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## A European mind? Europeanisation of football fan discussions in online message boards

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### ABSTRACT

Across Europe, national professional football leagues have seen increasing numbers of players from other EU states, while the Champions League and the Europa League have become a focal point for many teams. This article seeks to investigate how far this Europeanisation on the organisational level of football is reflected in identities and discourses of fans. We developed a framework to analyse the Europeanisation of identities among football fans. In the empirical part, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of fan discussions on publicly available message boards among fans of four first league teams in England and Austria. Our empirical findings indicate that fans' identities are to some extent Europeanised, albeit in very different ways and to varying degrees. The participation in European club competitions and the Europeanisation of player markets seem to shape fan perceptions in that respect.

### KEYWORDS

Europeanisation; football; football fans; identity; lifeworld

## 1. Introduction

The governance structures of football have been significantly Europeanised during the past decades (Brand et al., 2013; Geeraert, 2016; Manzenreiter & Spitaler, 2013; Niemann et al., 2011). These dynamics partly resulted from top-down pressure at the European level, i.e. rulings by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) or investigations by the European Commission (Niemann & Brand, 2008). Most prominently, the Bosman ruling by the ECJ has had an impact on European football through the widespread Europeanisation (and internationalisation) of player markets.

In addition, Europeanisation dynamics in the field of professional football have been fed by transnationalising processes, such as the cross-border coordination of football clubs and the formation of transnational lobby networks (i.e. the former G-14, now ECA) or the creation of a pan-European football league, the UEFA Champions League (Brand et al., 2013; Niemann et al., 2011). The EU has been able

to influence the governance of football, even if not consistently across the continent, driving some general tendencies that shape the face of the game (Geeraert & Drieskens, 2015).

This article asks how such phenomena influence football fans. For this purpose, we develop a framework to analyse the Europeanisation of fans' perspectives and identities. As the term 'identity' is often used in a fuzzy manner, a more specific concept is needed to study football fans in their specific habitat empirically. Our conceptual framework hence rests on two analytical dimensions, *communities of belonging* and *frames of reference*. Both dimensions cover the potential aspects of any Europeanised patterns of individual identifications and self-understandings among football fans.

As football research has already shown, phenomena such as the increasingly Europeanised transfer market, recurring competitions against other European clubs and continent-wide broadcasting are likely to have shaped the perceptions of a significant number of fans across the continent (King, 2003; Millward, 2009; Niemann & Brand, 2013). Some early research in these domains also suggested that travel to European competitions and contact with fans from other countries influence how fans perceive themselves vis-à-vis Europe (King, 2000; Millward, 2006). The underlying idea in these approaches is that increased contact and frequent exposure might trigger a normalisation and even appreciation of new spaces of attention and action among fans.

From this it is not far to assume that football as an everyday practice to some extent fosters collective European identities. This links back to the emergent literature in Political Sociology on 'Everyday Europe' (Recchi, 2019) and the formation of collective, cross-boundary identifications with Europe through mundane, leisure time-related activities (Hanquinet & Savage, 2011). The irony here would be that football, usually taken to be an area of limited cosmopolitanism among its followers, may act as a driver of 'subconscious Europeanisation' (Niemann et al., forthcoming).

The third strand of literature that we build upon is that of Relational Sociology as applied to the study of sport and football (e.g. Cleland et al., 2018). In this regard, the specific practices of interaction, relating to other fans and followers, and the eventual building of transboundary networks of interest becomes an important shaping force for how fans engage in identity management (see also Section 2). Finally, we see some anchor points of our analytic framework in the well-established literatures on team and fan identification in Sport Management and Psychology (e.g. Cialdini et al., 1976; Lock et al., 2012; Lock & Heere, 2017).

Our key empirical objective is to elucidate whether there is a structured variation in identifications along the lines of a Europeanisation of football. Do we find Europeanised perceptions of in-groups and out-groups (*communities of belonging*), and what conditions their extent? Can we ascertain differing priorities regarding national or European competitions (*frames of reference*)? In the second half of our article, we then enrich and empirically substantiate our conceptual framework with results from an empirical analysis of football fan discussions in online message boards (fan forums) from four clubs in England and Austria.

Our contribution to the literature is threefold: First, while most research on the Europeanisation of fan identities focuses solely on the UK/England (cf. King, 2000,

2003; Millward, 2009), our findings are based on a cross-country/league comparison. We juxtapose two leagues that vary substantially concerning their Europeanisation/internationalisation of player markets to analyse how much this conditions fans' perceptions. In addition, we add another 'hard' (unlikely) case for Europeanisation, given that (similar to the UK) the Austrian public has tended to be rather Eurosceptic. Second, most of the relevant literature on the Europeanisation of fan identities stems from the (early to mid-) 2000s. Given various developments at the level of club competitions and football governance structures and given that identities are to be understood as evolving over time (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 7), a fresh assessment is warranted. Third, our analysis concentrates on several aspects of identity that have hitherto not received sufficient attention in the literature on football fan identities, such as the comparative relevance of European/national competitions and the particular role of national belonging with regard to player assessment. In addition, while the majority of studies proceed inductively, our approach is more deductive and based on a priorly developed conceptual framework.

We proceed as follows: [Section 2](#) specifies our conceptual framework. In [Section 3](#), we elaborate on our case selection and database. [Section 4](#) illustrates our empirical analysis. In our conclusion, we highlight the contribution of our conceptual and empirical work to the literatures on the Europeanisation of identities *through* football, and *among* football fans.

## 2. Conceptual framework

A vast and conceptually rich literature on identity dynamics among sport fans and supporters already exists. Various typologies of football fans and followers at least implicitly emphasise the identity-related aspects of fandom – such as more locally-oriented forms we may find in Giulianotti's 'supporters' as compared to 'flâneurs' displaying more fluid conceptions of self and one's attachment (Giulianotti, 2002). In a similar vein, sport sociologists working in the tradition of Elias (cf. Dunning, 1994; Giulianotti, 1994, pp. 16–18) and Elias and Scotson (cf. Benkowitz & Molnar, 2012) have also attached great importance to identity work among football fans. From their perspective, the interplay of social structures like class, and more spatially bound forms of community, and the resulting othering of 'outsiders' constantly reaffirms notions of belonging to a rather exclusive in-group. Not least Cleland et al. (2018) have significantly sharpened our perspective on how Relational Sociology might productively add to our understanding. As they highlight, such an approach redirects our attention to the specific networks and links football fans may develop across distances, thereby forming communities capable of collective action that cut across local, regional and national cleavages (Cleland et al., 2018, pp. 1–28) and hence, at least in principle, also affect fans' transboundary identity processes. In contrast, the literature on Sport Management and Psychology has rather tended to focus on the idea of fan perceptions and aspirations as shaped by the sporting success of the respectively followed teams (Cialdini et al., 1976; Lock et al., 2012, pp. 284–285; Wann & Grieve, 2005). It is against this diverse background of literatures and conceptual approaches that we

suggest exploring the identity-related aspects of any Europeanisation in the minds of football fans in a more comprehensive manner.

