

# “Tribalism among US-Based Premier League supporters groups: a tribal marketing perspective”

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## Tribalism among US-based Premier League supporters groups: a tribal marketing perspective

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the significance of tribal behavior within the soccer supporters groups, the significance of roles among group members, and the influence of the community on the consumption habits of members through conducting an ethnographic examination of American soccer consumers. Social identity, field-capital and tribalism theories were tested through ethnographic, non-participant observation. Three US-located supporters groups of English Premier League soccer teams were studied through Internet-based social networks, particularly discussion forums. Results showed that, people join tribes not only as means of identifying and self-actualization but also as a form of socializing. Additionally, membership status was implied to influence consumption of specific brands; and soccer supporter groups were suggested to be unserved market segments that possess rich potential for the corporate market if adroitly cultivated. Implications, limitations and direction for future research were also discussed.

**Keywords:** tribalism, soccer consumers, ethnographies, online discussion boards, cultural capital.

### Introduction

**Research aim.** As e-commerce evolves, the reconceptualization of the promotional mix is predicated on making effective communication decisions. Specifically, heuristics are required that enable the marketer to build a strategic approach which effectively adopt technological applications that prioritize consumer interactions and relationship building in a new media context (Cowles & Kiecker, 1998). Porter (2009) emphasized that modern day consumers have an appreciation of real-team interactions. As such, the adroit marketer must consider innovative means for reaching and interacting with and comprehending prospective consumers. One feasible consumer channel is tribalism.

Tribalism has been investigated across an array of marketing situations. Jurisic and Azevedo (2011) examined the role of tribalism in building customer-brand relationships in the mobile-communication market. This supplemented an early examination of Cova and Cova (2002) that investigated the tribal element in an urban community of inline skaters. More recent exposure to tribal related sport marketing was generated by Pedro Dionísio Leal and Moutinho (2008) through an assessment of fandom affiliation and tribal behavior relating to the Sporting Clube de Portugal, a prestige soccer club in Portugal. Although the study provided a wealth of insightful information regarding devoted fans' ability to associate some brands with the club, the study possessed a limited research scope of one nation, one organization and one tribe.

Despite the limitations of the Pedro et al's (2008) examination, soccer remains a rich setting to investigate corporate sport marketing concepts and

their linkage to consumer tribalism. The appeal of soccer extends well beyond the younger generation. Major League Soccer (MLS) in the US concluded its 2012 season with its highest ever viewership ratings (Kennedy & Mahoney, 2012), the 2012 European Championships were watched by 63% more Americans than the 2008 Championships (Buteau, 2012), and 13.5 million Americans watched the Women's World Cup Final between the US and Japan in 2011 (Nielsen, 2011). Fans are also turning out for matches in person. In 2011, the MLS overtook the National Basketball Association to become the third most attended sport in America, behind the National Football League (NFL) and Major League Baseball (Eisenmenger, 2011). Major European soccer clubs are increasingly touring the US during the summer off-season, as well. In 2012, a match between AS Roma and Liverpool FC at Fenway Park in Boston sold out (Eisenmenger, 2012), and more than 40,000 fans attended an exhibition match between English rivals Tottenham Hotspur FC and Liverpool FC in Baltimore (Lambert, 2012).

As interest in soccer in America has risen, communities have formed around the game. Often, these groups are formed by fans of a particular team in order to express identity and share in the consumption of soccer. These communities develop rites, rituals, and language unique to their group and tend to develop in-group favoritism. In these consumption-focused groups, often the role and status of members is determined by the level of individual identification with the team ("Biased Evaluations of In-Group and Out-Group Spectator Behavior at Sporting Events, 2005). The role of these consumption-focused groups on the consumption habits of individuals, and the implication for marketers, can be better understood through an application of the post-modern marketing theory of neo-tribalism, which

emphasizes a local sense of identification, religiousness, and group narcissism (Dionisio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008).

Tribal marketing assumes that social identifications have the greatest influence on consumption decisions, and that these consumer tribes can be understood and accessed through their shared beliefs and consumption habits (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011). The aim of this investigation is to assist sport managers and their corporate partners to understand the role of tribal communities in influencing the behavior of target consumers.

