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Support Your Local Team: Resistance, Subculture, and the Desire For Distinction.

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Support Your Local Team: Resistance, Subculture, and the Desire for Distinction. Authors: Richardson, Brendan (Department of Management & Marketing, UCC, Cork, Ireland), & Turley, Darach (Dublin City University Business School, DCU, Dublin, Ireland). Body of abstract: Cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) is proposed as a model for exploring the nature of consumer resistance (Hogg and Savolainen 1998). The study of one community of football fans reveals the use of sub-cultural capital to maintain social distinctions between themselves and 'barstool' fans, who fail to support the local club and who support glamorous English clubs instead. Ultimately resistance is not aimed at the market, but at the practices of the oppositional group, whose subjectively defined tastes can be easily derogated. Such derogation reassures the 'ingroup' of the distinctiveness of their own identity and the superiority of their own tastes.

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Support Your Local Team: Resistance, Subculture, and the Desire for Distinction

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Consumer resistance is frequently conceptualised as consumption 'on the edge' (Ritson and Dobscha 1999), or resistance of the subordinate consumer to the dominant market (Holt 2002, Penaloza and Price 1993). An alternative conceptualisation of resistance is the desire of some minority groups to have their identities properly *represented* in the marketplace, rather than a desire for emancipation *from* the market (Penaloza and Price 1993). Yet another conceptualisation of resistance defines it as aversion to the tastes of others. Hogg and Savolainen (1998) cite Bourdieu (1984) to argue that a particular 'taste' is primarily a distaste, or aversion, to the identity associated with another set of tastes.

These perspectives help to construct a "resistance continuum", moving from "avoidance behaviour" at one end, to acts of active rebellion against the market at the other (Fournier 1998). At the weaker end of the continuum, consumer resistance can result from the desire for distinction, rather than an ideological opposition to the market *per se*. The purpose of aversion for alternative tastes is to demonstrate to oneself what one is not (Bourdieu 1984, Hogg and Savolainen 1998).

RESEARCH QUESTION

This paper seeks to address several related questions. Firstly, it asks whether the definition of resistance as aversion is helpful in understanding the consumption of soccer fans. Secondly it explores how resistance as aversion is structured. Whose tastes are denigrated, why are they denigrated, and how are they denigrated? Is the ingroup's system of subcultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, Jancovich 2002) important in determining these issues? Finally, it also considers the question of how such aversion might impact upon the consumption behaviors of the ingroup.

RESISTANCE AND SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL

The conceptualisation of resistance as distaste for the consumption preferences of others is supported by the work of a number of researchers. Thornton (1995:93) argues that the punk rock movement had more to do with an aversion to disco music—*within the cultural sphere of popular musical tastes among youth*—than resistance to normal, bourgeois society as a whole, as originally suggested by Hebdige (1979). The 'mainstream' is often nothing more than something invoked by members of a subculture when they wish to make distinctions between their group and some easily derogated 'other' (Jancovich 2002, Thornton 1997, 1995). Members of the rave scene in the U.K., for example, make distinctions between themselves and the mainstream Tracys and Sharons, the ordinary working class girls dancing round their handbags at the local disco (Thornton 1997). The subcultural capital of the rave scene is expressed through knowing which CDs to have in your collection, what to wear to a rave, knowing which DJ's are considered the 'hippest', knowing which forms of dance style are considered appropriate and which are not, which venues are 'in' and which are not, and so on (Thornton, *ibid*). Canadian rave participants articulate a resistance to the 'mainstream' of drunkenness and disco bars, not bourgeois society in general (Wilson 2002), and while cult movie fans mock the shortcomings of 'mainstream' cinema, the construction of 'mainstream' proffered by the various strands of thought within the cult movie subculture is incoherent, contradictory, and inconsistent (Jancovich 2002). What matters to subcultural participants, however, is that these distinctions "provide a

sense of subcultural authenticity (Jancovich, *ibid*)". Goods or services associated with the outgroup are seen as indicators of a lack of cultural capital, and so are stigmatised by a collective distaste. Consumer resistance, in this light, can be a manifestation of the desire for distinction, rather than a desire to resist the market itself.

