

More Than Just Hooligans: Exploring Football Fandom Of The Malaysian Football Fans

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Abstract – This study explores the significance of social identity theory in explaining the routine and habitual processes of fans' lives in becoming football fans. Football fans' personal characteristics and experiences relate to one another and strengthen their identity through identification, association, and affiliation within the group. Enhancing an understanding of the fans and essential connections between fandom, fidelity, and football is paramount to further understanding how fandom is practised and leads to understanding how fandom works. Meanwhile, the Malaysia Super League offers an exciting platform to examine fans' mundane experiences watching and supporting football. Through focus group analysis, general psychographics of football fans, their fandom patterns and practice will be identified, and at the same time, explore how fandom and fidelity are created. The results support that football fans attain vicarious achievements by being identified as loyal fans. The more identified a football fan is, the more likely they will find ways to demonstrate their fandom and fidelity publicly, for example, attending live matches at the stadium, wearing the jersey, and purchasing the branded merchandise of the club.

Keywords – Fandom, Fidelity, Fans, Social Identity, Para-Social Relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Sport has increasingly become embedded in everyday life. Many people in Malaysia become obsessed and attached to football matches, teams, and players they support. According to the '2022 World Football' report released by Nielsen Sports, football is popular in Malaysia, with 53% of the population interested in football, ranked sixth in Asia, ahead of football giants such as South Korea, Japan and China.

The national football association supports Malaysian football. The Malayan Football Association (MFA) was established in 1929 and renamed the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) in 1933. The FAM entered a new era of modernisation and professionalism when His Royal Highness, the Sultan of Pahang, Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah, took over as President in 1984. His Royal Highness was integral in the growth of football in the new era with the introduction of the semi-pro league in 1989. Semi-Pro League was divided into two divisions,

Semi-Pro Division One and Semi-Pro Division Two, to replace Amateur Football League. The Premier League replaced and succeeded it in 1994, Malaysia's first professional football league. Among the high points in Malaysian football was the successful hosting of the 1997 FIFA World Youth Championship, as well as the organisation of the professional domestic league, which has been called the Malaysia Super League (MSL) since 2004 when FAM decided to privatise the league from 2004 season onwards. Previously, the Malaysia Premier League was divided into two divisions: Malaysia Premier League 1 and Malaysia Premier League 2 ("History of Football in Malaysia," 2016).

WATCHING FOOTBALL IN MALAYSIA

Viewing trends have changed, and football has become increasingly globalized. All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator (Astro) launched the first sports channel, Astro SuperSport, in 1996. It offers a variety of international sporting events, especially football and badminton. Astro SuperSport high definition (HD) broadcast was introduced in 2009. In 2010, Channel 801 Astro Arena started and offered Malaysia's first 24-hour local sports channel, which is presented mainly in Bahasa Malaysia and includes sports events in East Malaysia. According to Astro chief executive officer Rohana Rozhan,

“More local sport will be aired and Astro Arena will meet the unfulfilled demand for local sports contents via a holistic offering of live coverage of major regional and local sports events, in-depth and extensive news coverage of matches and development of sports and athletes in Malaysia. Astro continues to be ahead of the curve by evolving with innovation to deliver a strong sports value proposition of bringing the best of international and local sports to Malaysia sports fans” (“Astro Arena Offers the Nation's First 24-hour Local Sports Channel,” 2010).

Meanwhile, the Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM) president Tunku Tan Sri Imran Tuanku Jaa'far, hoped that the newly-launched channel Astro Arena would concentrate more on local sports to help produce more sports stars. He said,

“We never really had local TV sports channels. In England, fans will spend the whole weekend watching sports on TV. The only way we can build a sports culture is by creating an avenue for the fans to watch our local athletes in action” (“Astro Arena Offers the Nation's First 24-hour Local Sports Channel,” 2010).

Sports and football enthusiasts will benefit significantly from Astro Arena through live coverage of sports news, events, matches, and feature stories of Malaysian sports heroes, sports clinics, and roadshows. Stadium Astro also created a website and application for the official match statistics, match highlights in multi-camera angles and push notifications on the latest news, videos and results. It gives passionate fans unlimited access and coverage to football 24 hours a day and enjoys a more interactive and realistic viewing experience. Due to this, at least half of Astro's 4.2 million subscribers sign up for its sports package (Wong, 2016).

At the same time, the popularity of football has increased with the advent of new media, tablet and mobile-based technologies. Football is fast becoming a big sport and attracting more fans. Fans can engage in a wide variety of online sports-related activities from sports-related apps (Onefootball and Sky Sports), sports news websites (FOX Sports and ESPN), sports live games and streaming video (FOX Sports Go), football scores

and results (LiveScore), football virtue and fantasy game (Fantasy Football), football magazine (FourFourTwo Magazine), an online football game (Football superstars) and football video and highlights (Fanatix).

