New Consumers and Football Fandom: The Role of Social Habitus in Consumer Behaviour

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BRENDAN RICHARDSON*

INTRODUCTION

Association football (or soccer) is widely credited with being the most popular sport in the world (Derbaix et al., 2002). Whether that claim is verifiable is not the topic of this paper. What is beyond question is that sports fandom is a source of excitement and pleasure for millions (if not billions) of consumers worldwide, and many of these consumers happily spend much of their discretionary income in the pursuit of their interest (Derbaix et al., 2002; End et al., 2002; Madrigal, 1995; Matsuoka et al., 2003). The loyalty of sports fans as consumers has therefore become firmly established on the academic research agenda in recent years (Kolbe and James, 2000; Mahony et al., 1999; Richardson and Dwyer, 2003).

FAN BEHAVIOUR

Cialdini et al. (1976) concluded that basking in reflected glory, or BIRGing (End et al., 2002; Madrigal, 1995), was a key source of pleasure and benefit to the sports fan. BIRGing is the attempted raising of social esteem levels through increased association with highly successful others (Madrigal, 1995). This could be through wearing team apparel after a victory, or verbal association, such as use of the pronoun "we" when talking about the team, again after a victory (Cialdini et al., 1976; End et al., 2002). The tendency to BIRG is partly explained by social identity theory, which proposes that the motivation to boost self-esteem causes individuals to identify themselves strongly with a successful (and therefore positively perceived) group (End et al., 2002). Should the group, or in this case the team, experience failure, then the individual may seek to protect self-esteem through a process termed cutting off reflected failure, or CORFing, which involves disassociating oneself from the losing team (End et al., 2002: Madrigal, 1995).

* Department of Management and Marketing, O'Rahilly Building,
University College Cork,
e-mail: brendanrichardson@ucc.ie

Madrigal (1995) suggests that these tendencies (i.e. to BIRG or CORF) help to explain the tendency of 'fair weather' fans to avoid attending matches when the team are going through an unsuccessful period and the increased attendance at matches during a successful period. That in itself is of interest, but it does not explain why many fans continue to attend games even at those times when the team is unsuccessful.

TEAM IDENTIFICATION, BIRGING AND CORFING

Tendency to BIRG or CORF seems to be mitigated by the individual's level of *team identification*:

> Team identification refers to a spectator's involvement with and psychological connection to a sport team. (Wann and Schrader, 2000: 160)

Wann and Branscombe's Sports Spectator Identification Scale, or SSIS (Madrigal, 2000, 1995; Wann and Schrader, 2000), utilises a Likert Scale test to measure the degree of team identification. Other studies (Matsuoka et al., 2003) have used amended versions of this scale to examine the same question, i.e. the extent to which the individual identifies with a particular sports team.

This measure is of interest because of the apparent differences in the behaviour of *high identifiers* and *low identifiers*. High identifiers display a far greater propensity for self-serving bias (team victories explicable in terms of internal controllable factors such as team ability or fans' strong vocal support; defeat explicable through external factors such as cheating by the opposition, poor refereeing or other external and uncontrollable factors) (Wann and Schrader, 2000). They have higher pre-game expectations than low identifiers (Madrigal, 1995, 2003), stronger emotional reactions during a game and are more inclined to engage in 'wishful thinking' and less inclined to be objective about the team's likely future successes (Madrigal, 2003). High identifiers also have stronger intentions *vis á vis* future game attendance (Matsuoka et al., 2003).

High identifiers derive more enjoyment from their fandom than low identifiers:

> ... fans who view their association with the team as a more important facet of their self-identity tend to experience greater personal joy and seek greater individual association with the team when it experiences successful outcomes. (Madrigal, 1995: 222)

This greater tendency to BIRG is confirmed by other studies, which have also found that high identifiers have a much lesser tendency to CORF than low identifiers (End et al., 2002; Madrigal, 1995; Matsuoka et al., 2003). This difference in behaviour is not satisfactorily explained in the literature, however, even though some research has examined the issue. Madrigal (1995) suggests

that for the high identifier, the team is perceived as part of the extended self (Belk, 1988) which makes CORFing more difficult. End et al. (2002) argue that CORFing may not be an option for high identifiers, who perceive it as disloyal. Alternative tactics are therefore needed. These include attribution of failure to external factors such as poor refereeing. Further research is clearly needed, however.