## 2.1. Identity

A promising and arguably more holistic analytic tool for analysing the Europeanisation of football fans' identities is the tripartite identity concept that integrates identification, self-understanding and communality (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) and on which we base our framework. As for 'identification', Brubaker and Cooper argue that we are constantly identified by others, be it institutions, networks, or even ourselves. Identification happens through specific markers: categorical (e.g. ethnicity or gender), relational (e.g. friends or family), or institutional (e.g. passports) (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, pp. 15–16). In this sense, 'markers' are latent constructs with which we can identify ourselves, through a cognitive or emotional process. The stronger our emotional ties to such 'markers' become, the more visible they get in the form of specific symbols, colours, or ideas (Eder, 2009, p. 431). According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 16), these markers influence the process of 'identification', which typically depends on the social environment and occurs through interaction. The main advantage of Brubaker and Cooper's conception of 'identification' is that it emphasises the external component of identity, i.e. it makes visible the multitude of *ascribed* roles.

This second dimension by Brubaker and Cooper (2000, pp. 17–19) is aptly captured by the concept of 'self-understanding'. Self-understandings, in contrast to identifications, outline how people 'make sense of the social world', how they perceive themselves, and how they react to certain situations. The process of forming a self-understanding is shaped by a variety of social influences (e.g. school, family, and friends), yet it occurs at the individual level. Such self-understandings can transform over time and vary in their attributes, i.e. they are fluid. The main point is that such self-understandings are subjective and vary from person to person. They are much more encompassing than individually held conceptions of team affiliation, and identity work to protect one's self-image in the wake of defeat, which have formed the main focus of the Sport Studies literatures.

Finally Brubaker and Cooper (2000, pp. 19–21) suggest 'commonality', 'connectedness' and 'groupness' as one aspect of identity. 'Commonality' describes a set of common attributes (e.g. ethnicity, religion or gender). 'Connectedness' captures the relations people have towards each other (e.g. family, friends and network), and is hence a good fit for the approaches to football fandom informed by Relational Sociology. 'Groupness' is a feeling, which combines categorical 'commonality' and relational 'connectedness'. It is described as 'the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 20). This feeling is created through time spent together in the group, joint experiences, and their perceived narrative in public. Looking at 'groupness' more closely, it becomes clearer that 'commonality' is more important for this feeling than 'connectedness'. People who share similar attributes can more easily form organised communities (e.g. football clubs). In this third dimension of 'groupness' we can most strongly identify linkages to the above-referenced literatures on team/fan identification. Again, we suggest the

notion of 'groupness' (based on perceived commonality and realised connectedness) to be superior for our purposes. First, it allows capturing any perceptions of belonging together as a group, including those that are *not* reducible to sporting success (Lock et al., 2014, pp. 284–285). Second, the groupness-idea put forward by Brubaker and Cooper (2000, pp. 7, 9) lends itself particularly well to capturing ideas about belonging and exclusion in a *comparative* mode (e.g. different fan milieus inspired by different ideas about European or local rivals). The concept of 'groupness' applied to the context of football can also capture emotional attachment and the extent of discursive delineation from 'others' against the background of group plurality (Brand & Niemann, 2014).

## **2.2. Communities of belonging**

This analytical dimension clusters dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, understandings of in-group and out-group, perceptions of community and discord, and adjacent 'narratives'. The concept of *communities of belonging* is used to understand how football fans perceive their 'sameness' within certain social groups and networks. Based on distinctions drawn to 'others', a sense of belonging is created at the same time. Three aspects form the concept of *communities of belonging*: inclusion/exclusion, interaction, and the encoding of events. All this bears a close relationship to the application of Social Identity Theory to sports fans (Lock et al., 2012; Lock & Heere, 2017), but our approach takes a step back to initially observe articulations of groupness and communality, no matter whether these have been triggered by sporting events, success or defeat, and without regard to the commercial usefulness of such ideas of sameness and belonging. We focus on constructions of likeness and difference among fans, in which categories (local, national, European, or other markers of delineation) they have been grounded, and whether a patterned variation between followers of differently located teams exists, for instance between European-level champions and counterparts from the respective leagues' lower ranks.

### **2.2.1. Inclusion/exclusion**

The inclusion and exclusion of people in and from a community is an essential part of identification. We analyse how football fans define their community by delineating contradistinctions between themselves and others, and on what grounds they do so. As the Eliasian-inspired work of the Leicester School in football research had it, local attachment and intense localised rivalries have historically been triggers of the more radical forms of such othering, leading to fan disorder and hooliganism (Dunning, 1994, p. 128). In our understanding, however, the 'other' is not limited to other teams but can also be distinguished within the context of one's own team or fellow supporters. Indirectly at least, such othering also leads to the articulation of certain self-images and contributes to the recognition of groupness. A guiding aspect for our analysis is to find out to what degree assessments of players and the behaviour of supporters are shaped by constructions of national or European belonging.

### **2.2.2. Relations among fans – coalitions and networks**

The second aspect of communities of belonging is the relationship between fans across teams. Despite the strong sense of separation between supporters of different teams, cross-national and cross-team relationships do exist. European networks such as Fans Against Racism in Europe (FARE) and Fan Supporters Europe (FSE) demonstrate the *transnational* dimension of coalitions between fans. Most notably, the recent work of Relational Sociology on pan-European networks of solidarity and co-operation among football fans (Cleland et al., 2018, pp. 161–180) and the attempts to classify such transboundary networked activism among fans as the work of self-professed ‘globalists’ (García & Llopis-Goig, 2020) has alluded to such phenomena. On a more general note, research into community-building among sports fans has made clear that many forms of such communities have developed more rapidly in the age of online communication (Popp et al., 2016; Popp & Woratschek, 2016). Our interest hence is not limited to supposedly ‘elite fan activists’ connecting across borders in networks such as FARE and FSE but also encompasses more informal groups and individual connections. We focus on the geographic dimension in networks and online communities. The aim is to uncover the interactions, references, and allusions between fans to get a deeper understanding of the communities to which these supporters see themselves belonging.

