



Netnography on Football

Fans online attitudes towards football

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the behavior of football fans within online communities. What is intended is to understand how people live the daily life of clubs, what influence sports have in their well-being and how they interact with each other using online platforms. The approach used to conduct the study was Netnography. A qualitative tool of marketing studies conducted through the analysis of high volumes of data collected online. The data collected during the study were treated using a thematic approach in which it was possible to disclose the main themes of the research based on the collected volumes of information. The results suggest that there is a quasi-religious nature in football. Clubs appear to be as cults followed by legions of loyal fans. It was possible to discern a recurrence of verbal violence and that this appears through people subject to doses of frustration. This disillusionment may have internal or external sources. That is, it may stem from unpleasant news related to the club object of support or from the success of the rival club. After presenting several conclusions, the report highlights some implications of this behavior. At the end of the dissertation some improvement opportunities for clubs are disclosed based on the supporters' complaints and some suggestions are provided for the moderation of the conflict and hostility

Resumo

O presente estudo vise compreender o comportamento dos fãs do futebol no seio das comunidades online. O que se pretende é perceber de que forma as pessoas vivem o dia-a-dia dos clubes, que influência o desporto tem no seu estado de espírito e de que forma é que estas interagem entre si utilizando plataformas online. A abordagem utilizada para a condução do estudo foi a Netnografia. Uma ferramenta qualitativa de estudos de marketing através da análise de grandes volumes de dados recolhidos online. Os dados recolhidos durante o estudo foram tratados com o recurso a uma abordagem temática na qual foi permitido eleger os temas principais da pesquisa com base nos volumes de informação colecionados. Os resultados sugerem que existe uma natureza quase religiosa no futebol. Os clubes parecem ser cultos seguidos por legiões de fãs leais. Foi possível vislumbrar uma recorrência de violência verbal e que esta surge através de pessoas sujeitas a doses de frustração. Essa desilusão pode ter fontes internas ou externas. Isto é, pode advir de notícias indesejadas relacionadas com a clube de apoio ou com o sucesso do clube rival. Depois de apresentar várias conclusões, o relatório apresenta algumas implicações deste comportamento. No final da dissertação são destacadas algumas oportunidades de melhoria para os clubes com base nas reclamações dos adeptos e são providenciadas algumas sugestões para moderação do conflito e hostilidade

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Researcher's Note

Throughout this report, several quotes from the study of online communities will be presented. It is important to disclose that some of the citations were slightly manipulated due to the offensive language of their original content. Although the explicit language could allow a better understanding of the behavior of the participants, the decision was not to present any expletive given that this is an academic work and so as not to hurt any susceptibilities. However, it is advisable to state at this point that some improper language and insults were kept

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Definition and Relevance

It is safe to say that football is the most followed sport in the world. With huge numbers of followers scattered around the globe, this sport has been climbing on several topics.

According to the Annual Football Finance Report published by Deloitte in 2018, European football is worth 26€ billion.

Clubs revenues have grown exponentially, as has the industry salary level. To get a sense of the magnitude of this sport, Paris Saint-Germain (French club) paid in 2017 more than 200€ million to acquire the services of Neymar (Brazilian player). A growth accelerated in the last 10 years. If in 2009 the record value paid for a player was 76€ million, today, more than a dozen deals occurred for higher values.

The magnitude of the spending is linked to the rampant revenue evolution. This evolution has a clear connection to the well-known supply and demand law. Fans are increasingly consuming this entertainment and are willing to pay more for it.

Although far behind, Portugal contributes to these figures through its three top clubs, SL Benfica, FC Porto and Sporting CP. These clubs, in addition to holding a large share of local consumers, earn annually revenues exceeding the 100€ million barrier.

In the 21st century, we also witnessed the boom in social networks and the elimination of almost all communication barriers. Nowadays, anyone can give his or her opinion on any topic. Numbers from the Marktest Group, collected in 2018, point to 5.3 million users of this type of platform in Portugal.

Thus, it becomes pertinent to understand what type of relation the Portuguese population has with a sport that does not seem to stall its growth. Like any other industry, the consumer sustains the growth of football revenues and notoriety. Therefore, it is fundamental to understand his motivations and how the interaction between people from different online communities impacts football and clubs and how supporters deal with the increasingly fierce rivalry between clubs.

1.2. Objective and Research Questions

This thesis pursues to explore online interactions between football supporters. As the three clubs in study all compete to, not only emotional and sportive pedestal, but also for financial and economic leadership, it is of key importance to uncover how consumers deal with rivalry and with the day-to-day of the teams they support. Throughout the study, it is intended to disclose how people talk about the sport itself and what kind of relevance the outcomes of the different football events have for their well-being. Specifically, the objective is to observe and explore different online communities where people interact about the topic and withdraw conclusions for the research questions. As an exploratory study, it seeks to discover qualitative insights to uncover the motivations and attitudes of people towards football. Additionally, it pursues to find out how people interact with each other and how, not only sports events, but also different opinions influence their behaviors.

Research question:

Q1: How do people talk about football online?

To reveal relevant insights that can help answering to this question, the following sub-questions will be explored:

Q2: How do people deal with rivalry?

Q3: What triggers people to talk about football?

Q4: Who are the supporters and why do they talk about it?

Q5: What is the impact of football in their behavior?

Q6: How do they interact with each other?

Q7: What are the implications to the clubs and the football environment?

These questions shall allow us to understand what supporters think of when they talk about whatever happens in football and the role played by the clubs and other institutions in the moderation of the chat between supporters.

1.3. Structure of Thesis

This dissertation is divided into six key chapters. First, the problem and relevance of the study are defined. Here, the formulation of research questions is displayed. Afterwards, it is highlighted a review of academic literature regarding sense of belonging, sports fandom and online communities. Then, further information on the industry is provided.

On the fourth chapter, the methodology used is finally explained. Here the reader will find an exhaustive description of all the procedures used. The methodology explanation is followed by the analysis of the thematic findings and its uses.

Finally, the report closes with a summary of the main conclusions, implications and limitations founded.

2. Literature Review

This section presents a review of academic literature on the paper's main research topics: Sense of belonging and football fans online behavior.

2.1. Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is defined as the experience of individual participation in an organism or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an essential part of that organism or environment (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema & Collier, 1992). A system can be a relationship or organization, and an environment can be natural or cultural. According to the authors, there are two dimensions of sense of belonging: (1) valued involvement: the experience of feeling valued, needed, accepted; and (2) fit: the person's perception that his or her characteristics articulate with the system or environment. In other words, belonging implies object relationships and identity (Kestenberg & Kestenberg's, 1988).

A preeminent human concern is establishing and retaining relatedness to others, social institutions, environments, and self (Berlin & Johnson, 1989). One constituent of this link between the self and the set of surrounding environment is a sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992). Maslow (1943) wanted to understand what motivates people. He believed that individuals possess a set of motivation systems unrelated to rewards or unconscious desires. The author stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs and that when one need is fulfilled, a person seeks to fulfill the next one. The most widespread version of Maslow's (1954) works, regards a hierarchy of needs. It includes five motivational needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, belonging is a basic human need, ranked third and stated as condition to obtain self-esteem and actualization.

Anant (1966) addressed belonging as, somehow, the missing conceptual link in understanding mental health and mental illness from a relationship/interactional perspective. The same author defines belongingness as a "sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable part of the system" (p. 21). It implies recognition and acceptance of a member by other members in a group (Anant, 1966).

Kestenberg and Kestenberg (1988 p. 536) noted that belonging is an important component of identity and object relationships. As people grow old, they tend to develop a sense of belonging not only to the family, but also to the community, the nation, and a cultural group.

As for other studies, these feelings of inclusion can be a component of other constructs. Steinkamp and Kelly (1987) linked subjective social integration to feelings of belonging and being loved and cared. Lindgren (1990 p. 469) concluded that social support provide people the chance to feel acceptance and affinity and believe that they are esteemed and valued, and part of a network or association of mutual obligation.

