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"I don't watch that anymore": an analysis of online comments by German soccer fans on their relationship to their favored clubs

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Introduction: Soccer fans are important stakeholders of their favored clubs; yet, although there is manifold literature on this subject, there are still open questions concerning supporters' relationship and loyalty to those clubs, such as potential fan exits, where supporters turn away from their preferred team. Existing literature describes diverging evidence as to whether an exit is possible and whether fans' loyalty prevents that response. Against this background, it is important to examine how the relationship between fans and soccer clubs presents itself from the fans' perspective. This study focuses on German soccer fans because an increasing number of media reports note problems for the fans in this regard, reporting eroded loyalty, increasing alienation, or turning away.

Methods: By means of a qualitative and explorative approach (thematic analysis), this study analyzes online fan comments associated with the mentioned reports. A purposive sample of 17 media reports with 10,902 associated comments written/published between 2020 and 2023 was included in this study.

Results: The thematic analysis show that fans reflect their relationship to favored clubs in three ways: negative changes in the emotional relationship, negative behavioral changes in the relationship, and no or positive changes in the relationship. A wide continuum of negative emotional and behavioral changes is identified, ranging from a deterioration of the inner bond with the favored club to different levels of ceasing soccer-related consumption. As explanations for the (potential) dynamics and changes in the relationship, fans reflect a broad and diverse field of developments in the context of German soccer. The differentiated developments are systemized within four categories: commercialization, governance, attractiveness, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion: The results are discussed and contextualized referring to the Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Framework and thematically relevant literature. Particularly far-reaching is the finding that there are indeed fans in the field of soccer who are capable of permanently abandoning (exiting) formerly supported clubs. The article concludes with theoretical and managerial implications emerging from the results, as well as limitations and areas of interest for further research.

KEYWORDS

exit, loyalty, supporter, team, football, fandom

1 Introduction

As in other economic sectors, loyalty and customer retention are of central importance in the sports industry for generating profit and thus success (Kucharska et al., 2020). Fans invest time, money, and passion in their relationship with their team or athlete, which makes them essential for the future of sports as one of the most important stakeholders (Senaux, 2008; Winell et al., 2023). This is all the more true for fans that are not merely consumers but actively contribute to the value and quality of sporting events as *value co-creators* (Kucharska et al., 2020; Woratschek et al., 2020).

One of the most popular sports worldwide is soccer, known for the deep attachment between fans and teams. Metaphorically, soccer fans have also been referred to as the “*bread and butter*” (Merkel, 2012, p. 364), while their importance is also emphasized by the generally known statement “*football [i.e., soccer] without fans is nothing*” (Bond et al., 2022, p. 116). Soccer also plays a special role among fans in Germany, where no other sport exerts such a fascination and clearly dominates the popularity scale compared to sports such as basketball, ice hockey, or handball (Huber, 2022). In the 2018/19 season (and thus before the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic), Germany’s top two men’s divisions generated EUR 4.8 billion in revenue, with almost 19 million tickets sold (DFL Deutsche Fußball Liga, 2020). A current market and advertising media analysis assumes that around 46 million people in Germany can be described as soccer fans due to a general interest, which would correspond to more than half of the total population (Statista Research Department, 2023).

Despite this importance, there are growing media reports addressing problems for fans in the context of German soccer. More specifically, these reports identify fans’ erosion of loyalty, increasing alienation, or turning away. Furthermore, this fan alienation is also reported in other European countries, including the United Kingdom (Giulianotti, 2005; Morrow, 2023), Poland (Choluj et al., 2020), or Norway (Hognestad, 2015), a spread that emphasizes the relevance of researching the extent and consequences of soccer fans’ alienation. One assumption is that certain developments in soccer endanger the relationship between fans and their clubs or even completely dissolve this connection (Kiernan, 2017). Other studies (e.g., Tamir, 2022) emphasize that true fans never turn away from their club and remain loyal, though their fandom is subject to change. This contrary description of the (potentially) dissolving relationship between fans and clubs calls for further investigation, especially for German soccer.

Interaction between fans and teams, as well as among fans, is no longer limited to matchday. Nowadays, fans interact in manifold ways online, where they express opinions and discuss problems. For this reason, their online participation remains a rich and necessary source of evidence (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010; Cable et al., 2022; Woods and Ludvigsen, 2022; Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen, 2023). The aforementioned media reports concerning German soccer are commented on by fans online, which affords an opportunity to investigate how fans assess and reflect on their relationship with soccer clubs. This study is therefore guided by the following research question: How does the relationship between German fans and soccer clubs present itself from the fans’ perspective? In answering this question, this study will particularly focus on which developments in the context of German soccer led to fans’ dissent and dissatisfaction, as well as to their impaired loyalty and turning away. The use of a qualitative and explorative approach also allows for the elaboration of

a variety of (potential) dynamics and changes in fans’ relationships, as reported in the comments.

This article is structured as follows: first, the theoretical background with the underlying *Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Framework* (Hirschman, 1970) is discussed and explained with reference to soccer fans and their relationship to their favored clubs. In the subsequent literature review, thematically relevant study results are cited. This is followed by a description of the methodological approach, including an explanation of the selection of relevant media reports and fan comments and an outline of the qualitative-explorative procedure within the thematic analysis. The findings are then discussed, focusing on the relationship between fans and clubs in response to the research question. The results show that fans reflect their relationship to favored clubs in three ways: negative changes in the emotional relationship, negative behavioral changes in the relationship, and no or positive changes in the relationship. Furthermore, fans’ comments reflect four different developments in the context of German soccer: commercialization, attractiveness, governance, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The article contributes to existing knowledge by concluding with theoretical and managerial implications emerging from the results. Furthermore, limitations and areas of interest for further research are identified.

2 Theoretical background

This study is based on Hirschman’s *Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Framework*, which is, according to Kiernan (2017, p. 880), a “particularly useful framework to apply to the ebb and flow of modern football [soccer]” and has therefore repeatedly found its way into the research of soccer and its supporters (e.g., Nikolychuk and Sturgess, 2007; Margalit, 2008; Healy and McDonagh, 2013; Hoegele et al., 2014; Kiernan, 2017). Within the framework, *exit* and *voice* are the two basic response options to members of an organization or customers of a company in the event of dissatisfaction. *Exit* or “cut and run” (Kiernan, 2017, p. 884) can be used to describe “all forms of ceasing involvement” (Hoegele et al., 2014, p. 300), whereby members may leave an organization, or customers may stop purchasing a company’s products (Hirschman, 1970). *Voice* or “stay and fight” (Kiernan, 2017, p. 884), on the other hand, refers to “any attempt to change a disagreeable situation [...] with the intention of forcing a change in management practices” (Nikolychuk and Sturgess, 2007, p. 843). For example, members/customers can address the management of an organization/company with complaints or initiate protest action (Hirschman, 1970). The factor of *loyalty* is described by Hirschman (1970, p. 77) as a “special attachment” of members/customers to an organization/company and moderates or intervenes in this context between the two basic response options. Loyalty prevents an exit, or at least delays it, and gives members/customers the opportunity to articulate voice more strongly (Hoegele et al., 2014; Kiernan, 2017) or, as Nikolychuk and Sturgess (2007, p. 843) put it, “the likelihood of voice increases with the degree of loyalty because these feelings [...] act as a barrier to exit, especially when substitution is limited.”

