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Football Fan Loyalty and the Fan Conversion Experience

As consumers, fans have been noted as particularly loyal and passionately committed to the objects of their fandom. It has even been suggested that unlocking the conceptual key to fan loyalty could lead to insights which might help to deliver consumer loyalty in other contexts (Mahony *et al* 1999, Richardson and O'Dwyer 2003). Research on sports fan loyalty originally focused on variables such as basking in reflected glory, self monitoring, or individual levels of team identification (Madrigal 1995, Mahony *et al* 1999, Matsuoka *et al* 2003), without considering the potential importance of loyalty to the fan community as central to an understanding of loyalty to a sports team. In identifying the possible impact of community dynamics on fan loyalty, Madrigal (2000) proposed the concept of group camaraderie as consumable object, and argued that "ultimate loyalty" towards this object arises when it becomes part of the extended self (Belk 1988). Thus team affiliations become resistant to change, because not only the team, but also the fan community, become part of the extended self. This offers a potentially richer explanation of fan loyalty than Madrigal's earlier (1995) suggestion that Chicago Cubs fans stayed loyal to a mediocre baseball team simply because they were high identifiers. The significance of fan community dynamics was also highlighted by Holt (1995) and Derbaix *et al* (2002). 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) found that similar group processes play an important role among fans of association football (or soccer, as the sport is more commonly known in some countries). A sense of community may therefore be central to the phenomenon of football fan loyalty. However, the question of how fan loyalty emerges in the first place still eludes us. Commitment to the group may reinforce loyalty to the team, but what causes

commitment to the group to form? This gives rise to the question of how other forms of community, such as brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) have emerged. Collective reverence for brands, and the emergence of brand communities, seems to centre around those brands with particularly iconic or totemic properties. Is there a connection between the reverence an iconic object or totem can inspire, and the commitment not only to the totem or icon, but to each other, shown by members of brand or fan communities? And can such a connection in turn help to explain the way in which these communities relate to the market?

Fandom as an activity has often been characterised as a form of unreflexive acceptance of mass market offerings. For instance, Bourdieu (1984:386) dismissed fandom as a form of "spurious participation which is merely an illusory compensation for dispossession by experts". Such an interpretation of fandom is not at all incompatible with the popular stereotype of sports fans as unreflexive couch potatoes who spend vast amounts of money on tasteless, extortionately priced football shirts, and even worse, sometimes behave with a complete lack of decorum.

However, research by King (1995, 1997, 1998) demonstrated the presence of a sophisticated level of reflexivity among football fans in relation to their own consumption and their position vis-à-vis the market, thus contradicting Bourdieu's viewpoint. King explored not only the surge in football's popularity among those he termed the 'new consumer' fans, but also analysed the reaction of the traditional hardcore fans to the influx of these 'new consumers'. He noted in particular that hardcore fans became very hostile towards the consumption styles of the 'new consumer' fans, and that they consciously changed their own consumption practices to make a clear distinction between themselves, the newcomers, and the sort of over-commodified fan identity now being proffered by the market. This suggested the presence of a system of cultural, or more correctly, subcultural capital (Thornton 1997) that was being used to affirm the greater legitimacy of one form of fandom over another. (The presence of such a form of subcultural capital among sports fans provides some support for Holt's (1995) argument that a system of cultural capital is intrinsic to the consumption of baseball, though it may be more accurate to designate this as subcultural or even localized cultural capital.)

King's findings on both the nature of fandom and its response to the market resonated with the findings in the wider fan literature. From the outset, research on fandom has consistently found it to be an active and participatory form of cultural activity, one where alternative systems of cultural capital play an important role (Fiske 1989, Kozinets 2001, Crawford 2000, Jenkins 1992). Fiske (1989, 1992) claimed that media fandom is no 'illusory sop' but rather has more to do with a resistance to the notion that being born into the 'wrong' social class somehow renders oneself or one's tastes inferior. For Kozinets (2001), the *Star Trek* fan community is a manifestation of the collective desire for social inclusion rather than exclusion, a desire that often results in the construction of communities of shared tastes that help consumers to dispel notions of social or intellectual inferiority.

The fan literature has also consistently shown that fans tend to consume the products of mass culture in a proactive and critical manner. They are often unwilling, rather than unwitting, consumers of mass produced products (Fiske 1989). Fans recognise that they may be excluded from possession of some of the indices of 'legitimate' social status. However, rather than passively accepting some externally defined notion of their own inferiority, they actively construct their own systems of cultural capital, status, and taste out of the cultural materials they have access to, the better to assert the validity of their own identity and practices. Fiske (1989:15) argues that "popular culture is...the art of making do with what is available". Fan communities are characterised not by a collectively passive acceptance of the meanings presented by the mass media, but by sophisticated practices whereby decommodified meanings are negotiated from the original mass produced text (Jenkins 1992, Kozinets 2001).

Thus, fandom has come to be associated at times with resistance rather than acceptance, and creativity rather than passivity. However, the resistance of fans to the market has tended to be interpreted as a form of ideology-based consumer resistance. The possibility that the motives for fan resistance are grounded in the same root causes that inspire fan commitment and loyalty has not necessarily been fully explored. What is it that inspires the refusal to accept notions of inferior status or identity, among fans? Could there be some aspect of the fan identity formation process that explains not only fan loyalty but also fans' sometimes troubled relationship with the market? Previous research on media fans suggests a connection between fan resistance and proprietary feelings over TV shows such as *Star Trek*

(Kozinets 2001), but has prior research fully explored why such feelings of ownership are so strong, or how they might emanate from the fan identity formation process?

Kozinets (2001) had found that *Star Trek* fans displayed a sense of ownership over the object of their fandom, and that it constituted something sacred in their lives. Could fandom in effect be a form of sacred identity (Belk *et al* 1989) that inspires both commitment and resistance, for related reasons?

The current study.

A number of issues in the literature pointed to the potential contribution of fresh research on fan identity. A study of sports fans could explore the relationship between community commitment and fan loyalty to teams, and identify the processes that contributed to the formation of both types of commitment. It could also explore whether football fans other than those studied by King (*ibid*) had begun to resist the market, as marketers increasingly targeted the emerging demand for sports related entertainment.

Moreover, sports fandom had clear overtones of sacred consumption (Belk *et al* 1989). A significant body of empirical work had already been carried out into the phenomenon of sports fan loyalty (Madrigal 2000, Kolbe and James 2000), the enduring nature of which further suggested the presence of key characteristics of sacred consumption, such as commitment (Belk *et al* 1989). A new study could therefore investigate whether there was a relationship between fan resistance and sacralisation maintenance (Belk *et al* 1989), and whether fandom was in effect a form of sacred identity (Belk *et al* 1989) that inspired both commitment and resistance, for related reasons. The fanatical devotion of football supporters to their teams, in tandem with the strong negative reaction of some fans to the increased commercialisation of the football fan identity, suggested that football fandom represented an ideal site for the current research.

The choice of ethnography as research method, and the commencement of the study:

Having decided on the research site, consideration turned to identification of an appropriate methodology. A number of factors pointed to ethnography as an optimal choice. For instance the literature on fan loyalty was, at the outset of the study, increasingly characterised by calls for exploratory research methodologies such as ethnography as a means of attaining a more holistic understanding of fan loyalty (Madrigal 2000, Kolbe and James 2000). An ethnographic approach would also allow for a longitudinal investigation, so that football fans' response to the arrival of the hyper-market in their particular subcultural sphere could be studied over an extended period of time. Furthermore, forms of ethnography, or closely related approaches such as naturalistic enquiry, had already been adapted for use in studies of sacred consumption (Belk *et al* 1989), and a variety of consumer subcultures where the relationship with the official marketplace was not always an untroubled one (Kozinets 2001). Variations on the ethnographic method had in addition been successfully used to study the consumer behaviour of fans of a variety of sports (Derbaix *et al* 2002, Holt 1995). Finally, the lead author was in a position to give the necessary commitment to prolonged fieldwork, for the attainment of veracity (Stewart 1998).

The selection of two fan communities for the study, namely those of Liverpool and Cork City football clubs, was guided by a number of principles. As a prior member of these two fan communities, the lead author could comply more deeply with "the proposition that only through direct experience can one accurately know much about social life (Lofland and Lofland 1995:3)". As Stewart (1998:25) states: "it is not enough to witness a variety of performances – you also have to experience culture personally". Pollner and Emerson (2001:123) agree that "...involvement in the form of life of a particular group or setting is indispensable for understanding local meaning and action". Such involvement was unproblematic for the lead author given his status as a fan of both teams at the beginning of the study. Lofland and Lofland (1995:17) argue that personal involvement if anything facilitates the gathering of rich data. They comment further that

“If you are already ...a member in the setting, you almost ‘naturally’ possess...the convert stance. You have easy access to understanding. You need, therefore...to seek mechanisms for distancing” (1995:23)

While it made sense to carry out the fieldwork in fan communities where the lead researcher already possessed this ‘convert stance’, this also gave rise to the issue of maintaining a degree of analytic distance from the data. Stewart (1998) argues that the researcher who ‘converts’, or becomes a ‘complete member researcher’, can retain sufficient detachment so as not to be a ‘true CMR’. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) sought to achieve such critical distance by means of regular reflection and periodic debriefing of each other. For the current study, it was felt that conscious adherence to field observation guidelines, regular reflection, and occasional peer debriefing would provide an acceptable degree of critical distance from the data. Further analytical distance was achieved by ensuring that every interview and fieldnote, and every discussion thread that had been downloaded from the online forum, was fully analysed in the iterative manner described by Spiggle (1994). Both authors carried out separate analyses of all interview and fieldnote data before discussing each other’s findings. This was done in order to ensure that each theme in the final interpretation had been subjected to scrutiny for disconfirming observations against all available data. This data included all fieldnotes from three years of online and offline participant observation, and qualitative interviews with twenty respondents, selected via purposive sampling (Stewart 1998) at different stages over the course of the study.

