

From the Terraces to Social Media: Reflections of Highlanders Football Club Supporters' Engagement on Facebook During COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

When Zimbabwe introduced the COVID-19 induced lockdown on the 30th of March 2020 as a World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendation to curb the spread of the pandemic, it meant that no football matches were going to take place until the lockdown was over. All along, the Highlanders Football Club (Highlanders FC) fans have been gathering at stadiums across the country, particularly Babourfields Stadium in Bulawayo to support their team. However, when the matches were banned the supporters took a new paradigm where they increased their engagement as fans on Facebook to discuss issues that relate to their team in particular and soccer-related issues in general. The chapter uses netnography as a research design to discuss the activities of Highlanders supporters as reflected through interaction on three of their Facebook platforms which are *Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7*, *Highlanders FC Bosso* and *Bosso Updates*. The study adopts the interactionist theory and was carried out by analysing topics and discussions that appear on the 3 Highlanders Facebook platforms. The results reflect that Highlanders supporters are a community that lives beyond the stadium where their sense of belonging is not limited by physical space. Discussions that appeared on the three Facebook pages included fundraising for the club, reflecting on the current affairs concerning football in general and Highlanders FC in particular, bringing back some memories about

the club and football in general, reflecting on the career paths of Highlanders FC players, and so on. The conclusion is that Highlanders FC supporters are a community that has its life even beyond the terraces and its culture is not only limited to football but also other social activities of humanness.

Keywords: COVID-19, Highlanders FC, Highlanders FC Facebook page, Highlanders FC fans, Bosso

1 Introduction

Football is the most followed sport in Zimbabwe where teams that are in the premier league play their matches on Wednesdays for mid-week fixtures and weekends. Also known as Bosso, Highlanders Football Club (Highlanders FC) is one of the biggest and oldest teams in Zimbabwe, with a very large number of supporters and is based in Bulawayo, the second largest city. Its colours are black and white and anything with those colours is associated with Highlanders FC. Anyone who dresses in black and white on the day when Highlanders FC is playing is regarded as a member of the Bosso family. Highlanders FC's weekend matches are usually played on Sundays at Babourfields Stadium which is its home ground. The Highlanders fans have become emotionally attached to their team so much that even when it is playing away matches, they follow their team to wherever it is playing. The team spirit displayed by Bosso fans does not end at the stadium but after each match, they would gather at the Highlanders Sports Club, not only to celebrate the team's victory but just to share a moment of togetherness as fans. At the club, the interaction is always joyous whether the team would have won or not and the occasion will be accompanied by Ndebele and Zulu music. The occasion goes beyond football as it turns to be a celebration of the pride of being Ndebele.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown resulted in the banning of soccer matches as part of the regulations. Although Highlanders fans were set apart through physical social distancing, social media emerged as a mechanism that brought their emotions closer together. Although the Bosso fans could no longer meet on the terraces of the stadium, their interaction on social media became accelerated. There are various social media platforms on which Highlanders fans interact. However, this chapter is focusing on three Highlanders Facebook platforms namely, *Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7*, *Highlanders*

FC Bosso and Bosso Updates. The conversations displayed on these Facebook pages are analysed from the paradigm of netnography as a research design and the interactionist theory. The idea is to demonstrate that when issues related to soccer are discussed on social media, an online community emerges in the process and the interaction in that online community goes beyond sport to involve other social, economic and political issues.

2 Highlanders FC, Sport and Social Media

Highlanders FC was established in 1926 as Lions Football Club and was renamed Matabeleland Highlanders FC in 1936 (Pindula 2020). Highlanders is one of the oldest football clubs in Zimbabwe and was founded by King Lobengula's sons Albert and Rhodes (Pindula 2020). It is one of the biggest teams in Zimbabwe alongside Dynamos. However, there has been tendency to associate Dynamos with the Shona people and Highlanders with the Ndebele people. Dynamos is based in Harare where Shona is the dominant language, and Highlanders is based in Bulawayo where the population is predominantly Ndebele. Highlanders FC and Dynamos FC matches are a representation of historical and contemporary ethnic conflicts, particularly between the Ndebele and Shona ethnic groups in Zimbabwe (Ncube 2014: 192). Highlanders FC used to be called Matabeleland Highlanders FC, and it was Joshua Nkomo, the former and late Vice President of Zimbabwe, in 1975, who suggested the removal of Matabeleland from the name as the term carried tribal connotations (Pindula 2020). During that time Zimbabwe was Southern Rhodesia and Joshua Nkomo was not yet Vice President but was the leader of Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), a political party that had strong support in Matabeleland and Midlands Provinces.

