Do I Dare … Disturb the Fan(atic)?
A Sociopsychological Study on Sports Fanaticism, Identity Formation, and the Making of a Fan

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Abstract

The ability to intuitively focus on ideas of sports and the fandom that it entails has not been the strongest subject of research throughout the countries of South Asia, and to understand the psychology that comes with it has been an even more farfetched notion. There is no denying that a gap subsists in the current literature that is accessible on matters such as sports fandom or identity formation apropos sports entities, teams or even franchises. Obviously, it is better to have an understanding of what sports fanaticism is, how it is related to individual identity and, more importantly, how it creates fan identity and also, to what extent the influences of such fandom operate in the context of our country. My paper, therefore, will primarily provide an account of sports fandom and fanaticism which will lead to the discussion of the present condition of sports fanaticism in Bangladesh focusing on the most popular sports of football. The paper will also put forward a theory about how sports fandom can accommodate itself as a perfect venue for identity creation and at the same time depict that, personal and psychological characteristics, contributing to the most basic determining factors of human psychology, have an immense part to play in the making of a sports fan. Finally, the paper will discuss the sociocultural effects and consumerist attitudes of sports fandom in our country. The research is based both on qualitative and quantitative approaches and is discussed in terms of social factors.

Fandom—The Current State: It has been just less than two centuries since the sport of football was introduced in Asia and ever since, it has been subject to compound repercussions in relation to our societies. From modern innovations to a tool of imperial regulation, the sport of football did not cease to be a mechanism for creating national, international, and beyond-border identities by becoming the most celebrated game and a forerunner of today's globalized consumerist society. The people of South Asia and, to be more specific, the people of Bangladesh, have always been great admirers and lovers of sports. Their great enthusiasm can be seen not only during the time of world cups but also the friendly matches between two fierce rivals of any given sport. Despite having the luxury of being exposed to so many different types of sports and although the national game is Hadudu, the general people are very enthusiastic about the game of football if we take the present condition into consideration. Geographically, the country itself, along with the entire Asian continent, has become very

important for the sport as well. The people of these parts are related to the game in three ways—as practitioners, as audience/fans, and as organizers. Therefore, the markets for both televising games and selling football related goods have been rejuvenated. Many national and international tournaments have also been arranged and these have been the subjects of vast investments as well. With the rise of fandom among the people and their entanglement with these games, there is a need for explanation on how fan identity is formed in these parts of the world and also what effect it has when considered from national, social, and economical perspectives. Now, the fan identity itself can be identified along with the leader-follower[1] identity praxis in terms of psychology and the idea of supporting or becoming a fan is a very natural phenomenon. The identity of a fan is very similar to the identity of a group. It is positive for the individual because it provides a sense of togetherness, a sense of community, and collectiveness. Zillman, Bryant and Sapolsky put forth many other optimistic notes on fandom including the inception of diverse interests and participation of the individual, who otherwise would not have had any other way to attach to what they hold dear. Fanship does not require any special skills either and that makes it a lucrative action for the ones who cannot perform in an athletic manner. The question is, however, not what sports fandom entails but among the various numbers of teams—international and national, foreign and domestic—how does a fan decide (or does one decide at all?) which teams, clubs or franchises to support?

Before we move on to even begin answering that question, let us first understand the multifaceted nature of the individual fan in our country. The "fan" of which we speak is not a linear entity but a sort of hybrid when it comes to supporting sport teams or athletes. The multifacetedness is a result of the amalgamation of quite a few factors which play crucial parts in crafting the psychology of the fan. This many-sided complex edifice within the consciousness of the fan is a result of not being able to directly identify himself or herself from stronger pledges. From a xenophobic point of view, our "fan" has very little to choose from since the majority of South Asian countries is not too well-known in the world for athleticism. So he or she must look elsewhere—towards other countries and their teams and athletes to find a more apposite and desirable taste. The sentiments of the "fan," however, are more reclusively wandering and thus, are harder to explain. There is always an existing tension between the fan's adopted taste and the innate one, thus, the "fan" that we are trying to explicate becomes remarkably different and unique.

For the sake of the scope of this paper, let us focus on the current state of fandom regarding football in our country. The people of our country support other foreign nations with more enthusiasm and vigor than their own countries which are inferior in sport skills and technical prowess. For most people who love this sport, it is no less than a religious conviction, a creed and therefore, people tend to support the ones which they feel are the strongest, the ones that can conquer and "protect," and the one that can bring dominance and establish peace (of mind). Therefore, it is painfully natural in our country that a contingent of fans assembling to see Lionel Messi's Argentina play against Nigeria would easily surpass the number of fans in a stadium watching their own country play against one of their regional rivals.