**Reasoning for the focus of this paper.** Soccer is no longer a marginal sport in America and other industrial nations. Professional soccer – both domestic and international leagues – is the second most popular spectator sport, behind the National Football League (NFL), among Americans age 12-24, and easily the favorite among American Hispanics of the same age, according to research by social scientist Dr. Rich Luker (2012). Given that this generation of Americans is larger than the Baby Boomer generation according to the US Census Bureau (Population, 2011), and Hispanics account for more than 18% of Americans aged 12-24 (Resident Population by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age, 2012), the opportunities for marketing through soccer cannot be ignored. However, as the corporate marketer evokes heightened attention to sponsoring soccer there must be prudent consideration of the return of this investment in sport (Maestas, 2009). As such, it is wise for the corporate marketer and soccer officials to gauge perceptions of target consumers (Chavanat, Martinet & Ferrand, 2009).

With the ongoing growth of electronic media, there must be an examination of effective mediums, for sport marketers to better understand the relevance of communications and their implication to building worth consumer and sponsorship exchanges. One developing opportunity to meet these specifications is the application of tribal marketing. According to Cova and Cova (2002), the emergent of the Internet and its salience an exchange platform provided the reemergence of community in a marketing sense. Consequently, the focus of this paper is designed to increase the extant literature on tribal marketing and its role in creating consumer relationships that provide utility for each stakeholder.

## 1. Review of literature

In the 1940s, during the post-World War II years, marketers began to allocate attention to the importance of creating consumer relationships. At the end of the war, Everett Smith, Director of Research at McFadden Publications, Incorporated, USA, conveyed that the war had been the consumer

and suggested as world markets progresses away from war that consumers will be bosses as they create jobs in a seller's market (Smith, 1945). However, the focus of this period was on consumption patterns instead of relationship building and consumer loyalty (O'Leary, 1945). Marketers' interests in the consumer intensified in the 1950s and 1960s. During the fifties, the objective was toward grasping the buying patterns and habits in retailing settings through employment of observational research (Applebaum, 1951). Further advocating was made for consumer research to interpret consumption patterns across social class segments (Martineau, 1955). During the 1960s, marketers began to assess relationships between advertising and buyer responses (Smith, 1965; Barach, 1969). In addition, investigators of this era were focus on consumer decision processes and their influence on product selection (Venkatesan, 1968).

Consumer behavior began to be better understood in the 1970s as Morrison (1970) studied adaptive consumer behavior on buyer choice, and Jones (1970) compared models of choice among toothpaste brands. Further efforts were made, during this era, to explore which particular factors induced product choice. Specific research directed by Lussier and Olshavsky (1979) found that brand choice strategy was contingent on task complexity and Cosmas (1982) examined the effect of lifestyle on product choice which generated results indicating products consumers purchase and consumer are influenced by lifestyle. The thrust of consumer research was, however, transformed from accentuating streams of inquiry focusing on the choice dimension to ones that attempted to explicate the behaviors of consumers from theoretical perspectives (Derbaix & Abeele, 1985; Hirschman, 1989; McCarty, 1989; Meyer, 1989). At the dawn of a new century, behavioral inquiry progressed to analyzing consumer socialization and its effect on advertising perceptions (Bush, Smith & Martin, 1999) and consumption (Rose, 1999).

Contemporary research has been oriented toward gauging the processes and structures of how consumers think (Barnham, 2012). Powers, Advincula, Austin, Graiko and Snyder (2012) indicated that that digital and social media have empowered consumers and that brands have an important role in facilitating conversations among consumers and themselves, openly sharing the values that will help consumers connect with them and with one another. With the proliferation of digital media, consumption considerations are increasingly being based from a social perspective thus the err of marketer is likely to stand out when exploration is solely concentrated on the individual (Earls, 2012). Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick,

Novak and Hofacker (2013) underscored the augmented role of crowd-based power from an Internet-enabled consumer empowerment point of view. Moreover, these researchers brought to light the gaps in the extant literature on topics relating to communal values and relationships. Labrecque and colleagues suggested that further research will help the practitioner understand how mechanisms of crowd-based power affect the crafting and adjustment of the organizational marketing strategy.

**1.1. Research and epistemological approach.** Cayla and Arnould (2013) stressed that the marketer should consider employing ethnographic research methods as unique means for understanding market realities. They further added that these investigative procedures can offer an effectual way for executives to grasp the complexities of consumer cultures. The purpose of this study was to explore the significance of tribal behavior within the groups, the significance of roles among group members, and the influence of the community on the consumption habits of members through conducting an ethnographic examination of American soccer consumers.

