

## Friends or Followers? The Relations between German Soccer Clubs and Their Fans on Twitter

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### Abstract

This paper shows how soccer clubs from Germany's first division have started to use Twitter. Analysis is based on tweets from and to club accounts as well as on follower numbers, and specific clubs are selected for case studies. This approach reveals that Twitter mirrors the conflicts between professional sports and traditional fandom.

### Keywords

sports communication; fandom; soccer; Twitter

### Introduction

In this study we examine Twitter usage in Germany's first division soccer league, the *1. Bundesliga*. As a major European sports league with an enormous fan base and high national media coverage we expected Bundesliga clubs to make use of Twitter for interacting with their fan base, and fans to get in touch with their clubs. Yet German clubs have been slow in entering the Twittersphere, leading to difficult situations around unofficial and inactive accounts. The most notable cases will be presented below. We applied common metrics (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013) such as tweet types (retweets, genuine @replies and original tweets) to describe different behavior of soccer clubs. Furthermore, @messages addressed at the clubs' accounts act as a measure of fan response. This study is part of a broader research perspective comparing the Twitter usage of first division soccer clubs in Australia, Germany and England. Tweets from the accounts of all first league clubs in these countries as well as @messages directed at them were collected during the season 2011/2012. Follower numbers of these clubs have been gathered on a monthly basis.

With Twitter offering a novel opportunity for soccer clubs to establish an open relationship with their fans, we investigated whether soccer clubs make use of this and how intensely their fans respond to them. As Auty (2002, 278) states, "the Internet has clearly established itself as a means of mobilization for football fans in a variety of ways". This mainly referred to online spaces such as forums and closed communities attached to fan clubs' websites. Other studies show how such online channels are used to establish social identity (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010) and communities (Krøvel, 2012) and to foster "subcultural practices" (Merkel, 2012, 269). We assumed that the specific communicative structure provided by Twitter has the potential to go beyond closed online fan communities and enable a new form of dialogue between the clubs themselves and their fans within Twitter's open environment.

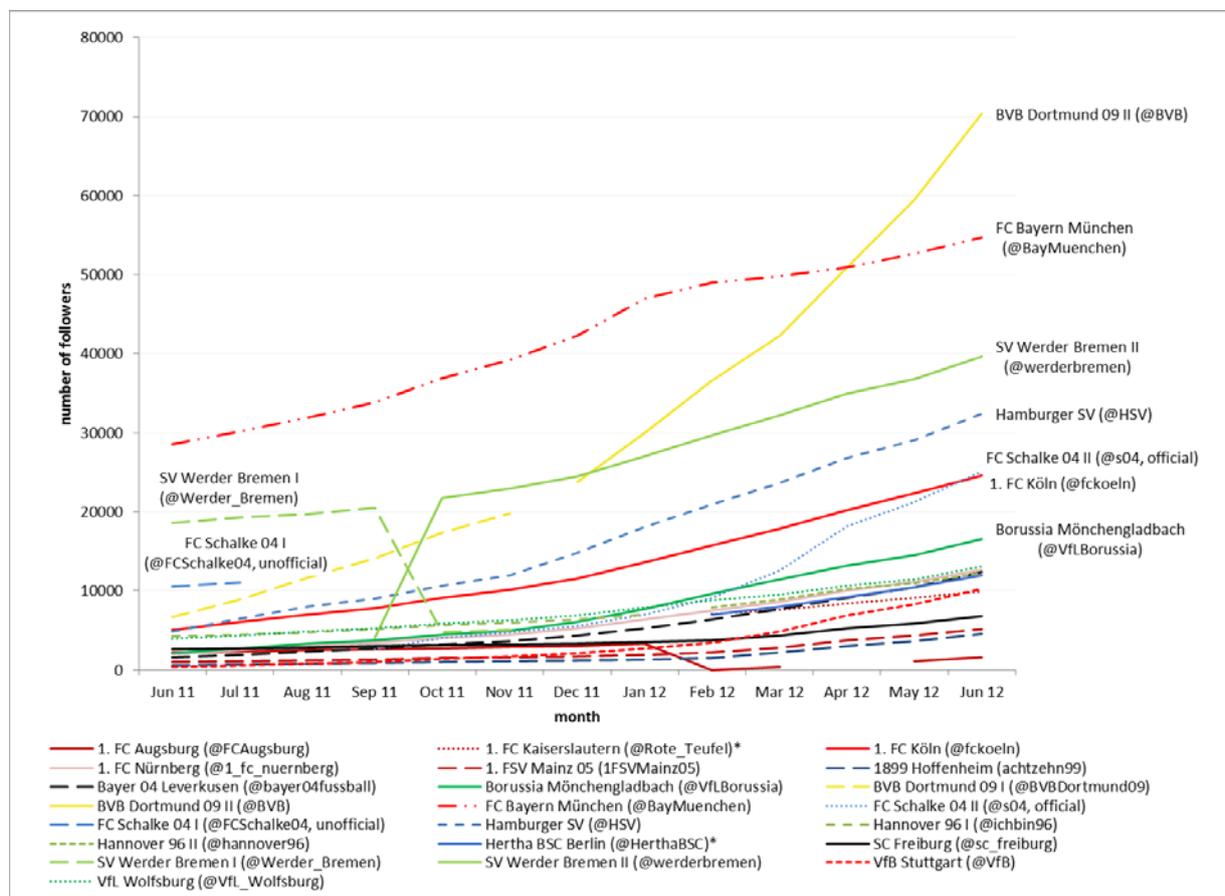
### Soccer Clubs between Marketing and Fandom