Researchers argue that Highlanders FC represents Ndebele identity although some sections of the Zimbabwean society have upbraided that premise. According to Guzura and Ndimande (2015: 2):

Highlanders is viewed by fans as a vehicle of Ndebele expression, it has emerged as the 'only' institution they have following the demise of the monarchy and ZAPU which were representative of Ndebele aspiration and identity. Fans have given Highlanders meaning and shaped it into a club that stands for Ndebele identity and nationalism, captures the Ndebele experience such as Gukurahundi, critique of

Shona triumphalism, imagining Ndebele identity, marginalisation, Ndebele-Shona relations.

Highlanders FC fans find solace in their team in a country where they feel marginalised. Highlanders FC matches have cemented the relationship between the Ndebele people. Meeting in the stadium to watch Highlanders FC matches has transformed into a get-together ceremony. Singing of Nguni songs that were adapted from the traditional ones has become common amongst the fans. Most of those adapted songs are those that are sung during traditional gatherings like ancestral appeasement or other traditional religious ceremonies.

Ncube (2014) argues that researching soccer should not be restricted to sport but should be seen as opening wider avenues to inquiring about everyday life. Ncube (2014) delved into chants and songs by supporters that are used in stadiums to study the interface between football and ethnic identities in Zimbabwe. Ncube studied these chants and songs through critical discourse analysis and the findings revealed that Highlanders and Dynamos FC matches are a representation of historical and contemporary ethnic conflicts, particularly between the Ndebele and Shona ethnic groups in Zimbabwe. Guzura and Ndimande (2015) argued that there is a strong link between Highlanders FC and Ndebele identity which is constructed, mediated and reproduced through support for Highlanders FC. Similar to Ncube (2014), Guzura and Ndimande (2015) conclude that Highlanders FC is more than just a sports team to the Ndebele people but it represents a yearning for self-expression of what it means to be Ndebele within Zimbabwe.

Football in Zimbabwe reflects ethnic rivalry. Choto, Chiweshe and Muparamoto (2019) argue that football between Dynamos and Highlanders FC, in post-colonial Zimbabwe reflect ethno regionalism and rivalry. Football rivalries offer a mirror into the socio-political tensions in society. Football between Highlanders and Dynamos is fraught with ethnic, racial, class and gender identities which often form the basis of rivalries amongst the fans (Choto *et al.* 2019). Ncube (2018) argues that songs by Highlanders FC supporters indicate that they are yearning for an independent Matabeleland as a nation on its own. The Ndebele, through songs that they sing when Highlanders FC is playing advocate for nationalism that challenges state narratives of a 'united Zimbabwe' and advocate for the secession of Bulawayo and Matabeleland provinces into an 'independent Ndebele nation' (Ncube 2018). Ncube (2018) concluded that while discussing secession is criminalized and condemned as 'tri-

balism' in Zimbabwe, Highlanders FC fandom is a critical site where some people express feelings and aspirations towards the establishment of an independent Ndebele nation.

Studies have also indicated that there is a strong relationship between football and politics. Ncube (2016) explores the interface between football discourse and politics during the rundown to July 2013 elections in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe symbolically became a football pitch where the two main rival political parties MDC and ZANU PF battled to score political points. 'Ordinary' Zimbabweans resembled the fans and/referees in the game whose vote symbolically became the act of scoring goals for ZANU PF; while for MDC-T it was akin to giving a red card to the ZANU PF party (Ncube 2016: 201).