BOURDIEU AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

How consistent is the above with Bourdieu's original conceptualisation of cultural capital? Cultural capital was originally understood as knowledge of how to consume, how to appreciate, to understand what should be considered tasteful and what should not, with particular reference to high (or "legitimate") culture (Bourdieu 1984, Holt 1998). Central to this thesis was the argument that this specialist knowledge, these ways of consuming, allowed members of the upper classes to maintain social and economic distinctions between themselves and members of other social classes. Cultural capital was therefore conceptualised as nothing less than a weapon that was being deployed to great effect in the perpetuation of class inequalities. In rejecting this thesis, Bourdieu's critics 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" 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). It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the question of whether cultural capital, as depicted by Bourdieu, is in fact deployed as a means of perpetuating class inequalities. There is some evidence, as noted above, to suggest that whether it is used in that way or not seems at the very least to depend on which country is being considered, France or North America, for example. What must be considered, however, is whether cultural capital has something important to say about consumer behaviour, beyond any putative use as a weapon in inter-class strife. This paper is concerned with the manner in which group-specific systems of cultural capital structure consumption *outside* the dichotomous framework of class conflict. Members of brand communities, for example, have their own systems of cultural capital, which they deploy to assert the superiority of the tastes—and ultimately the identity—of their particular group:

Appreciation of the history of the brand often differentiates the true believers from the more opportunistic. Knowing these things is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, Holt 1998) within the brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001)

Systems of cultural capital within brand communities therefore have fundamentally important functions with regard to the behaviours, attitudes, and experiences of members of these communities. "Insider" status can be attained through the acquisition of higher *community-specific* levels of cultural capital. This motivates members to immerse themselves more deeply in the culture of the brand. Thus we have cultural capital operating not to prevent members of one social class from gaining access to membership of the class above them, but rather to allow contemporary consumers experience a strong sense of community with each other. This takes place partly through the mutual development of robust ties to particular brands, but also through a mutual aversion towards other tastes and other brands. This resistance to the tastes of others is

grounded in the collective, community-specific system of cultural capital, and helps to give these consumers their sense of distinction (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC SYSTEM OF CULTURAL CAPITAL: THE CASE OF SPORTS FANS

Cultural capital has always been primarily dependent upon how, rather than what, one consumes (Bourdieu 1984, Holt 1998, 1995, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Some basis for asserting distinction will be found, even where all concerned are consuming the same consumption object. Just as the bourgeois consumer might assert distinction through an ability to critically analyse a play or movie in a way that a lower class consumer can not (Holt 1998), baseball fans achieve distinction through the practice of classifying (Holt 1995). This occurs at the level of both objects and actions (practices). At the level of object, for example, distinction from baseball fans who support other teams is readily attained through the consumption of clothing that bears one's own team's insignia. At the level of actions, practices such as the "throw back" are used by Cubs fans to maintain distinction between themselves and other less knowledgeable fans. Normally when a baseball fan manages to catch a baseball that has been hit for a home run, it is kept as a treasured souvenir. If it is an opposing batter who has hit the home run, however, Cubs fans pride themselves on throwing the ball back as a gesture of defiance. Failure to throw it back identifies the spectator as a neophyte fan poorly versed in the fan culture. A different group of fans, the "lads" of Manchester United assert their distinctiveness through the practice of terrace-style fandom, drinking copious amounts of beer prior to the game, and singing and chanting during the game itself (King 1997). Aversion is expressed through an antipathy towards the more sedate style of fandom practiced by the 'new consumer' fan. The official merchandise, including team shirts, the *de rigueur* outfit of the 'new consumer' fan on matchday, is boycotted by the "lads". This paper will now examine the practices of another group of football fans who practice resistance through aversion *without* resorting to a boycott of their own team's merchandise.

