuals from the same club is rare, but it happens occasionally as when one fan uses derogatory language against the manager after a defeat: 'And it is your job you worthless Portuguese piece of shit to get your players to play the same way!' (Thread: PostMatch v Newcastle). This posting is not only deleted quickly (as it seems to be against the rules), but also elicits harsh responses from other fans, emphasising that this is not an appropriate behaviour: 'You are not a fan, you are a disgrace' (Thread: PostMatch v

Newcastle). This latter quote was far from unique, highlighting that explicit racist or derogatory vocabulary is not accepted.

A strong difference to other match posts appears in a discussion about a match against West Ham United. This club is rejected based on its fans in a rather strong sense, as their fans are described as 'hooligans' and 'thugs'. While this first seems to be a regular rivalry between fans of different clubs, another post in the same context shows that the cause for exclusion is politically charged. When one Manchester fan expressed sympathy for the opposing fans, this sentiment was harshly rejected, based on the (presumed) political beliefs of the West Ham fans: 'Excuse me? That's like feeling sorry for The EDL or Britain First' (Thread: PostMatch v West Ham 2017). This exclusion of fans happened based on behaviour that is considered as inappropriate. The distinction is in this case connected to national identity as the 'other' is associated with English/British nationalism.

Players from the team are excluded in one special discussion about 'mosthated ex-United players'. One dominant theme is resentment of players that played for Manchester City or Liverpool after they had played for Manchester United, hinting at the relevance of local rivalry. In this sense, local rivalry becomes relevant, but the national origin of these former players does not matter in this criticism.

The player discussions with exclusionary expressions discuss mostly the (assumed) quality of players. Remarkable is a comment about player performance that connects the assumed quality of the Premier League with another league in Europe:

I thought he [Pogba] was absolutely dreadful he needs to wake up to the fact that he is now playing in the most competitive and toughest league in the world, he is not playing in the slow-paced Italian league where he would have space and time. (Thread: PostMatch v Newcastle).

This statement seems to contradict earlier discussions about the quality of players from continental Europe. However, while players from other leagues are generally regarded as potentially good ones, the Premier League is seen as superior compared to other European leagues. Both points of view have in common that knowledge about football abroad is required for these discussions.

To summarise, exclusion of players has both a local (rivalry) and a European aspect. While local rivalry defines 'betrayal' by players, exclusion based on under-performance can be connected with national or European league stereotypes. The latter requires knowledge – or at least stereotypes – about football in other European countries, which is seemingly very present among Manchester United fans.

### **Frames of References**

Regarding FOR, the discussions among football fans illuminates how they relate to the European competitions in relation to the national competition and how they perceive the context of competition.

#### *Perception of the European and national competitions*

The dominant perspective on European competitions among the fans is that they consider these competitions as extraordinary. This assessment elevates European football above the day-to-day of Premier League competition. Premier League fixtures, conversely, are downplayed in comparison to European competition, as a defeat against the Premier League club Newcastle exemplifies. A writer comments on a – from their point of view – bad performance prior to an upcoming European competition match: 'Maybe the players are saving themselves for the big boys stuff in the Champions League' (Thread: PostMatch v

Newcastle). This underlines the positive association with the European level and its competitions while the national league is characterised as relatively unimportant.

Qualifying for European competition is discussed as the most relevant goal of the team. The national league is subordinated to this aim, as bad performances on the national level are discussed in the context of this target (the top four places in the league qualify for the Champions League):

I really don't care how shit we were. The important thing at this stage is picking up the 3 points, staying in touch so if anyone fecks up in the top 4, we'll be there to take advantage. (Thread: PostMatch v West Ham 2017)

The need to compete successfully on the national level is seen as a means to claim a qualification spot for the European competition, while success within the national league is, at least in this context, not seen as being valuable as such.

For some fans though, participation in European competitions is considered expected. However, for some only the Champions League is seen as worthwhile, while the (second tier) Europa League is seen as cumbersome and not worth engaging in:

I'd rather not deliberately throw matches away to ensure we don't get Europa League football! If we end up in the EL again and we don't want to take part, just play a reserve team or something. (Thread: PostMatch v Arsenal 2016)

This approach of normality concerning European competitions shows the ambiguity of perspectives on the European competitions. While the Champions League is seen as a competition among the best, the Europa League is not even valued as much as the national league. Here, the club is seen as a good competitor, even as good that they even can send their second-best team to win.

Fans could look at European competitions from two different perspectives. They could consider them either to be competition among the best clubs in Europe or as a place where a club from their national league represents this league or even the nation against a representative from another league. Within the discourses of the Manchester United fans, their perspective is predominantly clear. Most writers consider these leagues to be a competition among the best in Europe instead of the place to represent the national league or the country. After the club lost to Sevilla in the Champions League, the dominant opinion is that the club is not amongst the best in Europe: 'Well this is the level we are at. Not a top 8 team in Europe. We basically lost against an average Spanish side. Just not good enough' (Thread: PostMatch v Sevilla).

In one exceptional case, a writer considers the European competitions as a place to represent the Premier League, arguing that they would always support an English team. But even this is not without qualification, as the poster apparently also carries a specific antipathy toward the Spanish opponent for personal reasons:

I only caught the second half, and believe it or not I wanted United to win - one for the fact you're still English no matter what, but more the fact I really dislike Sevilla who ruined the only European cup final I've attended. (Liverpool Supporter, Thread: PostMatch v Sevilla)

This position is neither echoed nor does it generate further discussion, however. In general, there is no idea of representing anything other than the club at the European level.

To summarise the attitudes towards the different leagues, 'Europe' and playing in European competition is seen as the norm for the Manchester United fans. The national league is of

limited relevance in and of itself, but commonly viewed in the context of European qualification.

