



**CATÓLICA
LISBON**
BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

**THE SCREEN BEHIND THE FIELD: A
NETNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MANCHESTER
UNITED FANS AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF
THE CLUB**

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Dissertation written under the supervision of Professor Pedro Oliveira

**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the MSc in
Management with specialization in strategic marketing, at the Universidade Católica
Portuguesa,
September 2019**

Title: The Screen Behind The Field: A Netnographic Study of Manchester United Fans and Their Perceptions of The Club.

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Abstract:

This dissertation aims to take a deeper look into the online interactions of Manchester United supporters. A netnographic approach is utilized in order to understand what perception these fans have with regards to the club. Some negative perceptions were observed to represent concerns to supporters. The dissertation also addresses who the main stakeholders of these concerns are. Data gathered online from two supporter forums were analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach. The results indicate that the main concerns of these supporters are related to their perceptions on ownership, performance, sponsorships and merchandise. This dissertation discusses the implications of researching the perceptions of football fans within their online communities. The results suggest that the fans show dismay with a current sponsor and with a lack of ownership on the fans' side. Managers and stakeholders are encouraged to 'listen' to these supporters and engage with them in co-creative and collaborative roles in hopes that this behavior will profit the stakeholders in the long-term.

Resumo:

Esta dissertação tem como objectivo principal analisar as interações online dos torcedores do Manchester United. Uma abordagem netnografica é utilizada de modo a perceber as percepções que os torcedores têm acerca do clube. Algumas percepções negativas foram observadas a gerar preocupações nos torcedores. Esta dissertação também abrange quem são os principais afectados por estas mesmas preocupações. Dados recolhidos de dois fóruns online de torcedores foram analisados usando uma abordagem temática qualitativa. Os resultados indicam que a principal preocupação dos torcedores está relacionada com suas próprias percepções acerca da posse, desempenho, patrocínios e merchandising do clube. Esta dissertação discute as implicações de pesquisar os torcedores de futebol dentro das comunidades online. Os resultados sugerem que os torcedores mostram uma desaprovação relativa ao patrocinador actual e relativa à falta de domínio que têm sobre o clube. Managers e stakeholders deveriam ser incentivados a "ouvir" os torcedores e interagir com eles em papéis co-criativos e colaborativos na esperança que este comportamento traga lucro para os stakeholders a longo prazo.

Keywords:

Football, Fans, Co-Creation, Perceptions, Sponsorships, Ownership, Netnography

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
1.1 RESEARCH AREA	3
1.2 RELEVANCE	4
1.3 DISSERTATION ROADMAP	4
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	5
2.1 FANDOM & PERCEPTIONS	5
2.2 FAN CONSUMPTION & SPONSORSHIPS	6
2.3 TRIBES, ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES & CO-CREATION	7
2.4 CASE CONTEXTUALIZATION	9
3. METHODOLOGY CHAPTER	10
3.1 NETNOGRAPHY	10
3.2 IMPLEMENTATION	11
3.3 RESEARCH PLANNING & ENTRÉE	12
3.4 DATA COLLECTION	14
3.5 DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION	14
3.6 MEMBER CHECKS	15
3.7 ETHICAL STANDARDS	16
4. RESULTS	16
4.1 PERCEPTIONS ON OWNERSHIP & SUCCESS	17
4.2 PERCEPTIONS ON SPONSORSHIPS	20
4.3 PERCEPTIONS ON MERCHANDISE & CO-CREATION	21
4.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY	23
5. CONCLUSION & MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS	24
6. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH	26
REFERENCES:	27
APPENDICES:	32

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Area

Football is by and large one of the most watched and followed sports in the world (Deloitte, 2019). The sport attracts legions of fans worldwide, who interact with their preferred club through online brand communities (Fenton, 2018). Football is also an extremely lucrative business; the largest 20 clubs in terms of revenue from around Europe accounted for €8.3bn out of which Manchester United accounted for €666 million (Deloitte, 2019). Much of the revenues are derived from sponsorships with corporate sponsors, merchandise and the licensing of TV rights (Biscaia et al. 2013). Over the last couple of years, the revenues of matchday revenue operations have decreased. This revenue takes the form of gate receipts and commercial revenue, which includes merchandising and sponsorships (Deloitte, 2019). Football teams can greatly benefit from understanding the perceptions that their fans hold about factors relating to the team (Biscaia et al. 2016).

This dissertation concerns football supporters of Manchester United and their online interactions. The focus is specifically aimed at the online communities RedCafé.net (RedCafe) and the ‘subreddit’ on Reddit.com/r/RedDevils (RedDevils). RedCafe is an online Manchester United forum run by fans of the club. Both RedDevils and RedCafe are predominately focused on the club and football, but also on general topics such as politics, sports, current events and pop culture.

The aim of this research is to shed light on what insights can be uncovered from the fan members of RedCafe and RedDevils. These sites of research consist of football fans that are regarded as stakeholders of the Manchester United Football Club organization. Specifically, the dissertation aims to understand what perceptions the fans have in regard to the club by adopting a netnographic approach. The study’s findings allow for a discussion of the managerial implications and demonstrate how research into online fan culture could become operational in terms of organizational marketing goals.

- *What can we learn from the online interactions of Manchester United fans?*
- *What are the perceptions expressed by Manchester United Fans online on RedDevils and RedCafe?*
- *What marketing and managerial implications can be derived from studying fans’ perceptions?*

1.2 Relevance

According to Vale & Fernandes (2018), the research on sport fan engagement on social media and forums is limited. There are many questions being raised and emerging issues that warrant an investigation into the nature of fandom and the online interactions of fans (Healy 2012; Kozinets 1997; Kozinets 2015). In light of the shifts in online consumer culture, as described by Lawrence and Crawford (2018), and the growing popularity of online communities, an inquiry appears all the more necessary. Kolyperas, Maglaras & Sparks (2018) argue that the research on value co-creation is limited and falls short in capturing the nature, processes and role of fans.

Healy (2012), who wrote about the Liverpool FC fans online also mentions that studying other club's fans could be beneficial as standalone studies.

1.3 Dissertation roadmap

The first chapter of this dissertation explains the research area, objectives and the relevance of the research. This is followed by a literature review on the topics deemed relevant to this dissertation based on an iterative research approach. Thereafter, an explanation of the netnographic methodology is presented and an overview is provided. The results and findings are then presented and explained together with an explanation of the thematic network. The last section consists of a presentation of the managerial implications, leading into a final conclusion and a discussion on the study's limitations and opportunities for future research.

