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Striving for Social Sustainability of Football Commercialization: An Ethnographic Case Study of the German Fan-Governed Club HFC Falke

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Abstract: In several European countries, a new football fan type has emerged in recent years—the post-consumer fan. These fans break with commercialized football by founding their own clubs in order to incorporate their vision of football. This vision is antagonistic to commercialized “modern football”. However, the newly founded clubs compete in the existing commercialized structures and need to generate financial capital. To date, little is known about how clubs deal with these contradictory goals. Based on a 27 month long ethnographic participant observation and ten semi-structured interviews, this article investigates how the members of the German club HFC Falke negotiated sponsoring and players’ wages. It highlights how the clubs implement alternative practices in order to remain close to their values while being competitive. As a result, they emphasize the democratic process, and implement normative guidelines. Some of the strategies are known from previous research on other clubs but during our research we also detected new strategies. The club and its members experiment with new practices, such as transparent payment based on effort and sponsoring used for the fans’ benefit (e.g., subsidies of beer prices on matchdays). Through these normative guidelines and practices, the clubs strive to establish a more sustainable football in commodified structures. The discussions in the club and its practices might also inspire debates on the future of professional football.

Keywords: commercialization; commodification; post-consumer fans; fan culture; breakaway club; authenticity; belonging; sponsorship; ethnography



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1. Introduction

Processes of commodification and (over- or hyper-) commercialization are crucial topics in European professional football that have been discussed over the past 20 years. On the one hand, football benefits from its commodification and commercialization. Advantages include better infrastructure, more professional employees and, as the result of both, better performance on the pitch [1]. On the other hand, several scientists agree that increasing commercialization negatively affects football and its fans [2]. Commercialized football is associated with high-risk transactions jeopardizing several clubs’ existence [3], as well as undermining social values and responsibilities by partnering with unethical sponsors or owners and illegal practices. Additionally, fans criticize commercialization transforming their authentic emotions into a business [4], turning fans into customers, while they see themselves as the clubs’ moral owners [5]. They feel alienated from the sport and ‘their’ clubs [6,7], which is a point to be considered since fans are a crucial stakeholders in sports [8]. Akin to social movements [9], they protest against football’s commercialization inside and outside the stadium in many countries, even cooperating with rival supporters [10].

Beyond classical protests, some fans choose a new approach. They leave the realm of professional football and establish their own clubs. Androus and Giudici [11] describe

this phenomenon as the fifth phase of the ultra movement, which emerged after previous unsuccessful and thus frustrating protests failed to limit the influence of commercialization on their clubs. These fans leave the commercialized stadiums to “exit the consumer game” and set up their clubs as “the most radical response to the commodification of the game” [12]. These clubs are owned by supporters and compete in the existing sports system, mainly in lower local leagues. They exist in different European countries, such as Belgium, England, Croatia, Israel, Italy, and Spain. These new clubs have been founded to incorporate the supporters’ normative vision of football [13]. Meanwhile, they refer to the parent club’s identity, e.g., by using the same colors as the club they followed in the past or using club names related to this club or its history. Davis named these fans post-consumers, a term also used in discourses on social change. Post-consumerism is an idea to transform society and its economy into a more sustainable one [14]. The idea of a post-consumerist society develops in niches [15], but interaction with a commercialized environment, such as professional football, is necessary.

So far, little is known about the post-consumerist fans’ vision of sustainable football and the clubs’ practices. The existing literature, mainly on FC United of Manchester (FCUM), reflects the clubs’ formations and proclaimed values or their democratic structure and participation [3,13,16–23]. The literature barely deals with the interaction of the post-consumer clubs and their commercialized surroundings. The contributions mention different values but do not reflect how the clubs behave based on these values. Moreover, they do not reflect if these values are tested in the leagues’ competitive surroundings. Based on this background, this article will focus on the following question: How do post-consumer fans deal with issues of commodification and commercialization with regard to their clubs? The results provide a better understanding of football fans’ expectations of a more sustainable football and explain how post-consumer practices work in football.

This paper focuses on one club as a case study, the German HFC Falke. This club was founded in 2014 by (former) supporters of the Hamburger Sport Verein (HSV). They broke away after the club’s professional teams had been spun-off from a non-profit organization towards a stock company [24]. HFC Falke’s claim “grateful backwards, brave forward” refers to the HSV’s founding history and emphasizes their ideal to create something new. In their “fundamental thoughts”, the club criticizes commercialization. They argue that “[t]he modern professional football has [become] more and more alienated and developed into an event and capital monster. Someday you reach the status where the last acceptance limit is broken, and you ask yourself, what shall I do” [25]. Thus, fans founded HFC Falke, hoping to create a more sustainable future. In 2015 the club started playing in the lowest local league, the ninth division—real, authentic football. In the two following seasons, they were promoted twice.