### **2.2.3. Encoding of events in narratives**

The third aspect of communities of belonging is the collective remembrance of events. The analysis of core events such as World Cups, games against certain opponents and their encoding in narratives is common in football research (Pyta & Havemann, 2015). Anecdotes about ‘football wars’ and symbolic victories are omnipresent, i.e. the 1954 World Cup for the formation of the German nation after WW2 or the narrative that the civil war-like conditions around the game between Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade in 1990 heralded the collapse of Yugoslavia (Brand & Niemann 2014, p. 43). We seek to evaluate fan discourses regarding the role of events for their identifications and communities. Do certain events trigger or foster a narrative and how are such narratives shaped by European or national aspects?

## **2.3. Frames of reference**

The second dimension of analysis, ‘frames of reference’, includes preferences and assessments of football-related aspects at the individual level as well as a wide set of supporters’ activities (following football events, travel activities, tourist activities in the context of away games, network building) in its spatial scope. This dimension is used to understand how football fans evaluate the game and their team’s role in it from a spatial perspective (national vs. European-level competitions) and the geographic range in which they engage. The focus is on elucidating whether there has been a normalisation of cross-border action (‘going Europe’) and if this connects to the Europeanisation of the governance structures of the game.

### **2.3.1. National competitions**

These competitions (usually the top-level national league and cup competitions) are often assumed to be the main area of supporters' interest. Games in the national leagues are the clubs' staple fixtures and national media give them extensive airtime. We seek to capture how supporters perceive national competitions, either as the most important competition or as secondary to the 'true' contest among European-level champions: How do fans understand the relevance of the national league in the context of European competition? This analytic dimension also includes those activities that are related to their experience of match days in national competitions and the investment that is connected to them.

### **2.3.2. European competitions**

While the national matches are seen as regular fixtures, games and tournaments at the European level often seem to carry the flavour of the extraordinary. Has the Europeanisation of football across Europe shifted attention to the UEFA Champions League and the Europa League? If so, is that valid for all clubs and their supporters throughout Europe? Especially for supporters of teams that frequently participate in the Champions League, this European-level competition might have become the preferred frame of reference. Moreover, the creation of a *de facto* European club league could have affected the overall perception of such competitions as rather regular (Niemann & Brand, 2020). We thus seek to determine whether supporters perceive these European club competitions as normal or extraordinary, both with regard to their own club as well as in general. It should also be analysed how and why participation in a European club competition is considered important for one's own team: is that valued because it allows a club to represent its national league, or is participation in the competition sought to belong to the top tier of the best clubs continent-wide?

### **2.3.3. Relationship between national and European competitions**

The third aspect of frames of reference is the relationship between the competitions on the national and the European level. This aspect focuses on the spread of attention across the two different competitions. It assesses how supporters frame the different competitions regarding their respective potential rivals. What shapes the leading ideas of rivalry between fans: local, regional, national, or European-wide references? How intensively do fans devote interest to their rivals in other European countries compared to regional/local competitors and rivals? A connected, albeit distinct question regards the attention and the travel activities for different sorts of matches. How regularly do fans travel across Europe to follow their team compared to national competitions and how do they understand these travels? Are their travel activities principally motivated by touristic considerations or is the main focus on the game? These questions are analysed with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the two levels of competition, national and European.

**Table 1.** Case selection and main criteria.

Club	League (as of season 18/19)	League level variables		Club level variables		
		Internation- alisation of player market	Non-native players (%)	Participation in European club competitions	European appearances 08/09–17/18	First league 08/09–17/18
Sturm Graz	Bundesliga (AT)	Low	27	High	7	10
Wacker Innsbruck	Bundesliga (AT)	Low	27	Low	0	4
Manchester United	Premier League	High	63	High	8	10
Newcastle United	Premier League	High	63	Low	1	8

### 3. Case selection and database

The empirical analysis is based on data from two English Premier League (EPL) clubs and two Austrian Bundesliga (ABL) clubs. From each league, one club with a high level of participation in European competitions and one club with a very limited or non-existent record of such participation were selected. In the EPL, the club with a high participation in European competitions is Manchester United F.C. and the club with little record of recent European appearances is Newcastle United F.C. In the ABL, the frequent European competitor is SK Sturm Graz, located in the Styrian capital, together with the less successful FC Wacker Innsbruck, located in the capital of Tyrol (Table 1).

The selection allows the analysis of ‘hard cases’ (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), as both the UK and Austria can be seen as ‘belated’ and rather critical Europeans. Both joined the European Communities later and remained sceptical participants, albeit for different reasons. In the British case, Europe has served as a derogative contrast to ‘Englishness’, especially in the Eurosceptic tabloid media, culminating in the ‘Brexit’ decision in 2016 (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016). The intricate situation of Austria during the Cold War made the country refrain from joining the European Communities until the 1990s. The Austrian public remained sceptical of the EU, the Euro-critical Austrian Freedom Party has performed well in national and regional elections, even participating in governing coalitions at times (Aichholzer et al., 2014; Gavenda & Umit, 2016).

The case selection provides for variety regarding supposed influencing factors at the league and club levels. At the league level, the composition of player markets differs between a high share of non-national players in the EPL (63%) and a low level of 27% of non-national players in the ABL. While the EPL’s financial power and liberal regulations for highly skilled migrants have contributed to an ever-increasing share of foreign players (Elliott, 2017), the ABL established a programme to encourage playing time for Austrian players through financial incentives (Brand et al., 2011). Thus, the two leagues provide distinctly contrasting contexts for the analysis: for EPL fans, non-British, and in particular non-English players have become the norm (on the complex interplay between Englishness and Britishness in football see e.g. Gibbons, 2017). For ABL fans, it is not only common to have a high share of Austrian players in their teams, but they know that the club benefits financially from these players.

### 3.1. Database

The study is based on an analysis of discussions in online message boards that relate to identity aspects and Europeanisation. We applied qualitative content analysis (using Atlas.ti software) to texts produced by fans in club-related forums that are publicly available on the internet (readable without registration). Such and other fan-made online publications heighten the discursive dimension of fandom by providing spaces where any fan can debate issues. Online communication between football supporters has been extensively used for discussions around the club as well as for planning of travel, ticketing and other aspects of fandom (Pearson, 2016, 2012; Mcmanus, 2015). Moreover, these forums are independent of the club and other gatekeepers such as editors or journalists. Usually, every registered user can contribute. This makes those forums a particularly *open* space for discussions.

The nature of publicly available forums (private forums are not the subject of this study) is that everyone can read the messages and follow the discussion without registration. Registration does not require any credentials, and the use of fake names is widespread (Cleland, 2014, p. 417). The resulting ‘anonymity’ lowers the threshold for expressing sentiments, especially those that contradict common social norms.

The anonymity of the participants and the lack of reliable information about the characteristics of the supporters such as gender, age and location make it impossible to claim representativeness. This has been elaborated in similar analyses before (Cleland, 2014; Millward, 2006).