In practice, the study availed of a hybrid approach to data collection, utilising conventional offline participant observation, interviews, and netnography (Kozinets 2002a). The netnography component of the study began with non-participant observation of a number of football fan discussion forums. Kozinets’ (2002a) original guidelines for netnography suggest that web discussion forums be chosen for netnography on the basis of (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. In practice this study’s early efforts were characterised by a somewhat haphazard approach. It took some time to settle on the website eventually used for the

study. The 'Real Reds' Liverpool supporters' forum eventually selected was chosen on the basis that it was characterised by a manageable number of discrete posters and discussion threads, and because member interaction was both regular and frequent. Most members contributed to the forum on a daily basis, and content was rich and diverse in nature. This meant that most of Kozinets' criteria for website selection were met to a satisfactory degree.

More traditional offline fieldwork commenced with visits to the home grounds of both Liverpool and Cork City, and an extended immersion in football fan subculture was carried out over the course of the next three football seasons, leading to the final analysis and interpretation presented here.

FINDINGS:

Fan identity and the fan conversion experience

One of the first patterns to emerge from the study was the ongoing presence of multiple aspects of sacred consumption. Repeated instances of *communitas*, *ecstasy*, and *flow* (Belk *et al* 1989) were observed and often personally experienced by the lead author over the course of the study. Such patterns are arguably unsurprising given that sports fan consumption is already understood to have themes of transcendent experience and sacred identity. Fans engage in worship of sports stars, the sports season is understood to be a sacred time, and sports stadia are sacred places (Bale 1993, Belk *et al* 1989, Giulianotti 1999, Hopkinson and Pujari 1999, Light 2000, Westerbeek and Shilbury 1999). What is of far greater interest is the issue of how such experiences combine to shape and determine both football fans' collective sense of identity and their relationship with the official marketplace. A particular characteristic of the sacred is that it

“... does not manifest itself to everyone. A sacred stone continues to appear like other stones, except to those who believe it has revealed itself to them as unique, supernatural, or ganz andere (totally other)”
(Belk *et al* 1989)

The fans in this study understand themselves as constituting a sacred and unique collective. They see themselves as the custodians of the spirit of true fandom, something that has been revealed to them, but - crucially – not to the marketers or the legions of *nouveau fans*. This theme of sacred identity, technically termed ‘*hierophany*’ (Belk *et al* 1989) thus emerged as a central issue in the understanding of

football fan identity. However, we believe that this sense of sacred identity stems from a form of conversion experience (Belk *et al* 1989) from which flow all other aspects of fan identity and practice.

THE FAN CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

The sense of fandom as sacred identity effectively begins with a conversion experience (Belk *et al* 1989) leading not only to feelings of hierophany, but also a keenly felt sense of producerly (Fiske 1989, Holt 1995) ownership over the subcultural terrain of football fandom. Once they have experienced conversion, fans crave the ongoing experiences of *communitas*, ecstasy, and flow that participation in football fandom provides.

The sense of hierophany that emerges from the initial fan conversion experience means that fans see themselves as the primary producers of ongoing fan experience. Fans seek to maintain these sacred experiences utilizing whatever resources are at their disposal. This has resulted in a variety of sacralisation maintenance practices. Some of these practices are intended to preserve sacred experience through tangibilisation, and some are designed to guard against habituation (Belk *et al* 1989). Other practices are specifically designed to achieve sacralisation maintenance through distancing fandom from the official marketplace, thereby maintaining the collective sense of ownership over identity and practice. Thus while hyper-commercialisation is seen as a destructive, desacralising force, particularly in relation to the fans' sense of hierophany, and the fans in this study have developed a variety of distancing tactics (Kozinets 2002b) to resist it and to differentiate their identity from the homogenised version of fan identity proffered by the mass market, this resistant behaviour should

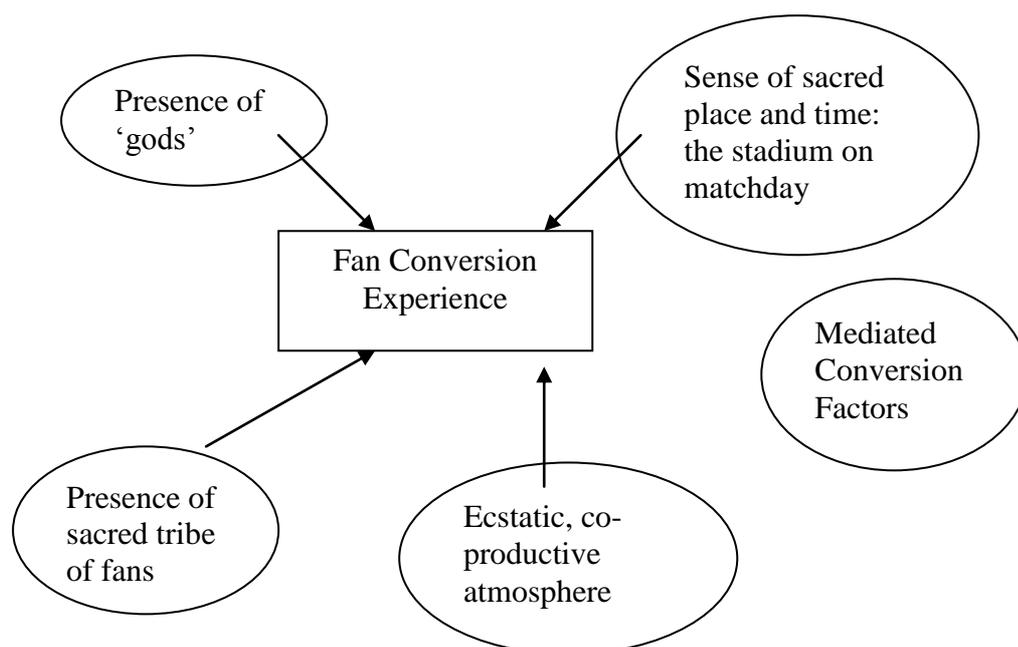
be understood as part of an overall approach to sacralisation maintenance, rather than as a manifestation of a broader and more fully politicized anti-market ideology.

We now turn to a more detailed consideration of the conversion experience (Belk *et al* 1989) that characterises entry into these communities, showing how it initiates the fans' sense of sacredness. This is followed by an exploration of the fans' feelings of hierophany and ownership of the subcultural terrain, so that the fans' motivation to engage in distancing tactics similar to those practised by 'Burning Man' participants (Kozinets 2002b) can be fully understood as an integral part of an overall desire for sacralisation maintenance, and not an end in themselves.

FACTORS IN THE FAN CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

There are a number of factors that contribute to the fan conversion experience (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Factors in the Fan Conversion Experience



The four factors shown in Figure 1 as directly connected to the fan conversion experience are all non-mediated in nature, that is, they are all factors that the fans can experience personally. The other element in conversion is really a combination of factors. Mediated influences on fan conversion, such as watching soccer on television, or reading literature on football stars and football supporters, can play a role in the fan conversion experience but lacks the same overwhelming sense of personalised immediacy that the term 'conversion experience' implies. Fans describing their entrance to soccer fandom tended not to cite the first time they saw their favourite team on television, but rather the first time they attended a match in person. Conversion in this study is therefore understood to chiefly arise out of non-mediated experience.

Personal accounts of the entry to fandom display a sense of the extraordinary, a sense of something magical, as fans come into contact with heroic, sacred figures who provide them with transcendent experience:

We were now inside the ground, and the smell seemed different, the pitch looked lush and green the stands – with their different colour seats – looked huge, and right in front of me were my heroes, there was Hansen, there was Grobbelaar, there was Lawrenson, where was he...where was my favourite...."there he is son, down there near the side". There was Ian Rush, my hero, stood signing autographs for fans in the Main Stand. I felt the tingle down my spine, and the hairs on my neck stand up. This was my baptism, and these players and this ground were my religion, I was now a fully fledged Red ('Roy', Liverpool fan)

Fans see the fandom that springs from this “baptism” as a life-long commitment. Belk *et al* (1989) explain that from a psychological perspective “such commitment directs attention to the sacred, which becomes a strong part of one’s identity”. By the term ‘conversion’ (Belk *et al* 1989), we further understand that initial contact with the sacred is so personally overwhelming that “an identity change resulting in an unshakeable conviction” takes place. Football fandom, then, can be understood as something permanently integrated into the consumer’s self-concept:

“My first Cork City match was a pre season friendly in Musgrave Park, 15 years ago now”

(‘Allan’, Cork City fan, male, thirties)

“I’ve supported them since 1990. So that’s fourteen years (at time of interview)”

(‘A.G.’, Arsenal and Cork City fan)

I have never once not supported United in twenty-odd years”

(‘Greg’ – a fan of both Manchester United and Cork City FC)

The conversion experience described above by ‘Roy’ emphasises the role of sacred people, in the form of heroes like Ian Rush, as a key element in the conversion process. Indeed, fan celebration of individuals as gods is a well-documented phenomenon in the literature (O’Guinn 1991).