2. Literature review

This chapter presents a review of the existing literature on the main research themes emerging from the data of this dissertation. The main themes are: football, brand communities, fandom, fan consumption, sponsorship, supporter behavior, and co-creation of value and ends with contextualizing the case.

2.1 Fandom & perceptions

Jenkins (1992) found that fandom offers an alternative to the traditional communities i.e. religion, gender, region, race, politics or profession. That being part of a group of fans or supporters allows for individuals to be part of the game without any special skills or talent (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Being part of a football supporter group offers the individual social benefits, such as the feelings of camaraderie, community and solidarity, in addition to enhanced social prestige and self-esteem (Zillman, Bryant & Sapolsky, 1989). Fandom has been defined as an affiliation in which a great deal of emotional value and significance are derived from group membership (Cialdini et al., 1976; Hirt, Zillman, Erickson & Kennedy, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). Cialdini et al. (1976) coined the term basking in reflected glory 'BIRG'. The authors explain BIRGing as the attempt to raise an individual's social esteem level through increased association with others that are highly successful. Examples of BIRGing, according to the authors, would be to wear a team shirt after a victory. BIRGing can also be achieved through verbal association, for example, saying "we" when talking about the team after a victory. Social identity theory partially explains an individual's tendency to succumb to BIRGing; the theory proposes that individuals identify themselves strongly with a more successful and hence a more positively perceived group in order to boost their self-esteem (End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick & Jacquemotte, 2002). BIRG is also said to be a key source of benefit and pleasure to these sport fans (Cialdini et al. 1976). Cialdini et al. (1976) further explains that if a team should experience a loss (failure), then in order to protect their self-esteem the individual might go through a process termed cutting off reflected failure 'CORF', which comprises of disassociating oneself from the losing team. Barnyard and Shevlin (2001) discovered that fans of a relegated team had clinically significant distress and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. The aforementioned tendencies in relation to CORFing and BIRGing explains the tendency of 'fair weather' fans, meaning fans that avoid attending matches when the team is going through a rough patch and vice versa when the stadia will see increased attendance in successful periods (Madrigal,

1995). Wolfson, Wakelin & Lewis (2005) found that the fans in the stands perceived and felt that they had influence on their team winning, taking credit for influencing the calls of the officials and distracting opponents. However, the fans did not perceive or accept personal blame for poor results. The authors also found that the fans may not have the option of abandoning their team, due to the deeply incorporated sense of affiliation into their self-identity, and thus perceiving the relationship between fans and the club as reciprocal, where both parties are expected to do their best.

Biscaia et al. (2012) found that the supporters of football teams experience a broad set of emotions both before, during and after a game, which contributes to their perception of the team in question, and to future purchase intentions (Sumino & Harada, 2004). Positive perceptions of the team and the team brand are therefore vital for the clubs, both in terms of retention of fans and profits (Biscaia et al., 2012). Biscaia et al. (2016) also argue that it is ever more necessary for clubs to understand the perceptions of fans in order to develop appropriate marketing strategies in order to increase the team brand value.

2.2 Fan consumption & sponsorships

Several authors have also explored the way in which football fans ‘consume’ their club (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011; Derbaix, Decrop & Cabossart, 2002; Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008; King, 2002; Pongsakornrunsil & Schroeder, 2011; Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Tapp and Clowes (2002) argue that for fans, their club-related purchases and consumption is, to an extent, part of their self-identity. However, Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho (2008) found that the supporters who participated in focus group discussions did not manifest great preference for sponsor brands. In some cases, the participants even showed resistance against exacerbated visibility of sponsor brands. Irwin and Asimakopoulos (1992) suggest that a main driver for sponsors seeking to invest in a sport team is a strong bond between the fans and club, insofar that the goodwill of the fans can be lend to the product or brand of the sponsor (Madrigal, 2001). Biscaia et al. (2013) found that when fans have a positive attitudinal it impacts their attitude towards the sponsors positively and increases their purchase intentions.

In relation to this Derbaix, Decrop & Cabossart (2002) assert that the consumption related to football is to fulfill four symbolic functions: integration, identification, expression, and ‘sacralization’. The authors argue that fans express their self-identification with their club as a unified community during sacred moments or sacralization. One of the major findings of their study concerns the sacred dimension of football consumption. It revealed that the sport

paraphernalia is, in large part, considered to be symbolic to the owners—representing sacred objects—which means that the objects are not used for their hedonistic or utilitarian purposes (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011; Elliot, 1999; Hirschman 1986).

2.3 Tribes, online brand communities & co-creation

This section will describe what brand communities are and their relation to football teams and their fans. This section seeks describe online communities and the way fans utilize them. Multiple authors draw the link between tribalism and football supporters (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar, 2007; Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008; Taylor, 2004). The utilization of a tribe in this thesis is defined as: "a network of heterogeneous persons [...] who are linked by a shared passion or emotion; a tribe is capable of collective action, its members are not simple consumers, they are also advocates" (Cova & Cova, 2002, p. 602). The effect that these supporters have on their teams is also explored and explained by Taylor (2004): "the crowd is the supreme authority without which the golden core of the game has no currency" (p. 19). The behavior of these fans is also explored by Vale & Fernandes (2018) and they argue that sport fans develop unique and engaging relationships with their favorite sport teams, both online and offline. Lawrence and Crawford (2018) maintain that there has been a significant shift in sports fandom in which the Internet plays a central role. Their conclusion is that the transformation of 'post fandom' culture which had its inception in the 1990s has entered the mainstream football culture through 'hyperdigitalization' due to the omnipresence of smartphones and tablets. They are describing the shift as part of a digital transformation in which the new millennial generation uses mainly digital media as their main source of information and community. They conclude that this late modern society is being shaped by this new generation consuming, interacting and connecting differently.

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) defined and coined the concept of brand communities to illustrate a community of admirers of a brand, focused on a common set of social relations, specialized and non-geographical bound community. Additionally, the concept is bound by idea that it is a common understanding of a shared identity.

These communities have existed for many years and the collaboration has taken place in many ways including on online forums and social media (Habibi, Laroche & Richard, 2014). Social media channels and online platforms are increasingly being utilized to build brand

communities by both the football clubs and their fans. In these scenarios, either the brand itself or the fans can be the creators of these communities (Fenton, 2018).