**1.2. Originality of the paper and contribution to knowledge.** The originality of this study was its integration of ethnographic methods to gauge the tribal aspects of an online soccer community in a nation that has a developing interest in the sport. Second, this study evaluated the potency of online communities as forms of marketing communications in reaching consumer tribes.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Sports fandom is particularly tribal in nature, as sports can evoke religious behavior from highly associated fans. Sports “fans” may be understood as being distinct from spectators, the latter being mere observers of a sporting event while fans tend to make sport part of their regular, if not daily, lives (Jones, 1997). Indeed, the link between sport and cult, as religion, is well established: “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” (Novak, 1975). Actions themselves can range from wearing team-identified clothing to participating in songs and chants to making “pilgrimages” to team stadiums or Halls of Fame. In some instances, sport even achieves holiday-like status, such as Super Bowl Sunday.

Fans form emotional connections to teams and to a sport, and their interest, enthusiasm, and passion surpass that of mere spectators. Those whose

attachments exceed the norm, often by a significant degree, are classified by DeSarbo and Madrigal (2011) as avid fans, and are found to invest considerably more time, money, and energy on sports.

Sports consumption now entails more than watching sport and purchasing affiliated clothing and merchandise. Participation in fantasy sports has been steadily growing, and now includes an estimated 35 million American adults according to the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (2012). Research by Dwyer and Drayer (2010) into the consumption habits of NFL fantasy sport participants found that avid fans consume three to twelve hours of sports media per week, spend significant amounts of time communicating with other fantasy sports participants, and were more likely than average fans to watch multiple football games and attend bars or restaurants to watch games.

For highly affiliated fans, sports outcomes become internalized. Viewership becomes participation through psychological connection as the individual will identify the team through possessive pronouns such as “we” and “us” (Richardson, 2004). Fans enjoy vicarious achievement by Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing), while distancing themselves from losses through Cutting Off Reflected Failure (CORFing), allowing fans to become a part of the game without any special skill (Dionisio et al., 2008). Matsuoka, Chelladurai and Harada (2003) suggested that marketers can increase fan’s consumption by moving fans up the team identifier scale which can also enhance further understanding of the degree of cultural capital stemming from this identification.

**2.1. Social identity theory.** Richardson (2004) suggested that a more effective means of increasing fan consumption is to move fans up the community identification scale as opposed to the team identifier scale. Referring to the “soccer fandom phenomenon”, Richardson (2004) further conveyed that the central themes of a sense of community, group identity, and shared experiences increase individual identification with the specific “in-group” of fellow fans, leading to higher self-esteem and a tendency to build brand loyalty based on the perceived social linking value of products.

These findings reinforce the significance of social identity theory in tribal marketing, which holds that individuals will seek to resolve attitudes that are not balanced or equitable, and, to account for difficulties in forming self-image in the absence of a social identity, may form group affiliations to form positive distinctness from other social groups (Dionisio et al., 2008). These group affiliations both boost individual self-esteem and foster positive

social identity through both in-group favoritism and out-group derogation ((Biased Evaluations of In-Group and Out-Group Spectator Behavior at Sporting Events, 2005).

Cova (1997) emphasized that, in the postmodern society, the “individual values the social aspects of life at the cost of consumption and the use of goods and services,” and, in seeking products, the social linking value is sought as much as the product utility. Cova and Cova (2002) researched the effectiveness marketing through social linking value and found positive results for organizations that sought to provide and reinforce community among the in-group, such as sponsoring group-specific events and hosting web space dedicated to the community.

Dionisio et al. (2008) clarified the role of socialization on individual identity: “Socialization is, in essence, learning. The process of socialization can be seen as a deliberated act of identity construction – the neophyte member begins to deliberately adopt mannerisms, attitudes, and styles of dress, speech, and behavior that s/he perceives to be characteristic of established members.” Moutinho, Dionisio and Carmo (2007) established the ritualistic nature such affiliations can carry: “One important aspect of the group identification and affiliation process is the performance of such rituals as collecting (souvenirs), dressing (club uniforms) and pilgrimages (travelling to away games), and in general treating the team or sport as a part of one’s own identity,” thus allowing the individual to derive strength and identity through group affiliation. As such, the following research question has been formulated.

*RQ1: Why do consumers form tribes? Field-capital Theory*

Completing such rituals can build status for the individual within the group, potentially moving the individual up the community identification scale as suggested by Richardson (2004). Tapp and Warren (2010) suggested an application of Bourdieu’s field-capital theory to analyze and understand the marketing implications and the value associated with this particular type of capital. Working from Bourdieu, a “field” is an area in which an individual can compete. While this would classically be understood as a career, a field could also be an area like do-it-yourself home improvement, knowledge of a soccer team’s history, or devotion to a particular religion. Capital, then, can be in forms other than economic. Social capital is derived from group memberships, relationships, and networks of influence and support. Cultural capital can be in the form of knowledge, skill, or any other advantage

that can be leveraged to achieve a higher status (Tapp & Warren, 2010).