However, there is an even stronger pattern in fan conversion narratives than the references to sacred persons in the form of star players. Fan conversion narratives, both mediated and non-mediated, far more frequently made reference to the atmosphere created by the crowd at a football match, rather than the experience of seeing their heroes in the flesh:

The whole crowd thing...I would never have been at an event like that...where there were so many people packed together, shouting, and...singing together, ...it (the whole thing) was just amazing to watch...when you're not used to it, it seems kind of exotic as well and so much fun...they (the Liverpool fans on the Kop terrace) ...were always so vocal, Liverpool would score a goal and the whole place would go ballistic you know?

('A.D.', Liverpool fan, early 40s)

The crowd and the atmosphere they generate are a key element in the conversion experience, inspiring ongoing commitment. In fan accounts of initial entry experiences, atmosphere is cited again and again. Just as 'A.D.' spoke with a sense of awe when describing her initial exposure to the atmosphere generated by the Liverpool fans on the Spion Kop, 'Wally' (a Cork City supporter in his early thirties), says that when he experienced going to Cork City's home ground, Turner's Cross, for the first time he "got hooked straight away" because of "the atmosphere, singing (and), chanting" and the feeling that "(we) ...were all there for the same thing". Another fan, 'Gerry', (male, thirties) describes his first experience of a football match in similar terms:

I just went down and that day it was jammed, it was a fair spectacle ... so that would definitely make me go back, you know

‘Gerry’ recalls that the next time he went to a match the experience was not as intense but by then he had already undergone his conversion experience – the change of identity was permanent:

I didn't find as many people the second time I went back, needless to say! Ah no, (but)... I was just bitten by the bug (by) then

The fan collective is thus central to the initial conversion experience. It is also worth noting that in the case of ‘A.D.’, conversion occurred even though the experience was mediated rather than direct. In the case of non-mediated fans, the initial experience can if anything be even more overwhelming, given its multi-sensory nature:

“(T)o stand packed on a terrace is to become part of terrace culture, to feel the shape and edges of at least four other bodies. There is nothing quite so out-of-body and helpless as being part of a crowd craning to see action in a corner (of the football field) and feeling oneself part of an involuntary human wave of massive energy” (Bowden (1995:122) cited in Crawford 2004:74/75)

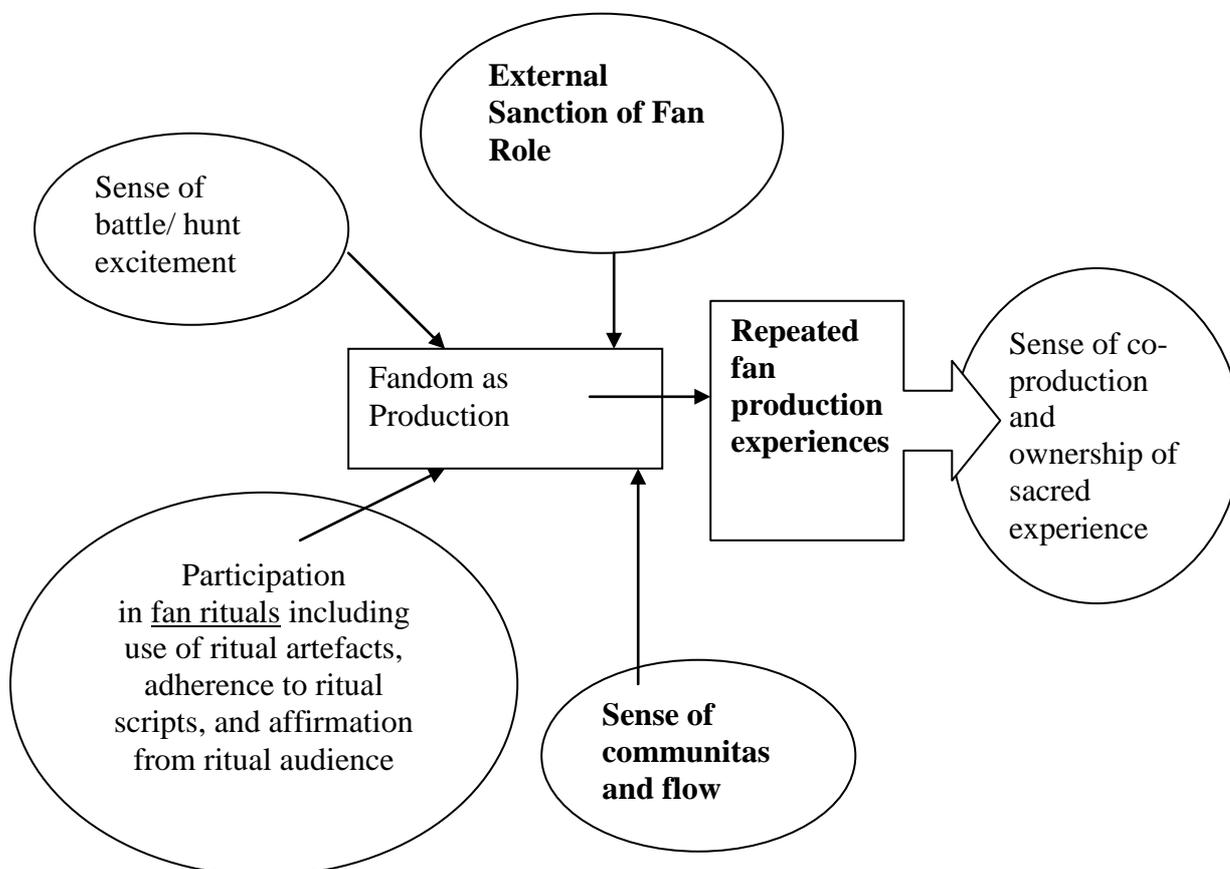
This feeling of “massive energy” generated by the crowd at a football match, whether they are packed closely together on the terraces or seated inside an all-seater stadium, has two important characteristics. It provides transcendent, sacred experience, and it

is perceived by participants as being produced by themselves. This in turn provides the foundation for feelings of ownership over fan identity and experience.

Fandom as Production of Sacred Experience

Once formed by means of the initial conversion experience, fan identity moves on to incorporate a sense of fandom as production. The intensely ritualised nature of the fan experience allows the fans to collectively imagine that they are helping to produce the outcome of the occasion (Holt 1995), as participation in atmosphere generation becomes central to the fan experience. A number of factors contribute to fans' sense of personal involvement in production of this experience (Figure 2):

Figure 2. Fandom as Ongoing Production of Sacred Experience.



Over time, ongoing involvement in fan production activities contributes to feelings of ownership of both fan activity and identity. One of the key factors (Figure 2) that contributes to this sense of production is participation in fan rituals. When fans join in the collective production of atmosphere at a football match, they are, according to Morris (2002), taking part in a contemporary form of tribal hunt. Morris conceptualises football fandom as a form of instinctive participation in a pseudo-hunt that allows spectators to exercise a deeply held need to hunt, born of primeval times but still present in the contemporary consumer. Football provides all the necessary

excitement of the hunt, with its drama, physical exertions, and its' targeting of the 'prey' (the other team's goalmouth) with a weapon (the football). Football fans inside the stadium join in the hunt through encouraging the lead hunters (the players) by means of chanting, shouting and singing, while intimidating or trying to intimidate the hunters (both team and supporters) from the rival tribe. The following fieldnote extract illustrates the fans' sense of participation in co-producing the consumption experience:

*We sing and roar, drowning out the Manchester City fans... (there are) shouts of instruction and roars of encouragement to the players. Groans when a move breaks down, shouts of "Sh**!" Excitement intensifies as Liverpool attack again. The pace of the attacks seems to increase each time, and the panic in the (Manchester) defence seems to mount. All singing abruptly stops as Liverpool suddenly surge forward. The shouts are more urgent now, one of the nearby fans just has time to shout "COME ON, COME ON" followed by someone else shouting "GET IT IN!" as (Liverpool player) John Arne Riise plays a one-two with Steven Gerrard before striking the football ...into the Manchester City goal. We erupt in euphoria, shouting incoherently, roaring YYYEEAAHHH, hugging and thumping each other (on the back).*

(From fieldnotes)

Such an ecstatic sense of shared flow (Belk *et al* 1989, Celsi *et al* 1993, Csikszentmihalyi 2000) is more likely to occur when the match has reached a certain level of excitement – the 'battle' really is being waged, the players are fully engaged in waging it, and the fans are fully engaged in the co-participative act (Holt 1995,

Morris 2002, Richardson and Turley 2006) of roaring them on. There is a heightened sense of not only unity, but unity in a dramatic, exciting battle against the (mock) enemy (Elias and Dunning 1993). There is excitement, heightened anticipation, intense joy (as described above) when the tribe's hopes are realised, and, at times, intense disappointment, when those hopes are dashed. Experiencing such powerful collective intensity for the first time can clearly trigger the conversion experience described earlier, while experiencing it again and again over an extended period of time can act as a form of sustaining ritual (Belk *et al* 1989) that perpetuates the sacred meaning of the experience and gives the "buzz" of soccer fandom its compelling qualities:

I (started going to) every away game, week in, week out...you just felt like you had to go! ...You have to go – and I don't know why – it just suddenly kicked in that the more you have, the more you want! And you just want – I just wanted the buzz, the buzz was unbelievable

(‘Le Songmeister’, Liverpool fan, male, early thirties)

The shared rituals and emotions of the stadium produce a vivid feeling of community, or consciousness of kind (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Hopkinson and Pujari 1999). The loss of self, at the level of the individual, through such ‘flow’ experiences (Csikszentmihalyi 2000), is replaced with a particularly potent sense of identity at the collective level. The individual “enters a transcending community of camaraderie (Hopkinson and Pujari 1999)”, feeling a strong sense of collective identity as a result of their ecstatic experience.