Healy & McDonagh (2013) explain that fans go beyond the offline realm and utilize new media to behave co-productively through their shared passion for the team and its culture. Conversely Popp, Germelmann & Jung (2016) address anti-brand behavior online, which described the way German football fans grouped together in communities built around their shared loathing of a club; FC Bayern Munich. Their research found that these anti-brand communities has led to a reinterpretation of brand meaning, essentially demonstrating that brand communities can have negative as well as positive effects on brand image. Escalas & Bettman (2005) found that these socially constructed beliefs, values and definitions of brands can be even more important in conveying meaning for the brand than the firm's own marketing efforts. Given these findings, co-creation has become increasingly more studied (Gabriel & Lang, 2008; Kolyperas, Maglaras & Sparks, 2018). Co-creation of value has taken a central and important role within marketing theory and has emerged as one of the most important marketing paradigms (Gabriel & Lang 2008; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Co-creation is defined as the process in which consumers and producers join forces or cooperate in creating value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This is similar to the findings of Wikström (1996), who suggests that marketing philosophy is no longer focuses solely on how firms can create value for their customers. Wikström (1996) suggests that the perspective has changed and hereby recast from the original producer-consumer role to co-creators of value. Communication within marketing has likewise shifted from telling stories *to* consumers to sharing stories *with* consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). According to Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder (2011) co-creation refers to the plethora of ways through which consumers are able to play active roles in the process of value creation. That is also to say that consumers no longer occupy the very end of the value chain (Gabriel & Lang 2008) and in relation Kolyperas, Maglaras & Sparks (2018) found that sport fans redefine, evaluate and reposition value propositions.

Cova and Dalli (2009) coined the term 'working consumers' to explain the process that happens when consumers collectively co-create value. They referred to the manner in which companies employ consumers as 'unpaid' laborers and also whereby market participants and marketers manage information asymmetry within the market and how consumers commit their time, energy, power, minds, or resources to co-produce together with companies.

2.4 Case Contextualization

Football or Soccer, colloquially known as ‘the beautiful game’ is widely recognized as being the world’s most popular sport and is a source of pleasure and excitement world-wide for billions of people (Derbaix, Decrop & Cabossart, 2002). In numerous European countries, football is a source of great economic revenues and of significant financial importance.

Manchester United Football Club is a professional football club in England, UK. The club was established in 1878 under the name Newton Heath and changed its name in 1902 to its current name. MUFC is the most successful club in English football, with 20 league titles and numerous other national trophies. They are also incredibly successful internationally, winning the Champions League, UEFA Cup, UEFA Super Cup and the FIFA Club World Cup. According to Deloitte, MUFC are the third highest ranked club in the world in terms of revenue. In 2018 they took in €666 million: €316m were from commercial revenue, €230m were from broadcasting revenue and €120m from matchday earnings (Deloitte, 2019). The earnings of 2018 in commercial revenue and matchday revenue were down from the year previous, and the earnings of 2017 were down from 2016 (Deloitte, 2019).

The MUFC history stretches over a century and for this reason only major events are noted for this dissertation. The club was witnessed immense success in the post-war years, after placing in the top of the league and winning the FA cup in 1948. They won their first title in 41 years in 1952. With an average age of the squad being 22, the media nicknamed them ‘the Busby Babes’. They team went on to win the league again in 1956 and in 1957. On the 6th of February in 1958, the plane carrying the squad, staff and other passengers failed to takeoff and crashed on the airport runway in Munich. The incident became known as the Munich tragedy and claimed a total of 23 lives, including 8 players and 3 staff members. It would take years to rebuild the team. The club managed to do so by 1965, when they reclaimed the title and won by aggregate goals over Leeds United.

The Ferguson years commenced in 1986, when Alex Ferguson arrived from the Scottish Aberdeen F.C. together with his coaching staff. The team would go on to win 13 league titles, 6 FA Cups and 2 Champions League titles under his management. These were also the years that witnessed the famous ‘class of ’92’, which included: David Beckham, Ryan Giggs, Nicky Butt, Gary Neville, Phil Neville and Paul Scholes. They became the first English team to win the ‘continental European treble’ in 1999, when they won the league, the cup and the Champions League.

Ferguson departed the club at the age of 72 and left his countryman David Moyes in charge, which proved rather unsuccessful. Since 2013, the club has had 5 different managers. The latest appointment was in March of 2019, when former MUFC player and caretaker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer accepted the position.

3. Methodology Chapter

This chapter outlines the methodology utilized in order to gain consumer insights of Manchester United fans in an online setting. For the sake of replicability and transparency it explains the essence and values of netnography, as well as the steps adopted when applying and implementing this approach.

3.1 Netnography

Robert V. Kozinets is broadly recognized as the inventor and creator of netnography and one of the prolific authors in the field. Kozinets first published work on netnography was in 1997, when he derived the term from an online review of one of his studies (Fenton, 2018; Kozinets, 2015). In 2015, he released a book with titled 'Netnography: Redefined'. Here he describes netnography as “the name given to a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 79).

This dissertation utilizes netnography as a means to inquire and to better grasp consumer preferences, culture, habits, and behavior of Manchester United fans. The choice of netnography was made in part due to its flexible, adaptable, immersive and unobtrusive nature. Kozinets (2015) asserts that netnography essentially offers a technique and method to gain understanding of online communities in their natural environment, where it focuses on social interactions and cultural insights. The researcher immerses themselves into the field through participant observation; the role of the researcher is essentially to observe, follow and participate (Kozinets, 2015). RedCafe, the focus of this study, is one such online community and the participants are its users.

Another focus point of Kozinet's study is the many ways that information and communicative acts emanate from the Internet and in what context these are derived in. That is to say that it is not merely content that is being put under the magnifying glass, but also the type of interaction, language, humor, meaning, characteristics of the communicator and even the elements on the forum. The interactions can thus range from textual, graphic, audiovisual,

musical, photographic, user-made or commercially produced and collectively or individually created (Kozinets, 2015).

When categorizing the different levels of membership Kozinets uses the terms tourists/lurkers, minglers, devotees and insiders¹. Not only the members are different, the communities themselves are described to have various characteristics. Kozinets (2015) categorizes communities into several types. He explains that there are communities that are focused on long-lasting relationship, but not on sharing their brand usage. These communities are classified as bonding communities. Seeking communities, Kozinets (2015) defines as platforms that favor information sharing and permit their users to keep each other up to date, include online forums and newsgroups. Lastly, building communities are defined as communities with a strong sense of sharing experiences and strong relational communication between members. Furthermore, these communities are described as catalyzers of co-creation since their members demonstrate a high brand devotion. The significance of establishing these classifications is for the researcher to pick the ideal site for their study. The importance of understanding the roles of members and their communities should be kept in mind whilst conducting the research since it allows for a greater understanding of the dynamics and the environment (Kozinets, 2015).