Examples of the previous statements have been suggested over time. The lack of a sense of belonging was identified as the common denominator in the mental breakdown of Israeli soldiers during war. Every battle-stricken soldier described feeling cut off and uprooted, abandoned, rejected, and psychologically severed (Dasberg, 1976). Also, Kestenberg and Kestenberg (1988), reporting on discussion groups for individuals who had been child survivors of the Holocaust, related that many of them felt that they didn't belong anywhere in terms of country, social group, or age.

2.2. Sports and Fans Behavior

2.2.1. The Meaning of Sports

The reason why people join cults or become devoted to a certain brand or institution is that the group they join tends to make them feel happy and comfortable by being members (Dionisio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008). Thus, one of the most imperative tasks of cults and cult-like brands is that they form their distinction regarding other cults (Atkin, 2004).

Generally, it would be difficult to assume that there is any link between sport and cults or religions. Prebish (1993) points out that sport is a competitive, dynamic, and most of the times individualistic activity while religion is a non-competitive process founded upon cohesion of a social organization. However, Novak (1995) argues that sport is, in some ways, a religion. The author states that “sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection. The athlete may of course be pagan, but sports are, as it were, natural religions”. Sports have also an appropriated significant religious expressions and terminology as a means of expressing their sincerity, fervor, and seriousness. So, if sports can bring their affiliates to a different experience, and this experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and space then it is both proper and necessary to call sport a religion (Prebish & Heavenly, 1984) or, at least, give it a quasi-religious nature.

2.2.2. Sports Fans

The fact that the fans are so interested and excited about it is the essence of demand for the game (Borland & Macdonald, 2003). The support of fans fosters the sports industry and, so, the crowd is the highest authority without which the golden core of the game has no currency (Taylor, 2004). Sports-devoted supporters have a kind of cult with their club and it is possible to establish differences among several distinct fan typologies varying with the level of fan commitment. The associative behavior of sports fans is influenced by affiliation through the need for social recognition, socialization and symbolism (Dionísio et al., 2008).

Returning to the concept of sense of belonging previously addressed, being a fan allows individuals to be a part of the game without requiring any special skills or talent (Branscombe, Nyla & Wann, 1991). Plus, this kind of affiliation also offers people social benefits such as feelings of camaraderie, community and solidarity, as well as it fosters social prestige and self-esteem (Zillmann, Bryant & Sapolsky, 1989). What can also be called Fandom can also be defined as an affiliation in which a great deal of emotional significance and value are derived from group membership (Hirt, Zillmann, Ericksin & Kennedy, 1992).

However, it is not required to be a fan to be a spectator. Spectators may not necessarily be fans. They will observe a sport and rapidly forget about it, while fans will have more intensity and devote part of every day to it (Jones, 1997). The difference between a fan and a spectator seems to be a matter of degree of passion. A fan can be defined as an individual possessed by an excessive enthusiasm for sport (Anderson, 1979).

Over time, many scales and typologies to measure the degree of involvement of a fan were suggested. Concepts such as temporary, local, fanatical and dysfunctional (Hunt, Bristol & Bashaw, 1999), fanatics, regular and casual (Tapp & Clowes, 2002) or aficionado, theatregoer, passionate partisan, champion follower and reclusive partner (Stewart & Smith, 1997) are all tools used to understand supporters. Nevertheless, independently of the names given, it is not risky to say that commitment is the most used and accurate criteria to address these distinct levels of attachment and passion.

2.2.3. Fan Behavior

Many concepts such as loyalty, number of games attended or artefacts used can be used to define a typology of supporters. However, at the end of the day, the concept of commitment to the club is always present and cannot be split from any analysis of supporter loyalty. Fans manifest a different behavior according to their level of commitment, ranging from an

occasional attendance to the point that they assume the successes and losses of their club as their own (Hirt et al., 1992).

It is of key importance to understand the relevance and influence of results (wins or losses) on the consumer (supporter) behavior. It cannot be surprising to recognize identification with a winning team as a key component for game attendance (Kahle, Kambara & Rose, 1996).

Across various sports, team success is ranked as primary reason for following a team (Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996). For example, when it comes to the Baseball Major League (USA), 25% of variance in attendance attributes to team performance (Greenstein & Marcum, 1981). Therefore, a sports fan's major desire is to witness their favorite team success (Zillmann & Paulus, 1993).

Tajfel's (1986) Social Identity Theory can explain the way fans relate to teams. It explains that part of a person's concept of self comes from the groups to which that person belongs. An individual doesn't just have a personal selfhood, but multiple selves and identities associated with their affiliated groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The primary assumption of this theory is that individuals will seek to resolve attitudes that are not balanced or equitable.

Snyder, Lassegard and Ford (1986) raised the concepts of BIRG and CORF. The phenomenon of "basking in reflected glory" (BIRG) reflects the psychological nature of fandom and the premise of vicarious achievement. On the other hand, when a team fails, fans tend to distance themselves through a process known as "cutting off reflected failure" (CORF).

However, there is much more to fan behavior than that. While it is possible to state that supporters realization and self-esteem are drastically affected by the outcome of sporting events (Hirt et al., 1992), it can also be said that fans attain a feeling of pleasure simply through being fans (Kimble & Cooper, 1992).

2.2.4. Fan Commitment

Devoted fans (expected to continue supporting the team under any circumstance) are those who are affectively committed to the team and are proactively engaging in sustained behaviors (Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004). To sports psychologists and marketers, the accurate measurement of identification/commitment has a great deal of importance, since the reactions of sport fans usually a function of those levels of commitment/identification with the team (Wann & Pierce, 2003).

Instead of being treated as a binary variable (commitment or its absence), commitment can be better represented through a continuum range, from partial commitment to absolute commitment (Malhotra & Galletta, 2003). Other way of looking at it is the three-component model of commitment, composed by the three components: continuance, normative and affective (Allen & Meyer, 1996). Moreover, the same authors (1996) stated that sports fandom can be considered something that is passed through generations and treated as inheritance (people inherit the team just as they would inherit a given family value).

The quasi-religious nature of sports lead to the possibility for a great propensity for self-serving biases. Meaning, high-identified fans tend to justify team victories in terms of internal controllable factors such as ability and explain defeat through external uncontrollable factors such as poor refereeing (Richardson, 2004). Most committed fans also have higher pre-game expectations and strong emotional reactions during and after a game and are less inclined to be objective and rational about the team's previous, present and future performances (Madrigal, 2002). This bias effect emerges, principally, in situations involving a threat to a person's social identity (Wann and Grieve, 2005).

2.2.5. Fan Affiliation

The constant desire for positive distinctiveness from other social groups motivates people to group affiliation (Madrigal, 2002). In affiliation, viewing the club as a part of one's self identity is one of the most important steps in the identification process.

Individuals get a sense of identity from their connections to social groups and use group affiliations and the social identity derived from them to form self-images that they were unable to build otherwise (Tajfel, 1982). Greater identification leads the individual to attribute desirable characteristics of the group to the self, and to assume a greater similarity with other group members (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). People seek to maintain and enhance a positive social identity by affiliating themselves with attractive social groups (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). After recognized as group members, the achievement of positive self-esteem is obtained by positively differentiating their own group from an "out-group" on valued dimensions (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The mechanism of the role adoption is a constituent of identity reinforcement or social recognition in sport. The fan social recognition facet is particularly relevant as sport takes place unequivocally within the context of society's significant symbols with impact on the

actors' self-perception and self-esteem, combining, that way, self-recognition with social recognition (Weiss, 2001).

Donnelly and Young (1998) argued that the process of socialization can be turned into a deliberated act of identity construction as the newest affiliate starts to purposely assume mannerisms, attitudes, and ways of dressing, speaking and acting that he or she recognizes to be typical of established members. According to the authors, such perceptions among neophytes are frequently stereotypical. Moreover, Richardson (2004) debated that in a socialization process, a fan attains a custom of cultural behavior from the team as a way of conserving dissimilarities between classes or fan categories. This socialization can be traced back to childhood. Jacobson (2003) refers to the fact that boys are regularly socialized into sports at an early age through both paternal encouragements and marketing means.