Fans of soccer clubs are generally known as consumers who have only limited substitution options. In this context, Bühler (2006, p. 30) also speaks of “*captive consumers* in a *captive market*, which means that they do not really have a choice,” clarifying that “traditional *die-hard supporters* would never change the soccer club just because

another club offers cheaper tickets or merchandising articles.” Simplistically, it is generally assumed that fan demand is largely inelastic and that fans support their sport *evermore* (Tapp, 2004; Dixon, 2014; Watkins and Cox, 2021). This is due to a high degree of fan loyalty, which is also the reason why fans are more likely to prefer the voice over the exit response in the event of dissatisfaction. For example, soccer fans often vocally express dissatisfaction with the leadership or performance of favored teams but do not limit their spending toward the club to the same extent (Bühler, 2006; Dixon, 2014; Roose and Schäfer, 2017).

Loyalty is a term used to describe the connection or relationship between fans and the teams they favor (Fillis and Mackay, 2014). Loyalty itself cannot be understood as a one-sided concept but is composed of both an attitudinal and behavioral dimension (Dick and Basu, 1994; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). The attitudinal dimension of loyalty basically characterizes the inner bond or emotional affiliation of fans to their team and is also captured in the sports context by the term *psychological commitment* (Bauer et al., 2005, 2008). Following Bauer et al. (2008, p. 207), this psychological commitment is present to a high degree among fans “if they feel a deep inner attachment to their favorite team and if their commitment is persistent over time and resistant to criticism.” The behavioral dimension of loyalty is basically expressed in various forms of fan behavior in the team sport context, such as “attending the favorite club’s games live in the stadium, watching the favorite club’s games on television, consuming other club-related media, purchasing club merchandise, wearing the colors or logo of the favorite club, [...] trying to convince others that the favorite club should be supported” (Bauer et al., 2008, pp. 207–208), and “participating in discussions about the favorite club” (Bauer et al., 2005, p. 11).

Furthermore, the behavioral dimension is supplemented by an intentional component, which, corresponding to the listed forms of past fan behavior, entails fans’ ongoing or future intention to behave positively (Bauer et al., 2008). Neither a low or a high level of psychological commitment necessarily has to manifest itself in a correspondingly low or high level of behavioral loyalty, nor must there be a correspondingly obvious connection between the two dimensions of loyalty. Dick and Basu (1994) also differentiate between *spurious* (low relative attitude and high repeat patronage) and *latent* loyalty (high relative attitude and low repeat patronage). For example, soccer spectators may regularly watch matches in the stadium because they have been given a season ticket, not because they feel a high level of psychological commitment to the team (Bauer et al., 2008). Conversely, a soccer spectator may feel a high degree of emotional affiliation to the team but refrain from going to the stadium regularly because of a lack of income or available company (Dick and Basu, 1994). Furthermore, the loyalty fans show to their favorite teams does not necessarily stand alone. The relationship might be dependent on other *points of attachment*; for example, the connection that fans have to the specific sport in general, level, player(s), coach, or community of fans (Kwon et al., 2005; Yoshida et al., 2015).

3 Literature review

Different studies have raised the fundamental question of the extent to which soccer fans are generally able to exit their favored clubs. In his study of soccer fans in Israel, Tamir (2022, p. 338) speaks

of a “natural life cycle of sports fans” and argues that fandom is equally subject to change due to the changing circumstances of the respective fan, but at no time is it terminated: “Sports fandom passes through several stages that vary in the strength of the fan’s connection and commitment to his team. Understanding the cyclic nature of sport fandom over fans’ lives importantly offers a better understanding of the dynamics between fans and their teams” (p. 349).

Researching German soccer fans, Königstorfer and Uhrich (2009) and Königstorfer et al. (2010) found that fans’ behavioral loyalty is unaffected when facing the negative sporting scenario of relegation, instead the relationship might sometimes even be strengthened. Thus, their results “support the notion that highly committed fans and their clubs are strongly bound to each other [...]. Indeed, loyal fans often remain behaviorally loyal to their club throughout their life” (Königstorfer et al., 2010, p. 664). Studies of soccer fans from the United Kingdom provide similar results, with Healy and McDonagh (2013) arguing that fans can “exit from the market” (p. 1534); that is, they can discontinue club-related consumption to varying degrees. However, changing clubs is not an option because “fans refer to themselves as extremely loyal and unable to switch clubs” (p. 1533).

Tinson et al. (2023) conclude that fans may see the value of their fandom diminished in various ways—for example, because high costs prevent game attendance—but are able to remain loyal to their team by compensating for this diminishment. Tinson et al. (2023) also stress that “there were no fans in our sample who had entirely exited the market. Although fans reduced their nature and level of participation in the market, they were reluctant to disassociate completely from their team. This supports the notion that fans can compensate perceptions of value being disrupted by trading-off negative experiences with ones that allow value to be recovered” (p. 421). In some contrast to this, Tapp (2004) points out that the loyalty of supporters cannot be relied upon in principle, as it is or can be influenced by a variety of different factors, as “sports supporter loyalties are more complex than is suggested by the simple conventional wisdom that all fans will ‘support you evermore’” (p. 212). A fan exit seems therefore possible.

Like Tapp, Watkins and Cox (2021) also point out the complexity and changeability of the relationship between fans and their favorite soccer clubs, but they deny the possibility of a complete exit. Using the case of fans who support a professional and a non-league soccer team in parallel, they argue that this “polygamous fandom” (p. 716) is also due to disillusionment and dissatisfaction with professional soccer. The relationship of fans with their professional team is characterized by an erosion, but is maintained nonetheless. The authors note in this regard that it is questionable whether the consumption of professional soccer can be ceased altogether. At the very least, the examined fans show “limits of loyalty to professional football [soccer] teams” (p. 716) by supporting a non-league team.

A *continuative exit* of fans from their favored clubs is observable in the case of so-called “post-consumer clubs” (Brandt and Kurscheidt, 2022, p. 4), with FC United of Manchester probably the most prominent example (Nikolychuk and Sturgess, 2007; Kiernan, 2017). In the context of German soccer, the example HFC Falke could be cited as a “club beyond commercialization” (Brandt and Kurscheidt, 2022, p. 2). HFC Falke was founded in 2014 by former fans of Hamburger SV as a reaction to the outsourcing of the professional teams. Fans’ founding of such new clubs is born out of dissatisfaction, giving them a place to go to and maintaining the community.

Furthermore, these clubs still have a certain connection to the respective parent clubs by following, sometimes more sometimes less strongly, their history and tradition (Brandt and Kurscheidt, 2022).

Another set of literature discusses reasons for and the dynamics of fans' dissatisfaction, which potentially cause an exit. With specific regard to the relationship of German soccer fans to their sport, studies that address developments in soccer or influencing factors concerning exit continue to be informative. Merkel (2012) gives an overview of fan reactions and resistance to developments in the context of increasing commercialization, although commercialization in German soccer is assessed as moderate compared to other European leagues. In general, commercialization subsumes developments that focus on the generation of profit and revenues, including increasing prices or new ways of selling spectators' interest to third parties. It is also a term used to describe the prevalence of increasingly market-oriented behavior; for example, transferring players or managers like assets and paying horrendous sums for this without considering the (local) fan community, in turn leading to a social and economic alienation between players and fans (Walsh and Giulianotti, 2001; Merkel, 2012; Brandt and Kurscheidt, 2022).