3.2 Implementation

The approach of grounded theory is inductive, where it enables a topic to be examined, data to be collected and analyzed in order to gain an understanding of what is occurring and develop a theoretical position (Bryman, 2016, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Strauss & Corbin explains that the grounded theory method is a qualitative research method that facilitates systematically discovering, developing an inductively derived grounded theory through an iterative process of the data collection and analysis. In this thesis, grounded theory allows for an inductive discovery of the unique insights and consumption preferences of Manchester United fans online.

An essential part of using netnography as a methodology is the adoption of the five steps (see also figure 1): Research planning, entrée, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and ensuring ethical standards (Kozinets, 2011).

¹The four types of members of online communities (Kozinets, 2002). “Tourists” lack strong social ties and deep interest in the activity. “Minglers” have strong social ties but minimal interest in consumption activity. “Devotees” have strong consumption interest, but are not

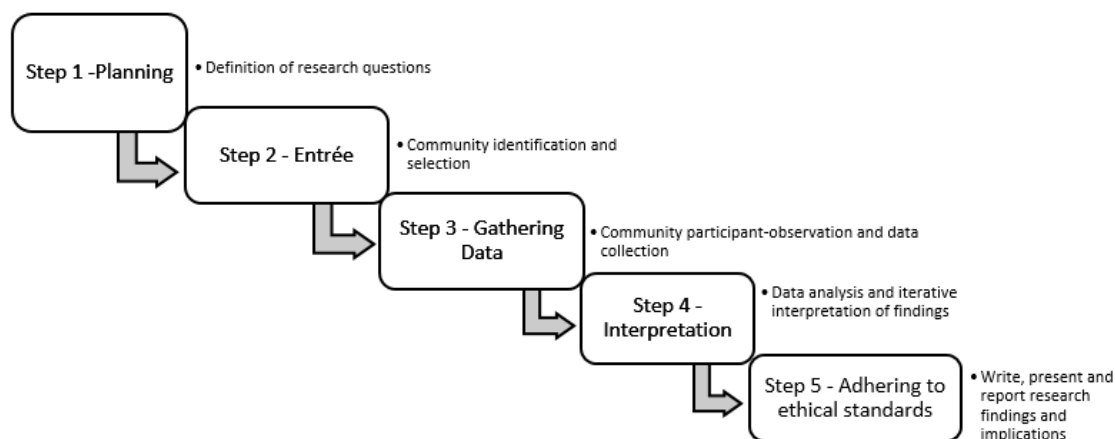


Figure 1: implementation of Netnography – Steps
 adapted from Kozinets, 2011, p. 61.

3.3 Research Planning & Entrée

Illustrated above in figure 1 are the steps that according to Kozinets (2011) are to be followed in order to carry out netnographic research.

The first step involves defining and formulating the research question. This process involves thinking of what the researcher wants to find in the online forum, which is why the inception of this study began with a broad open-ended question. To understand what insights can be learned from the Manchester United fans on online and how they perceive certain aspects of the club.

The second step involves finding and selecting virtual communities (VCs) based on predetermined characteristics. Online searches conducted through Google and different groups and pages were identified across platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Reddit and forums.

For selection process, Kozinets (2015) suggests weighting and ranking possible sites by using various factors and a ten-point scale. Careful consideration went into ranking the possible forums. The requirements were: relevance for research question, many active users, active and regular communication between users, experiential in the sense that it offers the researcher a particular experience, much quality content, richness of data, and good admin moderation (Kozinets 2015, p. 168-9). RedCafe and RedDevils were chosen for this thesis since they scored the highest based on the ranking system developed by Kozinets (2015)².

² See appendix 1

The website RedCafe was first launched in 1997 and the forum was created 2 years later in 1999. The site has a newbie system that consists of giving more restricted access to new members of the forum. The restrictions essentially mean that they can only post 3 times a day. When they hit 10 likes they are promoted to full member. Both RedDevils³ and RedCafe⁴ have a large membership and post count. Some basic statistics of the VCs are as follows:

- The moderation teams consist of 21 members on RedCafe and 10 on RedDevils to date (16 April 2019).
- RedCafe has 40,922 members, RedDevils 148,726 to date (16 April 2019).
- RedCafe has a total of 404,828 topics to date (12 April 2019)
- RedCafe has a total of 23,102,426 posts to date (12 April 2019)
- RedDevils has a total of 1,443,919 post votes and 173,113 post comments to date (16 April 2019)
- Red Devils has an average of 1394 comments per day

Both VCs allow for anonymous viewing, which means that lurkers/tourists can browse certain threads without logging on to the site. For the full view of the RedCafe forum a login is needed. When users are logged in and post on the forum their profile and post count is revealed. This online identification makes it easier to distinguish insiders and devotees from tourists, minglers and lurkers.

Membership access to both VCs requires the acceptance of a certain set of rules that are outlined on the sign-up page. Compliance with rules is monitored by a group of admins and moderators, whose job is to block any member who breaches of these rules. The rules of both RedCafe and RedDevils have made the job of the researcher easier by minimizing the amount of low-quality and irrelevant posts. One such way that the rules have made the process easier was that neither VCs allow spam and advertising. The no-advertising rule helped to eliminate users who were strictly promoting 3rd party websites. This both was a time-saver and allowed for the representation of real user generated content.

³ <https://subredditstats.com/r/reddevils>

⁴ <http://www.redcafe.net/forums/>

3.4 Data collection

The data collection took place from February till the middle of August 2019. All the data was solely gathered from RedCafe and RedDevils. The data entries that were gathered and analyzed were mainly dated from 2018-2019. A total of 140 threads and approximately 1500 comments were recorded and analyzed. After gaining access to the VCs, the data collection commenced by conducting netnography.

The interactions were not foreign to the researcher due to what Arnold & Fischer (1994) describes as hermeneutic pre-understanding. Meaning that the commencement of the data collection was more clear-cut and faster in comparison to traditional ethnography given that the data was already typed (Kozinets, 2015).

