

The 21st Century Globetrotters' Fans: The Case of Israeli Transnational Football Supporters' Communities Before and During the Pandemic

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Abstract

In the modern era of commercialized, mediated, and global football, there is a decline in the importance of the local aspect of sports fandom. Nowadays, through television broadcasts, the Internet, and especially social networks, a fan continuously follows elite football clubs from around the world, which provide an alternative to local clubs. This has created a growing trend of football fan communities known as “transnational fans”—fans of sports clubs from other countries. Contrary to traditional definitions of fandom, the transnational fans are not close to the home stadium and therefore do not take part in the ceremonial ritual of actively supporting the club from the stands. Because of this, they are not seen as part of the club's traditional fans. This means that transnational fans are forced to redefine the image of the football fan and to place special emphasis on an active community and loyalty to the team as markers of devotion. Contributing to the study of the psychology of fandom, this article discusses the characteristics of those fans' communities in Israel and seeks to present an analysis of the construction of their members' social and personal identity. To this end, an anthropological approach was adopted, which involved attending community gatherings throughout an entire gaming season and also included a series of in-depth interviews with community members. The findings of the study illustrate two main premises: the use of personal and community resources for self-determination, and the community and its place in the modern fan typology. Each theme attempts to

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redefine the individual's role in the social setting and present a dynamic image of football fandom as it will take shape in coming decades.

Keywords

transnational fans, fan typology, globalization, soccer, geography

Introduction

The accelerated globalization of sports, due mainly to technological developments facilitating the transmission of sports information via television and the Internet, has resulted in a new trend among fans: supporting foreign sports teams. This trend has been studied, for example, in the context of Africa (Omobowale, 2009; Onwumechili & Oloruntola, 2014), Asia (Cho, 2009; Gong, 2016, 2020; Park et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021), and even within several countries in Europe (see for example, Hognestad, 2006; Zeller, 2020). Such examples and other studies have focused mainly on aspects of global marketing, communication and economics, and on the fans' individual needs and motives. but did not usually consider the social aspects of these fan communities or the implication of COVID-19 on global fandom. These aspects are significant in view of the popularity of sport and especially its communal expression, which is based on a collective sense of identity (Gray et al., 2017), an identity that, for the most part, is derived from the territorial aspect of sports and the relations between sports clubs and the geographical unit in which they are located. Because of this, members of transnational fan communities must build a sense of community based on a common denominator of symbols and meanings that belong to another culture and space.

The soaring globalization of sports fandom in the 21st century has received a notable boost following the COVID-19 pandemic. The limitations that were imposed upon sports and especially playing matches without fans affected the psychological state of sports fans (Grix et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2022) and, at the same time, led them to change their daily routines and behaviors (Levental, Carmi, & Lev, 2021). The curtailment of access to the home stadium and the players has changed the way sports are consumed and hence, as discussed in this article, the self-identity of the fans.

Therefore, while trying to add some new bricks to the wall of research into the psychology of fandom, this paper examines the subjective views of research participants regarding their self-definition as individuals and as members of a group of fans. More specifically, the paper seeks to examine the emergence of a new sports fandom identity that has developed under unique circumstances, and specifically the importance of a sense of community to the fans' self-identity.

Indeed, the majority of European clubs actively participate in what some have referred to as "the banal cosmopolitanization of football" (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007, p. 177), manifesting in international competitions, appearances in globally televised matches, signing-up celebrity sportspersons for product endorsements and publicity, developing new fan "markets" through tours, local sponsorship deals, and social media, and pairing with transnational companies to produce globally distributed

branded merchandise (Sullivan et al., 2021). Thus, the current research is an ethnographic study that included in-depth open-ended interviews with Israeli sports fans who are active members of local fan communities supporting sports clubs from different countries.