This article reflects their striving to create a club beyond commercialization while playing football successfully. It focuses on players’ wages and sponsoring, two aspects of commercialization that had become virulent at HFC Falke during the time of research. The following section reflects the concepts of commercialization, the related term commodification, and the contrary concept of authenticity. Afterwards, the methodological approach will be outlined, introducing the process of participant observation. The results chapter introduces the members’ knowledge and perceptions of both topics. The club established different practices in order to strive to be a successful and non-commercial club. The results chapter introduces these practices, which will be reflected in the discussion. Insights into this case provides a better understanding of commercialization and authenticity in football and post-consumer fans’ vision of football.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Manifold literature on the processes of commodification, (over- or hyper-) commercialization and authentic fandom exist. This extensive volume results in contradictory findings and understandings of the matter. Therefore, crucial concepts, such as commodification, commercialization and authenticity, need further clarification. This section also offers a

review of the existing literature on commercialized football and post-consumer fan-owned clubs with a focus on their relation to commercialization, players' wages, and sponsoring.

2.1. Commodification, Commercialization and Authenticity

Commodification is sometimes used synonymously with commercialization. Moor pointed out its diluted use, as commodification is defined as a process in which former free objects are transformed into goods for market exchange [26]. From a historical perspective, Gerrad characterized players' wages as commodification and as the first step towards commercialization, having "a profound impact on the nature of sport" [27], as teams were transformed to financial organizations, selling their product to spectators, and excluding those who did not pay. Nowadays, a team's performance also depends on the ability to buy and pay the best players available [28].

Commercialization is an even more diffuse concept. It summarizes different aspects affecting the sports industry as well as both professional and amateur sports [29]. Ma & Kurscheidt characterize it as "a change process of the structures of resource allocation toward a greater use of the market mechanism" [30]. Dubal agrees when he describes commercialization in football as "the post-1970s infusion of a loose set of market-driven ideals that have pushed profit-making to the foreground of the global game, affecting fans and fan culture from São Paulo to Manchester, from Tokyo to Moscow" [6]. Direct effects on fans are increasingly high ticket prices, which price out traditional working-class fans and replace them with new customer fans [6,7,31–33], kick-off times complying with the broadcasters' and sponsors' interests [1,32] and 'new' investors replacing older governance structures [23]. Indirect effects are increasingly high player salaries [34], resulting in fans feeling alienated, [6] and sponsors' increasing influence [35,36]. These developments go along with the growing security management, which supporters perceive as criminalization [1,4,37]. These aspects are connected.

Commercialization is defined contrary to another concept: authenticity [38]. Authenticity is a romanticized imagination articulated in opposition to rationalized modernity and its commercialization [39]. It is "some sort of ideal, highly valued and sought by individuals and groups as part of the process of becoming" [40]. Different authors relate fans' authenticity to loyalty, class and geographical locations [12,41,42]. However, authenticity is a diffuse and complex concept [43]. To provide a short overview: objects are judged or perceived as authentic if they have a uniqueness based on a specific history and traditions [44]. People are authentic when they go beyond public roles and express their "true self" in opposition to these roles [45]. Experiences are perceived as authentic if they are extraordinary, including sensory and symbolic effects (intra-personal authenticity), or if they enable the creation of bonds between people of a community based on shared emotions (inter-personal authenticity) [46]. A football club is related to all three of these ideas.

From a constructivist's perspective, authenticity is not a natural property. Instead, authenticity is developed within the subject, the people. It depends on people's knowledge of their "own beliefs, expectations, preferences, stereotyped images, and consciousness" [46]. Commercialization could be understood in the same way—as a contrary category. People can judge or perceive objects, people, or experiences as authentic or commercialized. How they classify something depends on their knowledge and expectations. Consumer fans may perceive a football jersey as an authentic object related to their first stadium visit, while post-consumers may judge it as an inauthentic object produced by a global sports brand under poor working conditions, displaying commercial advertising. Authentic and commercial are extremes on a continuum. People may also classify the terms somewhere else along this continuum.

Understanding commercialization and authenticity in that way has two implications. First, commercialization does not necessarily destroy authenticity. Specific groups may judge differently as they focus on specific aspects and judge according to their specific knowledge [38]. Second, people can judge whether something is either commercial or

authentic, and they can adapt their knowledge. Former authentic objects can become judged as commercial after negotiations within a relevant community take place and the other way around. Most adaptations might be unconscious and happen unnoticed. However, during conflicts, they become visible—also to researchers. During the fieldwork, these topics had been players' wages and sponsoring, which are also common in commercialized (amateur) football.