In netnography there are 3 types of data: archival data, elicited data and field note data. Archival data is the data that is considered to be the already existent data in the community, and it is possible to extract this directly from RedCafe. This also means that it is not necessary for the researcher to inquire or be involved in order to obtain this data (Kozinets, 2015). Kozinets (2015) argues that it can provide a 'cultural baseline', since the data does not bear an imprint of the researcher as a director or creator.

Elicited data, on the other hand, involves the researcher's participation and requires them to interact with community members. This can be done either communally through community posts, or it can be done through interviews in a more private approach. Eliciting data means that the researcher has the possibility to clarify questions that can assist them in their analysis. By posting in a community forum, it gives the researcher the possibility to keep the conversation flowing, which should be the aim as opposed to an interrogation (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014).

Field note data are essentially made up of observations by the researcher whilst browsing the community. The observation made can be of the members, their interactions, what meanings are carried by them and the researchers own participation (Kozinets, 2015).

3.5 Data Analysis & Interpretation

According to Kozinets (2011) data analysis can be conducted in two ways: through hermeneutic interpretation or analytical coding-based methods. Kozinets (2015) suggests utilizing both methods, since they overlap on certain facets of the analysis. It is also

understood that these two methods can be complimentary, meaning that they can illuminate certain angles there would otherwise not have been discovered.

The process of coding involves affixing codes to the gathered data and categorizing them. It can be done both on a computer and on paper Kozinets (2015). There are two phases of coding: initial coding and focused coding.

Hermeneutic interpretation described by Kozinets (2015) is: “a process of reading and rereading, interpreting and reinterpreting, interpreting our interpretations, and reinterpreting our reinterperations. Questioning. Probing. Resolving. Upending. It is a process of seeking a whole from parts, and an interpretation in which we can find the whole within the parts” (p. 205). The aim of hermeneutic interpretation is to gain a coherent interpretation. However, it is important to recognize that when the researcher approached RedDevils and RedCafe, it was done with pre-understandings of the world. We are all in possession of a lens through which we have our own worldview.

Instead of trying to be empty-minded (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), we can seek to be as open-minded as possible while acknowledging our own bias and not providing any concessions to our pre-understandings. We can do so through a process of reflexivity from the beginning (Connell & Lowe, 1997).

3.6 Member checks

Semi-structured computer-mediated interviews were conducted with 6 members of the RedCafe and RedDevils community in order to have the results and findings confirmed. The best-case scenario: to gain more specific insight or other insights of the consumer perceptions. Qu & Dumay (2011, p. 256) argue that the benefits of semi-structured interviews are their flexibility, intelligibility and accessibility, as well as that they are effectual at illuminating hidden angles of human behavior. More specifically, these members were 1 moderator from RedDevils, 2 moderators from RedCafe, 1 member from RedDevils and 2 members from RedCafe. The moderators were chosen because of their seniority and their high level of engagement. The members from RedCafe were both full members with over 5,000 messages or posts each, and the member from RedDevils was chosen because he/she has demonstrated high levels of posts activity for over 5 years.

The purpose of these member checks was also to validate the data interpretations (Kozinets, 2002). The members were presented with the results, the findings of the archival dataset and asked in a manner that would serve to clarify these findings. Each member was sent a copy of

the results by email and they responded with notes attached to the word document and in some cases over Skype video-call. This proved beneficial for the research, firstly because the members confirmed most of the results. Secondly, the members also suggested looking into the offline movements when it came to e.g. the anti-Glazer protests⁵, that is to say that the members inspired the discovery of more findings, especially in regard to the the perceptions on ownership. After corrections and another section was added, a last email was sent to the members with the revised results. They confirmed that the findings and results were consistent with was being said on the sites and what they believed to be correct.

3.7 Ethical Standards

One extremely pertinent question when conducting this type of research is that it begs the question: are these football forums to be considered public or private sites?

Regardless of this ambiguity, Kotler and Armstrong (2013) argue that the guiding principle of ethical research should be to do no harm. The researcher would therefore let his presence be known on the threads. The respondents and interviewees were also told that they could at all times abandon the study. In extension to this argument none of the names or usernames have been recorded even though their information would be readily available on these websites, since these sites do not require a log-in or are not password protected.

4. Results

The initial coding of comments and threads began through grounded research and then followed the establishment of a thematic network out of the quotation based on codes, categories and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each comment was coded with keywords from which categories emerged, from these categories several themes emerged, however just one was chosen. The codes were clustered into categories and they were success, ownership, sponsorships and the club merchandise. All of the aforementioned categories fell under the theme: perceptions.

User quotes are not author-corrected except for profanity, which means that some of them contain spelling mistakes.

⁵ Which were protests that fans took part in offline, as an opposition to their ownership.
<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/man-utd-glazer-family-protest-16667165>

4.1 Perceptions on ownership & success

The fans care primarily about team performances and success. The most active threads on both sites are primarily linked towards success and team performance. The member activity was analyzed and filtered by most comments, most recent and most unique clicks. These findings are similar to the ones of Healy (2012) and Fenton (2018). The fans want their team to win, so that they can experience the thrill of winning and “bask in reflected glory”. The fans express that they are concerned about the club being successful, in terms of winning trophies on a national as well as international level. The fans express their concern about the way the club is being run and the decisions taken on the business side. These concerns include transfers: the selling and buying of players, investments in youth and scouting and player performances. The members on both RedDevils and RedCafe regularly and often discuss the inner workings of the club. A major concern is ownership or the lack thereof, which members perceive as being connected to the Glazer family’s ownership of the club. The Glazer family is an American family who besides owning Manchester United also owns an American Football team: Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Fans express their dismay with club management and ownership. The dismay with the American Glazer family triggered some fans to leave and setup their own football team. The fans created F.C. United of Manchester (FCUM) in 2005 in an opposition movement to the American ownership. They also started FCUM in order to counter the increase in ticket prices that many fans faced after the takeover of the club.

They express that the lack of trophies in recent years is attributable to bad management. When fans refer to bad management, they often refer to Ed Woodward, who is the chief executive at the club and was appointed by the Glazers. Regarding player transfers (the buying and selling of players), fans especially show their dismay with Woodward. A considerable number of fans express that they think that the owners are only seeking to maximize profits on player transfers, and that they prioritize the commercial value of the players instead of their actual footballing abilities. One fan describes the Glazers reign and management:

”The Glazer family bought the most successful club in England that was run from top to bottom by the most successful manager in English league history. They were venture capitalists with no real knowledge or history or interest in ‘soccer’. Since the takeover they’ve set about turning United into a cash cow, maximizing revenues and (no matter what anyone says) minimizing their investment. Investment in playing

staff has only followed the natural growth in revenues from TV, sponsorship and other commercial sources.” (Field quote 13(3)).