SELF-MONITORING

Other research on fan loyalty has investigated the effects of variables such as self-monitoring (Mahony et al., 1999; Richardson and Dwyer, 2003). Mahony et al. found some degree of linkage between high self-monitoring (a willingness to modify behaviour and/or appearance to ensure social acceptance, in this context engaging in team-switching to ensure association with a successful team) and propensity to team-switching among US college students. However, they failed to find any relationship between low self-monitoring and the degree of psychological commitment to the team. A more recent study of soccer fans found no evidence of a relationship between high levels of self-monitoring and team-switching. Soccer fans demonstrated high levels of loyalty irrespective of their self-monitoring scores (Richardson and Dwyer, 2003).

Thus, when we consider that BIRGing does not explain the behaviour of large segments of the fan population, that only fans with low team identification scores engage in CORFing to any significant degree and that other psychological variables such as self-monitoring have to date failed to provide conclusive insights into fan loyalty, it becomes apparent that other variables, indeed other dynamics, should be explored. One such factor is community.

FANDOM AND THE GROUP

Much of the research on loyalty has focused on fan identification with the team. This has been to the neglect of research on fan identification with other fans. The benefits of close identification with the 'in-group' of fellow fans of their favourite team include higher self-esteem, less depression and higher levels of life satisfaction among other things (Madrigal, 2000). It is possible that the positives of group or fan community membership far outweigh the negatives of team failure. Furthermore, once we acknowledge the reality of group membership, it suggests that factors such as compliance with group norms, out of a need or desire for ongoing acceptance and group membership, may be important determinants of fan behaviour (Madrigal, 2000).

Madrigal (2000) suggests that high identifiers are most likely to internalise the values of the group. He proposes group camaraderie as a consumable object. "Ultimate loyalty" towards this object arises when it becomes part of the extended self (Belk, 1988). Team affiliations become resistant to change because both team *and* fan community have become part of the extended self.

This offers a more insightful explanation of fan loyalty than the proposal that Chicago Cubs fans stayed loyal to a mediocre baseball team simply because they were high identifiers (Madrigal, 1995: 210).

GROUP PROCESSES IN CONSUMPTION OF SPORT

Holt (1995) and Madrigal (2003) noted that sportsmen's performances are evaluated against norms and expectations developed over time (consumption as assimilation). These expectations affect fans' sense of satisfaction with team performance. Group dynamics are central to this process, as they are to other aspects of the baseball fan consumption experience. Consuming as play and consuming as classification (Holt, 1995) involve high levels of interaction and identification with one's fellow fans. Derbaix et al. (2002) have found that these group processes play an important role among soccer fans. A sense of community, of group identity, processes and experiences, may be central to the phenomenon of soccer fandom.

It is unsurprising, therefore, to observe the growing calls in the literature for a more contextual approach to the study of sports consumption, such as a greater focus on the social milieu in which it takes place (Stewart et al., 2003), investigation of the effects of emotional contagion (Madrigal, 2003) and of the effects of group dynamics on fan loyalty (Kolbe and James, 2000). For example, the sense of community that fandom confers is itself a motivating factor in supporting a team (Kolbe and James, 2000). We therefore turn to the work of Maffesoli (1996), Cova (1997) and others, in order to explore this phenomenon of fan loyalty from a theoretical perspective appropriate for group consumption.