2.2. Commercialized Football

In Germany, professionalism in football has been officially allowed since 1963 [47]. Nowadays, top players have become modern celebrities, highly paid by their clubs and personal sponsors. They are globally mobile and only stay at 'their club' for a few years, signing new contracts depending on sportive and financial aspects. Meanwhile, fans are often locally rooted, receiving a much lower income and less attention. Fans and players live in different worlds, which could result in fans' alienation [6]. In the 2019/2020 season, Germany's top team Bayern München paid its players an average salary of USD 8.12 million per year [48], while the average employee earned around USD 52,000 in the same year. Supporters found themselves in an identity dilemma, expressed in a 'love the team, hate the club' dichotomy. Here, fans separate between their colors and the business, including players and managers, to continue their team support [13]. Supporters see themselves as the authentic, true and moral club owners, while players, managers, investors and customers leave if they find better opportunities elsewhere [13].

In order to be able to pay players, clubs need to generate money and push commercialization forward. Sponsoring is one crucial source of income in football. Between 2016 and 2019, the 18 clubs of the German Bundesliga, the highest national league, generated more than EUR 840 million in revenue via sponsoring, which exceeds match day revenues of approximately EUR 500 million [49]. Sponsoring is an exchange between sport (its associations, athletes and teams) and commercial enterprises. It is not a philanthropic gift. Sponsors affect sport in different ways. They affect athletes' behavior, rules, locations, spectator structure, competitive balance, emotional attachment, and fan alienation [35]. Hognestad offers an example to illustrate sponsors' influence. In 2012, the supermarket brand Rimi used a match for a marketing event (with musicians and subsidized tickets sold in their shops), naming the match the 'Rimi bowl'. While some fans welcomed additional revenues, others criticized it as a 'circus' and experienced cultural alienation. They boycotted the match [36]. Sponsoring is also a critical issue in German football. Displaying a sponsor on the jersey was officially prohibited until 1974/75 [47]—nowadays, it is common even in amateur football.

2.3. Post-Consumer Fans Football

Post-consumer is a term for specific political activists. It is an umbrella term that summarizes different groups and initiatives that criticize Western (hyper-) commercialization and strive for the robust growth of a consumption-driven economy. They elaborate alternative practices for commercial processes in niches, hoping to transform the economy and society. Examples of post-consumer initiatives are community-energy schemes, agro-food cooperations and worker-owned cooperatives. The groups differ in their purpose, but they share ideas of 'mindful spending' and 'collaborative consumption' [15]. Davis [12] picked up the term and transferred it to football fans who left the commercial game and established alternative practices in a niche—the clubs they founded. We call these clubs post-consumer clubs.

The most popular of these clubs is FC United of Manchester (FCUM). Kiernan describes the club as a "consequence[s] of a casino football model. In establishing a new club with a cooperative social enterprise business model and which could also retain an appeal to 'the authentic' fan experience [. . .] the new FCUM could become an ideal Manchester United, albeit at the lowest level of the football league" [3]. Other examples for clubs are Austria Salzburg [50], CS Lebowski [11], Hapoel Katamon Jerusalem [18], NK Zagreb 041 [17,51] or

to a lesser degree AFC Wimbledon. The latter club already reentered commercial football by reaching the English third league, but the fans still control the club [41]. These clubs are dominated by a “discourse of social entrepreneurship [that] replace[s] investment for profit with investment for expansion” [50]. They strive to be an authentic, sustainable alternative to commercialized football [50].

Meanwhile, these clubs must interact in football’s commercialized surroundings, as commercial practices and dynamics are also present in lower leagues [52]. Sometimes, they need to adapt their vision on post-consumer football [23]. An example is when FCUM built a new stadium for itself and needed the municipality’s support and millions of pounds to construct it. The members negotiated their priorities, including disputes and conflicts, after which some members left the club [41].

Another example is that FCUM pays its players’ salaries, but they are lower than those of competing clubs. Most players are amateurs, only earning a bonus if they play, while some are semi-professionals [22]. FCUM had a main sponsor printing its logo on the club’s program, pitch-sides, and website. Nevertheless, the club’s jersey remains clear of commercial advertising due to the club’s values, which is unusual even in amateur football [22,41,53]. The sponsor itself reported that they do not sponsor FCUM to receive a return of investment. Instead, they sponsor the club as they identify with the club and its values [22]. CS Lebowski from Italy also criticizes football’s commercialization and generates money by sponsoring. Its first sponsors were companies belonging to the club’s community. This overlap increases the relationship between the club and its community [11]. Hence, sponsoring is not necessarily in opposition to the post-consumerist club’s values. Table 1 summarizes different aspects of commercial and post-consumer football. Both are commodified but differ in categories, such as the fan–club relationship or the investment goals of clubs.

Table 1. Commercialized versus post-consumer football based on the literature.

Categories	Commercialized Football	Post-Consumer Football
Relationship fan–club	Consumer	Club owner, DIY
Investment goals of clubs	For profit	For expansion
Players	Paid, transferred, sportive and financial aspects	Amateurs, semi-professionals
Sponsor	Exchange; external	shared values (Identify with club)
Perceived authenticity	Low	High

The table and the existing literature did not reflect paradoxes and implications to the practice of these aspects. We chose the following research approach to provide such insights through discussions at HFC Falke.