The broad question that Field-Capital Theory seeks to answer in a marketing context is how people self-actualize through their consumption choices. Having “expert” status through knowledge may be sufficient in some groups to create image and earn a higher status, but often having unusual or distinct cultural capital is more highly valued. Likewise, artifacts of cultural capital can have value, but the value of storytelling can often be superior (Tapp & Warren, 2010). Among sports fans, an artifact such as a vintage Boston Marathon shirt can help an individual achieve status, but an “I was there when...” story entitles the “owner” to a perhaps-grander cultural capital for having been in attendance at an iconic sports event, such as Duke’s iconic win over Kentucky in the 1992 NCAA men’s basketball championship, or Newcastle United’s historic four-goal second half to earn a come-from-behind tie at Chelsea FC in 2011.

Moutinho et al. (2007) analyzed the function of capital as demonstrated through consumption choices and group assimilation among surfers and surfing fans, finding that “[i]n adopting the stereotypes, a sports fan acquires a kind of “cultural capital” from the group: the knowledge of how to consume the sport as a product, and do so in the socially endorsed way.” Yet, while adopting the “stereotype” by assuming the in-group mode of dress and imitating in-group consumption behaviors was sufficient for an individual to self-identify with a group and be accepted, this alone was not sufficient to earn status within the group. Clothing may be the most significant representation of group identity and belongingness (Jamison, 2006), but it is only the entry fee for the group. Mitchell and Imrie (2011) identified four stratified levels of group participation: low participation – amounting to group “sympathy-zers,” active members, practitioners, and devotees. Acceptance by members to these different roles is determined by the degree cultural capital an individual has accrued. Accordingly, the following research question has been drawn.

*RQ2: How does their membership status influence their consumption habits?*

**2.2. Tribalism.** The essential function of a “tribe” in the marketing context, then, is to bring together a group of individuals who are emotionally connected by similar consumption values. Typically, consumers initiate and maintain these groups using the social linking value of products or services to create a community and express identity (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011). The individual, therefore, does not merely buy products, s/he buys image; tribalism accounts

for a local sense of identification, religiousness, syncretism, and group narcissism (Dionisi et al., 2008). The social interaction is the most significant value provided by products/services and through consuming brands with tribe members, the individual is able to create identity and build esteem. According to Mitchell and Imrie (2011), “[s]ocially interconnected groups have been found to act loyally as a group because personal relationships are maintained through shared, regular consumption.”

In the post-modern sense, the individual is motivated to establish social inks and to self-actualize through tribal membership. Postmodernity can therefore be understood as a period of severe social dissolution and extreme individualism. But, attempts at social recomposition can also be glimpsed: the individual who has finally managed to liberate them from archaic or modern social links is embarking on a reverse movement to recompose their social universe on the basis of an emotional free choice. Less than differentiation, it is de-differentiation which seems to be guiding individual action (Cova, 1997). Tribes hold meaning and relevance for the individuals within them that, through the employment of cultural capital to demonstrate awareness of the symbols, or totems, of the tribe, provide the opportunity for individuals to create and communicate identity through consumption (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011). In other words, tribes form “around the use of symbolism to show allegiance to the group. This symbolic consumption is used to create a social link that is expressive of self-identity” (Bauman, 1992). Consumer tribes are characterized by rituals, beliefs, and symbolism in the same way as a non-religious cult (Moutinho et al., 2007), and a lack of centralized power. Rather, the power of the tribe is in offering esteem and security through self-actualization by providing a community of like-minded others who rally around some “totem” that allows for a sense of locality, kinship, emotion, and passion (Cova & Cova, 2002). Marketing to consumer tribes can be a delicate process. As Richardson (2004) alluded to, moving members up the ranks of the tribe leads to greater involvement and, hence, greater consumption (DeSarbo & Madrigal, 2011). Members of the tribe, and indeed the tribe itself, will seek products as much for their linking value as for their actual product utility (Cova, 1997), and are highly sensitive to brand-organization fit (Lee & Ferreira, 2011).

