
Brendan Richardson, UCC, Ireland
Darach Turley, DCU, Ireland

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It’s Far More Important Than That: Football Fandom and Cultural Capital

Brendan Richardson, UCC, Ireland
Darach Turley, Dublin City University, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) is proposed as a model for an exploration of the consumer behaviour of football fans. A study of two fan communities shows the presence of a system of cultural capital used to maintain social distinctions between ‘real’ fans and ‘daytrippers’. The system of cultural capital is also used to grant group membership to those deemed worthy of it. Cultural capital is used not merely to practice social distinction but as a means of sacralisation maintenance, in this case to ensure that the sacred identity of the group is perpetuated through the recruitment of new members. Finally, while the inner circle of traditional fans view the market as a de-sacralising influence, the wider fan community consume official branded football merchandise in order to experience the sacred.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural capital is defined as a knowledge of how to consume, how to appreciate, to understand what should be considered tasteful and what should not (Bourdieu 1984, Holt 1998). This specialist knowledge, this vocabulary, this way of consuming, allows members of the elite in society to fully appreciate, understand and categorise cultural objects in a manner that others cannot. Hence it can be used to control access to membership of the elite. This knowledge is organised in perceptual schemes (known as programmes for perception), learned primarily through socialisation processes within the dominant social class. Members of the elite can then correctly observe the nuances and values of their collective habitus. Other social classes, having a different habitus, have different tastes which are expressed through practices considered lower in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984:28). This paper proposes that cultural capital can be re-conceptualised to illustrate how consumption is structured not only within traditional social collectives, but also postmodern configurations such as subcultures of consumption (Thornton 1997).

This study examines the operation of systems of cultural capital among fans of association football. A number of factors justify this choice. Observation of football fan web forums and other media indicates the presence of deliberate practices of distinction. Perusal of the academic literature on football fandom similarly reveals competing definitions of fan authenticity, and research has found evidence of deliberate alteration of consumption practices by some football supporters for the maintenance of distinction from other categories of fan (King, 1997, 1998). Finally, while the literature differs in its characterisation of football fandom, some researchers utilising the concept of neo-tribalism (Cova 1997), others that of subculture (Giulianotti 1999), this study demonstrates that the concept of cultural capital is central to understanding the behaviour of consumers within this field, irrespective of its overall conceptual characterisation as either subculture of consumption or neo-tribal collective.

CRITICISMS OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital has not been without its critics. Critics of Bourdieu have tended to take the view that members of the dominant social class in North America, for example, tend not to limit their expressed tastes to ‘legitimate’ (as opposed to popular) culture, and that an ability to aesthetically appreciate the arts is not a key to social or economic advancement (Erickson 1996, Gartman 1991, Halle 1993). While Gartman (1991) accepts that the “evidence for class differences is systematically stronger in fields of nonmaterial [this writer’s italics] culture… (visual arts, music, literature) than in fields of material culture (food, clothing, furniture)” he argues that there is substantial evidence to support the notion of a commonly consumed mass culture that transcends class boundaries (1991:430), even in the sphere of non-material culture. This finding is to some degree corroborated by Erickson, who suggests that for the most part knowledge of popular culture in general, and often sport in particular, can be of greater use in securing social and career success, even among business executives.

It is interesting, however, that while Halle (1993), for example, claims to find evidence of similarity of taste across social class boundaries, one is struck when examining his photographic data by the clearly apparent differences in taste across social class, evident in the clear differences in interior décor between the working class homes of Greenpoint and the upper class homes of Manhattan. Certainly there are superficial similarities in the taste for art across social classes, such as a common taste for landscapes, but by limiting his examination to only one field of consumption, Halle (ibid) fails to notice the rather obvious differences in taste that present themselves in terms of overall tastes in interior design. In contrast to the above criticisms, Holt (1998) found that by examining multiple fields of consumption, not only was the influence of habitus apparent, but that systems of cultural capital were used by members of the dominant class to maintain their (perceived) superior social status, their distinctiveness from the masses, albeit not necessarily with conscious intent. Once so many members of the working class achieve economic parity with their ‘betters’, and once powerful material reminders of social status such as large houses, cars, or yachts lose some of their symbolic value to confer distinction, the elite seek to retain status through subtle shifts in the manner of exercise of their tastes. How one consumes, rather than what one consumes, is the true basis for distinction. Holt argues that this is what Bourdieu sought to explain to us all along.