Technologies have become the perfect companion for football fans' passion and devotion, whether reading minute-by-minute punditry, checking live scores or selecting the fantasy team. Most social media sites, especially Twitter and Facebook, have inspired engagement with their favourite footballers and clubs across great distances. This creates an avenue for football fans to connect with their favourite football team and footballer. In the same way, they have the opportunity and capacity to reach out to supporters and fans worldwide.

Unfortunately, in recent years, Malaysia has suffered dramatically in the development of the sport. The fans have also been affected by waning support and accusations of hooliganism and violence. Malaysian football fans have not generally been portrayed positively in the media, especially after some disgraceful fans' behaviour during the recent AFF Suzuki Cup and World Cup qualifying matches in 2015 and some domestic MSL matches. Malaysian football fans are criticized for their hooliganism, violence, aggression and outlandish behaviour.

Negative portrayals of fans and fandom in media narratives are damaging especially showing their antagonistic relationship with the state government, policymakers and advocates, law enforcement officials and Football Associations of Malaysia that they are dangerous and unwanted. Over the past years, mainstream media, especially newspapers, have described and framed them as menacing labels and negative stereotypes. The newspaper coverage has been episodic and mischaracterized the great wave of local football fans and over-emphasized themes of violence and aggression. For example, "Fanatic Penang supporters cause a stir after defeat" (New Straits Times, 2017). "Shameful acts of stupidity" (The Star, Sept 10, 2015).

More intense and accentuated warning messages to football fans were created by police and reported by newspapers. Examples "Police: Behave yourselves at the stadium" (The Star, August 29, 2017), "Police warn troublemakers ahead of SEA Games football final" (The Star, August 28, 2017) and "Don't cause trouble at Perak-JDT Malaysia Cup match, police warn" (The Star, October 2, 2015), "Police on guard against trouble during that match." (The Star, August 2, 2017)

From the discussion between the football fans and the Malaysian context, it can be concluded that the problem is exacerbated by the need for more understanding pertaining to Malaysian football fans' identity and fandom. The problems that remain are unlikely to be eradicated simply through restrictions and punishments on the action and expression of fans. Contemporary and post-fandom no longer consist only of watching, but the phenomenon of contemporary and post-fandom has arisen; a wide range of patterns, practices, meanings and experiences are available to football fans to create a shared identity. It is essential to take a greater look at the psychology of football fans and explore the range of fandom practices appropriate to the study. Therefore, this research will dissect fans' identity to study how fandom is practised and lead to an understanding of how fandom works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualization of fans

The concept 'fan' is an abbreviation for 'fanatic'. Fanatic derives from the Latin word 'fanaticus', a devotee. Understanding fan conceptualization is essential because fans are used widely in various disciplines. Thus, it

provides insight into differentiating fans and spectators, as there are different degrees of fandom, interest and loyalty.

Pooley (1978) says the importance of differentiating between a fan and a spectator; the difference is a matter of degree of engrossment and passion. Anderson (1979) defines a *fan* as an ardent devotee of a sport or an individual possessed frequently by an excessive enthusiasm for the sport. Jones (1997) notes that spectators will observe a sport and then forget about it, while fans will have more intensity and devote parts of every day to the team or the sport itself. Sloan (1989) explained that spectators merely watch and observe, but fans are enthusiastic devotees of a given diversion. Jones (1997) suggests that spectators will observe a sport and then forget about it, while fans will have more intensity and devote every day to the team or the sport itself. Jacobson (2003) argued the need for a more concrete conceptualization of “fans” as opposed to “spectators” in order to better understand and study fan identity. Wann, Melnick, Russell and Pease (2001) used the term fan, derived from ‘fanatic’, to describe individuals who willingly invest emotional or financial resources to support their favourite professional sports club. Not represent mere spectators to or watchers of sport, but rather a fraternity of people who diligently and over a prolonged period display their allegiance to a specific sports team of which they are fervent supporters. Giulianotti (2002) has categorized four ideal types of fan identities: Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs. Giulianotti’s categorization was moving from a hot, traditional identification. Smith and Steward (2007) explained that die-hard fans demonstrate loyalty in specific ways, like purchasing team merchandise and spending lots of money to travel out of state to see their team play. The die-hard fan puts a tremendous amount of investment into his or her fandom. The fan can be described as ‘someone who perceives him or herself as a fan of a certain team or sport in general’ (Bauer et al., 2008, p. 206).