Research by Daimon (2010) indicates that attending soccer matches in Zimbabwe is associated with masculinity where women are marginalised and those who attend these soccer matches as supporters are stigmatised and treated as societal misfits. Daimon (2010) says that while football is the sport with a huge following in Africa as elsewhere in the global North and South, its relations of production and consumption in the continent intertwine with cultural and socio-economic factors which reproduce social inequalities, gender discrimination and exclusion. Soccer is socially constructed as a masculine activity in which women are grudgingly accommodated as supporters (Kuyel 1999; Daimon 2010). Women who attend soccer matches face a lot of physical and verbal abuse when Zimbabwe's biggest teams Highlanders and Dynamos are playing at Rufaro or Babourfields stadium. At Rufaro, there is a wing called Vietnam where women are not allowed and at Babourfields there is Soweto where only those women who are well-known regular supporters are allowed. Those who are not allowed face humiliation, ridicule and physical abuse when they go there and are treated as prostitutes (Daimon 2010). Zimbabwean stadium humour is usually obscene with vulgar language, insults and repugnant songs that usually degrade the female anatomy being common practice (Daimon 2010). The revelation by Daimon indicate that Zimbabwean soccer arenas are gendered and oppressive.

While social media is being used by sports fans and journalists to communicate sports, not much research has been done on social media as a platform that is used in communicating sports-related issues (Sanderson 2015; Vale & Vernandes 2018). Meng, Stavros and Westberg (2015) wrote about the engagement of sports fans by their teams through social media and not about fans of a particular sports team engaging one another like what this study does.

Meng *et al.* (2015) established that social media is an effective platform for sports teams to engage with fans and to enhance the visibility of the team. McLean and Wainwright (2009) examined the impact of digital culture on football supporters through the analysis of social networks and media reports. Vale and Vernandes (2018) carried out a study that was focussed on unravelling how soccer fans engage with clubs on social media. Their research is informed by the idea that soccer fans develop unique and engaging relationships with their favourite football teams, both offline and online (Vale & Vernandes 2018). This chapter is interested in analysing the conversations that takes place as fans interact on 3 Highlanders FC Facebook pages.

It is clear that researches about soccer-related issues have not focused on the field of play but have been more about social, economic, political and cultural issues that relate to soccer. This is a clear indicator that soccer is not all about the game itself but a lot of interest lies in social, political, economic, cultural and historical issues. Evidence from researches done so far indicate that soccer touches all spheres of life that are related to politics, culture, economy and other socio-historical issues.

3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis of conversations that took place through interaction on 3 Highlanders FC Facebook pages was done from the perspective of the interactionist theory. Interactionism focusses on issues relating to meaning, identity and how social groups relate to each other. Interactionism is concerned with interaction, which means action between individuals (Holborn & Haralambos 2004: xix). There was interaction of fans in Highlanders FC Facebook pages where fans engaged in conversations on various social issues. When a particular subject was introduced on any of the 3 Highlanders FC Facebook pages, the fans interacted on that issue. The interactionist theory was therefore appropriate in studying the conversations that take place on social media where Highlanders FC fans interacted.

4 Research Design and Methodology

Netnography, or online ethnography is used in this chapter as a research design. As the number of internet users continue to increase around the world, and individuals' doing most parts of their lives online, the popularity of netnography has increased rapidly among researchers (Heinonen & Medberg 2018).

Netnography is web-based ethnographic research paradigm. With the growing interest of doing research on online communities, various styles of web-based ethnography have been developed, and these have been identified as 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000), 'Internet ethnography' (Miller & Slater 2001), 'netnography' (Kozinets 2002), 'cyber-ethnography' (Teli, Pisanu & Kakken 2007), 'digital ethnography' (Murthy 2008), 'ethnography of the virtual worlds' (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor 2012). Netnography is said to be a synonym of these other methods of online research although it has some advantages that make it distinct from the other approaches. The advantages are that netnographic data is rich and naturalistic, can be conducted in an unobtrusive manner, it is an adaptable and flexible qualitative method, is compatible with other research methods such as interviews, surveys and ethnography, and is faster, cheaper and simpler (Heinonen & Medberg 2018). In this study we prefer to use netnography because of its inherent strengths outlined above.