Soccer as the most popular sport in Germany keeps a very high level of professionalism both in performance as well as in marketing. The first division of Germany's soccer league, the *1. Bundesliga*, generated collective revenue of nearly €1.6 billion in 2009/10, thus being the second strongest European soccer market (and having the largest average attendance in European soccer) (Deloitte, 2011). Soccer fans in Germany are often dissatisfied with the increasing commercialization of their teams and even react in rebellious and subversive ways (Merkel, 2012), e.g. to events like the re-naming of stadiums after sponsors. Against this background, the internet could provide a space for

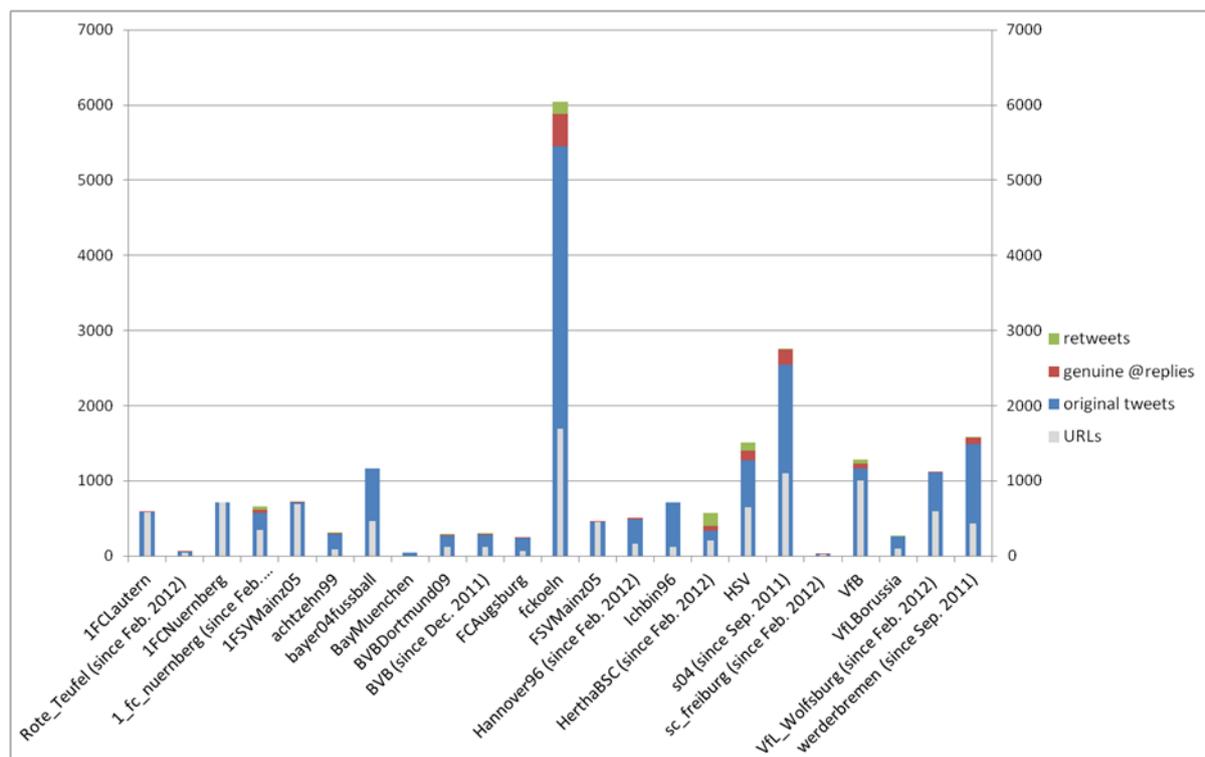
fans to express their discontent and to directly address the clubs, or even to “organize against the commercial power of the large football clubs” (McLean & Wainwright, 2009, 54). Twitter has the potential to enable new forms of participation, giving new public voices to a fan base which has lost almost all of its influence at the level of club administration. However, in Germany Twitter mirrors the conflicts between professional sports and traditional fandom, as clubs tend to use it as a tool for classical marketing activities, much like other companies do, rather than for fan interaction.

