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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Performative Outreach of Tifocracy: Ultras Winners

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, performance art has transcended the traditional confines of the theater and expanded into new realms, unleashing the potential of diverse acts and actors. Among them are the ultras, a group of laypeople whose untrained yet powerful voices ring out in unison, shaking the walls of fear and inspiring awe. Their performances, whether in support or protest of their teams, have captured the hearts and minds of academics and politicians alike, drawing attention to the complex dynamics that govern their actions. In this paper, we explore the world of Ultras Winners, one of the leading groups supporting Wydad Athletic Club, shedding light on the motivations, methods, and meaning behind their performances. Through interviews and focus groups, we give the ultras the floor, allowing them to speak for themselves and others without censoring or silencing their voices. We argue that ultras represent a unique form of popular expression that is more representative of the people than some political bodies and that studying their performances offers valuable insights into the workings of power and resistance in contemporary society. By painting a vivid picture of the whole paraphernalia surrounding ultras, we aim to offer a fresh perspective on a phenomenon that has long captivated and mystified us.

KEYWORDS

Performance art; Ultras; Fans; Chanting; Tifos; Popular expression; Power; Resistance.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Now that it has become common practice for performance arts to extend beyond the precincts of theatre and into realms other than the conventional spaces now said to confine and constrict rather than liberate and uplift, it is worth exploring at close quarters other forms of performance whose actants have not been moulded, fashioned or trained, nor have they been conditioned, disciplined or corrupted by any method whatsoever. These are lay people whose motley backgrounds one cannot possibly enumerate, yet when they chant in chorus or raise a tifo, they do so with one voice and in unison. Their chatter, once turned into a boisterous epiphany, causes the walls of fear to shake and shatter; their cacophony, once unified, becomes a spectacle worthy of attention, one that takes away attention from the game. Whether they are supporting or protesting against their team, its administration, or at times contesting that which lies beyond oppression and repression, ultras have caught our eyes, won our hearts and tickled minds, preoccupying academics and politicians alike, hence our interest. The show they put on is no less noteworthy than any other staged performance elsewhere. Perhaps, we daresay, they have stolen the show and proffer more pleasure than any show can possibly offer. The questions we raise, and address will give the reader an insight into the dynamics governing Ultras Winners, one of the leading groups supporting Wydad Athletic Club, in particular and, by extension, we hope, other ultras in general. Because it would be repressive to speak on their behalf, we are going to give them the floor either through interviews or a focus group in hopes of coming to grips with what, why and how they operate without falling into the trap of muting and muffling their voices. Convinced that Ultras may be more representative of the people than some political bodies and

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fully cognizant of their right to represent themselves, we have invited a plethora of representatives to speak for themselves and others, before which we deem it primordial to paint a vivid picture of the whole paraphernalia surrounding Ultras.

2. Background

Based on the symbolic sportive heritage of WAC, a group of young people descended from different areas of Casablanca decided to create an ultra to support their football team. In 2005, many meetings were held to suggest the appropriate name and logo. They eventually agreed to name it "Winners". In the same year, on November 13, they publicly declared themselves an ultra. Ultras Winners is the first ultra to have been established in the summer of 2005 in Morocco. It is also known as Fedayon Wydad in the Arabic Language, an appellation suggestive of their readiness to make sacrifices for their team. This ultra, just like others, is led by Capos¹, heads of their (neighbor)hoods and cheerleaders on the stands. Now that they have become well-established, they have received international acclaim for their remarkable work. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the following tifo:



Image I (wydadplus.com, 2014)

Spread out on the north of the Curva, their favourite spot and the cheapest one as well, in the derby with their sworn enemies Raja, this tifo was ranked atop in an opinion poll conducted by "Ultras Tifos" (ultras-tifo.net), a website gathering together the best ultras from all over the world. To top the list of 25 tifos worldwide is a great achievement only a few are capable of accomplishing.