3. Materials and Methods

Similar to previous studies on football fans [5–7], post-consumer clubs [11,13,22,23,53] and the ambivalent relationship between commercialization and tradition/authenticity in sport [54], the study followed an ethnographic research approach, mainly based on participant observation.

The first author joined HFC Falke for participant observation in August 2015 during the club’s first official match and stayed for 27 months until the general assembly in November 2017. The club had around 400 members. The average matchday attendance during the season 2016/17 was 415 for the first team [55] and 105 for the second team [56]. He became a volunteer and attended official and unofficial meetings, including other non-football leisure activities, such as private parties. Based on participant observation, he took 123 field notes. Additionally, 10 semi-structured interviews between one and two and a half hours were recorded with different members in different roles: board, management, players, fans and a member of the so-called ‘opposition’. Based on his previous research,

personal relations exist with all interview partners. The interviews have been embedded in the ethnographic research to contrast data, as Watson [57] suggests. The interviews are structured around personal background, the process of founding and joining HFC Falke and the club's specifics, aims and inner conflicts. Additionally, two internal group messenger chats have been archived and analyzed. All names are anonymized in this article.

As is typical for an ethnographic approach, the research followed an iterative process, which means a returning cycle of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data in order to refocus the research [58]. All data were uploaded to a qualitative data analysis software and carefully iteratively coded. The second author accompanied the interpretation process as a senior researcher and football fan in order to minimize the bias of the interpretation.

The first author was not a fan of or did not play for a specific football club before the research. He was interested and informed on football through various media outlets and attended different matches occasionally. He published three scientific publications on football before the research and benefited from his knowledge, which facilitates access to the field. During the research, different members asked him about his football background and knowledge in order to prove that it was appropriate for him to conduct research on football fans. Additionally, he benefits from being a native German who had been living in Hamburg for almost ten years, resulting in perceptions as an autochthon, even if the fan background was missing. Nevertheless, the field was aware of his scientific interest, expressed by calling him "Dr. Falke" and asking about his approach. Experiences, emotions and relations towards the field were reflected during an external supervision group parallel to the research, in which peers helped in reflecting the research.

The research can be divided in two parts. During the first period, the club itself constructed a new community and developed a new belonging. The club was quite open, and a positive atmosphere existed. On the pitch, they were dominant. No salary was paid to its players. The club's incomes exceeded their spending. People enjoyed their club, and its spirit, values or normative guidelines were not discussed. During the second season, at least in February 2017, the situation changed. The performances on the pitch were successful but not as dominant. Inner conflicts manifested and commercial issues were discussed, as players' wages became a virulent topic. The atmosphere had changed and became more hostile. People began to discuss their club and its values. The debate continued until the general assembly in November 2017. The club asked the first author to moderate that meeting as he understood the club, including its conflicts, and was perceived as respected and neutral. The insights discussed in the article relate to this second phase.

4. Results

This article wants to answer the following research question: How do post-consumer fans of HFC Falke strive to establish practices beyond commercialization at their club? The following section provides evidence on how HFC Falke and its members negotiated and dealt with players' wages and sponsoring as a commercial practice. Both topics are presented separately, following the same structure. A first paragraph provides background on the topic and when it arose within the club. Afterwards, the members' ambivalent knowledge of and opinions on these topics are introduced. The alternative practices of the club take up the central part of the section, as they are presented in more detail.

4.1. Player Wages

The club did not pay any money to individual players for the first two seasons. It spent money on the team's matchday and training kit, including laundry, two pre-season training camps and subsidies for a trip to the party island Mallorca at the end of the first season. The club started a debate on players' wages in preparation for the 2017/18 season, in case the club would be promoted to the seventh league. The coaches planned to train three times a week—previously it had been twice a week. The topic was brought up at a meeting in February 2017.

Most HFC Falke members already knew about wages in amateur football, but that knowledge differed between members. Most knowledge was related to single cases, based on their own experience. They shared rumors on single players earning thousands of euros or a single team that would not pay their players at all—both in the fifth division. The coach, manager, and players reported on their experiences at previous clubs. They shared their knowledge on how complex wages in amateur football are. First, the club's internal system is non-transparent: in most cases, players would not know if and how much their teammates earned. Second, the wages could also include diverse bonuses and non-monetary benefits. Third, in some cases, sponsors or private patrons pay the players. Patrick, a member with experience in amateur football, declared: "I the Bezirksliga, [seventh division] 90%, and in the Landesliga [sixth Division], 95% of the clubs pay. And even in the eighth division, some clubs pay". He pushed towards player wages, arguing that it would be common. He hoped this strategy would help to sign skilled players. Other members argued that some players were students with no income. If they received compensation, they would be able to concentrate on football four times a week without the need to work elsewhere. Patrick could not convince all other members. They argued that Falk's players already received a lot of support from the club—preparing and washing training and matchday kits, a physiotherapist and support for social activities. It can be concluded that the knowledge and perception of the existing support and the necessity to adapt it differed. However, the major dilemma for the club was a different one.