In addition to socialization, persons could convert into fans just as a mean to attain group membership or to be a part of a joint unit.

The utilization of cult symbolism is linked to fan groups. Products become social tools serving as means of communication between the individual and his significant references (Banister & Hogg, 2004). Consumption arises as the bonding value surrounding a common passion. Sports and football clubs, in particular, are full of symbols such as T-shirts, flags, scarves and a huge diversity of memorabilia (Dionísio et al., 2008). Each consumer becomes an illusion consumer that buys images, not products (Elliot, 1999).

2.3. Social Media and Online Platforms

As the online social networks grow and gain popularity, a new world of communication and collaboration has been created. Billions of individuals around the world are connected and networked together to create, collaborate, and contribute their knowledge and wisdom (Cheung, Chiu, and Lee, 2011).

In the last decades, the "science of networks" has developed into a thriving field of social scientific inquiry (Watts, 2007). This is because, in part, of the popularization of social network sites where individuals are allowed to (1) construct public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Allison, 2007).

This new form of media, also known as consumer-generated media, describes a wide set of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers to educate each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004).

In 21st century, consumers are turning their backs to traditional advertising sources like television, radio or newspapers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In addition, they demand more control over their media consumption. On-demand and immediate access to information at their own convenience is, now, required (Rashtchy, Kessler, Bieber, Shindler, and Tzeng, 2007).

Therefore, the 21st century is witnessing an explosion of Internet based messages transmitted through social media. This concept (social media) borders a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums, which include blogs, company-sponsored discussion boards or chat rooms. They have become a major factor in influencing a variety of aspects regarding the consumer behavior including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behavior, communication and evaluation (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), turning it, that way, into a powerful tool for marketing research in the context of Netnography. As a method, “netnography is faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography, and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews. It provides information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups”. (Kozinets, 2002).

For sport institutions, the Internet is a distinctive way to communicate, sell and market to their fans and potential consumers (Blazska, 2011). It also provides sport organizations a channel of communication to spread news about their programs and create an increased brand awareness (Wallace, Wilson and Miloch 2011). With the fast grown influence of social media (Safko, 2010), sports fans started to use these innovations to be connected to their favorite sport teams in a daily basis.

Nowadays, sport corporations are realizing the benefits of social media and are seeking new and more effective ways to use them as a part of their overall marketing and communication strategies (Coyle, 2010).

2.4. The Literature and the Study

The present study seeks to correlate the three main topics addressed before: the sense of belonging, sport and online communities.

Through an exhaustive netnography research, it is intended to understand the dynamics that exist in the rivalry between fans of different clubs and to ascertain their behaviors and what motivates them.

To do so, the study tries to understand the importance of football in people's daily life and what contribution it has, if any, to the mood of a fan. From there, it will seek to determine what factors trigger these emotional stimuli in people and how they behave within a community. The study of the interaction between supporters aims at perceiving how people from the same group or different groups relate and how they deal with one another's opinions, whether they are concordant or discordant.

From there, it should be possible to come up with major themes of analysis about what moves people within the sports phenomenon and confirm, or not, the cult nature that football may have in Portugal.

The final goal of the report will be to draw relevant conclusions and implications that could serve as a basis for marketing strategies or implementation of new measures or regulations by institutions that gravitate towards football.

3. Further Context on the Industry

3.1. Football in Portugal

The three clubs addressed on this study are FC Porto, SL Benfica and Sporting CP. These clubs compete with each other in the Portuguese Championship. In addition to these three, more 15 clubs participate in this competition. Each team plays two games against each of the participants, one of which in their stadium and the other in the opponent's field. This tournament is played on a points system. The win is worth three points, the draw is worth one point and a defeat is worth zero points. After each team has played 34 games, whoever conquered more points wins the competition. Also regarding to the first qualifiers, the first two hold a place in the next season's Champions League (a competition played by the best clubs of the different European championships) and the third and fourth place guarantee a place in the Europa League (a kind of second division of the Champions League). The teams that finish in the last two places will have to play the Portuguese second division the following year, being replaced precisely by the two best teams of the Second League, which is played in the same way as the Portuguese Championship.

Two main institutions organize and manage Portuguese competitions. The Liga de Portugal (League of Portugal), which has under its leadership the planning and control of the first and second divisions (the only Portuguese championships that are professional) and the Federação Portuguesa de Futebol (Portuguese Football Federation), which in addition to supervising Liga de Portugal is in charge of organizing the amateur and regional football competitions.

The Liga de Portugal responsible for one more competition: the League Cup. This competition is played between clubs of the Portuguese Championship and the Second League in a system that starts with a draw of games. The winner of each game will advance in the competition and the losers are eliminated. The last 8 clubs in the competition are separated into groups of 4 teams and play against each other in a points system. The top two finishers from each group advance again to a knock out phase to determine the winner of the event.

With regard to the Federação Portuguesa de Futebol, it controls two more competitions. The Portuguese Cup, which is played between all of the first three divisions clubs and is played in games in a knock out style until the last two teams in the competition play a final to find out the winner, and the Supercup which is played in a single game between the winners of the

Championship and the Portuguese Cup. It must also be said that football at European level is regulated by UEFA¹ and worldwide by FIFA².

Football matches are played in 90 minutes, divided into two 45-minute parts, with a 15-minute interval between them. Each team plays with 11 players, with the coaches having at their disposal 7 players on the bench. Of these 7, only three can enter the field, in substitution of any player who is playing. The games are refereed by 4 referees, one principal and three assistants, whom enforce the rules of the game.

3.2. Online Football Communities

There are several types of online communities linked to football. In this dissertation will be given focus to social networks, forums and news websites. As far as social networks are concerned, communities are created by an administrator and each person has to have administrator approval to join the community. In this type of community there are greater barriers to entry and a lesser degree of anonymity, as individuals typically enter communities through their personal profile account. The forums are slightly different. The administrator posts discussion topics and those present discuss them. However, access to these communities is less restricted, since everyone is accepted, and members are usually protected by nicknames that grant them anonymity. Lastly, news websites are the ones that differ most. If in previous ones its main purpose is to reunite the adepts of football, in these sites the main objective is to inform these same followers. Due to the growth of platforms such as those mentioned previously, the administrators of these sites have inserted in each news space for fans to comment through the insertion of comment boxes. Although the fact that the access is free and everyone can enjoy anonymity, if they wish so, there is more censorship here so that site administrators preserve their reputation.

Despite their differences, all these communities have tools that serve the same ultimate utility: allowing fans to get in touch with each other and exchange ideas and arguments about football and all that goes on around this sport.

¹ Union of European Football Associations

² Fédération Internationale de Football Association

4. Methodology Summary

4.1. Introduction

As previously addressed in the literature review, social media and other online platforms have become a major factor in influencing a variety of aspects regarding the consumer behavior including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behavior, communication and evaluation (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Because of that, online communities arose as an important marketing tool in the context of Netnography. This methodology is the core of this dissertation and the support for all the research and its conclusions. Proposed and developed by Kozinets (1998), it is a market research procedure. It uses information published and collected in online forums to recognize and comprehend the needs and motivations of relevant consumer groups within a given context (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography is no more than a way of conducting online ethnographic studies. This is the use of Internet and what is discussed in the cyber world to reach qualitative market research. It adjusts ethnographic research techniques to the learning of communities and cultures emerging through online communication among communities members. When compared with traditional offline ethnographic methodologies, netnography consumes a considerably smaller amount of time and requires less elaboration and complexity. A key difference and an important asset of this type of research, when compared with traditional offline ethnographic methodologies, is that it is unobtrusive. As the context in which the participants are inserted is not fabricated or influenced by the researcher, netnography is substantially less obtrusive than interviews or focus groups (Kozinets, 2002). This way, it offers the researcher the possibility to get access to behaviors that occur in a natural and genuine way that probably would not occur otherwise and this as a particular applicability when dealing and studying tension and conflict among the sample members. This provides relevant information and opportunities to the relationship between the researcher, the consumer and the marketer (Kozinets, 2002).