A major advantage of message board discussions is the opportunity to access fan discussions without intervening in the field. This approach seems most appropriate in observing subtle aspects of identification. Other researchers have successfully chosen intervening methods to analyse such message boards, i.e. by starting one’s own thread as a researcher to study football fans’ attitudes and expressions of racism (Cleland, 2014). Our aim was to prevent any bias caused by a researcher’s intervention (Millward, 2008, p. 307). While an open intervention allows participants to express an account of their honest feelings or opinions anonymously, our approach allows for accessing the rather covert or even subconscious expressions of attitudes and self-understandings. To minimise any potential harm (cf. Cleland et al., 2020, pp. 46–48) to the discussants who usually did not consciously contribute to research purposes, the names of the users are not revealed. Quotations are reduced to a minimum to restrict the opportunities for tracing back posters using search engines.

**Table 2.** Overview of sources for message board threads.

Club	Message board(s)	Abbreviation
Sturm Graz	austriansoccerboard.at > Sturm Graz	ASB
Wacker Innsbruck	austriansoccerboard.at > Wacker Innsbruck	ASB
	forum.tivoli12.at	T12
Manchester United	RedCafe.net	RC
Newcastle United	ToonForum.co.uk	TF

### **3.2. Data collection and analysis**

For each club, we identified one (usually the largest) fan forum. In one case, an additional forum was selected. The material covers two league seasons, 2016/17 and 2017/18. In total, it comprises 49 threads across the forums with 19407 individual posts (Table 2).

We expected that issues of identification arise most prominently in discussions about rivals, competitions, and players. A term search on 'Europe', 'European', 'English/Austrian', but also football-related terms such as 'UEFA', 'Premier League/Bundesliga', 'Champions League' and 'Europa League' confirmed that these words were mostly found in threads (grouped messages under a joint headline) covering two topics: discussions about rivals and competitions, and transfer discussions (for a list of all selected threads see Appendix).

#### **3.2.1. Discussions about rivals and competitions**

Rivalry was discussed in threads about past and upcoming matches (e.g. 'Post-match discussion', RedCafe.net and 'Match thread Watford v NUFC, toonforum.co.uk), but also in separate threads (e.g. 'Der Gästesektor im Fokus', ASB > Wacker Innsbruck). These discussions covered matches in national and European competitions. Match threads were usually available for each league and cup match during a season. The threads were selected for inclusion in the corpus based on a random sample of matches across the two seasons.

#### **3.2.2. Transfer discussions**

Discussions about transfers of players to and from other clubs were prevalent in all forums. They provided the main resource for discourses on player markets. Often there was one main discussion strand for each transfer window regarding incoming players (e.g. 'Der Kader 2017/18' at ASB > Wacker Innsbruck). Two threads per club, explicitly relating to one transfer window during the two seasons 2016/17 and 2017/18, have been analysed, covering all discussions about incoming and outgoing players as well as transfer discussions about other clubs during these transfer periods.

#### **3.2.3. Analysis**

After the material had been selected through the elaborated procedure, we applied our conceptual framework to the selected material by coding all relevant parts of the threads into the themes *communities of belonging* or *frames of reference*. The relevant parts of each thread were then summarised regarding their general lines of argument and potential controversies. These thread summaries were further condensed and aggregated to identify common patterns within each club across threads. The conceptual framework elaborated above served as the guiding tool to identify themes from the material. Additionally, aspects arising from the material were included in the analysis to allow for a deductive-inductive analytical approach.

## 4. Empirical results: Europe in discussions about transfers and rivalries

The first part of the empirical section elaborates general patterns identified through our analysis and illustrates them with quotes from the boards (quotes from the Austrian clubs are translated into English by the authors). The second part compares these discussions within each league and across the two leagues.

### 4.1. Fan discussions in the four clubs

#### 4.1.1. Sturm Graz

##### *The top club in an underdog league*

The discussions among Sturm Graz fans indicate a self-conception of a top club in an underdog league. References to other clubs regarding player transfers and rivalries are predominantly limited to the ABL. European club competitions are seen as an exceptional opportunity for the club. Their main rival – domestically as well as at the European level – is Red Bull Salzburg.

A general notion among the fans is that the ABL is not highly valued. This attitude is prevalent in the discussions about transfers from and to the club. The fans state that the league is useless and one dominant club always wins:

From a purely sports point of view, the league in Austria has now become completely meaningless. The same club always wins the league. Even the great league reform will not change anything here. (*Thread: 24. Runde SK Sturm Graz RB Salzburg*)

Limited financial and infrastructural opportunities are frequently mentioned as restricting performance, which is often contrasted with clubs that are perceived as belonging to the European elite, e.g. Paris St. Germain, Bayern München, Real Madrid or Manchester City.

European competitions are seen as an exceptional opportunity for the club and the fans. A discussion about a Champions League qualification match against Ajax Amsterdam underlines this perspective. Opinions on Ajax were divided between those who saw the Dutch club as ‘a really strong team’ and those that thought them beatable, but in both cases, fans express that they did not consider the match a prosaic fixture (*Thread: 2. Qualirunde Champions-League: Ajax Amsterdam – SK Sturm Graz*). The match is also discussed as a chance to represent Austria and increase its five-year UEFA coefficient (*Sturm in Europa 2018/19*).

We would not only earn important points for the club and the 5-year ranking, but also steal important points from our closest competitor Holland in the fight for the 11th rank. (*Sturm in Europa 2018/19*)

The club’s main rivalry is seen as that with the frequent ABL champion Red Bull Salzburg. The club is mentioned as a problematic competitor on the transfer market due to its financial resources, but the rival also enjoys great respect. Though a national rival, Salzburg is seen as representing Austria on the European level, which corroborates the representative character that fans ascribe to the European competitions.

Red Bull are just professional in all respects. We must accept that. And they are "the" heroes who score points for Austria. Nothing more, nothing less. (24th Runde: SK Sturm Graz – RB Salzburg)

The transfer discussions indicate a self-understanding as a club that develops young players and sells them to clubs in more prestigious leagues. The German leagues are a frequent reference point as a potential ambition for players (*Wintertransfers 17/18*). The rumours about incoming players are mostly limited to the ABL. Non-Austrian players are seldom the subject of debate. The discussions indicate a clear distinction between Austrian and foreign players, as the incentives for fielding Austrian players are regularly mentioned (*Wintertransfers 17/18*, *Sommertransfers 17/18*).