The researchers applied netnography by joining the 3 Highlanders FC Facebook pages and participating in them as observers of the topics that were introduced and the discussions that followed thereafter. The researchers were interested in how the Highlanders FC fans participated and interacted in the conversations. Identification of major subjects of debate was key as there was a need to systematically analyse the topics that triggered interaction amongst the Highlanders FC fans. The study systematically analyses interactions that took place on 3 Highlanders FC Facebook pages namely, *Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7*, *Highlanders FC Bosso* and *Bosso Updates* during the COVID-19 lockdown. These three Facebook pages constitute online or virtual communities of Highlanders FC fans. The study covered conversations covering social responsibility, dedication to the team, social events, and history about the club and the players. The study was interested in conversations that were posted between the 10th of April and the 15th of June 2020. These 3 Highlanders FC Facebook platforms are not private online networking sites, but they are open to all Highlanders fans who want to join and when they request they get accepted by the administrator of these online communities. Researching these 3 online communities was therefore not violating research ethics since the researchers were also participants in these public platforms.

5 Interaction by Highlanders FC Fans on Facebook Pages

The 3 Facebook platforms where Highlanders FC fans interact have not only

helped with keeping the supporters updated with information pertaining to the team, but has also kept the fans up-to-date with events that are taking place within the Bosso community. The sharing of information and discussion of issues around the events taking place within the club indicates that fans demonstrate allegiance to the team. The sharing of the team's historical encounters and articulating individuals' opinions about a variety of issues on Facebook shows that Highlanders fandom is not only restricted to the stadium but also touches other spheres of the lives of the fans, the players and the team in general.

5.1 Allegiance to Highlanders FC

Highlanders FC fans demonstrated their love and commitment to their team on the 3 Facebook pages in a variety of ways. What they said on Facebook did not remain on social media but was eventually implemented. The lockdown negatively affected the finances of the team since Highlanders FC largely depends on sponsors, with the current main sponsor being NetOne, a mobile network operator in Zimbabwe. It was reported on Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7 that 'Bosso lost their NetOne sponsorship after the mobile network operator decided to switch its support to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic'. Because of the strained finances at Highlanders FC during the lockdown, the club proposed 50% pay-cut for its players and the fans reacted on the 3 Highlanders Facebook platforms with proposals of intervening into the crisis. The issue of pay-cut was reported in various Zimbabwean newspapers. Highlanders FC fans made calls to intervene and help the team in paying the players their full salaries. One of the proposals from one of the fans which appeared on Bosso Updates read:

How many times would you go eBf (to Babourfields Stadium) per month under normal circumstances, 2 tymz I presume given that we play 2 home games, in this time of lockdown why don't we donate at least a ticket's fee worth of amount towards upkeep of the club \$50 a month will go a long way in assisting iteam yezwe lonke (the team for the whole nation) #donateyourticketfund let's have official biller code for the club.

This reveals that Highlanders fans have remained committed to their team even during the lockdown when matches could no longer take place. Their willing-

ness to donate money that they were going to pay as entrance fees if there was no lockdown is a clear indicator that they are dedicated to their team just like congregants will be dedicated to their church. On all the 3 Facebook pages, Highlanders FC fans have also been making a call to clear all the team's debts. It is even more interesting to note that there are Zimbabweans who live in South Africa who contributed to Highlanders FC and sent the money to Zimbabwe. Those who are supporting Highlanders FC from the neighbouring country call themselves the South African Chapter. Their gesture demonstrates that they do not only regard Highlanders FC as a sports team but they have that sense of belonging, that spirit of being one family.