Theoretical Background

Geographical Perspective on Sporting Fandom

Competitive sports have always included two important components: (a) symbolic and tangible connection to the space in which sports competitions take place; and (b) interaction with an audience (Levental, 2020). Components such as local pride, politics, and public interest were part of the early Olympic Games (Potter, 2011) and are also highly typical of modern sports at the local, national, and global levels (Vertinsky & Bale, 2004). From a geographical point of view, people have a collective identity that is symbolically expressed in the public arena (Ryan et al., 2016). In the context of sports, people connect to the social institutions of their place of residence, including the local sports club. This connection was not only rooted in the natural link between the local community and the local sports club but also depended on the limitations of communication and movement in space in the world of sports until the mid-20th century (Russell, 2016). Nevertheless, in the second half of the 20th century, the increase in the number of privately owned vehicles, the development of transportation routes, and especially the increase in the popularity of television began to weaken fans' attachment to a particular place (Bale, 1993). The development of the Internet and especially the accelerated processes of globalization in professional sports have led to a significant expansion of the fan bases of successful clubs. While sports clubs continue to preserve their local symbols, such as stadiums, colors, fans, and especially their name, some also devote major efforts to marketing themselves as polycentric to attract global audiences (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004). Therefore, if in the past a club's main fan base was local, that is, within physical proximity to the club's neighborhood, town, or city, sports fandom has now assumed global dimensions with a cross-cultural and national perspective (Bale, 2002).

After several decades of commodification and globalization of sports, a reexamination of how fans are classified is needed. Giulianotti (2002) proposes a classification in which fans are located along an axis between traditional fans and consumers. Accordingly, due to the commercialization of modern football, more economic value is attributed to consumer fans. This is because today the sources of income of major clubs are based on merchandise sales, and especially on broadcast rights, and not on traditional revenue from ticket sales. Therefore, major clubs have adopted marketing strategies geared toward significantly increasing the numbers of consumer-type fans (Callejo & Forcadell, 2006). Among other reasons, this has been made possible by the postmodern movement, which has facilitated the creation of global fandom by challenging the assumption that sports fans should favor a club within their geographical boundaries or national affiliation (G. Ben-Porat & Ben-Porat, 2004). This transformation of fans into

a social and economic resource has generated many varied groups of fans, in turn producing an arena for struggles between these groups over social prestige. New models of fandom have emerged based upon comparisons between the internal peer group and other fan groups representing different levels of stratification (Alfasi et al., 2015). Nevertheless, with the exception of the relatively recent work of Collins and Heere (2018), the literature has devoted very little attention to the dynamics of the relationships between the various teams, and particularly to the way in which a particular group of fans defines itself vis à vis fans of other teams.

There is a direct relationship between a sport club's professional success and its ability to attract fans from wider geographical circles. Thus, the modern fan base of major football clubs contains more fans from distant locations than those who belong to the immediate geographical community (Russell, 2016). Yet more than other modern cultural institutions, sports is still a leading tool for the expression and construction of a local image. Moreover, the emotional components of fandom are tangibly expressed in the home stadium, where fandom rituals take place on a regular basis (Levental & Galily, 2018). Therefore, global fan communities lack this significant component of fandom—physical proximity to a symbolic location. Hence, until now, sports fandom has not required a geographical perspective that considers the influence of the spatial environment on behavioral expressions or on definitions of individual and social identity.

Transnational Fans

The world of sports today is largely mediated by various outlets. Sports competitions that are broadcast from across the globe contribute greatly to the global popularity of sports and help create transnational fandom (Rowe, 2015). Over the past two decades, the rapid growth of individuals and communities of fans that support sports clubs from another country has also attracted widespread academic interest. The literature uses a number of terms to describe the supporters of a geographically distant club, whether in another city or a different country: satellite fans (Kerr, 2009; Kerr & Gladden, 2008); transcultural fans (Hitchcock Morimoto & Chin, 2017); electronic fans (Akindes, 2011); cosmopolitan fans (Petersen-Wagner, 2017b); and transnational fans (Hognestad, 2006), the term used in this article. One of the first to investigate this field of study was A. Ben-Porat (2000), who examined transnational fan communities in Israel. His study found that these fans are mostly young and educated men who watch almost all of the club's games, usually together with other fans from the community, in addition to consuming a great deal of sports information about the club.