In addition to growing commercialization, a study on fan activism in Germany concludes that developments related to governance are the most common reason for activism (Brandt et al., 2023). Fans' activism, as well as their opportunities to influence and participate in decision-making, are thereby furthered by the prescribed democratic structure of German soccer clubs in the form of so-called *Vereine* (Merkel, 2012; Brandt et al., 2023), where clubs, in principle, are run by their members. Even in the case of professional soccer teams being outsourced to corporations, the so-called *50 + 1 rule* normally only allows the parent club to hold a majority stake (50 + 1% of the voting rights) in the shareholders' assembly of the spin-off corporation. The 50 + 1 rule thus safeguards the leadership role of clubs and their members while limiting the influence of investors and preventing oligarchization (Bauers et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, there are approved exceptions to the 50 + 1 rule; currently this includes the clubs Bayer Leverkusen, VfL Wolfsburg, and TSG 1899 Hoffenheim (Adam et al., 2020), though it has been announced that the latter is to return to the rule (Guinin, 2023). Due to existing economic and legal interdependencies and dependencies, further clubs such as RB Leipzig or FC Augsburg are classified as circumventing the rule (Adam et al., 2020). Due to the circumventions and exceptions, Adam et al. (2020) suspect a latent repeal of the rule and a reduction of traditional opportunities for member participation in German soccer. Members' ability to influence relevant decisions is also considerably weakened by this. In the restriction of these options, which can be understood as expressions of the voice option (Hirschman, 1970; Bauers et al., 2023), Adam et al. (2020) also see the risk of soccer club supporters exiting. In line with this and based on a survey of members and fans of soccer clubs, Bauers et al. (2020) found that the majority of questioned persons are in favor of retaining the 50 + 1 rule. Advocacy is essentially related to the preservation of influence, the exclusion of multi-club ownerships, and the avoidance of increasing commercialization tendencies.

On the part of fans, another presumed point of criticism concerning the Bundesliga (the highest division in German soccer) is the decline in *competitive balance* or *competitive intensity*, which is attested to in studies by Ramchandani et al. (2018) and Wagner et al. (2020). This process can be seen directly in the dominance of the club FC Bayern München, which has won eleven championships in a row since the

2012/13 season. Furthermore, among recent technical developments, the most significant innovation in the context of German professional soccer has been the introduction of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR). Based on a survey, Schwab et al. (2023) argue that fans rate the VAR less positively or express dissatisfaction in this regard. Among other things, Schwab et al. (2023) assume that this is due to a lack of transparency in the review of disputed game scenes, which are shown to the referee but not to fans in the stadium. As a result, decisions made by the referee can be interpreted as wrong by the fans.

Another factor influencing German soccer was the COVID-19 pandemic, during which fans were only allowed into the stadium in reduced numbers or not at all (with matches played behind closed doors). Questioning fans of a Bundesliga club, Wilkesmann (2022) examined the factors that stand in their way of a return to the stadium after the end of the pandemic. The study concludes that the pandemic itself and the fear of infection, as well as the overall development of professional soccer (especially in the face of increasing commercialization), but also the feeling of belonging to the club before and during the pandemic all have only a marginal influence on supporters' intention to return. More specifically, 83.2% of the supporters surveyed said they would go to the stadium again, with Wilkesmann arguing that supporters are very loyal and strongly socialized with the club's culture. This might be a possible explanation why fans do not significantly change their behavior.

In summary, the literature review reveals contrary descriptions of the relationship between fans and their favored soccer clubs. Studies from Healy and McDonagh (2013), Tamir (2022), and Tinson et al. (2023) could not observe a (completely) dissolving relationship and emphasize the loyalty of fans to clubs in this regard. Tapp (2004) points out that the loyalty of supporters cannot be relied upon in principle because of its complexity and Watkins and Cox's (2021) study shows that soccer fans are indeed capable of substituting their favored club, at least to a certain degree. Under certain conditions some fans might even go a step further, abandoning their formerly favored club completely (i.e., exiting) and founding their own clubs, as the examples FC United of Manchester and HFC Falke show. These diverging findings call for a further investigation of the relationship between fans and clubs.

The literature review also shows that there are several developments that might have the potential to endanger or even dissolve fans' relationship with their clubs in Germany. However, focused research is missing and existing assumptions in this regard cannot be confirmed beyond doubt. Given the above-identified research gaps and this study's explorative research question (*How does the relationship between German fans and soccer clubs present itself from the fans' perspective?*), the following section pursues a qualitative approach. The focus thereby lies on the developments in the context of German soccer that lead to dissatisfaction and dissent on the part of fans, as well as to their impaired loyalty and turning away.

4 Materials and methods

Several studies have answered the call to use the online behavior and participation of soccer fans as research data. These studies have shown the benefits of using the variety of content that is available online (tweets, posts, comments on YouTube videos, Facebook group discussions, contributions to online message platform, etc.) as it comes without a need to engage with or influence participants via the

TABLE 1 Included media reports and fan comments.

Translated title	Publication date	Number of extracted comments	Number of relevant comments
Media reports from social media			
Q1: Is soccer as we know it dying?	16.11.2020	285	22
Q2: Erosion of fan loyalty in professional soccer	04.02.2022	1.195	190
Q3. Clapping, paying, silence: that's why your soccer DIES	23.02.2022	1.890	160
Q4: Supercup abroad: is this still soccer or can it go away?	02.03.2022	1.031	6
Q5: GamerBrother reacts to: that's why your soccer DIES	04.03.2022	314	14
Q6: Death Star of the South: is this still soccer or can it go away?	13.05.2022	1.596	24
Q7: The truth about German soccer!	20.11.2022	1.199	152
Q8: Bundesliga 2023: is this still soccer or can it go away?	17.03.2023	1.886	63
Q 9: GamerBrother reacts on Bundesliga 2023: is this still soccer or can it go away? 🤔	19.03.2023	539	23
Media reports from sport-related homepages			
Q10: VfB ultra Clemens Knödler interviewed: "at the moment we are experiencing a definitive betrayal of soccer"	16.05.2020	196	4
Q11: Alienation from soccer: Andreas Rettig contradicts Peter Peters	28.12.2020	21	0
Q 12: Column - The problems of German soccer: financial holes, fan alienation, leadership vacuum	10.09.2021	93	6
Q13: Fan representative Helen Breit on the development of the Bundesliga: "even FC Bayern does not have six votes"	21.09.2021	138	5
Q14: Bundesliga: spectator decline in Corona times - fan researcher explains "alienation"	09.11.2021	19	1
Media reports from classic newspapers			
Q15: The Bavarian Queen	24.05.2021	334	20
Q16: I do not love you anymore, soccer	23.04.2022	105	20
Fan forum discussing an included media report from social media			
Q17: Erosion of fan loyalty in professional soccer	04.02.2022	61	1
Total		10.902	711

researchers' presence (Woods and Ludvigsen, 2022; Hansen et al., 2023). Another benefit is the wide range of general or specific topics that could be examined through fans, as shown by studies on club ownership (Levental et al., 2016), VAR (Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen, 2023), corruption (Hie et al., 2023), nationalism (Tamir et al., 2016), and the allegiance to and interest in American Major League Soccer (Wilson, 2007).

Using a qualitative and explorative approach this study aims to gain insights into the relationship between German fans and their favored clubs. As the research was inspired by media reports considering this relationship, it was appropriate to use the online fan comments on these reports as data. The selection of media reports follows the approach of *purposive sampling* to gain a "better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigor of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results" (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653).