From Fandom to Fanaticism—Formation of a Fan(atic): A fan does not simply support a team or a club all of a sudden and, for every individual, there is a specific story behind their fandom. At this point there is a need to explain the relationship between the fan and the fanatic or likewise, between fandom and fanaticism. Fandom is merely the situation or status of being a fan of a particular team or an individual athlete. When an individual develops an attraction towards a particular team or athlete, we call the individual a fan of that exact team or athlete. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a fan is "a person who is very much interested in and spends a lot of time watching or reading about esp. an entertainer or sports team." Now, the idea of fanaticism traditionally refers to the act of irrational dedication or zeal. It is comprehended to be wild and dangerous in nature and passionately committing. But, in this paper, we are not going to have the traditional impression of fanaticism. For this paper, fanaticism will denote an idea of excessiveness regarding the characteristics of a fan. Also, since it has been previously stated that the characteristics of the particular fan which we speak of is nonlinear and multifaceted as it enthusiastically supports other countries rather than its own, we will categorize this fan as a fanatic for the "irrational dedication" and therefore, in further discussion, the terminologies of fan and fanatic may overlap one another as they signify the same individual and the characteristics that follow.

In recent years, the football loving people of our country have not only become followers of International football but also commenced supporting teams at the club level and a good number of people who love the sport are fans of club teams like Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester United, Barcelona, Real Madrid, AC Milan, Juventus, Bayern Munich, and so on. The reason is also not very difficult to fathom. To quote from Younghan Cho's significant document, *Football in Asia,* where he perennially describes the game of football as a global commodity:

> As one of the pop cultures, global sports came to replace the role of Hollywood in the process of cultural globalization. Given the central roles of the USA or American power in global sports, it is only football that is exceptionally unpopular with the USA. Contrarily, several European countries and Latin-American ones emerge as the powerhouses in football, and the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), which controls the FIFA World Cup, plays central roles in its organizational and institutional managements. As a result, a "soccerscape" in the globe portrays very different dimensions and dynamics, which have multiple centers and peripheries, and diversified trajectories. (3)

The diverse nature of football ensures an exposure of club level football in the country through cable network with channels like ESPN, Star Sports, Ten Action, etc. telecasting the most celebrated games live. I will reiterate the idea of most "celebrated" because many people think that the Champions League games, which resemble the World Cup of club teams, are more popular than the Olympic games themselves, which is considered to be "the greatest show on earth" and obviously far below the popularity of World Cup football. This may have opened the way for an individual to be exposed to both international and national level games but the process of creating the fan identity needs further narratives.

To explain how an individual goes through the process of creating a fan identity and identifies him or herself with a certain group, there is a need to understand the existing sociopsychological identity theories. Basically, there are two such theories that could be traced back to our own fan theory that we are trying to shape. One of them is Stryker and Burke's identity theory (1980) and the other one is Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (1979). According to identity theory, which was based on McCall and Simmons, role identity theory, the individuals supposedly carry out actions based on where they want to see themselves and how they like to be seen by others. On the other hand, the social identity theory, which was a derivation from Festinger's social comparison theory, claims that individuals will somehow attach and/or identify themselves with entities or other individuals who are characteristically similar or slightly better than the individuals themselves. In this case, the way individuals categorize themselves is based on their social and personal identities. Generally speaking, identity theorists believe that social identity "refers to the ways in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectives" (Jenkins 4). As far as identity is concerned, it is nothing less than a group of mechanisms taking form on the "self" either knowingly or unknowingly and this defines what the "self" is yet to become. Once the formations have taken place, there, however, rises a concern of commitment. The concern is whether the individual is going to hang on to the principles or characteristics that have taken shape in him or her rather than completely denying the effects after a considerable amount of time. The bigger the impact of commitment on an individual, it could be safe to say, the stronger the attachment becomes. The level of commitment, however, does not remain in the same domain for eternity. For a fan, there comes a time when the commitment is questioned. The very existences of the ingredients that have turned a person into a fan come into question when the particular teams or clubs go through a rough patch. When the team is losing or is going through a losing streak, it is very hard for a fan to not question his or her level of commitment. Keeping all of these primary ideas in mind, we will further focus on the mechanism of how a fan is formed.