"On a rational level, I would agree to the wages, but on an emotional level, I would reject it" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017). This quotation from Sebastian from one of the meetings expresses the club's ambivalence on player wages. The members agree that paying the players is a step towards commercialization, which they reject since it opposes their fundamental ideas. That is why they decided not to pay the players for the first two seasons. Meanwhile, they accepted the necessity of paying players in order to become successful in the future, which they wished for. During the first two meetings, no member expressed a fundamental opposition to wages. Nevertheless, they reflected on wages as a part of their club's commercialization. Table 2 lists arguments for and against the introduction of player wages. Sebastian's quote emphasizes an inner split, as he holds pro and contra arguments, similar to most other members.

Most arguments against the introduction of player wages do not express a fundamental opposition. Most argue against the timing of the introduction, as the following quotes emphasize. In a debate, one member said: "Three years ago, when they sat together and founded the club, its values were clear. We do not pay any transfer fee or any salaries. We should not abandon them too fast." The quote argues against wages, but its final part shows openness for wages—in the future. Here, this means not to start in the seventh division, as Steven expressed: "Additionally, I think you should not pay in the Bezirksliga (7th division!!!). It is still hobby-football (on a certain level)". They pleaded to enjoy their experiment as an authentic, non-commercial club a little longer. They wished to stick to their original plan the even if they knew they couldn't hold onto the dream forever. This argument was related to feelings or emotions, even if they knew they must adjust their dream one day and even if they agreed on the necessity of wages in higher class amateur football.

One strategy to minimize emotional problems regarding wages was a linguistic one. Officially, HFC Falke uses the term *Aufwandsentschädigung* [allowance], a term borrowed from tax vocabulary. It means compensation for voluntary work. They reject using terms such as salary or wages. When people around the club use the latter terms, others correct them. The result was the same; HFC Falke pays its players, but the members could see a difference to other clubs, as they do not pay a salary. Asked to explain the difference, they stated that the players did not have a contract with wages guaranteed.

Table 2. Pro and contra arguments on player' wages at HFC Falke sorted by themes and quotations based on fieldnotes.

Argument	Themes	Quotations
Pro	Caring for players	"If you have to come to training three times a week, you may give up your part-time job" (Fieldnote 25 March 2017).
	Appreciation	"It was emphasized several times that the players also had to be seen. Job, family and then three or four Falke appointments a week" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017).
	Success	"The hope is that greater participation in training will lead to more automatisms, which in turn will lead to better results" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017).
	Common	"There was always a hint that this would be a small incentive to get good players" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017). "Unfortunately, the fact is that amateur football is also contaminated with money. At some point we have to pay" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017).
Contra	Fairness and transparency	"Ben countered that it would be like other clubs, where no money was officially paid, but then players received money from sponsors. And that it was unfair if some received something, and others did not" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017). "Unimportant for many current players" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017).
	Not necessary	"I know a lot of Bezirksliga [seventh division] players, none of them train three times a week and none of them receive money" (Chat).
	Other benefits	"[We] have other things to offer than money: laundry, fans, physiotherapists" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017).
	Too fast + values	"We started with certain values that should not be thrown overboard so quickly, against modern football" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017).
	Kind of players	"Sebastian asked whether they wanted such players at all" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017).

The club tried to find solutions beyond a terminological level. To strive for the club's vision of better football, they used two practices of handling wages different from other clubs. They stressed that three larger meetings took place and that potentially all members were included in the debate. Every member could influence discussions at the meetings and vote on the final decision. During the debate, Tobias expressed: "The very fact that people discuss would be different from other clubs, where the board decides alone, and it is not transparent" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017). He argues that this process marks a uniqueness, regardless of its outcome.

Finally, HFC Falke implemented a system in which each player received EUR 5 per training session they attended. The money was only paid if they attended two-thirds of that month's sessions. Injured players training with the physiotherapist were counted as present. This system was also published on the club's website to guarantee transparency. They described it as equal, as any player had the same chance to get paid, independent of further factors, such as age, performance or coaches' preferences. Instead, engagement became the relevant category. The members perceived that their system differed from other clubs' untransparent wages systems. Tobias marked the difference by the following expression: "Here, everything is transparent, and each supporter knows what each player earns. It is still the Falke way. For me, it is rather a value update, like an update of computer operating systems" (Fieldnote 3 March 2017). To continue the Falke way means to remain authentic. During the debate on player wages, a second topic arose, also related to commercialization. To fund players' wages, HFC Falke discussed increasing its revenue through sponsoring.