Cova and Cova (2002) studied firms that had achieved success marketing to consumer tribes and identified a three-step process, beginning with ethnomarketing: analyzing and understanding the rituals and codes of the tribe by attending tribe events and observing members during encounters. Secondly, the role of co-design was a significant

factor in achieving success, and organizations that worked with tribes to determine product/service features achieved greater equity with the tribes. Third, firms that provide tribal support by becoming an “embedded actor” that shares the values of the tribe and can support the tribe through sponsoring events provides the sense of partnership with the tribe that is crucial to success. Mitchell and Imrie (2011) further detailed the tools organizations can use to support and communicate with consumer tribes, such as providing accessible social network (particularly via Internet), utilizing the purchase environment to understand ritualistic behaviors, use the opinion leaders as “gateways” for understanding the tribes and communicating with others, and communicate via “cultural resources” by understanding the tribe and expressing tribal values in the brand. As such, the following research question has been created.

*RQ3: How can the corporate marketer effectively communicate with tribes to build brand loyalty?*

### 3. Methodology

**3.1. Research design.** The research design was theory testing through ethnographic, non-participant observation. Three US-located supporters groups of English Premier League soccer teams were studied through Internet-based social networks, particularly discussion forums. As an effective means of ethnographic research, Kozinets (2002) suggested online forums as a data collection medium with high research-question relevance, high levels of traffic, high numbers of discrete posters, and high levels of member-member interaction.

### 4. Analysis

The analysis examined the supporters groups of two traditionally high-achieving English soccer teams – Chelsea FC and Liverpool FC – and one historically “middle-of-the-table,” or mid-tier team, Fulham FC. Liverpool, one of the most successful soccer teams in history, has US-based supporters groups organized regionally, while Chelsea and Fulham’s supporters groups are nationally organized. All three utilize their own web domains and are home to discussion forums that are heavily trafficked by a reasonably high number of discrete users. Of note, Fulham, as a team with very little historical success, had considerably fewer discrete users, but was ultimately kept in the study as other teams examined for inclusion – such as Aresneal FC, Tottenham FC, West Ham United, and Manchester City FC – either did not have centrally-maintained discussion forums or had less than daily posting frequency. Thus, the groups evaluated were Chelsea in America (CIA), Liverpool FC Supporters Club of New York (LFCNY), and Fulham USA.

## 5. Results

Results will be divided according to research questions in order to communicate outcomes in an organized manner.

*RQ1: Why do consumers form tribes?*

Language emerges as one of the identifiers of “belongingness” on all of the discussion forums. Members frequently discuss other teams in the Premier League and across Europe, but very frequently do not do so by their actual team names. Manchester United is frequently referred to as the Mancs, Liverpool as the Scousers, West Ham as the spammers, and Arsenal as the Gooners (a play on the team nickname “Gunners”). Scum or scumbags is used by all three groups, but each use the pejorative to refer to different clubs. On LFCNY, Liverpool’s across-town rivals, Everton FC, receive especially interesting treatment. They are frequently referred on the discussion forum as the “blue noses,” the “crap across the park,” or, sarcastically, the “loveable neighbours.” Of note, LFCNY members will not disdain to mention Everton by name, frequently substituting “Evert\*n” or “Evert’n” to avoid using the full name.

These pejoratives are used interchangeably to refer to both other teams and the fans of other teams, allowing members to differentiate themselves and their groups from other “out-groups” by establishing a positive distinctiveness (Dionisio et al., 2008). Interestingly, some groups have adopted the pejorative and use it as a means of differentiation. Scouser – which is a denonym based on the “Scouse” dialect of Liverpoolians, considered by many to be of a lower class owing to the working-class nature of Liverpool and the poor grammar that is a marked feature of Scouse (Coslett, 2005) – has not only been adopted by many Liverpool fans, as evidenced by discussion and by its employment in some user names, but the term has made its way into a number of Liverpool songs and chants about favorite players.

Language is also used as signal of belongingness among members. Fulham members frequently post COYW among their comments, and the acronym features prominently on the website itself, standing for an unofficial Fulham slogan, “Come on You Whites,” referring to Fulham’s traditionally white kit. Similarly, Liverpool supporters make use of the acronym YNWA, referring to the Liverpool’s official song and motto, “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” The term “Walk On,” a derivative of the official song, is also used quite frequently, and phrases such as “Shankly is God,” and “King Kenny” that refer to and idolize famous Liverpool managers Bill Shankly and Kenny Dalglish are

frequently used, both in discussion and as the “tag lines” of users that appear with every user-post. CIA posters frequently use an unofficial motto from their team, “get stuck in,” amongst themselves and particularly in welcoming new members.