According to Wann (2006c), two of the most significant motivations for fandom and team identification are the need to belong and the affiliation with other fans. Such affiliation is based on the community's relations with the team's symbols and common goals and is derived from the socialization of fans within the community. A variety of studies from the early 2000s (Wann, 2006b; Wann et al., 1999, 2003) showed that the psychological benefits for fans are lower among transnational fans due to their relative difficulty in maintaining contact with other fans of the same club. Transnational fans

cannot generate significant team attachment and gain the psychological benefits of fandom unless they create a local fan community that maintains close ties (Wann, 2006a). Kerr et al. (2011) found that despite the lack of geographical connection between the club and the fans, transnational fans show the same loyalty to the club as do local fans. Referring to Giulianotti's "flâneur," Petersen-Wagner (2017b) contends that an "ambivalent perspective allows for a more fluid and less mechanical understanding of the relationship between non-places and places, of 'offline' and 'online,' and 'authentic' and 'pseudo-authentic' transnational fandom" (p. 142). Thus, the transnational fan or the cosmopolitan flâneur replaces the traditional place with new places (mostly the online environment) that facilitate the development of stable solidarity.

The self-definition of fandom among transnational fans is based on support for the club, which is expressed by way of loyalty regardless of the club's achievements (Levental, Yaffe, et al., 2021). Therefore, this definition does not depend on physical proximity to the club's home stadium. This proximity has been replaced by watching most of the club's games on television and by frequent online and face-to-face meetings with other fans (Petersen-Wagner, 2015). According to Petersen-Wagner (2017a), shared love, as in the case of a community of transnational fans, is often more significant than other social aspects, such as gender, ethnicity, and social status. The study by Kerr and Emery (2011), which included questionnaires completed by 1,184 Liverpool fans from 37 different countries, revealed two important findings. First, most fans reported meeting with other fans on a weekly basis at home or in a pub, mostly to watch the team play. Second, the fans defined themselves as highly devoted supporters who maintain their loyalty to the club regardless of its performance (see also Millward, 2011). Similarities with local fans can also be seen in the study by Lee Ludvigsen (2018), which showed that, contrary to popular opinion, there is no significant difference between local and transnational fans in terms of commitment and "authenticity," neither of which are necessarily related to being physically present in the stadium. Transnational fans comply with the term "authentic" based on their extensive knowledge about the club as well as on their shared values of commitment and loyalty (Hognestad, 2006). This is despite the fact that in the eyes of the local fans, presence in the stadium is what makes them the real fans (Bridgewater, 2010).

Fan Communities

Taylor (1992) defined a sports fan as an individual who follows a sports team, supports it, is loyal to it, and shows great interest in it. Yet, fandom is not an individual activity, for it is rooted in communal aspects based on the interaction between different supporters of the same sports team. Several decades of research on the topic of sports fans have pointed to a wide range of motivations, among them family and friends, drama, entertainment value, escape from reality, excitement, interest in player or team, indirect achievement, and more (Funk et al., 2001). Sports fans are therefore motivated by a variety of factors that meet both personal and social needs (Funk & James, 2001; Wann, 1995). The need for belonging also reflects a prominent psychosocial motive in sport fandom—to serve as a means of self-glorification and self-efficacy as part of the

individual's identity (Wann et al., 2011). Yet, despite the importance of these individual psychological aspects, sports fans usually perceive themselves as members of an organization. Moreover, for the most part they define themselves through a group identity that sometimes develops alongside the perceived identity of the club (Heere & James, 2007). Fan identity thus encompasses two aspects. The first stems from the construction of self-identity, which is a private experience aimed at building a behavioral ideal (Jacobson, 1979). The second aspect of fan identity emerges from the theory of social comparison, which claims that people will aspire to be associated with other individuals who are better than they are or at least at their level, in areas where the individual is self-defined or measured (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Festinger, 1954).