4.2. Sponsorship

HFC Falke had different sponsors, even during its first season. Advertising existed on banners, in the matchday magazine, on training jackets and gym bags. Sponsoring was perceived as necessary and was mentioned during different debates as a possibility of funding. Beside player wages, sponsoring emerged during debates on youth teams, when planning an international tournament or an investment in a ground. In most of these cases, sponsoring was taken for granted and needed no further explanation, as Table 3 shows. In an interview, Timo explained: “You won’t keep an amateur club alive for a longer period without sponsoring. Maybe in the lowest division, if there are just mates and friends, but otherwise, it is not possible.”

Table 3. Pro and contra arguments on sponsors at HFC Falke by themes and quotations, as they are mentioned in interviews or during fieldwork.

Argument	Themes	Quotations
Pro	necessary	“So, without sponsors it doesn’t work.” (Steven)
	Taken for granted	“Having a sponsor, that’s what we have. That can’t be compared to the reason why I left HSV” (Steven)
Contra	values	“Keyword sponsors. Ivonne asked if that is compatible with the club’s ideology?” (Fieldnote 30 October 2015)
	Selling oneself	“We don’t really want to search for or sponsors. We want sponsors coming to us. Who already know our approach and say ‘Yes, we think what you’re doing is so cool’ ” (Yannick)
	dependence	“You only really realize that relying on a person as a sponsor is a big risk when he or she doesn’t want to do it anymore” (Christopher)
	banner	“We have a banner culture among the fans. This must not be compromised by sponsored banners” (Fieldnote 28 June 2017)

Only in a few cases individual members questioned whether sponsoring is consistent with the club’s fundamental ideas—but the questions were ignored, and no debate emerged. As the club wants to be successful, they accept sponsoring as a necessary evil in modern amateur football. The contra arguments, listed in Table 3 under themes banner and dependence, are not contrary to sponsoring. However, the fans emphasize the negative aspects of sponsors. Additionally, they accepted the necessity of sponsorships, and they started a debate on how authentic sponsoring would be possible, which would allow them to stay true to their own values.

Similar to when speaking about player wages, club members use specific terminology; officially, they use the term *backer* [Unterstützer] when talking about sponsors. During a debate on sponsoring, a board member explained that they have no problem using the term sponsor. However, the term backer was still used parallelly and dominated in debates and official communication.

HFC Falke also tries to do sponsoring differently and establish rules for sponsoring along two questions: who suitable sponsors are, and what sponsoring should look like in order to continue the Falke way.

The main normative guideline for sponsors is that they should relate to the club, which could be implemented in three ways. The first one is that the potential sponsor could be embedded locally. During an interview, Ben elaborated: “Small enterprises or especially enterprises that are local or from the city of Hamburg, if, for example, the corner shop in Stellingen [quarter around the training pitch], for example likes to sponsor the tracksuit”. However, there are sponsors they reject. The board proudly repeated several times that the club had rejected a sponsoring offer from a large insurance company, as it would undermine the club’s fundamental ideas. The two examples show how HFC Falke’s post-consumer fans perceive enterprises. They divide them into small local companies that are welcomed at the club and larger international companies that they reject.

In his interview, Collin also introduced a second opportunity. A sponsoring company could have a personal relationship to the club, if the club members owned the enterprises or the members worked for the company. Collin said: "If my company, my employer says 'Hey HFC Falke is an excellent thing.' He likes to engage. He sponsors some trainings t-shirts. That is a good thing. This is how I imagine sponsoring. Sponsors who really identify with our club and are not just oriented to make a profit or be present on the market." During the research period, three companies had the aforementioned personal kind of relationship, displaying their advertisement on banners or track jackets. One of them is a joinery and two are logistics companies. A personal relationship was also one of the requirements members agreed on during the general debate on sponsoring.

The third kind of relation to the club is that the company could be engaged in football for a longer period of time. One of HFC Falke's sponsors belonging to this category is the manufacturer Erima, which describes itself as Germany's oldest still existing sporting goods company, established in 1900 [59]. Erima was present on the jersey, the balls, two banners on matchdays and on the club's website. To a lesser degree, a local sports distributor also belongs to this category of football relations. HFC Falke's members accept sponsoring along the normative lines, if a personal relationship exists, the sponsor is locality rooted, or has a football background. These are three ways how HFC Falke members could combine sponsoring and authenticity.