The process that an individual must go through in order to become a fan includes either one of the previously stated identity theories. But independently, neither of them is enough to explain the hows and whys that turn an individual into a fan. They are enough to explain how the identity of an individual takes shape; however, to explain the status quo of fandom, various other factors must be brought into play. At the inception of the primary stage, the fans associate themselves with specific teams by following one of three possible mechanisms. These mechanisms, which we will henceforth identify as "inceptors," reside as the very first stage of the complex process of becoming a fan. The three inceptors are known as the hereditary inceptor, the empiricist inceptor, and the rationalist inceptor. The hereditary inceptor takes effect mostly on the individual's emotional attachments with other individuals of the society to which the individual belongs. The individual becomes a fan of a team, athlete or club not because he or she has firsthand experience of the ability or prowess of the team but because most of the individuals in his or her community support that particular team. The individual, when becoming a fan, is unknowingly pressurized by the ones around him or her and the individual ends up not having much of a choice to decide otherwise. Sometimes, tradition

suppresses any other fluttering feelings and one is almost forced (again unknowingly) to become a fan of a certain team without fully realizing why the individual is doing so. Examples could be drawn from many of the football fans of Brazil and Argentina national teams and strikingly similarly, the cricket fans of India and Pakistan national teams who belong to Bangladesh.

The second inceptor is the empiricist inceptor. According to John Locke's empiricist theory, knowledge is nothing but "sense perception." The second inceptor is a direct derivation from this theory. At a young age, when the potential fans come across certain games for the very first time, there are certain sports they like, and then there are those which they despise. The idea of liking a certain type of sport and despising others could be innate, but the process of experiencing an attachment for certain teams, clubs or athletes and having a feeling of fondness for them is a work of the senses. This is also regarded as the strongest of the three inceptors since an individual experiences the process firsthand. For this particular inceptor, the level of commitment is also undoubtedly the highest. For the empiricist inceptor, there are further steps that the individual must complete in order to perfect the process. This will be discussed in the following portions of the paper.

The third inceptor is the rationalist inceptor. This type of inceptor is based on the innate knowledge thesis which proposes that we have the knowledge of some ideas in a particular subject area as part of our rational nature and this *a priori* knowledge is completely independent of sensory experiences. In this case, the potential fan is neither influenced by sense perception and/or experience, nor the effects of peer pressure. This particular individual creates a sort of attachment with particular teams or clubs for no explainable reason at all. There is a sense of innate attachment and sometimes the fans themselves cannot provide plausible answers when asked why they support the team they ended up supporting. As partially mentioned before, the levels of commitment for the three types of inceptors also differ from one another. Through a survey on fifty random individuals, we arrived at the conclusion that the empiricist inceptor shows signs of having the strongest level of commitment where the hereditary inceptor comes second and the weakest level of commitment was shown by the rationalist inceptors.

There is not much to explain regarding the later stages of fan formation in terms of the hereditary and rationalist inceptors due to their very natures. However, for the empiricist inceptor, the next stages become more and more entertaining. Since the formation of fandom under the empiricist inceptor depends a lot on sense perception, this one is also the kind that takes the most time for the construction to be complete. Here, the potential fan experiences the game-play of different teams or clubs and one day, a considerable amount of time later, begins to grow an attachment to one of the teams he or she has been watching all this time. Meanwhile, the magic has occurred and this instantly calls Žižek and his ideas of "fantasy" to mind. Slavoj Žižek wonderfully explains how the external materialization of ideology is bound to reveal latent characteristics which perhaps explicitly we fail to comprehend. The fast growing fame of what we know as the "fantasy games" available online, where individual players become managers backed up with "money" in cyberspace where they assemble their teams

and compete with other similar teams to win "prizes," is yet another very similar example of where the excess of the want of fantasmic pleasure could lead us. What the individuals fail to comprehend while being so busy in creating their own teams and franchises online is that these "fantasy games" which become the source of so much pleasure can never be real and therefore, it conceals the feeling of reality by recreating the very feeling that it wishes to conceal. Now, the relation of the potential fan and the fantasy is a matter of real importance in the case of the second inceptor. Although hard to realize, each individual and potential fan has his or her mindset regarding what style of play or players or teams they like which remain latent and hidden. Developing the taste for a certain type of game-play or style is, however, deeply connected with one's own personal characteristics. When the potential fan comes into contact with the games of certain teams and experiences the characteristics of the game-play, the style, the history, the potential, and the players of that team, which correspond with the already existing latent personal characteristics of the individual, the person develops a certain attachment towards that particular team. For this to happen, the two characteristics—one of the team and the other of the potential fan must correlate and must behave as an imperium in imperio. A certain fan, for example, who is characteristically self assured and to some extent dominating over other individuals would, under every circumstance, end up cheering for a club or team which has dominated in its respective sport for at least a considerable amount of recent time. This is but just one example among a flurry of probable prospects.