Only reports of *thematic relevance* published between January 2020 and March 2023 and in the German language were included in the study. These are reports that address problems in the relationship between fans and German soccer that potentially could result in an exit. Another selection criterion was the *free and public accessibility* of the reports. This means that it is possible for everyone to view and comment on the reports and associated comments online, free of charge. Furthermore, reports in different *formats* were included in the

study to represent a *heterogeneous sample* of commenting fans if possible. The sample includes reports published online via social media, on sports-related homepages, by classic newspapers, and one fan forum discussion. Finally, only those reports were selected that received a certain amount of *attention and resonance* from the fans; that is, those with at least 10 comments. The final sample consists of 17 different media reports (Table 1) with 10,902 associated fan comments.

The comments, including *nested comments* (i.e., comments on comments), were extracted and transferred to *Excel* files in May/June 2023. This was done automatically by using the tool *exportcomments.com*. Where automatic extraction was not possible, comments were extracted manually. The sample of 10,902 comments was then divided between the two first authors to independently examine the comments' relevance to the formulated research question. The findings were then jointly evaluated and resulted in iteratively developed criteria for identifying relevant comments.

To retain the focus on the research question (*How does the relationship between German fans and soccer clubs present itself from the fans' perspective?*) and to uncover why German fans reflect on their relationship to soccer clubs the way they do, only those comments were included in which fans reflect on their own relationship to their clubs and on *developments* in soccer. That is, comments reflecting none or only one of these issues were excluded. Duplicates, ironic comments, unclear

comments, or comments related to (inter-)national teams were also excluded. Based on the criteria developed, the complete sample of comments was subsequently checked again, with 711 relevant comments transferred for thematic analysis.

Comparable to the studies of Cable et al. (2022), Hansen et al. (2023), Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen (2023), and Seijbel et al. (2023), the methodological approach of thematic analysis was selected for analyzing the data. More specifically, here we followed the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Relevant comments were coded *inductive*, meaning determined by the data itself. This does not obviate the need to state theoretical assumptions clearly and transparently (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The sample of 711 comments was again divided between the two first authors, initially coded, and searched for potential themes. In what Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82) have termed an “ongoing reflexive dialog” between the two first authors, the respective findings were brought together, coding for the entire sample was reviewed and revised, and the final themes were defined and named. This iterative approach reflects the fact that thematic analysis is not a non-linear process “of simply moving from one phase to the next,” but rather is a “more recursive process, where movement is back and forth as needed, throughout the phases” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86). The software MAXQDA 2022, a program designed for computer-assisted qualitative analysis, was used when analyzing the comments.

Finally, the use of fan comments requires some ethical remarks as internet-based research comes with challenges regarding the informed consent of participants and the boundaries between public and private spaces (Convery and Cox, 2012). The fact that the comments are free and publicly accessible does not mean that fans can nevertheless perceive their online participation as private (Convery and Cox, 2012; Wegner et al., 2020), nor that they agree to their use in an academic context. This study draws on the ethical considerations of Convery and Cox (2012), which points out that in open-access forums, such as newsgroups and bulletin boards, “informed consent may not always be required” as “the internet is usually considered a public place and public behavior does not necessarily require informed consent” (p. 54).

To fully address any ethical concerns, this study further follows the procedure employed in comparable studies (e.g., Wegner et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2023; Seijbel et al., 2023). Thus, the cited comments were subject to a complete de-identification, thereby excluding fans’ plain names or pseudonyms. In addition, comments were not cited in their entirety and were translated from German into English to preclude backtracking using online search engines. During translation, care was taken not to change the original content of the comments. In summary, ethical concerns in the context of this study could be eliminated by this procedure.

5 Results and discussion

In line with the research question, the focus in this section lies on the relationship between fans and their clubs as a point of attachment. Nevertheless, results concerning fans assessing their relationship to soccer in general, as another point of attachment (Kwon et al., 2005; Yoshida et al., 2015), are also discussed when they provide further insights. The following results section has been structured on the categorization of two higher themes, with associated lower themes.

The first higher theme entails the fans’ perspectives on their relationship to their favored soccer clubs with regard to the research question. To fully understand these relationships, it is necessary to consider both the attitudinal and the behavioral dimension of the concept of fan loyalty and the fact that there might not necessarily be an obvious and logically comprehensible connection between them (Bauer et al., 2008). For that, fans reporting negative changes in the relationship to their favored soccer clubs are discussed within two separate sections that cover these two dimensions. The changes within both of these dimensions are discussed with regard to fans’ exit. Due to the fact that some fans reported no changes in the relationship at all, or even positive changes, these comments are discussed within another section.

In this regard, the second higher theme contains the fans’ perspective on developments in the context of German soccer. The developments that the fans mention are to be understood as explanations for the (potential) dynamics and changes in the relationship. Within this theme, the underlying research question is discussed in more detail (i.e., *Why do German fans reflect on their relationship to soccer clubs the way they do?*). The developments that the fans assess in the context of German soccer therefore represent the second set of categories: commercialization, governance, attractiveness, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2 provides an overview of the categorization, which will be explained below in more detail and with examples from the sample of fan comments. If fans provide further socio-demographic data in their comments (age of the fan; name of their favorite soccer club), this information was added to the specific quotes.

5.1 Fans’ perspective on their relationship to their favored soccer club

5.1.1 Negative changes of the emotional relationship

In manifold comments, fans describe a negative emotional change in their relationship with their favorite club. Their emotional affiliation or inner bond with the club (Bauer et al., 2005, 2008) has deteriorated. An example is the following quote:

I realize more and more often, that the result actually does not matter to me. And if we are trailing behind, for example, [it] no longer even triggers great emotion. Somehow that’s really shitty.
(Q1: 15 – fan Eintracht Frankfurt)

Fans see themselves as emotionally affected by their favorite team’s matches. This includes anger about losing games or conceding goals, as well as joy about goals scored by their own team. Feeling sorry for one’s own team is a constitutive part of fandom. In this quote, the fan criticizes their own lethargy, describing this state as *shitty* because an elementary part of their fandom is lost. Other contributions describe a reduction in the duration of affects stemming from a match outcome; for example, from days to a few minutes.

In addition to the decline in emotion, other fans describe a decline in their interest in the club or in soccer in general, as in the following quote:

TABLE 2 Higher and lower themes.

Higher themes	Fans' perspective on their relationship to their favored soccer clubs	Fans' perspective on developments in the context of German soccer
Lower themes	<p>Negative changes in the emotional relationship:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deterioration of the inner bond • Losing interest <p>Negative behavioral changes in the relationship:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consuming the favored club only • Changing/abandoning club-related consumption • Make use of alternatives/substitutions <p>No or positive changes in the relationship</p>	<p>Commercialization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior of club's representatives • Monetary costs of soccer <p>Governance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image of soccer associations • Influence of investors <p>Attractiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excitement • Composition of the Bundesliga • VAR • Performance <p>COVID-19 pandemic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a catalyst for other developments • Clubs and associations dealing with the pandemic

Since day one I am a VfB fan, I love the club, independent of all. But not even I am looking forward to matchdays, at least not as before. And I realize how the interest is getting smaller and smaller. (Q8: 26 – fan VfB Stuttgart; 17 years old)

The fan remains loyal to the club, but a reduction in interest is evidence of a negative change in the relationship. Less interest can mean that fans invest less time in their club, or in soccer in general. As a result, one fan notes they would no longer know the names of the players of their favorite team (Q7: 18). Statements such as “The love for soccer has died out and that has nothing to do with the pandemic in my case” (Q2: 65) show how far-reaching changes in the emotional relationship can be.