The question at hand, however, is not whether members of different socio-economic classes are influenced by habitus or cultural capital, but whether members of other types of social configuration besides social class proactively utilise knowledge systems of not only what to consume, but more importantly how to consume it, to limit or control access to membership of their group. This paper argues that Bourdieu’s theory can be applied to explain behaviour, or the search for higher social status within certain social configurations, such as the community of fans attached to a particular football club. It will also demonstrate that the concept of cultural capital can help to explain the differences in consumption patterns across different categories of football fan.

FANDOM, AUTHENTICITY, AND THE NEW CONSUMPTION OF FOOTBALL

Research on fandom has tended to draw from either one of two disciplines i.e. psychological or sociological perspectives. Psychological variables such as Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing), Cutting Off Reflected Failure, and level of Team Identification (Madrigal 1995, 2000; Matsuoka et al 2003) have certainly enhanced our understanding of certain aspects of sports fan behaviour, but have not addressed the role played by group dynamics.
Madrigal (2000), however, has proposed the notion of fan camaraderie as consumable object, “(U)ltimate loyalty” towards this object arises when the group becomes part of the individual’s sense of extended self (Belk 1988). It is now proposed that just as relationships among devotees of Saab or Apple Macintosh facilitate individual brand loyalty (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001) the social or group dimension of fandom plays a pivotal role not only in maintaining loyalty towards the team, but in shaping the entire consumption experience. Indeed, recent research has confirmed the significance of the role of the fan community in shaping the nature of fandom (Holt 1995; Derbaix et al. 2002).

It is significant that in much of the sociological literature on fans of association football, issues that relate directly to the concepts of habitus and cultural capital are to the fore. Just as those at the core of the Harley Davidson Subculture reject the notion that their imitators could possibly be authentic bikers (Schouten & McAlexander 1995), the Manchester United hard core ‘lads’ (King, 1997, 1998) question the authenticity of other categories of football fan whose practices differ from theirs. The “new consumer” fans are recognizable, according to the ‘lads’, by their wearing of official replica shirts and their passive behaviour at football matches. The stereotype of this ‘new’ fan, as asserted not only by King’s ‘lads’ (1998:155) but sociologists such as Giulianotti (1999), includes a failure to join in the pre-match drinking, and a lack of participation in the ritual singing and chanting of football songs and slogans during the match. This suggests that football fandom, and the consumption patterns of football fans, might best be understood by means of an analysis of the presence and parameters of a fan-specific system (or systems) of cultural capital, that are utilised to maintain distinctions between different categories of fan. Such a system of cultural capital would be comparable conceptually to Thornton’s (1997) theory of subcultural capital.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study of a cultural field of which the researcher is already a member is considered unproblematic, provided appropriate techniques are adopted to ‘make the familiar strange’ and maintain an appropriate level of analytic distance (Lofland & Lofland 1995; Schouten & McAlexander 1995). In addition, the participant researcher will already possess an insider understanding of that culture, which facilitates assessment of data (Lofland & Lofland 1995). For the purposes of this study it was thus deemed appropriate to define the field in terms of the respective fan communities of two particular clubs, Liverpool F.C. and Cork City F.C. A period of prolonged immersion (Stewart 1998) in the fan cultures of both clubs has therefore been carried out. This involved systematic participant observation during football matches in the home stadia of both teams over a twenty four month time period, and participant observation on several web based fan discussion forums over a somewhat longer timeframe. Web discussion forums were chosen for participation on the basis of appropriate criteria for ‘netnography’ (Kozinets 2002). A number of qualitative interviews were also carried out with fans of both teams. Study respondents were initially selected using Lofland & Lofland’s ‘casting about’ approach but purposive sampling (Stewart 1998) was subsequently used to identify and interview respondents who matched criteria identified during the early phase of the study. Data was analysed in the iterative manner recommended by Spiggie (1994) and Lofland & Lofland (1995).