A second survey, which was carried out on a different group of fifty individuals (other than the ones who participated in the previous survey, Survey 1) who are ardent followers of different teams of the Barclays Premier League (the top tier football club competition of England), led to an amazing discovery. The survey assisted in concluding that there were five different categories of fans existing in the capital of Bangladesh, based on the five different traits and/or characteristics of different clubs in the BPL. The five traits are the following—the juggernaut, the magician, the pragmatic, the compassionate, and the historian. The juggernaut relates to those fans who answered the open-ended questions with a dominating tone. They prefer to lead and have a strong self belief in their abilities. They also possess a rich sense of heritage and, amazingly, most of them came out as supporters of the team known as Manchester United FC (the most decorated club in the BPL that boasts the most number of BPL trophies). Second, the magicians. These individuals are the advocates of style and beauty. Even in real life, they embellish and adorn themselves for the best of presentations. The matter of importance here is that the majority among them sided with the team known as Arsenal FC and also explained that they love this particular club because of its beautiful style of play. Next in line is the pragmatic. A certain number of the people chosen for the survey was accounted to be realistic in their decision making. These people always opted for the best possible outcome. They always remained with a positive outlook and they believed that no matter how ugly affairs get, they would like to come out with some sort of business done. They vouched for the team that goes by the name of Chelsea FC, which is known for its pragmatic approach to play. The next two are the compassionate and the historian. The compassionate comprise individuals who always tend to have a soft feeling for the underprivileged and the destitute. The majority having these personal traits happen to be the fans of Tottenham Hotspur FC, who regularly cut

a sorry figure in the BPL and very narrowly lose to their rivals. The historian is the last group of fans who characterize themselves as not being resilient enough when it comes to leaving the past and moving on. They prefer to cling on to the grand past and do not entertain the idea of embracing the future because the future, compared to the past, is a tad bit shabby. Not so surprisingly this time, they identified themselves as supporters of Liverpool FC, another club of the BPL franchise who was once a great team and who used to win a lot of trophies but recently have only managed to chase the shadows of their former selves. Holistically, there is no denying that a connection between a fan's personal traits, and the team or club he or she supports, is existent. This existence is perhaps even unknown to the supporter himself but what other reason could there be for an individual to support one particular team among many, and not the others.

Sometimes, one individual is found to identify him or herself with multiple teams as well. In that case, it is safe to say that those multiple teams share some similarities that enabled the individual to attach himself or herself to all of them. And when the teams do not seem to share similarities in traits, it could be said that the individual is going through some form of identity crisis. When it comes to the national teams at the international level, all these factors seldom come into play because then, a sense of national pride and patriotism prevails over all the previously explained factors. Even then, rarely some individuals are found who support rival nations and/or teams when teams representing their own countries feature in the same tournament. This, again, is an example of distorted identity for the individual concerned who also happens to be unsure about his or her own personal characteristics. The formation of a fan is a very diverse and critical process although there is no denying that the effect and relation of personal traits with experiencing and being able to identify oneself with the traits of the team or club, is of paramount importance.

Fandom, Sports Commodity and the Consumerist Society: Roy Krøvel and Thore Roksvold's edited collection, *We Love to Hate Each Other: Mediated Football Fan Culture*, investigates the centrality of media to contemporary sports fandom. The anthology includes theorizations and case studies of mediated football fan culture that engage a variety of national contexts, including Norway, Australia, England, Israel, Scotland, South Africa, and Sweden. The subject matter's diversity attests to the degree to which media have fostered increasingly globalized football fan cultures. Furthermore, it illustrates how the wealthiest and most powerful sports organizations, such as the English Premier League, have used media to cultivate communities of fans across the world. In addition to examining how media have facilitated and commodified football fandom, the collection's chapters usefully explore how media provide vehicles for fans to build, articulate, negotiate, and contest identities along national, gender, and ethnic lines. Further comprehension of their studies represents similar references between the footballing art/business relationship and what was echoed in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's essay, "The Culture Industry—Enlightenment as Mass Deception" where the authors brilliantly wrote:

> The man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him. Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of his function.

