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Algerian Ultras: A Support Process or a Model of Subcultures? An Academic Sociological Investigation into Stadium Spectator Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This scientific endeavor aims to investigate the underlying background of how the Ultras subculture penetrated Algerian society. This was achieved by examining the behavior of the targeted Ultras group across a series of matches involving their club against counterpart teams. The research focuses on the activities of this specific category of supporters and their relationship to key sociological concepts and indicators outlined in the observation matrix.

The researchers employed a descriptive-analytical methodology, as it is uniquely suited for uncovering empirical field facts and understanding the behavioral motives of the research sample during their active spectator engagements. Grounded in a sociological framework, the quantitative and qualitative data gathered via the observation grid were analyzed in alignment with the study's objectives.

The findings were largely consistent with several international studies conducted across different societies, despite variations in geographic and cultural boundaries. This consistency underscores the systemic nature and universal operational logic of the Ultras movement, whose adherents strictly conform to its behavioral model without deviating from its core tenets. This alignment has forged a distinct structural entity following identical practices regardless of group independence, demonstrating a strong desire to adopt this external culture and supplant indigenous supporter patterns.

Keywords: Ultras Movement, Sports Fandom / Support, Subculture.

1. Introduction

This study aims to demystify and clarify Ultras-style supporter movements as a complex social phenomenon that may conceal deeper dynamics beneath its visible manifestations. As a collective entity, the Ultras movement has historically sought contrived distinction and autonomy by maximizing the efficacy and impact of its active support in tandem with the ongoing

athletic competitions taking place before its adherents. Simultaneously, members express total detachment from surrounding spectator groups, beginning with the spatial autonomy of their stadium seating.

Accordingly, this scientific investigation aims to achieve a precise sociological understanding of the fandom phenomenon in general, and the imported Ultras subculture in particular within Algerian society. To achieve this objective, the research delves into the roots of the phenomenon by analyzing the specific factors governing its emergence, underlying background, and mechanisms of dissemination.

2. Problem Statement

The evolution of stadium environments has endowed sports fandom with new modalities of collective behavior, gradually replacing scattered individual spectator actions. This transformation follows broader waves of change within the modern football industry and its competitive ecosystem, largely driven by organized youth movements operating under Ultras standards and parameters (Williams, 2005, p. 162). This movement embodies collective diversity in adopting dynamic strategies that evolve continuously, facilitated by the noticeable proliferation of Ultras groups as novel socio-cultural entities adorning stadium stands since the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

Consequently, the Ultras movement has emerged as an imported culture possessing a concrete social identity that has supplanted traditional supporter culture—not merely within stadium boundaries, but extending into an integrated lifestyle. These movements have established structured mechanisms to organize stadium crowds, giving visual expression to internal cohesion and consensus among group members (Bertrand et al., 2006, p. 19). Fundamentally, this structure reflects a desire for belonging to a defined cultural group whose traits are manifested through collective behavior during match support. Based on these premises, this study poses the following main research question:

RESEARCH QUESTION

Main Research Question: *What is the underlying background behind the adoption of the Ultras movement within Algerian society?*

3. Research Hypothesis

The perceived efficacy and success of Ultras activities within global spectator dynamics serve as the primary catalyst for its entry and integration into Algerian society.

4. Research Objectives

Based on the problem statement and hypothesis, this study pursues the following objectives:

- a. 1. To determine whether the Ultras phenomenon represents merely a style of sports cheering or constitutes a distinct subculture with a genuine social identity.
- b. 2. To evaluate the impact of organized sports support practices on the formation and dissemination of cultural identity frameworks.
- c. 3. To examine the underlying reasons for the penetration of Ultras subculture into Algerian society and its significance in the lives of its adherents.
- d. 4. To highlight the factors driving the transition from traditional, classic spectating to organized fandom governed by Ultras principles.

5. Research Methodology

This study relies on the descriptive-analytical approach, as it is uniquely capable of yielding detailed empirical field data regarding the target sample in sociological contexts. The findings were analyzed within a sociological framework that blends quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative processing involved calculating the frequencies of specific behavioral indicators within the observation network to confirm their presence or absence during group activities. Qualitative analysis was subsequently conducted in accordance with established theoretical and empirical literature in sports sociology. This was further supplemented by direct semi-structured interviews following the dual-viewpoint technique (triangulating systematic observation with in-depth interviews).