COMMUNITIES OF CONSUMPTION

Of particular interest in the literature on post-modern communities of consumption is the suggestion that "the link is more important than the thing" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Cova (1997) speaks of the "desperate search" for social links. Brand choice is increasingly dependent on perceived social linking value. Consumer choices are made on the basis of opportunities for social interaction and participation in community that certain brands can provide. In this way, public icons, be they celebrities or football teams, increasingly function as totems around which consumers can congregate to share passion and emotion and thereby experience feelings of unity, of communitas, otherwise absent from their lives (Cova, 1997; Maffesoli, 1996). That passion, ecstasy and a sense of communitas can be experienced through supporting a football team has been established by a number of studies, the work of Derbaix et al. (2002) being but one example.

Of course, while many football fans may be supporters for this reason, i.e. to experience community, not all fans could be described as "desperately seeking" community in Cova's sense. The "lads" (King 1995, 1997) are

"traditional" fans, socialised into their choice almost from birth. They have not made a calculated, post-modern, neotribal choice of which team to support. Yet they form a specific subculture of consumption, which renders a group perspective appropriate for research on their form of fandom. Thus, whether we study traditional or "new consumer" fans (King, 1995), we are likely to find that membership of the fan community will "cement" member loyalty towards the brand. The brand becomes an intrinsic part of the intra-member relationship. It is the tie that binds (Maffesoli, 1996). To walk away from the brand is to walk away from the set of social relationships and is thus practically unthinkable (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

While there has been some discussion in the literature as to whether football fandom is subcultural (Giulianotti, 1999; Marsh et al., 1997; Merkel, 1999) or neotribalistic in nature (Alabarces, 1999; Cova, 1997; Crawford, 2000: 222), it is not, for the purposes of this study, a question of whether football fandom is a subculture, brand community or form of neotribalism, but rather of how the internal system of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1984) works.

Cultural capital is present in all forms of consumption community (Crawford, 2000: 224–8; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Thornton, 1997: 200). An exploration of cultural capital can therefore generate highly accurate and meaningful insights into the behaviour of all actors within the football fan community, irrespective of whether that community is a subculture, brand community or neotribal configuration.

Fan Authenticity and Cultural Capital

One of the perennial issues among football fans and academics alike is the issue of fan authenticity. Some argue that all "new" fans are passive rather than participatory and therefore are not "real" fans (Redhead, 1993; Giulianotti, 1999). Others, for example Crawford (2000: 45–9), dismiss the contention that one particular definition of fandom can be privileged over another. King (1995, 1997) argues that, as fandom is itself an imagined concept, anyone who imagines themselves to be a fan is therefore, essentially, a fan. Both King and Crawford, however, overlook the reality that some fans *are* perceived by "novice" fans as possessing greater authenticity. The utilisation of a specific system of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) by baseball fans to make such distinctions between themselves and others (Holt, 1995) suggests that a similar system, or systems, may be present in the football fan community.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital functions as a means of preserving distinctions – not only between social classes, but between categories of fans as well. Cultural capital is a knowledge of how to consume, how to appreciate; and to understand what is worthy of appreciation and what is not one must have specialist knowledge, vocabulary, a way of perceiving that allows one to fully appreciate, understand

and categorise cultural (and other) objects in a manner that others cannot. This specialist knowledge is organised in perceptual schemes termed 'programmes for perception' (Bourdieu, 1984: 1). How this operates in the context of baseball fandom is outlined by Holt (1995: 7–10). Knowledge of *how* to perceive baseball allows fans to distinguish between themselves and others (Holt, 1995: 10), between those with strong allegiance to the team and those with none, for instance. Within the community, this knowledge can be manipulated to impress others (and thereby attain higher social status). Thus, the concept of cultural capital represents an appropriate conceptual framework with which to explore the phenomenon of football fandom.

METHODOLOGY

The appropriateness of ethnography as an approach for studies of group consumption is well established in the literature (Celsi et al., 1993; Crawford, 2000; Holt, 1995; King, 1995; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Thus, ethnographic techniques such as non-participant observation can be used. The initial stages of this study involved non-participant observation in a number of Internet football fan forums, as well as participant observation at soccer matches.