The sense of belonging possessed by Highlanders FC fans saw them coming in to delve into the interior affairs of the team such as its financial soundness. The fans took their time to make suggestions as to how their team could generate income instead of relying on donor funds. One fan wrote on Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7 saying:

Bosso must adapt to changing times and stop asking for donations always. The support base is big and surely something can be done for the team about that to be self-sufficient. Any sponsor who comes will surely have conditions that's a reality. Highlanders is a big brand its time it produces \$\$\$\$ like what other big brands do. I know the economic situation has not been good in Zimbabwe for some time worse now worldwide due to covid-19/lockdowns things are not moving but its high tym we change our ways.

Another fan on Highlanders FC Bosso wrote:

With their huge fan base, Bosso can easily become one of the richest clubs if they can fully harness and translate their following into money. Recently formed FC Platinum which belongs to Mimosa Platinum miners, are now self-sustaining after forming a commercial division, FC Platinum Holdings.

The Highlanders fans saw themselves as having the potential to contribute to the betterment of their team to a level where it will achieve self-sustenance. The spirit that exists within the Bosso family is that the club belongs to them and they have the obligation to see to the survival and success of their team.

Bosso fans cut across all divides from politicians, business people, football legends, to the general populace and all these have the same vision of seeing success in Bosso. A politician and businessman from Matabeleland South donated groceries and money to the Highlanders players during the lockdown amid concerns that the players' salaries were going to be cut by half. The gesture from this Highlanders fan appeared on all the 3 Facebook pages under study. The post on Highlanders FC Bosso read as follows:

As we continue to work with fans, members and corporate partners to battle the Covid-19 effect on incomes, yesterday the club leadership and senior players were invited to Filabusi by Insiza North MP Farai Taruvinga who committed RTGS \$50 000 & 175KGs of beef to the cause. Honorable Taruvinga's constituency is home to the grave of one of Highlanders founding fathers Prince Albert Khumalo. Another businessman who requested anonymity also pledged RTGS \$30 000.

While this was a good gesture from the politician and businessman which earned positive comments from fans, others posted negative comments. One of the negative comments was saying, '*Honourable yani taruvinga yokunuka ematebeleland mxxm*' (Honourable what for stinking in Matabeleland?). This is an indicator that there are some Highlanders fans who still think that Highlanders FC belongs to the Ndebele people only. They associate Highlanders with being Ndebele, yet anyone from any ethnic group has a right to support a team of his or her choice. They also seem not to understand that there are people in Matabeleland who have Shona surnames who were born and grew up there and speak the Ndebele language. The issue of being Ndebele is a controversial one because most people seem not to understand that Ndebele is not an ethnic group but is a conglomeration of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Nhongo 2013). It is a multi-ethnic grouping that includes the Kalanga, Nguni, Sotho, Venda, Tonga, Karanga, Nambya and so on. Even some prominent figures from Matabeleland reacted negatively to the donation by the businessman-cum-politician, saying that he was making a donation so that he could hijack Highlanders FC. Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7 and Bosso Updates posted a newspaper article about one of King Mzilikazi's descendants who was fuming over donations that will come to the team and then have those sponsors wanting to 'take-over' Highlanders FC. The statement came out soon after the donation that was made by the politician-cum-businessman. King Mzilikazi,

the founder of the Ndebele nation, is the father to King Lobengula whose two sons formed Highlanders FC in 1926.

During the lockdown, Highlanders FC fans were also making decisions about the team on Facebook. The new Highlanders coach Mark Harrison had to take a break and go back to England, his home country amid the COVID-19 lockdown. In anticipation that he was not going to return back to Zimbabwe, fans were already making suggestions on who was going to take the coaching duties. One fan, on Bosso Updates wrote:

If the current coach doesn't come back After covid-19 I think Beke and Mandla can be given that chance. Let the home grown talent be exposed. Let's invest in our own coaches. Your thoughts...by former bosso player Salexington Mujokoro Zinzo.

The fans went out of their way to make decisions that are not their duty to do since there is a Highlanders FC executive that is supposed to make such resolutions as the appointment of the team coaches.