Almost half a century ago, Sarason (1974) defined a community as a group of people within a particular geographic unit who have a common interest and a sense of partnership. Today, technological developments have enabled new mass and interpersonal forms of communication, leading to a more flexible definition of community that expands the perception of communal space and the extent of community affiliation beyond geographical, physical, or national boundaries (Anderson, 2006). Examining the process of de-individuation in the context of sports shows that sports fans satisfy most of the attributes of this process. For example, fans dress in team uniforms during meetings, their joint goal is the success of the club, and their organization is built hierarchically, with some fans having more authoritative power within the group activities (Dimmock & Grove, 2005).

Classification of Sports Fans

The research literature proposes several ways to classify sports fans. Taylor (1992) defined three different categories according to level of interest, motives, group identity, and more. In addition to hooligans, Taylor also distinguished between spectators and fans. As their name suggests, spectators watch the games out of a desire for pleasure and entertainment, while fans often follow a team out of a sense of loyalty. This distinction is less relevant today, since loyalty to a club is not measured only by frequent attendance at games, especially in the age of COVID-19. First, every sports facility has a limited number of seats, while the potential number of fans is much greater. Second, in recent years, ticket prices have risen sharply. Thus, frequent attendance has become impossible for individuals from distant locations or with low socioeconomic status (Giulianotti, 2005). Third, technological developments, and especially the ease of creating and sharing information on social media, have facilitated extended consumption of sports information (Clavio & Walsh, 2014). And lastly, attending at the stadiums was prohibited for over a year and a half because of the global pandemic.

Hunt et al. (1999) proposed another fan classification based on fans' motives and behavioral expressions, including five types. The first two types are temporal fans, who are limited by time (regard themselves as fans during a defined period) and local fans, who are limited by geography (stop being fans when the connection between the place and the club is weakened). The next type is devoted fans. These fans are not subject to the above limitations and are mainly characterized by their intense

attachment to the object of their fandom. The fourth and fifth types are fanatic fans and dysfunctional fans. For these types, fandom is a central part of their identity and they show more loyalty and a greater sense of belonging than devoted fans. These types are differentiated by their daily priorities and their influence on other individuals in their lives. According to this classification, the geographical connection is of minor importance, while the most significant component is the degree of emotional attachment to the club. Similarly, Giulianotti (2002) proposed a classification of four types of fans located along two axes. One axis is that of traditional fans versus consumer fans, symbolizing local fandom over a protracted period of time versus market-centered fandom. The other axis of hot versus cold fans deals with the fans' degree of identification and solidarity. With respect to hot fans, the difference between the types lies in the fans' unidirectional connection due to their physical distance from the club. On the one hand, these fans are equivalent to supporters in terms of club solidarity, while on the other hand they compensate for their physical distance by adopting a more consumer-oriented style. Global fans or transnational fans represent one common expression of this type of fans, whose relationship with the club is not restricted to geographical or national boundaries and is based on creating a symbolic connection to their favorite team or athlete (Ingham & McDonald, 2003). The growing popularity of online fan communities, especially during the COVID-19 era, necessitates a new model for defining sports fandom, as discussed in this article.

Method

The research described in this article adopted a qualitative approach and used in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews used to examine the subjective perspective of the research participants were constructed based on two aspects: direct meetings with members of the fan clubs and an adaptation of the Sense of Community Scale (SCS) questionnaire. First, the researchers attended three fan club meetings (two meetings with Arsenal fans and one with the Liverpool fan club). These meetings, which took place in private homes, entailed watching the team games with the fans and engaging in social discourse before and after the games. The researchers made initial contact with the potential interviewees and asked to be invited to these meetings. Their presence at these meetings enabled them to map behavioral expressions and components of the discourse that helped them focus the topics for the interviews, among them community commitment, the nature of fandom, and personal ties. In addition, some of the interview questions about community factors were based on the SCS (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978), while integrating content relevant to modern sports, in order to understand the fans' feelings about their community and to examine their shared sense of community.