THE CURRENT STUDY: THE FANS OF CORK CITY F.C.

In seeking a site for this study, we were influenced not only by the relative neglect of soccer fandom in the literature on consumer behavior, but also by Lofland and Lofland's (1995) principle of "starting where you are". One of the researchers being based in the city of Cork in southern Ireland meant that regular, in-depth access to the fans of Cork City Football (soccer) Club was possible. A period of prolonged immersion (Stewart 1998) in the local fan culture was carried out, involving participant observation during football matches in the club's home stadium over an eighteen month time period, and participant observation on several web-based fan discussion forums, including 'Foot.ie' and 'CityNet', over a somewhat longer timeframe. These discussion forums were chosen for participation partly on the basis of criteria for 'netnography' proffered by Kozinets (2002). While Kozinets recommends observation of online forums with high research-question relevance, the highest levels of traffic, high numbers of discrete posters, and so on, the low number of forums available to Cork City fans made the task of forum selection very straightforward. Citynet and Foot.ie met Kozinets' criteria more so than the small number of alternative options available to Cork City fans at the time. It should also be noted that while no record was kept of the total number of posts downloaded from these web forums, 'Citynet' was visited several

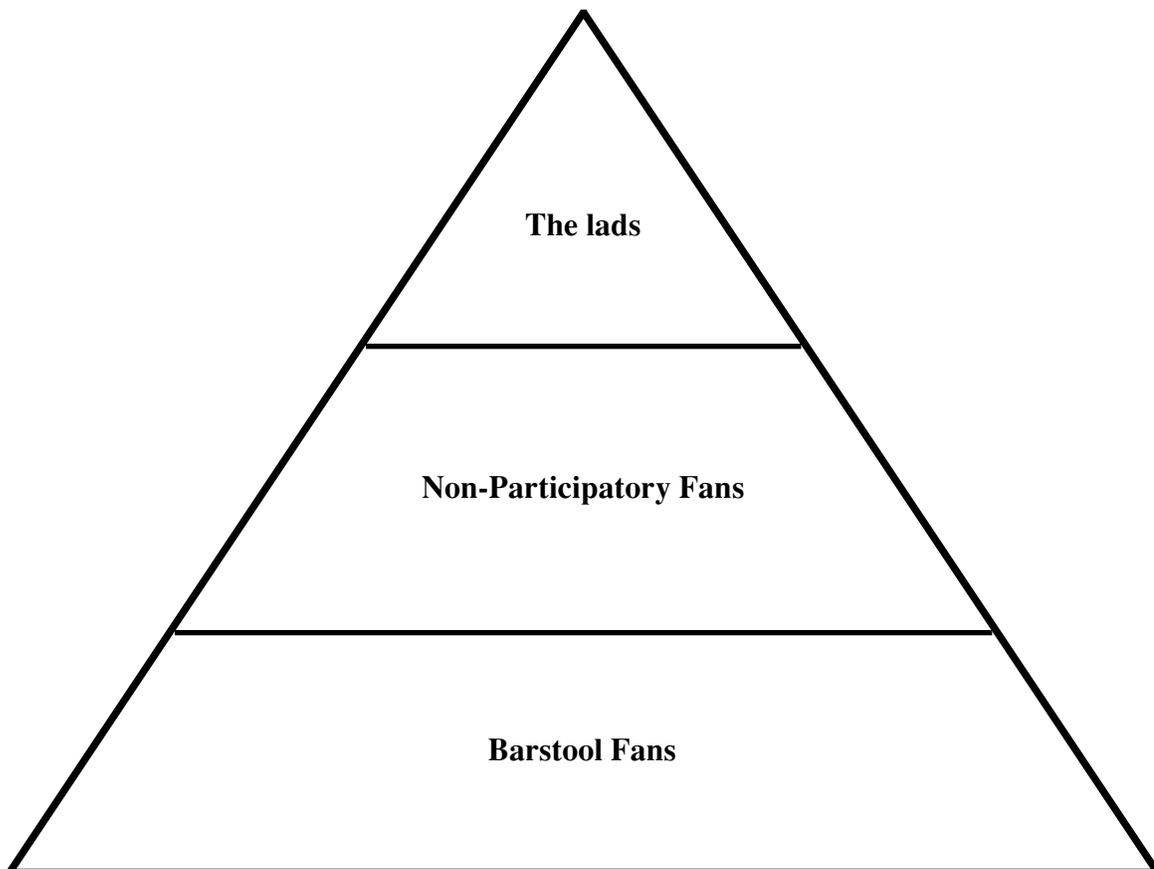
times a day, most weekdays, over a timeframe of several years so that any fresh posts could be read. When it closed down, the focus of attention switched to Foot.ie, a website for fans of Irish soccer clubs where each club has its own individual discussion forum. Themes identified from these web forums were subsequently introduced as discussion topics during interviews with fans. Respondents for these in-depth naturalistic interviews were initially selected using Lofland and Lofland's (1995) 'casting about' approach but purposive sampling (Stewart 1998) was subsequently used to select respondents who matched criteria identified through participant observation fieldwork. It became highly apparent during the participant observation process that the most active and vocal supporters at Cork City's home stadium were to be found in or near The Shed, the terrace (standing area) at the Turner's Cross end of the ground. This was observed, for example, throughout most of Cork City's home games for the duration of the 2004 football season. Usually, the most vocal of any soccer team's supporters tend to congregate at one end in this way, effectively making it the "home end" of the ground (Marsh *et al* 1997). This suggested that interviewing fans who frequented the Shed could generate rich, meaningful data. Having noted the predominance of males under thirty in the crowd of colourful noisy fans in the middle of the Shed, a number of these fans were interviewed, to explore their fandom through naturalistic dialogue. 