The sense of collective involvement is also important on lesser occasions when the match itself might not provide much in the way of excitement. Standing on the terrace at a League of Ireland game, enjoying the atmosphere produced by the fans around you is central to the fan experience:

It's good craic as well, standing in the Shed for 2 hours a week y'know, it couldn't but entertain ya...often the football (doesn't)! ...I just enjoyed it y'know, it was good craic ...that helps like, it's better than sitting looking at a telly there's nothing to compare to it like, you know? There's always some fella standing in front of you with a smart ass comment

(‘Gerry’, Cork City fan, male, late twenties)

The enjoyment of this co-produced atmosphere becomes part of the ongoing *raison d'être* of football fandom and therefore helps to bring fans back again and again even if the team are not playing well:

It's (atmosphere) very important! Yeah – I think a lot of people will tell you that...the atmosphere is what brings a lot of people back ... – the match could be crap but people come back...(because of the atmosphere) ...there's a bit of a singsong or whatever you know?

(‘Pablo’, Cork City supporter, male, late twenties)

The ritual scripts (Cheol Park 1998, Rook 1985) of football fans, including joining in the forms of ritualized behaviour described above, are therefore adhered to even if

“the match (is)... crap”. This is significant because being a football fan is not always about the enjoyment of one ecstatic experience after another. Fans can often have negative experiences:

*We've all been to horrible games like we'll say the (Cork v Bohs) game just after the Malmo game where we lost 1-0 and it was like – poor crowd, terrible weather, average game , you know?(We) lost 1-0, it's like those kind of games where people will go 'ah f***s sake I 'd much prefer being at home now, warm, watching the Simpsons or something!' (laughter)*

(‘Allan’, Cork City fan, male, early 30s)

Clearly fandom is not merely about the pleasure derived from victory. There is no guarantee of positive outcomes. How, then, is the sacredness of fandom maintained (Belk *et al* 1989), if ecstatic experience during matches is only occasional? It is maintained by a variety of factors, including the sense of commitment generated by the initial conversion experience, the fans’ sense of themselves as producers of their own experiences, and from the opportunities that such productive practices provide to experience an ongoing sense of hierophany. These fans do not see match attendance as an experience to be produced for them by either a marketer or the team on the pitch. Instead they feel it is very much their own responsibility to take on a co-involvement in creation of their experiences. Such is the intensity of this co-involvement that it gives rise to claims of idiosyncrasy as a means of expressing the collective sense of hierophany. For instance, Liverpool fans see themselves as unique among the wider soccer fan population. They believe that no other club has a spirit comparable to theirs. They assert that it is through their songs, their homemade

banners, and their sporting and knowledgeable attitude that this uniqueness manifests itself:

Nobody else does what we do. Nobody else would have organised a piss up (drinking and singing session) in London's main square because that's what we do at every other European away. Nobody's got the spirit of our club. Nobody else has got the spirit of our supporters.... Nobody else has got songs like ours.... Nobody else makes banners ...like we do

(‘Ed’, Liverpool fan, interview)

Passionate performances of tribal football songs such as ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ are collectively understood by the fans as demonstrative of their unique spirit and hierophanous identity, unmatched by the fans of any other club:

No other fans, when you’re 3-0 down at half time, sing ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’

(‘Les’, Liverpool fan, male, 30s, interview)

Here, ‘Les’ invokes the memory of half time in the 2005 European Cup Final, when Liverpool found themselves 3-0 down to AC Milan, and the Liverpool fans responded not by booing their team but instead by fervently singing ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’. The citing of this and similar incidents by star footballers, journalists, and other commentators, as evidence of the ardent loyalty of Liverpool fans has a sacralising effect on the fans’ perception of their collective identity, deepening the sense of hierophany among the fan community. Because comments eulogising the fans often come from figures whom the fans revere as gods (O’Guinn 1991), this external

sanction effect (Belk *et al* 1989) further concretises the fans' view of themselves as not just co-producers of the fan consumption experience, but an integral part of the team. Fan identity and experience are thus collectively understood to incorporate far more than mere enjoyment of team success on the field of play. They include an unshakeable commitment to the tribal totem that is the team, and an understanding that, ultimately, fan experience and identity are produced and owned by the fans themselves. Finally, this identity is understood to be sacred and unique.

MAINTAINING THE SACREDNESS OF FANDOM

Clearly, the fan experience is redolent with significance for members of the fan community. They will utilise any available resource to maintain the sacredness of this fan experience, including goods from the official market. However the manner in which goods are used, and the prestige attached to them, varies in accordance with the need to maintain the sacredness of fan identity and experience. A clear distance must be established to separate sacred fan identity from the profane marketplace. In the case of members of the 'Real Reds' Liverpool fan community, co-production that relies excessively on consumption of official merchandise is regarded as far less meaningful than co-production that utilises alternative consumption objects, such as home made banners, as part of the process of production. Official merchandise is not excluded from this process, but its significance is downplayed. The atmosphere generated by the fans is celebrated over and above anything that the market could provide. Fans collaborate in producing a socially constructed version of reality that emphasises their role over that of the market. For instance, Liverpool fans celebrating

their 2005 Champions League semi final victory over Chelsea view what happened as something that they themselves achieved, something that the market could never accomplish:

WE unnerved (Chelsea goalkeeper) Cech...WE made sure the linesman dare not disallow the goal...WE made the difference...You can't buy that Mr Abramovich

(Liverpool fan 'Steve', posting on the 'LFC' forum)

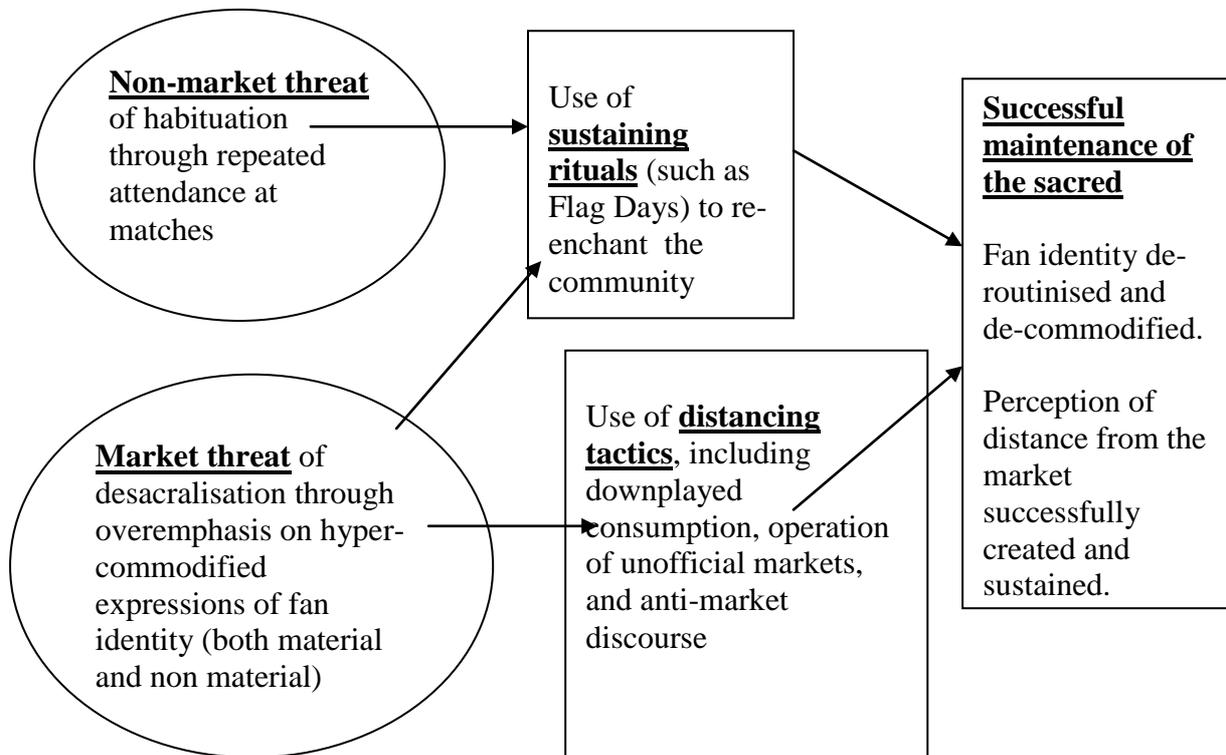
Here, the market is seen as something incapable of delivering unique experience. The assertion – ‘You can't buy that Mr Abramovich’ – is all the more evocative as a metaphor when we consider Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich's status as one of the richest people in the world. The moment of triumph over Chelsea is socially reconstructed as the triumph of the people over the market. The man who can buy everything defeated, thwarted, by the power of the people. This suggests that fans can have a strong sense of self-as-fan with little or no reference to market goods. Equally, it implies that any presentation of fandom that over-emphasises the significance of market goods will be perceived as problematic, because of the contradiction it poses to the collectively structured, socially constructed identity that the fans are familiar with. The cultural terrain is primed for at least some degree of consumer resistance to *any* attempt at marketisation of fan identity, because the belief that fandom is something that you do, not something that you can buy (Richardson and Turley 2006), is so strongly held.