Therefore, netnography appears to be a suitable methodology to disclose and interpret the forces that potentiate conflict within football fans. It is intended for it to allow the investigation of online football fan communities and understand when, why and how conflict arises and the triggers behind it, eventually leading to significant academic inferences regarding the theme. Moreover, being a marketing research tool, it might emerge as a source of important information that can have several managerial implications to the different

institutions that gravitate towards the phenomenon of football on how to better understand the topic of conflict, take advantage of its positive impacts, and mitigate its negative effects.

Hence, this method gains particularly relevance to understanding conflict as a result of a quasi-religious nature of the football culture (Prebish and Heavenly, 1984) that may lead to the possibility for a great propensity for self-serving biases such as justifying team victories in terms of internal controllable and explaining defeat through external uncontrollable factors (Richardson, 2004). Also, it is important to keep in mind that a great deal of emotional significance and value are derived from group membership (Hirt, 1992) and that, after recognized as group members, the achievement of positive self-esteem is obtained people through positively differentiating their own group from an “out-group” on valued dimensions (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). All these aspects might lead to frustration that latter turns into tension, which enforces arguments that, in the worst-case scenario, detonate insults and verbal violence, reinforcing the need of a methodology that can attain and perceive the participants instinctive behavior and opinions shared.

Netnography, as other market research techniques, contains some limitations. It requires great interpretive skills from the researcher as emotions are harder to address through online interaction and the absence of informant identifiers present in the online context leads to struggles in associate the results to outside of online community groups (Kozinets, 2002). To diminish the effect of this limitation, a researcher must wisely and prudently outline similarities among groups and use multiple methods of triangulation to be able to generalize the findings and insights collected through Netnography (Kozinets, 2002).

This master thesis intends to come to a grounded knowledge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as it is an ethnographic study. It will be carried out inductively and the insights collected from it will be used to form theories and reach conclusions and implications. Consequently, Grounded theory is going to be the base to interpreting and exploring the collected data.

4.2. Online Communities Selection

As this paper studies the online behavior of football fans and the geographical focus is Portugal, the community chosen was “The Big 3 Community”. In other words, the supporters of the three biggest clubs in Portugal, Sport Lisboa e Benfica, Futebol Clube do Porto and Sporting Clube de Portugal. The reason behind this choice has to do with the amount of traffic and number of messages and opinions shared and with the sample size. A study conducted in 2009 by a German marketing Research Company called SPORT+ MARKT pointed out that

these 3 clubs combined have 4.6 million supporters just in Portugal. Moreover, as the clubs compete for the same objectives, the rivalry between them finds no parallel within other Portuguese clubs and so it can be said that this community is composed by different people, with clear different interests and expectations that might lead to both in-group and out-group conflict.

The websites of the three daily sports newspapers operating in Portugal (A Bola, Record and O Jogo) as well as the football forum Contra-Ataque and the social media platform Facebook were chosen to be the platforms in which interaction and opinions were studied and evaluated and so, were this research took place. Groups and communities established on Facebook were chosen as the main platform since the traffic there is considerably higher and is accountable, the interaction among members is clearer but principally because, since there is no moderation or censorship, more severe natures of conflict can be observed, and that is of key importance when conflict is being addressed. On the other hand, there is no way to know or quantify how many fans are present in forums or view the sports news websites and there are managers and, as such, offensive language is deleted.

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The initial search around the topic of conflict was carried out broadly. The concept of Sense of Belonging allows individuals to be a part of the game without requiring any special skills or talent (Branscombe, 1991). This concept was also important to acknowledge that as people grow old, they tend to develop a sense of belonging not only to the family, but also to the community, the nation, or a cultural group (Kestenberg and Kestenberg, 1988). Moreover, as sports can bring their affiliates to a different experience, and this experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and space then it is both proper and necessary to call sport itself a religion (Prebish and Heavenly, 1984) or, at least, give it a quasi-religious nature. Thus, one of the most important tasks of cults and cult-like brands is that they establish their difference (Atkin, 2004).

Keeping in mind that bias effect emerges, principally, in situations involving a threat to a person's social identity (Wann and Grieve, 2005), on the platforms dealt, any signs of out-group arguments were exhaustively reviewed and assumed as relevant for the study. As there are different levels of commitment within the same group (Hunt, 1999) and that individuals may have divergence of opinions regardless of the group they belong, in-group arguments arose. Thus, also here, any kind of frustration or argument was taken in account to analysis.

Offensive language was a red flag during all the research and, many times, a starting point to understand the conflict rather than something that come out in the final of the information treatment. The study of this arguments lead to relevant out-group (e.g. corruption, referees, football matches) and in-group (e.g. players and team performance, manager job, boarder management) focus of tension. This focuses lead to the keywords associated such as names of people and clubs used in Google search engines and also in the search engines of the platforms (websites, forum, Facebook) used to additional exploration of conflict interactions.

As the football season is currently taking place and the phenomenon is somehow volatile, it was crucial to follow the process and identify the events that were heating the passion and contributing to the emergence of conflict situations.

Having said that, on the websites, 67 news topics were analyzed, making a total of 1483 comments, from which 631 were deemed relevant based on the levels of frustration and tension perceived among the participants. When it comes to the forum (Contra-Ataque), it is already divided in categories, which facilitated the process of search. In it, 32 topics of discussion where examined, and 18 were counted as important for the research given the richness of interaction and the relevance of the signs of tension. Finally, 53 of Facebook posts were read, with a total of 1964 comments analyzed and, following the parameters of evaluation used for the website and the forum, 819 recognized as significant.

In addition to online ethnography research, two member checks took part through semi-structured interviews (Galletta & Cross, 2013) in order to complement, confirm and better explore the data gathered and build ground knowledge about the dissertation's theme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The two participants were chosen because of the frequency of activity in the communities studied and the richness of their interventions taking in mind the study's topic. Both of them assumed that they rarely misses a match of his favorite club and defined themselves as "fanatic" (Participant 1) or "passionate" (Participant 2) and as "everyday participants" in social media groups attached to the teams they support.

Data treatment was done through grounded research and a thematic network was built out of quotations based on codes, categories and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

4.4. Access to Communities and Participants

Access to the information and the communities was made through different steps and procedures. The researcher was already a member of some of the Facebook groups studied

and asked for permission to enter others. When membership was authorized, the contact with the administrator of the groups was established and a bid for the use and treatment of the information was made. Regarding the forum, the procedure was the same. In both cases, the administrator was the one responsible to warn the community about the study and to ask for their permission. When it comes to the websites, the information was public and no contacts were established with the commenters.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

As previously stated, the researcher informed the administrators of Facebook groups and the forum about the study he was about to conduct and explained its relevance and objectives before start using the data provided by the community for academic purposes. Any kind of personal information disclosed by a participant in any post or topic of discussion was left aside. All the names, nicknames or any form of identification captures in these platforms were replaced by invented designations (e.g. Participant 1).

During all the research, participants were treated with respect and anonymity. They were free to ask for exclusion from the study at any given time of it and that request would be promptly be accepted with no need for explanation or reason attached.

The researcher committed himself to take the well-being of the participants as a maximum priority through the compliance of rigorous ethical standards.

5. Result Analysis: Ethnographic Themes

5.1. Support

The first theme highlighted is the support given by the fans to their teams. Here, the researcher selected all the quotes where people showed appreciation for their club. Much more than a spectator, a fan is one who devotes part of his or her day-to-day to the club (Jones, 1997). This type of affiliation offers people a range of social benefits as a sense of belonging and promotes their perceived social prestige and self-esteem (Zillman, 1989). This type of feeling and connection to clubs is the fuel that drives people to their manifestations of support. This support is displayed in two different ways. First, it can be presented by an emotional, but rational and always cordial way.