The results show a decreasing psychological commitment, which is not or no longer resistant to criticism (Bauer et al., 2008). Instead, the emotional relationship to the club can also turn around. There is a continuum that describes the intensity of these changes. This ranges from being less *involved* to being completely emotionless to statements calling soccer *disgusting*. Although the emotional changes described also suggest a change in actions, this is not necessarily the case because the attitudinal and the behavioral dimension are two separate parts of the concept of fan loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994; Bauer et al., 2008). The fans do not necessarily have to report a change in behavior in their comments, though it might exist. This explicit reporting of behavioral changes by the fans is explained below.

5.1.2 Negative behavioral changes in the relationship

In this context, fans report different changes in their realized consumption. One of these changes is that fans stop following other matches and exclusively consume their favorite club. The following quote illustrates this position:

In the past, I used to watch almost every match, whether live or in the summary. Today, I only watch the matches of my club or visit the stadium accordingly. The rest hardly interests me anymore. (Q8: 16)

In the sample, there are several quotes, almost identical in wording, where fans emphasize that they no longer follow soccer in general, besides the favored club. Another fan describes how they would like to save money on the live pay TV transmission, but “I cannot, because I still have to watch every BVB game” (Q8: 32 – fan Borussia Dortmund). In this quote, too, a distinction is made between soccer in general, and the favored club. Due to their loyalty to the club, there is a perceived obligation to follow the matches, even if costs are involved. These quotes clearly show that fans' negative behavioral changes might differ depending on the point of attachment; here, fans report negative behavioral changes in the relationship to soccer in general, but not to their favored club.

Other fans report that they have already gone one step further, meaning that they changed and limited their club-related consumption to different degrees; one being that fans no longer go to the stadium. This mainly manifests as not renewing season tickets, as in the following quote:

I have not been watching for a few years now. My season tickets are a relic from days gone by. My last visit to the stadium was 5–6 years ago. I only watch the results of Hannover 96 now. But even that's not always the case. (Q3: 365 – fan Hannover 96)

This fan has largely ceased consumption of soccer; in relation to Hirschman (1970), it could be said that he exited. Nevertheless, his relationship with the club Hannover 96 is not completely dissolved, because occasionally he still informs himself about the results. In this example, the exit entails a drastic change of behavior, but a certain connection remains, expressed in substitutional practices. These practices mean a significantly smaller investment of time and money in the club; however, this does not directly mean that fans completely

abandon their (former) favorite club. There are similarities between these results and studies from Healy and McDonagh (2013) or Tamir (2022) emphasizing fans' loyalty to clubs even in the case of changing consumption behavior.

The extent of change depends on the prior consumption of the respective fan. Like canceling a season ticket, some cancel their subscriptions with pay TV providers. In Healy and McDonagh's (2013) understanding, these fans (partially) exit the market but choose substitutional practices, like watching soccer for free instead. This could mean matchday summaries on public TV or on YouTube, even if the latter is only available after a few days' delay. The various mentioned substitutional practices match the findings of Tinson et al. (2023). Fans are capable of compensating for diminished value in different ways, while remaining loyal to their team.

What all these variants have in common is that the fans invest significantly less time and money in soccer. Another way of reducing consumption relates to social media. An example of this is the following quote: "Since the end of last year, I have unfollowed all channels that have to do with soccer and the Bundesliga. Also, my club: Dortmund" (Q3: 22). As a result of these terminated subscriptions, the (former) fan consumed less soccer content and the club has less range, which it could sell to marketing partners.

Another mostly emotional and symbolic expression was reported by one fan who "threw away all the jerseys. I do not watch that anymore" (Q2: 18 – over 50 years old). Another fan wrote about quitting his club membership: "We no longer pay for it. Too bad, I was a soccer fan and club member for over 50 years. We do not do that anymore" (Q2: 200). In contrast to the findings of Healy and McDonagh (2013), Tamir (2022), and Tinson et al. (2023), these actions symbolize a break with the (former) favored team to the fullest extent and are thus a (complete) exit from the club according to Hirschman.

In summary, there are two kinds of behavioral changes mentioned by the fans when referring to their relationships with their favored clubs. First, fans reducing their soccer-related consumption except for the favored club or showing substitutional practices of consumption, but in any case staying loyal to their club in some way. Second, fans expressing some kind of break with their formerly favored club, for example by stopping club-related consumption or, more symbolically, by canceling membership and throwing away bought merchandize. In short, fans abandoning their clubs.

Similar to changes in the emotional relationship, behavioral changes reveal a continuum of varying degrees of radical expression. Some fans describe that they have stopped a certain behavior according to Bauer et al. (2005, 2008), such as watching the game live on pay TV or consuming media related to the club, but they basically continue their fandom. However, there are also quotes in which fans describe a comprehensive turning away from the club and soccer:

I escaped from professional soccer. Do not feel like it anymore. Sky and Dazn [pay TV providers] have been resigned. Now, I go to the Regionalliga [semi-professional 4th division] and watch the home matches every second weekend. I do not even care about the Bundesliga and everything related to it anymore. It just does not matter. I've been a Bayern fan for over 17 years. The last game I watched I do not remember at all, it has become boring. (Q3: 15 – fan Bayern München)

In this quote, the exit from professional soccer and the once-favored club becomes clearly visible. Instead, the fan has sought and found an alternative.

In the sample, there are several examples of consumption alternatives to which fans refer. First, lower and amateur leagues of German soccer are frequently mentioned substitutions. Different to the results of Watkins and Cox (2021), this fan does not perceive their presence in non-league soccer as *polygamous* while still supporting professional soccer. Instead, they describe it as a real alternative. Fans emphasize different advantages of lower leagues in this regard; for example, a local connection or lower commercialization and costs. In some cases, women's soccer is also mentioned as an alternative, described with the same benefits. Within the mentioning of advantages, fans clearly show signs of romanticizing these leagues and the participating clubs. Similarities can be identified to the support of clubs such as HFC Falke or FC United of Manchester as *post-consuming* (Brandt and Kurscheidt, 2022). In principle, fans switching teams show that they stay loyal to the sport of soccer, even in the case of abandoning (exiting) a formerly favored club.

Nonetheless, some fans also mentioned different sports that they are currently following. As in this example:

The current soccer is just perverse. For me, the process is such that I prefer watching American Football and Formula 1. Of course, these two sports aren't really better in terms of commercialization, but that's been clear from the start. (Q3: 165)

It is noticeable that team sports are particularly popular. Among these, American Football is mentioned frequently. Here, the commenting fans are aware of the higher commercialization, but emphasize the greater competitive balance or intensity that is lacking in German soccer as the studies from Ramchandani et al. (2018) and Wagner et al. (2020) shows. According to Bühler (2006), soccer fans are limited in their search for alternatives. The sample shows that some fans are nevertheless capable of finding alternatives outside of the context of soccer.

