

HOW TOURIST'S PRESENCE CONSTRUCTS AUTHENTICITY IN LOWER LEAGUE FOOTBALL

Football, or soccer, is the number one sport in Germany, as in many other countries in the world. As a leisure activity, it is manifold related to travelling and tourism. Fans travel to away-matches destinations for national and international competitions. Even in lower leagues players, kids and relatives travel to matches, tournaments or trainings-camps.

Additionally, tourists integrate visits to football locations into their trips. Especially top teams' response to that trend by offering club museum and stadium tours. But the premium experience is visiting a football match, which is perceived as an authentic experience, participating in local practices. A specific group of guests at football matches are so-called groundhopper, for whom visiting matches and seeing the ground is the main purpose to travel. They gather grounds, sometimes symbolically expressed in printed tickets, buying matchday magazines or merchandise, and do not only visit big clubs, but also lower leagues and or countries usually not famous for football, but promising authenticity and nostalgia. Similar to other tourist groundhopper affect their travel destination and its community, but little is known about how these visited teams respond to groundhoppers and how they influence the clubs.

The presentation will investigate how one specific club responds to the regular visits of groundhoppers at their matches, the German HFC Falke from Hamburg. In 2014, (former) fans of the professional team Hamburger Sportverein (HSV) founded the club, playing in lower leagues (9th – 7th division). They left the HSV after a spin-off, which they criticise as commercialisation. Lots of German football fans know the club and its specific history. It has become a symbol of supporter activism and their struggle against commercialisation and vice versa a symbol of authentic football culture (Brandt & Kurscheidt, 2022).

Connell (2017) described groundhopping as a response to the commercialisation of Europe's top leagues. It expresses and fits four trends in leisure activity: "opposition to growing capitalist elements in elite football, nostalgia for an earlier era when football and locality were more closely bound together, embrace of collecting and the acquisition of social capital through a form of serious leisure" (Connell, 2017, p. 553). These are related to a broader trend, searching for authenticity, which is based on people need to create a "sense of the world in which they live" and therefore they use authenticity to balance their life" (Kuppens & van der Pol, 2014, p. 154). Authenticity in this presentation is understood as constructed by people. It depends on their "own beliefs, expectations, preferences, stereotyped images, and consciousness" (Wang, 1999, p. 355). Wang (1999) differs two kinds of authenticity. The first kind is intra-personal authenticity, which depends on specific individual perceptions. Individuals break their usual monotone routines and seek experience on adventures. The second type of authenticity is inter-personal authenticity. Here people „search for the authenticity of, and between, themselves“(Wang, 1999, pp. 363–364). Authenticity is created in bonds between people of the community or *communitas* based on shared emotions.

The research is based on 27-month ethnographic research between 2015 und 2017. The author joined the club to do participant observation, resulting in 123 fieldnotes, and 10 semi-structured interviews with different members of HFC Falke. For the presentation fieldnotes on specific games, where groundhoppers visit the club or when members discuss groundhopper's relevance, similar to one interview. The data was analysed based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

During the research, HFC Falke was several times visited by national and international groundhoppers. They were always welcomed. Club members discuss with them their previous experience and fulfil their assumed requirements. The results show that HFC Falke adapted their conditions only slightly to groundhoppers requirements. During the research, Falke's members discussed potential areas to save money. Someone asked if the club could use the tickets of the local football association instead of printing individual paper tickets for every match. They were the only club in Hamburg on that level doing it. The suggestion was rejected including the argument groundhoppers may need it. A similar argument was used in a discussion on saving voluntary work. Someone suggested closing the merchandise shop on matchday. Again, it was rejected by the argument, that groundhopper could not buy merchandise in that case. Both examples show that the club welcome groundhoppers. These welcoming are not monetary driven. Instead, the presence of groundhoppers was seen as proof of establishing an authentic football experience.

Falke's community was just established. They founded the club to "build a new emotional home" (HFC Falke, n.d.), for those who stopped following the HSV after the spin-off. Part of that new home is to establish an authentic and nostalgic football experience as in an imagined past. The orientation shows several similarities to the description of groundhoppers. They reject football's commercialisation and share the same knowledge, and expectations as Falke's members, especially when they are respected and well-known individuals. If they come and confirm the authenticity of the experience Falke's approach could be perceived as successful. Therefore, HFC Falke is interested to welcome groundhoppers and to fulfilling their needs. Meanwhile, groundhoppers expectations of authenticity are matched, when volunteers in a DIY setting sell merchandise, especially as they are not knowing that this is done for them. As a result, inter-personal authenticity is here constructed in an interplay between members of HFC Falke and the groundhoppers, as both are striving for authenticity.

References

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