About Benfica's president:

Member 1: *"Great President and great man! Como on Benfica!"*, **Member 2:** *"15 years of glory! Thank you President."*

Quotes greeting FC Porto's president, manager and some players:

Member 3: *"President and Conceição³ Sérgio must be congratulated! The winning DNA is finally back to our club!"*, **Member 4:** *"Another victory without pimples! Brahimí and Marega⁴ are the best African duo in Europe"* **Member 5:** *"Oh Conceição, make Porto champion!"*

Sporting fans saluting their club:

Member 6: *"We must give the benefit of the doubt to Varandas⁵. Found the club practically dead and is trying to lift it! Be strong President!"*, **Member 7:** *"This coach would never be my first choice, but I have to admit that the team has played very well! Long live the Sporting Clube de Portugal!"*

Moreover, it can be manifested by exacerbating the emotional levels which lead to irrationality and to biased and malicious behaviors and assertions.

FC Porto fans about their club and adding some comments on their rivals:

³ FC Porto manager

⁴ FC Porto players

⁵ Sporting CP president

Member 8: *"That's how I like it! Without fear of words! Great Conceição, smash all lamps⁶! We are Porto",* **Member 9:** *"Everyone is with a heartburn because of Portos' goal but we do not forget that the pigs of Benfica are all corrupt."* **Member 10** (reaction): *"You pig tripeiro⁷, you cheat bastard!"*

SL Benfica fans about their club and adding some comments on their rivals:

Member 11: *"Against everything all! Let's go to Porto, smash those provincials!"*, **Member 12** (reaction): *"Provincial is your aunt!"*

This latter type of support has been addressed throughout this report and is often a starting point for the issues of frustration and conflict. The same can be said for the kind of reactions to these expressions of support, coming from fans of the same club or rival supporters.

To conclude, it can be interesting to read part of the responses the two respondents gave to the final question made. ("If you could send any message for the manager of your club and all the players, what would you say?")

Participant 1: *"You did a great job last year and I really thank you for that. You made a tremendous effort. (...) However, we're facing a new challenging season and it is fundamental to beat Benfica again! (...) Blue and white is the heart⁸!!"*

Participant 2: *"We cannot lose the title again! I'm asking you to work hard until the limit of your strength to overcome our rivals! (...) I'm counting on you to embrace the spirit of the 6 million Benfica fans all around the country and lead us to Marquês de Pombal⁹. (...) Glorious SLB¹⁰!!"*

It is important to note the support they give to the teams and how they demonstrate that the success or failure of their club is linked to their mood. The fact that none of them was able to leave rivals out of their message (showing desire to win and also the wish to see rivals lose) and the way they used "we" instead of "you" (proving they feel part of the team) are data allowing to prove several assumptions made throughout the study.

⁶ Pejorative name for SL Benfica fans

⁷ FC Porto fans

⁸ Colors of FC Porto are blue and white

⁹ Place where Benfica fans celebrate

¹⁰ Sport Lisboa e Benfica

5.2. Distrust

The second theme raised during the research highlights a clear distrust of people regarding football and, above all, the integrity of those who run the clubs and the different sports institutions or the referees. To get a sense, each of the three clubs has already seen its name mentioned in corruption scandals this century. In 2006, FC Porto was convicted, and later acquitted, for supposedly paying referees to decide on their favor. Most recently, a Sporting director was also accused of buying a referee and Benfica saw his name involved in a supposed network of influence peddling. Every time a quote about these scandals or regarding accusations of cheating were read, they were addressed to this theme. Although none of these cases has been proved so far up to now, they have contributed to the total disbelief of the people regarding Portuguese football and its agents. However, it seems clear that there is still a general resignation and that this is not enough to keep people out of the game. On the contrary, it brings the supporters closer to the clubs they support. This happens, mostly, because there seems to be an evident emotional irrationality among most of the “cybernauts¹¹” that end up advocating that corruption is a common practice among opponents and that in their club management practices are serious and honest.

Here are some quotes proving it:

About the 15th anniversary of SL Benfica president as leader of the club:

Member 13: *"15 years of stealing, lying, coercing..."*, or **Member 14:** *"15 years stealing and deceiving the fans of Benfica!"* and **Member 15:** *"FCP¹² titles were all conquered without merit."*

In the first three examples, we can see that there is a clear devaluation of the successes of opposing clubs by discrediting their merits.

In other cases, although a panorama of discredit is maintained, it was often observed during the research to the assumption that as all follow dubious paths, these practices become almost acceptable since they cover all the agents. At this point, the topic of discussion changes and the most important thing is to address the most corrupt one.

Still regarding the SL Benfica president anniversary:

¹¹ Online platforms users

¹² Futebol Clube do Porto

Member 16: *"In the cheat ratio who goes first? The cheaters from Porto."* or **Member 17:** *"Which is the most corrupt club in Portugal? I spare you the job: FC Porto!"* and **Member 18:** *"Ignorance abounds above all the rival fans. They think in their clubs are all serious. LOL".*

Here it becomes relevant how members disclaim the less correct actions of their clubs by making such practices acceptable through the argument that the neighbor performs worse acts.

We should add to the discussion a statement from one of the respondents mentioned on the methodology chapter.

Participant 1: *"I am an FC Porto fan and I like football from an early age. I have always wanted to work in football and more specifically in the club that I love. (...) Today this dream is stagnant because I think it is a promiscuous world and I believe that to have any success I would violate my principles. (...) At this moment, I do not feel capable of doing it, but I never say never. The truth is that it is my great passion."*

It is interesting to note that the interviewee clearly assumes a disbelief in relation to football that, nevertheless, does not distance him from the sport nor prevent him from being a regular presence in the games of the club he supports. In addition, he ends by saying that although he does not see himself violating some of the moral principles he has in order to work in this environment, he ends up admitting that it is not a totally excluded hypothesis.

Prebish and Heavenly (1984), sports, and football in particular, lead supporters to express themselves through rituals, symbols, and their own terminology, which gives the sport a quasi-religious nature. And it is this nature that often leads to biased judgments and to the Fundamental Attribution Error (Ross 1977). Richardson (2004) explained this theory and linked it to sports fans and events. He stated that fans tend to justify their teams victories in terms of controllable internal factors such as skill and talent and to explain failures through external factors such as inadequate refereeing or other external and uncontrollable factors.

5.3. Frustration

The third theme found in the research carried out was frustration. Comments expressing feelings of discomfort, sadness, irritation or anger, were allocated to this theme. These feelings can be triggered in many ways, as any unpleasant news about a club leads to fans feeling such frustration. A bad result, bad refereeing or an injury or exit from a major player

are all examples of internal factors that trigger feelings of sadness in supporters. Similarly, whenever an opposing team wins a victory, regardless of its character, it will contribute equally to the fans of a particular club to feel deceived. These kinds of feelings are manifested in different ways. Madrigal (2002) argues that more fervent supporters have stronger emotional reactions and tend to be less objective and rational about the present and future of their club. The study allowed, in a way, to confirm this thesis. If some people can maintain some rationality and coolness in the analysis of each of these adverse events, a significant majority ends up being lost in the emotional intensity with which they live the day-to-day of the club and ends up using the curse words and the insult to express their frustrations.

Let's take a look at some quotes regarding this topic.

In relation to a player refusing to renew his contract with FC Porto and his imminent departure from the club:

Member 19: *"Go away! Ungrateful"*, **Member 20:** *"Idiot! Go and never come back! Badly grateful"*, **Member 21:** *"Agree! Should have gone a long time ago, We do not need him!"* or **Member 22:** *"One word only: OUT!"*

About the same topic:

Member 23: *"Sad to see him leave! He's looking for better conditions for his family, cannot judge!"*, **Member 24:** *"Gave everything he had and he was not forced to do more! Portistas¹³ should be grateful for everything he did"* and **Member 25:** *"He is being ungrateful to the club but it is undeniable that gave us many joys! Remains to wish him good luck"* regarding the same topic.