### Bundesliga Clubs and Their Followers

Twitter adoption in Germany is generally slow (Meyer, 2012); and so was the uptake of Twitter usage among German football clubs. By now, almost all first division teams have a verified Twitter account. In June 2011, however, there were only two verified accounts. Consequently it was not always easy to identify each club’s official account. Furthermore, a substantial number of clubs changed their Twitter handles during the 2011/2012 season. Both facts can hinder the successful establishment of a fan base on Twitter. Overall, the follower numbers of all clubs have been rising during the season (Figure 1) and are still rising until today.



**Figure 1:** Follower numbers of Bundesliga clubs during Season 2011/12. \* @HerthaBSC and @RoteTeufel have only been tracked since Feb 2012.



**Figure 2:** Tweets by Bundesliga clubs during Season 2011/12, distinguishing original tweets, retweets, genuine @replies and indicating URLs.

Football clubs in Germany use Twitter as a tool for broadcast messages, and rarely respond to users or retweet them. This can be seen in the high percentage of original tweets among all tweets (Figure 2). Some used Twitter to promote links to their websites or official press releases, resulting in high numbers of tweets including URLs. This illustrates that clubs rather view their fans as passive “followers”; not as equal conversational partners. One exception was *1. FC Köln* (Köln). It is one of only two German clubs that had *verified* Twitter accounts as early as June 2011. Köln did respond to and retweeted other Twitter users more often than any other Bundesliga club, and instituted special Twitter activities. For example, they hosted interview sessions with club officials on Twitter.

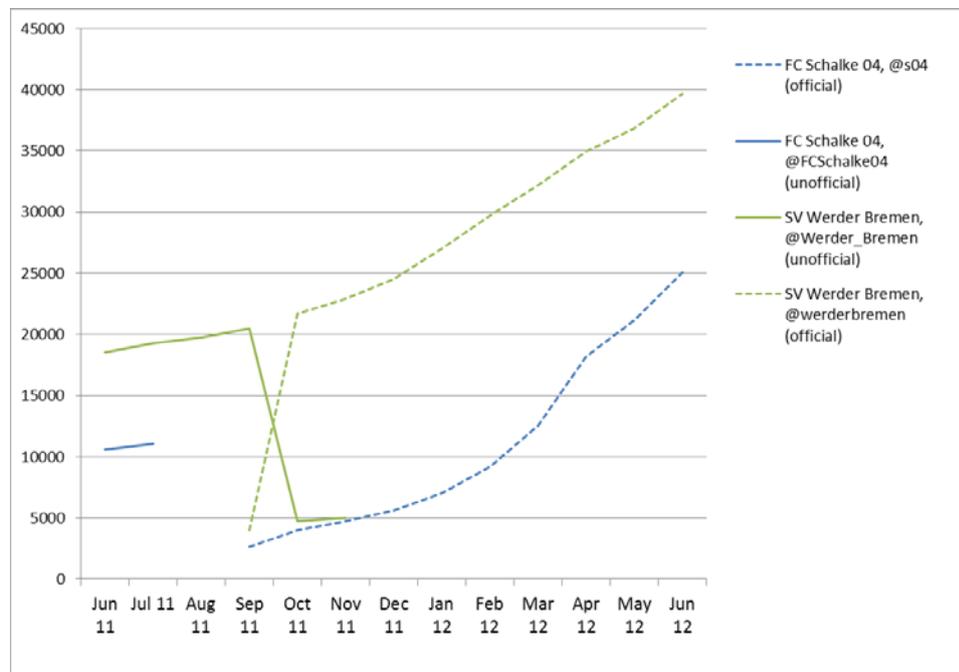
German clubs receive far fewer @replies than e.g. the soccer clubs of the far less prominent Australian first division (*A-League*), which engage with their fans more actively through @replies and retweets. The comparatively low level of @replies addressing German clubs, however, does not say anything about the general level of activity by soccer fans. By using the Twitter handles of ‘their’ clubs the fans could attempt to make their comments heard by the clubs – yet they do so very rarely.