We experience these games through the passive medium of television and the idea of "forced acceptance" is a materialization of negative industrial and cultural hegemony. Although these words are true for a one sided passive medium such as the television, the introduction of cyberspace changes the interactivity of the sphere to an extent. Now, the receivers not only "accept" what they are offered by the industry but "reply" and portray their views clearly as well through the many tools of cyberspace. Then again, throughout the internet, there are many social networking sites which have dedicated their existence in trying to make this world even smaller for its inhabitants than it already is. There are certain groups in these social networking sites that welcome people to be a part of that group because they feel that they share the same ideas, values and standards and by doing that, engage in debate, dispute, contest, and acknowledgment in certain subjects all related to the issue for which the group was created in the first place. There are two different categories of groups in these networks. One is the broad-minded, sports-oriented general groups where people who support different teams and clubs join and engage in debate or constructive discourse. And the other category comprises people who support individual teams or clubs, the latter being much more noiseless than the first since all of its members support the same team and so there is very little to debate about. These groups are more constructive and focus on how their favorite team could fare well in its competitive games. The first category, on the other hand, is more violent as fans from different rival teams gather here but to some extent, the debates they have are often constructive, giving it the essence of "constructive violence." These groups throughout cyberspace have created room for people who have access to it, for sharing their views and ideas. A lot of young people are seen giving case studies from the games held in the early 60s or 70s and this proves that these young individuals have done a lot of research on the games not only based on present tournaments but also from the past. The most interesting factor about the existence of these groups, however, is that it cultivates a grave consumerist attitude as well. Every month, there is at least one or two assemblies or gatherings hosted and entertained by the members of their respective groups in the name of watching the matches together, live on television. These gatherings are carried out in restaurants which are moderately expensive. Not only hangouts but every now and then, apparel, utilities, electronic gadgets, and other products carrying the emblem of the teams which individuals support, are sold at a hefty fee to their supporters. Sports fanatics are constantly being subjected to harassment by the consumerist society and it goes without saying that the fans and supporters make themselves easier targets because of the passion and love they embody for their respective teams.

No other idea, institution, or object brings so many people together and is so united in diversity compared to the various sports organizations existing around us. Fans and fanatics alike sometimes draw the line too narrowly and become overzealous, ending up committing

unruly and destructive behavior which has become a very regular incident all over the world and that includes our South Asian subcontinent as well. In 2010, Dean Nelson of *The Telegraph* reported that the police were forced to use crown control measures when riots broke out after two nearby villages in India fought over the famous South American footballing rivalry of Brazil and Argentina, three weeks before the beginning of the 2010 World Cup. Four years later, the same incident, concerning the same rivalry of Brazil and Argentina, happened, but this time in a different setting. The recent edition of the riots breaking out was not in the streets of Rio or the markets of Buenos Aires but the unlikeliest setting of Barisal, a district in the southern part of Bangladesh, some ten thousand miles from where the World Cup was commencing for the fifth time in South America. In some countries of Europe and the Americas, however, sports fandom becomes synonymous with hooliganism and terrorism as well, but that is not yet the scenario in the South Asian countries. Despite all the negativity, the future of the sport of football in our country and, on a larger scale, in Asia, looks bright. It goes without saying that many Asian club leagues are turning into successful organizations and the local footballing events are gaining international reputation. However, it is still regrettably true that the majority of Asian football fans are orienting their concentration towards Latin American or European leagues even though many Asian countries have their own professional football leagues and clubs. Predominantly in Asia, Korea initiated the K-League in 1983, Japan began their version of the J-League ten years later in 1993, and China did something similar with the Chinese Super League in 2004. Most recently in 2013, India launched their version of the professional football league known as the Indian Super League and carried on for two years with immense success. Bangladesh must look forward to emulating similar accomplishments so that the ascendance of professional football remains integral to our local, national, and international progress.

Notes

1. Four distinct identity types: the leader, the follower, the independent, and the drifter.

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Survey 1

A survey on the level of commitment of the three different inceptors based on personal choices and actions.

*Personal information will not be published.

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Favorite Sport:
4. I am a fan of the following national team(s):   i.
        ii.
        iii.
5. I am a fan of the following domestic/club team(s):   i.
        ii.
        iii.
6. I first realized I was becoming a fan at the age of:
7. How did you first begin supporting your favorite team?
8. Did anyone (family, friends, associates) influence you to support the team?
9. Why did you become a fan of this particular team? What persuaded you the most?
10. Any comment that you would like to put into words:

Thank you for your kind support.

Survey 2

A survey on individual traits, likes/dislikes, and personal characteristics of the followers of different teams of The Barclays Premier League.

*Personal information will not be published.

1. Name: 2. Age:

3. Mark the team you support from the Barclays Premier League:
Arsenal Chelsea   Manchester United   Liverpool   Tottenham Hotspur
Everton Leicester   Manchester City   Newcastle   Watford

4. Do you think that your support to the team you have marked in the previous point has anything to do with your personality and/or personal characteristics? Explain in no more than 100 words. (Feel free to use the opposite side of the page if necessary).

Thank you for your kind support.