Literature Review: Soccer Fans on the Internet

LIBR 200: Information Communities

Carolyn Goebel

Dr. Debra Hansen

San José State University

Fall 2014
Introduction

With the increasing prevalence of new technology, soccer\(^1\) has become more globalized than ever. Today’s soccer fans around the world can quickly and easily connect with one another for discussions and the exchange of information. A long-held distrust of official sources of information drives international soccer fans in growing numbers to unofficial and fan-mediated sources (Green, 1999). The virtual communities that spring up around these sources and other social media, websites, wikis, and message forums offer an unprecedented opportunity for soccer fans to discover vast quantities of information ranging from technical knowledge and statistics to the personal lives of soccer players and fellow fans. It is this burgeoning accessibility and innovation that warrants further studies into how soccer fans seek and discover information, what types of information they are searching for, and how they use this information their day-to-day lives.

Scholarly discussions regarding soccer fan communities on the Internet cover a wide range of topics. This review will explore several prominent studies that researchers have conducted, including: the motivations fans seeking information on the Internet; how traditional soccer culture is reflected and maintained by online fan communities; debates

\(^{1}\) For the purposes of this literature review, the phrases “soccer” and “football” are interchangeable; however every effort is made to refer to the sport as soccer when possible for consistency, with the exception of proper names and direct quotes. Any reference(s) to American Football are notated as “NFL.”
over authenticity of fanship in the online context; the innovative methods fans use to retrieve information; and how soccer fans use the Internet to maintain identities. By studying the information seeking behavior of online soccer fans, these scholars have shed light on a vast and intriguing community that should be the subject of further study.

Review of Writings

Previous research focused on the information-seeking behavior of soccer fans on the Internet centers on the frequency with which they access team websites. Studies by Joinson (2000) and Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Feys (2002) discuss theories of how fans engage in basking in reflected glory (BIRG) or cutting off reflected failure (CORF) depending on the outcome of a game. Both studies determined that there is an increase in a team’s website traffic after a victory, although Joinson observes that due to the anonymity of online activity, “the need to protect one’s self-image by ‘cutting off reflected failure’ does not influence information seeking on the Internet” (188). While these studies are revealing of fans’ information seeking habits in relation to their team’s success, Joinson has also acknowledged that there is a need for further studies to assess “how information gathered on the Internet is used socially afterwards” (189).

Other scholars have taken to online forums to observe how soccer culture translates into virtual fan communities. Wilson (2007) analyzed fan interaction and information sharing on American-based website BigSoccer.com. His findings revealed that the Internet provides an essential function for Major League Soccer (MLS) fans in the United States who are widely dispersed geographically, and whose league “lacks traditions and stronger identity” and has “no history of generational or geographically
based loyalty” in comparison to more established leagues around the world (381). In this study, Wilson argues that virtual communities fulfill an essential function in connecting fans and addressing information needs in a country that is perceived by fans to undervalue soccer in favor of “Big Four professional team sports leagues – the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), and National Hockey League (NHL)” (383).

Palmer and Thompson (2007) make similar comparisons regarding the significance of online activity for Australian soccer supporters known as the “Grog Squad.” The authors emphasize the use of the Internet as a means of maintaining fan identity (197). Kerr and Emery (2011) also share a study in which foreign fans of Liverpool Football Club described their various motivations for supporting the English Premier League club. Their findings showed the Internet’s role “as an important agent in the socialization of [foreign] fans” (884). For one respondent in their study, online interaction and information access provided “an experience as close as [they] can get to actually being at Anfield” (890).

There are other aspects of football culture that have been almost too easily transferred and, in a way, revived by the establishment of soccer fan communities on the Internet. In his article regarding racism in online message boards, Cleland (2013) studies discussions between English soccer fans about the prevalence of racism within the sport. With the aid of virtual interactions between fans, he demonstrates the enabling effect of

---

2 Referred to by the authors as “satellite supporters.”

3 Anfield is the official stadium of Liverpool FC.
social media and developing technologies in allowing anonymous racist commentary. The author observes that while the Internet provides a unique opportunity for soccer fans to “engage in everyday asynchronous discussion concerning footballing and non-footballing matters,” it also provides platforms for propagating the same racist attitudes that soccer authorities continually campaign against (427). Significantly, Cleland found that when it comes to social issues within the context of football, often “it is the fans who challenge each other’s views on certain topics” (428).