'Richard', an accountant in his twenties, was interviewed over coffee in the student centre of the local university. 'Pablo' was interviewed in a pub prior to the match between Cork City and a French football team, Nantes AFC, in the Inter Toto Cup, in 2004. 'David', again of similar age, was interviewed one evening in a quiet pub, before going to play in his regular Tuesday night soccer match. 'Gerry', an older fan who prefers the seated Main Stand to the Shed, was also interviewed at around this time. By contrast, 'Greg' was interviewed later on in the study, after the pattern of antipathy towards fans of English football had been identified in data from the earlier interviews and web based discussion threads. His profile provided a match to the criteria used in the first round of purposive sampling, but with the additional characteristic of a distaste for televised English football. Finally, 'Eddie', a slightly older fan in his late thirties, was also selected for interview on this basis. The interview with Eddie was conducted in the living room of his home one evening after work. This facilitated the desired naturalistic approach to the interview. For example, Eddie could easily locate photographs and other memorabilia to show to the interviewer, as related topics arose in the course of the dialogue.

FAN PRACTICES, PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY, AND FELT AVERSION

The literature on subculture and resistance consistently asserts that readily *accessible* cultural materials and practices are used to affirm distinction (Fiske 1989, Thornton 1995). In order to better understand the basis for distinction (as an aversion to the tastes of others) it is useful to consider what the data tell us about the practices and tastes the fans have. It is these practices and these tastes that provide a basis for comparison with the practices and tastes of others, to allow for the assertion of distinction (Holt 1995, Thornton 1995).

What can easily be observed on the Shed Terrace at any Cork City home fixture are the carnivalesque practices of ritualised group singing and chanting. Generally speaking, the intensity of the atmosphere tends to depend on the identity of the opposing team. If, for example, City are playing a European cup tie, this adds glamour and excitement to the occasion, while at the other end of the spectrum, a domestic league fixture against weaker opposition will

FIGURE 1
Hierarchy of Perceived Fan Authenticity



not be characterised by the same level of intensity. In addition to the practices of vocal support for their team, Cork City supporters usually create a ‘Sea of Green’ effect on the Shed by wearing replica team shirts and displaying giant flags and banners in team colours. The flags are usually unfurled and waved prior to kick-off and again at half-time, and this visual display, along with the pre-match singing and chanting, helps to establish a dramatic atmosphere inside the ground.