- The main activity of Winners is to stimulate the public support for WAC, especially within the stadiums, by displaying tifos² and by chanting their creative songs. One of the most interesting tifos they displayed was in the 70th commemoration of the birth of WAC. Other activities include writing new musical albums that reflect either their support of the team or tackle footballistic, social and political issues in Morocco and beyond.
- Prior to the genesis of Ultras, supporters were organized under different associations in Casablanca. The most recognized one
 is called Red-White Association, or R&B as they would call themselves, which was founded in 2000 in Casablanca. Before the
 coming of the ultra, they organized numerous activities supporting Wydad in the stadiums. They also played a significant role
 in putting pressure and control on the team by attending general meetings and through the media by publishing blogs on
 the Internet. One of the interviewees, Ahmed Lawyer, explains that

Ultras used to be associations of fans, and they used to meet in clubs or stadiums of their clubs. Whenever there is a training session, it is an opportunity for them to meet and coordinate with each other to discuss funds or logistics. Nowadays, communication has completely changed; the Internet is like a new revolution not only in Morocco but in the whole world.

¹ They are responsible for producing and sticking on the chairs the banners to be displayed. They are also the ones who initiate chants during the game. They make sure to be on the stands before all the other spectators. They also attend meetings with the WAC and the authorities to discuss issues related to the price of the tickets and violence during and after the game.

² Tifo is a "banner" and symbol of pride and power of every ultra.

• Another association goes by the name *Red House Association*. It was founded by the lovers of WAC in Derb Sultan, one of the neighborhoods in Casablanca. It did not have a very active role like the first one, but it showed that the neighborhood was behind the team. From there, other small associations started to appear in different neighborhoods all over Casablanca.³

3. How does it work?

Social networks play a pivotal role in bridging communication among Ultra members. However, nothing could be further from the truth than the assumption that social networking is the only means of communication there is. The current generation of Ultras Winners is the offspring of associations set up by parents, thus forming a bond of continuity and change. Continuity is epitomized in the preservation of physical contact through face-to-face meetings, whilst change is caught in the very recourse to virtual platforms. Because of the staggering number of supporters Wydad appeals to, communication amongst members is now more geared towards the Internet. In this respect, each neighbourhood elects the most qualified person to lead the cell. The heads of neighborhoods find it easier to communicate following this strategic network. This makes the Ultras' activities more efficient and accurate.

Zakaria: As you may know, Casablanca is a huge city; you can't gather everyone to say something to them. They are grouped into small groups; each group is located in a neighborhood. For example, in the Moulay Rachid neighborhood, there is a group of members in charge of that neighborhood, so whenever there is a meeting, they meet there. ... Every group has one or two leaders in charge of that group, and they state the objective of the meeting. If, for instance, there is a football match coming up next week, and they're willing to organize something during the match, they let everybody know about their plan. Every group talks about the same thing but in different places... After that, they just broke and spread the news through Facebook for everybody to know what the meetings were about.

Ahmed Lawyer: ... Ultras, as I said, are like associations, so they operate as cells. There are cells that are in charge of funds, support and logistics, slogans, and... In general, when you go inside the stadium, you find a group of people who are in charge of animation. These people are well known by their names or photos. When the Ultra is preparing the tifo, many members sweat and toil day and night to prepare it... The same thing goes for collecting funds...

H. Mohamed: The ultras' leaders know each other; they have each other's phone numbers and contacts. You can have a leader's Facebook account, or you coordinate with him... For example, Wydad's ultra has earned huge respect from other ultras because the people in charge of this ultra are pacifists...

The participation of the Ultra is twofold. For one, they coordinate with the club and the authorities. Second, they take stock of the aesthetic and logistic preparatory phase. As far as the former goes, the Ultras Winners watch over the safety and organization of spectators, hence contributing to the fluidity of accessing the stadiums. As for the celebratory phase, they spend weeks and months apriori thinking up original ideas for tifos, music and slogans. Despite what may appear to be contrary, ultras and the authorities in the person of the police, get on well with one another. As a matter of fact, Winners do not just content themselves with organizing spectators, but they also take an active part in sensitizing the public at large and youngsters, in particular, to stave off violence. From a practical side, Ahmed elucidates the preparations that take place before the match when Wydad is playing, say, Raja, Tangier or clubs with a huge fan base stretch over the whole week. The preparations are divided into two phases. He goes on, the first of which is aimed at ensuring the safety and security of all and everyone. Before any of this happens, a colossal tifo made of plastic tissues is mobilized to where it belongs. It takes a lot of time to fix it in the right place, from half a day to two days. So, in order for this to take lieu, Winners need to coordinate with the club, the local community and the authorities.