#### **4.1.2. F.C. Wacker Innsbruck: the underdog in the underdog league**

The discussion among Wacker Innsbruck fans indicates a self-concept as fans of an underdog club in an underdog league. They maintain a strong local perspective and seek to be the most successful club in the state of Tyrol. Their chief rival is neighbouring WSG Wattens. The ABL is seen as the natural habitat of the club and the two seasons spent in the second division are seen as only a temporary setback.

The fans' focus is on Austrian football, but they consider the national competitions as not very prestigious. Only in few cases do the fans look beyond Austria, e.g. the EPL is mentioned while discussing the financial impact of relegation (*ASB // Der Gästesektor im Fokus*). In one of these cases, fans mention other clubs to distinguish their Innsbruck from European top-level clubs in terms of infrastructure. This highlights that fans are aware of football in other countries, though they clearly distinguish it from their own club.

A team from Barcelona, Real, Bayern Munich, etc. could never be as successful with an infrastructure (training facilities) that is just about the midfield of the 2nd division, no matter how much money they can spend on new players. (*T12 // Kaderplanung Winter 2017*)

The most prominent rival is the club WSG Wattens (now WSG Swarowski Tirol, which is located in the nearby town of Wattens). The discussions around the derby between the two clubs are clearly oriented towards this local rivalry (*T12 // 12. Runde WSG Wattens – FC Wacker Innsbruck*). These discussions are fuelled by localism, focusing on the rivalry between the two clubs regarding spectatorship and young players .

With Buchacher [name of a player] it is also about showing the guys from Wattens that it is still a desire and promotion for their players to move from Wattens to Innsbruck. That is why we should grab their best player every year. A small power play to strengthen our brand. The way for domestic players to become a professional should be like this: from Wattens or the Wacker Amateurs to FC Wacker I and from there probably abroad. Wattens is only a stopover to the top (to us). (*ASB // Kader 2018/19*)

Regarding the transfer market, the fans are aware of players from other clubs in the ABL and the second Austrian league. Additionally, the German second and third leagues are potential pools for transfers. But references to players outside of the Austrian leagues remain vague. Foreign players are regularly referred to as 'legionnaires' and clearly distinguished from Austrian players (*ASB // Kader 2018/19*). A

specific case demonstrates that players from abroad are exceptional: a discussion focuses on a French player who potentially needs to ‘acclimate’ before being able to play properly (*T12 // Kaderplanung Winter 2017*). This discussion shows how fans differentiate between Austrian players that are called by their name and the ‘French’.

One must wait for the transfer of the Frenchman. But before I get Kienast [name of a player], I'd rather get the Frenchman. (*T12 // Kaderplanung Winter 2017*).

The fans express a strong identification with their region – Tyrol. The regional situation is relevant in terms of the weather conditions and their impact on matches. Some suggest that the club foremost needs Tyrolean players. A statement illustrates this attitude: the ideal way for local players towards becoming professional is as suggested above ‘Starting with Wattens [...] via Wacker I and from there maybe abroad’ (*ASB // Kader 2018/19*). This describes an attitude where the limits of the club and league are recognised, and rivalries are primarily located within the Austrian leagues.

#### **4.1.3. Manchester United: the contested top club in the top league**

The discussions among the fans of Manchester United indicate a self-concept of fans of a contested top club in a top league. Their perspective on European competitions relates to their perspective on the national league: they consider the European competitions to be a competitive place, but it is also a potential failing ground. Local rivalries (Manchester City, Liverpool) remain of utmost importance. Regarding transfers, the fans show broad interest in players across the continent, with no particular interest in English or British players.

The fans identify the EPL as top league, but see their club failing in reaching top ranks in the league. In this context, European competition becomes relevant. The Champions League is seen as too competitive for the current team, but the Europa League is a viable option that can serve as a substitute for success at the national level:

I think our best bet is the Europa. Keep ticking away at the PL no doubt, but I would concentrate seriously on the Europa. We are getting better and better all the time (bar the Chelsea game). (*PostMatch v Arsenal 2016*)

A disjunction from the European competition comes about when some argue that ‘the current Real team is pretty much a world class 11’ (*Summer Transfer Window 2017*) that can win the Champions League several times in a row. European football here is the implicit reference point, but it is a failing ground for the team. A post-match discussion following a loss against Sevilla highlights how the fans consider the opponent as only an ‘average Spanish side’ (*Man Utd 1:2 Sevilla Post-match discussion*). Thus, the loss symbolises a greater decline of the club as the following quote illustrates:

To know that that was the impression of the club we put out for the whole of Europe to see, on a night where no other “big” European club was playing, is truly embarrassing. (*Man Utd 1:2 Sevilla Post-match discussion*)

The main rival is local: Manchester City. The rivalry is discussed in the context of the EPL, but Manchester City’s performance at the European level also gets a great deal of attention, being identified as successful, but at the cost of the club being

owned by 'an oil rich middle eastern country' (*Man Utd 1:2 Man City Post-match discussion*).

Let's be honest, they are a much better side. But who cares, really? I will always be a United fan. Man City are only having their moment because the club was bought by, essentially, an oil rich middle eastern country. They spend, spend, spend to guarantee results [...]. (*Man Utd 1:2 Man City Post-match discussion*)

In transfer discussions, players from all over Europe are mentioned. One important argument is the Champions League. The competition is seen as a core advantage in signing new players (*Summer Transfer Window 2017*). One specific thread (*Most hated ex united players*) indicates core aspects of an 'us' vs. 'them' distinction among the fans. The national background or ethnicity of the players rarely plays a role. Most prominent is a resentment of players who went on to play for the rivals Manchester City or Liverpool, who are generally seen as 'traitors'.

#### **4.1.4. Newcastle United F.C.: the underdog in the top league**

The discussions among Newcastle fans indicate a self-concept as an underdog club in a top league. They see their club as an antithesis to the EPL top clubs, mainly due to its limited financial means. European competitions are not considered to be an issue, and their rivals are exclusively other English clubs. The transfer discussions are different: potential transfers from all over Europe are discussed as options, revealing a strong cross-national interest.

There is little doubt about the quality of the EPL among the fans, but they see their club in the lower regions of English top football. Teams like West Bromwich as well as Brighton & Hove Albion are described as equal competitors in the respective leagues (Championship in 2016/17 and EPL in 2017/18). This self-understanding is underlined after Newcastle's win against Chelsea on the last match day of the season (*Final match thread – NUFC v Chelsea*), which is seen as extraordinary despite there being essentially nothing at stake. This is a sharp contrast to the match against Watford a week before, which was characterised as 'a friendly' due to the game's lack of relevance for the final league results (*Match thread – Watford v NUFC*). No particular rivalry is visible within these discussions, as only the current competitive situation in the league seems to define rivalry.