The fans’ participation in these rituals gives them a deeply felt sense of self as *participatory* Cork City supporters (Belk 1988, McCracken 1988:87). For these fans, being a Cork City supporter is something that you proactively *do*. They therefore make strong distinctions between themselves and other categories of soccer fan, who fail to practice fandom in the culturally appropriate way. In fact there are high levels of aversion for the practices of some of the other fans. The degree of aversion varies with the location of these other fans in the perceived hierarchy of fan authenticity (Figure 1):

The ‘lads’, in other words fans like ‘Pablo’ and ‘David’, see it as their duty to contribute to the atmosphere in the stadium. The ‘call to order’ (Bourdieu 1984:380) extends not only to attending matches but to being as vocal as possible, in order to play one’s part in supporting the team:

I think everything we do is basically to try and create an atmosphere in there, to support the team... It’s from the first whistle now to the end ...whether we win or lose, basically—that’s the way it should be, you know? (‘Pablo’)

As shown in Figure One, aversion is expressed for two other categories of fan, namely fans who attend games in the stadium, but who fail to join in the participatory style of support, and ‘barstool’ fans, who watch English soccer teams on television, instead of supporting their local team. The basis for aversion in the case of the former group is failure to practice participatory fandom:

I know it’s a big bone of contention for some people ... that people in the other parts of the ground don’t make an effort but what do you do, like? There’s no point in getting upset about it either ...you know? They’re not gonna change just cos you’re urging them on...at least they’re there anyway, they’re better than the people sitting at home watching ... Sky (i.e. English football) on the telly like so—I think any criticism should be qualified you know, for what it is (‘Richard’)

Commenting on a recent trip to Estonia to see an international match between the local team and the Republic of Ireland, ‘Eddie’ says:

What’s happened in the last couple of years is there’s so many just, trippers going to the match, and they kinda turn up like they’re going to the theatre or the cinema, and they just want to be entertained...you could see people around you—you can’t resent them, because they’re entitled to be there—but they just weren’t up for it, they just wanted to be entertained.

'Real' support is not always about being entertained, it is about duty, obligation, blood, sweat and tears. Even if the football on show is horrendous or the weather conditions are miserable, the 'real' fan gets on with the job of supporting the team:

I mean we've all been to horrible games like we'll say the (Bohemians) game just after the Malmo game ...we lost 1-0 and it was like-poor crowd, terrible weather, average game, you know?... (I)t's like those kind of games where people will go 'Ah...I'd much prefer being at home now, warm, watching the Simpsons or something' (laughter) (David)

Aversion for the 'barstool' fans is grounded in a number of factors, including their practice of mediated fandom, as well as their support for non-local clubs:

Well, I like to watch Man United and Arsenal ...but eh...that's for entertainment purposes-I wouldn't be one of those fellas standing there or sitting there on a barstool screaming at the TV screen! ('Gerry')

The seemingly throwaway remark "that's (only) for entertainment purposes" confirms that it is acceptable to watch football on television, as long as it is understood that such viewing is only for "entertainment purposes". Thus the mediated fandom of the 'barstool' fan is deemed far less authentic than the participatory fandom culturally understood to make a difference to the outcome of a game. The "barstool" fans are also denigrated for their practice of supporting English teams (rather than the more authentic practice of supporting one's local team):

I've an affinity to the team...being from Cork, you know? ...I never understood sitting in a pub watching football, just it doesn't appeal to me and it's kind of amusing to me, people saying 'we' talking about English teams...I can genuinely say 'we' going to Turner's Cross, it's not the biggest, but they're our own at the end of the day you know? ('Pablo')

'Pablo' being from Cork means that he is supporting his local team. For the 'lads', his is a more authentic form of support than that of the Irish soccer fan who supports an English team such as Manchester United. 'Pablo' places himself in the same category as native Mancunians who support their local club:

Your average football fan from Moss Side's going to be a Manchester City supporter (rather than a Man United fan)...he's following that football team because that's where he's from, not because they're winning trophies every year ... they (Manchester City)... were still getting 30,000 people in the Second Division ... you'd respect them as supporters for that.