The examples illustrate a situation in which frustration comes from an internal factor, that is, the disillusion that falls on the supporters in a reaction to a news that comes from the club they support. The differences are obvious. If in the first group of adepts insult and irrationality take control the people, in the second group we can see some of the few examples where people show respect to the player and to each other. Although they might show a certain rational sadness (member 23) or dissatisfaction with the player's behavior (member 25), they have the coolness to demonstrate it with some calm and wish him good luck for the future.

¹³ FC Porto fans

Finally, once again, it is important to add a statement from an interview respondent on the subject.

Participant 2: *"I live football and my club passionately. (...) Football has a great deal of importance in my state of mind and provokes in me emotional reactions, positive and negative, of great intensity. I have the notion that it probably affects me more than it should. (...) I want to see my team win but I would say that the pleasure I take away with a win from my club is proportional to what I feel when my clubs' biggest rival loses. The same applies to moments of sadness."*

It is important to emphasize the assumption that football is a decisive factor in the day-to-day of this participant and that is a strong emotional aspect of his life. The participant also reveals an awareness that it may be an exaggeration leading me to believe that there is something irrational and almost uncontrollable in the way this fan lives the phenomenon of football. Another relevant aspect is that the participant affirms without great reservations that the success of his club and the failure of his rival gives him similar doses of happiness.

Hagerty et al. (1992) said that the sense of belonging is defined by the idea that strong personal involvement in a system, group or culture leads people to become an integral part of that system. By transporting this concept to football, being a club member allows each individual to feel an integral part of the club without having to have any special talent (Branscombe, 1991). In this sense of belonging there is an enormous emotional meaning (Hirt, 1992). Thus, the almost umbilical relationship with the clubs potentiates the emergence of frustrations. A fan's disappointment may come from in-group sources or out-group sources. Since the greatest desire of a supporter is to see their club winning, it can be said that in the case of more committed supporters they end up assuming the successes or failures of their club as their own (Hirt, 1992).

5.4. Conflict

Finally, differences of opinion and interaction between supporters (being them supporters of the same club or different clubs) leads to what is the third and perhaps most important theme taken from the research that is the conflict. This theme is no more than a consequence of all the other themes discussed. This theme arises when people engage in discussions and moments of distrust, frustration or even support motivate reactions in others. Affiliation with a certain group (club) is motivated by the constant desire for a positive differentiation in relation to another social group (Madrigal, 2002) and it is through this distinction that the

supporters obtain stimuli that allow them to increase their self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner , 1986). Moreover, it is when a group or person feels under the threat of an external group or being that biased and irrational behaviors arise (Wann and Grieve, 2005) in the incessant quest to defend their social group. The same is to say that the greatest source of conflict encountered during the study are external factors. That is, there is a substantially higher rate of conflict between supporters of opposing clubs than between people belonging to the same group, as can be proved in the following set of quotes.

Quotes about a possible referee mistake that resulted in an FC Porto goal:

Member 26: *"Usual cheaters are back! Another dirty victory of the corrupt ones!!"*, **Member 27** (reaction): *"You're an insult to human intelligence! Open your eyes ... Victory more than fair!"*.

Quotes about a possible referee mistake that resulted in an Sporting CP goal:

Member 28: *"Who does not cry does not breast! So much did the lizards¹⁴ cry that the good old Capela¹⁵ helped them!"*, **Member 29** (reaction): *"Shut up you fool! Get into the life of your own club that has a lot of corruption lawsuits to defend for himself!"*

Quotes about a possible referee mistake that resulted in an SL Benfica goal:

Member 30: *"Another victory to the club of the regime¹⁶ and its priests¹⁷!"*, **Member 31** (reaction): *"Jackass! Ironic you saying that after Felipe's¹⁸ irregular goal! Crook"*.

Although with a lower frequency than the discussions between groups, frustration also serves as base for the discussions between supporters of the same club. These emerge through the irrationality and lack of objectivity that Madrigal identified in more fervent adepts that makes them unable to accept criticism or accusations against their club and which clashes head-on with some opinions issued by more rational followers.

Regarding the supposedly bad financial results of FC Porto:

¹⁴ Pejorative name for Sporting CP fans

¹⁵ Football referee

¹⁶ Association of Benfica to the dictatorial regime of Salazar

¹⁷ Pejorative name for referees

¹⁸ FC Porto player

Member 32: *"In the past none of this happened! SAD¹⁹ was composed of competent people who anticipated these situations and protected the club."* **Member 33** (reaction): *"Wash your mouth before you talk about our president, stupid! You must remember all the titles he has won!"*

About accusations that evolved Benfica in a corruption scandal:

Member 34: *"I'd like the president to explain everything printed in the press. This silence is deafening. If it's true what is written in the emails²⁰ the board must resign."* **Member 35** (reaction): *"Shut up, you traitor! You're certainly a dragon²¹ infiltrated in this group! Here ordered by J. Marques²²? Bastard!"* **Member 36** (reaction): *"You see how it is! Have the judgment and respect not to say more"*

After former Sporting president, Bruno de Carvalho, being set off the club board:

Member 37: *"Mr. Bruno de Carvalho²³ only hurt Sporting. Just let the club move on!",* **Member 38** (reaction): *"Son of a gun! Because of supporters like you that we haven't not won a championship for 17 years! The Sporting of BdC²⁴ belonged to the people and all its supporters will fight so that it returns to be"*

These examples (one per club) attest to the fact that the conflict does not emerge only in guerrilla situations between clubs, but also among club supporters distinguished by their levels of emotional stability and their quasi-religious devotion to the club.

Moreover, during the two interviews held there was a statement on this topic that particularly drew me to attention.

Participant 1: *"I have many friends from Benfica and Sporting. I can talk to them about football with fair-play, even though I always defend my club. (...) I never got involved in any disrespect when I went to a stadium to watch a football game. (...) My online behavior is different. Not infrequently, I take more aggressive and irrational behavior when I see comments from strangers who go against my opinion or attack my club. (...) I don't know if*

¹⁹ Sociedade Anónima Desportiva: Sports company

²⁰ Some e-mails from Benfica's employees were revealed and led to accusations of corruption

²¹ FC Porto fan

²² FC Porto Director

²³ Sporting CP former president

²⁴ Bruno de Carvalho

it's because of me being behind a screen or because I'm protected by a false name, I don't usually give it any thought"

When one can think that behind a keyboard and with more time to reason and rationalize respect and kindness could be more potentiated, the truth is that it is assumed that respect ends up being more present in situations that require immediate reactions and less time for reflection. Although the participant was not able to admit in the interview, the security and protection that distance and the possibility of concealing identity ensure may be the most logical explanation for such attitudes and a starting point for further research.

5.5. Other Relevant Data

Although not present in the previous paragraphs due to the fact that the chosen citations better explained the themes and topics addressed, it is important to reveal other quotes with a great deal of relevance to the next chapter: Conclusions and Implications.

The first set of quotes regards the dissatisfaction of the supporters about the way they are treated by the police forces when they visit the stadium of a rival team to support their club. The following citations come from FC Porto's fans after a match against SL Benfica.

Member 39: *"Treated us like animals! Accuse us of being dangerous but resort to the trunk for everything and nothing!",* **Member 40:** *"Filthy pigs! We just want to support our team!",* **Member 41:** *"Treated us like a pig waiting for the slaughter! If you want respect, respect us!"*

The second group of quotes relates to the fans disappointment because of the fact that they are not allowed to attend their team's practices anymore. Apparently, in the past, they were able to do it and so they seem to develop some kind of nostalgic frustration about the topic.

Member 42: *"I don't know why there aren't any open practices anymore. The players are now unreachable gods.",* **Member 43:** *"Agree! In my time the players communicated more with the fans, we could attend the training sessions and they were still in the end to distribute autographs!"* **Member 44:** *"Benfica doesn't organize autograph sessions anymore. We miss it!"*

Moreover, it was also possible to glance a significant number of complains about the price of the tickets. The following set of citations regards that topic.