According to this fan, the owners only care about profits and not actual management. Thus, there appears to be an interesting dialectic between what the fans want and what the owners want. That is to say, fans prioritize success on the pitch and to BIRG, and owners are perceived to have profits as their end goal. This prioritization of success on behalf of the fans relates to why fans are fans in the first place and what was in part explained by social identity theory (Cialdini et al. 1976; End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick & Jacquemotte, 2002). This also explains the underlying emotions felt by fans, given that fandom is a social and emotional investment. That is to say that the participation in co-creating and producing fandom carries significant meaning to the fans, which leads them to have an emotional bond with the club (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). This could be the result of their social and emotional investment into the club performance, whose success “proves” that their choice of club is justified, that their choice is the right one (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). The choice of club is also choice of community and brand community i.e. RedCafe or RedDevils. Research has suggested that being part of such groups can be very important to the welfare of individuals (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). The fans connect, bond and grow attachment through ritually celebrating victories together as is tradition, and club ownership has been observed to derive benefits from such connections (Fisher & Smith, 2010; Football Task Force, 1999; Healy, 2012; Substance Research Team, 2010).

”Real investment in the football club stopped to any significant degree in 2005. All we are seeing now is the chickens coming home to roost. The natural end result of treating one of the worlds greatest sporting institutions as an ATM for its owners.” (field quote 13(3)).

The primary concern for fans is winning trophies and success on the pitch. The perception here is that the club owners and management are mainly concerned with profit maximization, and even refer to the club as an ATM. The main driver is for the club to experience success, and thus, for the fans to also experience that. If the club is not performing well, then the fans will take to their keyboards and discuss this on the communities; RedCafe and/or RedDevils. During the study, the situation of the club deteriorated, and the dismay of the Glazer ownership caused fans to take action. Fans active on both sites would repost memes inherently negative about the Glazers to other social media sites in order to gain traction

(appendix 3). They went from online to offline protesting⁶. Fans took to the streets and organized marches against the Glazers. They also organized ‘online protests’, where they would use the hashtag #GlazersOut and organize boycotts of Sky Sports Subscription, BT sports, Manchester United TV and club merchandise.

“Until the Glazers and Woodward f*** off, I’m not buying anything... including MUTV.” (fieldquote 7/14)

The goal of the online protesting was to create awareness for their cause and become ‘trending’ on different social media sites with the aforementioned hashtags. As one member said:

“Stopping going to games won’t matter one iota, they get most money from TV rights, that goes under then they will get the message.” (field quote 13/6)

and another member encouraged support:

”No matter your thoughts on this working or not, all it takes is a second or so per day. Keep this going and let these f*****s hear that we want them gone NOW! If you wanna do extra then I suggest flooding our sponsors with the same message.. the bigger the movement the better the chances. Come on guys, give it a go! LUHG GGMU #GlazersOut” (field quote 13/1).

LUHG is an abbreviation for ‘Love United, Hate Glazers’ and GGMU is an abbreviation for ‘Glory Glory Man United’. Fans co-produce this community identity online, simply through the reading and writing online on these forums. Offline, they sing the songs like; ‘Glory Glory Man United’, again also related to BIRGing (Cialdini et al., 1997). Even the creation of a new club (FCUM), which is more affordable, is also a production and creation of the community culture and identity, by means of utilizing online as well as offline ways. Another way of showing their opposition to the American owners is by using the colors green and gold (or yellow) on match days, which is a symbol of the original colors of the club, back when the club was ‘pure’ and uncorrupted. Again, drawing back to these principals of sacredness and purity that fans feels about their club. The slogan they chant and write online is: green and gold until the club is sold. This is an example of how the Internet serves as a catalyst for change in social interactions and reinforces the production of co-creation of these fans (Arvidsson, 2011; Fisher & Smith, 2011).

⁶ <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/man-utd-glazer-family-protest-16667165>

4.2 Perceptions on sponsorships

Several users on both forums have shown their dismay with the Chevrolet logo that is present on the jerseys⁷.

“It's impossible to have a great looking kit with the monstrosity. If Chevrolet deal gets extended it will be a dark day.” (field quote 3/12)

This user describes the Chevrolet logo as a “monstrosity” and adding that if they are to extend the sponsorship deal it will be a dark day for the club. It is rare to come across a post on merchandise without one fan adding that the Chevrolet logo is aesthetically unappealing.

“Honestly can't wait for the Chevrolet deal to run down.” (field quote 6/1)

This user is referring to the fact that the deal that Manchester United has with Chevrolet runs out in 2021.

“Can't come soon enough [the end of the sponsor contract], between the annoying shirt ads and the annoying TV ads in America, I refuse to ever own a Chevy.” (field quote 5/7)

Another user chimed in:

“The gold chevrolet logo colour ruined the shirt” (field quote 6/23)

This user commented:

“Curse of the Chevrolet sponsor...[No Premier League trophy since Chevrolet started sponsoring the team]” (field quote 6/29)

These comments were not standalone cases; in more than 50 threads, at least one user expressed dismay or other negatively laden emotion towards the sponsor. For Chevrolet, this could constitute a problem. Sponsorship deals usually entail paying hefty sums in order to have a logo printed on team apparel. The Chevrolet deal is reportedly worth \$559 million⁸. This corresponds to the findings of Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho (2008), in which the fans that they monitored and studied did not show great preference for the sponsors of the club. They even go as far as to conclude that the fans expressed resistance against the exacerbated visibility of the sponsor logo (Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008, p. 32). The findings of Biscaia et al. (2013) and Madrigal (2001) would also suggest that if the relationship between the club and the fans is strained, then this development would have a negative impact on the perception of sponsors and ultimately on purchasing intent. That translates very well into the findings presented above, where the users are expressing their own reluctance and resistance towards the Chevrolet logo. At the same time supporters want

⁷ see appendix 4

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/gm-manchester-utd-sponsorship/gms-chevrolet-jersey-sponsorship-of-manchester-united-debuts-in-u-s-idUSL2N0PY1M120140723>

the club to be successful, in terms of winning trophies both domestically and abroad. Vast amounts of money are invested in new players every year and the funds are raised among other things through sponsorship deals.