5.1.3 No change or positive changes in the relationship

Within some comments, fans describe developments around their favored club or soccer in general as positive, or at least explain that their relationship to soccer did not change. One example of these few positive comments is the following, wherein a fan is clearly describing a positive change and an increasing emotional bond between them and their club:

Last year it was just awesome to be a Mainz fan. It was painful not to be able to go to the stadium. I'm aware that Mainz is unfortunately only one of the few positive examples, but the bond has really grown stronger among many [fans]. (Q2: 9 – fan Mainz 05)

In addition, more neutral comments exist, wherein fans describe their consumption practices as consistent and not restricted by certain developments, as the following example shows:

I've been going to the stadium since [19]88, so a fucking pandemic cannot take away my desire. I'm still sitting in the stadium at [the age of] 75 (assuming I survive corona lol). (Q1: 16)

Furthermore, some comments even report a positive attitude to developments in soccer and the Bundesliga more generally, including the favored club:

Personally, I feel well entertained and I am happy when my club can sign good players. And if I can watch good soccer, I am willing to pay for it. There are a lot of things in life that bother me, that are actually unfair, but soccer is not one of them. It's pure entertainment and the business is only growing but that was never different. In the past, the players were also lured with a thousand nice things that were promised to them, and today it's just money because FIFA has more than enough of it. (Q7: 10 – fan Bayern München)

The fan thereby disagrees with the opinion given within the respective media report, emphasizing gratitude for the recent developments in soccer and marking the more critical comments as romanticized fantasies. Similar comments use a polemic style, criticizing the viewpoints of the media reports and fans who endorse these perspectives in their comments. Those fans legitimize their argument by the fact that millions of German fans still follow soccer. According to [Bauer et al. \(2008\)](#), these fans are showing high levels of psychological commitment to their club or soccer more generally through their certain resistance to criticism. Fans reflecting no or even a positive change in their relationship to soccer prove that the discussion is not one-sided and that not all fans have to share the viewpoints of the media reports.

In summary, this section shows that the fans' perspectives on their relationships with soccer clubs varies. The connections can be undergoing several emotional or behavioral changes or no changes at all. Emotional or behavioral changes could be separated analytically as two parts of the concept of fan loyalty ([Dick and Basu, 1994](#); [Bauer et al., 2008](#)), but might be influencing each other in practice. In regard to this, and in the context of German soccer, fans mention various developments that could be understood as explanations for the (potential) dynamics and changes in the relationship. These will be explained in detail below.

5.2 Fans' perspective on developments in the context of German soccer

5.2.1 Commercialization

The results show that increasing commercialization processes have a negative impact on the relationship, meaning decreasing loyalty between fans and clubs or at least their connection to soccer in general. In this regard, commercialization is the most mentioned development within the comments. This follows [Merkel's \(2012\)](#) explanations, recognizing the increasing commercialization as a source of fan resistance in the context of German soccer.

Within their comments, some fans just mention increasing commercialization as the reason for changes without further explanation, as they believe readers would understand what the term means. An example is the following:

When I was 6 years old, I started playing soccer and watched every game I could. Now I'm 23 and I never thought I'd say this, but soccer

is dead for me. It just has not been any fun for a while now. First and foremost is commercialization. (Q8: 17)

In the following, two aspects of increasing commercialization will be described in more detail. These are the behavior of club's representatives (i.e., players, managers, and coaches) and the monetary costs of soccer consumption.

Fans criticize the behavior of representatives and players and their lack of identification with the club and its fans when referring to commercialization tendencies:

I reject when I'm invited to watch the Champions League with my mates. Because I do not care about the business anymore. We fans have been totally cheated, we are just customers. Hardly any players have a bond with the club, they flee at the first crisis to the next higher salary. My heart bleeds when I write these lines here because that used to be my life. (Q3: 223)

The lack of identification with the players reveals itself within the comments in different ways. First, fans criticize that players often change clubs because they (supposedly) earn higher salaries at a new club. In this context, the term *mercenary* is often used by fans. Second, fans criticize the salaries paid to top players and the sums to transfer them:

18-year-old boys earn more a year than a normal person in their whole life—I've been out of it for a long time although I love soccer 😞 (Q4: 30)

In the quote, the fan refers to a difference between himself, his earnings, and those of top soccer players. Third, fans criticize the behavior of players who earn these huge sums of money; that is, their consumption of luxury items, etc. ([Merkel, 2012](#)). This behavior is interpreted as ostentatious, and the conclusion is drawn that the players can only afford this behavior because the financially worse-off fans finance it.

This argumentation is linked with a second development in soccer that fans often criticize: increased consumption costs. Occasionally, the costs of stadium tickets, including travelling, are mentioned, but more often fans refer to the costs of watching broadcast matches live. Criticism is related to the fact that fans need to sign several contracts to follow all matches, as the responsible association sold broadcasting packages to different providers. Due to the large number of subscriptions, fans incur high financial costs as described in the following comment:

The generation of money through TV rights has now taken on an absurd form. Sky, DAZN, Amazon, and who-knows-who-else all want a piece of the soccer cake and the fan, if he is unlucky, is allowed to pay every provider because the club is represented in all competitions. What is left for me, the fan? I've currently resigned everything except Sky and even there I'm considering not renewing. (Q3: 76 – Borussia Dortmund fan; 38 years old)

In this context, fans repeatedly refer to the fact that they want to see all their clubs' matches; however, as their club participates in different competitions and several subscriptions are needed, fans decide, as in the quote, to limit their consumption. As described regarding behavioral changes in the relationship between fans and

soccer, alternative forms of consumption then become a possible option, such as watching sports on public TV or using freely available, but illegal online formats. On a rather emotional level, fans feel that their interests are ignored by the splitting of broadcasting packages and that financial benefits of associations are the main reason this happens. Furthermore, fans feel only recognized as customers not as emotionally committed supporters.

Nevertheless, not all comments express harsh criticism of all aspects of commercialization. Several commenters emphasize that they understand the behavior of players and grant them high earnings for their outstanding performance and for offering appealing entertainment.

5.2.2 Governance

Governance is another topic that fans discuss within their comments. This involves the attitudes and behavior of national and international soccer associations and other sports governing bodies. Fans accuse these organizations of having their own interests at heart, which are not in the best interests of the fans. Instead, according to the comments, these organizations are concerned with financially driven interests:

I'm fed up with UEFA and FIFA, who just seem to own soccer, being mafia clans that cannot be kept in check by anything or anyone. (Q2: 112 – fan Borussia Dortmund)

The drawing of parallels between mafia and soccer associations occurs several times in the comments, with suggestions that the people in charge enrich themselves unlawfully and criminally, acting as if they own soccer. Meanwhile, the fans describe a feeling of being at the mercy of these criminals, without any chance of rescue. Reference is made to them carrying out their machinations in public, even after investigations by the U.S. authorities since 2015.

Related to corrupt structures in soccer, Qatar's hosting of the men's 2022 soccer world cup was another frequently mentioned topic in the sample. This also included fans' criticism of the winter schedule, which was perceived as undermining their traditional viewing practices. Others refer to the human rights situation in Qatar, the working conditions for construction workers, or the lack of sustainability of the constructed buildings. This could result in a rejection of the competition:

On top of that, there's the crap about a World Cup in inhumane Qatar. I'm going to boycott that. (Q2: 114)

Beyond Qatar, the world cup in Russia is also criticized as propaganda for an authoritarian regime. Referring again to the concept of a mafia, fans criticize FIFA's cooperation with such states and allege that the association is only interested in generating money.