Therefore, Irish fans of Manchester United are derogated not just because of failure to support their local team, not only because of their failure to practice participatory fandom, but also because of their perceived fickle preference for the winning of trophies, over the long-term unconditional loyalty expected of 'real' fans. Being a 'real' fan, for members of the Cork City subculture, prohibits anything other than single-minded monogamous devotion to one team:

A meanderer is a fella ...who goes to a live game and says 'I miss the replays' or 'I'd love a pint now' ...he meanders from (watching) Celtic V Rangers and Celtic are this great team...

then just after that Liverpool are playing Man United and then he's all into Liverpool... and then just after that they'll watch something else and they've always got this, they're a life long Liverpool and Celtic fan-they're not! They meander between 'em ('David')

The 'meanderer' is regarded as lacking in that crucial characteristic of the 'authentic' fan – a single-minded devotion to one team only. The meanderer *affects* fandom but seldom, if ever, actually *practices* fandom in the subculturally appropriate way. The demonstrated fickleness, the lack of committed passion for one team only, forms part of the basis for distinction between real fans and 'barstoolers'. Being a fan has to *matter* (Grossberg 1992). Full membership of the community of 'real' fans is reserved for the faithful who adhere to the code of unconditional loyalty, irrespective of the team's level of success, and who passionately practice participatory fandom. These practices will always be privileged over the lukewarm alternative demonstrated by any other group.

THE WINNING OF 'SPACE' AND THE EMBRACING OF THE MARKET

A key component in the Birmingham School's conceptualisation of subculture is resistance through the winning, or appropriation, of space. The working class "*have won space for their own forms of life. The values of this ...culture are registered everywhere, in material and social forms, in the shapes and uses of things, in patterns of recreation and leisure... (t)hese spaces are both physical ...and social (Clarke et al 1975:43)*".

In critiquing this view, Thornton (1995:25) asserts that space is 'won' by the actions of the *market*, in catering for a particular demographic. Yet in the context of Cork City FC's home ground of Turner's Cross, the tradition of the 'Shed' as the space that in a sense belongs to the 'real' fans, is a product of football fan culture and tradition, rather than a deliberate creation of the market. The market has informally facilitated this in the past through differential pricing between the (seated) Stand and the (standing) terrace patronised by younger low-income fans, but it is the *practices* of the fans on the Shed that have given it its meaning as hallowed ground reserved for those partisans who give their all to defend the honour of the team. It is highly illuminative to see how official Cork City merchandise is used in an unproblematic way to help create this space, through the group norm of buying and wearing official replica shirts to the match, creating the 'sea of green' effect discussed earlier. While this acts as a symbol to rally both fans and players, it is also a form of semiotic resistance to the 'barstool' fan practice of wearing the shirts of non-local clubs:

City are pretty good in that way, in that they usually (have the same shirt)...for two years-...other clubs (such as)...Manchester United-they'll probably have three shirts and they'll change them twice a year, you know? So it's not that expensive in that respect...the merchandise is pretty good quality as well ('Pablo')

'Pablo' clearly enjoys buying and using merchandise that facilitates the expression of self-as-local-fan. He regards the merchandise as being of "pretty good quality", hardly the thoughts of someone with an oppositional stance to the market. He also enjoys the expression of opposition to 'barstool' fandom that it allows him to practice. Pablo's resistance to the market is therefore bound up in his aversion for oppositional tastes. His aversion for excessive consumption of merchandise must be placed in the context of his cultural understanding of 'real' fandom. 'Real' fandom is something that cannot be bought, but rather is produced through a

combination of participatory behaviour and *appropriate*, rather than excessive, levels of merchandise consumption.