The second question is what sponsoring should look like. Here, again, normative guidelines were expressed that should guarantee to keep authenticity alive. The most mentioned issue was the jersey. In an interview, Yannick explained: "Err, it was always clear that we do not sell the chest. We shall not have an advertising partner on the front of the jersey. And I think this is something where most people agree." Most German professional and amateur clubs have a sponsor on their jersey. However, the jersey is also a crucial identification symbol for the fans, expressing the club's identity. Most HFC Falke members reject a sponsor on the jersey, which the ethnographer notes as one outcome of the meeting on that topic. Similar to that, the club's statutes prohibit any change in the stadium's name for sponsoring reasons. Nevertheless, in smaller groups or in interviews, individuals expressed openness towards jersey sponsors in the future. For example, they joked about a sock manufacturer named Falke or the brewery Holsten as potential sponsors. The latter was a long-term (for 75 years until 2014) sponsor of the HSV [60] and football fandom relates to drinking beer. In a way, the brand has become part of the HSV identity. One fan club (Ohnsorg Falken) combines the Holsten and HFC Falke logos in their emblem. That is why Holsten seems to be an appropriate authentic sponsor.

The rejection of sponsors on the jersey underlines that the jersey expresses the club's identity, and a blank chest would be the best way to express opposition to commercialized football. During the meeting on sponsoring, the members agreed to an advertisement on the tracksuit, as that is not an expression on the club's identity in the same way as the jersey. However, as one member mentioned, the players should not end up being advertising pillars.

The third question reflected the way sponsors are presented. At a meeting, someone explained that he dislikes if a sponsor is presented: "YEAH we have a new sponsor, and publish a picture on the homepage where the board and sponsor are shaking hands" (Fieldnote 28 June 2017). At the meeting, most people agreed with that remark. A sponsor should not dominate HFC Falke's perception. The club should not play a role but rather remain authentic, as Berger [45] would call it. Presenting a sponsor in the aforementioned way would turn HFC Falke into a commercial product, which would destroy its authenticity. The post-consumerist fans agree to sponsoring as commercial practice but try to prevent moments that symbolize the practice.

HFC Falke implemented 'new ways' of sponsoring, similar to their approach to paying players. New, here, means that individual members introduced them as new. One idea was to use sponsors to increase the club's community and thereby the member fees. Christopher explained in the interview:

“You raise money, but not for the team. Instead, it is for a fan party, free beers after a match, or an end-of-season party with fans. In any case, you should try to do something for the members, as, from my point of view, nowadays, healthy clubs grow by the number of their members. They do not grow by external money being pumped into the club or the squad.”

During the first two seasons, Holsten sponsored HFC Falke. The brewery gave beer to the club, which resulted in a reduced beer price for home matches of the first team. The fans directly benefited from this subsidy, but it is impossible to measure the effects on the number of total fans. Meanwhile, the beer price is an example of the concept’s boundaries. During the third season, HFC Falke stopped the beer subsidy and sold the Holsten-sponsored beer at the second team’s matches, generating a higher direct revenue. The beer price at first team’s matches rose. Fans complained about this development and that they had not been involved in the decision. This example emphasizes how the club tries new ways to combine commercialization and authenticity, and how difficult of a task that is. The patterns of this process will be discussed in the following chapter.

5. Discussion

This article explores how post-consumerist fans at HFC Falke deal with issues of commodification and commercialization at their club. During the research period, two commercial aspects had been virulent topics at HFC Falke—player wages and sponsorship. The ways the club dealt with both issues show several similarities. Both have been described as contrary to HFC Falke’s fundamental ideas. Both were perceived as necessary, as both practices are common in German amateur football, and the club strives to be successful. In the case of wages, knowledge about their dispersion was negotiated. In the case of sponsorship, knowledge was shared, and it was perceived as common. Even if HFC Falke accepted both practices, they tried to implement both differently, different from their experiences in professional football and different from regular amateur football. They tried to find, in their own words, a more sustainable way—the Falke way. This way includes several written and unwritten rules.

The first of these rules are different taboos—commercialized practices the club generally rejects. Members expressed them during the debates or interviews. They are: depending on a single sponsor, enthusiastically presenting a sponsor, having a sponsor on the jersey and hiring players who are solely interested in earning money. HFC Falke tries to prevent any symbolic takeover of their club. Therefore, symbolically charged objects that express the club’s identity should remain void of commercial takeover. They should never be commodified. Additionally, HFC Falke strives to stay financially independent. However, HFC Falke accepts commodification in general. They accept commercial practices to a certain degree. Sponsoring is allowed on objects that are not symbolically charged. Here, additional normative guidelines exist, which HFC Falke’s sponsors should fit into. These include local, personal, or long-term football relationships.

Additionally, they are looking for unusual concepts, allowing them to be different and more sustainable, such as beer sponsoring in order to increase membership numbers, or the different wages system, in which a player’s salary depends on their effort, not on skills, goals or star status. The club emphasized that the wages system is equal and transparent. These differences allow them to continue their image as being against modern (amateur) football even if they engage in certain financial practices. In both cases, they highlight members’ participation in the discussion, which marks a difference from professional and amateur clubs in which a small group decides on the matter. The wish to be different is also expressed in the use of different terms than those used in commercial football, for instance *Aufwandsentschädigung* [allowance] instead of salary and *Unterstützer* [backer] instead sponsor.