The study participants were 22 young men who met the criteria for being transnational sports fans, defined in this study as fans who are official members of an Israeli fan club that supports a football club from another country. Most of these fan clubs supported top teams in the senior European football leagues, mainly from Spain, England, and Italy. The choice of these fan clubs was based on the fact that only these

teams generated large fan communities. Moreover, because these teams are so popular, live media coverage of their games is more accessible and a great deal of information is available about them.

Note that the fan communities to which the research participants belong are officially recognized by the different football clubs and have been granted official approval for their exclusivity and activities in Israel. All the participants were Israelis ranging between 26 and 43 years of age. Although the research did not directly examine demographic aspects, the interviewees' comments on their work and personal lives indicate that most come from middle to high socioeconomic status backgrounds. Most of them are single, while a few are married. Indeed, based on the meetings and interviews, it appears that these attributes reflect the status of most of the members of the fan clubs examined in the study. The selection of these participants stemmed from the desire to investigate only formal club members and those with high levels of involvement. The initial interviewees were approached directly through the sites and pages of the sports clubs on the social networks, while the others were located through snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), which is particularly suitable for this study due to the closed nature of sports fan clubs. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by two researchers. Supplementary information about the interviewees was gathered by phone. The meetings, as well as the first set of interviews, took place in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020 and led to a unique phenomenon in world sport in which matches were played without attendance. As mentioned in the literature, the presence of fans in the stands is found to have an essential role in the self-definition of fans. Thus, the diminished differences between local and transnational fans because of COVID-19 and its implications required further examination. For that purpose, a second set of interviews was conducted in 2021 with 12 fans who also participated in the earlier stages of the research.

After completing the interviews, each of the two researchers independently analyzed the data. Comparison of their findings did not yield any significant differences. The chosen method was thematic analysis. This method is in line with the research objectives and the research tool of choice in that it seeks to identify the fans' perceptions of the general phenomenon without intentional direction on the part of the researchers. The analysis entailed four stages as part of the analysis model of Braun and Clarke (2006): coding the data, constructing criteria and themes, naming and defining each theme, and writing. After unifying the initial codes emerging from the data, the researchers constructed criteria that pointed to a wide variety of topics, among them investment in the team, the limitations of fan support from afar, the role of the community, fandom as a way of life, games without crowds, and more. These criteria were aggregated into two primary themes: (1) the importance of the emotional dimension; and (2) the importance of the community. The first theme was constructed from criteria associated with the personal resources invested in fandom, while the second theme was based on the interviewees' references to the various aspects of the community as part of constructing a collective identity.

Findings

The emergence of transnational fans as described in this article points to the growing strength of a new form of fandom that could not have become so widespread without the development of new media forms. Nonetheless, expressions of this new fandom to a great extent contradict accepted definitions of sports fandom. These differences demand that transnational fans redefine, both consciously and unconsciously, what fandom means to them, mainly in comparison to other expressions of support for sports teams. The interviewees raised several points related to fandom, among them the need to cope with spatial and financial limitations, the place of the team in their everyday lives, interpersonal ties, consumption of sports information, and more. These points were aggregated into two major themes, one touching upon the personal sphere and the other on the collective sphere. The personal sphere focuses on the resources that individuals have at their disposal and the ways in which they invest these resources in supporting their team, while the collective sphere focuses on the importance of the community as an essential component in facilitating transnational fandom.

The Increasing Significance of the Emotional Aspect

Sports fans have three resources they can invest in their favorite club: emotions, time, and money. The transnational fans interviewed for this study deemed emotions as the most important. The time component was of secondary importance and was reflected in the fans' ongoing emotional investment, in addition to group meetings and games watching, as detailed below. The money component was deemed least important and was expressed in some of the interviewees' responses, especially in the context of high travel costs to watch the team play at its home stadium. Unlike the time and money resource, the emotional resource cannot be measured quantitatively. Therefore, the fans sought to illustrate its significance both through the continuity expressed in their long-term dedication and through the magnitude reflected in the proportion of their daily lives devoted to fandom.