DISCUSSION

A key theme in the research of the Birmingham School was the expression of working class solidarity (Clarke 1975, Clarke *et al* 1975, Jefferson 1975). An 'us' versus 'them' attitude was expressed in every arena of working class life, particularly in the field of leisure. With the local football team being a particularly potent symbol of 'us' versus 'them', nothing less than absolute solidarity was acceptable. Contemporary football fan culture has inherited this sense of solidarity, this spirit of 'us' versus 'them' (Giulianotti 1999). In the case of fans of Cork City Football Club, the internal system of subcultural capital is systematically used to make distinctions between members of the subculture and other fans, particularly the 'barstool' fans. 'Other' is carefully constructed in ways that privilege 'ingroup' practice (Jancovich 2002, Thornton 1997, 1995, Wilson 2002). Cork City fans draw on the cultural belief that supporting one's *local* team is a *hallmark* of authentic football fandom (Giulianotti 1999:34-35). Thus while there is a degree of aversion for the practice of attending matches but not participating actively in supporter rituals, there is an acknowledgement that such non-participatory fans have at least made some effort to support their local team. 'Barstool' fans, however, being relatively restricted in their opportunities to practice participatory fandom, due for example to the cost of travelling from Cork to attend matches in England, are far more easily denigrated. They are usually confined to watching their heroes on television, unlike the Cork City fans who can easily travel the short distance to Turner's Cross. This allows the 'lads' to assert that theirs is the more authentic fandom. Furthermore, 'barstool' fans are described as glory hunters or meanderers, who transfer their affections with ease from one team to the next. This is a particularly barbed and highly subjective distinction, given the cultural significance of loyalty for football fans. The norm for Irish fans of English clubs is to practice lifelong loyalty to their teams (Richardson and O'Dwyer 2003), in keeping with the 'call to order' (Bourdieu 1984) of diehard loyalty that prevails across the wider culture of football fandom (Giulianotti 1999).

What all of this confirms is that the construction of 'other' does not have to be accurate, but must have sufficient perceived credibility for the affirmation of distinction. Resistance in this case can therefore be understood as the assertion of an oppositional stance to alternative tastes, or as Hogg and Savolainen (1998) describe it, aversion. Its purpose is the affirmation of the distinctiveness of the fans' own identity, and not the expression of ideological opposition to the market. It is therefore at the 'weak' end of the resistance continuum outlined by Fournier (1998). Market offerings that facilitate the group's identity are readily embraced, while alternative market offerings are rejected -not because they are market offerings, but because they are indicative of the oppositional taste of 'other'. There is resistance to the oppositional tastes represented by the behaviours and practices of the barstoolers, trippers, and meanderers, because these practices imply that fandom is something that can simply be 'bought' and that purchases alone can make the purchaser a real fan. For the 'lads' of Cork City, being a supporter is something that you *do*. Anything less than this, any suggestion that fandom can be achieved through simply buying a shirt, a scarf, or even a match ticket, is fiercely resisted because it represents a threat to the distinctive identity of the group. The lads' resistance, therefore, is not directly to the market, but rather to oppositional tastes, chosen for derogation on the basis of proximity in socio-cultural space, and the relative ease with which the distinctiveness of ingroup practices can be asserted.

Finally, the identity of this group is not primarily asserted through their aversion to the tastes of 'other', but through the felt sense of *communitas* (Belk *et al* 1989, Maffesoli 1996) derived from their communal style of fandom, including of course their mass displays of tribal colours (Derbaix *et al* 2002). This contrasts somewhat with the suggestion that "we are (first and foremost) what we reject (Fournier 1998)" but the concept of taste as *distaste* nevertheless plays a fundamentally important role in clarifying the lads' sense of self. It can certainly be speculated that these consumers would have found it very difficult to develop a clear, sustainable sense of group identity, were it not for the fundamentally important role played by aversion.

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