### Special Case Studies

#### *The Great Confusion: FC Schalke 04 vs. Werder Bremen*

In June 2011, the most popular Twitter accounts related to the clubs *FC Schalke 04* (Schalke) and *SV Werder Bremen* (Werder), both well-established Bundesliga teams with long histories and numerous fans, had been @FCSchalke04 and @Werder\_Bremen (ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in follower numbers by June 2011; see Figure 1). However, both accounts were not officially sanctioned by the respective clubs: the absence of official accounts had provided a space for the development of fan-operated alternatives. Both Werder and Schalke became aware of these fan accounts and reacted quite differently. The @FCSchalke04 account was suspended in August 2011, leaving an empty space behind for Schalke fans on Twitter (Figure 2). Another Schalke fan, who had operated the smaller @S04 account, tells the story of how his account was suspended in August 2011 as the club claimed this Twitter handle for its own online activities (Nettoor, 2011). @S04 was subsequently appropriated by Schalke as the official club account. Not only did Schalke miss a chance to establish contact with a fan who only wanted to

promote his favorite club on Twitter (“As I have been a Schalke fan for more than 35 years, it struck me that many big Bundesliga clubs were present on Twitter, but not my Schalke04?”, Nettooor, 2011) – it also took the club several months to establish their new and official account and enter the top 5 of accounts by follower numbers (Figure 1).



**Figure 3:** Two cases of fan accounts that were closed down in favour of an official club account.

By contrast, Werder Bremen set up their official account @werderbremen in parallel to the existing fan account. Before the fan account was shut down in November (Figure 3), it first displayed a disclaimer that this was an unofficial account (“inoffizieller Account von @leanderwattig”, 13. Sep. 2011), and then told the fans that they could now follow the official club’s account at another place (“Der ehemalige Info-Service von Werder Bremen. Verfolge Werder jetzt auf der offiziellen Twitter-Seite“, 20. Oct. 2011). Consequently, follower numbers for the new, official account quickly rose and in October 2011 continued at the same level as the previous unofficial account.

#### *The Great Emptiness: FC Bayern München*

Another remarkable case is that of Germany’s most popular and most successful club *FC Bayern München* (Bayern), @baymuenchen. In June 2011 it was the account with the most followers (Figure 1) – although no tweets had been published by it. The club’s press office confirmed having set it up as a test account, but said they did not use it. Still, it had grown to have some 50,000 followers by March 2012 (Figure 5). Another unofficial account took on the opportunity to actually tweet about Bayern, and this @fcbayern\_news account became even more popular (Figure 4). Only ahead of the current 2012/13 season did Bayern set up the new, official and verified account @fcbayern, which is actively engaged on Twitter and has made strong gains in popularity. The fact that even an inactive account such as the original @baymuenchen can generate high follower numbers shows that some fans obviously are satisfied with expressing their fandom through following a particular brand, rather than expecting a steady stream of official updates. On the other hand, the popularity of unofficial accounts also shows that fans are interested in news about their club, even if it does not come from authoritative sources.

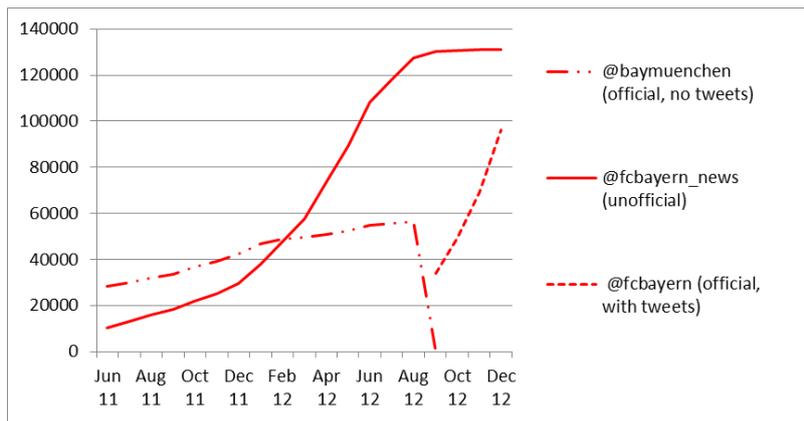


Figure 4: Official and unofficial accounts for Bayern München.



Figure 5: Account @BayMuenchen (now suspended) with 49,934 followers but without tweets, on 19 March 2012.

## Conclusions and Outlook

By now, German Bundesliga clubs have finally established their official presence on Twitter, and most of all use it for marketing purposes. They rarely interact with their fans, who in return rarely address the clubs' accounts through @messages. In future work, it will be useful to also include individual players' perspectives and to qualitatively study the communication between clubs and fans.

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