**THE HABITU OF THE FOOTBALL FAN**

A number of interesting and related themes have emerged from the research. Football fan culture does indeed possess a structure that can be conceptualised in terms of Bourdieu’s theory of habitus. In the first instance, football fans are loyal to an incredible degree. Being a supporter means consistently displaying an enduring and unconditional loyalty to one team irrespective of their circumstances. Team-switching is taken as an indication that the person who has switched sides is not a real fan. The practice of team-switching is equated with being a ‘glory hunter’. The term ‘glory hunter’ is used deliberately as a derogatory and insulting label to imply that the team switcher is “quite shallow”, and is easily seduced by a different team’s success:

A real fan is someone who has the club in their blood basically, who follows the club through thick and thin... a glory hunter doesn’t have that... they’d move on to a different club in the morning if a different club became successful... I would be a real Liverpool fan in the sense that I’ll never switch to another club even though there's a lot more successful clubs around (Joe Brown, Irish Liverpool supporter)

The emphasis placed by some fans on derogation (e.g. the emic label ‘glory hunter’) of the practice of team-switching is consistent with social identity theory, which explains it in terms of utilization of the (derogated) ‘out’ group to help define the identity of the ingroup (Aharpour 1999:11). From the conceptual perspective of habitus and cultural capital, however, what is of interest is the presence of a clear hierarchy of authenticity within fan culture i.e. the assertion that some people are ‘real’ supporters, and others are not. Bourdieu (1984:211) argues that any conflict “over the legitimate way of doing it” will result in changes in consumption practice to preserve the necessary inter-group distinctions (Bourdieu 1984:211, Holt 1998). ‘Real’ fans achieve this distinction in the first instance by their complete dismissal of the authenticity of anyone who would switch teams:

…it’s just a bit of fun for them so they’re not really supporters. (John Downey, Irish Liverpool fan)

Far from being restricted to the above means of achieving distinction, however, football supporters have an entire field of practices from which to draw, in order to assert what is meant by a ‘real fan’:

…(T)he fella who’s been through it, the fella who goes along with hope and expectation every game, who doesn’t moan, bitch and complain at the end of every game– win lose or draw, the type of fella who shouts a bit of encouragement out there, who’s entitled to his opinions, who calls a fella a dozy b- for missing something but doesn’t mean it, who’ll give him encouragement the next minute…(t)hat’s not just a real City fan, that’s what a real football fan is (David Allen, Cork City supporter)

This helps to flesh out, in emic terms, what is meant by the term a ‘real fan’. He has “been through it”, he “doesn’t moan, bitch, and complain”, and so on. He is there to encourage the team for every game, to actively offer his support, in contrast to “that guy (who) might come to the big game, two games a season”.

**FANDOM, STYLES OF CONSUMPTION, AND VOLUNTARY FRUGALITY**

A clear pattern in studying so called hardcore fans is that their definition of ‘real’ fandom typically does not make reference to consumer goods. It is interesting therefore to consider the choices of goods and services that they do make. ‘Real’ fans are those who practice voluntary frugality in relation to consumption of goods and
services. Fans will sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to follow their team, home or away, using the most frugal means of transport available:

(T)he travel was ridiculous, cos we flew out of Dublin at 6 o’clock in the morning so we travelled up overnight, stayed in Dublin airport, we flew into Charleroi, and it was a nine-hour drive down to Nantes, five of us in the car, the sun was beating down on top of us…(so we were in a pretty state when we arrived… it was hell, that’s what we described it as when we got to Nantes, it was hell. (‘Pablo’, Cork City fan).

This taste for frugality arises directly out of the obligations suggested by the *habitus* of the hard core fan. Having to travel to every away match to support the team dictates that money will be in short supply and must be made to stretch as far as possible. Cheap flights, budget hotels (if not sleeping rough in the airport for a few hours) and downmarket restaurants are chosen with this in mind. The obligation to follow the team everywhere therefore results in: the development of a taste for the necessary i.e. a higher cultural preference or value is attached to those things which allow the fan to fulfil this obligation (Bourdieu, 1984:177, Holt 1998:7). For these fans, to travel in style and stay in upmarket accommodation would therefore amount to a breach of the ‘call to order’ (Bourdieu 1984:380). Their frugality is socially rewarded in terms of the cultural capital gained from going on these ‘European away trips’. Supporters can join in the storytelling and mutual recounting of these experiences, the effect of which is to reaffirm the group in their distinctive identity as ‘real fans’.