Hence, fans’ are individuals who often subscribe to the unique culture or ethos of a club, immerse themselves within a community of other fans who share their passion for the club, and loyally embark on various endeavours that promote club interests, such as attending live matches at the stadium, wearing a jersey or purchasing the branded merchandise of the club.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

The Social Identity Theory was proposed and discussed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979. This theory explains that part of a person's concept of self comes from the groups to which that person belongs. An individual has not just personal selfhood but multiple selves and identities associated with their affiliated groups. When applied to football fans, it helps explain their actions and behaviour, particularly genuine and hard-core fans immersing themselves in a group. It depends on how someone relates to one another.

This theory states that people are motivated to behave in ways that maintain and boost their self-esteem and sense of pride. Football can increase fans' self-esteem through identification, association, and affiliation with the team and players. Thus, an in-group was created. By collecting football scarves, wearing the same team colours and jerseys, singing and chanting team songs, mocking rivals and attending every home and away game, fans feel attached to the team. Therefore, when a team wins, they feel satisfied and self-esteem increases. In-group status becomes stronger and intensified. Even if a team loses, a person will still have positive relationships with the team due to in-group favouritism and out-group biases. Social Identity theory suggests that individuals use social groups and group membership to maintain and support their personal and collective identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

This theory examines how football fans relate to one another and strengthen their identity through identification, association and affiliation within the group. Losses and wins connect fans. Thus, the phenomenon of identity fusion is created (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Identity fusion helps justify why fans are often deeply implanted and attached to a club through extended fusion. This is a significant social circle that provides a connection for fans to fuse their identity with their supported club. Hence, individuals become fans to be part of a larger group and be tied to group membership.

In this research, Social Identity theory will examine how football fans' characteristics and experiences relate to one another and strengthen their identity through identification, association, and affiliation within the group. Losses and wins connect fans; thus, identity fusion is created. Identity fusion helps justify why fans are often deeply implanted and attached to a club through local fusion and extended fusion. This is a significant social circle that provides a connection for fans to fuse their identity with their supported club. Hence, individuals become fans to be part of a larger group and are tied to group membership. Fandom and identity will be created and amplified.

METHODOLOGY

In a qualitative research method, the focus group will be engaged to explain football fans' fandom and identification formation to a football club. Fans' interviews are essential to provide meaningful data and details on MSL's huge fan population. A focus group is an excellent way to gather football fans to discuss and share their thoughts and perceptions on football fandom and identification in a smaller group without hesitation. The method for selecting participants is purposive sampling, not random selection. The selection of samples is essential to provide the best information. Participants will be recruited through MSL football fan clubs, for example, *Silver State Ultras*, *Perak the Yob*, *JDT Fan Club*, *Selangor Soccer Fan Club*, and *Anak Selangor Fan Club*.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The interviewed fans showed their solid and intense attachment to their supported club. They were highly emotional when sharing their stories and experiences during the interview. For them, being a die-hard football fan is no longer just watching a single match for 90 minutes. It is about the total happiness and satisfaction obtained through pre-match predictions, match scores and post-match analysis with fellow supporters or an online virtual friend.

[I hope every day is Saturday and Sunday. Saturdays and Sundays are the best days because I can watch football. I want to share football with everyone, even with someone I do not know or a virtual friend.] Participant, Selangor team fan, 22-year-old

[My computer and mobile wallpaper, Facebook and Twitter profile pictures and background images are only reserved for JCT, no matter win, lose or draw.] Participant, JDT team fan, 29-year-old

[Emotional support is essential. Shouting and screaming are expected when I am watching an Perak game.] Participant, Perak team fan, 30-year-old

Football fans seek to build football fandom in various ways. The more identified a football fan is, the more likely they will find ways to demonstrate their fandom and fidelity publicly: attending live matches at the

stadium, creating a sea of vibrant support across the stadium, wearing jerseys, facial painting, chanting, singing patriotic songs, purchasing branded merchandise of the club.

[We have something different for each match, banner, decoration, facial painting, giant flags, different messages for our team and for the opposition.] Participant, Selangor team fan, 35-year-old.

[We don't want a quiet stadium. We play drums and nonstop making noise just to support.] Participant, Penang team fan, 36-year-old.

Some participants admitted that light teasing and mocking through social media rivalries are standard practices to show football fidelity and identity. Also, it will make the match's spirit much more entertaining.

[Teasing and mockery are usual in any football game, especially during a derby game. This is normal in social media to support your only team.] Participant, JDT team fan, 29-year-old

[Mocking, teasing, chanting, insulting was part of the game in showing support. Light teasing and mockery are normal in any football game especially during big matches, Perak vs JDT, Selangor vs Kelantan.] – Participant, Perak team fan, 22 years old

Their passion and love for football developed during childhood, particularly at home. Fathers played a vital role in introducing younger fans to the football world. The fathers' and sons' relationship and bonding are connected to football, and watching football becomes a significant family event or activity during weekends. Patriarchy impacts the passion for football in a family from grandfather and father to grandson and son.