As suggested by the theoretical background, sports fans attribute major importance to their self-definition as fans. Moreover, they usually emphasize the self-relevant components of their fandom. The interviews show that fans attach special significance to the emotional and personal aspects of fandom. Specifically, all the interviewees referred to their emotional connection as individuals to the club they favor. In order to illustrate this feeling, they explicitly referred to their dedication to the club, which found expression primarily in the resource of time. In other words, being devoted to the club over a long period of time indicates the "validity" of the emotion. As one of the interviewees explains: "*First of all, I think that fan means devotion or love. I love the club, it means a lot of things, to know the club's history, the past and what happened in certain years . . . It's something you feel, beyond something physical.*" Another interviewee also provides an example of the importance of emotion and dedication: "*For me, being a fan is first and foremost being loyal, it's not something that changes every time the club loses or does something you think is wrong, you have to be with the club no matter what.*"

The coupling between fandom and emotions elicits a personal response from fans but also expresses the other motifs of identification, belonging, social recognition, and social interaction. In this context, the constant emotion is the starting point in constructing the identity of the community as the basis for investing the individual's resources in the group, both directly and indirectly. Sports fandom provides a personal-instinctive response through the fans' emotional connection to the club and the community. Therefore, including sports fandom as one of the characteristics of self-identity enables fans to achieve cathexis around these needs. The second aspect of emotional investment is the extent to which this emotion plays a role in the fans' everyday lives. This is also difficult to measure, so fans use other symbolic means to illustrate this. One common means is through personification of the football club and the use of imagery related to human relations. This personification gives sports fans legitimization in tying their emotional world to the fate of the club. In addition, it also enables the club to become a material component of the interviewee's identity.

The Community and Its Place in Sports Fans Typology

The fan club meets several needs, including the need for belonging, the need for recognition, the need for self-esteem through glorification of the club, distaste for other fan groups, and the need for social interaction with likeminded people. The importance of fan club activity is essential in the case of transnational fans because it is not possible to know whether and how these needs would be satisfied in the absence of the fan club. One fan expressed the benefits of his membership in the club as follows: *"The fact that I'm in [the official fan club] sets me aside from other fans who are just – ordinary. To know that the club knows me and to have friends you can talk to about everything, and during the matches you see their interpretation."* Another relevant comment: *"The moment we got the official certificate [Inter's recognition of the club as an official club] was an amazing moment, and at that moment all the work we did was worth it and I just felt part of something bigger. It is more than just saying that you're an Inter fan, it's being part of an official and exclusive fan club in Israel and that is worth everything."*

As for the need for self-esteem, one fan expressed his admiration for his fellow fans in raising his self-esteem by letting him be a member of the community: *"The club [our official fan club] is the only one recognized by the club [Barcelona FC]. There are a lot of organizations and groups in Israel that are trying to be recognized by Barca, but it is only us. It makes you proud. . ."*

These responses indicate that the fans perceive a hierarchy of various types of sports fans. This stratification of fan types allows transnational fans to see themselves as superior to others, such as those who identify themselves as fans only when a team succeeds (known as success fans) or fans who do not watch the games together with the other fan club members but only through the media and show little interest beyond that (known as armchair fans). Nevertheless, the geographical distance from the club's home stadium to some extent eliminates the distinction between transnational fans and armchair fans. The fan community resolves this as follows: *". . .armchair fans, I*

would not even call them fans, just people who are bored so they watch the games of a club. A real fan is someone who gives himself, who cares about the team. For example, we have meetings where we organize a group to watch Inter (International FC) matches and then everyone comes. You cannot compare this to the other quasi-fans.” Here is another example: “The easiest thing is to travel a quarter of an hour to the stadium every week, but when you fly to London, you get to see two or three matches. This also costs more than season tickets for every club in Israel and also demonstrates how much you love your club.” Another interviewee adds: “. . . obviously there are fans who are more . . . A fan who travels once every few years to a game is still more than a fan who only watches games on television.”