COMMENCING "NETNOGRAPHY"

Kozinets (2002) recommends observation of online forums with (a) high research-question relevance, (b) the highest levels of traffic, (c) high numbers of discrete posters, (d) the richest data and (e) the greatest level of between-member interaction of the type required by the research question. The forums monitored thus far, in adhering to most of these criteria, have proved very useful to the process of mapping out football fan culture and recording apparent patterns in fan behaviour. By recording those things that "real" fans say, do and value, one can begin to construct an understanding of the fans' system of cultural capital.

The monitoring period was timed to commence with pre-season for the English FA Premiership. This is a particularly significant time for football fans, the only time of the football season where all can delude themselves that this indeed will be "our" year, because "nothing has happened yet (this season) to disillusion us":

> At the start of August we are all certain our strikers can manage overhead volleys into the top corner from 30 yards; our defenders are only waiting for the chance to recreate that Bobby Moore tackle; and that kid from the youth team really is set to be the next Zinedine Zidane. (*Four Four Two*, Sept. 2000)

Citynet, an unofficial eircom league forum for fans of Cork City FC, was also monitored. Pre-season for eircom league clubs was approximately six months prior to the start of the study, so not all categories of issues encountered were the same as the pre-season issues discussed on Premiership forums. A wide

range of fan-related issues were discussed on Citynet during this time. The issues that troubled or excited Cork City fans were the same issues that seemed to affect football fans at much bigger clubs: questions relating to the manager's or the board's competence were debated; the danger that some other club was about to "poach our star striker" was discussed; the referee's performance in a particular game was criticised and so on. For that reason, monitoring of the site was continued throughout the initial phase of the study.

FOOTBALL FAN FORUMS IN THE PRE-SEASON PERIOD

One thread (Sunday 27 July) on Red All Over The Land (RAOTL), an unofficial Liverpool fans' website, contained a typical mix of speculation and pre-season optimism. Most of the speculation was concerned with the football player transfer market and the teams' prospects for the forthcoming season. Fans exercised their cultural capital through being able to speculate knowledgeably and expertly on these topics. Being able to speculate in this manner distinguished "expert" fans from non-experts, those with social currency/cultural capital from those without it.

That this is a recurring pattern rather than a once-off discussion is illustrated by discussions on the forum at other times. The fans on RAOTL often discuss items from the club's official website, such as opinion polls nominating the club's all-time best starting XI. When one official poll resulted in Steve McManaman being nominated in midfield, the fans on RAOTL suggested that "if you know your history" (RAOTL forum, November 2002), a number of other players could have been selected ahead of McManaman. What this illustrates, as much as anything else, is the fans' desire to distinguish between themselves and the type of "novice" fan who does not know very much about the club's history. Knowledge of the other players functions as a form of cultural capital to this end.

SEASON TICKETS

During pre-season, a discussion took place regarding the delays some fans were experiencing in having their season tickets renewed. This included some criticism of the club's ticket office and its operation of the season ticket renewal system. While this discussion in itself gave no definitive indication of the presence of cultural capital, subsequent discussions regarding the waiting list for season tickets strongly indicated that season tickets are a repository of cultural capital. To be a season-ticket holder is to be regarded as one of the inner circle of elite fans. If not a season-ticket holder, one at least should be on the waiting list. To be able to relate to other fans about this issue and compare experiences seems to form a key part of the system of social currency or cultural capital among the fans. It might also be speculated that the season ticket, as a form of hierophanous sacred consumption object (Belk et al., 1989), bestows cultural capital on the holder because it marks them out as one of the elite.

LOSS OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Issues from the previous season were very much to the fore for some fans. In early August 2003, fans on the *WestHammersFC* website forum were busy arguing over who was to blame for West Ham being relegated from the Premiership. Many of them blamed the manager, often the scapegoat of first resort for football fans everywhere (another alternative tactic to CORFing for high identifiers, perhaps).