5.2 Social Responsibility

Highlanders fans became a virtual family through Facebook during COVID-19 lockdown and this was seen through concerns about what was happening on one another's life during the period of social distancing. One of the notable experiences is where deaths of some known Highlanders fans were announced on the Highlanders FC Facebook pages. During the period of study of Highlanders fans as an online community, there are three deaths that were reported on the Facebook pages. On the 13th of April a female supporter of Highlanders FC passed on and the message on the 3 Facebook pages under study read, 'Popularly known as Luba the 35-year-old rarely missed Highlanders' matches and was a member of the club's Team Away group that travelled for all Bosso's games outside Bulawayo'. On the 26th of May, on Highlanders FC Bosso and Bosso Updates one post read, 'Morning *MaBosso amahle* (beautiful Bosso fans) on a sad note we have lost one of us Mr Augustine Moyo Rest in peace *Bosso elihle* (beautiful Bosso fan)'. On June 2, 2020, Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7 reported the passing on of another female supporter, 'We seem to be losing supporters during this hard and painful period of Covid-19 *kunzima bakwethu sekulomonakalo njalo ma-Bosso eish sesitshiyile u Manyo Ntoe* (It's hard

Bosso family we have lost one of our own Manyoe Ntoe)’. The same death was reported on Highlanders FC Bosso on the 2 June, in the words, ‘We have just received sad news of the passing away of one of our own, Ntombiyelanga Nyoni. We would like to convey our condolences to the Nyoni family and the entire Bosso family for this sad loss. RIP Matshelala’. Some Highlanders fans had the opportunity to attend to the burial of these three fans with the first two having been buried in Bulawayo and the third in Marondera. This shows that the relationship between Highlanders FC fans goes beyond Facebook and the stadium to conformity to the spirit of Ubuntu. Attending a burial of a known person in Zimbabwe demonstrates humanness. Although the COVID-19 regulations did not allow more than 50 people to attend a burial ceremony, Highlanders FC fans defied this regulation because of the love for one another.

Highlanders FC has a funeral policy called score pack which is administered by one of the sponsors of the club. This policy is not only for players but for all Highlanders FC fans. During the lockdown, some fans kept on reminding one another about this policy encouraging those who had not yet joined to do so and those who had joined already not to forget to pay their monthly subscriptions. The message ‘Supporting your favorite football team has never been this rewarding! Get your Score Pack Policy today & support your favorite club, Highlanders FC’, was repeatedly posted on Highlanders FC Bosso Facebook page.

When a member of the Bosso family is celebrating a birthday, fans get to know about the event on these 3 Facebook pages. On Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7, a birthday message, ‘Happy bday to our star player Nqobizitha Masuku enjoy your special day stay safe n healthy’ was posted. The post about this player’s birthday who also happens to be the team captain was also posted in Bosso Updates. On the 30th of May Highlanders FC Bosso wrote, ‘Happy Birthday to our former Skipper Gilbert Banda. As we take this opportunity to appreciate his service and loyalty, the club wishes the captain a happy and successful long life’.

5.3 Historical Encounters of Highlanders

Missing action in the stadium as a result of COVID-19 lockdown saw Highlanders fans resorting to taking each other down memory lane reflecting on the historical encounters of the team. On these 3 Facebook pages under analysis the fans were reflecting on the victories and losses that the team experienced in

the past. In one of the posts from May 30, Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7 shared a post of the league matches that Highlanders won since 1958 to date. The post read as follows:

Honours Winners of the RNFL in 1958 and 1975 Chibuku Trophy Winners (1980) Heroes Cup Champions (1980) 7 times winners of the PSL (1990, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2006) Mbada Diamond Cup (2013) Chibuku Super Cup Winners (2019) Castle Lager Challenge Cup Finalist.

Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7 also shared another post on the 29th of March indicating Highlanders FC's qualification and participation in Confederation of African Football (CAF) games, 'CAF Champions Appearances CAF Cup Winners' 1986 1987 1992 African Cup of Champions Club 1991 1994 CAF Confederations Cup 2008 2011 CAF Champions League 2000 2001 2002 2003 2007'. Another post from Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7 outlined the list of coaches that Highlanders FC has had over the years.