The responses of the participants in this study show that their inability to be present at the team’s stadium on a weekly basis effectively frees them from the obligation to attend the team’s matches and therefore makes this issue irrelevant when comparing them to other types of fans who deliberately choose not to attend matches. Nevertheless, the participants underscore the significance of their attendance at a small number of the club’s matches because, according to them, the financial investment and willingness to travel thousands of miles to support the team is much more valuable than just watching the matches on TV, which they can easily do throughout the year.

Another issue facing transnational fan communities is the inevitable comparison between their community and the local fan community living within the national boundaries of their favorite football club. As they perceive it, there is no difference between a transnational fan and a local fan except the possibility of supporting the players face-to-face. Regarding this comparison, one interviewee claimed: “I know people in Israel for whom the most important thing in their life is Arsenal and I’m sure they love the club more than the fans in England. You can see all the games, either on TV or on the Internet, and read every article or news item that appears anywhere. It’s not that they have any advantage over us.” Two other fans echoed these sentiments: “Today everyone sees everything and knows everything, except that they go to the stadium more, otherwise there is no difference between us and them.” “Today it does not matter that much anymore. It’s not that fans in Spain like the club more or something like that, they do not see more matches than we do because we see them all.” These comments describe the perception that there is no difference between transnational and local fan communities. This reinforces their connection to the community itself by negating the relevance of the obvious difference between themselves and local sports fans, who have more accessible ways to express their fandom, such as watching and supporting the clubs as part of the stadium crowd. The negation of this difference can be seen in two ways. First, the elimination of these differences reinforces the legitimacy of the global fan community and its members. On the other hand, this negation can be examined in terms of the global community’s efforts to reshape the self-image of its members. The goal of actively diminishing the importance of existing differences allows the fans to adopt the transnational fan identity in the context of a larger community, which inevitably becomes a central part of their perception of loyal fans in general. Because of the limitation due to COVID-19, the issue of attending games became irrelevant. The interviewees happily acknowledged that and

noted that in this situation, no local fan could directly contribute to team performance by cheering and chanting. As one of the interviewees said: *“There is no difference. Even if you watch the game from three blocks away, it’s still just on TV. The players don’t hear you. They don’t have 80,000 fans in the stands, so they must be thinking about who watches them live on TV.”* Before the pandemic, transnational fans downplayed the importance of being present in the stands, but while going through a year and a half of ghost games (games without a crowd) after the pandemic, eliminated the formerly perceived hierarchy between them and local fans and further enhanced the importance of communal connection.

This focus on the collective activity of the community as part of fandom indicates that the interviewees experience a certain de-individuation in shifting from the discussion of personal influences to the dimension of the modern fan’s self-determination. This de-individuation makes it possible to extend the legitimacy of the fan’s emotional investment in the club in that individual feelings become part of a whole whose specific purpose is to display one’s feelings toward the club and the club’s symbols.

This article has sought to discuss the unique features of football fan communities that support clubs from another country. Two main themes emerged from the analysis. The first is the fans’ special attention to emotions in their self-definition as fans. The second theme, which to a large extent is a product of the first, is the importance of the community as the starting point for a new categorization of fans in the modern era. The customary theoretical assumption is that sports fandom has a social element (Wann, 2006c) and a spatial element (Levental & Galily, 2018). Therefore, as part of their self-definition, transnational fan communities should attribute a different or stronger significance to the community than to stadium attendance. First, it appears that the fans place emphasis on collective fandom rather than on personal fandom, making the community a significant component of their identity. Second, they assign importance to two aspects that distinguish them from other fans and bring them closer to their club’s local fans. The first aspect represents their emotional investment, while the second is reflected in the club’s official recognition of the local fan community as its official representative in Israel. For transnational fans, these two aspects provide both internal and external validation of their status as loyal supporters of the club and thus legitimize their community.