6. Conceptual Definitions

6.1 The Ultras Movement: Derived from the Latin 'ultra' (meaning 'beyond' or 'extreme'), the term commonly refers to highly dedicated sports fans characterized by intense loyalty and devotion to their club (Ahmed, 2013, p. 25). The movement operates according to strict internal rules and normative codes that form the core of group organization. Originating in South America (Brazil, 1940) and later spreading to Europe (Croatia, 1950), the movement expanded globally, reaching Algerian society around 2007.

6.2 Sports Supporters / Fans: Linguistically, supporters are those who encourage and motivate others to undertake endeavors (Ben Hadia & Al-Baleesh, 1991, p. 1078). Operationally, sports supporters constitute a group of individuals sharing a psychological orientation toward a specific player, team, or athletic institution, which serves as a central focal point for them, regardless of whether they hold formal membership (Allawi, 1998, p. 188).

6.3 Subculture: A subculture brings together a group of individuals sharing specific social characteristics such as age, ethnicity, social class, religion, political affiliation, or nationality. It is often identified with a social stratum, linguistic or

ethnic minority, or distinct social organization that frequently operates in implicit or explicit opposition to the dominant cultural values of the broader society (Al-Jarrah, 2016).

7. Target Population and Sample

As this study focuses on the reality of the Ultras phenomenon in Algeria, active domestic Ultras groups constituted the target population. Specifically, the 'Ultras Polina' group—affiliated with ASO Chlef (a club competing in the Algerian Professional National Championship)—was selected as the empirical research sample. The group comprises over sixty (60) active members, all within the youth demographic, with an average age between 25 and 26 years. Systematic observations covered all registered group members during collective stadium performances, while direct interviews were restricted to the organizational core ('les noyaux' / group leaders).

8. Research Instruments & Data Analysis

The empirical investigation relied on evaluating the structural and functional characteristics of the group through a customized Systematic Observation Grid designed to track stadium behavior during home and away matches. The observation data were cross-validated using direct interviews based on the dual-view technique.

Table 1: Systematic Observation Matrix of Ultras Polina Group across 9 Observed Matches.

Behavioral Indicator	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	Total (A / B)
Match Preparation & Animation ('Dakhla' / Tifo)	+	+	-	+	+	+	-	+	-	5 A / 4 B
Role & Task Sharing among Core Members ('Noyaux')	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	9 A / 0 B
Hyper-Reactivity to Match Contingencies	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	9 A / 0 B
Unification of Activity Across Fan Factions	+	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	+	7 A / 2 B
Manifestation of 'Ultras Spirit'	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	8 A / 1 B
Adherence to Core Ultras Principles	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	9 A / 0 B
Socio-Political Orientations & Expressions	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	2 A / 7 B

8.1 Match Preparation & Visual Animations ('Dakhlat' / Tifos)

In Ultras culture, 'Dakhlat' refers to meticulously planned visual spectacles executed at the beginning of matches. These displays require coordinated collective effort, organized primarily by the leadership core ('les noyaux'). Planning involves multiple preliminary meetings (often 3 to 4 sessions) at designated headquarters to determine the display type, design, materials, and financing. The resulting visual display is revealed minutes prior to kickoff and typically lasts less than 10 minutes.

Interview data indicate that Tifo organization is viewed as an imperative for continuous innovation and unconventional expression. Groups strive to demonstrate superior organizational capacity through novel visual statements not previously executed by rivals, aligning with Martinache's (2010, p. 4) findings that Ultras seek non-traditional behavioral expressions of club devotion. Furthermore, visual displays vary according to match prestige and opponent rivalry, carrying encoded auditory and visual messages directed toward players, club management, rival supporters, and external authorities (Pilz et al., 2010, p. 14).

A central structural feature is spatial loyalty to a specific stadium section. The 'Ultras Polina' group occupies the 'Curva Sud' ('Le Virage'), located directly behind the goal along a 70-meter stretch. Though objectively offering poor sightlines for match analysis, this area serves as an active cheering zone rather than a passive viewing area (Al-Sharif, 2012, p. 62). Spatial commitment represents a universal structural marker defining global Ultras identity (Bromberger, 1999, p. 7).