Prebish (1984) established the connection between religious behavior and symbolic language in sports: “if sports can bring their advocates to an experience of the ultimate kind, and this experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and space deemed sacred then it is both proper and necessary to call sport itself a religion.” Aside from symbolic language and considering the home-team stadiums as sacred locations worthy of pilgrimage, the locally organized LFCNY has a gathering place, the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Bar, that is also treated as a sacred space and typically referred to simply in literary apostrophe as “11<sup>th</sup> St.” One LFCNY member who was living away from New York but planning a visit, reveals the sacred nature of the space by equating it to the next-best alternative to Liverpool’s home grounds, Anfield: “I tell everyone at the pub down here, the Brewhouse Cafe, which is a fairly good soccer bar, about 11th street with great pride, and since I don't see a trip to Anfield anytime soon, I am really relishing my return in just under 2 weeks time! [sic]”

Rituals have their role, as well. CIA and LFCNY both have very active forums dedicated to team chants and songs, and a great deal of discussion around the employment of chants and songs. Often, these rituals are compared to those of other supporters groups in order to establish positive distinctiveness. What follows is a representative sample of commentary on the rituals of Chelsea fans versus those of others from the CIA forum:

“If I remember correctly, the Mancs only sing “championnes” and the scouse sometimes try to get one going, but you can’t steal songs, so...”

“[T]he pubs in Chicago are typically dominated by scum-dom from a multitude of clubs that don’t know anything about singing or proper support.”

“Up until recently, the only other group that would show up were the Mancs. Their idea of support for those near 5 years was to say that Chelsea suck, and to try to MAKE FUN of the fact that we sang.”

The last comment is particularly interesting because of its vigorous defense of the ritualistic singing.

Practicing of rites can also be observed, including rites of passage, rites of worship, and rites of personal devotion, the latter being frequent and ongoing. Each site has a forum designated for new member introductions where newly joined members

are expected to announce themselves and describe their devotion to the particular team, often sharing testimony from their experiences as a fan.

Further, an established member of the LFCNY group offered new members a taste of what to expect from their membership:

“FYI, you might want to build up some amount of good will w/your loved ones as you enter a life of... crawling home after too many early morning pints; struggle with borderline obesity after too many half time pies; difficulty holding down a job after missing work due to a number of mid-week appointments w/a certain “dr. benitez”; and troubles @ home as your focus on the next weeks starting XI leads you to forget birthdays and anniversaries. Break up and divorce inevitably follow, but no worries, the club offers much in the way of drink and drugs to compensate [sic].”

Additionally, all three supporters groups also had prescribed ways of consuming soccer matches themselves. LFCNY, as a locally organized group, met frequently and for all games at their appointed bar, but they also participated in an organized soccer league, and congregated for other group activities. Also, as a locally organized group, Liverpool fans from around the country and around the world would contact members and arrange to partake in group activities while they were visiting.

Chelsea fans seemed to have two practices that most members followed. Smaller groups across the country would meet and watch matches together, and those that couldn't meet with others would keep an active discussion of the match on the discussion forum during the match. Fulham USA had a designated live chat webpage where members would watch the matches together, and, occasionally, the match replays. In fact, active members would post their apologies if they were not able to be present for a gameday live chat, as though there was an expectation of attendance.

*RQ2: How does their membership influence their consumption habits?*

Roles are fairly well-defined on each of the discussion forums. The capital that can be traded is mostly determined by participation within the group, and, as Tapp and Warren (2010) surmised, the role of the story is of particular value. Often, as new members post their testimonies to the new member forum, more established members will demonstrate their knowledge or history as a team supporter. On the CIA new member forum, a newly joined member discussed his first experience at Chelsea's home stadium, Stamford Bridge: “It was at “the bridge” in May of '83. Even though it was a

nil-nil draw I was hooked.” An established member responded by exhibiting his knowledge of the club in the early 1980's: “Middlesbrough at home... 0-0...the draw ensured we stayed out of the old Third Division...not as historic as the 1-0 win at Bolton which preceded it, but an important game in our history all the same.” This post serves to diminish the significance of the game the new poster had attended while establishing the respondent as having expert power.

Another interesting example of established roles within the groups arrives courtesy of CIA, where in November 2012, a well-established member who was at the time living in West London, home of Chelsea FC, reported on the forum that he had been invited, along with a small group of other fans, to visit with the owner of the club, Roman Abramovich, after the controversial sacking of manager Roberto Di Matteo. Meetings such as these would be extremely uncommon in English soccer, and the poster declined to discuss how he had come to be included in the meeting, or what the owner had said in the meeting. Where such claims would perhaps be met with skepticism in most other places, on this forum, the respondents were nearly unanimously congratulatory and thankful for the post.