The practices of the market in relation to fandom would probably have been perceived in a problematic fashion by the fans, even if marketers had adopted a high degree of

cultural sensitivity towards the fans' sense of identity. What has developed instead is a set of marketing practices perceived as lacking in sensitivity and possessed of an eagerness to cash in on the new-found popularity of football, by, for example, charging inflated prices for match tickets and football shirts. This has led to a feeling on the part of many fans that they were being ripped off and excluded from the game (King 1998) and the membership of the 'Real Reds' community are no exception to this.

More fundamentally, the hegemonic presentation of marketised fandom as the only legitimate version of football supporter identity is seen as a threat to the fans' sense of hierophany. This in turn has resulted in adoption of the rich variety of distancing tactics outlined below. In relation to these tactics, as Figure 3 illustrates, it is important to remember that efforts at sacralisation maintenance are not solely aimed at the market. Fans work to maintain the sacredness of fandom against *any* potential agent of desacralisation, including the habituation (Belk *et al* 1989) that might simply arise from going to the match, week in, week out. Thus, for instance, so-called Flag Days do not simply serve to assert a distance between fandom and the market but also to guard against the over-familiarity that can arise through frequent repetition of an activity. This serves to remind us that the fans' ultimate objective is to maintain the sacredness of fandom, rather than to take an ideological stance against the hegemony of the market. However because the main potential desacralising agent is perceived to be the market rather than habituation, most of the practices we now describe are aimed at distancing fandom from the market.

Figure 3: Fan Sacralisation Maintenance Activities.



Sustaining Rituals – Flag Days

A key resource celebrated by the fans in their assertions of idiosyncrasy is their practice of making and displaying homemade banners. Many of these banners are not displayed at every Liverpool match. Instead their use is reserved for special occasions known as Flag Days. These homemade goods are perceived as authentic artistic creations in their own right, thus possessing an unquestionable perceived legitimacy and semiotic payload beyond the potential scope of any commercial product (Kozinets 2002b). Displaying them is an act of reverence, venerating both the demi-

gods who play for the team now, or those who played for or managed the team in the past. However such ritual displays are not only an act of reverence, but also an act of renewal of the tribe's own identity.

These home made banners are perceived by fans not only as concretized representations of the spirit of the club, but as symbols of their own guardianship of that spirit. They are representative of what Maffesoli (1996) calls 'puissance', or the sacredness of the tribe. Of course, all these meanings can reside in official goods for some fans (Derbaix *et al* 2002) but the home made goods have the distinct advantage of being completely untainted by commerciality. They facilitate fans' collective sense of hierophany more so than official goods, for a variety of reasons. First, a sense of ownership of the symbolic meanings of the banners, and the integration of these symbolic meanings into the collective self-concept of the fans, is immediately achieved without the need for decommodification that accompanies official goods. Rather than wait for the market to provide goods with the desired symbolic meaning, and then buy those goods and gradually appropriate their meaning into the collective sense of self (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998), the fans have custom-made their own goods. Hence these concretised representations of tribal identity have not come from the market, and are thus *de facto* at a distance from the market from the very beginning, so that separation of the sacred from the profane is attained from the outset. Furthermore the practice of making these banners, dating back as it does to the 1960s, predates the introduction of market-produced football merchandise as we know it today, which further helps to achieve distance from the market. This is also redolent of a nostalgia for a pre-mass market ethos of unmediated creativity.

The achievement of distance from the market begins long before the banner is completed. It begins with the planning of the banner. Fans go online and ask the opinion of other fans on such design issues as materials, colours, the symbols to be used and of course choice of wording. Photos of completed banners are subsequently posted on the community website for approval; banners are not always brought to the match, so these virtual displays can be an important way of achieving recognition for one's banner making efforts. The making of these homemade banners is, therefore, a process in itself through which deeper assimilation of community identity into the self concept is affirmed via repetition of ritual (McCracken 1988) and mutual affirmation

of symbolic meaning through processes of discursive elaboration (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998, Goulding *et al* 2002).

Of course processes of discursive elaboration can also operate in the case of commercial goods, but in the case of home made banners all the inherent symbolic meanings are collectively understood to have originated within the community and outside the market from beginning to end. The process is collectively perceived as non-marketised. Furthermore, even an online announcement of the intention to make a banner possesses a richness of subcultural capital (Jancovich 2002, Thornton 1995) that easily exceeds the lower subcultural capital accruing from buying an item of official merchandise.

What particularly helps to concretise fans' perception of their fandom as something beyond the desacralising threat of the marketplace, is the fact that these banners are never made available for sale. While fans might buy fan-designed t-shirts or similar items from each other from time to time, no-one ever seeks to purchase another fan's homemade banner. The flags and banners can thus be regarded as all the more authentic because they have been artistically created, rather than reproduced for even the most moderate commercial gain. They are effectively a "signal of communal authenticity counterposed against the alleged inauthenticity of the mainstream or mass market (Kozinets 2002b)" and are therefore part of the communal armoury in proclaiming ownership of the cultural terrain of fandom and distancing it from the market. Furthermore "art that is consumed in the context of ritual and tradition in which it has been historically embedded can be said to possess an 'aura' that confers upon it a rich surplus of meaning (Benjamin 1969, cited in Kozinets 2002b)". This "rich surplus of meaning" effectively re-enchants the community (Kozinets 2002b). The special occasions, called 'Flag Days', when fans organise mass displays of these home made banners and flags can, therefore, be understood not just as sacralisation maintenance through keeping the market at a critical distance, but also as a form of sustaining ritual (Belk *et al* 1989). In order to maintain the sacred, it is not enough to keep the market at a distance. It is also necessary to have specific sustaining rituals in order to re-infuse the fan experience with a sense of myth, mystery, and magic, by using these home made flags and banners to celebrate the extraordinary events and sacred people of the past. The last home game of the season at Anfield is therefore

usually designated as a 'Flag Day' by the fans, and the Kop becomes a blaze of colour, as banners and flags not normally brought to every match are ritually taken from storage and carried to the ground for display before, during, and after the game. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this practice is that the devotion with which it is celebrated, in our observations, seems if anything to be more fervent on those occasions when the team has not won anything and has nothing to show for the season, no totemic trophy to facilitate basking in reflected glory (Mahony *et al* 1999). The real meaning of this annual ritual seems, therefore, to be not only about devotion to, and celebration of, the team, but mutual devotion to, and celebration of each other, in a carnivalesque, non-marketised, rejuvenation of the shared sense of hierophanous identity.

Distancing Tactics

The second main form that sacralisation maintenance takes is the systematic practice of explicit distancing tactics designed to relegate the role of the market to one that is subservient to the fans. In practice, there is a strong correspondence between the distancing tactics used by football fans and those used by 'Burning Man' participants (Kozinets 2002b), in the social construction of perceived distance from the market. Discourse, ritual, and practice are all used in ways that resonate with the purpose of achieving this perceived distance. Fan discourse serves to explicitly reproduce the inferior status of fans who make excessive use of market goods. Downplayed consumption (including personalisation of purchase frequency, the preference for 'retro' goods, self-deprecation, cultivation of the 'smart casual' look, and gifting behaviours) allows fans to purchase limited quantities of official merchandise, while maintaining their perception that they are not succumbing to the desacralising hegemony of the market. Participation in an unofficial market in fan-related goods helps these fans to further their sense of successful evasion of the official market. We now detail how the tactics of fan discourse, downplayed consumption, and the operation of an unofficial, or parallel, market are all used to distance football fandom from the official marketplace.

Fan discourse

In describing fan discourse as part of the range of fan distancing tactics, it is important to note that fan discourse is not, in the main, concerned with resistance. For the most part, it consists of items of fan chat or gossip, such as how the team were performing, whether an underperforming player should be dropped, or better still sold, whether the manager should be fired, and so on. When not discussing these topics, fans have tended to discuss alternative designs for new banners, which songs were given the best airing at a recent match, or who would be present in the pub for a “bevy” (pint) before or after the next Liverpool game, and so forth. However, when anything in relation to the market comes up in conversation, it immediately becomes apparent that fan discourse is a fundamental part of the collective distancing apparatus. For instance, where official market goods come up for discussion, it is often in a pejorative context, either by directly adopting a critical stance to the products sold by the club, or by collectively derogating some outsider group by associating them with official market-produced football merchandise.

The fans in the ground matter less than the fans watching on the TV (or so it seems), and those who dedicate time, effort and money week in week out, matter less than those who come less frequently and spend big bucks in the stores that are rigged out from top to bottom with mostly useless merchandise that clutters your house and makes you look like some sort of ... "sports nut" who shouts "Go team Go".