Ahmed Lawyer: The stadium is not what goes on on the pitch only. There's activity between what is seen and what is heard. What is seen is related to the design of the way fans sit, holding the slogans or colored tissues to transmit a message that has a cultural, political, and social goal. What is heard can be classified into music and slogans. Slogans are not just simple chatter but rather a speech that carries messages and is composed as a song...

Ahmed Lawyer: When you sit in the stadium facing the ultra, you see them wearing the same outfit; it's a movement. This unity is an expressive message. The fans spend the whole week thinking of how to come up with a unique new idea, which creates cutthroat competition among ultras to show the people who the best are.

Be it the way it is, members of the Winners strive ardently and settle for nothing but excellence, producing 3D animated banners in ways that dazzle the eye and puzzle the mind.⁴ The performance, which takes a few minutes to stage, is the fruit of weeks, if not

³ It is to be noted that there were supporters before in the forties and fifties, known for their acts of resisting French colonialism through their songs.

⁴ Some of these 3D tifos have been provided in the photo gallery section for the readers to feast their eyes on.

months, of tears, toil and sweat. It is the living proof that the members exude talent, artistry and mastery of different performative aspects, which state-sponsored media are known to obviate, obfuscate and obscure.

Mohamed: They buy plastic and take it to an empty yard. They put the white plastic on the ground and print out a 3D image depending on the number of seats. Once done, they cut the plastic up into parts. 24 hours ahead of the match, they take approval from the authorities, and they go to the stadium and place plastic parts under each seat. When the fans come, they take the plastic portion and wait for the signal from the Capo(s). Sometimes, there are two images in one plastic portion, a two-faced plastic tifo. When they flip the plastic portion, it gives a different image.

4. Going Glocal:

In this section, we will get to the core of the matter in that we will pick and choose some tifos to drive home the idea that Ultras Winners, in their choice of tifos, are responsive to local, continental and global issues alike. Suffice it to scrutinise these pictures to be thus convinced.



Image II (cnews.fr)

Image III (afrik-foot.com)

Image I was staged on the occasion of the second leg three weeks after a 1-1 draw with city rivals Raja. Whoever won this derby would secure a seat in the quarter-finals of the Mohammed VI Cup. As was expected, the match was being played to a full house, to borrow an expression from the world of theatre, living up to our expectations. It was exceptionally heated and disputed, ending in a draw 4-4, but so was the spectacle on the tribunes. While the tifo lends itself to multifarious interpretations, it is conspicuous to the eye that the firemen are there to extinguish the all-consuming red fire, which stands for the colours of the team. It would take giant firefighters to put out their fire, an impossible mission given the preponderance of red and the propagation of the fire. Wydad, it seems, is ready to set ablaze and eat up its opponents; the firemen are there to see to it that the fire does not get out of hand. Image II, from the same Derby, showcases a dragon in action spitting fire all over the place. This is no common dragon, but rather the dragon from the world-famous series *The Game of Thrones*. The show Winners put on is nothing short of carnivalesque traditions inasmuch as everyone, regardless of their social status, is invited to take part, and those not so fortuitous can still watch on and cheer along. In carnival times, ordinary people find themselves at the hub of events. Carnival became "a form of empowerment, which made possible an expansion of autonomy and creativity." What is more is that, by dint of the symbolic use of masks in carnival and, by extension, tifos in matches, "the individual is fused into a 'mass body' which is continually and collectively renewed" " (Michael Gardiner, 1992). In another reference to Hollywood movies in what one may consider as a clever yet provocative move, Winners stunned the world with this tifo:



Image IV (afrik-foot.com)