It won't be pretty to watch most of the time this season but I think we can match teams in the bottom half of the league (which will be our target) based on what I saw in the first half yesterday, so long as players treat every match the same. (*Match Thread: Newcastle vs Spurs – 13/08/17*)

The discussions on rivalry are consistent in that the reference points remain always within the EPL. European football plays no role. European competitions are discussed in separate threads and have no connection to Newcastle United (*Champions League Draw; Champions League Semis*). There is no clear perspective on European competitions regarding their representative function. A discussion evolves around supporting other EPL teams in European competitions, but there was no consistent opinion. Two positions clashed here: 'Why should I support a Spanish team against an English team?' and 'I don't want this [Liverpool] team to win anything,

also not in international competitions' (*Saturday football: Champions League and Play Off Finals 2018*).

The transfer discussions cover players from leagues across Europe. The main arguments for or against players are based on quantitative data, e.g. on goals and assists. Their reference points are online databases (i.e. transfermarkt.co.uk). Players are discussed regarding their performance, backed by statistics, but there is little to no reference to the players' home leagues (*NUFC Minor/Untrusted Transfer Rumours (Summer 2018)* and *NUFC Minor/Untrusted Transfer Rumours (January 2017)*). A strong distinction is made from top elite clubs. Newcastle United is seen as inferior to these competitors on the transfer market:

Bayern are linked to so many players already, we just need to find/keep the ones they don't take. (*NUFC Minor/Untrusted Transfer Rumours (Summer 2018)*)

One of the rare occasions where nationality came into play was the signing of a player to a club in the second Chinese league. This announcement was followed by several comments about salary, denying that there could be any other reason, except money, to go there (*NUFC Minor/Untrusted Transfer Rumours (January 2017)*). This is a sharp contrast to discussions about signing to other clubs in European leagues (e.g. Italy, Switzerland, and France) and indicates that differences are potentially not seen within European leagues but between European leagues and other aspiring regions.

#### 4.2. Comparison of discussions across clubs and leagues

The case descriptions highlighted discourses within the four clubs' message boards. Table 3 summarises the results. This section traces differences and similarities of fan

**Table 3.** Summary of results.

	Sturm Graz	Wacker Innsbruck	Manchester United	Newcastle United
Summary	Top club in underdog league	Underdog club in underdog league	Contested top club in top league	Underdog club in top league
Competitions	Focus: ABL, ECC as extraordinary opportunity and event. ECC have representative function	ABL as main domain, 2. League as necessary evil. No further interest on ECC.	EPL as failing ground, ECC twofold: CL too high (but training ground for EPL)	EPL as focus, though self-Id as relegation battler. No perspective on ECC.
Rivalries	Main rivalry: Red Bull Salzburg (national)	Main rivalry: WSG Tyrol (local), aim for Tyrolean dominance	Main rivalry: ManCity, Liverpool (local), but ManCity rivalry also on European level	Main rivalry: other EPL clubs in the lower parts of the table. No one in particular. Strong alienation from top clubs in the EPL
Transfers	Focus on Austrian clubs and players, minor interest in German leagues	Focus on Austrian clubs and players, minor interest in German 2. & 3. leagues	Focus on players from across European leagues, nationality irrelevant. One exception. Strong information base across the continent.	Focus on players from across European leagues, nationality not relevant. Strong information base, reference to other medium level club.

discussions along three lines of potential influence: the differences between top clubs and lower rank clubs within one league, the same differences across leagues and the differences between leagues. Three paired comparisons guide this section: (1) intra-league comparisons of the differences and similarities between the two ABL clubs and between the two EPL clubs, (2) cross-league differences and similarities between the two 'top clubs' and between the two 'underdogs' and (3) an inter-league comparison of the ABL clubs with the EPL clubs.

#### ***4.2.1. Intra-Bundesliga comparison – Sturm Graz vs. Wacker Innsbruck***

There are two similarities evident in the fan discussions of the Austrian clubs: fans share a rather self-deprecating view of the ABL, mainly due to a supposed lack of money and prestige. Their main transfer focus is on Austrian players from teams in the same league, and their extended area of attention regarding potential transfers rarely reaches beyond the German speaking area (German and Swiss leagues). Additionally, they differ in several regards: the self-image as an underdog at Innsbruck differs from the Graz perspective of being a top club in an underdog league. Wacker Innsbruck stands out with their fans' strong emphasis on regional identification, while Sturm Graz fans show a strong self-image of an educating club for other (and better) leagues. European club competitions are irrelevant for the fans of Wacker Innsbruck, but they matter for Sturm Graz fans, even if they see such participation as somewhat exceptional.

#### ***4.2.2. Intra-Premier league comparison – Manchester United vs. Newcastle United***

Similarities between the two EPL clubs are found in their perspectives on the league and on transfer options. They both share the perspective of following a club in a European top league. Players from all over Europe are considered when talking about potential transfers. These transfer discussions are informed by knowledge about quantitative data on player performance and they identify their main rivals among clubs in their respective 'segment' of the EPL.

The clubs differ regarding their self-image. While fans of Manchester United see their club as a (contested) top club, Newcastle supporters' image of their club is that of an underdog. Accordingly, for Manchester fans, playing in European competitions is a must, while it is irrelevant for Newcastle fans. This translates into different attitudes towards European transfers: while Manchester fans argue for major transfer advantages through Champions League participation, Newcastle fans distinguish themselves from the top clubs by being unable to afford potential top players.

#### ***4.2.3. Comparison across leagues – top clubs vs. underdogs***

The fans of Sturm Graz and Manchester United are similar in that they show a moderately European focus with a strong national league imprint. The main rivals of the self-perceived top clubs are other top clubs in their domestic league. They both emphasise the significance of European club competitions but differ in their expectations. The fans of Sturm Graz view European club competitions as rather exceptional while for Manchester supporters participation is a must. The fans of Newcastle United and Wacker Innsbruck are alike in that European club competitions are not relevant for

them. They resemble each other in seeing their club as an antithesis to top clubs in their leagues and beyond, based on their lack of financial means. But they differ strongly in their perspective on potential transfers. While the Newcastle United fans centre their discussions on statistical information about performances of players from all around Europe, the Wacker Innsbruck supporters mainly discuss players from Austrian leagues who they seem to know well.

#### **4.2.4. Comparison of leagues – ABL clubs vs. EPL clubs**

The fans of the EPL clubs differ from those of the ABL clubs in their respective perceptions of their own leagues and in their reference frame for potential player signings. The EPL is universally understood to be a top league and the fans have internalised that their clubs are attractive for players from other leagues. The transfer discussions indicate that they do not mind about the background of the players, but rather focus on 'neutral' criteria such as data on goals, assists, etc. The articulations of Manchester United and Newcastle United fans also reveal that it is in part the economic might of the EPL that opens windows of opportunity for considering the broader European and international player market for signings. For the Austrian fans, their reference frame is mainly the national league, even though it is seen as a second-tier league in the context of Europe. Here, 'being Austrian' also matters for their view on players.