[I am happy watching football with my father and grandfather even though I knew nothing about football when I was five.] Participant, Selangor team fan, 36-year-old

[I watched football since primary six, and my dad introduced me to FIFA World Cup 2002 and Selangor team.] Participant, Selangor team fan, 46-year-old

[I have known about football since I was a small boy. My father watches football during weekends, and he explains football and read The Star football news to me.] Participant, Penang team fan, 36 years old

FOOTBALL FIDELITY

A study has found that defeat and victory heighten fidelity to a football club. The shared painful losses and ecstasy of winning connect loyal fans in an imagined family. Thus, the phenomenon of identity fusion is created. Identity fusion helps justify why fan fidelity is often deeply implanted and attached to a club. This imagined family is an essential social circle that provides a connection for fans to fuse their own identity with their supported club. For example, when the game begins, the crowd becomes a collective unit (Allison, 1979). Hence, individuals become fans to be part of a larger group and be tied to group membership. Social Identity theory suggests that individuals use social groups and group membership to maintain and support their personal and collective identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Upon joining a group, fans will relate to the group identity, and it may provide a sense of community.

In this research, participants were asked questions such as 'Do you always stay loyal?', 'Do you allow jumping ship and following another club in the quest for success?' and 'How do you show your support?' Fidelity is essential to every football fan. The availability of technologies and social media altered die-hard football fans with a new method to show their advocacy. In the past, football fans might attend a game inside the stadiums, or they would go to watch football on television. This is the only way to build and develop fidelity. However, fidelity can now be cultivated inside and outside the stadiums. One of the participants explained his fidelity and unconditional love and support to JDT,

[Support them no matter what happens. How can you change your club? Come on, if you love JDT, you will not switch your club. If now I have the budget, I will leave everything behind and go to Johor to watch JDT. Even work there as a cleaner ... When I see these people switching from club to club, I feel disgusted. This does not seem right, and people will laugh at you...] Participant, JDT team fan, 29-year-old

PARA-SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

Social media has played a significant role in contributing to football. The advent of social media has changed the way of interacting and supporting a football team. The average time spent on football, including watching, commenting, following, reading and browsing, is far more than with conventional media. Online environments allow fans to strongly identify and be attached to their club, which allows para-social interaction to be established. They can enjoy an authentic media experience of sports never like before and be introduced to the para-social relationship.

Social media and football are well-integrated into the everyday routine of football fans' lives. As the fan becomes more attached to the team, the fan's commitment to the team develops into fidelity and emotional commitment to the team. From the interviews, the participant feels linked with the growing sense of proximity to the football club and stars through social media. This solid and positive para-social relationship boosts the level of satisfaction with football day by day. Re-tweeting brings them happiness. Reading comments brings them the most beautiful of experiences. A few of the participants feel emotionally closer to their favourite club.

[Social media makes me feel connected and attached to JDT.] Participant, JDT team fan, 29-year-old

[I followed JDT Facebook. When JDT wins the title, I immediately sent them congratulatory messages. I feel what they feel.] Participant, JDT team fan, 32-year-old

Some participants are engaged in reciprocal relationships with the football star. Therefore, it motivated them to use social media more frequently than others and become highly identified fans.

[My favourite players are Safiq Rahim and Syihan Hazmi. I love to read their tweets about national team and JDT.] Participant, JDT team fan, 32-year-old

[I admired Faisal Halim and frequently responded to his posts.] Participant, JDT team fan, 29-year-old

Social media redefined and deepened the para-social relationship as football fans began to engage in a two-way interaction. They have been abandoning conventional media in favour of social media. This is partly because social media is faster and more interactive than conventional media.

CONCLUSION

A football fan is a person who is actively interested in and wishes success for a particular football team, the most passionate football followers. Based on the research findings, die-hard fans seek to build football fandom and fidelity with their active use of social media, attending matches or watching football matches. Any age or gender does not define them; they do not wish to indulge in any agenda, with only their love for their football team as the unifying factor. They share a common objective of focusing only on football and discussing it on social media. The more one attaches and identifies with a football club, the more one integrates into a more significant group identity. The more identified a football fan is, the more likely they are to find ways to publicly demonstrate their fandom (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Thus, it increases the togetherness and creates intense feelings of belonging among die-hard fans. Social media has great potential to bring football and fans together in a para-social relationship.

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