Not only do Raja and Wydad represent the biggest contenders in the history of Moroccan football with the highest number of followers and titles, both national and continental, but they are also based in Casablanca, the most populated city in the whole country with over 7 million inhabitants. In fact, the city at large is at a standstill when the long-awaited derby is being played. It is not just the game that procures 'jouissance', but it is also the show preceding it, hence justifying why this particularly intense rivalry receives more media coverage than would any other in Morocco. This tifo, the outcome of putting together hundreds of bits and pieces, reads as follows Casablanca, thus dispelling all doubts about the title of the movie, all the while pointing to the city the match is being disputed in. Directed by Michael Curtiz, the 1942 award-winning wartime classic romance is set in Casablanca, or so it appears. The duo at the centre of the tifo are Rick and Ilsa. Rick, the café owner, is holding her tightly against his chest while both are looking out for imminent threats only he can blunt. That the male looks taller is no coincidence as this empowers him, making him look superior as compared to the shorter, inferior and frail female whose fate he will decide on. Her only hope of survival lies with him. His red necktie, as opposed to her green dress, leave no shade of doubt as to where their hearts are. The red and white he is dressed in seems to have spilt in the background all over the stands. Anyone who has watched the movie, and many have, will remember how she came looking for a sanctuary only Rick could offer. Despite her having broken his heart, Rick is so generous as to let go of the past and stand true to his ideals, epitomising the American hero. His gallantry, self-abnegation and valor contrast starkly with her opportunism, treason and infirmity. Being feminized, Raja has been stripped of her manhood by the more virile rival who now has her back. Her destiny will be drawn by him, as will the score of the upcoming match. Thus inspired, Winners hoist yet another spectacular tifo to the memory of Mustapha Choukri in what one may read as yet another acte provocateur. Before delving into the details of the matter, here is the tifo to relish:



Image V (outdooors.ma)

Choukri, alias Pitchou, is seen seated on the football, tying up his laces while waiting for Godot. Just like Godot, Raja football players never show up. This deictically points to the 1978 Derby, which saw Raja retreat after the first half in protest against refereeing. This tifo comes after a tidal wave of criticism levelled at Wydad for not finishing their match against the Tunisian team Taraji in the final of the African Champions League. The tifo serves as a reminder to Rajaoui supporters that they were the first to

have withdrawn from a match when Wydad was heading towards victory. After his foul on the Wydadi striker, the Raja goalkeeper is expelled with a red card, and Wydad is given a penalty. Raja had already used all their subs, so no more players could be subbed on. Abdelmajid Tholmi was warming up to take the goalie's place but could not find a jersey with a different colour. This was the moment when one of Wydad's players offered him a red jersey. As Pitchou was getting himself ready to shoot the penalty, tensions were simmering to a boiling point, the point at which Raja players deserted the pitch and into their locker-room not to be seen again that day. What added insult to injury was the fact that Pitchou, now a Duck, had been playing for Raja for the most part of his professional career before he turned his coat, or perhaps we should say his jersey. The wait had protracted, so Pitchou sat on the ball as is shown on the tifo. Wydad came out winners amidst so much uproar (2M.ma, 2019). In the same vein, one needs to go back to tifos which point the finger at the African Football Federation and its partiality.



Image VI ("Le Tifo du Wydad dénonce la corruption qui gangrène le football africain"Youtube)

What accrues from the fragments of plastic once juxtaposed is the tifo in picture VI, a tifo reminiscent of the shameful events accompanying the 2019 Champions League final between Taraji of Tunis and Wydad of Casablanca. Tensions were running high as the archrivals were disputing the final. El Karti scored a header, which was refused by the referee without recourse to the VAR.⁵ Wydad players stayed on the pitch but abstained from playing until the referee blew the whistle. After so much unprecedented hustle, the cup was given to the Tunisians. The African Federation of Football declared Wydad forfeiters, a decision which did not sit well with the Reds and Whites. A Moroccan Netizen commented that "It's science-fiction! I have the goose-bumps seeing what my young fellow country people are capable of. Sending messages with so much civism; it's excellent." He went on to add, "I think the AFF has received the message. The video of the tifo has been shared in the biggest ultra groups in the world" (lesiteinfo.com). With the video going viral, the reputation of African football, already disreputed for being corrupt and rotten, is largely at stake. Certes, the cup went to the Tunisian team, but Wydad has set a precedent in African football, which, it is hoped, will curb the cancer plaguing African football.

The contestations against the AFF are the ocular proof that, far from being content with showing their team full support, Ulras Winners transcend the confines of the stadium, making audible their discontent with the way master-puppeteers run African football in favour of certain teams with representatives on its committees. What begins as protests against corruption permeating the body of African football avers to be an overtly politicized message with ripples resonating on social media in what one may refer to as 'tifocracy'/the power of tifos. In this regard, Ultras Winners have come a long way from being solely team-centred, touching on issues pertaining to pan-Arabism and demonstrating their solidarity with other Ulras as is caught in this tifo.