The fans were also deeply upset about the loss of star players to rival clubs. King (1995, 1998) has argued that male solidarity and pride play a central role in traditional fandom. Losing star players to rival clubs is a deep blow to such pride and resulting feelings of hurt and embarrassment doubtless contribute to various forms of behaviour such as protesting, returning season tickets and so on.

In both cases (i.e. relegation and loss of players to other clubs), what the fans may have experienced was a loss of cultural capital. Participation in the Premiership provides opportunities for one's team to play against football's elite clubs. This in itself provides fans with opportunities for the acquisition and utilisation of cultural capital. Match programmes and ticket stubs for games against the likes of Manchester United or Arsenal are tangible proofs of one's bona fides as a fan and concrete evidence of the experiences the fan can relate to others. Relegation to a lower division, where opposition is provided by clubs such as Grimsby Town, is rather less prestigious and lacks the capacity to confer distinction on the fan. Being able to claim that you "… were there the night we beat Grimsby …" may not confer the same level of social currency as being able to reminisce about being in the crowd for the match against Chelsea. Hence some loss of cultural capital is experienced, which might help to explain reduced consumption levels on the part of some fans. Conversely, it is also possible that the ticket stub from the Grimsby game might be *higher* in cultural capital, as it implies the holder is a "true blue" fan, i.e. present for both unglamorous as well as glamorous fixtures.

"THE SCUM"

This post (name withheld[1]) is from the Cork City FC unofficial website, Citynet (Monday 14 July):

"When we playing the scum?"

This message was posted without any further explanation or indication as to who the "scum" were. It was an enquiry as to whether a date had been arranged for a previously cancelled league match against Shamrock Rovers. The lack of regard for Shamrock Rovers among Cork City fans is readily apparent from the fact that nobody needed to be told who the "scum" were. The poster received several replies without the name "Shamrock Rovers" being mentioned once. Across football fan terrain in general, the identity of the

"scum" may vary but the idea that they are "scum" does not. Arsenal fans understand it to refer to Tottenham Hotspur and vice versa; Liverpool fans usually understand it to mean, not their near neighbours Everton, but Manchester United.

This indicates that shared meanings are understood within the community associated with a particular club. Knowing who the "scum" are is a fundamental part of the system of social currency or cultural capital within any team's fan community. Tickets for matches against the "scum" will be sought after more than tickets for other matches; anecdotes from matches where "we" beat the "scum" will be more highly valued; and victories over the "scum" are more likely to be subsequently celebrated in song than victories over other clubs. This points to the pivotal role played by particular rival clubs in the fan community's system of cultural capital. Knowing who to derogate, how to derogate them and why they are to be derogated helps the community to define who they themselves are, by clarifying who they are not (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

OTHER RESEARCH: WATERFORD UNITED AFC v CORK CITY FC, FRIDAY 18 JULY 2003

Attendance at away matches is often regarded (anecdotally at least) as proof of one's bona fides as a genuine fan. Travelling to the match between Waterford United and Cork City represented a chance to engage in some participant observation at an event (i.e. an "away" fixture) regarded by members of the Citynet forum as being higher in cultural capital than attendance at a "home" fixture. The "real" fans are those who go to away games and give strong vocal support to the team for the full ninety minutes of the match. A two-fold aspiration operates, the first dimension being greater authenticity (the "cultural capital" acquirable through attendance at an away fixture) and the second being the desire to be with other "real" fans, to experience "consciousness of kind" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), to be with like-minded others who know the words of *all* the songs, not just one or two chants, and sing them throughout the game, thereby supporting the team in a more meaningful manner. The fact that such activities are high in cultural capital among the community of hard-core fans explains the desire of neophyte hard-core fans to participate in such activities.