(Liverpool fan ‘Roy’, on the ‘Real Reds’ web forum)

Merchandise from official club stores is “mostly useless”, it “clutters your house” and (worst of all?) it “makes you look like some sort of ‘sports nut’ who shouts ‘Go team Go’”. In fact, not only official merchandise, but every single manifestation of marketised fan identity is challenged by the hard-core fans. Voicing distaste for each and every representation of marketised identity is accordingly one of the most important distancing tactics through which the fans resist the market, because through it the fans reject the notion that the de-sacralising market could have any legitimate role in defining fan identity. The members of the forum thus differentiate, for instance, between ‘OOTs’ (out of towners) who are not from Liverpool but who are regarded as knowledgeable members of the fan community, and ‘day trippers’ or

‘jester hated beauts’ who are criticised for their tendency to treat match day as some sort of annual shopping expedition:

I would say an OOT (out of townner) is someone who goes as often as possible but is not from the area and a day tripper is someone who goes once a season but could go more and has the digital camera (look this is me at the Kop end, this is me with the pitch behind me arms length type of pic)/jester hat wearer/club shop bag bulging with goodies

(‘Albert’, Liverpool fan, on the ‘Real Reds’ web forum)

*I think everyone’s being dragged down by the way football is at the moment. Home and away atmospheres are getting worse and worse. At home, there’s the old annoyances, that have been dragging on for seasons such as the Liverworld day trippers and the jester hatted beauts all dotted around singing “stand up if you hate.....” and other such lower league sh*** that has no home on the terraces of Anfield.*

(‘Roy’, Liverpool fan, on the ‘Real Reds’ web forum)

‘Liverworld’ is a derogatory term used by ‘Roy’ to refer to the club’s official retail outlets. He is almost in despair at the de-differentiation he feels has been brought about by market commodification of football. Liverworld-frequenting ‘day trippers’, bedecked in jester hats, expressing their fan identity through silly merchandise and the singing of generic chants such as ‘Stand up if you hate Man U’, are to be heard everywhere these days – even in the hallowed ground of Anfield. The generic chants and ubiquitous displays of merchandise associated with the ‘new consumer’ fan style tend to standardise fandom across clubs, and to dispel rather than accentuate what is distinctive about them.

The emergence of chants such as ‘Stand up if you hate Man U’ is blamed on the new market-based outlets for fan discourse that have proliferated in recent years. TV shows such as *You’re on Sky Sports* have become populated by ‘new consumer’ fans eager to display their expertise on the subject of the beautiful game. While fans have

always enjoyed talking about football, individual fans can now engage in the opportunity to do so in front of a much wider audience, by dialing a premium pay phone number and going on air to present their perspectives on the burning football issues of the day. The Sky Sports Saturday morning show 'Soccer A.M.' comes in for considerable criticism on the 'Real Reds' website discussion forum. The fans who appear on 'Soccer A.M.' are always dressed in full replica football kits, and regularly perform the type of generic, homogenised chants that community members find deeply irritating and potentially desecrating:

*I hate Soccer AM with a passion. All the little sh***y things like that 'easy' clap thing they do are ruining football*

(‘Mike’, Liverpool fan, on the ‘Real Reds’ web forum)

The chant 'Easy! Easy!' meaning that the opposition are inferior and easy to beat, is despised because it appears to have originated on the commercial television show 'Soccer A.M.' and is therefore market produced rather than fan produced. It has been widely adopted by fans whose style is perceived as inauthentic. Their adoption of a marketised chant is seen as symptomatic of their inability to come up with original chants of their own. This implicates such fans as part of the 'new consumer' fan project. It labels them as believers in fandom as purchasable commodity and is symbolic of their utter lack of subcultural capital. The notion that football fandom could be reduced to the buying of team kits from official marketers and chanting exactly the same words as every other fan in the country is anathema to the hard-core fans. Distaste for this entire style of fandom is therefore a regular theme in the discourse among members of the 'Real Reds' community, and the increased emergence of this style of fandom at live football matches is bitterly resented. Therefore, these expressions of fan identity are collectively derogated as inauthentic, distasteful (Hogg and Savolainen 1998), lacking in subcultural capital (Jancovich 2002, Thornton 1995), and decried as representative of the homogenisation brought about by the over-commodification of football by the official market. The consistency of this theme in fan discourse confirms that it is one of the main tactics used by the fans to distance their fandom from the market.

Downplayed Consumption

(Insert Fig. 4 (photo of Liverpool fans on The Kop (May 2006) about here)

This photograph of Liverpool fans holding their scarves aloft while they sing ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ serves to remind us that even among these purist fans, market goods can be utilised for sacred purposes. Desacralisation is avoided by only using official goods on the fans’ own terms. Market contestation is therefore selective and targeted in nature. In order to maintain a sense of sacredness and ownership over their identity as fans, the community engage in downplayed consumption. This involves refraining from unquestioningly and uncritically buying and using merchandise in the manner of the ‘new consumer’ fans and instead adopting a variety of alternative practices, including personalisation of purchase frequency, the preference for ‘retro’ goods, self-deprecation in relation to buying of merchandise, cultivation of the ‘smart casual’ look, and gifting behaviours. In regard to personalisation, the fans emphasise that when they do buy merchandise, it is only occasionally, and in small amounts. There is also a preference for the cheaper items, such as polo shirts and ‘retro’ tops (Liverpool shirts designed to look like the team shirts from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s) rather than the more expensive option of the most recent official replica shirt. Also, when they buy official merchandise, they usually refer to such purchases in a highly self-deprecating manner (‘look at me, I’m a day tripper ha ha ha!’), or they buy online, rather than profaning themselves by using the same (offline i.e. official club store) shop as the ‘day trippers’. Another alternative means of acquiring merchandise while keeping at a distance from the market is via gifting behaviours. Fans might not practice self-gifting with any real frequency, but family and friends know what sort of gifts to give for Christmas or Father’s Day. The fans also consume vicariously by buying the merchandise for someone else rather than themselves, such as their own offspring, or a niece or nephew. It is important to note that this is also a form of sacralisation maintenance, because giving gifts of merchandise is a form of bequesting behaviour (Belk *et al* 1989). The gifts symbolise the ‘faith’ that is being handed on to the next generation of Liverpool fans, but this behaviour, crucially,

allows members of the community to buy official merchandise without indulging in the ‘bag filled with goodies (for oneself)’ style of consumption associated with the ‘daytrippers’. Finally, when official merchandise is used, it is usually used sparingly, often in conjunction with non football-related goods, to create a distinctive style recognisable to members of the community, but not to the daytrippers.

The tactics of downplayed consumption, taken in conjunction with the other distancing tactics, allow fans not only to maintain a collective perception of their fandom as something non marketised, but to do so while actually consuming official market goods. So ubiquitous is the presence of the market, and so meaningful are some of the official market goods for the fans, that some mechanism almost had to be developed to allow them a ‘licence’ of sorts to consume these goods, without feeling that they were thereby ‘selling out’, or desacralising their fandom. We now detail the main forms of downplayed consumption.

Downplayed Consumption: Personalisation of Purchase Frequency

One of the main tactics for downplaying the significance of purchasing official merchandise is to emphasise the relative infrequency of such purchases:

I only buy every two years, I refuse to buy the home, the away, the third... (shirt) – I don’t believe in it personally like, you know.

But you said, I mean once every two years the club bring out a new home shirt, so you usually buy it then yeah?

Yeah, I buy it! What I tend to do meself is I buy the home one, then two years later I buy the away one, then two years later the home one and I try to alternate

Oh Ok so you only buy the new home shirt every four years!

Exactly yeah – I have the home one this year

(extract from interview with Liverpool fan ‘F.M.L.’)

This practice separates the sacred ‘real’ fan from the profane ‘day tripper’ who blindly buys every single new shirt. This is a conscious rejection of the market’s definition of appropriate levels of purchase frequency, as new football shirts are usually issued at least once per season. Deliberate infrequency of purchase is also a form of singularisation (Belk *et al* 1989). This deliberate personalisation of purchase frequency helps to decommodify the experience, and guard it against habituation (Belk *et al* 1989).

Downplayed Consumption: The Preference for ‘Retro’ Goods

The preference for ‘retro’ items manifests itself in relation to two categories of fan merchandise, namely scarves and retro shirts, as seen in the following discussion on the ‘Real Reds’ website:

Just seen the official merchandise (on the club website) for the cup final - fancied one of the '77 shirts as advertised but only see the '84 one in the selection? Must have been a typo

(‘Sean’)

S... - I bought one from the club shop before moving here. It's proper cotton and doesn't date - better than a modern replica any day! And it's cheaper.

(‘Pete’)

Sound aren't they, bought a couple meself the other week and am made up with the quality, and no sponsors logos all over the place, just the LiverBird (club logo) looking proud ...

(‘scally’)

Such ‘retro’ shirts are a physical embodiment of the community’s displaced ideals, in that they are concretized reminders of the club’s glorious past (McCracken 1988:110-114). The preference for ‘retro’ over contemporary helps to socially construct a metaphorical degree of distance from the market. They are cheaper than the normal marketised version of what fans are supposed to wear, and come free of all the commercial logos that contemporary replica shirts are festooned with. They can be perceived as “old stuff” (Holt 2003) compared to the latest replica shirt marketers want fans to buy.

The status of football scarves as an acceptable item of market-produced football merchandise is explicable partly because of the symbolic meaning of scarves as a link to the past, when the scarf-bedecked Kop was known and celebrated for its colour and passion (Figure 6.5):

(Insert Figure 5 'The Kop in the 1970s' about here)

A typical scene from the Kop during the 1970s (source of photo unknown)

Scarves are seen by many of the fans on the forum as an appropriate item to bring to the match. Even if they do not normally wear colours they will still occasionally bring a scarf for flag days on the Kop:

Never wear colours nowadays...If it's a flag day then I might wear a scarf just to do my bit

'Stephen'

I've always worn colours of some sort or other...normally a bar scarf and HJC badge

'B.A.'