Another aspect of governance is related to club ownership. Here, fans criticize the entry of investors into soccer clubs, as in the following example:

I find investor-constructs in soccer very problematic. In my view, it is obvious that in the long term this endangers identification and thus the substance of soccer club culture. (Q14: 19)

In this context, the criticism is that investors would undermine the 50+1 rule in German soccer, which fans favor as a way to guarantee their influence (Bauers et al., 2020). According to Adam et al. (2020), restricting this influence brings the risk that supporters may exit. The fans also describe a lack of identification with clubs owned by private investors. Those clubs circumventing the 50+1 rule or standing as exceptions are described as less attractive related to the composition of the league. The majority of fans criticize investors, but there are also a few fans commenting that they have no problems with them. This is illustrated by the following quote: "If you have a romanticized image of soccer, then the thing with the investors bothers you, but I do not care" (Q3: 40). A few fans also consider investors as a possible way to end the sporting dominance of FC Bayern München.

5.2.3 Attractiveness

Within the comments, fans also refer to developments that affect the attractiveness and quality of soccer as a product, or as one Borussia Mönchengladbach fan describes it, "because it could hardly be more boring and uninteresting" (Q9: 25). Several fans describe the competitions as boring, which leads to decreasing interest, as in the following example:

I'm a soccer fan with heart and soul, but the Bundesliga has become a dull affair, and since the same commercial clubs without tradition have dominated all the European cups, it's dull there, too. (Q3: 243)

Boredom with the Bundesliga relates to two points. The first is the lack of excitement in the sporting competition. The most frequently cited example is that FC Bayern München has dominated the championship for many years. This lack of excitement is also transferred to individual matches where the outcome is more or less clear. In the case of the aforementioned quote, the lack of competitive balance is also transferred to international competitions, since here too the same teams are often found in the final rounds. These concerns about competitive balance have already been discussed in the literature (e.g., Ramchandani et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2020).

Additionally, fans criticize the composition of the league; that is, the teams participating in the Bundesliga as the highest division. They affirm that the Bundesliga has no interest in specific teams—mostly those relatively new in professional soccer or from smaller cities such as Augsburg or Mainz. This also applies to clubs that are considered representatives of a commercially driven soccer, because they are circumventions or exceptions to the 50+1 rule (VfL Wolfsburg, TSG 1899 Hoffenheim, Bayer Leverkusen, and, in particular, RB Leipzig):

But why should I buy a streaming service to watch Wolfsburg, Hoffenheim, Leipzig, and the permanent champions from Munich? (Q2: 24 – fan 1. FC Kaiserslautern)

Fans complain that clubs they perceive as having a long and successful tradition, a large stadium, and a well-known fan scene, such as 1. FC Nürnberg, Hamburger SV, Schalke 04, or SV Werder Bremen, are not participating in the highest division regularly or, in cases like the 1. FC Kaiserslautern, are even permanently in lower divisions. However, some fans emphasize that these clubs have taken many wrong turns and are rightly in lower leagues. Clubs such as Mainz,

Augsburg, or Freiburg are described as legitimate members of the Bundesliga, because they rely primarily on young players and their work is therefore seen as positive and sustainable.

Another development that limits the quality of the product soccer in the eyes of the fans is the VAR:

Abolish VAR because there are just too blatantly wrong decisions. They look for 6–10 min at actions and decide wrong and that week after week. These amateurs destroy soccer—just disgusting as they think they can bullshit you. I have already lost the fun of the most beautiful sport in the world by the VAR fraud. (Q8: 86)

Similar to fans in the study by Schwab et al. (2023), fans complain about this technical development, but they do so because of a loss of emotions rather than a lack of transparency regarding disputed game scenes. Fans mention that their emotions are destroyed after scoring, because they need to wait for the VAR to check. However, there are some comments praising the introduction of VAR and hoping for further improvements: “Through the VAR there are fewer wrong decisions and fewer faked fouls. [...] I do not think that the emotionality has decreased noticeably” (Q8: 50). This different perception of the VAR once more shows that perceptions of certain developments differ between the fans.

Another issue is the performance of a fan’s favorite team. Some fans express that their loyalty is not affected by the performance of the team they follow, emphasizing that they follow the team through thick and thin, and that “even a relegation would not scare me” (Q17: 1 – fan Union Berlin). Yet the sample also includes quotations where fans describe the relevance of performance for their loyalty, as in the following example: “I thought I was alone with this feeling because my club (Gladbach) has been shit for years and I’ve hardly watched the Bundesliga for years” (Q8: 24 – fan Borussia Mönchengladbach). Another fan emphasizes the relevance of team performance the other way around; that is, their relationship to the club became better after the club performed better:

The results of your own team play a bigger role than you might want to admit to yourself in such a period [i.e., COVID-19]. I had exactly the same thing in the summer, no desire to watch football [soccer] at all. [...] Now that my club (VFL Osnabrück) is playing more successfully than ever before since I became interested in the club, I’m starting to look forward to the 2nd division at the weekend again because I’m simply enjoying the football that VFL Osnabrück is currently offering me. (Q1: 12-fan VFL Osnabrück)

In summary, these quotations shows that a teams’ performance can influence fans’ relation to their favorite teams; contrary to Königstorfer et al. (2010) and Königstorfer and Urich (2009). However, this is not valid for all fans. It can generally be assumed that the fans are used to the “ups and downs” (Königstorfer et al., 2010, p. 666) of sport, and that factors other than the team’s performance are of more importance to them (Bauer et al., 2005). However, the results at least suggest that ongoing poor performance might enforce an exit to some degree, whereas great successes can certainly strengthen the relationship with the favored team.

5.2.4 COVID-19 pandemic

Since the included media reports and comments were written/published between 2020 and 2023, developments surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are also mentioned. Within the comments some fans reflect that the pandemic is having an impact on soccer as a kind of catalyst or *eye-opener* for them, as in the following quote:

Corona has given a turbo-boost to the commercialization and the revelation of soccer’s social deviance. (Q1: 7)

The fans refer to the fact that professional soccer matches were allowed during that time although most other social activities had been prohibited. The outstanding position of soccer and its business became visible and was perceived as inappropriate. Furthermore, the fans refer to developments that have already been discussed in terms of commercialization and that thereby reveal interdependencies. Correspondingly, the fans write that these developments are not new, but that the audacity and distance of soccer to the reality of ordinary people has become more obvious through the pandemic. Potentially, this perception results in long-term criticism of developments in soccer.

Fans also refer directly to the attractiveness of consumption during the pandemic. They mention a change of quality due to soccer being presented without acoustically present spectators:

90s of 2nd division are long enough. There are reasons why district league [meaning lower divisions] games are not broadcast on television. Probably I am just actually not a pure soccer purist, despite a 30-year Kicker [soccer magazine] subscription. I am out. Have fun. (Q10: 2)

The fan describes no longer being able to watch broadcast soccer because they were missing an essential part of the game. Similar to amateur soccer, the shouts to the coach, players, and referees could be heard in the TV broadcast during the games without spectators. Emotions generated by the audience did not occur. Thus, the fans here indirectly refer to the co-creation of the spectators, which is part of the experience of a soccer game (Woratschek et al., 2020) and which was missing during the pandemic to some degree. Since these comments only represent snapshots, it can only be assumed how the commenting fans have reacted to the end of the pandemic and the return of spectators to stadiums. According to the results of Wilkesmann (2022), the pandemic seems to be only having a temporary effect without long term consequences. Indeed, several fans commented that they are going to come back after the pandemic, therefore showing positive intentions and behavioral loyalty according to Bauer et al. (2008).