One fan mentions the curse of the Chevrolet sponsor (field quote 6/29), referring to the fact that the team has not won a league trophy since Chevrolet became the official shirt sponsor. This could be tied to the findings of Cialdini et al. (1976) and the desire to win and to therefore BIRG or “bask in reflected glory” and celebrate with the rest of the fan community. It also ties into CORFing and hereby shelters the fans from the reflected failure that they have been experiencing. The relationship between team performance and visual sponsorships can be described almost as superstitious. Meaning that it is the user’s perception that one event causes another, even without any evidence that they are related (Tobacyk & Shrader, 1991). Hanks, Zhang & McGinley (2015) discuss that the mood of fans influences their perceptions of brands. So, if a football team performs badly, the tendency of fans to be in a worse mood is higher and that can have a negative financial impact on the sponsors that are involved with the team. In this case, Chevrolet is being blamed for the overall bad performance, and a powerful negative perception of the brand is being established in this context. Popp, Germelmann & Jung (2016) suggest that fans can deconstruct and reinterpret brand meaning, or create and shape a whole new one, which is arguably just as effective in conveying meaning if not more (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). This means that the marketing efforts of Chevrolet could be counter-intuitive in terms of shaping a positive brand image, especially in regard to Manchester United fans. This can also be attributable to what Derbaix, Decrop & Cabossart (2002) argued to be the fans exercising sacralization, in which they consider their fandom to be “sacred” and “holy” (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989). In this case, the fans are resisting the commercial elements and the sponsors. Richardson (2007) theorized that this act is one in which the fans are protecting their club, brand, and the “authentic” and “sacred” culture behind it.

4.3 Perceptions on merchandise & co-creation

Perceptions on merchandise come to light when the official kits: consisting of socks, jersey and shorts are leaked during the year. Photos of the kits are uploaded to RedDevils and RedCafe. This is when and where the users take to their keyboards and jot down what they think and feel about the potential new designs.

“I absolutely loathe the modern trend of altering the colour of a club's crest. Turning the home kit blue will be next.” (field quote 5/19).

Fans are also suggesting changes to be made so that the apparel looks more appealing.

They talk about the colors:

“Currently there are options to buy Chevy vehicles with a black bowtie. I don't understand why they can't color coordinate for the kits” (field quote 6/11)

Another fan described his view on the new kit and his opinion on the kit progression.

“This badge would look great on a black away kit, but it looks garish on red. The visual balance between the black Adidas logo and our crest is completely off, it then competes with the Chevrolet logo. It looks like they've phoned it in this year which is disappointing considering that since the Nike switch our kits have been consistently good.” (field quote 6/26)

They talk about the meaning of the colors and the tradition of having the same colors on the home jersey.

“I feel every kit should have the proper full colour badge. Especially the red home kit. They've f****d around with the away kits without full colour badges and now they've done the sacrilegious thing of removing it on the home shirt. Just awful. I can understand for training tops to have a one colour badge or grey outline. Don't f**k around with the home kit please.” (Field quote 3/29)

Here, the user says that what they have done is sacrilege. This can be linked to the statement made by Kolyperas, Maglaras & Sparks (2018) when they said that football shirts can be considered a fashion garment that contains symbolic weight, associations and meaning. The user feels that the designers have tampered with something that he views as holy or sacred.

In response to their dismay some fans design their own kits and shirts. Triggered with their dislike, distaste or antipathy regarding elements of the leaked kits, they seek to improve on them by contributing with their own ideas⁹. They submit their idea on the forum threads and other members will comment their thoughts and ideas for changes and tweaks. Thus it goes through an informal design process until a design that is regarded as favorable is found and backed with the support of the members. This is similar to the theory by Füller, Jawecki & Mühlbacher (2007) which they call “innovation creation”, where shoe enthusiast design their own shoes on online sites similar to RedCafe and RedDevils. Some instances led to the fans

⁹ see appendix 5

creating their own shirts and buying those of each other instead of the original club jerseys. This was done partly in protest of the ownership, management and professing their allegiance to the United fan community.

4.4 Chapter summary

This chapter describes and outlines how fans are feeling towards the club. The ongoing consumption of the club revolves around the MUFC communities. They seek certain goals that they also want the club to pursue. In other words, fans want club goals to be aligned with their own. The goal for the fans is to also feel positive feelings and emotions regarding their continued consumption of the club. They further want their experience to meet certain expectations. These expectations are met when the club is successful in the leagues that they participate both on and off the pitch as well. The fans are showing displeasure with management, and in some instance's, animosity towards executives and owners. They are organizing offline protests against the ownership of the club, and they do so by joining forces online. Fans have also been vocal in their opposition to the Chevrolet logo on the shirts and that has translated into a more general antagonism towards Chevrolet as a brand.

5. Conclusion & Managerial Implications

This section aims to conclude on the main findings and present managerial implications. The implications are directed towards three parties, firstly, the club itself, secondly, the merchandise designers and thirdly towards the main sponsor Chevrolet.

Supporters of MUFC express their perceptions of club ownership online, that is to say that they're expressing a lack of control and their dismay with management. These frustrations are directly linked to their concerns about the team's success and performance. This reaction can be linked to the findings of Cialdini et al. (1976), Hirt, Zillman, Erickson & Kennedy (1992) and Jenkins (1992), that found that success of the club was a reflection of the fans' own success. This provides a reason as to why they are so vocal when they are dissatisfied, due to their emotional investment and the emotional value that they derive from the affiliation with the club. Many of MUFC supporters online consume the club and co-produce the culture. These fans express a demand for being part of the club and hence to co-create the brand and the identity.

This dissertation finds that there is an opportunity for managers and marketers of football clubs to engage in a more proactive manner in terms of co-creative activities that take place outside the realm of typical management control. This goes together with what the fans express to be as a lack of relation between them and the club management. They often and regularly express their want for more transparency, communication and reciprocal interaction, with the purpose of giving the fans more of a say in the workings of the club, its brand, its identity and ultimately its success. Managers could initiate in this by adopting a role of 'collaborative co-creator' hereby creating value *with* the fans. Caution must be taken since according to Kolyperas, Maglaras & Sparks (2018) fans could deconstruct the initial brand. This can happen by creating a narrative that's entirely different from the intended brand, but somehow connected to the fans' own idiosyncratic brand and this might not have the desired outcome. An example of this would be the left-wing narrative that St. Pauli's fans decided upon and the reaction that had toward the collaboration between their club and Nike (Kolyperas, Maglaras & Sparks, 2018).