⁵ VAR is short for video assistant referee. There are basically two ways of checking if a goal or a foul is legitimate or not. The four referees in the video room contact the wired referee. If they are not sure what to say, the referee can watch a replay of the incident on the camera near the touchline, neither of which this referee did.



Image VII (akhbarak.net)

By way of offering Zamalek supporters their condolences, Winners made and raised this banner upon the tragic death of 20 members of Zamalek Ultras in a football match, upon which some of the Ultras were imprisoned. "Freedom to the Knights" is the translation of the slogan on the tifo. This is meant that Winners Ultras are extending their solidarity to their brothers in arms, the White Knights, one of the most popular Zamalek ultras in Egypt. Neither is the language in which the slogan is written an arbitrary choice, nor are the colours, for that matter. Using Arabic points to their common background as Arabs, so their destiny is bound together, as is their shared language. The colours on the tifo call to mind those characteristics of the White Knights. The Palestinian flags underneath the tifo are those of Palestine. For both Ultras, Palestine represents the lost heaven, a just cause not only because of Israeli occupation but also because of the religious symbolism it is replete with. The word "Freedom" has a double-entendre at once, calling for the release of the Egyptian prisoners and for Palestine to be freed. Mohamed comments

In any case, that has something to do with the Arab nation or religion... Or even in Morocco, you find these ultras are the first in the public sphere. They supported the Palestinian case, and when Iraq was invaded, they were among the first to speak out and up. When someone talks about Ceuta and Melilla, you find the ultras to be the first to talk about it and support it... Even the songs the ultra makes are full of messages.

Given their motley backgrounds, Ultras Winners speak for the marginalized, the disenfranchised and the wretched. Their slogans and mottos transcend the walls of the stadiums they occupy, and so do their tifos, being outspoken when social movements have been hushed up. February 20th movement may have seen its heyday over, but it still somehow survives and seeps through the slogans Winners chant and the tifos they espouse to expose corrupt officials and denounce the backlash on civil liberties, which lands them in deep water and threatens their existence.



Image VIII (akhbarak.net)

This tifo in and of itself captures the revolting character Winners inhabit to the detriment of their continuity. Embarrassing as this is for state-run media, TV channels shun broadcasting such daring, politically loaded banners. Understandably, the two predominant colours with which the tifo is inscribed are red and white. The two words Winners chose translate as follows: "Struggle Freedom". These two are so entwined that one is predicated on the other. In other terms, the very condition of freedom is contingent on struggles for its existence. The maxim, as it were, derives much of its power to beset and unsettle from its ambivalence insofar as the message it conveys and purveys may have been thought of and drafted in relation to the local context, but it may also be suggestive of that which lies beyond; that is to say, countries such as Palestine, Iraq, Egypt and many others could be the object/subject of the ambiguous message.

5. The Gender Dimension

The footballistic is the political, Judith Butler would advocate. The public sphere in Morocco is constantly metamorphosing, becoming more and more inclusive. Not long ago, the only three public places a woman could venture into were the souk, the doorstep, and the bathhouse; some would dare add the terrace. Women have been striving to push male-dictated boundaries, but little have they succeeded in affirming their presence in the tribunes. Now, the public sphere is a space wherein women mix and mingle, take the lead and, at times, dominate. The once all-masculinist space has ceded before the incursion of females. One of the few fortresses, so to speak, to still resist this invasion is the stadium, where women are noticed for their conspicuous absence. For all their exclusionary nature/culture, stadiums are now being brushed 'au féminin', with quite a few women taking to the stadiums in support of their teams. However strong their presence may be, women are being shut out of Ultras. Due to a myriad of reasons Sara is ideally positioned to elucidate, women are being relegated from standing on par with men with whom they share the same passion for football. Ultras, we have come to realize, allow only males not only in Morocco but elsewhere as well. The reasons being given ascribe this exclusion to the fear that women could be harmed in the midst of overzealous agitated teenagers and young men. Others go as far as to cite religious reasons, which, in their own understanding, disallows the blurring of gender-based divisions. What is even more striking is that the likes of Sara, a very passionate fan, assert that girls should not be members of any ultras whatsoever when boys, aged 15, can enroll therein.