When another established member raised some doubts about the likelihood of such a meeting occurring, members were quick to defend the original poster and attack the doubter. Ultimately, the doubter rescinded his skepticism and was further persuaded to cease criticizing the team for the decision to fire the embattled manager: “given that you know all the details and I don't, I'll retract all my verbal attacks to the club and it's board [sic].”

Cultural capital in the form of knowledge of the game and the team are also used to differentiate types of fans both within and without the groups. From a CIA member: “The influx of “soccer fans” has been brought on by the FIFA gaming series. Not saying that is a bad thing just saying outside of our fans, they play the game and know the players. They don't know what is behind that badge.”

LFCNY members further solidify the expectations for membership when a member fails to surface to recognize the traditional birthday acknowledgement members receive on the forum. A post that reflects much of the commentary came from a well-established member:

“I appreciate that he is allegedly paying his dues (receipts, I want to see receipts! but [...] that's hardly the end of it. Is he one of those posh, upper west side type missing forumites that keep their name in the rolls whilst wandering the netherworlds of godknowswhere. You know the type, throw a



tenner for the membership and get all the attendant glory of such a prestigious association without doing the day in day out, grinding hard work of posting inane windups, baseless speculation and feeble analysis [sic].”

While this poster echoes the prevailing sentiment that merely paying the dues is not sufficient for status within the group, another senior member follows-up with encouragement for new members (names redacted): “On a personal note, I appeal to r\*\*\*\*\*, our newest member – Don’t be the f\*\*\*\*\* of 2008! Stay with it son. Things will look up, I promise.”

*RQ3: How can the corporate marketer effectively communicate with tribes to build brand loyalty?*

A fair amount of attention is paid to sponsoring brands and the members’ desire and ability to acquire team merchandise. As a historically small group, fans of international soccer leagues have few choices of where to buy team-branded items. In the case of Chelsea, the problem was particularly acute and the subject of much discussion. One fan captured an oft-cited complaint: “I would love to order from Chelsea Megastore UK site but can not because they refuse to [ship] to USA. [sic]” One of the Chelsea fans designed a custom Chelsea-in-America team scarf and uploaded the file so that users could have the item made through custom clothing makers. By popular request, he revised the template to allow for the inclusion of the names of local branches.

Discussion of team uniforms was also a frequent topic, particularly the fit and style of uniforms. English soccer teams change their kits frequently – some teams do so every year – and many fans purchase jerseys each year. One team changed their kit sponsor from Kappa to Adidas for the 2012-2013 season and the fans were mostly positive about the change and the increased options for team clothing. One fan, while tepid about the design, was positive about the additional consumption opportunities: “Adidas designs are pretty blah most of the time, but they are at least quality and have some decent training wear options.” Another member emphasized the other major concern with the uniforms – how well they fit the perceived team image: “I’ve always liked Adidas designs. Simple, classy...seems fitting for us.”

Fulham USA was unique among the examined organizations as the group was officially sponsored by Fulham FC. Members are required to pay dues directly to Fulham FC. Once armed with an official card, members can join Fulham USA and become eligible for monthly drawings and annual drawings such as autographed jerseys. Further, benefits received through Fulham FC include ticketing

priority, discounts on tickets, and access to special seating areas at Fulham’s home grounds, discounts on merchandise, subscription to a newsletter, and loyalty points that can be exchanged to obtain high-demand match tickets.

## Discussion

As defined by Cova and Cova (2002), the individual in the post-modern society seeks self-actualization by seeking out and joining a community of like-minded others who rally around some “totem” that allows for a sense of locality, kinship, emotion, and passion. Membership in the “in-group” and the ability to form positive distinctiveness through comparisons to various “out-groups” provides for the development of identity and self-esteem (Richardson, 2004). For soccer fans, supporters groups provide this opportunity by coalescing otherwise unlike individuals around their enthusiasm for a specific soccer club. These groups exhibit tribal behaviors in their language by re-defining other supporters groups in pejorative terms and positively comparing their rituals to those of other groups. As such, people join tribes not only as means of identifying and self-actualization but also as a form of socializing.