Merchandising is yet another frequently discussed topic for the members of RedDevils and RedCafe. Many of the most popular threads encompass merchandise, and especially the jerseys. Many fans expressed their dismay and voiced their opinion of the shirts when the

pictures got leaked online. Fans engaged in online debates on which color schemes should be used--to how the logos should look etc. These observations corroborate the findings of Derbaix & Decrop (2011), Elliot (1999) and Hirschman (1986) whose research shows that merchandise fulfills symbolic functions rather than hedonistic consumption objective. Where they would describe that changing the clubs crest as sacrilege, a thing you just do not do.

One initiative that the kit designers at Adidas could do is to include fans in the design process, they would mean that instead of following their traditional design schedule and process. They would have to create new steps in which the fans would provide their inputs and feedback. There are several approaches to this collaboration. The first is to create a platform, e.g. a website where they could receive feedback on their shirts. Fans would be able to post and share their own designs. They could also simply “leak” new designs and then lurk on sites, such as RedCafe and RedDevils where the comments are in the thousands. On Reddit, it is easier to see the consensus, given that members are using a ‘upvote/downvote’ system. Whereas on RedCafe, it would have to adopt a qualitative approach, since there is not any numeric metrical system to display which comment is the most or least popular. Lastly, it would also be beneficial to include the sponsors in the design process so that they can achieve their marketing goals.

A degree of resistance towards the sponsor brands was observed on the sites, especially towards the Chevrolet brand. This resistance could be a factor in the reason why the commercial revenues of MUFC have decreased over the last two years (Deloitte, 2019). Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho (2008) had similar findings with resistance to brands. The MUFC fans described the logo as ruining the shirt, as a “monstrosity”, as a “curse” and some fans expressed their loath and hatred of it. Sponsors, like Chevrolet, should reconsider sponsorship deals if the expected outcome is to have positive visibility. Due to these perceptions of Chevrolet it could be a possibility that for these fans, that the clubs involvement with Chevrolet has done more to harm Chevrolets image than their own marketing efforts (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Given what is already known and what is now supported by the online assertions of the MUFC fans, it is really necessary for sponsors like these to assess whether sponsoring these teams is actually in congruence with their brand awareness targets and more general marketing goals. It is equally as important for the sponsors to choose a club with whom the fans have high attitudinal loyalty (Biscaia et al. 2013). Suggestions for sponsors include listening and analyzing what people that are exposed to their brand are saying, in this

case for Chevrolet it would be to read what MUFC fans suggests and learn they dislike. Through co-production that everyone can become better off. Examples of other teams having utilized co-creation with fan co-designed jerseys include: Real Madrid's 2017 3rd kit¹⁰ and FC Bayern Munich fans voted for their 2017/18 jersey¹¹ used in the Champions League competition.

6. Limitations and further research

In terms of the scope of this thesis, it is through online observation that the data has been gathered and coded. That is why it is a distinct possibility and consequently also an argument that research carried out online is missing context from the offline world. In this regard it would be valuable for future research within this realm of football to also be carried out offline. It is also imperative to clarify that the insights found in this study are not meant to refute or validate the research and theories of previous studies but rather to act as a compass for where to take further quantitative and qualitative research within these themes. The research focused solely on English speaking fans. In the future, different findings could be brought to light by examining the communication of fans via other languages. Further research could also be conducted using the same methodology, but using another club and the fans of that club, in order to find differences and similarities between the two. Evidently more research is needed on these topics. A comparative netnographic study on how different supporters from different clubs perceive their clubs sponsorships could be interesting, or a stand alone netnographic study of one club could also be of interest.

To conclude, the world behind the football field is a peculiar one, where emotions seem to overshadow reality. This makes football-fandom such a rich area to conduct research into more complex stories beyond the field.

¹⁰ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/real-madrid-kit-fan-designed-10843912>

¹¹ <https://www.bavarianfootballworks.com/2018/11/14/18094148/bayern-munich-home-away-jersey-kit-colors-jorg-wacker-adidas-design-mint-green-blue-shorts-1860>

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Appendices:

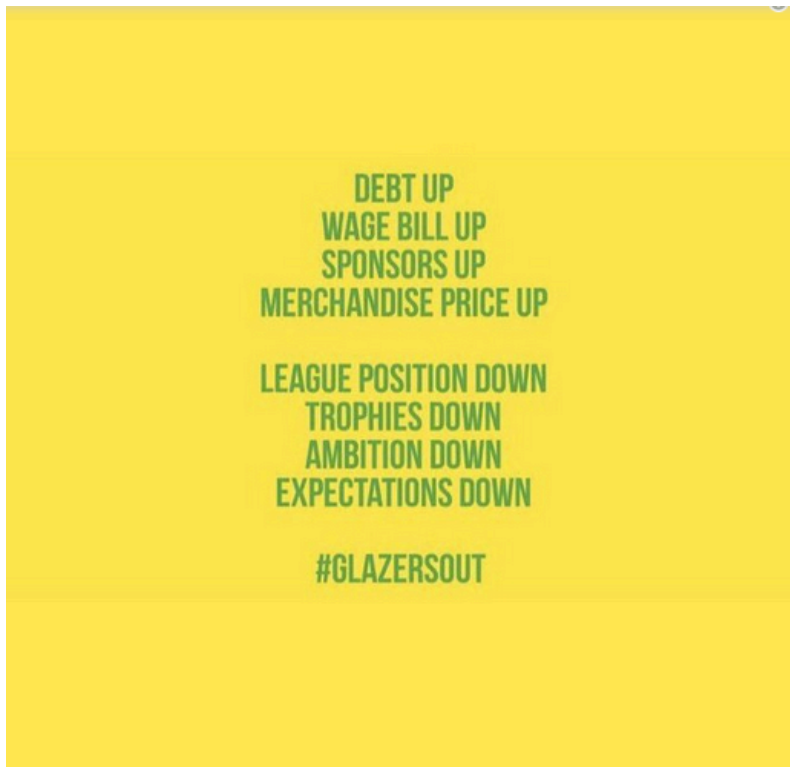
Appendix 1

Weighted ranking/factors	Weights	Scores	Totals
Relevance			
Activity			
Interactive			
Substantial			
Heterogeneity			
Rich in data			
Experiential			

Appendix 2

Concern							
Sponsorship			Ownership			Merchandise	
hate	curse	superstition	Glazers	Woodward	color	retro	Sponsor
Chevrolet	aesthetics		management		logo	jerseys	shorts

Appendix 3



Appendix 4



Appendix 5