*Context of European and national competitions: travel and rivalries*

The first aspect of competition contexts is travel to away games. This aspect is potentially very different for national and European competitions, as travelling to a European game requires much more effort than to a domestic game, especially given England's comparative geographic isolation. The travel discussions revolve around the organisation of transportation for both domestic and European matches. Access to official away tickets is restricted to season ticket holders because the demand is much higher than the spots that are available. Consequently, the availability of tickets is a recurring theme, but there is a difference between national league matches and European matches. While travelling to national away matches is common, attendance at European fixtures is seen as exceptional. For European matches, tickets are usually not difficult to get, as there are (unlike for national away games) fewer applications than tickets given the high travel costs and the problem with mid-week games. The amount of money that is needed restricts access to only a few fans. Even those who might be able to cover it are reluctant to do so: 'I am thinking of applying for a ticket, but I am thinking if it's worth paying £400 for a flight ticket. Anyone knows if there's any other options?' (Thread: Ticket-travel 2017/18, Super Cup discussion).

The response underlines the problems of uncertainty and short notice (given the knock-out format in the latter stages of competition) that are connected to European travel:

All the flight options that I have seen require leaving Monday and a night in another European city. Thomas Cook Sport said they are 'expecting' to do a trip but I don't know myself if I'll apply based on 'expecting'. (Thread: Ticket-travel 2017/18, Super Cup discussion)

These discussions show that travelling to the European matches is a rare event for a few fans, while national away matches much more accessible. The problems are based in part on the greater distances, but also on the way the competition is organised. Since the European competitions are less planned than the domestic games (due to knock out games and seeding groups by lots), travel is more complicated to schedule.

The second aspect of the competition contexts are rivalries between clubs. The chief rivalry on the national level is clearly directed against the local rival Manchester City. After a home defeat the discussion highlights how differentiation between the clubs is narrated as a different ideology: The opponent is characterised as owned by foreign investors (which is the case for Manchester United, too):

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. (Thread: PostMatch v Man City)

This perspective connects the local city rivalry to the bigger picture, as the rival is not only seen as a local or national rival but depicted as one of the best European teams. Consequently, rivalry against the club is extended to the European level. A defeat against the local rival gets also connected to success in the European competitions to come, as the discussion after the defeat shows. The defeat is seen as presaging further losses on the European level.

United should never set up that defensively as they did. They could do it against a team like Ajax and get away with it. They can do it against Arsenal and have the luck that Arsenal are perennial bottlers in finishing off their chances. But,

they couldn't do that against City, arguably the best European team right now.  
(Thread: PostMatch v Man City)

Rivalries with other clubs are not equally relevant in the discussions. The local rivalry emphasises the relevance of locality, but its transfer to the European competitions highlights that the national level is of lesser relevance. This shows that the local rivalry remains an important factor even when the reference regarding competitions is European.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article started from the assumption that Europeanisation is an ongoing trend in the governance of football and asked how this context affected fans' perceptions and if and how it influenced their subliminal identification concerning Europe. While most research on European identity refers to strictly political conceptions of Europe with an inherent focus on special strata of society, football addresses the lifeworld within a mass audience context. This makes football an ideal case to explore how Europeanisation of core aspects of leisure and lifeworld might influence individuals' attitudes and identifications beyond the core political identification.

Our research question targets this subliminal, subjective Europeanisation of spectators' identifications. The conceptual framework comprised two analytical dimensions: COB and FOR. These concepts were used to conduct an empirical analysis of online fan discussions among Manchester United fans around the topics of rivalry and competitions. The results show that Europe has left a strong imprint on fan discussions, both related to the way they include and exclude actors within the game and as a reference frame for their understanding of competition. This confirms previous assumptions about the role of Europeanisation of football as a mechanism that shapes football fans' perceptions and identities towards Europe (King 2003).

The ubiquity of cross-border aspects in the fans' discussions supports our assumption of an effect of Europeanisation in life-worldly contexts on individuals' Europeanness, even in a country context where the general attitude is rather Eurosceptic. More specifically, the COB of the Manchester United fans are shaped by a dualism between localism and Europe. While the local reference to the city of Manchester is relevant, both for who is perceived as a good fan and for players, Europe is fans' first reference point for players of high quality. This is contrary to those who perceived Brexit as beneficial for English football, for example the former England and Arsenal defender Sol Campbell stating that "[Premier League] teams load up with too many mediocre overseas footballers, especially from Europe, crowding out young English and British talent" (Gordon 2016). Such a view does not seem to reflect the dominant perspective of fans. Their relation to Europe in this sense is solely positive. It is the benchmark against which they judge the quality of players. Many fans possess extensive knowledge of football in other countries. The FOR of the Manchester United fans are shaped by a dominance of European competitions as their main reference. While the national league is perceived as a somewhat less important playing field, the European competition serves as an ideal goal. In some cases, the national league is even seen solely as a mechanism to reach European competitions. Additionally, even in debates about national competitions, references to the European games are ubiquitous.

The results confirm that football fans are influenced by the Europeanisation of their game. However, our results cannot claim to be representative for all fans of the club under investigation. Some comments on the accessibility of European games hint at a potential divide between football fans, for example based on the financial and time resources they can spend on the game. Further research needs to analyse whether this is an effect that is influenced by how frequently football fans are exposed to Europe through the game and whether the effect is only visible among a certain type of football fans. Due to the nature of

the data, we cannot contribute with an elaborated analysis of the potential conflict lines between fans and their different takes on the Europeanisation of football. But the references to socio-economic factors such as time and money indicate that such resources might also matter for the formation of Europeanness in a life-worldly context.

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