Zakaria: It's like one of their norms. Girls are not allowed to sign up or buy their products. They're not allowed to sit next to the ultra as, well. But, there are some girls who wear the ultra outfit.

Sara: I got you; honestly, my father and brother used to go to the stadium, and I begged them to take me with them to the stadium. They didn't accept it... they said no, and all you're going to hear are people swearing, and that is certainly right. When someone loves his team and gets angry, you hear inappropriate words, so both my father and brother don't accept it. But I have a friend who supports the Wydad team too, and she goes with her father and brother to the stadium, and I asked her if I could go with them, and she said, "You're welcome to join". The first time I went to the stadium was with my friend, her father, and brother. They're our neighbors, so I went with them...

Sara: ...The second time was just with my friend, and after, we went to the stadium and I was late, and when my mom called I had to tell her that I was in the stadium... My father and brother didn't accept it because every conservative family wouldn't allow such a thing... We live in a male-dominated society; a boy can go to the stadium, but a girl cannot. In the end, they accepted the idea, and I told them it was better that I didn't go alone because they were scared that I would hear swear words in the stadium. Why not take me with you and protect me as families do? That's it! Now I am going with my family.

Being a girl does not mean one loves their team less. Sara bears so much love for Wydad she is the living testimony that gender in football is not told, to put it a la Shakespearean.

Sara: I'm a girl, and I love the Wydad to the extent that sometimes I can support and shout inside the stadium more than a boy can. I see boys around me, and I don't feel their passion and love for football. ... But though I'm a girl, I'm against girls being members of the Ultra.

The last utterance reveals Sara to be a metonymically schizophrenic girl, one wanting a firm footing on the stands yet denying her kind the same status, a split stance, not all hers.

6. Conclusion

This article has been written in an attempt to chart out an uncharted sea, one so expansive we had to be eclectic to stay afloat. Because 'tifoscapes' as a novel field of study is under-researched, it still promises to yield more crops should academics give it its due. Winners have pushed the limits and set exceptional standards for the culture of tifo-making and

performing, so much so they have become a reference, thus changing the seascape of performing arts and opening up endless avenues for further exploration. The poetics and politics of the sub-culture born out of passion, strife and sacrifice as encapsulated in tifos, songs and choreographies blend the spectacular with the performative, Khalid Amine writes (Khalid Amen), procuring us with vivid accounts whose veracity and artistry are nowhere found in official chronicles. In fine, an alternative to his/her story is being drawn with tifos bespeaking deprivation, repression and oppression, hence calling for further investigation on their own turf/right. The waves of bodies as they move en masse in the only place where protests eschew the censor, the oppressor, may be deafening to some, but they have to be discerned and fathomed out for what they imply and entail. Their voice echoes the voices of the people; the inscriptions writ large on their tifos catch the anger and anguish of the masses they represent. Very much like carnivals, performing tifos "is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Mikhail Bakhtin, p.7). Their live protests come as an extension of street protests, a reaction to pressing social demands political bodies have failed to take heed of. The so-called Arab Spring may have seen its leaves wither away, but its seeds are here being revived and blown far and wide. However, by excluding women, these Ultras fall short of practicing what they preach, becoming oppressors in the very space where they shout 'NO' to oppression!

6.1 Limitations and recommendations:

There are certain limitations that should be acknowledged, starting with the research focus merely on the Ultras Winners in Morocco. Limiting the scope within one ultras, the findings may not be applicable to other ultras groups or different cultural contexts. To ensure a broader understanding of ultras culture, future research should include a more diverse range of ultras groups, capturing the varied dynamics and experiences within ultras communities.

While the research relied on interviews with ultras members and supporters to give them a voice to express their opinions, it is important to note that the selected participants in the study may not fully represent the entire ultras community. The findings may be influenced by the biases or specific experiences of the interviewed individuals. To address this limitation, future research could employ larger and more diverse samples to enhance the representativeness of the findings.

Finally, the study primarily focuses on the Ultras Winners without comparing their experiences or performances with other ultras groups or fan communities. A comparative analysis would be beneficial, providing valuable insights into the similarities and differences between ultras groups and helping to contextualize the findings within the broader ultras phenomenon.

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