Member 45: *"If you want full stadiums start adjusting the price of the tickets. Thieves!",* **Member 46:** *"They are rich and don't want to know about the poor! How can these prices*

be??", **Member 47:** "I would love to take my family to football but at these prices I cannot even get a ticket for me!", **Member 48:** "I would like to understand why the Bullfighting VAT is 6% but football pays 23% ... Shame on you!"

Rather than the prices, also the schedules of matches can create tension among supporters. FC Porto fans usually get stressed out because of the late night matches. Here are some examples.

Member 49: "Another game at night. I would like to know if it's FC Porto controlling the schedules of games or if it's SportTv", **Member 50:** "Only others are allowed play in the afternoon??", **Member 51:** "Another game without wife and children. Urgent to solve this question!", **Member 52:** "I see others playing at 16h, 17h, 18h and Porto games always after 20h30 ... I don't understand!", **Member 53:** "Do you want to keep families away from football??"

Finally, another relevant data obtained by the study refers to the partner companies of the clubs. It was possible to observe a relevant amount of comments from supporters identifying themselves with their club's sponsors and asking peers to do the same.

Member 54: "Benfiquistas²⁵, let's unite around our sponsors and ignore the sponsor of the cheat club. At my place NOS²⁶ dictates rules", **Member 55:** "It's for these and other reasons that I only drink Super-Bock²⁷!"

All of these cases and topics require measures to diminish the number of triggers of frustration and conflict in football.

²⁵ SL Benfica fans

²⁶ Portuguese telecommunications company (sponsors Benfica and Sporting CP)

²⁷ Portuguese beer producer (sponsors FC Porto and Sporting CP)

6. Conclusions and Implications

6.1. Conclusions

As mentioned earlier, this study was carried out in order to observe, understand, explain and justify the way football lovers, specifically the fans of the 3 most famous clubs of Portugal, live the day-to-day activities of the club and how they behave and interact with online communities in which they participate.

This study relied on the netnography methodology. It was, therefore, possible to obtain, in a non-intrusive way, a significant amount of qualitative data. To the exhaustive analysis of large volumes of messages, comments and reactions followed the conduction of two interviews that allowed a more detailed and focused examination of the attitudes of the fans.

As stated earlier, Berlin and Johnson (1989) emphasized that one of the greatest human concerns comes from the need for it to establish and retain relationships with other people or institutions. The study has confirmed that there is an incessant need of belonging in football fans and that it is obtained through the affiliation and support to their club. This is the way people find to feel as an integral part of the club without having to have a differentiating talent (Branscombe, 1991). Hirt (1992) points out that there is a great emotional intensity in this sense of belonging, and Zillman (1989) reminded us that this same feeling has a significant impact on people's self-esteem. It is in this need of belonging but also in the desire for a positive distinction between social groups (Madrigal 2002) that the attitudes of the fans are leveraged in the moment of interaction.

Thus, the study allowed highlighting four main themes.

The first one is the support that supporters give to the club that is then the source for their attitudes and behaviors. It is, moreover, from the way in which this support and affection are demonstrated that the other topics covered in the report are triggered. Manifestations of support can be rational and emotional.

The second theme is the distrust. It was possible to perceive a general disbelief of the people in relation to the various agents who are part of a game or a football competition. Whether it is about managers, referees or, in some cases, players, it seems clear that there is an assumption that good practice and integrity are far from being a reality. However, when one might expect this distrust to keep people apart from the game, the opposite happens. In the ceaseless pursuit of supporters for defending their club, they end up uniting around a symbol

and tending to disclaim the agents affected by their club, advocating worse behavior in rival clubs.

The third topic was frustration. Given that the outcome of a sporting event has a strong impact on the self-esteem of a fan and that more fervent supporters take on the successes or failures of their club as their own (Hirt, 1992), the development of feelings of frustration becomes a constant. This feeling can come from internal or external sources and can be soundly and rationally manifested or, in the case of some, irrationally and biased. It is in the latter case that insult and blunders are observed as a form of expression of disappointment.

Because of support, frustration and distrust, the fourth theme, the conflict, arises. This conflict is sparked through the interaction and difference of opinion among fans, whether are they supporters of the same club or (as in most cases) opposing clubs. Here, as above, the rationality or lack thereof, play a primordial role. If in the case of cordial people the discussion can be processed through argumentation, what happens most often is that the insult and the accusation become the tool most used by the fans who, due to their level of commitment to the club, leave rationality out and give rise to innumerable cases of verbal violence.

In accordance with other studies (Prebish & Heavenly, 1984), the study concluded that there is a quasi-religious nature in football. Fans associate with their club (their symbols and rituals) and create almost unbreakable ties. Devotion to a cause becomes an integral part of their daily life and whenever this cause is under threat, every effort is made to defend it. It is this nature that gives rise to rivalry and that leads to aggressive and unreflective behavior.

6.2. Theoretical Implications

The study contributed to the collection of academic and social knowledge. Through a better and clearer perception of the behavior of fans in relation to football and their clubs, it allows a better understanding of people's need to feel part of something and the way they relate to cults and social institutions. The same is to say that, although new and deeper studies are advised to confirm it, the way an adept relates to his club can be compared to the way people live another social group to which they are affiliated, whether it be a religion, a political party or an activist movement.

The attitude of supporters towards football can be characterized by four feelings or behaviors: Support, distrust, frustration and conflict. All these reactions to the sporting phenomenon are

intimately linked to the experiences and events to which people are subjected and that provoke in them reactions. The source of each of these feelings or behaviors may be external or internal and the reaction may have rational or emotional bases. Concepts such as loyalty, commitment, rivalry and belonging find in many lines of this report grounds for their understanding and explanation.

As it was possible to notice throughout this paper, it also contributed to the confirmation of several academic works about the sense of belonging associated with sports and the relationship of fans with their club and their behavior in online communities.

Finally, the report made it possible to understand the usefulness and flexibility of netnography as a method of collecting qualitative information and an important source of data to aid in management and marketing decisions.

6.3. Practical and Managerial Implications

First, it is important to acknowledge the troubling social implication inherent in several of the behaviors we could witness throughout the study. There is a great deal of verbal violence (which carries the risk of becoming physical violence) that may contribute to the degradation of society and communities and, it is important to say, to the discredit of a sport capable of influencing the masses.

I believe that each one of us has a duty to fulfill regarding social responsibility and a role and a word to say in the functioning of society and the community to which they belong. As such, I consider it necessary to begin the approach to the practical implications of this study by putting considerations that may help mitigate the harmful consequences of the aggressive behaviors that were observed in the online communities studied.

As many of the reactions we observed were based on news and behaviors associated with sports agents, I believe that these have a fundamental role in the pacification of Portuguese football. Changing behaviors and ending inflamed speeches is the first step towards eradicating extremist behavior in football.

UEFA and FIFA have already launched, in the last years, some campaigns promoting fair-play and respect among fans by repudiating violence and racism. Portugal institutions could follow this example.

Then, because online control is much more laborious, it is important to educate offline to reap the rewards online. By this I mean that, it is up to the regulators, be they sports, security or

even political institutions, to punish aggressive and / or incendiary behavior to heal the moods and clean up the image of doubt that seems to stamp football.

In this case, it is important not to confuse regulation or punishment with abuse of power. The study showed that there is a clear dissatisfaction among the fans towards the police forces, which are accused of excessive recourse to violence. This often leads people to feel frustrated and also resort to violent behavior.

In addition, the media have an important role to play. Through their influence on people, they could, in partnership with clubs and federations, carry out campaigns to promote competitiveness and healthy rivalry between clubs and supporters.

As far as online communities are concerned, it would be interesting for clubs to intervene. In order to take advantage of the incessant desire of belonging of its fans, the creation of official forums of the clubs (besides the official pages in the social networks) would be an interesting measure. Being that one of the greatest wishes of the fans is to feel an integral part of the club they support, nothing better than the official forum of a club to express their opinions. With this measure the clubs could promote the cordiality in the behaviors and, still, collect interesting data for possible marketing actions or management decisions.