8.2 Role Allocation and Task Sharing within the Core Structure

Systematic observation recorded an absolute presence (9 out of 9 matches) for structured role sharing. This highlights strong internal cohesion and functional coordination among group members, particularly between core organizers ('les noyaux') and general members. This operational model extends beyond Tifo preparation to encompass all matchday dynamics.

Literature confirms that Ultras groups reject strict formal hierarchies, promoting egalitarian participation grounded in collective belonging (Battini, 2009, p. 5). Decision-making relies on practical criteria such as group tenure, operational experience, and creative contribution rather than formal rank. Within this horizontal framework, the 'Capo' (stadium chant leader), positioned centrally facing the stands, plays a critical role in orchestrating collective vocal expressions and synchronizing crowd energy (Noseir, 2014, p. 97).

8.3 Hyper-Reactivity to Match Contingencies

Match dynamics—comprising player actions, referee decisions, and tactical shifts—serve as primary triggers for Ultras expressions. Observation revealed constant, highly dynamic reactivity (9/9 matches), distinguishing Ultras behavior from conventional spectator responses. Group members maintain uninterrupted vocal and visual engagement regardless of match scorelines (Pociello et al., 1998, p. 355; Duret, 2004, p. 55).

Ultras support operates as an active mechanism designed to influence match atmosphere, exert psychological pressure on opponents, and motivate players (Irlinger, cited in Pociello et al., 1998, p. 372). As Bartolucci (2012, p. 121) notes, Ultras prioritize matchday atmosphere and unconditional support over technical match quality, remaining standing and chanting throughout the 90 minutes.

8.4 Unification of Activity Across Fan Factions

Ultras groups frequently seek to centralize spectator activity, establishing operational independence while attempting to coordinate broader stadium crowds. Observation recorded unification efforts in 7 out of 9 matches. Ultras distinguish themselves from traditional fan clubs by striving to create a unified stadium atmosphere through standardized chants and coordinated visual displays (Bernache & Assollant, 2007, pp. 9–10; Bertrand et al., 2006, p. 161).

8.5 Socio-Political Orientations and Expressions

While global literature notes that Ultras groups can evolve into political actors or social movements (Ahmed, 2013, p. 21; Williams, 2005, p. 163), observation of 'Ultras Polina' revealed low direct political engagement (present in only 2 of 9 matches). Political expressions were limited to displaying banners of historic revolutionary figures (such as Che Guevara) during matches against USM El Harrach and MC Oran, serving as conventional symbols of anti-establishment identity rather than formal political alignment.

As El-Johari (2015, p. 131) observes, political expression within Ultras groups varies according to local socio-political environments. In the Algerian context, group activity remains focused on subcultural adherence, youth identity expression, and club support rather than structured political activism.

8.6 Adherence to Core Ultras Principles

Observation showed total compliance (9/9 matches) with global Ultras principles. The group operates within normative codes governing subcultural authenticity, visual symbolism, self-funding, and independence from club management. Following the dissolution of an earlier group ('Red Lions'), the establishment of 'Ultras Polina' reflected a deliberate effort to align with global Ultras standards (Pilz et al., 2010, p. 11; Al-Sharif, 2012, p. 62).

8.7 Manifestation of the 'Ultras Spirit'

The concept of 'Ultras Spirit' represents a foundational narrative within the movement, emphasizing commitment, group loyalty, and selflessness (Ahmed, 2013, p. 62; Bashir, 2012, p. 36). Observation confirmed strong manifestations of this ethos across 8 of 9 matches. Adherents view group membership as an identity commitment that transcends ordinary sports spectating (Lestrelin, 2015, p. 55; Hourcade et al., 2010, p. 21).

9. General Conclusion

The empirical findings demonstrate the global continuity of the Ultras movement, characterized by standardized operational codes, visual expressions, and behavioral norms that transcend local geographic boundaries. Algerian youth adoption of Ultras

subculture reflects broader globalization dynamics facilitated by digital communication, enabling local fan groups to adopt global spectator models.

In conclusion, the entry of Ultras subculture into Algerian society represents more than an evolution in cheering techniques; it constitutes the adoption of a distinct youth subculture providing identity, structured peer association, and social recognition. For its adherents, the Ultras movement functions not merely as a mode of sports spectating, but as a defining socio-cultural orientation.

10. References

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