Cultural capital also defines roles within the group, as members achieve status through their demonstrations of commitment to the team, participation in the supporters group, and knowledge of the team. The evidence provided has established that mere membership in the supporters group does not entitle the member to status. Rather, the status is earned through participation. Further, the role of knowledge and access to knowledge is well documented. Of particular note was the case of the Chelsea fan who claimed to have met the owner in a private meeting. While the claim was not backed by any verifiable evidence of fact, the individual had established enough referent power to not be questioned, and to be defended by other members when one did question the account.

Both of these examples provide evidence of tribal behavior comparable to that of a cult. In the tribe, status is earned through participation with the group and knowledge of the team, and those with privileged status have revered positions to the point of being beyond question or reproach. Membership in the tribe does appear to provide self-actualization and esteem, however, as is evidenced by the fond remembrances of moved-away members of FCNY, and the active attempts of all groups to enjoy soccer matches together, either in person or via the Internet. Research question one is answered affirmatively: members form and maintain tribal communities to establish identity and build esteem, and belonging to a consumer tribe provides increased opportunities for soccer consumption.

Perhaps the most salient response to research question three is that this is an underserved market. The evidence suggests that there is insufficient supply of merchandise to satisfy the demand of the supporters groups, such as group-specific scarves, which are easy to come by in England, but CIA members had to design their own to be produced ad-hoc. Also, all members lamented the generally thin selection of team merchandise available in the US.

The evidence does, however, provide some insight into how to effectively harness the marketing potential of these consumer tribes. Brand fit is a significant factor. Fulham fans preferred Adidas's subdued approach to team kits as opposed to Kappa's busier, louder take on the uniform. For a team that has achieved little notable success other than staying out of the lower rungs of the sport for the last quarter-century, the subdued approach seemed a better fit, which was sufficient to stir up interest in the brand and team-related merchandise.

Fulham also provides a useful example of the team's ability to communicate with fans directly. While Fulham FC is not the only Premier League team to sponsor official supporters clubs, very few other clubs do. Offering the opportunity to join the official US supporters club may aid in moving members up the commitment ladder by providing increased information about the team through official communications, increased opportunities for consumption through discounts and special opportunities, and increased community sponsorship by providing space for group members to meet up, discuss the team, and enjoy matches together. Further, the corporate marketer could take the proactive role as a content sponsor of discussion forums established by soccer and other professional sport franchise.

**Implications for theory.** This study utilized tribal methods to conduct testing of contemporary marketing theories through exploration of online supporters communities. In addition, this investigation provided support for employing digitalized ethnographies to understanding suppositions relating to consumer behavior and customer loyalty. Moreover, the outcomes of this study reinforced prior results in the extant literature relating to social identity theory (Dionisio et al., 2008), field-capital theory (Moutinho et al., 2007) and tribalism (Moutinho et al., 2007).

**Implications for practice.** This study provided rich insight regarding consumer behaviors in tribal roles. Specifically, intelligence was generated on factors affecting tribal participation, and on the influence

cultural capital has in establishing roles within tribes and consumption practices. Additionally, the study enlightened the practitioner on ways consumption practices of a tribe can be capitalized upon for marketing communication purposes. This, in particular, has practical value because the promotional mix in most organizational settings is being reconceptualized given the ongoing development of digitalized communications.

**Study limitations and direction for future research.** Although this study has generated important intelligence regarding consumer tribalism, it is not without its limitations. First, data are collected through non-participant observation. There is unsureness regarding how the inactiveness of participants has affected the validity of results. Consequently, we recommend that a mixed-method design be employed to better comprehend the effect of tribalism on the consumption intentions of soccer fans. Such procedures could apply a non-participant observation ethnography along participant Internet-enabled surveys.

A second limitation of this investigation is that it only examined perceptions of soccer clubs in the UK by querying American fans. As such, we recommend a broad ethnographic study of fans' tribalism with soccer clubs that is of international scope. These ethnographies should be constructed through integrating participant and non-participant methods.

Finally, our investigation solely examined tribalism in professional soccer. However, tribes of consumers are likely to form across other sport too. Hence, the tribal constructs should be investigated across these settings which should represent amateur and professional organizations through applying ethno-graphic, survey and mixed-method designs.

## Conclusion

Fostering the member-member community and exchange can prove to be a highly effective means of marketing for Premier League teams and the firms that market through the Premier League. Supporters groups are highly tribal and committed to their teams, and eager to show the symbols of support, which are most often manifest through clothing and merchandise. By engaging with and supporting these consumer tribes, marketers can not only increase their opportunities, but learn from supporters groups and co-create products augmenting loyalty in a growing market segment.

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