

## **From curiosity to connection: Emotional solidarity in football tourism**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Sport tourism is broadly understood as travel associated with participation in, viewing of, or engagement with sport activities (Hinch & Higham, 2001). Recently, travelling to live sporting events is an increasingly trendy form of leisure and tourism consumption among fans (Tobar et al., 2024). As one of the most influential sports, football tourism, which has encouraged fans to travel across regions to attend away matches, demonstrating significant economic and tourism contribution (Proctor & Bordoloi, 2023). The motivations of football tourists are not only watching games, but also experiencing stadium atmospheres, visiting host destinations, and engaging with supporter culture (Öğretmenoğlu et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the social interaction in football tourism is a notable phenomenon. Away supporters often encounter unfamiliar stadium settings, host cities, home fans, and local residents during their travels. On the one hand, these encounters enrich their travel experience. On the other hand, they may also involve tension, distance, or misunderstanding, particularly in contexts where home and away supporters are perceived as an “out-group” (Berendt & Urich, 2018). In this regard, emotional solidarity provides a useful perspective for understanding how feelings of closeness, mutual understanding, and being welcomed may emerge through such interactions (Daskin & Pala, 2025).

In football tourism, curiosity plays an important role in shaping away tourist's travel experiences. As a psychological tendency that encourages exploration of unfamiliar people, places, and situations, curiosity has been linked to openness, engagement, and social interaction (Chen et al., 2025). In sport event settings, curiosity may be reflected in fans' interest in new destinations, different stadium environments, local food and culture, and contact with other supporters (Park et al., 2011; Ito & Higham, 2020). For away fans in particular, curiosity may influence how they approach the broader travel experience beyond the match itself. Although curiosity has attracted growing scholarly attention as a driver of exploration, limited research has examined how curiosity is reflected in away supporters' travel experiences and how it may relate to the development of emotional solidarity in football tourism. To address this gap, the present study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to investigate away-game football fans' travel experiences in the Chinese Super League. Through semi-structured interviews, the study explores how fans describe their curiosity toward host places, people, and cultures, and how such experiences may be associated with feelings of connection, understanding, and welcome during away-game travel.

### **METHOD**

This study used semi-structured interviews to examine how curiosity contributes to emotional solidarity among away-game football fans. Purposive and snowball sampling were adopted to recruit participants who had attended away matches during the 2025 CSL season through supporter groups and online fan communities.

A total of 19 participants took part in the interviews, with a mean age of 31 years old, 15 were male (78.9%) and 4 were female (21.1%). The sample size was considered sufficient because no major new ideas emerged in the later interviews. Interviews were conducted in Chinese using both online and face-to-face formats, depending on participants' availability and location, and each lasted about 30 minutes on average. The interviews focused on participants' away-game travel experiences, including their views on stadium environments, host cities, and interactions with other fans and local residents. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the interview data via Nvivo 15, following the coding process suggested by Gioia et al. (2013). This method was chosen because it offers a clear way to identify patterns and themes in qualitative data (Lochmiller, 2021). First, all interview transcripts were read several times to build familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were created based on participants' own words and expressions. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. These



categories were then further developed into larger themes through repeated comparison across the interview data. In this way, the study identified both shared patterns and more detailed differences in fans' away-game travel experiences. The first author carried out the main coding. The coding and the developing coding structure were reviewed by the other two researchers. Any differences in interpretation were discussed until agreement was reached. During the analysis, the researchers also wrote analytic notes to record ideas and reflections. These steps helped make the analysis clear, consistent, and reliable.

## FINDINGS

A total of 10 sub-themes were generated and organized into four broader major themes through an iterative coding process informed by Gioia et al. (2013). As shown in Table 1, the findings suggest that away fans' curiosity was reflected in different aspects of away-game travel, ranging from match-related uncertainty to destination experiences and social interactions. Rather than being limited to the match itself, curiosity appeared to encourage broader engagement with places, people, and fan culture. Through these experiences, curiosity was often associated with mutual understanding, empathy, and the emergence of emotional solidarity. Meanwhile, the findings indicate that curiosity was not uniformly positive. When expressed in ways perceived as intrusive or inappropriate, such as taking photographs without permission, it could cause discomfort and lead to tension or conflict. Overall, the findings highlight curiosity as a nuanced and relational dimension of away-game travel, with the potential both to connect and to divide fan groups.

Table 1. Results of Thematic Analysis

| Themes                 | Sub-themes                    |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Curiosity              | Match-related curiosity       |
|                        | Destination-related curiosity |
|                        | Curiosity about uncertainty   |
| Destination experience | Sympathetic understanding     |
|                        | Stadium facilities            |
|                        | City experience               |
| Collective identity    | Community interaction         |
|                        | Team identity                 |
| Immersive atmosphere   | Match atmosphere              |
|                        | Conflict tension              |

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study provides exploratory insights into how curiosity is experienced by away football fans and how it promotes emotional solidarity in away-game football tourism. The findings suggest that curiosity may encourage fans to engage with home supporters and local residents, creating opportunities for interaction that can foster feelings of connection, mutual understanding, and inclusion. Additionally, the results indicate the context-dependent nature of curiosity. Specifically, curiosity could generate positive impacts. However, when away-game tourists expressed their curiosity in excessive or inappropriate ways, it may lead to discomfort, misunderstanding, or even conflict. Practically, the study suggests that league organizers and host communities may benefit from creating structured opportunities for positive fan interaction, such as cultural exchange activities or guided engagement spaces. In addition, providing clear behavioral guidelines may help channel curiosity in constructive ways and support a safer and more inclusive event environment. This study also has several limitations. Given the diversity of football fan communities, different subgroups may hold distinct perspectives and behavioral norms. As this study relies on interview data, it may not fully capture the broader range of fan discourses, particularly those expressed in online environments. To address this limitation, future research could adopt a netnographic approach to examine online fan interactions and discussions.

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