**ADDITIONAL PRACTICES OF THE HABITUS: THE (SACRED) MEANINGS OF SINGING**

Feelings of duty or obligation to the team extend for some fans not only to attending matches but being as vocal as possible in their support. This not only reflects the requirement for unconditional devotion to the team, but also reflects the obligation in the *habitus* of the hard-core fans to act as co-producers with the team. The onus is not only on the players to try to win the match, but for the fans to perform their role of providing active support:

(F)rom goalkeeper to striker, you know that they’re all giving it their all now and they’re professional and they’re not in the pub the night before, basically and you appreciate that… it’s professional on the field (so) …the supporters are trying to be a bit more professional (‘Pablo’, Cork City)

Participation in ritualised singing and chanting has a number of additional effects. It binds the fans together as a group, deepening the felt sense of group identity (Belk 1988, McCracken 1988:87). It provides opportunities for narcissistic display (Maffesoli 1996) while satisfying the taste for communal festivity and immediate gratification at times when the match itself is not entertaining (Bourdieu 1984-34). It also deepens the felt sense of participation in the tribal hunt (Morris 2002-467-469). Morris conceptualises sports activity in terms of a pseudo-hunt which allows both participant and spectator to exercise the instinctive need to hunt, born of primeval man but still subconsciously present in the contemporary consumer. Football in particular provides all the necessary excitement of the hunt, with its drama, physical exertions, and the need to aim (the football) at the prey (the goalmouth). The supporters, with their rhythmic drumming, singing, and chanting, actively participate in encouraging the lead hunters (the players) and intimidating or attempting to intimidate the hunters (both team and supporters) from the rival tribe, who, in providing the opposition, play a central role in the drama.

The atmosphere at a football match is therefore most highly charged when the home fans’ main rivals are in town, because this chief group of ‘others’ allows the ‘home’ fans to experience a particularly intense celebration of their own identity (Aharpour 1999:11 & 228). The ‘away’ fans are thus an important catalyst in enabling the home fans to maintain the sacredness (Belk et al 1989) of their tribal identity with an intensity that is usually only experienced on a handful of occasions. The presence of major rivals is usually required, so there is a noticeable qualitative difference in the atmosphere when Liverpool play against Manchester United rather than against Fulham, for example, or when Cork City play against Shamrock Rovers rather than Derry. The die-hard fans see it as their duty to contribute to this atmosphere, in order to secure a successful outcome to the hunt:

*You couldn’t be quiet (on the Kop). There was peer pressure to join in—especially the important chants*

*Give me an example of an ‘important’ chant*

*Say when you’re one-nil down*

*Yeah?* ‘Attack! Attack! Attack Attack Attack!’ …That had to be sustained, it had to be frightening. And if you weren’t chanting you’d get a bit of a ‘Come on!’…nights like St. Etienne you weren’t allowed to shut up! If you weren’t singing you’d get thrown out of the way*  *(‘Jeff Mac’, Liverpool fan)*

Fans are somewhat divided on the question of whether such acts of co-production constitutes a full part of the ‘call to order’. Some fans are tolerant of supporters who do not contribute, others are not. There is no question however but that many fans use this as a differentiating factor to distinguish themselves from less ‘authentic’ fans. It therefore represents yet another part of the systematic practice of distinction. What is of interest from the perspective of consumer theory however is that yet again the system of cultural capital confers high status on what is essentially a non marketised activity. No official market good or service can be purchased to obtain cultural capital here. The market is essentially absent from the processes of earning or exercising cultural capital.

**QUALITATIVE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FAN CATEGORIES: THE ROLE OF CONSUMER GOODS**

The above discussion leads us to the question of whether all fans take the same view of the products and services proffered by football marketers. What our research indicates is that broadly speaking there are two conflicting views of these products and services among Liverpool fans, depending on whether they are members of the inner subculture (usually, but not necessarily, from Liverpool itself) or the wider (i.e. from elsewhere in the U.K. or from other countries) neo-tribal (Cova 1997) community. Among this wider community of Liverpool fans, many seem to be unaware of the more subtle aspects of the system of cultural capital that operates among the hardcore fans. The neo tribal fan’s imitation of the subcultural habitus means that neo-tribal consumption of football retains many characteristics of the original, however. The tenacious loyalty of the fan to his or her team is a common characteristic, for example. However the neo tribal fan has a stronger dependence on official merchandise and other commercialised products that facilitate development and maintenance of the identity of self as dedicated football supporter (Belk 1988;
Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). They speak in terms of having to visit the club shop when they are in Liverpool, having to buy merchandise, having to buy programmes.

While the practices of this wider group may be grounded in acts of explicitly commercial consumption, their sense of felt devotion is genuine. The singing of ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ (sung at home games before the match begins) is a sacred experience for not only the local but also the non-local Liverpool fan. That such feelings of devotion and sacredness transcend national boundaries is evident in the explanation of Henrik Soderlund, a Liverpool fan from Sweden, that “…it (participating in this ritual singing) makes my skin (turn into goosebumps)”. Other non local Liverpool supporters express similar sentiments, while continuing to emphasise the role of the merchandise:

Ever since then (Liverpool versus Celtic, UEFA Cup tie, 2003) I’ve wanted one of those (Liverpool/ Celtic football scarves)...that atmosphere. That would have been a match. Everyone singing ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ (‘Alan’, Irish Liverpool fan)

While the non local fans can participate to a great degree in most of the required behaviours of the subcultural habitus, some aspects of it can be problematic.