Another controversial topic in the study of online soccer fans is the concept of authenticity of fanship. Several scholars have contributed to the discussion of what separates an “authentic” fan from an “inauthentic” fan, a distinction that is rapidly losing significance as soccer fans worldwide become engaged in virtual fan communities. Gibbons and Dixon (2010) argue that drawing lines between soccer fans based on their tendency toward live attendance or online activity misses the point entirely, as a significant amount of fans who engage in online information sharing are in fact the same fans that attend live matches (604). This idea is consistent with Palmer and Thompson’s assertion that these communities “[involve] a high level of participation” and that the frequent reliance on Internet resources serves to “[blur] the traditional demarcation of leisure and nonleisure spheres football fans typically adhere to” (197). Indeed, a study by Bodey et. al. (2009) revealed that large numbers of Hispanic soccer fans in the United States prefer to use the Internet in conjunction with television and other forms of media
to consume soccer culture, although many are deterred by the stark disparity in quality Spanish language content in relation to its English language counterpart (59).

Richard Green’s (1999) article analyzes the shortcomings of “official” club and league information resources and how they breed mistrust among information seeking soccer fans:

“A number of pressures contribute to the perceived level of misinformation. Firstly, there is the pressure of finding enough accurate information to fill the necessary column inches. Secondly, information has more filters to pass through; clubs, owners, shareholders, sponsors, players, and players’ agents all have a vested interest in manipulating information in their own interests. Thirdly, clubs have become more adept at PR and in handling the media” (4).

Green proceeds to argue that this mistrust in official information sources led to the creation of fanzines in the 1980s, which provided fans with abundant sources of unofficial information in addition to an outlet for sharing their perspectives. The author attributes fanzines as having “an enormous influence on the way the game is represented in the media and official discourse…[setting] the tone for a new style of football writing, in which the fans’ point of view is paramount” (2). At the time of publishing, virtual soccer fan communities were still in early development, but Green observed how “[hypertext] links allow fans to navigate their own paths through the masses of sites devoted to football, allowing for a flexibility and multiplicity of choices that suits the

---

4 Hispanic fans reported “consuming two-thirds of their online content in English” (59); Bodey et. al. cite Mummert (2007) in suggesting that Hispanics perceive Spanish language versions of websites to be inferior to English language versions.
voracious, and often haphazard information seeking behavior of football fans” (5). While only forty-five percent of the clubs surveyed in his study had websites at the time, he accurately predicted that the Internet would be instrumental in the expansion of access to information for soccer fans (5).

Although the Internet provides international soccer fans with a stunning array of free resources, Theysohn (2006) published interesting findings on fans’ willingness to pay for match reports on the Internet. International supporters were reportedly willing to pay an average of up to seventy-five percent more than national supporters to access streaming and download services (27). He calls attention to the potential for soccer clubs to provide paid information services to increase revenue, and to innovate new forms of distribution to consumers to increase their “international appeal” (30).

Interestingly, Gibbons’ (2011) report on representation of English national identity among English soccer fans reflects a general tendency toward the primacy of club teams over national teams (873). While fans tended to feel better represented by the English national team when they experienced success, they often identified more with their local club rather than the national team, the latter of which tends to be comprised of highly paid professionals from London. One fan in Gibbons’ study thought that players on the English national team “only [represent] themselves” (872). This article stresses the importance of locality for the majority of English fans, and a need to feel represented in an age where “multi-layered” identity is so common (876). With this need it is easy to understand how soccer fans, especially those expatriate fans that are no longer able to attend live matches and engage in face-to-face interaction with their peers, can use the
Internet as a means to stay connected with their club’s local fan community and to stay abreast of news and information about their club.

Conclusion

The wealth of studies published regarding the information seeking behavior of soccer fans presents a great diversity of topics to explore. While there is debate regarding authenticity of soccer fans who engage in online activities, scholars agree that the Internet has broadened access to information for soccer fans around the world, and that virtual communities provide new opportunities to exchange various types of information. While previous studies have focused on how and what causes soccer fans to seek information online, there is further need to study their evolving information needs, the unique information gathering benefits of online interaction with other fans, and the uses for information in their lives.
References


Kerr, A. K., & Emery, P. R. (2011). Foreign fandom and the Liverpool FC: A cyber-