To close this topic, I leave the caveat that rivalry is one of the fuels of sport and that in no time should end. It is important that it exists and that it is fostered for the sake of the survival of clubs and sport. However, it can and should be fed without violence being present. Differences of opinion will always exist and it is important that this be so, as well as the discussion and healthy interaction between rivals in defending their club.

As far as management implications are concerned, it seems clear that the identification and affiliation of supporters with their club is one of the most powerful weapons that the club's leaders have and that can and should be harnessed. Few companies have a stronger and more loyal consumer base than football clubs. Whatever happens, even in a state of dissatisfaction with the club, consumers will continue to support it. Thus, fans become not only consumers but also club ambassadors and a cheap and effective WOM marketing tool.

This way, the creation of marketing campaigns that appeal to the sense of belonging and that approach the fans of the day to day of the football team will always have a positive effect.

There are numerous of online and offline campaigns promoting merchandising products, ticket sales or any other source of revenue associated with the message that each fan is important and an integral part of the club's successes. Communicating the message that the club's success is as dependent on supporter support as on the talent of players and coaches is a common and successful practice.

However, a lot more could be done. Besides that, clubs could and should create more moments of physical contact between supporters and players. It was possible to withdraw from the study that there is great admiration from the fans over the players, who are seen as heroes and that there is a great demand for such moments of contact between fans and players.

Another relevant fact mentioned several times was the price of tickets. There have been a number of times that complaints about the exacerbated ticket price have been found taking into account the Portuguese economic reality. The blame in this area is shared between clubs and political power.

It is important to carry out a review of the price of tickets for the games. Matching ticket prices becomes necessary to create greater affiliation between people and clubs. Revenue lost from falling prices can be recouped directly through increased buying and indirectly through the emotional bonding with fans that will boost sales of artifacts alluding to the club. Here, also the Government have an important role. Football matches are taxed at a rate of 23% (VAT). When compared to the tax rate (6%) associated with other entertainment events such as concerts or art presentations it is possible to perceive a huge difference. The possibility of dropping these tax rates could provide the clubs with more flexibility to balance the prices.

Still in relation to the football matches, it was possible to see, although mainly by fans of FC Porto, a discord and dissatisfaction regarding the schedules of the games. In a quick search in any search engine, it is noticed that FC Porto usually plays later than its rivals.

It is up to FC Porto, along with Portuguese football institutions, to review this issue. There is a clear discomfort among people about the late hours of the games. The word "family" often comes up in the discussion of this topic. As Jacobson (2003) refers, children are regularly integrated into sports at an early age through paternal encouragements. Thus, it is important to recruit new generations and to create the conditions for parents to take their children to the games. Otherwise, the club can be losing an important number of potential new followers.

Finally, another relevant data obtained by the study refers to the partner companies of the clubs. There have been a number of times, comments from supporters identifying with the sponsors of clubs they support and asking other supporters to do the same.

It ends up being a data of extreme relevance that brings benefits not only to the clubs but also to eventual partner companies.

On the one hand, it benefits clubs because it allows them a greater margin of negotiation and an ability to generate more revenue through a loyal consumer base (supporters) and to the sponsors because they guarantee a legion of consumers and take advantage of the externality that is the commitment of consumers to another entity. Still, the sponsorship decision should be studied in detail because if, on the one hand, a large and solid consumer base is gained, a large group that supports a rival can also be turned away.

It is perceived, therefore, that in the loyalty of the fans lies the basis for innumerable opportunities of business and improvement.

7. Limitations and Further Research

As this thesis is an exploratory qualitative study, it was carried out to address and understand the dynamics of rivalry between football fans within some particular online communities. Hence, insights raised from netnography can assume great relevance are in the corroboration or disproof of any of the concepts studied by past authors. However, additional quantitative and qualitative investigation is always advisable.

While this report presents an wide set of discoveries about sports fans behavior, reasonable limitations occur which require further research. As stated before (see Methodology and research design), this study was restricted to a narrow set of online communities, where sports fans met a change opinions and arguments. This included Facebook groups, a forum and a sports news website. In addition, the report was also limited to the study of the fans of the three biggest clubs in Portugal.

Therefore, the outcomes of this paper may diverge from studies conducted within a different set of communities. Perhaps, other online communities, would exhibit findings confirming and offering more relevant data regarding distrust, frustration, support and conflict as attitudes commanding the fans online activity or, oppositely, display information refuting this themes and associated conclusions. Consequently, it would be not only interesting but also advisable to explore behaviors on different online communities and on supporters with other club preferences.

Further research looking to assign the insights raised into new online communities must take caution (Kozinets, 2002). As stated earlier, the communities studied narrowed the study to only the fans of three particular clubs. Thus, transferring the conclusions to other communities where the audience relates to other clubs is not be advisable. As such, this dissertation proposes further exploration through netnography focusing on different sets of supporters.

This thesis also contains a selection bias regarding Portuguese-speaking audience and so, it is only representative of a certain culture. The discoveries may contrast if we would contemplate online networks from different languages, countries or cultures.

Moreover, in the study was revealed that fans are distrustful towards football matches results and outcomes, since they do not trust the intentions of football agents and institutions.

Nevertheless, it was also pointed out that this fact does not necessarily drives them away from football. On the contrary, it seem to make them engage even more with their clubs and be more active in its defense. Hence, it would be advisable to measure the importance of such attitude with a quantitative study.

Still regarding distrust, it was possible to link this theme to beliefs that corruption is a reality within the Portuguese football structure. Therefore, studies and research capable of proofing or disproving occurrence of such would lay foundation to justify these type of attitudes.

Some insights where identified to stimulate further quantitative and qualitative exploration into online football communities. Primarily, the triggers that turn frustration into conflict. Then, the significance of internal factor vs external factors in the arising of frustration and consequent conflict escalation. Also, the rational and emotional basis of the arguments and discussions and what triggers aggressive attitudes. Finally, the impact of conflict in football for the sport itself and to the society and in what ways can the interveners do to mitigate or explore it.

In short, this dissertation helped to dig into the importance of football in people's self-esteem and how do they behave in an online football community context. It suggests that such communities can be very complex due to the fact that interaction can promote aggressive attitudes that arise several social problems. Online football communities, can therefore provide researchers with a rich setting of insights helpful for managerial and social purposes and exploitation, and to guide further research into those communities and conflicts.

Appendixes

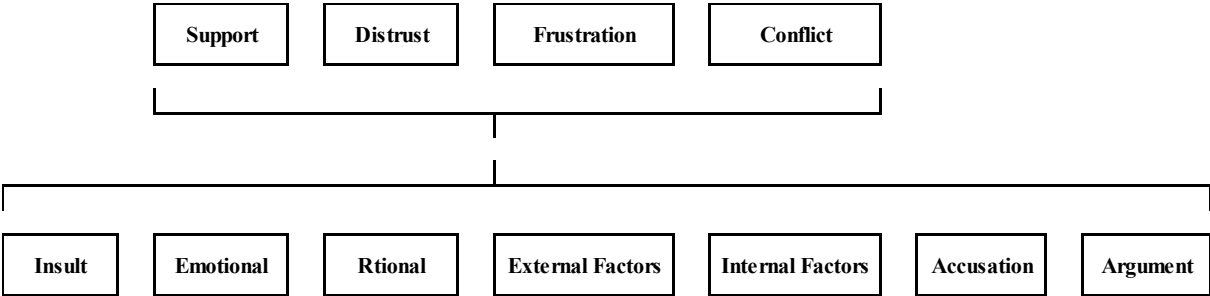
Maslow Hierarchy of Needs:



BIRG and CORF:

- To raise our self-esteem we often bask in reflected glory (“BIRG”) by associating with others who are successful.
- To protect our self-esteem, we will “cut off reflected failure” (“CORF”) by distancing ourselves from others who fail or are of low status.

Thematic Network:



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