The flexibility and dynamics of the definition of fandom greatly undermine the customary theoretical patterns of fans as described by Taylor (1992), Giulianotti (2002), and others. In fact, this flexibility and dynamics produce a new typology centered on a series of personal and group resources whose frequency among different groups produces relative self-definitions. Unlike the previous typology, in which a clear hierarchy was established that was usually based on loyalty or devotion to the club, the case of transnational fans shows that an objective definition of loyalty is not easily attainable. This can be explained by the importance of many factors, among them financial investment, emotion, scope of activity, group framework, formal recognition, and more. Changing circumstances like the ghost games during the pandemic could alter the importance given to each factor. Therefore, the importance of these factors stems to some extent from technological and media developments that have

removed geographical, language, and communication limitations. Football is often compared to religion. This analogy reveals two trends: On the one hand, the fan/believer can express loyalty in a variety of ways and places, usually through personal expression and community affiliation. On the other hand, the home stadium of the club or the main prayer venue is afforded another layer of holiness, so that pilgrimage to it reinforces the fan/believer's self-perception as a follower.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the interviews, several aspects emerged that are related to the way in which the participants define themselves and their community as part of their identity as fans. Comparisons to the existing research literature on fans revealed that previous models of fan classification do not provide a complete picture of this type of fans. One early model by Giulianotti (2002) classifies fans based on behavioral expressions of fandom (traditional vs. consumer) and the extent of their belonging to the group (hot vs. cold). The current study proposes two additional aspects that do not find expression in the earlier models. The first is the dynamic behavioral aspect, and in particular the subjective significance that fans assign to exploiting emotional, financial, and time resources. Because their physical distance from the team they support generates constraints, the value of each of these resources takes on a personal and subjective meaning that varies from fan to fan. The second aspect is the fans' sense of belonging, which they implicitly direct toward the team they support through their explicit sense of belonging to the local fan community. Because transnational fan communities are on the rise, additional dimensions need to be added to Giulianotti's two-axis model. The dimension of exploiting the three resources of emotion, money, and time subject to spatial limitations should be added to the axis describing the behavioral expressions of fandom (traditional vs. consumer). Furthermore, the sphere of fandom in the context of the group, the individual, and the community of fans must be added to the axis describing group belonging (hot vs. cold).

The findings of the current study point to the evolution of sports fandom. First, media developments have facilitated the rapid promotion of transnational fandom. As a result, the built-in social and personal needs of fandom have been reformulated subject to the limitations of the fan communities. The current research indicates that fans' self-definition is not necessarily dependent only upon personal preferences but rather on environmental circumstances as well. Sports fandom to a large extent reflects a sense of belonging and a definition of "us" versus "them." Hence, the discussion of transnational fans exposes a renewed definition of various types of fans and of their hierarchical perspective, which is not necessarily dependent on objective considerations but rather on the construction of their subjective identity.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on sports have created two main trends in sports fandom. First, the shift to consuming sports information and watching games via television and the Internet vis-à-vis going to the stadiums necessitated behavioral change (see Levetal, Carmi, & Lev, 2021). Because fandom plays a central role in individuals' lives, fans who can no longer attend the games have replaced it with other

rituals to strengthen ties with the fan community. There are two critical factors in the clichéd comparison of sports to religion: the place of worship—the home stadium, and the congregation—the community of fans. When the place of worship became irrelevant due to the pandemic, the role of the community became paramount, both as a daily practice and as a critical component in defining the fans' self-identity. The second trend that developed during this period is shifting toward global fandom. Without the possibility to attend the games regularly, the hierarchy of fans (local fans, transnational fans, armchair fans, and so forth) was flattened. The apparent disadvantage of the remoteness of transnational fans over local fans further justified the dedication of the research participants to their community. They also emphasized it as a sign of loyalty to the club. Moreover, 2 years of the pandemic allowed fans to start following other clubs. Although switching a favorite team is perceived as taboo, especially in one's country, having a favorite club abroad is considered legitimate. For the most part, as evidenced by the current study, football fans point out that they support one of the top European football teams and are a fan of an Israeli club.

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