## **5. Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to evaluate how football fans in a different league and club contexts reflect the Europeanisation of football in terms of identity. We specified an analytical framework with two dimensions that cover football-related dynamics of a Europeanisation of identities: *communities of belonging* and *frames of reference*. The online message board analysis indicates that such fan identifications differ across leagues and across clubs. Inclusion and exclusion patterns, the main manifestations of *communities of belonging*, exhibit the biggest difference across leagues. The assessment of players is regularly connected to 'being Austrian' among the fans of the two ABL clubs. In contrast, the EPL fans have a more inclusive perspective on players from all over Europe. Their schemes of inclusion and exclusion are mainly based on individual performance.

The *frames of reference* differ mostly according to the club's prospect to play European. The fans of the two clubs that rarely compete in Europe mostly ignore these competitions. For the two clubs frequently playing in European competitions, the relevance of this competitive level diverges. The Manchester United fans see 'Europe' as an appealing and commercially warranted level of competition, but also as a potential ground of failure. The Sturm Graz fans have a more relaxed view on European competitions as 'extraordinary moments'. However, both clubs' fans seem to agree that their eventual focus is still on the national competition.

Our study analysed two clubs of a league that stands at the forefront of European football and two clubs of a league that plays a minor role at the European level. These differences are traceable in the debates of the supporters. The EPL fans are focussed on Europe (and beyond) when discussing players, resembling the notion of

their league as the first 'global football league' (Millward, 2011), where local rivalries remain relevant, but transnational spaces shape the business (Taylor, 2018). They perceive a global space with a dominating European centre as their 'community of belonging' with regard to the inclusion of potential players. The EPL has not only shaped the views of those fans whose clubs regularly compete in Europe but also seems to influence the attitudes of the less successful ones through the prevalence of international players across all clubs in the league. The ABL fans mirror the reluctant Europeanisation of Austrian football, which has been influenced by political intervention. The public discussions of the increase in 'foreign players' and measures against it, e.g. the introduction of a financial compensation based on the playing time of Austrian players (Brand et al., 2011), seem to have left their traces on the minds of football fans.

These results corroborate the Europeanising effects of the game on fan perceptions, identifications, and life worlds from earlier studies (King, 2000, 2003; Millward, 2009). They furthermore expand existing knowledge in at least two regards: First, the comparative approach confirms the relevance of situation and context for matters of identity formation (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 14). Structural conditions, such as the formal regulation of the player market, ensuing degrees of Europeanisation and internationalisation and the standing of a league in continent-wide competition (resulting in different chances of national champions to play in Europe on a regular basis) seem to be main shapers of the respective fans' identity work. In contrast, wider societal and political forces seem to be of less importance, as we can trace Europeanised identification patterns – even if to differing degrees – in two rather Eurosceptic country contexts.

According to our analysis, EPL fans can be assumed to be used to international, most significantly European, squads in their teams for many years. Hence, normalisation effects in line with Europeanisation are more advanced. Only consequently, players are most likely to be assessed on the basis of merit and performance, much less often so on grounds of their place of origin. Interestingly, this effect also seems to hold in case of a club, which is a relegation battler more than a frequent participant in European-level competition. The ABL, in contrast, has been a 'late adopter' in terms of player market liberalisation, which is reflected in the relevance that fans still attribute to the national belonging of their players. This only is further hardened through the peripheral status of the ABL in European football and the lack of frequent European-level exposure.

Second, despite clearly detectable Europeanising influences, the term 'post-national identity' (King, 2000) should be used with care in this context. While the fans of a European top club such as Manchester United might express self-understandings that highlight the *local* embeddedness in a *European* competition context, with comparatively low emphasis on the *national*, this cannot be generalised as a phenomenon valid across clubs and leagues. Our analysis shows that national belongings still matter when structural conditions reinforce them, be it the regulations of a player market, or the lacking prospect of competing at the European level. As the case of the Austrian relegation battler Wacker Innsbruck demonstrated, the combination of a lack of exposure to European-level matches and an only moderate Europeanisation of players

markets pushes followers of the team towards more regionalised and localised patterns of attention *and* identification. On the other hand, the marginalised position of the ABL in the context of European football seems to activate only little national enthusiasm among fans. Similarly, they remain distant to the football played on the European level, in effect leaving them in an ambivalent position. While the above shows the potential role of the structural Europeanisation of football for the formation of more Europeanised identities through this leisure world activity, its effects cannot be taken for granted, nor assumed to be uniform across the continent.

Enlarging previous studies, our analysis shows that fans do not only position themselves towards the Europeanised *governance* of the game (García & Llopis-Goig, 2020). Frequent exposure to Europeanised players markets and competition and even an often-resented peripheral status in European (supposedly 'elite level') football shapes their self-understandings and reference frames considerably. Even more intriguing, Europe does not mainly serve in exercises of 'othering' or as a symbolical punching bag in the eyes of football fans. In contrast, aspects of it seem to get ever more normalised, and even appreciated: the European level as the home of true competition and world class players to be fancied and followed, Europe as the arena of extraordinary events, or a place of longing. Our analysis hence hints at the existence of some 'subconscious Europeanisation' of larger segments of fans *through* football; a process which seems to unfold alongside, or is even cut off from growing *political* Euroscepticism within the respective embedding societies.

Building on the findings of this paper, future research may probe whether our findings are also valid in different (regional) contexts, for instance in Eastern Europe, or in countries at the periphery of Europe that have never been EU member states. In addition, it would seem to make sense for follow-up studies (using different methods) to compare football fans with non-fans in order to determine more precisely the importance of the effects that the life-worldly context of football has on the formation of (Europeanised) identities. Finally, future research may analyse the impact of major contemporary trends and events – both exogenous and endogenous to football, such as Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic (and the subsequent development of regulatory capitalism) or the failed proposal for a European Super League – on (the Europeanisation of) football fan identities.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Overview of all threads, the links (as of April 10th 2019) and the number of posts in each thread and in total.