More than any other item of merchandise, scarves are 'retro' and therefore have a legitimacy of their own, one that is seen as beyond the profaning reach of the marketers. They are perceived as far more authentic than other forms of official football merchandise, because they have such a strong symbolic link to the club's rich heritage and past achievements. As such, they are perceived as having a sacredness that the marketers cannot profane. They are seen as "old stuff" that can be (re)claimed as authentic (Holt 2003). They are goods that industry no longer focuses strongly on selling, marketers' focus having moved on to the higher margin, 'rip-off' replica shirts as the primary official marker of fan identity. This sense of 'old stuff' is further confirmed by the marked preference among forum members for the obviously retro 'bar' style scarf rather than the other alternatives available in the club shop.

Ultimately, 'retro' scarves, with their plain designs such as the red and white alternative bands of the 'bar' scarf, are particularly representative of downplayed consumption, because they symbolise the fandom of pre hyper-marketisation. They further represent a collectively imagined idyllic time (Brown *et al* 2003) when the fan community was uncontaminated by pseudo-fans such as the *Soccer A.M.* 'daytripper'.

As such, they evoke not only the displaced meaning (McCracken 1988) of Liverpool as invincible football team, but Liverpool fans as the most colourful, authentic, and passionate fans imaginable.

Downplayed Consumption: Self- Deprecation

The sacredness of certain items of merchandise is such that members of the ‘Real Reds’ community feel compelled to make occasional purchases from the club shop or the online shop available via the club’s official website. However, the announcement of such purchases on the forum often gave rise to self-deprecating humour, of the ‘Look at me, I’m acting like a ‘wool’’ type. A ‘wool’ in this case is an abbreviated form of ‘woollyback’ or ‘daytripper’ fan:

*F**k it, be a wool for the day. ;-)* Apart from Jester hats, anything goes.
4 silkies (one off each wrist, one off each elbow) Jarg (counterfeit/ unofficial)
Istanbul teesh (t-shirt) from the stall outside TK Max in town. LFC sun-hat,
them Shades with LFC on them. Red and Yeller bar scarf from the club shop.
... P.S. Shorts are Blue Harbour from Marks&Sparks (Obviously)
(‘Mick’ describes his planned ‘look’ for the occasion of the 2005 European Cup Final)

The European Cup Final requires higher than normal levels of fan display. This calls for some device to reassert the distinction between authentic and inauthentic fan identity. Self-deprecation underscores this distinction. Again this device legitimizes the otherwise inappropriate act of buying official merchandise such as the scarf from the club shop.

Downplayed Consumption: Cultivation of the ‘smart casual’ look

While a mix of unofficial and official football merchandise might be appropriate for a significant occasion such as a Cup Final, alternative styles can also take the form of mixing subtle forms of fan identification such as small pinbadges with upmarket brands of casual attire:

Never wear colours nowadays. Used to when I was younger. Now its usually jeans and a smart jacket. Hugo Boss or (...similar)...However I always wear a badge! Only one mind! A small Liverbird badge is a must in my book

(‘Stephen’)

The use of labels such as Prada, Hugo Boss, and Lacoste is interesting because it represents a use of market labels to indicate resistance to the market – where it encroaches on football ‘space’. They are seen as expressing an oppositional stance to the ‘new consumer’ style of fandom. This behaviour resembles that of the Manchester United ‘lads’ who also turned to designer labels to differentiate themselves from the hordes of ‘new consumer’ fans who descended on Old Trafford in the 1990s (King 1995, 1997).

Downplayed Consumption: Gifting behaviours

The acceptance of official merchandise when it comes in the form of a gift is another distancing tactic. There is a warmth and acceptance of goods from the club shop when the source of the goods is a gift. Under the heading, ‘*Father’s Day Presents*’, for example, ‘Tom’ proudly proclaims the following:

So who got socks and smellies? None of that here. Liverpool FC Champions of Europe DVD and Electric Light Orchestra Greatest Hits CD. Best kids in the world my two.

This sparked the happy admission from a number of the fans that they too received copies of commemorative Liverpool FC DVDs for Father’s Day. DVDs of great matches of the past are socially constructed as legitimate forms of merchandise among these fans because they embody the perceived greatness and distinctiveness of the club. They are concretised examples of sacralisation maintenance through tangibilised contamination of unique experiences (Belk *et al* 1989). They are symbolic of the hierophanous identity of the club, and as such, constitute subculturally acceptable merchandise.

A final comment on the various practices that combine to make up the theme of downplayed consumption is that they are in part successful because they contrast with the imagined practices of the socially constructed stereotype of the 'daytripper'. The significance of personal consumption of official merchandise can be successfully downplayed, because community consumption of official merchandise is infrequent, moderate, and tasteful, in contrast to the over-indulgence of the 'day trippers'. Armed with this perspective, fans can continue to buy official merchandise without feeling that they have ceded the (subcultural) terrain to marketers, and without fearing that their sense of hierophany is under threat. The de-differentiating homogenisation of the market is thus neatly side-stepped.

Operation of a parallel market

Frequent reference has already been made to material embodiments of fan identity such as scarves, shirts, and homemade banners. Further material embodiment of fan identity is provided by means of unofficial goods produced for a fan-operated market. This unofficial market parallels the official market through provision of fan colours such as fan designed t-shirts and fan texts in the form of unofficial fanzines. It also provides many other consumption objects such as badges, CDs, and other paraphernalia. The most fundamental distinction between it and the official market, however, lies not in the goods it provides but in its socially constructed ethos.

One of the clearest aspects of the ethos of this unofficial market is the communal attitude towards prices. The fans practice very moderate pricing when trading with each other. Such non-extortionate pricing is seen as a form of deliberate opposition to the official 'rip off' market. Breaches of this ethos are taken very seriously and are one of the very few reasons that justify the barring of entry to, or expulsion from, the community. This was illustrated in the weeks prior to the 2005 European Cup Final when a small number of people attempted to offer Cup Final tickets for sale at a price substantially above their face value:

*For the next three weeks we are not going to be accepting new members...I don't have time to sift through threads looking for touting **** and then subsequently banning the f***ers*

‘Lou’ (Forum moderator)

*Great idea Lou.... It would have got a bit tedious telling them all to f*** off!*

‘Darren’

This discussion took place with less than three weeks to go to the 2005 European Cup Final, so the purpose of the lockout was absolutely clear, and the members greeted it with unanimous approval. This occurred in spite of the fact that it was Liverpool FC’s first European Cup Final for twenty years, something that one might have expected to lead to an unprecedented level of demand for match tickets among the fans. The offer of tickets for sale at vastly inflated prices received an angry response from fans who, though desperate to get to the Final, were completely unwilling to be ‘ripped off’, and were even angrier at the idea that anyone calling himself or herself a Liverpool fan could even contemplate doing such a thing to their fellow fans:

...you are scum. You don't deserve a final ticket. You should be reported to UEFA. If you'd come on here asking for say £50 to cover your own costs ...I think most people would probably live with that...asking people to pay upwards of £500 ...is very low indeed

‘Yossi’

*...we get ripped off by everyone else, so why the f*** do you want us to rip each other off?(You are) Banned. No touting (scalping) on (this forum) thanks...all of you know we hardly ever ban people, but we're not having touting*

‘Lou’ (forum moderator)

There is a clear sense of an anti-profiteering ideology here – the assertion that “we get ripped off by everyone else” is not an off-the cuff remark. It confirms the pattern elsewhere throughout the data that fans feel a strong sense of grievance directed at those who seek to define fandom as a purchaseable commodity packaged at a premium price. Community members frequently advocate buying t-shirts and other memorabilia from sources other than those who charge such “rip off” prices:

*The Reebok winners T shirt (from the official club shop) is playing on us wanting something authentic!! (i.e. as actually worn by the players), F*** the corporates off, as a previous post said, go (to) the HJC shop, and perhaps the HJC can come up with a decent 5 times commemorative T? I copped for some nice winners T's in the Bul after the game and only 6 quid, the club as usual taking the p*** 15 quid for a Red T shirt with a bit of a print on!!*

(‘Brian’, on the ‘Real Reds’ forum)

‘Brian’ advocates buying t-shirts to commemorate the 2005 European Cup victory from an *alternative* outlet – the HJC (Hillsborough Justice Campaign) Shop, which normally sells a variety of Liverpool fan paraphernalia at prices that are usually lower than those charged in the official club shop. Buying material representations of fandom is not the problem – the fans need tangibilised contamination, in the form of material objects, for sacralisation maintenance (Belk *et al*) – but these representations must, ‘Brian’ argues, be kept at a distance from the exploitative proclivity of the market.

The reference to the HJC shop illustrates another aspect of this unofficial market. It is not necessarily made up of formally incorporated retail premises, but rather exists in a collectively implicit sense. In this implicit, informal ‘market’, the fans understand that buying fan artifacts from alternative, unofficial sources such as the HJC Shop, street stalls, or even their fellow fans, is higher in subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) than buying from official sources. Adhering to the community’s system of subcultural capital by buying goods from any of these unofficial sources helps to protect against the de-sacralising effects of the official market in a number of ways. For instance fanzines (which are cheaper than the official matchday club programmes) are not sold from official programme kiosks. ‘Unofficial’ t-shirts are never sold in the official club shops. No form of unofficial merchandise is available from anything other than informal channels, which of course include the fans’ own unofficial websites. They are thus literally at a spatial distance from the official market. Most of the unofficial goods only appear from time to time, or are only available from outlets that many fans are possibly not even aware of, such as unofficial websites or dingy pubs frequented by hard-core fans on match day, but overlooked by most ‘new consumer’ fans. The goods are produced in small numbers, they are sold in small numbers from a tiny number of the type of outlet just described above, and therefore they retain their

heterogenous quality and a high level of perceived subcultural capital (Thornton 1995). The relative lack of availability of the goods, compared to the official merchandise, is a further inversion of the traditional marketplace logic of facilitating customer access to goods. Buying such unofficial goods from each other thus constitutes an example of how the fans can collectively view themselves as managing to contest and win control over the cultural terrain.