HFC Falke claimed that the club was founded for its community. Its members reject being customers; instead, they like to remain those who decide. To guarantee members’ satisfaction, the club must remain authentic. The club and its symbolically charged jersey

should only represent the members' interests, which means not representing the role [45] of an exchangeable advertising medium. The second way to create authenticity is based on acting different from other clubs in terms of sponsorship and wages. This perception allows them to perceive their club as authentic, as it marks a uniqueness, as Benjamin [44] described. HFC Falke is commercialized to a lesser degree than professional clubs and most amateur clubs, although by paying players wages, they went beyond the first phase of commercialization defined by Gerrad [27]. That is why they perceive themselves as remaining authentic. Additionally, members' participation in negotiation and decision making represents the Falke way.

Other post-consumerist fan clubs share some of HFC Falke's beliefs and practices. FCUM perceives locality as a characteristic of football's authenticity as they reject international capital [50]. At CS Lebowski and FCUM, sponsors are also tied to the community by personal relationships. [11] FCUM's jersey also remains void of advertisement in order to be authentic [22,41,53]. The similarities underline the general tendency identified at HFC Falke. Meanwhile our research detected practices and strategies that have not been covered in the existing literature. They did not report on practices, such as using different terms, or the special wages system, even if FCUM's wages are also lower than those at competitive clubs in their league. It could mean that other clubs use them as well, but that it has not been noticed in the scientific community, or that these are specifics of HFC Falke. Further research could investigate the practices at further clubs, to see if similarities exist.

To sum up, player wages and sponsoring are not automatically perceived and judged as inauthentic commercialization if the practices follow certain rules. HFC Falke accepts that commodification and on-pitch competitiveness are interrelated, but they strive to act differently. They negotiate how these differences look and which practices are acceptable to them, as the perception as either commercial or authentic depends on their knowledge. This approach is full of experiments, which could also fail. Similar to M. J. Cohen's [15] description of post-consumers, they do not seek a revolution. They act in a (smooth) transition process in football, a more sustainable way guided by normative lines. Older ideas of community and authenticity influence these lines. Meanwhile, they go beyond authenticities' old definitions of locality or class, in that personal relationships have the potential to create authenticity. The club's claim "grateful backwards, brave forward" is a synopsis of this process. Nevertheless, the club risks adapting too much to the commercialized system until the differences fade and the club loses its potential to become part of a post-consumerist transformation.

6. Conclusions

HFC Falke members are an example of what Davis [12] describes as post-consumer fans and Androus & Giudici [11] conceptualize as the fifth type of ultras. These fans and their clubs strive for a new type of governance in football by navigating between commercialization and authenticity along normative lines. Following a constructivist approach, these lines are never set. They need to be re-negotiated from time to time as perceptions and judgments on authenticity and commercialization change. It would be interesting to see if research on other clubs, sports or beyond show similar dynamics. Such research would benefit from a long-term perspective, as our research of 27 months shows. Similar research in other clubs or fields would help to detect patterns in the negotiations on values and to improve the empirically based understanding of authenticity, commercialization and associated dynamics.

HFC Falke is proud to be a democratic club. The decision to pay wages was made at an assembly. The culture of decision making likely influences the struggle between authenticity and commercialization. Therefore, a better understanding of HFC Falke's governance is needed to be able to compare its processes to those in other clubs with different structures. Further research should include the category of success in the analysis, as success influences fans' emotional perceptions and thereby the (potential) negotiations. Social sustainability and success can be called twin aims; they are contrary yet intertwined,

similar to environmental or economical sustainability and success in sports. Negotiations of these aims are relevant for sport fans and sport clubs in general. Do they abandon their sustainable values in cases of failure? Do they protect or adapt them according to the club's commercialized environment? These are highly relevant questions for social science.

Further research on football fans should not try to construct a general opposition of fans towards commercialization. It should have a detailed look at where normative lines and boundaries exist. One of the latest campaigns by the fan association SD-Europe and six national organizations strives for a football characterized by democracy, cooperation, solidarity (fair competition) and sustainability. They wish to negotiate these issues with the football establishment [61]. Additionally, these organized fans do not seek a revolution; rather, they aim for a smooth adjustment of normative lines. For instance, they call for a more even competitive balance which would conserve or even increase commercial football's attractiveness. Even at post-consumerist, fan-owned clubs, "the most radical response [to football's commercialization]" [12], most members act pragmatically. Looking at these clubs might uncover pragmatic and sometimes unconventional suggestions to modify the football industry towards more social sustainability. These results are also relevant for other sports in which social or environmental sustainability conflicts with success or revenues.

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