They cannot always join in the singing, for example, because they do not know the words. They join in the simpler chants instead, and sometimes sing them at inappropriate times, to the chagrin and annoyance of local fans. Their over-reliance on merchandise can at times be problematic.

Hence the disavowal of merchandise-consuming ‘daytrippers’ for example. Those fans who correctly display adherence to the required habits and system of cultural capital, by prioritising the non marketised practices of singing the right songs and knowing the club’s history, over the ‘day tripper’ practice of buying large quantities of merchandise, are welcomed with open arms:

…If you’re a Red, you’re good enough for me (‘True Red’ on the RAOTL forum).

DISCUSSION
Revisiting Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and habitus has proved very useful in exploring and explaining the consumer behaviour of football fans. A number of studies of collective consumption, such as Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) landmark study of brand community have stressed the value of examining localised systems of cultural capital, but by giving consideration to the wider concept of habitus and how it is operationalised in terms of a subculture’s internal ‘call to order’, we can shed further light on the subculture-specific criteria upon which localised systems of cultural capital are based. Cultural capital tells us that voluntary frugality is important, for example, but habitus tells us why it is important. Also, while the fan community welcomes new members, it rejects those who do not demonstrate an appreciation of the right ways to support the club. Fans who fail to comply with the call to order of the habitus are deemed to lack an appreciation of the system of cultural capital, and are therefore excluded from the recognition bestowed through consciousness of kind (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Furthermore, the repeated rituals of fan sacrifice required by the preference for frugality within the habitus, concretise and sacralise the sense of ownership that fans have in relation to their team. Sacrifice sacralises not only the consumption object but also the relationship between object and self (Pimentel & Reynolds 2004). Our understanding of the relationship between ritual and self (McCracken 1988) should be extended to reflect that where personal sacrifice is involved the concretising effect of ritual on self is considerably enhanced. The sacrifices made by ‘real’ fans therefore result in stronger feelings of ownership, and the frequent belief that they are the only ones who truly ‘understand’ (O’Guinn 1991).

The resulting strong sense of ownership of the team among football supporters can occasionally be voiced in terms of opposition to the ‘suits’ (King 1997) which echoes the themes of resistance and anti-corporatism found in the wider fan literature, when corporations act in ways which diverge from fan community values (Kozinets 2001). This also has resonances in other communities of consumption, such as the Saab owners (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001) or the Harley Davidson bikers (Schouten & McAlexander 1995) who claim that they, and not the corporation, are the ones who understand what the brand truly represents.

This issue of ownership points to the power of cultural capital as a mechanism for supporting community identities which need not be aligned to, and can sometimes be aligned in direct opposition to, the corporation that actually manages the ‘brand’. For example,
while the executives running Liverpool F.C. invariably describe the club’s identity as a brand, this definition is contested by many of the fans. Football Marketers (and indeed marketers of any brand that is associated with a community of consumption) would therefore be well advised to pay careful attention to the prevailing system of cultural capital within the core community, because it provides an excellent guide to consumer perceptions of the ‘true meaning’ of the ‘brand’. An understanding of this system would allow marketing practitioners to manage their ‘brands’ without alienating those hard-core devotees whose community structures can have significant effects on the acceptance or rejection of new products (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001; Schouten & McAlexander 1995). In the particular case of hardcore football fans, whose practices as passionate fans help to construct the consumption object (Holt 1995) of match atmosphere that renders the ‘product’ so attractive to the wider fan community, such an understanding might be of even greater strategic value. Ultimately however, the system of cultural capital is not simply a way to control access to the community of fans, or merely a means of guiding fan consumption. It is an important part of the community’s arsenal in guarding the sacred identity of the tribe and the (footballing) values the tribe represent. Finally, among the questions of importance for further research are those of firstly whether new members of the subculture are immediately granted full membership of the group, or whether they first have to serve a probationary period, and secondly, how might we explain those deviations from the habitus, where the hardcore fans themselves deviate from their professed disavowal of merchandise, for example. In answering those questions we hope in future to provide a more comprehensive description of this particular system of cultural capital and the habitus upon which it is based.

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