DISCUSSION: MAINTENANCE OF SACRED IDENTITY AS THE PRIMARY MOTIVATION BEHIND FAN COMMITMENT AND THE DISTANCING OF FAN CONSUMPTION FROM THE MARKETPLACE

We have documented the determination with which these fans practice a range of tactics to separate their identity from the market. We believe that fan identity is formed in a way that makes such determination inevitable. We have noted that fan identity is formed by means of a conversion experience that results not only in enduring feelings of commitment to one's team, but also one's fellow fans. Why, then, are hard-core fans so determined to distance their fandom from the marketplace? This has happened because the market's perceived over-emphasis on merchandise is unacceptable to the fans partly because it does not offer the necessary capacity for ongoing singularisation (Belk *et al* 1989) of their identity. Singularisation represents one of the chief ways in which consumer goods can be de-commoditised and rendered sacred (Belk *et al* 1989). Normally, commercial commodities can be used to enhance each fan's sense of unique identity. Once an object has been bought, its symbolic meaning is transformed from that of homogenous commodity to unique (and sacred) object by including it in the performance of rituals that are seen as having a singularising effect. Football fans can therefore buy and wear a football shirt or scarf, perform the ritual of wearing these items to a match, and in the process conceive of these items as sacred and unique to their 'tribe', even though millions of football fans around the world are engaged in the same process, using similar goods. However in this case it is clear that the fans perceive market offerings as either relatively lacking in capacity to deliver on this theme of singularisation, or worse again, actively diminishing the singular nature of the fan identity.

In the case of the hard-core Liverpool fans, their sense of production and identity being particularly bound up in non-market consumption objects has allowed them to

feel a particularly strong sense of singularisation. What renders unofficial consumption objects particularly preferable to these fans is that they are self-produced, and thus the fans enjoy full producerly control over them (Fiske 1989:103-104). The meanings thus assimilated into the self-concept (McCracken 1988, Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998) are predominantly taken from consumption objects that were never commercial commodities to begin with. The fan produced consumer objects are collectively perceived as preferable to market produced goods, therefore, because of their greater capacity to deliver on themes of singularisation, decommodification, and maintenance of the collective feeling of hierophany (Belk *et al* 1989). By the same token, retro shirts and football scarves, even if they are bought from official market sources, being much cheaper than replica shirts are therefore far less hyper-marketised and can be more readily included in fan rituals without posing any risk to the singularisation process.

What has become particularly problematic for the fans in recent years is the sheer scale of market incursion onto their cultural terrain. A variety of studies have concluded that the marketisation of football has made it far more difficult for supporters to articulate their support in the manner that they would wish, not only through changes in stadium design and increased ticket prices, but also, for example, through changes in kick off times that facilitate satellite TV broadcasts but make it difficult to attend away games (Bale 1993, Giulianotti 2002, Nash 2000, Parry and Malcolm 2004). Ultimately the market is also blamed for the introduction of what fans perceive as the incursion of inauthentic styles of support that threaten to destroy the sacred atmosphere within football stadia (King 1995, 1997; Richardson and Turley 2006).

While the response of fans to these issues has been to place greater emphasis on the significance of unofficial consumption objects as markers of authentic fandom, they have also adopted the tactics described in this paper to distance their consumption from the official marketplace.

The primary purpose of these distancing tactics is not to resist the market *per se*, but rather to maintain the sacredness of both the experience and the identity of fandom.

The manifestations of consumer resistance analysed in this paper should therefore primarily be seen as behaviours designed to maintain sacredness, rather than as participation in ideologically motivated social movements such as those studied by Kozinets and Handelman (2004). Fan resistance is not to the capitalist system as such, but rather to the manner in which it tends to commoditise and therefore secularise what should properly be regarded as sacred.

The distancing tactics identified in the current study included the voicing of distaste for marketised tastes and identities, the operation of an alternative marketplace, and the downplaying of consumption of official market goods. A number of these tactics as practiced elsewhere are recorded in the literature. Declarations of distaste for marketised attempts to appropriate subcultural identity are commonplace within subcultures of consumption such as biker fraternities (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), the tattooing subculture (Bengtsson *et al* 2005) and members of the 'Burning Man' (Kozinets 2002b) community, for example.

Authentic community, some argue, can only be achieved in "non-market mediated environments" (Thompson and Arsel 2004), hence the need to remove, or at least significantly reduce, the profit motive associated with the world of commerce. This is not done solely to attain a sense of authenticity with regard to community, but to attain a sense of creativity (Kozinets 2002b) and of course to maintain a sense of the sacred via decommodification (Belk *et al* 1989). The true spirit of the subcultural activity is thus always understood and articulated in opposition to commerce and the official mainstream market. The activity is always conceptualised as something that cannot be bought. In the case of tattooing there may be a financial transaction involved but this is reduced to a token fee, when a member of the subculture is being tattooed, to differentiate it from the normal price charged to the 'geeks' (Bengtsson *et al* 2005). Thus, while not every group has necessarily developed their own full-blown alternative market, a number of groups share a view of their activity as something that cannot be commodified. These uncommodifiable activities are then prioritised within the group-specific system of cultural capital. This explicitly facilitates the ringfencing

and protection of that which ‘really matters’ not just by keeping it at a distance from the market, but by being able to point to the distance between it and the market.

However it is notable that members of the ‘Real Reds’ community do not manifest a consistent resistance towards the market in general. There is no contestation of the market for computer game consoles, for instance. There is no anti-corporate alliance among these consumers, no agitation to stand up and be counted against the might of the Sony Corporation. Instead, resistance takes the form of oppositional taste (Hogg & Savolainen 1998), where consumers will argue the relative merits of the X-Box over the Playstation (or vice versa). This raises the interesting possibility that hard core football fans, having reassured themselves as to the non-marketised authenticity of their identity in relation to football, can happily consume whatever they like in other spheres of their lives, whether that is in relation to cars, video games, music, movies, holiday destinations, or other consumer goods and services. Having at least one area of life defined as sacred, and kept at a perceived distance from the market as part of the process of sacralisation maintenance, possibly helps to anchor consumers’ identities. It prevents a sense of anonymity from taking over consumers’ lives and also permits them to happily purchase mass produced commodities in other spheres of their existence. As Holt (2002) observes, it is impossible to completely resist the market. Perhaps most consumers are under too much pressure, due to the ordinary commitments and obligations of life, to practice consistent evasion of the market. It is possible that they manage to maintain a sense of transcendent meaningfulness by focusing instead on a small number of spheres of activity which they strive to maintain as sacred. In this way a sense of distance from the homogenising effects of the market can be sustained over time. Again it should be noted that the purpose of this is to preserve transcendent experience and identity rather than to maintain an overall anti-market stance. It is about having and preserving a sense that something ‘matters’ (Grossberg 1992). We thus concur with Grossberg (1992:58-59) that “...being a particular sort of ... fan can take on an enormous importance and thus come to constitute a dominant part of the fan’s identity”.

We believe that while fandom can incorporate a sense of resistance, that such resistance is not the *raison d’etre* of fandom, but rather a manifestation of the need to preserve a unique sense of identity. In the case of the Liverpool fans in the current study this amounts to the preservation of their mutual sense of hierophany.

This is a useful idea because it makes a distinction between fan subcultural capital as a resource for the pursuit of pleasure through the enjoyment of shared tastes, and fan subcultural capital as something primarily intended as a means to resist various hegemonies such as the hegemony of patriarchal society, or the hegemony of capitalism and the market. This differs slightly from Fiske's (1992) view of resistance as having a more central role in fan consumption. Fiske sees fandom as a producerly activity but implies that the main goal of this producerly fandom is resistance. However, for the fans in this study, the point of producerly consumption is really to enjoy the transcendent pleasures of fandom (Grossberg 1992). Resistance to the market manifests itself, certainly, but only after the fact of hyper-marketisation. Even then, the focus of producerly activity remains primarily on the production of transcendent experience.

Finally we conclude that fans' sense of hierophany, their desire for singularisation, and their adoption of distancing tactics to separate the sacred from the profane, all stem from the sacred nature of their initial conversion experience. It is this conversion experience that provides the foundation for loyalty to both the team and the fan community. We believe that the enduring nature of this loyalty is thus explicable in terms of the more or less permanent change in identity that conversion brings about. Similarly, post this conversion experience, it is by maintenance of the collective identity, through sustaining rituals and distancing tactics, that notions of inferior identity are fiercely refuted and a collective belief in sacred identity maintained. It may even be possible that the passionate loyalty of sports fans is replicable outside the context of the sports arena, and that similar conversion experiences are undergone by members of brand communities for example. In investigating this last possibility, future research on consumer loyalty could thus focus on how such conversion experiences may be generated, building on recent work in this area by Schouten *et al* (2007), and O'Sullivan and Richardson (forthcoming). Future research on fan identity could focus on exploring whether other types of fan also display signs of having undergone a conversion experience, and whether this has led to the adoption of distancing tactics similar to those documented in this paper, or whether a sense of the sacred is maintained in some other way that coexists more easily with the market. We conclude by speculating that more than one type of fan community may well

exist, and that while less reflexive fans may draw less critically from market offerings, that many fan communities may well have adopted distancing tactics for reasons similar to those outlined here.

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