ARRIVING AT THE GROUND

The experience of actually going through the turnstiles at a football ground is an important moment for the fan. It is where the ritual occurs of handing in the match ticket, receiving the ticket stub in return and passing through the portal from the world outside into the world within. You anticipate the first sight of the football pitch and the players and the sound of the crowd. It is a moment when you leave behind the outside world (and your normal persona) and cross over to

a location where your displaced meanings (McCracken, 1988: 106–11) are accessible for a short time. All of these factors help to explain why actual match attendance is so much higher in cultural capital than simply viewing matches on television (and match attendance thereby confers higher levels of cultural capital on the fan, also explaining the level of demand among Irish consumers for trips to Old Trafford, Anfield or Celtic Park).

AGONY, ECSTASY AND COMMUNITY

In the closing stages of the match, as Cork City clung to a one goal lead, a defensive error led to Waterford scoring an equalising goal. Shortly afterwards, Waterford went on to grab the proverbial late winner from the penalty spot, sending the home crowd into raptures. This incident provides further evidence of the ability of live football to affect the emotions of the fans. For ninety minutes, life is reduced to a set of simplistic ideas, where everything is black and white. Football fans tend to respond in a highly ritualised manner to the referee. In this case, even though the player's offence was clearly visible, the Cork City fans reacted almost violently to the referee's decision. This suggests a ritualised and emotionally charged (rather than objective) response. This would in turn suggest that what occurs may be learned behaviour, where the group has effectively "self-regulated" with regard to the type of response that is appropriate in this type of situation (Crawford, 2000: 161). By conforming to the behaviour deemed appropriate by the group, fans are effectively demonstrating the existence of a habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) which governs their conduct. In addition, by their participation in these rituals, even neophyte fans can experience meaning transfer and thereby attain a deeper sense of community membership as part of their own identity (McCracken, 1988: 87). Football fans seem to derive enjoyment from these crazy rituals, perhaps because they effectively constitute a "script" that is ritualistically acted out every week or every fortnight, providing a catharsis from the stresses of post-modern life. Maybe the referee's decision, or even the match result, have not gone your way, but you have still had the benefit of participation in the ritual. Finally, while the joint participation acts as an affirmation, a reassurance, of community membership, related consumption objects, such as club shirts or scarves, are subtexts, or ritual artefacts, which enable the consumer to participate in and feel a part of that community.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH AND MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

This paper has provided preliminary evidence of the community-related nature of football fandom and evidence that membership of that community is a primary shaper of the fan's consumption patterns. The evidence presented here supports the hypothesis that a system of cultural capital is not only present within the fan community, but that this community-specific system strongly influences and shapes the fans' consumption in specific ways. As the study

develops and more of the habitus is mapped out, the manner in which the behaviour of fans is affected by the underlying system of cultural capital that permeates the entire culture, and how this dictates their actual purchasing patterns and other consumer behaviours, will become more apparent.

One highly interesting marketing implication thus far is that while Matsuoka et al. (2003) for example, call for marketers to focus on moving consumers up the *team* identifier scale, a stronger response in terms of long-term fan loyalty might be better obtained by attempts to move fans up an alternative scale, that of *fan community* identification. A sense of affiliation to the fan community might prove to be the stronger bond in the long term. Thus (building on Madrigal's proposal of fan cameraderie as consumption object embedded in the extended self), it is suggested that the fan's loyalty can be assured provided a sense of community membership is cultivated. Therefore, football marketers may have much to learn from studying the "side bets" that act as barriers to exit among members of the Harley Davidson community, for example (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). What are the equivalent side bets that keep football fans together as a community? Which of these side bets are highest in cultural capital and therefore offer greater potential as exit barriers? Or can we even assume such a relationship? These and other pertinent questions can only be answered by further research, which will contribute not only to the debate on sports fandom but also on the role of cultural capital in structuring neotribalistic consumption.

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1   For the purposes of this paper, discussion threads have been analysed without the use of verbatim quotations, because individual posters have not as yet been asked for their permission to quote them.

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