Memorable matches were also listed on the Highlanders FC Facebook pages during the lockdown. On Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7, matches between Highlanders and Caps United where Bosso beat Caps United on three consecutive matches, two in Zimbabwe and one in the United Kingdom were posted on the 28th of May. The memories that were listed on the 3 Highlanders FC pages were also about the greatest players that the team has had over the years. The posts also talk about the best players for particular positions such as goalkeepers, defenders, midfielders and strikers.

In some instances, a legendary Highlanders player was picked and discussed on these Facebook pages. A player's profile was outlined from birth up to the present moment outlining his achievements, teams that were played for, and even coaching activities if the player ended up being a coach. On the 6th of June 2020, on Bosso Updates and Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7, the Highlanders legend who was discussed was Rahman Gumbo whom it was said was born on 18 November 1963. His career as a footballer and coach in and outside Zimbabwe was outlined. On other posts, even the career paths of those legends who are deceased were outlined on the 3 Highlanders FC Facebook pages. The outlining of the histories of the players have been beneficial to many Bosso fans as they got the opportunity to know more about the current players and the others who played for Highlanders sometime back.

5.4 Opinion Searching about Highlanders FC

Some of the posts that are put on Facebook by group administrators are meant to get fans' opinions relating to Highlanders FC. One of the most opinion seeking and brain teasing post during COVID-19 lockdown was on the *Bulawayo Kasi Battle* which was launched on the 25th of May which sought to compare the number of supporters from each of the suburbs in Bulawayo. Two suburbs were picked on each day and fans had to vote on Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7, Bosso Updates and Highlanders FC Bosso so that at the end of the day it would be determined which of the two suburbs had the most ardent Highlanders supporters. It is important to mention that this *Bulawayo Kasi Battle* challenge was also done on Highlanders Twitter page with the name *@HighlanderBosso*. However, this chapter is only focusing on the 3 Highlanders FC Facebook pages. Bosso Siyinqaba 24/7 posted the following message on the 26th of May:

Highlanders has launched a Bulawayo Kasi Battle to find out which kasi (suburb/ township) has the most ardent Bosso fans. The battles have seen townships being pitted against each other with members of the public voting for their favourite suburb.

This exercise kept Highlanders FC fans occupied by voting online and constantly visiting the page to check on the number of votes for each of the selected suburbs on each particular day. The exercise kept Bosso fans interacting with one another.

Another opinion seeking challenge was where Highlanders FC Bosso would post a player position and fans had to mention the player who has through the history of Highlanders been the best in that particular position. At times the challenge would be requiring fans to mention the player who manages an identified position in a particular described manner. This exercise transformed what fans were seeing all along in the field of play from the terraces into online debates.

6 Conclusion

Although the COVID-19 lockdown was anticipated to be a bad time for Highlanders FC fans, it however proved otherwise for those with access to Facebook as they got to interact with other fans on a variety of issues

concerning their team. The lockdown did not divert Bosso fans from remaining committed as they took to social media to interact about the affairs of their team. This shows that football is not all about watching and being entertained by players in the stadium but it goes beyond that as many Highlanders fans demonstrated passionate concern about social, financial and other affairs of their team. Some tendencies of hooliganism, tribalism and vulgar language that are demonstrated by some fans in the stadium also manifested as comments on Facebook. However, the idea of Highlanders being *ithimu yezwelonke* (the team of the whole nation) was defeated by the sentiments of tribalism as if one has to be Ndebele to be a fan. The posts and the subsequent comments that appeared on Facebook were exclusively in either Ndebele or English in a country with more than fifteen languages. This also defeats the idea of Highlanders being a team for the whole nation, but one that is confined solely to the people of Matabeleland. Although the COVID-19 lockdown resulted in taking support of the team from being physical to social, some of the behaviours that were usually exhibited in the stadium remained conspicuous on Facebook. The posts that were put on Facebook also proved that Highlanders is not just a sports team but it is more of a virtual family or rather a community that shares a homogenous Ndebele identity.

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