Sturm Graz		
Rivalry		
Season 16/17	No of posts	
Graz vs Red Bull Salzburg, 11.12.16	189	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109561-19-runde-sturm-graz-vs-red-bull-salzburg/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109561-19-runde-sturm-graz-vs-red-bull-salzburg/</a>
SV Ried – Graz, 17.12.2016	234	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109623-20-runde-sv-ried-sk-sturm-graz/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109623-20-runde-sv-ried-sk-sturm-graz/</a>
Season 17/18		
Graz – RB Salzburg, 25.02.18	578	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/113141-24-runde-sk-sturm-graz-rb-salzburg/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/113141-24-runde-sk-sturm-graz-rb-salzburg/</a>
FK Austria Wien – Graz, 17.12.2017	498	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/112720-20-runde-fk-austria-wien-sk-sturm-graz/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/112720-20-runde-fk-austria-wien-sk-sturm-graz/</a>
Ajax vs. Graz, CL Quali, 25.07.18	426	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/114667-2-qualirunde-champions-league-sk-sturm-graz-ajax-amsterdam/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/114667-2-qualirunde-champions-league-sk-sturm-graz-ajax-amsterdam/</a>
Graz – Larnaca, EL Quali, 09.08.18	735	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/114729-3-qualirunde-europa-league-sk-sturm-graz-aek-larnaca/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/114729-3-qualirunde-europa-league-sk-sturm-graz-aek-larnaca/</a>
Transfer		
Season 16/17		
Sommertransfers 17/18	180	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109905-sommertransfers-1718/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/109905-sommertransfers-1718/</a>
Season 17/18		
Wintertransfers 17/18	2238	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/111822-wintertransfers-1718/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/111822-wintertransfers-1718/</a>
Misc.		
Season 17/18		
Sturm in Europa 2018/19	743	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/112738-sturm-in-europa-201819/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/112738-sturm-in-europa-201819/</a>
Total (Sturm Graz)	5821	
Wacker Innsbruck		
Rivalry		
Season 16/17	No of posts	
Spiellethread 16/17	361	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/107737-spielthread-201617/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/107737-spielthread-201617/</a>
Der Gästesektor im Fokus	93	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/105991-der-g%C3%A4stesektor-im-fokus/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/105991-der-g%C3%A4stesektor-im-fokus/</a>
Erste Liga Saison 16/17		
3. Runde: FC Wacker Innsbruck – WSG Wattens	97	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4305">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4305</a>
12. Runde: WSG Wattens – FC Wacker Innsbruck	235	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4310">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4310</a>
10. Runde: FAC Wien – FC Wacker Innsbruck	284	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4324">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4324</a>
35. Runde: SC Wiener Neustadt – FC Wacker Innsbruck	199	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4321">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4321</a>
Season 17/18		
Spiellethread 17/18	448	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/111371-spielthread-201718/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/111371-spielthread-201718/</a>
Erste Liga Saison 17/18		
19. Runde: FC Blau Weiss Linz – FC Wacker Innsbruck	75	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4363">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4363</a>
35. Runde: SC Wiener Neustadt – FC Wacker Innsbruck	57	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4396">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4396</a>
14. Runde: FC Wacker Innsbruck – WSG Wattens	17	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4424">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4424</a>
14. Runde: FC Wacker Innsbruck – WSG Wattens	75	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4387">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&amp;t=4387</a>
Transfer		
Season 16/17		
Kader 17/18	401	

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**Table A1.** Continued.

Sturm Graz		
		<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/110313-kader-201718/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/110313-kader-201718/</a>
Season 17/18		
Kaderplanung Winter 17	133	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&amp;t=4397">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&amp;t=4397</a>
Kader 18/19	277	<a href="https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/113713-kader-201819/">https://www.austriansoccerboard.at/topic/113713-kader-201819/</a>
Kaderplanung Somer 2018	512	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&amp;t=4413">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&amp;t=4413</a>
Misc.		
EL/CL 2016/17	17	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&amp;t=4309">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&amp;t=4309</a>
EL/CL 2017/18	18	<a href="https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&amp;t=4371">https://tivoli12.at/forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&amp;t=4371</a>
Total (Wacker Innsbruck)	3299	
Manchester United		
Rivalry		
Season 16/17	No of posts	
Man Utd 1:1 Arsenal Post-match discussion	711	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-arsenal.423841/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-arsenal.423841/</a>
West Ham 0:2 Man Utd Post-match discussion	354	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-west-ham-united.425161/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-west-ham-united.425161/</a>
St. Etienne 0:1 Man Utd Post-match discussion	155	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-as-saint-etienne.426515/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-as-saint-etienne.426515/</a>
Season 17/18		
Man Utd 1:2 Man City Post-match discussion	885	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-manchester-city.434412/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-manchester-city.434412/</a>
Newcastle 1:0 Man Utd Post-match discussion	649	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-newcastle-united.436488/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-newcastle-united.436488/</a>
Man Utd 1:2 Sevilla Post-match discussion	996	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-sevilla.437260/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-sevilla.437260/</a>
Moscow 1:4 Man Utd Post-match discussion	250	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-cska-moscow.432758/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/post-match-vs-cska-moscow.432758/</a>
Transfer		
Season 16/17		
Summer Transfer Window 2017	736	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/summer-transfer-window-2017.429333/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/summer-transfer-window-2017.429333/</a>
Season 17/18		
Your ideal 11 – 2018/19 and outs (being realistic)	522	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/your-ideal-11-2018-19-and-outs-being-realistic.438172/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/your-ideal-11-2018-19-and-outs-being-realistic.438172/</a>
Misc.		
Most hated ex-united player	387	<a href="http://www.redcafe.net/threads/most-hated-ex-united-player.439133/">http://www.redcafe.net/threads/most-hated-ex-united-player.439133/</a>
Total (Manchester United)	5645	
Newcastle United		
Rivalry		
Season 16/17	No of posts	
Match day thread – NUFC v Leeds	283	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8820">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8820</a>
Match day thread – Brighton & HA v NUFC	595	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8760">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8760</a>
Season 17/18		
Match day thread – NUFC vs. Liverpool	215	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9044">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9044</a>
Match thread – Watford v NUFC	58	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9357">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9357</a>
Final match thread – NUFC v Chelsea	74	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9370">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9370</a>
Match Thread: Newcastle vs Spurs – 13/08/17	298	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8979">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8979</a>
Match day thread WBA v NUFC	256	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9123">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9123</a>
Transfer		
Season 16/17		
NUFC minor untrusted transfer rumours winter 2017	998	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8612">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8612</a>
Season 17/18		
NUFC minor untrusted transfer rumours summer 2018	1461	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9285">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9285</a>

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**Table A1.** Continued.

Sturm Graz		
Other Clubs Transfers Summer 2018/19	300	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9390">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9390</a>
Misc.		
Champions League Draw	5	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9274">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9274</a>
Champions League Semis	7	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8834">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=8834</a>
Saturday football: Champions League and Play Off Finals 2018	92	<a href="https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9388">https://toonforum.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&amp;t=9388</a>
Total (Newcastle United)	4642	