Another development surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic shows a proximity to governance issues. Here, fans criticize how clubs and associations dealt with the pandemic. They thereby focus on measures employed to limit the virus’s spread; specifically, measures dealing with unvaccinated fans:

The clubs, that excluded us fans and had no criticism of the policy measures, did not deserve to get even a cent from us fans. I know that this is an individual opinion of a frustrated fan, but this discrimination, especially against the unvaccinated, was

even forced by some clubs (e.g., Cologne, Frankfurt, etc.). (Q2: 71)

In this and other comments, fans perceive themselves as victims of discrimination and exclusion. In the statements, fans who feel excluded sometimes directly attack clubs and associations verbally, which implies a change in the emotional relationship.

In summary, fan comments surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic often refer to the previously described developments; that is, commercialization, governance, and attractiveness. For that, interdependencies could be assumed. Additionally, the pandemic might have worked as a eye-opener that revealed latent, or catalyst that increased preexisting negative developments in the eyes of fans.

6 Conclusion

Based on media reports addressing problems for fans in the context of German soccer, this study is concerned with the relationship between fans and the soccer clubs they favor. The focus thereby lies on the fans' perspective through analysis of their comments. The study confirms that the loyalties between fans and clubs are indeed complex and influenced by a variety of factors. Explicitly, the results revealed that the relationships between fans and their clubs are subject to various negative emotional and behavioral changes, which are mainly due to developments concerning commercialization, governance, attractiveness, and the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of German soccer. There are several theoretical and managerial implications emerging from these results which will be explained below in more detail. Finally, limitations and areas of interest for further research will be pointed out.

6.1 Theoretical implications

In view of the results obtained, it seems appropriate to further adapt and extend the *Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Framework*. The variations of reported emotional and behavioral changes show that the complexity and changeability of soccer fandom could not be fully covered with Hirschman's theoretical considerations. To exit in soccer does not mean taking one decision to exit. As emphasized in previous studies, fans might feel some kind of emotional detachment and alienation, even ceasing their club-related consumption, but nevertheless continue to support their club to some degree. However, some fans in the study sample reported that they permanently left their (formerly) favored clubs, with some reporting they found substitutions for their support in and outside of the sport of soccer.

The following question still remains, however: where does an exit begin and where does it end for soccer fans? A debate on the meaning of *exit* related to soccer fandom is therefore needed. The results show that a potential fan exit entails different emotional and behavioral changes; for example, a deterioration in the connection and a loss of interest, different levels of ceasing consumption, and the use of alternatives and substitutions. In both dimensions, a continuum of these changes in the relationship exists. In the emotional sphere, this ranges from less involvement, such as being emotionless, to rejecting the club by perceiving it as disgusting, for example. Consequently, an

exit could be defined as somewhere between being emotionless and enacting rejection.

In the behavioral sphere, an exit could be defined as something between minimalization of consumption (to different degrees) and a symbolic break with and radical abandoning of the formally favored club. The behavioral sphere can also be extended by aspects of substitutions and alternatives, with which the fans then fill their newly gained leisure time.

This understanding of the concept of an exit can help in further scientific discussions. For instance, the study contributes the finding that there are indeed fans in the field of soccer who are capable of permanently abandoning formerly supported clubs. To the best knowledge of the authors of this study, this behavior was only suspected in previous research, or reported in regard to the foundation of post-consumer clubs.

The study also showed that fans reflect a wide range of developments in the context of German soccer: from the behavior of clubs and institutional representatives, to the monetary costs of soccer, or the composition of the Bundesliga. A significant contribution has been made to systematizing these diverse and differentiated developments. Four categories were formed for this purpose, depending on whether the development relates to the commercialization, governance, or attractiveness of German soccer, or is due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study was also able to show the differentiation in fans' opinions; that is, fans can also assume positive positions in relation to the developments mentioned. Furthermore, it could be shown that the fan perspective can differ depending on which point of attachment is referred to: the sport of soccer in general or the respective favored soccer club. For example, there are several fans in the sample who report that they limit their soccer-related consumption to their favorite club only, and that soccer-related consumption beyond this was discontinued.

6.2 Managerial implications

The results of this study reveal various challenges for soccer clubs and decision-makers by confirming that the loyalty of soccer fans cannot be relied upon. Albeit that unconditional loyalty might be true for some of the fans studied, who report that their connection to clubs still exists, even in the face of negative emotional and behavioral changes. Furthermore, and as mentioned, not all of the researched fans reported negative changes or any changes in the face of soccer's current developments. Some show a certain degree of indifference, while others even report positive changes when considering soccer's commercialization, attractiveness, governance, or the influences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this variation, the fact remains that there are still fans in the sample who exited and therefore show cracks in the common image of an *unbreakable relationship* between fans and the clubs they support. Consequently, decision-makers should be aware of fans' capacity to leave, and the possibility that the relationship between fans and soccer might be destroyed if overstretched should be understood as more than a merely theoretical possibility.

Concerning the mentioned developments, the fans report in general that their interests are not considered enough. The specific

cases differ but mainly refer to the described topics of commercialization and attractiveness, and in comparison, to a lesser degree to soccer's governance. However, none of these should be ignored. Decision-makers should also be aware of the possibility that the pandemic might have worked as a kind of catalyst that increased other negative developments in the eyes of fans. The positive fan comments make it somewhat more difficult to provide clear recommendations for actions. However, as benevolent commentaries form a minority in the sample, soccer's decision-makers are advised to look closely at the fans and their behavior in the future. In particular, the status quo of the fan-club relationship can be determined on the basis of the listed (potential) emotional and behavioral changes, and then compared over time. In the event of negative changes, the decision-makers may then have enough time to intervene before fans leave their clubs for good.

6.3 Limitations and areas of future research

Concerning the underlying research question, the results reveal the complexity of fans' perspectives on their relationship to soccer clubs. Nonetheless, this study offers an approach to systemizing the various viewpoints and reflected developments in this regard. However, the qualitative and explorative procedure has limitations and provides possibilities for further research.

The included fan comments might be biased due to the fact they are associated with the respective media reports. Further quantitative research is needed to broaden and deepen the understanding of the categorizations made. It would be especially helpful to check the connections between the identified higher and lower themes and how they impact each other. Although the chosen qualitative-explorative approach allows conclusions to be drawn in this regard, further quantification and statistical tests are required. For example, the connection between the attitudinal and behavioral dimension of the fans' loyalty could be investigated further, or to what precise extent the listed developments explain the various negative emotional and behavioral changes.

Furthermore, the data is limited to the information provided by the fans. Not all of the comments contain socio-demographic data on the age of the respective fan, the duration of the fan-club relationship, the favored soccer club, or other variables. This especially limits potential insights into the fan's life cycle. Here, further research is needed in order to collect this data, such as using a survey, for example. Further data about the participants might help to contextualize and classify the emerging results and findings.

This study's focus is German soccer and its fans, although within this study it was shown that the topic is also relevant to soccer fans in other countries. Future comparative studies might be interesting in this regard. Lastly, as with other research approaches, this study could not provide any evidence on non-respondents. Fans that have already chosen to exit from soccer might no longer be engaging in soccer-related online behavior, nor might they be willing to comment on soccer-related content.

Finally, soccer fans' relationships to favored clubs, including all the mentioned and described perspectives, changes, dynamics, and developments, promises to be a relevant and interesting field for further research. This study contributes to the closing of existing research gaps in this respect. In general, the emerging findings emphasize that descriptions and images of loyal fans, who would never turn away, are simplified—even if this might be true for some fans, as the results show. Consequently, it is time to modify the understanding of fans towards a more nuanced description. The scientific research on the topic had just begun.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

MK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SBB: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. JB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing. GH: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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